
JANUARY 15¢
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SUPER-DETECTIVE
IND
A SPEED MAGAZINE
TWO LITTLE MEN
by
Roger Torrey

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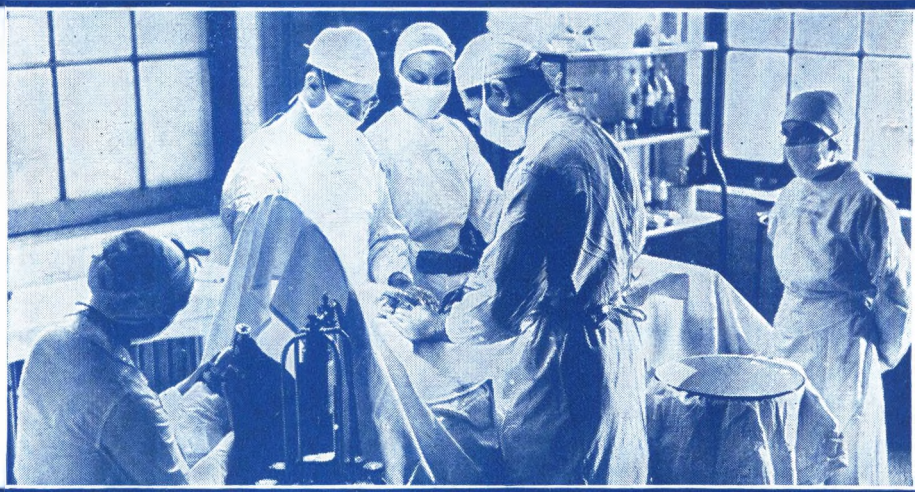
HOSPITAL AND DOCTOR BILLS
ALL BY YOURSELF!



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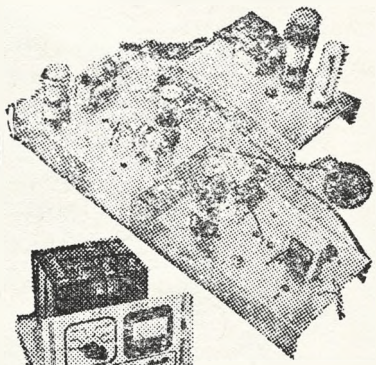

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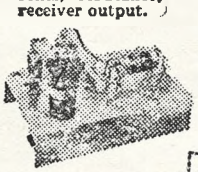

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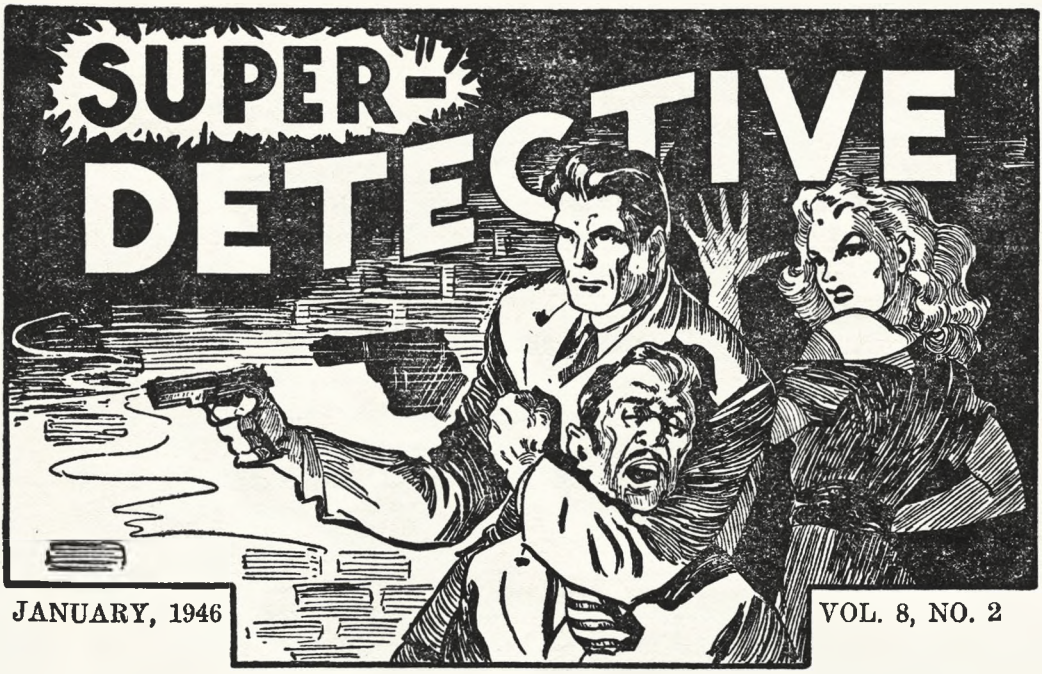

JANUARY, 1946 VOL. 8, NO. 2

Feature Novel, Complete In This Issue

Super Detective's Long Novelette

Shorter Fiction and Features

SUPER DETECTIVE is published bi-monthly by Trojan Publishing Corporation, 125 East Forty-sixth Street, New York 17, N. Y. Frank Armer, Publisher; K. W. Hutchinson and W. E. Matthews, Editors. Re-entered as second class matter May 8, 1945, at the Post Office at New York, N. Y., under the act of March 3, 1879 Subscription: Yearly, $.75; single copy, 15c. Canadian and foreign postage extra. Manuscripts should be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelope and are submitted at the author's risk.

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MESSAGE TO AMERICA

By

COL. EVANS F. CARLSON, USMC

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

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

It has been said that there are no atheists in the foxholes. I tell you that there are no distinctions of race, religion or color in the foxholes. For these are the non-essentials; not the fundamentals. When men have faced death together, when they have shared a common struggle and a common cause, the color of a man's skin, the particular church he goes to, the country from which his parents came, no longer matter. It is the man himself who counts; and nothing else.

This is one of the most heartening things that has come out of this war. Men from New York and Texas, Ohio and Wyoming have met and learned to trust and respect one another. Christian and Jew, white and Negro, native-born and foreign-born — they are all Americans, animated by the same ideals, loving the same land—yes, willing to die for her!

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

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By ROGER TORREY

I HAD the highball half way up to my face when the big guy, on my right, jostled my elbow. Hard enough so that half the highball hit me on the shirt front. I put the glass back on the bar and turned, waiting for the usual "Pardon me" or something like it, but I didn't get anything like it at all.

The guy said: "What's the matter, stupid? Too weak to hold a glass?"

He was around two hundred but he didn't stand more than five-ten. His nose had been broken more than once and he would have been offered a bid on his left ear in any vegetable market.

He said: "Mama's 'ittle boy ain't huffy, is he?"

I tossed what was left of the highball

If he hadn't twisted, it would have been all right, but as it was, I broke both his hips.

Two Little Men

in his face and he didn't step back, which was all to the good. I was half turned from him and that gave me a lot more power when I hooked him below the belt with my left, as I spun. He said, "OOF!" and started to buckle and that's what made me miss with the right I heaved at his jaw. I caught him high on the temple

It didn't matter so much what they did to me, but when they beat up my office girl, Ella, then they were talking in a language that just had to be answered. . . .

instead, but it was enough to upset him.

I took a step ahead, intending to kick what was left of his teeth out the back of his neck, but right then somebody grabbed both my arms, above the elbows.

The next thing would be either a knee in my back or a kick in back of a knee, and one would be as bad as the other. I kicked back with one heel, hoping to connect with a shin, but missed completely. Then I turned my head in time to see the bar man take the towel he'd been mopping up with and flick it past me, like he was snapping a whip.

The grip on my left arm loosened and the one on the right just wasn't there so I jerked free and spun around. The bird that had been holding me had both hands up to his eyes and I stepped on his foot and clipped him at the same time.

The first man was on his feet by then and going for the door, and I didn't think it was right that he should leave his little pal behind. Little pal was long and lean and rangy, and jail bird timber if I ever saw a board. And little pal was dead to the world.

I got him by the wrist with both hands and dragged him to the door and out, then dumped him in the gutter. The other guy was a hundred feet down the street by then, too smart to run but certainly walking fast.

I shouted after him: "Hey, chum, here it is. Come and get it if you want it."

And then went back in the bar and said: "Thanks, Murph! Do as much for you sometime."

Murphy, the bar man, said politely: "Don't mention it, don't mention it, Riley. Always glad to help a friend."

He even gave me a replacement on the highball without charging for it.

I'D just stopped in Murphy's for a fast one on the way to the office. I was an hour and a half late then, but it didn't make any difference because it was my own office and I wasn't working on anything at the time.

When you've got a girl in the office to take calls, a couple of hours in the morning don't mean a thing. A private cop doesn't get many morning callers—they usually come late in the afternoon. It seems as if it takes them all day long to make up their minds to see you.

My office is on the second floor of the Nye Building, and it's a fair location for the business. It's an old building but well kept. It isn't expensive enough to scare middle price customers away and it's decent enough so that the higher priced ones don't feel they're slumming when they call.

Also there's a front, side, back, and basement entrance and exit, and there've been times when this has been handy. Some people don't want to be seen calling on a private investigator, and some more of them want to make sure they're not followed from his office.

Not that I'm in anything crooked, but the very nature of the business demands secrecy a good part of the time.

But that was one morning I wasn't having any.

I noticed the elevator starter looked at me oddly but I put that down to the new suit I was wearing. Light gray, with a dark blue shirt, and a maroon tie that set that shirt off nicely. And a brand new hat as well, the same shade of blue as the shirt. My Spring wardrobe and I was proud of it.

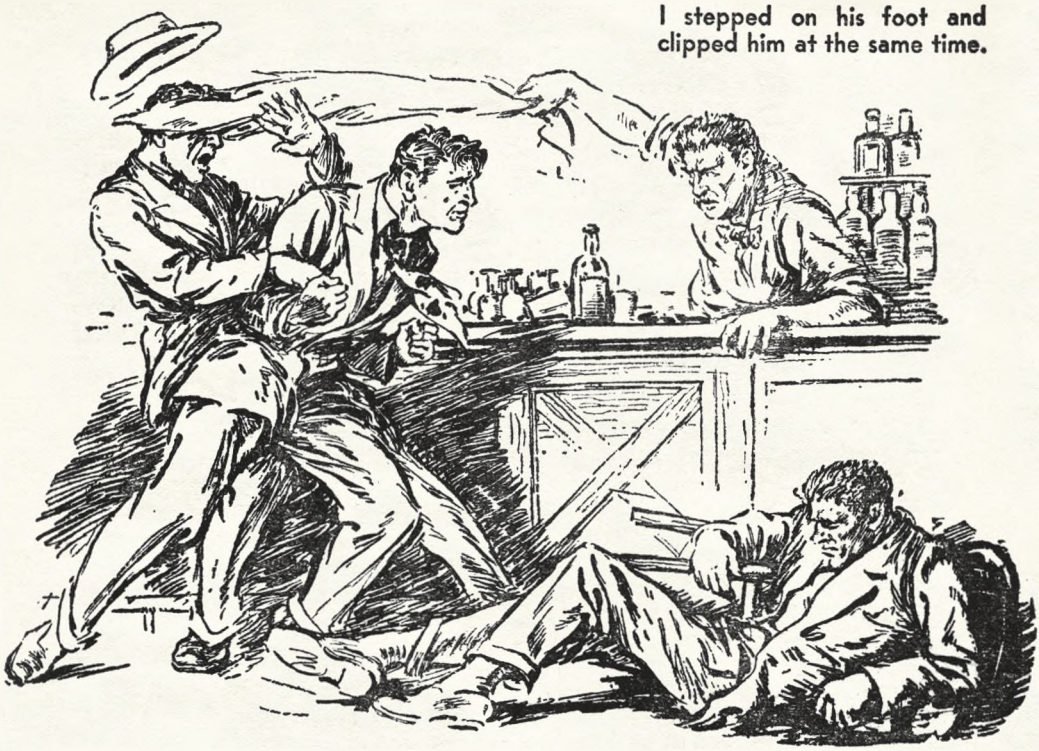
I said: "Hi, Jimmy!"

He said: "Morning, Mr. Keenan."

I went past him and I thought he was going to say something but he gulped and didn't. I went up the stairs—I never could see any sense in taking an elevator up one floor, and as soon as I got to the first door of my suite I knew there was something wrong. There were voices and too many of them.

So I stepped in and thought I was in Grand Central station at the time the commuters were heading for home. The place was so jammed they'd overflowed into my private office.

There were three uniformed cops, apparently just standing there. There were three others who couldn't be anything but plain-clothesmen. There was a photographer and he looked official. There was a spare little man with an air of authority. And there was Lieutenant Charles P. Lawton, whom I knew and who I knew worked homicide.



I stepped on his foot and clipped him at the same time.

And also there was Ella, my office girl, though she called it secretary.

SHE was a sight. She had one of the prettiest shiners I ever saw. It was already closed and already green and black and purple. The cheek bone on the same side of her face was swollen and that side of her mouth stuck out like a pigeon's breast. Her right sleeve had been torn loose from the rest of her dress at the shoulder, and, when I came in, she was trying to fasten it back with a paper clip. Her hair was every which way; she'd been crying, and if anybody ever looked like the original witch-woman it was Ella.

I said: "What goes on?" to nobody in particular, and the little man who seemed to be in charge was on me like a flash.

"You Keenan?" he asked.

"That's me. What's up?"

"Riley Keenan?"

"That's right. What's happened?"

Ella quavered: "Oh Mr. Keenan!" but nobody paid her any attention.

The little man said: "Come with me," and turned toward my private office, taking for granted I'd follow.

I followed.

That office wasn't quite so full of people as the outside one had been, but there still were too many in it for the size of the room. Six, not counting my fussy new pal or myself.

But it was the first two that I saw that set me back on my heels. Two men in neat white coats and standing by a long and narrow wicker basket.

One of the other men—all I could see of him was a broad back, with the rest of him hidden behind my desk, straightened and turned around. I knew him, too. Assistant Medical-Examiner Rosetti.

He said: "I'm through, inspector. I can do the P. M. late this afternoon, if that's okay."

"Sure," said the little man. And to the men with the basket: "You can have him in just a minute."

And then to me: "Come along."

I followed him until I could see back of the desk and what I saw wasn't pretty. There was a lot of blood and in the middle of it some man I'd never seen before in my life. A man, I'd say, in his late fifties, a tall, spare man whose hair had

been a dull white. The blood had changed the color, except for a little right in front.

He'd bled all over the place. My office rug doesn't extend to the back of the desk and there'd been nothing to stop the flow. His face was bruised and out of focus, mainly because one temple was crushed. He'd taken a terrible beating, though of course I didn't know whether that was what had killed him or not.

"Know him?" asked the inspector.

"I do not."

"Sure?"

"Positive."

"What was he doing in your office?"

"That I don't know: Miss Tompkins, my office girl, will tell you he's no customer of mine."

"No appointment with him?"

"No appointment with anybody. Miss Tompkins can also tell you that. She keeps a record of them."

"I'm not asking Miss Tompkins. I'm asking you."

"I mentioned Miss Tompkins because she's the only one who can verify what I say, inspector. That's all."

"Ever been in Hamilton, Indiana?"

"Not that I remember. I may have driven through it, coast to coast."

"Ever know anybody named Cyrus K. Winthrop?"

"Not that I remember."

"Ever hear the name?"

"Not that I can remember."

"You keep files?"

"Of course."

"Mind if I check them?"

"I DON'T mind your looking at the manilla covers. I certainly object to your examining the contents of them. Of course if you find anything there that has anything to do with this, the objection is removed."

"I quite understand."

He nodded to the two men with the basket and they brought it behind the desk. I didn't see them load the body in it because I was showing the inspector where the W files were kept. And it didn't take him a minute to find I had nothing under Winthrop.

He thawed out a bit then. He said: "The man's name was Cyrus K. Winthrop and he came from Hamilton, Indiana. Staying at the Ramona, which is practically a residential hotel. Been there four days. Supposedly a stranger in town. Clerk says he asked points of interset to see. Not much money. A nut. Came all the way from Indiana to see this United Nations conference. A fanatic on the subject of world peace, the clerk says. Talked to him about it all the time—talked to anybody in the lobby who'd listen to him about it. Clerk heard him."

I said: "If everybody would take an interest in it like that, it would be a good thing for everybody concerned. I should and don't, I'm sorry to say."

The inspector grunted, whether assent or not I couldn't tell. "Why should a man like that call on a private detective?"

"That I don't know."

"He was snoopy—we know the type. But why should he call on you?"

I shrugged. There was no answer called for.

"I'm putting Lawton on this. He tells me he knows you."

"I know Charley. Yes."

"You'll work with him?"

I wasn't sore but I was getting a little bit fretful. Two men had picked a fight with me for no reason. A man had been killed in my office. This inspector seemed to think I knew more about it than I did, which was nothing at all.

I said: "Inspector, I'll work with anybody on it. If you think I like murder done in my office, you're crazy. I'll work with Lawton or anybody. Did you find any prints or anything like that?"

"Not a thing. Lawton will no doubt tell you about that part of it, Keenan. He has the man's papers and identification and things like that—he'll turn them in to Property when he's checked them through for any lead."

"Okay. I'll help if I can."

He nodded and sailed out, without even bothering to say he'd be seeing me or any other one of the polite nothings.

The inspector was a busy little man and had an eye on his business.

CHAPTER II

One Little Man

LAWTON IS big and dark and quiet—too quiet for comfort sometimes. In talking with him you get the idea that he knows more than he's saying, and that is upsetting at times. At the times you're holding something out.

He said: "It was like this, Riley. The man came in and asked for you, and Miss Tompkins, Ella, said you weren't down yet. He said he'd wait—that he had to see you at once. He sat down in one of those lounge chairs you have in the outside office, and Ella went on with her work."

"You mean, Charley, that she pretended she went on with her work. She don't write three letters a day."

Lawton grinned. "Well, she pretended then. Five minutes later the door opened and two big bruisers walked in. Ella says she never saw either of them before. One of them said to Winthrop, 'In the other office, bud' or something like that. Ella was pretty sure of the sense if not the wording. Winthrop just sat there—I don't think he had any idea of what it was all about. Anyway, Ella said he looked surprised instead of afraid. Ella said, 'You can't go in there. That's Mr. Keenan's private office'.

"She got up from the typewriter and stood in front of the door to your office then, Riley, ane one of the two smacked her twice and knocked her down. It didn't knock her out but it dazed her. She saw them pick Winthrop out of the chair and shove him into your office then, and she heard them beating him up. She said he didn't cry out but once, and then in just a muffled way."

I said: "They probably had him out on his feet with the first sock."

Lawton nodded. "She was trying to get up on her feet when they came back through the outer office and one of them said to her, 'A present for Keenan, sister'. And then they left and she called in to the station."

"What did she say they looked like?"

He shrugged. "You know Ella. They could have been any two men in San Francisco, from her description."

I admitted that Ella wasn't quite bright and I was telling the truth. She could take a phone call, and if she wrote everything down right while she was taking it, I got it straight. If she tried to remember it, it sounded like code—and I'm not good at working stuff like that out.

So I have an office rule that everything is to be written down immediately.

She can type and very well, but this isn't much of a help to me. I have little business done through the mail. She knows nothing of short-hand, which would be a help to me. If she was good at that she could take down conversations between myself and the clients and I'd have a check on what was said.

However, she's nice-looking in a kittenish sort of way, and a nice kid. She's faithful, loyal, comes to work on time, and you can't have everything for the wages I can afford to pay.

So Ella stays on.

I SAID: "I don't know what to make of it, Charley. I never saw the guy. Naturally I didn't see the killers. How was he killed?"

"Sapped silly and then knifed through the neck. Whoever beat him up was a little crazy—it was as brutal a job as I've ever seen. As long as they were going to put him out of the way with a knife, there was no reason for making pulp out of him before. One lick would have put him down so that he'd make no noise when they used the shiv. But they worked him over just the same. Even fractured his skull."

"I saw that. A sap wouldn't do that, Charley."

"The butt of a knife would. The dent was the right shape, too. I take it that one used the sap and the other the knife."

He put on his hat, going to the glass above the wash basin and being very careful about the way he slanted it to the side.

I said: "Where to now?"

"The Ramona. One of the boys got the dope there already, from the clerk, but I'd rather get it first hand. Be seeing you, boy."

He went out and I heard him telling Ella he'd see her in Heaven, or in front of the Paramount at eight, if she wanted

to see a show with him. I didn't hear what Ella said, but I had an idea.

Lawton said: "Well, no harm in trying, honey. Anyway, I'll be seeing you."

Then I heard the outside door close and waited a moment and went out to see what I could see. I hadn't told Lawton about what had happened earlier in Murphy's place, and I didn't intend to for awhile.

At least not until I thought it tied in with my office murder.

ELLA looked like hell and knew it. I suppose she felt as bad, as well. Her shiner, by that time, was clear down on her cheek, and that eye was not only closed but puffed like a football. Her mouth was so swollen she could hardly speak. Her cheek-bone showed a nasty bruise through the swelling. Her good eye was red and angry-looking from crying, and though she'd tried to do something about her hair, she hadn't helped it much.

She had fixed her dress a bit—she'd found a safety pin somewhere and she had the sleeve tacked back on with it.

I sat on the edge of her desk, which was crosswise in a corner, and said: "Just a couple of questions, kid, and then you go home. I'll get a cab for you. Get straightened up a bit and then go to a beauty parlor and let 'em give you the works. Nothing will fix that eye except time, but they'll straighten you up a bit and you can wear dark glasses for a while. Okay?"

She said: "Oh, thanks, Mr. Keenan."

"Thanks for what? For fighting my battles for me? Even gives a bonus this week. Now tell me. What did those two guys look like?"

She gave me as vague a description as I ever heard in my life.

I said: "Now listen closely. Don't say yes unless you're sure. Was one of them short and stocky and did he have a broken nose? Heavy—heavier than I am? Did he have a funny looking ear?"

"I'm not sure about his ear, Mr. Keenan, but he had a broken nose. My brother's got one—it's got a sort of hump in it. This man had the same thing."

"Heavy?"

"Oh, yes!! That's the man that hit me."

"Was the other one tall and thin? Taller than I am but not as heavy?"

"You're very well built, Mr. Keenan. Yes, he was like that. And he had squinty eyes and looked as mean as he could be. It was him that said, 'A present for Keenan, sister'."

"Sure of that, now? You're not just thinking these were the men because I'm describing them?"

"No, I'm sure of it. Do you know them, Mr. Keenan?"

My right knuckles ached from where I'd hit the first one too high on the head. And I was willing to bet I had black and blue marks above my elbows, where the second one's fingers had bitten in when he'd held me.

I said: "I think maybe I've met them. But keep it under your hat. Now I'll call a cab and you go home and get straightened up. Got anything left of the paycheck?"

She colored and said she had, and I knew she was lying from the way she said it. I made her take a twenty dollar bill, over protests, then called a cab and got her started on her way.

AND then went down to Murphy's which was two corners away.

It was almost noon by then and Murphy had his bartender on the job. He was in the back booth, arguing with a beer salesman, and I gave him a nod and had a drink while I waited. The salesman either sold or didn't and left before I had time even to finish my highball, and I took it over to the booth and Murphy.

He said: "Ho, Riley! Lunch time already?"

I said: "I'm working. Really working."

He looked interested. And didn't ask a question. I'd been going to his place steadily, for the five years I'd had my office in the Nye Building, and he'd never asked a personal question during that time. He asked nobody personal questions—he just sat back and let them talk.

And found out more that way.

I said: "Ever see either of those two guys that made the fuss this morning?"

"Not before this morning, Riley. I won't let 'em through the door if I see 'em again, either."

"Let 'em in and call me. Or call the cops. That'd be better."

He raised an eyebrow.

"They killed a man up in my office. Before I got there this morning."

"Sure it was them?"

"They fit the description my office girl gives. Or rather, when I described them, she checked it. They smacked her down—I had to send her home."

He said, "Oof!" when I belted him, and he started to buckle.

Murphy said solemnly: "Now that ain't right, hitting a woman. I'd be sore about that myself. You say they killed a man?"

"That's right. A man I'd never seen before."

Murphy said: "See if I figure it the same as you do. They'd killed this man in your office. They start away. They see you turn in here. They follow you in—you remember they came in after you did. They pick a fight with you. I got a notion that if they'd got you down, they'd have put the botts to you. Right?"

I said: "That's right. It's the only way it could be. But how come they knew me? I don't know either of them."

Murphy said: "You've probably been pointed out to them at some time. They're

hired thugs, hired killers. That's certain. They'd naturally keep posted on who was what. They probably know every quiet clothes men on the force. And probably every man that carries a private badge. I should know."

And he should. Murphy had done a three to five once, when he was little more than a kid, and I was one of the few that knew it. He'd got sensible then and played it decent, and there was less rough stuff in his bar than in most of the cocktail lounges.

I said: "Well, keep an eye out for 'em, will you, for me, Murph. Killing a man and smacking my girl around, all in my own office, I don't like."

Murphy said he'd keep his eyes open and I went back to the office well satisfied. I knew he'd do more than that. I knew he'd put the word out about the two men, and that coming from Murphy, the word might do some good. He could find out more in one day than all the police stoolies could in a week, because he'd kept his connections and the boys knew he wouldn't be running to the cops.

So I went back to the office and met the first one of the little men.

CHAPTER III

The Second Little Man

HE WAS very neat and dapper. Not over five-four and he wouldn't have weighed over a hundred and ten wringing wet. He walked as though he had lifts in his shoes and he probably did. He must have been kicking close to sixty, because his red little cheeks were wrinkled like a Winter apple. He wore a suit of grey cloth that was not only better material than my new Spring outfit but was better tailored. His white shirt looked as though he'd put it on not five minutes before, and his patterned tie matched his socks and his breast pocket handkerchief. He wore a grey homburg that fitted the rest of the rig to perfection.

If he'd been half again as big, he'd have looked like an advertisement of what the well-dressed man wears. Like something out of Esquire, by the New Yorker.

He said briskly: "Mr. Keenan?"

I said: "That's right."

"I'm Hatcherly. Robert M. Hatcherly. My card, sir."

His card confirmed him. Also, in the lower left hand corner it read *Investments.* It said nothing about his office address or telephone number. And it was engraved, not printed.

I said: "Glad to know you, Mr. Hatcherly."

He said: "Before I state my business, Mr. Keenan, I must have some assurances. I understand that a private investigator is much in the same position as any other professional man. As a doctor or lawyer, let us say. Is that supposition correct, sir?"

I didn't know what I might be walking into so I played it safe. I said: "To a certain extent, of course."

"I refer to secrecy."

"That would depend. If a client confesses to a major crime, it would be my duty to so inform the police. If it was a minor matter, that could be arranged to the satisfaction of both parties—by that I mean if the injured person was satisfied—the matter could be handled secretly. It's a fine point and some members of my profession seem to fail to understand."

"Ethics, eh?"

"Exactly."

He breathed what sounded like a sigh of relief. "It's nothing like that, Mr. Keenan. However I wish it to be kept absolutely secret. I'm in this city on an important business matter. I'm not supposed to be here. If my, let us say, opponents knew I was here they would know the deal was ready to flower. They would move Heaven and Earth to block this merger I am arranging, and it is possible that they have power enough to do it. Am I clear?"

I admitted I wasn't much of a business man and that mergers and things like that were definitely out of my line.

He smiled, showing me teeth that were so good they were surely false. He said: "But you can appreciate the necessity of secrecy, surely."

"Oh, sure."

"I can depend on it then."

I DIDN'T like the way he was harping on the secrecy business but a client's a client and I could use one at that time.

I said: "Certainly. Not a word to anyone."

"That's fine. It's about my brother, Mr. Keenan. My twin brother. I can't find him."

"No?"

"He was to meet me here. We always stop at the Fairmont, you see. He hasn't registered—the hotel knows nothing of him."

"Maybe he hasn't got here yet."

He started to reach to his inside coat pocket, then stopped. "I had a wire from him from here while I was en route. Saying he had just arrived. I naturally supposed he'd be at the Fairmont. Do you wonder why I am concerned?"

I took a chance at master-minding myself out of the job and said: "Did he tell you for sure he'd be at the Fairmont?"

"Well, no."

"Then he's probably at one of the other large hotels. The town is crowded more than usual because of the United Nations conference, you see. It's possible that the Fairmont was full at the time he asked for a room there. It's possible that suddenly he decided to stop somewhere else. People take notions like that for no reason, I've found."

He shook his head. "I've called all the better hotels, Mr. Keenan. John is not the type to go to a cheap place, I may add. No, I fear something has happened to John."

"Then you should go to the police, Mr. Hatcherly."

"Would my presence here be held a secret?" he demanded.

I had to tell him: "Probably not. The newsmen watch for such things. Personal interest stuff they call it. The police, at least some of them, would keep it as quiet as they could, if you requested it. Some of them, I'm afraid though, have a tie-up with certain newspaper men, and hand out bits of information they shouldn't. The minority, you understand, of course."

He said: "The rotten apples that spoil the barrel. Yes, I know. Will you try to locate my brother for me, Mr. Keenan?"

"Why, certainly."

"And your fee? I always think it best to have details settled in advance. It saves arguments later."

He looked, talked, and acted like money, so I asked double what I'd have to pay the leg man I intended hiring for the job.

I said: "Twenty a day and expenses. They shouldn't be much—some cab fare and a lot of telephoning will probably be all it will be."

He looked doubtful and asked: "Is that the usual charge, Mr. Keenan?"

"It is in this office, Mr. Hatcherly," I assured him.

My swat didn't knock her out, but it dazed her.

HE hauled out an ostrich leather bill fold from a pocket inside his vest, having to unbutton it to get at the thing. His vest had white piping on it, I noticed. He counted out a hundred dollars and passed it over as though he hated to part with it, and I decided Mr. Robert M. Hatcherly might be in the chips but he wasn't letting them fly where they may.

He said: "On account, of course, Mr. Keenan."

I started writing him a receipt, and while I was doing it, I asked: "May I ask why you came to me with this? Instead of to one of the other agencies? It's just plain curiosity—it really doesn't matter."

He showed me a folded newspaper and said, in a surprised voice: "Why, this, Mr. Keenan. Surely you've seen it."

I hadn't. My office murder had apparently been just in time to make the deadline on the afternoon sheets, and they'd given it a nice splash. *DEAD MAN FOUND IN DETECTIVE'S OFFICE* was the heading, and in the story itself they gave the thing quite a bust. And either the reporter

or the rewrite man must have been somebody I knew—I know a lot of the boys, anyway—because he boosted me all over the sheet. I was "the well-known detective". I was "famous in crime-breaking circles", and the paper, while not quite coming out and saying it, implied I'd solve the murder before the police had time to get started on the matter.

The article, of course, would do me more harm than good with the cops, but it was swell advertising.

For example, it had already brought me a customer.

I said: "They give me quite a build-up, all right. If I could believe all I read, I'd be quite a guy in this racket."

He said: "Reading it is what gave me the idea of going to a private investigator. Frankly, I hadn't thought of it. I felt I had to do something about John, and had decided to go to the police. Knowing that in all likelihood it would spoil this matter I have been working on for months. But you were the logical answer, Mr. Keenan. I hurried right down."

"About John, now. Can you describe him?"

"Certainly. We are twins. I'm told people have difficulty in telling us apart."

"Any idea of how he'd be dressed?"

"John dresses, well, more sedately than I do. That is about all I can tell you. I haven't seen John for well over a year, you see, and I have no way of knowing what additions he has made to his wardrobe."

"John Hatcherly. Is that right?"

"John W. Hatcherly, Mr. Keenan. John William Hatcherly. I am Robert Morris Hatcherly. After the great American patriot, you know."

I remembered the name, faintly, from history lessons in the first year of high school, but I said that I remembered very well.

And then we shook hands and he went out.

Leaving me with a hundred dollar retainer and a definite suspicion that I was being played for a Patsy in some way.

SAN FRANCISCO is a big town, and a hotel and apartment house town. I honestly think a higher percentage of people live in hotels, apartments, and furnished flats than in any other city in this country, with the possible exception of New York City.

I had no city directory to help me, because John William Hatcherly had only been in town three or four days, but I thought his recent arrival might lead to a break.

Coming in such a short time ago it was just barely possible that some of the Fairmont people might recall his asking for a room. That is, of course, if he'd asked.

So I thought I'd check that myself, before turning the routine over to one of the ten dollar a day boys who are always on tap.

I drew an absolute blank. Robert M. was registered, though not in. John W. had not been heard from. I took particular pains to hunt down each clerk who'd worked the desk during the last few days and none of them remembered him asking for a room.

For that matter, none of them remembered anybody named Hatcherly, except Robert M., my client. And they all had a little smile for me when they remembered him.

I took it Robert M.'s rather youthful way of dressing, along with his tinyness, had created an impression.

So I took a cab back to the office and called George Dixon—and he was over in twenty minutes. George works constantly making ten a day and what he can chisel out of the swindle sheet, and he never has a dime.

His bookie, though, is doing right well.

I said: "It's the missing person thing, George. And it's quiet. Nothing that anybody can put a finger on. Can do?"

He said: "Can do."

"The name's John William Hatcherly. His brother wants him. He's worried about him. Here's what he looks like."

I then described Robert M. as best I could.

George said: "Sure he'll be under his own name?"

"As far as know, he will. Certainly his brother gave me no reason for thinking otherwise."

"And he was supposed to be at the Fairmont?"

"That's right. I've checked that, though, as I told you."

"The brother thinks he'd go to another good hotel?"

"That's right again. Only he tells me he's called all of them and still no brother John."

George stood up briskly and said: "If I work it right, I should get at least a month's work out of this. Give me some dough for expenses. What the hell is all this that happened in your office here this morning?"

"A guy murdered, that's all. And Ella got pushed around."

George knew Ella. He said: "That's a hell of a note. That kid's punchy right now. She can't stand much more pushing around, or somebody'll have to lead her on a string."

My poor little Ella.

CHAPTER IV

The Bruisers

WHEN I STOPPED in at Murphy's the next morning for the morning's morning, he was, as usual, mopping away at the bar with a damp towel, and scowling at the world. I didn't blame him much. The usual morning trade in a bar is strictly hangover, and just looking at dying men like these would curdle anybody's disposition.

I said: "Hiya, Murph."

He brightened a little and said: "Ho, Riley. The usual."

I said the usual and he put out a glass of plain water, a shot glass, and the rye bottle. I can't drink the stuff straight. I've always been a sucker for laryngitis, and raw whiskey sets me talking in a whisper. We talked about the weather, the United Nations conference, about which we both admitted we knew nothing, about the movie Murphy saw the night before and the burlesque shows he'd seen in the past—the vote went two tto nothing in favor of burlesque—and such chatter as that.

I bought a bottle for the office—the office crock was running low I'd noticed the day before, and Murphy reminded me again that he wasn't supposed to sell packaged goods and that he'd lose his license if he were caught. And I reminded him again that I could always go down to the package store on the corner if he didn't want to make a buck on the sale.

We got along like that.

He had his back to me, making change for the ten spot I'd given him, and he spoke without turning around.

He said: "Yes, sir, Riley, the old Clayton rooming house, down on Howard, isn't a bad place to stay at all. At least not these days. Of course it's sort of a tough neighborhood and a man hadn't ought to go there without friends, but still and all it's a pretty good spot."

He turned then with my change and I took it and said: "Thanks, Murph! Do as much for you sometime."

He said politely: "Don't mention it, don't mention it, Riley. Always glad to help a friend."

And that was that. I'd asked him to do some locating and he'd come through. And in a lot faster time than I'd hoped for.

I WENT up to the office and here was Ella, who I hadn't expected to see for the next week. She was wearing smoked glasses and heavy make-up over her bruised cheek, but her mouth was still so puffed it looked as if she were pouting. But her blonde hair was fixed up with little ringlets—something new—and she looked as bright and chipper as a sparrow.

I said: "Hey! You're supposed to stay home."

She said primly: "And let my work get behind?" And then eagerly: "Oh, Mr. Keenan! Have the police caught those awful men yet?"

I told her I hadn't seen hide or hair of Lieutenant Charles P. Lawton and that he'd probably quit working homicide and had joined the United Nations conference, representing the San Francisco police department.

Ella carefully explained that this would be impossible—that it had to be a nation before you could represent it. It seemed Ella had made quite a study of the thing.

After hearing this and how she'd spent all the day before holding ice packs on her mouth to take the swelling down, I went into my own office and closed the door. The usual mail was on my desk—two circulars, one touting loaded dice,

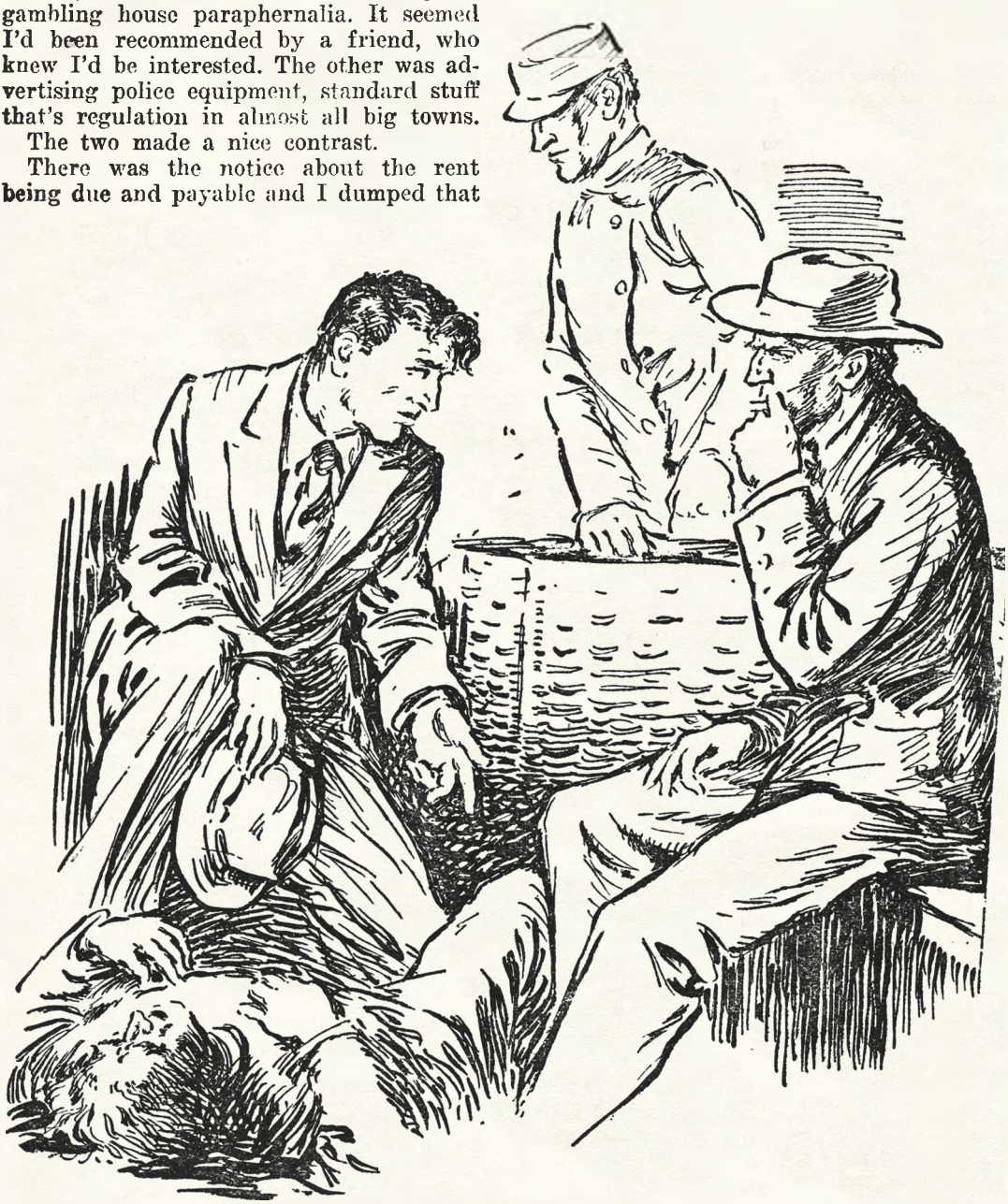
marked cards of various kinds, hold-outs, with the best going cheap for only fifty dollars, and all this in addition to regular gambling house paraphernalia. It seemed I'd been recommended by a friend, who knew I'd be interested. The other was advertising police equipment, standard stuff that's regulation in almost all big towns.

The two made a nice contrast.

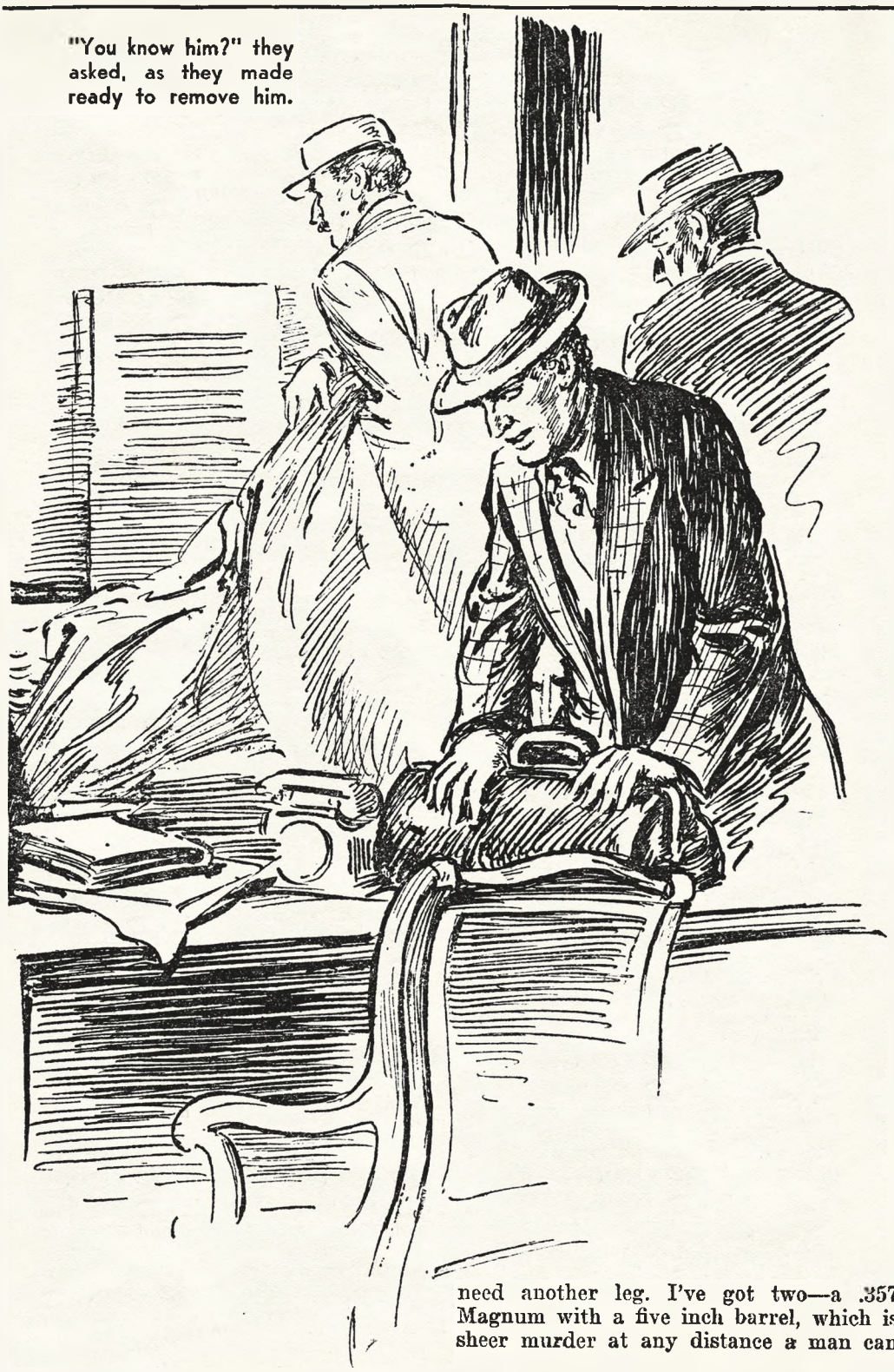
There was the notice about the rent being due and payable and I dumped that in the basket along with the circulars. I didn't have to worry about the rent until I got the one about it being overdue. There were four other bills, one small one which I thought I'd pay that day.

I filed the others in the waste basket, too.

And that cleared the decks for action.



I rarely carry a gun except when I go out to the police range where I've got a courtesy card. The gun's heavy and dragging on your shoulder, and you need one in routine work about as much as you



"You know him?" they asked, as they made ready to remove him.

need another leg. I've got two—a .357 Magnum with a five inch barrel, which is sheer murder at any distance a man can

be hit with it. And it's also a brute to shoot. It bounces me back so hard it makes my teeth ache, and the muzzle blast in that short a barrel causes me to flinch after a dozen or so practice shots.

However, if a man was shooting it in a bit of an argument, little things like that would go unnoticed.

The other gun is a Colt Woodsman Target Model, a .22, of course. And it's the pet. It hasn't much shocking power, naturally, but neither has it any recoil to throw you off your aim. You can hit a running man with it and call your shot, right leg or left leg, shoulder or thigh, and with high speed hollow point shells, it's a deadly little gun if you want it to be. There are far too many kids killed accidentally with it, each year. Mostly because they're not taught how to use and properly handle a gun.

I picked this and the sling holster for it and was out of my coat and putting on the harness when Ella came in. She took one look at the shoulder rig, another at the big gun and the little gun on the desk, and then she started squealing like a pig.

"You're not going to do it, Riley—Mr. Keenan, I mean. You're not going to do it."

I said: "Do what, kid? Clear that up for me."

"Whatever you're going to do. You're not going to do it."

I said: "Now, now! Any reason I can't go out to the range and punch holes in paper targets? That is, if I can hit the targets."

"You're not going to any range. You can't tell me that. If you were, you'd take your shooting kit. I know, all right. You're going to find those two men."

"I'm letting Lawton find 'em, kid. If I found 'em, I wouldn't know what to do with 'em."

She said firmly: "I'm not going to let you go. I'll . . . I'll . . . ."

"Come on, don't weaken, kid."

"I'll call Mr. Lawton myself. He'll stop you. It's his work to catch those men. You're not a policeman—you're only sort of a policeman."

I said: "The license board would love that. Now you never mind, kid. Papa Keenan won't get hurt. He never does."

SHE said bitterly: "There's the time you tried to step on the running board of that hit-and-run driver and he pushed you off and you were three months in the French Hospital. There was the time that man broke in the window of Shreve's, and when you tried to stop him, he shot you in the leg. Two months in bed that time, too. No! You don't get hurt. Not Papa Keenan! I'm going to call Mr. Lawton, right now. He'll stop you—I know he will."

I put my coat back on and tucked the little gun in its clip. Then shoved the big baby into the waistband of my trousers, under my shirt. It made too much of a bulge but with the lower button of my nice new grey coat fastened, it wasn't noticeable.

Ella started to cry.

I said: "Be back in about an hour, kid. Look after things."

She said: "Boo-hoo, boo-hoo. I don't know what to do, Riley. You've got to take Mr. Lawton with you."

I said: "Lieutenant Lawton is far too busy a man to go out to the range and punch holes in paper targets. He's trying to catch those two men. Don't you remember those two men? Now run back to work like a good little girl."

"You . . . you know I haven't any work to do."

I said: "I've got something for you to do—I was going to ask you to get at it right after lunch. But you can start now just as well."

I took her telephone directory and turned it to *Classified—Hotels.* I said: "Start right at the A's and work straight through. Call every hotel in order. Just ask if John W. Hatcherly is registered there. He might sign under J. W. Hatcherly, so make sure the clerk gets it straight. Got that name straight now, Ella? This is important."

She quavered: "Maybe I'd better write it down. I . . . I forget names sometimes."

She'd have forgotten her head if it wasn't fastened to her, but I didn't mention that. She acted as though she felt bad enough already.

THE sign, wooden, and with a fifteen watt bulb set in a gooseneck to show it up at night, read *THE CLAYTON*. This was over what looked like a hole in the wall, between a cleaning and pressing place on one side and a battery repair shop on the other. The hole turned into a tunnel running back maybe eight feet, and then two steep stairs climbed to the second floor.

That was the Clayton, and a dirty, dingier dump I've never seen. And it looked even worse at that hour in the morning. Eleven o'clock sunshine made it seem even drearier.

I pulled my shirt out from my pants a little, so that I could tear it away with my left hand in case I had to get the big gun out with my right. I tried the little gun and it snapped out of the clip like it had a life of its own.

And then I said to myself, "Well, here goes nothing," and started up the stairs.

There was a table right at the head of them, and on it one of the kind of bells you ring by hitting a gadget on its top. Above this was a sign reading *FOR MANAGER—RING BELL*. Mrs. Keenan had always taught her little boy, Riley, to do as he was told, so I rang the bell. Nothing happened. I rang the bell again. This time a door well down the hall opened, and a big fat wench came waddling up toward me. She couldn't have been over twenty-five but she must have weighed all of two-twenty. And she wasn't more than five-six and carrying that weight. Really a Mrs. Five-by-Five.

I said: "You the manager?"

She simpered and said: "Who else, dearie?"

If she hadn't been so fat, she'd have been kind of cute. She had a round doll face and big blue eyes, only when she smiled, they crinkled at the corners and almost closed from the fat squeezing up from her cheeks.

I thought I'd try diplomacy first. I put a ten dollar bill down on the table and said: "I'm looking for a couple of friends of mine. One's a big guy, an ex-fighter. Got a busted beak and a bad ear. The other is long and lean—I don't know his name. We used to call him Slim."

"I'm not fooling, sister," I told her. "Come clean."

She looked at me reproachfully and said: "And do I look like a stoolie, dearie. I can smell copper on you and you stink to me."

I picked up the ten-spot, thinking there was no reason to waste it or my time any longer.

I said: "Okay! If that's how you want it. I try to play it nice and you get cute. Where are they, sister?"

She told me to go climb a tree. And I hit her with my open hand as hard as I could swing. She teetered like a pin the ball's just touched, but when she went down, it was with a crash. I picked her up by the front of the smock thing she was wearing—it took both hands and all the heft I had to do it—and rushed her into the wall and pinned her there.

I said: "I'm not fooling, sister. Where are they?"

HER face was working like it was a bowl of gelatine with somebody shaking it. Two big tears came out of her closed eyes, with one of them rolling over the nice red mark the palm of my hand had made on her cheek.

She said: "You . . . you hit me."

I said: "Sister, I'll put you down on the floor and I'll kick your teeth in unless you loosen up. What the hell is this? Sunday School? Where are they, I say?"

I put my left hand on her throat and stepped back as far as I could and still

hold her. And then made a fist with the other hand, so that she could see it.

I said: "Okay, sister. Do I or don't I?"

She almost whispered: "One-twenty-one. Would you have hit me if I hadn't told you, dearie?"

I took my hand away from her neck and didn't answer. She said, in the same husky whisper: "You would have. I bet you would have."

I said: "Come on, show me one-twenty-one."

It was almost at the end of the hall, a room facing out on Howard. And I stopped just short of it.

I said: "Look, hon! Knock on the door. When they ask who it is, tell 'em you're the manager. They'll open up for you. But don't wait for them to open up. When you tell 'em who you are, you tip-toe to hell and gone away from here."

She said: "For you, sweets. They're both bad. Don't you take chances, sweets."

She knocked, and sure enough a voice I recognized said: "What th' hell is it?"

She said: "The manager, Mister Sayers. Can I speak to you?"

We heard a bed creak and then somebody coming toward the door, and the big girl picked up her smock thing showing me legs damned near as big as barrels. But she tip-toed away down the hall and didn't make a sound doing it.

I took the little gun from under my arm and went to the side of the door, the side where it would open. And went flat against the wall. The door opened and I heard somebody grunt, and then a head stuck out in the hall. I came down as hard on it with the butt of the little gun as I could, and the man took a couple of pitching steps out in the hall as he started to fall.

And by that time I was in the doorway.

The light was in my eyes from that Howard Street window and it took me a second to see what was what. And then I saw the tall thin man, lying on the bed, and dragging a gun from under the pillow by him.

A .22 Long Rifle cartridge doesn't make much noise when it lets go. Even in a pistol, and they're noisier than a rifle. It makes a sharp, vicious crack, but it's not loud, even in a room like that. The little gun made the noise and the man on the bed looked startled. That was all. He kept bringing out that under-the-pillow gun. I thought I'd been too far to the left and that I'd probably just burned his ribs, so I corrected with the next one.

He just put his head back on the pillow, letting his hand fall away from the gun.

And then one ankle went out from under me and I went down to the hall floor, dropping the gun.

CHAPTER V

Dead Evidence

I FOUND out in the first place that I'd made a mistake. The broken-nosed man wasn't an ex-fighter—he was an ex-wrestler. He had me by the ankle and he went to work on it in a big way, and when I tried to squirm over to where the little gun had fallen, he yanked me away from it like Tarzan works on a monkey-man.

I figured to hell with it. I'd been trying to be quiet. I'd used the little gun, knowing it wasn't the proper caper for close-in work like I probably would have, and all this just to make it a private quarrel.

And also I didn't want to have to kill either one of them. I wanted them alive so that I could find out why they'd killed the man in my office. But the guy inside had gone for a gun in the face of mine, and I was forced into killing him. It was shoot or be shot in that case, and I'd rather do the shooting when it comes like that.

It was the same right now. If I'd got my hands on the .22, I'd have taken a chance on crippling him. The way he was throwing himself, and me and my ankle with him, around, I couldn't pick my shot. I got the big gun out and tried to reason with him.

I shouted: "Let go. Let go or I'll turn loose."

He looked up at me then and I'll always think he was crazy. I knew then who'd beaten the poor guy in my office so unmercifully. He was one of the kind that go out of their head when they're hurting somebody.

Right then he got my foot in both hands and bent it, and I almost passed out with the pain. I leveled the big gun at one of his thighs, that was motionless for a second, and touched it off—and the Keenan bad luck stepped in. As usual.

Just as the gun slammed out that cannon noise it makes he jerked back, I suppose with the idea of tearing my foot off. That big slug took him through the right hip,

plowed through his groin—and by that time it had hit bone and was spread out to about 60 calibre, and it kept on going until it broke his other hip.

He let go of me, I'll say that. I was almost deafened by the muzzle blast of that big gun, but I could hear him scream.

Just once, though. It sounded like a horse that had been hurt.

He was paralyzed from the hips down and what that slug, hitting at fifteen-ten velocity, did to his lower region must have been a pretty. He was on his belly, with the upper part of his body arched up from the floor, and he was beating at it, first with one hand and then with the other. His eyes were open but there were no expression in them. For that matter I doubt if he felt any pain—the shock from that much lead, hitting from that distance and at that speed, probably killed all sensation. It was enough to put him out, anyway, because his pounding stopped and he slid down until his face was on the floor.

And then I tried to stand up and found the leg he'd been working on wouldn't hold me.

I was half screwy by then, and not alone because of what he'd done to my leg. The pain from that was making me sick to my stomach, but rolling around on the floor with a man I'd just shot was making me a hell of a lot sicker.

Then somebody said: "I'll help you, sweets. Nell will help you."

She put a hand under my shoulder and heaved, but when I tried to help her by lifting up, I twisted my leg in some fashion and this time I knew I was gone. I could see things start to fade and that's the last I remember about the business in the hall.

I WOKE up on the fanciest bed I've ever seen. It was way up from the floor and very soft—there were three mattresses on it, though I didn't know it then. The spread was satin and thick, and I was surrounded by French dolls, at least a dozen of them. They were flopping on the pillow by me, they were at the side, against the wall, and they were down by my feet.

It was then that I noticed my new grey suit. Rolling around on that hall floor hadn't done it a bit of good, and the broken-nosed man had really done it damage. The leg he'd been so enthusiastic with was bare from my knee down, and what was left of that part of the pants looked like rags. I was blood all over—I took it that I'd either fallen or rolled where the ex-wrestler had bled, and blood on a grey suit isn't pretty.

And yet the big fat girl had put me, blood, dirt, and all, on top of her fancy spread. I thought she was quite a gal at that, and then she came through the door, carrying a pint bottle of whiskey.

She said: "I had to run down to the store for it, sweets. I didn't have a drop in the place. You feel any better, angel?"

I felt better but not much, but I said I was starting to feel fine.

She said: "You *are* a cop, aren't you?"

I said: "A sort of one."

She gave a relieved sigh and started pouring whiskey into a wine glass. She said: "Then it's okay. I thought it'd be all right, but I'd have had to do it anyway. With that damned cannon of yours blasting in the hall, everybody on Howard Street knows there was a shooting here. So when I passed the cop on the way to the liquor store—and he was sniffing around like a bird dog, trying to locate where the shooting was, I told him. He'd have found out anyhow. He's down right now, looking over the bodies. I told him I had you here and that you'd be here when the rest of the boys come along, but he don't trust me, the—. He's looking at the stiffs with one eye, and up at this door of mine with the other, and he's got the old artillery out and handy, right in his hand. I had to tell him it was here, sweets. He'd have found out anyway, and I've got no backstairs to this scatter. You could never make it out with that gimpy leg."

By that time I had a wineglass full of whiskey inside of me and I actually was feeling better. The sick feeling had gone away, at least.

I faintly remembered hearing her call herself Nell, so I said: "What about my guns, Nell? Cop get 'em?"

She looked worried. "I've got 'em, angel.

There were at least a dozen French dolls surrounding me when I woke up.

Now you're not going to try and shoot it out with the cops, are you? You wouldn't have a chance."

I said: "It isn't that—I'm clear. I've got a private license and I'm supposed to be helping a cop that's in charge of a murder that happened in my office. It's just that I don't want the cops holding my hardware while they make up their minds what to do with it. Did that guy ever come to?"

"No, no, no. He never will come to. I looked at him, while you was passed out. He's shot all to hell. He might have had a chance if you'd hit him way upstairs but not where you did. He'll never say a word."

"What about the other one?"

"Right through the heart. You got him at the side of it the other time. He won't talk, either."

I DIDN'T get it for a moment but she went into details. She said: "Here it is, sweets, and I'll swear to it for you. You knock on the door. These guys are wanted and they're nervous. One of them answers the door and takes a pass at you and you grab him and throw him out in the hall. We don't have to say you clunked him on the head, sweets. Then you look in the room and you see this guy coming out with the percentage from under the pillow. There's only one thing to do and so you do it. You go for your own and you beat him to it. We can say the front sight of his gun snagged in the pillow case. Then the first guy grabs you and upsets you and the battle is on. Say! Is that big gun registered to you? Can it be traced back to you?"

"It can, Nell."

She looked regretful. "I was hoping it was hot. Then we could say he pulled it on you and that you took it away from him and that he got shot during the fuss about it. Oh well. The truth will do, I guess. So he was killing you and you let him have it. After warning him. I heard you do that with my own ears, angel.

What you should have done is blown his head off without saying a word to him."

"I guess so," I said, holding out the glass for more whiskey. "There's just one thing more you can do for me, if you will. That's telephone the central station and leave word for Homicide-Lieutenant Charles P. Lawton to get down here in a hurry. I may have to have him to keep from being worked over a bit."

She bristled and said: "They lay a hand on you and I'll have my own lawyer on 'em. They're not going to get rough with you, angel—don't you fret."

I said I wasn't worrying too much.

And then she laughed—a nice full-throated chuckle. She said: "It ain't you that should worry about getting rough. It'd be them. You are the most violent man I ever met—and how I love it."

And with that she waddled away to put in the call to Lawton—but she left the whiskey in easy reach for me.

LAWTON didn't get down to Howard Street and the Clayton for more than an hour, and by that time I'd had a damned sight more attention than I'd wanted. Two lieutenants, one of them homicide, the medical-examiner, who looked at my leg and told me I had both a bad sprain and bruised tendons, and that I'd be lucky if I walked on it inside of two weeks, and at least a dozen assorted policemen, both in uniform and quiet clothes, who looked in to see the killer at ease.

I was at ease, outside of them. I told the homicide man I was not only working with Lawton but waiting for Lawton, and I judged he called the station and verified the call my new big fat girl had put in for me. Anyway, he left me alone, just asked me how it happened. I told him the two were the ones that had killed the stranger in my office, and he looked sad about it.

He said: "One's dead and the other's dying. The M. E. says he hasn't got a chance to come out of the coma he's in. We never will know now what was back of that killing. I wish you hadn't shot as straight, Keenan."

I said: "Now what the hell! What was I to do? One of them's getting ready to shoot at me. I'm no clay pigeon. The other was pulling me in pieces and even then I tried to just break his ham. Is it my fault that just at that time he jumps back, trying to pull my foot off?"

Nell said: "You should let him alone until he's in shape to talk, lieutenant. I saw the thing, remember. That guy was tearing Riley apart."

The lieutenant grinned at me, then shrugged and left the room. With me and the whiskey and Nell all alone.

She said: "They're not going to badger my sweets. Nell won't let 'em. Nell'll tell 'em off."

I really had a lot of mama, I could see that. The cuff I'd given her had made her mine—and I was afraid for keeps.

I said: "It's okay! Lawton will straighten it out. I never tried to kill that last guy. I wanted him alive so that he'd sing.

She said: "I know, sweets. I hear somebody else talking, now. Maybe that's this Lawton man."

It was.

CHAPTER VI

Poor Little Ella

LAWTON straightened everything up in short order, mainly because I had a deputy-sheriff's commission that had lasted over from the time of a general strike, a year ago. That made my going up after the two thugs an attempt at a legal arrest, something a private cop hasn't got.

Of course, he's got the same right as any citizen. He can arrest anyone that he sees in the act of committing a crime, but he can't just tap somebody on the shoulder and take him in on suspicion.

It's quite a distinction.

And then I made the M. E. out a liar. He'd told me I wouldn't walk for two weeks and I got up and hobbled out of there.

And my big girl didn't like it a bit.

She said: "Now, sweets! You stay right here with Nell. Nell will look after you. Nell'll see you're okay. You'll hurt yourself, walking around on that gimpy leg, angel, and you'll be only half a man."

I said that I had work to do, that I had a family to feed. And I thought she'd fall over her lower lip it drooped so.

She said: "Somehow, sweets, I thought you was a single man. You just ain't got that married look."

I said: "No wife. No kids. I've got a girl in the office, two landlords, a bartender and a bookie, and a guy out doing leg work for me. They're worse than a wife and kids because it takes more dough to feed them."

"A girl in the office?" she said suspiciously.

"Sure. To answer the telephone. These two guys beat her up, at the same time they killed the man."

"Pretty?"

I said I'd never stopped to think about that, but that I guessed she was fair-looking.

"Blonde? Like I am?"

Nell was more than blonde—her hair was almost straw-colored. Too much and too extreme bleaching does that, I understand.

I said: "No, sort of brown hair. I never paid much attention."

She said: "I bet. When you coming back to see me?"

"As soon as I get time, kid. I'll be busy on the rest of this business, though, and I don't know how long it will take to clear it up."

"It's all cleared up now. You've got the guys that killed the man in your office, haven't you?"

"Yes, damn it."

"Well then?"

I explained: "They didn't just follow the man in my office and kill him for no reason at all. There was something behind that, kitten. That I've got to find out. Killing the man in my office made it a personal thing. And the cops can't help but think I know more about it than I do. That's why the inspector suggested I work with Lawton. It gives Lawton a chance to keep an eye on me without tipping his hand by putting a tail on me or anything like that. You can understand."

She said: "I guess so, sweets, but you promise to come back to Nell as soon as you can. Now promise."

I promised. And if I kept my fingers crossed, she didn't see them.

LAWTON had a police car below, a sedan with no insignia on it. He pulled out into traffic, made a right turn at the next corner to hit Market, and then started to blister me in a nice way.

"You certainly made a clean sweep, Riley," he said.

"I couldn't do anything else."

"You shouldn't have gone alone."

"I was just working a hunch."

He jeered at that one. "Like hell you were. You mean to tell me it was a hunch that took you to that one rooming house out of all there are in this town. Hunch my eye."

"Well, maybe somebody gave me a hint," I said.

He was on that fast. "Who? If this somebody knew where they were, he might know who they are."

"You can find that out. They'll both have records and you know it."

"Maybe he'd know who they've been with. I want to know why they killed that man in your office. Who tipped you, Riley?"

"I can't tell you that. You should know that, Charley."

He admitted he knew I couldn't stoolie on my own stoolie.

And then he took a new slant. He said: "What you working on these days, Riley?"

"Nothing. No work at all."

"You wouldn't be stalling, now would you?"

I said: "If I was working on anything, I could tell you about, you'd hear it. If I was working on something hush-hush, I'd have to keep it that way. I'd have to protect my client. If you can make sense out of that answer, why okay."

He could make sense out of it and I knew it. I'd the same as told him I was working on something I'd promised secrecy on.

He pulled up outside of the Nye Building then and asked: "Want me to give you a hand up to your office?"

I said: "The more I walk on this leg the better it will be. I'll send the gal out

to buy a cane for me, if they still sell the things."

He said: "Tell her to go to that United Nations conference. The boys wear striped pants and canes and the works, part of the time. Maybe she could borrow one for you."

I said she could go out to the park and cut me one from a tree if she had to, and he agreed that she'd try it, anyway, if she was asked to do it.

He also said: "And if I know Ella, the tree she'd pick would be a poison oak. The gal's not bright."

I said: "But willing! Poor little Ella."

SHE'D been crying, but she had the phone in her hands and the directory in front of her. Even as I came in the door I could hear her ask some room clerk if a J. W. Hatcherly was registered with him. She looked up and saw me and automatically checked off the hotel she'd called before speaking.

She said: "Oh, Riley! Mr. Keenan, I mean. It came over the radio, not ten minutes ago."

She nodded toward the inside office, where I've got a set to pick up the news broadcasts.

"It said that a well-known private detective shot and killed the two men suspected of the earlier killing of a man in the detective's own office. It said that the detective was injured in the mel . . . mel . . . ."

"Melee?"

"That's the word it said. It said the detective was released on his own recognizance, awaiting action of the Grand Jury. Is that right?"

"Sure, kid. There's so much red tape to go through when you kill a man."

"Did you really kill them, Riley?"

"One of them. The other was still alive. They took him to the receiving hospital, but he probably was D. O. A."

"D. O. A.?"

"Dead on arrival. He'd never stand the trip."

Ella shuddered and said: "I think it's horrible."

"I thought it was horrible to walk in here and find a man, first beaten half to death and then killed."

"Of course, Riley, Mr. Keenan, I mean."

"And I thought it was horrible to find you with a shiner and a busted face."

"Don't pay any attention to it, Mr. Keenan. It really didn't hurt very much. And it was sort of exciting."

I said: "You'd better make up your mind, kid. Either make it 'Riley' or make it 'Mr. Keenan'. You get me confused—I keep thinking there's a strange man in the room.

She gave me her best kittenish look and said she'd always liked Riley as a name for a man. And that somehow it fitted me.

I went into my own office thinking I should be grateful that my folks hadn't named me Algernon. I didn't think I could live up to Algernon very well.

I HAD the office bottle about half way down and was getting so that I could almost forget the ache in my leg when Ella came in, all excited.

The successful lady detective in person, no less.

She said: "I've found him. I've found him, Mr. Keenan . . . Riley, I mean."

I said: "The same routine, only backwards. Now clear it up."

"It's Mr. Hatcherly. Mr. J. W. Hatcherly. He's at the Washington—it's on Bush Street, right by where you go to Chinatown."

I said I knew the place. It's an old hotel, medium-priced now but a good hotel in its day.

I said: "How'd you get down to the W.'s so soon?"

"I got tired going A—B—C. So I thought I'd start up the other way for a change. That way I'd meet myself in the middle, you see."

She had logic on her side, all right, and it had worked out.

I said: "Well, that's fine, kid. Now see if you can get me Robert M. Hatcherly, at the Fairmont. Then put me on."

Hatcherly answered so promptly he might have been waiting for my call. I said: "I've located your brother for you, Mr. Hatcherly. He's at the Washington.

I don't know whether he's in or not—I just found out he's registered there."

"Now that's fine, Mr. Keenan."

"About your retainer. There's been some expense, of course. Telephone calls, cab bills, salary for an extra man—I'm charging you ten dollars a day for him is all—and it will take a little time to determine the amount. If you'll stop in tomorrow, say about this time or later, you'll have a refund."

He said: "That's perfectly allright, Mr. Keenan. You have done a fine job and I believe a workman is worthy of his hire. Let's not speak of a refund. I thank you, sir."

I said: "I thank *you!*" and we hung up.

I knew it was phony by then. I'd figured I was in the middle of something when he'd been in the office asking me to find his brother, but now I was sure of it.

Anytime people don't take a refund that's just the same as laid in their laps, there's something wrong. They usually not only take it but shout for more.

He had the refund coming to him and no mistake. I'd done nothing. And George Dixon hadn't done anything. I was just thinking of Dixon, and taking next to the last drink in the bottle, when he called in.

I said: "Nothing to report, eh, George?"

He said: "You took the words right out of my mouth. I see by the papers you've been having fun, down on Howard Street."

I said I'd just been having a swell time, and that he might as well call it a day. That I'd found the man we wanted—that he was at the Washington. And that if he hurried up, I'd take him down to Murphy's and buy him a drink.

He said he'd come running.

And then I went out in the front office and asked Ella to dinner that night. I thought the poor kid had earned it.

She'd found the second little man, which was certainly worth a dinner to me.

CHAPTER VII

Lawton And The Little Man

LAWTON came in while George Dixon and I were waiting for Ella to come back from the corner with another bottle. I'd more than punished the one I had—I'd killed it. But it had taken almost all the ache from my leg, or maybe it was just that I was in no condition to feel pain.

I said: "Come on in, Charley. Ella will be back in a just a minute with the wherewithal."

He said: "I can't stay long," but I noticed he took off his hat and settled himself comfortably in his chair.

He said: "Now if Ella don't get sidetracked, start buying a new hat or something with the whiskey money, she'll probably run her little errand successfully. Did you send her for whiskey?"

"Why, yes."

He said: "Chances are she'll come back with rum. There's more rum than whiskey in town, and Ella's the ideal gal to unload it on. Five'll get you two that it's rum she brings."

Knowing Ella, I kept my mouth shut. George Dixon also knew her but not as well—and he'd heard me tell her to get whiskey.

He said: "I'll take it, Lawton."

Then Ella came in with a paper bag and a bottle in it. And beaming. She said: "Oh Riley, I mean Mr. Keenan. It was the nicest man in the liquor store. He was having a special on rum, he said, so I got that instead. It was almost a dollar cheaper, too."

George sighed and handed Charley Lawton five of the ten dollars I'd just given him.

I said: "Okay, kid. Now run back and get the bottle of whiskey."

She looked hurt. "Should I take the rum back, Mr. Keenan?"

"We'll keep it for emergencies. Think nothing of it, kid. You were saving money, and that's a good deed in a naughty world."

I gave her whiskey money and Lawton said: "You get a cane yet?"

"Forgot it."

"Cane?" asked Dixon.

I hadn't told him anything about the Howard Street fracas so I went through it in a hurry. And just finished with it when Ella came back with the hootch.

I SAID: "And now, kid, one more thing and then you skip on home. D'ya suppose you can find me a cane? Something to lean on, mind you, nothing to twirl. Can you do that?"

She asked where she'd look for one and none of us knew. I finally suggested either the Emporium or the White House, knowing they'd have it if anybody would, and away she went. With me telling her again that I wanted it for use, not for show.

Lawton held his drink up to the light and said: "It'll be funny to see old man Riley Keenan doing the hobbling grandfather act with a cane."

Dixon said: "This I should see."

I said: "Old man Riley Keenan is lucky to have a leg to hobble with. I thought that—— was going to tear it off and beat me over the head with it."

Lawton said: "That's what I came up to tell you, Riley. The big one died on the way to the hospital. Never said a word. His name was Joe Meggs and he's done it in both Quentin and Folsom. The other was Harry Parrish. Another two time loser. Both of them worked guard when they were running whiskey between here and the South and both of them were in a bunch of hi-jacking. Meggs beat a second-degree rap back in '27, and Parrish beat three armed-robbery charges between '29 and '34."

I said, with hope: "Reward?"

"No reward."

I mentioned the Keenan luck, which was ever bad.

"And I talked long distance with the chief, back in Hamilton, Indiana. He said that Winthrop, the man who was killed here in your office, was an absolute stranger out here, as far as he knew. And that he'd known Winthrop all his life. That he knew of no enemies, although Winthrop was a fanatic on world peace. He could think of no reason why the man should have been killed. Said he didn't drink, but was no Prohi. Unmarried, though he had been. Wife died five years ago. Didn't chase women. In other words, no rounder."

Dixon said: "If a man don't drink and don't chase women, what the hell can he find to occupy his time?"

"He sits home and reads a good book," I told him. And asked Lawton: "He have any money, Charley?"

"He did not. A small annuity which he got from his wife's insurance and by cashing in his own. The chief back there thought it would run around a hundred a month. He kept books in three or four small businesses back there—a day a week in each one. That sort of thing. He cashed in his own insurance because he had no relatives. When his wife died, it was useless to him."

"You got details on him, anyway."

Lawton said: "The call cost the City of San Francisco twenty-seven dollars and eighty cents. I've got to know as much about the man as I can find out, don't I?"

Dixon said: "Isn't it closed? Riley's got the two that did it. From what Ella says there's no doubt it was them. And they were hotter than a pistol or they wouldn't have tried to battle it out."

LAWTON said absently: "I guess they're the ones, all right. We'll have 'em cleaned up by tomorrow and she can look at them and make the identification. It isn't that. It's who's behind it. They were just paid killers and I want the man that hired them."

I said: "Don't look at me that way. I'm damned if I'll let a man shoot me to pieces just so you can ask him questions. Or let another one break my leg. That last one was an accident—I've said that right along."

"So you have, so you have," Lawton agreed.

I didn't like the way he said it but there was nothing about it I could put a finger on. And if I could have, I'd have kept my finger at home. A man had been killed in my office, and the police had only my word for it about not knowing him. I'd killed the two men who'd done it, and one of the killings might have been avoided, as far as the police knew. They had only my word for it about the man jumping back just as I pulled the trigger. I couldn't prove I'd aimed at his thigh.

Of course I had my big fat girl to testify for me, but in action like that it's the result that counts, not what a bystand-

er sees or thinks he or she sees. Witnesses, during excitement like that, aren't reliable, even though they're telling the truth as they saw it.

It was easy enough to see why the police were keeping a suspicious eye on me, and I thought the best thing I could do was sing small and let it blow over if it would.

I poured another drink and Lawton took his down and was just getting ready to leave when Ella came back.

And came back just beaming.

She had a long, paper-wrapped parcel under her arm, and she started talking as soon as she was through the door.

"I got one that's just beautiful, Riley, Mr. Keenan, I mean. Just simply beautiful. And only eleven dollars and fifty cents."

I'd given her a twenty dollar bill to shop with and I could see right then I'd made a mistake. I'd wanted and expected something simple, and while I didn't know the price of canes I'd expected the thing to be not over five bucks.

She unwrapped the package as though she was uncovering a statue to civic virtue then, and she brought out one of the most horrid looking things I've ever seen.

It was black and gnarly, and I will say it was built for use. It was about an inch and a half thick. But the handle was the curse.

It stuck out at right angles to the rest of it, and so help me, it was carved to look like a man's face. It finished in sort of a bulb, just about right to fit a hand, but this bulb was a man's face, profiles at the sides and full face on top.

And to cap it all the model the carver used, if any, must have been the homeliest man in the world. I could see why he'd have to have practically no nose—it would have stuck up in the palm of your hand if it had been in proportion. But the eyes were sunk in and the thing had chin whiskers. I suppose so they would help give a firm grip.

Lawton said: "My good God!"

Dixon looked at me and started to choke.

And I thought of how Ella had certainly done the best she could, and that she thought I'd be pleased.

I almost strangled but I managed to say: "That's fine, kid."

THE three of us went down to Murphy's then. As long as I had the damned cane, I thought I'd better use it.

Murphy had two bartenders working, but he was strolling around, seeing that

Her fingers were curved like claws as she came at him.

things ran smoothly. He saw me and started over, but I looked at Lawton and shook my head, so I got just the usual salve.

He said: "Hello, Riley! Want a booth—the back one's empty."

I said: "You know George Murph. And this is Lieutenant Lawton. This is Murphy, Charley."

Murphy said that yes indeed he knew Mr. Dixon and that he was glad to meet the lieutenant. He mentioned a couple other cops he knew that Lawton knew and they were chatting about that while we walked back to the booth. Lawton said he could stay only for a fast one and Dixon then said he had to see a man about a dog.

What he had to do was lay the five he had left out of the ten I'd given him with his bookie.

They left together, and then Murphy slid into the seat they'd vacated, and I told him about the shooting down on Howard Street. And asked him how he knew those two were holed up there.

He said vaguely: "Uh . . . I guess maybe I spoke of it to a geezer I used to know who done a little time up Folsom way. I figured that at least one of them guys

would be a two time loser and a hard loser, so a Folsom graduate was the guy who might know."

Folsom is where they put most of the recidivists in California—with San Quentin for easier jolts.

I said: "The guy must remember like an elephant to pick out a guy like that just from a description."

Murphy said, as vaguely: "Maybe he was a trusty or something and worked on records. Maybe filed 'em or something like that."

And that was all I could get out of him. What he'd done was put the word out that he wanted two men that looked like such-and-so, and some old pal of his had turned them up.

He said: "You certainly got action with 'em, Riley? You busted up bad?"

"Just shoved around some."

"I saw the cane and you hobbling."

"Some cane, eh?"

He said, with honest admiration: "It's got class. Real class. I never had a cane in my life but I'm going to get me one. One like that."

I said: "You can have this one in a week, Murph. I shouldn't need it after that."

"That's good of you, Riley. I'd sure appreciate it. I don't suppose there's many like it, either."

I agreed with him on that. I thought that whoever had carved it had probably lost his mind when he realized what he'd done.

SOAKING for an hour in a hot tub took away almost all the ache that was left in my leg, but it brought full value out of the whiskey I'd taken. I fell down three times getting from the tub to the bed, and I was mumbling so that I had to give the switchboard girl Ella's number three times before she got it straight.

I said: "You, Ella?"

She said: "Yes, Riley. I think it's a bad connection. I can hardly hear you."

I said: "It's me. I over-estimated. We'll have to call it off tonight. Make it tomorrow night instead."

"Oh, Riley!"

"I'm just too tight to make it." And then I got a happy thought and added: "And my leg's going like a toothache. I don't think I could stand it."

Her voice changed and got actually motherly. She said: "You get right into bed and stay there and rest. And don't you dare come down to the office before noon. I'll call you if there's anything important happens. Now you go right to bed."

That was that. She hung up and I put down the phone and pulled the covers over me and passed out. And didn't wake up until eleven. Then I sent down for the papers and a pint of rye and some ice, and I made myself a drink before I even looked at the headlines.

And, in a full column, was my first little man. Picture and all. His name wasn't Hatcherly, but Higgins. He'd been cashier of a bank in Maysville, Indiana and he'd skipped out with sixty thousand dollars worth of cash and twice that much in negotiable securities.

But that wasn't all he'd done. That wasn't enough to win him the newspaper space he was getting. He'd had his throat cut, in his room at the Fairmont, and there was no trace of the money or securities he'd absconded with.

A caper like that will get space in every paper in the land.

CHAPTER VIII

The Other Little Man Again

THE WASHINGTON HAS A small lobby, neat but not gaudy, and I didn't have to go to the desk and ask about the second little man. He was in a lobby chair, surrounded by papers, and he looked like the wrath of God after a bad Indian.

He looked like his brother, but didn't, if that's plain. His brother had said they were twins and I thought they probably were, but where the brother had worn flash clothes and looked as though he took good care of himself, this one looked seedy and half sick. The first one had struck me as pushing sixty—this one looked at least sixty-five. The first one had red cheeks, this one's were greyish. The first one was trim and neat, and this one wore

a suit of black cloth that looked like it should be seen coming down an aisle, on a deacon.

The other, I'd thought, had worn lifts in his two-tone shoes. This one wore elastic-sided Congress gaiters.

The first one was bright and chipper, with his shoulders back and a twinkle in his eye. This one was stooped and sad-looking.

I sat down by him and said: "Mr. Hatcherly?"

He said dully: "My name is Higgins, sir. John W. Higgins."

"I know it."

He didn't even show a sign of interest.

I said: "Your brother commissioned me to locate you, Mr. Higgins. This, when he didn't find you at the Fairmont, upon his arrival."

He said: "The Fairmont is dreadfully expensive, sir. I haven't the means to stay in such a place."

That brought that line of conversation to a dead end.

I said: "I read about your brother. Dreadful, isn't it?"

He said: "To think a Higgins a common thief. I dread to return to my home. In the history of the family, sir, and I have personally traced it back well over three hundred years, this is the first time such shame has fallen on us."

I said: "I wouldn't call your brother a common thief, Mr. Higgins. Far from it. He was tops. Any time a man can nick a bank for as much dough as he did that Maysville outfit he worked for, he's not common by a damn' sight. I'd like to know how he got this far with it— they usually catch bank embezzlers before they get out of the state."

"It is not funny, sir. As far as Robert eluding the authorities, I know nothing about it. Robert was always clever—he was always a schemer. Even when we were boys together."

"D'ya live in Maysfield too, Mr. Higgins?"

"Why, no. My home is in Hamilton."

"Indiana?"

"Why, yes. Hamilton, Indiana."

I WAS starting to get a tie-up with the murdered man in my office, but I couldn't figure just how.

I said: "Your brother visit you much? I understand that Maysfield and Hamilton are not far apart."

"He visited feequently, sir. May I ask if you're an officer?"

"I am, of sorts." I pointed down to the paper he still held, where there was a rehash of the Howard Street shooting. There was an old picture of me, looking like something out of the rogue's gallery, and I made a mental note to raise hell at my hotel until I found out who'd swiped the original out of my room. Some newsman had bribed a bellboy or maid to get it, that was certain. There were two morgue shots of the guys I'd killed, and even one of my big fat girl, Nell. This was captioned: *ONLY WITNESS OF HOWARD STREET GUN BATTLE.*

The article went on to give the names and records of the two dead men and ended with a pretty nice blurb for me.

I said: "That's me, getting some free publicity. I'm the one that looks more like a thug than the real ones."

He looked and said: "My, my, my."

And then read farther. He said: "This is the strangest thing I've ever heard of. Is this correct, sir?"

I asked: "What?"

"This article states there was a man murdered in your office. A man named Cyrus K. Winthrop? Is that correct?"

"That's right. I went to my office and found it full of city police. The man had been killed an hour before then, and my secretary had called them. These two men did it. They also smacked my secretary around, when she tried to interfere."

"Dreadful, dreadful," the little man said. "I knew Cyrus quite well, sir. It would be Mr. Keenan, wouldn't it? I have known Cyrus for ten years or more. Why was he calling on you, sir?"

"That I don't know. Would he have known your brother?"

"Possibly. I don't know. But Cyrus was a Hamilton man and Hamilton is where Robert and I were raised. Robert, who was always restless, left Hamilton while a young man, although of course he fre-

quently returned. Sometimes just for a visit, sometimes to take a position there. He accepted the position in the Maysfield bank, I am sure, to be near Hamilton and his old friends."

I said: "I'm interested in this, Mr. Higgins. Robert, after all, was my client. He was murdered, as was this man Winthrop. There's a connection there, of course. That will explain any personal questions I ask."

FOR a moment he looked a little like his brother. That is, he had a little of his brother's fire. He said: "I do not feel obligated to answer any personal questions, sir. Robert did a disgraceful thing. He has been punished. I naturally grieve over Robert's passing, but I cannot help but feel it was best. To take advantage of his position, of his employers, was ingratitude of the basest sort. Money stolen like that is a curse."

"There's a point there, Mr. Higgins. The money and the securities were not found. Your brother was certainly killed because of them. It wasn't only murder, it was murder and robbery, with the second the motive for the first."

He nodded assent to what was self-evident.

I said: "I told him where you were, Mr. Higgins. Yesterday afternoon, about four. Did he get in touch with you?"

"I heard nothing from him. There was a message from him asking me to call him at his hotel. This was awaiting me at the desk, when I returned last night. I . . .uh . . . I confess I am a motion picture fan. My one vice, Mr. Keenan. I saw the picture at the Paramount and at, I believe it is the California. It was after eleven before I got home."

"You call then?"

He nodded. "Eleven was not late for Robert, though long past my usual bedtime. I called but Robert was not in. At least he didn't answer his phone. By the account of his death, he was killed at approximately that time. Possibly a few minutes one way or the other."

"They can't set the time exactly."

"He was found this morning, you know, by a chambermaid. I have little sympathy for Robert—I feel he has disgraced the family name—but he met a terrible end. His throat cut like an animal's. I dread returning to my home."

"Married?"

"Oh, no. Neither Robert or I ever married."

I said: "Then it shouldn't be too tough. It's not your fault what your brother did. How did you happen to come out here, Mr. Higgins?"

"It was Robert, Mr. Keenan. I should have known at the time that Robert was up to something. He came to visit me some weeks ago and we arranged this trip. He asked me to register at the Fairmont, under the name of Hatcherly, and this I agreed to do. But when the clerk at the Fairmont quoted me their prices, I decided a less expensive place would fit my pocketbook better. I am not a wealthy man, Mr. Keenan."

"What was the idea of the phony name? Did he give you any explanation? Of course we know now why he wanted it, but did he give you any excuse?"

THE little man actually blushed. He said: "Robert told me—this is in confidence, Mr. Keenan—that he had been having an affair with a San Francisco woman whom he had met in Chicago, while on a business trip. He did not want to become involved with this woman and so told her his name was Hatcherly, rather than Higgins. I did not approve, naturally, but I have always followed Robert's wishes in small things. Robert, I am sorry to say, always had a weakness for the opposite sex, and I am ashamed to say that I was, in a sense, grateful that he'd used an alias in this affair. I didn't want our name smirched, and from what Robert said, I judged this woman to be no better than she should be. In fact, I got the impression that she was a . . . a. . ."

"Bum? Tramp?"

He smiled faintly at me, showing me teeth as false as those his brother had worn. "That's it exactly. I fear I'm not in the habit of using modern slang. The word I was thinking of was trollop."

I said: "Well, it's a mess all the way

around. About all you can do is hold your chin up and ride it right through. When you go back home, just act as though nothing had happened, and it will surprise you how little attention people will pay to it."

"I am thinking seriously of not returning for some time, Mr. Keenan. The thought of seeing friends and neighbors, with this cloud on my name, is almost more than I can bear."

The little geezer was getting on my nerves, with his prissiness. What his brother had done was no fault of his, yet here he was blatting about it like a little lost sheep.

I said: "You're going to have a tough time of it before you go back, Mr. Higgins. There'll be a homicide detective named Lawton up to talk with you, and probably some more of the boys from the same detail. There'll certainly be insurance men, representing the company that carried the Maysfield bank. They'll ask you more questions about your brother Robert than you think are in the book. The money and securities he took are floating around somewhere, and they're going to do their damndest to find just where. This affair with the woman will be aired, and they'll try to locate her, just in case she might know something that would be of aid. I'm afraid you're in for a bad time of it."

He said stiffly: "I will assist the law and the insurance company as best I can, Mr. Keenan. That I assure you. I shall ask them to respect my name and to avoid publicity as much as is possible, but I shall do everything in my power to assist them in finding the stolen money. If found and returned to the bank, it would erase some of the stigma Robert has brought on me. I'm sure you understand."

I said: "Oh, sure," and that it had been a pleasure to talk with him.

And then I put in a call for Lawton and told him where to find little brother, and that little brother knew more about the business than he was telling.

It looked to me then as though little brother was mixed up in the steal. He'd talked too damned much about the family name being shamed.

CHAPTER IX

The Girl Friend

ELLA, OUTSIDE OF HER eye, was almost back to normal. Of course her cheek was black and blue, but heavy make-up covered most of it. Her mouth had lost practically all the swelling, and her smoked glasses covered her shiner in first class shape.

I said: "Looking a lot better, kid. I'm sorry about last night."

She said: "It was all right, Riley. You really shouldn't have gone out last night, anyway. You can barely walk, right now."

I was using the cane, all right, but my leg wasn't hurting too much. Time will take care of a lot of things. In fact, I was in more misery from my hangover than I was from my leg, but I didn't tell her that.

I said: "Any calls?"

"Just one." She started to look mad. "From a girl. From a girl named Nell."

I said: "That was my witness to the Howard Street thing, kid. I've got to keep friendly with that one, at least until after the grand jury meets."

Ella said firmly: "She sounds like a bad woman to me. Just the way she talked."

I said: "You're wrong, kid. She's a swell scout. Anytime a girl looks after a stranger, who's come in her place and loused it up like I did hers, she's all right."

Ella sniffed and didn't answer and I went inside and looked over the usual collection of bills. I was through with them and trying to decide whether a drink from the office bottle would kill or cure when she knocked and came in without waiting for me to tell her off.

She said: "There's a woman out here to see you. She won't give her name. I think it's that woman that already called —that woman named Nell."

"Is she big and fat?"

"Why, no."

I said: "Then it's not Nell. Let's call this one Madame X. Will you send her in?"

Ella sniffed again and sailed out, and I decided that jealousy was a bad thing

for a business office. And then Madame X came through the door, with *a* sort of Mae West swing, and I forgot about Ella for the time being.

The gal was fair-sized, probably running around a hundred and forty on her bathroom scales. As she was, she would go ten pounds over it—she wore that much fur.

She had *a* short jacket, made out of some kind of animal that had resisted all attempts at dying, and over this she wore three fox skins. With heads. One head at each end of this throw thing and the third peeking out at me from behind her right ear. It looked like it was hiding in her hair.

THIS hair was a brilliant brassy blonde, or a sort of shade between blonde and red. It looked as coarse as rope. She had make-up plastered on so thick I wondered how she kept it from scaling. One patch on each cheek and one on her chin, and she hadn't blended these into the area around them.

Under the fur she wore a yellow silk dress, and it was really yellow. The most yellow dress I've ever seen. And this had bangles, if that's what you call them, spotted here, there, and everywhere over it. Not just buttons—they looked as if somebody had pinned them on the dress in the dark. Her shoes, which were of some kind of crinkly leather, had heels at least four inches high, and she teetered on them as though she were walking on stilts.

She gave me a smile that showed some gold bridgework and said: "I just know you're Mr. Keenan."

I said: "Don't tell me—let me guess. A lady Sherlock Holmes."

She said: "Huh!"

"You picked me right out, didn't you? That's real detective work."

"I'm not here to fool, mister."

"Then let's get right down to business."

"A copper named Lawton sent me down here."

I said: "Good old Charley."

"He said you were working for Bobby Hatcherly. Only his name's Robert Higgins, instead."

"That's right."

"I want to know where I stand."

"I don't get it, miss. You'll have to clear that up."

"Do I get what money he left or don't I?"

I said: "Off-hand, if it's found, I'd say the bank gets it. Or rather, gets it back. Stolen money is usually returned to the people it's stolen from."

She waved a hand impatiently. "I don't mean *that* money. I mean *his* money. If he had any, that is. He always said he did."

I said that so often men were liars, and thought that the late Robert Higgins had, undoubtedly, the vilest taste in women of any man I'd ever met. This battle-ax could bite through chain mail—she'd really have been an asset during the middle ages.

She said: "He promised me every dime he had, that is when he died, if I'd meet him here in 'Frisco."

I said: "It's San Francisco, dearie. Out here they call it by its proper name."

"Well, San Francisco, then. What I want to know is how I stand."

"You'd have to see a lawyer about that. If the money he took from the bank is recovered and replaced, I imagine the court will still take all expenses from his personal funds. That is, money to cover the investigation of the loss and the pursuit of him. Then, if there's anything left, you have a chance at it. If he left a will naming you, that is. If not, it will go to his brother. That's the way I think it will be, but you should consult an attorney to be sure."

SHE cursed the late Robert Higgins and showed a nice command of the dirtier kind of language. And finished with: "The little jerk! The only reason I let him play around me was because he said he had dough. It looks like I was just wasting my time."

"Did he look you up, since he got to town?"

"He did not. He told me to meet him at the Granada Rooms—we picked that place out of a 'Frisco, excuse me, I mean San Francisco, directory, one day in Chi. I mean Chicago. He was to meet me there. He never even called me. I didn't even know he was in town until I read about

him in the paper this morning. Then I went down to the cops and they showed me around until this hick cop of a Lawton gets me and tells me to come to you. And you're not a damned bit more good to me than they were."

"How well did you know him?"

"That little jerk? Front and back and sidewise. If you must know, mister, he paid my rent for a year and more, in Chi. He'd come up from Maysville on what he called business, but it was done in my apartment, mostly. Do I know the little feist? Too damned well, mister. I should have had something down in writing, right from the start. Giving him my time and getting nothing but a lot of talk for it."

I'd been thinking, ever since I'd talked with little brother, and I thought I had the answers. And answers that fitted everything that had happened. The trouble had been that it was too simple. I'd been trying to complicate an easy situation, that was all.

I said: "Let's you and me take a little cab ride, sister. By the way, what *is* your name?"

She said: "Dolly La Varr. I was on the stage, Mister Keenan. In fact I practically quit my career to devote myself to Bobby Hatcherly, only his name is Robert Higgins."

"Let's not have secrets, Dolly," I said. "How long before you met him was it that you quit the stage? Now don't story to the old folks—just tell me how long it was."

"Well then, about five years. Maybe six."

She was in her forties and I wasn't giving her any of the worst of it at picking that age.

I said: "Okay, Dolly. Let's go."

"Where?" she asked, suspiciously.

I said: "Just you ride along and see."

CHAPTER X

A Modern Lazarus

WHEN I ASKED FOR John W Hatcherly the desk clerk looked faintly embarrassed. "I'm sorry, sir," he said. "He's in his room but he's talking with a police officer. The officer left strict orders that they weren't to be disturbed."

"A big, dark man?"

"Why, yes sir."

"I'm working with him. Put him on the phone, please."

In a moment I heard Lawton's irritated voice say: "Well! What the hell is it?"

"It's Keenan."

The voice eased. "Got something, Riley?"

"Wait until you see her."

"Her?"

"Her. The girl friend. Don't crack—I want to have a surprise."

Lawton sounded puzzled but all he said was: "Come on up."

I said: "Okay, Miss La Varr. We're going calling."

She said: "I hope to——you know what you're doing. I'm damned if I do."

I said: "For one thing, I'm trying to get back a lot of dough for a bank. They give rewards for such things, Dolly. The Bankers Association does, and usually the bank breaks loose with something. And I use money all the time, first for one thing and then another."

"Where am I going to come out on this?"

"That's where you're going to have to see a lawyer, like I told you."

We rode up in an elevator that moved like slow motion and ended at the fourth floor. The bell boy jerked a thumb that needed washing and said: "Down th' hall, mister. Seven-eight doors."

And then I knocked on the door and Lawton said: "Come in!"

I opened the door and, not out of politeness, waved Miss La Varr ahead of me. And Miss La Varr, once out of the little hall and into the main room, went into action with a speed no United States Marine would be ashamed of. She screamed: "You little jerk! Who th' hell d'ya think you're fooling?"

And then she tore at little brother like a wildcat, with her fingers curved like claws and with her blood red finger nails ready to slash.

Little brother ducked behind a chair

and Lawton caught her. He said: "Now what's this?"

I said: "All right, Dolly. Look him over. Is it or isn't it?"

She said: "I'd know the little jerk if I met him in the dark. I know the lying little——well enough, don't I? So you were going to meet me, were you, Bobby? What was yours was mine, was it? I give you one of the best years of my life and I don't even get what the chickens picked at. You little——! I'll tear your eyes out and make you swallow 'em."

I WINKED at Lawton, who plainly didn't know what it was all about.

The little man quavered: "Madame! You are in error. I'm not Bobby, I'm John. His twin."

She said: "Twin my eye! Don't tell me, you little jerk. You can maybe fool a bunch of dumb coppers but you can't fool me."

Lawton, still holding her, said: "Now what's this, Keenan?"

I said: "The little guy isn't John, that's all. He's Robert. John is the guy they found up in the Fairmont, dressed in Robert's clothes. They may have been identical twins, but it's certain that one or the other had some slight accident at some time that left a scar, and a tracer back to Hamilton, Indiana, will bring that out. That'll be your proof, though I think little smartie-pants will break down and tell all, if you leave him with his lady-love a little while."

Dolly La Varr said: "I'll make the little jerk tell the truth if I've got to pull him to pieces. He can't play with my affections, the little——."

I said: "You see, Charley, he knew the bank and the insurance companies and the cops would be after him for the rest of his life. He couldn't skip the country because there's a war on and travel is watched and limited. So he gets his twin out here, kills him, dresses him in his fancy clothes, and tries to make it look as though he'd been murdered for the dough he'd looted from the bank. His brother is quiet, and he's flashy. All he thought he had to do was act quiet for two or three years, back in his brother's place, then leave town and start spending his loot."

"What about the guy killed in your office?"

"That's the pay-off. The guy rode out with him. The minute he heard about the embezzlement he'd have gone to somebody with the story about riding out with Higgins. As it was, he must have been suspicious about it, or he wouldn't have come to my office. If he'd known anything was wrong, for sure, he'd have gone to the cops, so he must just have had a hunch something was wrong. Something wrong enough to maybe interest a private cop, but nothing definite enough to take to the police. That's only logical. But Higgins saw a squawk coming and hired those two thugs to put him out of the way before he could talk. They followed him to my office and did the job there. He'll confess to it, if you give him a choice between that and talking with Dolly, alone here, for an hour or so."

Dolly said earnestly: "You give me ten minutes with the little jerk, will you, copper? I'll kill the little——."

I said: "Only two things, Higgins. How much did you pay 'em and where did you meet 'em? You might as well talk—you're sunk."

He said: "I met them in a Howard Street bar and I gave them a thousand dollars apiece. You'd prove I was Robert, anyway. I broke my leg in a car wreck, three years ago, and it shows. There's no object in fighting, when it does no good. I'll say now that I'm sorry about Cy Winthrop being in it—I always liked Cy. But I've hated my brother since we were kids together and I don't regret killing him a bit. He was a smug, Psalm-singing Prohi, and I'll hang happy, knowing he went before me."

Charley Lawton said: "Well, you'll hang! But whether happy or not I won't say."

Miss La Varr said: "And serve you damned well right, you nasty little jerk. To think of the time I wasted on you!"

Higgins looked as though he were glad Lawton still held her.

THE money was in a safe deposit box in the Anglo-London-Paris National Bank. Higgins quite cheerfully told us where it was, and released it the next day. He hadn't spent a cent of it—he'd been operating on his own savings up to that time. I put in an official claim for reward money at the same time the insurance people and the cops took it from the bank—and there'll be no trouble in getting it.

If it hadn't been for the red tape, I think the insurance people would have paid me in cash, out of the box.

Higgins got life, I suppose because he pleaded guilty and didn't fight his case at all. A break for him that he didn't have coming. Lawton got a citation for clearing up his case so quickly, but it was nothing he could cash at the bank or buy groceries with.

The only bad after effect on the whole thing happened to me. My big fat girl, down on Howard Street, calls me at least every other day. And we go through the same routine.

She will say: "This is Nell, sweets. When you coming down to see me?"

I say: "Just as soon as I can get a minute's time, dear."

Then Ella will hiss: "That dirty fat slob!"

Nell will say: "Now you promise me, angel."

I say: "I promise, hon."

Ella will say: "Why don't you go down and see that big cow? Why don't you?"

Then Nell and I hang up and Ella goes into a tantrum, claiming all men are beasts. And on and on and on.

Sometimes I think it's a mistake to have a girl working in an office at all. A man may not be as pretty to look at, but at least they don't break out in a jealous rage with little or no provocation. In fact, if Ella keeps it up, I'll probably be down at Howard Street, in spite of Nell going around two-twenty or up on the hoof.

She wouldn't nag, anyway—and after a course of Ella that two-twenty don't look near as big to me. At least I'd have peace, which is more than I'm getting in my office.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

of SUPER-DETECTIVE, published bi-monthly at New York, N. Y. for October 1, 1945.

State of New York, County of New York: ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Frank Armer, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of the Super-Detective, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Trojan Publishing Corp., 125 East 46th Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Editor, Kenneth Hutchinson, 125 East 46th Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Managing Editor, Wilton Matthews, 125 East 46th Street, New York 17, N. Y.; Business Manager, Frank Armer, 125 East 46th Street, New York 17, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one percent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Trojan Publishing Corp., 125 E. 46th St., New York 17, N. Y. Frank Armer, 125 E.46th St., New York 17, N. Y.; Michael Estrow, 114 E. 47th St., New York 17, N. Y.; G. Donenfeld, 125 E. 46th St., New York 17, N. Y.; J. E. Wasserman, 801 Harries Bldg., Dayton, Ohio; Anna Estrow, 114 E. 47th St., New York 17, N. Y.; Janet DePinna Armer, 125 E. 46th St., New York 17, N. Y.; Alice U. Wasserman, 801 Harries Bldg., Dayton, Ohio; Linda B. Wasserman, 801 Harries Bldg., Dayton, Ohio.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

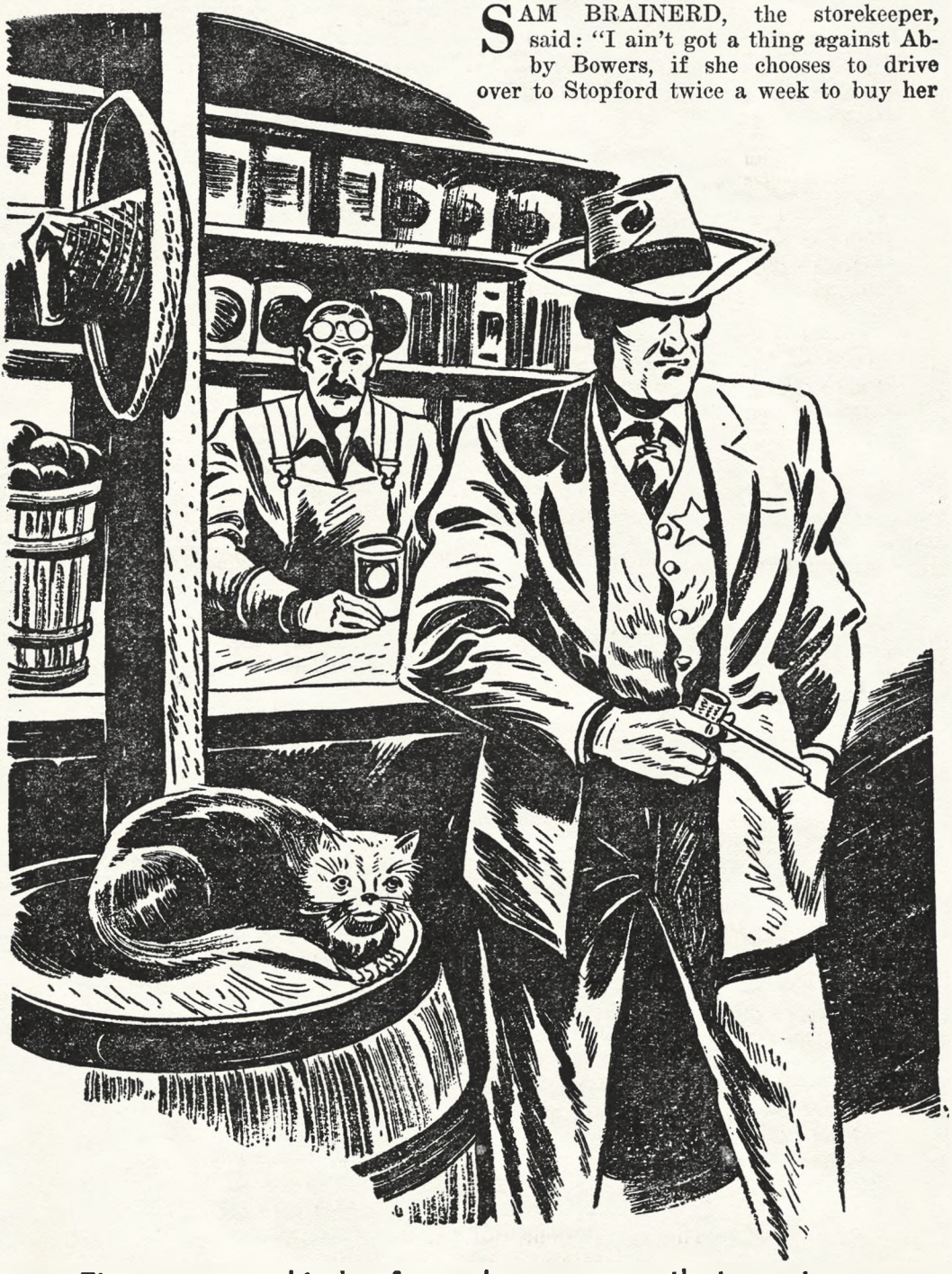
4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

FRANK ARMER, Publisher

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 5th day of September, 1945.
ALFRED B. YAFFE, Notary Public (My commission expires March 30, 1946.)

SEPTEMBER

SAM BRAINERD, the storekeeper, said: "I ain't got a thing against Abby Bowers, if she chooses to drive over to Stopford twice a week to buy her



Five separate kinds of peaches grew on that one tree, and Death grew there, too, though none could see it!

PEACHES

By LEW MERRILL

groceries, instead of dealing with me. I don't want her custom. Plenty old maids get cranky when they're fifty—lemme see, fifty-three."

"She sure hates our town like poison," said Will Jenkins, the garageman. "Abby must have pulled in a raft of money with her picture postcards, and I was told she's got to be an expert, and sells her work to high-class photographic magazines. Too bad she's soured on life."

"Too bad she set Cy Billings and Eph Soames by the ears," said the storekeeper. "Twenty-five years is a long time to carry a grudge."

Sheriff Tom Rayburn, seated on the cracker-barrel, began stuffing his corncob. He had been a little worried of late, since the old feud between the two men had flared up again. Especially since Eph Soames had been making mysterious threats against his enemy and next-door

"You're wanted, sheriff," the boy said. "Mr. Billings is dead."

neighbor.

It all went back to the first World-War, when Eph Soames and Cy Billings had been rivals for Abby's hand. She had been as good as engaged to Eph, but she wouldn't marry him before he went overseas. Eph had been stationed somewhere in the Orient, and when he came back, a year after the armistice, Abby had thrown herself at him, and he had turned her down.

Cy Billings was a widower then, but everyone knew he had been carrying on with Abby during his year of marriage. Eph Soames had quickly discovered it. And, when he turned her down, Abby had made a fool of herself, threatening a suit for breach of promise.

Will Jenkins was saying: "Eph's a big bluff. A feller who goes around making mysterious threats of murder don't have to be taken serious. What's your opinion, sheriff?"

Tom puffed at his pipe. "Eph don't look like killer material to me," he said.

He stopped on that note, and everybody grew silent as Eph Soames came into the store.

"MORNING, Mr. Soames," said the storekeeper. (Soames had become important enough to have the handle tacked onto his name). "What can I do for you?"

"Twenty-five pounds of Fertilo. Can you put it in my car? Thanks, Brainerd."

Luke Stores, the cut-up, said, "I bet you fed some of that Fertilo to Cy Billings's horse, else how come he dropped dead in Cy's driveway, the other side of your fence?"

"Call it an act of God, as the lawyers say," rejoined Eph. "No, I didn't feed Fertilo to Billings's horse. It hasn't got enough poison in it. But some day Billings is going to eat something stronger than Fertilo, and that will be one skunk out of the way."

The crowd guffawed. Sheriff Rayburn watched Eph, puffing hard at his pipe. Eph was a plain fool, talking that way about his enemy. The old trouble had flared up again within the two past years, over a boundary dispute, as the result of which Eph had had to move his fence back some six feet. It was since then that Eph had been throwing out veiled hints of killing his neighbor.

Eph specialized in the hybridization of fruits and vegetables. He had created a potato that already promised to bring big money to the growers. Then there was his improved black currant—but old Doc Tracy, the local representative of the Department of Agriculture, had made him root up his plants, because black currants might not be grown, on account of the pine rust disease.

The crowd guffawed. Whereas Cy Billings was generally disliked, as a grumpy old curmudgeon, Eph Soames was popular in the town. A genial man, in his early fifties, with a short spade beard, he combined the aspect of a professor with the free and easy ways he had acquired in the first war. In a way, the town was proud of Eph. It sympathized with him in his dispute with Cy.

They watched Eph accompany the storekeeper out to his car, Sam carrying the bag of Fertilo, which he deposited in the rear.

They heard Eph say: "I guess I'll be on my way to Dunning. You sure I can get gas without coupons at the garage there?"

"Oh, sure," said Sam Brainerd. "Hell, Mr. Soames, how else would any of the Summer folks have gotten home this year?'

TOM RAYBURN got up as the storekeeper came back. "Well, I'll be getting along," he said. "Give me a half-pound of Golden Bokay tobacco, Sam."

"Here you are, Tom." Sam slung the bag across the counter. The sheriff slowly untied the string, let the neck gape, refilled his corncob. At that moment a lad came running into the store, panting, and looking wildly about him.

"Mr. Rayburn here?" he gasped. "He ain't at his house."

"I'm here, son," said Tom, stepping forward. "Anything gone wrong?"

"You're wanted at once, sheriff. Mr. Billings's house. He's dead!"

"What's that?" The sheriff pulled taut the strings of his tobacco-bag. The mumble

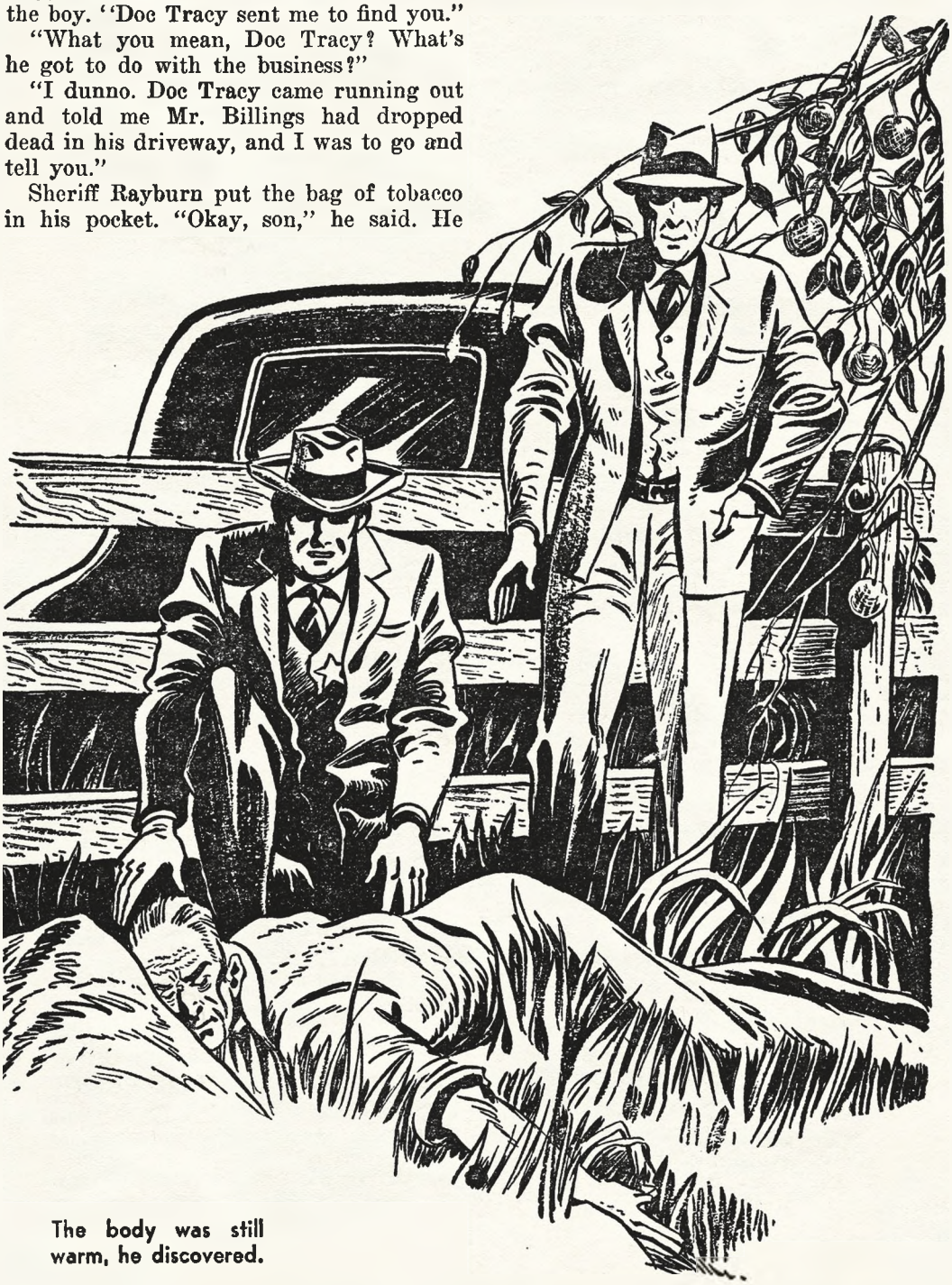
of voices stopped; the figures in the store seemed frozen.

"Mr. Billings dropped dead in his driveway, like that horse of his last week," said the boy. "Doc Tracy sent me to find you."

"What you mean, Doc Tracy? What's he got to do with the business?"

"I dunno. Doc Tracy came running out and told me Mr. Billings had dropped dead in his driveway, and I was to go and tell you."

Sheriff Rayburn put the bag of tobacco in his pocket. "Okay, son," he said. He went out to his battered car, climbed inside, and pressed the starter. In another minute he was clattering up the road. It wasn't until he was out of sight that the



The body was still warm, he discovered.

silence in the store was dissolved in chatter.

Doc Tracy was a survival of an earlier day, before the institution of modern medical procedure. Some seventy years of age, with his tall, straight figure, and his snow-white hair and beard, the Doc was a commanding figure in the town.

Some fifty years before, in all probability, he had taken a two-years course at some small institution, and obtained a license to practice medicine and surgery. Actually, he confined his surgical procedure to the setting of broken bones. In medicine, he treated simple ailments, and was an adept at the ushering of new citizens into the United States.

Tracy was almost the last of the old herbalists. He knew every plant, and its properties; he was the author of pamphlets on herbs, and almost each week was the recipient of inquiries, perhaps from the United States government, or maybe from some unknown correspondent in Australia, Iceland, or Ceylon, as to the order, genus, and species of some dried and pressed specimen. But to the town he was simply Old Doc Tracy, who could sometimes cure diseases, with roots and herbs out of the woods, where modern physicians failed.

HE had been out that morning on his regular constitutional, which he hardly ever missed. Doc knew that each species of vegetation has only a few days to live, and the fungi only a few hours. He never missed anything. Only the last year he had discovered three brand-new species of russula—the so-called toadstool of the woods, and one boletus—the kind with holes underneath, instead of gills.

And then he'd saved old Mrs. Kemp from pulling up roots of the poisonous aconite, which she had mistaken for wild horseradish.

What especially interested him, however, was Eph Soames's development of new species. He deplored the quarrel that had arisen between them when he ordered his gooseberries and black currants into the furnace. But that was Uncle Sam's orders, to protect the pines from the disease spread by those crops, and orders had to be obeyed.

Doc Tracy walked along the country road, enjoying the air. It was late September, and a little crisp. The Summer colony had gone. This was the sweet of the year to Doc Tracy. The roadside was lined with the deadly amanita toadstool—phalloides, and fly agaric; but the country folks didn't have to be warned about these. The pity was, they didn't know they wasted thousands of pounds of good vegetable meat each year in the shape of tender young puffballs, and the coral fungus and vegetable beefsteak, that grow on the roots of trees.

A car was coming along the road. Doc guessed it would be Eph's. But it wasn't. It was Abby Bowers at the wheel, maybe returning from her twice-a-week trip to Stopford, to buy her groceries. She drove past without looking at him. Doc Tracy grunted. Just a soured old maid, who had started all the rumpus in town.

At the end of the stretch of woods was Eph Soames's place. It wasn't very big—five acres or so, extending back of the house. Eph was out, for the garage doors were open. The Doc went into the grounds. Although relations between the two men were strained, there never had been an actual breach, and Doc was a kindly soul. He hoped Eph had got over the gooseberries and black currants. And he wanted to see how that five-way crop peach tree was faring.

There was a short lawn in front of the old stone house. There was a fence, dividing Eph's property from that of Cy Billings' next door. The two old fools had gone to law over boundaries, as a result of which Cy Billings had gained about six feet of Eph's land.

The loss to Eph was negligible, but it brought Eph's row of experimental fruit trees plumb up against the fence. The branches of some of them overhung Cy's land, and Cy had claimed that fruit overhanging his land was his own possession. There had nearly been another lawsuit over that.

THE Doc walked in, and stood looking at the apple-tree. That had a five-way

crop on it too, five different species of apple grafted onto a quince stock, and each of the five main branches bore a different kind of apple. But that was old stuff. Amateur gardeners had amused themselves that way for years. It was the five-way peach tree that intrigued the Doc.

There was a row of rose-trees—trees, not bushes. Eph was developing the rose-fruit, hoped to make a kind of persimmon out of it. But Tracy wasn't interested in the roses either. He wanted to see the peach-tree.

Luther Burbank, in the latter years of his life, had developed a fruit that he rather inelegantly called the "plumcot." It was a cross between plum and apricot, and had not been one of his successes. Wandering on, under branches heavy with pears, Doc found what he was looking for. It was a peach tree with five separate grafts on it.

From four of the branches the fruit had long since gone. There was a clingstone branch, a freestone, a nectarine, a sort of "plumcot." And now the fifth branch was in fruit, in late September!

It was Eph's mysterious hints about this fruit that had aroused the Doc's curiosity. He looked at it. Certainly it was distinguishable for color rather than size. It looked like a pale, fuzzy plum. It looked like the original wild peach of Persia, the home of peaches, and Tracy knew that Eph had somehow got into Persia, in World War I, with the British troops. Tracy reached up and pinched one of the fruits, and a spurt of juice ran over his thumb.

He stood, pondering. Eph had thrown out all sorts of hints about this new peach of his, coupled with his usual dark threats against Cy Billings. Too free with his mouth, the sheriff had called him. Before Eph went abroad, he had been a local farmer, raising calves and corn, but he had always been called crazy on account of his interest in experimental farming. And that improved potato of his had certainly put him on the map.

There, across the fence, was the spot where Cy Billings's old horse had dropped dead a week ago. Standing in the shafts, then suddenly dead. Eph Soames had bragged about it in town, called it a judgment. The sandy road was still scuffed, showing where the old beast had fallen.

Weeds grew high along Cy's side of the fence. A little nearer Cy's house was a depression among them. Something was lying there. Doc Tracy moved along the fence, until he was opposite it. He looked, and shouted. Next moment he was galvanizing his old limbs in a jog-trot back to the highway. Nick Turner, a farm-boy, was walking along. Tracy yelled to him, and grabbed him by the arm.

"Run into town, and bring Sheriff Rayburn here!" he shouted.

"Why, Doc, what's wrong?" asked Nick in surprise.

"Do what I told you! Tell him that Cy Billings has dropped dead beside his driveway. Don't stand gawking at me! Do what I tell you!"

WHEN Nick was gone, the Doc went back along Cy Billings's side of the fence until he came to the body. He bent over and examined it. The face was still warm, although Cy was as dead as he ever would be. There was a bluish foam upon the lips, and the distinct odor of bitter almonds. That meant cyanide poisoning, of course.

Tracy straightened himself, groaning as a twinge of his lumbago caught him. He stood still, considering the situation. Eph was out. Death had been practically instantaneous, perhaps fifteen minutes before. If any human agency had administered the cyanide to Cy Billings, it looked like Abby Bowers.

She could have stepped out of her car, on her way back from shopping in Stopford, and persuaded Cy to swallow it. How? Offered him a chocolate drop, maybe. That wasn't plausible.

Tracy began examining the branch of the peach-tree overhanging the fence. September was late for peaches to fruit, but this was the original wild peach of Persia, and maybe it had got thrown off its base, on account of the seasons being jumbled over here. Tracy went down a little way, and looked at the rose-trees. Eph certainly had developed the rose fruits into sizable

berries—about as big as crab-apples. But they were hard and uninviting.

The Doc straightened himself again as he heard a car coming at a fast clip along the road. It turned in along Cy's driveway. It was the sheriff's car, and Rayburn jumped out and came up to where the Doc was standing over the dead man. The sheriff knew death when he saw it.

"Poison?" he asked.

"Cyanide," said Tracy. "Not more than half-an-hour ago, if that. Body's still warm. Put your hand on his face."

"How come you're here, Doc?"

"I looked in to see what Eph was doing with his fruit grafts."

"Well, it looks bad, Doc."

"Bad for me? I guess you're joking, Tom."

"No, what I mean is, bad for Abby Bowers. She drove past here a few minutes ago. You must have passed her."

IN the Stopford court-house, before the inquest began, Tracy went up to Rayburn. "So the medical examiner found plenty cyanide in the body?" he inquired.

The sheriff grinned. "About enough to kill a bull elephant," he answered. "And, if the body of Cy's horse hadn't been disposed of for fertilizer, I guess it would have been found chock full of poison too. Examiner says death would have occurred in a minute or so. You're testifying that you found the body warm."

"That's so. Cy hadn't been dead more than fifteen minutes when I found him."

"Well, we ain't worrying. I've been checking up on Abby Bowers. I've been checking up on the chemicals she's been buying in Stopford for her photography work. And one of them is cyanide. Of course she had to sign a statement it was for commercial work before they'd let her have it. She bought enough the last three months to poison the entire community."

"You asking for a verdict against her?"

"I'm keeping strictly quiet. Possession of poison isn't prima facie evidence that she used it to kill. No, I've got a search warrant, and I'm going through her workshop. I'm taking along two detectives from the state police."

"Well," said Tracy, "if I was you, I'd go a trifle slow, Tom. I think you're wise not to ask for a verdict against her. There might be others involved."

"You mean Eph? Why, you stated that he was out, and that the body was still warm. That's what you're going to tell the coroner, isn't it?"

"Oh sure, sure!" answered Doc.

Tom Rayburn looked uneasy. "I don't know what's on your mind, Doc," he said, "but everybody knows Eph Soames has been shooting off his mouth about feeding poison to Cy. Still, by your own showing it couldn't have been Eph. And how would he have persuaded Cy to take it?"

"That's true, bot how did Abby feed it to him? And none of the three had been on speaking terms for years. I'd go a trifle slow, sheriff, even if you do use that search-warrant."

Tracy omitted all reference to Abby when asked if he had reason to suspect anyone. The verdict was "willful homicide by some person or persons unknown." Most of the town attended the inquest, and what jarred everybody, but especially Sam Brainerd, was encountering Abby Bowers cruising in her old car on her way to purchase her half-week's supply of groceries.

WILL JENKINS, the garageman, said, "I dunno why that woman's still at large, and running around. They found enough cyanide in her shop to kill off half the state. And a hypodermic, which had traces of the poison in it. Of course that makes it clear. She snuck up on Cy from behind, and gave him a shot."

"How about the horse?" asked the storekeeper. "You suppose she gave him a hypodermic too? What for would she have wanted to kill the horse?"

"Hell, you can't never tell what a spiteful woman won't do!" said Will.

"But what for would she have poisoned Cy and not Eph? It was Eph she was raising all the rumpus about, and going to sue for breach of promise."

"I guess that was a cover-up to hide her hate for Cy. After all, it was Cy who owed her most, and turned her down after his wife died."

"What did she tell Tom about the hy-

podermic that they found in her shop?" asked Sam.

"She said she'd bought it at the same place where she got the cyanide, and told them it was for photography work too. She said it was used for strengthening weak negatives, and that it had to be shot on instead of making it into a bath. You got to hand it to her: that woman's an A 1 liar."

Sam said: "You wouldn't think that Eph had a hand in it somehow? Maybe he tied Cy up, and Abby gave him the shot. I dunno, but, after the threats Eph's been holding out about Cy——"

But nobody answered him, for just then Eph Soames walked into the store, spade-beard outthrust, and a grin above it.

"Morning, Mr. Soames," said the storekeeper. "Well, we're still having crisp fall weather."

"It's a grand day, and we're all feeling fine," said Eph. "I'd like some of that stuff for killing the grubs of the Japanese beetle, so they won't wake up next summer."

"I've got some ten-pound packages here, Mr. Soames. I'll put one in your car. What do you think about them finding all that cyanide in Abby Bower's workshop?"

Soames cackled: "If Abby Bowers gave Cy a dose of cyanide, she must have rammed it down his throat. If you want my opinion, I think Cy ate something that wasn't good for him. He was always snatching fruit and other eats that didn't belong to him. Thanks, Sam, I'll take it."

"Well, I'll be damned if I see how he can get away with that!" exclaimed Will Jenkins, when Eph had left the store. "You think it was one of those fruits that he's experimenting with?"

Luke Stores said: "It's like you said, Sam. I'll betcha anything you like them two were in cahoots to kill Cy."

"But none of them ain't spoken for years," objected Sam.

SOMETIMES Doc Tracy was aware of the pressure of the years. It was about two miles from his house to Eph's, and he walked that distance slowly and ponderously, with the use of his cane, with which he destroyed any poisonous fungus that he encountered beside the road. He moved heavily to one side as a car came up behind him. When it stopped, he turned, and saw Abby Bowers sitting at the wheel.

"Have a peach, Miss Abby," he said

"Want a ride, doctor?" she inquired.

This was astonishing. It wasn't Abby's custom to show courtesies to anyone in town except the Summer visitors.

"Why, I was just strolling over to Mr. Soames's place," parried the Doc. "It ain't more than a quarter-mile further on."

"Get in. We'll park. I want to talk to you."

Tracy meekly complied, and Abby drew up the car beside the road. "I guess you

know they searched my shop, and took away my chemicals," she said. "And you're wondering why I haven't been arrested. I'm wondering too. They think I killed Cy Billings because I was in possession of cyanide. And bought in Stopford, mind you. I'd deserve to go to the chair if I bought poison, to kill a man, in the next town.

"Those fools can't get it through their heads that cyanide is used in photographic work. And if you want to know who killed Cy, I'll tell you. Eph Soames grew poison peaches along the fence, knowing Cy claimed all fruit that hung over his side, and would pick and eat it. I'm glad Cy's dead, and now I want Eph brought to justice.

"Eph let it out, like he was always hinting. He bragged to me two years ago he was growing something up against his fence that was going to put Cy out of business. That was after Cy got six feet sliced off Eph's property. He boasted that Cy had best let his fruit alone. I don't know whether there's any fruit left on that tree, but, if there is—well, pick one, and have it analyzed."

Doc said, without evincing much astonishment: "You haven't said anything to the sheriff about this, Miss Abby?"

"I'm minding my own business," snapped Abby Bowers. "I'm just waiting to be arrested, and bring an action for false imprisonment. But you go and look at those peaches." Abby opened the door.

"Well, thanks, Miss Abby, for what you told me," said the Doc. "I'll certainly investigate."

BUT, having already reached that tentative conclusion, and having already been on his way with the same purpose in mind, Tracy continued his way unruffled. He was contemplative enough to observe a self-fertilizing bottle-gentian by the roadside, and to discover a mass of oyster-mushrooms on a tree-trunk, unfortunately too old and wooden for consumption. He went on a little faster to Eph's place. He'd seen Eph's car in town, and planned to take advantage of his absence to make his investigations.

He had been pondering over the problem of the five-way peach-tree for some time. Many plants used extensively for food were originally poisonous, or still contained poisonous elements—the manioc, for instance. And the wild carrot, Queen Anne's Lace, was under suspicion, though he had never heard of anybody putting it to the test. And the tomato was allied to its congener, the deadly nightshade.

Doc entered the grounds, and made his way to the peach-tree. The branch that overhung the fence was heavy with the fuzzy little fruits, and he raised it. He picked one, carefully avoiding breaking the skin, and examined it carefully. It seemed to have a worm-hole in it. Tracy severed it with his knife, being careful not to get any of the juice on his hands. There was no worm inside.

He picked another, which likewise seemed to have a wormhole, and again he found no worm inside. There were those apparent worm-holes in all the riper peaches that overhung the fence on Cy's side. Maybe the worms had died as soon as they came into contact with the juice. Or maybe there never had been any worms.

Tracy straightened himself, groaning a little at the pain in his back. He had been so intent upon his problem that he hadn't heard the car coming up the drive. He turned at the sound of footsteps, to see Eph Soames coming toward him, that spade-beard of his thrust out aggressively.

"Hello, doctor! It's good to see you here again, after our little run-in," said Eph. "Of course you were in the right. And I knew you'd want to see this tree, as soon as the fifth branch came into bearing."

"I was wondering about it," said Tracy. "Seems to me there's an outstanding order of the Department of Agriculture about peach-trees. I'll have to look it up."

"Don't worry, Doc. What's on your mind? Looking for poison in my peaches? Well, Tracy, you'll have to fight it out with Nature, and not with me. There's a story going around the town that I grew poisonous peaches, and fed them to Billings. I don't know that there's any law to prevent me planting what I want to. I warned Billings to leave my fruit alone, and, if he chose to steal it, and die of eating it, that's not my affair, is it?"

"So you raised that fifth branch so that Cy Billings would pick the fruit and eat it?" asked the Doc. "And you think that's what killed him?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. But what about my right to plant poison plants, after warning my neighbor?"

"Well, a fellow's got the right to plant anything he pleases, provided it's not prohibited by the Department of Agriculture," answered Tracy. "There's some notice out about peaches, but it don't cover poison peaches, as far as I remember. So that's what killed Cy's horse?"

"I'm not talking, Tracy. I don't know how this talk about poison peaches got around town. I've been experimenting in growing a new kind of peach, and if it happened to be poisonous, it's too bad Billings picked one. What are you going to do about it?"

"Me? I'm only representing the Department of Agriculture, and we're interested only in plant life and plant parasites. We don't give a tinker's damn for murder, Mr. Soames."

"Strong talk," said Eph.

"Just how did you come to the conclusion that the wild peach was a poisonous fruit?" asked Tracy.

"Ain't it?"

"That's one of the things I don't know. I suppose I'll have to eat one of them to find out. Frankly, I don't know how you stand in law, Mr. Soames. But you're not going to let Abby Bowers take the guilt for this. I'm asking you to tell the sheriff what you've told me."

"Me? I ain't told you anything. You're inferring all this. If you think there's poison in my peaches, eat one, and try."

"Maybe I will," said Tracy.

DOC TRACY'S house was on the outskirts of the village, and was a typical village house, six rooms and an annex in the rear, containing Tracy's specimens of rare plants, dried and pressed, and his correspondence files. He had just finished the meal, prepared for him by his housekeeper, when Rayburn came in.

"Set down, Tom," said Tracy. "I was kind of expecting you."

"I ain't surprised. Who spread this story that's buzzing all over town, about Eph having grown poison peaches, on account of Cy having claimed all fruit that overhung his land?"

"I'm of the opinion both of them spread it," answered Tracy—Abby and Eph."

"Yeah, and the whole thing don't make sense to me," said Rayburn. "Here I was all set to arrest the woman, and now this turns up, with Eph bragging how he outsmarted Cy. It sounds like it's true. That accounts for Cy's horse. Must have snatched a peach while he was standing in the shafts in the drive. Look, Doc, what I want to know is if there is such a thing as a poison peach. Can you get enough cyanide out of a peach to kill a human being, let alone a horse? If so, I've been on a wrong trail, and it's just a coincidence, Abby having all that cyanide in her possession."

"Well," said Tracy, "cyanide, or prussic acid, is a natural ingredient of the peach and the almond. Mainly in the pit. But it's in such a minute quantity that it's harmless, though there have been reported cases of poisoning from eating peach and almond pits.

"Eph has been growing grafts on his peach-tree, and one of them is the wild peach of Persia. I don't know whether it's definitely poisonous, but it's a small fruit, with a soft pit that often splits.

"Personally I don't believe it possible that there could be enough cyanide in a peach to poison a human being."

"Then what's the outcome?" groaned the sheriff. "I've got to arrest somebody. That's what I'm for. Else the state detectives will be around here, messing things up. Which of them killed Cy?"

"Well, now, I've got an idea—" Doc began—and at that moment the door opened and Abby Bowers walked in.

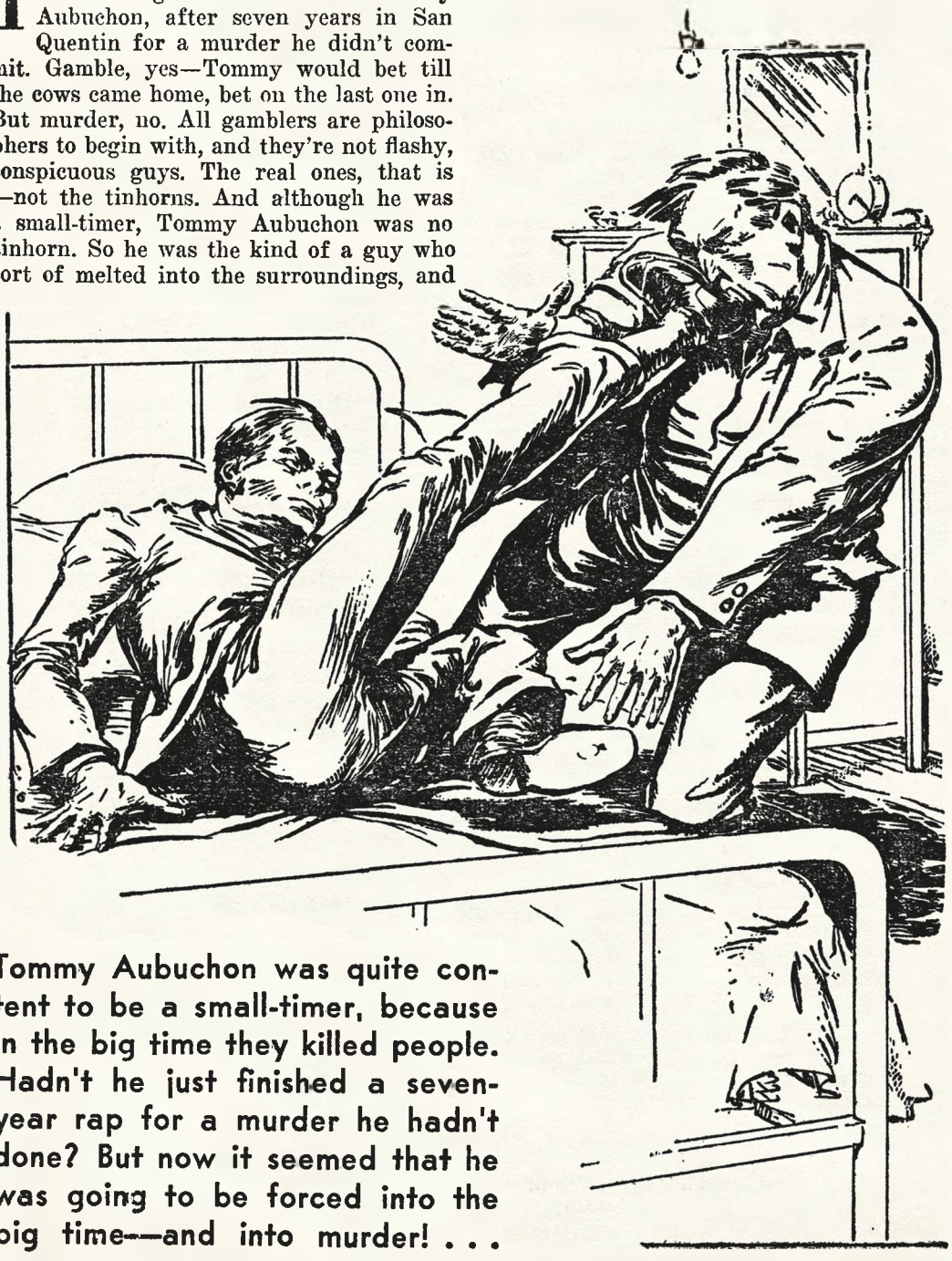
"I thought you'd be here, Mr. Rayburn," she said in a shrill voice. "What are you two cooking up? You know now that Eph Soames killed Billings, and has been boasting about it all over town. So maybe you'll return me my photographic chemicals, that you took away."

The sheriff looked helplessly at Tracy, who took up the ball. "I was just remark-

(*Continued on page* 94)

. . . GUYS WHO

THAT soft gait was natural to Tommy Aubuchon, after seven years in San Quentin for a murder he didn't commit. Gamble, yes—Tommy would bet till the cows came home, bet on the last one in. But murder, no. All gamblers are philosophers to begin with, and they're not flashy, conspicuous guys. The real ones, that is—not the tinhorns. And although he was a small-timer, Tommy Aubuchon was no tinhorn. So he was the kind of a guy who sort of melted into the surroundings, and



Tommy Aubuchon was quite content to be a small-timer, because in the big time they killed people. Hadn't he just finished a seven-year rap for a murder he hadn't done? But now it seemed that he was going to be forced into the big time—and into murder! . . .

KILL PEOPLE

that trait had been sharpened by San Quentin. So he was also the kind of a guy that is philosophical to start with, and seven years on a bum rap had made him more of a philosopher than ever.

There you have little Tommy Aubuchon. He padded down the hall of the Tropical Hotel, on East Sixth Street, the Skidrow of Los Angeles, to Room 212. His old partner, Bookie Byers, was supposed to be holed up there for some damn' fool reason. Their horse-parlor folded, of course, when Tommy went up on that bum killing, and they hadn't seen each other since.

But they had been very good friends, a pair of amiable small-timers who booked a bet here and there, and didn't work too hard, and never had ambitions for the big time. In the big time, the big-timers killed people. That's how Tommy Aubuchon and Bookie Byers got along together for years. That's why Tommy was on his way to see Bookie, after seven years in Saint Quinine.

Also, there was the little matter of six hundred dollars. Bookie had sent word long ago that he was holding Tommy's

Eddie watched as Tommy kicked Pony in his big, stupid face.

By CAMFORD SHEAVELY

share of the horse-parlor assets for him when he got out.

He knocked at 212. No answer. He knocked again. Then, with a fine set of skeleton keys, borrowed from a second-story and warehouse larceny guy he had met in San Quentin, Tommy let himself into the room.

The shades were drawn and it took him a moment to get used to the dim light. Then his blood stopped running and his mild, wizened face went white.

Bookie lay on the bed with three bullet holes in his face.

Tommy shut the door very quickly. He ran the blind up and took a look at his old partner. Bookie had put on weight, and he was wearing an expensive suit. Things evidently had been looking up when he got shot in the kisser—up to that moment and no farther.

Tommy whistled.

"Boy, are you dead!" he said. It was his way of expressing sympathy. "No wonder you didn't come see me when I got out, old kid," he sorrowed. "You were dead or heading for it. Well, let's see about that dough."

He did not burst into tears—not after seven years he hadn't owed the People of California. But there was an unaccountable misery, a sort of well-controlled rage in him, as he skimmed Bookie's pockets. He wished bad luck would happen to whoever messed up Bookie's puss that way.

SOMEONE had been in his partner's pockets ahead of him. Bookie's wallet was under him, empty. Tommy whistled again to discover a shoulder holster. The gun had been pulled out and was half hidden in the rumpled bedding. It had not been fired, and obviously was not the one which did in Bookie. Tommy slipped it into his pocket.

"What was he after, the guy?" he whispered, pulling his lip. "And did he get it?"

He thought not. Bookie's suitcase, closet and bureau had been rudely searched, too, but by someone in a hurry. Someone who had probably gone away hot as a fox in the end, after killing a guy and then not cashing in on it.

Tommy grinned. That meant that Bookie had been up to his old tricks of hiding money under the wallpaper.

He forgot all this for a moment, as someone went down the hall. It recalled him to the fact that he was, after all, in a room with a murdered man, and him just out on parole. However, it would do him no good to run to the law. They'd turn up unsavory details about Bookie and those wounds in his face and why they were there, and they'd pop Tommy back into prison. So he might as well have a look under the wallpaper.

He got down on his hands and knees as the footsteps died, and probed the paper along the baseboard with his fingers. At the closet the flap came loose in the corner where baseboard met door moulding. He pulled gently, and then sprang back as packets of small bills showered down around him.

There were twenty packs, in the bank's own neat wrappers. Five hundred dollars each, times twenty—he calculated automatically, as a horse player will, and got the right answer.

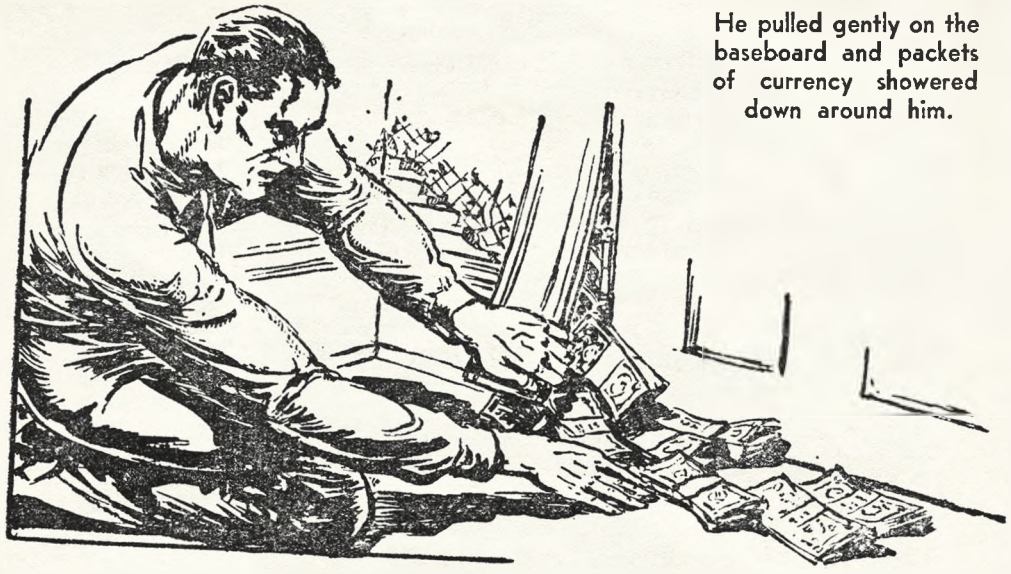
Ten thousand dollars! No wonder Bookie got shot. This was big-time, and they killed people in the big time. Tommy got sick to his stomach.

It recalled Eddie Eads to him. Eddie was the guy who knocked off Milt Posnoski, who owed a few bets to Tommy. Eddie was sore about a red-headed girl, but it was Tommy who went to San Quentin. Oh—he could have turned it on Eddie Eads. But Eddie was getting into the big time then, and Tommy thought he could afford a few years easier than he could make those guys mad.

But all the same, he got sick at his stomach thinking about it.

"So long, Bookie," he said, as he left the room.

HIS pockets bulged with money, yet he remained inconspicuous. It was one of his traits, you see. He got back to his Bunker Hill rooming house without anyone taking a second look at him, despite his prison pallor. The landlady was out when he reached the place. The old drawing-room that now served as a lobby was



He pulled gently on the baseboard and packets of currency showered down around him.

deserted. Tommy turned out the lights and lifted the cushions in the musty old velour couch. Frugally he pocketed two dimes and a nickel that he found there. The velour at the back was rotten around the tacks, and came loose with a feathery ripping sound. There was plenty of room for the ten grand and the gun, and when he replaced the cushions no one could ever tell the difference.

He went to his room, where he was surprised to find himself trembling. He sat down on the bed, but that didn't do any good.

"Boy, am I scared!" he marveled. "I wish Bookie had that ten thousand dol—I wish I'd left it where I found it."

He got up and dashed cold water on his face. That helped. He was using the towel when he heard steps in the hall, gruff voices at his door. And then the door came open from a good, solid push, the rotten wood yielding up the screws that held the lock without argument.

Two men walked in.

Tommy had a little trouble remembering the little guy. Or maybe it was that he just didn't want to. Eddie Eads had been mean in the old days. He looked poison today. He was dressed in the best that money could buy, and there was a fussy-looking, bankerish fringe of gray around his temples, and his eyes were ugly under gray brows.

"Hello, Tommy," he said, with a smile.

"Hello," Tommy gulped.

The first thing Tommy thought then was—*why, he's getting old! He's changed more than poor old Bookie! Have I, too? Seven years!*

"You're looking well, Tommy," Bookie went on pleasantly.

"You're not looking so bad yourself, Eddie."

He kept his eye on the big lout, who liked to hit people with things. By now Eddie Eads didn't have to get rough. He had this lout hired for it. This lout was "Pony" Greeley—and among the boys, that was short for Horace, or "Horse" Greeley. Pony was a big, sulking moron that had been beaten over the head as a child by a drunken father, and his brain had gone mushy; he was cruel, he could follow orders, but he couldn't think very well.

"Hello, Pony," said Tommy, placatingly.

Pony nodded.

"Sit down," Eddie suggested. "Sit down on the bed, Tommy. Pony, just for luck, try him for a gun. The gentle touch, please. Tommy's our friend."

Pony kept one hand in his pocket on

his own .45 as he searched Tommy, who lifted his arms for the rite so high that the cold sweat from them ran down his belly like ice-water.

"He ain't got nothing but keys and a handkerchief and some change and junk," said Pony, hoarsely.

Eddie smiled, and nodded.

"Oh? Well, that's nice. Now you may sit down, Pony." And as Pony started to shake his head, Eddie snarled: "Damn you, Pony, sit down or I'll mash your mouth in."

PONY sat down, still fondling the gun in his coat. Eddie gave Tommy a cigaret, smiling. Tommy smiled as he took it.

"Yes, you're looking well."

"I'm fine," said Tommy, with stiff lips. "I hope you're getting along fine."

Eddie smiled.

"As a matter of fact, Tommy Aubuchon, I'm all right," he said. "Oh—how's Bookie? I almost forgot to ask. When did you see him last?"

Tommy licked his lips and said, "Seven years ago. He ain't looked me up."

"That's a lie, of course," said Eddie. He stopped smiling.

"Honest to God it's not!"

"He was your partner. You two guys were a joke all up and down the Coast, the way you hung together. And he hasn't been to see you?" said Eddie.

"Eddie, I swear it," said Tommy, spreading his hands. "What's it about? I don't field it. Look, Eddie," he begged, sweating. "I'm on parole. If Bookie's in a jam, he could queer me and he knows it. He wouldn't do that. Or if he's got something on the stove, I could queer it by coming around, me on parole and all. I swear I been here four days, just waiting."

Eddie scratched his stomach impatiently. "That's a stinking lie, of course."

"Eddie, it's not!"

"You'd at least telephone him."

"Eddie, you don't get it. I would in a minute if—"

"He'd get a message to you," Eddie went on, losing his temper a little. "You're a stinking little liar. Or you'd get a message to him. The town's full of guys just out of San Quentin who are running messages all over town."

"Eddie—" Tommy choked. "As God is my witness, Eddie—!"

He could get no farther. Eddie spat on the floor and turned to Pony.

"Try him for lying, Pony," he said.

Tommy lay back on the bed with a wail, and doubled up his feet like a cornered cat. The gun and the money he had taken from Bookie's room ceased to exist. He wiped them from his mind, and from his mind he also wiped Bookie and the bullet holes in his face. He had learned that trick in San Quentin. It was kind of like hypnotism and kind of like Hindu magic, and it could be done if a guy learned the trick.

Now nobody could beat the knowledge out of him, because he didn't have it.

PONY, grinning, reached for one of Tommy's feet. Tommy whimpered and kicked Pony in his big, stupid face. Blood flew. A tooth in front became red all over and started dripping on the big, scarred chin. Tommy timed it, let him have the other heel square on the nose. It went flat and blood bubbled out of it as Pony reeled backward, clutching at his face and grunting like a stuck hog.

Tommy cringed on the bed, waiting. He had learned this little trick in San Quentin. Be abject enough, be frightened enough, and you defeated them. You had to look Death in the face to do it, but oftener than not Death spat and looked away, disgusted.

"Pony!" Eddie cried out sharply, as Pony started for the bed again, hands clutching. "Get back in the corner and wipe off your face. I ought to let you have it right between the eyes."

For emphasis he kicked Pony in the groin with his pointed toe. Pony went back to his corner, and Eddie stood looking down at Tommy Aubuchon, cowering on the bed. He grinned, and Tommy knew what he was thinking.

He was thinking about Milt Posnoski, whom he had killed over a girl, and for whose murder innocent Tommy Aubuchon had done time. He was thinking that any guy scared enough to take that prison rap

Draped across the sill under Pony was Eddie, and with the butt of his gun Pony was chopping away at what had been Eddie's face.

would have opened up minutes ago if he knew anything about Bookie Byers' present whereabouts. All that he overlooked was the little matter of education that Tommy had picked up in the seven grim years of self-discipline in San Quentin. Yes, he overlooked that.

"All right, Tommy," he said at last. "Sit up. I guess you don't know nothing

about nothing, do you? You poor little rat, I'd forgotten what you're like."

"Eddie, I'm sorry I kicked him," said Tommy. "If I knew anything I'd tell you."

"Oh, shut up."

Eddie took out his wallet. "Just to show you there's no hard feelings, here's some eating money, Tommy. Now tell me where you last heard of Bookie being."

Tommy counted the money with trembling hands, pocketed it with an air of gratitude. There was over a hundred dollars.

"Tropical Hotel, East Sixth Street," he stammered.

"When was that."

"Th-three weeks ago. Snowshoe Croft—you know old Snowshoe, who stuck the shiv in the Mexican girl—he got out on good behavior and ran into Bookie down there. Buzzy Sanders told me about it."

"Oh yes," said Eddie, thoughtfuly. "You saw Buzzy, up in San Quentin. He got careless. Did he tell you he was one of my boys?"

Tommy shook his head.

"Well, he was," said Eddie, "but he got careless, and he can smell up San Quentin the rest of his life for all of me. Tropical Hotel. We'll look him up. You go on out and get some supper and *keep your stinking mouth shut.*"

"Sure, Eddie," Tommy said hastily, as they went out.

He got one vengeful glare from Pony's ugly, lacerated face as they went out. He sat on the bed until they were safely away. Then he got up and, using one of his keys as a screwdriver, put the lock back on the door. Of course it wouldn't hold, but it was something to do. And it was what guys would expect of a guy like Tommy Aubuchon. And he wanted them to go on thinking he was like that. . . .

Tommy could put two and two together and get a four when he had to.

Buzzy Sanders, whom he had met coming in to San Quentin almost as Tommy was going out, was up on a narcotics rap. He was a user. That's what Eddie meant when he said Buzzy "got careless". One of the guys who shouldn't use opium is the guy running it for a living, quite obviously.

"So it's dope," said Tommy, with a shudder that distorted his face as he adjusted his tie and put on his hat before the cracked little mirror. "So it's dope!"

It didn't sound like Bookie Byers, to be running opium. Lots of it was coming up from Mexican poppy-farms now that the war had cut off the China and Manchukuo supply, he had heard. But it didn't sound like Bookie Byers! Still, there was that matter of the ten thousand dollars, the gun, and those three holes in Bookie's kisser. You didn't get fixed up with those items booking illegal bets on Havana, Mexico City and Tijuana races—the only tracks running then.

With over a hundred bucks on him, Tommy felt rich as roast goose. And speaking of roast goose, he was hungry for some. There used to be a joint, a little kosher cafe on Hill Street, with the best roast goose in the world.

He went there. He was still forgetting that ten thousand dollars.

AFTERWARDS he came out picking his teeth and luxuriating in the feel of a full belly. Mist was hanging low, aching to rain all over Los Angeles, and few people were abroad. He stood there wondering what Eddie Eads would do when he got over the shock of finding Bookie dead and no dough on him, when a man stepped up and jammed a gun lightly into his back. He froze in his tracks and the toothpick dropped from his mouth.

"Into the green car there, kid," a voice said urgently, "and be quick about it."

"Why, hello, Kelley!" said Tommy. "Sure. Put up that gun. You make me nervous, jabbing that way."

"Shut up!"

A heavy green Cad coupe slid up beside them and the door flew open. Tommy felt Vick Kelley push him into the seat. Mose Medal was under the wheel. Vick got in, took the gun out of his pocket, and laid it on his lap.

"Hello, Mose," said Tommy, softly.

"Hello, Tommy," said Mose, cordially, starting the car. "We don't want to scare you. We're just going to find Bookie By-

ers—or else. He's got ten thousand dollars that belongs to us."

"You talk too much," said Vick Kelley.

In response, Mose giggled. Tommy saw then that he was full of heroin. When Tommy went to San Quentin, both Mose and Vick were punks. Now they were driving a big car, dressing well, carrying guns, talking about dough in ten-grand parcels.

"Boys," he said, "this is a bum steer. I wish I knew where Bookie was myself. I don't."

Mose laughed, and said: "We do! Only we want you to walk in ahead of us, see, when we go in the door. Bookie's all rodded up, for the first time in his life."

"Where," asked Tommy, "would Bookie get ten thousand dollars?"

They were heading for the Tropical Hotel. They crossed Hill, Broadway, Spring, Main on Fifth Street, turned south on Los Angeles Street to Sixth, where they turned east again. Drunks, wretched women, maimed beggars and seedy grifters filled the teeming sidewalks. The big coupe looked out of place.

"Bookie got the ten grand from Eddie Eads," said Mose. "Vick and me, we sold Eddie a job lot of Mexican opium—see? But he wouldn't trust us and we wouldn't trust him. Would you trust Eddie Eads?"

"Oh, I don't know!" said Tommy, playing it safe.

"You talk too much," Vick Kelley said, toying with the gun.

"Bookie was our go-between," said Mose, paying no attention. "We give him the package and he was supposed to bring us the dough that afternoon. We never got it. Maybe he double-crossed us—maybe Eddie did. We're going to take you along and see what Bookie has to say. Then maybe we'll have a little talk with Eddie."

"I can't see Bookie monkeying with opium," Tommy whispered.

"Him?" Mose laughed. "Not Bookie. The damn' fool's been welding in a shipyard ever since the war started. That's why we picked the big goof. He didn't even know what was in the package. He was just doing a favor for a friend."

Tommy thought: *Then who knocked him off? Fine friend!*

THEY got out before the ramshackle Tropical Hotel, left the car unlocked, and went inside. Bookie's body had not been found yet—that was plain. There were no cops about, no scent of alarm, no odor of law, nothing but a whiskery clerk dozing over a kid's comic book and a half-pint flask of cheap orange gin. He did not look up as they started up the stairs.

At Room 212 they hesitated. Tommy was the first to realize that Eddie Eads was in there. Vick Kelley realized it next—he was already suspicious; and Mose Medal, being jagged up this way, made Tommy nervous as a goosed horse.

Mose Medal never did realize there was someone else in that room until he flung back the door and snapped on the light, pushing Tommy Aubuchon in ahead of him. Eddie Eads got up from the bed, where he had been sitting at Bookie's dead feet. With one hand Eads brushed back his distinguished iron-gray hair. With the other he held a small gun. By then it was too late to retreat.

"Come in, boys," he said. "I've rather been expecting you."

Vick Kelley, in the rear, tried to back out. Tommy dropped just in time to dodge Eddie's careless bullets. There were two of them, and they smacked into Vick's heart and stopped it. He fell over Tommy, and the next thing Tommy knew, there was Mose Medal down on his hands and knees, screaming for mercy.

"My God, Eddie, you can't do this to me—my God, Eddie, you're not going to do this to a guy that's always shot square with you, are you?" Mose wailed, over and over and over.

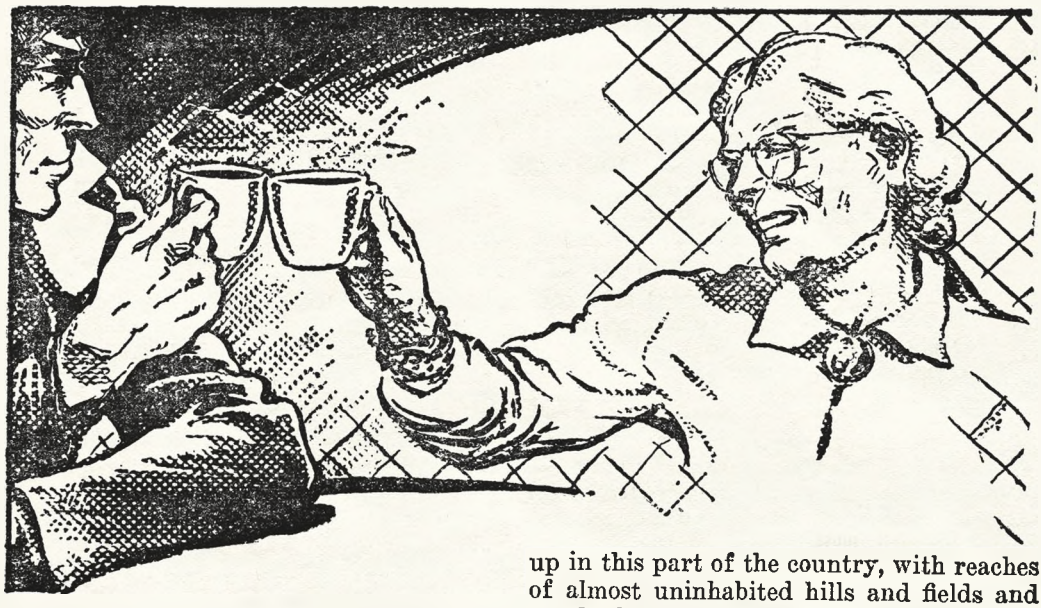
"Get up," said Eddie, through his teeth.

Mose got up. So did Tommy, but no one paid any attention to him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Pony Greeley back in the corner, and the moment Pony saw him his ugly, chopped-up face gorged with blood and he clawed at his pocket for his gun.

And then Tommy knew who had killed Bookie Byers. It certainly wasn't Eddie, and it wasn't Vick, and it wasn't Mose, because they were all looking for him

(*Continued on page* 91)

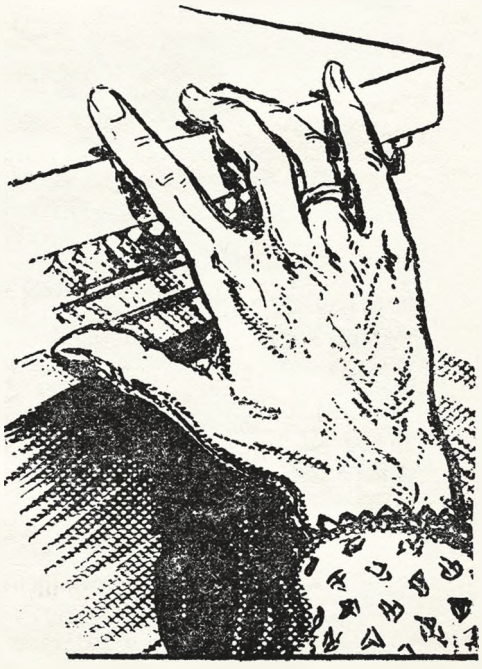
Man By The Road



THERE IS A MAN standing by the side of the road. You can see him from the car, far ahead through the wind-swept rain—a small, shapeless figure, standing quite still as though waiting there for someone. There is a moment of panic as you pass the little man, speeding the car dangerously until you know that it is out of sight of that motionless figure, the license-plate no longer visible. Now you slow down again, feeling the danger of the slippery wet road under you.

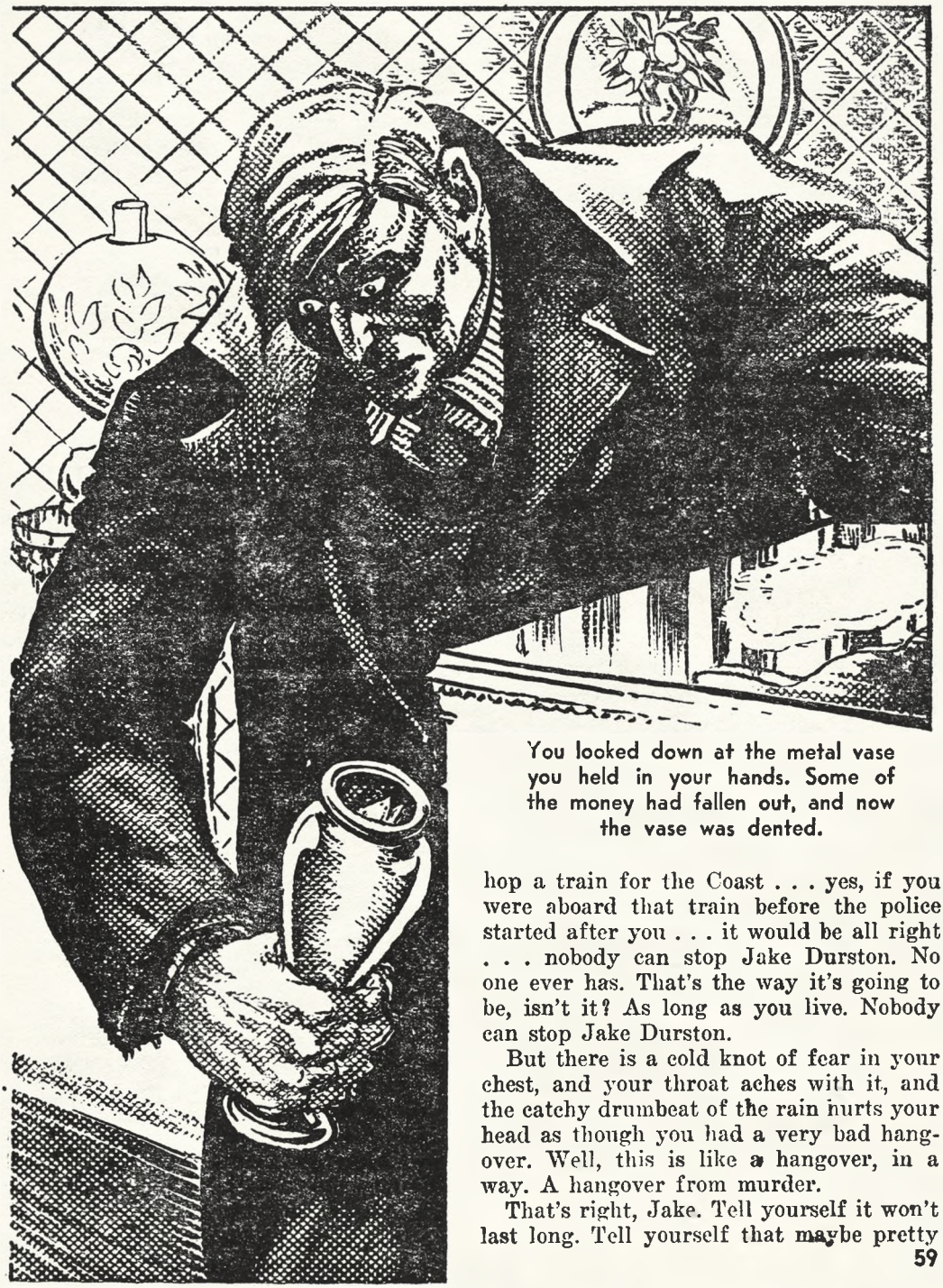
Strange, the things that become important when a man is afraid. Just seeing that darkly clothed, rain-drenched hitch-hiker—for that he must have been, although he did not flag this car—has made your nerves tighten and your body ache with the tension of mingled dread and guilt. The syncopated rhythm of the rain, beating against the windows and roof of the car, sounds loud and ominous, like a dooming native drum in the background of your thoughts.

If you can get to the next town fast enough . . . civilization seems to be broken up in this part of the country, with reaches of almost uninhabited hills and fields and woods filling up space between towns . . . but if you can get to the next one fast enough, and abandon the car . . . then



By RAY CUMMINGS

Who was the mocking little man there beside the long trail to escape? Jake Durston, fleeing from murder, wondered —and as he wondered, fear and terror suffused him. . . .



You looked down at the metal vase you held in your hands. Some of the money had fallen out, and now the vase was dented.

hop a train for the Coast . . . yes, if you were aboard that train before the police started after you . . . it would be all right . . . nobody can stop Jake Durston. No one ever has. That's the way it's going to be, isn't it? As long as you live. Nobody can stop Jake Durston.

But there is a cold knot of fear in your chest, and your throat aches with it, and the catchy drumbeat of the rain hurts your head as though you had a very bad hangover. Well, this is like a hangover, in a way. A hangover from murder.

That's right, Jake. Tell yourself it won't last long. Tell yourself that maybe pretty

soon you'll be able to forget the little farmhouse, and everything that happened there. But that isn't true, is it Jake? Will you forget the old-fashioned parlor, and the way that knitted rug looked with blood spilled all over it? And the kitchen, with hot coffee steaming, and a pot of pink geraniums in the window—will you forget the kitchen? Or will you turn cold at those memories until the day you die?

NOW your attention is caught by something else, and suddenly you sit bolt-upright behind the wheel, staring through the streaked rivulets of rain on the windshield. Your eyes dart ahead to a dark blob, far away and indistinct. Something by the side of the road. A little figure, a shapeless figure. A man, standing there. A man standing motionless, by the side of the road, as though waiting for someone.

Unbelievingly you stare, getting closer and closer, and now—you are sure. Incredibly, frighteningly, you are sure. *That is the same man you passed before. The one you saw, about a mile back. . . !*

But that's impossible, isn't it, Jake? No car has passed you on the road. You know that, because in the desolation of this countryside the sight of another car, or even of another human being, is exceptional. Yet—listen! even the persistent tattoo of the raindrops seem to be saying it—that is the same man, the same, the same, standing there, unmoving, his face hidden behind the curled, dripping brim of a dark hat—small and shapeless, the same, the same. . . .

This time you speed the car past him so quickly that it skids a little before you get it back in control. Then, glancing in the mirror, you can see him disappearing in the distance, but standing there still.

It almost numbs your brain for an instant, doesn't it, Jake? With puzzlement, with confusion, with disbelief. It gives you a vague feeling of terror, a feeling of brushing against the unknown, as though an icy hand had reached out and touched you in the darkness. But there must have been some mistake. Your imagination must have gone wild for a minute there. Of course, that was it, wasn't it? Convince yourself, Jake. Now, with the small figure far behind and out of sight, convince yourself that they were two different men, and that nothing unusual has happened. And if you still feel strangely frightened, if your mind still clings in puzzlement to the sharp memory of that waiting man by the side of the road—then think of something else.

Think of how you felt just a few hours ago, when you first saw the farmhouse. You were walking; you had been walking for hours, on and on, until your legs were like bent rubber under you, and your stomach was empty, and your pockets were empty, and you were beginning to know what desperation is. The first patter of rain slapped against your face, and through it you could see the little farmhouse, set back from the road on a rising hill. It was the only dwelling-place you had passed for miles; the rest was all rough and desolate country. What the oasis is to a man dying of thirst, what the saucer of milk is to a starving cat, that farmhouse seemed to you as you stood, chilled and damp, looking at it from the road.

You knew Donnegan was after you; Donnegan, whom you had cheated and double-crossed. And when your money for trainfare was gone, you had begun walking, farther and farther away. Because you knew if he ever caught up with you, it would be the end. It would be murder.

So what you wanted, what you needed more than anything, was a car, just to put a little more distance between you and a kill-crazy gunman. And you needed money. But, as all men will compromise when their physical need is great enough, you would have compromised then for a hot meal and a soft chair, and your feet off the ground for awhile; a warm room, and dry clothes, and maybe a cigarette. The farmhouse looked like heaven, come down to rest on a rising hill.

YOU turned off the road and began running toward it, stumbling because the ground was slippery, hurrying up the wooden front steps. You pounded on the door, your heart beating quickly; then modified the pounding to a knock as you heard footsteps inside. You brushed futile-

ly at your rumpled, dirty clothes, still knocking with one hand because you did not dare stop, wanting so much for the door to open. Then it did, and you saw her standing there: a tiny old woman, with smooth white cheeks and tidy grey hair; shiny rimless glasses perched on her nose, and a merry, inquiring smile.

"Well, young man, you needn't bang the house down!" Her voice was flutey and cheerful, like a sparrow in the early morning. "I suppose it's Virginia you're looking for, but I'm afraid you'll have to be content with me. She's gone to stay with friends for a few days."

You didn't know what to say, so you just shook your head. Finally you managed, "I'm . . . I guess I'm hungry."

Instantly the door was wide open and you were inside, you were hustled into the warm kitchen, you could smell the coffee steaming on the stove. The old woman was talking kindly and sympathetically, clucking over your dusty wet clothes, chuckling over her own little jokes as though you were an old friend.

"There now, stand close to the stove and get dry! That's it—but you mustn't scorch yourself, that wouldn't do, would it? You know, first off I thought you'd come to see my daughter. Lots of the lads come out from town to call; she's a very pretty girl. Gets her looks from her mother." She twinkled through the shiny glasses. "Maybe you wouldn't believe it, but once I was a belle. I had a little waist and a turned-up nose, and the brightest yellow hair you ever saw."

"I'd believe it." You were being nice, trying to be really nice for the first time in a long while. It made your feel good, it made you feel warm inside, because this time you weren't trying to promote anything. This time you were being nice because you wanted to, because she was—cute. Like a quaint, funny old valentine. "Sure, I'd believe it. You still look like a belle to me."

"Then we'll drink a toast to me in coffee, and pretend it's champagne." She rattled two big cups, filling them both to the brim with dark, strong coffee.

You clicked your cup against hers, and drank, "To the prettiest girl this side of Hollywood!" and she dropped a demure little curtsy, laughing, adjusting the rimless glasses in a small, confused gesture.

THEN, in the next instant, you felt a wave of weariness and dread returning to you, and with them came a new, sharp quickening of the sense. Your attention had been caught by the bright petals of a pink geranium. And beyond that, through the window, you could see a car standing in the yard, washed by the fresh rain.

The old woman followed your gaze. "It's Virginia's," she said proudly, nodding toward the car. "Sometimes she saves up her gas and takes me for a little drive. Not far enough to be unpatriotic, you understand—just a *little* drive. I guess when she comes back this time we'll go driving," she added happily, "because there's lots of gas in there now."

"Is there?" You turned toward her dumbly, and the warmth inside you was gone. "Is there?"

She nodded slowly, her smile fading and a puzzled little frown coming in its place. You must have looked strange then, because she looked at you strangely. Then she brightened, and bustled over to the stove. "Goodness, I've talked so much I haven't given you anything to eat!" She put a plate of hot food in front of you, jiggling it temptingly. "Now, you'll feel ever so much better when you've had a good meal, and——"

You were eating it, with her cheerful voice chirping an accompaniment, but on the windowsill you could see the geraniums, and beyond the geraniums you could see the car, the gleaming car that could carry you safely beyond Donnegan's reach; and you had stopped listening to the old woman. You were thinking about the car. You were wanting it, above everything else. You were planning how you could get it, groping around in your mind for some way to steal it and drive far away, unseen. You were hoping and planning so hard that there was just one word that could pull your attention back to the kitchen.

" . . . money," the woman was saying, nodding her neat grey head smilingly. "I

hope you won't mind my saying so, but I can tell by your clothes you might need some. Now don't you dare take offense, because I'm not *really* a belle, or it would be different. I'm just an old woman who might have been your favorite aunt, if I'd been lucky enough, and I'd like to give you a few dollars to start you on your way. You know, just a little for food until you get a job. You'll get one right away, wait and see, and then maybe you'll come back and see me once in awhile. I'd like that, you know, and I'd like you to meet Virginia. She's the way I used to be when I was young. A little waist, a turned-up nose, and the brightest yellow hair you've ever seen. I thought I'd like to give you . . . five dollars."

REMEMBER, Jake? It did something to you, the way she said that. You could tell the five dollars meant a whole lot to her, and she was trying hard not to show it. You could tell that five dollars was important around the little farmhouse. Maybe it would mean Virginia couldn't have a new hat that would look just right with her yellow hair. Or maybe the old woman would have to give up a warm sweater she'd counted on for chilly evenings. Or——

But you never liked to think about things like that, did you? It made you uncomfortable, because you weren't used to it. Sentiment is the bunk, you always get bitten for it, that's what you said to yourself, Jake. You were embarrassed, because for a moment or two something almost got you, as you sat there in the kitchen. For a moment or two, a stranger's kindness almost turned you inside out and started you off all over again. You might have been a different guy, Jake. You might have been okay.

"Yeah, I . . . I could use it. That's swell of you." And as you said it, you began wondering how much the old woman had. You looked past the flowerpot in the window, and the car was there, with all that gas in it. And suddenly the fear of Donnegan surged up in you again, and you didn't want to die, you didn't want to die, but you were afraid Donnegan would catch up with you and then that would be so long to Jake Durston. For keeps.

You stared down at your hands, clenched on the kitchen table, one on either side of the empty plate of food. They were trembling, two hard fists trembling. There was panic beating inside you, the fear of Donnegan. You didn't even realize the old woman had left the kitchen until you heard a slight rustling noise in the next room.

Very slowly you stood up, and unsteadily you walked toward the crisp sound. There was sweat on your face, but you wiped some of it away with the back of one of those hard fists. You saw the old woman standing there in the muted, old-fashioned parlor, standing on a soft-colored knitted rug, and in one hand she was holding a heavy metal vase. She was pulling bills out of it, peering at them through her shiny glasses, moving in the slow way of the old.

She looked up, smiling jauntily with her head on one side, as you stood in the doorway. "Virginia laughs at me," she said, waving the heavy vase, "for keeping it here all the time. There's quite a lot. You see, this is the money we're saving up to buy the farm. We don't really own it yet. Virginia's always telling me we should put it in the bank, the money, I mean, not the farm." She chuckled. "But I like to have it where I can get at it. For special occasions. Like this."

She fumbled with the bills, and you stood there watching her, and a hot fury rose up in you that was part of all your life, part of all the rotten breaks you'd ever gotten, and part of all you ever gave. You were ashamed for the first time, and it was a feeling that blinded you with resentment toward the woman who had done it; this naive, smiling old woman, like a quaint, funny old valentine. People had no right to be so trusting. They had no right to look at you like that, and make you feel ashamed. The anger rose higher and higher until it was like something tangible in your throat, choking you.

"Virginia's afraid one of the neighbors might steal the money, knowing where I keep it. Or the boy who sells us fresh eggs," she went on chipperly. "But I al-

ways say, everybody has a conscience. I never worry about things. Doesn't pay."

BUT all your life you had worried about things, and most of your life you had been afraid, but never as frightened as now. You could see Donnegan's face, a burning picture on your brain; his lean, cruel face, with the killer eyes. The old woman didn't have to worry, because she had everything and had been happy, and was happy now.

She had the car, and you needed it. She had the money, and you wanted it. There it was, in her thin white hands—the heavy metal vase, and inside it enough money, perhaps, for train fare to the coast. Escape was there in her hands, freedom from Donnegan, freedom from death. Escape . . . escape. . . .

With one hoarse, gasping sound you stumbled forward and twisted the vase from her fingers as though she were a child. She looked up at you in surprised bewilderment, smiling confusedly, and the anger coursed through you again, hot and blinding. You realized that it would be easy to steal the car and money, and there would be nothing she could do—but in an hour or less, the police would have the plate number, and then they would get you. You had to escape . . . and fear and fury had made you like a drunken man, thinking slowly, with your thoughts tumbling and disjointed. . . .

There was just one thing to do——

You raised the metal vase high over your head, and as it came down on that upturned face you could feel the impact jarring your arm, and you saw little shiny pieces of glass dancing down through the air. Her glasses . . . and then there was the strange, sobbing moan she gave as she crumpled down. And you saw the red blood gushing from her head, spreading over the softly colored knitted rug.

There she was, frail and tiny, her neat hair matted darkly, and her face smashed and horrible. Once she had been a belle, with a turned-up nose. . . .

You looked down at the metal vase you still held in your hands. Some of the money had fallen out of it, and now the vase was dented. You dropped it to the floor, covering your face as a sick revulsion flooded you. But with your eyes closed, all you could see was Donnegan's face.

After a few minutes, you opened your eyes. And very slowly, you picked up the bills from the floor, one by one. There was enough for train fare. You stuffed them into your pocket, and then, with an automatic instinct, you wiped the vase with your handkerchief, hating the touch of it. You kept saying to yourself: All I meant to do was knock her out. But she's dead. She's dead. You said it over and over, wiping the vase. Then you dropped it again to the floor, and put the handkerchief into your pocket with the money.

When you walked out through the kitchen, the smell of hot coffee seemed to follow you hauntingly. Even in the rain, even in the car, you remembered the toast you had drunk to the prettiest girl this side of Hollywood. You were remembering it the first time you saw that little man, standing by the side of the road, weren't you, Jake? And something about him frightened you even then. And the second time you saw him, a mile farther along, when no cars had passed and there was no way for him to be there—then you were really frightened, because that sort of thing just doesn't happen, does it?

BUT look now, Jake! Look ahead through the streaked windshield, look ahead through the driving rain! Do you see that wooden bridge, with the river rushing turbulently below? Do you see something, just this side of the bridge?

A man, Jake, a dark-clothed little man. A small, shapeless figure, standing motionless by the side of the road. As though waiting for someone. As though waiting for you.

Yes, now terror has you in its strong grip, tearing at your lungs and gnawing at your brain! Terror, as you drive closer to him, unable to stop . . . going faster, wanting to pass, to get across that bridge and away from that weird dark blob of a man who waits——

But this time you cannot pass, Jake! See, somehow he is beside you now in the

(*Continued on page* 88)

MARY TOOK A LITTLE LAM

Those black pearls started a black chain of death and deviltry—beginning with the murdered stiff under my bed!

I WAS TIRED. The prize-fight had lasted longer than anyone expected; and Joe Burkes, our fight reporter, was sick so I had to cover it for him as well as do my own column. I wanted to make the three-fifteen train, but I saw it was going to be well after four a. m., before I got through, so I called the Selma and asked them for a room.

I'm an old customer at the Selma. Every time I get hung up in town they bed me down, even if they have to put a cot in the manager's office; so I wasn't expecting any trouble.

The first thing that happened was a girl answering the phone instead of Pete,

By W. T. BALLARD

There was a knife driven into him, so that only the hilt showed.

the regular night clerk, who was off.

I told her who I was and she promised to do the best for me that she could. The best turned out to be a double room in which the beds had not even been made up. The bellboy got hold of a maid and she stripped the sheets off one of the beds and fixed it while I watched. The room was pretty dirty. It was obvious that someone had had a card game up there and not so long before. The room still had a lot of stale cigarette smoke floating around.

But I was too tired to care about that or anything else. I swept out the maid, peeled off my clothes, tossing them onto a nearby chair, and hit the sheets. I think I was fast asleep before my head stopped bouncing on the pillow.

I didn't know how long I'd slept. I'm one of those guys who wake up all at once, blooey, and I've got both eyes wide. None of this half-eye and muttering-in-your-beard stuff for me.

Anyhow I came awake, sitting up in bed. The lights were on and two guys were standing there looking at me as it I was one of the specimens that the troops brought back with them from the south seas.

THESE knuckleheads were well-enough dressed but they had a tough look about them, as if they made their money in a way that isn't exactly on the north side of the law, and the foremost was lugging a bottle of Four Roses and looking as if he had a good part of it under his belt.

"What the devil . . . who are you?" he asked.

"I was about to ask you the same question," I told him, sourly. "But if it's any of your business, I'm Willie Haynes, the sports editor of the *Constitution*."

He looked at me searchingly. The second guy said, "It *is* Haynes." He sounded kind of surprised. "What goes forward?"

The man with the bottle waved it at me. "I don't care if he's Grant Rice. What's he doing in my bed?"

I was getting kind of fed-up. I'd gotten a glance at my wrist and seen that it was barely seven o'clock, which means that I'd been in the sheets exactly three hours. With my disposition, it takes a lot more sleep than that to make me even seem related to the human race. I reached over, got a grip on the phone and called the desk.

To the clerk who answered I told the story and asked him what went forward. There was some scrambling around. It seemed that the gentleman who had the room had supposedly checked out at midnight. I passed the phone over to the lug with the whiskey bottle and heard him arguing with the clerk, but I wasn't much interested. I turned my back, shut my eyes and tried to sleep. I couldn't; his voice was too loud. Finally he hung up, swearing to himself, and went over to the closet. I opened one eye to see what he was up to, and saw him pull out a coat and a leather grip that I hadn't known were there. Then they waved the bottle at me by way of goodbye and vamoosed, slamming the door behind them.

I came to at eleven a.m. because the phone was ringing. It was the office, and the man at the other end of the wire was excited. Mart Black, the fight manager, had disappeared leaving a suicide note behind him at his apartment.

So I grumbled. Fight managers caused me enough trouble when they were alive. Dead, they were worse, but I rolled out of bed and started to kick my way into my clothes. I got my pants and shirt on, sat down and drew on my socks, then fumbled for my shoes. One shoe I couldn't find, and leaning over, I saw it under the center of the bed.

I guessed that my early-morning visitors must have kicked it there accidentally, and got down on all fours to reach it. And as I turned, preparing to get up, I saw that there was a man under the other bed, lying on his side, staring at me.

For an instant I thought one of the drunks must have returned and decided to go to bed on the floor. This room was certainly popular.

Then something about the face made me stiffen. It was familiar, too familiar. Marty Black might have been missing, but I knew where he was now!

"Come out of it," I said sharply. "I don't know what kind of a hot-foot you think you're pulling this time but it's too early in the morning for games!"

He didn't move. He just lay there, staring at me. I straightened and walking over, shoved the bed away, then I saw why he hadn't moved. There was a knife driven into his side, driven in so that only the hilt showed.

CHAPTER II

Payoff For Pearls

INSPECTOR ROFF OF THE homicide bureau said, "If Marty killed himself, I'm a fan dancer. Twenty-five years I've been on the force and I never heard of a man crawling under a bed and then sticking a knife in his own side. It don't make sense."

I admitted that it didn't. I also pointed out that I hadn't said that Marty killed himself, that I hadn't found the suicide note, and that in the final windup, I wasn't a police reporter and while I'd liked Marty for the amiable chiseler he was, I hadn't liked him well enough to go on the warpath, hunting his murderers. As far as I was concerned, he was dead and that was that.

Roff squinted at me. "What did those

two muggs that came in here this morning look like?"

"Like a couple of drunks."

He made a noise, deep in his throat. "Look, Willie, you've been writing fights so long that you think you have to gag every line. Murder is no gag. It's a damn' serious business."

"You should teach *me*," I told him. "I was covering a police beat for years before I ever hit the sports page. So someone rammed a shiv into Marty. In his racket he knew all kinds of people and most of them were bad. Offhand I can think of fifty people who will be glad he's dead, and some of them had reason. . . . Still, he wasn't a bad guy, as fight managers go."

"Hire a hall," Roff advised. "You'd better come down and take a look at pictures. Maybe you can pick out the two drunks. You say that one of them recognized you?"

I shrugged. "That doesn't mean anything. Half the chiselers in this town know me by sight when I wouldn't recognize them from Joe Louis." But I went with him anyhow. Roff was a very persuasive guy, even for a cop.

I must have looked at five hundred pictures before I said: "That's the guy who was handling the bottle."

"That's Lou Campana," Roff told me. "Know this one?" He fished out a second picture and I nodded.

"Yeah, that's the other guy. What gives?".

"You never see one without the other," Roff said. "In Detroit they call them the powder-smoke kids because a lot of their customers are supposed to have vanished in powder smoke."

"What are they, hot-shots?"

"In a way. They operate a book most of the time; but with racing closed, I don't know what they're up to."

I said, thoughtfully, "Marty used to operate around Detroit. He ran a fight club there in the early thirties and he might . . ."

"The room," Roff said, "was held by a man named Polk who registered from Los Angeles. There was a card game up there last night. I talked to the bellboy that handled the drinks. He said there were seven men, playing stud. It broke up at eleven-thirty, and Polk checked out at twelve. He had to catch a train. I checked that and about the only train he could get out at that hour was a Pennsy. We've wired ahead, but he isn't on the train although there was a reservation in his name which was picked up at noon yesterday."

"Nice little mystery," I told him. "Go ahead and solve it, my boy, and the lads will put your name on the front page. Me, I've got to get back to the office." I turned and walked out, trying to forget the whole thing.

THE woman had platinum hair which pretty well marked her era. I hadn't seen her for months, but I grinned as she walked into my office.

"Hi, Mary. What are you doing up at this hour of the day?"

She gave me a twisting grin. She wasn't as young as she once had been, but then, neither was I.

"You're getting fat," she said. "Why is it that all newspaper people look so well fed? In the movies they always make them look half-starved."

"That's to give them appeal," I told her, "like Sinatra. It's got to the place in this country that if you're healthy enough to stand on two legs without a mike to prop you up, you're a dud."

She laughed obediently, but I could tell that she wasn't amused. There was something on her mind. I'd known Mary Carstairs since her chorus days. She'd been good then and she was good later, as the lead in some of the big reviews. She was no actress but she could dance and sell a song with the best of them.

From there she'd gone to her own place, the Club Carstairs, one of the more intimate night spots, which meant that you fell over people in an effort to leave your money in that sucker trap. For a while she'd tried radio, but she needed a live audience to give her show meaning and she'd dropped out after thirteen weeks.

That was Mary Carstairs. They called her The Carstairs around Fiftieth and Broadway. Some of the fight crowd made the spot their playground and some of

the big-time gamblers used her tables as a kind of unofficial office.

"What's on your mind, Mary, my sweet?"

She said, "It's Marty. You were in the room where he was killed, weren't you? You found the body?"

I stared at her, for I was remembering something that most of Broadway had forgotten. Mary had been Marty Black's wife once. It had been a long time ago as things go around town. They were married the night of the second Dempsey-Tunney fight. I sat there trying to remember when they had been divorced, and couldn't. There was no hard feelings between them. I'd seen Marty in the Club Carstairs more than once and I'd seen him with other women, but not often.

"What gives?" I said.

She wet her lips nervously with the tip of her tongue. "He was my husband, you know. We never were divorced although we haven't lived together in years. The suicide note, the one that was left in his apartment, was addressed to me."

I whistled tonelessly. "So I hadn't known that. I guess I'm getting old, Mary."

"We all are," she said. "Now look, Willie, I'm not pretending any heartrending grief at Marty's death. He was a pal, nothing more, and it's been that way for a lot of years. But," she paused, hesitating as if in search of words. "Did he have anything on him this morning?"

I stared at her. "I didn't go through his pockets, if that's what you mean, but I didn't hear the cops mention anything out of the ordinary."

She was watching me as she said, "Would you consider a collection of black pearls worth a quarter of a million out of the ordinary?"

I whistled softly. "Was he carrying around something like that? Whose were they?"

"Mine."

WE stared at each other in heavy silence for several minutes. It was Mary who said, "I've told you that much. I might as well tell you the rest. I've been collecting those pearls for twenty-five years. When I was just a kid, starting out, a man I knew gave me two black pearls made into ear drops. I liked them. Marty gave me a pin to match and I got the idea of putting my spare dough into pearls. Lots of show people put their money into gems. We don't know much about banks and a lot of us have been burned in the market. Diamonds are usually as good as cash, but I like to be different, so I soaked mine into pearls."

I nodded, knowing she was telling the truth. "So?"

She wet her lips. "So Marty came to me yesterday afternoon. He said that he had to have dough, a lot of dough in a hurry. He couldn't raise enough and he wanted my pearls."

"It must have been for something important," I cut in, to make you let go of them."

She nodded. "You said it. It was plenty important."

"But the pearls—what was he going to do with them? They're valuable all right, but they aren't like diamonds. You can't raise a lot of money on them at the nearest hock-shop, at least not that kind of money."

"That's right. I asked Marty the same thing. He told me not to worry, that he'd already spoken to Benny Kosk and that Benny would advance a hundred and fifty thousand against them and give us six months to try to pay it back."

I whistled. Benny Kosk had started out as a bookmaker a long time ago. He wasn't now. Along the street they called him a gambler's banker. He'd loan money and plenty of it on short notice, if he liked the security. He was a little man with the protruding soft eyes of a beagle, but there wasn't anything soft about the rest of him. His heart, they said, was made of flint. If he was ready to advance a hundred and fifty grand, the pearls must have been worth plenty.

"Your best bet is to go to Benny," I told her, "and see if he's got the pearls. The next best is the police, or maybe that's better than going to Benny. If he already has the pearls and wants to keep them, he might stall you."

She shook her head. "That's what I can't

do, go to the police. I . . . they'd want to know what the money was for, and I can't tell them. I can't tell you, either."

I shrugged. "Okay, I'm sorry about all this, and sorry that I can't help you, but I didn't see any pearls and I'm sure the cops didn't find any."

CHAPTER III

He Kills For Fun

ALL THE REST OF the day I kept thinking about those pearls. I couldn't get them out of my head. I kept telling myself that it wasn't any of my business, but I was still thinking about it as I left the office.

There was a girl standing beside the doorway, a good-looking girl with blue eyes and light gold hair that sneaked out from under a tricky hat and puffed a little in the breeze coming up from East River.

"Wait a minute, Willie."

I turned around, tried to recall having seen her before and couldn't. "You've got me, sis," I said.

She pouted a little. "And you swore by everything that you'd never, never forget me. Is that right?"

I said that it wasn't. I also said that I was going on forty, getting a little tubby and that my days of going around telling blondes that I'd never forget them were about over. "You've got the wrong guy, sweetheart. I don't know what the game is, but I don't want cards."

She lifted the purse she was carrying and gave me a look at the small gun she held in her gloved hand. "All right, fat boy, if that's the way you want it, mama will have to play tough. There's a cab out at the curb. Go on out and get in."

I stared at her, at the gun. I'd been around for plenty years and seen a lot of funny things, but this was the first time that a blonde had stuck me up with a gun directly in front of my own office.

I'm not certain she would have fired. I'm still not certain, but there was a look of desperation about her eyes that made me think there was a good chance. Besides, she had my curiosity all worked up. I went over and climbed into the cab with her following me.

Apparently the jockey already had his orders, for we started without a word being said. When we'd gone a couple of blocks I asked her:

"What's the play now, sweetheart? You've got me, so what do you want with me?"

"I don't want you," she told me. "I wouldn't have you as a gift, but I do want those black pearls you took from Marty Black's pocket, and I want them now."

I stared at her. First Mary and now this blonde. I didn't know where she fitted into the picture, but I was sure of one thing. I didn't have the pearls and I'd never had them unless I'd taken them in my sleep.

"Look," I said. "You aren't the first person to put the bite on me for those pearls today."

She got worried. "You mean someone else knows about it? Who, Lou Campana?"

I'D forgotten about the drunk and his companion and suddenly I wondered if they were as drunk as they seemed. Maybe they'd known the dead man was under that bed, maybe they'd known about the pearls and had come back after them. Maybe I'd waked up just as they were leaving and they'd put on the drunk act for my benefit.

I tried to remember exactly where they'd been standing when I got my eyes open and first saw them. I couldn't remember.

"It wasn't Campana," I told her. "It was the dame who owns the pearls."

She looked startled at that. "And you gave them to her?"

"I didn't give anyone anything," I said, "because I never saw them. Doesn't it occur to any of you smart people that whoever killed Marty Black got them? Wasn't that the reason he was killed?"

She shook her head, then stopped herself. "I . . . I don't know. I'm all mixed up."

"You'll be worse than mixed up," I said sternly, "if you don't stop going around pointing that gun at people. Someone will take you seriously and that will be bad."

I reached over suddenly and grabbed both her wrists. I said:

"Come on, give it to papa."

She struggled silently for a minute but I was too strong. The gun was in the wide sleeve of her coat. The driver heard the commotion, glanced up into the mirror and demanded harshly:

"Hey, what goes on?"

"You mind the driving," I tolh him. "I'll handle this." Then to the girl in a lower tone. "Okay, sis, give out!"

"I haven't a thing to say."

"Oh, yes you have. This is New York, baby, and the Little Flower doesn't like small girls that run around acting tough. Besides, they have a law about guns here. Shall I tell the driver to take us down so that you can tell Inspector Roff all about it, or will you talk to me?"

"Who's Roff?"

"A nasty man who runs the homicide squad. He'd as soon send you over to Welfare Island or dump you up-river as look at you. I don't think you'd like him."

"I'm not afraid." But she was afraid of something, for the shoulders were sagging and most of the fight had gone out of her.

"Tell papa," I said. "What's your name?"

"Joan Joyce."

"Sister, you're good at making them up."

"Well, it's the one I sing under. My real name is Myrtle. I hate it."

"I don't blame you. I hate Willie too, but I can't change it. I've tried, but everyone still calls me Willie. Maybe it's because I'm not a singer."

She didn't smile.

"Okay, Joan, cut loose. What's the rest of the story? How do you know about the pearls?"

"Because they were for us."

"Us? Who's us?"

"Well, they were for Polk. He . . . he kind of got into trouble . . . a little trouble . . . and the pearls—anyhow, it would take money to get him out, so he came to see Marty and . . ."

"Look," I said. "Maybe these words make sense to your ordered mind, but I'm just a child. I can't figure which is the beginning and which the end. Who's Polk?"

"The man I'm engaged to."

"Lucky Polk. I hope he beats you. He gets into trouble, needs money to square it, and comes to Marty Black. Why should Marty cough up the dough? I've known Marty some years and I never knew him to be free and easy with a dollar, even when it wasn't his own."

"He's . . . he's Polk's father."

I whistled at that one. I was beginning to see things, at least I began to understand why Mary would let loose of her black pearls. "And Mary Carstairs is his mother."

"I . . . I guess so. I never heard of her until we came to New York."

"And where do you come from, my little songbird?"

"Detroit."

I thought to myself, *Everything seems to come from Detroit.* Then I shot at her. "Who's Polk? What's he do, I mean?"

"He's manager—" she stopped. "No, I've told you too much already." The cab was stopped for a traffic light and before I realized what she was up to, she had the door on her side open and was out, threading her way toward the curb.

I started after her and the cab started at the same time. Before I got the driver stopped, the girl had vanished. I grunted and settled back on the seat, wondering what to do next. I didn't have to wonder long. I had the driver drop me at Forty-eighth and Broadway and started down toward a little joint where you can get real enchilidas. I hadn't traveled more than half the distance until a guy in a tight-fitting blue overcoat tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around, making him by his clothes. The overcoat was high-waisted and much too form-fitting. The snap-brim grey hat had a little green feather in the band.

"Benny wants to see you," he said.

I looked at him. "If Benny wants to see me, tell him to come down to the office."

"No," the guy told me. "He wants to see you now."

I shrugged. I didn't need to ask which

Benny, and I didn't need to guess what he wanted to see me about. I turned around and followed the guy, expecting him to head for Lindy's. He didn't. He headed for the Club Carstairs.

Benny Kosk was at one of the rear tables. Behind him the wall was decorated with drawings of famous people by famous cartoonists. The wall on the side was plastered with framed pictures of actors. I asked Mary once why she didn't stick up the pictures of newspaper men and she said that the place smelled bad enough as was.

"Sit down," Benny told me without moving his thin lips.

I sat down, smiling at him. Inside I was boiling. I don't like being pushed around by cheap punks, even if they could afford to lend a hundred and fifty G'ees on some black pearls.

"Don't tell me," I said. "You think that I've got more pearls than a barrel of oysters and you want them."

His prominent eyes looked me over carefully. They stuck out so far that you could see them in profile beyond the bridge of the nose. The rest of him was very small. The hands were short, and dainty as a woman's. He looked as if you could knock him over with a strong breath.

"How'd you guess?"

"I never guess," I told him. "In my business you have to be right or you get a million letters from readers."

He made an unpleasant noise with his thin lips, the kind of noise that the Bronx boys have made famous. "Okay, where are they?"

"The pearls?"

"I'm not talking about mackerel."

I spread my hands. "Look, Benny, you've known me for a lot of years and I've always played it straight across the board. That's the way I'm giving it to you this time. I never saw those pearls. All I did in that hotel room was to try to get some sleep and I got damned little of that. Ask Mary. She came to see me about them this morning."

"She isn't here."

I stared at him. "Meaning just what?"

He shrugged. "She took it on the lam. The cops are hunting for her now. They've got wind of the pearls. They've got it through their heads that Marty got the pearls away from her and she knifed him."

"Are they crazy? A woman wouldn't."

"Mary would," he said. "Did you ever see her when she was mad?"

I had, and I knew he was right. She had a temper like a Brooklyn truck driver and a vocabulary to match. She'd taken care of herself for too many years to ask favors of anyone, and she never did.

"But that's crazy," I said. "It doesn't make sense. Why should she give him the pearls and then stick a knife in him to get them back? Besides, she was around trying to collect them from me."

"Smart," he said. "If she'd really taken them, that would be the best thing she could do. You'd be a witness that she didn't have them."

I LEANED forward across the table so that my words would carry above the noisy beat of the place. "And just what's your little interest in them? You didn't loan the money . . ."

His eyes glistened a little like two brown, slightly damp chocolate drops. "You're wrong there. I advanced twenty-five G's yesterday afternoon to Marty Black. He was going to pick up the rest of the dough at midnight and leave the pearls. He never showed, so I sent Tony to look for him." He jerked his head slightly toward the next table.

I turned and Tony Morro gave me a white-toothed smile. Tony had been a fighter, and had done time for forgery. Then Benny had picked him up. Up and down the stem they called him the Collector, because that was what Benny used him for. He had a broken nose, a flat face that was darkly handsome, even with the markings that his early fights had left.

"Howyuh!"

"I said, "Howyuh," in return, without much enthusiasm. Personally I didn't care much for either of them. Tony sat there by himself, watching that nothing happened to Benny. It was a nightly ritual. They never sat at the same table.

"And Tony didn't find him?"

Benny Kosk said, "Would I be hunting those pearls if he had?"

"Look," I told him. "People insist on getting me mixed up in this thing. I don't want to be mixed up. I don't want any part of it. How much do you know about this business?"

Benny's eyes seemed to protrude a little further. "I know all about it," he said. "You don't think I'd have been ready to slip Marty Black all that dough unless I knew the business."

"Okay, give it to me."

He was silent, considering, turning a fat cigar over and over in his slim hands as if he expected to find a carton of cigarettes hidden inside. Finally he said, "I'm a kind of banker, see. I loan money and I get paid back. I stopped gambling a long time ago, and a banker should have principles. One of them is that you don't spill the client's business."

I nodded. "Fair enough, forget it."

"No," he said slowly. "You're on the inside of this. Maybe you dipped up the pearls, maybe you didn't, but you got a right to know what goes on. If I'd been treated right, I wouldn't be talking, see, but I wasn't treated right. I'm out twenty-five G's and someone pays that back, or I get the pearls."

I DIDN'T say anything and he went on. "This Polk Black, he's Marty's son—Marty's and Mary's. They do right by the kid, send him to expensive schools and such and he comes out educated."

"So what?"

"So he gets a job at a radio station and finally he talks some of the boys around Detroit into backing him in buying a station with him as manager."

I nodded and he continued. "Well, this kid is hot-headed and he has trouble with one guy after another. Two months ago he's in Barney Alcoutt's Tavern with an actor named Gibbs, Lou Campana and a couple of other boys. This Gibbs gets tough and the kid hits him over the head with a bottle, hard. Gibbs goes down and that's the story. He don't get up."

I stared. "Killed him, huh?"

Benny nodded. "Killed him dead. The kid is pretty drunk when it happens, but it kind of sobered him and he's scared green. He's been up on a couple of other counts and he's done time for them. He'll be a three-time loser and the way the law reads, it's life, even if he didn't mean to kill the punk."

"So?"

"He appeals to Lou Campana, who thinks he's a big-shot because he's got this radio station. Lou don't mind moving a body if there's dough in it, or forgetting that he saw the bottle swung, so he gets his side-kick and they take this Gibbs for a quiet ride in the country and leave him under a couple of feet of dirt. Then Lou comes around for the payoff and the boy admits he hasn't any dough."

"And?"

"Lou doesn't like that, and he's a funny guy. People he don't like don't stay healthy long. He wants the dough the kid promised him."

"A hundred and fifty grand?"

"That's right. So the kid busts for New York to see if he can promote it out of his dad. Lou, not being a chump, tags along, bringing his partner with him. Marty hasn't got that kind of money, so he puts the bite on Mary. She digs up the pearls and I agree to loan the dough. I give him twenty-five G's yesterday afternoon."

"Why?"

"To keep Lou quiet. Mary has the pearls out at some jerk bank in Connecticut and can't get in with them before evening. Lou's getting restless, so I shell out the twenty-five thousand fish to Marty and he takes it over to the hotel where the kid and the others are stopping. In the evening, the pearls don't show. I see Mary about ten and ask her. She says she turned them over to Marty at seven and he's out looking for me. So I send Tony looking for Marty."

"And what made you think I had the pearls? Surely the guy who killed Marty would have lifted them."

He looked squarely at me. "The kid killed Marty," he said. "The kid or Mary. Anyhow, he was so scared after he'd used the knife that he didn't stay to go through the old man's pockets."

"Can you prove that?"

He shrugged. "I'm not going to try. That's cop business. All I want is my twenty-five G's."

I said, thoughtfully, "All right, just for argument, let's say that the boy knifed Marty. How do you know he didn't grab the pearls?"

BENNY leaned forward and stabbed the table cloth for emphasis. "If he'd gotten them, he'd have turned them over to Lou Campana or come running to me for dough. He's in a spot. Lou and his partner are holding him over at a West Side apartment; the kid knows he'll get his throat sliced if he doesn't produce."

"You've talked to Campana?"

He nodded. "They come to see me this morning. I got the whole story from them. Here's what happened at the hotel if Lou's telling it straight—and there ain't no reason to think he isn't. They sat around the hotel last night, waiting for Marty to show up with the dough. Some of Lou's local friends came in and they started a poker game. Around eleven Marty showed up."

"So?"

"He had the pearls, but he hadn't located me. You know, I don't have an office or nothing. Well, Marty was sore as the devil. It seems the kid had promised that if they bailed him out of this jam, he'd lay off gambling and be a good boy and here he was, shoving the pasteboards around in a game he couldn't afford."

"Then?"

"The old man lit into him plenty and they got to calling each other names. Finally Campana and the boys go out for a drink. When the joint closes, they come over here."

"Why here?"

"Because Marty has shown them the pearls, but he's so mad by that time that he says he don't know whether he'll bail the kid out or not. He says they've got to talk to Mary. Anyhow, they come over here and wait around. Mart doesn't show up, and finally they go back to the hotel and find you in bed."

"And they're certain that Marty had the pearls at the hotel?" My voice showed my disbelief.

Benny nodded. "He showed them."

I shook my head. "Wait a minute. This doesn't make sense, Benny. He told them that he didn't know whether he'd pay off or not, yet he had the pearls and a couple of tough monkeys like Campana and his partner simply walked out? Nuts."

Marty had a gun," Benny said. "From what the boys said, he threatened to use it."

I whistled tonelessly, thinking it over. "I still don't believe it. If you ask me, Campana has the pearls and is merely holding the kid, trying to make Mary cough up more dough."

"I thought of that," Benny admitted, "but if Lou Campana had killed Marty and lifted those pearls, do you think he'd have ever gone back to that hotel room?"

"Well," I considered slowly. "His coat was in the closet."

"Yeah, but he'd never left his coat," Benny told me. "Lou's an old hand at that kind of game. He wouldn't go off his nut and race out leaving his coat, and he wouldn't have knifed a guy in a hotel room that could be traced to him. That's the work of an amateur."

I had to admit he was right and nodded. "Besides, that suicide note in Marty's apartment. I don't suppose Lou even knew where Marty lived. For my dough, it was Mary or the kid and I'll give odds on the kid. And the pearls, if he hasn't got them."

"You have," Benny told me. "You newspaper guys don't make much dough, I know. You're always broke. So, here's a stiff with some pearls. Who's to know the difference if you pocket them?"

I grinned at him. "You make funny jokes," I said, sourly. "Prove I got them."

"I'm going to," he said. "You're going to get plenty sick of Tony in the next few days. Everytime you wash your face you'll look in the mirror and see Tony standing behind you. Think it over, pal. Be nice. Let me have them now. I'll slip you ten grand and give Campana the difference between one hundred and fifty G's and the twenty-five G's I've already put out."

"Who got that?" I asked.

"Lou Campana. Marty gave it to him yesterday."

"Get it back from Lou," I advised.

He laughed nastily. "I can take care of myself, but I don't want any trouble with a mugg like Lou Campana. He's screwy. He kills people for fun."

CHAPTER IV

Gun In My Hand

THE TEN O'CLOCK train wasn't crowded, but even if it had been I wouldn't have had any trouble seeing Tony. He made no effort at concealment. He trailed me to the station and down the steps. When we got aboard he started to sit down in a seat across the aisle, but I motioned to the spot beside me.

"Might as well sit here. You can look at part of my paper."

He gave me a grin which showed his white teeth. "I can't read," he said, and stayed where he was.

The town I live in is small and we walked up through the block-long business district with Tony keeping a hundred yards behind. There was a breeze from the Sound and it was cold. I made up my mind then that Tony could stay outside. I hoped he froze to death.

This thing was beginning to get on my nerves. Everyone was so certain that I had the pearls I was beginning to think that I must have taken them in my sleep.

There was a light on in the front room of my house and I paused, staring at it. I live alone. A woman comes in twice a week to clean and she could have forgotten the light, but I didn't think so. I stepped up onto the terrace and looked through the crack of the partly open venetian blind.

Mary Carstairs was sitting quietly on my big couch, staring into a small fire on the hearth.

I swore softly under my breath, went around to the front door and let myself in. She heard me in the hall and called: "That you, Willie?"

I said that it was, ditched my coat and joined her.

She had risen, making a picture as she stood there, the fire glinting on her hair. She wore a plain, dark dress of some serge-like material and I caught myself thinking that she was still the handsomest woman that I'd ever seen.

"I'm sorry to break in like this," she said, her voice low and throaty, "but I had to get away where they couldn't ask me any more questions, and I wanted to talk to you again."

I nodded, went over and pulled the blinds shut. I didn't tell her that Tony was outside. There was no use worrying her more than need be.

"That's okay," I said. "Drink?"

She shook her head. "Willie, I . . . I hate to ask, but I have to be sure. You . . . you ddin't get those pearls, did you?"

I started to make a crack about me and a pearl fisherman looking alike, and then I didn't, for I could tell by the look on her face that this wasn't the time to try to be smart.

"I didn't, Mary, so help me."

She sighed. "I was afraid you didn't. If it were anyone else, I might not believe him, but I never heard of you lying, Willie."

I said, "Thanks," and meant it. Coming from her, it was as nice a compliment as I'd ever had, and I didn't like what I was going to do, but for some reason that I didn't try to explain, even to myself, I suddenly wanted to help this woman, and I felt that the best way I could help was to bring things out into the open.

TALK, I've found, always helps everyone. It relieves inner pressure. The things we hold in our own minds would be better for an airing once in awhile. The trouble is that few people have friends close enough to whom they feel free to unburden their minds.

I said, "What are you afraid of, Mary? That the kid killed Marty?"

The question slugged her harder than if I'd socked her with my fist.

"Willie!" she said.

I said, and my voice was soft, "I'd talked to Benny Kosk. He thought maybe I had the pearls and he spilled the whole story."

She started to speak, then didn't. I said, "Let's face things. It's easier if two people

These two knuckleheads had a tough look about them, as if they made their money not quite on the north side of the law. One was carrying a bottle of whiskey.

thrash things over. Lou Campana wants more dough, is that it?"

She nodded. "And I can't raise any more, Willie. The club hasn't been doing so good the last few months. We were a late spot, you know. Most of our customers don't get up by twelve, and, well, I guess I'm getting old or something. The kids want a livelier show. Oh, the restaurant part has been flooded with business, but we haven't enough room to make much on food."

I said, "This is going to sound tough, Mary, but I don't mean it that way. You're fighting a losing battle, and you aren't doing the kid any good. Call Roff and tell him the whole story."

"No, Willie, please, don't do that. The boy isn't bad. It . . . it's just the way he was raised and all, but I couldn't do much else. Marty and I were split up. I couldn't have the kid with me, trouping around all over the country, and Marty wasn't any better. I failed him, Willie, and I've got to try to make it up."

I shook my head. "You can't, Mary. Believe me, I'm no moralist, going into a spiel. It doesn't matter who killed Marty, the boy is still behind the eight-ball. Do you think a punk like Lou Campana will ever stop bleeding him, or you either?"

She sank down on the couch and buried her face in her hands, but she didn't cry. She wasn't the crying type, she just wanted a moment alone to pull herself together.

"You don't know what you're saying, Willie." Her voice was muffled by her hands. "You never had a son."

"That's right," I admitted soberly. "I never had a son." There was a certain amount of bitterness in my voice and she looked up at me, quickly.

"How come you never married, Willie, a nice guy like you? Some girl stand you up, sour you on women?"

I shook my head. "Nothing like that. When I was a kid, I had to work pretty hard to get any place. After I hit New York, I figured that the more people I knew, the more spots I was seen in, the quicker I'd get ahead. It worked. I guess I was so busy learning my business, keeping up my contacts, that I kind of forgot about girls until it's too late."

"Why too late?"

I grinned at her. "Do I look like Romeo? What girl would go for a broken-down gin bum?"

"A lot of them would," she said. "You never give them a chance, Willie, and yet you do want a home. Look at this place."

"It's a hideout," I told her. "For years I lived in a hotel in the forties and the boys made my room a kind of unofficial club. Now, I live out here and there isn't one in a hundred that will spend forty minutes on the train."

SHE smiled faintly, but I realized that her mind wasn't on my words. "What am I going to do?"

I shrugged. "If you won't do what I suggested, if you won't go to Roff, then the best I can think of is for you to go to Lou Campana, tell him that you can't raise the kind of money he's asking and make the best deal you can. After all, Lou's in a kind of hot spot himself. His boys moved that body in Detroit, so if he gets too gay, we can call that little item to his attention."

"We?"

I nodded. "You didn't think I was going to let you go over there alone, did you?"

She said, "But this isn't your business, Willie. There's no use your buying part of a screwy deal like this."

I shrugged. "I didn't want any part of it," I admitted. "All I was trying to do at that hotel was to get a little sleep, and I got shoveled into something that I don't like, but I'm not going to let you go over there by yourself."

"I've butted around alone for a lot of years." Her voice was soft.

I shrugged. "That's okay because I didn't know anything about it and I didn't have you on my conscience. But now I know where you're headed and what you're up against. Do you think I'd get any sleep if I stayed here and let you go alone?"

She reached over and clasped both her hands around mine. "You're a good guy, Willie. I wish I'd known you sooner." She turned to get her things. I went into my den and opened the desk drawer. There was a gun inside, one that I hadn't carried for a long time. I filled its cylinder, made sure that it was working and slipped it into my pocket. This wasn't going to be easy. It was going to be very, very tough.

CHAPTER V

Cute Killer

TONY WAS WAITING when we came out of the house. He'd been sitting on the steps, his back to one of the posts. I couldn't see him clearly, but I felt his surprise as he saw Mary.

She recognized him and I heard her catch her breath. "What . . . what's he doing here?"

"Benny thought I'd get lonesome," I told her. "Let's go, Tony. We've only four minutes to catch the next train."

It was he who caught the train and held it by loitering until we arrived. The car was crowded. Mary and I found seats together but Tony was forced to move to the other end of the car.

After we were settled Mary whispered; "That man, he gives me the creeps. I think even Benny's afraid of him."

I shrugged. "Benny's a business man. He knows people are afraid of Tony, so they pay up faster."

She shivered. "We know so many interesting people," she said, bitterly. "Isn't there anyone decent left in the world?"

"Plenty of them," I told her. "You and I just don't go to the right places. Incidentally, do you know where Lou Campana is?"

She nodded. "The apartment's near where Marty used to live."

I thought about Marty's apartment and that made me think of something which I'd forgotten. "That suicide note. The one Marty's housekeeper found when she went in to clean his apartment this morning. How do you figure that?"

She shook her head. "I don't. Marty, for all his faults, and he had plenty, was no guy to kill himself. He was easy-going, but underneath he was a fighter. I've never seen him quit."

I shook my head. "There are several things I don't get. Marty has the pearls last night, Benny has the money. They hunt each other, probably in a section not over five blocks square, and yet, they don't run into each other, or do they? Maybe Benny did see Marty; maybe Benny figured that although he's giving you only a hundred and fifty grand, those pearls are worth a lot more. If Marty's dead, Benny can take the pearls and keep the dough."

She turned, catching my arm. "If I could only believe that, if I could only be sure that the kid didn't kill his father. The thing in Detroit I can kind of overlook. They were all drunk, they were mad and fighting. He didn't mean to kill that actor Gibbs when he hit him with a bottle. It was an accident. But this other . . ." she was silent for several minutes, then she added in a low, hopeless voice: "But that's not like Benny. He's no angel and I'd be the last one to think so, but he's got principles. Once he makes a deal, he'll stand by it, even if it loses him money. I've known him ten years and I've never known him to welch on anything yet. If it were anyone but Benny, I'd say yes, but not him. Not him."

I shrugged and was silent until we pulled through the tunnel and into Penn Station. Then I turned to Tony as we stood on the platform. "We're going over to see Lou Campana," I said. "I don't want either you or Benny to get any ideas that Mary's trying to pull a fast one. For that reason you'd better call Benny. He might want in on things."

Tony searched my face. "What's the gag?"

I shrugged. "There's no gag, my friend. We are playing this strictly on the level. Mary's done everything she could."

"Why'd she lam out to your place?"

"She wanted to be alone for a little while," I said. "Didn't you ever want to be alone?"

"I'm always alone," he said, and I knew he was speaking the truth. "Don't try to lam while I'm phoning Benny."

"We'll wait outside the booth," I promised and we followed him up to the Long Island waiting room, from where he phoned.

BENNY was waiting outside the apartment when our cab pulled to the curb. He waited for us to get out and for the driver to pull away, then he said, "Campana isn't going to like it, all of us tramping over here."

I shrugged. "The reason we sent for you was because we didn't want you to think that Mary has raised the pearls and is trying to make a deal with Campana, freezing you out. She hasn't found them, and she can't raise any more dough, unless you loan it to her."

His brown eyes glistened in the reflection from the entry lights. "What security?"

"The Club," I suggested.

"That joint." His laugh was far from pleasant.

"That's all she's got."

"I wouldn't take the Club for the twenty-five G's I'm already out," he said. "It's a rat trap that the cheese has turned moldy in."

I turned away, leading them into the apartment house. Campana's partner was loafing nervously beside the desk. He stiffened as he saw us, shot a quick, uncertain glance at the clerk and then came forward, walking on the balls of his feet.

I wasn't certain he recognized me, but he knew Mary and from the flicker of his eyes, Benny also.

"What do you want?" the guy asked.

Mary said, "I want to talk to Cam-

pana." Her voice was steady and unless you knew her well you would never have guessed the strain under which she was laboring.

"Why the crowd?" His eyes went over us, resting for an instant on Tony as if he sensed danger there, then moving on to me. "Oh, you're the guy in the bed, Willie Haynes."

I said, "You've got a good memory. Let us go up. She just wants to talk to Lou, and she doesn't go alone."

He ran his tongue uncertainly around the circle of his lips. He was in a spot and knew it. He didn't want any attention called to their presence in the apartment. On the other hand he was pretty certain that Mary didn't want any trouble that would call the police.

"You all can go but him," he said, jerking his head at Tony.

Tony gave him a white-toothed smile. "Where the boss goes, I go." He said it flatly, leaving no room for argument.

Benny started to speak, thought better of it and kept silent.

The man from Detroit still hesitated. "Okay, I gotta call Lou. Wait here." He walked to the booth on the other side of the desk and was gone five minutes. When he came back he nodded.

"You can go up, but at the first trick we dump the kid to the police." He was talking to Mary.

I said in an undertone, "They can't do that without implicating themselves. It's okay."

She shivered, pressing against my side as if deriving a little comfort from my presence. I squeezed her arm reassuringly as we moved toward the elevator. This was going to be tough and there wasn't much I could do to help her. It was something she'd have to fight out by herself.

LOU CAMPANA was grinning when he let us into the big apartment. I guess he figured that we wouldn't have been there if we didn't have the dough. He jerked his head toward the front room and we moved toward it.

There were two people there, standing close together—the girl who had called herself Joan Joyce and a young, black-haired man who looked something like Mary.

Mary paused for an instant in the doorway, then with a little throaty sob she went toward the boy, both hands outstretched.

Polk Black caught his mother's hands feverishly. "Did you find the pearls? Have you got the money?"

She shook her head, and Lou Campana from the doorway said sharply, "What the hell?"

I turned to face him. The whole air of the room was explosive. The gun felt heavy under my arm, and comforting. This looked like trouble.

It was Benny who eased things for the moment. He said in his slow, deliberate way: "She hasn't got any dough, Campana. It looks like both you and I are out of luck."

Campana looked at him without understanding. His face was long and narrow, almost as wide at the jaw line as it was at the forehead. It made him look something like a horse. "Where do you come into it?"

Benny said, "That twenty-five G's that Marty gave you yesterday was mine. I'm out that much unless you want to give it back."

Campana laughed and it wasn't a pleasant sound. "Fat chance."

"Shall I take it, boss?" Tony had shifted from the doorway, along the wall. He covered the room. Both his hands were in his coat pockets and he was behind both Campana and his partner.

Campana realized this too late. He dared not turn, leaving Benny behind him, yet with Tony at his rear he was helpless.

"A sellout." His tone was bitter. "Better make it a finish," he told Benny, "or I'll get you."

Benny was nervous. I'd never seen him that way before.

"Stop it, Tony," Benny said. "These men are our friends."

"Are they?" said Tony. He sounded a trifle surprised.

"We didn't come up here for any rough stuff," Benny told him. "We just came

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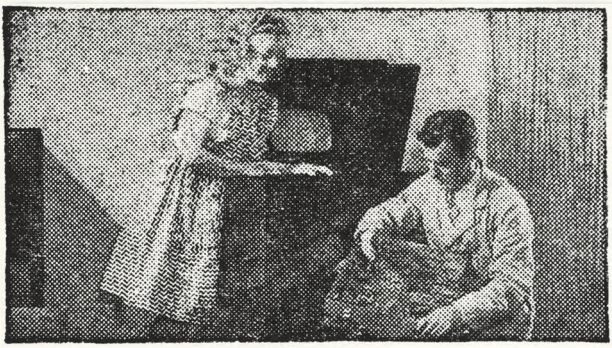

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up with Mary to see what kind of a deal she could make."

Campana grinned a little, like a hungry cat. "The same terms, one hundred and fifty G's."

"She hasn't got it," Benny was almost pleading. "The pearls were all she had."

"Then she'd better find who took the pearls and get them back."

"That's an idea," I said, as Mary started to speak. "Let's do that. Let's play games; pearly, pearly, who's got the pearls."

"Smart guy," said Campana. He didn't sound amused. "How would you like a mouth full of loose teeth, fat boy? I think I can kick them out."

I was getting tired of him. "And I can put three holes in your chest while you're doing it," I said.

He stared at me, startled. It had the same effect as if a mouse had suddenly turned and slapped a cat. "Oh, a tough guy?"

I grinned at him sourly. "Listen, you overgrown boy scout. I was around when guys were tough, not just a bunch of half-dry punks throwing their weight around. People have been scared of you so long that you're beginning to believe the routine yourself. Well, I don't. I've got to be shown. Start kicking. We'll tear this joint apart and every cop in New York will be here in fifteen minutes. They're funny. They don't like out-of-town boys who come in here and make trouble. They've got ways of handling them."

He stared at me, wetting his lips nervously with the tip of his tongue. "You wouldn't dare. Mary's son——"

"That's about played out," I told him. "You can do one of two things—help us find those pearls, or start throwing your weight around."

"How can I help?"

I shrugged. "Let's look at it this way. The man or woman who killed Marty Black knew he had those pearls. How many people knew it?"

Benny said, as if surprised: "Why, they're all here."

I nodded. "Unless any of you told someone else."

THEY all shook their heads. They were watching me with careful interest. At least I had their attention.

"Okay," I said. "It's a good bet that Marty didn't tell anyone. He wouldn't exactly advertise the fact that he was borrowing on his wife's pearls to help cover up a killing his son pulled, now would he?"

The boy started to speak. Joan Joyce said, "That's not fair! Polk—"

"Killed a guy," I said. "Let's leave out the adjectives. I'm not interested at the moment in what he did, how, or why. All I want to do is to find those pearls."

"Polk hasn't got them," she said, hotly.

I looked at her. "You weren't so certain this morning that he hadn't killed his father."

She said: "I'm certain now. He told me. He left the hotel room and left his father there."

"And just why did his father stay there?" I turned to the boy. Polk snarled angrily: "He said he was through with me. He said I could take the rap or anything else. He sat on the bed and watched me pack. He still stayed there after I left to check out."

"And what did you do then?"

"Came over here," he said. "This apartment belongs to a girl friend of Joan's. She was staying here while the girl is out of town."

I looked at Joan Joyce. "What time did Polk get here?"

"About twelve-thirty or one. He wouldn't talk about his father. He was very angry, that's what made me think that he . . . that they might have had trouble and—" she broke off, unable to go on.

"And when did Campana find you?"

"He . . . he called early this morning after he'd been back to the hotel and found Polk gone. He was pretty sore until I told him to come over. By the time he got here we'd heard on the radio that Polk's father was missing, then we heard later about you finding the body and we concluded you must have stolen the pearls—so I went down to see you."

It sounded screwy, too screwy to have been made up. Truth is often that way. I looked at Campana. "I don't think you

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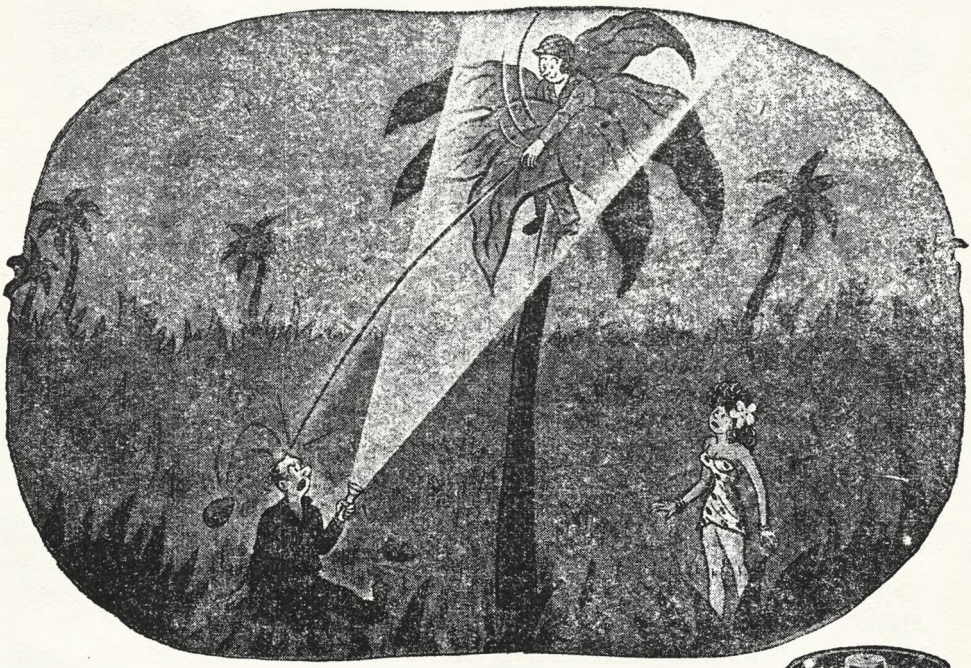

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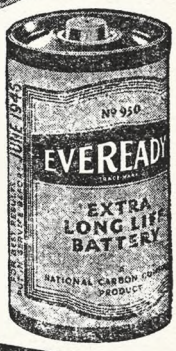

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got them," I said, slowly. "You might have. You might have come back to the hotel after Polk left, found his father there, had an argument, knifed him and grabbed the pearls. Then you might have hung around, hoping to put the bite on Mary for more dough."

Campana said, "I got plenty of witnesses to say I didn't go back to the hotel."

"That brings us down to you." I turned to Benny. "You were ready to lend a hundred and fifty thousand on pearls worth a quarter of a million. Maybe you figured that if Marty Black was dead, you could have the pearls for the twenty-five G's you'd already put out."

"Think I did?"

"No," I said, slowly. "You've got principles, my friend. You made a deal and you'd stick by it. But what about Tony? He knew about the pearls. He'd been sent out, looking for Marty. He said he couldn't find him, but Marty was around, looking for you. Couldn't Tony have maybe trailed him to the hotel, looking for a chance to get him alone, waited until everyone left the room, slipped in and put him on the bed?"

"He wasn't on the—" Tony stopped.

I grinned at him. "You see, my friend. You were going to say he was *under* the bed. Now, just how did you know that? It wasn't in the papers. The cops didn't publish the fact. They kept it quiet because I asked them to."

"Well . . . " He tried to laugh it off. "It stands to reason he had to be out of sight if you didn't find him till this morning. You, the chambermaid . . . Campana here. . . ."

"Just where was he?" I asked. "In the closet, in the bathroom, under the bed?"

"I don't know. I didn't see him."

"Then how come one of the bellboys saw you in the hall about midnight, hanging around? He picked out your picture at headquarters this afternoon. The cops have been following you, waiting to see when you went for the pearls. You didn't go for them and I think I know why. Maybe they're on you. You aren't the kind of a guy to leave things like that lying around. You might want to move in a hurry."

"Nuts."

"And the suicide note in Marty's apartment. It's a cinch he never wrote it. Who did then? It might have been you. You did time for forgery once. We can't prove that, but are you willing to let Benny search you?"

"No one searches me," Tony said, and pulled his gun into sight.

He was a fraction of a second slower than Lou Campana, who shot him directly in the stomach as he moved.

TONY went back against the wall from the impact of Campana's heavy slug, but he didn't fall. He fired so rapidly that the shots blurred together. I knocked Mary sideways to the floor, pawing for my own gun; but before I had it clear, Benny had a small gun in his fist and put a bullet directly between Tony's eyes.

He fell now, going down in a crumpled heap.

Benny said, to no one in particular. "A guy you can't trust is a guy which should be shot." He put his small gun carefully into his pocket. I turned around to see what the damage was. Lou Campana was down with two holes in his chest. His partner had one in the neck. Polk Black was face down on the floor with the Joyce girl bending over him, her arm bleeding from a bullet burn. That's about all I saw before the door was kicked open and Inspector Roff and his men burst into the room.

I stared at them. "What are you doing here?"

Roff grunted. "I'm the one who should ask that question. We've had this place staked out since seven o'clock. One of my men spotted Campana going in. Now, what?"

I wasn't sure. I walked across, bent over Tony and loosened his shirt. There was a little chamois bag, suspended from his neck by a leather thong. I pulled it out and opened it, spilling black pearls into my palm.

"Here's Marty's killer," I said and turned around.

Mary was at Joan Joyce's side, bending

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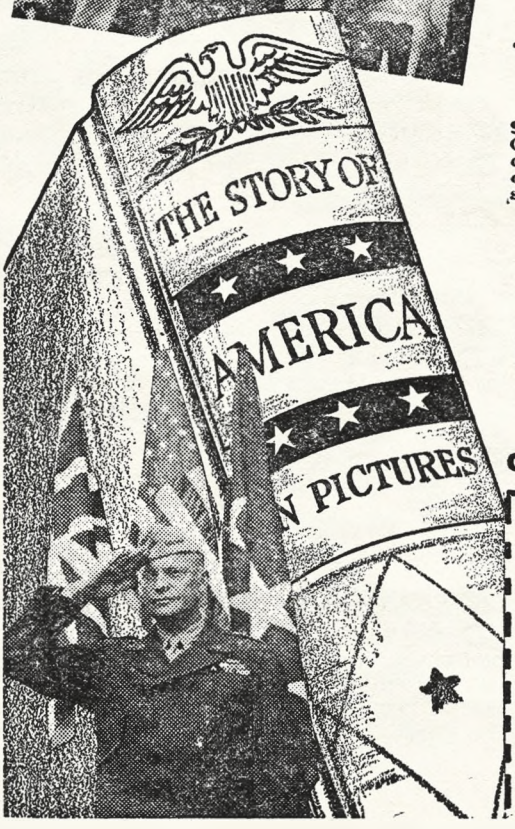

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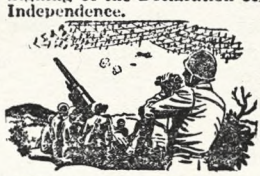

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over her son. She straightened as I looked and her voice was toneless. "He's dead, Willie."

I gave silent thanks. It worked out better for her that way, much better.

CHAPTER VI

ROFF LISTENED TO THE full story. I didn't hold back a thing. He said, finally, "I should run you in as an accessory."

I shrugged. "For what? Campana's dead. His partner's dying. Why not wash out the whole thing? Give it to the papers as a murder and robbery. Tell them that Polk Black helped trap his father's killers and—"

"He was a heel," said Roff. "Why should I whitewash him?"

"Because of Mary," I said. "Polk's dead, so are the others, but Mary's got to live—and she hasn't anything very pleasant to live for."

"How long you been carrying the torch for that dame?"

I shrugged. "Maybe a long time. I don't know."

"Ever tell her?" His eyes were cynical.

I shook my head. "I'm just a fat boy. She's okay now. She has her pearls and—"

"You said it was your house she lammed to tonight. Maybe she likes it out there."

I shrugged again and he swore at me. "You'll never find out without asking." He was silent for a moment, then he changed the subject. "What put you onto Tony? I'd have never thought of him myself."

I shrugged. "First something Mary said coming in on the train. Benny fitted well as the killer, but Benny has principles. Tony knew everything Benny did, but had no principles. Then too, he had a record as a forger and I knew that suicide note in Marty's apartment must have been forged since I was certain Marty wouldn't have written it."

"So?"

"So, I put the bee on Tony. All I was trying to do was to make Benny and Lou Campana suspicious. I didn't expect the shoot-out; I'd have never done it with Mary there if I had, but I guess I put on too much pressure. Tony cracked. He couldn't take it when I said one of the bellhops had seen him prowling on that floor."

"What's that?"

"I was lying," I admitted, "but it worked. By the way, Campana had a lot of dough on him. Twenty-five grand belongs to Benny and—"

"So now you're taking care of Benny."

"I'm taking care of Mary," I told him. "I don't want her to feel she has to pay it."

"If you want to take care of her, marry her."

"You know," I said slowly, "I might at that. She made a very pretty picture, sitting in my house, in front of the fire. I never thought of it before, but that's what that house needs to make it a home. Thanks, Inspector, for giving me the idea." I turned and went out. All the way down the hall, I could hear him calling me names. The least of them was a fool. From there they got much worse but I didn't seem to care. A guy who does me a big favor can call me anything. I like it.

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SET FOR A THIEF

A SHARP thorn in the side of department store managements is the shoplifter, whose little antics cost department stores many thousands of dollars every year. And this is in spite of numerous precautions, without which the losses would be many times greater.

The difficulties incident to suppressing shoplifting entirely center around the fact that it is a particularly sneaky and underhand type of crime. The success of the shoplifter depends upon the extent of his or her ability to abstract the merchandise unnoticed from under the very eyes of the salesclerk. A busy department, where each clerk has more than one customer to attend to at the same time, is the shoplifter's paradise.

To combat this evil, the stores employ crews of store detectives, male and female. These must be of an insignificant type that will not stand out in a crowd. In plain clothes, these detectives wander through the store keeping watch on the customers and being on the lookout for anything suspicious.

In addition to the plain clothes crew, each store has a number of uniformed special officers who are stationed at strategic points throughout the store. As a rule, these men are retired policemen who are well-versed in the ways of criminals and know just what to watch out for. Particularly vigilant must be the ones who are stationed in the departments where coats and suits are sold. The officer pays special attention to all customers who seem to be "just looking"—trying coats on indiscriminately without any intention to buy. When such a customer seems to have finished and replaces the garments on the rack and leaves, the officer sends a salesclerk over at once to see if the garment has been replaced correctly.

A favorite trick of shoplifters is to try on coats until one is found that is suitable and then to replace it in some out of the way spot on the rack. Some hours later, he or she returns and, picking a moment when all the clerks are occupied, removes the price ticket from the coat, puts it on and leaves the store.

As a general rule, when a coat is found out of its usual place, the salesclerk puts it back where it belongs. But if there has been an epidemic of thefts in the department, the coat is left where it is, and plain clothes detectives are assigned to watch for the return of the criminal.

EVEN if the shoplifter has been detected in the act, however, he cannot be arrested in the store. The detectives keep him under close surveillance until he has left the premises, and then he is arrested. A person cannot be accused of having stolen an article until that article is actually carried out of the store. When the shoplifter has been arrested, he is brought back into the store (usually through the back entrance) and taken to the office for questioning. The regular police are summoned, of course, but preliminary questioning is done by the chief of the store detectives and the manager of the store.

The very first step is a thorough search of the suspect, and a count of the money on his person. The suspected shoplifter will usually claim to have "forgotten to pay for the article". If the money on his person is not enough to pay for the merchandise stolen, this excuse can be disregarded at once. In one store, a young girl was caught with sixty dollars' worth of

dresses in her possession—and thirty-nine cents in her purse.

Shoplifters belong to both the professional and the amateur class. The professionals are very skillful operators. They will always make it their business to know the store detectives, and can manage to avoid them. Many times, the detective recognizes the criminal at the same time that he recognizes the detective, in which case the shoplifter usually leaves the store empty handed, knowing full well that he will be carefully watched as long as he remains in the store. If he has taken anything before he sees the detective, he is very careful to rid himself of it in the store before he leaves, so that, if he is picked up on suspicion, there will be no evidence to betray him.

The amateur, on the other hand, is easy to detect and to catch with the goods. He worries only about avoiding the special officers, disregarding completely the possibility of plain clothes men. When he is caught, he loses his head completely, gets very indignant, and ends up by breaking down and confessing.

MAN BY THE ROAD

(*Continued from page* 63)

car, and your flesh crawls with horror, and you cannot see his face because of the curled-down, dripping hatbrim . . . but he is beside you in the car, and one dark, shapeless arm seems to be moving toward the wheel as the wooden bridge rattles under you. The rain and the bridge and the rushing river are jumbled together, spinning, and you are plunging off into space, hurtling down toward the chaotic depths of water——

And as you fall, the man is gone; the man who waited for you by the side of the road. Now you know that your tortured brain created a tangible image of something that exists only within yourself. I am the man who waited there.

But I am nothing more than a voice in your heart, Jake. There was no one else. You saw no one. But you heard me, and you can hear me now as the dark water of the river swirls up to meet you.

Do you remember what the old woman said, Jake? "Everybody has a conscience."

AFTER NINETY YEARS

MURDER will usually out, even in cases where murder has never even been suspected. This is the story of a murder that took ninety years to come to light. Ninety years after the crime had been committed the murderer's confession was brought to light, long after anyone even remotely connected with the case had ceased to exist.

Shortly after the close of the World War (the first of that name), a group of Fellows of Christ's College, Cambridge University, gathered together to read a most amazing document. It had been written over half a century before by Christopher Round, Fellow of Christ's College, and had been sealed and marked to be opened fifty years from the day of the writer's death. The fifty years had now elapsed, and the story of Christopher Round was to be made public.

Christopher Round was born at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the son of a clergyman. He was a studious boy, and his father wished him to follow in his footsteps. To that end, he was enrolled at Christ's College, Cambridge. While an undergraduate student, he met Philip Collier, the man destined to be his friend and yet his enemy, both at the same time. Christopher was a brilliant boy, but Philip was just a little more so. No matter what Christopher undertook, Philip always surpassed him. In the various competitive examinations taken during their college years, Philip would always get first place, and Christopher would have to be content with just honorable mention. Once when Christopher finally succeeded in getting a first place in one of his examinations, he found to his dismay that he had not surpassed Philip, only equalled him. In this instance they had tied, and the honors for first place were equally divided between the two boys.

After graduation, the two men went their separate ways for several years. Christopher had got a Fellowship at Trinity College, and Philip had gone away to Italy on a protracted tour. Finally, a vacancy occurred in the Fellowships at Christ's College, and the Fellowship was awarded to Christopher. He now felt that

he had reached the point in his life where he could say he was really happy. But, to his extreme annoyance and dismay, only a month later another Fellowship became vacant, and this was granted to his old rival, Philip Collier. The thorn in his side was back again to plague him once more and nose him out by the slightest margin of whatever honors and advancements might come up.

TO make matters even worse, if that were possible, Philip now began to court the woman Christopher was in love with—and it looked very much as if he would win her. Lady Mary Clifford was a beautiful young widow who lived near the University. Christopher had been helping her prepare her late husband's papers for publication, and he had fallen in love with her.

It seemed to him that she reciprocated his feelings, and, when she left for a trip to Italy, he decided to propose to her upon her return. But when she returned, she had met Philip Collier, and poor Christopher knew he had lost out once again. He watched the friendship between Philip and Mary develop into love, and he suffered by it, but there was nothing he could do.

Things went on this way for about a year, when, one night, when he went to Philip's room, he found him in a semi-conscious state—sodden intoxication. He wondered how Philip had managed to reach his rooms in such a condition unseen, and a few nights later he had his answer. As he was walking in the garden, in his usual manner, he saw Philip come staggering up a little-used path to a small gate that led to his staircase, unlock the gate, and disappear inside.

From this time on, Christopher spent his nights watching for Philip and his days pitying poor Mary. He could never tell her the truth about the man she loved, but he could see nothing but unhappiness in the future for her if she were to tie herself to this incorrigible drunkard. Just at this time the professor of Greek at Christ's College was to retire, and Christopher was recommended for the post. This

opportunity for advancement in his work made him very happy, but his joy did not last. Philip's name was also suggested for this job, and, as a matter of course, Christopher once again found himself passed over. This, too, upset him very much. How could a man with such a vice hold down so important a position? But there was nothing he could do. He could not tell the truth about Philip. No one would believe him if he tried it. They would accuse him of spreading lies about his more successful rival out of sheer jealousy.

One night, as he was taking his usual walk about the garden, he heard the noise of a gate slamming. He knew it was Philip, and concealed himself so that he could watch him without being seen himself. Philip was terribly drunk, as usual. He stumbled along the path that led past the bathing pool. Suddenly he seemed to trip, tried to regain his balance, and fell into the water at the deep end of the pool.

Although he was a good swimmer, he was in no condition to help himself. He struggled in the water and seemed in danger of drowning. Christopher rushed down to the pool to help him. He seized a heavy iron hook, used for fishing things out of the water, and extended it to Philip in an attempt to get him to grasp it, so that he could pull him out of the water. At the moment that Philip seemed near enough to hook, something seemed to explode inside Christopher's head. Although he had originally had every intention of helping Philip, now he turned against him. All the pent-up rage and jealousy, all the fears he had had for Mary's happiness with this drunkard, boiled up in him. Instead of reaching the pole out to him, he let it drop on top of him. The heavy hook at the end struck Philip on the left temple and he sank beneath the water.

In some way unknown to himself, Christopher managed to find his way back to his rooms. He collapsed on the bed, and was found there unconscious the next day. He remained unconscious for many weeks, and it wasn't until he was entirely recovered that he found out the end of his adventure.

PHILIP COLLIER'S body had been discovered floating in the pool the following morning. The coroner's jury rendered a verdict of "death by accident". All would have been well for Christopher, if it had not been for the evidence that followed. Philip Collier had been experimenting with a new anesthetic that had just recently been discovered in America. Mary Clifford had become interested in the work and had been aiding Philip in his experiments. Philip had been using himself as the subject in all these experiments. He had not been drinking! The nights Christopher had seen him come staggering home, he had been under the influence of the anesthetic, not of alcohol.

Christopher Round had killed an innocent man! Instead of ridding Mary and the world of a worthless drunkard, he had ruthlessly murdered a courageous and brilliant person.

The shock of all this knowledge was too much for Christopher. He suffered a breakdown and was forced to take a year's rest away from the University. When he came back, he did not have the courage to confess what he had done. He regretted it very much, but was not brave enough to seek punishment for his crime. Instead, he punished himself after his own fashion. He never went near Mary Clifford again.

Although he remained at Christ's College, he stayed a Fellow all his days, refusing all advancements of any kind. He kept himself aloof from all his colleagues except one, and even to this one he never found the courage to tell the truth. For forty years, however, his conscience nagged at him. Although he could not admit his crime, he suffered untold agony from the pangs of remorse. As he felt death approaching, he knew he had to lighten the burden on his conscience before he met his Maker. And so he wrote down the whole story.

But even then he could not bear to have it known in the lifetime of those who had known and worked with him. He confessed his crime, but, according to his instructions, his confession was not to be read until he had been dead for fifty years.

GUYS WHO KILL PEOPLE

(*Continued from page* 57)

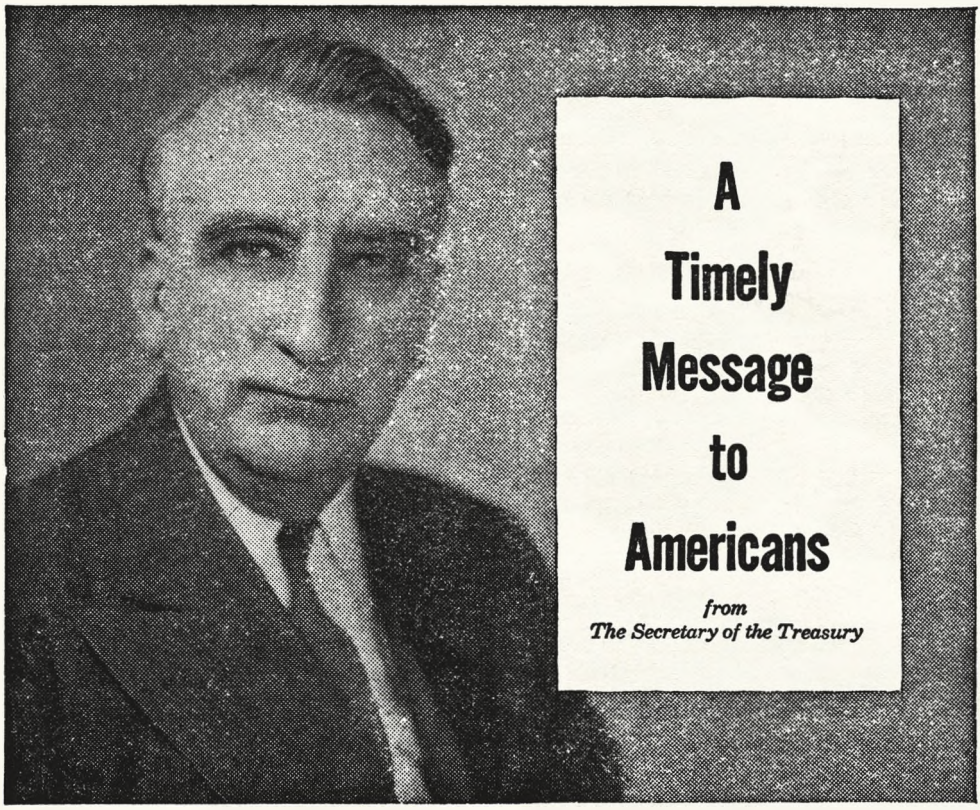
alive. And Pony was one of those guys who liked to kill people. Just for the fun of it, he liked to; or to show he was smart. Or maybe he was tired of taking Eddie Ead's sadistic discipline. Tommy knew then that it was Pony Greeley who had taken an appetite to that ten grand, tried to collect it, and got interested in a slight killing job when he couldn't get it just by asking.

These things ran through Tommy's mind as he darted for the window. It was dirty, and for all he knew there was a heavy wire screen on the other side—but there wasn't, he found as he catapulted through feet-first. Pony sent one wild shot at him, but no broken glass cut him, and he landed on his feet in a bad-smelling alley, three feet from a garbage can.

Still on his hands and knees he scuttled to one side and looked up. Pony was draped across the sill, and under him was Eddie Eads, and with the butt of his gun Pony was chopping away at what had been Eddie's face.

"Boy!" said Tommy. "That room's going to be chuck-full of dead guys in about two minutes, when Pony and that hopped-up Mose get to shooting at each other."

BREATHLESS, but with an outward appearance of calm, Tommy melted into the ratty skidrow crowd. He waited a block away to see the patrol wagon, the ambulance and the coroner's wagon respond to the call of the radio car that was never far from trouble in this neighborhood. He heard the cops shoot it out with Pony Greeley, sat and listened while he sipped a glass of beer. And from the gossip, he gathered that only the cops came away from the Tropical Hotel alive.



A Timely Message to Americans

from
The Secretary of the Treasury

America has much to be thankful for.

Abroad we have overcome enemies whose strength not long ago sent a shudder of fear throughout the world.

At home we have checked an enemy that would have impaired our economy and our American way of life. That enemy was inflation —runaway prices.

The credit for this achievement, like the credit for military victory, belongs to the people.

You—the individual American citizen—have kept our economy strong in the face of the greatest inflationary threat this nation ever faced.

You did it by simple, everyday acts of good citizenship.

You put, on the average, nearly one-fourth of your income into War Bonds and other savings. The 85,000,000 owners of War Bonds not only helped pay the costs of war, but also contributed greatly to a stable, prosperous postwar nation.

You, the individual American citizen, also helped by cooperation with rationing, price and wage controls, by exercising restraint in your buying and by accepting high wartime taxes.

All these things relieved the pressure on prices.

THE TASK AHEAD

We now set our faces toward this future: a prosperous, stable postwar America—an America with jobs and an opportunity for all.

To achieve this we must steer a firm course between an inflationary price rise such as followed World War I and a deflation that might mean prolonged unemployment. Prices rose more sharply after the last war than they did during the conflict and paved the way for the depression that followed—a depression which meant unemployment, business failures and farm foreclosures for many.

Today *you* can help steer our course toward a prosperous America:

—by buying all the Victory Bonds you can afford *and by holding on to the War Bonds you now have*

—by cooperating with such price, rationing and other controls as may be necessary for a while longer

—by continuing to exercise patience and good sense with high faith in our future.

The challenge to America of switching from war to peace with a minimum of clashing gears is a big one.

But it is a small one compared to the tasks this nation has accomplished since Sunday, December 7, 1941.

Fred M. Vinson

Secretary of the Treasury

A Government message prepared by the War Advertising Council and contributed by this magazine in cooperation with the Magazine Publishers of America.

Then he went back to the hotel. There was a letter waiting for him. He opened it and read it in the lobby. It was unsigned, but it was from Bookie—he knew the old boy's old-fashioned hand:

Dear old Pal:— I have your six yards I owe you in the Bank and some savings besides, and it's all willed to you in case anything happens to me, about fifteen hundred. I may get into a jam, because I am going to try to square you with you-know-who for that bum rap you took. I guess I don't care because the doc says I got cancer anyhow. But you was always square with me, so I am pinching about ten grand of you-know-who's dough for you. That's more than you could have made outside, because the racetracks are all closed and you are too light for war work. The law knows I'm clean so you won't have no trouble collecting on my will, even if I have bad luck. And you know where I keep things, don't you, old Pal? Well, so long. Maybe this will square you for them seven years.

Tommy read the letter and tore it through five or six times. Then he reached under the davenport cushions and fished out the ten thousand dollars. It made quite an armful, and he felt conspicuous carrying it out into the alley, and he wasn't satisfied until letter and money were both blazing merrily in the incinerator. When nothing was left but ashes, he heaved a sigh of relief. Let the probation guys come now!

He lifted his eyes and waved his hand at the stars, and said:

"Thanks, Bookie. I don't want you to think I'm not grateful, but the dough you willed me is enough for old Tommy. You know that! Ten grand attracts too much attention from guys that kill people. But thanks just the same, Bookie. Thanks just the same!"

SEPTEMBER PEACHES

(*Continued from page 49*)

ing," he said. "I'd got an idea. Suppose us three drop in on Eph tomorrow, and go into the matter. I ain't a law-shark, Tom, but I'd say, if Eph planted poison peaches to kill Cy, he's as guilty as hell. Would you arrest him?"

"You bet I'd arrest him! Looks like Eph thought he was outsmarting Cy, and he outsmarted himself. It's the intention that counts in law. Yes, Miss Abby, Eph's going to eat one of his own peaches, or I'll have him in Stopford jail by noon."

"Well, that's the best news I've heard in a long time," said Abby Bowers. "And I'll be glad to get back my photographic supplies."

"You'll have them tomorrow, Miss Abby—of course, if this story about Eph is true."

Abby sniffed. "It's too bad that a hard-working woman like myself should be made the victim of the grudges of two vicious old men," she said. "I've always held my head high in this town, and refused to pay any attention to their aspersions on my character."

"I guess everybody knows that, Miss Abby," said the sheriff.

But Abby had broken down in tears, and her head dropped—not on the sheriff's shoulder but on that of Doc, who stood holding her awkwardly.

"You're the only real friend I've got in town," she sobbed. "The only one I can trust."

"Yes, Miss Abby, but we'll have the guilty party in jail by noon tomorrow. I was thinking, Tom, I'll take my usual constitutional through the woods, and you two pick me up at the entrance to Eph's place—say around ten in the morning. Eph's likely to be home then."

"Suits me," said Rayburn.

"It certainly suits me," said Abby Bowers.

DESPITE the task ahead of him, Doc Tracy found time to stop and inspect a new sub-species of aster beside the road, He had long suspected that it was a sport, and he'd been observing that particular plant for the past three years. Then he went on, and the sheriff's car overtook him at the entrance to Eph's place just as Abby Bowers drew up across the road.

Eph was trimming his rose-trees. He grinned as the three came up, and thrust out his spade-beard.

"I was kind of expecting you," he said. "So you're putting it on me, because Cy Billings stole my fruit. I'd warned him, and I've got the right to grow anything I please—except black currants and gooseberries," he went on, with a malicious glance at Doc.

"If you grew poison to kill Cy Billings, so far as I'm concerned, you'll fight it out in the courts," said Tom Rayburn. "Question is, did you?"

"He told me so. He bragged about it to me two years ago," cried Abby.

"Well, now, it ain't hard to decide that proposition," said Tom Rayburn. "Suppose you eat one of them peaches that hang over the fence Eph. If you can get away with that, I'll drop all charges."

"I'm damned if I will," said Eph. "It was you who was offering to eat one yesterday, Doc."

"I'm willing," said the Doc blandly. "That'll be a fair test, Tom. I'm an old fellow, kind of useless, and nobody's going to miss me." Doc Tracy reached out and pulled a small red peach from the branch, inspected it carefully, and raised his hand to his mouth.

"Doc! You damn' fool!" Sheriff Ray-

burn grabbed at it. He was too late. Tracy was eating the juicy peach with evident relish.

Sheriff Rayburn was staring at him in horror. Eph's eyes were bulging. Abby Bowers was standing immobile as a statue. Nobody found a word to say as Tracy calmly finished the fruit, and flicked the stone away with thumb and forefinger.

The Doc plucked another peach and held it out to Eph. "Try some of your own medicine, Eph," he said jovially.

But Eph remained rooted to the spot, and Tracy pulled a third peach and held it out to Abby. "How about you, Miss Abby?" he asked.

"Damn you!" she shrieked. "You've tortured me enough! I knew you knew all the time! I don't care. I hate this town and everybody in it, and I'm ready to go to the chair, if I've got to!"

"Hold her, Tom!" said Tracy.

"YOU see, Eph really believed he could get even with Cy Billings, over that boundary quarrel, by planting a branch of the wild Persian peach, so Cy would pluck one, and eat it. But I guessed that was all hokum. You don't get concentrates of poison in that quantity in anything except the amanita toadstool.

"But Miss Abby here—now why don't you take it easy, Miss Abby?—she saw her chance to kill two birds with one stone. She'd kill Cy Billings, and then have Eph sent to the chair for it. And Eph was just fool enough to talk his way there.

"So Miss Abby took that hypodermic of hers, and filled it with cyanide solution, and injected it into all the peaches on Cy's side of the fence. Look at this! I thought at first it was a worm-hole, but there are no worms in those peaches. That's the mark of the hypodermic puncture.

"Of course the peach I ate didn't have that prick. Those are good peaches, and I think Eph's going to have something there. Okay, Tom. I'll be seeing you later."

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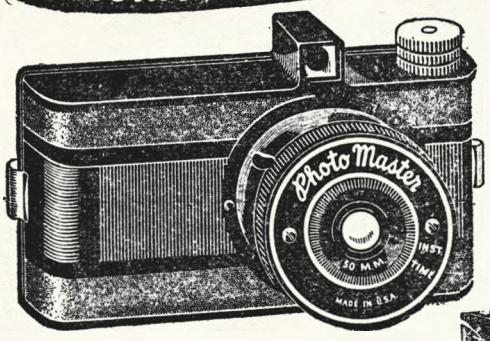

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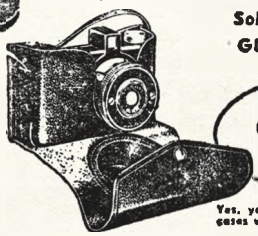

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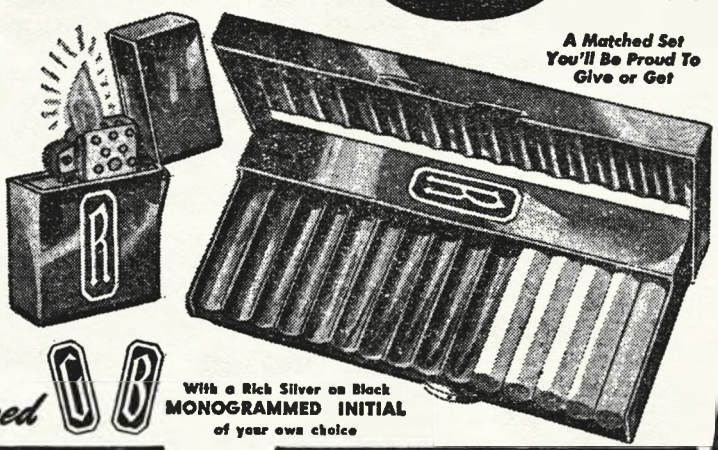

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