

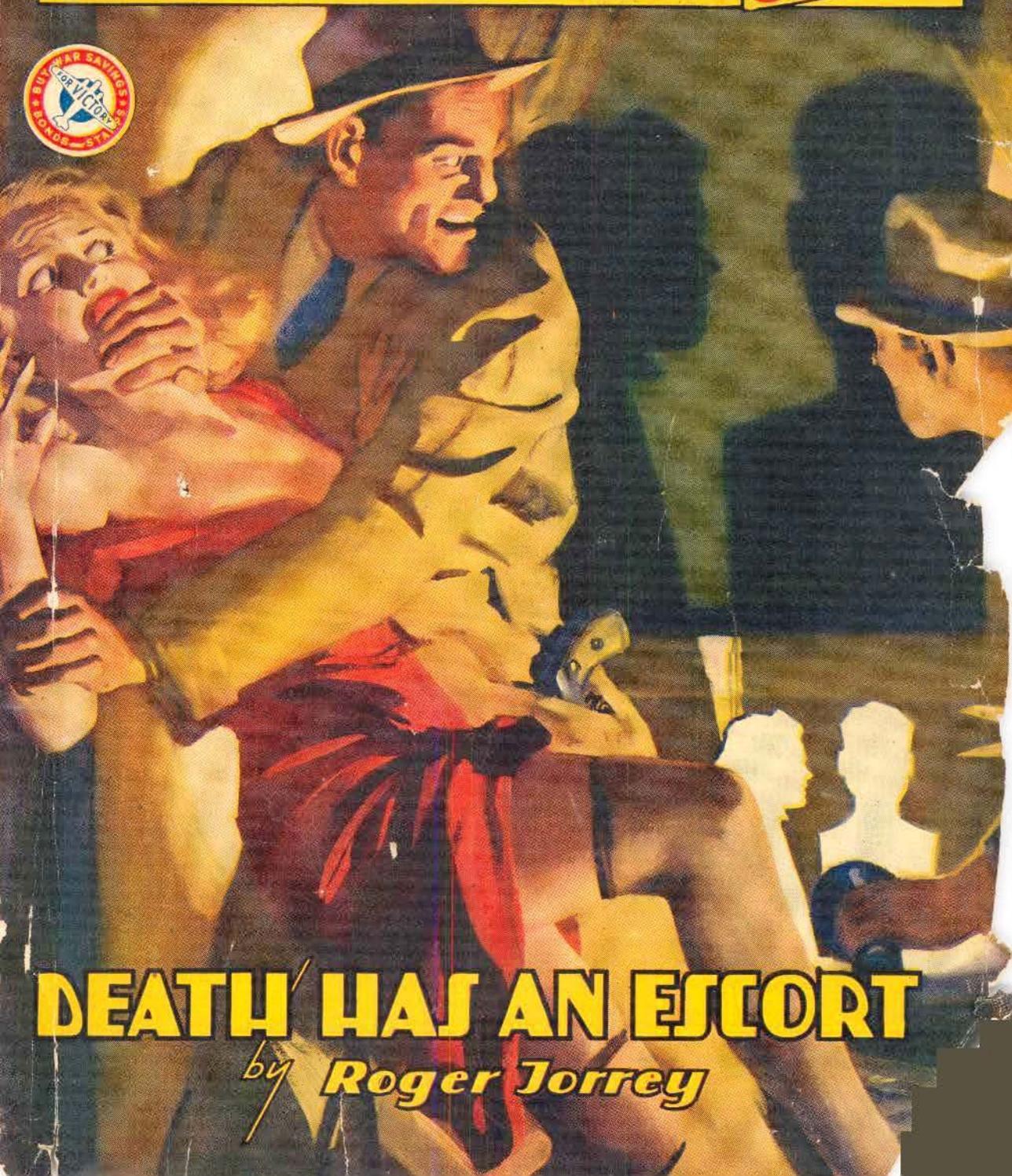
PRIVATE

October 15¢

DETECTIVE

IND

STORIES



DEATH HAS AN ESCORT

by **Roger Torrey**

IMAGINE THEIR JOY

WHEN THEY FOUND THEY COULD PLAY This easy as A.B.C. way!



Learned Quickly at Home

I didn't dream I could actually learn to play without a teacher. Now, when I play for people they hardly believe that I learned to play so well in so short a time.
*M.C.S., Calif.



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My family think my playing is just wonderful. My friends all want to know how I learned to play so well. I was glad to give credit to the U. S. School.
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*R.M., Vancouver, B. C.



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**BEGINNERS SOON LEARN TO EARN
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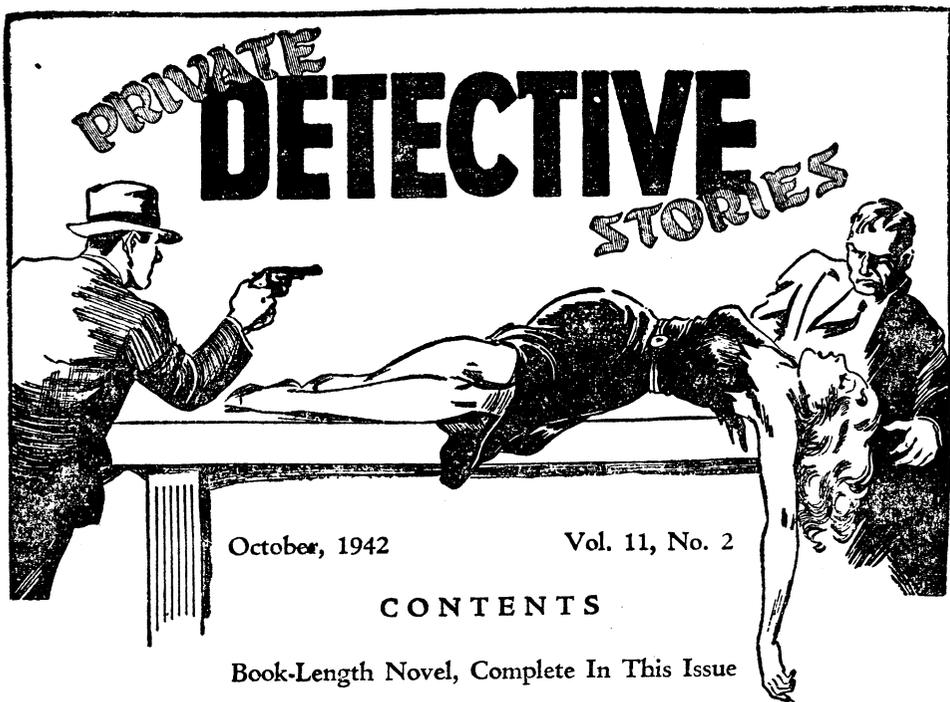
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October, 1942

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The names and descriptions of all characters appearing in this magazine are entirely fictitious. If there is any resemblance either in name or description, to any living person, it is purely a coincidence.

PRIVATE DETECTIVE STORIES is published monthly by Trojan Publishing Corp., 125 East Forty-sixth Street, New York, N. Y. Michael J. Estrow, President; Frank Armer, Secretary and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter August 25, 1938, at the post office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879. Subscription: Yearly, \$1.50; single copies, 15¢. Canadian and foreign postage extra. Manuscripts should be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. Copyright, 1942, by Trojan Publishing Corp. Title registered U. S. Patent Office.

Not Expensive to Learn SCIENTIFIC CRIME DETECTION

*The Steady Pay Profession
Good Times—or Bad*

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SECRET SERVICE
METHODS



I TRAINED
THE MEN
WHO THEN
GOT THESE
BIG JOBS



MAN IN UNCERTAIN LOW PAY JOB



BECOMES HEAD OF BUREAU OF IDENTIFICATION



"I will teach you Finger Print Identification—Firearms Identification—Police Photography—and Secret Service!" That's what I told the men who now handle the good jobs listed in the column at the right.

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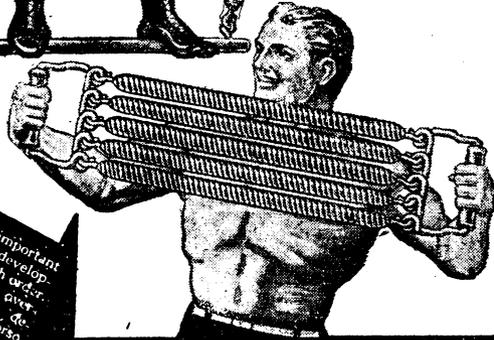
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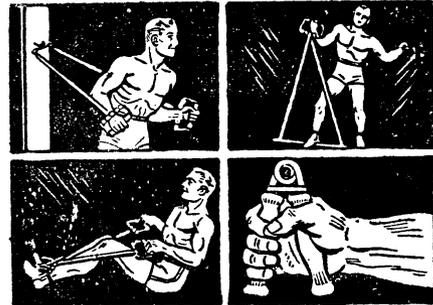
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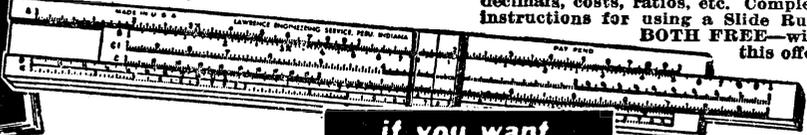
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HANGING

By **SAM DRAKE**

He hated himself for playing around with his secretary who neglected her appearance to the point of downright sloppiness, but when he stuck his neck out in a case that wasn't entirely legitimate, he discovered that it was the girl's very carelessness that proved to be her greatest asset!



EVIDENCE



I WAS at the usual morning occupation, watching Lee Marlin putter around her desk and wondering how she managed to look so sloppy. And hating myself for being fool enough to play around with the help, drunk or not.

This morning her hair was mussed and down over her eyes. Her make-

up was caked and on crooked. It wasn't the right shade for her complexion or coloring. Her heels were run over and there was dust on her shoes. Her slip was showing, as usual. Her dress was hanging from one shoulder instead of both and there were runs in both her stockings, though she did fill these up with pretty legs.

She was just her usual sloppy self.

I T WAS like that when the outer door opened and the strange woman came in. Lee closed the

I clipped him on the chin with his own gun, and that did it!



door between the offices, but one look was enough to tell me she was everything that Lee wasn't. She was neat and trim and looked as though she'd just stepped out of a beauty parlor.

Then Lee came in to me, wearing her sullen look. She'd been like that ever since I'd made her that bunch of silly promises.

"It's some woman that won't give her name," she said. "She's one of these high-toned tramps that think they own the world, Sam."

"Ugh. . . . Lee. . . ."

"Well, what?"

I was going to tell her to take a look at the woman and see what a little cleaning up could do for a girl but I lost my nerve.

"Ugh. . . . just take down what's said. I'll kick open the circuit."

She didn't answer—just wobbled out on her run-over heels.

And then in came my customer.

She looked to be about twenty and a fresh young flower, but a second look gave her five more years and took away the freshness. She was a hard-boiled wench who was smart enough to cover it up.

Her voice went along with her looks. It was soft and smooth but it had an edgy hardness. I'm no authority on women's clothes, but hers cost nothing but money. They had that fit and authority.

I kicked over the switch that opened the circuit to the head-phones in the outer office.

"I've got something to show you," my client said, opening her handbag. "Maybe you'll know what it is—I guess you read the papers."

She reached in and dumped a handful of jewelry in front of me,

and, while I was gaping at this, she followed it with another.

And then leaned back in her chair, watching me.

THE stuff was from the Allison robbery of the night before and no mistake about it. The papers had headlined the theft and described several of the pieces. I recognized a lot of stuff just from those scant descriptions.

"It's the Allison stuff," I said, and looked up at the girl.

She must have been in her handbag again because she had a gun in her hand. A cute little pearl-handled trick. It was pointed at my wish-bone and the safety was latched down and it wasn't over three feet from me.

She said: "Okay, Drake, it's the Allison stuff. There's no insurance on it, either."

"I read that."

"Can you deal with him? We should be able to get more from him than from a fence."

"For how much?"

She shrugged but she didn't bobble with the gun. "For as much as you can get. You'll get ten per cent of the take, besides what you can chisel from him."

"This kind of deal, isn't usual."

She gave me the kind of laugh that meant she knew better and she was right. Plenty of men have bought back their own stolen property. Of course, they can't prosecute afterward, and that makes it easy on the thief or thieves—but they get a chance to cut their own loss and they go ahead.

I tried her with: "I've got to know who I'm working with."

"With me."

"I'll be taking a chance on this. This is complicity after the crime, damn it. I'm likely to end in jail. You know that, don't you?"

She said: "Look, Drake. You fix things with Allison and I'll fix 'em with you. I'll see that we're both protected on the pay-off. And don't get notions about taking this stuff new. I'm holding the gun."

I'd never forgotten the last.



WE WERE right at that stage when the new man came in the picture. I heard a startled squeak in the outer office and opened my mouth to call to Lee and ask her what the commotion was.

Then the door between the offices slammed open and in she came.

Backward, and so fast she lost her balance just inside the room and went down hard on her backside. It was a nice awkward fall, with skirts flying every which way, and seeing what I saw I couldn't honestly blame myself much for having slipped the way I had. Not even for making all the promises.

She sat there on the floor with both hands at her sides as braces, and she was staring up at the door and the man who'd shoved her through it. She was moving her mouth as if she was speaking right out, but she was so mad she couldn't make a sound.

The man was a tall thin duck and he looked like a sad hound. His eyes were a soft brown and didn't hold a sign of menace. His face was lined and seamed, wrinkled like an old dog's. He needed a shave and

that made him look even more like Old Sport. He was wearing a low and dirty collar, and above this his Adam's apple raced up and down when he talked.

"Well, folks," he said.

I looked at his hands and saw they were big and empty—but that didn't mean he had no gun. I noticed my lady customer had swiveled her own so it bore on him, and decided this stranger wasn't going to walk out with the Allison stuff without an argument.

My client said, in an accusing voice: "You followed me!"

I wouldn't have seen it except for turning my head at the right time, but I saw her wink at this newcomer.

Then Lee Marlin found her voice and started to use it. She didn't try to get up from the floor, just sat there propped by her hands and talked. She didn't even bother to pull down her skirts. What she said was enough to take the hide off the sad-looking man. It seemed he'd asked to see me and she'd told him I was in conference. He'd started to walk in, regardless, and she'd stepped in front of him.

He'd walked in, regardless.

The girl started scooping up the Allison stuff with one hand, keeping her little gun trained between the stranger and me.

"He's one of the outfit," she told me. "You go ahead and fix it with Allison. If he goes for it, we'll arrange the pay-off. We'll get in touch with you—we'll tell you how and where it will be. That'll protect you; you won't know the score until you hear from us. You can tell him the truth—you don't have to cover a thing. That okay?"

I said it was okay.

And then I must have missed the sigh she gave the sad-looking man. Because I turned my head at a little flash of movement and saw him swinging a sap at my head.

That was all.

WHEN I woke up I was half-drowning and the first thing I saw was the lower edge of a dirty pink slip. Above this was a skirt with part of the hem ripped loose and above the whole effect, or rather inside it, was Lee Marlin. She was holding another pitcher of water.

"Hold it!" I said.

She didn't—she pitched it in my face. And asked: "You hurt any?"

I sat up and tried to find out. All that seemed wrong was that I had a knot on the side of my jaw.

"What happened?"

"He smacked you and you went down on the floor."

"And what are you doing there, may I ask?" said another voice—a new one to me.

It was a policeman, uniform and all. He'd walked in just in time to hear Lee's last remark, and I hoped that was all he heard.

"I got slugged out."

"Who by?"

"That's not grammatical," said Lee.

The cop glared at her but didn't answer. "Who slugged you, I said?"

"I don't know."

He turned and bawled: "Hey, Sarge! I got something."

A red-faced man, also in uniform, came in. This one wore stripes on his sleeves. He looked at me, still on the floor, at Lee, in her usual disorder, and finally at his own man.

He acted as if he didn't care for any of us.

"What's this, what's this!"

The cop said: "I come in here and the guy's on the floor, rubbing his puss. He's just been slugged out, or so the girl was telling him."

"Who done it, Mister?"

"I don't know."

"I don't think I like the way you talk," he said. "Come on." He reached down and caught me by the shoulder. "I want to show you something, Mister."

His cop brought Lee along behind us.

THE dead man was in the broom closet on my floor. He'd been shot three times with a small caliber gun, and right away I thought of the little gun my new client had waved around my office. The man had been around thirty, a thin-faced fellow, and very well dressed.

The sergeant said: "Well, who is he?"

"I never saw him before."

"You, lady?"

Lee shook her head.

"The janitor just happened to open this door and out tumbles the stiff at him. He put in a call. We're riot squad—I've put in a call for homicide."

I'm in a small building and there's only six offices on my floor. The doors to these are solid and a little gun don't make much noise if it's held close. I could understand why nobody had heard the shooting. The elevator stopped and let out a dozen more police, some in uniform and all looking official, and the red-faced sergeant lost his helpless air as his authority was taken over.



"Don't get any notions about taking the stuff now!" she warned me.

And I started making up a story.

The dead man had been named Gypsy Egger and he had a record a mile long. Mostly for armed robbery, which is another name for holding people up at the point of a gun.

That's the way the Allison stuff had been taken. Three masked men had walked into the Allison house behind that many guns, pushing the butler in front of them. They'd caught Allison in the library, where the safe was, and he'd done the smart thing and opened it for them.

They'd been professionals—they'd worked too smooth to be just starting in business.

I got all this from Lieutenant Thomason, who was sitting across

from me and helping me with my whiskey drinking. He was a short little man who looked like a cherub and didn't talk like one.

He said: "Why were you sapped, Drake?"

I gave him the story I'd thought out. I said a girl who refused to give her name had come in and wanted to know how much I charged for getting divorce evidence. That she'd just asked that when a man came in shoving Lee ahead of him, and that I'd stood up and got sapped down.

"She didn't give her name?"

"She did not."

"Why not?"

I tried to act as if this was also puzzling me. "The only thing I can

figure out on that is that she hadn't made up her mind about going through with the divorce. That she didn't want me to know who she was, in case she didn't go on with it."

He scowled and called Lee in. She gave him a mean look and me one that was actually ugly, but she backed up my story. He chased her outside after that.

"How d'ya figure Gypsy Egger in this?"

"I don't. It was just my hard luck that he picked my office building to be killed in."

I wasn't lying. I couldn't have had a worse thing happen, with the Allison deal just on the fire.

We went on like that for half an hour. Then Thomason left, no more fooled than I was about him. He knew I knew more than I'd told him—and I knew he knew it.

I went out to see Allison then and it didn't take me twenty minutes to sell his own jewelry back to him. With no questions asked. It was a good deal for him—he was getting stuff he'd paid over a hundred grand for back for twenty, and that's good business any time.



NOTHING out of the way happened the rest of the day. I had the usual run of bill collectors and Lee Martin did her usual smooth job of chasing them. I had two cases come in that I neither wanted or took. A man wanted me to do a skip trace on a sixty-dollar bill, me to get paid out of the sixty after I found the guy and collected. I declined with no thanks.

A young fellow came in right

after that and wanted me to locate his missing wife. He acted like a dope and he looked like a dope, and, worse than that, he acted like a dope with no money. It seemed his wife had been gone for three days and that he suspected she'd run off with some other man. Lee had announced him as "Some jerk named Graves" and I figured him the same way and told him to tell his troubles to the Missing Persons Bureau.

Then at five, when Lee was putting the cover on her typewriter, I got up my nerve and went at it. I took two big drinks to get up steam and called her in.

"Look, Lee," I said. "I can't see any reason for you running around this office looking like a rummage sale."

She said: "What I do with my money is no business of yours. You're not paying my rent, the way you said you would. You haven't been up to see me or taken me out for a month."

I said to forget I'd said a word. She said I was a drunken loafer who went around traducing innocent office help. She went into a lot of detail, and by the time she was through talking I was sorry I'd ever mentioned a thing to her. In fact, I was so sorry that the five-dollar raise she got was my own proposition—and she didn't even thank me for it.

She was good office help, anyway; I could console myself with that thought, at least.

MY CLIENT telephoned at noon, the next day. She said: "You know who's talking, Drake?"

I said I knew and that I didn't like the clip on the jaw. I said:

"And when I see that long drawn drink of water that gave it to me, I'm going to hand it back to him. Tell him that."

"Sore, eh? What about Allison?"

"He'll go for it."

"Can you get the dough now?"

"Any time before three."

"Don't rush it. Get it at three and take it home with you. I'll be up for it."

"When?"

"I'll pick the time."

"Know where I live?"

She laughed and hung up the phone, and I called Allison and told him I'd have to have the money that day. I didn't tell him where I was to make the pay-off or who I was paying.

I went out in the other office and told Lee I'd be gone for the afternoon and she stopped typing form letters long enough to tell me she'd miss me every second I wasn't there. She had on the same sloppy rig she'd worn the day before and it was that much more draggled. I could see at least four inches of her slip showing when she went to the water cooler in the corner and when she sat back at the machine I could see the shoulder straps that went with it. They were actually grimy, and I wondered how I'd ever gone for her.

The whole picture made me mad, but I decided to keep my big mouth shut.

Then the phone rang, with it turning out to be Lieutenant Thomason. He asked: "You know a guy named Sad Sam Small?"

I said I didn't.

"Meet me at the morgue," he said. "I think you do."

I said I'd meet him at the morgue—there was nothing else to say.

I KNEW Sad Sam Small, all right, if not by name. He looked more like a broken-down hound than ever, the way they had him stretched out on a slab. His ribs stood out like a hungry dog's and he was almost as hairy as one. He made a sorry looking corpse.

They had washed him, getting ready to do a P. M., and I could see two little holes almost centered under his heart.

Two smart young men in white jackets and rubber gloves were waiting with their little knives.

"How's he look, Tommy?" one of them asked Thomason.

Thomas said: "Like good news to the cops, boys. A bag egg. D'ya know him, Drake?"

There was no reason for lying and there was always the chance he could prove Sad Sam had been in my office.

"That's the guy that came in while the girl was talking to me. The one that slugged me. He's probably the girl's husband; she probably killed him while they were arguing about the divorce."

"That story stinks."

"Well, I'm just guessing."

"It still stinks. This guy was one of the best of the heist men. He and Gypsy Egger and a guy named Joey Ramos worked together. Gypsy's dead and Sad Sam's dead, and that leaves Ramos. Both these guys were killed with the same gun—ballistics tells us that. A twenty-five automatic. The only big steal lately that they could have been fighting over has been the Allison thing. Egger is killed outside your office. Small was talking to you, along with some twist. And now you give me 2

screwy story about the girl wanting a divorce. Where's Ramos, that's what I want to know? Who was that girl and where is she?"

"I don't know Ramos, and like I told you, I don't know who the girl is or where she lives."

Thomason laughed in a way that meant he didn't believe me. I didn't blame him. But he let me go and I went to the bank and did my business.

I LIVE in an old apartment house. It's comfortable and it's handy to the office and they don't care what time you have company. I'd taken Lee there a few times, which showed they didn't care what gave. I knew the locks were old and that the door-man was more often off the job than on, but none of that had made any difference to me up to then.

But when I unlocked my door and walked in with twenty thousand dollars all wrapped up in a neat little package, I felt different.

The money was in the hand I'd have used on my gun, but I'd have never tried to get at it. The man who was sitting on the couch had a highball in one hand and a .45 Colt automatic in the other. The gun wasn't exactly pointed at me but it wasn't far out of line.

"It's Drake, eh?"

"It's Drake," I admitted. "You'd be Joey Ramos. I'm dealing with you, then?"

He waggled the gun. "It would sort of look that way now, wouldn't it?"

"Where's the stuff?"

"The girl's got it, chum. Or at least she had it last."

"What's the cross?"

He laughed, very nastily. "I'm a brokenhearted man, chum. I teach a wench how to work a cross and she works it right back at me. So I'm going to work it right back at her. I should have looked for it—I ran around with the tramp long before she ever married the chump she did. When she came back to me, I should have kept my fingers crossed. She never did have any brains or she'd know she couldn't get away with it. Now look, chum. You went down to the dead house and looked at Sam. I was tagging along. You went to the bank and traded a check for money. I saw you there; I saw it done. I ducked ahead of you, figuring I'd meet you here and go along with you when you meet the wench."

"Got all the answers, eh?"

"It figures, chum. She crossed me and I don't like it. She should never have married the chump—I don't like that, either. So I'll go whole hog or none. I'll take the stuff back from the wench when we meet her. And I'll give her her lumps."

"What about Allison? How'll he come out? With neither the money or the stuff?"

Ramos shrugged. "He's got more money than you or me, chum. At that, I'll cut you in for two grand out of the twenty. That was the bargain and I'll hold to it."

Then he stopped and tilted his head and asked: "What's that?"

I said: "It's shooting down in the lobby. I heard it, too."

He tipped his head farther over and I took a chance and heaved the package of money over him and out the open window. It was taking a chance but I knew I'd lose it for sure if I didn't. He tilted that big gun



She went in backward, so fast she lost her balance just inside the door.

up at me and for a second I thought he was going to let go with it, but then he dashed to the window and leaned out as far as he could.

"There's cops!" he said.

He ran for the door with his gun still in his hand, and I let him go. I suppose I had a fair chance of stopping him but I had an even better chance of stopping lead, and a

shooting would be hard to explain even if I won.

So I thought to hell with it and started downstairs to see what was causing the fuss.

Ramos went the back way and I went down the front. I had that package of money to find if there was a chance of doing it—and I had only a little time to do the finding.

Because my client was due to call on me at any time.



I WAS saved the worry about being late for my appointment with her, anyway. She was on the lobby floor, deader than a coot. A uniformed cop was standing over her and another one was keeping out the curious. They were already four deep in front of the door and fighting for a look at the corpse.

The manager was standing there and jittering like some fool kid listening to a swing band. The door-man was inside, too, waving his arms and telling the world he'd just stepped around the corner to buy some cigarettes.

I asked the manager: "What happened?"

"There was shooting," he told me, "and I came out of my office. I . . . ugh . . . waited a minute. I . . . ugh . . . am afraid of firearms. The girl was here on the floor as she is now."

"You see anybody?"

"The door was swinging but I . . . ugh . . . I didn't look. I . . . ugh . . . the man surely had a gun, you see."

I edged toward the door with the idea of going out and finding my package of money. I didn't get to

first base. The cop there was keeping the outside people out and the inside people in.

I went back to the manager and said: "This girl, now? When you first saw her did you notice a handbag?"

"Oh no! If there'd been one, it would be here now, wouldn't it?"

I was sure that if there'd been a pile of handbags five feet high he couldn't have seen them. There was nothing I could do about the package of money, either. I had my name and office address written on it in pencil, and it was sealed, but it depended entirely on the honesty of whoever picked it up whether I'd ever see it again.

So I went over and looked at the corpse.

SHE'D been shot twice and one of the slugs had caught her in the throat. It had ripped through the jugular, and she'd bled like a stuck pig. There was blood all over the lobby floor, and on top of that she'd tried to crawl away from her killer and made a path through the blood.

It was an easy one to figure out.

She'd been shot the first time through the throat and that had put her down on her hands and knees. Blood had spurted out in front of her—it'll shoot quite a distance from an arterial wound. She'd crawled through it—her tracks were written out in it.

The killer had followed her up, probably after the handbag, and had fired again. This second slug went into the back of her head. It had centered, and the poor gal must have gone down like she'd been hit with an axe. There were tracks in

the blood behind her, where somebody had followed her and presumably had grabbed her bag.

It was all written out on the floor, which was filthy with blood and brains.

I didn't say a word—I just thought what Thomason would say and do if he identified her as the gal who'd been calling on me at the time Sad Sam Small had slugged me out. It would be plenty!

And I was thinking even harder about what Allison was going to do when he found he didn't have either his jewelry or his twenty thousand either.

I was fretting about that when Thomason and his boys came in from the Central Station.

THAT night I ended up in my apartment with Thomason and another cop named Wills. Thomason was keeping Wills along as a witness, in case I slipped and let something out. I wasn't telling them a thing.

Thomason said thoughtfully: "It's a funny thing, Drake. I had a tail on you. It just happened the boys parked in front of the cigar stand by the corner. The sixth at Hialeah was coming in and they thought that you'd stay put for awhile, so they listened in. Oh, damn all horse players!"

"They missed the shooting, eh?"

There were a dozen people off the streets and in the lobby when they got here. They got that many different stories. Some claimed they saw a man running away and some claimed it was a woman."

I said: "How d'ya dope it?"

"I've got it doped," he said

grimly. "You're in this up to your neck, Drake. It's a deal over the Allison stuff. Now there's murder in it. Three of them."

"You're guessing."

"I'm sure. I'll have proof before I'm through."

I WAS afraid he might be right, but I was in so deep I had to go on. There was nothing else to do. And he was so damned cold-blooded about the thing; threatening me at the same time he was drinking my good whiskey!

I said: "Who was the girl?"

"Her name was Alice Graves. What she was doing here we don't know."

"Was she a thief? It seems to me I remember the name, though I can't place it."

"Think. Think hard."

"It's just a name I've heard."

"She was no thief, as far as we can find out," said Thomason. "Try and think where you heard the name, Drake, and it'll make it easier for you when this thing comes to a head. She was just a young married woman. Did the shopping and kept house, just like any other young wife."

"Did she work?"

He shook his head.

"Does hubby work?"

"Some clerk job. You checked on him, didn't you, Wills?"

Wills said: "He's a shipping clerk at Kornblad's. His time card was checked out at the regular hour and that was that.

"I was the one who told him his old lady was dead. He was all broken up about it."

They left right after that.



HERE was nobody in my office the next morning but Lee Marlin, and there was no package of money on my desk. Lee was her usual sloppy self, with her slip showing six inches under her dress and with her hair in its usual helter-skelter state. She looked as though she'd slept in her make-up and hadn't bothered to put on fresh.

"Any callers?" I asked.

"Nope!" said she. "And you don't have to glare at me like that. I read the papers."

It was on the front pages. The cops had let the photographers go to town on the thing. My ex-client looked bad—she'd certainly been in no shape to photograph well.

Lee Marlin noticed this, nastily.

She said: "That shows you what good looks do for a girl. Her old man probably knocked her off, thinking she was calling on a sweetie."

"You're smart."

"I heard you make a date on the phone, you sap. Should I tell that to the cops or keep it a secret?"

"Let's not quarrel, honey."

"Aghghghh, you!"

"If the cops could prove she was calling on me, they'd crucify me, and you know it."

She took this thought and looked happy over it.

"And the husband's in the clear. The cops have checked him out."

She looked faintly startled.

"Thomason came in then, beaming. "We've got Joey Ramos now," he said. "One of the boys picked him up late last night, coming out of where there was a little dice game. Want to go down and see him?"

"I do not."

"What if I want you to go?"

"That'd be different," I said, getting my hat. "Lee, if anybody calls, tell 'em I'll be back."

"If he isn't you'd better see if you can arrange bail for him," Thomason told her. "I've got a notion that Ramos is going to talk, and that your boss is going to need a little bail. How about it, Drake?"

I said: "I don't know this Ramos."

I tried to hold that thought all the way to the station.

THEY had him in the sweat room and they'd been working on him. There wasn't a mark on his face but he looked sick. He looked up at me with a blank stare and I took the cue and prayed he'd hold together without breaking.

"I don't know him," I said. "This isn't like it was with that guy Small. I'd seen him, only I didn't know his name."

One of the policemen slammed a fist into Ramos' side and said: "You know this guy, punk?"

Ramos said: "I never saw him before."

Thomason said: "Take him back to his cell and let him rest. He'll be passing out on you pretty soon and you'll never learn anything from him that way."

We went back upstairs and Thomason said: "That's the guy you're dealing with for the Allison stuff, ain't it, Drake?"

I said: "You're just nuts."

He told me I could go, but not to leave town. I told him I had no intention of leaving town, and I wasn't lying. I had to get in touch with the twenty thousand dollars I'd



heaved out the window before I did anything else. And I hadn't the least idea of how to go about it.

I CALLED Lee before I went back to the office and she said: "Allison has been calling you every five minutes. He's talking now about calling the cops."

"He's bluffing."

She laughed nastily. "Sure. Only he says he'll claim he was only working with you in an attempt at trapping the thieves. That he intended nailing you right along with the people that have the stuff."

It was what I was afraid of—and there wasn't a reason why Allison, with his pull, couldn't make the story stick.

I said: "It's a nice thought, kid."

"You'd better get back here. I'm quitting when you walk through the door. I'm not staying here through a mess like this one's going to be."

"Just loyal, eh, kid?"

She called me a dirty name and asked me what I'd ever done for her, but agreed to hold down the fort until I got there. I could see I was going to have to do something about the frame of mind she was in

—even if it meant giving her another play.

I SAW Lee standing by her desk when I went in the office, but I didn't see anybody else until I was down on the floor. I was smacked and by an amateur, but it put me down in first class shape. And I didn't know who'd slugged me for a moment—I knew I'd seen the man but I couldn't place him. He'd slammed me on the side of the head and one ear was ringing like a bell and I wasn't thinking clearly.

"I'm sorry you came in, Mr. Drake," this man said. "Have you a weapon?"

I said: "Yeah!"

So had he—he'd hit me with a gun. He was holding it as if he was afraid it might go off, and I was more afraid of that happening than he was. He was shaking so the thing could have happened by accident.

"You . . . ugh . . . I found my wife, you see."

Then I placed him. It was the young fellow Graves—the one who'd wanted me to find his missing wife. I remembered then that my ex-client had been identified by the cops as Mrs. Graves.

I said: "Ugh . . . I guess you did."

Lee Marlin came a couple of steps over to me and I saw Graves' gun shift to cover her. Even looking up at her the way I was I could see where her face was pale under its caked rouge. And from that angle I could see how pretty her legs were, in spite of her wrinkled stockings.

"He's crazy," she said.

I said: "Sure."

Graves said solemnly: "Don't make an attempt at drawing your

gun, Mr. Drake. I would have to kill you—I can hang only once. I read that in a book."

"So you killed your wife?" I said. It was the only thing that could explain him saying he could only hang the once.

He nodded. "Why of course. I'm sorry, but I thought this young lady saw me do it. At the time I was excited and couldn't think where I'd seen her before. Then I remembered this morning and came down here to silence her. To silence her forever."

"He's nuts," said Lee. "I only saw a man running away. I didn't see who it was at all."

"But you see I didn't know that," said this crazy Graves. "You see now that I know you couldn't identify me, it's too late. Both you and Mr. Drake know I did it. So you see I have to kill you both."

"Did you read that in a book, too?" I asked.

About then I could see how silly the whole thing was. The way he was talking and the way I was talking and the dopey way I was lying there and looking up into the gun he was holding. He was there to get rid of Lee for seeing him kill his wife, and I was in it just as far as she was just from walking in at the wrong time. It wasn't that the guy was crazy, either. He was just out of this world. He was doing what they do to witnesses in books.

I decided to try for my gun and I must have telegraphed the thought because he kicked me in the head. Even then he didn't shoot—it was probably the second time he'd ever had a gun in his hand. The first time he'd shot his wife with it.

He just kicked me in the head and Lee took another couple of steps and got between us.



AND then I saw the light on a lot more things. I was looking at her feet and ankles and underskirt. She was crouching a little and the answers were right there. Her slip was a dirty dingy pink, but the hem and possibly an inch above it showed a crusty brown. In the back, where it had dragged. I thought of my ex-client and how she'd died in a pool of blood and I thought of the tracks where somebody had walked up to her and snatched her handbag.

I said, which was a fool thing to say at a time like that: "Listen, Lee! What were you doing at my apartment house?"

"I . . . ough . . . I was worried. I knew that girl would be there and I knew there'd already been two men killed over that stuff. And Sam, I didn't want you to be alone with that girl."

"Why not?"

"I know how you act when you're alone with a girl."

Fine talk for people in the mess we were in!

Graves said: "Step back please, Miss."

Lee minded him.

He was nerving himself up for what he was going to do. Killing his wife, I suppose, had been different. He'd been crazy mad. But this was cold-blooded murder and he just didn't have the guts to pull the trigger.

He tried. I'll give him that. He tried, pointing the gun at Lee's

middle, and I took a little wiggle and got closer to him. I could see his finger tighten on the trigger but not enough to let it off, and I could see the sweat break out on his face.

He said: "I just can't do it."

And then I tipped him over.

IF HE'D been expecting it and had been braced, it might not have worked. As it was, it was a cinch. I got one foot on each side of his right ankle, then hooked my toes together and rolled to the right. Down he went. He managed to shoot the gun, but he only knocked plaster out of the ceiling with the slug.

I got on him as he hit the floor and I got his gun and clipped him across the chin with it. He stayed there and I got up and brushed the dust from my clothes — Lee had never dreamed of dusting up the place.

She said: "I didn't think you had it in you. He went crazy, the heel."

"Talk sense," I said. "We've only got a minute until the cops come in to see about that shot. What did you do with the Allison stuff, you bum?"

She said meekly: "It's behind the radiator in my apartment. I was going to your place and I was going to throw that girl out, if she was there. Just as I got to the apartment house door, I heard the shooting inside. Then a man ran out and down the street. All I saw was his back. I went inside and saw her and that handbag. I knew the Allison stuff was in it so I took it. I . . . I meant to give it to you but I intended to make you come up after it. You haven't treated me right, Sam."

I said: "Let it go for now. There

is no sense arguing with the cops coming in at any minute."

THOMASON was across the desk from me and my whiskey was between us and I was thinking it was about time he furnished a bottle for a change.

"You've got it," I said. "Lock, stock, and barrel. You've got Joey Ramos and he's all that's left of the gang that knocked over the Allison stuff. I've got the stuff, or know where it is. It'll be turned back to Allison. It's cleaned up pretty."

"Who killed Egger and Small? Ramos hasn't broke on that."

"He will. He did it with the little gun the girl was carrying. That way, if he was picked up, he was clear. His own big gun he kept in case of having to shoot himself out of trouble."

"He hasn't cracked."

"He will when you tell him what he said to me up in my apartment. About how the girl was an old flame of his and how the two of them crossed Small and Egger and how she tried to give him the same thing. He had it coming—he taught that tramp all she knew, before she married the poor chump that killed her. She went back to Ramos, you see, and the husband suspected it. Ramos and his two pals did the Allison job and Ramos knocked them off, one at a time, to keep from giving them a cut. The girl probably talked him into it—he acted as if he was overboard about her and she certainly had larceny in her soul. He wouldn't have been as sore at her as he was if he hadn't been torching for her."

Thomason said cautiously: "I'll go along that far. The husband's

told us that Ramos was the guy he'd seen her with. He thought she was meeting him when he caught up with her in your lobby."

"Okay then. You've got the tie-up between the girl and Ramos. The little gun that was in her purse will check out as the one used to kill Egger and Small. With what he said, and the motive, it'll do the job for him."

"It should," Thomason admitted. "And then Graves killed his wife. Damn that Wills. He told me he'd checked the husband out."

I said: "That alibi was a cinch to establish. Somebody just put Graves' time card in that clock arrangement that punches the hour they quit. Somebody just did a favor for a pal, that's all."

THOMASON looked happier than any time since I'd met him. And then the phone rang and a nice voice asked if I was Mr. Sam Drake.

"It's Drake talking," I said.

"I just wanted to make sure you got the package I left for you, Mr. Drake. All that money, I mean. I . . . I thought possibly there might be a reward."

I said there certainly would be a reward and took down some lady's name and address. I knew that Allison would pay it gladly, as well as give me a fee for getting back his dough.

"That damn' Lee Marlin," I said to Thomason. "Some woman brought back that twenty grand that I pitched out the window and Lee held it out on me. She's plenty sore. She's sore because I won't take her out, but damn it, she looks like a rag bag."

Thomason snickered.

"If she wasn't so sloppy, she'd have got away with that business of grabbing the handbag. I'd never have known. But the way it was, her skirt was dragging so much that when she bent down to pick up the bag it got in the blood. I saw it on the edge of her slip, when Graves sapped me down to the floor."

"Hanging evidence, eh?" said Thomason laughing.

"She's been sore at me ever since I quit giving her a play. She's just burning. But I won't take her out looking like that."

Thomason started laughing.

"I don't get it," I said. "What's the joke. Should I take out some-

thing that looks like a refugee just off the boat?"

He said: "For God's sake! Didn't you ever look at yourself in a glass, Drake? I mean a mirror, not a whiskey glass."

I went over to the washstand and took a look. I even stood on a chair, so I could see my pants and shoes. And then I saw what he meant and why he'd laughed. I had to admit I looked just about as sloppy as did Lee.

I said: "Well, I've got to see her tonight to pick up that Allison junk. I'll see if I can turn over a new leaf for both of us."

He leered at me and told me to be sure that was all I did.



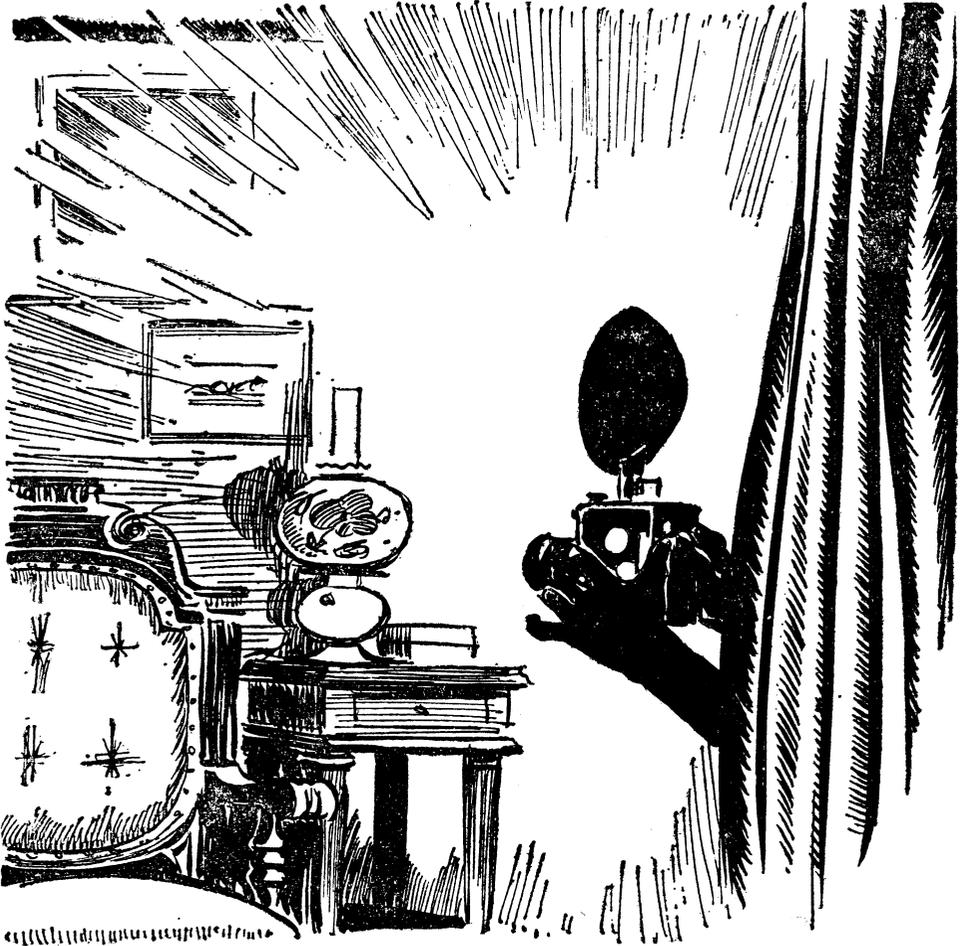
He bent over the girl's body, when suddenly a blue-white flash dazzled him.



A Date With Death

By R. T. MAYNARD

He had come to Oklahoma to drill an oil lease—not to get mixed up with girls on the Indian Territory. But now he began to see that there was something more sinister behind a girl's flirtations than a little fun



HE red-haired gal was ready to be kissed; her whole attitude, even her posture, indicated it. Hardrock Pike's eyes didn't know where to focus first. There wasn't another figure like hers in Osage County, and though that half transparent hostess gown did

take the edge off things, there were still many inviting curves to catch the eye.

"Listen, Marie. Is this a tableau entitled '*Cherokee Strip*'?"

"Silly," she scoffed. "Wheeler won't be in for an hour."

Hardrock Pike flickered an involuntary glance over his shoulder. He

began to remember he had come to Pawhuska to drill Wheeler Broken Axe's oil lease, not to do his home work.

Wheeler specialized in being divorced by his white wives. This was his fifth and nicest. Pike grinned, and said, "Wait till he names some correspondent!"

His hand shook a bit when he struck a match for the cigarette Marie took from his case. Then he realized it was his lucky day. The bulky man who had shadow-footed to the threshold was Wheeler Broken Axe.

His shoulders blocked the doorway. Pike wondered how long the Indian had been standing there. His blank features told nothing; least of all the venomous little eyes that peeped from between the wrinkles of a broad face that looked like a side of jerked beef. Pike's thought was, "I wish to hell she had some other dress on." He greeted, "Hi, Wheeler."

Broken Axe did not say "Ugh!" Neither *paleface*, *Great White Father*, nor *heap big* were in his vocabulary. He wore a checkered suit, a plaid necktie, and yellow shoes. Pike shuddered at the thought of Wheeler's stealth; but even so most of the Osage's wives had spent months playing with vacuum cleaner salesmen before he caught on.

Smart, these janes who graduated from a lunch counter to an oil royalty life. But some day, Wheeler would cut one of them small enough to make a handful of pemmican.

"How's that new drilling crew?" demanded Wheeler. "I had a hell of a time squaring up the way you shot up that so-and-so who was bor-

ing a crooked hole on purpose, and then got tough with you."

"Good men," declared Hardrock Pike. "Buddies from Texas."

"We ought to get some guards for that Smoky Mountain lease."

Pike shrugged. "Private dicks rob you." He hefted the sagging belt of his whipcord breeches. "I ain't exactly an investigator, but maybe I can find out who's trying to block us."

Wheeler made a snorting sound that indicated approval, and pulled a pint out of his pocket. Pike accepted it, gagged down a drop, and listened to the Indian kill the rest. At the same time, he watched Marie watching her husband.

She shivered, and before she could reclaim the errant folds of her hostess gown, Pike noticed fingerprints on her arm, and bruises on soft, round very nice curves that no gentleman would claw that way.

Pike said, "I better drive out to the lease."

Wheeler said something that did almost sound like "ugh!" He rather liked Pike, but he wasn't talkative when he was sore as hell at the Indian Agent who had approved the bills Marie was running up. He stalked out of the room.

Marie whispered to Pike, "I want to see you. About something I can't tell you over the telephone."

"Telephones," he jibed, "*are* still kind of primitive, huh?"

He headed for the door and kicked his way among the pooches that yapped at his heels.

PIKE nosed his coupé along the scenic drive that overlooked Pawhuska, sprawled in the valley be-

low: only six thousand inhabitants, but the capital of the Osage Nation. Wheeler, by some freak, had been pronounced competent; hence in spite of wives and bootleggers, he could dig up enough wampum to finance an oil well.

It was a noble enterprise. Petroleum royalties were dwindling, mainly because speculators had bought so much ground they could not afford to drill. Wheeler's lease would drain the adjoining ground unless the owners bored offset wells; and thus *their* neighbors would have to bore. They'd scramble like an audience when a strip tease artist autographs shirt fronts. Oil royalties for the Osage Nation would zoom.

But someone didn't like Wheeler's bright plan.

Pike pulled up at the yellow sandstone agency, and stalked into the office of a gray little man behind a large desk. Mr. Rawson blinked watery eyes, wiped his glasses, and ceased dictating to the gorgeous girl with a notebook on her cocked knee.

"Just a moment, Vera. What can I do for you, uh, Mr. —?"

"Pike's the name. I just shot the blistering hell out of some mugs that were gumming up that hole at Smoky Mountain. If you have a hunch who's behind it, you'd do them a favor by telling them to lay off."

Rawson pondered. That gave Pike a chance to appraise Vera Lemoin's nice legs, and the curves that blossomed beneath her charmingly ventilated shirt waist. Something lurking at the corners of her generous mouth made his blood race. Just

a flicker of hopeful fancy, and then all he saw was a dark-haired girl whose burnt orange ensemble perfectly accented her vivid coloring.

"Ah—sabotage, Mr. Pike?" wondered Rawson. He made a vague gesture. "But you're hasty, perhaps. Accidents in drilling—"

"Suit yourself. I just thought you know a lot of people here that don't like Wheeler's ideas."

"I'm sure there's no conspiracy," said the agent. "Good afternoon, Mr. Pike."

"There's a shorter way out," Vera brightly suggested, unwinding her svelte length. She was at Pike's side, and he liked her fragrance. It drowned the government-building odor of the hallway. "Right down—"

At the door it took her only a moment to whisper, "Maybe I can tell you things. Some evening. Come disguised as a boy friend. But phone first. Vera Lemoin, in the directory."

Pike began to like his job a lot more. He high-tailed out the highway, cut over a deeply rutted dirt road. As he nosed down into the ford of the thickly wooded creek, some twenty miles out of town, he nodded his satisfaction. From one side of the tall derrick came the hiss of steam. The walking beam saw-sawed, jerking the cable at whose end a steel drill relentlessly pounded its way toward the Bartlesville sand, twenty-seven hundred feet below.

He parked near a heap of casing, and poked his head into the drill house. Tex was lowering a twelve-inch bit for its final plunge into the cooling vat. The colors were slowly creeping toward the cutting edge;

yellowish white, yellow, orange . . . yellow-purple—then a hissing as a cloud of purple steam enveloped the forge and hoist. Perfect! No more purposely mistempered drills to break at the first stroke. These would tap the rich heart of the Osage Hills.

"How's she going, Harrigan?"

The red-faced driller looked up. Hand still following the rise and fall of the cable, Harrigan answered, "Smooth as silk, Hardrock. But you missed something a couple of hours ago. A redhead in a Packard convertible as long as a Chinese dream. Man, man—"

He let go the cable long enough to make parenthesis-shaped gestures indicating soul-satisfying bust and hip measurement, and licked his tobacco-stained lips.

That identified Marie Broken Axe. Pike wondered, but shrugged. Then Tex chortled in, "Me, I'd a damn' sight rather take the brunette jane that passed by here in a Chevie. Heading for Schidler, and didn't know the way."

"You showed her?" he fumbled for his cigarette case. Then he remembered; he'd left it on Broken Axe's davenport.

"Not half of what I'd liked to!"

"Listen, you jugheads," grumbled Pike. "Keep your mind on work, and give me a smoke."

TWENTY minutes of brisk driving brought him back to Pawhuska in time to tie on the feed bag. Later, in his room at the hotel, he was penciling Vera's number all over the fly-specked stationery, when the phone rang.

Marie Broken Axe was on the

wire. Her voice trembled with eagerness, "Meet me at the Timber Spring tourist camp as soon as it's dark. Cabin eleven. Don't knock. Just come in."

"Where are you now?"

"At home. Does it matter? Come right out—"

"Listen! How about my cigarette case—?"

"I'll bring it! This is important, you fool—!"

"Hey, what the hell—!"

But she'd hung up. Her haste advised him against calling back. He glanced at the mirror. Pike knew he didn't have that something that gave women notions at first sight. He always had to work—plenty. Maybe it was something important . . . or . . .

It might be a stall, but curiosity drove him.

At the outskirts of Pawhuska, he slowed down for the narrow bridge. An approaching car was weaving down the center. Pike pulled over to the railing. None the less, the wobbling car smeared him.

The other driver halted, slid from behind the wheel. Pike's fender was sliced its full length. The driver, a shifty-eyed fellow who came to Pike's shoulder, was raging, "You damn' blockhead, whyn't ya look—?"

"I wouldn't talk thattaway," Pike mildly objected.

He considered a moment. Then Pike's fist shot out. Pop! The smashed face spurted blood, splattering Pike's whipcords. Horns honked. Traffic was blocked. A cop barged in, eyed the two, and addressed the drunk, "You, Rufe, jest because you got away with murder once you can't hog the roads."

That identified him: Rufe Clifford, a squaw man who had settled an old grudge by using a knife in a general brawl and calling it self-defense. Pike was in a hurry, so he interposed, "Lookee-here, officer. "Unless you just want to pinch him, don't bother. I'm too busy to appear."

But Clifford still didn't look happy. Not with his leaky nose. Though he was sober now, and his slate-colored eyes focused better.

Some minutes later, Pike parked his car in the shadow of a clump of blackjack oaks a quarter of a mile from the tourist camp. He wanted to reconnoiter; Marie was just throwing things at him.

As he paused near the rear of the camp, a coupé, the same make as his own, but cream-colored instead of tan, swung into the shadows cast by the public bath house. A shapely girl slid from the wheel treating Pike to a luscious leg view.

When she hurried toward the further row of cabins, the band of light from the filling station up front gave him a glimpse of gleaming black hair and a little red hat. Her cheek bones betrayed a piquant touch of Indian blood, and he liked the smooth sway of her sleek hips. At the moment, however, the furtiveness of her gait meant nothing to Pike. She probably had a date with a boy friend.

Pike came to that conclusion as he halted behind Marie's cabin. The lights were on. The cabins on either side were vacant. At least, they were dark, and he heard no sounds. Stealthily, he crept toward a window whose drape bellied inward as from a draft. He wanted a look, just to judge the tempo of the rendezvous.

Pike's heart stopped for a long moment as he looked at the red-haired woman on the rumpled bed. She was dressed only in silken underthings. Her legs gleamed in the yellow light. Her white throat was a gaping cavern. Blood drenched the counterpane. Her eyes stared, blank and horrible at the grimace of lips drawn back against teeth like matched pearls. Marie had stepped out for the last time; but instead of a lover, she had found death in the Osage Hills.

CHAPTER II

The Girl from the Coupe



PIKE brushed the sweat from his forehead. He felt sick all over. Five or six hours ago, it was tough work keeping his hands off. And now! It did not seem real. Look at the way that chiffon clung to her body . . . that garter clasp shining against her thigh, softly indenting the smooth flesh . . . it was just insane, that idea of one whisk of a knife finishing such beauty. Platinum watch on that slim wrist. Gleaming like her garter clasp—

Suddenly Pike's fist clenched.

A silver cigarette case was half hidden by the rumpled sheets. One hand was closed about it. A frosty thought sneaked into his whirling brain: "That's my case. My initials. I was talking about investigating things. Here's one."

Pike silently cleared the sill, worming his broad shoulders under the raised sash.

His hunch was all too good. It was not Marie's smoking kit, but

his own. He pocketed it, and spent a moment feeling grateful.

Pike began looking for the murder weapon. But first he found her ensemble, her shoes and a satin slip all neatly stowed in the clothes closet. She had undressed the moment she stepped into the cabin. That important business had, been a stall from the start.

The kitchenette, like the bath, was to the rear of the bedroom. In a corner was a cast-iron skillet, the only thing out of place. None of the paring knives in the drawer could have slashed her throat. A single red hair gleamed against the black bottom of the pan.

Pike stepped to the bedside, bent over and ran his fingers through Marie's hair. But before he found the abrasion he expected, a momentary blue-white glare dazzled him; just like the reflection of a lightning blast.

He whirled, made a chair skid over the floor. Gravel crunched outside; gravel scattered by swift foot-



steps. Pike made a dive for the window. His conscious mind was still numb, but though he was not yet just making motions. The jar of the window blended with the sound of the snooping photographer's



The sheriff didn't answer; a pistol barrel plopped down on his head.

aware of it, he already knew that someone had touched off a flash bulb; had taken a candid camera shot of him in the act of bending over the red-haired corpse.

As a long bound carried him to the sill, he reached out, sending the sash rattling upward. That was quicker than dashing to the door and doubling back. Pike was not

flight; a single prolonged disturbance.

Pike checked himself, still poised on the sill, and gained a split second advantage on the shape that was rounding the front corner of the cabin, coming *toward* the window, not running from it.

That was all dizzy, but it did not bother Pike, this confusion of flight and pursuit. Everyone seemed to be going to town that night, and he followed suit.

It was nicely timed. His flexed

legs straightened. The power dive would have killed him had he missed. But Pike did not miss.

They both smashed against the adjoining cabin, but the man below was a shock absorber. Pike rolled clear of his cold-caulked quarry; the fellow was limp and groggy.

Pike blinked, let his eyes focus in the gloom that was but partially thinned by the glow from the window. The glassy-eyed man huddled on the ground was Wheeler Broken Axe.

"He was wise to her. Knifed her, then came back to bushwhack her boy friend. Didn't hear me go in the window, but heard me getting ready to leave, and came a-helling around from the front where he was crouching alongside the steps."

That was his answer as he headed toward the rear. He had to get away before the Osage snapped out of it. Wheeler might not have known who was coming to meet Marie; in fact, his lurking there hinted that he could not have known, else he would not have stayed there to wait.

PIKE noted a glassy gleam in the graveled space. It was a battery-operated flash bulb: one of those home photo lights, not as heavy as the kind press photographers use, but of the same type. That was something which might be traced. And as Pike picked a quiet course into the further gloom, he tried to fit himself into the murderous tangle.

There were too many answers, but one thing was clear. Someone had a picture of Pike bending over Marie Broken Axe. That would play hell with his oil drilling; an angle that set

him thinking as he hammered the road back to Pawhuska.

Tracing the flash lamp would take hours of leg work. He could not start until the stores opened for business, in the morning. On the other hand, the photographer had to develop the film. Comparatively few can do their own work, and an even smaller number know the trick of making a "wet" print. Pike had all night to work.

Instead of going to his hotel to clean up, he drove toward Wheeler's house. His purpose was to get a look at the personal effects of the dead woman, whose readiness to give Pike a play hinted that she could not have wasted very many golden hours. With a good break, he might get a lead on where she hung out when she wasn't home. . . .

The dogs yapped until the hills flung back baying echoes, but Pike unlatched the gate, and strode boldly among them. The house, set back in spacious, sloping grounds, was dark. He ignored the pooches, and circled about.

Finally he found an unlocked window. It opened into the dining room. Pike snapped on the pocket flash he had taken from the panel locker of his car and picked his way to the second floor. The dogs had ceased their atrocious yapping, and whatever Wheeler did when he recovered from his clouting, Pike at least had a head start.

A BLOOD warming feminine scent directed him very quickly toward Marie's bedroom, bath, and solarium. Nobody but an aviator could spy on the occupant of that glass enclosed gallery, nor was there

a Chinaman's chance of catching a lover by surprise. It was an easy drop from the solarium to the sloping ground outside the wall about the hillcrest. Marie couldn't have wasted such facilities!

"Bound to be some clues," he summed up, and there would be no risk in snapping on the house lights.

He found books of paper matches from every roadhouse in the area between Ponca City, Bartlesville, and Tulsa. He thumbed through the heap of bills tangled up with the cosmetics on her dressing table. She had bought everything but a baby carriage! And the credit memoranda were revealing: the old gag of taking the stuff back and getting a cash refund.

Pike frowned, sized up the methods and technique of a white wife going through the bankroll of an Osage who, even though "competent," is always under the eye of the Indian Agent. "Some buzzard," he decided, "must be helping her pull this. It takes a lawyer to make it jail proof."

But who was the slick number behind the scene?

Pike continued his search. Marie's luxurious rooms looked as if a cyclone had hit them. Frivolous underwear, passionate nightgowns, costly hosiery, shoes beyond counting; some on hangers, some draped on chairs, more stuffed pell mell into drawers; and unopened parcels from cleaner and laundry cluttered up a corner of the clothes closet. Catch as catch can, this butchered redhead; drunk with the idea that for once she could glut her fancy for expensive frills.

He turned to the telephone. It

was apparently a direct line; there was another one downstairs. This seemed to be Marie's personal wire. Handy! Pike began to see the possibilities of finding marked numbers in the directory, or notations absent-mindedly scribbled on the desk blotter.

But what caught his eye was a silver mirror, with a well worn and heavily tarnished frame and handle. It was where she had thrust it, perhaps weeks ago, half buried in bills and junk. The black was monogrammed in deep engraving "M.B." It looked like a relic of days before she had gotten into the big loot. He wondered who had bought it for her.

That query, however, was shaken loose by a muffled thump behind Pike. It came from a closet which he had not yet searched. He snapped off the light, lunged toward the door, and jerked it open.

For a moment he crouched, waiting for the lurker to make a false move; but there was none. Pike tried to tell himself that a dislodged parcel had fallen inside the closet. Yet he felt an intent stare, and sensed the fear of a cornered lurker.

Pike drew his flashlight, held it at arms length so that an answering shot would pass somewhere in the neighborhood of his extended hand rather than drilling him in the chest. Gun ready, he flicked the catch. The beam penetrated a tangle of clothes, shimmering slips, lacy bits of lingerie. The reflection revealed no sign of a lurker.

Pike holstered his automatic and rose from his crouch. He must be getting jittery. There, on the closet floor, lay a handbag that had appar-

ently fallen from its insecure perch in the pocket of a tweed jacket. He stooped to get it.

Too late, he heard the stir and gasp behind him. A woman commanded, "Raise your hands. I'll shoot—"

Her voice trembled. She was frightened enough to be dangerous. Pike obeyed, but made as if to face her. She quavered, almost hysterically. "Watch it—never mind who I am—one look and—"

"Shucks—if you ain't dressed, I won't peep," Pike reassured her.

But she was dressed. He could see that much in the mirror of the vanity. She must have emerged from beneath the bed. Her dress was dotted with lint, and her little red hat was all awry.

This was the girl who had emerged from the tan coupé, just as Pike was approaching Marie's cabin. There was no mistaking her glossy black hair, the suggestion of Indian blood revealed by her cheekbones. But for the first time, Pike realized how lovely she was.

She was slowly retreating toward the hall door.

From the corner of his eye Pike managed to follow her mirrored reflection. When she half turned toward the door, he leaped for the wall switch. She had not realized that the glass was betraying her. Thus his lunge caught her entirely off guard.

The room was in darkness an instant before a small, spiteful smack zipped the room. It was wildly jerked, and missed him by several yards. Pike's attack caught her from one side. He fairly crushed his shoulder against the edge of the

door, but he nailed an armful of sleek legs. She gasped, dropped her pistol, and they landed in a tangle on the carpet.

CHAPTER III

Enter the Law!



HE was an even more delicious armful than Pike expected. Lithe, resilient, shapely. He missed little during that moment when he squeezed her into submission, and felt her heart trying to hammer through her breast. For a moment he hated to break the clinch.

"Take it easy! I won't hurt you—what the devil's up—you got your nerve, sneaking in here. You might get flung in jail, if someone saw you."

"Someone — you mean, you won't—?" She gasped this as the cessation of her struggles made him risk releasing her mouth.

"Sure I won't. I'm working on the Q.T., just like you. Now, take it easy-like and let's talk this over."

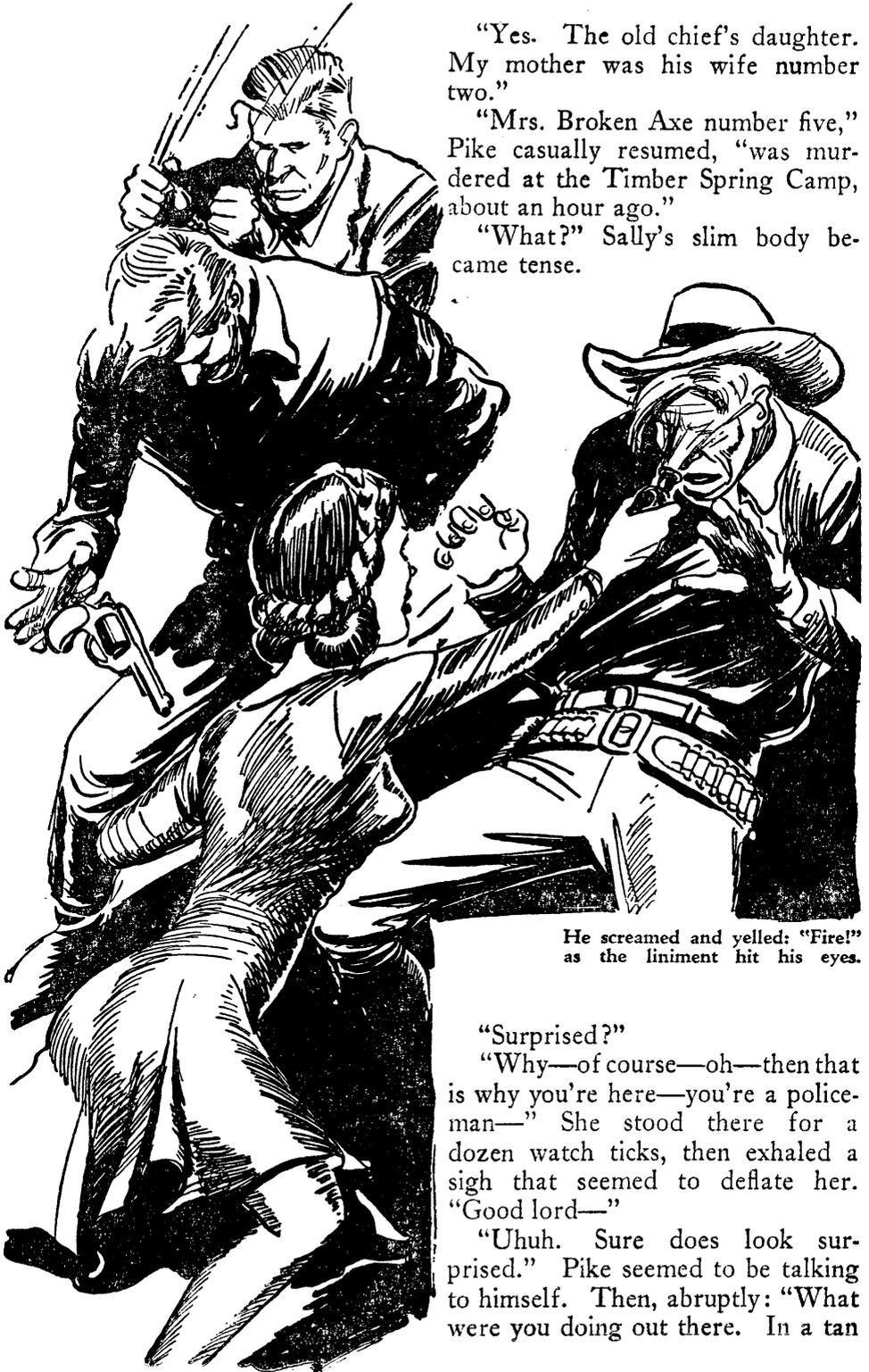
His calm voice had its effect. She forced a nervous little laugh. "Oh, all right."

Pike helped her to her feet. And after the embrace that had squeezed her breathless, she seemed unaware of the arm that remained about her as he headed toward the light switch.

Once the lights were on, the mutual sharp scrutiny ended in a pair of smiles. "Me, I'm Hardrock Pike," the investigator began. "And I'd sure like to know who you are, and what you're doing here."

She approvingly eyed him, then said, "I'm Sally Broken Axe."

"The devil you are!"



"Yes. The old chief's daughter. My mother was his wife number two."

"Mrs. Broken Axe number five," Pike casually resumed, "was murdered at the Timber Spring Camp, about an hour ago."

"What?" Sally's slim body became tense.

He screamed and yelled: "Fire!" as the liniment hit his eyes.

"Surprised?"

"Why—of course—oh—then that is why you're here—you're a policeman—" She stood there for a dozen watch ticks, then exhaled a sigh that seemed to deflate her. "Good lord—"

"Uhuh. Sure does look surprised." Pike seemed to be talking to himself. Then, abruptly: "What were you doing out there. In a tan

Chevvie? And how come you're up here?"

Sally defiantly answered, "I came up here on business."

"Don't get thattaway, Sally," he reproved. "You'll have to explain things to the police."

"So will you! What are you doing here? Why were you out there, with her? But that's easy—what do all the boys take her out there for?"

Sally's aggressive defense gave Pike a hunch. He smiled whimsically, caught her wrist in a firm grasp. "You got fixed notions about your dad's late number five wife. And how do you know I was *with* her?"

"I——" She checked herself abruptly.

"You saw me leaning over her, and you took a picture."

"She was a chiseler. She made a sap out of him. I've been watching her. I got that picture of you. If you don't help me, I'll give it to the police!"

"Get your feet on the ground." Pike's arm slipped about the half coherent girl. "I don't think Wheeler killed her, but it looks bad for him."

"What?" Sally seized his lapels. "Tell me. Please. I'll tell you anything."

NO DOUBT that she was deeply concerned. Pike countered, "Wheeler was out there tonight. Mad and jealous."

"She was a chiseler," Sally reiterated. "My mother wasn't. She played square with dad and didn't gyp him like the rest did. They were about to make up when along came

Marie and — well he's been dizzy about women and whiskey, ever since those oil royalties started."

"Then what?" Pike prompted.

"I watched her," flared Sally. "To get some pictures that would open dad's eyes."

"Too late," grimaced Pike. "Then you sneaked up here to find out who she was getting letters from, or playing with?"

Sally nodded.

"So did I," he admitted. "Now listen. You mean you couldn't see she was dead?"

"No. I just knew which cabin she usually took. I learned that from a friend who used to work at the camp. Then I saw your shadow against a shade. But I wasn't tall enough to look through the finder on the camera. So I just pointed it over the sill with one hand. I figured from the position of the bed, I'd get plenty."

"You did, all right," he grimaced. "But not what you expected. Give me that film, and I'll clear your old man."

"How do I know he needs clearing?" she challenged.

Sally would be a dangerous enemy, or a valuable ally; that depended on how Pike played his cards. He had already caught the highlights of the girl's game; resentful at the treatment accorded her mother, she was going to bat to open Wheeler's eyes and cause a general house cleaning. But she did not want to hit Wheeler directly. Pike was already certain of that, just as certain as he was that Sally would throw him to the dogs if that would serve her purpose. So he said, "You wait and see whether Wheeler isn't on the spot. And right

now, with that oil well he's drilling, he can't afford to be charged with murder. Even if he is finally acquitted, he'll just about lose his pants clearing himself. Tough for you and maw."

Sally grimaced. "It would be. What do you know about the well?"

"We? I'm just the guy that's drilling it. Where've you been the past week or so?"

"I just got here from Tulsa. I couldn't keep track of everything. Getting the dirt on Marie kept me busy. I trailed her all afternoon."

That checked with the story of the oil drillers. Maybe Sally had actually intended her candid camera trick, then tangled with her mother's successor and knifed the trouble maker. And after a panicky retreat, she could have returned to frame Marie's lover, just as added security, and a final bit of Indian vengeance. Being half Osage, a spiteful turn was not out of character.

"Maybe Wheeler did knife her," said Pike, "then hung around waiting for the boy friend."

He spoke casually, but watched Sally to see how she reacted to hearing someone else put into the rôle he had mentally ascribed to her. Her mouth tightened. She became tense, then flared, "That's crazy! If he'd suspected her, he'd have beaten her so she couldn't leave the house!"

Maybe, maybe not. But the sparring ended abruptly. The dogs were yapping. A car door slammed. Sally whirled, caught Pike's arm. He said, "Take it easy. Let's see what's up."

STILL clinging to him, Sally followed Pike to the hall. The window at the further end commanded

the front yard. By the headlight glare, they saw Wheeler Broken Axe and two white men. One wore a star.

"The sheriff," breathed Sally. "Quick—let's duck—"

"No. Let's listen."

They retreated to the head of the stairs, crouched close together by the balustrade. Light switches clicked below.

"You better go up with him, Sheriff. While he gets his cash and changes his clothes."

Wheeler snorted, "Think I'll run away? Why didn't I run instead of telling you she was dead. Anyway, I told you some fellow jumped out of her cabin and knocked me cold—"

"Yeah, I heard all that," grumbled the sheriff. "But I gotta put you in the cooler till we find that fellow. Run along up and get your duds."

As Sally and Pike slipped back toward Marie's room, they heard Wheeler's ascending footsteps, then the deputy's insistent, "We better not let him get outen our sight. Another thing. While we're here, we better look into her room. Might find something on the case."

Wheeler passed the door, swung into the hallway that ran the width of the house. But the sheriff and his deputy were on his heels.

"Good God—we're bottled up," gasped Sally.

She whirled toward the window. The footsteps were clumping from the head of the stairs. Pike caught her arm. "No. They'd hear us jump."

She struggled, fiercely whispered, "But they'll search every closet!"

"Take off your dress," countered

Pike. "Hurry—flop on the floor—"

"But they'll recognize me—"

"Cover your face. Do as I say or I'll knock you silly!"

Voices rumbled down the hall. "By God, we might get some clue or other in that red-head's room. Maybe she and Wheeler was fighting, savvy? If there's signs of a scrap, that'd sort of show intent."

"Uhuh," agreed the sheriff. "Pre-meditation. Be a pretty juicy case for Monty Borden to defend."

Montgomery Borden. Despite the tensity of that split second race with detection, the clash at the narrow bridge flashed through Pike's mind. Rufe Clifford, guilty of deliberate assassination if ever a man was, had been acquitted by the efforts of Borden, Pawhuska's slickest customer.

Sally wriggled out of her ensemble, hurled it at Pike, flashed him a desperate glance. He had no time to relish the lovely legs exposed until her slip settled back into place. He caught the dress, and said, "Flop in the door of the clothes closet—wrap the slip around your neck—tight—hide your face—"

"Listen, Cal," the deputy contended at the intersection of the halls, where they had luckily paused to argue, "I'll follow that damn' Injun and you start searching the red-head's room. He may get some liquor or a gun or something."

"Okay, Hicks."

Clump-clump-clump—

But Sally was sprawled in the doorway of the closet, and Pike lurked just inside, concealed by the scented tangle of garments.

HICKS, the deputy, muttered in his mustache when he saw the

pale bronze-hued flesh that tapered from Sally's hose tops, and the streamlined expanse of shapely figure above. She was not breathing enough to give the smallest betraying ripple; her slim hands were frozen as though she had perished while trying to remove a strangling loop of satin from her throat.

"I'll be everlastingly damned," groped Hicks. He was dazzled, shocked, thrilled; half nude feminine corpses were getting thicker than fleas on an Osage dog!

He knelt to make a closer inspection. Maybe she wasn't dead, though she sure looked frozen. He looked back over his shoulder and yelled, "Hey, Cal—"

But the sheriff didn't answer. The echoes in the hall distorted the exclamation, and then Mr. Hicks had nothing more to say. A pistol barrel plopped down on his head. He lurched forward, knocking Sally breathless; but being out cold, he got no thrills out of learning that it was a very much alive person who cushioned the shock.

Pike extricated her, and she wriggled into her dress. "What was the idea?" she gasped. "You could have sapped him when he came in the door, without—"

"Hicks, you say something? What'd you find?"

Sally, forgetting the skirt that was still wadded about her hips, fled in dismay to the solarium. Pike stepped behind the door, just in time to evade the sheriff's eye. For a moment he glanced about.

"Hicks, where the hell—?"

From the solarium came a crash of glass. The sheriff started. Pike swung, just once. Cal's knees tele-

scoped, and the oil driller let him to the carpet.

"Out the front door, Sally," he said. "Now, since you were asking me about that strip act." They tiptoed to the stair head. Wheeler was cursing a shoe he could not find. "Here's the idea. If both of them fellows had come in, I couldn't of socked one without the other nailing me. But with both of 'em seeing you, I could've cold caulked them with one swoop."

"You're awfully smart," conceded Sally, touched by his pretty compliment. "But why didn't we take Wheeler along?"

"Where to? Run out would be bad," Pike explained.

"I'm awfully shaky. Would you mind driving me home?"

"Anywhere but to a tourist camp," Pike agreed. "Where's your car?"

CHAPTER IV

Fireworks



ALLY lived in a little frame shack near the Bartlesville Highway. When Pike rolled her coupé into the shelter of the oak that bent protectingly over the house, she sighed, "I'd love to have you come in, but ma sleeps awfully light."

In the shadows, he could distinguish only the gleam of her eyes; but that was invitation enough. That her lips were upturned to meet his was not a surprise. But it was pleasant . . . unexpectedly so—

"You must go—please," she gasped, sliding from his arms.

"Hey, what's the hurry," he protested.

"Later," Sally compromised. "Honest, I mean it. But tonight, I've got so much to worry about. Try and clear dad, will you?"

"You might give me some idea about Marie's goings on."

"She played the field. But you get in touch with Monty Borden."

"Huh?" That name was oddly familiar.

"Montgomery Borden. The slick lawyer. He fixed up a couple of dad's divorces. He's guardian for a handful of incompetent Osages, and he snitches plenty, handling their allowances."

"And chiseling some loving on the side?"

"He'd never skip a chance," Sally declared. "But he is slick. You get in touch with him, will you?"

"Borden," pondered Pike, "ought to have plenty pull. He'd pretty near have to, sniping so much Osage money. Say." An idea nailed him, all at once. "Does Borden monkey with oil leases?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"I don't exactly know. Only, if he's going to defend Wheeler, he might be able and willing to dish out some dirt about the speculators that were blocking our drilling on the Smoky Mountain job."

Sally could not quite follow his wanderings, but her puzzled little frown brightened into an impulsive kiss. Then, before Pike could make a follow up, she breathlessly urged him out of the car: "Do run along, Hardrock! It's awfully late—'night, darling!"

Pike walked away, grinning. It was not far to where he had left his own car. So he set out to get it. Anyway, he was awake and restless.

As Sally's kisses cooled on his mouth, he began thinking of Tex and Flathead and Harrigan, the drillers who had gone on shift at sunset. Try and slip one over on them, and there'd be ex-tough guys scattered all over the Osage hills!

But Borden persisted in his thoughts. Clues or none, Wheeler would need a slick attorney.

Pike took the wheel of his car. As he nosed it down into the valley, he remembered Vera Lemoin, and her friendly hints.

"That gal is smart." Her picture for a moment was in his mind's eye. "And she looks warm enough to sizzle if you slapped her with a wet wash rag!"

Her phone number kept racing through his memory: "Seven-one-six . . . hell, ain't too late to call her now . . . seven-one-six. . . ."

He phoned from the lobby of his hotel. At the first ring, she answered. Pike said, "Listen, Vera. I been thinking all evening. And if you're not sleepy—"

"Oh, it's never really late," she brightly cut in. "Where shall we go?"

Being secretary to the Indian Agent was a stuffy job! She would want to go places. Pike replied, "I'm at a roadhouse and sick of it. Moon's just coming up, so I can make good time. See you in a half an hour?"

"Do hurry," she cooed.

SINCE he actually was within two blocks of Vera's house, he had time to dash up to his room, and put on some fresh clothes. The suit and shirt he wore were pretty much the worse for the evening's gymnastics.

He wanted a line-up on the whole situation before Vera heard of the murder.

Vera's apartment was on Main Street, at the foot of the Agency hill. The street level was occupied by stores; a stairway led to the second story where, set back from the railing that guarded the edge of the flat roof, were three groups of apartments, each opening into a long hallway. Between each block was a wide runway devoted to clothes lines, fresh air, and exercising the dogs.

Pike barged up to the door and punched the bell. Vera came hurrying from the dressing alcove of the efficiency apartment, her cerise negligee trailing like a comet's tail.

"Oh, but you did make good time!" Her futile efforts to pull the treacherous chiffon together were charming. "Do come in."

He was fairly dazzled by an eye-ful of cream-hued curves playing peek-a-boo with what little she wore beneath her negligee. Altogether shapely, from her lovely shoulders to her exquisite legs. Vera sank into the cushions of a lounge, bent over a moment to adjust the seam of her stocking. Before its length was perfectly aligned with her calf, Pike began to resent the idea of going places.

"I picked up a bottle quicker than I expected," he answered, producing a pint.

"Then we can stay right here and talk. It's so much cozier, isn't it?"

It was. When she twinkle-toed to the kitchenette to get glasses and ice, Pike was ready to throw away the key. In a moment she was snuggled against him, and trying not to grimace at the Indian Territory

to notice the arm that was drawing her into a close fit. "But did they do much damage? I mean, the crew you fired?"



He was looking into a gun muzzle before his question was half out.

hooch. Vera led off, "It's so fascinating, drilling for oil. Just imagine, boring down thousands of feet and getting the stuff it takes to make all those cars perk."

"It's a damn' headache, darling," he grumbled. Her stray hair, and the frills of her robe were caressing his cheek. Her smouldering eyes were a lot more romantic than any oil well. "A bunch of skunks are trying their best to keep me from carrying on."

"That's awful." She did not seem

Pike made a wry face. "Side reaming that bore and pulling the casing cost plenty, and we're damn' near broke. But we'll make it all right. Simply because no lousy mug is going to get close enough to do any more damage. Though I'd sure like to know who's behind that dirty work."

"You'll make it," she breathed in his ear.

That started thrills which kept him from getting any nearer to Pawhuska gossip, but he did get plenty closer to the brunette armful.

HOWEVER, Pike dimly remembered his line of investigation, but simply could not think of the right questions. Particularly not when Vera suddenly realized she was slipping. She tried to break the clinch, and protested, "Oh, I don't know why I ever let you get so close—honest, I'm half afraid of you. Now be nice, and tell me about oil wells."

But Pike still had white arms about his neck, and his hands were tangled by cerise chiffon when the door kicked open.

The man was about Pike's size, but lean, with sleek hair and dark eyes that for the moment blazed insanely. He reached for the gun in his shoulder holster. Vera screamed, "Monty, for God's sake—don't—you fool—"

Monty: Montgomery Borden, his pallid face twitching with fury. Jealous as a basket of tomcats, and ready at any instant to drill the woman whom sheer fright and surprise had huddled in Pike's arms. He moved, fast as he could, but she hampered him.

He got clear of her, made a dive for his automatic. A handful of chiffon snarled his hand and the weapon. He never had a chance. Borden fired.

A sledgehammer blow seemed to crush Pike's skull. He was petrified. If there had been a gun in his hands, he could not have fired. He had no sensation of dropping. He heard Vera's voice; it seemed miles off, then very close. He was on the floor, face down.

Though he could not move, his ears were working. She said, "You have killed him—he's all blood—put that gun away, you fool—you've killed him—"

"Killed . . . God. . . ." A man's voice. Must be Borden. He was dazed. "I thought . . . I thought—"

"You know I love you," she sobbed. "You utter fool—now I'll have to testify against you—it'll ruin everything—"

"You won't!" Borden's outburst drowned the uproar in an apartment in the other section; tenants were babbling, but cautiously keeping their distance. "You can't testify. Get on some clothes, quick. We'll get married. Wife can't testify—they can't make a case—"

"But you can't marry me!" she moaned. "You can't!"

Pike was hanging on. The loss of blood from his creased scalp dizzied him. But the shock of the bullet that had grazed his skull was passing. He wondered why Borden was so upset. Then it dawned on him: both Borden and Vera thought an unarmed man had been knocked off. For some reason, this was a trick the shifty lawyer could not square. They were both in the air.

"I can marry you! We'll go to Kansas!" Borden urged. "Before the cops get here—"

Hardly more than a brace of seconds had passed; a couple of long counts, maybe. Pike was bleeding like a stuck pig, but otherwise he was not much the worse, except for a terrific throbbing in his head.

Pike struggled to his knees. Vera had a dress over her face, was frantically trying to work it down over her hips. The view was beautiful, but Borden did not appreciate it; he was too busy helping her.

Neither did he see Hardrock Pike tottering forward with a drawn gun. It was entirely too late when Borden heard the oil driller growl, "Try this!"

Whop! The lawyer collapsed. So did Vera; she had never seen a dead man cold caulk a live one. She didn't have to be sapped. She slid to the floor—out cold.

The door kicked open. Sally burst into the apartment. The hall was a hell howling confusion. Below, a siren was screeching. She stared at the red-faced wreck that reeled in confused circles.

"Oh—did you kill them—my God—quick, honey—"

Heavy feet were pounding up the stairs that led from the sidewalk. A knot of tenants, who had finally decided that the shooting was over and that it was safe to take a look, poured down the hall; a tangle of half-dressed women, men in pajamas, squalling brats.

Sally lifted the window, boosted Pike to the sill. "Hurry—hurry—we can go down the other stairs—the cops—"

He tumbled over the sill, landed

on the graveled roof. Sally flopped beside him. As she tried to lift him up, he regained his balance, and tottered after her.

In the half darkness of the roof, they plowed through a cluster of tenants who came from the adjoining section. The police, judging from the sounds, were nicely pocketed; they were clamoring for gangway to Vera's apartment. The unconscious lawyer, plus Pike's blood on the carpet, would keep them busy for a few minutes.

Once on the sidewalk, Sally breathlessly demanded, "Now which way?"

"Hotel," gasped Pike. "I'm okay. Shot just creased me. I got to think this out. But what the hell brought you here?"

CHAPTER V

Pike Sticks His Neck Out



"CAME to see you," explained Sally. "I didn't dare phone. Dad did run out on the sheriff. And came to ma's place to hide out. He figured that's the last place anyone would look for him."

That was logical; but Pike groaned. Wheeler was as good as sunk. He couldn't stay under cover forever.

"That's what I told him!" Sally resumed. "But he's betting on your clearing him. He says there's something phony in the whole mess, and you're the guy who can get the answers. He thinks you're plenty smart."

"I used to have that notion myself," grumbled Pike, letting her

help him from the car. He was still groggy. But I still don't see how you located me."

"Listen," she patiently recapitulated, once they were out of the elevator. "I didn't dare phone you at a hotel. I was on my way up here when I saw your car, with the parking lights on. That Texas license was plain, so I knew it was yours, and—well—I just wanted to see what you were doing in that dame's neighborhood—"

"What dame?"

"Verna Lemoin, of course. You might remember in a town this size that everyone knows where everyone else lives."

"Yeah, I guess they do. And then you heard the riot?"

"Yes. Splendid detective work. Now you tell me."

"Nothing to tell," he began. But as she mopped the blood from his head, he blatted it all out, concluding, "That crazy buzzard is so nuts about Vera he was ready to shoot me, then and there. If my gun hadn't jammed in the holster—"

"Guns do jam," Sally admitted, with just enough irony to make Pike wish he were dead. "But never mind that. Is she really awfully nice?"

It was all crazy. Borden, supposed to be Marie's lover, was nertz enough about Vera to go shooting wild. Vera saying Borden couldn't marry her, though he was a bachelor. Pike shook his head to get rid of the remaining haze.

"Still don't get it," he pondered, letting Sally draw his battered head to a nice, soft spot where she could look down at him and stroke his brow. Then he sat upright, exclaiming, "But I do, now!"

"Get which, darling?" Sally's forehead puckered in a frown.

"Why that damn' Borden was so panicky when he thought he'd killed me—ow, hell's fire! What'd you put in my eye?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry—that's that liniment—the label said it was good for bruises, cuts, sprains—"

"By God, it didn't mention eyes!"

She picked up the bottle, glanced at the label, and then said, "Why was he panicky, sweetheart?"

"Simple!" Pike was pacing the floor. "I got it! Vera is giving him all the inside dirt from the Indian Agent's confidential files. That way he can make his crooked plays and not get in bad."

"You mean, Vera manages so Borden can pull phony stuff in being guardian to the Osages?"

"That's only half of it! She was helping Borden in that oil business. She made a play to have me tell her all about how much dough we still had to back us, and so on. It's plain as hell."

"But what of it?" she queried.

"Just this. If I was killed in her room, it'd expose the tie-up Borden had with her, and it'd look premeditated, me getting tangled up there and getting knocked off. Expose his whole pack of crooks. You know, the speculators that your dad's oil well is squeezing. They'd get sore and maybe bump him off. But if she married him, she couldn't testify against him."

"Um . . . well. Yes," she admitted. "But that's got nothing to do with getting dad cleared of murder."

THE peremptory knocking at the door brought Sally to her feet,

still clutching the liniment. "Heavens—I oughtn't to be in here with you this late—is the door locked—?"

"Open up, Pike. The law."

Sally flashed a terrified glance about her. Neither spoke, but both understood. Pike gestured toward the bath. She lunged, and he headed for the door.

The sheriff and Deputy Hicks were in the hall. They both looked grim. Both spat tobacco at the carpet. Pike wondered how they could have connected him with the slugging that had left them in Marie's clothes closet.

"Evening, gents," beamed Pike, who had jammed on his hat, so as to conceal the creased scalp and wad of taped gauze on his head. "Lucky you came in, I was just going out."

"You're going out, all right," rumbled the sheriff, "with us."

"Huh? What for?"

"Murder of Marie Broken Axe at the Timber Hill tourist camp."

"Hey, what the hell—you're crazy! How come?"

Pike was looking into a gun muzzle before the query was half out. The deputy was looping about to frisk him from the rear. He found Pike's gun, then announced, "No knife, Cal. He musta throwed it away."

"Listen, you jugheads," Pike stalled. "You're nuts."

"Nuts, huh? A witness seen your Chevvie parked in the camp, right acrost from her cabin."

"Who's the witness?" countered Pike.

"Rufe Clifford."

That was tough. Taking that squaw man's word indicated a first class frame-up. Pike was feeling

sick, but he demanded, "Got something that will stick? If you guys muff this play, I'm suing you for your shirt and pants, and I'll get it."

"Huh. Hold him for assault on Vera Lemoin, and assault and battery with intent to inflict bodily harm on Monty Borden when he heard her scream and come up to find out what was happening," was what the deputy contributed.

Pike watched the room spin around. So that was what Borden had fed the cops!

The sheriff turned the final card. "You might as well confess, Pike." He never let his gun waver, nor his eyes. But his free hand fumbled in his coat pocket, came forth with a photo, still glistening and wet. "Look at that, fellow. Confess and you *might* get off with second degree. She was a no good wench anyway."

Pike gulped, then looked at the candid camera enlargement! It showed him bending over Marie, one hand touching her hair. Her throat gaped horribly, and the blood on the pillow seemed to cover acres. God, what a picture! Hanging stuff, that grisly view.

"Uh — ah — where — for hell's sweet sake—"

The sheriff laughed. "We found that in Marie's bedroom. Along with a gal's handbag. Looks like someone was spying on you and Marie. Some jealous gal. Or maybe Wheeler took that snap of you. He says someone ganged him, and then he found her dead, so he reported, and we figured he must have killed her. But I guess he didn't."

In the scramble to get out of Marie's bedroom in Wheeler's house, Pike and Sally had forgotten

her handbag. Things had happened too fast for either to think of that roll of film.

"Want to confess, Pike?"

"Yeah. But let's get out of here." He wanted to give Sally a chance to slip out inconspicuously.

THE arrest was interrupted by a choked wail from the bath. It sounded like a woman half strangled and in agony. "Aw—help—let me out—ooh—"

Glass splattered. Feet drummed frantically on the floor.

"Gawd, he's got some jane locked up!" growled the sheriff. "Get along in front of us—"

"Handcuff him, Cal," corrected Hicks. "He's one of them fiends."

The woman's screams would have drawn that verdict from any one. Wrists manacled, Pike was prodded forward, deputy at his heels, sheriff leading.

The bathroom door was locked. The sheriff hurled himself at it. The panel splintered. Another lunge. A piece of the barrier yielded bodily. The rescuer reached in, fumbling for the latch.

Then came another scream, but this was no woman's. The law was howling. He came back, clawing his eyes, cursing in high pitched frenzy. He tripped, rolled, sputtered. Hicks, startled by the contagiousness of the agony, instinctively turned toward his suffering chief.

Whack! Pike's handcuffs floored him.

Sally came pouring out, breathless but laughing. The room reeked with the fumes of the penetrating liniment. The sheriff, still writhing

and yelling "fire," stumbled to his feet. A cuspidor flattened him, and he stayed flat.

"Puts him out of his misery," gasped Pike. "Get his keys, quick!"

In a moment he was free of handcuffs. Together they bounded toward the door. The room clerk was on the way, and from the floor above came a concerted thumping. But Pike and his companion made a dive for the stairs, dodging the clerk.

"Oh, darling, whatever will we do?"

"Get in your car, quick!"

THEY did just that. Luckily, they turned down the right street; so doing, they dodged the police patrol that came tearing to the disturbance.

"Now what?" gasped Sally, her arms fairly choking him as he wrestled with the wheel.

"To the Smoky Mountain lease," answered Pike. He set the accelerator to the floorboard.

"Why? Heavens above! What's this got to do with the oil well?"

"Lots!" he roared above the thundering engine. "I'll have every sheriff in Oklahoma on my tail. I'll be in the jug until they hang me. So I'm going out to put the boys wise. Tell 'em everything. Give them a check for my bankroll. They can finish the well. Then Wheeler—and you—with the oil money, I mean—can go to bat for me, maybe."

"Go to hell for you, honey," she answered.

He swung from the highway, tore down the rutted dirt road. The jitter and pounding flung Sally against him, draped her over him; but he was too busy to enjoy it. The headlights conked out. A cable had

snapped from the terrific wrenching and twisting of the little car.

"Kiss me before it's too late!" she gasped. "You're way ahead—slow down!"

He idled the car down, kept it on the trail with one hand. But the other was far from empty.

"Mmmmm—darling, do be careful—"

"Last chance," he reminded her, as they caught their breath.

Pike pulled up at the creek. The water of the ford was lapping and gurgling among the roots of the overshadowing trees. From ahead came the dull gleam of lights, the wheezing of exhaust steam, the everlasting thump-thump-creak of the walking beam.

"We'll hear them if they should turn off the highway," whispered Sally, referring to the impending pursuit.

"Maybe they won't come down this way," he admitted. "They'd not expect me here."

Her eyes were misty behind their drooping lashes, and her lips were half parted as she leaned back, drew him toward her. They clung to each other for an endless, throbbing moment. Sally murmured, "Let's sit on the bank, by the water . . . the last bit of loveliness we can steal. . . ."

CHAPTER VI

Confession



T WOULD have been a very long moment indeed, but Sally's kiss froze on her lips; sullen thunder rumbled from the derrick. The lights blinked out.

"Lord! They struck a gas pocket!"

That was Pike's first thought; he knew better, when the roar subsided, and nitrous fumes tainted the clean wind that swept down from the knoll. "They've dynamited it—wrecked the works—"

He leaped to his feet. The whine of the starter drowned Sally's cry of dismay. She barely piled in after him when the coupé plunged into the creek, raced up the slope toward the derrick. For a moment a black hulk was silhouetted against the skyline: a truck which sped over the hump, and into the gloom beyond.

Driving cars across the open hills to chase jackrabbits is an Osage country sport. "Step on it!" Sally screamed. "There they go!"

The fugitive, not expecting pursuit, was driving prudently. It was not until Pike zoomed over the crest and came thundering down the further slope that the driver realized what was happening. He wheeled his light pick-up, headed for the trail that snaked on into the hills.

Pike jammed the pedal to the floorboard, took a lead as though training a shotgun on ducks in flight. "Hang on!" he shouted.

He did not get Sally's answer. A split second later, he caught the light truck just aft of the front wheel. The impact hammered him breathless. Metal crunched, a tire exploded; the truck keeled over, and the coupé slumped nose down, its wheels crushed, its radiator gushing steam and water. Pike snapped the ignition and leaped to the ground.

By the glow of the truck's crazily tilted headlights, he recognized the driver, who had been hurled from the wheel. It was Rufe Clifford, unconscious and bleeding; Clifford,

the squaw man, whose nose Pike flattened earlier that mad night. His leg was crumpled under him. He could not escape.

Pike and Sally dashed back to the derrick. Harrigan was sprawled at the foot of the pipe rack, groggy and muttering. Nearby lay a case that had contained eighty percent dynamite; almost as powerful as nitroglycerin but far less hazardous to handle.

The sand line dangled loose in the bore from which poisonous fumes still surged. That shot had demolished the casing, filled the bottom with tons of debris. Perhaps the damage could be repaired; perhaps the well was utterly ruined.

Flathead was near the boiler. The switch of the little turbine generator that furnished the lights had been opened. Apparently Clifford, slipping up and killing the lights, had tricked Tex into investigating; and when a tap on the head kept him from remedying the difficulty, the unsuspecting Harrigan had left the derrick, only to be similarly ambushed.

SOME minutes later, when the red-faced Irishman recovered from his slugging, he confirmed Pike's suspicions. Flathead tottered to his feet. Then Pike interrupted Sally's solicitude: "Leave the blood on his head! Harrigan, stretch out where you were. Play dead. Never mind why! Tex, give me a hand with that mug on the other side of the knoll!"

"What the hell's the idea?" demanded the perplexed driller as he dashed after Pike. "Who done it? What's the score?"

"Wait and see," panted Pike.

"With a bit of luck, I can change the score a lot before the sheriff nails me."

But they needed their breath from then on. Clifford, regaining his wits, was making a desperate effort to drag himself away from the wreck. They collared him, bodily hauled him back over the grade.

"I tell you," he groaned, "I didn't do it. I was just driving—"

"Shut up!" growled Pike. "Your truck tracks show where it was parked at the derrick, after you slugged my crew. If I didn't need you for a couple things, I'd dump you down into the hole and mash you with a drill!"

That stopped Clifford. And his leg was hurting him. So also was his glass-raked face and his battered body.

They supported him between them when they reached the rig. Pike gestured toward Harrigan and said, "You didn't figure that big mug had an egg shell skull. You killed him."

Clifford's face turned gray beneath its grime and blood. His eyes rolled, apprehensively flickering from one grim face to the other.

Sally caught the play and flared, "You dirty bum, I'd cut your heart out and feed it to the dogs!" Then she burst into tears. "Kill the tramp, Hardrock!"

She screamed hysterically as Pike flashed her a wink and thrust her away. "They want me for one killing already, and this lug don't count. All right, Clifford! I guess you saw my car parked at the Timber Hill tourist camp, huh?"

Clifford gulped, blinked. "I don't know. Maybe it wasn't yours. Give me a break. I swear it wasn't yours."

With those pictures the sheriff had, Sally could hardly see what good Pike's play would do. Then her eyes opened; that was when he continued, "Who sent you out here to dynamite this hole? Sound off, mug! I'm not promising a damn' thing—but maybe we can give you a break. If you spill your guts."

"I tell you, nobody sent me. I was just sore account of you socked me there at the bridge."

"So you got a truck and a case of dynamite, huh?"

Clifford insisted it was his wife's truck. Pike said, "With luck, maybe you can claim it was just manslaughter. That Harrigan hit you, and you socked him, and he was a big guy and you aren't. You got a chance, provided Tex and Flathead don't up and claim they saw you cold caulk Harrigan when his back was turned."

That sold Clifford. He blurted out: "Monty Borden put me on the job. He told me—"

THE confession was interrupted by a familiar voice. The sheriff and Deputy Hicks had arrived under cover of the grilling. Their guns were out, and they were itching for a chance to use them. "Stick 'em up, Pike, or we'll rip your casing. I got a warrant for you. Murder of Marie Broken Axe, assaulting Monty Borden, assaulting officers, and resisting arrest."

Pike obeyed. Clifford, deprived of support, thudded to the ground, howling with pain. "What the hell?" demanded the sheriff. "Clifford, what's happened?"

"Meet the guy that just dynamited Wheeler Broken Axe's Smoky

Mountain Discovery Well Number One," said Pike. "He just confessed. These gents witnessed it. You might take him along."

The destruction, and the lingering fumes sold the sheriff. "Get a move on, the bunch of you. Watch 'em, Cal!"

Pike, handcuffed, accompanied the officers, as did the groaning Clifford. Sally went with the drillers, in their car. And as they drove, the law listened to their prisoner's charges against Monty Borden.

"Cal," said the sheriff, once Pawhuska's lights were near, "you better round up Borden. Destruction of property, and getting Clifford to give false testimony needs looking into. But listen here, Pike—that ain't doing you any good. Not counting murder, we got enough against you to keep you busy for life."

And right on the face of it, it looked that way. Pike thought bitterly of the explosion that had interrupted his serious clinch with Sally. Last chance. . . .

HE WATCHED the sunrise from the jail window. He was dog tired, and wished he had a broken leg; they had at least hauled Clifford to a comfortable hospital. Finally he slumped in a heap on the bench, ignored the two sodden Indians who muttered and indiscriminately parked lunch and rotten whiskey. Pike slept, though his rest was a whirling maze of corpses in negligee, dark-eyed siren in cerise chiffon, and Sally's tear-drenched kiss at the jail door.

The sun blazed in through the bars, finally awaking the prisoner.

The jailer would not let Pike phone anyone. Neither would he bring any coffee. Let the desperado wait until the next meal, maybe he'd not sleep through it.

Then everything happened at once. The sheriff, the chief of police and some deputies came tramping down the corridor. The turkey opened the cell. "Roll out, Pike!"

The police seemed to have rounded up half the town; the space in front of the desk was jammed. Sally was there, and so was her mother. Wheeler Broken Axe, his little eyes gleaming like a snake's, with with them. Two cops had Montgomery Borden by the arms, and Vera followed, red-eyed, in their wake.

Pike was dazed by the turnout; he hated to face Wheeler after the disaster which had ruined the well; he wanted to make a wild break, knock Borden into little bits. And why the hell had Wheeler come out of hiding? Why was he free?

"That's right. They got me for murdering Marie," he reminded himself.

Wheeler was saying nothing, but Sally's mother looked pleased. The old Osage had made up with the only honest woman he'd ever married. Suddenly he cut into the snarl of voices: "Turn Pike loose. He isn't guilty. I heard my wife phone him. I fixed up an extension phone she didn't know about."

"What's that got to do with it?" the sheriff demanded.

"Montgomery Borden phoned her, told her to get Pike out there and then they'd be caught together, and then I'd break Pike's drilling contract when I heard it. Because I

wouldn't trust him any more."

"Why the hell didn't you tell us that last night before you escaped?" demanded the sheriff.

"No use. You said I killed her. But now you got Pike anyway. So I'm telling you. I went out to catch them myself."

"So you wanted to clean up on Pike, huh?"

Wheeler snorted. His face was a seamed blank. He answered, "No. Went out to tell Pike she wasn't my wife anyway. Don't pay any attention. Don't get scared, keep drilling for oil."

"Not your wife?"

Wheeler nodded. Pike lurched forward, dragging a deputy with him. "Wait, I got it now. Who's wife was she?"

"Monty Borden's," said Wheeler. "I just found out last night. I saw some of her things with M. B. on them. Old things; 'B' don't mean Broken Axe. Means Borden. They never got a divorce."

"Borden killed her!" Pike yelled. It all made sense now. "He was nuts about Vera. He had to get rid of Marie. She was in the way. He didn't need her any more. He could rook Wheeler and all the other Osages working with Vera."

"That's a damned lie," croaked Borden; and the lovely brunette screeched her second.

"I heard you," Pike shouted, "asking her to marry you, when you thought you'd killed me, up in her apartment. You lost your nerve. One killing in a night pulled your cork. Two was too much. She said she couldn't marry you. Why not? Because you had a wife alive. You told her, you could."

"Sure you could. Marie was dead. You knew that. Vera didn't know, because the news hadn't leaked out. But you did know—because you did it."

"I didn't — he's screwy — listen, Sheriff."

But Pike outshouted him: "If you didn't knife her, how come your stooge, Clifford, told the cops he'd seen my car at the camp? He sprung that as soon as the news broke. My car was parked a quarter of a mile away from the camp."

"It was my car he saw," Sally cut in, elbowing her way past Vera. "I was there. I took that picture to try to get dad to break up with that no good chiseler."

Borden was choking. He was swamped by the freak testimony; he could not have anticipated Sally's candid camera tricks. Neither did he foresee that Clifford's destructive errand would be a link between dynamiting and murder.

"You poor sap!" flared Vera. "So this is what's making me lose a good job—wise guy, going to make a million off the dumb Osages—listen, sheriff, I didn't know he killed her, not until after he told me that now he could marry me so I couldn't testify, and then we found out Pike wasn't dead."

Pike roared above the babel, "You ain't heard half of it yet! Marie's bedroom was a tangled mess. Looked like it always was. But in the cabin, her clothes was hung up, real neat. Somebody undressed her after she was knocked cold with a cast-iron skillet. If I'd done that, with Sally and Wheeler snooping around, they'da heard the noise."

He waited for the ensuing rum-

ble of comprehension, then blasted down the single dissenting voice. "Wasn't any blood on her duds. She was peeled down and then knifed. Now I ask you, could all that have been done with a candid camera and an Osage Injun hanging around?"

He grinned at the cross fire of muttered agreement; he clinched it by chortling, "Anyway, I don't knife gals—I kiss 'em. You might ask Vera!"

"And me, too!" chirped Sally.

"Take him along," chorused the chief of police and the sheriff. "He's done everything but confess."

"And how about me?" demanded Pike. "Do I still have to sue you for false arrest?"

The sheer brazenness of it sunk the police. And having seen how a shyster like Borden had kept the law in knots for some years, they did not want to risk the lawyers Pike might bring into the scene. "You get the hell out of the county by six P. M.," said the sheriff, rubbing his battered head, "and I'll call it a day."

"That goes for the town," seconded the chief. "You private investigators are worse'n crooks."

Pike's face lengthened. He turned to Wheeler Broken Axe and said, "I guess I can't finish that well, even if we can clean it out instead of sinking a fresh hole. But my crew will stick—"

The old Osage almost grinned. "Got no more money. That blast settles it. But a plenty damn' good shot. It got Monty Borden. Just like I said, you're a smart fellow. Borden is something I been wanting to get for a long time."

He grunted, nudged his reinstated
(Continued on page 94)

DEATH HAS

By **ROGER TORREY**



HE was too big and too buxom but she still was pretty. Her card said she was Mrs. Margaret Arvin, and she came in my office like I was the wolf and she was the lamb.

She looked as though she ex-

pected me to jump over the desk at her.

I said hello and she said hello and there we stopped. I waited and she waited, wetting her lips and giving scared glances back at the door as if to make sure she still had a way out, and I got tired of it.



AN ESCORT

Give a couple of women plenty of money, turn them loose in a city where nobody knows what they're doing, let them have all the leeway in the world to go chasing pleasure—and maybe it'll be all right. And maybe it'll lead to tragedy. . . .



By the time the police came,
Phyllis was already dead.

"You wanted to see me?" I asked.

"Oh, yes."

"About what?"

"It's . . . I'm afraid to tell you."

"Well, I'm no mind reader."

"It's . . . well, I'm in trouble."

I nodded at the door. "It reads, Mrs. Arvin, 'Investigations.' It also reads 'Strictly Confidential.' I can assure you that if I didn't handle my business just that way the police would close me up. That make you feel any better?"

She said it did and managed to get herself down in the chair across from me. She sat on the very edge of it, all ready to take off at the wrong word.

"I . . . I think I'm being blackmailed."

"Don't you know?"

"Well, I'm being blackmailed."

"Who by?"

"The Metropolitan Escort Service."

I said: "You're wrong. That's another thing the cops keep an eye on."

"It *has* to be them."

I told her to tell me about it and she got red in the face and started to stammer. And after she got into the yarn I didn't wonder. I felt sorry for her, and not just because somebody was putting the bite on her, either.

It was because she was so ashamed of what had happened.

SHE came from Hamlin, a couple of hundred miles upstate. Her best friend was another widow, this one named Sally Wells. Mrs. Sarah Wells, to be exact, though when she got into the story it was always Sally.

She and Sally had come to the big city some two months before then, for a round of shopping and shows and such things. They'd decided it would be devilish to make the rounds of the night clubs, and although they knew a few people in town, they did not call up and hint for invitations, but called the escort bureau instead.

I said: "But why? Certainly you and Mrs. Wells knew somebody that would take you out and show you a time. The visiting fireman always gets taken around."

She blushed even redder and said: "We . . . well, everybody we knew was about our age, Mr. Boyle. You know. Sort of old and stodgy. It wouldn't have been any fun."

A last fling at romance with a capital "R."

"The boys came to our hotel and got us and we gave them money for expenses. And for their pay, you know. That's how they do, you know."

I said I knew.

"Then we went to a lot of places and Sally and I both drank quite a bit, I'm afraid."

"That's something new?"

She straightened and looked across the desk at me and I said: "I'm not trying to be funny, Mrs. Arvin. I really want to know. I'm trying to find out if these boys tried to get you and your friend drunk. That's all."

"Both Sally and I drink, Mr. Boyle. That is, a drink now and then. It wasn't the boys . . . it was Sally and I. They drank hardly at all."

Boys on escort service aren't supposed to drink much, so this checked. And I got the idea. The two gals

figured that as long as they were going to have fun they might as well go whole hog on it. They hadn't wanted to paint the town pink but a flaming red.

I said: "Saturday night stuff, eh?"

"I beg your pardon."

"Pay night, eh?"

"I don't understand."

I said to let it go. That I'd just meant she and Sally were out for a good time and trying to assure it.

She admitted that was it, exactly.

"Well . . . well, that was all. The boys took us home. Then after I went home, back to Hamlin, I got the first letter."

"Go on."

"It said I was to mail a thousand dollars to Howard Crashaw, General Delivery, here. It said that if I didn't, he'd send pictures of Sally and me to Hamlin."

"Who to? Who'd get the pictures?"

"He said he'd send them to our friends."

"What would these pictures be about?"

"I don't know."

I said: "Now, now! We won't get any place this way."

SHE started to cry then and I got the rest of it. The boys had taken them home to their hotel, all right, and that's what they're supposed to do. They're not allowed to go upstairs to the customers' rooms, even, and these boys hadn't. They'd left the gals in the lobby, properly, but then the gals had sneaked out the side entrance and met the boys around the corner.

That way, in case of anybody checking up, everything was kosher.

It put the boys off the job and on their own time. If they wanted to party, it was their own business and that of the people they partied with.

She didn't go into too much detail about what happened after that but she didn't need to. She told me enough. Apparently they'd been a couple of smooth talking young heels and the two widows, half drunk and entirely out for a good time, had gone for the line.

They'd gone up to the boys' apartment for some more drinks . . . the bars had closed by that time . . . and they'd stayed too long. That was as much as she'd admit, but she went so far as to say there might have been pictures taken. Both she and Sally had passed out after a while, according to her story, and she didn't remember just what had happened.

So that was that.

I said: "This is bad. What were the names of the boys?"

"The one with me was Howard Crashaw. The one with Sally was named Francis Blair."

"Did you send this thousand dollars to Crashaw?"

She sat up straighter. "I've sent him *six* thousand dollars. Each time I got a letter. Each letter says it will be the last, but they keep coming."

"That's always the way. Now, how about your friend? Sally, as you call her? Has she been paying off, too?"

"Sally's sent two thousand dollars. It's harder for Sally to get money, you see, Mr. Boyle."

"I take it you're fairly well off."

She nodded.

"And that Sally isn't?"

"Sally's well off. That is, she doesn't have to worry. I suppose,

with the insurance and all, Sally's got maybe a hundred thousand dollars. Of course I don't know. . . . I'm just guessing."

From the way she talked about a fortune like that I took it she thought it was small potatoes.

I said: "It seems funny to me that you called up an escort bureau. I still don't understand it."

She blushed and said that both she and Sally thought they'd better have a better time with somebody who didn't know who they were. And then she came out with something that really made me think.

"Mr. Boyle, I honestly don't think Howard has anything to do with this."

"You mean this guy you were out with; the one that you've been sending money to?" I must have sounded pretty hard to her. "You mean you think he's in the clear?"

"I really do."

"What makes you think so?"

"He's too nice to do a thing like that," she said. "So is Francis. Francis Blair."

I told her I wished I had her faith in human nature, and collected two hundred dollars from her as expense money.

We didn't go into the question of a fee. . . . She said she was perfectly willing to leave that up to me and I said I'd charge her according to how the job turned out.

That was fine with her and another thing that showed a trusting nature.

All in all, it looked very nice. A dumb and trusting widow with a lot of money isn't a thing that comes along very often in the private detective business.

CHAPTER II

Party Line



HE Metropolitan Escort Service had a staff of about sixty, though I'd heard that since the war they'd had a hard time keeping up to strength. It was run by an effeminate sort of fellow named Winters. . . . he'd started the thing right after leaving college, and he picked his help mostly from his fellow-graduates.

He had some older men, of course, but they were reserved for the more elderly trade. He was reported to be plenty strict, with rules and regulations for the hired men that really held them down, so I slammed into him hard when I got him on the phone.

I said: "Mr. Winters, I'm Boyle. I'm a private investigator. . . . a private cop. I want to see you."

He said: "Oh, goodness! Will you come up?"

"No, no."

"But my dear Mr., is it Mr. Boyle? Why not, may I ask?"

"I've reasons."

"But, Mr. Boyle! What is it you wish to see me about?"

"Blackmail."

I heard him gasp and call high Heaven to witness what was happening to him. I took it there was somebody else in his office.

"What's that you said?" he asked.

"I said I want to see you about blackmail. Your service is in it."

"When can I see you?"

"Right now."

I told him where my office was and then got Lieutenant Harry Sams, of the Bunco Squad. I told

him what was up and he came over, getting there just as Winters pranced daintily in. Winters was so excited he was stuttering.

"I want you to explain that statement you made over the phone, Mr. Boyle," he said. "Unless you can substantiate it, I assure you I'm going to sue you for criminal libel."

"This is Lieutenant Sams of the Bunco Squad," I said. "He can be your witness. I want to get along with you and work it out with you. That's why I asked the lieutenant to drop over."

"Do you mean to say you suspect me of blackmail?"

"One of the men who work for you? Or two of them, rather."

"Who?"

"When I tell you, what'll you do?"

"I'll discharge them immediately. I . . . I'll give them no references, whatsoever."

I nodded at Sams. "See it, Harry? It'd come out with a bang and there'd be my client out in the open. Just what I'm trying to avoid. You talk sense to him."

SAMS told him what to do and he made it stick. It took time and it took argument. He explained to the guy that blackmail was the hardest thing in the world to prove. That the person being blackmailed always lost . . . that what was being held over them always came out. That the very thing they'd paid to have hushed was given to the public, and that the more fuss there was about it the more publicity there was.

And he'd just got young Winters quieted down and seeing sense when the telephone rang.

I answered it and said: "John Boyle speaking."

It was my client, Mrs. Arvin, and she was so excited she could hardly talk.

"It's Phyllis," she stammered. It's Phyllis."

"Who's Phyllis and what about her?"

"It's my niece. She . . . she's dead."

I asked her what had happened.

"Somebody killed her, Mr. Boyle. She was murdered."

"Are you sure?"

She sounded like she was on the edge of hysterics. She almost screamed out: "Am I sure? I was with her when it happened."

"Where are you now?"

"Here, in Hamlin. I'm home now, but I've been at the police station."

I said I'd be up there and hung up.

"It's murder, now, Harry," I said to the lieutenant. "It's tied in with this blackmail business some way. It's all the more reason to keep it quiet for now."

"Crashaw and Blair, you think?"

"It could be. I'd certainly put a tag on 'em, but I wouldn't pick 'em up."

"My God!" said young Winters.

"This will ruin me. First the war and now this."

"I didn't start either," I said.

"And the lieutenant didn't start either. Are you going to work along with us or do you want to blow the thing sky high?"

He said he'd do just as he was told.

I told Harry Sams: "I'm going up and make sure my client isn't next on the list. Can you see to this end of it for now?"

I nodded toward Winters and Sams nodded back. "I'll keep it down," he said.

When he left the office with Winters, he was half carrying him. Blackmail and murder are pretty strong stuff for a guy like that who's going along peddling out company for the evening.

And for that matter, murder and blackmail are pretty strong stuff even in a racket as tough as mine.

I TOOK a cab in from the Hamlin airport and on the way the driver told me about the murder. It was big news for the town and they were making the most of it. The girl was Phyllis Arvin and she was about nineteen. She was a trampy wench, from what the taxi man said. She'd lived with her aunt, Mrs. Margaret Arvin, and that gave me a chance to do a little finding out for my own sake.

"What's the auntie like?" I said.

"A swell old dame," said the driver promptly. "Just a swell old dame. Every time she uses one of our cars, it's a buck tip."

"She must have dough."

"Just plenty. She keeps the rest of the family."

"Yeah"

"Well, there was this Phyllis and there's her brother Jerry. There's their mother, that's Mrs. Arvin's sister-in-law. Her name's Arvin, too."

I said I had that figured out.

"Then there's her brother-in-law, Sam Arvin. He's no good."

"A louse, eh?"

"In spades, brother. A louse if there ever was one. Well, I guess that's all."

"And the kid was a wild one?"

"Just plenty, even if a person should ought to speak well of the dead. Not mean, you understand. Just lively. Sort of boy-crazy, too, but lots of kids that age are."

"They called it flaming youth when I was a kid," I told him.

Then we pulled into the curb in front of the Hamlin House and I let him go. I got a suite instead of just a bed and bath because I had a notion I'd have company during my stay, and then I got on the phone.

MY CLIENT had calmed down some, and she explained this by saying the doctor had been there. I said I had to talk with her and she said that was all right. And then I gave her something to think about.

"It would be better, Mrs. Arvin, if nobody knows I'm a cop," I said. "I can look around and find which of the local police I can depend on for help, that way. I can't work with anybody that would do any talking . . . you can see that."

She said she got the thought and told me she'd introduce me as a man she'd met in the city. She'd mentioned him, though not his name, I gathered. I was supposed to be in the wholesale plumbing business, which was the racket her dead husband had made his money in. I told her I'd be out in an hour or so, and she hung up the phone before I did.

And then I heard another little click and put the phone bar down and got the switchboard, fast.

"Look, sister," I said. "Were you in on that line?"

"Why no, sir."

"You sure? I heard a click, after my party hung up."

I said: "Get away from that phone, babe, or I'll sit you down on the floor!"



"That wouldn't be from this board, sir. That would be on a party line, or possibly from an extension."

I said: "Thank you" and hung up.

It was just something else to worry about.

CHAPTER III

Friend of the Family



MY CLIENT lived in the most awful looking place I had ever seen. It had originally, from the looks of it, been built in the eighties, but it had been added to from time to time. The center and original part had been one of those castle-like affairs, all turrets and fancy roof lines, but this had been remodeled in an attempt at modernizing it. It hadn't been successful.

Out at each side were extensions, a story less in height. Wings, I think they're called. They looked like additions to a factory. The entire monstrosity was set back from the road in grounds that matched. It looked like some landscape gardener had lost his mind and had been turned loose. There were concealed spotlights here and there, set so they'd show up some particularly horrid piece of hedge work.

Believe it or not, some of the hedges were cut so they looked like statues and some like animals. Some of the bushes were round, some cube shaped, and some square. There was no rhyme or reason to the mess, and all through it were scattered full size castings. Iron deer, iron greyhounds, and iron horses.

The place looked like a crazy house at an amusement park.

I got out of the cab and rang the bell and a neat little maid opened the door and startled me. I'd expected something to match the house and grounds. I told her I wanted to see Mrs. Arvin and that I was expected, and she gave me a mean look I'd done nothing to deserve and led the way at least fifty feet down a narrow dark hall and then into a cross corridor as long or longer. And as poorly lighted.

She never said a word and neither did I.

Then we must have passed through the old house and into the right wing, because I came out into a room at least sixty feet long and half that in width. It had a fireplace in each end, both of them going. I suppose they called it the playroom . . . anyway it had a good-sized bar at the side and each fireplace was surrounded by heavy leather chairs hemmed in by end tables. The effect might not have been modern but it was comfortable.

THERE were about twenty people standing around, talking in hushed voices and looking like the mourners at a funeral. All except one guy, a bald-headed geezer of about fifty, and he was apparently having the time of his life. He was bustling about, shoving glasses into people's hands. . . . I *did* notice that none of the people refused the glasses, at that . . . and altogether acting like the perfect host at a pleasant little get-together. Just as I saw him, Mrs. Arvin came in from another door and saw me and came over.

The maid left as she got to me, and she hissed: "Call me Peggy! Pretend you're fond of me."

And then over came the bald-headed man, carrying an extra glass and an inquiring expression.

Mrs. Arvin said: "John, this is my brother-in-law, Sam Arvin. Sam, this is Johnny Boyle . . . you've heard me speak of him."

She added, so that I'd get it: "He was a friend of Arnold's, you remember. They did some business together."

Sam Arvin gave me a look and said: "You knew Arnold, then."

I said: "Sure!"

"Great guy, Arnold."

I thought of the screwball house and the screwball grounds and of all the money they'd cost. It didn't strike me as the kind of set-up a man Mrs. Arvin's age would get into . . . the average man of forty not alone doesn't have such dizzy ideas but he doesn't have the money to work them out. So I took a chance.

I said: "Well, yes. Of course, Arnold was quite a bit older than I am. And then Arnold was, well peculiar."

I'd said the right thing. Sam handed me the drink and beamed and said: "Say it out, friend. He was screwier than a barrel of nuts and bolts. And nobody knows it better than I do."

A loutish looking duck, not over twenty-five, came lounging over then and said: "Why not introduce me, too, Aunt Peggy. You know *I'm* always interested in your conquests."

This was Jerry Arvin, the nephew. And a thoroughly unpleasant young hellion if I ever saw one. He gave me a soft cold hand and sneered at me while he said he was glad to meet me.

I kept my mouth shut and just

shook hands. I was starting to feel sorry for my client, with a family like that.

THE uncle and nephew wandered back to the bar and Mrs. Arvin said: "I . . . I let them think that, well, that you're interested in me. I had to have a reason for your being here, you see."

I said: "Sure, Peggy. Quick, now. How old was your husband?"

"He was sixty-seven when he died. That was four years ago."

"Was he nuts?"

She grinned in spite of answering in a hurry. "When you've got as much money as Arnold had, it's called being eccentric."

"I get it."

"I want to see you alone? Where are you staying?"

"The Hamlin House."

"I can't go there . . . they **know** me there."

I nodded. In a town that small, there'd have been too much talk of a call at a hotel room. That is, if it was late at night and made by anybody as prominent as Mrs. Arvin.

"You could come out here, couldn't you?"

I said I didn't think it would be a good idea.

Then a bunch of other people drifted over and we had to stop the talking. I met everybody, forgetting their names as fast as I did, and then Mrs. Arvin said something I'd hoped she'd say.

It was: "Sally's coming over to be with me, pretty soon. She's been out of town . . . she just got back this afternoon."

I said: "This must have been terrible; I want to hear about it."

"They've got the man who did it in jail," she said. "I had to go down and identify him. It's over . . . and I think it's a good thing."

She left then to greet some more guests and she left me with a lot to think about. It seemed a funny way for her to act, with her niece murdered that very day and with her an eyewitness. As near as I could see, the whole family was slightly nuts.

SALLY WELLS was little and black-headed and case-hardened, if the way she acted and talked meant a thing. She knew who I was, all right, because as soon as we'd been introduced, she grabbed an extra highball and dragged me over to a couch, well away from the bar and the fireplaces.

"Have you found out anything yet?" she asked.

"Not a thing."

"D'ya think you will."

"I'm sure I will."

"D'ya think Howard Crashaw and Francis Blair are doing this blackmailing?"

I nodded.

She said: "Well, you're wrong."

"That's what Peggy thinks, too."

"Peggy?"

"She asked me to call her that."

"You work fast, don't you?"

"It's just business."

She laughed, one of the kitty-cat kind of laughs.

"That's right," I said. "I don't get this. Why the party, with her niece being dead and all."

"They hated each other."

"She acted upset today, when she called me."

"Who wouldn't be? The man shot at her, too."

"I didn't know that."

"What about Howard and Francis? Have you talked to them yet?"

"That's being taken care of."

"Who by?"

"The police."

This Sally Wells had black eyes and now they just snapped. "I thought this was supposed to be handled quietly. And now you've got the police in it."

"There'll be no fuss. That is, unless there's no out. Any time there's murder mixed with blackmail it's liable to blow up all over the place. If it can be held down, it will be."

"Where are you staying?"

"The Hamlin House."

"I can't go there to talk to you and I can't have you at my place."

"Why not?"

"Well, there are reasons."

"What's there to talk about?"

She moved closer to me on the couch and said: "There's a lot of things. Just a lot of things I have to explain."

"About the pictures?"

"Well, maybe."

THEN my client saw us and made a bee-line for us. From her expression I gathered she didn't like my being off in a corner with the girl friend.

"I want you to meet my sister-in-law," she said. "Of course she does not know you're a policeman, but I've told her I thought you might be able to help her."

"How?"

"Well, there's a lot of scandal about Phyllis. She thinks you might be able to stop some of it."

"Where is she?"

"She's upstairs, lying down. You know my sister is, well, sort of peculiar, too. Like my husband was. Will you go up with me?"

I said: "Certainly!" and she went over to tell her brother-in-law something.

Then Sally Wells said: "Leave your door open after you go home. What's your room number?"

I told her three-oh-seven.

"There's a back stairs, you know."

She drifted away then just as Mrs. Arvin came back.

And then it got complicated. We started up the stairs to the second floor, and Mrs. Arvin said: "What is your room at the Hamlin House?"

I told her three-oh-seven.

"I'll come up the back way there, after these people leave. I don't know what time it will be; I have to be careful that neither Sam or Jerry sees me, you know."

"I'm afraid that's taking a chance, isn't it, Mrs. Arvin?"

She said we had to have a talk and that she'd have to take the risk. It seemed that seeing the sister-in-law was just a stall to talk to me because we turned and went back to the party then.

CHAPTER IV

Unwelcome Advice



HE bar man down the street from the Hamlin House wasn't doing much business and was a gabby soul to boot. I found out over four drinks more than I had in all the time up to then. I got old Arnold Arvin described to me in enough detail that I felt I knew him



I slugged him three times in the face.

almost as well as if I'd been the friend I was supposed to be.

He was crazy as a coot and no mistake. He'd been a poor kid and sometime, when he was just one, somebody that had lived in that big old house had snubbed him. When he made a lot of dough out of wholesale plumbing, he bought a mortgage on the place and kicked the people out on their ear when it came due. Just spite work. He made it the monstrosity it was just because people tried to talk him out of doing it.

Why he'd married Margaret, my client, nobody ever knew. He admitted openly and publicly that he hated her, but he wouldn't divorce

her or let her divorce him. He hated his brother and his sister and her two children . . . but he made the crew live right here with him. He wouldn't give them their allowances if they moved away, and the whole bunch lived off him like a bunch of vultures.

The pay-off came after he died and they read his will. His widow couldn't sell the house and she had to continue living in it. She had to go on keeping her brother and sister-in-law, and the sister-in-law's two kids, just the same as he'd done. The brother and sister-in-law started suit, claiming that my client had influenced him in making the will and that he wasn't of right mind. The court had thrown it out.

Then they sued the poor gal, claiming she was ruining the morals of the children by the way she acted, and trying to get the will set aside that way. The claim was that it was against the public welfare for the kids to be raised like that, and that the will was no good because of that angle.

That was thrown out, too.

They had the two kids, the boy and the girl, spying on their aunt, and I judged that was why my client hadn't felt too bad when her niece got knocked off.

The family was common gossip, according to the bar man. And according to him, everybody was in favor of my client and hated the Arvin side of the family. They were the richest people in town and so were fair prey for talk . . . it's always that way.

She had to keep the in-laws and like it, or lose the dough her old man had left. She had to keep them

whether they sued her or not, whether they spied on her or not, or no matter what they did.

I SAID: "It's a wonder she didn't knock off this niece herself. The niece had it coming, if what you say is right."

The bar man said: "That niece was strictly bum. But pretty! Oh, Lord, man! How pretty."

"And the boy? The brother?"

"Another bum. Not as much of a bum as Sam, his uncle, is, but that's just because he's younger and don't know so much meanness."

"Swell family!"

The bar man glared at me and said: "Now wait, Mister! I don't like the way you say that. Peggy, that's Mrs. Arvin, is as nice a lady as you ever meet. You say a word against her and you'll have to fight in this man's town. I, for one, don't blame her one damn' bit for running around with that young guy."

"What young guy?"

"A fella named Crashaw, or some such name. Him and a pal of his was up here, staying right here in the hotel. He saw some of Peggy, I guess. They was in here a couple times, anyway."

"You must know her pretty well."

"I went to school with her. She's a local girl, same as the Arvins are local. But they were stuck-up people and Peggy's just people."

That seemed a nice way to put it and I said good night and went upstairs. I'd found out about my client and her family, all right, but I didn't know a thing about my client's pal, Sally Wells, the one she'd got in trouble with. I could have found out by taking another two drinks and

asking a question to start the mouthy bar man off . . . but I was afraid my company would start coming before I was home to receive them.

And I was trying to figure out this new angle about the Crashaw guy. When he was up calling on my client, he'd been blackmailing her. It was making no sense fast.

And then there was the niece getting killed and the attempt at my client's life at the same time. The guy that did it was supposed to be in jail, but I couldn't help but think there was something phony about that.

The whole thing didn't make sense . . . and I didn't want to phone Harry Sams in the city, and find out how he was getting along, until after my company had left.

I thought I might have some news for him.

I CLICKED on the light when I walked in my front room, and the first thing I saw was the nephew, Jerry, grinning at me like a stuffed ape. Then I turned my head and saw his bald-headed uncle. Uncle had my handbag up on a stand table and he had my underwear scattered all over the floor.

I said: "Now what the hell!"

Jerry said: "Hello, copper!"

I was sore as hell and I went to the phone with the intention of doing something about it. I was going to call the desk and report the thing and ask for a cop . . . and then I was going to have the two of them out on their ears. With me being on record with the call there'd be no comeback if one of them or both of them were mussed up a bit.

It didn't work out that way. The

nephew wiggled something in his pocket that could have been a gun and said: "Now wait a minute!"

I didn't know whether he had a gun or not but I did know he was drunker than a fool. That showed up, even if what was in his pocket wasn't so plain. I stopped in the middle of the floor, and Uncle Sam turned around from my bag.

"You're a cop!" he said.

"That's right."

"What you doing up here?"

"Getting ready to have you two heels arrested for breaking in and going through my stuff."

He shook his head. "Oh, no! We didn't break and enter. You can look at the door and see that we didn't."

"How'd you get in?"

"Does it matter?"

"It will to the judge."

He shook his head again. "Oh, no! We won't be talking to any judge. You're a sensible man; you'll see reason."

"What reason?"

"You're working for my sister-in-law, aren't you? She doesn't want any talk."

"You ask her."

He made a face and called my client a dirty name.

"We know who you are," he told me, "and what you're up here for. I suggest you go back to where you came from and stay there."

"Why?"

"We'll pay you . . . you're not needed up here."

I told him to go to hell.

"You'll blow things wide open for Peggy, up here. You can do her more good working in the city. I should think you'd see that."

"You're looking after her, eh?"

"Why, of course."

"That's why you're up here, then?"

"Why, yes. Somehow, you didn't strike me as a friend of Arnold's. We decided, Jerry and I, to check on you."

I said: "You get the hell out of here now and maybe I'll not report this to the cops. On your way."

"You're not interested then in any proposition?"

"Not from you."

He nodded at the nephew and that big jerk took his hand out of his pocket and showed me an over-sized cigarette case.

"That's in case you get a notion to tell the cops somebody held you up," he said. "We wouldn't want you to think we'd do any harm, Mister Boyle."

He accented the "Mister" and gave me a sneering grin to go along with it.

And I held my temper and didn't slap it off his ugly mug. I was glad enough to have them go, before the rest of my company came calling.

CHAPTER V

Two Visitors



MY CLIENT Peggy was first. I heard a soft little double-knock on the door and opened it, and she came in like it was something she'd done before. Just like a shadow, even if a good-sized one.

I said: "This is dangerous," and put the snap over on the lock, so that Sally Wells would have to knock in case she came before my client left.

"I know it. If Sam or Jerry knew



about this, they'd accuse me of having an affair with you."

"Well, you're of age."

"I can't have scandal. That would void my husband's will. The money would revert to the family, except for a life income."

"And yet you took a chance with this Howard Crashaw?"

She got red in the face and didn't answer for a moment. And when she did, I could hardly hear her.

"I'm . . . I'm not an old woman yet," she said. "I . . . I got lonely. You can't imagine how it is, living there with that bunch of ghouls watching every step, everything I do, listening to every word I say. If I didn't get away from them sometimes I'd go crazy."

"I can see that. But we haven't time to talk about it. What about your niece? How was she killed? Who did it? And what's this about him trying to kill you, too?"

"Who told you that?"

"Your friend, Sally Wells."

She bit her lip and looked worried. "I told Sally about that part of it . . . she's the only one. I didn't tell the police."

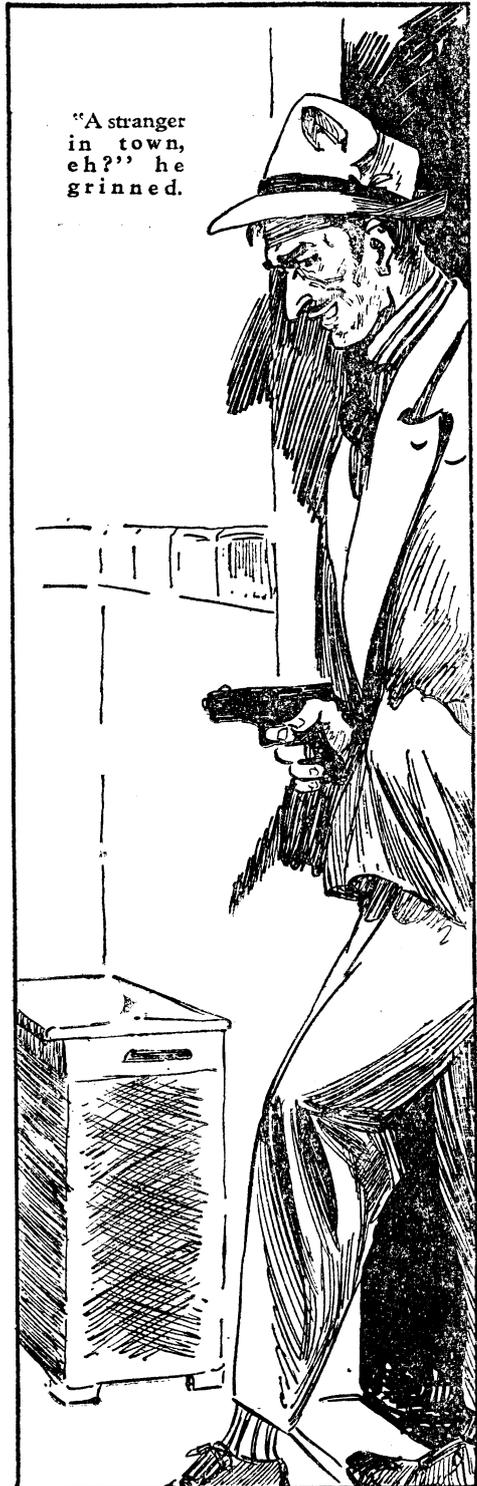
"Why not?"

"I thought they might investigate. You know, try and find a reason for it. I thought they might find out about the pictures . . . about Howard."

It was a silly reason for covering up an attempt at murder, but I suppose she thought that having the picture business come out would be worse than being killed.

I said: "Who was the man?"

"It was a man named George Severs, the police said. They've let him go."



"But why? I thought you identified him absolutely."

"I couldn't be absolutely sure. You see I didn't have my glasses. I'm near-sighted, Mr. Boyle, but I don't wear glasses very often."

"Why not?"

She said they didn't look well, as if that explained everything . . . as if that was a reason for going around half blind. I noticed then that her eyes had that soft vague look near-sighted people sometimes have, and I rather liked the effect.

"Tell me what happened."

"PHYLLIS and I were in the sedan, going home. She'd met me at the air port. A car pulled up in front of us and Phyllis stopped. She was driving. A man came up to the car on her side and said something, and then I saw the gun. I screamed and he shot and Phyllis fell against me. I fell down in the seat, sort of half on the floor of the car. Then I shoved Phyllis away and looked again and the man was standing in front of the car.

"He shot at me, that time, and the bullet went through the windshield right by my head. I screamed again and hid below the dashboard, and then a car came up from behind us and the man ran into his car and drove away. The people that drove up got his license number.

"Then the police came. Phyllis was dead but they didn't take her away. They left her there while they took pictures of everything. Then they took me home, but in a little while they came and got me and took me to the police station. They'd found out who owned the car by the license numbers, and they'd arrested

the man who owned it. They asked me if he was the man who'd shot Phyllis and I said I thought he was but that I couldn't be absolutely sure. I told them about not having my glasses, and all.

"The man said somebody must have taken his car, from where it was parked on the street, and that he didn't know anything about it. He said he'd been playing cards in his hotel room, with friends, and that he could prove it."

"And did he?"

"I guess he did. Anyway, the police called and said they'd let him go. I *thought* it was the same man but I couldn't be sure."

"And his name was George Severs?"

"That's right. He's a salesman . . . he sells things house to house, the police told me. He's staying here in this hotel."

"Are you sure this man was trying to kill your niece? Are you sure he wasn't trying to kill you, and just got her by mistake?"

"I don't know. I saw the gun and I got excited. I don't remember it clearly . . . it was like a terrible dream, Mr. Boyle. I just saw the gun and then everything got confused."

I said I knew how that could be and that she'd better leave before anybody found out about her calling. And then she looked wistfully toward the full quart bottle I had on the table and reddened a little.

"I . . . I don't have to be back right away," she said. "I told them . . . that is I told the maid, that I was going over and stay with Sally tonight."

Then the doorknob rattled as

somebody tried to come in, and then there was a soft and hurried little knocking.

I said to Peggy: "Look, now, quick! Go in the bedroom here. Quick, now! When you hear me open the door and when you know whoever's out there is in here with me and that the hall's clear, then you duck out fast. Get it?"

"Maybe they wouldn't stay long?" she whispered.

"I'm afraid they might," I said, and half pushed her into the bedroom and pointed out the hall door. "Now you duck out, as soon as you know the coast is clear."

Then I went back and let in Sally Wells.

I'D figured her as a hard-boiled wench when I'd first met her, and she didn't do anything to rid me of the thought. She came in as if it was her own place and spotted the whiskey and bee-lined for it.

She said: "Aghgh-h-h, getting ready for mama's visit, were you?"

And poured out two husky drinks.

"No ice . . . no soda?" she asked.

"I'll call down for some."

I went to the phone and she left the whiskey on the table and came over by me. And then she stopped and sniffed the air like a pointing dog.

"Somebody's been here," she said.

"What makes you think that?"

"I smell perfume."

"It's probably after-shave stuff," I said, and pointed to where my clothes were still scattered around the room the way Peggy's brother-in-law, Sam Arvin, had left them. "I spilled some of it . . . I was trying to get things straightened out."

She sniffed again and said: "It still smells like perfumue." And then she took a look at the junk scattered around and giggled.

"Whe-e-e-e!" she said. "Purple shorts, no less! I bet you look just ducky in 'em."

"I've got some green silk pajamas, too," I said. "I'm a ball of fire in those, I'm told. Did you come up to talk about what I wear or what?"

"I've spent time for less purpose," she said, giggling. "I came to talk to you about the pictures, Mr. Boyle. D'ya think you can get them back?"

"I don't know who's got 'em yet."

"It would be dreadful for Peggy if they came out. It would ruin her. That would break the will, you know."

"So I understand. It would be bad for you, too."

SHE tossed her black hair and said: "I don't care much. I don't have to live here like Peggy does; I can go where I please. I'm not tied down. Honestly, it would be sort of funny if those pictures turned up. It really would."

"Why?"

"You should see them. They're just terrible. Peggy was drunk and I was drunk and the boys were drunk. It was hot, that night, and we'd all been fooling around, and, well, they're really something."

"Pretty hot, eh?"

"Well, they look like everybody had been playing strip poker and that everybody lost. What the old biddies in the town would have to say about it, if it comes out!"

"You don't seem worried."

"The old hell-cats think I'm a tramp, anyway. I haven't got any-

thing to lose, not even a reputation. Peggy's got that and a lot of money, besides, and they'd both go."

CHAPTER VI

An Invitation Outside



HE phone jangled and I answered it and the switchboard girl said: "Long distance has been trying to get you, Mr. Boyle. The long distance operator has been trying all the hotels, and I told her you were with us. Shall I put her on?"

I said to go ahead and in a minute heard Harry Sams. He's got a gloomy voice, anyway, and he sounded more discouraged than usual.

"You gave me something hot, Johnny," he said. "You gave me something so hot that I don't know whether I can keep the blackmail angle down or not. I'm trying, but murder makes it tough."

"This girl being killed is out of your territory," I argued. "This is their concern up here. If I can tie it in with the other, I'll turn it over to them, of course, but I want to keep my client out of the mess."

"It's murder down here, too," he said. "I've been trying to get you ever since I heard about it. That guy, that escort, that was with the two gals, is dead. The one named Francis Blair."

I said: "The hell he is! What about the other one?"

"We can't find him. This guy he works for, this guy Winters that runs the Escort Service, he's having kittens all over the place. We brought him down to ask him questions about

the dead fella, and he had hysterics. I'm afraid he's going to crack about the blackmail angle. The only thing that's shutting him up is that he knows it will wreck his business."

"Keep giving him that argument," I said. "Look, Harry, d'ya know anybody named George Severs? Does that name mean anything?"

"Seems to me I've heard it. Why?"

"Can you look it up and see if the guy's got a record?"

"Sure. How're you getting along up there?"

"Just dandy. There's murder and attempted murder already, and I've been told to get out of town. My client's not telling me the truth and neither is my client's friend."

With that I took a look at Sally Wells, who was pretending not to be listening to the call. She didn't change expression in the least.

I said: "I'll call you back, Harry, as soon as I've got anything solid. Hold it down, if you can. And you might wire me a description of this Crashaw. Outside of my client telling me he's tall and dark and handsome, I haven't got a thing to go on. I wouldn't know him if he happened to show up here . . . and that could happen."

I hung up and Sally Wells said: "You were right on that last. It could happen, all right. That's why I didn't want you to come to my house. . . . Howard Crashaw's there. He's been there for a couple of days."

"Why? Don't Mrs. Arvin, Peggy, know that?"

Sally Wells grinned and said: "She does not. She certainly does not. She's got money and all that

but I've got appeal. Get the idea?"

I said I did. Then the boy came in with the ice and soda and we started in on a little serious drinking. I thought maybe if I got her a little tight she might talk . . . and she did.

BUT all she talked about was off-side. She had nothing to say that helped. She was a lonely little girl and it wasn't her fault that men fell head over heels in love with her, only the men that fell weren't the men she wanted. The ones she wanted left her strictly alone. Like I was doing, for instance. You'd think she was a leper or had small-pox or something, so she said. I figured that if the whiskey was loosening her tongue that much, why, a little sympathy might do even more, so I started to prove I didn't think she had anything contagious.

We seemed to drift along from bad to worse along those lines, and we were in the other room of the suite when the sitting room door slammed open.

That was at a quarter after three.

IT WAS two men I'd never seen before and it was a second before I saw them then. I was in no shape to receive company, and I had to get that way before I opened that door between the rooms.

And then I did and the first thing I saw was a full-sized gun.

The man holding it was a tough-looking egg if I ever saw one. Freckled and red-headed, and he looked like he'd put some time in the ring. He waved the gun at me and said:

"Get them hands up."

I did, then put them down and

grabbed for my pants. I'd been in too much hurry to buckle the belt. The man with the guy with the gun laughed and reached out and shoved his partner's arm, so the gun bore to the side.

"He's not dangerous, Scotty," he said. "Not now, anyway. Who the hell ever heard of a guy putting up a battle while he's trying to hold up his pants?"

I had an undershirt on and socks, but no shoes or shirt. I was as sore as a boil, but in no shape to do anything about it. This second man went to the bedroom door and peered in, then said to his pal:

"There's nobody there."

And then he must have seen Sally's coat, or at least something that belonged to her, because he went inside and to the bathroom and threw the door open. He came back, grinning.

"So!" he said. "A stranger in town, are you? Looks to me like you get acquainted damn fast."

"I do all right," I said.

"So I see. Watch him, Scotty."

He went over to the table, by the dead whiskey bottle and by the bowl the ice had been in, and picked up Sally's purse. It had been a chump trick to leave it there in sight, but we hadn't thought of anybody walking in like that. He opened it and looked at the name on a couple of letters, then checked them with the driver's license he found.

I said: "What's the snooping for? The lady's got nothing to do with me."

He said I was certainly familiar with strangers and that a man never knew when a little information might come in handy. He kept the letters, I noticed, but put the license back.

And then he said: "Now get the rest of your clothes on. You're going with us."

I nodded toward the bathroom and said: "What about the lady?"

"She won't run away. That is, she won't run out of town." He raised his voice and called: "Did you hear that, lady? You won't run out of town, now will you?"

Sally didn't answer him.

WE WENT in the bedroom and I dressed, though when I started to knot my tie, they told me to let it go. They grabbed what clothes I'd taken from my bag and threw them back, and Scotty picked the bag up with his free hand.

"You're checking out," the other one said.

"You're fooling with something," I said then. "You've got something that's going to be too hot for you to hold. I'm up here on police business. . . . I got a call from the department here, at the hotel, this evening. There's going to be hell to pay if I don't keep in touch with them."

"We came up the back stairs," he said. "I don't think the police are going to bother us a hell of a lot."

My gun was in its harness, on the floor by the bed. It was in shadow and I thought they were going to miss it, but nothing like that. The one that did most of the talking went to the bathroom door and said:

"Lady, if I was you I'd go home, and I'd keep the hell and gone out of guys rooms from now on. You hear me?"

Sally Wells said: "You go to hell!" It sounded muffled but as if she meant it.

The talkative one laughed and

then saw my gun. "Mustn't leave this," he said. "They'd know damn' well you wouldn't leave that behind. And it's too good a gun to leave hanging around, too."

He put it in his pocket, first latching out the cylinder to make sure it held a full load.

And then we went out in the hall and toward the backstairs. All in all, I thought those backstairs were really getting a play that night.

THEIR car was a dark sedan that looked like nine out of ten other cars on the street. The one that did the talking got in front and Scotty and I got in the back. Scotty made me get in first and clear over to the side before he followed, and the other one watched the move. He didn't show a gun; he didn't have to. He had mine in his pocket, besides what he must've had when he'd gone in the room, and it didn't look like a logical time to make a play.

They drove through town, taking it easy and watching every traffic rule, and it was like going for a Sunday drive with the family. The guy in front chatted along about the war and what our country was going to do, once they really got started right, and even Scotty chimed in with a few remarks about "them dirty Jap—!"

I didn't pay much attention to the conversation, though. The whiskey had worn away and I was scared sick. I'd never thought much about small-town bad boys, but these two seemed perfectly competent and cold-blooded about what they were planning.

And there was no question of that. . . . I wasn't being warned out of town. I was being taken out of town

in the one sure way. The only way I'd come back would be in that well-known pine-box.

Finally I said: "Who you guys working for? You ought to tell me that, at least."

"Does it matter?" asked the driver.

He conked her once: not hard, just hard enough.



"It does to me. Why can't I talk to the guy? I can see reason. I'm just up here because I was paid to come."

"You were offered money to leave."

"Then you're working for Sam Arvin? That it?"

They both laughed and the one that did the talking said: "We wouldn't work for that lush if he was the last man on earth. He'd cross his own mother and laugh about it. If the cops ever talked to him, he'd crack just that fast."

"Then who?"

"Nobody you ever heard of."

"Crashaw?"

They both laughed again.

CHAPTER VII

Wrecked!



COTTY was sitting as far from me as he could get, with his gun clamped against his hip bone, on the side away from me.

It was pointing across him and at me and it was impossible to take it away from him as long as he held it that way. I'd have had to reach clear across him, twist his wrist so the gun wasn't in line, and then do the muscle act . . . and the guy was stronger than I was, even without the handicap. The guy in front was sitting straight, driving like a chauffeur, and he looked safe. And felt safe, from the way he chattered on.

He was no bargain but he was my best bet . . . my only bet. It was either make a play, using him for the spring board, or it was keep on going until they got out far enough from town to drag me out of the car and

kill me and leave me in a ditch. The houses began to get scattered and he picked up speed, and then I saw a viaduct coming up in the headlights. It was over a railroad track because I heard a train whistle and saw its single headlight as it started to round the curve leading under the viaduct.

It was coming fast, with that light seeming to double in size every second. The car was closed, I suppose so I couldn't try to jump, and I couldn't hear it but I thought I could. We started up the ramp just as it straightened out entirely, and then that flaring light was full on us.

I said to Scotty: "Looks like it's going to hit us, don't it?" and I saw him glance up and nod. The light was full in his face and I could even see him blink.

I did it then. I tipped back, so that I was braced against the seat, and then brought my feet up to my belly and lashed out with them at the back of the driver's head. We were doing about forty and I knew we'd wreck, but that was better than what was coming to me at the end of the ride and I knew it.

And I also knew we were going to wreck and it came as a surprise to my killers.

The driver went ahead and I could hear his head slam against the steering wheel. But I also went ahead, clear down off the seat, with my back end down on the floor boards. I could feel the car swerve viciously and figured the driver had twisted the wheel as he fell ahead, and then I was looking up at Scotty.

And Scotty shot, just as I saw him. I saw the gun jump in his hand with the muzzle whipping up from the recoil. He just turned it loose, think-

ing I was still on the seat; he was half blinded from the train light and still didn't realize what had happened. I reached up with both hands, over my head, and got one on his wrist and the other on the barrel of the gun, and then we crashed. We hit the side of the ramp and both wheels on that side went with the smash, and then we kept on going with the running board acting as a sled runner and with the car twisting so we were sidewise for a few feet and then back end to.

It was too much for Scotty. The first smash slid him into a corner with his gun elbow cramped under him, and as we slued it kept twisting him farther around. We hit hard enough to lift me up from the floor and lay me in his lap, though I was helping this by shoving with my legs. I spread the fingers on the hand that didn't have hold of the gun and jabbed them at his eyes and I centered, because he howled and put his free hand up to his face to guard it. I got the gun with both hands and twisted, and this time when it went off it was pointed at the ceiling.

And then I had it and I slugged Scotty three times in the face with it, right through his guarding hand.

The gun was a .44 Smith & Wesson Special weighing almost two pounds and a half, and you lay that much metal in anybody's face and they go out like a light, whether their hands break the blow a little bit or not.

And Scotty was out and there wasn't any movement from the man in the front seat.

WE WERE stopped by that time, with the car facing the way we'd

come and tipped at a crazy angle. It was half over the foot high side of the ramp and, if we'd landed there any harder, we'd have gone all the way. I could see lights coming up fast from both directions, and I got my own gun from the man in the front seat and tucked Scotty's down under the back seat cushion.

That had been fired, and I didn't want to have to answer any questions about it.

The first car up held a man and a woman and they both got out. The man was definitely a half-wit, and proved it after he'd stared up and down the wreck.

"Must've smashed," he said.

The woman was brighter, though not much. "Somebody still in it, Mister?" she asked. She didn't need to . . . she could see both Scotty and the driver, both still dead to the world.

The next car held four college kids and they were a little bit tight. At that, they didn't make any foolish talk. They got out of their car and came over just in time to hear the woman start telling her hubby what to do.

"Get 'em out of the car, John," she said. "Maybe they're hurt bad. Don't just stand there like a dummy."

John stood there like a dummy.

One of the college boys said: "You'd better not move 'em, lady. Better wait until an ambulance or a doctor comes. You might break something."

I said: "That's right. We hit hard. I heard something snap when the driver hit his head on the wheel."

"Have you sent for help?"

"It just happened."

He turned to one of his pals and said: "Drive him back to a phone, will you, Jimmy. There might not be a police car by here for an hour."

It was working out perfectly. I got in with Jimmy and we went almost to the center of town before we found an open drug store, and then I worked the rest of it out myself.

"You go on back, Mister," I said. "I'll phone the police to send an ambulance and then I'll take a cab to the hospital. I hit pretty hard on the back of the seat . . . I think maybe I busted a rib."

"I'll drive you there, if you like."

"Oh, go on back to your friends. I don't know where the hospital is, and it'll take a little time to phone and all. You've done plenty."

He admitted he didn't know the town. They were just driving through, getting to school from a trip to the city, and he didn't need much urging to let the good samaritan stuff slide by the board. I didn't report the wreck, just waited until he was out of sight, and then started walking back to my hotel. I didn't want any cab driver reporting a mysterious passenger at that hour. I went in the back way and up those backstairs, making it quiet and praying I wouldn't run into the night porter or clerk, and it wasn't until I was safely in my room with the door locked behind me that I thought of what I'd overlooked.

It was just my hand bag and with it everything I had with me. There was identification in it, even up to and including a spare gun registered to me on my license.

And it was too late to do a thing about it.

IT TOOK the cops two hours on a routine check to find me. I give 'em credit . . . they were thorough. They'd found the bag in the wrecked car and checked the identification against Scotty and the hoodlum with him. They'd realized it must belong to a third party and checked the hotels to locate him, and there I was registered at the Hamlin House.

There were two of them, a sergeant and a patrolman, and they came in as if they weren't quite sure of themselves.

The sergeant said: "Your name Boyle?"

"That's right?"

"Where you been?"

I waved a hand and showed him the empty whiskey bottle, the empty glasses, and the general mussed up appearance of the room.

"Right here," I said. "Why?"

"Sure of it?"

I tried to sound like I was half drunk and sore.

"Say, what is this? What's the idea in busting up to my room at this hour and asking me silly questions?"

"We've got reasons, Mr. Boyle. You've been in all evening?"

"I had company. Yeah, I've been in all evening."

"Can you prove it?"

"I don't want to, if that means anything. My company was a lady, if you want to know."

"I see. Have any trouble tonight?"

I grinned and said I had the usual argument and I won a grin back for it. "I don't mean that," he said. "Anything else?"

"Why, no."

He lost his grin and snapped: "Then how the hell d'ya explain how

your handbag was found in a wrecked car, an hour ago. Tell me that, Mister."

"Must've been swiped," I said. "I'll be honest, officer. I was drinking and so was my friend. I'm afraid we weren't paying much attention to handbags."

"Private cop, aren't you?"

"That's right."

"Know all the answers, don't you?"

"I'm trying to cooperate."

"Sure of that?"

"You bet. I was sore when you came in; I didn't know what it was all about. That's all."

He said: "I don't think it's all, but maybe you're right. You won't leave town without stopping at the station and saying good-by to us, will you?"

"Not if that's what you want."

"It's what I want," he said.

"Come on, Sully."

It looked like I'd have to have Lieutenant Harry Sams get in touch with the local law and tell them I was working with him on the job.

CHAPTER VIII

Love's a Funny Thing



THE thing was a nicely mixed up mess and it was getting worse instead of better. In the first place, my client, Mrs. Arvin, was being blackmailed by somebody. The somebody could be Howard Crashaw, but it didn't have to be. Her girl friend was also supposed to be on the same spot.

Both of them had reason to fear blackmail, though my client wouldn't come right out and admit it.

Then my client's niece got killed,



"We want you, Boyle,"
said the sergeant.

and there was no apparent reason for the murder. She could have been killed by mistake, and that was the way I was figuring it.

Then my client's brother-in-law and nephew make a try at getting me out of town, and then two thugs do their best to take me for the well-known ride. And I couldn't believe they were working for the brother-in-law and nephew.

There was the question about the man who my client had picked as the one who'd murdered the niece. While she hadn't made a positive identification, she'd come pretty close to it . . . and here he was out on the streets again, after being picked up and questioned by the cops.

And last but not least there was

one of the suspected blackmailers being killed in the city. It was a certainty that he was killed over the mess . . . a thing like that wouldn't be coincidence.

There were too many angles to shoot at, so I gave it up and tried to get some sleep, and the Lord knows I needed it after the night I'd had. And just before I dropped off I decided to ask Harry Sams to come up; there were too many loose ends hanging out, and a little police help would aid in picking them up. Stuff like identifying the two hoodlums who had picked me out of my love nest. Like a check on Howard Crashaw, who was apparently living with my new light-of-love. Like checking on the interest brother-in-law and nephew were showing me.

There's a lot of things like that a policeman, with his official status, can get and that a private operator can't. At least unless he takes a lot of time and trouble, and I didn't have much of the first, even if I was having too much of the last.

HARRY SAMS sounded even grumpier than usual and complained, bitterly, that he was getting no sleep. It was then ten o'clock, so I asked him what he was spending his nights doing . . . certainly a logical question.

"Trying to get a line on that damn Crashaw," he grumbled. "He's quit his job, or so it looks like. They're on a sort of call service, Johnny, and he's just dropped out of sight."

"I've found him," I said. "He's up here."

"I'll send up a warrant to the local cops," Sams said. "They can pick him and hold him for me."

"For blackmail?"

"For suspected murder. I got a notion he knocked off his pal."

"You'd better come up yourself. It's getting better and better here."

He looked up plane schedules and said he'd be in at three o'clock and for me to meet him at the airport.

Then I got my client on the phone and from the way she sounded I gathered she'd been crying. I gave her the warning before she did much more than say hello.

"Don't talk," I said. "Somebody's listening in."

She mumbled something and I said: "That's right. Somebody's listening in on an extension there in your house."

She said: "I'll drive down, right now, and meet you in the bar."

I said: "You stay there and I'll come up and get you in a cab. From now on, you're going to either be with me or with a friend of mine."

"What's happened?"

I spoke for the benefit of whoever might be listening in. "It's coming to a head," I said. "I don't want the same thing happening to you that happened to your niece. I've got an idea of who's back of that, and I don't want you killed before I work it out."

"Then I'll wait here for you."

"I think you're safe enough there, at home. I don't think you have to worry . . . if anything should happen, I know who'd be responsible."

She hung up then, after telling me again that she'd wait for me, and again I heard that betraying little click on the line. It was a cinch it was either brother-in-law or nephew keeping cases on auntie, and that was all right with me. I wanted them to

think I knew more than I did . . . which was just about nothing.

WHEN I picked her up, I wondered why the devil she'd been crying, but she enlightened me right away.

"They must've followed me," she said, at once. "Sam and Jerry, I mean. They were waiting for me when I got home, and they accused me of going to the hotel and seeing you."

"So-o-o-o-o?"

"They told me all about it. How I went up the backstairs and everything. They even told me how long I stayed in your room."

"They must have hurried then, to get home ahead of you. That all they say?"

"Why, yes. Sam insists he's going to try and break the will again, on the morals clause it has."

"He won't. You sure that's all they said?"

"Why, yes."

That meant they were holding back the dope about Sally Wells being my second caller. For some reason, and I started getting an idea. We went into the Hamlin House bar and the same bar man that was on duty the night before came over and said:

"Hiya, Peggy!"

She said hello, and then he got mysterious. "I saw you-know-who this morning. He was in here with Sally Wells."

My client knew who you-know-who was and proved it.

She snapped: "That dirty ——."

I said: "You mean Howard's a dirty —— or that Sally Wells is a dirty ——?"

"Both," she said. "I knew she was making passes at him but I didn't think he'd be silly enough to pay any attention to her."

"Love's a funny thing," I said.

She said a word a lady shouldn't know, much less repeat, and I needed her a little more.

"He's been here for a couple of days. He's staying at her house."

She said some more words. She'd just slid out of her coat, but she started putting it back on.

"Now what?" I asked.

"I'm going up there."

I said: "Not until three o'clock, you're not. And maybe not then. D'ya want to blow this thing sky high?"

"I'm mad enough to do it."

"Listen to reason. That would bring the blackmail stuff right to the front. Let me handle it. I'm working with the police . . . it will all settle up at once, and the murder angle will blank out the other."

"Are you sure?"

I said: "Well, no. But I'm hoping."

THEN the same two cops that had called on me the night before came in and headed toward our booth.

"We want you, Boyle," said the sergeant. "I guess maybe you'd better come along, too, Mrs. Arvin."

Mrs. Arvin looked puzzled and I said: "I don't know what you want me for, but I do know there's no reason for Mrs. Arvin going along. Why can't she stay here?"

He said: "She spends too much time in hotels, I'm afraid," and gave her a hard look.

"You're wrong," I said.

"What does he mean?" asked Mrs. Arvin.

"I mean you were here, with him, last night," said the sergeant.

Mrs. Arvin colored and said: "Only for a little while."

I'd tried to kick her shin to stop her but I was too late. It did keep her from saying any more, and the sergeant had the last word.

"I want you people to come down with me and look at Scotty Whalen," he said. "He died about twenty minutes ago from a fractured skull."

I asked who Scotty Whalen was, trying to play it dumb, and I got told.

"He's the guy you beat to death with his own gun," the sergeant told me. "I just got through taking prints off the glasses in your room and they match with those on the butt of Scotty's gun. Coming along or d'ya want us to take you?"

I said we'd go along.

CHAPTER IX

In the Bag



THE first thing I did was clear my client. The patrolman had the glasses they'd taken from my room, and I insisted they check her prints against those on the glasses. They were Sally Wells' prints, of course, and they didn't match up two cents' worth. The chief, a pot-bellied customer named Dawes, got very profuse with apologies about that time, and was all for letting my client go home, but I put a stop to that, as well.

"You'd better stay here with me, Mrs. Arvin," I said. "I'll be leaving in a few minutes and we'll go to-

gether. I don't want you getting killed . . . you're too good a client."

The chief said: "What's this! What's this!"

I said: "I think somebody's trying to do my client an injury. That's all. I'm trying to protect her, until you guys get straightened out on the right track."

"Who'd kill her?"

I said: "Well, as near as I can narrow it down, there's five that might. Or any of the five might hire it done, which is more probable."

"You're crazy, man."

I said: "Her niece is dead, isn't she? She was killed by mistake . . . the killer meant to get Mrs. Arvin."

"But why?"

"Mrs. Arvin's the one that's got money, isn't she? The niece just had what Mrs. Arvin gave her."

"Well, what of it?"

I said: "That's why people get killed. Money. You know that."

He admitted that was the usual reason for murder . . . that murder for gain motivated just about all premeditated killings.

And then he stared at Mrs. Arvin and said: "And why should somebody be trying to kill you just now, Mrs. Arvin?"

I said, before she had a chance to answer: "Mrs. Arvin has had some trouble. Some people have been trying to shake her down, and she's got an idea of who it is. Now they're afraid . . . they're trying to shut her up."

"Who is it?"

I said: "If you'll call the city and get Lieutenant Sams, of the Bunco Squad, on the phone he'll tell you I'm working with him. He'll also tell

you, I think, that now's no time for you to fly off the handle."

HE PHONED and got Sams and Sams told him what I'd said he would. The chief started out talking big and bluff and ended by saying "yes, sir" and "no, sir," and I took it Harry Sams had told him it was big stuff and dynamite to handle.

Then the chief swung around to me and said: "And now what about Scotty Whalen?"

I told him the truth. About how the two hooligans had taken me out of my hotel with the intention of doing away with me, and how the car had wrecked and how I'd got away from them.

I said: "What about the other guy? The one that was driving the car?"

"Neck's broken," said the chief. "He'll live, if he puts in a year or so in a cast, but he's in no shape to talk and won't be for some time."

"They local boys?"

"That's right. They come and go . . . they make this town a headquarters and I can't do anything about it. That is, I couldn't do anything until now. About all I can do is postpone the inquest . . . you'll have to tell your story then."

I said: "By that time it will be all over, I hope. We can give the papers a real story, then, chief, and we'll all get some credit. Lieutenant Sams is coming up this afternoon, and I think that when he's here, things will happen."

"You'll want your things . . . the stuff of yours we found in the car?"

"Might as well take 'em," I said.

"And there's something else," he said, taking me to the side. "Now,

look! Don't get sore; we asked questions when this came up, you know."

"Well?"

"This fella that was with Whalen . . . his name's Joe Connor . . . had a couple of letters. We sort of asked questions . . . Mrs. Wells was up at your hotel, too, wasn't she?"

"Well, yes. She brought me a message from Mrs. Arvin."

I was taking a chance he didn't know how long Sally had been there, and I was wrong. The chief got red and embarrassed and started off by saying it was none of his business and just a story the porter had given them. And then he gave it to me.

The porter had seen Jerry and Sam Arvin pussy-foot up the backstairs, first. He had a room in the basement, off to the side, and through his open door he caught everything that went in and out the back entrance, it seemed. Then he'd seen Mrs. Arvin make the jaunt, followed right away by Sally Wells. Then Jerry and Sam Arvin had tip-toed down, followed in turn by Mrs. Arvin.

He hadn't seen Sally Wells leave at all . . . he must have been asleep when she'd left and at the time the hoodlums came up for me.

It gave me no proof for my hoodlum story and I mentioned this, but the chief waved a big hand and told me not to worry.

"We won't make you trouble unless the coroner's jury does," he said, handing me the letters. "We're glad enough to have those two out of the way. And from what Lieutenant Sams said, everything is the way it should be, with you working with the police and all."



I shot him in the knees.
At ten feet I don't miss.



I put the letters in my pocket and thanked him and left with Mrs. Arvin. It was turning out all right with the local police, but they were the least of my troubles.

HARRY SAMS got in at three, dour as ever, and by that time my lady client was in the bag. She'd been hoisting 'em steady for three hours and she just couldn't stand the



strain. I made her wait in the cab while I went over to meet Harry, and I gave her an out with him the first thing.

"Don't pay any attention to her, Harry," I said. "She's been scared to death about this business and I gave her a few drinks to quiet her. Only I guess I gave her too many . . . she's not getting any quieter and she's getting as amorous as a damn' mink."

"Swell people," said Harry. "This is a swell mess all around. I'd blast it wide open if I hadn't promised."

"And if it didn't scare everybody that's in the same sort of trouble away from the police," I told him. "Oh, well, it's coming to a head."

We got in the cab and Mrs. Arvin . . . she was Peggy and I was Johnny, by that time . . . snuggled next to me and beamed at Harry Sams.

"I like policemen," she confided. "They say the cutest things. We went up to Johnny's room for a little while, Mr. Sams, and just guess what Johnny said."

I said: "Skip it, honey, the lieutenant wouldn't be interested," but that louse of a Sams gave her a go-on look and away she went. She went into detail about some of the things I'd said . . . though I thank the Lord she left out some others.

And Harry took it all in, with an intent look, on his ugly face. I knew he was trying to remember every little bit of it to pass around to the boys back home; and I knew I'd be in for an unmerciful ribbing when I got there.

I said, trying to change the subject: "Look, Harry, this Severs is staying at the same place I am. He's

one of these house-to-house salesmen, and it's just possible he might be in. How would it be if we talked to him?"

"That's the man who shot my niece," said Peggy. "Or at least he's the man I think did it."

"Severs, Severs, Severs," said Sams, as if trying to place the name. "How come he's staying where you are, Johnny? You living in a dump?"

"The Hamlin House. It's supposed to be the best in town."

"And he's a canvasser?"

"So the cops say."

"He's a phony," said Sams, with decision. "No canvasser ever made dough enough to stay in a hotel that good. Where's he from?"

"The city."

"I've heard the name," Sams said, as if insisting to himself. "I've heard it or I've seen it and that lately. I think the best thing to do is talk to this Crashaw."

"What about his pal? The guy that was killed? Francis Blair?"

"He was found in an alley, a couple of blocks from where he and Crashaw had an apartment. His head was beaten in and he'd been stuffed behind a couple of garbage cans."

MRS. ARVIN shuddered nearer to me.

"He was an awfully nice boy," she said. "I'm sure that neither he or Howard had anything to do with all this trouble."

"Severs, Severs," said Harry Sams. "I know that name . . . if I can just place it. I almost had it then."

"He have a record?"

"No. I looked."

We swung into the main part of town and I said: "Peggy, we're going to drop you at the hotel bar. You wait for us there."

"If you're going to talk to Howard, I want to go, too."

"It's liable to be embarrassing."

She looked at Sams and got red in the face. "Harry knows about it . . . that is he knows about all of it you've told me."

She got even redder, but she insisted: "I want to go along."

Sams said: "Let her come, Johnny. It can't do any harm."

So I told the driver to take us to the residence of Mrs. Sarah Wells. I thought of her letters then, but didn't have time to read them.

CHAPTER X

A Chance for Sally



MY light-o-love, Sally, might have been a fickle little tramp and the rest of it, but she had a nice place. Small but neat . . . probably six rooms, and in a nice section of town. I could see how if she had one man there she couldn't well have another at the same time . . . they'd conflict for sure.

She opened the door for us and I introduced Harry Sams, and then my client opened the ball.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"Where's who?" asked Sally, giving me a so-you-told-her look.

"Howard! He's here; don't lie to me."

"I wouldn't dream of lying to you, honey," said Mrs. Wells, giving her a catty grin. "If you want to see Howard, why, see him you shall. Oh, Howard!"

Crashaw came up behind her, then. He was a tall good-looking young heel, black-headed and black-eyed. His mouth was too soft and red and his eyes were a little shifty, but then I guess the gals can't expect perfection.

"Hello, Peg!" he said, and raised his eyebrows at Sams and me. It looked like something out of the movies . . . the young Lord of the manor stooping to bandy words with members of the rank and file. "And hello, ah, men."

Peggy Arvin quavered: "Oh, Howard! I . . . I didn't believe it."

He shrugged and Sally Wells grinned.

Sams said: "I'm a police officer, Crashaw. There's a few things I want to ask you."

The dope said: "Are you arresting me?"

Sams said: "Why, no," in a surprised voice.

The dope stood on what he thought his rights were. "I don't believe I have anything to say to you then, sir."

I looked up and down and didn't see a soul. I said: "All clear, Harry!" and Sams nodded. And then shoved Mrs. Sally Wells to the side, as if she was piece of furniture and reached and got Crashaw by the front of his open shirt. He went in the house that way, moving faster as he went, and he finished in Sally's front room with the kid off his feet and dragging. It was just the reverse of the bum's rush, but it was as effective.

Peggy and I followed and I took Sally along with me, under an arm. She was kicking, but she wasn't making any noise.

Sams pushed the dope in a chair and said: "So you don't think you want to talk. I think you do, if you're going to keep on eating with them same teeth."

He had his sap up his left sleeve . . . some cops carry 'em there when they think they're going to have a use for 'em . . . and he yanked it as Crashaw started to bounce out of the chair. He flipped it, just using his wrist, and he was an artist with it if I ever saw one. The shot-loaded end landed just where Sams had called his shot, and Crashaw went back in the chair with his hand up to his mouth. He just took it away to spit out some blood and one tooth.

Sams said: "I think you know how Francis Blair got killed. Suppose you tell me."

MR. SALLY WELLS started for the phone and I asked her what she was going to do. She said: "Call the police! This is an outrage!"

I said: "Get away from the phone, babe, or I'll sit you down on the floor. I mean it."

Mrs. Peggy Arvin said: "I hope he does it, you dirty——."

"I didn't have anything to do with it," said Crashaw. "I . . . I didn't know he was dead until late last night."

"She told you, eh?" I asked, nodding at Sally Wells. "That it?"

"That's right."

"One of the things you found out from me, eh?" I asked her. "Too bad you didn't find out more."

She shook her head and said: "I found out enough."

"Got any of the pictures?" Sams asked Crashaw.

"No. I don't know anything about that. Just what Sally's told me about them. That's all I know."

Sams nodded at me and I went in the bedroom. There were half a dozen prints of the pictures in the top dresser drawer . . . neither of the two damn fools had made even a pretense at hiding them. Or maybe they'd been studying them . . . that I don't know.

And for a student in that kind of pictures they were well worth studying. And, as soon as I'd taken the first glance at them, I realized what was wrong.

I went back to the other room and found Sams still standing over Crashaw and glaring down at him. Blood was trickling through Crashaw's fingers, where he had his hand to his mouth, and I judged he'd spoken out of turn again.

I said: "Harry, get away from him a minute. There's something funny . . . I've got an idea that backs up."

He switched the sap for his service gun and said: "Sit right there, heel! I can reach out and get you across the room with this thing."

Crashaw cowered lower in the chair, and Sams backed to where I was by the bedroom door. Sally Wells was standing by the wall with my client in front of her and hemming her in, and as big as my client was and as small as Sally was, I didn't think she'd get away to call the police.

I said: "Harry, they all are in these pictures. All four of 'em. This guy Crashaw and Blair, and both women."

"So-o-o?"

"Well, who took 'em? Some-

body must've worked the camera. And a couple of 'em are sort of cut off at the side . . . like the camera wasn't lined."

"Well?"

"They were taken from the next room, I think."

"That ——— Severs!"

"Hunh!"

Sams said: "I knew I'd seen that name. Of course I saw it. He's got the apartment next to Crashaw's. I saw his name on it, when I was checking on Crashaw and Blair. That's it . . . I knew I'd seen it."

I said: "Then we've got it in our lap. Peggy was right . . . he was the guy that killed the niece, alibi or no alibi."

"He could have a dozen alibis, like he had," said Harry. "It won't hold up. He could have started a card game in his room, with some pals. He could have gone in and out the back way. . . . I take it there's as much traffic that back way as there is through the lobby, anyway."

I said: "There's one thing more," and called over to Peggy Arvin. "You know yet, Peggy, who was doing the listening in at your house? You sure it was Jerry or Sam?"

"It was the maid that Jerry is mad about," said Mrs. Arvin. "I've caught her at it. She spies and snoops all the time."

"For Jerry's benefit?"

"Why of course."

I SAID to Sams: "We're going to have to tie uncle and nephew in it, but I think we can do it through this monkey, here. I don't think he'll stand up when the going gets tough."

Sams said grimly: "I know damn well he won't."

I went over and slid between Peggy and Sally Wells. I said: "Sally, you're the brains, when it comes to a question of you and Crashaw. I know that. So we're going to give you the chance to call Severs . . . he'll come for you where he won't for Crashaw."

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

"We're giving you a chance for an out," I told her. "We can do it the hard way . . . we can take Severs out of his room on a John Doe warrant and talk it over with him in a back room at the station. Or we can get little bright-eyes here to call. . . . Severs will be able to understand him even if he does lisp a bit from losing a tooth."

"I take it you want me to telephone a man named Severs. Is that right?"

"Not admitting a thing, are you?"

She tossed her head and told me not to be ridiculous and that there'd be a stttlement as soon as we realized our outrageous tactics were leading us nowhere.

I said: "You going to call, or do I let Cutie do it?"

She said: "I'll naturally call, rather than have you and this hoodlum beat me. You will have to tell me what to say."

I said we'd tell her . . . and that if she said one thing else we'd do more than just talk.

With that she went over to the phone.

And I said to Peggy Arvin: "When she gets through, I want you to phone Sam and Jerry and get 'em here, too. We might as well have a family get-together and get the mess straightened out for good."

She'd said she'd do anything we asked.

SEVERS was the first to arrive and he didn't expect to meet us. Sams was behind the door when Sally Wells opened it, and I was inside the bedroom with Peggy and young Crashaw. Crashaw had a towel over his broken mouth by that time, but he was so scared he was as white as it was.

Severs came boiling in and I recognized him as a guy I'd seen in the Hamlin House lobby and bar. A tall, lantern-jawed, mean-looking bird.

He snapped out: "What's happened? What d'ya mean something has gone wrong."

He must've seen by Sally Wells' face that what was wrong was right behind him. He swung, jerking his hand up under his coat toward a hidden gun, and Sams stepped in to him with the sap. Severs back-pedaled and it turned out to be the worse thing in the world for him because it took him out of Sams' reach. Sally Wells was on her nerve alone, and seeing Sams miss his swing was just too much for her. She let out a screech and jumped for Sams, catching him by the arm that held the sap, and Severs got in the clear and got his gun in sight.

I couldn't wait then. I shot him three times, catching him in the knees, and at ten feet I didn't miss. He went down in a pile, his gun flying clear across the room as he fell, and Sally let out another screech and dived for it.

Sams was right on top of her when she got it. She turned and started to swing the gun and he conked her with the sap. Not hard, just hard

enough. She sighed and slipped down on top of the gun, and Sams swung around to us.

"Good work, Johnny," he said. "The guy's too fast and flighty to be trusted on his feet."

I said I didn't want to do it but that I was forced into it.

"He's fainted," said Mrs. Arvin, pointing at Crashaw. "He fainted when you shot that man. And that man's the same one that killed Phyllis; I'm sure he is, now."

"Why now? Why not when the police showed him to you?"

"It was the way he moved. He was standing still when I saw him at the police station."

Severs was moving right then, rolling back and forth on the floor. Both his legs were broken and his feet were flopping crazily. He was making a lot of noise to go along with it, too, and that bothered me.

I said: "After all, Harry, we ought to get an ambulance for the guy. He'll bleed to death."

Then there was a knock on the door and Harry motioned me back into the bedroom with Mrs. Arvin and then opened the door.

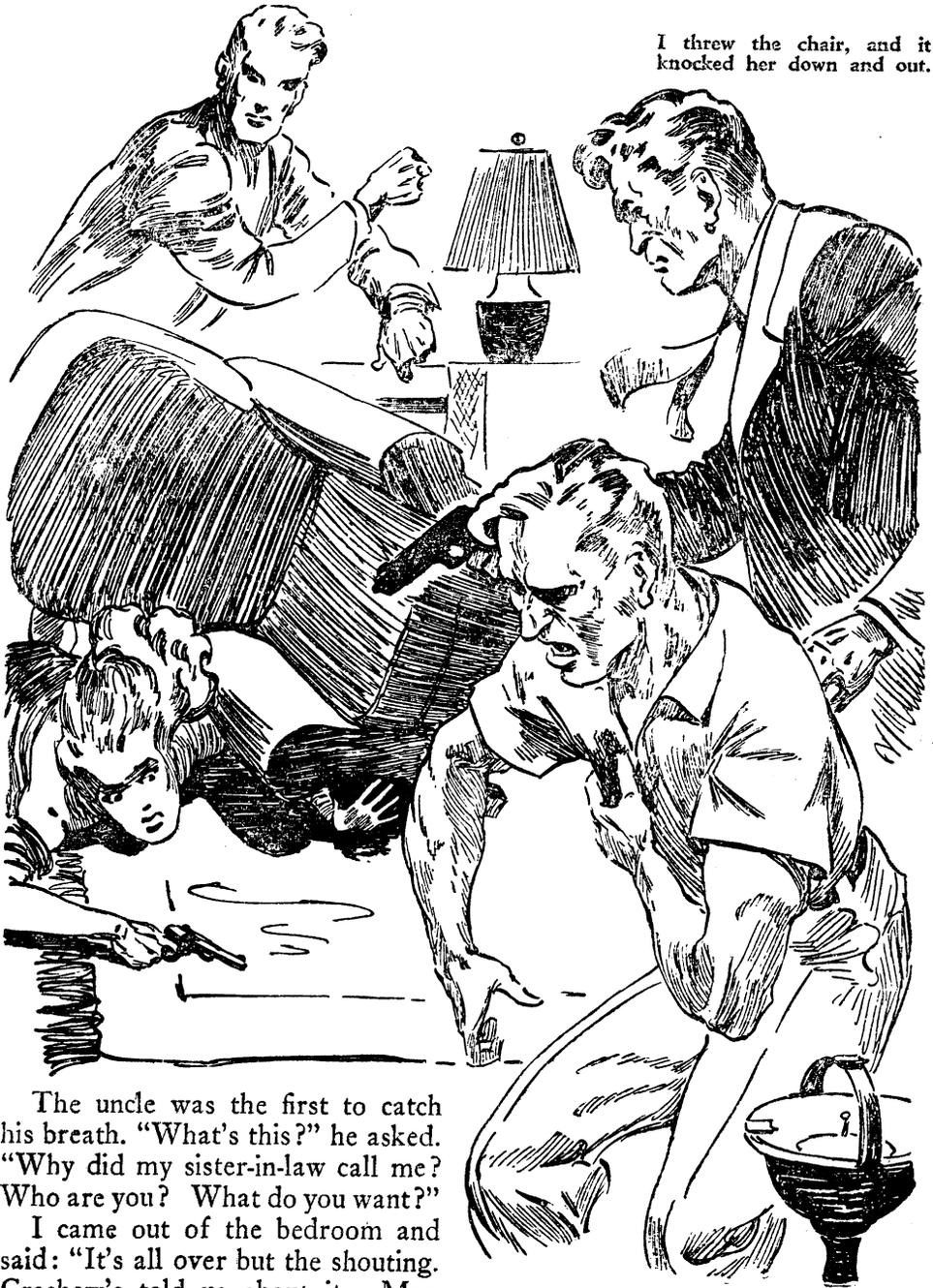
CHAPTER XI

A Few Letters



T WAS the Arvins, uncle and nephew. They stopped just inside the door and stared at Severs, writhing on the floor. They gave another look at Sally Wells, who was crumpled in a corner and looked to be dead. They looked at Harry Sams, who'd traded his sap for his gun and stood acting as if he'd like a chance to use it.

I threw the chair, and it knocked her down and out.



The uncle was the first to catch his breath. "What's this?" he asked. "Why did my sister-in-law call me? Who are you? What do you want?"

I came out of the bedroom and said: "It's all over but the shouting. Crashaw's told us about it. Mrs. Wells and Severs decided to fight it out. You can see what happened to them. It's your turn, now."

"My . . . my turn?"

"To talk. We know you've been working with Severs. We know the girl wasn't killed by mistake, like we thought, but was killed on purpose.

We know Severs did it. We know you and Crashaw and Severs and Mrs. Wells are all in the blackmail business together. It's all through, now . . . it's all over."

I was wrong . . . it wasn't over. We'd looked away from Sally Wells, and that was a mistake. Or the second mistake. . . . Sams had made the first when he didn't hit her harder. She came out of it, and there was Severs' gun right under her hand. She was half wacky, anyway, with all that had been going on, and away she went. She grabbed the gun and lifted it and shot at Sams, all with the same move, and I saw it out of the corner of my eye too late to stop it if I could. She didn't hit him, though. Jerry, the nephew, was at Sams' right, and he clutched his stomach with both hands and bent over and started walking straight ahead like a zombie. Sally Wells took a better grip on the gun and this time tried for an aimed shot, but I picked up an over-stuffed chair that must've weighed at least sixty pounds and threw it at her. It not only knocked her down and out again but it covered her.

Crashaw came to in time to see this last piece of shooting and chair throwing, and put both hands over his eyes and cried out:

"Oh, terrible! Terrible!"

I said to Sams: "Let's make sure these guys are under control and then listen to this bird tell his story. I'm sure he wants to do it."

Sams said: "Sure."

Then Crashaw fainted again but we found some ammonia in Sally Wells medicine cabinet and brought him around. We told him he had to talk fast because Severs was bleeding

to death from his broken knees and that Sally Wells should have a splint put on her broken arm. And that Arvin, nephew, should go to the morgue.

The chair I'd thrown did the arm breaking on Sally Wells.

IT WAS the way I'd figured it. Severs was a professional blackmailer and took the apartment next to that of Crashaw and Blair for business reasons. He cut through the wall between the apartments, just at a corner where he could mask the hole with matching wall paper, and just big enough so a candid camera lens would command the most of the Crashaw and Blair front room. That was the party room, we took it, from the pictures. He knew the boys played around with the Escort Service customers after hours, and he knew that some of the customers were moneyed people from small towns that couldn't afford a scandal.

All he had to do was wait and let nature take its course . . . wait until he had things to suit him on the set-up. Peggy Arvin and Sally Wells were made to order. Wealthy, respected, and the rest of it . . . and, when he got into it, he found that Peggy Arvin had more than just a fear of scandal to make her pay. She had everything to lose, according to the term of her dead husband's wacky will . . . and Severs knew he really had found a gold mine.

He dug for the gold . . . I'll give him credit. He told her to send money to Crashaw at General Delivery, knowing that Crashaw got his mail at the apartment. That made her believe that Crashaw was the

blackmailer, and she knew that Crashaw had plenty on her if he ever wanted to start a scandal.

The damn' fool had even played around with him after that party . . . he'd visited her and I got the idea she thought she was more than a little in love with the heel.

All Severs had to do was pick up the money, under Crashaw's name at the post office.

He worked her for all he was worth and he tried to work Sally Wells but Sally backed up on it. She didn't have the money to pay . . . it turned out she was living on her reputation. She had more bills than money, in spite of the insurance her husband was supposed to have left her.

IT WAS like that when Severs went up to Hamlin to scout around and see how much of a nick Mrs. Arvin could stand. He'd got a thousand, six different times, but he was greedy and thought he might get more. And once in town he ran into the gossip about the crazy will that tied her down and realized he had something even bigger than he thought.

It was then he started playing around with Phyllis Arvin, thinking he might as well get his dope straight from the feed bag. The fool girl was man crazy, anyway, and there's no question about Severs being a persuasive sort of guy. He found out what he wanted from her and through her contacted her uncle and brother. He propositioned them, explaining he had enough stuff on Mrs. Arvin to break the will. That would have given everything to them and left Mrs. Arvin out in the cold, except for a little annuity.

Of course they went for it, hook, line, and sinker. All they wanted to be sure of was that the thing would be strong enough to break the will. It was then that things began to go sour. Severs had the pictures, all right, and they were plenty strong enough to prove moral turpitude besides everything else, but neither he nor the uncle and nephew were in any position to produce them. It would have smacked too much of blackmail to get by in court; the court would have thrown the will case out because of the circumstances in which the pictures were taken.

That's a catch on blackmailing. Once the thing's public the threat has lost most of its force. And explaining how the pictures were in their possession would have been an embarrassing thing for the family.

That put it back to Severs, and he had to go back to first base and start again. He had to work it out through the two boys, Crashaw and Blair. With their testimony about the party the pictures would have stood up in court . . . there'd been no getting away from that added weight.

CRASHAW had fallen for Sally Wells, in spite of her being ten years and more older than he was, and he was easy to handle. He told the whole thing to Sally and she saw a chance for her to make something out of it. She cut right in with Severs and with the uncle and nephew . . . she even claimed to Peggy Arvin that she'd paid off the blackmailer, too. She was working for a cut on Peggy's money, after uncle and nephew got their hands on it, as was Severs.

Then Blair kicked over the apple cart. He must've been a decent young fellow; anyway he told them all to go to hell. He threaten'd to tell the cops about the whole affair and it was up to Severs to shut him up.

So Severs hired the two heels that took me out of my hotel room for the job, and they knocked the poor guy in the head and hid him in that alley, back of those garbage cans.

Then little Phyllis got wise to what was going on. And she must've been all for little Phyllis. She told Severs she was going to tell her auntie all about it and that auntie would have them all thrown in jail. That would leave little Phyllis sitting pretty . . . she'd be the blue-eyed baby with auntie. The rest of the family would be out of the way and she'd be in the honey spot.

That's what threw me wrong. I thought right along that the kid had been killed by mistake. That the killer had been aiming at Auntie Peggy and had made a slip. Instead of that Severs had tried to hire the kid killed, to shut her up, of course, and his two hoodlums had backed up on it. It was all right for them to kill men, but they drew the line at killing women.

So Severs did it himself, trusting to my client's poor eye-sight for an uncertain identification and backing it up with an arranged alibi with friends at the hotel. The little girl might not have talked but it wasn't worth taking a chance over . . . she was young and flighty and they couldn't trust to luck after what had gone before.

The maid had listened in on my first call to Mrs. Arvin and told

Jerry and uncle I was a cop. They'd told Severs and he'd sent his muscle men to put me out of the way. That had backed up . . . things were going bad all along the line for the combine by that time. They thought that if they could keep it under control until they had a chance to bust out with the suit to break the will, they'd be all right. After that, any charge Mrs. Arvin made against them would be ascribed to just trying to break their evidence.

There never was any reason for killing my client. All they had to do was break the will to get the money and money was all they were after.

WE GOT all this in sections, the first from young Crashaw. Then, after Severs and the nephew had been carted away . . . Severs to the hospital and nephew to the morgue . . . we got more from Mrs. Sally Wells. All she was trying to do then was beat a first degree murder charge. Sams could have charged her with that or with manslaughter over her shooting the nephew . . . just depending on whether she talked. He might not have been able to make the first degree charge stick but she certainly thought he could, and she spoke right up.

Uncle held tight until he saw he was in it for fair. Then he tried to tell more than the rest, thinking it would get him a break when it came to trial. Nobody promised him a thing but he went ahead and told everything anyway.

So that was that. We ended up at Mrs. Arvin's house, in front of the big bar in that big room at the side.

Sams took a slug of the highball he

held and said: "It was right, Johnny, but you were taking a chance. I know it had to be something like that, but there was a lot of that stuff you couldn't prove."

I said: "The only thing lacking was that I couldn't figure Severs in the thing. I couldn't tie him in with anybody. The minute you told me he had the apartment next to the boys, it all clicked into place."

Mrs. Arvin said: "That terrible Howard Crashaw. After . . . well, after everything that had happened. To do a thing like that to me."

"He just went ahead with Severs, Mrs. Arvin," Harry Sams said, in a consoling voice. "He just went ahead with Severs and with Mrs. Wells. They were the brains . . . he's just a big good-looking dope that's got larceny in his heart. They'll take it out of him, where he's going."

"And Sally! My best friend!"

My personal opinion of that was that both women hated each other and just ran around together because it was handy. They acted that way.

I said: "Well, it's over now. The only one left that can make you any trouble over your money is your sister-in-law. And I don't think she will. Both the kids are dead . . . I'm sorry about the girl, but it couldn't be helped . . . and the uncle is in jail from now on. The pictures won't come out . . . they'll try Crashaw on complicity of murder and that angle will be hushed. So I don't think you've got a thing to worry about."

"Sally Wells will tell about it," Mrs. Arvin said gloomily. "She won't have anything to lose . . . she'll see that it gets out."

"She won't," said Sams. "She'll claim she knew nothing about it.

That way they won't try to stick her for instigating the thing, along with Severs."

IT WASN'T until then I thought about the letters the chief had given me . . . the letters he'd taken from the hoodlum in the wrecked car. The ones the guy had taken from her purse, in my room. I brought 'em out and Mrs. Arvin saw the handwriting.

"That's from Howard Crashaw," she said. "I know . . . he's written me."

They held confirmation of the whole thing . . . Crashaw told Sally how his partner, Blair, was refusing to go along with the scheme and how Severs had told him that Blair would be taken care of. It put Mrs. Sally Wells in the plot solidly, with no out . . . it proved she'd known about what was going on and what was planned, all the way through.

I said: These will keep her quiet. I don't think they'd better come out in court, though. I think the best thing to do is just tell her we have 'em and will use 'em if we have to."

I handed them to Mrs. Arvin and she read them and got red in the face. Sams reached out a hand for them in turn, and Mrs. Arvin put them hurriedly behind her.

"There's things about me in them," she said. "I . . . Howard spoke of me in them . . . unless you *have* to see them I'd rather you didn't."

Harry looked at me and I nodded. I said: "She was a bum, that Sally Wells. She was keeping them for a hold over young Crashaw, I'll always think. So he couldn't make a play for you, Peggy."

Peggy said: "I wouldn't have anything to do with him. At least not now."

Sams ribbed her with: "You've certainly changed, lady!" and she looked over at me and blushed even more.

"I . . . I've got other plans, now," she said. "Of course they're tentative . . . there's nothing sure about them yet."

I thought of all the money she had and about how she was still a damned

good-looking woman. And I also thought of all the trouble she seemed able to get herself and everybody concerned with her in. It looked like an even-Stephen sort of thing . . . something that would take a lot of thinking over to decide.

I said: "That's right, Harry. I'm going to stay in Hamlin a few days, though . . . maybe we'll all know more about what's going to happen by the time I leave.

Sams just grinned at both of us.

A Date With Death

(Continued from page 51)

ex-wife toward the door, and stalked toward the street.

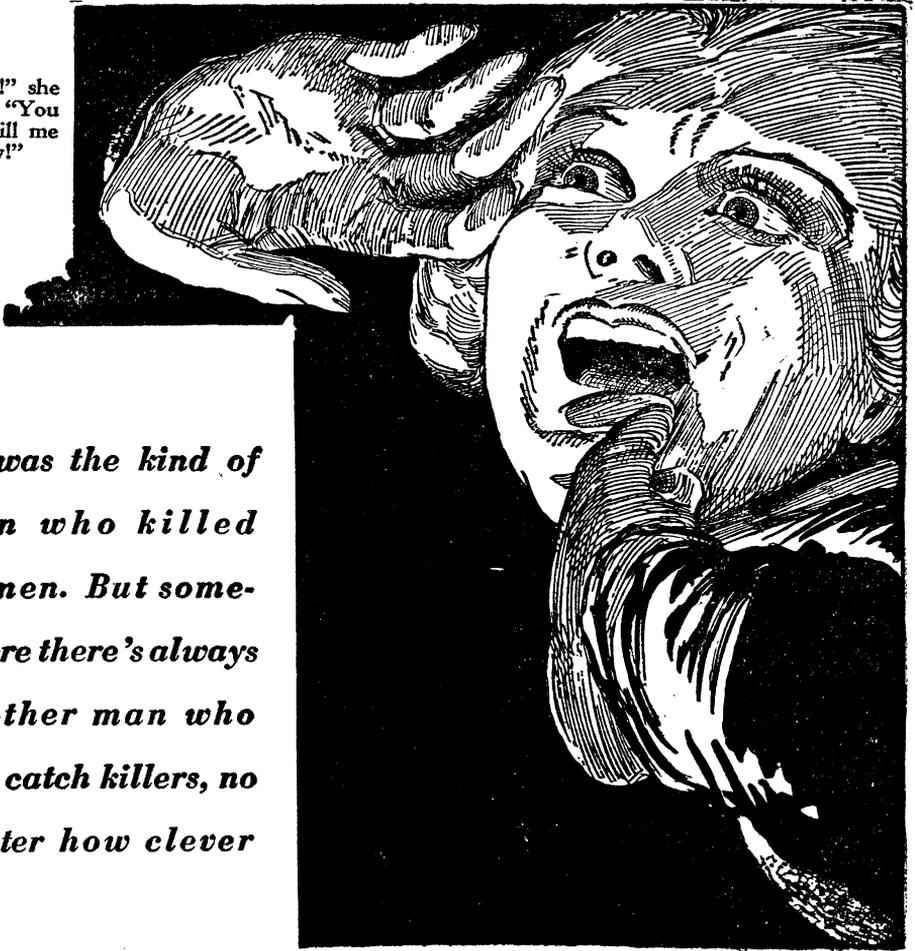
And by then, Sally had wedged her way through the crowd. Tip-toed, she got a hold about Pike's neck and refused to let go. But finally he managed to gasp, "Listen, honey—we'll be getting pinched on a

brand new count—lay off—I'll see you across the county line—"

"Don't be silly darling!" she laughed. "I'm going with you. This time there'll be no explosions to break in! And don't worry about dad. That's the best twenty-six thousand bucks he ever spent!"



"Don't!" she cried. "You can't kill me now!"



He was the kind of man who killed women. But somewhere there's always another man who can catch killers, no matter how clever

The Killer Type

By WILLIAM DECATUR



HE woman sat, fiddling and fidgeting with her fingernails, in a nervous pretence of polishing them. A fear that she could not analyze, but which every atom of her feminine instinct assured her was well based and sinister, increased as she looked at the second hand of the electric clock on the man-

tel, skidding round and round the dial, swift and inexorable as grains of sand falling through the hour-glass of Life; marking the moments she had left to live.

It was late, but she did not dare to go to bed, although she had a new lock on the outer door of the apartment-flat; the whole second floor of a house on the west side of Central

Park. The neighborhood was not aristocratic but it was respectable, although, such is the layer-cake character of Manhattan, it was close to localities that were shady.

The apartment was furnished with taste, well-kept. There was a faint odor of oil-of-cedar that proclaimed housewifery. The woman was a demiblonde, under thirty, with a definite allure in face and figure. She was dressed in lounging pajamas beneath a negligee.

An hour ago there had been a soft footfall outside, the grate of a key that would no longer fit the lock.

The bonds between her and the man she loved; or had thought she loved; were broken; not yet entirely severed; but she meant them to be.

She was independent of him, and it seemed to her strange that the quality of his devotion had subtly changed from the moment that she had told him of her small fortune. His ardor had seemed extravagant, his phrases stilted; there had been times when she even thought him a trifle mad.

IT WAS a relief when the telephone rang, though the shrill sound of the bell made her leap in her chair, her heart beating wildly as she picked up the instrument.

"Lucille, it's Mort. Sure, Listen, honey, you didn't have to change your lock. It made me feel terrible to think you'd shut me out that way. I got your letter. You're all wrong. It's *you* who've changed; but if that's the way you really feel about it, I wouldn't try to hold you. Only just to say good-by. Not in writing, not after all we've been to each other . . ."

She felt herself slipping, and called herself a fool, as she listened to the hypnosis of his voice.

". . . I promise you, Lucille, after tonight, you'll never see me again. I swear it."

She hung up, sat down, weak. Woman-like, she went into her bedroom and made herself look her best, for the man she no longer loved—or did she? She turned on the radio.

She set back the catch on her lock. He must have been close by, for he came swiftly; knocking, then entering.

The house was only three floors high—with the janitor living in the basement. Lucille barely knew the others who lived there, would not have recognized them on the street, nor they her. Such is New York.

He came in, immaculate, light-coated and muffled for the early spring night, drawing off his gloves. She would not let him take her in his arms and he sat in his familiar lounging chair, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Have it your own way, Lucille. What's wrong with you?"

"It's you, Mort. I'm afraid of you, lately."

"Afraid of *me*?" He laughed, as if the idea furnished him with enjoyment. "Afraid?"

She nodded. The look came into his eyes that made her wonder if he was entirely sane. Terror gripped her. Blue eyes that now glowed like the flame of burning alcohol. They were fixed on her, they held her gaze.

"You mean you're tired of me," he said. "All right." He looked at her from the low chair until she could see the whites of his eyes clear beneath the upturned orbs.

She watched him, fascinated as a rabbit before a snake, while he reached for his gloves, from the side table; putting them on, as he always did; first the fingers, then the thumb, tucked in. He gripped the wooden arms of the chair and seemed to haul

himself out of it. He was strong, terribly strong. He had often made her feel his muscles, hard as rubber cored with steel.

"Then it's good-by. I see you mean it. Somebody else?"

"No."

He laughed again. "I didn't really think that. There never *will* be anybody else, Lucille?"

She shook her head, not meaning anything, only waiting to see him go.

She had admitted the man she loved. But this was another being in him who attacked her.



Praying to see him go. The sense of danger, of horrible danger, gave her a slight vertigo. She fought off the fainting spell.

"It's all over," he said. "*All over.* You don't mind helping me on with my coat, for the last time, Lucille?"

Some inner voice whispered "no." But she could not refuse. She took the coat by its shoulders, held it for him. He stood facing her, looking at her with a smile that froze her.

The smile of a madman—a fiend!
Those flaming eyes . . . !

Strength went out of her arms. They dropped, still gripping the garment—and his hands clamped about her slender throat.

"Mort! . . . Mort! . . ." she gurgled.

Her eyes protruded, staring, losing luster. Her tongue swelled from between her scarlet lips and even, pearly teeth. Her face turned bluish, the rouge upon it a horrible travesty.

When he was quite sure she was gone, he let her down to the rug she had crumpled in her tap-dance of death.

He looked at the wall safe he had insisted she should install. He had suggested the combination, set it for her. Her money was there, in cash, with some jewelry. She had been waiting for him to tell her how to invest it in the jittery market.

For a moment, his face lost its satisfied expression as he wondered if she had banked it. It cleared again as he spun the disc about the dial. The cash was there. He did not touch the trinkets. He had bought two or three of them, bait for a killing.

He put the money in his wallet.

It was in big bills. They bulged a little, and he frowned as the bulk disturbed his perfect fit. He helped himself to a cigarette from the dead woman's silver box, used her lighter with his gloved hands; left her.

He had told her the truth, he assured himself, as he slid out into the night. *He would never see her again.*

There was slight mist off the river, coming from the sea.

He set up his coat collar, flipped down the rim of his hat, making for the Avenue, meeting only people like phantoms, who did not look his way.

He purposely walked ten blocks before he picked up the cruising cab, ordered it to go to Grand Central. It was a busy place, even at that hour, with commuters, who had stayed in the city for amusement, hurrying for their last trains.

The man the dead woman had called "Mort" went down into the subway.

It was only then that he remembered he had left the radio on in Lucille's apartment.

He turned down his coat collar, settled his silk muffler, felt the bulge in his pocket. He grinned slightly, and the girl opposite thought he was trying to flirt with her. She looked away. Somehow, though he was good looking and stylish, he gave her the creeps.

IT WAS the sputtering radio that made the third floor tenant finally call the janitor. It had been working when she first awakened, it was still going when she complained a little after noon.

"She never plays it in the morning," she declared. "There must be something wrong."

Lavinsky went so far as to knock on the door but he scoffed at the idea of trouble.

"Probably she goes out and forgets to turn it off," he suggested and never knew how close to the truth he had come. "Anyway the maid she comes at two."

The maid found milk and cream undisturbed, mail in the box. That meant nothing to her. She came in every day to clean up generally. Sometimes she got a luncheon for Lucille Langdon, whose breakfasts were sketchy. Lucille invariably dined out, save in very bad weather, when she might scratch up a meal for herself, leaving the dishes for the maid, next day. And quite often Lucille was in bed when the maid arrived. Sometimes she was not there at all. She was just as likely to leave the lights on as the radio burning up its tubes. Therefore the maid gathered the milk and cream and opened the door with one of the new keys Lucille had given her the day before.

Her scream brought everybody in the house together, for once.

The maid fainted. Lavinsky ran to find a policeman on post or traffic duty. Somebody else telephoned. Two detectives came from the precinct station, Flynn and Maloney. Flynn outranked Maloney and his face was grim, not so much from the fact of murder as its type.

Two other women had been found strangled under much the same conditions within the past ten weeks; both in that neighborhood. Flynn had tried to solve the cases and had failed. The second one had been played up by the tabloids to the limit of ghoulishness. He knew what would happen with a third.

There would be sob-sister tales, columnists' caustic comments, editorial raps, while the columns would seethe with jibes at the police department.

Some of this would be directed at Flynn, more would be directed upon his head, if the case did not break. They might take it away from him, at that; but he could not dodge it altogether. Prospects of promotion were vague, prospects of demotion to a walking beat and a harness loomed unpleasantly close — unless he could find the murderer.

If it was going to be as tough a puzzle as the two others, Flynn felt failure foredoomed. The layouts were the same. A walkup apartment in a house, a maid coming in for a few hours only, nobody who knew the name of any man intimate with the victim. No prints, no pictures, no clues.

Flynn was a good routine man. Maloney not quite as good. Flynn had little imagination, Maloney less. Both promoted for bravery.

"These dames lay themselves open to it," Flynn grumbled at Maloney. "Live in a dump where anyone can go in and out who gets a key; where half of 'em don't even know the names on the mail boxes in the entry. They fall for a guy like this Strangler, who's probably more or less nuts. This is three and I'll bet it's the same guy. He's like the London Ripper, you'll see. He'll go on strangling until he's copped."

"That's our job," said Maloney scornfully. "They expect us to catch the guy."

Flynn surveyed him with scorn.

"Oh yeah? That's goin' to be so easy. Here we are."

WITHIN half an hour the place was a hum and bustle of legal and reportorial industry. An inspector arrived, two sharps of the Homicide Squad appeared. That did not relieve Flynn. He saw already that this was another tough job. He would be the sacrificial goat, unless some genius solved the riddle off-hand. If there were no leads the assignment would be left on his hands with a reminder card at Headquarters, and regular callings up of Thomas Aloysius Flynn to report progress, or get combed because there was none.

The Medical Examiner made short work of it. He would do a more thorough job in autopsy. But it was, he said, a clear case of strangulation, probably by a man, to judge by the bruises on the throat and the pressure that had been applied.

"Probably find broken cartilage, possible rupture; the hyoid bone may be smashed; but that's not definite," he announced to detectives and newspapermen, who were already shaping up sensational heads, scenting what a lallapalooza of a story they had got.

**UNKNOWN STRANGLER SLAYS AGAIN
THIRD BEAUTIFUL VICTIM FOUND
MURDERER THOUGHT MADMAN
LONELY WOMEN TERRORIZED**

And so on.

The apartment was dusted for fingerprints, pictures and measurements were made. The open wall safe disclosed jewelry the maid recognized as having seen Lucille Langdon wearing. She did not think any was missing. The dead fingers had rings upon them. The maid knew nothing of any sum of money. There were between twenty and thirty dol-

lars in the dead woman's pocket-book. She—the maid—was always paid regularly. Lucille had been a considerate and generous mistress. She had worked for her for five months.

"Yes, she knew that there was a gentleman. There might be more than one, but she thought not. At any rate never more than one at a time, to judge by glasses and ashtrays the next day. She did not know his name, his last name. She had heard her mistress call somebody 'Mort' over the telephone once or twice."

She had never seen him, did not know what he looked like; and neither did anybody else in the house, from Lavinsky up, nor in the neighborhood.

The print men found only specimens of Lucille Langdon's loops and whorls and islands. Not even the maid's. Her statement explained that. She wiped the woodwork of the furniture with oil of cedar every afternoon before she left.

The legmen were gleefully telephoning to their desks, especially the afternoon editions. For once they would beat the tabs, although they would not serve up anything like so spicy a dish. They quarreled over two photographs of the dead woman, which were the only photographs in the place; compromised when they found one of the "galleries" could furnish prints.

The body was taken away in a basket. The inspector was curt and glum. The H. S. dicks from downtown faded.

"They'll work on the case," said the inspector to Flynn, sternly, "and so will you. It's your district, and

the third case of the kind. I'm hoping you'll do better with this one."

Flynn saluted. He and Maloney were left in the disarranged apartment.

"What did I tell you?" asked Flynn. "He knows it's a dry lemon. All we'd ever squeeze out of it 'ud be sour. We'll be the fall guys. I'll not be buyin' the old lady a new coat this winter, an' you'll not be marryin' your Kathleen this fall."

"Mind if I look around?"

BOTH officers whirled. The apartment door was still open. In it stood a man whose age might have been anywhere near thirty. He was well but not conspicuously dressed. His voice and manner were mild. He was well set up, though you did not notice it at first, and most people could meet Ernest Eaton, talk with him, and go away with only a vague impression of the color of his hair and eyes. That included girls. Yet he was anything but a vague person.

"I don't mind," said Flynn, not cordially. "If I did, you'd get a special permit."

Maloney did not know Eaton, but Flynn did. An ex-reporter who had come into some money, who had written a detective novel which had run into ten editions and made him more; to top it all, a cousin, or something, to the Commissioner of Police.

He had nosed into the two previous cases but he had not done anything to solve them, as far as Flynn knew, or anybody else. He was probably snooping about getting material for a new book.

There was some truth in this, more in the fact that Eaton was an

ardent student of criminal investigation. The extent of his studies and the amount of knowledge he had assimilated would have surprised Flynn, but not impressed him. He would not have understood a lot of it, nor wanted to. This bird was an amateur sleuth, and Flynn despised amateur sleuths. He made no attempt to disguise it.

"Go ahead," he said, "help yourself. Mebbe you can help me."

He said it with heavy sarcasm, and Eaton smiled at him.

"I'll try," he said. "I had a talk with one or two of the boys I used to work with. They seem to think it's a wow of a story, but a tough case."

Flynn merely grunted. He saw that Eaton had a camera case. Doubtless he had a microscope tucked into his pants. A can of moulage in another pocket. Sherlock Holmes the Second! Utsnay!

"They say she used to call up a man named Mort," said Eaton gently.

"What of it? I know plenty of Morts."

"The first woman who was strangled, not far away, had a boy friend she called Mort, didn't she?"

Flynn nodded. He had thought of that and then let the idea go. His wife's brother was called Mort. A plumber, who lived in Albany.

"What of it?" he asked.

"And the second woman had a friend she called Tod?"

"That might have been the name. It wasn't Mort for that one, anyway."

"The two names, Tod and Mort, do not suggest anything to you?" asked Eaton mildly, with his head a little to one side.

"Why should they? Plenty of Tods, too."

"She didn't have a telephone address book, with Mort in it, did she? Or Tod?"

"She did not. She didn't keep a diary, or an address book, and if she got any letters, she tore 'em all up. I'm goin' to make out my report. It's a spring lock. Close the door, when you're through, Sherlock. Come on, Maloney."

Eaton grinned as they left. There was still plenty of light as he surveyed the room where the woman had been murdered.

EATON was disappointed about the address book, but not discouraged. He did not expect this case to be an easy one. But he had gathered a few things from the previous stranglings.

He did not know much about women, personally, but he had studied their ways through the records of famous psycho-criminologists; and he still thought that Lucille Langdon would have her lover's number set down, somewhere. It was pretty certain the killer had been her lover.

There were the usual telephone directories, but he did not look at them. He examined such likely places as the doorjamb, close to the telephone. And, at last, he found it, set down on a corner of a chifferobe drawer, on the lining paper, underneath some dainty handkerchiefs.

Just the letter "M" and the number. Uptown, in the prosperous business district.

"M" could stand for Mort, but Eaton did not believe the man's name was Mortimer, any more than that

Tod's name had been Theodore. "Mort" was an alias. The man was cunning, his mind was depraved, his imagination bizarre. A sadist, who would go on strangling.

Eaton copied the number in his notebook, paid his attention to the prints shown up by the powdering of the Centre Street sleuths. As before, they had amounted to nothing, but Eaton was not satisfied. For one thing, he sniffed appreciatively at the oil-of-cedar. The cameramen had used flash bulbs instead of magnesium. Oil-of-cedar made for fine records. The reporter he had talked with had given him a good idea of what had been discovered. Eaton hoped to find something else.

"This," he told himself, "is a case of look for the man, not *cherchez la femme*."

The rugs had been scuffed all over the place. Eaton halted in front of the lounge chair. There were prints of some sort on the curved wooden arms. Not fingerprints, at all, but Eaton was curious. He looked at them from every angle. They stood out plainly enough but they had been an insoluble riddle to the professional dicks.

Eaton went down on hands and knees, lower. He got out his own device for powdering on a small scale, without a compressed-air blower. The police used white powder, Eaton preferred aluminum. He sprayed, and looked at the result with a flash-torch; chuckled.

"It might not be so hard," he muttered, "after all."

He set up his camera, used his own bulb, and got films of those curious markings, above, below, and on the sides of the two arms.

Then he went home to develop them; to study over them.

They were not like anything he had ever seen, or noticed, before; but he believed that there lay the prime clew he sought; if he could only identify it. He lay back in his own lounge-chair, thinking hard, forcing his brain to marshal possibilities.

It was dark, and he was hungry and thirsty, when he slapped his thigh and cried "Eureka!"

THE evening editions were all out, their legmen loose for the night. But Eaton knew where to find his friend. In a popular speakeasy, now dignified with a license, but still selling untaxed liquor; its clients almost entirely of the Fourth Estate.

He got his man on the wire.

"How's for dinner?" he asked him, knowing the answer, naming the place. It was a good dinner, with other things to wash the viands down than water.

The reporter was heavy laden, well awash, when Eaton put his question.

"Sure I'll find out for you, pal. It's easy. That the reason for the gush of hoshpitality? Fallen at last, have you? Don't kid me, it'sh a girl."

"It's something to do with a girl," said Eaton. "How soon can you get it?"

"In three minutes, pal."

Eaton waited, while the privileged legman called somebody, a clerk at Headquarters.

"Friend of mine, stuck on a jane, Pete," said the reporter. "Prob'ly some stenographer. He'sh a good guy, see? Give him a break with his cutey."

He came back with the information. Eaton thanked him, ordered a liqueur. The legman glanced at the check.

"You mus' be peffeckly squiffy over her," he said. "Royal repast, an' all that."

They had talked about the strangling-case, necessarily. The place had buzzed with it. The reporter knew of Eaton's bent for crime-detection, but he did not associate that with the telephone number. His Plimsoll-Line had been too deep when Eaton had asked him about that.

The address was off Fifth Avenue, above Madison Square, below the Public Library. Eaton had noted it. An old stable, with a paved court in front, open to the sidewalk, set about with bird-bowls, vases, statuary; all of artificial stone; replicas of good originals, designed for the wealthy trade of Westchester, Westport, Long Island.

The name was Petros. Neither real, given, nor surname, Eaton fancied. A trade-name. Petros, meaning "stone." The owner was probably not a Greek, any more than he was "Mort," or Mortimer; or Tod—save by his own usage.

Eaton strolled into the courtyard a little before ten the next morning. He was dressed in sober, but expensive and well-tailored tweeds. He wore a fedora hat and pigskin gloves, carried a cane.

He looked at the bird-bowls, the fountain cupids, boys with geese, spouting dolphins intertwined.

Then he entered the building. Part of the floor was a show, part of it a work-room. Italians were handling the artificial mixture in vats, on the

floor, pouring it into moulds. A girl came out of a small office. She did not pay much attention to him, save that he looked like a good customer. Wealthy, and a bit sappy.

EATON wanted to see the proprietor—Mr. Petros. It appeared that he had living-rooms on the second floor; rooms once occupied by a lowly coachman and grooms; now tastefully redecorated for Mr. Petros. The Petros private-office was upstairs.

The girl went up to see her boss, Eaton poked about the place.

"Petros would see him," she said. She had told Petros that the prospective client looked like a man who would order a lot of stone-seats, tables and bird-bowls. Personally, she thought a guy who bought stone seats and tables, goofy.

There was nothing truly Greek about Petros. He was a racial mixture, Eaton thought. Tall, lean, broad-shouldered, and powerful. Big, strong, shapely hands. A little black mustache, carefully trimmed. A mouth, whose upper lip was just a line. A long nose, and eyes that seemed to continually tremble, like a floating compass card. Ears pointed, like a faun's. They should have had tufts of hair, Eaton thought, tufts like a lynx, or Pan.

"I am not a millionaire," said Eaton, taking the seat indicated across the carved table that served Petros as a desk. He set down his hat and gloves, next to those of Petros, on a pseudo-medieval buffet. "I cannot afford originals. At the same time I don't want things that are duplicated by a dozen of my neighbors. I have one or two pieces, in

marble. I wonder if you could reproduce them by your process, not too expensively."

"I should have to see them before I could give you an estimate," said Petros.

He was no Greek, Eaton decided. A hodge-podge of breeds, that had not blended happily. A psychological freak, clever, crafty, cunning and cruel.

"I could show you photographs," he said. "Stupid of me not to have brought them. I have them in the city. This is Saturday, and I suppose you close at noon. I should like to get the thing off my mind."

"I live here," Petros replied. "The force leaves at noon, but if you cared to bring the pictures, we could doubtless arrange a price. Nothing is impossible to Petros."

"After lunch, then, say about three," Eaton told him, picked up hat and gloves and cane, and sauntered out.

He went to an art store and bought two or three prints of sculpture by not too well-known artists. Even if Petros recognized them he would only think that his client had been nicked for copies, consider him that much more of a sucker.

His final move was to call Flynn to the telephone. The detective answered gruffly. No genius had uncovered the strangling murder in the Headquarters experts; it had been strongly intimated that he would be the scapegoat in a suburban wilderness, swinging a locust stick; unless he turned it up.

"I've found out something about the Lucille Langdon affair that might interest you," Eaton said. "It might close the case, it looks like real evi-

dence to me. I can show it to you at half-past three this afternoon, if you'll meet me."

Flynn was not gracious about it. Amateur sleuths were always going off half-cocked. But, though he was not officially submerged and drowning, he was not averse to snatching at a straw or so.

"I'll be there," he said, "only I got no time to waste."

"I don't think you'll be wasting it, Flynn," Eaton answered mildly; "you see I have no authority to make an arrest. . . ."

He hung up with Flynn blustering in the phone. He knew that would bring Flynn, on the dot.

ONCE more Eaton mounted to the private office, laid down his hat and gloves and cane, close to those of Petros, who received him cordially. No employees were present. The place was deserted, showroom and workshop locked. Petros studied the photographs and Eaton brought out checkbook and fountain pen, laid them beside each other on the carved table.

Finally Petros named a price. It was stiff, and Eaton hesitated.

"I shall have to think it over," he said. He caught a flame in the strange eyes of Petros, that was not merely commercial chagrin, but revealed the swiftly flaring temper of the man. His lips smiled but his eyes were snarling.

Eaton started to stow away his checkbook. "It's just a matter of income," he said. "I may have to put it off for a week or two." He glanced at his wristwatch. It was twenty minutes after the hour. "I told a friend to meet me here, if you don't

mind," he went on. "He's almost due now."

It was tolerably clear that Petros was not keen on any delay in the departure of a new doubtful client. He said nothing. Eaton ignored his mood. He would have him at attention in a moment.

"I was reading about this strangling case," said Eaton, with the air of one making conversation. Again he saw red flame in Petros' orbs. They seemed to set, to stiffen in their sockets, regarding Eaton with malevolent intensity. "You know," Eaton continued, "I've got an idea how it happened."

Now the features of Petros had become rigid, his lips barely moved as he asked.

"How do you figure it out?" His mouth showed a slight sneer, but his attitude was that of a feral creature that might despise attack while every instinct was alert at the first sign of it.

"I get interested in these things," said Eaton. "To me, the police lack imagination, they proceed too much along stereotyped lines. For instance, they overlooked the grim coincidence of these three strangled women having a lover by the name of Tod or Mort. Two Morts, so far; if there should be a fourth victim, no doubt they would find some record of a second Tod."

"What does that prove?" asked Petros. There was no visible movement, but Eaton got the feel of a spring coiling, of a beast tensing, crouching for a leap. "That there were two different killers?"

Eaton fiddled with his fountain pen. "One," he said. "Those two names may be diminutives but, to me, they seem to have a more significant

meaning, they are a clew to the warped nature of the murderer, the grotesque working of his mind. For *Tod*, in German, is Death. So is *Mort*, in French."

"Ha! That is ingenious. Yet, if they had nothing to do with the man's real name, how does that identify him?"

The orbs of Petros, still fixed, were glowing like carbuncles. He spoke between clenched teeth. Eaton glanced at his watch again. He knew that he was face to face with a dangerous creature; as if he had entered a jungle clearing and encountered a tiger, half visible beneath the camouflage of its tawny stripes, the mask of its face less real than the gleaming eyes; the tailtip swaying back and forth, the body sinking, slowly, slowly, to the crouch; the leap.

He felt no fear, only exhilaration. He was not counting on Flynn for defense. Flynn might be like a "bearer," with a second gun ready for emergency. Eaton stared back at the hypnotic orbs.

"Women sometimes do not remember numbers easily. They set down telephone numbers, in curious places. They can be traced. You, for example, have no one employed here by the name of Mort?"

Petros' mouth began to stretch in a grin that suggested bared fangs. He shook his head.

"If there were," he said, "suppose one of these Death aliases, to use your fantastic suggestion for a moment, could be so linked up, how would that show that he was with any one of the women, on the night she died?"

Petros appeared to be willing to

listen, ready to break down; but, if things went too far, he was ready to strike. His hands rested on the edge of the table. Eaton was again struck with their power, their flexibility. The nails were trimmed short, well cared for, but they suggested talons, just the same.

"The police report no fingerprints, save those of the woman," said Eaton slowly. "The murderer was gloved. He might have known that the maid wiped the woodwork every day with oil-of-cedar, clearing records. But this time he was careful. He was gloved all the time he was there. The very absence of fingerprints shows how careful he meant to be, how set upon his bizarre and *outré* crime. But gloves are not all alike, Petros."

OUT of the window Eaton saw Flynn entering the open court from the street. For a man of his build the detective walked lightly. He gave a tiny nod. He would make no noise coming up the stairs.

"Take, for instance, gloves like you and I wear, Petros," said Eaton. "Pigskin, good quality. Grained distinctively and with no possibility of any two pairs leaving the same prints—glove prints. Especially when the murderer left a perfect trace of both hands, thumbs, fingers, even the palms, as he rose from the lounge-chair in which he sat. The oil-of-cedar made the impression absolute. He rested part of his weight when he rose—to kill. He left an exact record. Plain to the naked eye. Under the microscope, reproduced by microphotography, as it will be at the trial, it will send the man who assumed the grisly aliases of Death to the chair. And I think that, by

this time, the Medical Officer will have determined traces of oil-of-cedar on the neck of the strangled woman."

"This is all your own conception?" asked Petros very softly, hissing the words. Another face seemed coming out of his set features, as if they had become suddenly plastic. It was the face of a fiend. His fingertips seemed to sink into the hard wood of the table, changing the color beneath his nails.

It was very quiet. It was Saturday afternoon. The two of them were alone. Eaton could feel his devilish purpose, almost as if it were his hot breath.

"When I left you before lunch," said Eaton inexorably; I carried off your gloves. I left my own, like enough yours for you not to miss them. I compared prints I made from them with prints I took from the lounge-chair arms in Lucille Langdon's apartment. That is why I know *you* were there, *and that you . . .*"

The beast leaped, with incredible agility. Eaton had been prepared for attack, but it took him unawares. Petros hurled himself across the table as Eaton got to his feet. His hands were pressed against Eaton's cheeks, his thumbs viced down on the carotid arteries, the vagus nerve.

He was across the table, throttling, his mouth open now, with the red tip of his tongue showing, his eyes ablaze with the lust to kill.

A man may be killed within a minute in such a grip. Eaton felt himself swiftly losing consciousness, the blood in his brain seemed like a thundering Niagara, that colored all things.

He had just time to press the plunger on the fountain pen. Out of it there came a fine spray of methalol derivative into the nose, the open mouth, the eyes of Petros, filmy, swift as the poison of a spitting cobra; but not deadly. Enough to make Petros instantaneously insensible, to make his death-grip relax.

It was a close call. Eaton's head was still pounding when he looked at Flynn, standing with his underlip shot out, his blue eyes cold as the metal of the gun in his hand.

"Lucky for ye I was on time," he said.

Eaton did not contradict him. As a matter of fact, Flynn was late, according to Eaton's watch, though he might not have been with his own.

"I'm sorry you didn't get here sooner," Eaton said huskily, gingerly massaging his neck. "Now I'll have to explain it all over, so you'll get it straight in your report. I'd put the cuffs on that bird, if I were you, Flynn. That's your strangler. I'll give you the proof. You can guess what *he* thought of it. It's your case, Flynn. I don't like publicity, except for my books. They ought to make you an inspector for this. It is really quite ingenious and novel. The damned fool thought he was protecting himself; but he should have worn suède, not pigskin."

"'Tis Greek to me," said Flynn, looking at the gloves that Eaton had picked up.

Petros was still out, in a chair, the upper part of his body lolling on the table. The handcuffs were on his too flexible wrists.

"I'll give you a free translation," said Eaton, "before you call the wagon."

The reporter had earned his reputation for scoops by leaping before he looked. A nose for news, or hunch, he might have called it. But when he leaped into a case of slow death, he began to wish he had looked first!



ALL-OF-A-SUDDEN CASSIDY was in Trent Street because of a mysterious ring from Gyp Martin. Trent Street at midnight was a deserted backwater in the Cosmopolis whirlpool. Some of the city's finest residences stood there, many inhabited by wealthy Gold Coasters and others by higher class professional men.

The home of the district attorney, Milton Yarrow, was in Trent Street, and when Sudden Cassidy swung his fast little coupé around so the pencil from its spotlight could pierce the black shadows under the trees, he discovered he was directly in front of the Yarrow home with its funny Bingen-on-the-Rhine kind of tower at the corner.

Sudden hadn't given complete credence to Gyp Martin's somewhat incoherent information over the telephone. It might have been one of Gyp's dreams based on a lapse into marijuana. But Cassidy hadn't earned his name "All-of-a-Sudden" by analyzing tip-offs before he leaped.

Gyp had called him, he said, because he couldn't have called the police. That would have involved explaining first why Gyp had been prowling fashionable Trent Street at that hour. And Gyp remembered the favor of an alibi Sudden had furnished for him that time the dicks

had decided it would be easier to frame Gyp for a pent-house job than to follow a formula of deduction that might fail and leave them with an undesirable outcry from the press.

In one way and another, Sudden had done favors for many who, like Gyp, could and did tip him off ahead of the police to sundry bizarre happenings here and there. Such contacts, Sudden had discovered, were a source of copy worth having.

Yet nothing had come his way before with such boundless possibilities of a long continued first page spot. Gyp's words had suggested a crime so incredible that even Sudden had doubted its authenticity.

For out of Gyp's stammering incoherency had come the information that District Attorney Yarrow was lying dead under a tree on his own front lawn, horribly so, if Gyp's gulping description was to be believed.

Well, someone was lying there. The spotlight pencil picked out the dark huddle against the smooth green of the grass. Gyp must have been crossing the unfenced lawns, for dubious reasons of his own, to have stumbled upon the body. It was well back from the street and, in the darkness, invisible.

Leaving the spotlight playing upon the body, Sudden jumped lightly from his car and ran up the

HOURS of GRACE

Once the germs were injected, there was only
one antidote to be used—and nobody
knew how to find it!

By
**JOHN
WAYNE**



walk. Ten seconds later he was holding his chin in place with long slender fingers and fighting down an almost overwhelming desire to get back into his car and go far away from this place.

FEW friends of District Attorney Yarrow who had known him well in life could have identified him in death. Only his single gold tooth stood out where yellow lips had shrunk back. His eyes were closed and deeply sunken. A man of a hundred and eighty or ninety pounds, his body seemed to have shriveled grotesquely to half of that.

To get away quickly was Sudden's impulse. This was red hot. That came first. In the darkness the body might still lie there for several hours undiscovered. The *Star-News* would be on the street with the incredible story before its competitors could learn the crime, if it was a crime, had been committed. It wouldn't be the first time Sudden Cassidy had cracked a story before even the police had arrived at its source.

And, though Sudden was hard-boiled enough in his way, he wasn't enjoying the brief minute he passed beside the body. Overcoming a reluctance to touch the terribly dead flesh, he had ascertained that there was no visible wound. Though the street was deserted, his spotlight might attract attention of a patrolman or a late passerby, so Sudden worked fast.

Half a dozen letters in the coat pocket were routine. He returned them. He retained only the glazed square of cardboard after a hasty glance at its cryptic wording.

The words were typed.

So others may know. Would you pay for the antidote or would you die this horribly? Yarrow had no chance to pay. You have.

The dead man's twisted yellow right hand held his gold-rimmed eye-glasses so tightly that one lens had been crunched. In the left hand, too, gleaned a bit of glass. Sudden shivered, but he forced the fingers free. They had been clutching a slender, silvered hypodermic syringe, with the plunger high as though it had been prepared for an injection that had not been made.

No one appeared along the street. Sudden wrapped the syringe carefully in his handkerchief and slipped it into his pocket. He glanced toward the Yarrow residence. Except for the dim light over the entrance door, the house was in darkness.

Back in his car, Sudden clicked off the spotlight. Later the police would yell about that cardboard and the syringe. Perhaps he would get a few days for this contempt of procedure. It wouldn't be the first time the police had racketed him into court for being a few jumps ahead. The *Star-News* bonus would more than make up for it.

Sudden intended to know first what that slender tube of silver contained. Something told him the syringe had not been in the dead man's hand by design of his killers, if there had been killers.

As he started the car he recalled that Gyp Martin had said he would meet him in half an hour at the Cabin Club. He'd better streak over there and get hold of Gyp. He'd take him over to the *Star-News* and

sew him up where he couldn't talk while he was writing the break on the story for the Daylight Edition.

THE Cabin Club was in the Cosmopolis whirlpool. Indeed, Juniper Avenue pulsed more quickly after midnight than at midday. So the crowd near the alley in the Cabin Club block wouldn't have attracted Sudden if he hadn't seen the two police cars and the ambulance at the curb. He swung in.

"Nothin' much," growled Detective Connell, as Sudden shouldered in. "Cheap bump-off. One of them Mexican snow eaters. Sure, you know him. You fronted for him on that penthouse job, Sudden. An' see what you done for him. Right now he'd a been all safe in stir instead of havin' the back of his head almost knocked out from between his ears."

Sudden watched them roll the limp figure of Gyp Martin onto a stretcher and slide him into the death car.

"Know who?" said Sudden.

"Nor what," replied Connell. "Mighta had a mary-hannah fit and butted himself to death against the wall, only he got conked from behind."

Cold, damp flakes of snow seemed to fall thickly on the back of Sudden's neck and slide clammily down his spine, only it wasn't snowing. He wouldn't have to sew up Gyp Martin to keep him from talking.

And whoever had accomplished the same thing so efficiently and finally had been inspired by extraordinary purpose. Sudden linked the crime instantly with the huddled, horrible body that had been District

Attorney Yarrow. He was edging out of the morbidly curious crowd as he thought of it. It was a temptation to jolt the unruffled Detective Connell and his scorn of a "cheap bump-off" with that other thing that would assuredly set Cosmopolis by the ears.

But the *Star-News* paid him for that sort of exclusive ear setting, so it would have to keep.

A burly Negro bumped into him as he cleared the edge of the throng. The black man scowled, but muttered a swift apology and faded back into the crowd. But when another Negro, tall and cadaverous, removed his lanky figure from the fender of his coupé, where he had been sitting, Sudden again had the feeling of icy snowflakes impinging on the back of his neck.

He shook off the feeling. It was impossible that anyone could have connected him with the swift, mysterious demise of Gyp Martin. None in that crowd could have known where he had been within the past half hour. Yet the insides of his hands were slippery with cold sweat when he gripped the steering wheel and pushed off.

Someone must have seen Gyp when he stumbled upon Yarrow's body. Had that someone followed him, been nearby when he telephoned the *Star-News*? Or had Gyp come by his death at the hands of some other person unconnected with the incident of that gruesome body on the Yarrow lawn?

No time now to follow up that line of inquiry. Sudden swung his car into the *Star-News* parking space. But when he was upstairs calling Morrison, the city editor, to

get a couple of early copy readers down for the Daybreak Extra, his eyes kept swinging to the door at the head of the stairway.

For a third Negro had been leaning casually against the wall, at the foot of the stairs when he had come up. Though the Negro had apparently paid no attention to his entrance, Sudden had been grateful for the presence of the night janitor and two scrubwomen in the hallway. And the little classifying camera in the back of his mind had clicked for the third time that night on an oddity.

None of the three Negroes had seemed to be of the ordinarily type of the Cosmopolis black belt. What had been the difference? Their dress had been commonplace. Yet there was something outstanding. Yes, that was it. All of the trio were of the distinctively pure African type. That rarity in the States, a native Negro of unmixed blood strain.

All this slipped away in the following hour.

"God!" exclaimed Morrison, getting his first slant at Sudden's lead. "Won't this split open the works! You don't mean it's sewed up?"

"Sewed up an' we'll break it. Keep in touch with Pete on police. You know it, or Pete would've been burnin' in by this time."

And the plates were being locked in the presses with Sudden's story before Pete did call in. Then it wasn't the Yarrow death he had.

"There's been a funny stickup out at Arthur T. Marsden's on the Gold Coast," Pete told Morrison. "If you can rout Sudden Cassidy out at this infernal hour, thought maybe you'd like to have him get on it. Burke of the crime detail's out there, but I

can't get a lead on it at Headquarters. For some reason or other, they've all buttoned up."

"Okay," said Morrison. "We'll shoot a man along."

"You don't have to go," he told Sudden. "I'd figured you good for a week off and out of the way after the cops begin yapping on this Yarrow beat, but—"

"Hell!" said Sudden. "Marsden's a big shot, an' I'll run along."

He didn't tell Morrison, but the events of the night were too vivid to contribute to sleep and he wanted to be somewhere and enjoy the comments of a few Headquarters dicks he knew when the *Star-News* extra hit the street.

ARTHUR T. MARSDEN, president of the Transvale Corporation, largest maker of automobile parts in the state, and reputed to be many times a millionaire, was the center of a little group in the living room of his home when Sudden Cassidy barged in.

Marsden's rotund, usually good-natured face, appeared strangely stricken. He recognized Sudden and he whispered.

"For God's sake, keep the newspapers off of this!"

There were no other newspapermen there. Lieutenant Detective Burke stepped in front of Sudden.

"You heard what he said. You'll have to get out."

"That'll be swell," said Sudden easily. "We know just enough now to make it a peach of a mystery. Marsden held up and won't talk. An' say, he's pretty sick, isn't he?"

The man in the big reclining chair groaned. One of Burke's men

took Sudden by the arm. The reporter twisted with an apparently accidental flick of his right toe behind the man's ankle and the dick unaccountably performed half of a back somersault, alighting on one ear.

"First chance I had to try that one, Burke," said Sudden. "Now what's the dope?"

A calm, slow voice with only a hint of foreign origin spoke.

"I would advise, Mr. Marsden, it might be best to inform the newspaperman of what has occurred. In my own practice, I've discovered it is best to confide in the gentlemen of the press."

Deepset gray eyes looked straight into Sudden's. The reporter identified the man instantly as Dr. Von Kruppen. He was a pleasant, almost unctuous man who wore a physician's one-time traditional Van Dyke beard and small blond mustache. He was rubbing a thoughtful forefinger over

a forehead that sloped so suddenly his hair seemed to have skidded halfway off his skull.

Sudden had encountered him a couple of times on hospital cases. Dr. Von Kruppen, in the four or five years he had practised in Cosmopolis, had built a reputation as a brain specialist. Some of his lectures before the state medical society had made good copy.

"If you think so," whispered Marsden, suddenly seeming too sick to care much. "I'd hoped—what in hell is it, anyway, doctor."

"I only wish I could give you the right answer, but I'm afraid it's too soon," said Dr. Von Kruppen, taking Marsden's pulse. "I would say, Officer, you might as well let the representative of the press see that note and then we'll ask him as a special favor to keep it in confidence for awhile."

"What a chance!" growled Detective Burke.

Discovering the dead man cost him his life. His head seemed to split asunder.



The sick man was muttering in a low tone. "Things are getting blurred."

Von Kruppen tried to soothe him. "Hold yourself together, Mr. Marsden. Perhaps the power of suggestion is working. Try to forget for a minute that anything happened. I'll fix you a sedative."

"No! No! I tell you it isn't imagination!" The whisper was frantic. "Everything's fading out!"

"Nonsense," said Dr. Von Kruppen cheerily, but Sudden saw there was a worried crease in his long forehead.

"Well," said Burke, "someone held Marsden up when he got out of his car in the garage under the house. "He'd just switched off the lights when they grabbed him, he says. That's all, except it was damn' funny. He had several hundred dollars in his pockets and that diamond on his finger, but they didn't take anything. Just put him out with ether and walked out on the job. All, except this."

Once again big, damp, icy snowflakes fell from nowhere on the back of Sudden's neck. Burke was extending a small square of glazed cardboard. On it was written in typed letters:

Soon you will be very sick. You will grow worse until you die horribly. But you have one chance to live. One chance only. That will cost you one million dollars cash. Don't think anyone can help you. Only one man has the antidote and only that can save you. Get together one million cash at once and wait for instructions."

THE words photographed themselves on Sudden's brain even while he was swiftly revolving the facts and what to do. In less than an hour the *Star-News* Daybreak Extra would be on the streets. He didn't want to get in a jam with Burke and the Police Department, not just yet. They would find the District Attorney's body quickly enough after the story broke.

Sudden had thought of one place to go where he might get a part of the answer to the sinister, terrible thing that had struck down Yarrow. Now he saw the clear intent of Yarrow's killers, so incredibly horrible as to be fantastic. Important as the District Attorney had been, the cunning mind behind this plot to extort a cool million from Marsden, perhaps more millions from others, had considered Yarrow merely a pawn in the bigger game.

And what a terrific proof of the killers' power and their confidence in the scheme they had evolved.

Sudden thought of the bomb he could burst among this little group. Burke and his men, who would be incredulous until they had confirmed his story. The skilful, cool-headed doctor, maintaining his calm and going about his business of ascertaining what source of human ill was even now coursing through the millionaire's bloodstream.

Marsden himself. God! If he could have seen what Sudden had come upon in Trent Street! The shock alone would be sufficient to twist his already apprehensive brain.

The women Sudden had seen hovering about in a nearby room.

No. This wasn't the time to talk. Not to Burke. Later he could get

the more collected Dr. Von Kruppen to one side. Perhaps what he had to tell might give the doctor a lead. If he could only get the doctor out and drive him over right now to Trent Street. That fearfully shrunken, horribly warped body on the lawn might tell him something.

As he looked, Dr. Von Kruppen pulled back Marsden's sleeve and was feeling a tiny red spot on his upper arm. The mark of the hypodermic was plain. Sudden unconsciously touched the silver tube in his coat pocket.

The newspaper reporter came up-
permost. What a story, if that to which his mind had leaped might be true. No. This wasn't the place to tell it. Not now. He'd go to Dr. Von Kruppen later, very soon, but not until he had gone to the one man he had intended to see.

If there was anyone in Cosmopolis could tell him the secret of that silver tube he had taken from Yarrow's yellowed fingers, that man could do it. It was evident from the warning that Marsden would not be fatally stricken at once. He recalled now that Yarrow had been away from his office for more than two weeks. Had left word that he was going up country.

"And that's all then?" said Sudden, as if he had expected more. "You wouldn't think it was just a clever trick, one of them extortion scares? How about it, Dr. Von Kruppen?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell Mr. Marsden," said the doctor. "Possibly there was nothing at all except perhaps an opiate or something that might nauseate him for a few hours in that hypo."

"I can hardly see," mumbled Marsden. "For God's sake, Doctor, can't you do something to make sure?"

Dr. Von Kruppen smiled through his blond beard and looked at Sudden.

"I trust you'll treat this in confidence, young man, until I can be sure of something," he said. "Publicity is probably just what the scoundrels would want."

Sudden considered swiftly. He ought to be able to be back within an hour.

"I'll not let go of anything I've heard until I see you first, Doctor," he promised. "In the meantime, something may turn up."

He was in no doubt that something would turn up. And he slipped through the door, for far up the street newsboys were crying the Day-break Extra.

SUDDEN drove with such reckless disregard to the hilltop section of town that his mind was only on his driving and the possibilities ahead.

Half an hour later he emerged from a gray stone house on a side street. His pulse was jumping with elation. Professor Ralston's analyses never went wrong. When Ralston was doubtful, he refused to commit himself.

A serum, he had said, after he had passed two tiny drops from the syringe through a complicated test.

"Taken from the blood of an animal," he stated. "It's intended as a relief from or the cure of some blood disease. That I can't identify, to be sure. But I would say positively that it is an antidote in a se-

rum concocted from animal blood."

It made Sudden dizzy. Newspapersmen get that way when a big break on a great story is imminent. He had this one sewed up, as completely as the murder of the District Attorney. Now he was sure it had been murder.

He parked his car in the *Star-News* space and broke for upstairs. First, break the Marsden case as it lay, then get out to Dr. Von Kruppen's, if he had left Marsden's, and pledge the doctor to secrecy in return for giving the doctor his big chance to help solve the mystery of the ghastly plot for a million.

He barely took notice of knots of people along the street, of the newsboys selling extras, of the note of horrified excitement. Only vaguely he did see two huge Negroes lounging near the *Star-News* entrance, but in the heat of this new break on the story his mind passed that up.

THEN Morrison was thundering across the room toward him.

"You damn' fool!" the city editor was frothing. "Where in hell's that Yarrow body? What did you do with it? The commissioner himself has been on the wire! Answer me! What did you do with it?"

Sudden stared with unbelief. Morrison must be crazy.

"The body; Yarrow's, you mean? Why, in front of his house—right—"

"The police have combed every inch of the place!" shouted Morrison. "It ain't there I'm tellin' yuh! Where in hell is it? This puts us in a helluva spot!"

Sudden was dazed as he got back downstairs. He'd get to Marsden's

place and catch Dr. Von Kruppen there. Then he'd get out to Trent Street.

His car was parked in the shadowed corner under the *Star-News* Building. As he walked into the gloom he was aware that two Negroes had also stepped from the pavement, were following him. The import of it flashed on him now.

He acted almost on instinct. That was it. He might have realized it sooner. They were after that silver tube. Then it had been a Negro who had got Gyp Martin.

He thought swiftly, took the syringe from his coat pocket and pulled up his trouser leg. When he straightened, the silver tube was firmly held close to his leg by his hose supporter.

But the Negroes had stopped when he had. And they didn't move as he went on toward his car. He was watching them over his shoulder as he reached mechanically for the handle of the coupé door. Something brought his eyes around.

Those icy snowflakes again on the back of his neck. A man was erect in the seat beside the wheel. He was sitting motionless. Sudden figured he was too close to draw back now. One hand whipped his police gun from inside his coat and he pointed it at the same instant he yanked the door open.

It was only a slight jar, but the man in the seat had toppled forward, his head banging the instrument board. Then he rolled sideways and slid out head first at Sudden's feet as the reporter sprang back.

Sudden's breath caught and choked him. Every inch of his flesh

He drew his gun, and as the doctor fell, blazed away until the clip was empty.



quivered. Never before had the unexpected, even the horrible, gripped him as this did.

For the body at his feet was that of District Attorney Yarrow, with the single gold tooth gleaming.

What should he do? Hell, but this would be one proper mess to square with the police. Stealing a story was one thing, but apparent abduction of a murdered man was considerably farther than even Sudden had ever gone.

He started to walk around the car. A foul, sweating hand went over his mouth. It was almost as if the dead man had come to life behind him. He tried to squirm loose, but the hand tightened inexorably. A sinuous arm was wound around his throat. All at once there was a sweetish smell and then there was nothing at all.

YARROW'S shrunken, ghastly face leered through Sudden's bad dream. It was there as he awoke and when he was awake it still leered at him with that dead, gold-toothed mouth.

For a few seconds he imagined he must still be beside his car. But sunlight slanted through a high narrow window, making a pattern on the floor that showed the panes were barred. He was in an empty room, except for odds and ends of old furniture. Yarrow's body was in the corner he was facing. He shuddered and turned his head.

Sudden's head ached and he was nauseated, but he got shakily to his feet. His police automatic was gone. So were notes and some letters from his pockets. He tried to keep his eyes from turning toward Yarrow's corpse.

He tried the one door, knowing it would be useless. But as if his movement had been a signal, he heard shuffling steps outside. He drew back quickly, his impulse to

poise at one side and hurl himself upon any person who might enter.

Something pricked his leg. Then his brain clicked. He was here because he had in some manner interfered with the plotter of death who had got Yarrow and now was seeking to extort a million from Marsden. Or he must have something the killers wanted.

That was it. That silver syringe under his hose supporter. They had overlooked it when he had been knocked out. He believed, from Ralston's analysis, the syringe contained the antidote for which Marsden was to be forced to pay.

The steps paused before the door. Sudden bent swiftly, took the syringe from its hiding place and slipped it into a crack between the loose boards of the attic wall. He rolled to the floor and was stretched out when the door opened. He kept his eyes closed for an instant.

Bodies reeking with sweaty odor were close when hands pulled him up. He opened his eyes slowly, as if still dazed, and he was looking into the deeply meditative eyes of Dr. Von Kruppen.

"I might have known it would be you," said Dr. Von Kruppen. "You're a very smart young man indeed. I could see that at Marsden's. Very smart. You didn't betray what you knew to the police, and at that time I didn't know that my boys were following you."

Sudden twisted his arms, but black hands were stiff as manacles on his wrists. Dr. Von Kruppen?

"So it's you," he said. "And I was going to look you up to give you a chance at the—"

He bit his tongue sharply. The

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doctor's deep eyes sparkled and he smiled evilly through his blond beard.

"Yes, a chance at—well, go on."

The big Negroes holding him stood still as statues. The doctor rasped out a command in a guttural, native language.

Sudden was twisted to the floor. Piece by piece his clothing was stripped from him. He was left in his underwear and socks. The doctor went through his shoes. When he cast them aside he glared at Sudden.

"Smarter than I thought," he said. "Now, you have proved you are bright. Where's that syringe you took from the dead man?"

Sudden saw the idea.

"Oh, that? Why, a chemist friend of mine has the syringe. He dumped it for analysis. He's going to let me know about it tomorrow."

"You told him where you got it?" said Dr. Von Kruppen quickly.

"No, but he's read the *Star-News* by this time and he knows."

Dr. Von Kruppen laughed harshly, with a sinister, metallic note.

"It doesn't matter, not to you. We'll find out about that, but you won't care much. They tell me you're a great reporter. So, I'm giving you the greatest story you ever had, only you won't ever see it printed.

"If my boys hadn't been smart, too, five years of hard work would have gone for nothing. By this time you've guessed plenty, so I'll give you the rest of it.

"Yes, I gave Yarrow that pleasant, little prescription. Some idea, using him for a horrible example to Marsden and a couple of others that were on the list. Besides, Yarrow had been too damned inquisitive. He had been digging up some stuff and

I had to have it. He had found out that I came over to the States from London after my last trip through Africa and something had made him suspicious.

"Two birds with one stone, getting him. Then, just when he seemed all ready to pass out, the boys get careless and he walks out on us. He already had that card in his pocket, because we expected he was about ready to be packed out. Somehow he got into the laboratory and found that syringe and the serum, but he was too late.

"But he was tough, I tell you. He got all the way to his own place, but he couldn't quite make it, and he didn't have strength enough to use the antidote after he got it. My boys were trailing him, and they tell me they saw two men find him at different times. We intended to have his body found, but not with the antidote in his hand.

"They got the other man, but he didn't have that syringe, so they went after you. They were waiting for instructions when you went back from Marsden's. Well, they got their orders and here you are."

SUDDEN'S mouth was so dry his tongue stuck, but he said, "You can't get away with it. You must be mad. They'll nail you on this Marsden thing before you get started. The police are smarter than you think."

"Yes? You think so? I have been Marsden's personal physician for nearly three years. I have a consultation this afternoon with three eminent gentlemen who will help me decide what strange illness has attacked him. We will reach no conclusion. Not yet.

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a greater reporter than you to write it, as you will see."

Again the doctor spoke a guttural command. Sudden was helpless. He set his teeth as the needle bit into his arm. He was firmly clamped by the Negroes. Dr. Von Kruppen even sponged the spot scrupulously with an antiseptic wad of cotton before he thrust the deadly instrument into the blood vein.

"God!" whispered Sudden. "You can't do that!"

The doctor did not reply. He stepped back, smiling crookedly. Sudden would have hurled himself upon him, but he was still held powerless. Dr. Von Kruppen put away the death syringe carefully. He was a bright-eyed madman now, who wanted to talk, to boast.

"It will creep over you quickly," he said. "You'll feel no pain. You will be sick, but that will pass. If you haven't guessed, it's the sleeping sickness of Africa, the Nagana, they call it. My boys come from there. They're good boys. They owe me their lives, for I saved them with the animal serum I discovered.

"In a few minutes now you will feel it, because there are millions of the germs in that shot. Soon you will be unable to help yourself. You will live for hours, perhaps days, but you will be as dead all the time.

"In the meantime, my smart young man, we shall put Yarrow's body where the police will find it. We'll call that a tribute to a good reporter who beat the town with his story. But you won't be reading about it. I gave five years of careful building up for that million I'm going to have. At the proper time, with the aid of some of my worthy colleagues, I shall be forced to advise Marsden that his only hope is to pay for that antidote.



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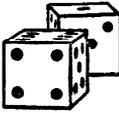
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"And then, there'll be a little joker. What he'll get won't be worth any more than so many drops of water. Can this physician help it if he was done to death by this strange disease?"

The doctor laughed mirthlessly. Sudden tried to conquer an overpowering nausea. His body went limp and a strange numbness started creeping along his arms, over his shoulders, along the cords of his neck to his brain.

The doctor seemed magnified, yet fading away, a laughing, blond monster.

SUDDEN was alone in the room. He turned his head with an effort. A sickening lassitude gripped his muscles. When he tried to arise, his arms and legs had no sense of direction. A dull pain throbbled across his forehead. It hurt more intensely when he tried to remember what it was he must do.

The syringe. Over there in the cracks of the boards. It must be night now, for a small light bulb burned at the end of the room. The body of Yarrow had been removed. They had left Sudden his wrist-watch and it had stopped.

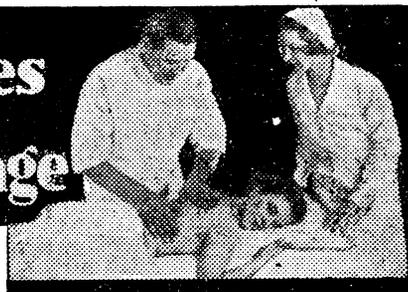
God! How many hours had he waited, slept? Or had it been days? Yarrow had rallied at the last, and Von Kruppen had said he couldn't use the antidote when he had got it. Time ceased. Only his will to move kept him awake, moving inch by inch toward that wall crack.

The board was loose. His fumbling, nerveless hand pulled it away. More hours across his brain as he hunted, and despaired and hunted again.

The touch of the silver tube was a final spur to ebbing will power. He

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half rolled, driving the needle deep in his leg. He made the weight of his knee shove the plunger home. He sank back and he knew the needle had snapped off in his flesh, but that didn't matter.

Whether he slept again, he could not tell, but when he opened his eyes, his head was clearer. Fearfully he experimented and his right hand obeyed his will. Strength was flowing through his veins.

When he had dozed and aroused himself again, steps were sounding outside the door. Sudden came to his feet quickly. Soreness ran along every quivering muscle, but he was no longer bound by lethargy.

The door opened and a tall Negro stepped inside. He came in with the careless assurance of one who knows there is nothing to fear. Sudden's right toe flicked out and caught the black above the ankle.

The Negro grunted and half somersaulted backward. Sudden was on him, a thumb under his armpit, fingers exploring for that nerve end in the Negro's neck. It found it and the big body quivered and stiffened. It was Sudden's own pistol his other hand encountered, stuck native fashion into the Negro's belt. He had no compunction as he brought the butt crashing down on the Negro's skull.

He was out through the door. Dr. Von Kruppen's smooth head and his blond beard poked up over the level of the floor as he came up the stairs. Sudden flung himself forward and he was close when he fired twice. The blond beard and the bald skull vanished and there was a thumping on the stairs.

Three Negroes were starting up. One had a knife and he threw it. Sudden felt the blade slice his arm as he dodged. The Negroes were close to-

gether. Sudden dropped to the top step, aimed carefully and the automatic jerked in his hand until the magazine was empty.

He picked up the fallen knife and went down. At the end of a long hall he found a locked door. In the kitchen he dug up a heavy iron and he smashed through a panel.

On the long table were many bottles, but on a small shelf at the side were two glass jars. The labels were in German but Sudden remembered enough to piece out part of the meaning. Enough. One was the antidote serum.

His knees threatened to collapse as he went into the hallway and found the telephone. But he propped himself against the wall and called the *Star-News*. Finally he got Morrison.

"Give me—rewrite—quick—," he said, surprised at the way his words halted. "The story's cleaned up. We'll save Marsden."

Morrison started burning the wire.

"Rewrite first—" Sudden said slowly. "It's a whale of a yarn—an' it's all sewed up—an' when you're on the street, you'd better call the police an'—say—you put my byline on it—y'hear!"

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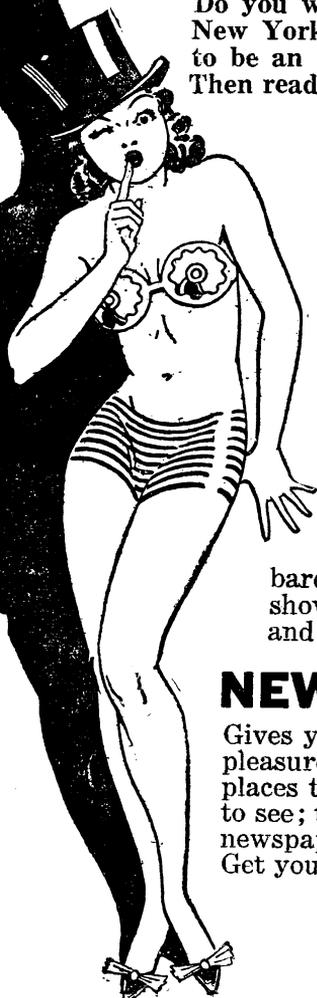
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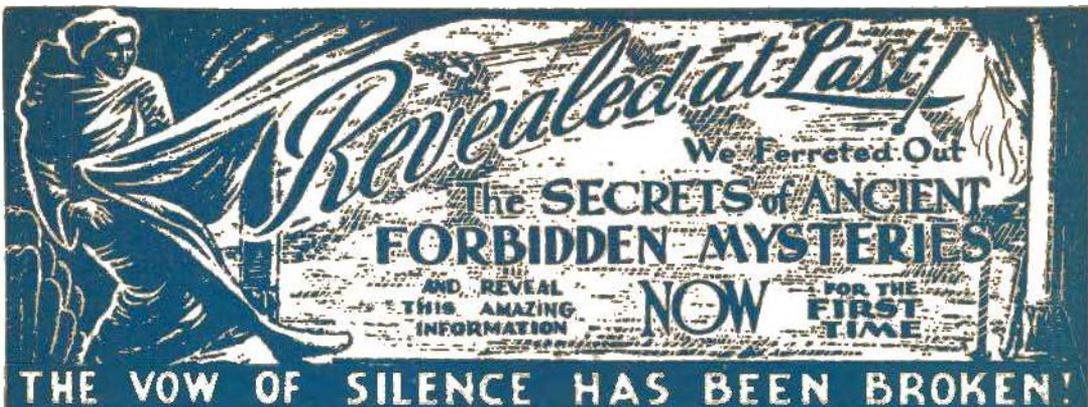
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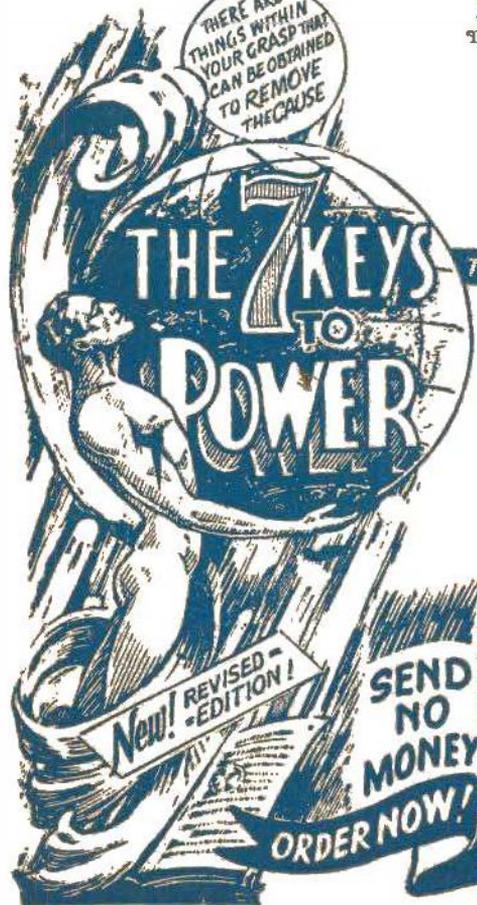
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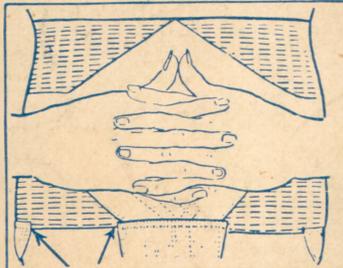
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