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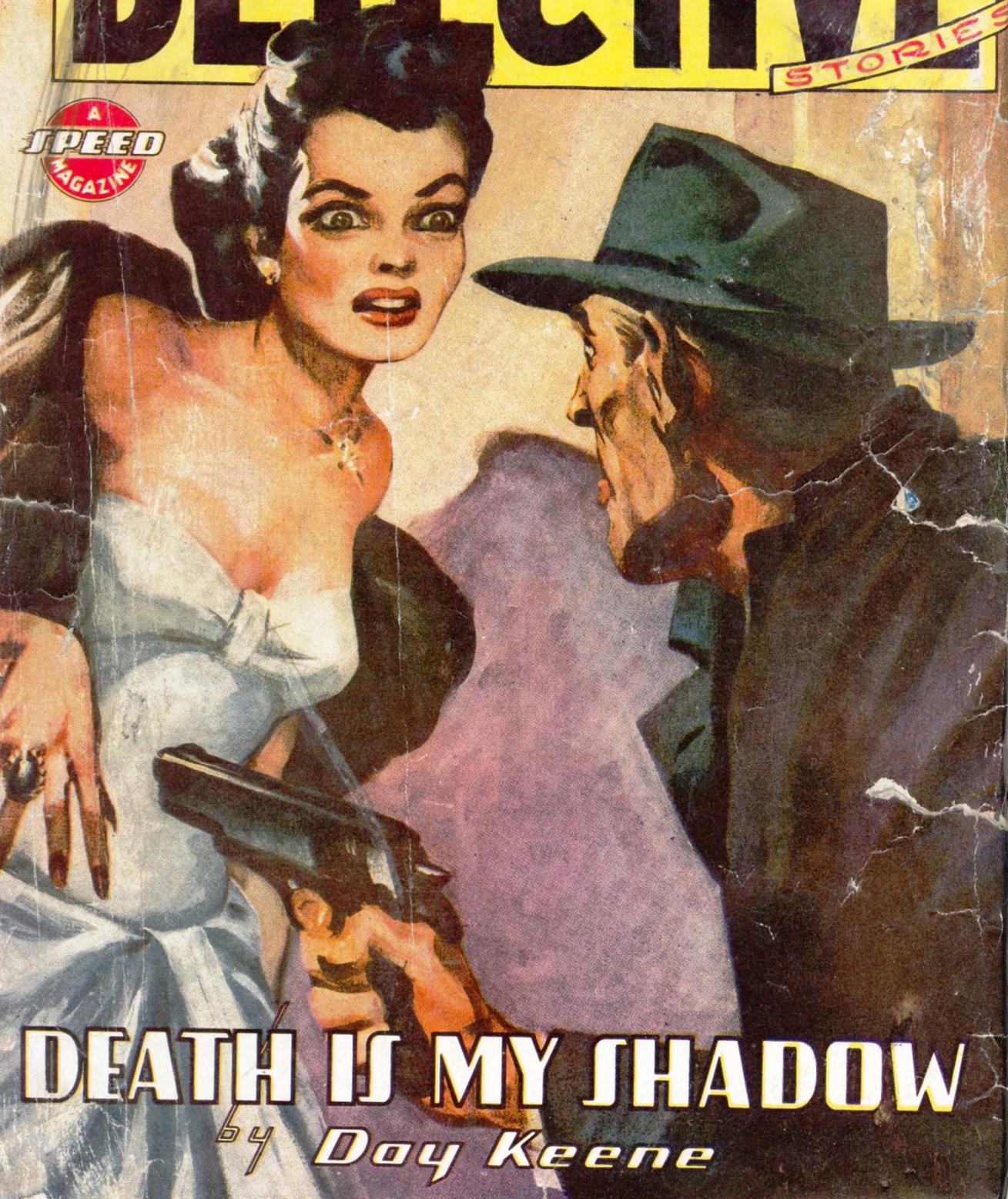
March 15¢

DETECTIVE

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STORIES

A
SPEED
MAGAZINE



DEATH IS MY SHADOW

by *Doc Keene*

OUTGUESS THE WEATHERMAN

AMAZING FORECASTER PREDICTS THE WEATHER 24 HOURS IN ADVANCE



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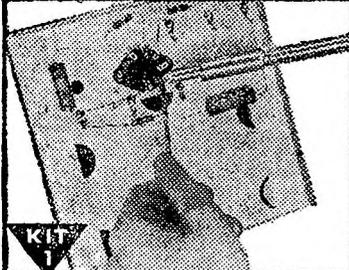
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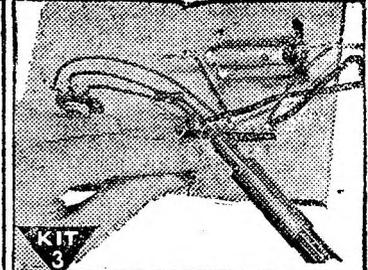
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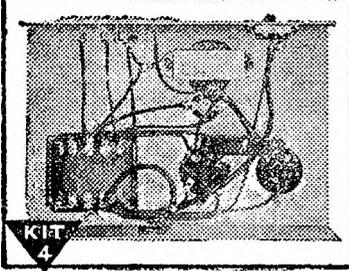
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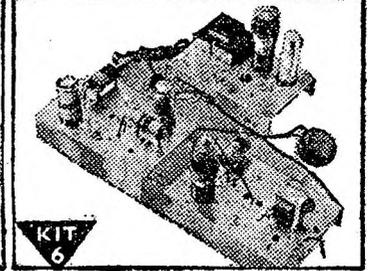
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You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



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GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH RECEIVER SERVICING

Win Rich Rewards in Radio



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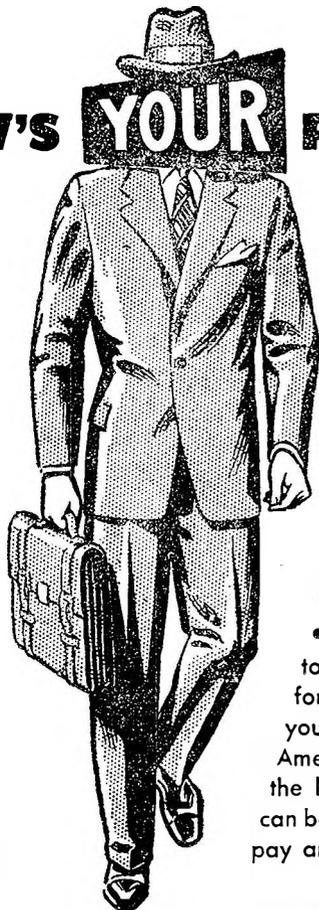
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DISCOUNT TO DISCHARGED VETERANS—SPECIAL TUITION RATES FOR MEMBERS OF THE ARMED FORCES

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T O
A M E R I C A
By

COL. EVANS F. CARLSON, USMC

THE boys are beginning to come home again. They are no longer boys; they are men matured by struggle and death, by hardships and dangers shared in common. They have seen their comrades fall; they have suffered wounds and illness. All these things have left their mark.

In the foxholes and the jungles, on the sea and in the air, men have met and judged one another. There is no better place to judge truly one's fellow man and to know what makes him tick than the close confines of ship, plane and tank, or the blinding field of battle. There the non-essentials fall away; only fundamentals remain.

It has been said that there are no atheists in the foxholes. I tell you that there are no distinctions of race, religion or color in the foxholes. For these are the non-essentials; not the fundamentals. When men have faced death together, when they have shared a common struggle and a common

cause, the color of a man's skin, the particular church he goes to, the country from which his parents came, no longer matter. It is the man himself who counts; and nothing else.

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When these men come home, they expect to find a land where the same things hold true. They are not going to stand by idly and see their buddy discriminated against or sneered at because of his skin, his creed or his nativity. They are going to take seriously the immortal words of the Declaration of Independence: "All men are created free and equal!"

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DEATH IS MY

Sometimes it's plenty tough to live up to a promise made to a friend, especially when murder is involved. But Raoul Danton was no ordinary guy. He had nerve and he just had to stick to his word for Johnny

CHAPTER I

Who's Dead?



RIGHT from the very start there was, to Raoul Danton, an air of unreality about the whole affair. The ground was too high. The sky was too near. A man could most reach up and touch the sun. Still, beyond and above the station platform the train from which he had just disembarked wound on even higher up the mountain until it disappeared, seemingly, into the clouds.

Below him, and angling to his right, Hardrock's single main business street had been built in a winding gorge carved out of the mountains by some prehistoric river. Patient burros, geldings, mares, stood side by side with Cadillacs, Buicks, Fords. The air was raucous with the rumbling of ore crushers, fetid with the smell of the smelters. Over all hung a tense air of expectancy.

There was no one at the station to meet him. He had not expected to be met. It was the first time he had ever been in Hardrock. No one had known he was coming, not even the girl whom he had come to see. And she would not be pleased when he had told why he had come. He had come to tell her that Johnny was dead.

He stood, a young Merchant Marine with a bandaged head, an incongruous blue island in the swirling sea of returning service men and sombrero wearing civilians, making certain that he had not forgotten Johnny's message.

"Tell her that Oakhurst has cashed in his chips."

That was all. But Johnny had said that



His fist swung back, and he froze there like the statue of a discus thrower, as Danton drew a gun from his pocket.

she would understand. He hoped so. He didn't. All that he knew about it beside the message were the simple instructions that Johnny had given him before his

SHADOW

By
DAY KEENE



numbed fingers no longer able to sustain their unequal battle against the sea had

slipped from the edge of the punctured life raft.

He was to go to a cafe called the Golden Eagle and ask for the Dutchess. He would know her when he saw her. She would be small and dark and the most beautiful woman whom he had ever seen. He was to invite her into a booth and order two Paradise Cocktails. Then he was to tell her that Oakhurst had cashed in his chips.

He walked a few steps with the crowd, the high mountains in the distance danc-

ing in the shimmering sun, hurting his eyes, making him slightly dizzy. He had left the hospital too soon. The head doctor had warned him so. But he had promised Johnny. And the Dutchess, whatever she was to Johnny, would want to know. He hoped that his mind would stay right until he had delivered his message. Most of the time it was fine. But there were times, especially when he became excited, when his head still hurt so badly that everything became confused. Sometimes he thought he was a boy again in the Louisiana marshes with the long gray moss dripping from the cypress and his mother and father alive. Other times he was back in oil smeared salt water, watching the boys drop off one by one, begging Johnny to hang on ten minutes, five minutes, even a minute longer. At still other times when one of the spells came on he was merely confused and a trifle frightened for fear that his mind might never be wholly well again.

A passing sombreroed man clapped his back good naturedly. "Quite a ways from the sea, aren't you, son?"

"Yes, sir," Danton smiled.

The man walked on a few steps beside him. "Stranger in town, son?"

Danton admitted that he was. He also admitted that he was looking for the Golden Eagle and the rancher's cordiality faded.

"You can't miss it," he said curtly. "Just follow your nose until you smell the worst clip joint that you have ever smelled. Then walk right in and be taken."

He walked on stiffly, his high heeled boots making sharp clean taps on the platform brick. Danton followed more slowly. So the Golden Eagle was a clip joint. So what? Whatever he did he must not allow himself to become excited or confused, at least not until his message was delivered.

A block from the station a lean, well-dressed, dark-complexioned man turned casually from the car he had just parked, looked sharply at Danton's face, then crossed the walk, his hand extended, a wry smile on his lips. "So that's where you've been holed up, eh? In the Merchant Marine. Smart boy."

Danton paused a moment before answering. The explanation was simple. The man

had mistaken him for some one else. He thought he knew him, just as many men, shipmates of both, had mistaken him and Johnny several times when they had made liberty together. Not that he and Johnny looked alike. They didn't. Their only similiarity had been that they had been of an age, size, general build, and both had had red hair.

"I'm sorry. But I'm afraid that you've made a mistake," he said finally.

The dark man withdrew his hand. His teeth were white in his face. "No, I don't think so," he said. "But if that is the way you're going to play it, shoot the works." He added, grudgingly, "Maybe you can make it stick. You always were a nervy gambler."

He got back in his car and drove away. Danton watched him down the street. The man was out of his mind. He wished he knew whom the man had thought that he resembled. He considered Johnny, this being Johnny's home town. But the dark man had said, "*You always were a nervy gambler.*" And Johnny would never touch cards, not even when the boys had played for matches only.

He was wearing his pea jacket. The afternoon sun was hot. He felt suddenly faint and realized that he had had nothing to eat since his evening meal in the diner. When he met the Dutchess he would have to drink a cocktail. There was no telling what a cocktail would do to him on an empty stomach. He had to have food of some kind.

A half block down the street he spotted a clean cafe.

SITTING at the counter he ordered a full meal. The food was good, well cooked, and inexpensive. Beside himself, the only person in the place was the plain-faced young waitress who also seemed to double as the cook.

He enjoyed his food and said so. The girl was pleased. He liked the way she smiled. There was nothing flip or hard about her. She wasn't as pretty as many girls he had known but her figure was better than most and her eyes were the biggest and the brownest that he had ever seen.

He said, "What with serving the kind of food you do I should think the place would be jammed."

She told him the place was new, that she owned it, and that she hoped that it would catch on, adding what the rancher on the station platform had said, that he was a long ways from the sea. "We don't see many sailors."

Then she wanted to know if he lived in town.

He said that he did not. "I'm just delivering a message for a buddy of mine. A Johnny Thompson." He added, as an afterthought, "He was drowned."

She said, "Oh." But the name seemingly made no impression.

He considered asking if she knew of a Johnny Oakhurst. But Johnny had impressed upon him that the name of Oakhurst was for the ears of the Dutchess only.



The raft swept into a wave, and he fought his way to the surface.

"Don't ask any questions, Tom," he had begged. "Just take my papers and do as I ask you, please."

The good food in his mouth tasted sour.

Sudden hot tears sprang to his eyes. The stool on which he was sitting began to rock like a raft in a heavy sea. His face was green.

The girl, whose name he had learned was Martha, said, "You're sick."

He shook his head doggedly. "No." He couldn't afford to be sick. He wouldn't be sick. He wouldn't let his mind wander until he had delivered his message. He owed Johnny that much and more. Johnny had saved his life, not once but twice.

Martha laid her hand on the back of his. "You poor fellows. Honest to God, when I think of all that you've been through and then how some of us gripe when we're asked to give blood or buy a bond—"

He reversed the position of their hands, admitting frankly, "I like you. Look. My train back doesn't come through until midnight. I don't suppose that we, well, maybe could go to a movie or something?"

She said she would be pleased to go to a movie with him and arranged to meet him at eight o'clock, then laughed. "But I don't even know your name."

"It's Raoul," he told her. "Raoul Danton. Way back somewhere we were French."

He finished his meal and left feeling much better than he had. She was a darn nice kid. And it was just like the doctor had said. Having four freighters shot out from under a man and spending sixty-two hours in the water wasn't exactly a nerve treatment. It was bound to do things to a man's system. But if he took it easy and refused to allow the things he had seen to get him, it was only a matter of time before they would begin to fade.

HE FOUND the Golden Eagle in the next block. It was a big, pretentious, place. Cappers were openly barking the gambling games inside. Hard-eyed, overly made-up, girls with set smiles and calculating eyes sat at its tables and on stools along the bar.

Its bar seemed a half block long. And clip joint or not, the Golden Eagle was popular. He walked the length of the bar trying to find a spot where he could elbow in to inquire about the Dutchess without having to talk over some stranger's shoulder.

He thought he had found such a spot and stood up to the bar only to accidentally joggle the elbow of a half-drunken miner

beside him. The miner turned, indignant, laying down the law.

"Washa big idea? You returning service men think you own the earth? You think that—?" He stopped, abruptly, his bleared eyes growing round as if he had seen a ghost. "God help me, I didn't mean it," he apologized. "I—I didn't know you were back. I didn't realize—"

Incoherent with fright he fled up the bar toward the door, peering back fearfully over his shoulder. Cursing inwardly, Danton wished he knew what local tough lad he resembled and turned back to the barman. "I would like to see the Dutchess," he told him.

The barman gulped visibly. "Yes, sir. Of course, sir. Right this way, sir."

Danton paralleled his course down the bar. Sweat beaded the barman's cheeks. He seemed anxious to get him out of sight. By the time he had reached the bar's end the man was already opening a door leading into a small hall that led, in turn, into a good sized office.

There was a man and a girl in the room. Danton recognized the Dutchess on sight. She was, as Johnny had said she would be, small and dark and the most beautiful woman whom he had ever seen. And as he walked into the office she was kissing a tall, bronzed-faced, heavy-set man passionately. The man was the first to see him. The color drained from his face leaving it a sickly yellow. His hands left the small of the girl's back and hung stiffly at his sides.

"Don't shoot, John," he begged. "I can explain."

Danton doubted it very much but didn't bother to say so. He was anxious to complete his mission and be on his way. He could spend the afternoon in the Home Cafe, and willing. No returning service man who had a claim on her would ever return to find Martha in the arms of some other man.

The dark haired girl cried, "John!" Then her big eyes clouded with doubt she walked toward Danton with the lithe grace of a black leopard he had once seen in a zoo. "You're not John," she accused.

"I never said I was," he said simply. He

went through the ritual as he had promised. "But I am speaking to the Dutchess?"

She said, "You are."

He cleared his throat, feeling like a fool. "Then if I might have the pleasure of your company for a moment, Miss, I'd like to order some Paradise Cocktails and deliver a personal message."

She shook her head. "To hell with the cocktails." Her eyes were suddenly worried. "You've come to tell me that—" She turned abruptly to the big man. "Get out. And stay out until I call you."

He protested, "But—"

She repeated, "Get out!"

He left.

"Now," she told Danton.

He formed the words in his mind before he spoke them. "I was to tell you that Oakhurst has cashed in his chips."

She showed no visible signs of emotion as she said, "I see." Her eyes never leaving his face she pushed a button on the desk. "I believe we'll have that cocktail after all." She spoke through the office-bar annunciator ordering a bottle of rye and two glasses. When they were alone again she poured two stiff drinks and said, "Now tell me about it, sailor."

HE DRANK with her, embarrassed not to, then told her as gently as he could how Johnny had died. There had been seven survivors at first. One by one the sea had torn them from the raft. "He was using the name of Thompson," he told her. "It was the third ship we had been on together. He saved my life twice."

Her reaction was not what he expected. She said, between clenched teeth, "A hero, eh?"

There seemed nothing more for him to say.

He took the oil skin wrapped packet of papers from his jacket and laid it on the desk. She fingered it, her eyes still on his face. She seemed to be making some decision.

"You've been sick, eh, sailor?"

He said, "Yes'm," and finished his drink. He touched his bandaged head. "Mentally like." He added quickly, "Not real crazy bad. I just get kind of confused."

She poured two more drinks and sat on the desk facing him. "Married?"

He admitted he was not.

"And your parents?"

He explained that they had died when he was young. "I was just a little shirt-tailed boy." He shuffled his feet, eager to be gone. "But now if you don't mind, Miss, I think I—"



He stared with unseeing eyes.

She said, "Wait."

There was something about her. He waited.

Her face lost its strained expression, became cynically amused. She handed him the drink he had set aside. "Drink up, Johnny. You have it coming. You don't know me, you poor devil, do you?"

"I—" he began, and stopped. He had done fine so far. He mustn't become confused. "Yes. You're the Dutchess," he admitted. "I knew you as soon as I saw you. Johnny said you were small and dark, and beautiful."

She drained her glass and set it aside. Her voice was a caress. "And you still think I'm beautiful, Johnny?"

Danton fought rising panic. His name wasn't Johnny. It was Raoul. It was Johnny who had died. His hands had slipped off the raft less than twenty minutes before the Navy plane had spotted him.

"Yes. I think you're real pretty," he admitted. "But—"

She got up off the desk and put her arms around his neck. Her lips were less than an inch away. Her body was softly familiar. Sudden tears had filled her eyes. "Oh, my poor darling. What have they done to you? Tell me that you know me, that you still love me."

Her lips moist and slightly parted stopped his protest. Her perfume was powder to his senses. "Maybe I am mad," he thought. "Maybe I am Johnny. Maybe it was Raoul who died."

But he knew better.

"Tell me you love me," she insisted.

He tried to loosen her arms from his neck. He wasn't mad. He wouldn't be. It was Johnny who had died. And she was Johnny's girl.

She clung to him possessively. "No, Johnny. Please. Don't be silly. You've been hurt. Let me make you well." She cupped his face between her hands and kissed him hard. Her voice was subtly evil. "Trust me. Believe in me, Johnny."

When she released him he leaned against the desk fighting a wave of whiskey and emotion induced nausea. For a time the floor rocked badly. He was back in the open sea, waves slapping at his mouth, men screaming and praying around him. Then all sound and motion stopped. Long beards of gray Spanish moss hung dreamily over the bayou.

A wry smile on her lips the girl walked to the door of the office, called, "Charlie," softly.

The tall, heavy-set, man came in. Raoul could see him vaguely through the moss. He was holding a gun in one hand. "So—?" the man asked coldly.

The Dutchess smoothed her dress over her hips with a sensuous motion. "So everything is fine. I was foolish to worry. It would seem that my—er—sailor is home from the sea after all."

CHAPTER II

For Better or Worse



HE apartment, on the second floor of the Golden Eagle, was large and luxuriously furnished. Danton had seen its like only in the movies. The suit that the Dutchess had insisted that he wear might have been made to his measure.

He searched the pockets thoughtfully. There was a fat roll of bills in one pocket, an expensive wrist watch in the other. For want of something to do he counted the bills. There was three thousand two hundred and twenty dollars in the roll. It was the most money that he had ever seen. He put the roll back in his pocket and looked thoughtfully at the watch.

He wondered if the watch had belonged to Johnny, then unscrewed the back of the case and knew it had. The inscription read—

*All The Love In The World
D to O*

D would be the Dutchess. O would be Oakhurst. And Oakhurst was Johnny's right name. He fastened the watch on his wrist and stood looking at it, wondering his best move. He was Raoul Danton. He wasn't Johnny. His brief confusion had passed. But he was up against a game of some kind. For some reason of her own, the Dutchess wanted him to think that he was Johnny.

He smiled wryly and looked at the watch. It was ten minutes of eight. The Dutchess had been in and out of the apartment a dozen times since the scene in the office. But she had not tried to force herself on him again. He wondered, amused, what she would do if he called her bluff and insisted on Johnny's rights. After all, he was a sailor home from the sea. And she was supposed to be his girl.

He thought of Johnny and his brief smile faded. Johnny had been his pal. Johnny had trusted him. And a man just didn't do things like that to a dead shipmate. The best thing that he could do was to sit snug and let her handle the wheel. She couldn't

Raoul sat in a chair ringed by men.



sail in circles forever. Sooner or later she would have to make her course known.

He paced the floor restlessly. The apartment was partially soundproofed but the strains of a hot band seeped up through the floor. The Golden Eagle would be in full swing. He fingered the roll in his pocket and walked out into the hall.

A broken nosed guard was sitting in a chair but he made no attempt to stop him. Instead, he got to his feet, grinning. "Getting kind of restless, eh, Johnny?"

Danton shrugged and walked on down

the hall. He wanted to know if he was a prisoner. The broken nosed guard followed a few feet behind him. There was a second guard at the stairhead. "Glad to see you home, Johnny," he husked. He chuckled, "You don't look much like your old self but we'll soon have you fattened out again and the hospital tan off your puss." He asked, as an afterthought, "You heeled?"

Danton shook his head and the other man took a gun from a shoulder holster and handed it to him.

"Then you'd better take this, Chief. There are still a lot of elephants in town."

Danton dropped the gun into his pocket and walked on down the stairs. Elephants had long memories. There seemed to be a lot of things about Johnny that he hadn't known. But if his head would hold out, if he didn't become confused again, he intended finding out some of them. Of one thing he was certain. Johnny hadn't meant this to happen. Whatever he had been before he joined the Merchant Marine, Johnny had been his pal.

THE long bar was lined two deep with men. The Dutchess was sitting on a stool just outside the little hallway. As she saw him she screamed, "There's my man," and crossed the floor and kissed him.

He surprised her by kissing her. The heavy-set man who had been sitting on the stool beside her got up quickly, his face clouding with anger.

Danton smiled thinly over her shoulder. "You don't object, do you—Charlie?"

Charlie, whose last name he had learned was Benton, colored slowly as he felt the eyes of the men at the bar on him. "Why, no, Johnny," he forced himself to say. "Why should I? She's your girl."

Danton pushed the Dutchess away. "Then see that you remember that."

Benton colored even more deeply but said quietly, "Of course, Johnny. Just as you say."

Danton thought, *"He'll get even for that. He's so mad he could bite a piece out of a cap'stan. Maybe I ought to hit him for stealing Johnny's girl."*

The Dutchess kissed him again. Then her moist lips brushing his cheek she whispered, "Hadn't you better go back upstairs now, Johnny? Please. Like a good boy. I'll be right up."

Anxious to see how far they would let him go in his role of Johnny, he pushed her aside gently. "No." He walked over to the bar. "Set 'em up for the house," he told the barman. "Let's celebrate my *home* coming."

The barman beamed, "Yes, sir, Mr. Oakhurst."

The strained silence that had heralded

his appearance broke. The bar filled with talk. The barman wanted to know what he was having. Danton considered a drink and decided against it. His head was clear. He wanted it to stay that way. "Buttermilk," he said curtly.

Behind him the Dutchess gasped, "Better and better. Johnny always drank buttermilk."

A perverse streak swept Danton. "Change that to a double-rye," he told the barman. He gulped the drink and wished he hadn't. His still shattered nerves wouldn't take it. He had to cling to the bar as the floor began to rock. The feeling passed but he was grateful, however, when the Dutchess noting his sweat beaded face suggested that they go into the office.

In the office he leaned on the desk, his hand on the gun in his pocket. "All right now," he told the Dutchess and Benton who had followed her, "let's stop playing games. I'm not Johnny. I know I'm not. You know I'm not. Now what is this all about?"

THE Dutchess stroked his cheek. "I was afraid that this would happen if you took a drink. Your mind's not well, Johnny. Now you go back upstairs like a good boy. And in a few minutes you and mama are going to take a little ride."

He played along by asking her where. She said that he would find out when they got there.

"To hell with that," he said. He got to his feet. "For Johnny's sake I've strung along this far. But I told you I was tired of playing games. And I'm leaving—now."

Benton took a step forward grinding one balled up hand into the palm of the other. "Oh, no, you're not."

"Look. You don't make sense," Danton told him. "When I walked in here you were kissing the Dutchess. You got sore as a boil when I kissed her. Now I'm willing to walk out. But you say no."

The Dutchess, her eyes grown calculating, moved closer to him. "You don't understand, Johnny." She slipped her arms around his neck and whispered in his ear. "Come on. Let's go back upstairs. Just you and I."

Danton thought, "*Well, there's the answer to one question.*" Aloud, he repeated, "To hell with that. I said I was leaving. And I am."

Benton came closer. "No." His fist swung back, froze there like the statue of a discus thrower as Danton drew the gun from his pocket. His eyes grown suddenly wide, he asked, "Now where the hell did he get that?"

The Dutchess wet her lips with her tongue. "The boys don't know. They think he's Johnny. One of them must have slipped it to him."

Danton motioned Benton out of his way. "I said that I was leaving."

The other man stood, undecided. The Dutchess decided it for him. She threw herself at Danton, one hand fumbling for his gun hand and depressing it.

"*I can't shoot her,*" he thought dully. "*I can't shoot Johnny's girl.*" He had no reason to. She had done nothing to him but kiss him and falsely insist that he was Johnny.

But Benton had no such scruples. One of his big fists lashed over the girl's shoulder and thudding against his already wounded head turned the room upside for Danton. Then he hit him again and everything turned green and there was salt water in his mouth and he was back on the pitching raft looking across the torn doughnut at Johnny's haggard, oil smeared, face—

"In Hardrock. The Golden Eagle, see? You walk in and you ask for the Dutchess. Then you invite her into a booth and you order two Paradise Cocktails. That is her favorite drink. Then—"

That wave almost had him. Hang on. For God's sake, Johnny, hang on. Just a few minutes more. They're bound to spot us soon.

Johnny was speaking again, gasping, spitting salt water. "And you tell her, you tell her, see, that Oakhurst has cashed in his chips."

The raft swept into the trough of a wave, green water buried him. Danton fought his way to the surface frantically, emerged in time to hear the Dutchess say—

"Hit him again, Charlie."

Charlie did.

THE moon was full and spiked on the peak of a distant mountain. The night, and the mountains, and the stars could have been cut from a picture postal card. Danton turned glumly from the window. He looked at his watch. It was nine. He had been out for almost an hour. Then he remembered his date with Martha from the Home Cafe. The girl would think he had stood her up. In a way he had. He shouldn't have pulled that fool scene in the bar. He should have walked right on out the door.

He sat down on the bed and retched, wondering how Johnny would feel if he could know what had happened all because he had tried to deliver his message. Because he had delivered his message. Johnny would be sore as a boil. He had been hard but he had been square.

The door opened and the Dutchess came in, alone. She sat down on the bed beside him but made no attempt to touch him. "I'm sorry," she said finally. She met his eyes then looked away. "It—it was just that it meant so much to me. That—that's why I tried to make you believe you were Johnny."

Without warning she began to weep.

He stared at her more confused than ever. "I don't know what you are talking about."

Her slim shoulders rocked with sobs. "And I can't tell you. You—thought a lot of Johnny?"

He said, "I did."

She sobbed, "So did I. But, well, that's that." She got up and walked toward the door looking somehow small, and pathetic, and beaten.

"Wait a minute," he stopped her. "What's this all about?"

She shook her head. "I can't tell you. You did like Johnny, though?"

"He saved my life twice," Raoul said simply.

Her forehead knitted in thought. "I wonder." She shook her head. "No. After the way I've treated you, that would be too much to ask."

He insisted on knowing what would be too much to ask. She repeated she couldn't tell him but asked that if, seeing that



Corson caught him roughly by the shirt front, and drove a clenched fist into his face.

Johnny had twice saved his life, he would be willing to do Johnny one last favor.

He eyed her suspiciously. Her grief seemed genuine. "That would depend," he told her.

Her eyes flashed hotly. "For a man who saved your life twice—that would depend."

The sick, faint, feeling came back. She was twisting it. But it didn't matter. She was right. "What do you want me to do?" he asked hoarsely.

"Just come with me for fifteen minutes," she said simply, "and pretend that you are Johnny, do something that he was going to do."

He thought it over. He didn't have much choice. If she was acting and he refused, he doubted he would leave the Golden Eagle alive. Benton would see to that. If she was sincere, if it *was* a favor for Johnny,

he owed him anything that she could ask. "Okay, I'll do it," he told her.

She kissed him, lightly, this time. "You're a swell guy, sailor. Come on."

The same broken nosed guard was in the hall. He slapped Danton cordially on the back. "So you're going to do it, eh? All the luck in the world, fellow. You got it coming to you."

The hood who had given him the gun, grinned, "I got the car waiting at the back door, chief. Boy, some guys have all the luck."

SANDWICHED between the two guards, the Dutchess clinging to his arm, Danton descended the stairs, wondering where they were going and why they thought he was lucky.

The car, a big black Cadillac, was wait-



ing in the alley. He had expected Benton to be in the car. But the big man was not in sight. Danton was vaguely pleased that whatever he was starting out to do did not include him. But he wanted to meet Benton again. He meant to make a point of it. Injured head or not he thought he could take him and meant to. A silly thought crossed his mind. He owed Johnny that much, too.

The Dutchess wanted to know what he was laughing at.

"It would be over your head," he told her.

The house in front of which the car had stopped was white and small with a bright

lamp in the front window. A gray-haired man met them at the door. He insisted on shaking hands. "This is a pleasure, I assure you, Mr. Oakhurst."

The Dutchess still clinging to his arm, Danton followed him into the parlor where a white-haired old lady was waiting. She kissed the Dutchess soundly, saying, "I'm so happy for you, my dear."

Danton noted for the first time that the Dutchess had changed her evening gown for a simple traveling suit and had wiped off most of her make-up. She looked young and sweet and almost virginal. Only her

eyes hadn't changed. They couldn't. They had seen too much.

The gray-haired man picked up a book. "Now, if you children will join hands." He looked over his glasses at Danton. "You have the license, of course, Mr. Oakhurst." It was a statement, not a question.

The Dutchess took a crisp folded paper from her purse and gave it to him. "I have it, Reverend."

License. Reverend. "*What the hell,*" Danton thought. "*I'm getting married.*"

He took a quick step backward and bumped into the broken nosed hood. "Don't be nervous, Johnny," the hood grinned. "It only takes a minute. And they say it doesn't hurt."

He laughed loudly at his own humor. Danton felt the Dutchess fumble for his hand. The minister began to mumble something. Only one line came clear to Danton's ears, "Do you, John Oakhurst, take this woman—"

Danton thought, "I'd like to take her by the neck."

The hood behind him poked him, whispering hoarsely. "I do, Johnny. Here's where you say, 'I do'."

He had promised. And if this was all there was to it, he owed Johnny this much and more. "I do," he said distinctly.

The balance of the ceremony was a blur. Then the minister was shaking his hand and the Dutchess was whispering in his ear, "Don't forget the money, Johnny. Give him plenty."

Danton slipped two bills from the roll in his pocket and gave them to the man without even looking at them. Then they were out in the night and the Dutchess was laughing softly.

"Now that didn't hurt, did it, Johnny?"

"No," Danton admitted, "it didn't." He started to follow her into the car and a heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

"Just a minute. Not so fast, Johnny."

From the darkness another voice added, "And tell your bodyguards not to go for their guns. There are five guns on you, Johnny."

Danton took his foot from the running board and turned around. A tall, stoop-shouldered, gray-haired man with a deep-

ly seamed face ran capable hands over his pockets, his armpits, and his thighs. "No hide-away," he reported.

Danton fought confusion. These men were mistaking him for someone else. He said so.

Sheriff Corson, the stoop-shouldered man who had searched him, pushed back his ten gallon hat. "We'll take our chances on that, Johnny. And if you think I like doing this to a lad who has been through what you've been through, you're crazier than a coyote with the pip. Why didn't you stay back east somewhere and have the Dutchess come on to you? You might have known that Charlie Benton would squawk his head off once he knew that he had lost her for good."

Benton. Squawk his head off. Lost the Dutchess for good. Danton fought the rising waves that threatened to engulf him. He couldn't give in now. He had to keep his head. He looked into the car. The Dutchess was crying softly.

"Tell them the truth," he told her.

She said, "They wouldn't believe me if I did." There was an evil smile back of her tears that only he could see. "But don't try to fight them, Johnny. I'll get a lawyer, the best in town. And I'll meet you in the sheriff's office."

"That's good advice, Johnny," Corson said. "It may be a lawyer can get you off clean, though I doubt it. The laws in this state are tough. And not all the water in the seven seas can wash away the stain of a man holding up a bank."

CHAPTER III

Don't Give Us That



HE room was large and brightly lighted. But it had not been furnished for comfort. All the furniture it contained was a table and two chairs. A male police stenographer, wearing the sombrero that seemed to be uniform, was sitting in one chair back of the desk. Raoul Danton sat in the other, ringed by men.

"Now, start at the beginning, Johnny," Sheriff Corson said not unkindly. "Take your time. And don't worry. There isn't

a man in this room enjoying what we have to do."

Danton said, "I don't enjoy being here. And you are making a mistake. I'm not Johnny Oakhurst. My name is Raoul Danton. I was a shipmate of Johnny's. I was with him when he was drowned."

Nat Wade, Sheriff Corson's deputy, said rather sharply, "Don't give us that, Johnny. It was a fair idea. But it didn't work. Why not come clean and face the music. In the past you and the law haven't always seen eye to eye but any lad who has served as merchant seaman, who has risked his life time after time, has made a mighty big contribution to the war effort and every last one of us will try to see that you get as light a sentence as possible. But don't try to make fools of us, Johnny." He cleared his throat hopefully. "Now, let's start all over. You do admit that you robbed the bank?"

Danton shook his head. "I do not. And even if I was Johnny, how could I rob a bank? In the first place, Johnny is dead. In the second place I only got into town this afternoon. And I've been at the Golden Eagle ever since."

The sheriff was patient. "The bank was robbed three years ago, Johnny. And while we suspected at the time that it might have had something to do with your disappearance we didn't know for certain until Benton burst in here tonight so mad he was fit to be tied and gave us the details."

Danton scowled at the floor. It was difficult to believe that Johnny could have robbed a bank. He didn't believe he had. "Benton is lying," he said flatly.

Wade was quick. "But you do admit you are Johnny?"

"No," Danton said. "I do not. And I can prove it."

"All right. You do that," Corson said.

Sudden panic swept Danton. Supposing he couldn't prove it. He had been the only survivor of his last ship. His parents were dead. He had no near relatives. Then he thought of his papers and said. "If you will go to the front room of the apartment over the Golden Eagle you'll find my papers in the pocket of my jacket."

Corson said, "We've been to the Golden

Eagle, Johnny. We stopped there on our way to pick you up at the minister's." He called to the stenographer. "Break open that packet, Bill, and tell us what you find."

The stenographer opened the packet, said, "Well, first, here's a seaman's union card made out to Johnny Thompson. Next—"

Danton got to his feet. "Those are Johnny's papers."

The sheriff pushed him back in the chair.



He knew Martha was no plain girl.

"And the only papers that we found." He was no longer quite so patient. "Why not stop horsing around and give us all a break. I'll tell you what I'll do. You sign a confession and I'll give you my word that bail will be made so low that you can raise it tonight. Hell. Bank robber or not, I'm not inclined to take a man away from his bride on his wedding night."

Danton cursed the Dutchess mentally. She had known that he would be arrested. She had burned or otherwise destroyed his papers. She was a hard little baggage who would stop at nothing. But he couldn't see where she stood to gain. Surely she gained nothing by dirtying Johnny's name.

Wade rubbed his fist. "Stop stalling, Johnny. So help me if your head wasn't still bandaged, hero or no hero, I'd start swinging right about now."

Sheriff Corson said, "None of that," sharply.

An officer came in to say that the odd Dutchess had arrived with Attorney Peters.

Corson tucked a chew in his cheek. "Tell 'em Johnny is still busy but will see them by and by."

The officer protested, "But the law says—"

"I'm the law in Hardrock," Corson stopped him.

The officer went out closing the door behind him.

"If you enjoy settin', set," Corson told Danton. "We can stand it as long as you can. But you're being a fool, Johnny. The bank job was clean. No one was killed. And what with your war service and all the most that you're like to get is five years."

FIVE years. Five years of his life in prison for a crime he had not even committed. The chair in which Danton was sitting began to rock. A wave of nausea swept him. His face turned green. "I'm going to be sick," he admitted.

Wade led him to the washroom and brought him back again. "He was," he told the sheriff. "Think we ought to call in Doc?"

Corson shook his head. "Later. I tell you what, though. Have one of the boys bring Benton over from his cell."

Wade dispatched an officer for Benton. A wizened faced, bow-legged, officer who looked like he might have been a cow puncher at one time offered Danton a cigarette. He accepted it gratefully.

Benton came in handcuffed to the officer who had gone to get him. His nose was bleeding. One of his eyes was beginning to swell.

"He cut up a bit," the officer apologized to the sheriff, "and I had to cuff him some. I guess having had a little time to think it over he's sorry that he squawked. Leastwise he *said* that he had talked all that he aimed to."

Corson slapped Benton with his open palm. "That so, Charlie?"

Benton winced. "No. Don't beat me up. I've changed my mind again. I'll talk." He scowled at Danton. "Damn you anyway, Johnny, if I hadn't listened to you, I wouldn't be here."

Danton said nothing. Corson asked, "Just the two of you did the job?"

"Just the two of us," Benton said.

Danton said coldly, "You're lying. You know you're lying. And you know that I'm not Johnny."

The other man stared at him, seemingly puzzled. "I know what?"

"You know that I'm not Johnny."

Benton grinned. "Okay. So you're not Johnny. But you and I still robbed the bank. We got ten thousand, two hundred and eighty dollars. We split it and you scrambled. I don't know what you did with your share. But I know what I did with mine. I got to thinking that they might have the numbers on the bills so I stashed mine. And I've told the sheriff where."

Corson took a glass fruit jar packed with money from the table. "And I dug it up. It's here, every penny." He looked at Danton. "Now, you still say that you're not Johnny? You still say you and Charlie didn't rob the bank?"

"I do."

THE sheriff spat wearily at a brass spittoon—and missed it. He was visibly upset. "Damned if I like to hound a man who has been through what you have. So, as long as you won't talk, suppose I do. Suppose I tell you what we've got against you, how we know that you *are* Johnny."

"He's Johnny," Benton snarled. "I suppose that the Dutchess would marry a stranger."

Corson gave him the back of his hand without even looking at him. "You got off the two-ten this afternoon. That right, Johnny?"

"I got off the two-ten," Danton admitted. "But my name isn't Johnny."

The sheriff continued. "You walked down the street sort of sizing up the situation. Outside of the bank job, you had several other matters on your mind. No

one has ever claimed that you weren't an honest gambler or that when you were running it that the Golden Eagle wasn't run on the square. But men who have lost their cattle and claim money to you in the past don't take their losses any easier because they lost fair and square. In fact some few have made big talk about what they were going to do if you ever came back again."

Danton asked, "Johnny Oakhurst was a good gambler?"

"You were," Corson admitted. "You could win everything with five cards that anyone had on the board."

Danton grinned. He couldn't help it. He knew now why Johnny would never sit in a game. He hadn't wanted the boys' money or their matches. He asked, "And Johnny Oakhurst made good money gambling?"

"You did," Wade said.

"Then, even if I were Johnny, why would I rob a bank?"

"We wondered that at the time," Corson said. He took a hat and a button from the table. "But it may interest you to know, Johnny, that we found these at the scene of the crime as they say in stories. More, we traced them to you. But banks not being in your line and you being gone we merely sniffed around a bit and let it go at that."

Danton's head had begun to ache again. He almost wished that he could confess. If he did, perhaps the sheriff would stop talking.

Corson continued. "Getting back, however, to your arrival this afternoon. One of the first men that you met was Attorney Peters. I met Peters shortly after and he mentioned having seen you."

Danton tried to think. That would be the lean, dark, man. What was it he had said. "*But if that's the way you're going to play it, shoot the works. Maybe you can make it stick. You always were a nifty gambler.*" He wondered if Peters was in on the frame and doubted it. Peters had genuinely thought he was Johnny. But he had known about the bank job and the latent suspicions.

"Then you went on to the Golden Eagle," Corson said.

Danton looked up sharply. Either the sheriff did not know of the meal that he had

eaten in the Home Cafe or he was holding it back for some reason. He started to mention it and thought better of the idea. There was no use dragging a nice girl like Martha into a mess like this. There was nothing that she could prove. Or was there? He wished that his head would stop aching.

Corson continued, "Joe Breed who had done some mighty big talking after losing his stack to you was the first man to recognize you. He lit out fast and he probably is still going. You walked on back to the office, found the Dutchess with Benton here and sent him out so you could have your reunion in private. Later on you went upstairs where you stayed until near eight when you came down and bought a drink for the house. That check?"

Danton said bitterly, "You've told me most of the things I did. But you've left out a few. You haven't said how the Dutchess tried to persuade me I was Johnny with her kisses." He nodded at Benton. "And when that failed how he beat me up trying to make me believe it."

Benton simulated a gasp. "Me? Beat you up, Johnny? Don't be silly. I'd be afraid to."

ALL of the officers but the sheriff laughed. He moved his tobacco to his other cheek, continued, "During the afternoon you sent the Dutchess down here to the courthouse for a license. She was so happy she was walking on air and telling everyone. That's how we knew where you were when Benton burst in here with blood in his eyes."

"But you haven't proven I'm Johnny," Danton protested.

Corson said doggedly, "Johnny's name was on the marriage license. And when the Reverend Dale said, 'Do you John Oakhurst take this woman—' you didn't say a thing about your name not being Johnny."

Danton had taken as much as he could. "I didn't know," he cried. "But she did. She told me that I was doing Johnny a favor."

Even Corson chuckled at that. "Someone should have asked such a favor of me when I was your age, son." He sighed wearily. "But now, just to keep the record

clear, before I tie this up. You say that you aren't Johnny Oakhurst. You claim your name is—is Raoul Danton and that you were a shipmate of Johnny's."

"That's right."

"You any kin folk who could back you up on that?"

"No," Danton admitted. "My parents are dead."

"How about other shipmates?"

"I wouldn't know where to find them," Danton said bitterly. "Besides, this isn't the first time that I have been mistaken for Johnny. It has happened before, by shipmates. Just because we both have red hair."

Wade winked at the sheriff. "Funny. What hair I have left is red." He took off his sombrero to display a pinkish halo of hair around a shining bald spot. "But somehow no one ever mistook me for Johnny, especially not the Dutchess."

No one laughed. The sheriff crossed to the table and picked up the watch and the roll of bills that he had taken away from Danton.

"Okay. Let's wind this up, Johnny. This is your watch. I guess you won't deny that." He put it back on the table and balanced the bills in one palm. "But it's these bills that have got you hooked. When you left here you left fast. But you left a roll in the pocket of the pants that you were wearing on the day you robbed the bank. And being gone you didn't hear the rumors about the bank having the numbers of the bills, which same they did. So when you came back and changed into your civvies you didn't worry about spending it. And it may interest you to know that the two fifty dollar bills you gave Reverend Dale for marrying you were part of the bank loot." He paused a moment, asked, "How about it? Do I get that confession now?"

DANTON fought wanting to be sick again, fought slipping back into the shadows where the waves were salt and green and death was always at his elbow. "No," he managed to say. "I can't confess. I'm not Johnny Oakhurst. My name is Raoul Danton."

Sheriff Corson's patience snapped. "Damn you for a stubborn mule." He

waved him out of the office. "Take him over to the jail and hold him on an open charge. And if Peters tries to get a writ, take a billy to him." He was still spluttering as Deputy Wade and another officer left the office with Danton between them.

The Dutchess was waiting downstairs with the lean-faced dark-complexioned man. He smiled white-toothed and extended his hand. "Sorry it didn't work, Johnny. I was afraid that it wouldn't. But don't worry about a thing. I'll get a writ and have you out in half an hour."

Danton didn't hear him. He was looking at the Dutchess. "Why have you done this to me?" he asked her simply. "Why don't you tell them the truth?"

She said softly, "You're sick again, Johnny. It's your poor head. But don't worry. I'll get you out of this."

Wade told Peters, "You're wasting your time, Hank. The sheriff says no bail, no writ, no nothing until Johnny confesses."

Peters' eyes turned hard. "We'll see about that. Who does that old fossil think he is?"

"The law in Hardrock," Wade said grinning. Peters had already started up the stairs. Wade nodded to his fellow officer. "For God's sake get hold of Hank and keep him away from the sheriff. The sheriff will chew his head off. He'll chew back. And they'll both be sorry in the morning."

The officer took the stairs two at a time.

The jail was across the square from the courthouse and the sheriff's office. Wade walked by the night watchman at the front door and holding Danton firmly by one arm opened the door for him. The Dutchess passed through first. As he guided Danton through the door Wade told the night man, "I ought to get my picture in the paper for this, eh, Joe? I never thought I'd live to see the day when I'd put Johnny Oakhurst in jail single handed."

The night watchman laughed.

THE cold mountain air felt good on Danton's fevered cheeks. Here in the courthouse square the roar and boom of the newly opened mines had failed to penetrate. Up the street the honkey tonks, the Silver Dollars, the Stag's Heads, and the Golden

Eagles, and the Palaces, were making a mockery of night. Here, however, it was quiet and dark except for the distantly spaced lights.

Wade explained his remark, "Nothing personal, Johnny. I think you're a darn nice lad. And if you hadn't been a fool and robbed that bank I'd have marched in the parade if they had had one for you, which same they probably would have."

The Dutchess caught at his arm. "Please, Deputy Wade. This is our wedding night. You can't take Johnny away from me. You can't."

Wade was embarrassed. "Now look, Dutchess. Don't take on. Please. I got to do what I'm told. But this thing isn't too serious. Why don't you go back and talk to the sheriff. The chances are that he'll listen to you and allow Johnny to be admitted to bail."

The girl backed from him suddenly. "No."

Wade clapped his hand to his empty holster. "Here!" he said sharply. "Don't be a fool. Give me back my gun."

Her eyes were cat green in the darkness. Danton called, "No!" too late.

The girl deliberately shot three times. Wade caught at his chest, then toppled slowly. His sombrero fell from his head and his fringe of red hair looked somehow ludicrous in the faint yellow rays of a street lamp.

Danton, frozen with fear and horror, felt the butt of the gun forced into his hand.

The Dutchess was sobbing wildly, "Oh, what have I done. Run. Please. Get out of town. Don't you understand. They'll think you did it. They'll never believe me. They'll hang you."

She spoke the last words with a rising inflection, audible across the square and in the open windows of the courthouse. The courthouse door banged open and the night watchman peered futilely into the dark.

"Wade?" he called. "Was that you? Who fired those shots?"

Too much had happened too fast. Danton, still frozen with horror, stared down at the dead deputy. Dead men were nothing new to him. But this dead man was differ-

ent. The girl was right. They would think that he had killed him. He had to get out of town. A fearful thought assailed him. But wherever he went, death would be his shadow. Men would hunt him down. And when they had found him, they would hang him.

The girl gave him an impatient push. "Run, you fool!"

HE RAN blindly in the direction he imagined the tracks to be. There were shouting men in the courthouse windows now. A few tentative shots split the night. He realized that he was still holding the death gun, threw it into some bushes, and suddenly wished that he hadn't.

If there had been any doubt of his guilt there would be none now. His fingerprints were on the gun. *The gun with which the Dutchess, for no reason, had killed Wade.*

Now her voice was rising shrill in the darkness behind him. He stopped running abruptly.

"I tried to stop him but I couldn't. He snatched Wade's gun from its holster and shot him three times in the chest!"

She had tried to stop him. He had snatched the gun. He had shot Wade three times.

He turned to go back and call her lie. Then turned again and ran on blindly. It was her word against his. And they had even less reason to believe him than they had when he had insisted that he was not Johnny.

CHAPTER IV

Wish He'd Died



NIGHT was a big black leopard lying in wait. Night was a lying woman. Night was death, and death was his shadow. He had been saved from the sea for this. He knew it was useless to run but still he ran on. It had been useless to cling to the raft, but he had clung.

He had long since turned from the tracks. Armed men were guarding the yards, combing the train on which he was to have left, searching the berths, the washrooms, the blinds. They thought that he had killed

Wade. That made it personal. And the Hardrock law took care of its own.

Just where in Hardrock he was, he did not know. But he had found that a street of shanties paralleled the main business street. It was seemingly carved out of rock, the shanties perched precariously on stilts. Dogs barked at him as he passed. Twice men swore at him in Spanish. Once he had been shot at. But the shooter had been a startled householder, not the law.

He ran on wearily not knowing where, not caring much. Then the side street ended abruptly in a wall of rock. He retraced his steps and turning down a steep lane found himself looking at Main Street.

The cappers and the shills were hard at work. Drunken cowboys and drunker miners staggered from saloon to saloon. Hard-eyed girls patrolled their beats. It would seem, he thought wryly, that Hardrock was wide open for anything but bank robbery and murder.

Crouched in the darkness of the lane, Danton saw two sombreroed officers enter a bar across the street. They searched the faces of every man, asked a few questions of the owner, and left only to repeat the procedure in the bar next door.

Wherever he was they would find him. And bad as the night was day would be worse.

There would be no need of asking questions then. And once they saw, they would shoot him.

Two men paused at the mouth of the lane while one lighted a cigarette. "Tough about Wade, eh?" one of them asked.

His companion had trouble lighting his cigarette. He struck another match. "Yeah. But it'll be a damn sight tougher on Johnny. That hawk-beaked old sheriff will make crow's bait of him. Why do you think he blew his top and shot Wade? He didn't have much coming. Why didn't he take the rap?"

The other man shook his head. "I'll be damned if I know. Could be that he heard some of the stories going the rounds concerning Benton and the Dutchess. But if he did, why did he marry her?"

The cigarette smoker blew out his match, made some remark about the Dutchess that

Danton couldn't catch and both men laughed and moved on.

DANTON debated going back up the lane and decided not to. It didn't lead to safety. There was no safety for him. He had been a fool to run. He knew that now. He might have had some chance of being believed if he had stood his ground and told the truth. He had none now. His only chance of living was to get out of Hardrock.

His stomach muscles rebelling, he forced himself out onto the crowded street. It wasn't difficult for him to assume a stagger. It was difficult to walk. He felt as he had felt just before the plane had spotted him. He wanted to give up. But something inside him wouldn't let him. A man wasn't dead until he died.

There was a dozen drunks on the street. He had lost his head bandage at sometime during the chase. No one gave him a second glance. A capper even tried to entice him inside the Belle Patee by describing the voluptuous beauty of—

"Fifty. Count them, buddy. Fifty beautiful hostesses."

Danton mumbled something and moved on, his body relaxed in simulated intoxication. Only his eyes were alert. They missed nothing. He passed a bar on his side of the street and saw two officers going through the procedure that he had seen from a distance.

It made him feel somewhat better. Perhaps from here on the street had been checked. He quickened his stagger a trifle. Perhaps he could get through the road blocks after all, up into the mountains. Ships had gotten across the oceans when the subs had still hunted in packs.

He passed the Golden Eagle, going toward the station. His alleged shooting of Wade had not harmed business. Men fought for places at the bar. The tables and the wheels were crowded.

He walked another half block. He was beginning to hope. And then he saw them. Sheriff Corson and the officer whom Wade had sent to get Benton were coming slowly up the walk, dragging it as certainly as a pair of mine sweepers. He glanced across

the street. A second pair were duplicating the performance. This was it. This was the end. He was through.

He backed into a darkened doorway, wondering if he could make it back to the lane before they saw him. Then the door behind him opened and Martha's voice said coldly:

"Get out of my doorway, Johnny Oakhurst."

Danton turned but it was too dark to see her. "You're making the same mistake the sheriff made," he told her wearily. "It so happens my name is Raoul Danton. And before I got into this mess I was looking forward to our date."

He could hear her catch her breath. "You're lying."

"I almost wish I was," he said quietly. "But don't bother to believe me. No one else has."

"But you did shoot Deputy Wade."

His laugh was bitter. "No. But I can't prove that I didn't. It's my word against that of the Dutchess. And she's convinced them that I'm Johnny."

He peered around the corner of the doorway. Sheriff Corson was less than twenty feet away, questioning a man who had just passed the restaurant. He caught the words:

". . . red-haired . . . dark-gray suit . . . he may have a bandage on his head, maybe not . . . but his face is pale like he just came out of a hospital."

The man shook his head. "No. I ain't seen him, Sheriff." He added, earnestly. "But I'll sure get word to you if I do."

THE sheriff started on again. Danton squared his shoulders. This was it. His hands were slipping off the raft. Then a small white hand reached out of the darkness, drew him inside the door and closed and locked it just as Corson paused in front.

The sheriff tried the door. There was only the dark glass between him and his quarry. The officer with him said, "He wouldn't be in there. Martha closes at eight. We'll probably find him in Mex town or holed up in the mountains somewhere."

Corson hesitated with the sixth sense of a man who has followed a sign. He had seen nothing, heard nothing. But he knew instinctively that the man for whom he was hunting had at least paused here recently. "Yeah. Prob'ly," he agreed with his deputy and moved on up the street.

Martha drew Danton back along the row of stools to a small room off the kitchen. There was only a bed, a chair, and a dresser. Her face was white but she managed to smile. "This is home for now. I'm keeping expenses down until the place begins to pay."

Danton sank down on the bed and held his aching head in his hands. Then he looked up to pair her smile. "Thanks."

She disappeared briefly to return with a large mug of coffee. "It's probably cold and as strong as get out," she told him. "But I don't dare to make fresh for fear that someone passing by might see the light under the urn."

He drank the coffee gratefully. It was luke warm and strong. But he had never tasted better. Martha hadn't said so, but she believed him.

She didn't speak until he had finished the coffee. Then she said simply, "Now tell me all about it."

He did, speaking slowly, trying to remember each detail, hoping to stumble onto something that would at least give him a clue as to why the Dutchess and Benton had acted as they had, why they wanted Hardrock to think he was Johnny, why they had pinned a bank robbery on him, why the Dutchess had framed him for murder. His story complete, he was as much in the dark as ever.

Her brow wrinkled in thought, Martha said, "If it was the Dutchess that Benton wanted, his confessing the robbery doesn't make sense. He'll only do time for nothing. As long as you weren't Johnny, as long as they knew he was dead, I can't see what they had to fear."

"Nothing from me," Danton told her. "Once I had delivered Johnny's message they'd never have seen me again."

She said, "I can see why she played on your sympathy and why you felt that you

(Continued on page 78)



R. HUBERT'S night of murder and blood and violence began in a very common manner. Just as on any other night, he went to bed and lay awake in the darkness of his small room, watching the faint, shifting shadows on the ceiling and reflecting romantic thoughts.

Mr. Hubert did not look like a man of romantic thoughts. He was frail and middle-aged, narrow-shouldered, with lonely blue eyes and surprisingly large feet. Everyone noticed Mr. Hubert's feet. They were like dejected portions of a broken propeller, flat and oversized, turning out as he walked and giving him an oddly flapping appearance. Above them his slight body and wistful, dignified face seemed anti-climactic.

Nevertheless Mr. Hubert was a hero for several hours each night, in the dramatic world of his imagination. He created nerve-racking situations from which he alone emerged in miraculous victory, fearless, calm, and gallant. He pictured himself confronted with boa-constrictors in a jungle fastness, or battling several desperate bandits in brutal combat, or rescuing a beautiful girl from death at the very edge of a cliff. Then his thin chest would ex-

It did not matter at all that nothing had ever happened to Mr. Hubert. He lived a lifetime in a few hours. And he was a hero. He would emerge alone in a miraculous victory! Or would he?

MR. HUBERT'S



He was heading into a strange, unexplored blackness.

pand proudly . . . and finally he would fall asleep contented, telling himself that someday something exciting really would happen to him. Nothing ever had, not in the whole of his life. But it would someday. A great adventure. An important adventure, and he would be the hero of it, just as he always had imagined.

It was at about eleven-thirty one night, more than an hour after he had gone to bed, that Mr. Hubert heard the creaking sounds coming quite definitely from the floor above him. He had thought he heard them once or twice before, on other nights, but the noises were so faint that he had been able to attribute them to a gust of wind or a spattering of rain. Now, for the first time, he was ominously certain that they came from the top floor, directly over him. Sounds like footsteps up there, where no one was allowed. Where the dead girl had lived.

LIFETIME

By
ELIZABETH STARR

A cold, creeping shudder made its way up Mr. Hubert's spine.

Mrs. Amsterdam had told him all about it not more than a week ago. She was the landlady of this small suburban boarding-house, a tall, capable-looking woman with warm brown eyes, dark hair piled neatly on her head. One morning Mr. Hubert had seen her crying on the landing between his floor, the second, and the top floor; crying very quietly and hopelessly. He had watched her for a few moments, standing uncertainly outside the door of his room. Then, coughing to announce his approach, he had stepped forward.

"If I can be of aid, Mrs. Amsterdam," he had said, feeling nervously gallant at the foot of the stairs, "please do not hesitate to call on me."

"Oh—oh, thank you, Mr. Hubert, but I . . ." Her voice choked on a sob, and she covered her face with both hands.

"Come, come . . ." Mr. Hubert ascended the stairs toward her, earnest and sympathetic. "Come, come, Mrs. Amsterdam, it can't be as bad as that. It never is, you know. Not as bad as you think."

"Isn't it?" She smiled wanly, brushing at tears with one large, competent hand. "Today would have been her birthday. She would have been eighteen. She . . ."

"Now, now." He stood before her, wistful and dignified, not knowing quite what to say in his eagerness to say the right thing. "Perhaps telling me about it would be helpful to you, Mrs. Amsterdam. Sometimes it is, you know. Once in awhile."

HE had sat down beside her on the stairs, and soon she was talking to him about her dead daughter, trying to smile, trying not to cry any more. She described Marcy so that Mr. Hubert almost felt he had known her—a lively little scrap of a girl, with a pert nose and flyaway red hair and the biggest brown eyes in the world. An upturned smile and a giggly laugh; sweet and funny and endearing, at seventeen.

"She was always so enthusiastic about everything," Mrs. Amsterdam said. "You know how kids are at that age. Maybe it's Sinatra, or maybe it's green and polish, or

a black strapless bathing-suit, or going out with the captain of the basketball team. Whatever it is, they're enthusiastic. Marcy was crazy about life. She thought it was wonderful. She thought everything was wonderful. Until maybe a couple of weeks before . . . before it happened."

Then Marcy had begun to be moody, for the first time in her short life. Dreamy and remote, so that her mother could not quite get at the thoughts behind those wide, impenetrable brown eyes. In the evenings, instead of dancing or going to the movies with her high-school beaux, she had stayed quietly in her room, learning embroidery.

"You see, Mr. Hubert, before Marcy's death this was a private house. I own it, and she and I lived here alone. She had the top floor all to herself. Maybe you've wondered why I never rented the rooms up there?"

Mr. Hubert often had wondered about that, in the two months since he had moved into the boarding house. The ground floor had three tenants: Ralph Douglas, a discharged young veteran who limped slightly, but smiled a lot; Evelyn Halson, a toothy young woman with startling platinum hair; and Paul Slate, who was short, good-looking, thirtyish, and whose pet cat—a large striped creature named Miriam—perched almost constantly on his shoulder.

On the second floor, Mr. Hubert's room was down the hall from that of a man named Jenkins. Jenkins was rotund and middle-aged and hearty; a congenital back-slapper. He and Mr. Hubert had disliked each other on sight, and although Mr. Hubert did not lose his dignity, their rather meaningless feud was not unknown to the other tenants; it even had become something of a boarding house joke, when Jenkins asked to be moved up to the top floor. But Mrs. Amsterdam—living herself in a small room off the kitchen, downstairs—had declined to let him make the change.

"Yes, I must confess I wondered a little," Mr. Hubert said. "But of course I can understand, if Marcy lived up there. . . ."

"Everything is just as she left it. I've never touched any of her things, or let anyone else up there. My poor baby, she had such fun fixing it up and inviting girl

friends in to help her make new curtains . . ."

But toward the end, Marcy had not seen much of her girl friends. She seemed to want to be more by herself, leaving the house at odd hours and telling her mother that she was going for a walk by the bluff, on the other side of town.

"I warned her about walking too close to the edge of the bluff," Mrs. Amsterdam said, her eyes growing dim again with uncontrollable tears. "Maybe you've been there, Mr. Hubert? There's a drop of about thirty feet, and . . . and rocks at the bottom. . . . I told her to be careful, I always told her to watch out and not walk too close to the edge. But she was such an impulsive little kid, thoughtless. Not believing anything bad could happen to her. . . ."

ONE Thursday afternoon Marcy had left early to go walking, right after school. It began to get dark, and dinner was ready, but still she had not come home. At about eight o'clock, Mrs. Amsterdam started phoning friends' houses. None of them had seen the girl, and with every hour that passed the mother's fear and worry increased; until finally she telephoned the police.

They found Marcy at the foot of the bluff on the ragged rocks

Her slight body had been broken against those rocks so that it hung limp over the policeman's arms as she was carried into the house. Her hair—the bright, flyaway red hair—was matted darkly with blood, and her face was like an opalescent little carving beneath it, white and impassive.

But she was not dead. Her eyelids flickered and opened as she lay on a couch with her mother and the policemen bending over her. Her eyes were almost black, dull with pain. Perhaps for hours she had waited, crumpled at the foot of the bluff, in a haze of bewildered suffering.

The upturned smile touched her face briefly for a moment as she recognized her mother, and then she was whitely expressionless again, a nerve jerking incongruously on one side of her childish

rounded chin. It was several minutes before she looked up again. This time her lips quivered, and a harsh, uncertain sound came through them. Her mother bent closer to listen, and Marcy said, "Peter . . ." And, in a whisper, "The sampler . . ."

Then she died, closing her eyes slowly like a little girl who is not yet ready to go to sleep.

"That . . . that was nearly five months ago, Mr. Hubert," Mrs. Amsterdam said unsteadily. "A few days later I found the sampler she was talking about. The embroidery she must have been working on, a small square piece with two hearts stitched in red. And fancy embroidered letters, not quite even. They said, 'Marcy loves Peter,' and she'd worked in some roses and blue forget-me-nots in each corner, but they weren't quite finished yet. I . . . I guess it was going to be a present for him."

"And who was Peter, Mrs. Amsterdam, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I never found out. You see, I never talked to anyone about it before, Mr. Hubert. But I guess Peter was one of the boys from high school." She smiled a little. "Maybe he was the reason Marcy began to brood so much. Maybe it was unrequited puppy love. I don't know. She never mentioned him to me, except . . . that one time." She stood up on the stairs, and Mr. Hubert rose hurriedly with her. "Now you know why the top floor is unrented, Mr. Hubert. I've never told anyone about Marcy before. But you see, today would have been her birthday."

NOW, a week later, Mr. Hubert huddled in bed, listening to the faint creaking sounds that were coming from the top floor. His room was very dark. He had an impulse to get up and turn on the light, but stifled it as he realized that such a move would involve dislodging the bedclothes from where he had them clutched under his chin. He felt more comfortable, clutching the bedclothes. More secure. Not, of course, that there was any reason to be nervous, Mr. Hubert told himself, peering fearfully at the dark ceiling of the room.

There they were again—definite rhyth-

mic sounds, like soft footsteps. He could not possibly be imagining them, and there was no wind to create an illusion. What, then, Mr. Hubert asked himself, was going on? He did not like to think. Perhaps it would be just as well to forget the whole thing and go to sleep.

He turned over determinedly, burying one ear in the pillow and twisting to tuck the blankets over his shoulder. Then, lying quiet, he found himself listening intently. The sounds continued, faint but definite, from the floor above. Like a young girl, moving softly. . . .

Mr. Hubert sat upright in bed, his thoughts of sleep gone. He felt damp and chilly all over. He wanted to talk to someone about the sounds, and make sure he was not imagining them. But there was no one to talk to. No one else lived on the second floor except Jenkins, and he and Jenkins were not on speaking terms.

There was a little rasping noise now, like a drawer being opened upstairs. Then more gentle, rhythmic paddings across the floor. Mr. Hubert held his breath, staring up into the darkness, listening. The rasping noise came again.

Perhaps Jenkins wasn't really such a bad fellow after all. Perhaps their mutual dislike had existed for long enough. It would be companionable to sit up for a while talking, and then maybe investigate the top floor. Together. Mightn't it, in the long run, be a nice gesture to make a friend of Jenkins?

Mr. Hubert, hearing more sounds, decided that it would.

He put on a warm bathrobe, slipped his overly large feet into woolly slippers, and flapped quietly out into the dimly lighted hall. But he had gone only a couple of steps, and progressed as far as the bottom of the flight of stairs, when he could see Jenkins' room. It was standing open and a small bedside lamp was lighted. The room, clearly illuminated, was empty.

Mr. Hubert stood still, looking into it, feeling confused. Was it Jenkins, then, wandering around upstairs? But why? What business had he among Marcy's things? His bed had not been slept in. How long had he been up there?

Mr. Hubert did not know; and, in the next instant, he did not care. He felt suddenly, and literally, frozen in his tracks, ice-cold from head to foot and unable to move. There was a scuffling from the top floor, apparently not far from the head of the stairs, and a long moan—not loud, but strangely despairing and hopeless. Then, like the period ending an explosive sentence, there was a dull thud.

Mr. Hubert, after a minute or two of agonized reflection, laid one propeller-like foot cautiously on the first step. Finding that it made no sound, he proceeded to the second step, looking up at the floor above. It seemed to be completely unlighted. He was heading into blackness. Blackness, moreover, from which only a few minutes before a moan had emerged. Mr. Hubert paused.

But then he began remembering things. Hours spent in imaginary adventure, with himself as a great man, a strong man, a man of fearless honor; undaunted in the face of peril, grimly smiling as his antagonists fell smited to the ground.

He started up the stairs again, smiling grimly, his frail body trembling in the warm bathrobe. As he reached the top, and was enveloped in the blackness, he saw a sliver of light at one end of the hall, which seemed to parallel the hall on the second floor.

The light was coming under the crack of the closed door. Mr. Hubert viewed it without enthusiasm. An open door was one thing, leaving little to chance. A closed door, on the other hand, demanded a certain aggression of which he did not, at the moment, feel entirely capable. He stood in thoughtful silence, looking at it.

THE deep quiet of the place was reassuring. It settled closely around him, as though he were the only person in the world awake at this time of night. He began to think of explanations for the moan and the thud; none of them strictly logical, but soothing enough to move him, his large feet curved on nervous tiptoe, toward the closed door. He reached it and stood listening in the darkness, his heart thudding like a big fist inside him.

He heard nothing at all, and that was what he wanted to hear most.

Mr. Hubert stood back from the door, bracing himself, and grasped the knob. It turned easily. The door swung open, revealing the brightly lighted room, making him blink for a moment. And then everything was clear. Too clear, like the sudden shocking clarity brought on by an icy shower.

The room was frilly and pink and inconsistent, the bedroom of a teen-age girl. A large map of the world was pinned up on one wall and a chart of face-powder shades on another, interspersed with blue and yellow banners of *Armville High School*. The dressing-table mirror was crowded with stuck-in snapshots. A phonograph record rested, perfectly balanced, on edge against a hairbrush, and a gay red ribbon lay on the floor as though Marcy had dropped it just a moment before.

But that was not the only thing on the floor. Near the door, with an air of utter finality about it, lay the rotund body of Mr. Jenkins.

Mr. Hubert stared at it dumbly. Jenkins was lying face-down in striped pajamas, his hands spread out on the rug as though he had been trying to push himself up when he died. And on his broad pajamaed back, a crimson gash was spreading a crimson blot. He had been stabbed to death.

When Mr. Hubert's brain got itself back in working order, he made his stumbling way over to a pink armchair and collapsed in it, facing the corpse. To say that he was upset would have been an understatement.

Jenkins must have come up to investigate the sounds which he himself had heard; and whoever had been making the sounds had murdered Jenkins. Therefore, Mr. Hubert's confused mind told him, there was a third party inextricably involved in the situation. Beyond that he knew nothing, except that Jenkins had been responsible for the moan and the thud and was now completely dead.

AFTER another few moments of unhappy consideration, Mr. Hubert got up from the armchair and walked over to the open window, looking down toward the

ground. A wooden rose trellis came to within a few feet of the window sill, nailed staunchly against the house and supporting waving brown vines in the brisk October night breeze. With a feeling of slight triumph, Mr. Hubert returned to his armchair, busily reconstructing everything that must have occurred. First, the murderer must have been up here going through Marcy's things, opening drawers and look-



There were three tenants who lived on the ground floor.

ing around. Perhaps looking for something which he himself had hidden—in a secret panel? Probably not in a secret panel, but at any rate he was searching when Jenkins caught him at it. The result was Jenkins' corpse, now resting there on the rug, stabbed. After killing him, the murderer had escaped down the trellis.

Of course there were still several questions left unanswered. Had the murderer also made his entrance via the trellis, or did he live in the boarding house? Of the tenants, Ralph Douglas limped, and Paul Slate did not look agile enough for such an escape; Jenkins was dead, and Mr. Hubert was the only one left. Therefore the murder must have been an outside job, if his reasoning was correct up to date. He sat back in the chair meditatively, trying to think of the next move.

It was then that an entirely new and

repugnant thought crashed into his waiting brain. Here he was with a corpse in front of him, all alone on the top floor where no one was supposed to be—and the corpse was of a man whom he was known to dislike, and who disliked him. Who had, in fact, asked to be moved away from him, as though by premonition. The real murderer was missing. The murder weapon was missing. All apparent clues were missing. In fact, of the myriad factors involved, only he remained.

Mr. Hubert shivered, small and miserable, in the bathrobe, his large, flat feet turned outward in helpless dejection where they rested on the floor. He had visions of an official black wagon coming for him, and already his thin wrists itched from the friction of anticipated handcuffs. Here he was, and his fingerprints were on the door-knob. He could not wipe them off without perhaps destroying those of the murderer, and thus impeding the path of justice. He was trapped.

But—no, not quite. If he could find what the murderer had been looking for, that should aid in the shifting of suspicions. It might even point to the identity of the killer. So if there was something, anything unusual in this room, he had to find it. He had to.

He got up quickly from the armchair and stood still, looking around. There was an adjoining door partly open, apparently a bathroom. That did not seem a likely hiding-place, but he would search it if he found nothing in the bedroom. First the drawers, which he had heard being opened from downstairs.

TEN minutes later he was discouraged with the drawers. They had yielded sweaters and bobby-socks and serviceable cotton underwear, one sophisticated black satin slip, and three pages of geometry homework. The few other assorted articles of clothing puzzled him, and he found only one interesting thing. This was the square of embroidery, the sampler that Marcy had mentioned as she died. It was just as Mrs. Amsterdam had described it, with the intertwined hearts in painstaking, uneven stitches and the intricate flower patterns in

each corner. The embroidered lettering, "Marcy loves Peter," looked oddly childish and pathetic. Mr. Hubert smoothed over the cloth, and put it carefully back in its place.

He turned next to the closet, dismayed as he saw the wilderness that confronted him. Now he could feel the vague, cold proddings of desperation as he realized that someone might hear him up here, that at any moment he could be discovered searching Marcy's closet with Jenkins lying dead on the floor. He riffled quickly through the maze of hanging dresses and glanced inside each one of the still row of small, scuffed shoes. Then the hatboxes—in them he found two hats, a copy of the novel *Forever Amber*, and a moth-eaten teddy bear. The top of the closet seemed the only place left to look.

This was in utter confusion. Schoolbooks and discarded dolls, a pile of magazines and a candy-box, three empty picture frames, all jumbled together, all valueless except to Marcy. Mr. Hubert turned away, with the beginning of real fear rising in him. If the murderer, knowing what he was looking for, had been unable to find it, what chance was there?

Then suddenly, standing in the middle of the room near Jenkins' body, he remembered something that seemed dimly to be significant. Mr. Amsterdam had said, "I never talked to anyone about it before. . . . I never told anyone about Marcy before. . . ." But she had told him all about it, and he knew every detail of the girl's death. Just he, and Mrs. Amsterdam, and the police. No one else. Not the murderer, then. No one.

He did not know why this should be important, but he felt that it was. Something about the sampler. And the glimpse he had gotten of a candy box on the shelf of Marcy's closet just now. It had been a quaint, pretty box of Whitman's Chocolates. Whitman's . . . *Whitman's Sampler!* That was the name on it—and perhaps Marcy had not meant the square of embroidery at all, but had been trying to say that there was something in the candy box, something that should be found after her death!

And the murderer could not have found it because he did not know, as Mr. Hubert did, what Marcy had said as she died.

The little man flung open the closet door again, pulling down a big china-headed doll and putting it on the floor so that he could see the rest of the shelf more clearly. His hands closed on the candy box and tilted it slowly so that he could verify the brand name. With a lift of elation, he saw that he had been right; and as he started to open the box, he could feel that there was something inside.

DIAMONDS would not have surprised Mr. Hubert. A map for buried treasure would not have surprised him. But he was surprised and exceedingly disheartened to find nothing in the Sampler box except a thick packet of letters, all addressed to Miss Marcy Amsterdam and tied up in a baby-blue ribbon. He looked at the signature on one of them—it was signed in a firm man's hand: *With all my love, Peter*. Mr. Hubert grew a little more interested. Then he saw that all the letters were in the same writing, and he was more interested still. He began reading snatches of the letters, and certain lines struck prominently at his consciousness. Soon he was reading quickly, avidly, with growing excitement.

. . . and always remember, Marcy, to be first at the mailbox. My letters must be a secret between us, you know, and so must our love. You mustn't ask me to explain. . . .

. . . But of course I love you, Marcy. I come in to see you whenever I can, but you don't know how busy I am. Our marriage will be impossible for some time yet. . . .

. . . And why can't you stop nagging me about getting married?

. . . You little fool, if you come out here or tell your mother about us it'll ruin everything. Someday I'll send for you. . . .

. . . So you've finally found out. What a kid you are! How dare you tell me to divorce her for you? How dare you suggest to tell her about us yourself? Can't you understand that sometimes a man just wants to play around? That's all it was, Marcy. . . .

. . . Marcy, dear, you mustn't do anything you said in your last letter. What a bad little girl you are to threaten me like that! Tell you what, I'll come down and see you Thursday, and we'll talk it all over by the bluff, where we've had such happy times together. But remember, Marcy, you mustn't do anything in the meantime. . . .

That letter was the last one, dated the week of Marcy's death. She had died on Thursday.

Down in the bottom of the candy box, freed from its baby-blue ribbon, a small newspaper clipping stared up at Mr. Hubert. The picture of a good-looking couple in their thirties, smiling serenely at a litter of Persian kittens and identified by the caption as Mr. and Mrs. Peter Sanders. The woman was unfamiliar. The man. . . .

Mr. Hubert's thoughts whirled in incredulous confusion. He tried to sort them out and cut them down to their simplest terms. This Sanders had made love to Marcy, and the poor little girl had believed herself hopelessly in love with him. Then, finding out about his marriage, she had begun to threaten him as a desperate last attempt at getting him to marry her. He had come to appease her—but as they stood there on the edge of the bluff, Marcy was too young and impulsive to be conscious of danger. She insisted on telling his wife, and making everything all right for them. And as they argued, suddenly he pushed her—and she lost her balance—and she fell down toward the rocks. . . .

Then, panic-stricken, Sanders must have remembered the letters he had written, and the evidence that was in them. So he had come back under a different name when Mrs. Amsterdam turned her home into a boardinghouse. He had come back as a tenant—under the name Paul Slate.

Yes, that was the same face, smiling in the newspaper clipping. The same short, good-looking man, genial with his pedigreed kittens around him. Paul Slate, who always had seemed pleasantly innocuous, carrying his pet cat on his shoulder.

Mr. Hubert was so absorbed in his discovery, rereading some of the letters and analyzing the picture, that at first he

(Continued on page 85)

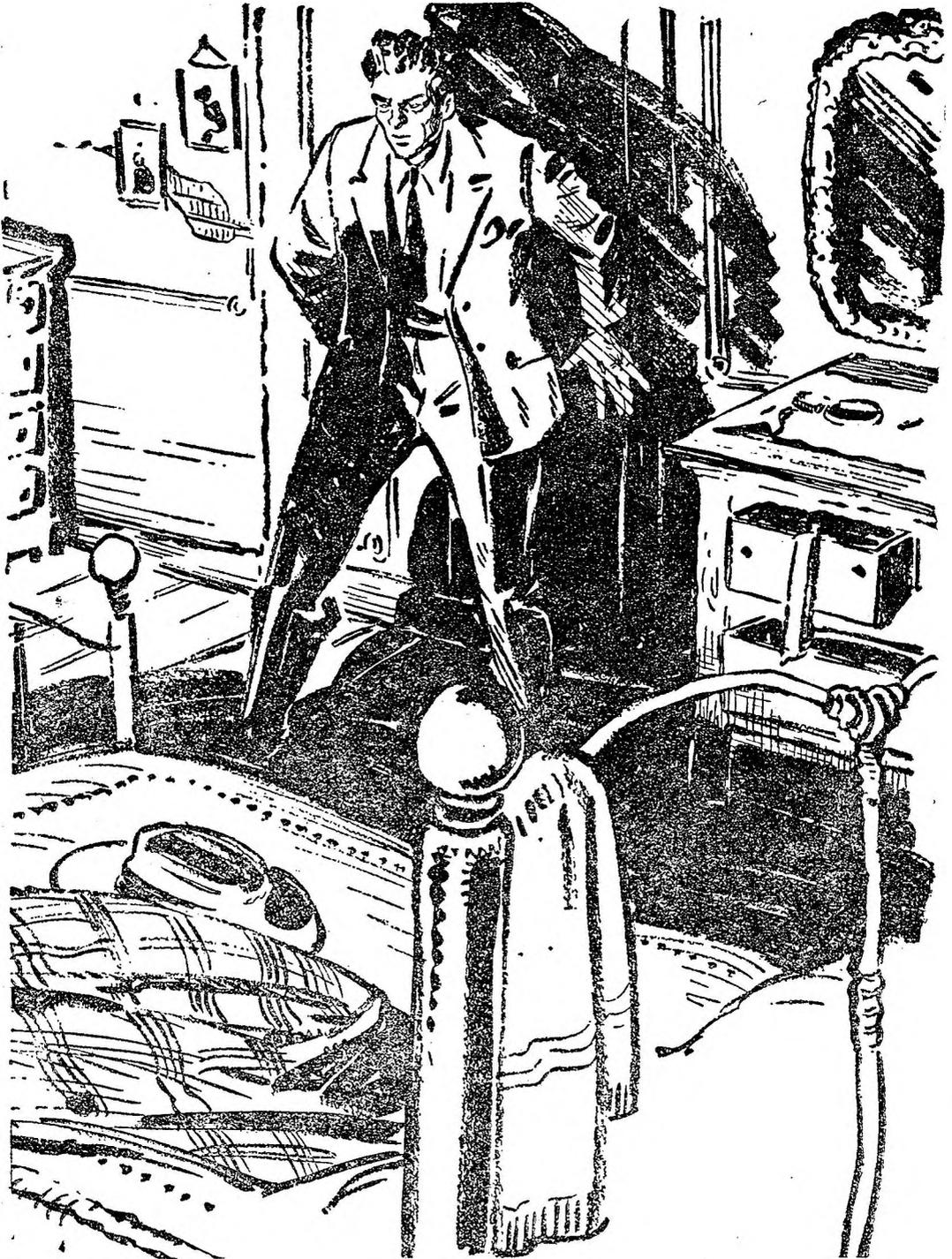
ELEGY FOR MAX

As Johnny grabbed the gungsel's wrist, he brought his knee up sharply and sank it into the thin belly.



Max's father was a genius and he insisted that Max be a genius too. So Max never learned to admit even to himself that he was frightened at anything. The net effect posed a grimly unpretty problem for two gumshoes!

By ANDREW HOLT



OHNNY BLAIR walked through the door that connected his hotel room with his partner's and sat down beside the bed.

"You've got company," he

said. "The desk will announce a caller in exactly five minutes."

Martin speared a forkful of bacon and fried egg, waved an inviting gesture at the silver coffee pot and the empty cup, and swallowed.

"I'm palpitating. Why five minutes?"

"Because when you came home sozzled last night you told them not to disturb you before eleven. I heard the clerk being adamant."

"Oh. Have some coffee?"

"No, thanks."

"It can't be a client. There aren't any more. Must be somebody who wants to sell me something."

"In a way," said Johnny.

Martin put down his fork and looked at his partner closely.

"Come on," he prompted, "out with it. I can always tell when my little man is bothered. Who is this mysterious visitor?"

"Mrs. Max Means."

"Oh."

Johnny said nothing. Martin watched the things that his partner could not bring himself to say cloud his blue eyes and re-lented.

"You think I shouldn't see her?"

"It's none of my business."

"I asked you."

Johnny put his hand on Martin's blanketed knee.

"She's nothing but trouble. She never comes to you unless she wants something."

"And you figure if she asked me for the Radio City Music Hall, I'd get up out of bed, walk east on Hollywood Boulevard until I got to Sixth and Fiftieth, and start to tear it down with my fingernails?"

Johnny looked unhappy but he nodded. Martin laughed.

"Look," he said, "I'm the kind of a guy who is a dope about women, but I'm also the kind of guy who knows it. You're not offending me. You're my partner and it's your privilege to worry. But you can't tell me anything about Pat Means. She's got the face of an angel, the body of a Grable, and the soul of a werewolf. I understand all that. Can I help it if she still hits me right between the eyes?"

The phone rang. He picked it up, said "Yes, I know," into the receiver, then "Give me five minutes and let her come," and hung up.

"Where was I?" he asked. "Oh, yes, she doesn't give a damn about me, but I've been handy and she's always very nice

when she needs me. Don't look so miserable. It can't be money she wants this time."

"Not unless she wants to run the forty-nine family millions up to a nice round figure like fifty."

"And," added Martin, "even if Means has thrown her out into the cold world in her old, torn mink, our bank balance wouldn't be much help to her or much loss to us." He swung his feet out of the bed and stuck his arms into the sleeves of his robe. Johnny spoke carefully.

"I always thought there must be more to it. Your relationship with her, I mean. You're not usually . . ."

Martin interrupted. "I've known her ever since I was a kid. We all lived on the same block, she and I and Jimmy. It was the part of Brooklyn the trees grow in. Jimmy was my best friend and we were both crazy about her. She didn't even know I was alive. She and Jimmy started going around together in high school.

"I was older than they were and I got out of school first and began to try to hack my way up in the world, but I saw a lot of them. They had it all planned. Jimmy would work his way through college and then they would get married. She got a job in a dance hall. With what she had it would have been easy to go on from there. But she didn't. She just wanted to marry Jimmy. I remember she saved up enough money to go out to Michigan for his commencement but she changed her mind at the last minute. The money would come in handy if he didn't get a job right away. That was the kind of a kid she was then. So Jimmy graduated. He drove home with a couple of the boys. They hit a truck. Nobody else was hurt but Jimmy was killed."

There was a short silence.

"SO," CONTINUED Martin, "after a while, Pat decided she had the rewards of virtue right up to here"—he drew his index finger across his throat—"and she set out to collect on what the world owed her."

"And the Means money was a good down payment. How long ago did this happen?"

"About ten years."

"That's a long time," Johnny said slowly, "long enough to get over anything, even a kick in the teeth like that. But I see your trouble. If she can't make you do something with those great big beautiful eyes, she can always remind you of Jimmy." He smiled. "You're a jerk, but I forgive you."

"Thanks," said Martin. There was a knock on the door and he walked toward it. Halfway across the room, he looked back at Johnny and threw him a grin. "Stick around," he whispered, "and protect me."

Mrs. Max Means was looking well. Her smooth, silver-blond hair was wrapped around her head in a coronet of braids. The cut of her casual suede coat was flawless, its pale green color was magnificent against her skin, and her jewelry had that expensive simplicity. She was very beautiful.

"Darling," she said and held out both hands to Martin, "it's been *years*."

"You're looking wonderful, Pat," he told her, crooking her arm through his and drawing her into the room. "You remember my partner, Johnny Blair."

"Of course. How are you?" She tossed her coat onto Martin's arm and sank into a chair. "It's simply marvelous to see you. You bring back memories."

Johnny cleared his throat.

"What are you doing out here?" she continued, touching her gold lighter to a cigarette. "Business?"

"We're on a vacation."

"Which we can't afford," put in Johnny too hastily. "Martin has a theory that when business is lousy, we shouldn't look as if we're trying."

She favored him with a single glance and turned her wide-eyed gaze back to Martin. "I came to ask you out for the week-end. You will come, won't you?"

Martin stubbed out his cigarette, carefully as if it were a matter worthy of his entire attention.

"Look, baby," he said, "I knew you when. You do it very well and I'd be an appreciative audience later in the day but I just got up. In the mornings, I'm a realist. What do you want?"

She stared at him with almost perfectly



Max fell onto some soft dirt and wasn't hurt. But the horse broke her leg.

simulated astonishment, then shrugged her shoulders delicately and flicked ash onto the carpet.

"Honestly, darling, it was just a sentimental idea. I read in one of the columns that you were in Hollywood and I thought it would be great fun to have you out and talk over old . . ."

"Nuts," interrupted Martin flatly. "You're as sentimental as an adding machine in the First National Bank. I don't mind being good; old Martin and I'll always come when you whistle, but I want to know why."

She laughed. "You always were rude." Then she shrugged again and her manner became businesslike. "It's about my husband. Somebody is trying to kill him."

CHAPTER II

Accident or Murder



AT MEANS swung her long, black convertible around a sharp curve, through a big, white-clapboard gateway, and sped three hundred yards up her private road.

"Now," said Martin when they came to a little gravelled clearing. She slammed on the brakes.

"All right," she told him impatiently, "if you insist, we can talk here. I wasn't trying to stall you. I just didn't want to talk in front of your partner."

"Why?"

"He doesn't like me and he wouldn't be a sympathetic audience."

"You're so wrong," Martin told her. "You sold Johnny the minute you mentioned money. A client is a client with the firm of Ferris and Blair and personal preju-

dices never get in the way of the fees."

She wrinkled her nose with distaste. "You don't like me very much any more either, do you?"

"Forget it," he said impatiently. "Let's leave our emotional reactions out of this. Even if you had thick ankles and crowsfeet and a roll around your middle, I'd still try to help you stop murder. You said, quote, somebody is trying to kill my husband, unquote. That sounds like more than one attempt. What has this inept killer been doing and why don't you just call the cops?"

"Max won't let me," she said. "He pretends he thinks they were accidents. You never met him, did you?"

"No. But I've heard the legends."

"Then you ought to understand. Max's father was a genius. He insisted that Max be a genius, too. He never had a childhood. He was always surrounded by nurses, tutors, bodyguards, and anybody else who could sell the old man that they were necessary. Now, he simply won't have anyone watching over him, no matter what. And he won't admit he's frightened, not even to himself."

"But *you're* sure they weren't accidents?"

"Of course. Listen, the first one happened two weeks ago. Max had a beautiful little mare; Satin he called her. She was very skittish. Nobody but Max ever rode her. She shied at lots of things but the one thing that drove her absolutely crazy was Max's cocker spaniel. She seemed to drive the dog crazy, too. He had a perfectly fiendish way of leaping out of a bush at her and yapping like mad. Max had been thrown a couple of times, so lately when he was going to ride Satin, he always tied Jake—that's the dog—up behind the stables. When I say tied, I mean he snapped a leash onto his collar and the leash was fastened to a stake. I **know** he did it when the accident happened because I saw him. Then I went back to the house and Max set off on Satin.

"He rode around the estate, up to the hills. There are a couple of places in the hills where there are sheer drops of a hundred feet or so onto rocks beside the bridle path. He was right in the middle of one of

the worst stretches when Jake came tearing out of the brush. It was just the craziest kind of luck that Max fell onto some soft dirt and wasn't hurt. Satin broke her leg and he had to shoot her."

"That's an awfully silly way to commit murder," Martin told her. "I mean it's so dubious. Lots of guys fall off horses every day without anything very serious happening to them."

"Yes," she told him, "that's just why it's so ideal. If it worked, it would look like an accident, and if it didn't, well, it was just an accident and he could try again some other way. And that's what he did. Last week. . . ."

"Wait a minute. How do you know the leash didn't break or wasn't properly fastened or something?"

"No." Her voice was positive. "It wasn't broken. I still have it, you can see for yourself. And as for it's being loose or unfastened or something, I know that wasn't so either because when I started back to the house, Jake whined and strained at the leash. He wanted to follow me. He was so frantic and pulling so hard that I thought he'd hurt himself and I went back to pet him and calm him down. He'd have slipped it then if it had been possible."

"All right. What was the next try?"

"He came closer that time. It was about a week ago. Max was rehearsing Jose Fredericks. You know," she added parenthetically, "that's one of the things the studio people hate about Max. He isn't a good director or a good writer or anything like that but he tries to do everything. He was showing Jose how he wanted him to commit a murder in his next picture. And he was making him do it over and over again until Jose wanted to scream and everybody else was bored to tears. They were using Max's own gun. It's a Colt .380 and it was not loaded. We all saw Max take the clip out. It was a full clip, but just to make sure, he pulled the sleeve. Nothing popped out. It was positively empty. Max stood in for the victim and Jose shot him at least ten times and there was just that click. Paris was there too, he's the producer, and he was fuming with impatience. I saw that there would be a scene, so I ducked

upstairs and asked the butler to announce lunch early, so Max would have to stop."

SHE lit a cigarette. Martin watched her steady hands and heard her cool voice in his mind again and wondered.

"Go on," he said.

"Well, in spite of my diplomacy, Max insisted on going back to it after lunch. He and Jose and the rest of us trooped downstairs to the playroom and they started all over again. Jose was wild. He's a very conceited young man and he hated Max's criticisms. He said, 'Is this what you want?' picked up the gun, aimed it straight at Max's middle, and pulled the trigger. That shot was the loudest sound I've ever heard. Max just stood there, shaking all over and Jose turned pale green and fell backward onto the sofa. For about five minutes nobody even said anything. Then Max got down on his hands and knees and looked around for the slug. He found it near the door where it had hit the cast iron hinge and ricocheted. I still don't understand how Jose missed him. It was a miracle."

"H-m-m-m," said Martin. "This Jose, would he have any reason to knock off Max?"

"Not that I know of. He's a rotten actor. Max is building him up only because he likes to think he has a discovery of his own. Jose's very conceited but I think he realizes that Max will do more for him than anyone else would."

"And the Paris character?"

"Irving? Good lord, no. Look, darling, if you were winning at poker and the loser was paying you off in cash, would you shoot him?" The question was rhetorical. "That's the way it is with Irving and Max. Max started off owning the whole she-bang, lock, studio and barrel, and Irving started with nothing but brains and the most colossal nerve in the world. Now he gives the orders and Max pays the bills."

"Honey," Martin told her, "nobody will ever accuse you of being blindly adoring of your husband. Did any of them duck out during lunch?"

"No. But they all washed up beforehand—in separate bathrooms. So either of them could have done it."



Jose shot him at least ten times and there was just that click.

"They were the only guests?"

"Yes. Oh, no, there was Quentin, of course."

"Who's he?"

"Max's secretary." She giggled. "I suppose he does have a motive. Max is always waking him up in the middle of the night to take down great thoughts. But somehow—I don't think—you'll see."

"Well, I don't want to seem crass but murder is often mercenary. Who gets the dough if Max gets his?"

"You mean me, I suppose." She laughed. It was not a nice laugh. "No, dear, I didn't. And I won't. I have every reason to keep Max happy and healthy. If he dies, I'll get practically nothing."

"How come?"

"I told you a little about his father. He had another cute idea, too. He wanted to start a dynasty. That's why Max was named for him. He figured he'd try it that way, but if it didn't work, he'd keep the name alive by itself. If Max dies without a son, the bulk of the estate will go to the upkeep of the Means Museum of the Cinema." She started the motor.

"By the way," she added, "You're not

Martin Ferris. You're Philip Giles. I don't want Max to know you're a detective."

"And, also, this way nobody will get any nasty ideas about how your ex-boy friends dangle."

"You're determined to be unpleasant, aren't you, dear?"

He grinned. "I won't give you an inch."

She threw in the clutch. Almost simultaneously, there was the whine of a rifle bullet and the deadened crackle of bullet-pierced, shatterproof glass.

For a full second, Martin stared at the cobweb around the hole in the windshield. Then he set the emergency brake, grabbed at the girl beside him and pulled her down. They crouched low on the floor of the car. The motor stalled.

There were two more whines and the ping of a bullet striking metal sounded twice. Then there was silence.

He waited five minutes by the dashboard clock with his arm around the slim warmth pressed close to him. Then he sat up.

"He's a lousy shot," he said. "Anyway, we can't stay here all night. Max wouldn't like it."

She did not answer. Her hands shook as she started the car.

"That was no accident," he told her. "Unless we reach the house and find we were parked behind a target." He patted her hand on the wheel and spoke cheerfully: "But I don't think we will. Whoever he is, he's added either you or me to his list."

CHAPTER III

Sink with a Splash



WITHIN a very short time, Martin had decided that he had seen more promising week-ends. His first five minutes in the house were spent in a fruitless examination of

the guns on the racks in the playroom. None of them had been fired recently. He could think of many things more cheering than the idea of someone loose with a rifle and the intention of using it. And the size of the house and the number of wooded acres surrounding it made a search difficult to the point of impossible.

Big houses with fifty rooms, bathrooms by the dozen, and the outward appearance of well-kept Renaissance mausoleums gave him claustrophobia anyway; and now that he and Pat had joined the others in the bar, he found that the inmates gave him indigestion.

He put one corner of his mind to the task of remembering to answer to the name of Giles, and the rest of it to observation.

Jose Fredericks was about what he had expected—sport clothes to make an Esquire artist dream nights, shoulders of a breadth that was an insult to the ordinary American male, and a tendency to veer to the left when addressed, to keep the best side of his profile in view.

Paris was the producer incarnate, complete with cigar. The arrogance of his manner conveyed his feeling that the others were children and backward ones at that.

Max was the same in a slightly smaller, a little more pot-bellied version. His arrogance took the form of exaggerated condescension like the democratic manners of royalty on a visit to a soup kitchen.

As for Quentin, the secretary, he was such a perfect type with his glasses and white collar that Martin could only conclude that Max had hired him through Central Casting. The other occupant of the room was a Filipino houseboy with a tray of drinks.

When he had consoled himself with a double Scotch and returned his reluctant attention to the conversation, they were registering horror at Pat's account of their close escape, and Max was giving out with his considered opinion.

"It must have been the kids next door," he said. "They're always fooling with target practice. I'll speak to their father. They're nice boys and they don't mean any harm, but they're careless. I . . ."

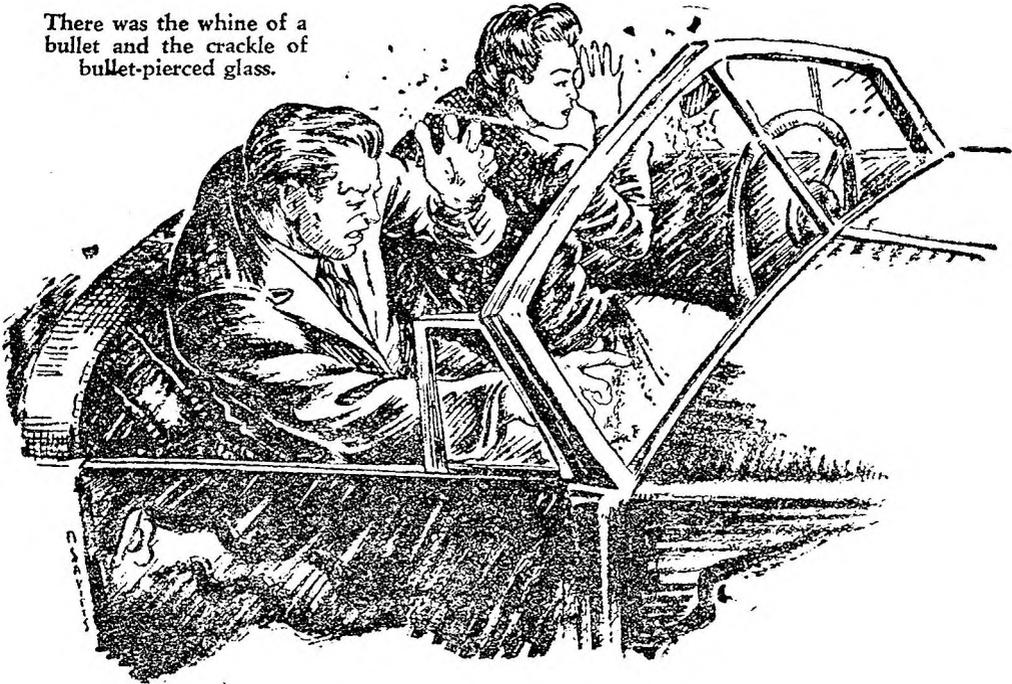
Martin decided to stop him before he got to "boys will be boys."

"A bullet," he put in flatly, "is an unpleasant fact. And whether it's accidental or intentional, the hole it makes is apt to be uncomfortable."

Max gave him a smile as if it were a valuable gift.

"It's a shame you had to have such an

There was the whine of a bullet and the crackle of bullet-pierced glass.



experience on your first visit, Mr. Giles. But you're all right and that's one good thing. This is the third."

The others stared at him.

"I mean," he continued, "all bad things coming in threes. We've had all of them now and nobody's been hurt, so we're in the clear." He dismissed the subject and glanced at his watch. "It's time for my dip. Anyone care to join me?"

Pat shivered delicately. "It's too cold," she said. "Ask me in about a month."

Paris shook his head and Martin stretched his empty glass toward the Filipino.

"I'll take my liquid internally," he said.

"I'll go with you." Jose offered. He gave the apple an extra rub with the polishing cloth. "I think you're absolutely right. A swim before lunch keeps you in condition."

"No." Max said the word so positively that it was embarrassing. He smiled to soften it. "You're too valuable to take chances with. You catch a cold and it holds up the picture. See about those letters, Quentin, will you?"

Quentin rose abruptly and left the room. There was a pause. Pat broke it.

"You change, honey. We'll go out to the pool and watch." She led the way. Mar-

tin hesitated long enough to watch the Filipino put the bar tray on a wagon and wheel it after them and then followed.

Outside, he got himself another drink and a canvas-covered chaise and concluded that there was something to money after all. Before him the pool shimmered blue and, behind, the wooded hills faded into the sky. Pat sat down beside him. Paris stretched out on the tile edge of the pool and flicked his ashes into the water. Jose composed himself in the attitude of an eager spectator and Max emerged from the house.

His gabardine trunks were so impressive that the parts of him which emerged from them were a distinct anti-climax. The cocker spaniel trotted at his heels.

He tossed his matching gabardine robe onto a chair. The dog sat up and begged.

"You've certainly got him trained, Max," Jose said admiringly.

Paris closed his eyes and yawned. Max beamed on his loyal supporter.

"Watch this," he said. He trotted off into the bushes and came back with a branch.

Max tossed the stick into the blue water.

"Is that Jake?" Martin asked Pat. She nodded, then shook her head as if to caution him.

Max tossed the stick into the blue water.

"Go get it, Jake," he ordered. Jake hesitated for an instant on the side of the pool. "Go get it," repeated Max.

THE dog jumped. There was a single splash and then a series of splashes. Martin got up from his chair and looked down. The dog thrashed the water violently with all four legs. Quite suddenly he stopped and lay still.

His body stiffened and began to sink. In the silence, Pat's scream echoed stridently. Jose Fredericks made a sickish noise. Martin put his hand up to keep Max back from the edge of the pool.

"Wait," he said, "there's something very peculiar about this."

Nobody else said anything. Max stood irresolutely by the ladder that reached down into the water. Martin watched Jake's body move slowly with the current, toward the outlet. In the center of the pool, the ripples made patterns in the oily slick that lay on the surface. Then he had an idea.

From the gardener's shack on the far side of the pool, he procured a long-handled rake.

In his bare feet, with his trousers rolled up, he walked to the shallow side.

The others watched, stunned to silence. Gingerly, he stepped into the cold water. Some poisons, he knew, entered the blood stream through the pores of the skin. A chill numbness crept up from his ankles. He could only hope that it was his imagination and the temperature of the water rather than its content.

"This is what you get for skipping your chemistry homework," he told himself sternly, urging his hesitant feet onward.

When the water lapped at his bare knees and the rolled bottoms of his best flannel slacks, he maneuvered with the rake until the dog's still body was within reach. Then, cradling it in his arms, he carried it around the edge of the pool to the silent, waiting group, and laid its dripping deadness at Max's feet.

Max looked at it briefly. He straightened his shoulders. Somehow dignity came to him. He spoke to the three of them, the woman who was his wife and the two men.

"I want you to know," he said slowly, "that I'll never forgive this. Never. And I'll see that you pay for it."

CHAPTER IV

Death of a Dog



AFTER lunch, in his own room, Martin lay flat on his back on the bed and stared up at the yellow and gray-striped ceiling. He was trying to recall and catalogue the reactions of the people beside the pool.

Pat had been genuinely shocked. There was no doubt about that. She might have assumed her air of numb silence, but the way her skin had grayed, making the scarlet of her lipstick stand out painted and blatant, was no act. He grinned at his own sensation of relief, took a swallow from the glass on the bedside table and prodded himself on.

Max's emotion also was unquestionably genuine. Martin could still see him standing there, with his fists clenched, including everyone in his malevolent stare; and he could remember the way Max turned suddenly and stumbled blindly toward the house as if he wanted to throw himself on his bed and sob into his pillow.

Jose Fredericks and Paris were something else again. The actor's condolences had been so smooth that it seemed impossible that they had not been rehearsed. Martin wondered. But he had known hams before whose most sincere moments bore the stigma of bad theater.

That left Paris. He had lain quietly on his back, trimming the ash of his cigar precisely, his manner announcing that he, a busy, efficient adult, had no sympathy with this childish, sentimental nonsense about a dog. And after Max had gone, he had risen deliberately and asked Pat if it wasn't time for lunch.

There was a knock on the door. It opened immediately and Pat Means came in.

"That Paris," said Martin, "I don't like him. Do you think if I sent East and got him a pair of Adler Elevator shoes it would be fair to hit him?"

She ignored the question. "You were

right," she told him breathlessly, seating herself on the edge of the bed.

Martin decided that he liked her negligee and that he should concentrate on concentrating.

"How much of the stuff was there?"

"Two gallon jugs. They're both empty. I found them myself in the gardener's shed. He came in while I was looking at them and he swears they were never opened. He's a conservative. Max is always trying to get him to use new things and he's always stubborn about sticking to the old way, so I guess he's telling the truth. I warned him not to touch them. I thought maybe we could get fingerprints."

Martin shook his head. "I doubt it,"

She looked disappointed. "I've been thinking it out. Anyone who has been here as a guest would know about that shed. It's right next to the pool. Where you got the rake." She took the cigarette he offered.

"You know, honey," Martin said, "two things emerge about this would-be killer of ours. To begin with, he's a moron. For instance, how could he know this swimming pool gag would get Max."

"You're wrong. There was nothing dumb about that. Max goes swimming every day and he's the only one who does. I never do, unless it's really hot. Paris doesn't even know how to swim."

"And Jose? And Quentin?"

"You heard Max. That's routine. Jose is too precious and Quentin isn't allowed to swim on Max's time."

"Even so," Martin insisted. "DDT is a new thing and I don't know too much about it, myself, but I do know it's not soluble in water. It was mixed with oil and it floated on top. You must have seen the slick. How could he be sure Max would swallow enough? After all, most people dive with their mouths closed."

"Jake died."

"Sure, but that doesn't prove a thing. Dogs are more susceptible to most poisons and drugs. You can knock one out with a couple of aspirins. Two gallons of poison would spread pretty thin on a swimming pool that size."

"But don't you see?" she jabbed her ciga-



Irving Paris lay at their feet. He was dead.

rette out hard on a copper ash tray. "That's what has me so scared. He goes on trying, in every indirect way he can dream up. Sooner or later, he'll succeed. And there's no way we can catch him, if he never takes a chance as the one who actually pulls the trigger."

He patted her shoulder. "You're forgetting way back this morning when we were the target for irony. He pulled the trigger then and missed."

"But he won't always miss."

"He'll always miss us."

"What do you mean?"

"He was just warning us, or trying to scare us off. He didn't really try to hit us."

"How do you know?"

"I'm psychic. I can smell a bullet when it's meant for me."

She shook her head doubtfully. "What was the second thing you were going to say you'd figured out?"

"Obviously, that it's one of your little group."

"Why?"

"Because it has to be someone who knows the house and Max's habits and who was here when each of the attempts were made. That means you, Paris, Quentin, Fredericks, and, of course, Max the pigeon."

"Couldn't it be one of the servants?"

"Sure. But I don't have it that way. I hate murders where the butler did it. How's Max?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen him since lunch."

"And what's with you and Irving Paris?"

She turned away from him. "I don't understand you."

"Yes, you do. He looks at you like it was after two years of rationing and you were a thick steak smothered in onions."

"Perhaps he does. So what?" It takes two to make a romance and I'm not having any."

"I remember, you told me how you had good reasons to keep Max healthy and happy. But you're the kind of girl who gets bored. And Irving has a habit of taking over Max's things." Her face grew hard.

"If I did get bored," she said coldly, "I'd still think twice before I risked what I have as Max's wife for a little thing like Irving." She leaned closer and her smile was derisive. "Now, you're different. You're big and strong and . . ."

A single shot exploded, split the air, seemed to echo back and forth against the bedroom walls, caught the moment in suspense and held it.

Pat's skin turned white. She sat motionless and dazed. Then she was on her feet and out the door.

Martin watched her go. He picked up the phone beside the bed and called his hotel. When he got Johnny, he was succinct.

"Come out here," he said. "I need you. It's on Pond Lily Drive and it's as big as Central Park, so you can't miss it. Wait around the gate but don't let the cops see you. I'll meet you."

"Will there be cops?" asked Johnny. "Goody!"

Martin hung up on him and walked down the stairs. Through the living-room windows he could see the group on the marble terrace, Pat, Quentin, Jose, and Max. Something lay at their feet. He went through the side door and saw that it was Irving Paris.

He was very dead.

THE bullet hole was small and placed precisely in the center of his forehead like a caste mark. There was dirt on the light tan of his sleeves and the tweed body of his jacket was wrinkled. His cigar lay on the white stone beside him, still burn-

ing, and coloring the scene with the fragrance of fine tobacco.

"Anybody touch him?" Martin asked, crouching beside the body.

"No." Pat's voice took on a note of hysteria. "He's dead, isn't he?"

"Definitely. Be a good girl, go call the cops." He looked up from his inspection of the corpse. "The rest of you go inside and sit down."

"See here," began Max truculently. "I . . ."

Martin rose to his full height and looked at him.

"And shut up," he added.

Alone on the terrace, he ignored the corpse and concentrated on the second-floor windows. There were four of them, opening like doors onto the narrow, pillared porch from which a stone stairway ran down to the terrace.

Then he joined the others, sat down on a chinz sofa and watched Pat try to comfort her husband.

"He was killed for me," Max wailed. "They thought he was me. It's my fault. I should have called the cops long ago." He turned to the others, pleading earnestly for understanding. "My God," he said, "how could I know? I thought I was the only one in danger. I've got a right to take a risk with my own life."

Martin reached into his wallet for a card. When Max passed the sofa in his nervous gyrations about the room, he thrust it under his nose. The little man stared at it with unseeing eyes.

"Read it," Martin insisted. Then, when comprehension dawned in the other's face, "You did have a cop. You can't be blamed for negligence. Your wife hired me. She was afraid for you. She didn't tell you because she thought you might send me away."

Max put his arm fondly around Pat. "You were right, honey," he told her. "I was neurotic on the subject." He turned to Martin. "You're a detective. Find out who did this."

Martin laughed. "It's not quite that simple. One thing, though, you're wife's in the clear. She was with me when the shot was fired and I'd probably have noticed the gun in her hand."

Jose rose indignantly and looked at Martin as if he had committed *lese majeste*.

"Of course she's in the clear! That's a damned insolent remark. You sit here talking impertinent nonsense and meanwhile the murderer is getting away. Why don't you do something?"

Martin surveyed him calmly. "Like what?"

Jose's rage nearly choked him. "Search the grounds," he spluttered. "Question the servants." Martin smiled at him again, then shook his head.

"It would bore me and it will entertain the cops. They'll do it very thoroughly and they'll find out that the butler has a second cousin in San Quentin and the cook used to be in the Floradora Sextette and hates movie executives because they won't give her Hayworth's parts. They'll be questioned for hours and scared into nervous breakdowns. Then, when it's all over, the police will come right back to the people in this room. And when they do, you'd be much wiser to control your indignation."

Jose rose from his chair, scowled, and took a determined step in Martin's direction.

"Stop it," Max ordered. "We've got to keep our heads."

"I'm glad you see it that way," Martin told him. "The cops will ask a lot of questions. I suppose the obvious starting place is that Paris was mistaken for you. How did he happen to be wearing your jacket?"

Max looked surprised. "He wasn't. Mine's upstairs in my closet. You can see for yourself."

"And where were you when the shot was fired?"

"In the kitchen, helping the cook."

Martin's eyebrows went up to form a question. Pat's giggle was high and unseemly in the quiet room.

"He's a gourmet," she explained. "We're having turkey for dinner and he always makes the oyster stuffing himself."

"Oh. Was the cook with you?"

"No. The servants were having their lunch. She prepared everything for me and I put the turkey in the oven myself when I finished trussing it. I was on my way upstairs when I heard the shot."

Martin looked at the secretary, took in his shaking hands and wilted collar.

"Where were you?"

"In my room, working."

"Anybody with you?"

"No—but Mrs. Means saw me come out when she ran downstairs."

Pat nodded. "It's on the wrong side of the house," she said.

Martin turned to the actor. "And you?" he asked. Fredericks answered sullenly:

"I was in the library. In my excitement I ran to the back door, forgetting that you can't reach the terrace that way. When I realized, I ran back. I met Max in the hall. We found him together."

"But you were all alone when the shot was fired?"

Max nodded. Jose squirmed impatiently in his chair.

"Control your reflexes," Martin told him. "By the way," he asked Pat, "where are the servants? By all the laws of literature and logic, the cook should be swooning over the corpse."

"I sent them back to their quarters. They were marching in here in a body when I got downstairs. I didn't know what had happened, but I thought they would be easier to handle if they stayed away from it, whatever it was."

"My, what a cool head, you have, grandma," he told her admiringly. He stood up. "I've got things to do before the cops come. It would be very clever of the four of you to stay in this room together until they arrive. The big thing in this is going to be the gun. That's the first thing they'll look for and when they find it—which they will—you'll all be in a much better spot if you haven't been alone long enough to hide it."

"I've had enough of this," Jose said. This time Max's command did not stop him. He seized the lapel of Martin's jacket and raised his fist.

Martin flicked his left delicately along the actor's jaw and watched him fall back into his chair. The friendly expression did not leave his face.

"Don't be athletic," he told him. "You can't afford to lose your temper. You're going to need all the brains you've got and

any you can borrow. Look at it this way: unless she had an accomplice, Pat didn't do it. The servants are out for reasons too numerous to discuss, but you can take my word for their existence. Pat saw Quentin leave his room, and if Irving was mistaken for Max, it follows that Max didn't do it. Which leaves you. Jose, *amigo*, you're it."

CHAPTER V

Sirens Sound



HE bridle path curved beside the winding driveway, screened by a tall hedge. Martin walked noiselessly in the soft, loose dirt and listened carefully for the police cars. He wondered what the four he had left behind were talking about and if the seeds he had sown had taken root.

When he was halfway to the main gate, a caravan of cars swept past. Now, if only Johnny had arrived first and kept himself hidden from the cops, things would be just the way he wanted them. Where the bridle path widened into the stable yard, he broke into a trot. Soon, he would be almost to the gatehouse. The cops must have posted a guard. He would have to plunge into the bushes and try to sneak past. It was not a pleasant prospect. He had heard too many snapping twigs in movies not to realize the threat they constituted and all he knew of woodcraft was what he had picked up in Lindy's.

He was almost past the brick stables now. A small stone plunked into the dirt at his feet. The second pebble hit him on the top of the head. He turned to see his partner's white head framed in the the open half of a stable door.

"Come on in and meet the girl," called Johnny cheerfully.

"Pleased to meet you," said Martin gravely to the geldings. He sat down on the straw beside his partner and lit a cigarette.

On the empty stall opposite there was a brass plate which read *Satin*. The smell of horses was pleasant.

"How did you do it?" he asked.

"Got here first, sent my taxi to wait over

the next hilltop, shinned up a fence post, and laid low. Are you having fun?"

"It's been a constant round of gaiety. First I got shot at, half an hour later the only one in the whole party I liked, a cocker called Jake, got poisoned in the swimming pool, then we had lunch and just now somebody knocked off one of the other guests, a gentleman by the name of Paris."

"Do you know who did it?"

"I think so, but proving it is something else again."

"Well, suggested Johnny helpfully, "why don't you get all the suspects together in a big room and . . ."

"I'd rather do it the other way."

"What other way?"

"Set a trap in the library and watch all night with Pat."

"That's what I was afraid of." Johnny's face grew serious. "You better leave that stuff for the Bob Hopes pictures. What do you want me to do?"

"Can you get out again without being seen?"

"Sure. You go down to the gatehouse and bawl the hell out of the cop for letting me sneak out. Meanwhile, I'll climb over my fence again."

"All right. Find somebody who's hep to the local dirt and get all you can on Irving Paris and Jose Fredericks. Also, Paris had a sport jacket, one of those cute ones with solid beige sleeves and a tweed body. Find out where he got it, when, and how. Then do some research on DDT—how much do you need to kill a man, etc. Don't call me. There are extensions in every room and you know how cops love to listen in on party lines. Hang around the hotel, and I'll get in touch with you. Oke?"

"Oke. Be careful."

"Don't worry, there isn't a guy in the joint I can't lick with both hands tied behind me."

"And your head's bullet-proof." Johnny's tone was sarcastic.

"Nag, nag, nag, all day long. That's what I come home to." Martin's grin softened. "Don't worry, baby," he repeated, "I'll do all right."

They separated. Johnny slid through a

low hedge onto the lawn, and ran quickly across the turf to the fence. Martin walked down the driveway to the gate.

"Where is he?" he asked the cop.

"Who?"

"The white-haired guy."

"Ain't been no white-haired guy here."

Martin looked puzzled.

"But he must have come this way. I've been following him down the road from the house."

"If he had, I would'a seen him. I didn't, so he didn't." The cop's face was positive.

"But where could he have gone?"

"I don't know. But he didn't get off the estate. There's only one other gate, around to the back, and we got a man there, too."

Outside on the public highway, a yellow cab whizzed past. Its back seat appeared to be empty. Martin's tone became grave and accusing.

"You're sure you didn't happen to be looking the other way or something?"

"Listen, buddy," said the cop indignantly, "I was put here to watch the gate and that's what I've been doing."

"Well . . ." Martin let the word trail off as he turned. "I don't understand it," he said, as he walked away.

"I'm Ferris," he told the cop at the front door of the house.

"Come on," said the policeman. He led the way to the library, and threw open its door. "I got him," he announced proudly.

"Were you looking for me?" Martin asked innocently.

"Yeah." The beefy, gray-haired man at the desk did not smile. The plainclothes man at the window turned, planted his thick body squarely and watched Martin as if he thought he might make a break for it. The cop slammed the door behind him. "Where were you?"

"Walking around. I thought I might see something. You know, clues."

"Took you a long time."

"I'm a slow walker."

"You're also one hell of a bodyguard."

Martin shrugged. "I was told when I was hired that my duties were to guard Max Means. He's still alive." The beefy man glared at him. Martin slid into a chair. "Besides," he continued, "what was there



He sat almost naturally against the wall. His head drooped forward, and there was blood on his jacket.

to do? I kept them away from the body and I persuaded them to stay in one place until you got here. After all, I couldn't start browbeating them. I'm unofficial."

"And yellow. Didn't it occur to you to search the grounds? Or were you afraid of getting hurt?"

Martin shrugged again. "Stop kidding," he said dryly. "I could see the shot came from the house and since nobody was standing around with a smoking gun in his hand, I deduced that it had been ditched. Have you found it, by the way?"

"No," said the beefy man shortly. He twisted in his chair. "This is a forty-eight acre estate. There are a lot of places a guy could hide a gun."

"If he had a chance," Martin told him.

"Exactly." The beefy man smiled for the first time. "If he took a walk around

the estate looking for clues, for instance."

Martin stood up again, put both palms flat on the desk top, leaned on them, and looked him straight in the eye.

"Check on me with New York," he said, "I've had my license a long time." He leaned closer. "Back east we may not be as brave as you are about plunging into loaded bushes, but we're tough enough to work on the real suspects even if they do have big movie names."

Surprisingly, the big man guffawed. "Hell," he said, "we won't get far this way. I'm Briggs, Captain Briggs." He waved a hand at the detective by the window. "Peterson."

"How d'ya do?" said Martin. "What do you think, or don't you care to tell me?"

He sat down, watched Briggs light a cigarette from a pack marked with an unknown brand, inhale, stare at the butt with hurt surprise and snuff it out. He pushed his own pack of Camels across the desk and, conscious that he had just bribed an officer of the law, waited for Briggs to speak.

"I don't know," the Captain said thoughtfully, "we're digging around, asking questions. From what I hear, I guess we're looking for someone who didn't like Mr. Means—and that means practically everybody from here to San Francisco. I wish I could get my hands on that gun and start tracing it."

"If it can be traced," Martin told him.

"What do *you* think?" Briggs asked. "You were here before the fireworks."

Martin shook his head slowly and rose.

"You got me. All I know is, I don't like it. Right after I arrived this morning there was that hocus-pocus with the swimming pool. Then lunch, and then this. . . . Look," he continued suddenly, "I'll make you an offer. Mrs. Means will probably keep me on. If she does, my job is the same as yours. I want him because he's after Means and you want him because he put a hole in Paris. Give me a little freedom to investigate and I'll bring you everything I get."

Briggs looked him over, inhaled deeply on his Camel.

"I'll take a chance," he said at last. "You

can sneak into places where the law can't go."

"Like into the parlor," said Martin, going out the door.

CHAPTER VI

Turkey Stuffing



HE little secretary's hand shook. He watched Max like a mujik waiting for a beating from the Little Father. Jose sat next to him, rising above it.

"Why can't you go upstairs?" Max yelled. "You've got work to do. The cops will have to let you. My affairs can't wait!"

Martin strode past him to the bar tray where Pat was mixing herself a drink with her back to the scene, took the ice tongs from her hand and poured two double scotches. He walked deliberately across to Quentin and thrust one of them into his limp hand.

"Drink it," he commanded, in the midst of Max's peroration. Then he watched Max splutter. "Even the lower animals have nervous systems," he said coldly, "stop yapping."

Max sank onto the sofa and mopped his brow.

Martin pursued his advantage.

"Have you kicked anyone especially hard in the teeth lately?" he demanded. "Or have you been your own sweet self?"

"You're fired." Max's face was as petulant as a baby's.

"Darling," intervened Pat, turning on the full force of her charm. "You must be patient with Mr. Ferris. He's trying to help us. All he meant was, is there anybody in particular you think might want to kill you."

The petulance disappeared from Max's face as if it had been wiped off by a damp rag.

"I'm a rich man," he said, "and I never worked for my money. A great many people resent that. Irving did, for instance. But does anybody ever kill for a reason like that? Not unless they're crazy. Especially since the people who resent me most are all dependent on me. Take Quentin

here, maybe you think he would like to murder me?"

The secretary turned his white face toward them. His mouth worked as if he were trying to push words out of it. Max continued, ignoring him, unconscious of the implication of his remarks.

The secretary turned his white face toward them. His mouth worked as if he were trying to push words out of it. Max continued, ignoring him, unconscious of the implication of his remarks.

"He probably would like to. But I pay him very well. Maybe, I'm not so polite to him, but where could he get a job like the one he has with me?"

Martin swallowed his distaste. "But someone *is* trying to kill you," he objected.

Max was back on his throne. He waved a regal hand.

"Do something," he ordered. "Catch him." He turned as if the subject bored him. "Ring, honey," he told his wife.

There was silence while they waited for the Filipino butler. Martin mixed himself another drink, and because it was nerve-racking to watch the secretary squirm, and he didn't enjoy looking at Max, he watched the actor.

JOSE had, evidently, decided on aloof composure. When the cop came to take him into the library for questioning, he arose with dignity and followed silently.

"Dinner," said Max telegraphically when the servant had arrived. "I suppose the whole kitchen is upset?" He did not wait for an answer. "Tell the cook, she shouldn't bother with a regular meal. Tell her to make some sandwiches and onion soup. She can serve at seven. And feed the cops."

"But the turkey . . ." began the Filipino.

"Turn it off. If it cooks any more it will get all dried out. We can have it cold tomorrow. And don't let her forget, she should cover and let it cool off in the oven." His housewifely duties accomplished, Max dismissed the servant with a glance. "Come on," he said to Martin, "we'll play gin rummy."

Dinner was dull. After it was over, Captain Briggs came in to say that no one except Martin would be allowed to leave the

house. In case they were nervous, he assured them, tactfully, he had left guards around the place.

When he had gone and the two police cars had torn off down the driveway, Martin stood up and yawned.

"To work, to work," he said.

"What are you going to do?" demanded Fredericks.

"Look for the gun," Martin told him, "now that the cops are out of the way."

He left them staring after him and stomped around on the upper floor looking idly into obvious places. When he had done that for what he considered to be a long enough period, he bet himself fifty bucks that the gun would be where he thought it was, walked silently down the stairs again, and sneaked through the hallway to the kitchen.

It was dark and empty, as he had hoped. He took a fountain pen flashlight from his pocket and located the stove. Inside the oven there was a huge roasting pan, its cover still warm to the touch. He set the flashlight on the edge of a porcelain-topped table so that its beam lit the oven and noiselessly removed the cover.

It was a beautiful turkey but at first glance he could see that there was something vaguely wrong about it. After a few blank moments, he decided that it was the drumsticks which stood away sharply from the breastbone as if they had not been tied together over it. He slid the pan out halfway and found the loose string which should have held them in place but didn't.

Whistling softly now, he lifted the big pan carefully and set it down on the stove top so that he could see the skewered opening. It was even more unorthodox than the drumsticks. The skewers were stuck in every which way. One of them had fallen out and the stuffing had swollen through the hole and lay in burnt bits around the bottom of the pan.

"Damned sloppy work for a gourmet," he told himself. He was no chef, but he had eaten enough turkeys to know that this one had not been properly prepared for the oven. He took up the flashlight and bent closer.

"Aha-a-a!" he muttered histrionically.



Along the loose skin through which the skewers were stuck, there were little tears—as if, having been put in just right by Max's practised hand, they had been torn out again

He had an odd dignity, a kind of strength in defeat. Or maybe it was just the rifle crooked under his arm.



and replaced hastily. He yanked at them, drew them out, thrust his hand into the warm, damp interior, groped around among soft flabby things which he took to be cysters

and pulled out a Smith & Weston .45 revolver, shellless, slightly speckled with onion and breadcumbs but, nevertheless, the gun.

And now that he had it, he didn't know quite what to make of it. One thing was certain—somebody looking for a really subtle place to plant a gun could not do better than inside Max's turkey.

He looked sadly at the violated bird, brooded over it, rummaged in a drawer for a carving knife and cut himself a drumstick.

Chewing happily, he found a dish-towel, wrapped the gun in it, picked up the kitchen extension, called a taxi, and walked loudly to the front door.

CHAPTER VII

Ten Grand Gun



"HAVE a drink," said Johnny. He was propped up in Martin's bed with a bottle, cigarettes, the remains of a club sandwich, two quarter mysteries, and a newspaper strewn handily about him. Martin picked up the bottle.

"Get dressed," he told his partner.

"Why?"

"Because I have a suspicion we're going to have tough company and you'd feel so silly taking guns away from gunsels in your pajamas and bare feet."

Johnny scrambled out of bed. Martin took a drink.

"Tell me what you got while you're putting your pants on."

"Well, to begin with—there's no gossip about Fredericks. He lives for himself alone, loves nobody but Jose, keeps his nose clean, and stinks on the silver screen. He and Max are like that," Johnny held up two fingers, clutched at his receding trousers and continued cheerfully. "As for Paris, it's the consensus that he was amiably contemptuous of Max, Max knew it, and hated him for it, but was helpless in the face of the fact that Irving was the only one who could keep the studio out of the red."

"The jacket?" prompted Martin.

"Oh yeah. His wife's maid says he came home with it one night about a week ago. His wife said, quote, Honestly! Did you have to get one of those things? I thought

you liked conservative clothes, unquote. And he said it was a gift but the maid didn't hear from who and she doesn't think the wife did either because to her way of thinking, which is French and nasty, he got it from a dame. Now, about the DDT. . . ."

"Never mind. I figured that out for myself."

"And you won't tell, you heel. Who's the company and why are they mad at us?"

"Because they want to put some money away for their old age."

He reached for his topcoat, pulled out the towel-wrapped gun, and displayed it. "I found this tonight and I was pretty obvious about it. It's the cannon that was shot off at Paris. I think the guy who hid it will send someone to get it back."

"Oh." Johnny leaned forward and sniffed. "It smells of onion."

Martin looked hurt. "You would, too," he said, "if you were roasted in a turkey."

There was a knock on the door. Martin shoved the murder gun and the towel under the pillow, reached into his pocket and brought out his own gun. Johnny grabbed his from the holster hanging in the closet.

"We're going to look pretty silly if that's a bellboy," he whispered.

"Come in," called Martin.

THE door opened and two men stepped in. The tall, blond one wore green pants and a yellow jacket. The squat dark one was dressed in quiet browns but to make up for them there were palm trees and hula girls on the ~~wall~~ background of his hand-painted ~~taxi~~.

They both stopped and looked through the guns as if they didn't see them.

"Do come in," urged Johnny.

The blond one walked nonchalantly past Johnny's trigger finger, turned the single, straight-backed chair around and straddled it. His companion closed the door and sat down in the easy chair. Martin put his gun down beside him on the bed. Johnny stuck his in his pocket.

"Well?" asked Martin.

The blond appraised him slowly, then turned and looked at Johnny. His eyes were completely expressionless when they

returned to Martin and so, when he spoke, was his voice.

"I understand you got a gun for sale," he said.

Johnny's face was eloquent of shocked disapproval.

"You can't do that, Martin," he said.

"Why not?"

"Why ever since I was an itty-bitty kid, I've been reading in the New York *Daily News* that you should stop selling guns."

The dark gungsel stared fascinated at him.

"How much am I offered?" asked Martin.

"Five grand," the blond told him.

Martin shook his head. "I couldn't do it. Not with my overhead and paying off cops and all that."

"Maybe we could get you eight."

Martin pursed his lips, appeared to consider, and shook his head again.

"Listen, shamus," put in the dark one suddenly, "I know a lot of private dicks and I never see any of them in Chasen's. You don't seem to realize we're talking about real money, the kind you can eat."

"We're Class-A detectives," Johnny told him, "the OPA lets us charge more."

"Your friend bores me." The blond spoke to Martin. "I don't feel so funny right now. We got ten grand to give you and that's it."

"Oh, the hell with it," said Martin. "I don't think I'll see, after all."

The blond stood up. So did the dark one. Martin sat easily where he was and watched them calmly.

"You're both very funny guys," said the blond at last, "and I can take a joke. But you gotta be careful about who you kid. My pal, here, he's got no sense of humor."

"Yeah," agreed the dark one. "You have a little trouble maybe tonight, or maybe tomorrow, and you lose the gun and then you got nothing."

"I'm shaking all over," said Johnny.

The dark one strode to the door, opened it, paused on the threshold and turned back malevolently to Johnny.

"That trouble I was talking about is going to be a personal pleasure in your case."

The blond hesitated. He seemed to be debating another try. The dark one stepped impatiently back into the room.

"You're making a mistake," the blond began.

"I'll say," interrupted a new and strange voice.

A THIRD man stood in the open doorway. He was thin, caved-in around the chest and his skin was a dirty, night-life white but his shaking hand steadied on the gun as if it was used to guns and liked them. The short-barreled pistol covered the space between Martin and Johnny so that it could be used quickly on either of them and it had a silencer on it.

He kicked the door shut behind him and advanced to the center of the room. Johnny watched Martin.

"Clean them, Chico," said the gunman to the dark one.

Chico scooped Martin's gun up from the bed, collected Johnny's and went back to stand beside his friends.

"Now," said the gunman, "we want that gun and we want it fast. Or I'll show you how quiet I can work."

"Go ahead," Martin laughed. "Look around. If you find it, it's yours." He stretched out full length on the bed and put his hands behind his head. "But show it to me, will you? I'd like to see the gun that's worth ten grand."

"I'll look too," offered Johnny, clownishly helpful. "I have nothing to do right now, anyway."

"Sit down and close your yap," ordered the gunman. "Get going, Beautiful, you and Chico look while I keep these comedians quiet."

Chico opened the bureau drawers, and tossed Johnny's clean shirts out onto the floor in a heap. Beautiful disappeared into the closet and Chico went into the bathroom. They heard him open and shut the medicine closet.

Johnny stood up.

"Sit down," ordered the gungsel.

"But I just had an inspiration," gushed Johnny, yanking at the seat cushion, "How do you know I haven't been sitting on it all the time?" He tossed the cushion to the floor and felt around the upholstery.

The gunman flushed, his voice rasped.

(Continued on page 87)

UNHONORED AND UNHUNG

SHERIFF BEN RACE moved another paper from the big pile in front of him to the small pile in the box on his desk. He sighed then, leaned back in the protesting chair, and fumbled in the pocket of his leather jacket for his pipe.

Deputy Clem Foster heard the sigh, and turned from the window where he had been watching the shadow of the First Methodist Church stretch its finger toward the drinking fountain in the square. It made a fair sort of sundial; today was September 15th, and when the steeple's shadow lay on the fountain, it would be five o'clock and quitting time.

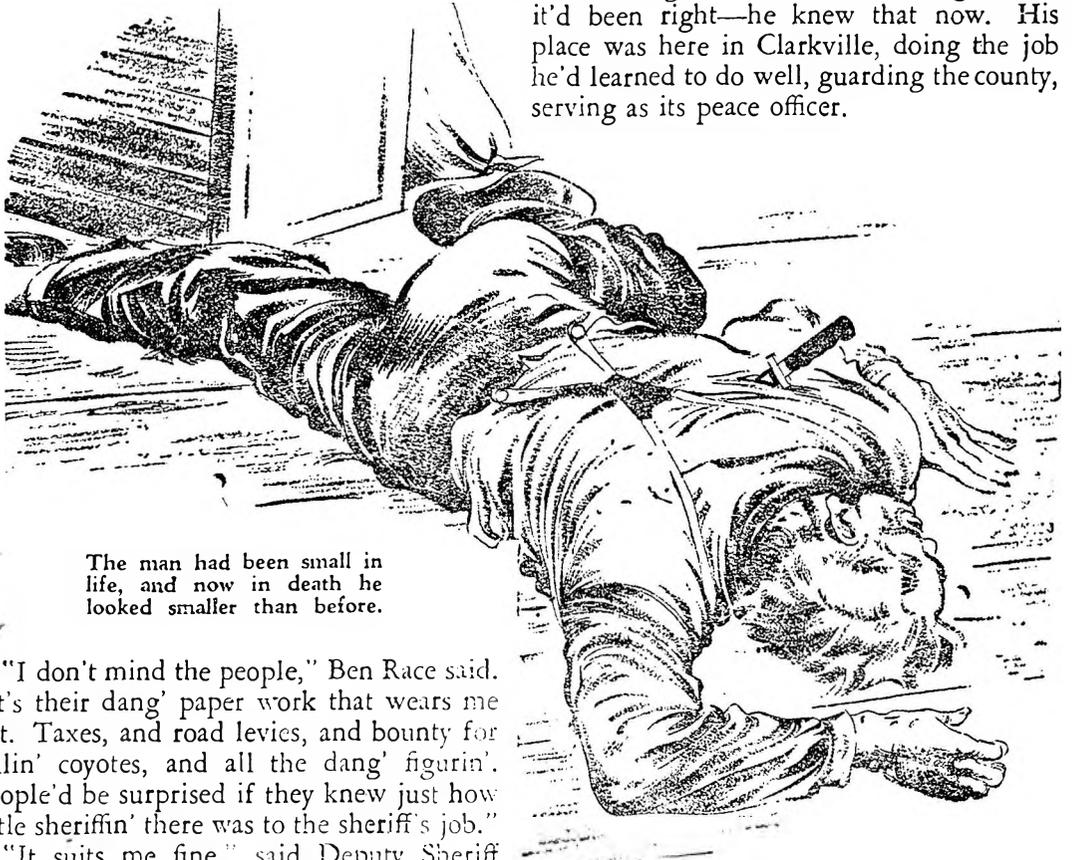
"What's the trouble, Sheriff?" Clem asked dryly. "Gettin' tired of bein' a servant of the people?"

Foster. "The less work the better. Idleness is the noblest estate of man. Consider the lilies of the field; they toil not, neither do they spin——"

"You ain't no lily, Clem!" said Ben Race.

He grinned a little as he turned back to his work. Clem Foster talked a good game, but actually there wasn't a lazy bone in his body. He'd been a deputy in Lewiston County, Oregon, as long as Ben Race had been sheriff, and that was crowding fifteen years now. Ben could look back on a good deal of history since his first election: bank holidays, the Blue Eagle, WPA, lean crops and bumper crops, Pearl Harbor and the Second World War.

He could look back on his own rejection by every branch of the armed services. It'd made him mad as a wet hen for a while, being classed as too old to fight. But it'd been right—he knew that now. His place was here in Clarkville, doing the job he'd learned to do well, guarding the county, serving as its peace officer.



The man had been small in life, and now in death he looked smaller than before.

"I don't mind the people," Ben Race said. "It's their dang' paper work that wears me out. Taxes, and road levies, and bounty for killin' coyotes, and all the dang' figurin'. People'd be surprised if they knew just how little sheriffin' there was to the sheriff's job."

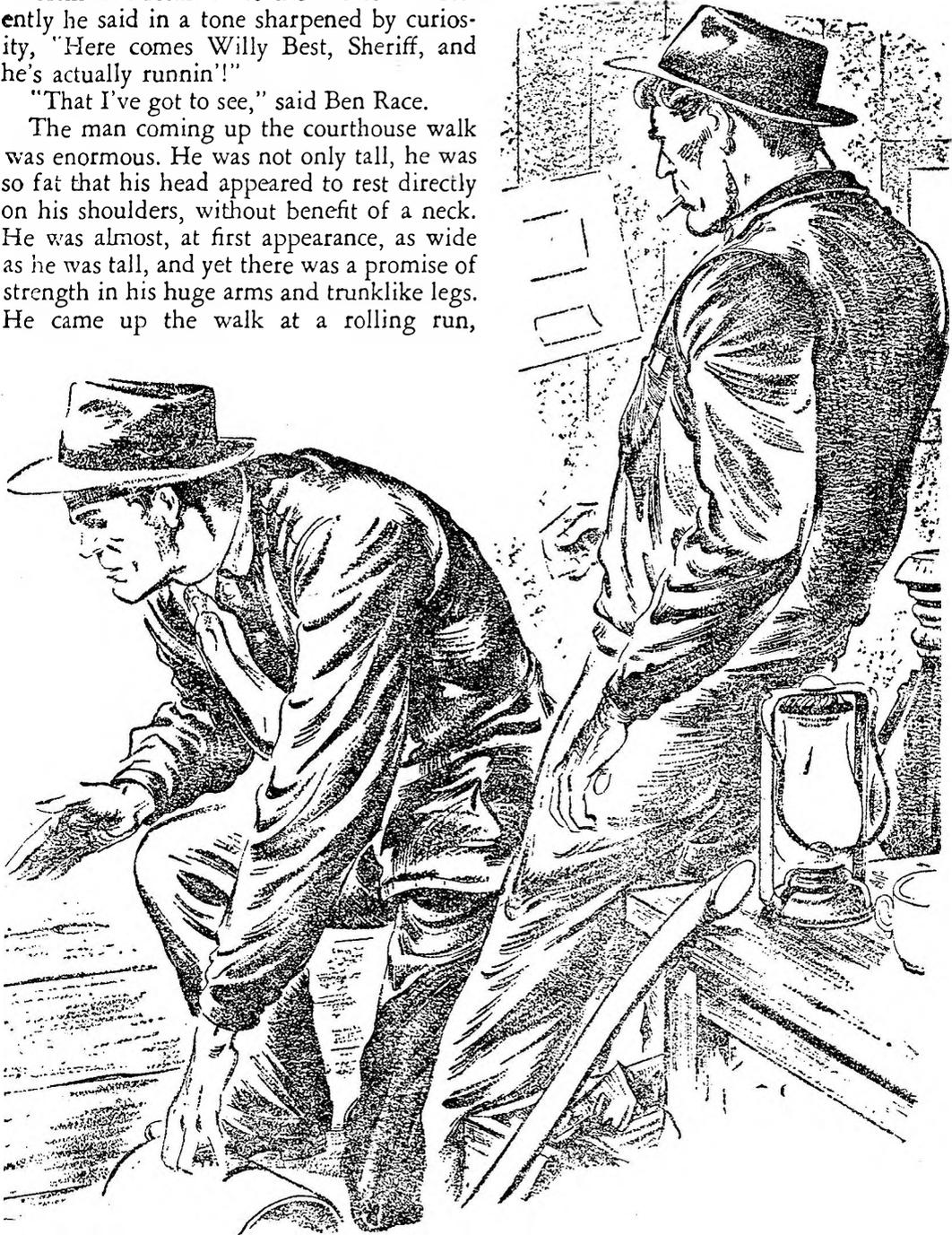
"It suits me fine," said Deputy Sheriff

By HENRY NORTON

Clem had returned to the window. Presently he said in a tone sharpened by curiosity, "Here comes Willy Best, Sheriff, and he's actually runnin'!"

"That I've got to see," said Ben Race.

The man coming up the courthouse walk was enormous. He was not only tall, he was so fat that his head appeared to rest directly on his shoulders, without benefit of a neck. He was almost, at first appearance, as wide as he was tall, and yet there was a promise of strength in his huge arms and trunklike legs. He came up the walk at a rolling run,



Murder was a great rarity in Sheriff Ben Race's bailiwick—but a killing with such puzzling angles as this one was most rare of all, and more than a good workout for the lawman....

seemingly clumsy, but making good time.

"He goes a side at a time, like a hog goin' to war," said the sheriff. "Wonder what's got him het up?"

Willy Best entered the courthouse and in a moment they heard his tread on the stairs. "We'll soon know," Clem said. "Sounds like he's comin' here."

"Must be extra special," said Race. "It's about the first time I ever see Willy move, let alone run. Any time I been past his place, he's just settin' in that big chair on the front porch."

The big man came in, puffing hard, and flopped down on a chair that groaned under his weight. For a moment he was too winded to speak. His round face was the color of the full moon through forest-fire smoke. His breath came in long, wheezing gasps. He fanned himself with a pudgy hand and looked from Clem Foster to Ben Race. It was a full minute before words choked from his mouth.

"Pete Graham's been murdered, Sheriff!"

"You sure?" Race snapped. "Who did it?"

WILLY answered the last question first. "I don't know," he said. "I went up to his house 'bout half hour ago—I was fixin' to buy a quarter of deer meat if'n he could spare it. He didn't come out when I hollered, so I went an' looked in the door. He was layin' there with a knife handle stickin' out his back. Looked like his own skinnin' knife, but I didn't go close."

"You sure he was dead?" Clem demanded. "Did you go in an' try to help him, Willy?"

Uncomfortably, Willy said, "He was dead, all right. I c'd see the way the knife went in it musta hit somethin' vital. An' the blood was dryin'."

"See anybody around?" Race asked.

Willy shook his head. "Nary a soul," he said. "But 'course I went up on the auto road. There coulda been somebody go up the footpath from the highway, an' I wouldn't of seen 'em anyway."

"You'd seen their car parked off the highway where the trail goes up, wouldn't you?"

The fat man's brow furrowed a little. "Well," he said, "come to think of it——"

He stopped then, and Sheriff Race said after a moment, "You'd better tell it, Willy. The law don't hold with restrainin' evidence in a matter as serious as a cold-blooded killin'. Whose car did you see?"

"I c'd be mistaken," Willy said reluctantly. "I didn't get a very good look. But it 'peared like a little blue pick-up was pulled in under the high brush right there where the trail starts up. An' down the road a piece there was a dark red car I don't remember seein' before."

"But you remembered seein' the pick-up before?"

"I wouldn't exactly say that," Willy Best said. "Them little trucks all look alike."

Dryly, Race said, "Mannie Tolliver's got the only blue pick-up in the county, Willy, an' you know it. You hadn't ought to lie to protect Mannie, after all the hard feelings betwixt you."

The sheriff's measured voice left his implication unmistakable: that Willy's reluctant disclosure was not much of a protection for Manny Tolliver; that he had mentioned the blue pick-up readily enough, and that there might be a personal reason behind it.

Willy's face reddened again, to an alarming shade. "I don't grudge Tolliver none," he mumbled. "I got no more reason to put anything on him than he has on me, if it comes to that. I'm just sayin' what I saw."

The sheriff nodded, and his lips twisted in reflection. "Sure, sure," he said. "Well, Clem, I reckon we'd better go out to Pete Graham's."

TO THE residents of Clarkville, Pete Graham was generally conceded to be a "character." In an earlier and less colloquial era he would have been called eccentric, or strong-willed, or given the fanciful title of hermit.

He lived in a small cabin, situated on a wooded knoll that someone had, with unconscious wit, named Knob Hill. Pete came into town no more than once or twice a month to buy sugar and salt and coffee and flour. The rest of his living he took from the country—game and fish, and a grubby garden of potatoes and the hardier root vegetables. He kept an evil-appearing black muley cow, and a dozen or so wild chickens

that were as apt to lay their eggs in the trees as in the henhouse.

He had no friends in Clarkville, invited no guests to his tiny, heavily constructed cabin. No one knew how he lived, or where he got the cash he used to replenish the store-bought staples of his diet. It was new currency, and sometimes it was in large denominations. The people speculated about a hidden mine, or bootlegging down the footpath to the highway, or even of darker deeds. But no one knew, and gossip enlarged the tales and spread them.

An auto road that was little better than a wagon track went up the side of the Knob. The sheriff followed it in his spry little car and pulled up in the clearing on top, where Pete Graham had built his cabin. The late sun skimmed the tops of tall evergreens and struck halfway down the wall of green at the opposite side of the clearing. The little shack in the middle of the clearing squatted in a pool of shadow. Ben Race shut off the motor and they sat for a moment, listening. There wasn't much sound—the occasional tick of the car's metal as it cooled, the forest rustlings that can be bird, or squirrel, or vagrant wind. There was a faint vague droning from the sky, a plane somewhere out of sight. From in back of the house came the bawl of a cow, repeated after a while.

"Well, Clem," Race said. "Looks quiet now. Guess we'd better view the body, as the saying goes."

They walked through tall dry grass to the front of the little house. The grass made wry whispering sounds against their legs. One of the half-wild chickens started up almost from under their feet and ran away with loud squawks, echoed by other chickens in the clearing.

The door to the shack was open a few inches. Ben Race hooked his toe under it and swung it open. Foster said, "For gosh sake, look at that door!"

It was no more than two boards wide, mounted on heavy strapiron hinges. Even a small man would have to turn sideways to go through the narrow opening. A very large man would be unable to get through any way. Race looked at it thoughtfully.

"Pete built it that way a purpose," he said. "He was scared of prowlers, an' figured a



In the car, Graham's eyes dropped, then wavered before facing the sheriff.

small door would help keep 'em out. He told me once he had to move the furniture in before he finished the house."

"Bet that's why Willy didn't go in," Clem said. "He's a blame sight too fat to get through that door, an' he's kinda sensitive about it, so he just let on he didn't see any use of goin' in."

"Might be lucky for Willy," the sheriff said. "It might save him bein' suspected of killin' Pete Graham, if he couldn't get in to where the murder was committed."

"Mean you were thinkin' Willy might've done it?" Clem asked in surprise. "Land sake, then why would he come runnin' down to the office to tell us about it? If he was guilty, he'd keep his mouth shut."

"Maybe he figured that way, too, an' come in to throw us off the trail. After all, he managed to throw suspicion on another party, didn't he?" The sheriff pondered. "No, it's too early to suspect anybody special. But we got to consider all the possibilities. We don't have a killin' around here often enough to be careless."

"**BY GUM**, murder!" said Clem. "It don't seem possible! I s'pose somebody got thinkin' about Pete's money an' thought maybe he'd be able to find it. Maybe he was lookin' for it an' old Pete come in an' surprised him, an' then Pete got killed in the scuffle."

"I wouldn't be surprised you hit it pretty close," Race said. "Pete Graham was in town about a week ago an' broke a fifty-dollar bill to pay for his grub at Rampole's grocery. Somebody might've figured it was a good time to prowl the place. But who was it?"

"That ought to be easy," Clem said sagely. "If Willy Best was tellin' the truth, it was Manny Tolliver. If he was lyin', it was Willy Best!"

"You make it sound a mite too easy, Clem."

"Well, ain't that right? If he saw Mannie's pick-up here, then Mannie must've been prowlin' around about the time Pete was stabbed. But if he didn't see it, then he's lyin' to accuse Mannie, an' he wouldn't do that 'less he was guilty hisself!"

"How you gonna tell if Willy's lyin' or not? An' why would Mannie leave his car in sight if he was thinkin' of killin'? Wouldn't he be smarter'n that?"

"Well then, don't that make it look like Willy?"

They were inside the cabin now. The swarming flies and wasps, disturbed from their grisly feast, made the small interior

murmurous with their wings. Ben Race knelt beside the still body a little while before he answered. He looked at Pete Graham's light-blue eyes, open and staring, at the pointed face now the color of putty. The man had been small in life—he now looked even smaller, as though the breath that had gone from him were somehow a measurable thing.

"This knife was pushed in by hand, Clem. It wasn't thrown—you can tell that by the angle it goes in. And a man ain't gonna walk after he gets a knife like that in his back. So unless you c'n figure how Willy Best got through that door, you better not try too hard to pin this on him."

Clem Foster scratched his head. Then his eyes brightened and he went back to the door. He shook it, kicked it, jolted it and slammed it. He scrutinized the jambs on either side. He turned back then to Ben Race, and his eyes were filled again with perplexity.

"Solid as a rock," he reported. "Hang it, Sheriff, it's gotta be Mannie Tolliver; that's all there is to it!"

"In that case, you've decided to believe Willy Best," Race reasoned. "So you'll have to believe his whole story. So what about that dark red coupé he told about. Whose was that? Where does it fit into the picture? Couldn't the killer have been in it?"

"Maybe Willy just added that to his yarn so it wouldn't look like he was tryin' to nail Mannie's hide to the barn," Clem said. "He might've——"

Clem stopped then, and scowled at the sheriff's open grin of amusement. He shut his jaws tight for a minute, knowing there was high color in his cheeks, and hating himself because of it.

"All right then!" he snapped. "How've you got it figured, if you're so all-fired smart?"

"Why, I haven't got it figured at all, Clem," Race said mildly. "We really ain't got enough to go on to do much figurin'. But what you've done so far don't hurt none. It gets us to lookin' at both sides of the facts, an' that's what counts."

"Facts are facts," Clem said doggedly.

"Not with murder," said Sheriff Race. "You c'n depend on the facts the murderer

gives you bein' wrong enough to steer you off his trail, an' right enough so you'll have a hard time tellin' where the truth stops an' the lyin' begins."

"Liars always trip themselves up," Clem said.

He had evidently tied the victim up all day and had tortured him savagely before killing him.



The sheriff grinned wryly. "That'd be nice, if it was so," he said. "Matter of fact, the truth's usually harder to believe than a good careful lie."

HE BENT to examine the body again, touching the face, the wrists, the crum-

pled legs—evaluating the progress of the death rigor. He stared thoughtfully at a red rubbed place on the thin wrist. He stood up then with no expression on his face to inspect the little cabin. It was small, clean and orderly in a haphazard sort of way. A meagre store of food was shelved above the

cook stove that doubled as a heater. An iron bedstead against the far wall was neat under thick gray blankets. A deal table and two puncheon chairs completed the furniture.

The sheriff said. "It's five-thirty now. He's been dead about an hour, which checks with Willy's story as far as it goes. No sign of a fight, which might mean it was somebody old Pete wasn't lookin' to for trouble."

"I thought he didn't have no visitors," Clem said, and frowned. "Maybe it was one of his customers. It's common talk in town Pete was bootleggin'."

Ben Race grunted. He opened the firebox of the little stove and poked around inside. He scabbled in the kindling in the woodbox, and picked up a bit of crumpled paper which he smoothed, stared at, and tucked carefully into his wallet. He lifted and shook two or three cans from the grocery shelves, and put them back unopened.

"Lookin' for his cache?" Clem asked.

"Half way," the sheriff admitted. "But I'll be blamed surprised if I find it."

"Think the killer got it, eh?"

"Listen!" said Race.

They had been hearing the sound intermittently for some time now, but as they listened it came more clearly, a loud bawl of discomfort from somewhere in back of the house. Ben Race moved to the door and stood listening, his head cocked to one side. His fingers moved along the door jamb, and for a moment he leaned closer and stared at the wood. He looked at his watch then, and grinned at Clem Foster.

"Well," he said. "I did think we'd go over and call on Mannie Tolliver. Howsomever, I reckon that c'n wait a little while."

"That's just a cow," protested the deputy.

"Just a cow that needs milkin'," corrected the sheriff. "Maybe Pete's been milkin' her early, so she feels pretty full by now. Well, Clem, I ain't been sheriff so long I can't still sap a cow in short order."

"You mean you're gonna let a murder suspect wait while you milk that dadburned old cow of Pete's?"

"Mannie Tolliver ain't hurtin' none," said Race, "an' that old cow is!"

It was a good half hour before they drove away from Pete Graham's cabin. The

body had been placed on the bed and covered with a blanket. The cow, relieved, was grazing in the clearing, and the chickens were pecking at the scattered feed the sheriff had thrown to them. Ben Race had driven staples into the door and locked it with his own padlock—not an impregnable fastening, but enough to discourage casual prowlers. He turned the nose of the little car down the road toward the highway.

Surprisingly, there was little talk. They were about halfway back to the state road before the sheriff said thoughtfully, "You know, that old cow sure gave a slug of milk. Clem, I wonder if——"

"Ben! Look down there!"

The road ran down a slope at this point almost parallel to the highway below, and there were thin spots in the trees where one could see down to the lower valley. Clem was pointing excitedly down to where, on the main highway, a maroon coupe cruised along.

"It's the dark red coupe Willy told us about!"

"By doggies, it might be!" the sheriff said. "Maybe we c'n head it off at the forks, if we make this buggy ramble! Hang on, Clem!"

Clem Foster hung on, alternately squashed on the seat and bounced against the top as the sheriff sent the little car racking over the forest road. It was a piece of iron-nerved, iron-wristed driving, with disaster lurking at every turn and every chuckhole. From time to time Clem glimpsed the other car, fitting through the leafy screen at their right. They were keeping pace with it, but they were not gaining.

"We ain't gonna make it!" Clem panted.

"We got a chance," Race said grimly.

A foot trail crossed the road just ahead, narrow and steep, but shorter to the highway by half. Ben Race yanked the car and headed it down the trail. Branches whipped against the sides; the earth dropped sickeningly away beneath them. The tough little car plunged downward through the brush, staggered on the brink of disaster as the trail slewed narrowing around a corner. It leveled out for a moment, nosed over a bank with a jolt that racked its frame, and rolled out across the highway just as the

maroon car rounded a turn and pulled up with screaming brakes.

A man with sharp blue eyes and a pointed nose put his head out the window of the coupe and said angrily, "Well, just what's the idea of this?"

Sheriff Race got out of his car and walked over to the other car. He looked at the man's features curiously for a moment, then nodded his head.

"You're James Graham." It was not a question.

The man's eyes narrowed. "How'd you know?"

"I saw your name on a letter to your brother," said the sheriff. "You look like Pete. What time did you see him this afternoon?"

"What's it to you?" James Graham demanded. "Do I have to be questioned just because I decide to visit my brother?"

"You do," the sheriff said gently, "when the brother's been murdered."

THE MAN'S head jerked back as if a blow had struck him in the face. His eyes dropped, wavered over the sheriff's shoulder, and returned reluctantly to face the sheriff's eyes. Graham licked his lips.

"Did you say—murdered?"

Race said, "What time did you see him?"

"I didn't see him," said James Graham. "I went up to his cabin to see him, and I waited around for an hour or so, but he didn't show up, so I went back into town. I'm on my way up to see him now."

"What time were you there before?"

"It was right at three-fifteen," the man said. "The place was unlocked, so I squeezed in and looked around. Then I waited, and he didn't come back, so——"

"Left there about four-fifteen?"

Graham nodded. "Around that," he said. "Look, when was he—what's all this, anyway?"

"You hear anything while you were there?"

James Graham studied a moment. "Yes, I did," he said. "Around four o'clock, I heard somebody outside the cabin. I thought Pete was coming, so I ducked into a corner to surprise him. Whoever it was looked in the

door, but I didn't see him, and he didn't come in."

"I take it Pete wasn't expecting you," Race said.

"You darn' right he wasn't," said the man in the maroon coupe. "Here I been sending him money to live on for the past ten years, and I find out he's rich! Got a racket of some kind—mine or something—and still he lets me keep on supporting him. I was going to give him hell!"

"How'd you find out he had money?"

"It's common talk," James Graham said. Sheriff Ben Race nodded somberly. "Yes," he said. "Common talk is right. Now I want to know something more, mister, and I warn you I've got ways of checkin' up on the answer. How much money have you been sending Pete, and how often did you send it?"

The man showed some signs of returning anger.

"Check and be damned!" he said. "I've sent him fifty dollars every two months for the past ten years. And cash, mind you! He was so darned suspicious he wouldn't take a check even when it was a gift!"

"He's dead now," said the sheriff. "You won't be troubled any more."

JAMES GRAHAM'S voice took on a note of apology. "I'm sorry," he said. "I suppose I really am sorry about the whole thing, mister. But Pete and I haven't been what you'd call close. I helped him financially, because it seemed to be my duty—after all, he was my only brother, and he didn't have anybody else to turn to."

"And now you find out he was wealthy and was still letting you send him money," said the sheriff. "Not such a very brotherly stunt."

"Oh, I don't care about the money I sent him," Graham said. "I make enough, and I'd spend it if he didn't. But by George, if he's got a fortune stuck away, or a mine or something, I want to know about that. I guess I'd be his legal heir, wouldn't I?"

"I suppose so," said Race. "That is, unless you killed him. This state won't allow a murderer to inherit from his victim."

The man's blue eyes got chilly. "You think that— Why, you dumb— Well, I'll be

damned! What makes you think I murdered my own brother?"

"I didn't say I thought that," Race said.

He went back and climbed into his car, backed it and swung out onto the highway facing away from Graham's car. He stuck his head out the window and said, "Better go on into Clarkville and wait for me, Graham. I'll want to see you in about an hour."

"Where we goin' now?" asked Clem.

"We're gonna talk to Mannie Tolliver," said Race.

TOLLIVER'S well-kept farm was four miles down the highway from the point where they had encountered James Graham. The sheriff drove absently, deep in thought, and Clem Foster knew better than to interrupt. They drove down the flower-bordered driveway to the house, and went around to the back door. The door opened as they stepped up onto the porch.

"Evenin', Miz Tolliver," said Race politely. "Is Mannie to home?"

The woman said, "What do you want with him?"

She was big-boned, a handsomely built woman with black hair and dark bright eyes. Her mouth was set in strong lines that gave her a faintly formidable appearance. It was said around the county that Mannie was far from happy in his marriage to her. Like many another man, he had married to get away from a tyrannical mother, and had found an equal tyrant in his wife.

"Just want to talk to him," said Race.

"What about?"

The sheriff smiled at her teasingly. "I vow," he said, "you're a plumb curious woman. Now what do you suppose I'd want to talk to Mannie about?"

"About that fool argument with Willy Best," she said, her eyes dangerously bright. "Willy didn't have no more claim to that calf than you have, and he knew it. He was just starting trouble!"

"Why'd he want to start trouble?"

She hesitated. "He's had it in for Mannie, ever since——" She stopped, and her face reddened. Ben Race waited, and she finally said, "Willy was kind of cut up when I married Mannie."

The sheriff nodded and said gallantly,

"Can't blame him for that, ma'am! Uh, where did you say Mannie was now?"

She turned and raised her voice. "Mannie!" she called sharply. "Come out here, you shiftless critter. There's a gentleman to see you!"

Her tone demanded action, and got it. Mannie Tolliver's face was at the kitchen screen before she had finished speaking. He was a small man, with pale hair and eyes, and a defensive cast to his sensitive features. He looked at the sheriff, but spoke to his wife.

"What is it, dear?"

The sheriff grinned and said, "You get that fixed up about the calf, Mannie?"

"I tried to," Mannie said, "but Pete wasn't home, and I couldn't get the bill of sale. You see, I bought it from Pete Graham, and when Willy said it looked like one his Holsteins had dropped, I agreed to get Pete to write me a bill of sale, to prove otherwise. Only Pete wasn't to home, so I'll have to go back tomorrow."

"What time were you up there today?"

"About four," Mannie said. "I looked in the cabin, 'cause I thought I heard somebody, but Pete wasn't there. I was going to look around, but I heard his old cow bawling, so I knew he wasn't there. I can see him tomorrow."

"Where were you all morning?" Race asked.

"Painting the barn," said Mannie, and when Race looked at the woman she nodded confirmation. The sheriff smiled then, as if he had suddenly decided something.

"File in, Mannie," he said.

"You arresting him?" the woman asked.

Race grinned. "Protective custody."

IT WAS an hour before the sheriff had located the others he wanted—James Graham and Willy Best—and taken them all up to the cabin in the clearing. He leaned his hand against the cabin door and faced them, his expression showing no more than polite interest.

"This was a murder for money," he said, "and the thing that makes it worse is, there wasn't no money. James Graham hit it right square when he called the story about Pete's fortune 'common talk'. Pete didn't have

any money except what his brother sent him, which amounted to twenty-five dollars a month."

Mannie Tolliver said, "Shucks, Sheriff, I've seen Pete break a fifty-dollar bill in Rampole's grocery, and I've seen it more'n once, too."

The sheriff nodded. "I know it. If a feller only had fifty dollars to his name to last two months, you'd say it wasn't much. But if he flashed a fifty-dollar bill, you'd imagine he was pretty well-to-do. Actually, a fifty-dollar bill ain't much if it's all you got."

"Good Lord!" Comprehension dawned on James Graham's face. "I usually sent him a fifty, just so the letter wouldn't be too bulky. You mean those bills've been the root of all this talk about Pete's fortune?"

"That's right," Race told him. "You come up here lookin' for a jawbone fortune, built up by gossip out of your own money. I checked Pete's spendin' at the store. He never spent more'n twenty-five a month, and hardly ever less. So you see, he didn't save anything."

"I'll be damned," Graham said. "But that still doesn't tell us who killed him."

"We knew that all along," said Race. "The one that couldn't have, because he couldn't get through the cabin door. An' Willy figured it pretty smart, too. None of the three of you could prove you wasn't here about the right time, so Willy did the next best thing, and had the murder committed where he couldn't possibly get."

"How you gonna prove it?" Willy wheezed angrily.

"By the cow," said Sheriff Race. "She

wouldn't have been so bad off, only she missed her mornin' milkin' too. Because the killer had Pete tied up this mornin', tryin' to make him tell where his money was hid. So it comes to alibis after all, Willy! And Mannie and James Graham c'n account for their mornin', but you can't!"

"But how'd he get in the cabin?" Clem blurted.

"He didn't," said the sheriff. "Why else would he tie Pete and torture him all day like a dadburned red Indian? Because he couldn't get in the cabin to search, that's why! He had to make Pete tell. An' when he couldn't, because there was nothin' to tell, he had to kill Pete anyway, so Pete wouldn't tell on him. He had that all figured out—he stabbed Pete right outside the door, then *threw* him into the cabin!"

"Lies, all lies!" croaked Willy Best.

"No," said Race. "It took your strength to pull it, Willy. It took your grudge against Mannie to trick him up here so he'd be suspected. But after you'd killed Pete you tried your darnedest to squeeze through that door and search the cabin. You left threads from that brown wool shirt of yours caught on the door jamb. Ever hear of a man as big as you bein' hanged by a thread, Willy?"

THE sheriff was wrong about one thing—Willy Best did not hang. He was sentenced to it, but on the first try the rope slipped from his thick neck, and on the second try the rope broke. The sentence was then commuted to life imprisonment at Salem, and a year later a heart attack accomplished the punishment the rope could not.

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SPEED MAGAZINES

RYE AND DIE

When is a heart attack not a heart attack? Well, for instance, when it's murder by say, a devious poison—and with a puzzling insurance angle attached. That puzzle, and the danger that went with it, was a job for investigator Adam Somervell!



DAM SOMERVELL, head of the investigation department for the life-insurance company, entered his office twenty-five minutes late. He had missed his usual train from Oakville, and had consequently hurried from the terminal. He flung off his hat, wiped the perspiration from his face, and

then looked in dismay at his filing cabinet, which contained confidential data about the more substantial policy-holders.

One of the drawers was open, papers had been withdrawn and thrown upon his desk, which Adam always kept immaculately neat. And nobody was supposed to enter Adam's sanctum uninvited, not even the manager, old Rufus.

"Now what the deuce—?" began Adam. For him this was a strong expletive; Adam's speech and personality were mild.

It *had* been Rufus. The old man came bustling in. "I'm glad you're here at last,"



By LEW MERRILL

"Poor Towlins was found lying dead on the pantry floor this morning," she said. "He had a weak heart. Maybe shock did it."



thousand two or three years ago, when Parmley's previous wife died in a similar way. So I looked through your files first thing this morning."

"I missed my train," said Adam, stung by the implication.

"The devil with your train! Look through those papers. We don't pay fifty thousand dollars a second time to a man with that kind of record!"

IN HIS capacity as head of the investigation department, Adam was familiar with the history of most of the policy-holders whose insurance topped fifty thousand. He remembered Parmley's dossier. Nevertheless, he began reading it again.

John Crowninshield Parmley, age forty-seven. Native-born. Good health. Formerly secretary to Snowbrand Tires and Rubber Company's president. Discharged—this was in red type, which meant that the information was confidentially acquired—on suspicion of selling out the secret of Snowbrand's synthetic rubber to a rival firm. Suit compounded for twenty-five thousand cash.

Married three times. First time, divorce. The second Mrs. Parmley had died in the

he said sarcastically. "I've been looking through your cabinet."

"I was just beginning to suspect it," answered Adam.

"Now don't get on your high horse, young man. Look at those!" Rufus picked up and slapped down some papers on the desk. "John Crowninshield Parmley. Wife died last night at their home in Meadowbrook, Mass. Joint insurance. Parmley gets fifty thousand from us."

"Well?" asked Adam.

"Wife died of a heart attack, after a party. I happened to remember we paid fifty

summer of 1942, at their home in South Carolina, and Parmley had collected fifty thousand dollars thereby. He had married again within six months, a wealthy woman, with a town house in Boston, and a country house at Meadowbrook, a fashionable seaside resort. Each wife had died of a heart attack.

Old Rufus, leaning over Adam's shoulder, said: "Go up at once and investigate. If the medical examiner is amenable, throw out a hint of poison. Insist on an autopsy. But use diplomacy, and don't let our company in for any lawsuit. This fellow appears to have a knack for collecting damages."

"Okay," said Adam.

In the closet off his office Adam kept two bags. One contained such personal effects that he was always prepared to start at a moment's notice, without having to go home to his bungalow in suburban Oakfield, for a change of clothes and safety razor. The other was what he called his portable laboratory.

This contained the various powders used in fingerprinting, a fingerprint camera, and a linen-tester's glass; also a number of chemical reagents, test-tubes, a miniature Bunsen burner, etc. After a moment's thought, Adam decided to dispense with the fingerprint apparatus entirely. If it were needed, the local police would be able to handle that end of the case. With the two suitcases in his hands, he stepped out of his office, and went down in the elevator.

He was in luck, for twenty-seven minutes later he was aboard a Boston train. The sun was still high in the west when he got off at Meadowbrook, and stepped into a taxi, bound for the Parmley house.

IT WAS a big, substantial house, standing some distance back from the ocean in a grove of pines, and Adam was just in time, for inside the entrance he encountered an ambulance, driven by a policeman, with a man in civilian clothes seated beside him.

Adam hailed, waved, and the driver stopped. Adam pulled up alongside him. "I'm Somervell, representing the insurance company," he said. "I want to speak to the examiner."

The cop jerked his thumb. "You'll find

him inside," he said. He pressed the starter, but Adam intervened.

"Mind telling me who you've got there?" he asked.

"Oh, sure." The cop grinned. "Mrs. Parmley that was. We're taking her to the mortician's parlor in Moyton. You got any objections?"

"I don't get the set-up," said Adam. "Is there any suspicion of foul play?"

The man beside the driver said: "Dr. Hawke, the examiner, happens to be the personal physician of Mr. Parmley. Mrs. Parmley had been in low spirits, and threatened to do away with herself. Mr. Parmley felt, under the circumstances, that the local authorities should be informed. But the death appears to have been due to natural causes, and Dr. Hawke is issuing a certificate to that effect. I'm the police photographer."

"So there will be no autopsy?" asked Adam.

"Absolutely not. Mrs. Parmley died of a heart attack. You've come up on a wild-goose chase," answered the other curtly. "There's nothing here along your lines, so you may as well turn back."

"Unless, of course, you're interested in the butler," put in the policeman, with a sardonic grin. "Towlins dropped dead, too, some time during the night. Dr. Hawke is inside, writing out his certificate, too."

"You call that nothing?" yelled Adam, and started up the drive as fast as his short legs would carry him.

INSIDE, Adam's first impression was of utter confusion. Something like a score of men and women seemed to be milling aimlessly about in the hall, on the stairs, and through the rooms. A plump, good-looking blonde, apparently in her early forties, rushed at Adam and threw her arms about him.

"Oh, who are you?" she sobbed hysterically. "Oh, this place is like a nightmare. Two deaths in one night, first poor Adele, and then poor Towlins."

"How did it happen?" inquired Adam.

"She died on the stroke of three o'clock this morning. We were all sitting in the living room, conversing so pleasantly, and hoping poor Adele had gotten over her mel-

ancholy, and it struck three, and she stood up, and put down her glass, and began to say something. And then she toppled over. Mr. Parmley was afraid she'd taken something, and so was I, but Dr. Hawke—he's Mr. Parmley's friend—says it was due to natural causes."

"And Towlins?" Adam asked.

"Poor Towlins was found lying dead on the pantry floor this morning. He had a weak heart, and must have been overcome by the shock of his mistress' death. He idolized her. So did we all. Dr. Hawke is sure it was natural causes, too. You haven't come here to make trouble, have you?"

"Certainly not," said Adam. "I just want—"

"Then what are you doing with those two suitcases?" screamed the woman hysterically.

"I just want to see Mr. Parmley," answered Adam.

Two men were coming down the stairs. One of them was evidently Parmley, for he was a man of about forty-seven, and he had the indefinable appearance of a host. The other, a little older, had a short, peaked, grizzled beard, and it was obvious that he was Dr. Hawke.

Adam released himself from the clutch of the woman, and went up to Parmley. "I'm Adam Somervell, from the insurance company," he said. "We got the sad news of Mrs. Parmley's death this morning, and I'm here on the usual routine procedure. I understand there was another unfortunate happening—?"

"Yes," answered Parmley, turning to the examiner. "Can you satisfy this gentleman, Hawke?"

"I'd like to see the butler's remains," said Adam.

Upstairs, in a small room, the dead man had been deposited on a large table. Adam, who had taken his course in medico-legal jurisprudence, could see at a glance that, if Towlins had been poisoned, the lethal dose had not been any of the more common toxic agents. The features were composed and calm. Towlins, a white-haired man of about sixty years, might have fallen asleep.

"Well?" asked Dr. Hawke satirically.

"What's your certificate, Doctor?"



"Lesh! all go down and get some drinks!" She seized Adam by the arm, paraded him into the living room.

"Why, death from natural causes. Towlins had heart trouble, in fact, a partly occluded artery which, as I'd warned him, might take him off at any moment. It was the shock of Mrs. Parmley's death that killed him."

"But you'll perform an autopsy?"

"Certainly not," said Hawke decisively. "We don't perform autopsies unless there is suspicion of foul play, or some factor that requires elucidation. Come, sir, who do you suppose killed Towlins?"

Adam grinned. "I don't suspect anyone," he answered. "But insurance companies are suspicious by nature." If Hawke had been less obdurate, Adam might have mentioned that Parmley's previous wife had died in the same way. As it was, he judged it best to hold his peace.

The wisdom of that decision was confirmed a moment later when Parmley came into the room. He stepped to the side of the

table. "Poor fellow!" he said. "He was with me nearly twenty years. Well, Mr. Somervell, are you satisfied as to the cause of death?"

"I must of course defer to Dr. Hawke's judgment," answered Adam.

"Well," snapped Hawke, "you don't seem too sure about it. Just what poison do you suppose would be disclosed by performing an autopsy?"

Adam was silent. He bent over the body, ostensibly to inspect it more closely—actually to try to detect that faint odor of almonds that is apt to linger after death by cyanide. He could detect none.

There was a group of poisons producing almost immediate death, but Adam knew that no autopsy would be likely to reveal the presence of any of them. He was completely stymied.

And yet the inherent stubbornness of his nature wouldn't let him cry quits. There was the death of Parmley's first wife, there was Parmley's shady record; perhaps stronger still was Adam's hunch that something phony was in the situation. There was, for instance, Parmley's leering face, turned mockingly upon his.

And there was the plump blonde, rushing into the room and crying: "Come downstairs, both of you! Take Towlins away, Dr. Hawke. We've all had enough of these horrors! We want to forget them!"

SHE planted herself in front of Adam, and Parmley said unwilling: "Mrs. Breen, allow me to introduce Mr. Somervell."

"Who is he? What's he here for?" she shrilled. Mrs. Breen hadn't been sober when Adam entered the house, but in the interval that had elapsed she had contrived to become very drunk indeed. She was swaying uncertainly; then lurched forward and caught at Adam's shoulder for support.

"Let's all go downstairs and have a drink," she said.

"I believe Mr. Somervell has to be getting back to Hartford," interposed Parmley.

"Why, he can't catch the five-fifteen now," said the woman. "He'll have to take the ten-twelve. You'll have to stay to dinner, Mr. Somervell, and then somebody will drive

you to the station. Let's all go down and have a drink," she repeated.

Dr. Hawke said: "Of course Towlins died from natural causes, Parmley. I'll make out a certificate. I've told the ambulance driver to be back for the body as soon as Mrs.—er—"

"Quite so," said Parmley. "I'm very much obliged to you, Hawke. We'll leave you, then, for the present." He turned to Adam. "I hope you'll stay to dinner, and forgive my brusqueness," he said, in a conciliatory tone. "I'm sure you'll understand, this sudden tragedy—and then poor Towlin's death—?"

"Of course; that's quite all right, Mr. Parmley," answered Adam, trusting the man still less than before.

"Naturally," pursued Parmley, "your sudden advent, and the suggestion of poisoning, was a little disturbing."

"I believe," said Adam, "it was Dr. Hawke who raised the question of poison. I stated that my visit was simply the normal routine procedure in such cases."

"Quite so," said Parmley, giving Adam his hand, which the investigator reluctantly took. "Then you'll stay to dinner, and I'll drive you to the station in time to catch the evening train."

"Dinner? Whatcha talking about dinner for?" shrilled Mrs. Breen. "Lesh all go down and get some drinks!" She seized Adam by the arm, and paraded him down the stairs into the living room.

FOR a house in which death had struck twice within a few hours, it was the most incongruous setting that Adam could have imagined. Parmley had been having a party on the grand scale the night before, and the guests were still milling about the place.

Several of them were wearing evening clothes. Nearly all of them were drunk. Some seemed to be circumnavigating the room with no clear destination in view, others sprawled on sofas or in chairs. Two were sitting on the floor, and one woman was asleep on the rug in front of the empty fireplace. Bottles stood everywhere, some unopened, most half-full, and their contents were being depleted every moment.

Detaching himself from Mrs. Breen, who stood shrieking to him to come back, Adam



"Looking around, Somervell?" Parmley asked unexpectedly.

passed through the bedroom into the dining room adjacent, on the table of which were at least a dozen empty bottles and glasses, together with bottles of soda-water, mostly upset, and lying in little pools that covered the mahogany. Beyond was the butler's pantry. It contained an enormous refrigerator, half of whose interior was the receptacle for more liquor.

Behind was the kitchen, littered with unwashed dishes, and in a small room off this was a stout, elderly woman, sitting in a rush-bottom rocking-chair, her apron over her head. She flung it down at the sound of Adam's footsteps, and revealed a homely red Irish face, bedewed with tears.

"It's been a great blow, Mrs. Towlins,"

said Adam. "But we've got to pull ourselves together. It's no good giving way."

"I'm not Mrs. Towlins, bedad, I'm Mrs. Clancy. But Towlins was a good-hearted soul, even if he did take a little drop sometimes. And that poor, swate creather—and that Parmley, bringing all thim drunken friends of his to the house, and asking me to give them supper, when poor Mrs. Parmley was ordered rest and quiet!"

"How did it happen, Mrs. Clancy?" Adam inquired.

"How would I know? I was in bed, but I couldn't sleep on account of the noise. They was shouting and yelling all night, and then about three o'clock there was the worst hulloaloo I ever heard. I slipped on some

clothes, and went downstairs, and I heard them shouting that Mrs. Parmley had dropped dead, and they were phoning for Dr. Hawke."

"She was on the party then?"

"She must have gone down to tell them to keep quiet, because she'd gone to bed early. Maybe Parmley persuaded her to take a drink, and that was the end of her, poor lady."

"How about Towlins? Who was with him when he died?"

"It was me found him when I come downstairs early this morn'ing, not having slept a wink all night. He was lying on the floor of the butler's pantry, with a bottle of whiskey on one side of him, and an empty sody-water bottle on the other, and the rubber stopper still between his fingers."

"And you think both deaths were accidental, Mrs. Clancy?"

"Bedad, and who'd want to kill that sweet young creature or poor Towlins? It was God's will for them to die, and it was the kind of death Towlins always said he wanted. He was a queer one, and he never passed up what was left in the bottles."

"What I meant was," said Adam, "there wasn't anybody who stood to profit by the death of Mrs. Parmley?"

The change in Mrs. Clancy's face was startling. "If you're meaning you want me to say anything against that Breen woman, you can take yourself off, young man," screamed the cook. "There's been trouble enough in this house without bringing her in!"

"You mean there was trouble between Mr. and Mrs. Parmley?"

"Trouble? When wasn't there trouble between man and wife? But not till that woman come and planked herself down here for a week at a time. And I'm saying no more. Who are you, coming snooping around here and asking questions?"

ADAM mumbled something, went back into the kitchen, and stood at the rear entrance, thinking. He had nothing concrete—nothing at all. And yet he'd never been more sure that he was on the heels of a murder case than he was at that moment.

If there had been poison in one of the

bottles of whiskey, he'd have to analyze the contents of every one, which was manifestly impossible. The way it began to look to him, Parmley had poisoned his wife, and Towlins, taking a swig from the same bottle, had likewise fallen a victim.

But there was no means of telling which was the bottle from which the butler had drunk. The cook might know where it was, but that was improbable; and, anyway, Adam wasn't likely to get any further information from her.

Behind him, in the living room, Adam could hear the party, still celebrating, as if nothing had happened to mar their joviality. In front of him, across a few yards of weed-grown ground, was the garage. Adjoining it was a smallish structure, with a brick chimney, from which a thin spire of black smoke was ascending. There was an acrid stench to that smoke, perceptible even at that distance. And it was the stench of burning rubber.

As Adam stood there, he heard a heavy thump, thump over his head, and that sound was unmistakable. The ambulance had returned, and the body of the butler was being carried down. Through an open window he heard the words, "Easy there with him!" and then Parmley's voice, "Poor fellow!"

Adam glanced back. Nobody was observing him. He stepped across the strip of waste ground to the structure beside the garage, and tried the door. It was locked, as he had expected, but there was an open window on the other side, and Adam stuck his head inside, and took stock of the interior.

It was a laboratory, very nicely fitted out on a small scale. The stench of rubber, which was intense, came from a small brick oven, in which something was burning.

Adam was surveying the scene with so much interest that he failed to hear the cat-foot steps behind him, until a hand clapped him on the back, and he became aware of Parmley.

"LOOKING around, Somervell?" asked the other. "That's quite all right. Come inside, and let me show you my laboratory."

The expression on Parmley's face showed

Adam that it was war between them, and for a moment Adam had visions of his dismembered body going up in smoke in that oven. He wasn't a fighting man, in fact he felt cold tremors run up and down his spine at the invitation. But, before he could open his mouth, Parmley had unlocked the door, and was ushering him inside.

Adam looked at the test-tubes, at the strips of rubberlike material on the table, at the bottles of chemicals upon the shelves, at a great rubber ball dissolving in some cloudy liquid.

"You are a chemist, sir?" he asked.

"I might call myself an inventor. I discovered the first process for the manufacture of synthetic rubber. Unfortunately I was too confiding. I carried the secret to my backers, the Snowbrand Corporation, as that particular gang of thieves called themselves. I was gypped out of millions.

"I settled my suit for a paltry sum, because I knew already that I was on the track of a process which would provide an infinitely stronger and more serviceable rubber at a greatly reduced cost. Now at last my dream is on the verge of fulfillment. But this terrible tragedy has unnerved me, Somervell. You are interested in chemistry?"

"I've dabbled in it."

"At another time, if ever you are up this way again, I should be more than pleased to demonstrate my method to you—of course, reserving the process by which I combine a certain element with the rubber, which is the key to my secret."

Despite the suavity of Parmley's speech, Adam felt heartily relieved when intervention came in the shape of Mrs. Breen, now very much the worse for imbibing.

"What are you two boys doing in here?" she screeched, and flung her arms about Adam's neck again. "Lesh all go back and have a drink, and forget tragedy. Looksh like no shupper. Cook's gone—. Come on, lesh all get loaded!"

Back in the living room the guests had thinned out, and Adam surveyed those that remained, trying to sum them up. It was clear that Parmley's tastes in company were low. That Parmley's wife had died a few hours earlier apparently made little difference to them.

"Have a drink!" urged Mrs. Breen, holding a glass to Adam's lips.

It was a very potent rye. Adam, who had no taste for intoxicants, withdrew with it into a corner, from which he surveyed the crowd again.

Parmley was persuading the more sober members of the party not to go. He wanted them there; he wanted company; he was afraid. Adam saw that the relationship between him and Mrs. Breen was very well defined. When the woman came over to him in his corner, he concluded that Parmley had set her to watch him.

"Somervell, you're drunk," she hiccupped, refilling his glass from the bottle in her hand.

"Soda-water," mumbled Adam.

She screamed with laughter. "Big boy's drunk, on one drink," she called merrily to Parmley.

Adam, strolling up with an affection of dignity, held out his glass. It had been half full of whiskey a moment before, but it was empty now. And it certainly looked as if Adam was under the influence.

Parmley slipped his arm through Adam's and led him to the refrigerator. Inside were the bottles of soda-water that Adam had seen before. Adam stretched out his hand to one of the bottles which, half-full, was sealed with a rubber stopper, but Parmley picked up an unopened one, jerked off the rim, and filled his glass. Adam drank lustily.

"Goo' stuff," he said. "How about another?"

Parmley laughed, and led him back into the living room, where his glass was again replenished. Adam sank upon a sofa, and Mrs. Breen depositing her plump form beside him, cooing over him, and departing from time to time to refill his glass, until it dropped from his hand. To all appearance, Adam had passed out.

PARMLEY was shaking him by the shoulder, and he opened his eyes. He was lying on the floor of the butler's pantry, into which he seemed to have strayed, and someone had placed a pillow under his head.

"How are you feeling, Somervell?" asked Parmley. "If you want to catch the twelve, I'll have to drive you to the station."

"Too tired," Adam mumbled. "Not shtirring tonight. Too weary and tired."

"Poor boy," squealed Mrs. Breen, over Parmley's shoulder. "Give him a bed tonight, Johnny."

"Ex-shel-lent idea," said Adam, struggling up into a sitting posture. "My head's going round and round. I'm a slick man, Mr.—whasyourname? Gimme a bed."

"My dear fellow, I'll be more than delighted," answered Parmley, assisting Adam to rise.

But at the foot of the staircase Adam paused. "Suitcases," he muttered. "There they are!"

The two suitcases were standing inside the hall door, where Adam had placed them that afternoon. As Adam staggered toward them, Parmley anticipated him. He picked up one in either hand, and preceded Adam up the stairs.

"Come along, Somervell, we'll soon have you tucked away," he said.

He opened a door, set down the suitcases, and Adam staggered to the bed, and slumped down on it. Mrs. Breen leaned over him, and impressed a kiss upon his lips.

"Nighty-night, big boy," she said. "Have a nice little nap, and come down when you feel like it. We'll be waiting for you."

Adam grunted inarticulately. His eyes closed, an incipient snore came from his lips. To all appearance he was already in the arms of Morpheus.

BUT some thirty seconds after Parmley and Mrs. Breen had disappeared he was very wide awake indeed. He looked about him, his eyes taking in the bathroom adjoining, and the telephone on the wall. He sprang to his feet, and locked the door. He peered out of the window. The moon was rising in the east, throwing a shaft of light across the rear yard. Nobody was stirring outside the house, and downstairs the shouts of the guests could no longer be heard. Listening at the window, Adam heard a car pass down the drive, and surmised that the guests were at last departing.

He pulled down the shade, and took his traveling laboratory into the bathroom. In

a few minutes he had completed his preparations. From an inside pocket he produced the rubber-stoppered bottle of soda-water that he had taken from the refrigerator in the course of his supposed drunken wanderings through the rooms below. He broke a package of compressed gas, attached it to his burner with a tube, and began operations.

Adam's first guess was correct. There was enough hyoscin in the soda-water to kill several men. And the bottle was only one-third full.

Although Adam had been fairly confident that he would discover this, or one of the same group of deadly poisons, his heart beat so hard at the discovery that he choked for breath. He dropped into a chair, and tried to figure out what must have happened.

It was a big bottle, a pint-size bottle. If Mrs. Parmley had had the first third of the contents mixed with her glass of liquor—if the butler, Towlins, had used the second third in the pantry, that would cover the situation, except for one question.

How had the hyoscin got into an unopened bottle of soda-water?

Adam must have sat brooding for fifteen minutes before he hit upon a possible solution. He went back to his test tubes. It was some twenty minutes later when he returned the contents to the laboratory. He snapped the case shut, locked it, then pulled up the shade; finally he took down the telephone receiver.

"Please give me Doctor Hawke," he said.

THE phone had rung several times before Hawke answered gruffly. Adam said: "This is Mr. Parmley's house. You're wanted here, Doctor."

"Who's this talking?"

"Well, my name's Somervell, and I—"

"You're the insurance man, who wanted to make trouble about Mrs. Parmley's death," rasped Hawke. "Well, I've said what I had to say, and you can hang up."

"Just a moment, just a moment," said Adam. "Mrs. Parmley died of hyoscin poisoning, and I've got the proof, and if we have to get an exhumation order you'll look mighty silly, Doctor."

"What's that? Proof? What's your proof?"

"I've got it right here. Now look, Doctor, I understand your position. You're a good friend of Mr. Parmley's, and naturally you're not disposed to suspect him—"

"You're alleging that Mr. Parmley killed his wife?" There was now a quaver in Hawke's voice.

"I'm saying, Doctor, that—what's the time?" Adam glanced at his wristwatch. "It's five minutes of twelve. If you'll be here at twelve-thirty, right on the dot, I'll give you all the proof you'll want. And I'm asking you to make it just twelve-thirty, because three deaths from hyoscin poisoning would look bad."

"I'll be there," grunted Hawke.

"And don't phone back in the meantime," said Adam. But it was doubtful whether Hawke heard that last remark, for he had hung up.

Adam hung up too, and unlocked the door of his room. He flung himself down upon his bed again. So far luck had been with him, for he had hardly stretched out before there came a tapping at the door, and Adam grunted a sleepy response.

The door opened, and Mrs. Breen appeared. "Hello! How's the big boy? Had a nice nap, darling? Let's go downstairs and have another drink. It's only midnight, and most of those tiresome people have gone."

ONLY four of the guests remained. Three men and a woman were sprawl-

ing in easy chairs, and they had all passed out, and were snoring loudly. Mrs. Breen shrilled to Parmley: "Let's make a night of it, Johnny. He's a nice boy, even if he is a detective." She patted the bald top of Adam's head.

Parmley said uneasily: "You've sobered up mighty quick, Somervell. Let's have a drink and get down to business."

"I could do with one," answered Adam.

He watched the other closely as he twisted off the top of a fresh bottle of rye; followed him into the butler's pantry and watched him bring a fresh bottle of soda water from the refrigerator.

"Say when," said Parmley.

Adam said when. Parmley pried off the cap of the soda-water bottle, and emptied a quarter of the contents into his own glass, and the same quantity into Adam's. He put the half-empty bottle back into the refrigerator.

"Here's how," said Parmley, lifting his glass, and they drank. Behind him, at the entrance to the dining-room, Adam, without turning his head, was conscious of Mrs. Breen standing, watching them.

"And now let's get down to business, Somervell," said Parmley. "Of course I realized you were just putting on an act when you pretended to be drunk. I know, of course, you people have to make a careful check-up in cases of death that seem at all suspicious. And poor Towlins dying on the same night as my wife does present an unfortunate coincidence. Well, my conscience is clear, Somervell. I didn't



poison my wife for fifty thousand dollars. What makes you think I did?"

Adam didn't answer, and Parmley went on: "It's this way, Somervell. A man in my position, who can't afford to get notoriety, often finds it necessary to compound with various persons who have the power to be . . . well, to be unpleasant. As I said before, my conscience is absolutely clear, but, to avoid any further annoyance, how would a thousand dollars in cash look to you?"

For a moment Adam studied the desperation in Parmley's eyes, behind the mechanical smile. Then he shook his head. "I don't do that sort of business, Mr. Parmley," he answered.

"Damn you!" said Parmley softly. "Think it over again, Somervell. Because—because—"

Adam always considered Parmley the most dangerous soft-spoken criminal he had ever met. He had sensed murder in the man's manner in the laboratory, and he sensed it now. But a gruff voice in the living-room broke in upon Parmley's unfinished sentence, and next moment Doctor Hawke appeared in the entrance of the pantry.

Parmley, who was facing him, sprang to his feet. "Well, Hawke?" he asked.

"I believe my business is with this gentleman," said Hawke stiffly. "You phoned me that you had positive proof that Mrs. Parmley died of poison. I'm sorry, Parmley, but you'll understand my position required me to investigate even the most preposterous accusations."

"Of course—of course," said Parmley, in a soothing tone. "I'm afraid our young friend here partook a little too freely of my refreshments. I had to help him to bed a little while ago. But he's back, and raving."

"Let's get to the point," said Hawke. "If you're accusing Mr. Parmley of murdering his wife, then you must have some evidence. Where is it?"

"Let's take it easy and have a drink all around," answered Adam coolly. He stepped back, took a third tumbler from a shelf, and poured out three fresh drinks of rye. He reached into the refrigerator and

drew out the half-empty bottle of soda-water. There was a rubber stopper in the neck, which certainly hadn't been there when Parmley replaced it.

Adam emptied the contents into Parmley's glass, then drew out a fresh bottle for Hawke and himself, pried off the top, and filled their two glasses.

"Here's how, gentlemen," said Adam. And, as neither stirred, he quickly drank half the contents of his glass, and set it down.

Hawke's eyes were popping. Hawke was staring at Parmley in consternation and bewilderment. For the look on Parmley's face was that of a leering mask. Slowly Parmley's fingers tightened on his glass.

Screams broke from Mrs. Breen's lips. The woman came rushing through the doorway, clutching at Parmley's arm. She was just too late, for Parmley raised his glass to his lips and drained the contents.

Mrs. Breen swayed back against the side of the refrigerator, panting sobs breaking from her lips.

Hawke stood staring at Parmley, who put out both arms, like a man groping his way forward through a heavy fog.

"Too smart—too damned smart," he said in croaking tones. "I should have . . . put him away—didn't suspect—"

Parmley tottered, and fell full length upon the pantry floor, striking his head upon the heavy wooden sill of the door. That blow had force enough to stun him. But it wasn't the blow that drew out Parmley's life in labored gasps that slowed and quavered to the stopping point.

ADAM said: "This woman was an accessory. He planned to marry her."

"It's a lie!" screeched Mrs. Breen. "I don't know anything about it! He told me not to touch the soda-water after a bottle had been opened. That's all I know."

"It's plenty." Adam addressed the astounded doctor. "You see, it was a very smart trick, and he'd have got away with it, if I hadn't been something of a chemist, and if I hadn't known he had been con-

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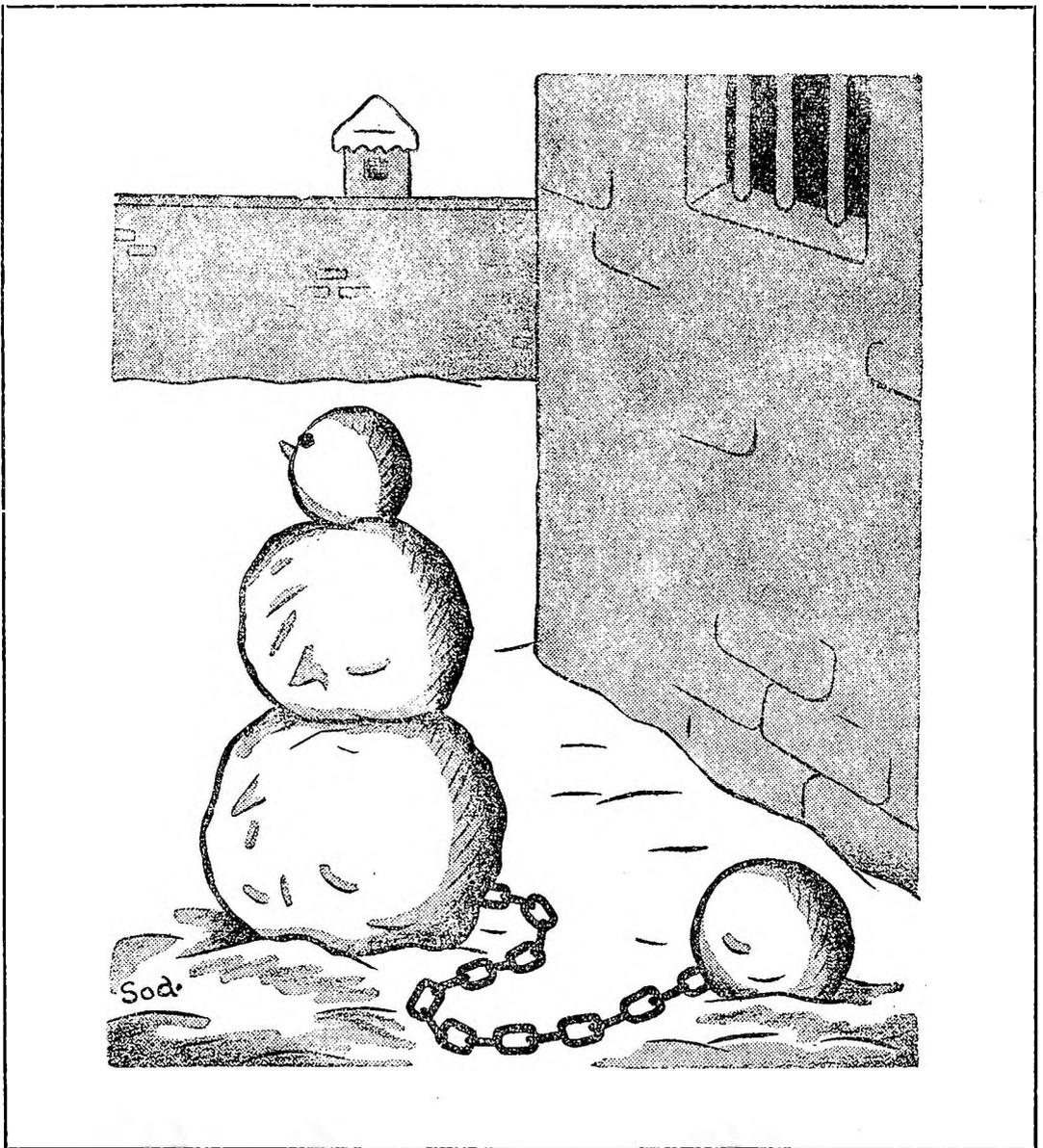
"Even then I was puzzled how the poison could have got into the bottles, till it occurred to me to analyze the rubber stopper of the one he'd evidently hidden in the refrigerator after it had caused the death of his wife and Towlins. It was impregnated with hyoscin.

"But Parmley didn't poison the soda-water. He just impregnated the stopper

with poison, knowing that, when a half-empty bottle was corked with a poisoned stopper, the suction and the effervescence of the carbonic-acid bubbles in the water would draw out the hyoscin.

"I'll trouble you for a lift back to the station, Doctor. "I'll wait there for the next train. I don't care what you do with Mrs. Breen. I'm just an insurance man, not a policeman."

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DEATH IS MY SHADOW

(Continued from page 25)

owed Johnny to get you to marry her. She'd seen that the other wasn't going to work. And she knew that you'd balk at going through a marriage at the point of a gun. But why should she have *wanted* you to marry her?"

Danton shook his head. "She and Benton have been thick."

Martha put two fingers together. "It's the talk of the town." She added, disdainfully, "Not that he's much of a man. But I guess she figured that a boy friend in the—er—parlor was worth two at sea."

DANTON laughed. He couldn't help it. "You're cute. And you're pretty," he told her.

She smiled and her plain face *was* pretty. "And you are a sailor," she reproved him. "My Heavens. The man is wanted for murder and he—"

"Wait a minute," he stopped her, the germ of an idea beginning to bud. "Right after the Dutchess first claimed I was Johnny she called Benton into the office and told him that she had been a fool to worry, that it would seem that her sailor, and she said it kind of funny, was home from the sea after all."

Martha shook her head. "That doesn't mean anything to me."

"It doesn't mean much to me," he admitted. He tried to puzzle it out. "But it does sound like she was worried because Johnny hadn't come back, and then was suddenly relieved because she figured that she could substitute me."

Martha protested, "But if she was in love with Johnny, if she wanted to marry him—"

"Folks get married for other reasons beside love," Danton said. "Do you know if Johnny had much property?"

She shook her head. "I know he owned the Golden Eagle. But she had that anyway. And a pretty penny she's made in that clip joint since they found more gold in the Consolidated Mine than they took out in the forty years it was worked." She added, "This used to be a ghost town, you

know. They thought the mines were played out. And now they find that they're richer than ever."

"No. I didn't know," he said. "You wouldn't know if Johnny had stock in this Consolidated Mine?"

She shook her head. "Not that I know of. I don't think there is any local money in it. It's owned by some eastern corporation."

He persisted, "And it's the only mine near Hardrock?"

She laughed. "Goodness no. There are two dozen smaller ones and the mountains are dotted with shafts and claims." She added, "And since they've reopened the big mine they've found gold in some of them, too."

Danton snapped his fingers. "I think I have it, Martha. Where do they keep the property records here?"

"At the courthouse," she told him. "Why?"

He wanted to know if she knew anyone who worked there. She thought a moment, told him that an elderly Mr. Miller who worked in the tax department ate most of his meals in her cafe.

"And you could get him to let you look at the records?"

She was dubious. "I might. But what good would that do?"

He told her, "I want to know if Johnny owns any mining property, however worthless it may seem. I have a hunch—"

HE STOPPED short, starting to his feet as a heavy fist battered at the kitchen door.

"All right, Johnny," Sheriff Corson called. "Come out shooting if you want to. But come out. We know you're in there."

Her eyes wide with terror, Martha tried to bluff. "What is it, Sheriff? What are you talking about? There is no one in here but—"

"You stay out of this, Martha," he cut her short. "And stay away from Johnny if he makes us shoot. He's a no good lying

skunk and whatever story he's told you was just to play on your sympathies."

"Don't shoot," Danton called. "I'll come out if you promise not to hurt the girl."

"We don't aim to hurt anyone but you," Corson answered.

Martha clung to Danton. "They'll kill you. Wade was one of the best liked officers on the force. And he was the sheriff's first deputy for years."

Fists were also pounding on the front door now, hands were turning the knob, gun butts tapping the glass.

"They'll kill you," she repeated. "Wade was well liked."

Danton told her, hard-eyed, "So was Johnny, it would seem. They were willing to give him every break until the Dutchess deliberately spoiled it." His time was growing short. "And I think that I know why. You will look up those records?"

She clung to him. "I promise."

Corson called impatiently. "I'm counting three, Johnny. Then I'm shooting the lock off the door."

Danton peeled the hysterical girl's hands from his coat lapels, made his way into the kitchen and lit the light just as a pistol butt shattered the glass in the front door. Still he stalled briefly, his queasy stomach muscles rebelling against what they knew was about to happen.

He forced himself to fumble with the chain on the door, asking, "How did you know I was here?"

"I didn't know," Sheriff Corson said candidly. "It was just a feeling. I didn't know you were here until I crept back down the alley and heard your voice."

Danton opened the door and Corson caught him roughly by the shirt front. The aged man's face was contorted with anger. "Before I get through with you, Johnny," he promised, "you'll damn well wish that you died on that raft with the better men who did." He drove a clenched fist into Danton's face. "Shoot Wade down in cold blood, would you? And him a family man with four children left to mourn."

There was nothing else he could do but deny it.

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"I didn't—" Danton began.

Somewhere behind him Martha screamed. The heavy fist struck him again. "Don't give me that," the sheriff roared. "The hell you didn't kill him. You killed him with his own gun."

Danton made no answer. He couldn't. He was back on the raft again with the taste of salt in his mouth.

CHAPTER V

Corpus Delicti



HERE were moments when his pain seemed more than he could bear. But crying out didn't ease him. Whenever he even gasped the heavy fist struck him again. Sheriff Corson was making no pretense of being legal. Wade had not only been his deputy, the dead man had been his friend.

He picked Danton from the floor, sat him in the chair, then knocked him off again. "Confess you killed Wade, skunk, or I swear, Johnny, that I won't leave enough of you to hang. The one thing I can't abide is a lying killer."

Through his fog of pain the sheriff's face looked strangely like Johnny's face to Danton. But the two faces weren't speaking the same words. Johnny was telling him to hang on, as he had done the first time that they had been torpedoed, the time that his hands had been burned so badly that he had been delirious with pain and Johnny had put his own life jacket on him. . . .

"Don't give up, kid. We've got a life jacket between us, ain't we. And me the champion swimmer of Hardrock. Hell. We're good for twenty-four hours. C'mon now. Keep that chin up out of the water or I'll clip it."

And there was no water in Hardrock. Johnny had learned to swim that night.

Sheriff Corson bent his ear to Danton's lips.

"What did you say?"

Danton repeated stiffly, "I am not Johnny. Johnny—was my buddy. My—name is Raoul Danton."

Corson raised his fist, lowered it and rubbed his knuckles. His eyes grew slightly

worried. It wasn't within the range of human capability for a man to take so much punishment and lie. "By God he *has* to be Johnny," he told the ring of watching officers.

"He's Johnny all right," one of them said. "The Dutchess is in the matron's office crying her eyes out. And the Dutchess isn't the kind of a dame who would cry about *any* man."

A second officer suggested cynically, "Maybe she's crying about Benton."

The sheriff scoffed, "Hell. Benton's got nothing to worry about. What with returning his share of the loot and turning State's evidence, the most that he will get is probation or a suspended sentence."

Johnny swam back into Danton's blurred field of vision, grinning. "*See. What did I tell you, kid. There it is. All you have to do is hang on and something always turns up. Boy, will we pitch a big one when you and I get back.*"

And they had. But Johnny hadn't come back the last time. He hadn't been able to hang on. He'd had too many cuts at the ball and the Umpire had called the last one.

One of the deputies said, "He's talking again."

Corson bent over to listen.

"I know the whole thing," Danton told him. "Maybe I can prove it. It all depends on Martha."

"Martha?" the sheriff puzzled. "What has she got to do with this?"

"Records," Danton told him. His flesh shriveling, he added, "Beat me—go ahead. But I'm not Johnny."

Corson spread his hands in a futile gesture. "I couldn't hit him again if I tried," he admitted. "He may be a killer and a louse but he's out-intestined me."

One of his deputies rolled up his sleeves. "I'll take over. I—"

HE LOOKED around as the door of the squad room opened and the night doorman told the sheriff, "There's a dame named Martha downstairs, sheriff. You know, that plain faced girl who just opened the Home Cafe." He nodded at Danton. "And she says she has to see him." He grinned. "What's *more*, she says that if

anything happens to him it's murder and we'll all stretch rope."

Sheriff Corson wasn't amused. "Send her up." He looked at Danton and countermanded his order. "No. Wait. Send her up in fifteen minutes. We can't let her see him like that."

The other man shrugged and closed the door.

The deputy who had rolled up his sleeves asked, "Why waste the time, sheriff? We know that he killed Wade."

Corson shook his head wearily. "No. I've been beating him steady for two hours and we still don't know a damn thing." He nodded at Danton. "Get Doc Pierce in here and have him patch and wash him up a bit."

Danton said, "Hello," as Martha came in. He still hurt in every muscle but he didn't look too badly. The police doctor had done a good job. He could tell that by the relieved look in Martha's eyes.

She walked to the chair in which he was sitting and squeezed his hand. "I was worried," she admitted. "I—I was afraid they would hurt you."

"No. They didn't hurt me," he told her. In a sense what he said was true. When a man had taken the mental and physical punishment that he had a little beating was minor. There had been plenty of times on and in the water when he would have welcomed the back room session. He tried to speak normally. "You got Miller to let you look at the records?"

"I didn't have to look," she told him. "Mr. Miller knew the property as soon as I phoned him. He says that it has been in Johnny's family for years."

"What are you talking about?" Corson asked her.

"The Lost Burro Mine," she told him.

He said, "Of course it has been in the Oakhurst family for years. But what has that to do with Wade being murdered?"

"I don't know," Martha said truthfully. She looked hopefully at Danton.

"I can tell you, Sheriff," he said. "But before I do, I want both the Dutchess and Benton in here."

An officer said, "He's crazy."

Corson's eyes were thoughtful. "I'm not

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so certain." He gave orders for the Dutchess and Benton to be brought up to the squad room.

MARTHA spent the waiting time holding Danton's hand. "You are all right?" she demanded.

"I feel fine now," he told her truthfully.

Benton came in between two officers, defiant. If the Dutchess had been weeping her eyes out they failed to show it. They were cold, calculating.

"So they got you, Johnny," she said coldly. "That was a fool thing to do, shooting Wade the way you did."

"So it would seem," Danton admitted cheerfully.

His hand on his gun butt, Sheriff Corson said, "All right. Start talking—er—" for the first time he hesitated over the name, compromised, "you in the chair, there. You wanted the Dutchess and Benton here. This is your party."

"All the way," Danton assured him. He grinned despite the pain it caused him. "And we can have another session if you want to. But I'm going to shove off by saying that I'm not Johnny Oakhurst. My name is Raoul Danton."

The Dutchess cried, "He's lying."

Danton reproved her, "Darling. Such a way for a bride to talk to her husband on their wedding night."

Her eyes were cat-green. "I didn't marry a killer."

"No. That's right," he agreed. "You didn't." He paused briefly, continued, "There is no use of repeating my contentions. You've heard them a dozen times. But in my trip from the station to the Golden Eagle this afternoon there was one stop I made that Sheriff Corson somehow over-looked."

"And that was," Corson asked.

"I stopped to eat," Danton told him. "I stopped in at the Home Cafe." He looked at Martha. "And why did I tell you that I was in Hardrock?"

She said, "You told me you were delivering a message for a buddy of yours, a Jimmy Thompson. You said he was drowned." She wiped away the tears that had spurted to her eyes. "And then you

looked so sick and well hurt-like that it made my heart turn over."

Corson demanded, "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

She snapped, "You didn't ask me. And then when Raoul didn't show up for our date and I heard he had married the Dutchess and had shot Deputy Wade, I was as big a fool as everybody else. I thought he had been lying to me."

"Go on," Corson ordered Danton.

Danton continued, "When I walked into the office, Benton thought I was Johnny. Even the Dutchess was startled. We must have looked more alike than either of us realized. And then when I gave the Dutchess my message, when I told her that Johnny was dead, all of this began."

Corson wanted to know why.

"Because the news of Johnny's death cost her a fortune," Danton said quietly.

"How?"

"Because she *had* to marry Johnny to collect. He *had* to come back alive so she could marry him. As his girl, the information she possessed wasn't worth a dime. But as his wife or as his widow, that was a different matter." He admitted, "I can't prove this. But I know it's so and some mining man can prove it. Johnny owned a mine, the Lost Burro. For years it hasn't been worth a dime. But I'm willing to bet it's worth a fortune now."

Corson asked thoughtfully, "And just how did she find this out?"

Danton shook his head. "I wouldn't know that either. Possibly some drunken prospector, spurred on by the finding of gold in the other mines, prospected the mine and told her over the bar of the Golden Eagle. Perhaps she hired some one to do it. Or maybe she learned it from one of the syndicates engineers who knew she was Johnny's girl and came to her trying to make a deal."

"By George that makes sense," Corson swore. "In the old days they took almost as much gold out of the Lost Burro as they did out of all the other small mines put together."

THE office grew so still that the Dutchess' heavy breathing was audible.

Danton continued, "But to get her hands on the money, she had to be a widow. And to be a widow, she had to be a bride." He smiled wryly. "So, resembling Johnny as I do, I was elected to be the corpus delicti."

Martha glowered at the Dutchess.

The Dutchess said, scornfully, "If you don't mind, Sheriff, I really don't care for fairy tales. So, I think I'll leave. Of course I feel sorry for Johnny. But I am beginning to think that he needs an alienist, not a lawyer." She started toward the door.

"Wait," Corson told her.

She waited.

Danton shrugged. "Just what made Johnny decide to serve his country at sea under an assumed name, I'll never know. Maybe he had a record and he was afraid the Army or the Marines wouldn't take him.

But shortly after he left town, or maybe the same day, Benton and the Dutchess who had been holding hands behind his back made certain that they'd have a club if and when he did return. They pulled that bank robbery and dropped just enough planted clues to cast suspicion on Johnny but not enough to send the law in search of him."

Benton spoke for the first time. "That's a lie. You and I robbed that bank together."

"I couldn't have," Danton said. "I was in Louisiana. And given time, I think that I can prove it. But your planted set-up was a natural for the gold mine steal. As soon as the Dutchess and I left for the minister's house you dashed in here and confessed, knowing, as I heard Sheriff Corson say, that the chances of your doing time were very slight. So, it worked. I was arrested.

"I couldn't say I was Johnny. Because I wasn't. Then the sheriff upset the Dutchess' plans by refusing to allow me to be admitted to bail. I don't know how she planned to kill me. But she did. Every moment that I lived was dangerous to her plans. Someone might have believed me. So she walked over to the jail with Deputy Wade and me. And halfway across the square she pulled Wade's gun from his holster and let him have it."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

Monastery Secrets

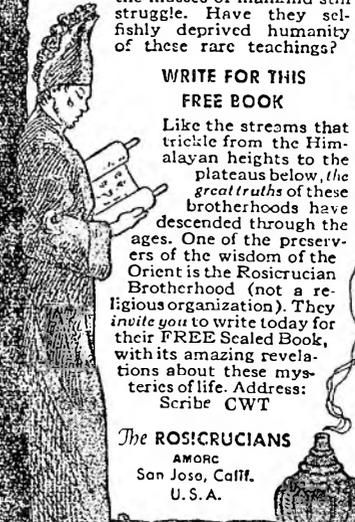
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Sheriff Corson demanded.

"Would you have believed me?" Danton asked.

"No," Corson admitted grimly.

Danton continued, "Then the Dutchess handed me the gun and told me to run for my life." He shrugged, "I'd been through too much to think clearly. And I did."

The Dutchess, her eyes blazing, screamed, "He's lying!"

"You didn't shoot Wade?" Danton asked her.

"I did not!"

He grinned, "Then how did you get those powder stains on your hand? You weren't wearing gloves. Suppose you have our hands tested, sheriff, and find out which one of us is lying."

THE Dutchess scrubbed at her right hand with her handkerchief. "No. You can't. I won't allow you to. I—" She stopped short, staring at her hands, realizing that her action was tantamount to a confession.

Benton cursed her. "You damn little fool. That's it. You and your millions of dollars that the Lost Burro was going to bring us. Maybe I can save my own neck by talking. If I can't, it won't be for not trying."

Corson nodded to four of his deputies.

They led the Dutchess and Benton from the office snarling and spitting at each other.

Danton got up stiffly and slipped his arm around Martha's shoulder. "And I guess that's that," he said.

Corson removed his gold sheriff's shield from his shirt with fingers that trembled badly, but his voice was under control. "I'm responsible," he admitted. "And while I don't suppose I have any right to ask favors after doing what I've done to you, Mr. Danton, I would appreciate it if any action that you take is directed solely against me. My men were acting under my orders."

Danton picked up the shield and pinned it back on Corson's shirt. "Don't be a fool, sheriff. You only did what you thought was right. I'd do as much for a friend." He added quietly, "And Johnny would have done as much for me. Hell, I couldn't be mad at you if I tried. You liked Johnny."

Corson shook the extended hand soberly. He had to be content with Danton's left hand. Martha was still clinging to his right. She released it only when Danton used it to tilt her chin so he could kiss her.

The only thing that puzzled him was why he had ever thought that Martha was plain. In that one respect, Johnny had been wrong. It was Martha who was the most beautiful girl in the world.



"Lady, would you mind moving over a little bit—? You're mashing my cigarettes!"

MR. HUBERT'S LIFETIME

(Continued from page 33)

disregarded the slight noise behind him. Then abruptly he realized that this situation was far from normal, and almost anything could be forthcoming.

VERY slowly and fearfully, the candy box quivering in his grasp, he turned. And as he turned, he had just one terrified instant of watching Slate leap at him from the partly closed door of the unlighted adjoining bath. Just one instant to feel betrayed by the trellis, which had not, after all, borne the murderer safely away. All this time, Slate must have been caged there, unable to escape from his murder of Jenkins. All this time he had been watching, and now as he leaped, Mr. Hubert saw a gleaming blade in his hand, flashing down. . . .

Gasping and choked with terror, Mr. Hubert managed to lift the candy box to the level of his chest as Slate's violent thrust came at him. The blade plunged through the box and the packet of letters, just stopping short at his chest. He thought of smiling grimly, but there was no time for that. Slate's handsome face was contorted with anger as he jerked the weapon free, muttering a curse. Stocky and powerful, he lunged again, one fist flailing out, the other slashing the air with the sharpness of the blade. Mr. Hubert hesitated not at all. He lifted one oversized foot and slammed it into Slate's stomach. The younger man doubled, swearing furiously, but without relinquishing the knife. Mr. Hubert took this opportunity to head for the door, jumping over Jenkins' body as he ran. He nearly had reached it when he heard a rush behind him, and ducked just in time to avert the full force of Slate's attack. He saw the knife blade whiz by his cheek and felt himself toppling over backward under the weight of the other man's husky body.

He was pinned on the floor, and Slate's face was dark with anger, coming toward him. "I had to do enough explaining to



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get here . . . to look for those letters. . . . I've killed two . . . one more doesn't matter. . . ."

"It does to me," Mr. Hubert whispered miserably. He tried to feel resigned as Slate crouched over him, the knife poised high.

THEN everything happened so quickly that he didn't know how he was feeling or what he was doing. An animated piece of fur appeared suddenly, apparently flying upward from the ground until it came to rest, scrambling, around Slate's neck. The man gave one startled gasp and whirled away from Mr. Hubert, dropping the knife so that it clattered to the floor.

In the split second of time before Slate realized that the clawing bundle of fur was his own cat, Mr. Hubert thought with all the speed of which he was capable, and his actions were to match. Lying only a foot or two away from him on the floor was the china-headed doll he had removed from Marcy's closet. Picking it up, he half-closed one eye, took careful aim, and swung artistically at Slate's head. The doll shattered. Slate staggered and dropped, with Miriam still clinging imperturbably

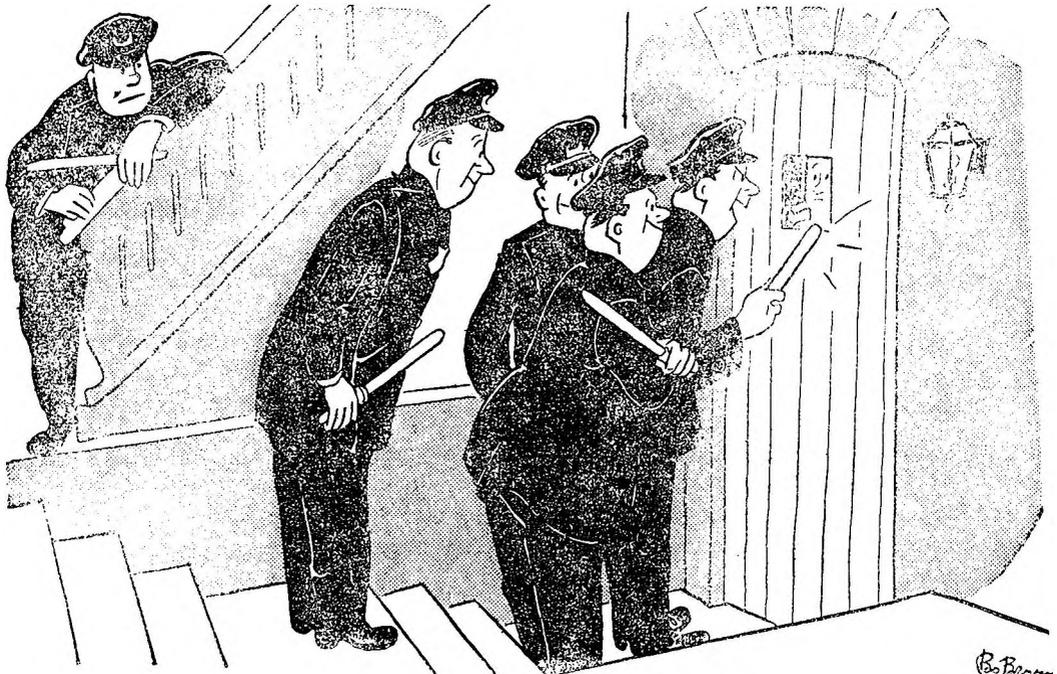
to his shoulder.

Mr. Hubert stood dazed for a minute. He stooped to pick up the knife and then remembered in time that he shouldn't. On closer inspection it was not a knife, after all, but a letter-opener, probably snatched up from among Marcy's things for the murder of Jenkins.

Through his daze, Mr. Hubert heard excited voices coming up the stairs; Mrs. Amsterdam and the other tenants, coming to see what had happened. And suddenly his frail body straightened and he felt a wild elation flooding over him. His wistful, dignified face was lighted with it, and it shone from his eyes as he stood in the middle of the chaotic, frilly pink room with Slate unconscious before him and Jenkins lying dead nearby, the murder weapon not far from the incriminating letters on the floor.

It did not matter that nothing ever had happened to him before, or that probably nothing ever would again. He had had his great adventure, and now he was a hero. He had lived a lifetime in a few hours.

Mr. Hubert placed one enormous slipper of a foot on Slate's chest, and waited for the others to come.



"Benny the stool pigeon sent us!"

Bob Berney

ELEGY FOR MAX

(Continued from page 53)

"Sit down!"

Johnny subsided onto the cushionless chair and grinned feebly. The gunman glared down at him. Martin slid his hand under his pillow and closed it on the barrel of the .45.

"One more little trick. . . ." snarled the gunman to Johnny.

Martin thought quickly. The thin gungel was not the kind you could scare with a gun loaded with turkey stuffing. This was the place for the long chance.

Almost before the thought had flashed through his brain, the heavy .45 sailed across the room at the gunman's head. The swish of air warned him, he turned, and ducked. The gun grazed past his ear. In the same instant, Johnny was out of his chair.

The shot went wild. Johnny's right hand locked about the barrel of the pistol, his left closed on the gungel's wrist. He twisted, and at the same time, his knee came up sharply and sank into the thin belly.

Even as his partner moved, Martin threw himself from the bed, hurled himself on the closet door, slammed it, leaned his weight against it, and turned the key. Then, as a footstep scraped on the tile floor of the bathroom, he moved along the wall to the door.

CHICO stepped out. Martin grabbed his gun arm, swung him around, and smashed his right fist against his jaw. Chico fell back into the bathroom. His head clunked against the edge of the bathtub, slid off the white porcelain and clunked again on the floor. Martin picked up Chico's gun, took his own and Johnny's out of his pockets.

Johnny sat on his heels, gave the recumbent thin man another tap with his own short-barreled pistol for good luck and made a washing movement with his hands.

"That does it," he began. The bullet from the closet cut off his words as it sped past them. He threw himself flat on the

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floor. Martin got down on his knees and crawled toward him.

Together, they watched and counted as the splintered holes appeared in the thin panelling of the closet door.

"Six," whispered Johnny. He fired one shot from the short-barreled gun. It made a clean hole, through the center of the door. There was silence from the closet.

"It depends on his gun," whispered Johnny. "Maybe he's got more shells and is playing possum, maybe he's out of ammunition, and maybe I got him."

"The hell with it," hissed Martin, crawling toward the telephone table. He reached up, pulled the instrument down, and asked the operator to find him Captain Briggs of the police.

He held the receiver cupped between the side of his head and his shoulder and waited.

"I wish I had a drink," he whispered, looking at the bottle on the far side of the bed. Johnny raised his head and stared at the closet. Outside, in the hall, there were excited voices.

"Ferris," said Martin to the rasp of voice from the receiver. "Three hoodlums just dropped in on us. I think it had something to do with the Paris killing but, unfortunately, we had to take them before they finished speaking their piece. Anyway, we've got them wrapped up and ready and if you'll call for them and give us a make on them, it might help."

He listened to more telephone noises. Johnny inched toward the closet. Nothing happened.

"Nuts," he said, and stood up. He turned the key and opened the door.

Beautiful sat almost naturally against the wall. His blond head drooped forward, and there was blood on his yellow jacket. Johnny walked around the bed and got the bottle.

"Tomorrow, say at ten in the morning," said Martin to the telephone, "I want to get all the suspects together in a big room." The hum of voices in the hall stopped. Someone knocked.

Martin held the receiver away from his ear and grinned at it.

"I know it's corny," he told it after a

pause. "But my partner doesn't have much fun and I promised him."

CHAPTER VIII

Funny Luck



HEY awoke early the next morning, put the empty bottle away where they couldn't see it, and ordered a big breakfast. Johnny poured a third cup of coffee and looked quizzically at

Martin.

"Do you really think there's a gambler called the Swine?" he asked. "Or do you think Briggs made the whole thing up last night on the spur of the moment?"

Martin grinned back at him. "It does seem improbable." Johnny took a swallow of coffee.

"Well," he said, "suppose we accept the existence of this Swine—you should excuse the expression—and the fact that our three visitors used to be his collection managers, and suppose we believe the even more improbable story that the Swine had a girl friend named Pearl to carve up so that the cops could throw him in the clink, leaving our friends unemployed and, so to speak, on the beach. Where does it get us?"

He paused invitingly. Martin said nothing.

"Exactly nowhere," continued Johnny undiscouraged. "It just means that anyone of our suspects could have known that three gunsels had time on their hands and could be hired to take the gun away from us. They'll never tell who it was. Guys like that don't talk to cops about their employers. We're no further than we were before they descended on us."

Martin sat silent for a moment under his partner's questioning eyes, then grinned again.

"You're trying to pump me. Here I am, working like crazy, to plan a surprise for you and what do you do? Try to spoil it." He lit a cigarette. "I positively will not let you open it before Christmas, so shut up."

Johnny stood up, took off his robe and let it fall to the floor.

"Then, for Pete's sake," he demanded, "let's get going."

They dressed, went downstairs, and picked up a hack.

"Straight up Hollywood Boulevard," Martin told the cabbie. When they had passed Cahuenga, he leaned forward and watched the storefronts.

"Stop here," he said at last.

Johnny watched his partner's broad back disappear through a door under a sign which read "Magic--Jokes," let his irritation grow, and leaned forward to speak to the driver.

"If he comes out with an exploding cigar, or a rubber knife," he confided, "or something cute like a two-hole inkwell, I'm going to dissolve the partnership."

But Martin returned as preoccupied and gagless as he had entered and they drove off—down to Sunset, past Schwabs, and turned onto Santa Monica. When they reached Wilshire, Johnny felt words rise inside him.

"You don't love me any more," he complained. "Now, don't deny it. It isn't the things you do, it's the things you *don't* do—like talk, for instance."

"I'm worried," Martin told him. "I'm about to pull off something so screwy that it scares even me. If it doesn't work, I'm washed up on this case, and if I'm washed up, we won't get paid."

"Oh, money!" breathed Johnny with relief. "I was afraid it was maybe love and Pat Means. Go ahead, brood."

When they had turned off the highway, past the gatehouse and a knot of tired-looking reporters, onto the estate's private road, they heard sirens in the distance behind them. Briggs was on his way.

THERE was no one in the downstairs playroom Martin had picked for his little scene but Pat. She was dressed in black as if to suit the gravity of the occasion, but her shining hair and glowing skin made it a mockery of mourning.

Martin looked at her for a long minute with an indefinable emotion softening the lines of his mouth.

"It's not decent to look that well so early in the morning," he told her.

She stared up at him, with those wide eyes.

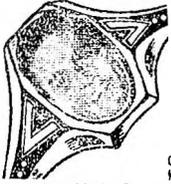
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"I don't understand," she said, putting her hand familiarly on his arm and swaying toward him, "Tell me. . ."

The entrance of the cops put an end to her question. She became a parody of a hostess, offered chairs, cigarettes, explained that the others would be down in a moment. Then Jose Fredericks came in. Martin could tell that the actor had not slept. His face was puffy and there was a thin, pale blue haze of beard along his jaws. His manner was truculent. He planted himself before Briggs and made a speech.

"I want to warn you," he said. "Ferris has planned this whole corny, theatrical business because he's trying to frame me. He knows he has to have a fall guy to cover up his own negligence and he practically told me yesterday that it would be me." He switched his accusing gaze to Martin and pointed a dramatic finger. "He found the murder gun last night. If he was trying to find the real murderer, he'd have turned it over to you, so you could trace it. But he didn't, did he?"

Briggs stood up ponderously. Anger crackled in his eyes and stiffened his flabby jowls.

"So that's what those three hoodlums were after," he growled. "Ferris, I want that gun."

Peterson moved his thick bulk closer to Martin's chair. The three angry men glared at him.

"Take it easy," Martin said. "I'm here and I can't get away. Also, I can't pull anything right under your nose. If you still want to book me later for concealing evidence, I'll be all yours."

The red faded slowly from Briggs' face. Peterson relaxed, turned his attention from Martin back to the gun racks on the wall.

"All right," said Briggs grudgingly, "but I don't have to tell you to make this good." Fredericks stared at him with disbelief in his eyes. Martin nodded.

"That's what my goose pimples have been whispering ever since I got up."

Fredericks' face was eloquent of disgust. "I warned you," he said to Briggs, then to Martin: "Now I'm warning you." His voice became shrill. "I'll smash the frame you set up and I'll smash you with it."

SUDDENLY, from the corner of the room where she had been sitting quietly, a spectator at a play, Pat spoke. She talked to Fredericks but her words were aimed at Martin.

"Stop it, Jose," she said. "I hired Mr. Ferris to protect Max, not to frame his friends. He knows that."

There was a silence into which Max walked. The actor subsided, sulkily, into a chair. The little man seated himself on a high-back bench against the wall under the racks. Peterson stepped hastily out of his way. Max's manner proclaimed to all that the king had arrived and the audience could begin.

"Where's Quentin?" Martin asked.

"Upstairs—typing. Do you really need him?"

"Yes." Martin's tone was dry. A uniformed cop went out at a nod from Briggs. The silence in the playroom grew and became uncomfortable. Everyone watched the door.

The secretary walked in, white-faced, hunched over as if he was trying to make himself small and inconspicuous, and slid apologetically into a chair. The cop closed the door and set his back solidly against it.

"Now," said Max magisterially, "We can begin."

Martin rose, leaned casually against a table and smiled at the assembled company.

"It's a funny thing about luck," he began dreamily, "you can always look at it two ways. For instance, you might say that this killer we're dealing with is the most unlucky murderer in the history of murder. Think of it, he planned three safe ways to commit murder and each of them failed. Then, when he decided to come right out into the open and pull the trigger, he killed the wrong man. Or," he paused and smiled again, "you can look at the other side of the medal and think how lucky Max was. Four times someone tried to kill him and here he is, without a scratch. All he's suffered is the loss of a friend he didn't like much anyway."

Max sat up straight on his bench. His tone was regal and reproving.

"I consider that remark in very bad taste."

"You do?" Martin looked surprised but cheerful. "All right, I withdraw it. As I was saying, somebody took a shot at you yesterday. By a lucky coincidence, the bullet made a hole in the wrong head, because somebody had given Irving a jacket like yours. Somebody put poison in your swimming pool and your dog jumped in first and took the fall. Somebody scared your horse and you got thrown onto some soft dirt and you don't have a bruise to show for it."

He walked over and stood before Max. The silence was now almost tangible.

"Would you mind standing up?" he asked politely. Max hesitated, then rose slowly.

"Now," said Martin, "comes the most remarkable luck of all. A week ago, Jose Fredericks stood about as far from you as I'm standing now. He had a gun."

MARTIN put his hand into the pocket of his jacket and brought out the Smith & Wesson .45, without stuffing. There was a gasp from Quentin. Pat screamed the beginning of a scream and stifled it. Then the silence went on, thicker and more intense. Max's face was white. He bit his lip and made a funny, almost resigned motion with his hand.

"And he aimed it just like this." Martin pointed the gun at the center of Max's round stomach. "He pulled the trigger and you weren't hurt."

"Like this." The shot shattered the silence, like a stone breaking window glass. Max fell backward onto the bench.

"You're crazy!" yelled Peterson, rushing at Martin like an enraged steer. Martin caught his rush with his shoulder, thrust the big man aside.

"Go ahead, Max," he said, "look around, find the slug, and show it to us."

Peterson rushed again, snatched the gun from Martin's hand, rocked back again with Martin's wild right.

"Go ahead, Max," he taunted. "find it. Or haven't you got one palmed this time?"

Max whirled. Martin bent for the .45. Max turned back, with a rifle from the rack in his hand.

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"Stand up," he barked to Martin. Martin stood up. "Stand still everybody." All over the room, hands dropped from their guns.

Max smiled and spoke directly to Martin. "They're just getting it," he said softly, "now that they see me with this gun in my hand. They thought you'd blown your top for a moment. That's what you planned, isn't it? You'd torment me into taking a gun and threatening you and then they'd all see."

He had an odd dignity, a kind of strength in defeat, or maybe it was just the rifle crooked under his arm.

"All right," he said, "I did it. I wanted to kill Irving. I'm glad I killed him and I'd do it again. Money is all right, but a man needs other things. He took them away from me. Respect, my work in the studio, and he was after my wife. I thought you'd never suspect me if it looked like someone was trying to murder me. God knows, there are enough people who hate me.

"I know you can prove it. Now that you're aware it was me, you'll know the right places to look. But I won't go to trial. I've got a hideout planned; I did that just in case, and I'm going to walk out of here and go there. Maybe I'll kill myself, I don't know."

He turned slightly and spoke softly to the cop at the door.

"Get out of the way." The cop stepped quickly sideways.

"No," Max told him, "all the way, over with the others."

The cop walked sheepishly to his chief.

"Five minutes," said Max to the rest of them, "that's all I want."

CCAREFULLY, with the rifle levelled at his hip, and his finger crooked on the trigger, Max moved backward toward the door. The silence had fallen on the room again. Someone's heavy breathing was clearly, rhythmically audible.

"Don't be a fool," said Briggs.

Max looked at him, smiled his strange, resigned smile again. He was in the doorway now, framed in the heavy, dark oak. In another moment he would be gone.

Martin thought of the cops the little man would have to shoot to get past the gate.

"Somebody has to be crazy enough to take him," he told himself, "and it might as well be me." He hoped that no one had ever taught Max to battle-fire a rifle.

Then he breathed air deep into his lungs and threw himself across the room. The bullet grazed his cheek, made a wet, red line. He kept right on coming. Max grabbed at the pump. Martin's weight took them to the floor. Max held onto the rifle with both hands, twisted under Martin like a dying animal. The uniformed cop drew a bead.

The little man under Martin stopped squirming. Martin stood up and looked down at him. He spoke almost as if he didn't care if the others heard him.

"It was obvious the minute Pat told me about that first shooting in the playroom. Nobody could miss at that distance. It had to be a blank cartridge and the only one who could have a reason for that was Max. All the other attempts were phony, too. The horse didn't shy. Max let the dog loose, shot the horse and then broke her leg. Nobody performs autopsies on horses. The swimming-pool gag was the same deal. There wasn't enough in it to kill him even if he had to get into it for some reason. That's all, except that he gave Irving that jacket to make the mistake possible and the gun was hidden in the turkey. That was why he ordered it for dinner, the day before, because he had it all planned in advance."

He looked tired.

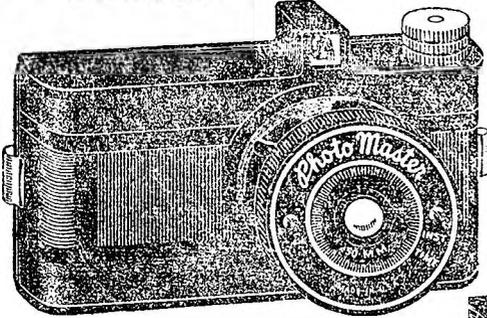
"Cover him up," he said, "and let's go upstairs and I'll answer questions."

One by one, they filed past the little man on the floor. Pat came last; behind her Peterson waited, with a scarf from a table-top over his arm. She looked down at her husband as they had all done. But in her eyes there was no pity. When she raised them to Martin, just outside the door where he stood with Johnny, they were hard and bright and there was rage in them.

"You fool!" she snarled, "You fool! I told you. . . ." Her words trailed off into inarticulateness. Her fists clenched, her nails bit into her palms.

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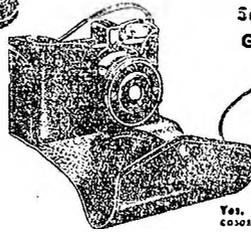
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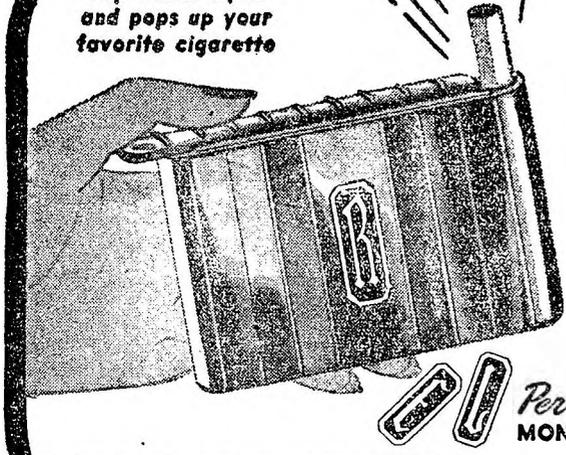
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"I know," he said quietly. "That's why you kept me on, isn't it? Because you had begun to suspect and you thought I'd come to you, when I'd caught him and you could buy me off, **one** way or another, and keep him safe and alive so you could have his money."

For a single second his face was as hard as hers. Then he smiled, a smile strangely like Max's.

"Oh, come now, darling," he said. "You've got something tucked away, haven't you? Jewelry, furs, cars, and maybe what you saved up out of your allowance? I hope so."

"A heck of a lot you care," she threw at him.

"But you're so wrong," Martin told her. "You haven't forgot have you, that there's the little matter of my fee."



THE HARD WAY



POLICE were puzzled lately over the abnormal increase in car thefts. They figured it was due to the end of gas rationing, which brought about the appearance of many more cars on the streets, but the increase in thefts was all out of proportion to the number of extra cars in use. When the cars began to reappear in large numbers, undamaged, but stripped of their tires, the mystery was solved.

People whose cars were not in use during the war can use them now, but some of them are badly in need of tires. The fact that tires are still rationed, although gasoline isn't any longer, has made the trade in illegal tires very brisk, and tire thieves have no difficulty in getting rid of their contraband merchandise in short order. As a result, their activities now cover more territory than heretofore.

They're very fussy, too. Only 1941 and 1942 models, whose tires have not seen too much mileage, are selected, the higher-priced and white-wall tires taking precedence over any other.

The tire thieves today also seem to believe that "the longest way around is the shortest way to the goal." No longer content with just removing the tires from cars, they now spot the tires they want, and then take the cars away entirely and remove the tires at their leisure. In this way, they obviate the risk of getting caught in the act of removing the tires, as it takes less time to steal the car than it does to steal just the tires. They park the cars in out-of-the-way places (far away from their illegal places of business, of course), take the tires, and then abandon the cars, leaving them to be discovered by the patrolman on the beat and eventually to be returned to the rightful owners.

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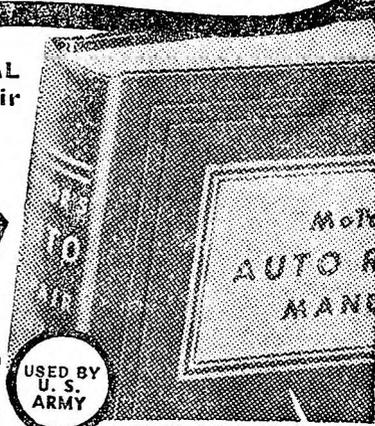
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