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A SPEED MAGAZINE

TWO MEN MISSING

by Roger Torrey

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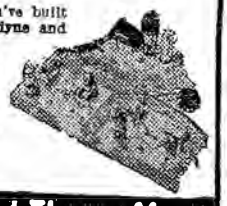

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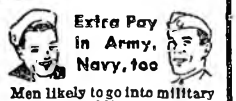

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December, 1943 Vol. 14, No. 1

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Other Top-Notch Short Stories and Novelettes

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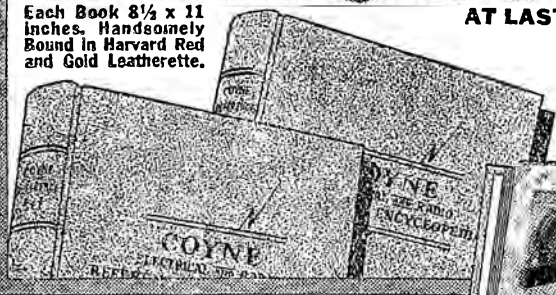

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I was flat on the floor behind an over-stuffed chair when the merry men came in. I'd tired of playing chump

By ROGER TORREY

"I'm being followed," Bowles insisted. "And there's no reason for it. No domestic trouble. Nothing, and I want to know why, and I want to know who's doing it." The dick was skeptical, until he found his client dead

TWO MEN MISSING

THIS man Bowles wasn't frightened. He was just plain mad. He was kind of short, very husky, and an aggressive little guy, anyway, and he was just fuming.

"I'm being followed, I tell you, Mr. Keenan. And there's no reason for it."

"Wife trouble, maybe?"

"I've been happily married for twenty-two years. I've a son in the South Pacific and another earning his wings at

Pensacola. There's nothing like trouble at home."

I'd heard that song before. Sometimes one of the couple will be looking for divorce evidence without the other one suspecting one thing wrong.

"If it was your wife, could this tag have caught anything wrong?" I persisted.

"Absolutely not. I've been in Washington on business. I stopped off here on more of the same—on the same deal. I've been followed since I got off the train."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

"What's your tail look like?"

"I think there are two of them. One is a tall thin man about my own age. About forty-five. The other is short and stout and possibly thirty. The first man is dark—the second is sandy-haired. Both wear conservative clothing and neither looks like a hoodlum. I don't understand it."

"Which one's on you now?"

"I beg pardon!"

"Which of the two is following you."

"The tall man. Though they interchange."

"Follow you up here?"

"Into the building, at least."

I said: "Okay! You tell me you're staying at the Charing. You go straight back there, taking it slow and easy so they have no trouble keeping up with you. I'll go out the back, right now. You give me five minutes and then leave, and I'll pick up you and your tag right down in front. Okay?"

"That will be fine."

"And when you get back to the hotel, go upstairs and wait for me. I won't have myself announced at the desk—they might have got to the phone girl and there's no reason for letting them know you've hired me, if they haven't found that out. I'll go right up."

"And you think you can find out who it is that's following me? And the reason for it?"

I said I could try—and that I wouldn't collect a fee unless I could furnish results.

Which certainly was fair enough.

MY MAN Bowles came out of the building with his hurried little walk, and I let him get halfway down the block before I fell in behind him. His tag was behind me then, but he passed me before we got to the next corner. He was the older one—Bowles had described him to a T. Tall and lean and looking like a respectable business man.

I went along with the parade, keeping well back of my man, and we were in that formation when we walked into the Charing. Bowles was just stepping into the elevator as I came through the door, and his shadow was heading for one of the house phones.

I let him make his call, and he sat down then in a lobby chair, watching the elevator bank and fanning his face with a good-looking gray hat.

I moved in next to him. "Hey!" I said. "I never mistake a face. Aren't you Jonas Hammond, from Wichita, Kansas? Didn't I meet you at the State Legion Convention in Wichita, three years ago?"

He gave me a blank look. "I'm sorry," he said. "I hate to spoil your record for remembering but I've never been in Wichita in my life. And my name isn't Hammond."

I said I couldn't understand it—that I never missed. Or, at least, very rarely missed. By that time I was sitting next to him and offering him one of the Keenan cigarettes, which he accepted. He couldn't very well turn it down the way I was insisting.

"I'm a stranger in town myself," I told him. "Kansas City. But Missouri, not

Kansas City, Kansas. There's a difference, but most folks don't realize it. Of course the towns do run together."

He kept watching the elevators. He'd mumble something when I'd make a remark, but I could see he didn't have his mind on his answers. And I could see he had me pegged as the typical hotel bore and was hoping I'd go away and leave him alone.

And then his friend stepped out of the elevator and my man stood up with relief on his face. "I've got to leave," he said. "It's been a most interesting conversation, Mr. . . . ugh . . ."

I said: "Keenan. Joe Keenan. Wholesale fruit—I do a little jobbing."

He said he was glad to have known me and fell in with his pal. The pal, of course, was the other one who'd been tailing Bowles. Bowles had caught him right, too. A blond two hundred pounder, with an undershot jaw and too close a shave, unless his blotchy red face was the result of high blood pressure. They went out together and I gave 'em a reasonable time to get clear of the entrance and almost missed 'em because of it. They were just taking off in a cab, and I got the one that was pulling into line to take the place of the one they'd chartered.

I said: "Keep after that one in front, sonny."

"You mean Joe's hack?"

That gave me another thought. I said: "He's a steady on this stand?"

"Sure."

I said I'd changed my mind and turned loose with a quarter. I had a hunch that Joe, the hacker, would remember where he'd taken the two guys—if I crossed his palm with silver, that is.

Those cabbies don't miss many bets.

BOWLES had 418 and I saw there was hell to pay at that end of the hall as soon as I got out of the elevator. There were a dozen or more guests milling around and there was the assistant-manager, whom I happened to know slightly, and there was Sid Jeffreys, the house cop, whom I knew very well. Sid had his back to 418, and was holding his arms out, saying:

"Please go to your rooms, people. The police have been notified. Please keep calm."

The people seemed calm enough but the assistant-manager was running around like his pants were on fire. He was wringing his hands and asking all and everybody what he was to do.

I went in through the crowd and Sid looked up and saw me. "Hiya, Keenan," he said. "What did you do? Just smell it out?"

"Come again," I said.

"This killing, I mean."

"What killing?"

He jerked his thumb back over his shoulder. "The maid walked in on it. She was going in to put fresh towels in the room—what with this war the laundry service has gone completely sour—and she walked right into it."

"Are you kidding?"

"If a stiff's funny, I'm joking like hell."

"Who was it?"

"Guy named Bowles."

"That's my client."

He corrected me. "Maybe that *was* your client, Joey, m'boy, but it ain't your client now. He's Saint Peter's worry now."

"Called the cops yet?"

"Sure. Gimme a hand and let's see if we can get these people back in their rooms. They come out when they heard the maid sound off."

We herded various guests, some indignant, some just curious, back into their quarters, and Sid told me what had gone on. The maid had gone into the room with her pass key, after giving the usual

little tap at the door. She'd found one man bending over another one, with the first one covered with blood. She stood in the door and screamed—and from what Sid said she really did a job of it. The killer ran past her, knocking her into the wall and out of his way as he did, and the last she saw of him he was going down the service stairs to the floor below.

I said: "He caught the elevator down there. I saw him come out."

Sid said: "You did *what?*"

"Saw him come out of the elevator."

"How d'ya know it was the killer?"

I said "Because I was talking to his partner."

"Loving Saints!" said Sid. "If the cops aren't going to love you! Here it's all wrapped up for 'em, as soon as it starts."

"Not so easy, Sid. Who the guys are I don't know."

He stared at this and started to ask more questions, but right then the police arrived in force.

They were headed by Captain Milton, who was a good friend of mine and that made me feel a whole lot better. I could work with Milton—and I had a hunch I'd have to.

BOWLES had been a small manufacturer, turning out zippers and patent snaps and things like that for the government. He'd been to Washington to see about some priorities he had to have, and he'd stopped in town to purchase some of the stuff he'd arranged the priorities for. Milton made a fast check, both with the man's home town and with Washington and made sure of this.

He said: "This guy, Keenan, was on the up and up. Even a couple of phone calls are enough to establish that."

"Why was he being followed then?"

Milton shrugged and said he didn't know.

I said: "He didn't know, either. That's why he hired me. There's another angle. Has anything happened in Washington? I mean during his stay there?"

"Nothing out of the way, if that's what you mean. There were the usual crimes, of course—the country don't hold steady—but nothing out of the way. Why?"

"I'm trying to figure why he rated a tag."

"Both men were strangers?"

"They were. I thought first they'd be some agency men, hired by either his wife or some competitor, but I know every sleuth in town. They weren't home talent if they were private cops."

"Any other line on them?"

I said: "No," and lied in my teeth. I hadn't said a word about the taxicab angle and I didn't intend to until I'd done a little looking around.

I said: "And now what?"

He said: "It settles down to this. It'll go down as a guest killed by a hotel prowler. We'll hold his things until his family has been notified and redeems them. It'll go down as unsolved on our books, unless we find out a lot more than we know now. Got any ideas, Joe?"

That time I told the truth. I said: "Not one idea."

JOE, the hacker's full name was Joseph Bernadowski. He was a dapper little guy and looked more like a movie star than most of them do when they're dressed in street clothes. He had the mustache and the profile and he fondled the one and gave me the benefit of the other.

"I forget," he said.

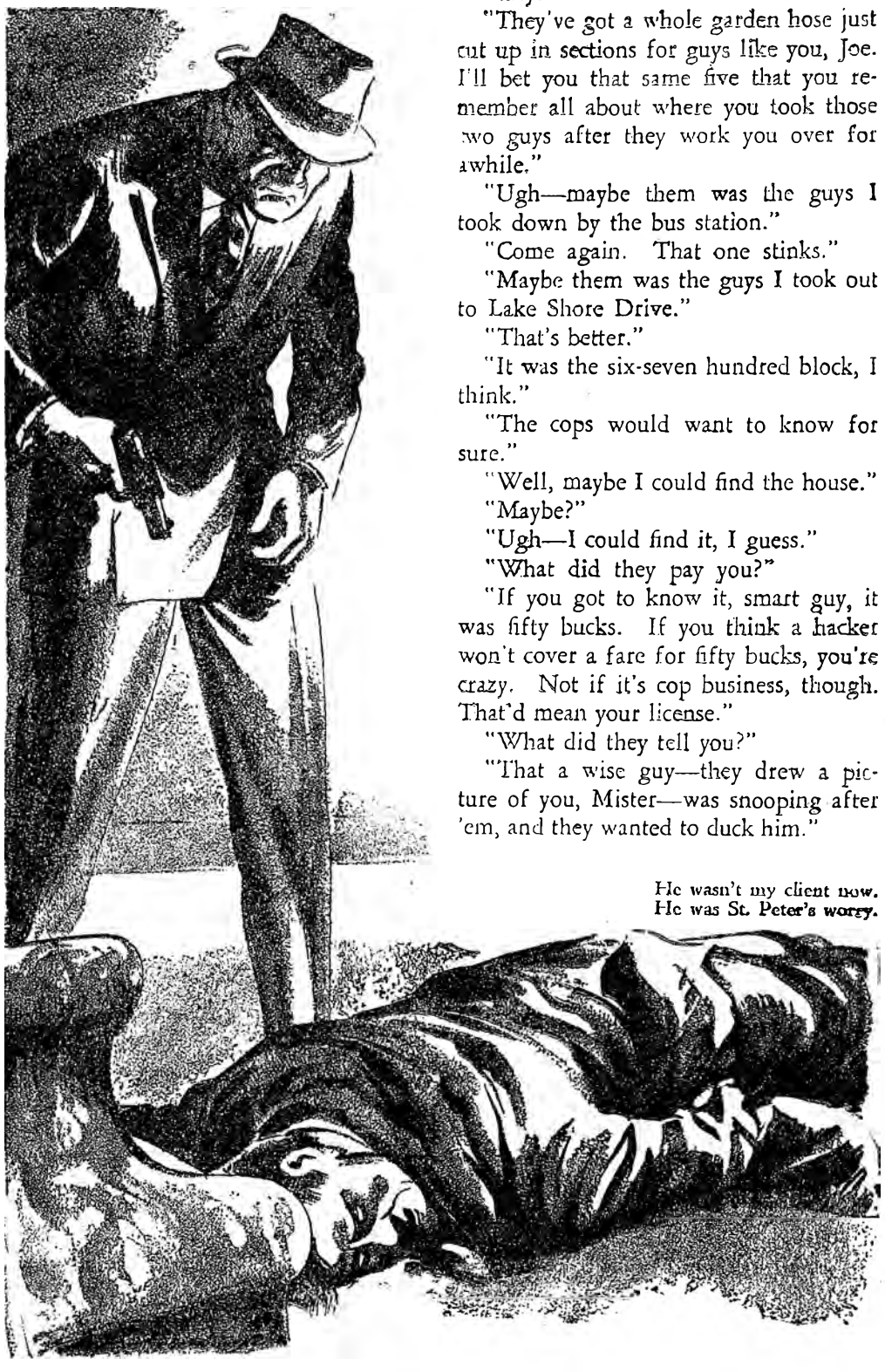
I showed him the five-dollar bill I'd figured was tops for the information. "You still can't place 'em?"

He didn't even bother to sneer at the bill. He said: "Brother, I can't remember a thing."

I opened the door of the cab. "Okay! Let's go."

"Where to, Mister?"

"Police station."



"Hey!"

"They've got a whole garden hose just cut up in sections for guys like you, Joe. I'll bet you that same five that you remember all about where you took those two guys after they work you over for awhile."

"Ugh—maybe them was the guys I took down by the bus station."

"Come again. That one stinks."

"Maybe them was the guys I took out to Lake Shore Drive."

"That's better."

"It was the six-seven hundred block, I think."

"The cops would want to know for sure."

"Well, maybe I could find the house."

"Maybe?"

"Ugh—I could find it, I guess."

"What did they pay you?"

"If you got to know it, smart guy, it was fifty bucks. If you think a hacker won't cover a fare for fifty bucks, you're crazy. Not if it's cop business, though. That'd mean your license."

"What did they tell you?"

"That a wise guy—they drew a picture of you, Mister—was snooping after 'em, and they wanted to duck him."

He wasn't my client now.
He was St. Peter's worry.

"They should have taken a couple of other cabs on their way. That would have thrown a tag."

"They gave me fifty, Mister. For another fifty I could maybe remember something else."

I dug out fifty, wondering whether I ought to pay it or whether to take the chiseling little heel down to the station and give Milton a chance at him. But I'd played along with a hunch that far and decided I'd carry it farther. I passed the fifty over and for the first time got something beside a scowl.

"They didn't change cabs, smart guy, because it wouldn't have done them any good. I know one of them—the tall thin one. That's Larry Hardenfeld. I used to drive a hack in Washington, and he's a Washington boy. You get it? Even if they'd thrown a tag, they knew I still could put the finger on 'em."

"That's worth the fifty," I said. "Let's roll. You show me the place."

It was a thirty minute trip. Out Lake Shore to the best residential section in town. He pointed out a big house—almost a palace—and said: "That's the place. That's where they went."

"Know who lives there?"

He said reverently: "Old man Cummings. Elijah Cummings. *The* Cummings. The old guy that owns half the world and has got a mortgage on the other half."

He was exaggerating but only in a minor way. Cummings had more money than Carter's got pills.

I said: "This is very interesting. Now we go back to town."

I KNEW some newspaper men and they're the ones I hit for information. What a good newsman don't know isn't fit to print—that's granted—but what they know and don't have any reason to print is everything in the book. The first one I picked was Charley Newman and I chose him because he'd served a hitch on the Washington *Post*.

I bought him a beer—he was in Jack's Bar—and said: "What d'ya know about a guy named Larry Hardenfeld, Charley?"

"If you're fooling with Larry, don't," he said promptly. "That guy's a hot shot. He's a big time gunner—he don't work cheap, but when he works, he doesn't miss. Now ask me another."

"What about old man Cummings?"

Charley's eyes looked suddenly guarded. "What about him?"

"That's all. What about him?"

Charley said: "Look, Joe. We're pals, aren't we?"

"Sure."

"If I tell you something, can you keep it under your hat? Can I depend on that?"

"Sure. You know it."

"It'd mean my job if it got out that I'd slipped you the dope."

"I won't crack about it, Charley."

"Old Cummings died three days ago in Washington. Every paper in town's holding it for awhile."

"But why?"

"Orders. With that news out, the market would do more tricks than a monkey can on a hundred yards of vine. They're putting things solid before they break it."

"Who's they?"

Charley grinned and didn't say a word.

"D'ya mean, Charley, that the papers can be soft-pedaled like that when a man as famous as Cummings dies?"

"It's war time, Joe," he said. "There's plenty going on that wouldn't happen in peace time. Let it go at that. The papers aren't hushing it just on a notion."

"What would Larry Hardenfeld have to do with a thing like old man Cummings' death?"

"Has he?" asked Charley. "Listen, Joe. If he has, maybe there's more to it

than the boys have figured. This Larry is strictly hot-shot."

I figured to go whole hog or none and told Charley everything I knew. He listened to it all and then shook his head. He said: "The Cummings money was behind a thousand war plants. It may have been behind this man Bowles, for that matter. But why Hardenfeld would be tagging a little guy like Bowles—a guy that's strictly small potatoes to the Cummings' interests, that I don't know. I don't figure it out."

"I'm going to keep trying," I said.

Charley said: "And I'm going right along."

THE police were looking for a tall, thin, dark man and a short heavy blond man, but the two of them picked Charley and me off the street in the rush hour and right in front of the First National Bank. And in a neat way.

We were going along, having traded Jack's Bar for the Clemerhorn and being in the process of trading the Clemerhorn for the Pied Piper, down on Ninth. Charley roams when he's drunk and I was going along for company—and waiting for an idea to strike.

This Larry Hardenfeld moved into step with me and said: "This isn't just a hand I've got in my pocket, Keenan. Where can we go and talk?"

I looked over and saw that Charley had a strained expression on his face and that the blond man was with him as Hardenfeld was with me.

I said: "We might make it the station, Mister. The cops are looking for you right now. You're hotter than Dutch love."

He laughed. "So the cops are looking for us, eh? Get that, Marty? The guy says the cops are looking for us."

Marty laughed happily. He said: "These cops and a lot of other cops all over the country."

Hardenfeld said: "Let's go to your office, Keenan. That's where the stuff is, isn't it?"

"What stuff?"

"Why not be nice?" he asked, as though he was reasoning with a child. "We won't hurt you if you behave. Newman, you knew me in Washington. Tell your pal I'm a nice guy as long as I get things my own way."

"He's a nice guy, Joe," Charley said woodenly. "Just as long as he gets things his own way. If he don't, they pick you up in vacant lots."

"You see, Keenan? I'm willing to go along with you. I'll even go so far as to pay a couple of grand to avoid a beef about the matter."

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

"The stuff that Bowles gave you, dummy. What in the hell d'ya think we were tagging the guy around for?"

"I can't figure."

"Then up to your office."

And up to my office we went. We passed half a dozen cops and the dumbheads stood on their flat feet and watched us pass. The gun would shove harder in my side and I'd gulp and walk right by 'em, just like a little man. Then we were inside, with Hardenfeld and his blond pal making themselves right at home. They took a drink of my whiskey, taking turns so one of them could watch us at all times, and then Hardenfeld started.

"Where is it," he asked. "You going to open up that tin safe of yours or do I have to send out to the dime store for a can opener and do it for you."

"He didn't give me a thing. I'm telling you the truth. He came up and hired me to find out who was following him and why. That's all."

Hardenfeld looked at his pal Marty and said:

"Well, I'll be damned. You were

right, Marty. He had it with him in that hotel room, all the time."

"Had what?" Charley asked, his news instinct coming to the front. "And what did it have to do with Cummings."

"Open the safe," Hardenfeld told me. "I'll make sure."

I opened the safe. There was nothing in it—there never had been anything in it since I'd moved in the office and found it there. It came with my lease. He searched me then, right down to the skin—and I came out of that all right, naturally.

And then he waved the gun he now held in sight and said:

"You boys be good and stay right here. That's all."

Then he and Marty left.

MILTON had the stuff locked up in the property room and it didn't take us long to go through it. The two handbags were Bowles with no mistake. They had his home-town tailor's labels in the clothes inside. There were half a dozen letters tucked into pockets in the bags, the way a man will do with hotel mail, and the identification was certain.

But it was a different thing with the briefcase. There was nothing in that but a will, but the will was signed by Elijah Cummings. It was made in Washington and dated two days before Cummings' death. What alterations were in it that changed the will before it none of us knew, but Milton went to first principles in finding out. He got the head of the law firm that did Cummings' business, or had done it while the old man was alive, and he had him down to the station in an hour.

It was a pompous old duck named Terwilliger. He'd been a lawyer all his life, but I'd be willing to swear that was the first time he'd ever been in a police station.

Captain Milton said: "It's this, Mr. Terwilliger. We've reason to believe that Mr. Cummings' latest will was stolen. We have reason to believe that the stolen will was innocently taken from the thief by a total stranger, by mistake. This stranger was named Bowles, and he was killed in an attempt at locating the will again. This by the original thieves."

"Impossible," snorted Mr. Terwilliger, blowing out his cheeks. "What would be the benefit in stealing an object like a will? That is, how could a thief profit by the theft? Ugh—I see, I see. I understand your point."

"You were familiar with the terms of the former will?"

"And with the present. I drew them both, sir. I went to Washington at Mr. Cummings request and at that time drew the latter document."

"How did it differ?"

"It cut Elijah's nephew Samuel E. Cummings almost completely out. He is to have an income of one thousand dollars a year from the estate. Before, in the older will, he was to receive five million dollars in cash. Elijah Cummings, gentlemen, kept a very large part of his fortune *in* cash. This to make his financing a simpler thing."

"Who knew of the change?"

Terwilliger shrugged. "I imagine Samuel knew the old man contemplated the change. They argued bitterly, that I know. This last quarrel was concerned with the harpy Samuel insisted on marrying. She was a shame and a disgrace to the Cummings name, and Elijah was bitter about the matter."

I said to Milton: "There you've got it. This nephew knew about the new will.

He got next to Larry Hardenfeld and that guy Marty, and hired them to steal the thing, after the old man died. What with the news of the old man's death being kept out of the papers and all—he's not officially dead, you might say, the new will naturally wasn't offered for

"Open that tin safe of yours," he commanded.

probate. Do you have a copy of it?"

"I have not. Elijah wanted to look it over, though he'd signed it in the presence of witnesses, legally. He hadn't made up his mind—he possibly would again have altered it if death hadn't taken him."

I looked at the captain and said: "There you have it."

And Milton said: "And I'll be damned if I know just what to do with it."

I made the appointment with Samuel E. Cummings by phone, but I picked the spot where I'd meet him. It was to be 1243 in the Charing, the same hotel where Bowles had found death.

I said: "I can deal with you, mister, where I couldn't deal with those two thugs you had working for you. You know who I am—they told you about me. I stalled 'em when they came after the thing, but I stalled 'em because you're the guy and the only guy that can make any kind of pay-off."

"You've got it?"

"That's what I'm telling you."

"Will you have it with you?

"Don't be a chump. I don't carry around anything worth that kind of dough. What's to prevent you coming in with a gun and holding me up and destroying it right then and there."

"I won't pay unless I know what I'm paying for."

I stalled but I let myself be persuaded, and the date was for ten that evening in 1243. The hotel had picked the room for us—'45 and '47 were both vacant except for about twenty cops taking evidence through contact dictographs on the walls.

And I played it the chump way right straight through. I let Samuel E. Cummings in the room and pretended not to see and hear him fix the latch. I let him talk me into taking a demand note for a hundred grand, this last payable immediately the Elijah Cummings estate was probated, in return for the new and twice stolen will. I even pretended to be surprised when Hardenfeld and his pal Marty walked in through the door Samuel E. had so carefully left unlocked.

But I didn't act chump when Milton and his merry men came in through the bathroom and from the adjoining room. I was behind an overstuffed chair and as flat on the floor as I could squeeze. And as it was, one slug tore the rug not two inches from my head.

IT ENDED with one cop down with a bullet through the thigh and another standing with a bullet through the shoulder. Marty, who's name turned out to be Martin Cruikshank and who had a record three sheets long, was down with two slugs in his belly. Deader than last week's news. Hardenfeld had his right arm broken in three places, by three different slugs, but was okay beside that. And beside the handcuffs that linked him to Samuel E. Cummings.

Even old lawyer Terwilliger was there, fussing and fuming in great shape. He shook a fist in Samuel's face and said: "You're a disgrace to your name, sir. I have never accepted criminal practice, but by God, sir, I shall ask the district-attorney if I may assist him in prosecuting your case. I—damn it, sir, you're not a gentleman. You have robbed the dead."

Cummings hung his head and Milton took pity on him and started to lead him away. Hardenfeld, that tough cookie, walked right along, just as though a shot-up arm didn't matter a thing to him.

Charley Newman was in heaven or hell—he didn't know just which and wouldn't until he'd talked to his managing editor. If the hush was still on Cummings' death, he'd have to blanket his yarn, and the thought was breaking his heart.

He was on the phone, trying to find out what was what, when Terwilliger came over to me. "The Cummings estate is going to be properly grateful to you, Mr. Keenan," he said, looking like a Santa Claus. "I can assure you you will be paid for the time and trouble it took you to solve the matter."

"Ugh—thanks," I said. "Ugh—what d'ya think they'll do—I mean the estate? I mean how much?"

HE thought and said, smiling widely: "I do not believe that five hundred dollars would be too much to expect, Mr. Keenan."

That time his smile made me think of a wolf, not Santa Claus. Here I'd saved the estate five million bucks and I was to get five hundred measly little dollars.

"You realize, of course, that you were not officially retained by the estate, Mr. Keenan. That naturally bears on the subject."

"Sure," I said.

Then Charley turned from the phone, beaming all over. "It's clear," he said. "They've got the old boy's death going through the presses, right now. I can slam this one through right on top of it. Oh, boy, oh, boy. The story of the missing will."

"And the missing men," I said. "Cummings wasn't missing and Bowles wasn't missing. But Larry Hardenfeld and Marty Cruikshank were and will be. Bowles is the only one hurt."

Terwilliger said thoughtfully: "You know, young man, I haven't as yet understood just how this man Bowles happened to have the will in his possession. You and the police captain assure me he knew nothing of it. And yet he had it. I fail to understand."

"Ever pick up anybody else's package in a store? Anybody else's bag in a station?"

"Why no, certainly not. Carelessness like that is inexcusable."

I said: "Bowles found that out."

Sentence of Death

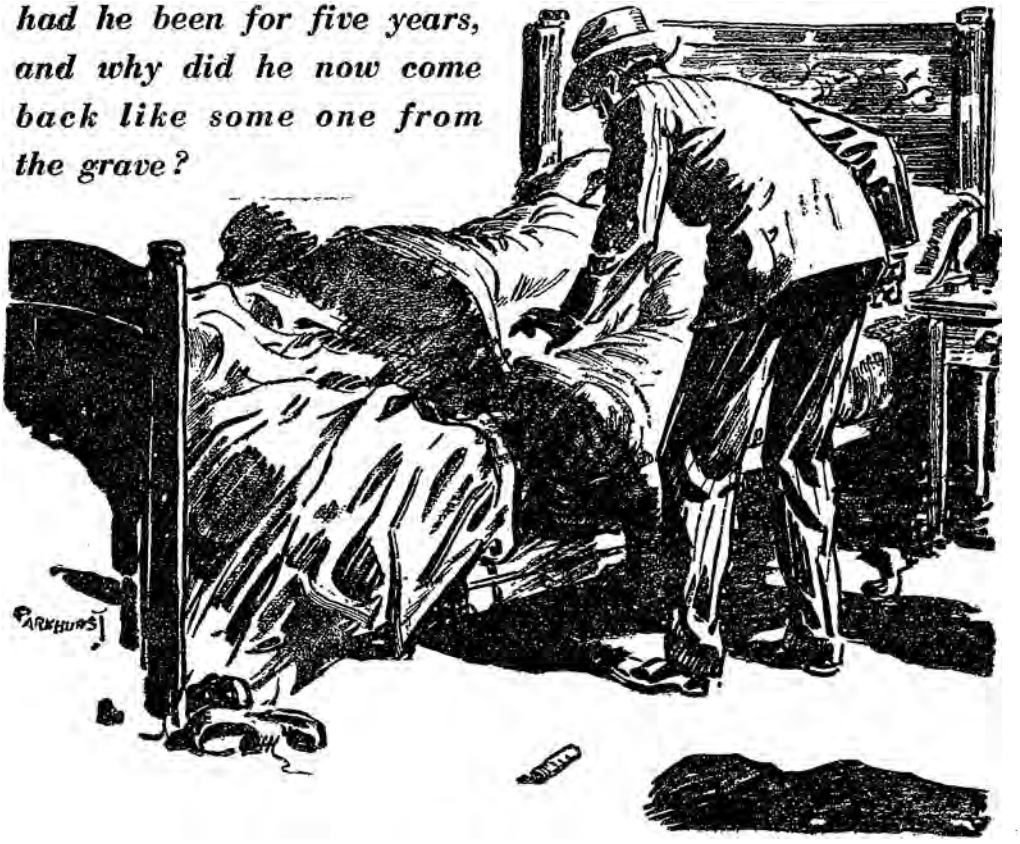
THERE are very few crimes for which the Government of the United States exacts the supreme penalty. Murder, which is the usual reason for capital punishment, is generally left to the individual states. But, in cases of kidnaping or treason, the Federal government may impose the sentence of death, after a man has been convicted by a jury of his peers. The crime of treason, a crime worse than murder or robbery, for it is directed against the government itself, has sent very few men to their death. It has also sent one woman, only one woman in our entire history, to her death.

If Mary Surratt had been beautiful, or even appealingly young, she might have become one of the best known and most dramatized of tragic heroines. The story of her life and death contains all the other necessary ingredients. She was a woman of great charm and gentle breeding, whose only proven crime against her country was serving soldiers and couriers with soup and hot coffee during the Civil War, which is not a crime. But she was just forty-five when the strange gyrations of fortune involved her in the most hysterical treason trial this country has ever seen.

The Civil War ended in 1865, but the feelings of the South continued at fever heat. A man named Booth came forth from the mob of malcontents who thought his God-given mission was to assassinate President Lincoln. He succeeded only too well, and the whole country cried for re-

(*Continued on page* 59)

Why were two anonymous persons interested in preventing John Barstow from borrowing on his insurance? Where had he been for five years, and why did he now come back like some one from the grave?



REPRIEVE

By L. G. BLOCHMAN

THE girl obviously had been crying. She had done a pretty good job of cosmetic concealment, and as she sat in the outer office of Roderick Poplar, chief investigator for the Gibraltar Insurance Co., she stole a quick, verifying glance into the tiny mirror of her compact and added an extra dab of sun-tan makeup. She could do nothing, however, to hide the slight puffiness of her eyelids, or the deep look of anguish in her blue eyes. Her hair was very dark, which made her eyes seem even bluer. The fingers which nervously jabbed out one half-smoked cigarette after the other were slim and graceful. She was small, trim, and quite young — probably not more than twenty. She started violently when the receptionist said: "Mr. Poplar will see you now."

The girl got up, smoothed the pleats in her Spring dress of pastel-blue silk, passed through two doors, and shook

The woman faltered. "Is he—is he—?"
"He is," Poplar answered. "Very."

hands with Roderick Poplar across a glass-topped desk.

"You're Miss Catherine Barstow," he said. "Please sit down and tell me exactly what it is you want."

Catherine Barstow sat down. She was reassured by his firm handclasp and friendly smile, still she hesitated. She was puzzled by Roderick Poplar's appearance. An insurance investigator was a detective, of course, and she didn't know exactly what she thought a detective would look like, although it was certainly not this. Poplar had the shoulders of a wrestler and the sensitive hands of a surgeon. His clothes were cut in extreme Broadway fashion, yet suspended from the watch-chain across his fawn-colored, double-breasted waistcoat was a Phi Beta Kappa key. His small dark mustache suggested the fop, but his high, broad forehead and the calm, penetrating gaze of his intelligent brown eyes denied the suggestion of mental superficiality. He remained standing as he waited for the girl to speak.

"You . . . I'm John Barstow's daughter," she said at last. "Has my father been up here to borrow—a rather large sum—on his insurance policy—within the last few days?"

Poplar smiled. "The loan has been approved," he said. "The check is probably being mailed out this morning. I have the papers right here."

"Oh." The girl appeared dismayed. "Where is the check being sent?"

"In your care, at Larchmont. Is that your home?"

"Yes," Catherine Barstow said ab-

sently. "Is there . . . Did he give any other address?"

"That's the only address we have. Doesn't your father live with you, Miss Barstow?"

"Not for the last five years. Can't you . . . isn't there some way you could find out where my father is living, Mr. Poplar?"

THE investigator was sitting behind the desk with his hands folded in his lap. He again smiled tolerantly. "You might try the Bureau of Missing Persons—"

"Oh, not the police!" the girl broke in quickly.

"Why not the police, Miss Barstow?" Poplar's eyes narrowed.

"Well, because of Mother, for one thing. And then I'm afraid. . . ."

"Of what, Miss Barstow?"

"Nothing, really. It's just that it's so strange the way father has come back without really coming back, that I—Well, what I really want is to find out where my father is living so I can tell him not to send me that money, and try to explain why he mustn't try to see me again. Is there any way of stopping that loan, Mr. Poplar?"

Poplar's hands leaped to the edge of his desk. He leaned forward, his arms wide apart. He said: "The reason they sent you to me, Miss Barstow, is that yesterday a man telephoned to ask the same question: Whether there was any way of stopping the loan on the Barstow policy. He said that he understood that no loan could be made without the consent of the beneficiary—which is wrong. Nobody can stop Barstow borrowing on his policy. Have you any idea who the man might have been, Miss Barstow?"

"No," said Catherine Barstow. Her tone was not convincing.

"Is your father by any chance John Barstow, the playwright?"

"Father used to write plays, yes."

"Didn't he disappear suddenly about four years ago?"

"Five years ago."

"Ran away with an actress, his leading lady? Dropped from sight at the height of his career?"

"That's what the newspapers said," the girl replied.

"Wasn't it true?"

"Yes, I guess it was. I was only fifteen then, and everybody kept the papers away from mother and me. Mother went all to pieces, you know. She still goes all to pieces when anybody mentions it. So I've never talked to her about father."

Poplar thumbed a buzzer. A stocky, square-jawed man wearing yellow shoes came in. He did not take off his derby which was pushed to the back of the head. "I've got the dope on that third race," he began.

"We're not going to the track today, Frank," Poplar said. "This is Frank Belden, my assistant, Miss Barstow. Frank, Miss Barstow's father has a $50,000 policy with us, ten-pay life, paid up, with accumulated dividends. We've approved a loan for $38,000 on the policy, and now several people seem to be interested in stopping the loan. I want you to get the classified directory, Frank, and call every play broker in town until you find the one who handled John Barstow's plays. He's a dramatist. Find out where he's living now, and where his royalty payments have been sent. That's all."

When Belden left, Poplar ruffled through the papers on his desk, then leaned back again. He said: "The beneficiary of your father's policy is Mrs. Laura Barstow Thane. Is that your mother?"

"Yes."

"So she's apparently remarried. But she still goes to pieces whenever your father is mentioned?"

"Well, it's partly Eric's fault. Eric

Thane is my stepfather. He can't mention father without calling him all sorts of names. When he's had a few cocktails, he threatens to kill father if he ever dares show up again."

"Do you suppose it was your stepfather who called yesterday to try to stop the loan?"

"I—I don't know."

"But your father did dare show up, apparently. Where?"

"At my graduation exercises last week. I sensed he was there even before I saw him, 'way at the back of the auditorium. When I looked for him afterwards, he was gone. Then three nights later he was waiting for me outside the house."

"That's your house in Larchmont, I take it. Does your father own that house, Miss Barstow?"

"Father built it, but it's always been in mother's name. When she married Eric Thane, he moved in with us."

"I see." Roderick Poplar clasped his hands behind his head. "What did your father want, Miss Barstow?"

"Just to talk to me. He said that now that I'd grown up and finished school, he thought there was no need for him to stay away any longer, although he wouldn't come back until he was sure his reappearance wouldn't spoil my life. He asked if I had any plans for marriage. I said—"

CATHERINE stopped. Her lips moved silently. There was anguish in the gaze she turned away from Poplar.

"And you told him that you were engaged?" the detective suggested sympathetically.

The girl nodded. "I told him that Bill hadn't been out of college very long and was still a law clerk, but that we were going to get married as soon as he can afford it. He's with Freeman & Forbes and they've promised to take him into the firm in a year or so."

"Pardon me again. Bill's name is—?"

"Simmons. William David Simmons. Father wanted to know if we were very much in love, and I told him yes. Then he said we were to get married right away and go to the West Coast. He said he would give us money enough to buy a little house in California and to take care of us until Bill could pass the California bar exams and get established."

"Did your father mention what he was doing these days?" Poplar asked.

"No, but I could see he wasn't very prosperous. He wore an old shiny blue-serge suit, his cuffs were frayed and his shoes had been half-soled. He said he was going to get the money from his insurance."

Roderick Poplar got up and went to the window. In the river, thirty stories below, a tug was puffing and straining to tow a string of gravel barges against the current.

CATHERINE waited for him to speak. Her eyes noted the titles in the bookcase back of his desk: Pollard on firearms, Lucas on forensic chemistry, Landsteiner and Levine on blood groupings, Kahn on psychopathic personalities, Schneickert on fingerprints, disguised handwriting, and burglary. Spread on the investigator's desk was a copy of *Racing Form,* marked in pencil.

"Did you ever meet this actress your father ran away with?" Poplar asked without turning around.

"Sabina Wells? Oh, yes," Catherine said. "She used to come to our house quite frequently while they were rehearsing *Reprieve*—father's last play. I rather liked her. It was easy to see that she and father were very fond of each other. It's an awful thing to say, I suppose, but I've always suspected that mother was never very much in love with father. I guess he needed affection. He was a very affectionate person. I remember how de-

voted he was to me when I was small. He used to spoil me utterly."

Poplar turned away from the window. He came over and leaned against the edge of his desk. "You say your mother wasn't in love with your father—and yet she goes to pieces whenever your father's name is mentioned."

"Well, mother was always very jealous," the girl explained. "I guess her vanity was badly mauled when father deserted her. She's terribly proud and self-centered, and it must have hurt her to have to face her friends at her clubs and on the golf course."

Poplar nodded. "You've told me about nearly everything," he said, "except one: Why have you been crying?"

The girl did not answer.

"Did you quarrel with Bill?" the investigator asked.

The girl nodded.

"Because of your father?"

"Yes. That's why I came here. Bill doesn't want to take the money father offered. He says he'll make his own way and that we'll get married when he has his own means. He despises father for what he did, and says he could never accept help from a man who treated us as father did. He even says that if I go on seeing father, our marriage is off. He—" Catherine dabbed at her small nose with a wisp of handkerchief.

"Well," said Poplar softly. "Perhaps we ought to arrange for some sort of truce with Bill."

"Oh, if you only could," the girl exclaimed eagerly.

FRANK BELDEN came back with a fistful of notes. "I located that play broker," he said, "but he doesn't know where Barstow is. Says he hasn't heard from him in five years. Last he heard was a written order asking him to turn over all royalties to Mrs. Barstow until further notice. Says he turned over plenty the first few years, because Barstow's play *Reprieve* ran for a year on Broadway. Then there were a couple of picture sales, but after that it's been slim pickings. A few hundred bucks from amateur performances, mostly."

The phone rang. "Just a minute," Poplar said. "Yes. Mrs. Who? Just a minute. Ask her to wait." He hung up, arose, and extended his hand to the girl. "Come in again this afternoon about four," he said. "I may have news for you. Frank, show Miss Barstow the way to the rear elevators. Then stick around. I think I'm going to need you."

He watched the door close after the pair, then picked up the phone. "Show her in," he said.

An instant later the investigator rose to greet a well-dressed, statuesque, suspiciously-blonde woman. She was at least forty-five, he estimated, yet she was still handsome in a cold, classical way.

"How do you do, Mrs. Thane?" he said. "What can I—?"

"You know why I'm here," said Laura Thane. "Where's my daughter?"

"Daughter?" Poplar frowned. "I'm afraid—"

"You may just as well shed your professional ignorance," said Laura Thane impatiently. She sat down. "I know Catherine Barstow came here, because I followed her. I got tired of waiting for her to come out, that's all. Where are you hiding her?"

"Of course, of course. You're Catherine Barstow's mother," Poplar purred. "I didn't connect you at first. Miss Barstow didn't mention you were coming. She just left."

"Then I'll talk to you," said Laura Thane. "I know what she came for. It's her father's insurance. I know John Barstow is back in town. The way the poor girl has been acting these last few days, I should have suspected it before this, but I didn't. I didn't tumble until I got this

For a moment the detective knelt by the keyhole. "Key's inside," he announced.

in the morning mail. Here. Read it."

She took a torn envelope from her bag and flung it across Poplar's desk. On a piece of cheap note paper, Poplar read:

> Dear Laura: Come and see me as soon as you get this. We've reached the Act III curtain, and you'll want to discuss stage directions with me. Yours,
>
> John.

"Are you sure this is from John Barstow?" Poplar asked.

"I ought to know his handwriting. I was married to him for sixteen years."

"What do you suppose he means by 'stage directions'?"

Laura Thane sniffed. "What else could he mean—but money? Look at the address on the note. John Barstow wouldn't be living in such a filthy neighborhood unless he was flat broke. I suppose he wants an accounting on the royalties from his last play. Well, there's no accounting to give. The money's spent. How did he expect Catherine and me to live? What I want to know from you, Mr. Poplar, is what sort of sleight-of-hand is John Barstow up to with his insurance

policies? Of course he's the one who sent Catherine up here. Is he going to make her the beneficiary instead of me?"

"No, Mrs. Thane. You're still the beneficiary. But I must tell you frankly that Mr. Barstow has applied for a loan which mortgages a considerable portion of the policy."

LAURA THANE'S hands clenched. "It would be just like John Barstow," she declared, "to die as soon as he's got his hands on the loan money—and leave me with practically nothing."

"Why do you say that, Mrs. Thane?" The investigator looked at her sharply.

"It would be just like John Barstow to shoot himself, publicly, just to spite me. He's a man of the theater, right down to the toes. He'd never miss a chance to stage something dramatic."

"I'm sure you're mistaken," Poplar said. "Mr. Barstow protected you by applying for special loan insurance—which contains a clause that makes the policy void in case of suicide during the first year."

"You don't know John Barstow?" Mrs. Thane insisted.

Poplar pushed the buzzer. Frank Belden came in. "Mrs. Thane, this is my assistant, Mr. Belden. I think we'd all better go over and call on Mr. Barstow."

"Not I," Laura Thane protested. "I have nothing to say to him."

"I promise I'll spare you the interview unless it's absolutely necessary." Poplar calmly took Mrs. Thane's arm. Reluctantly, Laura Thane came along.

The address John Barstow had given was a grimy tenement in a grimy street. The halls reeked of cooking and personal odors. The landlady put down her mop, shoved her untidy hair out of her perspiring face, and said:

"Barstow? Third floor rear. No, he ain't out. I ain't seen him come down and I been in the stairs since early morning."

Mrs. Thane climbed the steps with them. She gathered her skirts close about her silken limbs to keep them from contamination of the walls, filthy with the accumulated smudges of ten thousand dirty hands.

"I may as well have it out with him once and for all," she said. "I'll make him stop pestering Catherine."

There was no response to their knock on Barstow's door. Poplar tried the knob. The door was locked. He stooped to peer through the keyhole.

"Key's inside," he said. "Turn your backs."

He took from his pocket a pair of thin, long-nosed pliers with hollow jaws. He carefully inserted them into the keyhole, turned the key. Still the door would not open.

"Get the landlady," he said. "The spring lock's shut."

The landlady's key snapped the spring lock. The door gave only half an inch, then caught with a clanking sound.

"He's put the chain across," the landlady said, "so he must be inside. He sure is a sound sleeper."

"Get a policeman!" Poplar ordered grimly.

AS THE landlady clattered down the stairs, Frank Belden tested his toes against the door panel. After a few tentative kicks, he looked inquiringly at Poplar. Poplar nodded. One of Belden's yellow shoes crashed through the flimsy wood.

Poplar reached through the splintered panel, unfastened the chain. The door swung open.

John Barstow was lying in bed, at the far side of the room. His head was turned toward the wall, and one arm was stretched beyond the edge of the bed with awkward, eloquent immobility.

Poplar and Belden crossed the room with hurried strides. Laura Thane took three horrified steps beyond the threshold, then retreated drunkenly against the wall, her modishly-gloved hands spread behind her for support.

Barstow's eyes were closed. His mouth was open, as though to greet Eternity with a great, silent shout of jubilation. Poplar touched the outstretched hand. It was cold.

Laura Thane, pale and shaken, found courage to venture halfway across the room. She faltered: "Is—is he—?"

"He is," said Poplar. "Very."

Frank Belden was staring down at Barstow's face. The cheeks were a bright pink. A fly buzzed irreverently about the forehead. "Never saw such a healthy-looking corpse," Belden said. "Look at those pink—" He stopped, stared at Poplar. "Monoxide?"

Poplar nodded.

"But I don't smell gas."

"He's been dead quite a while," Poplar said.

"He couldn't have been gassed in here," Belden said. "There's flies in here. The gas didn't kill the flies?"

Poplar did not reply. He was examining a glass tube of white tablets which lay on the floor beside the bed, next to a tumbler half full of water. He glanced at Laura Thane. She was sitting limply in a chair, watching with dull, dazed eyes. She fumbled in her bag for a handkerchief.

"I—told you!" she gasped. "I knew—I shouldn't—come!"

Poplar indicated the glass tube. "Was Mr. Barstow addicted to sleeping tablets?"

"He always suffered from insomnia," Laura Thane replied. "Do you think he might have—?"

"Not with these tablets. They're non-poisonous. The autopsy will show, of course."

Poplar went directly to the single window. On the sill were two ten-cent-store cactuses and a young tomato plant in a coffee tin. The tomato plant was badly wilted. Poplar touched the soil in the tin. It was damp. He pursed his lips as he fingered the drooping leaves. He examined the window without touching it.

"Locked from the inside," he announced to no one in particular.

"John Barstow always slept with his windows closed," Laura Thane volunteered. "He couldn't stand fresh air. It was a phobia."

POPLAR seemed not to hear. He walked slowly around the room, stopped to look at a two-burner gas plate on a greasy shelf near the door. Both gas cocks were closed.

He frowned.

"Look, Frank," he said. "Stand in the stairway, will you? Cough when the landlady comes back with the police. We're not supposed to touch anything until the medical examiner comes, but—"

He recrossed the room, and pulled out a pasteboard suitcase from under the dead man's bed. He opened it. It was half empty: a frayed shirt, some much-darned socks, tattered underwear. Poplar picked up an untidy stack of manuscript, glanced over the pages. They were fragments of plays—false starts, the still-born efforts of a creative mind gone sterile. Beneath the paper he found a yellowed magazine, a five-year-old copy of *Suburban Homes*. Poplar thumbed through it to find what had made Barstow keep it. He had not far to look before he came upon an illustrated article describing the Barstow mansion in Larchmont. There were pictures of the house from all elevations, details of the rooms, vistas in the garden, plans of the house and grounds. On one of the plans someone had penciled a cross near the garage.

A COUGH from the hallway made Poplar close the valise, quickly push it back under the bed.

He handed the patrolman his card. He said: "When you come back from phoning the medical examiner, I'll give you all the routine information I have for your report."

"Do you think they'll need me?" Laura Thane asked. She was making a valiant effort to recapture her proud, cold composure, but was not succeeding very well. She had difficulty keeping her eyes from the dead man on the bed. "I . . . I have an appointment with my doctor. I'm afraid I'll need him."

"I think you can be spared most of the unpleasant details, Mrs. Thane," Poplar said. "They'll have to take him to Bellevue for an autopsy of course, and there's a certain routine. However, if you'll keep in touch with my office this afternoon. . . ."

"Thank you, Mr. Poplar."

When Mrs. Thane left, Poplar immediately tackled the landlady. "Did you ever see that woman before?" he demanded.

The landlady shook her head. "Never."

"Did Mr. Barstow have any visitors yesterday that you recall?"

"Well, no," was the reply, "except for that man."

"What man?" The words leaped from Poplar's lips.

"A man who came asking for poor Mr. Barstow about supper time last night," the landlady said. "I didn't ask his name."

"Did he go upstairs?"

"Sure, he went upstairs, but I don't know for how long. I didn't see him come down."

"What sort of man was he?"

"Oh, very nice and polite. Good clothes, too."

"Was he old or young?"

"About like you, I guess. Only he was better looking. Maybe he was a little younger."

"Would you recognize him again, Mrs.—?"

"I'm Mrs. Gropple. Oh, yes, I'd know him, I think."

Roderick Poplar paused. He stood a moment, lost in thought, fingering his Phi Beta Kappa key. He started when Frank Belden broke in upon his reverie.

"What do you think, chief? Suicide?"

"Of course not," Poplar declared. "If Barstow killed himself, he couldn't have turned off the gas cocks."

"Maybe it wasn't gas, chief."

"It was gas all right. Look at his pink cheeks."

"He must have been asphyxiated some place else, then," Belden said, "and the body brought here afterward."

Poplar shook his head. "Barstow died, right in this room," he declared. "And from gas."

Belden looked puzzled. "How do you figure that one, chief?"

"The tomato plant on the window sill," Poplar explained. "It's wilted. Tomato plants are very sensitive to carbon monoxide. One part of illuminating gas to a hundred thousand parts of air will start the leaves drooping."

"But the flies, chief—the flies are lively enough."

"Only red blooded creatures are affected by monoxide," Poplar said. "Flies don't qualify."

"I still don't get it." Belden scratched his ear. "I see how somebody might have sneaked in here to turn on the gas while Barstow was asleep last night, but I don't see how he could have sneaked back to turn it off—and then leave the door and window locked, and the chain across the door from the inside. What's more, they must have sneaked back last night, because the gas smell was all gone this morning. I don't—"

"Look, Frank," Poplar interrupted.

"You're very insulting," the man said. "I've business of my own."

I've got work for you, so you'd better hop to it right away. First I want you to find out everything you can about Eric Thane—that's the ex-Mrs. Barstow's present husband. Check his business connections, if any, and his financial status. Then jump out to White Plains and find out from the Westchester County Recorder if there's a mortgage on Mrs. Barstow's—I mean Mrs. Thane's—house in Larchmont. When you're through, drive over to Larchmont and meet me at the Thane house. If I'm not there, wait. And if Thane's there, don't let him get away. I want to talk to him."

IT WAS early afternoon when Roderick Poplar arrived at Larchmont. Belden was sitting in the shade of an elm, just outside the gate grille of the former Barstow estate. He told Poplar what he had learned, and the two men walked up the broad driveway to the house.

They found Eric Thane in the garden back of the house, lolling in a wicker chair under a bright parasol, a tall frosty drink by his side, and a litter of Wall Street papers around him. He was a handsome, slim man, at least five years younger than Laura Thane, with a healthy tan which at this season of the year be-

spoke plenty of daylight leisure. He greeted the two men with a weak, irresponsible smile.

"We've come to tell you," said Poplar, after the preliminaries, "something which you no doubt already know. John Barstow is dead."

"As far as I'm concerned, Barstow's been dead for five years," Thane replied cheerily. "You'll pardon me if I don't break down and weep, won't you?"

"Then you did know he was back in town?"

Thane's smile disappeared. "Why do you ask that?"

"I thought perhaps Mrs. Thane told you about the note she received from her ex-husband this morning."

"Laura left the house before I was up. I haven't seen her today."

"But you did know Barstow was back?"

Thane hesitated. He did not look at Poplar as he said: "As a matter of fact, I suspected he was back. I saw Catherine—that's my step-daughter—talking to a man outside the gate the other night. I wasn't sure, but he looked like Barstow."

"Didn't you follow him, to make sure?"

"I did not." Thane leaned forward. "See here, what makes you think I have the slightest interest in John Barstow?"

"The fact that you've been living off him," said Poplar

"That I've been—?" Thane flushed. "Now, see here—"

"The first year of your marriage you were supported by the royalties from Barstow's plays. Since then you've been eating the proceeds of the mortgages—first and second—on Barstow's house."

"You're very insulting, Poplar. I have a business of my own."

"You don't look very busy, Mr. Thane."

"I never go into town during a falling market. I keep in touch with my office by telephone."

"Your broker's office, you mean," Poplar said. "As a matter of fact, you haven't an account just now. You were sold out last month—for the fourth time in two years. You're not very lucky in Wall Street, Mr. Thane, and I think you might be highly delighted if Mrs. Thane should suddenly come into say $50,000—from Mr. Barstow's insurance."

THE color faded from Eric Thane's cheeks. "I don't know anything about John Barstow's insurance," he said.

"Did you call Gibraltar Insurance yesterday to inquire if there was any way to stop a loan that might deprive Mrs. Thane of some $40,000 if Barstow died before the loan was repaid?"

"I did not."

"Let's not beat about the bush any longer," Poplar said. "John Barstow has been murdered."

"Murdered?"

"And while I have no legal authority, Barstow was a client of ours and I'm anxious to get at the truth. I should think you would, too—if you have nothing to hide."

"Of course I've nothing to hide."

"Then perhaps you'd rather cooperate with me than with the police. Would you drive to town with Mr. Belden?"

"Now?"

"Right away. I'll join you at my office shortly. I have a few things to do in the interim."

One of the things that Roderick Poplar had to do was to walk around the garden back of the Thane house. He sauntered past the tennis court toward the garage, and stood for a minute looking at the dahlia bed. The dahlias were fine-looking healthy plants that promised a colorful display later in the season. There was a border of iris around the dahlias, but they had finished blooming and had been cut back.

Poplar then drove to the nearest bar-

racks of the State Troopers. After talking to the officer in charge, he phoned his office and left instructions for Belden to round up Catherine Barstow, Laura Thane, and Bill Simmons. Next he called the district attorney's office. Finally he got back into his car and headed for the city.

He did not go directly to his office. He stopped first at the dingy tenement in which John Barstow had died.

"There's still two detectives upstairs, Mr. Poplar," the landlady said. "I guess it's all right for you to go up."

Poplar didn't want to go up. He asked to see the gas meters.

"They're right back there under the stairs," the landlady said. "The gas company promised to put in new ones several years ago but I guess they haven't got around to it. "It's an awful nuisance for the upstairs tenants to come down to put in their money."

"Money?" Poplar fairly ran to look at the bank of meters under the stairs. Why hadn't he thought of that before? Yes, there they were—quarter meters, survivors of another era, some of the last coin-in-slot meters still in use. Well, that cleared up the mystery of how Death had entered the locked room. He said: "Mrs. Gropple, will you come to my office? There's a man there I'd like you to identify."

There were seven persons in Roderick Poplar's office when he arrived with Mrs. Gropple. There was Frank Belden with Eric Thane, there was Laura Thane with her daughter, and there was a red-haired, blue-eyed, defiant young man who was holding Catherine Barstow's hand, and who Poplar decided was Bill Simmons. There was also Deputy District Attorney Green and Lieutenant Adams of the Homicide Squad. Catherine had been crying again.

"This is not quite regular, asking you to come here," Poplar said as he took off his hat, "but the district attorney's office agrees to it, since I have practically completed the investigation into the death of —let's say 'the murder of'—John Barstow."

"See here, Poplar," interrupted Eric Thane, "if there's going to be any accusation of murder, I want to be represented by my attorney."

POPLAR smiled. "I believe Mr. Simmons here is a member of the bar. Perhaps he'd be happy to represent you."

Bill Simmons merely glowered.

"First of all," Poplar continued, "I should like to ask Mrs. Gropple if the man who called on John Barstow last night is here in this room."

"He's here all right," said the landlady.

"Would you point him out, please?" Poplar was watching Eric Thane closely.

"Sure," said the landlady. "That's him."

She pointed to Bill Simmons.

"Well, Mr. Simmons," said Poplar, not at all surprised. "You didn't mention this visit when I phoned you today."

"I didn't see any necessity," the young man declared.

"But you see it now, certainly. Would you like to explain how you found Mr. Barstow's address?"

"He gave it to me himself," said Bill Simmons. "He phoned me to come and see him; said he wanted to meet his future son-in-law. I went—to tell him exactly what I thought of him—"

"Please, Bill!" Catherine pleaded tearfully.

"—that I wanted him to keep his dirty paws off of Catherine, and that we wouldn't accept any money from him in any circumstances."

"Perhaps you're the man who called Gibraltar yesterday to—"

"Yes, I called Gibraltar—about Barstow's loan."

The telephone rang. "Yes, Poplar speaking. . . . You did? . . . Well, well. . . . Thanks, Captain I'll call you back."

Poplar again turned to Bill Simmons. "Did you, by any chance," he asked, "drop a quarter in the gas meter marked 'Third Floor Rear' after you left Mr. Barstow last night?"

"I did not!" Simmons declared.

Poplar nodded. "I didn't think you did," he said, "although someone did, later in the evening. It was you, Mrs. Thane."

Laura Thane blanched. "I did no such thing."

Poplar smiled sadly. "Mrs. Thane," he said, "that was Captain Hawthorne of the state police on the phone. He's been digging in your dahlia bed."

Laura Thane closed her eyes — then opened them very wide.

"You won't be greatly surprised," Poplar continued, "to learn that the captain found a skeleton buried among your dahlias—the skeleton of a woman. I'm not sure that we can prove, after all these years, that the bones belonged to Sabina Wells. And I doubt very much that we shall ever prove that you killed her, Mrs. Thane, to prevent her running off with your husband—because I suspect that the only witness to that crime died last night. But it won't matter, Mrs. Thane, because we *can* prove that you killed John Barstow."

"You can't! I didn't know where he was hiding—until this morning."

"Yes, you did, Mrs. Thane. Barstow had a $50,000 insurance policy to protect his daughter to whom he was most devoted. He must have left the policy with you, so that you could collect in case of his death. A few days ago he presented this policy to us in applying for a loan. Therefore you must have returned it to him. You wouldn't have refused if he mentioned the skeleton back of the garage. I suspect, Mrs. Thane, that the note you showed me this morning was written several days ago. It was undated, and in ripping open the envelope, you managed conveniently to obliterate the date of the postmark."

"It's not true! It's not—"

"I suggest, Mrs. Thane," Poplar continued, "that five years ago John Barstow told you he was going to leave you for Sabina Wells. I suggest that your reply was to kill Sabina Wells. Barstow was a witness. He may even have helped you dispose of the body. He certainly knew where it was buried because the location was marked by a cross on a plan of your grounds in a copy of *Suburban Homes* which he kept in his suitcase.

"To have you arrested would only deprive a fifteen-year-old girl of a mother at a time when a girl most needs a mother. And as Barstow was passionately devoted to Catherine, he merely disappeared and became party to the legend that he and Sabina Wells had eloped. But he did not grant you a pardon, Mrs. Thane—only a reprieve. When Catherine had grown up and was ready to start life for herself, he came back to face you with the consequences of your crime—the Act III curtain. You changed the ending, Mrs. Thane. You killed him.

"You were in Barstow's room last night; before, probably, but of last night I am positive. Before you left, you opened the gas cocks of the stove. There was no gas in the pipes because there was no coin in the meter. You left no prints on the cocks because you wear gloves, Mrs. Thane. When you left, Barstow locked the door and put the chain across.

"You knew Barstow slept with closed windows, that he used sedatives and therefore would sleep soundly. You may have remained on the stairs until you were sure he was asleep. Then you dropped a quarter in the meter, knowing that when Barstow was dead, the gas would shut itself off. It could have been nobody else but

you, Mrs. Thane, because the gas cocks were closed when I saw them first this morning. They must have been closed *after* we broke into the room. And there was no one in the room but Belden, myself—and you. For the first few seconds, Mrs. Thane, you remained near the door—within easy reach of the gas cocks. You closed them, because open cocks suggested suicide, and I remember mentioning to you this morning a suicide clause that would have affected Barstow's insurance. You—"

He stopped. Laura Thane had slipped from her chair. She lay huddled on the floor in a dead faint.

As Eric Thane and Lieutenant Adams lifted her to a divan and Frank Belden went for water, the deputy district attorney said to Poplar:

"Nice work, Rod. Is there anything I can do to reciprocate?"

"Possibly," Poplar replied. "I understand that our people mailed that loan check this morning, so that regularly it should be part of Barstow's estate, and not part of the insurance due Laura Thane. I have an idea Barstow may have died intestate, so if you have any influence with the public administrators in these parts, Green, I'm sure that my client—"

"*Your* client?" interrupted Bill Simmons, without bothering to take his arm from around Catherine Barstow. "You mean *my* client. She's got all the legal advice she needs right in the family. Haven't you, Catherine?"

"The best, darling," Catherine agreed tearfully.

Choose Your Weapons

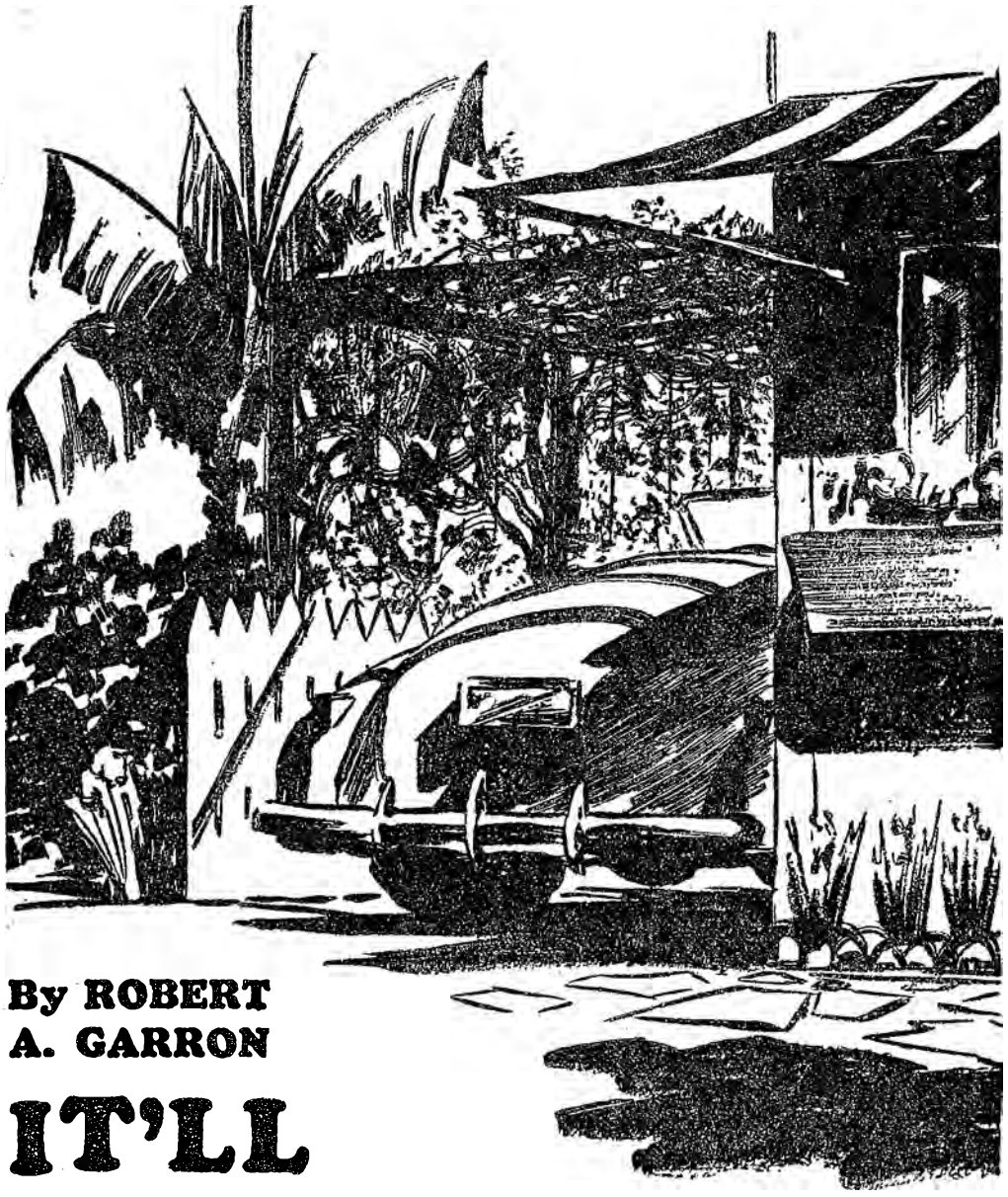
IN THE old days, it was the custom for anyone insulted badly enough to challenge his insulter to a duel. Usually, there was very little choice as to the weapons. It was either swords, which were apt to be very bloody, or single-shot pistols at twenty paces. However, since the one who is challenged has his choice of weapons, and since with the passing of the years science has developed many new methods of destruction, duels are not as popular somehow as they used to be.

Some years ago, when Germany was still free, Professor Virchow, a famous scientist, happened to criticize Bismarck, who was then the Iron Chancellor of the empire. Bismarck was very much insulted, and he challenged the timid professor to a duel. The morning of the duel finally arrived.

"Since I am the challenged party," the professor said to Bismarck's seconds, "I have the choice of weapons. Here they are." The professor held up two large sausages which looked exactly alike.

"One of the sausages," the professor continued, "contains a deadly germ. The other is perfectly sound. I will eat one, and let Mr. Bismarck eat the other."

It was only a half hour before the Iron Chancellor decided to laugh the whole thing off.



By ROBERT A. GARRON

IT'LL BE QUIET SOON

For a long time the girl had been the accomplice of a crook, yet he'd been so clever about it that she never suspected the fact. Now that she was married, he was trying to blackmail her, but she was as stubborn as he

His only problem now was where to dump her, and she had solved that difficulty for him!

WITH the approach of noontime, Robert Vance Voight found himself watching the clock with special interest. Either the bell would ring, or there would be a knock on the door. He knew, without question, who it would be. And he looked forward to the girl's arrival with a feeling of cold triumph and malice.

He was as sober as a tomb, as usual, his only indulgence being a light wine at meals. He did not smoke very much, either. At the most, he burned five panatellas a day, and these he smoked in a briar holder because he didn't want his fingers stained. He was a neat person.

The day was sultry to the point of being unbearable. Voight was in the kitchen of the house which he had rented in North Groveland. This was the coolest part of the house, and in back was a striped awning over a rectangle of flagstones where there were two beach chairs and a metal table. He was in the kitchen, because he didn't want to bother with wiping the dust from a chair and the table. He had a tall drink of strong tea, of which he was very fond, as dark in color as his brown shoes. The tea was clouded with ice.

He looked at the electric clock over

the stove, watched the sweep hand, and he was surprised that the seconds passed so slowly. He thought that he heard a light knock on the front door, and got up from his chair. The front door was open, and he passed through the living room to it.

There was no one in front but a small boy who was walking down the street on the asphalt and hitting the curbstone with a baseball bat, because it was fun, and because the hard wood had an interesting, clean, metallic ring. Voight went back to the kitchen.

He looked at the clock, and frowned because it was more than a quarter after twelve, noon.

He figured. Jane Minnich had said over the phone that she was leaving Groveland at twelve sharp. Ordinarily the trip would take about fifteen minutes, but there might be delays at crossings. There were at least five routes, and one of them took ten minutes or less. That was a bad, cracked road, and not traveled much any more.

North Groveland was really not connected with the city, though it was included in the city limits. There were bridges across the small Here River, but there was a stretch of woods between the city and the small-town suburb. From the town to the heart of the city it was a drive of about a quarter of an hour, on the average.

Rather to his surprise, because Jane was a direct person, the knock came at the back door. He looked out the window and saw a tan roadster in the alley. Then he opened the door.

THE girl was as tall as himself. She regarded him without hostility or recognition or interest, candidly, as though he were a complete stranger. In his turn he smiled in his mechanical way, thinking calculatingly. Except for the way she was dressed, she was the same girl he had known once in another city. A long time ago.

Whether she meant to be or not, she was strongly provocative. There was the favorite scent she wore, first. Then there was her outfit, which was a kind of uniform. It consisted of slacks which were sensible but probably an expensive job of tailoring; the shirt was mannish, with short sleeves. Her arms were tanned. Her hat had a visor and looked something like the WAC kepi. At any rate, it contained her hair snugly. Possibly she might have been taken for a boy, but she wore makeup. There was a wedding ring on her finger. There was no lacquer on her nails, which were trimmed round.

What Jane saw was a slight, strong man dressed immaculately, with the same hard, sardonic eyes. His necktie had a dimple under the knot, and a clip with his initials held the tie to his English shirt. The white cuffs just showed beyond the sleeves of the jacket. Once she had thought that he was the most beautiful guy on earth, until she found out what he was.

When he stepped back, she entered, casually as always. The low heels of her shoes made a sound as though she were deliberately striking them on the linoleum-covered floor.

"Iced tea?" she asked, noticing the glass.

"Want some?"

"No. It just occurred to me that there's usually something wrong with a man who doesn't drink nor smoke. You don't even swear, do you?"

"Oh, once in a great while." He was enjoying this, and gave her his hard, phony smile. "Hell. Damn."

"You haven't changed in the least," she remarked.

"Neither have you, my lass," he said, admiring her. "But what's the idea of the wacky pants and shirt, and the funny hat? Did you forget your necktie?"

"Don't you like it?"

"You look slightly queer in it, but I must say that it does things for your hips. What's the outfit for?"

"Factory uniform," she said. "I work in a war plant."

"You don't say," he marveled. "What do you do?"

"I operate a drill press."

"Has the old boy stopped your allowance or something?"

"I happen to like work, and this work in particular."

"All patriotic and everything," he commented. Her manner kindled a jealous anger in him for some reason, and he thought about it. She was so competent and self-assured, and was almost athletic in her good health. He had built up ideas about her, but he knew that she had reached such a remoteness from him in the months since she had left him that he would never get her back. Actually, what was happening inside him was a fury mounting to incandescence, though he didn't show it except in rather smooth mockery.

He asked, "How about things as they were?"

"It's all over," she said. "I'm married now, as I suppose you know."

"What difference does that make?"

"I happen to be in love with my husband."

"Ralph Minnich is nearly twenty years older than you are."

"What difference does that make?" she countered. She was a very cool customer, and he should have realized long before this that he was no match for her. She was unyielding with an iron stubbornness. "How did you find me?" she asked.

"You were in a newsreel shot."

"Oh, I see." After a brief pause she asked, "Well, what do you want?"

"You, chiefly. You're the main dish."

"No." She wasn't surprised nor angry, showing no emotion at all. It was as though he were being trivial, or the matter was as unimportant as refusing a cigarette. "Please hurry," she said. "I'm on my lunch hour, and I have to get back to the factory. What is it?"

"I want all the traffic will bear," he said, hating her with his eyes. "Let's start with ten thousand dollars."

"You don't need money," she challenged. "What about all that stock you used to own?"

"A guy can always buy more. And a guy can always use ready cash."

"You said 'start' at ten thousand. Then of course you'll keep on coming back for more. Won't you? When will it stop?"

"When you come through. With yourself," he said with casualness like her own.

"What you mean is that the game will never stop. I know you," she said. "If I gave myself to you, it wouldn't make any difference. You have a vindictive streak."

"You haven't got a leg to stand on," he said satirically.

"I don't want to hear that expression again." She was showing anger for the first time, and it made her eyes bright.

"Nevertheless, it's true," he said with his patient hatred.

HE WAS right. He was a criminal and quite a clever one, and she never suspected it until a pair of detectives called to question him about a robbery that indicated his technique. That time, he had served a year and a day in the Federal pen; but, besides, he had a list of charges against him as long as her nylon stockings. His attitude was, "I beat all those raps, didn't I? It's water over the dam. It doesn't make any difference any more."

In fact, she was his accomplice—had been without knowing it. Even now she could be prosecuted for innocently waiting at the wheel of his car on a dark

street while he enthusiastically looted safes in an office building.

He kept his chips, buying stocks and bonds.

When he went to prison, she was aghast. Feeling stunned, she simply got on to a train in Chicago, with no baggage, and bought a ticket from the conductor. There was plenty of money in her handbag. He had given it to her liberally. It was stolen, but it would never find its way back to the owners, so she used it. After two days in New York she went to Washington, which she found was a metropolis even more hellish. She went down to Florida, left quickly and stopped next in the mid-South. She started north. She had brains, and knew that she was suffering from shock, and it would take time to get over it. In Groveland she met Ralph Minnich and liked him. He was as substantial as granite and imperturbable. She liked his gray hair, his mouth, his solidity of figure, and his ideas, and she married him.

And she canceled Voight from her mind.

HER husband was important. Right now he was in Washington on a nuisance trip to furnish information on his plant's capacity with an expansion wing, to the War Department.

She was working in that plant.

"I thought it would be something like this," Jane said, and her eyes were quite grave. "All right, it's caught up with me." She laughed with real humor. "Why are you squinting at me that way?"

He stopped the squint.

"I've propositioned you," he said. "What are you going to do about it?"

Her answer made him think that he was nutty. He was hearing things, because what she said, unbelievably and cheerfully, was, "I might as well tell you that my only reason in coming here today was to kill you."

"What did you say?" he asked, literally sticking his neck out.

"When I left you for what you were, I left you for keeps," said she with something like relish. "I'm not going to have you hung around my neck again, and I mean that all the way."

"Well, this is interesting," he said.

"You can't have me, and I'm not going to be blackmailed either," she said. "And you're not going to dirty Ralph Minnich's name. There's one way out."

"I sort of get the idea," he said sardonically. "Now tell me just how you propose to commit this here murder and get away with it. A murder gets you into the papers quicker than anything. You'd be worse off than ever."

"In the first place," she said briskly, "I'm not here at all."

"Come again, please?" he said politely. "I don't get that one unless you mean that you're not quite bright in the head."

"It so happens," she said, "that I have a friend waiting for me in the Groveland Hotel Casino. During lunch I felt ill, and at this minute I am in the powder room lying down or something."

"Well, grind me all apart and call me hamburger," he sneered. "What if your friend goes looking for you and you turn up missing?"

"There are two more ladies' rooms off the lobby. She won't know which one, and she'll wait at the table because I'm driving her back to the plant."

"Won't it look like a kind of long wait?" he suggested.

"Oh, no," she said blithely. "Two of the men are joining Edith to hold down the table while she hurries down to the Golden Rule to do some shopping. That's why she drove into the city with me. If you know anything about human nature, they'll all swear by Saint Catherine that I was in the powder room all the time."

"Yeah. How—"

"The block is a hollow rectangle, and

She was stronger than he thought, and she almost knocked him over the lamp table.

the open space is a parking lot for guests. A door in the powder room opens on the parking lot, and I have a key for the door. No one sees me leave nor return."

"Her name is Edith, huh?" he asked nervously, feeling his way around in the dark. "Listen, sister, I'm telling you that you're gone too long already."

"No; everything dovetailed." She appeared to be enjoying this more than he was. "I got here at seventy miles an hour, and I'll get back just as fast."

"Don't give me any of that guff," he said. "There's a law agin traveling that fast these days."

"Don't you read the newspapers?" she asked. "There was a test case. The signs haven't been taken down, and you can travel sixty on the highway. There isn't enough difference between sixty and seventy for an arrest, and the governor has ordered the patrolmen to stop arresting 'speeders.' "

"Listen," said Voight, "I'm getting sick and tired of all this gabble, gabble, gabble. Do you think by any chance you're throwing a scare into me? I don't scare very easily."

"I know you don't," she said sympathetically.

"What are you being sympathetic about?" he snapped. Then he relaxed, and laughed. "Sorry for being so dumb," he said. "We wouldn't be gabbing like this and wasting time, if you were serious. Let's get together and forget about it."

"Oh, I have everything figured out. There really isn't any great hurry," she said. The mischievous smile deceived him. She was so easy in manner, so choice in her uniform, that the deadliness escaped him. It was impossible that she meant business.

FOR an instant, for once in his life, he was mute with consternation. She was standing fairly close to him, and approached even nearer, as though this was going to be like old times again. In a split second he was blinded by an explosion of fireworks. If he hadn't ducked instinctively, it would have been the end of him.

What this she-devil had done was to take a wrench from a special pocket, and with unbelievable dispatch she hauled off and slugged him with it. If she had been pitching baseballs, and she had the proper whip for it, this would have been a wild pitch. The wrench escaped from her grip because she swung so hard; the long handle twirled, clipped him on the noggin, and caused all the bells in England to chime at once.

This unwarranted act of hers stunned him so thoroughly that there was hardly any time at all for him to let out his neigh of fright. Beyond question she was a very fast girl, because he didn't see her take the knife from her jeans at all and figured afterward that she must have had it in her other hand all the time. It was a wicked baby with a rough horn handle, and the long blade snicked right out and locked in position at the pressure of a thumb on the catch. It was the way she held this toad-stabber that bothered him. This was the business. That nasty blade was clasped in the way a carpenter picks up a hammer, not in stabbing position. What she mortally intended to do was bury that thing in his stomach and rip up to let out his insides, or else chop down, or else just cut and puncture at random. Obviously she was an amateur, and had had no schooling in stilettory.

Voight acted with instinct, or hurry, not with any wisdom. He sat down hard on the floor when he kicked at her, and scrambled to his feet immediately. She was scrambling, too, because when he kicked at her she doubled over, backing out of range. His hoof caught her under the wrist, and the knife went spinning in the air.

When it fell, it stuck in the soft flooring at an angle, and both of them went after it. She was as quick as a cat and actually reached it first, but he twisted her wrist hard and then he had the knife in his left hand. Her head butted him in the chest, but he was braced. While they wrestled, she tried to throw him backward over a lamp table. She was a lot stronger than he thought, but he had the situation definitely in hand until she bit his arm. He let out a grunt of pain that was almost a squeal, and shoved her away so forcibly that she slammed to the floor. She went sidewise, striking with her left hip first. Then her shoulder hit, and she turned over to lie neatly spreadeagled on her back. Her head bumped.

In that position she lay still, because she was dead even as he watched her eyes glaze and close. The knife handle was sticking up straight out of her ribs.

Breathless, he couldn't think. He stared at her idiotically, open-mouthed. This was something he hadn't intended to do at all, and a dreadful fear was on him. He was crooked, but murder wasn't in him. It was a hideous accident. She was bleeding very little because the knife was

in snug. He looked at his hand, wondering how the knife had ever gotten away from him, and there was no blood on himself. It must have been that he had simply forgotten about the knife when he shoved her away from him. What he didn't know was that, at the war plant, she had ground down the back of the knife and honed it so that the blade was two-edged and as sharp as a razor. For this reason the knife had slipped between her ribs so easily, pinning her shirt to her skin.

The knife was meant to be used only once.

Voight turned away as though looking for escape. He had to get out of here.

No. He had to get *her* out of here.

"Murder, murder!" he said. "Oh, Mommy!"

He noticed that a lamp had overturned on the table, and he set it upright. This was his initial mistake, because it started a train of thought, and once a mistake is started it keeps on going.

He looked around for other things, and observed that her dippy hat had been knocked from her head in the struggle. He fitted it back on securely, lifting her head to do so.

He kept right on thinking.

There was, he saw, just one chief problem, and she had solved that one for him by driving up the alley instead of parking in front where a neighbor might see her. There was no need to wait for darkness now, Leaving by the back door he would be unseen because of the trees and the thick lilac bushes along the fences. Her own car provided transportation.

ALL he had left to do was decide on where to dump her. He wanted to plant her as far away from the house as possible, and that involved the problem of his getting back. And on the trip it wouldn't do for him to be seen, either.

She had even cracked that nut for him, for he had only to go the way she had come—via the short-cut.

There were no bugs in the plan whatever. It was a cinch, although the way things had turned out disgusted him. After a cursory glance around the premises, and a careful reconnaissance anent the neighbors' yards, he went out the back door with her limp body cradled in his arms. He caught the screen door with his foot so that the spring brought it shut with nothing more than a gentle tap.

Nothing was forgotten. Before he left the house he had shoved back into her special pocket the wrench that had made all the bells in England ring in his dome. The knife in her breast wasn't his and couldn't be traced to him, and it would be impossible to get any fingerprints off the horn handle. He had brushed it with a handkerchief, and found it firmly embedded, as though it were lodged in bone.

The car ran quietly and well with all its pristine power. Evidently, he thought with distaste, she had turned mechanic and kept the machine in first-class running order. The brake was just right; the clutch was new; the transmission was soundless; nothing was too stiff nor too loose, and the upholstery was spotless. He thought: Damn women; when they take over jobs that men are supposed to do, they always manage to do it better.

Traveling at about thirty, he went through this sleepy section of town without attracting any attention. When the houses petered out, he raised the speed to fifty. The girl was propped in the corner in a pose of relaxation, and stirred with the motion of the car as though she were daydreaming with her eyes closed.

At the oddly-named Here River, which was really a creek meandering through a swampy valley, he stopped and got out. From the rear of the car he unstrapped a bicycle.

This bike belonged to the couple from whom he had rented the house, and had

been left for his use in the garage. He had sneered at the idea of using it, but now it was his salvation, a logical and inconspicuous way of getting home. Everyone was using bikes these days. This specimen was an old-timer, with chipped black paint, rust, but it had racing tires and was in fine condition aside from its appearance.

There were bridges crossing the valley at intervals, but this was a dead-end street blocked by a flimsy fence and a black and white sign warning that there was no thoroughfare. Across the valley could be seen the clustered buildings of the city, too far away for anyone there to see him.

He propped the bike against a tree.

For a couple of seconds he debated whether to leave the car with its occupant where it was, and decided to get it out of sight and mind. He started it in low. At the right place he jerked out the hand throttle and jumped from the machine. He had time to slam the door but didn't bother, because this was obviously a murder to anyone with eyes in his head.

Down below, someone yelled, "Hey!"

There was a fisherman down there. The car crashing through the fence had alarmed him, and he was able to scramble out of the way as it plunged downward.

"Well, I'll be a dirty name!" Voight cursed softly, but he wasn't seen. Ducking, he raced to the bike and mounted it. He gave himself a push, and pedaled with all his might in order to make himself scarce in the vicinity. It wasn't at all necessary, because firstly the fisherman investigated the car to see whether the quiet occupant was alive. The man's name was Carlson, and it was quite some time before he mounted the bank to phone the police from the nearest house. By the time the call went through, Voight was well on his way home.

He pedaled along at about ten miles an hour, pleased that he got the hang of it so quickly. He hadn't ridden a bike since he was a kid. Nevertheless, he was using muscles which weren't in condition for exercise like this, and his legs ached severely long before he reached the house. It would have been impossible for him to make such good time if the bike hadn't been kept in such excellent working order.

Leaving the bike in the garage, he walked on cramped legs into the house. He was unseen and absolutely safe. Immediately, because he was in a lather, he stripped and took a shower. He took his time. First he started with a lukewarm spray, and gradually made it colder until the water was as cold as it would get. It was a dandy needle shower, stinging and pleasant, and he stood under it for a long while. When he had had enough, he made a point of drying himself leisurely, so that exertion wouldn't warm him up again. In the mirror he looked at the bite on his arm; it was a patch of blood-blisters, and hurt.

After dusting himself and combing his hair, he made a complete change of shorts, socks, shoes, shirt, necktie, and suit. He had some dry-cleaning fluid, with which he removed a lipstick mark from the arm of his other jacket.

The rug was scuffed, and he straightened it.

An unhurried search convinced him that there was no sign nor evidence that any violence had occurred here. He scrutinized the scatter rugs minutely. On the bare flooring was a stain that almost gave him heart failure, but it was an old berry stain, not blood.

Outside, there weren't any footprints, because she had used the flagstoned walk.

HE KEPT right on thinking while he looked around, knowing that he was utterly safe. It angered him more than anything else—her acting in the way she had. But he was smart enough to know

While he was being finger-printed, Bethune idly cut his cigar in two.

that he was really angry with himself for underestimating her.

He picked a crabapple from the tree in the backyard, liked its first flesh and flavor, and ate several. The redness of the small fruit reminded him of something pleasant, and he smiled.

After throwing the last core into the bushes he entered the house and did something unusual. A light perspiration made his face shine, and he knew that a drink would only make him warmer. But he turned on the cold faucet and let it run while he poured a stiff drink from a pint flask that he kept handy and drank it down without breathing to avoid gag-

ging. Then he drank the same amount of cold water, inhaled with relief, and lit a cigar.

Sucking on the weed to get it smoking, he walked into his living room. There was a bony individual in the room who looked lost. He was mopping his face with a wrinkled white handkerchief.

"Ah, there you are, Voight," he said absently. "I've been wondering when you'd get tired of eating those crabapples."

"What the hell is this?" Voight demanded. He talked rapidly. "You've got a hell of a nerve walking in like this. I don't care if you're selling diamonds for a nickel each and bigger than walnuts. Get out of here before I call the cops." He was burned up.

"I am the cops," said the stranger. He introduced himself, showing a shiny badge which he kept in his pocket with his small change. He was David Bethune, from the City of Groveland's Department of Public Safety. In conclusion he explained, "It's a damned sight cooler in here than it is outside. That's why I've been waiting."

"Oh," said Voight, with a little panic stirring in him. It was unbelievable that he could have been tracked down so quickly, so with tension in his chest he asked, "Well, what's it about?"

"Routine checkup," said Bethune, putting his hanky back into his pocket.

Voight relaxed, because things were easy now. He walked to the table where the lamp had been knocked over to brush the ash from his cigar into a brass tray. His only trouble was that he was enmeshed by a crackpot city ordinance. This ruling required any convicted criminal to register with the police when visiting the city if he had not been out of prison for more than ten years.

The law applied to Voight. He had registered promptly. The law was strictly enforced and the penalty was severe, to the extent of making a man a "fourth-time loser," meaning life, by failure to comply. It was a hell of an ordinance.

"What have you been doing lately?" Bethune asked.

"Eating crabapples," Voight answered. "Otherwise, just enjoying country life."

"You were in Detroit on the last stop. What gave you the idea of coming here?"

"This is west of Detroit," said R. V. V. "I was heading for California, but came across this place and liked it."

"It's quite a nice place," said Bethune. "The girls are quite comely, what's more. Some of the lasses don't exercise much judgment, and we have to look after them. Have you had any girls in this house, Voight?"

"Not a one," Voight said definitely.

"The gals certainly cause a lot of trouble," said Bethune. "Damned if they don't. But I guess you don't need any warning."

"No, I don't. I'm minding my own business."

"It's all right if you keep it legal."

VOIGHT had placed his cigar on the ashtray. Something lying there on the cloth next to the tray was enough to make any other man jump out of his skin, but Voight remained calm. He patted the dew on his face with his handkerchief. Then, when he picked up the cigar, he picked up the other thing, too, and kept it in his hand.

"Well," said the bony detective, "I guess we'd better start. Damn it, I don't know how you can look so cool in weather like this."

"Start where?" Voight asked, alarmed suddenly but keeping his composure. "I don't get the idea."

"Come, come, m'lad," said Bethune, with a manner of weary compassion. "Headquarters."

"Headquarters!" Voight ejaculated. "What for?"

"Your fingerprints weren't taken when you registered," Bethune explained, "and it's simpler to do it this way than get copies from Washington. Laddie-boy, I must say you look as cool as a cuke."

There was nothing to do but obey, and they started out.

"My God," Voight protested, after they had walked a couple of blocks under the shade of elm trees. "We're not going to walk all the way to the city, are we? Why, man, it's miles!"

"There's a Bertillon Room here in North Groveland," said Bethune. "You might say that the equipment corresponds with the same equipment in the city. Three more blocks down, and then two blocks right."

"Seven blocks all told," Voight remarked, "under a broiling sun. The life of McReilly."

"We're saving on tires and gas," Bethune said moderately.

Suddenly Voight didn't like this man. There was something suspiciously resembling satire in his mildness, and what was more he kept Voight walking a pace or two ahead of him, and besides never let his cold and unpleasant eyes stray.

Headquarters was in a modest brick building in the middle of the block, next to a large garage for police cars and the fire department. The only pleasant thing about the place, as far as Voight was concerned, was that it was air-conditioned.

He was escorted to the Bertillon Room. Without delay a young student-attendant inked a glass plate with a roller, and readied two cards and a large ledger sheet for fingerprints and the record.

Voight submitted to having his fingerprints rolled on the paper, and of course had to put his cigar down in an ashtray.

While the business was being done, Bethune idly picked up the dead cigar and cut it in two with a pocket knife. From the separated parts he removed a bobby pin.

"I was wondering what you did with it," said Bethune. "I was watching you all the time."

"Did with what?" Voight asked.

"What you did with the bobby pin I planted next to your ashtray at the house. I didn't think it would work. For a guy as smart as you're supposed to be, you're pretty dumb."

"I don't know anything about it."

"Well, then I'll tell you. Those bobbies are special. Jane Minnich made them for herself out of scrap metal at the war plant. There aren't any others like it. They're home-made."

"Well, there's a use for scrap metal," said Voight, looking at his inked fingers.

"I happen to know about it, because I was assigned to watch Minnich's wife while he's in Washington on a contract. She managed to slip out on me."

"Never heard of this Jane Minnich," said Voight, still under control, no matter how fast his heart was beating.

"Ever see this before?" Bethune asked. He opened his palm and showed a tie-clasp of platinum. It bore the initials R. V. V.

Voight glanced down at his necktie involuntarily.

"If you're wondering how we caught up with you so fast," said Bethune, "we just looked in the telephone directory. You're the only one listed with these initials. Get the idea, sonny?"

VOIGHT cursed with talented vehemence, aloud. He was trapped.

What was most irksome was the fact that the tie-clasp was not Voight's at all. His past was catching up with him with finality. As it happened, he had once come upon a well-heeled lush more than seven years ago in Albany, New York. He had rolled this drunk; he had also stolen the clasp because it was platinum, and because the initials it bore, by coincidence, were Voight's own.

By GEOFFREY NORTH

NATURE'S queer. Looking at Peg, you'd never spot her for my sister. Peg's nose is tip-tilted, she's got red hair and blue eyes, she's pretty as a picture. I'm dark, shaggy as a bear, a big beak of a nose, walk with a limp.

That's how the Kelso line breeds. Ugly as Satan or beautiful as an angel. No halfway measures.

Peg was tucking her curls under her hat. She gave me a sharp look. "Tom, you been as gloomy as the weather all through breakfast! No bad news about Ed, is there?" Ed's our brother.

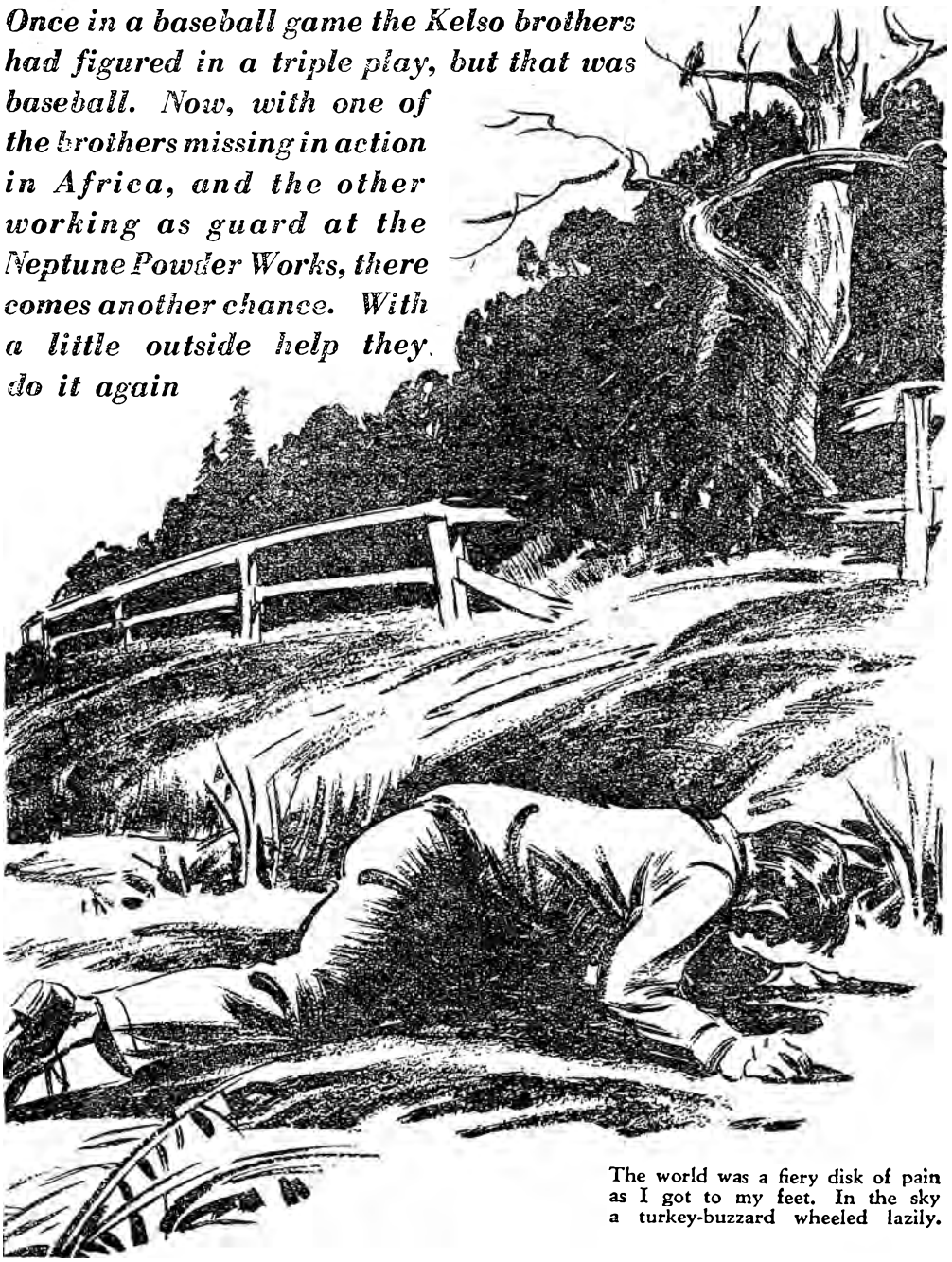
"No, I lied. The truth was a knife twisting inside me.

"Now quit worrying. Nothing's going to happen to Ed," she said. "Tomorrow we'll write him a long letter." She hurried out.

Only an hour had passed since the tele-

TRIPLE PLAY

Once in a baseball game the Kelso brothers had figured in a triple play, but that was baseball. Now, with one of the brothers missing in action in Africa, and the other working as guard at the Neptune Powder Works, there comes another chance. With a little outside help they do it again



The world was a fiery disk of pain as I got to my feet. In the sky a turkey-buzzard wheeled lazily.

gram came. "—Regret to inform you that your brother, Corporal Edwin Kelso is missing in action."

It would have been easier for me had Peg shared my grief. But that could wait until Peg's day off. Peg had a job to do as secretary to one of the head inspectors at the Neptune Powder Works, where I worked as guard.

What made it extra tough was the fact that two days before a letter had come from Ed. It was from Africa. Ed had written:

"I guess by this time you know about Casablanca. I just happened to be one of the first a-shore. We got in a kind of jam, but bluffed our way through. Some of us were luckier than others. I was one of the lucky ones. Yesterday they gave me some kind of medal. Shucks, I didn't do anything more than any of the other fellows would have done in my place. I just happened to be there when it happened."

WHEN I first read that letter, it stirred up memories. Twenty-four years ago, in the First World War, I had "been there." At the Marne. That's where I got the bullet through my calf. When I got home after the war, the old folks died in a short while. Peg was three and Ed was five. Somehow, with the neighbors' help, I'd raised them both.

When the second war came along and they called Ed for service, I tried to enlist with him. They turned me down on account of my leg.

The rest of Ed's letter read:

"When they gave me that piece of ribbon to wear, I felt good, all right, but listen, Tom. It wasn't near to the thrill I got that time we pulled that triple play. Remember? I caught that one in deep center and winged it to you at second and you snuffed out two other guys at the bag.

"My captain was so tickled about me getting the citation, that he fixed it to let me get this souvenir through. It's a piece of steel taken from the helmet that saved my life. I had one of these native Arab smiths fix it up for me in the shape of a home plate. Take care of it until I come back, and you and Peg carry on until we three meet again."

I choked back my tears. Hell! I'd raised the kid from scratch. "Missing in Action!" But that didn't mean for certain that he was dead. He could have been captured. Maybe he lay wounded somewhere, identification gone, his mind a blank. Dead? I couldn't just believe it about Ed.

I limped over to the cabinet, took out the diamond-shaped piece of shiny metal with the words "Casablanca, 1942," roughly engraved on it, and put it in my shirt-pocket.

Now, I ain't superstitious, or I ain't got much religion, but I felt better right away with that piece of Ed's helmet over my heart.

I strapped the gun at my belt and went out.

AT THE Ridgewood Bank, Ryan was waiting for me. We're both guards at the Neptune Powder Works. The place is situated in the middle of a barren heath, forty miles beyond the town, on the other side of Bighead Mountain.

Ryan had the payroll money ready and we stepped out to the car, stowed the money under the seat. It began raining as I took the wheel.

Ryan looked up at the sky, "Yowsah, brother," he said, "today's my lucky day. I've got a deuce on Wonder Boy in the fifth. You know what a mudder he is."

We started out. Passing the North End of Arrow Lake, the road narrows dangerously close to the shore. The rain was coming down so thick you couldn't see five feet ahead. I was cautious in taking the curve to the left and then something crashed my wheels, the car skidded craz-

ily, my hands were wrenched from the steering wheel. As the car veered over, I jumped and landed ankle deep in mud.

I floundered up out of the muck, and Ryan came crawling out from under the car. There were two shots in rapid succession. Right next to me, Ryan began spinning slowly around, a scarlet stain spreading across his belly as he spun and then he lay down in the mud and didn't move.

There was something wet inside my shirt. The rain-slanted trees were waving dizzily in front, the oozy earth began turning.

Then I saw the two men, one chunky, the other tall. They had handkerchiefs over their eyes, wore slickers, and their guns were pointing at me as they came forward. I rushed the chunky one, got my hand inside his slicker, and then there was the sound of thunder in my ears and I went down.

I WOKE up, facing a pair of baleful, beady eyes. The copperhead stared, slithered away through the swamp. Above the steaming bog-land, the sun blazed down on my bare head. My sleeve stuck to my skin and there was numbness all through my left arm. Pain shot in agonizing spasms down my side.

I got to my knees, bracing myself on my uninjured side. I crawled toward the road, racked with thirst. A breeze stirred somewhere and I drank the air greedily, resting my head over my good arm.

I saw the flies, fat and green, buzzing over the eyes. Half-submerged in the swamp, Ryan's body lay there. Up in the sky a turkey-buzzard wheeled lazily.

I moved ahead inch by cruel inch. The world was a fiery disk of pain. I moved slowly toward the edge of the disk, and then a feverish mirage came over me.

(The barrage began at dawn and all during the booming of the guns I moved forward with my squad, nearer to the German trenches. It wasn't love of country or devotion to duty that propelled me onward. Hell, that's not what makes a guy tick, when the enemy's fire begins withering your ranks. It's something deeper. Something inside of you that says. "Prove yourself here and now a soldier.")

When I opened my eyes, the fever had gone, my cheek lay against mud. All I wanted to do was rest there and get some strength into my bones.

I kept thinking of Ed. I felt in my pocket. The piece of metal was there. I held it to the light. There was a dent in the corner, where the bullet had ricocheted. Instead of drilling my heart, the lead had scourged out some flesh along my ribs and nipped my arm.

I tried to stand, staggered and fell down. The piece of steel lay in the mud and threw back coppery glares as the sun beat down on it. Clutching Ed's token in my right fist, I started crawling. My left arm dragged in mud.

I reached a spot that gave me a view of the top of Bighead Mountain. There was a fire-warden's lodge perched there.

I let the sun beat on the steel and played the reflected rays toward the mountain top, hoping that some refraction would catch the eyes of the lodge-keepers.

After a while a black beetle started twisting down the mountain. The light, played by my wrist, followed the beetle's course. Soon the beetle had wheels and became a car, roaring over the lakeside road to where I knelt. I put the steel back over my heart.

The car braked to a stop. A grizzled man in dungarees leaped out. I managed to gasp, before blackness enveloped me:

"They shot Ryan! His body's in the swamp. They crashed my car—a log on the road—took the payroll—get me to a phone."

When I awoke, a grizzled head was bending over me. A bandage sling

had been strapped to my arm. A curly-haired youth held a thermos bottle to my mouth.

Graham, the senior warden, propped some pillows against my back, and I raised myself, blinked, gulped coffee. "How long I been here, Graham?"

"Take it easy. About an hour. Clem phoned the bank and the plant. They're taking care of Ryan's body. You're to rest here. You've lost a lot of blood, you know. They're watching the roads for the crooks."

The phone rang. Clem picked it up, listened, extended it to me. It was Peg.

"Tom, you hurt?"

"Just a scratch," I said.

"Tom, you can't let those devils get away with that! The roads to Ridgefield have been washed out. You get started and head them off."

"I'm starting," I said. She hung up.

I shifted my legs over the cot, touched toes to the floor, stood up slowly. I stood up without wobbling. I finished the rest of the coffee.

"Crooks!" I said bitterly. "Murderers! They killed my partner. I got a job to do." I noticed the clean shirt I was wearing, a plaid one like young Clem's. "Thanks for the togs, kid. Where's my gun?"

"They must have taken it." Clem handed me a Smith and Wesson. "Here's mine."

"If I were you, I'd lie down a while," warned Graham.

I took Clem's gun, uncocked it with my thumb, examined the chambers, cocked it, put it at my hip.

"Kid, will you row me across the lake? After that rain those get-away trails are in mighty bad shape. It's a long shot, but I'm taking the chance."

"If you're set on it," said Graham. "Okay, Clem, take him across."

I limped slowly into blazing sunlight. My left arm and side were numb. My good hand gingerly felt the strappings under my shirt.

"Wait a minute," I said. "I forgot something."

I went back in. My own blood-soaked shirt hung over a chair. I took out Ed's souvenir, put it in the shirt I was now wearing, over my heart and went on out.

Clem rowed me across to the Ridgefield Pike shore and from there a kid with a motorcycle got me to Lookout Point in front of "Conger's Inn."

THIS was a newly built place since I'd last been here. The inn itself was nothing but a street-car diner lunch-house, situated on a shale of rock, the highest spot in Somerset County. All cars passing Bighead Mountain from East and West had to go by this point. A good place to gather information.

A two-car garage, now empty, faced the diner, across the road. A bow-legged man in sweat shirt and oil-streaked trousers was shining the gas pump. He greeted me:

"Got here, anyhow! There's been wash-outs all down below. Nary a traveler this way since early morning. I figure you been in a smash-up. Yeah?"

"How about grub?" I asked.

"Inside. She'll take care of you."

A big-boned woman with sky-blue eyes, her hair like wheat neatly braided in coronet, scoured the counter. She had big, shapely hands. A well-worn golden wedding band gleamed as she wiped fingers on apron, smiled at me.

"Scrambled eggs and a glass of milk," I said.

"Right away," she turned up the burner flame.

A row of stools, fixed to the floor, fronted the long counter, on which were some whiskey bottles and a siphon. That left space only for the entrance, one narrow table placed by the open window, a juke box in the corner.

I sat at the table. A breeze riffled in. I was hungry again, anticipating my meal. The fellow outside had said the roads were all washed out. Maybe the gunman would pass this way.

Maybe things would turn out okay. Then I thought of Ryan lying in the muck. Then I thought about Ed, and that ordeal ahead of me. Peg had to be told about Ed.

The woman came over with eggs and milk, arranged salt, pepper, and catsup.

I picked up the fork in my good hand. My arm began paining. I flexed the fingers of my strapped hand.

There was a red bit, like coagulated blood, underneath one finger-nail. I picked out the red clot, rubbed it between thumb and fore-finger, but it didn't have the feel of dried blood. It felt warm and soft. I looked at it closely. It was a tiny nub of red wool.

A mud-spattered car rolled up the hill, stopped. Two men got out. The tall one said to bow-legs at the pump: "Fill the tank. Check the oil. Wash 'er up."

"Make it snappy," added the tall man's companion, a chunky, hook-nosed man. He said to the tall one, "Let's chow."

I WATCHED them come through the door. The chunky one was wearing a heather mixture tweed suit. A brownish-gray pattern, flecked with red.

I felt a tightening at my throat. These were my men. I sipped my milk slowly. Everything depended on whether or not they recognized me. The chances were that when they'd plugged me in the rain, it had been so dark they hadn't had a good look at my mug. Figuring I was dead when I dropped, they had thrown me alongside Ryan in the swamp. That had been about two hours previously.

Taking the condition of the roads into consideration, my non-arrival at the Powder Works wouldn't yet be any cause for alarm. They must have figured it that way, for they came in free and easy. They didn't have the look of hunted men.

The tall fellow swung through, high-cheekboned, blonde, slim-hipped. How like my brother Ed he looked! Except for the eyes. Ed's eyes are blue, merry. *This one's* were flat-lidded, slaty gray.

The tall fellow sang out, "Ham and egg sandwich. Coffee."

"Ditto, sister," said the chunky one and went over to the juke box, put two nickels in the slot.

The tall fellow scraped a chair up to the table, said to me, "Mind?" and sat down.

The voice in the box began singing, "It's a long, long trail."

The chunky guy strolled over, gave me a nod, sat down across from his partner. I sat with my back to the window, the tall one at my right, the other at my left.

The woman came with the sandwiches and coffee. Bow-legs edged through the door, called out, "All ready, gents," and joined the woman behind the counter.

The tall fellow picked up the coffee cup, sipped, scowled. "Phooey," he said, and flung the contents of the cup over my shoulder through the window.

The mistake I made was in turning my head. Something hard was jabbing at the bottom of my spine. A voice hissed in my ear, "Take it easy." A hand took the gun off my hip.

The tall one had his gun out, covering the two back of the counter. "Step out from there, pronto," he said. "Keep your hands up. Backs to the wall."

The man and woman marched out, stood against the wall, by the counter, facing me, hands high. Bow-legs' face was chalky. The woman's eyes blazed bluely.

The tall man said, "You two stay put and nothing happens to you. We're taking *him* with us."

The rod kept twisting into my back. The record in the juke box clicked to a finish, the new one lifted up. A man's

voice began jubilantly, "Over there, over there!"

A bell rang shrilly. The gun dug in harder at my spine. The voice behind me said, "Take that phone, Floyd."

Floyd, the tall one, his gun covering the two at the wall, reached across the counter, lifted the receiver. He spoke into the phone:

"Yes, this is Conger. There was a car like that one passed here two hours ago. Took the Waynesboro Road." He hung up.

The voice back of me said, "Cut 'er, Floyd."

Floyd thumbed a knife from his coat, unclasped the blade, cut the phone wires. "Let's ramble," he said.

Behind the counter I caught the gleam of something black and shiny. A double-barreled shotgun muzzle, peeping up above a beer keg.

"Frisk his shirt first," Chunky commanded.

To face me, Floyd had to turn his back on the two against the wall. Chunky warned them. "Don't move!" He said to Floyd, "What's he got?"

"Just this," said Floyd, flipping the piece of steel from my pocket on to the table.

A BEAM of sunlight slanted in through the window, beat brassily upon the burnished metal. Floyd looked down over the steel. By some freak of light, I saw reflected in the metal not Floyd's cruel face, but the good-humored, lean features of my own brother. Ed's eyes beamed merrily an instant, faded out as the sunlight shifted.

New strength stirred inside of me, welled up and surged like fire through my blood.

A head leaned over my shoulder. "Casablanca," read Chunky. "What's that for?" He emphasized his question with a jab of the gun at my back.

"First to stop killer's lead," I said, pick up the steel, added, "and to signal for help—like this." The sun streamed in and hit the metal squarely.

"Come on, what are we waiting for?" growled Floyd. As he turned the woman darted an arm to the counter, grabbed the siphon bottle and squirted the seltzer in Floyd's face and sprang at him from the wall.

"Triple Play!" I cried, flicking the light shining from the metal right in Chunky's eyes, at the same time hooking my foot in his ankle.

The gun wasn't at my back now, but it spoke twice, and missed. Floyd fired at the woman as she came on, a catsup bottle in big, white hands raised high.

The bottle came down on Floyd's skull. "That for wasting good coffee, you bum!"

Floyd sagged, then his fist shot out, caught her square on the chin and she went down. Chunky's leg buckled under me. My fist smashed the hook-nose flush, crimson spurted over Chunky's face.

Floyd's gun cracked down on my skull. I hit the floor. They dragged me through the door, flung me in the back seat of the car, Floyd's gun at my ribs.

Chunky was at the wheel. He got the car into gear. Then came blast after shattering blast. The shotgun was speaking loud and true through the open window. I figured I'd misjudged bow-legs plenty.

For just the instant that Floyd shifted his gun from my side, I got one arm around his neck and held on. The lead kept spewing through the window at Chunky's body.

There was the sound of glass cracking, and I had Floyd's head through the shattered door, had it hanging over the door-frame.

The woman came running out of the diner, hair flying, the smoking gun cradled in her arms. She ran up to the

broken door-frame, over which Floyd's neck was wrapped. She took the gun by the butt and brought the muzzle down on Floyd's noggin. Four times.

I dumped Floyd's body on the ground, stepped out of the car. The woman began to breathe heavy, her gun slid to earth, and she plumped herself in my good arm in a dead faint.

Bow-legs came out of the diner, wiped his brow with an oily hand. I said to him: "Brother, your wife's a remarkable woman."

The woman stirred, opened her eyes, stepped from my arm. "Ho! Ho!" she laughed scornfully. "No wife am I of that one! I'm a widow. If I ever get hitched again," she looked directly at me, "it will be to a *man.*"

Bow-legs didn't say anything. I flushed beet-red, but kept my mouth shut. Pretty soon, some of the sheriff's men came along and took charge. They found the pay-roll money on the gunmen and after they'd got Floyd to speaking, he ratted on Chunky about Ryan's killing. Chunky didn't have a chance to deny it, him being dead.

The sheriff's men got there so quick, because they figured something was wrong when they had called up and Floyd had answered, saying, "This is Conger." He didn't know that "Conger" was the woman's name.

Panic overtook me as I let myself in the house. How was I going to break the news to Peg about Ed being missing in action?

Now she was facing me, cutting short my ordeal. "Tom," her voice was solemn, "there's something to tell you about Ed."

MY heart sank. Had there been another telegram, that Ed was now listed as dead?

Then she saw my arm. "Tom! What happened?"

"Nothing," I gasped. "About Ed? Tell me quickly!"

"He's safe. Thank God! But he's wounded. He's in England. Here's the cable. Everything's going to be all right."

Something that had been in my hand became a piece of twisted steel.

"For Your Enduring Mercy," I breathed.

"Here's what he wires," Peg read:

"Resting easy in England. Nipped in the wing. Shipping me home soon. Let me have the latest news."

"Swell," I laughed. "Here, cable this back."

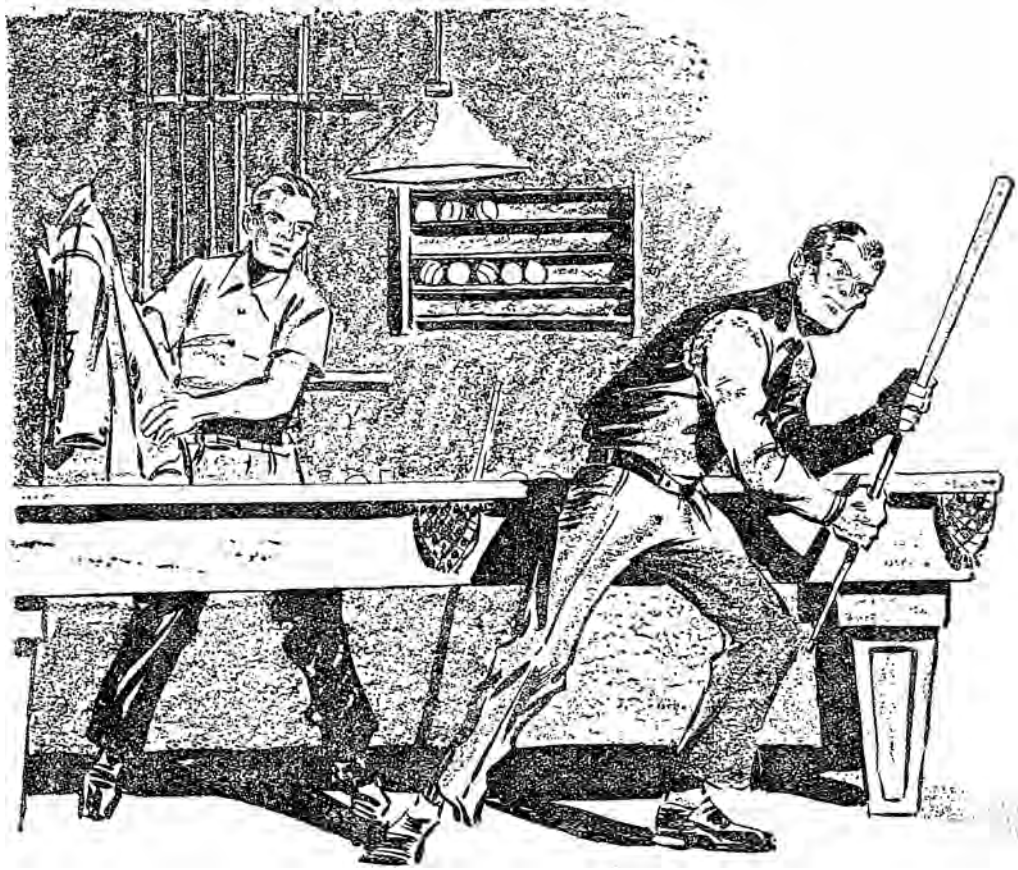
Peg had pencil poised. "Shoot."

"Another triple play today. Some outside help, this time. Kelso to Kelso to—"

(The image of a big woman with hair like wheat coiled about her handsome head kept smiling at me.)

"What was that last?" Peg asked. "Kelso to Kelso, to—what was the last name?"

"Get your hat on, baby," I said, "you and I are going up to Lookout Point right now and find out!"



Another of the players was slamming down with his cue when Wilson turned loose with the gun.

I GOT O'Rourke to go with me to make the pinch. I had a warrant issued by Judge Blair, and I'd spotted Wilson in this Idle Hour pool room, and all there was to do for O'Rourke was tap him on the shoulder and tell him he was under arrest.

It was nothing serious, either. I wanted Wilson on a charge of wife desertion, but I'd sworn out the warrant myself, so that it could be dropped in case Wilson decided to do the right thing by his wife and baby. The last thing either O'Rourke and I expected was action—I wasn't even wearing a gun and O'Rourke had his buttoned into his holster.

Wilson was in a Kelly game and he gave O'Rourke's uniform a hard glare and bent down to make his shot. He was on the nine ball, and it hung on the edge of the pocket and didn't drop. It must have

Up to now Wilson had been strictly small time. But blasting a cop put him in the big boy class. And since the only charge for which the law wanted him was wife desertion, his toughness became even harder to understand

COP KILLER

By JOHN RYAN

been the money ball, too, because Wilson slammed the butt of his cue down and swore viciously.

And then O'Rourke tapped him on the arm and said: "All right, bucko! Come with me. You're under arrest."

That started it. Wilson ripped his shirt out of his pants and grabbed at the butt of the gun he had in the waistband of his trousers. Another of the players, a short stocky dark kid, jumped for his coat, where it was hanging by the table. He was reaching into a side pocket at the same time a third man took a swing at O'Rourke with his cue—and connected.

Another one picked up a pool ball and held it in his fist as he swung at me, and with that weight in his hand he'd have broken my jaw if he'd connected.

Then Wilson turned loose his gun three times into O'Rourke's fat stomach, the gun sounding muffled because the nose of it was jammed up against the big Mick, and somebody from the side—somebody I hadn't even seen—clipped me under the ear.

I went down and as I fell I saw O'Rourke also hit the deck.

Then one of the brave boys kicked me in the belly and I went out like a light.

The next thing I heard was a cop swearing in a monotone. An old-timer,

too, or he wouldn't have known so many words. Then another voice informed somebody else that I was regaining consciousness, and I managed to get my eyes opened. I could see an ambulance interne leaning over me and back of him the swearing cop, a man of about O'Rourke's own age.

I said: "O'Rourke! Did they get him?"

The cop said: "Yes, damn you, Devlin! You walked him into it. He thought it was a routine pinch and he walked into it with his eyes closed."

"That's all it was."

"That's what you thought. If it had been that, why'd they shoot him down?"

The interne prodded me in the belly and asked: "That hurt?"

It did, and I said so. Loudly.

"You'll have to come to the receiving hospital so I can get an X-ray of that," he told me. "You may have internal injuries."

By that time I was able to lift my head and look around. I saw the pool room owner cuffed to another cop and standing by the door, waiting for the wagon, and that gave me a thought.

"Wilson and his pals," I said. "They get away?"

The cop said: "They did. Every man on the force is looking for 'em." He grinned wickedly. "When we get 'em, they won't stand trial. They'll fall down the police station steps or something."

I managed to get on my feet, though things were spinning around me. I said to the interne: "Thanks, Doc, but no hospital right now. I just can't spare the time."

"You're a fool to walk around until we see if anything's out of place," he warned me.

"I can't spare the time."

The cop looked at me hopefully. "You think maybe you can find this Wilson? You think maybe you got a lead on him?"

"I've hunted him this far," I said.

"I'll go along with you."

He was fat and forty-five and he was wearing sergeant's stripes. I knew he'd stretch every point, with Wilson being a cop killer, but I didn't want to be tied down.

I said: "Look, Sergeant! You'd just be in the way. I'm going places that a cop wouldn't be welcome."

"Just where?"

"First, to the office and pick up my gun."

He grinned at that and I wasn't surprised to find, when I came out of my office building, that I had a tag on me. It was Marty Riordan, a third grade detective, and he was loitering down a full half block behind me.

I didn't mind a bit. Marty was smart and the second best man on the police pistol team. I knew him pretty well, having the courtesy use of the police range and taking advantage of it once a week or oftener.

I couldn't think of a soul I'd rather have behind me than old Marty.

GEORGE WILSON was a smooth little number. He'd done time once, when just a kid, for acting as lookout on a chain store hold-up. Petty stuff—the gang got about eight hundred dollars between them and three to five in the state pen to pay for it. Wilson had done a little over a year of his time and then the parole board had turned him loose because he was just a boy.

He'd been in court a half dozen times since then. He'd been time-keeper on a job where the payroll had been heisted. The cops had figured he'd tipped the job but they hadn't proven it. He'd been charged with running a floating crap game but again he'd skipped the rap. He'd been up on suspicion a few times. He couldn't be vagged because his old man had left him a couple of vacant lots that made him a property holder, but he couldn't have

made coffee and cakes out of any legitimate job he'd ever held, and he always had bucks in his pockets.

Strictly a hustler, but small time up to then. But when they start blasting cops, it puts 'em in the big boy class—and I wanted him bad.

He'd married a nice little girl and had a three-year-old child by her, but the gal was working in an office supporting herself and the kid—and Wilson had never given her a dime since he'd left her a year and more before.

I went to Eddie Gorgan's place to try and pick up a lead. Not hoping or at least with not much hope—just on the chance. And the first man I met there was Wilson's brother-in-law, Long Tom Bardeen. The guy was about six feet five and skinny as a rail, and he had a wooden leg from the last war that gave him a kind of screwy wobbling walk.

A man with ordinary legs don't seem to have much trouble with artificial legs, but when you've got 'em as long as Tom Bardeen, it's really something. His phoney flopped around like it belonged to one of the neighbors, and when he stood still, he put it out to the side and sort of propped himself up on it.

And when I went into Gorgan's, he was propped on it in front of the crap table.

He had the dice and he was hotter than a pistol. He had a wad of money in one hand and the dice in the other, and he was asking one and all to get on the hundred bucks he had on the table in front of him. The boys were shy—which meant that Tom was getting over.

I said:

"Hi, Tom! When you lose those dice, I want to talk to you."

He picked up the forty that wasn't covered and made an eight for a point. He got it on the third roll and said: "I'm quitting! My luck run out on me—I could feel it drip away. Your dice, boys."

HE HOBBLED over to me, counting what he held, and it came to four hundred and fifteen bucks.

"A good night," he said. "So help me, another win like that and I'll get a leg that fits me."

"Letterman will give you one for free."

"I get in an Army hospital and they won't let me out," he said seriously. "It's a fact. They put me in and study me."

"Why, Tom?"

"Those medicos try to figure out how a man can live on straight whiskey, with nothing but a little mild gin for a chaser. They want to write me up for the books."

He could have been right at that. I'd known him for five years and I never saw him eat a bite. I'd seen him drink gallons of whiskey though, so I said:

"You're a winner—you ought to buy a drink."

So he went back in the front room to the bar and ordered.

I said: "I found that louse of a Wilson for your sister, Tommy. I found him and lost him."

"He crosses the street when he sees me coming."

"He will now. He'll do more than cross the street if he meets a cop."

"How come?"

"He killed one. O'Rourke. You know him."

"I knew him," Tom said. "Many's the drink I had with the big Mick. So George has turned out to be a cop killer, has he?"

"About an hour ago it happened."

"Then I got to do it," Tom said. "I should have done it long ago. I'll get the sheriff to make me an honorary deputy and I'll get a job in your agency so I'll have a reason to snoop around. Then, when I find him, I can kill him legally. I'd have done it before but you can't never tell about a jury."

He was ribbing—but he was ribbing on the square. Half a dozen times, when

he'd been tight, he'd gone looking for Wilson on his sister's account, and if he hadn't been so drunk he was half blind, he'd have probably found him. And he knew every angle worked in town, and people would talk to him because Wilson was part of his family. Most people didn't know the real set-up in that same family, and for that matter, those that knew would be on Long Tom's side.

Wilson wasn't liked and Long Tom was.

I GOT George Wilson's address from the draft board after a little argument, and headed there next. Not that I expected to find him there—he'd be long gone, I knew—but it seemed like a place to start. I'd planned on making the round of the joints, but with Long Tom working that track there was no sense in doubling on it.

Wilson lived in a walk-up flat — a grimy smelly joint, and he had the right hand place in the back, on the third floor.

And the door was open and I walked in on a dozen cops.

One of them was on the floor with a hole just over his right eye. A new man —one of the last batch of recruits I thought. The same interne that had brought me around earlier in the evening was kneeling over him.

He said, as I came in: "Been dead about an hour, I'd say. He must've got the flash on the radio and spotted Wilson as the man living here. He must've come up to make a check and stepped into it."

"He had this district," the same paunchy sergeant who'd been in the pool room said: "He should have called in for help—he shouldn't have tried to make it by himself."

Then he looked up and saw me and said: "Hagh, Devlin! You getting any place?"

"I've got help in looking for him," I said. "That is, if his brother-in-law gets a deputy's badge from the sheriff. He's head of the American Legion, so he shouldn't have much trouble."

"But you? You doing any good?"

I said I wasn't learning a thing, and he muttered about private cops getting in the way of the regular force. Two cops being killed in the same evening was getting them crazy mad.

I said: "Sergeant, if it'll help, there's this. He wasn't resisting arrest over a desertion charge. Not so—it wasn't strong enough. There was another reason for it. Now George is a home boy—he hasn't been a hundred miles away from this town since he was born here. That ought to give you an angle."

"Just what?"

"What have you got on the books that's fairly big and still open?"

He said instantly: "The job on the Mechanics Bank & Trust Company, over in Harrisburg. Last month. Two men killed—the cashier and a bookkeeper. A little over twelve grand taken and a clean get-away. Four men in the deal."

"There were four men in that pool room fracas, Sergeant."

"It could tie," he said.

"Think it does?"

He slammed one big fist into the palm of his other hand. "He didn't shoot a cop for fun," he said. "He knows what a cop killer gets in this town and every other town. And that bank job's the only big thing that's been pulled the last six months."

I watched the police go through the apartment and saw them find just what the little boy shot at. A great big nothing. There were clothes but they didn't mean a thing. He'd bought them in town. Identification wasn't needed—the cops knew who they were looking for. There were half a dozen .38 shells in one of the drawers which would fit the kind of gun O'Rourke and the rookie had been killed with, but until they got the gun itself they

THERE was a picket fence around the house and yard and it was in the middle of the block so that the corner street lights left the place in shadow. I couldn't see ten feet in front of my face, except where objects were highlighted against the white house itself—and because of that I almost fell over Long Tom Bardeen's wooden leg.

He was on his belly, all sprawled out, with that phoney leg stuck out as if it didn't have a connection with him.

"That you, Devlin?" he asked.

I swore under my breath and said: "Tom!"

"Sure! You never hurt me a bit."

"Got the same notion I did, eh?"

"Sure. And I got that deputy's badge."

"Got a gun?"

"Sure. Mine and one I borrowed to match it."

"Hold it!" I said, just as he struck the match.

didn't mean a thing. There were a few racing forms—a half dozen letters from girls—but that was all.

I said: "I'll be running along. What did you hold that pool room man on?"

"Just for questioning. He's out now."

"He have a record?"

"Not in our files."

I said: "I just wondered," and went away, just as they brought the wicker basket up to take away the rookie's body.

It was bad enough seeing him on the floor like that. I didn't want to see him carried down the stairs like so much deadweight.

He showed me two Army .45s. "I made Marksman with one of these the last fracas," he said. "Now maybe I'll have a chance to see if I've forgotten all I learned."

"Anybody home?"

"Sure. But I don't know who."

"The guy that owns the joint?"

"He just came in. The cops let him out and I watched him check his cash. Then I got here ahead of him and watched him get here. Know anything about him?"

"Not a thing. The cops don't, either."

Long Tom chuckled softly. "They should check before they give a guy like that a license. He's been here just about a month. He had a place over in Harrisburg. He's dropped at least two thousand bucks in Gorgan's place this last month. I've taken part of it off him and I know. A man can add up two and two and make five out of a proposition like that, can't he, Devlin?"

I SAID: "I got the same answer and I didn't have half the dope to go on. Wilson and his three pals wouldn't be hanging around the place unless they knew they were welcome. What are we waiting for?"

"This," said Long Tom.

Right then I saw somebody walking, between us and the house. He showed dimly against it but I could see light shine on the thing he carried in the crook of his arm.

"Shotgun," whispered Tom. "They're hot and they know it. There's two of them—the other sits on the front porch and watches the road."

"Call the cops?"

Long Tom said: "Don't be a fool," in a reproving voice. "There's money on these guys. The bank put up some and the Bankers' Association put up some more and the Pinkerton people have a standing reward for bank robbers. On top of that there may be some head money. And besides, if we work it out by ourselves, the sheriff may let me keep this buzzer and put me on steady, instead of just being an honorary member of his little force. That would pay wages, Devlin. I might even get an agency job along with you. They just turned me down—I called up your chief."

I said: "We could gang up on this one guy and take him when he makes his next round. And then we could shoot the other guy off the porch and go in front and back. But I still think we should have the cops. There'll be five of 'em."

"Two will be gone," said Tom. "We can take one apiece, and have the other one left to nigger with. Wait until I get this leg under me and we'll start. And Devlin!"

"Yeah!"

"I'm sure going to buy me a leg that fits me out of my cut of the reward money."

I tried to laugh but couldn't. It was the same gag I'd been hearing for five years, but it wasn't so funny right then. I kept thinking about what a shotgun could do at close range.

TOM was behind a bush that snuggled next to the house. Standing up. With that leg he had to—once down it took him time to get in action. I was on my hands and knees at the side and ten feet back, with the butt of my gun sliding around in my sweaty hand. I was scared to death—the nearer it came the more I wished I'd insisted on calling in some help.

Then the guard came shuffling along, passing within ten feet of me. He passed Tom, and I pitched a pebble so it rattled through the bushes a few feet to the left of the guard, and he swung that shotgun from his crooked left arm and brought it to bear on the noise.

He didn't say a word—just stood there—and it was so quiet I could hear the

shotgun safety click as he snicked it over.

Then Tom was out from behind his bush, looking as awkward as a stork in that dim light. He swung his arm down just as I reached the guard's other side and as he started to turn, and I heard bone crunch under the blow.

I saved my own. If the guy wasn't dead, he was at least out of battle from then on.

Tom giggled and for the first time I realized he was as scared as I was. "That's one down," he said. "Set 'em up in the other alley."

"You want to take the guy in front?"

He said: "No! Hell, no!"

"Neither do I."

"We'll toss for it."

That seemed fair. He pulled out a half dollar and handed it to me and said: "You pitch."

I tossed it and caught it and plugged it on the back of my hand, just as he said: "Heads!"

And heads it was.

I said: "Okay! I'm going to try to take the guy without killing him. If I do, I'll shoot into the front door lock and follow it in. You come in the back, the same way. If I've got to turn loose at the guy, you go in when I start it out. Okay?"

He agreed it was, and I did a belly crawl to where I could look over the front porch.

MY MAN was on the porch swing. One of those affairs hung from the roof by chains. And I got a break. Just as I lifted my head so that I could see over the porch floor, he yawned. I could hear him. I saw him put the gun he held down on the swing beside him and fumble a cigarette out of his pocket. He struck a match and cupped it, and when he bent his head down I was up on the porch and by him, with my gun in his ribs.

"Hold it," I said.

He didn't. He squirmed away and started a shout, and I swung with the gun at his head and missed. I caught him on the shoulder though and that slowed him enough so that my second wallop connected. I didn't know how hard I'd hit him or just where, so I slammed him again on the jaw for good measure.

And then I got to the door and blasted a shot through the lock, without even trying it. I heard somebody call out inside and then three muffled shots from there, and the door splintered out right by my ear.

Then I went in through the door, turning the knob and slamming into it with my shoulder at the same time. I got one flash of the pool room keeper reaching up on the wall for the light switch, and I shot twice, aiming for his legs. He squealed like a pig and dropped, and I jumped over him and ran for the kitchen. I heard Tom bellow something, still from outside, and then I was in a hall and facing the guy who'd tried to take a gun from his coat in the pool room. He shot, and it felt like somebody hit me on the left arm with a club. It turned me and started me for the floor, but I shot back as I was falling and saw him double up.

I hit the floor about the same time he did but he stayed down and I bounced up. I heard glass crash at the side and I changed direction and went into the first door I came to. I saw Wilson—at the time I wasn't sure just who—just going through the window, and I got there and stuck my head out just in time to get gun flash and muzzle blast right in my face.

I ducked back inside and fast.

Then the outside gun turned loose twice more and I took a chance and poked my head out again. I saw Wilson halfway to the gate and saw Marty Riordan right below me. Wilson turned and shot again, and Riordan cut him down as though he was shooting on the range.

And then I went back through the house to find Long Tom.

HE WAS on the back porch, sitting down. His phoney leg was propped out in front of him at an awful angle, but he was grinning.

"Hi, Devlin," he said. "It over?"

"I guess so," I told him. "I'd forgotten Marty Riordan—he's been tagging me around tonight. He came up just in time to put the stopper on George."

Riordan came around the corner of the house then with his gun up and ready. He said: "I got him in the back of the neck. Not bad shooting, when you figure the light."

I said: "There's two more inside some shot up. The two outside are just rocked to sleep."

"I've cuffed 'em together around one of the porch supports. You hit, Bardeen?"

Long Tom said: "Hell, yes, you know I'm hit. One of those geezers inside turned loose at me when I started to go through the door."

"Where'd it get you?"

"In the leg."

Riordan started to take off his necktie. "We'll put a tourniquet on it. That'll hold you until the medico gets here."

Tom said: "The hell it will. It was my wooden one. What I need is a piece of timber."

THE cops found what was left of the twelve thousand taken from the Mechanic's Bank at Harrisburg stuffed around the house in twenty odd places. They placed Wilson and his three pals as the actual robbers, and they placed the pool room man as the lookout and the man who'd cased the job. Long Tom and I were in Gorgan's, right after we'd col-

I went through that door like a flash and shot twice for the poolroom keeper's legs.

lected our reward money, and Tom was grinning and drinking whiskey like it was so much water.

He said: "I've got a good notion to realize a cherished dream, Devlin, but I've got a better notion not to. After all, hasn't the sheriff made me a full deputy, wooden leg and all? Why should I waste all this money buying me a better leg when I can get around on this one?"

"I thought that was what you were working for?"

"Well, it was."

"Then why don't you do it? Or at least why don't you go to Letterman and let Uncle fix you one?"

"Like I said, they'd put me on exhibition there. Like something pickled in alcohol, only the stuff would be inside me. Honest, Devlin, d'ya know that the time I *was* there, they wouldn't let me even take one little drink? If it hadn't been for a few pals who smuggled me in a little something now and then, I'd have been completely out of supplies."

"Well, then what?"

He said: "I think what I'll do is turn the money over to Sis and let her hold it for the kid. After all, if it hadn't been for George, I wouldn't have got it, would I? It sort of looks as though I owed it to him to help look after his brat."

I said: "Sucker."

He said: "Not so," and took a fifty cent piece from his pocket. "You remember that neither of us wanted to take the guy on the porch?"

"Sure."

"And that we tossed for it."

"Sure."

"And that I let you make the pitch so I could call the turn?"

"Why, sure, Tom."

"And that I called heads when you pitched it?"

"Why, sure. I'll never forget it—I was scared sick."

He said: "Then who you calling sucker?"

He passed me the coin then and started to laugh. I did, too, though at one time I wouldn't have thought it a bit funny.

The four bit piece was as phoney as his leg. It had heads on both sides.

SENTENCE OF DEATH

(*Continued from page* 15)

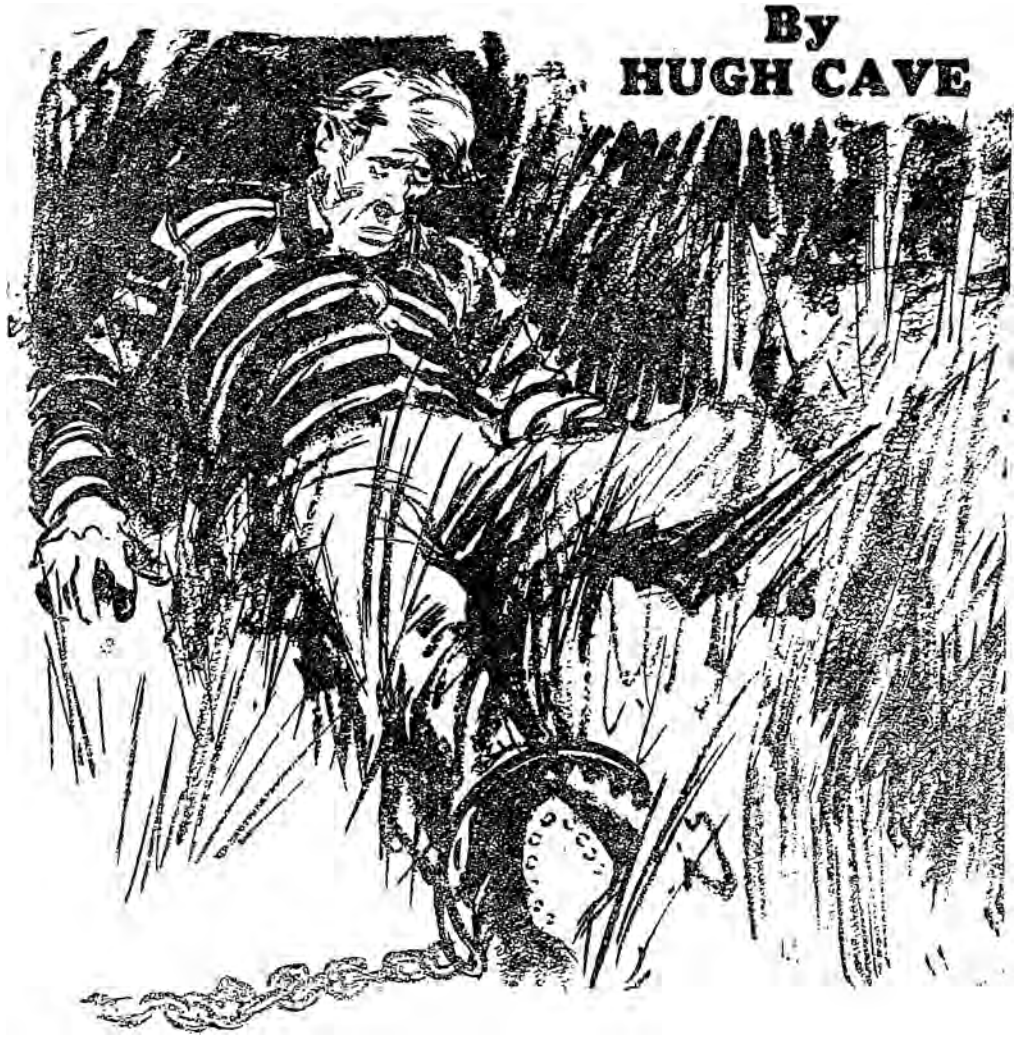
venge. Thus it was that Mary Surratt, whose only crime was that she might have befriended the killers, was taken to Arsenal Prison, there held manacled and incommunicado for nearly a month before being brought before the military commission that sentenced her to death on the flimsiest of circumstantial evidence.

The trial and her death that followed have been conveniently forgotten, for it was thought best to bury this shameful miscarriage of justice. For she was condemned on the statements of John Lloyd, a chronic drunkard, whose story was admittedly confused and contradictory, and of Louis Weichman, a small-time spy and turncoat, who was obviously in a sweat of fear, lying desperately to save his own neck. Even her request to be allowed to testify in her own behalf was denied.

Mary Surratt was the first and only woman ever to be hanged for treason. The record indicates that wartime hysteria warped the nation's sense of justice.

HANGMAN'S CHAIN

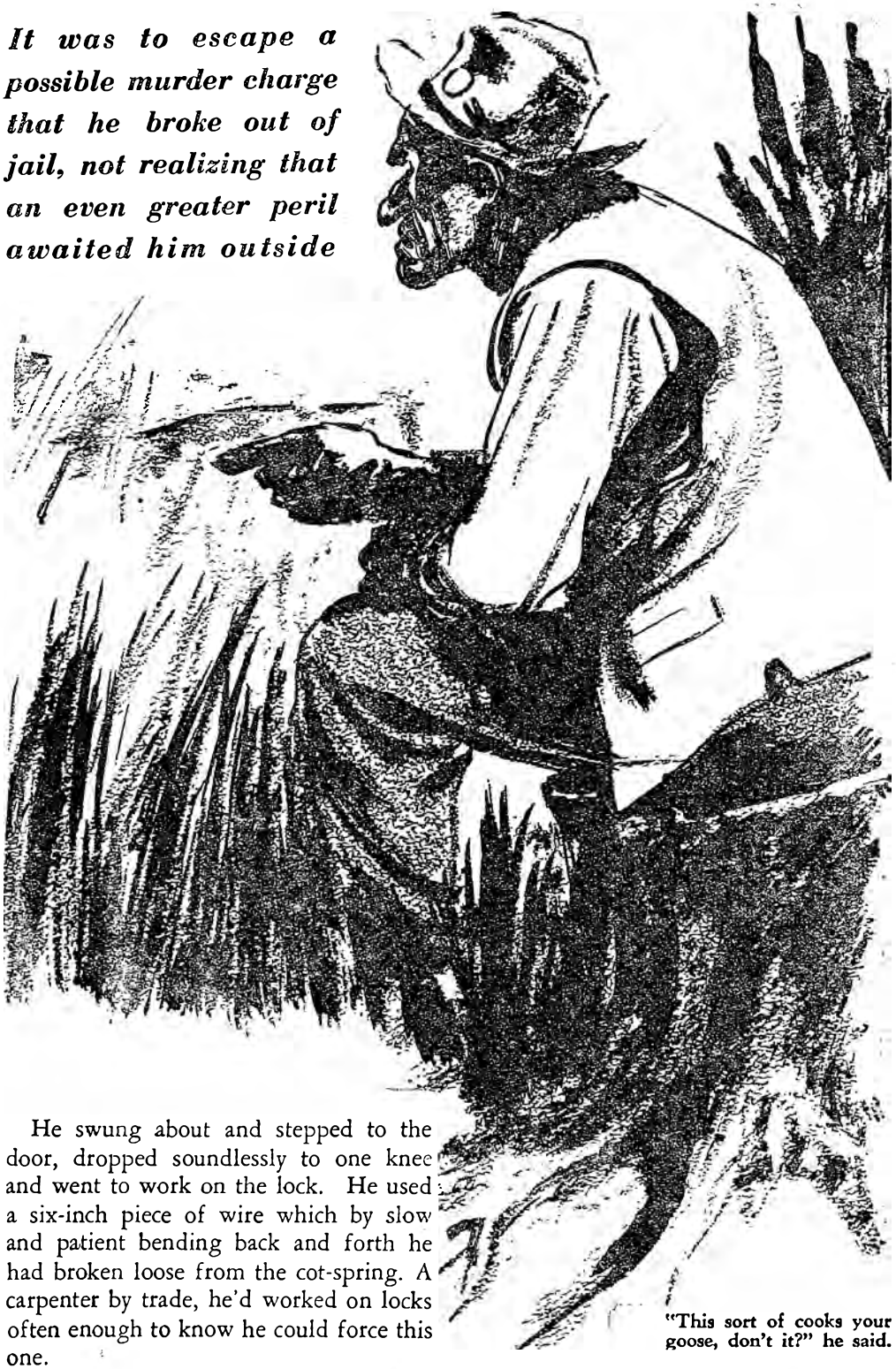
By HUGH CAVE



HE WAS through waiting. He had promised himself to wait until midnight, but it was ten minutes to twelve now, and that was close enough. The jail had been quiet as a crypt for more than an hour. Andy Wilshire was surely asleep by now.

Halliday got to his feet and moved across the narrow cell to the window. It was a warm July night out there, the darkness velvet soft against the bars. He could see a light in Holburn's garage, at the corner of Route 17 and Main Street. The rest of Ellis Corners seemed to be asleep.

It was to escape a possible murder charge that he broke out of jail, not realizing that an even greater peril awaited him outside



"This sort of cooks your goose, don't it?" he said.

He swung about and stepped to the door, dropped soundlessly to one knee and went to work on the lock. He used a six-inch piece of wire which by slow and patient bending back and forth he had broken loose from the cot-spring. A carpenter by trade, he'd worked on locks often enough to know he could force this one.

He wondered what would happen if

old Andy Wilshire discovered him. They'd been friends for years. Last month they'd fished together down Lassiter Brook, and Andy had shown him where to catch the biggest browns in Claydon County.

Now Andy was guarding him. Andy had the key to this door. Andy had a gun, and would be justified in shooting him if he tried to escape.

"It's a queer world," Jim Halliday thought, shaking his head.

The door was even less troublesome than he had anticipated. It creaked open. He'd been leaning against it and had to reach out quickly to grab it, or it would have clattered metallically against the wall of the corridor. His heart beat wildly and he wet his lips with a hot tongue. That had been close!

He went back to the cot and picked up his shoes, carried them both in his left hand as he tiptoed down the hall. Andy Wilshire was asleep and snoring in the small front room. The door was open. Jim had to pass that room to reach the door that led to freedom.

"Andy will lose his job for this," he thought. He didn't like that. Andy was old and not so spry any more, and had a family to keep. But it couldn't be helped. Murder was bigger than Andy Wilshire's job.

"It *would* be murder, he thought if Henry Dickenson died. It would mean spending the rest of his life in a jail a lot bigger than this one, from which escape wouldn't be possible. The rest of his life! Sweat ran down his body under his clothes. He was twenty-six.

THE door closed behind him. He was free. He tugged his watch out and looked at it, and found to his surprise that his escape had taken just fifteen minutes. It was now five minutes past midnight. Friday morning.

With luck, he'd be in Greenville before dawn. He thought wildly for a moment of striding into Holburn's garage and demanding a car. But when he turned and looked at the glow in the garage door, the thought died.

"It would put the whole town hot after me," he thought. "I'm in trouble enough!"

So he laced his shoes on and began walking.

In the four and a half hours that it took him to reach Greenville, only three cars passed him. He heard each of them coming and stepped off the road before the lights swept him. The rest of the time he hiked along, trying to conserve his strength with a smooth, swinging stride that ate up the miles.

He was a good walker, but this was different. It was a different kind of walking. It tired him. When Andy Wilshire waked, the news of his escape would be broadcast; the State Police would start hunting him. He'd be north of Greenville by then, on a road the State Police didn't ordinarily bother with—a road into the woods—but you never could be sure. Thornton West, for one, would guess his destination.

West wouldn't tell the police. Oh, no. But West would have a car, and would reach the end of that woods road long before Jim Halliday could.

"But it was me that cached the canoe," Halliday thought. "He'll need time to find it." He clung to that thought as to life itself. His life depended on it.

Greenville slept as he went through. There were some cars parked in front of a small wooden hotel, and he eyed them hungrily. The paved highway ended here.

His shoes kicked up puff-balls of dust as he strode along. His legs began to ache in earnest. The arch of his right foot developed shooting pains.

The last of the town's scattered dwellings fell behind and he was in the woods,

and it was daylight. No sun. Just a gray, damp, cloudy dawn. He began to limp, then remembered he had nearly fifty miles of this sandy road to travel, and forced himself not to limp.

Rabbits ran across the road. A deer crashed through the thick brush, stared at him, leaped into the road and fled ahead of him and vanished.

"I should have made Holburn give me a car," he thought. "Fifty miles of this will take eight hours or more."

He knew the road. He and Thornton West had driven over it a score of times, on their way in to, and back from, the lake. But walking it was different. He'd remember a landmark, a stream, say, that rushed under the road just around the next bend. Only it wouldn't be around the next bend, but a mile farther on.

His legs ached and his back ached and he was sweating. He kept looking at his watch. Rain fell for an hour. A wind came up, then died. He kept on walking.

Around ten o'clock he took his shoes and socks off and soaked his feet in a stream that paralleled the road, and while he was doing that he heard a car coming. He hid and watched it go by. His lips curled back over his teeth in a snarl.

"Him!"

It was Thornton West's machine, roaring along at risky speed in a cloud of dust. Jim forced his swollen feet into his shoes and walked again. The wind had died. The dust stirred up by West's car hung over the road and he breathed it for the next two miles.

THE car was there when he reached the end of the road, three hours later. It wasn't in the shed where West usually put it, but off the road a short way, half hidden in an alder clump. West was nowhere about.

"He's got a big start and he's fresh," Jim thought bitterly. "I can't beat him in to First Lake. But it was me that cached the canoe. He won't know where it is . . ."

There was no road at all now. Only a trail. It followed a stream, and at times he walked in the stream itself, letting the cool water ease his feet. When beaver pools forced him back to the bank, he fought doggedly on through brush and windfalls. The sun came out, hot as a stove-lid. The black-flies swarmed about him.

The flies got in his ears and mouth; they crawled up his sleeves and through the holes in his shirt. They bit and drew blood that mixed with the sweat pouring out of him. For a time he cursed them, then saved his breath. Perspiration attracted them, and he was sweat from head to foot. There was nothing he could do about it.

He fell, and got up again, realizing he was dead tired. The sun dazzled him. Little black motes swam before his eyes. He fell again, every tortured muscle crying for rest. But he could not rest. If West found the canoe, he was doomed.

The stream widened into a bog where it ran into the lake. He saw the lake for an instant, the sun glittering on its silver surface through the screen of spruce and crooked birch; it looked untouched, primeval. He splashed through the swamp with the black-flies swarming about him, blinding him.

Beavers had built a dam here. A big one. Twice he stepped into pools that looked shallow, and lurched in up to his neck. He crawled across a beaver lodge. A moment later, in deep water some twenty feet distant, a huge old fellow surfaced and slapped the water with its tail. Jim dropped flat. The detonation had sounded like a pistol shot.

The shock weakened him appreciably. He trembled now and could not stop it. The black-flies crawled in his sweat, under his clothes. He dragged himself for-

ward on hands and knees, the bog behind him, a brushy knoll rising darkly ahead.

Just beyond the knoll, in a finger of the stream overgrown with alder and choked with mossy windfalls, lay the canoe. He'd hidden it there himself, on their last trip out, after putting West ashore with their tackle on the far side of the swamp.

Would it be there now?

On his feet again, he drunkenly climbed the knoll, looked down and thought he saw it. The black-flies swarmed before his eyes; he cursed them and beat them away with his hands, and did see it. Something like a whimper escaped his bitten lips. He started down the slope.

Then he saw West, and stopped. The man appeared suddenly, two hundred yards away, from a tangle of brush at the water's edge. He looked puny against that wall of wilderness, but of course he wasn't; he weighed two hundred pounds or more and was a foot taller than Jim Halliday.

The flies were bothering West. He flung his arms about like a man sending signals. His high, shrill voice rang in the hot stillness as he shouted curses. Like a cloud of smoke the flies swirled about him. He walked slowly out along the trunk of a big fallen spruce, until his weight pushed the narrow tree under water. From this vantage point he studied the shore.

"Looking for the canoe," Jim thought. "He's *been* looking, too, for a long time."

He wondered if West could see the canoe's hiding-place from there. It didn't matter, actually. Seeing it and getting to it were two different matters, separated by at least ten minutes of hard going through brush and bog. He, Jim Halliday, could reach the canoe in less than a minute.

He'd won!

But West *had* seen the canoe, at that. The big man was shading his eyes with his hands and staring straight at the tiny finger of water in which the craft was concealed. He stood very still, staring, with the flies swarming around him. Then with dangerous haste he hurried back along the windfall. Jim heard him ploughing through the brush, on shore.

Jim hurried, too—down the slope of the knoll. He realized how near he had come to being too late, and the thought weakened him. It made him tremble. If he had stopped to rest on the way in from the road, if he had yielded even once to that awful dragging desire to sit down for just a few minutes the canoe would be gone now.

"God's watchin' over me, I guess," he muttered.

Too late he saw the thing in his path. His every nerve, it seemed, tingled to the screaming message from his mind to jump, to throw himself aside. But he could not obey the message. There was not time. He saw his foot descend as in ghastly slow motion. He saw the rusty metal jaws agape.

His foot struck the trap, and the gaping jaws whanged shut. There was an explosion of agony in his brain. He heard himself screaming as he fell forward to his knees. He heard, as in a nightmare, the sound of his own shrill voice returning in echo from across the lake.

THORNTON WEST heard the scream and pulled up short. He waited tensely for it to come again, and it did, not nearly so loud. West scowled and went forward again. He came out of a tangle of scrub growth and saw the canoe, but was more interested in the man who had screamed. The man lay face down on a carpet of leaves, not ten feet distant.

West waded through knee-deep water and climbed to the man, and scowled down at him. A look of incredulity crossed his face. "Well, I'll be damned!" he said softly. "Jim Halliday in a trap!"

He saw then that Jim's eyes were open. They were dull with pain, but still they were open, looking up at him. West backed away. He studied the trap. It was a big, saw-toothed bear trap that weighed close to fifty pounds. It was very old and very rusty. A heavy chain ran from it and vanished into a jungle of brush.

Thornton West made no attempt to release the metal jaws that held Jim's ankle. Instead, he hunkered down and stared at the captive, and smiled. "This sort of cooks your goose, don't it?" he said pleasantly.

"It wouldn't do any good, I suppose," Jim said, "to ask you to set me loose." He tried to keep the words level, but pain and bitterness barbed them. The other man's smile stirred an unholy hate in him.

"You're right," West declared. "It wouldn't do any good."

"I thought so."

"I'll leave you here and go on to the camp," West said. "I'll get the camera, like I planned—though it don't make much difference now, does it? Then I'll go on back home." He spoke slowly, as though thinking aloud. "It ain't likely you'll be found for a long time, Jim, if at all."

"You're leaving me here, then, like this?"

"You got yourself into this fix."

"Damn you, Thorn! You're rotten clear through!"

"I guess I am, at that," West said. He smiled. Even the black-flies seemed not to bother him now, in his moment of triumph. "War's war, though," he said. "You and me, Jim, we both wanted the same woman. That's bad. That's always bad. What made it worse, you're younger'n me and a good deal better lookin'."

West moved back a pace and sat on a log, chin in his hands, studying the man in the trap. "Seems to me I played my cards pretty smart, Jim."

The other man did not answer, but that made no difference. West wanted to talk. It struck him that he'd wanted to talk about this thing for days, but of course hadn't been able to. And here was the one man who really should be interested.

"Once my mind was made up." West said, "I made plans. That fellow with the plane—the one I arranged for you to take to the camp for a day's fishin'—it cost me five hundred dollars to get him. But it was a good idea. It got you out of the way. You'll admit you fell for it."

"I should have known!" Jim Halliday muttered.

"Oh, I don't know. Seemed reasonable enough, didn't it? Here was a man said he'd like to use my camp for a day, and had a plane to fly there in. Didn't want it known he was flying up there, because the plane didn't belong to him and he hadn't got permission to use it for any pleasure trip. That wasn't so far-fetched. I'd have fallen for that myself, I guess."

West looked down at a black-fly crawling through the hair on the back of his hand. He placed his thumb over it and pressed. "So you flew the fellow to the camp and stayed overnight. That gave me plenty of time, Jim. I plan things pretty careful, once my mind is made up. With Milly workin' over to Legion Hall every night, sewin' for the Red Cross, her father was home alone. He can't see worth a damn; you know that. All I had to do was slip in the back door and brain him with a hunk of cordwood."

Jim Halliday's lips curled across his teeth. He was trembling again.

"I could have left it like that," West said, "but you'd lent me your knife the last time we went fishin' together, and it was in my pocket, just achin' to be used. So I stuck the blade in the lock on the back door. I snapped it off in the lock and then took the broken knife to your shop and put it in the desk.

"That wasn't needed, though. You were blamed before they ever found the knife. Everyone knew you had had words with the old man. Everyone knew you hated him for standin' in the way of your marryin' Milly."

He smiled. "The old man won't need to worry now, even if he lives." Taking a bottle of fly-dope from his pocket, West poured the smelly liquid into his hands and smeared it on his neck, wrists, face. "Well," he said, rising, "so long, Jim. Too bad no one'd believe you about the plane and the picture. *I* did."

HE KNELT beside the trap and put his hands on it. It looked strong. Its jaws looked too rusty to be pried apart. He tried it, and they would not budge—and he was a lot stronger than Jim. He hauled on the chain and that wouldn't budge, either. The other end of it was evidently wound around the big spruce back there in the brush.

He walked around Jim and made sure there were no sticks in reach that could be used to pry open the trap. Then he went down the slope to the canoe.

The lake was nine miles long and the cabin was at the far end of it, on the wooded shore of an inlet. By canoe, West made the trip in three hours, against wind and rough water. Without a canoe, a man would need five times as long, for the lake shore was a twisting snake and there was no trail. Swamps and brush tangles and windfalls would make it an all day torment even if a man *could* get through.

He found the camera without any trouble. But he did not destroy the film in it. That was no longer necessary. He could develop the film at home and destroy the one picture that was dangerous, and save the others. The others had been snapped when he and Jim spent a week-end here, in June. They were pictures of Thornton West holding the grandaddy of all brook trout. He wanted them.

It was dark now. He made a fire in the stove and opened some cans of food. He ate heartily. He walked down to the shore and cast for a while and caught two trout on Jim's favorite home-made fly, a parmachene streamer. Then he returned to the cabin and played solitaire, and drank half a quart of whiskey. About eleven o'clock he went to bed.

He cooked the two trout for breakfast, after waking late with a headache. A stiff wind had come up. The return trip across the lake took him more than three hours and made his back muscles ache. He ran the canoe ashore to the left of the beaver swamp, pulled it into a thicket and turned it over.

The knoll was a good three hundred yards distant, with swamp in between. He fingered the roll of film in his pocket, and grinned, and wondered if the mosquitoes and black-flies on the knoll were still hungry.

"If he's ever found," he thought, "they'll suppose he was hoping to hide out at the camp, or trying to reach the border." And he wondered how many years that rusty trap had lain there, and who had put it there. Not that it mattered, but he was curious.

His car was where he had left it. He backed it out to the road and headed for home. "If anyone wants to know where I've been," he mused, "I took a trip to Portland."

About three hours later he drove past the jail from which Jim Halliday had escaped, and turned in at Holburn's garage, to fill up. Then he drove on home. He put his car in the garage and whistled as he climbed the porch steps. Later he would go over to see Milly.

HE THOUGHT of her—slim and young, with soft curves and soft red lips. He thought of her father, and won-

dered if the old man had died. It didn't matter much. If he lived, the old man would still be a worthless, crotchety drunk, eager to look with favor on anyone who slipped him a pint of whiskey now and then. What mattered was Milly.

He opened the door and was face to face with two men who wore State Police uniforms. They had been waiting a long time.

"Where you been, Mr. West?"

"Why—why, to Portland," he said. He didn't like this. Why were these men waiting for *him?*

One of the troopers held his arm while the other searched him and found the film. "You got this in Portland?"

"Why—yes."

"We don't think so," the trooper said. "You went to your camp on First Lake for it. There's a picture on it that was taken by Jim Halliday. Picture of a plane. Important, because it will show the number on the plane and with that to go on, we can pick up its owner. The owner of that plane can prove Jim was at your camp the night that Henry Dickenson was assaulted."

Thornton West felt like a man drowning. "But Jim said that before, and you never believed him!"

"He's said it again—since—with the marks of a bear trap on his leg."

West stared at the two men. His eyes were those of a cornered animal. "He—said it—since?"

"Jim Halliday walked to Greenville last night after you left him to die. He gave himself up and told what happened. Said you wouldn't be apt to destroy this roll of film; thinking him dead, you'd keep it for the fishing pictures on it. Jim's over to Henry Dickenson's house now, in bed, with Milly nursing him."

Thornton West wet his lips. He wanted desperately to make a break for the door, but the two troopers were in the way.

"You should have tested the chain on that trap, West."

"I did! It was fast around a tree!"

"Sure. And padlocked, too. But you should have gone into the brush and looked. The tree was a poplar, Jim says. The beavers had long since cut it down, a foot above the chain. All Jim had to do was work the chain up over the stump and crawl down to the dam for a stick big enough to pry the trap open."

A CORPSE

ETE PELTON was about to close his talent agency office on the Sunset Strip and go home for the evening when a woman walked in. Actually, she waddled in. She was fat and sloppy, a peroxide blonde in curious contrast to the swarthiness of her pudgy features. Her clothes screamed loudly of bad taste, and she might have been as young as forty or as old as fifty. She wore perfume more garish than her garb.

"Mr. Pelton?"" she asked in an unpleasant nasal whine.

He nodded, thinking he could not remember when he had seen anyone who'd affected him so disagreeably. He was polite to her, though. A man as broke as Pete Pelton couldn't afford to be impolite to anybody. He offered her a chair.

Pete Pelton was honest and poor. But when his brother was unjustly in prison, Pete was tempted to forget the honesty to free his brother. Then he found that, with some good detective work, there might be a way out . . .

CAN'T CROON

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

"What can I do for you?"

She studied him with black eyes that were recessed in deep pockets of fat. "I'm the one who can do something for you—if you're as honest as you look."

"Honest and poor," his smile caused some of the worry wrinkles to vanish from his freckled face.

"Work with me and you needn't be poor." Then her voice got an edge to it. "But stay honest or you'll regret it." She opened her large handbag, giving Pelton a glimpse of the .38 Smith & Wesson it contained.

His eyes widened. "Hey—"

"Don't worry, there's nothing to be afraid of if you're on the level. I just want you to know I'm not the kind that would stand for a doublecross." She snapped the handbag shut. "Della Dahlgren is my name. Mrs. Della Dahlgren."

"And?" Pelton asked her, puzzled.

"I've come to you because this agency used to represent the late Rusty D'Amorio."

Pete winced inwardly as a spate of bitter memories crowded into his mind. "It was my older brother Jim who handled Rusty D'Amorio," he said.

"Yes, and killed him."

PELTON choked back the denial that leaped to his lips. After five years, what was the use trying to defend Jim now? Best let the dead past remain dead, he decided.

It was a hard thing to forget, though. D'Amorio, handsome and young looking

Only a charred corpse was found — and Jim was stuck with the kill.

for all his thirty-odd years, had been a sensational radio star with a glowing movie future before him; an oddly attractive crooner with a sensual lilt to his voice that made women thrill when he sang on the air. Today's Crosbys and Sinatras would have had stiff competition from Rusty D'Amorio—if he had lived.

But he hadn't lived.

Pete Pelton cast a glance of veiled resentment at the loudly dressed fat woman. "Is it necessary to rake up a thing like that?"

"Yes. My business with you has a direct connection with D'Amorio, his fame, and his untimely death." She smiled unpleasantly. "Or should I say his murder, five years ago?"

Five years ago! It seemed like yesterday to Pete Pelton as his memory flashed back to the time when the Pelton Agency was one of the most successful in Hollywood, with a dozen major radio and screen stars under contract. His brother Jim had been at the helm in those days; Jim, who'd discovered Rusty D'Amorio and developed him into the king of crooners.

Then trouble had come. Jim married a girl who'd once been engaged to the Latin singer; and D'Amorio, furious with jilted jealousy, tried to break his contract with the agency. To discuss this, he had invited Jim Pelton to his summer home at Malibu for a conference.

The way Jim told it later in court, he had a couple of rum Collinses and passed out, awakening presently in his car to see D'Amorio's beach house a blazing inferno. When the fire was finally quenched, a charred corpse was found in the ruins; a body identified as Rusty D'Amorio himself, as far as any blackened huddle of shriveled flesh and bone could ever be identified by autopsy surgeons.

And the skull was shattered by a bullet hole.

They arrested Jim Pelton, accused him of shooting his client and then setting fire to the house in an effort to conceal his crime. He had no defense, could not prove his innocence and could not even remember what had actually happened.

He attributed this to doped liquor, but the jury did not believe it. The prosecuting attorney postulated that Jim had shot D'Amorio in a drunken brawl—and he won a manslaughter verdict. Jim drew ten years' imprisonment.

These were the things Pete Pelton was now remembering as he faced the fat woman. He recalled subsequent events, too; how he had taken over his convicted brother's agency and tried to operate it to make a living for Jim's wife. He hadn't succeeded too well, he reflected sourly. Client after client had drifted off to other offices, until now there was little left except a growing pile of unpaid debts. . . .

"Just what is your business with me, Mrs. Dahlgren?" he demanded. "And how does it concern a dead man?"

She showed yellow teeth. "Discs."

"I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You will. Didn't you used to take care of all D'Amorio's professional affairs?"

"My brother did."

"Including phonograph recording contracts?" she persisted.

"Yes, naturally."

"What was D'Amorio's average take for a platter date?"

Pete frowned. "It was a royalty agreement; so much on each record sold. He rarely netted less than five thousand dollars a pressing after he became popular."

"Closer to ten or fifeen thousand toward the last, wouldn't you say?" the fat woman asked sagely.

"I believe so."

"And all those old discs are out of print now?"

Pete Pelton nodded. "Come to the point."

"You come with me and I'll show you the point," the Dahlgren woman retorted. "Or rather, I'll let you listen to it." She laughed sardonically, and the sound made Pelton's scalp crawl.

DESPITE this, he closed his office and accompanied her down to her car; folded his lanky length beside her as she took the wheel. She drove expertly, with a sureness of touch that was almost masculine; and presently Pelton stiffened as he realized he was being driven into the hillside residential region behind Westwood Village—a street on which Rusty D'Amorio had lived. In fact, it was the crooner's former home on whose driveway Mrs. Dahlgren parked.

"Mine, now," she said.

"Yours?"

She cut her motor. "Remember D'Amorio left his hundred thousand insurance, his cash and his real estate to some cousin back east?"

"Yes, I remember."

"Well, I bought this house from the cousin. I'm living in it. That's how I found the platters."

Pelton blinked in the darkness as she led him to the portico. "What platters?"

"I got to prowling the other day," she unlocked the big front door. "I found a closet I didn't know existed; a sort of secret closet. I guess you'd call it. The door matches the library paneling and you'd never know it was there unless you happened to unfasten it by accident. Come in," she added, guiding him toward a sunken room and snapping the lights on.

The walls were of satin hardwood, with countersunken bookshelves. Comfortable furniture was tastefully arranged—much more tastefully, Pelton thought, than you'd expect from a woman like Della Dahlgren. There was also a huge combination electric phonograph and radio.

"Know what I think?" the woman asked.

Pelton stared at her. He shook his head.

"I think D'Amorio used to amuse himself by making home recordings of songs he never miked for any commercial outfit. At least that's the only explanation I can figure for what I found in the closet I was telling you about."

"What did you find?"

She opened the radio console and produced a dozen black wax discs. "These. Listen." She placed one of the records on the machine's turntable, started it. From the loudspeaker came glassy glissandos as a Novachord organ vamped a swing introduction to *Johnny Zero* and a voice took up the song's first phrase, mellowly.

Quick as a cat, the Dahlgren woman yanked the reproducer's needle out of its groove. "Sorry, wrong one. That's a Kay Kyser platter I bought last week. Here, we'll try this." She set aside the first disc, replaced it with another and started it revolving. Again Pete Pelton heard Novachord swing strains, sharp as polished crystal. A rich, sensuous baritone began crooning *Time On My Hands,* softly, poignantly. . . .

"Good God!" Pelton's own voice was harsh over the flood of melody. "That's Rusty D'Amorio! But—but he never sang that—not on a record, I mean—"

Mrs. Dahlgren's yellow teeth flashed. "Not on a commercial record, no. Not for public distribution. But he waxed it right here in his home. You can't deny he's the one who's singing. Nobody could mistake that." She stopped the turntable, put on another selection. "Listen again. It's *When You're Away,* this time. And better than Morton Downey ever did it."

She was right. The D'Amorio lushness was in the song; that strange qual-

ity which had made the crooner's name a magic thing more than five years ago, when he was reaching his peak. It was in every one of the twelve D'Amorio discs which the Dahlgren woman played for Pete Pelton. A dozen records of a voice long dead; records which the public had never been privileged to hear. Songs five years old, or even older. Romantic ballads, as nostalgic as a forgotten tune that suddenly pops into your head from nowhere and makes you remember moonlit summer nights when you were young.

The fat blonde switched off her phonograph. "Well?"

"It's amazing," Pelton said. "Like finding a gold mine right in your back yard!"

"That's what I thought. Possession is nine points of the law; and since these platters were in my house, they're mine. I can sell them if I want to. Or rather, you can sell them for me on a straight ten per cent agent's commission basis. Do you think Victor or Columbia or Decca would bite?"

"I know they would," Pelton answered slowly. "Any record company would snap at the chance to release pressings of those numbers—and the public would gobble them up. Rusty D'Amorio may be dead, but he isn't forgotten. Twelve of the things—and easily worth five to ten thousand dollars apiece!"

Mrs. Dahlgren chuckled. "Negotiate a deal, then. That's why I'm hiring you. But do it in such a way that this cousin of Rusty's, back east, the one who collected his insurance, doesn't cut in. I'm not sharing the dough with anybody, understand? Nobody but you, that is. You'll get your legal split for handling the transaction, of course."

Trembling, Pete Pelton gathered up thirteen flat, circular wax fortunes and made for the door. "I'll get right on the job tonight. Thanks, you needn't drive me back downtown. I'll walk the few

blocks to Westwood and catch a cab." As he went out, he was thinking of the Pelton Agency and his brother Jim with five more years to serve in prison, and Jim's wife . . . and what the records would mean to all of them. . . .

He strode down the winding hillside street, his eyes on the dull luster of Westwood's dimmed-out lights below him. He was so intent upon his destination—and the purpose beyond it—that he failed to

Dizzily, Pete heard a clap of gunfire, a scream from one of the coppers. . . .

sense the automobile which came drifting downward from the shadowy area he had just quitted. The car was running without lights, coasting.

Pelton didn't realize any of this until the machine angled toward the curb abreast of him as he stepped through a weak puddle of illumination cast by a

street-lamp whose normal three bright bulbs had been reduced to one of low candlepower. Then a lot of things happened simultaneously.

Somebody lunged from the automobile and leaped at Pete Pelton's back; smashed him over the skull with a blackjack. Pain surged through him, drove him to his knees. There was a sudden dizzy roaring in his ears, blinding flashes in his eyes. As he fell, he was aware of the arrival of another car: a police prowl sedan. By sheer coincidence it had come through this particular street at this particular instant, in time for its two uniformed occupants to witness the attack on Pelton.

As if from a vast distance away, Pete heard the cops yelling a command to halt. The order, he realized groggily, was directed at the man who'd slugged him. The man didn't obey, though. There came a clap of gunfire thunder; a scream from one of the coppers. Then more shots racketed through the night, back and forth as if some monstrous duel was being fought. Somebody groaned, slumped heavily to the gutter and lay sobbing there. Someone else raced by Pete Pelton and went slamming into the automobile which had no headlights burning. A starter growled, a motor yammered and tires squealed a banshee song, seeking traction.

Pelton dropped into a black abyss where nothing existed.

HE AWAKENED with the smell of medicine and disinfectants in his nostrils, a bandage wrapped turban-like about his throbbing head, and his aching body resting between the cool white sheets of an emergency hospital bed. A big, burly man stood over him, beefy-featured, grim-lipped.

"Feel like talking?" the man asked.

Pete Pelton tried to put his mouth in the semblance of a wry grin but it wasn't very successful. "I can make noises. I won't guarantee they'll be sensible."

"You sound okay," the beefy man responded. "I'm Donaldson of Homicide. I want you to tell me as much as you know about what happened."

Pelton stopped trying to grin. "I know damned little. I was walking along, carrying some phonograph records when a car coasted to the curb behind me and somebody chopped me down. There was a cop car, too, I think, and some shooting, but—"

"Yeah," Donaldson nodded somberly. "The driver of the prowl buggy stopped the big one."

"You—you mean he was killed?"

"Never knew what hit him. Died instantly. His partner came out luckier; one slug through the shoulder, another in the stomach. He may live."

"What about the murderer?"

The homicide detective scowled savagely. "Clean getaway. I was hoping you might be able to finger him for me."

"No. I'm sorry. I didn't even see him." Then Pelton had an abrupt idea. "The wounded policeman—can't he describe the guy? There was a little light from a street lamp where all this took place."

Donaldson shrugged. "There's a description, but vague. Tubby, short, dark clothes and topcoat, black hair . . . hell, Hollywood's got hundreds of citizens like that." He scowled again as he stared at Pelton. "Have you any idea why this tubby monkey conked you?"

"No, unless it was robbery."

"That's out. You still had your wallet and watch and dough in your pocket when you were picked up. You weren't rolled. Except if maybe you were carrying some valuables we don't know about. Were you?"

"Valuables?" Pelton stiffened. "God, yes! Thirteen records. Phonograph platters, you know—wax discs."

"Twelve," the headquarters dick said.

It was Pete Pelton's turn to stare. "They weren't stolen? You found them?"

"Right alongside you where you dropped 'em when you folded. Why? Were they important? Could the guy have been after them? And had to scram without taking them because he had a gun brawl with the two cops?"

Pelton struggled to a sitting posture in the bed. "Those records represent a fortune—and perhaps something else. Look. Is this wounded policeman of yours conscious enough to be shown a movie reel? I think I can give you a lead if he is."

"What kind of lead? Yeah, he could look at a movie if we'd project it in his room. He's next door to you here in the hospital. What's the angle?"

Pelton's voice was tense with excitement. "Find my clothes and get my keys. You're to go to my agency office on Sunset and let yourself in, understand? There's a steel filing cabinet in one corner. One drawer is marked *D'Amorio.* Open it and bring me a can of film you'll find there; the one with a label that says *D'Amorio, Test, Altamount, Pelton Agency.*"

"Are you talking about Rusty D'Amorio, the groaner who— Hey, I get it! Pelton, eh? It was your brother that creamed the crooner, wasn't it?" Donaldson's eyes narrowed.

Pete reddened. "Never mind that. I've got a theory that may surprise a lot of people if it pans out. Go get that test reel, won't you? Quick!"

"And a portable projector?"

"Certainly a projector," you idiot!" Pelton said. "We want to run the spool for your wounded cop!"

HOSPITALS, even emergency hospitals, are difficult to jolt from routine. It took Pete Pelton thirty minutes to persuade a nurse to bring him the twelve Rusty D'Amorio discs he'd carried when he was assaulted. And it cost him that much more time to argue another nurse into loaning him her portable wind-up phonograph.

He played snatches of all twelve records; just enough of each one to identify it. Then he had another verbal battle before the hospital interne would permit him to don his clothes. It was more than an hour later when Pete walked out of his room—and bumped into Lieutenant Donaldson in the corridor.

Donaldson blinked at him. "Up, eh? I thought they told me you'd have to stay in bed at least a day."

"The hell with what they told you," Pelton snapped. "How about that test reel and a projector?"

The homicide detective said: "I was just going to thank you for the tip. We ran the spool a few minutes ago."

"For the officer who was shot?"

"Sure, who else? And you know what he said?"

Pelton nodded. "I can guess. He said the man who slugged me and wounded him and killed his prowl-car partner looked amazingly like the test reel of a dead crooner, Rusty D'Amorio, except that the cop-killer was older and stouter."

"Exactly!" Donaldson confirmed this. "The resemblance was so striking that the murderer might have been D'Amorio's brother or something."

"Cousin," Pete Pelton said. "The cousin back east who inherited Rusty D'Amorio's estate and insurance. At least I think so. It adds up."

The homicide official rubbed his jowls in astonishment. "It adds up, does it? How?"

"I'll try to explain," Pelton answered slowly, marshaling his facts. "A woman named Della Dahlgren bought the house where Rusty D'Amorio used to live. She came to me this evening, took me to the house and showed me a batch of phonograph discs, home recordings, which she claimed she'd found in a closet."

"Well?"

"The records were songs sung by D'Amorio; old songs dating back five years or more. Worth a fortune to any commercial phonograph-record company. She asked me to peddle them on a royalty basis and I agreed. I was carrying them when I got blackjacked. Does this make sense to you?"

Donaldson looked hazy. "Not especially."

MAYBE I can clear it up," Pete said patiently. "The cousin from the east, who inherited everything from D'Amorio, seems to have been the person who slugged me and shot his way free when a prowl car arrived. At least it would look that way, if we can depend on family resemblance between the movie of a dead crooner and the appearance of the slugger."

"Oh-oh," Donaldson rumbled. "I get it. This cousin somehow found out Mrs. Dahlgren had the recordings and intended to sell them for her own profit. But he figures they rightfully belong to him, as D'Amorio's sole heir. So he tries to glom them from you as you carry them away from the Dahlgren dame's house; only just then a radio car spots him and he's forced to lam, killing one cop and wounding another. He powders in such a hurry that he leaves the records behind."

Pelton shook his head. "I can't quite agree. It might stack up that way except for one peculiar circumstance."

"Namely?"

"A missing platter," Pete said thoughtfully. "I had thirteen when I was slugged. Now I've got twelve."

"So the cousin managed to snag one as he scrammed," Donaldson grunted. "What's peculiar about that?"

Pete Pelton clenched his fists. "I'll tell you what's peculiar about it. The one missing record is a song called *Johnny Zero.* And I'd like you to go with me to call on Mrs. Dahlgren. I have a hunch we'll find Rusty D'Amorio's mysterious cop-killing cousin there. Are you game?"

Donaldson made an insulted mouth. "Not even Dan Turner ever had the brass to ask me a question like that, bigahd," he rasped indignantly. "Let's go. What are we waiting for?"

DELLA DAHLGREN, reeking of blatant perfume and wearing her blatant dress, looked like a pudgy blonde harridan as she opened her front door to Pete Pelton's insistent ring. "You," she said. She stared at Donaldson. "Who's your friend?"

"From Police Headquarters," Pete told her. "I've had trouble, Mrs. Dahlgren. Somebody knocked me cold as I was taking your D'Amorio records toward Westwood."

Her black eyes hardened in their pockets of fat. "Now wait. If this is a double-cross—well, remember, I warned you I never stand for double-crosses.

"Unless you deal them yourself," Pelton said.

"Meaning what?" her nasal voice whined threateningly.

"Only one record was stolen from me. The thirteenth record, it was; or rather, the very first you played for me when I was here this evening."

"Oh, that thing. The Kay Kyser platter. If that's all you lost, there's no harm done."

"There's a lot of harm done," Pelton contradicted her grimly. "You started to play that particular disc by mistake; and you snatched it off the turntable pretty hastily. Later, as if inadvertently, I gathered it up with the other twelve and took it away with me. It wasn't an error on my part, though. I picked it up deliberately. As soon as I'd gone, I think you discovered I'd taken it. I think you're the one who followed me in a coasting

automobile, slugged me, grabbed the one damning record and then shot two cops as you escaped."

"You're crazy!" the woman protested. "It was a man who did that—" Her eyes widened as she realized the significance of what she'd said.

Pelton grinned mirthlessly. "How could you know it was a man, Mrs. Dahlgren? *Unless you were the man.*" Then he reached swiftly for her bleached hair, yanked it roughly. It came away in his fingers, a wig; and sleek, close-cropped black hair was revealed where it had been.

"The mysterious cousin!" Donaldson roared. He drew his service .38 and covered the man masquerading in garish feminine garb. "The murderer!"

Pelton said: "The murderer, yes; but not the mysterious cousin. There never was a cousin. Rusty D'Amorio had no living relatives at the time of his supposed death."

"What?"

"You heard me, Lieutenant." Pelton then addressed the fat person. "I won't call you Mrs. Dahlgren because that's an alias. Presently, though, I'll tell you who you really are. A lot of things put me on your trail when I got around to meshing my facts together. First you used the vernacular of show business in discussing the D'Amorio recordings; you spoke of mike dates, platters, waxings and so forth.

"Too, you seemed to know a great deal about what Rusty D'Amorio used to earn from his commercial records; more than any stranger ought to know. That was sort of suspicious, I thought—when I finally did think about it.

"But the main thing was the first record you started to play for me and then snatched from the machine. Like the other dozen, it was a Rusty D'Amorio disc; I heard enough of the voice as it began the opening phrase to realize this. The very fact that you followed me, later, and slugged me to get that record back, gave you away. *You cop-killing slob, you're Rusty D'Amorio!*"

THE fat man in feminine clothing screeched a Latin oath and pivoted, started to run. Donaldson's .38 bellowed flaming thunder; spat a pursuing bullet. The fat man tripped on his skirt and fell forward, squirming, with blood seeping from between his shoulders. He rolled over, face up, and his dark eyes were twin windows of hell.

Pete Pelton looked down at him. "You lured my brother Jim to your Malibu Beach cottage five years ago. You hated Jim because he'd married your former fiancee, and you schemed a vengeance that would last for years.

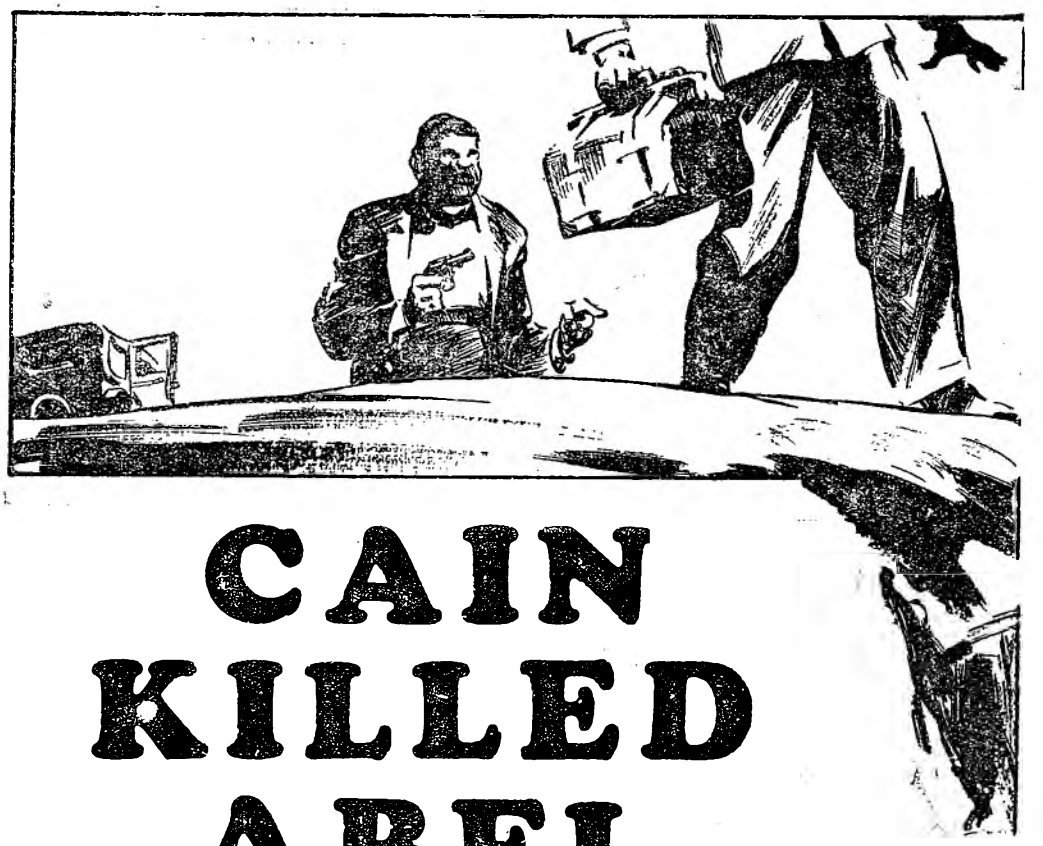
"You drugged his rum Collins and carried him, unconscious, out to his car. Then you shot and killed some nameless nobody, some anonymous hobo you'd picked in advance to match your own approximate size, and left the corpse in your house when you set it afire. That corpse, charred beyond recognition, was later identified as you; and Jim went to prison for killing you, a crime he hadn't committed.

"Then you went east and assumed the identity of a cousin who didn't exist; a cousin who inherited your property and insurance. We wondered about that cousin at the time, for we had always thought you had no living relatives. But we didn't dig into the matter; we were too busy trying to keep Jim from jail. We failed. Are you listening, D'Amorio?"

The fat man writhed. "I . . . can hear . . . what you . . . say."

"I guess at the end of five years you ran out of cash," Pete Pelton went on bitterly. "You'd got fat with good living and laziness, and now you were broke. So you came back to Hollywood, disguised as a sloppy blonde woman. You

(*Continued on page* 111)



CAIN KILLED ABEL

Some called him "Cupid" and some called him "Killer," and when he tangled with Madame Sable, each name had its own peculiar significance

THE little gray man's lips writhed sardonically as he read the tabloid headline. It screamed: *"MURDER MANIAC LOOSE IN CITY."* He said: "That's you, Cain!"

A picture showed a couple of bodies on the floor of a crumby stashout. The caption said the two Eurasians had been mysteriously murdered. I knew better.

They weren't Eurasians; they were Japs. They hadn't been mysteriously murdered. They had made the mistake of trying to gun out Cupid Cain. I'd nailed them in the midst of a nice little plot to knock off the members of the Pacific Strategy Board, one by one. They slipped up on their first two efforts. That was as far as they got. I left them there for the Capitol cops to find.

The he-sob sister from the tabloid went into a tailspin dragging up bodies of other aliens who had been found under similar circumstances. He conceived the brilliant idea that a murder maniac was loose in Washington, trying to create dissension and suspicion among the allies by these mysterious killings. I eased my two hundred pounds into the only chair in the tiny little office on Capitol Hill.

By GEORGE A. McDONALD

"Maybe I should have told those Nips to commit hara-kiri to save face," I growled. They had the idea, only I was the little man behind the desk.

"You need a vacation, Cain," the little gray man said. "A couple of weeks at the seashore. Up in Maine, perhaps."

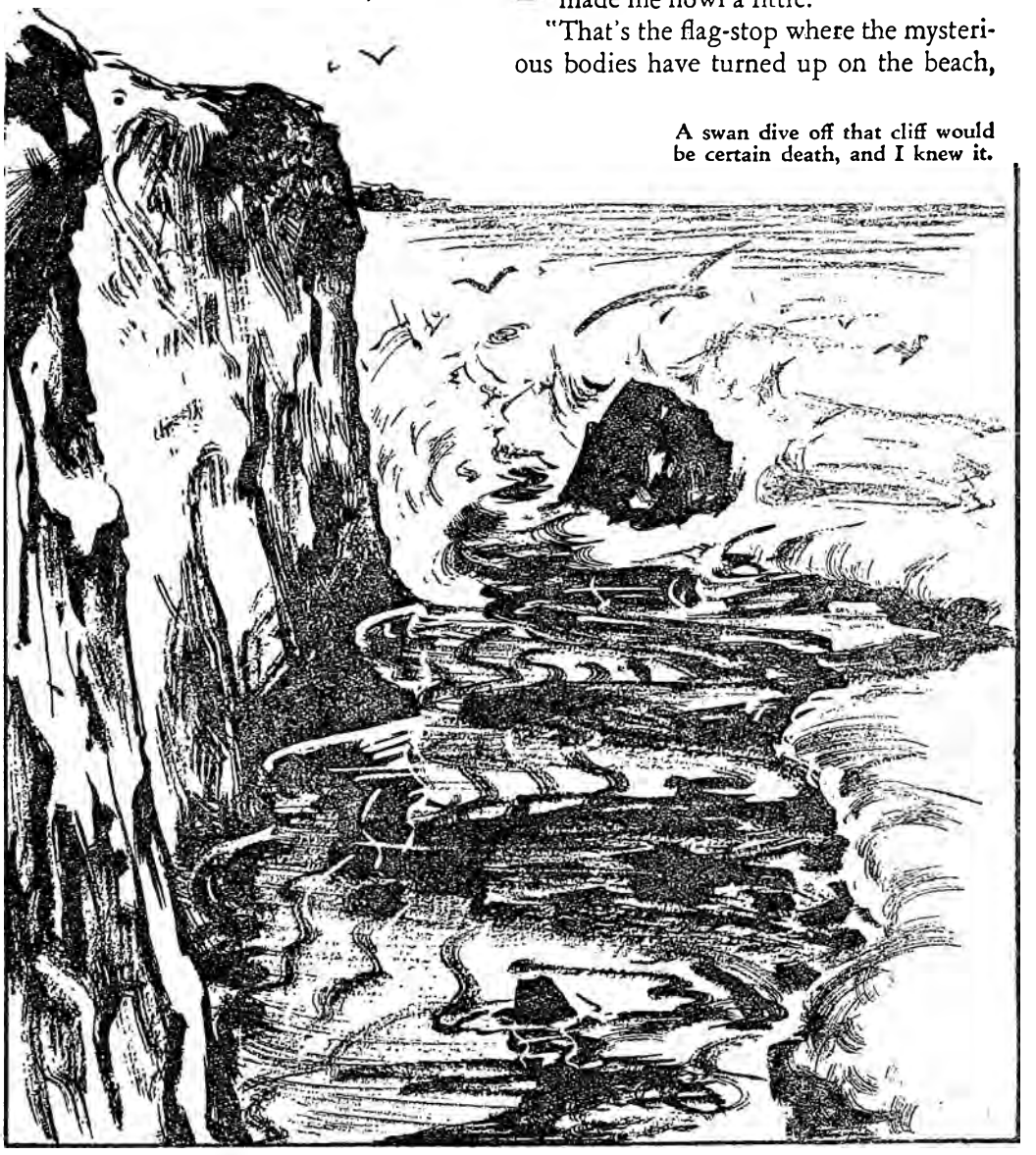
Right away I was wary. There wasn't a drop of solicitous blood in the veins of the little man behind the desk.

"I don't like the seashore," I said flatly. "Waves and pine trees give me the meemies. I'm a city lad, myself."

"If you should happen to go to Eastville," Little Poker Face continued imperturbably, "you might check to see whether my old pal Jared Taggart died a natural death, or whether his heart failure was helped along by unknown persons."

I KNEW I was hooked. Self-respect made me howl a little.

"That's the flag-stop where the mysterious bodies have turned up on the beach,



A swan dive off that cliff would be certain death, and I knew it.

all blue and burned," I said. "Do I investigate them, too?"

"Two of those bodies belonged to lads from the FBI," Mr. X said softly.

My eyebrows crawled up. "Like that?" I asked. He nodded. I pried my six foot length out of the chair.

"What's suspicious about Taggart's death?" I asked.

"Taggart sent a message to Dave Keyes by a Boston doctor, saying his heart was bad, like the attack he had in Panama. Keyes and I covered a special government installation Taggart was directing in Panama. No one had a heart attack. But some jurmentado natives did attack our camp one night. Dave figured Taggart was sending me a message. You can find out when you get to Eastville."

The little man pushed an envelope across the desk and I knew the interview was over. We had a very unique set-up. The little gray man had no title. He was the trouble-shooter for the real big boys. I had something of a reputation as a private shamus in New York. I was very handy with a Magnum .357. The underworld rated me tough enough to deserve the tab "Killer" Cain. My reputation was responsible for my being called to Washington. Sometimes international complications necessitated swift and silent justice being meted out. That was my specialty. I was short on finesse but long on justice.

There were reservations and tickets to Eastville, Maine, and a liberal allowance for expenses in the envelope. Nothing else. I was on my own now. If I got in a jam, I couldn't holler for help. Even Mr. X would repudiate me. That was part of the agreement. I couldn't embroil our government in any diplomatic "incidents."

EASTVILLE was about what I expected. The depot was at the foot of Main Street, about a half mile from the village. There was a taxi, but the station agent said it was out with a fare. I could wait or walk two miles to the Rock Haven Inn, down on the shore. My bag was heavy. It held my Magnum, a couple of boxes of ammunition, and a fifth of Scotch. I'd heard liquor was hard to get outside of the big towns in Maine. A late heat spell had set in, and I'm not built for walking. The station agent went home to dinner. There wasn't another train until later afternoon.

Ten minutes of sweating on a baggage truck soured me on Eastville. The battered flivver that looped around the depot plaza looked better than a de-luxe Checker would in the city. A sign, printed by hand, was stuck in the windshield. The driver was a lean, lantern-jawed character who chewed tobacco. He pushed back his hat, spat at a chewing gum wrapper on the sidewalk, scored a hit and asked mildly:

"Want to go somewhere, Mister?"

Now I know what's meant by a Yankee twang. He achieved a nasal whine without talking through his nose. I eyed the rear end of the flivver skeptically. He grinned, spat again, said: "She'll hold you, Mister. Don't worry about the springs."

I tripped over a spade on the floor of the car, got my Gladstone and then eased my two hundred pounds into the seat. The springs groaned, but they held up.

"Guess you'll be wanting the Inn," he said. "It's the only hotel in town. They'll welcome you, Mister. Business has been dead this year on account of gas and travel rationing. Goin' to stay long?"

I handed him an evasive reply. He tooled the flivver around the Plaza, along Main Street a couple blocks, then swung east toward the ocean. We went down a wide street shaded with maples, past houses of cool, clean white and yellow, with wide lawns and colorful gardens of fall flowers.

The smell of the sea grew stronger as we left the cottages and passed farmhouses with big red barns and fields of corn with golden spikes and vari-colored tassels. The driver pointed out the homes of local celebrities. He was better than a Chinatown bus spieler. When we reached the ocean parkway, I took back my brash statement to Mr. X. I'd never seen water that shade of blue and green. The sand was smooth and white along the beaches. Between beaches were bleak, jagged outcroppings of rock, where the waves beat themselves into white, frothy anger. This was really the rock-ribbed coast of Maine.

Just then the driver shifted his tobacco, jerked his chin at a big cliff that looked like the Rock of Gibraltar pushing its way out into the ocean. I saw a big Colonial mansion surrounded by a small forest of blue cedar and pine in the middle of the isolated crag.

"That's the Taggart home," Lantern Jaw said. "Ever hear of Jared Taggart?"

His sharp eyes peered at me beneath the brim of his bedraggled black felt hat. I kept my face blank as I shook my head.

"Mayor or local banker?" I asked.

"Nope. Jared was a famous engineer. Did jobs for big utility companies in foreign parts. Telephone and radio work mostly."

"Neighborly sort of guy," I remarked, "building a house on a lonely mountain like that."

"His ancestors built the place. One of them was a smuggler. Used to land his boat in one of the coves in that cliff, folks say. Jared wasn't home much in late years. Family used to own the beach and land this side of the cliff, where the Inn was built. Sold it to a city corporation. Guess maybe Taggart's widow and daughter Sheila will sell the place now. There ain't no more Taggart men to carry on the name."

I WANTED him to keep on talking. He described the family. I said:

"I remember reading something about Taggart's death. He was a famous sound engineer. Died accidentally, didn't he?"

Once again the jehu's shrewd blue eyes raked my impassive face.

"City papers must've got it wrong," he said. "Jared had a bad heart. Doc Whittaker treated him weeks before he died. They had a trained nurse and even brought a specialist up from Boston. A couple fellers was up here last week though, asking about Jared's death. Guess they must have been insurance men. That your line, Mister?"

I had a hunch the lean-jawed hick was pumping me now. I clammed up, said: "Hell no! I sell books." He seemed to accept that. He nodded at the other side of the car, slowed down a little, said:

"We call that Lover's Leap, Mister. Ain't nothing like it along the coast of Maine. Been three-four suicides off that cliff."

He really had something. He braked the car, while I leaned close to the open window. A huge cliff reared up more than fifty feet above the sea, almost a perpendicular plane. Sharp, jagged rocks thrust upward like shark's fins at the foot of the cliff. The tide was in, and breakers lashed at the rocks with diabolical fury, throwing spume from the white caps halfway up the cliff. The suns rays caught the spray, made irridescent rainbows dance along the gray wall of the cliff. The thunder of the waves beating against the rocks and the foot of the cliff was almost deafening.

He tooled the car along the wide curve of the road until we were opposite the flat top of the cliff. He said:

"Like to walk out and see it, Mister?"

I shook my head fast, said: "It gives with the thrills, brother, but I'm afraid of high places." I took another look at the overhanging cliff and shuddered. It

would take a hot torch to make me leap off there for love.

"You'll get over that, fatty. Right after you step off!"

I twisted fast, realizing the Yankee accent was gone. I was listening to a lingo that was strictly from Manhattan. I stared into the steady muzzle of a Colt .45. My blood pressure climbed. Damned few people ever risked calling me "fatty" to my face. There wasn't anything I could do about that right then.

Lantern Jaw's lips had skinned back, his blue eyes were flecked with a lust to kill. Bitter condemnation was like a sour taste in my throat. My Magnum was in the Gladstone at my feet. I went back against the upholstery, growled: "Okay, louse! What's the play?"

"Leap frog, and you're it, Cain!" My eyes widened a little, he grinned maliciously. "Sure, I knew you from down in New York. My job is to look over strangers who hit this tank town. I knew Killer Cain wasn't in Eastville for a vacation."

"So what?" I weighed the chances of jumping him. They looked slim. The phoney hick knew me by reputation. He'd blast me at the first sign of a move.

"So you make with a Brodie off Lover's Leap," he snarled. "For an else, you can take it right here and I'll drop you off with your suitcase. No one can find a bullet hole after the tide bounces you around among those rocks. Your body will come ashore miles from this spot. It will look just like you'd met with an accident."

His voice told me he was jittery. He was afraid of Killer Cain, even when he had a rod trained on me. That was a hopeful sign. I knew there was no one to hear the blast of the gun. We hadn't passed a car on the trip out. Desperate ideas milled around in my skull.

"I'd rather take a dive than be liquidated by a two-bit gunsel like you," I snarled. I started to open the door. The gun in his fist came up. He rasped: "Take your bag, fat stuff. And don't make with the monkeyshines."

He looked like a strait-jacket case from the laughing academy, as I grabbed my bag and opened the door. If I had said "boo" he would have blown the top of my head off. He felt safer when he saw the bag in my right hand. I'm not a two-gun man.

Lantern Jaw slid out from behind the wheel, followed me gingerly across the wide strip of grass between the road and the lip of the cliff. Cold sweat trickled down my spine. Each step, I expected to feel a bullet between my shoulder blades. I was banking on the fact that he'd had orders to make his killings look like accidents. There hadn't been any mention of bullet holes in the FBI lads picked up on the beach. My only weapon was a psychological one. In desperation, I was going to play on his fear of Killer Cain's reputation with a gun.

His feet slithered in the grass and gravel behind me. He was gaining confidence, for he sneered:

"How about making it a swan dive, fatso? With your figure, it would be out of this world—"

I placed him by his voice. Then I made my desperate move. My right wrist went forward with my stride, then snapped back. My Gladstone flew back at the spot where I'd heard his sneering voice. In the same movement, I threw myself forward and to one side, hitting on my shoulder and doing a half-doughnut roll.

CHAPTER II
Heart Trouble

IS gun cracked and a bullet whined off the granite face of the cliff as I went down. As I twisted up, he was dodging the bag and his second shot wasn't even close. But he

saw me on one knee, my hand flashing toward the left lapel of my coat.

Lantern Jaw had no way of knowing my shoulder holster was in the Gladstone beside him. He could only remember

Iron cleats extended all the way up the cliff.

stories he'd heard around New York's underworld, of Killer Cain's speed and deadly accuracy with a Magnum. His nerve couldn't stand it.

He yelled fearfully. Then he lammed for the flivver, taking the low guard rail in a ludicrous leap that carried him right into the car. He bent low, shielding his body as he gave the flivver the gun. Gears clashed and he went down the turnpike like an Indianapolis speedster.

Air came out of my lungs in a tortured gasp. I couldn't remember having been in a worse jam with less opportunity of getting out. Talk about coming in on a wing and a prayer! All I had was the prayer. I dished the perspiration out of my eyes, ran over to get my bag.

The loud blare of a horn lifted my head. I saw a dark sedan hurtling along the road, from the direction of the village. I cursed savagely; wondered if the people who hired Lantern Jaw to case all new arrivals, ran their murder efforts in relays. Then I saw the pretty, brown-haired girl behind the wheel. She looked more Park Avenue than gun moll. She answered Lantern Jaw's description of Sheila Taggart. Rubber shrieked as she braked the Buick fast. There was a big, blond man beside her. He looked like a larger-sized Nelson Eddy with a tiny mustache. The man's voice had a faint accent as he yelled:

"We heard gun shots, saw that car racing off. Anything wrong?"

I put a damper on my temper. I didn't know the score up at the Taggart house. I brushed myself nonchalantly, said: "I met up with a new-type taxi-driver. He uses a gun to hold up passengers. Most of them depend on their meters."

The girl got pale beneath her tan. I watched her guardedly. She wouldn't make the front line in a Broadway show. But her features were nice and regular. She had a pert nose that tilted a little over a wide, pleasant mouth. Her brown hair curled around her shoulders in a long bob. She was expensively dressed in a coral sport suit. Her blue eyes were clouded with worry.

"Jed Purdy is the only taxi driver in Eastville," she said. "He isn't a gunman or a robber. Was your driver a short, round-faced man, partly bald, with a fringe of white hair?"

"This goon was tall and lean with an underslung jaw."

HER eyes flashed to the blond man. I know fear when I see it. Sheila Taggart was scared. The square-faced, blond man stared at her. There was a chilly blankness in that stare. Sheila Taggart said:

"I saw a man who looked like that in the village today. He's not a native. Maybe he is a farmer or a lobster man from out of town." Her glib explanation had a phoney touch. I let it ride as her companion asked: "Can we drop you off at the Inn? We go right past it."

I sighed morosely as I sank into the rear seat of the Buick. The little gray man had handed me an assignment that was strictly from danger. From behind the wheel, the girl introduced herself:

"I'm Sheila Taggart and this is Jan Von Bleek, a friend of my father's from Rotterdam. Jan was in South America when dad was there. When Hitler took over the low countries, he couldn't go back home. He's staying with us—until his country can use him."

I nodded affably, wondering if my narrow shave had left me jittery, or whether I really caught a faint hesitancy, as Jared Taggart's girl explained the presence of the husky Netherlander. I said casually:

"My name is Cain. I heard about Rock Haven Inn being a good place to rest. That seems to have been an overstatement."

Sheila laughed, said gun-crazy taxi drivers weren't part of the scheme of life in Eastville. She advised me to get in touch with Sheriff Nelson, the local law officer. If my hold-up man belonged in Aroostook County, the sheriff would know him and would end his crime career abruptly. Then the car braked in front of the hotel grounds.

The Inn was a lovely spot. A big, double-winged Colonial mansion spread across green lawns bordered with flower beds. A young forest of pine and maple trees extended on either side of the lawns.

I could see the white sand of the beach beyond a sloping lawn in back. A side lawn had a Tom Thumb golf course, and there was a tennis court in back of the big, white edifice.

The bellhop who took my bag was a spry young sprout of seventy or more. I felt guilty watching him carry my bag up to the second floor room I was assigned. He nearly swallowed his upper plate when I handed him a dollar. When he left, I got my Magnum and shoulder clip out of my bag. I felt better with a gun against my ribs.

I dragged out the Scotch, poured out three fingers, used water from a thermos jug as a chaser. Then I sat down to review the situation. I was over my anger at letting a second-rate gunsel like Lantern Jaw put me behind the eight ball. His crude attempt had given me an inkling of what I was up against.

The little gray man wasn't day-dreaming when he suspected evil was rampant in Eastville. I'd stepped into a dangerous picture. Judging from the opening move, the cast was strictly professional and well organized. Some one was damned anxious to keep me from learning anything about the Taggarts. I tried to piece the scraps of information I had gathered, but they didn't add up to anything.

I CLEANED up a little, took another jolt of Scotch and went down to see what I could see. The big, paneled lobby was nearly empty. A couple of old ladies were sitting in rocking chairs by the stone fireplace that took up most of one wall. On the veranda along the front and one side, the gliders and porch chairs were mostly vacant. A couple of family groups, each with a kid or two, were definitely Canadian from their accent. I saw eight or ten bathers down on the smooth, white sand. I failed to see anyone who looked dangerous.

I ASKED the clerk at the desk about getting a taxi back to town. I wanted to shoot a wire to my boss in Washington. The clerk said the local taxi driver would bring some week-end guests who were arriving on the afternoon train. I could ride in with him, or I could telephone the message. I use a private code when I communicated with the little gray man. I didn't think the local operator could take a code message over the phone, but I didn't tell the clerk that.

I skimmed through the Boston papers on the table until the taxi pulled up. Only one couple arrived; a short, ruddy complexioned man in a sporty, checked suit, and his blonde, washed-out looking wife.

When I walked over to the desk to catch the taxi driver who brought in the baggage, the clerk appointed himself a master of ceremonies. He said:

"Mr. Cain meet Mr. and Mrs. Hardin, from Hollywood. They came up for a couple weeks earlier this season, and have been coming every week-end since."

I nodded politely. I let my glance flick over Hardin's face, wondered why it seemed familiar. I was positive I'd never met the man, although I'd been in Hollywood a couple of times on cases. I saw that he was sizing me up pretty thoroughly. He stuck out his hand, said:

"Haven't I met you in Hollywood in Washington, Mister Cain?"

"Not me," I answered promptly. "Maybe I look like Man Mountain Dean without the whiskers, but I'm not photogenic. Washington is too much of a madhouse for me. New York City is my bailiwick."

"I'm not in the production end," Hardin explained. He smiled, but I didn't get any warmth in his sharp, blue eyes. The washed-out blonde was plucking at his sleeve. "I'm a location scout. Pick spots for background and that sort of stuff. Guess that's why I fell for the scenery around here. Make a swell set

up for a pirate scenario—or a spy pic." His chuckle again failed to match up with his eyes; they got sharp and probing now.

The feeling that I ought to know Hardin deepened. Maybe it was because of his fencing around to see if I did know him. I'm enough of a Sherlock to know when I'm being pumped, even by inference. The stocky, red-faced man didn't look like the sort of lug who would be intrigued by Maine's rugged scenery.

The taxi driver had learned from the clerk I wanted to go back. He broke up the party, saying: "I have to meet the Montreal train in half an hour, Mister. We'd better get going."

Jed Purdy answered Sheila Taggart's description, even to the white halo of hair around his bald pate. He had a round face and twinkling blue eyes that could be sharp and inquisitive. It didn't take him long to spot me as a cliff dweller from the city who didn't take kindly to the wide, open spaces. Out of a casual inquiry about Taggart's house, he suddenly clipped: "Folks up here ain't dumb, Mister Cain. Some other fellers ahead of you made that mistake. Maine folks clam up when people talk down their nose to them. Jared Taggart grew up here. Folks like him and respected him."

I weighed my position carefully. I could use a contact man who knew his way around. Purdy had been shrewd enough to see it wasn't the scenery that brought me to Rock Haven Inn so late in the season. I decided to deal a few cards off the top of the deck.

"Jared Taggart had some influential friends in Washington who think there's something off-color about his death. I was sent here to nose around a bit in a confidential way. He wasn't a recluse. Why did he shut himself up in that big house?"

"Thought maybe you'd know that, coming from Washington," Purdy said shrewdly. I shook my head.

"Folks around here thought maybe he was working on something for the government that wasn't any of their business," Purdy said. "But they can't figure why his daughter Sheila refused to see any neighbors when her father died, or why the funeral was so private. There's something queer about her never coming to the village without that Holland Dutchman. She used to be a friendly sort of kid, before she went away to school. She came back only a little while before Jared died. Then all of a sudden she grew uppish. Maybe it's something she picked up at college, but it ain't natural."

I WAS groping in my own mind for a lead, any kind of clue that would give me a line on what went on at the Taggarts' secluded mansion on the big cliff.

"Have there been any queer happenings around here lately?" I asked. "Anything that might tie in with the sudden change of attitude of the Taggart family?"

Purdy drove nearly half a mile in silence. Then he said:

"Nothing you could put a finger on. There's the ghost the Portugee lobsterman thinks he saw walking in the Taggart's private graveyard a couple weeks before Jared died, but we lay that to an overdose of apple-jack. Manuel thought he saw white figures flitting around there late one night. But he claimed last week he saw a submarine out in the bay when he was setting out some traps by moonlight. Coast Guard says there ain't been one of our subs in these waters for months, and we ain't been bombed or shelled. So I guess Manuel ain't a reliable source of information."

I agreed that a Portugee lobsterman might see things after a couple jolts of apple-jack. They freeze cider, then chop the ice to get out the alcohol, down in

Maine. That's their idea of apple-jack.

"Course, there was the siren, that had all the air-raid wardens going nuts at first, until they learned it was part of some tomfool experiment Jared was working on," Purdy said. "We've heard it once or twice since the old man died, so maybe someone up there's carrying on the experiment."

Purdy said the local civilian defense people had objected at first, but when they called Jared by telephone, he got Headquarters in Washington to okay whatever

Only a few inches down we found the nurse.

it was he was doing. So folks kind of got used to it, since it wasn't nearly so loud and shrill now.

He told me Jared Taggart came back from a big job for a telephone company in South America, just after Pearl Harbor. Right away he imported a gang of ten or fifteen foreigners. Someone said they'd worked on the South American job with him. They stayed about three months, living at the big house. Lots of big machinery and equipment came in by freight. Folks thought Jared was building a private electric plant. Then the foreigners left, almost overnight. No one saw hair nor hide of them again, he said.

That was when the big gate at the Taggart place was closed and put under guard. No one but trades people allowed in and Jared never came out. It was rumored he was working on something for the government. Jared must have worked too hard; lights were going on all night lots of times. His heart went bad and Doc Whittaker, who had always been the family doctor, was called in. They installed a private nurse, even had a heart specialist come up from Boston. Jared died soon after that. There was no question in Jed Purdy's mind about Taggart's death. Doc Whittaker had signed the death certificate and he was nobody's fool.

THE funeral was private. Jared was buried in the Taggart's private cemetary, just beyond the estate out on the cliff. The nurse had stayed on, because old Mrs. Taggart was ailing. Now Sheila never came to town alone, always had the South American feller with her. He'd arrived about two weeks before Jared died and was still sticking around. The girl was polite when folks sympathized, but cold-shouldered any suggestions that old Mrs. Taggart might enjoy a visit from her old friends. The villagers didn't like that. Nor did they like Sheila taking up with a foreigner like Von Bleek. The guards on the estate had also gotten under the townspeople's skins.

Purdy said he got calls now and then to go up and bring Sheila and Von Bleek into the village. Gas rationing affected rich and poor alike, he commented. The guards at the gate knew him now, usually passed him without checking with the house.

"Was one of those guards a lean, long-jawed Yankee heel?" I asked.

"That gent ain't no New Englander," Purdy said vehemently. "He used to pull that hayseed dialect on me, just to rile me up. Do you know him?"

"Not as well as I'm going to," I promised grimly. I told him about Lantern Jaw's attempt to run me over Lover's Leap. I didn't say anything about Sheila Taggart's bum steer about not knowing the gunsel. Purdy dropped me off at the telegraph station, told me how to reach him in case he wasn't at his stand by the courthouse.

I shot the little gray man a wire in code, asking him to check the FBI files for a crook answering Lantern Jaw's description. I said he might have been a ham actor at one time or another. The telegrapher was worried about sending a code message in war time. My private dick's license from Washington was a good convincer.

Purdy told me where Dr. Whittaker lived. He was having office hours when I called. Whittaker was a rugged, weatherbeaten old-timer with nice blue eyes that hardened when I told him my errand.

"Jared Taggart died from heart trouble," he said flatly. "I get rather tired reiterating that statement. He was not poisoned, strangled, stabbed, or shot. I know heart failure can be simulated, but I knew about his heart condition long before this final illness."

He has influential friends in Washington. "They ordered me to investigate all circumstances surrounding his death. I'm

just obeying orders," I pointed out.

That softened him up a little. He said:

"I suspect that Jared was working on a government secret," he said. "Under those circumstances, his death might be viewed with suspicion. But I'll stake my professional reputation, nothing was wrong. He knew he was going to die. He had a skillful nurse—two nurses, in fact, for one was called away and had to be replaced. Dr. Talbot, the heart specialist, Jared had called from Boston, is one of the best in the country. His diagnosis was exactly the same as mine."

LISTENING to this splendid old gentleman, I was sure that Jared Taggart had called the specialist in, solely to send that message back to Dave Kaye, one of our operatives, in Boston. But why had he gone to that elaborate procedure? He must have been in danger of some sort. I knew I was on the trail of something grim and evil.

I was interested in the switch in nurses, but Doc Whittaker assured me it had been perfectly legitimate. The first nurse, a Boston girl working out of a Portland hospital, had been called home by illness in her family. The family arranged to have another nurse sent up and someone from the house had driven the first girl to the train. Both nurses had satisfactory credentials and both knew their business. The second nurse was still at the house caring for Mrs. Taggart who had collapsed. No, he wasn't treating her; she just needed rest and time to get over Jared's death. I left the little white cottage feeling certain that Taggart had died a natural death.

I killed an hour or two in the local library, looking over back files of the county newspapers. Some local scribe had published a biography of old Maine families. That gave me a good background on the Taggarts from away back. I had supper at a nice little restaurant in the village, then started to walk back to the Inn. It was a three-mile hike and it was dark when I reached the side road that led up through a pine forest past the Taggart house on the cliff. With the pencil flash I had brought, I found an old wagon road that followed the north wall, after I circled through the trees past the ten-foot iron gate in front. The walls were about eight feet high and had a couple strands of barbed wire atop of that. I hadn't seen any guard at the gate, but there was a little gate house inside where I suppose the guard was posted.

I found the spot on the north wall, where Purdy had told me the lobstermen used to short cut to their traps on the beach. It was near here they claimed to have seen the ghosts walking. There was no barbed wire, and blocks of granite had been piled to make a crude stile. I managed to get my two hundred pounds over without making too much noise or breaking my neck.

The big trees and the underbrush gave me the creeps as I circled along the inside of the wall, working toward the back of the house. Some of the front windows were lighted. The back of the house was in darkness. The fringe of heavy trees and brush made a border of about fifteen or twenty feet between the green lawns and the bare expanse of the cliff. As I moved back, I saw that on the ocean side there was a deep V cut into the cliff with wide prongs jutting out into the sea. That must have been the bay and the cave where the smugglers were supposed to have brought in their contraband goods.

I used my flash sparingly, working toward a spot where I could creep up to the back of the house. It was mostly by accident that I heard something moving in the woods ahead of me. I froze and reached for the Magnum .357 under my coat. At first I thought it was an animal. Then I made out the blurred outline of a human figure. Another tres-

passer had the same idea I did about sneaking up on the house.

I shoved my gun back in the holster, started to tail the dark figure. It wasn't a guard, his movements were too furtive. I couldn't see his features. I found that he was following a faint path. Once I found that, it wasn't hard to move silently through the evergreen shrubs and berry bushes. I managed to close up on him before he reached the edge of the lawn. Then I heard feet slapping heavily through the underbrush behind me. I whirled, reaching for my gun, but I wasn't quite fast enough.

Lantern Jaw had spotted me and had crept close before I heard him. Then when he recognized me, he charged, snarling:

"I thought you'd be peeping around here, Fatty." He was swinging the heavy night stick he carried as he spoke. I tried to roll away from the blow, but the pine needles in the path were slippery. The club paralyzed my shoulder, I could not lift my hand to my gun. I went down on my knees. Then I heard Lantern Jaw yell: "So you brought a helper!" I sensed that he had seen the other prowler. Then the club swung again. I felt as if I had taken that dive over Lover's Leap and had landed square on my head. An ocean of blackness closed in over me.

CHAPTER III

"Cain Killed Abel"

THERE had been a split second before I went out in which I thought I heard Lantern Jaw yell: "Hell! There's another of them. Halt, you louse, or I'll fire!" I took it he had discovered the guy I had been trailing. My first thought when I came to again was whether he had caught the other prowler.

Then the pain in my skull ended coherent thinking. I felt as if I had gone over Lover's Leap and the waves were playing badminton with the rocks. I was the shuttlecock. My back and hips hurt. Then I realized Lantern Jaw was dragging me out onto the cliff. He was grunting curses as he hauled my inert two hundred pounds over the rough ground. Then he dropped me for a breathing spell. My head bounced off the granite, and I almost went out again.

While he was resting, I managed to squeeze my arm against my chest. Exultation flowed in my veins; the Magnum was still in my shoulder clip. Lantern Jaw was trying to arrange another one of his "accidents" and had left me my gun to make it look better.

I let my muscles go slack. Some of the pain cleared from my brain. Lantern Jaw got his powerful fingers hooked under my armpits, started the last fifteen or twenty feet toward the wide inlet that cut into the cliff.

When he had taken two or three backward steps, I went into action. My hands snapped back, gripping the calves of Lantern Jaw's legs. Bracing my heels, I drove my shoulders back against his knees. Surprise—and the leverage between my hands and shoulders, jerked his feet out from under him. He screamed a curse as he toppled over backward.

I rolled fast, prodded myself up on one knee. The Magnum was glinting in my fist, as he scrambled partly up and raced away like a sprinter responding to a starter's gun. I yelled once for him to halt, but he circled toward the inlet, yelling at the top of his lungs. I couldn't let him go; he'd have everyone in the house out in a minute. My Magnum barked once, shutting off his screams.

The slug hit him in the side of his chest and the impact carried him toward the edge of the cliff. His hands clawed furiously at the air. Then he toppled out of sight, down into the wet grave he had planned for me.

I started to my feet, then dropped again. The shot and Lantern Jaw's yells had aroused the house. Instantly the entire grounds were flooded with illumination. Powerful arcs on the roof even bathed the cliff with radiant light. Still at a crouch, I dove for the shelter of the trees. I was none too soon. A high-power rifle cracked and bullets ricocheted from the granite around me.

I found the faint path, started in the

Before he could reach his holster, my Magnum cracked his skull.

direction of the house. Across the lawn I saw Von Bleek, running toward the trees. He cradled a tommy-gun in the crook of his arm. Two gunsels carrying automatics accompanied him. There wasn't a ghost of a chance of outflanking them. I lifted the Magnum, then let it drop. I could easily blast out the three of them, but I never could explain their deaths to the local law. Lantern Jaw had gone into the inlet. His body would be washed ashore far away from the Taggart estate. I was a trespasser here. It looked as if Mrs. Cain's little boy was square behind the eight ball.

THEN memory of the other interloper flashed in my brain. I knew he hadn't come over the wall where I had. He had sneaked in from the opposite direction. That meant there had to be some way of climbing up the cliff. I whirled, started back along the path, bent so the bushes would hide my bulk.

The path petered out in the underbrush after fifteen or twenty yards. It seemed as if my hunch was lousy. I could hear Von Bleek yelling to his men, off to my left. My brain was milling furiously. The other skulker had gotten away from Lantern Jaw. He couldn't have gone near the house or the two guards who were with Von Bleek would have spotted him. There must be a way down the cliff.

I risked a guarded beam from my pencil flash. Then I saw broken twigs and branches in the bushes. Something had gone through there fast. I started to plunge through, decided silence was safer than speed. I dropped to my knees and imitated an Indian as branches lashed my face and briars clutched at my clothes. Each second, I expected to hear Von Bleek's tommy-gun chattering forth its message of destruction. I found the path again, after five or ten yards of torturous crawling. Then I could make better speed to the bare cliff top.

For a second or two my stomach felt like a leaden weight. Ahead of me was the edge of the cliff, looming about fifty feet above the beach below. Beyond I could see the dark outline of the Rock Haven Inn. But there was the matter of a sheer wall of granite dropping in precipitous suddenness between me and the sands of the Inn's private beach.

My head twisted in both directions along the cliff front. My breath went out explosively as I saw a dark shadow across the cliff top. I crawled toward it, screened by the shadow of the trees. I found a wide fissure had split the cliff making a narrow V about six feet wide where I lay. There was an iron hand grip sunk in the top of the cliff a few feet to my right. I crawled over, saw two more iron cleats driven into the side of the cliff. Below them was a narrow shelf. The guarded beam of light I risked showed it was less than three feet wide.

Perspiration bathed me in cold trickles as I lowered my big bulk over the edge of the cliff, found the iron cleat with my toes. I did a spread eagle, clutching the top one, groping below with my foot. A misstep would hurtle me forty feet or more down into the black chasm. Somehow, I made it down to the narrow ledge. My light showed me it curved down the side of the cliff, like one of those donkey paths they show in travelogues on the Grand Canyon. I had to flatten my back against the cliff, and crab-step down. I was wringing wet when I reached a flat, narrow shelf that seemed to be the end of the path.

My flash showed me it was about six feet down to the water that filled the little inlet below me. I didn't know how deep the water was or whether it covered sand or jagged rocks. I slid over the edge, let myself drop, praying that I wouldn't break a leg and drown. I landed on soft sand. The tide was only about halfway in. The water came just above my knees.

I sloshed along the inlet, around the other lip of the cliff, onto the beach. I found the front door unlocked; the Inn wasn't afraid of burglars. I made my damp way to my room on the second floor without hearing a sound except the muffled snores of the more respectable guests.

It only took a minute to realize my room had been thoroughly frisked during my absence. It was an expert job, but I'd done the same kind too often to miss the faint signs. The search didn't worry me. There was nothing in my room to give the faintest hint as to the job I was on. But it told me someone else at the Inn was interested in the Taggart case. Or at least in my interest in the case.

THE girl who waited on me at breakfast was agog with excitement. With my bacon and eggs she served news of another body being washed up on the Inn's private beach. All blue and scorched like the other two had been. Just then the antiquated bellhop brought me an answer to my wire to the little gray man. I felt the hair lift along the back of my neck as I read it. It said:

"Man is Lew Abel. Played the borsch circuit doing hick routine. Member of Purple gang which was taken over by your old friend Madame Sable. Happy hunting."

Now I knew why I'd been sent to Maine. Madame Sable and I were poison to each other. The beautiful, sinister arch-criminal had paid me the compliment once of offering me a full partnership in her crime business. It was the only time in her career she had ever admitted a man was her equal. I had turned the offer down, busted up a clever scheme of fifth column work she'd established in Washington, and damned near lost my life. She had slipped through my fingers, partly because I was too soft-hearted to gun a woman. That was a weakness I'll never allow myself again.

There was a suggestion of butterflies fluttering in my stomach as I thought of tangling again with the dark-haired, sloe-eyed Rosa Sarenza, to give Madame Sable her right name. By her own admission I was as ruthless and dangerous as she was. I had trampled on her pride when I refused the only offer she ever made to break her lone-wolf credo. She wanted nothing more in life than to see Killer Cain dead, according to reports that had trickled back to me through the underworld.

I knew now the Taggart case was big-time stuff, with an international angle. That was Rosa's specialty, ferreting out important plans and secrets and selling them to the highest bidder. She must have suspected the little gray man would detail me on this job. That's why Lantern Jaw had been awaiting my arrival in Eastville. Mrs. Cain's little boy had to watch his step.

Quite a crowd was gathered on the beach. I got a quick look at the body; kept my face blank as I recognized Lew Abel. His flesh was blue, where it hadn't been scorched nearly black. The tide and waves or whatever had seared him had reduced his clothes to charred fragments.

A raw-boned, sandy-haired man with a sheriff's badge was peering at the hole in Abel's chest. I wondered if the slug from my Magnum was still in Abel's body; whether the local law could tie me up with the kill. A wry grin twisted my lips. I thought what a field day the headline writers could have with that set-up. I could almost see tabloid headlines screaming: *"CAIN KILLED ABEL."*

The sheriff straightened, asked the crowd: "Anyone know this feller?"

I let my guarded glance slither around. I saw Hardin, the movie scout, handing me an inscrutable, cold stare. I returned it until his eyes dropped. Beyond him I saw the stumpy figure of Jed Purdy. His eyes were asking questions of me. I dipped my chin in a faint nod.

"I think he's one of the guards up at Taggart's, Sheriff Nelson," the little man said.

The sheriff sent a deputy to the Inn to phone for Sheila Taggart to come down right away.

Doc Whittaker, who evidently acted as medical examiner, was giving Abel a quick once-over. He did a good job for a superficial examination.

"Man was dead from the bullet wound before he hit the water. Figure he was burned afterward. I'd say he's been dead about twelve hours." It was a shrewd guess. I figured it was just about 11 p.m. when Abel's attempt to murder me had backfired so disastrously.

Just then the dark Buick from Taggart's rolled into the driveway at the Inn. Sheila got out, accompanied by the blond handsome Dutchman. Sheriff Nelson was polite but firm as he questioned her. I didn't blame him. She looked a pretty picture in white shark skin sport clothes. The ocean breeze wrapped the dress advantageously about her lovely figure.

Her face went gray beneath its tan as she stared at the body. Her eyes had a

I caught the rat as he was taking a powder for the stairs.

frightened, haunted look. Von Bleek put his arm around her shoulder, as if to steady her. The gesture made me mad; I remembered how he looked when hunting for me with the tommy-gun the night before.

After a long second, Sheila Taggart lifted her dark eyes, shook her head. Her voice was low as she said:

"Jed must have been mistaken, sheriff. I never saw this man before."

Her eyes, flicking around to find Purdy, picked up my big bulk. She seemed to cringe, as if she expected me to point out the discrepancy in her statement. Yesterday she had told me she'd seen the man and thought he was a farmer or a lobsterman. I could read a silent plea for help in her tortured glance. Purdy flashed me a look, but I shook my head. Purdy muttered: "Maybe I *was* mistaken. It was dark near the gate when I saw the guard."

Nelson nodded. Sheila and Von Bleek turned away. Once again I had the feeling she was mutely begging me for help. Nelson was grousing to Doc Whittaker. Abel's fingers and hands were burned, so badly no fingerprints could be taken.

Whittaker saw me. His square face hardened. I guess he remembered the impertinent questions I'd asked about his diagnosis of Jared Taggart's death. His voice was a little malicious as he said:

"Mister Cain is a private detective, Sheriff Nelson. Maybe he could identify the corpse. Private detectives know a lot of people."

I shouldn't have fallen for it, but my temper slipped a little. He was trying to show me up as a phoney peep. I said:

"Why not ask New York for a description of a cheap gunsel named Lew Abel? Maybe that would help." I swung on my heel, started toward the hotel. Nelson's crisp voice halted me. He said:

"I'd like to have you drop in and see me, Mister Cain. Maybe I can return the favor by helping you, if you're working on a case."

I felt like kicking myself. But I said:

"Thanks, Sheriff. I'll take you up on that."

CHAPTER IV

Madame Sable

HINGS were churning in my brain as I walked back to the Inn. Jed Purdy was trotting by my side, wondering aloud at Sheila Taggart's open perjury. I thought I had the answer to that. Von Bleek wasn't a friend, he was a guard. Sheila wasn't allowed out of the house, unless she was under his eye. That meant that Madame Sable, somehow or other, had moved in on the Taggart home and taken command. I worried my brain over that. Then I had a flash of inspiration. Remembering the spade I'd seen in Abel's car, the night he nearly drove me over Lover's Leap, I began to add two and two and get the right answer. Maybe the lobstermen hadn't been cock-eyed when they thought they saw ghosts walking around the Taggart place.

Madame Sable hadn't just walked up and rung the front door bell at the Taggart place. The cold-blooded efficiency of the organization there; the haunted, pleading look in Sheila Taggart's eyes; the dispatch with which Lantern Jaw had twice tried to murder me; all pointed to the ruthless hatred of Rosa Sarenza.

It wasn't a job where clues were lying around for a master mind to deduce his way to a solution. I knew Madame Sable and I had a pretty good idea of how she had crashed the gate at Taggarts.

Jed Purdy furnished the missing link. He was still muttering about Sheila's changed attitude. He said darkly:

"Everything's changed up there, since Jared died. Used to be that some of the family and servants would be in town now and then. Never see any of them now. The first nurse came in to the movies when she had some time off. Ain't seen the second nurse, since she took over the case."

That beef clicked a couple of pieces of the puzzle together.

"If you wanted to bury a body around here without benefit of clergy, Jed, what spot would you pick?" I asked suddenly.

"Depends on where the body was lying," Purdy answered shrewdly.

"Say it was kicking around the Taggart place?"

"I'd use their private burying ground," he answered promptly. "There's plenty of open space. No one ever goes up there."

"Can you get me there without everyone in town knowing it?"

He could—and did. I still shudder at the thought of some of the cowpaths he tooled his flivver over. Finally we came to the little, low-walled cemetery with a dozen or more graves. Some of the tombstones had dates nearly two hundred years old. The earth was still fresh on the spot that marked Jared Taggart's final resting place.

IT WAS Purdy who found the spot where the turf had been stripped away and replaced in a desolate corner of the cemetery, near the wall. We found some pieces of broken slate and shale, stripped off the loose turf. Then we only had to dig a couple feet before we uncovered the corpse of the woman in the white uniform of a nurse. The girl's skull had been fractured; I judged by a blackjack. Rage filled my brain at the brutality so evident. Now I knew how Madame Sable had gotten into the Taggart house.

We covered the grave and rode back to town. Sheriff Nelson was at his office in the courthouse building. He'd contacted Police Headquarters in New York by telephone, giving them Abel's description. Records at the Center Street morgue quickly tabbed the dead gunman. My timely tip had broken down Nelson's hostility. He wanted to move in on Taggart's house to find Lew Abel's killer.

I had to tip part of my hand. I explained that I was working out of Washington but had no official standing. I told him he wouldn't find Abel's murderer at Taggart's, but promised him a better murderer. I told him how Jed and I had solved the mystery of the lobsterman's ghosts, and explained that the Portugee had seen the burial of Amy Lorton, the first nurse. A telephone call to Dr. Whittaker furnished a description of the Lorton girl. It settled any doubt about the identity of the girl in the unmarked grave.

Nelson was all for cracking down on the Taggart's at once. I had to talk fast to persuade him to wait until nightfall. It was his first murder case and elections were coming in November. I argued that he would endanger the lives of both Sheila Taggart and her mother by crashing in there in daylight. After dark, there would be a better chance of getting the guard unawares, cold-caulking him, and getting into the house before he could sound a general alarm.

It was finally agreed that he'd pick me up at the Inn around 9 p.m. with a couple of his deputies. That gave me a couple hours to try to puzzle out some other details that were bothering me.

Back at the Inn, the hotel clerk remembered that there had been a gorgeous, almond-eyed woman who claimed she was a former friend of Taggarts, staying at the Inn. She claimed she had known the sound engineer in Mexico. She checked out just about the time the Lorton girl was supposed to have returned to Portland to care for her sick relative.

That added up about right. I figured Von Bleek was Madame Sable's chief aide. He had wormed his way into the household, then arranged the details of Amy Lorton's fake message. Probably Von Bleek or Abel had offered to drive the poor girl into Portland. She'd been murdered and buried in a crude grave. Madame Sable had walked in as the relief nurse. She and Von Bleek could have smuggled other members of her mob in as guards. From then on the Taggarts were prisoners in their own home.

MAYBE the skull practice in working out this theory made me careless. I had no presentiment of danger when I unlocked my door and walked in. Hardin, the movie scout, was sitting on my bed. His Luger was pointed directly at my heart. There was a purposeful glint in his cold, blue eyes that killed any idea I had about going for the Magnum .357 in my shoulder clip.

His affability was gone. The stocky, red-faced man's voice was flat and level as he said:

"Peel out the shoulder gun, Cain, very carefully! I know your reputation, so don't get any screwy ideas about a fast play. I'll slap a slug in your heart before you can flip a wrist."

I know when a guy is bluffing. Hardin wasn't Lew Abel. He knew and re-

spected my reputation. But he had faith in his own ability. I let the gun slip to the rug; followed the gesture of his free hand and kicked it toward him gently. He kept me covered when he picked it up, shoved it in his belt.

"I came to proposition you, Cain," he said evenly. "I know quite a lot about you. We were on opposite sides of the fence on that Chesapeake sabotage job. I don't know who hired you, but I know it wasn't the government. I have a hunch you were working for Madame Sable then, and that you fell out on that date—club set-up she had in Washington. I take it you're here to beat her to the punch on the Taggart formula."

Then I spotted him; cursed myself for a dope for not having gotten his number before. He used several names, but was one of the smartest free-lance foreign agents in the field. I'd never laid eyes on him, and the picture they had in Washington had been taken some years before, when he was considerably younger and about fifty pounds lighter. That's why I hadn't recognized him sooner.

Lowering my two hundred pounds into a chair, I sneered:

"What's the matter, Hardin? Won't Rosa cut you in on the deal?"

"She's working for the Nazis and she hates my guts. The Nips will give us twice as much for that formula as the Heinies will."

"I thought they were all allied on the Axis front," I jeered.

"The Japs are all for the Rising Sun. They don't give a damn about Germany, except to use the Nazis. They're counting on a long war after Germany has folded. That's why they want this formula. I suppose you know what it is?" he asked suddenly.

I thought I'd air a wild hunch that had formed in my brain. I said: "You don't think I chase rainbows, do you, Hardin? I don't know why the FBI or Secret Service lads haven't tied up the siren that's been blowing and the submarine some of these yokels claim they saw off shore."

"I see you're on the beam," he nodded. "I'll split even with you on the Jap's payoff if you can grab that formula. We can jack the price up and make them pay through their buck teeth."

"What makes you think I can get it?" I asked. "Madame Sable is no dime novel vampire. She's the toughest, most vicious, and the best damned agent I ever ran up against."

"I know she offered you a partnership once. That shows she is afraid of you. You can clip her, if anyone in the world can."

"And if I don't want to split with you?" I asked tonelessly.

"I was up there on the cliff, when you murdered Abel last night. You got away down the cliff path I used. A hint to this hick sheriff would put you out of circulation."

Anger blazed in my brain. I told him what I thought of both the Japs and the Nazis. I thought he was going to squeeze the trigger of the Luger. He grated: "Don't pull that malarkey on me. I know you're a high-class gunman, renting your rod to the highest bidder, only on an international scale. I tell you that formula is going to Hirohito's navy boys. Get in the way, and I'll finish the job Abel messed up on." He started sidling crabwise toward the door.

I LET him go. He still had my Magnum tucked in his belt. I value that gun pretty highly. Just before he eased out, I said:

"You're a dead duck if you fool around with Rosa Sarenza, my chunky pal." I got out of the chair, moving my hands a little in front of me. "She's got one weakness. Maybe I'd disclose it for a price."

Cupidity glinted in his eyes. He knew

I'd outsmarted Madame Sable on that job in Washington. For a second or two he was off guard, the muzzle of the Luger dipped.

I can move fast, and my huge weight is deceptive. It sort of lulls people into discounting any physical exertion on my part. That fallacy has saved my life several times.

I hit him with a left and then a right. His head bounced off the door frame. His chin was an easy target. I clipped him again with a hard right and he dropped like an express elevator in a skyscraper. I jerked my gun from his belt. I didn't

Madame Sable fired just as I tore the gun loose.

bother dragging him out of my room. I just let him lie there when I went out.

The tide was partly out and I managed to make my way to the narrow path up the cliff without being seen. I didn't like the idea of shading the Taggart place in daylight, but there was no other way. I skirted through the woods, and mostly on my hands and knees, I made my way to the big inlet where Abel had nearly made shark-bait out of me. The scraps I'd gleaned from Hardin had bolstered my theory.

I wiggled to the edge of the cliff overlooking the inlet. The racing water poured into a deep, black cave. No wonder Abel had screamed. It would take a powerful swimmer to buck that undertow.

The mystery of the blue, seared bodies still had me stymied. I couldn't get the answer to that mystery without going into the cave. The lads who had gone in there hadn't been able to bring the answer to the mystery out with them. I decided to confine my interest to theorizing on that angle.

Back at the Inn, I ate my first real meal at the hotel. I promptly damned myself for letting business interfere with that pleasure. I didn't see Hardin and his blonde wife in the dining room.

I was just thanking the O. P. A. for lifting the coffee rationing in time for me to enjoy a second cup of the Inn's excellent brew, when I was called out of the dining room to the phone. The call was from Jed Purdy. He'd heard about the arrangements I made with Sheriff Nelson. Now, the plump little taxi driver was worried.

"I just got a call from Von Bleek," he said. "He wants me to bring him and Sheila Taggart into town. That's going to upset the plans you and Sheriff Nelson made. I tried to get Nelson at his office, but he's out chasing some lobster-trap poachers."

I scowled at the phone. Then I had another of my inspirations.

"Maybe it will work out just as well," I said. "I've been worried about what might happen to the Taggart women when the sheriff tries to bust in. This may be the answer. You can pick me up on your way up to Taggarts. I'll leave word here for the sheriff to come right along. I can use your taxi as a camouflage to get past the gate."

The guard at the gate must have been expecting Purdy. If he had seen me, trying to flatten my two hundred pounds down on the tonneau floor, he wouldn't have passed us in so quickly. Purdy drove along the wide gravel path that circled under two pine trees. I ducked into the shadow of the trees when Jed honked his horn.

Luck was with us. Von Bleek came out first. Evidently he was not suspicious, for he stood under the porte-cochere, called back to the house:

"Hurry up, dumb-kopf. Don't keep me waiting."

If I had any doubt about his ancestry, it was dissipated right then. He was purely from Prussia, ordering women around like slaves. I stepped from behind the car, clipped:

"Don't be in a hurry, louse! You aren't going anywhere! The sheriff is on his way up here. He wants to know how that first nurse died. And who buried her without authority."

Maybe Madame Sable hadn't wised him up. Or maybe fear made him reckless. His hand moved swiftly toward the belt holster he wore under his sport jacket. My Magnum brashed against his skull before he could even reach it. He went down on his face on the stone step.

I DRAGGED him into the back of the car. We lashed him tightly with Jed's tow-rope. Purdy figured he could keep him in hand until Sheriff Nelson ar-

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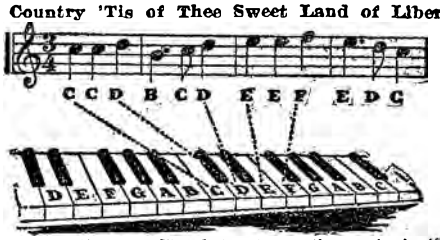

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rived. He used Von Bleek's own gun to guard the prisoner.

Sheila Taggart was standing in the hall when I pushed in through the open door. Her eyes were wide, black smudges against the pallor of her cheeks. She bent her head, tried to look past me. I said:

"Relax, gorgeous. Von Bleek is strictly out of this world as the hep cats say. I've got questions I want you to answer. And they're all sixty-four dollar questions, Sheila."

She looked as if she'd been given a last minute reprieve from the gallows. I followed her into the big living room. She dropped on the divan, folded her hands in her lap, smiled at me. She said:

"It will be good to talk freely. It's so long since I could."

I told her briefly who I was and what I was doing in Eastville. I wanted to know what the score was at the house under Von Bleek and his pals.

"His name isn't Von Bleek. He's Major Von Busch of the German Intelligence. His country wants the formula for detecting submarine my father perfected. He got into the house on faked credentials as an engineer from South America."

"And showed his hand when the first nurse was murdered and Madame Sable came in as a replacement?"

The girl's face got white again. She hadn't known the Lorton girl was killed. She thought she had been decoyed back to Portland.

I questioned her briefly about her dad's formula. She didn't know too much about it. Jared Taggart had found a way to accelerate the speed of sound waves and to magnify them so they could be used like electronic waves in radar are used to find airplanes and then reflect back. I had guessed as much when I heard about the siren. He had built a special laboratory in the natural cave under the cliff to experiment in sending his special sound waves through salt water.

"Your dad died without revealing his secret. I suppose Madame Sable has held you and your mother prisoners while she's had scientists trying to get the answer from your father's equipment."

"Yes. They tortured mother and me until they were convinced we didn't know the formula. After that, they threatened to kill mother by slow degrees, if either of us tried to communicate to anyone that we were virtually prisoners of the criminals who have taken over our home."

"Who was with your father when he died?" I asked.

"Mother and I were there. So were the nurse and Dr. Whittaker."

"Any chance your dad was murdered?" I asked bluntly.

Her dark eyes filled with tears. Her lips trembled and then her jaw stiffened. She said:

"Not a chance. Madame Sable was furious when he died. She wanted him alive until she got the formula. He could well have killed himself to end the psychological torture they put him through every day. Strong lights, endless questions, water dripping on his skull —they even tried hypnosis. But dad didn't crack. So I'm sure he didn't commit suicide."

"Didn't he try to tell you where the formula was, when he was dying?"

"He didn't have a chance. Madame Sable was watching him every minute. They fed him drugs to put him to sleep when they didn't want to keep watch over him."

"What was the last thing he said?" I asked. Time was getting short. Rosa Sarenza might miss Von Busch and come looking for him.

The dark-haired girl flushed a little, folded and unfolded her fingers in her lap. Then she looked up at me.

"I think his mind slipped a little at

the end," she said simply. "He'd been complaining his teeth didn't fit. Madame Sable and Major Von Busch wouldn't let us have a dentist up here. Dad wouldn't wear his denture, he claimed it hurt. He even tried building it up himself with gutta-percha. Perhaps he wanted to look his best when he died. He asked for his teeth. Mother slipped them in place for him. He patted her hand—and died—without a word about his secret."

"I'm glad to hear that, Sheila," a cold voice spoke behind me. "I wondered if you'd been silly enough to hold out important information from me."

Blood sang in my veins. A pulse throbbed at my temple. At the same time a chill went creeping along my spinal chord and made me want to shiver. I cursed myself for a dumb cluck. I'd expected her to come down the front stairs and through the hall. She must have used the rear stairwell, and slipped noiselessly through the kitchen and dining room. What I thought was an oriental wall drape behind me, masked a door to the dining room. I heard the low, vibrant voice say:

"Be careful about that cannon, when you turn around, Cupid. I'd drop it on the rug, if I were you. Just to play safe."

The thinly disguised threat was no bluff. Madame Sable hated my very insides. She ached for an excuse to drill me with a hot slug. I dropped the Magnum, let my body twist slowly.

Breath caught in my throat when I saw the exotic, lovely siren. Her white starched uniform closely moulded to her gorgeous figure. The white cap brought out the glints in her blue, black hair. Her long eyes were lambent with hidden emotion. I didn't know whether it was love or hate. I strongly suspected the latter. Her red lips twisted mockingly. The slim, long-fingered hand that held the .32 Colt was steady as a rock. It

looked like a toy. In her grasp it was latent death. A foolish impulse made me say:

"You're lovelier than ever, Rosa. That uniform does things to you."

CHAPTER V

By Submarine

SPOTS of color showed against her high cheekbones, spread a little across her ivory cheeks. She snapped:

"No partnership offer this time for Killer Cain. You're going out fast. I don't dare let you live, you're too dangerous to me. Abel was a dope. Von Busch wasn't much better. I saw how neatly you smeared him. I was watching from an upstairs window. But your hick hacker won't get off the grounds with him. There are two capable gunsels out there. They'll see him while making their rounds."

Without removing her eyes from me, she called over her shoulder:

"Come on in, Rocco. Take the famous Killer Cain for his last bye-bye."

A big hulking, pock-marked ginzo slid past her. Rocco nursed a sub-machine-gun against his hip. The way his lips peeled tight over his yellow teeth, showed he wanted to use it—but good.

There was a cold, hard lump where my heart ought to be. It would be fifteen or twenty minutes before Sheriff Nelson and his deputies arrived, even if they could get past the guards. It looked as if I'd gone out of my class. Madame Sable was due to hang up Cupid Cain's sorrel scalp. I'd been in tough spots before. But not facing opposition like Madame Sable.

I kept my voice steady and sardonic as I said:

"Not here, Rosa. You couldn't spoil that beautiful rug by making me bleed all over it."

Her eyes said she liked my nerve. Sheila Taggart started to sob a little on the divan. Poor kid, she hadn't been brought up realizing a life could be clicked off so lightly on a little turn of the dice of chance. Rosa Sarenza didn't like it when the girl cried over my execution. She clipped:

"Pick up his gun, Rocco. Herd him down to our private death chamber. Remember, he's Killer Cain, not some dumb gunsel. Blast him at the first sign of trickery."

The machine-gun muzzle prodded me along the hall, down two flights of stairs. The second flight was cut in stone and led to a walled passageway out to the natural cave in the cliff. The cave itself had been transformed into a huge laboratory and engine room.

A huge generator and dynamo had been installed. From the sound of falling water, I judged a dam had been built across the inlet to make a minature water fall, which in turn ran the turbine engine for the hydro-electric generator. Huge plastic panel boards lined the walls. They were covered with switches and dials. Two gnome-like figures in long coats looked up from the boards as we marched in. I knew these were the scientists Madame Sable had smuggled in to try to solve the secret of Jared Taggart's submarine detector. Madame Sable saw my eyes taking in the weird, subterranean generating plant. She asked mockingly:

"Looking for the electric chair, Killer?"

She turned, said something in German to one of the scientists. He twisted a couple knobs, threw a switch. The dynamos started to increase their hum and a wall slid up like a rolling door on a garage. Light from the room fingered out into the continuation of the tunnel, showed a cat walk cleated to the wall on one side. Then I saw the dam and the artificial waterfall. Out beyond the dam a sheet of red, solid fire stretched

across the inlet. She saw my eyes getting big.

"That's Taggart's broadcasting screen to magnify and accelerate sound waves," she said. "We know how it works, but we don't know what it's made of. But even a heavy conductor like salt water doesn't pull the electricity away from it." Then her dark eyes lighted with flecks of tawny yellow. She looked like a black panther surveying its prey.

"That's what your friends from the FBI butted into when they tried to swim into the cove to check on the mystery of Taggart's cave. The tide came in, washed them against the screen. They were electrocuted and toasted at the same time. You came nosing around to see how they died. We'll show you!"

I SAW what she meant. I would be marched out the cat walk which extended beyond the super-charged screen. Then a blast of Rocco's gun would drop me into the water racing in to the waterfall. I'd seen the power of that rushing torrent from above. I'm not enough of a swimmer to battle against it. I would be smeared against that livid wall of electric fire, like a moth beaten against a screen door by a gale of wind. Flesh began to crawl along my arms. My blood felt like ice in my veins.

Then I began to simmer with rage. I hadn't been too smart in making my visit to the house. I'd walked into a death trap like a correspondence school dick. Madame Sable would liquidate me. But I wasn't doing any plank walking for her amusement. I figured that a quick jump would carry me to the panel board where the Nazi scientists were grinning their approval of the show. Rocco could be depended upon to start blasting with the tommy-gun at the first move. The enfilade of the machine-gun fire would be bound to wreck the panel board and maybe one or both of the master-minds who

had tried to solve it. I'd go out—but I'd take Taggart's secret with me. If the U. S. couldn't get it, no back-stabbing Axis force was going to have it.

Rosa Sarenza saw my jaw muscles tighten, knew what I was thinking. She grated: "March him out there, Rocco. If he balks, cut him down here." She said something in German and one of the science boys stepped up the current. The screen turned from red to a livid glowing white. There were feral glints in the eyes of the pock-marked gunsel as he motioned slightly with the muzzle of the tommy-gun.

Then, over the increased thrumming of the motors, we heard the sharp crack of pistol shots. There were at least six or seven, and they echoed through the cave, like the roll of a snare drum. Madame Sable's head twisted in the direction of the shots. Rocco was startled. For a second or two his eyes sought Madame Sable in dumb inquiry.

I leaped at the opportunity those fleet seconds presented. My foot lashed out and a number eleven brogue crashed against his shin, with a full leg-swing. I heard the bone snap. Rocco screamed as the leg folded under him. Madame Sable whirled, blazed a shot at me, but I was twisting the machine-gun out of Rocco's grasp.

Rosa Sarenza knew what I could do with that gun. I got a glimpse of silk clad legs as the starched uniform crawled up. Then she was out of sight behind the first dynamo. Using it as a screen, she raced for the stairs. She yelled something at one of the men at the board. He nodded; threw a switch and the sound of the dynamos increased from a hum to a roar.

I cursed as Rocco clung to the tommy-gun, trying to turn the muzzle on me. I kicked him in the teeth, wrenched it loose. Just then the Nazi at the panel board yanked at a heavy cord. The cave laboratory rang and re-rang, with the shrillest, loudest siren wail I ever hope to hear. I thought my ear drums would shatter. I figured it must be a signal to the guards outside. I turned the tommy-gun in his direction, caught the rat as he was taking a powder for the stairs.

Rocco was trying to get up. I conked him with the butt of the tommy-gun, reached down and jerked my Magnum from his belt. He tried to get up again. The big lug was tough. I laid the barrel of the Magnum behind his ear, hoping the sound I heard was his skull cracking. Just then Rosa Sarenza flashed across the open space between the generators and the stairway. I fired as I twisted toward her. She clapped her hand to her side; I knew my snap shot had only grazed her. She went out of sight up the stairwell. The other Nazi started for the stairs; I slammed a bullet through his leg, just above the knee cap. I wanted some of the gang alive to talk later.

I POUNDED up the stairs after Madame Sable. Sheila Taggart was in the hall. She pointed to the side door, ran with me to throw the switch that flooded the grounds with light. Two shots cracked and lead sang in through the open door. I flattened against the wall, saw a figure huddled on the ground, with two men standing by it. They must have gotten a command to cover Madame Sable's getaway, for they were pouring lead through the doorway.

I could see the sprawled figure more plainly now, tabbed the dead man as Hardin, the Nipponese agent. He had evidently used the cliff trail for another attempt to grab off the formula for Japan and had run into the guards. The gun battle between Hardin and the guards had saved my life. Those were the gunshots we heard in the cave. Purdy was crouched in the back of his taxi, blazing at the gunsels, while they tried to cut me down.

I grinned wickedly. I could show those lads tricks about guerrilla fighting. I dropped the Magnum, shifted the tommy-gun to my right hand. Then I waved Sheila back from the door. Dropping on my stomach by the wall I suddenly rolled out, propped my elbows and cut loose with a blast. The hoods tried to bring their fire down to my level but they were just too late. They went down as though they had been scythed.

I raced out, just in time to see Madame Sable's white uniform disappearing in the trees beyond the lawn. The tommy-gun came up, but the burst fell short. Then she dodged to the left and back to the right and was screened by bushes. I raked the scenery, then dropped the gun, started after her. She was headed for the cliff, I couldn't see any escape out there, except the narrow path I had used the night before. I knew I could get her before she got down that path.

Sheila ran with me as I legged it across the lawn. We saw her white figure out on the cliff beyond the trees. My jaw tightened and I lifted the Magnum. Madame Sable wasn't slipping through my fingers this time.

She paused near the edge of the cliff, ripping off her white uniform. I held my fire a second, expecting her to turn left toward the narrow ledge path. But she peeled off the uniform, took a step toward the edge of the cliff. Her gorgeous figure was outlined for a second or two against the starry horizon. I wasn't thinking of her figure then. I remembered the FBI lads, in the hell trap in the cove. And the thousands of lives of our lads beneath the sea in pig boats, whose lives would be sacrificed if she had been able to sell Taggart's secret to the Axis. The muzzle of the Magnum came up again.

Just then Sheila Taggart screamed, grabbed at my arm and pulled.

"No! You can't shoot a woman, Mr.

Cain! It would be murder!" she cried. "She can't escape. The cliff is sixty feet high there—she wouldn't dare—"

I swore softly, shook the girl off, growling: "You don't know that werewolf." Just then the figure at the cliff-edge arched up in a perfect dive and plummeted down out of sight.

WHEN we reached the edge of the cliff, we could see nothing in the dark waves below. There were dark shadows against the white caps. Any one of them could have been her head, if she survived that breath-taking plunge.

While I was straining my eyes, muttering bitter curses under my breath, Sheila Taggart grabbed me again. Her voice was shaky as she gasped:

"Look—look! A submarine, out there in the bay! Some lobstermen swore they saw one weeks ago, but everyone thought they were drunk. But I'm not drunk. Or am I?"

As the truth slammed home in my brain, I wanted to turn Sheila Taggart across my knee and paddle hell out of her. If she hadn't grabbed my arm, the world would have been rid of its most sinister force of evil. Then I softened. I guess I was glad I hadn't ended Rosa Sarenza's career with a bullet in the back.

The conning tower lifted, then the long, sleek pig boat was surfaced and cutting through the waves toward the shore. I swore as I saw the swastika on the prow. A searchlight fingered its way across the waves. In the narrow cone of light we saw the black bobbing head, saw bare arms cutting the water in racing strokes. Madame Sable could swim as expertly as she did everything else. The boat slowed, turned a little and slid up to the swimming figure. Ropes went overboard and in five seconds she was aboard. The black hull moved forward at racing speed then started down beneath the surface, like a ghost ship fading from view. I swore once, then started for the house to telephone the nearest Coast Guard station. I knew it would be futile; the pig boat would be miles away before a patrol boat could be contacted.

Sheila ran with me still asking questions.

"I suppose the boat was there to provide a getaway for Madame Sable and Von Busch," I said glumly. "Maybe the Nazi scientists used it in trying to puzzle out your dad's formula. That hellish wail of the siren was evidently a signal to stand by for the getaway."

Sheriff Nelson and his deputies were at the house. They had to plug the guard at the gate to get in. Purdy had turned Von Busch over to them. He was handcuffed in the county car. When I had telephoned the Coast Guard, we went down, got the scientist I'd plugged through the leg. The state was saved the bother of burning Rocco. His skull had been fractured when I hit him with the Magnum.

Sheila went up to see how her mother had survived all the excitement. She came down while I was telling Sheriff Nelson as much about the set-up as I could. He pulled it the way I thought he would.

"So Cain killed Abel," he chuckled. "That'll be one for my records. Maybe I ought to stick in a word about Delilah taking Sampson over the jumps, too."

"We'll skip that part of it," I growled. "Some day I'll meet up with that zombie again and she won't have Sheila around for a safeguard."

Nelson shook his head, said: "All this killing for nothing. Jared Taggart took his secret with him to his grave."

"But definitely," I said. "So we'll have to dig it up."

Sheila shook her dark head, said: "Madame Sable made sure nothing was buried with dad. She and Von Busch watched

every minute until his casket was sealed and buried."

"She watched too late," I said. "Your father tipped you off, when he asked for his teeth, but you missed it. He had hidden his formula in his denture, covered it with the gutta percha you said he used to repair them."

Nelson's jaw dropped; he said: "Now I've heard everything. I certainly never would have thought of that."

"Not until you'd played around with secret agents as much as I have," I said. "I'm surprised Rosa Sarenza didn't fall wise to it. But then, she don't work for the little fireball who trained me to look for dodges like that. He'd used that gag himself. Jared Taggart was his friend and knew about it. So Jared tried to get word back to Mr. X where the formula could be found."

Sheila Taggart really turned it on, telling me how wonderful I was in freeing her and her mother from the living death they had endured. I took it all in. I was going to need something like that to bolster me, when I went back and told the little gray man about that submarine. He wouldn't miss the gag about how Cain killed Abel. But he read the Bible too. He'd have something to add about Delilah or Lilith. And it wouldn't be complimentary.

A CORPSE CAN'T CROON

(*Continued from page 77*)

took over your former home here in Westwood and figured a way to replenish your bankroll.

"You installed a room of recording equipment and a Novachord electric organ so you could play your own accompaniment as you sang for the microphone. Your voice was as good as ever; you tested it by singing some of the late numbers. Then you waxed some older ballads, planning to tell me you'd found them in a secret closet. The money from those pressings would put you on your financial feet again.

"But you made one mistake that gave you away. Among the platters you made for me to sell, you accidently placed one record: *Johnny Zero,* an experimental test disc. You realized it would unmask you, which was why you blackjacked me and shot two cops to get it back. Am I right, D'Amorio?"

There was a faint, whispering answer. "Yes . . . damn . . . your soul to . . . hell. . . ."

Then the once-golden voice of Rusty D'Amorio went silent with a silence that would last forever.

"Dead!" Donaldson growled. He looked at Pelton. "But how the hell did the *Johnny Zero* song tip you off?"

Pete smiled crookedly. "That's a comparatively new number; a war tune written after Guadalcanal. If D'Amorio had died five years ago, *how could he sing a this year's melody?* Corpses can't croon, Lieutenant. Therefore I knew Rusty must still be alive."

"Well, I'll be damned!" the Headquarters man said.

"No. D'Amorio is damned. And my brother will be released from prison. If you'll pardon me, I'd like to go tell his wife. I think it will make her pretty happy."

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J. G. O'BRIEN
Atlas Champion Cup Winner

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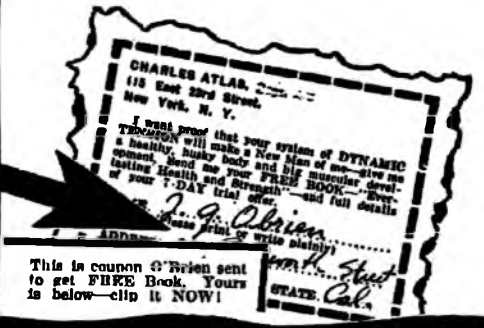

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