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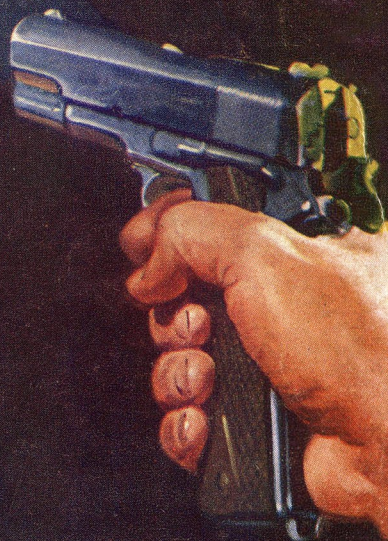
A THRILLING
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DETECTIVE

IN THIS ISSUE

NEED A BODY DIE

a novelet of suspense by
WALT SHELDON



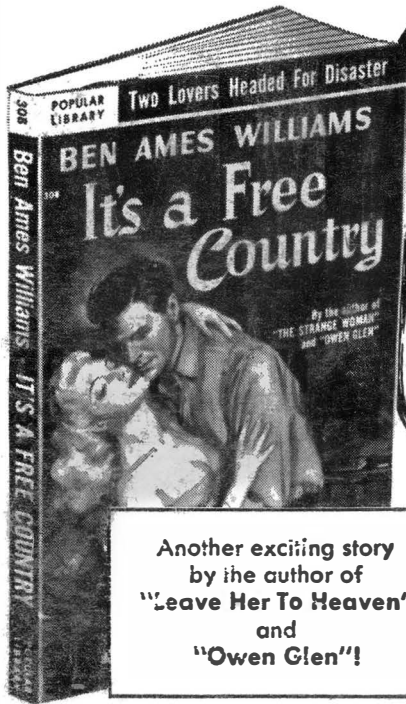
FEATURING

**BLOOD ON
THE ROCKS**

*a novelet of
diamonds and dames by*

WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT





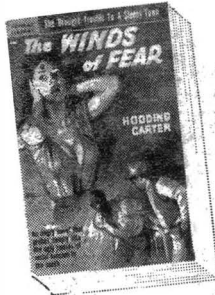
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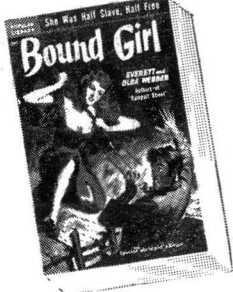
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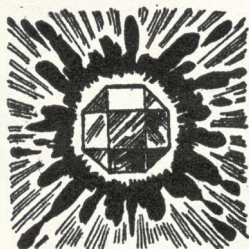
POPULAR DETECTIVE

Vol. XL, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

MARCH, 1951

FEATURED MYSTERY NOVELET



Blood on the Rocks

By William Campbell Gault

When diamonds flash death, scare-proof private eye Dick Callender tackles a mystery of stolen jewels, fetchingly beautiful dames and conniving killers!

9

ANOTHER NEW COMPLETE NOVELET

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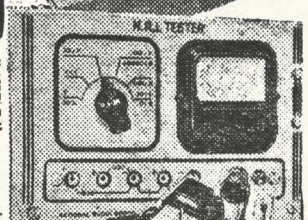
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Official BUSINESS



A DEPARTMENT WHERE READERS AND THE EDITOR MEET

WE DON'T believe we are giving away any secrets when we say that one of the ways in which criminals hope to commit a murder and make it look like suicide is by hanging the victim.

For one thing, there is no foolproof way—either by autopsy or by a microscopic examination of the marks on the victim's neck—of knowing whether he was alive before the hanging, or if he was already dead.

For instance, the victim may have been choked to death first and then hanged as a coverup. It is impossible for a person to choke himself to death—which rules suicide out in such cases. So a hanging afterwards may well serve a killer's needs in palming a murder off as self-destruction.

In choking, the marks on the victim's neck have a different appearance from that produced in hanging. The marks run almost horizontally around the neck rather than at a slant, and they go *all* the way around. In hanging, there is an interruption in the markings coinciding with the placing of the knot of the noose. But hanging the victim after he has been choked can largely destroy this clue.

Some Killers Aren't Dumb

What other evidence remains that marks a bona fide suicide? If the body hangs free, there must, of course, have been a place from which the person stepped or jumped—but it would be a stupid killer indeed who would fail to provide at least a chair, and probably fake evidence of the victim's shoes upon the seat as well.

So it becomes a complicated and tough crime to crack. Of course, murder will out, and such cases are cracked—but to the criminal mind, the setup looks perfect!

If the victim was hanged while still alive (a very rare occurrence, incidentally) there will usually be traces of violence on his body. But

even here, outer signs of violence may be absent if the victim were aged or too weak to struggle—which is exactly the circumstance in **KILLER IN HIS BED**, by Norman A. Daniels, exciting featured novelet in the next issue of **POPULAR DETECTIVE**.

When Jeff King came to the town of Weldon to be married, he was due for several surprises.

First, though he knew his bride, Grace Weldon, had money, he didn't expect that she and her family owned practically everything in the good-sized town in which they lived.

Second, he was surprised when only one guest showed up at the marriage ceremony. It made sense only when it was revealed that the people in town hated Grace because—

Third, Grace was suspected of being the mercy slayer of her father!

Suicide—Or Murder?

Fortunately, Jeff King had been a major in Army Intelligence. She was fairly well equipped to get at the root of the poisonous tangle in which he and the girl he loved had been ensnared.

It seemed that Grace's father had been suffering from an inoperable cancer and that he had "committed suicide" by taking an overdose of sleeping pills.

Or had Grace had a hand in it?

The one man who could clear her, Dr. Pulver, was dead—dead by his own hand. Or, again, was this "suicide" a fake too? There was evidence that it might be. For Dr. Pulver had hanged himself. And there was the catch.

For Jeff well knew that there was no more obvious way to murder a man and make it look like suicide—than by hanging.

Jeff King soon found himself in a very uncomfortable spot. While he was determined to prove Grace's innocence, there was still that

(Continued on page 129)



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WONDER WHAT THAT TAG SAYS



IT SAYS: I'M BOBBY HOPKINS' PET DEER. PLEASE TAKE ME HOME

WONDER WHERE HE LIVES



THIS IS A MIRACLE! BOBBY HAD GIVEN UP HOPE OF FINDING HIM

WE'LL LIFT HIM INTO THE TRUCK

WE'D BETTER GO ALONG AND SEE THAT HE DOESN'T JUMP OUT



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I'M SOLD. SUPPOSE WE COULD CLEAN UP A BIT, TOO?



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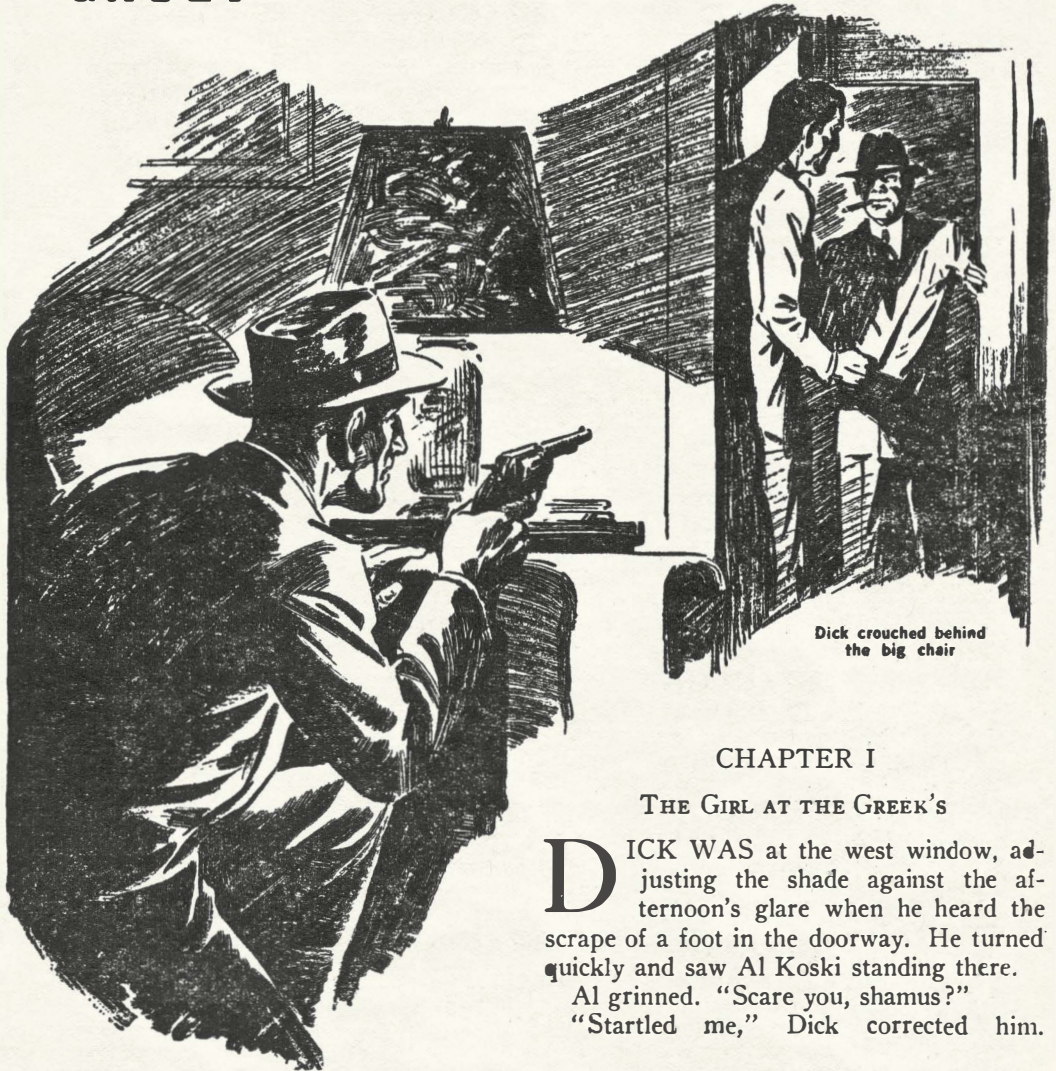
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Dick crouched behind
the big chair

CHAPTER I

THE GIRL AT THE GREEK'S

DICK WAS at the west window, adjusting the shade against the afternoon's glare when he heard the scrape of a foot in the doorway. He turned quickly and saw Al Koski standing there.

Al grinned. "Scare you, shamus?"

"Startled me," Dick corrected him.

BLOOD on the ROCKS

9

When Diamonds Flash Death, Dick Callender

"What's on your mind, Al?" He sat down behind his desk again.

Al took the chair on the other side of the desk and said nothing for a moment.

Dick thought, that's the hell of being a private operative, or one of its hells. You had to be polite to both sides of the law.

Finally, Al said, "This is kind of a new experience for me, going to the law."

"I'm not the law," Dick reminded him

"I scare lots of people."

"So do dentists. Why are we going around, Al? You must have had something on your mind when you walked in here—without knocking."

Al's eyes were momentarily bleak. "It said on the door—"Walk in." His voice was sharp.

"The *outer* door. And about being frightened: You probably have a gun. So

He went forward into space,
his brain flaming, conscious-
ness drifting out of him



in a tone not to be contradicted.

"Well, maybe not." He added, "You guys make much money?"

"I make thirty a day, when I work. Plus the swindle sheet. Did you just come in to pass the time of day, Al?"

Again, Al grinned and there was some admiration in his glance. "I don't scare you a bit, do I?"

"Should you?"

have I, and possibly twenty pounds on you, Al, plus the license to carry it, plus a certain amount of respect down at Headquarters." Dick took a breath. "Now, why should *I* be scared? Stop throwing your weight around."

A PAUSE, a moment while Al appraised him. Then the racketeer said, "I want you to work for me. I got a job for you."

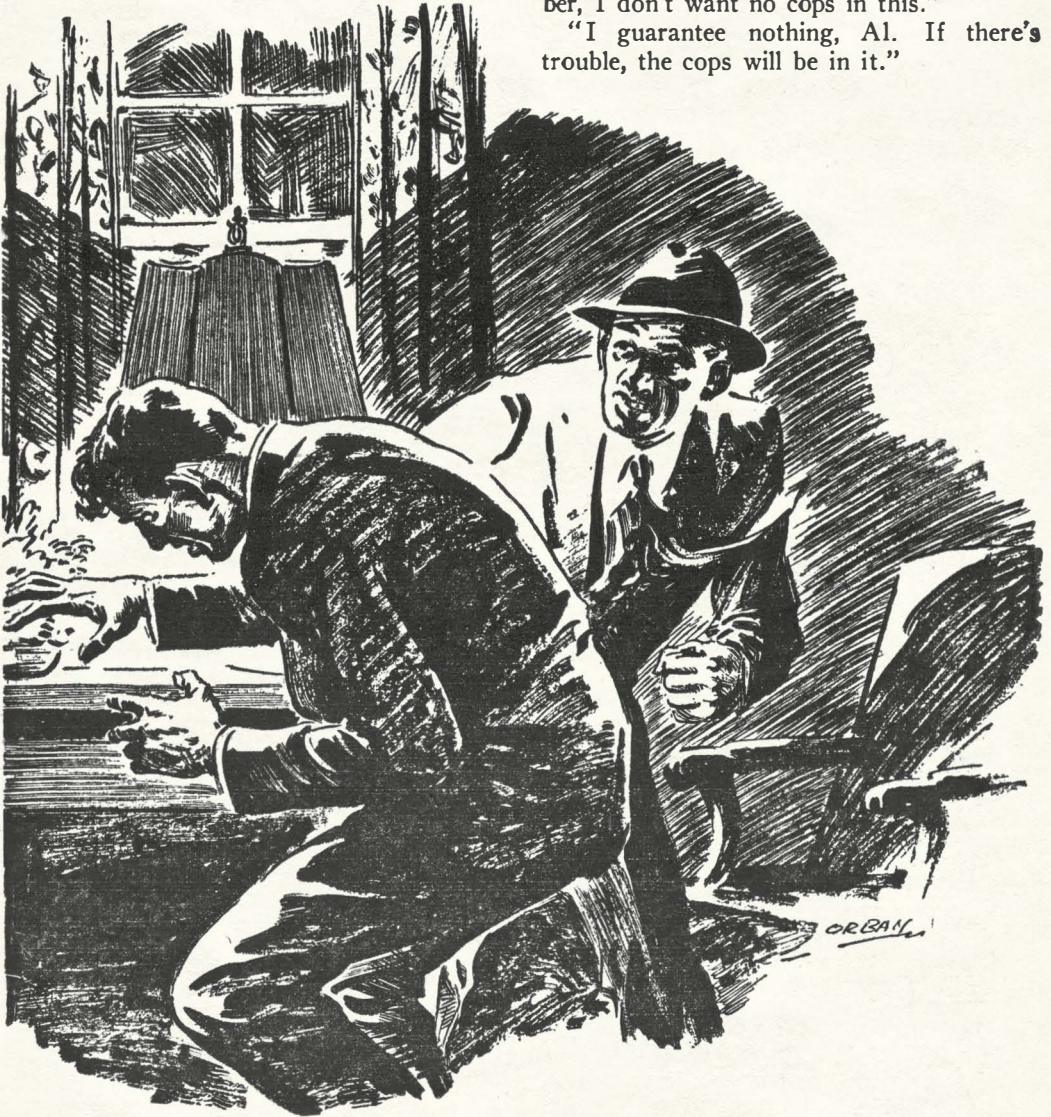
Meets a Killer Ring—in a Sucker Setting!

"Legitimate?"

Al nodded. "But that don't mean I want the police in on it."

Al shook his head slowly. "I just want to talk to him—if he's still alive. You got quite a rep for finding people. But remember, I don't want no cops in this."

"I guarantee nothing, Al. If there's trouble, the cops will be in it."



"What's the job?"

"To find a guy."

"Who's the guy?"

"Chev Ruby."

"I see." Dick looked at his desk top and back at Al. "And why am I to be your finger man? You out to get Ruby?"

"But you don't have to reveal the name of your client. I know that."

"You know more about my trade than you do about your own, then," Dick said. "I didn't know it. You've had enough experience with the police, Al, to know you reveal any damned thing they want revealed

—or you wish you had. I don't think we can do business."

Al said evenly, "I'm just asking that I get the same treatment any client gets, any *legitimate* client."

"If you're my client, you're legitimate, as far as our business goes. If I find Ruby—do I tell him you want to talk to him?"

Al's answer was slow, and he was grinning again. "Couldn't you let me know, first, when you find him? There any law against that?"

Dick studied the grinning, coarse face a moment. Then he said, "No, I guess there isn't. I'll want a retainer, Al."

"My credit's no good, huh?" No animosity in the question.

"Good enough for me. But in your business, you may be here today and gone tomorrow. It takes too much time to collect from an estate."

Al laughed. "You're a card. Will a hundred handle it?"

"For now." Dick went to work on a receipt. "What's the last you heard of Ruby?"

"Last I heard, he was shacking up with some brunette named April O'Shea. Used to be in the line at the Greek's over on Escradilo. You know the place?"

Dick nodded, finished the receipt and handed it to Al. He picked up the five twenties Al had laid on the desk and put them carefully in his wallet.

Al dropped a card on the spot where the money had been. "You can get me there, any time. Or leave a message."

Al had left when Dick picked up the card. It read: *A. Lester Koski—Investments*. Anything for a laugh, that was Al.

Chev Ruby was a name born of the man. His real name Dick had never heard—nor, probably, had the police. The Chev was because of the car he drove, the Ruby because of his trade. He dealt in gems, did Chev, and the warmer the better. Sometimes he sold them to insurance firms who considered the payment a reward, officially. And some times he found people who'd pay more.

Maybe Al had something to sell.

A brunette who used to be in the line at the Greek's . . . Al must have done some checking. The Greek's wouldn't be within

his usual orbit. I want to talk to him—if he's still alive. . . . That could mean anything or nothing.

The Greek's place was called *Isle of Cyprus* and the boss was Mike Bey, who wasn't a Greek but a Turk. It had started as a dump, but the Turkish viands of Mrs. Mike had attracted some gourmands and the crowd had followed.

Mike had put the income back into the business and bought himself a dinner jacket. Mrs. Mike stayed in the kitchen, though she had help now. Mrs. Mike had grown fat, and Mike hadn't. They both had mustaches.

MIKE WAS at the door when Dick entered. He was fairly tall, with a hard and masculine face, handsome in the old collar ad fashion. His mustache was trim and black, his hair unmarred by any gray and he could have passed for a young man.

"Good evening," he said to Dick, and looked away.

"I didn't come to eat," Dick told him. "I wonder if I could talk to a Miss April O'Shea?"

Mike Bey's warm brown eyes swung back to survey Dick. "She gets here around six." The eyes asked a question the mouth didn't voice. "Unless it is important, we prefer our employees to arrange their meetings some place else."

"It's important," Dick said lightly. "I'll have something to eat while I wait."

Mike nodded and turned away again.

Dick found one of the few tables that didn't have a *reserved* sign on it, and sat down. The place was a grotesque combination of black velvet drapes, potted palms, third rate oils in heavy gilt frames and terrazzo floor. The ceiling was high and painted a Mediterranean Blue.

Five musicians with maroon jackets and white shirts, with maroon bow ties and fawn trousers were kicking *Japanese Sandman* around in their routine way.

The food, Dick thought, would have to be awful good.

He had sarma, madzoon and lahmajoon and it was awful good. He had *San*, *Sleepy Time Gal*, *Honeysuckle Rose* and *East Of*

The Sun, which could have been better.

At a little before six, the place was more than half filled and a girl was making her way toward Dick's table. Dick looked past her, at the raised lobby and saw Mike Bey's eyes following her. Dick rose.

She was a good eight inches shorter than Dick, but he was an inch over six feet. She had too much make-up on an otherwise interesting face and a figure even her cheap suit couldn't blemish.

"My name is O'Shea," she said. "You wanted to talk to me?"

"April O'Shea? Dick asked.

She sat down across from him. "We won't go into that. April's my professional name. You a collector?"

"No, I'm looking for Chev Ruby."

She frowned, her eyes searching Dick's. "Why?"

Dick said nothing.

"You a cop?"

Dick smiled.

"Look," she said earnestly, "I don't want no trouble. The last I saw of Chev Ruby was a month ago. He was too slow around a buck for me. If a girl wants to sell out, she don't need to do it at bargain basement prices."

"I thought Chev was loaded," Dick said.

'Sure he is. You don't spend any money, you got to get some stored, after a while. He'll die rich, all right."

"It's pretty important that I find him," Dick said.

SHE WAS silent, studying him. Finally, "I don't want no trouble."

Dick said nothing.

She said, "I got a card from him, two weeks ago, from Seattle. He wrote that he'd see me when he came back and he'd be back in a couple days. He never showed up." She said this in a dead voice and her eyes never left Dick's face.

"I see," Dick said. "Who did he have—any particular friends you'd want to name, anybody I could go to?"

She shook her head. Her staring appraisal of him was clearly part fright now. "I—never mixed with—his friends."

"Where'd he live?"

"On Breeze Avenue, in Venice. You know, they call it the Speedway, but it's just an alley. Where Breeze meets the Speedway."

"You know the number?"

She gave it to him. Her voice was tight and her face anxious now. "You—are a cop, aren't you?"

Dick shook his head. "Just an unattached killer. Thanks, a lot, April."

He stood up and the waiter came with the bill. "The food was excellent," he told him. "Fine."

"Thank you, sir. Aren't you staying for the floor show?"

Dick shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid I'll have to miss it." His eyes watched April going back toward the lobby, and Mike Bey was waiting for her there. She stopped to talk to her employer.

The waiter said, "Pretty, she is."

"Very. How long has she worked here?"

"Two years now. She won't be in the chorus forever."

Dick made no comment on that. He tipped the man a carefully calculated fifteen percent and moved past the populated tables toward the lobby. It looked to him as if Mike was waiting, with words.

"I know you," Mike said. "You're Dick Callender. What do you want with Miss O'Shea?"

"Nothing," Dick said. "She was very helpful."

"I don't like my girls bothered. I take care of my girls."

"That should keep you too busy to leave any time for me," Dick mocked him. "Your wife's a fine cook, Mike."

The warm, brown eyes froze over. "Just what did you mean by that?"

Dick met his stare smilingly. "I mean— isn't it fortunate for you that she is? Or you'd be pushing a broom. Some guys don't know when they're well off."

Mike glared and Dick waited. Finally, Mike said, "Don't make the mistake of coming in here again."

"Break it off," Dick said. "I'll come in any time I'm hungry. This is a public place. Break it off before you make a fool of yourself. I didn't bother your Miss O'Shea and I'm

not interested in you. You're not heavy enough or young enough to scare me."

He moved past him, and out.

CHAPTER II

THE FRIENDLESS CORPSE



TWICE, today, he'd run into tough guys, at least vocally tough. Though Al Koski's toughness, he knew, went beyond the mouth. He realized, suddenly, that he was breathing harder than normally, and that annoyance was strong in him.

We don't get the respect we should, he thought. Nor the cooperation from the department. It's a jerk's trade.

His Plymouth coughed at him and then spun over with a rattle of loose tappets. He swung in a U turn, heading toward Venice.

Squatter's shacks on million dollar property, that was Venice. The realtors' blind spot—ocean frontage for hovels, lean-tos with riparian rights.

The address the girl had given him was a former beach house of white frame, tilted now, its paint gone, converted to one-room and two-room apartments. It was all one floor, with a covered, ground level porch running its long side.

He could hear the washing beat of the surf and the tinny music of a cheap radio. There was a light in the first apartment and a girl sat there in her slip, mending a stocking. He paused for only a second.

The second door had a card under the bell and on the card was printed: *Chev Ruby*. There was no light in the upper glass part of the door and three editions of the morning *Times* were stacked there.

Dick looked at the lock which was cheap and looked back a moment at the light in the window of the next apartment. The apartment to the left was dark.

Maybe, he thought, this is why we don't get the proper respect—and he reached into his pocket for a key, an ordinary dime store skeleton key.

Once in, he turned on the lights. Chev wasn't the kind who'd go for his gun or the

law. Chev probably didn't carry a gun.

A wicker davenport with three greasy, tapestry cushions. A gas heater, a chipped and burned folding leaf table, another table holding a gas plate, an antiquated, small electric refrigerator, two more wicker chairs and a straight chair, a floor lamp with a torn, fringed shade.

The abode of Chev Ruby, dealer in precious gems.

An alcove off this room held a cot and stacked newspapers. There were two bundles, tied, and one bundle in the process of being created. Dick checked through the untied bundle, noting the dates.

Chev's penuriousness was not just a legend. He actually saved newspapers.

"Mr. Ruby—?" somebody said from the door, and Dick turned.

"Oh," she said, "I'm sorry." It was the girl from the apartment to the right. She had a robe on over her slip now.

"Get your stocking fixed?" Dick asked her.

"I don't believe I—" She stared at him, a tall girl with dark blue eyes and a thin, intelligent face.

"I'm a friend of Chev's," he told her. "He told me to get his shaving stuff, but I'll be darned if I can find it."

"Did you look in the bathroom?"

"Didn't know he had one." Dick turned, saw the door, and went through it.

The light was over the mirror and the mirror was the front of a cheap, stamped-steel medicine cabinet protruding from the wall. There was a tarnished safety razor in there and a package of cheap blades.

Dick took them out and stared in the mirror. He could see the girl, watching him. He brought the razor and blades out into the living room.

"You a friend of Chev's?" he asked her.

"Not particularly. Where is Mr. Ruby?"

"At my place. I got an electric razor and he can't use it. Did you have something to tell him?"

"The message came," she said. She reached into a pocket of her robe and held out a plain, sealed envelope. Dick fought a battle with temptation, and won.

"You hold it," he said. "I'll tell him about

it. He might not like me messing in his business."

"But he—I mean—I'm not involved in his business, either, whatever it is. He said he'd—" She flushed, and shame came to the dark blue eyes.

"He said he'd pay you if you accepted a message for him?"

She nodded.

"How much?"

"He didn't—I didn't—"

"Five dollars be all right?"

NOW, HER shame was painful to look at. "We've all been hungry," Dick said quietly. "I guess Chev has too. Here, take five and he can pay you the rest if he wants. Though he's an awful slow man with a buck."

He handed her a bill from his wallet. She didn't look at him as she took it. She turned and went back down the porch.

Dick put the razor back and turned out the lights. He closed the door quietly and locked it. When he went past the lighted window again, she was not in sight.

The annoyance which had been born at the *Isle of Cypress* was stronger, now. That hungry, decent girl's proximity to this nickel-nursing fence had caused part of it. And yet, he was only guessing that she was either hungry or decent. Though it seemed plain that Ruby had used her for a stooge.

Fog was coming in from the beach, diffusing the lights behind him, bringing a cold mugginess to his nostrils. He was cutting across to his car when the spotlight caught him, and he saw the red light flashing.

He stopped, to let the prowler car by, and it stopped, too, directly in front of him. The rear door opened and a fairly short, but immensely broad man got out.

"I thought it was you, Dick. What are you doing down here?" It was Lieutenant Berge, out of Central Homicide.

"Seeing my girl friend. What are you doing, Ken?"

"Looking for Chev Ruby's igloo. Come along and keep me company."

"Chev in trouble, again?" Dick asked. He saw the girl next door coming along the walk from the former beach house. She

turned left at the corner, and was lost in the fog of the street above.

Ken Berge's eyes followed her a second, and then came back to Dick. "Chev in trouble? Not any more. He's down at the morgue. He looks like he was worked over with a sledge." Berge's eyes appraised Dick briefly. "Come on. It's too early to go to bed."

Together, they walked along the porch. The uniformed driver stayed in the prowler car. Dick let Berge take the lead. He stopped in front of Ruby's door, and tried the knob. Then he stepped back, and shoved his right foot into the panel sharply, near the center.

There was the sound of splintering wood as the sill surrendered, and the door swung open. Berge snapped on the light.

The wide detective's glance swept the room and his face was wondering. "He lives like this, and the last I heard, Chev was worth about a hundred grand, all real estate, rental stuff."

Dick was silent.

Berge moved slowly around the room, lifting the cushions of the wicker settee with the air of a man who expected to find nothing. He said, "Lot of good his dough will do him, now."

He went into the bathroom.

Dick hoped the girl next door wouldn't come back before Berge left. He lighted a cigarette and sat down in one of the wicker chairs.

Berge came from the bathroom and prowled behind the curtains of the alcove. Dick heard the rustle of papers.

Berge came out again. "Maybe the technical boys will find something. Let's see what his neighbors say."

They went out, and the fog was all around them now. Dick threw his cigarette over the railing as the lieutenant knocked on the apartment door to the left. No answer, and he tried the door to the right, the girl's door. He swore softly.

A man came along the porch, a uniformed man carrying a satchel.

"The door's open," Berge told him. He looked up at Dick. "Where does this girl friend of yours live?"

"The other end of the building. She's

gone to work, now. I'll see her tomorrow, if there's anything you want me to ask her."

Berge lighted a cigarette and started back toward the prowl car. "We'll talk to her tomorrow," he said. "Where does she work?"

"Telephone operator, nights, in Santa Monica."

"Bring her down tomorrow."

"Sure," Dick said.

He watched the hazy bulk of the lieutenant disappear into the car. It went away, its red flasher light turned off. The headlights were lost after it had gone a block.

I could drive a truck, Dick thought. I could sell groceries or drive new cars in from the east. Bring her down, tomorrow . . . Sure. . . .

HE WALKED up the way the girl had gone.

Ritz, the neon sign said, and below it an enameled sign read: *The Ritziest Burger In Town—Two Bits.*

On a stool inside, the girl next door was having the ritziest burger in town and a malted. There was a circular counter and leather topped stools and a charcoal grill behind the counter. The youth behind the counter stood with his back toward the grill, talking to the girl.

Dick went in, and the youth turned toward him. So did the girl. She looked startled.

"Nasty night," Dick said, and took the stool next to hers.

The youth was frowning. Dick told him, "Cup of coffee. No cream."

The youth seemed reluctant to turn. When he did, Dick told the girl. "Ruby's dead. I've just been talking to the police."

"I saw you were." She wasn't looking at him.

"I'm in kind of a spot," Dick said, and reached into his breast pocket for his wallet. He showed her his buzzer.

Now she looked at him. "I'm in trouble, too?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Not if you give me that letter, and forget you ever saw it. The law's still prowling around back there. You don't know anything."

The youth had the cup of coffee in his hand and stood before them. "Something wrong, Irene?"

She smiled at him bleakly. "Nothing, Don."

Dick grinned up at the pale, slightly pimply face. "Don't threaten me, Don. I've got a weak heart."

The youth's eyes slid over him, and he set the coffee cup down sharply. He walked up to the other end of the counter and picked up the evening paper.

The girl said, "The man who gave me the letter will know what I should do."

"Did he bring it to your place?"

"No. I went down to Westwood for it. He met me in the Sears' shoe department."

"What'd he look like?"

"He'd be hard to describe. Just—ordinary, about six feet or an inch under. He wore a ring on the little finger of his right hand, a round black stone in a heavy gold mounting. That's about all I can think of."

"You were being used as a stooge."

"I suppose. And now the police are in it. I didn't do anything dishonest—up to now. But if I give you the letter, and say nothing about it, I'll be—" She broke off.

"You'll be clear, if you believe that I won't let you down. You've got to believe that, though."

She took a deep breath. "That five dollars—that was your money, wasn't it?"

He lied with a shake of the head. "It goes on the expense account. I've a client in this."

"You—could have had the letter. I—offered it to you."

"That's right. But I didn't know Ruby was dead then. I'm no friend of his."

"I didn't think you were. You didn't look like a person who'd be a friend of his." She reached into her coat pocket and pulled the letter out. She slid it along the counter to him.

Dick took a twenty from his wallet. "Compliments of the client. I love to spend his money."

She looked at the bill for seconds before taking it.

"Out of work?" Dick asked.

"For three weeks. Got something due the

end of the week, though. Half a million unemployed in this state. What's it going to be if times get bad?"

"It's going to be worse. I'll walk back with you if you want. My car's back there and the fog's like Scotch broth now."

"Thanks, but I'm going to have some coffee. And maybe something more to eat. Shall I—get in touch with you if that man comes back, asking about the letter?"

Dick put one of his cards on the counter. "Do that. Or just tell him he can get it from me."

CHAPTER III

ICE—\$250,000 WORTH



WHEN HE went out again, the fog was shrouding the street lights and the traffic was crawling. It didn't thin out until he got to Lincoln Boulevard. He headed for his apartment.

In his living room, he tore open the letter and read: *Room 511 at the Alamarc*. There was no salutation and no signature.

He was still standing in the center of the room when someone knocked at the door. He shoved the letter in his pocket before going to the door.

He knew the man only slightly, a Detective Adams out of Central Headquarters. Adams said, "Lieutenant Berge wants to see you. I'll take you down."

"My car's in front," Dick said.

"I'll take you down. Orders. 'Bring you in' is what he said."

Dick managed, on the way down, to tear up the letter into small pieces. He dropped them on the sidewalk in front of Headquarters.

There was a uniformed officer and two detectives in Berge's office. The lieutenant looked up from behind his desk wearily. His glance hardened when he saw Dick.

"Got a complaint on you from the West Side Station." Dick was silent.

"Guy named Bey, said you were bothering one of his girls. Restaurant man. Taxpayer."

"I asked to talk to her, and I talked to her."

"You're looking for Chev Ruby."

Dick looked at the uniformed man, who had a notebook out, and then back at Lieutenant Berge.

"I don't want to ask a lot of questions," Berge said grimly. "It's been a bad day. Just start at the beginning, and this time don't put in that malarkey about your girl friend who works for the telephone company. Just give it to me straight and fast."

"Ken, look—"

"Straight and fast. My name's *Lieutenant Berge*."

Dick looked at him, and shook his head. "I've got nothing to say."

Berge looked at Adams. "Take him in and book him. I'll talk to him, tomorrow, if I get time. I haven't time to mess with him."

"Charge—?" Adams said hesitantly.

"I could give you five. You think of one. Good training for you."

Adams flushed, started to say something and changed his mind. He nodded to Dick, and Dick followed him out.

In the hall, Adams said, "He's been like that all day. Sinus, I guess."

"Sure. I could be a material witness." Dick paused. "Who's at the desk?"

"Sergeant Quarles."

"Well, I'll get a nice cell then, anyway."

It was a corner cell, with neighbors on neither side. The bunk was hard, but Dick was tired. He fell asleep almost immediately. He'd told Sergeant Quarles to phone his attorney and have him there in the morning, but the message had come back that his attorney was out of town.

At eight, they brought him a cup of muddy coffee and some lumpy oatmeal with milk. He touched neither. At nine, he was smoking a cigarette, stretched out on his bunk, when he heard two sets of footsteps coming along the hard corridor.

One set belonged to the turnkey. The other man was Phil Jordan, an operative who worked for Globe. He was tall, and fairly thin, addicted to blue serge.

"You've got the life," he told Dick.

Dick rose to a sitting position, swinging his feet to the floor. "What's up, Phil?"

The turnkey opened the door, and Phil came in. The turnkey went down a few paces, out of sight.

Phil said, "I hear you were looking for Ruby."

Dick nodded.

"Why, Dick?"

"Why not?"

"Who put you on his trail then?"

Dick just looked at him.

"I'm not stooging for Berge," Phil said, "if that's what you're thinking. I've been looking for Ruby myself for two weeks."

"What's Globe want with Ruby?"

"About a quarter of a million dollars worth of diamonds and emeralds. Stolen stuff, from Whitehall Importers, Limited."

"Ruby had it?"

"We don't know."

"Strange," Dick said easily, "that I didn't read anything about that kind of a haul in the papers. That looks like front page news."

"Not with Globe handling it. You think we want every mug in America in on the deal? The less said about this kind of crime, the better."

Which made sense. The first objective in any kind of big haul was to get the stuff back.

JORDAN was watching Dick, and frowning. "You don't want to tell me your client's name?"

"It was you. Globe," Dick said. His voice was low.

Jordan's frown deepened.

"That's what you tell Berge," Dick explained, "that I was working for Globe. Or at least for you. It's a big enough deal to afford an outside man. That could clear me with Berge." Dick paused for a reaction. There was none.

"Then," Dick continued, "when we're out in the sunlight, I'll not only tell you who I was working for, I'll tell you something else you'd probably give your eye teeth to know. Is it a deal?"

"I don't know," Jordan said. "The Old Man will have to back me up." He chewed his lip. "I don't think he would."

Dick said earnestly, "Berge doesn't want to hold me. He was just unhappy, yester-

day. You give him this line, and he'll have an excuse to release me. It'll go. I know it will, Phil. I can do you some good."

"Maybe," Jordan agreed. "Ken Berge always thought a lot of you."

"That's right. I'll be out of here, anyway, when they get a hold of my lawyer. You're only saving me time."

"Wait," Jordan said. "I'll be back." He went out, and the turnkey came back to lock the door.

In a few minutes, Dick and Jordan were walking down the hall together. They went into Berge's office.

Berge had a cigarette in his mouth and some papers in his hands. He was sitting behind his desk and he didn't look any happier. His eyes moved over Dick's frame and stopped at Dick's eyes.

"What were you getting so cute about last night? Globe's a *legitimate* outfit, in case that's outside of your experience. You could have said you were working for Globe and gone on your way."

"Everybody was throwing their weight at me, yesterday," Dick said quietly.

"Like who?"

"Well, this solid citizen, this Mike Bey. His girl friend was bothered, and he's got the right to run to the law. His girl friend said Ruby had dropped her a card from Seattle two weeks ago. But all the papers were stacked in Ruby's room, and they'd all been read, all but the last three. Unless he was dead, Ruby would be likely to stop the paper, being the kind of guy he is. You could check that Miss O'Shea once over lightly."

"That's *one*," the lieutenant cut in. "Who else threw their weight at you?"

"An unidentified racketeer and a punk in a hamburger stand. And a lieutenant out of Central Homicide. It was a bad day generally."

"I'm too busy to play games with you. You got any details for me, any names?"

"Not yet. There never was a time I worked *against* you, Ken."

"Yeh, yeh, yeh. Beat it before I forget that. And don't bother me unless you've got something I want. So long."

"So long, Ken. Thanks for the bed."

In the hall, Jordan was grinning. Ken's

all right."

"Why shouldn't he be? He gets paid, either way. He's set for life."

They went out into a cloudy morning. Dick said, "I was working for Al Koski. He just wanted to find Ruby, but I don't know why. That's not for the department yet, Phil."

"I know. Was there something else, Dick?"

"There was somebody in room 511 at the Alamac Hotel Ruby was supposed to look up. I don't know if the party is still there, or not. We could go over and find out."

"I'll go," Jordan said. "You might go and see Koski again. Try and get his angle. I can put you on the Globe payroll for a couple days, Dick, if you want. At your regular rate."

"It's all right with me. I think I'm out of a job on this one."

"You see Koski. I'll meet you at your office at noon."

"Check," Dick said. A cab went by, and he whistled.

CHAPTER IV

SHE'LL SLICE YOUR THROAT



AT HIS apartment, he showered and shaved and made some coffee. His mind went over all that had happened since the day before, as he ate his corn flakes.

The office of *Al Koski—investments* was a pool room off Figueroa. The office was really behind the pool room, though in the same building. It was a bookie joint.

Al had a small room for his personal use off this, and he was in, reclining on a soft, red leather couch, cleaning his nails. He looked up at Dick, and smiled.

"Close the door, shamus. Some of the boys are nosey."

Dick closed the door and sat in the swivel chair near the bleached mahogany desk. "Ruby's dead," he said. He took five twenties from his wallet and put them on Al's desk.

"I know he's dead." Al looked critically

at a thumb nail. "You worked a day for me."

"I'll forget that. I didn't earn any money. I spent a night in the clink, covering for you."

Al was smiling, looking at his nails.

"Don't put on airs," Dick said. "You're just a small time operator. This Ruby kill is shaping up into a big stink and you could be in the middle of it."

"You're made, huh," Al said. "About me being small time—I could buy you very easy, and Ruby, too. The rest we'll forget for now, because you had a bad night and you're mad. What'd that babe at the Greek's tell you, if anything?"

"She told me she hadn't seen Ruby for a month, but had a card from him, from Seattle, two weeks ago."

"She's a liar."

"I figured that."

"What'd that babe next door to Ruby's tell you, that Irene?"

Dick stared at him.

"I'm not as dumb as you'd like to think," Al said easily. "I saw you talking to her last night."

Dick thought of her mending the stocking, eating the hamburger. He thought of the way she'd looked at the five he'd handed her. He said, "She didn't tell me anything, except she'd been wondering if she could cancel the paper."

Al swung around on the couch and sat up. He put the nail file down on an end table. "I don't mind your lip, shamus, but I don't like your lies."

Dick stood up. "I worry about that. If *anything* should happen to that girl, Al, I'll come looking for you. Watch your step."

Al's eyes were venomous. "You've only got one gun, Callender. You've almost gone too far."

Dick's laugh was short and bitter. He used two words, one of them foul, and turned his back on Al as he went out. He went through the bookie joint like a man with a mission and out into the clouded warmth of the street.

He drove back to his office. He checked the mail and dusted his desk and the window sills. He was rearranging the 1942

National Geographic Magazines on his outer office table when Phil Jordan came in.

"Nothing," Jordan said. "Nothing at all."

Dick went in to wash his hands. "Empty room?"

"He checked out this morning. Guy named Arnold Green, from Fresno. A guy who didn't look like anything special and couldn't be described. A very ordinary guy."

"That's the description I had of him."

"How about this April O'Shea?" Jordan asked. "You get to see her?"

"Mmm-hmmm. Can't figure her. Saw Koski, about an hour ago."

"What'd he have to say?"

Dick was drying his hands on a towel. "He reclined on a couch and smiled patronizingly at me. He burned me up. I told him off."

"He's—pretty rough, Dick. You shouldn't have done that."

"He doesn't scare me at all."

"You—think he's in this?"

DICK straightened the towel on the rack behind the file and turned to face Jordan. "I don't know. With a quarter of a million kicking around, a lot of mugs will try to deal themselves in. How about this stuff? I mean, how negotiable is it?"

"Unset stones? Like gold, almost. If a guy took his time, selling a couple here and a couple there, he'd get almost a hundred percent. Ruby was always a cheap operator, and he dealt with punks. He bought cheap, and sold cheap, usually to the insurance men. This one was too big for him, if he was in it, and we've reason to think he was the fence, all right. That's all he ever was, is a fence."

"You've got no lead on the stones at all?"

"Nothing. If Ruby'd have lived, he'd have come to me eventually, I think. Somebody got to him first."

"Now what do we do?"

"Wait," Jordan said. "You want to go up against that O'Shea doll again?"

"You're the boss, Phil."

"It might be wise to keep an eye on her. Let's get some lunch first, though."

They ate at a restaurant three blocks from the office.

Jordan said, "If we don't get a nibble in

another week, the chances are somebody's got the jewels who doesn't want to sell wholesale. That would just about wash up the case."

Dick was only half listening. He was thinking of Al on the couch, cleaning his nails, and the girl sitting in that tiny apartment repairing a stocking. The combination of scenes nagged at him like a touchy tooth.

"What's eating you?" Jordan asked.

"I was thinking, it's a lousy world where the pay-off's so small for going straight. It's a world where money talks and it doesn't matter how dirty the money is. It was always bad and it's getting worse. I should have worked Al over when I was in his office."

"And wind up in the jug. He's a citizen, too."

"Technically. Where's it going to end, Phil?"

"No matter how it ends, the smart guys are going to be on top."

"Smart? I never met any Phi Beta Kappas on the other side of the fence yet. The brutal, you mean. The rotten guys."

"On my wages, I don't think, because I'm not getting paid to," Jordan said lightly. "If you get any new thoughts on the subject, you could write a letter to the *Times*. You want to look into Miss O'Shea again this afternoon? Maybe you'd better stay with her while I look into some probably blind alleys."

"All right," Dick said. "Thirty a day is what I charge, Phil."

"The Old Man won't scream too much. Not with a quarter million involved. Stay sober." Jordan rose and threw a couple of bills on the table. "And don't worry about the world. It'll probably be here when you're gone."

He turned a blue serge back on Dick and walked out. Dick looked at the bills and at the check. The waitress came and he ordered a drink.

The girl next door still haunted him. There wasn't any appeal she had for him. It was just that she symbolized so many who had nothing and would never have anything. Because they were a little too gentle, too refined, too straight.

The ones like April O'Shea who were too stupid didn't bother him at all.

He had another drink and went out to the Plymouth. The sun had come out and the Plymouth was a four-wheeled oven. He opened all the windows and the ventilator and drove over toward Olympic. He took Sepulveda over to Culver City.

It was a triplex of purple stucco, three single bedroom units on one level, set forward on a well kept lawn. Hers was the farthest back.

Bright it was, and cheerful, until she opened the door. Then he could see the heavy, carved furniture behind her and the dull, depressing red Bokhara on the floor.

"You—" she said.

"Me. You're playing a sucker's game, April. Why don't you get smart?"

SHE started to close the door, and Dick said, "I'm a licensed and bonded operative. If the Department didn't think I was A-1, I wouldn't be either. You're on the wrong road."

Some doubt came into the painted face. Her eyes searched his.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said. "I might do you a lot of good."

She hesitated only a second before opening the door wider. "Come in."

The drapes were brown velvet, another Mike Bey touch. Just an old country love nest. There was probably a smoking jacket around somewhere, and slippers.

"Want a drink?"

She gestured toward an elaborate and heavy-legged liquor cabinet.

Dick sat down on the couch, mohair frieze. "Not now."

"I do," she said, and went over to pour a two ounce slug of rye. She downed it in two gulps, and poured another. She put water in this one, and took a seat in the couch's matching chair at the other end of the room.

"When did you leave Chev Ruby?" he asked her.

"I told you last night."

"But I've forgotten. You know he's dead, don't you?"

She nodded toward the morning paper, open on a table.

"I've been reading about it."

"Is that the only way you knew?"

Fear in the eyes, but no guilt. "That's right. You trying to pin something on me?"

Dick shook his head. "I'm not one of your friends. I'm an honest man, more or less, April."

"And insulting," she said. "Who do you think you are?" She sipped her drink. "A crummy private dick!"

"Last night you didn't know that. You thought I was the law, and you were scared. That's some life you're living, scared silly of the law. Are you really Irish or is the O'Shea as phony as the April?"

"The O'Shea is mine. And the April's legally mine. Anything else I could help you with?"

"Maybe I could help you. Have you thought of that? You know, by calling the police last night to put the heat on me, Mike Bey opened a new line of investigation for the police into the Ruby kill. Have they got to you yet?"

"No. Look—is this a gag, or something?"

Dick shook his head. "They wanted to know why I was bothering you, and I told

[Turn page]

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them. Or rather, they found it out by adding up some things. They're going to add up more, just like I have."

She was immovable in the chair. The hand holding the drink trembled slightly and some spilled. She set the glass on an end table.

"Ruby," Dick went on evenly, "finally got his hands on a really big haul. Well, everyone knows where Ruby lives, and there are lots of boys with big guns who can use a quarter of a million. So he didn't live there, at the place in Venice. Right?"

"How do I know?"

"He went there, late at night for a few minutes probably, to see if there were any messages, but he didn't live there. Even Ruby couldn't shave with the razor and blades he had there. I'm thinking he might have stayed *here*."

She opened her mouth and closed it. She said nothing, watching him.

"Mike wouldn't mind living here," Dick said, "as long as there might be some money in it. Mike could overlook a lot for a quarter of a million fish."

"Why bring Mr. Bey into it?"

"Don't tell me you picked out this rug, April. One thing you're forgetting in this deal is Mrs. Bey. I know her. I know she'd slice your throat just as quick and easy as she'd slice a leg of lamb for shish-ke-bab. There's nobody in this deal I'd rather have on my side than Mrs. Bey. There's nobody who scares me more."

"You're taking a lot for granted, Snoop."

"Maybe too much. Anyway, I've said my piece, and I'm going. If you want to play along, I'm a good man for your side. If you don't, you can take your chances—with Mike and Mrs. Mike, with the law, and with any stray guns that might come along. You've got a few seconds to think it over, Irish. You've got until I get to the door."

NEXT ISSUE

BLUES IN THE NIGHT

A Novelet of the Harbor Police

By STEWART STERLING

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

COMPLIMENTS OF A FIEND



IT WAS about five steps to the door from where he sat. She watched him silently, the drink again in her hand. His hand was on the doorknob when it looked as if she might speak.

But she didn't.

He opened the door—and faced something that looked like a man. It was too big for a man, and the face was too battered, but it had a voice.

The voice said, "Where you going, Junior?"

There was another near-man behind the first one, not as big but just as battered.

"I'm going out," Dick said. "Any objections?" He put a hand toward his shoulder holster.

It was a right hand that caught him, right below the ear. Dick went sideways a step, and the man came in. The rest was confused.

There were a lot of fists, most of them into the stomach, so he wouldn't pass out too soon. Then it came, finally, the one he'd been hoping for, the button shot.

He went forward into space, his brain flaming. Needles and stockings and red leather couches were all in the dream, but it had no sense beyond that.

When he came to, the face of April O'Shea was above him, and there were tears messing her heavy make-up. He was on the floor, a cold, wet towel across his forehead.

"You're—all right?" she said.

"Not quite." He put a hand beneath him and pushed himself to a sitting position. His stomach was an over-sized boil. Pain lanced through his brain.

"They—didn't bother you?" he managed to ask.

She shook her head. "I should have screamed, I suppose. I should have. But I didn't."

"They say anything?"

"Just—'compliments of Al Koski.' Do you know what that means?"

Dick nodded. He moved his head tentatively from side to side.

"I should have screamed," she went on like a woman asleep. "I should have screamed for the police. But I didn't. I'm not in a position to." Her face was as dead as her voice.

People like April O'Shea, Dick realized, couldn't be moved with words. They needed pictures—and she'd just had one.

He got to his feet, swaying. He moved slowly to the davenport and sat down heavily, rubbing the back of his neck, fighting off the nausea.

"A drink?" she asked. She was sitting in the chair again.

He glared at her, shaking his head violently. "Just a few minutes of silence."

She got up and went to the window, an act from some remembered scene. Some dramatic statement would be due. Dick braced himself against the coming corn.

She turned, one hand still holding the heavy drape. "I think Mike killed Chev. I think he was jealous."

One of Dick's eyes was closing and he touched it gingerly. Mike Bey killed Chev Ruby? He didn't answer her.

There was the sound of a double chime.

"That's Mike," she said. "He was going to drop in this afternoon. I'm—I'm scared."

"Let him in," Dick said. He shifted on the davenport.

She went stiffly to the door, and opened it. A voice Dick recognized said, "Miss April O'Shea?"

"Yes—?"

"I'm Lieutenant Berge from Central Headquarters. This is Sergeant Delver of the Culver City Police. We'd like to talk to you."

She made some strangled sound, and opened the door wider for them to enter.

Berge's eyes moved around the room as he came in and settled on Dick. "Well," Berge said. His glance narrowed. "What happened to you?"

Dick didn't answer.

Berge's glance swung to April questioningly.

"Some men, some awful men came in and did that," she said. "I don't know who they were."

Berge looked again at Dick for a second,

and then at Delver. "Your baby, I guess, Sergeant." He turned to April O'Shea. "Your employer has been killed, Miss O'Shea. Murdered."

SHE stared at him, saying nothing. Her face drained away under the powder and paint, and she toppled. Nobody was near enough to catch her.

Ken Berge kneeled beside her, while Delver came over to the davenport.

Dick said, "I'm working for the Globe Agency. I was checking Miss O'Shea on the Chev Ruby kill when these mugs walked in. A couple of ex-pugs, they looked like. Club fighters, I'd say, who'd caught too many. They were too much for me."

Ken said, "It's Dick Callender, Sergeant. He could be all right. He's been all right up to the past couple days."

"Thanks, Ken," Dick said. "I'm not asking any favors."

Delver looked between the two men, frowning. April O'Shea's eyelids fluttered and Dick braced himself for what he knew was coming.

"Where am I?" she said weakly.

"You're in the main event at the Garden," Dick said harshly. "Come out of it."

Berge smiled briefly. Delver turned his face away.

Berge stood up, facing Dick, "You're feeling better, aren't you? Want to speak up like a man now?"

April started to get to her feet, and Berge bent again to help her. Delver went out toward the kitchen. He came back with a glass of water. April was now in her favorite chair.

April said, "Who—killed Mr. Bey?" She sipped the water daintily.

Berge shrugged. "We thought you might help with that."

"Why should I— How could—?" She stared at him helplessly.

"Next week, East Lynne," Dick said. "April, it's time to become an O'Shea. You've never had a better time to let down your hair."

Her eyes went from one to the other. "I don't know who'd want to kill him. I used to go with Mr. Ruby, and then Mr. Bey be-

came—he tried to gain my favor, and he was jealous of Mr. Ruby. When Mr. Ruby was killed, I thought maybe—” She put a hand to her forehead. “Oh, mercy, I don’t know what I thought. I’m all mixed up.”

Berge looked wearily at Dick.

Dick said, “A couple days in the deep freeze might cool her down. She’s all hopped up.”

“And you—” Berge said—“how level have you been?”

Dick’s chin lifted. “I haven’t changed. I’m too old to change, Ken. You know everything I do.”

Dick looked at Delver. “What do you think, Sergeant?”

“Both of you know more about it than I do,” Delver said. “I’ll follow your lead, Lieutenant.”

Berge nodded at April. “I’d like to take her downtown.”

APRIL had no speeches now. Her memory must be failing, Dick thought. He looked over to see Delver watching him.

“I’ll be responsible for him, too,” Berge said. “You’d better go and have that eye fixed, Dick.”

Dick nodded. “You’ll be in your office?”

“Probably. I’m usually available twenty-four hours a day.”

“Where’d you find Mike Bey?”

“In his restaurant. They found him in the storage room behind the kitchen about an hour ago. I’m waiting for a report from the medical examiner now.”

“Shot?”

“Stabbed. With a big carving knife. Went right through him.”

“Mrs.—Bey—” April said.

Berge looked at her. “No. She’s clear. But maybe you’d like police protection for a few days, Miss O’Shea. I think it would be wise. The cells are clean and the food’s good.”

Dick stood up. “Don’t forget the cross ventilation, Lieutenant. I’ll be going along, if it’s all right?”

Berge looked at Delver and Delver nodded.

The sun was still at work. The built-in sprinklers were throwing a fine spray over

the neat lawn. The Plymouth was again an oven.

He drove slowly, squinting against the pain behind his eyes, his tongue exploring the cut in his lip. He’d been beaten at the whim of Al Koski. Well, he wasn’t dead. There’d be time for Al. The two pugs were nothing, fists for hire, without rancor beyond their inherent animosity toward the rational world.

He drove back to his office and checked the afternoon mail. One bill, one check for services rendered, and an ad for the Little Daisy Fingerprint Kit, complete with magnifying glass.

Then he went home and soaked his battered body in a hot tub. He was red from the bottom of his chest to his groin and there were ugly blue welts over his ribs.

All his teeth were solid. His right eye was almost completely shut now. His lower lip was puffed, the skin tight and sore. He’d finished shaving and was stretched out on the studio couch in his robe, surveying the ceiling, when his phone rang.

It was Phil Jordan, the Globe Agency stalwart. “Just been talking to Berge. He tells me you ran into trouble.”

“I didn’t run, I walked into it. Couple of Al Koski’s boys.”

“It’s not for me to say ‘I told you so; but I told you so. Don’t do anything crazy, now, Dick.”

“Such as—?”

“Such as going gunning for Koski.”

“Not on Globe’s time, I won’t. What’s next?”

“Want to go over to my place and wait for me? The key’s in the mailbox.”

“Sure. Where are you now?”

“At Headquarters. It may be a while. I’ve another lead or two. You don’t mind waiting if you get paid for it, do you?”

“It’s a pleasure,” Dick said. “I need a rest.”

He dressed slowly, thinking about the girl again, about Irene, wondering if her job was going to pan out all right. He thought of April, and wondered if she’d told Berge anything worthwhile.

He drove along Sunset to Cahuenga and over the pass to the valley. On Naomi, in

Burbank, he found the simple abode of Phil Jordan, the poorest home on the block. The lawn was gray and lifeless, the porch unswept, the stucco badly weathered.

The key was in the mailbox, along with the electricity and water bill. The house was dim and fairly cool, for the valley.

Dick went out into the kitchen for a drink of water and then came into the living room to snap the radio on for the results at Tanforan.

Jordan's coupe pulled up in front of the house about five. He came up the walk wearily, and Dick met him at the door.

"This is the damnednest cast," Phil said. In the living room, he threw his hat on the chair. "Who won the sixth at Tanforan?"

"Beggar boy. Paid 6.80. Miss April O'Shea reveal anything interesting?"

"Looks like it. I guess Bey killed Ruby, all right. Berge is satisfied, anyway. But that doesn't get the rocks."

"Mike Bey had them, you think? And whoever killed Mike has got them now?"

"Who knows? I don't." Jordan collapsed in a chair near the radio. "I can't see Bey killing Ruby over that O'Shea dish. Dolls like that are too easy to replace. But suppose he didn't, suppose instead that he killed Ruby to get the stones. Then who killed Mike? It looks like his wife's work, to me, with jealousy the motive, and Berge thinks so, too. If that's so, the chances of getting the loot back are minus. Because Mike wasn't likely to confide where he stashed them, and he's not talking any more."

"But if Mike wasn't killed by his wife, if he was killed by somebody after the rocks, that would make them cheap, wouldn't it? That would make them hotter than hell."

"Who'd admit he had them, now? With two kills attached, who'd stick his neck out? It looks like a dead end, Dick." Jordan studied Dick's face. "You really took a beating, didn't you? For a lousy thirty bucks."

He reached into an inner pocket and pulled out his wallet. He took three tens from it, and handed them to Dick.

"Thanks," Dick said. "Now I'm free to go after Al Koski."

"For gosh sakes, Dick—! What will it

get you?"

"Moral satisfaction, spiritual salve. Man cannot live by bread alone."

Phil shook his head. He sighed, and snapped off the radio. "If something breaks, Dick, I'll get in touch with you."

"Sure. So long. Don't fret, Phil. You get paid, either way."

"Me and Berge," Phil agreed. "You said that about him, too."

"That's right, I did. Be good."

CHAPTER VI

KILLER—OR SAINT?



OWN through the pass again, and it was five-thirty. He stopped at a place advertising thin pancakes and thick steaks and had the pancakes. His mouth wouldn't be up to steak for a few days. He sat there for an hour. Then he went over to the Alamarc.

When he came out again, he sat in his car, across the street. He could see the desk, from where he sat and see the man who approached it, and talked to the clerk. He looked to Dick like the shorter of the men who'd worked him over, this afternoon.

There'd been a rumor, one time, that the Alamarc was owned by Al Koski under a silent partnership, and the presence of the mug as a pseudo house-detective seemed to bear it out.

He drove over to Venice, to the narrow alley someone had dubbed the Speedway and cut off of it on Breeze.

On the far end of the porch a man sat in a fireman's chair. He was wearing a tee shirt and faded denims. He had one shoe off, and was prodding the insole with an exploratory finger.

He watched Dick come along the porch in the light from the windows. Dick stopped in front of Irene's door, and knocked. There was no answer, and he looked up toward the man in the fireman's chair.

"You a cop?" the man asked.

"Sort of. Why?"

"Heard a scream in there, earlier this afternoon. Just wondered."

"A scream. You didn't report it?"

"Hell, no," the man said. "I'm no—"

But Dick didn't wait to hear more. He pushed the door open and snapped on the light.

Irene was sitting on the floor, facing the door, her back supported by the studio couch behind her. There was blood all over the white blouse she wore and the knife wound was gaping in her soft throat.

There was no phone in the room. Dick went out onto the porch again, and the man stood there.

Dick said, "Phone Central Headquarters and have them tell Lieutenant Berge, of Homicide, there's a girl dead in the apartment next to Ruby's. Got that?"

The man nodded, and hurried back up the porch.

Dick didn't go in, again. He stood in the doorway, his eyes toward the Speedway, smoking and trying to forget the scene behind him.

BERGE came with Detective Adams. Berge took one startled glance at Dick and said, "Wait here and go back with me." Then he went on, into the room. Adams trailed.

The man in the tee shirt came along the porch, trying to peer into the window, without seeming to.

"Murder?" he asked.

"Murder. You know her?"

"No. Seemed like a nice kid."

"When you heard the scream, didn't you come out to see what was happening?"

The man shook his head.

Detective Adams came out and said to the man, "You the person that phoned? Are you Mr. Kelvic?"

The man nodded. "I didn't find her though. This fellow here—"

"Would you mind coming down here a ways? There are a few things you might be able to help us with." They walked down to the other end of the porch, away from Dick.

Dick continued to look toward Speedway, though there wasn't anything to see. In a few minutes a pair of uniformed men came up onto the porch at the west end. They, too,

went into the room. Then Berge came out.

"Got your car here?" he asked.

Dick nodded.

"Let's go down to the station."

They walked in silence to Dick's car. Berge didn't say a word until they were halfway downtown.

Then he said, "I'm trying to believe it's all coincidence. I can't swallow it."

"What's coincidence?"

"That you're always around when things happen," Berge said.

"I wasn't around when Ruby was killed, or Mike Bey," Dick protested. "But I know what's going on."

"Really? And you're keeping it a secret?"

"No. I didn't know until an hour ago, or so. I'm not the brightest guy in the world."

"That makes two of us in the same spot. Who told you all these things an hour ago? The girl friend who works at the telephone company?" Then Berge paused. "Look, was that girl back there the girl friend—"

"No," Dick said. "She was a nice kid, Ken. She was a girl who tried to do what was right, and that's what happened to her."

"Do I have to listen to stuff like that before you tell me what you do know?"

"You don't have to listen, at all. You can go home and go to bed." Dick's voice was hoarse. "She's not the last one who's going to die. There'll be more."

Ken Berge turned in the seat next to Dick to stare at him. "What's the matter with you?"

"I'm mad. I've been sneered at and reprimanded and thrown in the jug and hired and fired and had the hell beat out of me, all in the last thirty-six hours. Now I get a glimmer of light, after it's too late, after that girl's dead."

"What was she to you? What do you mean, too late?"

"I mean if anybody had to live in this business, it was her. She was one of the few who had a right to live. The others don't matter worth a damn. Why couldn't that O'Shea get bumped? She'll probably wind up with an Academy Award."

"I don't know why anybody should get killed," Berge said tiredly. "People do, all

the time, and for the damndest reasons. That's what puts the butter on my bread. Usually, it's the wrong people who get killed, but I don't figure I'm the final judge of that. If you're mad, maybe you're ready to talk. I'll assume, for the time being, you didn't have anything to talk about before."

"Okay," Dick said, "we'll start at the beginning."

And he did. . . .

HE PARKED beneath the twisted, Dalilike branches of the apricot tree almost a half block away from the other car. He didn't light a cigarette, or even move very much. He just sat, keeping his gaze down the street.

His Plymouth was anonymous, and the houses were dark, mostly, all around him.

Berge would be in that other car down the block, and if both Koski and Jordan had to be tackled together, Berge would be useful. If they didn't, he would get along without Berge. His anger had held Dick thinking, and a man can take only so much punishment. When it gets more than he can take,

a man will talk, usually. Even the tough guys.

He sat for a half hour, for an hour, for an hour and a half and nothing happened. He was fidgety, but the light was still on, down there, and that kept him.

When two hours had gone by, he got out of his car, and walked down. Maybe Al Koski—whom he'd led Berge to believe would come here—wasn't going to show. Maybe, he'd guessed wrong. But he didn't think so.

He went up onto the littered porch and pressed the button. The door opened almost immediately and there was obvious disappointment on Phil Jordan's face. He had been expecting Al Koski!

"Oh, it's you, Dick," Jordan said. "What now?"

"That girl's been killed. Irene."

"Irene? Who would—?"

"You know the answers to that Phil. Aren't you going to invite me in? I've got a story."

Jordan's voice was quiet. "Sure. Come in."

[Turn page]

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There was only a table light on in the living room. Dick went over to sit on the davenport and Jordan sat stiffly in the chair near the radio.

"I've been kind of dumb," Dick said. "I never noticed until this afternoon that you had that white spot on your little finger. That's where you usually wore the ring, wasn't it, Phil, the one with the black stone?"

Jordan studied him, saying nothing.

"Irene said the man at Sears wore a ring like that, and this afternoon I checked through your bureau and found it, Phil. You're a hard guy to describe without the ring. You realized that."

Jordan was still quiet, his eyes steady on Dick.

"You don't make enough, do you, Phil? Not enough to keep you honest. Not enough for you to pay me thirty fish out of your own pocket. Globe doesn't pay that kind of money for part-time help. But you wanted to know where I was, and it's easy when I'm working for you. You had unfinished business."

"The deductive mind at work," Jordan mocked him. "Keep talking, Sherlock."

"Ruby's got a quarter of a million in stuff it would be hard to trace. He might even sell it for twenty or thirty grand to the insurance company. Or to you. But you haven't got twenty or thirty grand, and this is too good a deal to pass up. You go to Al Koski. He's got the money."

"You get the money from Al, and it's going to be a partnership split, probably. Only Mike Bey gets to Ruby before you swing the deal, and now Mike's got the stones."

Jordan stirred in his chair, saying nothing.

"Al Koski trusts you about as much as you trust him," Dick went on, "and when you come to him with news of Ruby's murder, he doubts your innocence and begins to wonder about a doublecross. So he comes in to put me on the trail, figuring our paths will cross, and he'll learn from me more than you're telling him. Then when either you or Koski finds out for sure that Mike Bey's got the rocks, and where they are, a meeting's arranged, and Mike's killed. That

would be your doing, because you're the logical man to deal with. And because if it had been Al's, there wouldn't have been the same necessity to kill Irene. You would have to kill her because she's the only one who can identify you, besides the clerk at the Alamarc, and the clerk is one of Al's boys, so he's safe. You were too anxious to steer me away from Al, Phil, and that's how I guessed you two were working together."

JORDAN still sat stiffly in the chair, but he was smiling. "A nice, clean job, Dick. I've always had a lot of respect for your work."

"I'll bet."

"It's no lie. So has Berge. Berge only wants a fall guy."

"And who would that be?"

"Al will satisfy Berge. So let's throw Al to him. You see, I'd as soon split with you as with Al."

"Al will squeal like a stuck pig."

"Not *dead*, he won't." Phil paused, still smiling. "When did you begin to get these horrible thoughts about me?"

"You were too sloppy. You didn't ask me where I got that message about Room 511 at the Alamarc, nor what the O'Shea dish had told me. You weren't interested, because you *knew*. Your work usually isn't that sloppy, Phil."

"Thanks. And now that we have exchanged compliments, what about Al? He's due in ten minutes."

"You'd rather have me as a partner, huh?"

"Al's—unstable. And not too bright. I'd rather have you."

"Okay. You've as much as admitted two kills, so this one will be mine. We'll need a reason to trust each other, Phil, and this will make it mutual."

Jordan glanced at him sharply. "That sounds kind of screwy."

"Sticking my neck out, you mean? Take a look at my face, Phil. It was Al's lads who beat me. You want to see my belly, too?"

Jordan grinned. "I'd almost forgotten. Where'd you learn about Irene, Dick?"

"I walked in on her, like that. I put her body under the bed. After we get Al, we'd

better drag her out again and call the police. We'll have to have a good story."

"We will. I'm glad to have a partner who can think. Now, I'll go to the door, and Al will walk in behind me, probably. We'll turn this chair around, and you can use the arm for a hand rest. This has to be right—without a lot of lead—and yet, he can't live, you know."

Dick nodded. "Steady does it. I'll be very careful." He went over, to take a position behind the big chair.

It wasn't too soon. The bell rang in less than two minutes, and Jordan went to the door.

"Everything hunky-dory?" Jordan asked, and Koski's voice answered something indistinguishable.

There were footsteps coming into the living room now, and Dick's .38 was steady, resting on the arm of the chair. The barrel was pointed almost level. The front sight was centered on Al's kneecap.

Dick knew how painful that could be, and how slow to heal. Some times, they never did heal completely, giving a lot of trouble in bad weather.

The sound of his .38 almost shattered the window.

Al screamed, and went down, and Jordan turned, staring.

"Go for your gun, Phil," Dick said. "That's your one chance. Go for it."

Jordan's right hand hadn't moved two inches when Dick's .38 roared again. He picked the other knee on Jordan, and with

his hand so steady on the chair it was a cinch.

* * *

"You're a hard man," Berge said. The light from his desk highlighted half of his weary, pugnacious face. "You're a—a—well, I'd better not say it. Both of those boys are going to be crippled for life. You think you're God, or something?"

"They're alive. I didn't kill them. Are they talking, yet?"

"They don't need to. I wasn't trusting anybody in this, Dick, I had a man next to that living room window, the one that was open. Detective Adams. And he stayed awake, for a change."

"Adams is a good man," Dick said. "A victim of your lousy disposition."

"You should talk. Look, neither Koski nor Jordan had a gun in their hands. What the hell kind of story can I make of that?"

"I don't know. You could book me for assault with a deadly weapon, among other things. You could put me away for years, and get me out of your hair." Dick stood up. "But I want you to remember this, Ken—*neither did that girl next door have a gun in her hand.* If your conscience bothers you, dwell on that. My conscience is perfectly clear. I feel like a saint."

"You're a long ways from that, Dick Callender. All right, run along. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Sure. Good-night, Ken."

"Good-night, you—you— Good-night, Dick."

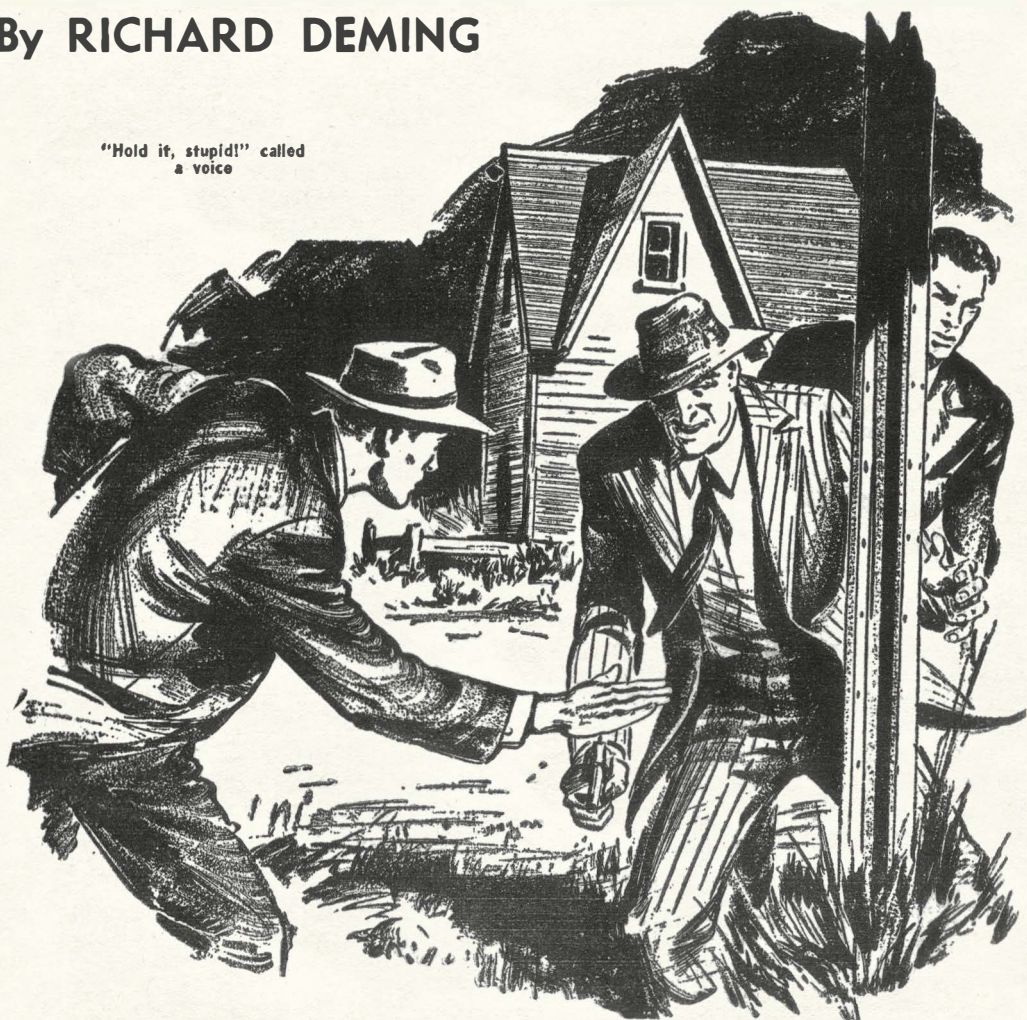


Jeff King finds himself married to murder—in *KILLER IN HIS BED*, a hard-hitting mystery novelet by **NORMAN A. DANIELS**

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By RICHARD DEMING

"Hold it, stupid!" called
a voice



The Edge of the Law

A FINAL wisp of smoke seeped from the automatic, making a thin question mark in the air.

No one spoke as the little man backed toward the door, the gun big and menacing in his small hand. Five of the poker players sat with their arms carefully on the table, and their eyes, frightened and unbelieving,

fixed on the arcing muzzle. The sixth, a Buddha-shaped man whose small eyes were narrowed in pain, gripped the table edge with the fingers of his left hand.

The other arm, shattered and useless, hung straight down over the arm of his chair and the fingers dripped blood on the pistol lying on the floor beneath them.

When Harry Cummings won fourteen grand at poker, he also acquired a deadly enemy—and two even deadlier friends!

"You might as well finish it, Harry," the fat man whispered. "I'm going to get you."

The little man with the gun held a bunched wad of currency in his left hand. Without glancing at it, he stuffed it in his side pocket.

"I'm checking out," he told the group quietly. "Anyone think I've got more than my winnings?"

No one said anything.

"I only want what I won," he explained carefully, knowing these men might forgive a shooting, but would never forgive a welch. "I'm estimating it at fourteen thousand. That fair, without counting chips?"

Again he got no answer. He fixed his eyes on the player nearest him, a gaunt, meatless man with sunken cheeks and gray hair. "That fair, Ed?"

Hardly moving his lips, Ed said, "I'd guess about that, Harry."

"If I lifted more from the box, I'll mail it back to Mark." He flicked his eyes at the wounded man. "You can settle with him."

His fingers felt the doorknob behind him, turned it and pushed open the door. "Thanks for the evening, Mark."

A vein began to beat in the pale forehead of the fat man. His voice still a whisper, he said, "I'm going to get you, Harry."

"Then you better practice up," Harry said dryly. "You're about a second slow."

He backed through the door, slammed it, reached the cottage's front door in two strides and raced across the lawn to his car.

WITHOUT even stopping at his room for his clothes, Harry Cummings drove straight north from Miami, for he knew syndicate gunmen would be converging on his hotel within minutes of his exit from the cottage.

All that night and for the next two days he drove his Ford sedan steadily north and west, stopping at tourist camps when forced to by fatigue, resting a few hours and forging on. At his first stop he counted the wad of currency and it came to \$15,830. He transferred \$14,000 to a money belt under

his shirt, and he mailed \$1,830 in a plain envelope to Mr. Mark Derhenning, Miami Beach, Florida.

Just before sundown the second day he stopped in a small town, purchased some toilet articles, socks, shirts and underwear and checked into a hotel for an hour. He bathed and shaved, and when he entered the hotel dining room for his first full meal since leaving Miami, he had shed all signs of travel except a slight bagginess at the knees.

He was a compact little man about twenty-eight years old, with dainty hands and feet like a girl's, but there was nothing effeminate in his square features, nor in the precise, controlled movements of his body. Even wearing elevated heels, which added an inch to his height, he was just short of five feet five.

After dinner he drove on more leisurely, and when about an hour later he passed a sign reading: "Winona, pop, 2,836," he began to whistle.

In Winona Harry parked his sedan in front of the city hall, climbed the steps and entered an office whose door was marked: "A. Cummings, Village Constable."

A shirt-sleeved man with a nicked badge pinned to his breast pocket sat with his feet on the desk. He was a tall, powerfully built man with the same square features and undersized hands and feet that Harry had.

Harry said, "Stick 'em up, Buster. Your money or your life," and simulated a pistol with his index finger and thumb.

A huge grin spread across the larger man's face, and his feet hit the floor with a bang. "Harry, you son-of-a-gun!" He rounded the desk and beat the little man on the back.

Harry said, "How you been, kid?"

"Swell. Just swell, Harry. Where you been keeping yourself?" He looked down at the little man with mock severity. "Fine brother you are. Every six months you breeze in and breeze out again, and never a letter in between."

"I been busy, Art. You know how it is. How are things around town?"

"You mean how's Gwen? She's fine.

But why the prettiest girl in town sits around waiting for a guy she only sees twice a year, beats me. Sometime why don't you stop long enough to marry her?"

Harry grinned at his younger brother. "Think I will, kid. That's one of the reasons I'm here this trip. I finally made our marriage stake. Fourteen thousand dollars."

The big man's smile faded and he asked without any particular expression, "Gambling?"

Harry's lips curled in mild amusement. "Don't start preaching, Art. I think arresting drunks is a lousy way to make a living, but I don't nag you about it."

"I'm not going to preach, Harry. You make it your way and I'll make it mine. Glad you were lucky."

Harry turned toward the door and said over his shoulder, "I'll drop down later tonight. Still bunk here?"

"Sure. Still a bachelor and the jail's cheaper than the hotel."

Harry drove to Gwen's house from the city hall, and Gwen's mother came to the door.

"Good evening, Mrs. Ross," he said, his hat in his hand and his eyes smiling at the old lady.

"Harry Cummings! Land sakes, you're a stranger. Come in." She held the door wide for him, took his hat and shooed him into the parlor. "Gwen, look who's come to call."

THE girl who rose from the sofa was nearly as tall as Harry. Her complexion was golden and matched her hair, and her eyes were wide-spaced and green.

She said, "Harry!" and came toward him to take both hands.

He dipped his head to kiss her lightly on the lips.

"Is it a visit again?" she asked, still holding his hands. "Or this time is it for good?"

"Some of both," he said. "How would you like California?"

She drew back, returned to the sofa and sat down. "Another 'deal,' Harry?" Her voice held a note of resignation.

Mrs. Ross said something about cookies

and coffee and faded from the room. Harry stood over the sofa, looking down, his eyes crinkled in amusement.

"Not this time, Gwen," he said. "I've finally got our stake. Fourteen thousand dollars. Cold, hard cash." He patted his waist and added, "With me."

Her expression did not change. "Where did you get it?"

"What difference does it make?" he asked, suddenly irritated. "I didn't rob a bank."

"Where did you get it?"

"I won it in a poker game," he said coldly. "Want me to give it back?"

She said in a low voice, "You could lose it in a poker game, too, couldn't you?"

"I've told you I'm not a gambler," he said, gesturing with his small hands in an effort to make her understand. "That is, I'm not a sucker gambler. It was just a matter of time till I hit the jackpot, and now I'm through."

"Who did you win it from?"

"Some fellows." He stared down at her perplexedly. "They could afford it, if that's what's worrying you. It was a private party at the beach cottage of a man named Derhenning. He heads a racetrack syndicate, and fourteen thousand dollars is about an hour's salary."

She asked, "What do you intend to do with your money?"

"Our money," he corrected her. "We're going in business."

Her eyes started to widen in surprised happiness, then the look faded and she asked warily, "What business?"

He pulled at his left ear and shifted his feet slightly. "Now, Gwen, there's only one thing I thoroughly know, and that's percentages. With fourteen thousand I can open a nice little handbook."

She dropped her eyes tiredly. "It would have to be a handbook, or whatever you call it, wouldn't it? Something on the edge of the law. It can't be something simple, like a shoe store."

He said impatiently. "What do I know about the shoe business? Any banker will tell you to go in a business you know."

Rising, she walked to the window, looking out with her back to him. "I've waited

four years for your *stake*, Harry. When you went away after your folks died, you were just a small-town boy, clean and ambitious. But every time you came back, at six month intervals, you had changed a little more. You've turned hard and citified. You aren't the same Harry I said I'd wait for."

He asked in a quiet voice, "You mean you've stopped waiting?"

She turned to face him, and went over and put her hands on his arms. "You know I wouldn't leave you, Harry. No matter what you did." Then a peculiar expression grew on her face, she removed her hand from his left arm and poked the bulge under his armpit. "Harry! Are you carrying a gun?"

"Of course," he said. "You can't sit in a poker game involving thousands of dollars without some protection. You'd be an open invitation to hijackers. I have a permit. Mark Derhenning got all of us permits."

"You're not in a poker game now."

"I'm carrying fourteen thousand dollars around with me," Harry said.

She moved away from him a few steps. "All right, Harry. But can't you see what these ideas of yours, this constant angle-shooting, could do to our happiness? We've already lost four years that we might have spent together."

He said, "I haven't even thought of another woman during that time."

She shook her head. "I don't mean that Harry. I'm sure you've been true. But you've got this thing in your blood. I'd like something more from life than a mink coat I might have to pawn at any minute to get you out of jail. And I hope *all* your friends won't be cheap and flashy and overdressed."

He said, "You don't know any of my friends."

"Yes I do. One is in town. He asked for you at the hotel this morning and Dave Hunter sent him over here, thinking I'd know where to reach you."

His face expressionless, he asked, "What did he look like?"

"He was thin and over dressed, and his

face was sort of gray, like he'd been sick, and he had a thin nose with a sharp bone, almost like a knife—" She broke off as it belatedly registered on her that he had asked only what the man looked like, and not for his name. Her face turned frightened. "He didn't leave a name," she said breathlessly. "What is it, Harry? The police?"

HE FORCED his expression to relax into a reassuring smile. "I haven't done anything that would interest the police, Gwen. It's a man named Marty Schwenk. I know him well."

Mrs. Ross, behind him, said, "I made some coffee children. Come into the dining room."

Harry said, "I'm awfully sorry, Mrs. Ross, but Gwen just told me a friend of mine's in town. I'm afraid I'll have to leave now, if I want to catch him before he pulls out. May I save the offer?"

"Oh, Harry," the old lady said reproachfully. "It's all made."

"You drink a cup for me."

He took Gwen's chin in his hand, kissed her lightly and said, "Phone you tomorrow, honey."

He drove to the town's single hotel along back streets, and parked in the dark courtyard at its rear. Removing the parcel containing his toilet articles and newly purchased clothing from the auto's trunk, he entered the hotel's back door and stood in the dim rear hall surveying the lobby before venturing farther.

A heavy-shouldered man about Harry's age sat behind the desk in his shirt sleeves. He looked up as Harry approached and spoke with no surprise in his voice.

"Evening, Harry."

"How are you, Dave? Got a room?"

"Sure." Dave pushed the dime notebook which served as a registration ledger toward Harry. "Feller looking for you today."

"Yeah?"

"Thin feller, with a beak like a sword 'Nother feller with him, carrying a violin case, but he stayed out on the sidewalk and I couldn't see him good through the screen."

"Carrying a violin case, was he?" Harry

asked quietly.

"Yeah. They're staying over to Maw Rooney's rooming house. Sword-beak said he was a friend of yours, so I sent him over to see Gwen. Later he came back, and I found out he wasn't."

"How?"

"He gave me twenty bucks to phone him when you come in, and not tell you nothing about it."

Harry smiled a faint, bleak smile. "He must have thought this was New York. Going to phone him?"

"Waiting for you to say."

"Think I'll stay incognito a while. Tell me a pretty name."

"John Smith," suggested the hotel man.

Harry screwed up his nose. He wrote "Andrew Harding" on the register and pushed it back to Dave.

"O.K., Mr. Harding," the hotel man said. "Room 210." He tossed a key on the desk.

Harry asked, "The tailor next door still open nights?"

Dave nodded.

"Will you pick up my suit and have it pressed?"

"Sure," Dave said. "Give you three minutes to get it off."

Harry found room 210 without assistance, emptied his pockets, peeled off his suit and threw it on the bed. Almost immediately a knock came at the door.

Harry called, "Come in," and stepped quietly over to the wall next to the door.

DAVE HUNTER entered, glanced at Harry curiously, and his eyes widened at the heavy gun hanging under the small man's arm. Without comment he picked up the suit and started out again, but at the door paused to examine Harry thoughtfully.

"Well?" the small man asked sharply.

"Be about ten minutes," Dave said in a mild tone, and went on out of the room.

Harry locked the door, lit a cigarette and walked over to the lone window. One hand reached down to raise the shade, then he glanced at his pantless legs and frowned. Crossing the room, he switched off the light, returned to the window in the dark and

raised the shade.

A pencil-thin beam of light in the courtyard below caught his attention, and his eyes narrowed. Two shadowy figures stood behind Harry's car, and one of them held the light on the license plate. The light winked out and the two figures faded back toward the alley.

Harry drew the shade and switched the light back on. He began to whistle soundlessly, but a light film of sweat suddenly beaded his forehead.

Standing over the bed, he worked the slide of his automatic until all the shells had been ejected. Examining each one carefully, he stuffed them back in the clip, rammed the clip home and worked the slide once more to seat a shell in the chamber. He dropped the hammer to quarter-cock and reholstered the gun.

Then he sat on the bed smoking until a knock sounded.

"Yes?" he said.

"Dave Hunter."

Harry unlocked the door and Dave brought in the freshly pressed suit on a hanger.

"Thirty-five cents," the hotel man said.

Harry lifted a quarter and a dime from his loose change on the dresser, automatically picked up a second quarter, hesitated and dropped it back. He gave Dave the thirty-five cents.

"Thanks a lot, Dave."

"Don't mention it, Harry. Give a yell if you need anything else." He eyed the small man's shoulder harness. "If my brother was constable, I'd tip him off to any sharp-nosed fellers crowdin' me."

Harry's eyes turned cold. "You run the hotel, Dave. I'll run my business."

Dave said mildly, "We been friends a long time, Harry. But if that's the way you want it—" He shrugged and turned to leave. "Just remember, preventin' trouble is part of the business of runnin' a hotel."

The little man's expression softened, but his voice remained gruff. "You got too dramatic an imagination. I won't get blood on your rugs."

When Harry had donned his suit he waited until he judged Dave had had time

to get back to the desk, then picked up the room phone and jiggled the hook up and down.

Dave Hunter's voice said, "Yeah?"

"Who's on the switchboard, Dave?"

"Run it myself," Dave said. "I'm the whole staff these days."

"See if you can get me room 837 at the Miami Beach Hotel. Station to station."

HARRY listened to the phone call being relayed through and finally heard the buzz of the other phone ringing. After the third ring, a voice said, "Hello."

"Ed?" Harry asked.

"Right."

"Harry Cummings."

The other man was silent for a moment. Then he asked, "Where you calling from?"

"New York City," Harry said easily.

"Mark get the money I sent?"

"Yeah, Harry. He got it." There was a long pause, and then Ed said diffidently, "Mark had his arm amputated."

"Did he?" Harry asked quietly. "Too bad. He should have kept it on the table."

"You didn't play it very smart, Harry. Mark isn't going to kiss and make up."

"He had his chance," Harry said with irritation. "I let him get it out before I even started to reach."

"He wouldn't have done anything with it though, Harry. He just wanted you to take off your coat."

"Sure. To see if I was wearing a sleeveholdout. I don't take that from anybody, including Mark."

"Well, you know how Mark is. You could have showed him and he'd have forgotten it."

"I know how he is," Harry said. "He likes to make the small fry dance. The big-shot ordering around his servants. 'Take off your coat, little man.' He's lucky I didn't choose his fat head."

"It's spilt milk anyway, Harry. But for old times' sake, here's a tip. Stay away from your home town."

"Why?"

"Mark figures you'll head there. He sent some friends to check."

"What friends?"

Ed said slowly, "Marty Schwenk. The other one doesn't matter."

"No," Harry agreed. "With Marty on a team the other members wouldn't."

"Play it close, Harry. You wouldn't have a chance against Marty."

"All right," Harry said impatiently. "I know he's tough."

"It's not just that, Harry. Lots of people are tough. But Marty's a specialist. Face-to-face against an ordinary goon, I'd put my chips on you, but you wouldn't even see Marty."

"All right," Harry said. "I'm staying in New York anyway. Thinking of opening a bookshop."

Ed gave a humorless laugh. "Not in New York, you aren't. Or not in the United States. Better try Canada."

"I don't get you."

"I'll give it to you straight, Harry. The word is out that Mark's down on you, and you couldn't lease a wire anywhere in the country. Mark swings a lot of weight. In fact he swings so much weight, I wouldn't want him to know I tipped you off, even though we used to be friends."

"Used to be?" Harry asked.

"Used to be," Ed emphasized. "Do me a favor and don't call anymore. Eh, Harry?"

"Sure, Ed," Harry said softly. "I wouldn't keep you on a sinking ship."

He hung up and the phone rang again, immediately. Thinking it was the ring-off, he let it sound, but when it continued, he lifted the receiver and said, "Yes?"

"Dave Hunter. Sword-beak was just in to look over the register. Andrew Harding is the only registration today, and when he saw it, he kind of smiled."

"Thanks," Harry said. "You can't see the back stairs from the desk, can you?"

"No. Why?"

"Just wondered."

"Listen, Harry," Dave said. "You're not going to have any trouble, are you?"

"Not if I can help it."

"Well, I wouldn't want any trouble in the hotel."

Harry asked, "Want me to check out?" His voice was brittle.

"No, no, Harry. I didn't mean that."

Just be careful, will you?"

"I'm always careful," Harry said, and hung up.

He went to the door, opened it and glanced both ways along the hall. When he closed it again, he left it unlocked. Going into the bathroom, he switched on the light and turned the cold water in the shower on half way. He left the bathroom door open and the light on, switched off the room light and dragged the single straight-backed chair to the side wall opposite the bathroom. Tilting the chair against the wall, he sat in it, drew the automatic from under his arm and pulled the hammer from quarter-cock to full cock.

FOR an hour he sat in the semi-darkness with his eyes on the door, listening to the shower run in the lighted bathroom. Toward the end of the hour a puzzled frown settled on his face, and he began to shift uncomfortably.

Finally he hooked his thumb over the automatic's hammer and let it move forward to quarter-cock. The muzzle was touching his shoulder holster when the doorknob began to turn very slowly.

For an instant Harry sat motionless, his arm across his chest and his hand gripping the butt of his half-seated gun. Then, as the door pushed inward the barest fraction of an inch, he swung the muzzle in a fluid arc to center on the crack at knee height.

All motion stopped, and the noise of the shower seemed to gain in volume as silence grew in the room. Harry realized he was holding his breath.

The door edge moved again, and the crack widened to an inch. Carefully Harry forced the hammer back with his thumb. As it clicked to full-cock the sound seemed to reverberate from the walls, drowning the splash of water.

Then there was silence. A silence so profound it contained an element of suspended waiting. The door remained motionless.

A light dampness ringed the little man's hairline as he noiselessly rose from his chair and circled the doorway until he could see into the hall through the thin crack. Nothing was visible but a stretch of carpet and

a section of bare wall.

Pressing his shoulder against the wall next to the door, he raised one foot to the knob and slammed the door wide open. Even as the inner knob crashed against the wall, he was whipping through the doorway and spinning to cover both sides of it, his breath held and his body braced against shock.

The hall was empty.

Back in his room he locked the door, switched on the light and cut off the water in the bathroom. A trembling reaction set in, and it took him three matches to light a cigarette. When he finally managed to get it lighted, he sat on the bed and remained there unmoving for ten minutes.

When he rose, his face was relaxed and his expression was one of rueful relief at having come to a not too satisfactory decision. He lifted the phone.

When Dave Hunter answered, Harry said, "Last time I was here, the only way out of town was by train. Any change since then?"

"If you mean bus or taxi service, Harry, no. In a pinch you could get a taxi from Desert View."

"That's thirty miles," Harry said. "So a guy without a car would be stranded until the midnight train, wouldn't he?"

"It stops at twelve-fifteen, not midnight. Yeah, Harry. Guess he would."

"Thanks, Dave. How much is my bill?"

"One seventy-five for the room. Two thirty-five for the phone call."

"I'll leave it on the dresser and the key in the door. Do me a favor?"

"Sure, Harry."

"Phone Gwen and Art tomorrow and tell them I'll write."

"Sure, Harry. When you leavin'?"

"After a while," Harry said noncommittally. "See you later, Dave."

The little man laid four ones and a dime on his dresser. With his remaining clean laundry and toilet articles wrapped in one parcel and his dirty clothes in another, he quietly descended the rear stairs and paused at the back door to survey the moonlit courtyard. When he saw no one, he pushed open the screen door, then stopped still.

His car was missing.

Returning to his room, Harry locked the door and sat on the bed again. His mind examined his situation coldly. Three trains a day—which his hunters could cover from any of a dozen possible places of concealment around the depot. Briefly he thought of his brother, Art, but irritably dismissed the thought because he knew Art would help, then insist he return to Miami and explain Derhenning's shooting to the police.

He smoked three cigarettes, and with each cigarette his square face set in more decisive lines and his lips grew thinner.

When he stubbed out the third, he lifted the phone, waited for Dave Hunter's polite "Yes?" and asked abruptly, "You say those fellows are staying at Maw Rooney's?"

"Yeah, Harry," Dave said slowly. "Thought you were leaving."

"Changed my mind."

"Listen, Harry, why don't you call in Art? I don't mean to butt in—"

"Then don't," Harry interrupted, and slammed down the phone.

UNLOCKING the door, he jerked it open and stepped through without caution. Behind him the phone blared.

He frowned irritably, then turned back to answer it. It was Gwen's mother.

"I hoped I'd catch you before you went out," she said. "Ask Gwen to pick up my vitamin pills at Rossiter's Drug Store before they close, will you? I forgot to tell her before she left."

"Is she coming here?" Harry asked.

"Of course," Mrs. Ross said in a surprised voice. "Isn't she there yet?"

Harry felt a sickness rising in his stomach. He kept his voice calm. "No. Not yet."

"Why she left a half hour ago. Right after Dave Hunter phoned and said you wanted her to meet you at the hotel."

"I see," Harry said quietly.

"Harry," Mrs. Ross said in a suddenly worried voice. "Is something wrong?"

"No, no," Harry said easily. "Just crossed signals. She's probably waiting in the lobby. Thought she'd stood me up."

His hand trembled slightly when he hung up. Immediately he lifted the receiver again and clicked the bar up and down until Dave

answered. "You phone Gwen a little while ago?" Harry asked.

"Naw. Why would I do that?"

Harry said bitterly. "That damned small-town accent of yours is too easy to imitate." and slammed the phone back on its hook.

Running his hand over his hair, he paced to the window, stared dully at the blank shade and returned to sit on the bed. Then he rose suddenly, put on his hat and started for the door. The blare of the phone stopped him a second time.

He raised the receiver and said, "Yes?" "Marty Schwenk," a low voice said.

Harry said tightly, "Where is she?"

Marty laughed cynically. "So you know about it, huh? Worried a little bit?"

"Spill it," Harry said.

"Not through a switchboard, friend. In five minutes the first public phone in the lobby will ring. You be there to answer." The phone went dead.

Harry entered the lobby walking fast, made no reply to Dave Hunter's, "How are you, Harry?" and shut himself in the first of the two public phone booths. The phone rang almost immediately.

"This is better," Marty Schwenk said. "Pay station to pay station, and both dial phones. Wonderful age we live in."

"What do you want?"

"Just called to tell you your friend's all right—so far."

"Listen, Marty," Harry said quietly. "Gwen's not in this and doesn't know anything about it. This state hangs kidnappers."

Marty laughed without mirth. "This state already wants to hang me, only under a different name. I'd never have come, only you don't say no to Mark. I want to make a deal with you, Harry."

Harry remained silent.

"Your friend will be home safe in twenty minutes if you give me your word you'll go through with the deal."

"Shoot."

"I want you at the water tank fifty yards south of the railroad depot at midnight sharp. Without your gun."

Harry said, "Do you think I'm nuts?"

"You got the wrong idea, Harry. Mark wants you back alive. The last car of the

twelve-fifteen train stops about at the water tank. We're catching that train."

"Mark wants me alive, eh? For what? So he can pull the trigger himself?"

"That's between you and Mark," Marty said. "I just work here."

"And if I'm not at the water tank?"

"You'll be there if you say you will. I know how you feel about welchers."

"Suppose I don't say I will?"

Marty's voice was suddenly vicious. "Your cute little redhead pushes off."

"You win the pot," Harry said coldly.

"But I'm not sure you feel like I do about welchers. In twenty minutes I expect a call from Gwen. If I get it, I'll be at the water tank at twelve. Without a gun."

Marty said, "Check," and hung up.

HARRY left the hotel and crossed the street to the city hall. The whole building was dark except for the constable's office. He found his brother sitting with his feet on the desk reading a magazine.

"Aren't you working kind of late?" Harry asked.

Art dropped his feet to the floor and grinned at the smaller man. "I ain't working, Harry. Just sitting."

"I need a favor," Harry said.

"Sure, Harry. Name it."

"Have to meet a couple of fellows later on. We're meeting in a rather secluded spot and I'm not sure what they want. I'd kind of like you hidden somewhere in case they want my hide."

"Wouldn't be the two strangers down at Maw Rooney's, would it?"

Harry said carefully, "I didn't say who they were. Just understand this: unless they make a pass at me, I want you to sit tight. I don't even want them to know you're there."

Art pulled thoughtfully at his left ear. "If those guys are some kind of hot characters, I ought to bring them in for questioning, Harry. After all, I'm a law man."

Harry shrugged. "Forget it then, kid. Just thought I'd ask."

"Wait a minute, Harry!" The big man followed him to the door, swung him aside and blocked the door with his own body.

"You know blamed well I wouldn't let you walk into anything, law or no law. But that martyr act stopped working when I was twelve and you were fourteen. We'll make a deal."

Harry scowled at his younger brother, then let the scowl fade into a grin. "Now I've seen everything. The law's straightest arm wants a deal with a shady character. Shoot, kid. Anything you'd suggest couldn't possibly get me in trouble."

"You know what the law means to me, Harry?"

"Sure, kid. You and the law sleep together."

"All right then," Art said. "I'll play it tonight anyway you want it, and in return you do a favor for me."

"What favor?"

Art said, "Am I putting limits on what I do for you?"

Harry regarded his brother with a puzzled frown. "Aren't you being a little dramatic, kid? You don't have to drive bargains. If you need my right arm, just ask."

"We'll keep it a deal, Harry."

"All right. So it's a deal," Harry said impatiently. "What's the favor?"

"It'll keep till we finish your business. What about tonight?"

Harry said, "I'm meeting these two fellows at midnight at the water tank south of the railroad depot. Unless they make a pass, I don't want them touched. We're supposed to catch the 12:15 train together. If we all get on it, just let us."

"And if you don't get on the train?"

"All bets are off. Do anything you want."

Harry returned to the hotel and sat in his room smoking until the phone rang. It was Gwen.

"Harry," she said, "what's going on?"

"You tell me," Harry said.

"Why, first Dave Hunter phoned and said you wanted me to meet you at the hotel. But when I got to the corner, that friend of yours with the sharp nose—Mr. Schwenk, isn't it—came along in your car and said you were out at Dewey's Inn and had asked him to take me out there. When we got to Dewey's Inn, there was another man there who said he was a friend of yours too. We

sat and drank cokes and waited for you, but you never came, and Mr. Schwenk kept going out to phone your room, but he couldn't get any answer. Then finally he came back from one of his trips and said you wanted me to go home and phone you. So he drove me home."

Harry said, "It was kind of a practical joke, Gwen. Don't worry about it."

"I don't think it was a very funny joke."

"The humor grows on you, Gwen. By tomorrow you'll die laughing. I have an appointment now, so I'll see you later."

"Is that all the explanation I get?"

"All for now, honey. Don't worry."

"Harry, do you love me?"

"Sure, honey. Of course I do."

"You never tell me," she said. "Maybe if you told me once in a while, I wouldn't be so blue about your deals and all."

"You'll be all right, honey. Go to bed. I have to leave now."

He hung up, removed his suit coat, unfastened the gun harness and laid it in his top dresser drawer. Then he put his coat back on, put on his hat and left the room.

DAVE HUNTER was asleep in an easy chair behind the desk. Harry shook him awake, paid his bill and tossed the key on the desk. "Finally leaving," he told the hotel man, "but I left some stuff in my room. Take care of it for me?"

"Sure, Harry. Good luck."

Harry walked the three blocks to the railroad depot with his eyes straight ahead. Circling behind the depot, he approached the water tank from the far side away from town. Although there was a moon, the shadow beneath the tank was so dense, he nearly ran into one of the thick girders holding it up in the air before he saw it.

Silently he moved between the girders, under the tank, and just as the town clock struck twelve, he came up behind two dim figures standing in shadow on the side toward the depot.

He said, "Good evening, gentlemen."

Marty Schwenk and his stocky, middle-aged companion turned slowly around. Both held their hands in their pockets. "Hello, Harry," Marty said. "Unheeled?"

[Turn page]



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"JEFF HITS the headpin right, but he'll never make a hit with that unruly hair. He's got Dry Scalp. Dull, hard-to-manage hair . . . loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic. . ."



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GREAT WAY to start your day! A few drops of 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic each morning check loose dandruff and those other annoying signs of Dry Scalp . . . give your hair that handsome, natural look. Contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients . . . and it's economical, too!

Vaseline HAIR TONIC
TRADE MARK

Listen to **DR. CHRISTIAN**, starring **JEAN HERSHOLT**, on CBS Wednesday nights.

"I said I'd be, didn't I?"

"Mind if I feel?"

Harry said coldly, "That's how Mark lost an arm, Marty. I don't welch."

"I know you don't," Marty said. "That's what makes it easy." He drew his right hand from his pocket and there was a pistol in it. "So long, sucker."

"Hold it, stupid!" called a voice from beneath the water tank.

As Marty swung his pistol toward the voice, Harry slapped his palm viciously down on the barrel. The gun exploded, plowing a small furrow of dirt between Marty and the tank.

With his left fist Harry smashed a rabbit punch behind the gunman's ear. Marty stumbled to one knee, swung the gun back and up toward Harry. Balancing on one foot, the little man brought his knee to his chest, grasped his shoe sole with both hands, then suddenly released it. The elevated leather heel crunched squarely into the kneeling man's forehead.

Harry flicked his gaze from the unconscious figure of Marty Schwenk to the other gunman. The man stood with his back to Art Cummings and his hands elevated to shoulder height.

The whistle of an approaching train sounded. "What now?" Art asked. "Still catching the train?"

Harry shook his head. "I told you all bets were off if they passed at me." He indicated Marty with his toe. "I think you'll find this guy is wanted for something. The other one's a stranger. I'll help you get them down to the clink."

A half hour later Harry shook Dave Hunter awake again.

"You didn't stay long," Dave said.

"Changed my mind. Give me my key again."

HARRY slept till noon and then visited the constable's office. His brother took his feet from the desk and looked up at him.

"Nice friends you got," he said.

"Why?"

"The guy with the nose is Norman Chandler. Escaped from the death row in '39. His pal is wanted for murder."

"I thought you'd find them interesting," Harry said.

"Chandler, or Schwenk or whatever his right name is, sang his guts out. Seems a fellow named Mark Derhenning in Miami hired the two of them to bump you."

Harry said, "I know."

"I've passed the whole story along to the F.B.I. They get interested in murders, or even attempted murders that take in more than one state."

"So I've heard."

"I wouldn't worry about Mr. Derhenning any more," the constable said. "If anything happens to you now, the F.B.I. will be down his throat like a tonsil snip."

"Derhenning know that?"

"He will, Harry. He will."

Harry smiled a crooked smile down at his younger brother. "Thanks, kid. Sometimes I wish I hadn't beat your brains out so much when we were punks."

Art flushed. "Aw nuts, Harry. You never did much after I outgrew you." Then he said diffidently, "Gwen will be along in a minute. I asked her over."

Harry looked surprised. "What for?"

"Figured you'd stop in, and I want to talk to both of you. I want my favor now, Harry."

The little man regarded his brother curiously. "All right. Ask for it."

Art studied his fingertips. Almost nonchalantly he said, "That fourteen thousand dollars. I want you to invest it exactly as Gwen wants."

Harry's face became very still and then began to redden. "Why you preaching—"

Art's eyes jerked up to bore those of the smaller man. "You wouldn't welch, would you, Harry?"

For a long time Harry stared down at his younger brother, and the cold anger in his eyes was gradually replaced by the begrudging respect a poker player feels for a royal flush.

Behind him the door opened and Gwen's voice said, "Am I late, gentlemen?"

Harry turned slowly and bent from the waist in an exaggerated bow. "Just in time, madam. Looking for shoes? We have all sizes."

Last Appeal

By ROBERT C. DENNIS



"Let us have one thing clear, Mr. O'Hanlon. If you work for me, you work under my terms!"

MAROLD had the appearance of a successful man—well-fed, well-barbered, and the suit he wore had been tailored by a virtuoso. He exuded assurance and the knowledge of his own worth. His long, expensive cigar, regardless of the NO SMOKING sign on the wall, scented the room with the aroma of success. If in all ways he gave the impression of being a successful lawyer, it was because he was one.

And here in the gray, indifferent vis-

itors' room of the penitentiary—where by his very presence every man was a failure—his appearance was a sharp, cruel contrast. He stood before a small barred window staring pensively out at the paltry slice of world which was every inmate's stern allotment.

He didn't turn when the prisoner was brought in. After a long minute of silence he permitted a streamer of smoke to escape through the bars toward the overcast sky.

Eleven years is a long time—if it's spent in stir!

"It's going to rain," he observed.

The prisoner made a bitter, wordless sound. For him there were no weather changes.

The lawyer came leisurely across the bare little room and sat down facing the prisoner. "So you're Paul Nemeth."

"No," Nemeth said. "I'm Number 743982."

"And bitter," the lawyer said.

Nemeth shrugged. "I've had eleven years to work on it."

He was a bony man, with flaky ashen skin and a lipless manner of speaking. His eyes were dark-circled and set deep in his face, as if the long years of hiding his thoughts had worked a physical change.

"Being from California," the lawyer said, "I can't practice in this state. I explained that in my letter. We'll have a local lawyer handle the actual court work. Do you know anyone who might volunteer his services?"

"Not now." Nemeth's mouth worked spasmodically. "Things change out there in eleven years."

"And you have no—"

"No," he said harshly. "No money. Not a cent. And no place to get any. So what do you expect to get out of this, Marold?"

FREDERIC MAROLD gestured with the cigar. "Satisfaction, perhaps. Justice—a little something to balance the scales."

"A guilt complex?" Nemeth suggested.

Frederic Marold laughed heartily. "You'll change your attitude after you've had a taste of freedom."

"Free!" Nemeth whispered, and looked off toward the square of stormy sky enclosed by the window. "Maybe you're right."

"We'll talk about that part of it later. Suppose you tell me your side of it. Of course," Marold added, "I've studied the transcript of the trial, and this new evidence has convinced me there was a terrible miscarriage of justice. But I want you to tell me."

Paul Nemeth looked directly into Marold's face. "I didn't kill Ralph Wesley. I wasn't within six miles of that golf course. They never proved I was."

"No," Marold agreed. "But they did prove perjury on the part of the witnesses who swore you were in the Shasta Cafe."

"They were trying to help," Nemeth said wearily. "I was on my way to join them when my car broke down." He hesitated, as if almost afraid to ask. "What is the new evidence?"

"Corroboration of your story," Marold said promptly. "The man you claim came along and helped you fix your car. He was a sailor—merchant marine. When you were arrested he was on his way to China. He didn't see a local newspaper until the case was over. It wasn't until recently that he read a story in a crime magazine and saw a picture of you. Then he recalled the incident."

"How did you come across it?"

Marold took three short, brisk puffs on his cigar. "Wesley's wife. A picture of her was in the magazine, too. It mentioned she was in California. Just how he located her, since she's now known by another name, I haven't bothered to find out yet. But he found her and she sent him to me."

Life flickered in the depths of Nemeth's sunken eyes. "Sandra did that?"

"Yes," Marold nodded. "But don't get any ideas. She doesn't want any part of you, Nemeth. That was done with eleven years ago. She simply doesn't want an innocent man to suffer."

Nemeth gave a brief, discordant laugh. "What does she call eleven years in this hell?"

"Bitter," Marold said thoughtfully. "We'll have to work on that. You're going to go free, Nemeth, but we'll have to get you adjusted to the world as it is now. Do you think we can?"

"Yes," Nemeth said, and his fingers locked on Frederic Marold's arm. "Get me out of here. Anything you want of me—I don't care about that. Just get me out!"

The offices in the Switzer Building on Spring Street in Los Angeles were ideal for small-business men and struggling law clerks, overnight promoters and private detectives. They were as tiny as cells and almost as barren. But nobody could afford a secretary, so size was not important. When a phone rang, the sound bounced off the walls like a fire alarm. But phones seldom rang—no one did that much business.

The O'Hanlon Detective Agency was entertaining a prospective client. She might have given her age as twenty-five or thirty-five and not been seriously questioned either way—a smartly turned-out woman, with dark hair and gray-blue eyes and calculating mannerisms that were, nevertheless, beguiling. She wore a hat with a tall feather that few women would have dared.

Tom O'Hanlon had been playing solitaire when she came in. O'Hanlon was dark, almost aristocratic looking, but there was a gauntness about him that suggested he often forgot to eat his meals. The hand which held the deck of cards trembled very slightly. He looked like a man who needed a drink badly. Only a woman in trouble could have failed to observe that O'Hanlon was fighting that craving.

And this woman was in trouble.

"I'll be brief, Mr. O'Hanlon," she said. "My name is Sandra Baysinger. Someone is going to try to kill me. I want you to protect me."

"Do you mind if I continue my game while you talk?" O'Hanlon asked courteously. "It's good for my nerves."

She gestured her indifference. "The man I fear was released from a northern penitentiary on a full pardon. He had spent eleven years there for the murder of my husband. Several months ago the state decided he was not really the murderer, and released him. Now he's here in Los Angeles.

O'HANLON played cards quietly, almost automatically. "What is the grudge toward you?"

She shrugged shoulders which good tailoring had made square and attractive. "My testimony helped convict him. And his motive was, or seemed to have been, a financial loss for which he blamed my husband. Perhaps he still feels the money is owing to him and that I should reimburse him. I could pay him, but I refuse to be victimized simply because I'm a woman!"

O'Hanlon squinted at an elusive thought. "You didn't tell me his name—or did you?"

"Paul Nemeth." She watched O'Hanlon's card game as if suddenly it annoyed her. "Does it mean anything to you?"

"No." He examined the cards and found he had no more plays. He deftly cheated once without changing the stalemate, then laid the deck aside. He permitted himself only a single cheat per game. He had had only one real excess in his life. "Did you want me to act as bodyguard?"

There were dimples in both cheeks when she smiled. "That would take care of the problem of an escort, and my safety at the same time, wouldn't it?"

O'Hanlon could smile with his eyebrows. He said, "I'd save you money and time possibly if I went around and talked to Nemeth. He might listen to common sense."

"Perhaps. But I'm afraid he's apt to be very bitter. After all, he spent eleven years in prison for a murder he didn't commit!"

"Every man is in prison," O'Hanlon said randomly. "A prison of his own making sometimes, but still a prison. For every transgression, there's a penalty of some kind." He stared almost blindly at her. "I wonder what yours is, Mrs. Baysinger? What put you in the prison you're in?"

"You're becoming rather fanciful," she said coldly.

He shrugged. "Maybe. But you'd get just as good—no, better—protection from the police. They have ways of reasoning with ex-cons. And a man

who has been eleven years in stir is going to think long and carefully before doing anything that might put him back there. The point I'm trying to make, Mrs. Baysinger, is that you're being a little cagey with me. And I like to know what I'm getting into before I take on a case."

She stood up in one swift motion, and now she was arrogant. "Let us have one thing clear, Mr. O'Hanlon. If you work for me, you work under *my* terms. You take orders and you ask no questions. If at any time my orders seem unreasonable to you, you are perfectly free to quit. Now do you want the job, or not?"

In the office adjoining a phone rang sharply, the sound reverberating until the next peal trod on the echoes. O'Hanlon listened intently as the occupant of that office answered. The words were muffled and unintelligible and the conversation very brief. O'Hanlon sighed inaudibly. The telephone company, he deduced, threatening to discontinue the service unless the bill was paid. Next week they would be calling him again, they'd called him last month.

With an effort, he put the shame he felt back into the crowded corner where he kept all his instincts and emotions.

"Yes, I want the job," he said simply.

A FEMALE sentry in shapeless black skirt and a white blouse that wouldn't stay in at the waistband, patrolled the reception office of Frederic Marold, attorney at law. There was a dusty, disregarded look about her like an old law tome put away on a shelf and forgotten. She informed O'Hanlon that Marold would see him in five minutes.

The lawyer was still talking into a dictaphone when O'Hanlon was ushered in. He waved at a chair, mouthed a few more silent words into the mouthpiece, then laid it aside, replacing it with a long cigar. His fleshily handsome face waited without expression for O'Hanlon to speak.

"I'm representing Mrs. Sandra Bay-

singer," O'Hanlon said. "She says your client Nemeth is going to get rough. Do you think there's any danger?"

Marold shrugged. "Who knows what goes on in the mind of a man who's spent eleven years in prison for somebody else's crime?"

"Will he feel any better about it if he goes back there for a crime of his own?"

"It would be very slight comfort," Marold chuckled, without humor. "But he's bitter, very bitter. Do you know the background of the case?"

"No." O'Hanlon's eyes were bleak for a moment. "I was merely hired as a bodyguard. Can you fill me in?"

"The murdered man's name was Ralph Wesley," Marold began. "I don't know where the 'Baysinger' comes from. She never married again. Anyway, it happened on a golf course. Wesley's drive had gone into a small woods and he went in alone after it. Never came out. Somebody used a Number Five iron to fracture the frontal lobe."

"Was it a public course?" O'Hanlon asked.

"No, it was a rather exclusive country club. The woods off the eleventh fairway bordered on a back road, so anybody could have been in there waiting. But the prosecutor seems to have convinced the jury that the killer was someone who knew Wesley."

"How did he do that?"

"It was a standard joke that Wesley always went into the woods on the eleventh hole. He had a bad slice anyway, and on this particular hole it got to be psychological. You a golfer?"

"No," O'Hanlon said. His nerves were calling for a drink, but the need, as always, could be shunted aside by this other interest. "What was the case against Nemeth?"

"He and Wesley had a violent quarrel the previous day. As far as I can discover, the actual cause of the quarrel was never fully explained in court."

"You mean it wasn't over money? Mrs. Baysinger implied that."

Marold considered his cigar as if it

were an amusing object. "Fine-looking woman, isn't she? Of course, she was only twenty when it happened. Wesley was ten years older. Nemeth was nearer her age. . . . Money? Well, Sandra inherited about thirty-five thousand dollars, including insurance. Nemeth got life imprisonment."

"Then since Nemeth didn't kill Wesley," O'Hanlon suggested, "maybe Mrs. Wesley did?"

"I made no such implication," Marold snapped. "I don't know who killed him. We'll probably never know."

"Did Nemeth have an alibi?"

"Yes and no. He had two. He seems to have been on his way to meet friends in a cafe on the other side of the city, when he had car trouble. These friends perjured themselves—swore he'd been there all afternoon. The prosecution blew that sky-high. That was the most telling point."

"Friends," O'Hanlon said dimly. "A man is better off without any."

Marold sucked lovingly on the cigar. "The D.A. claimed Nemeth committed the murder and was rushing to the Shasta Cafe for an alibi. The imponderable caught up with him—car trouble! Nemeth says he and some man worked on the car for over an hour—neither had any mechanical ability."

"The helpful stranger could have substantiated Nemeth's story," O'Hanlon observed. "Didn't the lawyer produce him?"

"Couldn't find him," Marold said. "He was in the merchant marine. Eleven years later he came across a story in a crime magazine. No question of the witness' integrity. Nemeth was exonerated."

"So the real killer could have been some transient who happened to have wandered into the woods," O'Hanlon said. "Or it could have been Mrs. Wesley."

"You're not going to get me to answer that question," Marold said shortly. "Nobody seems to have bothered to find out where Mrs. Wesley was at the time

of the murder. Sloppy police work, perhaps."

"How did you happen to get into it?"

MAROLD regarded O'Hanlon with suddenly alert eyes. "Nemeth's witness brought his story to me. Why me, I don't know. Never really asked him. Maybe he'd heard I sometimes donate my services for worthy cases."

"I see." O'Hanlon's clouded mind was chasing a vague thought, but it eluded him. "Where is Nemeth now?"

"Why?" the lawyer demanded.

O'Hanlon shrugged. "I want to give him a friendly warning to stay away from Mrs. Baysinger. Maybe I can head off trouble."

"I don't think I want you bothering him," Marold said flatly. "Besides, if he's going to do something drastic, you couldn't talk him out of it." He smiled, a false, empty smile. "That information is unavailable."

O'Hanlon got up, steadied himself with the chair, said, "I'll find him before the day is out. And if either of you is planning to extort money from Mrs. Baysinger, it won't work."

"You have exactly five seconds to get out of my office." Marold's voice was calm, but he had flushed crimson. "And if you ever come back, I'll knock you down the stairs!"

His gaunt face as white as milk, O'Hanlon walked out without a word. . . .

Two hours later, he discovered Nemeth at a small eastside hotel. An elevator, vaguely resembling a medieval torture chamber, wearily lifted O'Hanlon to the fifth floor. The operator was a wraithlike man who looked as if he were never permitted out of his cage. The hotel itself was a quiet melancholy place, full of shadows and indefinite smells and vague little stirrings that meant nothing at all.

The only sound on the fifth floor was an Hawaiian guitar softly crying from some unnamed loneliness. O'Hanlon rapped on Paul Nemeth's door and a voice called out over the music, "It

isn't locked."

Nemeth was sitting on the edge of the narrow bed with the guitar in his lap. He had good hands for playing the instrument. The fingers were long and white, almost fragile. He wore a dark-blue suit, which made too-sharp a contrast with his pale features. His eyes might have belonged to a man recently released from a hospital with the memories of pain still there.

"I'm not very good yet," he said softly, without looking up. "Out of practice. Eleven years out of practice."

"Sounds all right to me," O'Hanlon said.

"It's coming back. I was pretty good once. But they didn't supply guitars where I was. Sit down, mister," he said, without changing his tone. "You're the private dick Sandra hired, aren't you? Marold phoned me you were on the way over. He advised me not to be home, but I don't have anything to hide."

O'Hanlon sat down on the lone straight-back chair. "Cigarette?"

"I've got some. But I wouldn't mind having one of those cigars of Marold's. He doesn't hand them out, I guess. Strange guy, Marold. What did you think of him?"

"I thought he was strange," O'Hanlon said, and Nemeth smiled faintly. "But he did you a big favor."

Nemeth plucked the strings of his guitar and moved the steel lovingly over the frets. If his answer was in the music, O'Hanlon couldn't tell what it was. It was simply lonesome.

"So Sandra is frightened?" he asked and laughed, a sudden jarring sound. "What does she think I'm going to do—hit her with a golf club?"

"Are you?" O'Hanlon asked softly.

"Me? No," Nemeth said, shaking his head. "I'm not going to hit anybody. She doesn't have that to worry about. Is your mind relieved, mister?"

"It should be," O'Hanlon agreed. "But it isn't, somehow. Maybe it's because you know more about that business eleven years ago than I do. If you just

thought she killed her husband, that's one thing. But if you *know* she did it, it's something else."

NEMETH played a strange, haunting melody very quietly. He seemed more interested in the music than in what O'Hanlon was implying.

"What I mean," O'Hanlon said, "if there's a doubt in your mind, you could give her the benefit of that doubt and try to forget."

"Forget," Nemeth crooned to the music.

"On the other hand, if you've had definite knowledge all these years that she was the real killer—well, maybe you've got it worked out in your mind that there's only one thing for you to do. A man sits by himself long enough, working out a problem, and sometimes he gets one answer and nothing in the world could change his mind." The trembling in O'Hanlon's hands had moved into his stomach now. "Most people don't understand how it can be like that."

"Do you think you can?" Nemeth said harshly. "Have you ever sat in a cell for eleven years and watched yourself get old and nothing to show for it?" He laid the guitar carefully on the bed and stared at O'Hanlon. "Maybe you can at that, I don't know. So I'll tell you something, mister, just so your trip over here won't be wasted. I've got a reservation on the *Aloha* to Hawaii. Steerage." His voice was remotely bitter. "I leave tonight. If Sandra can stay alive that long, she's home free. Make whatever you like out of that."

"Hawaii is United States soil," O'Hanlon stated. "They could arrest you as you got off the ship. If anything happens to her, they'll get you."

Nemeth licked both lips. He said, without emotion, "Get out of here, will you, mister? Go buy yourself a drink. I'm tired of looking at you. You look like a stirbug yourself, and how tired I am of looking at stirbugs!"

"Remember that," O'Hanlon sug-

gested, "if you're ever tempted to fix Sandra."

Nemeth's face twitched alarmingly and his sunken eyes held a hot, wild look. "They'll never get me back there," he whispered. "Not ever! If the time comes for that, there's a better way! I've got that all worked out."

He was talking to himself now. He might have forgotten there was anyone else in that melancholy room. Perhaps he didn't even notice O'Hanlon go out and quietly close the door behind him. But a minute later the guitar started crying again and it was for a past that was long dead, without anything to show that it had ever been. . . .

O'Hanlon went into a cafe to call Sandra Baysinger. The need for a drink was overpowering, but somewhere in his tormented mind he understood that if he could hold out for the rest of this night, he could hold out forever. The nights do end, he told himself, and fought to chase down a thought that fitted forever out of his reach.

Something that Nemeth had said didn't fit—one false fact buried in the mass of truths. And with a sharp foreboding, O'Hanlon understood that that one falsehood was the key to a situation full of hidden meanings and smoldering violence.

When he called Sandra, she was out. An assistant in the swank dress shop on Wilshire, which Ralph Wesley's inheritance had provided her, informed him she had left unexpectedly twenty minutes ago.

He called again in a half hour. And again in an hour. Then, with conviction and horror mounting in him, he demanded to know where she had gone. When the assistant refused the information, he spent part of the advance he'd drawn to take a cab out to the dress shop.

Perhaps it was the sick apprehension showing in his eyes which convinced the assistant that something was wrong. Without further hesitation, she told O'Hanlon that Sandra had gone to keep

an appointment with Frederic Marold.

It was then five o'clock. By the time O'Hanlon reached the lawyer's office building the early California night had crept over the eastern half of the sky. A janitor was mopping the marble corridor with the stunned apathy of a chain-gang prisoner. In the reception office there was no one. The little secretary had gone for the night, leaving the door strangely unlocked.

O'Hanlon eased open the door of Marold's private office. It was as dim and hushed as an abbey and with something of the same air of changeless solitude. The mouthpiece of the dictaphone lay on the desk blotter and beside it the inevitable cigar, balanced on the rim of an ashtray. There was an inch of colorless ash, as if the cigar had burned for a long time, waiting for Frederic Marold to come back.

It had been a hopeless wait. The lawyer was not coming back. He was jackknifed across the middle drawer of a file cabinet, as though a stomach cramp had doubled him over. He had been shot in the face.

O'HANLON stood there in the gloom, staring at the dead man. A drink, he thought; just one. He'd need it for this. But after a long moment he shook himself and went slowly to the desk. He set the scale of the dictaphone at the beginning and put it on repeat.

As he had surmised earlier, Marold made a practice of secretly recording any conversations he might have need of. Part of O'Hanlon's early conversation was there, and Marold's courtroom voice explaining the case of Ralph Wesley.

Then Sandra Baysinger's voice came on, cool and arrogant at first, the way O'Hanlon remembered, then gradually losing its control in the face of the lawyer's cool demand for money, until just before the end she was shouting threats at him.

She would not be intimidated nor pressured, she screamed—though Mar-

old's voice was at all times reasonable, with no hint of pressure or polite extortion.

"He's bitter," Marold's voice rolled over the word as if it had some larger significance. "I have no control over him. If he's planning to kill you, there's nothing I can do to stop him. But I do know he wants to go to Hawaii, and if you made that possible it might placate him. It would also get him out of here."

"Blackmail!" Sandra stormed. "That's all this is! And I know Paul Nemeth—he won't go away for a few hundred dollars. He wants it all! The next thing I know, you'll try to have me arrested for Ralph's murder!"

The rest of it was the same, in mounting fury. She could not browbeat the lawyer, as she had O'Hanlon. At the end, she was screaming threats at him. Then came the dull explosion of the gun, rolling over Marold's final words, and after that the tube was spinning mutely in the machine.

O'Hanlon switched it off. His gaunt face was gray. Now, too late, he realized the significance of that one false fact. . .

The *Aloha* sailed at eleven from San Pedro. There was much less than half an hour left when O'Hanlon rested his elbows on the dockside rail and said, "It's a fortunate man who can escape from prison. But there's a prison that has no bars or stone walls, and that's the kind that's escapeproof."

Paul Nemeth stared moodily down at the dock lights.

"You were bitter—Marold kept saying that," O'Hanlon went on. "I say you were sorry for yourself! And that's what ruined you. You couldn't just take your freedom and forget the cost!"

"Eleven years," Nemeth said thickly. "She was in it all the way down the line. She planned it, but I did the eleven years. That's worth plenty!"

"You were out," O'Hanlon said. "That should have been enough. But you were sorry for yourself. You were going to have your money and revenge too."

Nemeth looked at him sharply.

"That's the point I missed when you told me you were going steerage," O'Hanlon said. "I sensed it, but I couldn't quite capture it. A man wrongly imprisoned always collects compensation from the state. You don't even have to sue to get it. And for eleven years it would be enough to take you around the world, first class!"

Nemeth's mouth twisted. "It was twenty-five thousand dollars."

"And was that exactly Marold's fee? It was the only way he could collect for his work. He posed as a great humanitarian, but he was a simple crook. Why a man in his position had to make his money like that, I'll never know. I suppose he needed money, and then more money. This was as good a racket as any. And he had a reputation for helping wrongfully imprisoned men. But why did you give it to him?"

THE *Aloha's* whistle bludgeoned the night with its hoarse roar and the echoes rode out, to sea on a soft salt wind. Nemeth didn't speak.

"Because," O'Hanlon answered himself, "he had you on the hook. He could send you back to jail. It might ruin him too, but you'd be back there for life. Because you *did* kill Ralph Wesley. The evidence Marold presented to the court of appeals was faked. That witness was Marold's stooge. Coached by him and paid off in the end.

"There was only one way to keep your money—kill Marold. Maybe you planned it that way all along, but I doubt that. Your first perfect murder flopped on you." O'Hanlon's fingers were clamped to the rail to squeeze out the trembling.

"Maybe you went to Marold's office, after I left you this afternoon, and heard Sandra in there. He tried to extort her when he learned she was scared enough to hire a private detective. You heard her threaten him, and you knew his trick of recording every conversation on the dictaphone."

"Stop it," Nemeth said sharply. "Stop

talking about it!"

"All you had to do was kill Marold and then add a gunshot to the end of their conversation. I found the second bullet in the leather divan, but only because I was looking for it. It was a better job than your first murder. No motive for this one—you wouldn't kill your benefactor. And there was Sandra neatly tied into it. But you were so used to feeling sorry for yourself, you tipped me off to Marold's racket."

Nemeth said quietly, "The whistle will blow again in a minute. Nobody will hear a shot. I'll carry you down to my room like a drunk—and bury you at sea. *I'm not going back to prison, mister! Let her get an alibi! This time it's Sandra's murder!*"

O'Hanlon was still bent over the rail. "The whistle won't blow again till you're off the ship. Did you think I would come here without calling the police first. Look around, man! There's cops on every side of you."

He heard Nemeth's heavy breathing become a sort of tortured sob. He waited, frozen, for the man's gun to sound, but it never came. The gun caught a glint of light as it spun over the rail and fell away, down the sheer hull of the ship. There was just room between the ship's side and the wharf for the gun to drop into the black water. There was not enough room for Nemeth's plunging body.

It hit the edge of the wharf and bounced once. Now, at last, he was free from his prison. In the only way he could ever be free.

Tom O'Hanlon stared down for a long moment at the sprawled, oddly twisted shape on the dock, and shuddered. Every man had his own prison, but he didn't have to stay in it. O'Hanlon had escaped his, and with the memory of this night to help, he would never go back.

He turned away from the rail and walked quickly into the night, which was as big as infinity and yet as small as a man's mind.

How to buy better work clothes



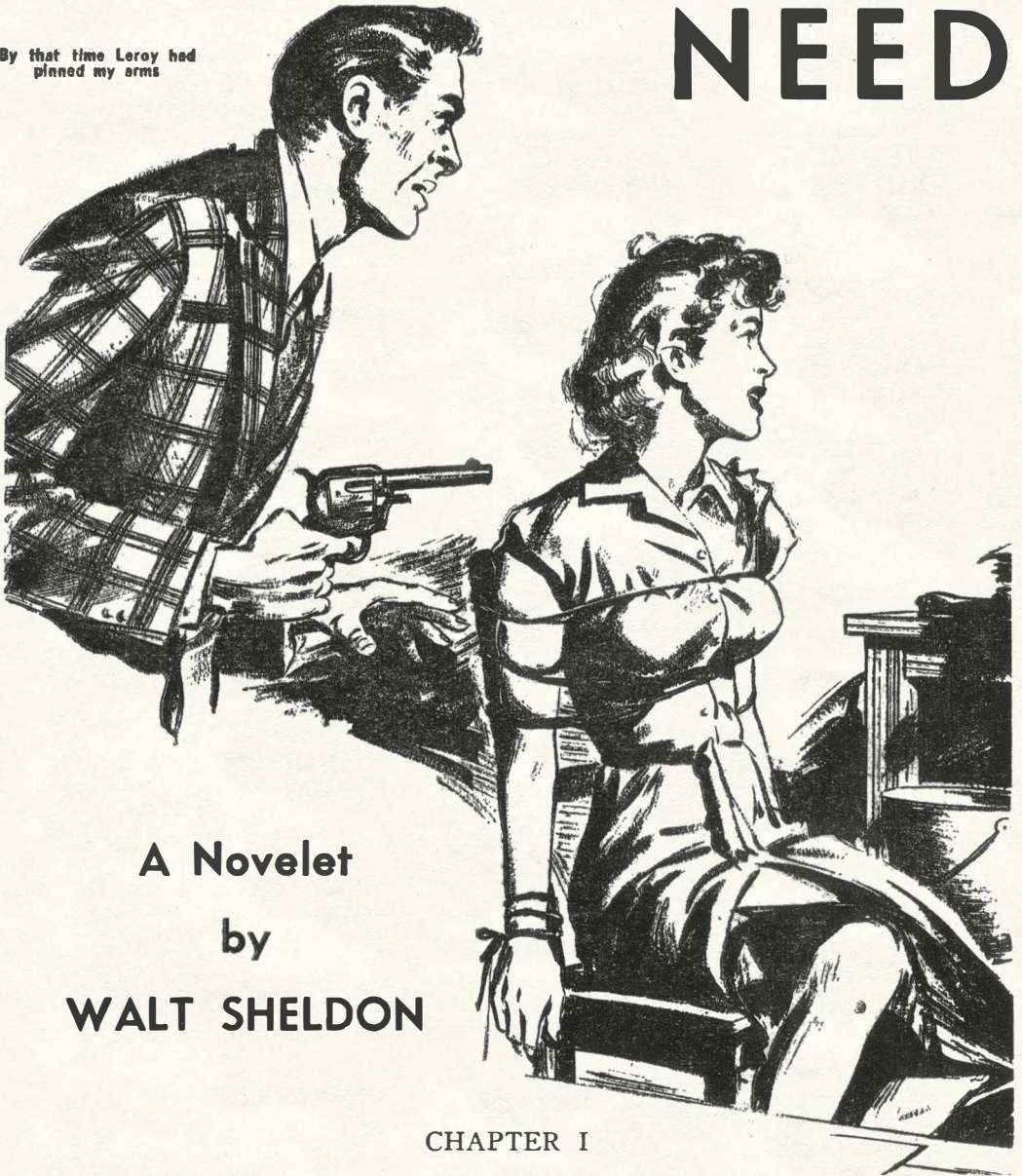
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By that time Leroy had
pinned my arms

NEED



A Novelet
by
WALT SHELDON

CHAPTER I

WHAT? WHO? HOW?

IT STARTED out to be something even less than a routine assignment, if you can imagine such a thing. That was because I was the only operative in the agency that Jackson Culley wouldn't give a regular assignment to.

He came into the outer office that morn-

ing, where I sat at one of the empty desks, and he shoved a piece of paper at me and said, "Here."

I looked at it and asked what was it. "It's a name and address," said Culley, "all written down, and printed even, so you can't possibly muff it this time."

Young private eye Byron Hoyt was too big and dumb to solve

a BODY DIE



I put the flat eye on him, although I could hardly blame him—I *had* muffed a' job or two lately. Bad breaks, one thing and an-

other. It comes in streaks sometimes. And on me it looks bad. I'm big. I've got hands like catcher's mitts and those things on

the case of the faceless corpse—or so the killer thought!

either side of my neck aren't football pads—they're shoulders. Jackson Culley, like a lot of other people, has got the human race all figured out by formula—if a guy is big, he's dumb, period.

I read the slip of paper. "John P. Burns. Benton Hotel. Thirty-fourth Street."

"Yes," said Culley, nodding. "Just go there. Don't do anything. Just sit and listen and write down what Mr. Burns says. It's going to be a frau-tail, and all you have to do is get names and places so I can put somebody on the job."

"Okay." I shrugged. When it comes to following guys' wives, I'd just as soon let another operative have it anyway.

I got up, and reached for my hat. Culley stood there looking at me if he still wasn't sure he could trust me to find Thirty-fourth Street, the Benton Hotel and Burns.

Culley looks fat at first glance, because every line on him is horizontal, even the bushy black mustache smeared across his upper lip. But after you know him a while you find out his belly is flat, and you can pick out by sight each separate muscle in his forearm. He walks with a tip-toe balance that says he's ready for anything, any time. He wouldn't be an easy man to throw.

And that's just how far I'd trust him—as far as I could throw him. But a job's a job, so I said, "So long," and slammed the door.

MY TEN year old coupe was at the parking lot, and I got it and drove downtown. On the way I kept wondering just how long I was going to last as Operative Number Eighteen with the Jackson Culley Agency. Not that I wanted the job all my life—but it did keep my one-ninety-three and a half pounds nourished while I was saving for my own agency.

I was still mulling over this as I walked into the musty, tile-floored lobby of the fire trap that was the Benton Hotel. You've seen such buildings. Everything dates from the Civil War, even the dirt along the mouldings.

The clerk—doing me a big favor—grunted and said, "Burns. Room Three-Fourteen." There was no phone.

I went to the stairs, ignoring the bird-cage elevator. You can risk your life just so many times, I figure, and there's no use wasting one of those times in an elevator probably built by Benjamin Franklin. I went up the stairs in a kind of heavy glide, still thinking about Culley's opinion of me, still stewing on account of it.

All right, I was thinking, maybe I wasn't a quiz kid and maybe I had muffed this and that—but I'd like to know how many of the other ops spent their spare time down at Police Headquarters, in I.D., poring over the fronts-and-profiles, over the M.O. and moniker files, or how many others sat in their rooms at night reading law books and studies on criminology. The only thing was, until I had my own agency and made something out of it, I couldn't really prove that any of this paid off. Not even to myself.

I climbed those dark stairs, past those dark halls and landings, and thought of all this.

Then, coming to the third floor and staring down at the moth-eaten green carpet, I shrugged and told myself what the hell. I *had* muffed that last factory job, after all; I guess my being so big and noticeable tipped the employee off, the one who was swiping sheet silver, and they never did convict him, and the factory squawked like a Burmese bird about paying the agency fee. So I couldn't really blame Culley for deeming me one dumb cookie.

I came to the door of 314 and saw that it was open an inch or so. I knocked on the jamb. No answer. Thinking maybe I hadn't knocked loud enough I transferred my knuckles to the panel of the door itself, and then I guess I knocked a little too hard. The door swung open.

I was all ready to say, "Excuse me," or turn away, or do whatever was called for—

But I wasn't ready for what I saw lying in the middle of the room there.

I swayed forward a little and felt a slight green feeling along the edges of my jaws. I guess I ought to explain that a private op doesn't come across dead bodies often enough to get used to it. He does dull, sordid things like following guys or dames

whose mates think they're playing around; he spies on employees suspected of swiping things or organizing the shop; he plays go-between for insurance companies that want something back and no questions asked—and in general about ninety percent of the things he does he hates himself in the morning for.

So there I stood, Byron Hoyt, age twenty-eight, six feet even, ex-M.P. and present sixty buck a week operative—junior operative—for the Jackson Culley Agency, looking at a dead body, and not liking it.

It was at the foot of the bed. It wore a dark blue suit, one of those double-breasted jobs where the lapel rolls all the way down to the bottom button—expensive sheen to the cloth. There was a big stain on the front, but nothing in the way of a large hole. My quick guess was "ice pick job." The thing that bothered me, though, was the face. Maybe I should say lack of face. Because person or persons unknown had beaten the front of the head to a red mash so there wasn't a recognizable feature left.

"Steady, junior," I told myself. That helped, but not much.

I went into the room and pushed the door almost shut behind me. In a minute, of course, I'd go downstairs and call a homicide squad and tell it to get here fast, but first I just wanted to make a quick check. Just on the vague possibility something of interest to the agency might be around. So I looked around.

THE room had hardly been touched, none of the glasses on the bureau used, the bed not ruffled, nothing in any of the drawers. The window was all the way open from the bottom and there was a fire escape out there that led to a narrow alley below, but there was nothing on the fire escape, and nothing in the alley. I gave myself ten to one the lad who had perpetrated this little thing had used the fire escape to leave by.

I turned then to go back to the door. I passed the body, glanced down at it. I happened to see the outflung wrist. On it there was the dull, milky gleam of a heavy wrist-watch band—

It was funny, then, how a little memory came up from the bottom of my brain and went *ping!* Something I'd seen in an old *portrait parle* down at I.D.—or maybe I'd just read it sometime poring over old crime accounts. Thick wrist-watch band. Looked like aluminum, only it wasn't. It was platinum. And a wrist-watch band like that had been the trademark of one of the biggest frogs in crime at least two decades ago. I recalled his name an instant later: Vincent Baish.

That was just too much for my curiosity. I knelt and gingerly lifted the dead man's forearm. It wasn't stiff yet, so this business had happened within the last couple, three hours. I took my pencil out so I could pry the wrist watch up and see the back of it. If this *was* Vincent Baish it would be big news. The Police Department would be more than mildly interested—to say nothing of the Treasury, Narcotics Division.

The initials on the back of the watch were: V.B.

I got out of that room and closed the door—tight. I stood there in the gloomy hall, my back to the door, and took a couple of deep breaths before I started walking again. Then I went to the stairs once more. I took them, going down, at a fast trot. In the lobby I started toward the seedy character at the desk, and then thought better of it—a kind of hunch, maybe, he'd try to go up there and mess things before the cops could get here. I went outside, spotted a drug store at the end of the block, and walked there at a quick clip.

All this time more and more dope about this Vincent Baish was coming back to me. He'd run things in the early Thirties—all kinds of things. Rackets, gambling, vice, you name it. The Big Stink—as the Murder, Incorporated, hue and cry was known in certain circles—had forced him into comparative retirement.

Reformers and ambitious D.A.s and newspapers now and then howled that they were sure he was behind most of the narcotics in the country—only they could never prove anything. Vincent Baish kept himself strictly above and beyond, at least as far as the eye could tell. He lived in a nice,

respectable, more or less wealthy neighborhood and went to work at an office every day, where he conducted the business of owning a couple of basketball teams, a fighter or two, and pieces of hockey, baseball and horses here and there around the country.

To anybody who asked, he said indignantly that he was strictly through with rackets—that he'd had one narrow escape and that was plenty. That was the time the D.A.'s office had actually tried to hang one on him, of course. You might remember the trial and how the defense, in a maneuver that's still a classic with lawyers, got Baish off by proving that it wasn't murder, it was manslaughter, and that the guy responsible was one of Baish's lieutenants—Joe Filemon—who had been acting on his own in defiance of Baish's orders. Joe squawked, as who wouldn't, but he went up for manslaughter just the same.

So it wasn't until I actually got into the phone booth that I got my bright little idea. If I could be even more certain that faceless body up there was Vincent Baish, I could tip the papers and make a nice little name for myself. Maybe even get somebody to finance my own agency through something like that. The phone book was on a little shelf under the phone and I wrestled it into my lap and turned to the suburban section. Baish was listed all right—name and number. I dialed the operator and asked for that number.

A WOMAN'S voice answered, and it was very low and it sounded as if it was coming through several layers of champagne and honey. The diction was almost like Katharine Hepburn's, maybe even better.

It answered my first question by saying, "Why, no, Mr. Baish isn't in right now. Who's calling?"

"Name's Hoyt, Byron Hoyt," I said, "and I'm a detective." I didn't bother to say I was just a private one. "Is this Mrs. Baish?"

"Miss Baish," said the champagne and honey voice. "Dolores Baish. I'm Mr. Baish's daughter. Is there—some trouble?"

"Well, that's what I don't know yet. Has Mr. Baish been—missing or anything lately?"

There was just enough of a pause to tell me I'd hit something. "Why—why do you ask?"

"Line of duty, Miss," I said vaguely.

"Well, as a matter of fact he didn't get home last night. I—uh—that is, Mother didn't know whether we ought to report it or not. I mean, sometimes he does take a trip overnight or something."

"Has he been getting any threats or anything lately?"

"Threats? Who on earth from?"

"That's what I'd like to know." The way she talked it sounded as if she didn't know her old man wasn't exactly the type who'd be picked to serve on the bishop's committee—that seemed incredible.

"I—well, as a matter of fact there may be something, but I don't think I ought to say it over the phone," she said then.

My second bright little idea of the day hit me. What if I could really dig up something on this Baish murder—if the guy upstairs was Baish—and do it all by my beefy little self? That would practically guarantee my getting backing for my own agency. Yup, a bright little idea, that was.

I ad-libbed fast. "Tell you what, Miss Baish. Suppose I come out there. I'm downtown and can make it in an hour or so—"

"Oh, no," she said quickly, "You mustn't come out *here*. I mean I'd much prefer it if you didn't. Couldn't I meet you some place?"

"Sure. If you want," I said, wondering what I wasn't supposed to see at her home. I remembered then that Baish had once owned a night club out in that direction and operated it as a gambling joint. I couldn't resist mentioning it. "How about the Club Caribe—want to meet me there?"

She didn't react particularly. She just said, "All right. That would be all right. In an hour? And—how will I know you?"

"Just walk up to the biggest, dumbest-looking man at the bar," I said, and hung up.

I called Detective Headquarters, then, and

recognized the voice of the sergeant who answered. He recognized mine, too. I told them where they would find a body, if they cared to. I hung up while he was still sputtering what-who-how.

The clerk with the gall and wormwood face was still at the desk when I got back to the Benton Hotel and I ignored his look and went to the stairs again. I remembered then that I hadn't called Culley to tell him I'd found a corpse for a client and I reminded myself to do it as soon as I could make my deposition to the detectives who would arrive and get away. But, then, I'd have to hurry some to get to the Club Caribe in an hour—so maybe the best thing would be to call the boss from there. He could wait. He wasn't going to get any business now, so he could wait.

I stepped into Room 314 again. The body was still there, and everything looked the same, and I nodded at the body for no particular reason and then decided even the musty hall might make pleasanter surroundings in which to wait. I stepped backward and started to close the door again. Once more I glanced at the dead man's wrist. I had to snap my head back a second time before what I saw really registered.

I said, "What the hell—"

The platinum wrist band wasn't there any more.

CHAPTER II

MORE THAN QUEER



I CHECKED the whole room. I looked at the fire escape, and the alley below. Nothing. It was, as far as I could see, just as I'd left it a few minutes ago. Then I noticed the room key on the dresser. I took it, closed and locked the room door behind me.

I was thinking that it was perfectly possible some cheap character staying on the same floor had entered 314 by mistake, seen the body, and taken the opportunity to swipe the platinum wrist watch. Only that was unlikely. Ninety-nine out of a hundred wouldn't enter the room by mistake, and

after that would probably report the body—

Something more than passing queer to all of this. I could feel a funny feeling in my bones. And I kept thinking if I could unearth just *some* of it, I might be able to spit in Culley's eye and go out and rent my own office before the week was out.

I went downstairs again. I tossed the key on the desk, and the clerk looked up from his newspaper and I looked back at him carefully to see if there was a reaction. There wasn't. He didn't even ask how I happened to have the key, or why I was giving it to him. He picked it up, put it in the slot, and went back to his newspaper.

"Who else besides Mr. Burns is registered on the third floor, little friend?" I said.

He blinked at me. "Who wants to know?"

I flashed the company badge. He didn't look at it closely enough to see it wasn't official—hardly anybody ever does. I said, "That's who wants to know."

"Oh," he said. He took his rimless glasses off. He blinked at me again. "Well, mater o' fack, lieutenant," he said, "*nobody's* on the third outside o' Burns. We fill the first two floors first—"

"Who went upstairs while I was out a moment ago?"

"Huh? Nobody. Not a soul. Nobody's been in."

I nodded, kept staring at him and thought for another second or two. I was beginning to wonder if maybe I wouldn't be here all day if I waited for the homicide squad. If one Captain of Detectives Gus Martin took a notion to come along, I probably would be. He would rather ask questions than eat. And I didn't want to miss seeing Baish's daughter. I had a strong, strong hunch on that lead.

I said to the clerk, "Okay, little friend. Tell you what. You just sit there nice and quiet. There'll be some visitors in one or two minutes. You show them up to Room 314 when they get here."

He said, "Huh?"

"There's something up there they'll want to see. It's a dead body, and you stay away from it till they get here."

He kept staring, and I waved my hand and went out.

I saw the plain blue homicide car pull up just as I turned my old coupe down at the corner and left the block. I headed north toward the Club Caribe and kept going.

The joint was on a more or less unpopulated stretch of road a mile or so from City Line and it was a large, cheap frame structure built a little back from the road in a grove of trees. In the cold daylight its unlighted neon signs reminded me of fake jewelry on a shopworn lady of the night. I saw four other cars parked in the gravel parking space and figured they'd belong to employees. The Club Caribe wouldn't be doing much business at this hour.

I parked my own wreck, lit a cigarette, mounted the porch, and went in the front door. The big dance floor was empty and the tables were shoved to one side. A mute bass drum glared from the bandstand. At the other end of the room there was a kind of step up to a bar-lounge, and the lights were on behind the bar and a bald character with a face like a frog was by the cash register going over sales slips. There was that sour beer and sawdust smell night club bars seem to have in the daytime.

Then, as I started toward the bar, I saw the girl at the far end of it. What I really saw in that first moment was a pair of the largest, darkest eyes I had ever seen—and they were turned right on me.

"Hello, hello, *hello*," I murmured to myself as I moved toward her.

She was the only one in the place besides the bartender, so she must have been Dolores Baish. She was thin. Maybe she would have been too thin for your taste, and those huge eyes made the rest of her look ready to blow away on the first breeze. But I liked it that way. Thin, quiet, smartly dressed—and with a sense of smoldering.

"Mr. Hoyt?" Her voice was low, controlled.

I nodded, shuffled to a pad-topped stool beside her and said, "Manhattan for me—how about you?"

"Too early."

"Okay." I was watching the bartender, not her, and I could *feel* her eyes sizing me up. I told the bartender one Manhattan without cherry, please, and he grunted from

his frog face and started to make it. His glare said this early in the morning why couldn't I just order a beer and not complicate matters.

I turned to Dolores Baish.

I looked at her very steadily and said, "Doll, can you guess why I asked if you'd like a drink?"

HER wide eyes got wider. Didn't think it would be possible, but they did. And they held right on me.

"It's—it's Father." She said this with a kind of indrawn breath. "Something's happened—"

I just nodded.

I left it quiet and hollow like that for a minute, and in the pause my Manhattan arrived and I nudged it toward her, but she still didn't want it. So I took a sip. And then, hunched a little over the drink and staring into it, I told her what I'd found at the Benton Hotel, leaving out the trick wrist watch that knew how to disappear.

She just said quietly, "I see."

"Now, over the phone," I said, "you mentioned threats. Or I mentioned 'em. You said, as a matter of fact, there might have been something. I know I'm a heel asking questions like this at a time like this, but—"

"It's all right," she said. No emotion. Maybe a kind of weariness, that was all. "Shall I start at the beginning?"

"Wish you would."

"And order me that drink, will you?"

"Done." I called the bartender, outglared him, and ordered two more Manhattans. He was very clearly teed off. He'd been on his way to one of the back doors when I called him.

Dolores and I waited quietly until the drinks came, and once I glanced at her and tried a little smile I hoped would look sympathetic in spite of the big face it was set in—and apparently it did, because for just a quick second she smiled back at me.

A moment later she had her drink and one of my cigarettes.

"I don't have to tell you what Father's business used to be," she began. No, I said, that she didn't have to tell me.

She nodded. "I knew, of course," she went

on. "I knew from about high school on. Say about fourteen. I'm twenty, now. I'm just between semesters at Westerley. You know about Westerley, don't you? Either ancestors or money'll get you in, and if you have enough of the second they don't ask too much about the first. Nobody's asked me about father yet—probably they simply don't make a connection with the name. I suppose some of the girls wonder sometimes why they never see my parents, why I don't have pictures, or speak of them very much—"

"You said parents. Plural."

"Yes. Mother is—well, it's a difficult thing. She's why I couldn't have you come to the house."

"Oh?"

"She's a drunk," Dolores said flatly, and again in that faintly tired voice. "Quart a day woman."

I remembered now that Baish had married an actress—a musical-comedy singer—and everybody had wondered why she'd left the stage flat after her marriage.

"Well, go on," I said. "What about the threats?"

She sipped her drink. "Not threats, exactly. Maybe just a—a *feeling* on my part. You see, I'm sure Father's quit the rackets, and while perhaps he pulls a shady deal now and then in one of his sports enterprises, there's no more outright strong-arm stuff. We live pretty much like so-called respectable citizens. Lots of people in the neighborhood don't know that pleasant little Mr. Baish is the same one they used to read about with a shudder. As for mother's drinking, well, they've all got a skeleton tucked away in the house somewhere."

It was very quiet in the big road house now. The bartender had disappeared. Dolores paused and I said, "Go on—what are you leading up to?"

"Just this," she said. Big eyes, steady, turned my way. "I've had the feeling for the last couple of weeks the house was being watched. Men passing—glancing. I never really got a good look at them. And then the other day, downtown, shopping, I swore I was being followed. A blond fellow, stocky, square face, and very, very pale blue eyes. Of course, I could be wrong."

"And I could be wrong that the man I found in the Benton Hotel was your father. We could both be wrong. Only I don't think so. Did you mention this feeling of yours to your father?"

"No. He—he seemed to have enough on his mind. And I'm sure he noticed it, too. I'm sure he must have been followed himself. He'd been very nervous, irritable. Mother was sober—let's see, when was it?—one day last week, anyway. I heard them talking together. I didn't catch much—only Father saying Joe Filemon was out of stir again."

I raised my eyebrows. With interest. Joe Filemon was the boy who had taken the rap for Baish in that murder trial.

"Things begin to make sense," I said. "Does Filemon have enough dough to hire somebody to tail your father—or do worse?"

"I don't know. I suppose he must. He certainly did at one time."

We talked it all over some more. The bartender came back and we both had another Manhattan. I'm not sure whether the warm feeling in my chest came from the Manhattans or from looking at Dolores. Anyway, the time passed and I made mental notes of all the things I'd have to do, like checking-up on Joe Filemon.

Then after a while Dolores said, "Byron—" she was first-naming me by now—"I wonder if you'd give me a lift downtown, if you're going that way. I took a cab here."

"Sure," I said. "On two conditions."

"What?"

"First, you call be By, not Byron. Second, you check more carefully next time somebody strange calls you on the phone and says he's a detective. I could have been one of Joe Filemon's hoods for all you know, trying to get at your father through you."

Wide eyes, staring back at me, half in fright, half in surprise for a moment. Then she said quietly, "All right, By."

That's what I liked about her. I like women who say "All right," and say it quietly.

IN THE car, as we drove toward, I finally came clean with the kid. We were on the long stretch with the pine woods on

one side just before you come to City Line itself.

I glanced at her and said, "Look, the more I think about George Washington, the more I think he had something. With the cherry tree, I mean. I'm also gonna tell the truth."

She laughed suddenly, then. It was the first time I'd heard her laugh—at that, it was reserved and controlled, like the rest of her. She said, "If you're going to tell me you're a private detective and not from the city or county, don't bother. I know already."

I stared at her, almost hit a highway sign, and then looked back at the road again.

"You win the refrigerator," I said. "How'd you know?"

"I checked after you called. Assistant Superintendent's office. The clerk there told me there was no detective in the department named Byron Hoyt, but that he knew the name—that you were an operative in the Jackson Culley agency. I was curious, so I came. I knew the Jackson Culley agency must be all right."

"How'd you know that?"

"Oh, father had some dealings or other with them not long ago. I heard him mention them."

That was funny, but I didn't say so. I kept driving, frowned a little, and wondered why, if Vincent Baish had been one of our clients, I had never heard about it. Not that I necessarily had to know *everything* that went on—

There was a car behind me. I'd been glimpsing it in the rear-view mirror for some seconds, not thinking about it one way or another. Not even noticing the make or year, just knowing vaguely it was a fairly large sedan, black or navy blue, recent. It was swinging out to pass us now. We were a couple of hundred yards from the intersection of City Line, I could already see the yellow blob of the stop sign ahead.

I was talking, not thinking. Talking about myself. Some dames do that to you.

"Well," I was saying, "the reason I'm trying to get to the bottom of all this is selfish enough. You see, the only way you ever do anything as a private investigator is to have your own office—a big one from the

start, with a couple of good steady industrial accounts to keep you going. Way to do that is grab a reputation. Ex-cops—inspectors, captains—they usually go into it after some big deal that's put their name in the newspapers."

The car that was passing suddenly swerved inward, viciously, cutting in front of me, and slowing-up at the same time. Even then I didn't catch on. Not in that first second or two, anyway. I swung the wheel by reflex action. I said something like, "Hey!" I jammed on the brakes.

And then, the moment I careened to a stop in the soft shoulder of the road, with that other car also stopping just off my left fender—this was only a moment or so later, mind you—I began to get it. Maybe Culley was right at that. Maybe I was big and slow in the brain as well as the body.

They came out of the doors on the right hand side of the sedan almost before I was fully stopped. I had time to see that one was tall, graceful and catlike, and the other was stocky and blond. The driver was still in the car.

I had time also to yell to Dolores. "Duck—get down!" And then I dug for my pistol.

The pistol is a snub-nose thirty-eight and I keep it in a small holster that I tuck right in my belt. I happened to have a double-breasted coat on this time. Somehow, there in the car, my lapels and the steering wheel and the angle of my body and I guess my fingers, too, all got in each other's way. I got the revolver out just in time to have the stocky, blond gorilla yank the car door open and grab it. It went off. But it was pointed at the blue sky somewhere beyond the blond guy's shoulder.

He and his tall chum hauled me out of the car. Not much I could do until I was actually out. I didn't have much space or leverage to work with. But the minute my feet hit the ground I braced and swung at the tall one. He ducked, but he also went off-balance and let go of me, and that gave me a chance to kick out behind, catching the blond boy's shins.

I took another swing—a reaching left jab this time—at the tall one. He was just regaining balance, so he didn't duck this one.

In fact, he came right into it. I said I was big. I'm no Joe Louis or anything, but I'm big. And all of my weight was behind that one.

It was a funny, suspended moment in time. There I stood, looking at him, knowing that sometime in the last second or two I'd dropped my gun, or somebody had grabbed it—not remembering just how I'd lost it. And there was a tall, thin, catlike hood stopped cold by my punch so that he seemed to hang in mid-air. He didn't go back. Gravity took over and he fell forward, reaching for the ground with his face.

By that time I was already turning to see what I could do with the other one.

There wasn't much I could do. Nor time to do it. I turned around just enough to get a blurred look at the arm that was swinging down toward me, and to realize that the hand on the end of that arm held a small, heavy black implement—sap or slapper, I never knew which.

CHAPTER III

THE QUIET BOMBSHELL



LET'S not go into details on how I felt waking up. Generally speaking, it was lousy—and the skull-ache kept me from thinking. It was agonizing, that ache, for the first few minutes, and after that it settled into a dull throb. But in those first few minutes I had a chance to see where I was, and naturally wonder how in the devil I happened to be there.

Sometime, then, during the clearing of the mist, I realized I was in City General. I could smell the hospital smell. I could sense the white ward room around me. I could hear a soft, but very tough voice say, "Sure he's okay, Doc?"

I recognized it as the voice of Captain of Detectives Gus Martin.

Another voice, hanging right over me, said, "No fracture, I'm sure. Of course we *should* hold him for observation."

"Observation," said Martin. "I'll observe him. I'll give him observation."

And then there was another period that was more like drizzle than mist where I got up and walked around and groaned a little and put my hand to my head and felt the bandage there. Sometime during this period the doc left the room. I saw I was still dressed and had been on an operating table, not a bed. The hospital smell was making me sick.

"Here," said Martin. He handed me a lighted cigarette.

I would have loved anybody else for that—but you just don't love Gus Martin. Ever. I studied him through the smoke of the first puff. Big: not as tall as me, hut wider. A twisted, misshapen face—a face of wax that had been half-melted then suddenly hardened again. And a quick-frozen eye.

"Let's have it, Gus," I said. "Let's hear what I did now."

"Uh-uh," said Martin, shaking his head. "You're the one's gonna do the talking. Who slugged you?"

"We weren't introduced," I said. "It was a blond party. His friend was tall and thin—moved like a cat."

"Why'd he slug you?"

"He didn't say."

"Straight answers, Hoyt," said Martin, with a dangerous kind of patience. "Don't be cute. Just answer the questions."

I shrugged.

"What were you doing up at City Line?"

"Driving," I said. "Driving in the country. It was such a nice day—"

He backhanded me—quickly and lightly, but with a sting—across the side of the jaw. "I don't like comedians, Hoyt. I don't like Groucho Marx and Danny Kaye, and I don't like you. Let me tell you right now, private detective, you're maybe in trouble. I don't know. First you call in and say there's a dead body in Room Three-fourteen at the Benton. There is, sure enough. But where are you? You know you're supposed to stick around when something like that happens. You're not so dumb you don't know that, are you, Mr. Hoyt?"

I grabbed a quick lie out of the air. I had to tell him something. I guess I could have come clean right then and told him all about Baish, and Dolores and everything

else—which maybe he knew in the first place. But my head was still throbbing and I wasn't thinking very well. All I knew was that I wouldn't tell Martin the correct time if he asked it.

I said, "I had a date with a dame out at the Club Caribe. I was coming back as soon as I told her the date was probably off. So that's what I did. So on the way back I got slugged. Don't ask me why. Some sore-heads from some job I did, maybe."

Martin studied me for a moment with his glassy eye, then finally said, "Let's take a little walk."

"Where?"

"Down the corridor. They got a big tile room down there. There's somebody on a slab I want you to see."

The body wasn't on a slab. It had already been tagged and put in a drawer. But Howell, the fat, cheerful morgue attendant slid it out again for us.

"The one you found?" said Martin, looking at me, while I looked at the body.

I nodded and tried to keep the sight of that battered, unrecognizable face from getting me.

Martin said, "You don't happen to know who he is, do you?"

"I was sent to see a guy named Burns," I told him. "John P. Burns. That's all I know."

"Yeah." Martin nodded. "That's all we know, too. I checked with your boss, Culley. He's on his way here, by the way. Nothing on a John P. Burns in the file."

"What about the stiff's fingerprints?"

"They've checked in I.D. No record. Maybe Washington'll have something. That'll take a day or two."

I said, "I see," and said it as easily and conversationally as I could. But to myself I was wondering how in the devil it was possible Vincent Baish's fingerprints wouldn't be on file here, where he'd been tried.

Maybe, then, this wasn't Vincent Baish after all.

IN THAT moment Martin tossed a quiet bombshell at me.

"We think," he said calmly, "that maybe the stiff is Vincent Baish, the racketeer.

Remember him?"

"Baish? Oh, yes—Baish. Ran dope and vice and a few things, didn't he?" I was trying to keep the sudden pounding of my heart out of my voice. "What makes you think it's him?"

"The suit," said Martin. "Baish's tailor knew it right away."

I frowned. "But—if it's Baish—how come the fingerprints don't jibe?"

"We got a little surprise in I.D. this afternoon," said Martin. "When we looked for Baish's fingerprints they weren't there. It's a bribe job, no doubt of it. If I ever find out who did it—"

I said, "Gus, do you mind? It's awfully dead in here."

"All right, let's go," he said.

I heard Howell slide the drawer back in as we went out.

Jackson Culley met us halfway down the corridor. He had his hat in his hand and he looked clumsy and ill at ease as he always does any place but his own office.

"Hello, Gus," he said. "I see you've got the bonehead here. Did he louse things up for you too much?" Then he looked at me just briefly and said, "You're fired, Hoyt," and looked back at Martin again.

Martin said, "We got everything straightened out." But from the way he said it, and the way he glanced at me quickly, I knew he was lying.

"Well, I'm sorry if it caused you trouble," said Culley.

"Forget it," Martin grunted. "All I want is what you know about this John P. Burns."

"Sure, Gus, sure," said Culley. "We're always glad to cooperate."

"Yeah. I'll bet."

"Now, Gus—you know I keep my nose clean with the department. And I can tell you everything I know about Burns—if that's his name—in six or seven words. He called up the agency, said his wife was playing around and he wanted her tailed. Said to send somebody to see him in the Benton Hotel. So I didn't ask questions. I didn't ask him why he didn't come to the office or anything. Clients get these queer ideas, we're used to them. I sent Hoyt to see him. That's all, Gus. That's all I know about it."

"Uh huh," said Martin noncommittally.

I tapped his arm. "Can I go now?"

He turned slowly, looked at me for a moment, then nodded. "Yeah. I guess so. Only don't go too far. Stick around town."

"Don't worry," I said.

He said, "I never worry, Mr. Hoyt. I never worry." And then he turned abruptly and stepped off down the corridor toward the alley entrance leaving Culley and myself standing where we were.

We watched him go out. Then Culley turned to me. "A fine thing you pulled this time. What'd you call the police and then leave for? Why didn't you call me? What've you got, mud in your head?"

I said, "I don't like dead bodies for company. That's why I didn't hang around."

"Then you should have locked the room, waited downstairs, and—" He narrowed his eyes abruptly. "Are you giving me sarcastic remarks, Hoyt?"

"Look, pal," I said, "you just fired me. If you want to ask me questions, hire me again."

He looked thoughtful. "You know something?"

Naturally he was interested. There's no profit for a private agency in fooling around with a murder—but sometimes it's good publicity. I said, "Maybe."

"All right," he said, "you're back on the payroll."

Then I grinned, right in his face, and said, "Thanks. That's all I wanted to hear you say. Now I can quit instead of being fired. So long, fat fellow."

And I turned and walked out and left him standing there.

TO GET my car back took me the better part of an hour, but I couldn't help that and I needed my car for another little drive I had in mind. They had it impounded down at Traffic Division, and I suppose the technicians must have gone over it as a routine matter since I was found unconscious beside it. I had to fill out forms to get it again. This gave me a chance to talk to one or two of the boys—luckily I didn't come across Martin—and learn what the score was on this whole thing.

It was a score I wanted badly to know, because a few little ideas were starting to come together in my mind. I was beginning to see a pattern. A wild guess, maybe, but sometimes it takes a thick head to make a wild guess.

Anyway, I found out that Gus's boys had checked the Baish residence as soon as that tailor identified the expensive suit the body wore. They were still out there. They were still trying to sober up Mrs. Baish—Dolores' mother—and get some sense out of her. Baish himself wasn't at his office. Hadn't been seen since yesterday. Nobody said anything about Dolores.

I drove out of the T.D. yard and headed north, slow and easy, when I finally got my car back. I drove just long enough to find out, from the rear-view mirror, what the car that was tailing me looked like. I'd known Martin would have me tailed from the moment he told Culley everything between us was straightened out. I think Gus Martin is that rare thing, an honest cop—and so he's a lousy liar.

Well, the first thing I had to do was shake the tail. It was a plain, dark-gray sedan, easy enough to recognize. Often, as a kind of mental exercise, I'd wondered just how I would shake a tail if I ever had to, and so I had it figured out in advance. I waited until I reached midtown, then turned east and headed for the factory district. There are always trucks taking up the streets in that part of the city and ordinarily they're a large and unhappy pain to a driver. Not this time.

It took me less than ten minutes to find just the situation I wanted—a truck in the process of backing to a loading platform and just about to block the street. I zipped past, just managing to squeeze through the narrow space. The dark-gray sedan was behind the truck now, and it would be at least several minutes before it got by. I turned at the next corner, and then made three more turns just to mix things up a little, and after that I knew I was free.

I went north to City Line, then headed up the road that led to the Club Caribe.

It was late afternoon now and the cocktail crowd had started to drift in. There

were maybe seven or eight people at the bar and a dozen or so at the little tables in the bar section. The big dance floor was still empty, but the curtains had been drawn and the soft pink lights turned on and it didn't have that cheap, hollow, daylight look any more.

I went right up to the bar. The frog-faced bartender was still on duty and he was at the other end, and I balanced myself on a stool and then waited until he moved toward me. He came without really seeing me, the way bartenders do.

HE STARTED to say, "Yes, sir?" and then he saw my face, and his eyebrows, both of them, went *zip-zip*—up a quarter of an inch. I knew then that maybe some of my guesses weren't so wild, after all.

He caught himself right away, of course, and made a mask out of his face again.

"Manhattan, no cherry," I said.

"Yes, sir," he said blandly.

I watched, and he moved off to the other end of the bar, muttered something to a second bartender on duty there, and then ducked out through the little half-door. He glanced at me just once as he did that, but I saw his head turning and managed to flick my own eyes to the front. Then I looked again and saw him head toward a door marked, "MANAGER."

I slid off the bar stool quickly then and went to the phone booth on my right.

I dialed the Police Department number and when the sergeant on duty answered I gave Captain Gus Martin's extension number. A gruff voice said, "Yeah?" and I said, "Gus?" and the voice said, "Just a minute. He's around somewhere." Then I heard the phone on the other end being laid on the desk.

I frowned, glanced from the booth, and saw the bartender coming out of the manager's door again—and I swore softly. I hadn't counted on this little delay. I wished now I'd thought quickly enough to spill out my story to whoever answered, without waiting for Martin. Maybe Culley was right, at that.

Maybe I did have a trace of mud in my head.

There were odd, unidentified noises in the receiver—footsteps, a door opening and closing, somebody calling to somebody else away from the phone. I kept watching the bartender, saw him glance at my stool and see it empty, and then saw his eyes dart around the room and stop when they came to the phone booth.

A faint voice, yards from the phone, sounded in my ear. "Hey, where's Gus?" it called. "Did he go downstairs?"

Yeah, where's Gus? This was a bonehead play. This was one I hadn't figured in advance. I'd known it was possible Martin wouldn't be in his office, in which case I'd planned to make my pitch to anybody who answered. But it hadn't occurred to me he'd be around somewhere, and still it would take so long to get him. Maybe I'd have done better to let the gray sedan follow me in the first place—only I didn't want a couple of boys with Headquarters written all over them following me into the Club Caribe and putting everybody on his best behavior.

I kept looking at the bartender and saw him slip from the bar a second time and go to the manager's door again.

"Come on, Gus, come on!" I breathed into the phone. I don't really believe in mental telepathy—but in a pinch you'll try anything.

More nondescript noises in the receiver.

I couldn't wait, then. Only thing to do now was to get the operator and tell her quickly where I was and let her relay it. I jiggled the receiver. I waited, and there was no answer, and I jiggled it again.

You've heard of the still, small voice. Mine was telling me off. *Smart boy*, it said. *You had to do it all single-handed, didn't you? Well, brother, you're batting out of your league—*

The door of the telephone booth was suddenly pushed inward, opening it, and a stocky, blond man with very pale eyes was standing there. He had his hand in his coat pocket and the bulge showing wasn't his finger. He was smiling, just a little.

"Hang up, sweetheart," he said.

I put the phone back in the prongs. Just before it clicked into place I heard the oper-

ator's voice—sad, tinny, and distant now—say, "Operator—"

"Come on, sweetheart," said the blond man, and stepped aside just enough to let me out of the booth.

As soon as I did get out, a taller, thinner man, a man with a catlike way of moving, came from behind the booth and took his place on the other side of me.

We strolled like old pals, the three of us, past the bar. We were all close together, and me in the middle. The people at the bar drank, and didn't notice, and the frog-faced bartender beamed and polished a glass and pretended he didn't notice either.

I was thinking what a clever, clever fellow I had been. How I'd put two and two together. I'd figured the men who forced Dolores and myself off the road at City Line must have followed us from the Club Caribe, partly because they hadn't seen us anywhere else and partly because the Club Caribe had been closely connected with Baish's operations in the old days.

I'd also figured that the idea must have been to kidnap Dolores, either as pure revenge, or to force Baish into doing something he didn't want to do, and I'd guessed that Joe Filemon, just out of stir and with blood in his eye, must have had something to do with it. I'd figured I could come out here, check, make sure, and then exercise the right of any taxpayer to police protection and call the cops. Yeah. I'd put two and two together and gotten zero—for myself.

We came to the door marked "MANAGER."

Blondie opened it for me and politely stepped aside so I could go in. I said, "Thanks," and he said, "Don't mention it, pal," and it was all like that, very chummy. That was what gave me the creeps more than anything else.

The room was a medium-sized office with a fuzzy rug and pickled oak modern furniture. A big desk was ahead, just in front of the far wall. There were papers on it, and an ashtray near the edge, full of old butts, and there was an unfinished whiskey highball on the blotter.

"Just stand there, pal," said Blondie.

Then to the slender man, "Open it up, Leroy."

Leroy nodded and said something that sounded like, "Nugh," and stepped across the room.

He went right to the wall behind the desk. The wall was white plaster and set with large, recessed panels, each the size of a large door or window. I think an interior decorator calls that Georgian paneling. Leroy stopped at the panel, then knocked near the edge of it. It sounded hollow.

A second later it swung inward making a large doorway in the wall. I saw that there was another room beyond the office. The man who had opened the panel was small and wiry, about forty years old, and very dark. He had these smoky eyes. They were on me. "Bring him in," he said.

"Go on, pal," said Blondie, nudging me. Leroy, at the doorway, stood aside to let me pass.

I don't know why I did what I did then. I might have been better off if I'd kept my mouth shut. But then again, maybe it made no difference one way or the other. Maybe it was just my half-surprise.

I stared at the little, wiry, dark man and I said, "Joe Filemon." I knew him from his front-and-profile down in the gallery, of course.

Joe grinned a sad, dry grin and said, "He's smart. He knows things."

"Go on," said Blondie again. "Get going."

CHAPTER IV

DUMB—LIKE A FOX



HEAD of Joe Filemon I could see that the other room was neither finished nor furnished. It had probably been used as a store room. There was a plain, conventional door in the far wall and from the whitish light that came through the keyhole I figured that must lead outside. I made a quick mental recap of my sense of direction. I was facing north, more or less, and so the outside door there probably opened on the

parking space on the north side of the Club Caribe. Which wasn't particularly helpful, even if I could get a chance to make a break for that door. My car was parked on the south side.

I was pretty desperate. I was trying to think, trying to keep my head clear, but finding it impossible. I didn't want to go into that store room—the walls and the trick door and the space of the manager's office were all thick enough to keep something like the sound of shooting from reaching the bar or the dance floor, and all I could think was that I was stepping into an execution chamber.

I said, "Look, fellows—you've got me wrong. You're making a mistake." And I realized how silly and weak it sounded even as I said it.

Blondie, behind me, laughed. "The big boy's scared," he said.

"Can it, Kramer," said Joe Filemon wearily.

Filemon moved back a step and I went by him, into that room. I stood there as Kramer and Leroy came in. I heard them come in behind me, and I heard the door shut, but I heard all of this through the thick curtain of a daze, because I was staring at something, and that something didn't leave room to think of much else—

Dolores Baish sat there near the middle of the store room. She sat in a plain wooden chair and she sat in it very stiffly, because she was tied to it. She was tied tight. The flesh bulged where the ropes—ordinary clothesline—bit into it. Her dress was ripped at the shoulder, and her shoes were off. She had the mulberry-hued beginning of a black eye.

"Hello, By," she said—and I liked the way her voice was still low and calm.

I turned partly toward Filemon. "What—what's the idea?"

Kramer suddenly came around in front of me then, grinned right in my face, and abruptly threw a hard right hook at it. It caught me in the mouth.

I staggered back a step or so, and automatically drew back my arm to return the punch, but by that time Leroy had pinned my arms, and hooked his heel around in

front of my ankles to keep me off balance, and Kramer stepped forward and slugged me again. This second one caught me in the forehead. I wrenched from Leroy's grasp.

"That's enough of that!" said Joe Filemon.

He didn't raise his voice particularly, but there was plenty of command in it. I saw Kramer flick his pale eyes at Filemon, scowl, then back away. I was still going to try to get a poke in at Kramer, and I kept going for him.

"I wouldn't, Big Boy," said Filemon. He had a gun in his hand.

So I didn't.

Filemon shuffled another wooden chair toward me and said, "Sit down." I sat down and then he said, "I'm glad you came, Big Boy. Dolores here almost had us convinced you were just a harmless mooch. We thought so, too, at first. That's why we left you by the car. But you know things, don't you, Hoyt? Maybe you even know where all the big smack is stowed."

"The big smack?" I wasn't faking. That one really surprised me. And then, after I spoke that automatic question, more things started to become clear.

"Let's not kid each other now," said Filemon, his dark eyes right on me. "Baish doesn't make the price of a silk shirt out of those basketball teams of his. I used to work for him. I know. He's got smack stored away some place. Lots of it. He trickles it out to the dealers and shovers. He's too smart to have it traced to him. Unless maybe some big dumb guy just stumbles on it. Or maybe you're working for him—I don't know. I don't know right now, but before I'm through I'll know. You'll tell me, Hoyt. You'll tell me just where you stand, won't you? Yeah, I'm sure you will." The eyes hadn't moved.

I said, "What time is it, Joe?"

HE STARTED to lift his hand, and then got it, and grinned. He held out his arm full length, stretching the sleeve of his coat back so I could see the thick, platinum wrist-watch band for myself.

"That what you wanted to know?" he said.

"That and a few other things."

"All right, sonny, we'll make a deal. I'll tell you some things. You tell me some things." He dropped his arm again. "Maybe you can tell me why Baish was already dead when I got to him. That wasn't supposed to be the set-up at all. That's why I had to grab Dolores here. I don't think you should have killed Baish. I don't think that was a smart thing to do."

Now everything was falling into place. Now I could really see what had actually happened, and understand what Joe Filemon must be thinking. Only I couldn't see how that helped matters much. Maybe a little. It gave me something to talk about, anyway. For the moment that was the best thing I could do—talk, and hope something would break.

I said, "All right, Joe, let me go over everything slowly. Let me tell you what I know. You get out of stir. You figure Baish is still in narcotics and has a big store of them somewhere, and part of that, maybe all of that, belongs to you. But Baish knows you're out and on the prowl, so it won't be easy to get to him. He's got bodyguards. Dolores noticed them hanging around. Meanwhile, you contact someone who knows Baish is going to be alone in a cheap hotel room—in the Benton Hotel—where you can get him. You probably pay good dough for this information. The set-up's all there—even a fire escape for you to get in the room. Only you're delayed, and you get there later than you're supposed to—after I've already come across the body. You see Baish is dead, and you're sore, but think it can't be helped, right?"

"Right so far." The dark eyes stayed on me.

"So you figure since he's dead anyway, you might as well have that platinum wrist watch. It's worth at least fifteen hundred, maybe two grand, but more than that you want to wear it because Baish always wore it, but now you're top dog. It's kind of a badge. It lets everybody know you're top dog. So you take the wrist watch and beat it. And then you decide since you missed out on Baish you'll grab his daughter on the off chance she knows where all that

smack might be stored. So you bring her here to give her a little working over. Either Kramer or Leroy owns the joint here in name, but it's your dough. This'll be your headquarters now that you start operations again."

"Keep talking," said Filemon.

"Only there's one little worm in the whole apple, Joe. *The guy you found in the Benton Hotel wasn't Vincent Baish.*"

His eyebrows moved. They raised themselves just a little—but that was the same as if he'd stepped forward with his jaw hanging open and said, "*What?*"

I nodded. "Sure, Joe. The guy you paid to finger Baish for you was just making a little side-gravy from you. Because he had a deal with Baish, himself, to make it look as if Baish had been murdered. Why? Baish wanted to disappear. He had all the dough he needed, he was tired of rackets, his wife was a hopeless alcoholic, his daughter was grown up and could take care of herself now, and on top of everything else you were out of stir and probably gunning for him. So he figured it was time to step out. He couldn't make the arrangements through any of his own mob, or through anybody that might get into a situation where they'd have to talk later on. So he found somebody else to help rig it.

"I don't know exactly where they got the body, but with a lot of dough on hand that wouldn't be hard to do—catch some bum in a dark alley near skid row some night. Find one just about Baish's build. Baish had already had his fingerprints swiped from the records, and in the days when they were taken, fingerprints weren't sent to the F.B.I. file as a matter of course. All he had to do was dress this body in one of his expensive suits, and put that platinum wrist watch on him—and then beat the face so there wasn't a recognizable feature on it."

ALL this time—as I talked, and talked fast—I was thinking. My head was finally clearing enough so that I could think, and I knew well enough that I was taking a wild, crazy chance, but I couldn't see anything else to do.

I said, "You can guess who it was pulled

this double-cross on you, can't you, Joe?"

Filemon looked at Kramer suddenly, then tilted his head toward the door to the parking space and said, "Bring him in."

Kramer said, "Sure," and went out.

And that was a break. That was a little bit of a break, anyway. I'd expected there'd be a delay of an hour so so while they went and fetched the man in question—but he was evidently here, probably parked out there waiting for his pay-off. I hadn't seen him because I'd parked at the other side of the building.

Filemon looked at me again. "You're a bright boy, Hoyt. You're pretty bright for a big, dumb-looking gorilla. I got to hand it to you."

I shrugged.

"Kind of a shame you're so bright. I could use talent like yours. Only I can't take a chance. You made a good try, kid, but I can't take a chance."

I tried to keep from swallowing the dry lump in my throat and said, "Where does it happen—right here?"

"We'll see," said Filemon mildly.

And then the outside door opened again and Kramer came in with Jackson Culley.

"Hello Culley," I said.

His eyebrows went up, way up. He said, "What is this?"

Filemon was watching Culley closely, studying his reaction.

The moment hung, and I knew I had to act now or never. I spoke quickly and quietly. What I had to do was get the information across to Culley, but keep the tone of my voice from alarming Filemon and Kramer and Leroy and giving them a second's warning—

"Jackson," I said, "they know all about everything, and the only thing you can do is make a quick break right now."

Quick it was. Even though Culley was broad and horizontal and looked clumsy, he had a quick way of moving. Probably the only reason I saw his hand go for his gun was that I knew where he kept it, and I was watching for it. He kept his snub-nose in a holster stuck into his belt, but not fastened there, just as I did when I packed a gun. I'd learned it from Culley, as a mat-

ter of fact. I saw his hand blur toward it, and I saw it come out again, and I saw the flashes and heard the sound of the shots filling the room.

It all happened in the space of maybe two or three seconds, you understand. I was on one side of the room, flanked by Filemon and Leroy. Dolores, tied in her chair, was to our right. Culley was on the other side of the room, and Kramer was standing next to him. He didn't bother with Kramer—not in that first instant. He let Leroy have it. Three shots. I could tell they went in Leroy's direction without even turning my head. And as soon as those three shots were squeezed off he whirled toward Kramer. Kramer was just beginning to react, just beginning to back away and trying to worry his own gun out of his coat pocket.

I jumped for Filemon then. He must have half-expected it, because he was already turning toward me as I jumped. His gun was already in his hand, and he hadn't been able to get a clear shot at Culley, because Kramer was practically between them.

The gun went off at about the same moment that I crashed into Filemon, grabbing his arm. I smelled powder, I felt my eardrums go numb from the blast, and I felt the sudden burning pain along my right arm, from the elbow to the shoulder. But I kept pushing. I pushed Filemon's arm up and back. He twisted, jerked violently. The gun went off again—but toward the ceiling this time. I kept bending his arm back until I heard something snap, and heard him scream with pain.

I shoved him about two feet away, and swung with my left hand. I gave him one hundred ninety-three and a half pounds of punch. It knocked him all the rest of the way across the room, into the wall. His gun dropped.

I DOVE for Filemon's gun then. It had fallen near Leroy who was on the floor clutching his middle and kicking himself around and trying to scream, but making only gasping sounds. I got the weapon, then rolled over so that I faced Culley and Kramer.

They had been grappling. But as I turned,

Culley, his wide shoulders bulging, had managed to push Kramer free. Kramer hadn't yet managed to get his gun into the open. Culley still had his. He pointed it right into Kramer's face and pulled the trigger. It wasn't pretty.

I said, "Culley."

He didn't bother to talk things over. He whirled toward me and shot at me at the same time. It was a quick shot, and he was moving when he got it off. I wasn't moving. I was there on the floor and I had my left elbow propped nice and steady and my bullet went where I meant it to go. It caught Jackson Culley in the arm. He dropped the snub nose without willing it, then realized he'd dropped it, and tried to pick it up again with his good arm.

I said, "No, Culley, don't," and he didn't.

We all had plenty of time to talk things over before Gus Martin and all the cops in the world arrived. I managed somehow to loosen the knots holding Dolores to the chair and keep Culley standing where he was at the same time. Filemon's bullet had only plowed a furrow in my upper arm and I could still use the fingers of my right hand a little. I kept the gun in my left.

Then we all went into the other room, the manager's office, where there wasn't so many shot people lying around, and things were a little more pleasant. Dolores did the necessary phoning from the desk. Culley stood over at the other end of the room where I could see him, and he held on to his bloody arm and glowered at me.

He only spoke once, and that was when he said, "How did you figure it out? How did a dumb guy like you figure it out?"

So I told him. "In the hospital corridor, Culley—remember? You said I should have locked the room and waited downstairs after I found that body in the Benton Hotel. Only how did you know the room was upstairs—and how did you know there was a key?"

It wasn't much, but it started me thinking. You sent me to find that body in Room 314 because you figured I was too dumb to wonder why I should go interview a client in a hotel instead of the client coming to the office. You didn't want to pretend to find the body yourself because that would get you too personally involved. Baish must have offered you a nice fat fee to work this whole thing for him—fat enough to make you commit murder—"

AFTER Gus Martin and all the cops in the world arrived, Culley denied everything, of course. But not for long. As soon as I finished explaining what I knew to Gus down at headquarters, a *portrait parle* of Baish went out over the teletype and two days later a cop named Herring, or something like that, picked him up in Wheeling, West Virginia. He talked.

He told how he'd decided to disappear, and how Jackson Culley had looked around for weeks before he found just the right nameless bum who would be able to pass for Baish with a bath and a bashed-in head. He insisted that Filemon had been wrong about that store of narcotics, and that he actually had been getting his income from more or less legitimate enterprises all these years. One of these enterprises had been the Jackson Culley Agency. Baish was its silent partner and the dough behind it.

Dolores felt pretty bad when the verdict for her father came in—guilty, first degree. It was the same for Culley.

That was a year ago. Baish's will has been probated now, and among other things Dolores Baish holds the controlling interest in the Jackson Culley Agency.

This makes it very difficult. You see, I hold the controlling interest in the new Byron Hoyt Agency, and can't figure out just how a guy goes about proposing marriage to a business competitor.

●

The attempted suicide of a lovely girl leads harbor policeman Steve Koski to the heart of a liquor hijacking racket in **BLUES IN THE NIGHT** by Stewart Sterling—next issue!

The Death Dancer

By CHARLES BECKMAN, Jr.

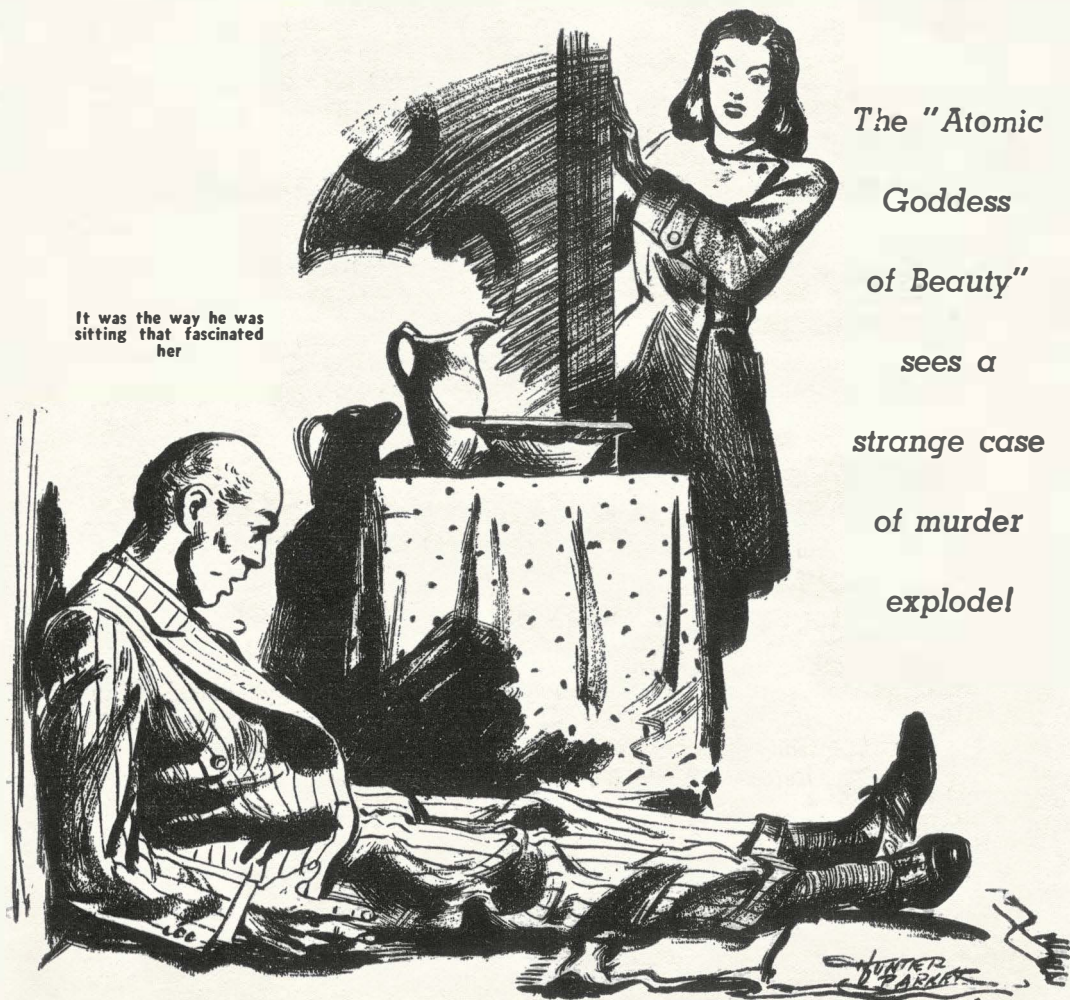
SUSIE LANGFIELD stood on the threshold of the hotel room, not moving. It was very quiet. The electric fan on Preacher Green's dresser hummed monotonously. Down the hall, in another room, a radio played.

A lot of crazy, disconnected thoughts ran through Susie's mind. She kept wondering who was going to deliver Preacher Green's

sermon this Sunday. As if that were important!

She thought she ought to run down the hall, screaming for help or something, but her legs simply wouldn't move. She seemed to be in a state of suspended animation. It was perfectly ridiculous, the way she was frozen in this position.

She heard someone giggling. It was a



It was the way he was sitting that fascinated her

The "Atomic Goddess of Beauty" sees a strange case of murder explode!

frightening sound and it gave her the shivers. She realized then those sounds were coming from between her own twisted lips, and she covered her mouth with both hands. Her eyes got very wide. Well, it certainly wasn't going to help matters by getting hysterical.

She looked at Preacher Green again. If she could just stop looking at him, maybe she could get hold of herself.

It was the way he was sitting that fascinated her. Propped against the wall that way, staring straight at her—as if he expected her to do something about the knife in his chest. A little rolypoly man with a fringe of white hair around a shiny bald pate, and a pink face that had become gray and saggy. A little man with a knife in his chest. Staring at her that way.

Then she started crying and that was better. She put both hands over her eyes and cried because Preacher Green was dead and she had loved him. Because he was a good old man who never hurt anybody. Because he was the closest thing she'd ever had to a father.

She sobbed brokenly and asked herself who could have hurt this nice old man? If she thought about it a moment, maybe she could decide who would have wanted him dead. Her mind went back to the carnival. To Green's Kingdom. To just an hour ago, when everything was wonderful and she was Mrs. Ray Lester, about to go on her honeymoon, and there wasn't any Nick Sheppard and she hadn't found Preacher Green's body this way. An hour ago . . .

THE BARKER'S voice rang out above the noise of the crowd and the tooting calliope: "All right, ladeez and gents! Now step this way for the super gigantic entertainment attraction of the show. Feast your eyes on Annabelle, the world's most beautiful girl! Brought at stupendous expense from the stages of Europe and Asia! Annabelle, ladeez and gentlemen! The atomic goddess of beauty!"

The rubes—store clerks, school kids, ranchers, Mexicans, Indians—drifted toward the big show at the end of the midway. The rubes, who had come with their nickels

to buy a bit of make believe carnival glitter.

The carnie people called it "Green's Kingdom." It covered the area of a city block and its tents and games and Ferris wheel and rides. Yes, and its leg show. For what was a carnival without a leg show?

The girls danced out on the runway, perspiring through their scanty satin costumes in the hot dusty afternoon. They heard the distant drums of thunder and prayed for a breath of cool air. But not rain. Rain would ruin the night show.

They went through their teaser steps for the gawking rubes and solemn-faced Indians, and perspired. And in the front line danced the atomic goddess of beauty, Annabelle.

She was all the barker said. A goddess of white limbs and soft young curves. A pagan beauty right out of the dreams of men and hopes of women. She was young and fresh and vibrantly alive, and her hair was a cloud of midnight spilling loosely over her smooth creamy shoulders that swayed to the insistent beat of the music. Her bare ankles and slim white calves flashed in the whirling steps of the dance. Now and then her slitted dress parted provocatively just above a shapely knee and the rubes howled.

Well, it was part of her job. She did it expertly and smiled back at the leering men. Only today, her smile was real, not a fixed grimace. Her heart was singing and she was really dancing. Her stomach wasn't turning over with disgust.

She whirled, holding her hands before her. The huge diamond on her third finger, left hand flashed in the hot sunlight. It assured her that she was really the newly married Mrs. Ray Lester and this was the last, the very last time she would have to parade before gawking men and look at their hungry eyes and hear what they said.

Mrs. Ray Lester!

The girls finished the short teaser routine. They ducked under the canvas, into the big tent where the main show went on in a few minutes. They crowded into their tiny wagon dressing-room grabbing a quick smoke, changing costumes. They were all talking about Annabelle's marriage—though they didn't call her Annabelle. Her real name

was Susie Langfield. Since last night it had been Mrs. Ray Lester.

"Lemme see it again, honey," Bessie, the kootch dancer, begged. "Golly!" she gasped, smacking her chewing gum with enthusiastic awe. "It musta cost a whole grand!"

Another girl grabbed Susie's hand and sparked the gem under an electric light bulb. "You're nuts, Bessie! Fifteen hundred, if it cost a cent. How many ranches did you say he's got, Sue?"

"I don't know exactly. He's planning to buy a new one, he told me. When we get back from Monterrey."

"Imagine! A honeymoon to Monterrey in a snappy convertible!"

"My old man took me to Niagara oncet," a small, faded blonde said wistfully.

"C'mon, stop gabbin'!" the show's barker, "Gabby" McClean snapped at them, sticking his head through the curtained doorway. "You ain't got all day! . . . Sue, a guy wants to see you. In my office. Make it snappy, kid. We got a big crowd."

She frowned, trotting across the open ground to Gabby's office, a streamlined trailer. She didn't know any fellows in this Texas border city except Ray. But why had he come here this time of day? He was supposed to pick her up tonight. They were driving down to Monterrey after she finished the last show tonight.

IT WASN'T Ray. She stood in the doorway, her icy fingers reaching for her throat. The sounds and smells of the carnival whirled around her dizzily.

The man in the office was Nick. Nick Sheppard, her first husband, whom she hadn't seen in three years. He was waiting for her here in Gabby's office. And this afternoon's nightmare had begun . . .

"Hi, baby!"

He was leaning back in one of Gabby's canvas chairs with his feet on Gabby's desk. He was trimming his fingernails with a pocket clipper. He folded the clipper, buffed his nails on his trouser legs. All the while, his eyes were going over her in a way that made her feel like clammy hands were touching her bare limbs. She shivered and drew her dressing gown tightly around her.

He laughed in a flat, ugly way. "Don't be coy, baby. I'm your husband. Remember?"

Yes, she remembered too well. She remembered when she had been a sweet, dumb kid waitress in a jerkwater town cafe. A youngster with stardust in her eyes. And Nick had come along—a dark-haired, flashily dressed guy with a glittering diamond stuck in his tie and a million dollars in his talk. A showman, he said he was. Owned a string of carnivals. Only, it turned out he didn't even own one carnival. He just ran a crooked little card game in one.

To her, he'd been the glamour and wonder she'd dreamed of. Until she found out what he really was. And by then he'd spoiled the sweetness and the dreams and the stardust was gone from her eyes for all time. She'd always hate him for that.

Yes, she remembered Nick Sheppard.

He dropped the nail clippers in his pocket, stood up and put his hands on her shoulders. She wrenched away from him.

"What do you want, Nick Sheppard? Get out and leave me alone!"

"Why, baby," he mocked, "I want a kiss from my wife. Tell me, aren't you glad to see me?"

She remembered when he'd run out on her—the night she had pneumonia, three years go. She would have died, alone and frightened in that hotel room, if kind-hearted Preacher Green hadn't found her and taken care of her. She hadn't seen Nick since that night.

"I hate you," she whispered through her teeth. "I'd like to see you dead!"

He pretended to be hurt. "I came back to congratulate you, baby. I heard about you marrying this rube with the dollar bills." He lighted a cigarette. "Tell me, baby," he asked her slowly, "won't it be awkward? Having two husbands, I mean? There's a law against that, you know."

The sounds of the carnival faded. For a moment, she heard nothing except the hurried beat of her heart in her ears. "Wh-what do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing. I just wondered what your new husband would say when I tell him he's a bigamist. Some guys are touchy about

things like that," he chuckled.

"I—I'm not married to you," she faltered.

"You got divorce papers to prove it?"

She licked her dry lips. It was just that she had never considered herself married to Nick any more after that night he'd deserted her. Now she realized that she'd done wrong, marrying Ray without telling him about Nick. But she'd wanted to forget there had ever been a Nick in her life. She'd wanted to marry Ray.

He patted her hand. "You look worried, baby. But don't you feel bad. Why, old Nick wouldn't stand in the way of your happiness. You know, I've always wanted to go to South America. I might make that trip now. Bow right out of the picture. Of course, a trip like that costs money. Say, five thousand."

"Five thousand—"

Blackmail! That was why he'd come back.

Panic tugged at her heart. "I haven't that kind of money, Nick. You know that."

"Oh, but your hubby has, honey. Your new one, I mean. From what I hear, he carries that much around in loose change. He'd never miss it. Tell him you need a new mink bathing suit or something."

She backed away from him, shaking her head. "I couldn't, Nick. I wouldn't."

He shrugged. "Suit yourself." He picked up his hat. "I'm staying at the Las Palmas Hotel." He glanced at his wrist watch. "It's two o'clock now. I'll hang around the lobby until five. If you haven't got the money to me by then, I'll go to your husband. And if necessary, to the cops!"

SUE DRESSED with shaking fingers. She batted Gabby's car into town on a cloud of dust. She could think of only one thing: Preacher Green. He'd help her, been like a father to her these last three years.

She'd pay him back, somehow. Later on she'd tell Ray, and maybe he'd let her go back to work for a while to earn the money.

But she couldn't tell him just yet. Ray was different from carnie people. He was like a big boy in some ways. He'd grown up in this hick town. Sue felt a lot older than Ray, though she wasn't, really. She doubted if he knew that things like crooked card

pitches and shills and blackmailing rats like Nick Sheppard existed.

The first night she'd met him he'd reminded her of a country boy, with his shock of unruly russet hair and his freckles and big, shy grin. Gabby had brought him around after the night show. "Customer wants to meet you, Annabelle," he'd said, and winked in silent carnie sign language to let her know that here was a well-heeled sucker with a roll just waiting for some smart girl.

Sue didn't do things like that. She hadn't dated a single fellow since Nick ran away that night. It didn't make any difference if the other girls teased her and whispered behind her back. She hated all men. She wanted nothing to do with men.

She intended giving this yokel the brush-off. But something in his wistful, awkward manner melted the hardness inside her. He was like a big puppy hoping for a pat on the head.

She finally let him drive her to town in his long, yellow convertible. They danced in a local night spot and he flashed a thick roll. Later he drove out into the ranch land in the moonlight, pointing out the place he wanted. He talked about the ranch where his parents had raised him, and mentioned property holdings in town.

He was money, all right. But it was something else that made her go out with him again the next night. Maybe it was the way he didn't hold her too tightly when they danced. Maybe it was the dirty jokes he didn't tell. Maybe it was because when he took her home that night, he looked as if he wanted to kiss her more than anything in the world, but instead he held her hand gravely and said how nice it had been of her to go out with him.

Maybe because he was on the level.

Anyway, she'd fallen in love with him. Really, for sure this time. Because he was on the level and she could trust him. So Preacher Green *had* to help her. He just *had* to. The fates were giving her another toss at happiness for the raw deal she got with Nick. Preacher had to make it all right!

That was what she told herself when she parked Gabby's car on a dusty side street

and ran up the back stairs of the small hotel where Preacher Green was staying. He'd told her often that he'd felt partly at fault about Nick, since he'd been the one who'd married them. So he'd help her now.

Green never ventured down to the carnie grounds in the heat of the day. He took his siesta in the afternoon and worked on the carnival books and his Sunday sermon at night.

Every Sunday morning, the carnie people in Green's Kingdom had to gather in the big tent for services whether they wanted to or not. Green's Kingdom was a good show to work for, but it was tacitly agreed that you attended Preacher Green's revival meetings on Sundays, or else!

The old man had started out to be a preacher, but an unconquerable weakness for alcohol had ruined him. Through his gift for flowery talk, he'd drifted into carnival work as a barker. Soon, he'd talked his way up to the ownership of a whole carnival. At heart, though, he'd remained a frustrated preacher.

The pink-faced, white-haired old fellow was a familiar sight, parading around the grounds, hymn book under one arm, reeling with every step. But he always showed up sober for his Sunday morning services. They laughed at the eccentric old coot. Yet his hell-and-damnation sermons brought more than a touch of earnestness to the otherwise callous carnie life.

And Susie Langfield Lester found him in his room, his silver tongue stilled forever. . . .

SUSIE CRIED for a long time, like a lonely little girl who had lost her only friend. She just couldn't think of anyone who would have hurt him. They all laughed at him, but they all loved him.

Down the hall, the rickety elevator shuddered to a halt. Its door rattled open. Sue moved all the way into Preacher's room and closed the door behind her. She didn't want anyone coming in here yet. She had to think first.

She sure ought to tell somebody. It wasn't right to leave poor Preacher this way. She wished her head would stop spinning so she could think what she ought to do.

It wasn't much of a room. White-washed stucco walls. An iron bedstead painted with chipped brown enamel. A dresser and a table. A closet. One window overlooking a dusty side street.

In the closet, Susie knew, were the proceeds from last night's show. Preacher Green always slept until noon, ate lunch, and dozed some more until the cool of late afternoon. Then he worked over the books and checked the take from the night before. The next morning, he sent Gabby or someone from the carnival down to the local bank, where they exchanged the cash for a cashier's check which was sent on to his main account in a Northern bank.

The proceeds from last night would still be here, plus the cash Preacher Green kept for salaries. It was careless of him to keep money on hand like that, but no one knew except Gabby and Sue.

She stared at the closet door, her eyes getting bigger and bigger. No, she couldn't do anything like that. It wouldn't be right, would it? But there was Ray, whom she loved and was likely to lose. . . .

She opened the closet door. She found the tin box containing the cash in his trunk with his books. Her fingers were trembling. She brushed the tears out of her eyes, tried to make herself believe it would be all right. Preacher Green would have loaned her the money without hesitating. He would have wanted her to have it.

She wasn't thinking very clearly. Her head was swimming and her throat was aching with grief and fear. So she took the money, five thousand dollars, and slipped back down the rear stairs. . . .

"I see. You say you found him dead. And then you took the money. Are you sure it wasn't the other way around, Mrs. Lester? Didn't you ask him for the money and he refused? So you killed him."

"No, no! He was good to me. Everyone loved him."

"Exactly. He was good to everybody. Nobody else had a motive, Mrs. Lester."

"But, you see, I loved Ray. I had to have the money because I loved Ray."

"Come, come, Mrs. Lester. . . ."

She ran down the last of the stairs, two

steps at a time. And piled right into the man who was coming up, head lowered.

He caught her. "Hey, miss! You're in a mighty big hurry." A little man in a baggy gray suit. A little man with big ears and spectacles. "Here, Miss, you dropped your tin box. No, I'll get it for you. There you are. . . ."

"But you were seen running down the stairs with the money. A witness. . . ."

"Say, ain't you one of the carnival people? Think I've seen you here talkin' with the carnival owner, Mr. Green. I'm on the same floor with him. Right down the hall. Mighty nice feller. Had lunch with him yesterday."

Little man in a baggy suit. Nothing different about him from the hundreds of other bored traveling men in tired gray suits who dozed in hotel lobbies. Nothing different. Except his big ears and his spectacles. And his room, right down the hall from Preacher Green. . . .

"A witness, Susie Langfeld, or Susie Lester, or Susie Sheppard, or Annabelle, whatever your name really is. We know the exact time you ran out of Preacher Green's room with the money. Minutes after Preacher Green was murdered!" . . .

HER HEELS were tapping the sidewalk now. She wished she hadn't taken the money. She wished she could take it back. But it was too late for that.

She whipped the car around corners. The Las Palmas Hotel. Lobby deserted. A sleepy desk clerk.

"Nick Sheppard? No ma'am. He ain't in his room. I saw him around the lobby a while back, then he walked out. Didn't say when he was coming back. . . . Sure, I'm sure! Say, ma'am, you all right? You look kinda sick or somethin'. Maybe the heat—"

Heels tapping concrete again. Gabby's car drumming the road under her. Hair flying. Wind stinging, blinding.

The carnival grounds. Green's Kingdom. Calliope tooting. Barkers yelling. The smell of popcorn and dust and straw.

She parked the car behind the big tent. As she was opening the door, she saw the Highway Patrol car nose into the carnival

grounds. A black coupe with a spotlight and a Highway Patrol police emblem on the door. . . .

"Yes, I saw her tearing down the stairs. Girl from the carnival. The one they call Annabelle. I went up to Mr. Green's room and found him dead like that. . . ."

She drove across the lot, to the road that cut the field at the far end. Then she headed back into town. She'd have to go to Ray, now. She'd have to tell him the whole mess, no matter what it did to them. He'd find out anyway, now. And maybe he could help her.

He was living in a bachelor apartment in a big old apartment house on a quiet street lined with shady oak trees. She ran up the walk, her high heels beating a tattoo. It was a big, ugly sprawling house, painted a ghastly shade of yellow, with brown window frames. Ray's apartment was on the second floor at the back end of the hall.

Sue twisted the knob, calling out his name. The door was unlocked. It swung inward. And there was Ray, his nice face kind of pale beneath all the freckles. And the other man in the room was Nick Sheppard. Sue's first husband. Nick Sheppard, looking dark and mean and dangerous.

He swore and grabbed her wrist, slamming the door shut. "What kind of cross is this, you little—"

Ray's face got even whiter, until his freckles stood out like cinnamon blobs. "Get your hands off her!" He held Sue protectively. "Honey, he said that—"

Her voice was muffled against him. "It's true, Ray. I should have told you. I was going to, but I couldn't just yet." She looked up at him, her eyes wide and black. "Preacher's dead, Ray. He"—her voice got twisted and crazy sounding—"he's up in his hotel room, dead! And I—"

Nick Sheppard grabbed her arm again. His hand was sweating. "Are you crazy?" he cried.

Behind them, the door opened again, slowly, and Bessie came into the room. Bessie Jones, the kootch dancer from the leg show at Green's Kingdom. She was chewing her gum very slowly, without thinking about it. She held a small automatic pistol in her

plump white hand.

Little Bessie, with the exaggerated curves, who made the rubes howl with her versions of the old time cancan and kootch dances. She was perspiring through her tight red dress. Thick layers of powder and rouge were caked on her face. A tiny rivulet of perspiration was trickling down her forehead, running through the heavy mascara glued to her left eyelashes. She smeared the back of her hand across it, wiping mascara and eyebrow pencil all over her left temple and cheek.

She kept the gun pointed unwaveringly. Her jaws moved steadily, rhythmically.

"Bessie!" Nick Sheppard swore. "What are you doing here?"

"Cops," she grunted. "Cops all over the grounds. Lookin' for Annabelle." She grinned, and against the caked white powder on her face her teeth looked yellow. "They're sayin' she killed Preacher Green and stole a box fulla money outa his room."

Nick's face got darker and meaner looking. A vein stood out across his forehead. "Bessie, you hop-headed little fool, what did you do?"

The room spun before Sue's eyes. Nick and Bessie were in this together! "You were helping Nick blackmail me!" she gasped.

"Sure," Bessie smacked. "How do ya think Nick found out about you marryin' Mr. Moneybags here? I sent him a telegram. It was a nice deal. We'da tapped you for five grand at first. More later on. Y'see, I knew you'd never got a legal divorce from Nick."

Nick Sheppard looked as if he wanted to choke her. "You crazy little kootch! You got me mixed up in a murder rap! And for nothing! This guy's a dud. He ain't got a cent!"

FOR THE first time, Bessie forgot to chew her gum. Her painted face seemed to come apart. "Huh?"

"I waited around the hotel lobby for a while, and then I got to thinking I'd made a mistake going to Sue," Sheppard said. "I shoulda tapped the guy right off the bat. If he was nutty enough to marry her, he wouldn't mind payin' five grand to hold onto her and keep her outa jail, I figured. Only,

it turns out he ain't got five grand. He ain't got five hundred. He's nothin' but a lousy second-hand car salesman! He don't even own that yellow convertible he's sporting. It belongs to the guy he works for."

Sue looked at Ray. At the nice guy with the freckles. At her husband. At the guy she'd fallen in love with because he was on the level and not a phony like the carnie people she'd known. She laughed in a twisted way, down in her throat, and her eyes got all blurry with tears.

"Just like all the rest," she whispered. "Like Nick and all the rest. Phony, like a three-dollar bill. Phony, phony, phony!" She whirled on Nick. "And you killed Preacher Green, that good old man who never hurt anybody in the world!"

Sheppard licked his lips. "I'm not getting my neck in any murder rap." He glared at Bessie. "This is all yours, baby. You knocked off the old man. I'm getting outa here!"

She backed against the door, waving him back with the gun. Her jaws were working furiously. A strand of her dyed red hair came undone and fell across her eyes.

"Yeah, I killed him," she whispered hoarsely. Her paint-smeared cupid-bow lips twisted as her eyes flitted toward Sue. "You weren't married to Nick. Not legally. Preacher Green hitched you two up, but he ain't got no more legal right to perform a marriage ceremony than I have. He's just an old lush with a whisky-soaked brain that played tricks on him. Sometimes he got to thinkin' he really *was* a preacher and he could marry people.

"That's why I wanted that mush-head Nick to go to you and not your husband for the tap. I figured you'd be too scared to check on how legal your marriage was. But old Green found out about Nick bein' in town. Sometimes the old coot's brain worked pretty good. He did some secret checkin', found out about my telegram, then Nick's and my deal.

"Right after noon, he called me up to his room," she went on. "He told me he was gonna tell you that you weren't really ever married to Nick and you had nothin' to worry about. Then he was gonna turn me

and Nick over to the cops, even if they hung a rap on him, too, for illegally marryin' people. He was really nuts about you, Susie.

"I—I got scared. I didn't want to get sent up for blackmail. I always carry a shiv with me in my purse. I've used it before. I used it on the old man."

Bessie was breathing heavily. Her eyes had become glassy. "Now I'm gettin' outa here. And I'm taking the money they say you took outa the old man's room, Susie. Where is it?" She jabbed the gun menacingly at the dancer.

Sue's mouth was dry. "Down in my car."

Bessie backed out of the door, slammed it. There was the sound of the key twisting in the lock, then Bessie's heels flying down the hall.

Sue stood very still, frozen. She heard the low moan of a police siren under the window. Voices yelling. Bessie's high-pitched scream. A quick exchange of shots. Then silence. Sue began crying quietly. . . .

She was crying again that night when she packed her clothes. The carnie grounds were quiet and deserted. Susie was leaving. The police said it was all right for her to go. Bessie had confessed to everything before she died.

Sue didn't know where she was going, or care. She just knew this was a lousy world and everybody in it was phony.

A rickety old sedan was parked outside the tent. A guy was sitting in it.

A guy with red hair and freckles.

"Susie!"

She turned her back on him and stumbled in the other direction, hiking her heavy suitcase along with both hands, crying. He came running up behind her.

"Please, Susie!" he pleaded.

"H-here's your ring," she choked. "It's probably glass!"

He caught her shoulders, made her face him. "Does it make so much difference that I haven't got a million dollars?" he asked bitterly.

"I d-don't care if you haven't got a d-dime," she sobbed. "It's just that you were a phony. You lied to me just the way Nick did."

"Not the way Nick did, baby," he whispered. His nice freckled face was miserable. "It was just that I loved you so much. I wanted to be big and important for you and I—I guess I stretched things. I guess if you get right down to it, everybody is a little bit phony. We try to make the world believe we're everything we'd like to be, even if we don't quite make the grade."

He pushed the ring back in her hand. "It's real, Sue. It took every cent I had, but it's real. Just the way my love is real."

"Oh, Ray!" she sobbed and held out her arms for him. After a few minutes, her tear-streaked face looked over his shoulder at his battered old car. She hiccuped once. "D-do you think we can make it to Monterey in that?"

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he had to kill her

By **HAROLD LAWLOR**

ALICE never knew what hit her. She'd just risen from her nap, tottered on sleep-stiffened legs to seat herself on the bench before her dressing table, her back turned to Murray.

One blow with the claw-end of the hammer he'd held behind his back till now was sufficient. She made no sound. She just pitched forward across the top of the dressing table.

"There, now!" Murray breathed, satisfied.

He'd felt the back of her skull crush in,

felt the mild shock of it all up his right arm. There was surprisingly little blood, and her thick graying hair served to absorb what blood there was. But she was dead, all right. He'd done a good job. He'd hate to be any deader himself.

Chuckling softly, he moved on stockinged feet, surprisingly noiseless for so heavy a man. Going to the kitchen, he washed the hammer, dried it carefully, replaced it in the under-sink cabinet.

Straightening, he winked jovially at himself in the small mirror Alice had kept over

the sink for hurried primping. A vain woman, Alice. Not one to let herself be caught disheveled should the bell ring unexpectedly.

As if anyone had cared for years how she looked!

Murray left the kitchen and went down the long hall, past the bedroom where Alice lay, to the living room. He made no sound. It was most important that he shouldn't. That nosy, querulous old bag, Mrs. Sanders, in the apartment below, mustn't hear him moving about. His story was to be that he'd been in the kitchen all the time, under the north window where it was slightly cooler, going over the papers he'd brought home from the office. They were already spread out on the kitchen table.

Later he would have need of Mrs. Sanders, of course. That was the plan. And he knew what would bring her running, just as it had three weeks before.

IN THE living room, Murray took thin white cotton gloves from his pocket. Going to the game closet, he withdrew the card table and set it up in front of the sofa. He found Alice's jigsaw puzzle in a drawer of the desk.

He up-ended the box, and let the puzzle spill out on the top of the card table. Sitting down on the sofa, he began to move the pieces about. It had served to puzzle and entertain Alice for days, but he, Murray reflected, was brighter than she. Oh, much! In ten minutes, he had one-third of the puzzle fitted together.

That would do nicely. That was enough.

Carefully he got up and moved the card table several feet from the sofa. He needed room for what he must do next.

He went to the bedroom. Time now to move Alice into the living room. He'd known that the corpse would be a dead weight, and difficult to lift, strong as he was.

But he was no fool. He'd thought of that. He'd thought of everything. Smart guys do. That's why they don't get caught.

He went to the tie-rack, selected two nylon ties that he knotted together. Slipping them under Alice's armpits, he had a sort of harness that expedited her removal.

Grasping the ends of the knotted ties, his

back to the dressing table bench, Murray lifted Alice. Back to back, he eased her weight gently from the bench to his back.

Puffing with the exertion, he moved slowly and laboriously, but above all quietly, with his burden to the living room, where he set it down upon the center cushion of the sofa.

"Hah!" he breathed when this was done. He unknotted the ties, shook them out. Nylon, they were wrinkle-free in seconds, it seemed. He went back to the bedroom and replaced them upon the rack.

In the living room again, he stood there looking down at Alice, rubbing his gloved hands together in satisfaction. Then he moved the card table back before the sofa, and artistically arranged the upper half of Alice's body upon it.

He knocked a few pieces of the puzzle onto the gray carpet, as if her hands had pushed them so as she had fallen forward.

There remained now only one last thing to be done.

And when it was done, he would have committed the perfect crime.

He'd meant to kill Alice for months. But had he gone off half-cocked, when the idea had first struck him, and rushed into it pell-mell? Ho! Not John D. Murray!

And that was why he was going to get away with this.

The trouble with most people who tried to commit perfect crimes, they were stupid. Yes, sir, that's what they were, stupid! They let their emotions get completely out of hand. In their eagerness, they leaped into things without sufficient thought. They forgot a dozen things they should have remembered, left clumsy loop-holes that you could drive a truck through.

But not John D. Murray!

He'd read a great deal about perfect crimes. Funny thing, they always seemed to be cases where husbands were trying to cover up the murder of their wives.

And what did ninety per cent of these dim-witted characters do? They'd kill her. And then they'd bury her body under the cellar floor.

John D. Murray shook his head in fond despair. Under the cellar floor! The first place any suspicious and half-bright cop

would look!

No, no, no! Why have a corpse anyway, the clumsiest thing in the world to hide? That was no way to do. The thing was to make it look like accident or suicide, with the body right out in the open.

Of course, some lads were smart enough to see this, too. But again they had no sense, no artistry. Suicide, now. You had to be horsing around with notes supposedly left by the dear departed. Faking her handwriting. Awkward! Unnecessary! Accident was better. It had taken John D. Murray six months of careful thinking to reach this conclusion.

Even then he had not acted rashly. An accident, too, had its pitfalls. It shouldn't happen just out of the blue. That was the mistake most men made. There should be a build-up. A convincing build-up. And you should wait till luck favored you. As luck had favored John D. Murray to reward him for his patience.

Three weeks ago, luck had shown him the way.

ALICE went alone to the movies that night.

"Do you care to come, dear?"

"Is it a Western?"

"Oh, for pity's sake! You know I loathe Westerns. Silly cowboys galloping about! Of course not. It's a musical with Peggy Delorme."

John D. Murray groaned. "Don't tell me, I know the plot. Peggy's a honky-tonk singer who becomes a great stage star on Broadway back in the Nineties, No, thanks. I think I'll stay home and read."

Alice sighed. "Just as you like, dear."

They never quarreled. He'd seen shrewdly to that. It would be another point in his favor. Later, when he had killed her, no one would ever be able to suggest a possible motive in the fact that they didn't get along well. So far as anybody knew, they did.

Indeed, it would be well nigh impossible to assign any motive to him for her murder. He never looked at another woman—not openly, that is—and Alice didn't chase around with other men. She didn't throw

his money away with both hands, and she had no fortune of her own. She was a meticulous housekeeper, a fine cook. She had a fairly even disposition. She was attractive enough, he supposed, for her age.

And she bored him cock-eyed.

They had nothing in common. They didn't even speak the same language. She had a dozen annoying mannerisms. She cluttered the apartment with her cursed antiques. And she bellyached her head off because they couldn't move, and this building quaked like an aspen every time the freight trains rolled by a scant half block away.

Trivial reasons, some might think, for killing your wife. But boredom was the motive for at least ninety-five per cent of all divorces, the statisticians said. And John D. Murray didn't believe in divorce. He didn't believe in running the risk of letting himself get nicked for alimony.

He really had to kill her. He had no alternative. Anybody ought to be able to see that, he thought aggrievedly. Later, when it was safe, he'd find some girl. Young. Gay. He was getting on. He deserved a little happiness. He hadn't too many years left.

Alice fussed before she left for the movies. Another one of her irritating mannerisms. She drifted about the living room, tightening an antimacassar on a chair-back here, blowing a fleck of dust from a table-top there.

She reached up and straightened the heavy bronze bust of nobody-in-particular on its bracket above the sofa.

"That's not a very safe place for that," Murray said automatically, as he'd said it fifty times before. "Too shaky."

Alice spoke by rote, too. "It's perfectly all *right* there, John. And it's the keynote for the whole room."

It was a hell of a looking thing, if you asked John D. Murray. Another one of her lousy antiques.

Alice was at the door. "Don't drop ashes on the rug, John. Don't litter the place with your things. Don't—"

"I won't dear," said Murray.

For Pete's sake, get out! he thought. *Leave me in peace.*

WHEN she had gone, he sat in the right-hand corner of the sofa, a detective novel open on his knees. He didn't feel like reading. He couldn't stand much more of this. He'd reached the breaking point where Alice was concerned.

He had to get rid of her. The time was ripe. He'd let months go by already. But how? That was the question that still had him stymied. Once he had the answer, he could act.

Luck smiled on John D. Murray. A train went by. The building shook. The lamp on the table beside him quivered. And then it happened.

The bronze bust toppled from its bracket, hit the edge of the sofa's middle section, caromed off onto the floor. Even on the thick padded rug it made a thud that shook the apartment more than the trains were wont to do.

Murray sat there, stupefied, staring at the heavy bust on the floor. His eyes measured the trajectory of its fall. Good Lord, if he'd been sitting in the middle of the sofa the thing would have brained him. He just wished Alice had been here to see that, after all his futile warnings!

A pounding came on the door. Still a little dazed by his fortunate escape, Murray got up, circled the bust as if it were something venomous in his path, and went over to the door.

He opened it to face the indignant features and ferret eyes of old Mrs. Sanders from the apartment downstairs.

"What in the world are you people doing up here!" she demanded hotly. "You should just see the crack in my living room ceiling."

Murray let her come in. He pointed to the bust.

"Look! It missed me by inches when it fell off the wall."

It diverted Mrs. Sanders from her own woes. "Oh, my! Lucky you weren't directly under it. It could have killed you. Or Mrs. Murray."

It struck him then. It was as simple as that. He almost smiled. But he only said. "She's at the movies."

"Well—" Mrs. Sanders said tentatively. She started to the door. "I hope it doesn't

happen again."

"I hope not," Murray agreed piously, before he shut the door behind her.

He went back to the living room, chuckling. "But I'm afraid it's going to."

He picked up the bust and put it back on its bracket. Then he frowned. He took it down again, went to the kitchen with it, washed it carefully. He put it back where it belonged, then, careful to hold it in the towel with which he had dried it.

There! There'd be no fingerprints of his own on it now. He'd wait a while. In a week or two, fussy as she was, Alice would cover it with a hundred prints of her own, dusting it daily.

He could well afford to be patient a little longer. The end was near.

MURRAY remembered all this now, looking down at his wife's body sprawled, across the card table.

He'd better get on with it. There were a few things left to do.

In his gloved hands, he took the bust and threw it on the floor with a resounding thud.

Haste was imperative now. He hurried noiselessly to the kitchen, donned the shoes he'd left there. A sheet of newspaper was ready. He wrapped the gloves in it, opened the incinerator door, set fire to the package and dropped it down. It would be completely destroyed in seconds.

He ran heavily down the hall, careless now of noise, crying: Alice! Alice!" in a voice loud enough to carry through the front door.

He'd timed it perfectly. Mrs. Sanders was pounding on the door just before he reached it. He opened it, swung it wide, hastened into the living room. Then he stopped. As one would stop, frozen with horror. He heard Mrs. Sanders gasp behind him.

Good! She'd be the perfect witness.

Confusion, then. Like a movie montage gone suddenly mad. Phone calls. A doctor. The coroner. A slim middle-aged man who seemed to be of the police. Opelka, his name was.

What was he doing here? He came with the coroner. Was it normal procedure?

Only routine? Or—just chance? Murray didn't know. He sank into a chair, covered his face with his hands. A man stunned by tragedy, he hoped they'd think. He needed to hide his eyes. And he didn't want to watch Opelka. The man made him nervous.

Opelka had a way of disappearing for moments, moseying through the apartment. What did he hope to find? He'd hovered too long over Alice's body. He'd inspected the bust too closely. Or so it had seemed to John D. Murray.

But nonsense! Let him get hold of himself. He had nothing to fear. He was smart. Murray rubbed his eyes, his forehead. Mustn't sweat. Mustn't seem nervous.

Mrs. Sanders' shrill voice was yammering, yammering. Murray started, looked up. Opelka was standing over him.

"The bust fell before?" Opelka said. "Didn't you warn your wife about it?"

"Of course!" Murray lied. "We've been arguing about it for days. If I've moved that thing once, I've moved it a dozen times. And every time I'd move it, Alice would replace it. Stubborn, she was. Set in her ways."

There, that sounded natural! Normal anger that his wife hadn't obeyed him.

Then Murray remembered something. Dammit, he hadn't touched that bust since he'd washed it three weeks ago. From what he'd just said, his fingerprints ought to be on it. He mustn't get rattled. He was talking too much. Thank Heaven, there were no fingerprint men here.

His break wasn't too important, but it shook him. He could feel his heart pound-

ing, his nerves beginning to quiver more and more.

IN THE background, Mrs. Sanders was still talking. "Such a sweet woman, Mrs. Murray. Nice as you could ever want to meet. Snooty, I thought her, though, when she first moved in. Passed me on the street several times without speaking, and I was peeved until I learned she was near-sighted, poor soul. Blind as a bat without her glasses."

"Ah!" Opelka said. He looked at Alice's body. There were no glasses on her face. "And she was doing a jigsaw puzzle for minutes before the bust fell, you said?"

Murray almost laughed. Opelka couldn't trip him on that one. Alice, and her pathetic, middleaged vanity! This was going to be one in the eyes for Opelka!

Murray said, "Alice threw all her glasses away. She's been wearing contact lenses for months."

Strangely, Opelka didn't seem surprised. "She had only one pair?"

"Certainly."

Was the man a fool? They cost one hundred and fifty dollars a pair. Who'd want two? What was this line of questioning anyway?

John D. Murray was smart. He got it, then. Sickness rocked his stomach. Alice had been napping just before he killed her. Had she—?

Opelka read the frantic question in his eyes. He held out his hand. "I found them on her dressing table."

Two plastic disks were lying on his open palm. Alice's contact lenses.

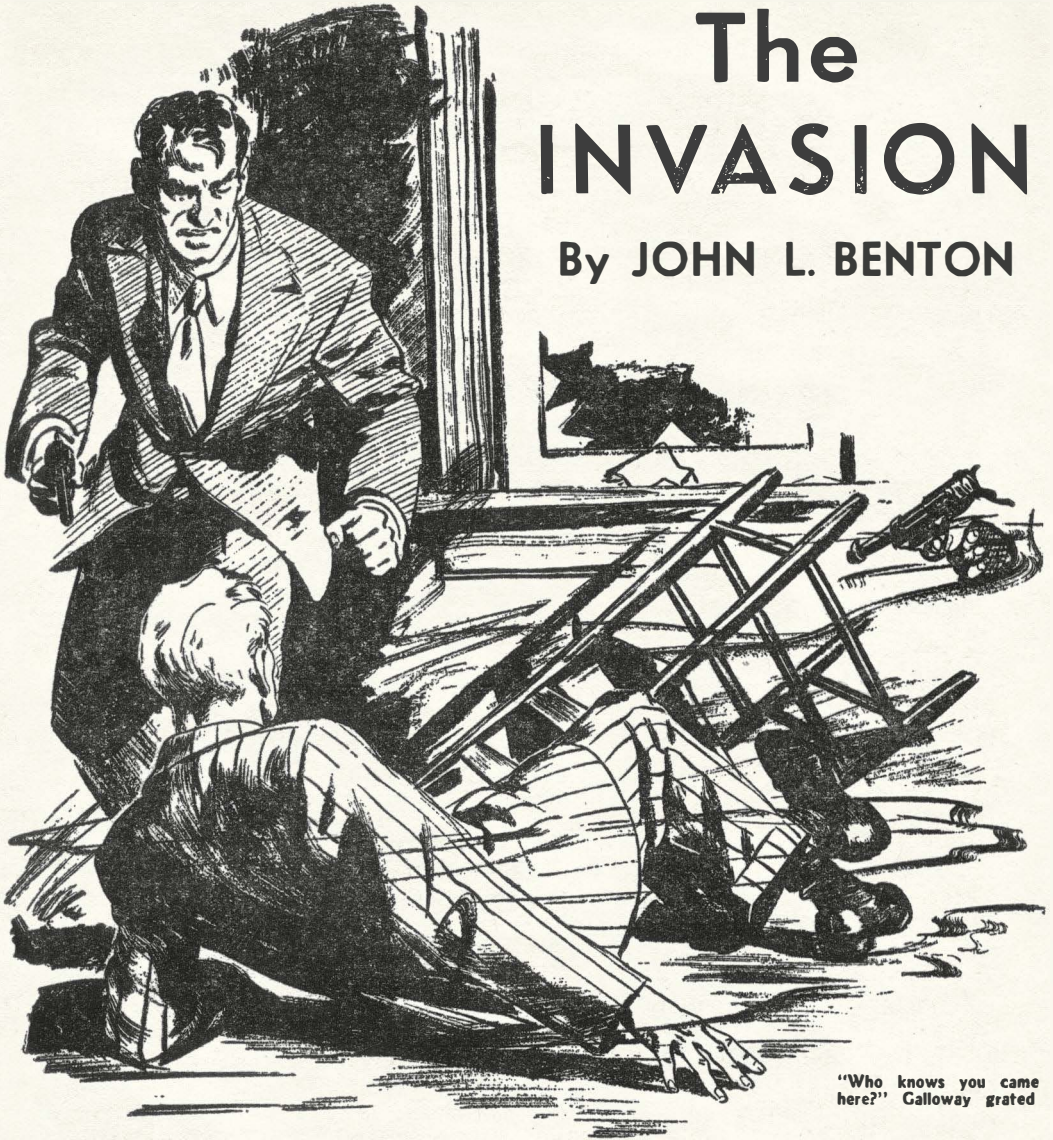


**"You Get On the Two O'clock Train—or
We'll Make You Wish You'd Never Been Born!"**

That's not the proper sentiment to hear on your honeymoon—but it's the way Jeff King was greeted in the town of Welden the night before his wedding, in **KILLER IN HIS BED**—a novelet of a murder marriage by Norman A. Daniels, coming next issue! It's a mystery packed with shocks, suspense and surprises!

The INVASION

By JOHN L. BENTON



"Who knows you came here?" Galloway grated

Old Dad Allen may be seventy, but he can still show his grandson-detective a thing or two about sleuthing!

JERRY met me at the station. He didn't look any too happy. "What in the world brought you here, Dad," he demanded, reaching for my bag. "Naturally, Jane and I will be glad to have you with us for a while, but this is a bad time of the year to come to Chicago."

I grinned at Jerry. "Chicago weather isn't any worse than it used to be, is it?"

"You aren't as young as you used to be, either," Jerry answered.

A long time ago I got over being sensitive about my age and about my grandchildren's protective attitude toward me, even though they call me "Dad." There

isn't anything I can do about being past seventy, and you can't easily change the habit patterns of grown men. My three grandchildren, Jerry, Bill and Fred, worry about me constantly no matter what I do.

Inside the station, I said to Jerry, "This isn't a visit. I'm just here to buy a few things. I'm going to stay downtown at the Michigan Hotel. I won't bother you and Jane at all."

That started quite an argument but Jerry did most of the talking. Jerry is a good talker. He's forceful and stubborn. They tell me he's one of the best detectives on the Chicago police force and I don't doubt it.

I'm an Allen, too, however, and in the end I registered at the Michigan Hotel. I promised Jerry I would come out to his house before I went back to New Bedford and after I had finished the business which had brought me out to Chicago.

They say that there is no fool like an old fool. I suppose a good many things I have done in the past few years would seem to bear out that statement. Fred, my third grandson, who is a real-estate man in Los Angeles, writes me long letters of advice, the sum and substance of which is that a man past seventy should spend his declining years in an armchair, reflecting upon the troubles of the world, drinking in the beauties of nature, and guarding his health so that he can live to be a burden on the community.

Well, an armchair is all right. I like to sit in one. I like to reflect upon the troubles of the world and to admire the beauties of nature. I don't want to die. I have too good a time living.

In all my life, however, I never saw an armchair philosopher who accomplished anything. Besides, I'm still too active to be confined to an armchair. If I was ten years older, and crippled with rheumatism, I still think I would have made this trip to Chicago. You see, I think a lot of Eddie Alcott and of Merle Houston, too.

AFTER Jerry left, I went out and bought a couple of shirts, a necktie, a new pipe, and a few other things I didn't need, just in order to keep my word to Jerry. Then I cleaned up, and took a walk down Michigan Boulevard and through Grant Park.

A cold wind was blowing off of the lake. The sky was murky. In about an hour I had had enough of Chicago's weather. Back near the hotel I dropped into a restaurant for supper, and after supper went up to my room. There was a message there to call Jerry's wife.

I called her. I told her I was tired and was going to bed and promised to come out and see her in a day or so. Then at about eight-thirty I called the hotel desk and told them not to ring me any more. I said I was tired and didn't want to be disturbed. But I didn't go to bed. Instead, I went out and took a taxi.

I told the taxi driver I wanted to go to the Ninety Club and after about half an hour's drive the taxi swung into the curb somewhere in South Chicago. I got out, paid the fare and looked around.

"Sure this is where you wanted to come, Pop?" the driver asked.

I said that it was and the driver scratched his head. "Well, watch your step," he advised. "That's a pretty rough joint some nights."

I thanked him, pushed open the door to the Ninety Club and stepped inside. I could see at a glance that it wasn't a very high-class place. It was typical, I suppose, of a hundred other such spots in the city. There were tables around a dance floor, booths along two sides of the room, a bar in one corner. A girl who couldn't have been more than sixteen but whose eyes were old and wise, took my hat and coat.

An oily-skinned waiter came up and bowed to me and said, "Table for one?"

"I'm looking for a friend," I told him, staring around the room.

The waiter nodded. He moved away, and just at that moment I saw Eddie Alcott. He was sitting at a table close to the dance floor. There was a red-headed

girl with him.

Eddie, I guess, is about twenty-five. He's short, chubby, round-faced. I never knew anyone who didn't like him. He looks like a chump. That is, there's something innocent in his eyes and something in his manner which would make a person believe that Eddie would fall for anything.

Underneath, he is serious. He is really a lad of no mean ability. At the bank in New Bedford they swear by him. Of course, right now they weren't swearing by him, but at him, and a warrant had been made out for his arrest. There were lots of us, however, who still believed in Eddie.

I didn't know the red-headed girl at Eddie's table, but that didn't stop me. I walked across to where they were sitting, grinned down at Eddie and said, "Hello."

Eddie caught his breath. He turned white around the mouth. He blinked up at me, swallowed a couple of times and looked back at the door as though wondering who had come with me, maybe expecting to see the sheriff. I pulled out a chair and sat down.

"Why don't you introduce me to your friend, Eddie?" said the red-headed girl.

"This is Dad Allen, Lydia," Eddie mumbled. "He's from back home." Then Eddie said to me, "Lydia Loring is the featured dancer here at the Nintey Club."

I nodded to the girl. She wasn't really a girl. If I had had to guess I would have said she had celebrated her thirtieth birthday at least six or seven times. She was still trying to look like a girl, though. Her face was carefully plastered with cosmetics. There was a sleek, artistic beauty about her.

"What are you doing in town, Dad?" the girl asked.

"Just came in for a few days," I answered. "Didn't think I'd run into anyone I knew. Eddie gets around, I see."

There was a stubborn, angry look on Eddie's face which I chose to disregard.

The girl stood up. "I must go, now,

and get ready for my dance. Stay and see it, won't you, Dad?"

I said I would and the girl left us.

SHE WAS hardly a step or two away before Eddie leaned forward. "What do you mean by butting in?" he asked tensely.

I got out my pipe, filled it and got it going. I knew I had to be careful how I answered that question. I couldn't, for instance, tell him Merle Houston had come to see me and had begged me to find him and send him home. I couldn't tell him what was in the back of my mind. Young people don't appreciate unsought advice from their elders.

"Well?" Eddie demanded.

I shrugged my shoulders, said, "I had to come here to see my grandson, and I remembered about that match-folder you picked up outside the bank after the robbery. I thought you might be around here, so I came out to see."

Eddie looked at me suspiciously. "Who else knows I might be here?"

"No one."

For a moment Eddie studied my face intently. What he read there must have satisfied him, for at last he said, "All right, Dad. I had a notion maybe you had followed me. I— What's happened back home?"

"Randall has sworn out a warrant for your arrest."

Eddie's lips tightened. Randall was the president of the bank. I think Eddie had counted on Randall believing in him, and I think Randall did. There wasn't anything else to do after Eddie had disappeared.

You see, there was something funny about that bank robbery. It had occurred early in the morning, when no one but Eddie was in the bank. Three men had come in, held him up, knocked him out and escaped with all the money in sight. The robbery had been pulled off so quietly that no one had been aware of it until Eddie was found, unconscious, in the bank. Not much money had been taken, but twenty thousand dollars worth of

negotiable bonds had disappeared.

Eddie said the three men had parked their car at the corner close to the bank and had come in through the side door, which was unlocked. Outside, near where the car had been parked, Eddie had found the match-folder advertising the Ninety Club of Chicago. Eddie gave the sheriff a good description of the men, but he didn't mention the folder to anyone but me.

I don't think Eddie even meant to tell me about it. There wasn't any reason to think that the robbers had thrown away the empty match-folder, excepting that Eddie found it near where their car had been parked. And as far as that goes, any passing motorist might have tossed it out. At best, it was a slim clue.

I made that point when Eddie mentioned the folder, but Eddie wouldn't listen to me. He had come to me, I know, hoping that I would explain things to Merle Houston. He and Merle planned on getting married.

Eddie took a deep breath. "So the police are after me."

I nodded.

Eddie leaned forward. "Dad, I was right. Those men *did* throw away the match-folder."

"You've seen them here?" I asked.

"Two of them."

"Have they seen you?"

"Yes, but they didn't recognize me," he explained.

"Don't you think you ought to call in the police, Eddie?"

He shook his head. "I haven't any proof, yet. All I could do is accuse them. It would be my word against theirs."

"How can you get any proof?" I asked.

"There are the bonds," Eddie pointed out. "Twenty of them, each for a thousand dollars. The men who took them haven't disposed of them, I know. They are hot."

The lights dimmed and a thin-faced chap stepped out on the dance floor, cracked some jokes I had laughed at fifty years ago, and then, with a lot of adjectives, introduced Lydia Loring. She

did her dance. I couldn't hand her much but the crowd seemed to like it. After the dance there were several other acts and then Lydia came on again and sang a "mother" song.

"Good, isn't she?" Eddie said.

I wondered if he could have forgotten Merle Houston as quickly as this. I looked at him rather curiously.

"Don't get me wrong," Eddie said. "I know what kind of a girl she has been, but just the same, there's a fine streak in her."

I didn't argue the matter. There's usually a fine streak in everyone, only sometimes it's so faint and thin it never shows.

"Eddie," I asked, "what are you doing to get the proof you need?"

"Nothing very dangerous," Eddie answered. "I'll tell you, Dad. I'll come see you tonight, after—well, say about one o'clock, if that's not too late. I—I'm sort of glad you're here."

"It won't be too late," I told him. "I'm at the Michigan Hotel." I gave him the room number.

I left after that and before Lydia Loring came back to Eddie's table. That was a mistake on my part. I should have stayed with Eddie. I know that now.

IT WAS almost two o'clock when Eddie showed up at the hotel. I had about given him up and was getting ready for bed when his knock sounded. When I opened the door I knew at once that something dreadful had happened. Eddie's face had a pale, strained look about it. His eyes were unusually bright. He was so nervous he was almost shaking.

I led him to the edge of the bed, made him sit down. "Well," I said, "what's the trouble?"

Eddie swallowed. He drew in a rasping breath. "She's dead!" he whispered. "Her face—" His voice broke off. A shudder ran over his body.

"Who's dead?" I asked him.

"Lydia Loring."

I went to the bathroom, wet a towel with cold water and took it back to

Eddie. I made him wipe off his face and I got him a cold drink.

"Suppose you tell me about it," I suggested. "Start at the beginning. You took the girl home?"

He nodded. "She has an apartment close to the club. We left after the midnight floor show. She had to go on again at two, but she was going to show me the box Creel left with her first."

"Who is Creel?"

"He's one of the men I was after. It was Creel who killed her, Dad. I heard it. She went into the bedroom. There was the sound of a scuffle, a scream. I ran for the door but it was locked. By the time I broke it open—"

Again his voice choked and he shuddered.

I pulled a chair up close to the bed and after a while I got a rather clear picture of what had happened. Eddie had gone to the Ninety Club thinking perhaps he might find some trace of the men who had held up the bank in New Bedford. He had seen and recognized two of the robbers, one of whom was named Creel. He had struck up an acquaintance with this girl, Lydia Loring, since Creel seemed rather interested in her.

One night he had asked Lydia about Creel and she had expressed a fear of him and had told him she had to be nice to Creel in order to keep her job. Creel, she said, owned half of the Ninety Club. She had also mentioned a box Creel had brought to her apartment and asked her to keep for him. She had said she didn't know what was in it but was afraid it was something which would get Creel in bad with the police if they found it at his place.

Eddie's story was rather sketchy, but I gathered he had pointed out to Lydia that the box might also get her into trouble and that he had persuaded her to let him see it. At any rate, it was for that purpose that they had gone to the girl's apartment between shows.

As to what happened at the apartment, Eddie was very definite. He had

gone into the living room and waited there while Lydia went into the bedroom for the box. He had heard a scuffle, a scream. Had tried the door and found it locked. He had broken it open.

Lydia, he told me, was lying on the floor by the bed. Her head was crushed. There was an open window in the room. Outside was a fire escape. Eddie turned that way. He saw Creel going down the fire escape. He had given chase but Creel had eluded him. After that, he had come back and hunted for the box, but hadn't been able to find it.

When he finished his story, Eddie looked up at me and said tragically, "I've messed it all up, Dad. Lydia wouldn't have been killed if it hadn't been for me. I'm really responsible for her death. I'll never get the bonds, now."

He went on in that vein quite a bit. He was about as low mentally, I guess, as a man can ever get.

I opened my bag and got out some sleeping tablets which I had brought along. I don't ordinarily use them, for it's very seldom I have any trouble getting to sleep. I was glad, now, that I had them, and I made Eddie take one. In his present state, sleep was the safest place for him.

BY THE time I neared Lydia Loring's apartment house, it was close to four in the morning. It was still dark. And cold. I left the taxi a couple blocks from the address Eddie had given me and continued the journey on foot.

Things seemed quiet enough in front of the place, and after passing it once I turned around and came back. I entered the front door and took the automatic elevator to the fifth floor. There was a dim light burning in the hall. I turned left, reached the apartment door.

"All right, boys!" said a sharp voice.

I straightened up at that, swung around. Two men had come out of a doorway across the hall and were running toward me. They were both big men and both had guns. I lifted my hands. They reached me and grabbed

me. They weren't very gentle about it. One of them felt my body—for a gun, I suppose—while the other snapped handcuffs on me.

"He isn't heeled, Jerry," one of them said. "He's an old duffer, too."

I caught my breath. I looked around the man's body. Walking toward us down the hall came my grandson, Jerry Allen!

As long as I live I don't think I'll ever forget Jerry's look when he recognized me. He got red in the face. His eyes almost popped out of his head. He seemed stunned, and then angry.

"Know him, Jerry?" asked one of the men.

"I know him, all right," Jerry said sharply. "Take him inside. I want to talk to him."

The two men took me into the apartment. I could see at once that the police had been here for quite a time. All the furniture had been powdered for fingerprints.

Jerry called to the two men from the hall. What he said to them I don't know, but after a while he came in alone and shut the door after him.

"Well, Dad?" he snapped at me. "What's the story?"

I didn't say anything. In a way, I wasn't surprised to find Jerry here. Since the police knew of the murder, it was the natural thing. Jerry's one of the best men on the force.

When I didn't speak, Jerry said, "All right. I'll tell the story. You came to Chicago to find a man named Eddie Alcott, a man from New Bedford who robbed the bank in which he worked. He tried to convince people there that someone else robbed it, and when he didn't succeed, he lammed for Chicago. Right?"

I didn't make any answer.

Jerry's lips tightened. "This is the rest of the story, Dad," he said. "When Alcott got here he started hitting the high spots. He took up with a dancer named Lydia Loring. He brought her home tonight. Sometime between twelve and one he killed her. Now we want him

for murder."

I looked up at Jerry. "Sure of that?"

"Sure of it?" he cried. "Of course I'm sure of it! His fingerprints are all over this room and in the bedroom where the girl was killed. I've talked to half a dozen people at the night club where the girl worked. I know he left there with her. I've two witnesses that know he brought her here. The woman across the hall heard her being killed. She saw Alcott leave this apartment fifteen minutes later. I suppose you knew where he was, Dad, and knew what happened and came here to see how bad things looked for him. Well, they look plenty bad! Where is he?"

"Look here, Jerry," I said slowly. "You're a little mixed up on this thing. I know Eddie Alcott. He didn't rob the bank. He didn't come here to hit the high spots. He came here to find the men who robbed the bank. He found them, too, and walked into this frameup."

Jerry blinked. "You believe that?" he cried. "Say it again!"

I started to repeat the story but it sounded weak even to my own ears. I told Jerry what Eddie had told me about chasing a man down the fire escape.

Jerry laughed. He used one of my own expressions, witheringly, "Poppycock!"

"Nevertheless," I insisted, "you'll find Eddie's fingerprints on the fire escape, too."

"What would that prove?" Jerry asked. "And who were these bank robbers? Did they have names?"

"Creel was the name of one."

Jerry looked puzzled. He shook his head. "That doesn't mean anything to me, and I know the name of every crook in this town with nerve enough to pull off a bank robbery. Where's Alcott?"

I shook my head. "I won't tell you, Jerry. At least, not now."

JERRY didn't hold back his anger any longer. He blew up. He called me a meddlesome old fool and a few other things not so nice. He paced back and

forth across the room shouting at me.

When he discovered that shouting accomplished nothing, he tried reason. He talked about his job and the chief of detectives. He told me the position this put him in, and he didn't make it sound attractive.

"Jerry, I may be a meddlesome old fool," I admitted, "but I know how police departments work and I can see what Eddie Alcott's up against. You've got enough evidence right now to send him to the chair or to jail for life. The story of what really happened sounds fantastic, even to me. If you pick up Eddie tonight, you'll rush the case through. If you have to hunt for him, you'll do a more thorough job on the actual evidence and maybe you'll stumble across a clue to the real murderer."

That seemed to make Jerry think, for he said, "I'll promise you this, Dad. You lead me to Eddie and I'll give him a fair break. I'll even try to prove that crazy story of his."

I was tempted, but not enough. I could imagine the headlines in the newspapers the next morning. On the basis of what evidence Jerry had, the newspapers would convict him beyond question. I shook my head. "I won't tell," I said positively.

There's no point in putting down all that Jerry said to me in the hour which followed. I didn't blame him for it. Here he had a case cleared up in record time, and a meddlesome old man of seventy, who could have led him to his quarry, stubbornly refused. To make matters worse, that man was his own grandfather. It put Jerry in something of a spot.

For a while I thought he was going to forget who I was and order my arrest, but he didn't. Just at dawn, he called another man into the room and said wearily, "Take him to his hotel for me, Mike, and stick with him. Don't let him out of your sight until this is cleared up."

Mike seemed to know who I was. His attitude toward me was that of a parent with a naughty boy. During the ride

in the cab he talked to me about Jerry and about Jerry's fine record, and about what a hard man the chief of detectives happened to be. I let him talk. A serious mistake is as bad for a record as a failure.

WHEN we got to the hotel, I figured it was all over. Eddie, I was sure, would be found, sound asleep in my bed. But I was wrong. The room was empty. The bed hadn't been slept in. Eddie Alcott was gone.

I couldn't understand it. Those sleeping tablets of mine were mighty powerful and the one I had given Eddie should have put him to sleep like a baby. Yet he wasn't here. I stared all around the room. I looked in the bath and under the bed. Mike watched me, half puzzled, half amused. For maybe ten minutes I tried to puzzle things out.

"Who owns the Ninety Club, Mike?" I asked finally.

"A man named Galloway." Mike answered. "He has six or eight such places. Other fellows front for him but Sid Galloway is the real owner."

"What is he like?" I demanded.

"Like poison! He's a good man to stay away from."

"Is he thin or fat?"

"He's thin and tall. He has yellowish skin and a long nose."

Mike's words excited me. His description was almost the same as Eddie's description of one of the bank robbers. All at once, things seemed a lot clearer to me. Galloway, I decided, was Creel. Galloway had recognized Eddie when Eddie had first shown up. He had forced the Loring girl to lead the boy into a trap, and for some reason or other had killed her and had framed Eddie.

Maybe that was a wild guess, but it wasn't so wild at that. The Loring girl had told Eddie that Creel was a part owner of the Ninety Club. Mike's description of Galloway tallied with Eddie's description of one of the robbers.

"Where does Galloway live?" I asked.

"Up over the Night Bird Tavern in

South Chicago. Why this interest in Galloway?"

"Look in the bathroom," I suggested.

MIKE entered the bathroom, and quick as a flash I pulled the door shut and locked it. That bathroom was fixed to serve two rooms and the door could be bolted from either side. It was already locked from the other room, I knew.

Mike yelled. He kicked the door. I leaned close to it, said: "Thanks, Mike. I wasn't interested in Galloway. All I wanted was a chance to get away. See you later."

From the way Mike started hammering on the door I knew it wouldn't hold him long, so I didn't waste any time. I hurried. Downstairs I asked the quickest way to get to Evanston. A sleepy clerk told me and I rushed out. I hoped to throw Mike off the track. The taxi I took I directed to South Chicago.

From the outside, the Night Bird Tavern looked about like the Ninety Club, only now, in the gray dawn of the morning, there wasn't any blazing neon light. The place seemed deserted. I walked around to the alley. The Night Bird Tavern was on the ground floor of an old building. A fire escape led up the back of the building from the alley.

I don't know how I managed to reach the drop ladder of that fire escape, but I made it. I started up. At the second floor I tried a window. It was locked.

For a moment I stood outside. I could feel the dampness of early morning reaching through my clothing. It suddenly occurred to me that I was playing the fool. Here I was, a man of seventy, with at least a fairly respectable record and with a grandson on the Chicago police force. On little more than a hunch I was about to break into the privacy of someone's home.

I almost turned away. In fact, I think I would have turned away if it hadn't been for the scream.

It wasn't a loud scream and a moment after it was over I couldn't be sure I

had heard it at all. The chill feeling which the sound had brought to me, however, still remained. I stared at the window, tried it again, and under the pressure of my elbows the cracked pane suddenly broke.

I ducked down, waited. Voices sounded from the darkness beyond the window.

A light came on.

"What was it?" someone asked.

"Nothin' I can see," came the answer. "Let's go back and finish up

The lights went off again. I heard footsteps receding. I waited for a few minutes, but not a sound reached me. At last I stood up. Then from the shadows just inside, a harsh voice ordered: "All right! Come on in, you, and keep your hands in the air!"

The lights went on again and I found myself staring into a bedroom. I didn't notice how it was furnished. All I could see were the three men in the room and the guns pointed at me.

I came in through the broken window, keeping my hands in the air as well as I could. There wasn't anything else to do. One of the men I recognized at once, from Mike's description, as Galloway. The other two, I noted, fitted in with Eddie's description of the other two bank robbers.

Maybe I should have gained some satisfaction from that and from realizing I had doped things right. But I didn't. A man can't feel much satisfaction when he's looking down the business end of three guns.

Galloway stepped forward, stared at me.

One of the other men said, "That's the old duffer who showed up at the Ninety Club last night. He's a friend of the kid's. From the same town."

Galloway sucked in his breath. He reached forward, grabbed my wrist. He gave me a jerk that pulled me off my feet. I lost my balance and fell to the floor. Galloway kicked me. His kick landed on my hip and sent pains racing up and down my body.

"Who knows you came here?" he grated.

"No one," I managed to answer. "No one at all."

Galloway swung around. "Drag him into the next room," he ordered.

The other two men did just that, kicking me a couple times on the way.

EDDIE ALCOTT was in the next room. He was huddled in a chair. A fourth man was standing over him with a gun. There were bloody scratches on Eddie's face. A bruise showed on his cheek. At the sight of me he started to get up.

The man with the gun shoved him back in the chair and I called, "Take it easy, son. I'm all right."

Galloway crossed to a window and pulled the drawn shade away from the glass. He looked out, then turned back to stare at me.

"Butch ought to be here in a minute, now," offered one of the men.

Galloway swore. "I want to get them out of here before anyone else shows up."

Eddie was scowling. "You shouldn't have come, Dad," he said. "I wish you were out of this."

I got up, sat on the sofa. Galloway was again looking into the street. I wondered who Butch was and what would happen when he got here.

Eddie called, "Hey, Creel," and Galloway turned around.

"What are you going to do with Dad?" Eddie asked.

Galloway laughed. "Don't worry about the old man. We'll look after him."

"He don't know what this is all about, Creel," Eddie said. "Why not let him go? Why not—"

Galloway looked out of the window once more and then swung back to face us.

"It's Butch," he said crisply. "Bert, you and Whitey take the kid. When you get him in the room, knock him out and lay him on the bed. Don't bruise him up too much. Then close the door and lock it and stuff paper under it and around

the edges. Get out one of the windows after you turn on the gas. And wear gloves. Understand?"

I looked at Eddie. His face was very pale. He was biting his lips.

"What about a note?" Whitey asked.

"We won't need a note," Galloway answered. "The police are already after him for the murder of Lydia Loring. They'll figure him a suicide. Those scratches on his face look like they might have come from Loring, anyhow."

Whitey nodded. "I'm glad you got rid of that dame, Sid. She was crooked as hell!"

Galloway laughed again. He rubbed his hands together. Footsteps sounded in the hall outside the door.

I was still looking at Eddie Alcott. Eddie was breathing heavily.

"What about Dad?" he asked again.

There was a thin smile on Galloway's face. "I have a couple friends who have a yacht," he said slowly. "Maybe they'll take the old man for a long trip on the lake."

Two of the men in the room grinned at me, and one of them said, "What kind of a swimmer are you, Pop?"

The door opened and a man who must have been Butch came into the room. "Everything's all set," he reported. "Ma Parsons didn't like it any, but she agreed to do what we wanted. I've seen the room. It's airtight."

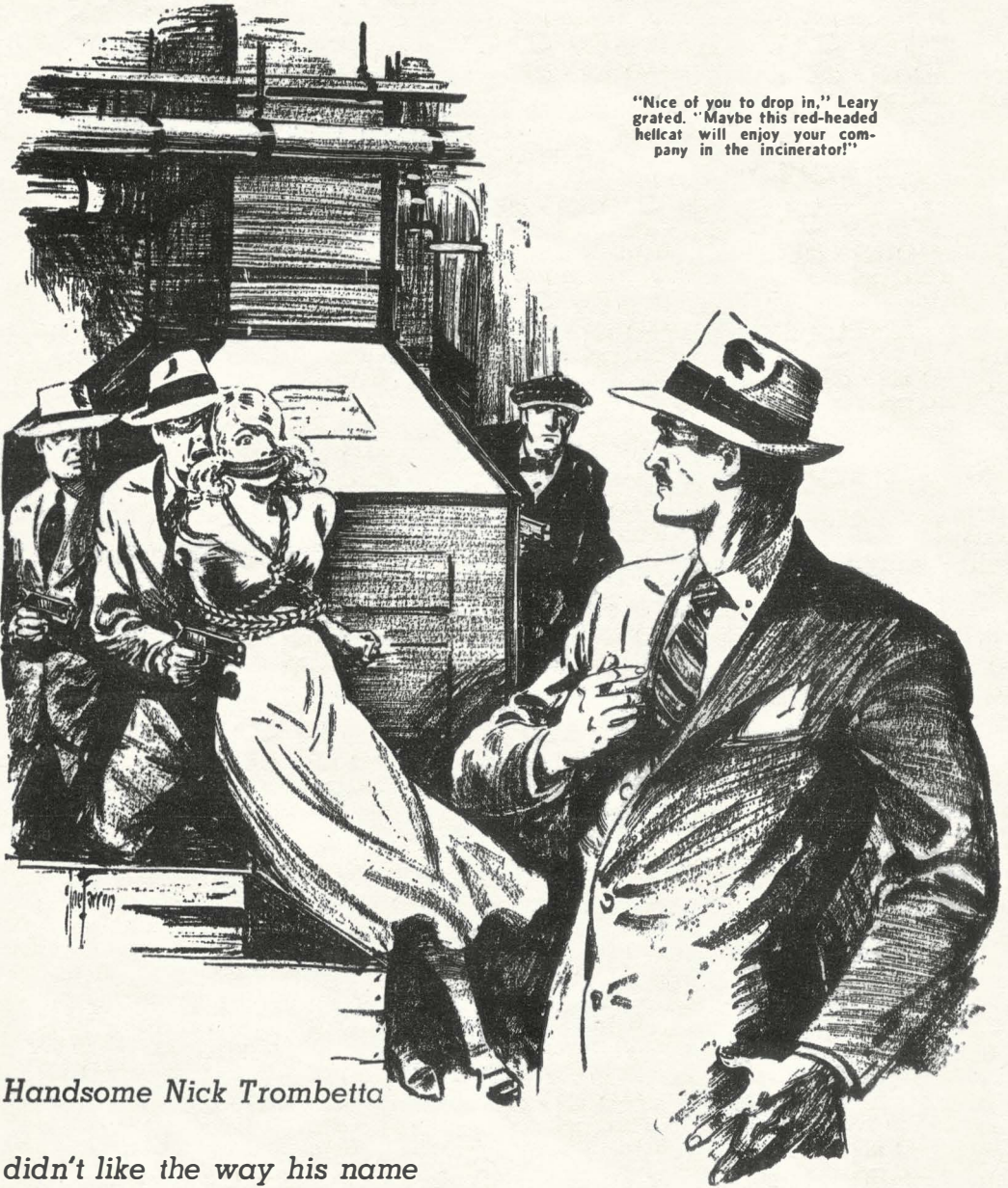
I looked from one to another of the men in the room, five, now that Butch had come. I have seen harder-looking characters, I suppose, for I've covered a lot of territory in my time, but never had I heard such a cold-blooded discussion of murder. Aside from the flashes of anger which Galloway had exhibited, there had been no display of emotion on the part of any of them.

Everything was clear to me now. Galloway had recognized Eddie, as I had guessed, and in his presence in the city had sensed a danger to himself. Wanting to get rid of Lydia Loring, he had persuaded her to lead Eddie into a trap.

(Continued on page 125)

MURDER

"Nice of you to drop in," Leary grated. "Maybe this red-headed hellcat will enjoy your company in the incinerator!"



Handsome Nick Trombetta

didn't like the way his name

was used to entice lovely redhead Cleo to her doom,

but to try saving her might only put him on a cold slab beside her!

KNOCKS TWICE

a novelet by

GEORGE A. McDONALD

CHAPTER I

CURVES AND RED HAIR

HILDA, the fourth floor chambermaid at the Hotel Grendalia was thinking of her day off as she knocked at the door of Room 416. She got no answer, so used her pass key. She was humming *Little Sir Echo* as she walked over and flipped up the window shade. Hilda didn't even see Howard Manning, the room tenant, until she started toward the bed.

The song stuck in her throat as she saw trousered legs, and shoes with worn soles, forked on the floor behind an easy chair. She blinked a second, looked swiftly around for signs of a nocturnal binge. There were no bottles or dirty glasses. A scared look came into her blue eyes.

Hilda edged a step or two closer until she could see a thin face framed by sparse, gray hair. Then she screamed. A shrill, hysterical cry that echoed along the hotel corridor.

The thin, gray hair she saw was matted and darkly stained with dried blood. In the middle of a stain was a black, round dent that had an ugly, obscene look.

The maid bumped into the porter as she stumbled blindly from the room, still screaming about bloody murder. He stared at her green face.

"Fer the luva Pete, woman! Pipe down! Wanna have all the guests on the floor on your neck? What's wrong with you?"

She jerked a thumb over her shoulder. The porter went in and came out in a rush. His color matched the maid's.

"Jeepers, woman! You're right," he

choked. "Call the manager. Have him get the cops."

Doors along the hall jerked open. A few late-sleeping guests came out, asking senseless questions. A bookmaker in a plaid robe slopped into Room 416, came out pop-eyed. He told the maid to use his room phone to call downstairs.

LESTER WRIGHT, the manager, was a thin, dark, fashion plate. But his polished veneer cracked when he looked at the man in Room 416.

"Murder!" he said hollowly. "Why did it have to be in this hotel?"

He tried impotently to shoo the curious guests back to their rooms. He was still muttering dazedly when the Homicide Squad arrived. Captain Conlon, squat, grizzly-haired and bull-dog of jaw, eyed the manager balefully.

"Where's this guy that got himself murdered? Who is he and why was he bumped?"

"He's in there. Name's Howard Manning. Registered a couple days ago. I don't know anything about him," the manager said dully.

Conlon went into the room, stared at the corpse. He spoke to the tall, black-haired man at his elbow. "Tab him, Trom?"

Detective Nick Trombetta nodded.

"Yeah. He's a cheap lawyer. Been chasing ambulances around town for a couple years. Looks like he got hit by one, don't it Skipper?"

Conlon snorted, started his men on routine detail. Nick Trombetta pushed his snap-brim hat back on the smooth, jet hair that was touched with silver at the temples. He pulled up carefully creased trousers and hunkered down by the body.

His lean, olive face was inscrutable as his dark eyes photographed every detail. Then he got up and started nosing around the room as an assistant medical examiner took his place beside the body. Trombetta was fingering his close-clipped black mustache as he came out of a clothes closet.

"Think you'd find the killer hiding in there?" Captain Conlon asked acidly. "Or has one of your hunches hit you?"

Trombetta grinned. His hunches were a constant thorn in Conlon's side. But the intuitive impulses of the big, temperamental detective usually were successful. Conlon futilely cursed his prima donna—as the news hounds called Nick—but he had a lot of faith in the good-looking, dapper detective.

"I don't think Manning kicked himself in the head," Trom said softly. "Murderers have been known to hide weapons near the scene of the crime. I had a hunch I might find a hammer lying around somewhere."

Captain Conlon swore pleasantly. "Look here, Trom," he said. "This card from Manning's card case has Ralph Sherry's name and address on it. Did this gyp lawyer have a blackmail record? Think he was framing something on old Sourpuss Sherry?"

Trombetta scowled darkly. He knew Sherry by reputation—a Park Avenue millionaire widower, Union Club, and stuff. He shook his head.

"Nix, Skipper. Sherry's nearly seventy years old. What in hell could a blackmailer get on that old fossil?"

"I'm going to find that out," Conlon growled. "Those old ginzoes are pushovers for the frails."

"Not old Sherry. Dames cost money and he's free as a convention of Scotchmen with his cash."

Trombetta shrugged as Conlon growled a profane promise to put the crabby old millionaire on the carpet. There was no use arguing with a one-track guy like Conlon.

The doctor finished his examination, reported death had been instantaneous, from a blow with a hammer or some similar instrument. He placed the hour between ten and midnight, the night before. Two internes were putting the cadaver in a wicker basket, when a startled feminine voice in the door asked:

"Is this Howard Manning's room?"

TROMBETTA and Conlon wheeled around fast. They stared at the slim, shapely vision in a close-fitting sport outfit of green. One of the dizziest of wacky hats perched on a wavy crown of auburn hair. Long-lashed, hazel eyes in a pale, oval face, widened on the detectives.

"It was his room," Captain Conlon said flatly. "He got himself murdered last night. Know anything about it, sister?"

The girl shivered. Color raced from her piquant face.

"But—but I was to meet him here at eleven o'clock!" she gasped.

Conlon's blue eyes brightened. He scrubbed his square jaw reflectively, and his voice was soft, as he said, "Is that so, now?"

Trombetta stepped toward the door. He knew the skipper was getting ready to take the kid over the jumps. The big detective had tabbed the redhead. She was Cleo Vale, a rhythm singer at the 19 Club.

"Hi, Cleo," he greeted. "How come you're up at the crack of dawn?"

"Nick Trombetta!" the girl cried, relief showing in her hazel eyes. "Tell your boy friend I didn't murder Manning. I don't know him that well. He's been to the club a couple times, asking questions about me. Not the kind of questions a pick-up asks. I heard about it and put the bee on him last night about his curiosity. He said if I'd come up here today, he might have some valuable information to sell me. It sounded like hokey, but I figured I had nothing to lose. So here I am."

Captain Conlon's snort was audible and expressive. Trombetta's amber eyes darkened a little. He knew Cleo Vale pretty well and didn't figure her for a tramp. He thought the auburn-haired kid was telling the truth. Conlon thought differently.

"What a line!" the skipper rasped. "More likely, she and Manning were framing old Sherry. They probably fought over the split and this dame conked Manning. Valuable information at eleven! Hell, that's like the guy that was waiting for a street car."

Cleo Vale's eyes snapped.

"Don't start that stuff, Granite Puss!" she rapped. "I don't have to chisel my rags and rent. I've paid my own way since I was old enough to sing, and my heart doesn't belong to any broken-down daddy like old Sherry, if that's what you have in mind."

Conlon's neck got red, his jaw stiffened. But Trombetta spoke quietly.

"Hold it, Skipper. Cleo works at the Nineteen Club, from dinner time until two A.M. She couldn't have been here when the murder was committed without missing her act. We can check the club."

Conlon knew Trombetta was right, but he wasn't admitting it.

"One of your hunches tells you she's innocent, I suppose!" he grunted. "With a temper like that, she'd kill her own grandmother. She'd better stick around town until this thing's cleaned up—and I do mean her!"

Trombetta nodded soberly. His left eyelid drooped at the girl.

"Did you come over here alone," he asked. "I'll take you back to your hotel. I'm interested in the questions Manning was asking about you."

Captain Conlon swore under his breath and not too far under. He shook his grizzled head.

"A murder on our hands, and he plays gigolo," he growled. "What did I ever do to deserve what I get assigned me as detectives."

CLEO VALE smiled, and shook her auburn head at Trombetta.

"I've got a friend waiting down in the lobby. I wasn't sap enough to come over here alone. Maybe it was a screwy idea—but Manning isn't the only one interested in me. A guy with a face like a horse has been tailing me for a week, and he doesn't look like a movie talent scout."

Trombetta looked interested. "Did you

see this shadow today?" he asked.

"Yes, I thought I did. But Jerry Jervais, the lad downstairs waiting for me, said I was utsnay."

"I'll go down and take a look from the lobby. This murder is beginning to have some interesting angles," the big detective said.

"And curves!" grunted Conlon. "I'm glad you remembered there was a murder."

Conlon rode down the elevator with them. He wanted to ask Wright, the manager, some questions.

In the lobby, Trombetta nodded briefly to Jerry Jervais, a handsome kid with a marcel wave in his blond hair. Jervais had played small bits in a couple of Broadway shows. Nick Trombetta hoped Cleo wasn't carrying the torch for the handsome young juvenile. Jervais wasn't in the redhead's league, Trombetta figured. Conlon left them with a curt word to the girl to stick around for future questioning.

"We'll go out on the sidewalk and stall until you see if you can spot Horse-face," Trombetta said to the girl.

Jerry Jervais' lips curled scornfully. He spoke up. "Cleo's got the meemies, Mister Trombetta. I couldn't see anyone trailing us."

Trombetta smiled politely, started the shapely singer through the door. Outside he halted, back to the curb, and lit a cigarette.

"See your dream-man, beautiful?" he asked quietly.

"Yes. Over on the northwest corner of Forty-Sixth. He's flagging a cab."

Trombetta's eyes slued from behind cupped hands. Then he sucked in his breath, and his voice acquired a sharp tone.

"That ginzo is Art Leary, a private dick with a bum reputation. He didn't go for seeing me with you. He's probably riding that cab to your apartment hotel, to pick up your trail there. I think I'll poke along with you. It'll burn Conlon up, and besides I'd like to put the hand on Leary and find out who's hiring him—and why."

The voice of the big, carefully tailored detective was casual as he fed her questions on the way to her apartment hotel in the Fifties. She told him Manning had been interested

in her background, her theatrical jobs and her night club experience.

Trombetta's imagination was beginning to tingle. This was no cheap, tawdry killing. With a set-up that included a square-shooting little redhead, an unsavory lawyer and a shady detective, almost any motive could have inspired Manning's murder.

The big fellow's dark eyes were glowing. Quick emotions flitted like shadows over his thin, mobile face. At the back of his mind, there was always the thought that Conlon might be right. Cleo Vale might be mixed up in some sort of a crooked racket with Manning and Leary, after all.

He was smiling faintly as he hooked a hand under her elbow, starting across Sixth. They had just reached the middle of the avenue when a wild, careening taxi whipped around a corner on two wheels.

TROMBETTA was a temperamental fireball. But danger chilled him into perfect coordination of mind and muscle. He saw the cab swerve and then plunge toward them.

The big fellow's hand gripped Cleo Vale's elbow. He whirled her about, spun her toward the sidewalk. Then he grabbed Jerry Jervais' shoulder, sent him staggering after the girl. He pivoted and leaped, himself, almost in a single, smooth movement.

Cleo Vale screamed once. Jervais' weak, handsome face was grayish. But Trombetta's face was a dark mask of rage as he hurled himself out of the path of the careening taxi. A fender grazed his thigh, knocked him off balance, sent him rolling toward the gutter. The redheaded singer cried out, ran toward him.

Trombetta got up, cursing in Italian and English. His flaming eyes tried to pick up the number of the cab. But it screeched around the next corner too fast. The big detective fought down the rage that smoldered in his brain. He had seen the cab driver deliberately swing toward them. It had been a cold-blooded attempt to blot either him or Cleo Vale out of the picture. Trombetta was sure only that it wasn't the cab Art Leary had boarded.

Someone else, then, had tried to murder them. Trombetta's lips flattened in a cold

smile. Murder had knocked at Cleo Vale's door, but he wasn't going to tell the little redhead that. Let her think it was a drunken taxi-jockey—she'd sleep better nights thinking that.

The big fellow brushed off his suit, stared ruefully at a tear in the knee of his knife-creased pants. He swore morosely.

"One hundred bucks for this suit—and a screwball taxi pusher ruins it. I'm going to get that baby. He can't do this to me."

CHAPTER II

WHO IS PEG-LEG?



CAPTAIN CONLON was biting his nails when Trombetta got back to the Hotel Grendalia. He had got nothing of value out of the hotel manager. The grizzled veteran looked interested when Trom told him of the attempt to murder Cleo Vale.

"Leary, eh?" he growled. "We'll pick up that phony shamus and grill hell out of him."

"And have him scream bloody persecution?" Trombetta said darkly. "We haven't anything on Leary. He'd yelp that he'd never seen Cleo, to say nothing of trailing her. I don't think Leary was in that cab. I've got a hunch that Manning's killer wanted Cleo Vale out of the way, but I can't figure why."

"Maybe Ralph Sherry can tell us," Conlon said grimly. "We'll go down and put the heat on him."

They had to argue with three secretaries before they got into the millionaire's private office. Sherry was head of a big investment trust in Wall Street. Inside the big, walnut paneled office, the tall, gaunt, hook-nosed millionaire glared at them from beneath craggy, white brows.

"If you're collecting for a police fund, see my secretary," he snapped irritably.

"We're collecting evidence on a murder," Conlon replied bluntly. "Does your secretary handle your murders, too?"

"Murder?" Sherry's lean frame came erect. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"A lawyer named Howard Manning was murdered last night at the Hotel Grendalia. He had your card with your name and telephone number in his pocket. Know anything about him?"

"Never heard of him," Sherry rapped quickly. A shade too quickly, Trombetta thought. "Any more foolish questions? I'm a busy man."

"Maybe you were busy around ten or eleven o'clock last night," Conlon said curtly. Sherry's brusqueness had got under the captain's hide. "Got an alibi—say, from ten p.m. to midnight?"

Anger darkened the old millionaire's leathery cheeks. His blue eyes were frosty.

"I was home in bed in my apartment from ten to seven-thirty this morning," he informed in acid tones. "My servants will vouch for that—though I see no reason why they should have to furnish me with an alibi. I'll inform your superiors to that effect."

Trombetta could see the blood creeping up Conlon's neck. He knew the skipper was ready to erupt. That would be bad business. Sherry was a big shot who could throw plenty of weight around if he wanted to. The big detective smiled, spread his palms and shrugged an apology for their intrusion. He asked meekly if Sherry had ever heard of Art Leary, the private detective, or a night club singer named Cleo Vale.

For a second he thought he saw surprise in the cold blue eyes, but the leathery face across the desk was austere blank.

"I don't know any private detectives, and I haven't been in a night club for years. I'm not acquainted with either of the parties."

Trombetta thanked him politely. Conlon was still sputtering as they rode back to Headquarters. The skipper still nursed the idea that the crusty old millionaire was hooked up in the murder, and he intended to prove it. Trombetta's agile brain was shaping up another theory. But he knew better than to spring it on Captain Conlon.

HE DROPPED the captain off at Headquarters, rode back up to the hotel. He felt that he had missed something at the scene of the murder. Intuition, like an ouija board, was shaping a shadowy message at

the back of his brain.

The bell captain at the Grendalia was an old friend of Trombetta's. Nick started to pump the lad and hit a well on the first drilling. The man remembered seeing a fellow answering the description of Leary, the private detective, riding up to the fourth floor a night or two before. The fellow had been accompanied by a tall, white-haired old crab with a hooked nose. There had been a good-looking girl with them. The bell captain hadn't seen her face, for she wore a double veil.

Evidently, Manning hadn't been in, for the trio came down right away—if it was Manning they had called on. But there was another caller, who had found the lawyer in. The night before the murder a big, gray-haired man who walked as if he had a wooden leg had been up. The bell captain had been doing a relief shift on the elevators. He knew the peg-leg had gone to Room 416.

The visitor had bleary eyes and looked like a heavy drinker. Half an hour later, the bell captain picked him up again on the fourth floor, muttering to himself and cursing someone under his breath. Trombetta thanked the captain, promised to get him an Annie Oakley for the fights that week, then rode the elevator up to the fourth.

His brain was busy as he went over every inch of Manning's room. It looked as if old Sherry had lied when he denied knowing Leary and Manning. Captain Conlon might be right. There could have been a frame-up, with the lawyer, the crooked detective and Cleo Vale putting the black on the old sourpuss. He swore under his breath. Trombetta prided himself on his ability to judge human nature. He wouldn't admit he had been wrong in tabbing the lovely little redhead as a square-shooter.

Manning's bedroom failed to produce a clue. Trombetta's eyes were shadowed as he moved into the bathroom. Even the cleverest of murderers usually left some trace behind them. But Manning's killing didn't shape up like a carefully planned, premeditated murder.

His narrowed gaze moved slowly around the bathroom, halted on the shower fixture. He went over, saw a couple of fresh scars on

a faucet nut. The faucet looked as if it had been hammered recently. A trace of rust and silt in the tub showed it had been repaired.

Trombetta's pulse skipped a beat. If the hotel plumber had carelessly left a hammer behind him, and the killer had found it in the bathroom— It was just a hunch, but it made his spine tingle.

The big detective scanned the tiny room. He went over to the toilet, lifted the top of the water box. Another thrill galvanized his brain. His hunch had guided him perfectly. A hammer lay on the bottom of the reservoir. Trombetta was ready to bet a hundred to one that he had found the murder weapon.

He pulled up his sleeve, reached for the hammer. Just as he got it, his keen ears picked up a faint, scuffing sound. He tried to twist about. He got a vague glimpse of a figure in a shapeless coat and a dark hat. Then the ceiling dropped on his head. He went down and his forehead cracked the edge of the bathtub.

WHEN the detective came to, his first conscious thought was of the hammer. He looked around, cursed bitterly. The murder weapon was gone. He climbed to his feet, staggered over to the wash bowl, soaked a towel and reduced the lump where the blackjack had smacked him, cursing in a furious fit of temper. The killer had taken him like a slicker takes a boob.

It had been just another murder case to him before. Now, the prima donna's pride had been kicked around. He'd get Manning's murderer, if he had to walk through hell barefoot after him.

The elevator boys stated they hadn't picked anyone up on the fourth floor since Trombetta went up. Nor had any of the help seen a man in a long, dark coat and a dark hat going out. Trombetta expected that. He made it that the killer had seen him come back, had faded up the stairs with his coat over his arm. Then he probably had sneaked down the back stairs and out a side entrance.

Trom's head still ached, and his stomach was blah. He grabbed a sandwich and a cup of coffee at the hotel coffee shop. His tem-

per still smoldered as he planned a course of action.

He figured Leary would be a good target at which to start shooting. He was in the right frame of mind now to work on the crooked detective. But he couldn't find the horse-faced gum-shoe at his hole-in-the-wall office. The pale blonde who worked for him didn't have any idea where Leary might be. Trombetta left word for the private sleuth to drag his carcass down to Headquarters as soon as he showed up.

The man with the wooden leg stuck in Trombetta's mind. He knew most of the chisellers around town, petty larceny crooks and big shots, but none answered the bell captain's description of Manning's drunken visitor. Perhaps Cleo Vale could put the finger on him. He wanted to talk to her about the call Leary and Sherry had made at the hotel with a girl. He flagged a cab, rode up to the redhead's apartment hotel.

She met him at the door of her apartment, and Trombetta's suspicions began to fade as her big, hazel eyes fixed on him with an eager, unspoken question in their depths. She was wearing a coral negligee that did things for her gorgeous figure. But her charm was all unstudied and unconscious, he thought.

Cleo Vale spotted the bruised forehead, saw the welt over Trombetta's ear, and inquired anxiously about them. He told her briefly, then asked if she had visited the hotel with Leary and Sherry. Her eyes went wide in denial.

"I wasn't kidding when I said I'd never seen Sherry. And I didn't know who Leary was until you identified him. You've got to believe me, Nick."

Trombetta eyed her somberly. Then he grinned.

"Hell, Gorgeous, I believe you. I got a lead about Leary and a guy that looked like Sherry visiting the Grendalia with a good-looking girl. I forgot that you didn't know either of them. Looks like we have a new suspect in this other girl."

Cleo was interested. She asked him questions about the case. Trom told her they had made little progress as yet.

"Got any wooden-legged men among your

boy friends, Beautiful?" he asked her unexpectedly when he was ready to leave.

His fine gaze was steady on her lovely face. He saw her pupils dilate. The color ebbed from her cheeks then surged back. An electric impulse pinged in Trombetta's brain. Then the little redhead smiled.

"Maybe I've missed something, Nick," she said. "The only man I know who has an artificial leg is Joe Venner, who chases Johnnies away from the alley door at the Nineteen Club. What made you ask that? Does one of your hunches tell you Manning was murdered by a man with a wooden leg? Sounds like a Sherlock Holmes plot."

"I'm not that good, Carrot-top," Trombetta chuckled. "A ginzo with a bum gam called on Manning a couple nights ago. I'd like to get a line on all that cheap mouth-piece's friends."

She walked to the door with him. Her eyes probed his lean, dark face. She spoke in a level voice.

"I know that Captain Conlon thinks I had something to do with Manning's murder. A show girl is a natural as a suspect for a hotel room killing, so I can't blame old Granite-face very much. He's put me on a spot—but I hope you can get me off it, Nick."

"Sure, Gorgeous. I'll beat this rap for you. I don't think you know a damned thing about Manning's murder. But I'm afraid the killer don't figure it that way. He thinks you know too much. I'm not trying to work a date in on you—but you ought to have company coming home from the club at three A.M. Promise me you'll stay there until I can pick you up, after the last show."

She wrinkled her pretty nose, and the corners of her eyes crinkled. The seriousness of the big detective's face sobered her. She nodded then.

"If you say so, Nick—I'll wait," she promised.

The hired help were fixing up the tables for the evening when Trombetta walked into the Nineteen Club. Tod Johnson, the owner-manager, hadn't shown yet. Nick asked the head waiter where he could find the stage-door keeper. Guido, the major-domo, jerked his shoulders, sliced the air with expressive hands.

"Where he spends most of his time—at the Sportsman's Bar over on Third. He's a no-good rummy, that Joe Venner. I don't know why Tod Johnson keeps him—except that Cleo asked to have him hired. For a four-star attraction like Cleo, maybe it's worth putting up with a broken-down bum like Venner. Maybe—but I'm not so sure."

CHAPTER III

WORDS WITH LEARY



DEEP scowl gathered Trom's black brows as he went over to the Sportsman's Bar. He knew the joint. It was a favorite hang-out for rods and torpedoes. A complete book on all tracks was operated there. Upstairs there were private rooms for secret conferences. Trombetta had an idea that more than one gang killing had been plotted at the Sportsman's Club.

He had a description of Joe Venner from the head waiter. He spotted the square-chinned, gray-haired, bleary-eyed doorman at a wall table. He felt vaguely that he had met Venner somewhere before, then forgot the impression as his quick, dark eyes flicked around the barroom. A thin smile tightened his lips as he spotted three hoods in the place, rats who had sworn at different times to drill him on sight. He ignored the furtive hostility in the hoods' faces, went directly over to Venner's table.

Venner was toying with an empty glass. He was several sheets in the wind, but he stiffened frigidly as the ace of the Homicide Squad sat down across from him.

"This table is occupied, gum-shoe," he said coldly.

"Then you know me?" Trombetta said placidly. "That simplifies things. What do you know about Howard Manning's murder?"

"I don't know anything about him except that he's a louse of the first water," Venner said viciously. "But I know that you clucks are trying to drag Cleo Vale into the mess. She's a sweet, decent kid who went out of her way to help a drunken old bum like me

get a job. I won't let her down. If anyone—cop or citizen—hurts that kid, I'll tear his damned heart out."

Trombetta's keen brain began to click. Venner's spiteful threat wasn't the mumbling of a booze-soaked moron. There was something deeper behind it.

He flagged a waiter.

"Bring Mr. Venner a drink," he said. "I'll take a shot of Scotch with soda." Then his dark, bright eyes were steady on the face that showed breeding and good looks gone to seed.

"I'm a friend of Cleo Vale's, too, Venner," Nick said levelly. "She walked in on a murder scene this morning, said she had a date with Manning. You can't blame us cops for thinking things. I figure she's innocent, but I'm just a deck hand. The skipper figures the girl is in it right up to her chin. He says I'm a screwball for thinking any different. If Cleo's got you on the arm for some favors, you can pay off by giving me the low-down on Manning. What kind of a racket was he running?"

Joe Venner fingered the glass the waiter brought him, his bleary eyes stabbing at Trombetta. He tossed down three fingers of neat rye, then spoke.

"Manning was a louse. He wanted to—"

The words seemed to stick in the old man's throat as his stare went past Trombetta to fix on someone at the bar. Trombetta turned. His lean jaw hardened and his eyes got humid. The thick-set, horse-faced private detective, Art Leary, was freezing Joe Venner with a cold, baleful glance. There was a blonde girl with Leary. She wore a silk sport dress that showed every curve of her million-dollar chassis. Trombetta tabbed her immediately. Flo Raymond was one of the better known strip-teasers in town.

TROMBETTA forgot the stage doorman for a minute. He saw a cold, contemptuous grin twist the corners of Leary's thick lips. It looked as if the private detective was giving the city detective the sleeve laugh. Trombetta's temperament wasn't built to stand horse laughs.

He jack-knifed his six-foot length out of

the chair, moved over to the bar.

"Let me in on the joke, won't you, Horse-face?" Trombetta drawled. "I'd like a laugh."

Leary's long jaw hardened, his slate-colored eyes narrowed. "So the prima donna feels like throwing his weight around, eh? Listen, wise-guy—I don't have to take any of your lip. I don't like cops, and I hate nosey cops."

The blond strip-teaser snickered. "That's telling him off, Big Boy."

Leary was tough, a bad actor. But he wouldn't deliberately invite trouble with Nick Trombetta without a good reason to balance the risk. A tiny voice at the back of Trombetta's brain whispered that the private detective had an ace up his sleeve. Trombetta's voice was deceptively smooth as he replied.

"You'll like cops less when we get through working on you in the Manning kill, ginzo. The boys want to talk to you—about your interest in Cleo Vale and Ralph Sherry."

Tiny pinpoints of rage flecked Leary's eyes. He shoved his lantern jaw at Trombetta.

"You punks haven't got a thing on me. I'll come down to Headquarters any time you want me—and if you try any rough stuff, I'll go to town on you. As for the Vale dame—I wouldn't have any part of her. You may be God's gift to Broadway, Trombetta, but you're a pain in the neck to me. Why don't you take a long walk for yourself?"

Nick Trombetta saw the play, knew Leary had been quick to take advantage of a natural set-up. Three of Trombetta's enemies were in the bar. If a fight started, one of the three would drill him when he went to work on Leary. Or if he feinted an attack on Leary and the gunmen pulled guns to attract his attention, Leary would drill him. The place would be emptied before a policeman could get there, and they wouldn't have the faintest idea who had plugged him.

COLD reason chilled his brain. Leary was playing for big stakes or he wouldn't dare to insult him so openly. The private operative wanted Trombetta out of the picture. The big police detective smiled at the

thought. He must be on the right track. Then he made his voice soft, almost placating.

"Okay, okay, shamus," he said. "You don't have to throw your weight around so much. I'm just telling you that Captain Conlon wants to ask you some questions. That's all."

It sounded as though the prima donna was eating crow. Trombetta wanted it to sound that way. Leary's horse face twisted in contempt. He turned to the blonde.

"You see, babe—they only talk tough," he jeered.

As Leary's head turned, Nick Trombetta's feet slid forward. His left fist hooked up, with a hundred and eighty-five pounds riding behind the knuckles that crashed against the private detective's jaw. Trom knew he couldn't miss a target like that.

Leary did a rearward spread-eagle, hit the floor on the back of his neck. But even as his left fist crashed, Trombetta's right hand was flashing to his shoulder holster. A police special glittered in the mirror of the bar, then steadied on the three hoods at the lower end of the mahogany expanse. Nick Trombetta's voice had a rasp as he fixed the three startled thugs with black, hard eyes.

"I hope you three punks feel lucky," he said. "Maybe you'd like to take up the argument where this heel left off?"

He got his answer in the sullen, hostile stares that dropped before his own challenging glance. Then the hoods faded from the bar, started for the door. They knew sudden death when they faced it.

Trombetta turned to look for Flo Raymond, but the strip-teaser had taken a powder. Joe Venner, the one-legged doorman, had also disappeared. Nick scowled at the unconscious figure on the floor. He knew the book said that he could call a wagon and cart Leary down to Headquarters. But Trombetta didn't follow the book, not when one of his hunches was riding high. He thought Leary could lead him to the solution of Manning's murder. He shrugged.

"When this mug comes to, tell him I said we want him down at Headquarters," he told the wide-eyed bartender. "If he don't come himself, we'll come after him."

Then he wheeled and went out.

Trombetta's brow was furrowed as he rode downtown. He had the feeling that Leary wasn't the brain behind Manning's murder. Someone had needled the private detective into trying to knock him off. The big shot in the mystery was still operating under cover. Trombetta grimly told himself that he'd better work fast. He was slated for a coffin, unless he got the master mind first—and quick.

He paid off his cab at the offices of the *Daily Star*. The city editor of the tabloid was a friend of Nick's. The big detective spent more than an hour in the newspaper morgue, his search of the old files carrying him back nearly twenty years. When he came out, Trombetta's step was springy. There was an eager, alert glint in his dark eyes as he called Headquarters to talk to Captain Conlon.

THE grizzled Homicide chief was fuming.

A plainclothes man had spotted Leary and the blond Flo Raymond in a secluded corner of the Ashford Hotel bar. The two were in deep conversation with no one less than Ralph Sherry. Conlon had gone, hell bent for leather, up to the hotel, but crabby old millionaire Sherry had departed. Leary and the blonde were getting into a cab just as Conlon arrived on the scene. The skipper and the plainclothes man trailed them to the building where Leary had his office.

Conlon was all set to go up and put the heat on horse-faced Detective Leary. But when they rode up to the agency office, Conlon was told that Leary hadn't come up. In rasping, profane tones, Conlon admitted to Trombetta that Leary must have spotted them trailing him and had ducked in one entrance of the office building and then out another.

Now the irate captain had a dragnet out for Leary and he was going to have old Sherry brought in as a material witness. Conlon was positive that the millionaire had instigated Howard Manning's murder.

Trombetta tried to argue with the captain. Then he warned Conlon that Sherry would certainly rap him with a suit for false arrest. Conlon swore, bitterly and futilely.

Finally, he grudgingly agreed to let Trom have a few hours to work out his hunch.

Trombetta's next stop was the Hotel Grendalia. Les Wright, the manager, was in his office. His lean, saturnine face turned hopefully to the big detective.

"Any line on who killed Manning?" he asked. "It's going to give the house a hell of a black eye—especially if the killer isn't picked up right away."

"We've got a couple suspects lined up," Trombetta said cheerfully. Wright's stocky figure perked up. Then Trombetta said, "The murder weapon was a common hammer, according to the doc's report. I've got a hunch the murderer picked it up somewhere around the hotel. Did you have anyone working in Manning's room in the last couple of days?"

Wright checked over his maintenance book, nodded his dark head excitedly.

"Yeah. There was a leaky plumbing connection there. It was repaired on Monday, the day after Manning took the room. I'll check with the plumber, see if he left a hammer lying around.

He thumbed a house phone, got the hotel plumber, talked with him for a minute. He turned with wide eyes.

"I think you've got something there, Trombetta. The plumber hasn't seen one of his hammers since he did that job. Do you suppose the killer used it and then lugged it away?"

"I doubt it," Trom said somberly. He started to tell Wright of finding it, then checked himself. He said, "Not very easy to hide a hammer in a pocket. The killer probably cached it somewhere in the hotel, waiting for a chance to get rid of it.

"The hotel incinerator would be a good bet. Have your engineer keep an eye on the ashes from the rubbish incinerator. The handle might burn, but the head would still be there. Even if it's been in the fire, the laboratory could pick up some valuable information from it."

Wright looked surprised. "You cops make it pretty hard to get away with a murder. There aren't many you don't solve."

"We can solve almost any murder where we know the motive," Trom said quietly. "I

know the motive in this killing. All I have to do now is prove that motive is correct."

He reached for his hat on the desk. The brim caught on the frame of a photo, face down on the desk top, clattered it to the floor. Trombetta apologized, picked it up, looked to see if the glass was broken. Then he grinned knowingly, lifted his eyebrows at the hotel manager. He handed back the picture, which was encased in a sterling silver frame.

"So that's what hotel managers do on their nights off," he chuckled. "Play around with strip-tease gals like Flo Raymond."

"Play, hell!" the manager snorted. "She lived here awhile, and beat it after getting us on the cuff for about thirty bucks. She forgot the picture, and I grabbed it off to hold until she kicks through. Some ginzo must have paid nearly fifty bucks for that frame. She can have it when she pays off."

CHAPTER IV

BATTLE IN THE BASEMENT



TROMBETTA'S facile brain was working overtime behind an impassive face as he left the hotel. He had not been bluffing when he told Les Wright he knew the motive for Howard Manning's murder. He believed that he knew the motive and he had a strong hunch as to the killer. But it was just a hunch, and it took more than intuition and guesswork to send a killer to the chair. If he was right he knew he had to hurry, or there would be other murders—his own among them. The murderer was getting scared. He would kill again and again to cover his original crime.

He grabbed a quick meal at a one-armed lunch room, then hurried over to the 19 Club. Cleo Vale would have finished her supper show. He could talk with her before she went on again at midnight.

He met Tod Johnson just as he came through the door. The club owner gave him a big smile, wanted to put him at a ringside table. But the detective shook his dark head.

"I'm not catching your revue, Tod. I want

to talk with Cleo Vale for a couple minutes. Find out if she'll see me backstage."

Johnson signaled the majordomo, sent him back. The head waiter returned in a couple of minutes, his plump face wrinkled in surprise and perplexity.

"She told the master of ceremonies she was going over to the Grendalia Hotel to meet you, Mr. Trombetta. She left right after you called her, so Morrissey said. Maybe you passed each other on the way."

Trombetta's olive face changed color. His eyes darkened with fear.

"I didn't telephone her," he said. "Let's go backstage. I'll talk with Morrissey."

The m. c. could tell him no more. The red-haired singer had said she was going out for an hour or so, but would be back for her midnight turn. She had slipped into her street clothes, but left her makeup on. Morrissey thought she went out the alley door.

The big detective's fingers worried at his crisp mustache. Tod Johnson sensed his fear.

"The call was probably a rib by some smart guy," Johnson said.

Trombetta shook his head, clipped, "Where is Joe Venner? Is he on duty tonight?"

"He's probably stiff in some gin mill," Johnson growled. "If he is able to navigate, he'll be out in his chair by the door. I don't know why Cleo ever wished him on me. But she's the kind of a kid who picks up mangy dogs and alley cats because she's sorry for them."

Trombetta's long legs went down the aisle past the dressing rooms to the alley door which the performers used. There was an empty chair by the door. Then he heard a faint groan.

HE NEARLY took the door off the hinges getting out into the alley. He saw the dark figure sprawled in the shadows just outside the cone of light thrown by the single overhead light. He ran to the figure, saw that Joe Venner's shirt was stained with blood over the heart. A small slit in the center of the dark stain told of the knife wound that had nearly finished the crippled door tender.

The old man's eyes were glazing as Trombetta picked him up, fired staccato questions

at him. Venner's lips opened, blood gurgled in his throat as he tried to talk.

"Cleo—hotel—save—"

Trombetta's nerves went taut as he strained to catch the faintly whispered sounds. Then Venner went limp in his arms. Trombetta cursed softly as he lowered the old derelict back to the pavement. Joe Venner was dead. The killer had struck again.

Trombetta didn't wait to explain anything to Tod Johnson. He gave orders to the night club owner to locate Captain Conlon by phone, ask for a detail from Homicide sent up to take care of Joe Venner and for the skipper to pick up the millionaire Ralph Sherry and to meet Trombetta at the Hotel Grendalia.

Johnson wet his pallid lips, nodded his head dumbly in understanding. Nick Trombetta pounded down the alley, flagged a cab and broke the speed laws getting down to the Grendalia.

Les Wright wasn't in his office, so the detective spent ten minutes in going over the room. Trombetta got the bell captain then, had him make a quick inquiry to see if Cleo Vale had paged him in the lobby. Neither the desk nor the bell hops had seen the lovely little redhead.

Trombetta chewed his mustache, rubbed the silver patches at the temples of his sleek black head. His imaginative brain was afire with flaming thoughts. Cleo Vale was in deadly danger. A wrong move might mean her death. He had nothing much but intuition to guide him. This was one time his hunches had to be right. He turned to the bell captain.

"Take me down to the basement, Fred," he ordered. "Down where the rubbish incinerator is located."

The bell captain looked surprised, but his short legs matched Trombetta's long strides as they headed for the service elevator.

"I'll get a flashlight," he said. "There's some dark spots down there."

Trombetta nodded absently. He had a pencil flash in his pocket, but his brain was so busy that the bell captain's words hardly registered. He didn't know what he expected to find in the basement of the hotel, but

that sixth sense, that intangible quality that Captain Conlon called his ouija board mentality, was warning him of some great danger.

The bell captain ran the car to the basement. Trombetta curtly told him to stay there after the man had pointed out the arched aisle that led to the incinerator. Fred had been right, there were plenty of dark spots. Cross alleys led to the coal bins and furnaces. Others went to storerooms and air-cooling installations.

The basement was quiet as a tomb, but as the big detective soft-footed along the cement, hair began to lift at the back of his neck. He saw the big asbestos and steel incinerator ahead through a wide arch. The room seemed deserted, but Trombetta found his hand instinctively moving up toward his shoulder holster as he stepped through the door.

His eyes caught the blur of a moving figure, at the same split-second that a harsh voice snarled:

"Grab for the ceiling, flatfoot! Get your hands up—fast and empty!"

NICK TROMBETTA froze in his tracks, slued his eyes toward the three men who were flattened along the wall. Bitterness etched lines of despair and hatred on his lean face as he saw one of those men holding the trussed figure of Cleo Vale in front of him. Over the shoulder of the disheveled little redhead, the long saturnine face of Art Leary sneered spitefully.

The other pair had guns trained on Trombetta. He mentally cursed himself for a dope as he recognized two of the hoods who had been at the Sportsman's Bar when he slugged Leary. It came in a flash that the face he had glimpsed in the careening taxicab that had nearly killed him and Cleo Vale was now grimacing lethal hatred in back of one of those guns.

He should have known it wasn't coincidence that brought the rats who had sworn to get him to the Sportsman's Bar that day. Leary had teamed up with these killers.

His hand paused a few inches away from the gun, then dropped in sickening futility. He might get one or both of the hoods, but the lovely redhead would be murdered in the

battle. His brain was racing as he heard Leary grate:

"Nice of you to drop in. Saves us the trouble of going after you. Maybe this red-headed hell-cat will enjoy your company in the incinerator."

Horror paralyzed Trombetta's throat for a second. When he spoke, his voice was a hoarse croak.

"You—wouldn't dare try anything like that, Leary. Even a louse like you wouldn't burn a human being alive!"

"Not alive." Leary's ugly face twisted savagely. "A shot down here wouldn't be heard. One of these lads used to work in the garbage disposal plant. He tells me that one of these incinerators won't leave enough of you to identify even if there was a chance of your ashes being found.

"You and this dame have been getting in my hair. Just a couple shots, then into the firebox with the fire at full draught. The Homicide Bureau will lose its prima donna, the Nineteen Club will have to find a new rhythm singer—and we'll be rid of a couple of pains in the neck."

Trombetta looked at the courageous girl, who was futilely trying to lash at Leary with her heels and elbows. Her dress was ripped and torn and her face matched the whiteness of the shoulder and throat that were exposed. But fierce hatred and loathing made tawny, yellow topazes of her blazing eyes.

The rage in Nick Trombetta's seething brain suddenly subsided, as though he had stepped under an icy shower. Exploding into anger would be suicide. He had to do something sensible. He couldn't let these fiends mete out a horrible death to the lovely kid they had enticed to her doom in his name. It was pretty hopeless, three against one. Only seconds separated him and Cleo Vale from death. He started to talk, trying to interest Leary in a deal for their lives.

While he talked, his strong muscles bunched. His keen ear had caught the faint scuff of leather behind him in the alley. It might be another member of the murderous crew, or it might be that the bell captain had disobeyed his orders about waiting at the elevator. Trom knew the fellow was un-

armed and that the bell captain would be walking to certain death if he entered the incinerator room. But if only the attention of the hoods could be distracted for a few seconds, Trom felt that there would be a hundred-to-one chance for freedom for himself and Cleo.

"You can't get away with it, Leary," he said. "You don't think I came here alone, do you? You might get us, but it means the end for you. You'll burn in the chair, before we burn in that incinerator. Better think twice and—throw your flashlight, Fred!"

The steps had drawn closer as Trombetta lifted his voice. The big detective dared not turn his head. Leary was staring blankly, wondering if fear had cracked the big Trombetta's nerve. Then a sharp voice yelled:

"Duck, Trombetta!"

At the same second the bell captain jumped through the door, his arm swung, and the flashlight in his hand flew straight at the head of the nearest hood.

The gunman tried to duck, but the heavy torch crashed into his face, staggered him backward.

Trombetta's body bent at the hips as he leaped sideward. When he straightened, his gun was in his hand. His first bullet grazed Cleo Vale's cheek as it ripped into the skull of Leary, who was trying to duck behind her while he got his gun lined on Trom.

The horse-faced detective dropped like a poled ox, carrying the girl to the floor with him.

Trombetta's snap-brim felt was lifted from his head as the second hood tightened his finger on the trigger of his automatic. A second shot clipped the skin from the edge of Trombetta's ear. The third shot whined against the plaster of the ceiling, for Trom's gun had whipped across and the sharp-shooting ace of the Homicide Squad planted a bullet squarely between the hood's eyes.

The big fellow was moving swiftly along the wall as he fired. He heard the bell captain cry out, saw the hood who had been bopped with the flashlight brushing blood from his eyes, throwing his gun in the direction of the man in the bell-hop uniform. Trombetta wanted to take one of the murder

crew alive but he couldn't risk a crippling shot now. He fired a snap shot, saw it tear through the remaining killer's throat and drop him, a writhing, bloody corpse.

CHAPTER V

THE PAY-OFF



BREATH went out of Trombetta's lungs with a loud gasp as he ran over to Cleo Vale. She lay still and white on the floor and for a second he thought she was dead. Then her eyes fluttered open.

He worked loose her bonds and lifted her to her feet.

"Are you okay, Gorgeous?" he asked anxiously.

She nodded shakily as her glance went around the room. Shivers went through her slim, shapely body as she saw the three dead men.

"You kind of went to town, didn't you, Nick?" she whispered faintly.

A slow grin split Trombetta's lean, good looking face. "You mean *we* went to town," he said. "Fred, the bell captain here, started the ball rolling. I joined in the game." He turned to the young man whose freckles still stood out against the whiteness of his face. "That was a damned nervy stunt, Fred, and I won't forget it."

"Shucks, it wasn't nothing," Fred answered. "I just trailed you a little way, then I saw through the door that you'd bumped into trouble. You stiffened and your hand came down from your gun, so I figured you were trapped. I had to do something to help you if I could."

"You sure did, pal," Trombetta said grimly. He turned back to Cleo, to her dress. "Let's get out of here, Beautiful. The morgue gang can mop up the remains of our hospitable friends. We've got places to go."

They went back to the elevator, rode up to find Captain Conlon and Ralph Sherry in the lobby. Conlon stared at Trombetta and the girl, his bulldog face a picture of wonder mixed with anger. He figured Trombetta had brought him on a wild goose chase,

and he was ready to take the big Trom's hide off.

Ralph Sherry's thin, bony face was a mask of cold fury. He pointed a thin, stern-looking finger at Trombetta.

"If you're responsible for having me brought down here," he rasped, "I'll see that you pay for it. I'll sue you in every court in the land. I'll spend every cent I've got to have you put behind bars."

Trombetta grinned at him cheerfully. "Hold your dander, Grandpop," he said. "You ain't seen nothing yet. You should go down in the basement and see the phony detective you hired—but he wouldn't be pretty to look at. He's got a big bullet hole where his face used to be. Two of his pals are there with him and they don't look any better."

"You mean—you shot Leary?" Sherry screamed sharply. "Why, that's murder!"

Conlon's eyes began to pop. He wondered if the temperamental Trom had gone berserk and murdered the crooked detective in a fit of rage.

Trombetta's eyes darkened. His voice had a thin edge. "Your gumshoe had funny ideas about burning Miss Vale and me in the incinerator down there. I think he was a sadist at heart."

"Miss Vale? Is this Miss Vale?" Sherry asked weakly.

Trombetta nodded abruptly, then told Conlon what had happened, asked him to call for a morgue detail to pick up Leary and his henchmen.

CONLON came back from the phone all agog. "Did you get any proof that Leary was the murderer?" he gulped hoarsely.

"He was an accessory," Trombetta said. "We'll go pick up the master mind in the crime now. The bell captain will tell the morgue detail where to go. Is your car outside? Better leave it here. We'll go in a cab."

"Where in hell are we going?" Conlon asked, as Trombetta herded Cleo Vale toward the door. "Do you want Sherry along, too?"

"We're going to call on his girl friend, Flo Raymond," Trombetta said enigmatical-

ly. "She lives over on Forty-fifth. He can go along for the ride."

Sherry looked puzzled. He had difficulty in keeping his eyes off Cleo Vale. The little redhead was getting annoyed at his stares. It showed in her face as they went out and boarded a cab.

Trombetta was pleasantly evasive as they tooled over to a second-rate hotel near Broadway. He had got the address of the strip-teaser when going over the newspaper files at the *Daily Star*. He stopped at the desk and flashed his badge.

"Is Flo Raymond in her room?" he asked gruffly.

The clerk gave him a scared nod.

"We're going up," Trombetta said. "If you touch that house phone, I'll tie knots in your neck when we come down."

The clerk gulped, nodded again.

They got off at the proper floor and went down the hall. Trombetta whispered to Cleo Vale, told her to knock and say she was Maizie on the bill with the strip-teaser at the *Frailty*. Cleo nodded blankly, but obeyed instructions.

A second later Flo Raymond, in a soiled negligee, opened the door. Her round, moon face went white under the heavy makeup as the three men crowded past her into the room.

"What in hell is this—a raid?" she recovered and asked savagely. "Or are you boys just feeling sociable?"

Trombetta wasn't looking at her. His dark, hard eyes were fixed on the slim, dark figure of Les Wright on the show girl's divan. Wright's face went gray. He licked his lips and spoke unsteadily.

"Imagine seeing you here, Trombetta. Not a business call, I hope."

The big detective's mouth twisted. He turned to Conlon. "There's your killer, Skipper. Wright murdered Howard Manning to keep him from producing Cleo Vale as Ralph Sherry's granddaughter and heir."

Cleo's mouth dropped open. She stared blankly, first at Trombetta, then at the tall, hawk-faced old millionaire.

"Him—my grandfather? You're crazy, Nick!" she gasped.

"Your right name is Venner, isn't it? Joe

Venner was your father, wasn't he?" Trom asked quietly. She nodded, and the big fellow went on.

"Twenty-four years ago, Joe Venner was a matinee idol in this town. He eloped with Cleo Sherry, your mother and Ralph Sherry's only child. Your grandfather never forgave her. He cut her out of his life completely.

"Joe Venner hated Sherry for that, especially when Joe started to hit the booze. Even after he deserted your mother, and hit the skids, he hated Sherry too much to tell him that there was a granddaughter who could inherit the Sherry fortune. Your mother was too proud to go back. She never told you of the relationship. Instead she worked and slaved so you could train for the stage."

THE girl's eyes filled with tears as she nodded agreement.

"Sherry was getting along in years," Trom went on. "His days were numbered and he had softened inside. He wanted to find your mother, so he hired Art Leary, who knew his way around theatrical circles, to find Venner and your mother. If there were any grandchildren and they were at all decent, Sherry would accept them. If they were what he judged Venner might bring into the world, Sherry wanted to settle a comfortable fortune on them, just to salve his conscience, and then to wash his hands of his descendants.

"Leary could have gotten a nice fee for locating you, but he and Wright cooked up a scheme to substitute Flo Raymond as the granddaughter. That's more or less theory, but it had to be that way. Wasn't that about right, Mr. Sherry?"

"Yes. Leary brought that blond hussy to the Ashford this afternoon, and told me she was Joseph Venner's daughter. I agreed to give her one hundred and fifty thousand dollars in settlement for any claim she might have on my estate. We were to meet tomorrow with my lawyers to draw up the agreement."

"But where did Manning come in?" demanded Conlon.

"Manning had done some work with

Leary before," explained Trombetta. "Horse-face wanted a lawyer to cover Flo Raymond's end of the deal. They brought Manning in on the split. But the sharp lawyer had been around Broadway longer than Leary. He knew Joe Venner's history, from the days it was played up in the *Star*, years ago. He nosed around, found Joe at the Nineteen Club, learned that Cleo Vale was his sponsor there.

"He put two and two together, just as I did, and figured that Cleo was helping Joe—the man who had lost his leg in a stage accident which had ruined a brilliant but hectic career—because he was her father. So he was going to play a lone hand and turn Cleo over to Sherry himself.

"Wright got panicky when he thought his girl friend was going to lose a fortune—so he went up to Manning's room, found the hammer a plumber had left there in the bathroom, and figured the best way to insure a fortune for his strip-tease girl was to remove Manning. Which he did."

"You're crazy, Trombetta," the hotel manager cried venomously. "You haven't got a leg to stand on. You're trying to get away with one of your crazy hunches."

Trombetta laughed grimly. "I knew it was an inside job when I found that hammer. You planted it in the bathroom because you thought you could get it at any time you thought it was safe to dispose of it. When I started looking for it, you got worried and tailed me up to Manning's room, with a dark coat and hat for disguise. I didn't think the man who slugged me could have gotten out of the hotel without someone seeing him, so it had to be you or one of your guests.

"I fed you that line about the laboratory picking up traces even if it was burned in the incinerator to keep you from destroying the hammer before I could get more evidence against you. Tonight, I found that hammer, and the coat and hat you wore when you slugged me, hanging in the closet of your office. You thought I was so far off the trail that you were perfectly safe."

Wright's thin, dark face betrayed his guilt. His eyes started roving about the room, seeking some means of escape. Trom-

(Continued on page 127)

DEATH Is a MAIDEN

A Novelet by PHILIP KETCHUM

CHAPTER I

A NEST OF BLOOD



A SCREAM, wild, piercing and weighted with terror, knifed through the bustle and confusion of Union Station. It sounded again and then again. People stopped and stood motionless in

their tracks as though electrified.

Near the information booth a redcap dropped the bags he was carrying and straightened stiffly. A mother clutched close to her breast a six-year-old child she had been scolding. A man who had just kissed his wife good-by hurried back to her side, startled. And over near the exit from the trains a white-faced woman stared with glazed eyes into the hatbox she had just opened, screamed once more, then tumbled over in a dead faint.

Detective Mark Howell came barging across the station. He bumped into a man, knocked him down, reeled sideward, recovered and hurried on. Two men who had rushed up to the fainting woman backed away from her. Howell reached her side. He started to bend over her, stopped, his eyes fixed on the open hatbox.

There, staring up at him from a nest of bloodstained silks, was a man's head. It looked almost alive. The eyes were wide open, the cheeks flushed. There was a horrible grin on the thick, cracked lips. The nostrils were wide, distended. Yellowed teeth were clamped tightly on a folded piece of paper.

Howell blinked, straightened. Cold chills ran up and down his back and beads of perspiration oozed out of his forehead. He sucked in his breath, reached out and closed the hatbox and then looked around.

Crowds of people were pressing forward, whispering questions, staring at the hatbox as though fascinated. A gray-haired woman wearing the badge of the Traveler's Aid Society pushed her way to the side of the woman who had fainted, looked down at her, then at the pushing crowd.

"Stand back, please," she said brusquely. "Give her air. She needs air."

There was a restless movement in the crowd but they hardly moved an inch.

Howell's eyes had selected four men. He said sharply, indicating them, "You four! I want you. Come over here. And I want anyone else who knows anything about this woman."

PEOPLE started edging away, but the four men came forward hesitantly. The Traveler's Aid Worker frowned at Howell.

"The woman's fainted," she said tartly. "That's all."

Howell shrugged. He got out his handkerchief, wrapped it around the handle of the hatbox, picked it up. Then he said, "Help carry the woman to the Traveler's Aid office," to the four men he had selected.

One of the men stooped over and lifted the woman in his arms. "I can manage," he offered.

The procession moved across the station to the office of the Traveler's Aid Society

The head in the hatbox had a note in its teeth, inviting Detective

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The man had seized the girl and was starting away

and the man carrying the woman took her to a room behind the outer office where he laid her down on a couch. Several other women were in that room, two with nursing babies, one in a wheelchair.

The Traveler's Aid worker drew Howell aside. "What's the matter?" she asked. "Who is she?"

Howell shook his head. "I don't know. See if you can bring her around." Then, turning to the four men who had come with him to the office, he asked, "Any of you know her?"

All four shook their heads.

Howell frowned. "I picked you men because when I first spotted the woman you were all close to her," he said. "You know

what's in that hatbox. If you've got anything to say you'd better speak up."

Three of the men still shook their heads, but the fourth, the man who had carried the woman to the office, said, "She came in on Number Twenty-seven. Got on at Rose-dale. I sat right across the aisle from her."

"Was she traveling alone?"

"She seemed to be alone."

"Speak to anyone on the train?"

"Not that I noticed."

"How did she act?"

The man frowned. "If you mean did she act at all unusual, the answer is no. All the way in she read a magazine. When we got here, she got off and walked into the station. I was some distance behind her. When she

Mark Howell to stick his own neck out if he dared—and Mark dared!

got to the waiting room she stopped, and just as I passed her she let out the first scream."

"What is your name?" Howell asked.

The man told him, gave his address, produced identification. And the other three men gave their names.

Howell asked them to wait. He stepped over to the telephone and called Headquarters. When the connection was made, he asked for the chief.

"Howell talking," he said, when he heard the chief's voice. "I'm at Union Station. You'd better come down here. I've got part of Giaconi, the gunman you were looking for."

"Part of Giaconi?" shouted the chief.

Howell nodded grimly. "His head. It was in a hatbox, Chief."

Another startled exclamation came to him and then a barked order to sit on the lid until the chief could arrive.

Howell hung up. Turning away from the telephone he noticed the crowd of people standing around outside the Traveler's Aid office. He stepped that way. Word of the grisly contents of the hatbox must have spread, he guessed, and the throng outside was curious.

TWO reporters shoved their way through the door, and following them came a photographer lugging his equipment.

"Hi, there, Mark!" called one of the reporters. "Give us the lowdown. Who is it? Where's the dame? Who is she? How about—"

The reporters pressed forward, but the detective's body adequately filled the doorway. Mark Howell was a tall man, wide-shouldered and husky. He had a rather square face with wide-spaced gray eyes which could turn as hard as steel, and a jaw that could set stubbornly. It set stubbornly now.

"I don't know what you're talking about, Snyder," he answered the reporter. "Back up a ways. You reek of rotten whiskey."

The newsman scowled. "Aw come on, Mark. Give me a break or I'll crucify you."

"Yeah? In your lousy sheet?"

"You'll find it ain't so lousy," Snyder

threatened. "Found another head, haven't you? That makes three in a week. Who is it this time?"

Howell shrugged. "Maybe a newspaper reporter."

"Nuts! Let us see it. Come on!"

The detective shook his head. More reporters showed up, but Howell stood his ground, grinning at them, but deaf to their entreaties, and thinking more about Tony Giaconi and about Red Costigan and Maxie Peters than about what they were saying.

Six days before, the bodiless head of Red Costigan had turned up in a trash can back of an apartment on the east side of the city and three days after that the head of Maxie Peters had been found wrapped in an old piece of canvas behind a billboard half across the town. Thus far, to put it mildly, the police were baffled. Because Giaconi had been a pal of Costigan and Peters, the police had been searching for him for questioning, but he had been missing—until now. No tangible clues to the killings had been uncovered, and the underworld seemed as bewildered as the police.

To be sure, the deaths of Costigan and Peters didn't cut much ice so far as society was concerned. Both men had long criminal records and eminently deserved death. But the horrible manner of their death had given the newspapers plenty to talk about. Now, with the discovery of Tony Giaconi's head, the papers would have more. That Giaconi was under a federal indictment on a narcotics charge would be almost forgotten.

Howell glanced toward the back room, and at the memory of Giaconi's leering grin his skin crawled. "Another Axe Murder" the press would call it, and editorially they would demand a solution and start riding the department in every edition.

"Come on, Mark!" Snyder insisted. "I'll give you a break in the story. Let me see the head."

"You wouldn't like it, chump," Howell grunted. "Even a guy as low as you wouldn't like it."

A POLICE siren shrilled outside and a moment later the chief came plowing through the crowd, followed by half a dozen

officers. One of them was stationed at the door and took over the task of holding back the reporters while Howell led the chief into the back room.

A screen had been set up, shielding the couch and the woman on it from the view of the others in the room. The woman was still unconscious. She seemed young, was slender, fair-haired. She wasn't beautiful, though Howell knew that the newspapers would refer to her as beautiful.

The Traveler's Aid worker turned to the chief as he entered the room. She looked worried.

"I—I think I ought to call a doctor," she said nervously. "The woman's pulse is quite irregular. I—"

"We'll take her to the hospital," the chief answered. "You just look after the others."

Howell pushed the Traveler's Aid worker away and knelt over the hatbox. He opened it carefully, using a handkerchief so as not to mar any fingerprints which might be on it.

"There it is," he said standing up.

The chief swallowed, muttered profanely under his breath. For a long moment he stared down at the grinning head, his face set in hard lines. Finally he stooped, carefully removed the folded paper from between the clenched teeth, opened it.

Howell moved closer so that he could see the printed message. Brief, cryptic, it read:

ONE MORE FOR THE MAIDEN

CHAPTER II

THE HAIRY BEAST



AFTER the woman had been taken to the hospital and the hatbox had been removed, Howell finished the task which had taken him to the station, made two other calls and then returned to Headquarters. When he got there the chief was in a vile humor. The story of the discovery of Giacconi's head had been played up in the papers just as Howell had known it would be and the chief was beginning to feel the pressure.

"Where have you been?" he barked at Howell.

Howell told him and the chief grunted, paced back and forth across his office for a moment.

"All right," he snapped, "let somebody else finish that up for you. You're on these axe murders from now on."

Howell nodded. "What about the woman, Chief?"

"She's a domestic named Mary Gerlock," the chief answered. "She worked at Rosedale for a family named Simmons. I've talked to them by telephone. Mrs. Simmons seems to have known the girl for a long time, gives her excellent recommendations. She was coming in to town because her sister's here, sick. That's true. We've checked it. Mary Gerlock herself can't give much of a story. She's conscious, but when we try to talk to her she goes off into hysterics."

"What about the hatbox?"

"Apparently it belongs to her. Hers are the only fingerprints on it and the clothing inside is her size. We've managed to get this much out of her. She packed the box last night, didn't open it this morning, had only time enough to make the train after she had finished her work at the Simmons place."

"Why did she open it in the station?"

"She wanted a handkerchief."

"What's the medical report on Giacconi's head?"

"He was decapitated by a sharp instrument, but you know doctors. How long ago they won't say. Incidentally, he was all painted up, rouge and powder, just like Costigan and Peters."

"The note?"

"No prints. I have no report on the paper yet."

Howell frowned, lit a cigarette. He repeated the message on the paper in a husky undertone, "One more for the maiden." Then, after a moment's silence, he asked, "Can I go to Rosedale?"

"Hell, yes. We have no jurisdiction there, but go ahead. I want some results."

Howell nodded. He went outside, got something to eat, looked up the train schedule to Rosedale, then, on a sudden impulse,

searched through his pockets until he found the paper on which he had written the names and addresses of the four men at the station. It wouldn't hurt any to have another talk with the man who had noticed Mary Gerlock. Half an hour later he was ringing the bell at that man's home.

The man wasn't glad to see him. He had told him all he knew, he stated gruffly, and he didn't intend to be bothered any more. But when he tried to close the door, Mark Howell's foot was in the way.

"Bad way to die," Howell stated, "losing your head. Besides, I'm only doing what you taxpayers pay me for doing. I'm not the press. I'm a policeman."

"But there's nothing more I can say," the man insisted. "Besides, when we were halfway in to town another woman got on the train and sat in the seat with the girl you found in the station, so I couldn't see her so well."

A SHARP thrill of discovery ran through Howell's body. "What other woman?" he insisted.

"Just another woman. I don't know who she was."

"What did she look like?"

"Well, she was older than the girl."

"But her size, man!"

"They were about the same size, I guess."

"Did this other woman have a hatbox?"

"Why I—I don't know. I think she did but—but—"

"Why do you think she did?"

The man moistened his lips. "I don't know. Maybe she did and maybe she didn't. I—"

"Where did this second woman get on the train?"

"At Marshfield."

Howell questioned the man further but the fellow only grew more confused. Finally the detective turned away. He thought he had something but he wasn't sure. However, if Mary Gerlock's story was true, if she knew nothing of that head discovered in her hatbox, there was a chance that intentionally or accidentally this second woman had switched baggage with her. And if that were true, it was to Marshfield that he should go.

It was almost eight o'clock that evening before Mark Howell's car approached Marshfield. For the past hour it had been raining. Water slobbered against the windshield by the bucketful. The road was slippery, dangerous.

Climbing a long hill, Mark Howell came to a place where the highway divided. He had missed the marker and, uncertain which fork to take, he rolled his car to the side of the road and stopped. He was sure that he had almost reached his destination. A while back he had passed a sign which had read: "Marshfield, 5 miles." Since then he was sure that he had come almost that far.

Staring ahead, he looked for the lights of the village. Marshfield wasn't large, he knew. He had passed through it on the train, recalled it as a place which was little more than a station serving a group of surrounding estates. But at that he thought that he should be able to see the lights just ahead. When he couldn't, he wondered if he had by any chance missed a turn and come the wrong way.

He lighted a cigarette, frowned, and then reached for the starter. But in the moment before he pressed it a thin, wavering cry came to his ears. He caught his breath, stared ahead, his eyes probing down the path of light made by the headlights of his car. Turning off the engine he felt for his gun. That cry had been a human cry! No animal could ever have made a noise like that. But what did it mean? Who could it have been?

Again the cry sounded, more plainly, this time. And closer.

Howell rolled down the window of his car, felt his muscles tighten. And then in the vague shadows just beyond the range of the lights of his car he distinguished a stumbling figure. In another moment he saw that it was a woman.

Quickly leaping from his car he ran forward to meet her.

BEFORE he had reached her side, Mark Howell saw that she was young. She wasn't wearing a hat and the rain had plastered her hair close against her head. Her face was pale, thin. Fright looked out of her

eyes. Her dress was soaked by the rain and was half torn from one shoulder.

The thought at once occurred to Mark Howell that somewhere close at hand there had been a terrible accident, that the girl had been knocked unconscious, that she had just recovered. He reached her side, grabbed her by the arms.

"What is it?" he said. "What's happened?"

The girl's breath was coming in great gasps. She was trembling.

"What is it? What's happened?" Howell demanded again.

The girl pulled away from him. "Quick!" she said. "Quick! Your car! He—he's coming after me!"

Howell stared at the girl, wide-eyed. "What do you mean? Who's coming after you?"

The girl turned, looked back in the direction from which she had come. Suddenly she jerked a hand up in front of her face, screamed.

Howell whirled around. Out of the darkness at the side of the road a huge figure seemed to have materialized. It was upon the detective without any warning at all. Howell stepped back, grabbed for his gun, jerked it out. But before he could fire, a heavy blow slammed the gun from his hand. He felt himself lifted into the air, then hurled backward into the road.

He rolled over, got to his knees, stood up. The girl's scream was again ringing in his ears. Close to the car he saw her and a giant figure with long ape-like arms, massive sloping shoulders and black, bristling hair. The man had seized the girl around the waist, lifted her off the ground. He was starting away.

Mark Howell charged forward. His lunging shoulder hit the big thug in the small of the back, staggered him so that he dropped the girl, turned around. In the unreal light from the car's lamps his features were bestial. His nose was flat. A short, black beard covered the lower part of his face.

With an inarticulate cry of rage he lunged at Mark Howell, swinging a hamlike fist which might have felled an ox. Howell ducked under the blow, stabbed out twice

with his fists. Both blows smashed into the hairy face, but it was like hitting a rock. Pain shot up Howell's arms. He stepped back, fainted, shot home another blow.

A wild, shrill cry tore from the thug's throat. Again he rushed the detective, but again Howell ducked out of the way of the creature's fists. To be struck once would end the fight. He knew that as surely as he had ever known anything in his life. If one of those fists connected with his head it would be crushed as though it were an egg shell.

Howell ducked again, taunted the giant, backed away. The man was dreadfully slow. As long as the detective kept out of the reach of those powerful arms and fists he thought he would be safe. Out of the corners of his eyes he had seen the girl get to her feet, hurry away. At least she was safe—for a time.

Howell backed across the road, away from the lights of the car. Twice more his fists shot out and smashed at the man's face, but though both those blows were solid they didn't stop the huge attacker.

Then the massive figure rushed forward again and Howell jumped back. The road seemed to fall away from under his feet. His toes clawed at a gravel embankment. He lost his balance, knew that he was falling, that in escaping from the thug he had fallen over the edge of the road.

He made an effort to turn his body in mid-air. The branches of a tree scraped at his face. And then a sudden blow seemed to tear off the top of his head and he lost consciousness in a blinding explosion of pain.

CHAPTER III

THE DARK CITY



WHEN Mark Howell awoke he was first aware of the fact that he was icily cold, then that he was wet and that it was still raining. Memory of what had happened, of the girl and of his fight with the thug returned to him and an involuntary groan escaped from his lips. "You—you're alive?" whispered a hushed voice.

Howell opened his eyes, made out a figure bending over him but the figure was indistinct.

"Who are you?" he said huskily.

"Gwen Nelson," came the answer.

He considered that for a moment, but the name didn't mean anything to him. "What happened?" he asked.

"You fell over the bank," the girl answered.

"You are— It was you who—"

"I am the girl he was after."

Howell sat up. His head ached painfully, felt as sore as a boil when he touched it. The branch of a tree, he decided, must have broken his fall, and for some reason or other the thug hadn't followed him down here. The girl, however, hadn't run away, for here she was.

Howell reached for his cigarettes, lit one for himself and then one for her. When he held the match for it, he saw that her face didn't look so strained and desperate as it had before.

She sighed. "I—I don't think that anything in my life ever tasted so good as this cigarette."

Howell smiled in the darkness. The girl was kneeling quite close to him. Behind them loomed the bank down which he had fallen, ahead stretched impenetrable blackness. The rain was still coming down steadily.

"Who was that man?" he asked suddenly.

"I—I don't know," whispered the girl.

"Why was he after you?"

The girl shuddered. "It's like a dreadful nightmare," she said slowly. "There's nothing real to anything that's happened. Pretty soon I'll wake up at home in my bed. I—I—"

Howell nodded. "Where is your home?"

It was back in town, in a block not far from where Mark Howell lived.

"I am staying there with my aunt," she said.

"Your aunt is—"

"Caroline Stokes."

"All right. What happened tonight?"

"This afternoon I went out to my car to drive down to the home of a girl friend. I had just started down the street when everything went black. I—I don't know whether I had

an accident or—"

"Did you look in the back seat before you started driving away?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Feel the top of your head, the back. Is it sore?"

THE girl felt her head, winced. "There's a bump back here."

Howell nodded. "Then you weren't in any accident. There was someone in the back of your car. Before you were going too fast he cracked you over the head. Well, go on from there."

"The next I knew I was lying on the ground in some kind of shack or outbuilding. It was raining and dark. I didn't know what had happened. I sat up, tried to look around, then I heard voices.

"There were two men outside. I found a window and listened at it. I heard one man say, 'He ought to be here by now.' And then the other one said, 'It's too bad. She's got a pretty neck.' It—it terrified me!

"I found a stick, broke out the window, got through it and started running. It seemed that I ran for hours and hours before I found a road and saw the lights of your car, and all the time I could hear someone right behind me."

Howell straightened. "Where is that shack?" he said. "Could you find it again?"

"What do you mean to do?"

Howell wasn't sure. He was after the man who had killed Giaconi, Costigan and Maxie Peters, all men with criminal records. Due to the similarity with which the three seemed to have been killed he felt that there was a definite connection between their deaths. Like the other detectives on the force, he had assumed that the solution would be found in the city.

But Giaconi's head had been discovered in the station, apparently being sent *into* the city. And if his hunch was correct—if that switch in hatboxes had been accidental—then, but for the accident, Giaconi's head might later have been found somewhere in the city just as the heads of Costigan and Peters had been found.

Carrying his deductions a step further, it seemed that the solution might be found

somewhere around here. The second woman had boarded the train at Marshfield, and here this girl who gave her name as Gwen Nelson had just escaped from some shack to which she had been taken after being knocked unconscious.

He stared at her. "Did you know a man named Tony Giaconi?"

She shook her head.

"Or Red Costigan or Maxie Peters?"

"No. Aren't those the men who—who were killed? You don't think—"

"I don't know what to think," Howell interrupted gruffly.

For a moment the girl was silent. Then she asked, "Where are we? How far is it to town?"

"We're near a place called Marshfield," the detective answered.

"Marshfield?" the girl cried.

"Yes. Does that mean anything to you?"

She bit her lips. "It's just rather a coincidence," she said hesitantly. "My aunt and I were invited up here for dinner tonight. We weren't coming, but—"

HOWELL grasped the girl by the arms. "Who invited you up here?" he demanded.

"A man named John Redpath. I don't know the man very well. I've only been to his house once. But my aunt is an old friend of his."

Suddenly, then, Mark Howell's memory clicked. John Redpath had been the name of one of the promoters of the Mojave Oil Company. A year before, the company had collapsed. Its failure had ruined hundreds, perhaps thousands of people whose life savings had been invested in its stock.

There had been quite a furor at the time. Redpath and others had been arrested and tried, but had escaped final blame. Several things about the case, however, had never been cleared up. There had been some girl, an office employee of the company, who had been mysteriously killed, and in a sensational fire most of the company's records had been destroyed. That fact may have saved Redpath and his associates from prison sentences.

Howell decided to play another hunch. "I

want you to show me the way to Redpath's home," he said to the girl. "Can you do it?"

"If we can find Marshfield," she told him.

They returned to the road. Howell's car was still there. Getting into it, they started forward and in a short time came to Marshfield. When they got there Howell saw at once why he hadn't been able to notice the lights of the town. No lights were on. In several places lamps showed through the windows. The storm, Howell guessed, had injured the power line which served the town.

Gwen showed him the way to John Redpath's home. It was situated on the side of a hill. Dim lights showed through the windows of the lower floor, and as Howell rolled his car up the driveway he saw three other cars parked over to the side.

He turned his car that way, stopped, got out. There was a wide lawn in front of the house, circular in shape and bordered by the trees of the surrounding woods.

"My aunt will be worried about me," Gwen whispered. "Don't you think I ought to telephone her?"

"We'll telephone from here," Howell promised. "Now you forget what happened to you, please."

The girl followed him out of the car and toward the wide front porch. The house was large and constructed principally of stone. Howell could see that the girl was shivering.

"Cold?" he asked.

The girl shook her head. "No. I—I'm afraid."

"Wait!" Howell said.

He turned back to the car, got an extra gun out of the pocket, examined it, snapped it into the holster under his arm. Then he returned to the girl's side.

He had a feeling that he was on the brink of an important discovery. Inside the house he could call the chief in the city, get a dozen men up here in a couple of hours. In view of the present situation the chief would forget the limits of his official jurisdiction.

But right now Mark's duty was clear. It was up to him to sit on the lid until help arrived. They came to the steps, walked up them and across the porch to the door. Mark

Howell knocked and they waited.

"You stick close to me," he said to the girl. "We'll see this thing through quicker by not running away from it."

CHAPTER IV

THE THING IN THE TRAY



THE man who opened the door was tall, thin, middle-aged, and Howell noticed that he kept the door on the chain until he saw and recognized Gwen Nelson. Then his eyes widened and a look of surprise came into them.

"Come on in," he said. "Come on in. Your aunt was worried about you. She thought—"

He didn't finish his sentence but looked suspiciously at Howell. The detective introduced himself.

"I met Miss Nelson down the road a piece," he explained. "She told me that I might use a telephone here."

The tall man nodded, put out his hand. "I'm John Redpath. Of course you may. Nasty storm, isn't it? When it rains up here it really rains."

Redpath led the way into a large living room. It was lighted by several lamps. As they reached the door Howell saw that there were four people in the room and one of them, an elderly woman, hurried forward to take Gwen Nelson in her arms. Howell guessed that she was Caroline Stokes, the girl's aunt, and that she must have changed her mind about not coming out to John Redpath's.

There was one other woman in the room and two men. They followed Mrs. Stokes forward and, turning to the detective, Redpath said, "I didn't catch your name, Mr.—"

"Detective Mark Howell."

As he spoke, Howell's eyes swept over the faces of the people in the room. Not a one but mirrored surprise. The two men to whom he hadn't been introduced stared at each other. Mrs. Stokes paled.

"Detective?" Redpath said.

Howell nodded.

One of the other two men stepped forward. He was short, heavy-set. His face was

ruddy and his uneven teeth clenched the stem of a short pipe.

Taking the pipe out of his mouth, he asked, "Business bring you this way, Mr. Howell?"

Howell shrugged. "A policeman is never off duty."

The short man put out his hand. "My name is Major Winstead," he announced, nodding toward the other man. "Harrison Foster, Detective Howell. Maybe you've heard of him."

Howell had. Harrison Foster was a prominent criminal attorney. He was elderly, stooped, thin.

Winstead, taking over the duties of the host, bowed to the two women. "Mrs. Redpath, Mrs. Stokes—Detective Howell."

Howell bowed to them.

Winstead turned to Redpath. "John," he said, "I'm going to tell Mr. Howell what's on our minds. Maybe he can help us."

Redpath appeared to hesitate, then nodded, but before Winstead could speak Mrs. Redpath said, "Well, Gwen should have a bath and some dry clothing. We'll join you later."

The women left the room. When they had gone Winstead looked back again to the detective.

"All of us who are here," he announced, "thought we came at the invitation of John Redpath, but when we arrived he told us he had sent out no invitations. Well, we might have thought it a joke excepting for two things. Mrs. Stokes had not planned to come, but just about five o'clock she received a telephone call informing her that her niece was here, that she had been hurt and insisting that she come immediately."

Howell frowned. "All right," he said. "What else?"

"The other thing," said Winstead, "is that those of us here are the people who were associated in a rather unfortunate business relationship."

"The Mojave Oil Company?"

"Yes."

"Mrs. Bruce isn't here," Redpath pointed out.

Winstead shrugged. "She may come later. Anyhow, that doesn't change things. The five of us, Mrs. Stokes, Mrs. Bruce, Foster,

Redpath and I planned the promotion of the Mojave Oil Company. During the trial following its collapse and afterwards, all of us received threatening letters from people who had lost heavily. Well, if someone wanted to 'get' us, it strikes me that this setup is perfect. We're away off here, alone, the power lines are down. I don't like it."

Foster moistened his lips. "Nor I!"

HOWELL walked over to a table, picked up a cigarette from a box, lighted it. His mind turned back to the Mojave Oil Company scandal. There had been many who had lost. There probably were many who would have loved an opportunity such as this. But the situation and story Winstead had told didn't fit in with the deaths of Giaconi, Costigan and Peters, and that was what had brought him out here.

Turning back to face the three men, Howell said, abruptly, "I came out here to find a murderer. I—"

He paused. The three men facing him had stiffened. He looked from one face to another. Fear showed in the eyes of each.

"I have a notion," he continued, "that the murderer of Tony Giaconi, Red Costigan and Maxie Peters might be up this way."

He was just talking, watching their faces for anything that might be revealed to him. It might be coincidence, he realized, that these men were gathered in this place and that the trail of the murderer led this way. But he had a feeling that it wasn't coincidence.

"The—the axe murders?" Foster asked huskily.

"That's what the papers call them," Howell replied. "Does the name 'Maiden' mean anything to you?"

Winstead shook his head, blinking owlishly. Foster shuddered. Redpath got out a cigarette, put it back in his pocket, looked toward the stairs. His eyes wouldn't meet the detective's.

"Where is the telephone?" Howell asked.

Redpath indicated it and stepping that way Howell took down the receiver and listened. The line was dead.

Of course, he realized, with the power lines down because of the storm it was only

natural that the telephone wires should be down too. But just the same an uncomfortable feeling came over him, and his hunch that there must be some connection between the three who had been killed and these men, grew stronger.

His eyes centered on Foster. Foster had connections with the underworld, he knew. Foster undoubtedly had known Giaconi, Costigan and Peters. But where did the others fit in?

A sharp knock on the door interrupted his thoughts.

Redpath turned that way. "That might be Mrs. Bruce," he whispered. "If it is—"

He started for the hallway and Howell, following him, was right at his elbow as Redpath opened the door. He saw Redpath stiffen, heard his choked cry. Redpath staggered back, bumping against the detective. A horrible, rattling noise came from Redpath's throat. His eyes were wide, staring. His mouth sagged open.

Howell moved over to the doorway and stared out into the night. There was no one on the porch, but several feet in front of the door, braced upright in a blood-filled tray, was a woman's head!

The detective's senses reeled. He clenched his hands together until the nails of his fingers cut sharply into his palms, forced himself to stare at that bodiless head. Glazed, unseeing eyes stared back at him, crimson painted lips sagged open. Between blood-framed teeth was a slip of paper.

Howell stepped out to the porch. He reached down, took the paper and the motion upset the head so that it rocked back in the tray and fell over on its side.

Howell turned back into the house. Redpath had slumped forward on a chair in the hall and Winstead and Foster were coming through the door from the living room.

The detective walked forward to where the light was better, unfolded the paper and read its message.

Prepare to Meet the Maiden

HE REFOLDED the piece of paper, slipped it into his pocket. Foster had gone on down the hall, was staring out the door.

Winstead had stopped and was looking at the detective.

"The message was—?" he said.

"Death," Howell answered.

Winstead passed him, heading for the door and Howell hurried forward to the stairs.

Fear in his voice, Howell called, "Miss Nelson! Miss Nelson! Are you—"

From upstairs the girl's voice called down. "We'll be there in just a moment."

Foster was leaning against the wall. Winstead had just closed the door.

"That is—Mrs. Bruce's head," Winstead said, thickly.

The detective moved forward. "The time has come to put all our cards on the table," he said sharply. "Let me tell you what happened tonight to Miss Nelson."

He repeated the story of the girl's adventure, told of his fight with the giant thug.

"Miss Nelson was lucky," he said. "She got away. Mrs. Bruce didn't—and you three men as well as three women upstairs may be face to face with death. Now, if you want to save your own necks, tell me all you can. Who wants to kill you? What do you know of that thug I fought? Where do Giaconi, Costigan and Peters fit in with the Mojave Oil Company?"

The three men stared at him, looked at one another. The silence in the hall was electric. Howell could feel it pressing in on him.

From somewhere on the floor above a heavy thud jarred through the stillness—a sound such as might have been made by a falling body. Howell ran for the stairs, pulling out his gun, calling Gwen's name.

But she didn't answer him, this time.

He pounded up the carpeted steps to the hallway above. When he reached the door of the room in which the women had been it yawned open before him. He stepped inside. Gwen's wet clothing was spread out on the foot of the bed, but there was no sign of her or of the other two women.

An open window attracted him and he stared out. Across the lawn, at the edge of the woods, he could make out a group of figures and he caught the flash of a woman's white dress just before the trees swallowed all sight of them.

CHAPTER V

RENDEZVOUS WITH MURDER



HOWELL turned away from the window. A part of his mind had noted the ladder leaning against the wall outside and the overturned floor lamp near the bed. But the details of the room were not important. The three women were gone and somewhere out there in the woods, the "Maiden" awaited them.

Redpath, Winstead and Foster appeared in the doorway. There was a frantic expression on Redpath's face.

"Martha!" he gasped. "Martha!"

"Gone," Howell answered.

Redpath staggered over to the window, looked out. Foster was again biting his lips. They were bleeding. He seemed like a man in a trance. Of the three, only Major Winstead was holding steady and there was a strange, unnatural light in his eyes.

"From what I told you of where Gwen Nelson found me," Howell said to him, "and from what I said of the place in which she was held, do you have any idea where it might be?"

Winstead nodded. "There's a place about a half mile from here, an old shack which hasn't been used for years. It's deep in the woods. I stumbled across it on a hunting trip when Redpath invited me up here last fall. That might be the place."

"Could you find it?"

"Yes," Redpath answered shakily.

"Are you armed?"

"No, but I have guns. I'll get them."

He hurried away.

Foster came forward to where the detective was standing.

"You—you're not going out there in the woods? You're not—" His grip on Howell's arm was a clasp of steel.

"What else is there to do?" Howell asked.

"Stay here. We are safe here."

The detective shoved Foster away. He had never liked the attorney. Fear stared out of Foster's eyes and he was drooling like a baby.

"Snap out of it!" Howell said. "That kill-

er, whoever he is, has three women out there. Get that? Three women!"

"But—"

The detective's hand lashed out, struck Foster across the cheek. Foster reeled back, sobbing, holding his face.

"He had that coming to him," Winstead said slowly. "Things like this show a man up."

Howell made no answer. He tried to order his mind, tried to think. He looked over at Winstead. "What do you think we ought to do?"

Winstead shrugged. "There's only one thing we can do. Try to find them before it's too late!"

"Who do you think's back of this? What is the reason?"

WINSTEAD shook his head.

A moment later John Redpath came back to the room with three guns. His face was pale, strained. He gave one gun to Winstead, one to the detective and kept the other.

Foster came forward again. "No!" he cried. "No! Are you mad? It's death to go out there!"

Redpath didn't even look at him. He had turned to the door and was hurrying down the hall. Winstead followed him.

Howell turned to the attorney, passed him the gun Redpath had brought.

"Here," he said. "Take this and come along!"

Foster came forward again. "No!" he "I'm staying here."

For a moment Howell studied the man, then he shrugged and followed the others. He had his own gun. Foster might be safe if he stayed here and if he wasn't too frightened to use that gun.

Outside, at the edge of the woods, they halted. It was still raining, and seemed even colder.

"Where's Foster?" Winstead demanded.

"He wouldn't come," Howell answered.

Winstead grunted. "This is just a long shot that we're playing," he said, rapidly. "Maybe it's right. If it is, all of us won't come back. There's not just one man in-

[Turn page]



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volved in this. There are several. The way they walked off with the women indicates that."

They turned into the woods. They made their way over a hill, came to a faint trail. Winstead led, followed by Redpath. Howell came last. For what seemed like hours to the detective they moved ahead, going first up, then down, and several times crossing a little creek.

Howell was soaked through. Cold water sloshed in his shoes. A feeling had come over him that this trip was futile, that it could only end in failure. He blamed himself for what had happened. He should have insisted that the women stay in the room with the men, should never have let them go off alone.

Suddenly Winstead stopped and Howell and Redpath moved up close to him.

"The place is just ahead," Winstead whispered.

There was no warning of the attack. At one moment the surrounding shadows had been ominously still, but suddenly they came to life. A cold, blood-curdling cry sounded from just ahead, and half a dozen huge, dark figures closed in on them.

Howell whipped up his gun and fired. He saw one figure spring into the air with a shriek. He fired again, tried to back away, bumped into someone. One of the attackers was upon him now and a sharp blow numbed his arm. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Redpath go down. From behind him he could hear Winstead shouting, then he heard a pair of quick shots.

His left fist lashed out and smashed at the thug towering over him. He kicked out with his feet. A blow smashed against the side of his head with such force that it almost lifted him from the ground. He would have fallen if hands hadn't seized him and held him erect.

FOR a moment, then, he struggled desperately. But the hands gripping his shoulders held him as though he were in a vise, as he felt himself being tightly bound. Then he felt himself lifted and knew that he was being carried forward.

The long shot, he realized, had been right.

But they had muffed the play. They had walked into a trap as beautifully as though it had all been a part of a game.

He was half dragged, half carried along a narrow trail through wet, overhanging shrubbery. One of the men who held him was the same man with whom he had fought back there on the road an hour or so before and the other was every bit as large.

They came suddenly to the edge of a clearing and the two guards stopped. Across a bare open space the detective could see a ring of trees, and just before him, lying on the ground, were five silent figures.

At his shoulder a voice said softly, "Yonder is the 'Maiden,' Mr. Howell."

A shaft of light probed through the darkness and near to the figures on the ground Howell saw two upright posts fastened together at the top and bottom by blocks of wood. Against the background of the surrounding trees it stood out starkly.

Howell caught his breath. Near the top block of wood was a triangular-shaped blade. It glistened dully in the light of the torch. On its bottom edge there was a red, thick stain.

"Test it, Pedro," ordered the voice.

A huge figure stepped out of the shadows, moved up to the guillotine, touched some spring which Howell couldn't see.

The blade shot down the grooved posts with a heavy thud.

"Crude," murmured the voice close to Howell. "Crude but effective—and the proper instrument for an execution. What do you think of it, Howell?"

The man's voice sounded vaguely familiar. Howell turned to stare toward him but the man stood in the shadow of a tree and his figure was vague, distorted.

"What do you think of it?" he asked again.

"A guillotine," Howell breathed.

"Exactly," the man agreed. "But called by many the 'Maiden.'"

A feeling of revulsion swept over the detective. The two men on each side of him still held him tightly. He worked with his fingers on the bonds which held his wrists.

The two guards had cut the rope which had led from his wrists to his ankles so that

he could be stood on his feet and pushed forward. That seemed to have loosened the bonds a little. A sudden hope that he might be able to free himself came to him, but he knew it would be no easy task. He needed time. He had to stall for time.

"Why do you call this an instrument for an execution?" he asked.

The voice laughed. "Because that is what it is. It has executed many."

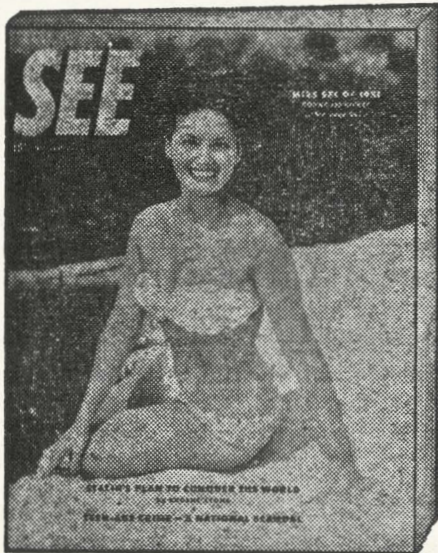
"Giaconi?" Howell demanded.

"Yes. This is where he died. And this is where Costigan and Peters met their fate. The three heads I sent into town. Cleverly, I thought, until this morning when a blunder disclosed one."

"The hatboxes were switched, then?" Howell muttered.

"So you figured that out? I wondered what brought you here so swiftly. It wasn't the woman I sent with the hatbox who told you, for she has paid for her carelessness [Turn page]

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with her life. Someone noticed where she got on the train. That was what happened, wasn't it?"

Howell nodded. "Yes, that was what happened."

He was working carefully on his bonds. One of the men holding his upper arm moved restlessly and scowled at him. He had to be more careful. He dared use only the muscles of his wrists.

Howell's eyes turned to the five bound figures lying on the ground close to the guillotine. He couldn't make out the faces of any of them. But three were women, he could see.

Glancing over toward the man in the shadows, he said, "Then you are the one who invited those people to come to Red-path's tonight."

"Yes. But no more of this interesting conversation. Our program must go forward. This is really Part Two. Giaconi, Costigan and Peters were executed for a commission they carried out at the order of these who are to die tonight."

The man's voice tightened. "Pedro," he ordered, "begin!"

CHAPTER VI

RETRIBUTION



LIKE a blinding flash of light, the connection between the three criminals who had been beheaded and the officials of the Mojave Oil Company became clear.

A girl employee of the company had been murdered. Though never solved, the murder had had all the earmarks of an underworld killing.

What Howell had just heard therefore meant that the officials of the company had ordered that girl's death, and that Giaconi, Costigan and Peters had done the actual killing.

Howell's mind turned back to the time of that girl's death. Some man who had been in love with the girl had been all broken up over her death. Who had it been? Who—

The huge figure of the man who had been standing close to the guillotine moved over

to the group of captives, bent over one and lifted him erect. The circle of light from the hand of the man in the shadows turned toward the guillotine. Howell saw the giant tug moving that way.

He gritted his teeth. There was something unearthly about the scene, about the steady march of that giant figure toward the instrument of death. He shook himself, strained at his bonds. One of the men at Howell's side growled and his grip on the detective's arm tightened.

Then, suddenly, from some hidden recess of his mind, Mark Howell pulled a name—the name of the man in love with the girl who had been killed. And that name was the same as the name of one of the officers of the company. The name was Winstead!

Howell spoke it aloud. He was still a little confused as to how Winstead, as an officer of the company, could blame the other officers of the company for the girl's death. He wasn't to learn until later that Winstead had been out of town when the girl's death had been arranged, and he wasn't to know until later that the murdered girl had discovered evidence of the crookedness of the Mojave Oil Company and had threatened to expose it.

But this one thing Howell did know. Winstead had been the name of the man who had been in love with the girl and who, if anyone, would have reason for the executions already performed and for those now planned.

"Winstead!" he cried aloud. "Winstead!" And with a final jerk he tore his hands free and twisted away from the men holding him.

A heavy fist smashed into his face. Blood spattered from his nose. Hands grabbed him, held him tightly again and he sagged between the two guards, almost unconscious.

"Look, Howell," came Winstead's voice. "Watch the 'Maiden.'"

Howell blinked his eyes, stared toward

[Turn page]

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the guillotine. There, his arms now free, but helpless in Pedro's grasp, stood the figure of Harrison Foster, who had stayed back at the house but had apparently been captured by some of Winstead's helpers and brought here.

Pedro touched him on the arm, indicated the guillotine and Foster shrank back.

Winstead laughed. "Yellow—yellow clear through!"

PERHAPS Winstead was right, but at times even a coward can be goaded to desperation. Foster's body suddenly stiffened. A wild, hoarse cry tore from his throat. He stooped over, picked up a huge rock, raised it shoulder high.

Pedro stepped in to knock it down, but with unexpected quickness Harrison Foster flung the rock directly at him.

The rock hit Pedro in the chest, hurled him back. With another cry Foster darted forward, directly toward Major Winstead. A gun crashed, but the bullet didn't stop him. Again Winstead fired, backing away.

One of the guards released Howell's arm, rushed to help Winstead, and then Howell turned on the other guard. He straightened up, jerking his knee at the man's groin. His fist lashed out for the man's face. He heard the man cry out, stagger back and he followed him, stabbing with his fists, kicking out with his feet. Again a gun crashed behind Howell—and again.

The guard he was fighting tripped and sprawled on his back and Howell whirled around. Pedro was on his knees, was getting up. Near at hand was a tumbling mass of figures he knew must be the other guard and Winstead and Foster

Desperately he hurled himself into that fight, locked one arm around the throat of the giantlike Pedro, and dragged him back. His left fist thudded again and again into the small of the man's back. The man staggered up, tried to whirl him off, but he clung grimly to the fellow until he had no more feeling in the arm which encircled the giant's neck, no more strength in the other.

He was slammed to the ground then. He tried to get up, made it to his knees expecting a sudden rush from the giant.

But that rush never came. The giant was standing almost over him, but his face was turned toward the clearing. Looking that way Howell saw two figures at the foot of the guillotine. One of the figures had shoved the other over the block under the blade and now swayed away, reeling unsteadily.

"Foster!" Howell cried. "Foster! Don't!"

A hacking laugh came back to him. Foster reached out for the side of the guillotine. There was a grating sound, a thud. Howell didn't see the falling knife, but he knew what had happened.

There was a movement at his side and, jerking his head around, he saw the thug with whom he had fought turn and flee through the woods. When he looked back toward the guillotine, Foster had tumbled to the ground at the side of the headless body of Major Winstead.

Howell scrambled up, made his way to where Foster lay, but the elderly lawyer was dead before Howell reached him. His whole chest seemed shot away. Only through the strength of desperation and by the power of will had he been able to overcome Winstead and drag him to his death. . . .

THE RAIN had ceased, the sky had cleared and a pale moon brought an unnatural light to the little clearing over which the gaunt structure of the guillotine reared as a specter of death. The detective and John Redpath stood near the bodies of Winstead and Harrison Foster. To one side sprawled the giant Pedro, heavily manacled. The other men had escaped.

"I suppose he was mad," Redpath said slowly, referring to Winstead, "but in a way you can understand how he felt. The whole Mojave swindle was his scheme. He was crooked clear through, but he did love that girl in the office, the one who discovered how crooked we all were and who threatened to disclose what she had learned to the police.

"Maybe if he had been on the scene, Winstead could have handled her, but he was away. Foster promised to take care of her. None of us knew what he planned until we heard of her death. Later he told me that he had hired Giaconi, Costigan and Peters

[Turn page]



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to get rid of her."

"Didn't Winstead suspect what had happened?" Howell asked.

"I don't know. Perhaps not at first. But later, in some way or other, he did find out."

Howell grunted.

"What are you going to do?" Redpath asked.

The detective looked over toward the three women. Gwen Nelson and Mrs. Redpath were in this only by the accident of relationship; Gwen's aunt probably—if what Redpath had said was true—only through the fact that she had been interested in the Mojave Oil Company.

"I don't know," Howell said. "You'll have to tell the chief what you've told me. After that, probably the district attorney. What they'll do is up to them."

Redpath sighed. "All right. If I've got to face it I will. I've lived with it on my mind for a long time. It'll be good to get it off."

He moved over to where his wife was standing and, taking her arm, started back up the trail toward the house. Howell joined Gwen and her aunt.

"Come on," he said. "This is all over." He sounded as if he meant just that.

But it wasn't all over, of course. The memory of this night, he knew, would live in their minds for always, would stalk through their dreams.

To take the girl's mind off of what had happened, he said to her as they left, "Tell me about yourself, Gwen, won't you?"

"You really want to know?"

He looked down at her and said sincerely, "Yes, I do."

"Shall I begin with where I was born?" Gwen asked.

She was playing the game.

"Yes," Howell said, "begin there and don't miss a thing."

The trail was narrow. In places the girl's aunt had to walk ahead and Gwen had to walk close to him.

He liked it.

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THE INVASION

(Continued from page 89)

It had been a trap for both of them. Galloway had killed Lydia Loring under circumstances which would make Eddie seem the murderer.

Eddie, however, had escaped and shown up here. Now, to make the frame-up stick, Galloway planned to kill Eddie and make the death look like suicide. Since I had horned in, I was slated to check out, too.

Whitey and one of the other men moved toward Eddie. "All right, kid," Whitey growled, "come on."

I DIDN'T expect Eddie to make any fight, for the situation looked hopeless. It *was* hopeless. Just the same, Eddie Alcott came out of his chair like a shot. One of his fists smashed at Whitey's face. The other took a cut at the second man. Whitey stumbled, sprawled at my feet. The other man reeled back.

Galloway rushed forward. So did Butch. Eddie lunged at Butch. He ducked under a blow. He smashed a fist into the man's face, then jerked around to face Galloway and I saw that he was crying, crying like a baby. Tears were streaming down his face. Choking noises came from his throat.

Whitey, who had sprawled at my feet, started to get up. I kicked him in the head and he flopped down again. Then I saw the gun in his hand. I pounced on it, jerked it up. One of the men was edging around behind Eddie. I leveled the gun at him and pulled the trigger.

The roar of the gun jerked Galloway around. I swung the gun on Galloway just as he grabbed for his pocket. My bullet caught him in the shoulder.

"Get out, Eddie!" I yelled. "Get out!"

Something smashed my arm, numbing it. My gun fell to the floor. Two men rushed me and behind them, Eddie came charging forward. I went down and the

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two wheeled to face Eddie.

I figured then that everything was over. Eddie, I knew, couldn't handle the men still on their feet. Even as I realized that, one of them stumbled across me, and getting to my knees I saw that Eddie had another cornered.

Galloway was heading for them. He didn't even glance at me. I reached out, caught his ankle and jerked. Galloway tripped. He lunged head-first at the wall. I started to get up. Something smashed against my head. That's all I remember until I woke up and found myself staring into Jerry's face.

* * * * *

I wasn't feeling any too good just then. There was a time when I could have gone through such an affair and come out of it with only a few bruises. This time, when I opened my eyes, I began to be aware of various pains. I rather wished I could lose consciousness again.

Jerry scowled at me. "What did you plan on buying here, Dad?" he asked.

That made me mad. I gritted my teeth, tried to sit up.

"Take it easy," Jerry advised. "That boy friend of yours—Eddie—is in the clear. We've got the men who robbed his bank, though one of them stays here to face a murder charge. Crazy as it sounded, that story you told me in the Loring girl's apartment turned out to be true."

I relaxed a little at that, and discovered a few new pains. I saw Mike staring at me.

"How did you get here?" I growled.

Mike laughed, and Jerry said, "He followed you. It didn't take Mike long to bust out of that bathroom. He was sure where you were heading. He sent word to me. He was in the alley, below you, when you were ordered through the broken window. We didn't get here until after the ruckus, but Mike got in on it. He says he's going to make a cop out of your friend Eddie."

"He'll have to ask Merle Houston

about that," I declared, remembering Eddie's girl.

Jerry moved away, and after a minute came back. "I've got a car outside, Dad," he told me. "I'm taking you out to my place. When you come to Chicago, after this, that's where you're going to stay!"

I didn't argue with him. There wasn't any point to it right now. Eddie's problem was solved.

"All right, Jerry," I said. "I suppose you know best."

Jerry grinned. "It's about time you admitted it. You're past seventy, you know."

I might have said a lot in answer to that, but I didn't. Seventy isn't a bad age.

MURDER KNOCKS TWICE

(Continued from page 105)

betta drove home his last thrust.

"We won't have much trouble pinning a rap on you. Flo Raymond can have her choice—either take a rap as an accomplice in the murder of Howard Manning, or tell what she knows and get off with a fraud rap."

Flo Raymond was smart. She turned on Wright.

"I told you that you'd fry for murdering Manning. You wouldn't take my advice and give him a bigger cut so he'd play ball with us. Sure, I'll sing. I don't want any part of a murder rap. I was willing to help swindle old hatchet-face out of some easy dough—he's got plenty of it. But the murders were Wright's idea. He even suggested to Leary that the hotel incinerator was a swell place to get rid of the Vale dame forever."

Wright came off the divan. His hand flashed to his pocket and when it came out a spring-blade knife flashed in the light as he lunged at the blond strip-teaser.

"By damn, if I'm bound for hell, you'll be there waiting for me," he croaked.

Trombetta moved like a steel spring that had been suddenly released. His automatic

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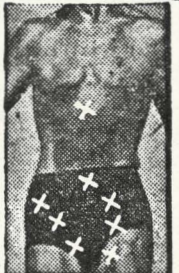


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cut through the air and the barrel crashed down on Wright's head, felling him.

"That's the last link," Trombetta grunted. "I think our lab men can match that knife blade with the wound in Joe Venner's chest."

"Is—is Joe dead?" Cleo asked. "I heard a struggle when they chloroformed me and put me in a car."

"Yes," said Trombetta gently. "Your dad tried to square things, I guess. He tackled your kidnappers barehanded, but this rat knifed him to death. Joe had his bad points, but he worshiped you, Gorgeous—and died to prove it."

Conlon was swearing under his breath as he put the handcuffs on the limp body on the floor. Ralph Sherry's bushy eyebrows were pulled down over his nose in a fierce scowl as he moved hesitantly toward Cleo Vale, his granddaughter.

"I know now that I'm not as good a man as your father was, Cleo," he said, "but—I'd like to try to—take his place—for the few years I've got left."

Trombetta grinned as he saw Cleo pat the thin, bony hand that went around the little redhead's shoulder.

"You don't deserve it, old sourpuss," he commented, "but if you agree to waive those charges against me and the skipper I'll give her the office to take you up on that. I always did envy those playboys who had wealthy girl friends. Now, I can find romance on Park Avenue for myself."

Conlon straightened, snorted in open disgust.

"We had a report about a Chinese getting knocked off down on Pell Street just before you called me up to the Grendalia," he said. "Take your hunches down there, Master Mind. Maybe you can find romance on Mott or Pell that's more your speed."

But Trombetta didn't pay much attention. He was too busy, with a grateful, affectionate redhead in his arms, trying to tell him that he'd found plenty of romance on the street where death had knocked twice.

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(Continued from page 6)

insidious doubt that he might have married murder, and that on his wedding night he had beside him a—KILLER IN HIS BED!

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[Turn page]

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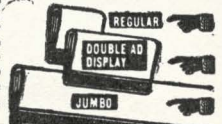
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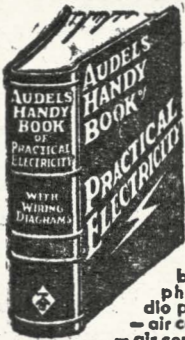
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