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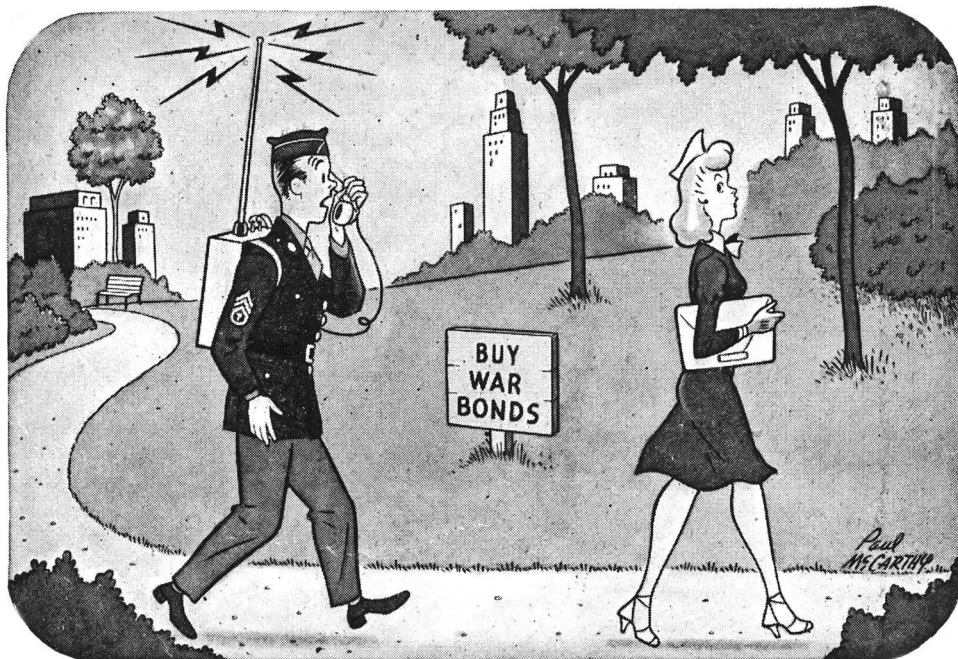


**PRINTER'S
INK RUNS
RED**

by

Roger Torrey

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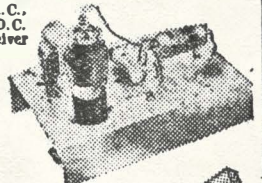
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Speed DETECTIVE



October, 1945

Vol. 4, No. 3

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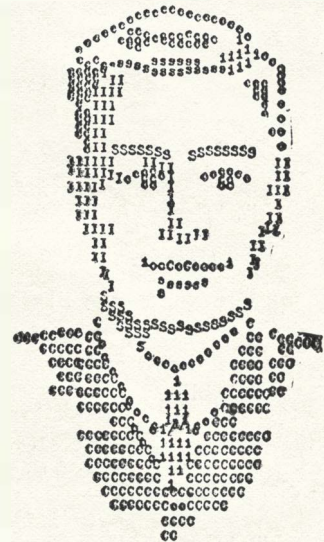
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PRINTER'S INK RUNS RED

I heard a gun blast from the doorway even before I saw who was standing there.



A blackmailing scandal sheet can put a savage yen for murder into the minds and hearts of nearly everybody who's being blackmailed. So when my friend Pender, who was one of them, looked like the fall guy—well, I, private-eye Mickey O'Connor began to throw my weight around to see what connection money and jealousy had to do with this grim mistaken-identity kill

By ROGER TORREY

I LIVE in an apartment house that sports a desk and a desk clerk, by this never means a thing. My little pals sail past the desk as if they don't see it, and the clerk who's shy, just gulps and lets them go. So I was sore instead of surprised when somebody started pounding on my door at a quarter after twelve. I'd been in bed an hour, and was just nicely asleep. I went to the door, but I was talking about having to go to it, and what I had to say was profane, not polite.

It was Jim Pender, who's in a way of being a friend of mine. And he looked as though he was seeing the little men that run around the base-boards.

I said: "Come on in, Jim. You look as if you need another one of the same."

He said: "I'm in trouble, Mickey. Bad trouble."

"Have a drink and tell me about it."

"I don't want a drink."

I said: "Dammit, I do. Come on in."



Once inside, where I had a chance to look at him, I could see that he was really up in the air. He runs a wholesale tobacco-and-candy company, and that business is a gold mine if it's run right.

And Jim Pender ran his business right. He knew everybody in town, had what amounted to a monopoly on his kind of business, and was running for the State Legislature on the Democratic ticket.

Which made him a cinch for election.

I made myself a drink with rye and ice and soda and Jim again refused one,

and he was a drinking man, if not a lush.

He said: "I've got to keep my head, Mickey. I'm really jammed. I flatter myself that I've got as good a name as most men of my age, but I can't stare down what's looking me in the face."

I took a sip of my drink and said: "And what's staring you in the face, mister?"

He said: "Murder."

IF I HADN'T KNOWN Pender as well as I did I probably would have thought of the possibility of error. But when he said "Murder" I knew it was

murder and nothing else. He wasn't the panicky kind. He was big and blond and placid, and this was the first time in my life I'd ever seen him upset.

I said: "All right, Jim. Take it easy. Now—who was killed and how are you mixed in it? Don't tell me that everything went black and all of a sudden you found yourself standing above the body, with a smoking gun in your hand. I won't believe it."

"Don't kid about it, Mickey," he said hoarsely. "I'm not fooling. It's murder, like I told you. It's Smiley."

"The guy who's running the scandal sheet?"

"That's right—that's the man. I had an appointment with him, and when I went to keep it, at his shop, I found him on the floor. Dead, with blood all over."

"How d'ya know he was dead?"

"I . . . I felt of his wrist. There was no pulse."

"Have you called the cops?"

"I couldn't, Mickey. I threw the guy out of my office earlier today. Right down the stairs. The police would certainly find that out. He was killed just before I got to his shop, because his wrist was as warm as if he'd been alive."

"If you threw him out of your office, how come you made an appointment with him at his shop? The police are going to ask you that."

"Maybe if I don't report it . . . if I let somebody else report it, they won't drag me into it."

Our town isn't so big, around eighty thousand, but that doesn't mean there's not some smart men on the force. He was a cinch to be dragged into the mess and I told him why.

I said: "Look, Jim! The minute the news comes out about Smiley being murdered, people are going to talk it over. Your throwing him out of your office will be remembered. You can bank on it. You'll have to tell why you did it. And why you agreed to meet him at his place, afterward. The cops aren't dopes . . . they find out things like that."

"But I can't tell why I agreed to see him."

"Why not?"

He got red in the face. He said: "He was trying to blackmail me. I'm running for office, Mickey. Now's no time for a scandal. I decided I'd advertise in his damned sheet. He propositioned me about it this afternoon, and when I told him I wasn't interested, he hinted he would publish a news story about me that I wouldn't care to see in print."

"And you got sore and threw him out."

That one got the faintest sign of a grin from him. He said: "I did more than throw him out. I picked him up from the chair he was cowering in, heaved him toward the door and grabbed him when he opened it, and then pitched him down the stairs. It's a wonder he didn't break his neck on the way down, and he was limping when he walked away. I don't think I was ever so mad in my life."

"I don't blame you."

"Then I got thinking it over and thought it might be better to go along on it until after election. It's next month . . . I thought I'd pay off that long and then tell him to go to hell."

"How does the blackmail tie in with the advertising? You said first that you were going to advertise with him and then you say he was trying to blackmail you."

Pender said bitterly: "That's the way he works it. It's legal. He finds out something about you and then comes up and asks you to advertise in his dirty sheet. He charges you blackmail prices for the advertising. In my case it was five hundred dollars an issue, and the sheet comes out as often as he wants to print it."

"He gets all his advertising that way?"

"Nobody in his right mind would advertise in that sheet unless he was forced into it, Mickey. Have you ever seen one?"

I said I had and started to get dressed. He looked a little more hopeful then and asked me if I had any idea of what was the best thing for him to do.

I slid into my pants and said: "I have. We're going down there together and discover the body. I'll call the cops. Our story is that you got a phone call from



I asked: "What's staring you in the face, mister?" And he answered: "Murder."

Smiley, whom you knew, asking you to drop in at the shop some time this evening. You happen to be with me and so I drop in with you. We find Smiley. And you'd be better off if you tell them about having an argument with Smiley this afternoon. They'll find it out, anyway. Tell them you loaned him money and that you asked him for it and he refused to pay you. And that you knew he had it, and that you got sore because he wouldn't pay you. That's how the argument started, you can say. Then tell them he called you a dirty name and you gave him the old heave-ho. Tell them you thought he called you to give you this money you loaned him . . . that will explain your being there at his shop. And me being with you will furnish you an alibi of sorts."

"That's swell, Mickey! I don't like to drag you into a mess, but I don't know anything about this kind of thing."

It was a back-handed compliment but I didn't mind. I get so few that *any* kind words are appreciated.

SMILEY'S PRINT SHOP was on a back street, a shabby neighborhood. I've noticed that a lot of print shops pick the same kind of location, and have finally decided that the reason for it is the

noise they make. The presses rattle and clank and I can understand a landlord not wanting to rent to such a noisy tenant—that is, if his place was alongside quiet business houses. They'd move and he'd be stuck with his noisy renter and that would be his only renter.

In the section Smiley was in, noise made no difference. There were warehouses, garages, machine shops, and an ice plant, and all the noise that Smiley could make wouldn't be heard above the din.

There was a dull light coming from the front of the place and there also was a neat little hole through the right-hand front window. It was pretty, with cracks starrng out from it in all directions. Some of them went clear to the edge of the pane.

Pender said: "The door's open—I walked right in."

"And left prints all over the place, I betcha. It don't make any difference, now, Jim. We dropped in together, we say. What would be more natural than your touching things?"

He said: "It's back there. By the biggest one of these. He jerked his head toward one of the machines, some kind of binder, I thought. And I also thought that Pender didn't know any more about the

printing business than I did, and all I knew was that they used ink and paper to do it with. We went to the back of the shop and, in the shadow of this press, if that's what it was, was Smiley.

He was face-down and there was quite a lot of blood. He'd crawled, apparently blindly, at least ten feet, and five feet of that distance were turned from where he'd run into the press or binder or whatever it was.

I said: "He was standing by this gadget and somebody saw him through the window and took a crack at him. It was nice shooting."

"Shooting's too good for a man like that," Pender told me. "It's guys like that that make all the trouble in the world."

By that time I was squatting on my heels beside the body. I tipped its head a little and then got up.

I said: "Did you know he had a printer?"

"Well, no, Mickey. What's that got to do with the mess?"

"That's the mess," I said. "This isn't Smiley, dammit. This must be some guy that works here. I wonder where he keeps the phone."

THE NIGHT MAN on the desk was Sergeant Ollie McKinney, and we'd always got along.

I told him it was Mickey O'Connor and he said it was Desk-sergeant McKinney and then we got down to brass tacks.

I said: "Who's working tonight?"

He played it straight with: "In what department, mister?"

They kidded themselves into thinking they had their detective force in special categories, but that was a joke. The town isn't big enough to have what few cops we have left placed on special duty. Some of the boys enlisted and some were drafted, and the town's running as best it can with a skeleton force.

I said: "Homicide, sergeant."

He did a double take on that one. He said: "Oh yes! That will be Lieu— Hey! Did you say homicide?"

"I did."

"You kidding?"

"I'm not. I'm calling from Smiley's print shop and we just came in here and found his printer dead. Shot. Somebody from the street potted him through the window."

"Olson's working. I'll tell him about it."

I said: "Do that," and started prowling the shop. And was lucky enough to stumble onto a file of previous issues, covering the past year and a half. I'll admit I stumbled into them where they were parked in a filing case, but I still think it was a coincidence. I was looking for the place Smiley kept his case records on the people he was shaking down.

I'd just got some of the old papers tucked away, under my shirt, when Smiley came beaming in. We were away from the printer's body then, clear up front and in another aisle, so Smiley hadn't seen a thing wrong.

He walked up to Pender holding out the hand of friendship, but he'd have looked more natural if there'd been a knife in it. He had a smooth and oily voice and I didn't like him and never had.

He said: "It's nice your coming down like this, Jim. What d'ya say we just forget about that little trouble in your office today? I will if you will, and no hard feelings between us."

Jim seemed to have gone blind, because he didn't seem able to see Smiley's hand. Smiley reddened a little but didn't speak out about the slur. Jim said: "You two know each other?"

We said we knew each other.

Smiley said to Pender: "I'm sorry I'm late. My pressman let you in?"

Pender said: "Oh, sure. He was here when we got here."

I knew what was the matter with him. He'd been sure that it was Smiley whose body he'd seen, and here he was talking to the man himself. It was upsetting and Jim had already taken quite a bit that evening.

I said: "This pressman of yours, Smiley? I don't believe I ever saw him around town."

I'd known Smiley for the year and a

I picked him up from his chair by the front of his coat, and I slapped his face with some good solid smacks.



half he'd been in town and we'd never made any pretense of having any use for each other. Of course I knew what he was doing, but no client of mine had had trouble with him and so I'd never tangled with him. I'd rather looked ahead to seeing him stretched out dead on the floor, though, just because I hate a

blackmailer. I think blackmail ranks next to kidnaping on the dirty-crime list. While I don't approve of it, house-breaking is by comparison a good clean crime. Murder, in some cases, is almost justified, though by this I don't mean murder caused by greed. But the blackmail victim hasn't a chance. If he pays, he's

bled dry; and if he toughs it out, he's pilloried.

Now, when I asked about the pressman, Smiley gave me a superior sort of grin and said: "I can see you don't know anything about the printing business, O'Connor. These fellows come drifting along, work for a week or so, and then go drifting along again. They work enough to keep them with a roof over their heads and a bottle of whiskey in their bellies, and that's all."

"This one you've got now? Know anything about him?"

"My dear O'Connor! Why should I know anything about him, except that he's a good pressman? I'm not in the least interested in the man."

"You will be."

"Why?"

"He's back there dead," I said.

LIEUTENANT OLSON was a big bland man, who had a swell grin and the palest eyes I've ever seen. Even when he was laughing so hard he'd have to hold his sides, those eyes never softened a bit. He wore nothing but grey, except for tie and shoes, and these were black. He weighed at least two-twenty and was the star man on the police wrestling team. For that matter he was star man on the police pistol team as well, the regulation Police Positive our force uses looks like a toy in his hand.

He said to me: "Now have I this right, Mickey? You were with Pender and you just went along with him when he kept this date? That right?"

"That's exactly it, Ole."

"It wouldn't be that Pender came down here expecting trouble, and that you came along to see he didn't lose?"

"It would not. You know I wouldn't lie to you, Ole."

"Not unless it paid you, you wouldn't I noticed something funny. Did you?"

"Funny about what?"

"About this dead man. Didn't you get it?"

He'd caught it, so I thought I might as well admit I had, too. I said: "If you mean that from behind he looked like

Smiley, I caught it. He had the same sloping shoulders and he was about the same size. Yeah, I caught it."

"I wondered if you did. And I wonder if Jim Pender did. And I know twenty other people I can wonder about, along with you two."

"You think somebody mistook this guy for Smiley? That it?"

Olson spoke as if talking with himself—as if he were thinking aloud. He said: "Here it is, Mickey. Here's a boomer printer come to town. A man who probably doesn't know a soul here . . . these printers are a clannish bunch. Why should anybody bust him through a window with a high-powered rifle? It doesn't add up. On the other hand we have Smiley, who this other guy resembles from the back. Here's Smiley who's been here a year and a half. Long enough to make enemies of half the town. I know twenty-five people who I swear would kill him like a flash, if they thought they could get away with it. If I was picking him up and he ran, Mickey, I don't think I'd shoot at his legs. And that's a hell of an admission for a cop to make."

"You know his racket then, Ole?"

He waved a hand the size of a ham. "Sure. Not that it does us any good. Blackmail's about the toughest thing there is to stick on somebody. We know how he works it and some of the people he's working it on, but what good's that? We run into scandal at the department all the time, naturally. Unless it can't be avoided, we keep quiet about it."

I'd run into enough scandal in my little private-cop business, and the bulk of my business was skip-tracing and petty stuff like that.

I said: "It must be a paying business. Smiley is certainly spending money and a lot of it. He's got two hundred dollars' worth of clothes on his back, and he's living at the Towers, which is the highest-priced place in town, if not the best. He's got five thousand dollars' worth of automobile, even if it's second-hand. And it must cost him nothing but money, this digging up the dirt on our good citizens."

Ole said: "He's banking about two

thousand a week, Mickey. We've been taking an interest in him."

"Over this advertising-blackmailing thing?"

"Oh . . . things . . ." Ole said vaguely.

I knew that was as far as he'd go—but I also knew the cops were watching Smiley for something more than the racket that was hitting Pender.

And so, in turn, hitting me.

CHAPTER II

I Find Murder

PENDER'S place was five miles out of town, built on a point that jutted out into the lake. It was too lonesome for my taste, but Pender and his wife and kids were nuts about it.

And I'll say it was a pip of a place.

The house had maybe ten rooms, with the biggest porch in front I ever saw. Glassed and screened, and they spent most of the summer out there. He had a man and wife living in a little cottage behind it, and they took care of the place so well that all Pender had to do, when he got home, was lift his drink up to his face. Both the man and his wife were better than green hands when it came to shaking up a cocktail. They were named Jules and Josie, and it wasn't a gag. That was really their names. Both French—Josie had been born across.

Pender and I sat on the porch, and I could hear Mrs. Pender bustling around inside—the front room opened onto the porch—and Pender had been almost going nuts, waiting for her to go inside so I could tell him the score. He was trying to keep it away from her and so we couldn't just go to his room for a conference.

I took a sip of my drink and said: "They're just about ready to hang it on you, Jim. You know where I got it from, but of course this isn't official. The guy you're running against is no fool and he's asking why you were down there at that hour to meet Smiley. He doesn't come out and say you killed this printer,

thinking it was Smiley you were shooting at, but if the man he's talking with walks away with that impression, this rival of yours doesn't worry. And there's been so much talk about it the police will act soon. They'll have to."

Pender swore but it was more bluster than temper behind this. He said:

"Mickey, I don't want this now. I can't win this election if I'm fighting murder charges. And I don't want to fight murder charges. I didn't do it and I don't want to be crucified for something I didn't do."

I said: "You know Ida Durstin? The gal that married old Simon Durstin? The department-store Durstin?"

Pender nodded and said: "I've heard of her. Who hasn't? When a guy sixty years old marries a girl twenty-five, and when he's filthy rich and she hasn't a dime, there's always talk. It's the sugar-daddy stuff carried to an extreme."

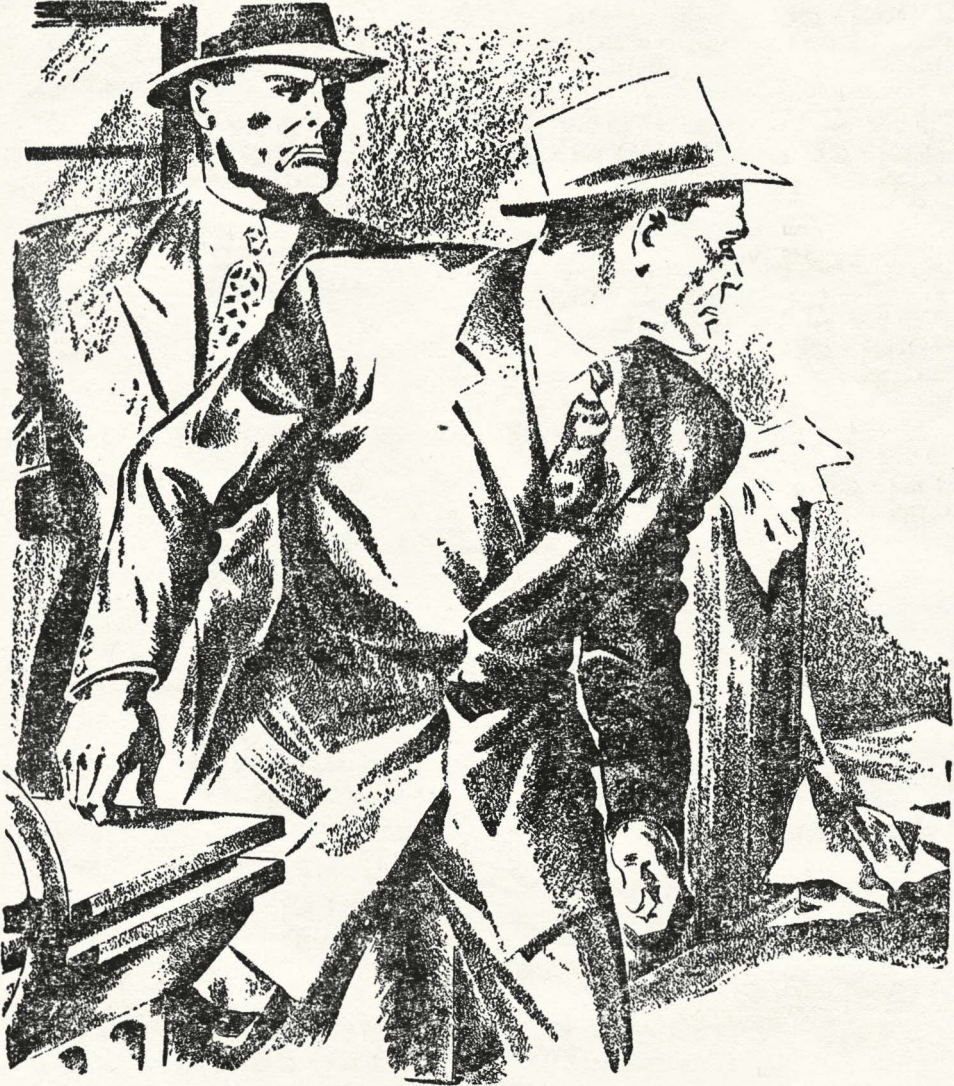
"She was around the printing shop before you were. She's got a Cadillac convertible sedan that's a bright blue, and she's got a long black bob and big black eyes and a shape."

Pender was staring. "Well, what of it? I'll bet there's lots of girls with black hair and eyes and a good figure. How d'ya know it was Mrs. Durstin?"

I grinned and said: "More stuff from my pipe line into the police department. The beat cop say the big car parked there, about a block from the print shop. Then he saw it cruising along when he made his next round. This went on until the beat cop got curious and jotted the license number down in his notebook. The cop remembered it when this printer got killed, and the cop told Lieutenant Olson."

"Well?"

I SAID: "About two months ago old Durstin came to the office and wanted to hire me to follow his wife around. He had a notion she was seeing too much of the chauffeur, if you know what I mean. He's a jealous old goat, believe me. I told him to wash his own dirty linen if he had any, but to do it at home. And I advised him to be sure the linen was dirty be-



fore he washed it . . . or he'd put himself out on a limb that somebody would saw off behind him."

"I thought private detectives did that all the time. I mean get divorce evidence."

I said: "If the girl or guy was an awful bum, I might. Not in this case. The old boy's almost crazy with jealousy. I wouldn't blame the girl, no matter what she did."

"There's that, too," Pender agreed.

I said: "What's got Lieutenant Olson down is the number of suspects. That's why I think he's going to grab you. He

can place you on the scene just about the time the crime was committed and he can't put any of the others there."

"What others?"

"Every man that advertises in that nasty little sheet of Smiley's is a suspect. That is, if you work on the theory of the printer being killed by mistake, by somebody who thought he was Smiley. Of course Olson's got the girl placed around there but he doesn't think she could do a job of shooting like that."

"I don't suppose she could," Pender said gloomily.

I grinned and said: "She was runner-

up in the woman's part of the State skeet shoot. The only one that could beat her was once national woman's champion. If she can shoot a shotgun like that, you can bet she knows a bit about a rifle, too. Ole Olson may be cutting her out of his mind as a suspect, but I'm not."

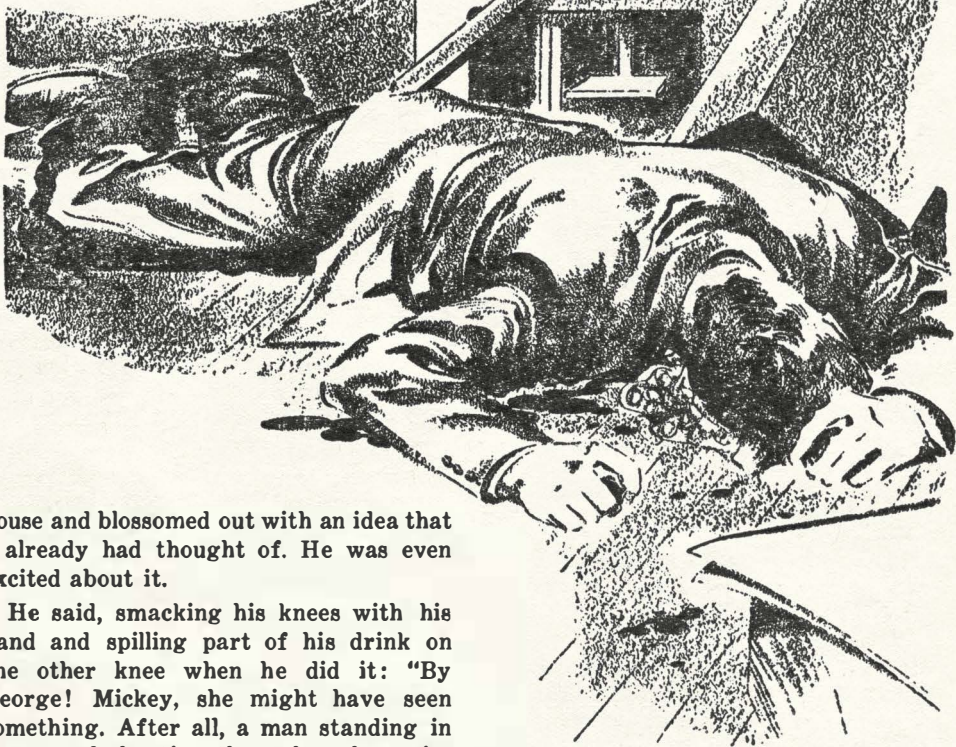
"She probably had a date with some guy and was waiting around for him to show up."

I said: "Could be."

Then Josie came out with a tray of fresh drinks and a wide grin. She told us, with quite a lot of accent, that the madame had ordered them for us and that dinner would be ready in about an hour.

Pender waited until she was back in the

The printer was lying face-down and there was quite a lot of blood.



house and blossomed out with an idea that I already had thought of. He was even excited about it.

He said, smacking his knees with his hand and spilling part of his drink on the other knee when he did it: "By George! Mickey, she might have seen something. After all, a man standing in a car, and shooting through a shop window with a high-powered rifle, isn't a common sight. I know the policeman who was walking that beat didn't see anything out of the way, but he passes that way

only once once an hour, I understand. It's just possible that she saw the killer."

I said: "Maybe I should talk with her."
"You certainly should."

I laughed and said she was going to stop in at my place, after she attended the show with a bunch of other high mucky-mucks. That is, if she could get away from her husband.

I told him I was trying not to miss a thing that could help him, even if it meant browbeating a poor, helpless little girl.

He didn't know why I grinned then, but I had reason. I'd called her and told her I wanted to see her and she'd naturally asked me what about. I'd said it concerned the printer killed in Smiley's shop, and that both she and others weren't in too good standing on the matter. Then she just about tore my ear off telling me what a heel I was to threaten a girl like that. She used language that would have had our wire disconnected if the operator had happened to cut in on us, and I'd finally broken it up myself.

I said: "You be there as soon as you can. And let's have an end to the tough language. I think we're on the same side, you fool."

She said, and meekly: "I'll be there as soon as I can make it," and I gave her my address again.

It was the first time I'd ever got tough with the wife of a couple million dollars, and I felt good about it.

I LEFT Pender's about half past nine and with about half a load aboard. So much so that I decided to call on Smiley to see if he'd heard anything about his dead pressman. He'd offered to write to the guy's union and make inquiries about him, and an answer was about due. And I didn't want to go home and sit around an empty apartment while waiting for Mrs. Ida Durstin, who might or might not show up.

But when I stopped at the Towers and asked for Smiley, they told me he was out and had been out since early in the evening.

Then I got a bad break, although at the time I welcomed it.

Along came Lieutenant Olson, off duty. Of course he was subject to call at all times, but he'd put in his regular stint

for the day and was just killing time.

He seemed glad to see me. He said: "I was hoping I'd run into somebody I knew, Mickey. What d'ya say we have a drink? Maybe two drinks."

I told him he should be at home with his wife and family and he grinned happily at me and told me his wife and the two kids were visiting her mother, back in Iowa. And that he was on the town.

Then one drink led to another and it was after eleven before I realized it, and it was half after eleven before I got out of the cab in front of my apartment house. And then I saw three police cars, the ambulance, and the medical examiner's big sedan—all up and down the street. I got stopped in the lobby by a big cop whom I didn't remember but who seemed to know me.

He said: "No dice, O'Connor. There's nothing in this for the likes of you."

I said: "I don't get it."

"The gravy boat ain't landed. Orders is that nobody goes up. That means you, along with everybody else."

"I live here, mister."

"Three newspaper guys have tried to pull that on me already."

"Ask the desk."

The night clerk was a timid little guy but he told the truth. The big cop shouted over: "Say! This guy live here?" and the little guy squealed back: "He certainly does!"

I went upstairs then and found what all the commotion was about.

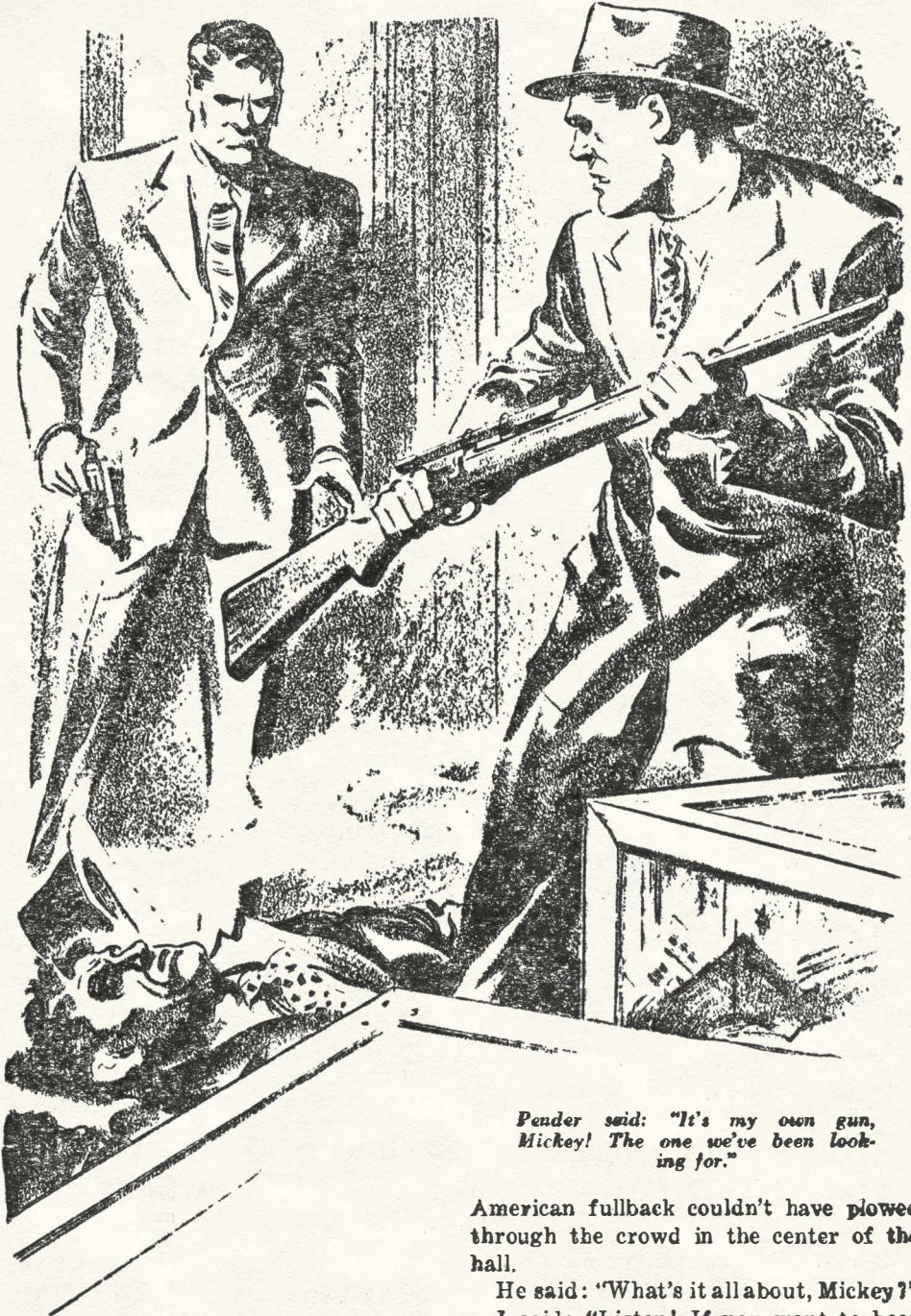
It was Ida Durstin—and she'd been killed just outside the door of my apartment.

CHAPTER III

Gun Missing

PENDER came up fifteen minutes later and in plenty of time to meet the police. I was standing in my doorway, watching them work, and I saw Pender when he stepped out of the elevator.

And even at that distance I could see he was excited.



Pender said: "It's my own gun, Mickey! The one we've been looking for."

American fullback couldn't have plowed through the crowd in the center of the hall.

He said: "What's it all about, Mickey?"

I said: "Listen! If you want to hear real language, listen to that medical examiner. He was on a party and they drag him out to look at a dead woman. He don't like it."

You didn't have to listen to hear the

He stared at the hall full of cops and ambulance men and at the medical examiner, who had a white uniform coat on over dress trousers. Pender came up to me by sliding along the wall. An All-

medical examiner. You couldn't *keep* from hearing him. He was about half-tight and he was as sore as a broken thumb. He was asking everybody why he couldn't be left in peace, just one single night. He was asking why in the so-and-so he had to be dragged away from his friends to state that a woman was dead and that she'd died from a knife wound in the back. He said, and loudly, that his mother's old Aunt Sarah could determine the cause of death in such a case—and that it proved his mother's Aunt Sarah had more brains than half the police force.

The medical examiner had always been a profane man, but he was outdoing himself right then.

Pender said: "What is it? Who was killed?"

I said: "A girl named Durstin, I think. One of the cops thinks that's her name." And under my breath I said: "Pass it off, you dope! Play like it don't mean a thing to you."

The lieutenant in charge came over then and I introduced Pender to him with the usual: "Lieutenant Arne, this is Jim Pender, Jim, Lieutenant Arne. Arne does stuff like this every night."

Arne was a tall, thin man who looked as sour as a lemon, while actually he wasn't that way at all. He was the opposite, and I often had wondered how he'd held a job on the force and stepped up to that rating. He was the kind of guy who'd catch a pickpocket with a hand in the Arne pocket and who, instead of taking the pickpocket to the station, would loan him a buck.

They shook hands with the usual glad-to-know-you stuff, and I asked the lieutenant in for a drink. He looked the situation over and said that he might take a small one, as everything seemed to be under control, and we went inside and I closed the door. And then, just as I was getting ice cubes out of the frigidaire, I heard a tremendous pounding at the door.

I put the ice down as I went through the living-room and past Arne and Pender, and when I opened the door I saw

Lieutenant Olson, whom I'd left not an hour before.

He said cheerfully: "I thought we should have a nightcap and I brought one along. See?"

He held up a bottle of whiskey in each hand and I decided he'd been just wolfing them down since I'd left him.

I couldn't do anything about it. I didn't want him to see Pender there, but there was no way I could avoid it.

I said: "Come on in, Ole. I can make a party out of this if company keeps coming in and if company keeps bringing their own liquor. Come on in."

Of course he did. He stared owlishly at Arne, who said: "Well, if it ain't Ole?"

OLSON lost a little bit of his drunkenness when he saw Pender, who stood up and shook hands with him. And he lost the most of it when Arne answered his question.

Olson said: "Who's out in the hall?"

"Who ain't?" said Arne, grinning. "That damn' medical examiner's better than a show. You should have heard him tonight. He always cries when he has to go to work, but tonight he's in the pink."

"I mean who's the stiff?"

"Some woman named Durstin, I think. At least one of the boys says he thinks that's who it is. There was no pocketbook or anything by her, so we don't know for sure, yet."

Right then Pender acted as though he was trying to put the noose around his own neck. He said nervously, to me: "I've been trying to get in touch with you for the last hour, Mickey. I was up here trying to catch you in, half an hour ago."

Olson was as sober as a judge right then. He asked Arne: "How long's this woman been dead?"

Arne told him: "Maybe half an hour, maybe three-quarters. That's what the medical examiner says, anyway, though when he gets on the stand and testifies he'll give himself a hell of a lot more leeway."

Olson asked me: "You and Mr. Pender find *this* body, too?"

I said: "Don't be like that, Ole. I nev-

er saw the woman in my life. The name's familiar, somehow, but I don't place her."

I was hoping that Olson had enough liquor in him to be a bit blurred, and that he wouldn't remember all he'd told me about the girl. But no luck. He was like an old-time fire-horse that heard the bell.

He said: "You place her all right, Mickey. It's the girl that was running around in Smiley's neighborhood, when that printer was killed. You remember that, don't you? You should—you found the body."

"Sure I remember."

Ole turned. "And you, Mr. Pender. Do you recall it, also?"

Pender said: "Why, of course."

"Do you happen to know anyone named Durstin?"

"I know Simon Durstin quite well," Pender said. "I sell him tobacco and candy for his counters. He's one of my best customers."

"That's his wife out in the hall—did you recognize her?"

"It so happens I didn't see her. Not that it would have made any difference. I've never met the lady. My relations with Durstin were entirely a matter of business."

"Sure of that?"

"Very sure."

I was proud of Pender then. He was standing up to Olson and holding his own, and that's a hard thing to do, with those pale eyes staring at you.

Olson said: "Now it wouldn't be that Mrs. Durstin, who was in the neighborhood of the Smiley print shop at the time the printer was shot and killed, it wouldn't be that she witnessed the killing, would it?"

Pender said: "I doubt it."

"Why?"

"She'd have reported it to the police, of course."

"Suppose she had everything to gain by Smiley's death. You notice I'm taking for granted that the printer was killed because he was mistaken for Smiley, I hope."

"I gathered that. I know of no reason,

though, why the lady wouldn't have reported it. Whether Smiley's death would have benefited her or not."

"Did you see Mrs. Durstin at any time tonight?"

"I wouldn't have know her if I'd seen her, Lieutenant. I've never met the woman, as I told you."

That was all of that. Ole apparently decided he was getting nowhere and let it drop for the time being. And it was something he was going to pick up again, of that I was sure. He was going to pick it up and worry it the way a dog does a bone.

Arne said: "Aw, sit down, Ole, and have a drink."

"If the two cases tie together, we can figure it out later. This one's mine and the other one's yours, and we can work 'em out together."

Olson sat down then and joined the party, such as it was. I could see that Pender was relieved to have the questioning over and I could see Ole sitting there, trying to make two and two add up to five. And I also could see that Pender had something he thought was important, something important enough to take him out of his house and downtown to see me at almost midnight.

It wasn't until almost three before Arne and Olson left, and by that time Pender was almost jumping up and down with nervousness. The minute the door slammed behind them he started in with what he had to say—and it was plenty.

He said: "I thought you ought to know about it at once, Mickey. My rifle's gone. A .270 Winchester, just about the same size gun that killed that printer."

I should have known right then who the killer was, but I muffed it.

If I'd pulled the handle, I'd have hit the jackpot then and there.

CHAPTER IV

Loose Ends

SMILEY was in his office when I called the next morning, and he didn't seem glad to see me at all. I looked at his filing-cases, wondering just how much

assorted dirt was in them, and then decided he'd keep the really juicy stuff either at home or in a safe-deposit box. Anything hot enough to collect on wouldn't be safe in a tin filing cabinet that could be opened with a can-opener.

He said: "All right, O'Connor. What is it? I've got a busy day ahead of me and I can't give you much time."

He'd started the act when I was with Pender, at the time when we'd found his

not big enough or tough enough to give me that kind of lip."

He said he'd have me arrested, and I laughed and waved a hand. He looked around his empty office, empty except for the two of us, and he got the idea.

I said: "If you get me arrested and I

That time I connected. And solid. He went to the floor.



dead printer, and I didn't like it then. I liked it less the more I saw of it, and I decided I'd had enough. I picked him up from his chair by the front of his coat and shirt, and I slapped his face, palm on one cheek, back of the hand across the other, with half a dozen good solid smacks on each side. His arms were flailing away, but not at me. He was just trying to get his feet under him, trying to get a little balance.

Then I let him back in his chair and said: "No more of that, little man. You're

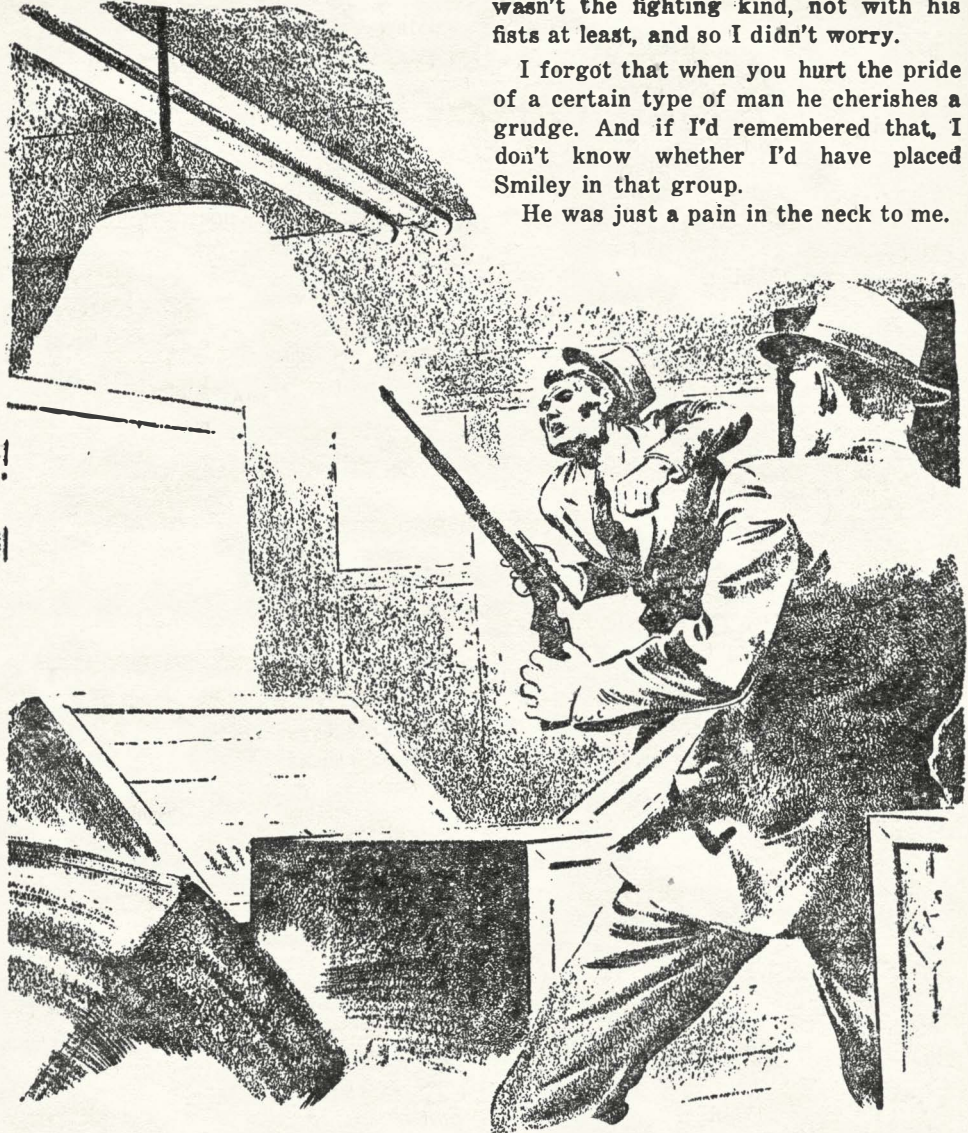
ever find it out, I'll do a hospital job on you. And you can quote me and see what sympathy you get from the cops."

He said: "I just asked you what you wanted."

"You know what I want. Did you hear anything from that printer's union?"

He said sullenly: "I have. But I don't know that I should show it to you. You have no official standing in the matter."

I told him he'd look pretty with no front teeth, and he softened up in a hurry. He tossed a telegram in front of me



wasn't the fighting kind, not with his fists at least, and so I didn't worry.

I forgot that when you hurt the pride of a certain type of man he cherishes a grudge. And if I'd remembered that, I don't know whether I'd have placed Smiley in that group.

He was just a pain in the neck to me.

and told me to read it, then went over to the window and stared out of it. The wire read: DONOVAN GOOD REPUTATION BUT HEAVY DRINKER. NO TROUBLE. FAMILY MAN. NO KNOWN ENEMIES. It was signed by a union secretary.

I'd hoped for a little dope, but I hadn't expected any, so I wasn't too much hurt. I said: "Thanks!" and Smiley gave me a dirty look and didn't answer. I had a notion I'd be featured in his scandal sheet if he thought he could get away with it—and I didn't worry a bit. He

PENDER drove me out to his house—I'd used all my A-tickets and couldn't get any more gas until the fifth of the coming month, and I was complaining bitterly about this to him as we rode along.

I said: "It isn't right. My car is listed as being used for business and pleasure, but the OPA board can't see the business part of it. You'd think I drove the thing just for transportation to the movies and to take a girl out riding. The old stall about running out of gas on the lonely

road is a stall no longer. A girl's a fool to go out with a guy these days—he'll run out of gas and be telling the truth."

Pender said it had cut both his sales and delivery service just about in half.

I said: "There's plenty of black-market gas but I won't do it. Maybe they won't take me in the Army or Navy, but I'm damned if I'm going to burn gas they can use. Not unless I do it legally."

Pender swung around a truck and then back into the proper lane on the highway. He said: "There's bootleg coupons now for gas. The country's full of them. They're supposed to be good enough to fool the average man, too, and that would certainly take in the average gas-station man."

I said I'd heard that, too, and Pender swung into the road leading to his point of land and house. We went inside, passed clear through the house, and then went downstairs to the game room.

A billiard table took up the center of the room, and there was a tiny little bar at one corner of it. Not over six feet long. The walls were hung with hunting prints, the lights were all concealed, and there was a fireplace that could take four-foot wood. Banked around it were deep leather chairs, and the room had a restful, pleasant air about it that made you feel good just to be in it.

Pender waved proudly and said: "Nice, eh?"

I said it was very nice and meant it. Then he pointed to the wall and said: "The gun was there. In the cabinet."

He had a section of the wall indented about six inches and there were a dozen or fifteen guns hanging there on pegs. Rifles, shotguns, and a couple of .22 target pistols. Pender pointed to a blank space in the rifle section.

"There," he said. "It was there. The best gun I had. A .270 Winchester with a Noske 'scope on it. Just the kind of gun somebody used on that printer."

I said: "It's a plant, all right. We've got to find it in a hurry."

He looked doubtful.

I said: "If the police find it before we

do, you'll end that day in the pokey. There wouldn't be enough left of the slug for the ballistics man to determine whether it came from your rifle or not, but the man can and probably would testify it came from a gun of comparative power. If the cops find it in your place, it'll be you for it."

"But why should they find it in my place? The last time I noticed it it was hanging here where it belongs."

I gave it to him in simple words. I said: "You're being framed, Jim. And I'm afraid it's working. It's a surprise to me the cops haven't picked you up by now. Look at it. You're put on the spot when you found the printer's body. Somebody probably stole your gun to do that job. You walked into the girl's killing and that was pure accident, but it ties with you. The police will claim she was cruising around that section and saw you do that shooting. They'll claim you killed her to keep her quiet."

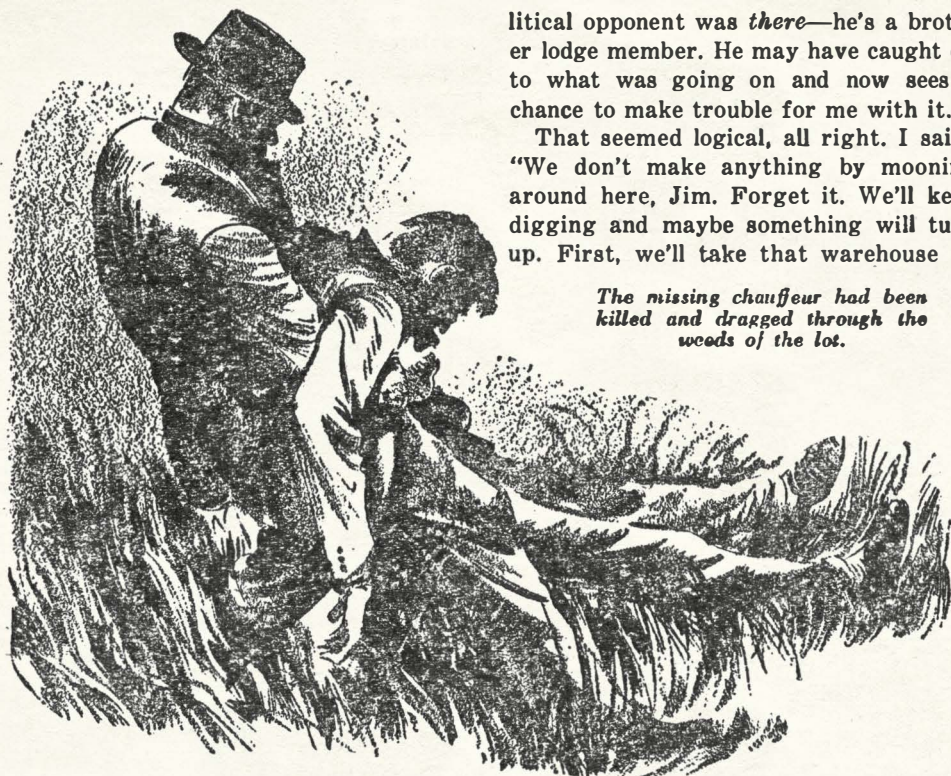
"I didn't even know the girl. I know her husband, that's all."

"You'd have a hell of a time proving that to a jury, mister. They're supposed to give the defendant the benefit of the doubt, but when the victim's a girl, they give the defendant the doubt the other way. The poor guy's got to prove himself innocent instead of the State having to prove him guilty. And the worst of it is that if they jug you and book you for murder, you'll stay there. You can't get bail for a murder suspect in this State."

"Why should anybody frame me?" Pender asked. "I've got business rivals but they're not enemies."

"Could it be that whatever Smiley's got on you has anything to do with it? I don't know what it is and I don't care, but is it anything that could kick back and be kicking back now?"

"Heavens, no. It's something that happened ten years ago. But my wife's both jealous and religious. She can't divorce me, according to her church, you understand. She'd be miserable and she'd make life miserable for me. And a thing like that, if it came out, would lose me a lot of votes with the church people. Here's



litical opponent was *there*—he's a brother lodge member. He may have caught on to what was going on and now sees a chance to make trouble for me with it."

That seemed logical, all right. I said: "We don't make anything by mooning around here, Jim. Forget it. We'll keep digging and maybe something will turn up. First, we'll take that warehouse of

The missing chauffeur had been killed and dragged through the woods of the lot.

what happened, Mickey. You can see that there's no chance of this trouble coming from it."

HE proceeded to give me much the usual story. He'd gone to the big town on a State lodge convention and he'd got himself taken drunk. In fact he'd been tight from the time he'd left until he got back. During that time he'd got acquainted with some gal, who he said was a good scout and as much there for a good time as he was. It was an old story and he told it as though he was ashamed of it—while the average man would have been bragging about his part in it. Nobody was hurt, it was over and done with, but somehow Smiley had dug the thing up and threatened to use it if Pender didn't pay his advertising-blackmail levy.

I said: "How would Smiley get hold of it after so many years?"

"Probably the guy that's running against me told Smiley. My current po-

yours apart, looking for the gun. That would be a good place to plant it. You own a coupe—we'd better look in the rumble seat for the gun. It will be some place where the cops can find it easily, you can depend on that."

I was banking on the warehouse showing pay dirt on the gun business, and my only worry was whether the cops would find it before we did.

WE COULDN'T start any search as long as the warehouse was open and running, and so I spent some of our wasted time in looking Olson up. And found that I'd been right in worrying about Pender getting thrown into the pokey. In the first place, Ole Olson was sour as he could be. He claimed the only way he could have a bigger hang-over was to put on weight. The one he had, he said, was as big a one as a man his size could support.

I was properly sympathetic and told him he should bring his wife home so she

could keep him away from his wild bachelor friends. And he said: "Damned if I don't think you've got something there."

I said: "I saw Smiley and he showed me a wire from that pressman's union. They gave the guy a clear bill of health."

Olson said: "They're burying him, even. He had just seven bucks in his pocket and he owed that for room rent. If they don't bury him, the city will have to."

I said it was tough—that printer being mistaken for Smiley that way.

Olson looked thoughtful. He said: "That's sort of funny there, too. I asked Smiley if he wanted a police escort and he said to hell with it. But I know the little rat's a coward—so it doesn't jibe. I'd think he'd want an escort. He knows there's plenty of people gunning for him. I can name you twenty men he's shaking down, right now, and heaven knows how many turned him down. Every time you read a dirty little article in his paper, you know somebody backed up on him."

I said I'd figured out the same angle. And I handed over the file that held all the back issues of the sheet, since Smiley had started it a year and a half before.

Olson looked astonished when he saw what it was. And then said: "I hate a liar worse than anything in the world, Mickey. So I'm not going to ask you where these came from."

I said: "A buzzard brought 'em to me. A buzzard is the only bird dirty enough to touch the damn' things."

And with that we started looking through them.

Some were four pages thick and some were sixteen. The early issues were small, but the thing had gradually built up. It was the size of a tabloid paper and printed on the same kind of newspaper stock. Its title was *THE TRUTH*—the title blazoned across the head in letters three inches high. The first issues had little advertising, but this had built up plenty during the year and a half.

It was a cinch to see how it went. In the first few articles Smiley had picked on our local slot-machine king. First veiled hints, and then when the guy still

held out, he'd gone into names and dates and places. I remembered then that there'd been a drive against gambling and the one-armed bandits had disappeared for a little while.

Right after that the sheet began running ads of the Star Billiard Rooms, which was the front from which our slot-machine mogul operated. And I noticed the sheet had nothing more to say about the slot-machine menace.

The next one picked up a theater man who was putting up a new building. It mentioned wiring and foundation work that wasn't up to State specifications on the safety factor. This went on for less than a month, and then the sheet came out with advertisements about waiting for the grand opening of the new Palace Theater.

AND SO it went. There'd be a reference to some business man's trip to the city. In the next issue the same business man would have an ad in the thing.

It was vicious, and unless somebody made a complaint and backed it with proof, it was sure and certain.

Olson said: "If his advertisers get together and lynch him. I'll turn my back on it. I won't see a thing. Nobody on the force will. I don't say that some of the boys won't take a little honest graft, here and there, but this is slow death."

I said I thought the same.

He spoke along in the same voice then, trying to trap me. He said: "What's he got on Pender?"

I said that, as far as I knew, nobody had a thing on Pender.

Olson laughed at that one and I didn't blame him.

I said: "You'll find out, Ole, that the key of this thing lies with Mrs. Durstin. I don't know that it will ever be cracked, now that she's dead."

"It's an angle," he admitted. "And we've been working on it. We've been working on these others, too. I've had four men out trying to trace where all these people were that night and it's an impossible job. That neighborhood, where

Smiley's got his shop, is almost deserted at night. It's a wonder that beat cop saw Mrs. Durstin down there. There's only one thing to do and I'm going to do it."

"What?"

"Pick up Pender. If I charge him with murder—and I've got enough to make it stick before the Grand Jury right now—he'll maybe break far enough to give me the dope on this little rat of a Smiley. I could make things a lot easier for him if he'd sign a complaint against the guy."

"It takes proof to make a blackmail charge stick."

Olson stared and said: "In this town? Mister! The D. A. would pack the jury with people who'd been stuck or who were afraid of being stuck. They'd give that guy life for stealing a kid's bicycle. That's why I don't get it, this turning down a bodyguard."

I said I didn't understand it either and said goodbye for then. It was getting close to quitting time at the warehouse and I wanted to get that gun business cleared up before they took Pender away to the pokey.

And I wanted to tell Pender what to do and how to do it.

CHAPTER V

We Find the Rifle

PENDER was in his office, waiting for me, and he was in a fever of impatience. He said: "I thought you'd got lost, Mickey. The warehouse has been closed ten minutes now."

I said: "Take it easy. In the first place, the cops are going to pick you up and charge you with the only thing they can hold you on. Suspicion of murder. You can't make bail on it. Then they're going to try and talk you into signing a complaint against Smiley, charging him with extortion. If you sign, they'll make it easier for you. Don't sign—don't do anything except keep your mouth shut. That clear?"

He said he understood and so we went out and down the street two blocks to Pender's warehouse.

The place was big, very big. Four stories high and covering half a block in floor space. The watchman was just starting on his rounds, and Pender let him go, telling me: "He's got thirty-odd clocks to punch and it'll be an hour or more before he's back. We might as well take the ground floor first."

And we did, and until that time I hadn't realized the job we'd taken on. We turned the work lights on and they made the place as light as day, but with crates and bales and cartons piled and scattered everywhere, there were ten thousand places where a rifle could have been concealed.

I said: "We might as well use our heads on this, Jim. The gun wouldn't be hidden where it would be hard to find. If it was, the cops would skip it and that's what the guy don't want. He wants them to find it."

Pender looked thoughtful.

I said: "We should go through the office, first. That's the first place the cops would look. You've got the cigarettes in a separate room, haven't you?"

"Why, yes."

"Then that's the second place."

We were at the back end of the place then and we started toward the front, where the office was. In the back, the place was stacked high with crates, with just a narrow aisle between each row of them, and we were talking across one of these rows, he being in one aisle and me in the one next to it. So when the shooters started to shoot, we didn't know whom he was shooting at—although I don't doubt that Jim thought as I did—that the Judgment Day had come.

I saw the man as I went into action. He was by the office door, down on one knee and with his cheek cuddled down into the rifle's stock. The gun slammed again, booming like a cannon in that low-ceilinged room, and then I knew whom he was after. Because the slug hit a crate right by my head, and splinters went every whichway.

I was going up like a monkey by then. I got my hands on the edge of the crate that topped the pile, and I really yanked.

It came over and didn't break, but that wasn't enough. I got two more down, blocking the aisle, and all the time hearing that damned rifle blast away, and by that time I was praying that Pender was doing as I was. What was saving me was the lighting. The work lights weren't more than ten feet above the floor and they have a tremendous strength. Nothing like an arc light, of course; but a five-hundred-watt light, set into a burnished reflector, is bright. And the room was studded with them.

The shooter had to face into this glare and he couldn't help being dazzled by it. The 'scope sight the gun was fitted with multiplied this three times, too, so I could understand how he was consistently missing as he was.

And then my barricade was complete and I started to have fun myself.

The lights were as bad for me as for him, of course. Probably worse, because he was slightly in shadow from the office hall behind him. I got down on my belly and eased my arm and gun, and then my head, from the side of my protecting crate, and I wasn't six inches from the floor when I did it. And then I turned loose and knew I'd missed at the same time the gun rocked back in my hand. And the worst part of it was I couldn't tell whether I was shooting over him or under him or pulling the shot to the side. The heavy lights above me blurred the Patridge sight on the rear until I couldn't see the square front sight clear enough through it to know whether I was centering or not.

IT DOESN'T take much error in sighting a short gun to throw a slug ten feet to the side at a distance like the length of the warehouse. And if the square front sight is above the square notch in the rear, I'd be more likely to hit the ceiling than the kneeling man.

Pender shouted something at me just as I shot the second time, but I couldn't tell what it was—not with the roar of the gun in my ears. And I was beginning to worry, too, and I was thinking of myself instead of Pender.

The guy had spotted the flashes of my gun and was putting them in at me close to the floor.

I ducked back away from that side of the barricade and this time heard what Pender was saying.

It was: "The watchman may catch him from behind."

There wasn't a chance of that. The watchman had barely started his rounds, but I got the notion all right. Pender wasn't used to being used as a shooting-gallery target and was naturally worried about it.

No more than I was, at that.

I said: "No chance, but maybe the rifle guy won't know that. He's not going to keep this up for long."

Pender said: "I hope not, O'Connor," and I gave him credit for keeping his voice steady. It's not many solid business men who can stand steady during a thing like that.

Then I took a chance. I figured I had to do something because the shooter was getting the range. I waited until he fired, and then, while he was working the bolt to throw another shell into the chamber of his rifle, I stood up and let the last four slugs in my gun loose at him, putting 'em in as though I was doing rapid fire on the range. I didn't think I had much chance of hitting him unless through luck, but I wanted to help make noise. It stood to reason that some cop would eventually hear the battle and would come running.

I dropped down again just as he shot and he took the top board off the upper crate I'd shot over, and I decided I wouldn't try that trick again. The guy was too handy with the rifle—he was snapping that bolt back and forth like a Camp Perry shark.

I stuffed fresh loads into my gun and tried him from the floor—and that time I connected. And solid. He spraddled out on the floor, falling over the rifle, and I heard Pender's whoop even above the roaring echo of the shot.

He said: "You got him, Mickey! You got him!"

I didn't answer, because I was getting



He looked up and spotted me and the gun, and he promptly dropped the tray—noisily.

out from behind my barricade and running toward the fallen man. There was a chance that I'd just clipped him hard enough to put him down for a few seconds and the closer I was to him if he came out of it, the better off I'd be.

I NEEDN'T have worried. My slug had caught him in the throat and had taken two inches of bone out of the back of his neck coming out. A big gun isn't pleasant to shoot in close quarters like that because of the muzzle blast, but if you hit something with one of them, the something goes down.

Jim Pender then did something I didn't think any sane man would do, and he did it before I realized what it was. He reached down and pulled the rifle from under the dead man.

And said: "My own gun, Mickey! The one we've been looking for."

I said: "Put it down. Or wait. You'd better give it to me—I can get away with a yarn where you can't."

He looked puzzled.

I said: "Don't you see, Jim? You're under suspicion now. I wouldn't put it past the cops, now, to claim you staged this business. That we shot the guy and fixed this up to look like a gun battle."

He handed me the gun and I leaned it against the wall, at the side. I said: "I grabbed it before I realized 'he guy was dead. Just to keep him from coming to and snatching at it. Protecting myself, you might say, and I'll certainly say it."

I'd been so busy that I hadn't been paying any attention to outside noises, but now I heard an axe hit the outer door of the place, and heard muffled shouting along with the smashing of the axe. I didn't think it was any fault of mine that I hadn't heard the racket before, either. We were in a hall that led from the office to the main floor, and the outside door was thirty-five or forty feet away and at least two inches thick.

And when you've shot and killed a man you're not at your best.

I said: "Here's not just the cop, here's a whole damned flock of cops. This is the riot squad coming in with the axes. Bet-

ter let them in if you want any door left in this place."

And I went with him and called Lieutenant Olson, while Pender was letting the squad in and arguing them out of the notion of beating his head in for not doing it sooner.

They somehow had the notion they'd caught a burglar.

IF OLSON had had high blood pressure he'd have had a stroke. He stared down at the dead man and then counted the empty .270 cartridges on the floor, where the gun had ejected them. There were nineteen of them. He looked at the gun standing against the wall, and I thought he'd blow his top then. And, of course, he blamed me for that, as I'd thought he would.

He said: "What the hell's the idea in that, O'Connor? Mean to say this guy got up off the floor and leaned the gun up there? And then went back and laid down? Your story stinks."

"He dropped, Olson, but I didn't know how bad I'd hit him. I got the gun out of his reach as fast as I could."

"Nuts! A blind man could see the guy was deader than last week's newspapers."

"You don't think so fast after a guy blasts at you that many times with a rifle. I wasn't taking any chances."

"Whose rifle?"

I spoke fast, before Pender could louse the thing up. I said: "Why, Pender's! He left it here because the gunsmith's place was closed when he took the gun down there today."

"This isn't his office, O'Connor. Why didn't he leave it in his own office? I know where that is—I've checked it."

I tried to act like I was getting sore. I said: "Now look, Ole! His own office is two blocks up the street. That's his main office. This office in the warehouse, here, is also his, even if it's just used to check shipments in and out. Why should he lug the gun two blocks up the street when this place was handy? The gunsmith's place is just down the street."

That was the truth and one break we

were getting. Then Olson picked another touchy spot in the yarn.

He said: "And I suppose Mr. Pender"—here he stopped and bowed to Pender in a nasty way—"I suppose Mr. Pender also left a box of shells for the gun, along with it. Thoughtful, I'd say."

I couldn't answer that one and had to let Pender do the best he could with it. And he didn't do so badly at that.

"I can't explain that," he said. "The gun was empty, of course, and of course I didn't have a box of shells along with it. Why should I? I just wanted the trigger pull smoothed up a bit."

"I suppose the guy came furnished with his own ammunition," Olson said.

Pender said, and very calmly: "He must have. It's the only explanation. He possibly saw the gun in the office, here, and decided he could find use for it."

"Was he after you or O'Connor?"

I said: "After me, Ole. But I'm damned if I know why. You can tell that by the damage he did to the crates of goods I was hiding behind."

"Why would he be laying for you?"

"That I don't know."

"What you working on?"

"Not a thing."

"What about Mr. Pender's trouble?"

"I mean nothing besides that. And I'm just curious about that. I happened to be along when that printer's body was found, that's all. And I can see how the police can misunderstand Mr. Pender's position in this thing."

A plainclothesman named Ellis came up then and said: "We've identified the guy, we think, lieutenant. We think his name's Richetti. There's not a thing on him that's got his name on it, but one of the boys thinks he knows him. He's got a gas station attached to a gyppo garage, out on West Ninth, we think."

"Check it, eh? Go out and get somebody from out there that knows him and make sure."

Ellis grinned and said he'd already sent out two men in a cruiser to do just that, and went back to where the police photographer was using flash bulbs.

Olson said: "All right, O'Connor! You

know anybody named Richetti?"

"I do not."

"Ever get gas out on West Ninth?"

"Probably. I still don't know this guy. I never saw him before."

"You, Mr. Pender?"

Pender shook his head and said the same as I had.

Olson grumbled: "It seems a damned funny thing to have an absolute stranger turn loose at you people like that. In fact, it's impossible. It has to be impossible. There's a tie-up between you, somewhere, and I want to know where it is."

"So do I," I said.

Olson sighed and said: "I'm too soft-hearted for my own good. I should take you down, Mr. Pender, and book you for suspicion of murder. My boss told me to do just that, and before this last raniky-boo. Why I don't do it, I don't know."

I said: "I know," and he asked me why.

And I told him.

I said: "For one thing, Ole, you think as I do. You think somebody's putting a frame around Pender. And for another reason, you know you haven't got enough on him to hold him. It takes more than just suspicion to put a charge like that against a man as prominent as Mr. Pender, and no Grand Jury will bind a man over on what you've got. Just as soon as I can tie Richetti, if that's his name, up with whoever's framing Pender, we'll have something. And if we can put Mrs. Durstin in the thing, some way, we'll have it cinched. All I've got to do is put all this together."

Olson laughed sourly and said that a little job like that should be no bother for me at all. But he let us go, after telling us he'd let us know when to appear for the inquest.

I HAD company waiting for me when I got back to the apartment, and for once my rabbit little night clerk had made the company wait downstairs. It was Simon Durstin and a long lean man with him, whom he introduced as Mr. Neff. It seemed Mr. Neff was one of the Durstin lawyers. I hadn't had any use for Durstin since he'd tried to hire me

to spy on his wife, but I was really glad to see him. His dead wife had been mixed up in the mess, and there was always a chance of him knowing something about it.

I said: "Well, Mr. Durstin! I was going to see you in the morning. I think we should compare notes."

Durstin was little and wizened, but he was no chump. All the matter with him was that he was a fool about women—and had been particularly a fool where his wife had been concerned.

He said: "Ah, yes! There are several things I'd like to take up with you."

I took them both upstairs and Durstin took a drink with me while Neff refused. Which surprised me, as I'd thought it would be the other way around. All that Neff did was sit back in his chair and watch me, as though I was a bug on a pin.

Durstin asked: "I'm sure you remember our previous conversation, Mr. O'Connor."

I said I remembered perfectly.

"You'll recall I suspected . . . well, to be brutally frank, I suspected my wife of being romantic with her driver."

"I remember."

"I didn't discharge the man, you know. I thought it better to keep him on, with the idea that by watching them, I could possibly tell whether my suspicions had any basis in truth."

Neff said: "Tell him the truth, Simon. He's guessed it anyway."

Durstin colored and said: "All right. If you must know, Mr. O'Connor, I proposed discharging him and Mrs. Durstin made an issue of it. You will understand that I had nothing but suspicion to go on and so let the man stay on."

I said I understood.

"The man had quit, Mr. O'Connor. Or shall I say he's dropped out of sight. With almost a month's salary due him. It doesn't seem in character . . . he was always after money. It's my honest opinion that Mrs. Durstin was giving him money constantly."

I took the chauffeur's description then.

It seemed he was tall, dark, and good-looking, was named Robert Pike, and was somewhere in the early thirties. It also seemed that he'd done just about everything except spit in Durstin's eye, all during the time he'd worked for him, depending, I supposed, on Mrs. Durstin keeping him safe on the job.

I said: "What d'ya want me to do? Find him?"

Durstin said earnestly: "Mr. O'Connor, that man's got something to do with poor Ida's murder. I know it—I feel it. I want you to connect him with it."

"Maybe you're imagining things. I can see where you'd be prejudiced."

"I'm certain that he's involved in her death, Mr. O'Connor."

IT WAS evident that Durstin didn't know what had been going on and I couldn't see any harm in telling him some home truths.

I asked: "Did Mrs. Durstin ever ask you, or advise you, to advertise with a man named Smiley? A man running a little smut sheet?"

"She did. Naturally I refused. The man's rates were exorbitant—his nasty little paper was no medium for department-store advertising, and the whole thing was out of the question."

"Did she tell you why she wanted you to advertise with this Smiley?"

"Why yes. She had met him at a party and rather liked him. She told me he was having a hard time getting started in the town but that she thought he'd eventually build his paper up to something worth while. I read one copy of his paper and differed with her."

I said: "Mrs. Durstin was around Smiley's print shop, Mr. Durstin, at the time a printer, working for Smiley, was shot and killed. I will add that the printer was shot in the back, from the street, and that from the back he resembled Smiley. The police think as I do. We believe Mrs. Durstin saw and recognized the killer, and we believe the killer took steps to silence her. You understand that Mrs. Durstin was cruising around the neighborhood in her car, and that the

printer, in all probability, was shot from a car. The killer used a rifle, you see, and he wouldn't be fool enough to wander around the streets on foot, sniping away like that."

Neff said: "That would explain Mrs. Durstin's checkbook, Simon. You see, O'Connor, Mrs. Durstin had drawn a considerable amount from her bank, lately. Far more than she had any legitimate reason to draw. We supposed she had been giving money to Pike, her chauffeur, but this may put a different construction on the matter. It's blackmail, Simon."

I said that Smiley had been blackmailing at least twenty-five people, but that knowing it and proving it were different things. That the cops had been trying to nail him on it for sometime and hadn't got to first base. And that the police theory was that some blackmail victim had got more than he could stand and had shot the printer by mistake, thinking he was doing away with Smiley.

NEFF asked: "What do you think, Mr. O'Connor?"

I said: "I don't know. It was dim in the shop and at a distance, and looking through a window, it would have been an easy mistake to make. If it had been Smiley who'd been killed, the police wouldn't be trying so hard to solve the case. I can tell you that. They'd make a pass at it, of course, but they wouldn't work too hard on it. But with the printer getting it, it's different. He was the innocent bystander that's always getting it in the neck, and the police are really looking for his killer."

Neff nodded and said he could understand that. Apparently he'd spent the first ten minutes in sizing me up, and now had decided he could talk in front of me and say something besides just words that meant nothing.

He looked over at Durstin, who nodded, and then went on with: "Mr. Durstin wants you to find the man who murdered his wife. It's hardly necessary to tell you if there's a blackmail angle to it, it must be hushed. He wants you to find this

chauffeur, this Robert Pike, and find definite proof that he's either connected with Mrs. Durstin's death, or absolutely



I said: "Get into the closet, blondie. And pronto."

innocent, beyond a shadow of a doubt. You see, Mr. O'Connor, Mr. Durstin doesn't want to persecute an innocent man, but he's convinced that Pike's guilty.

Durstin said: "If you can prove him guilty, Mr. O'Connor, I'll pay you any bonus within reason that you ask."

I said: "You certainly must hate the guy's guts."

Durstin said: "When you are convinced your wife is playing around, month in, month out, and you see the man you sus-

pect is her lover, day in, day out, you learn to hate."

Neff looked at him with no sympathy, and I could understand why. Here the old goat was crying about his wife playing around before her death, and he'd done nothing at all about it. That is, nothing but condone it. If I had Neff picked right, *he'd* have kicked the little woman out into the cold and cruel world, and I had a notion he'd do the booting fast and thoroughly.

I know that's what *I'd* have done.

I SPENT the next three days talking with some of the people who were advertising in Smiley's smut sheet, and found out several and many things. The first was that they were scared to death of what he could print about them if they didn't behave. The second was that they one and all hated him and about half of them admitted it. And the same people also admitted, tacitly, that they weren't going to do anything about it. I had a regular system worked out in talking with them, after the first half dozen.

I'd say: "I'm working on the Durstin murder. You know . . . Mrs. Durstin, Simon Durstin, the department store man's wife."

They all either knew her or about her. And they'd all say what a terrible tragedy that had been and how sorry they felt for poor Mr. Durstin.

And then I'd say: "We have reason to believe Mrs. Durstin was killed because of her witnessing a murder that happened just before. A printer, working for Smiley. Of course you know Smiley?"

About half of them would then deny they knew Smiley, this in spite of the fact they were advertising in Smiley's paper. If they denied knowing him, I'd point this out and tell them they'd forgotten the man, undoubtedly. If they admitted knowing him, it was just that much easier.

I'd say: "The police believe this printer was killed by mistake. That the killer thought he was shooting at Smiley."

I'd then get the stock question. Whoever I'd be talking with would ask why should anyone want to kill Mr. Smiley.

And then I'd give 'em the stinger.

I'd say: "Anyone of the many people he was blackmailing. Yourself for instance. Of course if you can prove where you were that night, say between ten-thirty and eleven-thirty. . . ."

The only ones who knew for sure where they were at that time were the homebodies, and that kind of alibi isn't worth a whoop. In a couple of cases I found men who'd had company in for bridge or something like that, and with these I

could do nothing. But I could work on the others and did.

I'd say: "Of course the police aren't working too hard on this—they're taking it the routine way. But with me it's different. I've got a client who wants his wife's murderer punished and he'll willing to go to any lengths to see that's done. You see the position it puts me in, of course."

None of them saw, or they claimed they didn't see.

I'd say: "It's this. We believe Mrs. Durstin saw the man who killed that printer. We think the same man killed her. It's a question of motive—it's only right that everybody that had a motive to get rid of Smiley is checked. That's just common sense."

From here on I'd get different reactions. Some of them would tell me to go to hell and dare me to try to prove they had anything to do with Smiley, other than advertising in his paper. Others would crack and beg me not to drag them in it, and just about admit they were being blackmailed in a legal way.

I'D GONE just about all the way down the list of advertisers before I really found gold. And I found it talking with a deacon of the church, who had a Sunday-school class that one day in the week and who robbed the widows and orphans right and left the other six.

He said: "I'll admit it, Mr. O'Common. I am paying a form of blackmail. I am paying five hundred dollars a copy for advertising not worth a fifth that. But I have no choice."

"What's he got on you?" I asked.

He told me and I wanted to laugh and had a hard time not doing it. He'd had some girl out; he and the girl had got themselves pie-eyed—and he'd tied his car up with a telephone pole. He and the gal had taken off across the fields and he'd walked all the way home, to find the cops camped on his front porch waiting for him. He was still tighter than a tick and he'd admitted he'd been driving the car when it had smashed.

So the cops took him down to the pokey

and held him overnight. In the morning he managed to make bail and get out, and by throwing his weight all around town he managed to get the charges squashed.

But Smiley had found out about it and showed the poor guy proofs on the little news story he was going to run about it. Though, according to Smiley, he'd never run a yarn like that about a good advertiser.

I could imagine what a story like that would do for a Sunday-school teacher.

I said: "All right, mister. A Lieutenant Olson of the Homicide Squad will be up to see you. Tell him just what you've told me. He'll keep your name out of it if it's possible."

"He simply has to, Mr. O'Connor. It would ruin me if it was known."

I said: "There've been two people killed. Maybe you think that's something that should be hushed up, too. And Lieutenant Olson will want to know where you were at the time both that printer and Mrs. Durstin were killed. You'd better tell him the truth, mister, or you're liable to be down in the jail with a charge against you that you can't make bail for."

I left him shaking all over and just right for Olson. I didn't think Ole could get enough from him to make a blackmail charge stick against Smiley, but it was a step in the right direction. And I hadn't been home in the apartment for more than five minutes before the deacon called me.

He said: "I just remember something, Mr. O'Connor. Possibly it has no bearing on the matter, but I remember seeing Mrs. Durstin talking with Mr. Smiley on the street once. This was a month or more ago."

I said that I knew Mrs. Durstin and Smiley knew each other. I did, too, but I couldn't very well have made it stick in court as proof. She'd agreed to come to my place when I'd told her it was about the printer being shot and about Smiley. She'd been in that neighborhood. She'd tried to talk old Simon into advertising with Smiley and she'd told him she'd met Smiley at a party.

The last didn't mean a thing. She wouldn't be either the first or last wife to lie to her husband.

WHAT I had to do was to have solid testimony and here was a bit of it. But at the same time I didn't want my church deacon to think he was giving me anything—I wanted to keep him worried and ready for Olson. I thanked him and hung up the phone, and it wasn't more than another five minutes before Olson knocked on the door.

He said: "We're getting some place now, Mickey."

I'd started making drinks as soon as I saw who it was, but now I stopped and stared at him. He sounded as if the end of the world was on him.

I said: "What the hell's the matter now, Ole?"

"At this rate I'm going to ask the undertakers for a cut. If I don't catch this damn' killer soon, we'll have to start a new cemetery. We'll have the old one full and overflowing."

"Who's it now?"

"Mrs. Durstin's chauffeur. A guy named Robert Pike."

"Well, go on."

He took down half the drink I handed him, with one swig. He said: "The guy's been dead about three days, the doc thinks. He was just out of the city limits, about ten feet in on an empty lot that's grown up with weeds. A couple of kids went by with a dog, and the dog found the body and started barking. The kids went in, thinking the dog had cornered a cat, and they found Pike."

"Was he shot there?"

Olson shook his head. "He was not. No blood. Shot three times through the body and once through the head. No, he was carried in there—we've traced where they dragged him through the weeds."

I said: "Tough. Well, at least I can tell old Durstin that I know where his missing chauffeur is. And I'll bet the old geezer'll be tickled to death when he finds the guy's in the morgue."

"No doubt, no doubt," Olson said wear-

(Continued on page 33)

*I piped the fact that the gal's
roscoe was drawing a waver-
ing bead on Evelyn Wy-
eth's table.*



I STARED thirstily at the dregs of my third Scotch and soda, debating whether to flag the waiter for a re-fill or be a martyr and hold off a while. I didn't like being a martyr, but I finally decided to wait until ten o'clock for my fourth snort. A private snoop needs a clear noggin when he's working on a job; and anyhow, ten o'clock was only fifteen minutes away.

My solo table was in a secluded corner

of the Hotel Diplomat's swanky Jungle Terrace on Wilshire Boulevard, partially shielded by potted palms and spurious shrubbery but affording me an unobstructed swivel at a certain other table nearby—including the couple who were seated there dawdling with their supper. Over the rim of my empty glass I hung the furtive focus on them, taking a lot of care not to make the scrutiny look too obvious and feeling pretty sure they

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM



BURY THE BADGER

★ ★ ★

Dan Turner is a patient guy but on this night he was getting pretty bored with things. Dams with roscoes were all over the landscape. And every one of them acted as if her chief purpose was to use it lethally on Dan!

★ ★ ★

hadn't tabbed me. That was important.

The jane was a gorgeous blonde with a figure as shapely as a castaway's dream and a map familiar to movie fans from border to border. Her name was Evelyn Wyeth and she was the brightest star on the payroll of Paragon Pix, which is the same as saying she'd reached the top of the Hollywood heap. In addition to her stardom she was engaged to be married to Maxie LeVine, head mogul of the studio that had her under contract; which goes to show you how lucky she was, because you wouldn't meet a nicer guy than LeVine in a month of Mondays.

She wasn't with the studio nabob to-night, though. Her escort was a tall and swarthy bozo with glistening white teeth, glossy black hair, and an unctuous Latin patina that gave me a pain in the tripes. How this lovely Wyeth quail could stand to be with a cheap, greasy bit-player of Pedro Cisco's kidney was more than I could fathom; but I wasn't being paid to unravel that particular riddle. I had been hired merely to keep her under secret observation.

And I didn't even know who'd hired me!

THE NOTE had been delivered to my office by special messenger that morning: a sealed envelope containing a single typewritten sheet of paper and three crisp new centuries. "*Dan Turner,*" the message said. "*Please accept the enclosed money as an advance retainer to pay for your time and possible trouble. You are to follow Miss Evelyn Wyeth from the time she leaves the Paragon lot at six this evening until she goes home to her residence in Beverly Hills, whatever that hour may be. Should your further services be required, you will be notified.*"

There wasn't any signature.

But what the hell; signature or no signature, I'm not a guy to argue with three hundred hermans. If some anonymous disciple craved to have me tail the Wyeth tomato for that much lettuce, it was jake with me; and thus far I'd earned my fee by sticking to her like chewing gum on a

blue serge suit. Now, however, it was beginning to look as if I had a long and dreary vigil in the offing. She and the swarthy Pedro Cisco were stretching out their meal by dancing between each course and it had commenced to get monotonous.

I scowled, resigned myself to boredom, and dourly stripped the cellophane raincoat from a fresh deck of precious gaspers; selected one and reached for a match. Instantly Lew Papadopolis, the Greek *maitre* of the Jungle Terrace who'd seated me where I could keep a glim on the blonde muffin, popped forward with a patent lighter. He snapped its flame alive, bowed like a monkey, thrust the fire at me.

"Ix-nay, pal," I grinned and waved him away. "You'll be wanting to spit for me next. Cut it out; I'm not used to having a caddy help me with my nicotine poisoning."

He refused to be brushed off. "You eating maybe in the wrong places, hah, Hockshop?"

"Not Hockshop. Hawkshaw."

"Sure. Is what I am saying. Hacksaw. You eating maybe in lowbrow joints where they giving no service like in Jungle Terrace, damned right." He applied the lighter to my coffin nail and dropped his voice to a discreet undertone. "You wanting I should telling you somethings, hah?"

"Go away," I said. "Scram. I'm busy."

"Hah, busy he is being. Busy making like a flatfeet. What a way to making a living, Pfuey."

I said: "So I'm in a lousy racket, so okay because you own a mess of stinking real estate that you bought with tips you wangled out of suckers—"

"Will you shutting op and let me talking a minute, hah? Damn to hell. I never seeing a guy who is being so hard to saying somethings to. Why do you must be such a null-scum, hey?"

"Not null-scum. Numb-skull."

He nodded sagely and poured water into my glass from a carafe. "English I am learning from a flatfeet. So from me the flatfeet is maybe learning some-

things, either. You want to listening while I am shoot off my mouth or shall I shouting 'it over the loudspeakerish microphone from the bandstand, hah?"

"All right," I resigned myself. "Give with the dialect."

HE BRUSHED invisible crumbs from the tablecloth. "Is Miss Wyeth I wish to discussing with you, Hocksaw?"

"What about Miss Wyeth?"

"She is hop."

For an instant I didn't get his drift; then it dawned on me. "You mean she's hep?"

"Didn't that was what I said, hey? I am going by her table, see; I hearing her say to this Cisco character she was want you to quit staring at her. You giving her the meeming screamies."

I almost gulped my gasper, fire and all. "She's wise that I'm a ferret?"

He shrugged. "She is tell Cisco she is not liking to be trailed by a private snip."

"Snoop."

"Snoop, snip, so what difference does it making if she is maybe getting sore and start trouble? Could be she will asking Cisco to coming over and slop you on the nose, so he will trying it, and you will knocking him subconscious and women will yelling with riots and screechings and hystericals, and the cops will coming in to closing op the Jungle Terrace for disorderly conductors and I will, losing my job because I am allow it to happening. Fine damn' thing, hah? Better you will getting op and taking it on the scam with my compliments."

"Inviting me to leave, are you?"

"Is only a suggestion, Hockshop. Far was it from me to insulting you, a friend from mine. But if Miss Wyeth is hop that you're shadow her, you might as well quitting. Hey, sport?"

Maybe he had something there, at that. When you're on a tail job and your quarry savvies the caper, you can usually kiss your usefulness goodbye. Whatever the Wyeth cookie had been intending to do, it was a cinch she wouldn't do it while she knew I had my optics on her.

Still, though, the instructions in that

anonymous letter had been definite and specific: I was to stay with her until she went home, regardless of the hour. Nothing had been said about an alternative program in case she caught wise to me, and I was momentarily at a loss as to what I ought to do. Mulling it over in my think-tank, I came to the conclusion that what I needed was some new orders from the guy who was paying me three yards for my work.

And who the hell was he?

I didn't know; but you couldn't stop me from guessing. Maxie LeVine, high panjandrum of Paragon Pix, was her fiancé; and an engaged guy is entitled to a certain amount of jealous suspicion if his sweetie hells around with another man.

THIS WAS ONLY a surmise, but it was worth a nickel phone call. I tossed a ten spot on the table to cover my three snifters of Vat 69 plus cover charge; told Lew Papadoupolis he could split whatever was left with my regular waiter. Then I barged out to the main lobby of the Diplomat, located a bank of booths and entered one and dialed the Paragon lot.

The studio switchboard was closed down at that hour, but they kept a single ingoing wire hooked to the cop box at the main gate. The night guard answered the ring.

"Dan Turner calling," I said. "Would Mr. LeVine be in the administration building by any chance? And if not, I'd like to have his home number."

"His home number happens to be private; we don't give it out. And he ain't in the administration building. In fact, he's out of town—up in Sacramento. So you couldn't reach him even if I gave you his home number, which I ain't gonna." There came the click of a disconnect.

Hanging up, I swore at myself for being a fool. Had my memory been functioning I would have realized Maxie wasn't in Hollywood; there'd been an item in the morning blats telling that he was flying up to the state capital for a job of lobbying. One of the social-minded

Maxie's sincerest eccentricities was an interest in the underprivileged class; he was constantly flinging away his gettuss on political schemes to help the downtrodden. Right now he had a pet project on postwar slum clearance that he was trying to jam through the legislature, and he'd gone north to do some jockeying when the session opened tomorrow morning.

This meant I couldn't contact him except by long distance, and that would take too much time. Moreover, I wasn't even sure he was the party who'd hired me; maybe I was haywire about it. I decided to mosey back into the Jungle Terrace, resume where I'd left off; hope for the best.

I almost got the worst. Just as I barged by a bank of counterfeit ferns I piped a metallic glitter that made my giblets pucker like prunes. It was light shining on the barrel of a nickel-plated roscoe which was being poked through the greenery; and the cannon was drawing a wavering bead on Evelyn Wyeth's table.

YOU NEED quick reflexes in the gumshoe game and mine were ten above par on a rising tide when I lamped that gat in the false foliage. I whispered: "Jeepers creepers!" and uncoiled my poundage; catapulted forward under forced draft.

There was a she-male crouching behind the backdrop of ferns—a jane with hair the color of a dusty sunset and grey-green glimmers lethally slitted. Her trigger finger was taut, the skin pallid over its bent knuckle; in another instant the heater would go boom and somebody would have a set of punctured clockworks.

I pounced.

My avalanche descent crushed the red-haired jessie floorward; smacked the wind out of her bellows in a wheezing whoosh. Simultaneously I made a snatch for her fowling piece, got it out of her mitt and rammed it in my pocket. Then I straightened her upright and dealt her a belt across the puss with my open palm.

"What the hell's the idea?" I snarled.

She cringed. "Oh-h-h—!"

"Come on, talk it up," I rasped, shaking her the way you joggle a pan of popcorn over a hot fire. "Who were you trying to render defunct and why?"

"I—I—"

"Look," I made a grim mouth. "Evasions won't buy you anything, sister. And I'm not giving you time to think up a plausible lie. Why were you going to squeeze a pill at Evelyn Wyeth?"

"I w-wasn't! It was—it was Pedro I wanted to k-kill."

"Pedro?"

"Pedro Cisco."

"So that's the score," I said, studying her. She was in her early thirties, at a quick estimate, and she was still pretty in spite of some unpleasant dissipation-lines etched on her painted mush. The redness of her hair had been helped by a generous measure of henna but it was an attractive tint, even so; and while a sculptor might have considered her figure a bit too abundant, I'd be satisfied to call it lush. At least you needed only one gander to know she had curves.

"Pedro Cisco, eh?" I said.

"Y-yes."

I said: "Bumpery leads to the cyanide chamber in California, kitten. Didn't you know that?"

"Yes, I know it. And I—I wouldn't c-care. Not after th-the way Pedro threw me over."

Unseen and unnoticed behind the screening ferns, I tightened my grip on her. "Cisco ditched you, hunh?"

"Yes."

"You were his chick and he gave you the gate for the Wyeth tomato, is that it?"

"He's with her. What else can I think?"

I hauled her toward a side exit. "Maybe you'd better do your thinking in the sneezer, sweet stuff."

"Sn-sneezzer?"

"The gow. The bastille." I gave her a brief slant at my special badge. "Something tells me I'd better hand you over to a gendarme and let him sweep out a nice clean cell for you."



While she phoned, she still kept that rod trained on me. "Everything okay at this end," she said. "How's with you?"

SHE WENT WHITE under her heavy makeup. "No—please—please, I d-don't want to g-go to j-jail. No, you mustn't! I—I—I was out of my mind for a m-minute; I must have been. I don't know how I ever came to th-think of—of k-killing him. It was crazy. I—I didn't realize what I was doing."

"The old *I didn't-know-it-was-loaded* routine," I sneered.

"You've got to b-believe me, copper. I was nuts. But I'm not crazy now, I'm okay, I swear I am. I—I'm not a criminal. I haven't done anything wrong—"

"For which you can thank me, toots."

Brine came into her optics, streaked twin rivulets of mascara down her cheeks. "I do thank you, copper. And I g-give you my solemn oath if you let me go, I'll be good, I won't make any more trouble. Please!"

Somehow I felt a little corry for her; particularly when she was so obviously in love with a cheap heel like the Cisco ginzo. That alone was enough to entitle her to sympathy. I growled: "What's your name, hon?"

"Louise Allison."

"Where do you hang out?"

"The Fenham Arms," she said, and added a street address. Her voice was dispirited, plaintively woeful.

I said: "Maybe we can deal, babe."

"Deal?" She gave me a dull stare.

"Yeah. If you agree to let me keep your roscoe and promise me you'll lay off the Cisco creep, I might allow you to powder."

She gulped audibly, as if she had an oyster stuck in her windpipe. "Copper, I swear I'll never go near him again. Honest. He—I—we're washed up. Through."

He's not worth it. Please—give me a break!"

"Okay," I said. "It's against the rules, but go ahead; scram. Only remember this, baby; if anything happens to Pedro, I'll know where to look; I've got your name and statistics. You'd better begin praying he lives to a ripe old age and croaks of natural causes if you want to stay out of the law's clutches." Then I steered her through the doorway; watched her scuttle off through the mist-veiled night.

Returning to the Jungle Terrace, I discovered no sign of unrest or commotion; apparently none of the patrons had sensed anything unusual. The orchestra's swingtime braying had kept my dialogue with the trigger-whacky redhead from being overheard; which suited me just fine.

I WONDERED if the Allison dame had been the reason for the anonymous letter hiring me to shadow Evelyn Wyeth tonight. Perhaps somebody had realized Evelyn was sticking her neck out by keeping a date with Pedro Cisco; had been scared Pedro's discarded sweetie might bust out with a severe case of homicide itch and spray a bouquet of slugs at both of them. Which had damned near happened; except that I'd been on deck to prevent it—

"Hey!" I yeepled.

Lew Papadopolis sidled up to me. "Somethings, Hockshop?"

I fastened the grasp on his tuxedo lapels. "What the hell became of Miss Wyeth and the Cisco guy?"

"How should I knowing?" He lifted a shoulder. "They pulled up hips."

"They've gone?"

"Sure. They paying their bill a minute ago and leave. Is this being illegal or somethings, Hacksaw?"

I told him to go boil a strawberry; pivoted and went buckety-gallop toward the lobby. I was just in time to catch a fleeting hinge at the blonde Wyeth cupcake gracefully undulating out of the hotel on Cisco's arm.

When I gained the exit, though, they

were already piling into a taxi which immediately started down the curving private driveway. This left me facing a dilemma of copious proportions. My own jalopy was on the parking lot, deeply buried in an assortment of other chariots; by the time I went after it and extricated it from its berth Evelyn Wyeth's cab would be long gone. And yet I had to tail her hack if I craved to keep my conscience clear.

The situation resolved itself when a second Yellow drifted into the spot just vacated by the first. Its tonneau door was invitingly open and I lunged toward it, tossed myself inside and started to tell the driver to follow the other taxi. I never uttered the words, though. Instead, I exclaimed: "Oops—sorry!" and felt an idiotic blush of embarrassment suffusing my puss. Under the circumstances my embarrassment was natural enough—because the hack I'd chosen was already occupied.

"It's quite all right, Mr. Turner," a husky, throaty feminine voice drawled. "Go ahead, driver."

"Nix!" I said. "I've got to—"

"I told you it's quite all right," the voice sharpened. Then, as we got under way, I copped a slant at its owner. She was a flagrantly lush brunette with rhinestones in her raven hair, an artful smile on her crimson kisser and a small but efficient '32 rodney in her right duke. She jabbed the gat against my ribs and muttered: "Quiet, shamus, if you don't want to be hurt."

ANY CHARACTER with a cannon can give me orders any time or any place; I have a vast respect for firearms when they're aimed at a vest I happen to be wearing. I slid into a far corner and settled my heft as the cab gathered speed.

Presently I said: "That's a nice outfit you're sporting, toots. Fits you like a scabbard."

"Thanks." She preened herself a brief preen. "Enjoy the view while you can. Possibly you'll think it somewhat more entertaining than the tail light of Miss

Wyeth's cab—which, incidentally, we seem to have lost."

"So I notice," I growled bitterly. "I hope you're happy."

"Quite happy, thanks. And now, gumshoe, suppose you tell mama why you were spying on Evelyn."

"I can't tell you because I don't know."

She frowned faintly. "Oh, come now. Whoever hired you must've given you some reason."

"That's the hell of it. I don't know who hired me."

"Do you expect me to believe that?"

"Make it easy on yourself," I said indifferently. "It happens to be the truth." Then I gunned my grey matter and dredged up more conversation, hoping to divert the brunette frill's attention and lull her watchfulness so I'd have a chance to purloin her pop-gun. "It might have been her fiance, Maxie LeVine."

"And why should LeVine want her shadowed?"

"Maybe because he was jealous; suspected her of two-timing behind his back with Pedro Cisco. That's one possibility."

"And another—?"

I spread my palms. "Maybe Maxie thought she needed protection. You know, a bodyguard in the background."

"Protection from what?" the brunette tensed.

"Your guess is as good as mine."

"Don't lie to me, Sherlock," she said, tautly.

I hesitated; wondered if she might be trying to pump me about the frustrated trigger caper of red-haired Louise Allison. Of all the screwball cases I've had in my career, this one took the king-size trophy. First I'd been anonymously engaged to tail Evelyn Wyeth. Then Evelyn had spotted me, thereby impairing my value as a shadow. Next, the Allison cupcake had almost squirted a charge of gunpowder poison at Evelyn's swarthy escort, Pedro Cisco. And now I'd been kidnaped by a brunette who was hep to my name and occupation, and who seemed to savvy more about the puzzle than I did myself.



"Never expect chivalry when dealing with a dick," I told her, and spooned her one on the button.

"Now listen, kitten," I said. "Let's—"

"No," she interrupted me firmly. "You listen. When this taxi stops, you're to get out and pay the driver without making any dizzy remarks, see? If you bleat, I'll blow you open."

I said: "You're whistling the tune, hon," and lapsed into dignified silence, inwardly seething because I hadn't got a chance to gloom her gat. I was certainly enjoying a streak of luck tonight—all of it bad.

THE CAB drew into the curb, anchors locked. And then I almost strangled when I lamped the name of the apartment building ferninst us. "The Fenham Arms!"

My mental machinery whirred faster than ever as I digested this latest surprise. Unless my memory had stripped a gear, the Fenham Arms was the stash where Louise Allison had told me she lived. So now I'd been ferried to the same apartment drop—and I couldn't help wondering what connection there was between that Allison redhead and the bru-

nette who was currently aiming a .32 at my elly-bay.

I was still wondering when the tough-minded beauty prodded me into a flat on the second floor. She made a light, closed the portal, and negligently waved me to a chair. "Make yourself comfortable while mama does her chores," she purred. "I might even buy you a Scotch when I'm finished."

She undulated over to an *escritoire*, unforked a telephone and dialed it with her left hand while keeping me covered with the rod in her right. And at that point my luck turned.

Some phone dials are fast, some sluggish. This was slower than the average; so slow that by straining my ears I could count each click in every back twirl of the gadget. I riveted my attention on the metallic sounds: *Click-click . . . click-click . . . click . . . click . . . click click? click . . . click . . .*

There was a long wait. Then the brunette drawled into the transmitter: "Hello, Pete? This is Dorothy. Everything okay at this end. How's with you? All set, eh? Good. See you later." She rang off as if she'd heard very nice news indeed; smiled like a cat feasting on a cage of canaries.

I didn't smile back at her; I was too busy concentrating. She had spoken to somebody named Pete. Could that be Pedro? Pedro Cisco, the swarthy and unctuous Latin bit-player who had been Evelyn Wyeth's *escore* tonight?

WELL, at least I'd learned one thing: the muffin's name was Dorothy. "How you doing, Dot?" I said.

"Just fine, Sherlock, just fine. One more call and I'll build you a prussic acid highball." She used the phone again, and the dial was as slow as ever. Three clicks. Four. Two. One. Nine. Seven. Then she said: "Lou? Dorothy. Pete's ready and waiting; I checked. Yes, she's with him. Okay here, too; I've got the gumshoe under a gun. 'Bye now."

Once again I did some rapid guessing. Earlier in this clambake there had been a Lou in the cast of characters:

Louise Allison. A dame named Louise is frequently called Lou by her intimates, and what else could you make of it? Obviously the Allison frail, Pedro Cisco's jilted sweetie, was involved in what was going on—even though I'd warned her to keep her nose clean.

But what the hell was cooking?

I didn't know; but it was high time for me to start hunting a solution. And even as I reached this conclusion, my chance came.

Dorothy herself unwittingly gave it to me. As she cradled her telephone, she took her glims off me for a split instant. That was all I needed. I erupted as if somebody had slipped me the hotfoot; surged across the room in one headlong leap and plummeted against the brunette chick before she realized her guard was down. The impact of my hundred and ninety pounds smashed her against the wall and her gat went skittering into a far corner. Then, as the wall bounced off her, I made a loose fist and spooned her a neat smack on the button.

She folded.

"Chivalry," I remarked sternly. "Never expect it when dealing with a dick." She was too unconscious to hear me, so I recovered her dropped *roscoe* and took it on the lam.

DOWN in the deserted first floor lobby, I made a hasty inspection of the brass mail boxes set flush into a marble panel; found one with Louise Allison's monicker. This gave me the redhead's apartment number, which was right here on the ground floor. I blipped to its portal; rapped.

Nobody answered.

I fished out my ring of master keys, tried a few and got one that worked the latch. Inside, I located a light switch; flipped it and made a fast prowling of the premises.

The Allison cupcake wasn't on deck; in fact, there was evidence of a hurried and permanent departure. A bureau gaped open, its drawers emptied; the flat's two closets were similarly barren. There were a few papers and scraps of

torn letters on the carpet, but no other trace of the jane. When I found no luggage, I knew she'd pulled the pin and didn't intend to come back.

Well, nuts; I might have expected something like that. I lamped a phone on a pedestal stand, grabbed it and studied its dial a minute, prodding my memory to recall the series of clicks which I had listened to upstairs when the busy brunette Dorothy made her two cryptic calls. Her first contact had been with somebody she'd addressed as Pete . . .

Two clicks had started it. That would be either *D*, *E*, or *F* of the prefix. Then two more; the same letters. What exchange was represented by that combination? *DF* and *FD* were out; likewise *DD*, *FF* and *EE*. Was there a prefix starting with *EF* or *ED*? No. So that left *FE* for Federal and *DE* for Dempstead.

I unpronged the receiver, dialed 0 and asked for chief operator. When she came on the line I said: "Police business, baby. Let me have the address listing on Federal one, one-one-three-one."

"I'm sorry, sir. There are no numbers beginning with Federal one. The Federal exchange starts with two."

"How about Dempstead?"

"Yes, sir, there is a Dempstead-one prefix."

"Good," I growled. "That narrows it down just fine. Shoot me the dope on Dempstead one, one-one-three-one."

In a moment I had my answer; a residence near Vermont and Los Feliz. I rang off, went through the same process again as I traced Dorothy's second call. This time I felt my gullet tightening when I got the information. I said: "What the hell—" and lunged out of the stash with my coat tails dipping sand.

Things were beginning to shape up, at least theoretically. If the gun-toting brunette's first call had actually been to Pedro Cisco, as I suspected, then her follow-up message made sense. In talking to the party named Lou she had said: "Pete's ready and waiting; I checked. Yes, she's with him." The "she" was unquestionably Evelyn Wyeth, meaning that Cisco and Evelyn were still together

and some sort of shenanigan was being hatched. In other words, the blonde Wyeth tomato was about to be installed in a jackpot.

I didn't know what the jackpot was going to be and I could only guess at the motives for it; but there was one thing I *had* discovered: the address where Evelyn and Pedro were now to be found. By tracing that first phone call I'd got the complete dope on the residence near Vermont and Los Feliz.

So okay. Since I'd been hired to keep the blonde quail under observation it was up to me to hie myself to that address with extreme velocity.

There was one complication, though. I'd left my own jalopy on the Hotel Diplomat's parking lot when the strong-minded Dorothy kidnaped me. As a consequence, I was now deprived of transportation unless I could locate another taxi in a hell of a hurry. And what with wartime restrictions on cabs cruising without passengers, this was going to offer difficulties.

I started walking.

THE NIGHT was foggy, chilly; but I began sweating before I'd gone four blocks. Intuition did that to me; a subtle sixth sense that sinister schemes were simmering and unless I stirred myself I'd be late for the blowoff. I broke into a lope, wondering if I would have to travel the whole distance on my tootsies. A hack was what I wanted, but I'd have settled for a pair of roller skates at the moment.

And then I piped a Yellow.

It was drifting along at a saunter, its flag down and its retreads whispering lazily on the moist asphalt. I catapulted over to the curb and gave vent to a shrill piercing whistle. "Hey you! Hold it!"

"Sorry, pal," the hacker kept rolling. "I'm runnin' deadhead, checkin' in at the garage."

I snarled: "That's what you think," and raced up abreast, tugging at a door handle. "Stop before it gives violence. This is cop business."

"Oh?" He applied his anchors. "You a dick?"

I showed him my tin. "Yeah."

"That thing?" he jeered. "Them special biscuits is a nickel a dozen. Quit kiddin' me. I thought you said cop business." He made a move toward his gear lever.

I said grimly: "So okay, I'm private. But being private gives me a license to pack heat. Would you care to have me flog you two or three times with my roscoe or do you cooperate peacefully?" I then whisked my .32 auto from the armpit clip where I tote it for emergencies; brandished the barrel under his trumpet. "How about it, buster?"

"Climb aboard, cap, climb aboard." He took a tuck in his truculence. "I never argued with no cannon yet and I'm gettin' too elderly to learn how. Where you wanna get drove to?"

"Los Feliz and Vermont," I settled down in the tonneau. "With great haste." And I gave him the address where I hoped to find Evelyn Wyeth and Pedro Cisco.

We took off in a cloud of waffle batter. Ten minutes later we gained our destination and I bounced out, paid the guy, told him he could scam. He did this; whereupon I approached a modest bungalow whose street number corresponded with the information I had garnered by listening to the clicks of the brunette Dorothy's telephone dial.

And even as I skulked toward the igloo I heard a scream seeping from inside; a she-male yelp, raw, harsh, horrified.

I SAID to myself: Hang onto your hat, pal, here we go again!" and belted to the bungalow's porch; hit the door a hell of a lick with my plunging tonnage. The flimsy portal crashed inward and I zoomed over the threshold in a shower of splinters; sailed into a shabby-genteel living room which was notable for two things. One was the swarthy Cisco ginzo stretched out on the floor with his skull crushed to hamburger. And crouched in a corner was a shivering blonde doll getting set to let out another hysterical yell. O course she was Evelyn Wyeth.

I copped a short hinge at Cisco and realized he was as dead as minced clams; I also piped a smooth brass candlestick

He surged straight at me, slammed into the chair I'd been hiding behind.



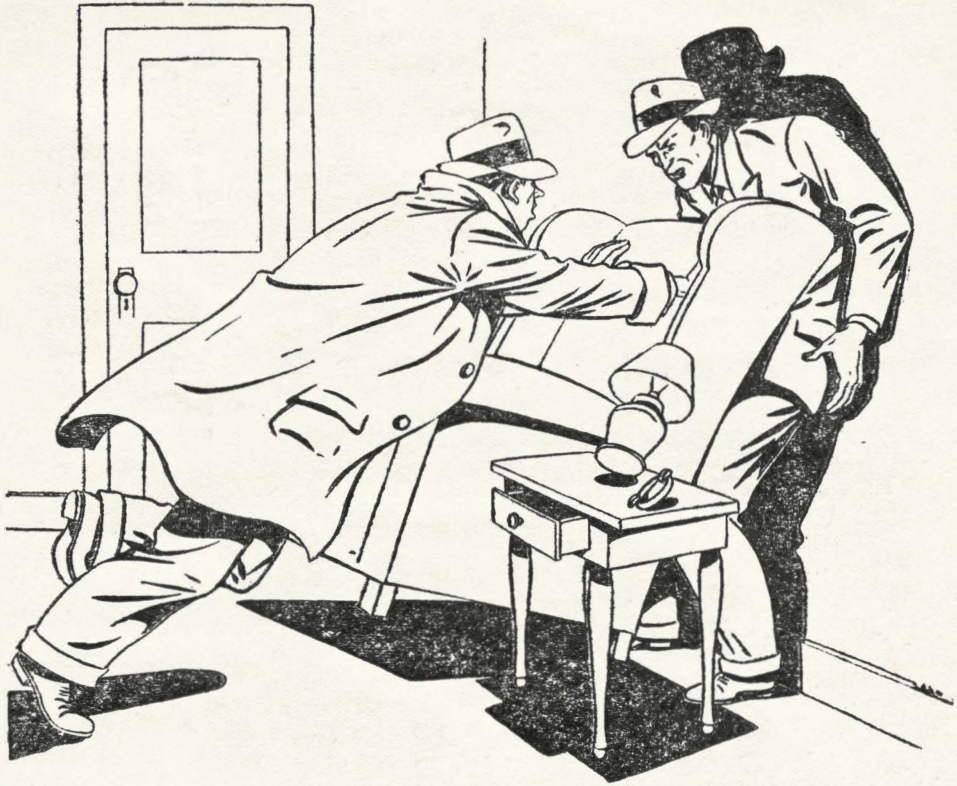
near his remainders—a candlestick stained with ketchup. It was the killery weapon, the kind that holds perfect fingerprints. Not stopping to inspect anything just then, I leaped at the Wyeth tomato; grabbed her before she could squall another caterwaul.

"Quiet!" I said, and cuffed her across the chops.

It wasn't a hard slap, but I put enough sting in it to give it authority and bring her down out of the clouds. Barring the splashy crimson imprint of my palm, her puss was as pallid as a whitewashed fence and damned near as expressionless. She stared at me with blank, lackluster glims; drew a ragged breath into her bellows and sobbed: "Who . . . what . . .?" Then she stared past me, fixed the hypnotic focus on Pedro Cisco's remnants and whispered: "My heavens . . . oh-h-h, my heavens. . ."

"Come on," I rasped. "Snap out of it."

"His head — somebody — hit him — k-killed—"



"Any dope can see that," I snapped. "The question is, who beaned him? Did you?"

"No—oh-h-h, no—I—I—you mustn't think—*No!*" her voice keened upward in frantic desperation. "I didn't, I didn't, I swear I didn't!"

"Then who did?"

"I d-don't know."

"Now cut that out," I said peevishly. "You came here with the guy and it wasn't too damned long ago. So now he's defunct. Either you cooled him or you saw it done."

She shook her noggin, dully. "I didn't see it. I—I was—unconscious."

"How come you were unconscious?"

"He hit me."

"Who?"

"Pedro."

I said: "How the hell could he hit you if he was deceased? Be reasonable."

"But he—he was alive when he hit me."

"So we're back on that routine," I

grated. "Look, let's take another shot at it, shall we? Start at the beginning. "You had a dinner date with Cisco at the Diplomat, the Jungle Terrace."

Her peepers widened. "How did you know that?"

"I was tailing you, remember? I'm a private pry. Dan Turner; that's me. Come on, now, start spilling."

"You're a detective?" she gasped. "I'm under arrest?"

I said: "Yes to the first question. As for pinching you, I'll decide that when you speak your piece."

"But—but—"

"You're engaged to Maxie LeVine, aren't you?"

"Y-yes."

"Then why were you prancing around with Pedro, the minute Maxie's back was turned?"

SHE looked shocked. "But Maxie knew about it. It was perfectly innocent. For the dancing," she added.

"Hunh?" I said.

"The dancing," she repeated. "Pedro was giving me rhumba and conga lessons for a scene he was to play with me in my next starring production. We went to dinner together tonight so we'd have a chance to try out the steps. In public, so I could gain a little confidence."

"In Hollywood anything can happen," I admitted grudgingly. "I remember you danced a lot between courses. Okay, then what?"

"Then Pedro said I wasn't getting the rhythm right and wanted me to come home with him for more practice. He said he had several special phonograph records—"

"That's a switch," I muttered. "Usually it's etchings."

She blushed. "You're wrong. He didn't make any p-passes or anything like that. We came here in a cab and then, almost the moment we walked into this room he—he hit me on the jaw."

"And?"

"And that's all I knew, until a minute ago. I woke up and saw him there on the floor—his head all bloody—ug-g-gh!" She shuddered violently. "I screamed and you rushed in—"

"Badger," I said.

She dished me the perplexed focus. "Badger?"

"Haven't you ever heard of the badger game?" I said. "It's an old racket with a lot of variations. If it's a wealthy guy that's to be victimized, some dame takes him to her room and they neck a while; then her phony husband barges in, accuses the sucker of alienating his wife's affections and demands heart balm in the form of a whopping payoff."

"But—that doesn't apply to this c-case!"

I said: "They altered it to fit. The Cisco fouse could have given you a drugged drink, but instead of that he bopped you cold; it brought the same results. The main thing is, he probably intended to get some candid snapshots of you and himself; pix that could ruin your career in the galloping tintypes. And it would cost

plenty to suppress those photos. Now do you savvy the setup?"

"Yes, except—he's d-dead."

"Very dead," I agreed. "Which complicates the mess; or seems to complicate it. We've got two possible explanations. First, his discarded sweetie—a red-haired wren named Louise Allison—crashed in and misunderstood the scenario; conked him in jealous frenzy. On the whole, though, I think that's the wrong theory."

The Wyeth jane blinked at me. "Wh-what else is there?"

"Something uglier," I said. "Let's go back to the badger game. Suppose Pedro Cisco was working for somebody higher up who craved to hang a frame around your neck. Suppose Pedro was a tool, a fall guy. He brought you here thinking he was to frame you—only his employer had a different notion and double-crossed him; croaked him; croaked him while you were unconscious."

"I don't g-get it."

"Look, kitten. A deal like that would make you the patsy on a murder charge. What if they've got a taxi driver lined up the brass candlestick that bashed Pedro? What if they've got a taxi driver lined up and willing to testify he brought you and Pedro to this stash? Suppose there are a couple more witnesses willing to swear you into the lethal chamber?"

FOR AN INSTANT I thought she was about to swoon. Her gams wobbled and her knees started to buckle; then she gripped herself as I reached out to steady her. "I—I've got to get out of here!" a stricken sob escaped her kisser. "Right now! Please—get me away before the p-police come and—"

"No dice," I said. "Screaming won't help you. Don't you think that possibility's been covered? All it needs is an anonymous tip to the cops that you were tabbed anking into this tepee with Cisco and your number would be up. The homicide flatties would swarm on you like a migration of locusts. Tests would show your dabs on everything you've touched in this room—"

"We can w-wipe all the plane surfaces, can't we?" she pleaded. "I remember reading in a detective story where all the fingermarks were rubbed off."

I said: "Oh, no. That would be destroying evidence, which same is illegal. If I helped you, I'd be compounding a felony; I might even catch a jolt on an accessory-to-murder rap. I won't buy that, baby, not even for you."

"But—but why not? You know I'm innocent."

"I do like hell. All I've got is your unsupported word."

"You—you mean you don't believe what I told you?"

"In a bumpy beef I never believe anybody," I said. "The way I see this fish-fry, you're either guilty or you're not. If you're not guilty, you were framed by a very clever character. And if it was that way, the one who did the framing will show up again—maybe sooner than you think."

"Wh-what for?"

"To put the bite on you," I pointed out. "To offer you a way out of your jackpot—for a cash consideration or something equally valuable." I set fire to a gasper, studied her through the exhaled smoke. "By the way, hon, isn't Maxie LeVine up in Sacramento tonight?"

"Why—why, y-yes."

"You think he's pretty much in love with you?"

"We're g-going to be married."

"Don't split hairs. Is he in love with you?"

SHE REDDENED AGAIN. "Yes," she said firmly. Then, less assurance in her tone: "I th-think he is."

"Do you know the name of his hotel in Sacramento?"

"I know where he t-told me he was going to stay." She passed me the information. "Wh-what are you going to do?"

"Call him long distance," I said, and snooped the cottage until I found a phone. Luck kept roosting on my elbow; I got my Sacramento connection in less than ten minutes. To the hotel's desk clerk I said: "This is Paragon Pictures calling from



"Would you call this comical?" she asked, and aimed the automatic at my ummy-tay.

Hollywood—may I speak to Mr. Max LeVine?"

The clerk's answer was as clear as if he'd been in the adjoining room. "Sorry, sir. Mr. LeVine left here more than an hour ago. He had a Los Angeles call and it seemed to excite him. He chartered a private plane and flew south immediately. He ought to be down there right now; this would be about the time he'd be landing, if he had good weather."

"Much obliged," I snarled, and rang off.

The Wyeth tomato stared at me. "He—he wasn't there?"

"No. I didn't expect him to be. He took a special plane south. In fact, he may be in Hollywood now."

Her glimmers widened. "I know what you're thinking!"

"You do, hunh?"

"Yes. You think Maxie came down here and spied on me and went crazy with jealousy when he saw me here in this house with Pedro; you think he k-killed him—"

I said grimly: "Jealousy wasn't the motive in this gore opera, baby. It was avarice. And the time has now come for

me to put out my bleat to the bulls."

"So they'll arrest Maxie? No, I won't let you."

"You won't let me? Hell's bells, hon, you're in the grease up to your adenoids yourself. Don't be comical."

"Would you call this comical?" she said. And I'll be a filthy name if she didn't open her handbag, yank out a .25 automatic and aim it at my ummy-tay!

THE ROUTINE was getting tiresome. Wrens with roscoes were too damned plentiful tonight, it seemed to me. First I'd had to snatch a gat from the red-haired Louise Allison; then I'd been forced to disarm the brunette Dorothy. And now this Wyeth tomato pulled the same stunt on me, which was much too repetitious. A guy could soon accumulate a good-sized arsenal if he spent his evenings taking heaters from she-males.

It had to be done, though. There was a tense expression on Evelyn's pan that warned me I was facing a very short future unless I took steps. So I took the steps.

The first step was sidewise. The second brought me close to a yellow brass object on the floor—the candlestick that had smashed Pedro Cisco to his ancestors. It now served another purpose as I gave it a swift kick in the blonde quail's direction. She piped it rolling toward her shapely silk-sheathed gams and knew it would smear her stockings with Cisco's coagulated ketchup if it touched her. She jumped instinctively, a reflex motion.

My own leap wasn't reflex; it was calculated. I launched myself across the room while the chick was still off guard, caught her napping and wrestled the rod from her mitt. "Now then," I remarked, pocketing it and producing my nippera. "Let's try these on you for size, sis." And I handcuffed her.

"You—I—you—"

"Cork it," I growled. "Let out one yap and I'll slap you bow-legged, which would be a pity on stems like yours." Then I returned to the phone and dialed police headquarters.

I asked for my friend Dave Donaldson of the homicide squad and presently he came on the line with his usual: "Who wants what and why?"

"Turner squalling. Listen fast. I'm wading around up to my neck in a murder mess at this address." I gave him the bungalow's street number. "A bit player, name of Petro Cisco, got tapped on the noggin a while ago with a blunt instrument, thereby becoming defunct. I've already got my cuffs on one character and I'll need a covey of cops for the big pinch. Can I depend on you to play it my way if I practically guarantee results?"

Dave's indignant roar rattled the receiver. "If it's murder I take no orders from you, bright eyes! I'll be right there—"

"Wait," I said. "This demands finesse or you'll foul it plumb to hellangone." I made my tone so serious that he quieted down to a whisper; you could almost hear him listening. "You're to make a stake-out around this joint, you and some of your minions. Cover yourselves with fog and don't move until you lamp Maxie LeVine—yeah, he's the Paragon Pix mogul—coming into the wigwam. The moment he's inside, that's your cue to come a-running."

"Maxie LeVine, eh?"

"Right. Now get started. Oh, yes, one more thing. You might send a couple of guys to the Fenham Arms and pick up a brunette muffin named Dorothy something-or-other; she's an accomplice. Her apartment is on the second floor; 209 is the number. She's slim but curvaceous; a good-looking dish. And she tried to hold me prisoner there in her joint while this Cisco kill was being pulled. Okay, got it?"

"Got it," Dave rumbled. "And may heaven help you if you're giving me a bum steer." He disconnected.

EVELYN WYETH gave me the dull focus. "So I was right. You are going to have Maxie arrested. You think he—"

"Never mind what I think," I said

curtly. "See that closet over in the corner? Get in it. Go on, now."

"But—but I—"

"In, I said. Or shall I gag you and throw you in?"

She moved hesitantly. "I—I'm a—"

"You're to lie low and keep quiet," I pushed her into the hiding place and shut the door. Then I scuttled to a corner and hunkered down behind a big wing chair.

I waited.

I kept waiting. Outside, the night, was getting foggier; I knew it because dampness and chill crept into the room, and there was a thicker yellowness to the electric lights burning overhead—that was mist coming in through the front door I'd busted open when I'd first plunged over the threshold. That had been a long time ago, I thought. After a while I wondered if I'd ever be able to straighten up from my huddled crouch. I wondered—

There was a sound outdoors; a car stopping at the curb.

Then footfalls on the sidewalk. Coming closer. Coming up onto the porch. Coming into the cottage, into the front room.

This is it, I told myself. Get set.

A voice said: "I don't believe it. I don't believe Evelyn is here, I don't believe she ever was here, and I don't believe what you told me about Cisco being dead—oh, my God! He is dead!" It was a voice I knew and recognized; Maxie LeVine's voice. And from the tone of it, he'd just lamped Pedro Cisco's cadaver sprawled on the carpet.

"You bet he's dead," somebody else spoke grimly. "And as for Miss Wyeth, she may be here or she may have run away. Either way, there's no difference. There's a caddy who'll testify he brought her here with Pedro and left them together. There's another witness, I won't mention her name; and there's myself. Not to speak of the fingerprints."

"Fingerprints—?" Maxie choked.

"Miss Wyeth's, yes. On the candlestick and other places. You figure it out. You know how the public is; always ready to think the worst when a girl and a man

go to the man's home late in the evening."

"Evelyn—Evelyn wouldn't—"

The second voice said: "Let her try and convince a jury."

"But—but—"

"Of course she might wave her legs and draw an acquittal; it has happened. Even if she does, though, the Hays office will put the ban on her. You'll lose a valuable star, lose all the profit her pictures might make in the next few years. And if she gets a conviction, you'll lose your marriage plans."

"This is—is monstrous!"

"It needn't be, Mr. LeVine. Look. The police haven't been notified yet. As I said when I phoned you long distance at Sacramento, she's in a bad jam but you can get her out easily enough."

"How?" Maxie asked frantically.

"A little bribery will take care of these witnesses I mentioned. And we can wipe away the fingerprints. We might even take the corpse and dispose of it."

"For how much money?"

"No cash at all, Mr. LeVine, none at all. Just kill that slum clearance bill you're trying to shove through the legislature. If you do that, everything will be all right."

I STOOD UP, whipped out my fowling piece and said: "Like hell it will be all right. *And what's happened to your comedy dialect, Lew Papadoupolis?*"

The tubby Greek *maitre* of the Hotel Diplomat's swanky Jungle Terrace pivoted, copped a stupefied gander at me. "Turner!" Then he fooled me.

You'd expect him to jump away from my rod if he jumped at all. Instead, he surged straight at me; slammed into the heavy, upholstered wing chair I'd been hiding behind. The chair rammed me into the corner, pinned me, spoiled my aim. And before I could draw another bead on the guy, he whirled and belted hellity-larrup for the door.

He made a mistake when he did that. Dave Donaldson was coming in, and Dave is a fast man on the trigger when there's a murderer trying to lam. There was the

(Continued on page 65)

MURDER! HE SAYS

By ELIZABETH STARR

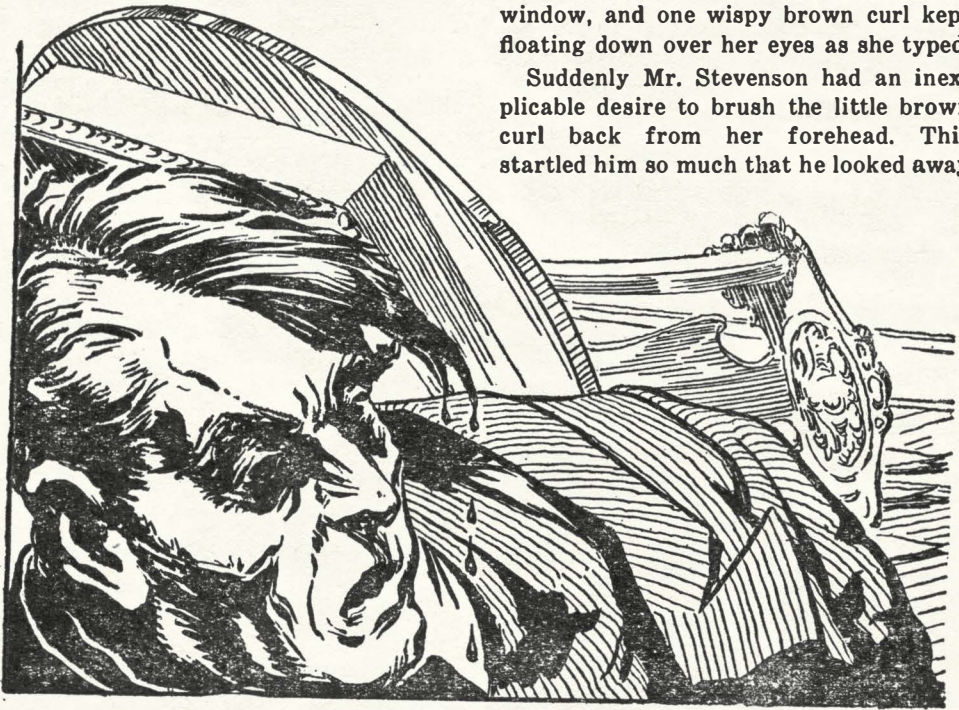
THE events preceding the murder at radio station KMOD seemed quite irrelevant—at the time.

It was a steaming afternoon in late July, and the research room of the small radio station was depressingly hot. At least Mr. Stevenson, seated unhappily at his desk near the filing cabinets, blamed his own depression on the heat. He had felt increasingly depressed for nearly a month, which was about the length of time Valerie Boone had been working at the station. Realizing this coincidence,

Mr. Stevenson felt his ears turning pink. He pushed the horn-rimmed glasses back firmly on his nose and coughed slightly, with a vague sense of embarrassment.

From where he sat, almost surrounded by the shiny dark-green cabinets, he could see Valerie at her typewriter, across the hall in Mr. Lambert's office. Old Mr. Lambert owned and directed the hundred-watt station, and Valerie was his secretary. She was drooping a little over the typewriter now, her slim body curved in its summery blue dress. The hot July sun poured in on her through the glass of a window, and one wispy brown curl kept floating down over her eyes as she typed.

Suddenly Mr. Stevenson had an inexplicable desire to brush the little brown curl back from her forehead. This startled him so much that he looked away



When the head man at that radio station got knocked off in mysterious circumstances, the somber and studious Mr. Stevenson found it necessary to transform himself into a masterful man—not only to impress a lady but also to impress himself with his prowess as a detective and thereby spare himself considerable personal mayhem . . .

Stevenson stared, clutching the paper bag in one hand. What he saw was shocking and unbelievable. It was as if his brain were upside down.



from her, and tried to concentrate on the next day's broadcasting time-sheet.

STATION KMOD, the schedule read, ELKON COUNTY, ILLINOIS. Weather reports—lately they had been “warmer, with increasing humidity”—went on at 8:00 A.M., followed at 8:15 by Dr. Jones' Get-

Up-and-Set-Up Exercises. Then, at 8:30, complete news analysis by Greg Dunham. . . .

Here Mr. Stevenson frowned at the time-sheet and jabbed the horn-rimmed glasses closer to his eyes, glaring at the name. He did not like Greg Dunham. He

could not understand why Valerie should like Greg Dunham. The man was oversized and brawny, with thick black hair and a handsome face and an apparently undeveloped brain. He reminded Mr. Stevenson strongly of L'il Abner, and Mr. Stevenson had never been one to follow L'il Abner. He did know, however, that the strip contained a girl called Daisy Mae who was fascinated by the hero's stern, fearless attitude toward life. Mr. Stevenson pondered this, feeling depressed.

The research room had grown hotter and hotter as the afternoon wore on. It was a rather small, stuffy room with only one window, which opened almost directly onto the roof of the building next door. The smell of warm tar wafted in from the roof, along with a consistent stream of gritty dust. The dust settled on the shelves of books and pamphlets in the research room, and on the one microphone in the corner of the room, which old Mr. Lambert used occasionally for recording purposes; it settled on the oily spinach-green of the filing cabinets, and on the empty reading table, and on Mr. Stevenson's desk.

Mr. Stevenson had been in charge of research at KMOD for five years. Before that he had been a librarian; and before that, a college student majoring in psychology. He was never without a small black notebook, in which he jotted down such items as, "Landlady overly prompt. in demanding rent—*anxiety-neurosis?*" The notebook was entitled THOUGHTS.

MR. STEVENSON was about thirty years old, tall and thin and somewhat stooped, with a high, bony forehead and straight brown hair. His eyes made him look younger than he was. They were spaniel-brown and wistful, framed by the thick tortoise rims of his glasses.

He adjusted the glasses busily now and strove to look efficient as Mr. Lambert came in from the office across the hall.

"Happen to know where Greg Dunham is?" Lambert asked. The old man looked tired and worried and hot. He was mopping at his face with a handkerchief, and

his small, active body was not as erect as usual. Mr. Stevenson noticed this, and was perturbed. He liked his employer. They got along well together, and it was understood that in the event of Mr. Lambert's death or retirement, Station KMOD was to be taken over by Mr. Stevenson. He was very grateful to the old man for this mark of trust in his abilities.

"Greg Dunham?" he answered now. "I'm sorry to say I wouldn't know, Mr. Lambert."

The old man crossed the room and sat down heavily at the reading table, facing Mr. Stevenson's desk. He pulled a scrap of paper from his coat pocket, and smiled at it wryly.

"Our muscular young friend left this on my desk," he explained. "It seems to be an ultimatum. He threatens to leave us this week unless I boost his salary again—and the hell of it is, he's pretty good with those news broadcasts. Not smart enough to be terrific, but he's pretty good. Can't pay him any more, though, the way things are."

Mr. Stevenson knew that things, meaning the financial situation at KMOD, were none too good. Local advertisers were aware that the pulling power of the small, unpublicized station was strictly limited, if not practically nonexistent. They preferred to entrust their accounts to the network stations in Chicago, or to the better-known independents. Therefore most of the KMOD broadcasts were sustaining shows, hastily put together by the small staff; platters, cheap local talent, and occasional educational talks by Mr. Lambert.

It was, Mr. Stevenson reflected, one of those cycles so often described as vicious. Lack of publicity discouraged advertisers, and lack of advertisers discouraged publicity.

"Psychologically speaking," he said thoughtfully, "I would not advise you to admit to Greg Dunham that his news analyses are more than passable. Such a statement, Mr. Lambert, would strike me as being most unwise, if I may say so."

The old man chuckled, his sharp blue eyes crinkling with amusement. "You can



Stevenson saw Valerie look up, smiling, from her typewriter. "Hiya, beautiful," Dunham greeted her.

count on me, Stevenson," he said, "not to hand out one nickel more than I have to. I may not be psychological, but I'm damned practical."

JAUNTY FOOTSTEPS sounded outside the research room, clipping briskly down the hall, and in a moment Greg Dunham appeared. He was clad in a checked suit, yellow pigskin shoes, and a tie that was almost audible. The energetic swagger of his powerful physique was repellent to Mr. Stevenson. It was indicative of an overly extroverted personality, due to intellectual inadequacy.

Dunham glanced into the office across the hall, and Mr. Stevenson saw Valerie look up, smiling, from her typewriter.

"Hiya, beautiful," Dunham greeted her.

Trite, Mr. Stevenson thought coldly. He was beginning to feel depressed again. Watching the two across the hall as they chatted together, a mental note for THOUGHTS came into his mind: "There is something depressing about Valerie Boone." This, however, did not seem quite the right phrase. He decided again that it was the heat, and smiled encouragingly at Mr. Lambert as the old man rose from the reading table and headed for the office.

"About this note, Dunham," Lambert said sharply, waving the scrap of paper. "Who do you think you are, Gabriel Heatter?"

As the two men began to argue, Valerie slipped from the office and shut the door behind her. She joined Mr. Stevenson in the research room, wilting down into the chair which their employer had just vacated, by the reading table. The light-blue dress made her eyes look bluer than ever, with the wispy brown curl floating between them.

"Hot day," she commented softly, after a pause.

"Oh, yes," Mr. Stevenson said earnestly. "Yes, it is." He coughed a little, carefully moving a bronze paperweight from the left side of his desk to the right side of his desk, and then back again. He was pleased that Valerie had come in, and he was happy, in a sad sort of way. These mingled reactions confused him, and he kept his eyes fixed on the paperweight, analyzing his emotions. Sad. Also happy. Confused.

He glanced up at Valerie, and she smiled, and the blueness of her eyes dazzled him; and suddenly he wanted to say all kinds of things to her, things that were strictly on a cultural plane. Things that he had never wanted to say to any-

one before. And he had a strange, sinking feeling, and new thoughts seemed to be actually whirling in his brain, like desperate little dervishes. His hands and feet were cold, and he had a lump in his throat and another in his chest. He stared at Valerie as though she were something apart from the rest of the world.

As he stared, one of the whirling thoughts emerged clearer than the rest, habit couching it in the familiar phraseology of the small black notebook. "Can no longer dodge fact," Mr. Stevenson thought. "Am in love."

His brown eyes were glassy as he stared at her.

"I don't really mind summer, though," Valerie said conversationally, in her soft voice.

"No?" Mr. Stevenson said hoarsely.

"Oh, no," Valerie said. She smiled.

Mr. Stevenson strove to get his brain back to working order. The voices of Lambert and Dunham, arguing in the office across the hall, were rising angrily now, the words muffled by the closed door; but he hardly heard them. He was beginning to realize that the discovery of his love for Valerie presented immediate problems. They were problems, however, which he was more than willing to undertake. It seemed to him that the first step was to determine just what attributes Valerie particularly admired in a man, and then to acquire them as rapidly as possible.

Mr. Stevenson approached this cleverly, adjusting his glasses with determination.

"Tell me, Miss Boone," he said, smiling briskly. "Are you fond of motion pictures?"

"Me? Oh, of course I am." There was a pleased and expectant note in her answer.

"And I suppose," Mr. Stevenson went on encouragingly, "that you prefer some particular actor to all the others?" Once he had seen a production in which Henry Fonda was starred, and he had felt that he was not unlike Henry Fonda, except in appearance. Both quiet, introvert types. It would be a very good sign if

Valerie should happen to say Henry Fonda.

"Humphrey Bogart," Valerie said.

"Oh," Mr. Stevenson said.

"Yes," Valerie said. She smiled a small, secret smile, and the lashes were a demure screen for her large blue eyes. "You see, Mr. Stevenson . . . women like masterful men."

MR. STEVENSON said nothing. Never in his life had he been more depressed. He did not even look up as Mel Hollis, staff writer at KMOD, stuck his head around the corner of the research-room doorway.

"Hey, Stevenson, how do you spell *indubitably*?" Mel Hollis wanted to know.

Mr. Stevenson spelled it out for him morosely, hoping he would go away. He was in no mood for conversation with Mel Hollis. The rotund little writer was always overly irritated about something, or overly enthusiastic about something else. Mr. Stevenson craved peace and quiet in which to think.

"Hey, listen," Hollis said exuberantly, bouncing into the room. "Remember that series I told you about? I'm on the last script now. Going to finish it up tonight, and then just you watch! This series'll make KMOD famous! It'll make *me* famous. Frankly," he added happily to Valerie, "I think it's terrific."

Valerie smiled. "That's swell. Does Mr. Lambert know about it?"

"Not yet. I been working on it in my spare time—three months' work, too, but worth it, you wait and see. It's inspiring. It's got scope. Lambert'll love it." His chubby face glowed with enthusiasm, and he perched himself on the edge of Mr. Stevenson's desk, facing Valerie. "Get this. It's a kind of a soap opera, see, and there's this girl—"

Suddenly the door of the office across the hall was flung open violently, and Greg Dunham strode out. His big, handsome face was flushed with anger, and he was still shouting back at Lambert:

"Okay, okay, but I'm not kidding. I'll stay to the end of the week, and then—"

"And then my answer will be exactly

the same," Lambert snapped, from inside the office. "I can't pay you any more, and I don't intend to. Do what you damn' please."

Dunham muttered something under his breath, and slammed the office door noisily behind him. Then, glancing in at Valerie, he said, "Come on, it's after five. I'll take you home."

She hurried from the room, running after him down the hall.

"Whew!" Mel Hollis let out a surprised explosion of breath. "What's the fight about? Do you know?"

Mr. Stevenson shrugged. His despondent thoughts were elsewhere.

"Well—" Hollis removed his pudgy body from the desk. "Guess I'll be getting along home. Want to finish up that last script. 'Night, Stevenson."

Mr. Stevenson nodded vaguely. He was alone in the room now, and there was no sound, except for that of Hollis' retreating footsteps. They faded, and were gone, and the sultry heat seemed to settle more oppressively in the silence. Long rays of late-afternoon sun poured through the open window, laying an oblong of bright yellow on the floor. The gritty dust, blown in from the roof of the building next door, showed plainly on it, and there was the faint smell of warm tar, melted by the heat.

Mr. Stevenson noticed all these things, as he had noticed them a hundred times before, but now he felt strangely lonely and strangely sad. Perhaps he had spent too much time in observation and learning. Perhaps the most important things were never found in books. And in those years of college, and as a librarian, and here in the research department of KMOD—perhaps he had lost his chance to become a masterful man.

STEVENSON looked up, his brown eyes wistful behind the heavy glasses, as Mr. Lambert came in from the office across the hall. The old man looked tired. He moved to the reading table and sat down, loosening his tie, smiling wryly at Mr. Stevenson.

"You and I work too hard," he said.



It was Mr. Stevenson's bronze paperweight that was used for the murder weapon.

"Everyone else has left, but we stay on forever." He reached for a pamphlet from one of the shelves, and began riffling through it. "Worst luck, I have to make that recording tomorrow—the Byzantine-architecture thing. I suppose I'd better get the material ready now. No time in the morning."

"I'll stay too," Mr. Stevenson said automatically. "You may need help, Mr. Lambert."

"Thanks. Mind if I close the window?" The old man had to be very careful of drafts. He pulled the pane down now, and locked the window, as Mr. Stevenson looked up *BYZANTINE* in one of the filing cabinets.

They worked for nearly two hours, and every minute grew more painful for Mr. Stevenson. He could hardly keep his mind on the work, and the room was stiflingly hot with the window closed. In addition, Mr. Lambert had an irritating habit of whistling one tune over and over softly, whenever he was concentrating. It was a song called *Murder! He Says*. Mr. Lambert always rendered it slowly and mournfully, apparently under the impression that it was a dirge.

Finally Mr. Stevenson suggested that they go out and have dinner before finishing the work.

"You go ahead, Stevenson. Just bring me back a sandwich. Sardine on white, no lettuce." The old man resumed his whistling, writing busily.

Mr. Stevenson hurried down the dark-

ened halls of the building, clipped quickly down the three flights of stairs, and out onto the street. It was nearly dark now, and much cooler. He breathed deeply, straightening his tall, slightly stooped body as he walked toward a small tearoom on the next block. Just before entering the tearoom, he saw Stan Meredith coming around the corner. Stan was the young staff engineer at KMOD; a pleasant-enough boy, but Mr. Stevenson did not feel like talking to anyone. He hurried into the little restaurant, choosing a quiet corner booth.

WHEN Mr. Stevenson returned to the station more than an hour later, after a good dinner, he opened the spring lock on the door of the building with his own key and trudged up the three flights of dark stairs, holding Mr. Lambert's sandwich carefully in a paper bag. All the way up the stairs, and in the hall leading to the research room, he was thinking about the wispy brown curl on Valerie's forehead.

But then, as he reached the doorway of the brightly lighted room, he stopped thinking. It was as though his brain had been suddenly turned upside down, and everything were registering wrong. He stared, clutching the paper bag in one hand, his knees shaking. What he saw was shocking and unbelievable, and it was impossible to make sense out of it. The reading table overturned . . . papers and books scattered beside it . . . a capsized inkwell pouring its blue-black stain across the floor. . . .

And in one corner of the room, as though he had backed into it in last desperate terror, old Mr. Lambert lay in a huddled ball on the floor. Mr. Lambert, with his white hair covered with blood and his face almost unrecognizable. . . .

Mr. Stevenson walked unsteadily into the room, the paper bag held tightly in his hand. The telephone was on his desk. He picked up the receiver fumblingly, gasping for breath, keeping his eyes away from that limp, huddled ball in the corner.

"Hello, I want the police department. . . ."

THE RESEARCH ROOM was a bedlam of strange faces and voices and general confusion. A fingerprint man had come and gone, and the coroner had removed Lambert's body. There were policemen walking around, talking among themselves and doing things which Mr. Stevenson did not understand; and a man in plain clothes, presumably a special investigator, had just arrived. There were two other plainclothesmen already present, but apparently the new arrival had more authority. He talked louder.

Mr. Stevenson sat in a small, hard chair against the wall, watching it all bewilderedly. A totally new atmosphere pervaded the research room. Cigarette smoke was a blue haze over everything, and the ordered neatness had turned to chaos. Cigarette butts and burnt matches littered the floor, and melodramatic words were being tossed around; words like "victim" and "killer" and "weapon." It was so incongruous that Mr. Stevenson felt conspicuous and out of place in his own office.

He glanced over at the other members of the station's small regular staff. They were seated together on the opposite side of the room; Valerie in an easy chair with Greg Dunham perched on the arm of it, and Mel Hollis and Stan Meredith a few feet away from them, in hard, straight-back chairs like Mr. Stevenson's. They had been coming in one by one for the past half hour, summoned by the police.

Even their four familiar faces looked strange and different. It was as though he had seen only snapshots of them before, and were meeting them now for the first time. They all looked stunned and confused, yet there was a tense watchfulness about them. They did not speak to each other.

Mr. Stevenson's eyes met Valerie's, and she smiled a little. He smiled back, pushing his glasses firmly into place with his forefinger, trying to appear calm and reassuring; but the muscles of his face felt stiff and rigid.

"You the one found the body?"

He picked the nightstick up and moved close to the two struggling men.



Mr. Stevenson started. The investigator stood before him, pencil poised over a pad of paper.

"Yes, I did. I telephoned you immediately."

He answered several more questions as

to his whereabouts during the evening, realizing uncomfortably that the facts did not sound too convincing when stated. Also he had to admit that the station was to be taken over by him at Mr. Lambert's death. At this point he sensed a certain hostility in the investigator's manner, but the moment passed, and soon he was left alone again while the others were being questioned.

Greg Dunham said that he had taken Valerie to dinner, then home, returning to his own apartment and spending the evening alone. Mel Hollis said he had heated some soup for dinner and then worked on a script. Young Stan Meredith said he had spent most of the time tramping from store to store, trying to buy cigarettes. He had gone to bed early, and was awakened by the call from the police.

"Now that's what I call airtight alibis," the investigator finally said disgustedly, slamming closed his notebook. "Airtight like a sieve."

"If we'd known there was going to be a murder," Mel Hollis said irritably, "we'd have gone calling on all our friends."

"Sure," Greg Dunham agreed, grinning.

"But we didn't know it," young Meredith added.

From across the room Mr. Stevenson called, "Definitely not," just to be on the safe side. He coughed, embarrassed, as everyone turned to stare at him.

THE INVESTIGATOR moved off to a corner of the room and began talking to the other plainclothesmen. He was saying something about the murderer having bashed in Mr. Lambert's skull with home force, which eliminated the girl—meaning Valerie. And there were no obvious motives, except for the guy who found the body—meaning Mr. Stevenson. Anyway, the murder weapon was missing. Not much to pin on.

Then he said something that struck Mr. Stevenson as being wrong. He said, "Anybody could have come across the roof of the next building and through the window. . . ."

Mr. Stevenson pondered this for a minute, trying to think clearly. He glanced over at the window. It was wide open—but Mr. Lambert had closed and locked it from the inside.

He sat very still, feeling cold and almost physically sick, fully realizing for the first time that there were only five people who could have gotten into the building and murdered the old man. Five people had keys—Valerie, Greg Dunham, Mel Hollis, Stan Meredith and himself. One of them—Dunham, Hollis, or Meredith—was a killer. Because Mr. Lambert would not have allowed that window to be opened while he was alive. The murderer must have opened it from the inside, hoping that the crime would appear to be—what was the phrase?—an outside job.

Mr. Stevenson was shaken. The sense of unreality, produced by the shock of finding Mr. Lambert's body, had left him now, but it was supplanted by a still more dreadful feeling. The sort of feeling, Mr. Stevenson thought confusedly, that one might have on awakening from a nightmare and discovering that it wasn't a nightmare after all, but the real thing.

He had no idea of what to do. Certainly it would not be wise to point out to the police that the field of suspects was fairly narrow, particularly as he himself was the only one with an instantly perceptible motive. It must also be considered that, as far as the police knew, he was the last one to see Mr. Lambert alive and the first one to see him dead.

MR. STEVENSON squirmed in the hard little chair, ignoring the activity around him, and trying feverishly to remember the Sherlock Holmes stories which he had read in college. None of them seemed to fit his predicament. What he was trying to decide, precisely, was whether to tell the police about the locked window, or to proceed alone, searching for clues and motives—assuming, of course, that he was not immediately arrested.

Both plans had dark potentialities. The trouble with Sherlock Holmes was that he

had never seen any reason to hesitate. Mr. Stevenson was not so confident. Suppose he did suddenly fall upon the murderer—what would he do with him?

It was while he was considering this, unpleasant visions marching through his mind, that Mr. Stevenson happened to glance at his own desk, over by the filing cabinets. His gaze sharpened and riveted on the surface of the desk. He stared at it, jerking his glasses into a better position, and then staring again. The heavy bronze paperweight was gone!

Skull bashed in with some force . . . murder weapon missing. . . .

Mr. Stevenson slumped down in the chair, gazing vacantly at the desk. His paperweight, used to kill Mr. Lambert. . . .

"Okay," the investigator said suddenly. "You can all go home now. We'll call you when we need you."

Mr. Stevenson watched dazedly as everyone prepared to leave the room. It was not until the policemen were actually going out the door, followed by Mel Hollis and Stan Meredith, that he rose uncertainly from his chair. Greg Dunham was over near the door, placing Valerie's light summer jacket around her shoulders.

He looked at Valerie. *Masterful men.* . . .

Mr. Stevenson thought rapidly. Then, as Dunham and the girl turned to follow the others from the room, he called sharply, "Just a moment—" They turned, and Hollis and Meredith paused in the hall. "As . . . as the new head of KMOD," Mr. Stevenson began, with as much emphasis as he could muster, "I would like to speak to you all for just a moment about . . . about the duty we owe to our late employer, Mr. Lambert."

Haltingly, but with unbridled determination, Mr. Stevenson launched into a symbolic talk on the torch of KMOD, which they must hold high and proudly in fond memory of the old man who had passed his work on to them. He talked on and on, as the tramp of the policemen's feet faded down the hall.

The members of the staff listened with barely concealed puzzlement and impatience. Then, when Mr. Stevenson was

sure that the police had left the building, he changed the subject abruptly.

"By the way," he said, "there's something very interesting that I forgot to tell the police. I must certainly notify them of it tomorrow. You see, Mr. Lambert was making a recording earlier this evening. The one scheduled for broadcast tomorrow—Byzantine architecture." He wet his lips, and put a strong, convincing note in his voice. "And this is what I must tell the police—when I . . . when I found Mr. Lambert, I also noticed that the recording microphone was still switched on. He must have forgotten it, you see. Of course I switched it off. Automatically. But the point is, *a live microphone was in this room at the time of the murder.* Therefore some clue may be down on wax at this very moment, in the recording room." He paused.

MR. STEVENSON had intended to watch very carefully for reactions at this dramatic pause, but before he could glance at the faces of the three men, Valerie exclaimed excitedly.

"Well, my goodness," she cried, "why don't we go right in and find out?"

"Why . . . ah . . . the difficulty there," Mr. Stevenson explained, again thinking rapidly, "is that, as you know, I have the only key to the recording room, aside from the one Mr. Lambert kept. And in the . . . ah . . . stress of the evening, I seem to have mislaid it. Of course, the police will find it very simple to break the door down, after I tell them."

"That's wonderful," Valerie said softly. "Imagine if all this awful business were cleared up right away. Do you really think the murderer's name might come out on the record?"

"Very possibly," Mr. Stevenson stated. "The machine in the recording room is automatic. When the needle is set, and the microphone switched on in *this* room, it can record continuously for some time. Automatic shift, you see."

"Well, nothing much we can do about it tonight," Greg Dunham said, "if you've lost the key to the room."

(Continued on page 80)

"Fire!" he said. "The whole building is burning! My shop is on fire!"



AT TEN O'CLOCK, when District Attorney Frank McLean arrived, the smell of gas was still heavy and unpleasant in the gray stucco bungalow on Maryland Avenue. It was a cheerless morning. No sunlight penetrated the blank, dull sky. The faces of the several police and county officers wore a pallor that seemed deathly in the dingy rooms.

The fingerprint man was finishing up, tidily putting his materials away. Two detectives were standing head-to-head by a window, frowning over a photograph one held before them. Griebold, the medical examiner, leaned over a table in the kitchen, filling out an official document in his tight, meticulous script.

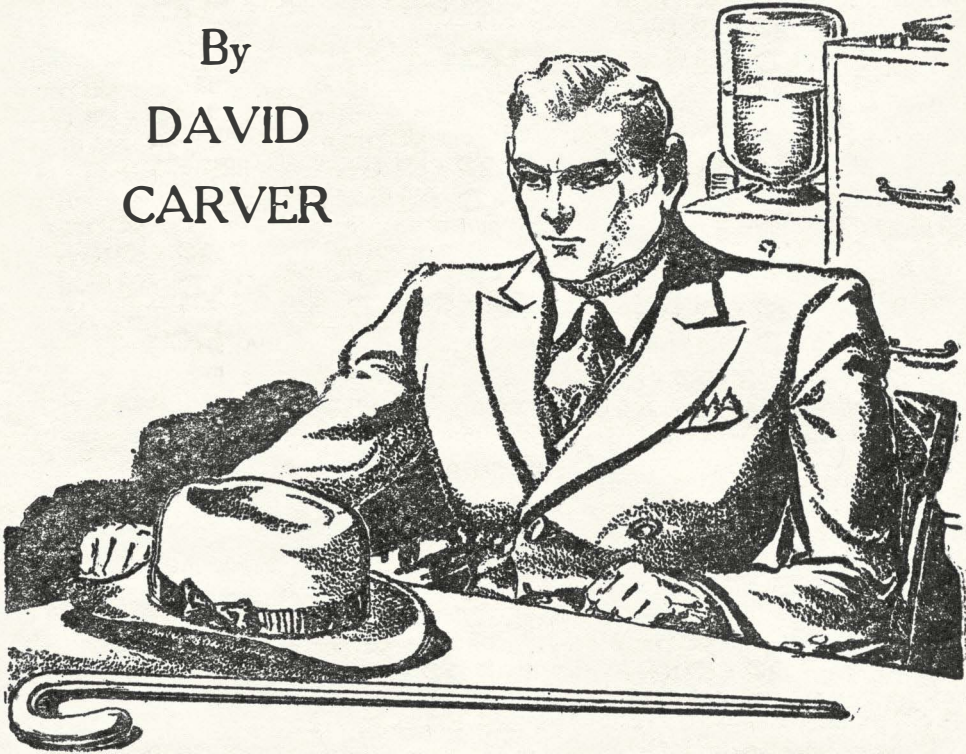
McLean, with his habitually irascible gray eyes, looked down at the girl who

lay strangely contorted upon the kitchen floor. She was slender, hardly more than twenty-five. According to Griebold's estimation she had been dead since about eight o'clock the previous night. The tips of her fingers, her hands, her face were blue—such a blue as may be found in varicose veins. It looked almost as if a film of ink had been infused beneath the surface of the skin.

"That's one of the inevitable symptoms of death caused by inhaling gas," Griebold said in reply to McLean's comment. "A salesman smelled gas escaping when he rang the doorbell this morning; he saw paper stuffed under the door. But it was plain to me that death had been fixed up to look like suicide. I noticed that some of the wadding had been stuffed un-

BLUE DEATH

By
DAVID
CARVER



You can't hide a dead man, very long . . . Death is no mystery when you find the right grave. And the counterfeiters found that out!

der the door from the outside. Furthermore I discovered a bruise on the top of the skull. She was knocked unconscious first; gas did the rest."

"What's her name?"

"Winifred Fox."

McLean glanced at the death certificate. Griebold had written down: *Murder by person or persons unknown.*

One of the detectives handed McLean the photograph. It portrayed a young man of thirty or thereabouts, dark-haired, slender. Across a corner was scrawled: "Your affectionate brother, Herbert."

"Not much from the neighbors," the detective said. "Herbert and Winifred are brother and sister—that much seems to be agreed. Couldn't get a line on what Herbert does for a living, or where he

is, or how to reach him. Winifred generally stayed home, kept house. Rarely any callers. Nobody was seen around the house last night, when the murder took place. Affectionate brother Herbert's going to be on the jump, I'm thinking."

McLean began a systematic search through the house. Whatever the motive, robbery could hardly be considered. The house was in good order. The girl's handbag was lying on a dresser in her bedroom. It contained forty dollars in small bills, and a few pennies and dimes. The most significant find was a sealed envelope that had been hidden far back in a drawer of the secretary among old receipts. McLean opened it. There were seven crisp ten-dollar bills inside.

McLean took them to the light, exam-

ined them narrowly, turning them over and comparing them with a ten-dollar bill of his own.

"Nice work," he muttered finally. "Have a look, Plummer," he said, handing the bills to the detective.

After a minute: "They're counterfeit!"

"Beauties."

The others gathered around, and the bills were passed from hand to hand.

"Fresh as griddle-cakes," Detective Plummer remarked. "And that explains why the neighbors don't know what Herbert does for a living."

BROME, in charge at the Federal Building, was an unexcitable man with dull, rather tired eyes; but there was knowledge and a vast amount of training behind his use of them. He took the counterfeit bills from McLean and looked them over with, it seemed to McLean, a very careless glance. Then he said:

"Wait a minute—I'll show *you* something." He opened a drawer of his desk and brought out a flat package wrapped in brown paper. Removing the wrapping he exhibited for McLean's inspection two oblong copper plates.

McLean frowned over these a moment. He saw that the plates represented the front and back of a ten-dollar bill.

"Are you telling me," he asked, "that these are the plates that printed the bills I found?"

"Exactly," Brome drawled. "I figure there's been over two hundred thousand dollars of these spurious tens run off this set. We keep getting 'em, too. It's one of the cleverest jobs I ever saw. Interesting story connected with the discovery of the plates, McLean. They were in possession of a slim, dark-haired fellow—"

"Is this the man?" asked McLean, showing him the picture of Herbert Fox.

Brome looked at it, and he showed an amount of astonishment remarkable for him. "That's him!" he breathed. "Where did you get it?"

Briefly McLean told him of the murder in the stucco house.

"How long had she been dead?" Brome

wanted to know.

"About fourteen hours, Griebold thinks."

An odd grin appeared on Brome's face. "You're way off, McLean," he said regretfully. "Herbert Fox has been lying in the City Morgue since Monday night—awaiting identification."

For a second McLean looked really villainous.

"Who killed him?" he demanded.

Brome shook his head. "Fox was hit by a perfectly innocent automobile," he said.

"You're positive?"

"Absolutely. My men checked it carefully. He was crossing the street against the lights, and a woman driver knocked him down; he died before they got him to the hospital. Then, when the plates were found in his pocket and turned over to me, the Criminal Identification Bureau tried to find out who he was. But his clothes had no laundry marks and his fingerprints weren't in the records. We couldn't consider letting the newspapers have a picture of him—we didn't want to put any partners of his on their guard."

"I've got detectives hunting for him," McLean muttered. "And a squad waiting at the Maryland Avenue house on the chance he might come back!"

"I've been trying to find out where he was coming from," Brome said; "why he had the plates with him; where he was going. You and I will have to pool our information, McLean."

"Suits me. I've got to know who killed Winifred Fox. And my only suspect," McLean said ruefully, "is dead."

"Worse than that; innocent," Brome grinned. "What are you going to do?"

"I'll let the newspapers have it for the night editions. I'll let 'em say that the accident victim at the Morgue has been identified as Herbert Fox, and the theory will be that his sister worried over his absence to such an extent that she committed suicide by inhaling gas."

"And what'll that buy?" inquired Brome skeptically.

"Somebody's going to look for those plates, Brome."

"In the Maryland Avenue house?"

"Possibly."

"Why didn't they look for 'em there last night?"

"It was the brother they were looking for last night."

"And is that why she was murdered?"

"Listen, are you trying to embarrass me?"

"Well, if that was the motive—"

"If, Brome. I don't know anything. Maybe Fox's partners thought he had run off with the plates . . . It's a hunch."

THE following day was Saturday. There had been no developments in the case for twenty-four hours. No one had come near the house in Maryland Avenue.

Then, at four that afternoon, Brome phoned McLean.

He said: "One of my men has been tailing a man known as Ludwig Fetra, an old-timer we convicted of putting out some green-goods in 1913. Pretty meager clew, I'll admit. He was seen last night around six o'clock going into a wooden frame building on Jones Street. The ground floor is occupied by a photo-engraving shop called The Century Crafts Company."

"Ludwig Fetra . . . Where is he now?"

"Gave us the slip, I'm sorry to say. There are several exits to the building. I've got Jones Street in a net, though. Here's the connection, McLean. Herbert Fox was killed about six blocks north of Jones Street. I know that's pretty thin, but we've got very little else to go on."

"What about the Century Crafts place? Legitimate?"

"Seems so. Fellow named Landstreet owns it; he's been established there about ten years. Does fair business, and his customers appear to be satisfied. It's possible, though, that Fetra works in his shop. I'm waiting for my man's report. Anything doing on your end?"

"Not a thing."

"I'll call you back if something turns up."

"Thanks, Brome."

An hour after Brome's call, McLean's secretary announced a visitor. "A Mr. Landstreet," she said.

"Show him in."

He was a tall, blond man; well dressed, with a cane hooked under one elbow. His thin nose was sharply angled at the bridge, and his under lip was excessively long and full. He had pale, prominent eyes. McLean judged him to be about forty.

Accepting a chair by McLean's desk, Landstreet began in a deep, throaty voice:

"I am the proprietor of The Century Crafts Company, Mr. McLean. I got into communication with the Bureau of Missing Persons this afternoon, and they asked me to see you. Last week one of my employees disappeared."

"What name?"

"Herbert Fox."

"What sort of work did he do for you?" McLean asked him.

"Handy man. He had been a printer, but got in trouble of some sort with the union. As we keep open shop at my plant, I let him come in as assistant to Mr. Fetra—"

"Fetra, did you say?"

"Yes. Fetra works for me as a sort of odd-job man, generally after hours. He's about sixty—a foreigner."

"How long have these two men been working for you?"

"Fetra—about a year. Something like six months ago he brought Herbert Fox in to see me and asked me to let him come into the shop as his assistant."

"Friends, are they?"

"I believe so."

"Don't you know," McLean asked, "that Fox is dead?"

"Yes," Landstreet said readily. "They told me that at the Bureau. I understand the news was reported in the papers last night, though I didn't see the item then."

"Did you know Fox's sister?"

"No. I didn't even know he had a sister until she phoned several times during the week to ask if her brother had reported for work. Now here's a strange thing, Mr. McLean. Fetra told me yesterday about her committing suicide—"

"What time, yesterday?"

"About ten o'clock in the morning. How could he have known about it? I un-

derstand the girl's body wasn't discovered until about that time!"

"Did you ask Fetra that?"

"I certainly will ask him. But I haven't seen him since six o'clock yesterday evening."

"Where?"

"In the shop. He came in for a minute, then he went out again. Meanwhile I went home, as I usually do about that time. This morning I saw that the shop had been left untidy. Either Fetra had neglected his work, or hadn't returned last evening. It was the first time a thing like this had happened. I thought, 'They're up to something, those two.' First Fox disappears, and now Fetra. Then, as I said, Fox's sister called me up several times. She'd seemed worried. I finally decided to make inquiries."

"Where does Fetra live?"

"That I couldn't tell you," Landstreet said regretfully. "He has a furnished room in town, but he's been in the habit of changing his quarters so often that we've lost track of his address."

"The post office may have a record," McLean said. "What do you know of Fetra personally?"

VERY LITTLE. He used to be an engraver in Europe, I understand. I didn't find him dependable in that capacity. The reason is he was using dope—heroin. He confessed as much—that was some time ago. But I didn't want to discharge him for that. He was useful, tidy, punctual. I regarded him as an unfortunate, you understand—"

"Didn't the men in the shop know him?"

"Hardly. He came to work after the rest had gone. Occasionally he got to the shop at noon, when the men were at lunch."

"Did he and Fox have easy access to the equipment in the shop?"

"Access to—" Landstreet stared. "I suppose so. Why?"

"Fetra was convicted about twenty years ago of forging United States currency."

"Is it possible!" Landstreet exclaimed, his pale eyes wide.

"Certain. Certain, too, that he's been at it again. Evidently Fox helped him, because they found counterfeit plates on him the day he was killed."

"Listen," Landstreet said hurriedly, "maybe you'll catch Fetra yet. He usually has his supper at a restaurant in Jones Street—that much I know. I left word with a waiter to phone me at your office between five and six in case he comes in this evening. Let's see—" He looked at his watch.

"Small chance," McLean grunted. "Fetra's gone places. But when he's found—"

The telephone signal glowed suddenly red. McLean picked up the telephone.

"Someone calling Mr. Landstreet."

Landstreet sprang to his feet. "Maybe—Hello? Yes, this is Landstreet. . . . Fire? What! Wait a minute—Mr. McLean, my shop is on fire—the whole building is burning! Please excuse me—I must go—" He dropped the receiver back, took his hat, his stick, and rushed from the office.

Brome phoned a minute later. "The Century Crafts Company is going up in blazes," he reported. "It's a wooden building—we were set to bust in at night and see what we could find."

"Look anyway," McLean advised. "I'm coming down."

"What for—get cinders in your eye? There won't be a shred of evidence out of it, McLean. That's what the fire was for. The inspector's absolutely sure it's of incendiary origin."

"I'm coming down anyway," McLean declared. "If somebody set that place on fire, there must have been something worth burning."

"Do you expect to find anything left?" Brome growled.

McLean, however, had hung up. Within three minutes he was speeding in his car toward town.

THE FLAMES had been subdued by the time he arrived. Outside the firemen with hose lines shot streams of water into the building; others were at work inside, also, plying their axes among the heaps of char. A thin, wet smoke

arose from the ruined building, seeping from the shattered windows and from the blackened walls.

McLean found Brome and Landstreet together, the latter looking as dejected as it was possible to look. Brome's face was not particularly happy either.

"Insurance?" Landstreet was saying bitterly. "It doesn't begin to cover the loss. Think of all the equipment—"

"Is it your notion Fetra set fire to the plant?" McLean asked him.

Landstreet shrugged helplessly. "What else is there to think? According to the fire inspector it was the work of an incendiary—"

"Fetra had plenty good reason to do it," Brome said. "If he'd tried to carry some of his stuff out, he'd have been caught with it. He must have known the place was being watched."

"You're quite sure, Brome, your men didn't see Fetra today?"

"I've had the place covered since yesterday. They saw him last around six last night—"

Landstreet said: "On Saturdays I close the plant about two o'clock, generally. But I got here at eight, and there was every sign that he hadn't come back last night. I found the shop untidy—"

"You spoke of that."

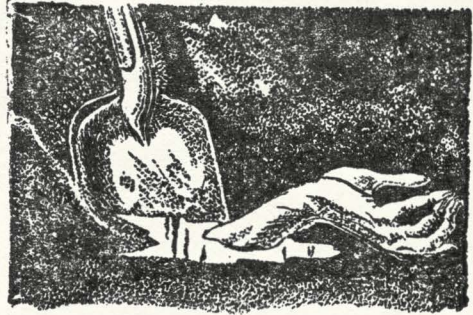
"I don't know how he gave us the slip," Brome said. "My men must have been dozing. My orders were to tail him every minute."

McLean frowned; and then he suddenly left the two standing there and went into the building. Brome shouted something after him, but he did not stop to listen.

Inside he found the fire inspector busily directing the work of his men. All about was smoking wreckage. The fire apparently had caught swiftly as if some inflammable agent had been used.

McLean made himself known. The inspector had a flat piece of grooved metal in his hand.

"This'll interest you," he said to McLean. "Here's the mechanism that did the damage." He pointed out a bit of charred substance at one end of the groove in the piece of metal he had.



The spade struck something soft and a dead hand appeared.

"Chewing gum; see? The fuse was placed along the groove, and there was probably a match stuck onto the piece of chewing gum."

"Where did you find it?" McLean asked.

"Under the basement steps. There's the door—over there to your right. I found a gasoline can just beside it. Say, you'd better not try to get down there, McLean," he warned. "The basement's all water-soaked from the hose lines—and they're still shooting it in."

"Probably drained off—"

"I don't think so. It ain't a cement floor. It's hard-packed dirt, and there's no drain."

McLean went nevertheless. There was plenty of light to see by. The wire-mesh frosted windows had been smashed in by the firemen. But it was sloshy walking.

AT THE further end was a row of lockers, perhaps a dozen—tall, spacious lockers of sheet steel, with small, circular perforations at the upper part of the doors. Most of them were unlocked. They contained men's aprons and overalls. Two, however, were locked. In one of these McLean was able to see vaguely the handle of an implement of some kind. It had a thick, wooden handle with a shovel grip. McLean made a note of the number of that locker.

Toward the left wall, where the water was trying to seek its level, he noticed an area where small bubbles arose with persistent regularity. . . .

In a little while McLean made his way back up the stairs. He went directly out-

side. Brome and Landstreet still stood together within a roped-off space. McLean joined them there. He asked Landstreet:

"When you saw Fetra last night—at six, you say—you were alone in the shop with him?"

"Yes," Landstreet said. "The other employees had gone about a half an hour before."

"And then he went out?"

"That's right. And I went home, after closing the shop. Fetra had keys of his own."

"And your men, Brome, neither saw him come out, or come back again last night?"

"No. What are you driving at, McLean?"

"Simply that Fetra actually never left the building at all. Doesn't that seem logical?"

"But Landstreet says—"

"Here, Brome, is how this entire thing happened: First of all, there's the disappearance of Fox. That's what started the trouble. His sister called up the shop and tried to find out what happened to him. Neither she, nor Fetra, nor Landstreet knew that he was lying at the City Morgue at the time. Now the fact that she knew where her brother worked makes it perfectly possible that she was aware of the sort of work he was doing—counterfeiting. She probably knew who else was implicated. Is that reasonable?"

"Perfectly," said Brome. "You found those counterfeit bills among her things—she must have known."

"Which shows there was motive enough for her murder. She probably threatened exposure of the counterfeiting operations, thinking that some hard had come to her brother. And in the meantime, the plates were missing, and no matter what it was that had happened to Fox, those plates, if found, would be incriminating. Fetra, with his record, was afraid of that. And it was, he realized, worse, with detectives watching him. . . ."

"Tell me, Landstreet," he said suddenly, "what time do your men usually get to work on Saturday morning?"

"Why—the usual time, nine o'clock."

"You came at eight, you said."

"Yes. . . . I usually do."

"All right. Come with me, I'll show you something. Come on, Brome."

THEY followed McLean into the building. He, walking quickly a little ahead of them, stopped to say something to the inspector. The inspector then called to some of the firemen.

"Get spades," he ordered, "and come downstairs."

After a short time McLean was able to direct the men in the work he wanted done in the basement.

"Dig there," he said, pointing to the place where the bubbles arose. "See that, Brome? Those bubbles are coming up along a width of about three feet, and a length about six. The dimensions of a grave—"

"What are you saying?" Landstreet gasped.

"Very little," McLean said, "until after I've seen what's been buried there. You see, if the earth of a hard dirt floor has been disturbed recently, and water is poured over it afterward, air bubbles are bound to appear over the disturbed place where, say, a dead man has been buried."

"A dead man!"

"Yes. You'll identify him, Landstreet. It's probably your man Fetra, who was doing that clever engraving work under your direction and hire. Is your locker number five, Landstreet? Don't lie—"

"Yes, but—"

"What's the spade doing there, then? That's it—think about it. You were alone with Fetra last night—you've admitted that. So you had opportunity. And this morning, between eight and nine, you had the chance to bury him. While you're thinking, Landstreet, better go over carefully your alibi for the night when Winifred Fox was murdered."

Landstreet stood rigid. His control was remarkable until one of the spades struck something soft; and when earth was spooned away a limp, dead hand appeared. Landstreet turned with a cry, but a man blocked his path.

"Stick around," Brome advised him.

There was a pistol in the Federal agent's hand.

Bury the Badger

(Continued from page 47)

roaring yammer of a .38 Police Positive as it sneezed: *Ka-Chow! Chow!* and pushed a pair of pills into the Greek's lungs. This caused the lungs to wheeze like leaky flues. Papadopolis staggered, rocked on his heels, took two mincing backward steps, and fell down like a chopped tree.

Donaldson glared at me. "Did I get the right guy, hot shot?"

"You never miss," I said. "Especially when I'm on deck to finger the target for you."

Maxie LeVine jittered: "Cops—somebody call the cops—"

"Donaldson's a cop," I said. "Take it easy." Then I bent down over the gasping Greek. "Want to confess, Lew?"

"My chest . . . I'm dying . . ."

I set fire to a coffin nail, blew fumes in his agonized countenance. "Killers always die, bub. The sooner the better."

"How . . . how did you know . . . I . . .?"

"That was easy," I said. "I pretended I was Sherlock Holmes." Then I got serious. "If you want the story step by step, here it is. First, you're lousy rich in real estate; cheap squalid hovels and tenements that shouldn't happen to a dog. Everybody knows it. Second, Maxie Levine's lobbying might have legislated you out of your holdings, forced you to demolish your rat traps. He's much too big a bozo for you to bribe, so you figured a scheme to dump his fiancée behind the eight ball on a homicide rap. With Evelyn Wyeth in a jackpot you might be able to blackmail him into doing what you told him. He'd follow your orders if he thought he could save her."

"But how . . . did you guess . . . I . . .?"

"Let me tell it my way, chum. You hired the Cisco ginzo to help you with your plot. But Cisco didn't realize he was to be a bumpy victim. That was the unexpected twist; an ugly double cross that only a heel like you would dream up."

"He . . . had it coming. He . . . did me a . . . dirty trick once . . . but I still don't

. . . understand how . . . you got . . . wise to me."

I SAID: "Well, you brushed me out of the Jungle Terrace with a lie; you told me Evelyn Wyeth knew I was tailing her and resented it. Later, when I talked to her, she said she hadn't known anything about it. So why would you have lied to get rid of me unless you were guilty?"

"It's only part of it," I said. "When I tried to follow the Wyeth cookie's cab, I got kidnaped by a brunette named Dorothy. This was to keep me from shadowing Evelyn. Nobody knew I was on Evelyn's tail except yourself. I had told you when I asked you to seat me at a table where I could keep my glimmers on her. Therefore you must have passed the information on to Dorothy. Does that make sense?"

"It's . . . beginning to . . . yes."

"And then later, in Dorothy's flat, she made two phone calls," I continued. "One was to Pedro. Pete, she called him. The second call was to somebody named Lou. For a while I thought it might be a jane named Louise Allison; I was wrong, though. Louise Allison doesn't even enter the case except by accident. We can skip her—she's scrambled out of town by now, anyhow. But when I checked up on that second phone call I found out that Lou was spelled L-e-w. And it was your private number at the Hotel Diplomat. You were the Lew in the case: Lew Papadopolis."

He closed his peepers wearily. Then he kicked the bucket.

I turned to Maxie LeVine. "Want to trade?"

"Trade? What do you mean?"

"Information," I said. "It was you who sent me the anonymous letter and the three hundred clams, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I—I suspected—"

"Forget your suspicions, Maxie. You'll find your sweetie in that closet over there."

By
LAURENCE
DONOVAN



*"Don't ask questions," Bill said.
"Now's our chance to get away."*

MAIDA LAYTON shivered as if from cold, although the Florida night was hot and humid. Her watch showed a few minutes past one A. M. A brilliant red moon skirted the ragged edges of a coming Everglades thunderstorm, with white lightning in the black clouds.

Bill Carlin would be coming along soon. Seen close up, the girl's face was a tight, white mask, with terrified brown eyes and a broad forehead under coiled coppery hair.

Maida stood beside an R. F. D. mailbox half a mile up the turnpike from the Ezra Varden orange ranch where she was employed. A message from Bill Carlin had directed her to meet him here.

It was an odd hour, but Maida had been keeping other dates at odd hours after midnight. They had been dates with her past. Dates with shame and public disgrace, perhaps with death, or so Maida believed.

Maida had not seen Bill Carlin for more than a year. She hadn't communicated with him for several months. Now he was back from the Southern Pacific with a medical discharge from the army. Maida couldn't even guess how Bill Carlin had learned of her being on the Ezra Varden ranch or of her becoming involved in the activities of a criminal bank robber and killer.

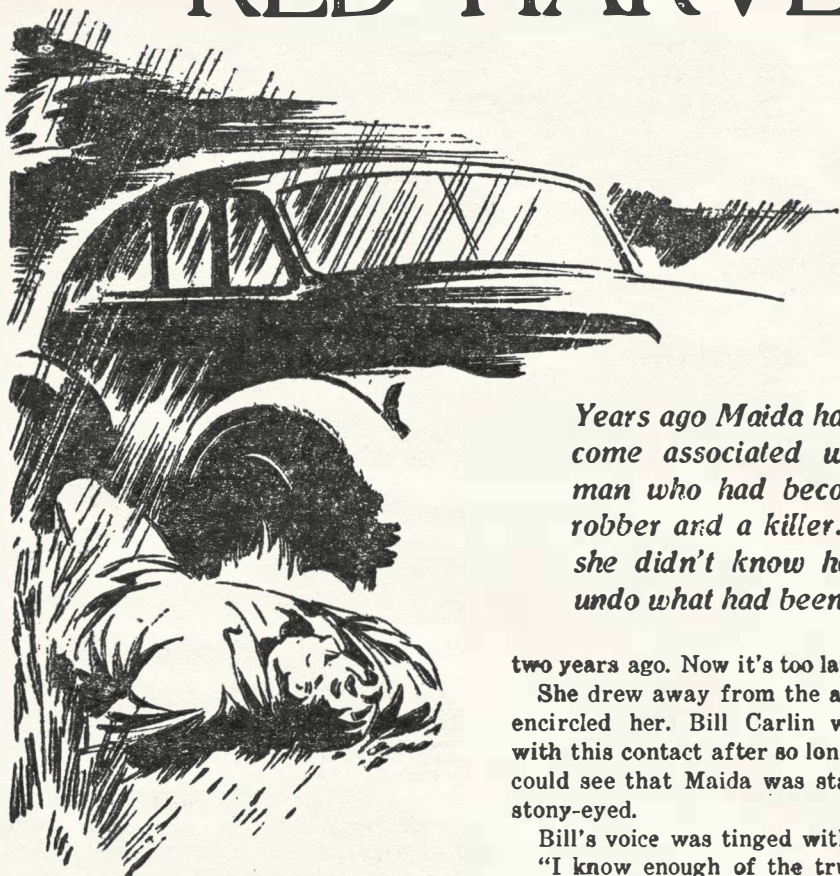
Maida knew only that she still loved

Bill Carlin. She intended to see him and make this a definite break. Perhaps Carlin would tell her how he had come to know that for weeks she had been meeting Pete Lomax, an ex-convict, at two o'clock in the morning each Friday night, and sometimes on Tuesday nights.

SALLY ADEN, a close girl friend in Miami, had broken a promise of confidence with Maida to inform Bill Carlin of this. For Sally had known so well the attachment between Maida and Bill that she had laid aside all scruples.

Sally Aden had gone to Bill Carlin with letters received from Maida, after she had learned that Carlin had been verging upon a nervous breakdown over Maida's strange behavior and her disappearance from the Florida tourist city.

RED HARVEST



Years ago Maida had become associated with a man who had become a robber and a killer. Now she didn't know how to undo what had been done

"I gave my word of honor not to tell," had been Sally's words. "Possibly I'll hate myself for it. But there are a few things in life that come ahead of so-called personal honor. I'm telling you the truth, Bill Carlin, because Maida needs you, and you need Maida."

Which was all of Sally Aden's part in this. But it was the reason for Maida being here on the highway at this odd hour of one A. M., waiting by the R. F. D. box that Bill Carlin had named in his phone message.

A coupe came along fast and pulled up with squealing brakes. Half a minute later Maida was held tight in Bill Carlin's arms.

"You shouldn't have come, Bill," protested Maida breathlessly. "If you knew all of the truth, you wouldn't be here. There's nothing you can do. I should have told you about myself when I met you

two years ago. Now it's too late."

She drew away from the arm that had encircled her. Bill Carlin was tingling with this contact after so long a time. He could see that Maida was staring ahead, stony-eyed.

Bill's voice was tinged with bitterness.

"I know enough of the truth," replied Bill. "You suddenly quit an important position in a war plant to come to this Ezra Varden orange ranch. You've made yourself valuable here to Varden and his wife, Jane, handling their books and managing the business end."

"That doesn't help any, Bill," said Maida hopelessly. "Now I want you to drive back to Miami and forget everything."

Bill Carlin shook his head and his gray eyes were hard. He had once been a state trooper. After that he had worked as an investigator out of the district attorney's office in this same county.

"We'll get this straight, darling," he said decisively. "You didn't tell me, but I knew you were married to Pete Lomax, convict and killer, when you were only fifteen. You're twenty-three now. You divorced Lomax five years ago. Lomax finished a stretch for robbery at Raiford.

Now you're meeting Lomax twice a week at two o'clock in the morning. Why?"

The girl's coppery head moved stubbornly.

"Pete Lomax traced me here," said Maida. "I'm helpless."

"There's the county law," said Carlin. "Lomax has robbed a dozen stores and banks in three months. Rewards are offered."

"No! Oh, no! I can't call in the law!"

There was acute terror in Maida's voice.

"Probably I'll have to go away with Pete Lomax as he is demanding. I should never have had a dream of happiness."

The red moon was lost momentarily in a flash of lightning. Maida shrank closer to Bill.

"I made this tonight, Maida," stated Bill, "I found out that you have been meeting Lomax every Friday night at two o'clock. That is half an hour from now. You don't have to meet him tonight. Go back to the house and leave it to me."

Carlin was amazed by the panic in Maida's voice.

"No—Bill! I can't tell you why. I love you more than I ever did. But that can't change what I don't dare tell even you."

BILL CARLIN had been a state cop- per and investigator long enough to read into Maida's words more than she was telling.

"What has Pete Lomax on you, Maida?" he demanded to know.

"Nothing—not a thing, Bill!"

It was too much a cry of fear. Bill knew Maida was lying.

Bill's voice became harsh, implacable.

"You're meeting Pete Lomax where the Varden lane reaches the Indian Creek road," he said. "You have fifteen minutes to keep the date. In the past six weeks Pete Lomax has murdered three good citizens, Maida. You run along and keep your date with him, but this time I'll not be far behind."

"No, Bill! Please! He's a killer! And if you capture him alive and put him in jail, it will be—no, Bill, don't do that

for my sake!" Bill Carlin had the answer now. Pete Lomax was holding something over Maida of which she was in deadly terror.

"I promise, Maida," said Bill slowly. "Give my word I won't put Pete Lomax in jail. You run along now and keep your date."

Bill Carlin's mind was made up. To him Pete Lomax represented the same breed he had been knocking over in the South Pacific.

There was a skit of rain and a crash of bright thunder over Indian River as Maida impulsively kissed Bill, then sprang from the coupe.

Bill looked to the clips of his two automatics. If there was something that had terrified Maida Layton, he judged that could only come by Pete Lomax being left alive.

"Too bad, Pete," grunted Bill. "But you're keeping your last date with the finest girl in the world who got mixed up with you when she was a school child. I knew that back in a Miami office more than a year ago."

LIKE ALL Everglades thunderstorms, this one unleashed all the furies of thunder and lightning and cloudburst rain. The unpaved road to the Varden lane turned to sticky gumbo and Bill, cussing, had to abandon his car.

He had planned to arrive at the moment when Maida first met Pete Lomax. The mud and rain held him back. But presently he saw what looked like a few fireflies dancing in the rain ahead. These were at the junction of the Varden lane and the Indian Creek road.

"There ain't no other answer!" boomed a coarse voice as Bill separated the fireflies into ranch lanterns and flashlights. "She killed him—bashed in his head with that old tire iron. I've been hearin' he's Pete Lomax the bank robber. I knowed Maida had been sneakin' out nights, but I didn't think she was meetin' him."

The voice was that of a rough-looking orange-picker.

The scanty, white, chin whiskers of old Ezra Varden were wagging.

"Sure, 'nough looks like he got rough

and hit her, an' she had the tire iron ready," said Ezra. "Split his skull nigh in two. Maida's been a good girl, and I wouldn't never think she'd be mixed up with ary city gangster."

Bill Carlin swung to the edge of the circle of half a dozen persons. Ezra Varden had an expansive wife who looked about three times his size.

There were three orange-picking hands.

Nate Toler weighed two hundred pounds and stood six feet.

Jim Lassiter was a small, dark man with polished black eyes.

Jason Lubitz was a fat man of German extraction and talked with a guttural accent.

But Bill's eyes were fixed upon Maida, although he hung back for the moment. The girl evidently had been picked up from the mud alongside the car. Nate Toler was weighing an old-fashioned tire iron in his hand.

Maida had a dazed, vacant look. She kept repeating her denial.

"He was like that when I got here," she said. "His head was hanging over the side of the window."

"You've got a bruise on your chin, Maida," said Jim Lassiter, the small dark man. "You real sure your boy friend didn't hit you, and you grabbed up that tire iron and let him have it?"

Maida's dark eyes were stricken with fear.

"I've told you he was like that when I got here," she said dully. "There was blood and I think I fainted. I must have struck my chin on the running board of the car. I don't know what happened after that until you were helping me to my feet."

Old Ezra Varden and his good wife seemed unimpressed by Maida's story.

"You've been a good girl for work an' keepin' my books," said Ezra. "But since you took to sneakin' out at two o'clock in the morning, it ain't looked so good. I kind-a figured you must o' been meetin' some man. But seein' this dead feller is a thief, he likely had somethin' on you."



He had little difficulty finding the flat rock in the rain.

"You, too, Mr. Varden?" cried out the girl.

Bill Carlin stepped into the circle of light. All eyes turned to him.

"If she did kill Pete Lomax, I think the girl's done the state a big favor," stated Bill.

He was unprepared for the reply of Ezra Varden.

"Ain't no way helpin' it," said Ezra. "Murder's murder an' it's a job for the sheriff."

Bill Carlin went immediately to Maida and put one arm around her mud-soaked

figure. Nate Toler laughed harshly.

"Looks like little Maida has got a heap o' boy friends," he jeered.

OF ALL those present, Bill Carlin liked the big Nate Toler the least. The three orange-pickers, he could tell, were transient drifters who moved from one crop to another. They never were to be trusted and seldom were on any terms of intimacy with the families of the ranchers.

Maida was clearly in a daze, had been unconscious. The fixed look upon her face was that of horror.

Pete Lomax was not a pretty sight. The tire iron had split through his skull from in front, almost to the nose. Ezra Varden jumped about and gave conflicting orders.

Bill Carlin had but the one thought. "Tell me, Maida," he said quietly. "You didn't do this?"

A light of sick understanding came into her eyes. She murmured, "You too, Bill? He was like that when I arrived. There was something I wanted to look for in the car. I slipped on the wet running board and struck my chin. The next thing I knew I was being pulled around and Jason Lubitz was yelling into my ear, 'You bane one killer!' I had had only a glimpse of—of—that in the car. I had only one great fear, Bill, that you had somehow got here ahead of me."

"Me?" exclaimed Bill.

"I knew what you had in mind," the girl said quietly. "You judged that if Pete Lomax held anything over me, you would see that the threat was ended."

"Whassay? Whassay?" shrilled Ezra Varden, cupping one ear as though he was not hearing. "Anything that is said will be used against her. My wife and I worked our fingers to the bone to give this girl a chance and this is how she pays it back."

By this time, Bill Carlin had firmly decided that Maida had not and could not have murdered Pete Lomax, in the gruesome manner that was shown. Yet he had never faced five more hostile people, than the Vardens and their three orange-

pickers. He looked at Nate Toler and his powerful arms. It would have been so simple for the big orange-picker to have used that tire iron.

Ezra Varden brought everything to a showdown, as Bill had Maida sitting on the running board of the car and was wiping the mud from her face.

"Come on folks," said Ezra Varden. "We have to get us up to the house and call the county sheriff—" Ezra paused and looked around. He then looked straight at Bill Carlin.

"You're the young fella used to be the state trooper," twanged Ezra Varden. "Me and Maw guesses you was sweet on this girl, Maida. We thought she was a good girl but good girls don't meet hold-up men and bank robbers at two o'clock in the morning. Mebbe so he knowed something about Maida. Tonight she got desperate, so she toted that tire iron all the way up from the old garage and used it."

Maw, who was a voluminous woman with three sets of chins and some three hundred pounds of figure, boomed out, "Come on Ezree! Let's get to the house and have the sheriff over. If we have to be standing for the disgrace, there's no way out of it."

Ezra pointed to Jason Lubitz and Jim Lassiter and said, "Come along and get back to your beds, so's you'll be fitten for something come tomorrow! Nate, you stay right here! Here's my old Betsy and you see to it there ain't ary funny moves." Ezra proffered Nate Toler a rusted revolver which Bill Carlin suspected might do more harm to the man who fired it than the one at whom it was aimed.

The Everglades rain had increased in intensity. It was sloshing down now. Bill said to Maida, "Let's get in the back of the car."—the car was a sedan—"No sense in getting soaked any more this way."

"Oh, no you don't!" shouted Nate Toler. "You let the gal set out here and take it! The rain weren't bothering her none when she came to meet this ex-convict."

Bill had known of this but it maddened

him to hear it from the droop-lipped Nate Toler. Moreover, Bill was doing some fast thinking. He pulled Maida inside the car. She shrank away from the horror in the driver's seat.

"Tell me, Maida," he said. "What more is there behind this? I happen to know from tonight's papers that Pete Lomax pulled a stickup this afternoon in which he gathered in some nine thousand, cash."

Maida didn't answer.

"I'm having a look-see," he said.

FIVE MINUTES later Bill had examined every part of the car and the clothing of the corpse. Except for a small amount of silver in the dead Pete Lomax's pocket, his search yielded nothing. Maida was sobbing like a hurt child.

"Bill," she whispered so that Nate Toler could not hear. "I have to tell you. Pete has been caching his money with me. I don't know how much money there is now. It is what he has taken in six or seven holdups."

Bill Carlin whistled softly. What Pete Lomax had taken in six or seven holdups would run into real dough.

"Why, Maida? Why did you do it?"

"He told me, Bill, that if I didn't he would see that I was taken in on a hold-up murder at a filling station that he had committed when I was only fifteen years old. I was driving the car. I thought he got out to make a phone call. He didn't

tell me until an hour afterward that he had killed a man in the filling station. But he said now that makes no difference under the law. Even though I have a divorce, I'm still implicated in that murder."

Bill Carlin swore furiously. Then he said, "He's been making a fool of you. You never could be held for what happened back there. He frightened you until you were unable to think clearly. By the way, he must have been bringing you the nine thousand dollars he got in the holdup today but he hasn't got it on him. What have you done with all the other money that Pete turned over to you."

"I buried all of it," she said. "Under a rock at the southeast corner of the big red cattle barn. I thought Pete would have more tonight."

Bill's voice was grim. "I haven't a doubt but that Pete did have more tonight. You haven't got it. The one who killed him took it. Maida, you can't afford to be arrested. If you tell the story you just told me, you will be implicated in all of Pete's holdups and killings by hiding that money. Maida, you have to trust me. We can't wait for the sheriff. There is one little thing, just one little thing I have to find out."

He slipped from the car. Big Nate Toler stood there dangling the rusted revolver in his fingers. Bill Carlin cupped his hands and started to light a cigarette. His right foot flew up. He kicked the old gun from Nate Toler's hands.



*The knife came down as Toler's knee
lifted high.*



Carlin's terrific left tore through Nate Toler's guard smashing his fingers upon his teeth. It was followed up by a right that sounded like wood clunking on wood when his knuckles met Nate Toler's chin.

"Come on, Maida! Don't ask questions!" Bill said. He caught her hand and they went plunging through the

swampy ground over toward the tidal shore of Indian River.

There was no evidence that Nate Toler had come out of his knock-out sleep. Maida and Bill reached Indian River. It was not far above the rushing ocean channel at Fort Pierce.

Innumerable fishermen's boathouses

were strung along the shore. The rain was pelting down in a solid deluge. Bill got Maida inside one of the boathouses and wanted to put his coat around her. She refused.

"I don't think I'll ever be cold or hot again. Bill, what's going to happen to me?"

"Not a thing!" grated through Bill's teeth. "Not one damned thing! But tell me darling, exactly how I can get my hands on the money you've been saving for Pete Lomax?"

"I told you, Bill! At the southeast corner of the big red barn. I put it all in a hole I scooped out under a flat rock that is lying there. I could just barely lift the rock. I moved away all the dirt.

THEY WERE a mile or more from the dead man in the car, and half a mile from the Ezra Varden ranch house. Bill stepped outside and listened. Although the wind was in the right direction, there was no sign of an alarm being raised. He held Maida to him, when he got inside, and kissed her.

"Stay right here, sweetheart," he said. "Don't leave this boathouse for any reason whatsoever. When they start looking for you they will be looking for my car. That's one reason I didn't take you there. Also, I'm not leaving the Varden farm until I have the truth."

She clung to him for half a minute. Bill slogged back to the swampy ground toward the outlines of the coral hill that rose a hundred feet or more behind the Varden farmhouse. He had heard no sound of an alarm when he reached the red barn.

He had little difficulty finding the flat rock. For a long minute he swore volubly in whispers. He had come upon what he fully expected. The flat rock very evidently had been overturned recently. A hole had been scooped out beneath it. He might have imagined he was mistaken, except that he saw the green corner of one small packet of banknotes protruding from the dirt. It was a flat package of about five hundred dollars in small bills. It had apparently been overlooked. The

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remainder of the Pete Lomax murder loot had been removed.

Bill Carlin paused to decide upon his next move. Then he heard shouting and wild oaths. Undoubtedly Nate Toler had been found. Naturally it had been discovered that Maida and he had disappeared.

At the distance in the slashing rain, Bill could not distinguish one voice from another. It was just a jabbering. For the moment he was set back on his heels. The small packet of half a grand would be insufficient as evidence. He knew he must find that other money. In the boathouse Maida had told him she had counted something like seventy thousand dollars that Pete Lomax had trusted to her. That did not include the last holdup money of Pete Lomax's.

While all of the excitement still seemed to be centering around the murder car, Bill decided it might be worth while to have a look-see in the Ezra Varden ranch house. He thought of the three itinerant orange-pickers, the dark-faced Jim Lassiter, the big, crude German Jason Lubitz and Nate Toler the giant orange picker. They might have brains enough, any one of them, to take the money but their one instinct would be to hide it in their own rooms. Then he had another sudden and startling thought which caused him to murmur to himself.

"No. If one of the tramp pickers had taken that money, he would be far away from here, now."

Bill decided to make a quick search of the house. He went along the side of the barn in the darkness and the rain. He walked around the corner.

A powerful arm that seemed to come from nowhere, locked about his throat and jerked his head back, strangling him and choking off his breath, almost cracking his spine. For a minute he fought with all he had, with punching fists that could find no target on the figure holding him so inexorably from behind. He felt his senses going. His lungs were aching for air. His attacker finished it swiftly. A rabbit punch caught



Gun in hand, he faced the three of them.

him across the back of his neck. He went down in a well of darkness.

BILL CARLIN did not know, when he awoke, how long he had been lying there in the rain and mud. It might have been minutes or hours. He turned his head slowly and it felt as if his neck were a rag. His throat muscles ached and there was still a dizzying sensation at the base of the brain. He managed to get weakly to his feet.

By this time the clatter of angry voices in the vicinity of the murder car had ceased, but there was angry shouting in the vicinity as if several people were yelling at each other. Bill tried to fix the direction. It didn't come from the house. It seemed to come from the side of the steep coral hill up back of the barn. It sounded as though the voices

were issuing from inside the hill, perhaps from some cave.

Bill was thinking fast. The Varden ranch had been on his beat when he was a state patrolman. Thus he knew of the hurricane cellar that Ezra Varden had hollowed out of the hill for the protection of his family and his hands from the ripping winds. It was high enough so that the tidal waters backing up from Indian River would not touch it.

There was no interference as Bill reached the entrance of the hurricane cellar. The heavy storm door swung half open. There was a light inside the cellar. Just as Bill reached hearing distance he heard the sharp voice of the dark Jim Lassiter.

"You can't get away with it, Ezra Varden! You and your dumb missus are going to split that dough."

The guttural tone of Jason Lubitz interrupted. "I bane not so sure," he said heavily. "Why should it be they make a split, Lassiter? They's around eighty thousand dollars and that would not be, what you call, peanuts. Would there be any good sense in the leaving of it? We did not kill Pete Lomax. We did not steal the money. What is finders will be, like you say, the keepers. Just you and me, Lassiter, we split between us."

Then the cracked voice of Ezra Varden rose high. "You danged fools! You wouldn't get out of the county. We'll get the girl for the killing of Pete Lomax. We'll put it on her and this smart one, they call Bill Carlin. I knowed danged well he would get away with the girl and that's why I left that dumb Nate Toler on guard. The girl will hide out and she'll be afraid to squawk."

Bill heard someone running toward the cellar. Bill was hidden behind the out-swinging door as Nate Toler rushed past him into the lighted space inside. Evidently Toler had just regained his senses. And he had heard Ezra Varden call him dumb.

"So I'm dumb, am I?" he roared. "You give me an old gun you knowed wouldn't shoot. You wanted the girl to make a break to get away, knowing that would

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be against her. What is all this money?"

A flashlight and a ranch lantern were burning in the depths of the storm cellar. Bill chanced a look inside. Gray-haired Ezra Varden had his small frail figure back to the wall. Beside him was the mammoth Maw Varden. Up to now Bill had been trying to guess which one had throttled him and perhaps believed he had been left dead out by the barn. He was guessing no longer. He was looking at the tremendous arms of Maw Varden. He made a mental note to find the murder tire iron. He was sure now he knew whose fingerprints would be on it.

Jim Lassiter and Jason Lubitz swore violently at the entrance of Nate Toler. It was evident that they had no thought of cutting the eighty thousand dollars three ways.

Bill saw it happen. He realized then that the swarthy Jim Lassiter was the really vicious one among them. Lassiter sprang at Nate Toler and there was a flash of a knife in his hand as he drove it straight for Nate Toler's heart. Lassiter underestimated the strength and the rough and tumble fighting ability of big Nate Toler. The knife sliced Toler's shoulder but Toler's big knee had jammed up into the pit of Lassiter's stomach which threw him backward.

IT WAS as if this was the moment that sly, little Ezra Varden had been waiting for. With Lassiter and Toler entangled, Bill saw that Jason Lubitz was holding his gun loosely as he turned to watch them.

"Now all of you, get your hands up!" snapped the voice of Ezra Varden. "I'll blow the hindsights off the first one of you that makes another move!"

Ezra Varden was holding a new and efficient blue steel automatic at waist level. Maw Varden who spoke but little, laughed harshly.

"You lunkheads! You thought you would get away with it! When we tell the sheriff how I got Pete Lomax and smashed his head when he pulled a gun, there'll be ten thousand dollars reward money coming to me. And if the sheriff

even starts thinking about all this dough, no matter what the girl says, it will sound like a crazy story. We know nothing about it. Paw and me will see to it now that none of you three ever talk. We'll tell the sheriff how the three of you jumped on us on account of ten thousand dollars I took off Pete Lomax when he tried to kill me tonight. Yes, we'll even let the girl go."

There was a snicker from little Ezra Varden. "And she ain't going around advertising that she had been hiding out money, blood money, for Pete Lomax."

Bill Carlin was seething inside. He saw what was coming and it amounted to the coldest blooded killing he had ever witnessed, and Bill Carlin had seen some killing in the South Pacific. That blue automatic in Ezra Varden's hand could rub out the three closely grouped orange-pickers before they could move in their own defense.

Bill's hand went to his shoulder holster. That gun was gone. But the other automatic that he had always carried snuggled in his belt lying close to his thigh was there.

Bill could hear the distant chugging of motors. A glance toward the Indian River road showed a string of vague lights in the rain.

"You called the sheriff too soon," whispered Bill to himself. "He'll come in right handy now."

He clicked off the safety and cut loose one shot. Ezra Varden screamed. His automatic fell to the floor and his thin arm dangled loosely. Big Nate Toler yelled, to Bill's surprise, "You are all a bunch of dirty thieves and killers and I'm sorry I ever got me a job here. There ain't anybody touching that dough."

Nate Toler whirled. The first slam of his fist deposited Jason Lubitz in one corner. He dealt with Jim Lassiter in a crude but effective fashion. His heeled boot kicked Lassiter in the stomach so hard that Lassiter went down heavily dropping his knife from him.

Maw Varden swore hoarse, terrible oaths that might have come from the



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toughest male killer. She hurled her great weight upon Nate Toler.

BILL CARLIN closed and bolted the heavy door of the hurricane cellar.

"This is once the big wind is all locked inside," he said grimly. Then an ironical thought came to him.

"Maw Varden busted Pete Lomax's skull," he muttered. "And you can't make that out a crime on account of ten thousand reward being offered for Lomax, dead or alive. The Vardens were making out to put the killing on Maida and steal the seventy grand she had been scared into caching for Lomax."

Bill Carlin grinned wryly.

"But the dough's all there in the storm cellar and any story they tell has to be accepted, unless—no—there is really but one crime that can be proved and that would be their attempt to frame the Lomax killing on Maida."

Bill ran his fingers through wet, tousled hair.

"By the holy catspaw!" he grunted. "Nate Toler turns out to be honest but dumb. Lassiter and Lubitz would have been thieves on their own account, but they picked out a hurricane cellar for an argument."

Bill Carlin had to admit that he had never been confronted by a more tangled situation. Intent to commit a crime could not be used as evidence. Bill's mind turned to veteran Sheriff Gerrity.

When Bill had been a state copper, he had tossed the credit in several tough cases to the sheriff.

"Anything to keep Maida out of this," said Bill, as three cars turned into the lane.

Ezra Varden was nursing a slug-busted arm. Maw Varden looked dazed from the going over big Nate Toler had given her. When he opened the storm cellar door, Bill had given Sheriff Gerrity a hint of what he might expect to find inside.

Lassiter and Lubitz were slowly getting to their feet. Big Nate Toler had Ezra Varden's automatic. His heavy voice rumbled.

"If there ain't nothin' the law can git

you for, I'll run you two thievin' Hars out of the county myself! That feller Carlin hit me and knocked me cold, but I had it comin'! I'm only good and sore because Maw Varden got Pete Lomax, and now she'll collect ten thousand dollars reward money!"

Bill Carlin groaned. But at least Maw Varden had reason to forget all about Maida and the frame-up that had been planned.

SHERIFF GERRITY'S wind-burned face was wrinkled with thought as he took in the scene in the storm cellar. Flat packages of money were piled on the floor. Nate Toler was still holding a gun upon the Vardens, Lassiter, and Lubitz.

Three deputies followed Sheriff Gerrity. Doc Carson, the county coroner, had been brought along to make a clean-up job. A pair of state patrolmen wheeled their motorcycles up and waited outside.

Maw Varden was the first to break out.

"Sheriff, them orange-pickers was tryin' to steal the money that Pete Lomax had cached out behind the barn!" she shrilled. "I've been wakeful nights, an' I seen this Lomax drivin' into our lane and plantin' his money behind the barn! Tonight I was waitin' for him! He pulled a gun on me, but I'd picked up a tire iron and I belted him good over the head!"

Ezra Varden nursed his broken arm and nodded. Big Nate Toler stared at Maw Varden as if she belonged to a zoo.

"An' to think I've been workin' for such folks," he grunted. "Now that all o' you missed stealing the Lomax money, you ain't sayin' nothin' about Maida Layton killin' Lomax, like you was claimin' before your thievin' scheme got blowed sky-high."

"Good fella!" grunted Sheriff Gerrity. He was watching Bill Carlin. He had known how it had been between Maida Layton and Bill before Bill had gone to the South Pacific.

"Seems as how when Ezra called my office he did say it was the girl that had murdered Pete Lomax," went on Sheriff Gerrity. He looked at Bill. "I notice that Maida Layton isn't here?"

Maw Varden had more words than sense.

"That's because this smart Bill Carlin helped her escape!" blurted Maw Varden.

"You danged old fool!" grated Ezra Varden.

Sheriff Gerrity smiled grimly. He spoke to Doc Carson. "Seein' there was a ten thousand reward up for Pete Lomax, dead or alive, we've got to be cautious, doc," said the sheriff. "Offhand what would you say an inquest would show? You saw the body?"

Doc Carson stroked his gray sideburns thoughtfully and puckered his thin lips.

"Well, now, according to what I'd have to tell a coroner's jury," said Doc Carson solemnly, "I'd expect a verdict that Pete Lomax came to his death at the hand of some person or persons unknown."

"Why, you—" Maw Varden turned turkey red with rage. "You can't do that to me. I killed Pete Lomax an' I can prove it. I—"

"That wasn't what you told us," drawled Nate Toler. "You come right out before me and Lassiter and Lubitz and said the girl done it. That's why you was callin' the sheriff."

"All right, boys!" said Sheriff Gerrity to his deputies. "Take this Lassiter and Lubitz and start them up the highway. If they ever show their ugly mugs in my county again, I'll put them on the chain gang for ten years."

Sheriff Gerrity turned to Ezra and Maw Varden.

"I'm thankin' you Maw Varden for watchin' Pete Lomax cache this holdup money," the sheriff said with a crooked grin. As for you, Ezra, I reckon you could find a buyer for your orange grove in short order. I'd say it shouldn't take you more than thirty days, because after then I'm expectin' to find you've moved out of my county with all of your holdings."

Big Nate Toler said: "I guess I'll be findin' me another pickin' job."

"Be a lot steadier workin' around the county garage and doing some driving for me," said Sheriff Gerrity. "I've been



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lookin' for a husky fellow I can trust."

Sheriff Gerrity walked outside with Bill Carlin.

"I guess you know pretty much of everything, Gerrity," said Bill.

"Like hell an' all I do!" growled the sheriff. "Take names now. I never can seem to remember them: I'm danged sure I'll forget the name of Maida Layton before I get back to town. I'm surmising that won't be her name long, anyway."

"IT'S LIKE THIS," said Bill Carlin solemnly. "My office business is getting away from me. I can't hire a secretary in town. I've figured out there's only one thing I can do."

Maida was snuggled close to him in the small car, a blanket around her rain-soaked clothes.

"And what have you figured out, Bill?"

she said faintly. "Bill, you're sure what happened doesn't matter? I might still be held for something—"

"You crazy little coot," said Bill. "You were only fifteen. You had no part in any crime. So you want to know what I've figured out, huh? It'll be cheaper. I'm going out tomorrow and marry me a secretary."

"Bill?" Maida's voice was fainter. "You mean you've picked out a wife so you can have a secretary?"

"That's right, darling," and Bill slid the car into a parking space.

A few minutes later Maida spoke with a little laugh.

"Yes, I'll be your office wife, Bill," she said with new life in her voice. "But you'll soon get over the idea you're getting a secretary cheap. This one will cost you plenty."

Murder! He Says

(Continued from page 57)

"Let's all get some sleep," Mel Hollis suggested. "We'll probably need it, before this is over."

Everyone agreed, and they left the building together, parting on the sidewalk to go their different ways. Mr. Stevenson walked off alone, his stooped shoulders straighter than usual. He was satisfied with what he had done, and there was a new excitement coursing through him that was partly dread, but mostly triumph. Hurried and far-fetched as his story had been, of Lambert's leaving the microphone switched on, no one had questioned it. One of the three men must, at this very moment be gripped by the fear that his name, uttered in Lambert's voice, was locked in the recording room, to be discovered the next day by the police.

The murderer—Mr. Stevenson rolled the phrase off grandly in his mind—the murderer would return to the scene of the crime.

HALF AN HOUR later Mr. Stevenson, feeling not nearly as triumphant, was back in the research room. He had done no more than walk around the block a couple of times, but his heart was pounding as though from strenuous exercise. The sweat on his forehead had nothing to do with the heat of the room. It was cold sweat, produced by fear.

He had come back to the research room to get the key to the recording room, from the drawer of his desk. Then he was going to wait for the killer.

The key was just where he had left it. He stuffed it into his pocket, and was about to turn away when he noticed a particular pile of scripts on the corner of his desk. He examined them long and earnestly before laying them down again, and turning out the lights in the room. Then, following the dark hall for a few yards, he groped for the door of the recording room and unlocked it. It clicked

shut after him as he stepped into the pitch blackness.

The room was soundproof, and had no window. There was a dry, musty smell about it that reminded Mr. Stevenson of an unaired Victorian parlor. He would have much preferred to be in an unaired Victorian parlor.

He groped his way over to a corner of the room and flattened himself against the walls, feeling his knees wobbling under him. He stood there motionless, hardly breathing, as his eyes slowly grew accustomed to the darkness. Soon he could see the squat outline of the recording machine, and a few small chairs near it, all very dim and ghostlike. The strange, muffled silence of the soundproof room closed in around him so that the pounding of his heart seemed audible, a drumbeat against his ribs.

Then, in the silence, there was a sudden scraping sound from the locked door. It came again, a little louder, and then a sharp metallic snap exploded noisily.

Mr. Stevenson watched, pressed tight against the wall, as the door opened slowly inward. He strained his eyes to see, and the door opened wider, and then there was a figure in the doorway. A small, round figure, moving into the room—*Mel Hollis!*

MR. STEVENSON added it all up in his mind, in a tumbling rush of thoughts. Hollis, who could be angered so easily . . . a middle-aged writer who had never gotten anywhere, and finally had an idea that he thought was "terrific" . . . working on it for three long months in his spare time, and then, when the scripts were as good as he could make them, hurrying back to the station in the middle of the evening, hoping that Mr. Lambert would be there to read them . . . finding him in the research room, and enthusiastically showing him the whole series. . . .

Those were the scripts which Mr. Stevenson had just seen, tossed carelessly on his desk and marked *N. G.* with a bright blue pencil. He could imagine how quickly Lambert had riffled through and discard-

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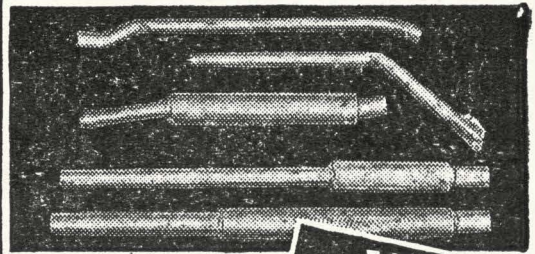
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ed them, perhaps with no more than a clever, caustic remark, not realizing what they meant to the hot-tempered little writer. And then, in a sudden flare of anger and bitter disappointment, Hollis had seized the heavy bronze paperweight. . . .

He was walking into the room now, cautiously, apparently getting used to the darkness. Mr. Stevenson did not move, or breathe. His eyes ached from the strain of staring out across that black room, trying to see clearly. With a gesture that was purely mechanical, he started to raise one hand to adjust his glasses. His elbow bumped against the wall with a barely perceptible sound—but it was enough.

Hollis jumped, and whirled to face him, standing still and tensely poised in the middle of the room. Then, "I see you," he said, in a voice that was ragged with fright. "I see you, there in the corner—" Then, moving suddenly, he reached for his coat pocket and jerked out a gun, starting to aim it.

At that moment, everything that Mr. Stevenson had ever learned about psychology flashed through his mind.

Without moving, he began to whistle the song called *Murder! He Says*. He whistled it softly and slowly.

Hollis gasped, and the gun clattered to the floor. He whispered, "Lambert . . .!" in a queer, chattering breath. But before he could reach the door, Mr. Stevenson leaped from the corner and landed on him, sprawling them both on the floor in the darkness, flailing at him with inexperienced but willing fists. They struggled for a minute before Hollis managed to scramble to his feet. As he got up, Mr. Stevenson grabbed one of his ankles and pulled him down again, this time socking him hard in the stomach.

They rolled over, and Mr. Stevenson slid one hand along the floor, reaching for the gun, meanwhile pummeling Hollis with the other fist. But his rotund opponent was too fast for him. He felt a crashing blow against his jaw, and a vague, fading feeling in his brain.

He lay still, shaking his head, until the feeling was gone. Then he realized that he was alone in the room.

Mr. Stevenson got up from the floor as quickly as he could without toppling from dizziness, and rushed into the hall. He heard Hollis' running footsteps, clattering down the stairs to the ground floor; and he started to shout at the top of his lungs.

"Help!" Mr. Stevenson shouted. "Help!"

He shouted it many times, and with increasing volume, as he raced through the dark hall to the stairs.

"Police!" shouted Mr. Stevenson. "Help!"

He made the three flights down to the ground floor in something less than ten seconds, and skidded out the front entrance of the building, his tall, thin body barely maintaining its balance, arms thrashing at his sides.

When he reached the sidewalk, panting, he saw Hollis on the other side of the street, grappling with a policeman who had heard Mr. Stevenson's not insignificant call. Hollis was jabbing at him, wriggling to get free, struggling. The policeman was not doing as well as might have been expected. Mr. Stevenson saw that his nightstick lay near the curb, in the gutter.

He crossed the street slowly, with a crawling feeling of distaste in the pit of his stomach. He picked the nightstick up out of the gutter, and moved close to the two struggling men. Then, first taking careful aim, he closed his eyes and smashed Hollis over the head.

THE NEXT DAY, Mr. Stevenson sat in the office which had been Mr. Lambert's and now was his. Valerie answered the phone busily, on the other side of the room. Advertisers had been calling all day to buy time on the newly famous station.

The morning papers had carried a good deal of information about KMOD, and about its new owner.

Valerie glanced over now and smiled, brushing the soft brown hair back from her eyes.

Mr. Stevenson got up and walked toward her, a masterful man.

Printer's Ink Runs Red

(Continued from page 31)

ily. "This has got me down. Oh yes! We checked on that guy you killed in the warehouse—and what d'ya think? The guy was running a gas station, all right. And he was running it with a bunch of these phony gas tickets. He was selling them, right along with gas and oil. There's no doubt of it—he had tickets enough there to get two hundred thousand gallons of gas, at least. Mean anything to you?"

"Not a thing."

I thought he was going to say something more about it, but he didn't. He just held out his glass for a refill.

And I got on the phone and told Simon Durstin about his chauffeur being found dead in a field, and gave him what details Olson had given me.

Durstin seemed very happy about the whole thing.

I WAS BEGINNING to get a lot of ideas, but the trouble was I had too many of them. If I was right one way I'd be wrong in all the others, and one thought seemed just as sensible as the next.

For one thing, I was trying to do too many things at the same time. I wanted to stick Smiley for blackmail, for one thing. I wanted this so bad I could taste it. Naturally I wanted to get Pender clear of any suspicion of murder and I could see where that job was getting tougher by the hour. Things were happening on that front that had no rhyme or reason behind them. Such as that attack on us in the warehouse.

That last really bothered me. I'd come out of that all right, but it was just luck that had taken me through. If somebody was trying to get me shot down and was using hired help on the job, it was just a matter of time before I'd go down to stay. It's tough enough shooting it out with a known enemy, but when you don't know who's after you, it's impossible to protect yourself.

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One of the most logical suspects on the frame against Pender, of course, was the man who was running for the State Legislature against him. The guy was as crooked as a braided rope, that I knew, but I couldn't somehow figure him as being back of any murder frame. He'd take advantage of any trouble Pender got into, naturally, and would certainly make trouble for Pender if he could.

But murder's strong stuff—too strong stuff for the average politician to swallow, and that's what the man was. Just an average, run-of-the-mill, crooked politico.

Then I had Smiley. There was a chance, of course, that Smiley had been sore enough at me to hire somebody to put me out of the way, but the little cuffing around I'd given him was hardly reason enough for murder. He knew, too, that I was trying to stick him for extortion and blackmail, but the cops hadn't been able to pin anything on him—and so why should he be afraid of me?

The Durstin business was an added complication. I could understand how Smiley had been working on her—that was easy. The slimy devil had probably worked it through some of the help. He'd probably found there was more than smoke in the reported romance with the chauffeur, and he was the kind of operator who'd find the fire under it. That I could understand; but I couldn't see why Pike, the chauffeur, had been killed.

That didn't tie in anywhere. Pike had nothing to lose except a job, and that's no loss in this day and age. He could have gone to work in fifty different places, the way the labor problem is these days. As far as any scandal hurting him, that was a joke. Old Simon Durstin could have sued him for alienation of affections, probably, and probably would have won a judgment, but a judgment against a man like that isn't worth the paper it's written on.

THE ONLY logical answer to that killing was that Pike was dangerous to somebody. The killer might have thought Mrs. Durstin had told Pike what

she'd seen by the print shop, or the killer might have thought she'd told Pike something of it.

Anyway, he was out of the thing now.

Then I had at least twenty-five other people who had reason to hate Smiley. Any of them might have reached the breaking point and gone down to shoot Smiley and made the mistake of shooting his printer instead.

Against this, though, was Pender's gun being stolen. That went along with the frame against Pender, and none of the other poor guys who were getting the bite put on them would have anything to gain by framing Pender. For that matter, there was little chance of any of them knowing that Smiley had his hooks in Pender.

The Durstin woman was the key to everything, but I couldn't find any place where the key would fit. She'd had nothing to do with Pender; so she wouldn't be in any frame against him. Neither had Pike, the chauffeur.

But then Richetti, the man who'd tried to gun me out in the warehouse, had had no connection with either Pender or me, and he'd certainly done his best to put me in the morgue, along with the other victims.

The more I thought of it the more of a headache I got, and I finally said to hell with it and went to bed and tried to sleep.

I didn't do so well, though—I don't think I had more than three hours' sleep when Olson came up at ten in the morning and woke me.

OLSON had a hang-dog look and that's something unusual for the big Swede. He's a guy who bulls ahead on the theory that whatever he does is right and to the devil with anybody who doesn't like it.

He said: "You're not going to like this, Mickey."

"Not going to like what?" I asked, heading for the frigidaire for ice cubes. I like a drink when I get up in the morning, working on the idea of getting wide awake in a hurry. Certainly a stiff slug

will either wake you or knock you out at that time, and either's better than running around in a fog.

Olson waited until I'd made a drink for each of us and then he said: "I picked up Pender at his office, just as he got there. Make no mistake—I didn't want to do it. But the police commissioner and the chief and the D. A. got together and I have to do what they tell me to do. You know how it is, Mickey."

I said I knew how it was and that I knew he wasn't trying to play heel with either Pender or me. And asked: "He charged yet?"

"The D. A.'s office is making it, Mickey. On the old gag—the 'information-received' thing. I came up to tell you right off the bat. You'll want to get in touch with his lawyer, won't you?"

"Can't Pender use the phone?"

"Well . . . uh . . . I don't know, Mickey. They had some talking about keeping the thing quiet for the legal forty-eight hours. If they do, they won't let him phone. They won't take a chance on having his lawyer getting him out with a *habeas writ*."

I said: "There's going to be a lot of hell raised about this, Ole. One good thing, though. If they keep it quiet, it won't hurt him on the election."

Olson looked unhappy. He said: "And that's something else I wouldn't depend on, Mickey. There's cops in and out of the station all the time, and any one of them might let it slip. It's news, and some of the papers will pay for that kind of news. The guy that's running against him would pay. That louse of a Smiley would pay."

"You get anything from that Sunday-school teacher?"

Olson brightened a little. "He says he'll testify in front of the Grand Jury if we can get Smiley with something that will hold him. He'd do that with the idea of strengthening any case we can make against Smiley. But he absolutely refuses to swear out a warrant against the guy. He says Smiley worked the racket in a legal way and that he won't put his neck out. And the hell of it is he's right."

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I said: "I'll get that guy Smiley if it's the last thing I do. If it wasn't for that smutty sheet of his and the way he runs it, none of this would have happened. The man should be lynched."

Olson said: "If you start a lynching bee, do it on my day off, so I can go along with you. I'm beefy—I could put a lot of weight on a rope."

I PHONED Jim Pender's lawyer and told him what had happened and he told me he'd get busy and see what he could do. And then I had a bad few minutes phoning Mrs. Pender and telling her what had happened. She was nice about it. She said she knew I was doing all I could for Jim, and that she was sure everything would come out all right, but she didn't sound optimistic.

It was then I decided to go whole-hog or none that night. I wasn't getting anywhere by playing it decently and legally, so the other way seemed indicated.

And then Smiley put out a special edition of his dirty little sheet, and if there'd been any doubt in my mind about what to do, the paper killed it. His lead story was a humorous little thing about Pender. He spoke of Pender as the town's "play-boy," hinted definitely at what Pender had been trying to conceal, and ended the pretty little poison-pen thing with the information that Pender was in the bastille.

He didn't call him by name, but nobody in the town could mistake a thing in the article. Pender was too well-known for anybody to miss on who Smiley meant.

He even took a cut at me in the thing. He said that the only surprising thing was that the plug-ugly who was the pal of the jailed citizen wasn't in jail with him. And hinted that every hour I was free was just borrowed time.

I've seen men horse-whipped for less than he had to say about me.

Smiley lived at the Towers, the best apartment house in the town, and I knew better than to ask for Smiley. With the way he was operating, he'd have everything but land mines to keep possible trouble away. And I wouldn't have asked

for him anyway—if I had any argument with him I didn't want anybody remembering me.

Getting into the place was no trick at all and I knew Smiley had the penthouse. And I'd been in the place enough times to remember that the elevator didn't make the last story to the penthouse, but stopped at the floor below.

I went in at the service entrance and up the service stairs and I didn't meet a soul until I got to the fifth floor.

And then it was just a chambermaid working the night shift, and she gave me an incurious look and that was all. And I had my hat pulled well down and I don't think she'd have been able to recognize me five minutes afterward.

Just as I got to the last floor and had only one flight more to get to the penthouse, I heard the elevator grind to a stop, and I cracked the service door enough to be able to see Smiley and a flashy-looking blonde come out of the cage and start up the stairs.

The blonde was going to be an added handicap, but I'd gone too far to back down then. Besides, I was getting madder by the moment—the more I thought of what was going on the more sore I was.

So I started up the stairs after Smiley and his blonde.

WHEN I was on the roof, with the door leading there closed, I felt better. Getting up there where I wanted to be gave me a lift and made me think that maybe things might break right for me after all. And so I looked around to see what I was up against.

In the first place I was in the open, with maybe twenty feet separating me from the penthouse itself. This was built to look like one of the model houses you see at expositions—flat-topped, with a lot of windows, and with what walls there were made out of glass brick. It had a terrace running along the front and side that I could see, and this was roofed. There were tables and lounging chairs along this, all modernistic. It was very neat, and the penthouse itself was much bigger

than I'd thought it would be. I thought it would have at least six rooms, and possibly more.

I could hear muffled voices from the house and I took my Betsy gun from under my arm and started that way. And then I ran into a piece of hard luck. Or into a colored boy who looked like hard luck to me.

He came out on the side terrace with a tray of drinks and started putting them down on one of the pipe-and-glass tables. That's all they were—twisted pipe with a sheet of glass over the top. He didn't see me for a second and I moved in on him fast. Then he looked up and spotted me and the gun, and he dropped that damned tray about a foot. It landed on top of the table and it sounded as if the side of the house had fallen out.

Smiley called from inside the house: "What the hell's the matter with you, Johnson? What did you break this time?"

I didn't say anything—just raised the gun muzzle so it centered on the boy. And he used his head, even if he was scared into a delicate grey.

He called back: "Nothing, suh! I jus' slipped."

I heard Smiley yap about "damn' clumsiness" and then I was up to the boy with no time to waste. I hated to do what I had to do, but I had no choice. The thing was far enough along then so that I couldn't stop, and the boy could be the one to tip over the apple cart if he got loose.

I swung the gun against the side of his jaw, and put enough weight behind it to put him over to the side about five feet. I tried not to hit him hard enough to break his jaw, but I also tried to come close to it, and I got it just about right. He went down as though he had no knees and he cracked the back of his head against one of the chairs, so I knew I wouldn't have to worry about him for a while.

And then I went inside, in time to meet Smiley just as he came from another room.

I hit him and I didn't care whether I broke his jaw or not. I didn't—I landed

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too high. I could feel teeth breaking out from under the gun's muzzle, but it didn't knock him out. He squealed like a pig and raised his hands to his face, and I jammed the gun into his fat little belly as hard as I could and he brought them down again. On the next swing I caught him where I wanted, about halfway along his jawbone, and I had to step back to keep him from falling on me.

And then I went in the other room to take care of the blonde.

THIS ROOM was a honey—if you like 'em furnished screwy. Every other panel was a full-length mirror, and the blonde was in front of one of these, with both hands up to her head, fixing her hair-do. She saw me coming in from behind her—or saw my reflection—and it was apparent that she saw the gun. She kept her hands right where they were and she didn't raise her voice.

She said: "Just like good old Chicago, hey, Mac! My purse is on the table in the other room and there's about forty bucks in it. Take it and welcome. But you're a chump to knock over this place. It's going to take you too long to get out of it."

I said: "I'm cutting the manager in on the take. I'll have lots of time."

She had nerve enough actually to laugh at that one. She said: "And what did you do with Fatso, might I ask? He's got a safe here, though, Mac, so I don't suppose you'll get much pickings from him, either."

I could see a half-open door that led to a bedroom, and I motioned toward that. I said: "Inside, sister! I hate to do it, but I'm going to make you stand in a closet, just like you were a naughty girl. I can't watch you and everything else at the same time, and you're smart enough to make me trouble if you got a chance."

"Right you are," she said, now turning. "I'll see you do three to five for this little caper, Mac. It'll maybe teach you a lesson, too. You've got nerve but no sense. If you had, you'd pick a place where you could make a getaway."

I'd caught it by then and I wasn't hav-

ing any. She was expecting somebody else to come in and was stalling me until they got there.

I said: "In the closet, Blondie. And pronto."

She went ahead of me and opened the closet door by herself, and I could see it was roomy, with plenty of air space for the time she'd be locked in it. And I also made sure the lock on it didn't operate from the inside. She waved to me as she went in and she was still carrying the thing off.

She said: "Don't run off and leave me, Mac. Because it'll sure as hell get stuffy in here by and by."

I said: "If I do, I'll phone the manager and tell him where you are. I won't let you smother—you're too good a sport for that."

She gave me a little curtsy for that and I closed and locked the door. I went to the kitchen and found a bottle of ammonia and into the bathroom and found a cold wet towel.

And then I tied the colored boy up with his own belt and hauled him out of sight, and finished the job by gagging him with a lemon I'd also found in the kitchen, tying this in with a kitchen towel. I'd dumped some of the ammonia on Smiley's shirt front and draped the towel over his forehead, and he was already starting to come around when I got through with his boy.

SMILEY was stubborn, but not for long. I didn't think he would be. If I was caught, I'd be stuck for assault with a dangerous weapon, attempted robbery at the point of a gun, illegal entry, and probably half a dozen other charges, and I explained to him that I had nothing to lose and plenty to gain by getting rough.

I said: "And it'll be a pleasure, you little toad. I'll love it. Just tell me again you're not going to do what you're told."

I'd raked him a couple of times with the gun, and his face was swelling in a couple of places. He was so scared that sweat was just rolling from his face, and

when he tried to talk he did more stammering than anything else.

He said: "All right, O'Connor! You've got me. What d'ya want?"

"Who's coming up here?"

"I . . . a fellow named Joe Peterkin."

"Do I know him?"

"I don't think so."

I took a chance and asked: "Another hired hand? Like Richetti?"

He was so anxious to get out from under that he slipped and badly. He said: "Honest, O'Connor, I had nothing to do with that. That was Richetti's own idea."

"Who got the rifle from Pender's house?"

He looked stubborn again and I tapped another tooth loose. If I'd had dibs on the dentist bill he was going to have, I'd have been in the money.

He said: "Richetti. He took the rifle."

"About Ida Durstin. Who did she see shooting the printer? And don't tell me you don't know."

"Richetti. He . . . well, he and I got in an argument and he got sore about it. He got over it . . . we straightened it out."

He'd said this last like he'd practised it and I knew full well he was lying by the clock. But I didn't want to take time out to argue it.

I said: "Okay! On your feet!"

"What are you going to do?"

"You're the one that's going to do it. You're going in and open your safe for me."

"I haven't any safe here, O'Connor."

"Your blonde bombshell says different. Must we go through this again? Don't you want any teeth left at all?"

He managed to totter to his feet, and the things he called the blonde were marvelous. She'd have had to have been trip-lets to be all the things he said she was. And I got sore and slammed him across a kidney with the flat of the gun and I gave it all I had. I'd liked the blonde—at least liked the nerve she'd shown.

I said: "That'll be all. If there's going to be any cursing done here, pal, I'll do it. Get at the safe."

I didn't even know where it was, but he led the way into the bedroom and

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pulled away a thick throw-rug from a corner. The next thing that came up was a section of flooring, about three feet square, and with this gone I could see a modern little cannon-ball safe, built into the floor. And I squatted right down next to him while he opened it, just on the chance of there being a gun left right on top.

That's one of the oldest gags in the business and it's just as good now as the day some smartie first thought of it.

I SHOULD have caught wise before, but the second Smiley got the safe door open I knew the answer. The safe was jammed with gas-ration books and, being shut up in that small space they gave themselves away. They smelled like fresh ink so much that even I could tell what it was. And I don't know any more about the printing business than a cat knows about heaven.

The funny part of it was that Smiley thought that was what I was looking for.

He said: "There it is. But they don't hang you for counterfeiting coupons."

The answers I'd figured took care of that, too. It explained why the printer had been shot to death . . . and it wasn't going to be the dead Richetti who'd be blamed for that.

I said: "So that printer caught wise to you, eh? And you had to get him out of the way, or lose your soft snap? And you saw a chance to lay the thing on Pender, thinking the cops would think just as they did—that the guy was killed by mistake? By somebody who thought he was busting at you? Mister, they may not hang you for making phony gas tickets, but they'll sure as hell hang you for murder."

"You can't prove anything like that, O'Connor."

I said: "Nuts! If I can't, Olson can. We've been looking for the wrong people. We've been trying to place somebody you'd been blackmailing down in your print-shop neighborhood. Now we'll try and place you down there and that won't be hard to do. You're known down there and have a right to be

down there, so nobody would think anything about seeing you around at that hour of night. Now that we know who to ask about we'll have no trouble finding somebody that saw you there. Think it over, smart guy."

Somebody from the door said: "You think it over yourself, smart guy. And drop that gun!"

I was sitting on my heels and I went back from them, spinning and rolling at the same time. I heard a gun blast from the doorway even before I saw who was standing there, but when I shot back, the man in the doorway went out of sight as though somebody had pulled him away. Smiley was flat on his face on the floor, and at first I thought he'd ducked to keep low and out of the line of fire.

That was before I saw the blood dribble out from under his head.

OLSON was in a fix and no mistake. He had his counterfeit gas tickets and he had the man who'd printed them, even if the man was accidentally dead from a bullet through the head. It seemed that the man in the doorway, one Peterkin by name, had been startled when I'd done my rolling act, and had shot in too much of a hurry. He'd caught his boss, Smiley, right under the ear, and Smiley probably didn't even know he'd been hit.

It was a good thing for Smiley at that. He'd have died in the chair for murder, certainly. With his blackmailing record no judge would show him mercy.

I'd caught Peterkin high in the right shoulder and he wasn't hurt too bad. He wasn't happy about it, of course—the slug had smashed up a lot of bone—but he was in no danger. And the D. A. was going to let him plead guilty to involuntary manslaughter in return for the information he had about what had happened and who else was in the gas coupon deal.

But Olson was jammed. I was guilty of at least six minor and major crimes, and, under the circumstances, had to admit it. I'd even called him up there and waited for him, so there wasn't a chance of my pleading false identification. The

colored boy was there to testify that I'd smacked him down. The blonde was there to swear I'd put her in a closet at the point of a gun.

And there was Peterkin, now a State's witness, to swear I'd shot him through the shoulder.

Olson couldn't do a thing except take me in, although he talked himself hoarse explaining he was forced into it.

He said: "You'll be up before the Grand Jury, Mickey, and I'll be called, too. I'll clear you there or break my neck trying. You did the work on this, even if you didn't do it legally."

I said: "I'm not fretting."

He asked why not and I gave him the angle I'd thought out.

I said: "Now look! You got the fake gas tickets, didn't you? But me, I got all the blackmail stuff that Smiley was holding over a bunch of the most prominent men in town. You couldn't get a Grand Jury that didn't have one or more of those guys on it, and if you think they'll return a true bill against me, after what I did for them, you're wrong. I'll go out of there as free as the air."

"There's that, all right," Olson said thoughtfully.

"And I gave them back their blackmail stuff and didn't charge any one of them a cent for recovering it. You know that, too."

"Well, yes. But it's been my experience, Mickey, that people forget favors done them, mighty quick. Maybe you shouldn't depend on that too much."

I grinned and said: "There's none of them will forget that favor, Ole. Because I read every word of the stuff before I handed it over and even made notes about it. And I told them so. I figured then that a bunch of prominent people might be a good thing to have on my side, and I was right."

He said I was no better than Smiley and that I had both larceny and blackmail in my heart.

PENDER gave a party for me but it was private. Just the two of us in his game room, and the refreshments

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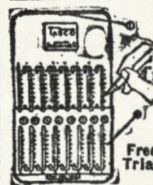
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were rye and soda, though from the way Pender talked and acted I could have had anything in the world. He'd bailed me out while I'd waited for a special meeting of the Grand Jury to be called, and I'd been lucky enough to have had him on it.

They did everything but give me a medal instead of an indictment, although Pender claimed it would have gone that way whether he was on the jury or not. He argued that Smiley had such a smelly name in the town that anybody getting rid of him could write his own ticket.

I said: "What with Peterkin knowing all about what went on, and turning State's evidence, it worked out very well. But who'd have thought Smiley had the nerve to do his own killing?"

Pender said: "He was forced. That printer got smart and caught him running off a batch of coupons on his own press. So Smiley had to get him out of the way. And he had to get Ida Durstin out of the way for the same reason. She saw him stand up in his car, outside the shop, and do the shooting. And Smiley knew damned well she'd told Pike, the chauffeur, about it and so he had to get him, too. He was afraid of you, so he had Richetti try to do you in, but that didn't work out so well."

I thought of that shooting in the warehouse and how Richetti had blasted at me nineteen times with the rifle, and said that Richetti had almost scared me to death even if he hadn't managed to hit me. Even thinking of it gave me the shivers, and so I took another drink to counteract the chills.

Pender said: "He was just too smart. If he hadn't tried to implicate me you'd never have been in the thing at all. Olson would have run around and found out

nothing at all and Smiley would have got away with it."

I defended Olson with: "Ole had nothing to go on. He suspected Smiley of being mixed up in that gas-coupon thing, but that was all. He knew like everybody else what Smiley was doing with his paper, but he couldn't do anything about that, either. If Smiley hadn't spent too much money, I doubt if Ole would have even suspicioned him of that gas business."

Pender said that all was well that ended well and I was inclined to agree with him. He was a cinch to make the State Legislature, something he'd set his heart on doing. He was out of a bad jam and he hadn't been hurt in it, to any extent. At least twenty-five good men and true were sleeping easier at night, with the evidence of their little mistakes in their own hands and so harmless. I felt badly about Mrs. Durstin getting in the way, but she'd asked for something like that when she'd started playing around with people like the chauffeur and Smiley. Smiley and a pair of assorted thugs were out of the way for good and all, and that was a fine thing for everyone concerned. They were together in a rotten black-market racket and they had it coming to them.

And I thought I was well ahead of the game. I not alone collected a nice fat fee from Pender, but I had at least twenty-five new and influential friends. And I knew they'd continue friendly, too.

Everyone of them knew I knew too much about them—it was be friends with me or else. I wouldn't have blackmailed any one of them for any reason, but they didn't know that and I didn't intend for them to know it.

I was going to try to play it cagey for once.

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Both Arnold and Slack had excellent reputations for integrity, the former being a '49er who had originally come from Kentucky during the gold rush. The rough gems which he and Slack displayed in the bank were undoubtedly real, as examination by leading jewelers immediately proved; and the two prospectors indicated that they might be willing to sell their claim if they were offered sufficient cash. They described their diggings as being fabulously laden with rubies, emeralds, and sapphires as well as diamonds.

All over San Francisco, important professional and business men became interested in negotiating for the purchase of the supposed diamond mine. Word was hastily cabled to an American banker in London at the time, who immediately took up the matter with the English banking house of Rothschild. The head of that great enterprise, Baron Rothschild himself, announced publicly that he saw no reason why there should not be diamond fields in America.

Meantime a prominent official of the Central Pacific Railroad resigned his highly responsible position in order to devote his full time to the exploitation of the alleged diamond field discovered by Slack and Arnold. Then the American banker returned from London—by now it was May 1872—and learned that the two prospectors had conveyed a noted civil engineer to the site of their claim, which, it developed, was in Wyoming. They blindfolded their guest before leading him to the exact spot, then whipped away the blindfold and revealed to him,

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as he later stated, "a diamond field worth at least sixty-five million dollars, even the aut hills sparkling with diamond dust." Such words, coming from a reputable engineer, did much to convince the public that the "strike" was all its discoverers had claimed it to be.

Shortly thereafter, Arnold and Slack went back, alone, to their Wyoming property and subsequently returned with a chamois sack crammed full of diamonds and other uncut precious stones. They even stopped over in Reno, Nevada, and telegraphed to their various dupes in San Francisco, complaining that they were scared to journey any farther while carrying such enormous wealth. They demanded protection—and got it in the form of personal bodyguards despatched from the coast to meet and accompany them on the balance of the westward trip to California. Along with the guards came that same American banker who, while in London the previous year, had innocently been responsible for interesting the House of Rothschild in the purported Wyoming diamond discovery.

The chamois bag carried by Slack and Arnold from Reno to San Francisco was found to be as full of raw gems as the partners had stated in their telegrams. For a time these samples were kept in a San Francisco bank vault; then, later, they were transported to New York and closely examined by Tiffany, the famous jewel expert. This inspection took place in the presence of such notables as General B. F. Butler, Horace Greeley the nationally known newspaper editor, and General George B. McClellan of Civil War fame—he who aspired to the Presidency but never made it.

Tiffany announced that the stones were genuine. Moreover, he appraised their value at approximately one hundred and fifty thousand dollars—which, incidentally, covered only a fraction of the chamois sack's full contents!

Upon public announcement of this staggering evaluation, a ten million dollar corporation was formed to purchase the diamond field from its owners, the two original prospectors, and to work it for

its hoard of glittering wealth. The head offices of the organization were set up in San Francisco, with a transfer office in New York. On the board of directors of this enterprise were General McClellan, William B. Ralston of the Bank of California, a representative of the London Rothschild interests, and nearly every prominent financier in San Francisco and Oakland. One of the organization's first moves was to buy the diamond field from Arnold and Slack, paying the prospectors \$660,000 in full for their rights.

It seems strange, as we look back on this historical event, that nobody appeared to think there was anything peculiar about a pair of miners accepting \$660,000 for a claim supposedly worth many millions. If there actually *were* diamonds in that Wyoming field, why should Arnold and his partner accept such a comparatively trifling sum?

Many historians, including Joseph Henry Jackson, have written learnedly about the period and the details of the gigantic hoax, and it may be that the answer to the public's gullibility is best given in the words of Miriam Allen deFord, who, in her book entitled "They Were San Franciscans," states: "The whole world was on the verge of a speculative frenzy that would have made the Comstock Lode look like a country auction."

Then the bubble burst.

Cause of the puncture was the United States Government itself, which despatched one of its top geologists, a man named King, out to Wyoming for the purpose of making a definitive and complete report on the value of the alleged discovery.

This was something which Slack and Arnold hadn't anticipated. It had evidently never dawned on them that their fantastic claims would be personally investigated by anybody scientifically trained in the knowledge that rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and diamonds never appear in the same beds or rock formations. King set forth to investigate the area—and soon found startling evidence that a tremendous hoax had been per-

petrated by clever crooks. He located diamonds in cracks and crevices of boulders; he found others in fake ant hills. He even picked a few gems from the forked branches of scrub trees—and finally, he actually came upon one stone that had been cut and polished by a lapidary!

Needless to state, he didn't uncover a single diamond in the bedrock, nor did he encounter the slightest trace of that formation known as a blue clay "pipe" in which diamonds are usually mined. What he *did* find was irrefutable, incontrovertible evidence that the purported diamond field had been, to use a western mining term, "salted!"

Ralston, the San Francisco banker who had been victimized into participation in forming a purchasing organization, made immediate restitution by repaying two million dollars cash to investors who had bought capital stock in the abortive enterprise.

As for Slack, the lesser of the two phony prospectors, he dropped completely out of sight and was never again encountered. Some historians think he died in the desert; others have hinted that he may have been murdered by his partner, Arnold, and robbed of his share of the original \$660,000 payoff. Nobody ever found out.

Arnold, however, was traced to his native Kentucky and charges were prepared against him, which, had they gone to court, might well have landed him in prison. But with brazen effrontery he made a deal whereby he returned \$150,000 of his ill-gotten gains, in exchange for which the prosecution was dropped and the slate wiped clean. This left Arnold with at least three hundred thousand dollars, maybe even more; and he used that money, of all things, to open and operate a bank!

Retribution caught up with him at last, though. In a duel he was killed by a shotgun blast—so that the fortune he had fraudulently made in his Wyoming hoax went, eventually, to his lucky relatives.

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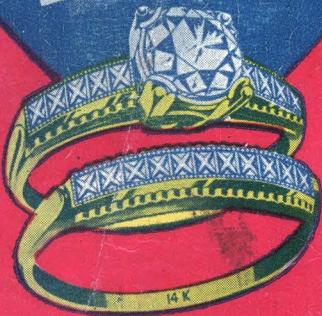
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