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The **OLD GREEK GAME**

by Wallace Kayton



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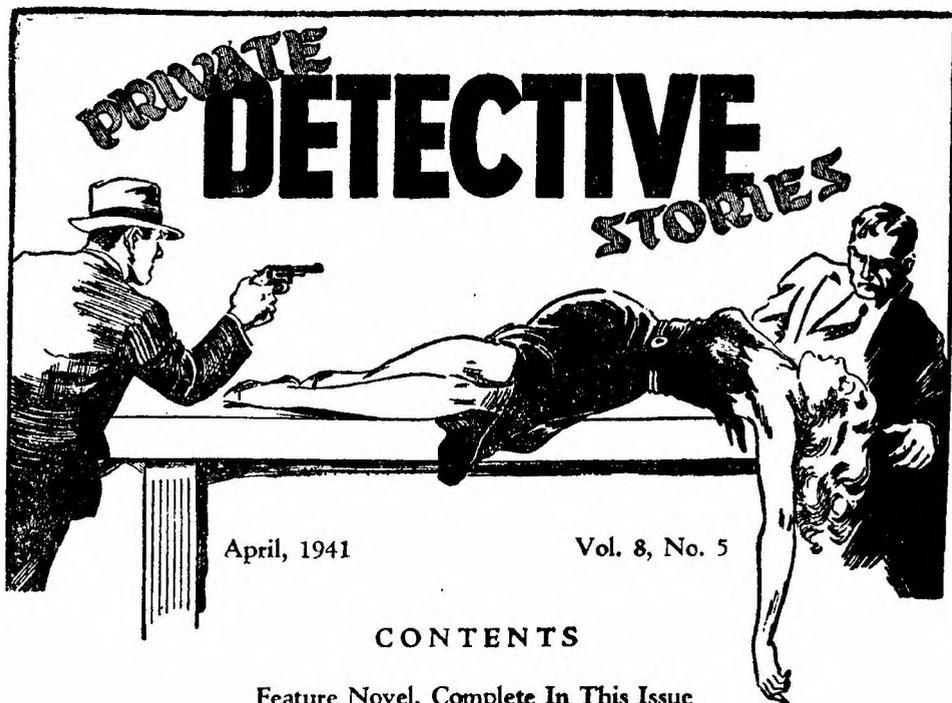
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April, 1941

Vol. 8, No. 5

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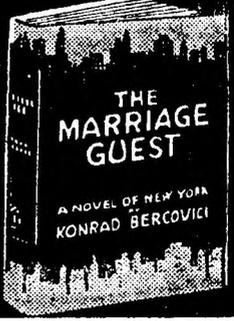
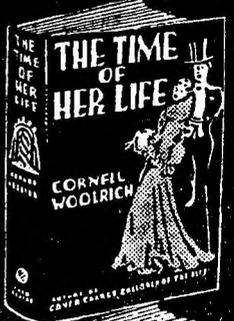
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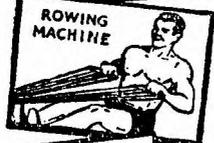
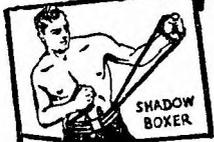
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found him dead—
and then some-
thing hit me!"



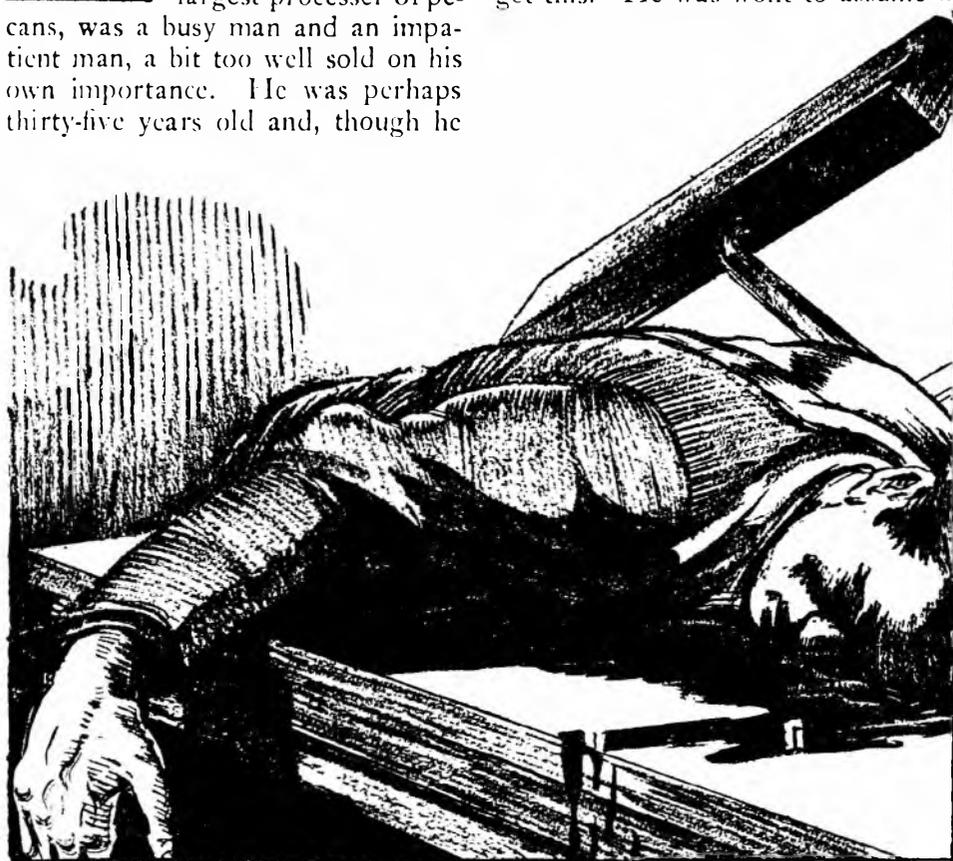
THE OLD GREEK GAME

Tim Sloan's weakness is women—pretty women. Emma's weakness is for pretty underthings. Working on the same case, from different angles, Tim discovers anew that dames can be poison, and Emma learns to beat a man at his own game—be it dice or murder



MR. JULIAN VERNON, president and sole owner of Texcan Shellers, the world's largest processor of pecans, was a busy man and an impatient man, a bit too well sold on his own importance. He was perhaps thirty-five years old and, though he

had inherited a large fortune, he had been keen enough to build it even larger through his own business ability. He never let his associates forget this. He was wont to assume a



Napoleonic posture at any moment and proclaim to any and all that he was a self-made man. Which, of course, was not strictly true, but which gave him an immense amount of satisfaction. And few of his associates were so well fixed that they dared point out to Vernon that such a statement was false.

For the first ten minutes that he waited in the office of Mr. Timothy Tappan Sloan, Private Investigator, Vernon was merely scornful. He didn't think much of anyone late for important appointments. During the second ten minute period, devoted mostly to a great show of leg-crossing and the reading of important documents from his own inner pocket, he grew less scornful and more impatient. With the arrival of the third ten minutes he was pacing the office floor angrily and making pointed remarks.

Miss Emma Hohenberger, secretary to Sloan, didn't help his mounting anger by disregarding him so completely. Emma was not very pretty, not too slim. She wore extreme clothes; that is, extremely sensible. Her linen waist was stern and prim, her woolen skirt full and practical. She wore heavy hose and flat-heeled oxfords that emphasized the Dutch solidity of her ankles.

Emma was engrossed in pasting up Tim Sloan's scrapbook. This was a work of love, for, unknown to her boss, she subscribed to a clipping bureau and, whenever Mr. Sloan was out of the office, devoted some time to arranging the various clippings in the great scrapbook she had selected. It was to be a present, come Christmas.

There were only two weaknesses

in Emma Hohenberger's life, two hopeless loves, if hopeless loves are weaknesses. The first was for silken underthings. She could no more pass up a window that exhibited those negligible spider webbish trifles that lie so close to the hearts of debutantes, than she could overlook lunch at the middle of the day.

Not that Emma wore these things. They were too holy for her, she stuck with rayon and muslin. But she bought these silken garments and wrapped them carefully in tissue, tucked them reverently into a special drawer. Her second weakness, or hopeless love, was her employer. Now Tim Sloan was notorious for his weakness for femininity. But Emma was to him like the filing cabinet or the telephone. Something to be used, something solid and concrete, but with approximately the same amount of sex appeal.

EMMA suddenly realized that Julian Vernon, red of face, was slapping his palm up and down on the desk before her, that words were sputtering angrily from his grim lips. She finished pasting up the particular item concerning Tim Sloan that was at hand. She closed the book. Almost absently she reached beneath the desk, raised her skirt hem and scratched the firm flesh above her thick stocking top. However, even though this was partially shielded by the desk, she pushed back before the natural movement was completed. Mr. Julian Vernon's words died, his face became red as his ears, he stared in disbelief at the scratching process, and dropped back wordlessly.

Emma said, "Yes, sir. Mr. Sloan

is thirty minutes late for his appointment with you; you think it's a sin and a shame and a slipshod way to do business; you've a notion to take your business to another agency, and if I worked for you, you'd fire me. Is that it?"

"That," said Mr. Vernon staunchly, "is exactly the situation. My time is extremely valuable, my business, if I may say so, is invaluable to Mr. Sloan. Yet he has the nerve, the unmitigated gall, to keep—!"

"Sit down!" The words were like the crack of a whip. Vernon found his reflexes responding automatically. He sat down. "Mr. Timothy Tappen Sloan," grated Emma, "is without doubt tops in his chosen profession.

"Do you realize that he can pick and choose, that literally hundreds of large firms and big people clamor for his services?" She might have believed this herself, but the chances are that she was merely carried away by her own eloquence. "Would you be surprised to learn that he is in conference right now with high officials of the United States Government, giving them his advice as to means of wiping out the Fifth Column? And yet you, with your petty troubles—!"

Weakly Mr. Julian Vernon mumbled, "Ah—well—how could I know that? How could I know he was mixed in—affairs of state?"

The last three words were very querulous and weak. As if they issued automatically by themselves, like the last few words or notes from a victrola record, just as it runs down. For Mr. Julian Vernon had barely said, "—was mixed in—" when the outer door opened and Mr.

Timothy Tappan Sloan entered his office.

From the very bottom of his size eleven feet to the top of his size six and seventh-eighths head, Mr. Sloan measured seventy-eight inches. This height was more or less startling because of his width. Frankly, Tim Sloan was skinny. He stood in his office door for a moment, his eyes feverishly bright, his hat far back on his head, his mouse-colored hair pouring from it down across his left eye. His shirt was open at the throat, his tie had been loosened, and the small end emerged from his half buttoned vest. The cloth of his trousers over both skinny knees bore large dusty spots, as though he had been kneeling. His right hand was clutched about the collar of a decrepit trench coat and his breath bore an alcoholic *bouquet* that could only result from mixed drinking, and lots of it.

He glared at Julian Vernon, he glared at Emma Hohenberger. He limped into the office, banging the door behind him, dragging the trench coat. He snorted, "Hah! Greeks! And why didn't you call me, why didn't you pull me out, you knew I was going to the Turf!"

"I thought you were at lunch," returned Emma mildly. "You always say never to interrupt your lunch, and—"

"You should have called," raged Tim stubbornly. "Greeks! And their screwy dice games! Barbudi they called it, barbudi!" He limped toward his own sanctum sanctorum, jerked the door open viciously, snarled over his shoulder, "A Greek named Papoulas will be around after awhile. Pay him \$280 and



don't let him teach you to shoot barbudi." He slammed that door even harder than the hall door.

Miss Hohenberger stared guiltily at Julian Vernon. Mr. Vernon curled his lips, snorted, "Affairs of state!" He might have sailed out angrily, except that the inter-office communicator blared into life. Tim's hard voice, aided by the instrument, said, "Haven't I told you not to take the glass out of the washroom? Bring me a glass, damn it, and what the hell does that stupid looking monkey want?"

HASTILY Emma flipped off the machine, snatched a glass from a desk drawer and fled toward the frosted glass door marked *Private*. Mr. Sloan stood behind the desk, glaring at her accusingly, his right

hand clutching a huge brown bottle labeled *Mouthwash*. She set the glass on the desk, tipped the bottle, and the odor of juniper filled the office. "Who's the monkey, I asked you?" He raised the glass, his Adam's apple bobbed up and down convulsively.

"That," answered Emma coldly, "is only Julian Vernon. That is only eight million dollars worth of personal fortune. That is only the Texcan Shellers, whose business you have been trying to get for years. That—!"

She got no farther, she was too busy dodging. Mr. Sloan choked on his gin, coughed, and got the

magazines. She wore a silver fox chubby, too short to hide the silken flare of her hips, and a skirt too short to hide the sheen of expensive hose on more expensive legs. Her hair, Tim noted, at first glance, was honey colored, she was addicted to too much lipstick and eye shadow, and she was mad as a wet hen.

THESSE things he noticed at first glance. After first glance he lost interest in them and centered on the thing she held in her hand. It was a pearl-handled gun. Not a measly little .25, built for women, but a business-like snub-nosed .38 automatic, a belly gun! And as Julian Vernon retreated before it, trembling and shaking and stumbling, the gun followed, but inches from his shrinking belly. There in the doorway, Tim's mouth dropped open until it was the same size as the bald-spot on his head.

Emma Hohenberger, too, glimpsed the unusual procedure in the hall. Emma retreated immediately to her desk. Quickly she dropped a large white handkerchief over one of the shotbags that served as paperweights, and rejoined Tim. By now the woman's words were distinctly audible, as well as Julian Vernon's protests and denials.

"Shut up, damn you," she shrilled. "The safety's off and my finger is getting a permanent wave. Back up, my darling cousin, we'll find out just what you've been up to. Hiring thugs, are you! Trying to frame Larry, anything to cross me! Back up and get back in there, we'll find out about this!"

By now they were almost at Tim's office. Tim said, "I say there, can't

you put the gun away and—hey!" For he suddenly found that he, too, was included among those menaced by the .38. Greenish blue eyes blazed into his.

"You big, skinny drink of water," raged the woman, "I've heard all about you, all about crooked private dicks. So you've framed up something with my big-shot cousin, have you! Back up in there and we'll find out what it's all about."

Over her shoulder she called, "Scram! All of you, scram!" The elevator boy and two curious passengers withdrew their heads like a trio of turtles seeking shelter in their respective shells. The door slammed, the whine of the rising elevator came to them.

"Inside, the precious pair of you!" Mr. Sloan, hands well away from his sides, and slightly raised, retreated in unison with Julian Vernon. Like a well-trained tap team. The blond menace stepped inside the door. Emma Hohenberger swung the paperweight, handkerchief enclosed. It hit a silver fox wrist. The gun plummeted to the floor, exploded, the bullet tore Mr. Sloan's right heel from his shoe and knocked that leg from under him.

The female gunbearer squealed in rage, jumped for the gun. Emma kicked it efficiently across the office. So the lady of the fox chubby curled her red-nailed fingers like talons and leaped for Emma. Stolidly Emma sidestepped the first frantic rush, and whammed the paperweight down on a forty dollar hat as it sailed by. Coat, hat, skirt, hips, and legs kept on their way, hit the far wall with a bang and bounced back into the center of the office.

Emma tossed the shotbag to a chair made washing motions with her hands, and closed the door. When Tim Sloan quit shouting seconds later, ceased hopping around on one foot long enough to come back to normal, he saw Julian Vernon cowering in the corner, mopping at his perspiring brow with shaking handkerchief. The lady of the gun was a crumpled heap on the floor. The skirt had gone the way of all billowing skirts in a high wind. Mr. Sloan noted with awe the long, slender curve, silken shadowed, from aristocratic ankle past rounded knee.

"Well," he snapped, at Emma, who was crouched over the woman, "get some water, do something. What are you looking at?"

"Point d'Angleterre," she replied hoarsely, awestricken. "Hand made lace from Belgium on her—on her!"

Mr. Tim Sloan fled for his own office, to obtain the bottle marked *Mouthwash*.

CHAPTER II

Mr. Papoulos Fades



EMMA HOHENBERGER had a mind like a card file. She was an inveterate reader of newspapers, a gossip column fan, and a breathless follower of society news. So great was her sense of association that, upon reading in today's paper that Miss Jane Doe was to be presented to society tonight, she instantly looked back in that file-like brain and remembered that Miss Jane Doe had eloped with the family chauffeur at the tender age of fifteen, that the year before, she had broken her new

stepmother's arm with a ball bat, and had, at the age of ten, been kidnaped and ransomed for a large amount of money.

Mr. Sloan had tenderly picked up the fallen gun woman and borne her into his own office, to place her tenderly on the leather couch. He had waved Emma aside when she tried to assist, and when Mr. Vernon had attempted to make good his departure, had said sternly, "Just a moment, my dear sir! After all, this—this—affair took place in my office. I am entitled to some sort of explanation. You will wait, please until your—your—?"

"Cousin," supplied Vernon, and sat down.

Tim held a glass of gin to the over-rouged lips, his right arm beneath soft, well turned shoulders. He glared vindictively at Emma when she pulled the short skirt down over the breath-taking knees. Green-blue eyes opened, long lashes fluttered, breasts rose and fell tremulously as their owner sighed. And the lady began to cry. Tim was a sucker for women that cried.

Vernon regarded the scene with sarcastic amusement. Emma finally got too much of it and sailed out primly. The last glimpse, however, showed the honey blond—or the blond honey—sobbing as though her heart was broken, her cheek against Mr. Sloan's slender breast, his great hands patting her back consolingly. The last words Emma heard were, "There now, there now, mustn't feel bad, Tim's got you!"

Emma slammed the door. At her own desk she tossed a pad on the table, opened the bottom drawer and extracted a pair of earphones. These

she clamped in place; she flipped a switch and poised a pencil, ready to take down all conversation within the inner office. But only silence greeted her. Mr. Sloan, then, still lingered at the leather couch with its precious burden. For the switch that opened the amplifiers was beneath his desk.

Idly her pencil flew over the pad. She wrote, "Julian Vernon," and after it, "Virginia Vachell." These two names were followed by, "Cousins. V V, daughter Old Man Vernon's sister, who was a wild one, running away with a circus. Old Man Vernon took her when she was six. Girl wild, too, always fighting with uncle. Uncle raised her because he thought it was his duty. Julian Vernon inherited father's fortune. According to will, pays woman \$4,000 per year, is her guardian until she reaches twenty-one. Nuts. All of them nuts. Name proud, mustn't sully Vernon name, all that baloney."

SHE might have gone on indefinitely except that Tim's voice slapped against her ear drums, he had thrown his switch, and consequently was at his desk. She could picture him, pushed back in his chair, his long fingers forming a church steeple on his chest as he talked over them.

"—so I certainly feel that some explanation is due me. Mr. Vernon, you come to see me on some sort of business; Miss Vachell, your cousin, evidently thinks it was a bad sort of business, and not only holds a gun on you, but shoots a heel off my shoe!"

"My business with you," Vernon answered stiffly, "cannot very well

be discussed before Virginia, Mr. Sloan. As for what she *thought* that business was—?"

"Thought? I know what it was! Mr. Sloan, don't you do it, don't you listen to him at all! He's moving heaven and earth to keep us from getting married! He claims Larry is a crook, he fired him from his job, and Larry punched him in the nose! Now he's trying to get something on Larry and send him to the penitentiary! Don't you let him! Please, Mr. Sloan!"

"Nonsense! All right, Virginia, since you've brought it all up and in such a common, nasty manner, we might as well give Mr. Sloan details. It's true, sir, that I do not want my cousin to marry Lawrence Warnock! It's true that I believe he is a crook, and that I came to you to engage you to prove it!"

"But he isn't," wailed the woman, "I tell you he isn't!"

The pencil flew in pothooks and hentracks as Emma took down the sorry mixup. The name Larry Warnock, too, was familiar to Emma. A year ago, he had been known as the town's wildest playboy. All of a sudden, he had apparently reformed. Julian Vernon had given him an office job, which he carried out so well that in a few months he was running one of the units or shell-ing plants that made up Texcan Shellers. True, he still liked to play; occasionally, he liked strong wine and weak women, but business definitely came first. She had read in the gossip columns that he and Virginia Vachell were often together but this was the first Emma had heard concerning an engagement or future marriage.

He waved Emma aside and tenderly carried the unconscious gunman into his office.



"Warnock," said Vernon primly, "hasn't the blood or the breeding to marry into the Vernon family!"

"My father was a tight rope walker!" snapped the woman.

"Nevertheless my own father raised you, and I, as your guardian, am responsible. I say Warnock isn't good enough for a Vernon." There was a wordless moment, filled only by Virginia Vachell's sniffing and Tim's throat clearing. "I'm positive, Mr. Sloan, that young Warnock has been engaged in some financial skull-duggery. Will you look at this."

TIM, knowing that Emma was taking it all down for his own protection, said, "Ah, a check. Made out to Texcan Shellers, Unit Four, signed by Mr. Dodge, for the Dodge Tile Company. Mmmmm. And endorsed on the back by Lawrence Warnock. Looks like a very good check, Mr. Vernon."

"It is. But why would a tile company buy \$800 worth of pecans, and why doesn't the transaction appear on our books?" In a few brief words he gave more details.

Virginia, a few nights previously, had told her cousin that she meant to marry Larry Warnock. The following day Vernon had gone to Unit Four, where Warnock was in charge. Entering, he had found Warnock opening his mail. This check had been in his hands, and he had been endorsing it. Vernon, surprised, had asked what the tile company was doing business with a pecan shelling company. Warnock had been greatly flustered, had claimed it really had nothing to do with the company. Vernon had gotten Dodge on the phone. The old business

pirate who headed the Dodge Tile Company had laughed like a crazy man and had said as a matter of fact that the money was due to young Warnock, not to the company.

"Nevertheless," said Vernon stiffly, "in spite of the fact that no \$800 transaction appears on Unit Four books, the check is definitely made out to us, to my company. Warnock grew insulting about it. Consequently I fired him and kept the check!"

EMMMA looked up at the newcomer. He was small, and either tremendously broad or his camel's hair coat was immensely padded in the shoulders. It was belted, the belt tying in the front; its skirts came almost to the cuffs on his expensive brown trousers. Though the collar of the coat was nonchalantly turned up, a purple shirt and a maroon-striped tie were visible. His large, white teeth appeared even more white because of the brownness of his face. His eyes were as liquid as those of a doc; his hat was white, jauntily turned up on one side, down on the other, and he exuded an unmistakable odor of attar of roses.

He closed the door behind him with his heel, touched his hat with a brown hand, on the second finger of which gleamed a pea-sized diamond. Advancing, he said, "Excuse, pliss Meester Sloan say you pay me toe-hoondred eighty dollars, pliss, to me, Theodore Papoulos."

She gestured vaguely with her left hand toward the chairs across the office, her pencil flew on with the conversation in the inner room.

"I took the check to the bank,"

continued Vernon stiffly, "and, as I do a bit of business there, was able to get a little information. I find that from time to time Warnock cashed such checks, from various big firms! Firms with which Unit Four of the Texcan Shellers had no business whatsoever!"

Sloan put in, "But this check, the bank admitted it was good, of course? And Dodge simply said it was personal, between him and Warnock?"

"Right. But Warnock had no right to use the firm name if it was personal. The bank president, although he didn't like it, managed to get me the names of five other firms who have sent Warnock such checks. Here's a list of them. The books of Unit Four show we have had no dealings with these people, yet they send us checks, which Warnock promptly cashes, and claims they were meant personally for him!"

"Pliss, lady," said Theodore Papoulos, "toc-hoondred eighty dollars Meester Sloan owes me!"

"Go over there and sit down a couple of minutes!" snapped Emma. The little Greek shrugged and walked to the window, the attar of roses lingering after him at the desk.

"Perhaps Miss Vachell knows something about them," suggested Tim Sloan.

Miss Vachell didn't. She was, however, positive that they did not mean Larry Warnock was crooked. Mr. Warnock himself, it seemed, was in New Orleans seeing about a job. And Mr. Warnock had wiped up the living-room with Cousin Vernon night before last, before he left, goody goody!

"Perhaps that happened," admit-

ted Vernon coldly. "But you will note that I still retain the check, with your crooked boy friend's endorsement. That is Exhibit A, as soon as Mr. Sloan finds out just what crookedness was afoot, using the Texcan name, I most certainly shall prosecute; then we'll see how your foolish marriage comes out!"

THE next five minutes were engaged in bickering back and forth, between cousins, with Mr. Sloan unable to get a word in edgewise. Emma sniffed. That scent was sickening. She turned her head slightly. Mr. Theodore Papoulos was at her elbow, staring down at her pad with his liquid brown eyes.

"Pliss, lady, een a hoory ees me. Meester Sloan—!"

At this point Mr. Sloan got in a few words. "Did you get in touch with these other firms and how did the bank know they made checks payable to your company—checks cashed by Mr. Warnock?"

"My dear sir, your knowledge of modern bank equipment is remarkably poor. Every check passes through a machine that photographs it, front and rear. As for investigating myself, I did not. That is what I wanted you to do. After what Mr. Dodge of the Dodge Tile Company told me!" He sniffed. "All of these six are large firms, I do not care to start any trouble with them in case this mystery is entirely legal, which I am sure it is not. I want you to get in touch with these six, on the list, and see just why they were paying large amounts of money to Larry Warnock through my firm!"

"Don't you do it, Mr. Sloan! Listen, he's hiring you to prove

Larry is a crook, I'm hiring you to prove he is honest! I'll—"

"And just what would you use for money, my dear cousin. After all, I give you four thousand dollars a year. This is December. Your allowance was gone, you will remember, in late September. I assure you, Mr. Sloan, as one business man to another, that she has no money with which to pay your fees. Here. Here are three one hundred dollar bills. Shall we call it a retainer?"

Emma almost laughed aloud. She could picture Mr. Tim Sloan torn two ways at once. The scent of ready cash was in his nostrils, cash on the line for doing a job he would dislike. And likewise the scent of a beautiful woman was in the same nostrils—which might be his for doing a more likable job that involved no cash fee. After all, there were fees and fees!

The woman's voice broke in, "Canceled checks, go back to their writers, don't they, Mr. Sloan?" Mr. Sloan, with the wisdom of an expert, agreed that they did. "Then this uncanceled check here on your desk, from the Dodge Tile Company, really represents all the evidence against Larry, whether it's something crooked or not." Mr. Sloan again gave solemn assent. "Mr. Sloan, will you please give me my purse?"

There was the sound of rollers on a swivel chair that needed oiling. Emma saw, in her mind's eye, Mr. Sloan handing her her purse, curled her lip scornfully, thinking Virginia Vachell was again going into her cry-baby act. And at the words that followed, she snapped a pencil completely in two.

"Thank you. Now, gentlemen, grab hold of your cars and hold on tight. This is the same gun, you'll note. I don't know what that check represents, but you're neither of you going to have it. I'll just keep it myself until Larry returns from New Orleans." There were no tears in that voice!

EMMA sighed, pushed back her own chair, dropped the handkerchief over the shotbag and approached the inter-office door. Behind her, she glimpsed Theodore Papoulos, his large brown eyes larger than ever, as he stepped out of range of the doors. The door to Sloan's office opened softly, the woman's voice came, triumphantly, "So you see, my darling cousin, you're not going to frame something on Larry after all, you and your skinny detective friend! And if you try it again, so help me God, I'll kill you! Do you hear, Mr. Sloan, I'll kill this mealy-mouthed, hoptoad of a cousin of mine as sure as —"

Emma swung the improvised shotbag expertly, caught the crumpling figure before it hit the floor. Over the shoulder of the silver fox chubby she said, to Tim Sloan, "After all! This is getting a little tiresome. Either tie her up or take her gun away from her!"

Again Tim Sloan picked Virginia Vachell from the floor and carried her to the well-worn leather couch. Again he poured the water glass half full of gin, inserted the rim of the glass between too-red lips, tried to keep his roving eyes off silken knees as exhibited by the crawling skirt.

Mr. Julian Vernon, at the door, snapped, "Well, you have it, Sloan.

You've accepted my retainer, you have the check, and the list of other check writers. I'll expect a report tomorrow evening. Right?"

Almost absently Mr. Sloan answered, "Right!" Emma walked over and picked up the check, picked the list off Sloan's desk.

"I'll take care of these," she assured Mr. Julian, who raised his hat politely, and leaving, closed the inter-office door.

Virginia's long lashes fluttered. Primly, Emma noted that she made no move—as nice girls should—to pull down her skirt. Her eyes opened. "Oh, why," she moaned, "does everyone hate me? Why is everyone against me?" Her breast moved as she swallowed convulsively. "I wish I were dead, I wish I were dead!" she moaned.

"Now, now," soothed Tim Sloan consolingly, "no one is against you! Don't you worry, honey, we'll find a way to work this thing out! We'll—"

"You're going to help me?" Her eyes were wide now, her red lips tremulous. She must have read assent in Tim's eyes. She said, "Ooooooh!" And throwing her arms about him, pressed herself close to him, kissed him thoroughly and completely—with no little cooperation on the part of Tim Sloan.

Emma closed the door behind her a moment later, her lips thin with disapproval. She walked across to her desk, almost unseeingly, drew a key from her bodice and opened a drawer. From that drawer she took a steel cash box, opened it, took a handful of bills.

"One twenty, one forty, fifty, two hundred, two fifty, seventy, eighty. Here's your money, Mr. Papoulos,

and don't get Tim in any more of those Greek dice games, for I won't pay—"

Her voice died away. She shrugged, put the money back in the box, the box back in the drawer. For Mr. Theodore Papoulos was gone, the office was empty. Frightened away by what had happened, she supposed, shrugging again. She rolled a sheet of paper into the typewriter, preparing to transcribe all that had occurred. She pulled her notebook toward her. And her eyes grew wide behind the thick lenses of her glasses. The notebook was blank. Those pages on which a shorthand inscription of the office conversation had been inscribed, had been neatly torn from the spiral wire that bound the notebook.

CHAPTER III

Sloan's Style



MMA didn't tell Tim about the missing notes for the simple reason that she had no chance. Nor did she have opportunity to listen in on what followed inside the inner office, for Tim used his head and flipped off the dictograph. However, Emma's imagination was topnotch. She had seen her boss in the clutches of pretty women before, so she simply sighed and made the best of it, her imagination supplying all the details.

She stood staring out the window, thinking of those notes. There were two possible takers, the Greek Theodore Papoulos and Mr. Julian Vernon himself. She recalled what she had written in longhand, while waiting for the dictograph to be switched

on; recalled that she had mentioned names of those then in the office, Julian Vernon and his cousin, Virginia Vachell. The Greek, then, being of average intelligence, could have read the names over her shoulder and putting two and two together, could have known she was transcribing conversation supposedly private. But what would he want with those notes? True, he'd seen the woman, he'd heard her threaten her cousin with the gun—or had he? Had he scammed before that all happened?

And Vernon himself. She could see why he'd like a transcription, or rather, the notes themselves! With those notes he had legal proof that his ward and cousin had threatened to shoot him.

The door opened, a whiff of attar of roses came to her. A voice said, "Pliss, ma'am, Meester Sloan—?"

She whirled. "All right, all right, I'll pay you now. Where'd you go?"

Papoulos' teeth gleamed whiter as his smile broadened. "I go queeck, ma'am! Papoulos like not goons!"

For a moment she stared at him, ready to ask about the notes, saw the foolishness of such a query and went to her desk. She drew a sheet of glazed paper from a drawer, rolled it into the typewriter and quickly wrote a receipt, dated it, lay it on the desk before her.

"Just sign right there at the bottom," she said, and keyed the cash-box drawer open. The Greek waited until she counted \$280 before him, then laid his left hand on the paper, inscribed his name with a flourish. She blotted it, laid it carefully into a drawer. The Greek was stuffing the money into a pocket when she

said, "Just what kind of a game is barbudi, my Greek friend?"

He beamed. His brown fingers came out of his pocket with two small dice. He rolled them across the desk before her; she noted that the corners were rounded.

"Barbudi," he beamed, "ees fine gam, fine gam. The seex-five, the one-one, the tree-tree and the five-five, all are weeners and mak mooch money! But, the one-toe, the four-four and the seex-seex mak you lose the money! You trow teel you ween or lose. You got money?"

A half hour later Tim Sloan came out of his office with the fox coated Virginia beaming proudly and adoringly on his arm. Emma was at her desk. The Greek was leaning against it, with a worried expression on his face. There was a small stack of bills between them.

Sloan said, "Ah, yes, Papoulos, Miss Hohenberger will pay you. Miss Hohenberger, should I receive any calls between now and two, you can reach me at the Fountain Room, where we're lunching. Afterward I have a bit of business to take care of, but should be back by four." He beamed at Virginia Vachell. "Should we go, my dear?"

They went out the door.

AT exactly four-thirty o'clock, Mr. Tim Sloan returned to his office. Emma couldn't resist. "I suppose you've had a wonderful afternoon and evening with your newest light of love?"

Tim looked hurt. "We finished lunching at one-forty, if it's anything to you. I've been working on these checks and—"

"Don't touch that glass!"

Again Emma swung the shotbag, said, "After all this is getting tiresome!"



He stared in surprise at his own waterglass, standing on Emma's desk, noted for the first time that lampblack had been applied to a set of fingerprints. "Those," she said briefly, "are right hand prints of Theodore Papoulos. I gave him a drink of your mouthwash!"

Tim's face reddened. "Listen," he began, "you can entertain your boy friends—hey, what's that?" She was carefully slipping a sheet of glazed paper into a glassine envelope.

"That's the left hand prints," she said briefly, "and he's no boy friend of mine!"

He glimpsed the camel's hair coat hanging on the coat hanger.

"If he's no friend of yours what's his coat doing here?"

"I won it. I won back your \$280 and about two hundred besides. The two hundred is mine. I really like barbudi." She closed the desk drawer on her fingerprints, said, "And what about the check—or checks?"

But Tim was momentarily speechless. He stalked into his office as though highly insulted. She heard the desk drawer open, heard liquor gurgling from a bottle neck. It was five minutes before he emerged.

"Warnock must have been pulling something crooked, all right. I wish I could talk to him, but he's in New Orleans. I went to all six of the places on the list, saw the treasurer or whoever signed checks, and every damned one of them denied ever making one out to Texcan, Unit Number Four! So, I tell them each about the little photographic device at the bank. And what happens?"

"What happens?"

"Every damned one of the six told me to beat it and tend to my own business, that the whole affair was a private transaction between them and young Warnock."

"So what now?"

"Well, an inventory at the plant, according to Vernon, doesn't show anything missing. Hell, Emma there's nothing but nuts to be missing! So Warnock didn't sell all these firms something he'd stolen from Vernon. But he sold them something, for example, \$800 worth!"

She said, "Maybe he was a mere go-between. His endorsement was good on Unit Four checks, Texcan Shellers. Maybe these firms paid him dough for someone else."

TIM nodded. "That is what I've doped out already. So, I'm going to investigate all of the guy's friends, or associates, though," he sighed, "he covered a lot of territory. Unless I can talk to him, unless he can defend himself successfully, Vernon will keep right on thinking he's a crook, and refusing to let him marry his ward, Giny, bless her heart!"

"Giny!" snorted Miss Hohenberger. "She seems to be able to look after herself. If I remember rightly, she's lived high, wide and handsome since she was fifteen years old! She seems to be doing all right with you! Why doesn't she go on and marry the punk, Larry? She's over eighteen, she can do it legally!"

"Why? Because her cousin is her guardian, he can cut down on any or all of her dough providing she doesn't keep the good old family tree in first class condition. And Larry Warnock—well, Larry has

worked hard, for the past year, but Vernon doesn't pay much. And Warnock has tried to beat the dice games around town with his salary. Which can't be done!"

Her eyes strayed to the coat. Tim flushed.

"I'll have to get in touch with Vernon tomorrow—"

"Why not tonight?"

"Well, er—" his face grew redder than ever, and Miss Hohenberger sighed. She knew why not tonight. The why not was a honey-colored blonde, built like a fashion model. It's name was Giny.

AT HALFPAST eight Mr. Tim Sloan's dashing convertible pulled to a stop at the curb before the Vernon mansion, directly behind a gleaming limousine which he recognized. The license number was a simple 600001, the six, of course, being the county key, the low final digit proclaiming that the owner was indeed a man of power.

The car, he knew, belonged to Honest George Blunt, who was, at present, City Tax Commissioner. Honest George had run county politics, and had a big say in state politics for more years than Tim could remember. Up until last election, however, he had been content to sit behind scenes and pull the necessary strings. Now, for some supposedly unknown reason, but a reason Tim and a good many other people suspected, he had gotten himself elected City Tax Commissioner.

Tim suspected the reason for taking public office was Mrs. Blunt. Her name was Garda and she was twenty-seven years old. Her husband would never see fifty-five again. Where

Blunt was a typical old time political boss, florid of face, heavy of belly, piggish of feature, Mrs. Garda Blunt was one of the most exotically beautiful women ever seen in this part of the country. The marriage, two years ago, had caused lots of comment, as a "beauty and the beast" wedlock always does.

Garda Blunt no doubt preferred an office holder for a husband to a disreputable political boss. Hence, the office of Tax Commissioner. The odd part was that Blunt seemed to be doing a remarkable job, and already there was talk of Honest George as the next mayor of the city.

Tim wondered idly what Blunt was doing at Vernon's house. But the house door opened and the lady of his delight appeared.

Even at that distance he recognized her. The light was all behind her. She wore but a wrap over her evening clothes which were on the sheer side. For a moment she stood there, peering back into the house, and every curved line of her glorious body was silhouetted. Then she was joined by a man in evening clothes, and Tim's heart sank as the two of them came down the walk toward the car. Warnock? Had that sap come back to town, damn it?

But it wasn't. "Hello, Tim," caroled Giny, "you know Glen Denman, don't you?"

Tim sighed. With relief. Glen Denman was a protege of Honest George Blunt's, titled his secretary. Denman was a lawyer; it was rumored that he was the legal conniver behind Blunt. Tim had never liked him, he was a bit too suave. His shiftiness showed in all his actions. But now Tim was glad to see him.

Out on the sidewalk they shook hands politely and Tim handed Giny into his car. Walking around to the other side, to fold himself beneath the wheel, he heard Giny say, "I'm sorry you and Julian argued, Glen. But nobody in the world could get along with that prig!"

Glen Denman laughed, said something unintelligible, and walked toward his boss' big limousine.

Tim noted with approval that his dash lamp did beautiful tricks to a pair of silken legs, that Giny was one of those women who took particular care not to wrinkle the skirts of her evening gowns.

"What should we do, beautiful?"

She sighed. Soft light from that dash made her too-red mouth gleam and her eyes flash. She laid long fingers on his thin knee. "Maybe I'm crazy," she murmured appealingly, "but after that emotional upheaval this morning, I'm exhausted. Couldn't we get a bottle of those prepared cocktails and just ride and ride and ride?"

Tim beamed. As a matter of fact, he beat that. He stopped at a drug store and purchased an oversized vacuum bottle and a neat package of paper cups. A well-known bar filled the bottle with Zombies, that potent cocktail than which there is no whicher.

AT TEN O'CLOCK Miss Emma Hohenberger rang the liquor house for another bottle of Scotch and more sparkling water. Messrs. Theodore Papoulos, George Paxos and Apollo Paarrhegolous stared disconsolately at the large stack of bills on the table.

Emma said, "It'll be here in a

minute, boys. Anybody got any more money?"

Mr. Paxos had a half dollar and a thin silver dime, but not for long. While he was throwing a pair of fours with the small round cornered dice, the whiskey arrived, and Emma fixed them a drink apiece. Three pairs of liquid brown eyes stared disconsolately into three glasses.

Mr. Apollo Paarrhegolous sighed "You are beautiful, ma'am, a beautiful woman—but louky." He pronounced it to rhyme with spooky.

Mr. Paxos said gently, "When he says louky, lady, he means louky. Could pliss, I have more whcesky?"

Mr. Papoulos said nothing, he simply extended his glass. After all he was an overcoat loser as well as a money loser.

Conversationally Emma said, "You boys ever shoot with a fellow named Warnock, Larry Warnock?"

Three heads nodded "That man," sighed Apollo Paarrhegolous, "ees more unlook than me! All bad, bad bad!"

"Ees right," agreed Mr. Paxos. "Never do he ween! That ees an oonlouky hoose, where he ees leeve!"

Emma looked inquiringly from one to the other. Mr. Paxos, the best explainer of the three, went into detail. "He leeve weeth Meester Denman, ma'am. Meester Denman who work weeth Hah-ncst George Bloont. Mr. Denman, he loose mooch more always than his fran'!"

This was interesting to Emma, but not particularly essential. She was, as a matter of fact, wondering about Warnock cashing those many large checks, wondering how much of the money—if any—was his.

The three gentlemen of Athens



were good losers. They even left most of the whiskey, departing around eleven o'clock, with a promise to raise more money and get together for another barbudi game in the near future. Though Emma knew they wouldn't. Her luck had been too good!

AT TEN until one Tim Sloan and Giny Vachell came to a stop in front of the Vernon home. They were a trifle disheveled, for the vacuum bottle had been emptied not once, but twice. Tim remarked upon having had a wonderful evening. The lady said, "Darling," and kissed him enthusiastically. After a long while they went up the walk together, weaving a bit, giggling lightly.

He had taken her key in the car and now inserted it in the door. In

so doing he saw a light, deep inside the house.

"Your guardian's waiting for you," he giggled.

"Not for me," she answered, and glared into the hallway. "We quit all our good nights years ago. And honey, you are going to prove there was nothing criminal about those checks, aren't you?"

He nodded. "I'll try. When will Warnock be back?"

"It may be a couple of weeks, honey. I know everything will be all right, however. I just don't want my cousin to find out anything with an angle which makes it look bad for Larry. You know?"

He knew. She meant a criminal angle, an angle from which Vernon might prosecute his erstwhile manager of Unit Four.

"Two weeks," he said gravely,

"gives us lots of time," and there was a double meaning to the phrase that she did not miss, for she laughed, squeezed his hand and, kissing him lightly, opened the door. He stood there fatuously as she closed the door, walked across the hall, hoisted the long skirt knee high and flashed slender ankles going up the steps. "Wonderful, wonderful," he said aloud, and went slowly back to his car.

The motor came to life, he shifted and the car was under way. He drove slowly, recalling the pleasant episodes of the evening with pleasure. He picked up the vacuum bottle and shook it. It was empty. He knew a few places in town that stayed open until the later hours, and decided he could do with a nightcap very nicely. Ten minutes later he pulled into the curb before a late bar, opened the car door. But he didn't get out. He peered down at an evening bag, undoubtedly belonging to Giny Vachell.

Tim had taken a bit too much to drink. Any other time he might have simply placed it in his pocket and given it to the lady the following day. Now, liquor inspired, the problem was even more simple. The bag belonged to the lady, hence as a gentleman, he should return it. But, by the time he reached the Vernon house, the cold air had slightly sobered him. Besides, the house was absolutely dark. Just to be sure, as it was a corner house, he drove down Spruce, the cross street. And arrived at the alley just in time to see a dark figure come over the fence from the Vernon yard.

He yelled, "Hey, you!" But the man turned quickly and fled up the

alley. For a brief second Tim considered giving chase, then thought better of it. He'd hurry to town, to that important bar, and call the police from there, reporting a prowler in the neighborhood. But a couple of friends were on their last legs in the bar, and hailed Tim jovially. He forgot about that prowler, and afterward was to kick himself for so doing.

CHAPTER IV

Loaded Dice



RRRIINNNGGG! Over and over again. Miss Emma Hohenberger arose from her bed, like a robed angel. Her night gown, severely chaste, buttoned high around her throat and reached clear to the floor. She paused long enough to don her glasses, to note that it was now twenty minutes after one o'clock, and on the way to the phone, wondered vaguely just what sort of trouble Tim Sloan was in this time.

"Hello, what's happened now?"

But it wasn't Tim Sloan. It was a woman's voice, high and shrill, near hysteria, almost to the breaking point. "Is this Mr. Sloan's secretary?" And, when Emma had admitted that it was, "Can you tell me where he might be? I've called his hotel, I've called a half dozen places, and I simply *have* to have him, I have to! Something terrible has happened!"

Emma said, "Get hold of yourself, Miss Vachell. I have no idea where Tim is. Wasn't he with you tonight?"

"Yes, oh, yes, but he brought me

home about one. Oh, my God, what am I going to do? What—?”

“What’s happened, Miss Vachell? Control yourself!”

“My cousin, Julian! He’s in the library, sprawled over the table, all bloody! He’s dead! I tell you someone killed him! I’ve got to find Tim Sloan!”

“Listen, I’ll leave calls for him, do you hear? Who killed him, did any of the servants hear the shot? Is the gun there? Who—?”

“Julian was funny! All the servants sleep out! I don’t know who killed him! I got ready to go to bed, and I’d had a little to drink, and I knew he was up for I saw the light when I came in, so I decided to have it out with him! I came downstairs and just as I opened the library door something hit me on the head! I just came to a few minutes ago, and the house was dark and Julian’s there dead! I tell you I’ve got to have Tim!”

“Just hold everything, don’t touch a single thing,” snapped Emma, “and we’ll get in touch with him. In the meanwhile, I’ll be right out myself!”

She banged the phone down, picked up the phone book. At the end of five minutes she had called seven all night bars and left word for Tim Sloan to come directly to the Vernon house. Her final call was to his hotel, where she left the same message. As she trotted into the bedroom again she was already shedding the gown.

IT WAS almost two by the time Emma crossed town in a taxi and made the Vernon mansion. Mr. Tim Sloan’s convertible was already

crouched at the curb, evidently he had been caught at one of the places she, Emma, had called. Emma paid her cab, hurried up the steps and beat on the door, notebooks beneath her arm, ready for business. There was no answer. She beat on the door again, and, to her surprise, it swung slowly inward. She shrugged, stepped into the hall, listened closely for a minute. From off to her right she heard muffled sobbing, and following the sound, soon pulled back the velvet curtains at the living room entrance.

“Tim!” Tim, red-faced, leaped to his feet. Miss Giny Vachell, a dream in sheer negligee, stayed where she was.

“I was—I was—” he began.

“Yes,” said Emma, “I know, I know. What did she kill him for?”

And Giny quit her sobbing and came to her feet in a flurry. The negligee was black, the skin that gleamed through it, white. The pattern of the lace was thus perfectly revealed to the interested Emma.

She murmured appreciatively, “Alencon! Real Alencon!”

“Killed him! I didn’t kill him! Damn you, how can you accuse me of that? Oh, Tim!” She wheeled and hurled herself at the advancing Tim, who frowned over her heaving shoulders.

Emma shrugged. “An elevator boy and two passengers saw her threaten her cousin with a gun in the corridor, yesterday morning. She threatened him again at the office, I transcribed it in shorthand and the pad was stolen.”

Tim’s eyes widened, “The pad was stolen!” he yelped.

Emma nodded. “Either the

Greek Papoulos or Vernon himself took it." She told him about it briefly and to the point.

Tim snapped, "That Papoulos, of course! Maybe he can read shorthand! Maybe—"

Emma interrupted. "Have you called the police?" She saw from Tim's creased forehead that he had not, realized that he, too, being a damned good detective, rather doubted Giny's story. "They'll like your not calling them," she said dryly. "But if you're going to give the little lady the benefit of the doubt, we better go to work." She unlimbered a notebook, took a pencil from her purse, grinned at Giny. "All right, sister, start talking. Start with your arrival here, approximate time, and all that."

Somehow the frightened Giny found her voice. She remembered that it was one minute to one when she started downstairs to "have it out" with her cousin and guardian. Tim remembered it had been around ten till one when they said good night, which gave Giny some seven to ten minutes to don negligee. If the story she told was true, thought Emma, her pencil flying, Giny had entered the library about one, had been hit, and was unconscious some fifteen minutes. It would have required five minutes for her to have made the calls he claimed she made in her frantic search for Tim.

"And that's all I know," she whimpered. Tim held her closer.

"Put this down," he snapped. And he told about the man who went over the fence at approximately ten or fifteen after one, according to his reckoning. He saw the disbelief in Emma's eyes, knew she thought he

was manufacturing verification for the woman's story.

"The bag is still in the car," he contended. "Somebody was here when we came we'll say, and they'd already killed Vernon. This somebody was searching for something Vernon had, or was supposed to have, and stayed behind, even after Giny came home. When she came in he stayed quiet, when she came downstairs he hit her and beat it out the back way, and I saw him going over the fence."

She snapped the notebook closed. "Then we'll look at the back door."

But the back door was bolted from the inside.

"Well, he went out the front door and around to the back," persisted Tim grimly.

THEY went to the front door. The key with which Tim had opened it was still in the lock! They both had forgotten it in the pleasure of the goodnight! Emma carefully wrote in her notebook, "Key in lock. Means killer could have so entered *after* Sloan left, when woman was in house." As she wrote, she asked, "And you heard no shot, Miss Vachell?"

"No shot at all!"

"Let's look at the dead man." But Giny refused to look again, and Tim and Miss Hohenberger went into the room alone. They turned on all the lights. Before looking at the body Tim walked to the various windows, found them all locked from inside. Emma was staring down at Julian Vernon. He had met death seated at a library table. The lethal bullet had gone in his left temple, out the right; his face was cheek

Tim roared: "Damn you—
you know I got influence
in this town!"



down on the surface of the table.

"Look," said Emma, pointing. There was a lump the size of a hen egg behind the right ear. "No wonder she didn't hear a shot. Evidently the killer—if and when—knocked this poor fellow unconscious. Then Giny entered and was knocked out, in turn, then this guy was shot. Look how warm he is, he couldn't have been dead long!"

"Where's the gun?"

A minute search of the room revealed no gun.

They stared at each other, each thinking the same thing. Tim needed a drink badly now, very badly. Emma shrugged. Tim went out, shoulders drooping. Again Emma started on a circuit of the room. Moments later a peculiar gleam of white caught her eye by the curtains. She started toward it just as Tim entered.

Tim said, "Her gun is missing. It's even registered in her name, Emma. She says she kept it in a bureau drawer, but it isn't there now!"

"What's that in your hand?"

"Just a snapshot I saw and picked up, I don't know why." She took it. It revealed a well-built man in swimming trunks with his arms around two better built women, in the scantiest of bathing suits. The one on the left was Giny Vachell.

Tim said, "The other babe is Garda Blunt, Honest George's wife. The guy is Glen Denman, the Tax Commissioner's lawyer and secretary, sort of. He was here tonight, around eight-thirty."

Softly Emma said, "And he shared an apartment with Lawrence Warnock!"

AFTER long seconds Tim shook his head. "Coincidence, Emma. Warnock is out of town and I saw Denman leave at eighty-thirty. It looks bad, bad!"

Emma nodded. "Bad enough," she admitted. "After all, your girl friend now stands to inherit several millions. She was known to have threatened Vernon. The bust in the head story is not so hot."

"She's got a lump," put in Tim defensively, "a hell of a lump!"

"Which she could have given herself!" Emma shrugged. "The gun missing looks pretty shaky, too. What if it's found with her prints, what if it was the kill gun? She could have done it, faked this story and hidden the gun! The cops will find it, they're far from dumb, you know, stories and movies to the contrary!"

"She didn't do it! I can tell when a woman is lying!"

The phone rang. They looked at it suspiciously. Tim started for it. Emma went back to the suspicious looking white object she had seen by the curtain. And again she failed to pick it up, for the hoarse whisper that came over the wire penetrated every corner of the room.

"The babe killed him," said the voice hoarsely, like a man endeavoring to conceal his identity. "She shot him with her own gun. I've got the gun, with her prints on it. She'll inherit now, she can borrow easy. Unless she wants the gun placed where the cops can find it, and maybe I'll tip them, she better get about twenty grand together. I know who I'm talking to—Tim Sloan. I'll get in touch with you—or with her if she's not in jail—tomorrow eve-

ning. Twenty grand! And in case you're trying to trace this, or even thinking of trying, I'm calling from a dial phone."

Tim hung up, wiped sweat from his brow.

Someone beat on the front door. Tim hurried out of the room. Emma stooped again. Straightening she heard, "Hello, Tim Sloan? What the hell are you doing here? We got a tipoff a few minutes ago that a monkey got himself knocked off at this address not long ago."

Before the cops came into the room Emma looked curiously at the thing she had picked up. It was a solitary die with round corners. One of the kind of dice she had used twice today—to shoot barbudi.

CHAPTER V

Murder, Well Mixed



TO SAY that Lieutenant Salters, Homicide, did not like private detectives, would be to speak too gently. And to say he did not like Timothy Tappan Sloan would be to attribute the squeak of a mouse to a full grown lion. He and Sloan had clashed quite often in the past—there was little lost love between them. Consequently, seeing how the land lay between Tim and the beautiful Giny Vachell, Salters took great pleasure in the next few hours. By four o'clock Sloan was fit to be tied.

He shook a bony fist in Salters' face, a face that did not retreat an inch. There was a gleam in Salters' eyes that said the heavy-set Homicide man sincerely hoped Mr. Tim Sloan would not pause with fist shak-

ing, but would break into fist slinging. Tim roared. "You know I got a little influence in this town, damn you! You know what the commissioner thinks of me! You Cossack!"

"Tch! tch!" replied Mr. Salters primly. "Commissioner or no commissioner, you know what I can do to you, either for concealing evidence or as a material witness, don't you?"

Emma Hohenberger opened her notebook. She snapped, "Tim! Lieutenant! You're like a couple of small boys. Salters, you've kept us here nearly three hours. I, for one, am getting sleepy. We've told you the truth, the absolute truth, of all that happened *here*."

Salters got it. "But what happened some place else is your own business?"

"Privileged," responded Emma laconically. "She's our client. Now I'm willing to cooperate and save you some time, I'll give you my notes and you can have your man—"

"Suppose you read them again, slowly. Sometimes a man misses something, some screwy alibi like a private dick would want to make."

Tim snorted. A man in uniform opened his own notebook, and Emma began to read.

She read her own statement, how Giny Vachell had phoned her in a search for Tim, how she had dressed and ridden crosstown in the cab, only to find that Tim had preceded her.

"Just what were Giny Vachell and Mr. Sloan doing when you walked in?"

Tim flushed. Giny Vachell, in the same negligee, moaned aloud.

Emma said, "Just what you think. Here's the rest of my statement."

Which she promptly read—except that she failed to mention the finding of the barbudi die.

Finished, she read Giny's statement, exactly as Giny had given it to her. "And what," asked Salters sweetly, "was it you were going to settle once and for all with your cousin?"

"I've told you seven times!" Giny sat up straight now, oblivious of the drooping negligee that called attention to the marble whiteness of her shoulders. "I want to marry Larry Warnock. My cousin said no! He tried to hire Mr. Sloan to prove Larry was a crook, and I hired Mr. Sloan to prove he wasn't a crook." She beamed at Tim, who beamed right back.

"That sounds like a private dick. One guy goes to him for help in framing another guy, and a good-looking gal steals the dick, so he can frame the framer."

Emma grabbed Tim. As she jerked him away he whispered hoarsely, "And shut up about this check stuff!"

"What was that?" Salters sprang on the whisper.

"I told her not to treat my neck rough!" Tim actually smirked. Emma shrugged. She knew the reason he wanted to keep still, which was his regard for the woman. After all, there *was* a possibility that that \$800 check would definitely prove that young Warnock was doing something illegal. With Vernon dead, the only man who had complained, what was the use of bringing it out? But nevertheless it went against Emma's judgment to keep it all from the police.

"All right," said Salters wearily,

"you came down to have it out and someone smacked you down, and when you came to in a dark room your cousin was dead and you tried to get Mr. Sloan. Why didn't you call the police, call a real detective?" He shrugged. "Go on, Miss Hohenberger. What was Mr. Sloan doing all this time?"

And after Tim's statement had been read Salters said, "All right, you can go, Sloan, you and your brains. You wouldn't have killed Vernon, you're too dumb."

Tim snapped. "And what about Miss Vachell. You charging her?"

Giny moaned, "I can't stay here now! I wish Larry were in town!"

Salters shook his head. "I'm not going to charge her, not without a weapon, at least. You're all holding something back, I'm no fool. Nope, I'm not charging her, but she better stick around."

Again Giny moaned. And for the first time Emma's sympathy was aroused. "Her cousin got himself knocked off in this house, Lieutenant. It couldn't be any too pleasant for her here. Suppose I take her over to my apartment?"

And to everyone's astonishment, Salters nodded.

FIFTEEN minutes later, with the sky beginning to grow dirty with dawn, the three of them entered Tim Sloan's convertible, Tim at the wheel. He kept his eyes on the rear-view mirror, and at last, before he reached the corner, said, "Watch me lose Salters' tail. The louse!" For a pair of headlights was pulling away from the curb.

He turned south on two wheels at the next corner, stepped on the gas

and in a hundred yards the speedy convertible was doing seventy. Left at the next corner, barely missing a milk wagon, then two blocks straight ahead where he cut his lights and wheeled left again. "I'll get them here on Lover's Lane," he said, enthusiastically, and Emma, holding onto her hat with one hand, her oversized handbag with the other, recognized the Heights district then, and knew Tim meant to turn into the narrow, gravel road known as Lover's Lane. Tim drove like a fool. Not even a police car would attempt to traverse that road with the speed Tim Sloan would make it.

They skidded into Lover's Lane, followed its serpentine twisting for at least half a mile before Tim took his foot off the gas. "That ought to throw them," he said exultantly, and wheeled his car around a hairpin curve made dangerous by a grove of cottonwoods. He saw the dark shape of the car ahead in sufficient time to keep from hitting it head on. But the left front fender of his own car, and the right front of the other—whose lights also were out—clashed like a pair of anvils.

Dazed, Tim sat still for a moment, the screams of Giny in his ear. Emma opened the door and hopped out, surprised that she was all in one piece. A man opened the door of the other car and staggered toward them. And Emma could barely make out the license on the other car. It was 600001. She paused at the hood of the convertible, while the man went past toward Tim, cursing.

"Of all the blinkety blankety fool things, why didn't you have your lights?"

And at the same moment, Tim

was saying, "Why didn't you have your lights?"

Then—"Tim Sloan!" And, "Glen Denman!" And Giny, too, adding her almost hysterical voice to the tumult. And, there, in the middle of Lover's Lane, over a pair of slightly wrecked cars Giny told Glen Denman all that had happened. Denman said, at the end, "Good God! And they think Giny did it?" So the excited talk went on and on. At last Denman said, "Well, it's getting light. I better get Blunt's car back in the garage. I like to ride by myself sometimes like this. Didn't know it was so late."

NO SOONER had Denman recognized Sloan, and vice versa, then Emma, temporarily forgotten, had leaned low and scuttled like a rabbit to the side of the other car. She never knew afterward whether it was instinct, hunch, or what it was. Clear to the rear of the big limousine, she went, around to the opposite side, where she could not be seen. A few seconds later she rose up cautiously and peered inside.

There was a woman, crouched down on the floor of the front seat. A woman who had been riding in Lover's Lane with Glen Denman clad in a negligee. Even now, so cautious was she being, that the negligee drooped neglected from her shoulder, parted as she crouched to reveal a silken knee. Now a curious thing happened. The woman twisted her head, and her eyes were closed, and Emma saw she was crying, saw that the right eye was swollen and starting to puff, where, no doubt, she had been thrown against the windshield by the collision. And the

woman's face looked strangely familiar! Emma stole away as silently as she had appeared, and none of the three who chattered so stridently beside the convertible missed her.

So, having thrown their police shadow off their trail, the convertible pulled away. Giny shuddered deliciously beside Tim, who patted her consolingly. Emma said, "You didn't tell the police about the check business, but you told Denman. How come?"

Giny sniffed. "He was Larry's roommate—or rather, they had an apartment together. Larry may get in touch with him, and he ought to know."

SO, THEY drove directly to Emma's apartment. Emma dove into her tissue wrapped packages, came up with a wonderful negligee and a set of undergarments, which Giny took and retreated to the bath. When the sound of hot water running came to them, and Tim had his nose safely ensconced in an Old Fashioned, Emma said, "Did you tell her about the gun and the twenty grand?"

Tim looked indignant. "Don't you think she has enough to worry about?"

"If it's her gun and her prints on it she's got even more. And twenty grand is a lot of dough—which *you* haven't got!"

He got the implication, at least. He sputtered over his drink. "Look, Emma," he said at last, "we got until night to find out who killed Vernon. And also who hit Giny in the head, who wiped off the kill gun and pressed her fingers on it, then beat

it, calling back later to demand twenty grand! I don't think we'll have to look far.

"The Greek, Papoulos. He read himself some shorthand over your shoulder, he tore off your pad, he saw all the implications. So what? He knew what Vernon thought about the family name. All he had to do was go to Vernon, offer to give it to the papers that he was keeping his cousin from marrying Warnock, and his cousin was threatening to kill him. Big scandal, and all that. Vernon probably wouldn't pay it, he conked Vernon, Giny came down and the gun was too good an opportunity to pass up."

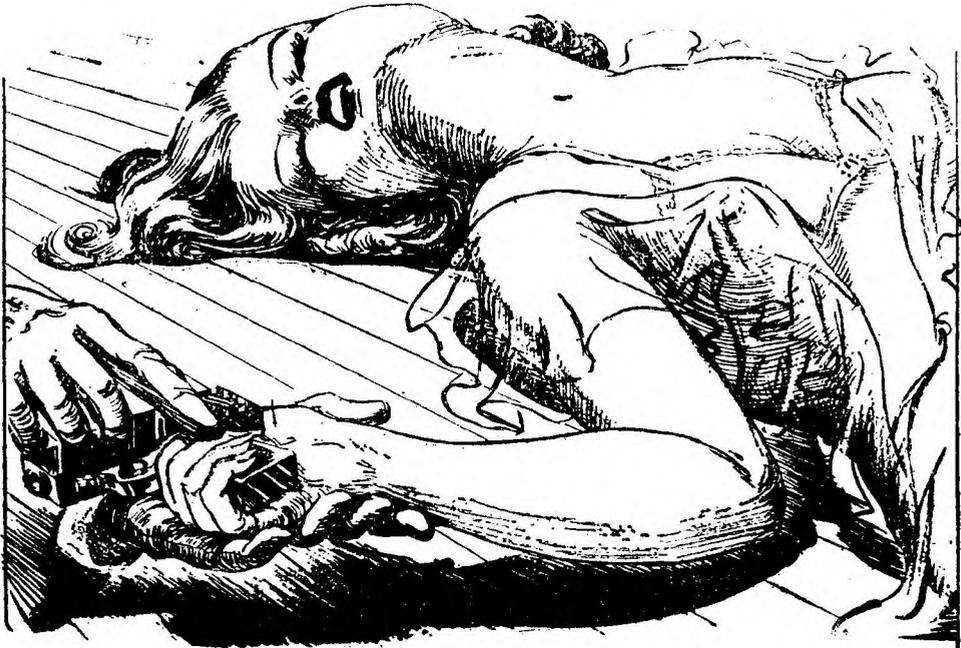
The way he told it, it sounded more than plausible—and he didn't even know about the barbudi die. Her breast swelled with pride, pride for his ability.

"How'd the babe's gun get downstairs?"

By now he'd poured a straight drink and tossed it off. He felt expansive. "Simple." He waved his big hands. "Put yourself in Vernon's place. She tried to shoot him with it. First chance he had, wouldn't he go upstairs and make a search for it, bring it down? Hell, it was probably right there on the table! It—My God!"

For Giny, wearing a \$40 negligee, constructed strictly for display purposes, came out of the bedroom. The negligee left little to the imagination, and at that, Tim was an imaginative man.

At seven, Emma had eaten—*as had Giny*. Scrambled eggs, toast, bacon and coffee. Tim's plate was still untouched before him. Emma pushed back with a sigh, she knew



"Who wiped off the kill gun and planted it?"

that look in his eye. "I have a lot to do at the office," she said primly. No one even answered her, until she had on her hat and coat and was at the door.

"Emma!"

Dutifully she went back into the dining room. Tim was alone. He had his coat off. "I was fixing to wash," he said haughtily. "Here, take this picture, and file it away in the proper place. Guess I shouldn't really have lifted it."

The picture was the snapshot he had taken from Giny's boudoir. The one that showed Glen Denman in swimming trunks, with one arm around Giny and the other around—the woman she had seen cowering in the front seat of the George Blunt limousine on Lover's Lane.

Idly she said, "And so that's Garda Blunt!"

Tim said, over his shoulder, "Garda Blunt, Honest George's wife."

CHAPTER VI

Killer Returns?



UNDER ordinary circumstances, whenever a pretty woman did not cross his path, Tim Sloan was a more than merely efficient detective; he was topflight. Emma Hohenberger had worked for him so long that she had absorbed a great deal of his ability, which, added to her own natural talent made her shrewd, indeed. She knew now that Denman was Honest George Blunt's secretary, and she knew now that Denman was playing around with Garda Blunt. She knew that Denman had been Larry Warnock's roommate, or apartment

mate, if you will. Altogether, there were too many Glen Denman's in the thing.

She found the address in the phone book, hailed a taxi and started crosstown. Twenty moments later the taxi slowed before Denman's apartment house, but before it could come to a stop, a man came out of the front door. He wore a long trenchcoat, and his hat was too far down over his eyes. But the morning wind was whipping up, the hat was a snapbrim, and a gust of wind swung that brim up, the hat almost left the man's head. He grabbed at it successfully, but not before Emma had seen his face as he dived into another cab. She lost all thought of going into the apartment.

The man was Larry Warnock, supposedly in New Orleans, searching for another job. "Tail him," she snapped, and the cab set off after Warnock's cab. She knew his face. In the past it had been in the papers enough! And as the cab pursued, she turned it over in her mind. Warnock, telling Giny he was in New Orleans looking for another job! And all the time, with such an alibi established—if it were established—he'd be the perfect suspect for the murder of Julian Vernon! He certainly had incentive and motive! Not only was Vernon keeping him from the woman he loved, but he was threatening young Warnock with criminal prosecution!

But she lost him at Five Points, where some fourteen traffic lanes come into one corner from five different streets. The lights were not only lucky for Warnock and unlucky for Emma, but no sooner had they changed to yellow and her own cab

sped up to make up lost time, then a great bumping and thumping beneath her told the story. They had a flat—and there was no other cab in sight.

SHE unlocked the office with grim lips, kept straight on for the phone, dialing her own number. Although the phone rang at least twenty times, there was no answer. Tim Sloan, at present, was not answering phones. Disgusted, she took off her coat, her hat, put them in place.

Then she seated herself at her desk, opened her handbag and placed one round cornered barbudi die before her. She shrugged at the hopelessness of her task, but opened a drawer to extract a bottle of lamp-black and a small camel's hair brush.

A moment later she had painted all six sides of the die with the brush, and gazed now at it with disappointment she knew was coming. No one picked dice up with thumb and forefinger. The fingerprints were notable for their absence. And yet Tim had said Papoulos—?

The scent of attar of roses came to her. So engrossed she had been that she did not hear the door opening. Theodore Papoulos, shivering violently, heeled the door closed behind him. His eyes were like those of a whipped dog. "Pliss, Mees Hoe-eenberger, you will troost Theodore weeth hees overcoat? Thees Theodore ees cold, too cold!"

And his trembling, chattering teeth showed he wasn't kidding! She said, "I'll shoot you for it, if you have your dice!"

His smile widened. "Eef I haf my dice? Theese dice, Mees Hoe-

eenberger, they are my lousy dice, alwiss I kept them, no?"

And the dice danced across the desk in front of her. Somehow she was glad. Although it didn't make sense, the fact that he had his dice seemed definite proof to her that he had never been in the Vernon home!

"Your coat against—hey, what you got to shoot? Where's your ring?"

"I lose cem las' night later, pliss. I shoot—I shoot—my suit, pliss? I am no colder without the suit than now!"

Emma blushed. She said, "Shoot!"

The dice rolled out. The little Greek sighed with relief at sight of the pair of fives! He doffed his hat. He seized her hand and kissed it, she flushed redder than ever. "I tal you, you are the sport, Mees Hochenberger, the sporting lady!"

And although the little Greek evidently did not know the implications of his remarks, Emma beamed and glowed inwardly for the next hour. During that hour she tried every fifteen minutes to get her own apartment—with no success.

IT WAS exactly a quarter after nine when the Trenchcoat came in. The gun he held was very large and very black, and his hand was a bit unsteady. The voice issuing from behind the handkerchief used as a mask was as shaky as the hand. "All right," said the voice, "stand up and back away from the desk."

She obeyed. But Miss Emma Hohenberger had nerve. She said, "What do you want, Mr. Warnock?"

For a moment she thought he was going to shoot her, for his trigger

finger actually whitened at the knuckle. Instead, he laughed. "So you know me, eh! And that makes it bad! Never mind, it's too late now. Look out, I'm coming behind your desk." As he passed the corner of the desk his pocket caught on a nail, there was a ripping sound, and again he cursed.

"Sorry," she said. "That nail should have been fixed long ago. If you'll tell me what you want, Mr. Warnock, maybe I can save you some time."

"I want a check made out to Texcan Shellers for eight hundred bucks, from Dodge Tile Company. The check Julian Vernon gave Sloan, **your** boss."

She regarded him steadily through the thick lenses of her glasses. "So, it was you! What a heel you are, Warnock. Your girl thinks you're in New Orleans, and instead you're around town killing her cousin and trying to blackmail her for twenty grand. You—" She backed away from him, reading death in his eyes behind the handkerchief. "I don't have the check, it isn't here. The guy gave it to Tim, didn't he?"

A bit at a time he backed her through the frosted door, through Tim's office and into the washroom. He snarled, "I can't think why I don't kill you! But if I hear a peep out of you for the next ten minutes I'll shoot through the door." The door slammed, she heard the key in the lock, and stood there panting. Funny he didn't throttle her, she knew him! Funny! Funny!

The minutes ticked away. For a long while she heard him scattering things about in the anteroom, in Tim's office. But after a while,

there was silence, deep and dull. Tentatively she slammed a fist against the door, and drew quickly to one side. No shots! She tried it again! Still no lead to hurtle through the door. *Bam-bam-bam* went her fist.

AND suddenly the key turned in the lock, the door came open, and she looked into the frosty eyes of Lieutenant Salters.

"Just what the hell are you doing in there?" he demanded.

She thrust her chin in the air. "Just what does one do in there?" Over his shoulder she saw a scene of desolation. Drawers had been emptied of their contents, the well-worn leather couch was on one side rather than on its legs, the office appeared as if a small cyclone had come in one window, curled itself here and there, and flown serenely out another.

"Who locked you in?"

"Was I locked in? I thought you walked in on me!" His face reddened, he was on the verge of apoplexy.

"Who the hell has been in here?" he roared. "What's the meaning of this mess?"

Stooping, she began picking up the debris. "There's an awful draft comes in every once in a while," she observed, and stalked into her own anteroom. It was worse than Tim's office.

"Where's Tim Sloan; I want him, do you hear?"

"You've got a police warrant for him?"

"I've got a warrant for the Vernon gal! He was with her. I thought you were taking her to your apartment!"

"I did. We ate breakfast there! Aren't they—?"

"Hell, no! We cracked down the door and it was empty. The apartment, I mean!"

"And you'll pay for the door, do you hear?" But at the same time it was running through her head: Where were Tim and Giny?

Something was tossed down before her on the desk. "I suppose you never saw this before?"

She stared down. "Naturally. They're my notes. This is what happened when Giny and her cousin Julian clashed here yesterday!"

"And why didn't you tell me about it? You know damned well there's murder motive! Where is this check, what about it?"

Wearily she said, "I just work here, copper. That's all. I have a living to make and I keep my nose clean. As far as the notes are concerned, I suppose you got them at Vernon's house."

Salters nodded. Nor did he understand Emma's deep sigh of relief.

He snatched the notes, tucked them in a pocket. "I've got that Sloan where I want him now," he gloated. "Concealing is the same as abetting, baby. I've got things to do now, but if Sloan gets in touch with you, tell him he doesn't have a chance." The door closed behind him. Dumbly she stood staring at the debris-littered floor. She wondered why she hadn't told Salters about Larry Warnock. What business did she have feeling a lot of sympathy for the guy just because he was in love with Giny, and Giny with him. She sniffed. The odor of attar of roses was still heavy in

the office. Curiously she looked at the back of her hand, where Theodore Papoulos had implanted a kiss. Then, flushing a bit, she began to pick up the debris.

Almost the first thing she saw was an envelope marked American Airways. There were two tickets inside, one made out to Mrs. John Smith, the other to Mr. John Smith. The tickets were good for transportation to New York.

For long moments she gazed at them. Warnock, then, was figuring on picking up his girl and screaming? For obviously the tickets had fallen from the trenchcoat pocket, torn on the nail that should have been fixed so long ago.

She grabbed her hat, she grabbed her coat, she left the office on the run.

CHAPTER VII

Honest Kill



HE paused at the entrance to her own apartment and made a moue of displeasure. Just as Salters had said, the police had broken the lock. She stepped inside the apartment and saw a scene fully as bad as she had left at the office. The place was a shambles. Even the carpets had been torn up, the pictures were awry, a strange smell permeated the air, and the sound of sobbing was plain from the rear bedroom.

She trotted through the house, threw open the bedroom door. Tim Sloan sat bound to an immense chair in the far corner, his eyes frantic, his mouth gagged with a strip of tape. A trickle of blood ran down

over his chin and onto his white shirt. He said, "Ugh-glubly-glub!" And nodded toward the bed.

Giny Vachell was on the bed. Emma's service weight hose had been utilized in spread-cagling her.

She wore lace underthings which fascinated Emma—until she found they were her own. High on one shoulder were two angry red burns. Mercifully she had fainted.

Emma sprang to Tim, jerked the tape from his mouth. He screamed angrily, yelled, "Did you get him, did you see him, he just left, damn him!"

But she was so busy untying him that she did not answer. When he did stagger to his feet he plunged across the room to the unconscious woman, while Emma ran to get a wet towel. As they bathed her brow, Tim continued to curse.

"May his soul burn in hell," he snarled. "I had the damned check, but you know how stubborn I am. I didn't think he'd dare pull anything until he tied me up and went to work on her. Then I gave him the check!" He leaned over the girl and crooned something foolish. Bitterly he added, "I don't see how you missed him Emma." As if it had been her fault.

Curiously she said, "Did he wear a trenchcoat with a torn pocket, and a snap brim hat and a handkerchief mask?"

"By God, you saw him," howled Tim frantically.

"Only at the office," she said calmly. "He pulled the same thing there. He dropped these." She handed him the tickets and his eyes glowed.

"So! Whoever it is, is taking a

runout, eh? And I'll bet six two and even it's that damned Greek that—!"

"Tim! It wasn't. I know who it was. But to hell with that. The police have a warrant for Giny—her cousin swiped my notes and they found them. It gives Giny a motive for murder, do you see, besides this inheritance business! They were here once, weren't they?"

Tim giggled. "Police! Hell, we stepped out on the fire-escape, that's all. But let's get this girl awake, we got to beat it before they come here again! Anyone see you come in?"

Again Emma said, "Tim, something stinks. I tell you who did it. Let her alone a minute, I'm half-inclined to think she was in with him. Larry Warnock is not in New Orleans at all!" And swiftly she told of trailing him after he left his old apartment, how she had lost him, and how the torturer was dressed with trenchcoat and dark snapbrim!

He jumped up. "I'll phone the cops," he swore.

GINY opened her eyes. "No, no! It couldn't have been Larry. Leave the cops alone! He isn't here, you're just mistaken! If you call the cops, I'll confess that I did it—and you both know I didn't! Larry wouldn't have burned me so terribly with a cigarette!"

And that did make sense. And, at the same time, Emma kept harking back to the fact that she was simply placed, unharmed, in the washroom, when she had obviously recognized the murderer, when he had practically admitted killing Julian Vernon!

The doorbell rang. For a moment no one moved, the three of them were frozen! "Police," said Tim wildly.

"Police wouldn't ring," Emma hard-heeled away. When she came back, there was a man with her. He wore a trenchcoat, and a snapbrim hat. He said, "Giny! Thank God you were here after all! I've been at the police station all morning!" Then he had her in his arms. And Tim Sloan, red-faced, turned away and went for a drink. He needed it.

Larry Warnock broke away. "Honey, I heard on the radio early this morning on the milkman's program that Julian had been killed. I've got my job, honey, I can make all the checks good, and—well," he glanced at Emma suspiciously. "Well, he finished lamely, 'I flew to you as quick as I could!'"

Emma said, "And the police didn't question you about the killing?"

Larry Warnock looked surprised. "Why, I had my canceled plane ticket. I didn't leave New Orleans till two this morning! Why?"

"That coat, Warnock, that hat! Who else has got—?"

"I guess that would be me." Glen Denman came out of the hall closet, with the same big gun in his hand. His lips were pulled back from his teeth, perspiration beaded his brow, his gun shook. "Larry and I, as pals and roommates, often bought similar clothing. Larry, I heard you had the dough to take up the check? Well, I got the check. Eight hundred bucks."

"Wait a minute!" That was Tim Sloan. "You, Denman, you wanted that check enough to kill and torture

Emma sprang to Tim
first, untied him.



for it! Listen, Larry, what he did to your girl!"

Denman's smile never faded. "Just cut out the talk," he said grimly. "I'm desperate for money. Shell out, all of you."

Sloan was persistent, but Larry took over. "So," he said slowly, "your fear of Honest George's finding out what you'd been doing made you torture Giny. I get it all now. You killed Vernon, thinking he had the check, didn't you! Because you knew what Honest George Blunt would do when he found out his front man was crooked!"

Oblivious of the gun, he wheeled on Sloan. "You know what he was doing? He had access to the Tax Assessment books! For a fee he'd alter them! And I was fool enough to help him! These crooks he helped were shrewd too. He'd ask for cash, but they wanted canceled checks, so they'd have as much on him as he had on them. And like a fool I let him use me! They were all made to Texcan Shellers, and I indorsed them and handed them over to him!"

DENMAN snarled, "All right, all right. Why should you squawk? Your boss got bumped in the shuffle, didn't he? You can marry the gal and several millions, while me, I'm practically penniless and have to take Ga—have to make a run for it! I needed that check, damn it. You know how Honest George feels now about crooks. He'd have killed me if he ever found out what I'd been doing!"

Emma said, "Tim, you were right! He knocked Vernon out, knocked Giny out, then gunned Ver-

non, because he'd been seen, of course, by Vernon. Then he put Giny's prints on the gun, and having lost his eye teeth at barbudi and needing money for a getaway with Honest George's wife, he figured the gun angle to knock off twenty grand more!"

Denman laughed, almost hysterically. "You'd never prove it! But to hell with it! By God, they can only burn me once, but—" His voice went higher and shriller. "You can't prove it!"

"Oh, yes, I can prove it. I found one of your *barbudi* dice in Vernon's library! Your fingerprints were on it!" Which was of course a lie.

Denman's left hand fumbled in his pocket, disbelief in his eyes. A second later he hurled one object on the floor, laughing wildly. "So, you found one of my dice, did you? I tried to get Vernon into a game, the louse! I tell you I needed money! Gar—!"

"Garda, you were going to say, Denman." The voice came from the hall behind them. It was heavy, it was tired, it was an old man's voice. "Drop the gun, Denman, and don't turn. I got the truth out of Garda, Denman, when you brought her at dawn this morning!" He laughed hoarsely. "Funny, wasn't it, Honest George, a politician all his life, suddenly turning up and up because of a woman. And all the time the woman was cheating, and because of that same woman, you were crooking the tax books. So you and Garda were leaving town tonight, were you. Don't do it, Denman don't do it!"

But Denman did. He whirled. And Honest George Blunt did! He

shot twice, and the heavy caliber bullets hurled Denman back against the wall, where he slid slowly down to a sitting posture, blood dribbling from his mouth while his eyes rolled upward in death.

Honest George, all three hundred pounds of him, walked to Tim Sloan and handed him a gun. "You're part cop, son," he said, wearily. "I guess I'm through."

Tim Sloan did a funny thing. He pointed the gun at the bed and fired two more slugs into the mattress. Looking a little embarrassed, he said, "You're not through, you're only beginning. A man only gets under way when he turns honest."

"I don't get you." Already they could hear a commotion in the hall.

Emma got him, however. She walked across and laid her hand on Tim's arm, proudly. "He had to fire the gun," she explained in a curious voice, "so a nitrate test would prove he killed Denman in self-defense. Mr. Blunt was stuck up just like the rest of us, do you hear, and Mr. Blunt also heard Denman's confession."

Honest George Blunt was still

nodding agreement when Salters led the cops into the room.

AT TWELVE o'clock Tim Sloan walked disconsolately into Emma's bedroom, a glass in his hand. She stood before a mirror, putting something on her best blouse, something that had arrived from the drug store a moment previously.

"What," he asked, "stinks like that and where are you going?"

"Stinks?" she demanded indignantly. "That's no stink, that's attar of roses. And going? I've got a luncheon date!" He wondered why she gazed so fondly at the back of her left hand. She smiled at herself in the glass. "He says he's going to teach me another Greek game!"

At the door, she said, "Ah, Tim, you wouldn't mind sort of picking up, would you?"

Mr. Timothy Tappan Sloan's melancholy eyes took in the front room, where Giny Vachell and Larry Warnock were in a little world of their own. "Not at all, not at all," he said bitterly. "After all, there's nothing else left to do."

Wallace Kayton offers

“CUT BACK”

In these pages next month!

By **ROBERT
LESLIE
BELLEM**



THE locomotive was nudging seventy when I took my future in my hands and started forward toward the cowcatcher. Speed yowled around me with a thousand tongues of wind and the flat landscape blurred past as if the

earth had turned into a liquid brown mill-race.

From cab to pilot a narrow steel gangway hugged the side of the engine, jumping and heaving under my feet with each hammering revolution of the massive drivers. Vibration shook me like a fist, rattled my den-

DANGER DELIVERED C. O. D.

The chandelier pulled loose as I came down on the second man.



It was a great stunt, perfectly timed, and it would make a hair-raising episode in the movies. But when death resulted and murder was charged, the situation was fraught with more dynamite than the movies would show!

tal crockery like marbles in a bucket. I inhaled a gob of smoke from the stubby stack up ahead. The taste was terrible.

I clung to the brass handrail, kept moving onward. It was too late to turn back even if I'd wanted to. There was a shadow directly above me now, and over the locomotive's exhaust I heard the steadier drone of an airplane motor. That was my cue for the big rescue scene.

"One," I began counting. "Two. Three." Everything depended on split-second timing; which was why I'd spent the whole morning rehearsing each movement on top of the engine while it stood still, synchronizing myself for the actual second of action.

Now, in the midafternoon heat of San Fernando Valley back of Hollywood, the sequence was under way. And it had to be right the first time. An accident at seventy miles an hour might spell somebody's funeral; maybe mine.

Overhead, that open-cockpit monoplane drew closer. Questa McBride was the aviatrix at the crate's controls: a yellow-haired, cuddlesome southpaw cupcake who knew all the aerial answers. By stalling and side-slipping she maneuvered exactly above my position on the engine and remained there. She peered over the side, her goggled glims narrowed and her kissable red lips forming the words: "Okay, Sam. Good luck!"

I nodded and kept ticking off the seconds. A rat's-nest of shrouds and rumpled white silk hung under the plane's fuselage, and at the very bottom of the snarled tangle a man swung helplessly. That was Lonny

Vonderhauff, the bobo it was my job to rescue.

THIS hair-raising sequence was part of an adventure opus being filmed by Superior Pix for the thrill trade. According to the scenario, an important character in the story was supposed to bail out of an airplane only to get his parachute fouled in the struts. Which mishap tossed everybody concerned into a peagreen predicament; obviously the ship couldn't land with a guy dangling underneath. Not without converting him into a smear of cranberry jelly.

In consequence, the script called for the plane's pilot to swoop low over a speeding locomotive whose engineer would thereupon desert his throttle, grab the imperiled party, cut him loose from the fouled 'chute and haul him to safety. Naturally the studio couldn't jeopardize its top-notch hams in an episode of that hazardous kidney, so I'd been called on to furnish the spurious shudders.

As head of my own stunting organization I'd accepted the assignment. Now I was doubling for the engineer hero while Lonny Vonderhauff, one of the newer daredevils on my payroll, filled in as party of the second part. And thus far the take was going off without a hitch.

I had to admire Vonderhauff's calmness as he dangled above me. For a johnny-come-lately in the cinema risk racket he certainly had a copious assortment of guts. He was a good-looking lad, jaunty but not fresh, brainy without showing it off. I drew a big belt out of the way he was trusting his life in my hands. His confidence made me all the more

anxious to see that nothing went hay-wire.

"Steady, fella!" I yelled to him as the McBride cookie jockeyed her plane a little lower, putting Lonny almost within my reach.

I couldn't grab for him until I'd finished my count of the seconds. Stunt work has a hell of a lot of angles. For instance, just as the action commenced I had triggered the mechanism of an automatic camera attached to the cab roof and a predetermined amount of footage had to be exposed before I could cut the youngster free. That was the way it had been rehearsed; that was the way it had to be now.

Moreover, I had to keep my back to the lens so my face wouldn't register, because after all I was only a double for the star of the pic. Which forced me into an awkward posture as I completed my count; but that couldn't be helped either. I tensed myself as the monoplane dipped two more feet. "*Now!*" I said.

I whipped a knife from my pocket, slashed the shrouds that held Vonderhauff helpless. One after another they twanged apart. I made the final cut and grabbed the lad to steady him until he could fasten his clutch on the handrail.

And then disaster maced me over the back of the cranium.

IT HAPPENED just as Questa McBride got my all-clear signal and zoomed away. For an instant I thought somebody had slugged me with a club. Pain jammed a monkey-wrench in my mental cogwheels. I gasped: "Hell's hinges!" as my knees buckled.

Lonny slid from my weakened

grasp, a wild yip bubbling in his throat. Through a swirling haze of agony I saw him topple off the narrow gangway, clawing for a handhold on nothingness. I tried to regain control of my dislocated reflexes; made a desperate effort to snatch him back before it was too late.

I threw snake-eyes. He plunged off, and the wind took him downward toward the rushing roadbed. Faintly came his last weird scream: "*Tell Wash—*"

Then he was gone.

For a blurry second I tried to guess what he'd meant. Then I thought I understood. The pic's director was Clive Washman, and evidently Lonny wanted him to know what had happened.

Nausea welled through me as I felt myself swaying off the catwalk in the kid's wake. I knew what was in store for me if I followed him overboard. Hitting the grit at seventy miles an hour would grind me to mincemeat. I'd already watched Lonny's impact, had seen him bounce and roll hideously into the ditch with his arms and legs flopping crazily. . . .

"Cripes!" I mumbled, stabbing frantically at the handrail. I made it; clung in a nightmare of heaving speed that matched the pain-pulsations at the back of my skull.

Air brakes hissed under me and sparks splashed from whirring steel wheels; that was the genuine engineer—the guy who was actually at the throttle in the cab behind me—wiping the clock with an emergency application of his Westinghouse anchors. But as far as I was concerned it didn't seem to matter.

Nothing mattered except the ugly fact that I'd allowed Lonny Vonderhauff to fall to his death.

That got me down. Lonny had been a hell of a swell kid. To him, Hollywood had been a glamorous oyster waiting to be opened; in fact, he had already extracted a pearl. She was Questa McBride, the stunt aviatrix. Lonny and the cuddly blond cupcake had been engaged; their wedding was to have taken place shortly. But now Questa would be wearing mourning instead of a trousseau. . . .

HARD fingers clamped on my shoulders, pulled me upright. By that time the locomotive had come to a shuddering halt in the middle of nowhere. I twisted around, pinned the hazy glimpse on the guy who was lifting me.

He was Joe Farnum, engineer of the chartered Mogul: a chunky, grizzled veteran of the iron pike whose leathery face was wrinkled like a relief map. His faded blue glims matched his denim overalls for color, but they looked colder than ice-cubes.

He dragged me into the cab, propped me up. "You heel," he said. "I seen you kill that boy. You deliberately let him fall." Then the old rooster bashed me square on the button.

I wasn't set for it; and I was still groggy from that larrup on the conk that had caused me to lose my hold on Vonderhauff. So when Farnum lowered the boom on me he doused my lights like a candle in a gale. The cab's deck drifted up at me and I took a sudden, unexpected sojourn in dreamland.

CHAPTER II

The Camera on the Roof



CREAMS yanked me out of my trance, feminine, hysterical. I stirred, tried to sit up.

I was lying on the ground near the railroad siding that had been the point of departure for my wild ride. Evidently Farnum had reversed his engine, returned me to the location camp after belting me senseless.

The whole Superior location unit was clustered around me—cast, extras, grips, and prop men. And it was Questa McBride who was doing all that caterwauling.

She'd landed her plane nearby, and now she was trying to get close to me. "Let me go! I'll kill him!" she was bleating in a tone that held concentrated poison.

A rangy, red-haired bozo named Brick Bergman was holding her, trying to quiet her. Brick was head cameraman for the production. "Nix, baby! Lay off. You can't—"

She struggled in his arms, her breast swelling turbulently under a tight sweater that emphasized every contour. "Get your hands off me!" she yawped. And she kicked at Bergman's shins. From where I was sprawled, the view was gorgeous.

I felt damned sorry for the blond wren; couldn't blame her for wanting to sample my gore. She'd been in love with Lonny Vonderhauff and now he was defunct, his corpse a shapeless heap under a nearby tarpaulin. And Questa considered me responsible for it.

Until my straying wits began func-

tioning I had the same general notion. But as the fog gradually cleared I started seeing things in a different light. I remembered the mysterious bop on the dome that had made me drop Lonny, and the memory brought me swaying to my feet, fighting mad.

I staggered toward Questa. "Hold everything, kiddo. I know how you feel. But you're all wrong."

She kept trying to get away from the cameraman. "Don't try to alibi yourself, Sam Devlin!" she raged at me. "I saw everything from my plane. You killed Lonny and I'll get even with you if it's the last thing I ever do!"

That was when Clive Washman, director of the opus, interposed his pudgy heft between us. He glared at me and said: "Scram. You can't talk yourself out of the hole you're in, Mister."

I blinked. "What hole?"

"You're all through as a stuntman," he said grimly. "No studio can afford to hire a man who lets people get killed through carelessness. I don't know what the law's going to say, but as far as I'm concerned you're blackballed—permanently."

That broiled my tripes to a crisp. I make my living stunting; it's all I know. And I didn't enjoy the prospect of being booted out of the game because of something that hadn't been my fault. But Washman was just the type who'd sacrifice an employee to save his own career.

I knew why he was threatening to blacklist me. Because of the bad publicity that was bound to follow Lonny Vonderhauff's death, Superior Pix might shelve this opus

entirely. And that would probably finish Washman as a top-racket director; after all, he was supposed to have full responsibility for everything that happened in his unit.

Moreover, he was already in wrong with the front office because of having recently been hauled before the Dies committee on suspicion of Nazi Bund connections. True, he'd proven himself innocent. All the same, he was still under a partial cloud; and the death of Vonderhauff might damned well wash him up unless he got out from under.

I didn't relish the setup and I didn't like the way the rest of the troupe looked at me—as if I'd been something they found in the plumbing. Worst of all was the hysterical hatred I saw in Questa McBride's peepers. That made me shiver.

IT WAS up to me to clear myself; not only for the sake of my job, but because I was a louse in Questa's estimation and I wanted to alter her opinion. Too, it wasn't pleasant to face a possible negligent-manslaughter rap when I knew damned well I was innocent. And Lonny Vonderhauff had been a nice guy; he had trusted me. I owed his memory a debt of vengeance.

I pivoted to face Joe Farnum; aimed a shaky finger at his denim overalls. "Listen, grampop. You accused me of intentionally letting Lonny fall off your engine. What gave you such a personal interest? Was he a friend of yours?"

"I knew him since he wore knee britches. Him and my daughter Lorcen went to school together. So what?"

"So this," I said, adding up a pos-

sible answer to what was puzzling me. "Lonny was deliberately murdered."

"You admit it, eh?" the old blister rasped.

I said: "I'm stating facts. Just before we started down the line you couldn't find your fireman; he'd gone off to see a man about a dog or something. The take was ready to be shot and we couldn't wait. So you handled the automatic oil-stoker yourself along with the throttle."

"Well?"

I hunched my shoulders. "Something conked me as I cut Vonderhauff loose from his fouled 'chute. I was hit hard enough to make me lose my hold on the kid. Whatever beaned me came from the rear of the locomotive; it was thrown from the cab. *And you were the only person back there!*"

"Are you sayin' I tried to knock you off."

"Not me personally. I was incidental. But you've already said your daughter and Lonny used to be playmates. Maybe they were sweeties as well. And when Lonny announced his engagement to Questa McBride you might have figured your girl got a raw deal. That could have been your motive."

He blew his topper. "You stinkin' son!" he yiped; and he charged at me with his dukes flailing.

I parried, side-stepped. I hated to bop him; for all his toughness he was still twice my age. But he certainly was asking for it. He kept boring in, swearing and trying to dust me off. What the hell else could I do?

I measured him, started to dish him up some knuckle tonic. Then I

pulled the punch as a diminutive brunette cutie barged from the extra ranks and came between us. She was the sweetest dish I'd seen in a month of Mondays, dainty, doll-like, with more curves than any one jane is entitled to.

She flurried at Farnum, tangled her arms around him. She wailed: "Please, Dad—stop it!"

THAT was the first time I'd known the engineer's daughter was a member of this location unit. And I couldn't help wondering how a leathery old barnacle like Farnum could have given vent to such a delicious chunk of feminine off-spring. It was a biological miracle; and there was another miracle in the way she handled him.

He halted; unballled his maulics. "Okay, Loreen. But all the same, Devlin's got no right to accuse me—"

"He didn't, Dad. He was just theorizing."

I pointed to the lump festooning the back of my conk and sneered: "Sure. This bruise is just a theory too."

"Couldn't you have hit your head when you almost fell off the engine?" she hurled at me. "Anyhow, my father wouldn't have any c-cause to d-do what you just said. Lonny Vonderhauff and I were never in love. He didn't jilt me, if that's what you're getting at."

"Naturally you'd front for your old man," I said. "But I know something slugged me, made me drop Lonny."

Her dark eyes challenged me. "Can you prove it?"

As a matter of fact I hadn't



I said, "Pardon my lack of chivalry, hon." And I gave her a shove that sent her sprawling.

thought about proof until then. But an idea suddenly burst inside me like a depth-charge. "Yes, I think I can," I said. Then I whirled around to Brick Bergman, the cameraman. "Come on, pal. Help me do a job of work." And I started toward the locomotive.

Brick let go of Questa McBride; pelted after me. "What's on your mind, Sam?"

"That camera on the roof of the engine cab. It was grinding out footage the whole damned time. I want a rush print of that footage!"

"You mean—?"

"Yeah," I snapped. "Maybe it will show me getting biffed by whatever it was that Farnum heaved at me." And I swarmed up to the top of the Mogul; unfastened the automatic camera and brought it down.

Then fresh hell erupted—feminine gender.

CHAPTER III

Attempted Burglary



OE FARNUM'S brunette daughter let out a banshee screech and lunged at me like an avalanche in skirts. "I won't let you pin anything on my dad! I won't!" And she grabbed at the camera to open it, let daylight inside.

That would have fogged the film, ruined whatever chance I had to clear myself. I could savvy the black-haired cutie's motives, of course: she was scared the reel would dump her old man in the grease and she wanted to protect him. Such filial devotion was commendable, but it didn't slice any cheese with me.

I avoided her rush, set the camera down on the ground and got set for her next onslaught. As she closed in on me I fastened the arm on her, jerked her around, got behind her. She tried to wrestle herself loose but I shifted my hold, turned on the pressure, and squeezed a series of moans out of her lungs.

The contact would have been damned enjoyable under other circumstances. The way things stood, though, I didn't have time to revel. I said: "Pardon my lack of chivalry, hon," and gave her a shove that sent her sprawling with her skirt hiking up past the high-water line. Then I picked up the camera, grabbed Brick Bergman and tugged him over to where my straight-eight teakettle was parked. I pushed him in, started to follow.

Clive Washman waddled over. "You can't leave here until the law gets on the job. I forbid—"

His pomposity got under my skin like a splinter. And when he tried to use his strength on me, my temper backfired. I said: "Who the hell do you think you are?" and rammed him in the midriff, knocked him for a loop.

He rolled over, hugged himself. "I'll fix you for that!"

I wasn't listening. I'd already wedged myself under the wheel of my bucket and kicked the starter. Now I headed down the valley toward Burbank and Hollywood. I wanted action and I aimed to get it if it cost me a kidney.

It was an hour's drive to the Superior lot but I made it in forty minutes flat. The studio gateman waved me past the sacred portals and I pulled up in front of the film-lab

building that adjoined the employee's parking lot. "Let's go, Brick."

Bergman nodded and trailed me as I lugged the heavy Bell and Howell portable outfit inside. Then he guided me into a darkroom on the first floor, closed the double set of light-proof doors and made sure the single window was sealed against sunshine leaks. He tested the emergency exit on the other side of the room, flipped on a ruby lamp and started unloading the camera's exposed spool.

A pungent chemical odor came off the film when he took it from its container. The notched celluloid strip looked like shiny pink milk congealed in a ribbon as he hooked one end to a revolving drum and slapped the reel itself onto a spindle. The big drum began turning with maddening slowness, its lower section dipping sloshily into a tank of developer solution.

A timing gadget controlled the negative's immersion, foot by foot; then the wet celluloid wound itself spirally on another drum for transfer to the fixing bath. After that would come a soaking in cold water to remove excess emulsion, and finally the drying process on another giant drum.

"It'll take quite a while, Sam," Bergman told me. "Don't be so damned fidgety. That won't help."

That was a laugh, telling me not to be fidgety. My nerves felt as if they'd been sandpapered. I said: "Let's wait outside where we can smoke. I've got the fantods."

WE LEFT the machinery running; walked into the ante-room. I torched a battered stogy,

puffed it to a butt and started another. From time to time, Brick and I took a peep at the developing process in the dark room; watched the film turning darkly glossy a few frames at a time. It was nearing sundown when we finally attached it to the drying drum and started the warm-air blower. "Pretty soon now," Bergman said.

Again I followed him out, battling the excitement that churned in my capillaries. Would the reel show me being conked by a spanner or something, back on the locomotive? Would it actually prove that Joe Farnum had heaved a dornick at my dome from his cab?

I fastened the jittery grip on my cameraman friend. "Grab another swivel at that reel, won't you, Brick?"

"Okay. I guess it's about ready. We can print a rough rush positive, at any rate." He ducked through the double set of doors.

And then I heard a heavy thud; a groaning yell. "Sam—for God's sake—!"

It was Bergman's voice, muffled, pain-laden.

I gasped: "Hell's hinges!" and catapulted my heft into the darkroom. Only it wasn't dark now. It was full of murky dusk from the window, which was wide open. As I plummeted over the inner threshold I tripped over something soft, yielding. I panted: "Brick!"

He was spang on his back, moaning and writhing. There was a nasty-looking weal on his left temple where something had kissed him coo-coo, and his glims looked glassy in the dimness. He was all but unconscious.

I leaned over him, shook him. "What the hell happened?"

"Somebody was . . . in here . . . must have used the emergency door . . . I couldn't see in the dark . . . then I got slugged . . . heard the window being opened . . . somebody jumped out . . . God, my head!" He cupped his skull in his palms.

The first thing I thought of was the reel of negative that might clear me of negligence in Lonny Vonderhauff's demise. I stared toward the drying drum, sucked in a deep sigh of relief when I saw the long dark spiral of perforated celluloid still wrapped around the gadget. Luckily the light hadn't spoiled it because the finishing process was already done. And if somebody had tried to swipe the footage, the attempt had failed. Brick Bergman had interfered in the nick of time—at the cost of a bash on the noggin.

But the very fact that a theft had been attempted seemed to prove my original theory. I said: "I was right. Joe Farnum *did* heave something at me on the engine! And it must have been Farnum who clouted you just now. He was scared the film would give him away, so he tried to glom it!"

Bergman started to answer. But a new sound butted in. It came from outside the darkroom's open window: an automobile motor starting and gears clashing.

I launched myself at the low sill, stared outward. I piped a maroon phaeton with its top down pulling away from a parking spot directly against the side of the lab building. And I recognized the chariot. It belonged to the blonde aviatrix cutie, Questa McBride.

Questa herself was at the wheel. She'd had ample time to return from location in a studio transportation bus, and now she was hauling her cuddly curves off the home lot.

But the thing that made my eyeballs bulge was an object on the red leather upholstery of her phaeton's rear seat. It was the portable movie camera we had taken from the roof of Pat Farnum's engine cab.

Questa was driving away with it!

CHAPTER IV

No Use for Mourning



IF ALL the screwball things to happen, that was the screwiest. Why should the McBride jenny be stealing that camera? Why should she sneak into the darkroom and conk Brick Bergman in order to glom the outfit?

The answer seemed obvious. She thought the reel of film was still in the container; thought she was getting away with the evidence. She hadn't stopped to consider that we'd had plenty of time to unload the spool and put it through its paces.

Even so, that didn't explain her motive. What connection could she have with Pat Farnum that would make her risk her reputation in an effort to save the engineer from a homicide rap? Especially when the murdered man was Lonny Vonderhauff, her own fiance?

All these questions bashed through me like chain lightning as I watched her maroon phaeton gaining headway toward the main gates. Then a fresh possibility took root in my seething gray matter. Maybe Questa wasn't fronting for Pat Farnum.

Maybe she was attempting to clear her own skirts!

I conjured a swift mental montage of the scene on the locomotive at the time of Vonderhauff's fall. I remembered cutting him loose, waving the all-clear signal to Questa in her monoplane. And then something had biffed me.

Something that might have been thrown, not from the engine cab, *but from the monoplane's cockpit!*

"Great God!" I yelled at Brick Bergman as he peered over my shoulder toward the vanishing car. "It could've been Questa who crowned me and made me drop Lonny! And she's scared the reel will show it!"

"You mean—?"

"Never mind what I mean. You stay here and guard the film. I'm going after the dame. The very fact that she swiped the camera is prima facie evidence of guilt!" Whereupon I uncoiled my muscles, took a flying leap out the window.

It was just a short jump down to the parking-lot pavement; no trick at all for a stunt-man. I landed in a narrow strip of weed-grown earth bordering the building, took the impact on relaxed gams and started running. Back at the window, Bergman seemed on the verge of following me but I waved to him, told him again to guard that film. I wanted the satisfaction of nabbing Questa personally with the camera in her possession. I wanted the privilege of mauling the truth out of her personally.

I sailed around a sound-stage building, slammed into a passing carpenter and knocked him on his hip pockets. A pint of nails sprayed

out of his kisser and he bellowed: "Hey, dammit—!"

I DIDN'T have time to apologize. I kept going. Dead ahead, the McBride blonde was about to drive through the gates. I sped, tried to reach her before she shifted into high. But my luck ran out just when I thought I might make the grade. From the executive office building near the front of the lot, three guys barged out and blocked me.

One of them was Clive Washman. You couldn't have mistaken his porky contours anywhere, even if it had been pitch dark instead of dusk. The two slugs flanking him were complete strangers to me; big, lumbering ginks in blue serge and square-toed brogans. Central Casting would have typed them as plainclothes dicks—and Central Casting would have been right.

The fat director's nasal whine ripped at me like a pain in the sinus. "There he is! That's Devlin now!" He pointed a thick forefinger at me.

The two brawny characters came at me. "Hold it, cousin," one of them said. He flipped his lapel away from a gold-plated badge; made a grab for my arm.

I said: "Hold hell!" and poked him in the teeth. His head snapped back and he sat down on the cement, spitting bridgework. I started running again.

But the second gumshoe got in front of me and tugged a revolver from under his armpit. "Look, wise guy," he said. "If you think this shoots feathers, start something."

"You can't do this!" I panted. "I've got to catch a jane—"

"Oh, a jane." He lifted his up-

per lip. "Too bad, pal. Romance will have to wait. The D. A. wants to see you."

"Romance my elbow!" I raged. "A jenny just drove off this lot and she's getting away with—"

The first dick got up off the pavement, twirled me around. "Save your chatter," he burred through the remains of his lower plate. Then he produced a set of handcuffs like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. He made a gesture with them, and all of a sudden I was manacled.

There wasn't anything I could do about it, then. Questa McBride was long gone and nobody wanted to listen to me. I let the two plainclothes numbskulls pile me into their sedan and take me downtown; the last I saw of Clive Washman was the satisfied smirk on his fat puss. He'd finally got even with me for punching him in the corpulence back on location.

But his vengeance didn't last very damned long. The minute I got into the D. A.'s office I began popping off. I explained the whole thing from start to end, including Questa McBride's theft of the camera. "And your two geniuses kept me from nabbing her!" I concluded sourly.

The D. A. said: "Hm-m-m. She stole the camera but missed the film?"

"Yes. But the very fact that she glommed the outfit indicates she's trying to cover somebody. Maybe we could sweat the truth out of her so we wouldn't even need the reel."

He stood up. "Very well. We'll see her at once." He ordered his cohorts to uncuff me and we all went down to the sedan, headed for Questa's bungalow on Curson Street.

A vee-sixteen coupe was just pulling away as we arrived. There was something familiar about the fat guy driving it. Our headlights broomed him for an instant as he gunned his motor. "Clive Washman!" I said. "What the hell was he doing here? And what's his hurry now?"

We didn't learn the answer until a moment later. We went up to Questa's porch, found the front door ajar. Nobody came when I tickled the bell so we ankled inside, made some lights. Then I took a squint into the living-room and damned near emptied my waste-basket on the rug.

Pieces of portable movie-camera were strewn all over the place as if somebody had used a sledge hammer on it. But that wasn't what made my stomach come up to meet my tonsils. It was Questa McBride huddled in a far corner of the room. There was a .28 Spanish automatic near her right hand, her dress was ripped to ribbons, there were bruises all over her and a brown-caked bullet tunnel through her forehead.

Questa would never wear mourning for Lonny Vonderhauff now. She'd never wear anything again—except a shroud.

CHAPTER V

Enter, the F.B.I.



HE District Attorney and his two hulking ferrets stared slack-mouthed. One of the dicks, the ugly lug whose dentistry I'd sabotaged back on the Superior lot, said: "Gahd! She musta shot herself!"

"You mean suicide?" I asked him.

"Sure. It looks like you were

the film was gone, she knew her cook was goosed. So she pulled the Dutch act."

I said: "But Questa happened to be left-handed. Then why is the gun near her right hand and the bullet hole in her right temple?"



My maneuver caught her off base and she yeeped bloody murder.

right. She was the one that heaved something at you from her plane and made you drop Vonderhauff off the locomotive. She tried to cover her tracks by snatchin' the camera. But when she busted it open and saw

The D. A. hung the gaze on me. "Are you sure of that, Devlin?"

"Damned sure."

"Then this is murder! Where's a phone? We've got to have Homi-

cide put out a dragnet for Clive Washman!"

"Why Washman?" I asked him.

"We saw him driving away from here in a rush, didn't we? Obviously he was trying to put distance between himself and the scene of his crime!"

I shook my head. "I haven't got a hell of a lot of love for Washman but I don't think he killed Questa. What would be his motive? Besides, look at the blood around that wound. Congealed, turning brown. She was shot quite a while ago; thirty minutes or more. Time for coagulation to take place."

"Well?"

"If Washman had murdered her he wouldn't have hung around so damned long after doing it. Especially when you agree that he seemed to be in a hell of a hurry to get away."

"He was arranging the scene to resemble suicide, of course. That accounts for his delay in leaving."

I said: "It wouldn't have taken him thirty minutes to plant the gun near her hand. The way I see it, Washman came to visit her about something or other and discovered the body. So he lammed because he didn't want to be involved."

"Then who did shoot her?"

I shrugged. "Questa's theft of the camera seemed to implicate her in Vonderhauff's death; but her own murder plays hell with that theory. Which takes us back to first principles."

"Meaning—?"

"Pat Farnum was the only other person who could possibly have beaned me on the engine. Granting that, you can reconstruct the rest. Questa stole the camera to shield

Farnum, God knows why. Then Farnum came here, discovered she had blundered by failing to get the incriminating film. It made him crazy mad and he shot her."

The D. A. thinned his kisser. "You're going to a hell of a lot of trouble to clear Washman. What's your angle?"

"None," I said.

"Then I'll thank you not to interfere." He gestured to his two snoops. "Handcuff this man again while I contact the Homicide Bureau."

They came at me all too gleefully. I had visions of being tossed in the cooler while the case got all messed up. My ire boiled over.

THERE was a chandelier directly above me. I made a stunt-jump straight in the air as the first dick dived at me. I caught the ceiling fixture, lifted my legs. The shamus grabbed at emptiness and kept going; smacked hellity-blip into the wall. It knocked him groggy.

Then the chandelier pulled loose as the second slob made his play. I came down on top of him. My heels kicked him into the D. A. and they both went down in a cursing tangle. I catapulted to the front door and went slamming out into the night.

The official sedan loomed at the curb, its dashlight glowing to reveal the ignition key still in the lock. I hurled myself into the car, twisted the switch and went away from there in a cloud of fumes before the D. A. and his minions could unscramble themselves for pursuit.

It was a bughouse thing for me to do. Now I was a fugitive, with auto theft added for good measure. But

I didn't give a damn. I could still remember the expression on Lonny Vonderhauff's pan when he fell off the engine—and how close I'd come to following him, thanks to that biff on the skull. Pat Farnum was going to pay for all that if I had to take it out of his leathery hide personally.

I drove to the nearest druggery, consulted the city directory, located the engineer's home address. It was over on Franklin Street. I abandoned the sedan, flagged a cruising Yellow and had myself wafted across town.

Farnum and his brunette daughter lived in a rundown apartment building. I climbed to the second floor, rapped on their door. It was Lorcen Farnum who opened up, and when she recognized me she turned six shades of pale. "Wh-why, Mr. Devlin—"

I said: "Yeah, babe. Where's your old man?"

"He—he isn't here. Wh-what do you want?"

I studied her. She looked plenty toothsome in a negligee and nightie that hadn't caused any silkworms to work overtime. You could see hinted curves and creamy skin through the gossamer texture; you knew there wasn't anything beneath that outfit except unadulterated she-male. I had a sudden idea.

Being armed with neither search warrant nor badge, I knew I couldn't frisk the flat. Not legally, anyhow. But if Lorcen's father were anywhere within listening distance my plan would smoke him out into the open in damned short order. I said: "So he isn't here, hunh? That's dandy. Let's have fun." And I glued the grab on her.

The maneuver caught her off first base. Before she knew it she was in my embrace and I was mauling the b'joseph out of her.

She yeeped purple murder. That was what I wanted her to do, although I was enjoying my work so much that I almost wished for a delay in the vocal fireworks. I pasted a couple of kisses on her mouth anyhow, just for luck. She bleated again.

Her old man didn't show up, so I knew he wasn't home. Otherwise he'd have shown himself, tried to lower the boom on me for assaulting his offspring. I released her and said: "Pardon my rough exterior, sweetheart. I was just testing the line."

She backed off, yanked her kimono shut. "You—you beast!"

"I know," I said. "I admit it. I'm a first-class heel and I'm sorry I manhandled you—although it was nice while it lasted. The point is, babe, I'm in a jackpot; I've got to the place where I can't believe anybody's word without personal checking."

"Y-you thought my dad was here? But I told you he wasn't! He should be on his way home right now. His shift ended at eight o'clock—about ten minutes ago. He was on the extra board to handle a switch engine in the freight yards after he got through with that movie charter job."

I said: "I'll check that, too," and made for her phone. I dialed the depot, got the yardmaster on the line. I asked him a question and he said: "Sure. Farnum left just a while ago. He was here since he came in from San Fernando."

I THANKED him, rang off. With that brand of alibi, the engineer couldn't possibly have murdered Questa McBride. I'd made a horse's blister of myself.

Loreen stared at me. "What is it, Mr. Devlin? Why are you so interested in my father's movements?"

"Questa McBride was killed this evening," I said.

"And you thought dad . . . Oh-h-h, you fool!" Her dainty bosom heaved and she pounded on my chest with her tiny fists. "Can't you understand he had no reason to m-murder Lonny Vonderhauff or anybody else?"

"Somebody bumped Lonny," I said. "Either your old man or the McBride quail. And her murder eliminates that angle."

"But Lonny was almost like one of our family! We knew him all his life: high school, college, and when he went to Washington to get his FBI appointment. . . ." Her hand flew to her mouth, but too late to trap the words.

I leaped at her, pinned her against the wall. "*Did you say Lonny Vonderhauff was a G-man?*"

"Please—he—I—he made me promise not to—"

I said: "Listen, hon. This is no time for secrets. Lonny's dead and I'm hunting his killer so I can prove it was murder and not my own negligence. If he was a Fed, it explains the last thing he said before he died. 'Tell Wash—' meant *tell Washington!* It all hooks in with the kill!"

"Y-yes. A k-kill you think my father committed." Her peepers puddled up and her lower lip got tremulous. Two tears as big as gum-

drops slid down her cheeks. "But you're wrong! Wh-why can't you leave us alone?"

"Never mind your father," I said. "If Lonny was a G-man it may change the whole damned complexion of things; may even clear your old man completely."

"How?"

"By furnishing a new motive for the murder," I said.

She drew a deep breath and whispered: "All right. I'll t-talk. Lonny *was* an FBI agent. He was investigating fifth columnists and Nazis in the studios. That's why he got a stunt job with you. It put him inside the lots, let him work under cover. He was the first one to suspect Clive Washman of subversive activities. Of course Mr. Washman cleared himself, but—"

I began to use my mental adding machine. "Look," I said. "Suppose Questa McBride had been a Bund member. Suppose Lonny got engaged to her in order to investigate that connection. And suppose Questa caught wise; took advantage of today's movie stunt to knock him off. That would explain her theft of the camera, later. It might also explain why she was croaked."

"How?"

I said: "Maybe Clive Washman was also a Bundster, despite his apparent innocence. Maybe he was the one who gave Questa her orders. And maybe he murdered her for failing to steal the incriminating film!"

"And that would c-clear my father!" Loreen whimpered. Hope dawned in her glims. "Oh-h-h, Mr. Devlin . . . Sam . . . please help dad. . . ." She wrapped her arms

around my neck, raised her parted red lips toward mine. The sensation was plenty nice.

I took the retainer she was offering me. Then I said: "Okay, sweet stuff. I'll do my best. If Washman's guilty, I'll pin it on him or know the reason why."

"B-but how can you find out?"

"By the film itself, maybe," I told her. Then I went to her phone again; fingered the dial. I got the Superior lot on the line, asked for Brick Bergman in the lab building. I said: "Brick? This is Sam Devlin. Have you made a rush print off that negative yet?"

"It's just drying. Where the hell have you been? Did you find out why Questa busted my camera before she—?"

"Tell you later," I broke across his question. "You get that rush ready to project. I'll be there in three jerks." I rang off, turned to Loreen. "Slip a coat on over your nightie, babe. We're coming to the end of the chase!"

She nodded, donned a topcoat. We went toward the door. But when I opened it, I found myself gazing into the muzzle of a gun.

CHAPTER VI

The Answer



HE whole damned corridor was infested with cops of every shape and smell. It was the D. A. who pointed a cannon at my indigestion. He was flanked by his two investigators, and he said: "Devlin, I arrest you for assault."

It was easy to figure how he'd guessed where to find me. Back at

the McBride wren's bungalow I'd beefed my suspicions of Pat Farnum, so naturally they had assumed that I would go straight to the Farnum apartment. Now they were honing to get hunk with me for flopping them around.

But an assault rap wasn't the only trouble staring me in the teeth. A bulky Scandinavian in plainclothes shouldered his way forward. "I'm from Homicide. We want you for questioning in the murder of Miss McBride. Do you come along quietly or shall I put my bracelets on you?"

Before I could answer him, two more bulls stuck their oars in. One of them waved a warrant at me. "We're from the stolen car detail, Devlin. There's a little matter of an automobile you swiped from the district attorney—"

I said: "Hell's hinges, what else?"

The answer came from a dapper young bozo who'd just legged it up the stairs. He seemed hard, capable; and he had Pat Farnum in tow. Farnum was protesting: "I don't give a damn if you *are* a G-man. You can't do this to me. I don't know anything about Lonny Vonderhauff's death except—why, there's the man you want. Sam Devlin!"

That really filled my basket. Now I had the FBI on my neck as well as the city and county authorities. I disregarded the D. A.'s revolver; shoved myself at the capable-looking guy who had just nabbed Farnum as he arrived home from work. "Are you really a Fed?" I asked him.

He showed me his G-badge. "I am. And if you're Sam Devlin, I want your version of Operative Vonderhauff's death."

"For trips' sake, you don't think

I killed him, do you?" I yowled. "How many times do I have to explain that something bopped me, made me drop him?"

Pat Farnum thrust out his leathery jaw. "I've had enough of your accusations! You can't—"

I said wearily: "Hell, I'm not accusing you now. "Then I turned to the FBI dick. "Do you know if Vonderhauff had his eye on any particular individuals who might have been Bund members? Had he filed any reports lately?"

"With Washington, yes. I've already wired for any names he may have mentioned. The answer should come through by morning. Meanwhile I'll have to ask you to come with me."

"Like hell!" I blared. "You'll come with *me*! Maybe I can give you visual evidence of what caused Vonderhauff to fall." And I told him about the film waiting to be projected.

He thought it over. "Very well, Mr. Devlin. I'll play ball with you to that extent if it's okay with these other officers."

His decision drew plenty of horsepower with the rest of the pack. At least nobody gave him an argument. We trooped downstairs, and en route I slid an arm around Loreen Farnum's dainty waist; gave her a surreptitious squeeze. She seemed to blot up a measure of reassurance from that.

FOUR or five official cars were parked at the curb. I piled into the first one with the FBI guy and we headed for the studio with the others trailing us. I was plenty jittery. I had all the riddle's answers

now, but on a guess-work basis only. And my theories wouldn't be worth a damn unless I could back them up with something definite.

We reached the Superior lot, barged into the lab building. Brick Bergman was waiting for me. He said: Hi, Sam. How-come all the audience?"

"Cops," I said. "They horned in. Let's run that reel before I go off my chump."

We went into a projection room. It was like a thimble-sized theater complete with easy chairs and a machine on a rear table for throwing pictures up against a half-pint screen. Brick threaded his reel into the projector, switched off the house lights, started the motor. I stood on the other side of the table, watching.

The screen glowed and came alive. You could see the long length of the locomotive thundering down the track, just as it had looked from the camera's position on top of the cab. You could see the landscape blurring past; and there I was, worming my way forward with my back to the lens.

Then a shadow darkened the scene. That was Questa McBride's plane hovering overhead, coming lower. The bottom of its fuselage showed, with Lonny Vonderhauff dangling from his fouled parachute shrouds. My shadow-self reached for him.

Now I was cutting him loose. My right arm supported him as I gave the okay signal to the plane overhead. It zoomed away—and nothing dropped from Questa's cockpit to conk me. Nothing was heaved from Pat Farnum's cab.

But I staggered on the locomotive's catwalk all the same. My knees sagged immediately after a slight jerkiness in the picture. There went Lonny out of my grasp. I was trying to grab him. I failed. He fell. . . .

Out of the projecting-room's darkness came a snarling growl from Pat Farnum. "I knew Devlin was lying. He never got hopped at all. The film proves it!"

"Yeah?" I yelled. "Then you need glasses, grampop. Brick, run it over again—quick!"

Bergman reversed the spool, re-wound it, projected it once more. Smoothly the action flowed screenward with only that one jerky instant to mar the image before my knees buckled and Vonderhauff plunged to his death.

I reached for the house lights, snapped them on. "There's your answer!" I bellowed. "*Brick Bergman, you're the murderer!*"

CHAPTER VII

Joker from the Bottom



STUNNED silence settled in the little room. Then the red-haired cameraman stared at me. "What the hell are you talking about? That camera-jerk didn't show a while ago when I ran the reel for myself—"

When he said that, I knew I had him. "So you ran the reel for yourself before we got here, eh?" I barked. "That ties you in a nice tight knot. You wouldn't have done it unless you were worried the film would give you away."

"Are you crazy? I wasn't any-

where near the locomotive when Vonderhauff got killed!"

"You didn't have to be. The reel indicates that neither Questa McBride nor Pat Farnum conked me. Since nobody else was on the engine, there's only one other possible answer. Whatever hit me must have come from the camera—which nobody handled except yourself when it was first fastened to the cab roof!"

"Why, damn your eyes—!"

"The sequence had been timed to a second," I said. "Including the amount of footage to be shot before I cut Vonderhauff loose. The lens was aimed directly at the back of my head and I'd been rehearsed not to vary my position. Knowing all this, you rigged an air-gun contraption inside the camera; set its mechanism to slug a pellet at my skull at the instant I rescued Lonny. You knew it would make me drop him; might send me off the locomotive as well. In any case it would look like an accident, which was what you wanted. And if by any chance the plan missed fire, nobody would be hurt."

Bergman glared. "You can't prove—"

I said: "The jerky reel is proof enough. That was caused by the air-gun discharging. You were willing enough to develop the film later, because you didn't think it would show me getting smacked by anything as small as a pellet. Your only worry was dismantling the camera and taking out the air-gun before anybody suspected you.

"You couldn't remove the gun in the darkroom because I was right at your elbow. But you finally got your chance. You entered the dark-

room alone, pretended to get bashed. That was phony. All you did was bop yourself on the forehead and drop the camera out the window before yelling to me.

"You figured the outfit would fall in that narrow strip of weeds under the sill where you could retrieve it later. But you got a bad break. *The camera landed on the rear seat of Questa McBride's car which was parked directly below!*"

He got pale around the fringes. "Ridiculous!"

"Not at all," I said. "Just coincidence—or maybe fate. Anyhow, when you saw Questa unwittingly driving away with your remote-control weapon you got scared. If she discovered the camera when she got home she might examine it, find your air-gun. Then you'd be sunk.

"So you sneaked away from the studio after I was pinched by the D. A.'s dicks. You went to Questa's bungalow, found her prying at the camera. You shot her, arranged it to look like suicide. Then you smashed the murder-outfit, removed its concealed gun and lammed."

"Where's your proof?" he sneered.

"You furnished that. When I phoned you a while ago you started to ask me something about the busted camera. But there hadn't yet been time for the news to get out about Questa's death; *so how could you know the details unless you'd pulled the job yourself?*"

He gulped as he realized his slip of the tongue had tipped me off. Then he tensed his muscles. "And my motives?"

I said: "You're connected with a Nazi Bund. You found out that

Lonny Vonderhauff was a G-man; that he was investigating your subversive activities. You wanted to kill him before he could report you to Washington." Then I came up with my last card, a joker off the bottom of the deck. "You were too late," I lied deliberately. "We've got a copy of Vonderhauff's last report. *He named you.*"

MY BLUFF hit the jackpot. Bergman's pan took on a trapped-animal expression. He whirled, slugged a cop out of his path and grabbed at Loreen Farnum. He held her in front of him like a struggling brunette shield, his hands digging into her. He hacked toward the exit and snarled: "If you shoot, the girl gets it!"

Loreen moaned; tried to release herself. And then I went into action.

I remembered a stunt I'd once made in a gaucho pic, two or three years before. I said: "Hell's hinges!" and yanked a long length of electric extension-cord from the movie projector. That gave me twenty feet of line, weighed at the far end by a heavy plug. "Everybody duck!" I roared; and I started swinging the cord in a swishing arc.

It hissed in a widening circle. Then, just as Bergman pulled Loreen almost to the door, I paid out the entire line. Its plug-weight slapped around the cameraman's ankles and wrapped a tight spiral there, binding him to the brunette cutie's shapely gams. I tugged—and they both went down in a flurrying tangle.

Loreen's skirt fluttered up around her hips. Bergman twisted, rolled.

His hand went under his coat, came out with an automatic. He tried to trigger it.

But the G-man triggered first. And Brick Bergman sagged to the floor with his brains leaking out of a round red hole.

I hurled myself forward, freed the brunette doll from the cord that bound her to the cameraman's remainders. I lifted her, put my arms around her. "Steady, babe."

She clung to me like a trembling kitten. "Oh-h-h, Mr. Devlin . . . Sam . . ." she whimpered. "Y-you've been so wonderful . . . you saved my life, saved my father from suspicion of murder . . . and all because you

happened to notice that j-jumpy section of the movie-reel. . . ."

I grinned down at her. "Notice it? Hell, baby, I produced it! I joggled the projection machine at that particular spot. It was the only way I could think of to make Bergman believe we had the goods on him."

"You—you faked it? You were j-just guessing?"

I said: "Well, you'd asked me to help your old man. And I was anxious to earn the fee you promised me."

She parted her lips and welded them to my mouth as a sort of token payment.

ESCAPE!

That's what the girl was seeking. Escape from the political gang which had murdered her husband, king of a Balkan monarchy. The American girl who had married royalty had also married into danger and intrigue. And never had danger been closer on her heels than when she fled to America with two huge steel chests — containing the fortune which had been hers to command and now seemed to be hers to die for! You won't want to miss this, next month — the absorbing story of

"Mr. Oo"

By

ROBERT A. GARRON

A complete novel in the May issue of **PRIVATE DETECTIVE**

Murder Makes



THE Clipper Club was packed with an assortment of guys who would have liked me better in a plush-lined box, so I really had no business shooting my mouth off. But I was suffering from overwork, oddly enough, and Pat Riley was getting in my hair, even though I knew his heart wasn't in his ribbing.

Pat Riley was deputy chief of police in Todd City. Gladys and I were indulging in highballs and swing music as a mild form of relaxation before separating for the night to our respective domiciles when Riley came barging over to our table, pushing his triple-decker stomach ahead of him and giving Gladys the X-ray eye. I never could stand the way he looked at Gladys, grinning as though he were mentally disrobing her and licking his thick lips over satin-smooth skin and soft, creamy curves.

Goodness knows, Gladys had 'em, twice as alluring as any others I had come across, and I couldn't sleep nights for dreaming about her myself. But what Gladys had was none of Pat Riley's affair; his love life consisted of a series of staggerings from one honky-tonk to the next.

"Larry," Riley sounded off, "if Todd County had seven sheriffs and

everyone went around burning poor-houses and orphan asylums, all of 'em together couldn't be half as bad as you say old Pop Zachary is."

NOW I had gathered in numerous heart-to-heart conferences with Riley that he had no more use for Pop Zachary, who has since gone down in history as the crookedest sheriff in forty-odd states, than the *Blade*, which was the paper I worked for. So I knew Pat was only trying to put over some heavy-footed humor, which didn't lift my spirits a bit. Furthermore, I could see the latest copy of Zachary's weekly alibi sheet, *Truth Triumphant*, sticking out of Riley's coat pocket, and it reminded me of the cute little poem boxed three columns wide at the top of Page One. The poem said, in unnecessarily large type:

*Spade, of the Blade, isn't afraid
To lie about people as long as he's
paid.*

I'm Spade—Larry Spade. I'm no literary critic, but those lines made my esthetic sensibilities lie down and roll over.

"If you think I've been hard on the sheriff," I informed Riley, "read the *Blade* tomorrow. It'll stand you on your ear!"

For a good reporter to change a story because he's threatened is unthinkable. But it's a different matter when the threats are directed at the girl he loves

A Difference

By DONALD LATHAM

I turned, but I wasn't quick enough. All the lights went out.



"Don't tell me," he said, pretending to be excited. "you're going to call him incompetent and lazy!"

"Confidentially," I blurted, cutting down on the voice volume, "I'm going to prove that Pop is an active

partner in every gambling joint and has a financial interest in every

sleepy-time girl outside Todd City—and they're all outside the city limits since the *Blade* turned the heat on you town cops."

He overlooked the slam. "You mean you're gonna hint at it!" he scoffed. "You guys print a lot of dirt you can't prove."

"Listen!" I tuned down another notch. "Do you want to know what Gladys and I were doing last night and early tonight? Nix—no naughty wisecracks! We were listening in on a nice little party in Heimie Mincer's private office at Castle Gardens. There was plenty said there, by Heimie and Zachary and a few others, and I've got the words and music in little bumps on phonograph records. Did you ever hear of a toy called the dictaphone, Pat?"

As soon as I said it, I realized I was asking for trouble, and so did Gladys, who happens to be the smartest little blond stenog in the district attorney's office, even if she did pick me for her future husband. She kicked me under the table in a tender spot.

"Now, you're interesting me," Pat said.

But I shut up like a clam. I wasn't worried about Riley, but I didn't know who else might have my wave-length, and things were too hot for running chances. Next day was Monday and my blast in the *Blade* was all dressed up for its debut. Tuesday was election day. If that blast appeared on schedule, it meant the finish of all the big shots who were getting rich off vice and dice, together with the end of Pop Zachary, who had been Todd County's one and only political boss for better than five years. And for me, the

best reporter for miles around, if I do say it myself, it meant promotion and extra pay and that little vine-covered cottage Gladys and I had been talking about.

"That's all," I told Pat. "If you are a pal, you'll forget all about it till the first edition hits the skids at eleven A. M."

"Larry," Pat assured me, "I'm the best pal you ever had." He turned that slimy look on Gladys again, making me squirm with the knowledge that he was thinking about all that shapeliness under the slinky gown she was wearing. The bum! I could have socked him if he hadn't waddled away in a second to mooch some more free drinks at the bar.



LADYS and I had another highball and then scrambled. We were almost at the door when a hand reached out from one of the tables and grabbed the tail of my coat. I looked down into the pretty, painted mug of Vera Peterboro, who operated the biggest string of undercover hot spots in the county and was built so nicely that she could have been her own best come-on girl for suckers, if she'd cared to work at the job herself. I said, "Hello, Vera," hoping Gladys wouldn't notice. Vera was all right; she had given me some good tips on stories and had hinted she wouldn't mind getting to know me better—but I didn't brag in public about our acquaintance.

"I've got something important to tell you," Vera said.

I thought fast. Gladys had gone on ahead. In a minute she'd turn

around to see what was keeping me, and then I'd have some tall explaining to do. Why is it that nice girls are always so certain that their boy friends can't even pass the time of day with the other kind without being contaminated?

"I'll be at the office in half an hour or so," I told Vera. "Phone me there and make a date."

Maybe I was talking louder than usual that night, or maybe Gladys was listening harder. Anyway, she took me in charge the minute we were on the street, walking toward the apartment she shared with another girl, just four blocks away. I eased my arm around her waist, being somewhat sentimentally inclined.

She twisted away from me with a disdainful wriggle of her hips, just when I was beginning to respond to the sensation of her being close against me.

"Save it for your date with Vera Peterboro," she said tartly.

"It's business," I argued. "She's going to give me some low-down."

"Monkey-business, you mean! And it'll be plenty low!"

I was aggrieved. "You know me better than that! You're the only girl in the world for me. But you know I've got to mix up with all kinds of people to get the dirt. She can tell me plenty!"

"I'll bet she can! And you can sit in a night club and blab it to everybody. Suppose Zachary got a load of what you told Riley. I'd hate to think of what might happen to you."

"The worst they could do," I told her, "would be to frame up a yarn to offset mine in the *Clarion*." That was the rival evening paper, and was

trying hard to get Zachary re-elected.

"They might go further, Larry. Remember, you're trying to wreck a racket that's making a couple of million a year. People don't give up that kind of money without fighting."

"What could they do? Beat me up?"

"They could shoot you," Gladys said, and she was serious, so help me! "They could blow up the *Blade* office. They could kidnap me."

I laughed and took advantage of her preoccupation to put my arm around her again. She let it stay, even when I squeezed. It made me feel so good I couldn't do any serious worrying. I said: "You've been reading magazines. This is real life. Those things don't happen!"

"I hope not," she said. She sounded plenty upset.

RIGHT now, if Gladys should tell me the world was coming to an end tomorrow, I'd start limbering up my shoulder blades for wings. If she said there was going to be a blizzard on the Fourth of July, I'd dig my overcoat with the astrakhan collar out of the mothballs and dust off my earmuffs. But that night I didn't know she was a seeress—at least, not at that particular second.

I was kissing her, holding her so tightly that the warmth of her cuddly body sent electric vibrations dancing 'way down to my toes, when somebody yelled from a car that was parked across the street. For two blocks in either direction the street was deserted, except for a few empty autos along the curbs.

"Hey, Slade!" the voice called. "Got a minute to spare?"

"I didn't recognize the voice, but lots of people stopped me in the streets to tip me off to stories, and sometimes the tips were good. So I told Gladys to wait a second and started toward the car.

"Don't go!" she cried, holding my arm.

"Nuts!" I said, shaking her off. "It's safe as—"

And that's all I had a chance to say, because at that instant the car across the street began to squirt bullets like a leaky hose squirts water. Lances of red and blue fire streaked out from three separate guns, and I could tell one of them was a sub-machine-gun. The racket sounded like ten thousand busy people running riveters and hammering on big sheets of copper, with a regiment of kettle-drummers trying to drown them out.

I was too surprised to move till I felt a sharp tug at my left sleeve, as though somebody had yanked me, and a sting in my upper arm, and knew I had been hit. Then I spun around and grabbed Gladys, wrapping myself around her and shielding her, not because I'm heroic by nature, but because she's a lot more fragile and dainty than I am.

Behind us was a thick hedge protecting somebody's front lawn. I shoved her right through it, hoping the branches wouldn't scratch her too much where her flying skirts exposed bare white skin, and dove after her. Back of the hedge I crawled along on the ground, dragging her after me, until we had covered fifty feet or more. Then I made her lie flat beside me, snuggling to leeward, as it were.

The submachine-gun sprayed the

hedge for about a minute, I guess, although it seemed like hours. Two slugs ripped through the cloth of my pants and one took a heel off Gladys's shoe, but neither of us got hit. Then the car, a big sedan, slid into gear and tore down the street in a hurry.

Gladys sat up, trying unsuccessfully to hold the front of her dress together where I had ripped it in towing her, so that the pretty little mound of a lacy brassiere peeped out. "What did I tell you?" she asked triumphantly.

"Can it!" I said, not very gently, feeling that this was no time for bragging. I yanked her to her feet and we got to her apartment house as fast as we could, keeping in the shelter of hedges and behind trees wherever possible. But the gunsters had knocked off for the evening, I guessed, because we weren't bothered.

I gave her an extra intimate hug and an extra long kiss when we were safe in the lobby, because when I looked back on it, it seemed a miracle we weren't both blasted to wet rags.

CHAPTER II

Murder Rap



LADYS' brunette girl friend, Judie, was getting ready for bed. She came to the door of the apartment in tricky pajamas that were like pink cellophane. Judie was overweight and I couldn't help staring at her contours as she stood in front of the lamp, which brought everything out in broad detail. It wasn't that I meant to be bold; it was just that there was so

much of her I was amazed. The man who married her would almost be a bigamist.

"Getting an eyeful?" she asked acidly. Judie had always disapproved of me more or less, suspecting my morals and mentality, and never missed an opportunity to hint that Gladys could do better elsewhere, which may have been true. She was suspicious of the rip in the front of Gladys' dress. When she heard about the shooting, her disapproval grew by leaps and bounds.

"It's the company he keeps," she informed Gladys. "He'll get you in more trouble before you're through with him."

But I had too much on my mind just then to bother about Judie's pessimistic prognostications. While Gladys, whose nerves were steady as a publisher's defense against a reporter who wants a raise, did things with iodine and bandages to the nick in my arm, I dragged my eyes away from the big girl and telephoned Riley. By luck I found him at Headquarters.

"The hell you say!" he bleated, when I had put him next to the ambulance. "I just heard there was a shooting, but nobody knew what it was all about. I'll send a couple of flatties over to bodyguard you."

"I'm safer without any dumb cops around," I informed him. "But send a couple to keep an eye on the apartment house at Sixth and Elm, will you? I want to be sure my girl is safe. Then I'm going to the office. Nobody'll possibly bother me in that joint."

"Let me have a police car take you over."

"No. My own hack is here. I can

outdrive any hoodlums this burg has ever seen, even sober!"

When I hung up, Gladys tried to talk me out of leaving. "If they find out they missed you, they're apt to be waiting outside for another shot," she said.

"How can I stay here," I wanted to know, "with Judie giving me the fishy eye? Now, if there were only two of us—"

"You can sleep in the chair, silly!" Gladys began.

But Judie had to butt in with her insinuations. She simpered: "Maybe he doesn't like chairs. And maybe he'll be more welcome in somebody else's apartment."

Of course, that made Gladys think of Vera again, and whenever she thought about Vera she saw red. "If you leave here," she declared, "I never want to see you again. You can spend all your time in the company of that Peterboro hussy!"

"Please!" I said. "You know darned well I don't give a damn about anybody else!"

But she wouldn't listen to reason, and I *had* to leave. Not so much because I wanted to hear what Vera had to say. I had told Riley the *Blade* office was safe, but it wasn't. Anybody that took the notion could walk in or out without hindrance, and the only person on duty in the news room was Jack Cahill, a dyspeptic old codger who handled the thin trickle of night copy. There were six or eight printers on duty in the composing room, but that was on the second floor, below the news room.

Maybe the hoods who tried to shoot Gladys and me didn't know it, but my story that would wreck Pop

Zachary and his buddies was a stack of messy typescript on Jack Cahill's desk, waiting to be turned into type when the early morning shift of linotype men came on the job. I wanted to see that story made safe, just in case something else should happen to me before the presses started to roll.

I grabbed Gladys before she could stop me and plopped a kiss on her nose. She aimed a slap at me, but I ducked it. I hated to leave. "I'll phone you first thing in the morning!" I said, and beat it.



A Y COUPE was standing in front of the apartment house, where I had left it earlier that evening. I climbed in, drove as fast as it would rattle to the *Blade* building without having to dodge any slugs, and then parked it in a dark alley behind the office, where nobody would be apt to recognize the machine.

I climbed the stairs to the news room and found old Cahill bent over a stack of copy, half asleep. He hadn't come to my yarn yet. He looked up and pointed to a corner with the stem of his corn-cob pipe before I could start talking.

"Lady to see you," he growled, leering.

It was Vera. She made a nice display, with her feet propped on a desk to show her firm foundation. I was surprised that she'd had the nerve to come to the office. She had no love for Pop Zachary and his crowd—they were robbing Vera of the biggest part of the money her hostesses brought in—but she couldn't afford to fight openly. If they'd even sus-

pected she was paying friendly visits to the enemy's camp — and I was enemy number one—they'd frame her right into State Prison, where her sex-appeal wouldn't help a bit.

"What's on your mind this time, baby?" I asked her.

"Zachary's out to get you," she whispered.

That wasn't news to me, but I was short of details. If she could provide those, my chances of coming through with a whole skin would be that much better. "How?" I wondered.

"I can't tell you here." She looked around fearfully, as though she expected to see stool-pigeons in every corner. "I shouldn't have come here in the first place. Let's go outside."

"You're more apt to be seen talking to me in the street," I pointed out.

But she had already started for the stairway, and I had my choice between trailing her and letting her go. I was dumb enough to trail her. I stopped for a second beside Cahill, though, and mentioned that somebody had tried to bump me off.

"I'll be back in a minute and write a story about it," I said. "Meanwhile, take good care of that Zachary yarn we're using tomorrow."

He leered again. "If I don't see you, I'll know you like those who know their way around," he muttered. He was looking after Vera, whose hips rippled enticingly when she walked, and there was a glitter in his eye that told me he wouldn't have minded following her, himself.

SHE got to the street door ahead of me and made for the nearest corner, walking fast. I scooted after her and ran square into three men,



"What's on your mind this time, baby?" I asked her.

standing close together. Harry Schneider was one of them—he was Zachary's big-bellied chief deputy—and the others were Joe Carr and Walter Ritter, two of the nastiest of the staff deputies. Ritter had a revolver in his hand. I knew they were waiting for me and had sent

Vera to bring me down, and my stomach turned around three times, real quick. I wondered if I could get back around the corner before the gun went off.

I couldn't. As calmly as you please, Ritter yanked the trigger, twice, pumping two .38 caliber bullets into—*Schneider's belly!* Then he stooped over, as Schneider folded up and went down, and put a third bullet into the side of his head!

You could have slapped me cold

with a toothpick. Here I was expecting a free ticket to the morgue, and instead I witness a red-hot murder right in Zachary's own family! Joe Carr was pointing a gun my way and indicating that I wasn't to leave, but my feet were frozen, anyhow. I wouldn't have been half as surprised if I had felt bullets punching into my own head and stomach.

Ritter was wiping off the gun he had used with his handkerchief. Suddenly he stepped forward, holding it by the barrel, and shoved it toward me.

"Here," he said. "Take it!"

I still say I'm a smart reporter, but I guess I do have my moments. So help me, I took it!

Then, before I could see it coming, Carr stepped in and batted me beside the ear with his own gun, and by the time I had shaken the stars out of my eyes there were handcuffs on my wrists. I heard Ritter saying:

"Take his rod, Joe, but don't mess up the fingerprints on it. The prosecutor'll need 'em, as well as Vera's testimony, to put the rope around his neck."

I looked up. Vera was standing a few feet away, her hands pressed to her generous bosom, looking ashamed of herself.

Above me I could see Jack Cahill's head popped out of a third floor window, trying to make out what all the shooting was about, and I yelled at him.

"It's a frame-up, Jack!" I cried. "Get a lawyer to the county jail right away!"

I couldn't give him any details, because Ritter and Carr were knocking the daylight out of me. . . .



POP ZACHARY didn't come to see me till I was tucked safely in a cell, which was smart of him. The way I felt, I'd have kicked his snagged teeth out even if a dozen of his lads were hanging on my arms. As it was, he kept his sanctimonious pan a good three feet from the bars when he spoke his piece.

"Why did you do it?" he asked, so anxious and worried you'd have thought he was my uncle.

"I was tired of it all," I cracked. "Life was boring me."

He shook his head sadly. "I can't tell you how sorry I am," he said. "If it wasn't such an open-and-shut case, and if two of my best men hadn't seen the murder with their own eyes and got the gun with your fingerprints on it, I wouldn't believe it!"

"Listen!" I told him. "I want a lawyer. And I want a doctor to fix up these marks your best men gave me."

He shook his head again. "If you hadn't resisted arrest, they wouldn't have had to get rough. You don't need a doctor. And I'm afraid you can't have a lawyer till the prosecutor sees you in the morning."

I knew it wouldn't do any good to argue. I knew I was so far behind the eight-ball I might never see any wide-open spaces again. They'd used a gun nobody could trace, of course. And Carr and Ritter would tell the jury that Schneider had called me names, and that I had got mad and let him have it. It was a hanging case, all right—this being one of the fifteen states where they still use the rope on murderers—and even if my

boss could keep them from stretching my neck, I'd get more years in jail than I liked to think about.

Why they'd picked Schneider for a fall guy was something I couldn't figure. I'd thought he and Zachary were closer than two youngsters parked in Lover's Lane. Likely they'd quarreled over splitting the racket profits, and Schneider was threatening to tell secrets, or something like that.

As if he could read my mind, Zachary said: "I wish it had been anybody else but Schneider. He was hot-headed, but he was true blue."

The blithering old hypocrite!

"After what's happened, do you think anyone is going to believe I cooled him off?" I asked. "Don't you think they'll believe me when I tell what really happened?"

"I suppose there'll be talk," he admitted. "People are always ready to think the worst of their public servants. Some of them will say I put you in jail just to keep you from writing some particular story the day before election."

"They'd be idiots if they said that," I remarked. "My story for tomorrow's paper is already written. You can read it before lunch—and weep!"

He looked at me sharply, and some of his pious manner evaporated. He asked: "The story trying to frame me and the boys in connection with Heimie Mincer and the vice business?"

"You should talk about frames!" I jeered.

He went away in a hurry toward his office.

I knew I had him worried, and it made me feel a little better.

CHAPTER III

Loser's Choice



'D BEEN biting my fingernails for maybe half an hour, and drumming with my heels on the sheet-steel side of the cell under the bench till most of the prisoners in the tier were cussing me in no uncertain terms, when Ritter came into the corridor. Vera was with him, looking as cool and pleasant as though she was playing hostess to the regular Sunday night crowd at her River Drive joint. Ritter unlocked the door and shoved her into my cell, grinning nastily.

"All the comforts of home," Ritter said. "Damned if I wouldn't almost as soon trade places with you myself, secin' my old lady's out of town! You know, Vera's an artist in her own way!"

I didn't say anything till he'd gone. The only words I had for him were words no lady ought to hear—not even a lady who'd been around as much as Vera. But after Ritter had got out of sight, I gave her a piece of my mind.

"I ought to wring your dirty neck!" I finished.

She wasn't fazed. She lighted a cigarette and leaned back against the wall and sucked smoke into her lungs. Her knees were crossed and the hem of her skirt was above her knees, unveiling smooth skin above rolled stockings. But I knew she wasn't deliberately staging a peep-show for my benefit. Her face indicated that other things, less light-some, were on her mind.

"I don't blame you for being sore," she said. "But look at it from

my angle, Larry. These crooks have got me under their thumb. Folks who think I'm slated for hell because my business is off-color, ought to get a slant on the angles of hypocrites like Zachary, who get fat on it while pretending to stand for the sanctity of the home and such slush. He and his gang get two-thirds of my profits. They've got the squeeze on me so tight I can't even move to another part of the country. First time I step out of line or try to act independent, I find myself in a frame just like the one you're in—only nobody's going to bargain with me."

"If you don't like it," I told her, "you should have played square with me and spilled the story. The *Blade's* out of favor with the local political set-up, but we're aces at the state capitol.

"The state troopers would protect you if I fixed it up."

SHE grinned regretfully. "It isn't that easy. If you'd been mixed up in rackets as long as I have, you'd know there wasn't any such thing as turning stoolpigeon. Once you've done that, the law hasn't any more use for you than the underworld. If the Civic Virtue League doesn't get you slapped in jail, the local rackets boss has your throat slit. And even if you get away from them both, you can't make a living."

"I believe you," I said. "But you didn't come here and show off your legs, just to tell me virtue is its own reward."

"No. I wanted you to see that I couldn't help leading you into that murder set-up. I got my orders, and I had to follow them—or else. You know I'd play on your side against

Zachary and his organization, only I can't."

"Well?"

"I want you to believe me and follow my advice. I don't want to see you shot in this joint or railroaded to the gallows, but that's just what will happen if you don't play ball with the gang. You saw them get rid of Schneider, because he was turning yellow. They'll get rid of you just as quick if you don't help them."

I knew that. It wasn't a nice thing to think about, but there was no use ignoring cold facts. I asked her what Zachary's proposition was, although I could guess pretty well.

"This is what they told me to tell you," she said: "You're to stop the story you expected to print tomorrow.

"You're to sign a paper taking back everything dirty you ever wrote about Zachary, and saying you were getting paid for lying about him. You're to take a job on the *Clarion* and write another story to be printed tomorrow, urging his re-election.

"They'll keep you here in jail, secretly, until all this has been done. Then, as soon as the election is over, they'll turn you loose and drop the murder rap."

I couldn't fall for that one. "No, they won't," I objected. "They'll get rid of me, just the same. They won't take a chance on my sqawking after it's all over, to get even with them."

"You're right about that, Larry. They won't take a chance. They'll keep the murder evidencce, just in case. As long as you act nice, they'll let you play with them, but the minute you try to make trouble, they'll put you right back where you are

now, and there won't be any bargaining next time."

Well, that rounded out the scheme perfectly. I was fairly sure I could count on walking out of jail a free man the day after election if I did as I was told. A free man in outward appearance, that is. Actually, I'd be a slave for life, without self-respect or friends—or Gladys.

"It wouldn't be worth it," I decided.

"Don't be a chump!" she pleaded. "You can work your way into the organization. You can get your hands on enough dough to make you independent in a year or two. You can have anything you want."

"Except my girl," I said. "Do you think I could make her believe I was a square-shooter, after pulling a stunt like that?"

"Your girl!" The way she spat out the word showed what she thought of girls. "You can have all the girls you want. I've got over fifty in my places—all types, shapes and sizes and you can have your pick of them. You'll find some nicer ones than you'd meet in church. Girls are funny that way, Larry—even me. Now, if you happened to like my looks—"

She leaned toward me, and her china-blue eyes said the rest. She was throwing herself at me. And she was good-looking enough to make almost any man's temperature rise—under thirty, with a shape that was something like those statues of Venus. A man could easily forget her past, seeing her so close and so friendly. I won't deny that my pulse speeded up and I began to get some interesting notions. . . .

But she'd picked the wrong time

to sweep me off my feet. My mind was too much taken up with thoughts of somebody else. She only made me mad, not being able to take what would have seemed pretty nice in other circumstances.

"I've seen and heard plenty," I said. "Move over and pull your skirt down and shut up before I forget I'm a gentleman."

Pop Zachary came shuffling along the corridor when he thought I'd had enough time to take advantage of opportunity and Ritter trailed after him. Zachary looked at Vera hopefully and asked: "How about it?"

"He's not human," she replied. "He doesn't want money or me, or even to get out of this dump alive."

Ritter stuck the key in the lock and the bolts snapped back. Zachary beckoned to me. He didn't look sorry for me any more.

"Come on out," Zachary said. "We've got business with you outside."

I hung back. It isn't hard for a cop to take a prisoner into the alley behind the jail and shoot him in cold blood and get away with it. All the cop has to do is explain that the poor devil was trying to escape. I knew it had been done before in Todd City, and I was afraid maybe Zachary had that in mind for me, not caring to take a chance on what I might say about him if I went to trial.

"This place suits me," I said. "I'll stick here till I see my lawyer."

Ritter took a sap from his hip pocket and came toward me. "You red-headed so-and-so!" he barked. "Do I have to slap you to sleep and put the cuffs on you again?"

So I went along, between the two

of them, into Zachary's office. Vera tagged along after us and flounced down on a sofa so that her skirts went up again. I noticed a mole on her left thigh, high up. Zachary noticed it, too, and his eyes glistened as he sat down at his desk and waved me to a chair across from him. Ritter took a seat just behind me. Zachary got a whiskey bottle and three glasses from a drawer and poured drinks. I left mine standing in front of me, although I could have used a pick-me-up.

"Whether you like it or not, Slade," Zachary said, "you're going to write me a story. A little piece for a newspaper, to run under your by-line."

"A confession that I murdered Schneider, eh?"

"No. We don't need any confession to that. But we want you to tell how you faked the story that's scheduled to come out in the *Blade* tomorrow. You know—you didn't really have any dictaphone in Heimie Mincer's place. You didn't hear any talk that might reflect on the sheriff or anybody else. It was all a practical joke."

"Pop," I confided, "you're a whole lot crazier than I used to think you were!"

"After that," he went on as though he hadn't heard me, "you can telephone your paper and tell them the same thing. If they kill the story you wrote for them, we'll forget all about everything. If they don't we'll print your new story in the *Clarion* to take the edge off it."

"I want to hear more," I said.

"Well, there's the business of fingerprints on the gun that killed poor Schneider. I'll let you wipe 'em off

yourself when the election is over. And Ritter and Carr will make a report saying they didn't see the actual shooting, and only brought you in because you were close by. Vera will testify for you before the Grand Jury. There won't be enough evidence for an indictment, unless you try to make trouble later and we have to manufacture some more."

I WON'T deny that I was tempted. On the surface, it looked like the only way out of the worst mess I was ever in. But I stayed honest for two reasons—because I wasn't at all sure that Zachary and his thugs would carry out their end of the bargain, and because I knew I could never look Gladys in the eye again if I did a thing like that.

I didn't think it over very long. When I gave my answer, I called the pair of them names that had been begging for utterance for a long time. I forgot there was a lady in the room.

Ritter jumped up and was all set to slug me, but Zachary motioned him back. Old Pop was his real self now—a cruel, dirty, unashamed crook of the lower-than-snake-belly variety.

"You'll do it, all right," he said. "You'll do it because your girl will never see you again if you don't. Some of the boys who want to see me re-elected have taken charge of Gladys Miller, and they'll let her go home again, safe and sound, if you cooperate."

"If you don't, she's going a long way from Todd City—away back to New York City, in fact, where Vera gets most of the hostesses for her clubs. You can figure out for your-

For a few minutes there were more guns banging than I could count.



self what can happen to her there. The boys'll all go for her type. Once she gets used to their society and starts to taking dope. . . ."

"You wouldn't dare!" I yelled.

"You haven't got the guts to kidnap a girl, you yellow-bellied scum!"

He pushed the phone over to me. "Call her house," he suggested.

I spun the dial and got Judie on

the line. She was mad clean through when she found out who had wakened her. She said: "Of course Gladys isn't here! Somebody phoned three-quarters of an hour ago and said something about you being in a jam, and she got dressed and went out. Imagine a girl being that crazy over you! Of all the nutty goings-on—!"

I hung up. I didn't have any guts left. I knew I'd crawl on my hands and knees and lick their dirty boots if they told me to. There was a typewriter on a wheeled stand in a corner, and I pointed to it.

"Shove it over," I said. "You get the story, you dirty rats!"

CHAPTER IV

One-Man Riot



OR a matter of minutes I sat and stared at the blank sheet of paper in the typewriter. Somehow, I couldn't force myself to the business of typing out the lies Zachary wanted. If I wrote them, and they ever saw the light of day, Gladys and the *Blade* and yours truly would be disgraced for life. It's the only story I ever had assigned to me that I couldn't put on paper, one way or another.

Ritter was standing behind me. "Get going!" he growled.

"Then sit down," I said. "I can't write with an ape looking over my shoulder. You can read it when I've finished."

He sat down, and I tried to get my brain working. I looked around the room quickly, gauging the chances for escape. I put my hands on the typewriter and began to punch

keys. I wrote, "Pop Zachary is a _____," only I put in words where I have to use dashes here. I wrote, "Walter Ritter is a _____." I guess maybe I could have been arrested for using that kind of language.

Then I stopped, pretending I was thinking up the next paragraph. I picked up the glass of whiskey absent-mindedly. Only I didn't drink it—I threw it straight into Ritter's face and eyes.

I LIFTED the typewriter from the stand, swung it with all my might and let it go at Zachary. It smacked him full in the chest and he coughed and choked and went over backward in his chair. He couldn't get up again.

Ritter had his gun out, but he couldn't see. So I rammed my fist against his chin and grabbed the gun and ran out. There was a corridor leading to the front door, which was solid steel with a small grating to look through, and a guard snoozing in a chair. I kicked him awake and showed him the gun, and he unlocked the door.

At the start of the fracas I heard Vera squeal, but I had forgotten her till she ran past me into the street. The sheriff's big touring car was in front and she dove into it, silk-sheathed legs and pink scanties flashing beneath her skirt.

"Come on!" she cried. "The key's in the ignition."

I didn't want her along, but I didn't have time to throw her out. Without answering, I slid under the wheel and bore down on the starter. I had the machine whipping around a corner two blocks away when some-

body came out of the jail and started to shoot.

There wasn't any need to weave through the city to shake off pursuit. The car stepped up to eighty miles an hour smooth as silk, and I just made a bee line for Castle Gardens. I wasn't sure I'd find Gladys there, but I knew I'd find Heimie Mincer. If the kid had really been snatched, Heimie was the boy who could lead me to her—or else eat all the lead in my borrowed .38.

It struck me all of a sudden that two-thirds of Gladys' prophesy—or warning, if you prefer—had come true. They could shoot me and they could kidnap her. They could blow up the *Blade*—

I thought about stopping long enough to phone Jack Cahill and tell him to keep his eyes peeled and maybe call a cop he could trust. I'd have dropped Vera off to do that, except that I couldn't count on her. I was sold by this time on Gladys' movie thriller ideas—but I didn't know but what Zachary and Ritter might be right behind me, and I didn't know how badly Gladys might need me.

I can tell you, that last thought put a chill on me! I managed to squeeze eighty-five out of the gas wagon.

"Swing off at the next road!" Vera yelled above the shrieking wind. "I've got a cottage nobody knows about at Still Lake! We can hide out there for a few days and get really acquainted!" Her hand was on my arm, coaxingly.

"Nobody invited you to come along!" I yelled back. "We're going right to Mincer! If you get in Dutch with your pals, that's your own lookout."

She shut up, and I didn't know whether she was planning to trip me or not. But I was taking a million chances anyway, and one more wouldn't matter.



CASTLE GARDENS was three miles past the city limits. It had been a rich man's country home, and now it was a three-story night club and gambling palace, with pretty and agreeable girls scattered around in dim-lighted rooms for those who liked to waste their coin on other things than the spotted cubes. Its weekly take ran high in the thousands. There were floodlights all around it and a lot of cars parked outside when I skidded up.

I gave Vera strict orders to stay in the car and keep out of my way, on penalty of a sock on the jaw. I smoothed down my hair and then scrubbed my face with my handkerchief. After the walloping I'd taken from Carr and Ritter, I couldn't have looked very classy, but there was no help for that. I went in the bar entrance and walked right on through to the main stairway and climbed to the second floor, where the dice were bouncing and the wheels spinning.

A couple of hundred people were packed around the tables and I looked them over. I saw a fellow I knew and waved to him. The sight of him made me feel better. It's always nice to know there are friends handy when you're in the stronghold of the enemy. But I couldn't call on this guy at the moment—the thing I had in mind was too ticklish.

Mincer's office was on the third

floor. All the way up the stairs I expected one of the bouncers to collar me. It was up here that Gladys and I had sneaked two days before to hang a dictaphone back of a picture in Mincer's office while he was downstairs arguing with a stew.

I walked into the office without knocking, and there was Mincer. He was all alone at a big mahogany table in the center of the room, putting figures in a notebook. He took one look at the gun I had and his moon-shaped face turned yellow. I'd always thought Mincer had more of the Oriental in him than was respectable.

"Where is Gladys Miller?" I demanded, letting him see how sore I was.

His eyes were bulging. He started to let one hand drop below the table, where I knew he had a signal button, but thought better of it when I jiggled the gun a little. "I don't know the lady," he stammered.

"I'll give you three seconds to remember her," I promised, "and then I'll give you all six of the packages in this rod. How'd you like those odds?"

"Don't!" he said hastily. "Let's talk this over, Larry. I'll do anything I can for you. But honest, I ain't got no dame by that name here. You can see for yourself—"

"Two and a half seconds are up already," I snapped. "Here it comes!"

"Wait!" He sounded hysterical. "Maybe she'll be here in a little while. She—" He stopped talking suddenly. He was looking at something behind me. He was trying the old trick to get me to turn my head, I guessed.

"She what?" I insisted, moving the muzzle of the cannon up and down.

"She—"

Then I knew there *was* somebody behind me. I heard Vera's voice: "Larry!" I remembered that I had been dumb enough to leave the door open, and I jumped. But I wasn't quick enough. I got a tap on the head and the lights went out as far as I was concerned. . . .

I couldn't have been out more than two or three minutes. I came to with a headache so big it filled the room and bounced back from the walls and ceiling. A light up above hurt my eyes. I didn't know whether I could move or not.

Somebody was saying: "We'll have him phone his office anyway, just to make sure."

I knew the voice. I opened my eyes and, sure enough, it was Pop Zachary. He was rubbing his chest with one hand as though it was sore, and coughing every second or two.

I was lying on the floor beside the table, and Zachary was sitting opposite me.

Carr and Ritter were with him, and Mincer stood over in a corner, his fingers twisted in the cloth of Vera's dress at the neck. Her shoulder was bare almost to the swell of her breast.

"How about after that?" Mincer asked.

"We'll take care of him. He escaped from jail, didn't he? He had a gun, didn't he? It ain't no crime to shoot an escaped murderer."

"Not in here!" Mincer said sharply.

"Naw," Ritter said. "We'll take him back to town. I'll do the busi-

ness myself to get even for that sock on the jaw."

I groaned to let them know I was coming to. I couldn't see any percentage in lying there and listening to them planning to cool me off. I wanted action.

I got it. Ritter jerked me up and dumped me in a chair across from Zachary. He pushed a phone toward me and took out his revolver.

"We're through playin', sweetheart," he said. "Pick up that phone and call your office. Tell 'em your story was a fake."

I looked around, pretending I was more dazed than I was. I caught Vera's eye, and believe it or not, there was a black circle around it. There was a different look in her face from what I had expected to see, too.

"I tried to warn you, Larry," she whimpered. "I saw Zachary coming and ran upstairs. But they were too fast for me."

She had been on the level with me, after all! That meant she would get the works, too, one way or another. Zachary wouldn't dare let her go, knowing what was in store for me.

An idea came wandering in through my headache. I remembered how I had worded the Zachary story. The first line of the fourth paragraph started: "Watch out for Pop Zachary and Heimie Mincer!" The last sentence said: "Murder is about the only crime that can't be proved on the sheriff, and in the long run the business he is in always leads to murder!"

If I could call Jack Cahill's attention to those particular lines, I thought, he might guess the spot I was in and do something about it.

I got Cahill on the line. "Jack," I said, "you know that piece I wrote about the sheriff?"

"I sent it out half an hour ago," he told me. "What's the matter with—?"

Right then it happened. I heard Jack let out a yell, and then there was the sound of a roar that became a splintering crash. A tinkling of glass merged with miscellaneous noises. There were other yells, and suddenly the receiver went dead.

Now, I realized, Gladys was a hundred percent right. They had bombed the *Blade*!

CHAPTER V

Racket's End



COULDN'T move for a minute. I felt like bawling. Just because I had let my mouth flap in the wrong place the campaign was lost, the paper was crippled, Gladys was in God knew what danger, and I was practically a corpse. I might have known there would be some Zachary spies hanging around my table, straining their ears to catch my every word. I thought about it until I got so mad I could have walked right into the barrel of a spitting machine-gun just to paste somebody.

I stood up so fast no one had time to stop me. My shoulder rammed against Ritter and tipped him off balance. I gave the table a heave and it went over, with Zachary and Carr underneath.

At the same instant the door opened, and on the threshold stood Gladys, and right behind her was Riley! With reinforcements at hand,

maybe things weren't so helpless, after all.

For the second time that night I busted my knuckles against Ritter's jaw. It was a hard jolt, and he rocked back on his heels, but not before his gun went off. The slug whacked my right shoulder and it turned me half around.

I was just in time to see Vera star in the fastest strip act on record. Anxious to get out of the range of the bullets she knew were coming, she twisted nimbly out of Mincer's grasp. But her dress stayed behind, split from throat to hem, and it was too bad most of the customers were too busy to get an eyeful of what was uncovered! There was plenty of girl on display, despite the wispy chiffon that clung to her white thighs and the tiny brassiere that did its duty poorly!

I suppose plenty of people in Todd County—from Zachary, at the bottom of the scale, on up to some of our most respectable businessmen and church leaders—had seen Vera like that, in one of her floor shows, if nowhere else, but it was my first view of the whole panorama. Even with the battle raging, I had time to wonder how I had resisted her when she put on that tease stunt in the jail cell. With her figure, she could have made a fortune in the County Home for the Aged and Infirm, putting new life in the local nonagenarians. And her form, surprisingly, was white and quivery and fresh-looking and a stranger gazing at those gorgeous contours would never guess she'd spent half her life playing the more susceptible sex for suckers!

I took one eye-filling, soul-satisfying glance at Vera as she dis-

appeared modestly behind a leather-covered chair, and then I had to pay attention to Carr, who was bringing a pistol out of his hip pocket. With my left hand I grabbed the chair I had been sitting in and slammed it at him. One of the chair legs ripped his check open and laid him out again. But there were other shots crashing in the room now, and one of them caught me in the hip. It felt like a pile driver turned loose on me, and I sat down and stayed down.

I felt silly as hell, sitting there with my eyes wide open and nothing at all the matter with me except that I couldn't move. But the fight continued without me, and there were more guns banging than I could count, and in the split seconds between shots I could hear the people in the gambling rooms below screaming as they stampeded for the exits.

The fellow I had waved to in the gambling room appeared in the doorway. He had an automatic in his fist and was blazing away for all he was worth. And was I glad to see him! Because—whether or not you believe in Santa Claus—he was Detective Slim McCann of the State Police, assigned especially by the governor to look into the racket situation in Todd County at my request!

Back of McCann, Pat Riley was holding Gladys, who was kicking and scratching like a lovely bobcat, showing lots more of her shapely legs than was ladylike in her excitement. I thought Riley was holding her to keep her out of the line of fire, and I was grateful till I saw him slip a revolver out of a shoulder harness and take aim at McCann.

I let out a howl of warning, and McCann ducked just in time. He

swung his own gun around and let one go that caught Riley right between the eyes. The fat cop dropped like a sack of wheat, and somehow I wasn't sorry. That last gesture had proved that he had been sailing under false colors all along.

Gladys made a dive for me and I hollered again, trying to stop her. But it didn't matter, because the shooting was all over, anyway. And what a finish!

Riley was dead. Carr was dead. Ritter was hurt bad and thought he was going to die, and was blurting out a confession that he had killed Harry Schneider to frame me and had sent Carr to plant the bomb in the *Blade* office. McCann was making notes of everything he said.

Heimie Mincer was winged and his moon face wasn't yellow any more—it was white as a fish's belly. Pop Zachary was on his hands and knees behind the table, and his skin wasn't even bruised—but if ever I saw a thoroughly beaten racketeer, it was Pop.

Vera crawled out from behind the chair on her hands and knees and McCann stopped taking notes to watch admiringly as she made a bee line for the remains of her dress, which Heimie relinquished without a murmur. If anything more was needed to clinch the case against Pop Zachary, I realized, we'd have it in her testimony.



LADYS had her arms around me, and I liked it even though the bullets in my shoulder and hip were starting to hurt. My cheek was against her breast and I wasn't thinking about

Vera's charms any more. Gladys was trying not to cry, and making a bad job of it.

"Numbskull!" I said, trying to make her mad for her own good. "Letting yourself get kidnaped!"

It worked. She flared up like Vesuvius. "Who started this, anyway?" she demanded. "If you had blabbed to the one person who wanted most to stop you, and made me pretend I liked him to get you out of trouble—"

"Do you mean Pat Riley?" I was still in a fog about plenty of things.

"Sure. Who did you think started all this? Right after the first attempt to kill us, I decided he had to be behind it. He was the only one you talked to, and nobody else could hear.

"I've found out since that Riley has been trying to muscle back into the rackets ever since the *Blade* chased them outside the city. He was going to quit the police force and take Schneider's job as chief deputy, which is why they arranged to get rid of Schneider. Zachary promised the job to Riley if he could shut you up.

"After you left my apartment, Jack Cahill phoned to let me know you'd got into some kind of trouble outside the office. I called Zachary and found out what the trouble was, and knew right away you'd been framed.

Zachary asked me to come to the jail, and I said I would. But I got to thinking they might keep me there, too, because I knew as much as you about things. So I went to Police Headquarters, instead, and looked up Riley."

"But what was the idea of that?"

I asked. "You knew he wasn't on the level."

"Silly! Maybe you didn't notice the way Riley looked at me in the Clipper Club. He's got quite a reputation as a Don Juan, which only means he's a sucker for women. I let him think I had fallen for him in a big way, and had got rid of you early just to look him up. By the time I let him put his arm around me, he was ready to get confidential and start telling me all the things he could do for me if I'd be nice."

I looked at the fat corpse with the hole in the forehead, and I was glad Riley wasn't among the living any more. "How far did he go?" I asked.

Gladys looked insulted. "You're impossible! I didn't even let him kiss me—except just a couple of times, so he'd get mellow and tell me things. And if he pawed me a little, it wasn't half as much as he wanted to. But I was willing to go farther, if I could coax him to get you out of that jam—"

"I'd rather have died a thousand times!"

"Well, I didn't have to. We were parked on the edge of town in a side road, and we saw Zachary's car streaking toward this place, with another machine following. Riley got excited and stopped coaxing and, trailed along, and—here I am!"

I sighed happily. I said: "Honey, grab that telephone and put it in my

good right hand. I've got a story to phone in, if the *Blade* is still there!"

I got the *Blade*, all right, and was connected with the big boss himself, who had come down to look over the damage done by the bomb. He told me the pineapple had ripped open one corner of the building, but nobody was hurt, the linotypes were clicking merrily and the presses were all set to roll on schedule.

"They'll roll early," I told him. "I've got a yarn that's worth a six o'clock extra and special editions all day for the follow-up stories!"

I gave him the dope while we waited for the doctor to come from town. I had a hard time convincing him I hadn't made it up out of a whiskey bottle. Then he got as excited as a cub reporter working on his first murder, and said he'd write it up himself.

Being smart, I knew that this was Larry Spade's golden opportunity. I said:

"Boss, I think I'm going to faint. Because I think your going to tell me I get that raise I've had coming for two years. I need it for—"

I could hear the dull thud as he hit the ceiling. "Raise!" he yelled. "Why, you thick-headed bum! You'll be able to get married and spend your honeymoon cruising around the world and have eight kids on your bonus alone!"

I fainted, all right.



Corpse Clue

By **CLARK NELSON**



THE dame was dead all right, all right. I said, "Convenient, ain't it, to have her bumped off right in the sheriff's office? Saves a lot of running around."

Ben Wyatt, the little sheriff, said, "She wasn't bumped off here! She dropped dead or something. Hey—where you going?"

"The county pays me to investigate murder. This is a natural death."

The coroner arose from the body of the dead woman. "Not natural, Scanlon. She was poisoned. I can't tell how without an autopsy, but all indications are that some deadly poison resulted in her demise."

I sighed, thinking of the good looking blonde I'd left to come down here. For a long minute I stared down at the dead girl, whose face was so contorted with the last pangs life could give her.

Her hair was henna-streaked; cheap powder flaked off her features; her rouge was smudged. A thin gold chain was around her neck. I found an old-fashioned locket on the other

end, initialed "R. from G. E." The locket revealed a small picture of the dead woman on one side, the smiling face of a curly headed youth on the other. I snapped it shut, undid the chain and dropped the whole business in my pocket.

I picked up a hand. The fingers were manicured and the nail-tips were slightly soiled. Great splinters had been bit from them, almost to the quick. The palms were soft. I peered closer to examine the third finger of the left hand. A ring, odd, curious, a plain band fully five-eighths of an inch in width, made of dull, yellow gold.

"Wedding ring," I grunted. "Old-fashioned. Must have been her mother's. Who was she and what's it all about?"

"Mills," Wyatt said to his deputy, "tell Scanlon what the dame said when she came in. What was her name?"

Mills frowned. "She mentioned it but I forgot. Here's what she said. That she was going to get knocked off and wanted to tell the sheriff about it. That's all, only she was scared as hell and said she had

Sometimes it seems unimportant to solve the murder of one girl—and more vital to prevent another one from being killed. Scanlon uncovers unexpected motives behind the mystery of the dancehall

to hurry, said she had to go to work."

I was going through the cheap handbag. When I straightened up, I had several light blue ticket stubs in my hand. "Yeah, she would be. Looks like she worked at the Bluebird, Maxie Shelton's taxi dance-hall."

"That joint!" roared Wyatt. "I've had more complaints about that place—"

"I know, I know." I headed for the door. "Well, neither one of you guys has got sense enough to poison a dame, so it must have been done somewhere else. Bullit, find out what killed her as soon as you can and I'll get in touch with you."

The coroner nodded. "She could have been poisoned several hours ago and the stuff just now took effect."

I nodded and walked out.

As I neared my battered roadster, I heard someone behind me. Mills, the deputy.

"Where you going?" I snarled.

Mills spat into the gutter. "Wyatt said to see that you went after a murderer instead of that blonde."

I snorted. Mills got in beside me.

THREE minutes later we pulled up before the Bluebird Dance Hall. A blazing Neon sign portrayed the fact that inside were one hundred beautiful hostesses. I walked up the stairs, Mills tagged along.

A checkroom attendant said, "Check your hats, gents, you gotta check." I grinned and walked by the entrance of the dimly lit ballroom. Mills stuck close behind me. The attendant ran from the booth, clutched

my sleeve with one hand, hatbrim with the other. "You gotta check your hats, gents. You gotta—"

I put my hand on the youth's chest and pushed. I said to Mills, "Throw him out, Millsie."

As Mills grasped the whirling youth by the nape of the neck and the seat of the pants, I glimpsed the immaculate form of Maxie Shelton coming toward me.

Suddenly, from the entrance I heard a shrill yell, a great clatter on the steps, a steady bump-bump-bump, followed by a dull thud. Deputy Mills returned rubbing his hands, just as Shelton heaved up with an anger-contorted face.

"What the hell are you guys starting a roughhouse for?" he snarled.

Mills said glumly, "Scanlon said to throw him out."

I said, "Hell, can't you take a joke?" And to Shelton, "You're Shelton, hunh? I'm Scanlon."

Shelton breathed hard through his nose, his eyes malevolent. "I don't care who the hell you are. You can't—"

I grinned, thumbed a match to my cigarette. "You're the same guy just got out of a little white slave jam, ain't you, Maxie?"

"I was clean—I—"

"Sure, sure, but how'd you like to have your joint closed up? A hell of a spot, anyway."

Over the manager's shoulder, as the lights went on and the music ended, I saw the dancers. The girls, under the harsh electrics, were not bad to look at. Most of them were young, all of them well curved, all of them daringly dressed. But the men! Physical misfits, boys from the farm, foreign laborers, Filipinos,



I said, "I'm a policeman. Ruby wants to know where you're going."

even a sprinkling of easterners, Chinese, Japanese.

"And all for a dime a dance," I said, and shook my head. Suddenly I whirled, the locket in my hand. "Who's this dame?" I asked Maxie.

He grinned, without looking at the locket. "I never saw her before in my life. Have a good time, boys."

He walked back into the dance-hall as the lights dimmed and the the music began.

I said, "Gimme a buck, Mills." A moment later I walked toward the ticket window to return with a strip of printed tickets. They matched the stubs I had found in the dead girl's purse.

Half of the tickets I thrust at Mills. Half I kept, explaining what I expected Mills to do. He groaned. But I left him. Headed toward a smiling blonde who leaned against a pillar. I took off my hat, muttered something unintelligible to the half-dressed hostess and walked through the gates of the dance floor, dropping a ticket in the hand of the attendant.

I saw Mills hooked up with a brunette, and then paid attention to my own blond hostess, snuggling up against me coyly, glued tightly against me, the full soft length of her. She undulated to the rhythm of the music. I grinned. "Honey, where's that red-headed dame that I danced with the other night? Little dame about your size with a gold tooth in front and—"

Before she could answer, we danced close to a railing. "Don't forget the next dance," said a wheedling effeminate voice. The girl in my arms stiffened, nodded. Glimpsing the look of repulsion on her face, I turned toward the speaker.

The man's head was almost double normal size, nearly free of hair. In the dim light, it shone like a billiard ball. The eyes were tiny, set deep beneath hairless brows, his nose a pulpy spot of stuff, huge-nostriled. The mouth was smaller than a woman's, twisted in a miniature grin to disclose two teeth of monstrous size. All in all, the top

of the monster's head might have reached to my shoulder. And I'm not so tall myself.

As we whirled into the dancers, I said, "Hell, do you have to dance with guys like that?"

"That's what the boss says," she said bitterly. Then, as if in afterthought, "The girl you asked about is Ruby Ellis. She ain't here tonight; neither is her roommate, Gladys."

"Know where she lives?" I made it sound casual.

"Sure. Been there to parties lots of times. She and her husband have got an apartment at 1414 Plymouth. Gladys rooms with 'em."

I heard her say, "Hey—" but I was gone, having passed the rest of my tickets into her surprised hand. At the entrance I stopped, put on my hat and turned around for another look. I saw Shelton seize my ex-partner's wrist as she hurried toward the washroom. He spoke angrily into her ear, she answered just as angrily. He jerked at her wrist. In the offing I saw the grinning figure of the monstrosity who had asked her for a dance.

Then a pair of dancers cut off the view. Almost at arm's length from me the dancing pair moved, utterly oblivious of their surroundings. The girl's body was plastered to that of the man, and he pressed her as close as he could. His cheek nestled atop black hair, his eyes were closed.

It was Mills.



FOURTEEN-Fourteen Plymouth was an old house converted into housekeeping apartments. A blowsy landlady directed me to the second floor back. I tapped at

the door. A woman's voice sang out, "Come on in, honey."

I grinned, slid in easily. Through an open door I saw a half-dressed blonde throwing clothes into an open suitcase. Without turning she said, "I'm almost ready, honey. Did Maxie lend it to you?"

I said, "Yeah." She whirled. For a moment she stood staring. Then she took a step backward.

"I thought you were—who are you?"

"I'm Scanlon. You're Gladys, ain't you? Where you going?"

Still she could find no words. I walked into the littered bedroom, glanced about. "Don't be scared," I said, sweeping my eyes over the shapely body, the long, stockinged legs. "Ruby sent me. Come in the other room; I want to talk to you."

She followed me into the other room. A half-filled quart bottle sat on the table. "Have a drink?" I asked. I poured yellow liquid into a dirty glass. She gulped it while I tilted the bottle to my own mouth.

"What does Ruby want? Who are you?"

"I'm a policeman. Ruby wants to know where you're going." Suddenly the girl began to cry. I looked at the trembling shoulders, the heaving breast.

"Honest, Mister," she moaned, "I can't help it. I love him."

"Sure," I said. "You love him. That's the reason—"

I stopped. The hall door was swinging inward. I reached for a gun as the newcomer barged in, and stopped thunderstruck in the doorway.

"Come on in, Mr. Ellis." It was the man whose picture was in the

dead woman's locket. Redfaced, he came in, backing against the door to close it.

"Okay," I said, "start talking. I'm from Ruby."

The big man blustered. "There's nothing to say. What do you mean? Who—?"

"He's a cop," said the girl.

"Where you and Gladys going? Taking a runout powder on Ruby, your wife?"

George glowered. Gladys sobbed.

"No need to do that now," I said, watching Ellis' face, taking a step forward. "You see Ruby won't care about her husband scrambling with her girl friend. She won't care about anything now or any more. She's dead." Utter silence. I said, "Let's go, George. I want to talk to you about a murder."

"Murder!" The word came simultaneously from both of them.

I sensed sudden movement behind me, heard the swish of the bottle as the woman swirled it through the air. It crashed on my head. I took two dizzy steps, and that's all I remember.

WHEN I opened my eyes someone was moving about the littered apartment. I heard the sound of running water and then approaching footsteps. Deputy Mills came in with a glass of water.

"The dame," Mills explained. "I asked her and she told me what you asked her, so here I am."

I gulped the water, glanced at my watch. It read 3:15. Mills said apologetically, "I didn't see you go, so I stayed till the joint closed. I was breaking in these shoes and—"

I tottered to my feet, made my

way to the pay phone in the hall. When the night man at the sheriff's office answered, I instructed him to put out a pickup order for Ellis and his girl friend, Gladys. I gave the time of their probable departure as one o'clock, described them minutely.

The man at the other end said, "We'll look up the dame, Scanlon, but hell—we already got the man."

"Hold him," I ordered. "I got a lot to talk to him about."

"Oke," said the night deputy, "but he won't talk. We picked him up in a vacant lot with a bullet hole between his eyes."

I hung up, ran down the front steps with Mills behind me. A few minutes later the battered roadster pulled up in front of the nondescript building that served as a morgue. A light burned behind the closed door.

I went in, yelled, "Bullit!" No answer. I went to the back, down a linoleumed hall, opened the door of the autopsy room. The light there was on also. I gave a yell, ran forward. In a heap on the floor lay Dr. Bullit, unconscious. His face was blood-covered, but his heart was beating faintly.

While Mills phoned for an ambulance, I glanced around. The body of Ruby Ellis lay on the autopsy table. White pans stood around; pans that held organs of the murdered woman. Test tubes and paraphernalia were scattered. On the floor I found Bullit's notes. *Aconite* was as far as I read. I turned to the corpse, pulled back the sheet. The left hand had been pulled up over the bosom. I started. The third finger had been neatly cut off at its base.

A few minutes later an ambulance arrived and shortly after that Sheriff Wyatt, with Lester, the reporter, who always hung around his office. I explained all that had happened.

They viewed the corpse of George Ellis, in another room, formed various meaningless theories as to the cause of the death—the reason for the bullet between the eyes. A later report from the hospital had it that Bullit had suffered a concussion and was unable to talk.

AT EIGHT-THIRTY the morning papers were on the streets with the details of the killings. At nine-five, Sheriff Ben Wyatt hung up his phone and said, "Well, I'll be damned! That was Mrs. Oxford, president of the Woman's Reform League. She's offering a five grand reward for the apprehension of the criminal responsible for the death of Ruby Ellis!"

I fumbled for a cigarette and asked, "Why?"

"She says the girl was a poor unfortunate or she wouldn't have had to work in such a place. Sounds screwy, don't it?"

I nodded and went out the door to my roadster. Mills was asleep in the seat. I shook him. "Get out. This ain't police business."

He shook his head glumly. "Then I got to stay with you. Sheriff said you had to stay on the job."

I said, "Get out." I grabbed his shoulder and jerked him to the street. Before he could protest, my roadster was pulling away from him.

The Oxford house was large and imposing, sitting well back from the street. I rang the bell. Again. A maid answered.

"Reporter from the *News*," I said. "I want to see Mrs. Oxford."

She led me into a large living room to wait. I lit a cigarette, settled into a deep chair, and glanced upward curiously. From the room above came the sound of footsteps, back and forth. Someone was pacing the floor.

"You're from the *News*?"

Mrs. Oxford, still *en negligee*, entered the room. I grinned. She was tall and svelte, her ample charms more revealed than concealed by the scanty, expensive negligee. Though I knew she had been a widow for twenty years, she appeared closer to thirty than to the forty-four she admitted.

I nodded and started to talk. There was something about her that held my attention. As she went into details concerning the reward she had posted, I concluded it was her mouth. It was wide, thin-lipped, cruel. Her eyes were black.

"So you see," she finished. "It is just such things our association tries to prevent. Why shouldn't I offer a reward as a protest gesture?"

I painstakingly wrote notes on the back of an envelope, thanked her, made the door. From overhead came the sound of footsteps, back and forth, back and forth. . . .

I WALKED out to my car sedately, without glancing back. I whirled around the corner, stopped, got out, surveyed the gables of the big house, the ones I could see from there. I flipped my cigarette into the gutter, looked up and down the deserted street, then cautiously forced my way through a boxwood hedge.

An arbor led to a basement door. Through this I slipped, opening the lock with a skeleton key. Through a furnace room, until my ear was pressed against the door that led to the kitchen. No sound in the kitchen. I tiptoed in. A short hallway off the kitchen leading to the front of the house. To my right a flight of steps. For a second I listened further, heard Mrs. Oxford's harsh tones, and the replying words of a maid.

Then cautiously I stole up the steps. At the top I laid my ear flat on the floor. Somewhere on that second story a person was pacing the floor, back and forth, back and forth.

Carefully, quietly, I opened a door, the first one to my left. There was no one there. I entered, closed the door and peered about, surprised. The place was a laboratory. Shelf after shelf lined the room, each shelf laden with jars and apparatus, books and tiny cages which held white mice, guinea pigs.

On soundless feet I made the rounds, examined retorts, test tubes, electrical paraphernalia, labeled bottles.

Near the window I pulled a brown bottle from a rack; a brown bottle whose contents were tiny white crystals. The label read *Aconite*.

Back in the hallway again I found another door. Listening carefully I heard from behind the door the unmistakable sound of paced footsteps. And another sound: the unintelligible mutter of a half-wailing voice. Doleful. I opened the door a thin crack and the voice became clearer as its owner paced the room.

"Why, why, why, did I do it? I must have been a fool not to see

through the thing. Dead . . . dead . . . dead! Never again to hold her! Never again! Dead!"

I opened the door farther, peered into the room.

THE huge-headed monstrosity I had seen at the Bluebird Dancehall was pacing the floor, back and forth, back and forth, muttering his mixed prayers and curses to the empty room.

I tensed. Here was a premise and conclusion. Aconite in another room: the cause of the girl's death. And this monster wrapped in the throes of self-remorse!

I threw the door open. The little man with the big head whirled, prayers and curses alike dying on his small lips.

"Well—" I said. And that was as far as I got.

"Put your hands up," said a voice behind me.

I turned and looked into the unwavering muzzle of an automatic held by Mrs. Oxford herself, her thin cruel lips twisted in a snarl. She came closer as my hands slowly went aloft. "A reporter," she sneered. "I know you now! You're Scanlon."

Her breast heaved against the thin negligee. I bowed sardonically, then suddenly straightened to kick viciously at the gun. My toe connected with her wrist.

She screamed, but before I could draw my own gun she was on me. Nails clawed, teeth snapped at me. Flesh that had appeared soft suddenly grew muscled as long legs thrashed and kicked at me.

I went down in a flurry of torn negligee and legs, fighting as best I could.

"Philip, Philip!" the woman shrieked. Her knee bashed me in the stomach. I was suddenly conscious of the monstrosity hovering over me, gun in hand. I tried to jerk aside, but the woman's strong inexorable hands were at my throat, her body pressing me down and smothering me. The reversed gun hit me on the side of the head.

I COULD hardly see when I opened my eyes again. The room smelled of dampness, and when I got used to the dimness, I made out that the walls were of stone. The muffled sobbing from across my prison oriented me. I was tied to a chair in a basement room. After a few moments I was able to make out a still white form, her outer clothing stripped off, tied to a cot on the farther side.

I recognized her and said, "Hello, Gladys," and she replied, "You, too! They've got you."

The light switched on and the door opened to admit Mrs. Oxford. At first I couldn't see the man with her. When I did see him I smiled. It was Maxie Shelton, proprietor of the Bluebird Dancehall.

"Well," said Mrs. Oxford, sardonically, "here they are. You've messed up the detail. What do we do now?"

Shelton snarled at me. "I messed up, hell! It was you with that damned reward! But no matter now. We'll bump the guy. The girl we'll sell in Buenos Aires, as we have all the rest."

"And what will I tell my son?" The woman's voice was low. "After all, I love him. I posted the reward to keep him from suspecting! What

will I tell him was the reason you used him as a catspaw in the killing of Ruby Ellis."

"I had to kill her!" The man's voice was desperate. "She got to know more than was safe, and she blundered on it. Then after she was dead that dumb husband of hers came to my place and tried to blackmail me, said he knew I had killed her. If your son was . . ."

"Yes," said a shrill effeminate voice from the doorway, "If your son . . . go on, Mr. Shelton."

The monstrosity of the big head stood there, gun in hand. His deep set eyes were blazing, his miniature mouth was twisted in a snarl.

"Yes," he went on as the man cringed away from him, "I loved Ruby Ellis. She was all that was good and beautiful to me. The only one that didn't draw away, the only one that didn't curl her lips and show the light of repulsion in her eyes. And you killed her! You used me, you patted my back and asked me for aconite from my experiments. You loaned George Ellis money. And you made him put up his wife's wedding ring for security.

"Clever, weren't you? You double-crossed us all. I know my own mother was in the girl traffic with you. I hate her for it, but she's my mother. You're worse—you're a killer! You filed rough places on that tight ring of Ruby's! You knew she was nervous; you knew she bit her nails and twisted her rings. And you gave her back her ring coated with the aconite I'd given you innocently."

Mrs. Oxford gasped, "Philip, Philip!" The dwarf brushed her aside, and I saw that the gun was

steady. He was in command here, and there was nothing I could do about it if she couldn't.

Mrs. Oxford was frantic. "You can have this girl," she pleaded. "I'll—"

The gun spoke, and Maxie Shelton, white slaver, seemed to leap into the air. He twitched once and then was still.

Even then I couldn't help seeing the whole business in the back of my mind. Mrs. Oxford had evidently backed Shelton in his white slavery, and Shelton had had to be nice to her son, even if he did look like hell. Ruby Ellis had blundered on a piece of evidence against Shelton. From what I'd heard, the motives and murderer were clear enough. Shelton had busted into the morgue and clouted Bullit in order to swipe the ring back. Scared. Well, he wouldn't be scared any more.

Neither would Mrs. Oxford, for as she ran forward crying her son's name, the gun spoke again. She clutched her breast; crimson spread out from her hand. She tottered and went to her knees.

The son dropped the gun, which rang on the concrete floor. For a second he just stood there, then he dropped and took his mother in his arms, sobbing. Suddenly from upstairs a door banged; I heard footsteps, and again I strained at my ropes. No good.

But I relaxed when the door opened and I heard that voice, "Scanlon? Gosh, guy, I had a hell of a time finding you. What'd you try to run away from me for?" Deputy Mills stepped in, gun in hand, and for once I was damn' glad to see him!

Dog Eat Dog

By **WALTON GREY**



PAIR of lips touched her ear, and a low voice whispered, "I've never seen you looking lovelier, Jane."

She turned slowly, and her face broke into a slow smile. "That's nice of you, Bob. But I thought I just told you not to follow me? Didn't you understand when I told you that I wanted to be alone for a bit?"

Overhead, a brilliant moon bathed the water in its silvery radiance, turning the night into day. It made Jane's skin seem whiter and her dark hair blacker than it really was.

The trim, white yacht was threading its careful way through the hundreds of small islands which lay south of the Florida Keys, and they all looked so much alike, only the very experienced eye could tell them apart. Jane's eye was experienced, and she had been looking for one particular island when Bob's strong arms encircled her waist.

He said, "Yes, I understand you, but I couldn't keep away any longer. I don't like this thing at all."

"It's all in the game. And if you

don't stop doing what you are doing . . . I shall go mad."

For answer, Bob drew her closer towards him. His lips covered her upturned face with kisses. Jane quivered, standing tensely against him. Her arms were about his neck. A little moan escaped her. Then she broke away and stepped back. In a cold, almost hard voice, she said:

"That'll be enough, Bob. I'm going now, and I don't want you to follow me."

Bob reached for her again, but she managed to step clear of him and, drawing the Spanish shawl about her shoulders, she started at a brisk walk down the deck towards her own stateroom. Bob watched her out of sight; then with a helpless shrug of his wide shoulders, he lighted a cigarette and turned his back.

In her stateroom, Jane stood in the center of the floor. She was shaking a little, and her face was flushed. Suddenly she seemed to reach a conclusion. Darting to the porthole, she glanced through. The yacht seemed hardly to move. Sil-

Jane took her life in her hands, swimming to the smugglers' island. Before it was over, she found that blood spilled and lives taken meant little to the hard men she had to contend with



"You're coming along with us, sister. Don't think you're not!"

houctted against the moon, she could make out a small, tree-studded island. It could not be more than a

quarter of a mile away. Jane became galvanized into action. The waves of emotion which Bob had

stirred up within her slowly subsided.

With one movement she stripped off the evening gown and tossed it onto the bed. She kicked off her satin slippers and slipped her feet into a pair of canvas sneakers. From a well-stocked wardrobe, she extracted a thin, simple white linen dress. This she quickly dragged over her head, buckling the belt about her slender waist. Then she turned out the light and again headed for the deck.

Although she did not mean to, she could not refrain from looking for Bob. She saw him, still leaning against the rail, talking with Bruno Walsh, the owner of the yacht and her new employer. Like a white shadow, her rubber soles making no sound on the smooth deck, Jane crept round to the starboard side and made her way aft.

THE yacht was making headway of not more than two knots. As Jane slithered along in the deep shadows of the superstructure, she could hear the voice of the man in the bow as he heaved the lead and reported the soundings to the bridge. Dangerous waters.

Jane found herself on the poop, with not a soul in sight. The watch was forward. Jane darted to the rail, climbed it, and for the briefest moment, stood poised on the top rail. The gentle breeze tugged at her, and her shining hair streamed out behind her, making her look like a slender, speeding goddess. She dived.

She hit the water without a splash, dug deeply into it and made for the bottom. Then she leveled off and for as long as her bursting lungs

would allow her she swam beneath the surface. When she could stand it no longer she slowly rose and dashed the salt water from her eyes. Gratefully, she gulped down great lungfuls of the soft, tropical air. She glanced about her. The yacht was already some distance off, looking tiny to her as she trod water. The white lights on the masts and the stern flagpole winked at her. Jane waved a bitter arm, turned on her stomach, and struck out bravely for the island.

She could swim like a professional and her long powerful strokes rapidly closed the distance lying between her and the shore. In a very short space of time she dropped her legs tentatively. She was not surprised to feel hard sand beneath them. She started to wade ashore. On the beach, she looked again toward the sea. The yacht was a white blur in the distance.

The cords in her throat tightened. She had never felt so lonely and afraid in her life.

At the top of the narrow beach was a fringe of trees. As she stood listening, Jane heard the gurgle of a spring somewhere. Feeling thirsty, she started toward the sound. The minute she left the beach and started in among the trees, the moonlight disappeared, and she found herself in almost total darkness. She stopped and strained her ears. The only sounds were the sounds of the night insects, and the rustle of dead leaves as some small animal scuttled away at her approach. Her heart was beating fast.

Jane had started again toward her goal, when something gripped her left ankle, and she found she could

not move. She wanted to scream, but managed to smother the impulse. She reached down and found that her ankle was being tightly gripped by a large, rough hand. She kicked viciously with the other foot. There came a low laugh. Then she was jerked violently off her feet and sent tumbling to the earth. A heavy body fell on top of her. She could feel hot breath against her face. Then a grip like steel about her neck continued until she knew that it was only a question of time before she would lose consciousness. Suddenly it relaxed.

"Going to be good?" inquired a voice.

"Yes."

It was all she could do to get the one word out. There was a grunt and the weight left her. She was dragged roughly to her feet and propelled violently through the scratching brambles of the small jungle about her. She could see nothing, but the man seemed to know every inch of the way. In a short time, Jane found herself on the beach on the other side of the island. In the brilliant moonlight, she looked at her captor.

"Lopez!" she said.

The man peered at her. "You know who I am?" His voice was dangerous.

"Yes, Jane became tough. "Leggo my wrist, will yuh? You're hurting me." She tried to break the hold. Lopez smacked her viciously across the face.

"Hold still," he growled.

Jane still struggled, and Lopez hit her again, almost knocking her head from her shoulders. She sank down on the sand and he released

her. Her head dropped to her hands. She sobbed. Lopez stood over her, grinning evilly.

"What the hell're you doing here, and who the hell are you?"

Jane did not answer, and Lopez prodded her roughly with the toe of his heavy boot. "Answer, will you?"

Jane looked up at him, defiantly dashing the tears from her eyes. She said.

"You'll have some answering to do when I tell Pincus about the way you've been manhandling me."

"Pincus. What d'you know about Pincus?"

"Quite a lot. I happen to be Pincus' girl."

Lopez stared at her with a new interest. Doubtfully, he said. "You're the broad he picked up in that joint in Havana?"

"Yes."

"Then what're you doing here?"

"That's a long story."

Lopez grinned. "You'd better start telling it, lady, and you'd better make it a good one. I ain't very good at believing."

JANE got to her feet. She could feel Lopez's eyes as they roved over her. "You're built nice," he offered.

"Yeah . . . that's what Pincus thinks."

Lopez came toward her, and his whole expression had changed. In almost a caressing voice, he said, "I didn't meant to hurt you, baby, when I made them passes at you. I was just protecting myself and the boys."

"Oh, so the boys are here, are they? Where are they?"

Lopez indicated a small cove a

little way up the beach. "We was running a load in from Havana yesterday when the Feds come after us. We come in here until they scrambled. We was going to pull out tonight; but the moon was too full."

Jane nodded understandingly. She said, "What're you running this trips? Chinks?"

Lopez shook his head. "Booze."

"Still in that racket, huh?"

"Sure. Why not? There's just as much in it as there ever was. Where's Pincus?"

"He's supposed to be here."

Lopez shook his head. "I don't get you."

Jane shook her wet hair. "Listen," she said, "take me to where you've got the boys. I may be able to tell you something that'll interest you."

Lopez came to the point at once. "Listen, baby," he said, coming so close to her she could feel his breath against her, "what's it going to be . . . me and the boys, or just me?"

"I don't get you this time," said Jane coldly.

"You don't, huh?" Lopez grinned. "Get this. We don't give a damn for Pincus, see? And we don't care what we do to one of his girls, see? You're swell-looking and I won't tell the boys to lay off of you unless you are nice to me. Plain enough?"

"Yeah." Jane said no more. She just stood there and looked at Lopez. Lopez came toward her and Jane stiffened, but she did not move. Lopez caressed her, then he stepped back and his eyes were blazing.

"I'll look out for you, baby. Come on."

He led the way up the beach to-

ward the cove, and Jane followed. She was sick at heart, and she would have given anything for the sight of Bob.

Anchored in the deep water of the cove was a rakish, sixty-foot power boat. Its every line spelled speed and power, and as Jane looked it over, she did not wonder that the Coast Guard had such a hell of a time catching these twentieth century smugglers. Jane was almost thrown into a small dory on the beach. Then Lopez shoved off, and his powerful arms sent the little boat speeding across the silent, moon-bathed water. He made fast under the counter of the power boat, and Jane was shoved up a rope ladder to the deck. Lopez followed, and they were met by six of the toughest-looking muggs Jane had ever seen. Lopez effected the introductions.

"Boys," he said, "this is Pincus' new girl, the one he picked up in Kelly's in Havana. I'm looking out for her exclusive this trip, and anyone who thinks I ain't got the right to . . . step up." A long knife suddenly gleamed in his hand. Not one of the "boys" moved. Lopez chuckled. "Okay." He gave Jane a brutal shove toward the cabin, "Get going," he said.

A FEW minutes later they all were sitting round the table, and a tumbler full of brandy was spreading a warm glow through the girl's body. A rug had been draped about her wet clothes, and all eyes were upon her. She addressed herself to Lopez.

"Here's the story," she said. "I'm going to quit the rackets and go straight. I didn't know it until



There was a shattering roar from the machine-gun. Jane felt sick.

just recently, and it's Pincus' own fault. He got me a job, through some political pull he has, as secretary to a dame known as Mrs. Bruno Walsh. The idea being that I should lift from the old dame about half a million dollars worth of rocks which she always carries about with her. That was fine. The only hitch is, I fell in love with the old dame's nephew, and I'm not going through with the snatch!"

She paused, and Lopez started to speak. "Shut up," snapped Jane. "I haven't finished. The reason Lopez found me on this island is that this evening I knew that if I didn't get away I'd get so involved with Bob that there wouldn't be any way out. I also knew that Pincus wouldn't hesitate to kill Bob if he found out anything. Therefore I ran away. And I chose this island because I recognized it as one used

by Pincus, and I knew that he'd put in here and pick me up. You got me instead."

"So you was going back, to Pincus, eh?" demanded Lopez.

"Yes. But when we hit the mainland, I was going to leave him and disappear."

"What about this other guy?" asked one of the boys. "What about him?"

Jane shrugged her shoulders. "I wasn't going to see him again."

Lopez raised a bottle to his lips and drained it. He set it down and leaned toward Jane. "What's this got to do with us?" he asked.

"This." Suddenly Jane's eyes hardened, and her fists clenched so hard on the table the knuckles showed white with the strain.

"I hate Pincus' guts, and I don't see why I should let that guy ruin my life any more than he has already. Running into you like this has given me an idea." She leaned far across the table and the boys followed suit. She addressed herself to them all. "Pincus cuts into your business plenty, doesn't he?" They nodded. "I thought so. Listen. He's traveling light this trip. Only Sam and Tony're along. Here's the proposition: If you boys highjack Pincus and put the finger on him, you can not only have his business, but I'll tell you how you can get your hooks on that five hundred grand I was telling you about."

There was a moment of silence, then slowly the boys turned and looked at Lopez; their eyes glowed greedily. Lopez played with the empty bottle, his eyes boring into Jane's. She did not flinch. Finally, he said:

"When would you want us to highjack Pincus?"

"Tonight. He's headed this way. It's in the bag."

"What do you get out of it?" he demanded shrewdly.

"The only thing I want. Bob and the end of the racket."

Lopez turned to the boys. "What d'you say?"

"Sure," they answered readily.

"All right. Get ready. Get to hell out of here. All of you. I'll see you later." His huge paw reached for Jane, and she was jerked to her feet. "Come on, you. We'll get you some dry clothes."

JANE commenced to tremble, but there was nothing she could do. Obediently she followed Lopez out of the main cabin and into a smaller one.

Lopez sat down on the edge of the bunk and kicked the door shut.

"Where's your heart, Lopez?" asked Jane. "Haven't I told you I'm in love with another man?"

"What the hell's that got to do with it?" demanded Lopez roughly. "I ain't going to take you away from the other guy. This thing ain't permanent."

Still Jane did not move, and Lopez pulled himself to his feet. Two steps were sufficient to bring him face to face with the shaking girl, and he raised his hand threateningly. "Want another poke in the jaw?" he said quietly. "I like hitting pretty women. It does something to me. Want another poke in the jaw?"

Jane shook her head. She allowed the rug to fall from her shoulders

and Lopez took her roughly in his arms and crushed her to him.

Jane almost fainted from the pressure of his arms. Her head was held defiantly erect, and she did the best she could to prevent the little thrills which crept up and down her spine.

She hated the fact that this beast was actually doing something to her against her will, and making her like it. It did not occur to Jane that she was not struggling.

There was a discreet knock at the door. Lopez stiffened.

"What the hell d'you want?" he shouted.

"Listen, Chief," said one of the boys, "Pincus' on the way. We can hear his motor."

"Is he headed this way?"

"Yeah."

"How far off?"

"Not more than a mile or so."

Lopez hesitated. His eyes still devoured Jane, but business was business. "Okay," he said finally, through the closed door. "Break out the choppers. I'll be with you in a minute."

"Better snap into it," said one of the boys.

Lopez grunted and turned to Jane. Softly, almost caressingly, he said, "We got lotsa time, baby. You like me, huh?"

Jane smiled. "You seem to know your way around," she admitted.

IN self protection, Lopez reached for the rug and tossed it about the girl's shoulders. Gruffly, he said, "I suppose you'll find some old clothes. Better put them on. They ain't very attractive, but they're better than those wet things of yours."

"Thanks. I'll see you on deck, then?"

"Yeah. Listen." Lopez came to her again. "I want mine, see? And I'm gonna get it, see? When're we going to crack that yacht safe?"

"How fast will this boat of yours go?"

"Fifty, in this sea."

"Okay. We'll do it tonight then. The yacht hardly had steerage way on when I left, and I don't suppose they've stepped it up at all. They ain't going nowhere in particular."

He left and Jane closed the door after him. As she crossed to the locker and pulled out the drawer, all about her she could hear the sound of low commands and increasing activity.

She dressed in a hurry, donning a tattered white shirt, a pair of dungaree pants and a pair of sneakers. She found an old sweater and into this she crawled. By the time she had crammed her hair into a greasy cap, she looked like anything but a beautiful girl. Her heart pounding with excitement, she went out on deck. Lopez and the boys were sitting around anxiously, and in the death-like silence, she could make out the whine of Pincus' motors.

At Jane's arrival, Lopez got to his feet, and the boys joined him. She noticed that all of them were heavily armed. Some with sawed-off shotguns, and some with submachine-guns, and judging by the manner in which each man handled his weapon, they were well-versed in the art of mass slaughter.

"I figure it this way," said Lopez judiciously; "we'd all better land and hit for the end of this reef. Pincus has got to slow down to make that

narrow entrance, and I don't see how we can miss him."

Jane shuddered. She said, "Aren't you going to give him some warning?"

Lopez glared at her scornfully. "Would he?" he demanded. "Sure we're not going to warn him. Here's how it's going to work." He turned to two men armed with Tommy guns. "You guys let him have all you've got around the engine housing. Don't aim for Pincus himself unless you've got time. Aim for the engine. You other guys, let Pincus and anyone else have it. See?"

The men nodded, and all of them made for the rail. The small dory made two trips before they were all safely ashore, and as they started along the jagged reef toward the entrance leading to the open sea, the thunder of Pincus' exhaust could be plainly heard.

THE moon had disappeared behind the hills and it was almost pitch dark in the spot which Lopez selected for the ambush. Not a word was said, and the men took their posts with the precision of trained soldiers. Jane watched the proceedings with macabre interest. How could forces of law and order, she thought, possibly hope to cope with such military precision? She shuddered again and squeezed herself into a deep shadow. The sound of Pincus' engine sounded like a foundry in the stillness.

The atmosphere was tense, and Jane could hear the beating of her own heart. Now and again a vagrant shaft of moonlight would sparkle on the barrel of a waiting gun, and she could hear the quick breathing of

the sheltered murderers. And over all, Pincus, roaring engine brought him closer and closer to the gates of death.

Suddenly it was quiet, and by straining her ears, Jane imagined she could hear the wash of waves against a knife-like bow. There was a splutter, a brief roar, then again silence. Jane raked the darkness with her eyes. Slowly, gracefully, moving under momentum only, around the headland came the rakish shape of Pincus' boat. He was going slowly and it was several minutes before the boat took on definite shape. Jane could feel the growing tenseness and she wanted to scream.

On came Pincus, and presently the sharp prow of his little boat shoved its way into the entrance. Jane could see him now, standing at the wheel. Another figure—she imagined it was the luckless Sam—was crouched over the silent engine. Jane felt rather than saw the movement of Lopez and the boys.

"Let 'em have it!" whispered Lopez.

There was a shattering roar, several sharp reports from heavy automatics, and the relentless chatter of the death-dealing machine-guns. The cacophony of sound seemed to last forever. In reality the shooting took less than fifteen seconds.

Silence, and the heavy smell of burnt cordite. Pincus' boat drifted serenely on. Sam lay riddled from head to foot over the engine housing. Pincus was draped grotesquely over the gunwale. In the darkness, he seemed to be a hunk of raw bleeding meat. The boat came within ten feet of where Lopez and the boys crouched.

There were three more splintering crashes, three orange gashes in the darkness, then again silence. The two hacked corpses in the boat seemed to quiver anew as the half-inch slugs fired by Lopez entered them. Lopez believed in doing a thorough job.

"That's that," he said casually. Jane heard the scrape of boats on the coral as the boys got to their feet. Lopez' hand closed about her wrist. Calmly, he said, "After we've attended to the yacht, we'll come back here, unload Pincus' boat and scuttle her." His grip on her tightened. "Then, honey . . ."

Jane said nothing, and in a daze, shattered and nerve-wracked, she allowed herself to be propelled back toward the shore.

Lopez went about the business of piracy on the high seas as efficiently and as brazenly as he had handled the ambushing and the slaughtering of Pincus.

IN AN incredibly short space of time his powerful cruiser had overhauled the slow-going yacht. He had circled it once at terrific speed, then by getting directly in its path had forced it to a stop. The two boats now lay, less than fifty feet apart, moving gently on the moonlit swell. Jane, shaking with apprehension, crouched alongside Lopez as he stood by the wheel.

The yacht's captain, hastily aroused and dressed in pajamas and dressing gown stood on the bridge. Through a megaphone, he bawled:

"What the hell's the idea? Are you men drunk?"

"No," roared Lopez. "We're coming aboard."

"Like hell you are! You'll be tossed into the water." Lopez laughed and turned to one of the boys.

"Give 'em a burst over their heads," he directed. "Don't hit nothing." An ear-splitting chatter followed the command, and Jane saw the yacht captain and his mate throw themselves to the deck. Lopez spoke again. "Listen, Cap," he said, "do as you're told and nothing's going to happen to you. Make one bum move, and we'll dump the lot of you. Break out the gangplank and make it snappy."

The captain started to expostulate, but his words were drowned by another burst of machine-gun fire which came uncomfortably close. He capitulated, and a couple of quartermasters hastily swung the gangplank into place. Lopez cased the power boat alongside and the man in the bows made fast. He seized Jane's wrist. "You're coming, too," he said.

"But, Bob . . . Bob's there . . . he'll see me . . ."

"He won't reco'nize you if he does. Keep in the rear."

Half dragged and half shoved, surrounded on all sides by well-armed members of Lopez's mob, Jane was forced over the side and up the gangplank. On deck, the few members of the crew awakened by the noise stood lined up against the superstructure, their hands above their heads. Lopez glanced them over scornfully. Behind him, in a compact mass, the moonlight glinting on their weapons, his mob backed him up. In the tenseness of the moment, nobody noticed Jane as she ducked and slithered down the deck.

There was a deathlike silence, then Lopez turned, looking for the girl.

"Where the . . ." he began.

"Drop those guns!" commanded a hidden voice. Lopez whirled. He could see nothing. Panic seized him.

"You're all covered," went on the hidden voice quietly, "and if you haven't dropped the guns by the time I count three . . . One . . . two . . . three . . ."

From in front of them, from behind corners and from behind open portholes suddenly came a burst of machine-gun fire. It was deliberately aimed high. The boys, white and shaken, dropped their weapons and raised their hands. They could not even see their antagonists, let alone shoot at them. Lopez still held his automatic, and in a fit of rage he emptied it at a shadow.

There was one blinding flash and a sharp report. A piercing scream and the clatter of a dropped weapon. Lopez, his right hand splintered to fragments, danced about the deck, screaming oaths.

MEN appeared on the scene. Six men, large men, all armed with submachine-guns. They backed the cowering mob against the rail and relieved them of their arms. They were handcuffed together and herded forward. Lopez, still shrieking, the sweat of agony pouring down his face, still clutching his hand, was led into a cabin. There he was met by Mr. and Mrs. Bruno Walsh, the captain, a strange young man, and . . . Jane. Lopez ceased yelling and looked about him in bewilderment.

"What the hell . . . ?" he began.

"Sit down," said the strange young man. Lopez did so, wonder-

ingly. The strange young man turned to Mr. and Mrs. Walsh. He smiled. "I can't tell you how sorry I am that Miss Brooks and I have caused you so much trouble; but it couldn't be helped."

"I think an explanation is due us," said Mr. Walsh coldly.

"It is, and I'm going to give it to you. Miss Brooks and I are Federal agents." Lopez almost swooned. "We've been working on two well organized criminal layouts for two years. One was run by Lopez here, and the other by a man named Pincus who, I think, is dead, eh, Jane?"

Jane nodded. "Yes, Bob . . . he's dead."

"I thought as much. To get on with the story. Neither of these gangs ever came up against the Federal Government, and they were too smart and too well protected to be bothered by any local government. But we determined that they should be wiped out. We decided to let dog eat dog. This we did. I won't bore you with the details; but what it comes to is this: Mr. Lopez here has kindly rid us of Public Enemy Number One, and since we can easily prove that it was his work, he has, at the same time, rid us of Public Enemy Number Two. That being himself. He will go to the chair for murder. Miss Brooks and I have been working out the plans for over-two years, and your yacht was picked at random. We simply wanted a boat which would not excite suspicion in these waters, waters which are regularly traveled by members of both gangs. If it's of any satisfaction to you to know it, you've assisted in ridding the country of two of the worst gangs in history."

Blonde Informant

By PAUL HANNA



BOB TRASK had had an hour to kill and he'd dropped into the Colonial. After twenty minutes, he'd decided that the picture stank. From the lounge he telephoned his paper, the *Globe*, and was told that he might as well take the rest of the day off. News was slack, and there would be no assignment.

He stopped in the lobby to light a cigarette and to get another look at the girl at the ticket window. She was a blonde, and a honey in any man's language!

To Bob's disappointment there was a man at the booth, his head all but thrust inside. The girl was pulling her hand away from the man's grasp and shaking her head, "No—no!"

Except for Bob, the lobby was deserted, and, for a minute, he thought he'd stumbled onto a hold-up. But the blonde laughed, and Bob changed his mind. He shrugged. Apparently, the man was the girl's boy friend. This was a hell of a time for Bob to make a play for her!

Regretfully, he took a last look.

The girl was dressed as if she were going out on a date—too flashily for a ticket-seller in a chain-movie house. But the effect was alluring, anyway. Her hair was elaborately waved and her gown was cut so low in front that it more than hinted at the lush curves beneath. Her eyes were wise, with a suggestion of naughtiness.

Bob sighed. He'd try to date her another time. He was turning away when a swarthy, dapper figure glided out from the theater. The larger man at the ticket window stiffened. The girl gave the newcomer a heavily lidded smile. "Hello, Nick."

Nick stopped. He spoke out of the corner of his mouth to the man who had been talking to the girl, and his manner was that of one addressing an inferior. In the vaulted lobby his low-spoken words carried to Bob. "Run along, Gus, and tell the boys to wait at the Greek's. I'll be there about twelve. Dolly and I've got things to do."

Gus looked sullen and there was pride in the girl's face. For a moment Bob thought Gus was going to express in action some of the hate and jealousy in his expression. In-

Quite a girl that blonde! Four separate men were interested in her—and with some of them the interest didn't stop at murder!

stead, he said, "Okay, Nick." Gazing straight ahead of him, he strode out to the street.

Bob made a show of studying the posters on the side of the lobby while he tried to place Nick. He'd seen the man or his picture somewhere. And then he knew! Nick Petrullo! The *Globe* had printed Nick's picture many times. Nick Petrullo ranked high among the leaders of the city's underworld.

Bob turned and strolled back to the door that was marked "Manager."

DUGGAN, manager of the Colonial, motioned Bob to a chair and, grinning, brought a bottle from his desk drawer without saying a word. Bob waved it back. He said, "Do me a favor, pal. Who's the cute trick on the ticket counter?"

Duggan laughed. "Burnie! Burnie. Better keep hands off! The big boss passed her on to me. He wanted her where he could keep his eye on her, but where his missus wouldn't see her and get ideas."

"Where does she live? What's her name? I won't blab."

"Okay, but 'forget who told you. Name's Dolly Hogue. Lives at the Richmond on Waverly Street—I don't know how, on her salary!"

Bob thanked him and walked out. So the head of the theater chain was interested in the blonde! And so was Nick Petrullo! And the fellow called Gus! Quite a girl that blonde! Bob wondered if he'd not be wiser to let his own interest in the girl die out.

When Nick had told Gus that he'd meet the boys at the Greek's, Bob thought he knew the place that

was meant. The Athens restaurant had a reputation for unsavory meetings. In spite of constant police surveillance, it was still a popular underworld rendezvous.

Bob's watch said ten to twelve when he sauntered in. Business was brisk, but the place wasn't crowded. Bob picked a table far back, ordered a sandwich and coffee, and looked around. He raised his eyebrows as he noticed the waiter working at the far side of the restaurant. It was the man Gus who had been kibitzing with Dolly Hogue when Nick Petrullo had appeared!

The lights in a drug store across the street went out. One after another, lights in a hotel down the way blinked off. But there was always a customer or two at the Athens. Bob dawdled over a second cup of coffee.

A policeman walked down the street, barely glancing into the restaurant on passing. Almost on his heels a sleek sedan drew up at the curb, and discharged two men. Bob recognized them both from having seen them in the line-up at Headquarters. Each was reputed to belong to Petrullo's gang.

They had no sooner seated themselves at a table on the section of the floor served by Gus than they were joined by a curly-haired young man. The three of them engaged in a whispered conference. A minute or two later Nick Petrullo slouched in and joined them.

Bob strained his ears. All he could catch of their conversation was the name "Harry Nolan," but that was enough to set him thinking. Nolan owned the chain of movie houses of which the Colonial was

Nick grabbed the gun from the girl,
and Bob knew then he better not linger!



one, and it was rumored that on the side he had a finger in a dozen other business enterprises.

The men's tones dropped lower and lower and there was no further excuse for Bob's lingering. To do so might be conspicuous.

Certain that somewhere in all that he had seen and heard there was a story, Bob headed for the Richmond, Dolly Hogue's address. In the dimly lighted vestibule he scanned the names of tenants, then ignored the automatic elevator, and walked two flights.

A faint light showed under the door of Dolly's apartment. Bob tapped gently. The door opened a

fraction of an inch. "That you, Nick?"

Bob grunted, "Uh-huh," and set his foot in the crack.

The girl's face appeared, framed in the doorway. At sight of Bob, the piquant features hardened. "What's the idea? Are you drunk? It's way after midnight! What do you want?"

Bob kept his foot in the door and grinned at her. The grin was contagious enough to soften her manner.

She said, "If I hadn't been expecting some one, I wouldn't have opened the door at all."

Bob sighed. "I know! Nick! I'm as good a man as Nick any day." He pushed past her into the room.

She said, "You know Nick?"

"Sure." His eyes swept the girl admiringly from head to foot. She wore a blue and gold kimono that was as fragile as a spider's web, that clung to every curve of her figure, and was transparent enough to conceal almost nothing. It gaped, displaying gleaming white skin.

She ignored his scrutiny. "Who are you, and what do you want here?"

He dropped into a chair. "You aren't very hospitable! I want to ask you a question, Dolly."

Her eyebrows went up at his use of her name. She asked, "Are you working for Harry Nolan?"

"Suppose I said yes? What difference would it make?"

She seated herself on the divan and Bob crossed the room and sat down beside her. He rested one hand lightly on her shoulder, and she let it stay.

There was a different look in her

eyes when she asked Bob, "What do you want to know?"

He slid closer to her and the hand on her shoulder moved until his arm was circling her. "Is Nick so important to you?"

WITH Bob's departure from the Athens the conversation of the quartette at the table had become more animated. Nick was berating the other three. "Getting yellow?" he demanded. "What's the matter with you guys? Afraid of Harry Nolan?"

The curly headed fellow answered. "Listen, boss! We're always willing to take a chance. But that guy's dynamite! Why go asking for trouble?"

Nick glared at the three of them. "Listen, you muggs. I know what I'm doing. I've been getting information from a dame that Nolan plays around with. I know it for a fact that Nolan's got a shipment of cocaine coming along about daylight—"

The waiter, Gus, bent over the table, his face set. "So Dolly told you that! If Harry Nolan ever found out she double-crossed him—"

Nick laughed harshly. "Who're you to talk about double-crossing? Haven't you been working here for a year just to get tip-offs you can pass on to me? Haven't you been straining your ears every chance you got, just like a damn' stool pigeon?"

Gus subsided. Nick went on. "What if there is trouble? That shipment that Nolan's expecting is big stuff! Grab it, and we'll all be sitting pretty. It's worth the chance. Any of you muggs getting cold feet better say so now!" He

glared around the table, hand near his armpit.

IN DOLLY HOGUE's apartment Bob Trask was really going to town. Half-heartedly, Dolly tried to push him away. Her breast was heaving and the kimono was a crumpled wreck. "You've got your nerve!" she panted.

Bob grinned and whispered in her ear. He was only guessing but her reaction proved that he was near the truth. "How much does Harry know?" she panted. "He doesn't—think—I—I'm—?"

Bob sat back in the far corner of the divan. "Don't you know what he'd do to anyone who double-crossed him?"

Fear flamed in her lovely eyes. "But I haven't! He's an old man, and a girl's entitled to some fun! Nick's never even asked me. If I ever spilled anything—" She snuggled nearer to him, and he could feel again the soft warmth of her alluring body. "Please," she pleaded, "you wouldn't give me away, would you?"

She surged against Bob so that her breast flattened and pulsated against his chest. Bob knew that she was deliberately using her body to win him to her side, but, even so, he couldn't resist the intoxication of her appeal.

Her velvety arms were twined about his neck. Her moist lips lured him as a flame lures a moth. He forgot everything but the girl in his arms. . . .

Three soft raps on the door brought them back to reality. Panic flooded Dolly's features. Her eyes glanced wildly about the room. "In

there!" She pointed desperately to the tiny bathroom, and fairly shoved Bob into it.

From behind the door, Bob could hear most of what went on, and imagine more. There was the rumbling voice of Nick Petrullo, the girl's desperate striving to be natural. Bob could picture in his mind's eye the fiery kisses, the fervid embracing.

Nick was jubilant. ". . . later than I meant, baby. The gang's going to work on that stuff you tipped me off about. . . ."

Then Dolly, anxious, pleading. "Not this time, Nick! Nolan's getting wise. If he finds out how you knew— Can't you lay off this time, Nick?"

The man laughed. "And pass up fifty grand! Not a chance! Nolan's boys won't know what hit them!"

"But Harry might suspect me! I'm afraid—"

"Why should he? Unless you've been crossing me up, same as you did him. Say! Whose hat is that?"

Bob went cold. The bathroom window was so small that the only exit was through the door. Frantically he looked around for a weapon.

He heard a thud, as if the girl had been knocked to the floor. Then Dolly's voice sounded. "Don't, Nick! A gun would wake everybody in the house! Honest, Nick, I was holding him for—"

BOB charged as the knob on the bathroom door turned. His fist sank into the gunman's belly. His left smashed to the man's jaw. A shot splintered into the woodwork behind him. He and Nick crashed

to the floor. The gun flew across the floor almost to Dolly's feet.

The two men were scrambling to their feet when she caught it up. She pointed it at Bob. Though her hand was shaking, there wasn't much likelihood that she could miss him. "Beat it!" she panted. "Before you get hurt!"

Bob started for the door. At the same time, Nick Petrullo made a grab for the gun from the side. Bob speeded.

He started down the stairs, half expecting at any minute to hear the bark of the gun and to feel lead thud into his back. Yet, halfway down, he stopped short, recognizing the man coming up. It was Gus, the waiter, another man who was interested in Dolly Hogue!

Bob saw Gus's hand slip inside his coat, saw the steel blade of a knife. Caught between knife and gun, he stood, momentarily petrified.

"Woman-stealer!" Gus cried. The knife hand swept up. Bob

ducked hopelessly. Nick Petrullo coughed throatily behind him, and only then Bob realized the knife hadn't been meant for him. Nick's gun spat flame toward the ceiling as he plunged down the stairs, blood welling from his throat.

BOB leaped past Gus and made the street.

Two minutes later he was in a phone booth on the corner. He dialed. A sleepy voice answered, "Yes, this is Inspector Lang. Who is it?"

Bob laughed. "You don't know your old pal, Trask? Listen, Dan. I called you at your home so you can make the pinch yourself." He explained briefly about the expected landing of the contraband dope and its planned hi-jacking. "And better send a couple of men to Harry Noland's house to get the big shot," he concluded. "Me, I'm going to call on a new blonde on a little unfinished business. I'll call you later."

Roger Torrey contributes
Foreign Affair
to May Private Detective
Stories

Tableau for Fright-wig

By **JAMES H. S. MOYNAHAN**



HE WAS in a bad way. I could see that by the way he looked. I took the bottle out of my desk and poured him a drink. "You better take this."

He spilled some out of the lily cup, but he managed to down most of it. I corked the bottle. "Look Jorgensen, how do you know they were trying to kill you? Couldn't it have been an accident? You'd know



She was small and lithe and young and she fought like a tiger.

about it if somebody was that sore, wouldn't you?"

"Listen!" He was getting worked up. "I told you this place I live in is a madhouse. I didn't go into details because you wouldn't believe me. When you see it, I won't have to explain."

"You're paying for this." I was getting sore myself. "Only when I take a job, I want to know what I'm getting into. Who runs this murderers' boarding house?"

"I didn't say that."

"You said a gang of nuts lived in this place and this potted plant that almost hit you was dropped by one of 'em."

back to anybody while I'm in the place. I can't tell who'll give it to me."

He shrugged. "I wish I could help you out, but I don't know a thing more."

I thought he was holding something back. It would have to wait till I got there. I stood up.

"Okay. I'll wait for my call, and after that I'll be over. You'll be all right till I get there?"

"I—I guess so. Now that I know, I'll be watching for trouble." He hesitated. "Just one thing. Watch out for Daphne."

"Daphne?"

"Madame Zeno's daughter."

A gang of nuts lived in this murderers' boarding house. The whole thing sounded like a detective's dream—until I saw Madame Zeno and her daughter . . . and the dead man!

"Sure. But I don't know which one. I don't think they're all murderers. Most of 'em are just plain cranks. Trouble is: Which ones?"

"Who runs the joint?"

"She calls herself Madame Zeno. She's all wrapped up in some new kind of religion about rhythm. Everything's rhythm. She takes in all these wacky people and half of 'em can't pay the rent—living in a dream. So she keeps 'em on. She figures she can make converts. Only, most of 'em are so busy trying to convert everybody else in the house to *their* particular monkey business, nobody pays any attention to her."

"Sounds like a detective's dream. By what you say I better not turn my

You'll see her. She wears this loose red blouse. Just don't fool with her."

"Why?"

"You'll know," was all he would say.

Madame Zeno's establishment was around the corner from the elevated, in an old quarter that was unchanged for centuries. The potted plant that had been dropped at Jorgensen from an upper story had been shoveled off the sidewalk, but bits of earth and a chipped place on the sidewalk showed where it had landed. I rang the bell. . . .

The door opened slowly. Incense hit me in the face—so heavy I didn't know if I was coughing or just choking to death.

The woman who opened the door was in character. Maybe a tough fifty, done up like a pageant-float in some kind of rainbow-colored cheese-cloth rig. I had her ticked as Madame Zeno before you could say; Neo-screwball.

"Mr. Jorgensen?" I said.

She lifted her arms dramatically and said, "Enter." Her voice gave it the bleaty quality of a Number 5 road-company Lady Macbeth.

I took my last breath of fresh air and went in. She shut the door behind me and cooed: "You may proceed. Straight ahead."

I turned right into a big room. It was a big, high ceilinged affair, with statuary, dark oils, and faded luxury. In the middle of the floor a little white-haired guy in shirtsleeves was juggling five oranges or so, and keeping up this running patter of musty gags. He didn't stop when we came in.

Down at the other end of the room, a beefy-necked individual with an oiled scalp and monocle was strutting back and forth, thundering something or other to a barefoot girl who was working on a little statue in green clay. The girl was wearing a loose red blouse. It fell away from her throat as she bent to her work. I caught my breath in spite of myself. This must be Daphne.

She seemed to be paying very little attention to the beefy-necked man's talk. The little juggler was certainly paying no attention to ours. Or Madame Zeno's. I was just listening. The Madame was putting the work on me.

". . . and wafted to your astral plane. Rhythm! That is the answer! Balm to the soul, key to—"

And so on. Nobody looked at her. Nobody looked at me. The guy with

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the oranges kept right on juggling. The guy with the razor haircut kept right on pounding his fist and talking to Daphne. Daphne cocked her head at the statue. A slender, deep-bosomed savage of a girl. I began to see what Jorgensen meant. Sooner or later this Daphne and I were going to have it out.

I WAITED for Madame Zeno to catch a breath. I was late, and Jorgensen would be worried. After five minutes it came to me the Madame didn't give a damn who I was or what I was there for.

I busted in on her spiel. "I beg your—"

The white-haired little guy in suspenders who was tossing up the oranges came over to me as if I'd been living there for six months. "I'm using little American flags in the finale," he told me. "'Course I'll admit they sat on their hands when I tried it before—that season I was on Pan time?—but they liked me in Dubuque, and I was held over a week at the Strand in Klamath Falls, and you can't argue with the public if they insist on having me when vaudeville comes back, can you?"

I said they should know their own minds and they're responsible and turned back to Madame Zeno. She'd wandered off. Not insulted. Not discouraged. She'd just wandered down to the end of the room and was gabbing with her daughter. Daphne went right on working, and from where I sat was paying her strictly no mind whatever.

I was starting to get mad. I thought: "A fine wacks' nest I've drifted into!" I barged down to

where Madame was barbering with Daphne. *Somebody* was going to tell me where Jorgensen's room was!

The shaven-skulled individual in the boots—I forgot about the boots—strode over to me, shot his palm up as if he had to leave the room and shouted: "Hail!"

I said I thought it'd turn to rain. He didn't get it or bother with it. The boot-heels clicked together and he fretted with his right hand as if he was flicking a riding-crop against them. "Are you Aryan?" he shouted at me.

"Well," I said. "Of course Mother always said it was the Spring—and then there was Paris, and a moon, and the madness in her blood, and what with the Laird forced to sell the hounds and all, I never did get through *Heder*—"

"We must abide by the wishes of our Leader!" he shouted. "Today it is Europe—tomorrow it will be the world!" He clicked the heels together again, saluted and shouted: "von Turdish—at your service!"

"Reilly," I said. "Don't mention it—I hope."

He stooped to flick a grain of dust off the boots. I took that opportunity to walk over to Daphne. *Somebody* must make sense around this joint!

AT MY question Daphne straightened quickly and her breast rolled around under the red blouse. I swallowed and repeated my question: "Do you happen to know where I can locate a guy named Jorgensen in this charming retreat?"

Madame Zeno got that glaze over her eyes that people get when they know other people have stopped

listening to them. She wandered off. Daphne looked me over

I looked her over. Slim through the waist, not quite so slim through the hips, and through the chest—not stingy, not overdone. That red pouty mouth alone would drive a guy mad.

She had a hot, husky voice to match it, too. "You must be new here?"

"I'm learning," I said. "What time are the treatments given?"

"Treatments!" She laughed. "There aren't any *treatments!*"

"You needn't laugh. It's an idea."

What bothered me was the damn' blouse. One button was missing. It's not that she was wearing nothing underneath. She had a way of moving her shoulders that put a strain on the next lower one no button should be called upon to bear.

She waved a clay-smeared hand at the stairs leading up from the hallway outside. "Oh, just ask anybody. If you can find Mr. Vox, he might point it out to you—he's Mr. Jorgensen's employer. I think he has the room beyond the bath on the second—or is it the third? The one with the paints in the tub. Or wait. Somebody's keeping a pet crocodile in *that* tub. You better just ask somebody up there."

I thanked her—a little weakly, I'm afraid, and said I was sure I'd find him. She went back to her sculpturing.

After all it might not be a bad idea to look over some of these roomers while I had an excuse. Jorgensen had said one of 'em must have tried to kill him. I wished now he'd given me the full story. I didn't like going up against strange cranks who didn't call their shots.

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was hooked by his leash to the newel post at the first floor barked and snapped at my ankles. I went past him down a long, narrow hall—corridor would be better—with thick green carpet in a strip down the center, and a lot of closed doors.

I figured I might as well bust in on somebody. The worst that could happen would be a door slammed in my face, and what's that to an old Fuller Brush man?

THE first door I knocked on had this guy in a cutaway. I asked for Jorgensen.

He said something. It sounded like Russian. Far as I was concerned it was. My education in languages stopped with Hog Latin.

I gave him a prop smile and went on to the next cell. My knock brought a Faded Lily with a black velvet ribbon around her throat, a Pekinese, and a finger stuck in a volume of poems. I could just make out the title: *Lilacs and Anchors*.

This lady was more helpful. Too helpful. She informed me between titters she was just about to brew a cup of tea, and wouldn't I step in and join her?

I'd just as soon be eaten alive by spiders as step inside this giggling creature's lair. I made some excuse and blew. I knew no more than when I knocked on the door.

The next room was acrobats—millions of 'em! They were too busy with one of those firemen's wall-climbing drills that look like rose trellises to bother with me. I moved on to the next tenant—a stout number in an outsize pink slip with chins who slammed the door in my face. I thought: "This is where I came in!"

Nothing daunted—to exaggerate a little—I tried one more knock.

This one gave me no tumble at all. For some reason this got me excited. I knocked harder. When no one answered my third knock, I went in.



THE worst thing was the blood. It seemed to be everywhere — on the blankets, on the pillow, and especially on the hairy chest of the man who lay dead in the bed. I went over to him. A powder-flecked hole was torn in Jorgensen's throat between chin and Adam's apple.

My scalp was cold. My stomach turned over. I went to a window, shoved it open, and sucked in air, fresh air. When I was sure I wasn't going to be sick, I turned back.

The room was in order. I looked around for a gun. I couldn't find one. The limp hand on the coverlet was still warm.

I wet my lips with a tongue that was suddenly dry and hot. No one had left this house in the past half hour or more. That meant something I didn't like to think about.

The killer was still in the house!

He was in the house—a house full of wacks and screwballs that made looking for him like looking for a particular cop with flat feet! Worse, the killer had taken his pistol. And worse yet, if this killing was any sample, he'd be the kind that would catch you asleep, or with your back turned.

I won't talk about nasty ways to die—if this was a sample, this bird would know them all.

I went down into the living room.

Daphne saw my face. She halted her clay-smeared hands in mid-air.

"Steady," I said. "Something's happened to young Jorgensen. Something bad. Very bad. . . ."

Her eyes jerked. "He's dead!" She clutched my arm with fingers like a vise. "You're sure it's Jorgensen? You know him? Third floor, the end room?"

I nodded.

Her hand slipped from my arm. I caught her awkwardly, feeling her shirt slide under my arms, my fingers touch her warm side. A pang of pleasure shot through me unwittingly.

Madame Zeno began uttering little short cries. "Oh! Oh! Oh! Poor Mr. Jorgensen! Oh, Daphne, my poor child! My poor, sweet lamb!

"And it would have been such an *ideal* match! Such a fine, promising young man! Oh, I'll never get over this! The Rhythm of my Life is shattered—"

The shaven man in the boots, von Turdish, came over and clicked his heels. "Permit me." He started to help me with the girl, lying inert against my chest, hair drooping.

I thanked him. "I think I can manage. If you'll move those pillows on the sofa?"

He did. I laid her on it and put her legs up. They were beautifully formed, slim through the bare ankles and curving up to a rounded calf. The loose skirt had slid down from one knee to show the long thigh, white and flawless. I straightened her clothing, made her comfortable, and turned.

It was then I noticed the pistol in the shaven man's hip pocket. A revolver—by its bulging outline.

The little man who had been juggling oranges shook his head.

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"Those Syrians! It was their fault!" He snorted. "Stealing all that money and claiming they thought it was a poor box! No wonder the phone company took it out!"

A man wandered in without looking at anybody. A shawl was thrown over his head and shoulders. His feet were in torn carpet slippers. He was eating soggy baked beans out of a cracked bowl with a fork. The juggler went over to him, spoke briefly, came back.

"This man says Mr. Vox, on the second floor, has a private phone in his room. Perhaps he'll let you use it."

"What's this Vox look like?"

"Oh, a fine-looking man. Usually wears a cutaway and—"

I stared. "That guy! But he only speaks Russian, or something. Doesn't Vox speak English? I thought he was Jorgensen's boss?"

The juggler smiled. "That's just double-talk. He's sick of being bothered and he takes that means of getting rid of strangers. I'll go up with you, if you like."

"Thanks," I said. "I don't believe I got your name?"

"Partridge. I did a single—the Great Partridge, Illusions. Opened in one—"

"Yes," I said hastily. I took his arm firmly.

The man in the cutaway opened the door wide when he recognized the juggler. "Oh, you, Partridge!" he said in a relieved tone, "I thought it was one of Madame's protegés!" He looked expectantly at me, and the juggler explained: "This is Mr. Reilly, Mr. Vox. He'd like to use your phone to call the police. Something terrible's happened, Vox. I don't know how to tell you. It's

young Jorgensen, from your bank. He's—he's—"

Vox gripped his arm. "What, man? Speak up! Don't tell me he's committed suicide! His books were in perfect order. That is, I thought they were—"

Partridge shook his head. "He's been murdered, Vox."

I turned from the collection of silver cups, blue ribbons, and photographs of track teams and sprinters on the wall. "That's not the worst of it, Vox. Whoever did it hasn't left the house. Unless I miss my guess, he won't be taken without shooting. He's still got his pistol, you see. I looked all around young Jorgensen's room and I couldn't find a gun."

Vox's face was sober. "I'd better call the bank. Have his books checked. No knowing what's been going on down there. I won't believe it till I see it though. Jorgensen seemed like a mighty honest chap."

"Mind if I call the police first? This is murder, you know."

I DIALED Headquarters. Waiting, I scribbled doodles on a scratch pad. There wasn't much room. Vox had it covered with notes. "Longchamps, . 1.15. Campaign Committee. 5,000 tonnage. Alumni Asso. Excalibur VII—" I was looking for a phone number that might turn out a blonde when the desk came on the wire. I gave 'em the story and they said they'd send somebody right over. I hung up and turned to the men.

"Don't s'pose anybody'd have a gun I could borrow?"

Partridge said: "I've one I use in the act, but I haven't any shells for it. You can borrow it if you like."

Vox laughed. "I was going to

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offer you a starting pistol, but that's just as bad."

"Worse," I said. "If it's the usual kind?"

He nodded. "This one's for outdoor meets—I do quite a lot of officiating. Used to be a sprinter in college.

"I was thinking you might use it to scare people with. You can't harm anybody: it uses only blank cartridges."

"I'm afraid that wouldn't be much help," I thanked him. "Look—you wouldn't have an idea who might have killed Jorgensen? Assuming it wasn't suicide?"

I was watching him closely. He looked at me in bewilderment. "Not suicide? But how could it be anything but murder? If it had been suicide, the gun would have been there, wouldn't it?"

"Unless somebody that thought a lot of him happened to get there first and remove it."

"Why would they do that?"

"Well—why do so many families go to such pains to prove the deceased met his death 'while cleaning a rifle'? Maybe to make it look better. I don't know. It's just an idea."

He shrugged. "I can't think of anybody in this house who'd want to do that unless it'd be Daphne. Madame Zeno's daughter. Do you know her?"

"We've met. Why should she want to protect his memory?"

Vox shrugged. "They were friends. Madame Zeno swears they're engaged. Daphne says no. Take your choice."

"Well, if it isn't suicide, who is there in the house that'd have reason to murder Jorgensen?"

Partridge and Vox exchanged glances.

"I won't breathe it to a soul," I promised. "Sure as my name's Walter Winchell."

Vox shook his head at Partridge. "*He* wouldn't have killed him. Jealous or no jealous, I don't think he'd go as far as *murder*."

"What's he carry the gun for, then?" I said.

"Oh, *that!*" the juggler said. "He just—" He broke off, colored. "Who're you talking about?"

The phone rang.

VOX crossed to it, lifted the receiver. "Hello? . . . Yes, speaking. . . . *Sunk!* . . . But—but— . . . I know, but— . . . Well, just hold everything. I'll be down."

He hung up slowly, and got unsteadily out of the chair. The juggler said quickly: "Something wrong?"

Vox' face was white. He stared at the wall. "What? . . . Oh, no, thanks. It's nothing. Nothing at all."

I said, watching him: "That starting-pistol. I think I'd like to borrow it after all, if it's all right with you. I'm going to have to take a gun away from a man, and he may not want to give it up."

Vox said dazedly: "Pistol? . . . Oh, yes. Oh, yes, sure." He went to a desk, opened a drawer and took out a large revolver with a black butt and gleaming nickel barrel. I took it, broke it open.

He held the drawer open. "There's blanks for it here if you want them. They be any use to you? It wouldn't take slugs if you had them."

I shrugged. "Might as well load the thing. The noise alone helps sometimes." I thumbed cartridges into the cylinder.

We went out into the hall and Vox fumbled nervously with the big, old-fashioned key until he discovered he was using the wrong one. Going down the stairs he almost stumbled. Partridge started to let me pass. I waved him ahead. "That's all right. You first."

In the bottom hall, Vox started for the front door. I stepped in his path.

"I should have told you. The police don't want anybody to leave till they get here."

He stared. "But I've got to get down to my office, right away! I'll be right back. You can tell them—"

I shook my head. Leave, and they'll go after you. More, they'll make it tough for you to prove you didn't kill Jorgensen."

"But— You don't understand! This—I wish I could say more. This is a business matter. It involves—it involves a considerable amount—"

"Call up and explain the circumstances. Look, Vox. We're all under suspicion. Why should one of us be allowed to leave, and the others, including maybe the murderer, have to stay?"

His shoulder drooped. "I suppose you're right."

I turned to Partridge. "Tell Miss Daphne the police are on their way and to see nobody leaves. Tell her to call me if she wants help."

He nodded, went into the living room. I turned to Vox. "Can I use your phone again after you're through?"

He nodded. We went upstairs.

In Vox's room, I waited while he called the bank and talked with a

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subordinate. After that I got my office on the wire. The girl said the boss was tied up with somebody from the Ship Underwriters. I told her to put me through anyway, and she did. The boss was too busy with what looked like a job of sabotage to listen much—some ship had gone down at her pier. I asked her name.

"Excalibur VII," he said. "Why?"

"Dammed if I know," I said.

I hung up and went back to Vox. "This loss of yours. Mind saying whether Jorgensen had anything to do with it?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid I'll have to say *no comment*. Some of these things are confidential, you know. It wouldn't be fair to our clients."

"That's fair enough," I said. "Well, I've got a dirty job to do. Let's go downstairs till I get it over with."

He locked the door and we went downstairs. In the living room I drew Daphne aside.

"Could I have a word with you in private?"

She nodded. We went out into the hallway. I faced her. She looked distrustfully at me under lowered brows. Her breast lifted to peak the flannel blouse. Her hands were at her back.

"What have you got in your hand?" I said.

That was wrong. I should have made a grab for it. She turned half sidewise. A hand flashed to her bosom.

I couldn't take a chance. I was figuring on a gun. I jumped for her.

She bit me. My hand brushed loose flannel, resilient flesh, and was deep in warm softness. Daphne fought almost silently, twisting, fum-

ing, biting at my free hand with little sharp teeth. I felt something give—her blouse. She was strong and lithe, and young. I groped, felt something crackle—paper. I clutched, came away with it—a letter.

She lay panting against the wall, blouse open halfway to the waist, head thrown back and aside, a wrist to her forehead. I said angrily:

"A fine time for tricks! With a man murdered upstairs! I thought you had a gun! . . . Tell me why you didn't want me to see this and maybe I'll give it back to you without opening it."

She looked at me, surprised. Our gaze held. Her eyes were the first to drop. They fell on the disorder of her blouse. Color flooded her cheeks. She overlapped the edges across her bosom.

I said reasonably: "All I asked you out for was to find out if young Jorgensen ever said anything to you about irregularities in his books at the bank?"

She said sullenly: "You've got the wrong idea. Sigurd and I were friends. He has—he had a sweetheart. That letter is to her. I wanted to get it out before the police—"

"That doesn't answer my question."

"Then all I can tell you is he seemed upset at times, but when I'd ask him if anything was wrong, he'd say: 'I hope not,' or something

vague like that. He used to talk to me about his sweetheart in the old country, and it seemed a shame to think of policemen laughing over his love letter—the last lines she'd ever have from him."

I handed her the envelope. "We can go into this later. You're a loyal friend, Daphne, I'll give you that."

She took the letter. Suddenly her lips were on my cheek, and she was gone.

IN THE big salon I went up to von Turdish.

"Cleaning up young Jorgensen's murder. Care to let me have a look at that pistol in your back pocket?"

He stiffened. His heels clicked. "By what right do you demand this?"

I waved a hand. "You weren't listening. I *asked* you. I didn't *demand* anything. If you want to cooperate, fine and dandy. If you want to get tough about it, that's your privilege. I hope you've got a permit for it."

"What business is it of yours?"

I was trying to be nice. This buzzard didn't understand that kind of talk. In his little world everything was fight or submit—nothing in between. There was no point arguing with him.

I knew I was wrong. I said: "Maybe I'll make it my business. Let's see the gun."

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"I'll show it to you!" he shouted, and reached back.

Daphne screamed. Vox cried out: "No! No!" I pawed for the gun in my pocket. I had it leveled at von Turdish before I remembered it was only a noise-maker, shooting blanks.

VON TURDISH saw the gun in my hand and lost his head. He shot in a blind panic. I squeezed the trigger of my own toy in reflex.

The din shook the walls. I saw von Turdish flinch instinctively. He brought up his gun again.

This was a sucker's game—with me on the short end. I slammed the starting-pistol at his face and dived at his legs. He stumbled backward. His gun boomed again. I was thrashing around. I didn't know if I was hit or what. I groped around, got my fingers on his gun. It scorched them. I had to let go. He tried to bring up the muzzle. I grabbed his wrist, got a lock on it.

His gun was in my hand.

I stood up. Vox hurried over. "You all right?"

I nodded. Partridge said in a frightened voice: "You think he shot Jorgensen with it?"

I shook my head. "No. Not with this. This isn't the gun that was used."

They stared at me. Vox said, puzzled: "How—why not?"

"Look at it," I said. "This is a man's gun. Shoot that off under your chin and see what happens to the top of your head."

"You mean a woman shot him?"

All eyes swung to Madame Zeno.

I took my time. I was still shaken. There was more to come.

"Not necessarily."

"A woman's gun, then? A twenty-two, you mean?"

I shook my head.

Vox said, laughing sharply: "What, then? Speak up, man! Is this a guessing game?"

"For some people, maybe. Not for you, Vox."

He squinted. "What are you driving at?"

"Why'd you get so excited this afternoon right after the Excalibur sank at her pier?"

He thumbed his chest. "Mc?"

"Her name and tonnage was scribbled on your phone pad. When someone called from your office you got all excited. You repeated the word, 'Sunk!' And you came away all upset."

"So what?"

"Ever hear of people, Vox, that buy up old tubs, load 'em with cargo for the war zone at the high freight rates they're paying, insure to the limit, and let the consignee take the risk?"

"What's this got to do with me? Do you know what it costs to buy up even the cheapest of those 'old tubs', as you put it?"

"Right. It takes hundreds of thousands. You haven't that much money. Your bank has. What was to stop you from risking the bank's funds in a wild gamble on the chance of a terrific take? Maybe I should say: *Who* was to stop you?"

I WAS sure he hadn't a gun, but I should have remembered 1929. These babies didn't tough it out; they jumped it out—out the window and down sixteen stories.

Vox followed the pattern. He had the little pills out of his pocket and

into his mouth before anybody knew what it was all about. The poison acted fast, whatever it was.

The police found us like that, huddled around his dead body. They took von Turdich away. He was innocent. They took him to a place where an innocent man can't hurt himself. The psychiatrists had some name for it, like Delusions of Grandeur. He'd been brooding on it too long. Now, they tell me, he thinks *Hitler's* crazy. *He's* Hitler!

Daphne decided to show the letter to the police after all. As it happened, it gave enough of the story to prove Vox had killed Jorgensen when the young employee had found out what his boss was doing with the bank's money.

I remembered then how Vox had got his keys mixed. We searched him. The other key was Jorgensen's.

"But," Daphne said later, "Why do you say Vox killed him with the starting-pistol? I thought you said it fired only blanks?"

"That's right," I said. I crossed the room to where my library of books on crime lined one wall. I took down Hans Gross, *System der Kriminalistik*, the English translation: ". . . Serious effects may be produced by the explosive gasses from a blank shot, i. e., without projectile. . . . Naturally in such cases the muzzle of the barrel must be placed directly under the chin or mouth. It is not, therefore, impossible that a murder may be committed in this way, and all the more likely as it lends itself easily to the suspicion of suicide; it is a fair supposition that a person asleep, stupified, or bound, may thus be killed by a blank charge fired point-blank."

"I sec," Daphne said thoughtfully.



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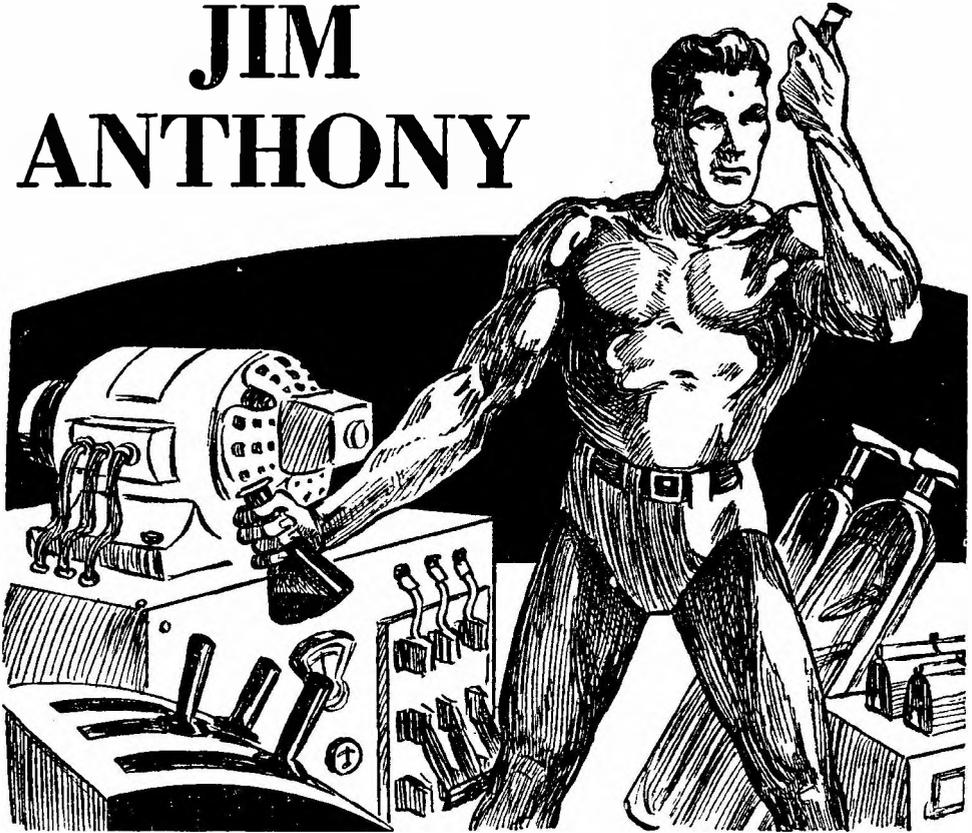
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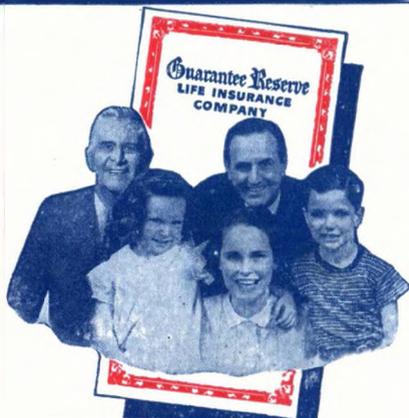
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