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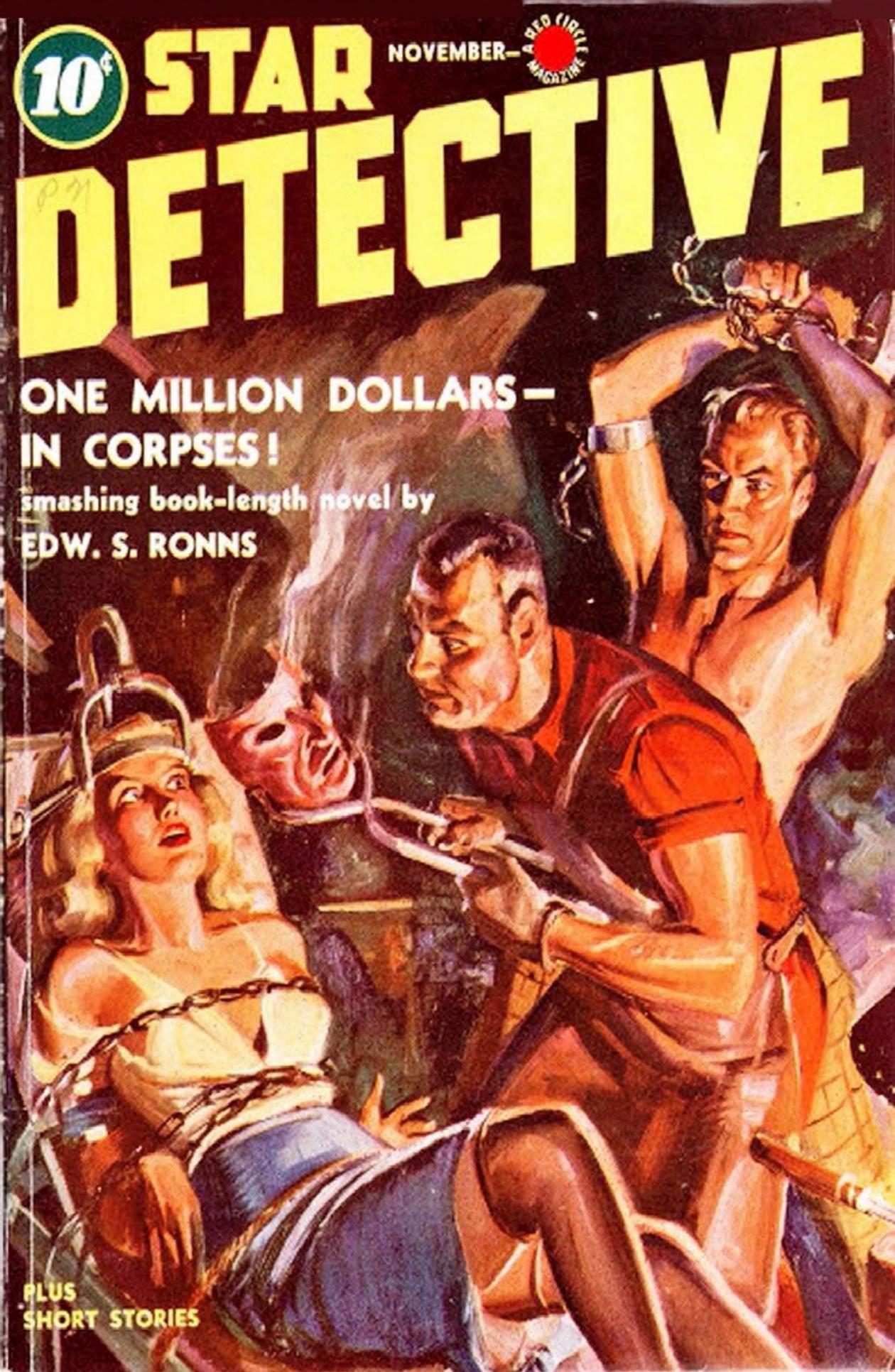


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STAR 10c DETECTIVE

Vol. 2, No. 5



November, 1938

A Book-Length Smashing Crime Novel

Page

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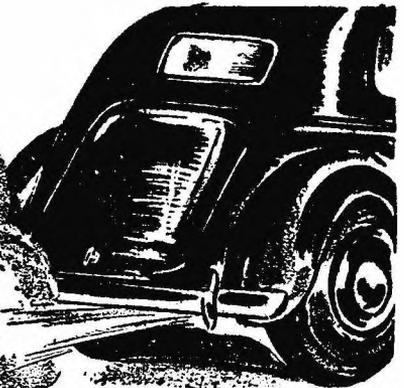


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Let us send you free sample which every salesman is furnished for demonstration. Let us show you, with their permission, ACTUAL earnings of our distributors. Let us show you how you can start in this business NOW—before all territories are assigned. The market is there—we have the product—are you the man? Let's find out. Write, phone or wire today. B. L. Mellinger, Pres., OVRHAUL CO., H-102, Los Angeles, Calif.

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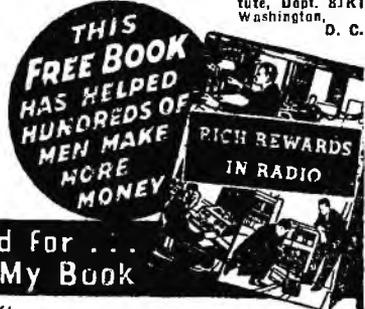
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I Give You Practical Experience
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Act Today! Mail the coupon now for "Rich Rewards in Radio." It's free to any fellow over 16 years old. It points out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tells about my training in Radio and Television; shows you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

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Employ managers, engineers, operators, installation and maintenance men for fascinating jobs and pay up to \$5,000 a year.



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Spare time set servicing pays many \$5, \$10, \$15 a week extra while learning. Full time servicing pays as much as \$30, \$50, \$75 a week.



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Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send "Rich Rewards in Radio," which points out the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please Write Plainly.)

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One Million Dollars—

It would be the money again, the neat packets of thousand-dollar bills, and another corpse, and as usual too much money to pay for the life of the victim—until it was the girl Leo Storm loved!

CHAPTER I

MONEY GROWS ON TREES

THE Greek looked at the world and said, "Pretty sight, isn't it?" He spoke as though he, alone, were responsible for it; and only the land and the wind, the sparkling, im-

personal sea and the secretly whispering forest replied to him, because his companion, Leo Storm, was too busy looking at them all to bother answering such an obvious question.

The road on which the two men stood was a ribbon carelessly tossed on the side of the ocean-washed cliff; it coiled in apparently aimless curves and dips until it vanished over the crest of the hill, beyond which peeped the windowed gables of an ugly, weather-beaten house. In the other direction, the road objected temporarily to its downward path and swept upward over an arm of the promontory, seem-



*"Don't shoot, Storm, or
I'll kill this girl!"*

A BIG SMASHING BOOK-LENGTH DETECTIVE NOVEL—

in Corpses!

by EDWARD
S. RONNS

Author of "Servant of the Devil," etc.

ingly disappearing in the nodding crests of the trees. Up there, the wretched wooden railing was completely disintegrated, but in the spot where the two men stood, the owner of the nearby house had guarded well against the straight-dropping cliff.

Storm, the taller of the two men, leaned beside the Greek, with his elbows on a splintery post he moved as a splinter tugged at the rough cloth of his shirt, and watched a potato bug wend its perilous way along the precipice. Then he lifted his eyes and examined the Maine coast.

Below him the waters of Kennebec Bay glittered cold under the summer sun. Five miles across, through sheer, wet-

whipped air, was the wooded arm that hugged the bay and protected it from the furious assaults of the sea. On the clear point of the opposite promontory stood the *Shady Grove*, the resort club that catered to the wealthy summer colony of Kennebec. The town itself could be seen snuggling intimately in the green forest, well in the shelter of the inlet.

Craft of all sizes dotted the water, but outstanding was the white motor yacht



belonging to the man Burton, who owned and operated the *Shady Grove*. Closer to the cliff where the two men stood, about two miles down the coast beyond the mountain, was the Kennebec Hotel, a pile of white stone in the mathematical

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center of flat green lawns.

The Greek, round and faintly ludicrous in khaki shirt and tight-fitting breeches, had his fill of the scene. His two hundred pounds shook as he shoved away from the railing.

"But it makes me seasick," he concluded, referring to the giddy drop to the rocks below. "Let's scam."

His tall companion remained motionless, answering the Greek's original comment. "Yes, it's quite beautiful, Poppo. You go ahead. I'll be along later."

The Greek shrugged, irritably rubbed a red jowl, and trudged away over the brow of the road. The tall man remained looking pensively down at the saw-tooth rocks; he listened to the never-ending roar as the sea battled to take a mouthful of the black, defiant cliff. The water was never quite successful, but it always persevered.

The sound of the ocean blended with the hum of insects and the rustle of the wind in the birches, and the man sucked in luxurious breaths of the tangy, wet air. It smelled of the sea and the pungency of the pines, and he pulled the crisp coldness deep into his lungs. For the first time in too long, he decided, he was happy.

It was rare that he got into the open like this. He was essentially a man of the city, knowing its topmost gilt and polish, that of the cloud-touched penthouses, and knowing equally well the yellow-lighted dens of the river people. His life was not one that called for much communion with nature. The effect of the salt air was revealed in the healthy red flush that pocketed his hollow cheeks and the return of luster to the slate-gray eyes that twinkled behind his rimless spectacles.

HIS broad, thin-lipped mouth marked him as belonging to the formidable school and the slight stoop of his sloping shoulders, due to his excessively gaunt height, did not cancel that impression of hardness. He looked flat and thin, until his gaunt stature was considered, and then you realized that his body was hard muscle, compact under well-cared for skin. His hair was thick, deep auburn in color, and the wind looped it over his forehead. The rimless glasses he wore gave him a pedagogical look, belied by the quick alertness of his eyes, that jumped with interest from one object to

another. Cultivating the pedagogical impression as much as he could, because its deceptiveness was useful to him, he lost much of it as soon as he was alone.

He pushed away from the rail and trudged along the road that slipped over the hill; his broad mouth puckered to form a little "O." As he went, he whistled a strange tune—the aria from Aida.

At the top of the rise, where the road left the cliff edge and descended through the forest to the bay, he paused as though struck by an afterthought, left the road and plodded with bent shoulders through the leafy shadows of the woods. He was perspiring from the warmth of the sun, and his checked shirt and khaki trousers stuck to his limbs. His whistle faded, welled, and went shrilling without any particular melody through the silent stand of white beech and pine.

Above him on the hill—the house was no longer visible—he sighted a lone mast-pine, a magnificent specimen of a type almost extinct, due to the voraciousness of the New Englander for straight spars in his dancing wooden ships. He walked toward the tree through a delicate pattern of shadows, his heavy cordovan shoes sinking deep into the till of the soil. A tall, gaunt man, he had to duck continually to avoid the low-hanging branches.

The whistle welled louder, resumed its sonorous melody, and then abruptly stopped.

Light from a lost ray of sunshine was suddenly shattered into quivering splinters as Storm's head jerked up sharply, and he peered through his rimless glasses at the tree before him.

"Curious," he muttered.

The brief-case definitely did not belong there. Nothing belonged there, save, perhaps, the nest of one of the birds that betrayed their presence by excited calls.

The brief-case was stuck in a crotch of the tree, which stood in the center of the little clearing. It was not the majestic mast-pine, which stood on the crest of the ridge about twenty feet farther on; it was a birch tree, and the brief-case had no business sitting in it, some twelve feet from the ground.

"Funny," Storm said.

He walked around the tree, studying the turf; squatted at the base of the trunk and thoughtfully regarded the heel prints of a man's shoe. One set was deeply

indented into the soft loam, as though the man who had put the brief-case into the tree—for it had scarcely flown there—had jumped from the crotch and landed heel-first.

Storm took off his spectacles and polished them absently, looking up again at the brief-case, shining black against the bark. He looked speculatively at the tree trunk, flattened his palm against it, shrugged and smiled. He hadn't ever climbed a tree, but crowding thirty was not too old to begin. Curious by nature, he had known from first sight that he was going to climb the tree and inspect the brief-case.

It was less difficult than he had imagined, for his gaunt stature helped him. Jumping up and catching at the lowest branch, he brought his heels up against the trunk and wriggled one leg over the bough. He sat there for a moment, almost exulting in his triumph; then he carefully considered his next move, for, besides being curious, he was also a methodical man.

He reached a foot-stand on the branch and found that his head was level with the shining leather case. He hugged the tree with one arm and swung the black bag from its nest. It was heavy, swelled to the bursting point with its contents. Carefully edging down, he resumed his seat on the branch.

HE fully intended to return the case to its place, after a peek at its contents. He was certain that it was put there for a purpose; it could hardly be listed as a lost object, because articles are rarely misplaced in trees. He reasoned that someone intended to call for the bag and, because he had an unwelcome streak of inherent honesty, he fully intended to replace it. Therefore he remained in the tree, for he did not relish returning to the ground and then repeating his Tarzan performances to return the case to its original position.

The leather straps offered no difficulty; the major obstacle to the satisfaction of his curiosity was the brass catch on the case. He frowned when he discovered that it was locked, but then reflected that, for his purpose, the straps allowed enough leeway to permit a glance at the contents.

Storm took his glance—and almost fell out of the tree.

"I'll be damned," he said slowly.

There was money in the brief-case. Cool, green packets of United States currency. Packet upon packet of it. By reaching his thumb and forefinger between the leather, he could ruffle the edges of the top packet.

He was pleased to see twenty-five one-thousand dollar bills riffle under his thumb. Thousand dollar bills. Funny. He stared, but the thousands remained.

Altogether, he reflected, there was quite a fortune sitting in his lap. And he was sitting in a tree, quite alone . . .

But the decision of honesty was quickly taken out of his hands.

A voice yelled, "Hi! Hi, you!"

After the voice came a crashing of underbrush, and finally a man broke into the clearing, out of breath, stumbling through the berry bushes and thorn-apple.

He was short and slight, dressed in a brown sack suit that marked him as coming from the wealthy resort colony down on the beach. His face was chubby and flushed, with a button of a nose that stuck out from his flat cheekbones. His ears were small and brick-red, perpendicular to the sides of his head. Storm recognized him. His name was Toogy, and he came from Burton's Shady Grove Club across the bay.

Toogy yelled again and came to a halt below Storm. "What are you doing up there, mister?"

"Just sitting," said the tall man, unperturbed.

The little man's ears went a shade darker in hue. "I mean, where did you get that case?"

"From the tree," said Storm, his calm deepening as he examined the little man.

"Well, hand it over," said Toogy. He added as an afterthought, "It's mine."

Storm laughed and smiled down at Toogy. He said airily, "Finders keepers."

"Yeah?"

"Certainly," said Storm, swinging his legs.

"It's mine!" Toogy rasped. "I want it."

"Prove that it's yours."

Toogy stepped back a little, suddenly apprehensive of Storm's swinging legs. The heavy cordovans were coming perilously closer to his upraised jaw with each swing.

"Listen," Toogy said, backing away. "You listen. The money is mine."

Storm smiled broadly, and Toogy said defensively, "Sure, I know what's in that ease. Money! I guess that proves it's mine."

"How much?"

"None of your business, monkey. Don't try any funny stuff, or I'll get the law."

"Go right ahead," Storm invited. "I'll wait."

TOOGY curled his lip at him. He drew back another three paces until he was well out of reach of Storm's swinging heels. His hand dropped to his hip pocket, and when it came in sight again, it was closed around an ugly looking black automatic. Sunlight spread a sheen along the barrel as it pointed up at Storm's middle.

Storm abruptly lost his smile. "Oh, my," he said.

"Yeah," Toogy breathed hard. "I guess I won't bother calling the law. I'm my own law."

Storm's lips twitched again. "Naughty boy."

"Nuts. Toss down the grip monkey. I won't hesitate to use this gadget. I know how."

"Undoubtedly you do. My only regret is that I haven't one with me to prove I can use those gadgets better than you."

"That's too bad. Toss down the cash."

Storm shrugged, hesitated, then moved. He wobbled, as though he had momentarily lost his balance, and regained his equilibrium with a vast sigh of relief.

"Quick!" Toogy urged.

Storm looked away over his head. Beyond the clearing, with its surrounding wild raspberry and thorn-apple bushes, with their pink blossoms, he saw something stirring that had no part in nature.

He delayed, asking naively, "Is this money real?"

Toogy snarled. "Sure. Even queer-peddlers got more sense than to make such big bills, sap. Where'd you shove grand notes?"

"Yes, that's true," Storm nodded. "The money must be good."

The slight delay of his question gained him objective. From out of the bushes behind Toogy arose a strange figure. First

a wide-brimmed Stetson sombrero poked over the brush, followed by an earth-colored face adorned by a broad, practically toothless grin. A body followed the head. A food-stained vest, ablaze with badges and medals of all grades and insignia, and a pair of tattered blue jumpers completed the main items of clothing.

What interested Storm was the business-like six-shooter in the man's grimy paw. It wagged at the unsuspecting Toogy's back.

"Stick up. You just drop gun."

The command was flat, emotionless, coming out of that grinning, toothless mouth. Toogy started, whirled, and shivered involuntarily as he sighted the newcomer. He hesitated, the automatic in his hand pointing at the ground, and Storm took off from the tree in a flying leap.

He hit Toogy just below the shoulder-blades, and the little man went down like a tenpin struck by a sixteen-pounder. He squawked once; the air sizzled with his vitriolic curses.

Storm rolled over, freed himself of Toogy, picked up the man's automatic and calmly proceeded to empty the clip.

Toogy stared, transfixed, at the ragged looking man in the Stetson hat.

"Who—who the hell is he?"

Storm looked up, pocketing the shells. "The Sheriff. Everybody knows the Sheriff."

"Cops!"

Toogy's red ears seemed to stick out straighter from the side of his head. His bright little eyes were like a trapped animal's, slewing through the woods as though seeking a path of escape.

"Keep your gun on him, Sheriff," said Storm. He handed the empty automatic to Toogy, and indicated the black leather case that lay at the foot of the tree. "That money yours, Toogy?"

The little man was startled. "No—no. How come you know my name, mister?"

"I know a lot of people. You work for Wheels Burton. Tell him, if he wants this stuff, he'll have to come for it himself, with an explanation."

"Sure." Toogy swallowed and glanced at the Sheriff, who had seated himself on a log and was staring moodily at the big six-shooter.

"Scram," said Storm shortly.

Toogy looked dazed. "You mean I can go? This cop—"

"The Sheriff is a low-grade moron. A village character. He likes to parade around in badges, with a blank revolver. He never hurt a fly."

Toogy swallowed again and looked down at his empty automatic.

"Damn you," he muttered. He turned on his heel and trudged toward the trees. He called back over his shoulder, "I'll get you, monkey!"

Storm waved an airy hand at the gunman.

"I'll be waiting, Toogy."

CHAPTER II

EASY COME, EASY GO

LEO STORM stood for a moment watching Toogy's retreating form. Sunlight found his hollow cheeks, outlined the smile that quirked around his mouth and reflected the humor that twinkled in his gray eyes. He put on his glasses. The shadows of the forest softened his irregular features and made him attractive, in a reckless way.

Toogy disappeared, and Storm, with a little shrug, walked across the clearing and picked up the briefcase. It was still locked, and he made no attempt to break the lock or cut the leather, but tucked it under his arm and looked at the "Sheriff."

The man was a breed Indian of indeterminate tribe, but probably both Pas-samaquoddy and Wawanock, with a goodly portion of French-Canadian. Mentally deficient, the Indian was a character of note around Kennicut, a sight to be pointed out to visitors, with his array of weird buttons and blank-cartridge revolver. He was seen only when he wanted liquor; when drunk, he vanished into the woods to some hidden shack of his own, and gave no trouble. As a guide to hunters he was invaluable, and save for the one mental quirk that convinced him he was the duly elected and sworn sheriff of the county, he had no further peculiarities. Since the legitimate Sheriff Corl-*wye* did not object, no one else did.

The Indian pocketed his blank revolver and grinned toothlessly. "Shrimp had you treed, Mr. Storm."

Leo Storm nodded. "Thanks, Sheriff."

He dug in his pocket and gave the Indian a crumpled dollar bill. "Go into town and get drunk. Then go hide."

"Huh. You bet!"

Storm trudged off through the woods, brief-case under his arm. To his irritation, the earth-colored Indian slid alongside, moving silently and with a peculiar grace through the brush.

"My boss comes back today," the Indian offered. "Boss lives on hill."

"The Coulters? The people who own that big house on the cliff?"

"You bet. Come back today. Old Coulter rich as all hell. I work for him—for nephew, too. Gregory Dolman. Gimme plenty money, then I get drunk and hide like hell."

"Not a bad idea," Storm commented.

He said nothing more until they were close to the winding road that he had deserted some twenty minutes before. A tan Cadillac touring ear was cautiously rolling around the escarpment, headed for the slight rise and then the dip into the valley and Kennicut.

There were three people in the car: the driver, a round-faced man whose hair was prematurely thin on top; a monkey-like, thin old man who looked straight ahead; and a girl who sat trim and straight, a neat white felt hat protecting her honey-colored hair.

"The Coulters," volunteered the Indian.

"The girl, too?"

The Indian shook his head. "Nope. She's the new secretary, Val'rie Feather. She lives at the hotel—room's not ready for her at the Roost."

"Roost?"

"Devil's Roost. Name of house, same name as mountain: Devil's Mount."

Storm watched the car go by. The young-oldish man who was driving would be Gregory Dolman. He nodded to the Indian when he saw him, and put on the brakes. The left rear tire exploded with a *pow!*

THE Cadillac swerved, heading for the rail, then came to a halt in a cloud of rattling gravel and rolling dust. Dolman leaned over the door and looked back at the sagging chassis. He cursed, then apologized to the honey-haired girl.

"It's a flat," he said. "It will have to be changed."

The Indian left Storm and went up to the car eagerly. "I fix it, Mr. Dolman."

The Indian set to work. Storm leaned back against the tree, saying nothing, watching the car and the sky and always the girl. She looked once at him, a side-long glance that settled with a little violet glitter on the brief-case tucked under his arm. For a moment he thought her eyes had gone slightly wider—they were quite beautiful eyes, he observed—and her red mouth puckered into a soundless "Oh."

She turned to the thin, shrunken old man. "I think I'll take a walk, Mr. Coulter. If you don't mind."

"No. But come back in time, however."

The old man had a nasal voice, high-pitched, that contrasted with the girl's quiet, "I will, sir."

She stepped out of the car, revealing herself as being rather tall and slender, and possessing good taste in clothing. She hesitated a moment on the gravel road, then struck off with a graceful purposeful stride toward the top of the hill.

Storm gave her three minutes and then melted back into the shadowy woods. His cordovans made no sound as they crushed into the thick carpet of pine needles and soft till. For a few minutes his thin body achieved a silent grace of motion, of a different sort than the girl's. He reached the little clearing and the solitary birch tree that stood in a puddle of buttery sunshine and went down on his knees, pillowing them on the dryness of the black leather brief-case. He watched the clearing.

The girl arrived, as he had expected.

She came with a hurried step, walking awkwardly because of her high heels, which sank into the soft earth. Her face and her violet eyes were quick with alertness and puzzlement, her glance slewing around with quick stabs at the silently nodding, pungent woods.

She went straight to the white birch and looked up at the crotch in the branches where Storm had first discovered the brief-case. She looked puzzled, then half-angry, and finally frightened.

She knelt, as Storm had done, and examined the heel marks in the turf around the tree trunk.

Storm watched her from behind the brush and murmured, "So our honey-blond knows about the cash, too, but not

enough to be a convincing owner!"

The girl stood up with a little clucking sound of despair, searching the surrounding undergrowth with anxious eyes. He got up from his place of concealment, brushed his knees and tucked the brief-case under his arm once more.

He said politely. "Looking for something, Miss Feather?"

The girl started and made a little frightened gesture with her gloved hands at the sudden sight of the tall man. Her eyes ran away from him with quick panic; then they swiveled and fastened with unconcealed fascination on the black leather corner of the brief-case, which stuck out from between Storm's arm and his shirt.

She said, "I—why, no, I'm just—just walking."

She laughed and came toward him. Her eyes, drifting from the brief-case to his face, met his slate-gray eyes behind their rimless spectacles.

She asked with naïve simplicity, "What have you got there?"

"This brief-case?"

"Yes. What's in it?"

"Leaves," said Storm soberly. "I'm making a leaf collection. I've got this brief-case just crammed with leaves. I specialize in green ones."

PERPLEXITY lingered on her face for another moment, to be replaced with a flash of anger. A veil dropped over her violet eyes. "Oh," she smiled. "You're fooling me, aren't you?"

"Indeed, I wouldn't do any such thing."

"May I see your—leaves?"

She reached out an impulsive arm to take the brief-case, and Storm's smile was one of polite embarrassment. "I'm afraid not. The wind, you know—leaves like these are lost so easily."

He was mocking her, stinging her to anger, but she matched his calmness.

"May I—"

She paused, then said, "I suppose you often give exhibits of your famous collection—I'm sure it's famous. Your leaves must be well known."

Storm smiled and decided he liked the girl. He said with continued politeness, "Yes, you've no idea how popular my leaf collection is. And most rival collectors are so unscrupulous—they wouldn't hesitate to use any means by which they

could steal the very choicest of my collection."

She bit her very red underlip. "Yes, I suppose they would."

"So," said Storm, still smiling, "don't try to get your gun out of your purse."

Her eyes darted quick hatred at him. "How did you know—"

"I'm psychic. Or perhaps it bulges." He shrugged and tucked the bag tighter under his arm. His voice was expectant as he said, "Of course, I'm not averse to private exhibitions with people I can trust. There are so many people who know more about my collection than I do myself. I'm really not much of an authority on the subject of leaves—green leaves."

She said, "Yes," in an abstracted tone, and then asked abruptly, "Aren't you Leo Storm? The man who took the cottage beyond Devil's Mount?"

He bowed slightly. "Yes, I am. But I'm staying at Kinnicut Hotel temporarily, until the Greek gets the cottage in shape. The Greek is my aide-de-camp, you might call him. My hotel room is 715. And yours?"

"713."

"Next door neighbors," Storm murmured with mock delight. "I'm sure we'll get together soon."

"It will have to be soon," Valerie Feather smiled. "I'll be living at the Roost in a short time—Mr. Coulter's secretary, you know, and I—"

The sound of a starting motor recalled the girl to her position. She turned hurriedly, glanced with reluctance at the brief-case, and then ran toward the road and the waiting touring car. Storm watched her trim, lithe figure until it was out of sight. His gray eyes became thoughtful.

"Let come what may—" he murmured, and poked his spectacles higher up on the little bump below the bridge of his nose.

He waited until the sound of the car was gone, and then circled the little clearing until he found a log that would make a comfortable seat in the underbrush. He fully expected someone new to visit the clearing. It was obvious to him that the real owner of the money had yet to put in an appearance.

The sound of the sea tearing savagely at the cliffs and the twitter of birds and unseen little animals were all he had for

company. He seated himself on the log and watched the solitary birch tree.

He did not have long to wait.

Presently a voice said, "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting."

The voice was a man's, cultured and resonant, and it was accompanied by the shocking-cold feel of the muzzle of a gun that was pressed tightly to the back of Storm's neck.

"No, don't turn," said the man.

There was a faint odor of bath salts in the air. Lavender. Storm sniffed and sat motionless. He did not turn his head.

THE man with the gun spoke, with the faintest of lisps, "I could have shot you down like a rabbit, Mr. Storm, but for the fact that I do not believe in injuring innocent bystanders. And I know you are innocent of any preconceived connection with my business affairs."

Storm sniffed again.

"I saw you discover the money quite innocently," the man with the gun went on. "I was watching you. Let me assure you that the brief-case and its contents are mine. I'd describe the money to you and give you the exact count—it's close to a quarter of a million dollars, to satisfy your curiosity — but I haven't the time to prove my ownership."

"Your gun does that," Storm said easily.

"True. You are sensible, I see. And let me again assure you that the money is mine."

The man reached around Storm and lifted the brief-case from his knees. Storm saw a smooth, plump white hand, the fingers ornamented with a single green scarab ring, and a shirt cuff of London-tailored fabric. Then the hand disappeared and the gun muzzle was withdrawn from Storm's neck.

"Please sit right where you are for ten minutes. I may have other men covering you, you know."

Storm nodded and pulled a pipe from his pocket, loading it slowly with rough-cut tobacco. He struck a match to the bowl as the stranger's footsteps faded toward the road at his back.

He sat there, patiently, for double the time, for twenty minutes, peacefully smoking his pipe.

He had no desire to be killed.

CHAPTER III

GIRL WITH FRIGHTENED EYES

IT TAKES a peculiar type of courage to occupy the table in Lucci's that is placed by the window, and the girl who slid into a chair and ordered chicken salad on toast did not look particularly courageous. She gave her order to Lucci himself when the maestro of gastronomies approached her with his famous toothy smile.

"Miss Feather, you're not occupying your regular seat."

Valerie made no answer, only scanned the menu. Her voice had a strained quality when she said, "I feel like watching the beach."

With her honey-colored hair and deep, murky violet eyes, reminiscent of a summer twilight, the girl was a delight to Lucci, who worshipped beauty not alone for beauty's sake, but because it attracted more male customers to his Kennebec restaurant. He merely observed that her eyes were beautiful, and did not stop to consider that the smoky haze in their wide depths veiled a blazing, bright flame of terror in her mind.

Despite her inward agitation, her oval face, with its red, red mouth, remained perfectly calm as she awaited her order. She smoothed her white linen suit, inspected the tips of her brown-and-white sport shoes, and adjusted the smart little hat that sheltered the honeyed coronet she fashioned of her hair.

Then she turned to the newspaper she held in her hand. She opened it to the features page and read the article in the upper left-hand corner. The column was unsigned; its writer was a mysterious figure even to the editor of the mighty *Post-Tribune*. There were many men who skulked in the big cities' canyons who would gladly have sat in the chair up the river for the opportunity of greeting the writer in the next world. Everyone read the column; and that included the police. It was a crime column from which even the dapper Lieutenant Tilliman of the Maine state troopers had gained an occasional clue—and whose writer Tilliman had cursed many, many times in his mildly weary tones.

Valerie read only the opening paragraph:

SKELETONS IN YOUR CLOSET

What retired jewelry merchant has gone haywire over the Spiritualist Foundation, believing so much in the powers of the Celestial Sphere that he sells this week the major part of his jewel collection for a quarter of a million dollars, and plans to make a public donation of the cash to the earthly guiders of Spirit-Land? . . . We say: watch this affair. That kind of money floating around in public generally winds up floating—in a pool of blood.

No signature; no further explanation. Valerie pushed aside the paper with a little shudder and looked up again at the window. Her features grew a little more pale, and her fingers went to her lips to suppress a tiny, choking gasp.

The object of her fear looked harmless enough. He was a little man with brick-red ears that stuck out perpendicularly from the sides of his head; his eyes were bright, set deep in his flat, puggish face. He pressed one little red ear against the window and stared at Valerie with intent interest.

"Toogy," she said, and crushed the paper in her grip.

Lucci came back with a waiter and set her sandwich before her. There was none of the lambent fear—only mild annoyance—in Valerie's eyes as she looked up and said, "Lucci—that man. Can't you make him move?"

Lucci pulled in his fat bulk and stared through the window at Toogy, who stared right back with unblinking brown eyes. Lucci flushed, embarrassed. He raised his eyebrows.

"I'm so sorry, Miss Feather. These people, they have no manners. We cannot stop them. If you care to change your table?"

"That won't make any difference. He'll still watch me. He's been watching me for three days."

Lucci said, inflecting his syllables to make it a question, "I don't understand?"

"Neither do I."

SHE scarcely touched the chicken salad; whenever she looked up, there was the little man, pressing first his brick-red ears to the window, then his nose. He looked at her with bored impatience shining quick in his bright animal eyes.

In five minutes Valerie got up, her red mouth compressed into a tight little line. She walked through the revolving doors into the blasting heat of the sidewalk. Toogy turned slowly and watched her unblinking and, after a moment's pause, followed her as she walked quickly through the crowds of vacationers toward the Kennicut Hotel.

Her heart was a thudding triphammer in her breast. She told herself that she was being a fool, that no one had reason to suspect her of anything, that she was a nobody. The little man with the ears could not possibly want anything from her.

She paused and glanced deliberately into a shop window, then turned around. Toogy was strolling after her, hands in his pockets, his lips puckered into a soundless whistle.

There couldn't be any doubt about it. She *was* being followed!

Her eyes cruised over the hot, murky street, her under-lip caught tightly between small white teeth. She examined the green slopes of the land above her, then the curving coast of the bay and the distant hotel, whose white walls reflected the glare of sunlight. She began walking along the shore, her high heels twinkling with her frantic urge for speed; then she suddenly slowed as she considered the plan she had just evolved in her mind. Her full red lips curled into a smile.

"I'll just see neighbor Storm about Mr. Toogy," she told herself.

Every morning for the past three days, since meeting Storm near the birch tree, Valerie had come down the hotel corridor to the accompanying click-click of smartly moving high heels; and every morning, on passing down the hall from her small suite to the elevator, she had seen the tall, thin man with the rimless glasses, lounging against door 715 and watching her.

She learned nothing about Leo Storm. She did not speak to him again, nor even glance at him—at least, not so that he could observe that she was looking at him. She had not approached him about the affair of the brief-case, since she had suddenly found no value in his insolent banter. But she could use him now. And if he were as good as he looked, the problem of Toogy would soon be settled.

She paused before 715 and pressed her forefinger to the ivory bell with a determined little jab. She waited, listening

to the tinkle of a bell somewhere, and heard some scuffling sounds, a muffled exclamation of annoyance, and then heavy, slow footsteps approaching the door.

A short, squat man, with the homeliest face Valerie had ever seen, bulked large in the doorway. He was partly bald; had a wide mouth, deep-set raisin eyes, and lifted eyebrows. She concluded that this was the Greek.

"Yeah?" he asked.

Valerie hesitated, then said, "I want to see Mr. Storm."

The man in the doorway shrugged. "He's gone, lady."

"That's right, Poppo—tell her I'm out," said a voice.

Valerie pushed her way determinedly past the chunky man and stepped through the foyer. The tall man, in a white gabardine suit, squatted on the floor, legs folded under him, Buddha-fashion. But he was not contemplating prayer. He was watching the tantalizing gyrations of a pair of dice that spun on the hardwood floor against the wall.

He did not look up at Valerie.

The dice came down six and three.

"My win," said Leo Storm. "One more cast and you owe me a five-spot dinner at Lucci's, Poppo."

"Let's see," asked the Greek, leaving Valerie.

BOTH men examined the dice. Poppo agreed regretfully that Storm had won. Storm twisted his neck and looked up at the girl in the white suit.

"Good afternoon," he smiled. "Come to pay a neighborly call, Miss Feather?" She detected sarcasm in his voice, and said, irritated, "It's business."

"If it's about my leaf collection," Storm said wearily, "I haven't got it any longer. And I don't want it."

She said briskly, "I know that. But I *am* being followed, and I want you to help me."

"And what makes you think *I* can help you?" he answered.

She said doubtfully, "You just look like—like the sort of man who would."

He looked shocked. "Poppo, get me a mirror—I want to see what kind of a face I'm wearing today!"

"I thought—I mean, you look like a detective," she said desperately. "Aren't you?"

He considered for a moment. "Yes—

and no. In my spare time, I would say."

"And what do you do as your regular business?"

Storm straightened his legs, but kept sitting on the floor, palms flat behind him. He laughed up at her.

"You know, I don't really mind answering your questions. I'll tell you what I do: nothing. Just nothing. Unless you count fishing and swimming and digging mummies as a vocation."

"Mummies?"

"Egyptians. Dead ones. I'm first a man who loves to do nothing: a parasite; secondly, I'm an archeologist—at least, I kidded myself into believing I was one last summer; thirdly, I'm a detective, of sorts. I dabble," he smiled, "in crime."

She raised her eyebrows. "Versatile, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes. Very."

"And modest."

"No."

He grew tired of keeping his neck twisted. He flexed his long legs and got to his feet with a groan. He looked very tall and slender, with his slightly stooped shoulders and spectacles giving his eyes the opaque expression of a student dazed by the vast compass of this world's knowledge. He smiled self-defensively and waved a hand at the Greek.

"Now that you know all about me, meet my assistant: Xerxes Byron Nikopolis," he said expansively. "Poppo, for short."

Valerie glanced briefly at the squat, broad-shouldered Greek, whose homely face cracked momentarily into a mechanical smile.

"I don't believe it," she said.

Storm nodded seriously. "It took me a long time to convince myself, too—No, don't touch, Poppo!"

The Greek was reaching for the dice that lay on the floor. Storm scooped them up with a long arm and stood rattling them in his hand.

The Greek muttered, "I think they're loaded."

"One more toss, Poppo," Storm said briskly. "Then you pay for dinner at Lucci's." He turned with a little bow and smile to Valerie. "Care to join us, Miss Feather?"

She stared unhappily at the tall, thin Storm. His smile was pleasant. Eyes twinkling. She decided with inward humor that, if he were insane, it would be

best to humor him. She might as well play.

The Greek lost his cast immediately and, for some reason, Storm failed to make his point of eight. Valerie knelt, rattled the ivory cubes awkwardly, and cast a trey and an ace.

"What do I do now?" she asked.

"Roll until you get seven or four. Four you win, seven you lose."

Valerie's eyes became determined. She wriggled to a firm position and asked, "How do ducks go to water?" and answered herself, "In pairs."

She cast, and a pair of two's showed up.

THE Greek exploded into a stifled exclamation. "What an amateur!"

Storm smiled. "So we treat you to dinner at Lucci's."

"No, thanks," Valerie answered. "If you will just condescend to act sane for a few moments, and listen to me, I'll call the debt off. As a matter of fact, I'm in terrible trouble, Mr. Storm."

"You said you were being followed."

"For three days," she nodded. "A man has been watching me for all that time. It's the same man. Just now, I almost had to run to get rid of him. But he knows I live here at the hotel; he'll pick me up again."

"Has he ever spoken to you? Annoyed you?"

"No."

"Do you know who he is?"

"He goes under the name of Toogy. He is one of Wheels Burton's men."

Storm opened his mouth, shut it, poked his spectacles up higher with his middle finger.

He said, "You know that Wheels Burton is New York's number one gambler?"

Valerie nodded. "I know."

"Why should Toogy, who is one of Burton's many stooges, be following you? What could Wheels be wanting that you've got?" Storm looked suddenly at the Greek. "That—that leaf collection?"

"No. I don't have it—I know you don't, either. I don't know why Toogy should be following me. I only want you to—"

"Perhaps it's because you know something about it."

"I don't!" she said passionately. "I don't know anything about it. I only—"

Her voice trailed off, and she sat down in a leather armchair, flexing her fingers around the oak knobs.

Storm expelled a little puff of air and walked to the window. He felt annoyed, primarily because he had expected a few more moments alone with the Greek and the dice. His eyes were irritated as he looked beyond the window into the shimmering July heat that crushed the bay and its resort settlement. Most of the streets of the small town of Kennicut were deserted, blasted empty by the temperature and the breathless, sticky air.

Finally he said to the girl, "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to get rid of this man who is shadowing me. I'll—I'll pay you well. I want you to get rid of Toogy."

"We charge five hundred dollars for murder," said the Greek sourly. "You could get it done cheaper by hiring big-city talent."

"I—I didn't mean that. I just want to be free of this man."

Storm said, "But if you won't tell us why he is following you—"

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

"Nuts." That from the Greek. "Why not call in the cops?"

Valerie's eyes jerked around, settled on a spot on her brown-and-white sport shoes. "No," she whispered. "No. I don't want any publicity. You see, I work as secretary to Myron Coulter—the wealthy man who lives on Devil's Mount. He's not exactly good-natured, and I—I need the job."

"Coulter's the one with the jewel collection?" the Greek asked ponderously.

"Yes. He's rather ill. I'll be going to the house tomorrow, and I can't have Toogy or any other gangster following me. The reason, you see, is Mr. Coulter's jewels.

"I'm afraid there is some plot afoot to steal them."

She took the newspaper she carried and showed Storm the crime gossip-column she had read in the restaurant. "You see, this writer believes—"

"He's full of beans, whoever he is."

Valerie looked indignant. "But this column has often predicted events that actually happened. I'm afraid Toogy's following me has something to do with this prediction about money floating in—in blood."

STORM exchanged glances with the Greek and shrugged his sloping shoulders. "How does your problem fit in with this crack in the column about a sale of jewels for cash?"

"Myron Coulter is the man who is selling his jewels," she explained, suddenly breathless. "He's receiving cash, a quarter of a million dollars, and he insists on making a public donation to this Spiritualist Foundation." She clasped her hands nervously and anticipated Storm. "No, what you found in the woods wasn't it. The sale hasn't been made yet."

"Then suppose you tell the police all about it," he suggested again. "I'm here only to loaf—besides, the problem belongs in the hands of the legitimate police, not in mine."

Valerie looked down at her sport shoes once more, then lifted scornful eyes at Storm. "You won't help me?"

"No. Any other time you find someone trailing you—well, put it down to your looks, Miss Feather."

The girl's eyes snapped anger at him, and he thought she looked quite beautiful when she was angry. He started to say so, but the girl bounced out of her chair, exclaiming, "I think you're quite hateful!"

She high-heeled out of the room, the slam of the door echoing in the silence that accompanied Storm's worried glance.

The Greek said, "It's a simple case, Leo. The girl is in the second stage of developing paranoiac tendencies. She has what the book calls delusions of reference. She believes everybody watches her. It's simple, Leo. She lives a dull life as a secretary to an old and grouchy millionaire, and has no social opportunities. She probably *wishes* someone would follow her. And so she picked out someone she thinks adventurous. Toogy, the little rat. She's just repressed.

"Shut up," said Storm briefly.

He walked to the window and watched the girl's trim figure cross the lawn about seven stories down. He was doing a little thinking. Not too much. Enough to make him observe the two little bugs that crawled along after her on the sidewalk. The two insects got into a car and rolled slowly in the girl's wake.

Storm reached for his felt hat and sloped his shoulders into his coat.

The Greek looked at him with puzzled

eyes. "I thought we were going up to the cottage."

"You go. I'll meet you there, Poppo. Maybe tonight, or tomorrow. Pay me the dinner you owe me some other time."

"And where are you going?"

"After the girl. She's in trouble. She's really being followed."

CHAPTER IV

THE CORPSE—

DIKRAN NAKESIAN'S apartment was in the Wawanock, a poor second to the Kennicut Hotel, as hotels went in the resort colony. His apartment was designed in a U-shape. The third-floor corridor of the Wawanock did not go completely through to the back of the building, but ended in a dark-panelled doorway that simply had the spiritualist's name on it in tiny letters. The doorway opened into a reception chamber, with rooms on either side that flanked the common corridor. One arm of the U consisted of Dikran Nakesian's living quarters; the other constituted his business chambers, in which the Nakesian told gullible old women and fluttery young girls the secret of what would come to pass in their lives.

The business quarters were further divided into a séance room and a smaller room where the spiritualist retired when exhausted from his efforts to contact the departed spirits—who sometimes were very shy of appearing, and often mischievous in giving out misleading information.

Dikran Nakesian was, ordinarily, an exclusive creature. Rarely did he have more than one client in his place at a time. His appointments were made by the Hindu, Ali: an efficient man with yellow eyeballs who saw to it that none of the receptions ever conflicted. It was all the more remarkable, therefore, that, on that summer afternoon in Kennicut, Nakesian was playing host to three men simultaneously in his séance chamber.

The room was circular, its walls completely hidden by maroon drapes that reached from ceiling to floor. A little Buddha held a bowl of incense in his lap and squatted on the floor, just as the three men were obliged to do, there being no chairs in evidence. A deep-piled rug

covered the floor; along the walls were cushions. The place had a definite feminine touch. The only solid object of furniture was a knee-high table on which were placed a milk-white globe—the only source of illumination—and a gleaming, chalky skull.

Nakesian sat behind the table, his long, tapering fingers stroking the white globe. His eyes were closed. His immaculately tailored London clothing remained miraculously unincreased by his squatting position.

He intoned in a vibrant voice. "It was a revelation, gentlemen. A revelation of evil thoughts which the spirits were pleased to show me in the minds of some unscrupulous men."

The three visitors stirred uneasily. One was a broad-shouldered man with iron-grey hair, a lantern jaw and hard, agate eyes; he had a beak-like nose, under which was a carefully tended military moustache. He snapped, "I can do without all this bunkum, Nakesian. It does not affect me. Let's come to the point."

"Shortly, Mr. Taite." Nakesian's closed eyelids fluttered, then opened to reveal deep pools of mysticism. Hurt was reflected in their fathomless depths. "It does concern you, sir. It concerns us all. Especially Mr. Coulter—and his nephew."

The leathery old man who leaned forward with such rapt attention sighed his approval.

"True. Tell us, Nakesian, what the spirits have said."

His nephew, Gregory Dolman, a man of thirty, was partly bald, with a round, moon-like face that matched Nakesian's in lack of expression. He said wearily, "Come to the point, mister."

"We all know," said Nakesian, "that Mr. Myron Coulter is a firm believer. We know of his generous offer to the Spiritualist Foundation—"

"Nothing but a racketeer labor organization of all you fakes," grunted Romwell Taite.

"You may think as you please! Mr. Coulter is selling his jewels to you for a quarter of a million dollars. That money he intends to donate to our fund. It should be needless to point out or remind you that there are criminal elements everywhere who would not hesitate a moment to steal that money."

"Including yourself," sighed Dolman.

OLD Myron Coulter chuckled. "That's Mr. Taite's look-out. When he delivers the cash to me, it will be safe. I've made arrangements with Sheriff Corlwyne to guard my house well. Once Mr. Taite gets his cash there, there's nothing more to fear."

Nakesian nodded, looking at the three men with heavy-lidded, somnolent eyes. He was a handsome man, of indeterminate age. He might have been thirty, or fifty. His features stood out in ghostly fashion above the glow of the milk-white globe. The shadows of his tapering fingers slid sinuously along the draperies and the ceiling.

"It is before the money is paid to you, Mr. Coulter, that danger enters. Last night, I received a message from the other world—"

"You mean the underworld," Dolman gibed.

Taite guffawed; Dolman's round face remained impassive.

Nakesian smiled slowly with his lips. Not his eyes. "Very well. Let's make it brass tacks. Three nights ago I learned of a conspiracy. I obtained proof of it. Proof from a criminal whose name you would all recognize if I mentioned it. I gained that proof, I say, and now I will show it to you."

He got to his feet with a quick, pantherish grace. He stood tall before the three seated men. He clapped his hands, and the light in the milk-white globe dimmed and faded. His voice came to his listeners.

"Wait, and I will show you."

Darkness choked the perfumed room, settling in sinuous folds around the three men. Taite's growled curse came through the blackness, then Gregory Dolman's weary, tortured sigh. Only from old Myron Coulter came no sound.

There was a rustling of the draperies, and a soft click as a door opened and closed. Another click as the movement was repeated.

A scream resounded.

It was a woman's scream. High-pitched, shrill, it hung in the choking black air in eerie cadences. Then it bubbled and died away.

STORM was on the street in front of the Wawanock when he heard the scream; it came to him faintly, but unmistakably.

He started, and looked down at his shadow, corrugated on the steps of the apartment-hotel where he had trailed Valerie Feather. His white gabardine coat was beginning to feel damp. He was carrying a gun in a shoulder-holster.

Storm looked down the street, his eyes bright and alert behind his glinting spectacles. Two men stood on the corner, their lips tight with silence. A black coupé, like a big beetle, squatted by the curb and breathed blue exhaust into the sultry air.

The desk in the Wawanock lobby looked deserted, until a sleekly black scalp poked itself slowly over the edge. A chalky face with a long pink nose stared out at Storm.

"I thought I heard a scream."

"You heard correctly," Storm agreed uneasily.

The elevator was in use. He hesitated between watching to see who came out of the cage or going up the steps; he chose the latter. Trouble hung in the air like too much strong perfume.

A man threaded past him on the steps, clattering on leather heels. He was big and beefy, dressed in a green suit and pink plaid shirt that hurt Storm's eyes. The man's face was wild; his mouth was open as if about to burst into a sun-maddened yell. Storm did not stop him. He went on up the steps, three at a time.

Lucius, otherwise known as Lucky Lamonte, he thought. Wheels Burton's stooge, like Toogy. Now what—

His thoughts were chopped off by a concerted hammering, as of fists on a door. A muffled voice yelled, "Let us out of here, curse you!"

The voice was husky, harsh with anger and fear. Storm's scalp tingled. He covered the last flight of steps and looked down the shadowy third-floor corridor to the door that stood half ajar, lights streaming from it to emphasize the duski-ness of the hall.

He padded quietly along the heavy muffling carpet. Stood silhouetted in the rectangle of sunlight. Looked in the apartment.

He said, "What's up, Hunk?"

A MAN with yellow eyeballs, looking like a Hindu, turned around with a wild gasp and leaned with his back against a door. Heavy fists pounded on the panel, and again Storm heard a

man's voice:

"Let us out, you fool! What happened?"

The man who looked like a Hindu turned a perspiring, anxious face toward Storm. "You! Hell, Leo—something's broke loose."

Storm's look of astonishment gave way to a mirthless grin. "Hunk, I thought you were in New York. Where did you get that get-up? And who's behind that door? And who screamed?"

"So help me, Leo, I don't know. I'm goin' straight now, see? This Hindu outfit is part of the racket. I'm workin' for Mr. Nakesian now. He's a fortune-teller. He had three lugs in there, and then I heard this scream. Sounds like murder to me, Leo, but I didn't have—"

Storm cut off the rapid flow of words with a chopping gesture of his hand. "Give me the key to that door."

Hunk thrust a key at him with a shaking hand. Storm thrust it into the lock, then took his gun from its holster and held it ready. He opened the door suddenly.

"Come on out, gentlemen."

Three men tumbled out of the dark room. Romwell Taite was in the lead. His heavy-jowled face was flooded with angry red, and his hair was disheveled by his efforts to force the door.

"What's going on in this clip joint?" he bellowed.

He caught sight of the gun in Storm's hand. It pointed directly at his middle and, as though he had been prodded by the muzzle, Taite folded backward, bumping hard against the old man and stout Gregory Dolman.

"Take it easy," Storm suggested. "Hunk, get some light in that room."

The pseudo-Hindu snapped a switch, and the milk-white globe sprang into existence once more, shining on the gleaming skull that grinned beside it.

The room was empty.

"Who screamed?" Storm asked next, his voice a sharp rap.

Taite began cursing with sizzling virility. "I don't know, and I don't give a hoot! Let me out of this den."

"No." Storm shook his head. "No, I can't."

"Who are you? And why the gun, mister?"

He shrugged. "Leo Storm is the name. Somebody screamed; a girl screamed. It

came from this apartment somewhere. Now, who was it?"

Hunk, the Hindu, suddenly blurted in a scared voice, "Gee, where's the boss, Nakesian!"

Gregory Dolman spoke for the first time. His rolypoly face was blankly expressionless. "I got the impression that Nakesian left the room."

"I didn't see him. He didn't come out here," said Hunk. Then his frightened face brightened with an idea. "He's gone to his private room, where he relaxes. That's where the scream came from."

The Hindu-assistant-from-Brooklyn crossed the audience chamber, yanked at the drapes and revealed a door in the convex wall. He rattled the knob, pushing and straining; then he looked helplessly at Storm.

"It's locked."

"Any other way of getting in there?"

"Sure. Through the hall. That room's got a door opposite the elevator. I got a key to it, too."

"Let me have it."

Storm took the key, and stared for a moment at the four men. To Hunk he said, "Watch these three." To Romwell Taite and the Coulters he snapped, "You'd better stick around. All of you. There's no telling what may have happened."

He left Taite to entertain them with his explosive Anglo-Saxon and went out into the hall again. Opposite the elevator was a door, and the key fitted easily into the lock.

He took a good look at the room, then at the body on the floor. The sun spread white light over a twisted, handsome face; glinted with hot slivers off the shining chromium handle of a knife that stuck incongruously out of the sprawled man's back.

The dead man was Dikran Nakesian.

CHAPTER V

—AND THE CASH

STORM's mouth jerked spasmodically. He poked up his glasses and wrinkled his nose at the lavish scent of perfume in the apartment. He stood for another moment in the door-

way, sweeping the room with hard, bright eyes. The floor was a checkerboard of black and white squares. Geometrical chairs, two squat lounges of maroon mohair and a wall of books completed the major furnishings. His eyes swept back to the corpse, which lay in almost the exact center of the checkerboard floor, for all the world like a chess piece knocked over in a game.

He knew the dead man was Dikran Nakesian. He knelt beside the dead spiritualist, avoiding the thin trickles of reddish-brown that puddled the floor near the man's body. Nakesian lay on his face, one knee flexed, his head resting on a pillowing arm as though in sleep. But the fixed expression of the heavy-lidded eyes told amply well that the sleep was permanent. They looked excited, with a hot and wild glare deep behind their black, shining surfaces.

The knife's chromium handle was imbedded deep between Nakesian's shoulder blades. Three thin trickles of crimson separated from the wound and ran down the various folds of the spiritualist's clothing, to drip on the waxed floor. Storm squinted interestedly at the knife handle. He noticed little bits of lint caught on the cross-guard. There were no fingerprints on the knife. They had been wiped off by the murderer, who had used a silk handkerchief, but had left the lint on the handle to betray his work.

Storm got to his feet with a tired sigh. On a low-squatting table stood a pinch-bottle of Scotch, a siphon and two tumblers. He poured the Scotch, ignored the siphon and drank. He felt better. It helped him think.

He glanced around the room, seeking the source of the feminine scream, and a sad little smile curled around his mouth. Crumpled in a doorway was a huddle of white: Valerie Feather. She was still dressed in her white summer suit, a skirt and short jacket. Her coroneted hair had become undone, framing her oval face and melting, honey-like, into a ray of hot sunlight that buttered the checkerboard floor. She was not dead; not injured. She had fainted.

He murmured softly to her, "Maybe now you'll consent to have dinner with me, darling."

He knelt, lifted the girl off the floor and carried her across the room, depositing her on a lounge. He stared thought-

fully, with puckered lips, at her clear features, relaxed in unconsciousness. His attention centered on her red-tinted fingernails. They were done in a deep, wine-colored tint, with clear white half-moons showing—except on the little finger of her right hand.

A red stain spread over the first joint of her little finger. Storm touched it carefully, and it wiped away. It was blood.

"Nice girl," he muttered.

He began to feel sickish. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and carefully cleaned the damning evidence from Valerie Feather's little finger.

Then he folded and replaced the handkerchief in his pocket. Straightening, he flicked another glance at the body. From this new position, he caught sight of Dikran Nakesian's right hand, pinned under his head. A scrap of paper was crumpled tight in the dead man's fist.

Storm knelt and painstakingly removed the paper from the thin, delicate hand. He expelled an explosive breath through his nose as he glimpsed the printed heading:

SKELETONS IN YOUR CLOSET

Murder walks the rock-bound coast of Maine today. To Sheriff Corlweye we say: stop the proposed sale of jewels that the richest man in your county intends to make. The stipulation of cash will bring death. As we predicted before, that money will wind up floating in a pool of blood . . . and the first of the sacrificial offerings will be made today. . . .

Incredible. The prediction in the *Post-Tribune* had come true; Dikran Nakesian clenched in his dead hand the prediction of his end.

NAKESIAN, Storm reflected, was one of the head men of the Spiritualist Foundation. The Foundation, he knew, was a racket organization, muleting foolish women and girls of millions every year. Myron Coulter, who was donating the quarter of a million dollars in cash to Dikran Nakesian, was doing so for two purposes: to gain publicity for spiritualism, and to invest money in a profitable business.

He recalled the price of the jewel sale as reported in the column Valerie Feather

had shown him. A quarter of a million dollars. Funny. He sucked in his cheeks and licked his suddenly dry lips. Walking around the room, he paused before the lounge on which the girl lay. Behind it, in a half-open door of a closet he found what he had been seeking.

It was a black Gladstone bag, and it was partly open. Electric currents of excitement shook his gaunt body. It had to be true, and if it were, then there was the money—too much money, too much motive for this killing—

He opened the bag with trembling fingers.

It was the money again. A quarter of a million dollars. The neat packets of thousand-dollar bills, fastened with gummed strips of blue paper, were the same he had found in the woods of Devil's Mount. Two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Had the sale gone through, and this money been stolen from Romwell Taite? It didn't make much sense.

"This much money," he mused aloud, "is worth almost any amount of trouble. Few Jack Horners could resist sticking their thumbs in this particular currency pie!"

The telephone rang, buzzing like an annoyed gnat. He glanced around the room and found the ivory hand-set beside the lounge at Valerie Feather's head. He used his handkerchief to pick it up and clipped into the receiver: "Yeah?"

A woman's voice answered, husky with quick impatience. "Hunk," she said, "Hunk, I've got to talk to Dick. It's important. Get him, will you?"

Storm pushed his tongue into his cheek and listened to the husky, frightened voice; he said, "This isn't Hunk. Who is calling?"

"I—who are you?"

Storm sighed. "Okay, I know your voice. You're Dawn Detras. You sing at the Shady Grove."

The voice in the receiver went sharp with haughty resentment. "I wish to speak to the Nakesian."

"Dikran Nakesian is out," Storm said, looking at the window. "He'll be out for a long time—until the Day of Judgment, I think. What do you want, Miss Detras?"

Dawn Detras was a singer at Wheels Burton's Shady Grove. A small, dark, vitally alive girl, with sloe eyes that could

knock any man off his pins. He rather liked her, and deplored the company she kept. He asked again, "What do you want?"

Her voice was disturbed.

"Nakesian."

Storm glanced at the body on the floor.

"Look, this is Leo Storm. Sometime private snoop. Remember me?"

Dawn Detras remembered. Her voice was a frightened gasp that hissed in the receiver.

He went on, "You can't have Nakesian. No one can have him now, except God or the devil. He's dead."

There was a long silence. Too long. He felt his stomach curl with tension before her voice came through the receiver again. He had difficulty understanding her words. They sounded very far away.

"Who did it?"

A smile parted his thin lips. "Did what?"

"Murder. It's got to be murder! I know Dick was murdered. Who did it, Leo? Please, who did it?"

"I'm not sure," he said gently. "I'd like to talk it over with you, if that is possible."

HER voice took on a high, tinny quality. "Are the police there?"

"No. You don't object if I call on you tonight? I'm private, you know. The cops are not my bosom chums, Dawn."

"Yes, I know. Meet me at the Grove tonight, after my songs. Will you do that? Please!"

She didn't have to say please to Storm, and he told her so. She laughed weakly and hung up.

Storm looked at the money again, then bit off a fingernail with a savage suddenness. He was a fool. Whoever had killed Nakesian would come back for the money. The murderer had been frightened by Valerie Feather's presence and had gone away temporarily. But with the money there, the temptation was sure to prove too great. The murderer would come back.

He thought of Lucky Lamonte, the man in the green suit and pink plaid shirt who had come clattering down the steps after Valerie's scream; he thought of the elevator that had been descending when he first entered the Wawanock.

He went to the window and looked down. The black coupé that looked like a beetle should not have been at the curb any longer. But he was wrong, for there it was; the beetle still breathed in the same place.

He took his .38 from his holster and dropped it in his side pocket. It made a bulge in the suit, spoiling the cut completely. It might be too late, but he had to try.

He picked up the Gladstone and went to the hall doorway, swinging the bag. Opening the door with his left hand, he stepped out into the corridor, opposite the elevator.

It was not a complete surprise when he walked between the two men who flanked the doorway.

They stood flat against the wall, their hands in their pockets. They were ugly men. One was Lucky Lamonte, scintillating in his green suit and pink shirt. Lucky was a tall man, almost as tall as Storm, and heavier. He was cursed by having been born with one blue eye and one green eye: a matter of great convenience to the men of Center Street, who had kept an interested eye on Lucky Lamonte since he put on his first pair of long pants and packed a gun in his back pocket. Lucky never got into the upper brackets of criminal society, but he was not to be ignored, by any means. Like most hoods, Lucky thought he was tough, and he could act tough. But, deep inside, he really wasn't.

Storm looked at the other man. Toogy. Uglier than Lucky, Toogy's face looked as though it had been made of rubber at birth, and as if the good doctor had squeezed it out of shape, pushing his scalp too close to his chin. His face was all bunched together, with his button-like nose sticking out from the rest of the features. Flanking the mess were his two little red ears.

Storm said, "Good afternoon, rats."

They ignored the murmur of conversation that came angrily from behind the main doorway to Nakesian's apartment, where the pseudo-Hindu, Hunk, was holding Dikran's three visitors at bay until the police arrived.

Lucky smiled, twisting his lips into a zigzag grin. It was cold and mirthless. Contemptuous. It held death in it.

His voice was throaty with reluctant admiration.

"You work fast, snooper. How'd you get in on this?"

"You came back for the money," Storm remarked. He looked carefully through his spectacles and weighed the Gladstone in his hand. "But why bump Nakesian? Or didn't you?"

"How did you know about this?" Lucky persisted. His face was close to Storm's, and Storm pushed him back roughly.

"A little bird told me. A vulture. Did you stab Nakesian?"

"It don't make any difference to you, and I don't have to tell you, mister. Maybe I did. But I didn't."

TOOGY was watching the Gladstone with bright, hungry eyes. Lucky's multi-colored glance stuck to Storm's hand as it drifted casually into his side pocket. Storm deplored the gabardine suit. It was cool and thin and comfortable. But a gun in the pocket showed up a hundred yards away.

Lucky murmured, "Don't," and Storm didn't.

Instead, he took off his spectacles and flipped them expertly into a case. He said softly, "This is a terrible tragedy. It's fortunate that there was a witness on the scene—meaning me."

"Yeah," said Toogy thoughtfully.

His button-like eyes sized up Storm speculatively, coldly, with clinical interest.

"Yeah, fortunate for us, monkey, that we caught you."

Storm put his spectacle-case into his pocket. He bounced lightly on his toes and dropped the Gladstone on Toogy's foot. The little gunman yelped and hopped aside, holding his injured toes with both hands.

"I didn't know you had corns, Toogy," Storm murmured.

Then he addressed, stamped and delivered a quick elbow jab to the little hood's midriff. Toogy forgot both the weapon in his pocket and his bruised toes and doubled up with a moaning, agonized yelp.

Lucky swung viciously, not daring to fire the gun in the apartment house. Storm's left flicked upward, caressing Lucky's jaw, and continued its swing toward Toogy. Lucky spread over the corridor floor. Toogy slewed out of the way and yanked out an ugly black auto-

matic that looked to Storm as though it had the bore of a field cannon. He grabbed it and twisted Toogy's wrist. He heard little bones cracking in the flesh, and then the gun thudded to the hall carpet.

The door at the end of the corridor opened and Hunk's scared face poked into the hall.

He yelled, "Hey, what—"

He caught sight of the gun in Storm's hand and slammed the door quickly, ducking out of sight. Startled voices came up the stair-well, and Storm knew that Lucky Lamonte and Toogy had more friends hanging around. A white flash blinked in the glass elevator door, and he gave up that idea, too. He snatched up the Gladstone and loped down the hall to a window with a fire-escape, feeling more than a little irritated.

He yelled, "Hunk, guard that room!"

Tossing one leg over the sill, he looked down the hall. Three men were stumbling up the steps after him, guns in their white hands. Behind them, Lucky Lamonte yelled, egging them on.

Storm fired, with his hand resting on the window-sill. The shot cracked the sultry heat, and one of the gunmen tripped over himself and hit the floor with his nose. The others shouted their fear and dived for cover down the stair-case.

Storm looked over the window-sill at the hard, white dust of the areaway that led to the street. He swung the Gladstone over the sill and dropped it. It hit the dry ground with a thwack, sending out a circular wave of dust, and burst open. He followed the money, floating quickly down the fire-escape. He picked up the bag and ran down the areaway to the gravel street.

A bullet slammed into a wooden fence; splinters showered his white suit. Across the dusty, deserted street was a rambling frame boarding house. He pounded over to it. A gun barked again, this time from a side window, and more lead spurted into the gravel. He thanked the fates that Lucky's men were poor shots.

He looked back and saw that no one was watching him: the heads had retreated from the windows. He hopped over the veranda rail of the boarding house and ducked into a shadow-darkened parlor.

The room was cool, and so was the

blonde who lay on the sofa, dividing her attention between a box of chocolates and a book. She watched Storm with disapproving eyes as he skidded through the doorway and dropped behind the window-sill at her feet.

"Call the police, baby," he gasped. "It's murder."

THE blonde had not heard the shots, or, if she had, had thought they were back-fires.

He kicked the Gladstone bag under the sofa where she lay.

She raised thinly traced eyebrows. "You crazy?"

Three men shadowed the pavement. He said hoarsely, "Listen, baby, and learn. There's a murder across the street in the Wawanock. They've got me on the list, too. They're after this bag. Keep it under the sofa. 'Way under.'"

The blonde's sleepy eyes, suddenly frightened, looked out from under their load of sticky mascara.

She whimpered, "You're a gangster!"

Storm watched the street and answered over his shoulder, "Call the sheriff and hang on to this bag. And how do I get out of here, except by using the front door?"

The blonde stared at the black .38 in his hand and stammered, "Back of me, mister. There's a door at the end of the hall. Cross the alley at the back of the grocery store. Please, don't get me killed!"

Storm jerked his head toward the wall telephone, but there was no time to enlarge on instructions. The three men were coming in.

He slid out of the parlor and went down a dark hall to a kitchen that smelled of the last meal cooked there.

"Hon, did a bozo come in here?" someone rapped. "In a white suit?"

The blonde chattered, "No. But somebody ran past the door."

Storm knew the three men did not believe her. They hesitated, shifting their weight on uneasy feet. Storm drifted through the kitchen and found himself in sunlight once again, in a stone-walled enclosure.

The fence was not too difficult to scale. The other side was a grocer's back yard, littered with barrels and wooden egg-boxes. The screen door was propped open, and at the end of a black hallway he

saw a public telephone, hanging on the wall at what would be the rear shelves of the grocery store.

He ducked into the house, fumbling for a nickel. The receiver buzzed, clattered. Shadows moved in front of the dirty store-window, and he cursed. The neighborhood was well in hand.

The murder of Dikran Nakesian for a quarter of a million dollars was no individual affair. The locality was covered by men of Lucky's gang—and they belonged to Wheels Burton's organization.

"Listen," Storm yelled into the telephone, when he heard the Greek's thick voice. "Listen, Poppo—Pop, there's been a blasting. Nakesian—"

Shadows filled the grocery store entrance. He had only one chance. He rapped loudly, "That's the dope! That's right! Throw out a net for Lucky Lamonte—I saw him. No, he's not alone. That's right."

He did not care what kind of headache that sort of talk gave the Greek. He hit the floor behind two barrels of kippers and poked his gun between them. The shadows in the store jumped when he yelled:

"Okay, boys! Up with them! Reach high!"

He knew it was not his words that made them scatter for safety, nor was it his gun. As far as they knew, he had succeeded in spreading his information, and they could not chop off an alarm by adding a second killing to their day's pleasure.

The shadows melted, faded into the sun-light outside. He heard a car start up, then another, and two sedans flashed past the fly-blown window, whining around the corner in a billowing cloud of rolling dust.

He got to his feet, trembling slightly, his eyes glinting with anger. The grocer came up from behind the counter slowly and stared at Storm with round, open-mouthed suspicion.

Then he spoke to Storm for the first time:

"What was the trouble, mister?"

Storm looked at the wreckage of the white gabardine coat.

"They wanted to collect on the tailor's bill for this ice-cream suit. I didn't want to pay."

"Why not?" asked the grocer. . . .

CHAPTER VI

TOO MUCH MONEY

STORM bought a pack of cigarettes from the grocer and lit one. The smoke trickled down to his lungs, feeling like cool silver. A siren on a car started wailing in the distance, but he was in no hurry to get back to the apartment and the dead man. The dirty street was deserted now. He left the grocery store and walked around the block toward the bay. He circled the frame houses and went into the vacationers' boarding house that faced the side of the Wawanock Hotel.

The blonde was sitting up now, nursing a black eye.

She looked up as Storm stepped into the parlor through the screen door and screeched, "Darn you, look what you made them do to me!"

He paused before her, feeling a sensation of constriction about the spot where his heart should have been.

"Have you got the suitcase?" he asked.

She shook her platinum, close-cropped hair. Her whole voluptuous body, in its sheath of tight green silk, was quivering with anger. Her green eyes snapped with two malevolent spots of hatred.

She said between tight carmine lips, "Your hoodlums came in after you, mister."

"The suitcase," Storm repeated. "Have you still got it?"

She indicated her rapidly swelling eye. "Does it look like I do? The girl came after it."

He was startled.

"Girl?"

"Honey-colored hair. Sweet thing, I'll say not! She came in after the grip."

"Did she give you the—um—black eye?"

"No, I'd scratch her to shreds if she tried. Her boy friend was the one. A little lug with red ears and a nose. She called him Toogy."

Storm was silent as the blond paused. Then she asked in a curious voice, "Was there really a murder across the street? The sheriff's car is there—and troopers, too. Has there really been a killing?"

He nodded, feeling sick. Valerie Feather had recovered and reclaimed the

cash with Toogy. She had told him that Toogy was following her, and had indicated that she was afraid of the little gunman. It was all senseless, lacking very much in point. He shook his head, and the blonde looked at him.

"They smacked you around, too, didn't they? Say, will I be a witness? I can use publicity, mister. Get my legs on the front pages and maybe I'll land a job in the movies! Who knows?"

"I don't," said Storm wearily.

He crushed the cigarette under his heel and left the boarding house, crossed the street and went around the corner to the front of the Wawanock. The black beetle-car was no longer at the corner. A red touring car, a state trooper's 'chaser and two motorcycles stood before the lobby entrance.

A trooper and a sheriff's deputy barred his way to the elevator, then drew back as the deputy recognized him and grinned.

"You mixed up in this, Mr. Storm?"

"Yes, and I wish I weren't."

EVERY branch of the law was on hand, crowding Dikran Nakesian's apartment. There was Sheriff Corlwye, with his straggling moustache and horsy farmer's face. He looked outraged and irritated, only outmatched by Kennicut's Constable Cafferty's wide-eyed, fluttery helplessness. The real business was being done by the uniformed crew of the state car.

All the men looked up when Storm entered, eyeing him with clinical detachment. One trooper had a camera, but was busy sampling the Scotch in the pinch-bottle in between languid efforts to snap a picture of the dead spiritualist. Another, who was numbered among Storm's innumerable acquaintances, hummed a blues song while dusting the telephone cradle for fingerprints. Beside him, staring curiously at an indentation on a pillow of the lounge, was a thin, dapper little man: Lieutenant Tilliman.

Corlwye raised irritable eyes at Storm's entry.

"Hugh! You look like you been in a dog-fight, Leo."

"You boys got here fast," he retorted evasively.

"We were havin' a meetin' down the block a ways. Coincidence, I guess."

The slender Lieutenant Tilliman suddenly rasped, "Kluger, check on this pillow. Somebody was asleep on it. There are some blonde hairs scattered about."

Kluger, the fingerprint man, said, "Wait a minute, Tilly; there's a smear of blood on the telephone."

The delicate-looking lieutenant nodded and swiveled around to stare at Storm.

"And what's your last name, Mr. Leo?"

"Storm," said Kluger. "He's a New Yorker. Come here on vacation."

Tilliman kept looking at Storm. "And what's your share in this business? How do you come into it?"

Storm plucked the bottle of Scotch from the photographer's fingers and poured himself a glass; he sank into a chair, snuggling the bottle in his lap.

"I walked right into it, lieutenant. Have you got the three men who were here?"

"You know about them, eh? They're in the next room."

Sheriff Corlwye jerked his thumb at the closed door. "I don't like that Hindu."

"Hindu from the Bronx," said Storm. "Or maybe Brooklyn. His name is Hunk Hubert, and he did five years on various charges. His job with Nakesian required a Hindu get-up. The color of his face is due to stain. Wash him and see."

Lieutenant Tilliman coughed delicately. Storm looked sleepy, blinking his gray eyes behind his spectacles. He could not remember when he had put his glasses on again, but they rested, as usual, below the bump on his nose. He pushed them up with the tip of his middle finger and watched as Constable Cafferty herded Hunk and Nakesian's last three visitors into the death-room.

It was their first view of the body that sprawled in the center of the black and white checkerboard floor. Sheriff Corlwye had pulled up the Venetian blinds for more light, and the body lay in a brilliant pool of hot white sunshine.

Hunk turned pale and gasped, "The boss!" His eyes darted around the room, settling on Storm. "Tell these guys I'm goin' straight, Leo! Cripes, tell 'em I didn't do this."

"Okay, you didn't do it," said Storm.

Kluger, the fingerprint man, chuckled. "A real bull-session, that's what we're going to have." He was a wiry man,

with gold-rimmed glasses and an olive face. His eyes were keen and bright. "No *cherchez la femme*, lieutenant? What the hell, there's no interest in this case without a flossie."

"There was a girl here," said Storm, and immediately he bit his tongue.

Lieutenant Tilliman swung around to him.

"Damn right there was! These hairs on the pillow—they're female, or I'll eat them. A honey-haired girl. Who was she, Mr. Storm? No, tell me what you know and how you happened to come into this in the beginning."

"Suppose I talk later," Storm suggested quietly. "You better question these three gentlemen first. Then we'll have something to go on. I came in after the murder; they were here when it happened."

Romwell Taite's heavy face flushed with throttled red, and he advanced toward Storm, fist clenched. "If you're insinuating that we know anything at all about this—"

Storm snuggled lower in his chair and extended the bottle of Scotch.

"Console yourself, sir, and tell the lieutenant your name."

Taite looked undecided, smoothed the little military moustache on his upper lip, grunted and accepted the bottle.

"Listen," he said, "let me tell you fools what I know and let's end this. I got a letter this morning from Nakesian telling me to come here at one o'clock sharp. I got another from Mr. Coulter, here, confirming it. The first letter stated that it was most important for me to be here, that it concerned the jewel sale that Coulter is going to make to me."

STORM interrupted: "You're the man who is buying the jewels? And Coulter is the one selling them?"

Tilliman asked sharply, "What's this all about?"

"If you read the papers, lieutenant, and especially the *Skeleton Closet*—"

"That rat's column. If I ever get my hands on the writer, he won't write another word, except perhaps a few more verses to the Prisoner's Song."

Storm persisted gently, "If you read it, you would know that Taite is buying jewels from Mr. Myron Coulter, for the sum of a quarter of a million dollars in cash. That money is to be publicly do-

nated to the Spiritualist Foundation, of which Dikran Nakesian was quite a big-shot. Mr. Taite is the buyer; Coulter is the seller. And Nakesian was to be the ultimate person benefited."

"I'm just buying the jewels," Taite said, "and I'm not interested in what Mr. Coulter chooses to do with the money after I pay him for his gems. If he wants the money in cash, that's his business. I'm concerned only with buying the jewels for my firm in Chicago. Mr. Coulter can throw the money into the ocean afterwards, for all I care."

Tilliman swiveled around on his polished black heels to the little dried-up old man. "You're selling your jewels to Mr. Taite?"

Myron Coulter bobbed his skinny head.

"I am, for a quarter of a million in cash."

"And then you're making a donation to the—um—Spiritualist Foundation?"

Again the old man nodded, his eyes bright and keen, his birdlike face cool and interested as he stared down at the body of Dikran Nakesian.

Kluger, the fingerprint man, chuckled again. "What a sucker!"

Tilliman scowled; his eyes were narrowed.

"No, he isn't. The Spiritualist Foundation is a racket feeding on a racket. Mr. Coulter is simply making an investment."

"Please," said the old man, with a patient smile.

"Oh, you can act the martyr, but some day I'd like to split that crooked ring wide open and put you fakers where you belong," snapped the lieutenant. He paused, bouncing his small, fragile height on his shiny patent-leather shoe-tips. "So I gather you three—Nakesian, Coulter and Taite—were interested in the same thing."

The lieutenant swiveled to Gregory Dolman, who stood with his hands folded over his little paunch.

"Where do you come in?"

"I am Mr. Coulter's nephew."

"All right, so you all received letters from Nakesian which concerned this proposed jewel sale," Tilliman summarized. "Now what did Nakesian say about it?"

"Nakesian claimed he had knowledge of a criminal plot," snapped Taite, irritated. He waved his hand, found the

bottle of Scotch in it, and put it down with an embarrassed flush. Storm leaned over and took it in his lap again.

"Nakesian claimed he knew of an attempt on the cash," Taite began again. "You see, I'm to transport the money to Mr. Coulter's estate, where the sale of the jewels is to take place."

"Well, what kind of a plot did Nakesian say it was?"

"He never got a chance to speak! He left the room, presumably to get some evidence that he wished to show us, and the next thing we knew the girl screamed. And when we tried to get out, this fake Hindu locked the door on us. When he did open it, Storm covered us with a gun and made Nakesian's helper keep us here until you men arrived. We had no chance to view the body, didn't even know what had happened until you brought us in here just now."

Tilliman puckered his lips.

"Don't any of you three have an idea as to what Nakesian had in mind?"

They shook their heads. Tilliman sighed and sent all of them out of the room, with the exception of Hunk Hubert. While the lieutenant questioned Hubert, Storm got up out of the chair and walked to the window, his brow wrinkled with thought.

"Hubert, when did you hear a girl scream?"

"About one: fifteen. The four of them—includin' the boss—were in the audience room about fifteen minutes. I didn't know what had happened when the dame let out her yip, but I wasn't takin' any chances, see? I locked the door on those men and kept it locked until Leo Storm showed up. That was about five minutes after the scream."

"Did you know there was a girl in the apartment?"

"No, *indeed!*"

TILLIMAN made a clucking sound and said to Kluger, "Get Taite back in here again."

The jewel buyer came back, his broad, heavy face still revealing his frank irritation.

"When is this foolery going to stop?"

"Murder isn't foolery, Mr. Taite. You said you heard a girl scream. None of you saw the girl?"

"No, she *must* have come in through the corridor door. There are two door-

ways, as you see."

Tilliman snapped pettishly, "Yes, I've got eyes. While you three were sitting in the dark, did any of you move?"

"I can't say. I didn't. I heard no movements, except Dolman; his legs were stiff. I couldn't see anything, and I had no physical contact either with Dolman or Coulter. But there was no reason for any of us killing Nakesian. We were all anxious to discover what Nakesian knew."

"Yes, sure," sighed Tilliman. He waved his hand. "You can go. Leave your address so I'll know where to find you, just in case."

Taite looked relieved. "Tomorrow I'll be going to the Coulter place to buy his jewels. You could find me there."

Storm raised his eyebrows and asked curiously, "But your cash—you don't have it."

Taite was puzzled.

"What do you mean? I haven't withdrawn it from my bank yet."

Excitement suddenly sent Storm's blood pounding. "You mean you didn't bring two hundred and fifty thousand dollars to this place today?"

Taite laughed with genuine amusement.

"I'm not that crazy," he said briefly.

Lieutenant Tilliman's eyes crinkled. "What are you talking about, Storm?"

"I mean I found a quarter of a million dollars in cash beside the body when I first investigated!"

Taite said quickly, in a curiously high-pitched voice, "It wasn't mine!"

"Then there is too much money around—a quarter of a million too much!" Storm snapped.

CHAPTER VII

STORMY WEATHER

SHERIFF CORLWYE pulled his nose. "Hugh! What fool would carry that much money around loose?"

Lieutenant Tilliman stared at Leo Storm with bright, hard eyes. Fingerprint man Kluger chuckled again, his sharp olive face limned by the sunlight streaming in the window at his back. A medical examiner arrived, out of breath,

and set down his little black bag with a thump and a sigh, then stiffened as he felt the coiled, tense silence in the room.

Tilliman said, "Start talking, Storm. There's no money in this apartment—explain your statement about that business. And explain the crack you made about the girl."

Storm shrugged.

"I can't explain the money. When I got here, I found Hunk holding back the door and keeping those three men inside. I ran through the corridor and came in this room and found Dikran Nakesian dead. There was a girl here. She had fainted. There was a suitcase full of money—I had no time to count it, but it must have approximated a quarter of a million dollars."

"Lot of cabbage," observed Kluger.

Storm ignored him.

"I've been figuring, going on the idea that Taite already had the cash in his possession. Under that assumption, there was some rhyme and reason to Nakesian's murder. I thought Nakesian may already have received his — um — donation from Coulter, or that he had stolen it from Taite. I figured Nakesian was killed for the money. But if that cash wasn't Taite's, or Coulter's, then — " he shrugged helplessly—"then I don't understand any of it."

"Sounds fantastic to me," Sheriff Corlwey muttered.

Storm sighed. "I'm sorry I mentioned it."

"I'll bet you are!" Tilliman snapped. "What happened to this money you say you saw?"

"I stepped back into the hall with it, and two rats tried to cop it. They did get the money, after a chase. I had to dive down the fire-escape, and I tossed the stuff into the boarding house across the street. They caught up with me and got the money. It was in a black Gladstone bag. You can check with the blonde across the way. They gave her a black eye."

Tilliman cleared his throat again. "Who are 'they'?"

Storm leaned back in his chair and poked up his glasses.

"You won't like to know, lieutenant. It was Lucky Lamonté and Toogy—Burton's guns."

The delicate-looking Tilliman stiffened

as though he had been slapped; his face went gray, and then a red sheen spread under the fine texture of his tightly-drawn skin. Wheels Burton had made a monkey out of Lieutenant Tilliman too many times; Burton had political influence. When Tilliman had once tried to rid the state of Burton and send the gambler back to New York, he had suddenly discovered that his captaincy was gone and that he was demoted to a lieutenant. There was nothing Tilliman could do about it.

For a moment, the lieutenant looked eager, his thin face sharpened and pinched. Are you sure you could identify Burton's men? If you'll appear as a witness—"

Storm shook his head.

"What good will that do? You can't prove them guilty of anything. Any one of the three men who were here might have committed the murder, for reasons we know nothing about as yet. The girl—no, she wouldn't. And then there was someone coming down the elevator—unknown quantity X."

"What a baby to cradle," Kluger sighed.

But Tilliman's eyes were keen on Storm. "Who was the girl?" he asked, his voice soft.

STORM slowly straightened, finally got out of the chair, and reached for a glass. He had another Scotch, his eyes fixed on the bright window. He was thinking of the three mornings he had stood outside the door of his apartment in the Kennicut Hotel and watched Valerie Feather's trim figure come swinging down the corridor. He could see every contour of her fresh, oval face, see again the clear brilliance of her violet eyes.

And he heard once more the blonde across the street saying, "She came in after the grip. Her boyfriend with the ears—"

And he saw again the drop of scarlet on Valerie's fingernail.

It appeared that she was mixed up with Toogy, and Storm did not believe it.

"Who was the girl who lay on that pillow?" Tilliman repeated.

And Storm said quietly, "I don't know. I never saw her before."

Tilliman snapped at his words, for all the world like a barking Pekinese. "You're a liar! What brought you here

in the first place? The girl! What's the cause for the cock-and-bull story about a quarter of a million in cash? To make us forget the girl! You heard Taite say the money wasn't his. Don't tell me there are two fortunes drifting around loose!"

Kluger's uniformed figure suddenly spanned the room, his dark face smiling. He reached Storm and whipped the silk handkerchief from his breast-pocket. Unfolding it carefully, Kluger exhibited the rusty red stain on it, holding it up by the corner for Tilliman to see.

"Oh, my," mocked the fingerprint man.

Storm said nothing. He felt a wall of animosity spring up between himself, an outsider, and these men on a rural police force. Their faces were hard and cold as they swiveled their glances from the damning evidence held high in Kluger's fingers to Storm's impassive face. He understood their resentment of his reputation in New York, and it did not make him feel any easier.

"Explain *that*," Tilliman suggested.

But Storm could not explain it. He couldn't say that he had wiped blood from Valerie's fingernail; and he suddenly decided to remain equally silent on the matter of the telephone call from Dawn Detras, when he had been careless enough to smear the blood from his handkerchief to the hand-set—where Kluger's sharp, ferrety eyes had spotted it.

And looking at Nakesian's body, he likewise determined to remain silent about the fact that he had found the same amount of money in the woods of Devil's Mount. The money of which Dikran Nakesian had relieved him — and for which Nakesian had died.

Tilliman sensed the hard set of Storm's face to signify stubborn silence. He snapped, "Search him."

Rough hands took Storm's gun, his wallet and his permit to carry the weapon. Tilliman broke open the .38 and sniffed. "Who did you shoot at?"

"Lucky Lamonte. In self-defense."

The lieutenant's eyes glinted with frustrated anger.

"You can't prove it. I wish to God you could, but you can't. You can't say what brought you here. You can't explain that slip about the money. You know who the girl is, but you won't talk. You're in a bad way, Storm," the lieu-

tenant concluded.

Storm waved a lazy hand at Dikran Nakesian's body. "Maybe you think I did it."

"Maybe you did. You're going to be held on suspicion. You can't prove you didn't, anyway. You can't alibi yourself— You could have knifed Nakesian, then run around to the main door of his apartment and come on Hunk Hubert as though you had just come up the steps. The fingerprints on the knife are gone, wiped clean by a white silk handkerchief. Like yours."

Storm sat down with a sigh. "Okay, so you think I did it. You're too yellow to buck Wheels Burton."

One of the crew of the state car walked slowly across the room and smacked his gloved hand across Storm's face. The leather seam made a little cut on his cheek.

"Don't say that again, guy," the trooper warned.

Storm sucked in his hollow cheeks and took off his glasses. He stood up and repeated, "Tilliman, you're too yellow to buck Burton."

He was deliberately baiting them, with their blind loyalty to the dapper little lieutenant, raising them to anger.

THE trooper sighed and looked at his superior. Tilliman said, "Oh, hell, Storm. Get him down to headquarters. Bill. We'll talk to him there."

From beyond the door, in the corridor, came a sudden thumping sound and a squeal of terror. The company in the sunny room whirled as one man. There followed a scuffling noise, and then a slam on the door.

The Greek stood there, holding a thin, trembling man with a partly bald head and an exaggerated pink nose. It was the desk clerk from the lobby downstairs. The Greek shoved his ponderous two-hundred pound bulk into the room behind the man.

"Hello, boys. Look what I found."

"The Greek!" said Kluger delightedly. "Storm gets his reinforcements. Achilles and his Grecian heel!"

"Nuts," said Poppo impassively.

His little eyes in his round face remained tired, as they always were. Exertion was distasteful to the Greek. He did not even seem surprised at the sight of Nakesian's body being examined by

the medical man.

"This weasel was snooping in the hall," he said.

Tilliman faced the terrified desk clerk. The Greek looked across the room to Storm, who brushed his fingers across his lips, and the Greek understood. There was to be no mention of the garbled telephone call Storm had made from the grocery store.

Tilliman said impatiently, "Well, man, what were you doing in the hall?"

"I was curious—curious, that's all," said the clerk. He rubbed his long nose, staring with morbid fascination at the body on the floor. "Murders don't happen every day."

"You'd be surprised," said the irrepressible Kluger. "Statistics show—"

"Shut up," said Tilliman, examining the clerk. "And what do you know about this business, eh?"

"Me? Oh, I don't know anything—nothing at all."

Storm interrupted, his slate eyes dancing with vibrant sparks. "He knows enough to clear me, lieutenant! Ask him where I was when he heard the girl's scream—which, you can't deny, fixes the time of the murder."

The clerk stared myopically at Storm. "Oh, you. I remember you. They accusing you of this, buddy?"

Storm crossed the room.

"Tell these dumb coppers when you saw me," he ordered the clerk.

The long-nosed man looked malevolently at the troopers and the sheriff's deputies. "Sure. I saw you right after I heard the scream. I saw you come in off the street, and you went up the steps three at a time. If the scream marks the time of the murder, you couldn't have done it, pal."

"Thanks," said Storm. He turned to Tilliman, his lips quirking. "May I have my gun, license, and my handkerchief?"

The lieutenant looked out the window.

"Are you going to talk, Storm? If you're in on this case for a fee—we can co-operate as well as New York."

"I'm not on this case. I'm in it this far completely by accident. I don't know what happened. I've told you the truth about the money and the girl being here. I can't do any more. And I'll be obliged if you don't object to my checking out of the Kennicut Hotel tomorrow."

"Not on your life!"

"I've got a bungalow up past Devil's Mount. It's staked out for two weeks. I'm done with detective work for that time. Through. I need a rest."

"How about our new W.P.A.-built jail?" Kluger cracked.

"Some day I'll take you apart," Storm promised. "And I won't forget to wipe my hands on a hanky when I do."

Tilliman came back from the window with a sigh. He waved a curt hand at Kluger, who looked dissatisfied.

"You can go."

Storm got up, looked at the bottle of Scotch to make sure it was empty, then stalked out through the doorway. The fat Greek, waddling after him, paused only long enough to waggle his fingers from the end of his pudgy nose at the squeaked fingerprint man.

CHAPTER VIII

GIRL IN THE CASE

IT WAS after three in the hot afternoon when Leo Storm and the Greek stood once more on the pavement before the Wawanock. The two men said nothing. A morgue wagon was parked before the hotel, and the number of police cars had been augmented by two: the medical examiner's Ford and another touring car from the sheriff's office.

The desk clerk had done his work well in spreading the news of the murder. A crowd of morbidly curious vacationers was being held back with difficulty by sweating constables. The blasting heat of the late afternoon sun did nothing to allay the interest of the thrill-seeking crowd.

Storm and the Greek moved off the sidewalk, skirted the knots of people and found their convertible coupé parked behind two state trooper motorcycles. A taxi rolled up behind the coupé as they got inside.

The fat Greek drove in silence.

"Slowly," said Storm. "Six blocks north, then around the station, then six blocks south."

The taxi that had pulled up behind them started up almost immediately. It went six blocks north with them, was lost for a moment, and then bumped over

the railroad crossing to proceed the next six blocks south. Storm watched the taxi's progress with interested eyes.

"Lieutenant Tilliman put a tail on us," he told the Greek. "I didn't think he would let me go just like that. He knows that I know something, and he thinks I'll lead him to it. Give him another think. He has almost as many facts about Nakesian's killing as I have, but he doesn't believe them. And the whole business doesn't make sense to either of us."

The fat Greek looked sideways at Storm, as though expecting him to pull a rabbit from his hat.

"It doesn't make sense to me, Poppo," Storm repeated. "So let's go home. To hell with the tail."

Storm took a shower, changed into a fresh linen suit, cleaned his gun and had another drink of Scotch—this time from his own bottle. The Greek was busy in another room of their flat, opening bureau drawers, carefully packing clothing. The Greek was invaluable to Storm. Lacking the rapier thrusts in mental capacity that Storm possessed, the Greek was father and mother to the tall, gaunt man, cooking for him, guarding him, lending his huge, round weight to the battle whenever the occasion demanded.

Poppo came into the oak-furnished living room, rattling something in his hand.

"These dice, Leo," said the Greek petulantly. "I found them in your suit. What say we finish the roll for dinner tonight?"

They rolled; Poppo lost.

The Greek muttered, "I should have known. I don't like them."

"Just pay for the dinner you owe me tonight."

The Greek nodded sadly and went to the window.

"Those dicks outside, front and back—they can't afford Lucci's. Isn't that a shame?"

Storm changed his mind as he made a sudden decision. "Better give me the five bucks now."

He got to his feet and looked out the window. "You're going to the cottage tonight. You're not eating at Lucci's. You're taking the car and you're going to drive. Something that looks like me is going to be seated beside you, but it won't be me. It will be a dummy, and Lieutenant Tilliman's fair-haired boys

can drive along after you and leave me free to work."

The Greek looked disappointed. "Aw, lissen, Leo—forget this crazy case! There's no money in it for us."

"A fee might appear at any minute," Storm said benignly. "The case reeks of money, and surely there may be a few thousand for us in it somewhere. Besides, there's the girl."

"What about her?"

"She's in it—and I can't forget her—and that settles it."

"But maybe she killed the fortuneteller! She got away with the money—she and Toogy. She's a gangster's moll."

STORM laughed. "Don't be crazy. She's just mixed up in this quarter-million dollar jewel sale, and she's in trouble. Otherwise, why did she come and ask me for help earlier this afternoon?"

Poppo's eyes slowly widened.

"Maybe Toogy and Lucky Lamonte ain't her boy friends?"

"There are two answers to that, Poppo. Either she's a scheming adventuress working out a detailed plan—in which case, I'll slap her in jail and forget her. She *may* have killed Nakesian for the money—there was a fortune in cash there, Poppo, in spite of that Taite man's denial. Maybe it wasn't Taite's money; maybe it belonged to some one we don't know about yet. But, in any case, the money was the motive for Nakesian's murder. And the girl may have killed him."

Poppo shook his head. "Aw, I don't like to believe that, really, Leo," he said uneasily.

"No more than I. The second alternative is that the girl was caught by Toogy. She may be meddling in this affair for other motives than we know yet. If Toogy came back, after chasing me around the corner, and found the girl in Nakesian's apartment, just coming to, he may have forced her along with him. In which case, she's in a pretty bad spot."

"That's got to be it, Leo," the Greek said. "She's in bad hands; she's in danger."

"We'll see," Storm answered. "Then again, she may be at home. She may be sitting in her apartment across the hall, laughing at me and everyone else."

"Easy way to find that out; just look

in her apartment."

"Have you got a key?"

"No."

"Then call Sammy, the bellboy."

Sammy had the keys. He wouldn't have given them up willingly, because that was against the rules, so he gave them up unknowingly. The Greek urged a drink on Sammy from the bottle of Vat that the busboy had brought up in reply to a telephone order, and while the bellboy tasted the liquor, Storm's slender fingers investigated Sammy's uniform pocket and transferred a master housekey from the bellboy's pocket to his own. After that, Sammy was politely but firmly shunted out of the room.

The corridor was deserted when Storm stepped out, and so was Valerie Feather's apartment. It was tastefully furnished. It was not too feminine—the major clue to the sex of its inhabitant was the subtle scent of perfume that hung in the air. Ordinarily Storm disliked scents. This one he wrinkled his nose at, considered for a moment, and decided was nice. It was expensive, difficult to place. It was an incongruous factor, that argued against Valerie Feather's story that she was a simple secretary to old Myron Coulter.

A picture attracted Storm's attention. It was of old Myron Coulter himself, and it occupied a prominent place on the table. Curious, that was. Secretaries are rarely that fond of their employers—at least, when the latter are old, withered men of grating temperament. To keep a picture of Coulter's sharp, birdlike face was inexplicable to Storm.

He pushed away these thoughts and examined the room in detail, to the extent of emptying the bureau drawers of their frothy, lacy contents. A grin appeared on his features and remained there. The bedroom and bath revealed nothing. The grin faded into an expression of perplexity when, in the swiftly gathering gloom of evening, he turned his attention to a little secretary desk.

It had a typewriter on it, which Storm examined carefully. The ribbon was well used. In a drawer were two fresh bands. Valerie Feather evidently did much typing. Well, that was to be expected, since she was secretary to a millionaire like old Myron Coulter.

He found something in the last drawer that made him expel his breath with a

long sigh of piqued interest. It was a scrap book, like a photograph album, and inside it was a collection of newspaper clippings. Column after column. Unsigned. Headed *Skeletons In Your Closet*.

"Pretty Valerie is interested in crime," he said uneasily to himself. "Perhaps she is an adventuress—a heartless gold-digger—a murderess."

His eyes were hard and gray when he closed the door of Valerie Feather's apartment and crossed the hall to his own rooms.

The Greek looked up anxiously at his entrance.

"Well?"

"You go to the bungalow tonight. If I don't join you in two days, Poppo, come back and look for me."

"Where shall I look, Leo?"

"I'll either be in the ocean or in jail," said Storm.

The Greek's round, full face puckered distastefully.

"Aw, I ain't gonna leave you, Leo. I can't."

"You've got to drive that car and that dummy to the cottage. And you've got to take Tilliman's leaches off my trail when you do it. I can't have them following me. If the lieutenant finds the girl, and she involved, no matter how innocently, she stands to take a rap on circumstantial evidence for the murder of Dikran Nakesian."

Storm held out his hand. "Well, pay me the fin you owe me."

CHAPTER IX

DATE WITH DEATH

THE Shady Grove was four miles around Kennebec Bay, on the opposite tongue of heavily wooded land that lapped out into the ocean. Before Storm went there, he got out of his white suit and donned a plain dark coat that efficiently hid the two guns he packed under his armpits.

The Greek's eyes were disturbed as he watched him get ready.

"Expect trouble, huh, Leo?"

"Burton always means trouble," said Storm. "And he may not like to have his little singer talking to me. Dawn

Detras went pretty regularly with Lucky Lamonte, and the big rat beat her for going to Nakesian, who was quite a lady-killer. Lucky thought of Dawn as private property, but I guess she liked our dead spiritualist more than she liked her gun-toting boy friend with the rainbow eyes. Lucky was jealous as hell, and I think Dawn will want to talk."

"You've got something there," observed the Greek.

Wheels Burton owned the Shady Grove, just as he owned a string of such places along the resort coasts from Maine to Florida, of which the Shady Grove was the biggest and most ambitious. The name he gave the nightclub was appropriate, Storm thought. It was plenty shady. What Wheels got out of the foolish public was a crying shame. Upstairs he had a floor devoted to roulette wheels, from which the gambler derived his title. Downstairs was a gaudy bar, with orchestra and handkerchief-sized dance floor. The waiters were Burton's thugs, imported from Avenue A. The gambling machines upstairs were not bothered very often by the state racket and gambling squads. Sheriff Corlwy's salary was rather low, but during the summer vacation season his funds increased considerably. That was Burton's way. Wheels had more men on his graft-roll than a dozen state congressmen, and he readily obliged his friendly enemies in return for accepted favors.

Storm gave his hat to the redhead in the checkroom booth, who said, with bright innocence in her blue eyes, "Hello, mister amateur-copper. Is Lightning Leo going to strike?"

Her smile said it was all in fun, and he answered in a mock whisper.

"I'm pretending tonight that I'm an amateur nothing," he grinned. "I have a date. Twenty bucks says you'll keep it under your wig."

The redhead promptly put out her hand. "Show me," she said, and the twenty changed owners. Storm decided to charge it to expenses.

He crossed the room and took a booth table on the far side of the floor. His eyes were alert behind his rimless glasses. The lights dimmed, and a pink spotlight shone on a trim little figure in a silver evening gown. It was Dawn Detras. Her frock was completely unadorned, save for a red rose fastened to one white shoulder.

She was singing something about love being dead, and her eyes, behind their long lashes, melted with the sentimental pathos of her lyrics cruising leisurely over the smoke-obscured audience until they settled on Storm's spectacles. When the song was over, she smiled, bowed slightly with infinite grace, and made her way through the spattering applause to Storm's booth. She slid into the seat across from him.

Despite her make-up, Storm knew she had been crying.

She began with false casualness, "So Dick—Nakesian is really dead?"

"Yes, that's true," Storm admitted. He added, "Where's the boy friend?"

"You mean Lucky?"

"That's the one."

Dawn lifted her dark eyes, and Storm saw she was really frightened. Her white teeth clamped down on her pouting lower lip to prevent it from trembling. She waved a vague hand.

"I don't know where Lucky is, and I don't care. Lucky's no friend of mine, Leo."

"Split up again?"

"For good. He beat me twice."

STORM told her he would cheerfully break Lucky Lamonte's neck when he got hold of it, and he meant what he said.

She asked in a tight voice, "Why do you ask about Lucky?"

He leaned back in his chair. "Because he stuck a knife in Dikran Nakesian's back. He was jealous of your visits to Dikran. He went up there and got rid of competition the only way he knew how."

Storm did not mean to be funny, but the little brunette started to laugh. He didn't like it; the shrill quality in her voice gave him chills. He told her to stop. She didn't, not until a minute later. Then she leaned across the table toward him and took his hand in a tight, nervous grip. Her fingernails pierced deep into his knuckles.

"You're wrong," she said. "So awfully wrong, and yet so nearly right! I'll tell you about it. Lucky did want to kill Nakesian. He hated Dick, and me because I was going with Dick. But why shouldn't I have done that? Dick was a gentleman, wasn't he?"

"Sure," said Storm. He did not wish to disillusion her. "Now — how am I

wrong? Didn't Lucky do it?"

"Nakesian was knifed, and that's why you're wrong, and you know it, Storm. Lucky would never use a knife, not when he's so used to carrying a gun regularly. Lucky is more familiar with bullets than steel."

"That's true. But he did have jealousy as a motive for killing Nakesian. And he was there. You better tell me why Lucky was on the scene, if it was not for the purpose of killing Nakesian."

She looked at the white tablecloth. "There was another reason, but only one was important to me," she whispered. "I mean, it's important to me that he went to warn Dick away from me."

"Then what was the other reason why Lucky was on the scene? If Lucky didn't kill Dikran, who did?"

"I don't know."

Dawn shrugged, and her shoulders gleamed smooth and rosy in the light of the little pink lamp. The rose on her silver evening gown stood out blood red against the milkiness of her skin.

"I don't know who killed Dick, but Lucky didn't do it. Someone beat him to it."

"Can't you guess who?"

"No, I don't know."

"What was Lucky's purpose, then, in visiting Nakesian — besides discussing you?"

Dawn Detras' eyes became frightened again.

"If I tell you, Leo, my skin won't be worth more than a cat's."

"I'll take care of you," he promised.

She laughed at him. "You can't beat Wheels Burton. You can't help me at all. Listen, Storm, Lucky had a quarter of a million reasons why he should visit—"

"Say it again," said Storm tensely. "Slowly."

She was startled by the change in his voice, then laughed with a little tinkling laugh. "That's all I know about it. Nakesian had two hundred and fifty grand that Lucky was sent to get."

"Who sent him?"

"Wheels Burton."

"Whose money was it?"

"Wheels said it was his. He said that Nakesian had stolen it from him."

"And who has it now?"

"I don't know." She gestured helplessly. "I suppose Wheels got it back."

Storm puffed air through his nostrils and settled back in his seat to stare in perplexity at Dawn Detras.

He asked, "It's mixed up with old Myron Coulter selling his jewels to Romwell Taite for a quarter of a million, isn't it?"

Dawn nodded her sleek, dark head.

"This Romwell Taite," she said, "doesn't know the score, even if he is tough. He comes from Chicago. He doesn't have anything to do with the business except to buy old man Coulter's jewels and pay him spot cash for them. Nobody intends to take over Taite. It's after old Coulter gets the cash, and before he makes that publicity play by donating it to the Spiritualist Foundation, that Wheels plans a grab. I don't know what the details are."

STORM let the front legs of his chair touch the floor and leaned forward over the table.

"It looks to me as though Nakesian would have ultimately benefited by this deal, providing nothing went wrong. I suppose Nakesian and you were keeping a close eye on the business, to prevent Coulter from losing his cash. Looks to me like you and Nakesian were in a soft spot to collect a lot of money."

Dawn looked up impatiently. "Dick and I didn't stand to gain much. The Foundation is just another racket. The publicity angle that old Coulter worked out is just to strengthen the organization through its clients. The old ladies, you know. I hated them, the way they fawned over Dick. But that doesn't matter. The Foundation was a union, collecting dues from the spiritualists on the threat of exposing them as fakes. Old Coulter was due to get his money back, with plenty of interest—and you can't break up the Foundation, Storm, not yet. They've got it organized so that it's really legal, so far."

Storm said nothing, interested in the fact that this little black-haired singer knew more about the coming transaction than the police.

Dawn Detras continued, "Listen, Leo, I'm going to tell you about Wheels Burton. He has a lot of rackets, Wheels has, but only his roulette wheels are known to the police. First of all, he's a shake-down artist—first class. He has a lot of people staying awake nights, wondering

what he'll do. People you wouldn't dream of associating with Wheels Burton. He's a louse, a crum, and I hate him until I could kill him, because he ordered Lucky to kill Dick."

"But you said Lucky didn't do it."

"The intention was there. That's enough for me."

Dawn Detras' eyes were bright and hard now, like black china, with a glinting luster that sparkled of red revenge. Her tiny, pert little face had hardened into a cruel mould.

Storm muttered, "If Burton's a black-mailer, perhaps that's the reason why Lieutenant Tilliman never could get an okay to ax this joint. But where does Wheels figure in on the quarter million?"

She shrugged.

"Wheels is out to get it," she said simply. "That's all I know."

"It doesn't make sense," Storm said. And then, suddenly, "What sort of people does Wheels shake?"

Dawn bit her red lip, and her fright came back to her. Storm asked, stabbing in the dark, "Does he have a chap by the name of Gregory Dolman under his thumb?"

The girl was startled. Her pouting mouth opened, and she made a funny little waving motion with her hand, winding up by covering her mouth with it.

A shadow fell across the table, and Storm saw it was a waiter: a chunky man with ears that somebody had long ago pinned back. The waiter put down two glasses of liquor and went away without a word.

Storm looked across at Dawn Detras.

"I didn't order any drinks."

"Neither did I."

He picked up his glass, sniffed at it and grunted. It had a fruity smell, and the stuff was not brandy. He told the girl not to touch her drink and looked around. Across the floor, over the heads of the patrons, he saw the redheaded hat-check girl and Wheels Burton. Burton and the redhead were watching him and Dawn. A captain of the waiters had his eyes open, too. They all looked as though they were waiting for something to happen, and were none too patient about it.

Storm got up and glanced into the next booth. Not too conspicuously. Just for a glimpse. There was no one in it, but

he still did not feel quite right. He went back to his table and looked around. The little pink lamp, close against the plywood wall, attracted his attention. He picked it up, looked under the base, and put it back again.

The lamp had a microphone under it.

WHEELS BURTON saw him make his discovery. The big man started across the floor as Storm picked up his liquor glass and stood beside the table. When Burton got about three steps from Storm, the latter picked up the girl's glass, also. Then he deliberately poured the liquor on the floor. After that, he dropped the tumblers and ground them to powdered splinters under his hard heel.

Burton looked annoyed. He asked, "What's the matter, Mr. Storm?"

Storm took his time examining this man, who did as he wished and laughed at the law when he did it; who paid his hired killers with money mulcted from people too foolish to realize that Wheels Burton had crooked roulette machines; who paid politicians with votes and contributions, and cracked the whip with his dirty knowledge, gleaned from snooping maids and spying butlers.

Wheels Burton looked like a lawyer, a banker, a broker—anything but a gambler. He was a big man, not so tall as Storm, but bulkier, with a figure carefully tailored by a medically prescribed course in athletics. He wore a little black moustache that crawled around under his blunt nose, and his tuxedo had a distinctly sporty cut, thereby proving that nothing was impossible. In his early thirties, the general contour of his face was that of roughly hacked stone; his jaw was strong, muscular, set with will and physical strength. Exuding masculine virility, Storm would have grudgingly summed him up as handsome, had it not been for Burton's eyes. There was scarcely any color in them. They were such a pale blue-gray that they looked almost all white, giving anyone who looked at him a creepy, uncomfortable sensation, and giving Burton a look of complete indifference and callous disregard for the world and its occupants.

Storm, looking at the redhead who had followed Wheels Burton, did not care for the way her lips smiled.

He said to her, "Hello, double-crosser."

You owe me twenty bucks for services not rendered."

The redhead threw back her head slightly and looked at him with level blue eyes.

Wheels repeated, "What's the matter, Mr. Storm?"

He was talking to Leo, but he kept looking at Dawn Detras.

Storm breathed through his nose and said to Wheels, "Chloral hydrate has a distinct fruity smell."

"Chloral hydrate?"

"Yes. Ordinary thieves' knock-out drops. Be more subtle next time, Burton. You might land your fish."

Burton's face grew rockier. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Storm thought that he had better take off his spectacles, and he did. He could see just as well without them, if not better. He used them for reading, generally, and because he knew very well that his appearance with them was that of an underfed jellyfish. Which came in very useful sometimes.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and yawned. Pressure was slowly creeping along all his muscles.

Wheels spoke to Dawn Detras. "You better go up to my office, Dawn. I'll want to talk to you."

"No," she whispered. "No."

She looked at Storm, and he felt empty inside. Her eyes reminded him of those of a puppy he had once accidentally hurt. She half got up, but he pushed her back with one finger.

"Pretend you didn't hear him, Dawn."

BURTON'S angular features grew ugly with slowly rising anger. Storm's thin, hollow face remained a mask that hid his own growing irritation. He did not intend to stand for anything, not one single little thing. He felt pretty ugly himself. He had gotten Dawn Detras into a difficult and dangerous spot, and he had promised to cover her. He intended to cover her.

He had expected the hat-check girl to cross him and tip off Burton that he was in the club, but he never counted on the microphone. He knew, as surely as he knew that Wheels wanted trouble, that there were wires leading to Burton's office, and that Wheels had heard everything Dawn had told him. That spelled

trouble for the raven-haired girl.

Wheels was smiling.

"Now, Mr. Storm, you're forgetting yourself. After all, the little lady works for me."

"Not any longer."

It was a simple statement of fact.

"Leo—" Dawn plucked at his sleeve with nervous little tugs.

"I'll land you another job in no time, Dawn."

He knew he could find her another spot, whenever he wished to, through his innumerable contacts, but there was more to the affair than just that. Wheels had heard her talk, and Wheels was not letting her go.

Storm got what he thought was a bright idea. He took one of his two guns and shoved it into the girl's hand. It looked ridiculously big and black in her tiny, crimson-tipped fingers.

He said, "Dawn, walk straight out of here and go down to the sheriff's office. Say I sent you. Stay there until you see me—not *hear* from me. If anybody tries to stop you on the way, let them have it. The whole clip. Do you understand?"

She bobbed her head in a jerky nod, slid around Wheels Burton and started walking.

Before the girl was halfway across the floor, Storm knew he had made a mistake.

She did not know how to use the gun, for one thing. She simply let it hang from her fingers, and walked as though in a trance.

He took a quick look at Burton, and saw that the gambler's face had gone chalky; and then he knew that the girl was a walking death warrant for Wheels Burton. Dawn Detras knew too much, a lot more than she had told him.

He moved after her, surging forward, pushing Burton ahead of him. The captain of the waiters followed. The waiter looked at Wheels, and Wheels looked back with his colorless eyes, and the man ran forward after Dawn Detras.

Storm yanked his gun.

"Hold it!" he yelled.

They didn't.

A blare of noise came from the shadows of the sobbing orchestra. Trumpets howled and saxophones wailed; a drum beat a mad dervish tattoo. The sound was deafening, spiraling like a tornado through the room, and the noise was perfectly timed. The men in the orchestra

played like the fiends of hell, but their mad music failed to cover completely the stutter of an automatic rifle.

The thing rattled and gibbered for a second; then everything was quiet, save for the orchestra music that sank down to a soft moan.

Storm had his gun ready, but there was nothing to shoot at.

The nightclub patrons were unsuspecting, unwarned. They did not know anything was wrong. The lights were half dimmed. Storm ran ahead to Dawn Detras.

She was slumped in a deserted corner among some empty tables. Curled up like a sleek kitten, her little body lay tight in its sheath of silver. The red rose on her shoulder strap had fallen off, but there was another crimson blossom to take its place—glistening red that stained the silver-whiteness of her gown and skin.

Storm's body trembled with a racking shiver. He felt hot and cold prickles go up and down his spine, and then he spun on his heels to face Wheels Burton.

"You'll sit in the chair for this, Wheels," he said, and his voice shook in spite of himself. "You'll squat, and so will your hired killers. I'm a witness. You can't chop me down like you can a defenseless girl. I'll swear you ordered her death."

His voice was a vibrating blade that cut through the smoky atmosphere with deadly intensity. Wheels knew that he was in earnest. And Wheels' face betrayed his fear.

He rattled quickly, "I didn't do this, Storm! I don't know who did this! I'm not responsible for it!"

CHAPTER X

SHOWDOWN

STORM waved his gun at Burton and said hoarsely, "Let's go to the orchestra pit, Wheels."

The nightclub operator nodded, and walked among the tables, with his waiter beside him. The musicians, playing a new swing tune, watched their ominous approach. Saxophones wailed in alarm. Pocketing his gun, Storm cat-footed after Burton.

The orchestra was seated on a little

raised dais. White-faced musicians watched Storm as he went from one man to the other, searching for the rifle. Wheels stood by, helpless, his strange, colorless eyes sending unspoken commands to his employees.

"I had nothing to do with this, Storm," Burton repeated. He cleared his throat. "Someone could have shot her from there, from outside."

The gambler indicated the stained-glass window behind the orchestra. It was slightly ajar. Behind it was the gloomy mystery of the pine-scented woods.

A ferret-faced drummer with a scrubby moustache muttered, "That's where it came from, all right. Chow-chow! I felt the slugs comb my hair, practically!"

"That's nice co-operation," Storm murmured.

He stared in distaste at the drummer, and the musician swiveled and hammered savagely on the taut kettledrum. The orchestra had not paused in its mad syncopation. The leader waved his baton automatically, his frightened eyes fixed on Storm's figure, his glance pinned to the hand that Storm kept thrust in his sagging pocket.

At last Storm said, "You'll still be under arrest, Wheels."

Burton walked quietly back with him to the corner table. A waiter was just getting up from his stooping position. He held a wet rag gingerly by one end, a rag which was stained crimson. The waiter looked sick. Dawn Detras' body was gone.

Burton chuckled.

"Arrested for what?"

Futile anger churned upward in Storm's chest.

"I practically insulted your boys when I said they co-operated with you. They know their parts to perfection! But just because you've already removed the poor girl's body doesn't mean I didn't see murder done."

"You can't prove it," said Burton coldly. "Not without a body. And you're the only one who claims he saw a killing. Come, be reasonable, Storm. I didn't do it, and I didn't order it done. It's a coincidence, see? The girl had a lot of enemies, and somebody took advantage of the orchestra to chop her down. It won't do any good to raise a stink. And I'm not responsible. Mur-

der isn't in my line, and that's the truth."

Storm felt uglier. He sucked in air, chewed on his lip, and did some thinking.

The more he thought, the more he wanted to take Wheels Burton down to the sheriff's office.

He wanted to, but he knew he couldn't.

Wheels Burton divined Storm's thoughts. "You can't prove anything, Storm. If you act fresh, I'll pull every political string I've got—and if you know Lieutenant Tilliman, you'll also know it's a healthy handful of strings I've got in my fist. Now, listen: the girl's body will be found, but not around my place of business. I can't afford the damage to my reputation. If you try to buck the story I'll have planted and act foolishly, you'll find yourself tied up in the worst jam you ever dreamed of. Now be reasonable, and listen to me."

"Murder isn't reasonable! The girl was killed because she talked about you. I could kill you right now, to even things up—and get away with it, too."

Wheels' angular face was the color of a badly-peeled potato.

"That murder-gun doesn't belong to me, Storm, but it can still talk!" he rapped. He waved a ringed finger around the murky nightclub. "It might still be somewhere around. Pointed at your back."

"That doesn't frighten me."

BURTON looked narrowly at Storm and shrugged, with a ghost of an admiring smile. "I guess it doesn't."

Storm chewed on his lip some more. His hands were tied: if he jugged Wheels, the man would wriggle and bribe his way to freedom. And discounting the possibility of the murderer still lurking in the vicinity, there was the problem of the missing Valerie Feather. If she were in Burton's hands, then her release was more important than jailing Burton. With Wheels held on charges, there was no way of finding out what had happened to the girl. It was a callous thought, perhaps, but it was a choice of avenging the dead or saving the living.

He grunted, and Wheels looked relieved—until Storm said, "Okay, march."

"Where? Now, listen, Storm, you didn't hear what I said—"

"I heard. We're going upstairs to

your office. We have a lot of—ah—gum-beating to do, you and I."

Wheels appeared to hesitate, then shrugged his shoulders.

"Let's go."

Burton's offices were up on the third and topmost floor of the rambling building. A private elevator took them up in tense silence. The waiter remained below, at a sign from Wheels, and the two men emerged from the cage directly into Burton's living quarters.

Burton flicked a wall-switch. Lights, concealed behind a silver moulding, reflected an indirect glow over the mahogany-panelled ceiling.

In contrast to the gaudiness of the Shady Grove, down below, the man's living quarters were done in hushed and conservative tones. The furniture was masculine, square and chunky, in gray mohair and silver banding. Over against the curtained window stood a solid desk, with chromium paraphernalia arranged on the glass top. Two walls were lined with books from floor to ceiling. They were good books, and looked as though they had been often read.

All this Storm saw with a quick, sweeping glance, even as he became aware of the man who sprawled in one of the deep chairs. He would not have seen the man nor been aware of his presence had it not been for the betraying clink of ice in a glass.

He tightened his grip on the gun, motioned Burton over against a wall, and then stepped around the chair to look into the man's face.

It was Gregory Dolman, short and squat, with his rolypoly face flushed and his heavy-lidded eyes shot through with a network of swollen little veins. One eye was blackened, and an ugly bruise stood out on his chin, purple against the powder-white of the man's face.

Dolman spoke, and Storm knew he was drunk. Dolman waved a glass of amber liquor, splashing some of it over his shirt cuff, and grinned vacuously.

"Welcome! Welcome to our little love-nest! So Wheels got you, too, eh?"

Storm looked up at Burton. The man was sitting on a corner of his big desk, the ends of his mouth drawn into annoyed little puckers under his moustache.

"He's drunk," said Burton, as though that ended the matter.

Storm remained in front of the chair. The paunchy Dolman looked up at the very tall man, his bleary gaze drifting from Storm's hollow face to the automatic that bulked black in his hand.

"Oooh," said Dolman. "Bad mans!"

"Yeah," Storm breathed. His throat ached with dry tension. He turned to Wheels Burton, who was examining his fingernails. "Often have drunks popping in on you like this?"

"No, not often. In fact, almost never."

Dolman stirred in his chair, twisting around and looking sideways at Wheels. "You're a liar, my good host. I'm always here. I've been here for ages. You wouldn't let me leave if I wanted to. And I don't, not as long as this nectar retains its flavor."

Storm lifted murky eyes back to the gambler, who looked totally unconcerned, save to repeat, "Dolman, you're drunk."

"Now here are some more things I don't understand," Storm said, his lips compressed to a paper-thin line.

"A pity," Burton sneered. "There's no difficulty in understanding that what Mr. Dolman needs is to be dunked suddenly into an ice-cold bath."

"You're poor at avoiding the issue," Storm pointed out. "Dolman is your prisoner. You've been beating him. First murder, now kidnapping—or was it vice versa?"

Wheels, laughing, waved his hand at the rolypoly man.

"Does it look as though I have a ball and chain on him?"

Storm returned to Gregory Dolman.

"Who's beat you up? Who blackened your eye and jaw?"

"Are they black?" Dolman asked. His pudgy fingers touched his puffed left eye, and he winced, then pointed accusingly at Burton. "He did it."

"Why?"

BUT Dolman wobbled his head and returned to his glass. His lips made little sucking noises as he drank the liquor. He had no more interest in Storm or the gun or Wheels Burton.

Storm shrugged. Burton was smiling, still leaning against the desk, and the fact that he was not worried made Storm feel uneasy. Burton stared down at Storm's gun, which pointed directly to a spot between his whitish eyes, and merely smiled.

Finally Burton turned to his desk, his hand reaching for a drawer. He looked over his shoulder and saw Storm rigid, the gun twisting to cover him before his fingers could touch the bright handle.

"Don't be jittery, Storm."

"I'm not. I can put six bullets into you before you can get your gun."

"I told you I don't believe in murder. Not when it's unnecessary. There is quite a bushel of facts I don't understand, Mr. Storm. Between the two of us, we could sort the chaff from the wheat, so to speak."

Burton paused, and rolled his tongue over his thin lips. "Perhaps ten grand may help pave the way to a clearer state of understanding between us. Although I insist I'm innocent of Dawn's death, I had to have her body removed. It will turn up in a day or two and go down on the books as unsolved. I had to get it away from the Shady Grove. Murders are bad for my business."

The gambler's hand came out of the desk with a thick sheaf of banknotes. Storm kept his face expressionless as Burton glanced inquiringly at him.

Then Gregory Dolman intruded again, speaking from the depths of his lounge chair.

"Don't touch it, Storm. Don't bother with it. It's shicken—chicken feed. We got a much better racket, we have."

Wheels said for a third time, without taking his queer, colorless eyes off Storm, "He's drunk."

Dolman surged out of his chair, clutching his glass. "And why shouldn't I be? Answer that simple question. You've kept shovin'—shoving wonderful liquor at me, and who am I to say no?" He hiccupped. "The truth is, Wheels, you're a very, very generous host. But irksome."

Dolman giggled. "Irksome, Wheels. You irk me." Then, abruptly, "I wanna go home."

He got up and weaved across the room, reaching wearily for the elevator button as though expecting it to disappear before his eyes. With a quick mutter of annoyance, Wheels crossed the room in front of Storm's gun and grabbed the paunchy man by the slack of his coat. Dolman was whirled around and thrown back in his chair with force enough to make him bounce.

"Now stay there until you're sober

and can tell me what happened."

Storm said nothing, watching the business with half-closed eyes. Burton turned back to him.

"Now about this ten thousand—it's yours. You know what to do, or rather, what not to do. I don't have to tell you."

"It will take more than that just to cover up a dead body," said Storm tonelessly.

Wheels said, "If you want more—" with a contemptuous gesture.

"It would take more than you can afford to pay," Storm went on. "Suppose you answer questions. Why are you keeping Dolman here?"

"I've been questioning him about this Nakesian rub-out," Burton shrugged. He eyed Storm's gun. "I want to know what happened over there. This fat little fool doesn't know."

"Well, I do," said Storm curtly. "Nakesian stole a quarter of a million from you, and you murdered him, through Lucky Lamonte, and got it back."

"So you know about the money?"

"I saw it," Storm stated flatly. "And you know well enough that I laid hands on it. I'd have kept it, too, but your boys were too many for me. They got it back."

BURTON shook his head and announced, suddenly angry, "But they didn't get it back! The girl got it, damn her!"

"Girl?" Storm asked cautiously.

"Whoever she is. I don't know."

"Don't lie," said Storm wearily. "You know where she is. She turned the money over to you."

"No, she's got the money."

"Then who's got the girl?" Storm snapped.

Gregory Dolman piped up from his deep-cushioned seat, "What young lady are you gentlemen talking about?"

"The girl I saw in Nakesian's apartment," Storm replied, looking at Wheels. "The one who disappeared."

He did not mention Valerie's name. He was treading dangerous and treacherous ground, working down an unwelcome path.

Burton smoothed his moustache, turned and stared out of the curtained window with folded arms. His voice drifted over his shoulder to the man with the gun.

"Look, Storm, it was my money that Nakesian stole. It was a matter between ourselves. I admit I sent the boys over to Nakesian's apartment to get that money back—sure. But I gave no orders to kill, and my boys didn't kill Nakesian. Just like Dawn—the thing was framed on me. Lucky and the boys didn't get the money or snatch the girl, as you seem to think. I don't have her."

Storm's lip curled.

"I suppose your little rat Toogy didn't turn the money over to you? He picked it up; he was with the girl. I cached the money in a house across from the hotel while your rats were chasing me all over Kennicut. Toogy picked it up, and Toogy had the girl with him."

"Toogy?" Burton spoke as though surprised. "Toogy with her? The little punk—I haven't seen him all day. So Toogy got the money with the girl!"

"That's one possible explanation."

"Have you got any others?" Burton asked, swinging around from the window to face Storm.

"I'm doing the questioning," Storm reminded him. He lifted the muzzle of his automatic to follow Burton's nervous pacing. "Tell me how the money Nakesian stole from you fits in with the Coulter jewel sale for two hundred and fifty grand!"

Burton lifted shaggy eyebrows and crossed the room, sinking into a chair that nestled deep in a corner.

"So you know about that, too, eh?"

Storm nodded. "You're playing a deep game, Burton."

"So are you. I don't see why you're butting in at all. You're not a cop, and you don't need money. I know about you, Storm. You are one of these guys who haven't any business of their own, and relieve their boredom sticking their noses into other people's business."

"And sometimes it's profitable," Storm said, "but not through taking bribes. Your game has only begun. Nakesian was killed, and now Dawn Detras—"

Gregory Dolman interrupted once again, getting to his feet with a lurch, swinging a bottle in one hand and an empty glass in another. His eye was puffed now until it was almost closed, and the blue-black bruise on his fat jaw stood out like an ugly smudge against the slack whiteness of his features. His eyes were

wide, and perspiration made his round face look glittery.

"Dawn Detras?" he croaked. "She's dead?"

"Sit down," Storm suggested.

"She's dead! I know it! Maybe Lucky bumped her, eh? He was jealous as hell."

"It's an idea," Storm admitted. He repeated, "Sit down."

Dolman jelled into the chair again.

STORM returned to Burton, who had slumped far down in his corner chair, gloomily surveying the shiny tips of his patent-leather shoes.

"Two murders, Burton, and the sale hasn't even been made yet! Taite hasn't withdrawn his cash from the bank yet. That means there is an extra two hundred and fifty grand around. You're not bidding for Coulter's jewels yourself, are you, Wheels? You're not competing with Taite, are you?"

Burton looked up, stared thoughtfully, and then spoke as though he had just reached a decision that was troubling him.

"No," he said. "No, I'm bidding for nothing. But I'm sorry you figured out there's extra cash around. You and the blonde girl both know it. I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I'll have to kill you both."

Storm laughed, a curt, ringing sound that echoed through the room. He looked down at the gun in his hand.

"You're in a fine way to make threats, Burton."

"I didn't want any killings," Burton went on tonelessly. "I haven't done any yet. But you're smart, Storm. You'll hit on the right answer soon. So I'll have to kill you before that unfortunate thing happens."

Burton leaned back in his chair with a smile that was pleasant and certain. He said nothing, did not shift his queer glance away from Storm's gun. Yet Storm knew, as surely as he knew that the gun butt in his grip had suddenly grown slippery, that danger hummed vibrant in the air around him. It reached out for him with hot, tingling tentacles from the rear; it rocked under his feet. Danger lurked in the elevator door at his back, although he heard not the slightest sound to indicate that the cage was operating. And danger lurked in the windowed curtains—

He understood too late why Burton had gone to the window, why he had later shifted his position to a seat in a deep, protected corner.

There was something moving behind the big windows, reaching almost down to the floor. But they were on the third level—

Flame spat viciously, glass tinkled, and the sharp, spiteful hiss of a bullet was heard as it buzzed past Storm's ear.

"Take him!" came Burton's shout.

Storm flung himself aside; snapped a shot at Burton that went wide because of his own movement; slipped with his right foot on the shiny waxed floor; and went down as bodies tumbled through the window from the *terrace* beyond!

There were two men, in addition to Wheels Burton. Burton, lunging out of his chair with startling speed, ducked aside as Storm's gun spouted flame and lead at him. Then their bodies crashed and locked together, and they went down to the floor as the two gunmen leaped in from the terrace and tore at Storm's body.

His knuckles spattered across one man's mouth and came away with a streak of red. With his other fist, he smashed at the second man's groin, and the fellow rolled on the floor, groaning.

But Wheels Burton had his hand on the gun, and Storm's attention was concentrated on retaining it. They rolled, heaved, twisted and squirmed over the floor. A standing lamp went over with a crash and tinkle of smashed bulbs, and the light in the room grew two shades darker. They came up against the corner of the lounge and then Storm got to his feet.

His breath was coming in long, shuddering gasps; his face was a mask of desperate power. Burton lurched up after him, equally silent, equally intent, his arm streaking for Storm's gun hand. The man with the split lips cursed and groped for the revolver he had dropped. Then they wrestled for the automatic that Storm held high above his head.

Burton twisted with savage force, and Storm bent far over sideways. He pounded his free fist into Burton's body, surprised at the muscular compactness of the big man's physique. And then, with a final twist, Storm regained complete possession of the black gun.

It meant his defeat.

THE wrench he gave sent him spinning off balance across the room, tearing away from Burton. He staggered against the hood with the dented middle. The gunman was quick to seize his opportunity. The revolver in the gunman's hand came down in a swishing, blurred arc on Storm's face. It smashed on his forehead, sending blinding pain searing through his brain.

He slipped, staggered, and went down on one knee. His automatic dropped from nerveless fingers. Through a reddening haze he caught a glimpse of Gregory Dolman, still seated in the deep lounge chair, with a bottle in one hand and a glass in the other, staring owlishly, with unblinking eyes, at the tangle of struggling men.

Then the gunman, grinning viciously, smashed the gun once more on Storm's head.

Leo went dropping into a spiraling tunnel of roaring wind, a tornado that sucked downward into dizzying, bottomless depths. . . .

CHAPTER XI

ESCAPE

AT first Storm thought it was beetles. Thousands of beetles, buzzing, rattling, swarming around inside his head.

He did not open his eyes immediately. He lay still, trying to find his body. But, when he did discover his limbs, he regretted it. Every muscle was a leaping flame of agony; his head felt as wobbly as a run-down top.

Voices drifted to him, punctuating the rattling and buzzing that he heard. He opened one eye and winced as a shadow fell over his face; he saw the round outline and partly bald head of Gregory Dolman. The man was leaning over him intently.

Storm opened both eyes, and Dolman swayed back, grinning and blinking rapidly with his sleepy eyes.

"Oh," he said. "Oh, you woke up."

Storm watched a gold tooth that glinted far back in Dolman's mouth. The buzzing sound still persisted. He tried to sit up; he couldn't move. He found himself tied hand and foot to a couch.

He was in a bedroom of mahogany paneling, with deeply alcoved windows. Rain beat with a thousand silvery hammers at the glass panes. The hissing downpour was the source of the rattling beetles.

"Hail, comrade," Dolman said. "Have a drink?"

Storm accepted the invitation. Dolman held a glass to his lips. The liquor was strong, slaking its way down his throat to land with a resounding splash in his interior. He looked up at Dolman incredulously.

"That what you've been drinking all night?"

"Yep. Wonderful stuff, huh?"

"The wonder is that you're still on your feet."

He started to get off the bed again, but the sharp jolt of his bonds sent his head spinning. He sank back with a groan.

"Can't take it," Dolman observed owlishly. "Go on, ask me."

"Ask what?"

"Say, 'Where am I?' Everybody asks that. It's the thing to do."

"Okay, where am I?" Storm asked, humoring him.

"You're still in the apartment in the Shady Grove," Coulter answered, with a smirk of satisfaction. "In Wheels Burton's private apartment. In fact, you're in his own bed."

"Well, I don't appreciate it."

Dolman pondered that for a moment. Then, "No, neither would I."

"What time is it?"

Dolman consulted his wrist-watch, peering for a long time at the dial. "You've been out twenty minutes. It started to rain just when you got slammed. Thunderstorm. It's stopping now."

So it was close to midnight. Storm lay back and listened. There were still voices in the air, coming from behind the closed door.

He asked, "Why don't you leave, Dolman? Burton's keeping you here for questioning, isn't he? He beat you, didn't he? If you're free to walk around, why don't you escape?"

"Because I'm drunk," said Dolman flatly. "I'm fine, so far. Let me hit the air and—*whoosh!* Blotto. Besides, they have guns. That's a reasonable argument, isn't it?"

The man's speech was perfect, unim-

peded. It was a miracle. Dolman went on, "I can't leave because my amiable host has fifty thousand dollars' worth of IOU's signed by me. That's bad—bad for me. If my precious old uncle hears of it, what will he do?"

Storm blinked at him.

"I'll tell you what old Myron'll do," Dolman insisted, wagging his hand. "He'll disinherit me, that's what. And that would be a tragedy. So I'm here to answer Wheel's questions, only I don't know anything and he doesn't believe me. So I think I'll tell him some lies and then he'll let me go free. Wonderful idea!"

"How about cutting me loose?" Storm suggested.

Gregory considered for a long moment, then then shook his round head.

"Nope. Wouldn't do any good. They got guns outside the door. Besides, little Val'rie will have us out in no time."

Storm lay still suddenly. "Valerie?"

"Shh!" Dolman spread his plump fingers flat over his mouth. "Listen!"

FROM beyond the door that led to Burton's living room came the sound of voices rising in determination and anger. Storm felt a chill run through his blood as he recognized the tones of Valerie Feather. Interrupting and overruling her speech came the husky, suave accents of Wheels Burton.

They were arguing. Burton was saying, "You have my money, young lady, and that's the only payment I'll accept in return for Storm's release."

"I haven't your money," Valerie returned. "Your rat Toogy took it away from me."

"I don't believe that, and don't ask me to. You probably tricked Toogy and got away."

"No, that's not true! I'm giving you straight facts, Wheels. Besides, the money's not the point. You've seen these papers. They're duplicate copies of what I know about your affairs—and a little of what I know about your plot on Coulter's jewels and Romwell Taite's cash. I could stomach some of your plans, Wheels, but not this."

Storm frowned and bit his lip in anxious thought as he recognized Valerie's tone as indicating a familiarity with Wheels Burton. She sounded as though she had been in league with the gambler on previous occasions, and was

now rebellious! Somehow, the thought turned his hopes gray.

Burton queried softly, "You wouldn't cross me, would you, Valerie?"

"No, I wouldn't. But those papers are safe—the originals are where you can't get your hands on them. I expected you'd take in Storm sometime tonight. Unless you release him—and Greg Dolman, too—the papers go in the mails. It won't do you any good to search for the person who is holding them for me. You won't find him. Unless you release Storm, the exposé will be mailed to Lieutenant Tilliman. He'll get them tomorrow morning. You can imagine the rest."

Burton's sneer was sharp. "You're pulling an old gag, my girl."

"But it's still effective; I'm not a fool."

"Tomorrow morning is a long way off," Burton considered. "Plenty of time for you to die before that."

"I'm not afraid. You'll die, too, if those papers are mailed. You'll die in the electric chair. Either you set Storm free—or the other thing, in which case we'll both go under together. You're not a fool, Burton. You'll agree to my terms. I've already told you that Storm knows nothing of value to tell you."

"No, but he's dangerous."

In the room beyond the door, Dolman nodded his head in solemn agreement. Then he suddenly stiffened as Burton murmured something in reply to Valerie Feather. His moon-like face turned whiter, pastier. He got up, crossed the room, and returned to the bed with a gleaming knife. He stood over the bound Storm and blinked at him.

Cold chills rippled in delicate feathers along Storm's spine. The man was drunk, with a dangerous weapon, and Dolman's eyes were set with groggy determination. The knife glistened above Storm's head, little splinters of light leaping from the blade.

Dolman giggled.

"I'll cut you free," he said.

Storm exhaled in relief. "Do that, quickly."

It was the work of a few moments for Gregory to manipulate the blade and saw through the cords that kept Storm flat on the bed. When the job was done, Dolman stepped back with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Now, when Burton comes in, you

grab him," he said. He balanced the sharp weapon in his pudgy hands. "I'll kill him," he concluded with satisfaction.

Storm watched the drunken man with narrowed eyes. Dolman was set in his purpose, chuckling with satisfaction at the thought.

"I'll kill him, and he won't bother me any more. He won't bother anyone with his dirty blackmail racket. The world will be a cleaner place without him. I'll tickle his heart with this nice, shiny point."

"No," said Storm.

Dolman's bloodshot eyes opened wider, and he held the knife with the point toward Storm.

"Yes. Maybe I'll finish you, too. Burton said you were dangerous."

THE man was criminally insane. Kill-crazy, overflowing with raw liquor. From beyond the door came slow footsteps on the lush carpet: the heavy, reluctant tread of Wheels Burton, and the staccato clicking of Valerie Feather's high heels.

There was quick brittleness in Storm's manner as he sat up, slid his feet off the counterpane and stood before Dolman. He held out his hand.

"Give me that knife," he said.

Dolman backed away toward the door, shaking his round face, a broad, vacuous grin on his battered features. His black eye was completely closed, the bruise on his jaw lividly purple. He would have looked ridiculous but for the knife that gleamed wickedly sharp in his white paw.

"I'm going to kill Burton, so don't act silly, Storm."

There was no time for further argument. The door handle suddenly went down, and Dolman moved with amazing alacrity toward the entrance. Storm leaped at the same instant. The door swung inward, and Storm's heart froze as he saw Valerie Feather framed in the entrance, slightly preceding the bulky, athletic figure of Wheels Burton.

And Dolman was launching himself toward the doorway, knife raised to strike with drunken strength.

Storm dived headlong across the room. He heard Valerie's frightened gasp, then smashed hip-high into Dolman as the fat man drove forward. Gregory went staggering to one side, but, by a miracle,

maintained his balance. Storm was down on his knees for an instant, and Wheels Burton, pushing through the door around Valerie Feather, tripped and staggered over his legs.

Dolman snarled, "You fool!" and moved with a lurching sway toward Burton. Storm got up, his fist driving forward and upward from the floor. It smacked crisply on Dolman's chin, and Dolman grunted and slid down to sit on the floor with a thump. The knife dropped from his hand and stuck point-first in the hardwood floor.

Burton lunged for the weapon at the same time as Storm, and the two men crashed together.

"Taste some of this, Burton," Storm breathed.

His fist hammered with deadly accuracy at Burton's middle, drummed on the gambler's heavily handsome features. Burton went sideways with a muffled yell, and Storm followed him up. He was a deadly machine, intent on revenge for the previous attack. He was meeting Burton man-to-man now, without the balance of guns in the gambler's favor.

But Burton was tough. He stepped back quickly, covering up, and Storm's swift, slashing blows were blocked. In a moment the gambler had regained his balance, and drove forward. Storm checked him with a left to the stomach, sliced upward with his right, and again his knuckles spattered crisply on Burton's jaw.

Still the man did not go down. But he was suddenly haggard, and his breath came in shuddering, sucking gasps.

A voice said, "Stop it, Leo."

It came clearly and with no uncertainty in it, as sharp as the knife that vibrated in the floor. It was Valerie Feather's voice, and it had the effect on Storm's red anger of a douse of ice-cold water.

He checked himself, remained motionless for a moment, staring at Burton and then swung around to face the girl.

She was wearing a light box-coat over a blue skirt and jacket. A light felt hat sloped sharply over one eyebrow. Her red mouth was a gash of brilliance in the paleness of her oval face. He stood and examined the girl's tall figure, noted the straightness of her stance and the easy familiarity with which she handled the

little .32 revolver in her gloved hand.

"Stop it, Storm. It's not necessary," she said again.

Her voice was husky and compelling. He dropped his hands to his sides and stepped back.

"We're getting out of here," the girl said crisply, brittleness in her tone, ice in her violet eyes.

Burton said, "I've changed my mind."

Valerie wagged her gun.

"You can't."

Woman-like, she held a purse in her left hand. Now she tossed it over to Storm, who caught it and opened it.

"You'll find another pea-shooter in there," she said.

STORM took out another .32. Burton opened his mouth to protest, but Storm merely laughed softly, poking the gun at him.

"You heard what the fair lady said, Wheels. We're leaving. And we're taking Dolman with us. He's going to answer *my* questions, and you won't chop him down like you did Dawn."

Dolman sat up from the floor. He should have remained completely out, but the man had amazing resiliency. He bounced back like rubber, completely losing his murderous air.

"Bravo!" he crowed. "I wanna go home."

Burton watched him as he slowly climbed to his feet, with infinite difficulty. The little lines around the gambler's sharply chiseled nostrils tightened. Then he waved a limp hand.

"Go ahead, beat it."

Storm said, "With you, Wheels. Come along. Escort us to the door, at any rate. I'd hate to find your rats waiting for us when we get downstairs."

Burton had regained his composure. He smoothed back his thick hair, straightened his tie and opened the door. Storm nodded to Dolman.

"Come along, toad."

The little procession went down the elevator in silence. Storm and Valerie hid their guns. In the glare of noise from the Shady Grove, two hard-bitten, lean-jawed gunmen started to approach Wheels, but he waved them away, after a quick look at the unpleasantness of Storm's face.

Valerie had a little blue roadster

parked in the gravel road outside. She slid behind the wheel. Storm nudged Dolman along, keeping Burton close by his side. In the yellow doorway of the Shady Grove were the two gunmen and the saturnine captain of the waiters, and Storm had no intention of offering himself as a separate target.

Valerie prodded the starter. Storm put one foot on the running board, kept a firm grip on Dolman's sleeve, and said to her:

"When I say go, honey, slam the juice down to the floorboards, and don't worry about speed limits."

She nodded.

Storm suddenly planted a foot behind Burton's heels and stepped into the car, dragging Dolman in after him. His maneuver jerked Burton off balance, and the man hit the pavement with a thud. His three hoods yelled and came running out under the marquee.

Before they could get their guns up, the roadster was skidding and churning down the gravel highway toward the village.

CHAPTER XII

JUST TALK

THERE was nothing said for a while, as the girl expertly circled the bay through the forest. Storm felt a chill wall of silent animosity spring up between him and this graceful, soft girl, who could be so hard and familiar with a deadly game like this.

Dolman finally spoke up. He kept his eyes closed.

"We won't be bothered by Wheels any more. He won't try to get us back. Li'l Valerie did a good job, whatever it was. Wheels will let us alone—you and me, Storm. But he's got it in for Valerie."

Storm said, "You just keep still."

"No. Look, Storm, I'm very much attached to Valerie. We're old friends—even more than that, Storm. I want her to be safe."

Storm made no reply. Every new thing he learned was unwelcome. Valerie an old friend—even more—to this man: That was a distasteful thought.

Dolman sat forward, fumbling in his pocket, and brought his hand out with

something crackling in his fingers.

"You're a detective, aren't you, Storm? You're a bodyguard?"

"Not as a usual pastime."

"Well, this is an unusual thing," Dolman said. His voice blurred for a moment. "Guard Val'rie. She deserves it. And I'll pay you well."

The girl did not seem to be listening to the conversation.

Storm said quietly, "Valerie seems more capable of taking care of herself than we do, Dolman. But you wouldn't have to pay me to take care of her. It's the least I can do."

"But I insist—I really do. You take this—it's a hundred. Take it."

Dolman leaned forward and shoved a paper bill into Storm's hands. Something fluttered to Valerie's lap, dropped off and whirled to the floor in slow gyrations. It was a scrap of blue paper.

Storm checked his exclamation and, before he could move, Dolman spoke again.

"Bye, now. I'm leaving you."

And the man opened the door of the roadster and jumped.

Storm tried to clutch at Dolman's coat, but missed. The fat man hit the road, went down, and rolled over twice. Valerie jammed on the brakes with a shuddering gasp, and then Dolman stood up in the center of the gravel highway and waved a white paw at them. He started to run, ducking into the woods.

Valerie gasped, "Get him! Stop him!"

Storm shook his head.

"Let him go. He'll pass out any minute and sleep it off. Drunks never get hurt. He'll be safer in the woods than we'll be in the village. Besides, we're not far from town, and he'll be all right."

While he spoke, he leaned forward, his fingers groping for the long, thin scrap of blue paper he had seen Dolman drop. It had swirled under the clutch pedal, and Valerie had her foot on it.

She said in a tight voice, "I saw it, too, Mr. Smarty."

"Oh. Then you know what it is?"

"Of course."

She guided the car into the bayside road to the hotel, and removed her heel from the scrap of blue paper.

"I was hoping you hadn't seen it. It's one of those gummed strips of paper that are used to hold packets of money together."

"Yes?" he prompted.

"The money in Nakesian's apartment was fastened with gummed strips of paper. They were blue, like this one."

"So Dolman has the money," Storm said pensively.

He settled back on the leather seat with a muttered sigh.

They left the roadster in a garage near the Kinnicut Hotel and walked the remaining two blocks in silence. The wall of mystery was crystallizing between them with every additional second, and neither liked it.

COMING through the revolving door of the Kinnicut was a familiar figure. Small, stooped, pimply-faced, morose: Sammy, the bellboy. He was dressed in street-clothes, an unusual and unfamiliar sight without his smart red uniform.

He muttered, "'Lo, Mr. Storm—Miss Feather," and then he noticed the tall man's appearance. "Gee, Mr. Storm, what happened to you?"

"I ran into an accident and it hit back. What's the trouble, Sammy? You look like your pet cow died."

The boy's face was disgusted.

"Aw, I lost a key."

Compunction struck at Storm's heart. "And you lost your job?"

"Yeah, that's right. Caldwell—he's the manager—he tied the can to my tail. I don't know what I did with the damned thing."

"The house-key?"

"Yeah, I know I had it before I went to your rooms to deliver that '69, Mr. Storm. I missed it about thirty minutes afterward. I can't find it anywhere."

Storm delved in his pocket and brought to light the little metal object that he had used to explore Valerie's rooms.

"Is this it?" he asked with a smile.

Sammy snatched at it with glee. "Yeah, that's it! I musta dropped it in your room. Lots of thanks, Mr. Storm."

"It's quite all right."

He took Valerie's arm and piloted her up to the elevator. The girl's red mouth was compressed into a tight little line of contempt.

"So you've been snooping in my rooms, Mr. Storm?"

"That's right," he said easily. "You think fast. I thought I'd find out what

part of the jig-saw puzzle you represent."

"Very ethical," she sniffed.

"Killers aren't ethical," Storm observed with emphasis. "So I can't afford to be, either."

"I'm not a killer. Why did you search my rooms? Really?"

He sighed, fitting the key to his door-lock.

"For various reasons," he said. "I wanted to find out more about you. Don't you think it's high time you behaved sensibly and stopped acting so mysterious? You—"

He paused, suddenly, for the girl had gone several shades whiter, the color draining from her cheeks. Her eyes clouded, went murky and dazed. A shudder racked her slim body; then she laughed shakily and put her hand to her forehead.

"This is a fine time to be afraid," she whispered.

She conquered her reaction with a stiffening of her shoulders, and Storm swung the door open, gently guiding her into his rooms.

"I've been an ungrateful cur," he said. "You saved my life, after all, and while it may not mean anything to you, it does count up to some pile of beans in my estimation. Maybe in yours, too. You risked your life for mine."

"Don't flatter yourself," she said flatly.

"The least I can do," he went on, "is get you something to eat and drink."

The girl followed him into the kitchen. His head throbbed with a giant, hammering pulse when he stooped to get a bottle and glasses from the shining porcelain icebox. When he straightened, he noted the girl watching him with fearful wonder.

"Anything wrong?"

She laughed, with a tremor in her voice.

"I don't think you know it, but somebody split your head open."

His fingers wandered to the cut on his scalp, and he winced as his clumsiness sent aching flames of pain through his head.

"I hadn't noticed," he grunted.

"It looks quite nasty," she said briskly. "If you've got a medicine closet handy, I'll fix it up for you."

"Nasty men did it," he mocked.

When she vanished to get the iodine, he went into the Greek's room. It was empty, for the Greek had followed out his orders and gone to the cottage beyond Devil's Mount. Storm wished now that he had the Greek's ponderous, stable presence to steady him.

THE Greek had prided himself on his collection of guns, and it occurred to Storm that he had lost two of his best automatics in the Shady Grove. He opened a closet door and examined a rack of two automatic rifles, three revolvers and an equal number of automatic pistols, including a long-barreled Luger with a bulbous silencer fitted over the nose. He selected a flat .38-40 and was sliding it into his pocket when the girl came swinging back into the room, carrying white gauze bandages and iodine and a basin of hot water.

She paused abruptly as she saw the array of deadly weapons.

"Quite an arsenal," she murmured.

She put the medicinal articles down with lowered eyes. "You don't need a gun in your pocket because I'm here," she said.

"Maybe it's—"

He checked himself, and waved an abruptly disgusted hand at the bandages. "I don't need all this. It's silly. I'll just wash it with peroxide."

"Maybe it's what?" she persisted, her eyes boring into his.

It was his turn to look away. "I'll mix some drinks."

"You just don't trust me, is that it?" she demanded. Her voice had the vibrancy of a taut wire and the lash of a whip. "Listen, Lee—"

She used his first name. Lee. Nobody called him Lee—he was Leo. Leave it to a girl to make it sound better, he thought grimly.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "you could do well by explaining your part in Nakesian's murder."

Her eyes became pools of hurt.

"Sit down," she said, "and I'll wash this cut." She splashed in the basin of hot water, and added irrelevantly, "I ought to hate you for thinking what you do of me."

"Well, do you?"

Her voice was tired. "I just said I ought to."

The atmosphere was charged with mis-

understanding. Storm said bruskiy:

"You'd better get out of here. Don't bother with the cut. It's nothing I can't fix myself."

She said, "You're afraid of me."

"No, I—I—"

Stammering like a love-sick fool. He damned himself. The girl looked at him helplessly, then said in a meek voice:

"All right, I'll tell you everything I can. Just let me fix this cut. It's really bad."

She went on in a small, crushed voice, "First, I'd better tell you what I *don't* know. I don't know who killed Nakesian, and I can't explain the money he had. It's all part of a plot to loot old Myron Coulter of his jewels and get the cash that Romwell Taite will give him."

"How did you find out about this vague plot?" he asked.

Her eyes were distressed. "Please, I don't think I should tell you. Not—not yet."

She dabbed at the cut, squeezed water from a soaked wad of cotton, took a dry bit and patted the wound.

"I used the corridor to Nakesian's apartment. I came to you first to get rid of Toogy, you remember. I didn't want Toogy following me to Nakesian's. I knew Nakesian was in terrible danger."

"Are you permitted," he asked bitterly, "to tell me how you knew that?"

"I can't tell you that, either." She shrugged. "Listen, Lee, please. Trust me. I reached Nakesian's too late. I came in that side door and found the money and saw him—dead. I—I fainted, like a fool. When I came to, I heard shots in the corridor. I slipped away in the excitement, went to the front window, and saw you run into the boarding house across the street. I had an idea that you would get rid of the grip you were carrying. For a moment I thought you were—"

"Stealing it?"

"Just a little black thought about you on my part. It makes us a little more even." She smiled anxiously. "We haven't trusted each other much."

HE was brutally curt. "You're not giving any evidence of improvement. But you ran across the street and—"

"Toogy was waiting for me. He fol-

lowed me into the boarding house while Lucky Lamonte went chasing after you. He guessed what you had done, just as I had. He used a gun on the blonde girl in there, struck her down and picked up the money. He tried to force me to go along with him, but I—I got away."

"And Toogy has the money?" Storm asked sharply.

She looked at him unhappily. "You don't believe me."

"It's hard to swallow. It's hard to make sense out of the whole business. Nakesian learns of a plot against the sale of the jewels. He doesn't want anything to go awry, because he is the one to profit by the sale, since old Coulter is donating the cash received to the Spiritualist Foundation. Nakesian steals a quarter of a million—which curiously enough is the same amount as the value of the jewels—and cops the money from Wheels Burton. Burton tries to get the money back and claims he did *not* kill Nakesian. He further claims he did not regain possession of his money. Burton thinks that Toogy must have double-crossed him. Or that you and Toogy crossed him, working together."

She said queerly, "What makes you think I'm an ally of Burton?"

"You came along and talked to Wheels as though he were an old acquaintance. You threatened him with exposure of facts, the nature of which you won't tell me. Whose side are you on, anyway?"

"My own," she said, with sharp independence. "You—oh, I can't tell you, because I don't know it all myself! I threatened Wheels with an exposure of his blackmailing racket—it has nothing to do with Nakesian's murder. It was a good whip to crack over him to set you free."

Because Storm was by nature a methodical and careful man, he choked down the impulse to accept her words without challenge.

"I can build up a good case against almost all of the persons involved," he said. "Including you. But we'll start with Taite. Isn't there a possibility that Taite is playing a game of his own, for his company's money—and, possibly, the jewels? Taite could have murdered Nakesian, and if the money is not Burton's but Taite's then—"

"No, it's Burton's," Valerie said simply.

"Okay. Then take Gregory Dolman. Like Taite, he could have killed Nakesian easily enough, by slipping out of the darkened room and returning unnoticed. He certainly handled the money Nakesian had—you saw that blue wrapper that dropped from his pocket in the car. That wrapper was identical with the ones on Nakesian's money. But no," Storm said sarcastically, "Toogy has the money."

Valerie sighed, "Then why should Dolman wish to kill Nakesian?"

"Perhaps Burton ordered him to. Burton has fifty thousand dollars' worth of IOU's signed by Dolman. And Gregory can't pay. Then again, Gregory Dolman stands to gain if his old uncle does not donate the money to the so-called spirit-uists. Dolman wouldn't want to lose a quarter of a million out of his inheritance."

Valerie looked shocked, pausing as she uncorked a bottle of iodine. Her honey-colored hair gleamed as she lowered her head.

"Hold still," she said clinically.

The antiseptic burned a livid scar across Storm's scalp. He bit his lip and went on:

"Then there's you. You have no motives, beyond personal gain of the money Nakesian had. But you could have come into Nakesian's apartment, seen him with the money, killed him—"

"And then fainted. Very likely," she scoffed. Her eyes were hurt.

"Your nerve may have given out at the last moment. And then Toogy beat you to it by getting to the house and getting the money when I cached it," Storm concluded. He sat up suddenly. "And you can't possibly explain by your story how you got some of Nakesian's blood on your fingernail!"

She paled, and looked at her hands with a little shudder.

"On my fingernail? I—I didn't know. It must have gotten there when I stooped by Nakesian's body to examine him."

"So you can examine a corpse, like one of Tilliman's men, and then faint?"

She waved her hand in a little gesture, then said abruptly: "Who took the blood off my finger?"

"I did. I don't know why."

HE was the one who raised the wall of animosity now, until it became

akin to active dislike in the girl's eyes. She walked away, clasping her hands.

"So that," said Storm, "is what I insist on having explained."

She came back and stood before him.

"Thank you for concealing my identity from the police. But I can't explain or tell you more. If I told you the truth, you would jump to even worse conclusions about me."

"Let me be the judge of what I'll think about you."

"No. If you think me guilty now, it proves you're a very poor judge. After all," she said, "I hardly know you."

Her words were quick, jammed between her small white teeth. She sank into a chair, and Storm muttered:

"We're getting nowhere fast."

She shrugged, then said passionately, "Why torture ourselves? Listen, Lee, please. You can't deny that I saved your life—that's not very sporting of me, to remind you—but you thanked me for it."

"I can't deny it, but I must feel pretty small about it. I always deluded myself into believing I was old enough to take care of myself."

She persisted anxiously, "You owe me something, then don't you?"

Now it was coming, Storm thought. He waited grimly, and the girl went on with a quick rush of words.

"Then give me your trust. I can't say any more beyond what I've told you. You must believe in me. Romwell Taite is going to the Roost tomorrow evening, and he'll have the money to buy Coulter's jewels. He's already gotten Tilliman's permission to leave town and withdraw the money from a Boston bank; Tilliman didn't deny him, because he's up against a blank wall, just hoping for further developments. He knows that nothing new will break if he pins Coulter and Taite in Kennicut."

"You interest me strangely," Storm murmured mockingly.

"Taite won't accept a bodyguard. He's a pig-headed fool; he claims he can take care of himself."

"Well?"

"That sale must be made without further bloodshed," she pleaded. "They won't call it off, neither Coulter nor Taite. But there need be no more killings! And there won't be if—if you guard Romwell Taite."

Storm threw back his head and laughed.

"Taite won't accept a bodyguard. You said so, yourself. Besides, I'm in this business, frankly, for money—not for the sake of letting someone sieve holes in me."

She snapped, "You're a coward."

He spread his hands. "Okay, I'm a coward." But she knew he wasn't.

HE dug his hands deep into his pockets. "I'll take your job on one condition—and the money doesn't count."

She sighed helplessly. "I know. You want me to explain my interest in the whole business."

"I want to know three things: how you enter the murder of Nakesian, the meaning of the money in Nakesian's apartment, and how well you know Wheels Burton and Gregory Dolman."

She asked in a small, desperate voice, "So I can't get you to trust me?"

"No," he said. "I can't trust you. Not if you won't explain."

She expelled air in a little sigh, as though the effort she had made had left her limp with exhaustion. Her body lost some of its straightness for a moment. Then she slowly stiffened, in proportion to the blaze that started in her eyes. It was a little spark, at first, that spread and spread until her wide eyes seemed to flame with contemptuous anger.

She bounced up from the lounge and stood motionless before him, staring at him for a quick moment. Storm almost waited for her to stamp her pretty foot, but she didn't. Instead, she said quite calmly:

"I hate you."

And she walked to the door with quick, hurrying steps, her high heels shattering the silence with their rapid tattoo.

CHAPTER XIII

SKELETONS IN YOUR CLOSET

THE Boston *Post-Tribune* had its offices quite a lengthy distance from secluded Kennicut Bay.

The editor of the *Tribune* was a sober, conservative man who wore nothing but pearl-gray cravats, except when

he felt extraordinarily dashing and donned a blue polka-dot. Like a few others in the old city of beans and crooked streets, the editor felt that journalism should be confined to a strictly objective dissemination of news.

But there were radicals, even in Boston. People demanded a features page. And to tell the truth, Mr. Daly—such was the curiously appropriate name of the head man of the mighty *Post-Tribune*—had a streak of daring deep down in his iron-clad soul, and sometimes the feeble thing stirred for a free breath of air.

That was why, when one day Mr. Daly received the anonymous manuscript of a column entitled *Skeletons In Your Closet*, he had succumbed to a momentary spasm of abnormality, probably due to his being surfeited with events on the Charles River.

He put the box, two sticks wide, in the upper left hand corner of the Inner Section, the first page of which was commonly called Features.

The crime column was a sensation overnight. For two years it appeared at irregular intervals, and always just prior to some crime. So even the gray-haired police chiefs read the column—when no one was looking, of course. On the other hand, the column occasionally learned of a planned coup of the police, in which event the criminal had a better than even chance of escaping, if he read the features page of the *Tribune*.

For the last reason, the police—including Lieutenant Tilliman in nearby Maine—would gladly have parted with half their prospective pensions to lay violent hands on the anonymous writer.

On the evening after the death of Dikran Nakesian—an event the *Tribune* had printed as a half-stick on the second page—a familiar blue envelope was tossed irreverently in the wire basket marked *IN* on Mr. Daly's desk.

Mr. Daly wore his polka-dot tie and felt the little devil of Smash-Convention scampering around inside the hard shell of his conservative soul.

He looked carefully around his cubby to make sure he was alone.

Then he said, "Gosh!"

And the latest *Closet* was on its way to see the light of day in the pages of the mighty *Tribune*.

It read:

The money that Myron Coulter, jewel collector, was to receive from Romwell Taite, buyer, has already received its baptism of blood. . . . In exclusive Kenicutt Bay colony, Dikran Nakesian, one of the leading spiritualists of the Foundation—if that's an honor, but let's speak well of the dead!—joined those with whom he had so much converse while on this earth. Namely, the spirits.

He was found this morning with a knife planted deep in his back; and no amount of aid by his fellow-spiritualists can contact Nakesian's ghost to find out what happened. . . .

What puzzles this Skeleton In The Closet is the quarter of a million dollars in cash that was found beside the dead man's body. . . . And equally puzzling is the disappearance of that same \$250,000.

Who has it?

And is it just a coincidence that this money totals the same amount as that which is to be paid for Myron Coulter's jewels? And is it also a coincidence that Mr. Coulter, his nephew, and Romwell Taite, jewel buyer from Chicago, were present in Dikran's apartment at the time of the murder?

We don't think it was coincidence. . . . But let the high-g geared mentalities of our police department crack that one. . . .

MR. DALY dashed off a juicy check and kept his bargain with the anonymous writer by sending it to a specified general delivery box and promptly forgetting the number.

The oil-sweating presses of the *Tribune* rolled and thundered all night, and in the early hours of dark morning the train carried its bale of news up the Maine coast to Kenicutt Bay, where it was scattered and deposited on various doorsteps.

Wheels Burton received the paper folded with the column face-outward by a worried Lucky Lamonte, and cursed long and violently. He shrugged out of his dressing gown, left his coffee untouched, got into a dark blue serge and prepared for a day of strenuous business. . . .

Sheriff Corlwey was also shown the newspaper, by Lieutenant Tilliman of the state police. The sheriff merely grunted into his moustache and said that he would wait and see, that people in the cities couldn't know as much as he did—

he, who had been on the spot during practically every minute of the investigation of the murder of that danged fortune-telling feller.

But Lieutenant Tilliman, whose authority extended beyond the sheriff's, thought it his business to call on Mr. Myron Coulter and Mr. Romwell Taite.

He accordingly left the sheriff and climbed into his police car, ordering the chauffeur to proceed to the Devil's Roost and not spare the horses.

The two men he sought were seated on the veranda that stuck like a pouting lip over the edge of the cliff. The air was wet with spray, dashed high by the tumult of the waves on the rocks far below. The world was shot through with the monotonous crash of the sea and the murmur of the wind souging through the pine and spruce.

They were having breakfast. Coffee at the Roost was excellent, as Lieutenant Tilliman well knew, and he readily accepted the invitation to join the two men.

His eyes were bright as the two others hedged for a few moments, then eventually brought the topic down to the points of interest that were uppermost in all their minds.

Tilliman looked over the rim of his coffee cup and asked with peculiar surprise, "You gentlemen aren't going through with this sale, are you?"

"Of course we are, lieutenant." Myron Coulter nodded his head, which looked like a shriveled, dried-up apple. "Dikran Nakesian's death can not affect my purpose to donate the cash to the Spiritualist Fund."

"I didn't mean that—"

The little old man cut him off with a wave of his blue-veined hand.

"I fully intend to sell a part of my jewel collection to Mr. Taite. We've already gone over the selections and are decided. And as long as Mr. Taite is willing—"

"Of course I'm willing!"

Tilliman's bright eyes darted from Coulter to Taite. There was only scorn for danger in the Chicagoan's bluff red features. His white moustache was smoothed, however, by fingers that betrayed their unsteadiness to Tilliman's quick black eyes.

"But aren't you—um—nervous? Gentlemen, it's dangerous! One death in this case is one too many—"

"Fine way for a cop to talk!" Taite snorted. "Bluffed by a cowardly murderer. If you ask me, the killer is that Storm man. Besides, there is nothing to prove that Nakesian's death is really tied up with this sale. I'd argue that assumption."

Tilliman said quietly, "Nakesian was killed because he learned of a plot against you two men. There can be no doubt about it. And the matter of money found beside Nakesian's body is too much of a coincidence to be lightly dismissed."

"That money! We have no proof there was any, except for the statement of a man who could not explain his own presence in Nakesian's apartment."

Tilliman smiled a tight little smile.

"Leo Storm's word may be taken as truth, gentlemen. I happen to have heard of him before. He's quite a wealthy man, the type of adventurer who is born squalling for excitement. He has had his nose in most of New York's criminal affairs—and has helped the metropolitan police on more than one occasion.

"Besides—" Tilliman smiled, and showed his folded newspaper across the table—"someone else besides Storm was present and saw the money. We've told no one about it—nor would the gunmen who were present be likely to contact a paper like the *Tribune* and give them such information. Yet the writer of the column knows about it—and that baby hasn't missed once in two years—damn him!"

COULTER coughed and looked at Taite. The man from Chicago considered his coffee cup for a moment, then looked up with defiance in his pale blue eyes.

"The sale is going through, regardless," Taite muttered. "I stand to make a good commission from my company, and Mr. Coulter here wants a cash stipulation. I'm going to Boston in an hour to get the money. I'll be back this evening. And tonight the sale goes through."

Tilliman looked incredulous.

"You mean you're going to ride back from Boston with a quarter of a million in cash?"

"Tcha! Nobody will bother me. An overnight grip looks innocent enough."

"Nakesian didn't think anyone would bother him for a quarter of a million,

either," Tilliman pointed out sharply.

"I can't help that."

"Well, then, I suppose you have arranged for a bodyguard?"

Taite looked surprised.

"No," I can take care of myself, lieutenant."

"By the way," Tilliman mused, his eyes narrowed shrewdly, "is your money insured?"

"No, confound you, and how do you like that?" Taite exploded. "Insinuating that I would deliberately frame a robbery—"

Tilliman spread his white palms in self-defense. "Please, I'm only an officer of the law. Such action as yours is extraordinary, to say the least."

"Mr. Taite is rather an extraordinary man," Coulter put in with a placating wheeze. "But surely, Mr. Taite, you will admit the necessity of a guard."

"No," stubbornly.

Tilliman tried again.

"Isn't the man Storm retained by you, Mr. Taite? If not, I'd advise—"

"No, your Leo Storm has nothing to do with me."

"Then I'll go along with you to see that the Nakesian affair doesn't repeat itself," Tilliman said decisively.

"I don't need you," Taite snapped curtly.

Valerie Feather was busy before her dresser, trying to repair the damage done by a sleepless night, when Sammy the bellboy slid a copy of the *Post-Tribune* under her door. She turned on the little bench and looked thoughtfully for a moment at the newspaper, then got up, with a weary little smile, and picked it up to read it.

She turned first to the feature page and read the crime column. The smile on her lips lost some of its weariness, and the veil over her eyes lifted for a moment to reveal a sparkle of mischievousness. She read the column through twice, eagerly, and then turned to her dresser and used a scissors to snip it from its surrounding text.

Then she made haste to get dressed. Her bags were packed, her room was in order. She searched it carefully to be sure that she had left nothing she needed. Satisfied, she returned to the now empty dresser, rang for Sammy to take her bags down, and stepped across the hall.

The time was only ten minutes before seven. Storm was still asleep. He did not hear the slight rustle of paper as Valerie Feather shoved the clipping under his door. She hurried downstairs, with Sammy laboring in her path with her grips and portable typewriter.

Storm slept until nine.

He took a cold shower, walked through the living room twice without seeing the paper under his door, and prepared his own breakfast in the little white kitchen, silently annoyed at the Greek for remaining in the cottage and not being on hand to prepare the meal.

Grapefruit, bacon and eggs, two cups of coffee and rolls found their ultimate destination. Satisfied, he walked to the door; and then, for the first time, the scrap of paper caught his eye.

He picked it up and read it through three times.

HIS expression changed from one of puzzlement to a broad grin. Folding the clipping carefully, he tucked it in a pocket and crossed the hall to Valerie Feather's door.

He knocked lightly at first, tentatively, then louder, with more insistence. He got no answer.

"Val!"

Bang.

"Valerie, listen!"

Bang.

"I'll take that job, Valerie! Wake up!"

Bang.

Sammy stuck his carrot-top over the head of the stairs and surveyed Storm with outraged dignity.

"Hey, Mr. Storm, you'll wake up the residents. Not so much noise, please, sir."

Storm's face was lined with anxiety.

"There's no answer, Sammy. Something's wrong. Get your key."

Sammy's lip curled. "Maybe you want I should have a *duplicate* made for you, sir?"

"Never mind the chit-chat," Storm snapped. "Get this door open. She doesn't answer."

"Sure there's no answer," Sammy replied. "She isn't there, Mr. Storm. She left almost two hours ago."

"Left? Where?"

"The Roost. She told me to tell you—"
Sammy's face wrinkled with perplex-

ity. Storm said, "Well, what did she say?"

Sammy scratched his head and considered.

"It was darn funny, and it didn't make any sense to me. She said to tell you, 'Romwell Taite is coming in on the evening train with the leaves. He's your job. Take care of him.' What's the leaves part of it mean, Mr. Storm?"

Storm smiled, chuckled, and finally laughed aloud. Sammy looked at him sideways, the corners of his eyes crinkling with disgust. There were too many crazy people in the world to suit Sammy.

"Scoot, Sam, I'm leaving, too."

"You, too? Aw—yes, *sir!* I'll call for your bags whenever you're ready, Mr. Storm. I'm sorry you're going."

CHAPTER XIV

TRAIN TRAP

THE train had to be an Anglers' Special. There couldn't be such luck as to find an empty or nearly empty train of a couple of cars hitched to a rattling locomotive. This train was sleek and new, but it swayed, bounced and bucked like the best of its historical predecessors. Its wheels thrummed along with a devilish rumbling; then, as the train hit a curve, the jangle increased and the momentum sent the laughing and screaming holiday-seekers into confused piles of arms, legs, and torsos.

They seemed to enjoy it.

Behind the club-car and the two Pullmans it was comparatively peaceful. There was one drawing-room car, in which Romwell Taite occupied compartment B. Storm lounged in the corridor, walking back and forth.

He was irritated. Whatever it was that Valerie had recognized in the newspaper clipping, she had betrayed a knowledge of the way his mind worked, and no man likes to discover that someone can anticipate his thoughts. She had known that a reading of the crime column would make him change his mind and accept her plea that he guard Romwell Taite.

He was mildly irritated both by the girl and by the recognition of his own

weakness. For the trip, as he perceived it, was valueless and a waste of time. Although he had seen Lieutenant Tilliman tripped up in Boston by the special train's schedule, and left behind to await the regularly listed train, Storm's examination of the Anglers' Special revealed nothing suspicious. His trip through the cars enabled him to allay the tedium of the ride by occasionally resorting to the crowded bar up forward and soothing his inwards with Scotch.

It was on his third trip back to the drawing room that he gained the first intimation that something was wrong. As he stepped into the vestibule, the rattle of the wheels on the tracks suddenly swelled to a deafening crescendo, mixed with a whistling wind that swept out of the gloom-gathered Maine forests. They were reaching their destination, Kennicut Bay, where it had been arranged with the conductor to drop Taite and him off.

Storm balanced himself on the steel plates, glancing at his watch. It was five: thirty. In fifteen minutes they would disembark and he would escort Romwell Taite up to the Devil's Roost. After that, his part of the job would be finished, except to see Valerie Feather. He had many things to say to Valerie.

Then the little man was there, suddenly catapulting into him. One swift glance and Storm, recovering his balance, clutched for the man.

It was Toogy, white-faced, except for his little brick-red ears. Toogy, who would know about the money found in Nakesian's apartment! How or when Toogy had boarded the train Storm did not know, but his hand flashed out to collar the gunman.

The little hood yelped and dived into the coach, struggling through the crowd of alcoholic anglers. Storm drove after him. The roar of the wheels on the tracks was suddenly drowned out by the chatter and noise of the holiday-seekers. A fat man crossed Storm's path, obliterating the sight of Toogy's wriggling little form. He tripped over a girl's leg, stumbled, caught his balance, and went on.

Toogy, white-faced, reached the end of the coach and disappeared into the vestibule. Storm reached the door half a minute later and passed into the next car, after briefly examining the men's cubicle. He saw Toogy halfway down to the end of the train. The little man reached the

last door, tried it, rattled the locked panel, and cowered, the very picture of fear, his palms pressed flat against the steel behind him.

As Storm came up to Toogy, the little man tried to duck under his arm. Storm caught him by the slack of his collar, slammed him back against the door and held him there, breathing hard through his nose.

A tanned, burly young man detached himself from a group of giggling girls and said, "Hey, stop hitting the little fellow."

"Take care of your lady friends," Storm snapped, and shoved the man's fish-pole back at him. "This little guy's a killer."

ONE of the girls screamed, and Storm bit out, "Keep quiet." To Toogy, he rapped, "Come along, rat; you and I have some cheese we'll nibble at together."

Toogy tried desperately to free himself, attempting to wriggle free of his coat and leave it in Storm's hand. The attempt failed. Storm clipped his right fist up hard under the little man's chin, and Toogy promptly lost all thought of resistance. Slingshotting Toogy's body under his arm, as though the hood were just so many potatoes, Storm made his way back through the crowded coaches, ignoring the curious glances and comments directed his way.

At the Pullman car he paused, abruptly dumped Toogy to the floor, and ran toward the door of drawing-room B. It was open, and it shouldn't have been. Romwell Taite had no business going out of his compartment; and no one had any legitimate business going in. But doors are only opened for one of two purposes—

Ice flowed in Storm's veins before he reached the door. Toogy—the little man's appearance had been to serve as a decoy, to lure him away for a while—

He was right.

Romwell Taite was in the compartment, but Romwell Taite did not know it. The big man's head rested a foot away from the compartment door, face turned sideways on the floor. The limbs were sprawled, the right arm thrown forward as though the big man had collapsed in the act of reaching for the door. His face wore a look of stark terror, and

his iron-gray hair was disheveled.

Storm breathed loudly through his nose.

"Hell."

He turned and dragged Toogy's body in out of the corridor, then went back to the door and rapped to a startled onlooker. "Get the conductor!"

Closing the compartment door, he dropped down beside Taite's body, turning the jewel buyer's head in his hands. He breathed easier.

Taite was not dead.

He pulled back the man's eyelids and carefully examined the sightless, staring pupils.

"Drugged," he muttered. "What—"

His attention fastened on a zipper case. It hung on a little hook between two black windows. The glass reflected the yellow electric bulb and the gauntness of his own face. Beyond the windows there was nothing to be seen.

Storm hefted the case, transferred it from one hand to the other and frowned. It was heavy.

He lifted back one flap, after an effort that bent the thin metal lock, and caught sight of green currency. But it wasn't the money Romwell Taite had withdrawn from the Boston bank. These packets had the familiar blue bands around them. And one of the topmost bundles had been torn open and several bills withdrawn!

Storm suddenly produced the scrap of blue paper he had picked up on the floor of the roadster the night before, while riding with Valerie Feather and Gregory Dolman. He compared it with those in the zipper case. His scrap of blue paper was identical with those on the packets in the brief-case.

The money didn't make sense. A thought buzzed around inside Storm's mind like a trapped beetle. That money wasn't the money Romwell Taite had obtained from the Boston bank. The person who had drugged Taite had substituted this money. Perhaps the attacker had not been aware that Storm was on the train, and had hoped the deception and substitution would not be discovered for some time. But then, what was the purpose of drugging the man to obtain one fortune in cash, if only to leave another? Or had Romwell Taite never withdrawn his cash from the bank? Had there ever been more than one of the

quarter-millions floating around loose at one time?

He turned with a puzzled frown, sighed, and searched absently in his pockets for a cigarette, looking thoughtfully at Romwell Taite's unconscious body. His glance picked up the empty liquor glass that had rolled under the seat, and he pulled it into sight with the toe of his shoe. He lifted it, wrapping it in a handkerchief, and smelled it.

"Mickey Finn—Wheels Burton's favorite. What the hell!"

THE conductor was coming down the aisle, talking loudly, demanding to be shown the location of the trouble. Storm went to the door of the drawing-room and crooked a finger at the fat man.

There was a little crowd of curious people collected around the doorway by now. The conductor forged through them with pompous importance, his face perturbed. His perturbation became worse when he saw the bodies of Toogy and Romwell Taite on the floor of drawing-room B.

"Well, well, what—oh!"

"One of them is drugged," said Storm crisply. "The other I knocked out."

"You knocked out? Why? Drugged, eh? How do you know?"

"I've had experience," Storm said bluntly, and the conductor's round face quivered.

"Well, well, I'm glad it's nothing more serious. Very glad. Robbery motive, I expect? And you caught the criminal? Very commendable, young man. Very commendable."

Storm said, "The robbery was successful. This little rat wasn't the criminal. There was an overnight bag stolen, full of rather valuable papers."

"Papers, eh? Well, well! Well."

"I want to know how this man—" indicating Romwell Taite — "was drugged." Storm indicated the handkerchief-wrapped glass he had discovered under the chair. "If it's not too much trouble."

"Trouble? No trouble. But how? You reach Kennicut in ten minutes, young man. Ten minutes. What can you do in such a short time?"

"Get me the steward, or whoever totes the liquor to patrons who ring for it."

"Oh, yes. Yes, that's a good idea."

It took three minutes to find the

steward. He was frightened: a white-faced, long-legged, thin man, with a bald pate that shone under the yellow train lights.

His story was brief.

"I brought a tray with two ryes in here by accident. I apologized and started to back out when that gentleman—the big one on the floor, sir—reached out and grabbed one. He was shaky. His hands were trembling. I thought he was ill, or frightened, and I gave him the drink, of course. What else could I do, sir?"

Storm poked his spectacles up higher on his nose, put his head back and stared thoughtfully at the frightened man. "What sort of accident could it be that made you step into the drawing-room?"

"Why, a gentleman ordered these drinks. Told me to bring them to this compartment. He must have been mistaken, of course."

"What did he look like?"

The steward rolled his eyes and looked at the two men who sprawled unconscious in the crowded little compartment. He licked his lips and started to speak twice before he finally said anything coherent.

"I—I could not say what he looked like. I didn't pay much attention."

"Tall?"

"Er—yes, sir."

"Bushy hair?"

"Possibly, sir."

"Hooked nose?"

"I—I think so, sir."

"Fat?"

"Uh—yes, sir."

Storm clucked with disgust. "You'll answer yes to any question I ask you, won't you, steward?"

"Uh—no, sir."

Storm cursed softly and turned to the conductor. "We'll have to search this train from one end to the other. And hurry! I'll recognize whoever did this!"

The fat conductor protested, "But we're almost at Kennicut! The train can't be delayed. There's been no real trouble; I can't see—"

But Storm had already pushed through the door and through the crowd of curious passengers. The conductor waddled after him, muttering to himself. He locked the drawing-room door on his way out.

THE two Pullmans and their human contents yielded nothing in the form

of a familiar face. Storm went on until he came to the vestibule that led to the mail car. The door swung on its hinges with each buck of the rattling train.

Storm yelled to the conductor, "That's the mail car?"

"There's only Tony in there. Nobody could hide in there, mister."

The raucous, shrill wail of the locomotive whistle drowned out Storm's reply. The train lurched as the engineer applied the brakes, and steam hissed up around the vestibule in which they stood. Storm rubbed at the fogged window and looked out. The lights of Kennicut were drifting past.

The conductor was jittery. "You'll have to get off. You and your friend. If, indeed, he isn't just drunk. I wouldn't be surprised if he was just drunk, young man."

Storm looked into the mail car and turned around with a taut smile.

"Your mail clerk ever get drunk?" he asked curiously.

"Tony? No. Tony never drinks."

"Take a look at him, conductor."

"I— See here, you'll have to get off. You must—Oh, *my!*"

The young mail clerk, in vest and rolled-up sleeves, was sprawled on the floor before the letter racks. His hair was disheveled and, from where Storm stood, he could see that the young man had been struck down from behind.

The conductor waddled into the mail car. "Government property," he muttered. "Robbery."

But there was nothing missing, as the conductor hurriedly checked the bags of mail. The clerk was moved to a comfortable position until he should regain consciousness. The train slowed, rumbled over the Kennicut river bridge and hissed to a standstill beside the wooden station platform of Kennicut. Steam exploded in sizzling, deafening jets from the boxes.

"The mail for Kennicut—I'll have to get it off. Goodness, what a trip! Here, help me."

The conductor quickly lifted two bags marked Kennicut and dropped them into a chute. They tumbled out of the mail car onto the station platform.

Storm, starting for the door, turned a politely curious face to the stout conductor. "Does Kennicut always get that much mail? Two bags?"

"Sometimes. Not often. Getting off?"

Storm turned and ran through the Pullmans to the drawing-room. A sizzling exclamation left his lips as he forged through the reluctant crowds of curious passengers to compartment B.

Toogy was gone.

CHAPTER XIV

A GAME WITH DICE

STORM stood on the station platform and held Romwell Taite erect with one arm, carrying the brief-case in his free hand.

A flat rectangle of light suddenly fell along the warped platform boards, and the shadow of a man plodded alongside.

"Hey."

Storm turned carefully, Romwell Taite's legs wrapping around his own. The station-master of Kennicut stood peering at him: a frizzled, gray, stooping man, with ruddy cheeks that bulged with chewing tobacco.

"Your partner looks drunk— Oh, hello, Leo. And it's—"

"Mr. Taite. Joshua, did anybody else get off that train?"

"Nope. Nothin' and nobody, not that I seen. But can't say I'm sure; I was nappin' inside."

A stream of tobacco juice spattered the coals on the roadbed. "What's-a-matter with him?" jerking a thumb at Taite.

Storm shifted his arm again, bringing his burden up higher. "Sick, or asleep, or drunk. I don't know. It must have been something he swallowed."

"That city hooch. Bath-tub gin."

"Prohibition is long over," Storm informed him. He made slow progress toward the shack, his eyes trying to pierce the gloom on either end of the curving platform. The forest pressed in on the little pool of light he stood in, dark and whispering of many secrets. His flesh crawled as he realized that he was a perfect target for anyone hiding in that fringe of mystery.

He dragged Romwell Taite's body inside the shack and dropped him into a chair with a sigh of relief. Joshua ambled in after him, his jaws working methodically.

"Old Coulter's niece been calling here for you, Leo."

"Who?"

"Valerie Feather."

Storm tried to keep from appearing too astonished.

He said, dropping the brief-case into Taite's lap, "I mean, who did you say she was?"

Joshua grinned and squirted tobacco into a brass cuspidor. "Nobody knows, except me. She's a poor relation. Niece of old Myron Coulter. Poor as a sand-sniper, she is. He tuk pity on her, the old skinflint—gave her a job workin' for him. And him with millions. Old miser!"

"So she's old Myron's niece—that's news! No wonder she wouldn't say—she knew I'd think—"

"Eh?" asked Joshua.

"Nothing." Storm was suddenly brisk. "Who took care of the mail-bags?"

"Bags? There was only one."

"Two," said Storm.

"Only one due. Might be two, at that. See the Sheriff, up t'other end of the platform."

"The Indian?" Storm rapped, his query like an explosion.

"Sure, he does odd jobs. Good at mail work. Always catches bags off evenin' train, when he's not too blind drunk to see what he's doin'."

Storm waved a brusque hand at Romwell Taite and the brief-case.

"Take care of him, and that bag. Call for a taxi and wait. Don't let either Taite or that case out of your sight until the taxi comes."

"Ain't more'n one taxi in Kennicut. Ab's got it. Ab's my brother. He's eatin' supper now."

"Call him. Ship Taite up to the Roost and be sure the brief-case goes with him. That is, unless I fail to come back right away."

"You goin' somewhere?"

"I want to see that Sheriff. You call that taxi."

The breeze came in from the ocean, raw and damp, and brought with it a wet chill. Storm moved his gun from his shoulder-holster to his side pocket and stepped quickly out of the pool of light in the doorway toward the second shack at the end of the platform.

LIGHT streamed from the windows, coming from a solitary lamp that

hung from a cord in the ceiling. The room was deserted. A table, polished by long wear, had a single bag resting on it, marked: U. S. Mail. Beyond that, the room was empty. The Indian was not in sight, but someone had taken in the bags.

One bag. There had been two. The other, filled with the money stolen from Taite—that was gone.

Across the tracks, the tree-line pressed in close, edging surreptitiously toward the encroaching railroad right-of-way. Storm thought he saw a vague movement there, and suddenly dropped to his knees before he could recognize or define it. Flame winked with a gush of red and orange from the dark mass beyond the roadbed. Something whanged overhead, and the glass in the shack window vanished with a merry tinkle. A shard dropped beside his right foot, broke into a dozen fragments.

He swore in a tense whisper and ran off the platform, his gun in hand. There was nothing to be seen in the dense undergrowth ahead of him.

He picked his way across the first set of rails, and his foot dislodged a microscopic avalanche of gravel. It fled down the incline with a little rattling noise; then bright flame once more licked at him from the blackness ahead.

A bullet plucked suggestively at his sleeve.

This time Storm caught a glimpse of movement, of faint starlight on a blued barrel. He lifted his own gun, fired once, and then walked rapidly to the left, crouching low, and gained the opposite embankment.

He had missed with his shot.

He reached the fringe of undergrowth and listened, breathing through tight lips.

A twig snapped.

He ducked, squeezing the trigger of his big automatic. The report crashed with resounding echoes through the ghostly pines and white birch. Lead bit spitefully into the hole beside him. The shot almost coincided with his own reply; and this time he heard a startled exclamation and a word of command.

His enemy was only twenty feet away from him.

He heard a hoarse voice and leveled his gun. Then he heard another voice, coming from the opposite direction.

So there were two of them.

For a moment panic tore with clawing fingers at his brain. He crushed it down, stepped cautiously toward the last voice.

Its owner was gone, vanished in the shades toward the mountain. Behind him, over the route he had taken, came the sound of cautious feet and cloth brushing on the bushes.

He whirled, again caught the blue gleam of a gun barrel, and fired. His feet slipped in the soft till and shot out from under him. His bullet buried itself in the ground. So did the muzzle of his gun. There was soft mud under him, and his automatic was shoved deep in the muck by his involuntary attempt to save himself.

Now his gun was useless.

The skulker in the woods behind him was coming closer, with cautious footsteps that slid over the fallen leaves. The man was holding his fire, drawing nearer until he could be sure of the kill.

Storm got to his feet and scrambled up a slope, tearing through the brush with long legs.

Whang!

Thank God, the man could not see to shoot straight.

He clambered on, sucking in his breath, and in five more harrowing minutes came to a little clearing. A tumble-down shack loomed crazily in the dark pattern of the trees.

He heard water chuckling over rocks, and he could see the sky. Mist was coming in from the ocean, obscuring with the ghostly sweep of a vague hand what little starlight there was.

His opponent at last grew impatient.

“You stop! Let’s talk!”

Talk! Was it a trap? Storm was helpless, in any event. He paused and stood under a tall pine near the cabin. He was only a faint shadow in a fantastic pattern of deeper shadows.

“Your gun no good!” called the stalker.

And Storm knew who the man was.

It was the Indian. The “Sheriff.”

THE starlight brightened momentarily as the Indian stepped into the clearing. Storm could see the man’s food-stained vest, his ragged trousers, his fantastic Stetson hat.

A grin was on the Indian’s earthy face. A gun was in his gnarled fist. It was no blank revolver now. It was a

heavy .45, and smoke still trickled from the muzzle from the last shot that had been fired.

Storm rasped, "What's the idea? Why have you been shooting at me?"

"Told to."

"Who told you?"

The Indian grinned again, prodding him with the big gun.

"That not your business. You come along to cabin. You sleep there. Sit there. Don't care what you do. You just stay."

"But why?"

"You make trouble, that why. March."

The Indian was carrying, incongruously enough, a new overnight grip of black pigskin. Storm eyed it, eyed the gun, and "marched."

The cabin ahead of them was their destination. The Indian prodded him in before him, closed the door, bolted it, and scratched a match. An oil lamp flickered, illuminating a filthy interior. There was a broken-down iron bedstead, a table scarred with many knife marks, and a chair; these completed the furnishings.

The Indian pulled down tattered green blinds and turned to Storm.

"Maybe you want to sleep?"

Storm shook his head impatiently. "How long am I going to stay here?"

"Tonight. Maybe all day tomorrow."

The Indian looked indifferent. "Maybe I have to kill you. I'm not sure. I'll see what boss says."

"Who's your boss?" Storm asked.

The Indian grinned and made no reply. He put the overnight bag under the bed and sat down on the ragged mattress. He pulled a knife from a hunting sheath and began to whittle at a peg of wood. He whistled a lugubrious tune.

Storm got up out of the chair and walked to the window. The Indian picked up his revolver again and waved it at him.

"No, sit down. Stay down. Otherwise, kill you now. No funny business."

It would be foolish to antagonize the Indian moron. Had it been another person, a normal man—if a killer could be called normal—Storm would have taken his chances in a rush to gain possession of the revolver. But with the Indian, force was useless. The Indian was a mountain of brute, animal strength and, despite his ragged appearance and shuffling gait, he could move like a streak of light.

No, there had to be some other way to get free.

Precious minutes dragged by.

Storm delved with his fingers in his pockets, finding nothing of value save a few crumpled bills. He tried his vest pockets, and discovered the dice he had been carrying for the past three days. He leaned back in his chair thoughtfully, his eyes fixed on the black overnight bag.

He asked, "You were the only one who shot at me?"

"Me," said the Indian, unblinking.

"Who got you to pick up the mail-bags?"

"Mr. Joshua."

"I mean the second bag—the one that had the overnight bag in it?"

"Huh," grinned the Indian.

Storm shrugged hopeless and resigned shoulders.

"Okay, have it your way, Sheriff. But if I have to stay here, let's lighten the tedium. Let's have a drink."

"Haven't got any liquor. No money."

It was the answer Storm sought. He laughed and pointed with his toe at the bag under the Indian's feet.

"Don't you know what's in there?"

"Sure, I know."

"What?"

"Money, lots of it."

"Well, then, why not use some of it? You can tie me up, go into town, buy some good stuff, and come back. We'll drink together."

"Nope. Won't touch. Money no good."

A LITTLE shiver curled the bones of Storm's spine. He looked down at the little pile of shavings around the Indian's feet.

"That money is all right, Sheriff. You're going to be paid for tonight's work, aren't you? You may as well take it in advance. You're important to your boss."

"You bet. That what he say?"

"Then take your pay."

"Nope. I tie you up, though, and take your money, not his."

"No, that would be stealing," Storm said calmly.

Muscles twitched about his mouth as he spoke, but he dared not smile. The Indian nodded soberly, and looked puzzled.

"I'll tell you what we can do," Storm offered, taking the dice from his vest

pocket. "I'll roll you to see who pays for the drinks."

"Have no money."

"Use some of that in the grip. Whoever wins buys some of Lucci's best."

The Indian wet his lips and considered. Storm held his breath. Then the Indian sheathed his knife, tossed the whittled peg into a corner and pulled the grip out from under the bed. He opened it and looked for a long time at the piles of crisp, green currency that Romwell Taite had withdrawn from the Boston bank.

"Lot of money," the Indian muttered.

"Sure. Nobody will miss a couple of bills. I've got thirty dollars on me—Let's roll."

He let the Indian win the first cast, and had difficulty convincing him that there should be another roll. Finally the Indian agreed. They rolled on the table, which the Indian had shoved against the cabin wall. The gun in the Indian's hand was always held on the alert.

Storm rolled and won. They were even.

He rolled again, and won thirty dollars. The smallest the Indian had was a hundred-dollar bill.

"I'll roll you for the century," Storm said. "My sixty against your hundred."

The Indian licked his lips and nodded. Storm cast a six and a trey. His next cast totaled eight. His third point was nine. He took the hundred dollars.

The Indian was perspiring.

"That too much money. Boss wasn't gonna give me so much. You give it back."

"That's not fair," Storm protested easily. He rattled the cubes in his hand. "I'll roll you this against another."

He got a seven on the first cast, and took a second bill from the Indian. The "Sheriff" licked his lips and rubbed his earth-colored face. His sloe eyes crinkled around the corners as the muscles of his face lifted to express merriment. He was beginning to look petulant.

"Roll again," the Indian commanded.

Storm won once again.

He was playing a desperate game. He made no effort to conceal his manipulations of the dice. It was a matter of time until it dawned on the Indian that he was being cheated. The sooner it came, the better.

The Indian muttered, "Lemme roll-

um."

The Indian lost. Storm had five hundred dollars.

He stepped back and said, "I quit, Sheriff. I've had enough."

The Indian, scowling, wiped perspiration from his slanting brow. "You can't quit. Boss kill me, I lose so much money. Gimme it back. Rollum!"

Storm rolled. He wagered the whole five hundred dollars, and won. He had a thousand dollars. He had won on the first cast, with the third straight seven.

The Indian suddenly blurted, "Lemme see dice. Think you cheat me! Dice crooked!"

Storm's face sagged and went gray.

"Cheat you, Sheriff? I—No, what do you want to see the dice for? Why should I do anything like that?"

The Indian was convinced. He snarled suddenly, put the gun down on the table, and reached out a lean brown hand for the dice.

"Gimme!"

"Sure. Right on the button!"

Storm exploded into action. His hand shot out and gripped the Indian's extended wrist. He yanked savagely, and the Indian went off balance, pulled sharply away from the table and the gun. The man cursed and dug a claw-like hand at Storm's face. He took it on the cheekbone, rolling his head, and the Indian crashed against him.

THE smell of earth and sour clothing reached Storm's nostrils. He released his grip on the Indian's arm and lunged toward the gun. The Indian belloyed angrily and yanked at the knife in his sheath. Storm gave up reaching for the revolver. He caught the Indian's arm again and yanked suddenly, bracing his feet.

The Indian's middle came forward, his knees bent, his head shot back by the force of the savage pull. His chin was exposed, a perfect mark.

Storm's left came up almost from the floor in a drive that knocked the Indian off his feet and sent him flying into the corner. He crashed into the log wall, his head making a queer thumping sound. He sank slowly to his knees and pitched forward on his face, his crazy sombrero rolling in loops over the floor.

The back of the Indian's head was bloody.

"Poor fool," Storm gasped.

He turned to the table and scooped up the money. The gun was gone, hidden under the Indian's body. The Indian was dead, and Storm felt a cold distaste to touching the gun.

He shoved the loose currency into the grip and walked unsteadily to the door, sucking in great great gulps of air. He unfastened the lock and turned to look at the "Sheriff."

"You didn't have to tell me who put you up to this," he muttered. "I know."

CHAPTER XVI

AND MORE MURDER

FOG came in over the ocean: deep, thick, tasting of the sea.

Storm walked with long, jolting strides down the side of the slope toward the station. His legs trembled with the urge for speed. He had been gone about an hour. Down below, the station lights came nearer, until he scrambled across the railroad embankments and up on the creaking wooden platform.

He kicked open the door of the shack and put down the bag of money.

A head came up over the round, pot-bellied stove. It was the ruddy face of Joshua, the station-master.

"Hi, Leo. Mr. Taite is—Hey, what happened to you, young fellow?"

Joshua's eyes took in Storm's battered appearance.

"I slipped," Storm grunted.

His glance swept the bare shack. It was empty, except for Joshua and himself. Romwell Taite and his brief-case full of alien money was gone.

"What happened here?" he rasped.

Joshua rolled his head. "Mr. Taite, he came to, and picked up his 'folio mad as hell and went out of here. My brother Ab tuk him to the Roost in his taxicab. I tried to get Mr. Taite to wait for you, but he wouldn't even listen. He was in one big hurry."

Storm muttered something between tight lips. Then, "Any other cars around?"

Joshua shook his ruddy head.

"Nope. No other taxis in Kennicut. Don't need them. Folks that come here have their own cars." He paused, struck

by an afterthought. "Miss Feather was here again, 'bout ten minutes ago. She was looking for you. She didn't say."

A gnawing deep in the pit of Storm's stomach urged him to haste. He was losing time, talking to Joshua. There wasn't another car he could take to Devil's Mount. He would have to walk—a good four miles. It would take almost ninety minutes, climbing uphill. He had no time to waste. Something was brewing, indicated by his encounter with the Indian, that boded no good for the occupants of the house on the cliff.

He picked up his bag and swung away into the night, heading through the thickening fog to the mountain. He was thinking only of the fact that Death lurked above him, and that he was going to be too late to prevent it. . . .

He had walked for what seemed like ages when a hail washed out of the darkness.

"Halt, you!"

Storm paused, with a sigh of relief. His legs ached, and he put the grip down and sat on it. The relaxation was heavenly.

He waited.

Presently a lanky shape materialized out of the darkness of the lawn around the Devil's Roost: a tall man with a wispy beard and deep-set eyes in a hatchet-face. He carried a shotgun under the crook of his arm, cradling it so that it could be dropped at an instant's notice into his hard, calloused palms.

"What're you doing here, hey? You crazy?"

"Just tired," Storm sighed. His eyes took in the deputy's badge on the man's suede windbreaker. "Has anybody been murdered yet, do you know?"

"What's that funny business, hey? Answer me!"

"I must see Myron Coulter and Romwell Taite. That is, if they are still alive."

"And why shouldn't they be alive? What reason should they be dead—"

"Half a million green reasons," Storm replied. He got to his feet as another shape came out of the gloom from the direction of the big, rambling house.

"What's up, Jeff?"

"I caught a prowler. A bug. Sheriff Corlwee. He talks crazy-like."

"I'm just tired, that's all," said Storm easily. "Hello, sheriff."

THE lean and grizzled sheriff peered at Storm with his cheated-looking eyes. His horsy face grew longer, then relaxed.

"Oh, it's you, Storm. What do you want?"

"First, I want to rest. Then I've got to see Myron Coulter and Romwell Taite. It's important, sheriff."

Corlweye considered, then said to Jeff, "Search him. Take his guns. He carries them."

"Not this time. I haven't any guns," Storm said.

They searched him, anyway. Satisfied, the three men walked to the veranda, where the deputy left the others to return to his post on the lawn.

Sheriff Corlweye walked around Coulter's Cadillac touring car, which was parked in the driveway, and clumped up the steps.

"It's all right, lieutenant. My men are wide awake. It's only this Storm fellow."

"Only me," Storm agreed meekly.

The thin and dapper lieutenant stood in the doorway, his sharp, delicately chiseled face looking disagreeable.

"Storm, how did you manage to follow Taite?" Tilliman demanded. "I got on the regular train and missed him. He wasn't on it. I had to fly part of the way and come the rest by a state border-patrol car. I'm lucky to be alive."

"Taite took an Anglers' Special," Storm explained. "I trailed him around in Boston every minute while he was there. I took no chances. He learned about this special vacation train and took it. I just managed to hop the last car."

Lieutenant Tilliman snapped, "And what happened? Taite looked like the last rose of summer when he came in here."

"He was drugged on the train; I slipped up. Someone stole the money he had."

Tilliman looked at him with suspicion. "See here, Taite had his money with him—"

"Not the money he took from the Boston bank," Storm said wearily. He said, "Look, I'll explain later. Just let me sit down."

Lieutenant Tilliman looked puzzled. He led the way down the main hall, and then through a darkly paneled corridor into a library, furnished in equally somber colors. A log fire crackled in a large

hearth; and, showing over the back of a lounge before the fire, was a head of honey-colored hair.

Valerie Feather sat up, looked around, and smiled shortly at Storm. "Hello, Mr. Storm. You didn't take on my job."

"Yes, I did. I fell down at the very end. But if Taite is here, that's okay."

She looked at him more closely. "You're all scratched up, and—"

He remembered that she was the niece of Myron Coulter. "I climbed the mountain," he said shortly. "There is only one taxi in Kennicut, and Taite grabbed that. And this time I can dispense with your expert services as a nurse."

She sniffed and went out of the room. He heard her footsteps going up the big staircase to the second floor.

Lieutenant Tilliman walked around the lounge to the fireplace. He came to Storm and prodded the traveling bag with his toe.

"What have you got there?"

Storm was still looking down the hallway. His eyes were puzzled, uncertain. He said, "It looks like an overnight grip to me. I go on a trip prepared for anything—with an extra shirt and socks."

Fortunately, the little lieutenant did not ask what was in the grip. And the sight of Valerie Feather did not prompt him to take Tilliman into his confidence. If the girl were Myron Coulter's niece, then she had the best motive of all to kill Dikran Nakesian. Of the impoverished branch of the Coulter family-tree, she would scarcely view old Myron's donating two hundred and fifty thousand dollars to Nakesian with an easy eye.

He was suddenly aware that Lieutenant Tilliman was also staring down the hall after the girl; it occurred to Storm that Tilliman might connect the blonde hairs found on Nakesian's lounge with the honey-colored hair of Valerie Feather.

He said rapidly, "Where are Taite and Coulter?"

Tilliman took his glance from the corridor and jerked a slender thumb toward dark-paneled double doors at the opposite end of the library.

"They're in there, making their deal in privacy. Taite's looking over the gems. He took the money in with him. I've got two troopers here—" He pointed toward the shadowy hall of the library, and Storm was startled to observe two

heretofore unnoticed troopers in their state uniforms. "And Corlwey's got a half dozen deputies with shotguns and rifles patrolling the grounds. I imagine the deal's safe enough.

STORM said, "The deal isn't as safe as you think it is, lieutenant. I haven't time to explain, but—"

He started for the double door, but one of the two troopers stepped forward and barred his path.

Tilliman snapped, "Stay away from there, Storm!"

"But you're a fool, lieutenant. There's been a mistake, I know! Those two men in there—"

"Tell me what's wrong, Storm."

Storm looked into the lieutenant's eyes; they were cold and hard and intent. He would hate to have Valerie Feather at the mercy of those eyes.

He shrugged. "I've got something to say to Taite."

"Sit down. They'll soon be out."

Storm seemed to hesitate. "On your responsibility, Tilliman. Perhaps nothing has gone wrong, and in that case you shouldn't have to hear what I have to say to Taite."

"Sit down."

Storm picked up the bag without another word and walked over to a chair in the corner. He put the bag under his feet and began tucking it in under the chair. With every movement Storm made, he managed to push the grip deeper into the shadows, using his heels at every opportunity.

Sheriff Corlwey entered the library and asked Tilliman a question concerning the bluff and the necessity for a guard. Tilliman went out with him, jerking his head at the two troopers and then at Storm. They nodded understanding.

Storm did not have long to wait.

The low murmur of voices from beyond the double doors suddenly burst into angry, staccato speech. He distinguished old Coulter's high-pitched, nasal tones, and Romwell Taite's growling rumble.

The two troopers looked uneasily at each other.

One of the two doors popped open, then, and Storm gained a glimpse of a cozy, well-lit study. He could see French windows that showed only the black night

beyond them, and a table with a shaded lamp spilling yellow light on jewels that rested on black velvet. The jewels were on one side of the table. The other end held the brief-case, open to show its contents of paper currency scattered about. The little old figure of Myron Coulter stood before one of the windows, hands clasped behind him, his back to the library.

Romwell Taite came out of the study and glared angrily at the two troopers. He did not see Storm, who sat well back in the shadowy corner.

Taite's heavy jowls shook with rage. His face, paled by the effects of his drugged drink, had two high spots of color on his prominent cheek-bones.

He snapped to the nearer of the two silent troopers, "Where's the lieutenant, man? I've been robbed!"

"Robbed?"

The two troopers glanced at each other with white dismay. One of them licked his lips and stepped forward, hand outstretched.

"How could you be—"

"Don't pose there like a fool! Where's Tilliman?"

The trooper bolted for the door, and Romwell Taite went after him.

The shot came like the sudden snapping of a taut, thrumming wire. It whanged through the walls of the house, seemingly echoing from everywhere with a thunderous bark.

Someone yelled a question in the back of the house, and heavy feet clattered on the hall floor. The remaining trooper, standing before the door, literally jumped a foot sideways at the sound. Yet the shot really was no more than a quick *pop!* that echoed away, and it was not repeated.

Storm got to his feet, ignoring the trooper's gun. He moved toward the door with long strides. The trooper looked at him with indecision, then muttered:

"Come on, we'll see what goes on."

The big double doors were not locked. The room beyond was empty. There were the jewels on the table, and the cash. Storm now saw a little Corot that had been taken down from the wall to reveal the gleaming interior of a chrome-steel safe. The jewels and the money lay under the glow of the table-lamp—a half million dollars in cash and gems.

The trooper looked at the table and swallowed loudly.

"Gee!"

Storm cast only one swift glance at the assembled array of wealth. He got down and looked on the floor under the table. It was clear and empty. The whole room was empty—empty of little old Myron Coulter. He was simply not in it.

A stray gust of wind blew fog into the room. The French windows were open, the windows through which Storm had glimpsed the old man peering while Romwell Taite had gone in angry search of Lieutenant Tilliman.

The trooper spoke up. All he said was, "The old man is gone."

"But not far," Storm suggested.

He stepped through the window. Then he went three paces and drew back with a quick, rasping intake of breath. The trooper crowded close behind him, bumping against his shoulder.

"Hell."

From the wall of the house to the iron grill fence that protected stray feet from the edge of the cliff was a distance of perhaps twenty feet. A flower-bed was plotted in the center of this ground. In the light that streamed from the study window, it was a gaudy riot of plants, a mad conglomeration of nature's lavish color schemes, neatly arranged in symmetrical designs.

There was only one odd note in the symphony of flowers, and that was the incongruous, darker mass of deep maroon that could not have been one of the gardener's arrangements.

It was the body of old Myron Coulter, clad in a maroon dressing-gown.

He lay on his side, almost on his back—which in itself was an added incongruity. One arm was outflung over his head, the other was at right angles to the body. A dark stain appeared close to the old man's silvery hairline and wriggled down one side of his wrinkled, seamed face. The stain welled up in a dark spot far up on the old man's scalp.

A nasturtium waved over the man's head.

The trooper stared at the body. "I guess he's—"

"Dead as they make them," Storm blurted irreverently.

CHAPTER XVII

ENTER THE "SHERIFF"

ONE by one, the people on Devil's Mount came to the scene, drawn by the shot like iron filings to a magnet. Footsteps thudded on the lawn. Shapes hallooed anxiously to each other.

The trooper took a step toward the body, only to be reminded by Storm's tug at his arm.

"The ground is soft—don't make any prints."

The trooper nodded and swallowed noisily. Storm moved cautiously around the flower-bed, the wind pushing and tugging at his clothing, the ocean murmuring like a giant voice, in a monotone. Shreds of fog occasionally fled through the scene like frightened wraiths.

The light that streamed from the open study window glinted on blue steel and a snubby barrel, close by the mesh iron fence that guarded against the cliff. It was the murder gun. Storm did not touch it, but swept the surrounding ground with a thoughtful glance.

Near the wall of the house, almost under the trooper's boots, was a pebble. Not an ordinary pebble. It had a thin piece of white string tied around it. It was knotted twice, and one end of the twine trailed in loose coils over the ground. Storm looked up at the wall of the ugly, rambling house and clucked his tongue.

Lieutenant Tilliman came running out of the night, his thin face sharp and anxious. His little eyes puckered as he saw the body of old Myron Coulter.

"Ah. . . . Hell."

"The gun is over there," said Storm, indicating the fence. "And I found this."

He pointed with the toe of his shoe to the pebble.

Sheriff Corlwey, with two deputies, came up and said, "Aaah."

He was in time to see Tilliman examining the pebble.

"Trash," the sheriff commented briefly. His lean face was sallow in the yellow light.

"That gun—" said Tilliman.

The lieutenant knelt and lined up the man's outflung arm with the weapon.

"Suicide, maybe," Tilliman muttered.

"My guess is murder," said Storm.

"Eh? How?"

"That remains to be seen."

He turned and walked into the study, where the table-lamp shone down on the exhibition of jewels and scattered packets of money.

"Half a million dollars," he sighed.

"Half a *million!*" repeated one of the deputies, following him inside.

Sheriff Corlwey bellowed from the flower-bed, "Get back to your post, Jeff! Now is the time we've got to be on guard! Somethin' mighty funny is goin' on."

"Funny isn't the word for it," Storm murmured. He walked around the table and picked up a jeweler's loupe that had fallen on the floor.

Tilliman plucked at his sleeve.

"Why not suicide, Storm?"

"No. Why should old Coulter kill himself?"

Only the muttering voice of the ocean answered him.

Romwell Taite came through the partly open French window. His heavy-jowled face was saggy and yellow. His military moustache looked as though it were pasted on his upper lip, and worriment etched deep creases in the lines from his nose to the corners of his mouth.

He said shakily, "Oh, there you are. How did this thing happen, with all you men—"

"What did you want of me, Taite?"

That from Tilliman. Taite shrugged and looked frightened; he glanced at the window and back again with a quick shudder.

"I was robbed, but that hardly matters, now. Death is much more important, isn't it, than money? And yet—"

TAITE shoved his fingers through the piles of money. His gesture was disdainful, as though his hands held contempt for the fortune he held in his grasp.

"This money," he said, "is not worth the paper it's printed on. Old Coulter examined it, although I told him it had come from the bank. Coulter said it was counterfeit!"

"Counterfeit!"

Tilliman gasped, and Sheriff Corlwey went "Hugh!" The word was like an explosion; only one man seemed totally unmoved by the announcement, almost as though he hadn't heard it or grasped

its significance. That was Storm. His thin smile broadened for a fleet instant, and then he took a quiet, inconspicuous place in the background. He was not to remain there long, however.

Tilliman's eyes widened, narrowed, and he snatched up one of the thousand-dollar bills in his well manicured white hand.

After a moment's hushed silence, he sighed. "Yes, it's queer. But *why?* Damn it all, Taite, you got this money from the bank, you said."

"I—"

Taite suddenly spotted Storm, and pointed an accusing finger at the tall man who looked so unconcerned.

"He did it—Storm! You switched on me! This isn't the money I got from Boston! You drugged me on the train and switched money on me! I understand that whole business now!"

Storm shook his head; mockery danced in his deep gray eyes.

"Why can't I come back at you and say that it was you who plotted this business all the time?" His voice was harshly metallic. "Taite, you had this counterfeit money printed in the first place. Nakesian stole it from you, and you murdered Nakesian to prevent your switch-plot from leaking out. Your plan was to buy the jewels with the good money and later substitute the counterfeit quarter million, thus getting Coulter's jewels at the simple expense of finding a good engraver and having the cash printed."

With each lashing word Storm said, Taite had taken a step backward. Now, at the end, the jewel buyer's heavy face flooded with angry purple.

"You're a damned liar! That's a good one—me getting this fake money! Why, you were on the train—don't try to deny it! That—the station-master told me you got me off! You bribed the steward to bring drugged liquor to my compartment and, while I was unconscious, you substituted the queer money."

"And then I came up here to join in the fun, I suppose?" Storm rapped, his retort blasting Taite's sudden confidence to shreds. "No, my theory is better, Taite. You could have planned this robbery all along. You had the queer money printed and intended to substitute it for the good. And you were in Nakesian's apartments when he was murdered—just as Nakesian was about to explain the plot

to Mr. Coulter! You had to shut Nakesian's mouth to save yourself, but you didn't have time to conceal the counterfeit money that Nakesian had stolen from you! But your helper, Toogy, got it back."

Taite sneered.

"Then I suppose I drugged myself on the train?"

Storm shrugged and pushed up his glasses. He said with a little smile, "Now we're even."

Tilliman whirled to Storm with a tight-lipped denial. "No, you're not," the lieutenant rapped. "You've got a lot to explain about this train business, and why you're up here. The money was substituted on Taite aboard the train, and you were present when it happened. You left Taite in the station and disappeared, leaving Taite to recover and bring the fake currency up to the Roost. Joshua called and said you had the grip that Taite owned, Storm. I've checked on that. You brought that grip into this house! You have a lot of explaining to do—"

Storm sat down and crossed his legs.

"Yes, I have the real money. But I didn't substitute this valueless pile of paper on the train. Somebody else did that neat little trick. Moreover, I owe Taite an apology, because I know he didn't plan this thing, although the murderer's counterfeit plot is essentially the same as I've described it to be."

STORM thrust his hands deep in his pockets and went on: "The counterfeit money was that which I found in a tree — you don't know anything about that little episode, lieutenant—and the same queer money was in Nakesian's apartment. Nakesian learned that someone was working a switch scheme, and he copped the counterfeit coin from whoever had made it. He was going to tell old Myron about the switch plot, and intended to show Coulter the queer money as proof of his exposure. But Nakesian was murdered, and — well, *somebody* got into the flat and escaped with the money, the same that I had cashed in the house across the street. That somebody decided to go through with his — or her — plans, although not exactly as originally scheduled. Originally, the queer money was to be substituted *after* the sale of the jewels, and Taite, here,

would have taken the rap. The switch would not have been discovered until it was too late to determine the exact time of the substitution. The murderer now decided to substitute before the jewel sale, and went through with his plan by drugging Taite on the train."

Sheriff Corlwyne looked with frank admiration at Storm's lithe and lazy figure.

"It begins to make sense," he muttered.

But Tilliman's black eyes snapped with impatient suspicion. "The money," he said. "You don't deny, Storm, that you have the real money. Yet you can't explain how you got it!"

"But I can," Storm said easily. He seemingly went off on a tangent, speaking dreamily. "I should have known the money I found in the tree, and later at Nakesian's, was queer. It seems so simple, now. But you know, Tilliman, I never had a chance to take a really good look at it. And then again, what fool would manufacture thousand-dollar bills? They would be impossible to pass. The only purpose was that of substitution, and that didn't occur to me until a short time ago."

Tilliman persisted, "You have the real money?"

"Yes. And I didn't substitute this pile of pretty paper while on the train, either. The real money was stuffed into Taite's brief-case while I was chasing Toogy. The cash was taken to the mail car, where the postal clerk was slugged, and then dropped out on the station platform."

Sheriff Corlwyne leaned over the table, his long and craggy face twisted with disbelief.

"Fine thing for the murderer to do! Rob Mr. Taite here and then toss his loot off the train. Why shouldn't he have just kept right on traveling? Why should he throw it off and stick around here, where he'll certainly be caught?"

"Certainly? Well, I hope so. But listen to the facts: I began a search of the train immediately. The man who drugged Taite is one of us, one of the people involved in this case. I'd have been sure to recognize him. He had to get off the train before I saw him, and, naturally, he'd take his money with him."

"Hugh!"

"But the Mr. Somebody planned to get

off the train, in any event," Storm continued. "He shoveled the money into a mailbag and tossed it on the platform, where the Sheriff, who worked with him, grabbed it and lammed."

Corlwey's jaw dropped in astonishment. He turned red with anger and took a quick step toward Storm, doubling his fist.

"Why, you—you can't say that I had anything to do—"

"I mean the Indian. Our village character," Storm said quietly. "Lambent flame danced in his slate-gray eyes. 'The Indian worked for Joshua and the robber, as well. Simple-minded as he was, he knew how to carry out orders. And his orders were to grab the money that he knew was coming off the train.'"

Tilliman asked, "And where is the Indian now?"

"I think he's dead," Storm said soberly. "He tried to kill me when I trailed him into the woods. Then he tried to keep me prisoner. I had to hit him. The Indian was holding the real money, you see."

TILLIMAN said acutely, "Then that would indicate that the robber had laid plans to return to the Devil's Roost!"

"Exactly," Storm nodded. "He came back here to kill Myron Coulter. I wanted to tell you, but I wasn't sure myself, and you wouldn't listen. I didn't figure out this counterfeit scheme until just now. The murderer had to kill old Myron because the old man would be sure to recognize the money as counterfeit—as he did—and would immediately figure out the whole plot and know who was behind it."

"Very pretty," Taite growled. "But I don't believe it. The fact remains that you have the money—my money—and I want it. You can't deny possession of it."

"It's in this house," said Storm, nodding. "In the other room. I brought it."

"Good," someone said. . . .

The voice did not come from any of the men in the room. It came from the half open French windows, and it was brought into the study with a gust of wind and the increased swell of the ocean's rumble.

"Don't move. Drop all guns, or I'll kill."

It was the Indian.

He stepped lightly over the sill and stood close to the wall, his shapeless sombrero low over his muddy yellow eyes, his brown face a mask of twisted pain and set purpose. His hands were raw and bleeding, but the right, which held the revolver, was steady.

Tilliman let his positive slip to the floor. His troopers followed suit. The light in the Indian's narrowed, crazed eyes did not allow for any other course of action.

The Indian swiveled back to Storm.

"You think I'm dead. But I got hard head."

"So I see," Storm said. "What do you want, Sheriff?"

"Gimme back th' money you stole from me."

"I don't have it any longer. I gave it back to its rightful owner," Storm said calmly.

"No, you didn't. Give it back to me or I'll kill you. Right now. Not afraid, Leo."

Storm looked at the revolver in the Indian's torn hands. "How did you get up here, Sheriff? The place is surrounded and guarded—"

"Climbed up cliff, from ocean side."

Sheriff Corlwey gasped. "That's impossible. There ain't a man alive could climb that precipice."

The Indian did not smile. He simply said, "Me, Sheriff can. I climbed up. No guard on this side." To Storm he snapped gutturally, "Gimme money."

Storm looked at the troopers, at Sheriff Corlwey, and lastly at the shining-clean face of Lieutenant Tilliman. His thin lips twisted into a wry smile.

"All right, Sheriff, I'll give you the money."

Taite rasped harshly, "You can't! You can't give away my money to this madman—this moron."

"Do you want to argue with him?" Storm invited.

Taite looked at the silent, earthen figure of the Indian. "I—I—" He swallowed and rushed on. "There must be something! See here, my man, you can't just—"

"Shut up," said the Indian.

Storm spread his hands. "That's that. Come along, Sheriff; I'll give you the money back."

He moved through the knot of men

toward the door, and the Indian followed him on silent feet. Pulling open the doorway, Storm started into the library. The Indian paused.

"Everybody walk ahead—" he commanded.

But he was too late. Tilliman had slipped around to the Indian's back. He scooped up his positive that he had dropped on the floor, at the Indian's order, and held it by the long barrel.

The lieutenant took no chances. He stood on tiptoe and brought the butt down in a swishing, murderous arc that ended on the crown of the Indian's head.

There was just a dull crack, and that was all. The Indian's gun bellowed once, spitting lead into the floor, fired by reflex action, and then he sagged forward to pitch flat on his face.

Storm expelled air between his lips in a sigh of relief. "Thanks, lieutenant."

He walked to the library and came back with the grip; he waved a hand at the safe.

"Better stow it in there. It will be safe, then."

Tilliman worked for a few minutes in a queer silence that settled over the men like a muffling cloak. Tilliman finally twirled the knob and turned around, his small eyes bitter.

"So the Indian did it. The Indian shot old Coulter. He came up over the cliff and killed him there."

"No," said Storm thoughtfully. He started toward the library, then came back to the study, his hands thrust deep into his side pockets, his thumbs extending. "No, the Indian didn't shoot him. Old Coulter was shot from upstairs."

"Upstairs?" Tilliman stepped over the Indian's body and poked a stiff forefinger at Storm's chest. "How do you know old Coulter was shot from above?"

STORM'S face was gray and bleak. "Take a look at the wound. The bullet entered Coulter's hairline and came out through the base of his neck. It killed him instantly, of course, but that's a most peculiar path for a bullet to take."

"He may have been bending forward, looking down at the ground."

"In that case he would have fallen flat on his face, not on his side and almost on his back."

Storm moved across the room and

picked up the pebble, holding it by its length of string.

"The last I saw of old Myron, he was standing looking out of the window—probably already realizing the plot against him and the significance of the counterfeit money. He heard a tapping at the window that aroused his curiosity, and he stepped outside to see what it was. He feared no danger, knowing the deputies were keeping guard."

Corlwey flushed and rubbed his big jaw. Storm paid no attention to the sheriff's embarrassment.

"Coulter stepped out and looked up. The murderer had the pebble attached to a string, and lured the old man outside by tapping it on the window pane. The murderer was standing on the little balcony of the second floor, letting the stone hit the window. When he saw old Coulter's face looking up at him, the murderer shot the old man, dropped the pebble — probably accidentally — and tossed the gun away in an attempt to clear the cliff and let it fall into the sea. It hit the grill fence and bounced back to the ground. And Myron Coulter, looking up, fell over backward, hurled down by the impact of the bullet."

Tilliman whispered, "But who's upstairs? The only person up there that I know of is—good Lord, Valerie Feather went upstairs."

Storm's face was a weary mask. "That remains to be seen."

Corlwey said hoarsely, "Whoever it is, the murderer is on the second floor!"

Storm nodded, feeling drained suddenly of all vitality.

"Yes. Let's go."

CHAPTER XVIII

RAID

THE body of men surged forward, squeezing between the big double doors and flowing in silent knots through the library. The red, dancing firelight from the hearth was not particularly kind to their savagely twisted, drawn faces. There was nothing to be said.

Storm moved on his long legs ahead of Lieutenant Tilliman, breasted the

lanky, horse-faced sheriff, and reached the foot of the dark, oaken stairway that led to the floor above. He got one foot on the first step and paused, his hand on the round knob of the banister post.

The knuckles of his hand suddenly stood out white.

Tripping down the steps was the graceful figure of Valerie Feather. With her, her arm in his, was a tall, handsome man with thick hair and smiling lips. There was no mistaking the straight, ramrod bearing, the lean jaw and hard, rocky outlines of the man's face, nor the queer, pale color of his eyes, noticeable even at this distance. It was Wheels Burton.

He was smiling, showing his white, even teeth, and covering the girl's hand with his own as it rested on his arm. He was looking with fond interest into the girl's laughing eyes.

It was incredible, shot through with the vagaries of a nightmare, Storm thought. They paused and stood motionless for a brief instant at sight of the suddenly silent group of men at the foot of the steps. Then they came on.

There was puzzlement on Burton's features; but the girl's oval face retained its faint smile, rather like a Mona Lisa smiling over her newest fool-proof plan to get rid of her most recent husband. The smile told Storm nothing, yet told him everything.

Burton came to the bottom of the steps and said airily, "Well, well, well! What's all this?"

Sheriff Corlwey cleared his throat and stepped forward, brushing little Tilliman aside.

"I suppose you don't know?" he asked huskily.

Perplexity clouded Burton's pale eyes, and he puckered his mouth thoughtfully. "Know? Know what? Here, what's the trouble?"

"Murder," said Corlwey impressively, and Storm felt a strong urge to throttle the man. "Murder, and I'm arresting you two for doing it."

The girl's fingertips fluttered up and brushed her red lips. Her eyes slid sideways, met Storm's quickly, and returned to Sheriff Corlwey's weather-beaten face.

"Murder?"

Her voice was little more than a whisper that went scampering through the silent hall.

Burton laughed uneasily. "Come, now,

you're frightening the girl."

Storm moved forward, adjusting his glasses.

"On the contrary," he said, and the smooth timbre of his voice was in sharp contrast to the raw tension visible on his companions' features, "I think you two know all about it. Myron Coulter has been shot and killed. The murderer is—or was, until now—upstairs. We've proved that. And you can't really claim not to have heard the shot."

The girl only said, "Uncle Myron. . . ." in a frightened little voice.

But murder was nothing new to Wheels Burton. He shrugged his broad shoulders callously. "We heard no shot. It's too bad, but we didn't. And to say that we—"

The girl found her voice. Her chin came up and she looked straight at Storm. "Wheels and I were outside on the western veranda. It's impossible to hear anything there above the wind. We've been there for the past half hour, Mr. Storm, watching the lights of Mr. Burton's yacht down in the bay. We've been there ever since you came in."

"And how does Wheels Burton happen to be in this house in the first place?" he demanded.

"He's a guest here. Gregory—Mr. Dolman—invited him up this morning."

Burton nodded, his rocky face serious. "Yes, we've been together on the veranda. It may be awkward, our alibi-ing each other, but I really don't see—"

He shrugged his muscular shoulders and smiled. Corlwey cleared his throat again.

"I see it all now, Miss Feather. You needn't try to conceal from us that you were Myron Coulter's niece—"

"Let's get back to the library," Tilliman suggested abruptly.

CORLWYE was insistent. "You were poor relations to Myron Coulter. But you stood to gain a sizeable chunk of his money if he died before making any more financial deals. You and this—this gunman, here—"

"Oh, say, now," Wheels protested easily. "I never carry a gun."

"You keep quiet. I know your kind. Slick city gangsters, that's all you are." Corlwey pushed into the library, his long, horsy face working with excitement. "Burton, you and this girl engineered

these killin's together. The girl didn't want to see old Myron giving away most of the inheritance she was bound to get, and she determined to stop it. You gangsters know how to make counterfeit money, and the two of you planned this whole thing, planned to substitute the counterfeit cash, just like Mr. Storm here explained."

The girl's fingers fled to her lips again. Burton moved behind her.

Valerie said, "Counterfeit? Counter—Oh, I understand now." She parted her lips to say more, her violet eyes suddenly alight with excitement, when Wheels Burton put his hand on her shoulder.

"If you're accusing Miss Feather and me of this murder, sheriff, say so, and I'll call my lawyer. Until then, we'd better not talk, eh, Valerie?"

Storm leaned back against the wall, a lithe and lazy figure; then he sank into the corner seat. His heels doubled under the chair, hooking on the rungs. His eyes were carelessly watching Wheels Burton and the girl, and they were clouded with something that he didn't understand.

He said quietly, "It adds up, of course. Burton's men were on the scene when Nakesian was murdered. And if Burton planned to substitute the money, Taite would have been framed. Burton claimed that this queer money was his!"

"I said nothing of the sort," Burton snapped. "You can't prove I made any such ridiculous claim."

"No, but I know you did. You made it to me. The money Nakesian stole from you to show Myron Coulter had blue paper bands around it. The money that Taite brought here—not the money he got from the bank, but that which was substituted on the train—also had blue bands around it, and your hophead Toogy was on the scene when Taite was drugged. That money is inside there, on the table. The same lot of currency. Worthless. You claimed once it was yours."

"I deny it."

Tilliman coughed. "The motive is certainly established. You must admit, Miss Feather, that if Myron Coulter went through with this sale and got the cash with which to make his public donation, you would have lost a great portion of your inheritance."

"But I—I didn't kill him," she said in a small, crushed voice. "I wouldn't

do such a thing."

Romwell Taite suddenly stepped forward, excited by a discovery. He pointed to Valerie's honey-colored hair.

"She must be the girl who was in Nakesian's room when he was murdered! I didn't believe Storm when he spoke about her being there, but—don't you see, lieutenant?"

Tilliman nodded wearily. "Of course. I've been thinking of that for some time."

The girl turned pale, stepped toward Storm, and then leaned back against Wheels Burton. The puzzled light in Storm's gray eyes became more intense. There was something wrong in the room—something in the girl's wide eyes, in the manner in which she kept close to Wheels Burton. There was no necessity for it, unless—unless, he concluded to himself, Wheels Burton had a gun in his pocket and was keeping it pointed at Valerie Feather. . . .

He got out of his chair with a groan. The assembly turned to stare at him. Hands deep in his pockets, he walked to the fireplace, turned his back to it and faced the group of white-faced people.

"We're forgetting something," he said. "Several things. First, Miss Feather is not the only one who would benefit by Myron Coulter's will—" Corlwe opened his mouth to speak, but Storm waved him to silence. "Secondly, it might be a good idea to search this house thoroughly. Miss Feather and Burton may or may not be telling the truth about killing old Coulter. The murderer may still be in the house."

Wheels Burton laughed. "I told you you were smart, Storm."

Corlwe snapped his bony fingers. "Right!"

HE rasped orders to his deputies, and two of them started for the steps at the end of the hall, their shotguns ready in their rough, calloused hands. The sheriff watched them go, and the company listened to their heavy-shod feet on the staircase.

Two minutes dragged by.

Then came the hail, "Nobody up here, sheriff, but somebody *was!*" And one of the deputies came running back, to be followed shortly by his fellows. "Somebody was upstairs and got down by a rope left out of a window!"

Taite sneered. "It's only a blind, by these two—"

He was interrupted by a sudden howl of throttled fear that came from the adjacent study. There followed the sudden thump of struggling bodies, a curse, and a muttered guttural.

Tilliman gasped, "The Indian! He has got a hard head—"

Storm was already halfway across the room toward the big double doors. The Indian was necessary for his case, necessary to prove the theory that had been revolving in his mind since the sheriff had made his first accusations against Valerie. The Indian was necessary to identify the man who had given him his orders to get the money off the train.

Lieutenant Tilliman was possibly thinking the same thing, thinking of the necessity of keeping the Indian safe—and harmless. In their urge for speed, both men crashed together at the door, and lost a valuable moment while they fumbled for the handle.

Storm got it open and banged it back. He saw the Indian lunging for the table, a trooper trying dazedly to get to his feet. The Indian whirled as Storm shot through the doorway, then darted toward the French windows.

Storm dove for him and missed as the Indian ducked into the open. He cursed the fact that he had no gun. Tilliman came up to him, shrilling, "Where'd he go? We need him!"

Storm thought he caught sight of the Indian's blurred figure, vague in the foggy, milky night. He started running without answering Tilliman's question.

Someone fired behind him, and the Indian zig-zagged, running close to the iron grill fence. He came to the end of the rail with Storm a dozen paces behind.

Beyond this point the fence ended, and the cliff sloped downward in a disintegrated cleft of rubble.

Storm dug his heels in sharply and skidded to a halt as he caught a glimpse of blue light to his left. The Indian ran on ahead, a fleeting gray shape in the black, sea-tasting fog. Occasionally wind would eddy over the lip of the mountain, and then the fog would be torn into clawed shreds for a brief moment.

Storm suddenly gasped and dropped forward, trying to bury his body in the rocky, gritty soil.

The blue streak of light to his left had

suddenly blossomed into a stuttering, ghastly tongue of red and orange flames; an automatic rifle rattled and gibbered, and lead whistled low over Storm's flat body. The rattle-gun kept firing, in quick, staccato bursts, at the Indian.

First the "Sheriff's" sombrero was snatched off his head as though by an angrily sweeping hand. Then the man's body jerked, his legs tangled and he went down, skidding on his stomach.

The Indian screamed.

His body rolled; and kept rolling down the rubble of the cleft until it bounced over the overhanging lip of rock and dropped out of sight.

Only the Indian's continued scream marked his plummet-like fall to the jagged rocks many feet below. When the scream ended, the Indian was dead. . . .

Fog swept over the lip of the cliff in whirling eddies, adding to the moisture that already dewed Storm's face. He swallowed, licked his lips and cautiously raised his head to look around.

Blurred shapes moved swiftly across the flat top of Devil's Mount; moved toward the house with guns in their hands. Storm felt a sensation of sudden stricture around his heart as a shotgun went off with an explosive blast. A man yelled in frantic fear and warning; then the shout was drowned out in the sudden rattle of automatic rifles.

STORM wet his lips again, running his tongue around the inside of his suddenly dry mouth. It was a raid.

Over a sudden tumult of sound he heard the thud of footsteps coming toward him: heavy, ponderous, yet moving with speed over the gritty soil. Storm drew his legs up under him, getting his toes firmly imbedded in the ground, and waited. When he heard the man's gasping breath, coming in long, shuddering puffs of agony, and when he suddenly saw a large bulk loom up directly ahead of him out of the fog, he thrust forward and upward.

He hit the man in the stomach, and the runner went down, exclaiming, "Storm, you damn fool!"

Storm gasped, "Poppo."

The Greek did full justice to the mercilessness of certain Anglo-Saxon words. He ended with, "You're pretty tough, Leo."

"Save it." Storm's words came in

staccato syllables. "Hell is breaking loose. Where'd you come from?"

"The cottage—mile back along the coast. Burton has the Roost surrounded with coked-up gunmen. He's promised them a share of the loot; he's gone crazy-mad, I think, because somebody double-crossed him, and he's out for blood. How many men does the sheriff have?"

"Not enough."

Storm got to his feet and squinted at the house. Tongues of angry flame winked all around it. There came a roar, as though from a hand grenade, and in the bright blossom of red he saw that the struggle was centered about the study and the shining chrome-steel safe. Men were ducking through the French windows, rifles in hand.

"My," said the Greek. "Just look at that."

The man who loomed out of the fog coincidentally with the Greek's speech was quick, but not quite quick enough. A Tommy-gun chopped off his words, and jittery bullets spurted up the ground in a crazy pattern. Somebody yelled, and then Storm hit the Greek and dragged him down with him. Bullets poured over their heads in a hot blanket of lead.

"Guess that'll keep you two!"

The voice belonged to Lucky Lamonte. Storm could see the gunman's big body and square shoulders looming through the fog. He groped for the Greek's gun, couldn't find it, and the Tommy-gun went jittery again. Something burned across his forehead, and he thought his head was going to spin off his neck. He sank down, and the ground heaved under him. He couldn't see; blood was trickling into his eyes.

Lucky Lamonte pounded away toward the house.

The Greek asked anxiously, "You all right, Leo?"

Storm wiped the blood away. His scalp had a new furrow about two inches long in it. He helped the Greek to his feet and rasped, "Give me a gun."

The Greek shoved a long-barrelled Luger into his slippery palm. "Keep it. I got another, Leo."

"Then come on."

From the house came a hollow boom that echoed along the mountain top. The rifle and pistol fire abruptly choked away. Men groaned and cursed in the sudden silence.

Curiously enough, it began to rain, and the sudden, intense hiss of water was all that was to be heard for a moment. Then there came the sound of feet and bodies crashing through the undergrowth, heading down the mountain-side toward the bay.

Storm staggered over the lawn, weaving crazily. He spotted two wounded deputies and one gunman, lying in the mud. The gangster was dead. He had no face.

Storm whispered, "Valerie. . . ." and went into the house through the crazily hanging French windows.

CHAPTER XIX

A SOCIABLE EVENING

THE study was a shambles. The windows were half off their hinges, and all the furniture in the room was tossed as though by a giant hand against one wall. A hole gaped in the other wall. There was nothing left of the Corot; the hole was behind the spot where the painting had been, where the chrome-steel safe had been located. The mohair on the chairs and settee was gray-singed by the blast that had blown open the safe and enabled the raiders to clean out the loot.

A gun barked and Storm hit the floor, yelling his name. The croaking voice of the lieutenant answered him, so hoarse that he scarcely recognized it.

"Hell, it's you, Storm. I thought you were dead."

He shook his head wearily. One of the deputies swayed into the room with a bottle. Storm plucked it from his hand and split it evenly among the straggling members of the police force.

He took a long swallow and spat it out, like a fighter recuperating between rounds; then expelled air luxuriously from his nostrils.

"By the way," he asked the exhausted men, "has anyone seen Gregory Dolman?"

"Dolman? He hasn't been around all night," said one of the deputies.

"That's what you think." Storm paused. "I see Wheels Burton is gone."

Lieutenant Tilliman gestured wearily with his right hand; his left arm hung

limp and useless.

"It was Wheels Burton's gang, although we'll never prove it unless we catch up with them—and they've got too big a start. They're down the mountain by now. There must have been twenty coked-up gunmen. Automatic rifles, and everything. Even a grenade. We didn't have a chance."

Corlwyne spoke from the door, his long face splotted with mud. "Well, I'm not taking the blame for this! This will cover the front pages of every newspaper in the state!"

"In the country," Storm corrected him.

Tilliman shook his head and sank hopelessly into a chair. "The money's gone, the jewels are gone. A half-million dollar raid. I'm licked. Through."

"Damned killers," muttered the sheriff in a blurred voice. "Got Bert and Jeff." Corlwyne passed a dazed hand over his eyes. "Jeff, he just got married. To Julie Patterson."

Storm asked sharply, "Where's Burton? And the girl?"

Tilliman laughed in a high-pitched voice that bordered on hysteria. "They're gone! Burton grabbed the girl. He had a gun on her all the time he was talking to us, and she didn't dare make a break! As soon as the Indian went over the cliff, he showed us the gun and backed out, pulling the girl with him."

Poppo, the Greek, shoved his bulk through the French windows. "I know where they went," he whispered hoarsely. "The *Joy Boat*. Wheels Burton's yacht. It was anchored down in the bay. I've been watching the lights. It's moving north."

Tilliman got to his feet. "Let's go."

"We haven't a ship that could catch them," Corlwyne said.

Storm put aside the bottle and rapped, "They won't be going far. They'll land soon, before we get a chance to send out an alarm on the teletype and block off the coast from them."

"They could sail clear to Canada in that boat," Corlwyne objected.

"Then we'll follow them there. Wheels won't go far. He has to have this thing planned."

Light suddenly bubbled up in Storm's brain. He wasn't thinking of the murderer, but suddenly he knew the answer to many questions; he knew why Valerie

had been kidnapped and taken along on the *Joy Boat* with Wheels Burton. And he knew suddenly why Gregory Dolman had not been seen that evening.

He spun on his heel and took the Greek's arm. "Get a car," he said. "Any car."

THE motor whined and growled, racing through the alternate rain and fog that swept around it like gray cotton wadding. It was Valerie Feather's car, the little blue roadster that had seen many better days; but since it was the only other auto at Devil's Roost besides the big tan Cadillac of Myron Coulter, Storm and the Greek had accepted it.

Behind them, visible only occasionally because of the innumerable rises and drops in the road, they could glimpse the lights of the touring car, crammed with the sheriff's deputies, Tilliman and his two troopers. There had been no time to call for reinforcements, nor was there any means of doing so, the telephone lines having been brought down by the one bomb that had been thrown.

Storm was driving. He could see little beyond the eagle on the car's radiator, and he was depending more on instinct than on sight. Occasionally, through the patches of rain, the visibility lifted and he could glimpse the sea, sometimes far below them as they skirted a cliff, sometimes off to their right along some flat, rock-strewn tidal beach.

They had long since passed the cottage where Storm had planned to spend a few idle weeks.

"This last cove—" Storm said suddenly, wiping his palm over the fogged windshield. "If Wheels doesn't put in there, we're licked. The road is impassable farther on."

"If it is a road," the Greek commented, peering forward. "I can't see anything."

Storm twisted the wheel again and they rounded a curve. There was nothing but deep, billowing fog to their right.

The Greek sucked in air nervously. "There *wasn't* anything there."

"No," Storm agreed. He went on abruptly, "Wheels is the kind of a man who can hole up for a year, until the stink blows over. He'll land his gunmen and send them scattering. This fog must cover the whole Maine coast, and they have a good chance of getting away in it."

With a half a million in cash and jewels, Wheels figures the game is worth it. Unless we stop him now, he's got an excellent chance of escaping with the money and the jewels, not to mention causing a number of unadulterated deaths."

At the top of the next rise, Storm cut the motor and switched off the lights. The Greek clutched at the door handle as the car bounced down the slope in almost utter darkness. Trees floated past them and sometimes before them, always avoided somehow. They coasted across a heavily wooded spit of land, and then water glittered ahead. A cove. Storm applied the brakes and the roadster ground to a halt on the gravel road.

There was nothing but silence, that was only accented by the muttering rumble of the surf, choked in fog.

But riding at anchor offshore as the yacht, sheltered from sight from the ocean by the wooded tongues of land that licked into the sea. From the shore road, it would have been invisible to anyone who was not particularly looking for it.

"You were right, Leo," the Greek sighed. "But now we'll have to wait for Corlwey."

Storm shook his head.

"No. I'm swimming out there. I've got to get the girl. Wheels would hold her for hostage and keep the sheriff under control by threatening to kill her. And he would kill her, too. I've got to get her off, first."

"But those gunmen, Leo. They—"

"Most of them will be off, if they're not all gone already."

"No, there's a light, see?"

Storm nodded, slid carefully from the seat of the roadster and walked down to the shore. He paused under the shadows of a spruce tree and took off his shoes, coat and tie, depositing the articles on the sandy beach. The Luger he jammed in his waistband. It would be useless, once wet, but it could serve as a threat.

As slowly as possible, to avoid a splash, he waded into the blood-freezing iciness of the water and eventually took off for the yacht, which lay about twenty-five yards offshore.

In ten grueling minutes he floated around to the stern, which was extremely low, and reached up to hang with his fingers curled over the edge of the after-deck.

THE fragrant aroma of cigarette smoke came to his nostrils; then he heard a quick, impatient sigh, and he knew that someone was lounging against the rail directly above him.

Storm began to lift himself out of the water.

It required infinite patience and infinite strength. If he were discovered as he was, his situation was helpless. He could not have raised a finger to protect himself.

The first hint the guard had that a visitor had come aboard was the feel of two wet, strong, deadly hands that encircled his neck and squeezed. . . .

There was not a sound to disturb the fog-wrapped quiet until, in the faintest of whispers that drifted on the wet, salty air, Storm said, "Don't answer me, rat. Let me talk for a minute."

His whisper was fainter than the ripple of water below. "If I release you, you might howl and wake up the dead, and if I'm to visit the young lady you're keeping aboard as a guest, it might not be discreet to carry you along with me. So what shall I do with you, eh?"

The gunman clawed and wriggled spasmodically. Then he shook his head to signify his perfect willingness to remain quiet.

Again came the whisper. "Fine. Good. But a word of advice, cherub. All good-mannered people speak softly, and for your own health, let me advise you to practice the custom. Otherwise I may unfortunately break your neck. I'd like to, you know."

One hand was released suddenly from the gunman's throat and searched swiftly through his clothing until it took possession of a heavy automatic.

"Or I might decide to let cool night into your carcass," Storm concluded. "So answer quietly: How many cabins on this boat?"

The gunman gurgled: "Four. The fluff—the girl is up forward. Burton's in the middle cabin. . . . Who the hell are you, anyway? Cops?"

"Hundreds of them," Storm said quietly, and regretted the dull crack the automatic made when he slapped it down on the thug's head.

Catching the limp body, he carried it silently into the deep shadow of the cabin wall, and then padded forward on his bare feet. The feel of the heavy

automatic in his hand made his steps almost buoyant—until he heard heavy-shod feet coming along the deck toward him. With one bound he caught hold of the top of the cabin; with a second quick convulsion of his muscles he drew himself up on the cabin roof; and then he peered down at the big man walking toward the stern.

It was Lucky Lamonte, wearing a trench coat, his felt hat pulled low and rakishly over one eye.

The hood walked slowly to the stern, turned around with a mutter of annoyance, and returned to the bow. Storm pulled his head back over the edge of the cabin roof and fingered the automatic; he decided to postpone the pleasure of shooting Lucky until he had located the girl and the loot. Lucky would realize that his name was all wrong when Storm met and smiled at him, for it wasn't going to be a pleasant smile.

Something wedged uncomfortably in his ribs and, when he turned to examine the sharp point, he found it to be a skylight. It creaked slightly when he lifted it and laid it back carefully on the cabin roof. Below was complete blackness, like the interior of an ink well. The next moment Storm dropped feet first into the dark hole.

A startled, shuddering gasp came out of the gloom.

Storm recovered his balance and stood on his bare right foot to rub the sting out of his naked left.

He whispered: "It's all right, Valerie. This is Leo—come to take you from this floating den of vice."

"L-Lee! I—I'm glad you found me! Who is with you?"

He strained to pierce the darkness, and finally saw the girl, a faint outline of her, on a bunk. He answered, "No one is with me except my shadow, my good humor, and my very wet feet. They all are very anxious about you—I suspect they love you. But I wasn't cut out to be the barefoot boy. Speak softly darling."

HE felt around in the darkness, then struck a match, cupping the flame. He held it over his head. The girl was tied to the bunk with three big leather straps, fastened with buckles that were out of her reach. There was a bruise on one of her cheeks. It looked like

Lucky Lamonte's signature—and Storm mentally added one more count against Lucky.

The buckles were easy to undo. She could not stand alone, and he slid his arm around her to support her slender body. Her arms went around his shoulders, and she clung weakly for a moment. Her lips brushed his, and the flavor of her lipstick tasted very good to Leo Storm.

"Now we're even," she murmured.

Storm sat down on the bunk in the darkness, took the girl's hand and made her sit beside him. "Listen carefully, because I won't have time to repeat myself. There are only a few men aboard the boat. Most of Burton's hoods are ashore, paving the way for a grand lam. I think I can round up those who are left. I've got two guns. I'm going after the cash first—I think it's going to be yours, you know. If you hear any rumpus, stick close in here until I call for you. The air is likely to be filled with drops of lead instead of rain"

She was silent for a moment, her hand tight on his arm. "I'd like to have a gun, Lee," she said. "I don't want to be left—"

Storm shoved the Luger in her hand.

CHAPTER XX

THE MONEY

SHE pecked a little kiss at him, and her hand tightened momentarily on his shoulder, as though she were reluctant to have him go.

A little corridor ran between the ship's housing, ending in a doorway at one end and a companionway at the other, leading up to the deck. Storm padded along on the cold floor, choosing the doorway. From what he had seen of the yacht, he could guess that it led to Burton's cabin. He slid along the wall when he got close to the door, then put his hand on the doorknob. He pushed it open quickly, his gun ready to talk business in a split second.

Nothing happened. The cabin was as dark as the corridor.

Something stuck out from the wall and prodded him between the shoulder blades. It was a light switch. He sud-

denly flicked up the button and threw himself flat with the same movement.

Wheels Burton was sitting on the bunk. A revolver dangled from his limp hand. Yellow light washed his face spreading from the little bulb in the ceiling to limn the granite outlines of the gambler's features.

Storm took another look at Burton and planted his feet more firmly on the cabin floor. His glance wandered from the big automatic in Burton's hand to the puddle of red on his shirt front, and then hopped up to the knife that stuck low in the gambler's throat. It stuck in there up to the hilt.

He made an involuntary sound, and Wheels opened his eyes. They had been closed before, and now Storm knew that Burton had not even heard him come in. He looked at Storm with his whitish eyes and smiled, reminding him of a sick cat. Burton did not get off the bunk. He made a gurgling sound and waved an arm in short, jerky circles. The gun in his hand wagged up.

Storm said, "Don't."

He stared with a sense of dizzy unreality at the knife hilt that stuck like a little cross in the man's throat. It was a miracle that Burton was not dead. But he would be, soon enough, in fifteen minutes at the outside.

Burton's breath bubbled. "Storm, I—I'm done for."

There was neither fear nor complaint in the gambler's voice. It was just a plain statement of fact.

Storm said, "Yes." He was very thoughtful.

"I can shoot you, Storm," said Burton suddenly. "I can kill you. And if you get me in return—that won't make any difference to me. I'm going, anyway."

Storm murmured, "That's reasonable."

Wheels muttered, "But I won't shoot you."

"Thanks," Storm said drily. "Who stuck the hardware in your throat?"

"Who do you think?" he grinned. "The master mind!"

Storm told him he was in no condition to be humorous. Wheels coughed, his breath bubbling deep in his throat. "I'm not. Listen, Storm, you think I planned this whole game. But I didn't. I've been a sucker. The rat had every detail

worked out from the start. He even knew I was going to shake him down, knew what I'd ask for when I did. And he led me on like that—me, Wheels Burton. And I always kidded myself by believing I had the best brain in New York."

While Burton spoke, Storm looked around the cabin, the palm of his hand slippery against the gun. He noted the desk, the bunk, and the heavy leather curtains that covered the two portholes. There was a door, painted ivory, that he figured opened into a closet. His stomach suddenly crawled.

Burton coughed, and blood flowed over his under lip in a gush of crimson. He wiped his mouth, moving laboriously, and began to talk again.

"He came to me first just to play my wheels, Storm. He was like all the rest of the society playboys, and I figured on taking him for a lot, like he deserved. I did, too. He dropped plenty to me. But he welshed on his debt, claimed he had no money of his own, and just asked me what I was going to do about it. He was plenty slick. He edged in with his talk about Myron Coulter's jewel sale, just casually at first, then in detail. I became interested. Anything that deals in figures of half a million interests me. But he was not the one to suggest anything to me. Not him. He let me do that. He knew I would get an idea on it; he knew I'd figure he owed me plenty jack, and that I could scare him into working with me. So we figured out a plan, and all the time he acted as though he were reluctant to do it, as though I were blackmailing him into playing along with me."

STORM said, "Save your breath; I know the rest. You figured out a plan based on the fact that the jewel sale was to be made in cash. You didn't want an outright raid; you didn't want murder.

"You had some swell counterfeit money made up—you had access to forgers and engravers—and you printed a quarter of a million, the price of the jewels that were for sale. Your friend knew the combination of the safe in the Devil's Roost. After the sale, he was to open it, substitute the queer money and get away with the good cash. The substitution wouldn't have been discovered for some time, maybe not until Myron

Coulter made his donation to the Spiritualist Foundation. And by that time no one would know when the substitution was made. And the rap would fall on Romwell Taite."

Burton grinned. "You got it figured exactly. But I was double-crossed."

Storm nodded his head slowly. "First Nakesian got wind of your plot, probably through Dawn Detras. I believe you know about her death, Wheels. Lucky killed her because he was jealous of her affair with Nakesian. The girl loved Nakesian, and she helped him steal the counterfeit money from you. Nakesian planned to expose you and your pal to Myron Coulter, because he wanted to see the jewel sale go through without any hitch. He stood to gain by the donation to his racket organization. He cached the money in a tree, and I butted in for a while, but he got it back.

"Nakesian was murdered by your pal, He was in Nakesian's apartments at the time. He slid through from the reception room and knifed Nakesian—just like he knifed you. But he didn't have time to hide the money; he had to go back and insure his alibi. But he was thinking. And having seen the queer money, he realized that, if he could get hold of it himself, he wouldn't need you any longer. He ran the whole works like that, like a puppet-master pulling strings. You thought you were the one who directed the works, but you were always merely following out his plans. He kept one jump ahead of you, Wheels, as far as thinking went. He wanted to hook his fingers into old Myron's cash box, and he needed your guns and your counterfeiters. Once he got the queer money, he crossed you. He had a rat named Toogy—who was supposed to work for you—cop the money after I got hold of it a second time."

Storm expelled air through his nose and wet his lips. In the momentary silence he heard careful footsteps in the hall beyond the door.

He went on. "Your double-crossing friend still had you fooled, until tonight. He drugged Romwell Taite on the train and substituted the queer money to make the sale go through its preliminary stages. He got the Indian to grab the good money and he came up to the Roost himself to kill Myron Coulter. He had the good money, Taite had the bad. And

he knew Myron Coulter would recognize Taite's money at once as being counterfeit, and from there on Coulter would figure out the whole game. So he had to kill Myron Coulter—and he did. He hid upstairs, unknown to you and the girl, and shot the old man. Then he slid down a rope and—that's all. Where is he now, Wheels?"

Wheels Burton said, "He's trapped, as long as I sit tight here. He's hiding—"

Storm knew very well where Burton's attacker was hiding, but he had no chance to act. In between Burton's bubbling, gasping words, he had listened to the footsteps that came creeping down the companionway at the other end of the hall, coming slowly toward the door to which he had his back.

He was ready for it when it happened, and at the first sound he threw himself aside, before the door had opened two inches. A Tommy-gun gibbered and chattered and spewed lead across the cabin, dotting the opposite wall with big holes where the slugs tore into it.

BEHIND the gun was the face of Lucky Lamonte, and behind him was a little frightened man with brick-red ears—Toogy. Lucky had the machine-gun cradled in his arm, spouting flame through the doorway. He was a picture of death gone amuck. His hair was done over his low forehead, his lips twisted by the most vindictive grin Leo Storm ever hoped to see.

"Lucky rasped: "I know you're in here, Storm! I found Nickels conked; and I know you're here, damn you! I'll blast your insides all over this ship."

Storm dived for the floor, ducking under the blanket of slugs, and hit Lucky just above the knees. At the same time he triggered one shot at Toogy. He wasn't quick enough to prevent Toogy from snapping off the light, but his aim nailed the little man's hand to the wall—and Toogy's violent reaction snapped the light on again.

Hitting Lucky Lamonte just below the hips, he sent the gunman caroming back, the gun jerking up into the air. It kept spewing its lead, chunking away at the ceiling, and then Storm got his hands on it.

Lucky drove a pile-driving fist into his face, and for a moment Storm could see nothing. His grip on Lucky loosened,

and the gunman started to bring the rifle down on his head. And that was the last thing that Lucky Lamonte ever did.

Storm heard Valerie running down the corridor. Before she got in the line of fire, he pointed his automatic a half inch to the right of Lucky's green eye, and a half inch to the left of his blue eye, and shot him, right there, adding a little black hole to the rainbow.

Storm looked around for Wheels Burton and felt a cold shock. Burton was still sitting on the bunk, in the same place. He hadn't stirred once during the play. The knife still stuck in his throat, and he just sat there, leaning back, yet without touching the wall, appraising Storm with his whitish eyes.

Storm rasped to Toogy, "Line up over against the wall; Valerie, get out. It's not over yet."

She held the Luger he had given her and looked at him, puzzled. Storm repeated his order, but she failed to understand. She said, "but you've rounded up everybody, haven't you?"

Wheels Burton chuckled, and the sound was ghastly.

"No, Miss Feather. Not everybody. We're waiting for Gregory Dolman—"

Storm wasted no more words on the girl. He shoved her in the general direction of the corridor, but she resisted and bumped against the wall, inside the cabin.

Storm pointed his gun at the closet door. "Come on out, Gregory; we're waiting for you."

Storm had known that Gregory Dolman was in the tiny compartment ever since Wheels had started talking and wouldn't move from the bunk. From where Wheels sat he had a clear view of the bulkhead, yet had a split-second advantage on the person inside when it opened, because Dolman would have to push the door open about ten inches before he could see Wheels.

That was the sort of a game the two men had been playing when he had come on the scene, a few minutes back. Good, clean fun. Wheels sitting there with the knife in his throat, hoping he wouldn't die before Gregory Dolman came out for air. It had to be air, Storm thought crazily. That closet door was a tight fit. Sooner or later the man inside had his choice of opening that door or suffocating to death inside. . . .

Dolman came out of the closet fast, a gun blazing. He moved faster than Storm. His heavy-lidded eyes were not bleared with sleep or liquor now. He took one look at Valerie Feather and leveled his gun at her.

"Don't shoot, Storm, or I'll kill this girl."

But Storm knew that Wheels Burton was not going to stop. Burton cared for nothing now, just so long as he got Dolman before he died himself. Storm saw Burton's movement out of the corner of his eye, and he snapped one shot at Wheels. Not to kill him. The big gun in Burton's hand went spinning to the floor, and now he had a broken wrist to add to his wounds. Not that he cared.

Dolman was going to shoot the girl, in any event. His heavy-lidded eyes were wide open, crazed with desperate fear. He leaned forward and dragged Valerie to her feet, holding one arm around her to protect his own chunky body. And Storm dared not fire.

THAT was when Wheels Burton put on his act. It happened in a split second. Burton did not get off his bunk. He just pulled his hand up to his throat, waved it around a little, and twisted the knife that was jammed in his neck; twisted it out of his own body and tossed it quick as light across the room in a straight, flashing line at Gregory Dolman.

The knife had no sooner left Burton's hand than Storm was across the room, slamming into the man and the girl. Valerie went sideways, out of the way, and Storm hit Gregory almost at the same time that the knife bit deep into the murderer's back.

Wheels Burton's face suddenly went gray. He had finished himself by throwing the knife at Dolman, but he had finished Dolman, as well. . . .

That was when Sheriff Corlwey and his deputies came in.

They bunched up in the cabin door, letting their jaws hang and looking as though they suddenly wished they weren't there. Storm tried to grin, couldn't make it, and dropped his gun to the floor.

He whispered hoarsely, "Come on in, boys. But the party's over."

He walked unsteadily across the room and reached around Wheels Burton's

body. He had seen Burton lean back, apparently resting, yet not touching the cabin wall; and he knew that the man was not leaning on air. He was right. It was the black grip. The jewels stolen from the house took up little room. They were scattered like so many multi-colored gleaming eyes among the green packets of currency. Crisp green banknotes, belonging to Romwell Taite. And the jewels—

Storm picked up a few of the gems and trickled them into Valerie Feather's hands. "Take them—they're yours."

Her red lips twisted in a pitiful way. "It's terrible," she whispered. "It's got blood all over it."

"All money has blood on it. It will wash off. It always has."

He took Valerie's arm and went on deck. He needed air, lots of it; and he needed more than that.

Valerie Feather said quietly, "I've been such a fool, Lee."

"No, you haven't. I wouldn't have believed you if you had told me the truth about yourself. I figured on Gregory Dolman a long time ago, knowing he was Coulter's nephew. His relationship gave him plenty of motive to prevent the jewel sale, and adding that to his frequent appearances at suspicious moments, I knew it was Dolman, working with Wheels Burton. If I had known that you were old Coulter's niece—and getting around the way you did—I'd have thought the same about you. I was that kind of a sap. It's I who ought to ask—"

Her fingers brushed his lips, and he was silent. She said, "I should have told you long ago that I was Myron Coulter's niece. I come from the other branch of the family—the one that hasn't any money or jewels or anything. The one that has to work for a living."

"And what a job you picked."

Her eyes were startled, luminous through the fog that slipped silently around them.

"You know?" she asked.

"Gregory Dolman in the closet—that's a scoop for you. For once you've got a story that fits the head of your column: *Skeletons In Your Closet*. I knew you wrote it when I read the copy you slipped under the door. It mentioned the money found by Nakesian's body. The only persons who saw and knew about it were you and I and Burton's thugs. They wouldn't talk about it, and I didn't, so I knew that you were the writer of the crime column."

She shuddered. "Don't joke. I—I don't feel humorous. It's true, I write that awful thing. Through my activities, I first picked up a lead on Dolman and Burton's plot, but I wasn't sure of anything then. I—I couldn't tell you. I didn't want you to laugh at me, at the idea of a woman being a police reporter. I—I couldn't have you laughing at me."

Somehow she came into his arms, with a little sigh and a little sob. She seemed to belong there.

AND then a hoarse voice interrupted him, and a paw-like hand prodded Storm's shoulder. It was the Greek.

"Leo," the Greek said. "If it's not too much trouble, Leo. You owe me five bucks."

"Eh?"

"Five bucks. Dollars. I heard about the way you chiseled the Indian. Those dice you used on me were crooked. One of the deputies went to the Indian's shack and got them. I got them now."

"Let's see them," Storm offered.

He took the cubes from the Greek's fingers and examined them carefully. Somehow, he wasn't quite sure how, they slipped from his hand and dropped over the rail.

Storm listened to the two tinkling plunks as the dice hit the water below.

"You can't prove it, Poppo," he said gently.

The Greek looked crestfallen. Then he took another look at Storm and the girl, and it finally dawned on him that Leo Storm was not thinking about dice.



Murder Is Serious

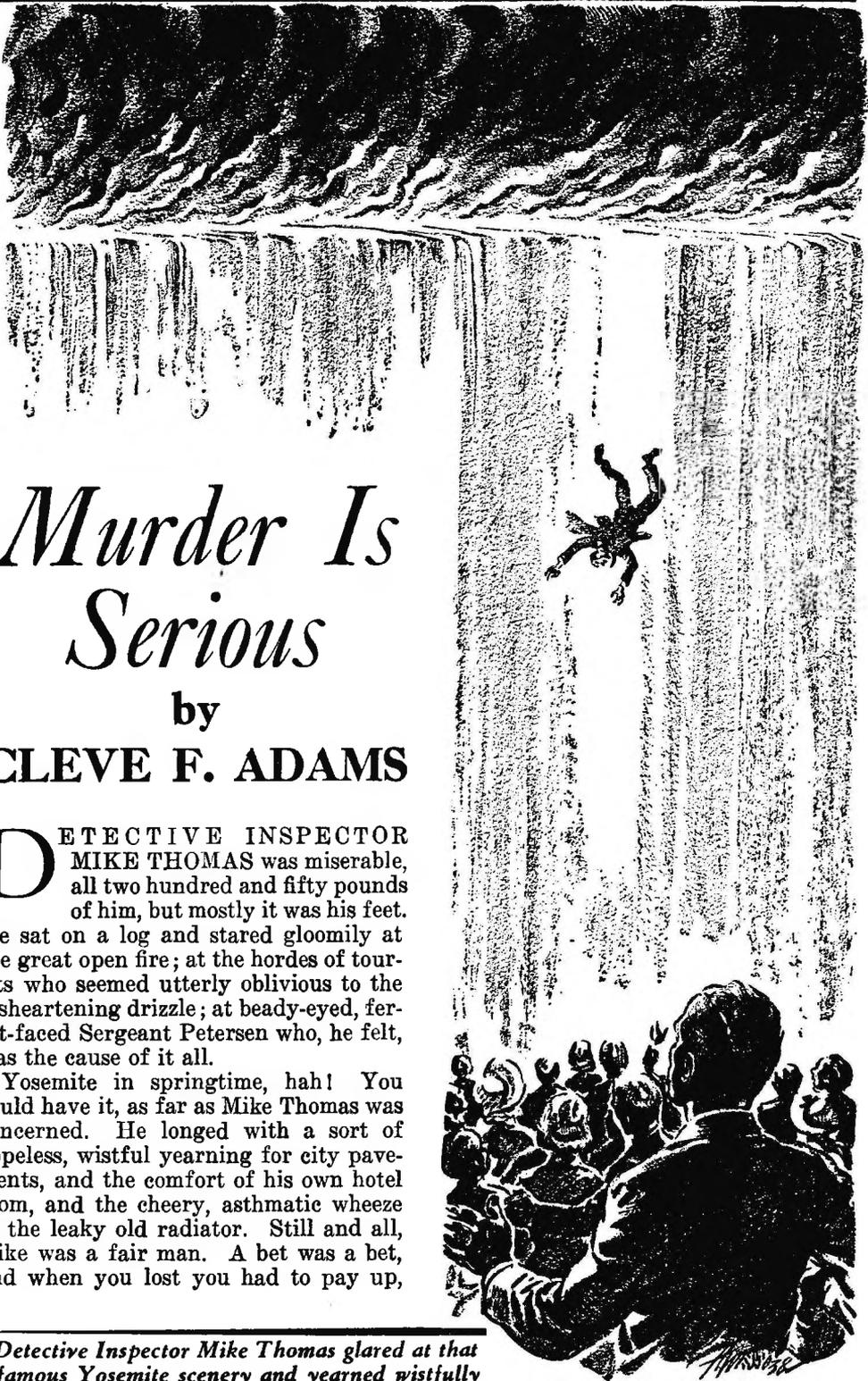
by
CLEVE F. ADAMS

DETEKTIVE INSPECTOR MIKE THOMAS was miserable, all two hundred and fifty pounds of him, but mostly it was his feet.

He sat on a log and stared gloomily at the great open fire; at the hordes of tourists who seemed utterly oblivious to the disheartening drizzle; at beady-eyed, ferret-faced Sergeant Petersen who, he felt, was the cause of it all.

Yosemite in springtime, hah! You could have it, as far as Mike Thomas was concerned. He longed with a sort of hopeless, wistful yearning for city pavements, and the comfort of his own hotel room, and the cheery, asthmatic wheeze of the leaky old radiator. Still and all, Mike was a fair man. A bet was a bet, and when you lost you had to pay up,

Detective Inspector Mike Thomas glared at that famous Yosemite scenery and yearned wistfully for his familiar city pavements—where a man had only an ordinary murder case now and then to solve!



even if it was through the nose. Hell of a way to spend a vacation, though. Thomas mentioned this for perhaps the hundredth time and began unlacing a soggy boot.

Little Petersen leered at him. "Trouble with you, you got no appreciation o' the grandeurs o' nature. Here's more scenery than you ever seen in your whole life, and a swell fire, and dude cow-pokes makin' rhythm on the range, and all yuh do is bellyache about your feet."

"It ain't the feet," said Thomas. "Anyways, I'm kind of used to the feet by now. It's these damn' boots you made me buy."

A man on the platform, a man in orange chaps and ten-gallon hat, picked up a megaphone and bellowed aloft along the face of Glacier Point. It was so dark you couldn't see the top, but there must have been somebody up there because presently, like an echo, came an answering hail, dwarfed, made eerie by the distance. The man in the orange chaps did an encore.

"Oh Glacier! Let the fire fall!" He sang it, kind of, so that it sounded like "Fir-r-r-re faw-aw-aw!" It reminded Thomas of the dying wail of a siren, and then he forgot about sirens and his aching feet and everything else except the spectacle which followed.

A tiny spark appeared 'way up there in the murk. Thirty-two hundred feet, Pete had said, and all of it straight up. The spark was joined by others, and still others, faster and faster now, until there was a roaring cascade of living fire plunging down the face of the cliff. A waterfall done in flame. In spite of himself Thomas was impressed. The falling dummy was anticlimax. And then quite suddenly, Thomas knew that it wasn't a dummy. It was a man. It may have been the horrified screams of the tourists, or the dazed, slightly sickish look on Sergeant Petersen's face; it may have been that Inspector Mike Thomas had seen too many bodies to be fooled for long. But whatever it was, and despite his unwieldy bulk, it was Mike Thomas who first reached the crumpled, broken form at the base of towering Glacier Point. The fire fall was dwindling away now, and pine trees made swaying, grotesque shadows about him as he knelt, turned the man over. The body was like jelly, boneless, smashed beyond repair.

There was no pulse.

Thomas stood up as the first of the crowd burst through the trees. Petersen bobbed up beside him with a flash, and a ranger, very young, very stiff in his uniform barked at the big man with the placid moon face and one boot still held awkwardly in a ham-like fist.

"Stand away from there, my man! What do you think you're doing?"

Thomas said gently, "I've been doing all there was to do—for him, son. He's dead. Next thing is to find out did he fall, or did somebody push him."

THE young fellow snorted. "Mind your own business," he snapped, and dropped down beside the body. And then all the starch went out of him. White-faced, jittery, he turned glazing eyes on Thomas.

Thomas said "Yeah, I know just how you feel, son. Used to be that way, myself. S'pose you scam outa here and notify your superiors. I'll hold off the crowd till you get back." Strangely enough the kid went without protest. Thomas snatched the flash from Petersen's hand, pointed it at the advancing mob. "That's close enough, folks," he admonished. "The fella's plumb dead and it ain't what you'd call a pretty sight." A woman in the crowd screamed. It was like a physical force, pushing the others back.

Thomas floundered to his knees again. There was not a mark on the dead man that couldn't have been made by the fall. The clothes, and the contents of his pockets, labeled the man as well-to-do, fastidious. He was young, somewhere around twenty-six or -seven Thomas thought. Thomas turned the light on the man's boots. He was interested in footwear, mainly because his own feet troubled him. These boots were new, scarcely a blemish on them, and still they looked comfortable. Thinking to find the maker's name for future reference, Thomas examined the soles. Practically unscarred. But there was something in one of the heels that made Mike Thomas straighten hunched shoulders.

Sergeant Petersen said, "Well, did he fall, or was he pushed?"

"I dunno, Pete. Mebbe neither. Mebbe he was only helped a little. Can't tell I guess, till we find out more about him."

Petersen grunted. "Trouble with you, you got a evil mind. Always lookin' for murder, even amid the—now—glories o' nature."

"Yeah," Thomas said. "At that, murder does seem worse out here than it would at home."

"So yuh do think it's murder!"

"Could be," said Thomas solemnly. And then: "Tell you what I'll do, Pete. Just to lighten the—now—tedium of our stay, I'll make you another little bet. Is it murder, we go home in the morning. Is it a accident, we stay here the full week. Fair enough?"

"It's a bet," said Petersen, always willing to gamble.

The kid in the nice uniform came back. With him was an officer, a man of forty or so, heavy of face and aggressively arrogant.

"I'm Captain DeGroot," he announced, and glared from the dead man to Thomas. "By what right do you presume to give orders around here?"

Thomas waved a pudgy fist apologetically. "I ain't been givin' orders, Skipper. Merely suggesting. And incidentally I'd suggest you take steps to stop whoever was with the young fellow up above. I got a idea this wasn't exactly a accident."

Captain DeGroot snapped erect. "Nonsense! I know this young man and his whole party. It was unquestionably an accident. I've already been in touch with Glacier Point by phone, and your insinuations are ridiculous. Who are you, anyway?"

"Me," said Thomas, "me, I'm just a copper. Mike Thomas is the name. Still and all you might say I'm interested in this case. You holding those people up above till we can get there?"

"No," said DeGroot, "I'm not. And I'll thank you to mind your own business. The rangers are well able to look after park affairs without the blundering interference of city flatties."

"I see," said Thomas quietly. He watched the body being loaded on a stretcher, started to limp away, still clutching his boot. Something told him he was making a mistake; that the captain was making a worse one. He turned, limped back. "Skipper," he said earnestly, "I hate to go over your head. I hate it like hell. But there's a chance this wasn't an accident. If you won't hold

that party up above where the thing actually happened—well, I've got a friend at district headquarters in Frisco. I'll just hafta call him."

DeGroot flushed an angry red. "Call and be damned to you!" he grated. "These people are too important to be annoyed at a time like this. I won't do it."

THOMAS limped off through the crowd without another word. He found the lobby of the rustic lodge crowded, noisy; and, apparently a little abashed, he retired to the veranda to put on the offending boot before again venturing inside. He was just squeezing himself into a phone booth when he felt a hand on his arm. It was Captain DeGroot, a little apologetic now.

"Why didn't you tell me you were Inspector Thomas?"

"Oh," said Thomas, "the rank makes a difference, hunh?"

"Quite a lot, my dear fellow. We've heard of you, even up here. If you think there's a chance that something is wrong—well, there's no need of making that phone call, eh?"

Thomas sighed. Was the captain a coward? Or just a diplomat? And, anyway, what of it? The thing was to hold that party on the Point for interrogation. Thomas grinned suddenly, put out a huge paw. "Forget it, Skipper. You and me can get along. Only thing is, murder is my business, seems like. Pete claims I got a evil mind. I dunno, mebbe I have. Can we get a car to take us up there?"

"No car," said DeGroot, gripping the proffered hand. "The auto road isn't open at this time of year. We'll have to ride up. I'll go order the horses now."

Thomas looked dismayed. "Horses?"

"Horses," said DeGroot cheerfully. He went away. Thomas stared gloomily at the clock on the wall. Sergeant Petersen found him like that a few minutes later. "Well, well!" he chirped. "So you're gonna ride a horse. You won't be yellin' about your feet tomorrow."

Thomas eyed him with disfavor. "There is times, Pete," he said, "when I think I don't like you very much. This is one of 'em. Fact is, I don't like you a lot."

They made quite a party, Thomas and little Petersen and Captain DeGroot and

a trooper from the corrals. The trooper led off up the winding, tortuous trail, carrying a lantern at his saddle bow. The rain had stopped except for an occasional gusty shower. A pale sliver of moon struggled with scudding clouds. Loose shale scabbled under the horses' hoofs, made the footing uncertain, at times even hazardous. Thomas, astride a nag several widths too narrow, shifted uneasily.

"Look, Skipper, tell me some more about the dead guy and his outfit."

"Karl Kruger is—or was, I should say—one of two brothers. Twins, I believe, though the boys are totally unlike. Then there is Otto Stern and his daughter Sylvia. Stern is the surviving partner of Kruger & Stern, the chain store magnates. He was named administrator of the Kruger estate, and has acted as a sort of guardian for the boys since their father's death. They come up here frequently. Old Stern is a sort of camera fiend. Fact is, he was taking a picture of Karl Kruger when the accident happened."

Thomas granted. They topped the last rise, came out into a shallow little valley, hushed, very peaceful under towering pines. Pine needles carpeted the earth, fragrant after the rain, and the moon, conquering the clouds at last, was like a benediction. Thomas was vaguely uncomfortable. Here was a boy and a girl and an old man whom he was about to devil in their moment of sorrow. And all for what? Because, as Pete had said, he had an evil, suspicious mind. Still and all, there was that boot-heel. He clamped his wide mouth shut tight, dismounted stiffly.

So here was the jumping-off place, hunh? There was a two-inch pipe fence along the edge of the cliff. Beyond the fence a great hanging rock. Beyond that, nothing. Mist still filled the valley far below. A few embers still glowed dully on the granite ledge inside the fence, and there was a huge pile of rotted wood, like punk, fuel for tomorrow night's fire fall, and the next and the next.

CAPTAIN DEGROOT coughed apologetically. "Oh, I know what you're thinking. That fence was put there to discourage people, but it doesn't always work. Someone always wants to climb out on the hanging rock and pose for the tourists. I'm surprised at Karl Kruger,

though. He should have known better."

Thomas swung around as feet clattered over rock. The trooper was returning, escorting a second man. Beyond them the lights of the rest house glowed brightly yellow, and there were moving shadows inside. The man with the trooper turned out to be Otto Stern. He was noticeably shaken, and very indignant.

"See here, Captain, what's all this? Haven't we trouble enough without being detained up here in the cold? John is all broken up over this, and Sylvia—well, Sylvia is practically a nervous wreck. She was to have married Karl, you know."

DeGroot introduced Thomas. "Sorry, Mr. Stern. The thing seemed to call for some sort of an investigation."

Stern looked as if he were going to have a stroke. He was a roundish man, slightly bald and more than a trifle pompous. He glared at Thomas through thick lenses. "What sort of an investigation, sirrah? What is there to investigate? My Lord, do you think someone pushed the boy off?"

"No," said Thomas quietly. "As I get it, he was all alone out there on the rock. The rest of you were all inside the fence, at least twenty feet away. Let's see, now. There was you, and your daughter and the other twin, John. Who else?"

"John wasn't here. He stayed up at the rest house. But beside Sylvia and I there was our guide and the fire tender and his wife. Karl insisted on my taking his picture out there on the rock, even though it was raining a little and quite slippery. I—I only wish that I had refused."

Thomas said, "Yeah," rather absently. There was a queer sort of tingling along his spine, as if the very stillness was trying to tell him something. Presently he turned from gazing out into space. "Well, let's go up to the rest house. Mebbe some o' the others will have something to add."

Stern scouted the idea. "What else is there? The boy slipped and that's all there is to it!" He appealed to Captain DeGroot. "Must we submit to another interrogation?"

DeGroot looked at Thomas uncomfortably. "I don't see, Inspector, that we've accomplished anything."

Thomas said, "No. No, that's right.

I keep thinking about that young fella, though. Kind of bothers me." He lumbered off toward the lights of the rest house.

John Kruger, the brother, was a dark, slender young man, a little sullen of mouth, brooding eyes distant even when being questioned. He had nothing to add to the story. He'd been on the veranda when it happened, saw the whole thing. No, no one except Karl had been on the outside of the fence. His sombre gaze kept going to the girl Sylvia, over by the great, pot-bellied stove. She was a cute little trick, yet sensible, Thomas decided. Her eyes kept watering, too, when he questioned her; they touched the boy's bent head fleetingly, almost caressingly. Funny thing about that. She was supposed to be in love with the other guy, the dead one. Maybe this was only sympathy for a bereaved brother.

Thomas probed deeper. "Look, little girl, your father took care of all the business, hunh? The twins was satisfied?"

She stared. "Why, yes, of course. Karl"—her lips quivered just a little as she said the name—"Karl intended to begin taking an active part very soon, though. He had a lot of new ideas. But poor John isn't a business man. He's quite satisfied to let Dad run things. I'm afraid Karl and John didn't get on very well together—" She broke off with a sudden gasp of dismay. Her blue eyes, startled, swept the moon face above her. "I—I mean—well, you see—"

Thomas smiled down at her. "Never mind, sister. I'd have found out, anyway. Happens sometimes that one brother is stronger than the other, showier, more flashy. Naturally the weaker vessel is apt to be jealous. Funny, though, I'd have picked you to see through a false front. How come you was marrying Karl when you — umm — loved John?"

"I didn't!" she gasped. A slow flush crept up around her eyes. She set her lips firmly. "It was father's wish that I marry Karl. Need we go into that any further?"

"Nope," said Thomas, suddenly genial. "You better go over and kind of comfort John, though. I think he'll be needin' it shortly."

SHE was on her feet instantly, small fists beating at his broad chest. "You

mustn't, do you hear? John couldn't have had anything to do with it. It—it was an accident, I tell you!"

Thomas avoided her eyes. He wished he wasn't a dick, wished he'd had sense enough to mind his own business. But he heard his own voice saying, "Yeah, everybody's been telling me the same thing, sister."

He waddled back to the main group. "Look, Skipper, any o' this party bring guns into the valley?"

DeGroot looked startled. "Lots of people bring guns in," he said, "but you know the law. We seal every weapon till the owners check out. But surely you don't think Karl Kruger was shot!"

The inspector's bland eyes examined him curiously. "I asked you about this particular party. Did any of 'em have a gun?"

Otto Stern intervened. "Certainly. John owns a .22 rifle, but it was sealed on our entrance, and is down at the hotel this moment. You're being most ridiculous. Karl wasn't shot."

"No," said Thomas. "No, he wasn't shot. Not in the usual sense, that is. Funny thing, though, I'm looking for a guy who knows how to shoot and had the opportunity, and the motive. I think I've got him."

DeGroot looked annoyed. Otto Stern stifled an angry exclamation. They both chorused an incredulous "Who?"

Thomas looked across the room to where the girl and the boy were engrossed in each other. Tough going, this. Aloud, he said, "You favored Karl Kruger as your new son-in-law. Why?"

"Because he was the better man," said Stern promptly. He would have been an asset to the business, and I—well, I'm not getting any younger. John, I'm afraid, is nothing but a dreamer."

Thomas nodded gloomily. "Yeah," he said, "a dreamer. A sensitive kid who's probably had his brother's accomplishments shoved down his throat all his life. You practically signed Karl's death warrant when you gave your daughter to him instead o' John. Mebbe the money he'll inherit had something to do with it, but off hand I'd say Sylvia was the last straw. John killed his brother."

"You're crazy, man! Think what you're saying! Why, John was up here at the lodge, even farther away than any of us!"

"And the only one out of sight of the others!" Thomas turned to Captain DeGroot. "Look, Skipper, down there at the foot of the cliff I found something buried in one o' Karl Kruger's boot-heels. It was a lead BB, and it didn't have no business to be there unless—well, unless somebody had shot it there. I got a picture o' this Karl lad, poised out there on that slippery rock, waiting to have his picture took. Suddenly something catches him in the heel. It don't take much, just enough to startle him. He lost his balance and went over."

"But the gun!" said DeGroot. "He'd have been seen carrying it!"

"Yeah," said Thomas heavily, "we better have a look for the gun. It'd be an air rifle, or mebbe a air pistol. Something that wouldn't make enough noise to be heard above the crackling of the fire."

Otto Stern protested. "John had no such gun! I swear it!"

Thomas left them arguing the point, went over to where little Petersen was chatting amiably with the lodge keeper and his wife. Petersen grinned. "Yuh look like yuh lost your last friend, Mike. Did you finally prove to yourself it was all an accident?"

"No," said Thomas, "I'll probably win my bet with you, you dried-up little wart, but I ain't happy over it like I thought I'd be. I'd rather stay in this dump for a year than do what I'm gonna hafta do."

"Meaning?"

THOMAS didn't answer. His roving eye lighted on something behind the counter, a kid's air rifle. Heavy-footed he rounded the counter, picked it up, looked at the attendant. "Yours?"

The man shuffled uneasily, shot a glance across the room at Captain DeGroot. "No," he said. "No, it isn't mine. It belongs to the kid. Gets kinda lonesome up here for a little shaver and I let him have it. Cap'll probably give me hell."

Unaccountably, Thomas brightened. "The kid!" he said. "Mebbe it was a accident, after all. Where was the kid at the time Karl Kruger took the dive?"

The attendant's wife bridled. "If you mean our Jimmy shot him, you're crazy. He was in bed and asleep when Peck and me went out to take care of the fire. You

ask the other Mr. Kruger if that ain't so. He stayed right here on the porch o' the store."

The inspector's moon face mirrored his disappointment. "I believe you, lady. So John Kruger was here all alone with the little kid's gun." He sighed. "Well, that's that, I guess."

Sergeant Petersen caught up with him as he wandered disconsolately out to the veranda. "Yuh mean this John Kruger shot his brother with that air gun?"

"In the heel," said Thomas. "And speakin' of heels, what does that make me? Yuh know, Pete, there's times when catchin' a murderer is a downright chore." He stared through the window at the group about the girl and the boy. The boy looked sullen, beaten, as if denial were hardly worth while. The girl was crying. Thomas shivered, turned to stare out over moonlit Half Dome, and the hanging rock of Glacier Point, and the swirling mist below.

Little Petersen's voice sounded hollow. "Well, it does beat all how your luck holds up. We gotta leave all this now and go back to the stiffin' pavements o' Los Angeles." He waved an arm. "Nature," he declaimed, "Nature unspoiled, just like she's been for centuries and centuries."

Thomas couldn't keep his eyes off the girl and the boy inside. "Nature," he said sourly, "is the nuts. There's a couple in there that ought to be as happy as larks, and instead o' that they're breakin' their hearts. 'Cause why? 'Cause Nature made 'em like that, and makes people do things they shouldn't, and—aw, hell, what's the use?"

He wandered inside again, leaned on the counter and idly studied the contents of the glass show case. The party was getting ready to leave now. The guide and the trooper were ranged on either side of John Kruger, and Otto Stern was packing up his camera paraphernalia. The girl stared accusingly at Thomas.

More to be keeping his big hands busy than anything else, Thomas reached across and picked up the little gun again. He twisted the burl nut at the end of the barrel, tilted the gun so that a few of the BB's rolled out into his broad palm. And, quite suddenly, he cursed. Thomas seldom used profanity. But this was an occasion. He put the gun down, very quietly then, and bore down on DeGroot.

"We better wait a minute, Skipper."
DeGroot glared at him. "What in hell for?"

"Because," said Thomas, "I'm thinkin' I made a mistake. I don't very often make 'em, but when I do, I admit it. The kid's air rifle ain't the one that shot Karl Kruger in the boot. And seein' that is so, I reckon there may be some doubt about who did the shootin'." He stooped a little, so that he could peer directly through the thick-lensed glasses of Otto Stern. "Mebbe you'd have a motive, too, if we checked you real close, hunh?"

Stern recoiled as if from a blow. "You're mad, sirrah, positively mad!"

"You said it," said Thomas. "I ain't been so mad since I come to Yosemite." He grinned naively at Captain DeGroot. "Things has been runnin' around in my mind, Skipper. Motives and things. Guess mebbe I was tryin' to find an out for the boy, here. Seems Otto Stern has pretty much had his way with the Kruger fortune, and the business and all. Seems there wasn't much danger of John interfering, or checking up. But how about Karl? I understand Karl was gonna take an active interest pretty soon now."

"Meaning there was bound to be an accounting and that Stern was short?"

"Meaning that it could be, Skipper. I've seen such things happen before."

OTTO STERN had recovered his poise. "I'll have the scalps of both of you for this," he said, not angrily, but as one stating a fact. "Kruger & Stern

have enough influence to do it, too. If there was a crime committed—I say if there was—then certainly I had nothing to do with it. At the moment Karl fell, I was taking his picture, and I was in plain sight of at least four witnesses."

Thomas said, "There's another angle. Just for fun, say there *was* a crime, and that young John, here, committed it. He hangs, and that leaves you sitting prettier than ever."

Stern struck him across the mouth. Thomas took it. It was like a puny, futile wave beating against a towering cliff. He said, quite as if there had been no interruption: "All right, you were taking a picture. I see by your equipment that you still use the old-fashioned hand-operated flash-gun. That accounts for one hand. The other, I suppose, was busy with the shutter?"

"Of course!"

"You probably were under your black cloth, to shut out the light from the fire?"

"Naturally."

"Then," said Thomas, "we should have a pretty good picture on one of your plates, hunh? Mind getting it? I see they have a dark room here."

For the first time Otto Stern showed a trace of worry. His pale eyes flicked rapidly from Thomas to DeGroot, rested fleetingly on his daughter, came back. "I'm sorry," he said nervously. "Really, I don't know which plate it was, now. There was so much confusion at the time—"

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"Never mind," said Thomas. "We'll just develop 'em all."

He picked up the plate case, waddled over to the counter. "Run these through in a hurry, will you? We just want to get an idea."

Stern was suddenly at his elbow, clawing frantically. "You can't touch my property! I won't permit it!"

Thomas brushed him off as he would a fly. "Not scared, are you?" He addressed the room at large. "Did friend Otto take a little walk, mebbe, after the accident?" He read the answer in Stern's own blanched face. "Unh-hunh, so you did! Look, Skipper, you might have your boys scout around outside for an air pistol."

DeGroot spoke to the trooper and the guide. They went out. DeGroot came over. "See here, Thomas, I've played along with you, but this is a pretty serious business."

"Murder always is," said Thomas. He wasn't feeling much better. If he were right, he was only clearing the boy to pin it on the girl's father.

Her white, stricken face bothered him. They were clinging together now, the boy and the girl, as if for mutual protection.

The man came back from the dark room. "Blanks," he announced. "Not a darn thing on any of them."

"And that's what I thought," said Mike Thomas. He stared hard at Otto Kern. "Know why there ain't anything on those plates? 'Cause you never made the exposure. Your left hand triggered

the flash-gun, but your right hand was pointin' a pistol. The boys'll find it."

STERN gave a sudden bleat of terror. "All right, I did it! But you'll never catch me!" He was away like the wind, through the door and out to the edge of the precipice. There was a scream, wafted up from the depths; just one long scream, choked off quite suddenly. Thomas came back to the veranda, puffing a little from the chase.

Petersen materialized out of the shadows. "Well, you pulled it off, Mike. The boys just found the gun. But look, how'd you know it wasn't the kid's air rifle?"

"The BB's," said Thomas, blowing gustily. "The kid used the copper-coated kind. The one in the guy's heel was plain old lead."

"Hmmm!" said Sergeant Petersen. He stared out over the vista of peak and valley. "Shame to be leavin' all this," he mourned. "Look, Mike, yuh must have some o' the finer feelings in that hunk o' fat you call your body. Can't yuh feel it? Ain't nature grand?"

Thomas was looking through the window at the boy and girl instead. Time would heal their hurts, mebbe. And they had each other. And mebbe the old duck had left 'em a few dimes for a start. He breathed a gusty sigh.

"I asked yuh a question!" Petersen snarled.

"Hunh?" said Thomas. "Oh, sure, sure! Nature is one o' the grandest things I know. Human nature."



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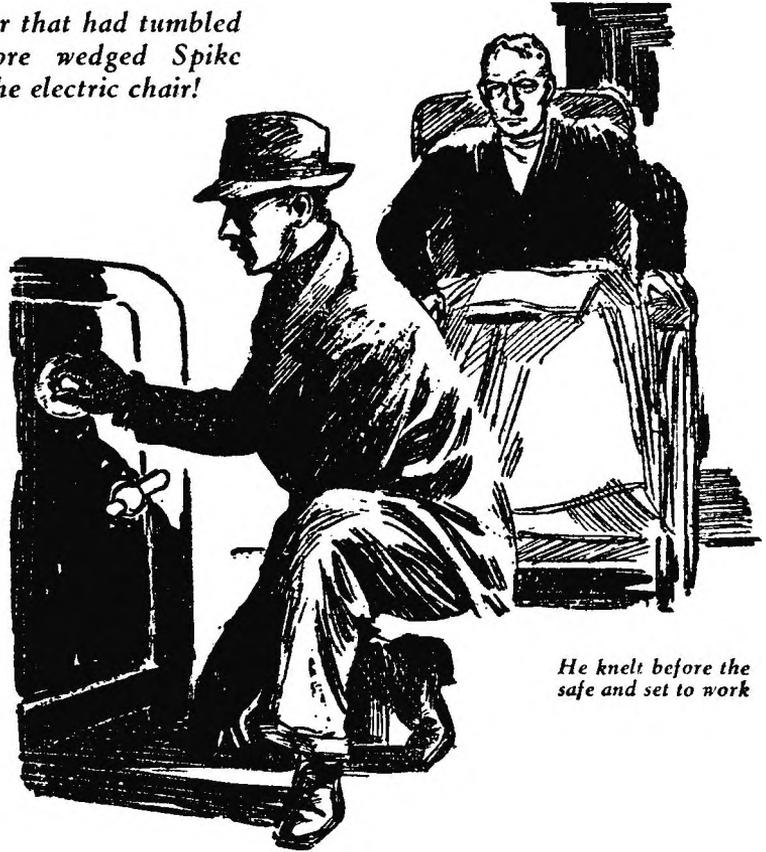
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Dead Man's Code

by JAMES HALL

Author of "The Crime Killer," etc.

*A pile of lumber that had tumbled
ten years before wedged Spike
Evans into the electric chair!*



*He knelt before the
safe and set to work*

SPIKE EVANS, gambler and ex-convict, stopped before the rough, pine door of John Reeve's lumber office. Slowly, noiselessly, his fingers found the chipped, porcelain door-knob. He twisted it, pushed, and the door opened without a sound.

The gambler's close-set eyes fastened on an old man in a wheel chair who was reading a newspaper in the glow of a hanging kerosene lamp. He shut the door and as the latch rattled, the old man dropped the paper to his lap and spun the chair around to face the door.

"Sorry, Reeve, if I startled you," Evans said unpleasantly.

The old lumberman's right hand groped for an electric bell.

"Ring the bell till the battery's dead," Evans grated. "I rapped Banton over the head and tied and gagged him. Even if he comes to, he can't help you."

The old man pulled his hand away from the button and gripped the arms of his chair until his knuckles whitened.

"I know that tomorrow's payday and that you've got the money, over \$6,000 in your safe," Evans went on harshly. "I also know that dead men tell no tales. Slitting your throat will repay me with interest for that time you had me run out of town."

No sound came from the old man in the wheel chair. His face, except for the burning eyes, was expressionless.

"Don't you wish you could talk?" Evans bantered. "Too bad that, after that pile of lumber fell on you ten years ago, you was never able to talk or walk, ain't it?"

* * * * *

Evans' eyes shifted to a small, old-fashioned safe. He crossed the room, knelt before the safe and set to work,

slowly turning the dial, listening for the fall of the tumblers.

Suddenly, he looked up, an angry snarl on his yellowish face.

"I ain't got time to fool around like this." Drawing a slip of paper and pencil from his pocket, he rose and handed them to the old man. "Here," he grated. "Write the combination down for me."

The cripple wrote one word: "No."

The scar on Evans' face whitened. "Oh, you won't, huh?" he snarled.

He drew a slender-bladed knife, started toward the door.

"You'll either write the combination, or I'll slit Banton's throat as well as yours!"

He glanced back over his shoulder and saw old Reeve motioning him to return.

Grinning, he went back to the wheel chair and watched the old man write down a series of numbers on the slip of paper. He jerked the paper from the trembling old fingers and hurried back to the safe.

* * * * *

It took the gambler only a few minutes to get the money and stow it in a small black bag which he had brought. This done, he rose and glided back to Reeve. . . .

The old man died quickly and silently.

Evans was halfway out the door when he stopped, struck by a sudden thought. The old man had had that pencil while the safe was being opened. There was a chance that he had left a note.

The gambler turned back to the wheel chair. He saw the newspaper still lying across the dead man's legs, but saw no sign of a note.

Then his eyes fell on a scrap of paper lying on the floor. He caught it up and turned it over. A grin spread over his face. Written on the slip of paper were the words: "Spike Evans is looting the safe and is going to kill me. J. Reeve."

The gambler congratulated himself on thinking about looking for a note. Why, the old buzzard had almost slipped one over on him! He burned the note, then left the building.

* * * * *

NEXT morning, Spike Evans was sitting at one of the square, rough

tables in Joe's saloon, sipping some of Joe's choice whiskey. He had every reason to feel secure. Banton hadn't seen him—had been knocked out from behind. The knife he had tossed into the river, and he had buried the money. Everything was in order, and he was in the chips.

He raised his glass to his lips, drank. As soon as things blew over, he'd lam out of town. It wouldn't do to leave now, might arouse suspicion.

Suddenly he looked up. Two men had entered the saloon and were sauntering toward his table. The tall man was Banton. The other fellow, thick-set, short, was the sheriff.

For a moment, Spike Evans knew fear. Then his yellowish face twisted into a grin. They hadn't anything on him.

Banton and the sheriff stopped beside the table, and the sheriff drawled, "Spike, I reckon I'll have to be takin' you to jail for murderin' ol' man Reeve an' stealin' the payroll."

The sheriff's voice was slow and soft, but it carried a note of surety that wasn't to be mistaken. Banton's steel gray eyes held a hard glint that chilled the gambler's spine. Suddenly, Evans knew that he was cornered—knew that, in some way, these men had discovered that he was guilty.

The gambler's close-set, shifty eyes sought escape. His hand slid toward a shoulder holster.

Suddenly, Banton threw his weight against the table. The glass and bottle crashed to the floor. Evans went over backwards. When he looked up into the muzzle of a gun held as steady as a rock in the sheriff's hand, he knew that escape was out of the question.

"How did you—guess?" His voice was a whisper.

"We didn't have to guess, you rat!" Banton clipped.

He jerked a crumpled newspaper from his pocket, flattened it out and shook it viciously before Evans' eyes.

"Reeve left us a note. See? He punched out letters on the front page of this paper with the point of a lead pencil. The missing letters are f-i-n-d s-p-i-k-e e-v-a-n-s!"

Killers Don't Scream

by **CYRIL PLUNKETT**

Author of "The Song That Death Sang," etc.

That simple, modest apartment was a homicide hotspot tenanted by a corpse who was leading Judy Greene inexorably to the morgue!

The man's gloved fist was clamped over hers, forcing those shears toward her breast. Then Johnny Porter lunged!



TIM CASEY said: "Yeah, Johnny, but three thousand bucks is a lot of money to pass up." Detective Casey, family-man, forty and forceful, was the grizzled senior member of the prowler car.

Johnny Porter, Detective, second grade, tooled the black sedan into the more brightly lighted Jefferson Street, and rearranged his six feet two behind the wheel. "Don't I know it!" he sighed. "It's a screwy set-up, Tim.

Uncle Nate believed in early wedlock to hold a fellow down. Three thousand bucks if I marry before I'm twenty-five. Only I don't need holding down—and I haven't even got a girl."

"What's more to the point," Casey ruminated, "you'll be twenty-five in one more month. Why don't you get yourself a girl, Johnny?"

Johnny sighed again. He had gray eyes, and a generous and friendly mouth. He looked like the kind of a fellow almost

any girl would want. "There's more to it than that," he said slowly. "Not a girl, Tim, but *the* girl—and I can't find her. Maybe I'm a funny guy, maybe I try too hard to figure the future, but I can't see the percentage of jumping into the double harness with just any—"

The car radio abruptly spluttered. "Calling car 19—calling car 19. Proceed to Jefferson at 67th, the Seton apartments. Neighbor reports gunshot and a woman's scream. Investigate."

Johnny said, "That's us, Tim!" and he jerked his hat down tighter. The car shot forward.

The Seton was three blocks down, a red-brick building on the right. The prowling car slid to the curb, and Johnny beat Tim Casey to the ground.

"Maybe here's the dame you've been looking for?" Tim grinned. "Damsel in distress, romance—"

"You've been reading a book," Johnny Porter chuckled, and they hit the entrance. A plump woman was pacing the narrow foyer. The plump woman cried: "Oh, I'm glad you're here, officer!"

"I was coming down the stairs from Mrs. Goldberg's," she explained. "I was on the fourth floor, no—let me see, the third. Oh, I'm so mixed up—"

"And you heard this shot and scream?" Casey growled.

"Yes! From back in the hall. It—it must have been the last apartment."

"Lady, you stay right here," Casey snapped. And he started up the stairs, Johnny at his heels.

THE hall was dimly lighted, gloomy. And silent, though it was but ten o'clock. Casey said: "You take the right, Johnny, and I'll try the left," and Johnny drew his service gun. He rapped on the last door to the right, thought he heard a gasp inside. "Sounds like this place is empty," Tim was muttering on the other side, and Johnny had a hunch, obeyed it. He turned the knob and pushed. The door swung in.

There was a black cat halfway across the softly lighted room, its unblinking eyes not unlike an owl's. Another door opened on a bedroom, but this side of it, her back to heavy, floor-length window drapes, was a girl. She was young and blonde, and her violet eyes were very, very wide. She wore a jaunty little hat, and a jaunty little jacket, but there was

nothing jaunty about her parted lips, nor the twin blotch of rouge where all color had faded from her cheeks. She said, "Oh—!" and her body shuddered.

"Police," Johnny explained quickly. "A lady downstairs called in maybe two minutes ago about a scream."

"And a shot," Casey's rumbling voice cut in. "Did you scream, lady?"

"Why, why yes, I did," the girl breathed. "But—but there wasn't any shot." Nor any smell of gunpowder, Johnny's nostrils told him.

"There wasn't, eh?" Casey grunted. "Suppose you tell what happened?"

The girl looked scared, Johnny thought, but he supposed a guy barging through her door with a gun in his hand was enough to scare anybody. He put the gun away.

"I—I was coming home from a show," the girl was saying. She had a husky voice. She had, in fact, Johnny's mind decided unbelievably, everything! "I was thinking—" She swallowed nervously. "You know, preoccupied, and when I came in—I kicked the cat. It frightened me."

They all looked at the cat. It had stalked to the girl's feet, stood rubbing its body against the drapes.

"But there was something else, wasn't there?" Johnny said softly.

"Something else? Why—why yes, there was. I thought I saw someone at the window." She pointed to the window, one of two opening on the rear of the building, its shade now tightly drawn, long drapes almost closed. "But I guess it wasn't anyone. I looked out, and the fire escape was empty."

The funny part of it was, Johnny Porter mused, she seemed to be getting more nervous every second. One slender hand clutched at her purse; the knuckles showed white. She'd raised the other to the side of her forehead, was tapping it as though indescribably anxious.

"You got a headache, lady?" Casey inquired, squinting.

"I—" The hand came down quickly. "Oh, no, officer."

"Okay, now this shot?"

She managed a fleeting smile. "I guess I slammed the door. It *would* sound like a shot, wouldn't it?"

Casey nodded, seemingly satisfied. Johnny went over to the window. He raised the shade on a dust streaked pane;

the sash was unlocked. Once opened, he looked out and down.

"Okay," Casey was saying. "Now if I could have your name for the report."

"Judy Green," she answered promptly. "I'm secretary to Mr. Newton Temple, cashier at the Jefferson National Bank."

"You live in this place, of course?"

"Of course."

"Then I guess that covers it. You don't want us to give it the once-over?"

"That isn't necessary, is it?"

"Just a minute," Johnny cut in quietly. "Tim, there isn't any fire escape at that window; the escape hits the *other* window, the one she didn't point to."

Judy Green gave a little gasp, and once again all color left her face. And Casey said: "Guess we look the place over."

"But really—" Judy pleaded, stood breathing swiftly as Casey moved across the floor. He went into the other room. He called: "By heaven, Johnny, take a look in here!"

Johnny closed the hall door, and his footsteps followed Casey's. He hadn't gone three feet inside the other room when the door behind him slammed. And the key turned in its lock!

BOTH men whirled, and Casey let out a bellow. He dived for the door, jerked at the knob. Began then to roar: "Hey, you! Open this door!" He'd said it twice when Johnny's shoulder drove against the panel. The wood shivered, and Johnny lunged again.

The cat eyed them, blinking, as they broke through, but Judy Green was gone, and the other window—to the fire escape—stood open. Johnny Porter knew now that Judy Green had never lived here, for men's shoes had stood beneath the bed in that other room, and only a man's personal things had appeared upon the dresser. But though Casey had already crawled out of the open window, cursing that the night was like a blanket, racing on down the steel steps, young Detective Porter stood oddly frowning. The cat, arching its back, had crossed the room, began to rub itself against a closet door. The cat looked up and mewed, and Johnny went over to the closet.

The body of a man, still warm, lay crumpled on the floor dead, a knife protruding from his chest. But though the face was twisted, Johnny Porter recog-

nized it. The thought flashed: "Thomas Kemp, paying teller at the Jefferson National—the bank where Judy Green said she works!"

For a moment he stood stiffly, startled, but the wheels of his mind were racing. *Killers don't scream* rolled through it first of all, over and over, tantalizing and barbed. It prodded him then that Judy Green didn't look like a girl who would keep a tryst in any man's room, much less murder that man. She'd seemed to him more like the girl he'd dreamed of some day finding, intelligent and honest and good. A girl any man could *trust*.

But she *had* been in this room, with death, and she had wanted Casey and himself to quickly leave—and she had trapped them and flown. Johnny's mind abruptly ceased to spin. He looked at the cat, and then at the window with its raised and grimy pane.

Five long steps took him to the window; the sixth, through it. But though Casey was calling to him from below, Johnny began to mount the fire steps. When he came to the floor above, the window there, he paused again.

It was dark inside, but the light of an advertising sign a half block away glinted on the glass. Johnny tried the sash, raised it. He heard no sound ahead, but he went in nevertheless. And then suddenly he did hear sound, sound that was a gasp, a groan, a curse beyond the light-crack of a door. Johnny Porter dived for that door, and turned its knob.

There was a mad instant, wherein he saw a squat man bending over Judy Green's gagged figure. Judy Green lay on the bed, kicking at him, clawing with her one free hand. The other hand held a pair of shears—but not as a weapon of defense. *The man's gloved fist was clamped over hers. The man was forcing those shears toward her breast.*

Johnny Porter lunged.

He'd almost reached the bed before the struggling man heard him and whirled. He saw contorted lips, eyes glazed by fury—a hand streaking for side pocket. Johnny didn't dare use his own gun, for Judy was in the line of fire.

There was a flash of steel, two sharp reports. One bullet fanned his cheek, the second creased his outstretched hand. By that time he had the gun barrel in that hand; and his other was swinging.

The squat man ~~took~~ the first blow,

twisted, came up under Johnny's arm. He leaped for the open doorway, but Johnny had spun with him and his foe stopped abruptly, squealing at the fingers that caught his neck. Simultaneously, Tim Casey appeared at the door, gun drawn, but Johnny Porter was already swinging, and the man dropped.

Casey gasped. "It's Newton Temple!"

From the bed, her gag half removed, Judy Green sobbed. "Thank God, you came in time."

Casey handcuffed Newton Temple, and then phoned headquarters. Johnny Porter smiled at Judy Green.

"YOU see," she said, "I told the truth. I *had* been preoccupied coming home. The floors are identical, and I'd taken the third floor hall instead of the fourth, my floor, without noticing my error. I'd opened Mr. Kemp's door, stepped inside fumbling for the light switch before I realized I was in the wrong apartment. But it wasn't the cat that frightened me. It was turning on the light and seeing Mr. Temple, with Thomas Kemp's body at his feet. And he slammed the door, shutting me in.

"Of course I knew Temple had killed Kemp; I even suspected why. Walking home from work tonight, Mr. Kemp had hinted that everything wasn't right in the bank's accounts, that he'd spoken to Temple about it. Temple apparently had embezzled considerable money, and faced with Kemp's suspicions, doubtless realized he could throw guilt away from him and onto Kemp by murder that looked like suicide."

Newton Temple cursed, and Judy shuddered. But she continued:

"When you rapped at the door, he'd already hidden Kemp's body, already changed his plans. It was to look now as though I had murdered Kemp and then committed suicide. He slipped behind the drapes, his gun pressed at my back, and whispered he'd kill me instantly if I didn't bluff the scene through.

"Though I was frantic, I—I tried, and when you started searching, he saw his chance to trap you; forced me then, quickly, to raise and crawl through the window, precede him upstairs, the quickest way to my rooms. Once I was out of the way, he could have calmly walked down the hall and back to Kemp's room as though just arriving for a visit.

"I didn't dare scream, lest death at once shut off all hope. And the floors are soundproof; I knew you wouldn't hear our footsteps upstairs, so I—"

"You marked the way," Johnny said quietly. "A small but significant arrow on the grimy window pane, pointing upward. Temple, in his urgency, didn't see it, but I did and understood."

"Wait a minute," Casey grumbled. "When we broke down that door, it still looked like this lady was on the lam. I saw the arrow, too, but ladies on the lam don't leave signs, and that arrow *might* have been there for days."

"But you didn't observe Kemp's cat." Johnny chuckled. "It pointed out its master's body, and I remembered then it had acted the same peculiar way before, at the window drapes. I got the pictures—maybe because I wanted to believe Miss Green had been telling me the truth."

She flashed him a grateful glance. "In spite of the discrepancy about the fire escape and the windows?"

"Because of it," he answered solemnly. "If I believed half your tale—about coming into Kemp's room that way, but living at this address—I could only conclude you'd actually described *the corresponding window in your own apartment, which the escape did hit*. And why did I reach this conclusion? Because you'd said the escape had been clear four stories down when we were on the *third* floor at the time!"

"So that's the way you figured where to go!" Casey cried. "But suppose—"

Johnny cut in. "I didn't have to suppose anything, Tim. The arrow pointed up, but Miss Green is a very intelligent and thorough person. First she'd been tapping her head—"

"My temple!" Judy breathed. "I'd mentioned the bank and Newton Temple, and I was trying to tell you *temple* was important."

"I figured you wanted me to use my head," Johnny grinned, "because I was sure by this time that you were using yours. So I looked for a further sign and found it—on the fourth floor window pane. X marks the spot in all murders, Tim—she'd raised the window and contrived to leave an X!"

He confided later: "That girl's got brains, Tim. You know what? The three thousand bucks I got coming will buy a lot of furniture."

Murder Blackout

by ROBERT
O. KENYON

Author of "Turn to
Dust and Die," etc.

Jed Carlson buried his past in a she-devil's
gorgeous body!



Mitzi screamed: "I'll wreck you! I'll wreck
your career!"

IT began weeks past, with sharp little doubts, and then sharper little thoughts. And Jed Carlson fought them in his way; he believed they never really would have to happen. It ended with a rush of blinding rage when Mitzi screamed, "I'll wreck you! I'll wreck your career!"

She was standing not three feet distant, golden-haired, slant-eyed. But she could be a devil. And he was backed

against the table, his hands behind him. They touched the knife. . . .

One moment their eyes—hers green and blazing; his jet, yellow-flecked—were locked in hatred. Mitzi cried, "I'll drag you through the courts! I'll show the whole country what their idol really is!" Carlson snarled a curse and lunged.

There was a scream, her scream . . . gurgling. Her fingers caught at her

breast, at the knife, like claws. But the knife was already buried to its hilt, her white gown staining all around it. Those frantic hands tried to push him away then, but they barely touched his shirt. They fluttered, fell, and a sigh escaped her lips.

Carlson stood panting, began to laugh. The mad mist still clung about his mind. Emotion was like a river, too long dammed. It had to find release in laughter. But gradually sanity returned, and for a long minute he stood staring, almost numb.

Mitzi Mack . . . dead. Mitzi, who had first intrigued and then drugged him with her slender body, her capacity to love. She'd seemed perfect for his ego, his genius, with money and a husband far, very far in the background. So far, Carlson had often wondered if he really existed.

But like all women, she had finally demanded marriage, and that was her mistake.

Jed Carlson was a name to conjure with. Southern California knew him for what he was, vain, selfish, grasping, cruel. To the world, however, he was box-office. The black haired, black eyed movie hero. Stalwart, brave, handsome as only screen actors can be handsome. And *he* thought a lot of this latter person; he coddled and guarded it—as he guarded his personal freedom. There was no room in his life for marriage, even with a glorious creature like Mitzi Mack. *Particularly* with Mitzi Mack, because once he'd let her see his ardor cooling, she'd change and become scheming. She'd threatened and her threats were real. He'd realized they could swing the mercurial pendulum of public opinion; they could bring disaster to all he lived for, money, applause, fame.

But no more would they endanger him. Mitzi Mack was dead, and he—he wasn't afraid. He was Jed Carlson, who lived his pictures, who could accomplish anything; and his mind began to plan.

THE knife, first. Carlson wiped it carefully with his handkerchief, put the blood stained linen in the side pocket of his tuxedo. To be burned later. . . . His hands? Amazingly free of blood! She'd been alone this night in her canyon home, also. So the servants were no problem. And he'd parked his car

before the garage, *back* of the house. No casual passerby could have seen and identified it. Moreover there were no near neighbors—and the heavy window drapes to this room had been tightly pulled.

Alibi? Sometimes the old tricks, brought up to date, were the best. He'd be suspected, of course. Who had called upon Mitzi oftener than he? So his alibi, therefore, must not be *too* good. There was a small electric clock on the occasional table on which the knife had been laying. Carlson grinned. He got into his topcoat, his hat, his gloves. He turned the clock ahead thirty minutes, to ten o'clock, and then he pulled its cord from the wall socket. If its emergency spring kept it going awhile longer, so much the better. The servants weren't due back till morning. The clock he dropped to the floor; the table he turned over. And then chairs, as though a struggle had taken place.

His mind was working swiftly now. Robbery must seem the motive. Why not? A lonely house; tonight a lone woman occupant! So drawers were jerked open, contents scattered. Ten minutes for this. Twenty minutes left to ten o'clock, the approximate time the crime would be tagged. Twenty minutes to get—not back to Hollywood and the gayer spots—but to Inca Inn!

Carlson hummed as he drove, certain no one had seen him leave the canyon home. His watch showed two minutes before the hour when he entered Inca Inn.

He stripped off his gloves, shoved them in his topcoat pocket. He removed his coat and hat, and told the check-room girl she ought to have a screen test. The stained handkerchief was still in his tuxedo left pocket—he felt of it to be sure—and turned at a voice behind him.

"Carlson!" It was Anthony Mack, his own director.

Mack was in his forties, short, stocky, partly bald. He had little blue eyes, keen as a razor, and his rise to cinema fame had been meteoric. It was said Anthony Mack had once spent a week in the filming of a single bit of "business," a mouse peeking from a hole. He'd waited for the mouse to show "expression." But exactitude had brought its rewards. Mack, today, had just finished Carlson's latest picture, *The Storm*.

"Hello, Tony," Carlson answered easily. "I was driving home and I stopped in for a drink. Now I won't have to drink alone! You'll join me, won't you?"

Tony Mack looked at his wrist watch—Carlson smiled inwardly—and nodded. "Ten o'clock. Yes, I have time, but—" the blue eyes narrowed. "You have hurt yourself, maybe? Blood it is, on your shirt, under the tie!"

Blood. . . ! Carlson's left hand, still in his pocket, instantly clenched, and a chill raced down his spine. Mitzi had tried to push him from her! Oh, what a fool he'd been not to look into a mirror. He glanced down quickly, raised the shirt and saw the blood stain was small, smeared. Saw, mentally, something else.

"I cut my hand on the car. Nothing serious." The hand came out of his pocket then, the blood stained handkerchief carelessly around it, *covering* it. "How about that drink, Tony?"

Tony Mack wagged his bald head. "Cuts, they can be serious, no? You do something for it."

You could bet he would, Carlson thought, back in his car later. He'd *cut* it! He let the blood flow a little, grimly; rewrapped the hand then. The breaks, so far, had been both good and bad. Meeting Tony, with his mind for detail, would definitely establish the time of his entrance at the Inn. The time he and Tony got their coats and left the Inn for their cars. On the other hand, the handkerchief could not now be destroyed. Nor the stain too soon removed from his shirt. For Tony would remember those things, too. He cursed Tony Mack, even while he exulted in his own ability to successfully carry the scene off; drove home then, and made a noisy entrance for his valet's benefit. Went to bed—to fitful sleep shortly before dawn. There was something vague but troubling in his mind, something he sensed he had done wrong.

THEY came in the morning, the headquarters' car and Homicide Lieutenant Grove. They filled the air with questions, but Carlson was his clever self, debonair, agile brain quite ready. Presently a studio car whirled into the driveway, with Metz, the studio's executive vice president at the wheel. Tony Mack and Pearson, the public relations coun-

sel, were with Metz.

It was tragic, it was horrible, Metz stormed. Suspecting Jed Carlson of murder! It was fantastic . . . and moreover, distribution of *The Storm*, Carlson's new picture, might be delayed. The police must remember that. Pearson must remember it, and like a good press agent, arrange for the newspapers to be careful.

"But I happen to be innocent," Carlson smiled.

"Sure!" Metz cried, "but will the people, the censors think that? Carlson, why did you ever know this woman?"

"We were only casual friends," Carlson explained. "I'm sorry she's dead, of course, but—" He shrugged. Could he help it? that shrug implied. It was beautifully timed and executed. It expressed just the right amount of regret—but without worry.

Grove said, "You'd better drive down to headquarters, for a chat. If you're really clear, there'll be no trouble."

"I can only tell you again what I did last night," Carlson answered wearily.

"With me, he was. Yes, with me," Tony Mack interrupted, "at ten o'clock. I know because I always know precisely what I do or see." He frowned then. "Jed, your hand? You have fixed it right?"

Grove's eyes had narrowed. "I've been wondering about that bandaged hand. You cut it, eh?" as Carlson explained.

"And there was a blood stain on your shirt? I suppose you've washed the shirt and handkerchief?"

"My word, I never wash shirts!" Carlson laughed. "Should I have?"

Grove grunted. "We'll find and take those things along with us. If the blood type is yours, okay. But if—" He didn't complete the sentence, didn't have to. Carlson shuddered. Now he knew, too late, why he had been troubled. Blood types! Good God, they'd have him! He lit a cigaret, followed Metz to the studio car, hardly knowing how he walked and talked and acted without showing his terror.

"You call attention to his hand yet, Tony," Metz was raging. "It is almost that you want to cost us money!"

Tony Mack sighed, and Carlson could have throttled him. Tony said, "The details must be right. Money, it is of no

matter. Why should you worry any-way? The stain was from his blood."

His blood. They'd find *two* types. They'd have proof no lawyer could evade. They'd . . . they'd . . . they'd . . . Hours, it seemed, of probabilities, and questions. Hours until the laboratory phoned in its report.

Carlson, type three. Type three, Mitzi Mack. Carlson's heart stopped beating momentarily. He lit another cigaret and smiled. "May I go home now, gentlemen?"

The breaks were with him. The blood types proved it. The newspapers were with him. Pearson had seen to it his name was barely mentioned. *Killer Loose*, the headlines read. Carlson mixed himself a heady drink and laughed and laughed until the tears rolled down his cheeks.

On Tuesday, this was. Mitzi Mack had met death on Monday night. Thursday morning, the studio called Jed Carlson back for retakes on *The Storm*.

"It's colossal!" Pearson exulted. His eyes glittered behind thick glasses. "This is a job I can go to town on. It's like this, you're innocent, see? So we can capitalize on this murder, and you know how the public eats up Hollywood murders! Now this girl in *The Storm*, this Eileen, gets killed. Only now it's going to be murder! Hey, don't interrupt me! This is terrific. You're going to the chair for another's crime, and you're strapped in the chair, ready for the juice jolt. You *suffer*, and then at the last minute—"

"Who's responsible for this—this brainstorm?" Carlson snarled.

"Damfino," Pearson grinned. "It just up and got born! But it's going to be sweet. Boy, is it going to be sweet! The boys worked all last night building the set."

CARLSON cursed him and strode on to his dressing room. Cursed himself finally for a fool. Why get excited? Mitzi Mack was safely dead—and he was safely covered. What mattered *any* scene, even in a prison death chamber?

Nevertheless, his nerves were on edge, and when Tony Mack decided to shoot the chair sequence first, when Tony ranted and instructed and viewed this camera angle and that, never satisfied, Carlson could not control his wrath.

"You fool," he shouted. "I'd planned on a weekend in the mountains. I won't have this delay!"

Tony's round face flushed. "But *Mister* Carlson, the detail. It must be right. We'll try it now, yes? You know your lines?"

"Of course I know them," Carlson snapped.

"Then perhaps we are ready. You sit in this chair. You are strapped—there, like that. You try to control the fear, but the lights seem to grow more dim, and you cannot control the fear. The sweat pours from your forehead—no that is not right, *Mister* Carlson. The eyes must not look hard and cruel. Bravery, it is, but fear too.

"*Ach*, the lights are wrong. Such a stupid thing. The lights must be *closer*; not visible, but we must have their heat."

"If you're going to spend another hour with your crazy details, Mack, I would suggest you use my stand-in. I—"

"But *Mister* Carlson, it is not angles now so much. It is *you!* You do not satisfy. We try again—no lines we need yet. Just expression."

Minutes . . . minutes . . . hours. Or so it seemed. It wasn't morbid connotation of the electric chair so much as Tony Mack that got Carlson. Or was it the chair after all? Wasn't he straining to be *away* from it? Seeing himself really in it, dying for the murder of Mitzi Mack? Silly, of course. They *hanged* murderers in California and the locale of this play was not California. But, damn it, the *association*. . . .

"You are too taut," Tony sighed. "We try it again." Again . . . *again*. With silence all around, and strained eyes watching him, Jed Carlson, writhing, dripping sweat. His hands balled into fists. His jet eyes glared at Tony Mack. He thought, By God, I'll kill you too—

"*Now*," Tony beamed. "Now we will make this one good!"

The cameras ground. Carlson spoke his lines almost in a daze. His gaze finally locked with Tony's, and Tony Mack sat forward in his chair; Tony's lips were parted and his body tense, as though on a leash. When Tony called, "Cut!" Carlson shuddered and got up. The one thing he needed now was a drink, a big drink.

Presently Tony Mack rapped, entered Carlson's dressing room. "You see, it is fine at last!" Tony grinned.

"I'm worn out," Carlson snapped. "I'm through. You hear that?"

"Yes, you are through, *Mister* Carlson." Tony was still grinning. "I do one more scene maybe, without you. But tonight we see the rushes, no? Tonight you will be here?"

Was this fat fool taunting him? Daring him to be on deck tonight? Carlson shrugged with contempt. "Of course I'll view the rushes. Get out, Mack."

THE District Attorney came with Metz. A few minutes later, Lieutenant Grove and two headquarters plainclothes dicks appeared. They nodded to the D. A., found seats near him.

Carlson, waiting, began to squirm. "What are *they* here for?" he asked.

"It's Tony," Pearson confided. "Exactitude, get it? Between you and me, Carlson, that guy's screwy! But can he turn out hits! Anyway, he doesn't want to antagonize the local Law on this murder angle. He says he's got to get their okay."

"He's a damned fool," Carlson muttered, and saw Tony Mack. Tony beaming, trying one chair, then another.

The screen became alive. *His* screen, and for a few moments Carlson forgot all anger, became lost in pride and admiration for himself. This was magnificent! A piece of work the nation would applaud—and never know it was *not* acting. Jed Carlson on the screen this time was *real*, frantic. The words, "But I tell you I am innocent!"

"Good God, I can't go on. This thing is driving me insane! I killed her. I killed Mitzi Mack! Sure I killed her when she—"

Carlson jerked erect, trembling. Was that voice *his* voice, in *his* mind? Or coming from the screen?

"She threatened me. I—I grabbed up the knife. I set the clock ahead to *alibi* myself."

Jed Carlson cried out, "No! I didn't say that! It was in my mind, but I didn't say it. I didn't! I didn't!"

The room was abruptly black, and he heard his sobs, the voice he could no longer control, screaming. Someone stood beside him, and he struck out at them, cursing. Lunged toward the door.

Fought, scratched, clawed to reach that door. Lights flashed on, blinding him. To everything but the handcuffs on his wrists.

For a long time Tony Mack remained seated, smiling vaguely.

"You are fired, you hear? Fired!" Metz was raging. "You lose us an actor and *millions*. You lose us this picture, *The Storm*."

Tony went on smiling. That smile seemed to say: A job? There are many jobs for one who does not fail himself.

Lieutenant Grove and Pearson drew near. Grove cleared his throat. "We got down every word he said, Mr. Mack, even in the dark—and he couldn't sign fast enough."

"But he didn't *say* those things this afternoon!" Pearson was insisting wildly. "I tell you, I *saw* the scene when they took it, and he—"

"An old lady in a new dress," Tony Mack said softly then. "A trick so old as the talkies. Carlson's lips, yes; but *another's* voice cued in upon the sound track."

"With a theatrical blackout for effect! Say—!" Pearson gasped. "I get it. Mitzi Mack . . . Tony Mack! You're the husband everybody wondered about! You did it—to avenge her death!"

"When Carlson came into Inca Inn that night," Tony went on gently, "there was blood upon his shirt. A spot my mind must account for. He attempted to show me it came from his hand, which he had wrapped with a handkerchief."

"It is very, very strange. Because I had just seen him at the door, taking off his gloves. He had no stained handkerchief around his hand then, could not have had inside the gloves. Leaving the Inn with him, later, I managed to steal his gloves from his topcoat pocket. You see, I cannot rest until I have the answer; until the details are precise and accurate. So, Lieutenant, those gloves are yours now—for evidence. No sign of blood appeared inside them. The answer was—you call it obvious?"

"Swell," Pearson agreed. "But the *human* element is terrific! The wronged husband in turn setting right a wrong!"

"You must not forget that this is Hollywood," Tony sighed. "Mack is a name so easy to remember. Alas, my own is not. It is Mackovitski."

The Sizzle-Seat Is for Saps

STARTLING OFF-TRAIL CRIME NOVELETTE

by NORMAN A. DANIELS

Author of "The Devil's Highway," etc.

I never could see anything funny in the things Fats laughed at—like how it wowed him to see a guy coughing up his life's blood from lead poisoning—but I'd hooked up with the sap, and I was stuck with him!

LET up on the gas pedal a little, gripped the wheel with my left hand and let go with a beautiful right. My knuckles weren't even barked because I wore gloves. You see—a guy set for a stick-up job is a fool if he doesn't wear gloves.

My fist clipped Fats Kobler a honey right on the button. He hadn't been prepared for it because he was too busy sorting out a wad of dough and putting it in a neat little stack.

But the close quarters prevented it from being a knockout. Fats was quick on the move too. Before I could blink, his gat was sticking right under my nose.

"What's the idea?" he demanded. "Tryin' to get your hooks on all the dough?"

"You poor damned fool," I told him. "You can have the dough. I don't want any part of it. Fats—what the hell did you bump that guy for? He wasn't trying to gun you out."

Fats lowered his gun and laughed. I never did like the way he laughed or some of the things he found funny. Like a man kneeling in the gutter, coughing out his life's blood. Fats roared when that happened.

"You're a sap," Fats grunted and dropped the gun to the seat of the coupe. "If I hadn't plugged the guy,

he'd have yelled bloody murder for the cops."

"And I suppose that slug you put through his head wouldn't draw a bull, huh? Hell—before we were half a block away, ten of 'em were running towards the guy. It was just luck they didn't spot us."

"Lucky for them," Fats agreed somewhat controversially. "I'd a plugged any damned cop who tried to stop us."

I saw a car coming toward us. It had bright headlamps and I didn't like the looks of it. Highway patrolmen usually had brilliant lights and I didn't want to meet with any of them. Every few minutes the radio we had hooked under the dash of this stolen bus, would give a squeal and we'd both jump, but the dope that came over gave us a break.

You see, when cars were ordered east, we headed north.

"Like I said," Fats remarked as he stowed the wad of bills away, "you're a sap. Who's gonna know we did that job? You stayed in the car. I had on a mask. I never spoke a word. The clerk in the store was so scared he wouldn't know if I was white, black or red. Only that old duck who chased after me to yelp for the cops. He shoulda known better."

I said, "You could have conked him



one instead of just walking up to the poor guy and putting your roscoe against his head. And you laughed like hell when he flopped in the gutter. Damn you, Fats, you even stopped long enough to frisk the guy."

Fats grinned. "And I got fifty-two bucks out of his wallet, what do you think of that? Fifty-two bucks don't just grow on trees and I don't pass up any chances to make the take bigger. I—damn it, Eddie—look at the sleeve of my coat. It's all blood. I musta brushed it against the guy."

I didn't say anything more just then. After all there wasn't much to say. Fats plugged the old guy and I was in the car as lookout man and driver. That made me just as guilty as though I'd pulled the trigger. You see, Fats and me had worked together for about six months. We were the cause of all the headaches the cops got. Why say—in them six months we held up forty-nine places. Mostly liquor stores because their take is pretty good and they stay open late.

"Gotta get rid of this coat," Fats cursed. "And the suit cost me thirty bucks. Damn bad. Maybe I should have it cleaned, huh?"

"Sure," I agreed with one of my best scowls. "Why not? The guy who cleans it won't notice a blood smear all over it. He wouldn't tell the cops if he did and so what anyway? Cops are dumb. You always said so."

FATS laughed hard at that one. You couldn't insult the big hyena. Not even that sock I handed him made him mad and that guy could have knocked my fool head off but he didn't and I knew why. Without me Fats would be just a punk like he'd always been until I picked him for my lookout man. Fats didn't have the brains to think up ways of casing a place, sticking it up and then getting clean away with every cop in the state on the prowl for you.

Sure I'm a punk. Did I say I wasn't? Any guy who makes his living by shoving a roscoe under another guy's nose, is a punk. I'm not proud of it, but I got certain limitations and I won't go beyond them. Every time I stuck up a joint, I did it with my gun loaded with blanks. I'd rather been nailed ten times than bump a guy—like Fats had done to that poor old duck who started to holler for help.

I said to Fats, "This washes us up. You and me are done, Fats. You'll go kill crazy and let some other poor guy have it. From now on I work alone."

Fats grinned some more. "Think so? You're wrong, Eddie, because you and me is pals. Long as we are pals then I wouldn't say nothing. I'd never sing like a canary against anybody I like. But if we was to bust up—then you wouldn't be my pal, see? Maybe some dick would get a phone call. But aw hell, forget it. We're pals, ain't we?"

"Sure," I said because there wasn't anything else to say. Fats was just plain damn fool enough to put the cops on my trail and get away himself.

We rolled along about forty-five, not wanting to attract any attention from a possible patrolman. It was about four miles out of Norristown that I spotted a man in his shirt sleeves standing beside the road and waving his arms like he was trying to flag us down.

"Step on it," Fats said. "Maybe there's a million cops hiding around to nail us if we stop."

"Don't be nuts," I said. "There's no place they could hide. Anyway there's a little house back there—see the lights? The guy must be in trouble."

"Maybe," Fats admitted, "but so are we. To hell with him."

But something told me that guy needed help. I stepped on the brake and pulled over toward him. Fats picked up his gun, took off his hat and covered it so he'd be ready to shoot in

a second.

The guy yanked open the car door and for a minute I thought Fats would let go. But the poor guy who looked in was wild-eyed.

"Thank God you stopped," he cried. "I need help. It's my daughter. She took poison. Poison—by mistake. She's terribly sick. I haven't a phone and anyway she needs hospital attention. Please—let me borrow your car—"

"Nuts," Fats rasped. "Come on, Eddie, get going."

But I couldn't see it his way. There was no question but this guy was on the level. You can fake a lot of things, but not the expression this bird had creased around his pan.

"Listen, Fats," I said, "if his daughter is dying, he needs a break. Let's give him a hand."

"You crazy?" Fats wanted to know. Then, suddenly, his expression changed and I saw a sly look come over his face. He got out of the car. "Maybe you're right at that. Let's have a look at the girl, mister, and if you ain't faking, we'll give you a lift."

Like a fool I still didn't understand Fats' play. To Fats, helping somebody was like picking up a red hot poker. He wouldn't go half an inch out of his way even if it meant that a life was to be saved. Fats lived for himself.

"In here," the man cried eagerly. "I—I'll need help in getting her out. Just drive up that lane. I—I haven't a car any more. Used to have one but lost my job. Gosh—it's great of you men to help me. I—I'd do anything to return the favor."

"Sure," Fats smirked. "We're good guys, mister. Let's see the kid."

HE hung on the running board and I sent that bus careening up the lane. The front door was open and I could hear somebody moan. Fats went in right behind the guy. There was a

girl—no kid, mind you—but a girl of about nineteen lying on a davenport. Her face was purple and she looked like she'd pass out any minute. I didn't wait much longer, but Fats stood over her a second.

"Not bad, huh?" he asked with a grin. I could have socked him then. Sure the girl was nice. But hell, she was dying! Is that any time to look a dame over?

I pushed Fats out of the way, picked up the girl and carried her out to the car. Fats just stood to one side and didn't say anything. The little guy hesitated.

Fats gave him a shove toward the driver's seat. "Listen, mister," he said. "We're giving you a break, see? That means you owe us something. Okay—remember that. If anything should happen, you'll know we need a little time so stall like hell, understand? You can have the bus and here—take my coat. I'll borrow one of yours. It's chilly—you'll need it."

"Good luck," I told him and slammed the door. He backed the car to the highway at about forty miles an hour and ten seconds later his tail light was getting dim.

I looked at Fats and walked back to the little house. Fats searched the place for a drink, swore when he didn't find one and finally sat down, flicking his cigarette butt onto the middle of a worn rug. He watched it smoke and burn the nap.

I said, "Think you're a smart guy, huh, Fats? You let that poor mutt have our bus. That car's hotter than dynamite. You left your rod pushed down back of the cushion. That rod can send a man to the chair."

Fats grinned. "Why not? If they ride him, that leaves us out. Anyway he said he'd do anything if we helped him out. Once the cops jump on him, he'll know what I meant."

"And he'll stall them," I said mood-

ily. "Sure as hell that's what he'll do because he'll figure we need a break now. You even let the guy have your coat. It's smeared with blood. The cops can type that blood, practically prove it came from the old duck you blasted. Fats—you're smarter than I figured."

Fats was looking at a picture of the girl. It had been taken maybe a year or two before, and she certainly was a nice looking kid. If things had been different, I think I could have gone for her myself.

I got up. "Come on. We'll hike to some town and take a bus back to the city. If they nail this sap, they won't be looking for us. And be careful, Fats. Don't smear your prints all over this house."

Fats adjusted his gloves. We hadn't removed them once. Fats grumbled while we walked along the highway, ducking every time we saw a car coming. Walking wasn't anything that Fats enjoyed. But I did. The air was swell, a little crisp maybe, but I hadn't felt better in weeks. Physically, that is. Mentally I felt a little sick at the memory of the murder Fats had committed. And a little sicker at the thoughts of this poor chump taking the rap until we got away clean.

We hit the city at daybreak without being spotted by a single flatfoot. Fats jumped into bed and was snoring ten minutes later. But not me. I stayed up by the radio. In a few minutes an early morning news program was due to come on. I wanted to hear if they found the sucker Fats had picked to take the rap.

They had! But doggone if the guy didn't reach the hospital and stay there while the docs fixed up his daughter. She was in pretty tough shape. Another ten or fifteen minutes might have meant the finish for her. As it was, she had been put on the critical list. But the guy—Roger Calhoun the announcer

said his name was—he'd been stopped by the cops on his way toward the outskirts. I suppose he was heading home. What was more, this Calhoun refused to talk. The cops, according to the announcer, weren't even trying to get an immediate confession out of him. The car was identified as being the murder bus, the gun was tested and proven to be the one that shot the old duck into the next world. The coat that Calhoun wore was bloody. Hell—what did the cops need a confession for anyway? And the girl? Somebody connected with the prosecutor's staff solved that angle quick. She'd taken poison when she heard what her old man had done.

THE early morning papers had more of it. I read the story aloud to Fats and he sat there, smoking and grinning like a half baked Buddha.

"Roger Calhoun will be presented to a magistrate's court this morning and held for trial. The Coroner has already issued a verdict of murder in the death of Isaac Melkin, who died from a bullet alleged to have been fired by Calhoun. Calhoun has so far refused to talk and seems not at all worried. A hasty check shows that he worked at the Allen Mills as a tool maker for ten years and was laid off a year ago. He indicted to police that he had been living on his savings since and that his money was exhausted a week ago. In the pocket of his blood smeared coat was found fifty-two dollars, the exact sum stolen from Isaac Melkin as he lay dying. Police say they are certain Calhoun is the man and they believe he was driven by desperation into this short lived life of crime. Police are also seeking the loot taken from the store. A marked twenty dollar bill is among the cash taken. A first degree murder verdict will be asked."

I looked at Fats and swore. "So you even put that fifty-two bucks into the coat you let the sap borrow. Fats, you're getting too smart for me. We split from now on. We can't pull any more jobs now. And look at the dough.

Is one bill marked?"

"Yeah," Fats was looking at a twenty. "Yeah, Eddie, he's right. There's something written on this twenty with an indelible pencil. You're right, too. If we pull another job, maybe the cops will get the idea that Calhoun ain't the mug who bumped that old guy. We can't take chances like that. But split? Hell, no! We got around thirty grand. Let's take in the horses at Saratoga. By the time the races are over, we can come back and hear this guy's trial. Ain't that something? To sit and listen to a sap being sent to the chair for a bump off you did yourself?"

I couldn't see the funny side of it, but I didn't dare get Fats' goat now. We pulled our tracks for Saratoga and boy, did them ponies give us the works. Fats was cleaned in two weeks. I gave him half of what I had left. Not because I wanted to, but Fats had a habit of getting himself shellacked when he got in the dumps and he talked fast and loud when booze loosened his tongue. My donation was just a little life insurance.

I finally got him to hightail it back. We hit the city about the time Calhoun was going on trial. In fact the jury was being selected. We'd read about the case and Fats laughed himself sick over the way the cops took Calhoun's alibi.

"They think he's full of hop," Fats roared. "Imagine a guy, tied up with a kill by a car, blood soaked coat, stolen dough and a murder gat saying the mugs who bumped the old guy let him take the car so he'd be able to get his daughter to the hospital? Wait until the D. A. tears into that before a jury."

I didn't say anything but I thought plenty. Hell, that was all I could do. If I spilled what I knew it meant the chair for me. Around the fourth day of the trial I dolled up.

"Where the hell you going?" Fats

wanted to know. He was suspicious these days, like he figured maybe I might sing a song and take my chances on the D.A. going easy.

I pulled my tie a little tighter. "To court," I told Fats. "I want another look at the sucker we picked to die for us. Want to come?"

Fats Kobler shook his head. "Not me. I'm gonna be busy, Eddie, so have a good time only don't let the guy spot you. I don't think he noticed us much that night on account of he was too busy worrying about his daughter. Say—did you get a look at her picture in the tabs? A honey if there ever was one."

I didn't answer. I couldn't because one word would have led to another and before it was finished, Fats and me would have been all over the place. I felt like letting him have one a couple of times every day. The guy was bleeding me for my share of the dough—and getting it. He knew I was soft and plenty scared of facing the chair too. Fats was right there. I used to lay awake nights sweating over the thoughts of being cooped up like a turkey before Thanksgiving. Sometimes I wondered if the rope was quicker—or a firing squad—or that poison gas they pump at you out west. I got myself plenty wacked during the day time to keep from thinking about it. What was worse, our roll was getting thinner and thinner. Fats was oiling up a new gat he'd bought. I knew the signs. He was itching to start things going again and he was stupid enough to pull another kill if he had half the chance. Fats was like that—blown up with his own importance and cleverness since he'd pinned the rap on Calhoun. He wanted to tell every good time Charlie he met about how smart he was. And he carried that marked twenty dollar bill around. Every time he got himself stewed, I was sick worrying that he might spend it.

I DIDN'T like the way Fats hung around until I left our room. He acted funny, too. When I was buttoning my shirt around the neck, I saw him jam a newspaper under the pillow on the bed like he didn't want me to see him, but he forgot that I was standing in front of the mirror.

I got into the trial easy enough. The court room was fairly well packed, but the rear seats weren't so full. Calhoun was on the stand, sweating blood while the D.A. waltzed around him banging the tables, the witness chair arms, pointing his finger and hollering at the jury. Calhoun looked about fifteen years older than the night we met him. And sitting beside his lawyers was the girl we'd saved. Fats was right. She was a looker. Blonde, built streamlined and her complexion was something like the blush on a ripe peach. Now, with no poison contorting her face, she was a ringer for Janet Gaynor. One of them mousy kind you like to help. I watched her rip the edge off the cheap purse she carried.

The D.A. was going great guns.

"And you maintain that two men—two very kindly men who had just murdered Isaac Melkin in cold blood—came along and out of the sheer goodness of their hearts offered you their car to help your daughter. Preposterous! If those men existed, do you think they'd have cared whether or not your daughter died? Murderers don't stop to help people. You're lying, Calhoun. Lying to save your life. Lying as your daughter did when she testified she took that poison accidentally. You know she didn't. You were desperate, on relief and broke. You stole that car, got yourself that gun somewhere and robbed the liquor store. Then, when you returned to your home and told your daughter, she tried to kill herself. I don't blame her. Having a father for a murderer is more than decent people can stand."

"I'm telling the truth," Calhoun said in a tired voice. You could see the poor guy was licked before he started. "Those two men came along and helped me carry Arline to the car. One of them—the stout one who was built like me—told me they were giving me a break and they deserved one in return. That's why I wouldn't talk when I was arrested. I thought I did owe those men a favor and I wanted them to have a chance."

I looked at the jury. One of the guys was yawning while Calhoun talked. Hell, they weren't believing a word he said. About an hour after I came in, the case went to the jury. The D.A. didn't even bother to make a speech. Even the judge practically told the jury what to do.

I stuck around because I had an idea it wouldn't be long now. It wasn't. The jury came back in twenty minutes with a verdict of guilty and the foreman didn't say a word about mercy.

The judge thanked them and I had to snicker at that. Thanking those pig-heads for sending an innocent man to the chair. Calhoun took it standing up. He even managed to smile at Arline when two big sheriffs led him away. They were going to let him stew a few days before they hauled him back to court to hear a day set when he'd go out of the world on a bolt of lightning.

I sort of covered my face when Arline went by. While she had been unconscious the night we'd framed her father, I was taking no chances. But the kid wouldn't have seen me. She had too many troubles to be looking at the people who pressed around her.

I went back to our hotel room feeling kind of low and I sent for a bottle of rye. It perked me up a little. Fats hadn't come back and I began to stew about that. Then I thought of that newspaper he'd hidden. I found it and the paper was folded so that a cute picture of Arline Calhoun was exposed. I

got up, took a healthy drag on the rye and flung the paper to the floor. Hell, what a sap I'd been. Fats wasn't back because he was trying to make that girl. There was no telling what he might spill to get her on the right side. And the girl? I could tell that she'd give both her arms and a leg if she thought it might save her father.

I barged through the lobby and went into one of them drive yourself places. I put down a deposit on a rickety old crate and wondered if the outfit hoped I wouldn't come back so they could keep the deposit. It took me an hour to reach Calhoun's house and sure enough the place was lit up.

I parked up the road and sneaked toward the house. The front door was open, but the screen door was hooked inside. I could hear Fats talking so I just parked and listened. In back of the house was a shiny bus. Something Fats picked up in the city—from the curb.

FATS was saying: "Sure, baby, that's how it is. I think I know the bird who bumped that old guy. Me—I'm wise, see? I keep my eyes peeled and my ears open. I hear a lot of things around town. I saw your picture in the papers and I felt kinda sorry so I come up."

"Please," the girl implored, "help him. Dad didn't kill that man. He—he couldn't do such a thing. And I did take that poison accidentally. I thought the pills were headache tablets. I didn't turn on the light in the bathroom—just reached for the bottle and swallowed a couple. But they wouldn't believe me. They think I'm lying to help Dad."

"Sure, kid," Fats said and his voice got silky and kind of thick. "I know how it is. Them cops don't believe nothing. Now this is the way I sees it. Your old man—your daddy is slated to go in about two months, see? We got

that much time to work. Now you gotta help naturally. I got a little work first running down a clue, see? By tomorrow everything will be set. Tomorrow night about nine, show up at my apartment and—I'll tell you who your daddy is taking the rap for."

"At your apartment?" Arline asked hesitantly.

I could hear Fats laugh. "Why not? We don't want an audience, do we? I'm not such a bad guy and you ain't got anything to be afraid of."

She nodded her head slowly and Fats stood there grinning. When they left, I was hidden around the corner of the house. Fats had his arm around her and he wasn't fussy where his paw rested. Fats always was an impatient guy. He got in the bus he'd swiped and the last I saw he was going like hell toward the city. I sat behind the wheel of my bus and sweated. What could I do? Telling the cops meant the same as committing suicide. Sure Fats would go along the same road with me, but that was no satisfaction. If it wasn't for the chair! Prison didn't mean so much—not even if it turned out to be life, but the chair! I'd seen pictures of it. I'd been in prison when guys were led to it. Nights like that nobody talked. The big place seemed like a tomb until after the hour was past. Then the boys used to raise hell—including me. Honest, I could see myself being led down that corridor toward the door. I could even hear the priest chanting and believe me it's been a long time since I thought of priests or the litany for the dying.

Finally I rolled to the city and got back my deposit on the car. Fats wasn't in the hotel room, but he came in about two o'clock in the morning.

"Hiya," he grinned at me. "I been taking in a couple of shows. There's a honey at that joint around the corner."

"Yeah," I said without looking up, "all about love and kisses. I saw the

pictures when I went by a couple of hours ago."

"Swell show," Fats said and began to undress. For a minute my trigger finger got itchy. Then I shrugged it off. What the hell did it mean to me anyway? If they burned Calhoun, and Fats bumped his daughter when he knew she couldn't be fooled any longer—what did it mean to me? I have to look out for myself. I went to bed and listened to Fats snore until I couldn't stand it any longer. I took a walk and when I came back, Fats was sitting up.

"Where you been?" he asked.

"Around the block," I told him. "Why?"

"Listen—if I thought you were stewing about that guy in the death house, I'd knock you off, Eddie. I like you, but you ain't gonna send me to the chair."

I pulled off my shirt. "You're nuts. I couldn't sleep so I took a walk. Maybe Calhoun is bothering me, but can I do anything? Think I want the chair too? Hell, Fats, be yourself."

THE next night Fats was oiling his gun when I came in. He went right on and I watched him stuff the magazine full of fresh slugs.

"Going to kill somebody?" I asked him.

He grinned. "Maybe," he admitted. "If that somebody gets fresh."

He put the roscoe in his pocket when he went out and I had a damn good idea who was going to look down the muzzle of the gat. I stewed awhile trying to get things clear in my mind. All the papers were full of Calhoun's pictures since every avenue of mercy was now gone and he didn't have a prayer of living. It made me kind of sick looking at his mug. You could tell he wasn't a killer but the D.A. had brought that up big, making the jury think the man who looks like a saint can be more of a gunman than some big bruiser with a

pan like a map in relief.

I smoked half a dozen packs of cigarettes, grinding them out on the floor until there was a good sized pile. I knew Fats was getting set to have his fun with Arline or rub her out. And at prison they'd soon be dusting off the chair for her father. And all because of Fats and me. I began to walk the floor and once I ground my teeth so hard the enamel chipped off a molar. It sent a stinging pain into the roots and that pain cleared my head.

I jammed on my hat and went out. It took me fifteen minutes to reach Hamilton's place. Hamilton runs a sort of real estate agency for guys on the lam. He furnishes hideouts and arranges getaway channels. It costs dough but all the boys go to him.

I never did like the rat. He was undersized with a screwed up face and fingers that itched eternally too close around a wad of dough.

"Where," I asked him, "is Fats Kohler holed up? The apartment I mean?"

Hamilton shook his head, but I reached across the desk, got a good grip on his necktie and pulled it tight until his tongue hung out. He waved his arms and gurgled something. I let him loose.

"Want to kill me?" he yelled. "Anyway you oughta know where Fats holes up. Ain't you and him pals?"

"Where," I asked again, "is the joint?"

Hamilton got the drift when my fists started toward him.

"He's in apartment 4B at 2105 Lancaster Street. Listen, Eddie, you ain't gonna tell him—"

"I ain't going to tell him a thing," I said, "and neither are you."

He took my right on the button and passed out. I tied him up, jerked the telephone out of the wall and went to the street. A cab took me to the address.

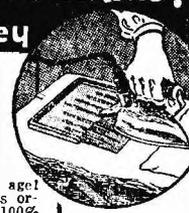
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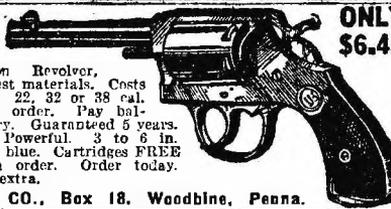
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I went up the steps slow, sweating again as if I had a fever. What the hell was I doing? Let Fats have the dame. Hell, what was it to me? And let them burn Calhoun! If they didn't they'd burn me! The fingernails of my right hand cut into my palms until they bled. But I kept on walking. My mind was telling me to turn back, but there was something else that made me go on. I don't know what it was. Conscience? Maybe. A guy like me wouldn't know too much about that.

I reached the door and I didn't pause. I tried the knob. The door was locked as I expected. So I banged on it until the thing rattled like false teeth.

"What the hell?" Fats yelled from inside.

"It's me," I said and tried to make my voice natural. "I got news."

Fats opened the door with a gun in his fist. Over his shoulder I saw Arline crouched head down in a corner. The neck of her dress was ripped. For a minute I thought he'd killed her, but then I saw her shoulders move and I realized the poor kid was just crying. Suddenly I knew why I was doing all this. I loved that kid. Imagine that—me—in love?

"What's the idea?" Fats backed up. He looked as if he'd enjoy yanking the trigger.

I shrugged calmly but I was seething inside. "You're a sap, Fats. Think I didn't know you had the girl up here? I just dropped in to tell you what a damned fool you are. That girl will talk."

FATS motioned for me to shut up. "No she won't," he whispered. "I'm polishing her off. She's getting suspicious anyway and we can't take chances. I can fix it so's it'll look like she done the job herself because her old man was going to fry."

I walked over to Arline and she looked up. Her eyes looked dead and

her mouth dropped like it had the night I first saw her—when she was dying from the poison she'd taken.

I sat down. Fats was standing close to her. He finally sat down too—on the other side of the table. His free hand made a subterranean pass at the kid under the table and I started up. His gun covered me and he grinned.

"So," he said. "I figured you for a soft sap. Just dropped in, did you? Listen, wise guy, you're here because you're sweet on the dame too. Well—you can have her. I've got new ideas, Eddie. Swell ideas."

I leaned forward a little. Fats was getting himself primed for the kill. I could see it in his squinty eyes. He reached in his pocket and took out a bottle. He drank half the stuff in one gulp. I held out my hand.

"How about a snifter, Fats? I need a start on the binge we're going to tackle."

"Sure," Fats said. He corked the bottle and threw it at me. He was smart enough not to come too close. The girl sat upright, saying nothing, but I could see she was getting wise.

I uncorked the bottle and put it to my lips. I took a healthy swig, used a couple of lungfuls of air for a chaser and tipped the bottle again. Only this time I didn't swallow the stuff. I corked the bottle, got up and walked over toward Fats. He had his gun resting against one knee and he reached for the bottle.

I let go with a spray of rye. It hit him in the face and before he could act, I knocked him over the chair, landed on top of him and tore the gun out of his hand. He got to his knees and I let him have the roscoe on the head. Then I walked over to the girl.

"It's okay, Arline, I'm a friend. This guy's been telling you he might dig up the real murderer of that old man and get your father free. Well—he could have done it because he's the guy. I

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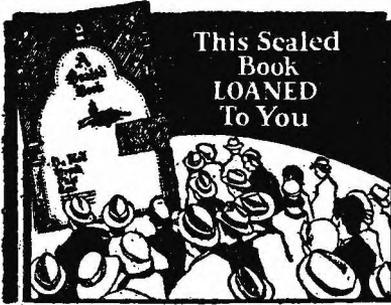
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know. I was there too."

She didn't say anything. She couldn't! All she did was crawl into my arms and hold me close so I could feel her heart thumping against my ribs. Fats groaned and shook his head. He was coming out of it. Finally he sat up.

"Okay, wise guy," he said. "I heard you tell her I plugged that old guy. So what? Think you'll tell the cops I did? You're a sap, Eddie."

"Sure I am," I admitted. "I'm all kinds of a sap, but Fats—this girl's father isn't going to burn."

Fats let out a yelp and came at me. I pushed Arline out of the way. But Fats was smarter than I figured. Instead of tackling me he made a dive for Arline. He got her, clamped his paws around her neck and began to squeeze. She couldn't yell and he was too strong to have her struggles bother him. Fats kept her body in front of him too, so I couldn't shoot.

"I came here to bump this dame," he told me, "and I'm doing it. With her dead nobody knows we bumped that old guy. Put down the gun, Eddie."

I had the roscoe tilted upwards a little and my finger was tight on the trigger. I knew I was doing all right. Arline's face was turning from red to purple. Her head sagged to one side. For a second Fats' beefy face was exposed. I fired one shot. I caught him plunk between the eyes, but I didn't feel any elation over that swell piece of marksmanship. Arline tumbled to the floor. But she had guts, that kid.

"You're not lying to me?" she flung at me. "You're not lying as he was?"

I said, "Search him, Arline. Inside that coat you'll find the lining sewed up. Rip it open and take out that marked twenty dollar bill. It's the one he got from the liquor store and the one the cops say your father destroyed."

She gave a little cry and not even the fact that she searched a dead man

phased her. I don't suppose anything could at this stage of the game. She found the bill and started for the door. Then she stopped.

"But you—you're guilty too. He—he said so. They'll—they'll kill you."

I laughed. No kidding, in my own ears that laugh sounded like the yelps I used to let out when I was a kid. I walked over to her, took her arm.

"We got places to go, kid."

I used a taxi, got out and led her up the wide steps of the big building. A guy in blue uniform stuck his arm out to stop us from entering the swinging leather covered doors. I grinned at him and poked him hard in the belly. A second later we marched down the aisle of night court.

A LITTLE guy was waving his arms and yelling. The judge was on the bench, half asleep or anyway that's how he looked to me. Another big guy came barging after us, but I elbowed him out of the way.

"What's this?" The judge wasn't sleepy any more. He could see that me and the girl were in dead earnest. We walked a few more steps down that aisle. I could feel people staring at me. The courtroom spun like a kaleidoscope, steadied and I could see a brown stained door ahead of me.

Then Arline squeezed my hand and drew closer to me. I shook my head. The brown stained door led into the judge's chambers, but I knew where there was another one like it—one that led to eternity.

I looked up at the judge.

"Your honor," I told him and my voice was steady. "I just killed a man and I am also guilty of the murder for which Roger Calhoun is slated to die."

Do you think I was a sap? Fats, some place down in hell, would think so. Plenty of the wise guys thought so. I wondered too—when they slit my trouser leg.

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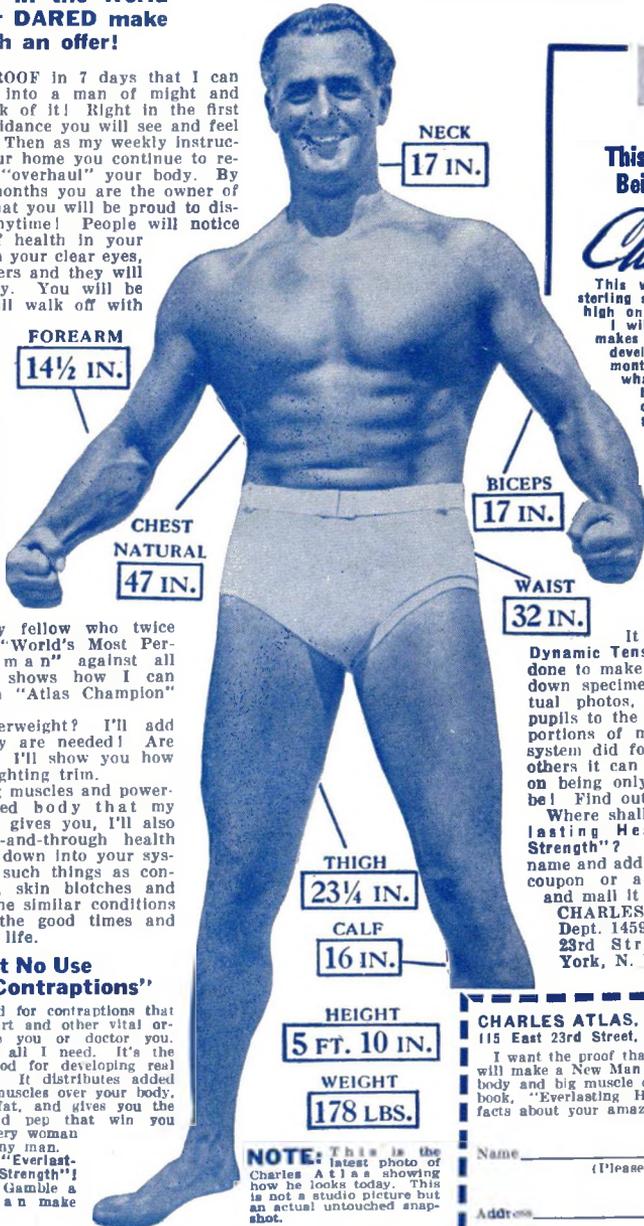
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