

Smashing

25¢

DETECTIVE

SEPT.

132 PAGES

STORIES

**KEEP THE
CORPSE
HOT!**

by T. W. Ford

**SO DEAD
THE ROSE**

by Sim Albert

**FIRST COME,
FIRST KILLED**

by D. A. Kyle

**ALL STORIES NEW
NO REPRINTS**

DOUBLE-ACTION
MAGAZINE



**NEW! MAGIC PANEL FEATURE SLIMS LIKE MAGIC!
LOOK SLIMMER, MORE YOUTHFUL**

REDUCE



You will look like and feel like this beautiful model in your new and improved cool—light weight **FIGURE-ADJUSTER**

YOUR APPEARANCE!

THE FIGURE-ADJUSTER MUST BE THE BEST GIRDLE YOU EVER WORE . . . YOU MUST FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE, and you MUST look and feel younger . . . Your shape MUST be noticeably improved or you get every cent back at once!

No matter how many other girdles you have tried, you can be sure: **NO OTHER GIRDLE CAN DO FOR YOU MORE THAN THE FIGURE-ADJUSTER!** No other girdle or supporter belt offers you more **BELLY CONTROL, BULGE control, HOLD-IN and STAY-UP power . . . safely, scientifically.** No other girdle can begin to approach the miracle-working **FIGURE-ADJUSTER feature!** Figure-Adjuster is **LIGHT in weight (ideal for ANY weather)** yet powerfully strong! Figure-Adjuster allows **AIR** to circulate through it, **ABSORBS** perspiration, is made by the most skilled craftsmen, and allows you to **ADJUST** it to just the right amount of **BULGE-CONTROL** you like and **NEED** for an **IMPROVED FIGURE!**

MAGIC PANEL CONTROL—No laces show when you wear a **SLIMMING** Figure-Adjuster. The control you get is completely **COMFORTABLE . . . and GUARANTEES** healthful, **lasting support.** Its satin **TUMMY** laces right up to meet the bra—**NO MIDRIF BULGE! LIFTS and FLATTENS** the tummy, **SLIMS** down the waist, **TRIMS** the hips and eliminates the "SPARE TIRE" waistline roll! The magic **ADJUSTABLE**, **slimming, easily controlled panel** is scientifically designed and is the result of testing different kinds of panels on thousands of women! Figure-Adjuster creates the "**BALANCED PRESSURE**" that gives each bulge the exact amount of **RESTRAINT** it requires. It gives you the right amount of **SUPPORT** where **YOU** need it **MOST!** Let Figure-Adjuster give you **MORE** figure control . . . for more of your figure . . . let it give you a more **BEAUTIFUL FIGURE** . . . the **slimmer, trimmer figure** that **INVITES** romance! You **ACTUALLY APPEAR SLIMMER AT ONCE WITH** THE **MAGIC PANEL** control of Figure-Adjuster. Colors nude blue or white. Sizes 24 inch waist to 48, only \$4.98.

MAKE THIS TEST WITH YOUR OWN HANDS! Clasp your hands over your **ABDOMEN**, press upwards and in gently but **FIRMLY.** You feel better, don't you! That's just what the **UP-LIFT adjustable FIGURE-ADJUSTER** does for you, only the **FIGURE-ADJUSTER** does it better. **MAIL COUPON AND TEST IT AT HOME FOR 10 days FREE** at our expense! **NO OTHER GIRDLE AT ANY PRICE CAN GIVE YOU BETTER SUPPORT,** can make you look better, feel better or appear **slimmer and younger!** Sizes 24-48 waist.

100% MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE!

Test the Figure-Adjuster at home for ten days **FREE** at our expense! It's sent on approval! It must do all we claim for it or return it after ten days and we'll send your money right back. We take all the risk . . . that's because we know that even though you may have tried many others you haven't tried the **BEST** until you have tried a **FIGURE-ADJUSTER!** **MAIL COUPON NOW!**



**TRULY SENSATIONAL AT
NOW \$498**

formerly \$6.50

**TRIM UNWANTED INCHES
OFF YOUR MIDRIF, OFF YOUR MIDRIF,**

waist and hips with real breathe-easy comfort. New scientific construction whittles away rolls and bulges . . . **slimming, easy-to-adjust rayon satin tummy panel laces** right up to your bra. In powerful elastic. White, light blue or nude. Small (25"-28"), Medium (27"-28"), Large (29"-30"), Extra Large (31"-32"). Also "**PLUS**" sizes for the fuller figure, **XX (33"-35"), XXX (36"-38"), XXXX (39"-40"), XXXXX (41"-44").**

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For Your Figure's Sake MAIL THIS COUPON NOW!

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- Raises Abdomen and Keeps it In!
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- Smooths and Slims Thighs
- Makes Your Clothes Fit Beautifully

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Yes! Please rush "**FIGURE-ADJUSTER**" on approval. If not delighted I may return girdle within 10 days.

I will pay postman \$4.98 plus postage.
 I enclose \$5.00, cash, check or money order, send postage prepaid. (I save up to 75c postage.)

Color _____ 2nd color choice _____

Size _____ Panty Girdle _____ Girdle _____

Name _____

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Smashing DETECTIVE STORIES

Volume 1

September, 1951

Number 3

Powerhouse Feature Novels

- KEEP THE CORPSE HOT** T. W. Ford 8
"I'll play dead, while you figure out who wanted to kill me!"
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It lay clutched in her hand, waiting to tell its own story...

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ROBERT W. LOWNDES, Editor

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MEN! WOMEN! take orders for famous NYLONS GUARANTEED 9 MOS.



**ONLY YOUR
SPARE
TIME
NEEDED**

Look at these Exceptional FIRST WEEK EARNINGS

Space permits mentioning only these few exceptional cases, but they give you an idea of the BIG MONEY that is possible in this business starting the very first week.

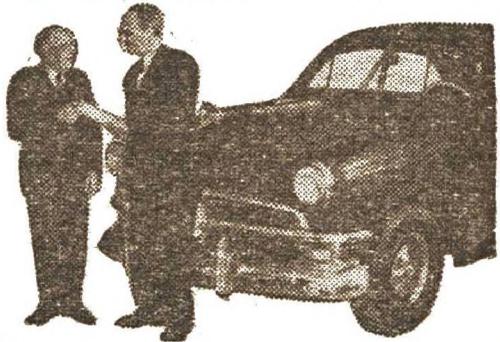
Mr. E. L. Lippard, Texas \$59.32 first week	Mrs. Arnold Junge, Mich. \$64.68 first week
Mr. Clarence Bush, New York \$41.24 first week	Mrs. Fred Pillath, Jr., Wis. \$41.82 first week
Mr. Ralph Shearer, Ky. \$67.11 first week	Mrs. Morton House, Ga. \$48.92 first week
Mr. Horatio de LaRoche, Cal. \$68.84 first week	Mrs. Hazel McClean, Ill. \$40.35 first week
Mr. Boyd Shaw, Tenn. \$53.46 first week	Mrs. Pearl Elvera, Minn. \$63.87 first week
Mr. W. F. Gardner, N. C. \$63.49 first week	Mrs. Pete Dickson, Ohio \$81.32 first week

NYLONS GUARANTEED NINE MONTHS

Sensational Guarantee is creating a tremendous demand for Wilknit Nylons! Mrs. Robert Franklin of Ohio started out with me and made \$56.00 the very first week. Mr. Cadman, of Rhode Island, did even better. His first week's earnings amounted to \$69.37. Mrs. R. E. Page of Massachusetts chalked up \$177.94 worth of orders first week out. These exceptional earnings give you an idea of possibilities.

GUARANTEED AGAINST RUNS—WEAR AND EVEN SNAGS! Why is it so easy for Wilknit Salespeople to get orders? I'll tell you—it's because we stand back of Wil-

knit Nylons with the most amazing guarantee you have ever heard of. Your customers can wear out their hose. They can develop runs. They can even snag or rip them. No matter what happens to make Wilknit Nylons unwearable . . . within 9 months . . . depending on quantity . . . we replace them free of charge under terms of our guarantee. No wonder women are anxious to buy Wilknit! And no wonder it is easy to quickly build up fine STEADY year around income. Earnings start immediately. Look at these exceptional figures—Ralph Shearer made \$67.11 first week. Mrs. Paul Estes \$42.82—Mrs. Ivy Gentry \$43.37. Doris Jensen in addition to making as much as \$17.00 in a day, earned 2 cars as EXTRA bonuses.



A Car in 2 Months PLUS \$1,007.60 Cash!

"Naturally I was honored winning a new car and I am happy to have won the car in two months when we had a whole year to win it in. My commission for two months totaled \$1,007.60. I have

earned as much as \$50.00 a day and \$30.00 to \$40.00 a day commissions have not been unusual. It is a high privilege and I may say an honor to represent the Wilknit Hosiery Co."

Frank C. Schultz

FUR COAT ALSO GIVEN!

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Genuine I. J. FOX Creation

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SEND NO MONEY JUST NAME AND NOSE SIZE

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beautiful hosiery of the year—every pair guaranteed for quick, easy and profitable sale. Mail coupon or penny postcard today, and learn at once how you, too, can earn big money in FULL or SPARE TIME and quality for an EXTRA BONUS over and above your daily cash earnings.

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7419 Midway, GREENFIELD, OHIO Hose Size

Please rush all facts about your guaranteed hosiery money-making plan and FREE CAR or FUR COAT offer. Everything you send me now is FREE.

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NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ ZONE _____ STATE _____

**NEW! MAGIC PANEL FEATURE SLIMS LIKE MAGIC!
LOOK SLIMMER, MORE YOUTHFUL**

REDUCE

YOUR APPEARANCE!

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MAGIC PANEL CONTROL—No laces show when you wear a **SLIMMING** Figure-Adjuster. The control you get is completely **COMFORTABLE . . . and GUARANTEES** healthful, lasting support. Its **satiny TUMMY PANEL** laces right up to meet the **waist—NO MIDRIF BULGE!** **LIFTS** and **FLATTENS** the tummy, **SLIMS** down the waist, **TRIMS** the hips and eliminates the "SPARE TIRE" waistline roll! The **MAGIC ADJUSTABLE**, slimming, easily controlled panel is scientifically designed and is the result of testing different kinds of panels on thousands of women! Figure-Adjuster creates the "BALANCED PRESSURE" that gives each bulge the exact amount of **RESTRAINT** it requires. It gives you the right amount of **SUPPORT** where **YOU** need it **MOST!** Let Figure-Adjuster give you **MORE** figure control . . . for more of your figure . . . let it give you a more **BEAUTIFUL FIGURE!** . . . the slimmer, trimmer figure that **INVITES** romance! You **ACTUALLY APPEAR SLIMMER AT ONCE WITH THE MAGIC PANEL** control of Figure-Adjuster. Colors nude blue or white. Sizes 24 inch waist to 42, only \$4.98.

MAKE THIS TEST WITH YOUR OWN HANDS! Clasp your hands over your **ABDOMEN**, press upwards and in gently but **FIRMLY.** You feel better, don't you? That's just what the **UP-LIFT** adjustable **FIGURE-ADJUSTER** does for you, only the **FIGURE-ADJUSTER** does it better. **MAIL COUPON AND TEST IT AT HOME FOR 10 days FREE** at our expense! **NO OTHER GIRDLE AT ANY PRICE CAN GIVE YOU BETTER SUPPORT,** can make you look better, feel better or appear slimmer and younger! Sizes 24-in waist.

100% MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE!

Test the Figure-Adjuster at home for ten days **FREE** at our expense! It's sent on approval! It must do all we claim for it or return it after ten days and we'll send you money right back. We take all the risk . . . that's because we know that even though you may have tried many others you haven't tried the **BEST** until you have tried a **FIGURE-ADJUSTER MAIL COUPON NOW!**



**TRULY SENSATIONAL AT
NOW \$4.98**

formerly \$8.00

**TRIM UNWANTED INCHES
OFF YOUR MIDRIF,**

waist and hips with real breathe-easy comfort. New scientific construction whitens away rolls and bulges . . . slimming, easy-to-adjust rayon satin tummy panel laces right up to your bra. In powerful elastic. White, light blue or nude. Small (25"-26"), Medium (27"-28"), Large (29"-30"), Extra Large (31"-32"). Also "POUS" GIRDLES for the Fuller Figure, XL (33"-35"), XXL (36"-38"), XXXL (39"-41"), XXXXL (42"-44").



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OR YOUR MONEY BACK
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FREE!

"SECRETS OF
LOVELINESS"
booklet tells how to take advantage of correct choice of clothes, proper use of make-up and other secrets to help you look years younger, pounds and inches slimmer will be included **FREE** with order.

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Why Diet? Try It!

- Takes Inches Off Tummy!
- Raises Abdomen and Keeps it Flat
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- Smooths and Slims Thighs
- Makes Your Clothes Fit Beautifully

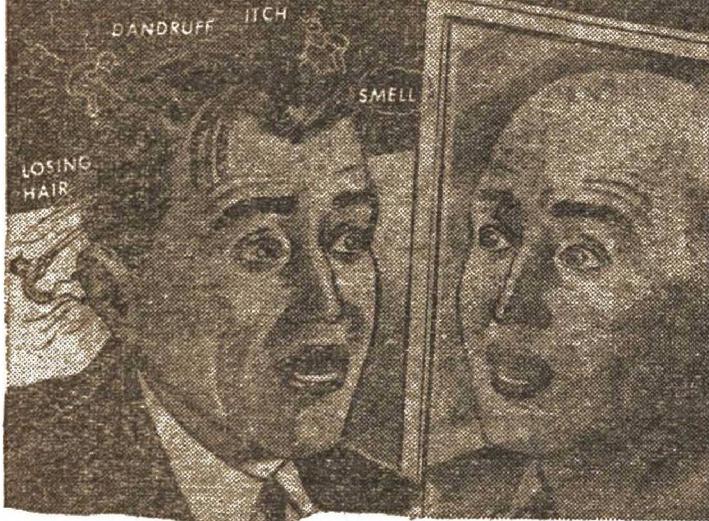
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FIGURE-ADJUSTER CO., DEPT. FA-248
318 Market St., Newark, N. J.
Yes! Please rush "FIGURE-ADJUSTER" on approval. If not satisfied I may return girdle within 10 days. I will pay postman \$4.98 plus postage.
 I enclose \$4.98, cash, check or money order, send postage prepaid. (I save up to 70¢ postage.)

Color _____ 2nd color choice _____
Size _____ Panty Girdle _____ Girdle _____
Name _____
Address _____
City _____ Zone _____ State _____

Please **PRINT** carefully. Be **SURE** to give **YOUR SIZE**.

NODRUFF STOPS DANDRUFF AT LAST-



Here's An Amazing
NEW
SCIENTIFICALLY PROVEN
Method to

- KILL Scaly Dandruff,
- STOP Scalp Itch
- RELIEVE Annoying Irritating, Dryness

8 WAYS NODRUFF will benefit YOU

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- Stimulates Flow of Natural Oils
- Puts An End to Distasteful Head Odors
- Brings Out Natural Highlights That Dryness Hides
- Makes Hair Easier To Manage
- Kills Harmful Bacteria On Contact

Now, for the first time, science has combined natural ingredients into a new product—NODRUFF—that is guaranteed to kill harmful bacteria that feed upon your scalp and rob you of your hair.

HEED NATURE'S WARNINGS—Don't Look Old, Haggard, Unkempt!
The time to do something about scalp itch and flaky dandruff is NOW! Don't wait until it's too late—until your hair is falling out or is dull and lifeless looking. Once you're bald—that's it! Your hair is gone forever and so is a great deal of your attractiveness. NODRUFF is guaranteed to stop all this—or your money back.

WATCH YOUR POPULARITY SOAR—

When your hair becomes re-vitalized, FREE from enemy bacteria that bring slow death to your hair and scalp—you stop looking haggard and old and regain your youthful look of vitality and neatness.

MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

Don't take our word for it that NODRUFF will absolutely eliminate scalp dryness and scaly dandruff. Try it for yourself on our money-back guarantee. A full month's supply of NODRUFF Ointment is only \$2.00. If at the end of a month, you are not 100% satisfied with NODRUFF Return the empty container to us and we will gladly refund your money. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain by ordering NODRUFF TODAY! Act Now—Clip Coupon and Mail to Maxon Distributors, 210 Fifth Avenue, New York City.



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Please rush me a 1-month supply of NODRUFF. If not completely satisfied, I will return empty container to you and you will refund my \$2.00 in Full by return mail.

- Enclosed is \$2.00 for a 1-month supply of NODRUFF (Postage Prepaid).
- Send me C.O.D., a 1-month supply of NODRUFF. I will pay Postman \$2.00 plus postage.

Name

Address

City..... Zone..... State.....

FEATURE NOVEL of MIDNIGHT MURDER



"... And there's four thousand more, Hood, if you get me the proof I need."

KEEP THE CORPSE HOT

By T. W. FORD

AS HE drew up at the small suburban estate in the darkness, Ben Hood pondered on Cooper's strange request at his investigation agency. "Hood," Cooper, the ultrasonics expert, had said, "I'm scared for my life; I want you to get me officially dead—not actually—as quickly as possible."

Raw-boned Ben Hood had almost fallen to the Aubusson carpet under his desk; it sounded cockeyed with a capital "c". But when the massive, gray-haired Cooper explained—it didn't sound so crazy. The head of the new plant with a government contract in Banson City had had two attempts made on his life recently. There were three men he suspected; he had figured it out if those three believed him dead, the one who wanted him that way might show his hand—if he thought himself in danger of being accused.

"And, incidentally, for the few days I'm supposed to be dead, I'll at least be temporarily safe," he'd added, shaking his head. "This sensation of being a sitting duck in a shooting gallery is no fun." He expelled his breath as if in nervousness. "I'm really scared."

It was hard to imagine the big, powerful Hilton Cooper afraid of

anything. Though in his early fifties, he was heavily built, a dominating stamp on his broad-jawed face. The face reminded Ben of a picture of a gladiator he remembered when he was young. Cooper exuded an aura of ruthlessness for power.

"Now the way I planned we could do this, Hood, is—"

Ben had shaken his head, at first; said his agency didn't touch those kinds of cases. "Besides there are the proper authorities of the Law you can apply to, Mr. Cooper. I advise you—"

"No good; if the police started to probe, innocent people might become involved. A smear like that can ruin a man for life, you know. Besides, there's a woman in the picture, my daughter."

Ben had hesitated, in his ornate office with two months of unpaid back rent; he'd lounged back in his two-hundred-and-fifty dollar, custom-made suit. The tailor's lawyer had phoned that very morning, threatening a lawsuit over the matter. But still he didn't like it; this didn't smell right. He might be accused by the police of some kind of a conspiracy; it might get him fouled up down at City Hall. And the commissioner, Dakes, was ready

"There have been two attempts on my life already, Hood, and there are three men out to get me. I'm sure of that, but I have no proof. You get the proof, while I play dead." Then the suspects were killed, one by one...

to grab at any excuse to refuse to renew Hood's license. If he had simply hired out as a bodyguard to protect Hilton Cooper, in case of another attack, it would be a different matter. He started to shake his head again.

Then Cooper held out a one-thousand dollar bill. "Or, I'll write out a check, if you prefer. And there's four thousand more when you find out who's been trying to get me—with proof the police can proceed on, Hood."

That clinched it for Ben Hood. Dakes, down at headquarters, always claimed Hood would murder his mother if the price were right. He rose with his bland smile and they shook on it. Now he was out here, in smart Wardton, on a fall night to start proceedings. He got out of his gray convert and took in the California ranch-type home; he whistled softly, a sleek-headed, black-haired man—almost handsome. But Hood's light-blue eyes could turn as hard as polished ball-bearings when the going got rough; he had a hound-like look about him.

"Nice shack," he muttered, thinking how he could use this kind of a layout himself. Ben Hood believed in the best ~~front~~ possible; the customers were willing to pay more for your services, than. Of course, half the time it had him teetering on the thin edge of bankruptcy; but Hood never let a little thing like that worry him long.

THERE WERE a couple of low lights on, down near one end, but no porch light. He was just stepping into it when the two brittle guneracks swung the night. There was a cry from somewhere inside the house; moments later Ben heard the sound of a window being thrust up around the corner of the house to his right. He started around for it, remembering he had left his Police Positive in the glove compartment of the big car. But he didn't pause to go back for it; Cooper might be in serious trouble. Hood sped around some blue spruce shrubbery—and got

it across the back of his head out of the darkness.

It seemed as if the end of the house had caved in on him. Ben reeled and twisted to get at his adversary; he clawed at cloth, then lost it. The lights had gone out in his head; he was trying to see through a tarry fog. Then there was another blow on the side of the skull. Hood hit the ground in a flower plot. Just before the awful clanging in his head turned to a detonation that swallowed him, he tasted the salt of blood running down his jaw...

When he came out of it, a spotlight poked fiercely into his face. Then Ben identified it as a desk lamp in the big library of the house. He was on a divan, one of Cooper's thick arms around his shoulder.

"Give me that brandy, Todd." A butler brought over a carafe and a glass. "Here, Hood; gulp a real jolt."

Ben Hood obeyed and sat up straighter as the ancient vintage stuff burned into him. He saw that Todd was a little wisp of an old man who might have been Tiny Tim's grandfather. It was Cooper's only servant at the house. Hood tried to think straight; it did seem strange that a man whose life was in danger would have only—

Cooper's big voice boomed at him. "Feeling any better, Hood?"

The private eye pushed some more of the cobwebs out of his brain, then saw the fresh cut under Cooper's left eye. "Another attempt on you, Mr. Cooper?"

"Yep. Took two shots at me just as I came downstairs to the living room here. One of them's in the wall over there. When I grappled at him, he hit me with something—that's how I got the cut. And he got away, damn it."

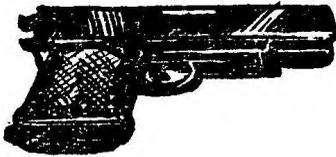
"Get any kind of a look at him?"

Cooper shook his head, said his assailant had been waiting in the shadow by the wall with only one small lamp on in the room. Besides he wore a snapbrim hat pulled low; he had gone down and looked out

the open window by which the man had left and seen Hood himself sinking to the grass.

"I thought of helping you right away, Hood."

Ben reached over and helped himself to more of the brandy. He had a growing lump at the back of his head, and a small cut that had ceased to bleed at one side. He swore hoarsely. Cooper added that when he had gone outside, a car parked somewhere downhill from his place had roared away. Hood re-



alized there'd be no percentage in going out to get the would-be killer now. He swore again. "I don't like people who treat me like that, dammit. The next time we meet, I'll give it back to him with interest. He—"

The bigger, huskier Cooper cocked an eyebrow. "Would you know him when you met him? Too bad you weren't a few moments sooner; this whole thing might be cleared up now." He helped himself to a drink. "Well, I'm ready to proceed on schedule, Hood, if you are?"

Ben cocked an eyebrow as he bent to light a cigaret. For a man who'd just had a third attempt on his life, Hilton Cooper seemed remarkably calm. And ready to go off to his lonely tucked-away fishing camp as had been planned...

HOOD WENT out to his car on instinct. When he came back he had his Positive in the shoulder sling under the specially tailored coat to conceal the bulge. Cooper looked more perturbed now.

"If you had only come up the drive a little faster, Hood... You were just easing along as if thinking."

Hood nodded. "I was." He indicated the girl's picture on the table. "Your daughter?" She was a beauti-

ful girl, an ash blonde, with a faint elfin touch to her face. Cooper said it was, Sandra.

"She's out of town right now," he added gruffly.

"You haven't filled in just how she fits into the picture, how she's concerned."

"I've told you enough, Hood... She must not be involved in any way in your investigations." He lighted a thick black cigar and checked his wrist watch. "Stirling should be here now." Stirling was the magnate's personal physician, an old friend, who was in on the strange deal.

"Now, after this third attempt, Cooper, aren't you worried they might try for you up at your fishing camp? You'll be alone there and—"

Copper cut in curtly. "Nobody knows I'll be there this time; nobody will see me leaving here. And remember—I'll supposedly be dead. Also I happen to be a damned good shot. I'll be armed up there."

Something made Ben Hood's narrow forehead twitch in a frown, but he couldn't put his finger on it as he stalked about the room. It was at the lake, Cooper had told him, that the first attempt had been made on his life. He had been out fishing in a small rowboat, and a hidden sniper—using a silencer and telescopic sights—had drilled it full of holes at a deserted point on the lake beyond Cooper's own island. Fortunately, Cooper had been working in shallow water at the moment; he would never have made it in deep water.

"Why didn't the sniper try to get you directly?" Ben had asked at the time.

Cooper had a ready reply. "Because he was smart enough—then, anyway—to want it to look like an accident, not murder. Hilton Cooper found floating, drowned... Boating accident. They'd never have found the boat at the bottom of the lake; no cause to look for it."

HOOD REVIEWED the second attempt on the ultrasonic ex-

pert. It had been an apparent hit-and-run driver out at the new plant. Evening. Cooper had been working late alone, been checked out by the night watchman. He had stepped into a narrow tree-tunnelled crossing. Without warning or lights, a cruising car had whipped up speed and born down on him, swerving in murderously. Cooper had leaped backward and just been brushed by a fender. Dr. Stirling had confirmed his bruises. Cooper and the murder car had been alone on the road at the time.

And now, tonight, the third attempt. "You've still no idea, after this time?" Hood pressed.

Cooper made an impatient gesture. "I told you how I figured it; there are three men with motives, Hood. It's up to you, dammit, to watch them when I'm reported dead under suspicious circumstances."

Hood's aquiline face hardened a little. He didn't go for that imperious manner of Hilton Cooper's. Mentally he checked off the trio. There was Roy Furgo, young engineer with the company, headstrong and hot-headed—according to Cooper. Furgo had two scores: First, Cooper refused to let his daughter marry him. Second, Furgo thought he was being deliberately held back at the plant because Sandra was willing. There had been a couple of bitter rows over that, one ending in blows at the plant.

"And you didn't fire the kid after that?" Ben had asked.

Cooper had shrugged as he shrugged now at the sound of the electric chimes at the front door. "Well, for one thing Furgo has promise of being a brilliant engineer; for another, I licked the boy in the bargain."

Now, in response to the door, old Todd dandled in with Dr. Stirling. Hood and the doctor had met earlier, as the plans were being worked out. The balding, ascetic medico said: "Hilton, I still think you're insane to go on with this scheme. I don't like it; too many things could go amiss and—"

"And I don't like being popped at. Have a drink, John... My two guests should be here in half an hour."

YOUNG FURGO, Hood knew, was to be one of them; the other would be Max Darstal, Cooper's junior partner, also an ultrasonics expert. Darstal, too, had a double-barrelled motive. For one thing, he and Cooper had been working on a new development in inducted heat production, had practically perfected it though a patent had not been applied for as yet. Their method would control the application of heat on selected areas more perfectly; it could revolutionize the industry.

"Actually I worked out the details of this new system—had the main idea and everything. But Darstal *did* help, and I always admitted it frankly," Cooper had explained. "Now, as things stand, he would come in for a small piece of the profits; but with me out of the picture—well, he could simply patent it himself; there'd be nobody to prove he didn't invent it. He'd clean up."

"And his second motive?" Ben had inquired.

"The government has been checking on Darstal's antecedents; he's from Eastern Europe, you see. Was there before the last war. Were he in full charge of the Cooper-Darstal business, head man, he might be able to quiet down the investigation of his background. He'd have the money to use then, you see."

Now, Cooper lifted his brandy glass. "Well, I'll be off. And this thing will come off all right, too. Don't—"

A phone ran mutedly. Todd came into the living room like an ancient cat, picked up the instrument. "Oh, Mr. Easter. Yes. No, I can't tell you. It's important? Have him call you any hour he comes in? I understand."

Hood and Cooper exchanged glances, the latter trigger-taut about anything upsetting the plan now. But Cooper shrugged. "It's all right;

I know what the old goat wants."

The "old goat" was Evans Easter, one of the city's top legal lights, who'd been handling all Cooper's legal affairs for years and years; he was the third suspect.

Though they had done business together for some time, Cooper claimed Easter held a deep bitter personal grudge against him; his late wife had been originally married to Evans Easter. "Evans never forgave me for stealing her, Hood. Never. He did business with me for the money in it."

Ben Hood knew of Easter well, an outstanding criminal lawyer, noted for his heavy gambling and women-chasing. But it was hard to think of him as a potential killer; lawyers were usually too smart to do things that way. He said as much.

Cooper had used that word that bobbed up in his conversation so frequently. "Money?... Men will do about anything for that, Hood. And Evans Easter is financially against the wall; his gambling, for one thing. Also, I know because I've advanced him some large sums."

Hood had picked up the ball there. "And if you were dead, Cooper..."

Cooper had nodded. "He could always claim the money represented legal services. We've done business on an informal basis for a long, long time; I've even advanced him money against company stock he owns."

That completed the picture. Ben's job was to pin down one of them as the potential killer.

"Well, do a good job and hustle it up, Hood," Cooper said, gripping his hand hard. "I'm anxious to get back into harness at the plant, you know." He swung on a topcoat and headed out the back way. His little Bugatti waited for him down on a small dirt road on the grounds. "Remember, I won't be taking any calls on the island up there."

Ben nodded; every detail had been worked out. Cooper would phone Hood's office or the house here for information. The doctor wiped his high forehead with a white silk handkerchief. "Those two should be

here in twenty minutes," he said. Cooper always was a great one for night conferences at all hours.

But Ben Hood wasn't listening; he stood staring after Cooper, frowning, like a man who's discovered something is missing...

2

DARSTAL WAS the first to arrive, a short little man as sharp-eyed as a ferret; he spoke with only a slight accent. His eyebrows shot up in surprise when he was introduced to Hood as a private investigator. "A private detective, yes? Hmmm. I did know Hilton had been kicking about the security at the plant but..."

"There's a little something wrong, Max," the doctor said with a grave face. "But we'll wait till young Furgo gets here."

Furgo came in a couple of minutes later, a big-boned young man with shaggy red hair. He wore slacks and a sports jacket. Hood appraised the sensitive mouth, the large quick moving eyes, figured he was the type with deep, impulsive emotions. Now he wore a guarded look as he found himself in the house of the girl he loved.

"Mr. Hood is a detective, Roy," Darstal said. "It seems something is the matter. I would like to know. When will Hilton be here?"

Furgo threw Hood a quick look, eyes slitting. The doctor was over behind the carved-legged table, leaning on it as he faced them. "Gentlemen, Hilton Cooper has had a regrettable accident. To be blunt, he's dead."

From the shadows, Hood watched hawklike, the oversized hands flexing. Both members of the company were shocked, naturally. It was Darstal who found words first. He said thickly: "His coronary trouble, yes?... But he told us to be here this evening. We were to confer," he added illogically. "Where is he?"

Furgo stepped forward. "You said an accident, doctor?"

"Maybe it wasn't an accident,

Roy," Stirling built the story. "Maybe he was murdered."

The younger man sucked air, but Darstal jumped forward, blunt hands gesturing around his bald-topped head. "Then why have you got the private detective here? Notify the authorities! Call in the police—the storm—the state troopers! Do something and—"

"Which is just what the authorities don't want now," Ben Hood picked it up. "The Federal authorities, I mean. This is too big a thing, they say. Hilton Cooper was an important figure in the defense effort; he might have been assaulted by an enemy of a foreign power. You understand?"

"No," said Darstal bluntly.

"The Federal authorities figure if the man who struck him down doesn't know he's dead, he may try again and reveal himself."

Roy Furgo hand-combed his ruffled red hair. He asked the first personal question. "Where did this happen, doctor?" Ben figured the young man looked relieved, as if he was glad it wasn't something else.

"At the plant," Stirling told him, then held up a hand as they asked for details in chorus. "We have orders to say no more now." He added that Hood had been hired personally by Cooper, because the latter feared something like this would happen. Hood would stay on to extend his aid and information on suspected parties to the government men.

Darstal walked around, shaking his little head. Furgo lighted a cigarette. "I'll make no bones about it; we hadn't been getting along." He made a helpless gesture. But he, along with Darstal, seemed genuinely shocked.

"Nobody is to see the body—right away?" Darstal asked.

"That's right. We want the whole matter kept secret," Hood replied. As the junior partner turned away, Hood saw him put his hand quickly over his mouth to hide a slight jerk—as if of triumph.

"Well, it seems there's nothing we can do. So I might as well run

along." When Hood asked where he could be reached if needed, he gave the address of the Carteret, a modest downtown hotel. Through the window, Hood watched him case his second-hand car down the drive. But when Furgo hit the main road outside, he really poured the coal to it like a man with a destination to reach in a hurry.

BACK IN the room, Max Darstal nodded sadly. "Yes, Hilton wouldn't permit his daughter to marry Furgo, even though they're



in love. Furgo hated him to the core... It would have been better if Roy had left the company after that. Me, I would not want a man under me who hated me so terribly." He held out his hands. "I do not want to run down the young man—but facts are facts at a time like this, I think."

"Sure." Hood lounged half over the arm of a chair. He was glad he had heard it from Darstal; it corroborated what Cooper had already told him. But Cooper could have been exaggerating the situation.

"Now for Evans Easter," said the doctor, going to the phone after Darstal had marched off. "After that, you'll be taking over; I'll put you right on."

Ben watched Darstal leave in his sedan, an over-cautious driver who waited at the estate gate for three cars to pass him. He had said he was going directly to his house in a modest suburb across the city. Hood heard Dr. Stirling give Evans Easter the bare facts, then took over the phone. He filled out the picture for the organlike-voiced lawyer.

Evans seemed plainly shocked, calling it "terrible, terrible." The lawyer was plainly upset about something; he said he supposed he'd hear from the Federal men on it.

"They already have picked up some stuff," Hood bluffed back; "there are two or three suspects right now."

"Really?" Evans Easter's cultured voice became guarded. "Perhaps I can be of some help, Mr. Hood. Hilton Cooper had enemies, as other men have; but he had a faculty for really embittering a man."

"Yes?" said Hood, smiling over the mouthpiece.

"Yes. Believe me, I know. And a man who should be closely checked is Max Darstal. Darstal concealed even from Hilton that he had entered this country under false pretenses. Hilton was really furious at him about it; he threatened to expose the whole matter to government authorities more than once. He really made poor Darstal squirm more than once."

Ben thanked him, hung up. He wore a smile as if he'd swallowed the cat that had swallowed the canary. "Two of them have twisted back to strike at another; wonder when we hear something from Furgo," Hood mused.

But they didn't hear from Furgo; they heard about him. Hood had operatives following both him and Darstal when they'd left the house; another was covering Evans Easter's ornate apartment. The time inched away, Hood burning down cigaret after cigaret. Maybe it was a wild goose chase.

"Somebody's got to make a move, show their hand," Ben muttered once.

Then the call came. It was Peabody, a legman who occasionally did work for Ben. He'd been watching Furgo's place. "Furgo's lit out, Ben. In his car. Went to an apartment house at 1890 Leverett Boulevard." It was out near the edge of town. Peabody was in a candy store across from Cooper's estate. This could be it, the big move.

A TRAFFIC snarl delayed him. When Ben drew up near the address, Peabody, a lank man as sad-faced as a bloodhound, was just stepping from a barroom.

"Nice candy store," Hood flipped at him.

"Look, Ben, she went in there and made a phone call."

"Who in blazes is she, idiot?"

Peabody rolled big eyes. "The cutest little number I ever saw. And she had blue hair, too. She—"

"How many have you had, Peabody?" Hood meant drinks.

Peabody scowled, unconsciously lifting a hand to his head that was bald. "Look, boss, when Furgo arrived here, as he walked under a street lamp, this blue-haired goddess, she waved to him from the window of that middle apartment on the second floor. She seemed surprised to see him."

"Cut out the 'seeming' stuff, Peabody. What *happened* then?" Peabody was dependable, but you had to dredge him to get all the pertinent facts on the same day.

"He went up. A little later she came out with the suitcase—and the blue hair. Then—"

"She'd have looked damn funny without hair. Then?"

"She got down to the corner, then came back as if she'd forgotten something. She went in there and into the phone booth. She kept getting a busy number because she kept hanging up and waiting, then trying again. But that was a little while ago, as you were some time getting here." He worked a finger around inside the collar of his blue shirt, half turning his head as he did so. "There she is now—getting into the cab on the corner. See the blue hair, boss?"

It was blue, a thick dark-shimmering cloud that hung like a mist about her head. Hood saw more too, a cute little chassis and underpinning that would have caused a score of wrecks on a high-speed highway. She was pure high-velocity stuff. Then the cab door slammed behind her and it drew away. Hood only hesitated a second; he had noted that tears stained her pale, chinalike cheeks.

Still, she might have been some trick Furgo had come out to see. The man Ben was to watch was upstairs, or should be. And the light was now

out in the second-floor window Peabody had indicated. Hood waited a few minutes, then slid inside the lobby behind a couple emerging so he didn't have to worry about the lock. He ignored the self-service elevator and took the stairs in long houndlike strides. Something told him to hurry. Nothing made sense. It looked, though, as if Roy Furgo, who was supposed to be crazy about the boss' daughter, had himself a love-nest.

He tried to figure the proper door in the short corridor. A radio yak-yaking behind one and a tiny fragment of female handkerchief that had been dropped before 2-D gave him the hunch. He rang twice to no avail, then pounded. Next he drew a small case of tiny skeleton tools from a pocket. In a matter of moments he was inside a dark foyer hall with the inky black cave of the living room beyond it. The radio still blasted. Hood fitted his long hand around the Police Positive, advanced.

Across the street a two-story high neon sign burst into quivering span-gled glow. In it, Hood saw the thing that had been a human being on the floor. A plain kitchen carving knife seemed to still quiver in its back. Even as Ben recognized him as Roy Furgo, he knew the poor devil was dead...

3

HE MOVED to where a light switch should be—and into the other who was behind him. The other's weapon was in Ben Hood's back before he realized anybody was there. A voice spoken between clenched teeth to disguise it said, "Just stand very still, friend."

It was one of the nicest jobs of being knocked out Ben ever had done on him. A powerful short hand slid around, came sharply against his throat. It was the right hand, Hood had time to notice. Which meant the other had the gun in his left. Then the thumb and forefinger exerted the pressure under each ear where the carotid artery splits to feed the

brain. Hood gathered himself for a break; the gun jammed deeper into his back to warn him.

It was like being smothered by a great dark silken pillow, painless and soft. The brain, its blood supply cut off, began to dim out...

His experience of the thing told him it was only a minute or two later when he came out of it. He sat up to find himself shackled hurriedly and crudely by a couple of ties from the window drapes. It was simple to get free and switch on a table lamp. He leaped into the outer hall and then realized the minute or two was all his assailant had needed. There was the stairs. And at the end of the hallway was the door to the fire stairs. He could only hope that Peabody kept his eyes peeled outside. As he headed back to look at Furgo a siren moaned somewhere down the drive.

Ben had only seconds. He knelt beside the corpse and noted a bump from some heavy instrument on the side of the head. Furgo had evidently been slammed unconscious, then murdered like a slaughter-yard animal. It had been brutal, a slaying that must have been conceived in terrible fury. If robbery had been the only motive there had been no need to kill him.

Hood checked the living room rapidly. It was modest but neat with the things that showed a woman, no mere man alone, lived there. Two sirens bayed now; Ben slipped out and down the fire stairs. He stepped out from the service entrance as the first cops dashed in the front door. In his hand he had several paper packets of matches from the foyer hall table of the murder scene.

"Damn slick," he said viciously. For it meant the man who'd jumped him must have phoned in the notice of a murder before getting out. But who would want to hang a murder on Hood? Again something that didn't make sense.

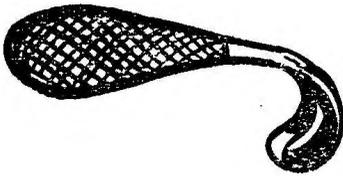
He got to Peabody across the street by the barroom. "Did you notice anybody come out of that building after I went in?"

"I've had the cop on the beat

pushing me around for the last minute or so. But hell sure must have popped in there! Did you find—"

"You won't have to tail him any more, Peabody; he isn't going to be walking much." Ben kept trying to make something add, even two and two, as he moved down toward his car. It seemed as if Furgo had had a love-nest, and perhaps the blue-haired girl had done the job. But his glimpse of her hadn't made her seem powerful enough; and there was no apparent motive. He plucked the packet matches out of his pocket.

On a hunch, he had grabbed up a fistful in going out the door. They were a striking gold-and-white, quite a stack of them on the little tray, apparently all alike. That was what struck him. Against the background of the cover was a girl dancing in



Mexican costume with obviously nothing beneath the skimpy bolero but a nice lot of flesh. She wore a flat-brimmed hat so it was impossible to tell much about her face. The motto said, *Come to The Pacific Club and see Murka Dance. One visit never enough...*

It told him little. He couldn't imagine Furgo as a heavy night-club fan. Often when a place or a product closed out, bales of such matches advertising them were sold to cigar store dealers at a cut price.

BEN GOT on the public phone down near where he left his car and checked with Cooper's house. Old Todd squeaked out that "the subject", as they had determined to refer to Cooper, had called in and arrived at the lake all right. There was two other messages for Hood. One was from Hanners, his operative he had tailing Darstal. Hanners' tale made Hood moan with pain in the phone booth. Darstal had left his

home, driving, and had given Hanners the slip, cutting into a parking lot with two exits. Hanners would keep checking with the office to see what his instructions were.

On a hunch, pummeling the booth side in his impotent anger, Hood got the night operator at his office. She had some good news. Bricky had rung in. Bricky was the man Hood had set to watch Easter's moves. Bricky was a five-foot six blob of muscle, dependable for the rough work, as tenacious as a bulldog. Nobody knew what his real name was except that in his past he had done time. He was content to work for what he called "hamburger-and-beers" money; Ben Hood liked people to work cheaply if they were working for him.

Bricky reported, indirectly, that he had followed Evans Easter to the Cooper grounds for a spell, was still tailing him now. He also claimed he had one of the lawyer's gloves; he would keep checking in. A bell rang in Hood as he hung up. He didn't know why the lawyer had visited the Cooper estate, but it must have some significance.

"Okay, Millie, I'll be calling back and—"

"Just a minute, Mr. Hood. I have another call coming through." After a few moments, she came back onto his wire. "It was a Mr. Darstal, boss. He said if you're looking for him, he's out at his office doing work."

Hood didn't crow over that one. It simply meant Darstal had slipped his man, then carried out his errand; his message as to where he could be found was a cover-up. But Hood raced along the river parkway, blithely ignoring speed laws as usual, Peabody tailing him. At the plant they couldn't get into the entrance for the office staff. A guard at the main doorway told them they had nobody on that other door at night. He picked up a nearby intercom phone and said, "Mr. Darstal?... Yeah, Jimmy."

Hood wanted to cheer when he heard him answer. But he had a be-damned and tough attitude when he stalked into Darstal's second floor

office. "Damn it, Darstal, where have you been tonight?"

Darstal's slow smile froze. He removed his glasses, looked at an ink stain on his left index finger, licked at it. "It's Mis-ter Darstal to you, if you please... And just what business is it of yours where I have been?"

Hood, ired by all the blank walls he had drawn, snapped: "You deliberately gave the slip to a man following you when you drove from home."

MAX DARSTAL rose to his full height, looking like a dwarf next to the tall Hood. "I called your office merely as a matter of courtesy in case you chose to phone me. Am I under surveillance? Am I a suspect?"

Hood sneered. He could see Darstal had a film of sweat on his face, despite the cool breeze from the window. Something was eating on him inside no matter how he poker-faced it. "There are people who think you should be one... could be, anyway."

"You have no right to cross-examine me, Mr. Hood."

"The government boys, they tell me, play even rougher than I do when I'm examining a man's back-ground, Mis-ter Darstal—if it is."

It was a foul blow but it went home. Breathing hard, Darstal swayed a little. "I'm busy now, Mr. Hood. I shall have to ask you to leave now and—Jimmy," he called to the guard outside the door.

Hood pitched another one from the dark. "Did you know Roy Furgo had been killed? Do you want more of that?"

"Yes, Roy Furgo was stabbed to death out on—" He went waxen, gesturing toward his desk radio. "I heard it on—" He grabbed at his side.

Hood laughed softly, quietly, like a big cat. It had been broadcast; he had heard it on the way out. But there had been no details except that Furgo had been found slain. Dakes, the chief copper, played it that way sometimes to keep a criminal, on

a tough case, in the dark about how much they knew.

"My—my—" Darstal couldn't say it. He pitched over, half in and half out of his chair.

Hood thought it was a piece of ham acting at first. But the man hung there, ashen with great globules of sweat on his face. Jimmy the guard hustled in. Quickly he produced a bottle of medicine from the desk, mixed it with water from a carafe on the desk, and worked it between Darstal's lips.

"Cardiac condition," the guard said. "He had an attack last month. I'll get Miss Meyers the night nurse up."

"Will he be all right?" Hood asked him sincerely. Darstal had lifted his head a little and his breath was more even. Jimmy assured him he would. Ben Hood picked up his hat. He knew he'd get no more from the man that night; it might be dangerous to try. But he had a man he could put the finger of pressure on, at last...

4

IN A CHOPHOUSE back in the city, Ben Hood dropped into a booth, ordered a double brandy with a club sandwich. It was then he saw that, in the ruckus at the apartment when Furgo had been slain, he had sustained a one-inch rip in the right sleeve of his suit. His lips curled; he was getting madder on this case all the time. Then Peabody shuffled in.

"What the devil are you doing here?" Hood demanded coldly. "Get back there at the plant to pick up Darstal when he comes out."

Peabody looked hurt as he saw the brandy served. "But you said he had a heart attack. Where can he go tonight, boss?"

"It might depend on who comes to him, meathead. Check him back home and make sure he's in bed before you quit." Ben ignored the legman's groan but he was really expressing his anger at himself.

What had he to show? He had been black-jacked once, knocked out at a

murder scene. He had almost been caught with the corpse by the police which would have been not so damned pretty. Darstal had given him the slip once and performed some errand. Darstal might be broken on the morrow; but Hood had a hunch that the man knew little more than he himself did. It totalled up to a big fat zero.

Sitting back over a coffee, he tried to get some angle. Furgo's death may have had nothing to do with the Cooper case, yet again could have; he couldn't tell that yet. The blue-haired girl might be Furgo's slayer. Yet, then what was that man doing in the place—the one who had so neatly half garroted Hood? Ben snapped his fingers in annoyance, forgetting his cigaret. It hit the floor. He produced another, sought for his monogrammed lighter. It was gone, in none of his pockets. He sought again; a cold feeling akin to panic came over him.

It must have been jostled out when he went down at the murder apartment, briefly unconscious. Sweat studded his upper lip. Ben could guess what Dakes would do with this. No wonder he was keeping all details—especially about the murder instrument which would not fit Hood's way of doing a job—hushed up. Dakes, the chief, would be spinning the web, pulling strings, trying to find motive and why a man with a license to carry a pistol should stab a man to death.

Hood's next swallow of coffee tasted like tepid scupper juice. He sat there with a packet of matches in his hand, a packet advertising the Pacific Club and one Murka. Darstal had seemed to know more about Furgo's death than the average citizen should. But how, how...?

BEN LIGHTED the fresh smoke and stared at the match packet, recalling how he'd scooped them up on leaving the place. It was odd, anybody having so many packets advertising one place around. He remembered the smartly-designed modernistic cover for the studio couch in the place, the bright cerise window

drapes. Things came back to him that he didn't know had registered at the time. There was a potted elephant-ears plant on a side table. All a woman's touches. Then he put it together; Blue-Hair obviously lived there. And even in his snatched glimpse at her he had put her down for the show-girl type, with that smart kind of glamour that goes with the entertaining business.

If she were that, perhaps she worked at this Pacific Club; that would explain the stack of their matches around.

He hit the street without finishing his coffee, usually a ritual with the sleek operator. Hood had an aching to get rough, very rough with somebody. He had to close in on this thing before it closed viselike on him. Then he sighted the burly figure, lolling a few feet from the Caddy convert, his back turned at the time. Ben turned the other way and snagged a cab in traffic, giving the address of The Pacific.

"What kind of a joint is that, driver?" he asked as they paused on a red light. It must be new; he couldn't place it.

The driver turned half around to take him in. His practised eye told him the topcoat Hood carried wasn't worth a cent less than two hundred dollars. The hackie nodded. "Nice place—for the right kind of people. Nothing cheap. Run by Joe the Gimp, an ex-racketeer. But he's shooting on the level now; calls himself Mr. Mottacell. But anybody who really knows him calls him Joe the Gimp... Depends on you what kind of a treatment you get, mister."

It was a couple of side streets over from the Main Line. You went down a couple of steps, under a discreet canopy, to get in. But inside, seated at a small banquet table in a quiet room with a glass ceiling to represent sea water of various shades, Hood was disappointed. A small band played dreamy music. A lot of couples sat around holding hands. He waited for entertainment. A gal looking like a sub-deb came out and kipped a couple of soft numbers at

a mike. There was a guitar player who worked hard at imitating Josh White. But no sensuous dancers.

HEN SUMMONED a captain and asked when the real entertainment started. The man looked blank, said they didn't go in much for entertainment. Hood tried again, giving Murka's name. The waiter pursed lips, said maybe she danced there before his time.

"Joe the Gimp around?" Hood finally tried.

"You know Joe?"

Hood didn't play it dumb. The instant this Joe the Gimp laid eyes on him, Joe would know whether or not he, Hood, knew him. "Not exactly. I'm out of town. But a friend of mine told me to look up his place if I ever came in. Still, maybe I'm in the wrong joint." He had slipped a ten-spot half under a napkin.

The waiter's palm absorbed it like a seal catching a dead fish. "I shall see, m'sieur, if you are in the wrong place..." He went away and came back in ten minutes to lead Hood into a corridor that stretched rearward. A young man shoved a banjo chest out of a side doorway. He wasn't wearing any sleek-as-paint dinner jacket. Instead it was a gray-double-breasted that slightly needed a pressing. If he was carrying a rod, it was too small a calibre to be noticed. His hair was slightly unkempt. He asked Hood's name.

"Harry Q. Tench, Bridgeport, Conn.," he said. He produced a card from his wallet, one of several false ones he kept for that purpose. Gray Suit took it and crossed the side room to another door. When he stuck his head out the door again he told "Mr. Tench" to come in. Hood followed. Behind a large gray desk sat a plump man already sporting a corporation. He had the round, pleasant face of a man who'd found his niche in life and is quite content with it. Over against a side wall sat a little graying man who might have been a lawyer. Joe the Gimp stretched a hand across the desk.

"Nice of you to drop in, Mr.

Tench. Sit down; who is it you know who sent you here?"

"Man named Emmerich, in shoes. Wholesale." Hood sat.

Joe the Gimp thought. "Nope. Don't know anybody by that name in this town." The bland eyes enlarged a little.

"I didn't say he was from here," Hood came back evenly. "As a matter of fact he's in business now in Binghamton. But he told me to drop around. And that everybody calls you Joe the Gimp." Hood waited.



Joe laughed after a moment. "Yeah—I have some out-of-town customers. They don't usually go by their own names when they aren't with their wives though."

"You know a lawyer from Bridgeport named Henry?" the gray-haired man asked in a voice as dry as last year's newspaper.

Hood shook his head. The gray-haired one nodded at Joe the Gimp. The latter chuckled again. "Good. He doesn't either, Mr. Tench. What kind of action was it you wanted?"

Hood said, "I wasn't looking for action tonight. My friend Emmerich told me to be sure and see this dancer—uh—Murka."

"Murka..." Joe the Gimp played with the word with his tongue. "That girl sure is great box office; everybody wants to see her. And she's a nice girl toe, really works at that dancing. She's helping send a kid brother through college... Okay, Ricardo, you can take him upstairs. Enjoy yourself, Mr. Tench."

RICARDO led Hood out into the main hall, then down to a rear door marked *Men*. It didn't open till Ricardo touched a hidden button, then slid back. Upstairs, Hood found himself in the secret gambling quarters of the club. There were two luxurious rooms with roulette and

dice tables. Off in an ell was a third room for entertainment. A small orchestra had just ceased and a girl had turned to leave the back end of the floor. Hood strained around people to glimpse her when there was a tap on the arm.

"Your heater, please," said Ricardo; "it will be downstairs when you leave."

Hood saw two dinner-jacketed men, plainly house men, watching him from the small leather bar. Plainly it would not be wise to argue the point. He turned it over in the dim light. Ricardo went away.

A waiter was just seating him in the booth of the lavish entertainment room when the dancer returned for a demand encore. A baby spot caught her in wide white velvet Mex-type pantaloons. It touched the very brief bolero under which her dusky skin gleamed. And she really blossomed out that bolero as she spun in liquid gyrations. Then she moved into the Mexican hat number around a big Mex sombrero on the floor, still dancing with her face in the dark. She was a living flame, incredibly provocative in every moment, charged with sex, and her art still beautiful. Hood stood watching, holding his breath.

But for him there was the tension too. She might be the blue-haired woman—or nobody as far as he was concerned.

Then, as a second spot flowed from the ceiling directly overhead, she whipped off the hat. And the blue hair whipped out like a living navy cloud, so striking against the pale petal of her face. *It was her.*

Hood was still standing as the lights came up. She turned once his way in backing off, then stood stock still. He said it with his lips. *Could we have a drink together?* And then she was coming over to him. A captain was there to introduce him. It seemed like the most natural thing in the world to Hood to slip into a banquet next to the fascinating girl with the long light-blue eyes. Still, there was something familiar about her mouth...

THEY MADE small talk over a drink or two, Hood turning on all his charm. The dangerous cut-open bolero had him dizzy. The hell with the Cooper case and everything else. Then, for the second time, she asked what he did. He came out with it honestly this time.

"Kid, I'm a private investigator. Right now I'm on a job for the Cooper company, trying to prevent a murder."

"Mr. Cooper—" Her mouth twisted and she stood up abruptly. "I must go."

He took one of her arms, knowing he had blundered, had been swept into it by her wiles. "Look, what happened today in your Apartment on Leverett Boulevard—this evening, earlier?" His voice was still lazy but with a harsh scrape. "Maybe I could tell the police a few things."

She sneered. "It's my apartment. What happens there is my business. I'm Helen Furgo and I live there. Now—"

She almost eeled away from him but he caught her. Now it seemed she must be lying. "Don't tell me you're Roy Furgo's wife? I won't buy it," he said brutally. "I've been checking on him; he isn't married. But—was he already dead when you breezed out of there with a travelling case tonight?"

"Dead?" The word from her was like a little coughing sound, a sound chilled with terror. "My brother... dea..." She shook like a rag doll.

Only then did Ben Hood realize she knew nothing about the slaying. No actress could have been that good. Then she twisted away from him and ran out a rear exit of the room. Realizing what he'd done, Hood stood rooted with shock. Then he took after her. He did get into the narrow hallway leading down to some dressing rooms. And then like a little pool he saw here there on the carpeting, collapsed. He stooped to pick her up. He had to talk to her some more after she was recovered.

A voice said, "Hey, Mac!" Hood half looked up and the knee of a man who had come from the other end of the hall chopped up into the

side of his face. Stunned, he reeled against a side wall to get his legs under him, wound up for a judo jab to the midsection. Something like an over-sized boom fell on the back of his neck. Hood twisted around, going for his shoulder rig, forgetting having given up the gun, and swinging a blind punch. He saw what Ricardo, soft-spoken Gray Suit, was using for a boom. It was the heel of a hand as big as a paddle, a typical wrestler's hand.

Hood saw it coming at his face in what seemed slow motion. The slow motion exploded against his jaw. He went *boom-m* inside his head...

5

THE BOOM had become a sort of prolonged moaning. It must be the girl sobbing, Hood figured. Sometimes it speeded up to something like a whirring sound, a few times went *squee-gee*. A far-away sounding voice said, "Geez, did you see the way that skirt cut in on us!" Then there was a quick bump underneath that set loose the marbles in Ben Hood's head again, and a sound he suddenly identified as an automobile klaxon. With it, Hood's olfactory senses elicited on again. He sniffed new leather upholstery around him, gasoline faintly. Then he knew he was in a car, trussed up on the floor of the back seat, headed somewhere.

He unglued one eye and took in a canal-boat-sized pair of shoes. He also saw the grayness of early day. A voice from the front seat said, "Let's stop here at Al's place and get some coffee." It was a deep but soft voice, reminding him of Gray Suit. The voice of the man on the seat above him answered:

"Naw, I don't want no java. Bring me out a cold bottle of beer when you come back. I'll watch the punk here."

The tires crunched on gravel and they drew to a halt. He heard the two in front get out. Then it hit Hood. It seemed impossible. Joe the Gimp couldn't get away with it—but he, Benjamin Scott Hood, was being

taken for a ride. He swallowed the hard way twice, smelled smoke from the cigaret the man above him had lighted. Hood worked his head around a little, pried his eyes wider. He took in the huge underjaw, like the gangplank gate of a tank-type landing craft, hung above him. The man had the cigaret pursed right in the middle of fat lips, never touching it save when he wanted to knock off the ash. He was humming, *I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby*.

Nobody but Bricky, his tough little part-time operative, a specialist in the rough-stuff department, smoked a cigaret that way. Hood started to work himself up, eyes bugging. Now he had gone crazy. The eyes in Bricky's oversized baby face twisted down.

"Boss, what the hell are you doing here?" Bricky husked out.

"I might ask you the same damn thing! I—"

"My Gawd, I didn't know you were the punk they were throwing outa the club. Honest. I never—"

"I thought I told you to stick with Evans Easter like glue to wall-paper, sap!"

"Sure I did—that's how I happened to be in the Pacific Club last night. He came there, boss. I—"

Hood tried to work the gummy feeling out of his mouth with his tongue. He was shaking with anger again. This whole case had turned screwy once more. "Then what the blazes are you doing here now?"

"I just wanted to help Joe the Gimp out, boss. Easter was upstairs playing the dice table anyway... See, I used to work for Joe. He done me some big favors. Now, he don't have any of the rough-stuff boys no more. I didn't know it was you they was packing out. I—"

"Naw, he doesn't have rough-stuff boys any more. They just tickle you crazy! Get me untied. I got to get outa this and down to work again."

"I don't know, boss. Joe, he be awful damn sore and—"

HOOD GLARED, found two front teeth were loose. "Are you nuts? Is this Joe the Gimp crazy

enough to think he can have me sent on a ride and get away with—"

"This ain't no ride, boss. Joe, he's just sending you up to a little place in the country so you can't make no trouble for a few days for Murka. He's crazy about her—like she's his own daughter. They think you want to arrest her on a murder charge. I hear them talking last night. Joe, he don't want nothing to happen to Murka. You ain't going to be hurt at all; just little vacation. Maybe we play some poker, hey, boss?"

"I wish I had one now!... Look, Brick, I'll double your take on this job. But get me loose—and out of here. You can say I overpowered you, that I got one hand loose and had a hideout gun, that I made you drive off."

Bricky chewed his huge underlip with the effort of thinking. He peered through the early morning haze at the roadside stand. Then he produced a tiny penknife a school-girl would have been ashamed of and went to work on Ben Hood's bonds. Moments later he slipped out of the door on the side away from the lunch stand. The big motor gunned into life, the car rocked away. After he got himself completely free, Hood took over the wheel. Brick drove as if he were handling a team of half-broken truck horses. They whipped onto a sideroad and soon were headed back to Banson City.

"Joe, he going to be awful sore about this."

"So am I. And I'll tell him so in person just as soon as I dress up with a new heater and return to that slick sucker-trap of his."

Bricky read his mind. "That won't do you no good, boss. I heard 'em say—Joe the Gimp—how they're going to hide out Murka for a few days till they see what the cops got on that Furgo killing."

Hood swallowed spleen and tromped harder on the gas pedal. He felt like a mail-order "detecattif" for fair. He sure had kicked it around last night, botched things like a full-fledged ham. Lost a heater and an expensive topcoat at the club. Undoubtedly the cops had taken in his Caddy now. And now he'd

lost track of the blue-haired girl who could be the key in the slaying of his brother. Then he remembered the glove Brick had reported in that he had found after trailing Easter to the Cooper estate last night.

Bricky turned it over, a gray suede, size 9. He told how he had seen the lawyer drop it by a little cabin tucked away in a stand of trees down at the back of Cooper's place.

HOOD TRIED to figure what Evan Easter would be doing down there. At nine-thirty, he walked into the attorney's office for his answer. The suave Easter saw him at once, a little Napoleonic figure with a mane of silver-gray hair.

"Lost a glove lately, Easter?" the battered Hood came out bluntly, dropping the glove in front of him.

Easter examined it carefully, "hmmmed." "Odd, it's exactly like a pair I have. Same size, too." He spoke to a secretary on an office intercom box. A couple of moments later a prim secretary walked in with a pair of gray suedes. Easter passed them over to big Hood.

They were exactly like the one Brick had found, and both there, a right and a left. Hood snorted. "Maybe you buy your gloves two pair at a time, Easter. What were you doing prowling out at the back of Cooper's estate last night?"

Easter inspected him as if he were a mentally deranged case. "Suppose you tell me, Hood. I don't know, because I don't know I was there—unless I walked in my sleep." Easter was as slippery as an eel to tie down. "And what would it mean if I had been, anyway? And by what right do you walk in here and try to cross-examine me like—"

"Because you could be a suspect in this thing, Easter. After all you bitterly hated Cooper because he stole your wife away from you, broke up your marriage and married her himself."

Easter laughed low, shook his head. "That's a funny one, Hood. My wife and I had been separated for months before she even started divorce action. Cooper never stole a

woman from me. You can check this in the newspaper files. I—well, frankly, I liked to play around too much.”

“What?”

“Certainly. And more. Their marriage was a bitter failure; she drove Hilton Cooper half insane at times. The joke was on him. You hardly hate a man in that case.”

Hood walked out of there chewing on chagrin in large lumps. But he told Brickly to stay on Easter's tail like a hungry summons server. Grimly he phoned the office. The only news there was that Barstal, after last night's heart attack, was confined to his bed under the care of a physician. Nobody could see him. Hood swallowed a nice chunk of frustration, ducked away from a copper and took a cab out to Cooper's home, dog-tired, toying again with the possibility that Furgo's death had no connection, that Murka had cut him down in a moment of wrath, perhaps in an argument over a man she went out with.

WHEN HOOD walked into Cooper's home, old Todd, looking like a friendly spider in the daylight, told him his master had phoned twice from the lake. Hood shrugged as he ordered a big breakfast. After all, all he could tell Cooper was that he had nothing more to fear from one of his potential murderers. Hood was just plowing into the meal, anticipating how good bed after a hot shower would feel, when Cooper called a third time.

“Say, what're you trying to do down there, boy,” he asked jovially, “murder everybody?”

Ben didn't feel jovial about it. He started to talk. Cooper told him to raise his voice, he couldn't hear him.

“I don't think Furgo could have been the one who made those three tries on your life, Cooper. I don't think he was a potential killer. And maybe the other two aren't either. I—”

“Hell, they all are. I don't give a hang if you get 'em all knocked off. You say Darstal had a heart attack last night? Well, maybe another one

will take him out of the picture too. Then there'll be only one left to worry about... Okay, I'll keep in touch with you.”

A little later he slid his long body between the sheets of a bed in a guest room. It seemed as if he'd hardly dropped off when Todd was shaking his shoulder, holding a bedside phone. “Hood?” a feeble voice said.

Hood came taut as he recognized the slightly foreign accent of Max Darstal's voice. It began again, then broke off as if strangled by pain and weakness. Then it got out. “Hood, come, I have something—to tell.” That was all. There was no more voice. But Hood, feeling fear now, realized the connection had not been cut.

He jumped into clothes, ignoring his usual fastidious feeling about his wardrobe, got a small car out of Cooper's garage. On the way across the city, he almost had two accidents, had another close call as he turned for the small road leading to Darstal's modest cottage. That time it was with a police prowler car. And there were a whole mess of them in front of the cottage. Hood got out and edged in the door in the confusion. A few newspaper men, tipped off by somebody down at headquarters, were already there, flash-bulbs going.

“Seems he just called headquarters and said he'd been shot, was dying,” somebody said. “Yeah, gave it to himself in the middle of the forehead. Contact shot with powder burns. So he simply did the Dutch.”

Hood worked his way inside the door of a little library set up as an office. There was a huge battered desk, strewn with papers. In the middle of it in bathrobe and slippers, head slumped across it, dwarfed in death, was Max Darstal. There was a lot of blood which meant it hadn't been instantaneous. One of the Homicide men was bent to examine a sheet beside the head, blood-deckled. And Hood did a quick look-see over his shoulder, took in the scrawled unfinished writing.

I was at Furgo's... There was a dropping line where the pen must have slipped from his hand. *He—*

was already....dead.... There it ended, except for a single word. Hood....

"Nice of you to drop around," a voice like coal riding down a chute on a cold morning said at Ben Hood's side. "How did you happen to make this one, Hood?" It was Dakes, police commissioner, a man a full size-larger than Hood. He had a splayed nose that occupied half his face; it was typical of his disposition. He was a good chief but hated like poison for anybody else to crowd in on his business.

BEN TOLD him about the phone call, knowing he could check on it. He looked back down at Darstal, at the gun still half gripped in a clawed finger of the corpse's right hand. He realized, now, Darstal must have been the one who got him by the carotoid veins when he had walked in and found Roy Furgo dead. But he was wondering what had brought Darstal there; it explained how Darstal had known Furgo was stabbed before the facts were given out, but still—

Dakes tapped him very lightly on the shoulder. Dakes was the kind who did that when he was winding up a roundhouse belt. "But how did you happen to be in at the Furgo killing, friend?"

"Wasn't. Who can prove I was?" He still stared down at the corpse, remembering now the ink stain on the index finger of the left hand Darstal had licked off when he'd visited him at the plant last night.

Dakes moved a small glittering piece of machined-metal around in front of Ben Hood. It was his monogrammed cigaret lighter. He didn't need to be told it had been found in the apartment where Furgo had died....

6

HOOD drove away from Darstal's house a free man, at least temporarily free. It had been a tough job though. He had pooh-poohed the lighter, then, out on the sun porch, given Dakes the

tipoff. The chief could check at the plant. Darstal was left-handed, and he had given him a piece of advice.

"Dakes, pick up Murka, the dancer at the Pacific Club. She was the slain Roy Furgo's sister; she's being hidden out now."

Going back home, Ben cursed at the blank walls he faced on all sides. Only one thing was certain: This was murder, not suicide. He considered Easter as a possible killer, but it didn't seem logical. And then he recalled Easter's telling him—and convincingly—how he had never resented Hilton Cooper for marrying a wife who'd already left him. It didn't seem possible a man as acute as Cooper could have imagined that bitter hidden enmity.

Just for luck he phoned Easter when he got back. The lawyer had already heard of Darstal's death. Hood asked his opinion.

"Too bad Cooper had to die first," the lawyer said cynically, "or else now he'd be in possession of that new ultrasonics method Darstal had developed about on his own." He hung up.

Helen Furgo, Murka the dancer, seemed the only key. Ben caught some more shuteye. Twice during the late afternoon, Dakes' office told him they had not had word on the missing dancer. At the Pacific Club, they had simply said the girl was away; Joe the Gimp was supposed to be out of town, too.

Ben sat up in his chair with a jerk. What about the traveling case Helen Furgo had been carrying when she left the murder apartment? It had been no little bandbox like that in which a showgirl would be carrying her costume. It had been a full-sized Pullman case; he had seen it. He conned the late afternoon editions with the story of Darstal's death and the one of the disappearance of the murdered Furgo's sister vying for feature space. Bricky reported in. Evans Easter was having dinner at the Bristol.

"He'll probably go onta the Pacific, boss, like he does so often. Want me to stay with him? I'm sleepy and my feet hurt bad an' —"

Hood said cruelly, "Stay with him,

meatball, or I'll tip Joe the Gimp you let me escape." He hung up on the groan. Then the thing began to form up in his mind. Maybe, just maybe, Evans Easter would not go to the Pacific tonight. He had one other weakness beside gambling...

BEN WAITED. It was a little while later when Brickly called again. He wanted to go home; his mother would be getting sore. Easter had gone to the Marset, a residential smart hotel outside of the commercial area. He was in Suite 419; Brickly had found that out from a bellhop there he had something on.

"He's probably up to see another one of his dolls, boss. And I heard him telling a friend at the restaurant he'd see him at the Pacific later. So—o, please, have a heart an' —"

Hood was about to give him the okay; Easter was too smart to show his hand crudely, as cool as dried ice. Besides he was devoid of a motive in either slaying. Something changed his mind. He told Brickly to wait. The latter met him in front of the Marset.

"Easter's still there," he told Hood. "And somebody else has been tailing this character, boss, I think. A big guy but —"

The latter was reconnoitering on the layout with the smart doorman and several bellhops and desk men inside the severely smart lobby. Getting into a joint like that was tougher than cracking a safe. "You go in there and put on a drunken act, Brickly. Shove around a few flunks and put on a diversion."

"Aw, Hood, I ain't been juggled for drunkenness for over two years. I —"

"I could talk to Joe..."

It was a good act Brickly staged. He took out the doorman with a nice lineman's block, got inside the lobby singing. *This is a free country and I got a right* — he started off as a houseman intercepted him. There was a sweep of a ponderous arm and the houseman was sitting upside-down on a divan. Brickly bulled around with a couple of bellhops as

the night manager and a desk man hurried out. In the excitement, Hood sauntered through the lobby, told an elevator man, "Same floor as this afternoon, fourth." Upstairs he found 419 around a corner, knocked staccato-fashion.

There was a rustling inside, then Easter's suave voice. "Who's there?"

"Detective Captain Flession of Homicide. You can't get out, we got the place covered like a tent." He eased the Positive out of the shoulder rig, made certain of a second smaller gun in a side pocket.

Evans Easter opened the door. "Come on in, Mr. Hood."

BEYOND HIM, seated on a divan in striking white silk lounging pyjamas, was Helen Furgo, the dancer. Hood made cluck-cluck sounds; his hunch had been solid. Easter had not gone to the Pacific for the gambling alone. For a man with his taste in glamour gals, he couldn't help but be hit hard by Murka. Hood put it together fast as he saw fear contract the girl's face. Easter had arranged for this hideout for her.

Easter's poise was as polished as ice. "Why don't you quit trying to drag her into it, Hood? You can't prove a thing."

Hood eased over to the arm of a chair after taking a quick check in the adjoining bedroom. He played it slick. "Look, I'm no copper; I'm not interested in throwing Miss Furgo into their arms. You have my promise. Throw the ball to me and I'll throw it back to you."

Easter said, "What do you want, flatfoot?"

"An answer to a question, maybe two, shyster. Miss Furgo, what were you taking away from your apartment in the bag last night?"

Easter said, "The girl has to answer none of your questions. She —"

Hood flipped cigaret ashes in his general direction. He spoke to the girl. "Look, honey, a gal like you could commit murder every day in the week and get away with it with me—so long as it wasn't me, of

course." He gave with the big easy grin.

Helen Furgo's face relaxed a little. "Why not, Evans? My sister-in-law's clothes... My brother was married to Sandra."

"Sandra Cooper?"

"They were secretly married a few weeks ago over the State line. She was hiding out — you might say — at Miss Furgo's place. Roy used to see her there nights; she's been away the last few days though."

"Why was it so important to get her clothes out right then?" Hood said as if only half interested.

"Evans called me and advised me to, Mr. Hood. He was worried; he told me about Mr. Cooper's death."

"I don't catch." Hood scowled at the lawyer. The latter started to shake his head as if to refuse the answer. "Look, you could still be a candidate on these jobs, Easter. Wake up. You were heavily indebted to Cooper and maybe Roy Furgo and Darstal..." He let that lay there.

Easter's heavy gray eyebrows climbed toward the steeple of his hair. "Indebted to Cooper? It was just the other way around. I can show you books and cancelled checks in my office files. You remember how excited I was when you phoned me about Cooper's death. I was thinking of the heavy financial losses I might take. As a matter of fact, through taking Cooper's stock as security, I'm the largest stock-holder of the company at present. That was why, today —"

Hood came to his feet and draped himself over a television console. "Somebody's been lying like hell... But why were you worried —"

EASTER CUT in pompously. "Here it is. Then you can get out. I never believed Hilton Cooper was dead. I'm a lawyer. To me, the story had a phony ring. And I knew he was close to the financial rocks."

He bit off a cigar end. "I also know Sandra was married, and at Miss Furgo's place. I also happen to know Hilton has a complex about his daughter and never intended for her to marry anyone in his lifetime. He was even after me to adjust his

will so she'd lost everything but a meager sum for support if ever she married."

Hood's mouth sagged so he almost lost his cigaret. "Keep running, Easter, please."

"I know Cooper's violent temper, his uncontrollable rages. Several times in the past I've had to make out-of-court settlements for acts of violence of his."

Hood took it then. "And you suspected his daughter was married and at Sandra's, that he had staged a disappearing act to do something."

Easter nodded, smiling a little. "Exactly. Sandra wasn't there, but her things were; I was worried about Miss Furgo."

Ben walked around a little, then turned to the girl. "But afterward, why did you fear me? You had no motive for murdering your brother. By running —"

"She could not have proven she'd left the apartment before he was killed," put in Easter.

"And I had a motive—at least neighbors could claim I had one," the girl added. She explained that Sandra and her brother had a tiff last week, that the girl had gone out of town to stay with friends. "The night before his death—Roy and I had a fierce argument over it. I blamed him. And my temper is as hot as his. Neighbors heard. I know because we got complaints." She bowed her head, thinking of her brother.

Hood pruned around some more. "You went out to the place last night, Easter, to see it—"

"If he might be hiding out in that little cabin down in the back, Hood. He closed it up a year or so ago."

Hood's brain was spinning like a dervish. "The whole thing's been a phony—Furgo would have no advantage to gain by the death of Hilton Cooper. Neither would Darstal, as it turns out now. And neither would you."

"Me? Why of course—"

"And I was to be the great alibi... Come on, Easter. Because you're next on the list. Next on the killer's list!"

Easter paled. "What do you want me to do?"

"Be a sitting duck! It's the only way we can get him, red-handed at least..."

7

THEY WAITED in Evans Easter's sumptuous, terraced apartment further up the hill in the residential district, Hood, Evans, and Bricky. An hour had passed.

"I could be wrong, Easter... But he'll come. And tonight, I think. I —" He paused, reading a feature front-page box in a late edition of an evening paper on the coffee table at his knees. Its head stated: *Principal in One of City's Two Big Murders Turned up*. It went on to say that Evans Easter had issued a statement for his client, Miss Helen Furgo, to the effect she could be produced whenever police wished to question her. Mr. Easter admitted, in reply to queries, that she knew Hilton Cooper, whose disappearance had just been released. "Helen Furgo saw my client as recently as three days ago on the street near her apartment." Mr. Easter added.

Hood came up with a sharp cry. "You—you gave out this? You revealed Cooper's disappearance?"

"I had no choice, Hood. The D.A.'s office had me as the biggest stockholder now of the Cooper company, an officer in it as well, you know. They wanted to know where Cooper was. So-o."

Hood took one deep breath. He didn't even bother to grab his hat and cloak this time. "Come on; the killer isn't here because he'll go to the Merset first! Don't you see, man? Your statement to the papers about the girl will show him she knows too much. He'll get her before he comes after you. Come on-n!"

In the elevator he spelled out the rest of it. "Cooper killed Furgo in insane, unnatural jealousy because the boy had married his daughter. As Helen mentioned, when Roy came in yesterday, just as she was leaving, Roy said he'd received a telephone message telling him his wife would

be back shortly. Cooper's timing was great on that one. He got Roy, lured Darstal there; he meant to leave Darstal on the scene of the murder to be found when police arrived. He—"

"Cooper?" the lawyer cried.

"Sure. Nobody but. With Darstal out of the way, in jail for life perhaps, Cooper would have complete control of the new development in ultrasonics. But Darstal must have been late, and Cooper had already phoned for the police, he had to get out. Then I walked in, and Darstal got away before the police nabbed him."

"You mean Cooper killed Darstal too?"

"Certainly. He had to after that first failure. You were to be next. Now..." He leaped into the taxi Bricky had hooked.

AT THE Merset, he left Bricky outside, just in case Cooper had not come yet. With Easter along, he had no trouble getting upstairs. It was the ashen shakymouthed lawyer who knocked first on the door before Hood could grab his arm. Ben, already at work with his fine skeleton tools, didn't want that. It could warn the mentally twisted killer. He thrust open the door, gun out. Gun out, Hood leaped in. One look at the girl's stricken features as she stood indecisively over by the partially closed bedroom door, told him.

"Go away," she said in a pinched throaty voice. "I don't want to—to talk to you. I lied. I lied to Evans." She made a gesture of entreaty. "I never saw Hilton Cooper near my place just before he—he d-disappeared. I—was covering up something that—" Her voice fogged up in a choking whisper.

Hood sensed Easter on the verge of speaking behind him, still partially in the foyer hall, silenced him with a backward thrust of his free hand. "I know you did, babe," Hood spat out. "That's why I'm taking you in for the murder of your brother. It'll make me the biggest private eye in this town." He winked quickly,

saw the girl's eyes widen to try to understand.

"And if you try to escape," he went on, voice a rough lash now, "I'll gun you, and you'd fall down hard. Wouldn't you?" He lifted an inquiring eyebrow.

Her eyes twitched sideward as if she wanted to see behind her. Then her lips formed an unspoken "yes."

"If you tried to run to the terrace and dive off— Don't, you murdering fool!" Hood's gun blasted. The bullet smashed into the wall just beside the girl. With a cry, she threw herself sideward in a graceful fall.

"All right, you can come out now, Cooper!" Hood barked at the bedroom. "Come out or I'll go in and drag you out by your damn entrails!"

THE DOOR on the inner darkened room inched wider. Hood never saw it coming. In toppling, Helen had bumped the television console on its high delicate legs. The cabinet swung off, bumping his shooting arm just as he fired. It caused him to miss. Cooper's bullet from inside didn't, catching Hood in the flesh over the ribs, twisting him. He pumped another slug inside, then flopped to his knees to one side of the door, bleeding from a scalp wound, too.

But it looked worse than ever. Helen was lying there, a few yards away, in range of the demented man's weapons. Mouth twisting in a cockeyed smile, Ben gave a groan like a ghoulish being tortured in the nether regions. He sent his gun bouncing out over the rug in line of view of the doorway.

Hilton Cooper came out, limping on a wounded leg, eyes like a wild dog's. He bent for Hood's gun. From the side, sitting up, holding the smaller gun from his side pocket, Ben said sharply: "Get them up, Cooper! Release your own weapons!"

There was a moment. Then Cooper, back half turned to Hood, obeyed heavily. He cackled with a wild laugh. Easter leaped into the

room as Helen rose, very pale.

"He was here. He told me he was going to kill me by throwing me off the terrace... Then, when you came, he said he'd let me live if I lied—and also said I'd never seen him near my apartment where Sandra was," she gasped out.

"He'd never have kept that promise," Easter roared.

"You can't prove a thing on me," Cooper said with a sly grin, sitting down. "Nobody can connect me with the two murders! Not for a case that'll hold—hold water."

"If it had gone right, it would have been a cutie," Hood admitted. "I'd have been your alibi. You were up at the fishing camp all the time— But, just recently I realized there never was a witness to the alleged attempts on your life."

"You were—at the third!"

"There was none. You fired a couple of shots inside the house. Then you came out a side window and slugged me, like an escaping assailant, in the dark."

Cooper's mouth worked around his dentures. "You still can't convict me," he muttered.

"Sure—with a confession. Cooper, I'm going to shoot you dead right now—for the attempt on Helen Furgo's life—unless you start confessing. And that won't be murder in the eyes of the police! So-o." He pushed out the smaller gun.

Cooper's big face quivered like a mess of ash-gray pudding. "All right," he finally lipped weakly, all the nerve run out of him. "I did kill Furgo. Then—"

Ben sat laughing low, looking down at the smaller .32 he held. Only he knew the joke. When he had tossed the Positive as bait, he had made a mistake; it was the smaller gun which he usually used for that trick in an emergency. Why, he never even bothered loading the little fellow.

Bricky's head came in the doorway. "Look, boss, I just called my mom, and she says..."

SO DEAD THE ROSE

By SIM ALBERT

IT MUST HAVE been the sound that awakened me, but as I sat up slowly in bed and looked around it was gone—whatever it was, it was gone. I sat there, with sweat pasting my pajamas against my chest, and tried to remember.

The small room was filled with the black reflection of night; somewhere nearby I heard a deep, hypnotic throbbing I didn't recognize at all. I shivered. A chill breeze came through a round, unfamiliar hole in the wall and it plucked at my damp pajamas with icy fingers.

Then I became aware of something that galvanized my nerves but paralyzed my muscles. The room was moving—slowly, gently, almost imperceptibly; back and forth it swayed, back and forth, and I hung on with frantic fingers of terror... then quite suddenly I remembered and let go.

I sank back on the cool pillow in relieved exhaustion and let the ship's engines remind me of my purpose aboard the *Empress of Bermuda*. I glanced at the radium-painted dial of my wrist watch. Two o'clock; the cruise liner had been out of New

York about three hours and Bermuda was only thirty-odd hours away.

I got up, lit a cigarette, and watched the smoke float lazily out of the open porthole. Perspiration was drying on my scalp and I let the breeze worry at my thick shock of red hair. Then I heard it again—the sound that had awakened me; it was a soft persistent tapping on wood. Someone was outside my room, flicking fingernails against the cabin door. I heard a voice, the guarded whisper of a woman's voice, from lips pressed close to the wood panel. "Red? Red Hanley? Let me in!"

Now that I was fully awake I knew that voice—but it was impossible. How could she be here? He had said that she didn't know.

"Red? Red?"

I flipped the cigarette through the porthole and went over and opened the door. Vera English stood framed in the small light from the passageway for just a fleeting second, just long enough for the glinting gold of her hair to remind me of other days; then she slipped through the open wedge and I felt her body against mine.

For Vera's sake, I had to protect a rat, but the rat had deadlier plans than I dreamed—and I found myself up to my neck in murder! And only a rose pointed to a way out—a rose clutched in a slain hussy's hand...

FEATURE NOVEL of STALKING DEATH



"Many men wanted Angelica... so long as their wives didn't find out..."

I let the door close with a sharp click, stood there like that with her in my arms, not moving. Then I pushed her away and went over to switch on the light.

"No! No! Don't, Red, don't!" she cried, "Please, please don't." So I didn't.

She was in my arms again, trembling like a frightened bird; without looking I knew she was crying, although I didn't know why. For a brief moment I didn't care...she was with me again. The scent of her next to me carried the fragrance of time past, and I almost forgot she was married to Mel English. Then I remembered and shoved her away at arm's-length.

"Red, Red," she sobbed, "what will I do? Tell me, what will I do?"

There was hysteria fomenting inside her and I acted before it rushed forth from her tight lips. I grabbed her and shook her. "What are you talking about? Do about what?"

She was sobbing wildly then, so I shook her some more. "Vera, Vera! What are you trying to say?"

I relaxed my grip and she leaned heavily against me. "Help me, Red, help me," she implored, and her finger-nails dug deep marks into my forearms. "Angelica!" Vera moaned. "She...she's...dead!"

IT WAS ONLY yesterday that Mel English had walked into my office in the International Building and asked me if I knew Angelica Whitmore.

"Sit down, Mel," I'd squawked. "You make me nervous stomping around like that."

He sat down but his white, twitching fingers didn't. "Okay, okay," he said, "but do you know Angelica? She's a blonde..."

Sure, I knew Angelica; who didn't? She was blonde and desirable, in a coarse way. Her curves were banked high like a well-built road, and she was the featured dancer at a little honkey-tonk down in Greenwich Village. Yeah, I knew her all right. She was the kind of gal that

men wanted, as long as their wives didn't find out about it.

I looked at him as if he'd come in *under* the door instead of through it. The mere thought of him married to Vera and playing house with that blonde brought bubbles of anger to my lips. "Don't tell me that you and that cheap dancer..."

He interrupted me with a wave of his thin hand. "She's *not* cheap, Red; believe me she's not—I can prove it."

"Yeah?" What did he want from me, an affidavit?

"Five thousand isn't cheap, huh, Red, huh?" He grinned at me in a way that was meant to be casual, only it turned into stone when it made contact with my face. "That's what she wants, Red," he explained and he shrugged. "For Vera's sake, I gotta pay up."

And if it hadn't been for Vera I'd have slugged him right then; for Vera's sake I didn't. "You're a louse, Mel," I told him, "a real louse."

"So I'm a louse," he retorted hotly. "What do you want me to do? Let Vera's name get spread all over the tabloids?"

You see the type Mel was? He always knew where your soft spots were and didn't hesitate to jab into them. No, the papers mustn't get this. It was perfect headlines for the yellow sheets: *Beautiful heiress burns while husband fiddles*. Vera didn't deserve that.

"Does she know?" I queried.

"No," came his reply, "and she mustn't know about me and Angelica; that's why I'm paying off."

Fool! So there were letters, too. How much of a sap can a man be? This wouldn't have happened if Vera had married me.

"Will you help, Red?" he was saying.

I should have clouted him then but I couldn't; I nodded. His face said nothing but his manner plenty. Mel English almost smelled of relief. He took a large, brown manila envelope out of his inside pocket and emptied a thick packet of small denomination bills on the desk in front of me.

"Five thousand, Red, that's her price. Will you take it to her?"

I got mad then. "What the hell do you think I run here," I yapped angrily, "a messenger service?" He was making me feel more like some cheap private shamus than a guy who ran a well-known insurance investigation office.

"For Vera?" His eyes did things to the pit of my stomach that made me feel sick.

I got up, reached across the desk, and grabbed him by the shirt front, dragged him clear across the top of the polished walnut on his belly—then I let go and sat back down again. That wasn't going to help her any.

He slid off the desk and stood there in front of me grinning. "It's like I said, Red boy; this you'll do, huh?"

I nodded; this I would do. "But if it happens again..." I left it hanging in mid-air.

He laughed. "For your help, we thank you, both of us; Vera especially."

I ignored his sarcasm and I picked up the money. "Where does this go?"

"Oh, I almost forgot. Here," he flipped a small envelope at me; "you're going on a week-end cruise to Bermuda—there's your ticket." He paused at the door, his knuckles white on the brass knob. "Angelica will contact you on board." He laughed out loud at the open-mouthed expression I was flashing. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do, Red, and oh, yes—bon voyage!"

VERA HAD left the door to Angelica's cabin open slightly; when I got there the light from inside was a thin, shiny blade that crossed swords with the dim ray coming from the mazda in the passageway. I pushed open the door and went in.

The dancer was sprawled on the floor, her lush body quiet, grotesquely inert, her well-shaped legs still. The puddle of blood that had

widened its stain all around her had stopped spreading now—there was only the handle of a large paper-knife protruding from the whiteness of her bosom to mark the source of the crimson flow.

Looking at her like that I felt sorry for her. I looked again—there was a trail of blood clear across the room. Evidently she hadn't died immediately; she had crawled over to...my eyes stared at the small overturned table, the bowl of roses on the floor and her hand, her right hand!

That was peculiar; she must have known she was dying; why hadn't she crawled to the phone? Why the bowl of roses?

The engine-heart of the *Empress of Bermuda* sang a wildly throbbing song and the pounding pulse in my head answered noisily. Just before I left Angelica's cabin I noticed two things.

By the dancer's side was a large, white, linen handkerchief and in her lifeless fingers was a rose...a crushed rose, its color darkened with blood.

2

VERA WAS smoking furiously when I got back to my cabin.

The light was on and she was pacing up and down, her white features agonized. She took one look at me and covered her face with her hands, sobbing quietly.

There were things I didn't understand; I didn't speak at first but went over and looked out at the ocean going by. It was dark out there, but where the moon's light danced there was quick-silver on the rolling surface of the sea.

"Angelica's dead!" I muttered. "That I understand, but what I don't get is—what were you doing in her cabin? On this ship?"

She stopped crying suddenly and sat down in a brown leather chair near the open porthole. "It's terrible, Red," she murmured and she kept her eyes averted. "Oh, Red, I'm so ashamed. That woman and...and

Mel." She tore it out of herself, "They...they..."

I went over and patted her shoulder. "Okay, take it easy, Vera," I said; "I know."

"You know?" she gasped and she looked up at me, her blue eyes filling with tears again and something else—a peculiar expression I just couldn't seem to place. "Oh," she moaned, "I am ashamed, I am..."

"Cut that out, Vera," I snapped harshly. "You haven't answered me yet, Vera. Why did you go to..."

"She called me," she blurted out. "Yesterday, Red, she phoned me." Vera started whimpering again. "There are some letters."

"Go on," I urged.

"She threatened me; she said she wanted five thousand dollars or the newspapers would get the letters."

"Well, I'll be damned!" was about all my tightly compressed lips could shape.

"I came aboard at about ten," she was saying, "I was going to wait until morning, Red, but, but I just couldn't. I couldn't, do you understand?"

"Go on."

"I couldn't sleep, Red. I—I wanted to get it over with so I went to her cabin. I just had to have those letters...I had to." She waited for me to say something and when I kept silent she went on, "The door was open, Red," and she looked at me as if I didn't believe her. "It was, I tell you, it was!"

Why was she so determined to impress me with the fact that the door to the dancer's cabin was open? "Go on," I said quietly.

"She was lying there, Red; she was on the floor; she was..." Her voice trailed off into a thin thread of a whisper and then there was nothing but her muffled weeping.

Angelica had really played both ends against the middle. Five thousand from Vera and the same amount from Mel.

"Does Mel know about this?"

Her wagging head was a negative answer to my question. "He...he doesn't even know where I am," she mumbled, and from the way she said

it, she didn't care either. "He thinks I've gone to Connecticut for the week-end." She got up suddenly then, her face blanching and her eyes rolling in their sockets. "The letters...the letters! When they find them in there they'll...they'll... Oh, Red, what will I do?"

Well, she was sure right there. When they discovered Mel's folly along with Angelica's body, Vera was bound to be linked up with the whole sordid mess; money wouldn't buy her out of this.

She came over and stood very close. She had always been desirable to me and I knew that now she had nothing but hatred and contempt for Mel. I tingled all over...maybe some day soon Vera and I...she stood on tiptoes.

"Help me, Red, I need you," said her vibrant pleading voice.

I could feel her warmth, see her sparkling eyes, her moist, trembling lips...and in the manner of all males, I buckled on my shining armor and charged blindly out into the passageway, up and down the various stairways, until I once again found myself inside the dead dancer's cabin and also in the middle of as damnable a mess as a guy could get into.

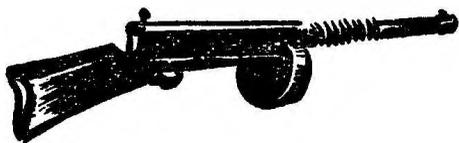
THE LETTERS were not there; that I'd swear to, because I went through the place with a fine-tooth comb called desperation. I was just starting for the closed door when I stopped suddenly as if I were equipped with four-wheel brakes...someone was standing outside the cabin!

I heard the soft sound of knuckles laid surreptitiously against the panel. Then as a key went into the lock, the back of my neck ran cold with sweat and I wondered how the hell ice cubes had gotten inside my belly. Frantically, I searched the cabin for a way out. There was none, only the porthole. Did you ever wish you were a midget?

As the key turned and I heard the tumbler fall in the lock I switched off the light and did the only thing left for me to do. I

couldn't afford to be found in Angelica's cabin with her looking like that.

He couldn't see me in the dark as he opened the door, but his jawline was a beautiful sight against the background of light from the passageway. I counted slowly, silently, the way I'd trained myself to do before the pigskin used to thud into my stomach—a few years back. *One...two...three...*



He was big and fat as his full-moon face snuck around the slowly opening door, his pursed lips softly calling her name, I finished my counting...*four...five...* *SIX!* It was like shooting fish in a barrel. My right fist caught him flush on his heavy jowl—and that was all, brother. He grunted like a prize sow that just got done out of first prize at the county fair, and he went sprawling face first clear across the room. By the time his massive head battered up against the wall I'd closed the door quickly behind me and was sprinting down the passageway like it was the forty-yard line and goal to go. My skinned knuckles hurt but there was a pleasant sensation all along the nerve ends of my arm...it felt good, real good.

I took Vera back to her cabin and the cool night air up on deck was sensational. We didn't go back right away; it took a while to convince her that the letters she had been willing to buy had disappeared.

"Do you think there really were any letters?" she asked, hopefully.

"Yeah," I said, "there were letters." She didn't ask me how I knew and I didn't bother to tell her. What the hell for? I'd swear that they weren't in the cabin with Angelica's body, so why worry.

"You're a darling, Red," she toned softly from way back in her throat, "you really are."

I put my hands on her shoulders and she swayed towards me. Quickly I spun her around and marched her to her cabin. "Goodnight, baby," I said thickly. I shoved her inside and closed the door.

I AWAKENED with a light in my face—someone was holding a bright light full on my face. I opened my heavy eyes blinking. My lids felt like sewer-tops...it was morning and the sun was coming through the porthole as if it had a particular rendezvous with my eyeballs.

It's amazing though what a cold, needle shower will do to a guy. Afterwards I went on up to the ship's barber for a lazy man's shave. You know something, it's a good thing I did because that's where I got a real good look at the guy I'd run into down in Angelica's cabin the night before.

He was sitting in the one-chair shop getting a haircut. The barber touched his jaw to straighten his scissor line and the fat boy yelped and cringed like he'd been slugged by an expert. I rubbed my knuckles against the soft part of my leg.

"What's the matter, Mr. Russell?" the barber asked.

"Doors," he grumbled, "everywhere you've got doors on this old tub." He fingered his face tenderly. "I've never been on a ship before," he said by way of explanation; "I'm not used to ships you know."

The barber said, "Uh-huh," and kept right on cutting hair as if he were bored. The guy pinned his beady little eyes on me. I looked right back at him, without being afraid of his recognizing me; it had been much too dark for that.

"Hey, feller," said fat boy, "did you hear about the murder?"

I swallowed hard. "What?" I tried to register surprise and evidently I showed a face full of it because he unloaded the big news as if he were the town crier.

"That's right, feller, we have a

killing aboard—exciting, eh?” He was bubbling like a kid with his first brand-new Louisville slugger.

I joined the thin-faced barber in looking disgusted and the latter stopped clicking his scissors while he surveyed his fat customer with a cold, angry glare.

“Exciting, mister?” he rebuked in a high squeaky voice that went along with his mousy appearance. “This ain’t no ship’s movie, mister. That was a real live woman when she came aboard last night.” He snipped at the air fiercely by way of punctuation. “When the steward found her this morning, mister, she was D-E-A-D, dead!” He paused to get his breath and I wanted to shake him by the hand. “Exciting?” he finished off. “There ain’t nothing exciting about a thing like that, mister.” He went back to his hair-cutting as if he’d never stopped.

The fat boy deflated visibly, his mouth flopping open a couple of times as if he had some sort of rebuttal; then he stopped trying and just sat there licking his lips with a thick, purple-colored tongue, and let the barber finish his job.

And that was when the full meaning of what the barber had said hit me. If the steward had found Angelica’s body this morning, then the beefy one hadn’t reported it last night. Why not?

“Next,” called the barber; the guy I’d skinned my fist on got up and I took his place in the chair. After the barber had finished I went up to the dining room. Vera wasn’t there; either she’d had an early breakfast or she was still sleeping. I ordered and had just gotten two tablespoons of orange juice down me when someone tapped me on the shoulder.

I TURNED around. It was a ship’s officer.

“Good morning, Mr. Hanley. Would you come with me, please, sir?”

“Huh? Now?”

“Yes, sir. The Captain’s request. He said it was important.”

“What’s it about?”

He shrugged and didn’t answer.

I got up, told the waiter to hold my order and trailed off after Mr. Goldbraids until we came to the Captain’s quarters. He came forward, hand extended. “I’m Captain Brent.”

He was a tall, red-faced man with broad shoulders, thin lips, and black hair that had been powdered slightly with the white sands of time.

“I’m Hanley,” I said as I took his big palm in mine.

“I’m afraid,” interjected young Goldbraids, “we took Mr. Hanley away from his breakfast.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Hanley,” the Captain said apologetically, “but there’s been a murder.” He was looking at me queerly. “You probably know about it, eh? Things like that sweep a ship with the speed of a fire.”

I nodded. “I heard, Captain, but I don’t quite understand why...”

“Sit down, Mr. Hanley, but first I want you to meet Mr. Rosewell—Mr. Jeremiah Rosewell.”

I hadn’t noticed the chubby little guy standing by one of the portholes until then; when he came forward and shook hands with me I still didn’t notice him—he was that kind of a man.

The Captain was saying, “Mr. Rosewell here is a deputy sheriff on vacation. He’s kindly consented to conduct the preliminary investigation; in that way the passengers won’t be too much inconvenienced when we get to Bermuda.”

“That’s fine, Captain, but what has it got to do with me?”

The chubby little man was playing with a set of thick, bushy eyebrows out of which peered two of the sharpest question-marks I’d ever seen. “May I, Captain?” he asked in a soft, well-modulated voice, and then turning to me said, “Mr. Hanley, you’re an investigator; you can help.” His words had an edge but his tongue had a thick rural coating.

I laughed uneasily. “Insurance investigation is my business, gentlemen. You’ve made a mistake; I’m afraid I can’t help you.” I got up to go.

The Captain looked disappointed but the sheriff unconcerned. “The

same thing, son," he said slowly; "whether you're investigating insurance or murder, it don't make no difference." He grinned openly, "I'll sure need your help, son."

"Sorry, Sheriff, this is a little out of my line."

I turned and started to leave but he caught me by the arm. "Wait a second, I'll go with you."

HE TURNED and spoke to the Captain and while I wasn't sure, I fancied I saw something pass between them—something unsaid—something in their expressions; but when I looked again the Captain was saying, "The Company radioed its approval of your conducting a preliminary investigation, Sheriff, and the New York Police are flying a man down. He'll come aboard tomorrow when we dock."

"Good, good," the little guy muttered, "we'll try not to disturb the passengers."

"We'll"—he'd said. Rosewell still wanted me to help him. Why me?

Even when we paused on deck by the open-air swimming pool, and stood watching the pink and tan bodies cavorting as if there were nothing else that mattered, he kept after me. But I refused to get involved. How could I? But I couldn't tell him that. After all, there was nothing to connect either Vera or me with the murder, so why not let it lie where it was.

He waved his pudgy hand in the air and a slender girl, wearing a form-fitting, white satin bathing suit, smiled and returned the compliment. My eyes popped like corn on a hot stove. "Hey, Sheriff, do you know that gorgeous creature?" His only answer was a wicked grin.

Even from where I stood, she was wine, exhilarating, heady wine. As she came towards us, her wet body glistening in the sun, jet-black hair hugging the beauty of her well-shaped head, I got drunk with the sight of her; damned if I didn't.

You would have, too, if you'd seen this gal.

"This is my daughter, Gerry," the sheriff said; "Mr. Hanley, honey."

"Uh, Red's the name," I added hastily.

She glanced at my red hair and laughed. Beautifully, musically, she laughed. "I wonder why?"

"Hi there," I said.

She slipped her hand into mine and her voice into low. Soft, vibrant low. "Hello! Do you want to join us... Red?"

I started to answer but her old man beat me to it. Oh he was a shrewd one, that small town sheriff. "Sorry, honey," he told her, "but Red has kindly offered to help me with that murder investigation."

She clapped her hands together. "Oh, how wonderful of him!"

From then on I was a dead duck; grudgingly, I left her up on deck and went down to Angelica's cabin with Sheriff Rosewell. See what a guy can get into?

ROSEWELL must have thought that the gasp of surprise I couldn't suppress was for the sight of Angelica's body...it wasn't, but I didn't let him know. Twice I'd been in the dancer's cabin and each time when I'd left it was in perfect order—even after my search for the letters, it was shipshape. Now as I looked around the place was a shambles. Every drawer, closet and piece of luggage had been turned inside out. I couldn't help wondering who else had visited the dead girl's cabin after I left—besides the fat boy, I mean. Tub-of-lard was one bird who didn't seem to have the guts for this sort of thing.

"What do you think, son?" the sheriff was asking.

"Oh—er—looks like robbery, huh?"

He shook his head from side to side. "No, son, 'tain't robbery." He had emptied a pocketbook out on the bed and I saw greenbacks flutter out along with the usual stuff a girl carries with her. "Must be about a hundred and fifty dollars here, son...see what I mean?"

I saw what he meant all right. The chubby sheriff from the grass roots was definitely scratching out

robbery as the motive for the dancer's murder.

"See any clues, son?"

He was talking to me like a vet cop breaking in a rookie detective and I didn't like it. But I was in it now; so I decided to play along and humor the old guy. Then as soon as it wasn't too obvious, I'd get the hell out from under.

He went over and picked up a large white linen handkerchief from next to her body and held it up for me to see. It was the same one I remembered seeing there the night before. "Now, that's what I call a clue, son." He pointed to the initial embroidered on the corner and as I looked at it, I felt my tongue go dry, my legs go numb, and deep down inside of me there was a red hot core of fear burning slowly through my quivering intestines.

The initial H was mine...and so was the handkerchief.

3

THE SHERIFF looked at me strangely. "H for Hanley, maybe?"

I almost jumped him then, but luckily I noticed the amused way his tongue hugged his cheek and I let myself relax.

"I'm kidding, Red," he smiled.

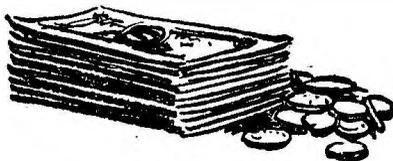
"You'd better be," I barked. I was unnerved enough to make him think I was sore, so I took his fumbled apology with bad grace. "I'm getting out of here, bud," I squawked; "go get yourself another boy."

"Hold it, Red!" he yelled unexpectedly. "Look at this!"

I stopped and followed his pointing finger. "What do you think that crushed rose in her hand means, son?" he chattered. "Any ideas?"

He was so smooth that he made it impossible for me to leave without making an issue of it, so I stayed there with him. He went over for a closer look at the rose Angelica grasped firmly in her still, white fingers. His eyes explored the red trail across the room.

"Why didn't she make for the phone, or the door?" he remarked to himself. "Why?" He looked at me only I wasn't playing Twenty Questions any more; I was just listening. So he went on, sounding more like an excited kid than a middle-aged cop from some two-bit police force up in the mountains. "It's a message, son," he muttered; "that's what it is, a message from the dead!"



"Well, I'll be damned!" was about all I could say—for the second time in just a few hours.

"You see?" He was tracing her labored movements with his finger. "There's the phone, there's the door. But she came over here, knocked this bowl down off the table and with her last breath, grasped a rose...as if she was trying to name her killer."

"You're kidding!" I shot at him. This was unbelievable. Outside of fiction, a dying person's first interest is for himself, not to go through some improbable gymnastics of identifying an attacker...or is it? You see, Rosewell even had me thinking his way.

He went over and pulled a sheet from the bed; I helped him cover Angelica's body. "She must have meant something," he muttered half to himself, "the question is..."

"If you're through with me," I cut in, "I'm going up on deck and get some fresh air, okay?"

"Uh huh, son," he said quietly, "I don't blame you."

As I left, he was standing over the sheet-covered body, his hands clasped firmly behind his back. He was thinking out loud. "A rose...a red rose..." As I went out into the passageway I heard him mumbling, "'A rose by any other name...'" I closed the door and went up on deck.

I FOUND Vera. She looked badly, there was a hollowness in her

blue eyes, if she hadn't slept all night.

She shook her head at my question. "I didn't, Red, I...I just couldn't sleep." She touched my arm and her fingers felt like steel. "The whole ship is talking about it, Red. I'm scared, scared—what if they find those letters?"

I was beginning to get a little irritated over the whole damned mess and I let it show. "I told you, Vera," I barked rather sharply, "they're not there, I'm positive." Then, when I saw the hurt expression spread across her face like a dark cloud, "I'm sorry, baby," I said evenly; "I guess I'm getting a little jittery myself."

Her smile was my reward, and it seemed quite an effort on her part. "I'm glad I saw you come aboard last night, Red," she whispered; "I'm afraid I'd be lost without you."

I got to thinking. What if they did find those letters down there? Vera would be in it up to her gorgeous white neck. Then I dismissed the thought; the letters weren't there. I'd bet on it. Then I got to thinking, *but if they weren't in that cabin, where are they? Who took them?*

Suddenly I was aware that Vera was clinging too close to me as we stood by the rail, and for some reason I wanted to get away. Somehow or other she annoyed me just then; all at once it seemed that she'd changed a lot since she'd married—or, on second thought, maybe it was I who had changed since she'd married.

I left her at the bar and went forward; once again stood watching the pink and tan bodies cavorting in the open air swimming pool, particularly one in a form-fitting white satin bathing suit. She waved and wig-wagged back at her. Right at that moment I'd almost forgotten the still form of the blonde dancer in the cabin below deck. And then the sheriff spoiled it.

"I had an idea I'd find you up here, son," he said softly. "Look at this."

"Go away, will you," I growled, but I took the piece of paper he handed me. It was a list of names written in a pencilled scrawl. "What's this?" I asked.

"Son, I'm convinced that that dead girl was trying to tell us the name of her killer when she reached for that rose." His eyes were two bright buttons that kept worrying at me—like a dog with a bone. "I made up that list from the Passenger Sheet," he continued. "Those are the only people aboard whose names connect in any way with what I believe the murdered girl was trying to say."

I wanted to laugh in the old buzzard's face, but how can you do a thing like that when your own name is standing out in bold relief among a list of eight?

MATHIAS X. FLOWER
LEIF JENSEN
MILTON ROSENBERG
DOTTY THORNTON
C. J. ROSE
JACK RED HANLEY
GERRY ROSEWELL
JEREMIAH ROSEWELL

I was so completely flabbergasted by the old boy's amazing list that all I could say was a weak, "You don't feel well, do you, pop?"

"Why?" he replied briskly.

"This is the craziest idea I've ever heard of." And I handed the paper back to him as if it was alive with radio-active particles. "And on second thought," I grumbled with my feathers mussed considerably, "even if you did want to play this list out to the end, don't you think you can easily eliminate the last three names?"

"You know something, son," he muttered in a low voice, "you may have something there." He was smiling in a crooked way I should have understood, but I didn't. I was just beginning to feel better when he picked up where he'd left off. "I know where Gerry was last night... I know where I was last night." He cocked his head to one side, "Where were you, son?"

I suppose if I'd had any sense at all, I'd have opened up wide to the little sheriff from the mountains;

but from the way he was always smiling, I never knew whether Rosewell was ribbing me, or if I was actually one of his suspects. Anyhow, I decided to keep my mouth shut for the time being just in case it was the former.

LATER that afternoon we all gathered in the sheriff's cabin, and I couldn't help having the feeling that the old boy was making a supreme fool of himself. But it was his show; he was the sheriff.

Nobody seemed to know what they were there for, but as it was common knowledge that Sheriff Rosewell had been placed in charge of the murder, there was a current of suspense humming through them.

Mathias X. Flower was the first to speak. "I say, old man, what's this all about?"

He was a tall, thin man with a long, gaunt face and popping eyes; when he told us he was from the Bronx Botanical Gardens in New York City, the sheriff smiled...he just smiled.

"Thank you, sir," he said, "you may go now."

Mathias X. Flower looked surprised but he left and appeared glad to do so.

Sheriff Rosewell didn't tell the rest of them much but he went around the room from one to the other asking simple questions that seemed to have no bearing on the death of the blonde dancer at all. As they left the room one by one I wondered how much longer the farce was to continue.

Leif Jensen was next. He was a huge muscular man of about thirty; by his flattened nose and cauliflower ears he was obviously either a fighter or a wrestler.

"They used to call me the Blonde Butcher," he grunted hoarsely, "when I was rassling, that is. Ain't been at it for a year now, though," he added; "I'm kinda tired."

After the sheriff was finished with Jensen, I watched his broad bulk go through the door. He was a giant of a man, and I remember

thinking he'd be a real tough guy to meet in a dark alley.

As the door closed behind him someone said, "He's a bum; he was always a bum. I used to see him wrestle at the Armory."

"And you, sir?" asked the sheriff, turning to the man who had spoken.

"I'm Milton Rosenberg. Dresses for Misses, that's me." He was a good-looking man with a heavy tan and a thin hairline. He took a card out of his wallet and handed it to the sheriff like it was a hundred dollar bill. "Stop in on your way back." He smiled politely at Gerry, standing quietly near her father. "I got some real nice outfits for you, dear—and for wholesale, too," he added.

"Thank you," she said and her smile matched his own.

He turned his attention back to Jeremiah. "I knew her, Sheriff," he said in a loud tone. "Angelica used to model for me."

"Shut up, Milt," said a female voice.

He pulled away from the blood-red fingernails clutching his sleeve. "So why shouldn't I tell him? I got something to hide, maybe?"

The sheriff was looking past him at Dotty Thornton standing behind the dress manufacturer, but he spoke to the man. "Have you, Mr. Rosenberg?"

"Huh?"

"Something to hide, I mean?"

"No, no, of course not," he said quickly. "She used to model for me, that's all. She was a college grad, and she wanted to dance, she always wanted to dance." He shrugged, "So she danced, that's all I know."

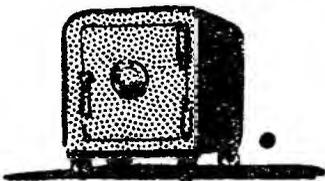
"How about you, Miss Thornton?"

Her dyed hair was the color of sparkling champagne but her eyes had the flat look of stale beer. She hunched her well-rounded shoulders.

"Yeah, I knew Angelica, who didn't? Everybody knew dear Angelica," she said bitterly, and I noticed the accent on the word "dear". She paused and squinted narrowly in my direction. "Even him," she said nodding her head at me. "Angelica

and me used to work at the same Club in the Village; I saw him around a couple of times—ask him.”

She was looking at me. The sheriff was looking at me, and Gerry was looking at me—particularly, Gerry was looking at me.



“Sure,” I said; “I saw Angelica Whitmore a couple of times. Anything wrong in that?”

“No, son, no,” the country copper murmured, “but you should have told me. You really should have.”

I GRUNTED at them and got up and walked out, leaving them sitting there. I was sore. Why the hell did Mel have to pick me out to pay Angelica off and why did Vera—I opened the door to my cabin and went inside, I needed time to think.

Do you think I got it? Not with Leif Jensen standing there waiting for me, his huge fists hanging loosely at his sides and an angry look on his broad unhandsome features. “Where’s the five thousand, Hanley?”

“What?”

“The five G’s boy; I want the dough you were going to pay off to Angie.” I stared at him and he kept right on gabbing. “Sure, Blondie told me you were paying off for the sucker. It ain’t in the gal’s cabin and she’s dead, so?” He leaned over and kicked me in the stomach; as I doubled up, his fist hit me across the back of my neck. As I went down on my face I heard him yell, “I want that five thousand, boy . . . and now!”

I rolled over and looked up at him. Was this the killer? I must have said it out loud, and if it was trouble I was soliciting, I got it.

His big hand grabbed a fistful of shirt and yanked me roughly to my feet. “If you noise a thing like that around I’ll break your back; so help

me, Hanley, I’ll break your back.”

Now believe me, I’m a pretty good athlete. I’ve played football, baseball, and done my share of boxing, but I was no match for the Blonde Butcher. I tried hitting him with my right but it never even landed. He threw up his hands and I went over his shoulder, flying across the room like I was a sack of wheat; when I landed against the wall I felt the same way. Then he went to work on me. He was going easy, for him, but by the time he’d finished he could have counted up to five thousand and I wouldn’t have heard him—not with that tea-kettle whistling in my head and a white puffy cloud carrying my dead weight around high in the clear blue skies.

The pounding in my head and the hammering on the door were one and the same noise. I got up off the floor and opened up.

“Good Heavens!” breathed Vera. “What happened?”

“Come in, baby,” I said and pulled her inside, closing and locking the door behind her. I pointed to my torn up cabin. “Look at this place.” But I knew she was looking at me.

“Are you all right, Red, are you sure?”

I was sure, just the same as I was sure that I was going to blast the whole business open to the sheriff. Enough’s enough, and I’d had it, chum. Vera begged me not to say anything for her sake, for her. But something had happened inside me; I didn’t seem to hear her any more. It wasn’t Vera’s fault, I guess, and it wasn’t mine; it was just that—well, maybe I was getting in too deep for comfort. And, after all, this murderer aboard might not object to a repeat performance.

AFTER SHE left I straightened up the cabin, then I showered and got cleaned up. Aside from a persistent buzzing in my ears and a soreness around the middle I felt at least half all right; Jensen *must* have been taking it easy on me. I

went over, picked up an open magazine from the arm-chair, and the envelope with Mel English's five thousand dollars fell out into my hand. Isn't it amazing how the obvious is overlooked? That was what I'd counted on; it usually works.

I stuck the money in my pocket and went aft to the Purser's Office, where I should have gone in the first place. He looked up as I came in but he didn't move. He was on the telephone.

"Is it out now, Fred?" he said anxiously into the mouth-piece, and he wore a disgusted look that fitted him well. "Okay," he went on, "make your report to the Captain, Fred, but are you sure it's out? Okay, see you later."

He banged the receiver down on the hook. "That's the way some trips go huh? First a murder, now a fire..."

"A fire!"

"It's okay; it's out," he hastened to say and he looked a little guilty. "Just some jerk probably fell asleep smoking. Wouldn't you think they'd know better, mister?" I nodded and let him get it off his chest because he was going to anyway. "And this guy, mind you, just came *out* of a fire, a big one, too. The steward tells me he's a plastic surgery case. Oh well, what the hell... What can I do for you?"

His eyes popped when he counted the money but he gave me a receipt without comment and I went up to the bar and had three straight bourbons. After that I walked around the ship until I found Sheriff Rosewell. "I was looking for you, Pop," I greeted him. "I've got things to tell you."

"Yeah, son, I wouldn't be surprised," he told me as he took my arm, and I noticed that the usual smile had vanished from its comfortable berth on his lips.

"What do you mean, Sheriff?" I didn't like the way his eyes were fixed on mine and I had an uneasy sense that I wasn't going to like what he was about to say. I didn't!

"That handkerchief, son, the one with your initial on it down in the

dead girl's cabin—it's yours, isn't it? It must be," he said into my gaping mouth. "I found mates to it in your luggage."

"You had no right," I started to protest angrily, then pulled up short ... he wasn't even listening.

"And how about the five thousand dollars you just gave the Purser?" he went on. "What's that all about?"

"You know everything, don't you?"

"That's near right, son, and it ain't all," he answered. "I've got me a witness who saw you coming out of the deceased's cabin late last night."

"What?" I cried. "That's impossible. Who?"

He spoke softly, casually. "Joseph T. Bellows is the name," came the country cop's voice. "He's waiting for us in his cabin. Shall we go down?"

Things were piling up fast and I knew that if I didn't start spilling what I knew, I was going to get caught right smack in the middle of it with no comebacks.

"Look, Sheriff," I blurted out, "there's something I've got to tell you."

"Hold it, son, not now. Let's get this identification over with first."

"But I..."

"Later, Red, later," and he meant it.

4

THERE WAS no response to the Sheriff's knock on the door of the cabin occupied by Joseph T. Bellows. He tried several times without success. "He said he'd wait," he muttered and then he went off and got the steward.

The fellow opened it with his key and we went in together. The room was empty...furniture was overturned and the cabin bore mute evidence of a terrific struggle. The porthole was wide open and I could plainly see two things along the fresh paint of the cabin's round window: a series of long, jagged scratches and the bright red drops of blood!

I turned slowly as the steward went

out closing the door behind him. The sheriff was standing there watching me closely. There was a queer, strained expression on his open face and a big Army 45-calibre automatic in his closed fist!

"Why did you do it, Red?" he queried softly. "Why did you kill him?"

"Kill him! You're crazy!" I yelled. "I didn't kill anybody, how could I?"

"Maybe yes—maybe no." He tugged maddeningly at the lobe of his ear. "You know something, son, I'm mighty curious. Could be you were afraid of his identification, huh?" He looked questioningly at the open porthole.

Either he got too interested in the specks of red blood on the paint or he underestimated my temper; anyhow he let me get too close to him. I lashed out with my right fist and he went down heavily on his side. He rolled over and got up slowly but this time I had his gun.

"You shouldn't a done that, son," he mumbled. "You shouldn't a..."

"Sit down, Sheriff," I said coldly and I waved the gun at a chair. "Over there. I've killed nobody," I said, "but it sure is getting to look like I have—or else somebody wants it to *look* like I have."

Then after he was squatting I spilled out the whole story to him, the way I should have right from the beginning up there in the captain's quarters. I told him everything and skipped nothing, but watching his face I felt like a commuter who had missed the last train home; it was obvious by the bland expression he showed me that Sheriff Rosewell wasn't inclined to believe a word I told him.

"Damn it, man, it's true!" I shouted. "Every word of it. Check with Mel English; check with his wife—she'll tell you the truth."

"You know something, son," he droned, "that's an idea you got there, I sure will—that's if it's okay to leave here, now."

"I'm sorry about that, Sheriff," I told him, "but I was afraid you

weren't going to give me a chance to explain. No hard feelings?"

There was a faint semblance of a grin on his face. "You've explained and I've listened. Now, do I get my weapon back?"

I gave the gun to him and watched him tuck it back in a black leather shoulder holster under his coat. He got up and strode briskly towards the door.

"Let's go, son." His voice was too soft but as he caught the expression I flashed at him he added, "Let's go see just what this here Mrs. English has to say, okay?"

WE FOUND Vera in her cabin. She'd just come out of a shower and the loosely cut wrapper she wore tightly around her firm body didn't harm her appearance one bit. Her gold-blonde hair was tied back with a black velvet ribbon and even without rouge her lips were very full and very red.

"I'm not very presentable, gentlemen," she said coyly.

"Pardon me, m'am," Rosewell said, "but this ain't exactly a social visit, ma'am. I'm Sheriff Rosewell; I want to ask you a couple of questions."

"Why certainly, Sheriff, I'll try to answer," she said coolly.

I'd expected her to act flustered; instead she sat there with all the assurance and composure of a recent graduate of Mrs. Plimy's School for Girls. I stared at her in amazement. Where had the jitters of last night and this morning gone?

"You know Mr. Hanley, of course?" the sheriff said.

She smiled benignly. "Of course; we're old friends."

"Did you know he was going to be on board, Mrs. English?"

A dark shaft of annoyance darted across her otherwise serene countenance. "No, I didn't." And her manner clearly asked—why?

The sheriff ignored the unspoken question and then dropped a bomb. "What would your husband say, Mrs. English, if he knew you'd visited Mr. Hanley's cabin last night?"

That wasn't clever; it was stupid. Vera started indignantly to her feet,

her serenity fast becoming a thing of the past. "I beg your pardon?"

I placed my hot hand on his shoulder and whirled him around. "Now look here, Sheriff," I spat at him—but he turned his back on me as if I wasn't even there.

"I understand, Mrs. English," he went on unruffled, "that first you went to the dead dancer's cabin last night and then from there to..."

"What?" She was standing now, her small white hand clutching at the thin folds of her gown. "You must be mistaken, Sheriff, I...I don't understand."

I could feel the angry blood rushing up into my burning cheeks. Rosewell had fumbled very badly; he'd made her visit to my cabin sound cheap and coarse. Somehow I got the feeling that it wasn't an accident that the sheriff had deliberately worded his question in such a way that Vera was forced to deny she had come to my cabin for help.

"Vera," I spoke up and I tried not to let the strain I felt wearing at me show in my voice, "the sheriff knows about last night. I told him everything."

She was looking at me as if she was seeing me for the first time and her voice twanged like a taut wire. "What do you mean?"

"Listen to me, Vera, the sheriff has reason to suspect me of murder; you must tell him the truth—you must!

Her tightening mouth was fast becoming a hard, thin line of defense against the words I wanted to hear. She turned to the sheriff. "Really, Sheriff, I just can't imagine what this is all about." The beautiful eyes had become cold blue glass. The warm, deep glow from within was gone and in its place was only the shallow, impersonal stare of a woman who cared for nothing but herself.

"Mr. Hanley must be mistaken, Sheriff," she pronounced evenly. "I didn't know he was on board until late this morning."

IF IT HAD been anybody but the middle-aged little sheriff from the mountains, I'd have been in the

brig—at least until we got to Bermuda and the New York cop took over, I'd be in the brig. But chubby Sheriff Rosewell didn't see it that way. "You ain't going no place, son," he'd said, "not unless you're a damn sight better swimmer than ever got born before."

So we went down to my cabin. I suppose the general idea was for me to stay in it until we docked the next morning, only I couldn't see it that way. So I slugged him again—a couple of times, good and hard—and he went to sleep like a baby.

He didn't act much like a cop; he was too easy to hit. I took his gun, trussed him up like a chicken back on the farm, shoved him into the closet, and went on out.

He'd said once that there was no difference between investigating crime and investigating insurance. Okay, then I was out to prove it, one way or the other, and the way I figured it I'd only have about two hours—that was all. After that, well...why think about that?

I went about it in the same methodical way I'd have tried to run down an insurance fraud, one thing at a time—and Joseph T. Bellows was Number One on my list. Why had he told the sheriff he'd seen me last night? The fat man was the only one there and he wasn't Bellows. Why wasn't Bellows in his cabin when we got there? What did the



scratches and blood mean on the porthole? Another murder?

In order to save time, I told Captain Brent that Sheriff Rosewell had reported Bellows as missing and asked to have the ship searched for him. Then I went up to the radio room and sent a message to Mel English. I sent another one, too, one to the Mayor of Newton, New York. It read: *SHERIFF ROSEWELL REQUESTS TWO-WEEK EXTENSION OF LEAVE*, and I

signed it with my name. Now don't ask me why I did that, I just did—that's all.

Then while they were searching the ship for the missing man I rounded up the chubby sheriff's list of suspects one by one, beginning with Leif Jensen. The ex-wrestler wasn't tough to handle this time, not with Sheriff Rosewell's big 45 in my mit. I should have added a few gunshot scars to the other marks on his face; but what the hell, it wouldn't have done any good.

Oh, he blabbed all right. With that cannon sticking in his puss, he squeaked like a beaten pup, but what he said would do me no good. He'd been Angelica's partner in the racket she had with the sucker boys, only he wasn't going to tell the authorities that. Me, he'd tell—the sheriff, no soap. The way he put it, "Jail I ain't looking for, bub, and unless I tell 'em about me an' Angie, they don't know ~~from~~ nothin'. There ain't no evidence to connect me with her, see what I mean?"

The big behemoth readily admitted that he was the boy who had torn the dancer's cabin apart. That made two of us who hadn't been able to find the blackmail letters. "But she was dead when I got there, bub, see what I mean?"

He was telling the truth, I was sure; it wasn't until *after* she was killed that the cabin had been ripped apart. I saw what he meant all right and I left him and went down to see another one of the boys on the sheriff's list of roses.

C. J. ROSE turned out to be a harmless looking guy who ran a big dry goods store in Jackson, Kentucky. He said he was travelling for his health—but I noticed that his grey eyes were clear and I couldn't help thinking that perhaps his conscience was the same. Could he help if his name just happened to be Rose?

By the time I got through talking with Mathias X. Flower, the botanist from Bronx Park, I was disgusted with myself for even imagining that the sheriff's fantastic theory about

the rose in Angelica's hand might be the answer to my dilemma. All he could tell me was that it was an American Beauty rose—a common type—and that the sheriff had shown it to him and asked the very same question I had.

The fat boy with the sore jaw was not on Rosewell's list but he was on mine. He was just a very scared hardware dealer from the Mid-West who'd had a rendezvous with the dancer the night before, only to find out that it had turned into a date with death.

"The killer was there, mister," he jabbered excitedly. "He hit me here," he touched his jaw, and I nodded more appreciatively than he could know. "And that's all I know," he finished emphatically.

"Did you see him? Could you identify him?" I asked.

"No, mister, it was too dark and it happened too fast."

"How come you didn't report the murder last night?"

He wrung his hands. "I didn't want to get mixed up in it, mister; I've got a wife and two kids."

My stomach was suddenly crawling with contempt; this kind of character I loathe. I left him snivelling with fear, his fat lips slobbering about his family, and when I looked back he was still sitting there.

I found Vera at the bar, but she saw me come in and, downing her drink with a quick gesture, tried to slip away before I could stop her.

I caught up with her and held her firmly by the arm. "Vera, why did you do it? Why didn't you tell him the truth?"

She looked at me like I was cold spaghetti. "Please, you're hurting me."

I let go. I hadn't meant to hurt her, but I was desperate. She had to tell the truth, she just had to. But when I looked into her eyes I knew she wouldn't, not even for me—and I wondered how I'd ever loved her.

She moved away, her slim figure haughty, her manner detached, and I knew then that I'd never even

known her—not really. I cursed myself. If it hadn't been for Vera...

"Don't let it get you, brother," said a loud voice behind me, "this little old boat is lousy with women."

It was Rosenberg, the dress manufacturer from New York. He was yanking at my arm and I tried to pull away but he held on with determined fingers. It was almost as if he didn't want me to follow Vera.

"Come on over," he said, "have one with us, huh? Dotty looks like she's interested, see?"

THERE was nothing I could do about Vera, not right then, so I allowed him to pull me over toward the ex-model. Dotty Thornton was perched atop a red leather seat at the bar, her fingers wiggling at me like so much bait on a hook, her nylon-covered legs twisted boyishly around the chromium stool. There was nothing boyish about the rest of her.

"H'lo," she mumbled. Her tongue was thick. "Girl give you the brush? Never mind—lotsa girls, lots." She banged her hand on the bar and looked for Rosenberg. "Want another drinkee, Miltee," she said.

"You've had enough," he told her.

"Never had 'nuff," she answered, "never had 'nuff...except of Angeli...An-gel-i-ca," she finished carefully and started laughing softly to herself as if she had a joke all of her own.

"Bourbon," I said to the bartender and sat down next to her.

"H'lo," she said again as she leaned towards me. She'd have lost her balance and fallen if I hadn't put my arm around her waist.

"Oohh!" she breathed, "I like you, I like you very much."

Rosenberg was straddling the stool on the other side of the blonde model; he looked unhappy but didn't speak.

Dotty took another long swallow from the glass in front of her. "You know somethin'...she shoulda died...she shoulda died a long time ago."

"Shut up, Dotty!" yelled the dress manufacturer.

"Won't shut up. It's a free country, isn't it? Isn't it?"

"Sure, Dotty, it sure is." Was this the break I was waiting for? My job was to keep her talking. I kept my arm around her waist. "What about Angelica?" I prodded.

Rosenberg got up and touched me on the arm. "Leave her alone, feller," he said, "she doesn't know what she's saying."

"That's the idea, bud," I told him and shook off his heavy hand.

"I mean it, feller," he said again, "I don't want you should get this gal mixed up in that stinking mess."

"She was no good," the blonde model mumbled sleepily,— "wanted to be an actress. Shakespeare. But she was no good, even at that." Her head fell forward limply on my shoulder.

Evidently the buxom stewardess was used to such things; she took Dotty off our hands in a way that bespoke ample experience.

"She's right about Angelica," Rosenberg told me when we got up on deck. "I don't know what you'll think about me for speaking bad of the dead," he waved his hands in a hopeless fashion and went on, "but she wasn't any good and that's why Dotty didn't like her."

"What's Dotty doing on board?" I asked.

"She's on her way to a hotel booking in Bermuda. It's a seven-weeks engagement, I think."

"What's your interest in her, Rosenberg?"

It must have been the way I said it because his handsome face flushed and he grabbed at my shirt front—then he let his hands drop to his sides. "I'm sorry, Hanley, but it just didn't sound right. Look, Hanley, I didn't know Dotty was aboard until I ran into her this morning; I hope you believe that."

I nodded and told him I did. The way his eyes looked I'd have been a fool not to have. And that's where it stood. I was about as close to finding Angelica's killer as I was to the bottom of the sea—and that was three and a half miles straight down!

TWO HOURS later it was getting dark and I got word from the captain. The passenger known as

Joseph T. Bellows had disappeared; there wasn't a trace of him anywhere aboard. It was just as if he had never existed!

Soon after I got a message from the radio operator. When I got there he told me that he didn't have an answer to my radiogram to Mel English but he had one from the Mayor of Newton. That one was an eye-opener, too. It read: *MUST BE SOME MISTAKE. NO SUCH PERSON AS SHERIFF ROSEWELL KNOWN HERE.*

The operator took one look at my face. "What does that mean, mister, a joke or something? Maybe I'd better call the captain, huh?"

"Yeah, yeah, do that, huh," and I rushed out of there and right smack into Gerry Rosewell.



She was standing there leaning against the rail, her back arching slightly and her dark, brown eyebrows doing likewise. "What have you done with my father?" she said through her teeth. "I want to know, now!"

"You're kidding, baby."

"No, Mr. Hanley, I'm not—see?"

She lifted the edge of a bright-colored hankie she carried in her hand and what I saw was the small round muzzle of a 38-caliber. Her lovely little hand was cuddling it close to her but the wicked-looking barrel pointed straight at my belly.

5

NOW, WHAT would you have me do, pull out the sheriff's gun and blast a hole right clean through her? Uh uh, not me—not with that radiogram in my pocket and me on the trail of the killer. Besides, you know something—this was a beautiful gal, and double besides, she might also lead me where I wanted to go.

"Okay, baby," I drawled, easily, "I'll take you to him; but easy with the cannon, huh?"

I could almost see the sneer playing with her red lips. She looked real determined; and me, I was likewise. I was willing to see her play it out to the end, and with the heavy "45" in my pocket I felt something like a man with an ace in the hole.

The sheriff got up off the closet floor massaging his legs and arms; the wet towels I'd used as ropes were hanging limply in my hands. He walked towards me, his dry tongue gradually getting used to the feel of his mouth without a gag in it. In a second he'd be close enough to frisk me. I glanced quickly at Gerry. Her hand was as steady as a pawnbroker's but her eyes were beginning to waver.

I jerked the gun out of my pocket and backed up, the girl and I facing each other; she with a thirty-eight and me with the big forty-five.

"Don't!" yelled the sheriff. "For God's sake, don't shoot! Drop the gun, honey," he coaxed softly, "for me, honey, drop it."

She stood white-faced and undecided for just a second but I'd figured it right, she was no tough guy, she hadn't even looked the part.

"Daddy!" she cried, "Daddy!" As the gun thudded to the carpet she became all little girl, and throwing herself on my bed sobbed like the completely feminine creature she really was.

I picked up the "38" and handed the sheriff the radiogram. He read it and I waited quietly for him to speak. Only he didn't; instead he started to laugh, dryly and through tight lips, but he was laughing nonetheless.

Gerry heard him, too, and looked up, her tear-wet eyes two saucers of surprise. "It's okay, honey," he told her, "he ain't no killer."

"Huh?" I grunted.

"And neither am I, son," he said evenly.

I shoved the gun at him. "That radiogram to the..."

"...to the wrong town, son," he

finished. "This is to Newton, we're from Newtown."

Do you see now what a complete idiot a man can make of himself? If Gerry had had the nerve to use her gun, I'd probably be cold in my grave right about now. But anyhow, one thing came out of my mistake...

"You thought I was the murderer, didn't you son?" I nodded foolishly. "Which only goes to prove," he muttered, "that you *ain't*!"

"Yeah," I said, "that's right, isn't it?"

GERRY got up off the bed drying her eyes and said, "I could kill you, Hanley, I could just kill you."

"You know something, baby," I told her grinning, "you almost did." I shoved her in the bathroom and told her to wash her face; I liked her better the other way.

"The question is," remarked the sheriff, "who is trying to make you out the murderer and why?"

"Yeah, and how about Bellows?" I asked. "Who the hell is he, and why did he try to put me at the scene of the murder last night?"

"Did they find him?"

"No," I said, "not a trace. Maybe he committed suicide."

The sheriff grunted at me, "With blood on the porthole?"

"Okay," I admitted, "so somebody killed him and jammed his body through the opening." The cop from Newtown looked doubtful and I got real thoughtful. "Wait a minute, Sheriff, nobody could get through the porthole unless he was a midget...or unless the body was butchered...and there wasn't enough blood for that."

He tugged at his ear again. "You know something, son, I think I got it. Those scratches were put on the porthole deliberately and so were those drops of blood."

"Why?"

"To make it look like murder."

I did a repeat broadcast for the coast and asked it again, "Why?"

"So Joseph T. Bellows could disappear!"

"Disappear! On a ship! In the middle of the ocean! Hey, pop," I

twitted, "you don't feel well again, huh?"

Gerry came out then. She still looked a little shaky so I went over and put my arm around her waist. Just to give her support, you understand—like I said before, she looked a little shaky. Well, she did!

I gave the sheriff back his two guns and we left him outside the Captain's quarters. Up on deck the cool breeze felt good blowing in our faces and my arm was still around her. For a while we didn't talk, just stood there at the rail watching a big moon cut bright swaths of light through the dark ocean with a huge silver scythe.

"You know something, Gerry," I said softly.

"No, what?"

She turned her head towards me and she was very close. I'd wanted it like that from the first moment I'd seen her standing by the pool in her white bathing suit, her wet body glistening in the sun. I pulled her towards me, her lips were soft... cool.

SHARP footsteps sounded behind me and I turned quickly. Vera was standing there under the small electric light, her face dark and twisted like a threatening sky before a storm. Then she turned and went inside.

"Gee," breathed Gerry, "I guess the fat's in the fire."

"Look, baby," I said gruffly, "you don't have to..." My tongue stopped on a dime but my mind was racing like a four-alarm fire. Angelica wanted to be an actress. Shakespeare! "What did you say, baby? Say that again, say it!"

She pulled away from me and I couldn't see the expression on her face, I could only guess. "The... the fat's in the fire," she echoed, "that's all I said. I don't see what there is about that to get..."

"That's what I thought you said, baby; c'mon!"

I grabbed her hand tightly and took off forward, with her streaming behind me, her chartreuse eve-

ning gown ballooning slightly as she ran.

The Purser was in his office when we got there and he gave me a face full of surprise at my question. "The guy who started the fire, Russell Wheatley?"

"Yeah, yeah," I prodded anxiously, "the plastic surgery case; the one who smokes in bed."

"Oh, the guy in A-10." He grinned. "Only I was wrong, mister; he doesn't smoke in bed." He was getting that disgusted look again. "No, sir, this bird just *burns* things—like letters in a waste-paper basket, that's all he does. Did you ever..."

But I didn't hear. I didn't wait to. I pulled Gerry out of the cabin and closed the door. "Go get your pop, baby, and hurry. It's a 'Rose by any other name.' Tell him I'm down in Cabin A-10. Tell him I've found Joseph T. Bellows."

WHEN I knocked on the door of A-10 Russell Wheatley's muffled voice called out. "Who's there?"

"Steward," I answered in my best Limey accent, and while I waited for him to open up I kept telling myself that there was something I ought to remember. As the door opened and I stepped into the cabin, I suddenly knew what it was, and it was all in the two muffled words Russell Wheatley had uttered.

The door closed behind me and I was alone with him, the missing Joseph T. Bellows—only his face was swathed in white bandages and he wasn't Joseph T. Bellows at all; he wasn't even Russell Wheatley. And as I looked at the little pig eyes I knew that I was face to face with Angelica's murderer!

"Mel," I said, "Mel English!"

There's something about a knife that makes my stomach creep. Even a gun with its spray of red hot lead doesn't do it—but a knife!

He stood there with it in his fist and I knew he was going to use it. I started talking, at the same time trying to figure how long it would take Gerry to find the sheriff, and just how long...

"You must hate me, Mel, hate me a lot."

"I hate your guts," he spat out and his voice was crawling with venom. "It's always been you and Vera, hasn't it? Hasn't it?" he shouted.

So that was it, the poor fool. But why bother to explain, he wouldn't believe me. Any man who could contrive such a mad scheme of murder and revenge wouldn't believe the truth anyway.

I heard footsteps in the passageway and he must have read my eyes because he came at me, the knife flashing low. I grabbed at him, holding on to his arm like a leech but he was a wild thing, possessed, demented.

I felt the steel bite into my flesh; it was cold, it was hot. It went in again and the warm blood ran down my body. I lost my legs then, quite suddenly I lost them and went down on my back with him standing over me. I saw the door come open and the sheriff, gun in hand, danced before my eyes. Mel was dancing, too, he was bending low, and dancing. The shiny thing in his hand came at me again and I couldn't move.

Something made a terrible noise in the room; there was a flash of lightning, then everybody started dancing again, everybody except Mel. There was only Gerry, she was close, right next to me. Her face was wet; she was crying. Why was she crying?

I CAME to on a white bed; there were three other white beds there, but I was all alone. Then the door to the ship's hospital opened and Gerry came in. She moved gracefully as only a beautiful woman can and her lovely smile was unbottled tonic.

"Gerry," I whispered.

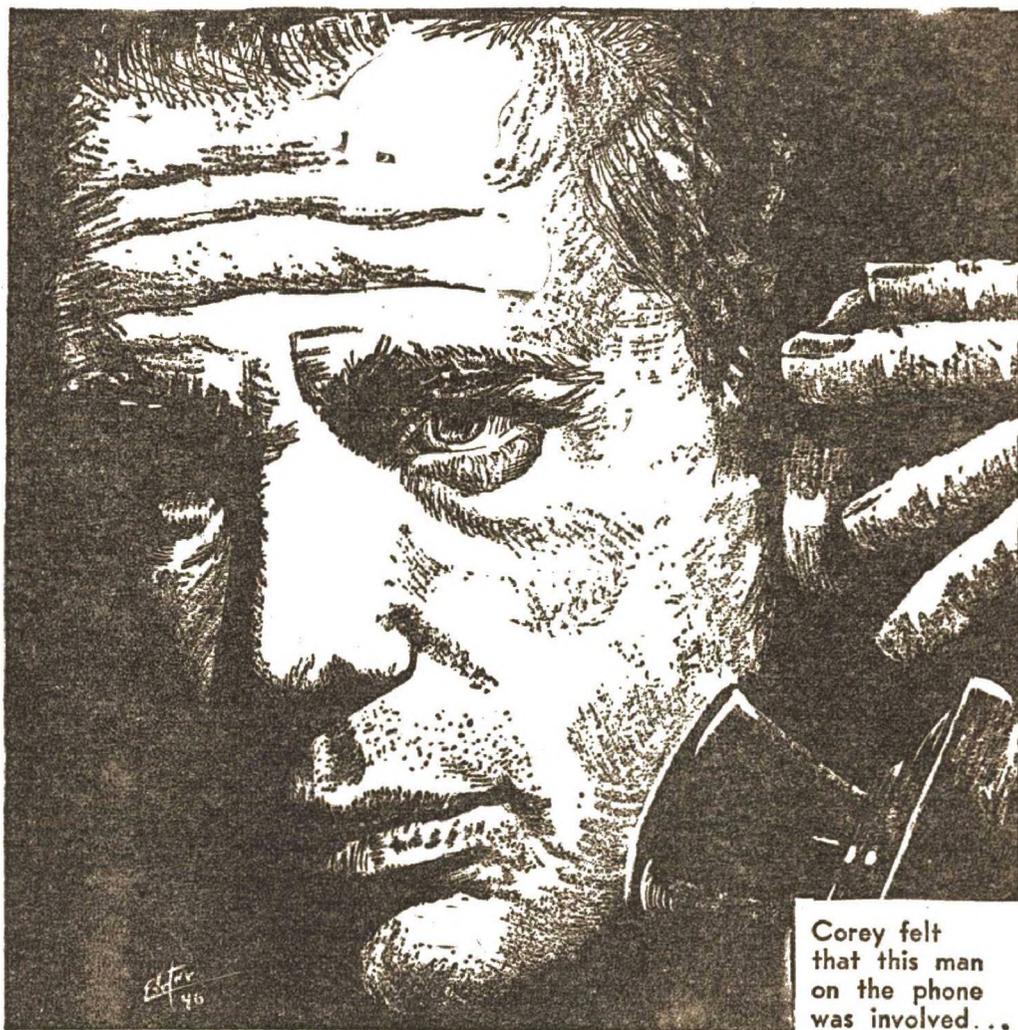
"Sshh, darling, look what I've brought for you—aren't they lovely?"

Yeah, you guessed it—just what I needed—roses; a huge bouquet of red roses!

As she bent over me I reached up and swept her lips down to meet mine...

I need roses?

FIRST COME,



Corey felt that this man on the phone was involved...

FIRST KILLED

by D. A. Kyle

It was just the house for Corey, Real Estate Broker, to sell—complete with skulls in the cellar and the lurking ghosts of old crimes...

THE RAMSHACKLE house, battered by years of inattention, was hidden in high brush and tangled young trees. The porch had sagged and the window glass had disappeared and the roof, luxu-

riant with moss, was rotted in spots.

"This?" Micheline Moore said incredulously, sweeping her arm in the direction of the house; "this is what you expect to sell?"

Paul Corey pinched his lower lip with thumb and forefinger and studied the building. His grey eyes held a trace of disappointment.

"It's certainly a wreck, Mich," he admitted; "it's an acre of jungle with a ruin in the middle." His fingers moved upward and pinched the bridge of his long nose. "But not hopeless; it's a good piece of land. The house can be fixed and the lake is convenient. It'll cost money for improvements, but that's why the price is so cheap."

They pushed their way through the bushes and climbed on the porch.

"The lumber's good, Mich," Corey said and kicked the planking heavily.

Micheline stepped through the doorway and Corey followed her, his hair, not quite six feet from the soles of his feet, brushing the top of the frame. Inside the bare rooms were scattered with refuse from past picnickers and tramps.

"It's not too bad," Micheline said, encouraged by their examination; "a woman's imagination could accomplish wonders."

Corey twisted his lean frame through a maze of broken furniture. "Let's look at the foundation." He tried to open the cellar door but it was wedged fast by a sprung board. He pulled and pounded and labored until he had managed to open it several inches. Using a stout piece of lumber he inserted it in the crack and pried the door free.

They went down the rickety stairs.

The cellar was completely dark; no windows nor holes let in the daylight. He turned on the flashlight he had taken from his pocket and shone it over the dusty concrete floor and walls. Micheline said, "It's creepy here," uneasily.

The remnants of a packing case leaned against the corner of the cellar. Corey pulled the warped wood away from the wall. The sides, cracked and curling into thin strips,

collapsed at his feet. A cloud of dust billowed around them, then slowly cleared.

Micheline screamed, weakly but earnestly.

The dust-dimmed rays of the flashlight were reflected by a white skull.

The unexpected discovery combined with Micheline's cry made Corey juggle the light nervously in his hand. It took him several minutes of shakey conversation with her before he recovered his poise enough to step closer, spraying the beam around the floor. Micheline glued herself up against him, twining her fingers in his suit.

"Don't be frightened, Mich," Corey said dully, preoccupied with his examination. The skull had its customary grin weirdly altered by the lack of its two front teeth. Ribs of the skeleton stuck up sharply in the air, but the rest of the bones were hidden by the dirt and debris.

"I—I'm—n—not," Micheline stammered. "Paul! Let's—get out of here!"

"Hmm," he replied, paying no attention to her. A glint of metal appeared under his delicate probing and he extracted a tarnished cigarette case. Just underneath an elaborate "Kid" engraved on the lid was a hole, the thickness of a finger, punched through the metal. He shifted the flashlight from the case back to the skeleton. One of the lower ribs had been splintered half-way down its curved length.

Micheline had silently watched his flashlight focus on the cigarette case and the bones. "Bullet hole?" she quavered.

"I think so," Corey answered. He turned around with difficulty, hampered by her tight embrace. "We'll go back to town now. The police have to be notified; we can come back with them again after we have lunch."

"Lunch, ugh!" Micheline said and shivered.

●
P PAUL COREY had the evening newspaper spread out on his

desk and was cutting a strip from the front page with a pair of shears when George Jackson entered the room.

"More stuff for the scrapbook, Paul?" Jackson asked cheerfully as he dropped into the leather armchair and stretched his legs. "I just tossed my paper in my office on the way by." He was tall and thin with jet black hair and about Corey's age. "I see they call you 'real estate broker and noted private detective'."

"Ah, fame!" Corey said sarcastically.

"You gave the newspapers something to smack their lips over. Did you mean it? Do you really think it was a murder?"

"Well, George," Corey said in an ominous whisper, "you're my closest friend. I'll tell you the truth. That newspaper story quoted me—one hundred percent accurately."

"You think the hole in the cigarette case was a bullet hole? You think the rib was smashed by a bullet? Why?"

"Because that's what it looked like." Corey laid the story he had clipped on a dictionary and pushed the rest of the paper into the basket.

"With women it's intuition," Jackson snorted, "but with detectives it's deduction."

"Not only do I believe what I said," Corey added, filling a pipe from a humidor on his desk, "but I'm going to try to solve it."

"What!"

"You heard me... Where's that pretty little joint receptionist of ours?"

"Mich," Jackson replied with a boyish grin, "is spending the rest of the afternoon in a beauty parlor. She says she's getting rid of the smell of death... Now what's this about solving your so-called murder?"

"That corpse has been there for about four or five years. The police are going to check all missing persons in the area along about that time. While they're doing the obvious thing, I'm going to be reading."

"Reading?"

"All the old newspapers of that

period; if there's anything which I might consider a lead, I'll follow it up."

Jackson leaned forward, spread his arms on the edge of the desk with fingers interlocked and put his chin on his hands.

"May I point out," he said patiently, "your financial status? A mild word for it would be: critical. Money, of which you haven't, goes out for business and personal expenses, which you have. Real estate and insurance puts food in your mouth, not the detecting profession. This property—this property with the corpse—it was supposed to be a quick deal with fifty percent commission. It was supposed to be the windfall which would keep the wolf away for a couple of weeks."

"I know, I know. I'll sell it. I'm not worried."

"That's right," Jackson agreed ironically, "you let me do all the worrying for you. Now if I were a great big successful lawyer, like I hope to be, I'd give you twenty cents a day so you wouldn't starve and let you detect all you wanted."

"Now, George," Corey laughed. "When that bungalow development starts clicking—"

"Sure, Paul, sure," Jackson interrupted mockingly.

The telephone rang. Corey picked it up and spoke into the mouthpiece: "Paul Corey speaking... Yes, Mr. Thompson... It's for sale, of course, but the police are conducting an investigation at the moment and it may not be available for several days... No, I'm afraid I'm going out to supper now... Suppose I call you in a day or so?... Fine... Goodbye." Corey wrote the man's name and address on his memorandum pad.

"Am I developing moronic qualities," Jackson asked caustically, "or did you really give a prospective buyer for the cemetery in the wilderness the brusheroo?"

"I did," Corey replied, coldly serious. "I'm going to poke around that spot tomorrow and the customer can cool his heels until I'm good and ready."

AUTOMOBILES of various sizes and shapes, including state and city police cars, were scattered around the entrance to the property late the following morning when Corey arrived. He left his own car parked on the shoulder of the macadam road and started up the path which was becoming well trampled.

Close to the house he was stopped by a state trooper who demanded, "What d'ya want?"

He told the trooper who he was and was waved on.

In front of the house, milling around in the bushes, was a small mob of people. Blue-uniformed policemen were mingled with gray-uniformed troopers.

Two men in white came up the path behind Corey and entered the house. Corey followed them.

Inside were more people. A loud-mouthed newspaper reporter was discussing the murder with his photographer. Corey squeezed behind them and reached Police Detective Flear.

Corey tapped Flear on the shoulder and started to say, "What's—?" when he saw the body lying on the floor. There was blood all over the man's shirt front. The two men in white, who had placed a stretcher on the floor, rolled the body on the canvas and threw a blanket over it.

"Well?" Flear said, staring at Corey.

Corey said, "Another murder?"

"Looks that way, don't it?" he answered impatiently.

"What's it all about?"

Flear pointed a warped finger at Police Chief Wittenberg. "Go ask him; I'm busy."

Wittenberg was wiping his forehead with a damp handkerchief when he noticed Corey and nodded a greeting. His reply to the question was polite but bored: "A detail working on yesterday's discovery came out here this morning to search the grounds and discovered this second body. The corpse was fresh; the killing must have taken place about four o'clock this morning. Three slugs from a small caliber

pistol hit him in the chest and two more have been found in the walls. The weapon is missing." He put the limp handkerchief back in his hip pocket. "According to the identification, the man was Elio Smith, 41, and lived at Maple Corners, about eight miles out on the Blakeston City road."

Corey was jotting down words in a leather notebook.

Wittenberg frowned. "Keep your nose out of this, Paul," he warned. "Your license doesn't entitle you to mix yourself into strictly police work. These murders are no business of yours."

"I know, Chief," Corey agreed soothingly. He kept his pencil poised above the pad. "I'm not planning to interfere. My files might produce something of help to you. What about these murders?—Do you have any leads?"

"No," Wittenberg replied and added, as Corey thanked him and moved away, "Remember, don't louse up our investigations!"

MICHELINE MOORE came into the office and said, "Give me a cigarette please, Paul." He looked up from the desk piled high with manila folders, handed her a cigarette, and studied her as he held the flickering lighter. Her reddish hair was immaculately arranged and her dress was gayer than usual.

"My first cigarette since lunch," she said and blew out a thin stream of smoke. "Find anything yet in those newspaper clippings?"

"Nothing definite... My, you look attractive today."

"Thank you, sir... What do you hope to find?"

"I'm picking out anything unusual which happened within the year of that first death. For a city of our size that's not difficult. There may be a clue to the unravelling of that crime."

"What about the second murder? Are they connected?"

"They must be."

"So if you solve one—you solve the other?"

"Something like that."

"Find any possibilities?" Micheline leaned over the desk and read the headlines of five clippings laid side by side on the desk blotter. She listed them aloud: "Unsolved slaying, dragnet for bank robbers, another unsolved slaying, a mysterious suicide, and a missing man believed kidnapped. Which one do you like the best?"

"The dragnet and the missing man. The missing man can be easily checked but the dragnet for the bank robbers is almost too difficult to follow up."

He picked up the story he had rested his forefinger on and alternating his glance from it to her face recited: "Five and a half years ago a bank across the state line was robbed by three masked men. They engaged in a gun battle with the guard, but they jumped into a car which was driven by a fourth bandit and escaped with \$19,000. One of the bandits was reported wounded and the guard was killed. Their car was found deserted a mile from the bank, indicating they had switched to one or more other cars. The state and local police here were alerted, but no trace of them has ever been found."

Micheline was excited. "Do you think the skeleton might belong to one of the gang?"

"It's very possible; if the wounded bandit died, the others would have had to dump his body in an isolated place, where its discovery wouldn't point the direction of their flight."

"How can you identify the skeleton as one of them?" Micheline asked. Her forgotten cigarette burned her fingers and she jumped, dropping it. She picked it up and snuffed it out.

"I don't think I can," Corey replied and put the clipping back on the blotter. "I've already checked with Chief Wittenberg and he informs me that no description was ever given of the men which could be checked with the skeleton. Nor

can the half dozen bullet slugs and cigarette case be traced."

"So that means you're licked?"

"No, not at all," Corey smiled at her. "We've got a good lead, Mich. Wittenberg is going to check on Elio Smith, the second victim. If he has a criminal record, he might very well be another member of that hold-up gang."

Micheline was puzzled. She bit a fingertip, noticed the lipstick she had smeared on it and rubbed it with a piece of tissue she produced from nowhere. She said, "But why would he come back after all those years? And who shot him—and why?"

Corey stood up and yawned. "If I could answer all those questions, Mich," he said gently, "I could solve the case." He folded some blank paper and stuck the sheets in his pocket. "I'm going down to the public library now, Mich, and do some reading. I'll call every half hour for any messages." He put on his hat. "Could be I'll find some very interesting information," he said mysteriously and winked at her.

GEORGE JACKSON pulled a wooden chair up next to Corey and whispered, "Mich said you were here. Don't you know what time it is? Aren't you going to eat supper?"

Corey said, "Hello, George." He looked at his watch and began rearranging the bound volumes of newspapers. "Let's eat together. I've got a couple of theories I'd like you to hear."

The librarian coughed and gave them a pleasantly remonstrant look. They put the huge books away and walked out in the silence of exaggerated caution.

On the street Corey said rhetorically, "You know about my bank robbers? I've been reading the personal news columns all afternoon and I've a list of hundreds of people who moved into town or the suburbs within six months after that robbery. I believe that one or more of those people might be part of that gang."

"You do?" Jackson was incredulous.

"Yes. My reasoning is simple: The two homicides are connected; at least three people are involved. The rapidity with which today's murder followed yesterday's discovery indicates that the murderer and his victim live in this vicinity. The skeleton must not be a local man or he would have been identified before this time. The second corpse was that of a man who moved here from an unknown place just three months after the bank holdup. Assuming the three persons involved are related, then the murderer now at large was originally not a local resident. It's logical to believe that he settled down sometime within six months after the robbery."

"But why should they all pick this town to live in?"

"Because there's something which ties them here."

"Do you know what?"

"The bank loot. I think it's been lost or hidden and the man with the front teeth missing—the fellow who was killed five years ago—is the key to the location of \$19,000."

"I think I see." Jackson hesitated a moment, gathering his thoughts. "The bandits escape and on their way, in this town, one of them is killed. His death coincides with the disappearance of the money and they come back here to live, hoping that some day they may find it. Is that right?"

"More or less... A more detailed explanation, and therefore more liable to be erroneous, would picture the toothless man as the wounded bandit. The gang stops outside town and tries to patch him up. Something happens during the night by which they become separated. The wounded man hides the money and crawls off and dies alone. The rest of the gang know he couldn't have left them, so they figure out what has happened to him and drift back later to settle down here and search for his body and the money. I find the body, which they easily recognize by the missing teeth or cigarette case, and last night they converge on the spot.

An argument develops and one of them is killed. Thus—the second body."

Jackson shook his head in admiration. "Beautiful deduction, Paul—if true. Now if you were to apply some of that brain power to my law work or your real estate business—"

Corey's snort interrupted him. "All right, let's not go into that." He squeezed Jackson's arm with firm fingers. "You know, if I could break this case there might be some reward money stuffed away in some cubby-hole."

"A lovely thought. What do you intend to do about this theory of yours?"

"The murderer, as I said, is conceivably one of those who moved into town shortly after the robbery. My list of residents for that time is my list of suspects."

"How accurate can it be?"

"Very accurate. The newspaper checks all real estate transactions for its personal columns. This is no shot in the dark; this is a mathematical probability."

"So now you start investigating several hundred people?"

"No," Corey drawled, pulling his eyebrows into a tight vee over the bridge of his nose. "I investigate only one man."

"One man!" Jackson exploded in excitement. "Who?"

Corey curled his lips with self-satisfied humor. "You were present when I received that phone call offering to buy the property. The name of the man who called is on my list. It's easy to see why he was anxious to get the property for himself."

Corey became grimly serious. "Mr. Walter Thompson is going to have a visitor—tonight."



WALTER THOMPSON'S home was on a respectable residential street. Corey walked up the concrete sidewalk which ran to the front porch between neatly trimmed grass and punched the bell button.

An exceedingly attractive woman

opened the door and admitted him after he had introduced himself. She was smartly dressed in inexpensive clothes with a large spray of gold leaves with red stones fastened near one shoulder.

"Sit down, Mr. Corey," she said, leading him into the small living room. "I'll call my husband." She went out and he heard her footsteps going up the stairs.

Several minutes later he heard heavier footsteps coming down. A middle-aged man with the build of a wrestler entered the room. His eyes were closely set and darkly piercing, imbedded in a fat face, and his thick hair was black. "Yes," he said hoarsely.

"My name is Corey; you called me concerning a piece of land which you're interested in."

"Yes."

"Well... Are you interested?"

"Yes," said the hoarse voice.

Corey pulled out his notebook and thumbed to a place.

"Would you like to see me at my office?" Corey asked. "Or shall we talk business here?" He paused and added cautiously, "I hope all this publicity about murders hasn't bothered you?"

"No," the man said and remained immovable in the middle of the room. "I'll talk business with you tomorrow afternoon."

Corey suddenly showed agitation by slamming shut his notebook.

"The police," Corey said with careful politeness, "were interested in your phone call to me. I don't want them to bother a client of mine; can you give me an alibi for yourself as to where you were at the time of the most recent murder—between three and five this morning?"

Thompson's rough face was impassive. "Yes," he answered in his rasping tone. "I was at my business as manager of the *Midnight Club*. Every minute can be accounted for until five in the morning." He moved no muscles; his face remained stoic and his eyes piercing.

"Thank you, Mr. Thompson," Corey said, squirming slightly un-

der the cold gaze. "I'll expect to see you tomorrow afternoon at my office." He rocked himself to his feet. "Well," he said lamely, "thank you for your time. It's a fine piece of property, you know." Without a word Thompson shut the door at his back.

THE AUTOMOBILE turned off the highway and entered the side road, headlight beams slashing their way across the trunks of trees. Corey drove slower, weaving gently with the curves.

"It doesn't seem reasonable," Jackson repeated. His long thin body was jackknifed on the leather seat beside Corey, head tipped back on the top of the cushion. "It's too dark. We'll never discover anything tonight; let's search the property tomorrow."

"Tomorrow may be too late," Corey said. One hand held the wheel, the other an unlit pipe.

"Expecting another corpse?" Jackson cracked.

"Don't joke, George. It's impossible. With \$19,000 loose and two of the original bandits still at large anything is apt to happen."

"Still believe your bank holdup theory? You haven't produced one fact to prove it yet."

"Two murders and that Thompson character are enough for me."

"And he's also got a perfect alibi."

Corey made no reply. He watched the road unfolding in front of them and changed from driving to parking lights.

"You might say," Jackson pointed out, "that you've made absolutely no progress. And I don't see how wandering around out here in the darkness is going to help any."

The automobile swerved into a clearing and stopped. Corey turned off the parking lights. "I think someone else may be out here. Catch him and we've got a key to the solution."

They climbed from the car and started cautiously up the path

toward the house. Every few steps they would pause to listen and without light their advance was slow and tedious.

Nearly twenty minutes had passed before they had worked their way through the brush and around the house. Mist was damp against their cheeks.

"Listen!" Jackson warned.

After several minutes of fruitless listening they inched ahead. They almost stumbled over another man. He jumped at them and all three fell to the ground. Before they could grasp him firmly he had dodged away and disappeared into the bushes.

They floundered after him, following the noise he was making. The noise suddenly ceased and though they waited patiently there was complete silence. They became aware of a faint whispering; the mist was turning into a light rain.

"We've had our one chance," Corey said bitterly. "Let's go back and see Micheline." Jackson cracked his knuckles in irritation.

A SMALL SIGN next to the highway said simply in green neon script: *Club Midnight*. Corey slammed the car into a space in the parking lot and stalked to the entrance with Jackson behind him.

Inside, there were about thirty people seated, talking and drinking while the orchestra had an intermission. They found Micheline at a small table in the corner. Jackson pulled up a third chair and they both sat down.

She looked at their glum faces and asked, "You found nothing?"

"Worse than that," Jackson replied. "We stumbled over another man and then let him get away." He examined his hands. "Paul and I are dirty. Will you order something for us, Mich? We'll be right back."

Two scotch and sodas were awaiting them when they returned. They sipped in silence while Micheline reported the results of her assignment:

Thompson had been visiting with the customers, moving his big body from table to table, for the past hour. He hadn't been out of her sight more than ten minutes at a time. Ten minutes before they had arrived he had disappeared into his office with a mustached man. No suspicious characters had been observed; nothing had happened.

"Well," said Jackson, "this has been a singularly profitless evening."

At that moment a man appeared around the corner of the cloak room, crossed the dance floor and, wiping dirt from his cheek with a handkerchief, entered the men's rest room.

Corey and Jackson looked knowingly at each other. "Let's take a closer look at him," Corey said. They both arose from the table.

The man was brushing his trousers with his hands when they entered. He was nearly forty, tall, thin-faced and not very husky. He started to wash his hands.

Corey said, "How did you make out?"

The man jerked his head up, startled.

"Did you find anything?" Corey persisted, keeping his tone casual.

The man said, "Whaddaya mean?" He held his hands motionless over the wash basin.

"We've been waiting for you," Corey said. "We want to know how you made out with the search."

"What's it to you?" The man hesitated. "I don't tell nobody but my boss." He started drying his half-washed hands.

"Its all right—" Corey began, but the man pushed his way between them and scurried out the door. They didn't try to stop him.

ON THEIR way back to the table they noticed him talking to a waiter. They sat down and watched the waiter lead him to another table against the far wall. The members of the orchestra filed across their line of vision to re-assemble on the bandstand.

"Did you see that man earlier tonight?" Corey asked Micheline and masked his pointing finger with a menu.

"No..." she answered. "I might mention that he's sitting at another man's table." She checked a penciled diagram on a paper napkin. "It's the table of the man with the mustache who went in the office of Thompson."

Corey shut his eyes and rubbed his long nose between his forefingers. Jackson asked. "Is that Thompson?"

Corey opened his eyes and watched Thompson standing in front of his office door surveying the room. "Yes," Corey and Micheline said simultaneously. Thompson saw the man who had just come in and walked over to sit down at his table. They talked with friendly gestures.

Corey stood up. "Come on, George," he said and sauntered toward Thompson and his companion. The orchestra began a fast foxtrot.

Thompson saw them coming and got to his feet. He smiled, stuck out his hand and said, "Good evening, Mr. Corey. I'm pleased to have you here this evening." The hoarseness in his voice emphasized the warm, befriending tone. Corey introduced Jackson.

"Sit down, gentlemen," Thompson urged, capturing two more chairs with huge hands. "This is Mr. Baxter," he said, indicating his companion. "Mr. Baker owns a private taxi company and is quite well-known with our patrons." Thompson was effusively benevolent.

Corey got directly to the point. "We are interested in learning the reason for certain activities by Mr. Baker this evening."

Thompson showed white teeth in an apparently sincere smile. "I know just what you mean, gentlemen. Mr. Baker has told me about his adventure at your piece of property, Mr. Corey." He included Jackson in the conversation by a

nod. "Evidently it was you two men who he bumped into."

Corey and Jackson were unsuccessfully trying to conceal their surprise.

"A Mr. Webster, a stranger in town, hired him to search the property for a heavy metal box. He looked for several hours until you tripped over him. He was frightened—the murders, of course—and he came back here to report his failure to Mr. Webster."

Corey said, "Where is Mr. Webster?"

Thompson held his smile. "He's left."

Baker got up abruptly and said, "I'm in the phone book if you want me; I gotta go." He walked hurriedly from the room.

Thompson said, "Mr. Baker is an honest man; you can believe him. Is there anything else I might help you with?"

"Perhaps," Corey said. He got to his feet, with his hands on the table. "Do you know Mr. Webster?"

"Slightly." Thompson scraped back his chair and got up. "He introduced himself and asked me to recommend a man to do an unusual errand for him. I suggested Mr. Baker."

"Does he have a mustache?"

"Yes."

"We'd like you to step over to our table, Mr. Thompson," Corey said. "I think you can be of some help." Jackson now was also standing. "George, will you lead the way?"

Corey introduced Micheline and then asked, "Did the mustached man come out of Mr. Thompson's office, Mich?"

Micheline was disturbed. "N—no."

"Can you be mistaken?"

"No. Of course not."

Corey looked directly into Thompson's face which was close to his. "Shall we discuss this in your office, Mr. Thompson?"

Thompson smiled again, a trifle ironically. "Certainly, Mr. Corey." He turned and the three of them followed him.

The door shutting behind them stifled the orchestra into a faraway murmur. Their feet sunk into the oriental rug. Thompson indicated the lushly upholstered furniture with an invitation to sit down, but they all remained standing.

"Mr. Webster," Thompson stated, jerking his head toward another door, "left by the back way not more than five minutes ago."

Corey probed the modernistic office with his eyes. A faint odor of perfume was noticeable in the air. From an ash tray on the massive desk a thin plume of smoke wavered upward. Corey moved to the ash tray; a cigarette had burned down to the lipstick mark at its tip, leaving an inch-long uncrumbled ash.

Corey snapped his fingers and shot a rapid question at Thompson: "Did your wife leave with him?"

All the pleasantness evaporated from the stocky man. His eyes narrowed in his hardened fat face. "No," he said. The sinister, eerie quality had returned to his hoarse voice.

"Did they go to your home?" Corey was matching stare for stare.

"No," was the rasping reply.

"One of them," Corey said coldly, "is going to be murdered tonight; either way will be unfortunate for your wife."

"I can handle my own affairs," Thompson growled, his eyes glittering.

Corey shook his head. "It's too late, Thompson; either you lead us to her now, or you may never see her again."

For a moment Thompson leaned forward with his hands clenched into white-knuckled fists, then he shrugged, walked to a closet and took out an overcoat.

took the key Thompson gave him as Corey pulled the gun from his shoulder holster.

They all stood on the steps waiting for Jackson to open the door noiselessly. As the door swung back they heard the sharp report of a pistol fired inside. Corey sprang through the door, his own gun ready in front of him.

A woman backed into him and he said, "Drop it!" when he saw the gun in her hand. She sucked in a brief cry, startled, and tried to twist her gun at him. He hit her wrist with the barrel of his own automatic, knocking the weapon from her hands. Thompson pinned her arms to her sides as Jackson picked up the gun.

"Be good, darling," Thompson said huskily. The woman was his wife.

On the other side of the room, draped over an armchair next to the fireplace, was a man's body. Corey examined him with rapid sureness and twisted him into a sitting position in the chair.

"Wounded," he said. "Nothing very serious."

Thompson, crushing his wife helplessly to him with one hand, picked up a telephone with the other. Jackson, holding the gun by the barrel with nervous fingers, watched him cautiously. The big man, with his wife sulking at his side, first ordered an ambulance, then the police. Micheline leaned against the wall and looked ill.

Corey was trying to bring the injured man to consciousness. The pock-marked face was extremely pale underneath the thin graying hair.

"That's Webster," Thompson said, having finished with his calls. "All right, Corey; what's my wife been up to?"

Corey waited until Thompson and his wife were seated on the divan before he replied. He folded his arms, still holding his automatic. "I don't know it all; she or Webster can fill it in later." He stared at her and related the story

THERE WAS light in the front room of Thompson's house when Corey parked the car. The four of them approached the front door quietly, passing a new black sedan in the driveway. Jackson

of the bank robbery, with his theories of the missing \$19,000.

"When you called, Thompson," Corey added, "I figured you as one of the gang."

"She asked me to call," he explained and looked at her. "She said she had an idea for buying the property and building a lowdown night club to be called *Bucket of Blood* or something like that and cashing in on the publicity. And I took the damn witch serious—me playing a chump for five years." He gave his wife a rough, unloving hug. "Tell me, Corey, where does she fit in?"

"She was one of the gang." Corey looked at the woman. "You were the driver, weren't you? Everyone assumed, I suppose, that the driver of the getaway car was a man; I was fooled too."

THOMPSON slapped her across the cheek so hard that her head was snapped back. "Talk!" he commanded. She uttered a string of bitter, vulgar words. He grabbed her wrist in one of his hands and began twisting. "Talk!" he insisted.

"Yes!" she hissed, glaring at him with hatred. "Yes, I was the driver. That's why I married you on condition we would live in this jerk town. I wanted to look for the missing money and have security too. If I'd found it, I would have deserted you fast." She spat out some more invective.

He gave her wrist a painful jerk and she began talking more rapidly: "We were to meet that evening on the other side of town at Maple Corners. I was in one car with the Kid, and Webster and Smith were in another car. The Kid had some bullets in him and was dying so I drove into town to get some bandages. I left him in the underbrush and when I came back he and the money were gone.

"I met the other two and told them what happened. We searched the area that night and never found any trace of the Kid or the money. We split up then, because

we were afraid of capture, and decided to come back later and search.

"We met several times after that and never found a thing. Finally I figured I'd settle down near the place and keep looking. So did Smith, but I never knew it until today. I thought I'd find it after a few months."

"So you and Smith were camped around the scene hoping to find the pot of gold," Corey said, "but where was Webster?"

"He was drafted and I never saw him again until tonight. He read the newspaper stories in the city papers and came back to try again. He must have met Smith that night and killed him in an argument. And then tonight we met accidentally at the club and came here to talk. He threatened to kill me, too, but I was faster."

"But not fast enough," Corey said dryly. He looked at Webster. "Lies!" the man said weakly.

"When did you get into town?" Corey asked.

"This morning."

"What part of the body was the Kid shot?"

"Shot bad. Clean through his right shoulder—out his chest."

Corey shifted his glance back to hers. "So you killed Smith and tried to kill Webster?" he mused. "I can guess why. Want to tell us?"

She lost her sullen look, grew frightened.

"You weren't hanging around here for five years because you wanted to find the money," Corey said. "You had the money all the time—probably still have all of it—just waiting for a chance to leave. But you couldn't leave, could you? You knew Smith was here still searching; when the body was reported found, you and he went out to hunt for the money that night. But you knew the money wasn't there—you were only faking. You were really planning to kill him should he accuse you of murdering the Kid. He accused you, so you killed him."

Her face had become colorless.

"When Webster showed up to-night you decided to kill him also and finish off the last threat to your peace of mind. Then no one could suspect you had made \$19,000 as an accomplice in a bank robbery—or that you murdered the rest."

THE SIREN of a police car was approaching in the distance.

"You even killed the Kid."

She tried to deny it, but her mouth could form no words.

"You had to stay around and find the Kid's body because you shot him several times and he crawled away with a body full of slugs. He'd dropped the money and you hid it, but when you went to find him and run the car, with his body, into the lake he had vanished in the night. So for years you've tried to

dispose of the evidence which would have sent the rest of the gang gunning for you—constantly afraid from day to day that someone else would find the body. When I found the skeleton and called it murder you decided you had to kill off your friends before they killed you."

The loud wailing of the siren began to die as a car screeched to a halt in front of the house.

"The police will knock the truth out of you," Corey said, listening to the footsteps coming up the walk. "I hope they find your loot, too; a little reward money can keep the bill collectors off my neck for a few pleasant weeks while I try to sell that private graveyard of yours."



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COMPLETE NOVELET

Branded as a yellow dog who let his best friend die, Dan Wilkins strikes back at the unknown traitor in the department, who was profiteering in blood and murder.

BARS IN THE Nation's Capital are mostly garish, red-leather-and-chrome affairs that do no more than add to the restless, tense loneliness that forever grips most of the populace. There are no neighborhood saloons, and there is no neighborliness. You have to be seated to be served a drink even of plebian beer. You can't move about, but only stay at your tiny table, or cramped booth, while a who-

the-hell-cares type of waitress infrequently appears discourteously to serve you another of whatever it is you're drinking. A guy looking for camaraderie, the good-fellowship that goes with imbibing, is better off taking a train to Baltimore.

I used to go to the Maryland metropolis to do my friendly drinking, but now I didn't want any of that. I just wanted to be alone, to crawl into my dismal shell and get stinko. A Washington bar is just suited for that—that is, if you get one where the barkeep or the proprietor will continue to serve you. The law says you get no service if the server considers you've already had enough, or when he so considers. But it's hard to tell if a man's drunk when he's sitting down; anyway, most places are too money-conscious to refuse you a drink no matter what your condition. I didn't ever want to stop, unless I fell over.

But then this vision, this girl, slid into the booth, facing me, where I was proceeding to drown my woes. "It is Dan Wilkins, isn't it?" she asked.

I nodded, trying to focus my eyes in the afternoon dimness of the place, trying to get into line the cherry-brown hair, the pert face beneath it, the firmness where her tight-fitting jacket only suggested a plunge. Light brown eyes looked into mine and helped me get the picture.

"Have a drink?" I queried. I held up a hand and the waitress appeared. "The same for me," I said, which meant a double rye with water to wash it down.

"Planter's punch," the vision said.

"So?" I said, my head feeling light. "So what do you see?" Her eyes had raked me over and over and the rye in me rebelled at the inspection.

"A sniveling quitter," she replied.

"What," I growled, "business is it of yours? A great guy, my best pal, murdered, and me fired from my job because of it! Kicked out on my can! So I got a right to get plastered."

The words rolled thickly off my tongue.

"A man would fight back."

The way the dame accented the word, the disgust in her voice, roiled me and took the edge from my inebriety. Bitterness and a touch of honest shame—the girl was right—had a slightly sobering effect. A maddening one, too, so I grunted, "Who the hell are you, sister, and how did you find me? And what do you want?"

"I found you," her brown eyes flashed, "by calling at your apartment-house and being told you were probably at the nearest cafe. I looked in on two others before I got to this one. The name is Dee Morgan and I want..."

"What?" I jumped at the name, quite sober now.

"Johnny's sister," she said, softly gravely.

"Johnny's sister," I gulped. "I knew he had one, in school somewhere, but I didn't..."

"Cedar Crest College for Women," she said. "I left the school yesterday to come here; I won't go back until I find Johnny's murderer. I thought you would want to help." Her lovely face twisted into lines of pain, determination, vengeance.

THE WAITRESS served the drinks and I gulped mine needing it to cushion the shock. "Sure," I said, my voice low, serious, "I'd like to find him too. I'd also like to fly like a bird, or maybe break the bank at Jim's place over in St. George's County. But I can't even get in the joint. Or sprout wings," I added.

Dee Morgan seemed not to hear me. "I need help."

"I know," I said. "But, honey, Johnny's murder was just one more in a long list of murders. You could even add to the list the thousands of our boys killed by the Chinese Reds in Korea, killed with weapons made in U.S.A. The best brains in the law enforcement agencies of every country in the free world can't put a finger on the man, or men

responsible. What can you—or the two of us—do?”

“Johnny was my brother,” she said, simply, as though that was the only answer.

“And my best friend,” I said. “I worked with him, drank with him. I was at his side the night he got it, and,” my voice took on a bitter tone, “I got kicked out of the Department because my pig-headed supervisor held me responsible for Johnny’s death. How do you think I feel, Dee Morgan?”

Her brown eyes looked into my bleary, bloodshot blue ones. I felt something new, something strange, twist at my heart. “Like my brother,” she spoke softly, “you were an investigator, an undercover agent for the Munitions Division of the State Department. Your job was to collect information on arms smugglers, the kind of rottenness that makes millions in profit while the enemy kills our men with guns and ammunition of our own manufacture.” Dee’s eyes hardened; she sipped her drink.

“No lecture, please,” I said, “You’re not telling me anything new. And the profit is in billions, not just millions.”

“I’m sorry,” she tossed her head and the cherry-brown hair whipped enchantingly back from her shoulders. “I can’t help myself sometimes.”

“Johnny felt the same way, honey,” I said. I reached out a hand and covered hers. It felt soft and warm beneath my touch and I knew then that here was a hand that I would always want to hold.

“Profit from guns, and blood,” her words had a harsh ring. “Did Johnny tell you anything before he...he died?” she asked suddenly.

“Tell me anything? He didn’t take me into his confidence, if that’s what you mean. He didn’t have time to; I knew from his actions, his hints, the excitement in his manner, that he felt he had something on his return from Manila. But...”

Dee Morgan interrupted. “He did have something, Dan. He found something in Manila that proved to

him there was a traitor, a leak of some kind, in your own Division—right here in Washington.”

“What?” I gasped, then, “How do you know?”

“He wrote me, Dan,” the girl said, and I liked the way she had begun to use my name, liked the way it came from her full, luscious lips. “He always wrote me, in a special code we had between us. I think he did it mostly as a big brother trying to satisfy a kid sister’s appetite for adventure. I knew about you because he wrote me often about you, described you, and once he sent me a picture of the two of you together.”

“But about this—this leak in our own offices?”

“He didn’t have a name,” Dee said. “He only was certain the person existed. He was going to tell you his suspicions, and take them up with Paul Pleven...”

“Paul,” I said, slowly; “Johnny reported to him immediately he got in from Manila, was with him for several hours. Then Paul ordered us both to take the next plane to New York. Johnny hadn’t had time to unpack. That very night, down on the lower East Side—where we were supposed to rendezvous with a couple of stool pigeons—Johnny got it.

“All Johnny said to me up to then was that he had latched onto something big; he’d tell me about it when we got back here.”

“But he didn’t get back.”

“No,” I said. “And I got back to have Paul Pleven boot me out. Officially, so he said, I turned yellow; I let Johnny die. He twisted the report from the New York cops to make it look that way.”

DEE’S WONDERFUL eyes bored into mine, “The way I see it, you should be dead, too. But you escaped; so the next best thing was to have you discredited. Then, even if you knew what Johnny had known you’d be laughed at; you’d be a discredited sorehead trying to even up for the loss of his job.”

“You mean, that whoever this traitor is, he was on to Johnny—that

the deal that sent us rushing off to New York was a trap?"

"I mean just that," Dee's brown eyes snapped. "He must have told your supervisor..."

"Pleven? But I don't think he..."

She interrupted my interruption. "It doesn't have to be Pleven; he could have passed Johnny's report on up the line and whoever is guilty was in a position immediately to contact some of his racketeer pals, arrange this New York deal, and pass the assignment back through Pleven."

"Yes," I admitted.

"Whoever it is," Dee Morgan showed the steel that was in her, "That's the man who murdered Johnny." She turned her flaring gaze on me again. "Will you help me get him?"

"If this is true," I said, "it's big. Bigger than both of us. Bigger than just Johnny's murder. Too big for just you and me. But I'm with you; where do we start?"

"With Pleven," she said.

I nodded.

"You go back to your apartment," she advised me, "and get yourself completely sober. Shower, eat, do whatever it is that offsets the whiskey. I'll see you later this evening; I'm staying at the Smith-Plaza Hotel; I'll call you from there."

We left the bar together after I paid my check. I put her in a cab, then walked slowly, thoughtfully, to the building that housed my one-room-bath-and-kichenette efficiency apartment.

2

I SHOWERED, letting the hot needle-point spray steam out the alcohol, then found myself pacing the floor of my one room, frowning out its windows on the darkness that was beginning to shadow the Washington sky. I watched the dusk as it lowered over the top of the Veterans Administration building, across the park from my apartment-house abode. "Damn," I muttered, and, "Double damn!"

Then I made up my mind. I lifted my phone from its cradle and dialed a number. A moment later, I asked for a certain extension. "Joe," I said finally.

Joe Amantia, sleek black-haired Joe who looks more like a ballroom dancer than an FBI agent, admitted he was at the other end of the wire. A long-time friend, Joe had worked on a number of the cases of munitions smugglers Johnny or I had turned up. We of the Munitions Division of the State Department, after all, had no arresting power; we were spies only, digging up the dirt for the enforcement agencies. "Dan Wilkins, Joe," I said.

He began to tell me what a dirty deal I got from the Division, but I cut him short. I told him about Dee Morgan and what she had told me. "I think there's plenty to it, Joe," I said. "It adds up. Johnny's excitement; the funny way he was ordered out on that New York caper practically before he could get his breath. Usually, when an investigator came in from a trip like Johnny'd just made to Manila, he gets a rest, some time off. Routine. It's only struck me now how queer it was to shoot him back out; and me along with him. And there were plenty others who could have handled the assignment of collecting whatever the stoolies had to offer."

Amantia got it. "Yes," he said, "if such it was to have been."

"Sure," I returned, "Hell, Joey, the Division's got a couple undercover men regularly stationed in New York. The more I think about it the more I'm convinced it was a murder trap for Johnny, and for yours truly."

At last the Federal man advised, "I know I can't tell you to stay out of it, Dan. Johnny was your best friend, and now you've got your feet wet. You've got this sister on you, too. But play it easy-like; you're gunning for death, kid."

"There was always the chance of that, Joe," I said "All the time I was with the Division."

"But this is different, Dan. You were one of Uncle Whiskers' boys

before, and not such an easy mark. You haven't got Uncle officially on your side now, you know. And if this Mr. X, whoever it may be, suspects...you're less a threat to him dead than alive, even with a cloud over you. The girl, too, Dan."

I HUNG up, in a moment, with some of the tension in me eased, knowing that the FBI would start digging, start getting some wheels in motion, even if Joe had to begin unofficially. Dee and I were no longer alone.

Then the telephone bell jangled, and it was Dee Morgan. "Feeling better?" she asked, and I affirmed that I was. Much better; but I did not tell her why. Let Joe Amantia remain in the background, at least for a while; he would be around when we needed him. And I had a feeling that we would need him.

"Would you like to take me to dinner?" she asked.

Truthfully, I replied that I'd enjoy taking her to dinner under any circumstances.

Her voice over the wire rasped like rosin rubbed on glass. "This is business, Mr. Wilkins."

"Business it is, then," I said, irritated; "but you did call me Dan, this afternoon.

She laughed, then, throatily, and I thought how much lovelier her face must be with a smile upon it. "All right, Dan," she said, "It's just that...oh, I don't know! I'm on edge. It's my brother's murderer I want, not someone to..."

"To tell you how wonderful you are?" I asked, brashly.

"Mr. Wilkins!" The rasp was back again.

"Sorry," I said, although I wasn't. "I'll call for you at the hotel in half an hour."



When I hailed a cab to transport me to the Smith-Plaza, I suddenly remembered the glimpse I'd had of Dee's gorgeous gams as I'd ushered her into a hack after we'd quitted the bar. It was like seeing them

again and this time noticing them; while the lovely sight had registered before my mind had been too confused to let her legs excite me.

She was waiting for me in the hotel lobby, trim, neat, her tailored green suit setting off a figure that whistled at itself. I looked at her legs now, stared. And Dee, catching my gaze, had the grace to blush and say, as she placed a hand on my arm, "Please, Dan."

We went to a capital city restaurant, famous for its barbecued spare-ribs. Over the succulent morsels and between sips of beer, she said, "Our best plan is to work on Pleven. If he's the guilty one, we'll force him to crack, somehow. If he's not; well, we'll have cleared him and we'll know we've got to go on."

"Wouldn't Paul be too obvious a suspect?" I asked.

The light brown eyes probed mine. "You're not wearing your thinking-cap tonight, are you?" There was a hint of a grin tugging at the corners of her lips.

I wasn't. I was only thinking of her—and a guy can dream, can't he? I shrugged. "He was our immediate superior; he issued the orders sending us into... If he's the rat, the Mr. X, the unknown quantity...well, it seems too easy, too certain."

She spelled it out for me. "Only to us, Dan. Except for what Johnny discovered, there's no trail to Paul Pleven, and even Johnny didn't have his name. And whatever Johnny did know..." The misery, and the hate, darkened her eyes. "And Pleven, if he's Mister X, is sure Johnny passed no information on to you. If he had, you'd have acted by this time. If you had suspicions of your own; well, you know where you stand."

"Uh-huh."

"As for me, Johnny's personnel file in the Department would inform Mister X of my existence, but I doubt if he'd ever dream that Johnny would pass on any suspicions to his college-girl sister."

"You are so right," I chided.

Her fingers, greasy with the handling of the ribs without benefit of knife and fork, clenched into fists.

She could be no more than in her early twenties, yet her face seemed old beyond its years as her emotions betrayed her. "Maybe I should go right to Pleven and accuse him..."

I REACHED across the booth we shared and patted her arm. Some of the frantic, tense feeling within her communicated itself to me but I held it in check. "You'll do nothing so rash, honey, unless you want to wind up in the family plot with Johnny. I've seen these racketeers at work; it isn't pleasant. And it would be oh, so easy to arrange a convenient 'suicide' of the grieving sister."

"But we've got to do something."

I could have told her that I'd contacted Federal Agent Amantia, but all I said was, "It's your party."

Dee wiped her fingers on her napkin, wiped the corners of her mouth, then busied herself with the application of a fresh coat of lipstick to the ripe lips that, I thought, needed no adornment. The lines of her face softened and she looked like a sweet kid out on a happy date. My heart trip-hammered as my eyes feasted upon her. At last, she spoke. "Could we go to the Diplomats' Club?"

I almost jumped from my seat. "The Diplomats' Club! Do you know what it is?"

She smiled. "Not exactly. Johnny sometimes mentioned in his letters that he went there, with you, with this Mr. Pleven, for a few drinks—especially after a long day's work in the office, or when one of you came back to Washington from being out on a case."

"He didn't explain?"

"No, but, Dan," her smile was lovely, "I've been to night clubs."

"This is different, Dee," I explained. "Washington hasn't many of the garden variety of night club which, by local law, close weekday mornings by two o'clock, and by midnight on weekends. This has brought about the opening of so-called after-hours clubs. They operate under high-sounding names, but none of them are genuine clubs—just hangouts for nocturnal drinking. A member buys a bottle of liquor,

takes it to the club and pays a terrific service charge to drink his own stuff. Some of the places offer entertainment, a jive band, a singer of risqué songs."

"So," Dee mouthed.

"Most of them are run by hoodlums, and most of them are patronized by the night-owl gamblers and racketeers who get away with murder in this city."

"But you go to such places," the girl interjected.

"Well, yes," I agreed. "These places thrive on we suckers who work, or worked, late hours, burning the midnight oil until long after the legitimate places legally closed their bars. Tension-driven, a few drinks seems the answer. The excitement; the work; the worry; the confusion—all the things attendant upon this mixed-up time we live in, like the Far East situation today, makes more customers. As fast as the authorities crack down on one club, three others spring into existence."

"Are you lecturing now?" Dee asked, slyly. "Or excusing yourself?"

"Neither," I grinned. "But the Diplomats is that kind, a hangout of the criminal element, a breeder of crime. Actually, it's run by an offshoot of a New York mob. It's located in Foggy Bottom..."

"Foggy Bottom?" Dee interrupted.

"An old neighborhood term for the area in which the new State Department building is located. So the place was close by when we needed a drink, a spot of relaxation."

"And Paul Pleven still goes there?"

"I suppose so," I answered, "but it's not the place for you. I wouldn't..."

DEE FROWNED and under the creases of her forehead her eyes flashed. "Dan Wilkins, are you the man my brother wrote me about? The guy who'd risk his life on an assignment; the one who carried a torch for the good in the world; the fellow who would destroy these profiteers?" Her voice rose shrilly.

I shushed her, but she continued, voice lower but still intense, "Don't

you see? If this club is what you say it is, it must be where Pleven, or any other, has his contacts? It's the place for us to start; I want to go there, now, more than ever." Dee was quivering with the force of her emotion.

I sighed, resignedly. "All right. This is Friday, and if Paul works late, he's sure to drop in for a few nips at his bottle. A lot of the Department people will be there, listening to the tinny band, drinking hard, because they won't have to get up tomorrow. I'm not sure I'll be welcomed, but..."

"Still got that self-pity," Dee muttered.

That did it. "We'll go," I said, hiding my anger.

Her face turned radiant. "I knew I could count on you, Dan," she said, "even though it takes a needle once in a while to get you moving."

My anger melted. "We've time to waste," I said, "How about a movie?"

In the theatre, I held her hand and forgot all else.

3

THE GUY inside the door to the Diplomats' Club, a dingy, red-brick building hardly in keeping with its name, looked like the cinema version of a tough guy. He recognized me and nodded, reaching for the bottle I carried, one I'd purchased at a liquor store before the movie. He passed it over to another character from the same mold who sat at a desk behind a partition that also served as a check-room. The guy at the desk grunted, "Wilkins, ain't it?"

I nodded, and the character printed the name of a piece of gummed paper which he pasted to the bottle. He handed the fifth back to me, by way of the doorman, and said, "Give it to the bartender," as if I didn't know. We had no coats to leave, so I ushered Dee along the hall and up the stairs that led to the club parlor.

We stood for a moment in the doorway that led from the upper hall

into the long, high-ceilinged room, a long bar running the length of one side, with the rest of the room except for a small bare portion just in front of the dais at the end opposite the doorway crammed with small tables, each with several chairs. The orchestra on the dais was blaring forth with the *Tennessee Waltz*.

There were a few customers at the bar, and a few couples at scattered tables, but none of the State Department crowd. I recognized a couple of numbers writers and the usual hangers-on. It was yet early. The waiters, sleek, olive-skinned, furtive-eyed, all eyed me as I marched Dee to a table. Their opinion of me did not matter; I had a lower one of them. When we were seated, one approached. "Didn't expect you, Mr. Wilkins," he said, his oily stare taking in Dee Morgan, mentally undressing her.

I handed him the rye. "With water on the side for me," I said, "And yours?" I turned to my companion.

"Likewise," the girl smiled.

The fellow left us. "I see what you meant," Dee said.

My eyebrow went up, and she added, "The kind of characters here. He looks like he just came out from under a rock."

"A little punk," I said, "the slimy kind, a short-change artist."

The waiter returned with our drinks and then moved his slippery way back to the bar to join his counterparts there.

Dee sipped at the rye, then poured it into her water glass. She let her eyes rove about the huge room, taking in the framed photographs of dignitaries of state which adorned the walls on all sides. "Blasphemy," I grunted.

Her eyes flicked from the photos to me. She tossed her pretty head in affirmation. "I'm sure," she said, "you'd never find a Jimmy Byrnes or an Acheson in this place, in the flesh."

"But the Plevens," I said.

"I hope," Dee grimaced.

THE PLACE began to fill up. A motley crowd. A number of musicians and entertainers who worked the legitimate night spots and could not partake of alcoholic beverages while on the job. Army, Air Force, Navy men in uniform, drinking with a 'let's live for today' attitude, not knowing but what the next hour might find them headed for Korea, Germany, or some other abscess festering on the face of the good earth. Heavily rouged and painted ladies of the night. Innocent young Government-girls, hysterically making the best of a night out with a man, an all too rare thing in a city overly populated with women. There were a few of the late workers from the Department; those that noticed me looked on me darkly, then pointedly ignored me. The freeze hurt. At last Paul Plevan came in, alone.

"Our quarry has arrived," I said to my companion.

"Where?"

I nodded toward the bar where stood, a little apart from the rest, a tall man, very tall. With strong, bony face beneath a balding pate.

Dee's eyes, blackened and narrowed almost to slits. "Now what?" I asked.

"I want to meet him. We've got to get him on the hook, even if I have to resort to sex." She had the grace to blush.

"He may chose to ignore me, as some others here have," I said, the taste of it bitter in my mouth.

My former supervisor did just that. But only until the bourbon he'd been punishing took hold. Then he made his way to our table and stood over us; we'd pretended not to notice his approach. "You got your nerve, coming here," he said to me.

I looked up then and for the first time noticed the glitter of his pale eyes. His mouth was kind of sneery and I felt that he wanted trouble.

"What's a good-looking dame like you want with a yellow snake like this?" He turned to Dee.

I wanted to smash him on the spot. A knot hardened in my stomach. Dee recognized my feelings and

only an almost imperceptible shake of her head kept me from boiling over. "Maybe you should lower your voice, Paul," I said, evenly.

Dee smiled up at his sneering face. "Mr. Wilkins and I are friends, Mr. Whoever-you-are."

Paul's voice got louder, for the benefit of the other Department employees in the club, "Nice girls don't make friends of a worm like Wilkins. He contaminates people; he lets his friends die."

Only a superhuman effort kept me from rising from my chair and socking him. "Paul," I said, spacing my words, "May I introduce you to Miss Dee Morgan, Johnny's sister."

An odd look crossed the man's face. His thin lips tightened; he pulled up a chair and jackknifed into it. He seemed less drunk as he stared across the tiny table at Dee. A strange tension spread over us and chilled me. I glanced covertly at Plevan and saw a stranger, not a man I'd known and worked under for several years. There was something deadly, cobra-like, to this man, his pose, his eyes. Something evil seemed present, grim and foreboding. Then Paul laughed, loudly, and his long frame slumped back in his chair. The spell was broken.

"Johnny Morgan's sister," he said.

PAUL LED the conversation into channels of bright, meaningless chatter, mostly ignoring me, deftly but politely showing his distaste for me, but playing up to Dee. *Smooth*, I thought, *smooth and very smart*.

How smooth and clever was apparent as, feigning friendly interest in Dee Morgan's school life, her plans for the future that would—sadly—be one without a loved but lamented brother, he drew from her the admission that Johnny had passed on to her a suspicion of intrigue within the Department's Munitions Division.

Dee realized her mistake and tried to gloss over it. Plevan's attitude did not change, outwardly, but I sensed him stiffen, felt the chill of evil again hover over us. I quickly

downed a shot of rye. The drinks had been coming with fair regularity since Paul had joined us, the waiter always at elbow, very solicitous.

I glanced about the crowded, smoke-filled room, trying to allay my fear. I knew that if I looked at Dee my feelings would show; that my fear which was chiefly for her could not be hidden. My eye caught the gaze of a man at a table behind ours; he looked away, but not before I was aware of his interest in the action at our table. He was a small, inconspicuous sort of guy, alone, toying with a drink from a half-pint bottle he kept on the table before him. I wondered for a moment, then dismissed him as some lonely clerk eagerly hoping for company in this city where crowds and companions seldom are the kind to dispel loneliness. I turned my attention back just as Plevin, his mouth sneering again on me, excluding me, got up to leave. He was telling Dee to be sure to call him on the morrow.

I watched, silent, as Paul made his way, less unsteady for all the liquor he had consumed, back to the bar. I thought he mouthed a word to a pair of plug-uglies, minor hoodlums, on stools at the near end of the bar; I thought the mugs looked at me, then. But I shrugged it off as a figment of apprehension as Dee spoke. "Take me back to the hotel, Dan."

I paid my oversized check and we quitted the after-hours joint. Dee Morgan sat close to me in the taxi on the way to her hotel and I felt again a swift sensation of pleasure. "I'm afraid of that man, Dan," she whispered.

"Huh?" I came out of my reverie.

"He's foul; there's something about him..."

"So," I commanded, "You stay away from him, whatever it was about his seeing you tomorrow. If he's our man, and if he thinks you know the score...well, honey, I've seen enough murders to know that no corpse is ever pretty." I found her hand and squeezed it. "I don't want you to become a corpse."

"But we haven't accomplished anything yet; it must come from

him. We need a little more connecting him with this."

The hand was nestled pleasantly in mine. I pressured it again and thrilled to feel an answering pressure. "Honey," I murmured, "I think the time has come to look for help. We can go to the FBI..."

"And have them laugh at us?" she interrupted.

I clammed up. I bade her good-night after asking her to promise not to do anything silly the next day, this day, in fact, for it was early Saturday morning—almost time for dawn to creep grayly up and over the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the Jefferson Memorial, the kind of things that stood for the way of life we must yet fight to protect.



I walked home from the Smith-Plaza, feeling the cool air might help me think, find a way to move in what was yet, to me, a maze. I reached the grey-brown, uninspiring Veterans Administration building and crossed to the park opposite, toward my abode. Out of the darkness behind me I suddenly felt an arm encircle my neck. I tried to turn, to fight back, but the arm tightened and a second form came out of the dimness of the park to smash a fist into the side of my face. I must have been slugged a good many times until I lost consciousness, and after that, for it was a long time until I came to.

When I did, I found myself tied to a cot. I could feel caked blood on my face and there wasn't a part of me that didn't ache. My right eye was but a pinpoint in a puffed face; my left but little better. My lips were thick, sore, encrusted, too, with dried blood. I could taste the blood in my throat. My head pounded with pain and it hurt the more to try to discover where I was.

Faint light entered the room, bare except for where I lay tied and a chair opposite. I heard a train whistle and felt that I was being held in a room of one of the old, di-

lapidated buildings in the slum area of Southwest Washington, somewhere near where the trains moved along into Virginia and to the South. And I really was held; I tugged at the ropes that bound me and only succeeded in sending new waves of pain and nausea over my battered self. Whoever had tied me had meant me to stay tied. I strained and passed out again.

4

SOMEBODY began to shake me. Rudely, for a bruised guy like me. Lights suddenly hurt my slits of eyes. I pushed against the ropes and felt them loosen. I looked up into the dark, handsome face of Joe Amantia.

"Joey," I grunted, feebly.

He helped me to sit up and then I noticed the little fellow. It was the same unobtrusive guy I'd noted at the Diplomats' Club, the one I'd passed off in my mind as a lonely clerk. My throbbing head began to put two and two together.

"Yeah," said the FBI agent, "I put a tail on you within a few minutes after you telephoned me. I wanted to have someone on hand when you went barging in like a knight on a white horse. I didn't want you to join Johnny Morgan, six feet under the sod."

"I didn't," I tried to talk and the resulting mumble sounded silly, even to me.

My friend shook his head. "I know. But if I hadn't taken the precaution, you'd be a dead duck now."

"What happened?" The way I said it must have been the way the corny expression originated: *Wha' happen?*

"A couple of hoods followed you from the Diplomats' Club. Nichols here," he indicated the little man who smiled at me, "was behind you, too. Too late to be of help in the beating you took, but not too late to get the license number of the car they used to haul you away. He rooted me out of bed and, well, here

we are. It did take us a couple of hours to find the car, a stolen one, where it had been abandoned, and to make a thorough search of this area."

"The thugs," I managed to whisper.

"Took them without much trouble," Amantia answered, airily. "And they'll sing; we already know who put them onto you."

My lips formed the word: Pleven.

The Fed continued, "You were to be held until it was convenient to get rid of you. Probably in a container of cement to be dumped into the Potomac."

I shuddered.

"Dee?" I asked, "Miss Morgan?"

"There's a man at the hotel," Joe said. "Well, let's get you out of here and get you some medical attention."

It even ached to sit in the soft rear seat of the FBI man's car, but wonder and worry exceeded the ache. "You hop into this, Joe," I asked, "just on the strength of my phone call?"

"No, Dan," he answered, honestly, "not quite. Actually, we've been wary of Pleven for some time. Oh, his loyalty check passed muster; no taint of any Commie ties. But there were a number of little things in the reports that came in. Some of his associations with odd characters, mostly the five-and-ten-cent brand of hoodlum, the hopheads. And reports of his spending far more money than his position paid him; they added up to something."

I grunted, my bruised lips churning on an oath.

"We want him now," added Joe, "and we want the man, or men, above him." Joe's words were cold, nasty. "We want any lead to that top guy."

"Some day," I said, "we'll turn him up. The brains of the whole stinking international gang." The rest of my words were unprintable. We drove on in silence, neither of us needing to express the grim hatred we felt. Nichols, still resembling an inoffensive clerk, sat quietly beside Joe in the front of

the car. We drove to my home and the boys assisted me to my room. "I'll call a doctor," Amantia said.

I looked at my electric alarm clock. Its hands showed three o'clock in the afternoon. "Let me call Dee first," I said.

I DIALED the Smith-Plaza number, then asked the hotel operator for Dee's room. I listened to the ring, a queasiness growing in my guts. At last the operator advised that that room did not answer. Angrily I barked to be connected with the desk clerk. I told him who I was and asked if Miss Morgan had gone out.

"Yes," the clerk answered, "and she left a message for you, Mr. Wilkins. Said if you called, to tell you she went to see the supervisor; that she would call you later."

I groaned and not with the pain of my hurts. "Joe," I cried, "Paul's got her! He'll kill her! He's wise! That's why he put those thugs on me. Dee let it slip last night that Johnny'd got some word to her."

Amantia's dark face wore a deep frown. "She slipped by our man, somehow." To me, he added, "Take it easy, Dan; we'll get to him. He thinks he's safe, with you out of the way. He doesn't know we've got his hired stooges and have turned you loose. He's got only the girl to worry about and I doubt if he does away with her...yet. Smart killers don't operate in daylight, Dan; they like the cover of night."

Joe's words had some of the desired effect. I knew Plevan would never suspect that I'd gone to the FBI with the suspicions Dee had brought. He'd seen to it that I was a discredited, yellow bum; how would I dare to go to the authorities? And, as far as he knew, his torpedoes had me tied up, to be disposed of later. But I still burned for action, burned with a bitter desire that blotted out my bodily pain. If Plevan harmed a hair of Dee Morgan's head, I'd rend him limb from limb. "Let's get going!" I shouted.

Joe shrugged. "You should be in bed, under a physician's care, but I've worked enough with you to know better. Come on; we've got Plevan's address."

Siren screaming, Joe pushed the car swiftly through Washington traffic and out Massachusetts Avenue to grind to a halt before an imposing apartment-house building. "Elite son," I grunted through my puffed lips as Joe, Nichols and self piled from the car and moved into the foyer of the building. A slender lily-like desk clerk rose languidly at our approach. "Yes, gentleman," his girlish voice sounded.

"Mr. Plevan in?" asked Amantia, "Paul Plevan?"

"But no," the dainty fellow answered, "He's gone out, perhaps half an hour ago. Left in his car."

"Alone?" I butted in.

The pretty boy turned up his nose at me, at my battered face and ripped, dirty suit. Or perhaps he turned up his nose in disdain because, as he intoned, "With a woman."

"A woman?" This was the Fed's question.

"She called for him. He came down and joined her and they went off."

I groaned. "He's got her, Joe!"

Nichols spoke for the first time. "He's undoubtedly got a place to take her; he has to have a place to hold her without anyone knowing; where he can dispose of a body."

Joe Amantia snapped his fingers. "He's got a place." I could see the shine in Joe's dark eyes. "I remember a part of a report in his loyalty file, on the amount of big dough he was spending. He'd bought a summer home of some sort, along the river some ten or so miles above Glen Echo."

The pretty-boy desk clerk had retired to his droopy position behind the desk, ignoring us.

We got back into the car, "It's a chance," said Nichols.

"The only one," said Amantia.

I just sat tight in the rear seat, my heart thundering my throat.

JOE DROVE like the devil. We roared out of the city and over the highway that led beyond the Glen Echo amusement park. On the highway he hit each curve and gunned the sedan all the way around, snapping it out on the other side. His face was set, saturnine, glued to the road. A Metropolitan Police cruiser gave chase just as we cleared the city line.

We sped on. About ten miles beyond the park, in Maryland territory, we slewed off the pike and onto a narrow black-top road. To our left the land sloped down to the edge of the river. It was overgrown with brush, trees, but here and there a clearing showed, and an occasional cottage where the Capital City's wealthier citizens came to escape the summer's humidity.

Suddenly, Nichols growled, "There!"

Joe slammed on the brakes and sliced the car into a narrow gravel road that angled off from the black-top and down the slope toward the water. Tire marks on the gravel, and broken branches of the trees that screened and overhung the road, had caught the sharp eye of Nichols. A car had recently come through. We gunned down the lane and braked into a grassy clearing before another of the summer homes.

Just as we came to a halt, the car that had been standing before the cottage began to move, toward the river below. I caught a glimpse of

cherry-brown hair in it, and I shouted and ran. It rolled on into the water. It was sinking rapidly as I burst crazily into the river, leaping toward the sinking car, forgetting all my hurts. As the heavy thing sank with a great gurgle, the suction pulled me after it. My head rose once above the water, then I thrashed wildly down, trying mightily to find the car. Somehow, by accident, I caught a door handle, as the sedan settled on its side. My lungs felt about ready to burst, but I pulled on the handle and the door opened, against the weight of the water. The water rushed in, but not before I found my searching fingers grasp hold of a soft form. I backed water, kicking furiously, pulling on the object, and then I got her free. Up we went.

Nichols was kneedeep at the water's edge and dragged us in. Like a boy scout, he began giving the limp form of the girl artificial respiration. I felt I needed it, too, but I stayed on my feet, spitting out oodles of river. Then I heard the voices.

PAUL PLEVEN was standing at the door to the summer home, his tall, bony body tense, his strange eyes glittering. "So," he said to Amantia, "the FBI. Has this crackpot Wilkins got you into his game, whatever it is?"

I dragged myself to where Joe



He had the stuff, this big Jeb Orden, but he couldn't believe he had it!

THE BLASTED BOMBER

by T. W. Ford

leads off the July

Now on
Sale

SPORTS WINNERS

confronted the man. "What's your version?" I asked.

The sneery mouth again. "The way I see it," he said, "In order to smear me, blaming me for your own misfortune, you, Wilkins, sold Miss Morgan a bill of goods, that I was a spy in my own organization, that I was responsible for the murder of her brother, that I tried to make a scapegoat of you..."

"But," interjected the Federal agent, "What about that?" He indicated Nichols working on Dee Morgan.

"I admit, sir," said Pleven, "Miss Morgan and I had an argument. I tried to show her the error of her ways, believing whatever guff this Wilkins had handed her. But mad with grief over the death of her brother, she was willing to believe him. She was irrational. Just before you people drove down the road, she ran out and got into my car. I guess she couldn't drive very well, and in her irate condition, she apparently lost control and headed for the river. I, er, unfortunately, am not a good swimmer; I couldn't have helped."

"It won't work, Paul," I said, the pain biting at my lips.

He sneered.

"The girl isn't dead," said Joe, "And I think she'll tell a different story."

"An irrational one, I'm sure," Pleven still held his poise, but his pale eyes grew more wary.

"We know too much, Pleven," Amantia said. "We know Miss Morgan's suspicions came from her brother, not from Wilkins. She still has her brother's letters, you know."

Paul Pleven stiffened.

Nichols called, then. "She's coming 'round."

Both Joe and I turned. Paul Pleven saw his chance. He made a desperate dash for the Federal agent's car. But somehow I got in his way. Some effort, from wherever I could drag it out of my weary, aching body, put me in his path. He tried to hit me.

I socked him in his skinny gut with my right fist. I balled my left

and splintered it against his bony chin. He dropped to the grass and I fell on top of him, my eyes blood-red, rage tearing at me. Wildly, uncontrollably, I pummeled. Then Joe was pulling me from him.

Paul Pleven lay, sobbing, his face a mess of blood. Joe listened with me to the blood-smear confession as it came from the thin, cruel lips. As I looked down on the vermin, I thought how much he was like many of the others I had seen. A touch of violence administered to them, and they babble like babies.

And then I had Dee Morgan in my arms and nothing else seemed to matter.

PLEVEN'S confession led to the cleaning up of another of the putrid sores that infest the fair face of democracy, but it did not lead us any closer to the shadowy figure whose slimy fingers reach, octopus-like, into all the foul corners of the world. Uncle Sam still fights, still seeks the bloody racketeers, knowing that, even now, American boys are dying on foreign fields, killed by American-made ammunition. And I am back on the job, in the midst of the fight.

Dee, happiness tempered by concern in her eyes, helped me celebrate the night I was reinstated with the Munitions Division. "I used to worry about Johnny so much," she said, "and wait to hear from him, to see him. He was all I had then."

"I'm afraid," I whispered, kissing her cheek, for this time I sat beside her, not opposite her, "you'll have some more worrying and waiting, darling."

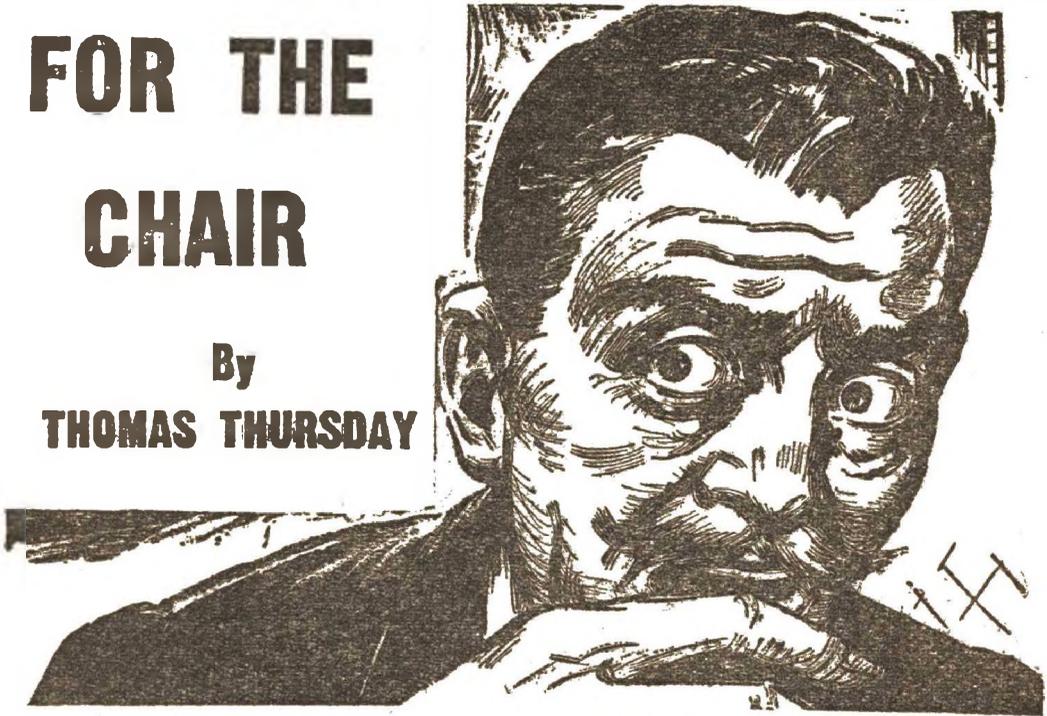
"Must you do it, Dan?"

"Yes," I said, "I must. Now more than ever," I squeezed her hand, "because I have something more to work for."

Dee Morgan squeezed my hand in return. "Let's forget it for now, Dan. Until you go gunning for death again, let's steal a moment for peace—and love."

SCORE NONE FOR THE CHAIR

By
THOMAS THURSDAY



Gillen was scared, and sick; he didn't claim complete innocence, either.

IF ANY ONE around Headquarters was making a book on a Murder Handicap, I'd lay 100-to-1 that Joe Gillen was guilty. A vicious and premeditated homicide, at that. But Howard—that is, Det. Chief Gwynn Howard—never said a word until the morning of the second day. Meanwhile, Gillen was sobering up in the county jail across the street.

Now, I'm no wizard at detectival deduction. I also know that circumstantial evidence can likewise be screwy. But the records will show that most murder cases are cracked via circumstantial evidence; and if it wasn't for such evidence a flock of homicidal hams would be acting in more murders.

But no matter from which angle you viewed Joe Gillen, he looked like the Murder of the Month Club selection for the sizzle seat. And the evidence was more than circumstantial: it was also self-confessional, or practically so. If Gillen wasn't guilty, then Adolf Hitler had nothing to do with World War 2, as I saw it.

I found Howard alone in his office, adjacent to the temporary detention cell. It was 8 A.M. Howard never said much, and gave strangers the impression that the most important thing in his life was filing his fingernails. His left foot was usually draped over a corner of the battered desk, while a cigarette dangled from

"Look, Bub, when you've been in the crime-chipping business as long as I have, you'll learn that a criminal investigator has two duties. One is to prove guilt, and the other is to prove innocence."

the right corner of his mouth. He smoked from mere habit, not because he liked it.

"Gillen talk yet?" I asked.

"Made a sort of confession. Even thinks he may be guilty of killing his wife."

"*Thinks!*" I snorted. "Why, the guy was caught by two squad-car men as he tossed the carved torso into the river. *Thinks!* Why, the man must be nuts."

Howard smiled lightly and examined his nail file like he had just discovered a convicting fingerprint. "I admit it looks like a wrap-up case," he said, "but, Bub, you never can tell." He called everyone "Bub", from the chief of police to the newsboy on the corner. "Don't forget that Gillen was drunk when caught."

"Is booze an excuse for killing your wife, or anybody else? It's getting so that every man, or even woman, who gets in a jam with the law, tells the judge he has been drinking. And it's never more than two bottles of beer. It's time to change the record; that booze one is cracked."

"Liquor is no excuse," said Howard. "But men and women will do things under its influence that they wouldn't have the nerve to do while sober. Gillen has not admitted that he killed his wife. He does admit that he carved up her torso and threw it into the river."

"Now *that*," I said, "is very nice of him to admit. He's just telling us what we already know. Did he have any more fairy tales?"

Howard took three sheets of typed paper from his desk. "Here's the official statement from the gentleman," he said. "He was able to talk about 4 A.M."

I READ the confession. Briefly, Gillen stated that he and his wife, Mary, had been drinking in their small frame cottage. It was one of the rare cool days when the Miami temperature went down to 40 degrees. They began to quarrel. Over what they argued he could not recall; probably over nothing, as usual. In the small kitchen was a

little potbelly iron stove. He put in some paper and charcoal and lit a fire. Then he went to a divan in the front room and fell asleep, his wife sitting in the rocker near the fire. This was about 4 P.M., as near as Gillen could remember.

He awoke about 11 P.M. His head was splitting and he was altogether groggy. He went to the kitchen, lit the light, and found his wife still sitting in the rocking chair. He called her a vile name; she did not answer. He shook her by the shoulders and she fell to the floor, motionless. He leaned over her and listened to her heart. There was no beat; he then knew she was dead.

"I became scared," he stated. "I knew the neighbors had heard us fighting and they would all accuse me of killing her. I don't think I touched her, but I can't remember very much. I knew the police would accuse me of murder. I just lost my head, and—well, you know the rest."

I passed the confession back to Howard. "A very touching tale," I said. "He could write some of that detective goo I hear on the radio. I still say he killed her, whether he knew it or not."

"The examination showed no signs of a blunt instrument on any part of her body," said Howard. "No gun wounds or even knife stabs."

"What do you mean, no knife stabs? He carved her up, didn't he?"

"True, Bub, but there was no signs of one-shot knife stabs. It was all good, clean carving. At one time, the guy must have been a butcher, he was handy with a knife."

"If he didn't kill her, it was two other fellows with the same name. He had to admit he carved her up because he was caught with part of the torso in the bag. Right now he's just playing the old game of Chair-Ducking, hoping to win life instead of the Big Jolt."

Howard examined the file very carefully. "Look, Bub," he said, "when you've been in this crime-chipping game as long as I have you'll learn that a criminal investigator has two duties. One is to prove

guilt and the other is to prove innocence. Personally, I'm not wholly positive that Gillen killed his wife before dismembering her body. Years ago, before the creation of modern criminal laboratories, Gillen would have been railroaded to his death. No one really knows how many innocent persons, men and women, have paid the extreme, official penalty for crimes they never committed. But times have changed, Bub; when a person wins a rope around his neck or seat in the One-Way Chair, you can make book that he is guilty."

I scratched my head and said, "Well, what are you waiting for now?"

"Doc Vollmer's report. He's been checking the remains and also the Gillen house."

"I bet Doc says he's guilty," I said.

"Maybe so, but you may recall the Joel Hammond case. You had just come on the force, about ten years ago, and you were working in the uniform division. Well, Hammond appeared innocent, and even the first editions of the papers made him a burglar shooting hero. But the morgue subject wasn't a burglar. At the time Mrs. Hammond was vacationing in North Carolina with her parents."

Howard put the nail-file on the desk and went on. "The dead guy was named Raymond Nolle. Anyway, around midnight Hammond phoned Headquarters from his house and said he had just shot a burglar. We found a young man of about 30—who was Nolle—lying on the floor, with a .45 slug through his heart. It was a lucky shot. Hammond was still in his pajamas and his bed was disarranged, indicating he had been



What Happens
When An Umpire
Changes His Call?
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ALL SPORTS

sleeping. He explained to us that he had been sound asleep when a draft from the open window awakened him. Then he saw a male form in front of his bureau. He reached under his pillow, got his gun, and fired. Since he claimed he fired in the dark, it was a good shot. In fact, too damned good."

Howard picked up the file and went to work on his right thumbnail. "Well, Bub, Hammond's story sounded reasonable until I flashed a light into the eyes of the dead Nolle. I found that his pupils were very small; you know what that means?"

"What?"

"It proved Hammond was lying. The lights were on when Nolle was shot. Moreover, he had been shot with planning and deliberation on the part of Hammond."

"You mean the eyes of the dead Nolle showed you that?"

"Exactly," replied Howard. "In death, the size of the eye-pupils do not change. Nolle's were very small, proving they had been contracted when he was killed. Light contracts, darkness expands. So I arrested Hammond for murder. Two days later he confessed that he had asked Nolle to call on him, believing Nolle was having an affair with his wife. Subsequent facts proved his jealousy was both unfounded and silly. Dumb? Double dumb."

I started for the door, stopped halfway and asked, "Do you mind if I call on Brother Gillen for a little chitchat?"

"Help yourself. You'll find him in the county jail, with his head in his hands, no doubt."

GILLEN sat on the edge of his cot, with his head in his hands. He was a stupid looking guy, with a half-moon head of hair—half hair, half bald. He told me he was 42 and worked, when he worked, as a carpenter's helper.

"Ever work in a butcher shop?" I asked. His green-gray eyes looked at me like that of a scared fawn.

"Nope; never worked in a butcher

shop. Why ask that?"

"Polite conversation. Skip it."

He covered his face with his hands and began to cry. Have you ever seen a full-grown man cry? It makes you feel kind of silly and you begin to wonder if we're not all babies in a pinch, no matter how old we get.

"Maybe I killed her and maybe I didn't," he said, "so help me God, I don't know!"

Next morning Howard called me into his office.

"Your odds on murder have flopped," he said. "Horses and murders are usually bad bets." He tossed the nail-file in the air and caught it with his left hand. He was in excellent humor. The forehead wrinkles, which always crease his brow when he was working on a case, had vanished. "Doc Vollmer says Gillen never killed his wife, whether he thinks he did or not. And Doc knows his stuff."

"You mean Doc proved something that Gillen couldn't prove himself?"

"That is correct, Bub. Vollmer has proved that Gillen never killed his wife."

"Did Vollmer prove that it *wasn't* Gillen who carved her up and tried to throw her into the river?"

"He didn't try, Bub. That's another angle and Gillen is guilty of the carving business. *But*—she was *dead* when he started to slice her. So he is not guilty of murder. You can't kill a person twice."

"Just how did the Doc prove it?"

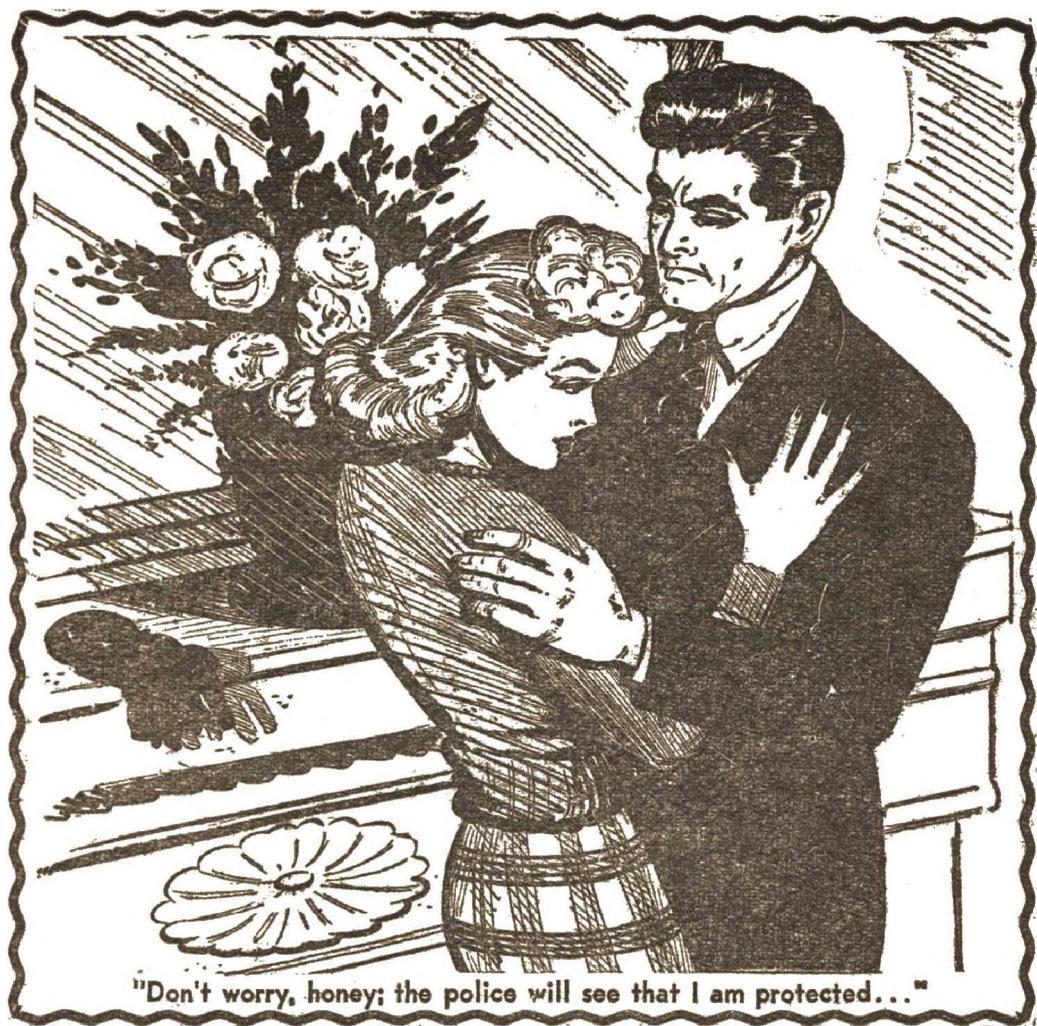
"By a spectroscopic examination of what was left of Mrs. Gillen. She died from carbon monoxide gas from the potbelly iron stove; it nearly got Gillen but he didn't know it."

"What reward will he get for his carving ability?" I asked.

"I'd say ten years in the state pen."

"Which is better than the Chair?"

"*Much* better," said Howard.



"Don't worry, honey; the police will see that I am protected..."

You'll Kill The People

By RICHARD BRISTER

Right after he first appeared on TV, Buddy Burton began to receive warnings: *get out while you're still alive!* It didn't seem to make any sense, but Buddy found that the party sending them meant business, and...

THE ORCHESTRA gave him a couple of bars, for an introduction, and he stood there, still a little uncomfortable under the staring eyes of the TV cameras and a dozen assorted studio technicians, and gave out with his rich baritone

on an oldie, something called *Careless*.

He sang with feeling. Professionally, he now called himself Burton, Buddy Burton, but he had been born plain Joe Caterisano, in a brick row house on the outskirts of Newark, N. J. His Latin blood showed in his raven black hair, in his slightly over-ripe but wholly natural gestures, as he punched emphasis into the worn-out words of the old song lyric. He was swarthy, masculinely handsome, and he sang, people said, like a bird.

"You kill me," a girl had told him at a party, a few evenings ago. "I don't know what you've got, but every time I hear you sing something inside of me starts to flutter and then I just go all to pieces."

"I'll settle for that inside flutter," he had gagged. "I don't want to kill anybody, Miss Barney."

He wished everyone well. The world, of late, had been a wonderful place to be in, from his personal standpoint. After he'd knocked them dead in the three nightclub bookings, his agent, Max Gittman, had got him this spot on TV, a fifteen-minute, three-nights-a-week summer sustainer, and now things were coming his way so fast he was dizzy.

"Kid, you're a shoo-in," Max had told him. "Ever since you chucked that library of Como, Clark, Crosby and Sinatra in the ashcan, and started being plain Joe Caterisano—er, excuse me, Buddy Burton, that is—I could smell success on you. I mean strong, kid. Like garlic. I'll make a prediction."

"What, Max?"

"Two years from now," Max said, "you'll be so fat you won't know what to do with your money. You're on the way, kid, and all roads lead up, in a hurry."

He wrapped up his smooth rendition of *Careless*, giving it that characteristic Buddy Burton punch at the end, and a few seconds later the big red hand moved past the hour, and he could relax once more. The hungry eyes of the TV cameras no longer gobbled up each small detail

of his face and figure for projection into millions of homes throughout the eastern half of the nation served by this TV network.

He rode the elevator down to the studio garage, and drove his car downtown and through the Tunnel, and an hour later he was relaxing in the living room of his modest house in the Jersey suburbs, listening to Marie tell him how she had reacted to his broadcast.

"I couldn't pick out anything to criticize, Joe," she said seriously, a little loving frown on her pretty face, for she knew how he hungered for any small criticism which might help him improve on his performance. "You put those three songs over perfect."

"Come on, baby," he pleaded. "There must've been something."

"I don't know what," she said. "Even when you were talking with the announcer, you seemed—just natural. Like it wasn't something somebody had written down for you to say."

"I was perfect then?" Joe kidded. "Better watch out, baby. I'll be getting swell-headed."

"No you won't," Marie said, and she smiled, a small and warm movement of her pretty lips. "You're too sensible for that, Joe. You worked eight years for this and you're thirty years old, a man with a wife and three children, and a sense of humor about things. I guess I know my husband by now, Joe." And she kissed him fondly.

THEY WENT up to bed and at eleven-thirty, the phone rang. Joe threw a robe over pajamas and padded downstairs in bare feet to see what it was.

"Burton?" the voice said.

"This is Buddy Burton."

"You stink, Burton. I caught you on the TV tonight, and you stink."

He had only just begun to be somebody, but he had always known that once he got there he would have cranks to contend with. He couldn't help grinning, remembering what he'd said to Marie about getting stuck on himself. Not much danger

of that, with characters around like this one on the other end of the wire.

"You may have something there, pal. Anything else on your mind? If not, I'll go back to bed."

"Put that voice or whatever you call it in mothballs, Burton. Go back to driving a truck for a living."

"Not till I have to," he laughed, trying to keep this exchange on a good-natured level. "There's more dough in the singing than in truck driving."

"Get off the TV, Burton," the voice gritted. "That's a warning."

The phone clicked dead and he stood there frowning at it for a moment before he replaced it in its cradle. Upstairs, Marie said sleepily, "Who was it, honey?"

"Just some squawk," Joe said. "Wanted to tell me I can't sing worth a damn." Marie's eyes opened, showing fright for a moment, and he said comfortingly, "Guess we're really on our way now, baby. Max Gittman says you can tell you're beginning to get there when people start pestering you this way."

Marie was up earlier than he, because of the kids. She went down and brought the milk in, and promptly ran upstairs to show him a note that had been thrust under the kitchen door. It had been fashioned out of words and letters snipped from the New York newspapers. It said:

GET OUT OF TV, KID. BIG MONEY AIN'T WORTH IT. HOW MUCH DOUGH CAN YOU SPEND SIX FEET UNDER.

"I'm scared," Marie said. Her eyes were wide, under the dark lashes, and her mouth trembled. "What are we going to do, Joe?"

"Just some nut," Joe said. "Some—"

"You can't dismiss it like that, Joe. This is a threat on your life. Take it to the police. Please?" she said.

He frowned at the prospect, but looking at Marie, sensing her fear for his safety, he knew he had no real choice in the matter...

"UNDER the kitchen door, hey?" the Chief of Police said. He bit the end off a stogie and stared hard at Joe across the tip of it, before striking his match. "I been seeing you on my television, kid. You sing pretty. On your way, I'd say. Maybe another Sinatra."

"Thank you," Joe said, and his cheeks reddened.

"Now," said the chief, "lemme get this thing straight. A guy phones you last night, tells you you stink as a crooner, and tells you to go back driving a truck, right?"

"That's right," Joe nodded.

"You laugh him off, so this a. m. the wife finds the note. All right, now whaddaya want me to do, Burton?"

"You know your business, Chief. What's your usual—"

"Usually, in a case like this, we'd turn the story over to the newspaper and the publicity, plus the information we're holding ourselves responsible for your personal safety, would be enough to scare whoever put that note under your door back in his rathole." The chief blew cigar smoke at him, and frowned thoughtfully through it. "But somehow I ain't worried about your safety, Burton."

"What does that mean?"

"Judging from the way you're coming along as a crooner, I'd say you got a smart business manager. Right?"

"Right. Max Gittman."

"Give Max Gittman a message for me, will you, kid?"

"What message?"

"Tell him my police department is gettin' tired of bein' the Patsy for every young Tom, Dick and Harry in show business that wants to stir up a fuss and get his name splashed around in the papers, complete with a picture showing his best profile to his public."

"You think this is just a publicity stunt," Joe said woodenly. "But it—"

"Get outta here, Burton. I'm gonna tell you something. I got three girls home that are coming the dangerous age, and I don't like crooners."

"But—"

"I give you enough time already. Get out. Tell that Gittman what I said. You want publicity, you go out and earn it. Go overseas and entertain some of the boys that are fighting to keep this country safe for you crooners."

"I did my share of that," Joe protested hotly. "I spent three years as a dogface, back in—"

"Don't cry on me, Burton. I lost two boys over there in the last one. Now get outta here, before I lose my temper."

HE DROVE in Tuesday afternoon to rehearse for that evening's show, and Alec Thornbush, the program director, remarked that he seemed nervous.

"It's nothing," Joe told him. "Been off my feed the last day or two, Alec."

He got through the show better than he had hoped to, rising to the occasion like any seasoned campaigner, but he hurried down to get his car, when it was over. In the back of his mind was a nameless worry; somehow he was eager to be home again, to know that Marie and the kids were okay.

As he nosed the car out to the street, he had to wait for the light to change at the corner. A man in a light tan topcoat, wearing a felt hat pulled low over his eyes, stepped casually up to the car, on the passenger side, opened the door, and slid in beside Joe.

Joe felt a tightness in his throat as he peered toward the intruder.

"Sorry," he said, underplaying his role. "No riders."

"I guess you said that a lot back when you were wheeling a truck for a living, didn't you, Caterisano? This is a gun in my pocket." He jabbed it through the tan cloth of the coat, stretching the cloth out to a little cone against the gun's muzzle, so Joe could get the idea. "Drive," he suggested.

Joe saw that the street was momentarily clear and he swung out from the garage, heading toward the Avenue of the Americas. "This is a stick-up," he suggested hopefully.

"You recognized me. You want my money."

"Drive," the man said. He kept his face averted. He had on thick-lensed glasses. His coat lapels were turned up, hiding his chin and partly concealing his mouth. "And don't do anything I might not like, pal. You just did another TV show, Caterisano. After I asked you not to. You get me kind of mad, pal. I don't know what I'm goin' to do with you."

"What's this all about?" Joe said angrily. "I never saw you before, friend. Why should you have it in for me?"

"Another thing," the man said. "You went to the cops, after I left that note under the kitchen door."

"I—"

"I happen to know you did. Because I tailed you. You make me plenty mad, pal. What did the cops say?"

The man not only talked mad, he looked mad. The gun again made a cone-shaped bulge against the pocket of the tan topcoat, and, like a dog, the man seemed to be bristling with anger.

"They laughed at me," Joe tried to mollify him. "They seemed to think I was gunning for some free publicity at their expense, if you must know."

"You know something?" the man laughed. "I can believe that. I don't think you're lying."

"What's your angle?" Joe said. "What do you want of me? I don't—"

"Pull up to the curb down there in the next block, Caterisano, and turn off that ignition. We'll talk a little."

JOE PARKED at the curb and turned for a better look at his rider. The man said, "Uh-unh. You keep staring straight ahead, through the windshield. Now, you asked what I want, and I've already told you, but I'm ready to give you one more chance, pal. I want you to quit singing. Get out of show business, see? Find some other way to earn a living, pal."

"I worked hard for the break I'm

finally getting," Joe said. "What are you, some kind of a nut? You don't know what you're asking."

"I'm telling, not asking. Get out of show business, Caterisano, or—"

"Or what?"

"I'll kill you," the man said in a matter-of-fact tone of voice that sent a sharp chill up Joe's backbone.

"Why?" Joe said. "Be reasonable. I'm entitled to at least some explanation."

"I'll give you some explanation," the man said. "I'm a guy who never took to working for a living, pal. The way I get mine is my own business, see? And let's say the cops would like to make it their business, but I'm just a little too smart for them. Get the idea?"

"More or less."

"I've never been mugged. I've never been printed," the man said. "I don't pull off many jobs, and when I do pull one off, I make it a big one. I operate solo. I trust nobody. I never go after anything but the hard cash. Jewelry has a way of fingering a guy, sooner or later. I won't have anything to do with it."

Joe said, "I guess I'm not very bright. What does all this have to do with my getting out of show business?"

"So far I'm an anonymous," the man said. "I'm Mr. X. Oh, I been seen by a few people. But you know, it's kind of funny how little help that is to the cops, pal. A guy walks into a place and holds it up, let's say, for a couple of thousand, and gets away clean. So the guy on the unhappy end of the stickup goes to the cops and gives his description of the man, and what's it add up to? Tall, dark, maybe handsome, dressed in this or that color suit. So what of it? What are the bulls going to do with it? Nothing."

"If there's a gimmick here somewhere," Joe said wearily, "I still don't get it."

"Don't worry about it," the man said. "Start the car. Get it rolling. When we get down to that next stoplight, I'll be getting out, pal. And you'll keep on rolling."

"I see," Joe said, and it did not

occur to him to disobey the man's curt instructions.

"One thought I'm goin' to leave with you, pal. Get out of show business. Break clean, see? One more TV show, like tonight, and I'm goin' to have to do for you. You can make your own choice, pal."

Joe had come by now to the stoplight. It was red. He pulled up, waiting. The man opened the door and stepped onto the paving. "Just drive on when the light changes," he said. "Don't look back."

The light changed. Joe started the car, started across the intersection, and pivoted on the seat for a quick look at his man. Bright headlights from the oncoming traffic flickered momentarily across the man's face, spotlighting him, half-blinding him for one instant.

Joe Caterisano got a very good look at the man, despite the lowered hatbrim, the turned-up lapels of the coat, the eye glasses. A sharp pulse of surprise slid through his tense body as he drove the big car down the street, and he said softly, "Well, I'll be damned. So that's his angle."

THE CHIEF of Police stared at Joe across the glowing tip of a mangled cigar and said, "I checked that claim of yours, that you put in a couple years as a dogface in the war, kid."

"Three years," Joe said. "Not a couple. I was at the Normandy beachhead, and in the Bulge, and—"

"And in a psycho ward for a couple months, after, accordin' to my information," the chief said. He scowled at Joe, obviously still not liking what he saw, still disapproving the way Joe earned his living. "Maybe you're havin' a relapse," he suggested.

"I tell you, the guy means to kill me," Joe said.

"Yeah. Sure."

"I saw his face. He's a dead ringer for me, Chief. I'm sure of it, even if he did have on those cheaters. Are you such a knucklehead that you can't see why he's scared?"

"Kid," growled the chief, big shoulders bunching up within the

confining blue uniform coat, "you better go easy. You ain't that big a shot yet, you can talk to me that way."

"Look," Joe said wearily, "suppose I was a big shot. Like say, Sinatra. A big enough shot so that everybody, well, practically everybody, knew what I look like. And this guy happens to be a dead ringer for me. So what happens, the next time he tries to pull off a job, Chief?"

"What?"

"Somebody gets a good look at him. Ordinarily they couldn't describe him, except in a general way. But this time—"

"They'd say," cut in the chief, "he looks just like Buddy Burton, the famous crooner on TV and in the movies. Is that what you're selling me, kid?"

"That's what I'm selling. A couple more months on TV and I'll be fingering this guy. And he knows it."

The chief stared ruminatively at him through a cloud of cigar smoke. "This is like something out of a crummy paper-back, cops-and-robbers story. Go back and tell your friend Gittman, or whoever dreamed up this one, that I ain't buying. I still ain't handing you any free publicity, kid."

"This is on the level," Joe protested.

"Yeah, sure," the chief scoffed. "Go on. Get outta here, kid. You told your story. I listened, but only because I'm paid to listen to stories. But I ain't paid to believe 'em. And I still don't like crooners."

"I want a police guard when I put my next TV show on," Joe said insistently.

"You want publicity, kid. Go buy yourself some. You're makin' money."

The chief sat there, grinning impudently at him, still mangling the fat stogie between his wide lips. Joe threw up his shoulders in a tired gesture, and walked out.

HE HADN'T told Marie anything, but she noticed. That tension was in him, working away all the time, making its presence

felt in small signs that reached the surface.

"Joe what's wrong?" she said. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Joe, were you threatened again? Did that man—"

"Honey, everything's all right. Honest. Now, don't you worry your pretty little head over nothing."

He got his gun out of mothballs, the one he'd picked up on the other side, during his Army service, and he took it down to the studio, had it in his coat pocket as he rehearsed the new show for that evening.

He ate his light dinner in the luncheonette down on the street level, with Alec Thornbush. He kept looking around, as he nibbled at the food, and Alec said shrewdly, "What's eating you, pal? What's with this hunted man act?"

"I dunno. Working too hard, I guess. Just nerves, Alec."

That satisfied Alec. They got up and Alec picked up the check for both of them, and walked toward the cashier's cage with it. Joe tarried to leave a tip, got up, and almost bumped into a man with a hat pulled down over his forehead, wearing glasses, a man who bore a striking resemblance to Buddy Burton, of TV fame.

"Hello," Joe said.

"Get sick," the man suggested. "Throw up or something. Don't go on tonight, pal."

"I'm show folks. There's a tradition. The show must go on," Joe said slowly.

"I'll stick around," the man said. "I'll be right here, in the building. I guess you know how things stand, pal."

"Who was that?" Alec asked, as Joe joined him.

"Just a guy, Alec." Joe glanced at his watch. "Getting toward show time. Let's get up there."

The clock in the studio said a quarter of the hour. Joe Caterisano, or Buddy Burton, faced the TV cameras and exchanged a few lines of banter with the announcer, Ben Barlow, and with Kitty Anderson, his feminine guest star. He sang a

song and the studio audience, the far greater audience watching his image on TV sets throughout the city, noticed a strangeness in his manner as he sang this evening.

He was obviously tense. His gestures were jerky.

When the big red hand moved past the hour and the fifteen-minute show was over, Joe suddenly turned to Ben Barlow, and snapped, "You think you're pretty smart, don't you Ben?"

The portly announcer stared at him. "What's the matter with you, kid? Are you nuts?"

"You loused me up on my lines," Joe gritted at the startled announcer. "I'm wise to you, Ben. Tryin' to make me look bad. I'm onto your game. You never did like me, did you?"

"Kid," Ben Barlow said smoothly, trying to put a pudgy hand across Joe's shoulders and steer him off stage, away from the startled eyes of the studio audience, "you're kind of mixed up. You—"

"Take your hands off me!" Joe said. He had the gun out of his pocket. "I don't like you either, Ben. You know why?" he said, pointing the gun right at the popeyed announcer. "You look like a Kraut. That's what you look like to me, a Kraut."

"Kid, kid," Barlow said weakly. "Take it easy. You're upset. You—"

"Shut up," Joe said. He heard stealthy footsteps behind him and wheeled to see Alec Thornbush sneaking up on him. "Back off," Joe grated, "before I have to plug somebody with this thing. It's been a long time, but I guess I still have the knack of it."

Alec Thornbush stood still, not breathing. He appeared to have lost all desire to play the hero.

JOE HALF-RAN from the television stage, brandishing the gun with the air of a man who itched to kill somebody with it. He raced toward the hallway. The receptionist stared at him. She wore glasses.

"Why, Mr. Burton—"

"Baby, give me those glasses."

"Whatever—"

"The glasses, baby. The glasses."

He let her see the gun. She seemed to freeze for a moment. Slowly, like a person confronting a deadly snake, she slipped the glasses off and handed them to him.

On the way out of the reception room he paused beside a coat-and-hat rack long enough to appropriate a tan coat and a tan hat to match it. He ran out into the hallway just as Jimmy stopped at that floor with the number five elevator.

A man started to step out, but backed up quickly, staring at the gun Joe brandished. Joe followed him into the elevator, pointed the gun at Jimmy, and said, "Take her down a floor or two, kid."

"Hey," the kid gulped. "What kind of a gag is this, Mr. Burton? That thing looks real. Quit pointing it—"

"Let's go down a floor or two Jimmy. Nice and easy."

"But—"

"You heard me all right, didn't you, Jimmy?" Joe asked.

Jimmy looked at the gun. Jimmy said, "Yes, sir. Okay, Mr. Burton. Down, nice and easy."

"Look here," snapped the man Joe had backed into the elevator, "you can't—"

He was a portly, red-faced man with an officious manner. Joe pointed the gun at him and said, "Shut up, please."

The man gulped. His mouth closed and he was sullenly silent.

"Stop here, between floors," Joe suggested. "We'll sit awhile, Jimmy."

"Okay, Mr. Burton," the kid said placatingly. He stopped and they stood quietly in the motionless elevator for perhaps three minutes. The portly man's face grew increasingly sullen, but he didn't say anything.

"All right," Joe said. "Street level, Jimmy."

The kid took him down. He walked out into the tiled corridor, with the glasses in place over his eyes, the hatbrim turned down over his brow, the gun in his hand hidden under the topcoat he had borrowed.

THE MAN came over from the other side of the newsstand and stood nonchalantly beside him. Jimmy had hurriedly closed the door of the elevator behind Joe, taking his important passenger up where he'd intended to go in the first place.

The man said, close to Joe's ear, "Pal, you should've known better." His voice was almost plaintive.

"It's in my blood," Joe said. "I just had to do it."

"What's the gag with the glasses? And that hat you're wearing. It don't even fit you, pal... Walk, friend. I'm focused on you."

"You're taking a chance, aren't you?" Joe stalled, and he was wondering how long it would take them to get here. A phone call from up above there shouldn't take more than a matter of seconds, and the cops had radios in all their prowling cars, didn't they? A guy gone berserk, with a gun in his hand, should rate faster action than he seemed to be getting. "You can't get away with this," he said.

"Walk, pal."

"Maybe I called in the cops. Maybe they've got the building staked out."

"Walk."

"Maybe I don't even walk. Then what?"

"You're makin' me nervous, Caterisano. Walk."

Behind them, an elevator's doors opened, and passengers disgorged from it. "There he is," somebody said, and some of the hardier souls edged carefully across the tiles toward Joe and his nameless companion.

"Which one?" somebody was gasping. "Which one is Burton?"

"Pal," the man hissed at Joe's ear, "you been up to something. I—"

The first cop came in then. He must have been an excitable rookie. He came barging in with his gun out, just asking for trouble from an armed man gone berserk.

The man at Joe's side swore gutturally and shot through his coat pocket. The cop groaned and went down. Joe knew he was almost certainly next in line for it, and he acted upon instincts developed during his hitch in the Army. He

shot the man, his gun still hidden under the topcoat draped over his right arm.

He hit his man in the chest, mindful of the crowd in the corridor, of the very real danger to all those present. The man went down like a stone, coughing and gasping. Joe kicked the gun out of his fingers, dropped his own gun, and the tan coat he had used to conceal its presence, and lifted his hands high as more of the cops spilled into the building.

"**A**LL RIGHT," the chief said, disgruntled. "I guess I owe you an apology, kid. That dumb rookie, O'Hara, will live, and it could be he owes his life to you. The corpse could be your twin brother, so that proves you were telling me a straight story."

"Who was he?" Joe asked.

"John Davis," the chief sighed. "Accordin' to the identification card in his wallet. We got nothing in our records to tab him, and that checks with the story you said he told you. One of those smarties. A top operator, but working alone. I guess you did the public a service when you plugged him," the chief admitted, somewhat grudgingly, it seemed to Joe. "But did you have to be so melodramatic about it? Where was the need of staging that nut act, up in the studio?"

"You wouldn't listen to me," Joe grinned. "I had to do something drastic. You put the bug in my bonnet, Chief. I really ought to thank you for that."

"Don't thank me for nothing," the chief snapped. "I still don't like creoners."

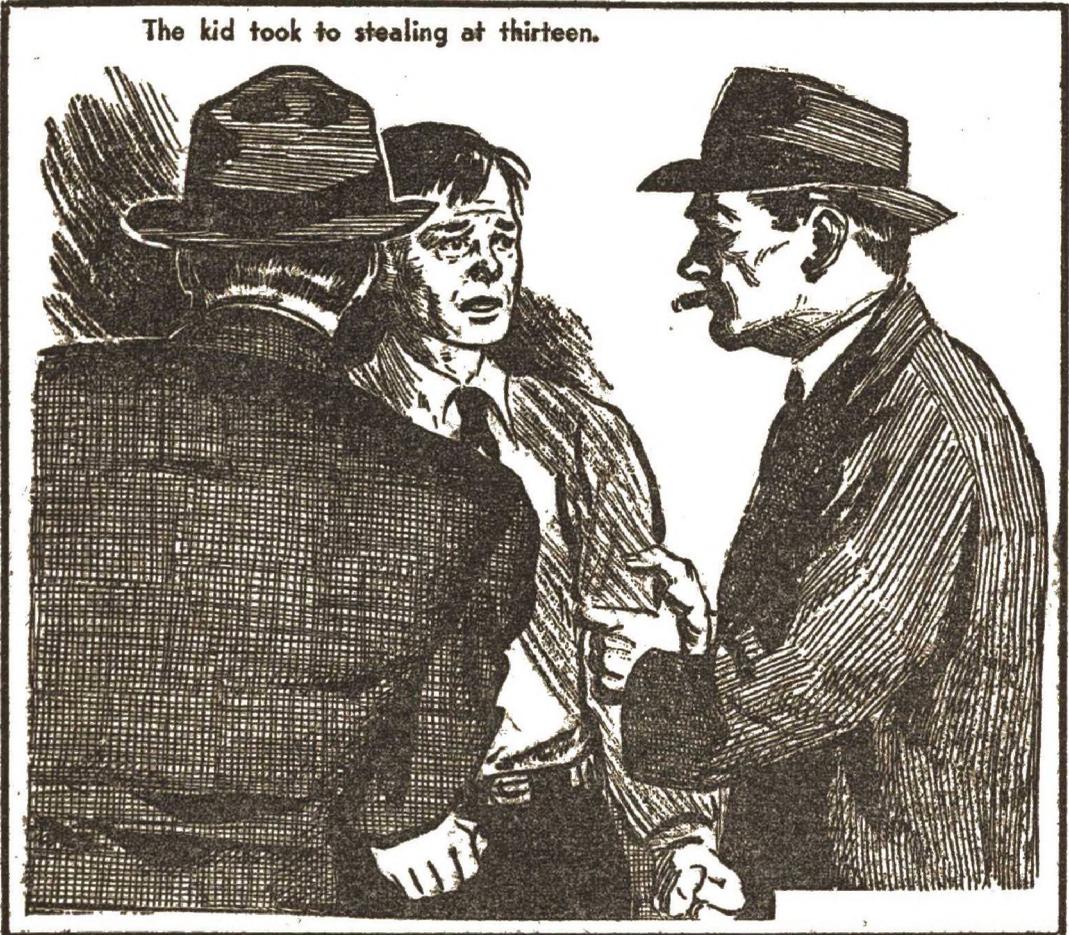
"Well, thanks for the publicity, anyway," Joe grinned. "I'll get a big play from the papers, on this. And a sponsor, if I know the radio business. Be seeing you on your TV set, Chief."

He turned his back on the chief, who was muttering into the mangled stogie, and went out to his car. He drove pretty fast, on the way out to Jersey. Marie would be waiting up, to hear all about it, and they always garbled things on those newscasts.

THIS SIDE UP

By JOHN LADD

The kid took to stealing at thirteen.



THE LONG, sleek limousine rolled slowly to a halt in front of the First Farmers Bank of New Albany, Indiana. The liveried Negro chauffeur started to turn off the ignition when a sharp, thin voice from the rear seat froze his hand. "Leave her running, George."

"Y-yes, suh!"

"Get out and go into the bank—

slowly! I'll be right in back of you. Understand?"

"Yes, suh. I—I understand."

George's face was a little pale as he got out of the car and walked slowly, as directed, through the door of the bank. Though there was a cool breeze, sweat beaded his forehead.

Behind him the expensive car disgorged incongruously a stocky

There's no glamour in crime, particularly when a sixteen-year old kid turns bank-bandit and killer. A true story of a boy whom no one ever loved...

kid, not over sixteen, his cheap checked suit tightly buttoned and his cap peaked down to shade his face. Both his hands dug deep in the pockets of his coat.

There were few passersby on Main Street that afternoon in 1948, and they paid no attention to the chauffeur or the youth who followed him. Within the bank, the tellers were beginning to lounge. It was near closing time. The bank guard leaned his elbow contemplatively on the grilled window behind which Henry Green was counting his money. Mr. Smythe, gray-haired president of the bank, placed a paper weight carefully on the report he had been reading, and got up from behind his desk. He had an appointment to play golf.

Horton, the guard, turned as he heard the bank door open. George, the chauffeur, entered.

"Hello, George," grinned Horton. "You almost didn't make it; bank's getting ready to close." Everyone knew George. He chauffeured for Mr. Jones, owner of the big steel mill over in Louisville, just across the river.

But George didn't answer with his usual ready smile. His face was rigid, imploring; he moved forward stiffly as though propelled irresistibly from behind.

"What's wrong?" demanded the guard in surprise. Then: "Hey!"

The stocky kid had swung suddenly into view. The cap was low over his eyes. A gun thrust forward in his hand. "Up with your hands, you blankety-blank soandso!" he said in a high, bleak voice. "If you make a move, I'll drill you, so help me."

Horton's fingers dropped away from his holster; his arms lifted slowly.

"And the rest of you," snarled the kid. "Stand still and shut up. Where's Smythe, the president of this bank?"

Mr. Smythe stood at his desk. He held himself carefully. "I'm Mr. Smythe," he said; "if you think you can hold up this bank you're—"

"Shut up! Turn around and open that safe in back of you."

"Look here, you can't—"

"Open that safe."

Smythe braced himself. "I won't," he said.

The kid fired. Sharp sound filled the bank. Smythe jerked forward, staggered and fell headlong.

Horton gasped, dropped his right arm swiftly in a desperate attempt for his gun. The kid swerved; sound again blasted the walls. The guard's fingers uncurled, and the half-drawn gun dropped with a clatter to the floor. He followed it, shuddered and lay still.

But even as the reverberation of gunfire echoed from the marble, a new sound blasted with insistent clamor. The urgent shout of the alarm bell.

The kid shoved his gun at the frightened teller. "You lousy son," he screamed. "You asked for it." A single shot pierced the stridency of the alarm. Henry Green, his foot still on the buzzer, crumpled out of sight.

The kid backed toward the door, the smoking pistol covering his retreat. "You!" he stabbed at George. "Get the hell out there into the car. And no funny work. Understand?"

"I—I understand." Ashen-faced, the breath sobbing in his lungs, the chauffeur stumbled out into the light.

The gunman waited until he heard him open the car door. Then he spun around, raced for the limousine, flung himself into the back seat. "Drive like hell! I'll tell you where to go."

Behind him was a shambles; three dead men, panic and the senseless clangor of the alarm.

AL ARONSON, ace reporter of the *Louisville Courier Journal*, bent over the dying man. It was hard to hear his words. His chest, swathed in bandages to hide the gaping wound and keep the ebbing life within a little longer, rose and fell in labored spasms.

The hospital nurse said: "You two will have to be brief; talking isn't good for him."

Lt. Dave Hunt of the New Albany police said gruffly: "We gotta get the facts, sister. Go ahead, Al. See if you can make out what he's saying."

Al bent even closer. His voice was gentle, sympathetic. "This is tough on you, George, but it's important. Do you think you'll be able to tell me the story?"

The wounded man opened his eyes, tried to gather his strength. "I've got to, Mr. Aronson," he whispered. "The killer—he's only a kid—but he's killed four men and—"

"Three, George."

A sad smile flitted over the Negro's drawn face. "Four, Mr. Aronson," he corrected. "I know I'm through. But—I was waiting over in Louisville to pick up my boss when this kid puts a gun to me, an' makes me drive him over the bridge to New Albany. When we came to the bank—"

A shudder coursed through the dying man. He shut his eyes.

"Save your strength," said Aronson. "We know that part; what happened after?"

"That kid was mad—mean mad when we got back in the car. I've heard cursing before, but never like that. He was filthy-mouthed. Cursed the men he'd killed, cursed the alarm system, cursed me. And in between curses he kept directing me—turn down First Street, then into Cranberry, left on Lake."

Aronson nodded. "Knew the town, eh, George?"

"Yes, suh. He sure did. I was scared silly, but I tried ta fool him. Kept making mistakes, twisted wrong, tried to get him in front of the police station. I 'xpected to smash the car and yell for help, but—"

"He knew better," Aronson interjected softly.

George stared up at the reporter, his face sweating with the memory. "Knew every twist an' turn like he'd lived here all his life. Pushed his gun in my back, swore he'd blow me ta hell. Landed me in an alley on

the river front where no one was. Got out, turned, pointed that gun at me, said with a nasty grin: 'Only one way ta keep your mouth shut,' and pulled the trigger. Next thing I know, I'm here and—"

He was going to die. George knew it as well as Al Aronson, Lt. Hunt, the nurse, the doctors, and everybody.

Poor fellow, thought Aronson. *No use trying to tell him he's going to be better.* Aloud he said: "What did he look like, George?"

"A heavy, tough kid—'bout seventeen, I'd say—and 'bout five eight or nine. Wore a checked, tight suit o' that loud green, and a cap. Couldn't see much of his face; had his cap down too far; but he was full o' pimples. Had a tough kid's voice; the filthiest I ever did hear."

Aronson straightened wearily. "That's fine, George. Now, unless Lt. Hunt wants to ask you some more, just relax."

Hunt set his jaw. "Just a couple o' questions, George. In the first place—"

The chauffeur seemed to slump underneath the bedclothes. His eyes were fixed on Hunt, but they were blank.

"Save your question, Hunt," said Aronson. "George will never answer it."

LT. HUNT chewed angrily on his cigar. "Stop trying to ride me, Aronson," he exploded. "I'm telling you for the last time that killer was no local kid. I know every last hoodlum in town, and this punk doesn't fit in. He's an outsider."

Aronson leaned forward earnestly. "But," he protested, "you heard George say that kid knew the back alleys here better than he did."

"So what? He could of come here a day before and studied the place. Why, for instance, would a local boy have to go over to Louisville to grab a car and bring it all the way here? Does that make sense?"

"It does sound screwy," Aronson admitted.

"Okay, then. And don't you go writing articles in your paper to the contrary, if you want the run of this place, either."

Al Aronson was riding his hunches, and the hunch of George, the dead chauffeur.

George had been sure the killer was a local boy. Yet Hunt was a damned good cop, and if he said that there wasn't a hoodlum in New Albany who fit the description he was probably right.

Al Aronson disconsolately got into his car. He'd have to get back to the paper and write a story. *Except it won't be a story*, he thought disgustedly. *It'll be a rehash. KILLER STILL ON THE LOOSE. NO CLUES.* The newspaperman in him revolted at the thought of dishing out yesterday's warmed-over news.

Then an idea hit him! He heeled the car around in a screaming U-turn and went racing back to New Albany. He had an angle—not a very convincing one yet—but at least it explained how Lt. Hunt and the chauffeur could both be right. Maybe the kid had once lived in town, but had moved.

Pulling up at the first gas station, Aronson went into a huddle with a telephone book, and came out with the names and addresses of the six moving companies in town.

He started making the rounds, interviewing the driver of every moving van. They listened to his description; then shook their heads. "Sorry, Buddy. If I ever saw him, I don't remember."

Aronson began to feel his job was futile. There was so little to go on. But he wouldn't give up. Then—he struck pay dirt!

A mover named Davis said, "A mean kid, dark haired, pimples? A real low-down mean kid? Yeah, I remember him, all right; I'll never forget the dirty little rat."

"When did you move him?" Al asked.

"Must have been about a year ago. But I remember him good. Frankie

Benson was his moniker. I moved him and his old man. The kid said he'd help me with a crate—a big crate—kind of a piano crate, but no piano in it. When we had it up, he let go his end. Near busted my back. He started cussing me. Filthiest mouth I ever heard. I grabbed the punk and almost slugged him. Then I remembered he was just a kid, so I let him go. And when I turned around, he threw a hammer at me. Lucky his aim wasn't too good. It missed my head, but near tore off my ear; here, I'll show you the scar. They had to put three stitches in it. I woulda torn him apart if I got my hands on him, but he ran away, and I never saw him again."

THREE HOURS later Al Aronson made his way down a dirty, ramshackle street in Louisville, to the address Davis had given him. He surveyed the pait-peeled, two room structure in the small, littered yard.

I should have gotten Hunt to come along, he thought. *Wish I at least had a gun with me. Well, here goes.*

He crossed the street, now growing dark, and peered into the unlit front room. No one there. He made his way to the back of the house. Through a rear window he saw a stoop-shouldered, gray-haired man puttering around a stove. Apparently Frankie wasn't at home.

Aronson knocked on the door and introduced himself to Mr. Benson. He started telling the story, just the way it happened, carefully watching the old man's face. Before the reporter was halfway through, the man suddenly burst out, "Don't tell me no more; I don't want to hear it. It's him, all right. I knew something like this would happen. Four men killed! Oh, my God! It's my fault, I guess. He was bad all the way through, but what could I do?" The man's voice was taking on a hysterical note.

The newspaperman helped the shaking old man to a chair; tried to quiet him. "All right, Mr. Ben-

son, why don't you tell me the whole thing?"

And then the flood gates opened. Benson poured out his story in a rush of words, as though something stored within him for years had now reached the bursting point.

It wasn't a particularly new story—not much different from dozens Aronson had written about—except its fateful climax. It was the story of a kid reared in the slums—a mother who died when the child was very young, and who hadn't cared what happened to him before that. A father who worked out of town, and saw him only a couple of hours on weekends. Frankie Benson had lived in the streets, almost like a wild animal, prowling back alleys for food, hanging around pool halls, bullying the smaller animals of the jungle he lived in and running from the larger ones; rejected and scorned by the decent elements of society, and nursing an ever-growing hatred. He had stolen, gone to reform school, and come out all the worse.

"At first I thought he was just wild, like kids get sometimes," the old man said hoarsely. "But then, when he was only thirteen, he started stealing. That's when I knew he was bad. And I knew then that he'd end up rotten, that something like this would happen."

Condemned at thirteen! Al thought bitterly. *The kid never had a chance!* His mind flashed back on his own boyhood. Thirteen—that was the year he was confirmed. He recalled that day in the synagogue—the joy and the warmth of it, surrounded by loving parents, relatives, friends, teachers. *A kid needs people to love him*, he said to himself. *People rooting for him. Frankie never had anybody on his side.*

"He used to hit me," Benson went on in a voice that was now half sobbing. "His own father. I was afraid even to talk to him. I'd ask him to do something, he'd knock me down. Once when he was out in the box I yelled for him to come in to eat. He nearly choked me to death—said he'd kill me if I ever bothered

him when he was busy with the box."

Aronson leaned over and said softly, "What box, Mr. Benson?"

"It was a piano crate, I don't know where he got it; he brought it home one day, years ago. He fixed it up and would stay in it. Sometimes almost a whole day. Like he was hiding from the world. It used to be sort of a game, I think—like most kids would use a tent. But then he'd shut himself in and hide. I don't know from what."

"Where's the box now?"

"I shipped it out, like he told me."

Aronson leaned forward. "When did he tell you? When did you ship it? Where did you ship it?"

The old man thought for a moment. "Day before yesterday. That musta been the day those men were killed. He gave me some money, and said I should ship the crate to Knoxville. No address, just Railway Express, in Knoxville. He said I'd better do it the next day, or he'd take care of me. So that's what I did. I sent it to Knoxville."

"Have you seen Frankie since?"

"No."

"Do you have a receipt for the box?"

"Yes. I'll get it."

Aronson reached into a drawer in the kitchen table, brought out a couple of scraps of paper. He gave the receipt to Aronson, and then stood studying a dirty piece of note paper in his hand. "I found this on the table that night, after he told me about sending the box. I—I didn't know what he meant then."

Aronson took the note from his fingers, and read the child-like scrawl. *Stop me, please, before I do it again.*

The old man looked entreatingly at the reporter. "Before he does it again! Oh, stop him! Stop him!"

Aronson's lips tightened. He took the receipt and headed for the door. "I'll try."

IN THE quiet of the darkened warehouse, Lt. Hunt flashed his

light along the rows of high-piled crates, trunks and boxes.

"I must be crazy," he said to Al Aronson, "letting you drag me out of bed to chase an old piano crate down to Knoxville. It would be different if he had gotten away with the bank robbery—maybe he'd have the dough in the crate. But he didn't get a dime. We could have had the Knoxville police pick him up whenever he calls for the box. I don't know what you expect to find inside of it, or what the big hurry is?"

"Not so loud," whispered Aronson. "The warehouseman said it would be somewhere in this corner."

"What are you whispering for?" the Lieutenant demanded.

"We don't want to warn the kid we're coming."

"What makes you think the kid is here in the warehouse? How could he get in? It's locked and guarded."

"He's in the piano crate; he was shipped in it from Louisville."

"You're crazy!"

"You'll see. Flash your light around."

The circle of yellow light moved slowly down the row until it came to one larger than the rest.

"The piano crate!" Al said. He checked the markings on the box. "This is it, all right." Then he pointed to a series of round holes bored in the side of the box.

"Just as I thought," he whispered. "Air holes."

Hunt swore under his breath; drew his gun.

Al called out, "Okay, Frankie, we've got you covered. Come on out of the box."

No answer.

Aronson motioned for Hunt to take cover. He himself stepped behind a large trunk, said loudly, "Okay, Hunt, let's roll this lousy crate over on its side."

Two shots splintered holes in the box. A hysterical voice called, "Stay away from me, you lousy bums. I'll kill you! I'll kill you!"

"Be sensible, Kid," the reporter called. "You can't hit us because you can't see us. But we can fill that box of yours full of lead; we can

put more holes in it than a sieve. Come on out and give yourself up."

An obscene curse was the only answer, and a third shot crashed wood and spanged into a metal drum. "Show him we mean business, Lieutenant," Al said.

The detective fired a shot through the upper corner of the box.

"Next one goes right through the middle," Aronson called out. "What do you say, Frankie?"

There was a moment of silence, then a muffled sob, and the side of the case swung slowly back on its hinges.

Frankie Benson came out with his hands raised, crying. "Why did I do it?" he sobbed over and over again. "Tell me why I did it. Why?"

Lieutenant Hunt examined the piano crate; said, "Hey, Al, he really had this thing rigged up—a pullman bunk, three pistols, water bottles, cans of food—and straps to hold everything in place. You ought to get a photographer down here. It will make a swell picture. You've got a great story—the story of the year."

But Al Aronson was staring at the snivelling kid in front of him, still sobbing, "Why did I do it? Why? Why? Why?" The sneering, ruthless killer who had coldly murdered four men without the slightest compunction was now just a scared, pimply-faced 16-year-old boy, all mixed up.

And Al knew that the story he would write, the story that would command banner headlines on the front page, would not really be the main story. The important story was the one that would answer Frankie Benson's plaintive entreaty—"Why?"

And that, Al thought sadly, was an answer he didn't know—a story that would never be written.

For the Inside Fact Story

don't miss: COPS ARE ALSO PEOPLE, by Tom Thursday. You'll find the latest of this series in the August

FAMOUS DETECTIVE STORIES

Double-Crosser

by Johnston McCulley



He'd get a sadistic "warning", then a trigger-man would suddenly confront him...

If Danny Blure could get out fact, he'd have a small fortune in jewelry. And one of Ace Agnew's boys would take the rap for the murder Benny'd unintentionally committed; he'd covered himself that far, when he planted the evidence at the scene of what he'd meant only to be a robbery..

NOBODY saw Danny Blure enter the apartment house; he had darted into the alley and gone to the service entrance. By lucky chance, he found the service hall empty. He entered the elevator, closed the door, and punched the button for a stop at the fourth floor. Danny's bachelor suite was on the fifth.

He would have had a story ready, if seen, but it was better that he did not have to use it. When he got his bag packed now, he could go down in the service elevator; if he met the

janitor Danny would toss off a remark about wanting to cut through the alley because he was in a hurry.

The janitor would not think the move unusual. Danny Blure had been a tenant for more than three years, had always paid rent on time, and tipped generously. The janitor would not think he was skipping with a few clothes and leaving an unpaid bill.

But that was what he would be doing—skipping. Not from an unpaid rent bill. He would be skipping from the menace of violent death which now hovered over him and seemed to press him down with an overpowering weight.

The elevator stopped at the floor. Danny tried to compose himself before opening the door. He might encounter someone here, though this was an hour when the maids would have their regular tasks done and be gone. He took a deep breath in an effort to control his trembling, tried to wipe the set look of a man in terror out of his face.

Nobody was in the little service hall. Danny went quickly and almost silently up the rear stairs to the fifth floor. Nobody was there. He peered along the hallway at the door of his own apartment; he gave a sigh of relief when he saw the hallway was empty.

So far, he was safe. Now he would hurry into his apartment and lock the door. He would pack swiftly, get down in the service elevator, walk out of the apartment house—and disappear. It would be dusk when he emerged, the best hour for safety.

Danny got his door key out of his pocket to have it ready, for he did not want to linger in the hallway a second more than necessary; one of Fox Agnew's killers might spot him. One of those hopped-up, cold-blooded, inhuman trigger-men might sneer at him and begin emptying an automatic into his body.

His hands were clammy as he hurried along the corridor. He was licking at lips dried by the heat of terror. Like a wild animal, Danny flinched at the slightest sound that might warn of danger.

WHY HAD he done it? Why had he tried to go it alone? He might have known that Fox and the gang would suspect him some day, prove his guilt to their satisfaction, give him a facetious warning, then blast life out of his body.

He didn't believe Fox Agnew knew of the little apartment he had here; Danny had two homes. One was in an apartment house in another section of the city, a place where men and women came and went much as they pleased. This one was an ultra-respectable place; it was the address on the books of the firm for which Danny worked.

In both places, he was known as a salesman of women's expensive lingerie, which he was, really. Danny worked under his own name. His commissions gave him a splendid living, for the goods he sold were fashionable, exclusive fine merchandise at high prices. His clientele was composed of young women of fashion and social position and wealth, and older women with wealth enough to ape the younger women's ways. And the firm for which he worked was an importing company of high integrity.

Danny called on these women by request, after their interest had been solicited by the firm itself. He was tall, and women called him handsome. He had a low, well-modulated voice that aroused thoughts of romance in women; they bought double when Danny Blure showed them his samples.

They did not know, nor did his firm, that Blure had a side-line which netted him far more than his honest commissions, and which, for obvious reasons, was not revealed on his income tax report.

Two years before, he had made the acquaintance of Fox Agnew, believing it accidental and not knowing it had been contrived cleverly by Fox. Agnew and his boys were well known to the police; occasionally one of his boys was caught wrong, and even Fox's expensive mouthpiece could not save him. But Fox himself always escaped; the police knew, but could not prove.

Danny Blure's acquaintance with Fox had resulted in a deal. Danny

wanted money, and plenty of it. He worked in an atmosphere of wealth, and the odor of it was in his nostrils. These wealthy women to whom he sold lingerie . . . women with fortunes in jewels, perfume at a dollar a drop, with gowns and hats bearing Paris labels, silly women tossing money around! Their men with club memberships and yachts and seats on the Exchange! Why should they have so much and Blure so little?

Fox Agnew had whispered to him how he could get an abundance of money easily, and without danger to himself. He had only to keep his eyes open in the houses and apartments he visited on business. He had only to report certain things to Fox—where jewels were kept; how rooms were arranged; the number and habits of servants—things like that.

Fox had his working gang, both men and women, and they would do the rest. They would follow up Danny's relayed information by making a raid. Sometimes it would be only a passkey job, and at other times a party stickup. And Danny would get his percentage in a way that would not incriminate him.

So Danny Blure became associated with the Fox Agnew gang.

IT HAD paid him well from the start. He kept his criminal side-line independent of his regular business. He continued to turn in more orders and build up his legitimate commissions. The more places of wealth to which he gained an entree, the more valuable information he had to send to Agnew.

But Danny Blure was of the never-satisfied type. Why take a small percentage when he could get it all? He had decided that in some cases the danger would be small; he wouldn't try to sever relations with Fox Agnew, for that would invite suspicion and possibly disaster. But he could go it alone occasionally, take on another side-line.

In a clever hiding place in this bachelor suite of his in a respectable building, he had all the money Agnew had given him. Danny had not spent or flashed it; he had sense enough to

live well within his legitimate income, so any investigation—if it ever came to that—would reveal nothing suspicious.

He wanted to amass a big stake, so he could go away to some place where he was not known and live like a young prince for a time. He had a vision of marrying some rich woman and having it easy the remainder of his life.

Fox Agnew, Blure felt sure, was a man who could not be fooled long; Fox would consider any outside moves to be rank treason, and would send his boys to exact a terrible punishment. So there remained for Danny the necessity for making one big haul. He decided he would work toward that end, would put the loot into his hiding place with the money Agnew had given him from time to time, and which he had not banked—remembering the income tax report.

Then, he would go on as usual for a time, and finally disappear, market his loot, and travel. He would be smart.

Without doubt, the police were continually watching Fox and his associates. They might possibly have the idea that the Agnew gang was responsible for a wave of jewel thefts and party holdups. As a farewell gesture, then, Danny would pin his crime on one of the Agnew gang, and keep himself in the clear.

He had contacted Fox Agnew only by telephone since their deal, and his percentages had been delivered to him in cash, small bills, by a clever method. There was nothing to link him to the gang.

THE GO-BETWEEN Fox had contact him at times met Danny in a cafe. The go-between was nervous, and as they talked and the money was slipped to Danny, the nervous go-between pared his nails with a little gold knife.

When they parted, the go-between was careless enough to leave the knife on the table. Danny had been watching for such a chance; he picked the knife up carefully with

his handkerchief and put it into his pocket.

Now he was all set for the big knock-off. He had spotted his prospective victim. She was a Mrs. Matilda Doring, a silly old woman who lived with a gadding niece, who left jewels scattered around, who ogled him and sent for him repeatedly.

Danny had been in the apartment so much that he knew it as well as the servants, who were two maids. He knew the servants' day off duty. And he knew that Mrs. Doring was half wrecked by arthritis and had cancelled all social engagements while under medical treatment.

The right moment came. The niece was away for the weekend; Mrs. Doring would be alone on her servant's night off. Danny knew how to get into the apartment with small risk of being seen.

He had clothing he had purchased at a second-hand store, the sort he never wore. He had a close-fitting reddish wig which would show beneath the brim of his hat. He had a thick handkerchief made into a mask, with small holes for the eyes.

It had not been difficult to get to the door of her apartment and ring without being seen. As Mrs. Doring came slowly to the door, shuffling like a half-crippled person, Blure slipped the mask up over his face. When she pulled the door open, she saw the masked man holding a gun that menaced her.

Danny was inside and had a hand clapped over her mouth before she could scream. He kicked the door shut behind him and heard the latch-lock snap into place. He thrust Mrs. Doring into her chair and stood before her, his eyes blazing, using a voice not his natural own when he spoke: "Get me your jewels and money—quick! Hand 'em over to me, lady! You want to go on livin', don't you?"

Trembling and on the verge of collapse, Mrs. Doring opened a wall safe in her bedchamber and let Danny help himself to jewels and money. He thrust the loot into a coat pocket and ordered Mrs. Doring back into the living room of the apartment.

It had been easy, he was thinking; now he had only to get out of the place and away without being seen. The apartment was on the second floor on the side of the building. Danny had come up a fire escape that extended entirely to the ground, and from the fire escape had walked into the hall and to the apartment's front door. He would leave by the same route.

He compelled Mrs. Doring to sit in the chair again. "I'll have to tie and gag you, ma'am," Danny told her, in the false voice he was using.

That frightened her more than what had happened already. Her voice was raised in alarmed protest: "No—not that—!"

The sound of her shrill voice brought terror to Danny. In a frenzy of fear at discovery, he struck once with the gun to silence her, struck her on the side of the head. Mrs. Doring toppled off the chair to the floor and sprawled.

Danny whirled toward the door, listened there a moment, heard no sound in the hall. He stepped back and took the gold knife from his pocket and shook it out of the protecting handkerchief. The fingerprints on it would give the police a lead in the wrong direction, he thought.

He opened the door cautiously and saw the hallway empty. Removing his mask, he closed the door and hurried to the fire escape and went down it rapidly. In a few minutes he was in the clear, a distance down the street.

Fear began leaving him. His pockets were stuffed with loot, but he felt sure that Mrs. Doring had not recognized him. The unusual clothes, the false voice and wig, had protected him; now, all Blure had to do was get home and store his loot in the secret hiding place.

THE FOLLOWING morning, he went to work as usual, his nerves quiet again. He got his samples and a list of prospects the firm furnished him, and started out. At a corner news stand, he bought a late edition of a morning paper and scanned it

rapidly as a taxi carried him toward his first customer of the day.

Terror struck him again. He read how Mrs. Matilda Doring had been found dead by one of the maids. She had been killed by a blow on her head, the report said; the wall safe in her bedchamber was open and empty of jewels and money.

Danny Blure had a sudden attack of nausea. He made a fight to control himself. He feared the taxi driver might glance in the rear-vision mirror and see the guilt in his face. He tossed the newspaper aside as if it had been something impregnated with poison.

"Changed my mind—stop at the next corner," he told the driver.

The taxi turned in to the curb. Danny's hand was shaking as he paid his fare and mumbled something about forgetting to attend to an important telephone call. He picked up his sample case and walked swiftly along a side street.

In a small secluded cafe, he sat at a table and ordered a drink, and got out his prospect list and pretended to be studying it. He wanted time to think, to control his attack of nervousness. He was a killer! He had struck the old lady too hard; theft was bad enough, but now he was a killer!

He remembered the knife he had dropped. The owner of that knife had a police record, and his fingerprints were on file. It wouldn't take the police long to pick him up. He would be blamed for robbery and not Danny Blure. If the man had even a legitimate alibi, the police would scoff and say it had been arranged in advance.

He, Danny Blure, had nothing to fear. The loot was well hidden. He would wait for a time, and then quit his job and disappear as he had planned.

Danny knew he was in no condition to visit prospective customers and take orders. He couldn't keep his mind on his work; he wouldn't be able to exert upon women customers the charm that brought him success. So he would simply kill the day somewhere, he decided, and re-

turn to the office with no sales to report, as happened occasionally.

WHEN HE did return to the office in the evening, he found on his desk an office note to call a number he did not know. Danny called it. But it was not the voice of some woman eager to buy lingerie that came to him over the wire.

It was the stern voice of Fox Agnew saying, "Listen, Danny!...you had to do a double-cross on me, did you?...not satisfied with your percentage...had to try it alone..."

"Wh—what—?" Danny stammered.

"Listen to me carefully, Danny. The cops picked up one of my boys. My mouthpiece has talked to him. He's facing a murder rap, Danny—facing the hot seat. You did that; he's a good boy—"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Danny broke in.

"Cut that kind of chatter, you punk! That knife you planted...my boy remembered he had left it on the cafe table when he parted from you. And we've been watching you, Danny. We've been a little suspicious of you."

"But I—I don't know—"

"Keep your ears open and your your mouth shut, Danny. My boys are after you now; you're going to get it, punk! You don't know when or where, but you'll get it. Maybe you'll see a gun muzzle, and angry eyes above it, and that's the last you'll ever see."

With a trembling hand, Danny replaced the phone on its cradle as the connection was broken. He was thankful nobody was near to see him, for he knew his face revealed his terror. He got out of the office and the building, glancing behind often, like a fugitive.

There was but one thing for him to do now...get home, get the loot, get out of town and keep going. He could market the jewels sometime in the future; he had plenty of cash to pay traveling expenses...

●
So here he was safely at home,

without having been seen entering. He listened at the door of his suite as he fumbled with his key. Not the least sound came from inside. Perhaps Agnew did not know of Blure's apartment in this respectable house; perhaps Fox's gunmen were watching the other place.

Danny unlocked the door and pulled it open, glanced through the entry hall quickly, closed the door again and stepped into his living room.

"Freeze!" a low stern voice ordered.

Danny's eyes focused on the muzzle of a gun which seemed to approach him and grow larger in size. A touch of light glinted from it. Danny's body seemed suddenly ossified by shock, his mind to stand still in its thinking.

He couldn't take his eyes from the gun muzzle. He expected to see a spurt of flame and gas through which a slug of metal would be hurled to tear the life from his body. He drew in his breath in a sharp sob.

He raised his eyes slowly, taking his sight away from the gun muzzle. He looked into another pair of eyes that glittered blackly from beneath lids almost closed—the eyes of a killer. One of Agnew's boys, he thought. Then, Fox must have known of his apartment here.

"You... you..." Danny mouthed.

"Take it easy, and be quiet!" the man who held the gun cautioned. "You walked in on me, chum; this is a stickup."

"Stickup—?" Danny acted like a man who did not quite understand.

"That's right. I came in with my little passkey and went through your place, and I didn't find much. Years ago, gents had jewelry, but now they don't use it so much. It's tough for a man in my line. So I'll have to go through you and see if I can find a wallet. Face the wall, chum, and get your hands up."

Danny was shocked by bewilderment, scarcely capable of thought and action. Only a passkey thief, and he had believed this visitor to be one of Fox Agnew's boys. Then he had a quick suspicion that the man real-

ly was one of Fox's gang, and that he would shoot as soon as Danny turned his back.

"No...no..." Danny muttered.

"Flatten against that wall, chum!"

DANNY REELED back against the wall, suddenly weak. He put up his hands, clammy palms trembling as he pressed them against the wall's surface. He felt the other man's hands exploring his body. His wallet was taken, also the gun he wore in a shoulder holster.

"So you're packin' a rod," the man said.

"I—I'm a salesman—got a permit."

"That's all right with me, chum. Wish I had a permit." He tossed Danny's gun into a corner of the room and made Danny turn and walk to a chair and sit. Standing a few feet away, he leafed through Danny's wallet and extracted some currency.

"This haul isn't paying me for my trouble," he complained. "Let's go into your bedroom now. I'll have to tie you up so I can make a getaway; you've seen my face, and could identify me. But I'm no killer."

Danny was compelled to go into the bedroom. He was forced to stretch out on his face while the passkey thief took off Danny's belt and fastened his wrists behind his back with it. Then he turned Danny over and gagged him with a handkerchief. And finally he lashed Danny's legs from feet to knees with strips from a sheet taken from the bed, and tied his ankles to the bed posts.

"That'll keep you quiet and busy long enough for me to get away," the passkey thief said. "Sorry, chum, but it's your fault for walking in on me as you did."

He left the bedroom, and Danny heard the hall door opened and closed. Stretched there, he realized that his body was bathed in cold sweat. A surge of relief came to him, and his terror left him.

Danny was still safe. Now he could get his loot from the hiding place, pack a bag quickly, get away. Agnew might have his boys watch-

ing the airport, so he wouldn't try to take a plane; Blure decided to go to the edge of the city and catch a bus going in any direction, and travel until he could make a long hop by train or plane.

The passkey thief had been careless fastening his victim's wrists with the belt, for Danny found he could reach the buckle with his fingers. It was difficult to get the buckle unfastened, but he accomplished it. He tossed the belt aside, sat up on the bed and got his legs and feet free, reeled out upon the floor.

He put on his belt, went to a small table in a corner of the bedroom and poured himself a stiff drink and downed it. Then he hurried into the living room and went to the door to make sure the latch had snapped and the door was locked.

Back in the bedroom, it took him only a moment to go get a traveling bag from a shelf in a closet. He opened dresser drawers and grabbed a few articles of clothing, hurried into the bathroom for shaving and toilet articles, and tossed them into the bag.

Now it was time to get the loot from its hiding place. He would have to work swiftly, he was thinking. Dusk would be coming in an hour,

and he wanted to leave during the gathering night.

He returned to the bathroom. With a razor blade, he chipped around two of the tiles high in the wall, where the cement had been removed and soft putty substituted. He took out the tiles carefully and disclosed an aperture behind water pipes, and from this he took several packages of currency and the jewels he had removed from Mrs. Matilda Doring's wall safe.

Working swiftly, he carried money and jewels into the bedroom and put the loot in the bottom of his bag beneath the clothing. He had no time to hide it better. To get away quickly was the thing now, before one of Fox Agnew's boys faced him with automatic in hand.

He snapped the bag shut and started to turn toward the door of the living room.

"Freeze!" a voice said, for the second time since he had entered the apartment.

DANNY WHIRLED, terror clutching at him again. It had been a woman's voice. She was standing in the doorway, a well-dressed blonde whose age he guessed at about thirty. And the gun she



*The September issue
will be on sale July 1st*

**A Powerhouse Baseball
Novelet**

SHADOW OVER THE DUGOUT

by T. W. Ford

**A Super Sports Special
STRETCH-DRIVE SECRET**

by Jim Moore

SUPER SPORTS

held looked as formidable to Danny Blure as the one he had seen in the hand of the passkey thief.

"Step right into the living room," she ordered. "And remember I can shoot."

Danny gulped as he looked at her, obeyed as if the legs which carried him were not his own. He went into the living room and backed against the wall at her gestured order. "I'm glad to get out of that closet in your entry hall," she told Danny. "It's hot and stuffy in there."

"Who are you? What do you want here?" he asked.

Fear came to him again. This was it! Agnew had plenty of women in his mob, hard-hearted molls who knew how to shoot. Perhaps Fox had sent this woman; maybe she was the sweetheart of the man who owned the knife, and had asked to be sent so she could have her revenge.

"Thanks for digging out all those jewels and that money for me," she told Danny. "I was here when that passkey worker came, and had to hide in the closet. I saw him ransack the place and get nothing. I was only waiting for him to leave so I could get busy myself. Women are generally better searchers than men."

"You're a passkey worker, too?"

"Oh, no," she replied. "The stuff you got from behind the tiles in the bathroom is what I hoped to find. I'm Magda Renton, a policewoman."

"A policewoman—you? You don't look like a female cop to me," Danny told her. "Let's get right down to business talk, Gorgeous. Maybe we can make a deal of some sort. You interest me."

"You don't interest me, except as a crook, and your well-known charm isn't working today as far as I'm concerned," she informed him. "Don't make a move to get your gun where the passkey man tossed it into the corner! I didn't have time to pick it up myself. Make a move toward it, and I'll blast you down!" Her eyes were glittering now. "I was in the WAC during the war, and learned to shoot. If further information is needed, let me relate that I hold the women's championship for the police pistol range."

"But...I don't understand..." Danny gulped.

SHE SPOKE as if discussing an ordinary event of minor interest. "Oh, it's quite simple. The Doring affair, you know. The police have had eyes on you for some time; they learned that jewel robberies followed in your wake. They witnessed some of your contacts. We had everything we need except the loot from the Doring job, to pin this murder on you. Now we have that—thanks to you for digging it out for me."

"It's a lie!" Danny stormed. "What's your game? You're no lady cop. If so, why'd they send you here?"

"A lady cop is a little more gentle when it comes to searching than a rough copper," she explained. "I was to search your place, and if I found nothing, leave everything shipshape so you'd not suspect we'd been prying. In that case, we'd have kept on watching you. Sergeant Doyle is downstairs; he was to phone up and warn me if you came in. So you must have slipped in the back way—more evidence of guilt, though we'd not need it now. And that cheap passkey thief—I got a good look at him, and he'll be picked up. I'll get a pat on the back for this day's work."

Terror had seized Danny Blure with a terrible grip this time. He could not reach his gun in the corner; and he sensed she would surely shoot him if he made a hostile move. Terror of death was upon him—not from the muzzle of a gun held by one of Fox Agnew's boys, but death in the electric chair.

Watching him carefully, holding the gun ready for quick use if he made a move, she stepped to the phone and spoke to the switchboard below: "Please tell Sergeant Doyle to hurry up here. I've got Danny Blure and the loot from the Doring job."

Sagging against the wall, all strength drained from him, watching her as she watched him with keen eyes, Danny waited.

THE MOUNTAIN COMES TO MOHAMMED

By

AMELIA R. LONG



The fat man was there, in the room.

DETEKTIVE Sergeant Forbes made a gesture of exasperated frustration with his big hands. "I tell you, Mr. Carter, Donovan or Greene or I have had Louie under our eye every minute of the day since you first put us on the case," he protested to the district attorney; "and at night one or the other of us has camped outside the door of his hotel room and peeked through the keyhole. If he'd contacted Landis, we'd have seen them."

"That's right, Mr. Carter," Detective Donovan affirmed earnestly. "That guy hasn't even been to the men's room without one of us taggin' along; he just couldn't have met Landis without us knowin'."

"He just couldn't have, but he just has," District Attorney Jeff

The police couldn't seem to crack this counterfeiting set-up, until Stephen Carter thought of a possible switcheroo—simple to the point of sheer genius. But, if Carter were right, it explained why they never saw the fat man.

Carter amended with deadly calm. "Or maybe you two think he pulls those phony tens and twenties out of his hat, the way a magician does rabbits. Louie and Landis are meeting somewhere, and meeting regularly."

His voice rose to a sudden roar. "What's more, they're doing it right under your stupid noses. Now get back on the job, and this time try tailing Louie with your eyes open; you can tell Greene the same goes for him."

The two detectives muttered hastily "Yes, sirs," and departed from the district attorney's office with an air of injured dignity which implied that they considered themselves unjustly impugned.

When the office door had closed behind them, Jeff spoke to his younger brother Stephen, who had been slouched sideways with his feet dangling over the arm of the visitor's chair while he waited for the district attorney to be

ready to go out to lunch. "I've never known Greene or Donovan—let alone Forbes—to fall down on a simple assignment of this kind before," he remarked; "yet the facts prove they've slipped somewhere. But I'm hanged if I can figure out where."

Stephen pivoted about on the end of his spine until his feet came to rest upon the floor in front of him. "Just who are these chaps, Louie and Landis, Jeff?" he asked.

"Counterfeiters," the district attorney answered. "Lonesome Louie Madden pushes the stuff—gets it into circulation—and isn't especially important. But Big Ben Landis is the brains of the gang; that's why I want to use Louie to lead us to him. Naturally, the Federal men are working on the case, too; but they're leaving this particular angle of it for my office to handle, and I'd like to show them we can make good. Only for some reason that's a complete mystery to me, the best men on my staff seem unable to follow a trail that must be as broad as the back end of a Mack truck."

"Maybe Landis is passing the money along to Louie through some other member of the gang," Stephen suggested.

Jeff shook his head. "Landis doesn't operate that way," he replied. "He claims that the middle man is the weakest point in a counterfeiting ring—which is pretty much the truth—so he doesn't use one. He manufactures the stuff himself, from engraving the plates down to the actual printing, and doles it out to two or three leg-men, who pass it on small purchases, and turn what they get in change back to him—less their commissions, of course. He never gives any of them more than a few hundred dollars at a time, for fear they may get ideas about skipping out and going into temporary business for themselves. That's how I know he must be contacting Louie practically every other day or so. The thing that's got me beat is, how does he do it?"

"Could be he's leaving the stuff somewhere for Louie to pick up," Stephen offered. "Say a box in the railroad station, for instance."

"I'm afraid that's out, too," the district attorney said. "I've got the daily reports here from Forbes, Donovan, and Greene ever since they've been on the case," he gestured toward a manila folder of papers on the desk in front of him, "and not one of them so much as mentions Louie's having gone anywhere near a railroad station or any other place where he could pick up a package that might contain two or three hundred dollars in phony tens and twenties. All he does when he goes out is stroll about the center of town for an hour or so and make a few small purchases with his phony money. I can't let it go on much longer; yet if I pick him up now, I'll lose the only chance I may get to catch Landis."

"Maybe Landis is wearing a disguise when they meet."

Jeff smiled briefly, also ironically. "It would be easier to disguise a hippopotamus than Big Ben Landis," he observed. "The man must weigh over three hundred pounds. But let's forget about him while we have lunch." He reached for his own hat on the clothes tree in the corner, then tossed Stephen his. "I don't want my appetite spoiled."

Stephen caught the hat with one hand and placed it at a rakish angle upon his dark head. With the other hand, he picked up the folder of reports from his brother's desk, and took it with him.

LA TE IN the afternoon, having a free hour or so, Stephen went over the reports carefully in the privacy of his own law office. He learned from them two things which he considered significant. The first was that every morning at exactly ten-thirty, Lonesome Louie left the cheap hotel where he was staying to go for a walk, during which he merely strolled aimlessly about for an hour or so, then returned to the hotel; the second

was that he repeated this procedure every afternoon at exactly one-thirty. Stephen smiled with satisfaction at the reports. They had told him precisely what he wanted to know.

That evening during dinner, he brought up the subject of Lonesome Louie and Big Ben Landis. "What would you say, Jeff," he began, "to my going along with Sergeant Forbes tomorrow morning when he goes on duty?"

The district attorney looked up suspiciously from his plate. "What for?" he demanded.

"I think I know how we can make Lonesome Louie lead us to Big Ben Landis."

Jeff snorted skeptically. "This isn't a problem in deduction, Steve," he pointed out. "It's a matter of routine tailing that doesn't call for any fancy mental gymnastics, but just for ordinary police training and practice; which Forbes has had, and you haven't. If he hasn't been able to spot the way Louie makes contact with Landis, how can you expect to do it?"

"Still, I don't guess it'd do any harm if I tried," Stephen persisted. Jeff was forced to concede the point.

The following morning Lonesome Louie was temporarily disconcerted, upon descending from the unclean flea-bag that was his room, to find two tailers instead of the usual one waiting for him in the lobby of the hotel—especially when he recognized in the smaller of the two the younger brother of the district attorney. But his generally lugubrious countenance relaxed in a confident grin when, as he sallied forth, both Stephen and the big sergeant fell into step behind him in the usual way.

"You see, Mr. Stephen," Forbes said, discouraged, after they had played a kind of shadow tag with Louie for the better part of an hour, "he doesn't meet anybody or do anything worth battin' an eye at. He acts more like a man who's just out to kill time."

Stephen smiled in agreement.

"Forbes, how right you are!" he murmured, but he didn't sound in the least discouraged.

Louie continued to lead them a merry if somewhat leisurely chase for another half hour, then he headed back to the hotel.

This time, instead of taking up their former position on the scuffed leather bench in the lobby facing the staircase and the perpetually out-of-order elevator, Stephen waited until the man they were tailing had disappeared from sight up the stairs; then he began to follow.

"We'll just pay a little, friendly call on Louie," he remarked to the sergeant. "I've a notion this is his time to be receiving company, although I don't guess he'll be expecting us."

When they unceremoniously flung open the door to Louie's room, the enormous fat man who was there with Louie sprang up with a violence that sent his chair crashing over backwards. His hand made a quick jab toward his hip pocket, but stopped midway when he saw the muzzle of Sergeant Forbes' police automatic trained upon him.

"Okay, Landis," the sergeant said with grim satisfaction, "you can reach, but it's not gonna be for anything you can touch."

BACK IN the district attorney's office an hour or so later, Stephen lolled in the visitor's chair and cocked one leg indolently over its arm. "It was all perfectly simple, Jeff," he drawled. "I spotted it as soon as I read those reports, and noticed that Louie went for a walk every day at exactly the same time in the morning, and again in the afternoon. After he'd left the hotel—with Forbes or Donovan or Greene, as the case might be, following—Landis simply walked in and waited in his room for him to come back, when he gave Louie a fresh supply of the counterfeit money and collected his share of the real money Louie had got in change when he passed the phony.

[Turn To Page 122]

DEATH BY GAS

A Brain-Teaser
by J. J. Mathews

Can you figure out the answer before you turn the page upside down, and read it for yourself?

THE BOYS down at Homicide have a special interpretation of what the middle initial in the name of Captain Howard T. Pearsons really means. They like that tall lanky ex-football player with his penetrating mind. "The 'T' means 'Thorough'," says Detective Peter Reilly. "When my boss gets on a case his mind looks for every point and never overlooks the smallest detail." For in solving crime you face a paradox. The thing that is often very obvious is exactly what is overlooked by everyone—from the cop to the killer.

The girl on the sofa could hardly have been over twenty-two at the most. She was extremely thin and the lines on her face showed great suffering. "No doubt death was due to gas poisoning," said the coroner. "After we get the body down to the morgue I'll check up on the internal organs."

Captain Pearsons turned to the milkman who supplied all tenants in the house. "Now don't leave out a single detail. Tell me exactly what happened." The middle-aged man was a bit nervous as he began to speak. "I generally get here between 6 and 6:15 every morning. As I placed a bottle of milk on the side of the door I thought I smelled gas. I pushed on the door knocker but could get no answer. So I ran downstairs and saw a cop on the beat. He came up with me and we smashed the door down."

The police official then turned to a young rookie. "Now you tell me, Patrolman Patterson, exactly what you did as soon as you smashed the door down and entered this apartment. And don't leave out a single detail.

The young rookie spoke slowly. "First thing I saw was that young girl on the sofa. She had a long rubber tube in her mouth. The other end was connected to an outlet on the floor, and the gas heater had been pushed aside. I removed the tube from her mouth; then I shouted to the milkman and told him to open the windows. I tried first aid on her and

failed, so I told the milkman to call for an ambulance. He went out. Then I looked into the bedroom and found this fellow, who says he is the girl's husband, coughing; he must have been overcome with gas, too."

Herman Matthews didn't wait for an invitation to tell his story. "What the cop says is so," he began. "Lucy, my wife, must have been going nuts the last month. She even yelled in the grocery store she wanted to die. Life wasn't worth while living. She must have gotten out of bed, disconnected the gas heater, and put that tube in her mouth. The gas sort of got me, too. Good thing the milkman came around and smelled the gas, or I would have been a goner too."

Something was bothering Captain Pearsons and he stroked his chin twice. There was something wrong in the picture and he just couldn't put his finger on the detail. "You could have killed your wife," he suggested quietly. "Forced the tube into her mouth and turned on the gas. Figured out just about when the milkman would come, then back into your room after getting a whiff of the gas."

Herman Matthews was indignant. "You can't prove that. I got a witness who will swear my wife wanted to die. Be careful what you say, Officer."

A smile began to play over the lips of Captain Pearsons as he snapped back, "Of course you killed your wife. The evidence is right there staring you in the face."

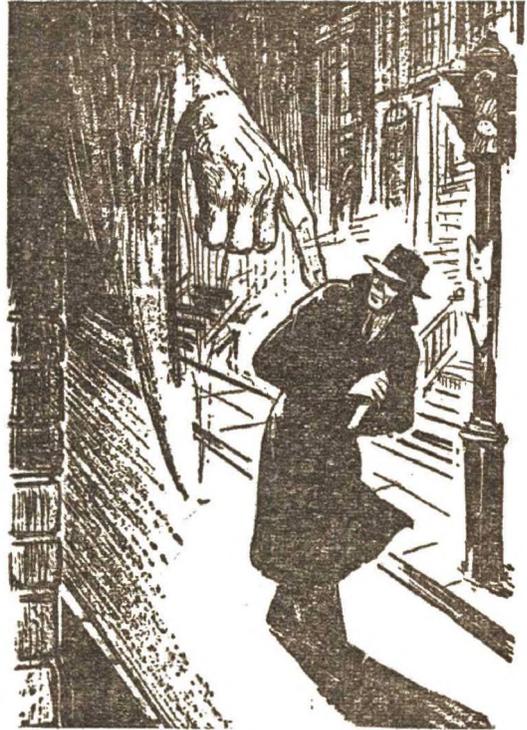
QUESTION: How did Captain Pearsons know Herman Matthews must have killed his wife?

ANSWER: Who turned off the gas? The testimony of the milkman showed he never touched the tube or the gas cock. The patrolman took the tube from the girl's mouth. If he didn't turn it off, he must have seen it had been turned off; that left only Herman Matthews—who, by force of habit, had turned the gas off.

Butterfly of Death

By HAROLD GLUCK

It sounded like a bad joke, at first, but then the murder attempts started. And Joe Delaney found that he was likely to end up as the victim in a true detective mystery—a lot like the stories he edited. And the cops thought it was just a publicity gag!



I knew I was marked . . .

IN THAT particular Friday evening I was exceedingly tired. Working for Frank Parker, of Parker Publications, wasn't exactly the type of work in which you could take it easy. My job was to edit three of his magazines, *Detective Adventures*, *Science and Crime* and *Private Eye*. It meant spending hours reading all kinds of manuscripts, good, bad, and indifferent. Which all accounted for the fact that at about 7:30 I tried to relax in the easy chair that faced the street, in the living room of my apartment on East 53rd Street.

I closed my eyes to get some kind of relief. The meal I had eaten at Luigi's was light; there were thousands of little round red dots dancing around my two eyeballs. I opened both eyes as though to chase them away; it was futile.

The phone rang twice. "Odd" was the only comment I made to myself; I had a private, unlisted, number—known only to my editor, the printer, and my personal physician. Not once had my phone rung during

the past year. I arose, went over to my desk, and lifted the receiver from the hook.

A muffled voice asked, "Joe Delaney?"

Mechanically I replied, "Yes, who is this and what do you wish?"

A queer kind of a chuckle hit my eardrum. "You're Joe Delaney," repeated the voice, and then it added, "So you think you can take my little Butterfly away from me and nothing will happen to you?"

Remember, I was tired and that accounted for the fact my brain cells failed to react quickly. Something had to be said and I went searching for words. Then I found them. "What kind of a trick is this?" was what finally came from my lips.

"This isn't a gag," was the reply. "I'm going to make your life a living hell, just like you made mine. And don't think I'm kidding; you're

going to be tortured and when you have suffered enough, then I'll kill you."

Nice words to hear over a phone. I was getting back to myself and trying to think a mile a second. "There are lots of Joe Delaneys in the phone book," I protested; "You got the wrong one."

"No," was the reply, "I got the right one. The one who works as an editor at Parker Publications and thinks in his spare time he can play around with my wife. You damaged my butterfly; I'm going to damage you."

This was getting on what was left of my nerves. "I'm going to hang up now," I shouted through the mouthpiece of the phone.

"Still think I'm kidding," the voice continued. "I'll show you I'm not bluffing. Wait fifteen minutes, then walk down on the east side of 47th Street, between Ninth and Tenth Avenues, and see what happens. Then you'll know whether this is a joke or the beginning of the end for you, Joe Delaney."

That was all; I heard a little laugh, and then I, too, hung up.

Back I went to my easy chair to try a bit of thinking. *This is all a joke on me. Some fools are having a little celebration and someone who knows me is having fun at my expense. My inner brain snapped back, But if you don't take that dare and walk out, you will never know whether it is a joke.*

I arose from my easy chair and looked at my wrist watch. If I walked quickly, I could just make it. When I got downstairs, my heart was beating so rapidly, I realized it would be silly to walk; I hailed a cab and got out at 47th Street and Ninth Avenue. I walked slowly towards Tenth Avenue. As I passed an alley, I turned instinctively, just pressing my head to one side. From somewhere out of the alley, came a baseball, thrown with tremendous force, just missing my skull. It hit against the side of the wall and fell to the ground. I gasped for breath, then came a little unconscious hysterical laughter from my lips.

"Some kids playing baseball," I said to reassure myself.

I picked it up and walked down the alley, looking for the kids, so I could return that ball. Yet I knew deep down in my heart, I wouldn't find any youngsters.

Slowly I walked home, trying to make some sense out of this situation. It wasn't a joke; there actually existed a person who was determined to torture and eventually kill me. Why? He must be some kind of a nut, who had a mistaken idea that I had played around with his wife; somehow, I had to get hold of that fellow. When I reached my apartment, I sank into that easy chair, completely exhausted. Maybe I slept for an hour or two. But I had a nightmare; I saw an executioner trying to throw stones at me. He missed the first five. Then the sixth hit my head, bounced off and landed on a large bell. I could hear it ring. It rang, rang, and rang.

When my eyes opened, I realized the phone was ringing. Warily I lifted the receiver. "Missed you," said the voice, "but don't worry; I'll get you before the week is over. And don't think you can trace this phone; I'm too smart for you."

That was all. I knew the phone call couldn't be traced; the devil take the new dial phone. And my caller was probably using different pay stations.

SATURDAY morning, instead of playing tennis, I went over to the Fifth Avenue apartment of Frank Parker. His wife, Eleanor, was there at the door to greet me. "Come in, Joe," she said, "What brings you over at this time of the day?" And then, as though she were answering her own question, she added, "Must be very important for you to give up your tennis match. Frank is in the studio, poring over circulation figures, when he should be with me at Atlantic City."

I walked through the living room, into the room on the left, without the formality of knocking. There, seated before a long mahogany desk, was a tremendously tall man, but one

who was not a bit ungainly or awkward. He had a narrow, high forehead, and a long thin nose, rather fleshy at the tip. There wasn't much left of his chestnut hair. I don't know what any woman could see in him, except the simple arithmetical fact that his bankroll was in the millions.

"What's up, Joe?" he asked, as he pointed to a chair at the side of the table. I actually slumped into it.

"Some nut has been making phone calls threatening my life. And last night I was almost beamed on the skull with a baseball when I answered a challenge over the phone to go down and see whether my caller was joking or not. I am going over

to the police station to make a formal complaint. The 63rd Precinct station is near my home."

When I finished, Frank looked at me, arose and took hold of both of my shoulders with his hands. "Joe, this is the most wonderful publicity stunt I have ever heard of; it certainly is worthy of you. Go ahead and make a bee-line for the police station. I will run a full page ad in Monday's papers offering ten thousand dollars for information leading to the arrest and conviction of your unknown enemy. Why, that ought to run circulation figures of the detective magazines into the hundreds of thousands."

I stroked my chin twice, trying to

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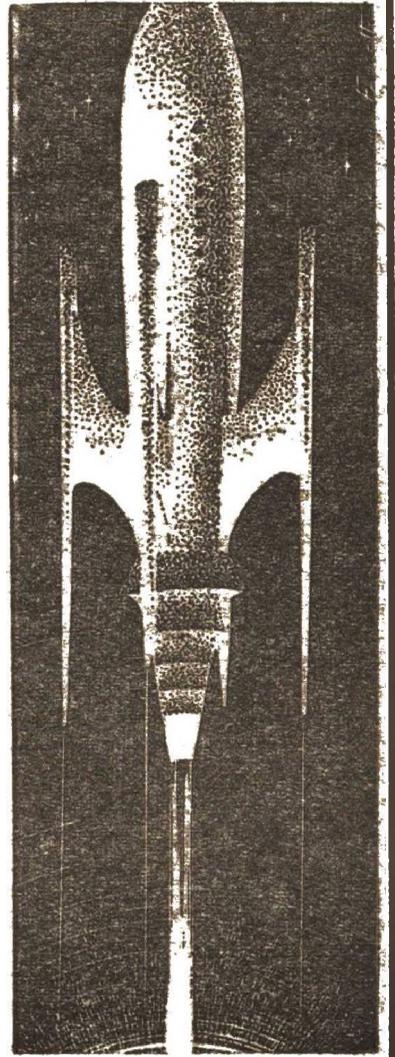


figure out what to reply.

"Look, Frank, this isn't a joke. I actually got those calls over the phone. My life is in danger."

A peculiar smile played over the lips of my boss. "After all, you have read enough manuscripts to know what to do with almost any crime situation. I won't quarrel with you; let's say it really did happen. It still will be the best publicity stunt of the year."

I arose, shrugged my shoulders, and left the room, without waiting to hear a formal good-by. Eleanor was still in the living room, reading a magazine. I looked at her intently. She was a beautiful creature, with corn-colored hair, blue eyes, a nose with just a wee bit of an upturn, and a smile that could dazzle the hardest of males.

She realized I was studying her carefully, but before she could say anything I asked, "Did anyone ever call you Butterfly?"

"How perfectly charming a question to ask," she replied. "I have been called lots of names by various people, from those who loved me to those who hated me. But not one of them ever compared me to the Butterfly."

I LEFT the apartment, took the elevator down, then started to walk along Fifth Avenue. Suppose Parker was the man who had called me? From the thousands of detective manuscripts I had read, I knew the proper procedure was to consider anyone and everyone as my potential enemy in this situation. The police would probably laugh at me, once they thought it was a publicity stunt. I would be powerless to convince them it was the real McCoy, until I was dead.

An hour later I was in the 63rd Precinct. The sergeant at the desk sent me upstairs and there in a large room were two men. I spoke to the older one, Detective Ralph Pierson. He was a man in his late forties, with a head of bushy black hair and deep-set brown eyes. Maybe he had been an athlete in his youth, but mother nature now had retaliated and

presented him with a large stomach. He asked me my name.

"Francis Geronimo Delaney" was the answer. Then I told him the entire story, omitting nothing. At the other end of the room was a much younger man, with horn-rimmed glasses, bothering himself only to the extent of removing dirt from his fingernails with his pocket knife. But he was taking in every word I said.

When I was finished, Detective Pierson looked at me very carefully. "This is the worst kind of a publicity stunt I ever heard a supposedly sane man create. You got your nerve, even to tell me your boss thought it was tops; get out before I throw you out."

I didn't budge an inch. "The law says that when a person makes a complaint in regard to a threat to his life, he is entitled to police protection."

Detective Pierson snapped right back at me. "And the law also provides that any person who tries to use the machinery of the law for publicity purposes has committed a misdemeanor."

The younger man arose from his seat and came over to where I was. "May I ask him a question, Ralph?"

"Go ahead, suit yourself, Herman. I'm through with this fellow. If he has any complaint to make, he can go down to Center Street. This smells to high heaven."

"I am Detective Herman Butler," said the younger man. "You said your name was Francis Geronimo Delaney; yet the person you claimed who spoke to you over the phone addressed you as 'Joe' Delaney. Why the difference in first names?"

Then it dawned upon me. "Say, you just gave me something of a clue. Only the people down at the office, and a few of my close friends, call me Joe. To the rest of the people who know me, my name is exactly as you have it."

"Any objection if I give up some of my time and see nothing happens to this poor editor?" asked Butler in a rather sarcastic voice.

Pierson laughed, "If you want to

play nursemaid to a publicity stunt on your own time, why that's your funeral. If you catch the ghost who has been calling him up it would make departmental history."

In utter disgust I left the room. There was an inward feeling that urged me to tell both of them to go to a warmer region in the portion of this world below the surface.

It was rather delightful outside, and I walked slowly towards my apartment. Perhaps I was absent-minded as I crossed Park Avenue on 52nd Street. A woman shouted, "Look out!" and I jumped back to the curb. A black sedan was headed straight for me; then it swerved. I didn't need much intelligence to realize someone behind that wheel was deliberately trying to run me down. The driver got the car back into the center of the street and stepped on the gas—but not before I had observed that the man behind the wheel had his hat pulled down so he couldn't be recognized. And I knew it was a 1948 black Cadillac sedan with the license number C768-452.

I rushed home and called up the police station asking for Detective Butler. He came to the phone and I told him what had happened, giving him the number of the car. He told me to remain home until he came over to see me.

MAYBE IT was three centuries later—that's how long it

seemed to me—before he arrived at my apartment, carrying a small leather case which he placed on my table. "It didn't take long to find the owner of that car," he announced with a certain measure of pride.

My eagerness asserted itself, "Who's the guilty party?"

Butler laughed. "The car belongs to your boss; he said he left it in front of his house. We found it around the corner with a damaged fender."

I know exactly what was in Butler's mind. "Guess that means you still think the entire set-up is a publicity stunt."

"Could be, could be," was his retort. "However your boss did agree to drop any idea of capitalizing upon what you have, so far, claimed to be attempts on your life. He isn't going to run any full page ad in the newspapers; I read him the riot act about that. Meanwhile, I am going to keep you company until another telephone call comes across. I have a tape recorder outfit with me; there is a tiny microphone that can be attached to the receiver of your phone and it will record every word coming in. So let's just sit tight till the phone jingles."

It was most annoying to watch that officer of the law sit so comfortably in one of my chairs. According to all the rules of fiction he should either have been upset

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or finding relief in a couple of high-balls. Instead he merely placed the fingertips of his right hand against those of his left hand and looked up at the ceiling.

I just couldn't sit still. Once he remarked, "If you keep that up, you'll land in the nut-house within a week."

I was going to snap back that, after all, it was my life at stake, but on second thought I said nothing. The bell rang and he signaled me to answer. I lifted the receiver to my ear, and he adjusted the tape recorder.

It was the same voice at the other end, "Hello, Joe; sorry I missed you with the car. That fool woman ruined everything; almost made me crash. But don't worry; I'll get you before the next week end comes around. Hope you are suffering and going to pieces."

That was all. I hung up the receiver and Butler started the recorder. I could hear every word over, and when finished he looked like a man possessed with a single idea. "Get your hat," he ordered. "My car is outside. We are going up to see a friend of mine—Professor Hubert Musterman, who lives at 116th Street and the Drive. He's one of the best analysis men in the country."

DOWN WE went and he opened the door of his rather old coupe. He entered and I followed. For five minutes nothing was said, then I began, "Mind if I ask some questions?"

"Go right ahead," he replied, "Get them out of your system if it will make you feel any better."

"Number one," I began, "Did you dust the car for fingerprints?"

He took his eyes off traffic momentarily to give me a "drop-dead" look. "That's what you get for living in a world of detective fiction. The man who drove that car, if he did exist, wore gloves. There were several messes of what once had been finger contacts with the door, but utterly useless."

He had made it quite evident he still doubted me. Might as well come

right to the point. "If you don't believe that all this is on the level, why are you bothering with the case?"

He didn't bother to look at me as he replied, "My father was the late Nelson Butler. Died some five years ago. Guess the name doesn't mean much to you. My father was arrested and convicted for forging four checks on the Third National bank. He spent three years in Sing Sing; not a soul would believe he was innocent. I was a kid then, but my mother worked herself to the bone to get funds to fight for my father's freedom.

"Finally a plain flatfoot believed she might be right; somewhere in this country there was a man who was my father's double. The man was finally arrested in Los Angeles, confessed everything, and my father was freed. The state at least had enough decency to compensate him financially for the wrong it had done to him. It was his wish that I dedicate my life to preventing injury to the innocent. That's how I became a detective; and for your information, the flatfoot is now Detective Pierson, my best friend."

I wanted to ask also whether he was on the case officially, but I just let that go. When we came to 116th Street, he parked the car around the corner, and we went up to see the Professor. He lived in a penthouse all by himself.

He must have been expecting both of us for he looked at me and said, "Ah, that must be the editor in search of a crime."

I couldn't help laughing. The professor looked more like a retired businessman, weighing about 230 pounds, with a full head of light grey hair, and a pair of real friendly brown eyes.

"I have the voice on the tape recorder," explained Butler, "you give me your verdict."

He played it once and the professor motioned for a re-play. This went on for six consecutive times.

"Your voice is speaking through a handkerchief," declared the Professor, "and he is also doing his best to

disguise the voice. That means it is someone close to Mr. Delaney—someone whom Mr. Delaney hears frequently, and would recognize at once. The man probably once lived in New England and also spent some time in the Middle West. The voice also has a nasal quality to it which means either the speaker has trouble with his adenoids or can handle French with ease."

I had to put my two cents in. "Professor," I asked, "I notice you refer to the owner of the voice as a man. Why couldn't it be a female?"

All I got in response was another of those "drop-dead" looks that probably are very destructive in a classroom. Then realizing that he had before him, not a student, but a potential murder victim, he hastened to explain, "While the range of tone is within the frequency used by a woman, its quality is definitely masculine."

DETECTIVE Butler now asked for advice, "What's my next step?" The Professor opened a box on his table. From it he took a small purple flower which he inserted in Butler's coat lapel. Then he connected a small wire which he then hooked up to an outfit that resembled a hearing device. "You can use this Mitone recorder," he suggested in no uncertain terms. "It will run for twenty minutes, then you can insert another reel. Listen to all your suspects. All I need is about five or six sentences from each; then I can compare with the voice on your recorder. Maybe it will help, though I can't guarantee results. The microphone in the flower will pick up any voice within fifteen feet from yourself."

We both thanked him for his interest in the case.

I must admit I was sort of glad when we landed back in Butler's car. "You know," I said, "In all my excitement, I forgot about the simple necessary fact that a human being must have food. On our way home we will pass Luigi's and there you can eat the best plate of spaghetti in town."

When we entered the restaurant, the red-haired cashier signaled to me. "Good evening, Mr. Delaney, there is a little package here for you. Haven't any idea how it got here, but I found it on the side of my cash register when I took over at 6 this evening."

I thanked her and she handed me a small box, about 4 inches by 2, wrapped in brown paper, sealed with two rubber bands; it had my name on it, very carefully printed. Butler followed me to a booth in the back of the restaurant. We sat down and I opened the box. Then I turned a sickly pale white. He looked at its contents—there was a butterfly in it with a broken wing.

"Now comes the play on your nerves," was all he said. "Put it away and let's eat."

I would have had to be made of iron to have digested my meal. Luigi came over midway between my coffee and cigar. "Meet Herman Butler, Luigi," I said. The two men shook hands, and Luigi sat down.

Butler said something merely to make conversation. "Learn how to cook in Italy?" Luigi laughed. "I was born in Sweden," he explained. "My grandfather went there in the early 1870's. When I came to this country, all I could speak was Swedish and French. I have learned Italian since by the simple trick of listening to a set of language records."

Butler looked at his wrist watch. "The hour's getting late. We better start back now."

Before we left Luigi handed me an envelope. When we were outside the restaurant, Butler turned to me. "How stupid, we forgot to pay our bill."

"Not at all," I disclosed; "you see I have a half interest in the restaurant. Inside the envelope is a check for this month's profit."

When we got into the car Butler asked, "If it's not too personal, how does an editor become a partner in an Italian restaurant run by a Swede?"

"Nothing mysterious," I began,

"you see, it all started in the days of the depression back in the '30's. Luigi was broke; I gave him three thousand dollars to open a small place. It prospered until he opened this restaurant and my return was the half interest."

Then my tongue froze in my mouth. My eyes almost popped out as I remembered something.

"Hey, what's wrong—poisoned? Or did you swallow your tongue?"

"I just remembered something terrible," I confessed. "You see the partnership agreement contains a clause that in case of death of either partner, the survivor gets the entire business and also the sum of \$25,000—which would result from a partnership policy we took out."

"That makes Luigi on par with your boss as a possible suspect," was the only comment I got from Butler. "Don't worry, I got a recording of his voice on the Mitone recorder. I am going to take you directly to your apartment, then go home for some sleep."

He rode up silently with me on the elevator. I took my key case from my pocket and inserted the key in the lock. As I opened in the door, I heard something snap. Detective Butler threw his body against mine, and we both went down in a heap, as a sawed-off shot gun missed me with a scattering hail of buckshot.

WHEN I recovered consciousness, Butler was standing over me and a doctor was bandaging my hand. "It's not serious," said the doctor, "your hand was just grazed by some of those buckshot. Don't use it for a few days and it will be o. k."

My eyes spoke that I wanted the puzzle cleared up.

"Your voice almost got you this time; he rigged up a sawed-off shot gun connected to a mouse trap. When you opened the door you pulled the string that set off the mouse trap. That in turn pulled another string which pulled the trigger of the shot gun. He rigged that gun up with a clamp on your table. I just got a glimpse of the

barrel and we made it by a split second."

I was shaky and Butler could spot the trembling in my voice. "Can't take very much more of this kind of a game. If this keeps up, the fellow who wants to bump me off can't have a straight run of errors. All he has to do is connect once and that finishes me."

And there wasn't any doubt that my bodyguard had the same idea going through his brain cells. "Get some sleep if that's possible. Tomorrow morning you go to the office and I'll be at your side. As soon as I get a recording of everyone there we go straight to the Professor's place. I'm not kidding myself either; Time is of the essence when you got Death staking the cards against you."

Sleep was impossible and I wasn't conscious of the pain in the hand; I just wanted to go on living and that didn't seem to be an unreasonable desire on my part. If the someone we were looking for happened to be part of the office staff, that narrowed the search down. But cold sweat gathered on my forehead when I thought of the possibility it might be a person outside the office. Then we could never spot him.

Roger Hartly was in charge of the art department. He was one of those fellows who could have been in his late twenties or early forties. You couldn't win a bet guessing his age. He had a busy head of hair that told you, "either musician or artist." Roger placed some drawings on my desk.

"Here's some nice stuff by the fellow who wrote us last week. Harold Gibson is his name. He's been free lancing for some of the pulps out in Chicago and I think he's going places."

I looked at the drawings and just nodded my head automatically. "Guess that accident last night unnerved you," said Roger. "But as long as you got that nursemaid from the police department around, I

guess your killer wouldn't have an easy job making a victim out of you."

I felt like telling Roger to jump into the lake when I caught Herman's eyes. It was first names now, especially when Death has almost given you a fatal kiss and you sort of feel a closeness to the man who is doing his best to keep you alive. I arose from my desk and went over to the corner of the room where my detective pal was going through some back issues of our magazines.

"We better leave now," he suggested in a low voice. "I got all the recordings we need. The sooner we get over to the Professor's apartment, the better." The suggestion seemed sound to me and we were on our way uptown in five minutes.

I WATCHED with eager eyes, like a kid of ten, as Professor Musterman played those recordings. He did it a second time, and then a third time. On a sheet of paper he had the names of the people.

"Your man is Roger Hartly," was his verdict. "New England in it, a bit of the Middle West, and that nasal touch. I can place a handkerchief over this speaker and show you a recording of the voice as it would be when it is disguised." Five minutes later we listened to a second recording and there wasn't the slightest bit of doubt as to the identity of the man.

"Where does he live?" asked Herman.

"Uptown, off Central Park West. I've never been there. He's not a very sociable fellow and likes to keep to himself; I guess he has his own crowd and goes out with them."



The apartment house was relatively new and we went up to the sixteenth floor. My bodyguard rang the bell and an eye appeared at the peep hole. I told her who I was and she let us both in. Then we got the shock of our lives. She must have been about five feet six, thin, and in perfect proportion. Jet black hair drawn back and narrow eyes. She was dressed in a kimono! I got what was off my mind first.

"Tell me—why they call you Butterfly," I tried to remark in an off-hand manner. It was a shot in the dark and it worked. My ego went up one hundred per cent as she replied in a musical tone of voice.

"I was born in the Orient. My parents were missionaries and Roger met me in Japan while he was painting some pictures for a millionaire. He gave me that pet name. Maybe I reminded him of the tragic heroine of a certain opera."

We waited and waited for Roger to come. If his wife knew anything was wrong, she never for once betrayed it.

"Can I get you some drinks?" she offered as we heard the key turn in the lock.

Roger looked at the three of us, and you could see a wild cast to his face.

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He pointed his index finger at me and demanded, "What kind of a cat-and-mouse game are you playing with me? You knew all along I wanted to kill you. And I had every right to do so; you took my wife's love away from me. Are you trying to drive me mad?"

How do you reason with a madman? One who has let jealousy deprive him of the power of clear reasoning. Then Roger raised his other hand and it held a snub-nosed .32 which he pointed directly at me.

Herman got into action with words. "Look here—before you do any shooting with that gun; you can make a mistake and kill the wrong man. Why not ask your wife if there happens to be another man? And if so, let her name him."

"If you go for your gun, Mr. Detective," warned Roger, "I'll let you have it too." Then he turned towards his wife and kept his eyes focused on us at the same time. "Is Joe the man?" was all he asked.

Mrs. Hartly nervously bit her lower lips as she tried to avoid her husband's piercing gaze. I guess I was about ready to sink to the floor; all she had to do was to mention my name and that was my finish. Whoever the other fellow happened to be, if she loved him, she probably wouldn't betray him; I could be the sacrificial goat.

THEN, ALL of a sudden, the expression on Roger's face changed as though he had suddenly become conscious of some fact he had long overlooked.

"You don't have to answer," he recommended with sarcasm in his voice. "I think I know who has been responsible for all of this. I've been blind a long time but now I see things clearly."

His eyes shifted to me. "Sorry, Joe, for the mess I have made of things. The man who likes my wife must be the same one who suggested you were playing around with her. That rat is..." but he never finished the words. Four shots in rapid succession poured into his back as he slumped to the floor—dead.

There was the glint of a gun-barrel in the door behind and Herman got out his gun and emptied its contents at the narrow opening. Then the door slammed tight. We smashed through that wooden door into a hall and then spotted the service door to the apartment.

Butler opened it and commented as we looked into an empty hall. "The killer must have had a key to the apartment. All the time he was behind that door taking in every word being spoken. Well, Mrs. Hartly knows who he is; I'm going to take her to Police Headquarters and she'll talk."

As we turned to retrace our steps we heard one shot. We raced back to the room to see Mrs. Hartly on the floor with her husband's gun in her outstretched hand. She had put one bullet into her brain—which was all that was needed for the job.

Detective Pierson came over with the boys from Homicide and they took charge of things; Butler saw I was ready to collapse. "I'm going to Kansas, where I have an aunt, for a rest or I'll have a mental breakdown," I said. "But first I'm going over to my boss' place and tell him to get a new editor."

"I might as well go with you," suggested Herman Butler. "After all there is a killer still on the loose. Whether or not he wants you, the law wants him. Its going to be my job to get him, even though we haven't the slightest clue as to his identity. If one of my bullets nicked him, he's got to go to a doctor and the law requires a physician to make a report within twenty-four hours of such a case. Let's go over to Mr. Parker's house."

I SAW Eleanor first and told her what had happened. "You certainly need a rest, Joe," she said sympathetically. "My husband is in his library. Go on in and settle things with him."

I entered the library room followed by Detective Butler. I came right to the point and to my surprise found my boss very nice about it. "You take off as long as you want,

Joe. A month, two, three, four or five. And remember, it's with pay; I never forget the loyalty of a good man."

I extended my hand and we shook with my nervous fingers holding his in a tight grasp. Then I saw the red trickle of blood coming down his sleeve and staining my fingers.

"So you never forget the loyalty of a good man," I echoed. "You killed Roger; his wife is dead because of you; and you nearly sent me to a grave."

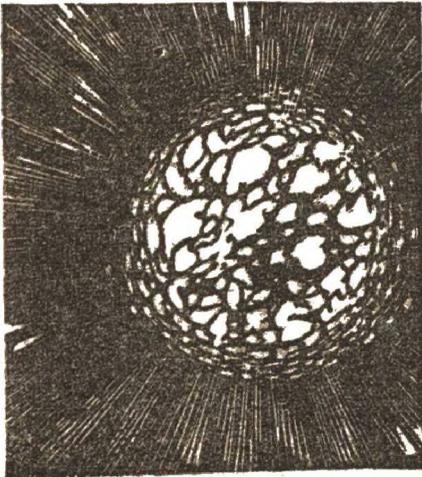
"Don't reach for your gun," advised Butler, "because there is nothing I would like better than to say in my report that you were killed resisting arrest."

Three months later, after the jury had returned a verdict of guilty in the first degree, without a recommendation for mercy, Herman and I sat in Luigi's. I had taken a two

month's rest and looked much better.

"I'm going to continue with the magazines," I told him; "Eleanor wants me to carry on. Somehow when you go through an experience like mine, you get a different attitude when you read fiction manuscripts. To think that Parker even told Roger to take the car and run me down. Parker was just as jealous as Roger; even though he had been cheating, making love to Mrs. Hartly, he thought I was making love to *his* wife. He wanted me out of the way as well as Roger. Poor Butterfly. I guess I'll always think of this as The Butterfly of Death. Parker had a gold key to her apartment and he always knew when her husband was out. Women are a funny lot."

There was a peculiar smile creeping over Detective Butler's face. "Women are a funny lot? Which reminds me. I get married next month and you are going to be my best man."



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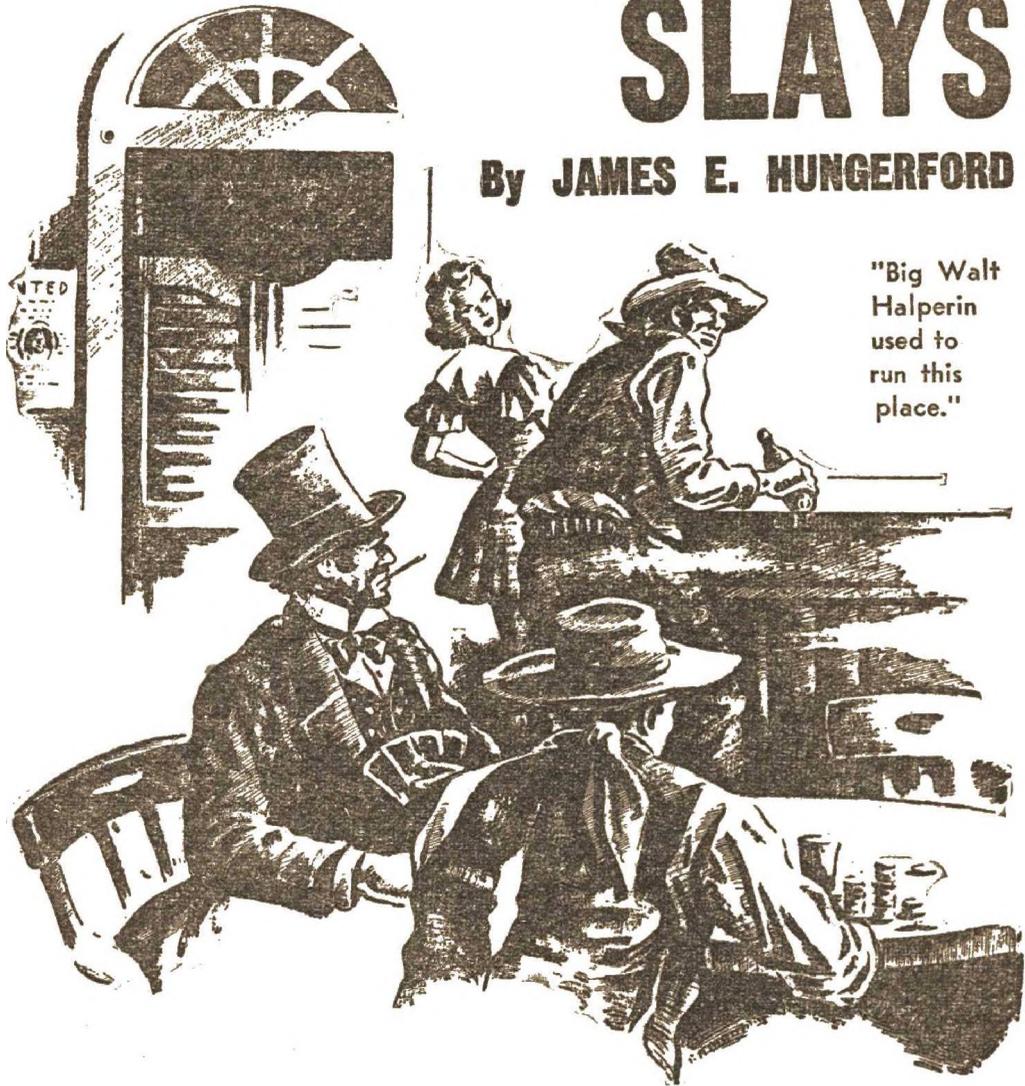
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By JAMES E. HUNGERFORD



"Big Walt Halperin used to run this place."

When the movie company came in, it looked as if a bad-man gambler had returned from Boothill to get in a few more killings!

IF AN EVENING, when desert winds moan weirdly through deserted buildings in Yucca City, "Ghost-Town Jim" Boggs sits on the rotting-plank platform of the Tonapah & Hassayampa branch-line depot muttering greet-

ings to oldtime friends who have been dead for years.

"Howdy, Big Watt!...Howdy, Poker-Chip...Nice evenin', Caliente Rose!... *Buenas noches*, Mexican Molly!"

Sometimes Jim imagines he hears

a train rolling down rusty rails of the long-abandoned railroad track, and hops up from his rickety cane-bottom chair to meet it as spryly as in days when Yucca City was a roaring, lawless, gold-rush "boom-town." Not that Jim Boggs is looney; far from it! He only lives over again in memory the days when he was Chief of Police of the Nevada mining-town.

In its prime, Yucca City boasted a population of ten-thousand inhabitants, and Main Street was cluttered with gambling-parlors, saloons, dance-halls. Then the mining-boom petered out, and the town was deserted. A Police Chief was no longer needed, but Jim refused to leave, believing the town would "come alive" in a new gold-rush, and he would get his old job back.

For years now, Jim's sole companions have been snakes, lizards, horned-toads, bats, and other crawling, hopping, flying denizens of the desert that make their habitat in the crumbling, dilapidated buildings on Main Street. These, and a flea-bitten old bear-dog and an aged burro keep Jim company. Sometimes "Mexican Joe" Mendez, a grizzled, swarthy-skinned resident of the Nevada Desert, visits Jim, following him about like a faithful old dog. Jim saved Mexican Joe's life once, when a drunken prospector had tried to cut Joe's throat.

One afternoon, not long ago, Jim's eyes bulged at sight of a large aggregation of people coming toward Ghost-Town over the shimmering sands. The shock brought him out of his chair, with a gasp, dropping his pipe.

"By golly Moses! The old town's *comin' alive* again in a new gold-rush!" he blurted.

Nerves jumping with excitement, he rushed forth to greet the newcomers, only to meet with bitter disappointment. The cavalcade of men, women, horses, trucks, trailers, had come into the Nevada desert to "shoot" scenes for a historical-Western motion-picture.

At first Jim refused to be welcoming host to the visitors, resent-

ing their intrusion on his privacy. But after considerable persuasion, movie-director Dave Parsons prevailed on him to act as guide about Ghost-Town and play a "bit" role in the picture.

"All right! Go ahead with your danged tomfoolery!" growled Jim. "An' git it over *quick!* I ain't han-kerin' for company!"

THAT EVENING, when the movie-actors gathered on the old Tonapah & Hassayampa depot platform, Jim Boggs told hair-raising yarns about boom-town days that gave his listeners the creeps. Mexican Joe Mendez had drifted in from the desert and joined the group.

"The spirits of the dead—dance-hall gals, gamblers, outlaws, come flittin' down Main Street 'round the old buildings 'most every evenin'," concluded Jim somberly. "Along 'bout midnight, they starts in wailin', moanin' an' lamentin' over their past sins."

Dexter Marlow, the movie villain; a handsome, swarthy, sinister-looking thespian, sat beside Mazie O'Hern, the company's pretty, dark-eyed leading lady. "Ghosts—*bosh!*" he rasped sneeringly. "Damned tommyrot and nonsense! The only ghosts around here are in the brains of some foolish, superstitious humans!"

"I'm—I'm not so sure of that!" said Mazie O'Hern, peering awesomely at the moonlit desolation of Main Street. "After hearing Mr. Boggs' gruesome experiences as Police Chief of Yucca City, I—I feel sort of jittery and squeamish."

"Nonsense!" scoffed Marlow. "Living alone in this damnable desert has made Mr. Boggs neurotic! His 'ghosts' are nothing more than the wind whistling through empty buildings."

Mazie's uncle, Stephen O'Hern, tall, gaunt, elderly character-actor, coughed harshly. "Fools are skeptical of everything!" he rasped. "Wise men withhold judgment until a thing has been proved or disproved!"

Marlow shot him a cold, contemptuous glance; that the two men dis-

liked each other heartily was obvious.

With the exception of Mazie O'Hern, no member of the movie company liked Marlow, because of his insolent tongue and swaggering pose of superiority. "Tex" Lanning, leading man, detested him, as did Dave Parsons, the director.

Jim Boggs had noted these facts as his shrewd, deep-socketed gray eyes had studied his guests, gathered on the depot platform. "You don't have to believe what I've told you about the spirits of Ghost-Town flittin' around the old camp o' nights," he growled. "Some folks 'low it's the wind whistlin' through buildings. Maybe it is, and again maybe it ain't. You can decide *that* for yourselves!"

Jim proudly showed his guests faded old photographs of Caliente Rose, Mexican Molly, Poker-Chip O'Fallon and Big Watt Halperin, ex-residents of Ghost-Town. The movie-actors were much interested in the pictures from a "character" angle, particularly Tex Lanning, Dave Parsons and Stephen O'Hern, all expert "make-up" artists.

Mazie O'Hern had moved over beside Jim, on the platform. "I'm terribly interested to know something" she whispered. "*Which* of those dance-hall girls did you like best, Mr. Boggs; Caliente Rose or Mexican Molly?"

Jim smiled in the moonlit darkness—a tender smile. His gaze shifted to Boothill Cemetery, rising somberly in the silvery gloom, north of Ghost-Town. "I—I always put flowers on the graves of both of 'em," he said gently.

WHEN THE gathering on the depot platform had broken up, Boggs heard angry, lowered voices in the shadowy darkness of the Casino dance-hall. From behind a corner of the old building, he caught only a brief snatch of the quarrel. "...and if you don't keep away from her, Marlow, you damn philandering phony, I'll wring your neck!"

The speaker was Tex Lanning.

Dave Parsons came hurrying up as the two actors began pummeling each other with fists. "You fellows get to your sleeping quarters!" he rasped. "I'm damned tired of your bickering! And I'm telling both of you *again* to keep away from Mazie O'Hern after working hours!"

"That doesn't seem to apply to *you*, Parsons," sneered Marlow. "Mazie is the only friend I've got in this damned outfit! I intend to see her whenever it's agreeable to her!" He strode away abruptly into the night.

"The *heel!*" gritted Dave Parsons. "If he wasn't a good actor, I'd give him the gate! Sometimes I'd like to wring his onery neck!"

"You and me both, Boss," growled Tex Lanning. "And one of these days I might *do* that little thing!"

The members of the movie company didn't sleep much that night in the quarters Jim Boggs had allotted to them in the dust-filled, gloomy old Palace Hotel. From all directions came screechy, whistling, sobby noises. Bats darted squeakily about the ancient, crumbling buildings. Sand-owls hooted dismally along Main Street. Coyotes yelped hideously at the moon from lonely tragedy-haunted Boothill Cemetery.

Along toward midnight, Jim Boggs was jerked out of sound slumber by a piercing scream, followed by running footfalls along the hall. Somebody knocked frantically on his door. "Quick! Let me in!" cried a hysterical voice.

Jim flung open the door, and Mazie O'Hern almost fell into his arms. "That—that man, whose photograph you showed us, this evening, Big Walt Halperin, the oldtime dance-hall owner! I—I looked out my window and saw him sneaking along near the hotel, in the moonlight! His—his face was exactly like the face on the old photograph—long black hair, black moustache, and—"

"Bosh an' nonsense!" growled Jim. "Big Watt Halperin has been in his grave on Boothill for years. Maybe his spirit wanders 'round town, but I ain't ever seen Big Watt

personal! Now get back to your bed, an' quit imaginin' things!"

But Mazie O'Hern was in no mood for slumber.

JIM WAS trying to calm her nerves, when Lanning came striding into the room. Halting, he stared in surprise to find Mazie O'Hern there. "What's wrong, honey? What are you doing here?" he questioned sharply.

"I'm here, perhaps, for the same reason you are," answered Mazie. "I don't believe in spooks ordinarily, but—"

"Nor do I," snapped Tex. "Maybe you'll think I'm crazy, but I'll swear I saw a face peering into my room window, a few minutes ago, that looked like—"

"Like the fellow whose photograph Boggs showed us this evening, Big Watt Halperin!" a voice interrupted from the doorway, and Dave Parsons came into the room. "I saw the fellow's face distinctly, peering into my window, and—"

"Funny," growled Jim. "If three of you seen Big Watt Halperin, he must have been there, unless you've got the dangdest imaginations—"

"I see face, too, senor Jim," broke in a husky, guttral voice, and Mexican Joe Mendez joined the party. "I see Big Watt's face plenty plain! Him look in at window, glare fierce! *El Diablo* send Big Watt back from Boothill to—"

Dexter Marlow came swaggering into the room, but his stride was less cocky than usual. Not far behind him was Mazie's uncle, Stephen O'Hern. Both men had seen a face resembling the pictured likeness of Big Watt Halperin peering in at their windows.

"Funny Big Watt didn't drop 'round an' pay me a call, too," scoffed Jim Boggs. "Danged if I don't feel plumb neglected, bein' passed up by my old friend, Watt, if he's come back from the dead! Now you folks get back to your quarters an' quit imaginin' things! A walkin' corpse! Bosh!"

Marlow laughed raspily. "You're not as neurotic as I imagined you

were, Mr. Boggs," he flung back, as he swaggered from the room.

NEXT MORNING the corpse of the much-disliked Marlow was found sprawled on the floor of the dusty, cobwebbed Palace Hotel room where he had bedded himself, his eyes staring glassily up at the crumbling plaster ceiling. Apparently he had come to his death by strangulation.

The windows of the room were securely latched, and there were no footprints visible on the ground outside. Dust lay thick on the floor of the death room, and the footprints there were evidently Marlow's.

"Looks like the devil hisself has paid a visit to Ghost-Town," muttered Jim Boggs, as he inspected the murder chamber. Bending over the actor's body, his eyes widened with sudden surprise. In one rigid, clenched hand Marlow clutched several long, black hairs.

Returning to his own room, Jim got the tarnished old badge he had once worn as Police Chief of Yucca City out of a dusty bureau drawer, polished it on his shirt sleeve and attached the badge to a suspender gallus.

Then he walked slowly, thoughtfully up to Boothill Cemetery, and stood looking down at Big Watt Halperin's weed-grown grave. "How in hell you could get flesh back on your skeleton bones, a suit of clothes on your back, an' get out of that six-foot-deep hole, without disturbin' the dirt is more than I can figger," he muttered. "But you was such a danged schemin' rascal, when you was runnin' the Casino dance-hall an' gamblin'-parlor; maybe you made a dicker with the devil to let you come back to Ghost-Town for a vacation!"

On his return trip from Boothill to Main Street, Jim was passing the Casino dance-hall when Mexican Joe Mendez hailed him from the dance-hall entrance. "You come quick, senor Jim! I got somethin' to show you inside much queer!"

Jim followed Joe into the big barnlike structure that had once

been the center of hilarious gaiety in Yucca City gold-rush days... hilarity and ghastly murder. Here and there under the floor-dust were ancient blood stains; dark-splotched reminders of violent knife and gun killings.

"Look!" grunted Mexican Joe, pointing a gnarled forefinger. "Big Watt Halperin visit dance-hall last night!"

At one end of the room was a long mahogany bar, flanked by a big, ornately-framed mirror. The mirror was cracked in places, and heavily filmed with dust grime of passing years. Scrawled in the dust in the center of the mirror was a crudely drawn skull and cross-bones.

"Umph!" exclaimed Jim. "I didn't know Big Watt was an artist!" He strode behind the mahogany bar, followed noiselessly by Mexican Joe.

Jim noted that enough dust had been wiped from the left side of the mirror to permit a man to see his reflection clearly in the glass. He ran a forefinger nail through a gob of white, greasy substance on the mirror frame, and grunted. On the back bar, directly beneath the greasy, white substance on the mirror frame, was another gob of the same greasy substance.

"Big Watt Halperin always was a vain damned cuss," muttered Jim, "The walkin' corpse evidently was here last night lookin' at himself in the bar glass by candle light. He stuck the candle on the mirror frame, an' it dripped that gob of grease on the back bar."

MEXICAN JOE had been doing some exploring on his own account. In one gnarled hand he clutched a large, black, hairy object, which he had found under the mahogany bar.

"Well, shoot me for a rattler!" exclaimed Jim. "It looks like the wig Big Walt Halperin bought years ago in Reno, to cover his shiny bald head!"

Examining the toupee, Jim found small particles of candle-grease imbedded in the long, black hairs. "The

lit candle stuck on the mirror frame must've dripped on the toupee while Big Watt was admirin' himself in the glass," he muttered. "Furthermore, the hair on this wig looks like the hairs I found in the hand of the dead actor, Marlow. Big Watt's walkin' corpse evident paid Marlow a visit."

Mexican Joe took the toupee from Jim, grinning. "Me got bald head, too," he said, and placed the wig on his nearly hairless pate. "Not so good fit—but I wear heem."

"You're welcome to the dang wig," chuckled Jim. "Gosh knows, I've got no use for a dead man's old head-piece! Well...I've got to be movin', Joe. I've got a movie actor's corpse to look after over at the hotel."

As Jim stomped out of the dance-hall into Main Street, a muffled cry of agony reached his ears, followed by loud groans. Running back into the Casino, he found Mexican Joe sprawled on the floor, blood trickling from a nasty scalp wound on the back of his head. The wig was gone from his bald skull. In his right hand, he clutched a sizable bunch of long, black hairs. When able to talk, he told Jim of being attacked and struck down from behind. He had grabbed at the wig, as it was snatched from his head.

"Looks like Big Watt's walkin' corpse has come back from the grave to raise some sure-'nough hell!" gritted Jim.

Helping Mexican Joe over to the Palace Hotel, Jim left his friend's head-wound to the tender ministrations of Mazie O'Hern, while he paid a visit to Marlow's death room. To his surprise, he found the actor's body had been removed during his absence.

"Maybe Big Watt Halperin showed up here an' packed the dead man up to Boothill graveyard to keep him company," muttered Jim.

STEPPING into the hotel hallway, Boggs nearly collided with Director Dave Parsons. "What happened to Mister Marlow's corpse?" he questioned the movie man sharply. "You ain't met up with it roamin'

'round the hotel somewheres, have you?"

"I—I took Marlow's remains to the undertaker in Hassayampa," informed Parsons. "After a brief examination, the coroner thought Marlow may have died of natural causes; a heart-attack."

"Then the coronor is damn dumb, or for reasons of his own he's figurin' to make a false report at the inquest!" snapped Jim. "The actor feller, Marlow, was murdered."

Parsons seemed nervous and distraught. "We—we've got to go easy on this matter, Boggs," he stammered. "It—it would be nasty publicity for my picture, if it got out that Marlow was—er—murdered. I have no reason to doubt the coronor's assumption that—"

"Bosh!" gritted Jim. "Marlow was choked to death by a murderin' killer! I'm still the law in Yucca City—all the law there is. An' by thunderation, as long as I've got my old badge of office, I'm goin' to see that justice is done!"

Parsons knew that Jim meant what

he said, but he was persistent. "Now see here, Boggs, can't we get together on this unfortunate business? I don't want any adverse publicity that will hurt the sale of my picture. If—if it's a matter of money—"

"It ain't! It's a matter of murder!" snapped Jim. "All I'm interested in is findin' the rattler who killed Marlow."

Dave let the matter drop for the moment. "By the way, Boggs. That old photograph of Big Watt Halperin you showed us last night—I'd like to borrow it. We're taking some camera-shots of the Casino dance-hall, this afternoon, and I thought it would be a keen idea to have the dance-hall owner in the movie-play look like Big Watt Halperin—a typical honky-tonk type of boom-town days."

"Sure thing, I'll loan you the photygraft," agreed Jim. "Big Watt was so dang vain, I wouldn't be surprised if his walkin' corpse would show up at the dance-hall an' want to act in your picture!"

Parsons emitted a raspy chuckle.

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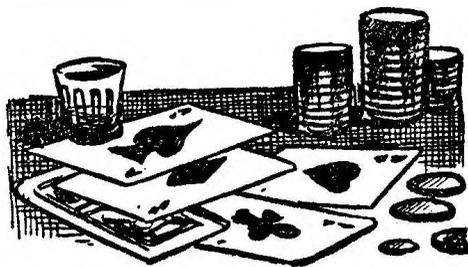
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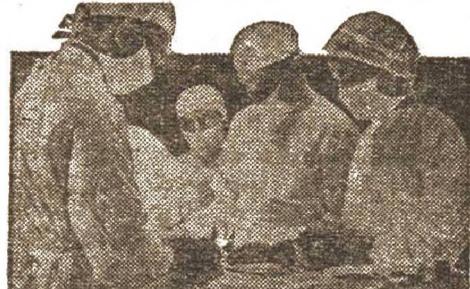
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"You have a bizarre sense of humor, Mr. Boggs," he commented acidly.

That afternoon, lighting and sound apparatus was set up in the big main room of the Casino dance-hall. The bar mirror had been cleaned of accumulated grime of years, and the actors were using the glass in applying make-up to their faces.

Stanley Ryerson, understudy to Dexter Marlow, had taken the dead man's place in the movie play. Ryerson had disliked Marlow intensely because the deceased player had regarded the understudy's acting with intolerant contempt. Now Ryerson was assuming Marlow's role in the picture with intense satisfaction; Marlow's passing seemed to exalt Ryerson rather than depress him.

Three actors were preparing to "test out" for the role of Big Watt Halperin, dance-hall king, whose faded photograph stood on the back bar, to guide the thespians in applying their make-up. Those testing for the "hit" role were Tex Lanning, Stanley Ryerson and Stephen O'Hern.

THE ACTORS were absorbed in transferring the photograph likeness of Big Watt Halperin to their faces. When Jim Boggs entered the Casino dance-hall with Mazie O'Hern, Mexican Joe Mendez shuffled along behind them, fingering the patch of court-plaster Mazie had applied to his scalp-wound.

"Danged if Big Watt Halperin ain't comin' alive three times!" blurted Jim, staring at the actors' faces reflected in the bar mirror.

"It's—it's really uncanny!" exclaimed Mazie O'Hern. "If I was a man, I'd like to play the part of Big Watt Halperin, myself. He was such a thrilling person!"

"Yeah. He was a thrillin' person, all right," drawled Jim "An' also a killin' one; he murdered six men, when he was runnin' the old dance-hall in boom-town days."

"All right, boys," snapped director Dave Parsons. "Don your wigs now, and we'll make a still-camera test to decide which of you gets the role

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of Big Watt Halperin in the dance-hall scenes we're shooting this afternoon."

The three actors finished applying their make-up, and donned black-haired wigs like the one Big Watt Halperin had worn when Yucca City was at its zenith.

Mazie O'Hern shuddered. "They—they look exactly like the creature I saw outside my hotel window last night!" she exclaimed

"Yeah. I reckon so," agreed Jim Boggs gruffly. "Big Watt was so dang vain, he would be mighty proud an' puffed up to see himself three times in a row. I wouldn't be surprised if his walkin' corpse has come down from Boothill an' is takin' a peek at his actor duplicates through a dance-hall window!"

Heads of the assembled movie actors pivoted around jerkily on necks, but the Casino windows stared back at them blankly.

"Okay, men—now for the test," ordered Dave Parsons, and the actors lined up before the waiting camera.

"Shoot the picture, Tony," snapped Parsons.

"Jest a minute!" interrupted a gruff voice. "If there's any *shootin'* to be done, I'll do it!"

Jim Boggs stepped swiftly in front of the camera; jerked a wig from the head of one of the actors; shoved his old Colt .45 against the thespian's stomach. "I arrest you for the murder of the Marlow feller you choked to death last night in his hotel room," he rasped.

COMMOTION swept the Casino dance-hall like a conflagration. "He—he must be crazy!" cried out Mazie O'Hern, horrified. "It's ridiculous to accuse—"

"The old coot has gone nuts!" blurted Tex Lanning; "he imagines he's back in his police-chief days!"

"What's the meaning of this damn foolishness?" shouted Parsons. "You're insane, Boggs!"

"On the contrary," said Stephen O'Hern, the character actor, grimly, "Mr. Boggs isn't indulging in fool-

GHOST-TOWN SLAYS

ishness nor is he the victim of an addled imagination; as a matter of fact, he has delivered the goods."

From a pocket of his faded, patched old coat, ex-Police-Chief Jim Boggs drew a pair of handcuffs and clipped them on the wrists of the actor who had played the role of murderer in many a stage and movie play.

"O.K., Sheriff Hopperson! Come an' get your prisoner!" he shouted.

From a rear room of the dance-hall strode the sheriff of Hassayampa County. Jim had sent Mexican Joe to fetch the law-officer earlier that afternoon.

"Good work, Boggs," commended the lawman. "And now, maybe you'll do us the honor to explain how you caught this killer."

"Glad to accommodate," said Jim. "Fact is, I didn't know who the killer was till a few minutes ago. When the actor gents put on them wigs, I figgered I had my man. For one thing, there was a patch of hair missin' from the killer's headpiece; the hair Mexican Joe yanked out of the wig, when the killer sneaked up behind him, grabbed the wig an' busted him on the head. Joe didn't get a look at the murderin' varmint. Last night, standin' before the bar-mirror, the killer made himself up to look like Big Watt Halperin. He stuck a candle on the mirror frame an' some of the grease drippings from the candle dropped on his wig, as you can see by them particles imbedded in the hair. When he had fixed himself up to look like Big Watt, he come snoopin' 'round the Palace Hotel, scarin' hell out of folks.

"As for the murder," concluded Jim, "Marlow, the actor, was clutchin' some black hairs in a dead hand; had evident yanked the wig off the killer's head before—"

"Precisely, Mr. Boggs," interrupted a somber voice. "Marlow jerked the wig from my head before he died—but I didn't strangle the rat, as you believe. I intended to kill him, but he died of a shock; heart-failure. Last night, when you showed us Big Watt Halperin's photograph,

[Turn Page]



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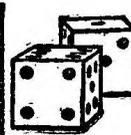
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"Why did you want to kill Marlow?" broke in Boggs sharply.
 "Because I despised the low-life cheat and philanderer!" rasped Stephen O'Hern. "I wanted to protect my niece, Mazie; tongues were wagging, when we left Hollywood for the Nevada Desert. My niece is slated for stardom in pictures, and—"

WITH AN agonized cry, Mazie O'Hern flung her arms about her uncle.

"There, there now, child," he soothed gently. "Try to forgive a miserable old fool for—" His voice broke in a low moan.

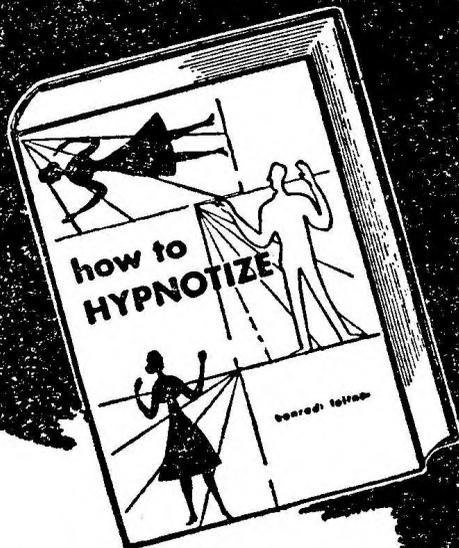
Tex Lanning drew Mazie away from her uncle, comforting her. Her arms went about the young actor, as she had embraced him in many movie love-scenes. This time it wasn't play-acting.

Stephen O'Hern's head was bowed; his face sorrowfully tragic. "I—I don't allow the Law will be too hard on you, Mister O'Hern," Jim Boggs said gently. "I figger maybe you'll get off light, as we're fair an' square in dealin' out justice in Hassayampa County."

Jim removed the tarnished old police-chief badge from his suspender-gallus and looked at it affectionately. Sighing heavily he thrust it into a pocket of his faded, shabby old coat.



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THE MOUNTAIN COMES TO MOHAMMED

(Continued From Page 103)

bills. Then, when Louie went out for his afternoon walk, Landis left again. It was all perfectly safe and, as I said before, perfectly simple; so simple that I'd have spotted it even without reading the reports."

"That," Jeff stated flatly, "I don't believe."

Stephen smiled with the bland ingenuousness that always set his older brother's teeth on edge. "But it's true, Jeff," he protested. "If Louie wasn't meeting Landis—and it was plain that he wasn't, or Forbes or one of the other men you had tailing him would have spotted them—then the only other way for them to make contact was for Landis to meet him. You all made the quite natural mistake of expecting Mohammed to go to the mountain, whereas," his smile became even more ingenuous, "this was one of the rare instances in which the mountain came to Mohammed."

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FOR THIS REASON

By

JOHN THOMAS URWIN

Mrs. Frack thought she was justified in shooting her husband...

"STILL TRYING to be Mrs. Frack's lawyer?" the Sheriff asked me, "Why don't you just let her alone like she wants?"

"Not my idea." I said; "her relatives want me to see what I can do."

"Well, I'll check." He picked up the phone. A moment later he said, "She'll see you." He looked at some letters in his hand. "It's been a week, now; maybe she's getting lonesome." He waved me on toward the distant cell-block.

"Wait a minute," he called after me. "Here, take these to her. Probably some cranks praising her for shooting her husband." He looked at the faces of the envelopes quizzically, "Some bills here, too," he said. "They're certainly sure as death and taxes, aren't they?"

I took the bundle. "They're addressed to her home," I said, "how did the mailman come to leave them here?"

"It's a small town, son; everybody knows she's here, and why."

"Oh," I said, "yeah. Well, I'll take them in."

[Turn Page]

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"Cleary will show you where," the Sheriff said. "I like to stay away from those ferret-faced women much as I can."

The Sheriff was right. Cleary showed me where, unlocking the cell for me; and Mrs. Frack was ferret-faced. She was attractive enough in a slim way, but her facial expression gave me the feeling she thought that I and the whole world were holding something out on her. She didn't say anything about sitting down, so I handed her the mail.

She looked at it impersonally, said abruptly, "I don't see any point in our talking." She paused. "I thought if I told you that you'd leave me alone."

"Your brother's folks wanted me to—" I didn't really get started.

"I shot my husband," she said. "I shot Richard when he was phoning that woman again; I couldn't stand it any more and I killed him."

I wanted to get her talking. "Perhaps," I said, "Mr. Frack wasn't calling a woman. Maybe it was a business call."

"At one o'clock in the morning?" There was scornful bitterness in her voice. "It was a woman. I just *know* it was. He had taken to staying up long after I went to bed just to talk to her."

She was so intense that she convinced me that Richard Frack had certainly been an indifferently faithful husband. "If it was a woman," I still reserved a final judgment, "do you have any idea who it was?"

"No, but I watched him for a

long time. He was acting very differently toward me." Her eyes flickered over my face as though to search out some defection on my own part. "I caught him, though."

There was a world of satisfied suspicion in her voice. "I went to bed and fell asleep finally; when I woke he was standing at the hall telephone with the nightlight showing his face plain."

She opened a letter with a quick probe of her nail-file. "Richard," she said, "had a very pleased expression on his face, very pleased. Oh, he was talking to *her* all right."

"Perhaps," I suggested, "we might make something of a plea of temporary insanity—" I got no further.

"No! I went to the dresser and got his gun. I shot him just after he put the phone down. He still had a satisfied smirk on his face; that's the way it was."

Mrs. Frack had been talking to me as if from memory. She kept flicking at the envelopes with her quick nail-file, briefly scanning each letter and putting it aside.

Finally she was looking at a paper that had the crisp impersonality of a bill. She was very quiet; when she continued to say nothing I gently eased the paper from her fingers. She never even noticed.

It was a telephone bill stating the monthly charges, no toll calls listed. The last entry was for the 31st, the morning Richard Frack had been killed. It read with simple starkness:

Time-Signal _____ 0.10.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

★ DEATH OF THE PARTY

By Robert Turner

★ I MURDERED MYSELF!

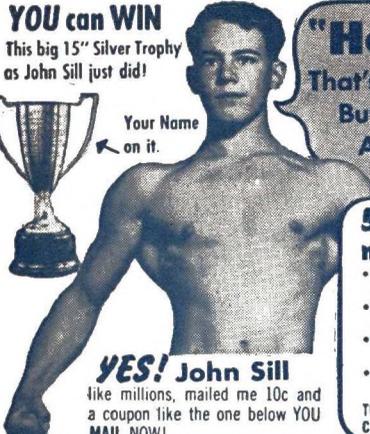
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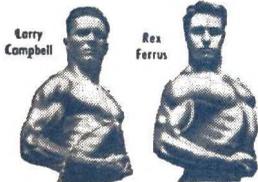
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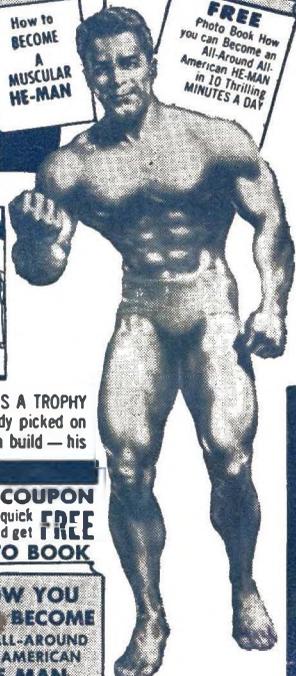
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