

NEW COMPLETE CRIME MYSTERY STORIES

15[¢]

POPULAR

NOV.

DETECTIVE

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION



THREE COMPLETE NOVELETS
TILL DEATH DO US PART
By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

BANSHEE OF THE BAYOUS
By JEAN FRANCIS WEBB

THE GREATER CRIME
By ANTHONY TOMPKINS

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Dunbar

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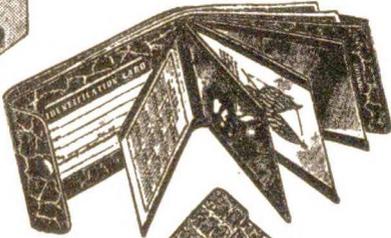
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2



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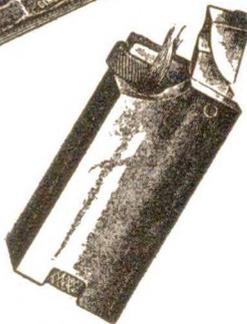
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3



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SIXTEEN ADDITIONAL PAGES IN THIS ISSUE!

POPULAR DETECTIVE

Vol. XXXI, No. 3

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

November, 1946

A COMPLETE CRIME NOVELET



Till Death Do Us Part

by *Robert Sidney Bowen*

Two wealthy sisters run into a grim nightmare of trouble when an evil, scheming husband dishes up a murder and blackmail stew—and then it's the job of private detective Chet Lacey to solve the baffling mystery, and also to serve the solution! 13

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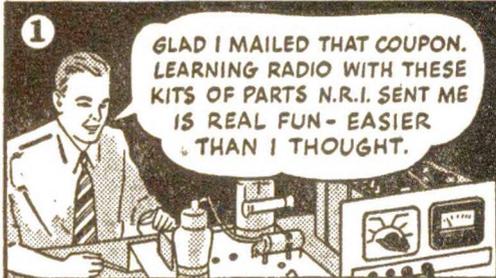
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OFFICIAL BUSINESS

A DEPARTMENT WHERE READERS
AND THE EDITOR MEET

THERE are many surprises in store for you when you read **THE GRAVE MUST BE DEEP**, by Norman A. Daniels, which is featured in the next issue of **POPULAR DETECTIVE**. It's a gripping complete novel, a long and full-bodied yarn that carries a punch in every paragraph and a thrill on every page!

It all began when rich and conservative Peter Ander suddenly went insane. He was normally a quiet man whose daily routine was always the same, but one day at noon, when he made his way from the office to the restaurant where he always ate, his secretary noted that his hands were blood-stained.

He was seated at his accustomed table and seemed almost as composed as usual when he abruptly let go of the coffee cup he had picked up. It crashed on the saucer, broke and spilled coffee over his lap. He paid no attention to it. He arose slowly and his fingers encircled the neck of a heavy water decanter. Grasping this, he pushed back his chair and took three steps to the next table.

No More Murders!

The two men occupying it stared up at him in amazement. Ander didn't say anything for a moment. Then he spoke, in a low unsteady voice that threatened to break into a strident scream.

"There will be no more murders, do you hear me? No more murders. I won't have it. I shall be compelled to resort to violence if you think about murder again. I shall certainly—"

One of the men started to rise. Ander raised the decanter and brought it down with a thump on the head of the nearest man. The man hit the seat of his chair and fell across the table. His companion leaped up and backwards, almost stumbling over his own overturned chair. Ander made no attempt to go after him.

The little man still held the decanter in his fist and he was looking around. His eyes were bright pools of fire. Those nearby began drawing away from him. Suddenly Ander raised the decanter and flung it. An unerring toss straight at the huge plate glass window. It crashed and the restaurant manager started running toward him.

Ander put up quite a fight before the police arrived and he was finally captured and taken away, still babbling about murder.

Alex Hart, a young assistant district attorney, and sergeant Erford Nolan of the police were sent to question the Ander family after Peter Ander had been placed in the hospital where he was declared insane.

The Anders were very rich and socially important, so Alex knew that any questioning of the family would have to be done diplomatically, and warned the sergeant that the usual police methods would not work.

When they reached the house Kip Ander, Peter's brother made it plain that he resented their presence as he met them at the door.

"Reporters?" he asked menacingly.

"No," Alex replied. "My name is Hart from the District Attorney's office. My friend is Mr. Nolan, similarly attached. We came to get certain facts and we won't bother you long."

Kip Ander was reluctant to talk, or to let them into the house, but he finally did so—and Alex Hart met some of the rest of the family. Alex learned from Mrs. Ander, the mother of Peter and Kip, that she maintained quite a large household. Besides Kip's daughter, there was a nephew by her sister-in-law's marriage, Alfred Porter; a brother-in-law, Jerome Ander; and a grandson, Noble Sanborn, whose parents were dead. These was also Suzanne, the housekeeper, and Dr. Bob Prentice, who also lived there.

The Blood-Stained Bullet

One of the strange things Alex Hart learned on that first visit to the Ander residence was that someone evidently had been murdered in the house, for he found a blood-stained bullet lodged in the back of a chair!

When Peter Ander was killed while being given a shock treatment at a private sanitarium, because someone had deliberately increased the electric current, Alex decided that he and Sergeant Nolan had better continue their investigation. Alex remained at the house and he eventually fell in love with Kip Anders' daughter, Judith.

Tension steadily mounted as the mystery deepened and took on new aspects. There were many problems for Alex Hart to solve.

What became of the body of the person who had been killed in the house? Why was there a mysterious grave hidden where it could not be easily found—and what was in that grave?

(Continued on page 8)



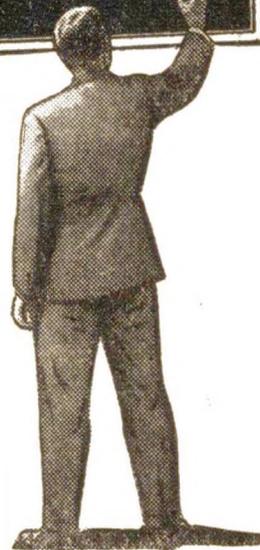
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OFFICIAL BUSINESS

(Continued from page 6)

Had a dog been in the house—despite the fact that everyone there denied it?

These are but a few of the baffling questions that confront Alex Hart before he reaches the solution of the whole affair—and you'll have an entertaining time testing your wits by trying to find the answer before he does in **THE GRAVE MUST BE DEEP**, a novel you will enjoy and remember! It's a "must" for detective story fans!

A Chet Lacey Thriller

Chet Lacey, hard-boiled private detective, will also take a bow in the next issue for another appearance—this time in **DARLING, YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE**, an exciting novel by Robert Sidney Bowen.

Mrs. Roger Fenimore called at Lacey's office just as he was about to go out for lunch. She announced that she wanted the private investigator to find her husband, who had been missing for three days.

Mrs. Fenimore admitted that for the last six months her husband had been going out at least five nights a week—and while he claimed he was busy at his work, his wife knew he was gambling. She had found a card from the Del-Ray Inn—and some poker chips—in one of her husband's suits that she was about to send to the cleaners.

Chet Lacey took the case. He knew that a smart crook named "Smooth" Carter owned the Del-Ray Inn—and Lacey had no love in his heart for Mr. Carter.

So Lacey went to the night club and questioned Smooth Carter and found he was getting nowhere fast. After Lacey left the club and was driving away in his car he found he had company—a mysterious man who suddenly came out of hiding in the back of the car and stuck a gun between Lacey's shoulders. After the detective was forced to drive out in the country, he was hit over the head and knocked out.

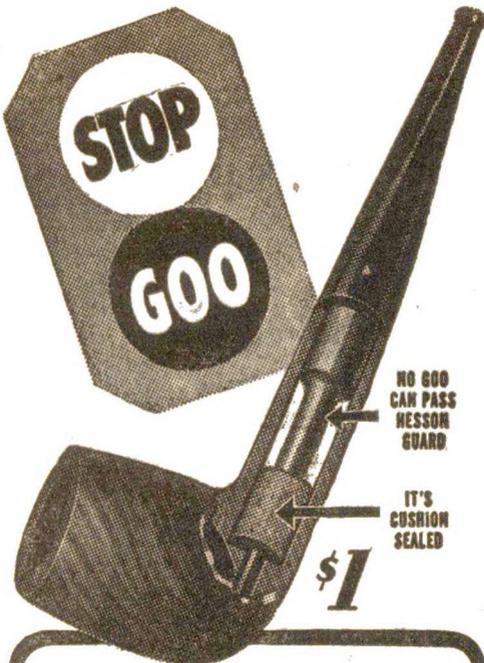
When he recovered, Lacey found he was alone and his car, gun and wallet was gone. He began walking and discovered a car wrecked at the foot of a cliff. He climbed down to investigate and found a dead man—and the dead man happened to be Roger Fenimore! Now it was up to Lacey to clear up the entire mystery, and the way he did so makes **DARLING, YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE** an exciting yarn from beginning to end!

There will also be other splendid stories in the next issue of **POPULAR DETECTIVE**, each one packed with mystery and suspense. Good reading for everyone! Be on hand for a real fiction feast.

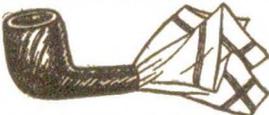
LETTERS FROM READERS

LET'S hear from more of our readers! We value your opinions, so please keep right on telling us which stories appeal to you the most and about those that do not suit your fancy in this and other issues of **POPULAR DETECTIVE**. Now let's take a look at some excerpts from just a few of the many letters we are constantly receiving.

(Concluded on page 10)



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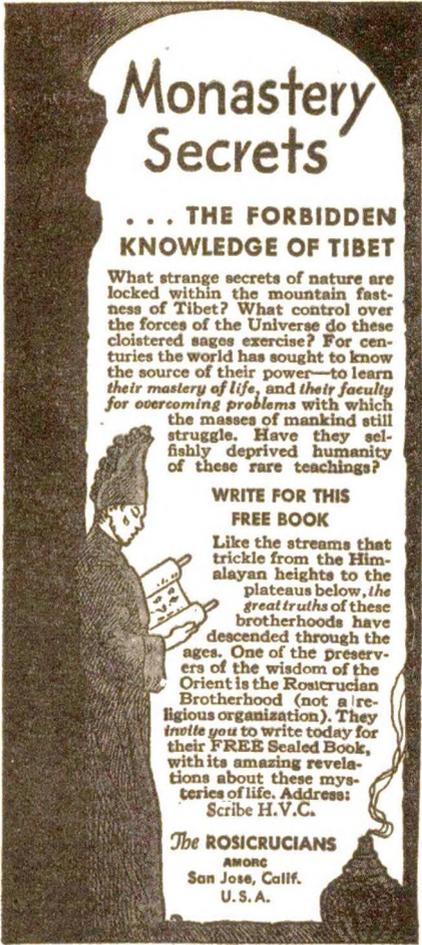
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(Concluded from page 8)

I started reading POPULAR DETECTIVE with the February, 1945, issue—and now try and stop me. I think it is a swell book. The stories I liked best in the issues I have read were: THE RED SWORD, by John Drummond; BULLS MAKE GOOD BODY-GUARDS, by Thomson Burtis; BONUS FOR A BODY, by T. W. Ford; MOTTO FOR MURDER, by Frank Johnson; CLOWN OF DOOM, by John L. Benton; MURDER NIGHTMARE, by Norman A. Daniels; DEATH AT OODNADATTA, by Charles S. Strong; MURDER THROUGH MAGIC, by Curtiss T. Gardner; DEATH HAS A POKER FACE, by Robert S. Fenton. Those were my favorites—there were some others, too, that I liked fairly well—but I don't believe I need to list all of them. Keep up the good work.—Robert Haynes, Denver, Colo.

Thanks for your letter, Robert. We're pleased that you listed the stories and authors you have especially liked.

Boy, for my money, Willie Klump is always a howl. How I do enjoy those yarns about him by Joe Archibald—they are the first thing I turn to every time I get the latest copy of POPULAR DETECTIVE. Of course I like the other stories, too—but Willie Klump is my favorite.—Fred Watson, Boston, Mass.

We're fond of Willie ourselves, Fred. Thanks for your letter.

I've been reading POPULAR DETECTIVE for a long time, and would like to thank you for many an enjoyable evening. I have four children and by the time I have them in bed for the night I haven't much time for other recreation. I've just finished the latest issue and found it very enjoyable. I liked MISSION OF DEATH and Willie Klump—all of the stories for that matter are very good. Thanks again.—Mrs. W. Cameron, Montreal, Quebec, Canada.

And thank you, Mrs. Cameron. The rest of you—remember we are always delighted to hear from our readers, and even though we may not be able to quote from more than a few letters in this department, all your comments and criticisms are carefully read and deeply appreciated. Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, POPULAR DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

See you next issue!

—THE EDITOR.

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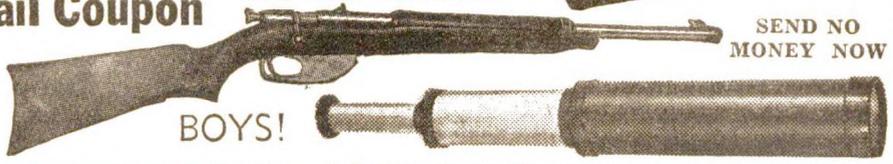
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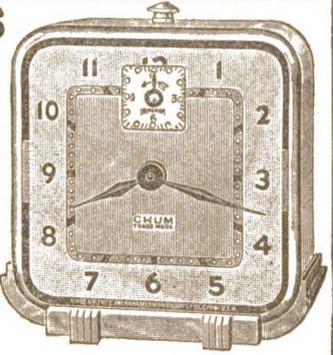
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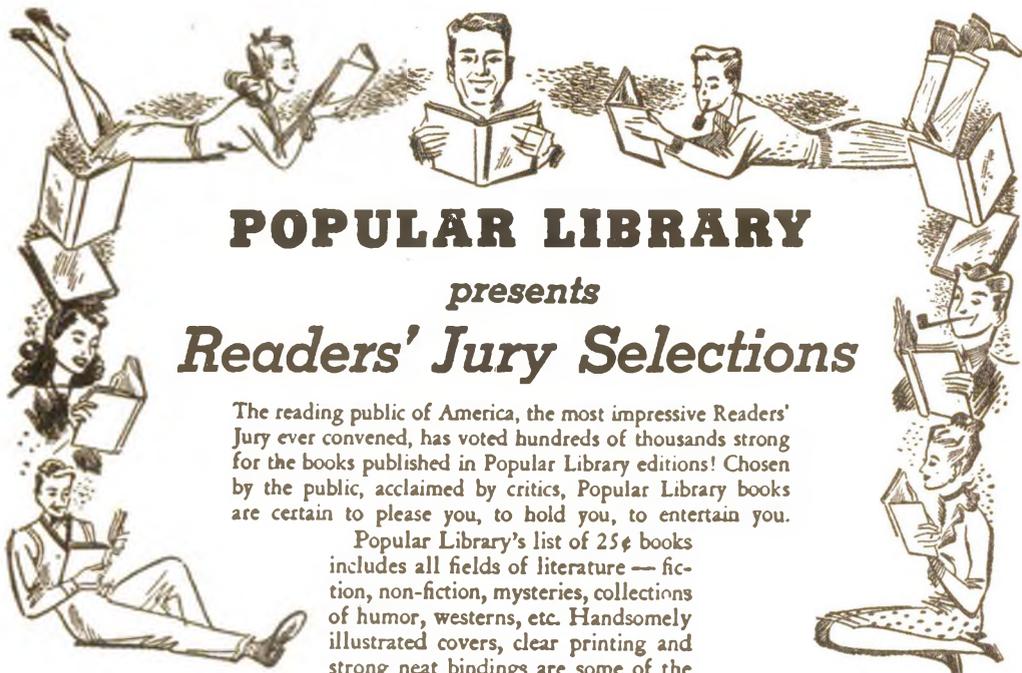
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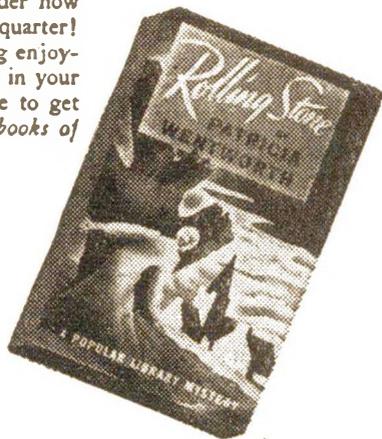
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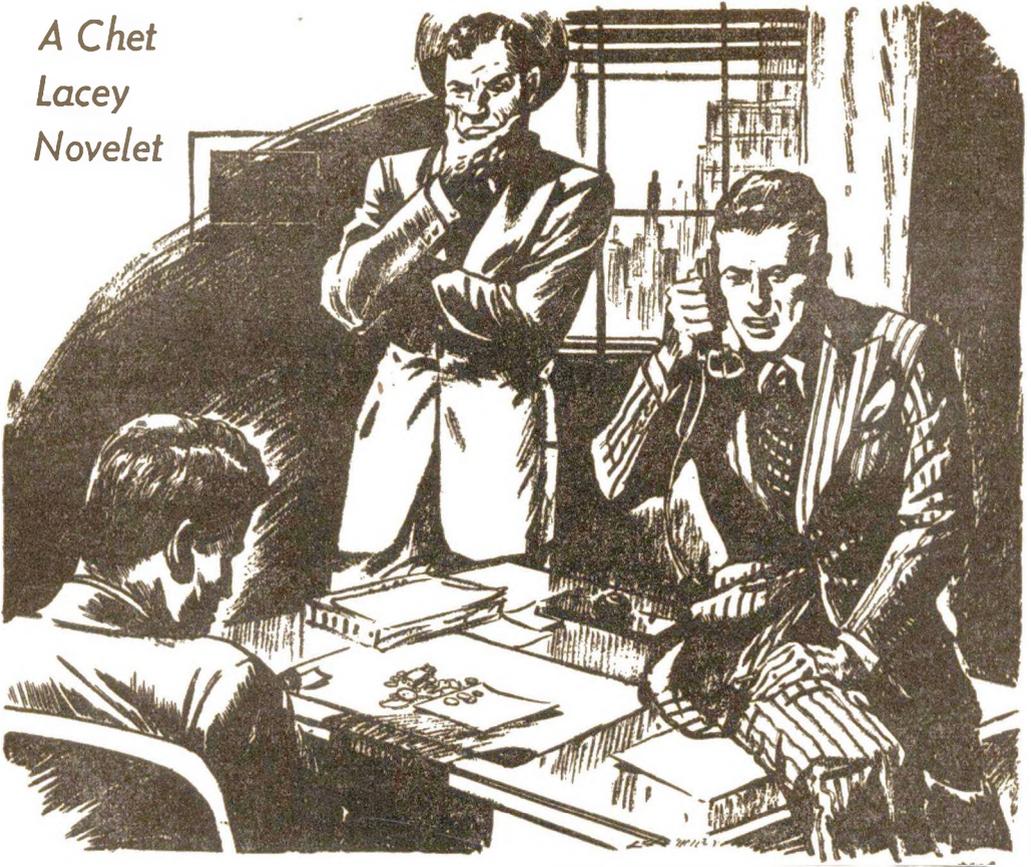
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A Chet
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Novelet



Our study of the stiff in my desk chair was interrupted by the jangling of the phone

TILL DEATH DO US PART

By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

Two wealthy sisters run into a nightmare of trouble when a scheming husband dishes up a murder and blackmail stew, and it's up to private detective Lacey to serve the solution!

CHAPTER I

Corpse in the Desk Chair

THE man was dead all right, but he was not what you would call a run-of-the-mill corpse. He had been a well-built, good-looking guy between thirty and thirty-five. Even in death you could see that he had been the ruddy-faced, outdoor type. His clothes were of the better kind. Good material, and well-tailored. Sight of his single

strap military type shoes reminded me I had been meaning to get a pair.

It required no second guess about the instrument of death. The blood-soaked front of his tan broadcloth shirt was smooched with powder marks from a close range shot that had gone straight to the heart. The crimson stain was still spreading through the threads, which meant he had not been dead very long.

The biggest puzzle to me at the moment, though, was—who was he, and what was he

doing in my office desk chair, besides being dead? I do not like that sort of thing. Usually I go to where corpses are at, and begin from there. To have corpses come to where I am at, is annoying. Particularly, when they come to my office.

I took my eyes off him, and closed the office door. Then, on second thought, I started to lock it just in case a weak-stomached prospective client should pop in to see me. My thought came a couple of seconds too late. The door opened in my face, and there stood Lieutenant Sol Bierman, of the Detective Bureau. Sol could be a good friend on occasion, but I didn't think this was it.

"No, pal," he said, and pushed the door wider. "It seems that . . ."

He then saw my forever silent visitor, and his grin broadened. He came all the way in, and closed the door, still looking.

"Well, well!" he said softly.

"The very words I used," I said, and watched his face, because sometimes I have known it to slip.

"A client who would not pay you, no doubt?" Sol said, and gave me the full benefit of his maddening grin.

"Seven bucks, he owed," I played along. "Wanted to settle for three. Do you blame me?"

"You were always so impetuous," he sighed, and stepped closer to the desk chair. "Where's the girl?"

"What girl?" was all I could ask.

"The one who called us from here, and screamed there was a murdered man," he said, without looking at me. "Then she hung up in my ear."

"You're crazy!" I said. And added without thinking, "No girl called from here!"

"Oh, so you've been here all the time?" Sol asked softly.

I was reaching the mood of detesting the sight of that confounded grin.

"Of course not!" I snapped. "A hundred Rotarians can tell you where I've been for the last couple of hours. I just came back, and what's more, I never saw the guy before in my life!"

"Famous last words," Bierman murmured, trying to steam me up. "A lady did phone, though. I heard her voice. And my friends, the telephone company, assured me that the call came from here."

"Well, there's no dame here now!" I said, and took a step forward. "And I'm going to find out who this guy is that's got the nerve to get himself dead in my office."

"Not you, my friend—me," Sol said, and pointed the finger of the Law. "You stay

right where you are. Shame on you for not keeping your office door locked!"

"I always lock it when I leave!" I said hotly. "Just in case a snoopy cop I know wants to make himself at home."

BUT Sol was missing it all. His attention was directed at the good-looking stiff, and the assortment of articles he took from the man's pockets and piled on my desk. It was all made up of the usual junk a fellow carries around. There was no wallet, however, or any other means of identification.

Bierman stared at the stuff, and shook his head sadly. "Why do killers persist in making it difficult for us hard-working cops?" he murmured.

"Correction on the hard-working cops!" I said. Then, with the edge missing, "That straight about a dame calling, Sol?"

"I do not lie to a dear chum," he said. "A dame called from here. She screamed there was a murdered man here. I asked her where, and she hung up. Hoping it might be you, I hurried over as soon as I'd checked with the phone people."

I thanked him for his kind thought, and fell to staring at the dead man, myself. In the back of my head I tried to live over that moment when I had left the office to go to the Rotary luncheon. Tried to recall definitely that I had slipped the catch so that the door would lock on closing. I couldn't, though. I'd done that thing a million times, and it was automatic. As hopeless as trying to remember which shoe I put on first last Wednesday—the left or the right.

Then suddenly our collective, pensive study of the stiff was interrupted by the jangle of my desk phone. I snatched it out from under Bierman's reaching fingers, and felt good because of the look on his face.

"Lacey Investigations. Chester Lacey speaking."

The voice at the other end was soft, and a shade sultry. The way I like a woman's voice to be. A pretty woman's voice, preferably.

"I would like to hire your services, Mr. Lacey. It is impossible for me to come to your office, so would you please come out here? Deauville Apartments. Nine D. Right away?"

The same voice that had called Bierman's office? Stranger things had happened in my business. I glanced at Sol. He was frowning at the corpse, and listening hard to me.

"I'm tied up right now, Mr. Henderson," I said to the nice voice. "How long has your mother been missing?"

Pay dirt!

I shot him in the forehead before he could get the little gun to bear on me!



"Oh, I see, Mr. Lacey," she said with meaning. Then, "How soon before you can come out here?"

"I'll be along as soon as I can," I said, very businesslike. "But I wouldn't worry, sir. Perhaps she took a trip and neglected to let you know. Has this ever happened before?"

"No," I was told. "This has never happened before. So please come just as soon as you can!"

"Just as soon as I can, sir," I said. "Good-by."

I hung up and pushed the phone away with a half-shrug. Bierman was looking at me now, and his face was very sad.

"Some guy has lost his mother," I said. "Maybe there's a buck in it for me. Wants me right away, or must I stay here while all your little boys wreck the joint?"

"I am a dope!" Sol sighed. "When I am not constantly on my toes, you spoil so many things!"

"Spoil what things?" I truly wanted to know.

He pointed at the phone.

"The lady who phoned me," he said like he was going to cry. "Remember? And now you have smeared up all her nice fingerprints."

"Gee, I'm sorry, Sol!" I told him, and was honest. "It never even occurred to me!"

"Little white lies I must tell the captain," he said and wagged his head. "Then, "Okay, beat it. But, Chester?"

When Bierman calls me Chester, it is not good. I stopped in midstride toward the door.

"Yes, Sol?"

His eyes were pained, and something else.

"Always I am interested in your success, old pal," he said. "So later you will tell me all about finding the gentleman's dear old mother?"

In front of Sol Bierman you just cannot fake for beans!

PERISH the thought I even so much as considered that Bierman wouldn't let me go my way unobserved! It was simply from force of habit that I drove around town for a while, with one eye on the rear-view mirror, before going out to the higher bracket residential section where the Deauville is located.

After I had parked across the street, though, I did not get right out and go in and up to the intriguing voice in 9D. Not that I didn't have that intention. It was because someone else had other intentions. He just

stepped up to the car and slid in beside me in the continuation of a single movement. I did not ask him out, nor order him out, because he had a big gun that was pointed across his legs at my middle.

I looked at the gun first, then at him. Both were ugly-looking, and both were ready for business.

"Just drive along, and keep driving!" he said, in a voice like loose tacks in a tin can. But with plenty of authority. I started the car, shifted, and tooled away from the curb.

"Any place in particular, Strong-arm?" I asked.

"Straight ahead will do," he replied, and gave a quick squint into the rear-view mirror. "I'll let you know."

"Let me know now what's the score," I tried him.

"I win, you lose. Just drive, and don't hit nothing."

The gun across his legs was close enough to grab. But I have a four-inch scar under my right arms that proves the bullet is faster than the hand. And an old five-weeks hospital bill around the house somewhere.

I kept both hands on the wheel, and paid attention to my driving. We were heading out and away from town toward the foothills that end in the mountains, the tallest of which tops eleven thousand feet.

I had never seen the lad before. That I knew from the one look I had taken at his cow-catcher-battered face. New in town, or else I was slipping badly on my monthly tough character census.

I thought of the lovely voice that had phoned me, but it did not make sense. My baboon passenger could have done this just as easily in front of the office where I park my car. Which made it appear that somebody did not want me to meet the lady of the beautiful voice.

When I had to stop for a red light I deliberately turned my head, and took a second good look. It did not improve my initial impression.

I saw the character's eyes this time, and they were very, very nasty.

"Know who I am?" I suddenly asked.

"Yeah, Lacey, I do."

He said it with a crooked grin that was an invitation.

I'd simply wanted to be sure he hadn't made a mistake. Guys with the hair line as close to their brows as his, often do.

"I still don't get it," I said. "Who wants me?"

"Could be nobody, Lacey! The light's green."

CHAPTER II

Miss Heavenly of the Year

WAS getting sore fast, but cautious, too. My rider might have a low conversational IQ, but he seemed to have a ken for guns and their uses the way he held his. Lightly firm, and never off the target. We drove for a couple of blocks in silence. Then I swerved

to avoid a car from a side street. More than was necessary, because I wanted to find out.

I did. He didn't move anything but his gun arm. The muzzle jabbed my stomach to my back-bone, and let it snap back. The stab of pain was white-hot.

"I like to earn my dough following orders, Lacey!" he said, mean. "But you can have it sooner, if you want. Pick a tree, or anything. This heap won't hit it with you alive!"

"The fast, tough kind, eh?"

He nodded. "Yeah. The fast, tough kind. Call me if you don't think so."

I had no intention of calling him, yet. I always like to know the why, if possible, before I risk the only life I have. However, it was beginning to look more and more like my ugly-faced hitchhiker was confining everything to deeds, and nothing to words. In hope, I tried once again.

"Do you know Sol Bierman, the city dick?" I asked.

"Look chum, you're wasting your breath," he said, and almost friendly-like. "I don't know nobody but you. And no more than a couple of things I've been told. So skip the quiz program. I don't know the answers. Even if I did it would make no difference."

Probably a record speech for him, and while it revealed no facts, it made me fairly certain of a couple of things. He was undoubtedly an out-of-towner. He had been hired to scratch Chester Lacey from the human race. That last seemingly fairly obvious, I mentally checked a list of characters who would hire an out-of-towner for heavy duty. I was combing the list, a fairly short one, for the second time when he interrupted.

"Next left, Lacey."

That caught me flat-footed off the bag. I hadn't expected it so soon. My hands on the wheel, going white at the knuckles, showed it. Ugly Face saw the sudden tight-

er grip, and figured it wrong.

"You'll get a break, Lacey," he said. "It won't hurt none. You'll never even know."

Considerate of the bum! For a split second I came close to going to town right then and there. But foolish thoughts though I may have, foolish actions are something else again. I said nothing. I made the next left. It was a narrow dirt road that led to nowhere, through some woods. A lovely place to park at night with your lady of the moment. I sincerely hoped some guy and his girl would not have everything spoiled by finding me some night.

"Any chance for a last smoke?" I asked.

He started to laugh, let it fade away.

"Sure, I'm human," he said. "I'll even give you one of mine."

It didn't spoil my play when he pulled out some Camels, shook one from the pack, and stuck it in my mouth. He took one himself. Natural-like I reached out my right hand and pushed in the dash lighter. If he minded that, he didn't say so. A few seconds later the coil was red and the thing popped half-way out. I pulled it out the rest of the way and stuck it to my cigarette.

Started to, I should say! Instead I whipped that glowing end toward his ugly face. Maybe a prayer was on my lips. I don't remember.

Anyway, he did the natural instinctive thing. He lifted both hands, and jerked back his head. The red coil sizzled on the end of his nose. My right knee rammed his left leg. The gun in his hand went off, but by then the gun was tilted upward. It put a hole in the brim of my hat, and another in the roof of the car.

I found that out later, because I was too busy to notice then. I had come over with my left edgewise and chopped down on his gun wrist. I had also dropped the dash lighter in my right, and was going for my left-shoulder-holstered gun. I hit his wrist a savage crack but he did not drop the gun. He twisted away and tried to turn the gun for a clip shot.

Mine was in my hand by then. Maybe him being so nice to let me have a smoke, I should have let him get the gun all the way around and beat him to the trigger squeeze. But I love life dearly. I shot him right through the center of his face. From a range of six inches. That made him with just about no face at all. Which, considering, was perhaps an improvement.

The car by then, of course, was off the dirt road and, front bumper to a tree, stalled. My foot off the gas had slowed it down to a

crawling four miles, so neither of us felt the stop jar. Anyway, I hadn't and maybe I had made him dead too soon. I didn't stop to think about it.

HE HADN'T splashed much, but he was beginning to bleed a lot. I do not like blood-stains in my car. It is untidy, and can give rise to suspicion. So I reached past him, opened the door, and pushed him out with my foot.

Just a couple of spots on the back of the seat, and a few specks on the windshield. I cleaned them off with a windshield rag, then got out my side and walked around to where he was, back flat to the earth, and faceless face to the sky. I have seen worse, so it did not bother me.

Besides, there were other things to think about. I pulled him off the road and around behind some bushes. Then I went through his pockets one by one.

I guess he must have been the type who wanted to live through his life span anonymously. Until his prints were checked. He didn't have a thing on him that told me his name. In fact, he didn't have anything on him that interested me at all, except for a couple of items. His suit label said he had got it at a Chicago men's furnishings. And a half-used clip of matches was from the Tip-Toe Inn, the hottest night spot in our fair community.

If the guy had used a lighter I would have continued to be up a tree as to what was what. The match clip, though, told me something. So I thought. At least I didn't have any certain feeling that I was still up a tree.

I dropped it into my pocket then, using my handkerchief, I pried his gun loose from his fingers and put it in the car glove compartment. Some day when life was clear and rosy again, I would get Sol to check the prints with the character's files at Police Headquarters. Maybe even with Washington. I do not like to go on through life not knowing who it was I have had to kill.

I told him that I was very sorry, but he'd asked for it, started the car, and backed out to the main highway. . . .

The two-hundred-odd pounds of French blue, gold braid and gold buttons on guard at the Deauville Apartments gave me a look that bespoke of the nerve of the likes of me to be entering the sacred portals. However, he said not a word, for his good sake, and presently the automatic elevator let me off at the ninth. Nine D was to the right at the far end, and the name card above the pearl

bell button said, "Cain."

I had purposely not asked the lovely voice her name, because in my business it often does not help at all to have clients' names tripping along telephone wires. Phone wires can be tapped, and have been often by the inquisitive cops, as well as others. And you never find it out until too late. Usually.

As I jabbed the button I quickly checked the Cains in my brain file on names, but I failed to come up with one that meant anything. Yet I felt that one of them should. And a couple of moments later when Miss Heavenly Of The Year opened the door, and smiled at me, something tinkled in me, and it was not entirely because of the spell she cast.

"Come in, Mr. Lacey. It is very kind of you to come here so soon."

I did not mention that I had planned it to be sooner. I think I simply mumbled some stock phrase about being able to put off some other business, and followed her along a short hall to one of those sunken living rooms that have everything anybody with taste ever hopes to have. That she was there, too, topped par for me.

She finally stopped by a real fireplace, with charred logs to prove it, and waved me to a chair. "Sit down, Mr. Lacey. Would you like Scotch or rye?"

I told her Scotch, and watched her push a button by the fireplace. A panel slid open and revealed more of all brands than I ever hope to drink. She made two, with ice from a small built-in refrigeration unit, and gave me one.

Maybe it was touching her fingers for an instant as I took the drink that produced the electricity to pop up the right name card in my mind. Anyway, the lovely thing was Helen Cain. And although I had never seen her in the flesh before, she had smiled out at me a hundred times or more from various newspapers. Usually her kid sister, Marie, was with her; serving doughnuts at the USO, selling War Bonds, donating an ambulance, dancing with war-weary GIs. But, of course, that was months ago.

But the Cain girls were best known for the three million dollars apiece they owned. Cash, stocks, bonds, or what have you. But all theirs. From their father, T. T. Cain, the cattle king who, with his wife, about a year ago had been killed in an air-liner crash.

I was really drinking with the very best. In every sort of way.

"To an unexpected, and most delightful meeting, Miss Cain," I said, and gave her my smile reserved for such people.

SHE smiled back, took a small sip, then put down her glass on the coffee table between us, and picked up her purse. From it she drew a sheaf of brand new money. The top one was a fifty. She dropped it on the table a couple of inches from my glass.

"There is a thousand dollars, Mr. Lacey. Is that enough for a retainer?"

New green always makes my fingers tingle, but I let them tingle.

"It might be," I said, reasonably enough. "What do you want me to do?"

A frank question, and did I get a frank answer!

"To kill a man."

I looked at her. She was indeed serious.

"If it is necessary, Mr. Lacey," she said. "But nine thousand more whether you do, or don't. Provided, of course, you obtain something for me."

So seldom a new twist in my business! Most always—provided you do this or that! Use mirrors, if you like, but do it.

"Who?" I asked. "And why?"

Her little frown made her even lovelier.

"I would rather be sure you are going to work for me, before I explain, Mr. Lacey."

That was three million dollars speaking, and three million smackers has a right to talk as it pleases. That it gets results with me is a shoe on another foot.

"And I always listen to a client's story before I commit myself, Miss Cain," I told her. "However, it is a strict habit, and rule of mine to respect any and all confidences whether I go to work for the client or not."

Her face was quite frosty for an instant, and then that smile melted it all away. She took another sip, and her eyes did things over the top of the glass.

"Touché, Mr. Lacey! I think I like you for saying that. Anyway, I'll tell you my story, and we'll see what you think of it."

I smiled that that was okay, and gave a

hunch some free rope.

"Better me than the police, Miss Cain," I said. "Your call to Police Headquarters was traced. Maybe your call to me, unless you have a dial phone."

The hunch romped home a winner. She caught a quick gasp. Her face went stiff, and the ice in her drink clinked against the glass. Then everything was all right. She was smiling again and not even sheepishly.

"That was very stupid of me," she said. "But I was in a panic for a moment, and completely lost my head."

I nodded and smiled understanding, but I didn't quite.

"My phone does happen to be dial," she said, with a faint frown. "Does that make a difference?"

"All the difference in the world," I told her. "A call from a dial phone cannot be traced, once the connection is broken. My office phone's the old type."

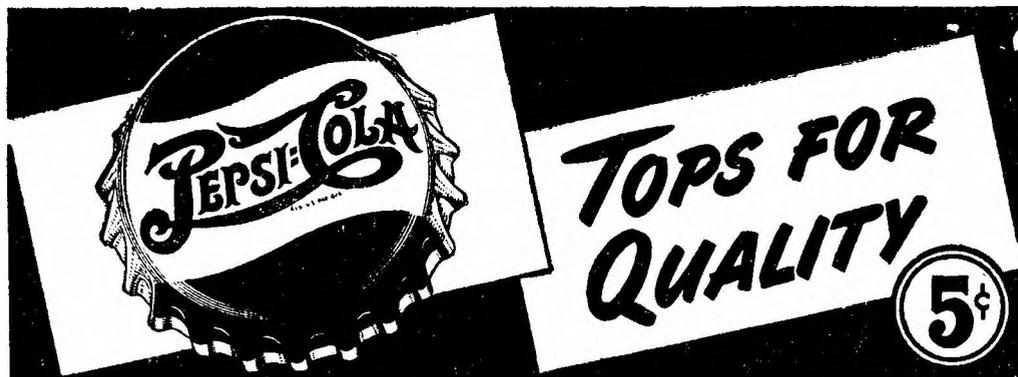
She seemed relieved, and for a moment or two stared into her drink. I thought the shadow of a smile worked on the corners of her mouth, but I wasn't sure.

Then, presently, she began to tell her story. In that nice, nice voice. It was sort of hard to concentrate. It took some time in the telling, but there were lots of parts that I can leave out.

A couple of years ago she had met a man—she did not tell me his name right away—and she went overboard, silver slippers and all. Dad and Mother took one look, and it was thumbs down. Decidedly. But love was love, and the two skipped to Ensenada, Mexico, and the deed was done in secret. They decided to keep it a secret for a spell.

I broke in there to ask why, and she blushed as pretty as a picture, and was quite frank. She had been of age, of course, but there were still a few years to go before she

[Turn page]



Two Murders

would get the money her father had set aside for her. He had not liked Friend Husband, and it was odds on that he would hit the roof and remove all the nice green forever. Love is love, but with three million in the offing it is also sensible to be practical.

I would be, of a certainty!

Anyway, the secret was maintained for a year. Then the air-liner crash that killed her father and mother. Then, also, she had found out her husband was a punk, strictly Grade Z. The money he might one day get his hooks in was his only goal.

Which made him very much a blind dope in my book!

Well, the three million was finally all hers, but she wanted out from marriage. She tried to buy him off.

Nothing doing. Unless she wanted to make the price a cool two million, which she did not.

FOR reasons best known to him, Friend Husband pulled a strange one. He got hold of the Ensenada records. To wit—she could not prove she wasn't married to him, and she couldn't prove that she was. He held all the cards. She all the money. For two million of it he was willing to sell her the whole deck.

She was at sixes and sevens. With the secret out she would never live it down in her set. With monthly sums she held him off from blowing the whistle while she tried to make up her mind. Then into the picture came a childhood sweetheart. Just like in the movies. Husband got wind of that. And came the ultimatum. The two million right now, or else!

She told all to Friend Sweetheart, and he was a very sensible guy, in my opinion. He suggested they go to the likes of me. Anyway, he would see if I couldn't tie the husband in knots and make everything fine—for less money! She was to meet him in my office, but she was late. When she got there the childhood sweetheart was dead in my chair.

She lost her head, made that call to the cops. Then raced home and called me when she got there.

When she stopped talking my glass was empty. So was hers.

She made a couple drinks more while I did some thinking.

What did I think? I thought this. But I did not think it out loud!

"Helen, you are beautiful. And you are a beautiful liar!"



AFTER I had smiled my thanks, and tasted my refill, I had some questions to ask.

"What is your husband's name?" was my first one.

She didn't seem to want to give with that, but she finally did.

"Paul Otis."

I didn't believe her. And after staring at her hard, I believed her less. No woman as beautiful and wonderful as she could possibly fall for that heel. Not even with star dust blowing in her eyes, and the big romance moon all over the place. I knew Paul Otis well. So did every other dick, and cop, in town.

He was a heel, and everything else in the book. But he was a good-looker, and he had brains enough for three guys. Anyway, his name had never wet a police blotter, though it was known he was connected with everything shady that went on. Knowledge but not proof. And there were a couple of times when he had been close to it, if not actually, the head man in a cold-blooded murder.

"So you think Paul Otis murdered the man in my office?" I asked when I got off the shock merry-go-round.

"Of course," she said quietly. "Obviously Paul. Somehow he found out what Jerry and I planned to do. He feared that you could spoil everything for him."

Could be, could be. Perhaps! My ugly-faced rider had certainly intended to do more than view the scenery with me. And with two of us out of the picture Sylvia might be inclined to change her mind.

"Jerry's other name?" I asked, as I mulled over things with the other half of my brain.

"Gerald Porter. He is from New York. He came out here on a visit a week ago. I had not seen him in years."

She suddenly stopped, and gave me a funny look. I knew what was in her beautiful head, but let it ride. I had some more of my drink, and the selfish in me wondered if I could drag things out long enough to have a third. It was very upper bracket Scotch.

"So you want to hire me for two things," I said. "To kill off Otis before the police get him, and all comes out in the papers. Or

take from him the marriage proof he's holding over your head. Right?"

"Or both, Mr. Lacey," she said with a nod. "It sounds dramatic, but I do not want poor Jerry's death to go unavenged."

She was certainly giving me a task. I almost wished that Sol Bierman was there, just to hear him scream, and watch him tear the hair he didn't have. I decided I had better put her straight on a couple of counts.

"There is a dead man in my office," I said. "It so happens that, because of you, the police know about it. The police are very strict about such—"

That's as far as I got. A door banged open off to the left, and a semi-hysterical voice came sailing out.

"Helen! Helen, where are you? I . . . Oh!"

The last was because Marie Cain suddenly saw me. She was a pretty kid. Not the mature beauty of her sister, but still pretty enough for guys with my high tastes. Even her wild, flying hair, her tear-streaked face and reddened eyes didn't hurt her too much.

"Oh, I didn't know someone was here."

She was murmuring that as Helen reached her. Elder sister murmured something in return, and led her like a little child back into the room, and closed the door. I let my mind go blank, and took full enjoyment from my drink. Then Helen came back into the room and sat down. Regally apologetic, and a tender sadness about her that hit me every place at the same time.

"Please forgive us, Mr. Lacey," she said, and a new smile went with it. "A trying day for both of us. This—this is the anniversary of the day Mother and Father were killed. Marie was on that plane, you know. One of the three who survived. I'll have to send for a doctor, if she won't help and pull herself together."

"The memory must be pretty terrible," I said sympathetically. "But, as I started to say, the police—"

Checkmated again! The phone bell tinkled. It was on a stand in a far corner of the room. Yes, a dial phone. Helen went over quickly, and took the call. I couldn't hear what she said, but I could see her. Not too well, though. A table of potted plants gave her some cover. She shook her head a couple of times. She stiffened a couple of times, too.

ALL in all, she acted like she wasn't pleased with the conversation at all. When she hung up she sat there a moment or two giving the empty air the vacant

eye. Then she came back to me, but didn't sit down.

"Could you come back later, Mr. Lacey? Say, sometime this evening?"

I could, but I didn't want to. I asked her why?

"That was our family physician. He called about Marie, and I told him. I'm really terribly worried about her. She's not very strong, you know. He wants me to take her to his office. He heals mentally, as well as physically, you know."

I wanted to tell the beautiful, beautiful fiber that she could do with some mental therapy herself, but I didn't. It was her murder, not mine. Or was it? Anyway, I was being asked to leave. And I can be a gentleman.

"All right," I told her, and stood up. "Say, about eight o'clock?"

"That will be fine," she said. Then quickly, "Oh, Mr. Lacey! This. You forgot."

"This" was the sheaf of green. She had picked it off the coffee table, and was holding it out. I do love the stuff so much, but maybe I've got some of the womanly characteristics in me. Anyway, I passed up a thousand bucks for the last word.

"I never accept a retainer, Miss Cain, until I accept the case. See you at eight o'clock."

It was the kind of an exit actors dream about finding in the script. I even gave Gold Braid an engaging smile as I walked past him to my car parked a bit up the street. And yes, I was ready for any unwanted riders this time, but none showed up. I slid behind the wheel, lighted a cigarette, and had a nice think for myself while I waited.

I waited about eleven minutes. And then she came out. The cost of her coat alone would top any retainer I ever received. The collar practically hid her face, so this time I admired her legs as she waited for Gold Braid to finger-wiggle a cab up. I gave the cab a couple of blocks, and started after it. We all went straight downtown. To the shopping center. She left the cab in front of a hat shop, and went in. I parked and smoked some more while I watched the fancy front glass doors.

I watched for forty minutes. Then I got out and walked past the place. There were hundreds of hats, and two sales girls inside. Helen was nowhere to be seen. I got a familiar itch at the back of my neck. The sucker itch, I call it. I went inside.

"I'm waiting for the lady who came in here a bit over half an hour ago," I said, and smiled at the nearest sales girl. "Where is she? The one wearing the mink coat and

green hat."

"You must be mistaken, sir," the kid said. "No one like that came in here. Isn't that so, Alice?"

Alice said that it was, and I stopped being polite.

"She was Miss Helen Cain," I said, hard. Then pretending to flash a badge, "I'm the police. Where did she go? Give!"

The kid, and Alice, almost fainted. Alice made an O with her lips, and the kid said it out loud.

"Oh, oh!" she said it twice. "Why—why, Miss Cain said somebody she didn't like was following her, and was there a back entrance to this shop? There is, and we showed her. But, gee, I didn't know that it was the police!"

I went out quickly, because my face can get as red as the next guy's, and I don't like people to see it that way. Small hope I had, though!

I'd taken a dozen steps or so from the door when a shadow was at my elbow, and a gentle but firm hand on my arm.

"Hello, chum!" Sol Bierman greeted me. "Going some place?"

It was on my tongue to tell him I was going to the nearest river, but I checked it. I gave him an exasperated shrug, and the same kind of look.

"Did you ever try to buy a hat for a dame, Sol?" I asked. "Of all the worry!"

"No, I never did," he cut in. Then with the grin, "But I suppose I'd sit in my car for half an hour getting up the courage, too. Who was the lady, Chester?"

"What lady?"

"Vaudeville gags, you give me!" Bierman said, a change in his voice. "And corny ones, too. Come along. We ride."

I began to sweat a little.

"Now look, Sol, maybe I can give you something right on a silver platter, if you'll just be patient."

"Wonderful!" he said softly, and stroked my arm. "Maybe even two murders, old pal?"

I REALLY began to sweat good then, but I didn't let him see it.

"What are you raving about, Sol? Two murders?"

"One a gentleman named Gerald Porter, from New York," he said, and the grin went from ear to ear. "Oh, yes, so many things a fellow can overlook the first time. Especially when you are watching me. So I search our poor friend again and find a crum-

pled business card. Way down in the handkerchief pocket. Even the cleaners did not notice it. Very limp and faded. A little stuck to the lining, it was. I call the New York phone number. You'll see the call on your next bill. I ask questions, and descriptions tally. He is what it says on the card. Gerald Porter, New York insurance broker."

"So that's his name?" I said, and let my brows go up. "Never heard of the guy."

Sol wasn't listening. He was having fun. Playing with the mouse!

"The other murder," he said, and shrugged. "Who knows? Self-defense is not murder. Did he try to kill you, pal? Try first?"

"Huh?"

"The plug-ugly you took riding," Sol said, and shook his head. "The next boy and girl to use that lane would have been scared into old, old people. Why did you do it?"

"Why did I do what?" I gulped. "Sol, you're crazy!"

He sighed, and he was very unhappy.

"He will not let me be a friend," he groaned. Then with his grip on my arm tightening, "Come along, Chester. We will ride in my car down to Headquarters and your ticket for overparking we'll see about later!"

It was a bad hour I spent with Sol at Headquarters. A very, very bad hour. He was so inquisitive, and twice as persistent. For a while I really was seeing the jail bars in front of my eyes. But Bierman is a sweet guy. I shall love him the rest of my life. Or at least until the next time.

He finally accepted my story that Ugly Face had slid into my car, and had forced me to bullet slap him out of this world. He let it ride that I had no idea who had hired Ugly Face, or why. And he also let it ride that I was only trying to find a guy's dear old mother.

And he did not mind too much that I refused to give him the name and address of my client. Anyway, he let me go forth still a free man.

I was not kidding myself, though. Sol and I had hooked horns too often for me to think he believed my story. Even believed five per cent of it. He was simply a man of bright and sound ideas.

Brow-beating me around would not get him to first base. Rather, give that Lacey a lot more rope, and then crack down when it counts. And never fear, when Sol figured he was ready he would crack down just as hard on me, his friend, as he would on a cheap ten-cent crook.

Anyway, I left Police Headquarters with the bobbing lump finally out of my throat. And with some knowledge I was glad to have. Sol had not tailed me. By accident a prowl car had seen me back out of that dirt lane. The boys had gone in to investigate. A lone guy backing out of that place in broad daylight didn't check.

Result, Ugly Face dead. And they had taken my plate number. Bierman had done the rest of the adding up. He had found me parked and waiting for Helen to come out of that hat shop.

The other bit of knowledge worried me a lot. The bullet in Gerald Porter was small caliber. Not from a man's-sized gun, but from a lady's-sized gun. Sol was particular to point that out, and I had really sweated until he seemed to forget it and go on to something else.

Well, I had things to do when I got away from Bierman, and I did them. By then it was time to eat, and realize again what I've realized countless times before. In short, that life is certainly full of cock-eyed liars.

CHAPTER IV

The Wrong Sister



WHEN I had finished eating, it was eight o'clock. I stepped into a phone booth and called Helen Cain. No answer. I went to a bar, had a drink, and called her at eight-thirty. No answer. I called again at nine, and it was the same thing.

By then I was becoming really annoyed at a lot of people. But for one good reason why not, I might have washed my hands of the whole smelly business and investigated a brand new phone number I had filed under "Evening Entertainment" in my little black book.

The reason why not, was the late Gerald Porter. I do not like to have people die in my office. It is not good publicity. It is even worse when I do not find out things, and in time can explain all.

But, more to the point, it would be a fate worse than death to hear Sol Bierman say: "Remember, pal, the time I cracked that murder practically committed in your lap?"

So I had another drink, and went back to work.

It was what is called the early hour when I paid off the taxi at the Tip-Toe Inn and made my way to the bar. Just the same there was a goodly crowd there, and the floor show was starting around for the second time. I saw a few guys and gals I knew but I just gave them a cheery wave, and ordered Scotch from Mike at the bar.

The lad I was looking for was the owner of the joint. That's right! Mr. Paul Otis, owner of the Tip-Toe Inn, and a dozen other places. His business offices, though, were at the Tip-Toe. On the second floor. You went up the stairs at the rear, if various dinner-dressed baboons had received the word it was okay for you to go up.

Well, I didn't see him sitting at his usual "party" table, and hadn't expected to. It was too early. And I didn't go upstairs to see him because if I was thinking the right thoughts I was one guy Otis had told the baboons to keep on the first floor. So I enjoyed my Scotch and waited until Mike was free, and had taken his post down toward my end.

Mike was the best barkeep in town. And straight as a die. He worked for Otis simply because Otis paid him twice what any other night joint could afford to pay him. And Otis was no dummy to do that because Mike had one whale of a drinking following. Why he never set up a place of his own, I don't know, and I've never asked. But in past years I had done a favor or two for Mike, and he thought I was pretty much ace.

"Think you could answer a question, Mike?" I asked when nobody was close.

He gave a nervous glance around and ended it on me. That was odd for Mike.

"I could try, Chet," he said, and rubbed off a spot on the mahogany that wasn't there.

"A guy," I said. "Little bigger than me. Ugly face. Store teeth. Blue pin-stripe, snap gray, and flashy tie when I met him. Chicago, I think. Talking with Otis lately, huh?"

Mike avoided my smiling eyes and went on working hard on the spot that wasn't there.

"Couldn't say, for sure," I finally caught off his non-moving lips. "Lots of guys been talking to the boss lately. Out-of-towners. Could be your friend was one."

A yes and no answer, but it was good enough for me, coming from Mike. It meant that Otis had hired Ugly Face to slap me. And Mike's actions told me things he wanted me to know, but wouldn't put into words. That it was known I'd beaten Ugly Face to

the slapping, and that my appearance at the Tip-Toe Inn wasn't going to be held long from Otis's ears.

So, all in all, that was fine. I had been sort of hoping that it would be like that.

And then, as the saying goes, the delicate touch that tipped over the apple cart! The fancy glazed glass foyer doors swung open and Marie Cain came in. She was alone, and she looked every bit of her three million bucks. As I've said before, she wasn't quite in the same beauty bracket as her older sister, but she didn't make any male heads turn and look the other way. Certainly not mine.

But it wasn't completely her face and figure that held my eyes. That she was there was like the ringing of a bell in the old brain. And when she came forward, and was about to ease by me toward the more crowded sections, I slid off the stool and blocked her way with me and my smile.

"Good evening, Miss Cain."

SHE looked at me, and through me, and started to go around right end.

"Just a minute," I said, and touched her arm. "I'm looking for your sister. Do you know where she is?"

Her lips tightened slightly, and her violet eyes changed color. Or so it seemed. Then oodles and oodles of money spoke.

"Please let me pass?"

A question, and a command. I let some of the polite softness go out of my smile.

"I was in the apartment this afternoon, Miss Cain," I said. "Remember? I had an appointment to meet your sister there this evening at eight o'clock. Nobody answered the phone. Your sister went out shortly after I left. Where did she go? Better still, where is she now?"

If meeting me had been any kind of a shock, she was well over it, and then some. Her chin came up a little, and her eyes were bright and fearless. What an actress the stage was missing!

"I have no idea where my sister went, or where she is now!" I was told in cultured, but no uncertain terms. "Now, stop bothering me, and let me pass!"

Truthfully I had half the urge to turn her over my knee and start a riot, but I curbed the pleasant prospect. Instead, I jolted her good, right where she needed jolting.

"Bother you, I must, Miss Cain," I said. Then letting her have the professional face, I added in a lower tone, "In fact, I insist on bothering you—Mrs. Paul Otis!"

It was a full fifteen seconds before some

of the color came back into her face, and she was able to speak.

"You're insane! What are you talking about? I'm not Mrs. Paul Otis!"

I had her lightly by one elbow then, yet firm enough to hold it when she tried to jerk it away. And I also had her headed toward a nice secluded corner table. I was bending my head a little and smiling my best smile. Like I always do when I'm giving the dear, sweet darlings a routine build-up. But I was not giving Marie any build-up. I was going her a few straight facts.

"You are in one sweet jam, lady," I told her. "Your sister is wonderful, but she cannot act for peanuts. Not in front of me, anyway. If I can see through glass, so can the police. Your sister doesn't want them to take a look, and neither do you. That's where I come in. Maybe I can do something."

She didn't say anything. Didn't even look at me. But she was acting fine. With pretty face serene, and even a little smile on her mouth, she let the waiter pull out the chair and take her evening wrap. I sat down and looked the question. She ordered a Martini, and I kept her company.

I knew that many pairs of eyes were fixed on us. Most of them because maybe we looked a stunning couple. But a few pairs, I was sure, weren't doing any admiring.

I told myself I was trying to play it the hard way. That I should get her out of there and to some place where we wouldn't be bothered. But I'm the stubborn kind when I get fed up. And I was that! Fed up with a lot of things. I wanted action, even if I had to force it by sticking out my neck.

"Where is your sister?" I asked, still with the smile. Then lifting one hand from the table a little, I added evenly, "And, please, let's not you and I play games."

She waited without looking at me until I had held my lighter for her cigarette.

"I don't know. I don't know where she is!"

"Did she return after going out this afternoon?" I asked.

"No," she said, and shook her head. "And I'll answer your next question. She did not tell me where she was going. Only that I was to stay where I was until she returned, or phoned."

"She phoned?"

"No."

"But you didn't stay there, like she told you to."

She started to crack a little, but only as

close as I was could you notice it.

"I—I couldn't! I had to get out of there. I had to try and find her. Mr. Lacey, I'm worried about Helen! Terribly worried!"

I thanked her with a smile for admitting knowledge of my name. Then I let the smile go back into the box.

"You should be," I said, and meant it. "Now, how much of what your sister told me this afternoon was true?"

The answer was postponed by the arrival of the Martinis. Incidentally, anybody is idiotic to drink that stuff on top of Scotch!

"All of it," she told me, when she could. "Except that it was I, and not Helen. But how did you know?"

"When I went to night school I studied hard, and learned lots of things," I said, a trifle hard. "No games, I warned you! The part about what happened in my office wasn't true, either. Just what did happen?"

THE way the color shot out of her face made me kick myself for not having taken her elsewhere. But I was stuck, and if she was going to pull a faint, she was going to pull a faint. At least the lights were of those let's-make-love wattage, so maybe that would be a help. She helped, though, by not fainting.

"I don't know," she said, in a voice I could hardly hear. "I—I mean, that when I arrived Paul was there. They had been talking, and Jerry was terribly angry. Then—"

"Then?" I tried to help when she couldn't go on.

She looked at me tear-eyed, and baby-mute. I really felt sorry for the kid. Money all her life, but nothing in her head better than a scratch single.

"Then I don't know," she said, and tried to bend one of the Tip-Toe spoons with her fingers. "I—I saw Jerry and Paul both coming toward me. Then everything got sort of hazy, and then black. I fainted."

"And when you woke up Jerry was sitting dead in the chair, and Otis was gone?" I prompted.

"Yes. It . . . He looked awful! I think I fainted again."

I leaned forward a little, and held her eyes with mine.

"And when you woke up the second time you couldn't find the little gun you carry in your purse, could you?"

She did not give me an answer to that question. She did not, even though it may have been on her pretty lips. A shadow materialized on my left. The character's name was Murtaugh. He had charge of all

the waiters, and a lot of other things. I gave him a very sweet smile, and shook my head.

"The lady and I will order later," I said.

He smiled down at me, and let me have just a tiny peep at the gun he held shielded by one of the Tip-Toe's two-foot-square highway robbery sheets. I noted also that a couple of waiters were lingering by some fake palm trees a little to my right.

"Mr. Otis would like you and the lady to have dinner with him upstairs," Murtaugh told me.

CHAPTER V

Three Million Beautiful Smackers



ENALLY I gave myself a gold star for getting action sooner than I had hoped. But I was not too pleased. I would much rather talk with Marie some more before I talked with Otis. If it was to be a talk! Anyway, I held my smile.

"It would spoil business, Murtaugh," I told him, glancing at the gun.

"Give the joint a bad name, and get it closed up."

He gave a little sigh, and a shrug, and watched my hand.

"I mentioned that, Lacey," he said. "But he didn't seem to mind. A man who likes to have his way, you see. Always. And he's waiting."

I glanced at Marie. She was staring at the Martini she hadn't even touched. Her eyes were glassy, and larger than they should be. And her lovely shoulders were slumped, as though a hundred tiny voices in her were chorusing, "This is it, sister!"

In the few seconds I took to glance at her I felt very sad that I was soon going to lose my gun. Naturally, Murtaugh would take it unto himself presently, and I was betwixt and between as to whether it would get anybody anything to make use of it while I had the chance.

Had Helen been across the table from me maybe I would have decided, yes. But dead, I would not be able to find her, and I wanted very much to find her. As a matter of fact, what decided me was that I had a good hunch where she was. I took my fingers off my drink, and smiled at Marie.

"Dinner on the house would be lovely," I said. "Let's go."

I told her other things with my eyes. Mainly, for the good heaven's sake to hold onto herself, and let me run the interference as well as carry the ball. Maybe she read it, and took note. Or maybe she was just what she'd been all her milk-and-honey life. A child of impulse.

Anyway, she smiled wanly, let Murtaugh ease back her chair, and slip her wrap over her shoulders. Doing so gave me a wide-open opportunity, but Murtaugh seemed to realize it too. And not even care. The smile he gave me over Marie's shoulder was almost boyishly eager.

Then the opportunity was gone, but with no special regrets on my part, and Murtaugh was suavely escorting us to the curtain-covered stairway leading upward. At the top of the stairs an immaculate evening-garbed tub of lard appeared out of nowhere, bowed to Marie, and smiled pleasantly enough at me. I smiled pleasantly back because the muzzle of Murtaugh's gun was poking me gently.

The tub of lard went right to business and took the gun I carry in a left shoulder-holster. And then a moment later he got a surprise, and so did I. But I got mine first. I mean that through the years I had perfected a trick little gadget that permitted me to carry a small gun fitted to my left wrist.

At the touch of a little plunger spring it would pop into my hand, even though I was holding both in the air. It had served its usefulness many times without receiving much publicity. However, the tub of lard had heard about it. He shoved up my jacket sleeve and took a good look. He got his surprise then because there was no little gun fitted to my wrist.

"This one tonight," I said, and held out my other hand.

He didn't believe me but took a look just to make sure.

"Too bad," he grunted. "I like to collect souvenirs off punks."

I let him have his wise-crack, and told myself that maybe there would come a day. Then Murtaugh led us along the hall a short distance, tapped on a closed door, and pushed it open. Marie and I stepped inside. Marie took a look and let out a stifled cry. I took a look, but didn't make any sound.

Paul Otis was seated at a desk, a well-dressed, good-looking, low-down heel. And in a chair near-by, smoking a cigarette, and smiling at me quietly, was Helen Cain!

"Come in, my dear," Otis said to Marie. "You too, Lacey. We are about to celebrate

with some champagne. You stay and join us, Murtaugh."

The beaming host, was Otis. As he spoke he got up and came around the desk and took Marie by the elbow. The kid tried to shrink away, but he led her to a chair close to Helen's.

"Calm yourself, darling," he said. "There's not a thing in the world to be afraid of. In fact, you should be overjoyed, my dear. The thing you want most is going to be yours."

Marie seemed not to hear him. She walked like a ghost, and her face made her look like one. She sat down, staring speechless at her sister. Helen smiled gently, reached out a hand and patted her knee.

"Sorry I couldn't call, dear," she said. "But everything's going to be all right."

As she spoke the last her eyes came back to my face. And they asked me the question I couldn't answer yet. Is it?

"Sit down, Lacey, sit down. Don't look so glum. After all the drinks are free!"

OTIS was slapping my shoulder, but stood so that there was lots of free air between me and Murtaugh's gun. I played along with a "thank you" grin and sat down.

"Don't mind if I do, Otis," I said. "And what are we about to celebrate?"

Otis chuckled, and didn't answer until he was back behind his desk. An iced bottle was in the silver bucket on his desk. So was a silver tray of glasses.

"Something I've wanted to celebrate a long time, Lacey," he said pleasantly, as he popped the cork and poured. "My retirement from the active business world."

"All the suckers downstairs will be glad to hear that," I said. "And a lot of other people, too."

"Cute guy, aren't you, Lacey? But a dope. Now, take me—"

He paused and smiled at Helen and Marie. I wiped that smile off his lips.

"Could be I will," I said.

The polish cracked and fell off. The meanest-looking snake's eyes in any man's head glittered at me. The handsome face stiffened in a grimace of plain hate.

"Some other time, gumshoe!" he rasped. Then with a shake of his head, "But not tonight. Tonight I am drinking to three million dollars. Three million beautiful smack-ers!"

If I was supposed to say anything to that I flubbed it badly. I just looked at him, and then at Helen Cain. She met my eyes for a split second, and then stared at the cigarette

between her slender fingers. Marie's reaction was to go whiter than she had gone before, give with a whispered gasp, and crush one little clenched fist to her lips. Her sister put out a hand and patted her knee again.

"Yes, Lacey, three million for all my holdings in this town. And for a couple of other things. Not bad, eh?"

"Depends on the couple of other things," I said to him.

That pleased him mightily. The lug was having so much fun.

"Tossed in for good measure, because I'm the big-hearted kind," he said. "These two little items."

Still looking and grinning at me, he pulled open the top desk drawer, took out a fat envelope, and a gaudy little twenty-five caliber pistol. He held them up, one in each hand, for me to see. I was burning, but inside. I clucked my tongue, and wagged my head.

"Such a right, square guy," I said. "The gun that killed Jerry Porter. And all the precious marriage papers from Ensenada, I think?"

"You think right, chum," Otis said. "I have permitted the lady to examine them to see they're all here. Clinched her decision, Lacey, to buy me out. She should have fun running the Tip-Toe, eh?"

He was of course half-looking at Helen as he spoke. I looked at her too. But I didn't look at her with any fondness. I was sore. I always get sore when clients go over my head, or make an end run around my back. But she didn't drop her gaze this time.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lacey," she said, "but—I thought it best. However, I will pay you your full fee. I think that would be only fair."

Otis boomed with laughter at that. I don't think the two girls got it, but I did one hundred per cent. Little strings of Chinese fire-crackers were beginning to spfft in my head, but I held everything under control, and shot a casual glance Murtaugh's way. He was sitting in a chair to my left, and his right hand in his dinner jacket pocket was making more of a bulge than just a hand makes. And he was looking right at me. I looked back at Helen.

"You are being very dumb," I said quietly. "Don't pay him. Don't pay him one little dime."

She looked at me in blank amazement for a moment, then a great sadness crept into her face.

"You don't understand," she said. "I thought you did, when I explained. Unfor-

tunately, some things cost a lot of money."

I know perfectly well what she meant by some things. The untarnished name of Cain, for one. Little dim-witted Marie's happiness, and so forth, for another. Her attitude gave me a pain in the neck, but it didn't last very long. The way I felt about her she could have got me to come up with the three million, if I'd had it. Maybe!

"Then you have paid?" I asked.

Otis answered that, and waved the proof.

"Dated and signed," he said, and kissed the check in his hand. "When the bank opens we get it certified. Then we both sign the transaction papers, and that will be that."

MUCH as I detested him, I had to admire him for a smooth article. Black-mail all the way down to the bottom, but try and prove it, pal! If somebody wants to pay three million for a few night spots and things, who can do anything about it? Only me, and Otis had it all worked out that that angle would be taken care of nicely. Except for me it wouldn't be nice.

I leaned forward with my arms resting lightly on my knees and looked at Otis.

"And we all celebrate until the bank opens, eh?" I murmured.

"All but you and Murtaugh," he said and loved it. "You two have a date."

Just as I had figured it. I was almost beginning to get happy. Otis mistook whatever expression was on my face. He chuckled and fingered Marie's little toy pistol significantly.

"A minor point, Otis," I said. "It's been bothering me. You tailed Porter to my office, and saw him open the door?"

He frowned a moment, then shrugged.

"That's right," he said. "I saw him walk right in, and I went in after him. We were talking things over when my wife arrived. She went crazy and pulled that gun she carries. She missed me and nailed Porter. So here we are."

I paid attention only to the first part. I sighed and shook my head. For the first time in hundreds I hadn't automatically slipped the catch that would lock my office door when it closed. In an abstract sort of way I wondered what would have happened had the door been locked. Shooting in the hall? Then Otis was talking, and holding out a glass of champagne.

"Have a drink to my success, Lacey," he said, beaming. "Then you and Murtaugh can trot along."

Maybe it was the dramatic actor in me. Or

maybe that face of his threw a switch and I couldn't check myself. Anyway, I took the glass and flipped its contents right back into his face. He let out a snarl of rage, and so did Murtaugh as he came toward me fast with his gun out and in his hand.

I was ready for him. With my left arm still resting on my knee I let my hand drop as though I was ducking over to escape the gun chop I expected from him. But I didn't duck to escape anything. Only to whip up with my little gun I was carrying in a new place, strapped to my left ankle under the pant cuff.

I don't think Murtaugh even saw it, and that makes me sorry. I would like to have had him realize before my bullet went through his right eye, that I was truly a clever fellow.

When he started over backwards I put him out of my mind. I turned in the chair, and there was exactly what I had expected. Otis was lifting Marie's gun up off the desk.

No, I wasn't even sporting about it then. I shot him through the forehead a year before he could get the little gun to bear on me. It went off, though, and Fate had a good laugh for herself. The bullet hit Marie and knocked her off her chair onto the floor. I cursed for not waiting an instant longer, but I hadn't even dreamed Otis could pull the trigger before he died. But he had, and there was Marie on the floor, and the white silk of her dress over her chest was becoming very red.

Her sister didn't scream, or make a sound. She simply went off her chair in nothing flat and knelt down beside Marie. I did a couple of things first before I went over. I jumped for Otis' desk and scooped up the envelope and the check, and Marie's little toy gun. I shoved all three into my pocket, and went over to the girls.

Marie was still breathing, but there was no telling for how long. There was also a fist banging at the door. Two fists.

"She needs a hospital, and fast," I said to Helen. "Take her wrap and bag."

As I chopped out the words I gathered Marie into my arms and lifted her off the floor. Helen snatched up her kid sister's purse and wrap, but then stood looking at me wide-eyed and not knowing. I did.

"This door," I said, and started walking. "The way he comes in without going through the place downstairs. I've been here before."

I had, and knew all about Otis' private entrance to his second-floor offices. The

door in back of his desk led to a small hall. It led to some stairs that went down to a door that opened onto the street. We were just starting down the stairs when another door leading off that short hall opened up, and the best dressed tub of lard of the evening stuck his head out, and then his gun.

I should say he started to stick his gun out. Mine was still in the hand of the arm I had crooked under Marie's knees. I turned both of us a hair, pulled the trigger and slapped the tub of lard along the same road with Murtaugh, and Otis.

Then I went on down the stairs after Helen.

CHAPTER VI

"I Can Hope, Can't I?"



HE dawn of a new day was beginning to creep past the city's building tops. It was a little before five. Helen and I were standing by the hospital corridor window staring at it silently. We had been there for hours. For years, it seemed.

Behind us, through a door into surgery, the best man in the business was performing a yes or no operation on Kid Sister Marie. I glanced out the corner of my eye at Helen, and went all wooshy inside. I reached out and touched her arm.

"Go ahead," I said softly. "Cry your head off. That helps a woman a lot, they say."

She turned her head, looked at me, and tried to smile.

"I'd like to, but I can't, Mr. Lacey," she said. "They just won't come. But—you haven't asked me. Don't you want to know about that phone call? And why I gave you the slip in the hat shop!"

"I already know it," I told her, honest. "It was from Otis. Bearing down. He told you he could prove that Marie shot Porter. He boosted his price. Three million for everything your sister wanted. You accepted, and went through with the deal, because your sister was in no condition to go through with anything. Right?"

"Yes," she said, low, and turned back to the window. "Marie told me she had fainted, and didn't know what happened. Then when Otis told me he had the gun I was scared. It was Marie's, and her fingerprints were on it. An accident, of course, but—but—"

She shook her head and put a little crumpled handkerchief to her lips. Crushed it against them.

"So you decided that three million was cheap enough to get hold of the murder gun, and the marriage proof," I said.

She nodded, and was silent for a moment.

"I love Marie very much, Mr. Lacey," she said presently. "It is hard to explain, but—"

"Don't try to," I said, and placed the check and the envelope on the window sill in front of her. "And don't worry. Nobody will ever find the gun. Not even me, the way I'll lose it."

She turned toward me, and my pumper tried to fight its way out through my vest.

But, no. She didn't kiss me.

"You are a very splendid person," she said gravely. "I—I don't know what to say. I guess I'm a pretty poor story teller, aren't I? I knew that you were not believing me when you asked Jerry's last name."

Smart girl. A beautiful, lovely smart girl.

"One item Marie had forgotten to tell you," I said, and smiled. "In her crazy moment of panic she had taken his wallet, and any other means of identification, hoping that would help somehow. When I didn't know who he was, you knew that Marie had left something out in her story to you. But your excuse for Marie's tears was the

[Turn page]



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clinker, when I checked later. You thought up a quick one too fast that time."

"A quick one?" she murmured, puzzled.

"Back newspaper files," I said. "I had a look, after you gave me the slip. The plane crash was fourteen months ago. Also, your sister was not on the plane. It was no anniversary."

She didn't get a chance to comment on that because the surgery door opened, and a man in white came out. Helen turned to him and stiffened, with both hands pressed to her cheeks.

The man in white, though, smiled as he came over.

"Don't, Miss Cain," he said gently. "It's all right. She pulled through wonderfully. Nothing to worry about at all. In fact, you may go in for a few minutes, and see for yourself. Now, now! I tell you it's all right."

Helen was trembling, and weeping, dry-eyed. He patted her hand a couple of times, looked at me, guessed our association completely wrong, and walked away. She stared after him a moment, and then started slowly toward the surgery door. I stopped her with my hand on her arm.

"Just a minute, Miss Cain."

She turned and looked at me, vacant-eyed, and then blinked.

"Oh yes, of course," she said. "If you'll just wait I'll write out your check."

"The name's Lacey, not Otis!" I said, as I stopped that one below the belt. "I just wanted to tell you. Your sister did not shoot Gerald Porter. Otis did."

SHE straightened up as though I had slapped her. And tried several times before the word came.

"W-w-what?"

"Three people could prove it," I told her.

But two are dead. And the third, your sister, was in a faint while it happened. Otis did it, though. He showed you the gun when you went to his office, didn't he? In a handkerchief?"

"Why—why no," she replied. "He held it in his hand, but so I could recognize it."

"Fingerprints," I stopped her. "If she had pulled the trigger Otis wouldn't have blotted her prints out with his own when he showed you the gun. Nor later, when he showed it to me. But he didn't care then, because he thought I wasn't going to be around. No, he would have played it safe from the start, and made sure his prints weren't on the gun, and he'd really have a sales point."

"Then — then Marie didn't kill poor Jerry?"

"No," I told her again. "Your sister was crazy to have it with her. But she's the type that gets desperate easy. Maybe she thought if she happened to run into Otis... Well, I don't know. Anyway, she did. But fainted too soon. Maybe she really doesn't remember. Otis was just fast. He grabbed the gun and fired before Porter could reach him. Then parked him in my desk chair, and left with the gun. We'll never know the exact details, but that's close enough to the truth to believe. So, as the Doc said just now, nothing to worry about at all."

"Mr. Lacey," she said softly. "Mr. Lacey. You—you will wait, won't you, please?"

I shook my head.

"No. A couple of things to do. I'll phone you later. Give my best to Marie."

I TURNED and walked half-way down the hall. Then I stopped because dear old Sol Bierman was walking toward me. The only thing I could think of to say has whiskers this long.

"Why Sol, fancy meeting you here!"

He was wearing his saddest look, and that maddening grin.

"Nothing but coincidence," he said, and took my arm. "Come along again, Chet. I want to hear a long story. I love to listen to stories."

"Okay, Sol," I said walking with him. "But there's a condition."

Bierman clucked his tongue, and wagged his head.

"Okay!" he groaned. "Shoots half the people in town, and there must be a condition. What?"

"So you fix it with the newspapers so that a couple of names do not come out," I said. Then quickly, "OK, I'll tell you all, but you've got to give it to the papers a way I can show you. So that a couple of names do not appear in print. A deal?"

"Now you want to deal with me!" Sol growled. "Chet, because I think you are almost my friend sometimes, I will listen to your story. But if I do not like one single word I will throw you in the bastille, and get drunk with pleasure!"

I did not go to the bastille. On the contrary, that night I had dinner with Helen Cain. Not at the Tip-Toe. She was divine, and all is wonderful.

She still has her three million dollars, and she is very beautiful, and I think she likes me a little, and—

And can I not have my hopes?

Pratt's gun spat flame at the enraged man



YOU CAN ALWAYS CATCH FISH

By EDWARD CHURCHILL

Easy-going Ephraim Pratt, Chief of the two-man police force of Corn County, finds plenty of bait in his "evidence" file!

EPHRAIM PRATT, Chief of Police of Corn City, gave the lie to the chestnut that fat men are always jovial, as he sat contemplating the sluggish waters of Enoch creek. He held his rod in lifeless, ham-like hands. His small blue eyes stared drearily at a cork which had refused to bob since dawn. It was now well after eight o'clock and the world was about its business—all save Pratt.

He could not recall when Enoch creek had been so low. Never had the fish failed to nibble on the plump worms with which he be-

gulled them in this secret and guilty tryst on the vast, forbidden domain of old Jed Tatum.

Until now he had contended that the peculiar soil formation at this inaccessible spot on the creek had something to do with the avid way they took his hooks—this strange reddish clay, shot with black and gray, which cropped up for fifty yards or so—different from all other soil in Corn County.

He discarded this theory. Not that it mattered much in the state he was in. Nor was he concerned because Bart Crady, Corn County's treasurer, for the first time had

failed to keep a dawn rendezvous in this hidden spot.

Bart Crady and he held their precious secret, poached at will on the red-black-gray banks beneath the overhanging trees, in the depths of the usually thick green undergrowth, now parched and dried by drought. Not even his brother and sister-in-law—Jason Pratt, who devoured the soul-satisfying messes and Cora, who cooked them—knew his secret.

Pratt felt himself quivering mentally beneath his vast, inert expanse. He rose from his log perch with a grunt, reeled in his line, and snapped the worms off his hooks almost viciously. He futilely tried to get out of his mind Peter Harrison, the humorless, stern-visaged banker running for mayor in the election just three days away. Pratt, having polled sentiment, knew Harrison would ride in on a landslide. He had not needed to plumb the banker to know that Harrison disliked him and his work, would oust him as Chief forthwith and with pleasure.

Pratt reflected that he had given his all for twenty years to the two-man Corn City police force—he was the day side—as he cleaned his hooks and drove them into a cork, snared the end of his line on his reel, disjoined his pole.

Making his way over a tortuous route through the underbrush, he propped himself with the thought that when an administration changed in a county seat as small as Corn City, you weren't demoted—you were out. Especially when the night side was a shiftless political appointee like Harry Adders, who had got his job through the offices of Banker Harrison.

When he finally reached the battered police car which he had hidden in a clump of trees, his depression had sunk down to his fourth chin. It clung to him without surcease as he bumped across old Tatum's trackless fields, onto a little used dirt road, and thence to Main Street. It weighed him down as he brought the car to a rattly halt in front of the Corn City House, his bachelor abode.

He didn't hear Mary Tatum, daughter of old Jed, whose "no fishing" signs he had so flagrantly violated, until she called to him from her sedan for the third time.

"Oh—hello, Mary!" he finally gasped as he boosted his corpulence out of his vehicle. He managed a certain ponderous lightness of manner as he turned to her. "How's the debutante?"

She laughed as she held out her left hand. He saw a diamond on her ring finger.

"And that's not all, Chief Pratt! Papa's de-

ecided to sell his farm to the Armbruster syndicate—which Edward represents."

SHE indicated the young man beside her. Pratt looked him over. He was about twenty-five, the chief judged. He had blond hair, blue eyes, a boyish way about him and wore good, though citified, clothes. Pratt had seen him several times at a distance during the past fortnight, had secretly admired his trimness, his easy-going grace.

"You've met Edward, of course."

The chief shook his head.

"May I present my fiance, Edward T. Armbruster, III, of Philadelphia?" She turned to Armbruster. "Edward, this is our police chief, Ephraim Pratt.

"And there's more news. As soon as the deal's closed with Mr. Harrison, Papa and Edward and I are leaving in the car for Omaha. Edward and I will be married there. Then we'll drive to Philadelphia to meet the Armbrusters and after that a trip to Europe. Isn't that so, Edward?"

Pratt saw Armbruster's fingers close over Mary's.

"That'll be a right nice trip," Pratt said. He glanced at his watch. "Nice town, Philadelphia. I was there once. Thing I most remember is the scrapple—"

"What?" Armbruster asked.

"Scrapple. Mush and sausage all mixed together."

"It's great stuff, chief. Beg pardon. I didn't catch it."

"Well, I'll be runnin' along. Good luck to you both."

Pratt contrived an airy wave, creaked up the wooden steps and across the porch into the lobby of the Corn Center House, got a strong whiff of bacon and eggs from the dining room, which gave him strength to make two flights of stairs to his room. There, he laboriously pulled off his soft, battered hat, his coveralls and his heavy boots. He turned on his small radio, washed and shaved to the rhythm of the "Happy Hour" setting-up exercises. He was nearly finished when the buzzer on the wall sounded three times. With a sigh he put down his razor, pulled on his tentlike uniform trousers, and clumped down the hall in stocking feet. He lifted the receiver on the wall telephone.

"Chief Pratt speaking. . . . Oh, yes, Mr. Harrison. . . . What's that? That's terrible. . . . In the courthouse? . . . Yes, I know I'm late. . . . I'll be right over."

He banged up the receiver and, with an alacrity which surprised him, he hurried

back to his room, pulled on uniform shoes, his false dickey, snap cuffs, uniform coat and chief's cap. He shoved a small magnifying glass, two envelopes labeled "Evidence," a bug-bellows, a couple of small glass plates, a strip of cheesecloth and a pair of pliers in his coat pockets. The stairs rumbled under him as he made the street, holding his breath as he went by the dining room.

He bounced into the police car, raced the motor, swung it around. He drove two blocks to the courthouse, banged the car into the curbing and huffed and puffed up the steps. Banker Harrison, heading a group of bug-eyed, white-faced citizens, awaited him. Wordlessly they escorted him down the first floor hall.

Pratt shuddered at the sprawled, crumpled body of Bart Crady, county treasurer. The body lay almost in front of the door so labeled—a yard or so, Pratt judged, down the hall. He was lying on his side. The handle of a deerfoot hunting knife protruded from his shoulder blades.

"I was walking down Main Street on the way to my offices when Miss Humphries, the recorder's clerk, came screaming to the street," Banker Harrison said. At the tone of his voice, Pratt felt derelict in his duty. "I returned and discovered poor Bart's body. I suppose you've some idea of the guilty party—or at least the motive? Or how Bart happened to be in his offices late at night?"

Pratt shrugged. So this was why Bart Crady had broken his date! Bart would have to come by the building on the way to Enoch creek at about four o'clock in the morning. If he had seen a light, or a stranger had acted suspiciously, there wasn't a cowardly bone in Bart's body.

"Can't say's I have or do," Pratt replied. "Anybody touched anything?"

He looked around him at the stern, puzzled faces. Heads were shaking from side to side. He crouched low over the body. Yes, the deerfoot handle was cracked. It belonged to Joe Lincoln, son of Art Lincoln, proprietor of the Owl Drug Store, which was being forced to the wall by that new cut-rate chain store run by the Omaha company.

"Last tax installment was due and paid yesterday after my bank closed," Harrison prodded. "Must've been a lot of money in Bart's safe."

He started for the door, his hand out toward the knob.

"Don't touch it!" snapped Pratt.

The banker drew back his hand and watched as Pratt went into action.

HE HOISTED himself to his feet, went to the door, took out his bug-bellows, blew his breath on the knob, and sprayed a fine powder over it. He fished out his magnifying glass, at the same time thinking about Joe Lincoln.

When he thought of Joe, he thought of Mary Tatum, and the poor boy-rich girl romance that had flourished until Edward T. Armbruster III had come to town to look over and buy farm lands for the Armbruster syndicate. A poor fellow, goaded by such wealth as Armbruster represented, could very easily be tempted to get wealth of his own by illegal means—especially if love was involved. Then, too, there was another angle.

The powder sifted down evenly.

"No prints," Pratt announced lugubriously. "You can go in now."

Harrison wrapped his lean fingers around the knob. He turned it, and the door opened. He whirled on the chief.

"This is an outrage! No wonder we have crime. Why, this door isn't even locked!"

Pratt bit his tongue to keep from telling Harrison that Harry Adders, the night half of the force, was specifically charged with the duty of checking the courthouse doors. Pratt reflected that after all he was to blame, for with him rested final responsibility.

He treated the knob and handle of the safe with his breath and the bug-bellows. There were no specific prints. He held his breath as Harrison tried the handle. He let it out with a blast of relief as the banker announced with mystification:

"That's funny! It's locked!"

Pratt went outside, looked at Bart's body. Then, remembering his glass plates and his evidence envelopes, he looked for clues other than the knife. His quick eyes focused on something which struck him as strangely out of place in this drought-ridden area—a cake of dried mud!

It was a rough triangle about an inch and a half in size, thick on one side, which was curved, and tapered to waferlike thinness. He picked it up, studied it, tried to fit it into the instep of both of Bart's boots, like part of a jigsaw puzzle. The curved line should fit against the front of the heel—but Bart's were straight cut. He dropped the mud into an evidence envelope.

Harrison came out of the treasurer's office.

"Any clues yet?"

"I can't make any statement now, Mr. Harrison."

"See here!" Harrison bellowed. "I won't stand this any longer! For months—for

years—I've been sick of your stupid bungling! Laziness! Inefficiency! Carelessness! I'll fire you so fast—"

"You aren't mayor yet," observed Pratt, his own voice even.

"Maybe I'm not mayor, yet! But as an influential citizen of our community and as a candidate for public office I feel the right to intercede. I'm going to call Omaha. I'm going to have a couple of good men come up here by plane. Crime shall not go unpunished in Corn City!"

Pratt felt an almost uncontrollable desire to applaud.

"And I've got work, so I'll go," he said. He turned and ambled out of the building, saying over his shoulder:

"I'll call Undertaker Powell."

On the way to the Owl Drug Store he fought his way past the Bon Ton Cafe, where Violet, the waitress, always served him double portions, and turned into the telegraph office. There he very carefully phrased a wire to the Police Commissioner, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Then he continued his waddling progress to the drugstore, turned in, sighted his quarry behind the fountain, and eased himself onto a stool. He studied Joe Lincoln's thin, tightly compressed lips, his thin cheeks, the eyes which were lighted by a dull, dark fire, the dark, level brows.

"Double thick malt, Joe," he ordered. "Ain't that one heck of a breakfast?"

"It isn't up to you, chief."

"Say, Joe—how's about a little fishin'—maybe up to Enoch creek some morning, eh?"

Joe picked a large glass, shot chocolate syrup into it.

"Never could go much for fishing."

"Mean to say a feller your age ain't even got a rod and reel?"

"That's right."

Joe put three scoops of ice cream into the glass.

"Better touch 'er up, son," Pratt admonished.

Joe gave him a crooked grin and plopped another ball into the mixture. Pratt pulled himself off his stool as Joe placed the glass under the mixer. The detective glanced over the magazine stand, picked up a copy of the Corn City Clarion, climbed back on the stool, studied it. Then, when he saw one item about Mary Tatum's engagement, he deliberately held it up so Joe could see it.

"Tough," he said, watching Joe's face. "I kinda figured you had the inside track there, until this Armbruster feller came to town."

"Sorta looked that way."

Joe didn't bat an eye.

"Say, Joe—maybe you don't like fishin'—but your huntin's okay. Remember last fall, you got that big buck when you and me and Red Hastings and Slim Hobart went up Princeville way?"

"Yep."

"You even quartered him. Whatever become of that fancy knife of yours? Still got it?"

Joe put down the malted milk and Pratt took it at a gulp.

"Nope."

"I meant the one with the deerfoot handle. It was kinda split."

"I know the one you mean, chief. I traded it off to Bart Crady."

"You mean before you had that big fight with Bart over the time he took in your pa's ranch fer back taxes—the time you swore you'd kill him?"

JOE leaned belligerently over the counter. "See here, now, chief—"

"Wait a minnit, Joe. I was jest thinkin'—sorta out loud. Maybe you'd go after money so's you could keep up with another feller and marry a gal. And maybe, if you was crossed, you'd kill — two birds with one stone."

"You're getting me sore, chief. I don't know what you're getting at."

"You got a bad temper, Joe. You ain't plannin' a trip away from town?"

"No. Say, what's this all about?"

"A lot of people know that deerfoot knife is—or was—yours, Joe. There's a couple of hifalutin' Omaha dicks flyin' up here. They'll ask plenty of questions. Those people'll talk. So will the ones that know about your fight with Bart."

"Talk about what?"

"About Bart Crady bein' done away with this morning, son."

"You're kidding, chief! Why I saw him walking down the street with my own eyes last night!"

"And I saw him with my own eyes, completely dead, with your knife a-stickin' out of his back up in the courthouse jest a mite ago, Joe. The dicks—detectives'll be comin' 'round to pick you up. I wouldn't go no-where's."

Pratt left Joe with that thought, and the lad's eyes were wide and his mouth open. The chief ambled into the hot street, in which dust was swirling, impelled by a morning breeze. He went to his car, drove to city

hall, half of which was occupied by the police department and cells.

He went inside, slouched into his comfortable oversized chair, and felt none of his usual interest as he contemplated letters addressed to "Chief of Police, Corn City." Official, important letters. He opened them, read circulars about wanted criminals, official bulletins, an invitation to the state police chiefs' convention, catalogs of books dealing with penology and criminology, and found his mind wandering back to the crime.

He looked at the long row of books on modern criminal investigation, histories of violent deaths and poisonings, and several correspondence courses in detection in which he'd once reveled. All, he reflected, for naught.

He filed the circulars and bulletins, looked over Night Officer Adders' report with a feeling of distaste. All the time, in the back of his head, was that cake of mud. He emptied his pockets, took it out of its envelope. It had split in half—and inside was mud of a reddish hue, tinged with black and gray!

He sat up straight and pounded his fist on the desk. That meant only one thing, that somebody who had walked up the hall since it was last swept had invaded the sanctity of his secret fishing-hole! That cake didn't fit Bart's boots.

He looked up from the contemplation of this new drop in his already overflowing cup of sorrow to see a boy of fourteen walk into his office with a yellow envelope in his hand.

"Telegram for you, Chief Pratt. Ninety-three cents due. Ain't it awful about Bart Crady, chief? I'll bet you've got lots of clues."

Pratt shook his head.

"No clues, Teddy," he said, as he took the telegram and opened it. He laid it aside as he fished out his coin purse, extracted ninety-three cents in silver and copper installments, and then added a nickel.

"That's for you."

"Why—thanks, chief!"

Pratt grinned after the young messenger as he hurried out, then picked up the telegram. He read:

PHILADELPHIA, PA.
IN RE YOUR QUERY EDWARD T.
ARMBRUSTER, THIRD. HE SON MUL-
TI-MILLIONAIRE FAMILY WITH VAST
FARM HOLDINGS. NOW MAKING MID-
WEST TRIP PURCHASE NEW PROPER-
TIES.

HALBERSTADT
SECRETARY COMMISSIONER

He tossed the message aside.

"Another lead shot," he said aloud. "I'd've sworn he didn't know what scrapple was, but I guess he jest didn't hear."

His stomach reminded him to look at his watch.

Noon!

He heard the drone of a plane motor low overhead. That would be Harrison's big shots from Omaha, arriving to cover themselves with glory. And he didn't have a clue!

He ignored his stomach's insistent calls. Whoever it was who had walked in the mud in that isolated spot by Enoch creek would have left tracks! A slim and forlorn hope, perhaps, for the mud cake might have been lost by anyone walking in the hall—someone having no connection whatsoever with Bart's murder. But it was worth a gamble. He'd look for prints, make a moulage, even if the sole result was to take his mind off his troubles.

He got his moulage equipment—everything needed to make a composition impression and cast of a footprint. Spray gun, composition, plaster of paris, tin for the outside of the mold and chicken wire to hold it together.

After half an hour of study he found a fine specimen print. He set up his mold, sprayed it with plaster of paris, poured his moulage. He had identified three sets of prints. His own big ones. Smaller ones made by Bart on a previous visit. And a series of alien indentations plainly showing the heel with the curved front.

IT WAS late in the afternoon when he returned to the city hall with his hardened replica of the bottom part of what looked to be a new pair of shoes or boots. Two large-shouldered men wearing soft felt hats and blue serge suits advanced on him when he entered his office. Behind them handcuffed, his head bowed dejectedly, sat Joe Lincoln.

"Where you been?" one of the men, who was chewing a cigar butt, asked.

"Out," replied Pratt. "I guess you want me to put young Joe away."

"You guessed it," said the spokesman. He flashed a badge. "I'm Homer Boland. He's Maynard Jackson. We're from Surety Bonded Agency, in Omaha. Open and shut case, chief. Surprised you didn't see it. You boys ought to catch up with the times, out here in the sticks."

"I'll put Joe away."

He wiggled a pudgy finger at the youth.

"Come along, Joe."

"You better be careful, chief. He's des-

perate. He give us a peach of a battle," Jackson was saying.

Pratt smiled inwardly as he saw the beginnings of a shiner around Jackson's right eye. Boland, he saw, had a cut cheek.

He led Joe to Cell Number One, unlocked it, made sure he had a pitcher of fresh water and a glass.

"Make yourself to home, son."

Boland and Jackson were on his heels. Both tried the cell door as if they were not quite sure it would hold.

"Yep," said Boland, "got him dead to rights. Admits he owned the knife. Admits he threatened to kill this Crady. Says he was home in bed last night, but ain't got any proof. Could of slipped out a window from his room at home, first floor back. Admits his pa and him are against the wall, need money to keep from bein' foreclosed. Sore at Crady and the county on account of them takin' his farm for back taxes."

"He says he gave the knife to Bart."

"Cock-and-bull story," Jackson announced flatly. "I suppose you figure Crady up and decided to commit suicide for fun, picked the courthouse because the floor was soft, and then rammed the knife into his own back."

Boland laughed sourly.

"County prosecutor has our report. We'd stick around and show you some more things, but we've got a really important case back in Omaha. He'll probably talk after a couple of days in this dump. When he does, call us and we'll come up and take his statement."

"That's right neighborly," said Pratt.

They walked to the door.

"Take you to the field?" Pratt suggested.

"Thanks. We rented what you hicks call a taxi."

Boland led the way to the car.

"Don't take any gold bricks," Jackson called over his shoulder.

Pratt watched them go, his face a mask of indifference. Then he went to his office, told Marion, the operator, to get twenty-seven, ring three. In a moment he heard the pleasant voice of Cora Pratt, his sister-in-law.

"You got a customer down here."

"I heard tell on the party line. Isn't it awful? Is he guilty? He seems like such a nice young man."

"Dunno. What you got for dinner?"

"We were going to have nice, fresh fish."

"Don't go jollyin' me, Cora Pratt."

"Chicken. A nice stew, with dumplin's and rich gravy, some fine blackberry short cake, mashed potatoes. When I bring down Mr. Lincoln's, how about a portion for you?"

"Ain't hungry."

There was a gasp and a pause on the other end of the line.

"Why, Ephraim Pratt! You ain't ailin'?"

"T'ain't my stomach—it's my head."

"Better see Doc Sutter. He's got some powders."

"Ain't that kind of a hurt."

"Well, I swan."

Another pause.

"I'll send Jason right down with a tray."

"Thanks, Cory."

Pratt hung up. He went to his car, where his moulage still rested, got in, and drove to the small, shabby bungalow occupied by the Arthur Lincolns and their son, Joe. Mrs. Lincoln greeted him with white face, red, shadowed eyes, and a tear-filled voice.

"I tell you, Chief Pratt, I just can't understand it."

She opened the door to admit him. He had his moulage tucked under his arm. He patted her shoulder with his free hand.

"You can't never tell what sometimes is in the mind of even a loved one," he said. "Now, ma'm—will you let see Joe's shoes? All of 'em."

"There isn't but one pair, beside what he's got on, and boots."

She gave him a bewildered look, came back with them. He studied them carefully. None remotely compared with the moulage. "Thank you, ma'm," he said. "You're welcome to come see the boy any time."

He climbed into his car, drove back to the office. Another dead end. It was getting late. Almost nine o'clock. Joe had eaten his meal, Harry Adders had checked in and was out on his beat, which caused him to sigh with relief. He hadn't wanted to face Adders.

STEP by step, he went over the case. He had a pretty clear picture of what had happened. Bart had seen movement or a flashlight in the county offices. He had unlocked the outside door, probably making a noise which alarmed the thief and caused him to conceal himself. Looking around, he had perhaps discovered the thief. They had struggled.

The intruder had felt the knife, pulled it from its scabbard—Bart had always carried some kind of a knife to clean fish—and had driven it home, then had escaped, fear causing him to abandon his plan to rob the safe. Pratt thought of the mud again. It was sticky, glue-like. A fight would have dislodged it.

But the rest of the scattered ends didn't

fit. What did the visit to the secret fishing-hole mean — if the thief had invaded it? How did that tie in with the murder and attempted robbery? Armbruster, who was interested in the farm, was planning to purchase it, had a clean bill of health. Pratt had checked all Joe's shoes, even the ones he wore, and they didn't remotely resemble the cast. He ran over a list of names from Banker Harrison to Lem Coyle, the town drunk, and eliminated them from suspicion, one by one.

Belatedly, on an off-chance, he decided to check Armbruster's shoes. He lifted the receiver, told Marion to get him the Corn City House. He heard the voice of Ralph Mills, the night clerk.

"Mr. Armbruster come in yet?" he asked. "This is Chief Pratt."

"Yes, sir. He retired half an hour ago."

"Thanks, Ralph."

He hung up, glanced at his big silver watch again. Midnight! He had no idea it was so late. Well, checking those shoes could wait until tomorrow. He thought again of his criminological equipment. He'd used everything that could be used. That department was exhausted. But somehow, somewhere, there must be something which would guide him.

He looked at his cherished row of books.

"O'Slaven's Crime Detection." That had been one of his favorites. He reached up, pulled it down from the shelf, ran listlessly through the pages, found his attention slowly turning to the printed word. For a while he darted about, reading haphazardly. Then, almost desperately, he began to read a chapter headed "Criminal Psychology." He read many pages. Then he found a paragraph which glued his mind to the text. It stated:

"The criminal mind, although warped, is logical. It flows easily, logically, through cause to effect. Consider, for instance, the thought-sequence in relation to places of concealment. The criminal with something to conceal will, naturally and normally even without the function of conscious will, seek out the most secret place imaginable to hide evidence of his crime. Uppermost in his thought is the need to avoid detection. Look for your evidence, even for your guilty man, in the most inaccessible place within a reasonable distance from the theatre of the culprit's operations. Perhaps you will find what you seek held with a thumb tack on the underside of a chest of drawers or deep in a well, long disused, nearby."

Pratt read the paragraph three times. It applied, and yet it didn't. Obviously there was no loot. Yet, having failed the first time,

the criminal might strike again. And if he did—if he succeeded—if the slayer of Bart Crady had lost mud from his boot—it was possible that he might come again to that hidden spot by Enoch creek!

He rose ponderously, stretched, looked at his watch.

In another hour, it would be dawn!

He picked up his huge belt, from which hung a holster encasing a .38 police positive, and wrapped it around him. He went outside. The cool air revived him mentally and physically. He got into the car, drove as quietly as possible to his tree-shelter, parked the car there, hiked into the hiding-place.

Half an hour passed, marked only by the hoots of an owl, and, as dawn came, the scurrying of rabbits and squirrels in the underbrush. As soon as light filtered through the overhanging branches he rose, ambled around the vicinity of the water—and saw fresh footprints—prints made by shoes or boots with curved-fronted heels. The killer had come in the night, surely before he'd arrived—and had gone!

He followed the trail to many prints, to signs of freshly turned earth, covered with a few large rocks. And the brown-black stains of blood!

Swiftly he bent. Frantically, with his big hands, he scooped away the wet, heavy clay—and felt cold, clammy flesh. Not long after, he had cleared enough to see the mute evidence of murder. Here was the pale face of old Jed Tatum, with death having erased the twisted expression which must have come in that last horrible moment.

For old Jed Tatum's throat was cut from ear to ear!

Pratt rose, scrambled excitedly out of the glade, puffed and panted as he threw himself into the car, drove over a rolling hill to the Tatum farm-house. He banged on the front door, the back door. There was a hush, a stillness, and the sedan was gone from the garage.

He piled back into his car. The deal on the farm—Mary Tatum had said it would soon be closed.

THE OLD car swerved and careened into Corn City. Pratt used the old red siren to clear Main Street as he barged down it, brought the car to a shuddering halt outside the Corn City National Bank. He soared like a balloon to the sidewalk, darted inside, faced Miss Wiggins, Peter Harrison's secretary, who sat in front of a thin walnut partition which preserved Harrison's sanctity.

"I want to see Harrison!" Pratt gasped.

"It's about the Tatums!"

Voices came at him over the partition. Miss Wiggins pressed down a button on a dictaphone box and announced Pratt. The chief needed no dictaphone to hear Harrison's harrassed answer.

"Tell him I'm busy. Tell him I'm going to be busy all day. The Crady case is closed!"

"I'll wait," said Pratt, after Miss Wiggins had formally repeated the message.

He sat—and listened. Voices came clearly over the partition.

"Now that everything's settled, Mr. Harrison, Edward and I are leaving immediately for Omaha. Isn't that nice? We talked to Papa last night, and he said that he'd stay behind and look after packing our personal belongings, so that we'd have a real honeymoon before he joined us."

That was Mary's voice.

Then Armbruster's heavier tones.

"Here are the papers, all in order. You understand, we plan immediate improvements, Mr. Harrison. As you agreed, you'll advance in the form of a mortgage, twenty thousand in cash."

Pratt heard the crackling of documents.

"Of course," agreed Harrison. "I have here two thousand in cash and a cashier's check for eighteen thousand which can be cashed anywhere by a man in your position. With the recorded deed as security—"

Recorded deed? Ephraim Pratt felt things click in his head. Tatum was dead. How could a deed be—

He reached for the telephone on Miss Wiggins' desk. What a fool he'd been! The offices of Recorder Parsons were next door to Bart Crady's. And, all the while he had been barking up the wrong tree!

"Give me three-two-three."

A feminine voice answered.

"This is Chief Pratt, honey." He kept his voice low and his mouth close to the transmitter. "Quick. Look up the record of a transfer of deed from Jeddediah Tatum to the Armbruster Syndicate."

"I'm sure it hasn't—"

"Look it up, please."

Silence for a moment while a jumble of words came over the walnut partition. A medley of goodbyes. Then Tillie came back on the wire.

"I was right, chief. There is no record."

Pratt banged up the receiver, rolled toward the door into Harrison's office, waved back Miss Wiggins as she rose in protest. He entered, looked from one to another of the trio.

"Wait!" he exclaimed.

"What's the meaning of this?" stormed Harrison.

Pratt sucked air into his lungs.

"Mr. Harrison—that deed you're holding—it ain't recorded."

"Why, you're mistaken," Armbruster protested. "See here, Mary and I are in a hurry. It's a long drive to Omaha."

"I ain't going—and you'll all listen to me. Mr. Harrison, we didn't figure right. Note that deed has the official stamp and seal of Corn County—that Recorder Parsons signed it."

"Of course," agreed Harrison, impatiently. "It's in order."

"It ain't in order. Parsons is lackadaisical. The only things he locks up are th' record books. Everything else lies around. The feller who stabbed Bart Crady wasn't tryin' to rob his office. He'd already been in Parsons' office, used the seal and forged the signature on that deed. Ain't it clear?"

"He's crazy!"

Pratt saw color rising in Armbruster's boyish face. He turned on him.

"You ain't Armbruster at all. You are a vicious, dirty crook who got next to Armbruster in Omaha or somewheres. You cottoned up to him, learned all about what he was doin', then done away with him. You come up here, posin' as him, knowin' Armbruster's syndicate was talkin' deal with old Tatum."

"The man's a maniac," Armbruster burst out to Harrison. "Dangerous—he should be—"

"We'll hear him out, Mr. Armbruster," Harrison said quietly.

"He told Tatum the Armbruster outfit would buy his land," Pratt explained. "Made false love to Mary. Went out and found a secret spot he was goin' to need. Talked Tatum into goin' to Omaha with him and Mary for the weddin'. Laid his plans right smart."

"Yestidday mornin' he had the deed made out, forged with Tatum's name and Parsons' name. Then he goes to Parsons' offices, uses th' seal, which he has to have to convince you the deal's done. Bart Crady, goin' fishin' with me, sees somethin' goin' on in the courthouse and goes inside. Armbruster, as he calls himself, traps Crady and in a fight stabs Crady with his own knife."

"Then, last night, he talks old Tatum into sayin' he'll stay behind and meet him and Mary later in Omaha. Everything's all set. He purtends to leave the Tatum farm, doubles back, and cuts old Tatum's throat so's

there won't be a chance of a slip-up when he gives you the false deed today."

He saw Armbruster's hand move backward.

"Lies—crazy talk—the man's insane!" the fellow blustered. "He can't prove a thing."

"No? Lissen, son. I've got a perfect mold of your boot, made right by the grave you dug down at Enoch creek."

ARMBRUSTER'S gun came out and blasted. But a fiftieth of a second after Pratt's gun spat flame. The killer's weapon skittered across the floor. Clutching his wounded arm, he made a dash for the door, and Pratt stuck out his big foot and tripped him. He bent, put his knee in the small of his back, clipped manacles on him. Then looking up, he saw Mary Tatum fall back in her chair, sobbing. He looked at Harrison.

"All clear, now? He didn't have no interest in Tatum's farm. All he wanted was to pass off that phony deed on you and get twenty thousand dollars of your money. He didn't care nothing about poor Mary. He'd of ditched her—"

He jerked "Armbruster" to his feet, frisked him, shoved him against a wall, where he stood, sullen and broken. He went to Mary,

put his arm around her sagging, shaking shoulders and lifted her gently to her feet.

"I was a fool. Such a blind fool! Now Papa's dead and—"

"Now, now, honey," Pratt said, gently. "It's a case of off with the new and on with the old. I reckon poor Joe's mighty anxious to get out, and he'll like it right smart when you show up to welcome him. You need him now, Mary. The Tatum farm is a big place to run."

By noon, Tatum's body rested in Powell's mortuary, Joe and Mary were together, and "Armbruster" was in the cell Joe had occupied. Ephraim Pratt had found the shoe which went with the moulage impression in the baggage in the sedan. He had also broadcast a national alarm concerning the real Edward T. Armbruster, III.

Suddenly he was overpowered with a hunger so great that he felt faint all over. So he waddled into the Bon Ton Cafe, gave his order for oatmeal, an order of bacon, an order of ham, a four-egg omelette, hot cakes and coffee. While he was waiting, Banker Harrison came in.

"Mind if I sit with you, Ephraim?" he asked.

"I reckon I can't think of nothing that would please me more, Pete," he replied.



"I'm Afraid You'll Have to Answer My Questions —What's All This Talk About Murder?"

IT WAS just a routine investigation that Alex Hart, young assistant district attorney, was making at the Ander home—but the "talk of murder" he spoke of soon proved to be very much more than mere talk.

Even as he was questioning young, pale and beautiful Judith Ander, Hart became quite conscious of the fact that death had already stalked.

There was something strange about the chair he was sitting in—he turned and saw the jagged scar in the upholstery. And gingerly, concealing his action, he withdrew a spent bullet from the padding.

"Will you please hurry?" asked Judith. "I haven't time to answer you, as father is waiting—"

"Very well, Miss Ander," said Hart. "I'll call tonight. Will the others be here?"

Without a word, Judith left. And then Hart saw that the padding of the chair in which he was sitting was blood-soaked. He collected some of the padding and quietly left the house. And then smashed into whirlwind action in **THE GRAVE MUST BE DEEP**, by Norman A. Daniels, next issue's exciting complete book-length novel.

THE GRAVE MUST BE DEEP is a suspenseful mystery thriller that will make you grip the sides of your chair tightly as you follow Alex Hart through the baffling ramifications of a case that unfolds slowly, clue by clue, with startling surprises in every chapter!

BANSHEE OF THE BAYOUS

By JEAN FRANCIS WEBB

Deep in the Louisiana waterways, Federal man Marty Howell battles to track down a shrimp fleet demon and to catch up with the fiend who has brought grief to Desiree La Plante!

CHAPTER I

Wailing Doom



HE daily train hit Gran Balier an hour late, to the minute. It had been due at noon; two day coaches, one freight car, one engine.

Slapping cinders off a rumpled seersucker suit, Marty Howell grabbed up his duffle bag and dropped off the end of the second car. The

dank heat of a Delta summer was frying the weathered wooden platform and what he could see of the little shrimping community, off beyond the station shed, was semi-observed by shimmering waves like a shot from an old-time movie. Shade trees were scarce.

"M'sieu!" It was a girl's voice, calling, "M'sieu 'Owell!"

As he swung around toward the sound, squinting into the raw glare, Marty Howell felt the telegram in his breast pocket crinkle. It wasn't the first time since New Orleans that the slip of yellow paper had edged in on his attention. Whoever this fellow was, this Joe O'Dowd who was sending sub rosa calls for help to the Immigration bigwigs—he still remained a mystery to Howell.

"It must be you, M'sieu 'Owell."

This time it was a man's voice, deep-timbred, masculine—young and buoyant.

"Joe, he tell us that it is today you come to Gran Balier," the man continued. "You are only stranger on train."

Marty gave both of them a quick once-over with gray eyes trained to check everything. They had come pelting out of the station shed, side by side. Twins, they looked like—brother and sister. They had the same tall, wiry look about them, the same mops of gold-copper hair, allowing for

one's being cropped short and the same dark, healthy eyes, shiny as patent leather. Each also had the same easy swing in walking.

They'd be about twenty-one or twenty-two, Marty guessed, but no more money in the family than went with most of these Delta people. The man wore faded jeans and the girl was neat and crisp in a dress of checked cotton. Yet there was a look about them that set them above the rank and file, some way. There was a drive, a force, high pride in their demeanor.

"I am Anton La Plante, m'sieu," the young man was saying, flashing a smile white enough to shoot sparks. French descent, then, despite the hair. "Permit that I introduce my sister, Desiree."

"We are best friends, here, of Joe O'Dowd." The girl sounded breathless, almost as if she had been running. "I am his affianced, m'sieu. We are to marry in the autumn. The bans are posted."

"So when Joe does not return by train time, we feel it our duty to meet you ourselves. To explain, m'sieu, that he will come shortly."

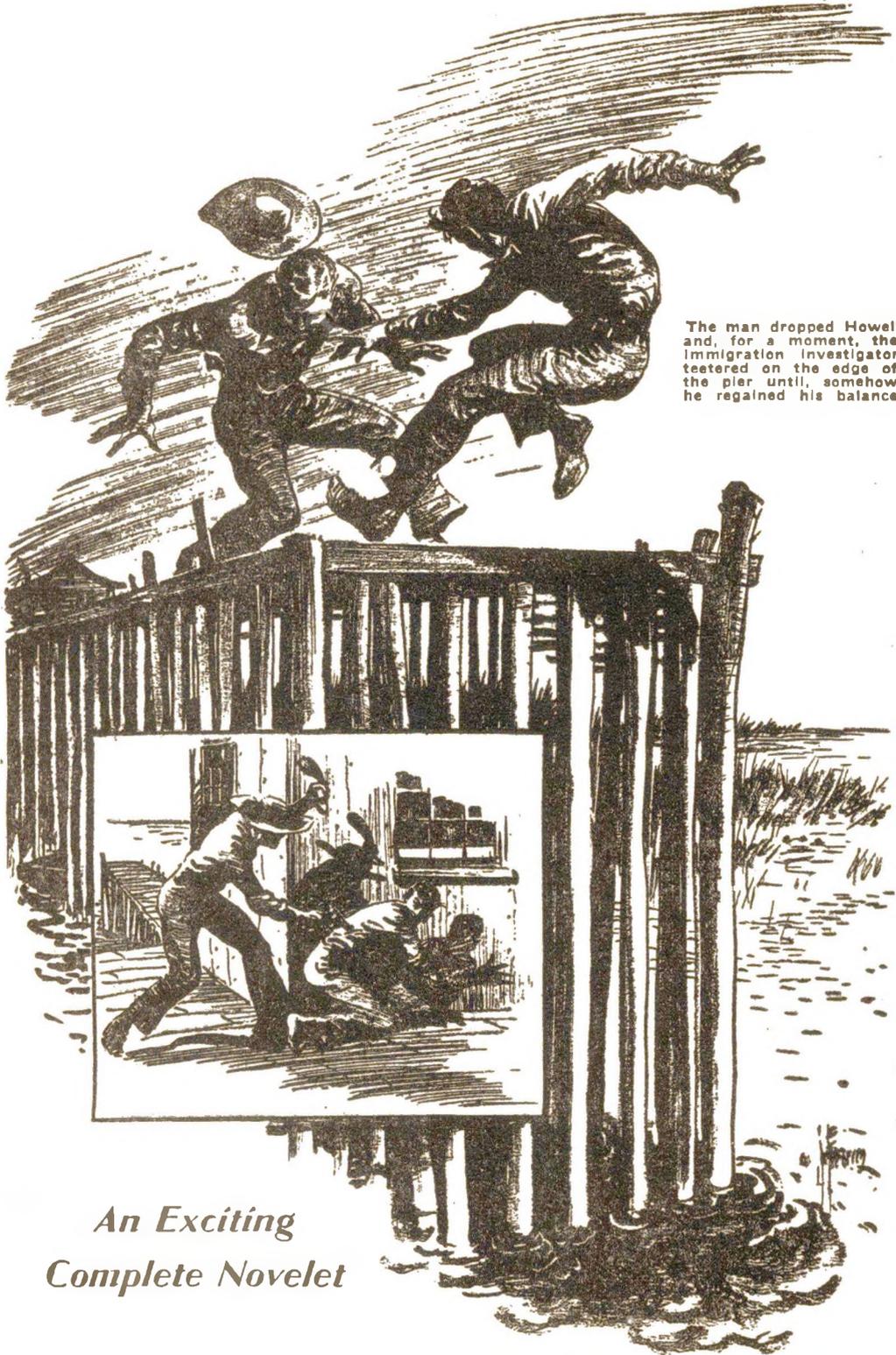
Howell shifted his duffle bag.

"Return from where, La Plante?"

"Wherever it is that he go yesterday afternoon, after he step off the ice boat at St. Lucienne Landing. The fellows on the boat, they see him wave back from the edge of the trail. Since then—who knows?"

His sister spoke. "We are worry, M'sieu 'Owell. It is not like Joe to stay so long. But one thing, it is certain. The first place he come, when he realize he has miss your train, it will be to our home. So there you would be welcome until he finds you."

MARTY HOWELL considered swiftly. Not much chance this O'Dowd would still turn up at the station, with the train so far behind schedule. The only address given in the telegram, which had brought him his orders, was the name of a



The man dropped Howell and, for a moment, the Immigration Investigator teetered on the edge of the pier until, somehow he regained his balance

*An Exciting
Complete Novelet*

business outfit—the Great Gulf Packing Company.

"Maybe O'Dowd's on his job and couldn't get off," Marty remarked.

"No, m'sieu," contradicted La Plante. "He is not at his inspection belt. Desiree works there. He did not come in all this morning."

Presumably, a man with sufficient public spirit to telegraph a request for an Immigration man would be also conscientious enough to ride herd on his job during hours. The suggestion the two young Cajuns had made seemed promising. They were, after all, close to O'Dowd.

"Since he's not at the packing plant—all right, let's try your place. I want to get hold of him as fast as I can."

Somehow, although Marty Howell had not intended to relinquish it, young Anton got hold of the duffle bag. The brawny, wide-shouldered Delta man was so obviously anxious to do the honors in proper style that Howell made no protest. Instead, he followed along at Desiree's side.

Gran Balier was a one-street town, and that street laid out like a wriggling snake along the crooks and twists of the bayou. Its head was the station, its tail was invisible, somewhere in the matted green land stretching south to the Gulf of Mexico. About at its mid-section, the hump of ugly buildings and sheds which bore GREAT GULF on their sides in fading letters bespoke the community's chief industry.

Like most of the non-packing company structures in town, the La Plante bungalow was a one-story and single-board affair. It was poor, but scrupulously clean. Flower beds, losing their fight against the heat, still revealed traces of care. The door was scrubbed, although its blue paint had faded. Inside, protected by drawn shades, the stiff little parlor showed evidences of Desiree's housewifeliness in the dustless old plates on a what-not—in antimacassars and polished floor boards.

Anton La Plante raised one shade an inch. A white glare fingered through.

"You will be more comfortable here, m'sieu, than at the station. Our home is honor. And it save Joe much embarrassment, when he come."

Howell had veered around so his back was to the light streak under the shade.

"Maybe," he drawled, "you two could answer a few questions for me while we're waiting for your friend to show."

"Questions?" By this time, Marty Howell had realized the breathlessness was a part of Desiree's low, quick voice. It had nothing

to do with running, probably no more to do with the killing heat. "But—anything, m'sieu!"

"Well, then—just who is this Joe O'Dowd, anyway?"

"Who?" It was the girl again. He saw her eyes and her brother's meet in amazement. Then she stared at Marty. "But—do you not know him at all?"

"He's only a name in a telegram. Just a man I'm supposed to see."

Anton's well-defined eyebrows hoisted quizzically.

"Joe, he tell us so much about waiting for you to come that we think he know you good. But that does not give you answer, eh? My sister's affianced, he is one swell fellow. He is inspector at Great Gulf for the United States Food and Drug Administration. He make with eyes like hawk's to see no little shrimp get inside can unless it is one fine, 'ealthy shrimp."

Marty's pricking interest was not reflected on his face. A government representative, eh? That made it automatically twice as important as it had seemed before. If a government inspector called for help, it was likely whatever was going on in Gran Balier wasn't just a pipe dream.

"Either of you know why he sent this telegram?"

"Joe is very conscientious fellow." As he spoke, Anton La Plante picked up a gaily painted but battered concertina from the parlor table. He fingered it lovingly as he spoke.

"If he get idea something is wrong, quick like a flash he start fixing it," he said.

"He is best inspector the plant 'ave, m'sieu," added Desiree with quiet pride.

"And what did Joe O'Dowd decide was wrong about Great Gulf?"

Once again, brother and sister glanced at each other in astonishment.

"But — nothing," said Anton, finally. "What could? The shrimp pack, she is very fine this season. Joe not 'ave trouble there."

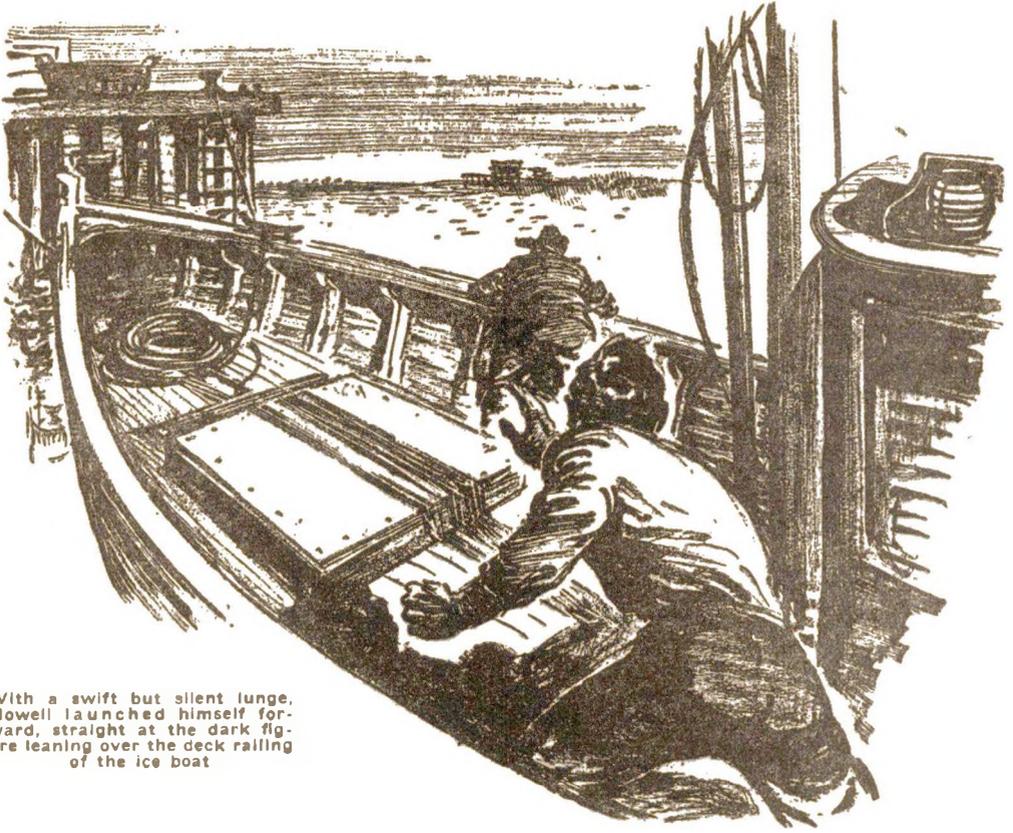
"But something, it bothers him very bad," Desiree cut in. "This last week, it make him very restless—very moody. So yesterday he ride out with the ice boat. As far as St. Lucienne Landing."

"Since which time nobody's seen him? Where is this landing?"

"Maybe ten, maybe twelve mile down the bayous," Anton answered. "It is only a few shacks and a pier for the shrimp fleet."

"Has O'Dowd made a habit of junketing down that way?"

"Never before, m'sieu. Never since he



With a swift but silent lunge, Howell launched himself forward, straight at the dark figure leaning over the deck railing of the ice boat

make one trip, first week he come to Gran Balier, for what you call the sightseeing."

HOWELL scowled at the faded carpet underfoot.

"I'm an Immigration man, Shrimps don't need passports. That suggest anything to you?"

In unison, the two shook their copper-gold heads.

"Yet I am sure Joe think something very bad is happen," murmured Desiree. "Otherwise he not send for you, and act so strange. M'sieu 'Owell—"

A catch of fear in her voice jerked his gaze upward. "Well?"

"Perhaps it is that you are not a superstitious man?"

"Superstitious? Me? Well—I have been known to knock wood."

She smiled, wanly. "But ghosts? Banshees? You believe in them?"

"No." His tone was curt, for he suspected she was kidding him. "No banshees."

"Yet all along the bayous, people hear

the screaming." Her dark eyes closed slowly. Her face took on a grayish tinge. No, she wasn't pulling anybody's leg. "At night, always at night. It come like the wailing of souls in the hereafter, rushing along the water very fast."

Marty Howell was watching her.

"What's that got to do with Joe O'Dowd?"

"Nothing—maybe." Yet her slim shoulders were rigid. "Joe, he hear the wailing, though. And next day he get on the ice boat. M'sieu—find him for us! Make it that he comes back to us safely!"

The sudden, passionate appeal caught Marty off balance, but not the implied request that he start looking for Joe O'Dowd. He was a Government inspector with problems on his mind. Searching for persons already was an old idea with Marty Howell. He had turned the problem over in his mind for several minutes already.

Here was a man who wasn't likely to send out an S.O.S. unless he had a tiger by the tail. Moreover, O'Dowd was a Government employee who'd know enough about the proper functions of Governmental bu-

reaus so that he would appeal to the Immigration authorities only when he had a job up their alley. Hence, this was no matter of an improper seafood supply!

Figuring further, the trouble O'Dowd had uncovered wouldn't be centered in Gran Balier proper. O'Dowd had headed south toward the Gulf—at least as far as this St. Lucienne Landing—because some new angle to his problem had led him that way. Neither of the two people closest to him could explain the sudden departure any other way.

Moreover, O'Dowd, in his anxiety to get help and turn over his difficulty to the proper authorities, had not returned to Gran Balier in time to meet the noon train. Only circumstances important enough to overshadow the Immigration man's arrival could account for that.

"This ice boat you both were talking about?"

"It leave for the fishing ground each day, taking ice to keep cold the catch," Anton explained. "One boat arrive with shrimp. One leave with ice. It leave at two o'clock, so to meet the fleet by twilight."

"Today's boat, then, will be pulling out in about twenty minutes?"

Anton glanced toward the old-fashioned mantle clock. "Oui, m'sieu."

"We're going to board it," Marty said. "I'd like you to come along, if you can take the time. You know O'Dowd. I want to find him fast."

The young Cajun's grin flashed white.

"Time, m'sieu, I've much of! Last week I sell my drag boat to my cousin Mathieu and now look about for a better one. Oui, I have time."

"And can you get us both aboard this ice boat?"

"That, too, if we hurry. Baptiste Gosse is my good friend."

Back in the town's lone street, striding along toward the Great Gulf plant, Anton explained about Gosse. The man, it developed, was unloading foreman at the cannery and doubled in brass as the police department of Gran Balier. Obviously, a very important individual.

"But ill-favored, m'sieu. A little man, with a mean squint and a sour tongue. Baptiste is like the shrimp. He lives in a shell."

They turned in at the cannery gate just as a shrill, crack-toned horn blasted by the river bank beyond the buildings. Automatically, Anton La Plante quickened his pace. Marty broke into a dog trot beside him.

"The ice boat isn't shoving off already?"

"That was just first warning, m'sieu. We will make it yet!"

Rounding the corner of the nearest shed, they all but ran down a lone figure headed in the opposite direction. The man had a limp that made his progress crablike. He glared at them out of shifty, colorless eyes and twisted back his crooked mouth in a wordless snarl.

"A thousand pardons, M'sieu Froissart!" Anton mumbled, with a quick respect which—Marty noted—held no warmth or admiration.

"Humph!" the man he'd called Froissart answered, still glaring.

"I take M'sieu 'Owell to the ice boat," Anton explained. "We 'ear the whistle, so we 'urry. It is that Joe O'Dowd—" But Froissart had sidled past them and was limping angrily on his way, still muttering.

"Nice friendly-type character," Marty offered.

ANTON made a grimace which epitomized his real opinion of the man. "He is vice-president of this company, is Henri Froissart," La Plante said. "Also, he is one pig on two legs. For a dollar, he slit the throat of his mother!"

The whistle sounded again as they rounded the last shed in the row. The small, wiry figure on the company dock who was directing the casting off—Marty would have recognized Baptiste Gosse anywhere, from Anton's brief description. The tall young Cajun towered over him, bright head blazing in the afternoon sun, while he gained permission for boarding.

Then he was gesturing toward Marty and the two of them were racing up the splintered gangway to the ice boat's after deck. The boat was casting off already. They had to jump for the railing as the plank began to slide under them. But they landed hard on scrubbed flooring.

Straightening, Marty grinned at his companion.

"Close connection!"

"What would you? At least we are aboard, m'sieu!"

Marty Howell turned to face back toward Gran Balier. Already the strip of water between boat and pier was widening. The hot sun shimmered on rotting piles, cast a long shadow under the conveyor belts.

This must have been Joe O'Dowd's last view of the town. Why hadn't he come back, after that sudden trip to St. Lucienne Landing yesterday? What had he been hunting, in the bayou-threaded Delta

stretching to the Gulf? Had his telegram any connection with the banshee wailing?

"Down!" Marty Howell barked suddenly, dropping to the deck.

The flash of red behind one of the cannery windows had warned him. Before the whine of the carbine reached his ears, Marty was lying flat. Along the railing where his hand had lain, a sudden white furrow appeared—spitting up splinters as it lengthened.

"Somebody at one of the windows back yonder!" the Immigration man panted, feeling the thud of Anton's husky frame on the boards beside him. Somebody had fired that shot. But who? What person in Gran Balier was so determined that Anton La Plante was not going to reach the shrimping ground with a stranger in tow?

CHAPTER II

Playground of Evil



OR three hours the ice boat had been nosing down the bayous — a complex, interlacing series of waterways which would bring them at last to the Gulf. The heat had not lessened as the afternoon wore away. Sweat darkened the shirts of the laborers aboard the ice boat and rolled

down Marty Howell's spine like water down a funnel.

"That was St. Lucienne Landing we just passed?" Howell asked.

Anton La Plante, stretched out on his back on the after deck, nodded agreement. He was fingering a gay little French melody, "Frere Jacques," on his concertina, seemingly unshaken at his recent narrow escape.

"Three shanties—and a pier that's half rotted away," Howell mused. "What could be there that O'Dowd thought was important?"

"A road starts at St. Lucienne. It run back into the empty bayou country. But Joe, he is friendly fellow. Why he go visit place where even banshee would be lonesome? That is one big mystery."

The road theory looked good. Certainly the tiny hamlet huddled at the bayou's lip could conceal little in the way of crime. And it would have to be crime O'Dowd was smelling after, else the telegram made no

sense. Crime, and a very definite type of crime at that. Immigration jobs were narrowed down to a specific and specialized field.

The ice boat fumbled onward, along a waterway half choked with masses of water hyacinth. Anton La Plante pointed out the flowers lazily, explaining that much of the profit of the shrimping industry was consumed by the necessary job of keeping channels cleared for the boats. He kept on fiddling with his concertina, relaxed, jovial, seemingly at ease.

But Marty Howell was not at ease. A hard core of awareness remained deep inside him, held together like the fingers of a clenched fist. Staring at the banks lined with oaks, gray trees dripping gray moss, he was actually struggling to see beyond them and across the miles of flat Delta country. What sinister secret did this lonely place conceal?

"What's that?" he demanded presently, pointing ahead.

Anton rolled over and propped himself up on one elbow. The small community which had materialized on the bayou's rim was in most respects a virtual duplicate of St. Lucienne Landing. One difference chiefly identified it. Built up on poles above the mud flats spread out around the brief huddle of shanties was a succession of wide wooden platforms. Obviously, these were not intended for piers. The water ended at some distance from them.

"Ling Foo," murmured Anton, as if this explained everything.

"I'm a stranger here myself," Marty Howell prodded him somewhat acidly.

Anton's handsome face lighted up with its white grin.

"Pardon, m'sieu! I forget! This is place of Ling Foo, China fellow. Platforms are where shrimp dry in the sun. Oriental customers say shrimp boiled in brine, then dried, make very fine eating. Ling Foo does big business."

"It's a one man business? I didn't see much going on there."

"Ling and maybe two—three other oriental fellows. In old days, different China fellow own it. Then shrimps were shelled by shrimp dancers, wearing heavy boots on feet. Ling more modern fellow, I guess. He has machines for job."

It was a long speech for Anton La Plante. He rolled onto his back once more at the end of it. The concertina began to sing.

But Howell kept on eyeing the passing banks of the bayous, hating them the way a convict hates bars at a window. The brood-

ing oaks, the rank green undergrowth, made a picture beautiful in its own strange way. But the evil in it seemed to increase as night crept nearer. Shadows, that might be more than shadows, began to twist and shimmer far off, almost out of view.

It was like a playground for devils, this bayou country. Howell thought again about Desiree's story of the wailing banshee. Did it tie in, actually, with Joe O'Dowd's odd disappearance? Was it some freak of nature—wind on a sounding board of water, something like that? And if not, was there some hidden tie between it and that bullet back at Gran Balier?

The shot still puzzled him. There had been no way to get ashore to investigate. By the time he glimpsed that flash of red at a dusty window, the hidden sniper was safe from pursuit off the ice boat.

But who was it? Who had met him? Who knew where he was headed? Desiree knew. But she had remained behind, at the house, and she was in love with O'Dowd. Could Henri Froissart, with his vile temper and his fishy eyes and his ability to inspire hatred in his employees, have found out? The foreman, Gosse, might have learned something too. The list was brief. Unless it was someone else, someone unknown to him, who had been gunning for happy-go-lucky Anton, it must be one of these.

"We will be out of the bayous by dark, mon capitain?"

The voices came from some forward portion of the boat, beyond the hatches. They carried distinctly in the dull hush of the bayou. The second one answered gruffly.

"Certainment. Are you afraid, too?"

"Since the banshee begin to wail, mon capitain, it is well to be out of harm's way before nightfall. Fear? It is but good sense!"

HOWELL glanced quickly toward Anton. He lay with his eyes open, staring up at the shadows already closing in. Solemnly, he winked one bright orb.

"It is not Desiree alone, m'sieu. It is everyone. Maybe so soon you hear the wailing, even yourself may feel the blood run cold."

The boat kept plowing forward, while Marty brooded.

Abruptly, they shoved through the last of the rank swamp grass and were out in a large lake studded with tiny islands. The lake was, actually, more Gulf hemmed in by islands. Anton swung to his feet.

"Journey's end, m'sieu. Joe could 'ave come no further."

The ice boat slid on among the islands,

lights already showing, to thread her way into the channel where the Great Gulf trawlers rode at anchor—made fast to one another like links in a chain.

Within half an hour she was lashed to the end of the line, where the departing in-bound boat had lain, and on deck dinner was under way. Anton's concertina squealed. Men who had grown silent on the last miles of bayou became their hearty, rowdy selves once more.

Plans for the night were made early. Howell, at Anton La Plante's behest, was donated a cornhusk mattress, plus blanket and pillow, on the drag boat of the fleet boss—a black-bearded giant caled Molveau. Anton himself found space with Cousin Mathieu, two boats away in the line.

Marty Howell was stretched on the after-deck of Molveau's boat when Anton La Plante reappeared from his song fest.

"Molveau fix you up good, eh? Shrimpers bed early. The first try net, she must be under water by sunrise."

"What's the rest of tomorrow's program apt to be like?"

"Ice boat go out to deep water. Trawlers drag nets for load, then return to ice boat to unload. Each one make maybe four, five trip. Ice boat go back to Gran Balier at sunset, full up with shrimps."

The routine sounded simple. Too simple. Howell's forehead creased as he watched Anton vault the railing to the next boat. Activities in the shrimping fleet were too regulated to allow much scope for criminal irregularities. Then what had Joe O'Dowd been investigating?

Boots tramped the deck. The giant form of Molveau hove into view against the stars.

"You are not yet asleep, m'sieu?"

"Doing a spot of thinking," Marty answered. The shaggy, shrewd-eyed Cajun towering over him would be ideal type casting for a villain. Plenty tough. And, for Marty Howell's money, a breed who'd sell his own son.

He was fleet boss, too, was Molveau. A nice spot to hold, if you wanted to utilize the shrimping boats for any illegal purpose.

Molveau spat overside.

"Anton say maybe you go ashore tomorrow."

"Maybe. I haven't made up my mind."

"Nothing ashore. Only swamp grass, mud, and end of road leading to Saint Lu. Leon Petit, maybe he 'ave little launch he rent to you."

Howell kept eying the giant appraisingly.

"Who's Petit?"

"Fellow in lead boat. He fix engines, rent

out nets—all such." Molveau's mammoth shoulders veered cabinward. "Good sleep, m'sieu."

Again Marty Howell had the afterdeck to himself—and his thoughts.

That O'Dowd's discovery tied up with this fleet's activities, he had never doubted. De-barking at "Saint Lu" Landing made no sense, except in terms of that road. Unless O'Dowd had been sneaking up on the fleet, to observe it from a shore point.

The hours lengthened. Great Gulf's fishermen had settled down to slumber. The only sound in the night was the whine of mosquitoes which rose from the distant swamp grass in murmurous clouds.

"Hang it all!" Howell murmured. "It has to be something tied in with the fleet!"

But shrimp could not make illegal entry into a country. Even polluted fish were no concern of the Immigration department. Then what could it be?

At last his eyes began to feel heavy. The lids greased with mosquito repellent began to sag. What was this wailing banshee? Desiree believed in it. So did that ice boat hand. Maybe—Maybe—

His body was rigid—shocked by some sentiment of peril into full awareness even before he was fully awake again. He'd been asleep, all right. And long enough for his joints to become stiff from the bumpy mattress. What had awakened him?

His eyes wide open, he stared about him.

The tiny foredeck was deserted, as it had been since Molveau took his great hulk below to the cabin—shortly following Anton La Plante's brief good night visit. The moon had moved across the sky, considerably toward the west. Otherwise there seemed no change in the scene.

Lying motionless, Marty Howell found himself listening for all he was worth. But the sounds which came to him were harmless enough—only the mumbling lap of waves under the trawler's hull and the buzz of the mosquitoes.

THEN he saw a red gleam in the water—or thought he saw it.

The glow appeared, a few yards off, across the slick surface of the bay something like a red eye winking up through the little ripples. It was gone almost at once. Then the water was empty, shining under moon reflection.

It came again—red and brief and burning. It was gone again.

Howell felt the short hairs prickling all over his skull. The emotion was not fear.

But it was that primitive warning of danger which can alter the heartbeat and the body's temperature. Slowly, moving with infinite caution, he drew his legs under him and began to rise.

And the red eye was there again, burning through the water.

He had realized, by this time, what it had to be. It was the reflection of a light—a signal light—being flashed from the after deck of the very trawler on which he crouched now in tingling awareness. The systematic blink of the red spot began to form patterns. Patterns Marty Howell found simple to sort out and identify. He knew International code.

B—that was definite. R—I—N—And he was ready for the "G" before it came, anticipating the red dots and dashes. "Bring!" Somebody was flashing words into the night—into the night from the side of the trawler which faced a rind of tiny islands lying here low in the water and cut off by the bayous from open Gulf water!

Slowly, cautiously, moving with a care which mocked at his body's tingling eagerness to swing into action, Marty Howell began to creep along the weathered rail—headed forward. And as he moved, catlike, he read the blink of reflected code on the waves.

I—N. A second word, "in". C—A—R—G—O. The smaller pattern began to assume larger outlines. "Bring in cargo." That made sense!

Yet the cargo of this trawler was shrimp. And shrimp, according to Anton La Plante, were a daylight acquisition. What cargo other than shrimp could be coming in from the open wastes of water beyond the reef? Marty Howell's heart was pounding. He could think of one thing! One thing which fitted right in with Joe O'Dowd's telegraphed S.O.S.!

By now he had rounded the squat cabin where—presumably—the fleet chief Molveau lay asleep and undisturbed. Marty's breath sucked in softly between set teeth. The flashes of light had broken off now. But he could make out the man's outline, dark against the opposite railing, crouched with shoulders hunched, as if awaiting an answer.

O'Dowd had shown interest in what was happening amid the shrimp fleet—and O'Dowd had not been seen since. Marty Howell proposed to take no chances in a matter whose full, sinister implications he still could only guess at. The figure by the railing was very apt to be armed with more than a flashlight. Guns at such close quarters

were dangerous.

So he took efficient care to make no sound as he lunged forward.

His arms swept around the motionless figure by the rail from behind, taking it over with a low football tackle. It was only as the shape in his grasp disintegrated—literally fell into pieces—that he swung back in a desperate effort to regain his feet once more. But the recoil came too late, as he had sensed it would be.

The man who had been lurking in the black shadow of the cabin was leaping over toward Howell before his hurtling body had actually struck the deck. The man held something blunt and heavy in a lifted hand. He was only a blur, a shadow, a formless thing which moved with lightning velocity.

Down swept that lifted arm in a short, vicious arc.

Marty had only time to hunch one shoulder, to break the blow a little. Thereby he probably saved himself a crushed skull. The bludgeon, whatever it was, knocked him flat once more alongside the dismembered thing he had tackled. But this time he made no move to rise. This time he was unconscious, sprawled on the gently rolling deck, not even moaning.

CHAPTER III

On Ice



His limp body contorted in a shudder, instinctively withdrawing from some repellent contact. It was cold. Funny. Awhile ago, the night had been sweating hot. Now he felt chilly. His teeth rattled like castanets . . .

His eyes opened slowly, heavily, reluctantly.

It was dark where he lay. Only, this wasn't the open darkness of a boat deck. This was something closed in, confined, like the inside of a trap. And it was cold, icy cold. No mistake about that!

Ice! The bumpy, frozen hardness of the surface on which he lay suddenly took on recognizable qualities. Ice! But except for the cargo of the boat which had brought him from the cannery at Gran Balier, there was no ice around here.

He understood, suddenly. He was lying inside one of the hatches of the company ice boat. And he hadn't gotten in the hold by osmosis, either!

Through the throbbing pain in the rear half of his skull, memory began to assert itself. The *Molveau* trawler. The blinking red light. The dummy set up on the dark deck to fool him into a wide-open tackle. And then that massive shadow, arm uplifted—it all came back!

When he tried to move, to finger the lump on the back of his head, Howell discovered how far the ice packed all around him had done its work already. His arm was numb. It took a long, tortured effort to make it move at all. Alarm shrieked inside him. Suppose he froze to death!

But he had regained consciousness in time.

Responding to his frantic jerks and slaps—feeble at first, but gradually forcing themselves to greater vigor—he could feel the blood begin to seep through numbed veins once more. He kept on working, desperately—wriggling toes and fingers, kicking legs, flapping arms.

Finally, he could stand. The effort it caused, the new torture exploding in his head, seemed nothing in exchange for the knowledge that his legs would hold him up. His feet skidded wickedly on the chilled mosaic of ice beneath them. But he could stand erect.

Panting, he began to circle the dark hold with the awkward, lumbering movements of a bear. Faint light filtered in overhead through the tarpaulin-covered hatch. Not enough to give real visibility, but at least a sickly lunar glow which caught faint gleams from the crumbled ice.

That hatch was the one way out of the freezing prison into which his unidentified assailant had plunged him.

Blindly, impelled by sheer instinct which defied reason, Marty Howell sprang upward—arms thrust high, fingers clawing for the rim of that dim square above him. He fell back sprawling on the ice, retching from his effort, sickly aware of how far he had failed in attaining his goal.

He clawed himself erect once more atop the slippery ice. And as he did so, his groping hand brushed something solid—something which, for all its coldness, was not ice.

He felt rigid, distended chilled fingers there in the dark, and recognized what he'd touched. It was a human hand. A dead hand. Reflex jerked Marty's own fingers free. He thrust them deep into his pants pocket for warmth. A moment later they closed on the paper of matches. He pulled them out and lighted one.

The tiny light sparked alive in his cupped hand. By its light he knew what he had

found. He had found Joe O'Dowd.

Wide, unblinking eyes stared back at the match's light. The man had been dead a long time—twenty-four hours at the least. A face which must once have been mobile and friendly and intelligent was set now in a frozen mask blanker than a store-window dummy's. Those eyes had been blind for a whole day while Desiree and Anton La Plante were still speaking of their friend in the present tense.

With only the briefest hesitation, Marty slid his hand down into the dead man's pocket. It came up with a wallet. The money in it, several bills, had not been the motive for O'Dowd's murder. Nothing was disturbed. The identification cards were still where they belonged.

For an instant longer, Howell stared into the dead man's face. Joe O'Dowd stared back, forever silent now about what he'd been trailing from Gran Balier and St. Lucienne Landing. A long clay streak discolored his forehead like clotted blood. But the blow had come from behind.

"Like mine." Howell's voice sounded far away. "Only I'm still alive."

Three matches burned out before he finished his brief examination. After inspecting the corpse, the Immigration agent looked around enough to check his first impression of the hold. He had been right. The hatch was its only exit. And standing on the ice which half-filled the room, even a man of the titanic Molveau's great size could not hope to reach the hatch.

"Sorry, O'Dowd," he said softly. "There's no other way."

Directly under the covered hatch, he bent down and began to dig with his bare hands. The loose ice shifted rapidly under that feverish assault. When Marty turned back toward O'Dowd, he had cleared a well thigh deep. Despite the cold, salt sweat was dripping off him.

ONCE O'Dowd had been set upright in the hole, the work of repacking the ice took mere minutes. Tamping the last of it firmly into position, Marty Howell straightened and gave the dead man a grim salute. It spoke volumes, that gesture. It was a promise he intended to keep.

From the perch afforded by those husky, unfeeling shoulders, he could just skim the upper edge of the hatch opening with extended fingers. Hours on ice had stiffened O'Dowd's body sufficiently to support Howell for a mere instant—no longer. Breathing a prayer, Marty jumped.

His hands gripped hard on the hatchway, jerked back by the full weight of his body as O'Dowd crumpled beneath him. Straining, panting, he drew himself upward on corded arms which twitched with pain. Now the canvas tarpaulin was brushing his head. Now one leg slid between it and the lip of the hatch, gaining purchase from the bare deck outside.

A few moments later, winded but safe, he stood in the clear.

The ice boat rocked gently under him. The hot night air slapped in his face like the breath of an ore oven, in contrast with the hold he just had left. Marty Howell hung onto the railing beside him and stared down at the canvas covering Joe O'Dowd's temporary tomb. The ice he had escaped was no colder than his narrowing, slate-hued eyes.

Presently, he began to move again. Cat-like, once more.

But this time he was stalking no fugitive red glimmer on water. This time he knew exactly where he was going. Over the side of the ice boat he vaulted, dropping soundlessly to the lower deck of the trawler moored next to it in the sleeping line. Deep in the miniature cabin, a Cajun fisherman was snoring. The rhythm continued unbroken as a long moon shadow slid past a lone porthole and was onto the next boat in line.

From one craft to another, Howell made his silent way. He knew just how many drag boats he had crossed before, to reach the one belonging to fleet boss Molveau. Subtract two, for Cousin Mathieu's.

He paused in his phantom progress only when the craft he had been seeking actually was dipping restlessly under his spread feet. On the uncovered afterdeck, head pillowed on a folded coat, Anton La Plante was spread out beneath the stars. He was breathing deeply, regularly, as Marty Howell bent over him.

"La Plante!" The whisper was quick, urgent. "Anton!"

The deep breathing checked.

"Eh?" An eye opened and a fist raised to dig at it. "What is it? Who call—oh, you, m'sieu!"

Like the healthy animal he was, Anton awoke from sleep rapidly. His lithe body stretched once and brought itself up to a squat. Balanced on lean hams, Anton peered upward.

"What is wrong, m'sieu?"

"I've found Joe O'Dowd," Marty answered grimly.

"Joe!" The young Cajun came erect, eagerly. "He is, then, okay? Desiree, she worry until she get me worrying too. Where, m'sieu?"

"In the ice boat." Howell added a final harsh word. "Dead."

Anton blinked, as if he had been slapped across his bronzed face.

"Dead," he echoed stupidly. And then, "Dead?" once more, angrily.

"Murdered. Hit over the head from behind."

"But—" Anton protested—"you say just now the ice boat! That boat, she not reach 'ere till sundown. If he is dead since yesterday—"

"Somebody had him hidden somewhere else. Same party got him into the ice boat hold after dark tonight. And then this person came after me, and took me as close to the Pearly Gates as a man ever went and lived to tell about it."

"You, too, m'sieu?" It was a sharp, torn exclamation of horror.

"Keep your voice down. We don't want to wake the whole fleet." Marty Howell's warning was urgent and low. "Yes, somebody tried to get me too. He rigged up a dummy on Molveau's deck. Led me to it with faked signal lights. Then slugged me from behind and dumped me into the ice hold."

"But he would have to carry you across many drag boats!"

"Why not? I didn't wake anyone, coming back—and this lad is every bit as careful as I am. Look, Anton, we're getting out of here."

Anton La Plante scowled faintly.

"We run away? And leave Joe behind?"

"We're not running. But it's supposed to be at night that banshee howls in the bayous. I want to find out why he howls. Tonight."

The Cajun scratched his mop of gold-copper hair reflectively.

"A boat would be needed, m'sieu. A boat of our own."

"Molveau spoke of a Leon Petit. Said he rented boats. Where are they, when they're not in use?"

"Some are moored near shore. Others—one or two, most times—are made fast to Leon's trawler." La Plante nodded slowly. "Oui. One of those we could come by. It will be but to arouse Leon and arrange a price."

"Never mind that. We'll take the boat. I'll pay what he asks afterward. Come on, La Plante. We have banshees to hunt!"

EVEN after they had dropped soundlessly into one of the three nondescript little motorboats lashed to the Petit trawler, Howell kept scanning the dark row of fishing craft for the merest flicker of a light. But apparently no one was awake. There was no movement along the line.

"No!" he whispered sharply, in warning. "Don't spin the motor until we're away from the fleet. We can drift east on the tide."

Anton grinned comprehendingly and squatted in the stern.

"You are smart fellow, M'sieu 'Owell. Joe send for good 'elp when he send for you."

"I didn't get here in time to help him much," answered Marty between set teeth. "But I'll finish his job for him, anyway."

The strip of water between them and the fishing fleet widened swiftly. The tide was running out, toward the Gulf, and it carried them with it at a better speed than Marty had dared hope. He sat opposite the young Cajun, watching the distance increase, gauging it tensely.

"Molveau, he will be surprised tomorrow," La Plante confided. "'Ands are short. I promise I 'elp them load the ice boat while I wait for you. Hey! My concertina, m'sieu! We leave it behind."

"Your Cousin Mathieu can look after it until tomorrow. You're not afraid this banshee will do us in, are you, La Plante?"

"Me afraid?" Anton chuckled derisively. "Anton is not scared."

"That's good," came back Marty Howell's voice. "Because I'm none too happy about heading into those bayous at night myself. All right, you can break out the motor now. It won't disturb those shrimpers' dreams."

He felt certain that his companion had not exaggerated his courage. Still, as the motor began to spit and a white ruffle spread in the tiny craft's wake, Marty crouched nervously in the prow. The dark shoreline rushed toward them, forbidding and silent under a wan moon. The outlines of the live oak jungle further in, rose black and twisted.

Swamp grass closed in around them, marking the lips of a narrowing channel. They had left the bay behind and were back in the bayous. The small, sturdy motor hummed stoutly, shoving them on into the murk.

"Which way, m'sieu?" asked La Plante, at the controls.

"Back the way we came. Back toward St. Lucienne."

The little boat drove on, shouldering the brackish bayou water aside. Something brushed Howell's face like an invisible finger

CHAPTER IV

Bar Sinister

and he jumped involuntarily. But it was nothing. Nothing but a tendril of that ever-present, drooping, ghostly tree moss.

"You keep looking back toward the Gulf, m'sieu."

Marty nodded.

"If anyone from the fleet were following us, that's the way he'd be coming from. Someone there tonight killed O'Dowd."

"If I get my 'and on his dirty neck—" Anton began, in a deep growl. The threat dangled unfinished. "But why he also attack you, eh?"

"Because I was onto the racket he's working," said Howell softly. "I know he's smuggling in aliens the Government won't accept through regular channels. That would mean former enemy aliens. Germans or Japs, say."

Anton La Plante blinked slowly.

"M'sieu!"

"But that's been obvious all along. It's the only reason O'Dowd would have communicated with the Immigration authorities. Moreover, it's proved by the light I saw flashing. The message was 'Bring in cargo.' What cargo would be in my department's province—except a human one?"

"By jing!" the Cajun gasped. He nodded as if unwillingly. "So Joe find them, and they kill Joe! Now maybe they follow us up bayou and make trouble." He grunted softly. "We could hear them, if they run with a motor, m'sieu. Wait. I kill our own, and we listen sharp."

The chugging engine choked and was silent. Some evil in the darkness of the bayou seemed to pour into the vacuum created where that one cheerful little sound had been. La Plante squatted in a pose of tense attention, leaning back a trifle. Marty Howell himself was rigid, sweating.

Then came a nerve racking sound.

It was not the rhythmic explosion of a second motor, back along the waterway they had already traveled. It did not come from behind them, but from somewhere along the bayous ahead.

Thin, high, chilling, it went on and on—past the capacity of any human lungs. It was the most ghastly scream that Marty Howell ever had listened to. There was something soulless, something of another world—a world of fiends in anguish—about that banshee cry.

Prickling fingers, like a warning of danger, passed over the two men in the little motor-boat, and they shivered as in an arctic blast as the wail rose, thinned, and faded and rose again and again.



smothered exclamation came from Anton La Plante.

"Mother of Heaven!" he muttered hoarsely.

Marty Howell made no sound. But his ear drums seemed to be splitting with the throbbing horror which tore at them across the swamps. It was louder than any natural voice,

that scream, yet at the same time it seemed to come from considerable distance. That it was following the interwoven network of the bayous, hurtling along them at an inhuman rate of speed, was undeniable.

La Plante's strong hands trembled.

"M'sieu, we are doomed!"

"No," Howell said, slowly and distinctly, thinking of Joe O'Dowd's dead face with a dull, itching fury. "No, my friend, we're not doomed. But your banshee is. Tonight's going to be his last night to howl."

"You know how to stop him, then, m'sieu?"

"I've got an idea. Start the motor again, Anton."

The briefest of pauses preceded the young Cajun's reach for the spinner. But even after the boat's small motor was popping once more, he kept gnawing his underlip with an obvious nervousness. He tried to whistle a reassuring bar of music as they started forward again along the sluggish water. But the sound was dismal, and it faded quickly.

The banshee, on the other hand, had not faded at all. As nearly as Howell's ear could determine, it had made full circle of a route of ten miles or so of swampland in the five minutes since they first had heard it. Distant or near, its full wailing, eerie vigor was undiminished.

"No, Anton, not that way. Away from the sound, not toward it!"

"But m'sieu, just now you 'ave said—"

"We're going to stop the banshee. Sure. That's why I want to head back over exactly the same route the ice boat followed this afternoon."

The shrug of Anton's wide shoulders was eloquent of confusion, but he made no protest. The motor dory swerved past a new bed of floating water hyacinths and cut back in a direction almost directly opposite to that being followed by the wild, high screaming.

"It is home to Gran Balier you wish us to return?"

Howell jerked his head. "In that general direction, yes."

"I wish very much," intoned La Plante, addressing the night in his bewilderment, "that I 'ave with me my concertina. I think music, she would be one big 'elp on trip like this one."

They nosed on along the channel, spreading a fan of white wake behind them. It was the only sign of movement on the dark water. The bayous lay deserted. Obviously, local residents were not anxious to come face to face with the source of that supernatural howling.

"While we're traveling," said Marty Howell, grimly, "you might give me the dope on a list of names I've been turning over in my mind. You know 'em—I don't. I could be doing a little eliminating, maybe."

"As to who is kill poor Joe?" Anton nodded. "Shoot, m'sieu."

"Well, first, what about this Froissart? The vice-president?"

La Plante spat overside.

"Nobody like Henri Froissart in Gran Balier. He crazy for money. Cheat cleaning girls at cannery out of their shrimp nickels, he is so stingy. If you figure Froissart is in on Joe dying, I tell you one thing. For money he not stop at murder."

Recalling the mean expression and shifty eyes of the Great Gulf executive, during the brief moment of their encounter immediately before the ice boat sailed, Marty was not certain the big Cajun beside him had exaggerated. But there were other names on his list.

"Gosse?"

"Baptiste Gosse is police officer of Gran Balier, m'sieu, beside the job of unloading foreman! He is paid to enforce the law."

"There have been instances where lawmen turned crooked."

"But Baptiste, m'sieu? It is true he has disposition of sour pickle. It is true he love gran' lady in New Orleans, who make him buy her big presents because he is so homely and so little it is only way he can make big impression. That maybe take much money. But he is police!"

"Either one of those two might be pretty interested in the profits from smuggling a few high-paying undesirables into the country, then?" As he spoke, Howell had hoisted a pile of Leon Petit's fishing net up off the dory floor. He began to play it out on the bayou's surface, as if unaware of his action, while he spoke. "Then—there's Molveau."

"Pierre, on whose boat you sleep? You are joking, m'sieu!"

"I haven't felt much in a mood for jokes since I saw O'Dowd," said Howell softly. "Why shouldn't Molveau be mixed up in this? He might have been the man who konked me. He's boss of the fleet, in the best spot to maneuver it for his own interests."

"Please, m'sieu! Pierre, he is my good friend. One time, before she is betrothed to Joe, he want to marry with Desiree. We know him so well; and for many, many years. Pierre is fine fellow, you bet."

MMARTY HOWELL said the names over, aloud:

"Froissart. Gosse. Molveau."

"M'sieu!" Relieved of the responsibility of answering questions, La Pante had swerved his attention to the net now trailing widely on the water. "What you do with the net? She is all play out!"

"I'm trying to catch the banshee in it, Anton."

The Cajun stared at him, apparently deciding at last that his companion had gone mad. He edged away, unobtrusively, as far as the confines of the little boat would allow. His dark eyes were nailed to Howell's face.

"M'sieu, soon we get back to Gran Balier. I know one fine doctor!"

"We're not going to Gran Balier, Anton. We're stopping here."

They had rounded a curve in the bayou as Howell spoke. To their left, propped up like grotesque birds on their long poles, the shrimp-drying platforms of Ling Foo jutted dark and awkward above its mud bar. The dim humps of the little colony's shacks showed on beyond—but only as vague blurs against the black, empty swampland stretched behind it.

"Here?" Anton croaked. "But this, it is only a shrimp station."

"I know what it is," Marty cut in, briskly. "At least, I think I do. And dried seafood is the least of its products. Turn in."

Wordlessly, but shaking his bright head as if in the face of an ultimate calamity, La Plante obeyed. The nose of the dory described a curl like the top of a question mark on the bayou's inky surface. Anton La Plante had cut down his motor to a stutter, and they slowed as they heaved ahead.

Somewhere along the route they had followed, they had lost the high hideous sound of the wailing. It was possible the banshee had decided to call it a night. In any event, the stillness which brooded over this black

bayou country seemed two parts oppressive, fetid heat and one part bleakly stark loneliness. Not even a cicada chirruped.

La Plante was already reaching out to grasp one of the platform piles and draw them in against it, when Marty Howell felt the tug on his spread net. He went rigid in the stern of the dory, every nerve in his body instantly tingling, every muscle tense. He reached out swiftly on the side of the little boat from which the jerk had come, disentangling the net.

"I thought so!" he whispered, half aloud. "I thought I'd find it!"

Anton La Plante had turned back in the prow.

"What is it, M'sieu 'Owell?"

"The banshee," Howell answered.

The Cajun blinked back at him.

"But in your 'and is only the net! And with it, you 'hold long sucker root from water hyacinth!"

"Look again, Anton. This is no flower root."

The dripping, snakelike thing which he lifted above the bayou's surface for an additional thirty seconds before he let it fall back again was, indeed, not botanical. It was a length of cable, disappearing into the foul-smelling darkness under the platform at one end; off down the hyacinth-choked rim of the bayou, at the other.

"But, M'sieu," the young Cajun bleated. "A cable, a wire that is!"

"Loudspeaker system," Howell answered succinctly. "Fed from one of those shacks up yonder. Just waterproof cable, strung along where the hyacinths grow thickest—camouflaged, protected, by the flowers. That, and a few neatly concealed loudspeakers at various strategic points."

Anton La Plante clawed desperately at his mop of copper hair.

"M'sieu!"

"The banshee couldn't have traveled as fast as it seemed to. Nothing human could, and this had to be something human. What other explanation was there? Somebody had to be broadcasting that scream to one point after another on the route, making it seem to race along." Marty Howell stood up. "Come on. Let's get up onto the platform. Shove the boat in underneath as far as you can, where it won't show from the water."

La Plante reached out a big hand, solicitously. "Let me 'and you up, m'sieu. These mud bars, they are like quicksand. If you slip, you are gone!"

"I won't slip."

Unaided Howell had gripped the edge of

the bare wooden structure overhead and was swinging himself aloft. The cold fury in him would have made him able to swing up a flagpole, or so he felt at the moment. Joe O'Dowd! His pulse kept pounding. Joe O'Dowd. . . .

A moment later Anton La Plante's lithe body drew itself up beside him. Howell was stretched out full length on the crude planking now, the stale and fishy odor of the mud bars filling his nostrils and a rapidly clearing plan of action maturing inside his head. The discovery of the cable had been the concrete piece of proof he needed—the solid fact to yank his theory out of the maybe class and make it positive.

But Anton La Plante still seemed to be struggling with developments too quick for a simple bayou-bred brain.

"M'sieu 'Owell," he murmured severely, "I think maybe now is time you tell me what 'appens 'ere. First is banshee, then is cable! First we head for Gran Balier, now we stop 'ere! All this is to find out who kill Joe. Is this not true?"

"And to find out what it was O'Dowd was trying to stop—so others can stop it for him. And to make his murderer pay for the job."

LA PLANTE wriggled on the bleached boards.

"Maybe I am weak in 'ead. All my life since I grow up, I am shrimp fisherman. Then I sell my boat to Cousin Mathieu 'cause I wish better one. I am simple fellow, always poor, not much schooling. I do not understand all this."

The night pressed down over the mud bar like a pot lid. It was the blackest thing Howell had seen outside a barrel of tar. The sweating heat of the day just passed, still clung to the platform boards. Olfactory ghosts of the millions of shrimp shelled here gagged in his throat.

"I told you before," he muttered. "Aliens being smuggled in. It had to be that, or I wouldn't have been sent for. Presupposing it's aliens, they're also undesirable. Who'd pay the highest prices for a quick way into the United States? Germans or Japs, hunting a hideout now the war smoked them off their old happy hunting grounds!"

"But with the shrimp fleet so busy in the bayous, m'sieu, they would be seen."

"The shrimp fleet is a help, not a hindrance. It gives a Jap like this Ling Foo a legitimate reason for owning a lonely outpost on the bayous—practically within stone's throw of the Gulf of Mexico."

"Jap?" La Plante was gaping. "But—no,

it is impossible! Chinese—"

"How many Orientals live here in the Delta country? How expert are most of you fishermen at telling the two races apart? Granted, it would be an impossible impersonation in any cosmopolitan community. But here, just a faked Chinese name like Ling Foo would be disguise enough."

Marty Howell had eeled around so that he could watch both the dark shacks beyond the rim of the drying platform and the bayou lapping at the soggy mud flats against which young La Plante had warned him. It was hard to see far in the starless murk, but his eyes were straining.

"I was right about the cable," he muttered. "I think I'm right, too, about the reason for it. It was meant to scare the natives off the waterways at night—which must be the time the 'cargo' is brought in by boat. Once here, a hundred men could hide out undiscovered until the chance came to move them on up north and scatter them."

"Japs!" Anton mumbled. "By golly, this I sure like to see!"

"You will, my friend. And soon. That banshee didn't wail for nothing."

They lay silent, then. The soft suck of water under the platform piles was the only sound in the darkness. Had that been a flicker of shielded light, inside one of the nearest shanty's windows? No, more likely nothing but a firefly swept up from the swamp by the hot breeze.

Time crawled. But with the wetness funneling down his spine, with his shirt plastered to him, Howell still felt cold. He still felt the way he had felt in the iceboat hold, staring into a dead man's eyes.

"Listen!"

It was Anton La Plante who had caught the faint noise first, and who hissed the swift warning. It came again. The dull, muffled dip of an oar in water. Again. Out on the bayou, someone was rowing closer—furtive, careful. Already, when he first betrayed his presence, the rower was close enough so the drip of water off his oars was identifiable.

They could make out the black outline of the boat, now. It shunted in close alongside the platform piles, a mere knobby solidity against the liquid obscurity of the bayou. It never had taken on real outline. Stare at it as much as he had, Marty Howell was unsure how many figures it had contained.

They were shinnying up the piling. He could hear the soft scrape of bodies against rotting wood. He blessed his lucky star that they had made fast to the piling almost as

far as possible away from the spot where La Plante had run the motor dory in out of sight.

Up over the edge of the platform they struggled—five silent human shapes, led by a sixth who gestured them on with peremptory jerks of an arm. Even in darkness, there was more than a suggestion of the Orient in their squat figures and bandy legs. Marty Howell felt no surprise. Logic had revealed them to him long before their actual appearance.

He hugged the repugnant planking, thankful for the absence of moon and stars from the pre-dawn sky. The line was already past him, herded along by its leader. The other persons moved like cattle, submissive to each gesture and sibilantly whispered syllable. They filed into the nearest of the shanties supposedly dedicated to a one-man dried shrimp industry, and the door creaked gently shut behind them.

"By golly!" Anton La Plante muttered once again, beside Howell.

Howell was rising to his feet already.

"Time to pay a call on our friend, the alleged Ling. This is what O'Dowd was hunting for."

"Who kill him?" La Plante hissed it fiercely. "Who kill my friend Joe, to make this bad money? Froissart? Baptiste Gosse? Pierre?"

"We'll know the answer to that within the next five minutes," answered Howell stolidly. "We'd better separate here and come up on the shack from opposite sides. That'll give us twice the chance to surprise 'em. Good luck, Anton."

As Howell spoke he was creeping forward already, toward the dark shanty riding the ridge of the sinister mud bar.

CHAPTER V

Banshee's End



MARTY HOWELL heard the soft steps of his companion creep to the left and shuffle to silence in the darkness. All the lonely emptiness of the bayou night seemed to crowd in beside him, as Howell moved — the soundless way a shadow moves — closer to the shanty beyond the plat-

form.

His hand probed under the open front of

his shirt and loosened the small, useful revolver nested there beneath his armpit. The cold touch of it was reassuring to his sweat-slippery fingers. He drew his hand down again and kept on sidling forward.

The man who had murdered O'Dowd would be waiting for him there. In his memory he seemed to be hearing Anton's harsh hiss once more:

"Froissart? Baptiste Gosse? Pierre?"

He knew the answer, well enough. The man's identity was no longer a mystery. But the man's middle name, tonight, was Death.

Except for its one ornate trimming—that banshee cry, so knowingly contrived to prey upon the superstitions of the Delta natives—it had been such a direct and simple plan. One boat, only one in the fleet, had brought back a cargo other than shrimp from a day's fishing in the waters of the Gulf. Met by signal, it had picked up its passengers off the rolling water. Perhaps they had been on rubber life rafts, perhaps they were swimmers equipped with Mae Wests. Detail was unimportant.

It had been a simple matter, then, to keep them hidden until the early bedtime of the fishing fleet. It had also been simple to unload them into a silent rowboat and send them on their way up the dark bayous to Ling Foo's hideout.

"It had to be Ling's," Howell told himself, over again. "It was the one place we passed that was lonely enough. Even St. Lucienne's Landing would have its dangerous neighbors, its chance for a slip."

And he understood, too, how luckless Joe O'Dowd had become entangled in the search which, for him had ended in an ice-filled hold.

As inspector, and an expert at his job, it would have become increasingly clear to him that the shrimp catch passing along the inspection conveyor belt beneath his eyes, was short of that which was to be expected from such a sized fleet. Short by approximately one trawlerload a day.

His telegram to the Immigration office proved what sort of a man O'Dowd had been. Conscientious. Tenacious. Law-abiding. He'd have started to check. He'd have followed one link to another. He'd have gone as far as St. Lu with the ice boat and from there cut across lots to get a look at the fleet from shore.

And there someone had caught up with him. Someone who didn't want his activities checked on.

The corner of the shack loomed ahead of Marty Howell, so close he could touch its

tarpaper siding with an extended hand. He flattened to it swiftly, inching along the wall in the direction of the little curtained window where, earlier, he had thought he glimpsed a spot of light.

Moisture gilded his forehead and snaked its slow way through the damp crest of hair thatching his skull.

When would it come?

Every nerve in his body seemed to jangle, although his hands held steady. When would it happen? He had almost reached the window.

Behind the thick burlap stretched across it he was certain he could hear a hum of voices—

"That is far enough!"

The cold tip of a revolver barrel pressed against his spine with a sudden forward thrust which took him by surprise, despite the fact that he had been expecting it. He had not caught the softest hint of a step behind him, although he had been alert and listening. A sharp downward glance showed him why. The feet were bare. No boots to betray them.

The muzzle nosed deeper. Obediently, Howell lifted his arms above his head. And so close that the breath which propelled it fanned his neck.

The whisper came again.

"Too smart. Like O'Dowd. Too smart to live."

It was coming now. Howell could feel the subtle tensing of the body so close behind him. He could feel its muscles bunch together, ready for the shot. Lightning swift, he streaked his hand for the holster under his armpit.

As he tugged at his gun, he was pivoting.

He hadn't anticipated that the man behind him would be already lifting a blackjack in his free left hand. Dangerous oversight! The clever schemer behind the plot had not forgotten that a bullet in a body, recovered from the bayou, might possibly be traced!

Down swished the weighted object in that lifted hand, and Marty Howell had no chance to duck it. He felt the loosened butt of his pistol skid heartbreakingly under sweaty fingertips. He jerked his head a fraction of an inch to one side. But that was all. The blow landed.

Suddenly the tarpaper wall he was close against seemed to move like an ocean wave. He felt his knees sagging, as if they weren't there any more. The edifice of bone and muscle that always until now had supported began to crumble. He was sinking, sinking, sinking. . . .

YET he did not lose consciousness entirely. He knew that strong arms were lifting him, before he had hit the planking toward which his stunned figure toppled. He knew he was being lifted again.

His assailant was toting him along, slung over one wide shoulder as if he were a slaughtered pig. The blackness of the night kept spinning wickedly. But through the pounding inside his battered head, he could make out the dull pad-pad of bare feet on wet platform boards.

Words seemed to scream across the bright pain which spread like porcupine needles through his brain:

"These mud bars are like quicksand!"

And now they were at the edge of the platform, over the place where the rancid bayou licked at the supporting piles underfoot. Howell could hear the sound of the water, slithering like a snake in dead leaves.

"Goodby to you, then, M'sieu Snooper!"

The words came, soft and malignant, through the darkness. He was being lifted. The cording of those mighty arms was shifting him out, away from the man who held him—out, over the sucking mud.

Howell kicked one leg as if it were a jack-knife blade popping free. Every atom of the strength he had been hoarding all the way across the platform lay behind that one swift drive. His knee rammed like a piston into the unprotected muscular abdomen. He flayed out wildly.

The man dropped him, and he arched desperately as he fell. Somehow his frantic feet found solid support, at the very lip of the pier. He battled for balance, and flung himself forward.

This time the odds were more even. His captor had been forced to thrust his own gun through his belt, in order to free his hands for the task of disposing of a body. Both of them streaked for their weapons, panting in the murk. Marty Howell jerked his faster.

"Drop it!" he gasped hoarsely. "Drop it, La Plante!"

Anton La Plante's handsome young face had altered into a mask of evil. His lips had parted, and the questing tip of his tongue licked along them—almost the way a rattle-snake runs out its tongue. His dark eyes glittered.

"Drop it!" whispered Howell again. This time, Anton La Plante obeyed.

The heavy-caliber weapon, half lifted from his heaving waistline, slid from his fingers and thudded to the platform. The tall Cajun was watching Marty Howell with the eyes

of a maddened mountain cat, ready to leap.

"You know all the time," he muttered.

"You know from the first."

"Not quite from the first."

"How?"

The word carried all his baffled hatred.

"Easy enough as we went along," Howell answered. "The first place you slipped was on the boat tonight. Admitting you knew he had been dead a whole day. I'd only just found the body. I alone knew that."

La Plante snarled softly.

"It was a little thing."

"So were all your mistakes. You showed fear of the Banshee only when I was about to trail it, for instance. The other men around here were nervous all along. But you knew it was only a staged trick." Howell shrugged. "Except for O'Dowd, only you knew that I'd be coming to Gran Balier—and why."

"It was natural I know his business! I was his good friend."

"Sure, you knew. But only you. So when we were fired on from the plant window, boarding the ice boat, it had to be you who had arranged to stop me. With the pseudo-Ling, I figure. Gosse and Froissart lacked time."

Howell was feeling steadier now. The platform righting under him.

"I caught on why. Shrimp fishing is hard work. You're too ambitious to be satisfied with such pay. So you teamed up with Ling Phooey for some real chips to make money. You promised to help work the ice boat tomorrow. You'd have dumped O'Dowd overside into deep Gulf water. Obviously, that's why you hid him in the hold."

"Molveau could 'ave lure Joe on board then."

"He was killed ashore. Clay streaks on his face prove that. The person who planned to get rid of him—and me—was the murderer."

"You are one black devil!" whispered Anton La Plante.

"Nope. Just a guy. Just a guy who got mad when he found a citizen like O'Dowd rubbed out by somebody he had a right to trust. La Plante, you were the only one but me both in Gran Balier and with the fleet when things happened. Since O'Dowd obviously was carted aboard sometime after we arrived on the ice boat, you fitted in all around!"

"Yet you pretend to suspect Pierre! Baptiste! That Froissart!"

"Just to see how you'd react. And, sure enough, you handed each of them a dandy

motive for killing O'Dowd—if I wanted to fall for it. Henri Froissart was money-mad, you said. Gosse had a greedy lady in New Orleans—although you pretended a becoming reluctance to suspect a police official. Pierre Molveau was your friend, so you defended him by planting the information he loved Desiree and would be jealous of O'Dowd. Every word—”

He caught the slight, subtle change in the eyes staring so balefully into his, caught it in time to leap backward, just as La Plante's great knee drove up for his abdomen. The Cajun lashed down for his fallen gun, swift as a striking adder.

But Marty had been ready for the break. He knew why Anton La Plante had kept him talking.

JUST as the clawing fingers of the murderer closed on their weapon, Marty Howell's gun kicked. The neat red hole through the tanned gun hand began to spout a tiny fountain of crimson, and La Plante screamed in surprise and anguish. He jerked back, flaying wildly—and overbalanced at the very rim of the drying platform, where it hung above the mud.

“Nooooo! Sacré nom!”

Flapping like some giant wounded bird, he had plummeted from sight. A sucking thud below marked where he landed.

Until now, the struggle between them had been silent—a matter of noiselessly straining muscles, of whispered or grunted words. But the shot and the scream were a warning to the swamp at large.

The door of the shanty a hundred yards away burst open as suddenly as if the figures streaming from it had been propelled by an explosion. But Howell was ready for them. He fired once more, on a line not too far above their heads, and watched the

stampeded aliens flop for cover. The man who had popped out in their wake, was limned against a rectangle of light from inside. He wheeled and began to paw for his hip. A third shot blasted.

It kicked through the tar paper wall, a scant inch to one side of the doorway, and the man who had become Ling Foo—whatever his Tokyo cognomen had been—thought better of resistance. His arms shot up over his head with comic alacrity. He was babbling wildly, in Japanese.

“Get moving!” Marty Howell's order carried clear across the drying platform. “Your friend's in the quicksand. If you want to save his neck for a gallows, get moving!” They scrambled to obey.

And Marty Howell, stooping to retrieve Anton La Plante's fallen gun for double insurance, saw the light of dawn beginning to seep in through the live oaks on the bayou. At dawn, he had learned, the shrimp-fleet was already about its work. On the ice boat, someone would be sure to have lifted the hatch to the hold by now.

This would be one day that Great Gulf tradition would be broken. This would be one day an ice boat would race back for Gran Balier in the early morning, with a grisly load aboard, and pass this spot.

As he pictured Joe O'Dowd's dead eyes staring back into their frightened gazes, Marty Howell smiled a grim little smile. O'Dowd wasn't getting cheated, after all. He'd be bringing the help that would stamp out his murderer's smooth-working racket forever, would O'Dowd.

Off beyond the spot where Anton La Plante was babbling in terror and imploring his unwilling rescuers to hurry, the bayou stirred and began to glitter. The banshee's night was over.

Morning had come.

Next Issue: FIT TO BE TRIED, a Willie Klump Howler by Joe Archibald

Backache, Leg Pains May Be Danger Sign Of Tired Kidneys

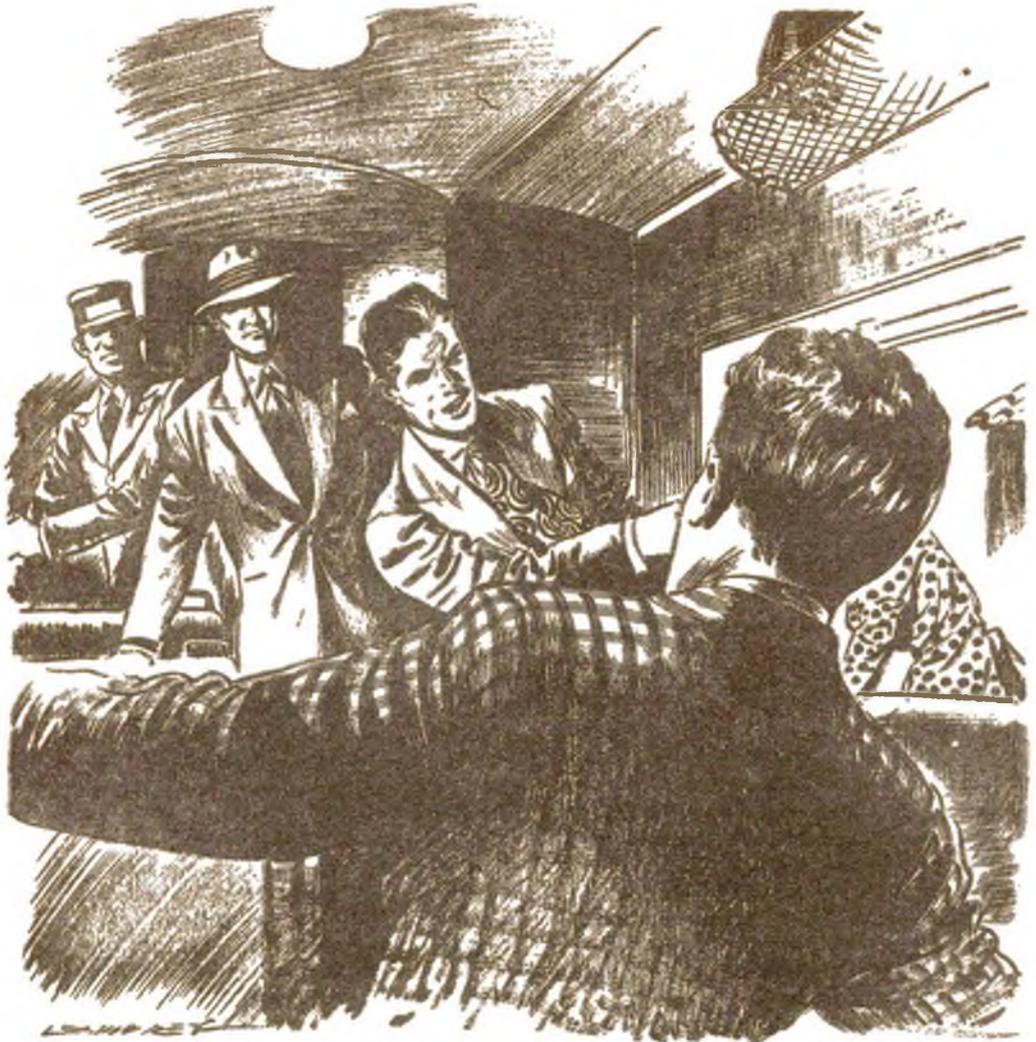
If backache and leg pains are making you miserable, don't just complain and do nothing about them. Nature may be warning you that your kidneys need attention.

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

If the 15 miles of kidney tubes and filters don't work well, poisonous waste matter stays in the blood. These poisons may start nagging backaches, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of

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

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from the blood. Get Doan's Pills. (Advt.)



When the crook staggered back and went for his gun, I knew I had to finish him right then

MOON OVER MURDER

By ROBERT J. HOGAN

New York Detective Tad Madden heads for Miami to bring back a thief, and then finds himself prowling about in graveyards!

THERE'S a slogan the Chamber of Commerce sticks on your windshield when you drive into town. It says, "Isn't it great to be in Miami?" It certainly was.

I had come down from New York City to get a punk called "Lefty" Hanson who had

given himself up to the Miami Police. There wasn't any hurry, since they had him in custody. So liking the trip down by train, and having a little item to figure out in my mind before I got there, I'd come down on the Champion Streamliner, instead of flying.

I'm a gregarious sort of guy. I like peo-

ple around me, particularly the attractive kind of the opposite sex. And on a train like the Champion they have a nice crowd on the streamliner, and you have better than twenty-four hours to get to know anybody that appeals to you.

In this case, it happened to be a brunette who turned out to be the sister of one of the boys in the Seventh District, another detective that I knew. She got off at West Palm Beach to visit a friend there, and so I'd only had the two hours it takes to run from West Palm Beach to Miami to think about why Lefty Hanson had turned himself in.

I hadn't taken time to look up Hanson's record before I left New York except to find out that he was wanted for a petty larceny matter that wouldn't be likely to hold him for more than a year. So I was looking for his angle, but I hadn't got far.

Between West Palm Beach and Miami, I'd gone into the men's room and changed from my dark city clothes to tropical worsteds, my white shoes, and a light felt topper with a loose brim. When I stepped off the train at the Florida East Coast Station, which is only slightly north of the twenty-five-story courthouse, nobody would have taken me for anything but a Miami sport, come to lay a wager on the ponies, which I also enjoy, along with fishing out in the Gulf Stream.

But I hadn't done this to hide my identity as much as to get the lift that it gives you when you get decked out like a beach millionaire and strut your stuff along the wide streets of the city of outstretched palms.

It's not far from the station to Police Headquarters. You get off the train and wander past the tall court house with the county jail house, as the Southern boys call it, and you cross West Flagler Street and you're there, in the City Hall settlement.

It was like old home week before I'd even reached the steps.

"Miami Madden!" somebody yelled, and it was my old friend, Gene Howell.

Gene was city detective in charge of liquor license enforcement. He'd just been getting into his car at the curb when he saw me.

GENE came toward me on the run. He had the same light feet he used to have on the football field. He was a Georgia boy, like a lot of the good men on the Miami Police Force. I'd known him for years. After the faculty and I had decided that Georgia Tech was not for me, Gene Howell and I had played a little professional football together around the Deep South.

"I figured you'd find a way to fenagle the

job of coming down to pick up Lefty Hanson," he said, as we shook hands. "I been expecting you, boy—only you're about fifteen hours late."

Howell was a big, good-looking guy with shoulders like Dempsey's and wavy black hair and a smile like Grover Whelan's. He had on a neat but not gaudy sport coat, tan shark-skin slacks, white and tan shoes and a pearl gray topper about like mine.

I asked him what he meant by my being late, and he laughed.

"You're going to smile real pretty," he said, "when you hear what trouble your friend, Dave Cromer, is in. They're twisting his tail, son, to get him to find the killer of Lefty Hanson."

Lieutenant Dave Cromer was in charge of Homicide. I grinned at the thought of Cromer being in a little difficulty. He was the only man in Miami, outside of the usual itinerant crooks that slip in and out, that I had any dislike for.

It had all started during my first vacation in Miami. Dave Cromer was somewhat older than I was, but it seemed that long ago Cromer had got himself a job with the New York Police Force. Dave was a Georgia boy, too, and from what I'd heard around Headquarters up North, he'd come with some ideas about setting New York's Finest to rights, and he hadn't gone over so good. Besides, the boys kidded him about his long, slow Georgia drawl, and they took delight in stepping on him, so Dave Cromer had finally got sore and quit.

He hadn't done badly in Miami. He was more in his element there and I won't say that Dave Cromer was dumb by a long shot. But he didn't like New York's Finest and he didn't keep it to himself. So on my first vacation in Miami, when I used to wander over to the City Hall settlement and sit around with the boys between horse races and fishing trips, Cromer started to throw the barb into me about how the New York Police Force was all tied up in politics and it made me mad.

So it was good to hear that Cromer was simmering a little as head of Homicide. It sort of made the whole trip to Miami more delightful, like meeting a nice redhead.

He didn't seem depressed, though, when I walked in on him. Cromer was a tall, slim guy, even at middle-age. He looked like a dignified Georgia gentleman, with a long, slim stogy in his mouth stuck out at the angle of the flag pole over the entrance to the Ambassador Hotel.

"If it isn't my dear friend from the big

corrupt city to the North," he said. "If it isn't Thaddeus Percival."

I don't know where he'd found out my first two names. I'd always gone by T. P. Madden until, after two vacations in Miami, the New York boys began calling me, "Miami" Madden, because I liked the place so much.

"The world famous Miami Madden who solves crimes with his brilliant mind and who is feared by every criminal in the country because of his bravery and skill with his fists," Cromer said before I could come back after his first crack.

That was what a national magazine had written in an article about me a year or so ago, and Cromer had memorized it word for word. He ended by laughing his head off. And when those Georgia boys laugh, they enjoy every minute of it.

"Look, Cromer, my friend," I said, pretty mad by now. "Those names that my angry father pinned on me at birth are the reasons why I learned to use my dukes."

Cromer just kept on laughing.

"That's what the man said in the magazine article," he said.

"Okay," I said. "Laugh this one off. I came down to get Lefty Hanson—or to find out who killed him."

Cromer was always a little slow getting some things.

"When you find out, let me know," he said, but he got the idea, but didn't see so much fun in it.

I got the details from one of Cromer's Homicide Squad at the record desk. Seemed Lefty Hanson had given himself up three days ago. They had locked him up in the city jail and wired New York. But Lefty had begun acting a little nervous and had asked a couple of times to get put up over in the county jail on the twenty-fifth story of the courthouse. The city jail got pretty crowded with drunks and characters and so just after dark, last evening, one of the boys had taken him out and was taking him over.

THEY hadn't figured there was any need of handcuffing Lefty, since he had given himself up, and he had seemed anxious to get over to the other jail. He and the cop in charge of him were walking across Flagler Street when a car pulls up and a guy knocks out the cop with a sap. They take Lefty in the car and drive off.

The witnesses said three men were in the car, and somebody took the number, but the car proved to be a detective's car which had been stolen from in front of the police sta-

tion. They found the car, later, abandoned on the Tamiami Trail.

As I've said, Dave Cromer was a little slow at times, although he usually got there. So it took him until I was this far through the records to come over to me and say:

"You Yankees up New York way got any leads on that armored car holdup six months ago?" And of course he laughed—at me.

"You should ask," I said, which was the best I could think of at the moment.

There wasn't much more dope on Lefty, except that a little before daylight this morning his body had been found in Bay Front Park, down by the fishing pier where the charter boats take you out for a day's fishing.

"How long had he been dead?" I asked the record man who was named Gaines, a nice Georgia boy, pretty keen on his stuff.

"The medical examiner said Lefty had been dead maybe an hour or so when he was found," he said. "The patrolman who found him said he was lying in a little spot where the moon shone through the palm trees just before daylight."

"Then he must have been there almost ever since he was killed," I said.

"That's right," Gaines said, "because the murderer most likely wouldn't have left him in the spot of light. The moon must have moved after he was dumped."

"Right," I said. "Anything else about him?"

"We figure it might have been done by somebody around the fishing pier," Gaines said. "He was found near there. He had been beaten to death, and there was a fish hook through his lips. It was kind of gruesome, the way the hook had torn almost through his lips."

Homicide, Gaines said, figured the death might have had something to do with fishing, because of the fish hook, and from the marks on the grass and gravel and some of both on Lefty's heels, it looked as if the body had been dragged from the direction of the fishing pier.

Of course, I knew there was a wide parking space between the fishing pier and the park but I thought it was kind of funny the police hadn't figured a car might have brought him there.

"It looks like Lefty knew something, and somebody else was trying to get it out of him," I said.

"We thought of that, too," Gaines said, "but the Lieutenant thinks there might have been some connection with a holdup four nights ago in the Mardi Gras night club over on the beach." Gaines grinned. "He'd like to figure that one out ahead of the Miami

Beach Force."

"Good old Cromer," I said. "Always trying to get something on another cop. Go on."

"We figured," Gaines said, "that Lefty Hanson was in the mob that pulled the beach holdup and when things looked a little tight, he decided to pull out and give himself up for a short stay up in your city."

"How many were in the holdup on the beach?"

"Two. They were masked, but one of them was small and wiry like Lefty."

"Could be," I said.

But I kept thinking how Lefty had been beaten up, and that fish hook through his lips kind of got me. I couldn't think of any better way to make a guy talk than to run a fish hook through his lips and keep yanking it until he was ready to talk. I'd never heard of such a thing, but it sounded as if it should work.

Gaines and I went into the morgue and looked over what was left of Hanson. He was a mess. The fish hook was still pinning his lips together.

I MEASURED the hook, and then we went over what personal effects they had found on Lefty. There wasn't anything there to shine any light, except a little red note-book, and all that was in it was a list of names and telephone numbers of a few girls.

"What's all this?" I said, and pointed to the top name on the list.

"All of those names and numbers stumped us," Gaines said. "They seem to be names of dames, with their telephone numbers, but we've checked and there aren't any such women at those numbers. In fact two of the numbers aren't even in the Miami directory."

"This one wouldn't be, anyway," I said tapping the top name and number. "There isn't any such telephone number in Miami like one-seven-one-six. Miami telephones have five numbers."

I kept looking at that top name and number. It said:

MATILDA ROWE 1716

"We checked that in Fort Lauderdale," Gaines said. "Up there, twenty-six miles north, they've got numbers like that. But nobody knew anybody by the name of Matilda Rowe."

The whole thing kind of stumped me, but I kept thinking about Dave Cromer and how he would like to send me back without a thing. I ran into him coming out of the files department.

"You got the murder all solved, I expect, Madden," he said, and laughed. By now I had got to hate that laugh worse than an onion breath.

"You don't mind my thinking about it, I hope," I said.

"Not at all, sonny boy," Cromer said. "Help yourself."

I wired New York for all they had about Lefty Hanson. Then I hunted up my friend, Gene Howell, and we went over to Tom's for a shore dinner and to chew over old times.

When I got back to Headquarters about nine, they had an answer to my wire. For a long time up there they had known that Lefty Hanson was a crook, but all they had on him was that petty larceny job he was wanted for.

There was one interesting thing about his background, though. Seemed he had been the black sheep of a family over in Brooklyn. He had a brother who had been as good a guy as Lefty was bad. This brother of Lefty's had been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for a stunt he had pulled in the E.T.O. about the time of the break-through. The brother had captured a German tank, when his outfit was washed up. He had tossed a hand grenade into the tank, cleaned out the crew and then, with another guy, had taken over and raised particular riot.

Funny thing about that, but it got me thinking. I couldn't help the feeling of a tieup somewhere there, but I couldn't get the connection in my mind. It was like a name that gets on the tip of your tongue, but that won't come through clearly.

I kept thinking about that girl on the top of the list. Somehow, the name "Matilda" got me. I couldn't picture a guy like Lefty being interested in a gal named Matilda. It didn't make sense, but there it was.

I didn't have anything to do that night, so I got in touch with Gene Howell who was at Headquarters getting ready to start out on his rounds of the night spots to check on license violation. They got a law about closing on time in Miami and they enforce it right up to the limit, as Gene Howell is a very square guy.

"Gene," I said, "I'd like to visit some spots where they have girls that are the kind to associate with a guy like Lefty Hanson."

"Looks like Miami Madden is slipping," he said. "You must be hard up."

"I am," I said. "I'm looking for a gal named Matilda."

"Son, you are hard up," he said. "But I'll take you around. Only I better go with you."

"Just tell me where to go," I said. "I don't want to cramp your style with your duties."

"Everything's under control," he said. "And I better go along with you. You're asking for some of these places where you bow your way in and fight your way out."

We went first to a place called Palonas. It was a dingy place with lots of girls, and in an hour I'd got around to all the girls I could find in the place. Some laughed when I asked if they knew anybody named Matilda Rowe. Some just shook their heads and tried to get friendly.

We went to the Golden Slipper and the Crazy Club and the Slop Shop and Aunt Martha's. I had kind of hoped we might find out something at Aunt Martha's, but it was the same everywhere.

It was getting near closing time.

"Now I'll take you to a place that your mamma never dreamed of when she done told you," Gene said. "It's called Mother's Happy Home."

It was on the west side of town, out by the airport. He told me about "Mother" on the way out. It was one of the real joints where the seamen hung around when they wanted action.

ONLY last week a big Swede sailor had got well oiled and had started to spank all the girls in the place, one at a time. Seemed Mother, as she called herself, was pretty well built and when the sailor was going good, she called him for it.

"Okay, Mother," the sailor said. "You're next."

That was when the real action had started. Mother took out a knife and went to work on the big guy and when she got through and they got the sailor to the hospital they had to take fifty-three stitches in him to hold him together.

The place, I saw when we got there was about like Gene said it was. There were seamen and punks and girls around the place, and a juke box was screaming its head off, and the dance floor was half-filled with dancers.

I spotted a well-worn and aging bleached blonde I figured might make a good beginning for the questioning. I went over and bought her a drink and asked her if she knew anybody named Matilda. Matilda Rowe.

The blonde was pretty well stewed, and she looked at me and stared like I was insulting her, then she threw her head back and started to laugh.

"What are you laughing at, sister?" I said. "Do you know the girl?"

"Know Matilda?" she said. "Listen. Anybody with a name like that should be dead."

I got a funny mind. It's like a cash register, sometimes, or like a cash register that doesn't show the amount right away when you ring up something.

I knew what she said had hit something, but I couldn't think, right now, what it was. It was like the dope about Lefty's brother blowing up the German tank with a hand grenade. That had hit pay dirt, too, but it was pay dirt like you might find on your boots and couldn't remember where you might have picked it up.

There wasn't time to ask any more girls because Mother was coming around, eyeing Gene and telling the guys and gals to drink their drinks because she ran a respectable joint and it was closing time.

But all that night I kept thinking, between winks, what it was the blonde had said that had hit the right spot in my brain and made it go click!

Next morning I got up and went to the fishing pier early. It's a long pier off the back end of Bay Front Park and it's full of cabin cruisers—"charter boats" they call them—that are tied, stern first against the long pier. I started with the first boat captain and went over his hooks until I found one about the size of the hook that had been found in Lefty's mouth.

"We use that size mostly for kingfish," he said.

"That's what I thought," I said. "Have you happened to have a party in the last week with one guy called Lefty in it?"

He hadn't. I went on down the line, talking to the captains, one after another. I'd talked to about half of them when I came to a young guy in a charter boat called Reel Lucky. I asked him.

He was down in the stern open deck of his boat and when I asked him, he turned the long visor of his cap up and looked at me up on the dock. He nodded right away.

"Sure," he said. "Four or five days ago I took out a party of four men. The one that acted scared they called Lefty."

"The one that acted scared?"

"Yeah. He didn't want to go, but they urged him. One of the others, the big one that was all dressed up for a lawn party, explained to me that Lefty was scared of getting seasick."

"Did he get seasick?"

"No, but the big one did. We struck a school of kingfish, but he wanted to fish for something else though Lefty said we were doing all right."

"What did they call the big guy?"

"Duke," the captain said.

The captain's name turned out to be Jensen. He was a clean-cut blond lad with a gold service eagle on the wing of his sport shirt.

"Would you know these guys if you were to see their pictures?" I asked him.

He thought a minute. "Is something wrong?" he wanted to know.

"If you had the party that I think you had, they were looking for a good spot to commit murder. Mind looking over some pictures?"

He hesitated. "I got some engine trouble," he said. "We've got a party to leave at ten o'clock for a fishing trip, and I want to get the engine fixed."

I could see his hands were all grease and the top of the engine hatch was up.

JUST then another young guy comes swinging down into the cockpit and it turned out to be Decker, Jensen's partner.

I was beginning to work out some things in my head.

"I'm with the New York Police," I said, "and I came down to get this fellow that's called Lefty. If your partner could handle the work today, I'd like to have you help me."

It seemed Decker would be glad to run alone that day. Anyway, it turned out, Decker had been sick the day that Jensen had out the party of four that I was interested in.

We got into Jensen's car. It smelled of fish. It smelled good. I like fish and everything that goes with them.

"I'll charter your boat for the first day I have free," I said, as we pulled out of his parking place. "Tomorrow, maybe, if we work fast."

"You don't have to do that," Jensen said. "I'll be glad to help any way I can. I thought there might be something wrong with that party of four, but then we get everything down here. One day you take a party of show people and another time you get a bunch of gangsters aboard."

"These four looked like gangsters?"

"I'd say so. That Lefty was really scared. He jumped out the minute we hit the dock when we got back at noon and he ran."

"You interest me," I said. "Tell me more."

"Well," Jensen said, "I didn't like their looks to start with, and when we get a party like that, especially if one of us is alone, I keep with the rest of the boats out in the stream."

"So you joined a kingfish ring, right?"

"You know about fishing, Mister?"

"My favorite sport down here," I said.

He warmed up, since I was talking his

language.

"When one of the boats spots a school of kings," he said, "he signals the other boats and starts circling the school. That keeps the school together."

"Sure," I said. "You circle the school and troll around and around the edge."

He grinned. "You know," he said. "And the more boats you get circling the king school, the easier you keep the school together."

"Right. So they made Lefty go against his will? Did they want you to go off some other place to fish?"

"They kept asking me about going farther out, for marlin. They just seemed to know the name. They didn't know anything about fishing."

"But you stuck to the king ring. Smart boy."

"I figured I was safer," Jensen said.

"Remember any other names? What did they call the other two punks?"

"Acker, or something like that," Jensen said, "was one."

I ran the names over in my mind. Acker and Duke and Lefty. "And the fourth?"

"Gates or something like that," he said.

"Gate?" I asked him.

"Could be."

"Anything else?"

"Only that they paid for a full day before they started, or that is they made Lefty pay."

"Hold it," I said. "You say they made Lefty pay?"

"Before we had cleared Biscayne Bay," Jensen said. "He had a roll of green stuff that would choke a sea cow."

"Go on."

"As I say, they paid for a full day, but when they found out we were going to fish the king ring all day and they couldn't talk me out of it, and there were all the other boats around, they wanted to go back. We docked a little after noon."

We'd pulled up in front of the Miami police station by now, and we went in.

Lieutenant Dave Cromer was just coming through the outer office. He looked at me and then at Jensen.

"Got a suspect, Madden?" he said, and started to laugh.

"Stick with us, Cromer," I said, "and let's go into the morgue."

Jensen identified Lefty Hanson's body as the guy who had been the Lefty in the party of four.

"And that was the kind of fish hooks we were fishing with for kings," he said. "That hook in his mouth."

Cromer didn't look so happy.

"Now wait a minute," he said.

"Haven't got time now, Lieutenant," I said. "The Yankees have just started to work. Come on into the picture gallery and see what happens."

I ASKED the boys in the identification department to get out pictures of anybody named Acker and anybody that went by the handle of "Duke" and also try "Gate" Klein. There were lots of Dukes, but the name of Gate was a little odd and I was just guessing it might be Gate Klein who'd done a stretch some time ago for a bank robbery.

Jensen recognized Acker and Gate Klein right away when he looked at their pictures. It took him a long time to find the right Duke, but finally, he settled on a big mug called Duke Balto.

All the time Jensen was looking for the right Duke, Lieutenant Cromer hung around with a smug look on his long and hungry face, as if just waiting to laugh when the right time came. I got to feeling more and more as if I wanted to poke him.

About now he started to grin.

"I hate to spoil your fun, sonny boy," he said, "but Acker and Gate Klein have already been found, dead in the Park. They were shot during the night. So you won't pin anything on them." Then he sobered as if it had just come to him that he had spoken out of turn. "Now wait a minute," he said. "This ties up with the whole picture. Where's this Duke Balto?"

I ignored Cromer. It was fun. I turned to Jensen.

"Do you know if any of these guys had a car?" I asked.

"I don't think so," he said. "The day I saw them, they got out of a taxi. I remember because I was looking for customers."

I turned to Cromer. "What time do the morning trains pull out of Miami?" I said.

"Just cool off, Madden," he said. "It's about time you tell me what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about the guy that killed Lefty and the other two. His name is Duke Balto and unless he had a car down here he'll be lamming out of here on the next train."

I looked at my watch and it was eight-thirty already. The clerk at the desk looked at his watch.

"I believe the Daylight Express and the two sections of the Champion have already pulled out for the North," he said.

Cromer gave him a dirty look, then he

seemed to forget his jealousy.

"That's right," he said. "Balto might be on one of those trains." Cromer's face got a little red. "In that case, we sure missed 'im."

"We can fly to Jacksonville and catch Balto there when he arrives," I said.

"Now wait a minute," Cromer said. "You don't know that he's left."

"That's right," I said, and things began clicking right along in my mind, like the tail end of a jigsaw puzzle going together. "And I got a hunch we can find out in short order. How many cemeteries have you got in Miami?"

Dave Cromer was right on the button there.

"Six," he said, then his face got redder and he asked, "What in thunder has that got to do with it?"

"Let's get on the telephone and we'll find out. I could be wrong."

He looked relieved that I would admit it.

We started calling cemetery offices. There was only one office open yet. The rest apparently didn't open until later. I asked the one office that I did get about the name of Matilda Rowe. It took a long time to look through the directory of the buried dead, but finally the guy came back to the phone and said there wasn't anybody by that name buried in his cemetery.

"Look here," Lieutenant Cromer said. "What gave you the idea Matilda Rowe was a corpse?"

"Because," I said, "Matilda is an old-fashioned name. A girl who would run around with a punk like Lefty Hanson wouldn't own a name like that. She'd change it. I got the idea talking to a blonde up at a juke joint last night. When I asked her if she knew anybody by that name she said anybody with that name should be dead. I'm kind of thick, but the ideas come through after a while. It just came to me, Lieutenant."

He could have told me that was smart, but he just grunted as if he was mad he hadn't thought of it first.

By now somebody was at another cemetery office, but they didn't have any Matilda Rowe buried there either. We ran through two more, and no luck. I was beginning to feel pretty low when one of the boys in the outer office came in and handed me a telegram from the Inspector in New York. It said:

WHILE GETTING THAT TAN KEEP ON THE LOOKOUT FOR ANY SUSPECTS IN ARMORED CAR HOLDUP

LIEUTENANT CROMER was reading the telegram over my shoulder. He let out a laugh, but it was kind of sick.

"What makes your inspector think your crooks are down here in Miami?"

"Because it's the best place in the world to hide out," I said, and I began to grin a little myself. "And besides, the Inspector is psychic this time, because they are, or were."

Just then they got a line cleared to the office of a big modern cemetery out off the west end of Flagler Street and I started talking to the manager. I asked him about Matilda.

He ran through the files and found her.

"Yes," he said, "we have a Matilda Rowe buried here."

"When was she buried?" I asked him.

"April, twenty-second, Nineteen-thirty-nine," he said.

"Thanks," I said, and my heart settled back a couple of inches below normal. "That's funny," I said.

"What's funny?" Cromer wanted to know. He was all ears again to find me in trouble.

"I'm not sure," I said. "Anyway, let's go have a look." I turned to Jensen. "You may have to fly to Jacksonville with us, Jensen, if you don't mind. Better get out of that fishing outfit and into some civilian clothes—something medium or dark so you won't be noticed. And a hat with a brim."

When he had gone, Cromer and I drove out to the Peaceful Rest Cemetery. On the way out Flagler I told him.

"You see," I said, "I got a tick of the brain that Lefty Hanson might be mixed up in that job we want to draw together toox in New York. I got all the dope on hiraw me it seems he had a brother who was aho on beater in a tank. He got the blue thoves for blasting a German tank with wier grenade dropped inside it, then hern b ommer and raised cain. And it just ca it t e a while ago. You see, Cromer, mieness toves slowly, sometimes."

"That ain't what the mag the outa about Miami Madden."

"Okay, Needler. Anyw m Ae ieen trying to tie up Lefty Hansosoy Haneme big job in the past, and then. and n to me. The armored car holdup inr holcleark was pulled the same way thar waeistother got that German tank, by tand tva hand grenade inside and blowior hre fine crew. Then the armored car wan wad waff and they cleaned it out later ono tae hm't the first time that the no-good ho-war tf a war hero has used some of thee the .irs the hero brought home."

"Go on," Cromer said.

"So I'd been figuring that Lefty might hacht been on a big job like that and maybe in,ybe i excitement, they split up and Lefty got cras with the bulk of the dough. I was tryy goth work out in my mind where a crooiss t,ybe hide the dough for safe keeping unepiry an cooled off. So when I straighten a c,maybe brain tick that the blonde's worping iolwa—when she said Matilda should bightnd rwith a name like that—I had a hundd wvrruaybe a fresh grave might be a shou'rrarce. It would be right out in the onade'nde's nobody would think of looking anckinha should write down the name of the ong the the h the grave and he couldn't forge't fo inehe'd hid it. Nobody else in the in thethould think of looking there."

"You know," Cr i l, un-umitted, looking real serious, "I tre sravsou got something there."

"Only," I sai I e vesda Rowe was buried in the sprinow," een-eteen-thirty-nine. So there woulds, "I frony fresh grave to dig into."

Cromer." I l san his long chin.

"I seen." en n mean," he said. Then he thought wouis lond his eyes lighted up. "But wait st an, Maybe the stuff was buried undies one. one." He pulled through the cense't s jstes just then and he said, "Like ounaend sese stones here in this modern unosed ent They lay 'm all down flat, here." wai up got it," I said. So we drove to the une -found out where Matilda was buried of x sifted up the stone. There was a hole in the metal box had been, but it wasn't there now l thd the hole was empty.

"We got to fly to Jacksonville and catch the Duke up there," I said.

"How you figure about the numbers after her name in the note-book, Madden?" Cromer said, as we were driving out of the cemetery.

"Slow up and I'll show you," I said. I pointed. "Matilda was buried in a burial lot that was in the seventeenth row from the first corner of the cemetery you come to. Then her lot was sixteen lots down from the front. That was so Lefty could find it at night in the dark. That made seventeen, sixteen, like the numbers."

Lieutenant Cromer just drove back with one hand and pulled real hard on his chin with the other. For a minute, I almost felt sorry for the guy, but then I remembered all the nasty things he'd said against New York's Finest and I didn't feel so sorry.

We picked up Jensen in a business suit,

and with a broad-brimmed felt hat pulled down over his face. We picked him up at the police station, drove to the Miami Airport, where we chartered a plane and flew to Jacksonville. We passed all the trains on the way that had left Miami earlier that morning. . . .

THERE wasn't any way of telling what train Balto would be on. The only thing we could do was to walk casually through the trains as they came in, and try to spot him. We had the Jacksonville police checking all those getting off there to make sure Duke Balto didn't give us the slip.

Jensen spotted him. That was why I'd brought Jensen along.

We found him on the third train that arrived. Duke had been smart. He had taken the Palm Express out of the west side station in Miami and when we came into the lounge car, he was sitting in the lounge car with two suitcases beside him. One of the cases was brand new.

"Get ready for a fight," Cromer whispered.

"Don't worry about me," I said, and I stopped in front of Duke Balto.

Duke was a big guy, nicely built, and good-looking, and he dressed flashy. He looked up at me casually.

"Duke," I said with my hands at my sides, "you're under arrest for murder."

I didn't say it loud, because I didn't want to start a panic in the lounge car.

Duke tried to put on the hurt air.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "There must be some mistake."

All the time, he was slowly getting up out of his chair and I could see his hand trying to slip under his coat without me noticing it.

I never like to go into a gun battle with a crook if I can help it. A left hook and a follow up with a right is a lot more fun, so I nailed him right there.

He staggered back and his hand went for his gun in earnest, so I knew I had to finish him right then. I tossed in a left to the stomach and put everything I had in a right uppercut to the button. It just happened to land neat.

Duke went backward over the chair where he had been sitting, and crashed to the floor. By the time he knew what had hit him I had frisked him and had taken his artillery away from him.

Duke got to his feet roaring about a mistake, but by now Cromer had him handcuffed and a gun in his ribs. We led him out of the lounge car and brought his suitcases along, opening the new one to make sure it

had the green stuff I'd expected was in there—which it was.

On the way through the station, with half the Jacksonville cops around us, Duke Balto put up one last argument, so I gave him the treatment of how we knew.

"After you and Acker and Gate Klein and Lefty Hanson pulled that armored car job in New York," I said, "Lefty got away with most of the money during the excitement. You and Gate and Acker came down to Miami looking for him later. You found him, and took him out on Jensen's fishing boat.

"When you could get the charter boat off by itself, you planned to dump Jensen in the ocean, torture Lefty, find out where he had the dough hidden and then dump him over, too.

"But Jensen was smart. He wouldn't leave the other fishing boats, so when Lefty lammed off the boat and turned himself in for the little job in New York, you couldn't get to him. You waited around, and when he was taken across the street to the courthouse jail at night, you got him, worked on him all night and got the dope out of him. That fish hook torture, which you got the idea for on the fishing trip, must have done the trick. Lefty gave out about Matilda's grave and then you killed him. You didn't dare dig up Matilda's stone in the daylight and there wasn't enough darkness left after you'd killed Lefty, so you had to wait until last night.

"Meantime, you figured out that if you personally knocked off Acker and Gate Klein, you'd have all the dough yourself."

Duke Balto didn't say a word. He didn't have to. He looked guilty as sin and plenty scared.

We got to the police car that would take us to the Jacksonville airport north of town.

Lieutenant Cromer stopped and turned like he was going to say good-by to me, and glad of it.

"Well, Madden," he said, "I expect you'll be starting North now. You been quite a little help to me."

"Quite a little help?" I said, and I went into a touch of Southern drawl. "Listen what the man saiz." Then it was my turn to laugh. "I'm flying back with you to Miami, Cromer," I said. "I got a little unfinished business to take care of."

"Now listen," Cromer groaned. "You didn't do all this by yourself. You can't take credit for all of it."

"Credit, my old man's mustache," I said. "We've got a date to go fishing, haven't we Jensen?"

DOCTOR HUNTER HURRIED OVER AND THEN ...

YOUNG DOCTOR HUNTER, JUST RESUMING CIVILIAN PRACTICE, HOPED HE'D LEFT EXCITEMENT BEHIND IN THE ARMY. . . . BUT HE'S AWAKENED BY A PHONE CALL AT 5:30 IN THE MORNING.

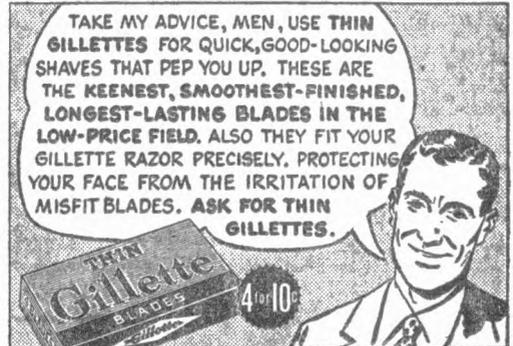
MAKE IT SOUND GOOD, LADY, OR..

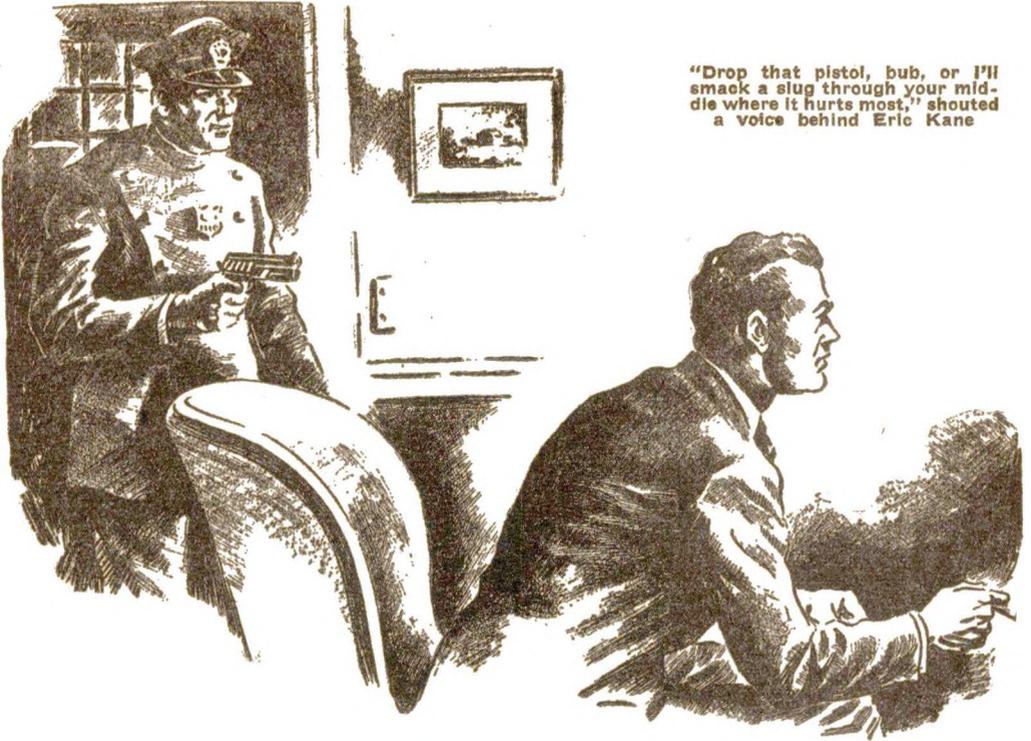
IT'S LIFE OR DEATH, DOCTOR YOU MUST COME AT ONCE!

14 ADAMS? BE THERE IN 20 MINUTES

H-H-HE MADE ME CALL, DOCTOR!

GET BUSY ON THIS SHOULDER, DOC. ONE FUNNY MOVE AND THE GIRL GETS IT





"Drop that pistol, bub, or I'll smack a slug through your middle where it hurts most," shouted a voice behind Eric Kane

THE GREATER CRIME

By ANTHONY TOMPKINS

CHAPTER I

Murder Comes Home

ERIC KANE, at forty, looked ten years younger. He hung up a twenty-dollar black felt hat and the very expensive topcoat he wore over his tuxedo. It was ten minutes after midnight. He walked slowly down the long hallway of his large city home. Martha had been dead for eight years now, but he always found himself half expecting her to come down the steps to greet him, as she had always done.

There was only a grim silence, to remind him not only of Martha's absence, but also that his oldest son Ralph was dead, too. Martha had died of swift illness—almost as swiftly as the Jap bullet had killed Marine Second Lieutenant Ralph Kane, on Iwo Jima.

Eric Kane selected a choice Havana from the humidor in his study, picked up the news-

papers he had brought home and sat back to relax. He hadn't liked the party which he'd attended tonight and he bowed out early—and gracefully. Everything Eric did was graceful. But parties fell flat, mostly because Martha was no longer alive to be with him and partly because he was still none too well accepted in society.

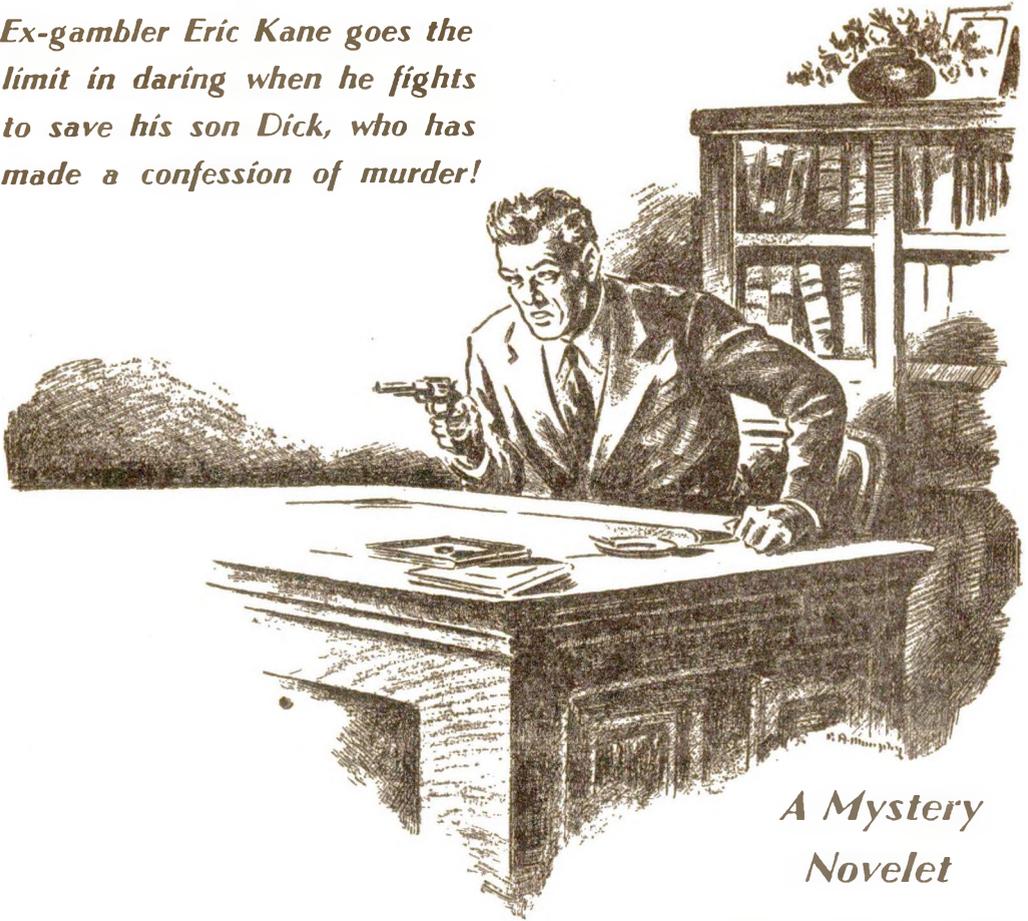
Not that Kane cared much, but in his line there were certain amenities to be observed, otherwise nobody would come to his restaurant and pay those exorbitant prices he charged for plenty of swank and much less good food.

A grandfather's clock in the hall struck the half hour. Eric yawned. It seemed funny to be tired this early when he had worked practically the whole night, most of his lifetime.

Then like an insistent echo, came the sound of the doorbell.

Before Eric Kane could reach the hall, someone was fitting a key into the door. It

Ex-gambler Eric Kane goes the limit in daring when he fights to save his son Dick, who has made a confession of murder!



A Mystery Novelet

opened and a younger counterpart of Eric Kane, his son Dick, suddenly burst into the house.

"Dick!" Eric gasped. "What in thunder's the matter?"

"I killed him," the seventeen-year-old boy cried. "I killed him. I know I did. He was lying there on the floor, all blood!"

For a moment the hallway spun before Eric's eyes but, by an effort, he regained control of himself. This was his boy, the only son he had left! Dick was also dressed in a tuxedo and, in this crisis, he looked like Eric, thought like him, and acted like him. Too hot-headed most of the time. This was his son, with his right sleeve saturated with blood.

Eric grasped the boy by both shoulders and shook him hard.

"Take it easy," Eric snapped. "Quick! Tell me about it!"

The boy shuddered.

"I—I slipped away from school early tonight. I—I did that last week too. School gets pretty boring sometimes, Dad. I went into town—to a gambling house."

UNCONSCIOUSLY Eric Kane winced at those words, which from Dick seemed to sear into his heart.

"Canada Louis' place," he said mechanically. "That's about the type which would appeal to you. Well, go on."

"Dad, I didn't mean to do it. Last week I won six hundred dollars. But I got into a fight with a man there. He said some of my winning chips were his. We—battled it out and I knocked him cold. He couldn't fight much and you know I won the inter-prep boxing matches."

"Yes, yes," Eric stormed. "I know all about that. Get down to facts about tonight. Tell me why you say you killed someone and why your sleeve is bloody."

Dick grasped the back of a chair for support. He was weak, exhausted, and showed it. For the first time Eric Kane noticed that his shirt and his coat shoulder were torn.

"I sneaked out of school and went back," Dick said, in dead tones. "I was told to go upstairs to a certain room. I did. It was dark and the lights wouldn't work."

"I know." Eric's blue eyes were mirrors of

ice. "The man you had a fight with last week came in."

"Y—yes. He rushed me, hit me several times before I could get set. Then I let him have it. We battled like fools for five or ten minutes. He got his arms around me. I—was carrying Ralph's big knife in a holster under my arm. It was a crazy thing to do, but I figured on winning a lot of money and maybe I'd need something to protect myself with."

"Keep to the point!" Eric demanded. "So you hit him?"

"Well, this man saw the knife and drew it. I thought he was going to kill me so I got scared, but I didn't stop fighting. A couple of times I felt the knife whiz past me. Then I hit him a good clip and he fell down. But I was off balance. I bumped into a chair and fell myself. The fall must have dazed me."

"When I got up again and started moving toward the door, I stumbled over something in the dark. I struck a match and that man was on the floor. Dead! The knife was right through his heart. I had killed him."

"What makes you say that?" Eric asked quickly. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I am. I had hold of his wrist. I kept trying to twist it so he'd drop the knife. I—can't remember much, but he's back there dead. Dad, what am I going to do?"

"Who was the man?"

"I don't know. Nobody told me his name."

"What did you do after you discovered he was dead? I want details, Dick. Even minute ones."

"I snapped out of my daze when the match burned my fingers. I left the room and found that a hallway led me to steps that went to the first floor and a side door to the street. I'm a coward, I guess, Dad. I ran away."

"No man is a coward when he is trying to preserve his own life and freedom," Eric said. "Does anyone at school know you left?"

No, sir. I've got a private way out. When I'm sneaking out, I always go through my window, across the campus and then over the fence."

"Take off that coat—and the shirt," Eric ordered. "Hurry! Put on mine instead. We're about the same size. There isn't a second to be lost."

Five minutes later, Eric Kane was driving his car across town, heading for the express highway which would take him to the nearby suburban town where Dick went to school. Eric wore a silk lounging robe over his jersey tops and made a rather incongruous

looking figure.

The older man was talking firmly.

"Now listen, Dick, and make no mistake about this," Eric said. "You must slip back to your room and go to bed. Try to sleep. Try as hard as you can."

"Dad, I'll never sleep again," Dick groaned.

"You'll do exactly as I say," Eric cut in coldly. 'Hang up the tux. Make certain there is no more blood on your hand or arm. We didn't have much time to look while we were at the house. In the morning, report for breakfast and classes just as if nothing happened. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Yes, sir," Dick answered. "I'll do my very best."

"Listen, son," Eric said. "Killing a man is a serious business. Even at your age the law doesn't excuse it. You killed him in self-defense, but you lost your head and ran out. That aggravated your offense and now nobody would believe you were only defending yourself. But I'll get you out of it, somehow. You are not to worry. Don't give the slightest indication of nervousness, even if the police come. They probably will."

DICK paled. "Do you think they'll—they'll question me?"

"They won't even suspect you," Eric said. "People at the gambling house don't pay much attention to anything except the cards and the dice and the wheels. There is no record of your leaving school. You're alibied, perfectly, so long as you keep cool. That's all you have to remember, I think. Just sit tight no matter what happens."

"Yes, sir," Dick replied. "I'll do anything you say. Dad, it's kind of tough. This happening after Ralph was killed fighting the Japs. But I didn't mean to kill that man. Honest, I didn't. He'd have murdered me. I know it."

"Then your conscience should be comparatively clear. Now keep quiet. I've some thinking to do."

Finally Eric pulled up. There was a brief handclasp by father and son. These two believed in each other and each would fight like a Trojan, in the other's defense. It was an odd feeling to Eric. His son had grown up—and he had killed a man.

Eric Kane watched Dick scramble over the fence, give a final wave and then vanish. Eric started driving back, rolling along as fast as he dared. He supposed all this was retribution for his own sins, somehow, but he wondered if he deserved such stern payment. Yet this was no time to weigh the pros and cons. He must get back to the

house before the police arrived.

For arrive they would—Eric had not the slightest doubt about that. On that murderous jungle knife was etched the name of his dead son—a name listed in directories. The police would get on the trail soon.

Reaching the neighborhood of his home, he braked the car to a crawl. Finally he stopped it, got out and peered around the corner. There was a car parked in front of his house. Eric left his coupe where it was, cut through yards and reached the back door of his own home.

Having a key to the rear door, he let himself in quietly. The front doorbell was buzzing insistently. He tiptoed as rapidly as possible to the stairway, went up one flight. At the top he paused to smooth his hair, to let his heart stop pumping like a machine-gun and to compose his features. Then he snapped on the hall light and started down the steps, pretending to be annoyed because his doorbell was ringing at this time of night.

The bloody clothes were upstairs, well hidden. Eric almost felt at ease as he unlocked the door and pulled it wide. There was a police officer standing on the porch, a giant of a man with a sullen mouth and large, very bright eyes.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" Eric simulated surprise. "Captain McMasters! What are you doing around here at this hour?"

"Hello, Eric," McMasters said. "Surprised to see me, eh? I know you don't like me and the feeling is mutual, but I'm coming in anyhow. Official business."

He walked into the hall and Eric closed the door after him. "You're wrong, Captain," Eric said. "I got over all that long ago. Sit down. I'll fix you a drink."

As Eric manipulated the decanter, ice tongs and glasses, he was pleased to note that his hands didn't shake at all. He handed McMasters his drink.

"We're getting on in years, Mac," he said. "It's time we stopped being foolish. True, you arrested me for murder, back in Nineteen Thirty-Two, wasn't it? You'd just been made a captain and I guess the promotion made you sort of impulsive. It just happened I didn't commit the crime you accused me of and the right man was found. Of course I was sore. Spending a month in jail is no fun any way you look at it. But I've forgotten all that now."

"I haven't forgotten." McMasters was smiling. Eric thought he looked like a cat after it had finished a bowl of cream. "I made a mistake. I admit that and I've paid

for it ever since. Because of my mistake, I've stayed a captain when I should now be an inspector. Well, I won't make the same mistake twice. Where did you spend the evening?"

"At James Loring's home." Eric studied the rotating cubes of ice in his glass. McMasters knew something. "Why?"

"Well, you see," McMasters said, "there was a murder tonight. A particularly nasty killing. In a gambling house. Know anything about it?"

Eric slowly shook his head.

"Nothing. I don't go near those places any more. True, I once owned a string of the best gambling houses in town, and I made a lot of money. The owner of such setups can't possibly lose. But I stopped, Mac. Right now I wouldn't bet even money that it would be daylight at noon tomorrow. Did you ever know why I stopped?"

"Can't say I did," McMasters was interested.

"Because of my wife," Eric said slowly, his mind going back into the too vivid past. "Eight years ago, Martha and I were visiting an aunt of hers in the country. It was winter and we were snowed in. Martha developed an appendix attack. No doctor could get out because of the drifts. I decided to battle the snow and take her to a hospital. The appendix was badly inflamed and threatened to burst. That would have been fatal. But, mind you, it might not have burst."

Eric took a long drink and gazed moodily at McMasters' huge face before resuming.

"I put her in the car and started," he went on in icy tones. "We'd have made it all right, but the car skidded and went into a ditch. It turned over twice. That did it. Martha died the next day. I had gambled for the very last time. I gambled that I could reach the hospital—and I lost."

"And since then you don't gamble," McMasters grunted heavily. "I suppose there is a moral some place in that yarn. Perhaps a desire on your part for some sympathy too. It won't work, Eric. I'm going to arrest you for murder, hang the crime on you and see that you burn."

"Murder!" Eric pressed amazement into his tone and widened his eyes.

"That's what I said," McMasters said coldly and he reminded Eric of a wolf about to spring upon a catnip mouse. "No doubt you got an alibi, but it won't work this time."

"Is this a joke, McMasters?" Eric asked.

"You know it isn't," the police officer chuckled. "You're clever, Eric, but not clever enough. It'll be the chair."

CHAPTER II

The Closing Net

THE McMASTER'S grim threat, Eric Kane gave the visible start of amazement expected of an innocent man.

"What the devil are you talking about?" he demanded.

McMasters took a big knife which Eric instantly recognized from his pocket. It was wrapped in a handkerchief. He placed the knife gently on the table beside him.

"Ever see that before?" he asked.

Eric shrugged.

"I've got one just like it, I think," he said. "My son was killed in the Pacific and they sent home his personal things. A knife like that was among them."

"Let's see it," Masters suggested with a wide grin.

Eric arose, walked over to his desk and opened a drawer. Then he opened more drawers. Finally he returned and sat down again.

"Mac," he said slowly, "I did have such a knife. It's missing. I haven't the slightest idea what could have happened to it. If you believe that is the same knife, you're mistaken."

"I can prove it's the same knife," McMasters said. "It's got your son's name etched on it. That's why I came here. To find out why you stabbed Max Conlon."

Eric blinked.

"I—didn't stab anyone. I've never heard of a man named Max Conlon."

McMasters wrapped the knife up again.

"Mac worked for Canada Louis," the detective explained. "Canada Louis bought out some of your joints. Tonight Max was knifed through the heart—with that little toy I just showed you. Come off of it, Eric. You killed him and I'll prove it. Several people saw you at the place. Saw you gambling. Lie out of that if you can."

"No," Eric answered. "I don't have to lie out of anything. Those people who claim to have seen me are mistaken because I spent the evening at James J. Loring's home, attending a high class social affair. Telephone Jimmy Loring and ask him. I was at Loring's house from eight-thirty until nearly midnight. I can account for every moment of my—" Eric hesitated just the slightest

interval—"of my time," he concluded.

"Then you came straight home?" McMasters demanded.

"Naturally. I'm not a playboy. I like the comfort and ease of my own home."

"Why didn't you answer the doorbell?" McMasters snapped. "I was punching it for at least three minutes before you came downstairs."

Eric sighed. "I was on the verge of taking a bath. I had to slip into my trousers. I'd forgotten my slippers and had to step into my shoes again and lace them. That takes three or four minutes. I heard the bell."

McMasters arose, lifted his glass and drained it.

"Thanks for the drink, Eric," he said. "You'll hear from me again. And I will check up on your alibi. I think it can be broken because you killed Max Conlon. Good night. Happy dreams. And Eric, you're a smooth liar, but I caught you tonight. I was ringing your doorbell for at least fifteen minutes. Think that over."

McMasters closed the front door. Eric sat down in one of the severely straight backed chairs and wiped sweat off his face. Things were bad. McMasters was not only heavily suspicious, but he had some things to go on. He knew very well that Eric hadn't been home when he arrived.

And there was one other item. Eric had left the party, which bored him, for a leisurely stroll through Loring's large grounds. He smoked a very long cigar, slowly, and it must have taken at least forty minutes. To reach Canada Louis' place from Loring's home, murder a man and get back all in forty minutes would have been quite possible.

Furthermore, he'd met Monty Price in the gardens. At an unfortunate moment too because Eric had stepped out the gate, stood on the sidewalk a few moments. Then, as he turned to walk back into the grounds, Monty Price had appeared. If McMasters ever talked to Price, there was going to be trouble. It would be difficult to convince McMasters that he hadn't been out of the Loring estate for the full forty minutes.

For more than half an hour Kane sat there, racking his mind, trying to find some way out of the predicament which confronted him. The knife was substantial evidence. He couldn't deny ownership, or explain how a murderer had gained possession of it.

Everything he said would be construed as a lie so he must maintain silence. This would delay McMasters, if nothing else.

WORSE than his own predicament was that of his son. Eric felt no anger toward the boy. During his life he'd gotten into plenty of messes himself. He'd gambled and fought, slipped away from school and told lies, when necessary. Dick was a killer, but not a murderer. There was a difference.

The idea of turning Dick in never entered Kane's head. Rather than do that, he would unhesitatingly have taken the blame and shouldered the punishment for the crime himself. After all, Dick was only a kid starting in life, with years ahead of him. At forty, Eric was suddenly feeling old. No, Dick deserved all the breaks.

He shook himself out of that morose lethargy. Perhaps McMasters wouldn't find a thing beyond an air-tight alibi. People at gambling houses are not inclined to mix with the law. If anyone there had seen Dick and mistaken him for Eric, those people would probably change their minds when they realized it would mean a trip to court, the witness-stand and the disclosure that they frequented gambling houses.

All in all, Eric thought he had a fair chance. McMasters was working on bluff backed up by an intense hatred. McMasters had never forgotten what a fool Eric had made of him those many years ago. He was the type of man who doesn't forgive. If he could send Eric to the chair or to prison, he'd do about anything possible to attain this.

Captain McMasters was a very dangerous man.

In the morning, the clamor of the telephone awakened Eric Kane. Somehow he had finally fallen asleep. For three or four hours the phone kept ringing every twenty minutes or half hour. People, his friends, were calling to ask why the police were interested in Eric's whereabouts the evening before.

Patiently and carefully, Eric explained the situation, always adding:

"This particular cop doesn't like me. It happens I could not have killed that man so I'm not at all worried. Thanks for phoning. If McMasters returns, just tell him the truth."

By eleven o'clock Eric was working on a list of the people who had attended the party. Those he knew formed ninety percent of the guests. He kept checking off their names as they phoned. But the name of Monty Price was still unchecked. McMasters hadn't reached him yet and Price held the key to the whole thing.

At three in the afternoon, Eric went to his restaurant. He hadn't dared call Dick but he did so now, from a public booth. Dick was worried, but so far nobody seemed to know he'd left the campus.

"You're safe," Eric told him. "Perfectly safe. They've already come to me about the knife but, you see, I've got an alibi for the time that fellow was killed. They can't touch me, either."

"Gosh, Dad," Dick groaned. "Sometimes I feel as if I ought to give myself up."

"Nonsense," Eric snapped. "Don't even think of such a thing. That man had it coming. I've discovered he didn't amount to much anyway. Just another crooked gambler. And, Dick, if they arrest me, pay no attention to it. That will be just routine stuff. I'll be free again because they can't prove anything against me. Goodby, son. Have faith in me. I can handle this."

"If I didn't think you could, I'd tell them the whole truth," Dick answered. "Thanks, Dad, for all you're going through for me. I sure acted like a fool."

Eric hung up. The kid was made of the right stuff. That he had become involved in this trouble was the result of an accident. Dick hadn't intended to kill anybody. He had been fighting to save his own life. Also, he was young. Inclined to spur-of-the-moment actions, he'd run out after the man dropped. It was too late to remedy matters now.

They'd both have to bluff it out. And once again Eric reaffirmed, in his own mind, the fact that he'd take the blame if McMasters really got something to go on.

At seven that night, the headwaiter came into Eric Kane's office and said that he was wanted at the table of Monty Price. Eric held his breath for a moment. Then he walked through the exclusive, polished, expensive restaurant and sat down at Price's table.

Monty Price was gray-haired, something of a playboy still and with enough money to satisfy his ego and whims. Nice looking, well-dressed and educated, Monty was an enigma. Everybody wondered why he'd never married.

"Hello, Eric," Price said. "Sit down. I'm in somewhat of a quandry. A detective talked to me today."

"McMasters," Eric nodded. "I know. He talked to me last night. The man has a silly notion that I killed somebody. However, the crime happened when I was at Loring's party. McMasters is questioning everybody there."

PPRICE buttered a bit of Melba toast. He didn't look up.

"Eric, you may not be generally accepted in society, but I like you, and I know of no one who doesn't. Whatever happened last night is none of my business. Not even the fact that I saw you entering Loring's gardens through the side gate."

Eric Kane spoke in a low voice.

"I was taking a stroll, just as you were. The party became dull. I stepped out to the sidewalk for a few moments. I did not leave. I did not kill that man. I didn't even know him."

Price looked up, his blue eyes steady.

"I believe you, Eric. You're the kind of a man who, if he wanted to kill someone, would go and kill him and to blazes with the consequences. You wouldn't sneak away afterward. Unfortunately, the crime happened while you were unaccounted for in the house, but nobody seems to have missed you. I made inquiries, for your sake."

"Thanks," Eric said. "I'll try to express my appreciation some day."

Price laughed. "I don't need a thing, Eric, but the set-up is certainly wonderful for blackmail. Your alibi is wide open so far as I'm concerned, but only with me. Nobody else realizes it and I'm keeping quiet."

"What did you tell McMasters?" Eric asked. "That man is an unholy devil when he gets his nose on a trail. He hates me, too."

"I told him you were in the house all the time—that I saw you continuously all during the evening—that, at the time of the murder, you were seated close to me listening to that abominable string quartette Loring dug up somewhere. I made it strong because the situation called for strength."

Eric sighed in relief.

"Then McMasters is stuck. Thank you again, Price. . . I hope I can repay you some day."

Price grinned and waved his hand in a gesture of dismissing the whole idea. Eric walked back to his office. As he reached for the door, a huge bulk brushed against him.

"Good evening, Eric," McMasters said pleasantly. "I see you and Price had quite a talk. An interesting man, isn't he?"

"Quite," Eric replied. "He asked me to his table to inform me that you had been on my trail. Price claims to have observed me most of the evening. I didn't notice him, but if he saw me—well, it's all that's necessary."

"Sure is," McMasters dropped his voice. "But it doesn't satisfy me, Eric. You murdered Max Conlon and you'll pay for it. I could make the pinch right now if I wanted to."

Eric laughed. "But you don't feel like it. Your memory is still fresh about the last time you arrested me. You were wrong then. You're just as wrong now. If you'd like dinner, I'll arrange it. On the house, of course."

"I don't mind," McMasters acknowledged the invitation with a wave of his hand. "You have the best food in town right here. It's a shame to break up a place like this."

Eric called a headwaiter and put McMasters in his charge. Then he went back to his office, lighted a cigar and sat there contemplating the glowing end of it with huge satisfaction. He was in the clear. Price would see to it.

That meant Dick was safe, too, and nothing else mattered. Eric went to work with an easy conscience. The whole thing was bound to be a dead issue soon, whether McMasters was on the trail or not. It made no difference, now, what he did.

When Eric left at one in the morning, he knew he was being trailed and paid no attention to it. He went straight home. The phone rang a half hour later. The voice was muffled.

"Hello, Eric," the man said. "This is Price. I find I need a little change. About five thousand. I'm sure you can help me out."

Eric smiled. "Of course I can. Only five thousand? Tell me, Monty, what stock dropped today?"

The voice hesitated for a second.

"Steel!" it said.

Eric roared. "So it was steel. Listen, my flat-footed and flat-headed friend. Tell Captain McMasters this trick was overdone by the Romans back in Caesar's day. Monty Price never owned a share of stock in his life. He's so wealthy that making any more money is uninteresting to him."

THE phone clicked hurriedly and Eric kept on laughing. If that was the best McMasters could offer, he was safe. Mac was playing rough, but in desperation. Eric felt safer than ever.

Even when the doorbell rang, he kept chuckling as he went to answer it, wondering what McMasters would try next. He unlocked the door, opened it and a black-haired, too sleek looking man came in. It was "Canada" Louis, who owned the gam-

CHAPTER III

The Need to Kill

bling houses Eric had once conducted.

"Nice to see you again, Eric," Louis said. "You don't visit my places very often."

"Come in," Eric said curtly. He'd never liked this slick black-haired man. "Captain McMasters seems to think I do."

"Yes," Louis said bleakly. "That's why I'm here. McMasters was giving us a going over. Luckily, one of the boys spotted the corpse in time and we converted the joint back to a club without dice or cards before the cops got there. Eric, did you bump that guy?"

"I did not."

Louis shrugged.

"I was just asking," the gambler said. "Max was a friend of mine. I liked him. He made money for me. He could turn a card neatly or act as a shill. Guys like him are rare."

"What do you want?" Eric demanded.

"Not a thing, Eric. Not a thing. Only that guy McMasters is poison and it seems to me I did notice you playing one of my tables last week. Or was I mistaken?"

Eric puffed contentedly on his cigar.

"It must have been my double. Every-night last week I spent at my restaurant. I was seen fifty or a hundred times. It couldn't possibly have been me."

Louis nodded.

"That's what I thought. I sent some of the boys to check because, you see, I don't pass up a good thing. I figured if you had been at my place, I could touch you for a little cash. But your alibi's too good. It's air tight.

"Uh-huh," Eric muttered softly.

Then came the question Eric was dreading and praying would never occur to this self-professed blackmailer.

"How's that kid of yours coming along?" Louis said. "In school, ain't he?"

"If you mean my son—as I customarily call him," Eric replied tartly, "he is at school. Why?"

Louis arose.

"Nothing much. Except I recall the kid looks enough like you to be your double. And age hasn't put any weight on you, Eric. You got the build of a seventeen-year-old kid. The only difference is a little gray hair at the temples which might not even be noticed. Well, so long, Eric."

"So long," Eric said. "Let yourself out."

They were closing in. The relentless McMasters. The double-crossing, avaricious Canada Louis. How long would it be before one of them got some concrete evidence? Eric Kane slept very badly that night.



WHILE Kane was preparing his breakfast coffee, the next morning, Dick phoned from school. Dick exuded confidence.

"Dad, that big detective was here last night," he said. "He asked me a lot of questions, but I just said I'd never left the school. He told me about the murder and

how he suspected you. Dad, you don't think I'd better tell what I know?"

"Of course not," Eric said patiently. "I told you I was completely alibied."

"Okay, then," Dick responded. "Because if I believed they were going to try and fasten the guilt on you, I'd give myself up right away. But I fooled the detective all right. I asked him if he thought maybe I did it and he said that could be. He wanted to look around my room and I let him. I even showed him the tux you gave me."

Eric expelled his breath.

"Did he ask to see it or did you show it to him of your own volition?" he asked.

Dick laughed.

"I was smart. He looked over all my clothes. He was looking at the tux and I asked him if he thought he'd find blood on it."

"All right, Dick," Eric said slowly. "Thanks for calling, but you'd better not do it again. McMasters isn't above getting a court order to tap my phone wire. Just sit tight."

Eric hung up and the appetizing aroma of coffee was less appetizing. Dick, young and unskilled in worldly things, such as understanding a smart detective, had practically given McMasters a trail. Eric drank half the coffee in one gulp and then sped upstairs to get the bloody tux. He examined it closely. Only the right sleeve was bloody.

He carried it down cellar, saturated it with oil and threw it into the furnace. In a few moments there were only some blistered buttons left. These he carefully retrieved and smashed to powder with a hammer. Then he swept out the furnace and finally flushed it with oil, as if the oil feeder had leaked onto the furnace floor. Next he disposed of the ashes by flushing them down the set tubs.

He felt a little better after that and had another cup of coffee. But it occurred to

him, he now had no tuxedo. At the restaurant he wore only a semi-tux. A black suit with a soft shirt, but it wasn't a tux. He'd worn one the night of Loring's party so he had to get another.

Outside, McMasters' detective was on duty. Eric knew he was followed again, and this time it would be necessary to throw the man off the trail.

He got out his car and drove toward town at a leisurely speed. Behind him came the police car. Eric selected his destination shrewdly. It was an office building in a busy section. He parked directly in front, got out and walked to a tobacco shop at the corner where he bought cigars. Lighting one, he strolled back.

The detective was waiting. Eric sauntered into the building. There was a crowd near the elevators and he joined them. The detective kept his distance. Eric stepped into the elevator, just before the doors closed. He knew what would happen. The detective would take the next lift and try to find out whom he was visiting.

"Eighteen," Eric said, in a fairly loud voice to the operator. The detective didn't try to get into that car. Eric changed his mind as the lift started up. He asked to be let out on the first floor. Then he ran down the stairway, peered cautiously into the lobby and saw that it was clear. He reached his car and drove away, grinning.

Far downtown he visited a tailor shop and was fitted with a tux. He had to wait an hour until the necessary alterations were made, but he departed with the tux wrapped in brown paper under his arm. He drove home again, into the garage and let himself into the house through the back door. He started up the stairs to the second floor when he saw smoke curling from the door of his study. Eric walked in. Captain McMasters was comfortably seated in Eric's favorite chair and he was calmly reading a newspaper.

"Who gave you the right to invade my home?" Eric demanded hotly.

McMasters put the paper down.

"Hello, Eric. Nobody asked me in. I rang the bell, there was no answer and, lo and behold, the door wasn't shut tight. Now, being a cop, I wondered if anything had happened so I came in. Nobody home. I wanted to see you so I sat down. Do I need a warrant for that?"

Eric put the paper wrapped package on the desk. Of all times for McMasters to show this moment was the worst. He knew why the ungainly detective had come. His man

had reported that Eric had given him the slip and McMasters wanted to know why.

THE detective looked at the parcel Kane had laid down.

"What's in the bundle?" McMasters said. "Laundry?"

"Shirts," Eric replied. "I just bought them. What do you want, Mac?"

"Not a thing," McMasters arose. "I talked to Monty Price again last night. He kept insisting that he observed you practically every second of that period for which you need an alibi so badly. But then, I have to believe him. You two aren't terribly friendly. Price certainly has no motive to lie. A guy with all his dough can't be interested in blackmail. But a peculiar thing turned up."

Eric held his breath. "Well?"

McMasters grinned. "The funny thing about it all is that nobody at the party can alibi Monty Price. Nobody remembered him being around during the time you need your alibi. Some of the guests have vague recollections of seeing you, but not Monty. So what I want to know is this. How can Monty Price alibi you—assert that you were in Loring's house at the time, when nobody saw Monty? In fact, he was actually missed a couple of times."

Eric shrugged. "I haven't the remotest idea, Mac. There were a lot of people at Loring's. Everyone kept circulating around. I know I saw Monty several times."

"Oh, sure," McMasters agreed. "But you wanted to see him. About this knife, Eric. I bet that son of yours polished off a few Japs with it. Ugliest weapon I ever laid eyes on."

McMasters took it from his pocket, gripped it tightly and started shadow boxing with the thing. Suddenly it swept down, hit the paper wrapped bundle and sliced it open neatly.

McMasters hastily put the knife away. "Sorry. Guess I thought the room was full of Japs. Well, Eric, I'll be moving on. By the way, if you have a lot of affairs to be cleaned up, better take care of them. Like a manager for the restaurant and somebody to sign checks."

Eric walked with McMasters to the door.

"You're anticipating too much, Mac."

"No." The detective turned on him with a wide smile. "Not at all. In fact, I'm beginning to like you, Eric. Guess I always did, unconsciously. Funny thing, several times before this happened, I thought of coming to see you. To play pinochle, maybe.

But now you just aren't going to be available. And for the arresting detective to visit the prisoner in a death cell—well, it just isn't being done this season. So long, Eric."

"Goodby," Eric answered. As he began to close the door, McMasters turned again.

"Eric," he said, "I don't like your taste in shirts. Black shirts. And what material. Same stuff they make tuxedos out of. See you later. Maybe next time I'll have a warrant."

"I'll be here," Eric said stonily. "And remember Nineteen Thirty-Two, Mac. You made a complete fool of yourself then and you're heading in the same direction now."

"Am I?" McMasters smiled. "That all depends on how you look at things."

The rest of the day was fuzzy for Eric. Mac was getting too close and he was too sure of himself. Price had slipped, too—probably in attempting to emphasize Eric's alibi too much. McMasters knew when a man was trying too hard.

The real blow came that night—with the suddenness of a V-bomb. It was in the shape of glossy-haired Canada Louis who walked into Eric's office without knocking. He sat down and helped himself to a cigar.

"I been thinking that your kid looks so much like you as to be your twin," he said smoothly. "Same height and weight. Same looks. In a tux it would be hard to tell you apart."

"So?" Eric parried.

"Well, I got thinking. You couldn't have bumped Max Conlon. That's out. I'm satisfied about it. But your kid might have. And my boys told me a guy who looked like you had a scrap with Max a week before. Only the night it happened you were right here at your restaurant. So that eliminates you again. I sound just like a copper, don't I?"

"To me," Eric said slowly, "you're beginning to sound like the rottenest of all people—a blackmailer."

CANADA LOUIS looked up at the ceiling piously.

"That could be a nice sideline for a gambler. Well, I talked to some of my guests and I find a nice kid—a pretty girl. She told me the guy who had the fight with Max had been trying to shine up to her a little. She said he was nothing but an overgrown kid. Just like your son, Dick. And, to top it all off, she was at the club the night Max was bumped and she saw this same kid there. How about it, Eric?"

"Would five thousand hold you for

awhile?" Eric asked in a low voice.

"I guess so." Canada Louis contemplated his highly polished fingernails. "For maybe a month. You got a swell racket here. It must pay off nice. Sure, five grand would see me through for a month."

"I'll have it tomorrow," Eric snapped. "I don't keep so much cash around loose. The take from the business is checked every night by my cashier and I wouldn't want that much money missing. Coming back tomorrow night?"

Canada Louis got up.

"There's no rush. I'll send one of the boys around. Not that I don't trust you, Eric. You're a swell guy. But a man has to be careful. And, so help me, the monkey who calls will think it's just business with the gambling houses you sold me. Put the dough in a sealed envelope. Be good, Eric. And be careful—eh?"

Eric waited until Canada Louis had time to leave the premises. Then he opened a drawer in his desk and took out a sleek thirty-eight automatic. He pumped a bullet into the firing chamber with a vicious jerk of the mechanism. He was going to kill a man. He had to! It had come to that now. Canada would bleed him dry and then think up something else to make his life miserable.

So Canada Louis had to go. Before McMasters got on his trail. One thing about Canada Louis—he'd never take the kind of guff that McMasters could deal out. Alive he was a dangerous man to have around. Dead, he wouldn't make any difference.

By the time Eric was ready to leave the restaurant and go home, it was all worked out in his mind. He was followed again, of course, for McMasters was taking no chances. Arriving home, Eric went straight to the cellar. It was equipped with a lavish playroom. Part of the decorations was a cigar store Indian. He sawed the wooden Indian in half and then sawed off his feathers to give the head of the image a smooth, rounded look.

Next he carried the upper half of Indian upstairs and placed it flat on the bottom of a chair. He turned on the light, walked over and pulled the shade. Then he quickly lifted the wooden Indian into a sitting position. Outlined against the shade the object looked exactly like a man either reading a book in his lap or just brooding. They'd expect him to be doing some brooding.

He slipped out of the house, crossed the street from far down and came back behind the houses on the other side. He wanted a

look at that profile to make sure. Nothing must happen to his alibi tonight. The Indian made an excellent double. If Eric had been the detective, he would have been fooled by it himself.

The gun snug in his pocket, he made his way to the gambling house where Canada Louis maintained his office. Getting in was a cinch. Eric had never turned all the keys of this establishment over to Louis. Now he used some of them, passed through three doors which had highly tempered steel inside the panels and reached the steps leading to Canada Louis' office.

Eric went up the steps softly. There were no guards about. Canada Louis seemed to fear no one. Why should he? The office was practically the middle of an armed camp.

Eric selected a key to Canada Louis' office, inserted it gently and turned it, using a great deal of strength to make the movement slow and noiseless. He opened the door about half an inch. Canada Louis was seated behind his desk—once it had been Eric's desk—and he was busy adding up some figures.

Eric drew the automatic, pushed the safety off and carefully thrust the gun through the door. He drew a bead, placed Canada Louis behind the sights and his finger stiffened against the trigger. In imagination, he could see Canada Louis flop, see the blood spill from his head, see him twitch and die there on the desk. Yes, he could see him die. . . .

Slowly Eric lowered the gun. He couldn't do it. He simply wasn't a killer.

Then his jaw hung slackly and his lips moved as if in a silent prayer. It was a prayer of sorts, but a self-condemning one. He closed the door almost shut and left it that way. He walked to the narrow stairway and sat down.

He couldn't kill a man! Why then, would Dick kill a man? Even in self-defense? Dick could fight better than any punk such as Max Conlon. Dick had flattened Conlon with a single blow a week before. If Max Conlon was such a pushover in a fist fight, how could he have put up such a tremendous battle on this occasion? Also, when Conlon had drawn that knife with murderous intent, why hadn't Dick tried to escape rather than kill him?

Under the impact of the implications of these two questions, Eric Kane's eyes glowed with sudden hope. For the first time the utter absurdity of Dick's killing anyone struck him full force. Dick would never have slain anybody. He would have tried to escape!

For a while Kane fell into deep study. Then, at last, he raised his head and smiled grimly, his eyes on the ceiling. His thoughts were on the room upstairs where the murder had been committed. It was on the top floor, above Louis' office. Kane knew that room well. He'd once owned this gambling house. The room was fitted out for private gambling parties. It was used only occasionally.

He closed the door and snapped on the lights. The rug was light blue and the dark bloodstain in the middle of it was vivid. Eric turned slowly and surveyed the room. He knew every inch of it. He walked toward the far wall. There was a dark smear, about waist high across the wall. It was blood, of course. Eric never doubted it. He turned his back on the spot, deliberately moved up against it while facing the middle of the room and let his right hand go limp. It came into contact with the blood smear. To Eric that explained everything. It was the tip-off!

CHAPTER IV

Dressed to Kill



HOPE was surging high in Kane's heart as he crept out of the house. He went directly to the medium-class hotel where Max Conlon had lived. Eric knew a few things about him—knew he had a roommate. Whether or not he was in made no difference now.

Eric called the room. He said he was a friend of Max, with important news, and got permission to go up. The man who opened the door took one look at Kane's set face and started to slam the door again. With the automatic, Eric made a gesture indicating the man was to step back and raise his arms.

Eric kicked the door shut and kept the gun steady.

"Sit down," he said harshly. "You lived with Max a long time. What did he do for money besides work for Canada Louis?"

"Nothing. At least nothing I know of. Listen, pal! I'm not mixed up in this. I just live here!"

Eric hit him, not too hard, with the flat of the gun.

"Talk! You're lying and every time you lie, I'll know it and slug you again. Answer my question."

The man rubbed his face. "So help me, I don't know!"

Eric glanced around the room.

"This joint isn't much to look at on the outside, but this stuff is all Max's and it cost a lot of money. More dough than Canada Louis ever paid any of his men. Max had another income. Come on—out with it!"

He raised the gun suggestively. The man whimpered and covered his head hastily.

"No, no! Don't hit me again. Max was bleeding some guys. He knew things about them. He never told me any names, but he used to collect a few grand at one clip."

"Canada Louis, maybe?" Eric suggested.

"No. If he'd tried anything with Louis, Max would have had his throat slit long ago. Anyhow he liked Louis and all the boys there. They all liked Maxie too. He was an easy guy to get along with when he was sober and you didn't cross him."

"Sit there," Eric commanded. "Make a break for the door and I'll shoot the legs out from under you."

Eric frisked the room and found nothing. He departed, somewhat reluctantly. This was going to make Canada Louis plenty sore when he found out. Max Conlon's roommate would sprint all the way to Canada's place of business and tell him.

Canada Louis was in a safe spot and he would realize it. He could phone McMasters, tell him all he knew and explain he was doing it just to get even for the murder of an employee he liked. In fact, Louis had to do it to protect himself. He wouldn't want to be pegged by the police as a blackmailer.

Eric considered tying the man up, or slugging him into a comatose condition that could last for hours. But he found he couldn't do it. He was chicken-hearted and that was that. Even the glancing blow he'd administered with the gun had made his blood run cold.

He did lock the man in the room—a petty precaution, but it would serve to hold him there until Eric could get clear of the neighborhood. He rode away in a cab which he dismissed near a small park. He entered the dark spot, selected a secluded bench and sat down. He puffed on a cigar and thought until his brains ached.

Things were clearing up somewhat, but thus far there seemed to be no logical solution. As yet he had nothing he could throw to McMasters and take the heat off himself or Dick. One thing he did know for sure. Dick hadn't killed anyone or even accidentally been responsible for Max's death. Dick

was merely a stooge who had conveniently wandered into the path of a destroyer already bent upon killing Max.

Dick hadn't killed Conlon. Eric knew the boy was like himself, so exactly that sometimes it was amazing. They even thought the same and acted the same. There were identical little habits, such as wearing a fedora with the brim turned down only on the left. There was a reason for it. Eight years was a long time and they'd spent most of it together. The likeness had been born in Dick and brought to its fullness through constant association with his father. Dick wasn't a killer.

He'd been framed. Dick had been framed by someone who had first lured Max Conlon into the third floor room and, probably, knocked him out. Then the killer had concealed Conlon, caused Dick to come up to the room and had tackled him in the darkness. Perhaps he'd even said he was Conlon to make Dick identify him and know a fight was in store.

HE'D known that Dick carried a knife! How? Dick had taken the knife along under a sudden impulse. Eric's blood began to run faster and faster. He could feel his excitement mount. There was an answer to that. There had to be! Kane was getting close.

The killer had sent Dick sprawling. Certainly it hadn't been Conlon for Conlon didn't know how to fight. It had been someone with an excellent knowledge of boxing. With Dick on the floor the killer had dragged out the unconscious Conlon, stabbed him, left the body in the middle of the floor, after making certain that Dick's sleeve had come into contact with the blood welling out of the wound. There had been a great deal of blood. Then the killer had crept away and left Dick to discover the corpse and take the blame.

Eric Kane threw the cigar away, left the park bench, and started walking toward the string of stores facing the entrance. Before he reached the gate, he was running. Speed wasn't essential now, except that he wanted to clear himself and Dick as fast as possible.

He squeezed into a phone booth and dialed the school. He soon had Dick on the wire.

"Listen, son," he said. "This is very urgent. Things haven't been going so well and you may be able to clear up the whole thing with one explanation. Did you wear that knife under your coat—in its leather scabbard?"

"Yes, sir," Dick replied. "In the scabbard."

"Yet someone must have seen it," Eric said

quickly. "Did you, for instance, go to the wash room and remove the coat?"

"Yes, sir, I did. Just after I got there. My hands and arms were all dirty from scaling the fence."

"Eric took a long breath. "Who was in the wash room at the time?"

"Just one man," Dick replied. "I didn't pay much attention to him. An elderly man. He was dressed to kill."

"Dressed to kill is right," Eric said. "Thanks, Dick. That's a big help and you are not to worry. If things pan out right, I'll be at the school in the morning and explain the whole thing. Just in case they don't turn out, keep on sitting tight."

Eric Kane hung up and a slow smile of satisfaction came over him. He took a taxi to the home of his recent host. He dismissed the cab in front of Loring's house, but he didn't go in. He walked around to the side gate. It was the place he'd stepped out of that night of the murder. Pushing the gate open slowly, so it wouldn't creak too much, he moved through it, stopped and turned around. He lighted a match, shaded the flame with his palms and brought the flame close to the gate and its supporting pillars. There was a dark stain against the white painted wood.

The resulting elation made him shake visibly. He stuck a cigar into his mouth and bit on it hard. What he knew was valuable, but it wasn't evidence. Not unless he could make a man break down. Eric was thinking hard again as he walked across town. Once he thought he heard footsteps behind him along the silent street, but when he looked, there were only shadows and he shrugged, believing the whole thing was getting on his nerves.

Then he was in front of Monty Price's large house and lights glowed with comforting satisfaction from some of the windows. Eric rubbed his hands along his thighs and prayed. He started through the gate. It was about a hundred feet to the door and very dark. Suddenly a police officer stepped out before him and Eric almost yelped with fright.

"Hello, Eric," a familiar voice whispered. "Surprised to see me?"

"McMasters," Eric breathed again. "You nearly scared me to death. What the devil are you doing here?"

"Well, you see, I figured Canada Louis knew more than he claimed so I went there tonight. To sort of take him over a bit. And who do you suppose I saw going in—

by the back way? You guessed it—you! So I hung around a bit. Then you came out and I started some trailing. I'm pretty good at it for a big guy. So—when you headed in this direction, I knew where you were going and I simply took a little short cut."

"And what do you intend to do now?" Eric asked. "Listen, Mac, I need a break. I know you are darn close to what you believe to be the truth. But it isn't. I swear that. What are you going to do about it?"

"Just this." McMasters bent closer. "When you go in, see that the door isn't locked. Fiddle with the latch buttons or something. Okay?"

"Okay!" Eric answered fervently.

HE WALKED up on the porch and rang the bell. Monty Price opened the door and let him in. Monty seemed worried.

"Eric, you looked fagged. What's happened?"

Eric sat down in the living room, his back toward the door. Monty occupied a chair behind a small desk.

"Monty, when I sold my gambling business to Canada Louis, I didn't sell all of it," Eric said. "One little part I retained and a certain man ran it for me. He died—under peculiar circumstances—a couple of days ago. He was a good man. Max Conlin, of course. He used to—shall we say—collect money from my friends. Suddenly I found myself accused of his murder. I had an idea who might have killed him. At times Max Conlon became a trifle threatening to these friends of mine. When they didn't pay up on time and in full. So I examined these friends. I discovered you were among them."

"You rotten blackmailer!" Monty Price rasped. "After I went to all the trouble of helping you, now you come here to keep on bleeding me. I can't deny it. If you know this much, you're the man behind Conlon and you have the evidence. All right, I'll pay. But get this—if I find a chance to upset the alibi I so carefully built up for you, I'll see that you go to the chair. Even if this business you have on me is publicized."

"I also know who killed Conlon," Eric said blandly. "You did. You were alibiing me frantically. In fact, you wanted to alibi me so much you made Captain McMasters suspicious? Why, Monty? The answer is obvious. In alibiing me you alibied yourself. You were missing from the party too.

Things worked out well. You went to Canada's place to pay Max Conlon off. But you saw my son there and you knew he'd had a fight with Conlon. You also noticed that my son wore a big knife under his coat.

"You knocked Conlon out, brought my son to that room upstairs, and battled with him in the dark. Then you killed Conlon and made my son think he did it. But the boy was pretty good with his fists—more than you bargained for—so when it was over, you were so tired you leaned against the wall in that room. That was a mistake, for your right tuxedo sleeve was soaked with wet blood and it smeared on the wall. Without noticing the blood, you went back to Loring's party, got through the gate and smeared some more blood there.

"When you saw me wandering about, you were forced to hide, until I stepped outside to the sidewalk. Then you pretended to be just coming from the house. I was your alibi then. You had to save me to save yourself."

Monty Price was quick. Perhaps he'd already pushed the desk drawer open. At any rate, the gun appeared in his hand like magic.

"Too bad, Eric," he said. "I liked you. I don't even believe that part of your story about you being a blackmailer. I think you found some clues and followed them up. But I'm forced to kill you. There is nothing left for me to do. I'm not a born killer. My hand was forced before, but once it became bloody, another murder doesn't mean very much. I'm really very sorry, Eric."

A voice boomed out from behind Eric.

"Drop that pistol, bub, or I'll smack a slug right through your middle where it hurts most."

Monty Price turned deathly pale, but the gun didn't move.

"McMasters," he said softly. "I should

have known this was all set. There was no one behind Max Conlon. But I can kill Eric. He brought this to my doorstep. I can kill him and let you plug me. I'd rather die with a clean bullet than in the electric chair."

"If you killed Max Conlon because he was blackmailing you," McMasters thundered, "no jury with brains will enter a first degree murder conviction. Use your head."

Very slowly Price laid the gun down. McMasters pounced. In a few moments Eric was writing down Price's confession. Then the house swarmed with police for a little while. McMasters went to do some more telephoning. There was a broad grin on his face when he returned.

"Eric, that feller I got watching your house just called Headquarters and said you hadn't moved in two hours. He thinks maybe you knocked yourself off and he wants to bust in."

Eric laughed. "Thanks, Mac. You more than made up for Nineteen Thirty-Two."

McMasters shook his massive head.

"The devil I did. In Thirty-two you had a whale of a good motive for killing a man and you didn't do it. This time you had hardly none at all and yet I figured you as the guilty party. I'm getting old, Eric. Old and feeble in the brain. I forget to size up a man before I make up my mind about him. I put you over the coals and I'm sorry."

Eric Kane rubbed a hand across his face.

"It's nothing, Mac. I really was guilty, you know. Not of murder but a greater sin. Like you, I jumped at conclusions, only in a much worse way. I thought my son was a killer. I actually believed it and went along on that theory. Then, like you, I sized him up and knew I was wrong."

"Yeah," McMasters said heavily. "We're both dopes. But I think you're the biggest and those games of pinocle you and I will play are going to prove it!"

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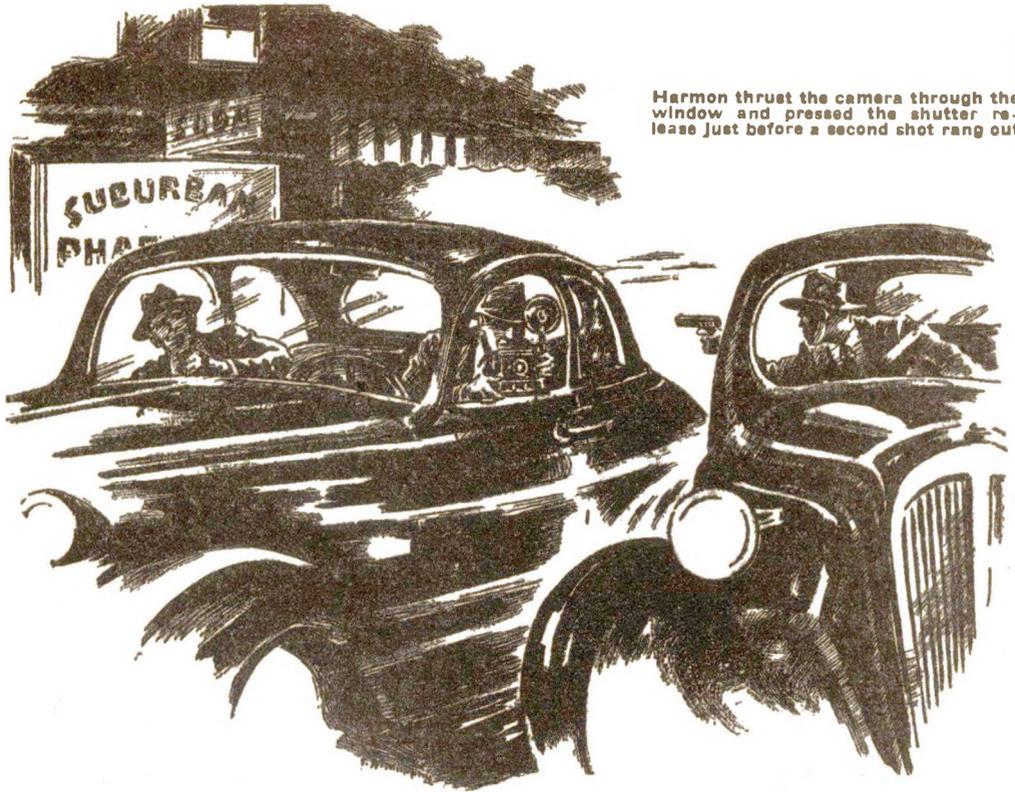
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When his father dies in a murder trap, Ray Harmon turns his camera into a fearsome Nemesis for an underworld Big Shot!

RAY Harmon carefully locked the doors of his sedan. His Speed Graphic and its accessories were inside and cameras of that sort are precious and easy to steal. Even in front of Police Headquarters, where Ray Harmon had parked his car.

Harmon was of medium height, but wiry and gave the impression of stamina and speed, like his camera. His hair was light brown enough for him to have been called "Blondie" in college and he had made a fair center on the college second string.

For four years now he'd been devoted to camera work. It hadn't been difficult to get a job on one of the big dailies because Ray Harmon possessed that certain, indefinable knack a newspaper photographer needs. Also there was the little matter of his father being a detective-lieutenant in charge of the Jewelry Squad which might give Ray, and his newspaper, certain breaks in stories.

Harmon waved to the captain and several officers behind the big desk. He walked swiftly down a long corridor, paused by the door of the press room and was greeted by "Breezy" Anders. Breezy was police reporter on the "Globe" and his nickname was a sarcastic criticism of his laziness. He managed to be a good reporter without exerting himself to get his stories. To Breezy Anders, the telephone was the greatest of modern inventions.

"You're in a big rush, Ray." Anders smiled in his customary lazy style. "Never paid off to rush around, kid."

Harmon chuckled. "Pop wants to see me. He said it was important so maybe there will be a story."

Breezy Anders whistled softly. "About that bunch of stickup men and jewel thieves who have been preying on our best citizens? Of course that must be it. Your father was

slated for retirement months ago, but stuck because he was neck deep in running down those monkeys. Didn't want to turn in his badge until he collared them. I made a good human interest story about it, Ray."

"Yes, I know," Harmon nodded. "The clipping is in Pop's scrap book. That was nice of you, Breezy. Without that story maybe the Commissioner would have forced him to quit. Pop's getting on."

Breezy Anders' eyes narrowed speculatively. "Or it could be that your father's got a line on those three gorillas who busted out of the pen in the next state a few days ago. That would be a story. Those babies have sworn to go out shooting and I think they will. After all, they killed a guard on the way out of prison so what have they got to lose? Look. If it's that, tip me off like a good fellow. Do the same for you some time."

"It's a deal," Harmon moved away. "I'd better see him before the whole thing busts wide open. Stick around, Breezy."

ANDERS waved a lazy arm, turned and walked back into the press room. Ray Harmon went to the end of the corridor and entered an office without knocking. His father looked up and nodded. Detective-Lieutenant Joe Harmon didn't look his sixty-four years. He was straight and square-shouldered, with iron gray hair. His youthful face created the illusion that he was prematurely gray. Lieutenant Joe Harmon was all cop, every inch of his six feet.

"Sit down, Ray," he said quietly. "Thirty-nine years ago I joined the police force. My first night out I was lucky. I collared a man wanted for murder. It so happened that a newspaper man took a picture of me bringing that man in. Not much of a picture. Cameras weren't so good in those days and neither were the photographers. But that picture starts off my scrap book. I want to end the book with another shot of me hanging onto the neck of another badly wanted crook, or gang of thieves. I'll have the head man."

"Got a lead?" Ray Harmon asked anxiously. He wanted that picture to be the last entry in that scrap book just as much as his father did. "Is it that gang of jewel thieves you've been working on?"

Lieutenant Harmon grinned and wagged his gray head. "I'm not talking. Not right now. Maybe you'll get a nice surprise. And Ray—when it happens, I want you to take that picture."

"Right, sir," Harmon nodded. "I'll stick around and wait for the flash."

"Good. Stand by. It won't be very long now and you're going to be proud of your old man."

Ray Harmon was half out of the door when his father's phone rang. He turned.

Lieutenant Harmon seized the instrument, barked a greeting, listened for half a minute and then grunted assent.

He hung up with one hand, reached for his hat with the other.

"This is it, son," he said. "You'll be hearing from me in a short time now. What a surprise you're going to get. Wish me luck."

Their hands met for an instant. Then the older man was gone, hurrying with the steps of someone half his age. Ray Harmon walked slowly back to the press room. The flash would come there. He got no special advantages here. His father might be in charge of the whole investigation, but when the news broke, every man on duty in the press-room would know it at the same time.

Breezy Anders strolled in five minutes later, prying open the cellophane on a pack of cigarettes. They were brown paper things he had a merchant on the corner stock especially for him. Some of the reporters jokingly maintained that Breezy Anders smoked this brand because nobody else could and he was saved the trouble of reaching for his pack when someone wanted to mooch.

"Anything doing?" Anders asked. "I saw your pop going out like the place was on fire. And incidentally, I had a little chat with Sergeant Randall. He's in line for your father's job. Has been for about ten years and he swears if your father doesn't apply for retirement soon, he'll retire him with his fist. Randall's a nasty mug."

Harmon chuckled. "Pop could handle him in a walkaway. Anyhow, that retirement is due shortly. Pop's after his last bunch of law breakers. He told me to stick around and wait for a flash."

"Hm," Anders grunted. "Guess I'll stay too. One thing about your old man, he gets results. Takes time, sure it does, but dog-gone few men he brought in were ever let go."

Ray Harmon strolled over to watch a card game. Anders sat down, tilted his chair back, his hat down and promptly went to sleep. Half an hour went by. Then they all came to attention except Breezy Anders, who was snoring lightly. There were sounds of activity. Men running, car motors in the garage whirring madly. The phone rang. A flash!

"They've got the Vogan gang treed," the reporter who answered, bellowed over his shoulder. Then he sprinted for the door. "End of Victoria Lane. Abandoned house."

Ray Harmon sprinted to his car parked in front. As he released the brake, he heard his name called and saw Breezy Anders hurrying forward at lightning speed, for Breezy. Harmon let him in and then burned up the roads toward the end of Victoria Lane. It was an isolated section of small houses with small garden plots, mostly inhabited by suburbanites. The house they were after was somewhat isolated. There wasn't a building

within a quarter of a mile of the old, rambling ramshackle place.

POLICE had fanned out to surround the place. Harmon grabbed his camera and started running toward a spot where he could get good shots. This wasn't his father's case, but it was an important one. Three sworn-to-die-fighting convicts were surrounded and already battling. Harmon hoped they'd get it over with quickly so he could get back in time to answer the call having to do with his father's job.

He took one pan shot of the exciting scene and then set his lens for closer work. Police were gradually slipping nearer and nearer to the house. From a police car an inspector was bellowing orders through a loud speaker. The going was difficult. Care had to be exercised to keep officers from shooting one another. A policeman with a tear gas rifle was edging in. From the windows of the house, upstairs and down, came shots.

Then Harmon saw a figure sprawled out in the middle of the overgrown path leading to the big porch. It was a man, motionless with that strange inertness which is death.

A policeman, in uniform, made a crazy sprint toward the prostrate figure. A bullet stopped him and he went down, his leg shot out from beneath him. He crawled slowly away and the ground near him sprouted little geysers as bullets ripped into it.

Miraculously, he reached the security of a tree. Harmon hardly noticed the incident. His eyes were riveted on the motionless figure, on the gray fedora, the tan suit and the iron gray hair around the rim of the hat. It was his father!

Ray Harmon put the camera down, took a long breath and started running. He heard his name being shouted over the loud speaker, but he paid no attention. Something buzzed past him, like a bee in angry flight. He kept on going. It seemed that every policeman at the front of the house was shooting toward one window. No more bullets zipped past him. He heard a wild scream, looked up for a second and saw a man topple forward over the sill of a second story window.

Then Harmon was kneeling beside his father. He didn't take time to find out if he was alive. He simply hoisted the limp form to one shoulder and staggered back. Two cops came running to meet him and the others were concentrating their fire to cover Ray's retreat.

He reached a safe spot and gently laid his burden down. Then he saw the bullet hole. It was directly between the eyes. There were others, but this particular one told the whole story. Lieutenant Joe Harmon had died in harness. His scrap book wouldn't be finished the way he wanted it to be.

Ray Harmon gave a curse that half stuck in his throat. Then he reached out and tore

the rifle from the hands of a patrolman. Gripping it he dashed for a tree closer to the house. He got behind it, trained the rifle and waited. But Harmon was only one man among very many. One of the escaped convicts made a desperate attempt to kill more policemen. For an instant he was visible through a first floor window. Harmon never even pulled the trigger because half a dozen tommy guns and a score of revolvers and rifles went off before he could draw sight on the man properly.

The convict disappeared. There was no scream—nothing. But that man was stone dead. Harmon knew that. All those bullets simply couldn't have missed. Tear gas was fired through some of the rear windows and now an enterprising young detective was throwing more gas through the front windows.

Suddenly the front door opened. At first nobody appeared, but they heard the string of curses the last of the convicts shouted. He was gassed, maybe wounded and half mad with rage and desperation. He leaped onto the porch, holding two revolvers. Nobody opened fire. The convict was bleeding from a head wound, his eyes were glassy.

Then he gave a lusty shout, raised the gun, and died. The hail of steel that hit him turned him into a gory mass. Ray Harmon didn't look. He merely dropped the rifle and walked slowly back to where his father lay. A police surgeon was just covering the pallid face. Someone touched Harmon's arm. It was Breezy Anders.

"I'm sorry, kid," Anders muttered.

Harmon walked away. Automatically, he picked up his camera and automatically went about his business. He obtained good pictures, the kind that would make front and back page stuff. When he had enough, he trudged slowly back to where his car was parked.

Suddenly he stopped. Breezy Anders, coming up from behind, stopped too.

"Breezy, where's Pop's car?" Harmon asked. "He used his own sedan to get here."

Anders shrugged. "Look, kid. Your father wouldn't have driven right up to the front of the house. The car is probably hidden somewhere. He tried to sneak up, but those gorillas were on the watch."

HARMON was frowning. "Breezy, something about this doesn't ring true," he said. "If Pop knew those three killers were there, why didn't he take along a squad? He was well aware those men would shoot until they were killed. Yet he seems to have just walked into it. Breezy, I'm going back and look around before that path is muddled up by too many footprints."

Harmon retraced his steps. There were police all along the path, but the place had been deserted so long that the cement flags

of the walk were buried in grass and dirt. Soft dirt that took footprints quite well. Harmon knelt and then moved forward on his knees. His father's footprints were clear. His shoes had been equipped with a brand new pair of rubber heels that left perfect impressions. They formed a straight track in the direction of the porch.

Harmon thought: This is all silly. Pop wouldn't have walked right up to the door. He'd have dodged behind trees and shrubs. There are plenty of trees. It would be suicide to make such a direct approach, especially in daylight.

Two big brogans planted themselves close to Harmon's head. He got up slowly. The man he faced was towering, bulky and overbearing. Detective-Sergeant Jess Randall was smiling with one corner of his mouth.

"Hello, Ray," he said. "What the devil are you trying to do?"

"There's something funny about this," Harmon explained. "Very funny. From his footprints Pop seems to have walked straight up to the house. Would he do that if he knew those killers were inside?"

Sergeant Randall shrugged. "No telling what your father did, Ray. Personally, I think he got a tip these monkeys were here and he was trying to cop all the glory by capturing them alone. To avoid being pensioned off. To keep me from getting his job."

Harmon's fists curled. Randall was twice as heavy, a full five inches taller.

"I ought to punch your head off, Randall," Harmon said quietly. "In fact, that's just what I'm going to do!"

"Hold it." Randall backed away a little. "You're right. I deserve to be slugged. I didn't mean that, Ray. I take it all back. It was just . . . Well, your father and I didn't like one another too much. Professional jealousy, I suppose. Kid stuff and I'm ashamed of it for my part. Your father was a better detective than I ever hope to be."

Harmon's fists relaxed. He didn't answer Randall, but he recognized the sincerity in the man's voice. Randall had spoken his innermost thoughts a trifle too fast and was genuinely sorry.

Breezy Anders took Harmon's arm and piloted him back to the road.

"They just found your father's car," Anders said. "He'd driven it into a lot behind some brush. And all three of those killers are dead, if that's any comfort to you."

Harmon said nothing. He got into his own car and backed up to a spot near the place where his father's car had been found parked. He walked over to the car, opened the door and got behind the wheel.

"Breezy, this whole set-up gets worse every moment," he said slowly. "Look at the gear shift. It's in neutral. Sure the hand brake is on tight, but Pop never relied on the brake

alone. Once, long ago, he parked a car and the brake sprung. The car hit a kid and hurt him badly. Ever since, Pop always left the car in gear. Even in the garage. No matter how excited he might have been, he'd have left the car in gear."

Anders frowned. "What are you driving at, Ray?"

Harmon leaned back and his eyes stared straight ahead. "Pop was murdered. Not by those gunmen. They were just a sort of weapon, like a knife or poison, a strangler's hands or a gun. Pop didn't know those killers were holed up in that house. He went there expecting something else. I'd say it was in connection with his investigation of the jewel thieves. Someone sent him here, knowing very well those killers would recognize him and shoot to kill. He was sent here by a murderer who knew he'd never come back."

Anders shook his head. "Kid, you sound daffy, but in a sensible sort of way. Maybe you're right. Tell me more."

"Pop never talked much about cases that weren't finished," Harmon said. "But in this one he spent months trying to run down that gang. I think he had a stool pigeon out working for him. Somebody connected with the gang, probably its leader, knew this. He could have phoned Pop and told him some story about this house. Maybe that the loot was hidden here. He knew Pop would get here as fast as he could, and alone. That's what makes me so sure. Pop wasn't a glory seeker, no matter what Sergeant Randall thinks. If he had the remotest idea Vogan and his two pals were hiding out here, he'd have taken along enough men to do the job right."

ANDERS nodded. "Sergeant Randall," he muttered thoughtfully. "Now there is a lug who hated your father enough to kill him."

Harmon thought of Randall's savage remarks and his almost too prompt retraction. Randall could have done this. He could have discovered Vogan was here and sent his superior to the house by means of an anonymous phone call. Sergeant Randall had been in charge of the manhunt for Vogan and his gang. If anyone could have found them, it was Randall.

"And there is another mug," Anders said slowly. "You know about your father and Clyde Emmett. Ten years ago Emmett owned some fancy gambling joints and he had protection. Your father busted the whole thing wide open. Proved Emmett wasn't running just a fashionable gambling house, but a place to which wealthy people went, well-heeled. They were fingered there and Emmett's men held up the suckers at the point of guns. When Emmett went up for twelve years, he swore he'd get your father.

He's out now. On parole."

"Emmett," Harmon said, almost to himself. "Pop spoke of him the other day, wondering if he still felt the same way. Dad never carried a gun much off duty, but lately he packed one all the time."

"Emmett it could be," Anders added. "Look, kid. Let me in on this. Your father gave me a lot of breaks in my day. I want to help."

Harmon got out of the car. "Thanks, Breezy. Pop would have liked to hear you say that. First though, we've got stories and pictures to file. Meet me in an hour in front of my newspaper building. We'll go see Emmett."

Harmon dropped Breezy Anders in town, drove to his office and dark room. He helped to prepare the shots for the next edition. He was grim-faced and stony-eyed. This was no time for sorrow. He had a job to do. One which would require nerves and steady hands.

It was six o'clock and getting dark when he picked up Breezy Anders. Anders had already determined that Clyde Emmett may have been on parole, but after his hours on the job the parole board demanded he fill, Emmet was running a new gambling place. The same type as before.

"In fact, I shouldn't be surprised if Emmett was running it while he was still a convict," Anders explained. "Through someone else, of course. Take the next corner and then the second left turn."

Emmett's place bore no visible signs of being a gambling den. It looked like a small cozy and respectable night club. An orchestra was playing and the dance floor was crowded. Harmon and Anders didn't check their hats and coats. They squinted out a man in a tuxedo.

"We're looking for Clyde Emmett," Harmon said. "And don't stall. We know he's here and this is his place. Take us to him or, so help me, we'll blab the whole story right on the front pages of tomorrow's editions."

The man in the tux bowed slightly, requested them to wait and two minutes later he reappeared. He led them to a small elevator and they went up two floors. As they stepped out, three burly men descended toward them, but remained at a respectable distance. The man in the tux tapped on a door. Electrical mechanism clicked. Harmon and Anders walked into a sumptuously furnished office.

Behind the big desk sat a man of about forty-five. He was well dressed, smoothly mannered and showed no trace of uneasiness. His face was still pale from years in prison. Not even sun lamps could remove that pallor so quickly.

"Which one of you is Lieutenant Harmon's son?" Emmett said. His voice was pleasant,

assured. Wait, you with the camera. You're Ray Harmon. I expected you would come here."

"Just what made you expect us?" Harmon asked coldly.

Emmett shrugged. "I once made a foolish threat against your father. I've been sorry ever since. Your father ruined my business and robbed me of twelve years of my life. True I had reason to hate him and I did. But lately I reasoned it all out. He was doing a job. There was nothing personal in it."

"Why did you expect us? Harmon repeated.

Emmett leaned across the desk. "Because I think as I know you do. That your father wasn't a blind fool to try and bring in three killers alone. Lieutenant Harmon used his head all the time. Maybe I don't know that! Somebody knew those three mugs were holed up there and sent your father to that house on some pretext or other, knowing he'd be killed. That's what you're thinking, isn't it?"

BREEZY ANDERS spoke first. "Yeah. Exactly. But it's also uncanny how your mind runs in the same channels, Emmett. All we have is your word that you still didn't want to kill Lieutenant Harmon."

"My word is all I've got," Emmett said quietly.

"Where were you at ten minutes of four this afternoon?" Harmon asked. "If you've nothing to hide, you can answer that question."

Emmett fiddled with a pencil for a moment. "It's hard to keep track of the time as close as that. I think I was in the waiting room of the parole officer's office about that time. I could check on it."

"We'll do that," Harmon snapped. He turned on his heel and walked out. Anders followed him. In the hall the same three men watched them carefully. The same man in the tux took them downstairs. Outside, in the car, Anders sighed.

"Well, what do you think?"

"Emmett was telling the truth," Harmon replied. "I have a feeling about that, but we can check up. Now let's go see Sergeant Randall. And Breezy, be careful. Randall is smart. We don't want him even to suspect that he's on our list."

Sergeant Randall seemed eager to cooperate. Stepping into Lieutenant Harmon's shoes automatically made him second in command of the detective division and, as such, practically in charge of carrying out Harmon's task.

"Personally, I don't believe anything of the kind, Ray," he said. "I know how you feel and I respect your feelings, but nobody, not a soul, knew those mugs were hiding out in that house."

"That's a lot of nonsense," Breezy Anders put in languidly, making no effort to hide his dislike of this huge man. "Somebody tipped Lieutenant Harmon off about the house. Otherwise why did he go there? Of course, someone knew the crooks were there too."

Randall nodded heavily. "Okay, I concede that. Fact is, I haven't had much time to think about the matter. My mind is still in an upheaval of too many things. Mainly, I've got to find out who your father was using, Ray. There's a stoolie. Sometimes he used a fellow named Markham. Seedy character, but he got around. Now I can't find him."

"Pop got a phone call about ten minutes of four this afternoon, Sarge," Harmon remarked. "You weren't anywhere about so perhaps you'd know who phoned?"

Randall shook his head. "I was in the teletype room looking over the latest bunch of reports about the gang of killers we just cleaned up. People were seeing them all over the country."

"There are telephones in the teletype room," Anders said quickly. "Booths, too, aren't there?"

"Sure," Randall nodded. "What of it?" "Nothing," Anders answered. "Not a thing. Let's get out of here, Ray. We've got work to do."

Outside in the car, Harmon sat behind the wheel, steeped in thought for a few moments. "That stool pigeon may have tipped Pop wrong. It's possible he was working for the gang of jewel thieves."

"Good gosh!" Anders gasped. "Are you still hipped on that gang?"

"They killed Pop," Harmon said. "He was closing in on them and they knew it. There was a man heading that mob. Someone pretty clever. More than once, Pop almost nailed some of the mob, but they always managed to get clear just before he arrived. It's someone close, Breezy."

"Like Randall," Anders answered. "Or even Clyde Emmett. Don't laugh at the last name. Even if he was in prison, he could have had a mob working for him. He made the plans, got details during visitor's day. It's been done before and Emmett did operate that gambling house while he was in stir."

Harmon started the car and drove North, not very fast. Sometimes he could think well while he was driving. The camera prodded into his thigh, but he paid no attention to it.

"What you say is true, Breezy. Emmett is a smart operator. He's proved it many times. Randall is smart too and besides, like Caesar and Hitler, Randall is an ambitious man. He's wanted Pop's job for five years, at least."

"And Randall was in charge of hunting down those three killers," Anders added

significantly. "If anyone knew where they were, he did. Don't forget that."

Harmon had his eyes on the rear view mirror. "I'm not forgetting a thing. Especially a car that's been tailing us for the last five minutes. It's pulling out now, to pass. Breezy, get set to duck."

QUICKLY Harmon picked up his camera. There was a single shot as the other car pulled abreast. Anders slid ungracefully for the floorboards. Harmon let go of the wheel for a second, thrust his camera up to the rolled down window and pressed the shutter release and the synchronized flash bulb exploded. There was another shot, this one closer, hitting the windshield and narrowly missing the camera and Harmon's head. The bullet glanced off the shatterproof glass and buried itself in the seat of the car.

The murder car pulled away fast. Harmon grabbed the wheel of his own machine, but a trifle too late. That second bullet had thrown him off. As he tried to twist the wheel, the car mounted the curbing, lunged across the sidewalk and smacked into a brick wall. Anders lifted his head. "Are we dead?" he asked in a squeaky voice.

Harmon was holding the camera against his chest as if it were a baby.

"I'm not hurt," he said. "The car is smashed, but we were going so slow nothing happened to us. You're okay, Breezy?"

"Just got a case of chattering teeth," Anders gasped. "That hood really meant business."

"And so do I," Harmon said. "I think I've got a picture of that bird. Got to develop it fast."

"Wait a minute," Anders said. "Car tailing us, mug starts shooting. The elements of a paid killer, Ray. The kind of a punk who'd hang out with someone of Emmett's class."

"Or maybe Sergeant Randall in a car he picked up at random," Harmon countered. "I hope the plate has his picture."

"I'll stay with the wreck," Anders groaned. "After I have it towed to some garage, I've a hunch to follow. It may not pan out. My memory isn't so good lately, but when Sergeant Randall spoke of a stoolie named Markham, it rang a bell in my brain. I did a series of articles once about characters who like to think they're secret agents working for the cops. This Markham may have been among them. I'll check and phone your office."

Harmon hailed a cab and had himself driven to his newspaper building. He hurried to the dark room, locked himself in and went to work. In a comparatively short time he lifted a print off the electric dryer and studied it. The shot was reasonably good, under the circumstances. The ugly face was clear, even though the gun in the man's hand was clearer.

Harmon left word that if Breezy Anders called, he'd be at Headquarters. He went there as fast as possible, talked with the man in charge of the identification division and showed him the picture. The man grunted, went to his files and laid a better picture of the same man before Ray Harmon.

"That is a brainless killer named Beatty," he said. "Only thing he can do is shoot a gun, but brother, he knows how to do that. Crack shot! Never knew him to miss."

"And at no more than ten feet too," Harmon said, musingly.

"You say something, Ray?"

"Just thinking out loud," Harmon answered. "Thanks."

He was about to leave for Sergeant Randall's office when Anders' call came. Anders knew where Markham, the stool pigeon, lived. Ray didn't bother about having Beatty brought in just now. Markham was much more important. He met Breezy Anders and they went to one of the poor sections of the city, climbed steps to a chilly fourth floor and banged on the door. A woman with gray stringy hair and soiled apron let them in.

"I'm Mrs. Markham," she said. "What do you want my husband for?"

Anders barged past her, opened a door and stepped into a darkened room. "The mug is here—in bed," he called out. "I'll roust him out."

"You got no right to hurt him," the woman cried furiously. "He never done nothing to you."

"Take it easy, Mrs. Markham," Harmon said. "All we want from your husband is some information. My father was Lieutenant Harmon. He was killed this afternoon, you know."

She backed away a few steps and Harmon thought she had turned a trifle paler. One hand toyed with a cheap metal pin on her housedress.

"If you're the Lieutenant's son, you're all right," she said. "My husband did a lot of work for him. Honest work. My husband always wanted to be a policeman. Ever since I knew him. But all he saw of a police station was from their cell rooms. He drank too much. He's drunk now. He had a bottle when he came home. He said we had nothing to worry about any more. Then he drank a lot and went to bed."

INTEREST gleamed in Harmon's eyes.

"Did he ever tell you anything about the cases he worked on with my father?" he asked, and held his breath waiting for the answer. It meant everything.

"He talked too much. That was his trouble, besides the booze," she told Harmon.

"Sure he talked about the jobs. He was like a regular cop."

"Did he say anything about a gang of jewel thieves recently?"

She nodded. "Your father promised him one hundred dollars for the right tip-off and he tried real hard. He knew some of the gang, but your father wanted the leader. I remember he said this afternoon when he found out your father had been killed, that one of the men who killed him had a brother who was a member of the jewel thieves gang."

Harmon darted toward the room into which Breezy Anders had vanished. Anders was trying to find the light switch. "We've got it," Harmon shouted. "Markham knows a lot. We've got to wake him up."

"Hold everything." Anders voice was raspy. "I've been trying to wake him up. I thought he was dead drunk, but now I think he's just plain dead. Ah! The light. Never knew they had cords hanging from the middle of the ceiling any more."

Anders' assumption was correct. Anders' hopes faded, as he looked at the man sprawled across the bed. He was dead all right. A half filled bottle of whisky lay beside him. Harmon picked it up and sniffed.

"Poison," he said. "Plain as can be. Cyanide, I think. Maybe diluted with the whisky enough so he could drink in front of his wife, stagger in here and fall across the bed. There's no pulse, Breezy. Better call Sergeant Randall."

"Yeah," Anders said. "Yeah, that's right. Somebody beat us to him, Ray."

Harmon moved toward the door. "I'll do the phoning, Breezy. You're more used to this stuff than I. I've seen enough death for one day. You don't mind?"

"Go ahead, kid," Anders said. "I can take it okay. Only tell Randall to snap it up."

Harmon sped down the steps, not stopping to answer Mrs. Markham's sobbing questions. He telephoned Randall, told him briefly what happened and then he made more calls. Randall arrived in a hurry. So did the medical examiner and the whole crew who respond to death's violent visits.

"It must be Emmett," Randall theorized after he heard Harmon's whole story. "Or me, because I had a motive too. That makes it easy because I know I wasn't responsible. So we'll pick up Emmett. I've got him for violation of parole anyhow."

"Pick him up for that if you wish," Harmon said quietly. "But he didn't do this. It was someone close to Pop, yes. Very close and Pop never suspected. But he was on the trail and the killer knew it. One of his mob of jewel thieves was a brother to one of the Vogan gang and knew where they were, so the gang leader knew it also. I think the leader called Pop, said he was Markham and that the jewel thieves' loot was hidden in that old house. That's why Pop unsuspectingly answered the tip and got shot down."

"That sounds logical enough," Randall agreed.

"Now look," Harmon went on. "Those

three killers were desperate men, but not insane. If a stranger happened to approach the house, they wouldn't open fire. They must have recognized my father. They knew him all right. Were you aware that they did, Sergeant?"

"Me?" Randall gasped. "Heck, no. I didn't have the vaguest idea."

"Did you?" Harmon faced Anders.

"Never heard of it," Anders answered.

"You're a liar," Harmon shouted. "Pop arrested Vogan once for the F.B.I. Vogan was never booked at Headquarters, but simply turned over to the Federal men. At the time the thing got no publicity, but you delight in writing human interest stories about cops, Breezy. You wrote an article five years ago in which you described that pinch. It was under the heading of extra-curricular activities of our police department and its men. Randall didn't know Vogan would recognize Pop. Certainly Emmett didn't, because he was in jail. And nobody else did either because the article was never printed. Just filed. Your editor didn't think it was worth running. But to get the dope you interviewed my father and he made a note of it in his scrapbook. To look for the article. Pop never missed an item about himself. I called your editor and he remembered, dug the story out of the files."

"I'd forgotten all about that," Anders said languidly. "What does it matter anyhow?"

AN ANGRY flush reddened Harmon's face. "It matters a great deal," he snapped. "Tonight a character named Beatty took two shots at us, from about ten feet away. He missed. Why? He is known to be a crack shot. I'll tell you why. He missed on purpose because he didn't want to hit you. You put him up to it. Maybe you had some trick planned so Emmett could take the blame. He was a perfect target for suspicion. But when my father got that phone call, Emmett or Randall here couldn't have made it because I checked. You went out to buy your favorite cigarettes at the only store that carries them. You made a phone call from there at exactly three fifty, the moment when my father got the tip that sent him to his death."

"But Ray, what are you trying to do?"

"I'm accusing you of killing my father. Of murdering Markham who lies dead in the next room. Because when Randall mentioned his name, you knew how my father was getting his information. Markham was close to your gang. You didn't stay with the wrecked car. You had it sent for. Then you hurried off to get Markham. You knew his weakness was booze so you stopped at your favorite liquor store where they automatically handed you a bottle of your favorite brand. It was an expensive kind, something Markham would never have bought. You

softened Markham up, told him you'd pay well for his silence and sent him home. When we arrived at this house, you tore into Markham's room so you'd be certain he really was dead and couldn't talk."

Breezy Anders wasn't lazy looking any more. Neither was Sergeant Randall. "The clue to the whole thing is who phoned my father. Emmett?" Harmon went on. "Even if he didn't have an alibi, Pop would never have believed him. Randall, also alibied, never did it because Randall would have gone for those men himself. The only other person close to my father, who knew how the case was going was you, Breezy. That indifferent attitude is just a stall. You've headed this mob of crooks for years, and my father was almost ready to identify you."

Breezy Anders suddenly moved away, not toward the front door, but into the room where Markham's body still lay. The room was empty. Anders slammed the door and locked it. Randall started forward to smash in the door. Harmon stopped him.

"Let it go," he said wearily. "The evidence against Breezy is circumstantial. He'd never talk once he thought it all over. I'd bet he'd be found not guilty in spite of the fact that you and I know he killed Pop and Markham. Maybe some of his gang will talk when we land them. Maybe they won't. But at least one of them knows my father was slated for murder. This crook moved Pop's car so it would seem as if he hid it and tried to sneak up on the house. Also, why didn't those three killers run out after shooting him?"

Randall was still eying the locked door.

"They didn't have time to run out," he said. "The flash came to Headquarters too fast and radio cars closed in."

"Sure, they did," Harmon agreed. "But the section was isolated, nobody around when we got there. The man who hid Pop's car also sent in the alarm. Breezy wanted those three convicts killed by the police. It all added up to a plot to get rid of my father."

"If he gets away—" Randall began.

"He won't," Harmon sighed deeply. "There is no way out unless he wants to dive from the window and he won't do that. Breezy always did hate messes. He'll use that bottle of poison. It was still in there. The boys from Headquarters evidently left it for you to bring along. I think you can break in now, Sergeant."

Randall went through the door in two savage lunges. He knelt beside the limp form on the floor, looked up and nodded.

Ray Harmon picked up his camera. He walked slowly out of the tenement. There was no feeling of accomplishment within his heart. No satisfaction, just a certain grimness that Breezy Anders was no better than any other killer. Just a little smarter than the average mug, that was all!

Brannon's fist came up
with paralyzing force



BOLT FROM THE BLUE

By C. L. BOSWELL

It's up to Jerry Brannon, former South Pacific Marine Pilot, to find out just who is on the firing end of a murder gun!

THERE wasn't any warning. Luckily, Jerry Brannon had leaned over to get a package of cigarettes out of his glove compartment, or he would have been brained. As it was, the thing sheared through the soft top of his six-year-old convertible coupé like an ax through pliofilm, and hit the Morocco leather seat with a solid smash.

The reflexes of a man used to being shot at catapulted Brannon's long, lean frame out of the car with fluid speed. He struck the gravel of the parkway half asprawl. Crouching there, he warily eyed the blacked-out

façade of the two-story building before which he had just stopped, saw no silhouette limned against the star-ridden night sky, and slowly let out his pent-up breath as he got to his feet.

An accident, maybe? Something fallen off the building top? They had been removing the camouflage netting up there. A careless laborer might have left a tool in precarious balance on the roof edge. Maybe.

Brannon somberly eyed the spectral fingers of a trio of searchlights probing the heavens a mile off toward the ocean. What a way

to get it, after surviving a thousand close brushes with death as a Marine pilot in the South Pacific!

A punctured eyeball, received when a blast of Jap machine-gun fire shattered the plexiglas enclosure of his Grumman fighter, had earned him a medical discharge from the Service. By reason of an excellent practical knowledge of stress, he had landed a job here on the West Coast in the metallurgic division of the small but busy Air Parts Corporation, which machined castings and forgings for the nearby aircraft plants.

He had come down on this particular Sunday night to pick up a forgotten test graph on an aileron bellcrank casting with which he had been experimenting.

His car door had swung shut and he opened it, grimaced at the ugly tear in the soft top, felt around on the seat for the thing that had fallen through. His look of detached interest froze as he brought forth a short-barreled, nickel plated .38. A nasty conjecture took shape in his mind and he held the muzzle to his nose, got the acrid smell of cordite.

"Glory!" he breathed, and bee-lined energetically for the building entrance.

LETTING himself in with a pass-key, Brannon strode through the semi-dark foyer, entered a tiled corridor flanked by a succession of doors faced with opaque glass. The leather heels of his sport brogans beat a solid, reverberating tattoo upon the tile as he moved with rapid purpose toward the far end of the hall, where a stairway led to the roof.

A dozen feet ahead, one of the doors flew open and a man backed out. His hand was over his mouth and he mumbled between his fingers like an idiot.

Brannon recognized the slight figure and the disordered mop of dark hair. Priddy was the man's name. Secretary to Everett Kittredge, the company's new process engineer. He was dazed, glassy-eyed with horror.

Brannon grasped his arm, shook him roughly.

"Snap out of it, man! What happened?"

"I didn't do it!" Priddy wailed. "I didn't do it, I tell you! We were working on an impact test on some new steel, and I went out to the lounge, and when I came back there he was!"

His face was the greenish white of a frog's belly, and fear had constricted his throat muscles so that the words were delivered in a high-pitched falsetto.

Brannon started to say something, but clipped it off short and drew in his breath with a shuddery, hissing sound as he looked beyond Priddy.

Death had found Everett Kittredge on his knees in the middle of the Process Laboratory floor, pleading for his life with his arms outflung, so that when the bullet took him above the right eye he had fallen forward in a limp, grotesquely sprawling posture. He had been a handsome man in his early fifties, but the emerging bullet had taken a good part of his skull with it, and he was handsome no longer.

Brannon pushed the whimpering Priddy into the lab and knelt over the corpse. The red cement floor was a slippery mess, and it made him a little sick. He shook his head, got to his feet.

"Looks like a pretty complete job," he murmured.

"Complete is the word for it. You don't believe in doing things half-way, do you, Mr. Brannon?"

Brannon spun around. There was a heavy pistol anchored solidly in the big fist of the company cop standing in the doorway. He was built like a wine barrel, with sultry eyes almost hidden under shaggy black eyebrows, and tufts of hair sprouting from his ears. Tate was his name.

"You fellows might get as free as you want with a gun against the Japs, but here it's different, see?" he added.

Brannon gave him an injured, nervous look.

"And what makes you think I killed him, Tate?" he said.

The cop's unfriendly eyes traveled to Brannon's right hand and the gun in it. Brannon grunted and shrugged.

"Some clever mug tossed it through my car top from the roof of the building as I pulled up to park."

He realized how foolish the explanation sounded even as he uttered it, and his lips got tight.

Tate grinned disagreeably, showing large teeth.

"Was I the one that bumped him off, I'd sure think up a better one than that," he advised.

Brannon guardedly eyed the cop. No matter what he said, the evidence was there. A man lay murdered, and the weapon was in his, Brannon's hand.

He shot an oblique and faintly hostile glance at Priddy, who was sobbing hysterically in a chair. The fellow was either as innocent as a newly hatched chick or a

mighty good actor. He could have killed Kittredge, gone up on the roof and flipped the gun over the edge, and then got back downstairs before Brannon came in. Which would be an excellent stall to direct suspicion elsewhere.

Tate moved into the room, held out a hand toward the gun. "Gimme," he said.

Brannon hunched his shoulders a little. "Sure," he murmured. "Why should I argue?" He added with apparent irrelevance, "What's that stuck under the edge of your lapel—a chicken feather? You been raiding a chicken coop somewhere?"

Tate looked annoyed. "Cut it out. You think I'm a knothed? You can't rope me in that way. I've been around. I said gimme."

Brannon sighed, extended the gun butt first. Tate took two steps forward, reached for it, and Brannon said, "Oops!" as it slipped from his fingers and fell on the floor. Reflex jerked Tate's eyes from Brannon to the gun for the barest fraction of a second, which was what Brannon had been playing for.

HIS right fist came up with paralyzing force, caught the big cop square under his chin. Brannon felt a numbing shock clear to his elbow as Tate's gun went off with an enveloping roar. Tate took three off-balance steps backward, like a grotesque, oversized adagio dancer, crashed into the wall, bounced off it and went flat on his face.

Brannon took an instant to snatch up the murder pistol, and poured himself through the door and down the hall at a dead run. Outside, he bee-lined for his car and had it in high and down the road in something less than sixty ticks of his watch.

Four blocks away, he realized that he was trying to push the accelerator through the floorboards, and that the legal speed limit was thirty-five miles an hour. He corrected the error at once, angled off at the first cross street.

A red traffic signal at a crosstown artery several blocks down stopped him, and he made use of the moment's wait by snapping on his dashlight and giving the gun a quick scrutiny. He noticed that the serial number had been ground or filed off. An orphan. Which added up to the interesting fact that the man who had committed the murder was probably also the man to whom the gun had been registered. Very interesting, indeed.

The light changed to green and he got the car in motion again. Moving with the traffic,

he debated his next step. Of prime importance was clearing himself of this jam before the police caught up with him. Kittredge's home, in the Palisades, was a starting point. He had been there several times. The man was a bachelor, and lived alone except for a housekeeper who came to clean up every morning.

He drove north until he came out on Sunset, turned left toward the ocean. The boulevard meandered between ornate residences, through canyons and over hilltops, from which he could see the Westwood and beach districts sprawling below him like a neon-embellished fairyland.

Skirting the Riviera polo field, he went up the hill beyond and came out in the Palisades district. Half a mile more, and he turned off to his left on a dark little side street lined with acacias.

Kittredge's place was a low, quasi-Spanish affair set far back on a quarter-acre. Parking a half block from it, Brannon went the rest of the way on foot, turned up the graveled drive that led to a double garage beside the house. He went around to a well-tended back yard with his shoes making crunching sounds on the gravel, thankful for the privacy afforded by a tall cypress hedge that surrounded it.

At the rear was a flagged patio overhung with a blue striped awning. Rustic garden furniture was scattered about the patio from which French doors gave access to the house. Brannon tried these, found them locked. A pad on one of the chairs gave him an idea and he wrapped it around his right hand, holding the ends together in his fist. A sharp blow on one of the panes shattered it, and the glass fell inward with a tinkling clatter. He tossed the pad back on the chair, reached through the opening, unlocked the door and entered.

Kittredge's den was toward the back part of the house, at the end of a hall leading from the front door. Because of Brannon's previous visits he was able to locate it without difficulty. A tiny, windowless room, it contained a spring chair and a desk on which were several books, a lamp and a stack of papers.

Closing the door, Brannon snapped on the lamp and riffled through the papers. He hoped for a clue that might at least lead to a motive for the murder, but they turned out to be merely the conglomerate assortment of business letters, test charts and notes that a man in Kittredge's position might keep.

Disappointed, but by no means dis-

couraged, Brannon tried the desk drawers, found them locked. He was searching for a means to force them when sound filtering from the front of the house made him turn off the light. The sound grew to hurried steps, then he heard rapid breathing.

When the door opened Brannon was behind it, flattened against the wall. The man who entered without hesitation left the door ajar and went over to the desk. He fumbled about for a moment and opened the top drawer. Pulling it completely out, he set it on the floor, reached into the cavity thus created and produced a small tin box. He turned on the desk lamp, unlocked the box with a key from a ring in his fist and pawed hurriedly through its contents. His satisfied "Ah!" was audible proof that he had found what he wanted.

Brannon stepped from behind the door.

"You didn't waste much time in getting here, did you, Priddy?" he said.

PRIDDY gasped and whirled, holding several papers in his hand. The box slipped from his fingers and sprayed its contents on the floor.

Brannon motioned to the papers.

"Let me see them, fellow. They must be pretty valuable to make you shoot a man in cold blood."

Priddy's mouth opened and shut and his eyes skittered from Brannon to the open door, back to Brannon again. He licked dry lips, made a half-motion as if he were going to hand them over, then darted forward like a rabbit. With desperate agility he spun through Brannon's clutching fingers and scrambled down the hall.

Brannon, on his heels, caught him in mid-leap with a beautiful flying tackle. Priddy squaled and spilled to the floor, ploughed up several feet of hall runner with his nose and lay there, moaning.

He had left the front door slightly ajar as a means of quick exit in case something went awry. It opened wide and Brannon found himself looking up at a blue uniform with a burly cop poured into it. The cop had a Police Positive in his fist and a nasty grin on his flat mug. He wagged his head reprovingly.

"Tch-tch," he said. "Playing football in the hall, too. Bad, bad boys."

Priddy had hung onto his precious papers. On his knees, his nose skinned and bleeding where it had caressed the rug, he shook the papers at Brannon.

"I didn't do it!" he screamed. "I didn't kill him, I tell you! He's the murderer!"

Brannon got up and dusted himself off, scowling at a neat barn-door tear in his seventy-five dollar suit.

"It's your ball, brother," he said to the cop. "So what do we do now?"

"We go for a ride," the cop said, preserving that nasty grin of his. "It seems there's a stiff down at the Air Parts plant, who was bumped off with a thirty-eight. A guard by the name of Tate phoned Headquarters and said we might find something out here. The Homicide detail will be waiting for us."

Brannon shrugged. No use trying to argue. He submitted to a quick search and remained silent when the cop located the .38 with a pleased "Hah!"

Priddy raised voluble and noisy protest at being relieved of the papers.

"They're mine!" he declared. "Those are chemical formulae for a new ductile magnesium alloy that I worked out. Mr. Kittredge was going to run a test on them for me. When he was killed I came to get them, because I was afraid they might be claimed by his estate. I'm his secretary, and I knew where they were kept. Besides, I had a perfect right to enter here."

"Save it, brother," the cop said. "And get going, the both of you."

A prowler car with a second officer in it was waiting at the curb in front of a convertible with a gray top like Brannon's.

"How about my car?" Priddy wailed. "I can't leave it here. Somebody'll steal the tires, and they're pre-war rubber!"

"I'm beginning to lose my temper, bub," the cop said looking annoyed. "Now, get in, and not another yip out of you."

When they pulled up in front of the Air Parts plant, the contents of the parking area had been increased by several police hacks and a big Packard sedan. The Packard belonged to Jason Summers, who was Air Parts' president. At the husky cop's order Brannon and Priddy piled out. A plainclothes detective was at the door. He let them in.

"Nice work, Fitz," he told the cop.

Kittredge's body still lay on the lab floor. A police photographer was putting away his equipment. Tate was there, looking mighty pleased with himself and nursing a badly swollen jaw. So was Summers, a couple of police, and Lieutenant Cheswick, of the Homicide Squad. Cheswick was built along the lines of a bridge pier, with a heavy-jowled, gloomy map in which was stuck the thoroughly masticated rag of a cigar.

Summers stepped forward with a shocked look on his gaunt face.

"Brannon!" he exclaimed. "I—I don't don't know what to say."

"Suppose you let me do the saying, Mr. Summers," Cheswick said weightily. He took the .38 from Fitz, scowled at it, turned it over in his big hands.

"No serial number, hmh?" he said to Brannon. "I suppose you didn't do it and this ain't your gun."

Brannon shook his head. "Listen," he said urgently. "I didn't kill Kittredge. But I think I can tell you who did it if you let me have that gun for ten minutes."

CHESWICK got red in the face, hunched his beefy shoulders.

"Just what the devil do you think I am—completely crazy?"

Summers had been standing by, nursing his shocked look. He stepped forward.

"If I may have a word," he said. "Brannon came to me highly recommended by his commanding officer, and after all, the evidence is not conclusive. Ten minutes isn't much, and if you convicted the wrong man you'd be sorry for it all your life."

Brannon perspired gently between the shoulder-blades while Cheswick studied him for a long minute. Finally the detective switched his cigar to a corner of his mouth, swallowed, and said:

"Okay. I'm always a sucker for first plays, and I've never had this one pulled on me. Keep an eye on him, Fitz."

He emptied the .38 and handed it to Brannon.

"Let's go into the shop," Brannon said. "Magnetic inspection."

"This better be good, fellow," Cheswick muttered.

Brannon moved ahead of them through a door labeled "Employees Only." They came out in an aisle flanked by heavy machines that crouched like dully gleaming monsters under the night lights. Midway down the floor was a cleared area where the parts were tested for flaws before being relayed to the airframe plants. This was magnetic inspection.

Brannon paused before what looked like an insulated hoop about fifteen inches in diameter. He pressed an electric switch and passed the .38 through it. Tate had stepped forward and was watching with intense curiosity.

"What's that thing?" he said.

"A magnetic field," Brannon explained. "That's where this type of inspection gets its name. We use it for testing steel castings and forgings for flaws.

He moved to a glass-lined tank filled with a dark liquid, and immersed the gun in it while Tate hung at his elbow.

"This," he continued, "contains iron oxide in a solution of kerosene. On magnetized metal the iron particles will have a tendency to build up over cracked or excessively dense areas." He lifted the gun out, squinted at it. "When the serial number was stamped on this revolver the metal was made more dense where the numbers were imprinted on it. So even with the serial filed off, the oxide has collected over those dense spots and brought it out. Take a look, Lieutenant."

He handed the gun to the profoundly amazed Cheswick.

"A checkup on the registration of the gun should give you the murderer," he added.

Tate had taken a step backward and there was a pinched look on his face. His gun had jumped into his hand.

"You think you're pretty smart, don't you, Brannon?" he said thinly.

Brannon grinned cheerfully at him and nodded. "Smart enough to put two and two together and make four. I knew that gun was yours after I began to get wise to the clues you left around."

"Such as?"

"Such as the chicken feather and the fact that Priddy has a soft top coupé like mine. Remember when you walked in on me in Kittredge's lab and I told you there was a chicken feather caught under the edge of your lapel? I wasn't kidding. The feather was brown, and the camouflage netting they're tearing off the roof is covered with brown chicken feathers.

"You went up there and pitched the gun at what you thought was Priddy's car, knowing he was in the lavatory. Priddy had a motive, too, with those formulae of his. It might have been proved that Kittredge was trying to put one over on him. My unexpected appearance threw a monkey-wrench into your plans, and you tried to blame me, since I had the gun. Why did you kill him, Tate?"

"Because he was a first-class skunk!" Tate said savagely. "Three years ago I was working in the machine-shop at Midlands Metals, in Chicago. He was their process engineer. I figured out a new idea for case-hardening steel and submitted it to him, thinking he would help me put it over. A short time later a man was killed at my machine and I got canned for it. I was blackballed in Chicago, couldn't get a job, and I came West. I found out later that Kittredge had

sold my idea, and built his reputation on it. I swore I'd kill him if I ever met him again. . . . Don't move, any of you. I'm getting out of here."

Tate slowly backed away and Cheswick cursed sloppily.

"Fitz!" he muttered. "You're letting him get away, you fool!"

Fitz' upraised hands trembled and his homely mug screwed up in an agony of impotence.

THE police photographer had been left in Kittredge's lab, gathering up his equipment. He opened the door, stuck his head into the plant and yelled:

"Hey, Cheswick, the boys from the morgue are here to—" His voice dribbled off into stunned silence as he took in the tableau.

He was just out of range of Tate's vision, and Brannon found a strange fascination in watching Tate stiffen, fight the impulse to turn his head, waver, and finally succumb. The photographer came to life with a squawk and ducked inside as the roar of Tate's gun filled the big building with hollow thunder.

There was a stack of aileron bellcrank castings beside the Rockwell hardness testing machine, within Brannon's reach. He scooped one of them up and let fly. Tate jerked his head around just in time to receive it full in the face. He squealed with pain as Brannon dived from a standing position and buried his shoulder in the man's midsection. Tate lost all his air and any further interest in the proceedings as the pair of them skidded across the floor and came to a jarring stop against a big planer.

Brannon lifted himself off the limp and moaning Tate, silently picked up his gun and handed it to Cheswick. Fitz, the cop, shook his head.

"The way you tackle, mister," he murmured admiringly, "you must of been All-American. That's twice I seen you pick mugs off."

Cheswick spat out his rag of a cigar and grinned for what could have been the first time in his life.

"Brother," he said fervently, "for my money that lad's an All-American menace. If all the boys in the Pacific were like him, no wonder the Japs lost."



Hard-boiled private detective Chet Lacey, whom you met this month in "Till Death Do Us Part," our featured novelet, is back again in the next issue—where he takes the trail of a missing husband in one of the most exciting mysteries of the season—

DARLING, YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE

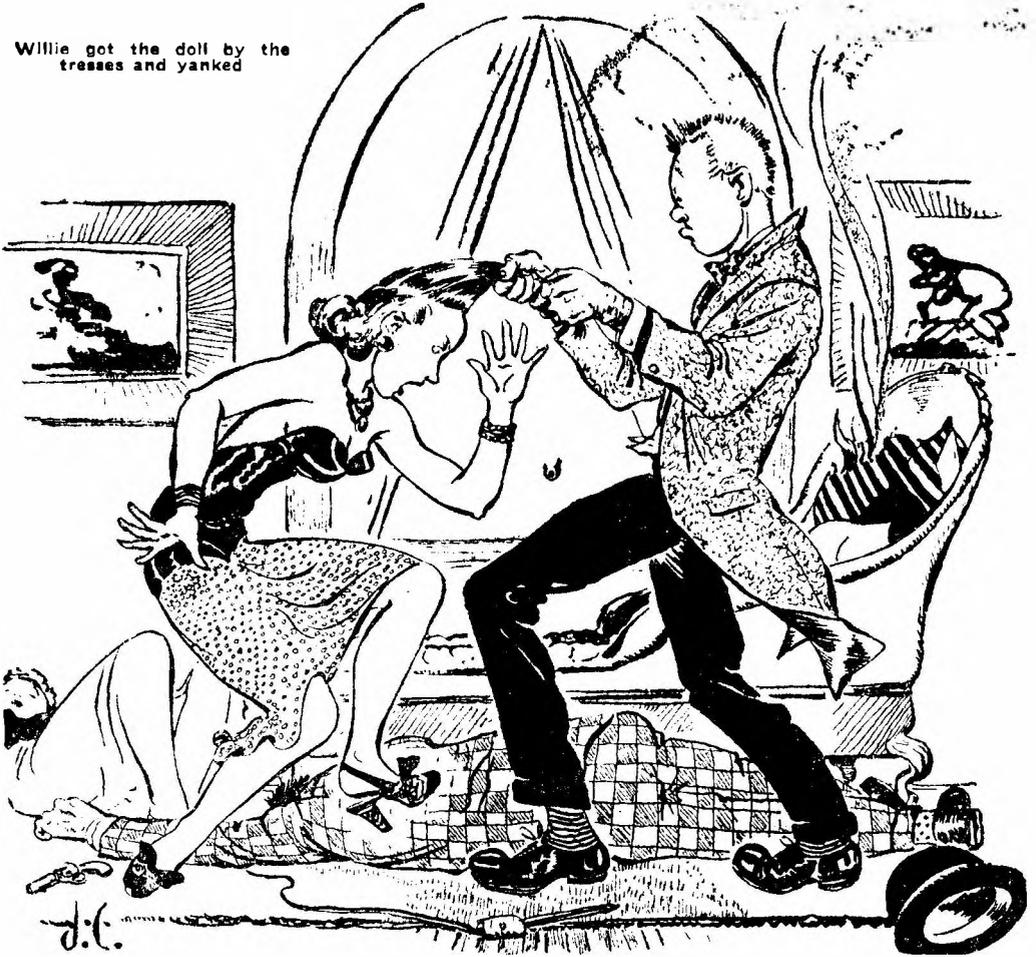
A Swift-Moving Complete Crime Novelet

By ROBERT SIDNEY BOWEN

Look forward to this action-packed yarn!

It's fast, it's furious—but it's far from funny for the victim!

Willie got the doll by the tresses and yanked



HUBBA HUBBA HOMICIDE

By JOE ARCHIBALD

When a nightclub warbler is snatched, Willie Klump is just the bird to trap the kidnaper in his nest!

ONE morning William Klump happened to pass by a rooming house on East Forty-seventh Street and saw a small black coupé parked at the curb right in front of it. There were big white letters on the jalopy that said:

COLBY'S COLLECTION AGENCY

Several intrigued citizens had gathered and were ogling the auto, and most of them had knowing grins on their physiognomies.

"Quite a stunt," a fat character said. "You don't have to come right out an' say whoever lives in there is a chiseler. The landlady must owe somebody plenty, huh?"

Willie paused also. Then the door of the rooming house opened and an energetic-looking man wearing a plaid suit and a big grin came down the steps counting a little wad of bills.

"She paid up, huh?" Willie asked. "It is legal what you are doin'?"

"Natch," the citizen said. "My card."

Willie took it and pocketed it. "How much is your cut?"

"Fifteen per cent. Sometimes twenty, accordin' to how tough the prospect is."

Colby got into his car and drove away.

"Why don't nobody tell me these things," Willie said, as he hurried to his office to think.

The Hawkeye Detective Agency could use a subsidiary, in view of the fact that it was getting to be about as solvent as a hobo's poke.

"I can't afford an auto," Willie reasoned when he had his feet up on his desk. "But a bicycle with a sign on it would do just as good. He picked up the phone and called a sign painter. Two hours later the glass on his door read:

HAWKEYE DETECTIVE AGENCY, INC.
PRIVATE DETECTIVES.

MISSING PERSONS FOUND.
COLLECTION AGENCY.
William J. Klump, President.

"I'll need some letters sent out an' new cards printed so I got to hire a temporary typist," Willie thought aloud. "Gert will fork over a little of my savin's if I prove it is to improve my business."

He picked up the phone again. He took a deep breath first. He and Gert had had a little misunderstanding, and he had not seen her for ten days.

"Hello," Willie said, when he dialed the beauty shop where Gertie worked. "Miss Mudgett, please."

"She ain't here no longer. Call Madame Mujay, Plaza nine, oh, oh, four oh!"

"Oh," Willie said. "She quit there, huh?"

He hung up and called the new number. A voice that was vaguely familiar said:

"Bon jour, M'sewer. Madame Mujay at your serveece!"

"Who? Er, this is Willie Klump."

"I told you to not never speak to me again, you bum. I am verree bizee an'—"

"Gert, you have no more French blood in you than a dash-hound," Willie sniffed. "What is the big idea?"

"Oh, awright. I'll explain tonight. Meet me at seven at La Parisienne on Forty-Sixth!" Gertie hung up.

Willie could hardly wait. When he met Gertie at the eating place, his Adam's apple spun around and went up and down like a dumb-waiter. Gertie had an upswEEP hair-do and a new fur coat, and her face had changed. Willie saw her eyebrows had been

narrowed to two little pencil lines.

"For a minute I thought I made a mistake an' come to Minsky's back door," Willie said. "If everybody in this country wanted to be French what would the UN do?"

"You wouldn't understand with your BB brain," Gertie said. "I have spread out."

"In places, I admit," Willie said, and escorted Gertie into the restaurant. "Look, what I wanted to see you about, I am expandin' a little myself and need a little financin'."

"Now I know you'll see it my way," Gertie said as she sat down and inserted a cigarette into a long holder. "I opened up my own place as a lot of the customers where I worked said I should, and two of them backed me with a little money, Willie. They says people flock to beauty shops run by French women as they got the savvy fare. So I took most of your money, Willie, to finance the joint—er—shop. Madame Mujay. I had to look the part, too, so bought a mushrat-dyed mink. Don't you think I did the smart thing, Willie?"

WILLIE knew he had to say she did. Otherwise there would be the usual rhubarb. The waiter would come over and request they take a powder and Gertie would swing on him, and then they would be out on the sidewalk. It had been a monotonous routine.

"You did right, Gert," Willie said.

"How you doin', just as if I didn't know? Why don't you git pergressive, Willie?"

"A guy can't go far if they steal his railroad ticket," Willie said.

"There was dirt behind that, William Klump!" Gertie leaned forward, her elbows on the table, like the foreman of a jury when the D.A. draws blood.

"It is wonderful pot roast, huh?"

"It is tray chick," Gertie said, settling back. "I wonder do they serve patty defoy grass here?"

"Look under salads," Willie said.

A miracle took place. They walked out voluntarily, with a full course dinner warming their meridians.

"Congrats, pal," the headwaiter whispered to Willie. "For a minute you had me worried."

"Oh, I'm sure on the ball now, Willie," Gertie said as they walked toward the nearest cinema. "Big shots are callin' me for apertments. I want you to acquire more polish, Willie, or elst my bein' with you will ruin my business."

"I will buy a carnation tomorrer," Willie said. "An' a can of shoe polish. I will even buy a pair of cloth-topped shoes with pointed toes, but nobody can make me eat snails. This is awful silly, Gert. You can't make a mink purse out of a chow's ear."

"That did it, William Klump!" Gertie yelled. "You go your way and I'll go mine!"

"That was only a figment of speech!" Willie yelled back. "You are just trying to shake me an' not pay me back my dough. You are a Delilah, only worst, as she only trimmed Samson's locks, an' they'd grow in ag'in. Twenty-dollar bills don't have roots."

"It is heart balm coming to me, Willie Klump," Gertie yelled.

Willie, when the sound of Gertie's high French heels had died going down subway stairs, knew his chances of retrieving his lettuce were nil, not half as good as Gertie's accent. He went to his rooming house and sat and brooded, and had to get out of there when he realized his mind was too interested in some mouse poison he had in a bureau drawer.

He walked and walked, but no matter where he went, he found himself still behind the eight-ball. At midnight he was about to step into a beanery for a cup of coffee when a police car siren shook his ear-drums. He spun around, saw it scorch past, and turn on two wheels at the next corner.

Willie started running. Tires squealed, so he knew the jalopy had stopped not far away.

The commotion was taking place about a block from a neon sign that said,

"HUBBA HUBBA CLUB."

Willie recognized a familiar but repulsive face he had more than one reason to remember. Aloysius Satchelfoot Kelly had taken over and was pushing the crowd around.

"Stan' back! Give 'im air!"

"Why?" a voice sneered. "He can't breathe it."

"He might need it, though," Willie said. "All depends on how long the stiff's been here. Somebody git murdered?"

Satchelfoot banged his hat down on the walk, not a foot from a very inert citizen.

"You again! Willie, you are either a zombie or a ghoul, as you are always around when I pick up a corpse. I'm warnin' you, you keep away. You make one false move an'—"

"Here we go again," Willie said. "This is a better show than they got over there at

the Hubba Hubba."

Kelly ground his teeth closer to the nerves and went to work. He picked up an old slouch hat.

"Initials A.K.," he said.

"Your hat, Satchelfoot." Willie laughed and sat down on a hydrant. "Put it on or you'll catch lumbago."

The diagnostician of the defunct arrived and looked the body over.

"Death due to some blunt instrument," he said. "I figure this gee has only been dead about fifteen minutes. H-m-m, name's Hubert Wigg. Wearin' a tux, so must of come out of the hot spot."

"I'll do the detectin'," Satchelfoot said. "May I cut in?"

ANOTHER character in soup and fish shouldered his way through two cops and bent over Wigg. He had a long, thin, dark face and patent-leather hair.

"They got 'im," the man said.

"Awright, you know all about it, hah?" Kelly said. "Who rubbed him out?"

"How'd I know? I am Mandy Costi, an' Wigg worked fer me. He was a bouncer an' escorted Venay Benuta around the corner, where she lives, between her numbers. Somebody come runnin' an' said they saw a pair of gees sock Wigg and push the girl in a cab an' drive off. I come as quick as I could. Nobody was mad at Hubert, an' the doll is a warbler and has no rich relatives, so why should they grab her?"

"I'll ast the questions, Bub," Kelly said. "Venay Benuta. Yeah, I heard her sing over the raddio. She packs 'em in the Hubba Hubba, Twitchell says. She would have plenty of wolves droolin' at her heels, wouldn't she, pal? Some guy got brushed off an' won't take no for an answer."

Willie Klump sniffed, and leaned over, and picked up a bedraggled carnation from the gutter. There was a little pin with a pink head rammed through the stem. Willie tossed the wilting posy away and put the pin in his cravat. Satchelfoot Kelly's boys combed the area and found no clues. They could not think of a better motive for the liquidation than Kelly's.

"Not a thing to go on," Kelly groaned.

"They should never let concrete harden," Willie said. "Then killers would leave footprints like actors do in that Chinese theatre in Hollywood."

"I am in no mood for your guff, Willie," Satchelfoot yelled. "If they only got that cab's license!"

[Turn to page 100]

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"If you don't need me no more, I beg to be excused," Willie said.

"Keep walkin' east an' don't stop even when you git to the river," Kelly snarled.

"Sensitive person," Willie said to a cop, then ambled away.

Willie forgot about the Hubba Hubba and the Grim Reaper the next morning. He breakfasted on a stale cinnamon bun in his office, washed it down with Nescafé, then planned his collection agency.

He thought of a muskrat-dyed mink coat which would have purchased a dozen bicycles and became a little nauseated. Well, he could start out from scratch with a sign on his back. He would get up a letter and have it mimeographed. He started scribbling. After a while he held up the finished product. It read:

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"That sounds good," Willie said.

He went out for lunch and bought a tabloid. There was a picture of the hot spot canary on the front page and a story that jogged Willie's memory a little. The Hubba Hubba had once been known as the El Clippo, a joint considered by night club addicts as a flea-bag. Mandy Costi had taken it over and renovated it, to say nothing of fumigation, and it had been Mandy's luck to discover Venay Benuta singing on top of a Steinway in a Sixth Avenue loud and dirty.

The doll had a voice that was low and husky, like a warning buoy in the harbor, but it had that quality which was poison to housewives and eager little mice waiting at the church. Venay drew the customers like a magnet snares a pin, and it was quite apparent that Mandy's oasis would soon be one of the largest purchasers of red ink if the cops did not rescue her from the bad, bad boys.

"The El Clippo," Willie said. "Huh, I took Gert there oncet, an' we got bounced as I was short that evenin'. I have a scar to prove it, too. Gert hit the waiter over the scalp with a tray and swung on an ex-wrestler who tossed the undesirables out. I remember the cops arrived and took us both to the cooler. Who was it run that joint? What difference does it make? It says here there is no clues as to the identity of the kidnapers, an' that Mandy is at a loss to give

the D.A. a motive as Venay was the quiet, home-lovin' type. Mandy didn't suspect no competitives as he was pals with them all."

THAT afternoon Willie inserted an ad in a newspaper. He had a water-cooler for sale. He figured whatever he got for it would defray the expenses of mimeographing.

"Dames!" he choked out when he accepted seven-fifty for the cooler just before closing time.

Three days later, a letter came in the mail from an undertaking parlor. They wanted to see Willie about collecting a bad debt. Willie went up to the other side of the Harlem River, walked through a loft filled with bye-bye hampers and entered an office. He asked for a Mr. Berriam.

"Here," a beetle-browed citizen said. "You from the collection agency? Here, take this bill. You'd think a guy would pay up cheerful buyin' a box for a mother-in-law. He still owes forty-nine fifty on the coffin an' he only paid sixty. There's his address."

Willie lost no time. He was standing in front of a door in a tenement on One Hundred and Seventh Street, just twenty minutes

[Turn page]

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later. A big character in his undershirt opened the door and nearly blew Willie back to the stairway with a "Whadda ya want?" "You are Patrick G. O'Gatty?"

"Maybe you expected Van Johnson?" "Er, it is about a bill you owe," Willie said. "For a casket. It seems it slipped your mind."

"So that ghost wrapper is puttin' the hooks to me, hah? Listen, beetlehead, that crate wa'n't worth ten bucks as it was only made of beaver-board. Go dig it up an' take it back, an' don't never put no bee on me ag'in or your relatives'll be payin' for one, too!"

Wham! The door slammed in Willie's face, but literally. Willie was sure his proboscis resembled a stepped-on over-ripe peach as he staggered away. Well, he said philosophically, you can't win them all. Better luck next time.

Willie wrote Mr. Berriam a letter. He told the mortician that Mr. O'Gatty had been willing to return the article, which seemed all right and only fair as people were allowed to return pianos, radios, ice-boxes, etc. The letter Willie got in reply was one he did not think advisable to use as a testimonial.

"I could have him arrested if I turned this over to the post-office," Willie said. "This business ain't as easy as it looked at first, but will I quit? I should, but I won't."

The door opened, and Willie quickly crumpled up the letter.

"From Hedy LaMarr maybe?" Willie looked around and saw Satchelfoot.

"Wait'll I open the window," he said. "The air is bad in here."

"Let's stop hatin' each other," Kelly said, and sat down. "We could use each other to mutual advantage, Willie. You got any ideas on why they kidnaped that canary?"

"I'd forgot about it," Willie said. "It could be a publicity stunt, like them rich babes who lose diamonds they never did."

"I thought of that, too," Kelly said. "Look, you been lucky at times with cases, an' I says what can we lose if we cut Willie Klump in? The D.A. says for me to tell you he will welcome any corporation on your part an' will see you get remunerated."

"Is that good?" Willie asked. "He means dough," Satchelfoot sighed. "Well, gimme a lead," Willie said. "They're ain't any," Kelly snapped.

"You are very big-hearted, you an' the D.A.," Willie said, off the alkaline side. "You would give away knives without no blades. If I find anythin', I'll let you know."

"I just did what the D.A. ast me to," Kelly sniffed. "You don't think I'd come to you for nothin'?"

"That is just what you'd git," Willie said. "You seen Gertie?"

Kelly grinned. "Oui, M'sewer. Imagine that broad posin' as a French mouse. I have got as much chancet of passin' off as Shirley Temple."

"I will not sit here an' let you—"

"Awright, Willie," Kelly yelled. "If you only knew what she called you. Oh, brother!"

"I know them all," Willie said. "If she thought up anythin' worst, they are in French. Anyway, I do not wish to discuss my interment affairs."

Satchelfoot Kelly paused to read the new lettering on Willie's door, laughed out loud, and went out.

NEWSPAPERS kept the Hubba Hubba nubout and kidnaping as hot as a pistol. The cops kept calling on Mandy Costi, accusing him of holding back a ransom note, as whoever heard of a kidnaping without one? Mandy kept insisting that he knew no more than the cops, which would never qualify him as a Rhodes scholar. Satchelfoot Kelly was quoted in one journal, space apparently being as plentiful as G.I.'s in college.

We believe Costi is not cooperating with the police. He has a reason, maybe, because his night club looks like a bus stop at Cranberry

[Turn page]

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Bend, Vermont, at two in the morning these nights. Getting this Benuta back in a shroud wouldn't pull him out of the red.

"Kelly is settin' journalism back fifty years," Willie said with contempt as he tossed the tabloid onto a pile of comic books in a corner of his office. "This is a funny case, though."

At the beginning of another working day, William Klump went through his mail. One letter asked for contributions from the altruistic minded to a fund which would insure a pint of milk every day for anemic Madagascareans. The other letter was from a Lexington Avenue Florist, I. Bloom. Mr. Bloom wanted to see Willie right away about collecting a sizable bill.

The president of the Hawkeye Detective Agency hiked over to the flower shop and had to wait for Bloom. He sat near a little desk where husbands, sweethearts, etc., wrote sentimental notes on little cards. There was a paper box at Willie's elbow, filled with little pins with pink heads. Willie asked a blonde about them.

"They're to pin flowers on lapels, of course. We got pink heads on 'em as then people know where the flower come from without astin'. Good advertisin'. We got an agreement with other florists not to use the same color."

Willie sighed and removed his stickpin. It wasn't very exclusive, he thought. Then Mr. I. Bloom came in and he led Willie into his little office

"Such chisellers nowadays, Mr. Klump! Not all of them are sculptures. Here I have it a bill five months old for just carnations only. You get fifteen per cent if you can loosen this character up. I warn you, he is very unreasonable. Here is his card."

Willie read it aloud:
ANCIL V. GAZELLI
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"I give you twenty per cent, Klump."
"It is a deal," Willie said.

Pins with pink heads. Gazelli. The light on the switchboard in Willie's noggin blinked and buzzed, but still he did not plug in. He pocketed the bill which was for eighty-seven dollars and fifty cents and made his way crosstown and up a dozen blocks. Arriving at the address, Willie found that it was an unimpressive pueblo of about eleven stories. He had a chance to recover, he thought, if he was thrown out of an eighth story win-

dow. He still wished he had an auto with his name on it.

"Well," Willie said, "this will make or break the Klump collection agency," and went inside.

He took a self-service squeaky elevator to the floor where apartment 7-C should be and walked down a long hall. He paused in front of a door, then rapped with his knuckles. For a few moments there was no answer. Willie was positive he heard subdued voices. He knocked more authoritatively. "Keep your shirt on!" somebody said then.

The door opened. Willie put his foot over the sill and the door was banged against it. Willie let out a painful yowl and the citizen grabbed him and pulled him inside.

"You want I should git evicted with such a house shortage?" the host snapped. He stared at Willie, his beady eyes half-drawn. "Say, you look familiar!"

Willie looked at his prospect. "You Ancil Gazelli?"

"Yeah! What's it to you?"

The private detective looked at the carnation in Gazelli's buttonhole and the light in his dome blinked brighter and buzzed a little louder. He looked at Gazelli again. "You look like somebody, too. You are familiar to me in an uncomfortable sort of way. I come here to collect a flower bill."

"Huh?" Gazelli grinned. "What chancet you think you got?"

"Fifty-fifty," Willie said. "You do or you don't."

HE THOUGHT this Gazelli was getting more familiar than ever. The Latin was a suave-looking gee and had certainly never walked up four flights for the suit he wore. With that plaid, you never got a baseball bat. Willie felt a chill coming on. He wanted his dough and a quick out.

"How about it, Mr. Gazelli? Le's clean up this little matter of Mr. Bloom's, yeah?"

"Phooey," Gazelli said.

"That is not the right attitude," Willie sniffed. "It is a honest debt. Think of the expense of all the little pink pin heads alone."

"I seen you somewhere before."

"Could be I was there," Willie gulped.

He happened to jar something loose from the table with his elbow, he was beginning to shake that much. He leaned forward to pick it up and a size ten shoe covered his fingers. But Willie could see the big gold initials on the doll's reticule. "V. B."

"Git off my hand," Willie said. "What is the idea?"

[Turn page]

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drag your feet!"

Willie had no alternative. He went in the closet and the door slammed shut on him and a key turned in the lock. It was as dark as the inside of a lump of tar. He could hear Gazelli talking. The rough person said something about a cement block and the East river. Willie groped around for a light cord and found it. He yanked it and there was light.

He sat down on an old suitcase and heard Benuta say something about shipping a trunk to Argentina with dry ice in it. He wondered what they intended to ship that was that perishable. He thought of one thing, and shuddered.

"All looks lost," Willie said. "I come to collect a bill an' fall over the payoff, just as if it will do me any good."

A decade seemed to slip by. Then Willie heard a knock somewhere. He got up and pressed his ear to the door. Gazelli growled and swapped words with the blonde dish.

"It's awright, Ancie," Benuta said. "I ast her to come."

"Wha-a-a-a-a-a?"

"Oh, go and open the door. I've been locked up for four days an' look at my hair. That dame is the dumbest cluck in the world next to what we locked up in the closet."

A DOOR opened. "Come in, M'dam," the warbler said. "Am I glad you got here! Look at my coiffure. Isn't it ridick? And the dark roots are showin'."

"Bon juror, M'dam," a voice replied, and Willie's legs became strips of boiled spaghetti under him. "Eet ees ze nice day, none? Ah—er—you got kidnaped!"

[Turn page]

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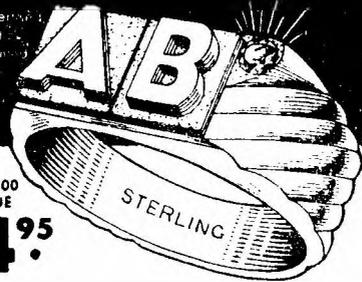
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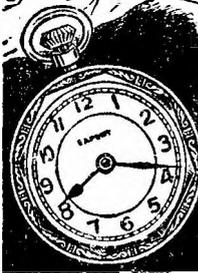
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"Look, you dumb crumb-bun!" Gazelli yelped. "You ast this dame to come here knowin' every cop in town was lookin' for you? Now, we got two bodies to dispose of!"

"So the more the merrier," Benuta countered. "These locks of mine will be beyond help if I let 'em go another day, Ancie!"

"Just a minute!" Gertie Mudgett, alias Madame Mujay, yelped. "I've had an ear botherin' me for a coupla days, but I am sure you said somethin' about bodies! What goes here? So you put on an act, hah? Maybe to git publicistic, Benuta? But if I remember right, a certain party was knocked off, an' don't tell me it was a wax dummy."

"Look, you phony French twist," the Hubba Hubba Hartz Mountain canary said, her voice as unlovely as a cheetah's snarl. "You ain't opening your kisser, see I have already sent you a dozen customers, ain't I? An' there'll be five grand in it for you, too."

"Why, you—you—you are talkin' my language," Gertie said, and Willie sank down on the suitcase and crossed off all the years that should still be coming to him.

"Greed," Willie moaned. "Avarish. How can there be a better world? There is Gertie sellin' out for sordid gold."

"Ain't I see you somewheres before, Hand-some?" Gertie asked.

"I git around," Gazelli said. "You sure have," Willie gulped. "You dumb dame. It was him had us throwed out of the El Clippo before it was the Hubba Hubba. Oh, it is all clear in my dome."

"Well, let's get after my hair, M'dam," Benuta said. "You think Mandy'll show up pretty soon, Ancie?"

"Yeah. That night club ain't been doin' no more business than a oil-burner salesman in the Sahara," Gazelli quipped. "Yeah, I see you somewhere before, too, babe."

"Maybe at a convention," Gertie said. "When do I get the five grand?"

"When we git ours," the Hubba Hubba doll said. "What you starin' at?"

"A hat," Gertie said. "It looks like some-

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thin' I also saw somewheres before."

"Yeah?"

"Wa-a-i-i-t a minute," Willie heard Gazelli say. "Now I remember. Sure! I spent nine bucks for a hunk of black market sirloin to put over my eye. It was a night at the El Clippo, babe. You ruined three waiters, a bull fiddle an' a bass drum. The punk with you—"

"I never heard nothin' so silly," Gertie said. "You must use more snow than Goerin'. M'dam, show me where to plug in my curlin' iron."

"Awright," Gazelli said. "So I'm wrong. Awright. I'll just sit here an' keep rememberin'."

A door closed. Gertie's and Benuta's voices were muffled. Willie heard Gazelli's voice at the keyhole.

"You know I ain't kiddin' don't you, Klump?"

"It is all Greek to me," Willie called out.

A key turned in the lock. Gazelli opened the door.

"Come out, punk," he whispered. "Make one yeeep outa ya an' I flatten you with this jack."

"The murder weapon," Willie whispered.

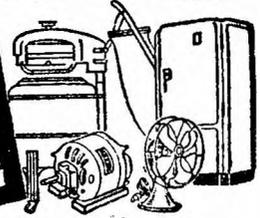
"No kiddin'? When she comes out, you'll be sittin' there in that chair. I'll know by the expression on her pan if I'm right."

[Turn page]



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Willie sat down. So did Gazelli. The erstwhile boniface of the El Clippo had a Betsy aimed at Willie. In the next room, Gertie and Venay Benuta were talking. The long hand on a clock crawled around and around. Gazelli suddenly stiffened and sniffed at the air. Willie's nostrils picked up the smell, too. Gazelli was on his feet just as Benuta screamed:

"Fire!"

Gazelli flung a door open. Smoke was pouring out of a chaise-longue. The night club nightingale was slapping at the little tongues of flame. Willie saw Gertie slap Benuta with more than a pillow. Gazelli leaped at Gertie and tripped over some electric cord.

"Careless of me to put that hot curlin' iron in that shay long, wa'n't it?" Gertie screeched, and jumped on Gazelli's back and started punching. "Come on, Willie! I know you are there somewheres!"

WILLIE came in just as Gazelli arched his back like a wild mustang and Gertie flew into a corner and struck her noggin against a radiator. Benuta, her eyes crossed, was on her feet and throwing a lamp-base. Willie ducked it and it whanged Gazelli right in the equator and flattened his bellows.

Then the President of the Hawkeye Detective Agency found himself locked in mortal combat with Venay Benuta. It was a clinch lacking a trace of glamour. Venay's talons raked Willie, and missed his jugular by the width of a sheet of cellophane. Willie tickled her in the ribs and she howled and let go of his throat, and he got Benuta by the tresses and yanked with all his moxy.

Gazelli got up. He fired at Willie, and the bullet went through Gertie's upsweep. The smoke was so thick now, identities were a tossup. Outside fire sirens screeched. People were hammering on the door. Willie saw a figure loom up in front of him and he let her have it. Somebody got him by the leg and chewed.

"I'll get hunk with you, Willie!" Gertie yelled.

"I thought it was the blonde," Willie called out. "Where is she at?"

"I am walkin' on somethin' lumpy, Willie. It squawks like a doll. We got to git out alive."

"That's logic," Willie choked, groping through the smoke.

The door fell in. Cops and firemen filled

(Turn to page 112)

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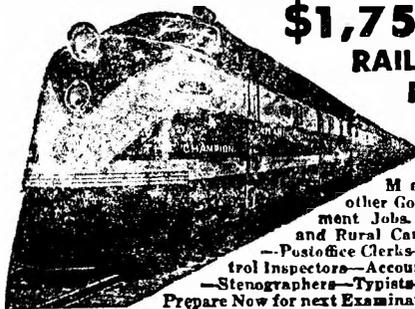
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the reeking flat. In about ten seconds four pairs of handcuffs were snapped on the rioters.

Out in the hall, Willie Klump yelled: "Git that blackjack in there. That blonde is Venay Benuta. She an' Ancie Gazelli there kidnaped her. I am Willie Klump, private detective. I mean Gazelli kidnaped the canary."

"Yeah," a cop said. "This is that Benuta babe. Wait'll Kelly hears about this! Why, it is Willie! But who is this other blister?"

"Be careful what you call me, you ape!" Gertie yelled. "I am William Klump's fiancée."

"Ancie knocked off Hubert Wigg," Willie said. "You get hold of Mandy Costi an' bring him downtown, too."

"Willie how did you happen to get wise to this job?" a cop wanted to know as they put a pulmotor on him.

"Tryin' to collect a bill for carnations he owed I. Bloom," Willie said. "Li'l pins with pink heads."

"Give him oxygen," Gertie squeezed out. "He is gaga!"

"Oh, you dumb chickadee!" Gazelli threw at Venay Benuta. "Makin' an appertment with a hair-dresser. Well, you'll git braised, too."

"I will not!" the night club sparrow squawked. "I wa'n't in on this until I woke up in this dump. I'll talk my brains out!"

"Then I ain't worryin' much," Gazelli said. "One word won't be enough."

"I found the blackjack on him," a cop said.

"All of you git out of here," a fireman said. "How can we put out a fire? I wisht LaGuardia was mayor."

"Let's go," Willie said.

It all came out an hour later. Mandy Costi admitted he kept things from the cops for a good reason. He said he was just

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about ready to call on Gazelli and agree to handing him over a twenty per cent cut on the Hubba Hubba take. It was worth it to get the dame back. Mandy went into a tantrum when he heard his chick had allied with Gazelli when she got the real lowdown.

"You better git more'n one Philadelphia lawyer to make a jury believe you started right in with that mug from scratch, babe! I'll testify you was an excessory!"

"Why, you dirty doublecrosser!" Benuta shrieked.

Satchelfoot Kelly sat in a chair talking to himself.

"He went to collect a bill. Gertie, who was Madame Mujay, got a call from the kidnappee to fix this Benuta's locks. Willie walked right in on the warbler's kidnapers, an' then Gertie joined him. . . . Wait, I'll start all over."

"Shut up, Kelly!" the D.A. snapped. "How can this stenog concentrate? What was that, Gazelli?"

"We are not needed here no more, Willie, dear."

"Just a sec, until I remind him of the remuneration for my corporation on this job," Willie said.

"You'll get paid," the D.A. said.

Willie and Gert left the gray building and limped toward a subway, looking like two survivors of an atom bombing.

"We're some pair, ain't we, Willie?" Gert asked. "What would we do without each other like shad an' roe or ham hocks an' cabbage?"

"Live to a ripe old age, that's what," Willie said.

It went over Gertie's head. Then she said she was sick of trying to talk through her nose all the time, and was selling out because of the overhead.

"Whicht reminds me," Willie said. "I got to git some aspirin."

Gertie sighed. "Make mine penicillin, Willie."

Next Issue's

WILLIE KLUMP

Howler!

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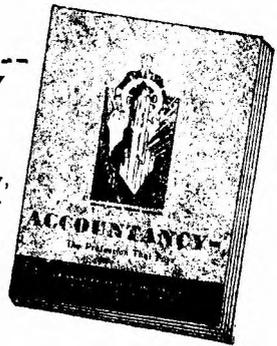
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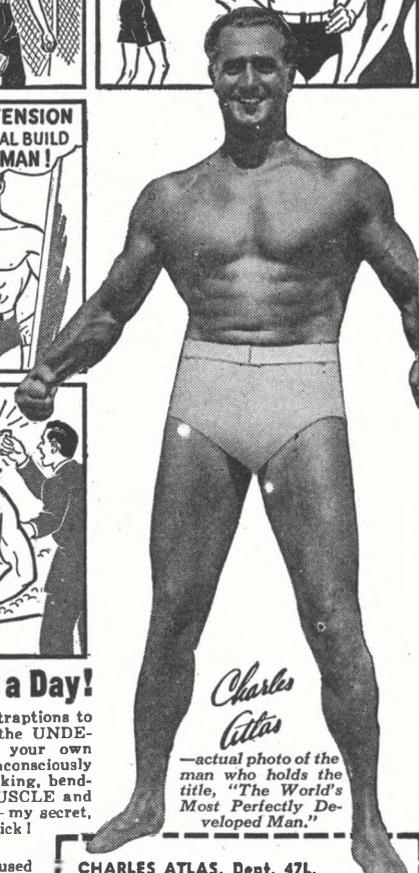
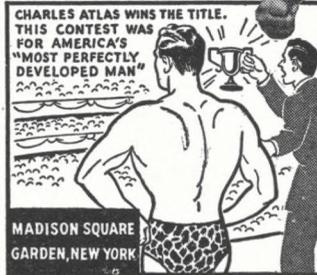
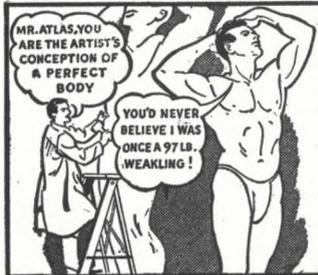
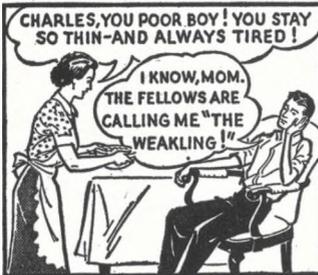
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