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A THRILLING  
PUBLICATION

# POPULAR DETECTIVE



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**HANDS OF**  
**MR. PRESCOTT**  
*A Mystery Novelet*  
**By BRUNO FISCHER**

**MARRIED TO MURDER**  
*An Exciting Crime Novelet*  
**By NORMAN A. DANIELS**

15¢  
POPULAR DETECTIVE  
MAR. 1942

Rudolph Belton

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and is Tired of  
Straining to

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# POPULAR DETECTIVE

Vol. XXXVI, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

MARCH, 1949

## FEATURED NOVELET



## *The Hands of Mr. Prescott*

by *Bruno Fischer*

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## FEATURES

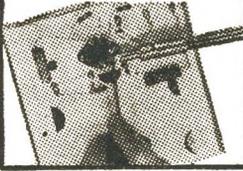
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POPULAR DETECTIVE, published every other month by Better Publications, Inc., at 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Subscription (12 issues), \$1.80; single copies, \$.15. Foreign and Canadian postage extra. Reentered as second-class matter April 14, 1938, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Copyright, 1949, by Better Publications, Inc. In communicating with this magazine, please include your postal zone number, if any. Manuscripts will not be returned unless accompanied by self addressed, stamped envelopes and are submitted at the author's risk. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. Printed in U.S.A.

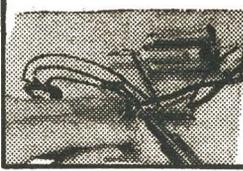
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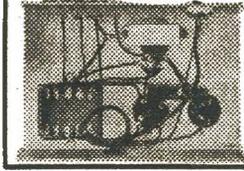
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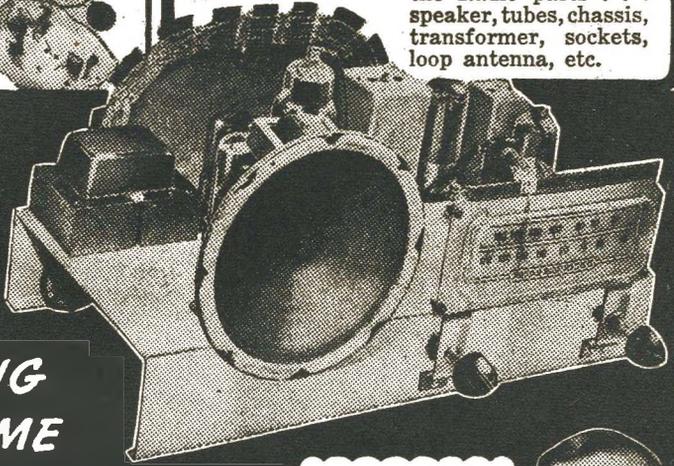


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# Official BUSINESS



A DEPARTMENT WHERE READERS AND THE EDITOR MEET

**K**EENE MADDEN, West Coast head of the Thoroughbred Racing Protective Bureau, was in a bar when the phone call came through to him. He sauntered into the booth with the loose, rolling gait of a horseman.

The voice on the other end was shrill with hysteria. "It's Johnny Cady, Mister Madden."

"What's new, Johnny?" the racetrack detective asked the diminutive jockey.

"Them dirty fix-bums is out for my hide, that's what's new. All on account I try to stay on the level, like you warned me. You gotta get me outa this jam, but I mean in a rush!"

"Name's Madden, Johnny. Not Houdini."

"I'm not kidding! After you gimme that or-else this noon, I do my stuff strictly on the up an' up. I give Lookaway a nice, snug ride in the seventh. So now them crummy scuffers decide that because I go straight on 'em, I'm also liable to squawk on 'em, too! They're trying to fix my wagon so it won't squeak!"

"What makes you think so?"

The sudden fury in Johnny Cady's voice made the receiver vibrate. "Couple hours ago, I'm drivin' back from the track when my left front wheel comes off. Somebody loosened the lugs on that wheel, Mister Madden, figurin' I'm gonna smack up an' kill myself. Which I durn near did!"

## A Mysterious Silence

"Tell me more about it, Johnny. Who's behind it?"

There was no answer.

"Johnny!" Keene could tell the line was still open, but still there was no comeback.

"Johnny!" The crinkles around Keene's eyes were supplemented by other, sharper, lines around his mouth. He jiggled the hook a few times before he hung up.

He made a straight line then for the court where Johnny lived, and parked his car beneath a palm. Beneath a screen of citrus a dozen cars were scattered around a semi-circle of Spanish stucco bungalows. Johnny Cady had come a long way from sleeping on feed sacks in stables to a snauzy bungalow like this.

As Keene Madden came up to Number Nine, avoiding any crunch of gravel by walking on the grass, the lights inside the bungalow went out. He stepped swiftly into the pool of shadow at the side of the building. Keene listened, heard nothing except the tinny tinkle of a radio a couple of bungalows away, but sensed movement behind him. He ducked and whirled.

His right hand flashed inside his coat to his left armpit. Instinctively, he shoved out his free hand to ward off the vague blur coming at him through the gloom. His fingers touched smooth satin over soft flesh. The girl who'd backed into him spun around.

## A Deadly Dame

She drew in her breath sharply, but the scream he expected didn't come. He caught at her shoulder. She wrenched away. The top of her satin pajamas ripped.

"Let go!" It was a whisper of terror. Stark fear was stamped on what he could see of her features . . . Dark eyes wildly staring. Full lips taut against small, even teeth. Glossy hair cascading down over the pale oval of her face.

The impression was instantaneous, but inescapable. This beautiful young thing was half scared to death!

He had to use both hands to hold her. "Nobody's going to hurt you, sister—"

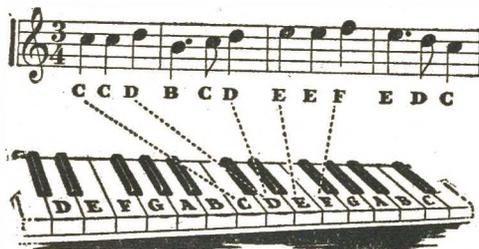
Her knee came up savagely, caught him. The blinding pain made him relax his grip for a split second. Long enough for her to

(Continued on page 8)

# Over 850,000 people have studied music this easy way

SEE HOW SIMPLE IT IS!

"My country 'tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty"



The first note on the music above is "c." Follow the dotted line to the keyboard and locate "c" on the piano. Find the other notes the same way. As you strike them you'll be playing the melody

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## OFFICIAL BUSINESS

(Continued from page 6)

tear loose, race barefooted across the lawn.

The panic-stricken figure in scarlet satin vanished among the mottled moon-shadows beneath the orange trees.

Recovering, finally, Keene went around to Number Nine's tiny veranda, called "Johnny," tried the door without waiting for an answer. It was open.

He found Johnny on the bedroom floor. The jockey's eyes were open, but they weren't looking at anything. His mouth was open, too—but it was a little late for him to be saying anything.

### Marks of Violence

The left side of his forehead was marked up with cuts and scratches. Dark streaks of dried reddish-brown slashed across the cheekbone. His nose was swollen. The lead-gray lips were bruised and puffy. He looked like a pitifully battered boy of twelve, in his crumpled cream slacks and matching shirt. The handset of the pickup phone was lying across his left wrist, as if the jockey'd suddenly collapsed while on the phone.

There was no indication of a weapon—of any attack. The marks on the dead jockey's face could very well have come from that car smashup he'd mentioned.

On the rug there was a little scrap of surgeon's stickum. It had been wadded into a ball. A figure had been written on it, the figure 4.

Keene unrolled the strip of tape. There was more writing. He spread it out on the bed-table. The lettering covered the whole strip:

S041—N71—G2—C

Keene turned it over. Stuck to the adhesive side, running diagonally across one end, was a single thread of scarlet silk. . . .

That's the exciting beginning of **HOMICIDE HANDICAP**, by Stewart Sterling, thrilling new Keene Madden mystery novelet that will headline the next issue of **POPULAR DETECTIVE**.

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(Continued on page 10)

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## OFFICIAL BUSINESS

(Continued from page 8)

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## LETTERS FROM READERS

**WHAT'S** on your mind? Anything on your chest? If so, this is the place to speak your piece, unload your gripe, or otherwise unburden yourself. This column is wide open for your comments, be they good, bad or worse. Tell us what you think of **POPULAR DETECTIVE**, the stories in it, or the kind of stories you'd like to see in it. Also, if you have any questions on crime or detecting, this is the place to direct them. And here's our promise—we'll either publish in this column, or answer personally, every letter or postcard we receive.

So what's delaying you? Write us today.

To all your authors, regarding a subject that is very evident: They are either grossly ignorant, or else just careless, because they call a revolver an automatic as often as by its right name. But the worst is always telling about silencers. That's a sore point—because there is no such animal.

A silencer was invented by the Maxim brothers sometime about 1889 or '90. I've seen one and here are the dimensions: About 8½ inches long, 2 inches in diameter, and of

(Concluded on page 98)



You receive all parts, including tubes, for building this modern Superheterodyne Receiver; and other standard equipment to use and keep.

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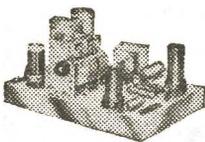


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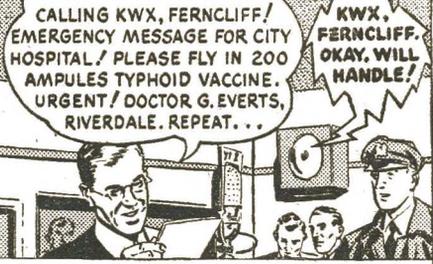
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RIVERDALE AIRPORT TO PIPER 237: RUNWAYS FLOODED. LAND ON HIGH GROUND BETWEEN FLARES. OVER



HERE'S THE SERUM, DOC. THIS YOUNG LADY...

GOOD! WE CAN USE HER! HELP THE SERGEANT LINE 'EM UP, MISS!

B-B-BUT...



ONLY FIFTEEN MORE, DOCTOR

THANK HEAVENS THAT PILOT BROUGHT FIFTY EXTRA AMPULES

Eight Hours Later



ME ON YOUR NEWSCAST? GOSH, I WAS JUST GOING HOME AND CLEAN UP

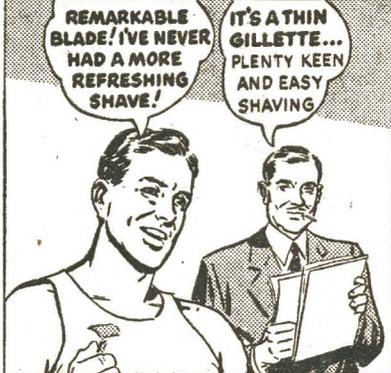
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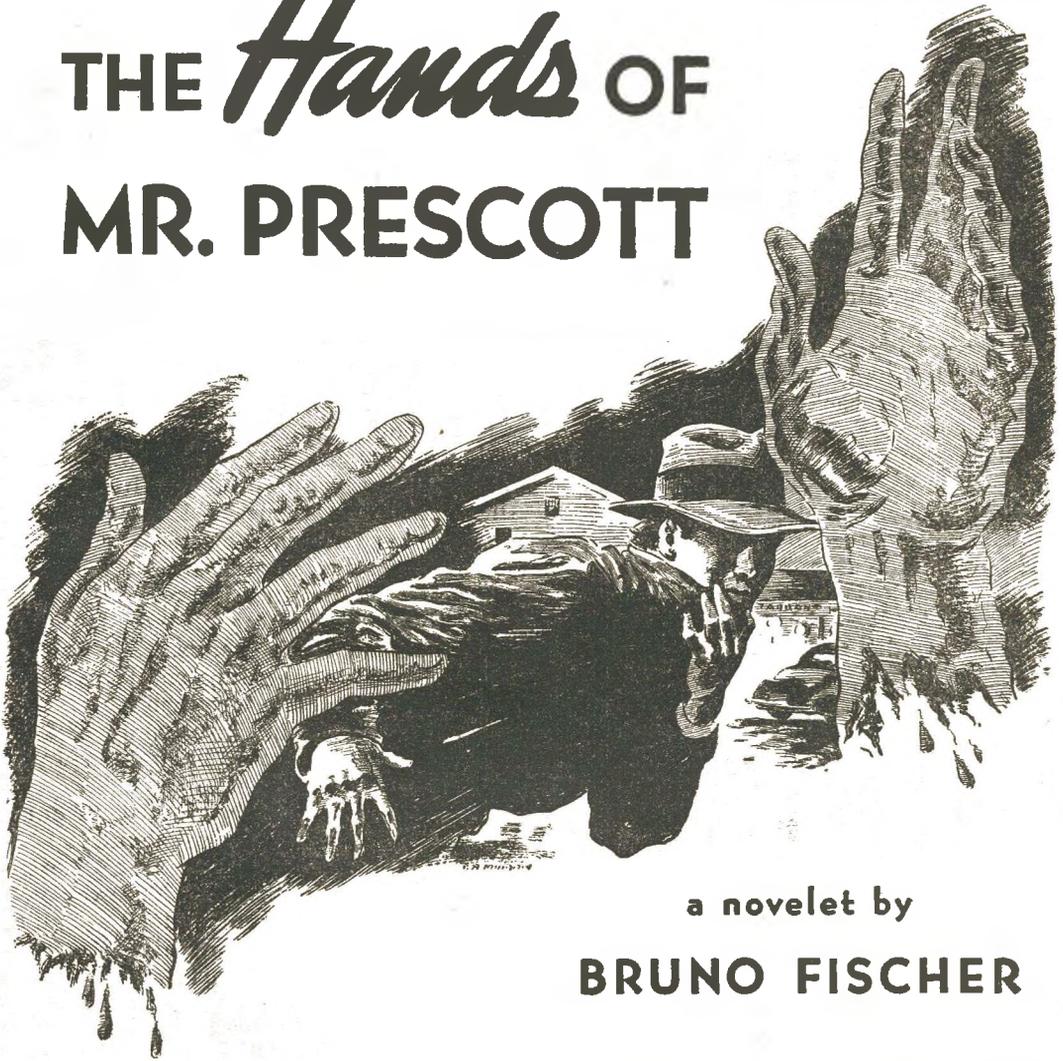
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# THE *Hands* OF MR. PRESCOTT



a novelet by

**BRUNO FISCHER**

## CHAPTER I

### *Lady In Distress*

**R**AIN came down as if dumped out of a cauldron. Most drivers on that Connecticut highway pulled off the road to wait out the worst part of the storm. But Lester Miles kept driving. He would not permit a mere cloudburst to hold him up.

One other car was moving—a convertible which showed a barely distinguishable New Jersey license plate.

Momentarily the convertible vanished in a spray of water. Lester braked his coupe, stopped at the edge of what was virtually a lake formed by the rain. Water completely covered the road and spread out over the grass on either side. The convertible was in the midst of the flood, and the impotent whirr of the starter told Lester the car was stuck.

*A hitchhiker's weekend bag plunges Lester Miles into darkest mystery and makes him the target of killers!*

He heeded the warning, remained where he was.

The midsummer storm tapered off, the sun burst bright and hot. Traffic tried to move, but the convertible was blocking half the road. Horns on the right lane honked impatiently.

The starter continued to whirr with a kind of frenzy. The motor probably wouldn't catch for hours because the wires were wet.

The right door opened. A young man's face under a pulled-down slouch hat looked out.

"Mind pushing me off the road?" he asked Lester

Lester nudged the car over the shoulder of the road. Traffic began to crawl past him. He backed up, swung around the convertible.

"Can you give me a lift?" the young man called.

"Sure," Lester said.

The young man opened the car door and recklessly stepped into water almost to his knees. He reached back into the convertible, brought out a small week-end bag, waded to the coupé and climbed in.

"Thanks," he said. "I'd appreciate it you'll drive me as far as a service station where I can get a mechanic."

His voice was curiously low and deep. His face didn't go with that voice. He was young, handsome. No, not exactly handsome, Lester decided, because he was much too pretty for a man. The mouth was small, the black eyes surprisingly large, the black lashes unusually long.

"We were both dopes to drive in that cloudburst," Lester Miles said. "If I hadn't seen what happened to your car, I'd have gone through that puddle myself."

**H**IS passenger placed his small bag carefully between his feet.

"I noticed your New York license plate," he said. "Are you going far?"

"Southern New Hampshire. Spending a week-end at my sister's place near Keene, fifty or sixty miles south-west of Concord."

The boy was soaked.

"I'm dripping water all over your car," he apologized, and as he turned his face to the right window Lester saw that his black hair curled thickly at the nape of his neck.

"Listen," he said. "I'd appreciate it if you'd give me a lift as far as you go."

"All the way to Keene? What about your car?"

"I'll phone the state police on the way. It's now past six. I'd like to reach my—my brother's house—in Concord before midnight. Please!"

His voice changed on that "please." It was suddenly thinner, higher, and somehow made Lester uneasy. That slouch hat was pulled down low. Although it was a stifling day, he wore a tweed suit, the jacket buttoned, the necktie knotted tightly.

There was something decidedly wrong about him.

"Are you in any kind of trouble?" Lester asked sharply.

The boy laughed. Or tried to laugh. Then he sat back, his hands folded.

"I suppose you could call it trouble," he said. "My name is Ed Brown. It seems crazy to leave a good car behind, but my brother is sick and alone and I must get to him in a hurry."

Lester kept shifting his eyes from the road to the boy's hands. They were small, delicate, the fingernails as carefully manicured as a woman's.

"That's not such a hot disguise," Lester said drily. "I should have spotted you as a girl at once."

The face was quickly averted. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Your small hands and feet," Lester said. "Your smooth skin. The way you try to make your voice deep. You're running away from something?"

The girl sighed wearily. When she spoke, her voice was feminine. "It's a good enough disguise if I'm seen in a car from a distance."

"Are you running from the police?" Lester asked.

"Oh, no!" She twisted to face him. "Please! You've got to help me!"

She was all woman now, appealing to a man. He didn't care for it. All he wanted was his week-end away from sweltering New York and his job as accountant for an insurance firm. Here was somebody trying to complicate things, the way women always did.

"Suppose you tell me about it," he said.

"I can't."

"I see," he said crisply. "You're afraid I'll turn you over to the police."

"I just can't explain now." She placed



As the man on the rock was fighting to bring up his heavy gun, Ellen put a second bullet into him

a soft hand on his hand. "I won't mind if you do call the police, if you'll drive me to my brother's home first."

"All the way to Concord?"

"It's sixteen miles east of Concord. It will take you less than two hours out of your way. My brother will pay you well."

"No!" he said angrily. "I'm not in the business of helping girls escape."

"I'm sorry I mentioned money. Help me because I'm in trouble."

Lester's teeth were caught in his lower lip. He was sweating, but not because of the heat. Still, if he was to believe all the stories he'd read what red-blooded man would refuse to help a fair lady in distress? But he wasn't a hero. He just wanted to be let alone.

He felt her shift closer to him, felt her hand touch his arm.

"You're strong," she said. "And your face is pleasantly rugged."

"When a woman wants something from a man, she flatters him," he said disgustedly.

They were driving through open country, with tobacco fields, on either side. However he felt about her, she was on his hands. The only way he could get her off his hands was by kicking her out of the car.

He didn't. "You're name isn't Ed Brown, of course," he said, "but I bet your initials are E.B."

"Ellen," she muttered.

"What does the B stand for?" he said.

Her face was turned to the window. "Just call me Ellen."

**A**T TEN minutes to seven, they passed into Massachusetts. Ellen sat huddled in the corner of the seat, looking small and pathetic in those men's clothes. He felt an urge to say something to her, but he only drove on at a moderate rate of speed.

"Can't you go faster?" she asked once.

"Sure I can, but I'm in no hurry. I'm not running away from anything."

She didn't argue.

After another twenty miles he pulled into a service station. Ellen abruptly sat upright.

"Why are you stopping?" she demanded.

"I need gas."

He got out of the coupé, and handed

the attendant the gas tank key.

"Fill 'er up!" he said, then walked a bit, stretching his long legs. When he returned to the car, Ellen was no longer there.

"She's run out on me," he thought, and was surprised to find that he was not relieved.

He moved closer against the car, and saw her. She was cowering so low that her man's hat was not visible.

And then he saw the State Police car. It had pulled into the service station within the last minute or two. A trooper was standing near the hood, his thumbs hooked in his gun-belt. He was speaking to a man with unruly red hair.

Here, Lester told himself, was his chance to do his duty as a law-abiding citizen. He had only to tell the state cop about the girl in his car.

The trooper looked directly at him. Lester pulled air into his lungs. The trooper returned his attention to the red-headed man.

"Very pretty," the red-headed man was saying. "About twenty-three. Black eyes and hair. She abandoned her car near Treeport."

"That's in Connecticut," the trooper said. "What makes you think she's headed this way?"

"I know where she's bound," the red-headed man replied. He was squat, as broad in the shoulders as Lester, but a full head shorter. "In fact, I know—"

He broke off, his gaze on Lester who obviously was listening. "This any of your business, mister?" he asked drily.

Lester flushed. He dropped his cigarette, stepped on it, moved toward the rear of his coupé. He tried to act casual, but his heart was thumping.

## CHAPTER II

### *Red-Headed Man*



**T**HE attendant was locking the gas tank. Lester paid him, and got behind the wheel. The red-headed man was moving toward a blue coupé with a New Jersey license plate.

Lester swung out on the highway. Ellen might have been a bundle of old clothes piled

on the floorboard.

After a minute he said: "Which one are you afraid of most—the state cop or the red-headed man?"

Ellen got up off the floor.

"That red-haired man is my husband," she said. "I'm running away from him and he wants to bring me back."

"What part of New Jersey do you come from?"

"The southern tip. A small town you never heard of."

"That's not a good lie," he said more in disgust than anger. "His car comes from Coast City, just across the river from New York. And there's no law against a wife leaving her husband. You wouldn't disguise yourself as a man. You wouldn't be as scared as you are."

"All right, he isn't my husband," she said after a silent moment. "I'm not married, and I'm not running away from anybody," she said.

"You're giving a good imitation of it."

She put a hand on his arm. "You didn't give me away when you could have. I'll never stop being grateful to you."

Lester scowled at the road. By keeping his mouth shut at the service station, he had let himself into something up to his neck. He wished he knew what it was.

Suddenly Ellen crouched in the seat. Lester glanced into his mirror, and he saw the blue coupé coming up rapidly behind him.

His hands tightened on the wheel. A horn honked. The blue coupe, with the red-haired man behind the wheel, drew even with him.

Then it was past.

Lester felt his lungs expand. Ellen straightened up as the blue coupé rounded a curve out of sight.

"Suppose he knew you were in the car with me?" Lester said slowly. "What would he do?"

"I'm not sure."

"He looks tough."

"He is." Her tone was confidently feminine now. "But you're not afraid."

"Oh, no," he said bitterly. "I'm a terrific hero. Only I'd feel better if I knew what I'm not afraid of."

"Nothing, really," she lied blandly. "You are going to drive me to North Paris?"

"I thought you were headed for Concord."

"I said a small town west of Concord.

That's North Paris."

He supposed he should be afraid of the red-headed man, and he was afraid of what he didn't know. But here he was, burdened with this girl, and oddly enough, he was minding it less and less.

"All right, I'm a sucker," he said. "In a short while we'll come to the turn-off which will lead us into Concord."

"They'll keep all the roads to Concord covered," she said.

"They?" he said. "How many are there besides the red-headed man?"

Ellen stared out of the window. "I don't know," she muttered. "I suppose they're farther north than we are now, and watching all roads, but I think we can slip through because they don't know your car and my disguise is good enough. They'll suspect us less if you go the long way, through Keene."

He shrugged. "Okay. It's your party."

They were three-quarters of the way across Massachusetts when dusk spread before the windshield. Lester snapped on the parking lights, then saw with surprise that it was twenty minutes after eight.

"No wonder I'm hungry," he said. "You must be, too."

She stirred. "Please! Let's not stop till we get there."

He was annoyed with her, annoyed with the entire situation.

"I'm starved," he told her crisply, "and it's still a long drive. You can stay in the car if you want to."

Again she didn't argue.

A FEW miles farther a neon sign blinked. "RESTAURANT," it announced. He pulled in, yanked the keys out of the ignition lock, and got out.

"I'll bring a sandwich for you," he said.

"Wait!" She reached behind the seat, pulled up her weekend bag, opened the door on her side. "I suppose I can risk it. I haven't eaten since breakfast, and I feel faint."

He watched her walk around the car. She was tall for a woman, and slim in the hips. He wondered how she would look in a dress and without that ridiculous hat.

He frowned at the bag she carried.

"Do you mind locking this in the car trunk?" she said.

"I'm going to lock the doors while we're in the restaurant."

"The trunk is safer."

"What's in the bag that's so valuable?"

"Please!" she said.

He shrugged. This was the smallest favor she had so far asked him. He took the bag, unlocked the trunk and placed the bag on top of his pigskin two-suiter. As he was lowering the trunk, he felt the pressure of her against him. He dropped the key in his pocket and turned to her. All at once she was sagging in his arms.

Even in those man's clothes, even with the brim of that hat against his chin, she felt very much a woman. She clung to him with a kind of despair then abruptly pulled away.

"I—I'm sorry," she said. "Suddenly I was so tired. It's been a—a hard day."

His heart went out to her. He wanted to hold her again, comfort her, but they were out in the open.

They entered the restaurant.

A buxom blonde took their orders for roast beef dinners. Ellen was trying to be a man again, speaking huskily, and she had to wear her hat.

While they waited for the food, Ellen's hands were never still. They fumbled with a spoon, plucked at a jacket button. Seeing him gaze at her, she smiled wryly, but she didn't really look at him. Her eyes were haunted, staring at ghosts.

He thought of how she had clung to him outside, almost as if he were the only one in the world on her side. Was he on her side? He supposed so. He had made his choice back at that service station when he had said nothing to the state trooper.

Clam chowder was set before them. Ellen spooned it up eagerly. He was hungry himself. After the chowder both silently dug into the roast beef.

A stifled cry brought his head up sharply.

Ellen had half-risen, was staring past him.

Lester twisted his head. Two men had just entered. One was short and slim. He wore a garish yellow polo shirt and blue slacks and was smoking a cigar. The other man was enormous. His shapeless pin-stripe suit looked like a sack. He was fanning his florid, overheated face with a straw hat.

The little man glanced toward the table. His eyes met Lester's impassively, then shifted to his over-sized com-

panion who was already seated at the counter. He swung himself up on an adjoining stool.

Ellen was concentrating on her food. "Who are they?" Lester whispered.

She spoke as if to herself. "How did they find me here? Oh, they're so clever and desperate, have so many resources! They knew I was here."

They were looking at her now. They had ordered only drinks, and they sat at the counter with their faces turned toward Lester and Ellen.

"What do you think they'll do?" he asked her.

Her head remained lowered, as if still hoping that if she did not lift her face they would not know who she was.

"Anything," she replied hoarsely. "But they won't hurt you."

Through the mirror, Lester saw the little man rise from the counter stool. His drink was only half-finished.

LESTER'S fingers dug into his palms. Something was going to happen. Ellen's assurance that he was out of it didn't mean anything. He was in it; she had put him in it.

But there were plenty of people in the restaurant to prevent anything from happening here. While he and Ellen stayed here, she would be safe.

Maybe.

The little man was no longer visible in the mirror. Lester twisted in his chair to see the door swinging shut. He had gone outside.

The big man put down his empty glass and rose ponderously from the stool. He grinned at Lester, and sauntered toward him.

Lester turned back to Ellen. She wasn't at the table. His eyes darted about the room, searching for her.

"You won't find her," a soft voice said. "She scooted out through that side door."

Lester looked up at the big man standing beside the table. His mouth was dry. He couldn't think of anything to say.

The big man didn't seem to be disturbed by her flight. He lowered himself in Ellen's chair, dug out a pack of cigarettes, offered Lester one. Lester just stared at him.

"You look nervous," the big man drawled. "You needn't be if you're an innocent bystander, as I suspect you are." He held the flame of a lighter to

his cigarette. "I doubt if you ever saw Ellen Bronson before a few hours ago."

"Is that her name?" Lester said, forcing himself to sound casual.

"You refer to *her*, which means her disguise didn't fool you." The big man studied him. "May I know who you are?"

"That's none of your business!" Lester was surprised at the controlled anger in his tone.

The big man grinned boyishly. "Take it easy. I'd like to discuss a small matter of business."

He sounded sure of himself, and he wasn't worried about Ellen having fled. That was because the little man was outside, to intercept her.

Lester got to his feet.

"Sit down," the big man drawled.

Lester knew that stepping out of this restaurant meant stepping into danger. He had little doubt that the big man had a gun.

"A hundred dollars is yours and you won't be hurt," the big man whispered. "Otherwise—"

Lester stood with his knuckles pressed down on the table and remembered how Ellen had clung to him, how she needed him. Then he was moving to the counter. He handed the man behind the counter a five-dollar bill.

"For two dinners," he said. "The rest is a tip." He turned to the main door.

The big man was coming after him, waddling in his hurry. When Lester was through the door, the big man was at his heels.

"I'll make it two hundred dollars," the big man said. "All you have to do is unlock your car trunk."

### CHAPTER III

#### *The Black Bag*



**N**OW twilight had deepened into dark-gray-ness. There was nobody in front of the building, but a fourth car, a two-toned green sedan, was parked beside Lester's coupé. It had a New Jersey license plate. Doubtless that meant that the little man and Ellen were

still around.

"It's an easy way to earn two hundred

dollars," the big man urged.

"And what will you do to Ellen Bronson?" asked Lester.

"Not a thing unless you compel us to get tough." The softness left the big fellow's voice. "Then you'll lose two hundred dollars and get hurt in the bargain. Badly hurt."

"Blast you!" Lester blazed at him. "What do you think I am?"

The big man sighed. "You asked for it," he said, and threw a punch at Lester's face.

Instinctively Lester sidestepped and caught the blow on his left shoulder. It spun him halfway around. If it had hit the target he would be down and out. The big man was pulling his powerhouse left back for another try.

Lester stepped in under the second punch and sank his fist up to the waist in that fatty midriff. The big man grunted and doubled over. Suddenly Lester was calm, calculating. He knew what to do; he had done it often enough in the YMCA gym. He straightened his opponent up with a vicious uppercut.

The big man tottered. He looked surprised. He brought his hands up to defend his face, and Lester let him have another in the midriff. The man's guard dropped, and Lester swung with all he had into that beefy face.

The big man went down and lay still.

Incredulously Lester started down at that unconscious mound of man. It was the first time in his life that he had ever struck a blow without boxing gloves, or in anger. He felt a sense of power. He hadn't wanted to start anything. He had wanted to be let alone. They had made him fight.

All right, he was fighting.

He looked back at the restaurant. Nobody had heard the fight. He walked to the far side of the restaurant, paused at the corner.

Trees ran to within fifty feet of that side of the building. Ellen was hardly more than a shadow against the solid background of the trees, but the little man's yellow sport shirt made him visible. They were talking, but their voices were so low that no words reached Lester.

His shoes made no sound on the grass as he walked toward them. The little man's back was turned to him and all Ellen's attention was concentrated on the man.

When Lester was within twenty feet of them, he could hear what they were saying.

"I hid it in Connecticut when I passed through," Ellen was saying.

The little man shook his head. "You could have hidden it more easily in Coast City. You didn't dare because you knew we would force you to tell us where. It could have been simple—merely let Digger and his knife spend a little time on you."

Ellen's voice was dull. "I knew you were following me, so I hid it."

"You did not. You were disguised and not using your own car. If you had left Coast City at once, we might not have been able to catch up with you. But you waited to borrow Mary Hatch's car and dress yourself in her husband's clothes." He chuckled. "You know of our resources. We were only a few minutes behind every move you made to Coast City. We reached Mary Hatch just after you had driven off in her car. I am afraid, my dear, that we frightened her."

"You hurt her?" Ellen gasped.

"No. But she told us that you were in her car and disguised as a man. We knew, of course, where you were headed with the bag, and I had already sent men ahead to watch every road in New England. Late this afternoon one of my men spotted your car west of Hartford. In broad daylight and in the midst of traffic, he dared do nothing but tail you. There was a rainstorm and your car got stuck and he saw you change into another car. From there on we were in constant telephone communication with each other. As you drove across Massachusetts, the net drew tight. Carter and I preferred to handle the matter ourselves. That was why you were allowed to come this far."

"You don't even trust your own men," she sneered.

"Ellen, my dear," the little man replied affably, "neither of us trust anybody."

**T**HEN Lester saw the gun. A three-quarters moon broke through a rift in clouds, and moonlight glinted on the nickel stock. The man held it against his right hip.

"Why all this talking?" Ellen said. "You're holding me here while Carter does something?"

"My dear," the little man said, "I pre-

fer non-violent methods. Carter is working on the man who gave you a lift. Carter will offer him money to unlock his car. If that does not work, Carter will use the persuasive power of a gun."

"And if it's not in the car?"

"You will tell us where it is, Ellen. You know I cannot afford to let anything stop me."

"And what do you think my brother will do when he finds out?"

"Your brother knows nothing. If you had been able to communicate with him, you would have hidden in Coast City and let him come to you. I know his New Hampshire country place. There is no electric, no telephone, no modern conveniences. You could not communicate with him except by mail, so you realized that the quickest way was to drive out to him."

"If you get the bag, will you let me go?" Ellen asked.

"That remains to be seen."

In other words, Lester thought, the answer was no. Giving them the bag would not save Ellen. And big Carter would not remain out cold much longer, if he hadn't already recovered consciousness.

Lester started toward the two shapes against the trees.

"I wonder what's taking Carter so long?" the little man said, turned his head, and looked directly at Lester. For an instant the man stood motionless, as if uncertain who Lester was. Then he swung all the way around, his right hand thrusting out from his body.

His gun! Lester hurled himself forward.

Ellen's shape merged with that of the little man. His right hand was no longer out-thrust. He was writhing to break Ellen's grip on his arm.

Lester swung at the fellow's jaw, connected solidly. The little man went down to his knees. Ellen released him and he fell over on his side.

"Two!" Lester thought with a strange exultation.

But his man wasn't quite out. He was squirming on the ground, struggling to bring his gun to bear on Lester.

Lester stepped on the man's right wrist, pinning it to the ground. He stooped to pluck the gun from him. The grip held tenaciously on the trigger guard. Lester ground his heel into the wrist, the man moaned, and his fingers

loosened. Lester straightened up with the gun, a small-caliber automatic.

Ellen was running toward the restaurant.

"Ellen!" he shouted.

She disappeared around the corner of the building. Lester started to follow and almost fell on his face. A hand had closed around his ankle, tugging feebly, trying to pull him down. The little man was groggy from the blow and his gun had been taken away from him, but there was still fight in him.

With a vicious yank, Lester freed his ankle and ran.

"I'll give you a thousand dollars!" the little man called after him thickly.

Lester kept going. He was halfway to the building when he heard a motor spring into life.

"Ellen!"

Behind him the little man was saying brokenly:

"Five thousand! You crazy fool! Five thousand dollars!"

Lester's pace didn't lessen. Headlights glared at him when he reached the corner of the building. One of the four cars was being backed out of the parking space. The light in his eyes prevented him from seeing which one it was.

The car straightened out, shot forward, roaring in first speed. A huge human shape appeared around one of the parked cars, lurching after the moving car.

The car shot by Lester, and by its dash-light he saw Ellen Bronson behind the wheel.

It was his own coupé.

LESTER stood rooted to the spot. There had been a nightmarish quality about the last ten minutes, and this was the most incredible part. How could

Ellen have driven away in his car when it was locked and the keys were in his pocket?

His hand dug into the pocket. It was empty. The other jacket pocket contained only cigarettes and matches. He searched his trousers pockets. No keys.

Ellen had them. She had lifted them from him when she had clung to him as if weary, as if needing him to hold her.

Sucker! His mouth went tight with bitterness. He had done everything she had asked him. He had not given her away, but instead he had risked his life for her. This was her gratitude. From the first she had planned to steal his car, with her bag in it.

She hadn't trusted him. He recalled that the little man had said: "Neither of us trusts anybody."

He had lost more than his car. He had lost somebody who had come to mean a lot to him.

"What's all the commotion out here!"

The counterman was standing in the restaurant doorway.

Lester became acutely aware of the gun in his own hand. He wasn't sure what to tell the counterman.

Carter had returned from the road.

"This gentleman had a quarrel with his wife and she ran out on him," he called to the counterman. "She drove off in his car."

It was as good a story as any. With Ellen and the bag gone, the two men would have nothing against him, unless they bore a grudge because he had struck them. But he had a gun now, with which to protect himself.

"Glad I'm single," the counterman said. He stepped back and closed the door.

Carter strode over to Lester. He

[Turn page]

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stared angrily at the gun.

"What'd you do to Neale?" he demanded.

That would be the little man. Carter the big one, Neale the little one.

"The same thing I did to you," Lester said. "I hit him."

Carter fingered his jaw. "Brother, I'd like to get you into a fair fight."

"Our fight was fair."

"The devil it was!"

The nightmarish quality persisted. It could only be in a nightmare that at a time like this two grown men squabbled like children over which one was better with his fists. And what, Lester wondered, did he do now? Report to the police that Ellen Bronson had stolen his car?

Even now he wasn't sure he wanted to get the police after her. He was still a sucker.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Strange Bailwick*



**B**Y NOW the little man named Neale had appeared. A few minutes ago he had hysterically offered Lester a five thousand dollar bribe, but now he did not appear to be disturbed by anything that had happened. In his yellow shirt and blue slacks, he looked like a tourist

taking a languid walk.

"Ellen got away in this guy's car," Carter growled.

"I saw her." Neale smiled bleakly. "You disappoint me, Carter."

"It wasn't my fault. He knocked me out." Carter's huge hand went gingerly to his jaw. "He socked me when I—"

"Can it!" Neale snapped. "You didn't have to try using your fists when so much was at stake."

Carter jabbed a thick finger toward Lester. "He's not just an innocent bystander. He turned down two hundred dollars. He'd given her his car keys. And he's carrying a gun."

"It happens to be my gun," Neale said placidly. He extended a hand, palm up, to Lester. "May I have it back?"

"No."

He didn't know what he was going to

do. Probably simply walk away. But he had an idea he needed a gun to do even that.

Calmly Neale's gaze went over him. "I don't think I've ever seen you. Your car license says you're a New Yorker. It looked as if you picked Ellen Bronson up by accident. But, as Carter pointed out, you don't act like an innocent bystander."

"I was," Lester said tightly. "But you changed that."

"I think you'd better drop that gun," Carter said softly.

The voice was close to Lester's left ear, and he felt the pressure of something hard against his left side.

Too late Lester realized the mistake he'd made by ignoring Carter for even a moment. Because Carter had a gun. He hadn't shown it because he had believed that his fists would be sufficient—that he would knock Lester out and take the car keys from him. During the fist fight he hadn't had a chance to draw a gun.

Now it was sticking into Lester's ribs.

"Drop it, mister," Carter said again.

Lester let the automatic fall to the ground. Neale picked it up.

"There's another reason I know you're in this with Ellen," Neale told him affably. "I offered you five grand and you turned it down. No man who hadn't a reason would turn down that much money."

Lester knew there was no use trying to explain. Men like these wouldn't understand anybody turning down money to save a girl who had lied to him and betrayed him. He wondered if they intended to kill him here.

"Meanwhile Ellen's making miles," Carter said impatiently.

"Not so many," Neale told him. He smiled wryly at Lester. "What do you know, mister?"

"Nothing," Lester said.

Carter was chewing nervously on his thick lower lip. "Let's get out of here," he growled.

"With our friend, of course." Neale held his gun close to his belt so that it wouldn't be obvious to anybody looking from the restaurant or to a passing motorist. "Open the door of that sedan and get in."

Did they mean to take him where they could kill him unobserved? Desperately Lester's eyes shifted, and he saw a man

step jauntily around the two-toned green sedan.

He was the stocky, red-headed man who had asked the state trooper about Ellen miles back at the service station. Negligently his right hand rested at the knot of his necktie, and without knowing quite why, Lester was sure that that gesture was menacing.

"Good-evening, gentlemen," the red-headed man said affably.

Carter made a strangled sound in his throat. His lower lip started to quiver like that of a child about to burst into tears. He seemed to forget that he and Neale held guns while both the red-headed man's hands were visible and empty.

Neale only scowled darkly. "What are you doing here, Captain?" he demanded.

"Could be the same thing you are." The red-headed man turned a friendly smile to Lester Miles. "I've got my car parked a little way down the road. I'll be glad to give you a lift, Mr. Miles."

LESTER blinked at him. He hadn't told any of them his name.

"Miles, eh?" Neale grunted. "Friend of yours, Captain?"

"This is the first time I've ever spoken to him." The man called "Captain" leaned against the front fender of the sedan. His hand remained at his necktie. "I phoned the New York Vehicles Bureau and gave them the number of his license plate. They told me his name was Lester Miles and that he lived on West One-hundred and Ninety-third Street in New York. I like to know with whom I'm dealing."

"What are you after?" Carter asked hoarsely.

"To begin with, your guns," the Captain replied blandly. "Miles, please collect them."

Lester stared at him in bewilderment. Carter and Neale had their guns trained on him, but the red-headed man was acting as if he had complete control of the situation.

"Don't let them worry you," the Captain told Lester. "I doubt if they'd care to risk any shooting here in the open. Shots will attract people in the restaurant and they'll see the number of Neale's car. Not even George Neale can come into Massachusetts and murder people in public."

"I can shoot in self-defense," Neale

said softly.

"You might if my back were turned." The Captain's hand flattened against his deep chest, the fingers extended toward his left armpit.

"You know I have a gun in my shoulder-clip. You know I can burn down both of you before you remember there are triggers on your guns. You and Carter are only going through the motions of being bold, bad men. I'm the real thing."

He said that without bravado. His assurance was somehow deadlier than anything in Lester's experience. He shivered a little, even though the man appeared to be on his side.

"I've never liked you, Carter," the Captain said. "I'm not sure I'd mind shooting you. You'll give me a chance to find out if you don't drop your gun."

Carter's huge body sagged.

"Don't shoot!" he moaned, and his right hand opened and his gun fell to the ground.

"Curse you, Carter!" Neale said. "He had no chance against two guns. You yellow rat!"

The Captain nodded in amiable agreement. "Sure, he's yellow. You're not, Neale. You're smart, which will make you do the same thing. Take his gun, Miles."

Lester hadn't stirred since the red-headed man had appeared. Now he roused himself as if from a dream. He stooped for the gun which Carter had dropped, then moved to Neale's side and plucked the man's gun from his unresisting fingers.

"You were asked several times, Captain," Neale said. "What are you doing here?"

"Could it be I'm looking for a little week-end bag Ellen Bronson took away with her from Coast City?"

"You know?" Carter said in a stricken voice.

"It's my job to know," the Captain said. "Miles, I'll take those two guns, if you don't mind."

Lester stepped over to the Captain's side. A large, freckled hand accepted both guns and thrust them into a jacket pocket. It was only then that the Captain removed his right hand from his necktie.

"Captain," Neale said, "you've played ball with me in the past. I've had an eye on you for the commissioner's job."

"Thanks," the Captain said drily, "but a few minutes ago I found out I'm not your kind of commissioner. I've done a lot of dirty work in my day, but I couldn't stand by and see you murder Miles."

"I didn't intend to harm him."

The Captain smiled sourly and said to Lester: "Let's go."

They moved to the green sedan. When the Captain reached the left rear tire, he pulled a clasp knife out of a pocket and opened the blade. Silently Neale and Carter watched him slash the tire, and Lester felt even more acutely than before the deadly menace of that squat, red-headed man.

Air gushed out of the tire. The Captain straightened up and closed his knife.

"To keep you gentlemen out of our hair for at least a few minutes," he told them.

"You'll regret this, Captain," Neale said in cold fury.

"One of us will, that's sure," the Captain replied indifferently.

He moved to the road. Lester followed. They walked south.

"This is terrible!" Lester heard Carter wail. "How did Radin find out?"

"You yellow rat!" Neale said to the big man.

**B**YOND the lights of the restaurant, the Captain took a flashlight from his hip pocket. The blue coupé with the New Jersey plate was parked a couple of hundred feet below the restaurant, facing north. Lester got in beside the Captain.

Before starting, the Captain removed the two extra guns from his pocket, shoved them into the glove compartment, locked it.

"Guns in any pocket but mine make me nervous," he commented.

That was sheer mockery. Lester didn't believe that the man had a nerve in his body.

"Are you going after Ellen Bronson?" Lester asked, when the car was moving.

"Of course." The Captain seemed surprised at the question. "I've been going after her for hours."

They passed Neale and Carter brooding over the flat tire.

"They've an organization," Lester said. "They've all the roads guarded. I heard Neale say she won't get far."

"Uh-huh. Let's hope we haven't wasted too much time."

"We?"

The Captain gave him a sidelong glance. "If you want to walk out, Miles, I'll stop the car. I'll see to it that your stolen car is returned to you."

Lester drew in his breath. "I'll see it through."

"That's all right. Only I wonder if you know what there is to see through."

"I admit I'm scared," Lester said. "For a while I thought that there were just some gangsters involved. That would have been bad enough. But this thing is big because the men in it are big. You're a police captain, aren't you?"

"Uh-huh. John Radin, head of Coast City Homicide."

"And Neale offered to make you Police Commissioner if you played ball with him. You called him George Neale. Everybody's heard of George Neale, the political boss of Coast City. Who's Carter?"

"Vincent Carter, an assistant district attorney."

Lester sat peering at the dark, winding road for sight of his car.

"Big shots," he said bitterly. "Law enforcement officials. I'd feel safer with cutthroats."

"We're in Massachusetts now. Whatever weight we throw around in Coast City, we're on our own here."

"There's been a lot these days about George Neale in the New York newspapers," Lester said. "For the first time in twenty years he's having a fight on his hands for control of Coast City. There's a man named Preston or something fighting him."

"Harold Prescott," Captain Radin told him. "Head of the Citizens League. He's going to run for mayor against Neale's man this November, and there's a better than even chance he'll get elected. He's one of those do-gooders."

The sneer in Radin's voice annoyed Lester. "You wouldn't care for do-gooders. You couldn't have become a police captain without Neale's backing. Probably you'll be fired when Prescott gets in."

"Uh-huh. And now that I got on the wrong side of Neale, I'll lose my job no matter who wins."

"I'm grateful," Lester said quickly. "You sacrificed your career for me."

"That's what I get for being soft,"

Radin replied mockingly. "But don't worry about this baby. I've a habit of looking out for myself."

## CHAPTER V

### *Vanishing Lady*



CAPTAIN RADIN was driving at sixty-five, hardly slowing down at curves. Whenever they approached a car, Lester was alert to see whether it was his, but he caught no sight of it.

"What's in Ellen's week-end bag must be valuable to make everybody concerned so desperate," he said to Radin.

"Could be to the right person," the Homicide man told him. "I don't suppose Ellen gave you a hint of what was in it?"

"No."

"I guess she couldn't. You'd yell for the nearest cop." Radin frowned at the road. "Early this morning I was on a homicide case on the waterfront. The body was badly mangled. While I was looking into this I heard that George Neale was turning the town upside down looking for Ellen Bronson. Neale has a crowd of mugs, but for this job he needed police experience.

"That's how I got onto it. I wasn't far behind a couple of men Neale sent to visit a Mary Hatch. She was hysterical. They had just made her tell them that Ellen had borrowed her car and her husband's clothes. I figured Ellen would head for her brother's place in New Hampshire.

"In Connecticut I found her abandoned car. The rest was a break. Shortly after I pulled out of a service station, I passed a car—your car. I saw a man in it, but when I was past, through my mirror I saw another man straighten up. I pulled over to a side road and watched your car pass, and the second man looked a lot like Ellen Bronson. So I tailed the car."

"But you didn't stop us," Lester said drily. "You were waiting for an opportunity to steal the bag."

Captain Radin's hard mouth tightened in the ghost of a smile. "As a

Coast City cop I had no jurisdiction to stop her in this state. When you parked at that restaurant I parked back off the road."

"And found that the bag was locked in the car's trunk."

"Uh-huh. Let's say it was my duty to take it back to Coast City. Now forcing a car trunk lock isn't easy when you can be seen from the restaurant or the road. I figured on waiting for Ellen and waving a gun at her. I knew I had time. I walked to a service station a quarter of a mile back and phoned the New York License Bureau to find out who owned that New York car—your car. When I got back, I saw Neale's car outside the restaurant.

"I kept under cover. I saw you knock out Carter. That's a nice sock you have, Miles. I skirted the woods to see what was with Neale and Ellen. I was standing behind a tree when you smacked Neale and took his gun. I couldn't stop Ellen from getting away, because I didn't know she had your car keys until it was too late. How'd you happen to give them to her?"

"She stole them," Miles said sourly.

Radin nodded. "Smart girl, Ellen. She drove away. I was working back to my car to chase after Ellen when I saw that Neale and Carter had the drop on you, going to force you into their car. That was a bit too much to stand by and watch."

"Did you think they were going to kill me?"

Neale figured you knew too much. He's skating on thin ice. What would he have to lose by getting rid of you?"

"And what did you have to gain by saving me?"

Captain Radin grinned. "Not a thing. I'm getting soft. Any year now I'll become a do-gooder like Harold Prescott."

There were no towns, no houses, no farms. Moonlight vaguely showed hills in the north, and in the south were fields and woods. Lester, remembering the map, thought that they were not far from the Connecticut River.

Radin frowned at the road.

"Do you think she turned off somewhere? Lester asked.

"I doubt it. She'd figure that side roads would delay her, and she's in a hurry."

"The roads ahead are being watched."

"We know that. Does Ellen? I'll lay

odds she took the most direct road to North Paris."

"What will make her safer when she's with her brother?" asked Lester.

**T**HE dashlight showed a wry smile on Radin's lips.

"Her brother is quite a guy," he said. "Safer to keep him out of it. But if there's no choice—" Abruptly his square jaw ridged. "Look, Miles. If anything goes wrong, it may be a good idea for an outsider to know a little. What's in that bag belongs to Harold Prescott."

"What is it?" Lester asked.

"Probably I've told you too much already. That's all you'll have to know—if things go wrong."

Radin suddenly came down hard on the brakes. The car came to a shuddering halt.

"Did you see them?" Radin said.

"Who?"

"Two cars off the road. On the left side."

Radin was backing up. A car approached, he waited for it to pass, then resumed easing his coupé backward until his headlights shone fully on two cars parked past the shoulder of the road.

"My car!" Lester yelled.

"We're too late," Radin said.

He parked next to Lester's coupé. The car on the other side of it was a two-door sedan—from New Jersey.

Lester leaped out, pulled open the door of his car, but found nothing.

"Here's something," Radin called.

He was at the rear of Lester's coupé, his flashlight focused on the trunk.

"Keys in the lock," Radin pointed out. "Your keys, I suppose."

The three keys, including the trunk key, were still attached to the leather key-case. Lester nodded and raised the trunk lid.

His pigskin bag was in there, but Ellen's week-end bag was not. He locked the trunk, pulled out the key.

Captain Radin looked up and down the dark road.

"One of Neale's boys was waiting for a coupé with your license plate to pass," he said. "Ellen rounded the curve to find his car sprawled across the road, blocking her way."

"And she grabbed the bag out of the trunk and ran into the woods with it," Lester offered.

"No," Radin said. "The guy wouldn't

stop to park his car and then hers neatly off the side of the road before chasing after her. When Ellen had to stop he was standing on the road with a gun. She hadn't a chance. He forced her to park both cars off the road, out of sight of other cars coming along. He didn't want witnesses."

"Why didn't he take the bag and drive off?" Lester argued. "He didn't want anything but the bag."

"Didn't he?" Radin said quietly.

He looked at the woods. His hand slipped under his coat and came out with a short-barreled automatic. In the warm night Lester shivered.

"Good glory!" Lester said. "Do you think he took her into the woods to kill her?"

Radin didn't reply. He went past Lester's coupé, stopped.

"You've got your car back, Miles," he said. "There's nothing else in this for you."

Lester was in this through no wish of his own. Here was his chance to get out. That would be the same thing to do.

"I'm seeing it through," he said.

Radin shrugged and went into the woods. Lester followed the glow of the flashlight.

After twenty feet or so, Radin paused, bent down. His light covered a man's slouch hat.

"Ellen's?" Radin asked.

"It looks like it."

Walking on, Radin kept the flashlight beam pointed downward and partially shielded by his fingers so that it would not be visible from any distance. Lester followed at his heels.

The trees were tall and there was little undergrowth. The moonlight did not penetrate here.

Radin stopped again, snapped off his light.

"What—" Lester said, and broke off when Radin gripped his arm.

**A**HEAD and to the left Lester saw a light. His thumping heart was the only sound, until presently there was another—that of a man chuckling softly. And the chuckling voice said:

"I got all night, sweetheart."

Ellen was alive. Lester felt emotion choke him. The most important thing in the world, he suddenly realized, was that she was not dead.

Then he saw her. She was in a little clearing, standing in the bright spray of a flashlight—slim and straight in her men's clothes. But now that she had lost her hat, short black curls tumbled about ears and brow.

A man was a few feet away, sitting on a flat rock. In one hand he held a flashlight, in the other a revolver which looked enormous. Behind the flashlight, he was in shadow, but enough of him was visible to show a tall, thin body and a long, pinched face.

"You saw that the bag isn't in the car," Ellen was saying.

"I don't want to know where it isn't, sweetheart. I want to know where it is."

She tossed her curls.

"All right, I'll tell you. Neale and Carter took it."

"Where?"

"In a restaurant ten or fifteen miles back."

"And they let you go?"

"Yes."

The man chuckled again. Lester thought that it was the nastiest sound he had ever heard.

"They didn't let you go, sweetheart. Bag or no bag, you know too much. So you still got it. You hid it on the way."

Ellen was silent.

"So you're going to tell me where it is, sweetheart," the man said. He was enjoying the situation.

He was not like any of the others. Neale was a big-shot politician, Carter an assistant district attorney, Radin a detective-captain. There was desperation in their actions.

But this gaunt man, Lester felt, was evil for its own sake.

"I like talking to pretty girls," he was saying, "but I've had enough for a while. All I want to hear from you is where you hid the bag. If you ain't made up your mind in another minute, maybe a slug in the leg will help you."

"George Neale has it," Ellen said woodenly.

In the black darkness Lester whispered to Radin:

"Do something!"

"Wait!" Radin whispered back.

Radin would want to wait—until the man forced Ellen to reveal where she had hidden the bag. Because Radin was as determined as any of the others to get his hands on it.

Now Lester knew why Radin had

brought him along—not because he needed help, and certainly not because of friendliness. Radin wanted to keep him within reach because he was not convinced that he knew nothing about the bag.

"And if a forty-five slug in the leg don't open you up," the man went on, "I got a little knife that will. Like I said, I've got all night."

Ellen sagged.

She stood as if huddled against cold, and said nothing.

"The minute's passing quick," the man said, and pointed his gun down at her legs.

Frantically Lester groped for Radin.

"Do something!"

Radin shrugged him off.

Radin would stand by and see her shot, watch her being tortured, until she revealed where she had hidden that bag! Then Radin would take care of the gunman and go after the bag himself. He was letting somebody else do the dirty work for him!

"Time's nearly up, sweetheart. You talking?"

ELLEN'S head lifted, her firm chin jutted.

She thrust both hands under the waistline of her trousers, the thumbs hooked in the belt, and smiled.

"Brave, eh?" the man said, grudging admiration in his tone. "But let's see how brave you'll be when a slug smashes your kneecap."

"Do something!" Lester shouted soundlessly to himself. "You can't just stand and watch!"

He had been depending on Radin, who had a gun and who was a policeman. Though he knew now that all Radin cared about was the bag. There was only himself to save Ellen, and he was unarmed. Radin had made sure not to let him hang onto either Neale's or Carter's gun.

"In heaven's name, Radin!" he whispered urgently.

But Radin had stepped away in the darkness, and there was no time for Lester to find him. There was not even time to cover the distance between himself and the gunman in the futile hope that he would not himself be shot down before he reached the man.

"Here it comes, sweetheart! In the right knee."

## CHAPTER VI

*A Shy Corpse*

LESTER opened his mouth to shout. That might at least force Radin to take action.

The shout stopped in Lester's throat as Ellen spoke.

"You win," she said tonelessly.

The gun dipped. The man laughed. "That's a smart girl. Where is

it?"

"You're right—I hid it."

Ellen's shoulders slumped. She pulled her hands out of the waistband of her trousers—and there came the sharp crack of a small gun. It was not as loud as the tall man's scream.

"Radin!" Lester thought. "He's turned soft again!"

Then he saw the small automatic in Ellen's hand. The beam of the flashlight covering her wobbled. The man on the rock was swaying, struggling to keep upright, screaming and fighting for strength to bring his heavy gun to bear on her.

Ellen put a second bullet into him.

His scream was cut in two. His flashlight dropped from suddenly lax fingers, and darkness closed over him and Ellen.

For a moment all that Lester could see was the dull splash of light made by the flashlight which had fallen to the foot of the rock. Then that, too, was hidden as the man tumbled to the ground and covered the beam with his body.

"Ellen!" Lester heard somebody yell, then realized it was his own voice torn involuntarily from his throat.

Blindly he stumbled toward where he had last seen her. A cone of light cut through the darkness. That would be Radin's flashlight. Momentarily it paused at the still form at the base of the rock, then moved on and impaled Ellen Bronson. She was running toward the trees on the farther side of the clearing.

"Stop!" Radin barked.

She glanced over a shoulder, plunged on.

Radin's gun roared. Ellen didn't falter.

She vanished among the trees.

Lester was running toward Radin's light, yelling at him, cursing him. Radin ignored Lester, racing after Ellen. The trees swallowed him. A moment longer Lester saw his light, then came darkness and silence.

Lester, listening for another shot, an outcry, anything, was panting as if he were running. If only he had a light and a gun!

But there was a light and a gun. He groped forward. What moonlight filtered through the trees vaguely outlined the rock and the man lying beside it. He shoved a hand under the man's chest, found the flashlight, pulled it out. By its light he found the heavy revolver. The man had dropped it when he had been shot the second time.

Lester raced into the woods. He had no idea what he would do if he found Radin. Try to keep him from harming Ellen? Even though he knew Radin was too much for him—too tough and experienced?

He blundered on. Every now and then he paused to listen. He heard nothing but the chatter of insects.

Presently he saw a dim spot of light in the distance. He went toward it, and suddenly he was back in the clearing. He had made a complete circle.

It was Captain Radin's light. He was bending over the man who had been shot. Ellen was not there.

Radin rose. His gun was not in his hand; doubtless he had returned it to his shoulder holster. He did not appear troubled because Lester was pointing a gun at him. But he had faced Neale and Carter when they'd had guns, and that hadn't troubled him either.

"She got away," Radin said. "There's not a chance in the world to find her in the woods at night."

"You chased her to kill her!" Lester said tightly.

"Come now, Miles, do I look like a man who shoots down women?"

"You fired at her."

"You underestimate me, Miles. I don't miss what I want to hit. I shot over her head to persuade her to stop running. It didn't work." Radin smiled. "What a girl! She burned down Digger without batting an eye." He cocked his head, listening. "Ellen might try to skirt around to the cars. Maybe Digger left the key in his."

He started back toward the road.

LESTER looked down at the revolver in his hand. Radin was not afraid to turn his back to it. He was not afraid of anything.

Lester tagged after him.

The three cars stood where they had left them.

Radin pulled out a pack of cigarettes and extended it to Lester.

"Put up that gun, Miles," Radin said. "If I wanted to get it away from you, I could."

"This one I'm keeping," Lester told him.

Radin shrugged indifferently. Lester dropped the heavy revolver into his pocket, knowing that he couldn't fight Radin with guns—if he had to fight him.

He accepted a cigarette and said, "So you know the man Ellen shot."

"I know most of the Coast City mugs. Digger Denkin was one of George Neale's strong-arm boys. A tough customer, but he died because he was a gentleman."

"What was he—a mug or a gentleman?"

Radin grinned. "Both, in this case. He must have frisked Ellen. He was too careful an operator not to. But because she was a woman, he only patted her pockets. He didn't try to find out if she carried a gun under her belt." Radin was amused. "Maybe not exactly a gentleman. Let's say Digger was merely shy. So now he's a corpse."

"She killed him in self-defense," Lester said. "She shot him the moment before he was going to shoot her."

"Oh, sure. And no doubt she gave George Neale the same sort of chance. But she would've killed Neale too if you hadn't saved his life."

Lester stared at him in bewilderment.

"Isn't it clear?" Radin said, with that amused smile. "Neale had Ellen covered. He didn't suspect any more than Digger did that Ellen carried a little gun in her waistband. When you socked Neale, you thought you were saving her, but it was the other way around. Girls like Ellen Bronson have a big advantage. They look so soft and pretty and helpless, but how they make suckers out of men!"

"Like she did me," Lester thought.

She had got him into this mess, then had stolen his car. Would she have used her little gun on him if she had considered it necessary?

"She killed Digger in self-defense," he repeated, as if needing to convince himself.

"So what? Chances are Digger's body won't be found for days, and then it'll be only another unsolved mystery for the local police."

"You mean," Lester said slowly, "that you're not going to tell the police about this?"

Radin shrugged. "What for? As you said, it was self-defense. All we'll accomplish would be to get ourselves tangled in red tape."

"You're a police captain," Lester reminded Radin. "How would you act if somebody kept a killing from you in Coast City?"

"I wouldn't like it. But here I'm far from my jurisdiction." Radin flicked ashes from his cigarette. "Are you anxious to hand Ellen over to the cops?"

"It's our duty to tell what happened here."

"Duty!" Radin laughed as if that were a particularly good joke. "If you lived in Coast City, you'd be one of Harold Prescott's do-gooders." Abruptly his laughter ceased. His tone became crisp. "I'm telling you, Miles—let it lay."

"You're afraid that if there's an investigation of this shooting, all the rest will come out," Lester said angrily. "Especially about what's in Ellen's bag."

"Don't try to be too smart, Miles," Radin told him softly. He dropped his cigarette to the ground, stepped on it. "There's your car, Miles. Get into it, drive on, and be thankful you got out of this so easy."

The Captain politely opened the door of Lester's coupé, closed it when Lester was behind the wheel.

"Use your head, Miles." Radin was leaning against the car door, his elbow resting on the window frame. "You're an amateur among professionals. You've nothing to gain, about everything to lose. Open your mouth to anybody about any of this, and I'll testify that you shot Digger Denkin in cold blood. My word will carry weight. And I wouldn't be surprised that Ellen Bronson will corroborate what I say. Catch on?"

"I catch on," Lester said quietly.

THIS was what he had wanted to do from the first—mind his own business. He had his car back, and Radin was giving him the chance to turn his back on

the whole mess.

"Good-by, Captain Radin," he said, and backed his coupé out to the road.

When it was pointed toward New Hampshire, he looked back. Radin had snapped off his flashlight, was invisible. And the two parked cars were two distorted humps in the night.

Before Lester Miles had gone more than a couple of miles, he became aware of a knock in his motor. He slowed down, listened. Not a knock but a rattle, as if something loose had fallen on the motor and was bouncing with its vibration.

He pulled over to the side of the road, got out, lifted the hood. The flashlight beam revealed everything apparently in order.

And then he saw Ellen's bag.

It was jammed in under the battery. And what he had heard had been the handle of the bag slapping against the cylinder head. The bag was not visible at a glance.

He had found it only because he had been looking for something.

Smart girl, Captain Radin had said of her. When Digger Denkin hadn't found the bag in the car or in the trunk, he had assumed that Ellen had hidden it somewhere. So had Radin.

Lester felt a vast hollowness in the pit of his stomach. He was in it again, deeper than before. He was in possession of the bag for which men were ready to torture and kill, and for which a sweet, attractive young girl like Ellen Bronson had shot a man. He was stuck with it.

Headlights approached from the south. Panic hit him. He snapped out his flashlight, but the headlights of his own car were on, making him and the car visible. He remembered Digger Denkin's gun in his pocket and put his hand on it.

The headlights rushed by. It was a Massachusetts car. Lester, again alone on the road, dug the bag out, closed the hood, placed the bag beside him on the seat.

He ran his car off the road and cut the lights.

He placed the lighted flashlight on the seat and the bag on the floor. There was no lock on the bag—only two clasps. He opened them and lifted the top.

The bag contained two human hands, each severed at the wrist.

Lester straightened up with a jerk,

breathing as if he'd just run a great distance. When his trembling lessened, he directed the flashlight beam into the bag.

The hands had belonged to a middle-aged man. They were wrinkled at the knuckles and covered with fuzzy blond hair. Cultured hands, refined hands, showing no sign of physical work, the nails manicured.

There was a signet ring on the small finger on the left hand. The initials on the ring read: "H. P."

Lester Miles didn't need those initials to tell him to whom those hands had belonged. Radin had mentioned that what was in the bag belonged to Harold Prescott.

Lester closed the bag and looked south. Nothing but darkness, but Neale and Carter were bound to be somewhere not far behind; Radin also, and perhaps ahead were still others. All after Mr. Prescott's hands. All prepared to kill for them.

He replaced the bag under the hood. When he was back in the car, his hands shook so that he had trouble turning the ignition key. He meant to drive as fast as he could to the nearest town and turn the bag and its grisly contents over to the first policeman he saw.

**W**ITH the motor running, he hesitated. Ellen Bronson would be charged with murder. Two murders, for she had killed Digger Denkin only to avoid giving him Mr. Prescott's hands. What had Radin said about her? "Girls like Ellen Bronson look so soft and pretty and helpless, and how they make suckers out of men!" He was through being used by her.

Savagely he twisted the wheel, ran the coupé back onto the road. He saw headlights coming up fast behind him. Frantically he tried to speed up, but he had only just shifted into high gear when the car behind him tore past—a two-toned green sedan. Two men were in the front seat.

The sedan's brakes squealed. The sedan slowed, turned broadside to the road, stopped. Lester had to apply his own brakes or crash into the car.

Two men tumbled out of the sedan—George Neale and Vincent Carter. In their home town they were highly respectable citizens, a political boss and an assistant district attorney, but here they were two desperate men ready to kill.

## CHAPTER VII

*Ready to Kill*

ULLING Digger Denkin's heavy revolver out of his pocket, Lester held it against his right knee and sat tight.

The two men came up to the coupé. Somewhere Neale had got hold of another gun. He waved it at Lester.

"Where's Ellen Bron-

son?" he demanded.

"I don't know," Lester said.

"Who killed Digger Denkin?"

"I never heard that name before," Lester said.

"We found his car off the road a little way back. We looked for Digger and found him dead in the woods." Neale poked his gun through the window. "How'd you get your car back?"

"Radin and I found it parked with another car," Lester told him. "Ellen must have abandoned it. The key was still in the ignition. Radin searched the car, then told me to beat it. I did."

"Radin must have shot Digger and taken the bag!" Carter wailed.

Neale scowled at him. "Then what do you think happened to Ellen?"

"She's with him," declared Carter.

"I don't believe it. Radin always plays his own game. He wants that bag for blackmail." Neale turned back to Lester. "Did Radin pass you in his car?"

"No."

"Maybe he took a side road." Neale chewed his lower lip. "How do we know the bag isn't still in the car?" he demanded of Lester Miles. "Let's have your keys."

Lester plucked the keys out of the ignition lock and handed them to Neale, who passed them to Carter. The big man went to the rear of the car and searched the trunk. Then he came to the left door and pulled it open. Lester's gun was between his knees, out of sight. What should he do if they thought of looking under the hood?

They didn't. Carter banged the door shut and lumbered over to Neale.

"What's going to happen to us now?" he groaned.

Neale's face twisted. "We're by no

means through. Ellen is headed for her brother's. I think Radin will go there too."

"No!" Carter said thickly. "We haven't a chance."

"You yellow rat!" Neale growled. "Give me those keys!"

He snatched them from Carter and threw them into the darkness beyond the road.

"That'll keep Miles here for a while."

"You're going to let him go?" Carter asked.

Neale looked at Lester, and Lester's finger tightened on the trigger.

"He doesn't matter," Neale snapped. "We're after the ones who do."

He strode to the sedan. Carter tagged sheepishly after him. They drove off.

Lester breathed a weary sigh. He waited for the tail-light of the sedan to disappear, then he leaned down and lifted the floor mat. A spare set of keys lay there. He started the motor and drove slowly.

Ellen Bronson would go on to her brother's place. She would hire a car, or steal one, or get a lift. For all he knew, she might be in that Massachusetts car which had passed a short time ago. And Neale and Carter and maybe some of their henchmen—men as tough and ruthless as Digger Denkin—would follow her.

She had to be warned.

He stopped at a roadhouse. Neale had said there was no telephone in Bronson's New Hampshire home, but he had to find out. He called Information and drew a blank. No telephone for a party named Bronson in that section of the state.

But Ellen had to be warned. Whatever she had done, he wanted to be with her, help her, fight her fight.

All right, he was a sucker. Just the same, he was driving to North Paris.

HE AVOIDED the main highways and did not turn toward New Hampshire until he passed Fitchburg, Massachusetts. It was slower, but safer. He had no desire to be again stopped by men with guns.

But he was stopped, shortly after he crossed the state line. The needle of his fuel gauge pointed dangerously near empty. He had hoped to make Nashua, since in a city he would be able to buy gas at that hour, but in the midst of nowhere the motor sputtered and died.

And he hadn't passed even a farmhouse in miles.

Nothing had gone right since he had picked up Ellen Bronson in the late afternoon. Now all he could do was wait where he was until daylight. Wait with Mr. Prescott's hands.

Lester knew he had dozed off only when he abruptly awoke with the rising sun in his eyes. He got out to stretch his legs and a small milk truck passed. The driver gave him a lift to a service station which was just opening. It was six-thirty.

At ten minutes to seven he was on his way with a full tank.

All the others must have reached North Paris long ago. But perhaps he was not too late, for he possessed the one thing that mattered—Mr. Prescott's hands. And he was driving directly into danger. Twelve hours ago it would not have occurred to him to be so incredibly foolhardy, but much had happened in those twelve hours.

When he reached North Paris he discovered that the town consisted of a general store and houses scattered on either side of the highway. Lester went into the store.

"Bronson?" the wizened man behind the counter said. "You mean the district attorney?"

Lester frowned. "The local district attorney?"

"This Bronson comes from Coast City, New Jersey. Warren Bronson, the district attorney there. He has a summer place over past Blueberry Ridge."

The name clicked then. In the New York newspaper accounts of the political struggle in Coast City between George Neale and Harold Prescott, Warren Bronson was often mentioned. As Lester recalled it, Bronson had been one of Neale's men, but some time ago he had broken with the political boss and lined up with Prescott.

Nothing but big shots involved in this hideous business. And what, Lester asked himself, was he, a stick-in-the-mud accountant from another city doing in this?

"First dirt road on the left," the storekeeper was saying. "When it ends, you're there."

The rutted dirt road wasn't much more than a cow path, hardly wide enough for one car. Once started up it, there was no way to turn until the end—no way to

escape if a car came toward him or up from behind.

The road ended at a broad, flat, grassy stretch, and there were two buildings, a barn and a sprawling house with many gables. Each structure was at least a hundred years old—maybe older.

Only one car was parked in front of the barn—no doubt Warren Bronson's. None of the others had as yet arrived, or had come and gone, or had hidden their cars nearby.

Lester parked and, keeping his hand on the gun in his pocket, got out. The view from here was magnificent—hills rolling off into infinity. He moved along the side of the barn—and saw a man's shoe. It was protruding from the far corner of the barn, and it was attached to a leg.

For a breathless moment Lester stared at it.

He looked back at the quiet house, then went to that corner of the barn.

The shoe belonged to Vincent Carter. The rest of the assistant district attorney looked like a bag of potatoes tossed carelessly against the wall of the barn. Blood, drying rapidly in the morning heat, formed a ragged splotch over the large area of jacket between the shoulders.

Lester compelled himself to touch the upturned cheek. Carter was dead. He had been stabbed in the back, and perhaps there had not yet been time to get his body out of the way.

LESTER clenched his hands to keep them from shaking.

"Get out of here!" an inner voice said. "This is none of your business. It never has been."

But what about Ellen? He had to know.

He was halfway to the house when a woman appeared. Tall and attractive, she wore a flowered housecoat and her bare feet were in sandals.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"Is Ellen here?" he asked.

Fear crossed her face. "Warren!" she shouted.

A man in white ducks and a white T-shirt appeared around a corner of the house. He was a tall, husky, masculine edition of his sister Ellen.

A rifle rested on the crook of his arm. His finger was on the trigger and the muzzle covered Lester's chest.

"Did Ellen get here yet?" Lester asked. Warren Bronson looked at Lester's coupé and smiled.

"I suppose you're the New Yorker who gave Ellen a lift?"

"I was the sucker, if that's what you mean."

The woman moved to Warren Bronson's side. Lester guessed that she was his wife.

"Darling," she said, "he got his car back! What does it mean?"

"We'll see," Bronson said. Then to Lester: "Go into the house."

It was an order. Bronson waited until Lester was past, then he and his wife followed. The skin between Lester's shoulders tightened, as if against the coming impact of a rifle bullet. Now that he had brought the bag to them, would they want to get rid of him?

Sucker! When would he stop being a sucker? And suddenly he was no longer afraid. Rage was too strong in him to allow room for fear.

He entered the house and found himself in a large, square hall. Ellen Bronson was coming down the stairs.

She wore a pale green dress and her legs were lovely in nylon stockings. She had put on make-up—not much; just enough. It was the first time he had seen her in women's clothes.

He thought he had never seen anybody so beautiful.

"I saw you from the window," she said, and smiled. "I see you got your car back."

It was a pleasant enough smile, but it drove anger deeper into Lester.

He had done her dirty work for her. He had brought Mr. Prescott's hands to her.

"I got the car back," he said, "after you shot Digger Denkin."

She stopped on the lowest step and grasped the banister. The smile had left her face. Lester glanced around and saw that Bronson and his wife stood behind him and that the rifle was still trained on him.

"I thought it was Captain Radin I ran away from," Ellen was saying.

"I was with him."

There was a silence. Lester sidled his back against the wall so he could face all three of them at once.

"Warren, you can put that rifle down," Ellen said. "He's harmless."

Her brother lowered the rifle. Lester

took the heavy revolver out of his pocket.

"I'm tired having guns pointed at me," he said. "I'll do the pointing for a change. I may be harmless, but I've stopped being a sucker."

"Did you come here to tell us that?" Ellen said tonelessly.

"No," he told her bitterly. "I came here because I think I've fallen in love with you. I'm admitting that to give you a laugh."

Nobody laughed. Ellen looked at him, and it was as if she were pleased by what she saw.

He pulled his eyes away from her. "But that's not the whole reason. I came to return Harold Prescott's hands."

Bronson studied the revolver curiously. "So you're not just a poor innocent?"

"I've learned. I've been compelled to learn."

"Is my bag still in your car?" Ellen asked breathlessly. "We'd about given it up."

Lester didn't answer that. He said grimly: "I'm wondering what you intend for me now. Am I slated to be murdered like Vincent Carter has been?"

MRS. BRONSON uttered a choked cry. Ellen and Warren Bronson stared at him.

"What about Carter?" Bronson said.

"You'll find him behind your barn. He died of a knife in his back."

Ellen found her voice. "And you think we did it?"

"I saw you shoot Digger Denkin."

"He gave me no choice."

"All right, that was self-defense," Lester conceded. "And Carter came here to kill. But you didn't defend yourself against him. He was stabbed in the back."

"I don't believe it," Ellen said.

Bronson shrugged. "Let's see for ourselves." He moved toward door, holding the rifle by the barrel.

"Leave the rifle here," Lester snapped.

Bronson's mouth twisted sardonically. He placed the rifle against the wall, and they all went out, with Lester bringing up the rear, and this time he was the one who had the gun. It was as if he were standing outside himself, incredulously watching himself. Because he was no longer the man he had been a few hours ago. Anger had changed him.

## CHAPTER X

*Dead Man's Hands*

WHEN they reached Carter's body, they found Captain John Radin standing over it. His car was not in sight. He must have parked some distance back so that he would not be observed approaching the house.

The sight of the detective-captain frightened the two women more than did the sight of the murdered man. Ellen stopped abruptly and crossed her arms at her shoulders. Mrs. Bronson gave a half-stifled moan. Lester felt the revolver become heavy in his hand.

"The rats gather," Warren Bronson commented drily. "Though I don't think, Captain, that you'd knife a man in the back."

The accusation seemed to amuse Radin. He didn't take the trouble to defend himself. He leaned one shoulder indolently against the barn wall and smiled at Lester's revolver.

"I see I underestimated you, Miles. Maybe I shouldn't have let you keep Digger's gun. Stop pointing it at me."

Radin's hand was not near his shoulder-holster. Yet he was sure of himself, was giving the orders. Lester's teeth clicked. His anger reached out to enclose the red-headed detective as well as the others. He was surprised that his hand holding the revolver was so steady.

"I've been pushed into this against my will," he said. "Now I'm staying in for a while. Ellen, he's got a gun under his left shoulder. Take it."

Listlessly, Ellen obeyed. And Radin stood completely relaxed, his hard mouth smiling crookedly, as she plucked the automatic out from under his shoulder.

"Bring that gun to me," Lester snapped.

The words sounded ridiculous as soon as they were out of his mouth. If she refused, he couldn't shoot her. He couldn't shoot any of them in cold blood, not even Radin. He was relieved when she handed him the automatic, then moved back to where her brother and sister-in-law stood.

Radin beamed at Lester, as if proud of him. "Not bad for an amateur, Miles. But what will it get you?"

Lester wasn't sure. He felt like a caricature of a Western badman. But he had all the guns in sight, and that was what counted. Nobody would keep poking any more at him for a while. What about Ellen's little gun? He looked her over and decided that she couldn't have it anywhere under that simple dress.

"I'll get some truth, maybe," Lester answered Radin. "Ellen, how did you get hold of Prescott's hands?"

"I stole them."

"If we're going to have a discussion here around a dead man," Warren Bronson said testily, "it's all right with me. Ellen is my confidential secretary. Neale's grip on Coast City politics is so great that even in my own office, the district attorney's office, I can trust nobody but my own sister." He scowled down at the dead man. "It's obvious now that Carter, one of my top assistants, was secretly one of Neale's men."

"What I want to know," Radin asked, "is which one of Neale's goons knocked off Prescott?"

"It was George Neale himself," Ellen told him promptly.

Radin's eyebrows arched. "He's not that dumb."

"He was when he did that the night before last," Ellen said. "And I know enough to know that the reason grew out of the fact that a year or two ago Neale used his influence to cover up a murder committed by one of his lieutenants. I don't know the details, but it's plain enough that Neale made himself an accessory. So did Carter, because he used the district attorney's office to cover up after Neale. Somehow Prescott got hold of the evidence to prove how Neale was involved. Neale and Carter heard of it and went to his house and tried to bribe him. Prescott turned him down cold. He even went to the phone to call the Governor right then and there, so Neale got panicky and shot Prescott."

RADIN clucked his tongue. "Corny stuff, cutting off the wrists," he commented. "Cops can identify bodies in other ways."

"What happened," Ellen said, "was that Neale got one of his goons, Creep Flint, to get rid of the body. He was

supposed to tie weights to it and throw it into the river."

Radin grinned. "I get the picture now. Creep cut off the hands and let Neale know it. Figured he could turn a pretty penny through blackmail. Pay up or I use these hands to prove that Prescott was murdered. The mere fact that Prescott was murdered automatically pointed to Neale as the murderer."

"Yes," Ellen said. "Creep Flint knew that what he was doing was dangerous to himself. Yesterday morning he brought the hands in a small bag to Carter in the district attorney's offices. He thought he would be safe in doing that, for if anything went wrong he could run to Warren for protection. Most of the staff was away on vacation, and Carter and I were almost the only ones there. I'd relieved the switchboard girl for a few minutes and I heard Carter put through a call to Neale and ask him to come right over."

"Carter was always a dope," Radin commented. "Why did he have Neale come there?"

"He had no choice," Ellen explained. "Creep Flint refused to leave or turn over the hands until he was paid right then and there. There's a small store-room attached to Carter's private office and an entrance to it from the outer office, so I hid in there. When Neale arrived, I heard everything that was said. Neale brought money and gave it to Creep Flint, and Creep turned the bag over to him and Carter."

"Anybody want to bet that Flint is a corpse?" Radin said. "Mugs don't blackmail George Neale and live."

Ellen brushed a hand over her curls. She looked undisturbed by Lester's gun. But carefully she avoided looking at the dead man.

"It was Carter's job to get rid of the hands," she went on. "I followed him. I had a gun. I held him up as he was getting into his car and took the bag away from him."

Radin chuckled. "Didn't I tell you she was quite a girl, Miles?"

Lester flushed. He was being kidded by Radin. He was convinced that he made a preposterous picture standing there with those two guns, while Ellen and Radin did all the talking. They had completely taken the play away from him.

Lester plunged into the talk, asserting

himself. "I can guess the rest of it," he said. "Ellen, you knew that Neale and Carter and their mugs would be right behind you. You didn't dare hide the hands in Coast City because you knew they had ways to make you talk. And there was nobody but your brother you could trust, and he was in New Hampshire. You couldn't communicate with him because he has no phone here. So you dressed as a man and borrowed a car and headed here. Once you got here with the hands, your brother would turn them over to the local police for safe-keeping and Neale and Carter would be in the soup."

"I'm sorry I stole your car," Ellen said woodenly, "but I couldn't trust anybody. Neale is lavish with bribes and guns." She turned her head toward the red-headed detective. "And there was Captain Radin on my trail, too. I feared him most."

"Come now, Ellen," Radin chided her. "I'm not such a bad guy."

"You'd want those hands for your own purpose, Captain," Warren Bronson said tightly. "Probably to make a deal with Neale for a better job. Say the job of Police Commissioner?"

"Could be," Radin didn't hesitate to admit. "Only I'm an old softy. I had to go and save Miles here from Neale and antagonize the big boss. He made me offers, but they didn't mean anything, because Neale doesn't forgive." He grinned at Lester's guns. "And that's your gratitude."

"At any rate, Captain," Lester said, "I doubt that you murdered Carter. I've come to know you pretty well since last night, and I can't see you stabbing a man in the back. You'd kill a man, but not by sneaking up behind him."

"I'm flattered, Miles," Radin told him, with only a trace of mockery. "But why did you come here, and why are you throwing your weight around? Because you're after the hands, or because you've already got them?"

"I've got them."

"Ah." Radin turned to face the district attorney. "Did you knife Carter?"

"My bet is that you did, Captain," Bronson said.

"Wait a minute," Lester said. "Carter was a coward. I think that when he got here and saw that Ellen had arrived, he realized that the game was up. His nerve gave way completely. Neale sus-

pected that Carter would give state's evidence to save his own skin, and so Neale pulled out a knife and—"

**H**E BROKE off. Radin's broad shoulders had jerked.

"You say Neale knifed Carter?" Radin said in a curious tone.

"I'm sure of it," Lester replied. "I saw how Carter's nerve was failing. They got here this morning, and after Neale knifed Carter he left because—" Again he broke off. "You think Neale didn't leave?"

Warren Bronson said hoarsely, "Neale wouldn't leave here without—"

They all froze at the sound of a low chuckle.

Neale, looking jaunty in his blue slacks and yellow polo shirt, came around the corner of the barn. His gun was in his hand.

"Without the bag?" Neale finished Bronson's sentence. "Precisely. Look behind you, Miles."

Lester looked over his shoulder. He saw the blank barn wall, but when he raised his eyes he saw a window some ten feet above the ground. Framed in the window were two strange faces. Hard, impassive faces. Neale must have collected his remaining thugs who had been watching the roads for Ellen. Each of them had a gun angled down at Lester's head.

"So you'll drop both your guns, Miles," Neale was saying.

The silence in that clear morning air was like death. Then it was broken by a ragged whimper from Mrs. Bronson who was sagging against her husband. The district attorney stood like a rock. Ellen's hands were clasped in front of her in an attitude of strained waiting. Captain Radin kicked at a blade of grass and looked disgusted.

"If you don't drop those guns at once," Neale said softly, "one of my boys will put a bullet in your head."

The guns felt heavy and awkward and futile in Lester's hands, but clinging to them was like clinging to life. There was nothing but those guns between him and death, between the others and slaughter, and yet what use were they now?

"Listen!" he said. "You were in the barn while we were talking here. You were waiting for one of us to tell where Harold Prescott's hands are. You had to reveal yourself when we realized that

although you'd murdered Carter you were still nearby."

"So?" Neale said.

"You heard me admit that I have the hands. I'm the only one who does know where they are. If you shoot me, you'll never get them."

"That'll be all right with me," Neale said, smiling. "I'd like them never to be found. Are you dropping those guns?"

And then what? Neale couldn't afford to let live anybody who knew he had murdered Prescott.

"And I did this to them," Lester thought dully. "I disarmed Bronson and then Radin and put them at Neale's mercy."

Radin's eyes were on him, steady and intense, as if trying to tell him something. And Radin's right hand moved slightly in an underhand gesture as if tossing something invisible. A sign of what?

"All right, if you want it now," Neale said crisply, and he lifted his eyes to signal the men at the window to shoot.

Lester threw the revolver into Neale's face.

**I**NSTINCTIVELY Neale flung up a hand to ward off the missile. Lester didn't see the rest. He was spinning, close against the barn wall, and he glimpsed two thugs up there gaping, momentarily stunned by the nature of the attack. Then they leaned far out of the window to bring their guns to bear on him.

The heavy automatic jumped in Lester's hand. He was shooting wildly up at that window, but the shots drove the thugs back from their exposed position.

From the ground came a shot. Lester glanced around. Radin and Neale were both on the ground. Neale was motionless, probably knocked out by Radin. And Radin had grabbed the revolver and was shooting up at the window.

Above a man screamed. Something fell from the window, and when it hit the ground Lester saw that it was a gun. One of the thugs hung limply over the sill, half in and half out. Radin had shot him dead.

"Keep the other one away from the window!" Radin yelled at Lester.

Radin was running, and he disappeared around the corner of the barn.

Bronson and his wife and Ellen were huddled against the barn wall, as far as

they could get out of line with the window.

**L**ESTER swung back toward the window and shot up at it. The thug up there was not visible. The shots were keeping him back, or else he was in flight. Lester held his fire.

A single shot sounded in the barn. Then breathless, almost unendurable silence.

Captain Radin came around the corner of the barn. He was grinning.

"That takes care of that," he said cheerfully.

Lester Miles was suddenly wearier than he had thought a man could be. He leaned against the barn.

"What a blow-up there'll be when we get back to Coast City," Radin was saying to Bronson. "Neale will stand trial for murder. His machine will be

smashed. You and I, Bronson, will be sitting on top of the heap. You'll be mayor for the asking. I'll settle for the job of Police Commissioner."

Holding one arm about his wife, Bronson thoughtfully rubbed his chin with his other hand. "You've got something there, Captain. We'll discuss it later."

Already, Lester thought bitterly, they were dividing up Coast City. He didn't care. All that mattered to him was that now he would be able to drive on to his sister's place.

Ellen was at his side. She put a soft hand on his arm.

"I think you're wonderful," she said.

He looked down into her glowing black eyes, into her lovely face. He felt nothing at all. Maybe later it would be different. His one desire now was to get away from here—away from guns and dead men and politicians.



## *Headliners in the Next Issue*

**T**HERE'S all the thrill of an exciting horse race—plus the added thrill of a race with death—in **HOMICIDE HANDICAP**, the exciting Keene Madden mystery novelet by Stewart Sterling coming in our next issue. Keene Madden, West Coast head of the Thoroughbred Racing Protective Bureau, literally gallops into action when crooked "fixers" go as far as murder. The result is a fast and furious yarn—packed with suspense and surprises from start to finish line! Look forward to **HOMICIDE HANDICAP**—the odds are in favor of your finding it one of the best mystery yarns you ever read.

**O**UR next issue also brings you another entertainment-packed novelet—**THE MAYOR IS DEAD**, by B. J. Benson. This yarn features Mike Dobson, private detective, who has appeared in previous stories—and this time Mike is appointed by the Governor to clean up the crooked town of Jefferton, which needs a pretty thorough going over. And that's just what Mike Dobson gives it when he takes the trail of the killer who did away with the town's mayor. It's a tense and terrific tale!

**P**ARDON us for laughing—but there's another hilarious Willie Klump yarn on the way for our next issue. It's **THE GAT AND THE MOUSE**, and Willie is at his rollicking best in it—as he tackles an assorted selection of crimes, including an armored car robbery and an attempted jailbreak. Willie has his own methods, too—and they work again in **THE GAT AND THE MOUSE**, much to everybody's surprise, including Willie's!

**S**HORT stories by other favorite writers round out an excellent issue, which also includes **CLUE OF THE FALSE APPEARANCE**, an exciting true story of crime by Jackson Hite. One of our series on "Little Known Facts About Well Known Crimes," this feature goes into some astonishing facts about the famous Lonergan case. The next issue's **TOPS** from cover to cover!

# MARRIED to

Danny grasped Steve's wrist and twisted it, while Janet suddenly jumped up in fury



a novelet by

## NORMAN A. DANIELS

### CHAPTER I

#### *Murder on His Mind*

THEY looked like any ordinary couple in a neat convertible, rolling along a country road and quite oblivious to the changing autumn colors about them, or to the sound of the sea from somewhere beyond the cliff's edge.

Janet shivered, for it was cold enough to require a heater going and the top of the convertible up, but they were so close to their destination that it would have been foolish to stop and go through all this. Janet missed a glove, dug a hand down behind the seat cushion and ferreted out the brown glove. She shook a little rice and confetti off it.

# MURDER



*Wealthy Dan Adair had ideas about the murder of his brother, but when he married the suspected killer, folks wondered!*

"Danny"—she blew the confetti at him as he turned—"let's get married every other week. It's so much fun."

Dan Adair laughed, patted her cheek, and when she pouted at him, he kissed her soundly with an utter disregard for the curving road they traveled.

It was an astounding thing, Danny told himself, how two such widely di-

versified feelings could exist at the same time in the same person. He was in love with Janet, and revolted by her. His mind had been made up for some time. If she had done what he felt only she could have—then he was bound to kill her.

"Janet," he said "are you sure you don't mind living at the house—that is,

after what's happened?"

"Of course not." Janet smiled. "I'm not afraid of houses just because people have died in them. I only wish our honeymoon could be more pleasant for you, darling."

"It's no honeymoon at all," he said, looking straight ahead.

In a moment now they would top the ridge and he would be able to look down at the old house and the cliff—and the spot where Russ had gone to his death.

"It's enough for me," Janet sighed contentedly. "Just being with you."

He wondered how she could act it out so well. Janet, the murderess! Janet, the loving newly-wed. If she hadn't lied about it, he would never have been overcome by this obsession. But Russ had been murdered. True, the police didn't say so. They put it down as an accident. Something that might easily happen to a cripple who was confined to a wheel-chair. Even Danny might have believed this—if Janet had told the truth.

**A** MOMENT later they saw the house with its gables and turrets, and its widow's walk encased in a railing and overlooking the sea. The place was almost a hundred years old, set amidst rolling countryside that ended abruptly at the cliff's edge.

"It's lovely!" Janet suddenly held his arm tightly. "Oh, Danny, it's the loveliest place I've ever seen!"

"Russ liked it," Danny said in a low voice.

"You can't get over him, can you, Danny? Tell me about Russell. You've never really said much since he died. Before that it was Russ all the time, but only in general terms. I want to know what sort of a man he was."

Danny could hardly believe it. Her voice was warm and tender. She could talk about the man she had murdered as though what she had done had been a kind and charitable act.

"Russ?" Danny said. "He was—just Russ. Eight years older than I. He practically raised me after Dad and Mother were killed. Then Russ got polio. It left him a wheel-chair cripple and I took over. We had plenty of money. Since his death, his share has become mine. We're quite wealthy, Janet."

She nodded. "I assumed as much, though it really doesn't matter. How long shall we live here, Danny?"

"Does it make any difference?" he asked.

"Only that—perhaps I could help do something that might free a too vivid memory of Russ from your mind. I know how much you loved him, and what he thought of you."

"How did you know that?" he interrupted roughly.

"Why, from what you've told me, of course. Let's not talk about it now. I can't talk any more now. My heart is too full of—yes, gladness. Because Russell's death shouldn't affect us, Danny."

"That's easy for you to say. You never knew or saw Russ."

"I know that, but I married his brother, and I want to make you happy. I can't unless you help yourself, and grieving over him . . . Danny, try to see it my way."

"All right." He turned the car into the long, sloping driveway to the house. "I won't be morbid on my wedding trip. Anyway, here we are. Be sure to like it, Janet, because we might live here a long, long time."

She stepped out of the car and breathed in the crisp, tangy air. Again Danny wondered how she could possibly be what he had branded her as being. A mercenary murderess! She was so downright pretty. Not flamboyantly so, but her hair was just the right shade of brown and her eyes were the lovely gray he had always admired. She had even lips, well-shaped. She reached almost to his chin, and was built like a little doll. Now, encased in her silver fox jacket, head thrown back, she looked like a goddess.

He found himself close beside her, his arms around her, and she bent willingly into his embrace. He kissed her, tenderly at first and then hard. It was so odd, this feeling of love and revulsion. The two shouldn't exist together. They were incompatible, rubbing like pieces of sandpaper, and were making his life a torment already.

Because, as he kissed her, he was scheming. The doorbell would show. At least give a slight indication. He led her onto the porch.

"Wait here for me," he said, "while I fetch the bags. I can't leave them for

Lissy. She's getting too old to handle heavy things."

He returned with a bag under each arm and gripping two more with his fingers.

"Be a good girl," he said, "and announce our arrival. Lissy is probably in the kitchen, and hasn't heard us."

"Of course," Janet said.

She raised a gloved hand to the big knocker set high in the door. The hand hesitated, then came down. Beside the door frame was one of a pair of owl heads, set on either side of the door. This one secreted an electric bell. When the owl's beak was pushed, the connection sounded a fairly loud bell. But unless one was quite familiar with the fact that there was a bell in this odd place—put there solely for the use of Russ so he might reach it easily from his wheelchair—any visitor would have automatically used the brass knocker.

Danny's lips tightened and his eyes grew colder when he saw Janet touch the bell without any further hesitation. She was humming a bit as she stepped back.

"Darling," she asked, "what is Lissy like? Will we get along, do you think?"

"You will, or you won't," Danny told her. It was hard to keep the deadly coldness out of his voice. "Lissy likes you, or doesn't like you. There's never a halfway for her. But why shouldn't she like you?"

"I don't know," Janet said. "I just worry about those things."

He forced a laugh. "Lissy is about sixty. She took care of my grandparents and—mark this—she considers the house as much her property as it is mine. She'll boss the devil out of you, but after a while you'll like it. She lives about two and a half miles further up the road. Has her own little house and goes back and forth in a car that looks as old as Lissy herself."

THE door opened and Lissy was there, red-faced from the hot kitchen, and there were dabs of flour on her forehead. She went past Janet, hugged Danny, bags and all, then turned to Danny's new wife.

Lissy had a thin face and spare body. With her head cocked slightly to one side, she reminded Janet of a rooster trying to select a harem. For some reason the thought made Janet smile.

"She's a pretty child." Lissy smiled, too, and Janet liked her. "Exactly what we need in this old tomb of a house. I've fixed the north wing. You'll find everything ready, and dinner will be, too—in about half an hour."

"Perhaps I could help in the kitchen," Janet suggested.

Lissy cocked her head a little more. "Repeat that offer after dinner," she said. "When there are dishes to be done. Then see how quickly I'll take you up on it."

Danny let Janet precede him. She climbed the stairs, helping now by carrying one of the bags. At the top, she turned without hesitation and made her way to the proper wing.

She quickly unpacked the three bags which were hers, then changed to warm slacks and an ivory colored sweater.

"Darling," she said, "I insist you take me for a walk to the cliff before dinner. I want to be so hungry when I sit down that Lissy will love me forever."

"She does already," he assured her. "I can measure Lissy's reactions. Of course we'll go to the cliff, if there is time. Otherwise, we can go there tonight. I think we'll have a half moon and the sea is especially wonderful then."

She kissed him lightly. "We'll save it, Danny. I like moonlight and cliffs and the ocean and my new husband."

After dinner, which Lissy watched them eat, Janet went into the kitchen and helped. Danny, in the living room, smoking a pipe and trying to tell himself he was a fool, heard the two women chattering. Now and then their voices ceased or became low. He wondered what Janet was telling Lissy.

Lissy, her ancient and molting hat atop her white hair, came into the living room and tossed the boa she called her alley cat around her thin throat.

"She's tired, poor thing, and gone to her room for a rest," she said. "Let her have an hour's sleep. She's a nice girl, Danny. See that you live up to her."

Danny nodded and removed his pipe. "Lissy, sit down a moment. I haven't seen you since the funeral, and then there wasn't time to talk. What really happened? To Russ, I mean. If anyone knows, you do."

She didn't sit down. "Danny, you're grieving for a man who wouldn't have grieved for you. Russ was too practical for that. What happened to him? Heaven alone knows. He rolled himself out in

that wheel-chair of his and went too close to the edge of the cliff. It may be he sat there and fell asleep and the chair rolled over of its own accord. Maybe he didn't know he was so close to the edge. And then—maybe he became tired of living in a wheel-chair."

Danny slapped the arm of his chair. "Lissy, you're not even to think that! Do you understand? Russ didn't kill himself. He'd never have done that, and I won't permit even a whisper of it to exist."

"Yes, Mr. Adair." Lissy nodded, and the boa slid down over one shoulder. She hoisted it up nervously, turned and walked to the door. Danny called her.

"Lissy—I'm sorry." He passed a hand over his eyes. "Please believe me, I wish I hadn't said that to you."

"It's all right, Danny." She had half a sob in her throat. "Quite all right, Danny. Good night."

## CHAPTER II

### *Hovering Death*



DAN ADAIR went to Russell's room a few moments later and closed the door. Russ almost seemed to be here, seated in the wheel-chair, thin face pale and dark brown eyes shining with a zest for life. Nothing got him down—not even polio.

Danny sat down behind the desk. He started with the top drawer, examining papers, sorting them, throwing some away and retaining others for further study. Russ had always handled the financial part of the estate, and now it was all Danny's problem.

He found the little comb with its gold border and the initials "JLB." in the top drawer of Russ' desk. He had never seen it before, but this was Janet's comb. He knew it, just as certainly as he had recognized wisps of her hair in the guest room wastebasket the day after Russ was killed. As he had identified the unique perfume she used, and which had still lingered in the guest room closet.

Janet had been in this house before. She had talked to Russ, though she swore she had never seen him. Why had

she come? Because Russ sensed she might be a gold-digger and wanted to satisfy himself about her? Or had she come of her own accord, to lay plans for murder?

Danny had gone through with the wedding, though he could have reasonably postponed it because of Russell's death a week before. He had married Janet so she could be near him. So he could kill her easily, once he became convinced of her guilt.

There, in the silence of that room, a new idea came to Danny. It set him to brooding and he restrained a quiet little shiver of apprehension with some difficulty. If Janet had murdered Russ so that her new husband would come into the whole estate, then the estate was what she had angled for. Didn't that mean she would also kill her new husband? Would she be willing to share with him an estate she had already murdered to possess?

The death of Russ had been a perfect crime. Nobody suspected anything and never had. Janet, behind that façade of loveliness and sweetness, possessed a calm, orderly, calculating mind. If it was now concerned with another murder, Danny had cause to worry. . . .

Danny was back in the living room when Janet came downstairs shortly after nine o'clock, and he greeted her with all the warmth he could summon.

"You look rested," he said. "And prettier every minute you live. Darling, you will like it here. I know you will."

"I know that, too, Danny. Now I want my share of moonlight. Take me to the cliff. I'm afraid of heights, so hold me tightly when we get there—and don't go too near the edge. You've got a scary wife on your hands, darling."

They walked, hand in hand, across the meadow toward the cliff and the rolling sea. They reached a point twenty feet from the cliff's edge and stopped there. Janet passed an arm around him, and leaned against him as if she were tired. Quite automatically he held her, too, and there in the charm of the moon and the magic of the ocean, he almost forgot that she had killed his brother and would try to kill him.

He was in love with her again, just as he had been before that day when Russ had plunged to his death. Danny glanced toward the broken edge of cliff over which the wheel-chair and Russ had

plunged. There were rocks below, sharp crags at the bottom of a hundred foot drop.

He shuttered, and Janet felt the tremor pass through his body.

"Are you cold, darling? You should have worn a sweater."

"I think," he said, "we'd best go back."

"Danny!" She took a forward step. "Danny—there, to the right a bit. Something that gleams in the moonlight."

He saw it too, left her, and moved toward it. Half a dozen paces away he recognized it as Russell's gold pencil. What in the world was it doing here, an appreciable distance from the spot where Russ had gone over? Danny moved closer and bent to pick up the pencil. His fingers closed around it and he was straightening when he felt the cliff give way.

It felt like an elevator unexpectedly dropping from beneath him. There was no crumbling sensation. Just a sudden vacancy beneath his feet. He cried out and Janet screamed. He heard the scream grow shriller as he plunged down.

An edge of rock ripped his coat at the shoulder, but it helped to check the wild fall. He hit another crag and this time he was able to grab at it with both hands. The fingers slid off. There was too much momentum in his descent. He clawed out again and managed to look down. What he saw, in the moonlight below him, was bloody death in those sharp rocks.

**H**E SAW the ledge, too, flat enough and wide enough so that he swung his feet toward it and landed against it with his thighs.

He couldn't maintain any sort of balance, but now his fall was checked sufficiently so that he managed to secure a grip on the ledge.

He hung there, wondering if that was Janet's scream still ringing in his ears, or if she hadn't stopped. Slowly, grimly, he pulled himself up until he had an elbow against the ledge. Then a knee was over the side of it and finally he lay there, panting and shivering, half an inch from eternity.

"Danny! Danny!" Janet's voice floated down to him. "Danny!"

Without thinking, he raised his head. "I'm all right so far. I need a rope. You've got to fetch a rope."

"I'll get one!" she called back. "There's rope in the tool shed. Darling,

hang on! Hang on—I'll be as quick as I can!"

Then he wondered why he even let her know he was still alive. If she thought he had plunged to his death, she wouldn't take any further steps to kill him. Now he had simply given her another opportunity, perhaps a better one.

She was gone an amazingly short time for being a stranger on the premises. He heard her cry out and looked up. She was lying on the edge of the cliff. If her fear of height was real, she must have been thoroughly frightened. She called something to him, but the wind took the words away.

Then a rope came down. A good strong rope, probably purchased by Lissy for use as clothes line. It swung there, temptingly close. If he took it, he might climb to the ledge just above, and from that to the top would be easy to make. If the rope didn't give away.

"Danny"—he could hear her now—"the rope is anchored to a tree. Are you hurt? Can you climb the rope?"

"Yes," he called back. "I'm coming up."

He wound the rope about his middle, grasped it with both hands and leaned back. If she was going to let go, now was her chance. The rope held. He braced himself, set his feet against the sheer wall and started climbing.

The sweat stood out in great beads on his face. It would be so easy now. Let the knot slip—if the rope really was tied to a tree.

Let it slip, then sobbingly relate how the tragedy had occurred when help finally had come.

He looked up, but she had disappeared. He took a long breath, swarmed up the rope, and made for a small bush projecting from the side of the cliff. He had to make it. If she let the rope go he would need that bush. It looked as if it might hold him.

"Danny! Danny!" Her voice floated down again.

"I'm okay," he shouted back. "Watch that rope."

"Danny, wait. Don't risk it. The knot I tied isn't very good but someone is coming. I see a car, and I've been yelling!"

He reached the bush and wound an arm about it. Now if the rope slipped, he still would have a lease on life. He stayed there until he heard a man's voice

and Danny came as near to fainting as he ever had in his life.

"Dan!" the man called. "Hold it a moment! Don't move. Don't put any weight on the rope yet. Hold it, do you hear me?"

Good old Steve Taylor! Now he was safe. Now Janet couldn't complete her little act of murder.

Why, Steve would wring her neck if he ever suspected. . . .

"Tie a hitch under your arm." Steve called down again. "I'm going to haul you up. Yell when you're ready."

Danny came overside, helped by both of Janet's hands. When he was safely away from the edge she went into his arms and alternately sobbed and shivered.

She couldn't speak, couldn't move.

Steve Taylor, sweat glistening on his forehead, crossed the beam of the headlights of his car which he had driven close to the edge of the cliff. Steve was pale and shaken.

He stuck out his hand.

"Welcome home," he said shakily. "The next time you decide to hang by your toe nails off cliffs, let me know so I can have mountain climbing rescue equipment handy."

"Thanks, Steve," Danny said. "Janet was doing her best."

"I never could tie a knot." Janet laughed with a trace of hysteria. "I knew the rope was slipping."

"Well, it wasn't what you'd call a good knot," Steve said, and grinned. He had an infectious grin. It seemed to cover half of his handsome face. "So you're Janet. I must say I like meeting brides under different conditions than this, but circumstances and places be hanged, I'm coming in for a kiss. It's rightfully mine as the closest friend of the family."

**JANET** kissed him because she had heard so much about Steve. He lived up to Danny's enthusiastic description, too.

Besides looking like a bronzed god, he acted like one.

"Come on you two," he said. "Climb into my car and we'll go to the house for a couple of stiff drinks. Incidentally—how come you were cliff walking, Danny?"

"Russell's gold pencil," Danny said. "Janet spotted it near the edge of the cliff. I went to pick it up and the whole

cliff caved in under me. What's happening here, Steve? Is the cliff being undermined?"

"We'll have to give it a look in the morning," Steve agreed. "A cave-in was what sent Russ plunging down. Perhaps the cliff isn't safe any more."

Steve drove them back to the big house. Janet hurried to prepare the drinks. She was adept at mixing cocktails and shortly afterward, Steve smacked his lips over what he claimed was the best martini he had ever tasted.

"And I earned it," he laughed. "Stop feeding Dan so much good food, Janet. He's getting too heavy to haul up the side of a cliff."

"How did you happen to show up in the nick of time like that, Steve?" Danny asked.

**S**TEVE put down his glass. "Thank you for reminding me. Old Man Cartwright at the railroad express office says your trunks are there, and would you get them the devil out to make room for a lot of chicks coming in for the Wilson farm tomorrow first thing."

"All right," Danny said. "I'll have to use the station wagon. Also I'll need that muscle you're bragging about, to help handle the trunks. Janet, will you come along?"

"I—no, Danny. No, I've still some things to unpack and—and perhaps Steve would like a snack. I'll have something fixed when you two get back. Anyway, you'd probably have me throwing those trunks around before you were through. When two men get together, heaven help the girl who happens to be the third party."

Steve jerked a thumb in her direction. "How did you do it, Dan? Land her, I mean. Girls like Janet don't stumble into a man's life. They have to be sought out, hunted down like precious gems. Oh my, what a sensation she's going to make at the country club! Janet, let your nails grow long and sharp. You may need a good weapon of defense."

"I'll go get the station wagon," Danny said. "Janet, are you certain you don't want to come along?"

"Positive, my sweet." She smiled. "A woman's place is in her home—when she expects to have two hungry men to feed. I'll show up this Lissy who cooked what was probably the best dinner I ever tasted in my life."

## CHAPTER III

*Menace*

GOING out through the kitchen, Danny passed the tool shed, then came to a stop. When he had clung precariously to the ledge, Janet had called down that she knew there was rope in the tool shed. How had she known? How had she even known which of the sheds contained the tools?

Danny walked into the tool house and snapped on the light. The first thing he saw was a pick and shovel propped in a corner. Both were covered with fresh dirt. Moist, rich soil. The same kind of dark soil that composed the surface of the cliff. This pick and shovel had been used recently. Where? To dig beneath the cliff, weaken it so when he moved to pick up the planted gold pencil there would be a cave-in?

Danny turned off the lights and hurried to the big barn which had been converted into a garage. The station wagon was old, but the tires were all right. Danny put water in the radiator, kicked the starter and the ancient vehicle responded with a throaty rasp before settling down to its accustomed clanking.

He drove it out, blowing the horn for Steve as he neared the front of the house. Steve came out quickly. Janet was in the doorway, waving to him, and Danny had never seen a prettier picture. Colorful aprons became her and he had never before seen a woman in his life who could look dressed up in an apron.

"She's a swell dish, Dan," Steve said, as he climbed in beside Danny. "You're a lucky beggar, do you know that?"

"I—suppose so." Danny tooted the horn in recognition of Janet's final salute, then headed for the highway.

"You suppose so," Steve grunted. "Danny, come off it. Even Janet senses there's something wrong with you. She's worried, and she told me so. I know what you thought of Russ. But believe me, Russ wouldn't have wanted it this way. You'll lose a wife if you keep on brooding."

"Who is brooding, and why don't you mind your own business?" Danny made

a raucous sound in his throat. "I'm sorry, Steve. I didn't mean that, and you know it. I'm upset. I can't tell you why but—well . . . Oh hang it, talk about something else."

"We'll stay on the subject," Steve said. "Look here, take my advice and turn back. Tell Janet to pack, and then both of you leave. Go to a spot where there is life and music and bright lights. You're taking her into a tomb, Danny. And to make it worse, you act as though Russ were still there, haunting the place. Danny, don't make Janet live through this."

"She doesn't seem to mind," Danny countered acidly. "In fact, it was her idea we come here. She said I had work to do in connection with the estate and that if I faced things, lived with them, I'd get over them faster. I didn't want to come."

Danny topped the ridge and dipped down into the curving road which led to the valley and the village. The road wound in and out, and two miles further it seemed to fall off the edge of the world and go down in what was one of the steepest hills in a state of steep hills.

Danny was rounding the third bad curve when Steve suddenly grabbed the wheel. Danny automatically drove the brake pedal down and felt the mechanism suddenly lose its force. He lifted his foot and pumped it down on the pedal again. Then he reached for the emergency. It didn't work at all, and he recalled that it never had been much good.

"Hey—what's wrong?" Steve exclaimed. "You're taking these curves as if you were mad at them."

"Steve," Danny said, "open the door beside you. The brakes are shot. I can't stop this thing and if I try to roll her off the road I'll turn her over on us. Too many banks. If I don't make the next curve, jump."

"Hang onto that wheel!" Steve yelled. "Nurse her around the bend. On the straightaway you'll be able to leave the road and hit tall field grass. That'll slow us down. Only don't miss, Dan. Beyond that open stretch lies the drop."

"I know. That's what worries me. Hang on, Steve! Here we go!"

Soft tires screamed protest as they all but flattened on the sharp curve at high speed. Headlights picked up reflectors on the stout highway fence. It zipped

past them like one solid white wall. A fender scraped one post and threw the car back onto the road. But not for long.

**A**T THE sharpest point in the long curve, Danny knew he would never make it. He got the door open beside him, yelled "Jump!" and hurled himself out. He landed hard, rolled over a couple of times in the dirt and saw Steve still rolling. There was a crash. The station wagon smashed through the fence, rocketed on and down into a gully where it nosed over and stood there, resting on its face.

"Are you okay?" Steve called from somewhere in the darkness.

"Yes—outside of a few million bruises. What about you?"

"All right—I guess. Leg hurts a little, but I can stand on it so it can't be broken." Steve limped over and leaned against the fence beside Danny. "What the heck happened?"

"She did that, Steve," Danny said. "I'm betting if we check the station wagon we'll find evidence of sabotage. She undermined the cliff. She was going to let me drop until your arrival prevented that. She fixed the station wagon because she knew I'd have to use it to go to town. Did she come with us? I asked her twice. I should have known then."

"Hold it," Steve said sharply. "If you're trying to tell me what I think you're saying, you ought to see a doctor, Dan."

"She killed Russ," Danny said in a monotone. "She came here and killed him. She was in the house before. She knew where the hidden porch bell was. She knew her way around the house like no stranger ever could have moved. She murdered Russ so his part of the money would go to me. Then she married me, and I'm next."

"Man, you're battier than a deserted castle! Dan—do you know what you're saying?"

"I knew, or suspected, when I came for Russell's funeral. I knew Janet had been in the house. There was her perfume—little things she'd forgotten. Like strands of hair in the guest room wastebasket. Her hair, Steve. She was here and never let me now. She set the trap for Russ and killed him. Now she means to kill me. Don't you see, Steve—the rope with the bad knot, the cliff undermined? Once to kill Russ, again to get

me. There isn't much erosion on that cliff. There wasn't a cave-in even while we played there as kids. It was always safe and now, suddenly, it isn't safe any more. Then—what just happened? The car."

"I'm going to prove you're wrong, Danny," Steve said. "We'll check the station wagon. Brakes can fail. That's an old bus and it never was taken care of properly. You'll see."

They both saw, after Danny managed to crawl into the car and procure a flashlight which still worked. They removed the hood and saw the brake rod severed. Enough had been left to take care of normal pressure but on the curves, when a man had to bear down, the steel had parted.

"I still refuse to believe it," Steve said. "It isn't possible, that's all. If someone is trying to kill you, it isn't Janet."

"Can you name anyone else?" Danny asked seriously.

Steve bit his lip. "Not offhand, but it can't be Janet."

"It has to be Janet. No one else has a motive. Nobody hates me. I've harmed no person in this village or anywhere else. It takes a motive to commit murder, and Janet has it."

Steve shook his head. "Take it easy, Danny. There is no absolute evidence. Don't act until you have it."

"So you do believe it then?" Danny asked.

"I do not. That's why I beg you not to be too hasty. Treat Janet as you should a brand-new wife. You'll soon see how wrong you've been. Why, a man with half his sight could see that there isn't a chance you're right. I'm rooting for Janet, Danny."

Steve trudged on to town while Danny turned back. He walked slowly along the road, his mind so full of thoughts that he hardly knew where he was going. Of course Russ had been murdered. In the first place, he had always been extremely careful. He wouldn't have gone too close to the edge of the cliff unless he was lured there—or pushed there.

Danny possessed not the slightest doubt about Janet having been at the house before, and was keeping that fact a strict secret. Everything pointed to it. And Russ had been just the type who would have fallen for any story she might have cooked up.

He recalled the rather casual recep-

tion Lissy had given Janet, and Lissy hadn't been herself at all. Usually when strangers came she wanted to know what they liked to eat and practically all there was to know about them.

**L**ISSY'S little cottage was along this road on the way back. Danny made up his mind to go see her. Lissy had never lied to him, and she wouldn't begin now. If Janet had been at the house before, Lissy must have known about it, or at least guessed it.

He was gratified to see lights in Lissy's house and he turned into the path. She was sitting in the darkness on the porch and she rose to welcome him.

"I expected you, Danny," she said. "I saw you race by here in that old station wagon. But why are you walking? Did Steve borrow the truck?"

"We had an accident," Danny said.

She sat down and commenced rocking. "I knew you would. Danny, when will you learn? Can't you remember how you were almost killed that time eight years ago? When they had to sew up your head?"

Danny grinned a little. "I was inclined to be a bit crazy in those days, but I've changed. We weren't traveling fast, Lissy. Something happened to the brakes."

Lissy nodded smugly. "It's high time that old car was junked anyway. You want to phone Janet to come here and pick you up?"

"No, I'd rather walk home, Lissy."

"She's a grand girl, Danny. Don't make any mistake about it. I'm glad for you. I was afraid, for so many years, that you'd wind up with some—some actress or something like that."

"Janet is nice," Danny said casually. "Russ must have liked her too."

"Russ? And Janet?" Lissy stopped rocking. "When did they meet?"

"Lissy, don't lie to me. Janet was here at the house. She came to visit Russ. I know it. Janet disappeared for several days last month. She never explained to me where she had been. Lissy, tell me the truth. She was here."

"Are you daft, lad? I never laid eyes on the girl before in my life. Nor did Russ."

Danny bent over the old woman and shook her by both shoulders.

"She's charmed you, too. You're protecting her. Lissy, I know she couldn't have bought you for any price, but she's convinced you of her baby innocence. That she could do no wrong. You're hypnotized by her!"

"Stop it, Danny!" Lissy cried. "Stop it this minute. I'll not let you talk about your wife that way. She's a nice girl. I don't know what you're driving at, but whatever it is, don't blame Janet for anything. She loves you, but you're not used to her kind of love. The kind that gives everything. You're too accustomed to the selfish kind that Russ gave you. Russ didn't want to lose you; Danny. He didn't want you to marry her because she would take you away and Russ didn't want that to happen. Danny, open your eyes!"

"They've been open for quite some time," Danny said quietly. "Good night, Lissy."

He walked down off the porch and she followed him as far as the stairs.

"Danny,"—she extended one arm—"Danny, listen to me."

He kept on going. It seemed miles before he reached the driveway to the house and Janet was atop the gate, waiting for him. She climbed down and rushed into his arms.

"Darling, you've been gone so long!"

"The car—it landed in a ditch," he told her. "We weren't hurt, Steve or I. Just shaken up a little. He walked to town and I came back."

Her arms slid around his neck, her face tilted upward toward him.

"So long as you came back, darling. Danny—Danny, is there something wrong? You're acting strangely. If you're upset over something, let me share it with you. That's what a wife is for."

He shook his head. "No, I'm all right. The reaction, I suppose. After all, I buried my brother one week, got married the next, and doggone near got killed tonight."

"Danny, if you ever feel that you're in trouble, tell me about it. Please."

"I promise." He smiled and kissed her.

Then his arms tightened and he was holding her close. He wanted to hold her like that. He wanted to know that she was his, and that they would spend the rest of their lives together. Solve

their individual and mutual problems and lean upon one another as a husband and wife are supposed to do.

But this woman in his arms—she was a murderess. She had killed his brother and had tried to kill him. He walked with her down the moonlit drive to the front porch and they sat on the steps. Neither spoke. They just looked out across the quiet, moonlight-drenched fields.

## CHAPTER IV

### *Knife in the Back*



THE spell of it got Danny. He began to have doubts. How could such a sweet girl plot and plan such diabolical murders? Why hadn't she shown any tendencies toward wanting money even before he asked her to marry him? It was true that they had

known one another only two months, but two months is usually long enough to bring out both good and bad traits.

He recalled that she never even asked him how he was fixed financially. Of course she might have investigated and known he was wealthy, and would be twice as rich when his brother died.

Perhaps Steve Taylor was right. Circumstances abetted his foolish notions of murder. Strange things could happen to anyone. Those cliffs had been there for hundreds of years. It was logical to assume they would crumble in places at one time or another. And so far as the rope was concerned, Lissy might have explained what was in the tool house.

Janet had fetched the rope. He felt certain if she hadn't, he would have fallen to his death. The easiest way to have killed him would have been simply to have gone away and not come back.

And a girl is hardly expected to know how to tie trick knots meant to hold up a man dangling off the end of a cliff. As for the station wagon, Lissy and Steve were right about that. The crate was old. Brakes give out even on new cars. He did tell himself it looked more like sabotage than an accident, but Janet

deserved the benefit of the doubt.

There was Lissy to think about, too. She had a special knack for picking out phonies. Like the time he had brought home a college friend who made a practice of looting the homes into which he was taken. Lissy had spotted him right off, though her warning had never been taken seriously.

Dan took one of Janet's hands between both his own. His face had been cloudy, but it cleared now and he was smiling.

"Janet, I can be pretty much of a fool sometimes. You have no idea what I'm capable of. If anything happens that you don't understand, let it pass."

"I'm happy," she whispered. "Dan, I've never been so happy."

"Good. Then I'm glad."

They didn't speak for a while. Janet, chin cupped in a small hand, stared straight out into space.

"What happened to the station wagon, Danny?" she finally asked. "I mean, what caused the accident?"

"Something to do with the brakes," he said. "You wouldn't understand."

She laughed at him. "Wouldn't I? If the brakes didn't hold, the line must have been bled dry or the rods broken. Darling, there is so much you don't know about me. I spent two years in the WAC and I learned how to strip down and repair a car motor."

Danny arose abruptly. "I don't doubt it," he said. "Good night, Janet. I'm going inside—to Russell's office. There's a lot of work to do. You go to bed. I'm not tired enough to turn in yet."

She was staring at him as he slammed the door and disappeared. Something in that look, something about the way she just stood there, frightened him. He locked the door to the study after he was inside. Even the locked door didn't restore his confidence. . . .

Danny awoke about six-thirty in the morning, stiff and uncomfortable. He had fallen asleep at the desk, head cradled on one arm that was now so numbed he thought it would never straighten out again. He went into the bathroom adjoining the study and took a cold shower. That helped some.

A shave would make the start of the day even better. He tiptoed upstairs, feeling somewhat sheepish. He didn't want Janet to see him, to know that he

hadn't remained awake all night working over Russell's books. Danny didn't feel frightened any more. Daylight banished terrors and fears.

He passed Janet's room. The door was open slightly and he tiptoed back, to look in on her. He saw the empty bed. It had been slept in, but there was nobody in the room now.

Danny forgot about the shave. He went back downstairs. The front door was not closed. He stepped out on the porch. Nothing stirred. There wasn't a sound in the early morning stillness.

He began thinking of breakfast and realized that Lissy should have been here by now. She always arrived before six in the morning as regularly as the coming of daylight. Her ancient coupé was not parked near the barn, and when he went to the kitchen, there were no signs of her. The stove was cold.

**D**ANNY frowned and wondered if she had been taken ill. He left the house and set out at a brisk lope toward her cottage. The coupé was in the yard, where it had been the night before. He paid no attention to it. He banged on the door, received no answer, and found the doors locked. He smashed a window, certain now that she must have become ill during the night.

He climbed through the window and searched the house. Everything was as neat as a pin, but Lissy wasn't there. Danny tried to figure it out. She never went anywhere without the coupé, for her legs had more or less given out the past few years and walking was torture for her. The car was there all right. He went over to it and pulled open the door.

He almost screamed in horror.

Lissy was half on the seat, half off it. There was a kitchen meat knife buried in the back of her neck. She was still warm and hadn't been dead long. Danny's first impulse was to find a telephone and get the police, but he gave up the idea temporarily.

He closed the coupé door, walked backward and surveyed the car. It was standing in the middle of the driveway just outside the garage. A large driveway, because Lissy wanted plenty of room to turn around. The drive was covered with cinders that snapped and crackled underfoot for they were new,

dry, and not flattened down yet. No one could have approached that coupé without Lissy knowing it. She was in the center of a cleared space and any approach would have been signaled by the loud crunch of the cinders.

Therefore, whoever killed Lissy had stepped up to the car and she had shown no suspicion. A quick thrust of the knife—

Danny's face went grim. Lissy knew something. He had felt that last night. She knew a great deal about Janet's visit here. Lissy would have talked sooner or later, as Janet must have guessed. And where was Janet now? At this early hour of the morning?

Danny walked slowly away and headed back to the house. He knew exactly what he had to do now. Merely turning Janet over to the law wouldn't suffice. Not for Russ and Lissy. Any jury would take one look at Janet's shapely legs, her petite figure and her innocent baby face. With concrete evidence to convict her, they would recommend mercy.

Danny wanted her to die. She deserved nothing less than that and, if the law wouldn't do it—as he knew it would not—then he had a mission to perform in the name of Russ and in the name of Lissy.

He reached the house and let himself in. Janet was just starting down the stairs. She came to a stop half down them and grasped the railing hard with one hand.

"Danny—what's the matter? You look as if—as if—"

"I'd seen a ghost? Or maybe a corpse?" He approached to the foot of the stairs. "Come down here, Janet. We've something to discuss."

She descended hesitantly, as if she half realized what was on his mind. He couldn't wait for her to reach the bottom. He ran up a couple of steps, seized her and pulled her down. He pinned her against the wall. His heart was pounding savagely, his eyes were mirrors of icy hate.

"Lissy is dead!" he shouted. "Do you hear me? She's dead! Somebody stuck a knife into the back of her neck. Someone she knew and trusted and let get close to her. You were not in your room half an hour ago. Where where you? No wait, I'll tell you. You went to Lissy and killed her because Lissy was bound

to talk some time, and she knew too much."

"Danny!" Janet said sharply. "You're hurting my arms. Danny, let go of me. You don't know what you're saying. You have no idea. . . ."

"I've got practical proof!" he shouted. "Janet, answer one question for me. Just one. Answer it honestly. Will you do that?"

"I'll tell you anything you want to know. Danny, oh, please—please!"

"You were in this house before Russ was murdered. You saw him and talked to him. You knew Lissy. You stayed here, in this house."

"Yes," she screamed. "Yes, I was here. For three days, and Lissy remained here while I was a guest. Danny, don't ask me about it. Don't ask me why I came nor why I never told you about it. Let it go! We can straighten things out so long as we love one another."

"Killer!" He spat the word. "Murderess!"

She screamed again, for his hands left her arms and curled about her throat. He leaned forward and began to increase the pressure.

"I swore I'd kill you if I had proof you murdered Russ. Now you've killed Lissy too. You don't deserve to live. You don't rate a chance!"

Suddenly his hands dropped. He backed away, his face white. Janet stood there, one hand at her throat now. She seemed incapable of speech.

"I—I can't do it," Danny mumbled. "I can't. Blast it, I'm in love with you no matter what you are! No matter what you did! I'm no murderer. I couldn't take anyone's life and above all, yours. I'm going, Janet. I'm going away. So far you'll never see nor hear of me again. Don't speak. Don't utter a sound. Just let me go!"

He wheeled and fled through the house. He reached the garage, flung the doors open and started the convertible. It was doing thirty when he rolled it past the house and careened into the driveway to the road. He raised his eyes and saw Janet reflected in the rear view mirror. She was on the porch, one arm extended toward him in a beseeching gesture.

He stepped harder on the gas pedal, screamed into the turn and didn't care where he was headed. One thing he did

know—he loved Janet. If, by circumstances, her guilt was ever discovered, he would come back to stand beside her. He knew that very well. All his vows of vengeance meant nothing. Not even the fact that she had tried to kill him on two occasions, seemed to matter any more.

There would be the devil to pay about Lissy's murder. His lips turned down at the corners. Maybe he ought to just keep on going. By his disappearance he might take a certain amount of guilt off Janet's shoulders. Perhaps save her from prison or the electric chair.

He laughed raucously. Here he was, the determined man who meant to kill whoever had murdered his brother, and now he was trying to devise ways of accepting Janet's blame for the death of Lissy. He shuddered violently. If he had strangled Janet a few moments ago, his whole world would have come to an end as certainly as hers. Murder was no way out. It was never a way out!

## CHAPTER V

### *Mask of Guilt*



STEVE TAYLOR'S sedan was rolling fast toward Danny. He didn't want to see Steve. He didn't want to explain to anyone. But Steve must have had a premonition of what was happening because he started waving one hand out of the window and frantically signaled for Danny to slow down and pull over. Steve even weaved his car as if to cut him off.

Danny applied brakes and came to a smooth halt about fifty yards past Steve's car. Steve was already running in his direction. He reached Danny's convertible and yanked open the door.

"You idiot!" he shouted. "What are you trying to do—kill yourself? Janet called me. She said you'd gone crazy. For heaven's sake man, what is it? Tell me. I'm your friend. You can talk—but talk sensibly."

"I told you what it was all about," Danny said. "Janet murdered Russ. She visited Russ and never told me she'd been here. Lissy knew it and kept silent.

Everyone kept silent for Janet. And why not? Didn't I fall for her too?"

"Danny, you're wrong," Steve protested. "You know you're wrong."

"Am I? Would you like to ask Lissy? Well, I tried that last night and Lissy wouldn't say a word. I wanted to try again this morning, but she was silent. She'll be silent forever, Steve. Janet stuck a knife into the back of Lissy's neck."

Steve gaped, utterly incapable of saying a word.

"She undermined the cliff so it would cave," Danny went on. "She rolled Russ close to it and let him go over. She murdered Lissy so she'd never tell me the truth. But I forced it out of Janet. I made her tell me she'd been here before—secretly. That she knew both Russ and Lissy. Oh, she admitted it all right, after I'd almost killed her."

"Killed her?" Steve shouted. "Danny, you didn't!"

"No, I couldn't do that. Murderess or not, I'm still in love with her. I'm going away. She can have everything I own. What do I care any more? I'll even accept the blame for killing Lissy if you or someone else can plant something to show it was I who did it."

Steve suddenly slapped Danny across the face, then slapped him again.

"Now hold it!" he cried. "Listen to reason. Running away won't help. If Janet is a killer, let her face the consequences. Because, Danny, after what you told me, I wouldn't permit them to blame you. Let them hang her—if she is what you claim she is. But Danny, can you be absolutely certain? Can you say this without an iota of doubt?"

Danny closed his eyes and leaned heavily on the wheel.

"Sure?" he repeated. "Would I have gone this far if I wasn't positive? Steve, I found the pick and shovel she used to excavate under the cliff. She had an opportunity to do it—Lissy sent her upstairs to rest. She could have slipped out the back door and, with her experience cutting under the cliff where Russ went over, it would hardly have taken her long to prepare another pitfall for me. Then there was the incident of the brakes on the car. Steve, if you hadn't grabbed the wheel so I jammed on the brakes before we hit the steep hill, we'd have been killed. Both of us—both of us!"

"Just the same you should come back and face it," Steve insisted. "Janet isn't deserving of a chance if she did this. Danny—you love her very much, don't you?"

Danny nodded mutely.

Steve shrugged. "I'm pulling out of it. You can do what you like, but if I'm called upon to testify, I'll tell the truth. Janet or no Janet, I won't lie to save her pretty neck."

"Get out!" Danny said slowly. "Get out of the car, Steve."

"Look, Danny—"

"Get out, or I'll take you with me."

Steve scrambled out of the car.

"What are you going to do? Danny—no! No!"

But the convertible was racing down the highway, straight toward a curve. Several cars which had been going too fast to make this corner before, had gone through the fence and ended up in the creek below. Steve stood there, face frozen, as he saw Danny make no attempt to turn the wheel. The convertible smashed the fence, its rear end leaped up into the air, and the car disappeared.

Steve began running toward the scene. He scrambled through the broken fence and came to a stop. The convertible still stood, by some miracle, on all four wheels but twenty feet away lay Danny, arms and legs twisted in those almost ludicrous positions of death.

STEVE bit his lip, turned away, and returned to his own car. He drove it to the house and Janet came out to meet him. He led her into the living room and helped her into a chair.

"I've news, and all of it is bad," he said softly. "What we've all feared finally happened. Danny is—dead. He deliberately smashed up the car and himself. I saw it happen. I was right there, Janet. I couldn't help him. He was completely mad."

She closed her eyes and stifled a sob.

"It's the best way, Janet," Steve went on. "Even Russ sensed what would eventually happen. That's why Russ asked you to come here, when he learned you were going to marry Danny. Russ wanted to warn you that there had been insanity in the family, and that Danny was injured some years back."

"I know—I know, Steve!" she cried. "Russ told me over and over again. But

I didn't care. I thought I could help Danny. I was so sure of it, but he never gave me a chance. It made no difference if he was hurt and had to be put in an asylum for a while. I loved Danny. I wanted to care for him, to ease him through this awful thing. Steve, is Lissy—"

"Yes," Steve said. "He stabbed her. She's lying in her coupé outside of her house. One of your kitchen knives is in her neck. Nobody has discovered the crime. Janet, you've a great deal to face. Let me help you, just as you wanted to help Danny. I owe him that much and—well, you know I'd do anything in the world for you."

"That I believe, too," a voice said from behind Steve.

He jumped to his feet, turned, and saw Danny approaching. Steve tried to pull a gun, but he had difficulty clearing the pocket and Danny was on him just as the gun started to come up.

Danny grasped Steve's wrist and twisted it. Turned it hard but he couldn't make Steve let go, and Steve was beginning to smash painful punches to Danny's stomach. These blows were raised until they struck him near the heart.

There was cold murder in Steve's eyes. While he struck, he kept pulling his gun hand free and he still clung to the weapon. Clung hard! He was, in fact, beginning to get the muzzle toward Danny's chest.

Once it was in line, he would squeeze the trigger.

Danny never had been a match for Steve, not even when they had been small boys, and now it seemed he was going to lose another battle—the last one. That gun kept inching around, and Steve was beginning to laugh confidently.

Then a fury landed on him. Two hands clawed at his face. Sharp teeth bit into his gun hand until the blood flowed. Steve screamed and opened his fingers. The gun fell. Danny let go of him, stepped back, and Steve kept trying to fight off Janet.

Then Danny moved in. He uncorked a right hook that must have shaken Steve to the heels. It seemed to all but shatter Danny's shoulder with the impact. But he landed another and another. He kept raining blows on Steve's face until Janet screamed at him. Then he realized that

Steve was down, unconscious, and no longer a danger.

Danny arose. Janet rushed to him and he circled an arm about her.

"So he told you I was crazy," he said. "That my accident eight years ago put me in an asylum. Russ told you that, too. I heard Steve telling you all this. Janet, whatever you think of me, hear me out and learn the truth."

"Danny, I don't care. I don't care a bit so long as you've come back and you're safe. Steve told me you were d-dead!"

"I hoped he'd think so. I met Steve and he stopped me. He kept talking about letting you hang for killing Russ and Lissy. He harped on it too much—and I suddenly realized what a fool I'd been. I remembered how Steve and I were rolling fast in the station wagon and he grabbed at the wheel for no reason at all. He wanted me to use the brakes, and have the rods snap before we hit the steep hill where he would have been killed too. Steve didn't want to take that ride—never meant to—but I teased him into it and he had to spoil his own plan for murdering me."

"But Danny, why? Why?"

"It's rather obvious. With me dead, or declared insane, or just vanished off the earth, you'd come into a great deal of money. And you'd also inherit good old Steve, friend of the family who'd be expected to help the beautiful widow, and perhaps marry her some day. That is what he was after. Russ always listened to Steve, and he was easily convinced that I shouldn't be allowed to marry and desert my crippled brother.

"So they got up here, told you that fantastic tale about my being crazy, and even convinced Lissy of it. Neither of you would tell me for fear I'd go into a relapse or something, and when I talked about murder, you thought I'd gone off the beam again. Janet, I was never mad. I was never in an asylum."

**JANET** clung to him more tightly. "It doesn't matter," she pleaded. "I can see the whole thing now—so clearly. Steve made me afraid of you. So did Russ. But I loved you, and nothing or no one could stop me from marrying you. The money had no meaning. Danny, you've got to understand that."

"I do, darling. Steve killed Lissy because she wouldn't have stayed silent once we started to break up. And she'd

have rejected their story about my being in an asylum when she'd had time enough to think it over. I was away for two years—in Europe—just before the war. But I wrote Lissy and I phoned her twice, once from London and again from Vienna. When she remembered those things she would have realized somebody had lied. So he killed her. How else did he know that her body was in the coupé and that the weapon was one of our kitchen knives?"

She looked up at him. "Darling, when you were so sure I killed Russ and—and Lissy, why didn't you kill me? You were planning to do that. I sensed it, and I was frightened. I slept in the attic last night."

"Why didn't I kill you?" he asked with a bitter laugh. "Janet, one doesn't kill the only thing that makes life worthwhile. We were both fools. Russ tricked us first, then Steve saw his chance and kept the game going, first by sending Russ to his death. As soon as I realized he had prevented the station wagon from going down the steepest hill, I guessed he was behind it. So I drove through the highway fence, down a bank and got out of the car and draped myself around the landscape. I guess I looked dead all right, because he never came down to make sure."

"You might have been really killed!" "I had to take the chance," he said. "And anyway, I'd had experience at that particular spot. It was the place I hit when I had that accident eight years ago, and after I got over it, I studied the locale and saw how I could have saved myself and the car. So I knew what I was doing. I didn't even wreck the car."

"What about—him?" Janet pointed at Steve's limp form.

"We'll have to get the police, of course. I don't think they'll have much trouble convicting him. Janet, if I ever doubt your love again, remind me of that moment when Steve almost had me, and you pitched into him."

"I wanted to kill him, Danny. I guess I would have too if—if it had been necessary."

"As soon as the police come, we'll go away from here," Danny whispered. "We've had enough, darling. But I know our marriage is based on a firm foundation now. We've that much out of it, at least."

She kissed him, then hurried to the phone while Danny tied up Steve with portions of the unconscious man's clothing. Danny whistled as he worked over the man. There was even a cheery note in the whistle.



## The "Inside" of Detective Work

### 4. Three Types of Fingerprints

**D**ETEKTIVES classify fingerprints into three different types. They are: 1. Visible. 2. Plastic, and 3. Latent prints.

Visible prints are ones left by fingers that have been smeared with such substances as dirt, grease, ink, or blood, and are seldom clear enough to be of any value.

Plastic prints are ones left on such substances as candlewax, butter, tar, putty, soap and other soft, plastic substances.

The type of greatest importance in scientific crime detection is—the latent print. Almost always invisible to the naked eye, these prints are usually found on smooth surfaces such as glass, china, wood, metal, or leather, and are revealed by dusting with fingerprint powder. By use of chemicals, latent fingerprints may also be exposed on cloth, rough woods and papers. Fingerprints have even been found on fingernails and toenails—but they have yet to be revealed on human skin.

The fact that a criminal is usually nervous when he commits a crime helps the detective, for his perspiration causes his fingerprints to be left more readily and more clearly.

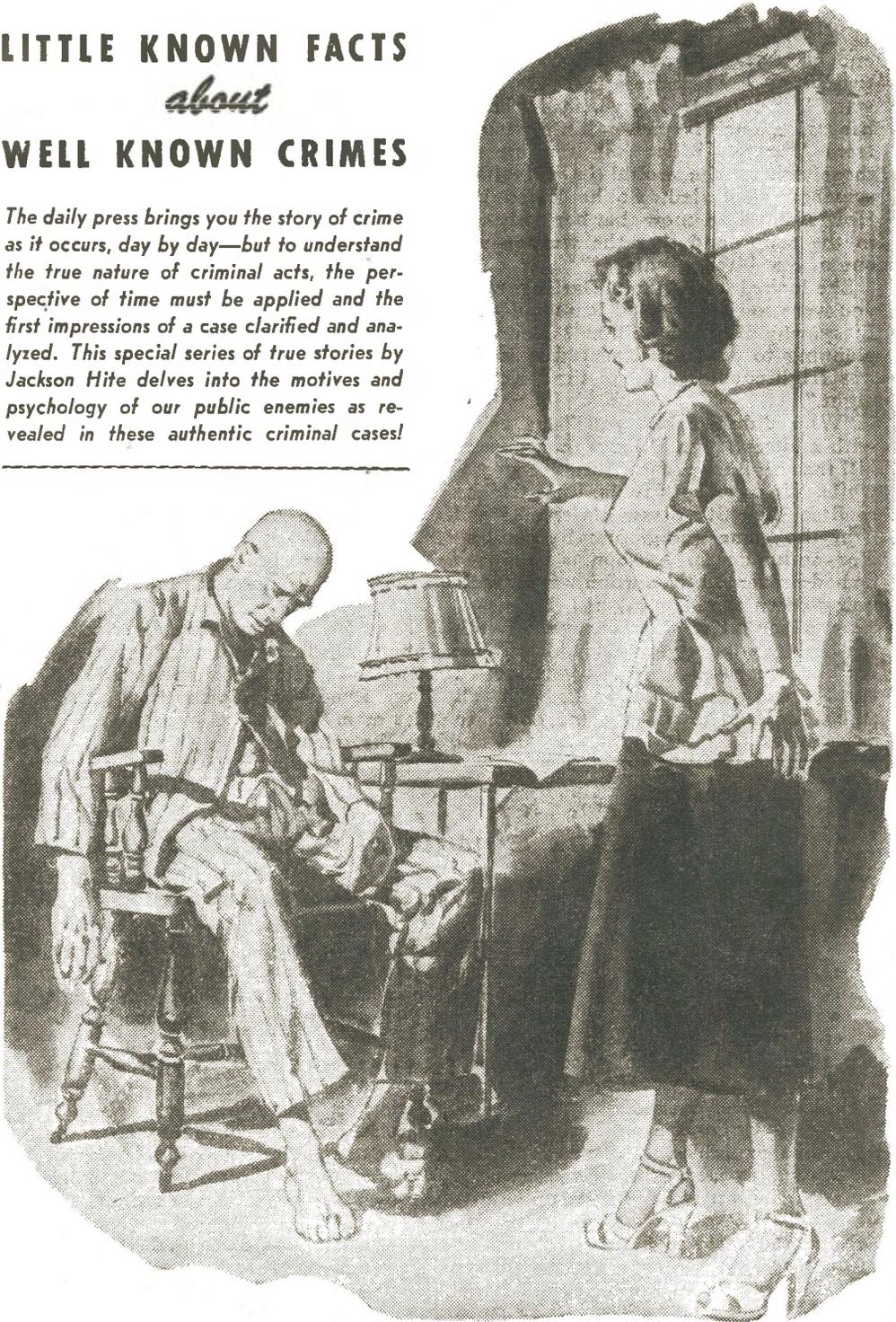
Detectives often show up fingerprints of the latent variety in darkness, using a flashlight. The oblique rays of light will clearly reveal the prints. Latent prints may also be shown up by breathing on the surface where they are found, and then examining the surface obliquely.

—Carter Critz.

# LITTLE KNOWN FACTS *about* WELL KNOWN CRIMES

*The daily press brings you the story of crime as it occurs, day by day—but to understand the true nature of criminal acts, the perspective of time must be applied and the first impressions of a case clarified and analyzed. This special series of true stories by Jackson Hite delves into the motives and psychology of our public enemies as revealed in these authentic criminal cases!*

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# *Murder* of the **BRIDGE EXPERT**

The slaying of Joseph B. Elwell, man-about-town and darling of the ladies, remains on the blotter as an unsolved mystery!

by **JACKSON HITE**

**T**HERE are unsolved murders in the files of every police department but few of them have captured the public imagination as has the murder of Joseph B. Elwell, noted bridge expert, man-about-town, and darling of scores of women. In many instances where a murder officially is listed as unsolved, police actually know the identification of the killer or have an excellent idea of who he is, but due to political ramifications or the lack of legal evidence cannot make an arrest.

However, in the Elwell case, police are as mystified today as they were when first called to the scene, even though they succeeded in narrowing down the time of the crime to within one hour. The case now stands as a rare example of a perfect murder. Here are the complete details of the case including the names of key witnesses police did not divulge at the time.

## **Housekeeper Discovers Murder**

It was at 8:10 A.M. on June 11, 1920, when Mrs. Marie Larsen, housekeeper for Elwell, arrived at his four-story town house at 224 West 70th Street in New York City. She entered the vestibule, picked up a bottle of milk and then let herself in with her key.

As she walked past the living room she noticed some letters on the floor, and glanced into the room. The bridge expert, clad in pajamas and barefooted,

was slumped in a chair, a bullet hole almost in the exact center of his forehead.

For several seconds Mrs. Larsen stared transfixed at the man. He was alive and breathing noisily. At first she failed to recognize him because he was minus hair and teeth and she had not known that he wore a toupee.

A sudden groan broke the spell that had been holding the housekeeper rooted to the spot. With a shriek she headed for the doorway and in her haste stumbled and fell in the hall. Scrambling to her feet she dashed out into the street shouting for help.

## **Elwell Keeps His Secret**

The first person she met was a milkman who told her he was too busy to find a cop. A block away she located Patrolman Henry Singer who summoned an ambulance from Bellevue Hospital and notified headquarters of the shooting.

Elwell died an hour later without regaining consciousness while detectives waited in vain to question him. The murder of so prominent a figure brought high ranking officials speeding to the house. Elwell's book, "Advanced Bridge," was a national best seller and he was personal instructor to many members in the Social Register. His annual income enabled him to maintain a town house in New York, a winter

house in Palm Beach, and summer residences at Saratoga Springs and Long Beach.

Captain Arthur Carey, veteran head of the Homicide Squad, took command of the investigation with District Attorney Edward Swann on hand.

It was obvious that no struggle had taken place in the murder room. Elwell's chair was against the wall next to a bridge table. A battered .45 caliber slug was on top of the table where it landed after ricocheting from the wall where it had gouged out some plaster. A half-smoked cigarette of a different brand from the one smoked by Elwell was on the mantlepiece.

### Dr. Norris Investigates

Huge, bearded Dr. Charles Norrjs, Chief Medical Examiner, said that Elwell had been seated when shot and the pattern of powder burns on his forehead showed that the bullet had been fired from a distance of two to four feet.

It had traveled at a 15 degree angle through the skull which meant it was fired almost on a straight line, the logical answer being that the killer had been seated opposite Elwell. If the murderer had been crouching then the bullet would have angled upward more sharply. If the killer had been standing then the bullet would have coursed downward.

Burglary was almost immediately ruled out as a motive for the murder. All the windows on the first floor were barred by iron grillwork and were locked. The front, rear and basement doors were bolted. The only open window in the house was in a third floor bedroom occupied by Elwell, and beyond the reach of even a cat burglar.

A wallet on the bureau in his bedroom contained \$400 while one of the drawers held many valuable pieces of jewelry. His toupee and false teeth were on top of the dresser.

Mrs. Larsen explained that Elwell also employed a male secretary and a chauffeur but lived alone in the huge house, the employees leaving by 6 P.M. Elwell customarily dined out.

### Find Pink Nightie

A search of the house soon disclosed why Elwell preferred to have no help about after dark. In a bedroom ad-

joining his, detectives found an expensive pink nightgown and a matching pair of slippers. Mrs. Larsen said she did not know the name of the woman who wore the garments but she had heard her voice. She indicated that there had been a steady parade of women in Elwell's life.

This was verified by a search of his desk. A card index contained the names, initials, nicknames, addresses and telephone numbers of 53 different women. In addition there were hundreds of photographs of women from different stratas of society, including social lights and chorus girls. Concealed under several pads of paper was a list of women with notations alongside each showing that Elwell had been sending them checks every month. Cancelled checks and voucher stubs indicated that Elwell had pensioned off many of his ex-mistresses.

"With fifty-three women, and a lot of them married, we have plenty of motives for the murder," Captain Carey commented. He assigned men to question every woman on Elwell's lists.

### Mysterious Phone Calls

When police arrived they found the telephone out of order but it was quickly repaired at Captain Carey's request. A check of records showed an incoming call at 3 A.M. and at 4:39 Elwell had called a number twice in Far Rockaway. The operator reported that she rang for several minutes each time without receiving any answer.

The letters helped fix the time of death. The mailman said he left seven letters for Elwell about 7:10 A.M. Since the bridge expert had these with him in the living room, it meant he was alive when the postman called. The shooting had to occur between 7:10 and 8:10 when Mrs. Larsen arrived. The only letter that was opened was from Elwell's horse trainer in Covington, Kentucky, and was a chatty note about the condition of several of his horses.

About noon, while detectives still were searching through the house, the restored telephone rang and a woman asked for Elwell.

### Elwell's Girl Friend

When the woman said she was a friend of Elwell's, the quick-thinking detective

told her to hurry right over without revealing that the bridge expert had been murdered.

"Mr. Elwell is very sick and needs your help right away," he told her.

Pausing only to ask if she should bring a doctor, the woman promised to rush to the house immediately. A short time later an attractive brunette hurried up the front steps, ran a gauntlet of reporters and entered the house. Authorities refused to reveal her identity to newspapermen although Mrs. Larsen declared that she recognized her voice as the woman who wore the pink nightgown. Reporters promptly dubbed the mystery brunette "the Lady in Pink."

The caller was beautiful Viola Kraus, member of a prominent social family. She indignantly denied the housekeeper's assertions that she had stayed overnight with Elwell. She was able to help police account for the murdered man's time the previous evening.

Elwell had accompanied her to the Ritz Carlton where they had dined with Mr. and Mrs. Walter Lewisohn, her sister and brother-in-law. As their party was being seated, another couple was ushered to an adjoining table. The man was Victor Von Schlegell, former Yale football star, and wealthy executive from whom Viola had just received her final divorce decree that day. Her ex-husband was accompanied by an attractive blonde.

### Such Friends He Had!

She said there had been an awkward pause for a few moments but Elwell and Von Schlegell, who had known each other for years, nodded cordially and the two groups ignored each other after that.

Several hours later Elwell's party went to the New Amsterdam Theatre roof where Eddie Cantor was starring in the *Midnight Frolics*, a Ziegfeld show. They were joined by Octavio Figueroa, a well know South American journalist. While they were telling him about the meeting at the Ritz-Carlton, Von Schlegell and his blonde companion stepped off the elevator for the second encounter that night.

Captain Carey exchanged glances with his men. "One is better than fifty-three," he remarked and dispatched men to pick up Von Schlegell.

Miss Kraus added that her ex-husband left early after the performance but her group remained until 2 A.M. She admitted that she and Elwell had quarreled just before their group broke up. When they emerged on the street all piled into a cab except Elwell who told them to go ahead since they were heading for the East Side while he lived on the West Side.

### Trace Victim's Movements

Detectives traced back on Elwell's movements from the time he left Miss Kraus and found a taxi-driver who had picked up the bridge expert near the New Amsterdam Theatre shortly after 2 A.M. Elwell had been alone. Elwell stopped the cab once to buy a racing paper. The hackman remained parked in front of his house while he made out his route sheet which lists time of arrival at destination. He saw Elwell enter the house and nobody was on the steps waiting for him. The route sheet listed time of arrival at 2:30.

It was evident to Captain Carey that Elwell had not gone to sleep on his arrival. He had changed to night clothes and stretched out on top of the bed to read the racing paper. One of the pillows was dented and the paper was on the floor beside the bed, but the sheets were not wrinkled.

Miss Kraus said she had called at 3 A.M. and had patched up the minor spat with Elwell. They had a golfing date for later that day.

### Cops Grill Von Schlegell

Von Schlegell was questioned and said the two meetings the previous night had been a coincident that is bound to happen in New York where certain hotels and cafes are considered the smart place to go.

He revealed that his companion had been Miss Anderson, of Minneapolis. She was in New York studying voice. The previous night had been her last in the city because she was returning home for a while and he had allowed her to select the places she wanted to visit. She picked the Ritz-Carlton and the New Amsterdam roof. A wire was sent to Miss Anderson asking her to return to New York, which she did. She verified Von Schlegell's story. Police also withheld her identity from reporters and

since the pretty blonde was dressed in black when interviewed by detectives, newsmen labeled her "the Lady in Black."

While being questioned Von Schlegell admitted owning a "large Army gun." Detectives raced to his bachelor quarters in the Knickerbocker Chambers on East 62nd Street to examine the weapon. Dust marks on the shelf showed that the gun had been disturbed fairly recently but it was a .38 caliber while the death weapon was a .45 automatic.

### Check His Alibi

Von Schlegell said he arose about 7:30 that morning and records at the resident hotel showed that he had telephoned the superintendent at 7:50 A.M. and ordered breakfast. The call had been made on the house 'phone in his room.

Frank Barker, the superintendent, said he came up with a breakfast tray at 8:10, let himself into the apartment with a passkey, placing the tray on a serving table in the foyer. One of the elevator operators removed the tray about 9 o'clock and the breakfast had been consumed. His time was accounted for from 7:50 on. This left a gap of 40 minutes from 7:10 but since he lived over a mile away from Elwell's house, it would have taken fast timing to have made the round trip plus time in Elwell's house.

Von Schlegell's car had been in the garage undergoing repairs and was not called for until shortly after 9 A.M. Although the time element indicated rather plainly that Von Schlegell was in his apartment at the time of the murder, police shadowed his movements for 11 days and then cleared him. Von Schlegell later married Miss Anderson.

### Phone Rings In Vain

Tracing the two attempted calls by Elwell to Far Rockaway, showed that the number belonged to W. H. Pendleton, Elwell's partner in a racing stable. Although the operator said there had been no answer to her rings, Pendleton told detectives that he had been home at the time and his telephone was in his bedroom so he would have awakened if it rang. An extension was in a maid's room and she would have heard it. He added that Elwell never called him at such an early hour during the three years of

their association.

The investigation of the 53 women in Elwell's life went on for weeks. Not only were the movements of all the women traced but so were the actions of the husbands and sweethearts of the women. At one time it had been Elwell's custom to give each new love life a key to his home, but with so many keys out he realized that an embarrassing situation might arise if more than one woman dropped in. As a result he changed the lock just two weeks before the murder, with only two keys made for it—one for himself and the other for Mrs. Larsen, the housekeeper.

### Elwell was Discreet

The searching inquiry into these women only served to prove that Elwell had been most discreet in his affairs of the heart and had managed to carry them on without any scandal.

Police reluctantly had to cast in new waters for a possible suspect. They began to dredge into the background of the murdered man. Elwell was married but separated from his wife to whom he paid \$200 a month plus support for their son. They had been separated for some years and Mrs. Elwell was indifferent to his activities.

She had an air-tight alibi for the time of the murder and since she had been satisfied with the financial arrangements made with her husband, detectives had eliminated her early in their investigation. She had known that he cut her off in his will so she would be the loser by his death.

Almost equally puzzling as to how the killer had entered the house was the question of how the killer left. A painter was at work next door when the mailman deposited the letters for Elwell. He saw the housekeeper arrive and witnessed her dash outside a minute later shouting for help.

He had not seen anybody enter or leave the house from the time the mailman called until Mrs. Larsen arrived. The large pool of blood on the floor showed that Elwell had been shot some time before Mrs. Larsen found him. Neighbors, some of whom were on the street on their way to work during that fateful hour were questioned but none of them had noticed any stranger about or had heard the sound of a shot.

Newspapermen were having a field day bringing in names prominent in international society. Countess Sonia Szinswaska, a Polish friend, and Princess Dalla Patra Hassan el Kammel, a niece of a former Khedive of Egypt, found themselves in the spotlight simply because they had played bridge with Elwell and police hoped they might know of some incident which would place them on the track of the killer. The women were unable to give any help on that score. They presented unassailable alibis but detectives never considered them as suspects.

The search for the missing .45 was thorough. Police even moved three tons of coal in Elwell's basement, piece by piece. Chimneys were scrutinized, floors and ceilings tapped for hidden compartments, and all sewers in the neighborhood were searched. Several dozen patrolmen ruined their dispositions and their appetites as they raked through every piece of garbage collected in the city that day. The missing weapon never has been found.

### Many "Tips" Pour In

Hundreds of letters and telephone calls poured into headquarters and while authorities patiently checked ev-

ery tip and rumor, they obtained no leads.

Mrs. Larsen, her husband who was in the Army, the secretary, and chauffeur all were examined thoroughly and cleared.

Police doubt that Elwell's killer was a woman because a .45 automatic is not the kind of a gun a woman would use and also because it is unlikely that the bridge expert who was so vain of his appearance that he even would not allow his housekeeper to see him without a toupee, would have admitted a woman visitor without his wig and false teeth.

Since the killer had smoked a cigarette and sat only a few feet from Elwell, it had to be somebody with whom he was pretty well acquainted. The lack of any struggle points to his being taken by surprise. He might have been glancing at the letter and talking when the killer stealthily pulled out the gun, fired once and vanished like a wraith.

One thing is certain. The playboy bridge expert was murdered by somebody who left no recognizable clue and has kept his or her mouth shut during the passing of the years. Although the case still is open on the files, police believe that only a miracle could bring about a solution now.



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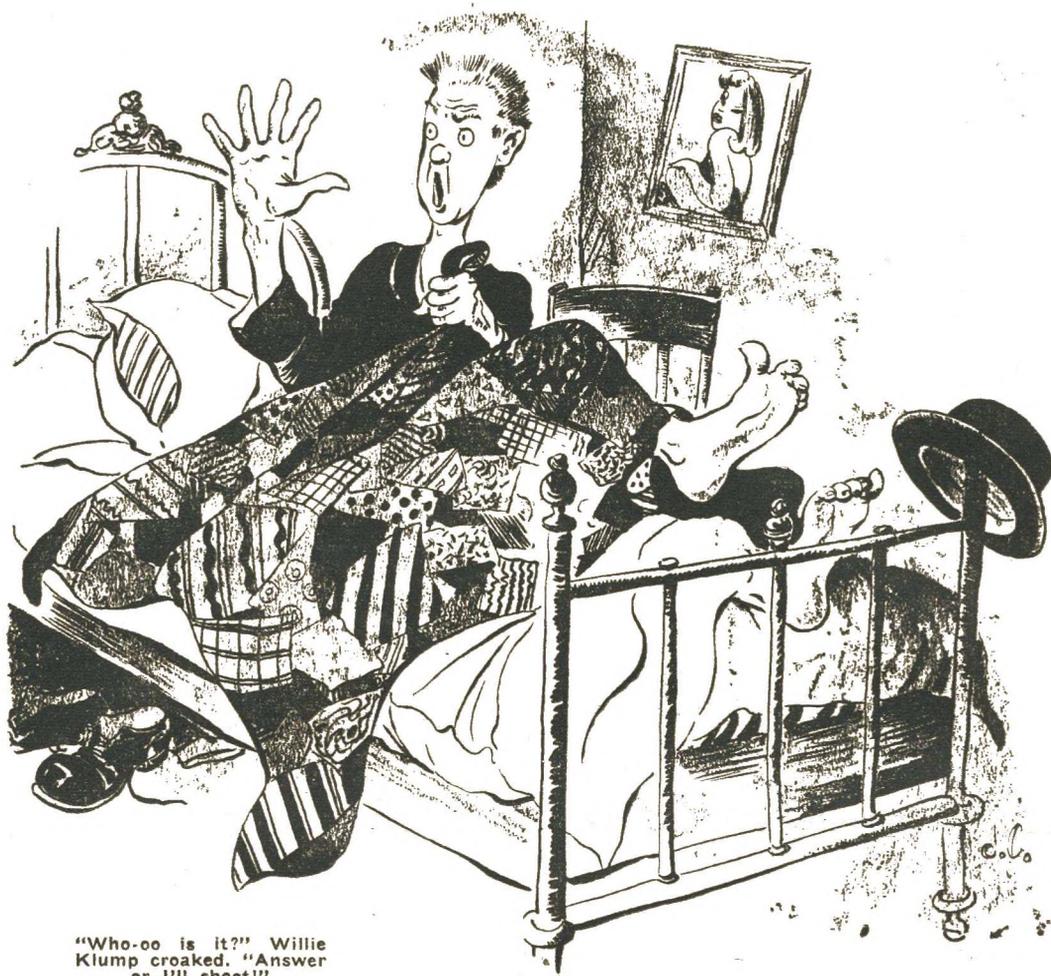
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"Who-oo is it?" Willie Klump croaked. "Answer or I'll shoot!"

# Dying to See Willie

By JOE ARCHIBALD

*The crook climbed right into bed with Detective Klump before kicking the bucket, but he left a valuable clue behind him!*

**G**ERTRUDE MUDGETT walked into the office of the Hawkeye Detective Agency, Inc., just as the president, William J. Klump, was having his lunch.

"Have a jelly doughnut, Gert," Willie greeted her cordially. "The coffee will be cooked any minute now."

"Huh, I must say!" Gertie sniffed. "This is certainly a delusionment, Willie. The private eyes on the radio, like

Fats McGlone, have beautifully furnished pesthouses and a varlet. You are about as glamorous as a tomcat casin' an alley for a fishhead."

"Them fakers!" Willie bridled. "Every place they go even if it is on the steps of a parsonage, they stumble over a corpse. They open their door of a night and there is a stiff wearin' their favorite dressin' gown. Only morons believe that dribble."

"Whicht means I am one, hah?" Gertie yelped. "It is just perfessional jealousy with you an' you know it, Willie Klump! Look at Aloysius Kelly for instance who is workin' on a big murder and robbery what took place last night! He's what I call a detective, Willie!"

"Huh? Tell me more, Gert!"

"I met him in the subway this mornin'," Gertie said. "He was on his way uptown to investigate a suspect might've known about the crime. Somebody killed the watchman at the Pusey Plastic Novelties Company just across the Harlem River an' they also took forty grand from the safe whicht looked like a punch job to Hardhat Hafey of the Safe an' Loft Squad but maybe wasn't. Kelly says it looked like some gee knew the combo of the crib only it turns out nobody knew it but the vice-president an' the cashier an' who would suspect them? The watchman was slugged by a piece of pipe or somethin' an'—"

Willie held up a hand. "Take time out, Gert," he suggested. "That is the way you git blood pressure. Then go on an' tell me the rest."

"I certainly will not as he give it to me in strict confidence," Gertie said. "If everybody blabs what they hear, how could the crooks git caught?"

"A good question," Willie sniffed. "Satchelfoot Kelly is handicapped enough as it is, not havin' a brain. That shnook couldn't find a moose in the museum of natural history."

"I don't intend to sit here an' have you insult my friends, William Klump!" Gertie snapped. "Go chaste a skip tracer, as that is your speed!"

**W**ILLIE shook the punch off and put half a jelly doughnut back in the bag for future reference. "Say, ain't Hardhat married?"

"He is," Gertie said loftily. "Some men do git married, Willie!"

"An' others join the Marines," Willie said. "I must talk to Hafey. I guess that plastered novelty company would like to git forty grand back."

"Don't make me laugh!" Gertie Mudgett snorted disdainfully and picked up her warbag. "An' wipe the powdered sugar off your face, Willie!"

A few minutes after Gertie had taken her leave the president of the Hawkeye called up a certain number downtown and finally got Hardhat Hafey.

"Hello there," Willie said. "I just called to tell you what a swell wife you got, Hardhat. I saw her for the first time las' Saturday night as you two walked into the Blue Pelican on Fifty-Ninth. Platinum hair, huh? An' what bookie or dope peddler you coverin' for to buy her a fur coat like that?"

"Er, look here, Willie!" Hardhat gulped at the other end of the wire. "You know I showed you a pitcher of the babe I married. That was a cousin from out in Kokomo an' I was showin' her the sights."

"Ha-ha!" Willie replied.

"Awright, you blackmailer!" Hardhat yelped. "What's the bite?"

"It is just I might want to know all the angles about the Pusey job," Willie said. "Of courst you marryin' a girl she should be *broad* minded, Hardhat, an' wouldn't mind you buzzin' with a cousin."

"Willie, I will meet you in Hogan's at five," Hardhat said.

William Klump hung up. Sometimes he wondered if he was as dumb as most people claimed he was.

He was in Hogan's tavern at five sharp and Hardhat Hafey, a six-inch shiv in each eye, was waiting. "Hello, worm," he said.

"Flattery won't get you nowheres," Willie said, and sat down. "All is fair in love until you marry 'em, Hardhat. What's with Satchelfoot Kelly?"

"Well, we cased that joint after the holdup, Willie," Hafey divulged, "an' it did look funny. The dial was knocked off like with a mallet or somethin' an' the spindle pushed back only the sockets wa'n't broken like they should of been. We figure the cashier might of worked with crooks an' he told 'em to be sure it would look like a punch job when they was finished. Kelly is still investigatin' the character's background an' livin' habits an' such. I give you my word it is all I know, Willie!"

"Have another beer," Willie said. "Was it an old safe, Hardhat?"

"It sure wasn't, Willie. It was one of them Burpson's. The D.A. says they are tough babies to bust open. Now I hope I can trust you, Willie, not to tell about—"

"Hardhat!" Willie exclaimed, "What kind of a detective you think I am?"

"Do you mind if I don't answer that one?" Hardhat sniffed.

"Not at all." Willie grinned. "Well, I must be goin'."

William J. Klump was ducking into a subway just three minutes later when who should come out of same but Aloysius "Satchelfoot" Kelly, a citizen Willie had always loved the way he did the withholding tax and calves' brains a la mode.

"What are you snoopin' around for, you poor man's Sam Spade?" Satchelfoot snarled.

"I lost a collar button," Willie said. "You have any luck briefin' the cashier?"

"If there ever was a deader end than that one I just hit my dome against, I don't know where it could be unlest it was sittin' on your shoulders," Kelly griped. "That character Barnaby, an' his wife repair Gideon Bibles in their spare time. The cashier has had two suits the last six years an' has been to one movie. What would he want with forty grand?"

"Satchelfoot," Willie said. "The one you should suspect the most is the citizen nobody thinks of doin'."

"No, you don't," Kelly suddenly yelped. "I am not goin' to let you worm nothin' more out of me. Git lost!"

**W**HEN Willie Klump walked into his rooming house that night his landlady was waiting for him in the hall and the look in her eye convinced the president of the Hawkeye there would be no good news tonight.

"Evenin'," Willie forced out. "I know I am back about a week in the rent but you have t' admit that for me that ain't bad."

"Leave us forget that, Mr. Klump," the old doll said. "It is the only reason I don't feel too bad about evictin' you. My daughter out in Jersey has been evicted an' so she an' her husband have to have your room as of tomorrow this time."

Willie was fast becoming a fatalist. He rocked back on his heels for a moment and then stiffened his upper lip.

"Well, it shouldn't be bad in the park these days, Mrs. Klipspringer. Hah, I feel the call of the great outdoors."

"You could git into a hotel until you got another room, Mr. Klump," Mrs. Klipspringer suggested. "I hate to do this."

"Well, blood is thicker than the hot water we never got in this flea-bag,"

Willie said.

It took Willie about twenty minutes the next afternoon to throw his worldly goods into a straw suitcase. That morning he had noticed a medium class hotel just off Union Square and had been informed that a certain room would be available for at least a week. The bite would be seventeen dollars. It was the Hotel Luxoria.

"Maybe I could make a deal with 'em," Willie sighed. "For the rent I would give them house dick services. Well, I could try."

Willie was in Room 660 at the Luxoria at three P.M. At three-thirty Gertrude Mudgett called him on the phone. "I phoned your roomin' house, Willie Klump," she said. "So you been holdin' out on me with a big detainin' fee from somewheres, huh? Sincet when could you live in a hotel without washin' dishes? You doublecrosstin' giraffe!"

"Look, I got evicted!" Willie yelled. "Stop jumpin' at inclusions."

"Didn't pay your rent again?" Gertie shot back. "What dizzy dame you been squanderin' your money on? If I ever find out, you sneak!"

"I left the water runnin' in the tub, Gert," Willie said. "Call me back." He hung up and then saw a sign tacked up near the phone that said:

#### NO COOKING ALLOWED IN THIS ROOM

"Is that so?" he sniffed. "Neither did Mrs. Klipspringer. As long as I don't cook cabbage they will know from nothin'."

Willie got to his office at four to look through his mail. A mail-order house claimed they had a shoe for such as he that made less sound than rubber, and they had built-in arches. Another letter screamed at him, Come to Morgridge Manor And See Our Houses! Protect You And Yours From Eviction!

"I wisht a corpse would come in here an' drop dead at my feet," Willie griped. "Fats McGlone, huh! No cow ever carried as much tripe as them radio flatfeet. Even what happens to me at times is like readin' *Black Beauty* compared to it."

The phone rang and Willie eagerly grabbed it off its cradle. "Hawkeye Detective Agency, Incorp. William J. Klump speaking. Missin' persons found. Skip tracin' an'—"

"Mr. Klump, we are takin' a radio poll," a dulcet feminine voice cooed. "Do you listen to Fats McGlone on station WHAM on Wednesday evenings?"

"This is not the observation tower at Bellevue," Willie snapped. "Do I look that stupid, sister?"

"You sure do," the doll said. "An' drop dead! If I was your sister I would give you rat poison!"

"An' if you was, I'd take it!" Willie countered and slammed the phone down. He decided to give up and go back to the hotel. On the way he purchased an evening paper to see if there were any new leads on the murder and robbery at the Pusey Plastic Products Company. Willie chuckled when he read part of a story on page 5. Headquarters had assured the newspaper citizens that an arrest would be made inside forty-eight hours.

"I wonder when they will stop listenin' to Satchelfoot," Willie observed. "Or at least believin' him. Let's see now. The cashier's name was Barnaby an' might be in the phone book. You stop thinkin' like that, Willie! What chancet have you got anyway?"

**S**UDDENLY Willie felt a tap on the shoulder and turned and looked into the face of a very big cop.

"Yeah?" Willie inquired.

"You're either drunk or crazy," the cop snapped. "Who you been talkin' to the last couple minutes? There ain't nobody with you. Git off my beat 'fore I run you in."

"I will have you know I am a detective," Willie said indignantly, then knew he had made a very grave mistake and started running. It was a hot day and the cop was fat. There were times when Willie had to admit he got the breaks.

At ten o'clock that night he peeled off and tumbled into bed and tried not to think of the seventeen bucks he would have to pay at the end of seven days. And then it occurred to him that it would be easy to lower his straw suitcase to the court in back and so he dropped off to sleep.

It was much later when the president of the Hawkeye suddenly woke and sat straight up in bed. There were sounds in the room that shouldn't have been there and certainly hadn't been made by things the exterminators had missed.

And a cockroach could not fall over a chair. Willie tried to scream but his throat was as dry as a camel's foot. Then something heavy fell across the bed and pinned his knees. The cold sweat came out of Willie and trickled down his spine and down his nose.

Finally he croaked, "Who is it? Answer me or I'll sh-shoot!"

All that Willie could hear for the next few seconds were tom-toms and a sound like a kid dragging a stick along the pickets of a fence. Then he gradually realized that his ticker and his teeth were making the racket and he pulled himself together. He reached up and groped for the string to the light that was attached to the wall over his bed. He found it and yanked. Willie's locks shot up as if he also had pulled the string of a fright wig.

A big citizen who was a stranger to Willie had fallen across the bed. His hat had dropped off. In the back of the strange intruder's plaid coat was a hole that had never been chewed out by a moth. In short the citizen looked very, very dead. Willie squirmed and got his legs out from under and swung out of bed.

"I guess you made a mistake," he gulped. "You was maybe lookin' for Fats McGlone on the radio."

Willie picked up a snapbrim hat and saw the label inside. A Truly Warmer. There were initials, M.F.T.

"Huh, this skimmer never cost more than three-sixty-five," Willie said. "But this character's suit never cost less than a hun'ed. Why did he come in here to breathe his last? I better call the night clerk, then the cops."

The night clerk was a citizen well past seventy and he had no more hair on his pate than a pickerel. He nearly lost his store choppers when he took a gander at the corpse.

"Why, he come in just a few minutes ago, Klump," the old geezer said. "I figgered he had one too many an' that was why he staggered."

"One too many is right," Willie said, mopping his brow. "Right between the shoulder-blades, pal. Who is he?"

"Name's J. L. Cusp," the clerk nasaled. "Been here about a week. Has Room Six-Hundred. That's it, Klump. He was all mixed up an' wasn't seein' too good an' sixes an' zeros all looked alike so he stumbled in here—"

Willie suddenly snapped his fingers. "J. T. Cusp? Then why is M.F.T. in his hat, huh? Don't answer that. Just leave me git to the phone to call Homicide oncet more. Ha, he died to git to see me, didn't he?"

"I guess I ain't got a sense of humor," the old desk tender sniffed.

Willie called Headquarters. "Yeah, that's what I said an' it ain't no gag," he said in part. "He crawled in bed with me an' expired. Huh, don't you ever listen to the radio? Be sure Satchelfoot Kelly comes if he happens to be there. This he's got to see."

The night clerk inched out of the room. Willie looked the deceased over more thoroughly. He had been a nice looking citizen who had found life ended at forty and was not a criminal type any way you looked at him. Willie wished that he was heel enough to case the cadaver thoroughly before the legitimate cops arrived.

"But it is like I always told Gert," he said aloud. "My conscience ain't much but my sub-conscience is what makes me lay off temptation at times. I could leave a print in the wrong place an' Kelly would do his best to send me to the rotisserie. Lay off, Willie."

**T**WENTY minutes later the appraiser of the violently departed snapped his bag shut and announced that the stiff had been one for at least forty minutes. Satchelfoot Kelly eyed Willie askance after the private eye had told his story.

"It ain't possible," he sniffed. "Truth can't be stranger than Willie Klump. What you doin' livin' in a hotel, Willie? You got mixed up in some racket, I bet."

"Oh, I just peddle a little opium at times," Willie said sourly. "An' don't you think we could git more dope on the corpse if we went to the room he lived in, Satchelfoot? It is six-hundred. Follow me."

There was a nice leather suitcase in the late J. L. Cusp's room. The initials J.L.C. were on it. Inside it were a few articles of clothing that told the gendarmes nothing.

"It looks like he was held up somewhere is all," Satchelfoot opined. "There wa'n't no poke on him as I frisked him. Looks like he never got no mail while he was there. Well, I can't waste too much time on this rubout unlest somebody identifies him in the morgue

as some big shot. With that Pusey case still to be solved—"

Willie wondered if he should mention the hat with the initials M.F.T. in it, then told himself the late J. L. Cusp might have grabbed it off a rack in a barber shop by mistake. Anyway, why should he do what the cops were getting paid for? It was silly.

"Awright," Kelly said. "If you boys have everythin' covered we'll call it a night. An' don't you dast leave town, Willie!"

"You got nothin' on me, flatfoot," Willie replied. "I t'rowed the gat where no radar could find it, ha!"

Willie Klump returned to Room 660 and was quite relieved to discover the cadaver had been removed to the deep freeze. He was wracking his brains for a plausible explanation to all this when his phone rang. He answered it and recognized the voice of the night clerk.

"Mr. Klump, there is a cab driver down here," the old character wheezed. "He has got a pocketbook belongs to J. L. Cusp, I am sure. You'd better come down."

Willie did. The cabby said he found the wallet in his jalopy after coming out of a beanery. "Yeah, I thought I'd clean up the heap a little an' I found this wallet. I was sure it belonged to my last fare whicht was a drunk in a plaid suit. He hails me at the corner of Second Avenya an' Forty-third. I took him to this dump an' he han's me a five he has crumpled in his fist. He says I should keep the change."

"It is easy to figure out why he was easy with his lettuce," Willie sniffed. "The citizen is dead, pal."

"Huh? Look, I don't know from nothin'," the hackie yelped. "You think if I rubbed him out I'd come back with the wallet I stole from him which I did not!"

"You are in the clear, Mac," Willie said. "You are the kind of citizen makes things tough for dishonest persons. Just leave your name an' address in case we need a witness."

"Okay, pal."

A few minutes later William J. Klump, in the privacy of his room, made a startling discovery that put buzzing sounds inside his noggin. There was not a single bit of legal tender left in the late J. L. Cusp's poke but tucked away in a little cubicle were one or two old business cards. They said: J. Luscomb

Crump. Burpson Safe Co., Inc., Grand Rapids, Mich.

Willie went to the washstand and splashed cold water on his face. He pinched himself on a tender part of his anatomy to make sure he was not dreaming that he was listening to a Fats McGlone radio can of corn. But the wallet was still there on the bed. He took an old notebook and a pencil from a dresser drawer and scribbled down the things that came briefly to mind.

"The corpse lost a hat marked with the initials M.F.T. He registered at the Luxoria as J. L. Cusp. Why?"

"But the deceased was really named J. Luscomb Crump so why the pseudonym? It was a Burpson safe knocked off at the Pusey Plastered Novelties Company and it looks like this rubout has a string attached to the assassination of that watchman. Willie, you ain't that lucky!

"An honest gee don't lead no double life. If this J. Luscomb Crump was crooked what kind of underworld characters would he make deals with? Of course they should be safe crackers. I wonder is there one in the files with the initials M.F.T.?"

**A**BRUPTLY Willie put his pencil down. He had a headache too big even for a horse for he was quite allergic to such large scale thinking. He pocketed the notes and then looked for his bottle of aspirin.

"I don't believe it," he mumbled. "Maybe I'll be awright in the mornin' an' find it is all a figurement of the imagination. The don't even happen to me."

At ten o'clock of the same day Willie walked into an office downtown and conversed earnestly with a citizen in charge of the rogues gallery.

"I hate to bother you," Willie said, "but I have to make a livin' the same as anybody. I have been on the trail of a missin' person for a client an' I got reasons to believe he was either in the can or out of it. I git paid even if I just find out where the missin' person is as his wife says she can git a divorce if she can prove her husband is a ex-convict or one now in good standin'. Of course us private eyes have to hold our clients in strict confidants. I can only say the initials of the character I am huntin' is M.F.T."

"Klump, you get worse every day," the

headquarters specialist sniffed. "Just initials. Git lost."

"My client said he would be in for safe-crackin' if anythin'," Willie coaxed.

"All right, follow me, Klump. We'll have a look in that category."

A few minutes later William J. Klump was getting a gander at the pedigree of an incurable incorrigle named Melvin F. Trumbo. Melvin had worked out a rap back in Joliet and had once gone over the wall out in Kansas. He had a moon face and a pair of eyes Willie thought should be grafted onto a blind buzzard in the event of his demise.

"This guy, Klump? If that's the mug he is now on parole I am quite certain. I can get where he lives an' where he works."

"Do that," Willie said.

The president of the Hawkeye Detective Agency left the bastile a few moments later with the address of Melvin F. Trumbo. The parolee was now employed as a mechanic with the Dairy-maid Milk Company on Third Avenue.

"I might be able to milk somethin' out of the gee," he mumbled just as a familiar voice pulled him back on his heels.

"What you doin' here at headquarters, knucklehead?" Satchelfoot Kelly yipped.

"You don't expect a civil answer an' you know it, Satchelfoot," Willie grinned. "You caught that bunch of crooks yet who knocked off the Pusey Nov—"

"You would laugh on the other side of your silly kisser, Willie," Kelly snapped back, "if I should happen to pin it on the vice-president, huh?"

"Truman know about it?"

"I mean the v.p. of the Pusey Pl—aw, shuddup!" Satchelfoot Kelly snarled.

"They indentify who J. L. Cusp is yet?" Willie asked.

"Why should they when they know what his name is, beetlebrain?"

"That is right, Kelly. Silly of me, huh? Well, I can't waste time with the likes of you."

At five-thirty that evening William Klump rapped the wood of a certain door of a room above a pawnshop on Second Avenue near Thirty-Sixth Street. Melvin F. Trumbo admitted him and asked what in the aitch he wanted.

"I am a private eye," Willie said. "Seein' you wish to make up for things you did to society I thought you might

give me some info on a character named Boogoo McFoody who is wanted by the cops."

"Never heard of the punk!"

**W**ILLIE was not surprised. Neither had he. It was quite evident that Melvin Trumbo was slicking up for some smooching for the ex-con wore a nice white shirt and slacks no baseball bat ever came with.

"Look, flatfoot, I got a date with a dame an' I ain't got much time. How long do you think I could keep goin' straight unless it was to the morgue if I sang on everybody I knew, huh? Why don't cops try usin' their own brains?"

"A good question," Willie admitted just as the phone rang out in the hall.

"That's the doll," Trumbo yelped, and hurried out. Willie quickly cased the room and then he saw something on the dresser that made his ears twitch. He tip-toed across the room and picked up the expensive olive-green skimmer. He looked inside and saw that little gilt letters had been torn from the band only Melvin had not been able to get rid of the prints they had left. Willie made out the initials J and C and then dropped the hat as if it had suddenly caught fire. He was sitting in a chair and examining his nails when Trumbo hopped back inside.

"Nice room here," Willie said. "Ain't it swell goin' straight, pal?"

"Nothin' like it, copper. Look, some other time, huh?"

"Okay," Willie said. "I hate stool pigeons anyway, Trumbo. I jus' wanted to see if you was one."

Willie felt a little radio-activated when he walked west. After a hamburger he went to a telegraph office and composed a night letter which ran as follows:

**BURPSON SAFE COMPANY, GRAND RAPIDS, MICH. HAVE YOU GOT A. J. LUSCOMB CRUMP THERE? IF NOT WHERE IS HE? STOP WANT INFORMATION ON MAN STOP WIRE WILLIAM J. KLUMP ALL INFO IN FULL TO HAWKEYE DETECTIVE AGENCY, INC., ROOM 349, WACKEY BLDG., N.Y.C. STOP.**

Willie managed to scrape up the tariff for the service rendered and went to his hotel to pitch and toss all night like a shrimp boat caught in the middle of the Atlantic. At eight A.M. he was sitting in his office biting his nails. At nine a

messenger arrived and handed him a yellow envelope marked collect.

Willie surrendered all but thirty-eight cents of his assets and feverishly ripped open the telegram. The words jumped at him and each one was like a hammer hitting him between the eyes:

**WILLIAM J. KLUMP, HAWKEYE DETECTIVE AGENCY, N.Y. J. L. CRUMP LEFT OUR EMPLOY THREE MONTHS AGO STOP WAS EXPERT ON COMBINATIONS BURPSON SAFES STOP UNABLE TO GIVE YOU FURTHER DETAILS STOP W. P. GOOGINS, BURPSON SAFES.**

William J. Klump grabbed up a notebook and the stub of a pencil and wrote faster than a post office clerk.

No. 1. It could be. A citizen could make more scratch opening Burpson Safes when they was full of payrolls than he could by just testin' them out at so much per a week.

No. 2. A character like J. Luscomb Crump would not be an habituated criminal so would not know how to case joints to first get in where a safe was. Adult relinquents like Melvin Trumbo would and might hire out for a consideration.

No. 3. It looks like Crump could of crossed or been crossed on the Pusey Plastered Novelities deal and I wonder how? I can't think of everything all at once. I—

The phone rang. Willie picked it up. "Awright, hurry up as I'm in conference an'—huh? You must have my room as of tomorrow night as a convention is comin' to town? Look, I'll see the OPA. You can't—you can, huh? So I'm evicted ag'in! An' they say lightnin' don't strike twicet in the same pl—that's it! Thanks, pal! You don't know what you did for me!"

"We don't?" the room clerk at the Luxoria gulped in reply. "Odd character," Willie heard the man say just as he hung up.

"Well, I must be a little different than most. Of courst it could strike in the same place but there is more chancet it would hit some other place than the first time. I must get down to the telegraft office."

**V**ERY soon Willie realized that he was a fiscal fiasco before he got to the message center so he hopped into a drug store and called Gertie Mudgett.

"Look, star of my life," he said when he made connections. "I got to have at least three bucks an' it is life an' death. I am at Lex an' Forty-Eighth, Gert. Don't spare the horses!"

Gertie arrived fifteen minutes later and Willie took her in his arms and kissed her in front of everybody.

"Oh, you precious lump of sugar!" he cooed.

"Oh, Willie!" Gertie sighed. "Is three enough? Take ten, please!"

Willie did.

"I have to rush back, sweetface," Gertie said, her eyes dewy. "Willie, I misjudged you awful, didn't I?"

"Why didn't I think of this technique before?" Willie asked himself as he slammed the door of a cab behind Gertrude Mudgett's derriere. "Well, this is no time for romance."

He went in and sent another wire to the Burpson Safe Company asking for the location and sizes of their brand of cribs in the big town. Then he rushed back to his office to wait.

Willie did not get a telegram back from Grand Rapids. Mr. Googins called him long distance instead.

"Is this Mr. Klump, Hawkeye Detective Agency?" he queried. "Well, we wonder what this is all about and we hesitate to give you the information you want without first consulting New York Police Headquarters. After all, Mr. Klump, we have no way of knowing whether you're responsible or not. You could be a crook."

"Look, I have got a lead on the robbery of one of your safes here," Willie said in a huff. "The one at the Pusey Plastered Novelties Company. Unless we prove that a Burpson Safe is punch-proof, how you goin' to sell many more around here? Of course I work private but if you feel that way—"

"Klump, you sound like you're on the level," Mr. Googins said. "We have to be careful you know. Now, there are about a dozen of our new safes there but the two biggest ones are owned by the Krippinger Casket Company in the Bronx and the Garfinkle Girdle Company on Tenth Avenue. If you do prove that safe there was not forced open there is a thousand dollars in it for you, Klump. You don't mind if we investigate into your character and integrity in the meantime, do you?"

"Not at all," Willie gulped. When he hung up he wiped his pan. "I am glad no television is attached to these phones. An' I better work fast 'fore they get a report back on me. Huh, I have got to gamble between girdles an' coffins. An'

that two heads wore the same size hats."

Willie knew he had to work fast and so he did. He looked at a girlie calendar and saw that it was the thirteenth of the month. He called up the Krippinger Casket Company and asked for the head of the accounting department.

"This is the office of the internal revenue," he said fast. "We are just checkin' up. Do you pay your employees by the week or twicet every month?"

"On the fifteenth and thirty-first," the coffin concern's comptroller answered. "Look, you guys should've known that by this—"

"We are awful mixed up here," Willie said, and severed connections without further ado. He fell back in his chair and marveled at his gall. It scared him. For the first time since he had opened the Hawkeye Detective Agency he admitted that he would need help on this one. He picked up his hat and left the office.

An hour later Willie sat in the D.A.'s office between two big policemen trying to convince the prosecutor he should not be packed off to the nuthatch.

"Look, leave us go over it ag'in," Willie pleaded. "This Crump was a combo expert. He an' some crooks knocked off the safe at the Pusey outfit an' erased the watchman. Crump quit the Burpson Safe Company an' would know how to open all the other Burpson cribs, wouldn't he? Well, he had a fallin' out with the crooks worked with him an' was croaked. The dishonest gees figured they wouldn't need to cut Crump in if they could grab the combos of other safes he might be carryin'. Now this Krippinger Casket Company could be one of the—"

"He's stark an' ravin' mad, D.A.," Satchelfoot Kelly choked out. "A corpse come to bed with him an' it turns out he is an ex-employee of the Burpson Safe Company usin' an alias an'—Fats McGlone on the radio wouldn't swallow that coke-eater's dream. Why don't you just call the wagon?"

**T**HIS seemed like a wonderful suggestion to the man from the Public Prosecutor's office.

"I'm askin' myself why I don't, Kelly," the D.A. yelped. "Give me a chance. You know what this lemonhead has done before when we figured he was crazy, don't you?"

"Why not prove he's insane?" Hardhat Hafey sniffed. "We'll cover that casket outfit the night before they pay off their help."

"It is a fifty-fifty gamble," Willie argued. "You cops ain't been gettin' no place with the Pusey thing. What can we lose?"

"We can't lose a thing, Klump," the D.A. snapped. "But you can get tossed out of that two-bit clothes-closet you call a detective agency and get psycho-analyzed to boot. Somethin' tells me it'll be worth it."

"I'll go along with that," Satchelfoot Kelly said gleefully.

At precisely ten o'clock that night William J. Klump, Hardhat Hafey, and Satchelfoot Kelly were camped in a big storage closet in the offices of the Krip-pinger Casket Company up in the Bronx. Just outside was one of the most modern and biggest of Burpson Safes loaded with nearly fifty grand.

"This better be good," Kelly griped. "If it happens to be a turkey I am personally strangling you with my bare hands, Willie. There is only about enough air in here for three canaries. The D.A. must be near a breakdown, too, or he'd never listened to you. Huh, a guy on parole cased the Pusey job for the combo expert and kept a hat Crump lost an' now has the combo of the crib out there. Hardhat, I got a good mind to go home."

"You ain't got a good mind to do nothin'," Willie sniffed. "It is the thanks I git for lettin' you cops in on this. We will know for sure in maybe three hours."

An hour slipped by. Two hours. Satchelfoot Kelly, nearly a psycho, was panting like a big bloodhound on a hot August afternoon. Hardhat Hafey was mumbling like a shepherd and Willie Klump was beginning to wonder if he had not laid a very bag egg this time.

"I count to a hun'ed," Kelly suddenly gasped. "Then I punch you right on the nose, Willie, an' go on home."

"You couldn't count as far as fifty, Satchelfoot," Willie sniffed and mopped more brine from his physiognomy. "You —sh-h-h!"

"Huh?"

"Sh-h-h," Willie admonished again. "Listen to that noise! If it is a mouse, then it is jimmyin' a winder open."

"Yeah," Hardhat whispered. "An'

there it goes. Willie, you could of been right."

Came next some low voices from what had to be very low characters. There were soft footfalls out in the office. Then a familiar voice seeped into Willie's big ears.

"This is sure a lead-pipe cinch, Arky," it said. "An' we won't need to leave it lookin' like a punch job now Crump is in the city Kelvinator. Awright, I'll read off the combo—"

"What are we waitin' for?" Kelly whispered.

"Give'em a chancet to git caught right in the act," Willie whispered back. And then Satchelfoot Kelly sneezed louder than a human ever should.

"Oh, cripes!" Willie gulped. "Now we got to bust out of here, Hardhat!"

A Roscoe roared just as Willie shoved the door open and he felt a bullet burn along his scalp inside his hat. Hardhat Hafey quickly liquidated one of the rough characters but Satchelfoot fell over a wire wastebasket.

"Melvin Trumbo!" Willie yelped at a hood trying for the open window. Melvin whirled and fired a shot that zipped close to Willie's left ear and the slug disintegrated a two quart bottle of red ink that stood atop the Burpson safe.

"Where is everybody?" Willie howled. "Hardhat, go ahead an' shoot for Heaven's sake!"

**T**HEN he saw Hardhat and a criminal person locked in deadly combat and Melvin Trumbo was half out of the window. Willie rushed forward and got one of Melvin's feet in his hand and the other one right in the teeth. Honeybees swarming in his noggin, Willie hung on for dear life and dragged his quarry off the window sill. Melvin's chin made a very sickening thump as it made contact with the hard floor.

"I'm dyin', Willie," Satchelfoot Kelly yelped as he stumbled away from the safe. "I'm covered with blood."

"It is only that you are in the red, lemonhead," Willie gasped as he banged Trumbo's head against the floor. "Where are you, Hardhat?"

"I'm awright," Hardhat called out. "This gee wouldn't leave me git my fist out of his mouth fer awhile. Looks like we hit the jackpot, Willie, an' leave me congratulate you."

(Continued on page 97)

Steve watched him as he moved forward with the poker, like an animal preparing to spring



# THE MOON TURNED RED

By WILLIS GRAHAM

*It wasn't Steve Therar's job to find out who killed King Randolph, but he had personal reasons for wanting to know!*

STEVE THERAR spotted the blond the minute she walked into the Blue Moon Cafe. He waited behind the counter and his fingers beat a light rhythm on the cash register keys as she threaded her way through the crowd.

She had a figure like something out of Hollywood and a face that was smooth and innocent. Her blond hair fell carelessly over the bright-red shoulders of her suit. On Fifth Avenue on Sunday

afternoon she might have fit like the missing piece to a jigsaw puzzle. But in the Blue Moon Hash House she was as out of place as a phony bandage on a good thumb.

In the center of the cafe she hesitated and looked about. She narrowly missed getting sloshed by a stein of beer, then stopped in front of Steve.

"I'm Kay Royce," she said, giving him the business with those doll-like brown eyes. "I'm looking for a room."

"Sure you ain't in the wrong neighborhood, sister?" Steve asked. Then for the first time he saw something else in those eyes. A kind of hardness that might have been interpreted as determination.

"Okay, so you're not lost," he said. "Rooms I got five of upstairs. One is mine, one belongs to that charming character in the corner—the tall slim one—Danson, the policy boy, and I don't mean insurance. Connie Raines, my cook's, got one of 'em. Hey, Connie, want to give up your room for a good cause?"

Connie stuck his ugly flat face out the short order window. "Yeah, I'll go live at the Astor," he cracked without humor.

"You see how it is, sister," Steve said, still trying to size her up. "Young artist name of Ned Garwin's got the other one. But he ain't likely to be moving soon. You might find a bench in Central Park, but—"

"Ned—this Ned Garwin," she interrupted. "He painted those pictures behind your counter, didn't he?"

**R**ELUCTANTLY Steve raised his brows and eyed the canvases. They were a sore spot to him and constant reminder of his own too soft heart. That soft heart made him sucker enough to take in those paintings when Garwin couldn't pay his rent. Years before it had also influenced his decision to quit the Homicide Squad in favor of opening this little cafe and rooming house.

"You know Garwin?" he asked suddenly. The girl jumped a little and didn't answer. "He's gone upstairs," Steve continued. "He's taking another roomer, King Randolph, where he won't get himself hurt stumbling over these chairs and tables. Randolph won a grand and a half on the policies, and his celebrating began to flow out his ears."

The blond wasn't paying attention. "Which room is Ned in?" she asked.

At that moment Garwin's face appeared around the corner. Steve waited as he approached the counter. Abruptly Garwin stopped. For a fraction of a second he studied the blond's profile. Then like a Times Square taxi he was off in high gear, knocking another man flat against the door in his haste to get out.

The blond saw the startled look in Steve's eye and followed the direction of his stare. But Garwin had disappeared. "Did you hear me?" she asked. "I want-

ed to know which room Ned's living in."

"You a friend of his?"

"In a way."

"That why you wanted the room here?"

"In a way."

"You stuck on that one answer, sister?"

Steve asked. She shut up completely after that. Steve's curiosity was reaching the boiling point. He couldn't figure this classy doll with the shabbily dressed Garwin. No use asking her more questions. The answer page was torn out of the back of the book.

"Look, I've got one room," he said. "Used to use it for storage. But there's only one window."

"Wonderful," she said eagerly. But Steve wilted under those innocent eyes.

"I can't do it," he said. "I'll move in the little room and give you mine."

It was three hours later in mid-afternoon that Steve saw young Garwin come back. At first he thought it was a stranger going up the stairs to the rooms. The new gray suit and decent hat made that big a change in the kid. Steve stuck his head in the short order window.

"Take over for me, Connie," he told the short, squat cook. "Be back in five minutes."

Steve didn't get to the top of the stairs. At the first landing he met his old scrub-woman, Anna. Her wrinkled face was pasty as uncooked dough. Her lip trembled and there was fear written in her watery blue eyes.

"Come quick, Steve," she whispered hoarsely.

"What's up, Anna?"

The bent old woman didn't answer. She turned back up the stairs, puffing her effort to move fast.

Steve Therar was at her heels when she stopped in front of King Randolph's door. There he saw what had excited her.

A thin trickle of liquid moved smoothly under the door. Steve dabbed a finger in it and looked at the red splotch on his hand.

"Blood all right," he said, his face hardening. He tried the door. It opened a few feet, then stopped against something soft. Steve squeezed through and stared down at the floor.

Looking around him Anna gulped loudly.

"It's Mr. Randolph! Is he dead, Steve?"

"Just what do you think?" Steve asked Anna unemotionally, eyeing the great

gap which all but separated King Randolph's head from his shoulders. Briefly he surveyed the room. It was orderly enough but for one thing. The rug had been thrown back into one corner.

**L**IEUTENANT Howard Vann, homicide expert, glanced at that rug when he first walked into the murder room. Excluding everyone but his former fellow-officer, Steve Therar, he shut the door.

"Who is he, Steve, and why was he murdered?" Vann asked in a staccato voice that seemed to go with his small rabbitlike face and constantly nervous hands.

"He's an ex-con," Steve said. "Did a stretch for blackmail. But since getting out two years ago has been honest so far as I can tell. He's been working as a waiter for me."

"How come he wasn't on the job today?"

"King was a policy player. Sank every nickel he could get with the gambler, Phil Danson. Last night he hit for the first time. Fifteen hundred dollars he won!"

Vann whistled softly to himself as he went through Randolph's pockets. He found a wallet but it was empty.

"Guess that's our answer," he said. "Robbery. Anyone in the hotel who'd be a likely suspect?"

Steve thought of the blond, Kay Royce. Or was it Boyce? He filed that in the back of his mind and temporarily ignored it.

"Danson hates to lose that kind of dough," Steve said. "But I don't think he'd murder for it."

Vann grunted meaninglessly and examined the room.

"Strange place for a rug, thrown back in a corner."

"Always been something screwy about it," Steve agreed. "The day Randolph first moyed in here I had just varnished the floor. But he brought this rug with him and insisted on putting it down even before the varnish dried. Nailed it to the floor. I was in this room yesterday. It was still nailed down."

Vann didn't notice as Steve covered something with his big shoe. The homicide lieutenant was on the other side of the room when Steve stooped quickly and slipped a cigarette butt into his pocket.

"The knife did a nasty job of cutting Randolph's throat," Vann said. "But a very effective job of disappearing. It's not in this room. I'm sure of that. And from the size of that cut I'd say the blade's more than the pocket knife variety. It's a big one all right."

Steve's mind was on blond Kay Boyce. "Look, Vann," he said. "You'll want to talk with the others. I'll round 'em up."

The detective let Steve get to the door before he stuck out his hand. "I'll take it, Steve."

"Take what?"

"Turn out your coat pocket and I'll see."

Steve grinned. "You got sharper eyes than you had when I was on the force, Vann. It's nothing but a cigarette butt."

"Hummm. Common brand. My brand in fact. But I don't use lipstick. Got any women living here?"

Steve shook his head. "Not till this afternoon. Little blond name of Kay Royce couldn't find a room. I gave her mine and moved down into an old storage room."

"Still the soft-hearted mug, aren't you, Steve? Kay Royce, eh? That her real name?"

"I don't think so."

"What's she got on you? Why're you protecting her, Steve?"

"I'm not. But when I saw that cigarette with her name written on it in lipstick I figured I'd better talk with her."

"We'll talk with her," Vann said. "Which room?"

When Steve found the girl was gone, he wasn't much surprised. But Vann was upset. To soothe him Steve handed out a description that would fit a thousand blonds in Manhattan and left Vann at the door of the murder room. Until he was around the corner Steve walked casually, but once out of sight he sprinted the half-dozen steps to the door at the end of the hall.

**H**E OPENED it without knocking and what he saw made his jaw drop back. He had found the blond. She was being smothered by a warm kiss from young Ned Garwin. They jerked apart as Steve closed the door behind him. He could see the girl had been crying.

"What's the idea?" Ned said indignantly. But the girl shook her head at him.

Steve frowned. "I'm wondering what the idea is myself," he said. "What's your real name, baby?"

Before she could answer Ned said, "She's my sister. She just came down here to try to get me to come home."

It hadn't been a very sisterly kiss as Steve remembered it. "She got herself mixed up in a murder," he said. "Randolph's been killed."

They feigned surprise, but it wasn't very good. "Come off it," Steve said. "In the first place I know you were in the death room, baby. By this time you'd have told Ned. That why you been crying?"

"That's not true."

"I found your cigarette in there," Steve said. "Your lipstick and probably your fingerprints." He didn't tell her how he had already wiped the cigarette stub clean. The bluff worked.

"I was there after he was killed," Kay said, a stark look making a mockery of those doll-eyes. "I thought it was Ned's room and I wanted to surprise him. Then when I found that—that dead man, the cigarette must have slipped from my fingers . . ."

"Understandable," said Steve. "If true, I think you'd better talk with Lieutenant Vann."

"Have a heart," Ned said. "I can't let her get mixed up in something like this. She didn't murder Randolph. She didn't even know him. But think what the publicity would mean. Her mother's old and has a weak heart, and it might kill her to have Kay's name in every scandal sheet in the country."

Steve studied the pair a moment. "I'm a soft-hearted idiot," he said. "But if you want to avoid the cops, you'd better use the back stairs."

When Steve got back to his cafe, every one mobbed him with questions. He retreated to the kitchen.

"Keep 'em out, Connie," he said to his cook. "I gotta think and I can't do it with that crowd after me."

"Who do you think did it, Steve?"

"Could be anybody. You knew Randolph better than the rest of us. You went on drinking sprees with him, didn't you?"

"Sure, but we never had anything else in common. He was just another guy to me. And I don't think he had an enemy in the world. I'll tell you one thing though. Randolph was getting funny.

We used to spend lots of time in his room, but he hasn't let me stick my nose in there for the last coupla weeks. Stopped me at the door always. I figured maybe he was just getting cracked."

There was a rap on the door and Connie answered it. He let Phil Danson come in. The color was high in Danson's cheeks now and he even managed a smile.

"Hello, Steve. Bloody mess upstairs, what?"

"No time for comedy," Steve said bluntly. "Did you know the money Randolph won from you was stolen?"

"I'm not surprised," Danson said, sinking to a kitchen stool. "That's the biggest hit I ever paid off. But it was all Randolph's dough. He was just getting it back from me after two years of policy playing."

"You don't advertise your business much, do you?"

"It's a sucker's game. I keep 'em happy."

"Who'd you think cut Randolph's throat?"

"Not one of my customers I hope. Maybe the young artist, Garwin. He'd dressed in fancy duds this afternoon."

"Yeah," Steve agreed. Maybe Danson had hit on something. "I'm going out the side door," Steve said. "For Pete's sake, Danson, go out front and answer some questions for those monkeys. They got more curiosity than a hatful of old maids."

STEVE glanced at his watch as he climbed the stairs. Ned had been gone only a short while. He wouldn't be back yet. Steve tried Garwin's door and found it unlocked. When he opened it, Lieutenant Vann was standing in the middle of the floor grinning at him.

"What's up, Steve?"

"Just wanted to look around."

"I've already done that. Nice Easter egg hunt. Witness the egg." Vann held out a fistful of wadded bills.

"You found that in Garwin's room?"

"Very unusual hiding place. There under the mattress. But this is only part of the dough. Little less than a grand. Know where I can find this Garwin?"

"He went out. Should be back in an hour or so. I'll keep a lookout for him."

"Maybe I'd better get his description broadcast."

"No use, Vann. Why make things hard

on yourself. He'll be back tonight."

Vann finally agreed and Steve went back downstairs. He doubled as cashier and waiter during the supper hour. When most of the mob had cleared out, he went back into the kitchen. Connie left to carry an order out and Steve poked around on an upper shelf for some bicarbonate of soda.

Suddenly something shoved behind the cans in a far corner caught his eye. He pulled it down. It was a plain apron with Blue Moon Cafe written in light blue thread across the top. Around the middle was a long red smear. When Steve rubbed his finger across it, blood came off.

As he heard Connie returning Steve quickly stuffed the apron in his back pocket and leaned against the ice box.

"I'm going out for a while, Connie," he said. "Think you can handle 'em?"

"You pay me to cook, not wait on tables and run the whole blasted restaurant."

"Do me a favor. I'll be back in thirty minutes."

"What's up—you got a lead on the murder?"

Steve laughed. "See you later," he said, going out the side door so Connie couldn't see the bulge in his back pocket. Once in the hall he walked fast out the front way and down to Doc Wagner's pharmacy.

The Doc was in the back mixing a prescription. He looked up over his glasses as Steve handed him the apron.

"Do something for me, Doc. Get me an analysis of everything that's on this apron."

"In a hurry?"

"I'll wait if you can do it now."

The Doc went into his lab grumbling. When he came out he handed Steve the apron and a list scrawled on a prescription label.

"Gave me a scare for a minute," he said. "First thought that blood might be connected with the murder up at your place. It's not though."

Steve scanned the list. The Doc had been thorough. He listed the apron as containing everything from flour to sugar to salt. Some resin and a spot that the Doc said looked like stoveblack. The last item was "blood, animal—probably beef."

"Maybe I ought to come eat with you," Doc said. "You got meat tonight?"

"We had some beef stew, but it's gone," Steve said. He was distinctly disappointed. It had looked like a good clue.

He stuffed the apron and the list in the glove compartment of the car he had parked in back of the Blue Moon. Then he took a quick look in the cafe. Connie yelled at him.

"Lieutenant Vann just called. Wants to see you upstairs pronto."

"Right," Steve nodded.

HE FOUND Vann in Ned Garwin's room. The only lamp was turned full on the kid. Vann stood outside the circle of light. Steve could see Garwin was sweating.

"He's got a funny story," Vann snapped. "Says he sold some of his paintings for seven hundred and fifty dollars. First ones he's ever been able to peddle. And he has orders for more."

"But you found a G," Steve objected.

"That," said Vann, "is where the funny part comes in. He claims Randolph bought three hundred dollars' worth. We checked the dealer where Garwin says he sold the first lot, and sure enough the guy did pay cash. But as far as Randolph shelling out three C's for some stuff like that, I don't think so."

"You find the paintings?" Steve asked.

"The ones Randolph bought? Yeah, that's another screwy angle. They're in his room in the closet. They were wrapped in heavy brown paper like he had no intention of hanging them up."

"I don't see anything screwy," Garwin said suddenly. "Randolph bought the pictures as an investment. He was impressed that I had sold some stuff for good prices. And he thought these others might be valuable some day."

"Could be so," Steve put in. "Randolph liked to play the long shots."

"Okay, Garwin," Vann shouted. "So your story's right. Then why did you hide the grand under the mattress?"

"I told you," the boy said. "I don't have a bank account. And after the murder I didn't want to carry that much on me. I didn't even tell anybody about it."

A uniformed policeman came to the door. "Lootenant, there's an old dame down the hall. She wants to get into the murder room. Says she's the maid and has to clean up."

"Nothing doing," Vann said. "Nobody goes in that room. She work for you, Steve?"

"That's old Anna. Want me to tell her?"

"I'd better take a look," Vann said. "You wait here. And keep an eye on Garwin, will you?"

Steve nodded. When the two policemen were gone, he moved close to the kid. "Look, Garwin," he said. "You're in a rough spot. Better come clean with me. Maybe I can help."

"You don't think—"

"You murdered him? No. But I don't believe the song and dance you and your phony sister gave. What's her real name? Who is she?"

"Okay, I'll tell you," Garwin said. "She isn't my sister. Her name's Kay Boyce. And we've been engaged for three years. She came down here to try to talk me out of the notion I have that I won't get married until I'm selling enough of my paintings to make a living. Well, I saw her in your cafe and I ran before she could get a look at me. Maybe it was a foolish kind of pride but I didn't want her to see me until I bought some new clothes."

"I figured you used the money you got from Randolph to do that," Steve said. "But how come your girl Kay wanted to move in here. Why didn't she just talk to you?"

Garwin grinned. "We talk by phone all the time. I guess she's decided that didn't do much good. So she was going to see me night and day until I get over what she calls these foolish ideas."

"Well, you're selling now," Steve said. "What's to keep you from getting married?"

"Nothing, if this murder was cleared up."

Lieutenant Vann came back into the room. "I'm sending you down to headquarters, kid," he said. "No charge right now. Just more questioning."

Steve's hand came down on Garwin's shoulder. "Go along," he said. "And don't try to make any trouble. Play 'em straight and we'll get you out of this."

When Garwin had gone with the uniformed cop, Vann lit a cigarette and frowned at Steve. "Why such a big interest in the kid?"

"I got a soft heart, remember?"

"Yeah? Well, I got an empty stomach. Let's go down to your joint and eat."

**T**HEY were eating at a table near the back when Connie came in. There was

a bundle covered with flour in his hand. He brushed it and put it on the table in front of Vann.

"This is the missing Randolph dough," he said without cracking a smile. "A full grand I had hidden in the flour barrel."

Vann sputtered and choked. He grabbed the package and unwrapped the brown paper. The money was in century notes.

"What're you doing with it?" he asked.

"Randolph gave it to me," Connie said. "For safekeeping when he started getting tight."

"Why didn't you tell me at first?" Vann asked.

"I guess maybe I had the idea of keeping it. Nobody knew about it. But I got a conscience. I'd rather be able to sleep at night than have the money."

"That," said Steve, "let's Garwin out."

Vann thumbed through the bills. "Not so fast," he said. "Maybe the kid killed Randolph thinking this dough was on him. That may explain why we found only part of the money in Garwin's room."

"No grudges, Lieutenant?" Connie asked.

"If you killed him to get this dough, you wouldn't be turning it in," Vann said. "No grudges."

Phil Danson sauntered toward the back. He was grinning. "I hear the law was looking for me a coupla hours ago," he said to Vann. The lieutenant nodded to a chair and Danson sat down.

"Where were you at the time of the murder?" Vann asked bluntly.

"Trying to trip me on an old one?" Danson laughed. "I don't know exactly when the murder was committed. But I'll say this—right after young Garwin took Randolph upstairs I left the cafe and went to a show. At the Metro. Bought a flower from the old flower girl just inside the lobby. Sat through a double feature and left there two hours later."

"I guess somebody saw you on the way out."

"Smartest guess you've made today. I gave the flower to one of the little usherettes. Nice gal. Redhead name of Marie if you care to check."

Vann walked over to the phone. When he came back, he sat down not looking at Danson. "Air tight alibi," he said. "Except for one thing. You could have slipped out one of the exits."

"Would've been tough getting back in," Danson grinned. "Try again, Lieutenant."

Vann got up and thrust his hands in his pockets. "I'm going to headquarters, Steve," he said. "See you in the A.M."

By nine the next morning Vann had not arrived. But already Steve had hired a new waiter named Slim and had finished serving breakfast. He was standing behind the counter sipping a cup of Java when the mailman brought in the usual collection of circulars and bills. Steve browsed through the stack, then stopped abruptly over a mailing piece that advertised home fix-up week. He stared at the illustration of a man working on the interior of a house.

Slowly Steve set his coffee cup down in the saucer. He motioned to the new waiter. "Slim," he said. "Call Lieutenant Vann at police headquarters. Tell him to get out here on the double. Got it?"

The thin lad gulped and nodded. "Anything wrong?"

"No," Steve said. "I think everything's finally right."

Quickly he walked out the door and around back where his car was parked. In the glove compartment he found the bloodstained apron and the list Doc Wagner had written on a prescription label. Steve grinned as he read it. Then putting both the apron and the slip of paper in his coat pocket he walked fast toward the stairway.

No one saw him when he passed the door of the cafe. As he paused in front of one of the rooms, the hall was deserted. Steve went in, closing the door noiselessly. Starting at one corner he began a systematic search of every drawer and closet. When he had finished, clothes were strewn about the floor and the rug thrown back. But he stood empty handed, a puzzled expression on his face. It had to be here. There was no other answer. Steve stood staring down at the table in the middle of the room.

**S**UDDENLY he chuckled to himself and examined the smudge of dust on the black tabletop. It was the bare outline of a heel. Steve looked up at the old fashioned inverted chandelier. Then, standing on the rickety table, he reached near the ceiling next to the light. He brought down a package.

With fingers made clumsy by his eager-

ness he ripped the brown paper from the package. The grin was back on his face now. His search was ended.

Footsteps echoed in the hall and Steve dropped from the table. He concealed the package behind his back just as the door opened. Connie, his face a dirty gray, looked about the disorderly room.

A cold emptiness separated Steve's stomach from his throat. But he made his voice sound tough. "The jig's up," he said. "I'm turning you over to the cops, Connie."

The fat cook found his own voice now. "What right have you got wrecking my room? You out of your mind?"

"Bluffing won't get you anywhere," Steve said. "From the first time I saw that knife gash in Randolph's neck I suspected you. A cook is about the only man around here who could walk around with a big knife in his hand without arousing questions. And that's why we never found the murder weapon."

"Sort of slim evidence."

"That's only the beginning," Steve drew the apron from his pocket. "I found this after you hid it in the kitchen, Connie. The apron you wore the day you murdered Randolph. All along I had the evidence. But I was too dumb to be certain. Then today I was reading a house fix-up ad. All about refinishing floors. I remembered that Randolph had nailed down his rug before the varnish on his floor had dried. That left flakes of loose varnish on the floor under the rug. When you knelt down beside Randolph's body you got some of the varnish resin on your apron. It's there all right. Doc Wagner will testify to that. What's more, Connie, I found your package in the chandelier. When you gave back the thousand bucks, that eliminated the money robbery motive. But I figured there was something that Randolph had hidden under his nailed down rug."

Steve held out the package. Resin stuck to it like a shiny brown crust. "Randolph had quit blackmailing," Steve continued. "But he still had plenty of hot dope in case he ever got tired of going straight. It was a tie with the past he couldn't break. Then when you two were drunk together, he told you about how he kept this under his rug. That's why you murdered him, Connie. But you gave yourself away when you said you hadn't been in his room in several days. The resin on your apron proves

you're a liar."

Connie stood frozen to the floor. There was a sickly grin on his face.

"You're smart, Steve," he said. "But don't be a fool now. Remember I gave the one grand back. That was a small price to pay for throwing suspicion off me. But you know why I could afford it? That package in your hand has letters and pictures worth fifty thousand. Maybe a hundred."

He moved closer to Steve now, his voice going into low register. "I'll split with you," Connie said. "Nobody even suspects, we'll get away with it. Be rich the rest of our lives."

"I think," Steve said, "I'd better call the cops."

Connie sprang back against the fireplace. There was a new wild look in his eyes as his hand curled about the big poker.

"I want that package, Steve. I've killed one man to get it. I don't mind killing another."

He was walking on his toes, slowly, like an animal preparing to spring. Steve backed toward a corner of the room. He looked around wildly. But all escape was cut off. His back flat against the wall, he waited tensely as Connie raised the poker.

Steve heard the swish of iron above his head as he ducked under the blow. His fist came smashing up in an uppercut that staggered Connie. The cook backed away and this time the poker found its mark. Steve felt fire shoot through his shoulder. But as he threw another blow into Connie's face, a table behind him overturned and a lamp crashed to the floor. Steve swung another roundhouse punch that connected and the poker slipped from Connie's fingers. Another

blow caught Connie high on the forehead as he slumped to the floor.

Steve's breath roared in his own ears. He stared down at the fallen murderer.

"Nice going," a voice from the doorway said. Lieutenant Vann entered, a .38 in his hand. "Sorry I couldn't shoot, Steve. But I waited outside the door to hear Connie's confession. Then after the scrap started, I was afraid I might plug you. Nice right punch you got."

The detective clicked the handcuffs about Connie's wrists.

Steve's head was beginning to clear now and his shoulder wasn't throbbing quite so badly.

"You shouldn't have tackled him alone," Vann said. "Why didn't you turn over the apron evidence to me?"

"For a better reason than you may think," Steve said. "It might have done nothing but implicate me. At the time of the murder just two guys were wearing Blue Moon aprons. Connie—and me. Now if you can get along without me, I got a very important phone call to make."

The detective stopped going through the blackmail evidence long enough to raise a quizzical eyebrow. "Sounds like a woman."

"Yeah," Steve admitted. "A blond. Kay's her name. And I think I'll make her awfully happy."

"At your age?" Vann laughed.

Steve walked over to the mirror and looked at his rough face. He needed a shave and there was a cut under one eye.

"Funny thing," he muttered. "I always pictured Cupid as a pretty little three-year-old."

"What's that?" Vann said sharply.

"Forget it," Steve grinned. "At your age you wouldn't understand."



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# FIT to KILL

By  
STEWART  
STERLING



"Come with that 'll split you with this er!"

*Don Rixey takes his radio kit along when he tunes in on the activities of Larry the Gong!*

**D**ON RIXEY peeled cellophane from a Choc-a-Bloc Nibble, gnawed the confection moodily. "I don't like it," he said. "I don't like it one bit."

Annalou Kenyon leaned dimpled elbows on the lunch counter, her pert face tited up provocatively. "Whyn't you try a Baby Ruth, then? Ask me. I know what you like!"

"Yeah," He admired her taffy-bright

hair, her smoky-gray eyes. "You know what I mean, too." He jabbed an accusing finger at the newspaper lying beside the salt and pepper rack.

She read the headline aloud: "*Icy Eyes Strikes Again! Third Gas Station Stickup in Week Spurs Citywide Manhunt.*" Annalou pouted prettily. "If it's me you're worrying about—don't!"

"What else?" Don licked chocolate off his thumb. "You! Out here in this

dump, all alone, at this time of night!"

"It's not either a dump. It's a modern snack bar. And I'm not all alone."

"Most the time you are." His amiable square face was unhappy.

"Bill's here. Or anyway, he's right near." She glanced across the drive-in at the row of red-enamel gas pumps.

"Bill's a nice old gook," Don said. "Very fatherly. About as much protection as one of those woolly poodles they sell in toy stores. If this gent the papers call Icy Eyes showed up around here—"

"It wouldn't bother *me!*" Annalou asserted flatly. "I know better'n to argue with an automatic. I'd just say, 'Mister, help yourself.' It's not my cash register. He can take the works, for all of me. Don't you fret!"

"No-o-o!" Don scowled. "I'll never give it a second thought. You. Way out here on the lone prairie, practically, fixin' to swap wise cracks with a gunman who's scared three gas-station attendants so bad they can't even remember what he looked like!"

"If you don't like my working out here nights," Annalou drifted down the counter, began to balance lemon-lime bottles on top of a Pepsi-Cola pyramid, "whyn't you drag me before a parson, then set me up in a snug little apartment in town?"

He reached across the counter, caught her, squealing. "Right this minute! Now! Tonight!"

**A**NNALOU disentangled herself, demurely, pulling down her uniform apron over her trimly rounded figure. "Let's not go over that again! The future Mrs. Rixey does not intend to start housekeeping on any shoestring."

"I've got nearly four hundred stashed away."

She scoffed. "You haven't been pricing refrigerators or stoves or dishes lately. With what we could buy for four hundred," she waved disparagingly at the meager equipment of the Outside Inn, "we might as well live here."

"After what's happened around gas stations the last week," Don growled, "I don't want you within a block of one. But we don't need all that stuff they advertise in the magazines, just to get married. Look at gypsies. They get along with very little and everybody claims they're the happiest people in the world."

Annalou punched the cash register violently, and directed his attention to the *No Sale* card which popped up. She came around the counter with tightly compressed lips. "It just so happens, Mister Rixey, that I don't care to sleep like any gypsy on a mangy blanket with some smelly old straw for a pillow. I want a nice box spring mattress and a thick, fluffy comforter."

"Okay," he sighed. "But the way things are going with Regal Radio Repairs, it's going to take another year before I can hold out enough from the payback on that GI loan to feather our cozy little nest. Meantime, the idea of your bein' all alone way out here, nights, with that holdup artist runnin' wild, is enough to drive me to drink."

She appeared to deliberate. "Given my choice I believe I'd rather spend my nights with you than with any stickup man. So the sooner you roll your half-ton hoop back to the shop and start operating on the insides of a superhet, the sooner I'll be able to. 'By now, darling. Don't run through any red lights. . . ."

A few minutes later a short, stocky man shuffled out of the attendant's shack which was the Outside Inn's only neighbor. He was moon-faced and nearly bald, and he wore a yellow polo shirt and faded khaki pants.

"Wasn't that the demon set-wrecker, Annalou?"

"You're speaking of the man I love, Bill. Yep."

"Doesn't he ever buy any gas for that truck of his?"

"Not at gas stations," Annalou grinned. "Don has a hate on gas stations. They attract too many holdup men." She pointed to the stickup story.

Bill read it gravely. "Icy Eyes, my foot! That's the trouble with these creeps. They pull a gun on some guy with bad nerves, get away with a few bucks, and the papers start buildin' 'em up like they was Jesse James the Second." He snorted disgustedly, flipped the page. "So pretty soon they think they've got to live up to their rep and then they kill somebody."

"Hey!" Annalou peered over his shoulder. "You any good at noses?"

Bill stared owlishly at her. "I got the normal amount of same. Maybe a little less'n average. What you mean, Annalou?"

"There!" Annalou indicated a half-page advertisement of a furniture store, a contest puzzle picture in which a pair of brooding masculine eyes surmounted an incongruously thin and lugubrious nose placed above an even more ridiculous button of chubby dimpled chin. The advertisement proclaimed:

**YOUR FORTUNE IN THE STARS!**

Win five hundred dollars worth of luxurious home furnishings. Test your knowledge of motion picture personalities by entering today.

"Five hundred smackers," breathed Annalou. "What Don and I couldn't do, if we had that!"

"Puh-lease," Bill murmured. "Spare me the details!"

"I mean we just have to put 'em together." She colored rosily. "The features they've jumbled up here, I mean. I ought to be pretty good at this. I'm terrible on names, but I hardly ever forget a face."

Bill considered. "That might be Lou Costello's chin. The comedian, you know."

"Sure," she agreed. "And those are Charles Boyer's eyes, I'll bet." She paused, "But whose nose?"

"Ain't Durante's. Not big enough."

"Humphrey Bogart? No." She shook her head.

Bill clucked sympathetically. "I wouldn't know. To me, one nose is as good as another, long's it stays out of my business."

**S**HE glanced up at the sound of crunching gravel. "Excuse me for mentioning it, then. But you got a customer."

A maroon sedan rolled smoothly onto the drive-in. It had a doctor's white cross beside the license plate. Bill hurried over to the ethyl pump.

A tall man in fawn gabardine with snap-brim to match, got out of the sedan, pointed to the windshield, asked Bill a question, strolled languidly toward the attendant's shack. A tall, slim, leggy girl climbed out, too. She looked up at the sign:

Fill Your Insides  
At  
The Outside Inn

"What you want, Eddie?" she called. "Coffee," he answered, over his shoulder. "Black."

Annalou put away the puzzle sheet,

slid two cups onto saucers.

The tall girl was willowy and graceful. Like those models at the big stores in town, Annalou thought. The dress she was wearing helped the illusion along. It was something soft and fuzzy in a pink-and-gray mixture, cut way down to there in front. It had that New Look everybody was talking about. On her, Annalou decided, it wasn't bad.

"Howya, honey-chile." The newcomer's voice was throaty velvet. "Hot java on tap?"

"Best in town." Annalou gazed admiringly at the dress. Must be an exclusive. Pipe that rose-rhinestone embroidery. "Something with it?"

"Uh-uh. Make it two, though." The girl sat sidewise on her stool, crossed her nylons. "Things kinda slow?"

Annalou set out cream and sugar. "Always quiet this time of—"

A flat report came then. It sounded like a backfire. Annalou glanced quickly at the sedan's exhaust. The motor wasn't running. Bill had filled the tank, gone back to the shack.

The tall girl spilled off the stool, scurried toward the car. The driver of the sedan walked swiftly out of the shack. He got about ten paces from the door when Bill stumbled out, all doubled up, holding both hands pressed tight over his abdomen.

"You—skunk!" He coughed. He leaned against the door frame, fell down, got to his hands and knees, crawled a few feet, sagged to the gravel on his face, and lay still.

The tall girl snatched at her companion's arm. "Eddie!" she screamed. "You promised you wouldn't!"

He didn't break his stride, didn't answer.

"Eddie!" She tugged at his arm. "You've killed him!"

He jerked open the car door, slid in. "Coming?" He kicked the starter, the motor roared.

She scrambled in beside him. The sedan leaped forward before she got the door closed.

Frozen with fear, Annalou reached for a pencil on the cash-register ledge. She scribbled a number on the edge of the puzzle.

Then she grabbed a nickel out of the cash drawer, stumbled with pounding heart across the gravel toward Bill. . . .

Lieutenant Les Wiley waited until the

flash-bulb boys were through and the starchy internes had lifted Bill's body onto a stretcher.

"You say this girl called him Eddie, Miss Kenyon?"

Annalou shivered, moved closer to Don Rixey's protecting shoulder. "That's right. Twice, she called him Eddie."

"You'd recognize him, if you saw him?"

She hesitated. "I don't know. I didn't see him close, Lieutenant. He had his hat pulled down over his eyes."

The phone in the attendant's shack rang. One of the plainclothesmen answered. "Hello," he said, and "Yes," and "Just a sec." He came to the door.

"For you, Miss Kenyon. Your mother, I guess."

**T**HEY must have put it on the radio already then, she guessed. Otherwise, how would they have heard, at home? She hadn't called anybody but Don.

"This is Annalou." Her hand shook as she picked up the receiver. There was a spatter of dark red on the floor beside the phone shelf. This was where it had happened!

"One minute, honey-chile." That throaty, velvety voice!

Annalou could only gasp.

"Listen, kid!" It was the man's voice, now. Those brittle tones were unmistakable, though she'd only heard him speak one word. The murderer! "I'm givin' you some friendly advice, babe. You talk all you want to, to those Little Boy Blues. But you'll sleep better if you kind of forget to remember what I look like. You didn't see me very good. Catch wise?"

"Yes," Annalou breathed, almost paralyzed. "Yes, I catch."

"That's a smart kid," the man at the other end of the line went on, smoothly. "That's being sensible. I'd hate to have to do—what I had to do there in the office where you are now—again. Understand?"

Annalou nearly fainted. "Yes," she managed to say. "Oh, yes, I understand."

"So just be kind of vague, undecided. That's right. And you won't hear from me any more. If you play it that way."

She didn't hear him hang up. She didn't hear anything. The plainclothesman picked her up off the floor. Don slipped a wet handkerchief on her fore-

head. The lieutenant found a flask in his pocket.

When she recovered enough to talk, she told them.

Lieutenant Wiley studied her narrowly: "So now you're going to find it hard to remember, huh?"

Don snapped: "Why shouldn't she! What would you do, if your life had been threatened!"

The lieutenant regarded him morosely. "Let the little lady do the talking and me the thinking. We'll get along. How about it, Miss Kenyon?"

Annalou looked at Don, but she thought about Bill. Good old amiable Bill, crawling across the gravel there, with a hole as big as your fist in his stomach.

"I don't know if I can describe the man." She brushed her taffy-bright hair back off her forehead, wearily. "But I might be able to pick his picture out if you have a photo of him in the Rogues' Gallery." She bit her lip. "I hardly ever forget a face."

A few hours later the lieutenant came into the file room with a typed report and an air of resignation.

"A lot of quick thinkin'—for nothing. That license number you spotted, Miss Kenyon—"

Don exclaimed eagerly: "They picked up the sedan, huh?"

Wiley raised his eyebrows sardonically. "You in again? How'd it be if you pretended you're just an innocent bystander, hah? Leave me and the little lady go into this kind of private like, hah?"

Don retorted defensively: "I just thought if they got the car—"

"They did. Half an hour ago. Parked. Right here on State Street. It was a stolen heap. We knew that, anyway. The doctor who owns it had reported its loss earlier tonight." Wiley laid the report on his battered flat-top desk. "There weren't any prints on the steering wheel or door handles. All wiped off, of course. So we're back where we started."

Annalou snapped a fingernail briskly against a glossy black and white print. "Not quite, Lieutenant."

**D**ON flung an arm around her shoulders, bent to examine the photo. "That him?!"

"Yep."

Wiley reached for the picture. He

had to reach around Don. "Pardon me, Dick Tracy. You positive this is the man, Miss Kenyon?"

"Uh-huh." Annalou shuddered a little.

"If this is the same fellow who stuck up those other stations," Wiley said, "and we're pretty sure he is, we'd better get busy. All those other attendants could remember about him was that he had eyes like a couple ice-cubes."

"Maybe they also had phone calls which might have affected their memories no little," Annalou suggested.

"Could be. Still and all, you wanna be absolutely certain," counseled the officer. "Remember you didn't get a gander at this guy within fifty or seventy-five feet. He had his hat on, then, too."

"He could have been wearing an Eskimo parka," Annalou said bitterly. "I'd know that pug nose and cleft chin anywhere."

Wiley turned the photo over, studied the data on the back. "I hope you're right about this."

"Who is he?" Don asked.

Wiley ignored him. "This lug you identify, Miss Kenyon, is Larry, the Gong. There are readers out for him from Cleveland, Pittsburgh and points east."

"Larry, the gong?" Annalou's eyes made inquiry.

"They gave him that handle because he is all the time booting that gong around, Miss Kenyon. Y'understand? He is one of those wacky heroin hounds who never know themselves what they'll do next."

Don Rixey stuck his chin out aggressively. "I got a pretty good idea what he'll try to do. He'll try to fix Annalou's wagon so it won't squeak. That's what he'll try to do!"

Annalou's mother was in the kitchen, washing the breakfast dishes. Annalou sat on the sofa in the living-room, chain smoking and arguing with Don.

"What do you want me to do? Stay shut in here all the rest of my life?"

Don patted her shoulder. "I don't want you roaming around where this Larry, the Gong, might get a shot at you. Particularly I don't intend to have you going out to that 'burg joint where you

(Continued on page 89)

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81

For Walt Penner, bucking a badger game is all in the—

# DAY'S WORK



Harry had a gun, which he leveled at the girl

By **ROGER DEE**

**T**HE big man got out of the Cadillac awkwardly and slammed the door behind him. He stood for a moment in the darkness, swaying and holding to the door handle for support while he squinted at the neon clock inside the roadhouse window.

The clock's bright green hands pointed out bright green figures: 11:30. A brilliant splash of crimson lettering underneath spelled out:

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He went inside, stumbling a little over the door sill and letting the screen door bang behind him. Inside, the road-

house was like a thousand others, a combination restaurant and bar with a cubby-hole office at one end. There was a familiar grouping of black and chromium tables, empty at the moment, and a gaudy plastic juke box shimmering with color. There was also a cash register with a blonde behind it.

The blonde looked him over with impersonal eyes and lifted a knowing eyebrow when the big man laid both hands on the counter to steady himself. She wore a loose sleeveless dress of some small-meshed material that matched her eyes, and there was a small blue bruise on one bare shoulder. Through

the glass cigar case her legs showed slim and bare, tanned the color of light toast. Her hair was honey-colored, casually fluffed.

"Meal or cabin?" she asked briskly. Her green eyes moved impersonally from his slack, heavy-featured face to his big well-tailored body. They stopped at the whisky stain on his shirt front, and she added: "Or just a bottle?"

"Cabin and a bottle," the big man said. His voice was deep and a little hoarse. "I can eat any time, baby."

"The man wants a cabin, Harry," the girl said without turning her head.

The owner of the Cadillac looked past her, squinting, as if seeing the other two men for the first time. The man sitting at the bar was young, a big sullen-featured six-footer with heavy black eyebrows that met over a once-broken nose and a swarthy hard-planned face that would always need a shave. He held a water glass half full of amber whisky and swished it slowly with a circular motion. He gave no sign that he heard what the girl said.

The bartender was middle-aged and thin, with very white hair and a very red face. His nose was prominent, red-veined, beaked.

"Can't leave the bar, Kit," he said. "Gotta watch the trade." His voice was high and nasal.

"All right, all right," the girl said resignedly. She shoved a register across the counter. "Cabin Four-Oh Two is empty, mister. Two rooms and bath. Sign here."

THE big man signed the book, scrawling *Walter Penner* in large careful letters, and paid with a twenty-dollar bill from a wallet that gaped greenly. The blonde girl put up the book and took down a ring of keys and a flashlight.

"I'll show you to your cabin," she said. "If the gentlemen at the bar can spare me."

Penner stumbled after her through scattered rows of stucco cabins all cut to the same pattern. The night air was still warm, heavy with the smell of flowering lemon and jasmine. The blonde girl made a nice silhouette against the circle of light her flash-

[Turn page]

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light threw ahead of them.

Inside, the cabin was like most Florida tourist cabins, furnished with bamboo furniture spaced stiffly on a straw carpet. There was a studio couch that folded out to make an extra bed, and a bath with faded shower curtains. Penner dropped his bag on the floor and blinked against the light when she found the switch.

"What about a bottle?" he demanded. The girl smiled at him, a smile that just missed being provocative.

"I'll send you one later if I can get that drunken bum Harry away from the bar long enough," she said. "My husband, I mean. He's pretty ugly tonight, though, so I won't promise he'll bring it."

"Bring it yourself," Penner suggested.

He took a step closer. "Hey, you're pretty nice," he said, as if seeing her for the first time. "Look, baby, you bring the bottle and I'll buy you a drink. Who cares if Harry gets drunk alone?"

She gave him a speculative look.

"I may do just that, mister," she said. "I'll see you get your bottle, anyway." Her pretty face hardened. "It would serve him right if I did, the mutt!"

Penner reached for her then, but she slipped under his hands and was outside before he could turn. Her laughter drifted back lightly, mingled with the scent of the flowering lemon.

Left to himself Penner unzipped his bag and took out a nearly empty pint bottle. He found a glass in the bathroom and poured a stiff drink, then he lighted a cigarette and sat on the couch.

He had not long to wait. Less than an hour had passed when there was a light knock at the door and the girl came in. She still wore the green dress and she had a round quart bottle in her hand.

Penner got up unsteadily and went to meet her. "I was afraid you wouldn't come," he said. "Have trouble with Harry?"

"Some day I'll kill that heel," she said tightly. "He's been fighting drunk for a week, and every day he gets meaner. Look."

She pulled back a shoulder of the sleeveless dress and showed two fresh purplish spots above an old bruise on her arm. "He gave me those while I

was helping Joe put him to bed."

Penner put a big hand over the purple spots.

"Forget him," he growled. "You think he'll come out of it before morning?"

She shook her head, not trying to draw away.

"If he does there'll be a killing," she said positively. "Harry's bad enough sober, mister, but when he's drunk he's like a crazy man. He'd kill us both if he caught me out here."

Penner laughed and slid his hand around her shoulders until his fingers met behind her.

"I'll take that chance," he said. "And look Kit, forget the mister. My name is Walt, remember?"

"All right, then," she agreed. She ducked under his arms and held up the bottle. "Going to open this, Walt, or are you saving it for a rainy day?"

He took the bottle, fumblingly got a penknife from his pocket, and slit the seal. Kit brought two fresh glasses from the bathroom and Penner poured drinks. Kit took her drink and sat on the couch, her bare legs crossed provocatively.

"What, no toast?" she asked archly. Her green eyes mocked him. Penner set his glass on the floor without tasting it.

"We can drink any time," he growled. He sat on the couch and pulled her to him, his big hands holding her so close that she gave up struggling at once and lay quiet in his arms.

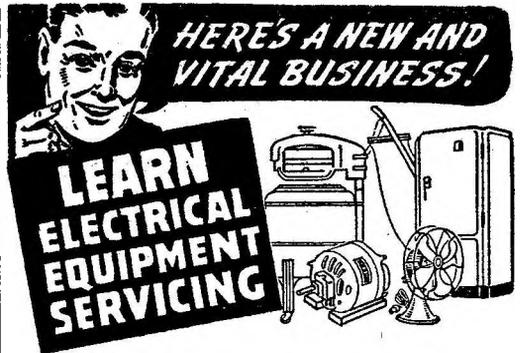
It happened so quickly that neither had time to get up.

The door crashed open and Harry came in at a staggering run that brought him almost upon them before he could stop. His hair hung in a damp black mat over his eyes and his dark unshaven face gleamed with perspiration. He had a gun, an ugly little .32 revolver that looked lost in his big fist.

"Got you," he said. His voice snarled in his throat like a mastiff with a bone. "I told you before, you little double-crosser—"

Kit screamed thinly and sprang away from Penner. The .32 muzzle swung to follow her, wavered and shifted back to Penner. "You," Harry said. "Smart guy. I'll show you—" The hammer came back.

[Turn page]



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Kit hit him from the side with a bamboo chair, a blow so swift that it caught the big man only half turned to meet it. He shook his head, his knees bent under him and the gun dropped to the floor. The girl gave it a kick that sent it spinning against the couch where Penner sat staring dully, open-mouthed.

"Don't let him get it again!" Kit screamed at him. "The gun, you fool! He'll kill us both!"

Harry lunged, apeline, without straightening out of the crouch. Penner rolled off the couch to the floor, snatching up the gun almost mechanically, and Harry went headlong into the couch. The couch overturned, scattering cushions. Harry came to his feet swaying, fumbling with a clasp knife that snicked coldly and sprouted a shiny three-inch blade.

"Now," he panted.

Penner lifted the gun uncertainly, his eyes on the girl.

"Shoot, you fool!" she screamed at him. "Don't you see he means to murder us both?"

Penner squeezed the trigger. The gun barked flatly, four times. Harry put both hands, splay-fingered, over his stomach and fell heavily on his face. The cabin shook under the impact.

Penner and the girl stared at each other blankly.

"He wasn't so drunk after all," Penner said insanely. Kit said nothing. Her eyes, wide and green, watched the dark puddle oozing from under the body on the floor.

This time there was no knock, only the quick sounds of running footsteps outside before the white-haired bartender burst in and slammed the door behind him. He took in the situation at a glance, his pale eyes hardly pausing at Harry's limp body before he pointed his red drunkard's nose at the girl.

"I knew it'd happen," he said. "I knew he'd catch you sooner or later, you peroxide fool."

He looked from the girl to Penner, who still sat on the floor with the gun in his hand. "All right, mister, you killed him. Now what are you going to do?"

Kit made a defensive gesture. "He had to do it, Joe," she protested. "Harry

would have killed us both if he hadn't."

Joe started toward the door, his eyes still on Penner.

"I'm calling the police anyway," he said. "It's their business, fella, not mine."

The words seemed to sting Penner out of his daze.

"Wait," he said. "Please—" He swallowed audibly. "I can't afford to be mixed up in a police case, Joe. It would ruin me."

He got up off the floor and sat on the overturned couch. He stared at the gun in his hand as if seeing it for the first time, and dropped it as he might have dropped a coral snake.

"Wait," he begged. "I've got to think."

Joe stopped with his hand on the door. "Then you better get busy," he said. "You'll have to think fast to make this anything but murder, mister."

"It wasn't murder," Kit protested shrilly. "Harry—"

"Yeah, I know," Joe said wearily. "Harry would have killed you both. And why not, you little fool? Do you think any jury in the state would convict him for killing the two of you after he caught you right here in one of his own cabins?"

**PENNER** hid his face in his hands. "Joe's right," he groaned. "I wouldn't have a dog's chance with a jury." He raised his head and looked at Joe pleadingly. "Look, Joe, I'll make a deal with you. Put it—put Harry—in my car and take him away somewhere. Throw the gun in a canal. I'll make it worth your while."

Joe laughed, a high nasal whinny. "Not little Joe, mister. That would make me an accessory to murder. I'm calling the cops—now." He opened the door.

Penner said coaxingly, "Nobody'll know. You and Kit can swear he went out on a tear and didn't come back. You don't know where he went. I'll give you five hundred to take care of this for me, Joe."

Joe held the door open. "I'm not sticking my neck out for carfare, fella," he said. "Now, if you was talking *money*—"

[Turn page]

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"All right," Penner said wearily. "I've got twelve hundred with me, and that's all. If you won't take that, go ahead and call the cops and be hanged to you!"

Joe shut the door and looked at the girl. He was sweating a little.

"What about it, Kit? Can you keep your mouth shut?"

"Yes, yes," the girl breathed. "This would ruin me for life, Joe. Get him out of here quick."

"All right, I'll do it," Joe said. He was suddenly eager, as if the girl's panic erased his last doubt. "Let's have the money, fella."

He thumbed swiftly through the wallet Penner gave him, his hands shaking.

"Seven hundred and fifty," he said. His pale glance fixed Penner sharply. "Four-fifty more, mister. Shell it out, I got work to do."

"It's in my bag," Penner said. "Keep your shirt on, I'll get it."

He stood up, unzipped the traveling bag and reached inside. His hand came out holding a blued .38 Police Positive that covered the room loosely, its grooved butt almost touching his thick middle. The square edges of his teeth showed thinly in a sardonic grimace that might have been a smile except that it had nothing of amusement in it.

"You can come in now," he called, raising his voice. Two state troopers filed inside, guns in hand. One of them jingled a shiny rope of handcuffs.

"All right, let's get it over with," Penner ordered shortly. The trooper with the handcuffs yanked Joe's hands behind him. The cuffs snicked shut and the trooper turned toward Kit.

"Not me!" she cried shrilly. "I didn't know about it—nothing—you can't pin it on me!" Her skin was suddenly the color of wet ashes, and her eyes, blank with terror, glistened like wet green marbles.

She screamed piercingly, "Harry!"

Harry lunged up from the floor, the clasp knife glinting in his hand. The second trooper hit him, almost casually, behind the ear with his gun butt, making a heavy, meaty sound like a butcher chopping bone. Harry fell again, on his back this time. The front of his

shirt glistened wetly, a thick soggy red.

"Ketchup," Penner said. His voice was thick with disgust. "Blank cartridges, iodine bruises, badger games, smart operators! And they snap like suckers at the first plant that shows up with a new car and a stuffed wallet. You'd think they'd learn the angles, some day."

The trooper snapped the cuffs on Kit, who submitted passively, her face blank with shock.

"That does it, Lieutenant Penner," the trooper said. "You going with us to take them in?"

"What's the use?" Penner said sourly. "You've got all the proof you need, without me." He looked at his watch and swore. "I've got to get home, anyway. My wife's waiting up for me."

## FIT TO KILL

(Continued from page 81)

been working. It'd be the first place he'd look for you."

"But, Don, if I don't show up, I'll lose my job," she wailed. "I can't afford to lose my job. Don't forget how hard we're trying to save up for our marriage."

"They won't fire you for being out a few days, snooks."

"Who says the police'll round him up in a few days, anyhow!" Annalou wanted to know.

"Every cop in six states is looking for him. They've been broadcasting his description every hour on the hour. That's just why he'll go gunning for you. He'll be sure you're the only person who could have identified him."

"I don't care," Annalou persisted, "I'm not going to be cooped up here like a hermit, for weeks, when all the time this Larry is probably a thousand miles away, in Miami or Los Angeles or some place. He wouldn't dare stay around this city. He'd be sure to be caught."

"Lieutenant Wiley thinks he's still here." Don was grim. "He says none of the trainmen or bus conductors or airports or bridge tenders have seen anyone answering that description, heading out of town. It's a cinch he can't be travel-

[Turn page]



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ing very far by car, because every gas station within three hundred miles is on the lookout for him. Chances are he's holed up right here close by somewhere, waiting until the heat is off, before he tries his getaway."

Annalou ground out a cigarette she'd just lighted. "And you think I'm going to stay penned in all that time until the heat is off! Well, let me tell you something, darling!"

He beat her to it. "No, I don't expect you to hole up here, indefinitely. I have an idea. Listen."

She listened. Right up to the time he grabbed her with one hand, his hat with the other—and kissed her goodbye. . . .

**T**HE sergeant behind the desk squinted dubiously at the clock on the wall behind him.

"Lootenant Wiley goes off duty at four o'clock. 'Tis now half-past three. What might be the nature of your business with him?"

Don could hardly restrain himself from blurting out: "I know where Larry, the Gong, is hiding!" He did say:

"I've got some important information about that gas station bandit, I think."

"You think." The sergeant pondered. "Would it be important enough to confide to Detective First Grade O'Hare, you think?"

"If he's on the case. Sure." Don was getting sore. Didn't these cops want any help in finding a murderer?

"Upstairs. First right." The sergeant dismissed him.

Ten minutes later, Detective James O'Hare tilted his straight-backed chair against the wall and pulled his hat down over his eyes as if the light hurt him.

"I got to get this straight, Mr. Rixey. You never saw this Larry yourself?"

"No, sir."

"Nor saw this ritzy dame who was with him at the time of the murder?"

"No, but—"

O'Hare held up a traffic cop palm. "So you couldn't identify either of 'em, if you was to see 'em. But anyhow, you don't claim you have seen either of 'em at this—" he glanced at scribbling on the desk pad in front of him—"this School Street address?"

"I haven't even been around there to try to," Don admitted. "If you'd only let me—"

The hand came up again, in the Stop signal. "Nobody at this department store actually remembers this dame, either—so you draw a blank there, too?"

"That's right. Only—"

"Still, you'd like for the police to stick their necks out by going around and arresting somebody, just on your guesswork?"

"It's more than guesswork," Don protested. "She was the only one—"

O'Hare smiled tolerantly. "This Bureau doesn't pull stuff like that, sonny. We're sort of old-fashioned, maybe. But we like the least little bit of evidence, before we go bustin' in people's homes. A wee smidgin, so to speak, of identification. We like some slight indication that we won't get bawled out by the Commissioner, raked over the coals by the newspapers and sued for false arrest by the wrong parties." He brought his chair down on all fours with a bang. "Not that we don't appreciate your public-spirited interest."

"Public-spirited, bosh! I'm interested in Annalou!" Don rose angrily. "Then you won't even investigate this lead?"

"We've too much to do to go wild-goosin' off at every crackbrain suggestion from amateur gumshoes, sonny." Gently O'Hare tapped the address in front of him. "By the same token, we won't overlook any bets, however goofy they may seem. We'll put this in the hopper. In the morning, the boys will make a routine investigation quietly."

"By morning this Larry may have taken a runout powder!" Don raged.

O'Hare smiled patiently. "If he runs, we'll get him. If he stays—and if, he's where you say, we'll still get him. We may not be Mounties. We don't always get our man, but our battin' average isn't so bad. Thanks for comin' around. We'll let you know, if we hear anything."

Thirty minutes later Don parked his Regal Radio Repair truck on School Street, in front of the address he'd given O'Hare.

"In the morning!" He mimicked the detective's tone. "We'll look into it, in

[Turn page]



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the morning. Maybe, if we don't forget about it, and if we don't change our minds!"

He took his kit, stalked into the building. There was a row of mail boxes. Apartment 5-B had a black metal plate with gilt lettering: *Tolman*. That was the name they'd given him at the store.

**H**E AVOIDED the elevator, mounted three flights, and put his ear to the door of 5-B. Someone was singing "Doin' What Comes Natch'rally."

Don grinned tightly. The singer was Lou Blue of KYKI. He'd tuned too many superhets to that smouldering contralto not to be certain.

There was no other sound, inside 5-B. He heard the hum of the ascending elevator, ducked for the stair well, and ran on up.

He went all the way to the roof, congratulating himself on his foresight in wearing the coveralls with the garnet lettering on the back: Regal For Quick Repairs.

On the roof he found the right fire escape, went down it cautiously to the rear of 5-B. He kept a coil of wire over his shoulder, carried his kit conspicuously and held a pair of pliers, in case anyone should start asking questions. Nobody in any of the apartments he passed noticed him.

The shades in the rear windows of 5-B were drawn tight. He wouldn't have been positive it was the right apartment, except that Lou Blue was giving out with "Mama, mama, mama, come dance with me."

He traced the Tolman aerial to the roof, did things with wires, and crept back down the fire escape. The radio was giving a passable imitation of the Battle of the Bulge.

He took his time about climbing to the roof again, smeared a little grease on his chin before he went downstairs and thumbed the button at the 5-B door.

For maybe half a minute, nothing happened. The radio continued to explode intermittently, but at lower volume. Somebody had tuned it down.

Don's mouth felt dry. That was funny, he thought. How could his mouth be so dry when he was streaming sweat. Click! The door opened suddenly.

He had heard no warning footsteps. Nothing—except bang, and there she was!

She wasn't wearing the dress Annalou had described in detail so carefully to him. She wasn't wearing much of anything except a filmy negligee that was about as concealing as cellophane. But her general appearance checked with the rough description Annalou had provided the police.

"Well?" she asked. There it was. The bland velvet voice.

"Radio repairs," he blurted out with just the right mixture of embarrassment and wide-eyed admiration. "Sump'n wrong with the aerals. Mixup."

"Do I care?" The willowy girl sized him up, coolly. "I didn't call you. No complaint here."

"Floor above." Don grinned vaguely. His knees felt like melting butter. His voice sounded as if it belonged to somebody else and he was hearing it on a play-back. "Like to check your connections, if you don't mind."

"I do." She started to close the door.

He anticipated her by a fraction of a second, blundering in as if he'd mistaken her refusal for an invitation. She blocked his way, suspiciously.

Out in the hall, the elevator door clanged. Somebody got out.

"Must be some trouble in your place," Don said loudly, "it puts all the radios in the building on the blink. You don't want everybody complainin', do you?"

The footsteps clattering down the hall paused, momentarily.

"Come on in," she snapped venomously.

He moved in. She closed the door behind him.

Acid dripped from her tongue. "Don't get the idea you're going to put the tap on me for any expense that's involved."

"It won't cost you a cent, ma'am." Don wondered if she could hear the way his heart was pounding. "I'm gettin' mine from the other people."

HE FOLLOWED her into a snauzy living-room. Thick, cream-colored chenille underfoot muffled his tread. Low, underslung furniture met his gaze all around. There were wood cuts in bleached-wood frames on the walls.

[Turn page]

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Packing to go away, he thought. Not much man's stuff around, though. Maybe I'm too late! Maybe he's gone already.

She didn't seem to be conscious of the litter, but she watched him with eyes bright with suspicion.

"Here's the radio. It only went sour a few minutes ago." She stood over him as he went down on hands and knees, got busy with his kit.

He put on a pair of dummy ear-phones, pretended to listen while he traced the ground connection. He followed it into the bedroom. Was that a shutting-door sound as he crawled in?

He scraped insulation off one of the cords that fed the lamp on the head of the four-poster. Beside him was the closet-door.

"That's only a reading lamp you're fooling with," she challenged, her tone displaying steel under the velvet.

"You got ground interference here somewhere, lady. I'm right close to it, now."

"No kidding," she snapped. "I think you'd better skip the static gag, brother. I've got to go out. And so have you!"

"Anything you say." His nerves tautened. He reached for the knob of the closet door to help himself to his feet.

"Keep your hands off that door!"

But Don pulled the door open as he stumbled laboriously erect. He got a fast glimpse of the closet. The pink and gray dress wasn't there. A row of shoes was: women's shoes, slippers, mules, sandals, all colors. Plus a stub-toed pair of Scotch grains, with ankles in them!

It was risky stuff, he knew, but he nerved himself to take his time about closing the door, clamping his foot against it as if by accident when he bent over his tool kit.

He came up with a hammer, a fist full of six-penny nails.

He wouldn't have been shocked at the blast of a pistol, the sudden pain of a bullet crashing into his back, yet he jumped as if he'd touched a hot wire when she raked his face with needle-sharp nails.

He punched her. With the hand that held the nails. She went over backward as if he'd hit her with the hammer.

Before she could scramble to her feet he was smashing away at the first nail, driving it into the jamb and through into the frame.

There was a crashing blow from inside the closet. Wood strained, cracked. The top of the door bulged out an inch or so.

He drove another nail home before she came back. With a carving knife.

"Come near me with that, I'll split your skull with this hammer!" he said through his teeth.

A dull muffled thump came from the closet. A splinter stuck out ominously from the door, leaving a small, round hole. Don stepped to one side, hammered in another big nail.

She moved in on him, catlike, knife held low for an underthrust.

He drove one more spike in near the top of the door before she was close enough to strike.

He lashed out with the hammer. She dodged, slashed at him viciously.

"Come on in, boys!" he yelled at the top of his lungs. "We got both of 'em!"

She whirled. He flung himself on her back, wrested the weapon away from her.

Thump, bump, bump bump!

Four more holes, nicely shaped, low in the closet door. Don gave thanks, as he tapped the girl behind the ear with the hammer, that he hadn't been standing there when those bullets came through the paneling. She sagged limply. It only took a couple of seconds to twist wire around her wrist and ankles. Then he went back to the door.

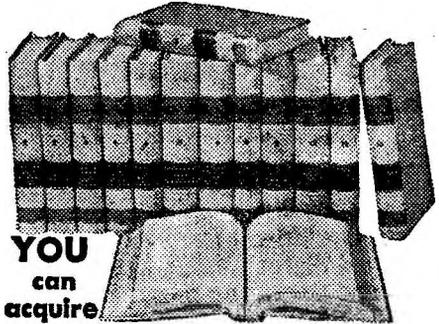
The man inside had reloaded, was shooting at the lock. Don lay flat on the floor, reached up, drove another nail. Another, another. . . .

Before he went out in the living room to phone, he pushed the girl over against the door. For luck.

**W**HEN he ran into the living room, the door to the hall was opening, noiselessly, slowly.

There was an eternity for Don to realize he'd been dumb enough to forget that the killer and his girl might have pals.

[Turn page]



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"Turn around!" A cold command from the hallway. "Stick your thumbs in your ears! Stay that way!"

Don obeyed. What a sap! Caught like this! His mind flashed to Annalou. She'd been right. It had been a matter for the police. And now—now—

He remembered how Bill had looked, there on the gravel.

Something prodded him between the shoulder blades. A finger.

"Holy cow! If it isn't Young Slue-foot!"

It was O'Hare. Beside him, Wiley. Don closed his eyes, opened them again. It was no trick of his imagination. The officers were really there.

While they were smashing down the closet door, while a strangling coughing indicated that Larry, the Gong, was choking on his own powder fumes, Wiley bawled Don out:

"Just because you get some cute notion about where this dame—" the Lieutenant nodded at the willowy figure sitting up with her back against the end of the bed and her front covered with a blanket, "—hangs out—"

"I tried to tell you." Don dabbed at claw marks on his cheek with his handkerchief. "Annalou remembered the dress this girl wore. She knew it must be brand new."

"Murder wears the New Look," O'Hare said, caustically.

"That's right," Don inspected his face in the mirror. "Annalou thought maybe the store that sold it would have a record of the customer, if there weren't too many like it. It was unusual. Rhinestone embroidery gimmicks. So I went around and asked. There'd only been a couple sold, like the one this lady—" he considered a moment, changed it. "—this hellcat, wore last night. One was to a friend of the Mayor's. The other was sold to Miss Tolman, of this address. So I came here."

"Just like that," Wiley said. "Single-handed. You realize you might have scared them both away? That we might never have nabbed either of them?"

"Never thought about it." Don admitted.

"You're lucky to be alive," O'Hare said. "If we hadn't come along when we did, no telling who'd be spending that

reward dough."

Don turned. "Did you say—'reward'?"  
"Five hundred fish," Wiley said. "Gas companies offered it, tonight. Don't you ever read the papers?"

"I will from now on," Don promised.  
"Especially those furniture ads."  
He went out to call Annalou.

## DYING TO SEE WILLIE

(Continued from page 68)

Melvin Trumbo sang even before he reached the bastille. It was just the way Willie Klump had figured it was. This guy from the Burpson Safe outfit had made a deal with him and two other pals. After the Pusey Plastic Novelties rub-out and robbery, they went into a huddle and asked each other why did they need J. Luscomb Crump any longer.

"Yeah, we jumped him an' he put up a battle," the ex-con divulged. "Arky had to let him have it. We walked him out of the joint an' by mistake one of us put my hat on his dome. We took ten grand off him an' a notebook with safe combos in it. We leave the shnook to croak out on the street somewheres but what does he do but cross us up!"

"There never was honor among thieves," Willie sniffed. "Yeah, he had enough moxey left to git a taxi to his hotel where he come into my room by mistake an' died in bed with me. I wonder how many people will believe this one?"

"Take me out of here," Melvin sighed.

Willie Klump and Gertie Mudgett were sitting in a tavern a couple of days later listening to Fats McGlone, Private Eye. It was about a hospital blood bank being held up by a grim character all dressed in black and flying a black autogyro. Fats McGlone finally trailed the guilty party to his lair which was an old cellar in a haunted house. It was Dracula back again and in modern dress.

"Willie, you was right," Gertie sniffed. "I never heard nothin' so far-fetched."

"It is too tame," Willie commented  
[Turn page]

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dryly. "Why don't they git some oomph in that pogram?"

"Supposin' the crooks had gone to rob the girdle factory instead, Willie?" Ger-tie wanted to know.

"Huh? Maybe because I figured they figured if they got caught there they'd git a two-way stretch, ha!" Willie said.

"I shouldn't of ast," Gertie sighed. "Let's have another beer."

**OFFICIAL BUSINESS**

(Concluded from page 10)

bronze, weighing about 3½ pounds. It couldn't possibly be used except on a gun that had a thread cut, where it could be screwed on solid. On a revolver, it caused a backfire, practically as much noise as without it, and was liable to blow off the other chambers. The Government forbade its make, so only five or six were made, and it didn't silence. It cut the report about 73%. That's the facts about silencers. If such things were made, every crook would get one, but have you ever seen one?—*Walter S. Winfield, Portland, Maine.*

Any of you other readers have something to say on the subject?

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I like your feature **THE "INSIDE" OF DETECTIVE WORK**. But I wish the instalments were longer. Couldn't you publish at least two pages at a time?—*Eddie Smith-Jones, Jr., Far Rockaway, N.Y.*

Is it possible to tell if a hair comes from a man or a woman?—*Edna Frolick, New Iberia, La.*

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—THE EDITOR



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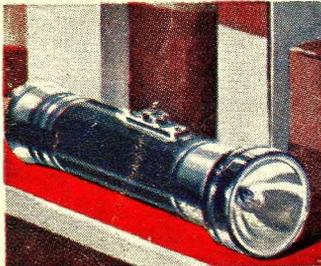


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