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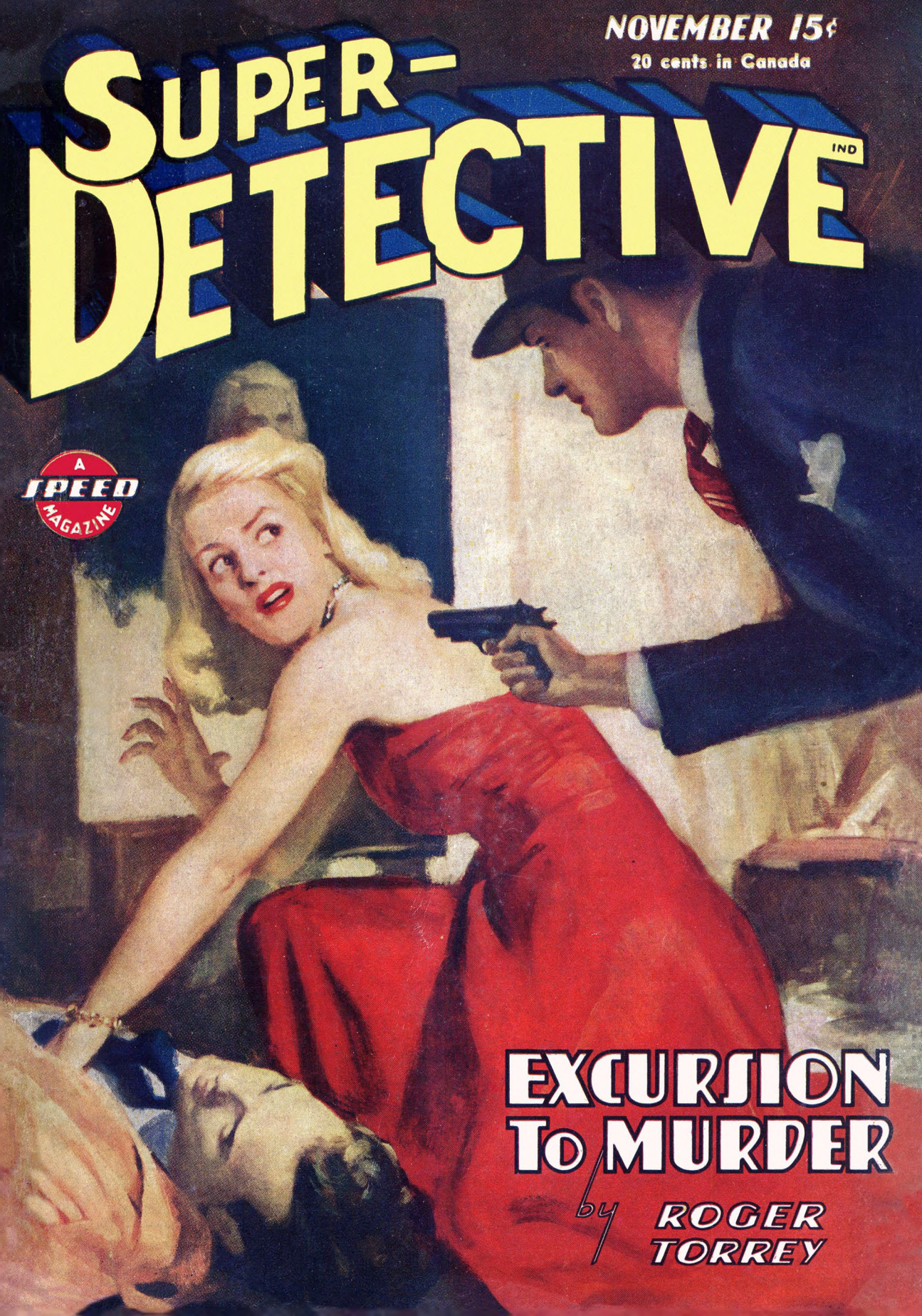

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by ROGER TORREY

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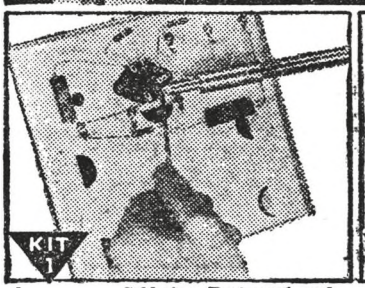

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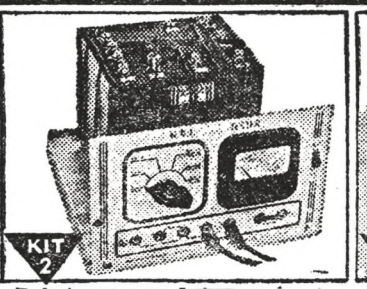

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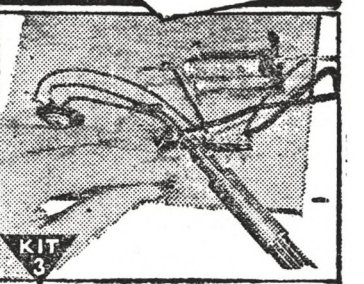

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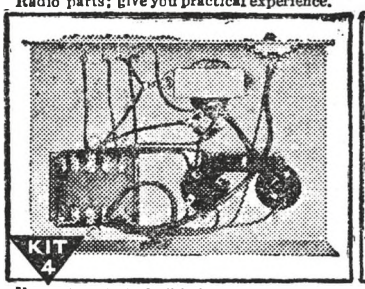

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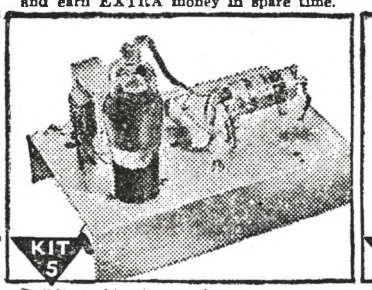

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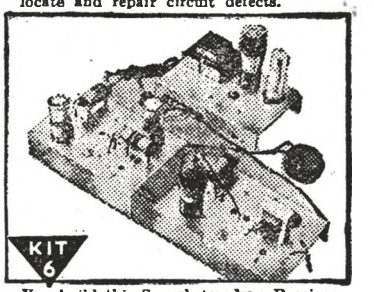

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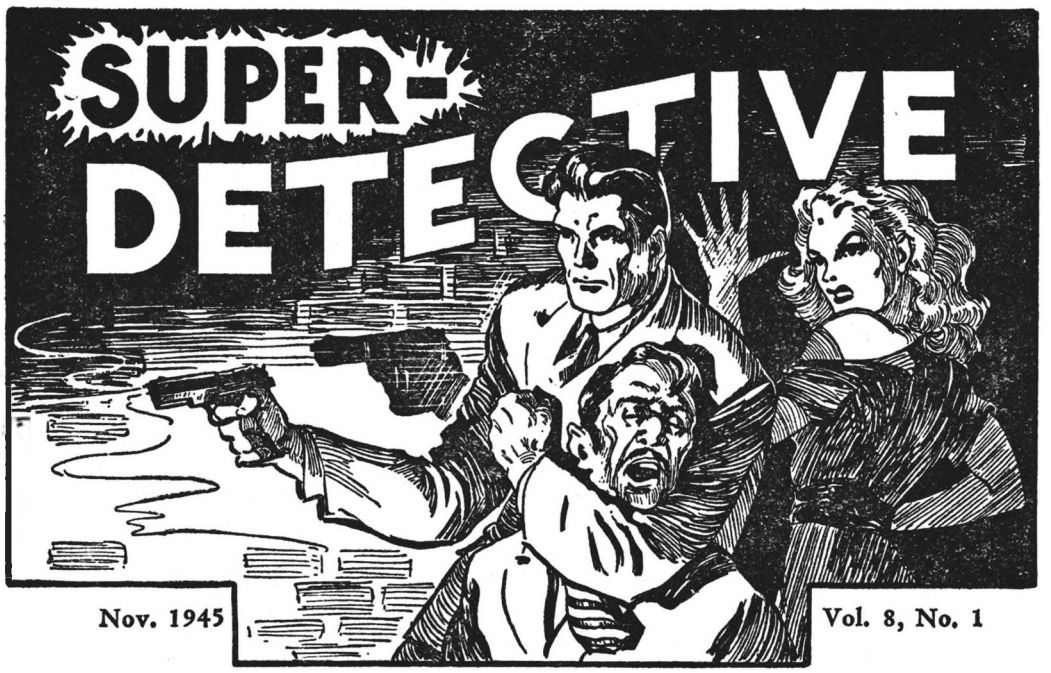

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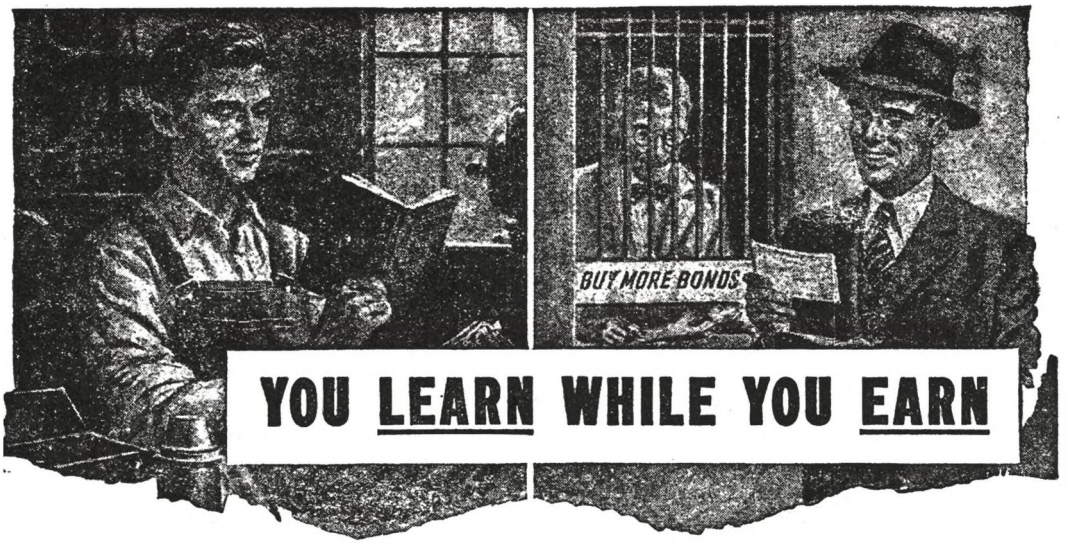

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He shoved him, shotgun and all, into the house.

"...Each Man Kills..."

AT forty-four, Putnam McManus was as set in his ways as an old maid of seventy. He was of medium height, already beginning to be both bald and grey, and was more than a little worried about his growing waist line. He knew that behind his back at headquarters the younger detectives called him "Old Putter", but it didn't bother him at all. Not as long as Chief of Detectives Smoot was satisfied with his work—and Smoot was, definitely.

McManus went onto the force walking a beat when he was twenty-five years old. Now he was head of Missing Persons, and as Smoot often said, if ever a man was cut out for that unromantic job, McManus was. He had a turtle's patience, knew how to plod along day after day with a question here and a question there, until an erring husband or an eloping daughter was eventually located.

But if anyone had ever mentioned the fact around headquarters that McManus was a shrewd psychologist and psychiatrist, McManus himself would have been

By EDWIN TRUETT

Unromantic, set in his ways, that was Putnam McManus, head of Missing Persons. Or that, at least, was the way most of the world he moved in viewed him . . .

the first to throw back his head and rock with laughter.

McManus never married, for, if the truth be told, all his life he had been afraid of women. After his widowed mother died, he stayed on alone in the old house out on Delaney Street. There he did his own cooking, his own housework, and even devoted part of his evenings to a little garden in the back yard and flower beds in the front yard.

There on Delaney Street the number of his friends were legion, for everybody liked McManus. He liked kids and kids liked him. He even put rings and a trapeze in the shed behind the house, and any of the neighborhood kids were welcome at any time. At night, when he sat on his porch to read the papers before the light failed, at least a half dozen cars would slow in front of the cottage and blow horns at Mac, invite him for a ride, or a glass of beer. Sometimes he went, but usually he didn't. McManus was a shy man.

The Farrells took the house next door during the summer of 1941. McManus was off duty that day, saw the moving van back up to the door, and a moment later a black sedan joined it at the curb. The man he came afterward to know as George Farrell got out of the sedan, and it was all too obvious that he was drunk. He managed to key open the door, then stood weaving in the shade of the porch while the movers began taking in their nondescript load of furniture. After a few moments McManus saw him speak to one of the moving men, hand him something and walk to the curb to his car and depart.

The movers got the furniture inside. They locked the front door carefully, one of them dropped something into the mailbox. They drove off in the van. McManus thought no more about it, but went about fixing his evening meal. He ate, read the paper, glanced at his watch to see if it was time for the radio news—and happened to look out the kitchen window. A woman was going around the house next door with a baby in her arms. He noted with grave approval that she was a very pretty woman, slender but well-rounded, clad in cool white, red hair swirling down from beneath her small hat. She went up the three steps to the back door, tried the knob and found it locked.

FOR a moment she stood hesitantly at the bottom of the back steps and suddenly the baby began to cry. McManus had never been around many babies, but if he was any judge of volume, this kid had unusually good lungs. The red-headed mother patted it anxiously, swung it from side to side. The baby kept yelling. Back to the front of the house she carried him, McManus walking through his own house to follow her. Once again she tried the front door there and once again turned away in disgust or anger. She began walking the porch with the crying kid. McManus reached for his hat. He would no more have thought of leaving his house without his hat than he would have thought of leaving without his trousers.

She saw him coming up her walk and glared at him angrily. The kid kept yelling; McManus felt his face reddening.

He said, "Excuse it, ma'am, but I'm Putnam McManus that lives next door." He paused to gulp. She had the largest, brownest eyes he had ever seen. The baby hit high C again. He waited until its breath played out so that he could be heard. "Sick?" he asked.

"Hungry," she snapped, "and I can't get in the house. I've got milk for him there." He saw the zippered bag near the door. "I had an idea my husband was going to meet me here but he seems to be—!"

McManus went to the mailbox, thrust a brown hand into its depths and came up with the key. Her eyes widened. He was opening the door when she said, "So George has been here and gone!"

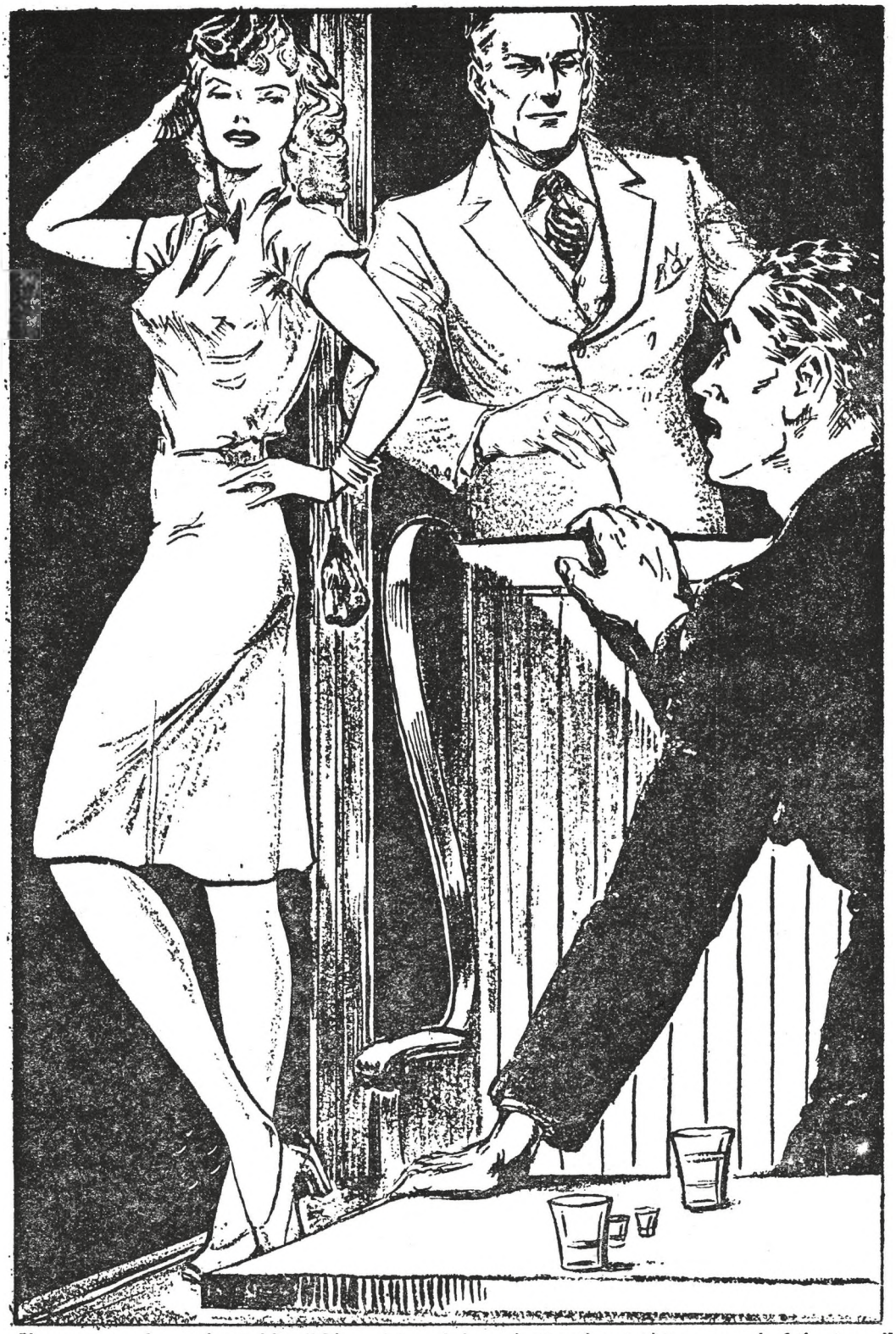
McManus wasn't a very good liar, and certainly he didn't approve of young Farrell's drunken actions. Afterward, thinking it over, he decided he lied simply because he didn't want to hurt her feelings. He explained gently that he didn't know George from Adam but that he had seen one of the movers drop something into the box, and had presumed it to be a key.

She said, "Our name is Farrell. You're Mr.—?"

"McManus," he told her again.

"I'm Cy Grange's daughter," she added.

He wasn't acquainted personally with



She got up from the table. "Okay, Mac, I knew better than to hit your end of the town."

Cy Grange, but he knew of him. Grange operated a string of one-stop service stations, and also owned one of the largest used-car lots in town.

By now he was flipping at the light switch—unsuccessfully.

"Seems like you don't have any lights," he said, and thought he heard a heartfelt *damn*. Through the almost-dark house she made her way to the kitchen, while he waited uncertainly beside the front door. The baby wailed on. He heard the click of her returning heels; the baby paused for breath.

She said, exasperatedly, "And no gas! I know the deposits are up! I transferred them myself!" He remembered his first sight of George Farrell, weaving and reeling.

"Look," he said, "maybe your husband forgot to call them. You could come next door to my place and fix your kid a bottle and I could call the gas company for you from there." He was amazed at his own boldness.

A LITTLE later, after pulling a bit of authority on the power and light company and reminding them of a few favors they might sometime want from the local police department, he went back into his own living-room. She'd warmed a bottle on his stove and was now sitting in his dead mother's favorite chair feeding the little tyke.

For some reason, McManus glowed all over. He stood there grinning with his hands locked behind his back, rocking back and forth on his feet, heel and toe. She looked up, returned his grin. The light from the floor lamp made her hair like spun gold, her skin was smooth and fair, her mouth red, a natural red.

He thought: *Maybe that's what this house has been needing. What Putnam McManus has been needing!*

The very thought made him flush, so quickly he told her about the phone call, about the results he had obtained. She nodded, made shushing noises; already the kid's eyes were closing, the bottle was nearly empty. In a moment she tiptoed across the room and put the kid down on the couch. McManus' couch! Somehow he found himself beside her, leaning over the kid. Cute little trick—even if it did yell.

He found some beer in the icebox and they talked like old friends until the Power and Light Company truck stopped in front of the Farrell house. He walked across with her, carrying her zipper bag. The baby kept on sleeping. He told her good night at the door after seeing that the lights worked, and walked slowly back across his yard.

It was one of the strangest feelings he'd ever had in his life, just standing there in his own living-room *remembering* the few minutes she'd been with him. He went over to his mother's chair, where *she* had fed the brat, and it seemed to him that the chair was still warm with the heat of her body. He didn't even have to close his eyes to recall the red gold of her hair, the pleasant twist of her lips when she smiled, the way she looked when she leaned over the sleeping baby.

Aloud, he said, "Hell! A man could kill with pleasure for a woman like that!"

McManus didn't know how right he was.

A HALF hour later, strangely restless, he rolled his battered jalopy out of its garage and went down Elm Street. From his back yard he'd seen her again—bustling around the house next door, a towel or something tied about her red hair, pushing and shoving the furniture into place.

It burned him up, remembering the husband. Still, afterward he vowed to himself he hadn't deliberately set out to find the guy. It was just that when he passed Patsy's Tavern he happened to see the black sedan parked directly in front of the joint, and being a good detective, remembered the car. He, too, parked and went in, ordered a beer.

Patsy, himself, was tending bar. He greeted McManus affably enough and took his money. Once he'd made the mistake of telling Mac it was on the house. McManus drank a little absently, for the man he knew now as George Farrell was very obvious at a corner table. Obvious because of the garish blonde with him.

He asked Patsy: "Ain't that girl Goldie Weber?"

Patsy, trying to act surprised, said it was, by Golly. McManus looked sorrowful.

He said, "I'm ashamed of you, Patsy. You know this is my neighborhood and I try to keep it clean. No, never mind." His gesture stopped Patsy. "I'll tell her myself."

He finished his beer and walked steadily back to the blonde's table. She saw him coming, reached for her purse resignedly and was getting up from her chair by the time McManus arrived.

She said, without rancor, "Okay, Mac, I'm leaving. An old friend of mine called me." She nodded at the open-mouthed Farrell. "I knew better than to hit your end of town, Mac, but I haven't been able to persuade George to leave. Be seeing you, Georgie."

Farrell got blusteringly to his feet. "Now, listen," he began.

McManus said, "Son, you had enough for tonight. Goldie ain't good company for you. Trot along, Goldie."

She swished her hips out of the tavern. Farrell raged, "Listen, you may be a dick but you don't shove me and my friends around! You—"

McManus said, "Yeah, I do. You're a nice-looking fellow and I wouldn't like to throw you in the clink. But you had enough for tonight; you better go on home."

Farrell jammed his hat onto his curly hair and swayed out. McManus went back to the bar and ordered another drink. *The skunk,* he was thinking. *Not good enough to shine his wife's boots. Leaving her in a new shanty with no lights or gas and swilling beer with a female like Goldie. Somebody ought to kill him!*

CHAPTER II

Splendid Louse

DURING THE COUPLE of months that followed, because the woman, Sue Farrell, represented everything Putnam McManus had ever wanted, he checkd and double-checked on the situation next door. If he had known the word, he might have called it anomalous. He didn't know the word, so he merely called it the screwiest set-up he'd ever ran into in all his forty-four years.

He didn't mean to pry; he was simply curious on account of the woman. She was

"If you don't, by tomorrow, I'm going to kill you," he whispered.

Cy Grange's only child, and Grange was, of course, crazy about her. McManus even managed to get acquainted with the old man in order to get the full story. Sue had been back East at school when she met George Farrell. They had eloped and their baby was well on the way before they told the old man.

Sure, he'd been upset, Grange told McManus. He'd checked on Farrell and found he'd never been able to hold a job, that he was a hustler and a dime-a-dozen promoter who'd been in plenty of woman trouble. So because his daughter loved the scoundrel so blindly there'd been but one thing to do. That was to bring them home and give Farrell a job. For a time they'd lived at the old man's house. Grange was a little close-mouthed about exactly what happened, but anyway, Sue had finally told him they wanted to move to themselves. Hence the house on Delaney Street.

McManus had rolled his unlighted cigar into the opposite corner of his mouth and said, "Whereabouts is he working for you now, Mr. Grange?"

And Grange had snapped back, "He ain't in trouble, is he?"

McManus shook his head.

"Well, I got him managing a service station out on Magnolia," Grange said. "Funny thing, when he keeps at it he's a damned good man. He makes a lot of friends that swear by him, then he'll blow up and be gone for a couple of days, God only knows where. But when he comes back he's always so sorry and penitent that Sue and everybody else forgives him and he gets away with it. Personally, I think he's a little crazy."

McManus knew what he meant, all right. Because the second evening the Farrells lived next door to him, George had come and leaned over the fence with a sheepish smile and said, "You're McManus, aren't you? I want to shake hands with you and thank you for what you did last night." In spite of his opinions, McManus found himself shaking hands with him. Farrell was tall, with black curly hair and flashing eyes and a captivating grin. He went on, "I sure don't deserve what I've got, Mr. McManus, a wife like Sue and a kid like we got. I'm not making any excuses, understand, but just between us, I get so damned nervous sometimes that I got to take off or go nuts."

McManus waited, watching closely.

"I love Sue," continued Farrell, "and I love the kid, but sometimes I figure I wasn't cut out for marriage. The poor kid can get to bawling sometimes and I think I'll go nuts." He looked pretty woebegone about it, but McManus blasted anyway.

"Sure," he said, curling his lip, "you go so nuts you have to tank up and run around with people like Goldie Weber."

Farrell said, "You can't say a thing I haven't said to myself, mister. Not a thing."

Sue Farrell came out on the back porch and waved. She was wearing a green slack suit and looked like something that had just stepped out of a fashion advertisement.

A contrasting picture of Goldie Weber leaped before McManus' mental eyes. Not that Goldie was bad-looking in a big-blonde way, but just that since having her trouble Goldie seemed to have coarsened and hardened. Goldie had been a registered nurse, and a good one, too. Except that she worked for the wrong doctor and got her feet wet. When the doctor went up to the State pen for a little illegal practice, she'd gone, too—for a little over eighteen months. She'd had guts enough to come back to town, however, though how she lived now McManus wasn't exactly certain. He had ideas, of course, as did other detectives.

He waved back to Sue Farrell, told George he was through in his garden for the night, and went back into his own house. He tried to listen to the news but was too restless. So he opened a couple of bottles of beer and sat down in an easy chair in the darkened room and began to think of several missing-person cases he was working on. But gradually his mind went back to the people next door. Why was it, he wondered, that swell women like Sue Farrell almost invariably seemed to get stuck with worthless trash like George Farrell, and seemed to go on loving them no matter how many times they messed up the detail?

So he sat there in the darkness visualizing Sue and the kid sitting in his mother's easy chair because she belonged there. It made him realize that something had always ben lacking in his life—and now he knew what it was.

He grunted in disgust, thinking of George Farrell, said, aloud, *"That lug isn't worth killing!"*

Of course it was just an expression.

CALL it woman's intuition, call it anything you like; the fact remains that a good woman always realizes when a man loves her, often sooner than the man himself realizes it. A month later it was McManus to whom Sue came about the check. She wasn't tearful and she wasn't defiant.

She said, "He's not bad, Mr. McManus. Sometimes I think he's a little crazy, specially when he gets to drinking. So there is the check out for one hundred and five dollars, and this man Patsy Bivona that owns the Tavern has already turned it over. He says he's going to make an example of George." She paused, bit her lip. "You see, it isn't the first time that George has pulled something like that when he was drinking."

McManus said, slowly, "So he sobered up and came sniveling to you, hah?"

"He's not bad, he's just wild when he gets to drinking. Things sort of get on his nerves—!"

"Things like his own wife, and maybe like his own kid crying or something like that?"

He wished he hadn't said it the moment

Hitting him, McManus grated, "If you were worth killing, I would do it here and now."

the words were out. He patted her on the shoulder clumsily and said: "Well, I'll go in and see Mayberry. He's in charge of rubber checks. You know we got a pretty tough State law about anything over fifty bucks, but I'll see what I can do."

He'd walked with her out of headquarters then, watched her walk up the street toward the busline, her head erect, her shoulders thrown back.

He fixed the cheek. Mayberry owed him a few favors. And he saw Patsy Bivona at the Tavern. Bivona said hell, maybe he hadn't ought to have turned the check over to the prosecutor, but that punk had beaten him three or four ways from the ace already. McManus said he didn't blame Patsy too much but there was one sure way of keeping from getting beat again.

Patsy nodded. "He's had his last drink in here," he said. And McManus figured some good had come of it, at least.

Funny, though. Farrell never mentioned the deal to McManus. Not that McManus wanted any more thanks than what he got from the brown eyes of Sue Farrell. Farrell spoke to him just as if nothing had happened, and from time to time leaned over the fence as if he were welcome and sure of himself.

Sue solved that little mystery by asking anxiously if McManus had ever mentioned her visit to him in connection with the cheek. He said no, and cursed Farrell more than ever. What kind of louse could the guy be? Pull a hot one like that, and then leave it laying right in his wife's lap to clear up! Probably never asking her how she did it, and getting offended if she ever mentioned it again!

"I'd like to wring his neck," he said, to himself.

CHAPTER III

Don't Make Me Kill!

IN LATE NOVEMBER CY GRANGE picked himself up a bad case of influenza. By the first of the month it had turned into pneumonia, and by the fourth or fifth it was pretty well established that he was fighting for his life without much chance of coming out winner.

Sue Farrell spent as much time as possible with the old man, of course. And as luck would have it, the Farrell kid picked that particular time to get sick. Often, when Sue went to visit her father, McManus could see George Farrell walking the floor with the crying kid, his face black with rage.

That Saturday night, around eight o'clock, he saw George drive away from the house. Sue, he knew, was at her father's bedside. He wondered a little vaguely if he hadn't ought to call her and tell her that her husband had gone on another tear, leaving the sick kid by itself. Around nine, he walked out into the yard and heard the thin wailink of the baby floating across to him. By God, he'd call her, and then he'd hunt up Farrell and break every bone in his body. But just at the particular time that he made up his mind, the baby quit crying. He went back into the house and turned on the radio. After all, it wasn't any of his business. Farrell wasn't worth getting jammed up about.

Around ten, someone beat on his door, yelled his name. It was George Farrell, hatless and coatless, wild-eyed and fearful.

"The kid," he managed to gasp. "Something bad has happened to the kid!"

McManus hotfooted it for the other house with Farrell, Farrell chattering all the time. "I had the radio turned on," said George, "and was trying to read the paper. I didn't hear a thump or anything, but when I went in to see how he was, there the poor little devil was on the floor. I think . . . I think he broke his neck falling off the bed!"

The kid was still on the floor; Farrell hadn't had the guts to touch him. And the poor little tyke wouldn't cry any more. It was easy to see that.

McManus said, "And you've been here all evening, Farrell?"

"All evening," sobbed Farrell. "If I just hadn't had the radio on maybe I'd have heard—!"

McManus hit him, knocked him against the wall. Farrell didn't try to get up. He did get to his knees and cover his face with his hands. He did sob, "Don't tell her, McManus, don't tell her! There's no use to hurt her any worse! Don't tell her!"

McManus grated, "If you were worth killing, I'd do it right here and now. You're

damned right I'm going to tell her, tell her you sneaked out and left that sick kid all alone."

Wildly, Farrell cried, "I'll deny it! Damn you, she won't believe you, she loves me! You'll never know where I was! I'll deny it, I tell you! I'll tell her you're saying it to make trouble, because you want her yourself! I'm no fool, I can see, damn you!"

McManus looked at the slobbering, sobbing creature with a feeling of helplessness.

He didn't tell Sue Farrell the truth. Even though at the funeral his heart was torn in a thousand pieces to see her cling to George Farrell's arm, dry-eyed, but racked by sobs. He couldn't. He knew he was whipped.

A week later, Cy Grange died.

THE next few days were the hardest of McManus' life. He watched the woman he loved moved about like a robot, with absolutely no expression on her face. The Japs attacked Pearl Harbor and McManus was scarcely concerned about it. Every day of the world he went next door—and every day of the world, he found her the same. Dry-eyed, unsmiling, but like an automaton. He did a thousand and one things for her, never receiving a smile or even any thanks. It was as if she didn't even notice.

After Grange was buried, McManus noticed that Farrell was away from the house more and more. Through her windows he could see her often, at night, simply sitting, her hands turning in her lap, staring straight at the light with unseeing eyes.

Chief of Detectives Smoot thought he was overworking and offered him a couple of weeks off duty. McManus merely grunted his thanks and refused. *Hell,* he thought, *I've got to work. I've got to work up to a murder!*

He found Farrell that same night in a downtown bar, slid into the booth across from his and stared at him for a full moment. Farrell was drunk enough to be defiant. McManus said, dully, "Go home. She loves you and she needs you. Go home."

Farrell laughed. "Home? To hell with home! Don't you think I have any feelings myself? Do you want me to go crazy sitting around with her? Great God, I'm no iron man!"

He read the loathing in her eyes and knew it was for him, who was trying to save her.

Fascinated, McManus stared at Farrell's throat, noted the cords on either side, noted the Adam's-apple. He thought: *My palms about those cords, my thumbs on that piece of gristle. A little pressure—*

He never knew where the words came from, but he said, "Farrell, you're going away. You're going to join the army."

Farrell looked at him and his face grew white in spite of the flush of the liquor. What McManus didn't know was how he, himself, looked. How his eyes were cold, and slotted, how his own lips were pulled back from his teeth, how his heavy hands were clenching and unclenching convulsively atop the table.

"Yeah, tomorrow," he went on. *"And Farrell, if you don't, I'm going to kill you!"*

He got up, then, slowly, stolidly, his eyes never leaving those of the man he'd threatened. Finally he turned and walked away.

The next day George Farrell joined the army.

McMANUS never really knew what he had expected, or whether he really expected anything at all. He did know one thing, did realize one fact. That was that he would have killed Farrell as surely as night follows day if the man hadn't gone into the army.

Strangely enough, Farrell's action seemed to snap his wife out of her lethargy of grief. She looked proud as any wife would look when she told McManus what George had done. She began to take a bit more pride in her appearance, to spend more and more time at the business her father had left to her. Everytime she received a letter from her husband she insisted on reading it to McManus.

McManus used to grin crookedly, listening. Her eyes would be gleaming and her mouth would be red and moist, her whole body transfixed with pride in her man. She sought McManus' advice about what to send George in training camp, what presents a soldier would like to have. He always suggested something.

Months passed and Farrell, as a radio gunner, went to China and the Fourteenth Airforce. The funny part was that the guy was good! Not that he boasted, particularly, but there was confidence in his letters, and he'd scarcely been over two months before he was cited. He sent the citation home, and in the same letter there was a few words for McManus.

"Tell your next-door neighbor McManus," said the letter, "that I've run into an old friend of his out here. She's a nurse, a 2nd Lieutenant, and a very wonderful person. Her name is Weber. He'll know who I mean."

How the hell Goldie Weber ever managed to get into the army with her record, McManus never knew. But there she was, and there was Farrell taking a sock at him, McManus, with the information.

There was a long period of time when Sue didn't receive a letter at all. McManus consoled her as best he could—*and all the time he was hoping that Farrell was dead!*

TO keep her mind from her troubles she threw herself into business and in spite of rationing and the OPA, had the Grange stations going as they had never gone before. She came dashing into McManus' little office at headquarters one day, radiant with happiness. She had a letter. Not from George, from Lieutenant Weber, nurse. It said that George was doing nicely, after having spent thirty-two days walking out of the jungle after their B-23 had crashed. He was not wounded, but had been badly broken up. As soon as he was able, he would write.

He wrote, after another thirty days, from the General Hospital at Calcutta, where he had been moved. McManus saw that letter, too. He saw Sue's face as she read it, saw that her eyes were hot with tears and her chin was firmly set.

He asked for a divorce. He said that their marriage, as he saw it now, was a mistake. That he had found someone for whom he really cared and who really cared for him. He said McManus, her next-door neighbor, would know all about Lieutenant Goldie Weber.

McManus' heart did a flipflop. What a break for Sue Farrell! What a solution for everything that troubled him, McManus.

He made a church steeple of his fingers and kept his eyes on the steeple as he talked. Flatly, colorlessly, he told her all the facts about Goldie Weber and the trouble she had gotten herself in, the sentence she had served. When he had finished, he looked up.

Sue Farrell said, "No! Not to a woman like that!" Her words began to pour out in a veritable torrent. "Does he think I can't read between the lines? He's there in India aid this woman is close to him. Naturally he'd grow romantic about her, or any other white woman after what he's been through. No, I tell you the answer is no!"

He said, "It wasn't only India, Sue. He knew her here."

She shook her head stubbornly.

"I don't want to hurt you," he went on, hating himself for doing it. "The night the baby was killed he wasn't at home, Sue. I saw him drive away. I can't exactly prove it but I'll bet my life he was with Goldie Weber."

She got up, then. She backed across the room, her face white, her eyes wide, her hands clenched over her breast. The wall stopped her. He sickened, then, reading

the loathing in her eyes and knowing it was for him, for McManus, who was only trying to save her.

She said, "I don't believe you! I don't believe you!"

She turned and stumbled blindly out of the dingy room.

McManus prayed: *Oh, God, let him die! Let him die there across the world from her. Don't let him keep on hurting her like this. Don't make me kill him.*

CHAPTER IV

For Irony

HE DIDN'T BOTHER HER for a long period of weeks. She nodded to him when they met, in their yards or on the street. He saw her come home late at nights and learned that due to a shortage of help she was operating the biggest of her stations herself. He didn't even know that George Farrell had been sent back to the United States. He did wonder where she went on weekends, always being gone over Sunday. At last he learned.

She knocked at his door one Monday night and came in to sit once again in his mother's old chair. The same floorlamp danced across the red gold of her hair and the same feeling of utter emptiness and aloneness swept through McManus.

She said, "I'm sorry for the way I've been acting, Mac. I . . . I . . . understand why you did it, why you wanted me to divorce him." She looked at him openly and frankly. Miserably he stared back at her, knowing exactly what she thought. She thought, he knew, that he had deliberately lied about her husband to influence her in getting a divorce because he, McManus, wanted her so badly.

"I'm sorry it can't be that way," she went on. "I'll even admit it might be better if it were . . . were you and I, Mac, instead of the way it is."

He nodded. He felt like an old, old man.

"He's back," she said softly. "Been back over a month, over here at Coxe General Hospital." That explained the weekend trips she had been making. "He's . . . well . . . they call him a psychoneurotic, say he's pretty well cracked-up mentally." She read the question in his eyes, shook her head. "No, Mac, more than ever the answer is no. He needs me now—even though he still says he wants a divorce. He wants to see you, Mac. I don't know what for. Will you go over with me?"

It was only forty miles to the town where Coxe General Hospital was located. They didn't talk much on the way over. At the gate they obtained passes and Sue, of course, knew the direction to be taken. It was a little shocking to McManus to see the heavy iron wire that formed the doors to the psycho section. Down the hallway he saw men walking casually about in maroon-colored robes. They looked all right to him.

So they waited in an anteroom off the entrance, and bye and bye the big doors clanged and George Farrell was in the anteroom with them. He grinned at McManus.

To Sue, Farrell said, "I want to talk to him alone." She got up, wordlessly and left the room. Farrell sat down and lit a cigarette with steady fingers.

He was thinner, much thinner than when McManus had last seen him. Long hospitalization had left him pallid, had emphasized the gleam of his black eyes. He said, "The army says I'm crazy. I'm going out on a Section Eight in a few days."

McManus said, "You sound all right to me."

Farrell laughed. "I *am* all right. Oh, I'm nervous at times, I get to brooding now and then." He dragged deeply on the cigarette. "When I get like that anything can happen. I'm not wholly responsible." There was a jeering note in his voice.

McManus said, harshly, "What do you want? What do you want from me?"

Farrell leaned back. "Still love her, don't you, McManus? If you didn't you'd never have come over to see me."

McManus glared at him and Farrell laughed. "Do you kiow how they work a psycho discharge? Somebody has to assume responsibility. She's my wife, so she's willing. They send an attendant with me from here right up to my front door, then I'm in her hands."

McManus' hands trembled badly as he lighted his cigar.

"I want a divorce," said Farrell calmly. "You're going to talk her into giving

me one. Right now she's got that martyr complex and won't listen to me. You've got to make her listen to you."

"Why do you want a divorce, damn you? Haven't you done enough to her?"

Farrell threw back his head and laughed. *And again McManus' big hands formed into hooks; he stared fascinated at the corded throat and the Adam's-apple.*

Farrell roared: "This is funny! You love her and want her but you want me to keep her."

McManus got up slowly and moved toward him. Farrell quit laughing but the bright gleam built up in his eyes. McManus said, "Is it the Weber woman?"

Farrell nodded. His voice softened a little. "I know what you're going to say. So what? She's no good, I'm no good, and water seeks its level. We've got to have each other."

"What does Goldie say about that?" sneered McManus. "You couldn't make a dime for her."

Farrell snapped, "What does she say? She says if I can't find a way out of this she'll do it herself." He got up. "You think I've put Sue through a lot of hell, don't you? Okay, then get a load of this. If you can't talk her into divorcing me decently—and with some dough for me—well, you haven't seen anything yet. Just remember I've got an out—I'm not altogether responsible for what I do!"

TWO weeks later Farrell was home, and two weeks after that Sue came to the house to see McManus. She looked ten years older; utter fatigue was written on her features.

"—I just don't know," she ended up. "Is he really so psychoneurotic as he pretends? He's forgetful. He's nervous. When he's sleeping you take your life in your hands if you touch him."

McManus winced at that.

He said, "You could have him—?"

She shook her head. "I'd never have him committed or even sent back to a Veterans' Hospital." She bit her lip, seemed to be thinking something over. At last she opened her handbag and took out a letter. "This is from the Weber woman. She's out of the army herself. No, I didn't steal the letter; he gave it to me deliberately when he brought up the divorce thing again. Go on, read it."

McManus turned brick-red reading that letter. It was the most frankly passionate love letter he had ever looked at. He began to wonder if Goldie Weber wasn't a little on the neurotic side herself.

The letter concluded::

..And so you've got to do something, darling. You have got to be brave, to break it off someway. Remember the Oscar Wilde poem I used to quote to you?

For each man kills the thing he loves,
By all let this be heard:
The brave man does it with a sword,
The coward with a word.

..You've said we mustn't see each other until the thing is settled, and I'm trusting you. But I'm not made of steel and stone. Just remember one thing—if and when you need me, send for me. All hell couldn't keep me from your side.

It was signed Goldie *and the address was local.*

Bitterly, Sue said, "He's got to get her off his mind or he'll never get well." Sue hesitated. "Isn't there anything at all you can do about it, Mac?"

Grimly, he thought: *I can kill him! I can put these two good hands around his throat and choke the life out of him.*

He shook his head. "I can't do anything with her, if that's what you mean, Sue. I couldn't arrest her for writing your husband letters."

She put the letter back, turned the purse over and over in her hands. "I went to see her," she said, dully. "She laughed at me. Mac, I'm afraid, not of him, or of her. I'm afraid of myself. I told her if she didn't let him alone I'd kill her!"

McManus lifted her out of the chair and shook her until her teeth rattled. He raged and ranted at her. And when he loosed her she simply turned and walked out of the house.

McMANUS wasn't asleep around ten that night when the squad car pulled up in front of the Farrell house. He watched the two patrolmen circle the house with their flashlights, watched them cast the lights on each window and door. He heard

Farrell's high-pitched, near-hysterical voice saying, "I tell you there was someone, someone was trying to get in at me!"

One of the patrolmen said, "Well, there's no one now, Mr. Farrell. You scared him away, all right. We'll keep an eye on the house the rest of the night, so don't worry."

McManus smoked in the darkness, wondering, wondering. A little before eleven he saw Sue's black sedan pull into the drive, go back to the garage. The light was on in the kitchen, and after she went in the back door, McManus could see Farrell, seemingly excited, telling her about the prowler.

McManus went to Houston the next day on a case and stayed three days. His mind never left his problem—and Sue's problem—during all the time he was gone. The picture of her, utterly tired out, worried to death, aging by the hour, was constantly before him. He could hear Farrell's words over and over, "And when I get like that I'm just not responsible."

It was ten-thirty at night when he got back home from Houston. Exactly ten minutes later he heard the roar of the gun. His blood ran cold as he sped across the yard toward the back door of the Farrell house, which was ablaze with light. His own gun was in his hand.

Farrell gibbered in the door that led from the kitchen to the dining-room, a shotgun in his hand. "I told them, I told them," he half screamed. "He was in the kitchen, I heard him and I saw him!"

McManus heard the scream of the prowl-car siren, knew that someone had called up already. He took the shotgun away from Farrell. The wall by the stove was filled with shot from the gun. He said, "There wasn't anybody, Farrell. Quit playing."

It couldn't have been timed better, he told himself. Sue arrived from work about three minutes after the prowl car. She got Farrell quiet. A little later, she said to McManus, "There was someone, Mac. Look at the screen door."

There was a slit in the screen above the latch, enabling someone to unhook the door. He examined it closely and shook his head.

"Somebody made the slit," he agreed grimly. "I'll just take this gun on home with me, Sue."

Sue didn't answer.

Two days later Farrell came over himself and demanded his gun. He wasn't, he said, going to take any more chances with prowlers. McManus gave him the gun.

He had the letter already written. As soon as Farrell left he went to the post-office and mailed it. He didn't know whether to feel good or bad, to feel like a saint or the devil.

BECAUSE of the sincerity in his voice she trusted him. He talked about a thousand things to keep her mind occupied, but he, himself, managed to hear the cab. It seemed to him that he could almost hear the click of heels going down the drive, could almost hear the squeak of the screen door opening so stealthily.

A gun roared, blasted the night darkness. She leaped to her feet, wild-eyed, headed for the front door. From the Farrell house front porch came George Farrell's screams. "Help! Help! Help!"

McManus passed Sue, shoving her roughly aside. Farrell in his pajamas, shotgun in hand, was still sereaming on the front porch. McManus snatched the gun, shoved him into the house.

"The backdoor, the backdoor," gibbered Farrell. "I heard him just like the other night. I—!"

His eyes grew wide with disbelief. His wife, Sue, entered the front room breathlessly.

"You?" he said, in a hoarse whisper. "Not . . . you?" He turned and ran reeling through the kitchen to the back porch, McManus and Sue behind him.

Goldie Weber had been blown clear off the few steps by the blast from the gun. Farrell was crouching over her, crooning over her, madness in his eyes.

McManus said, "Go in the front room, Sue. Do you understand?"

She was like a walking dead woman. She nodded. She said, "I understand, Mac. He meant it for me, didn't he?"

McManus didn't even answer. She turned and left the kitchen. He went into the darkness and found Goldie Weber's purse, took something from it and put it into his pocket. Again he heard the wail of a police siren approaching.

(*Continued on page* 94)

By LEW MERRILL

NO WITNESSES

POLICE CHIEF JOHNNY DRAKE, of Repton, was old enough to be a philosopher. He had been on the force of the little town for nearly forty years, and police chief for almost half of them. One of the things that he'd philosophized about was how evil could be justified by the mercy of God. Especially after the war began, when bestial things were happening all the time.

For example, there was the sinking of the hospital ship, *Medora,* at night, as she lay at anchor with all her lights blazing, and the red cross showing plain. Twelve nurses went down when she sank, besides two hundred-odd wounded soldiers.

One of the nurses was named Evans. She was a woman of middle age, who had been posted to Repton when it became an army center. Repton was a sleepy little town, with only six members on its police force. It had suddenly found itself crammed with soldiers, MP's, nurses, all the paraphernalia of an army corps.

While he was trying to reconcile the death of these twelve women with divine justice, Chief Drake remembered, a little while before the detachment sailed, Nurse Evans sitting in his office with him, talking excitedly.

The old chief said: "You're ready to swear you recognize him, lootenant?"

"Recognize him? Why, I was the attendant nurse when the operation was performed! Twenty years—fifty years would not prevent my recognizing him."

"Well, now, lootenant, supposing that's correct. You'll be piling up a lot of trouble for yourself. Why not let it go? Why stir it all up after twenty years?"

"Because it's an infamous case. It's well known all through medical circles. I shouldn't be doing my duty if I didn't denounce that man. That's why I've come to you."

"I dunno I've got the authority, lootenant. Why don't you go to your commanding officer?"

"Because she hates me, and wouldn't raise a finger to help in the matter." Nurse Evans, a middle-aged woman, looked the picture of frustration. "Something's got to be done. Won't you act in the case?"

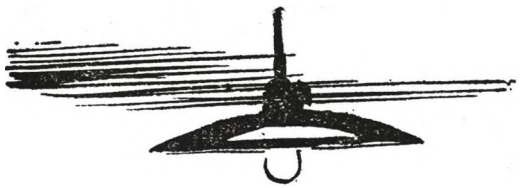
"You don't want to let bygones be bygones?"

"I certainly do not—and won't."

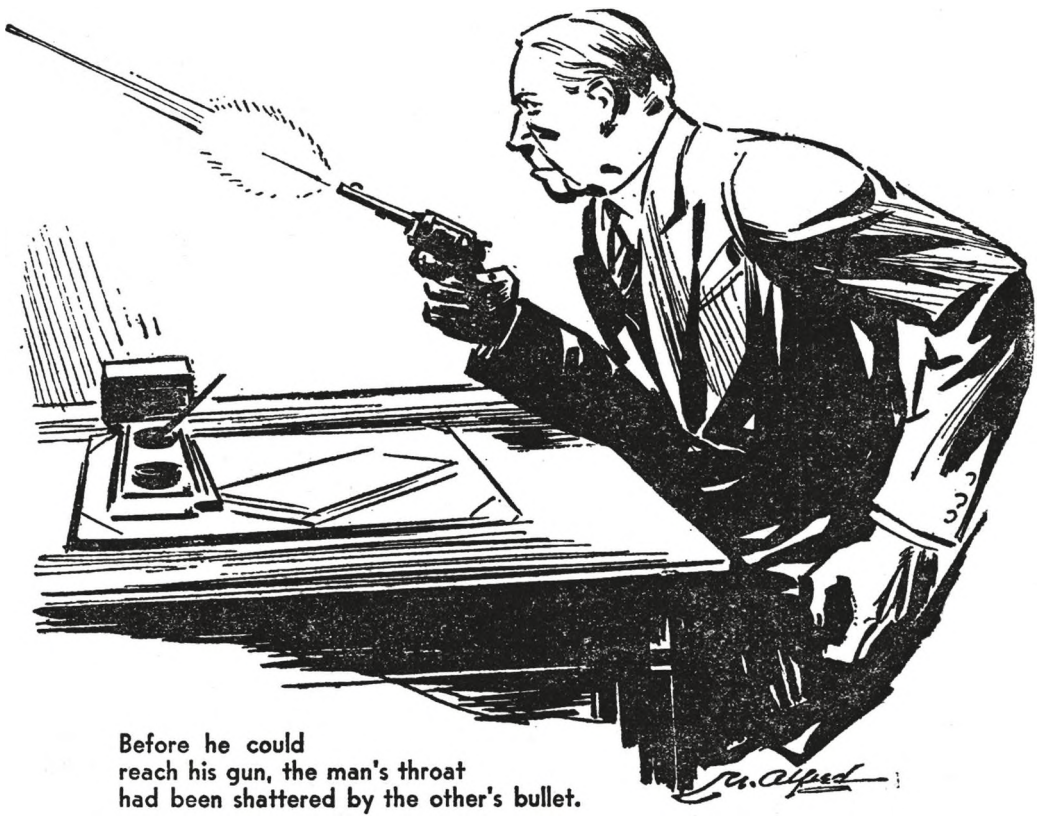
"He didn't recognize you?"

"No!"

"Seems to me," said Drake, "your best



Because Doc Curtis had saved the chief of police from blindness, the chief felt called upon to save Doc from the consequences of a mistake the doctor had made twenty years before



Before he could reach his gun, the man's throat had been shattered by the other's bullet.

course is to make an affidavit before a notary, and submit it with a letter to your commanding officer. It ain't a criminal case, and so I dunno what I can do."

Next day the detachment had been ordered away for embarkation. And Nurse Evans had gone down on the *Medora*. If she hadn't, what would have happened to the man who might have been harmed by her survival? That was when Chief Johnny Drake really became a philosopher.

HAL CURTIS, eye, ear, nose, and throat specialist, was not too old to volunteer, but he was too old to be drafted. Because hundreds of people throughout the State swore by him, he had decided that he could do more good by remaining in Repton, and continuing his civilian practice, than by enlisting in the service, which had plenty of specialists.

Besides, the army called on him often enough, when some especially delicate case of eye or ear surgery required an expert.

Curtis had come to Repton some fifteen years before, and had achieved his reputation within a few years. People said there wasn't a doctor like him anywhere in the

south. He told you the truth, too. There wasn't any humbug about Doe Curtis. If you were going blind, he told you just how long it would be before you'd need a Seeing Eye dog.

But the cures he'd effected! Consider old Johnny Drake. Glaucoma, a progressive eye disease that always ends in blindness, unless it's caught in time. Doc Curtis had caught it, operated, and now the old police chief could see as well as ever.

And Mayor Johnson's little girl, with mastoid disease. All the town knew how Doc Curtis had found her dying at home, no time to rush her to the hospital. He'd sent for his surgical chisel and mallet, and chipped away the iron-hard bone behind her ear on the kitchen table. And she'd got well. That was one of the town legends.

And folks really needed Doc Curtis more than the army did. That was why he stayed on the job, the only civilian eye, ear, nose, and throat specialist in the town.

It's strange, but it's true—the bigger they come, the harder they fall. The Greeks knew it. Instinctively men know it today. For nearly twenty years Fate had been stalking Hal, like a tiger following the trail of a buck. Once it had sprung, wounded him, lost him. If Nurse Evans hadn't gone down on the *Medora,* Hal would have been caught. Now, only old Johnny Drake knew.

And Johnny Drake, the police chief, with his eyes bright and clear behind his shining glasses, would have given—well, almost given his eyes for Hal. The secret was safe with Johnny. But, of course, Fate generally has at least two hooks on her line.

(Just incidentally, Hal wouldn't operate for two or three years after starting practice in Repton. He had to finally, a dangerous mastoid case. After that he operated regularly. The other doctors were amazed as they watched; wondered why he'd been hiding his light under a bushel for so long).

HE stepped out of the pretty house he'd built. A low-slung white house, with green shutters at the windows, and clumps of rhododendron growing under the windows. Just an average home of a well-to-do man in a pretty little southern city. In the middle of the lawn, a traditional magnolia. Around the white picket-fence tulip beds, iris beds, phlox, and zinnias due to appear in season. At the door, Kitty, to kiss him goodbye. A charming, clear-eyed southern girl, not dreaming that a female corpse, dragged here and there by the wash of the Pacific tides, could have wrecked life for her.

Kitty's arms around Hal's neck. "I'm turning you out to work, you old damnyankee. How's Myra Turnball coming along? Will you have to—have to—?" Kitty's voice broke.

"No, I won't have to take out her eyes," said Hal. His voice faltered too. "It's not glioma. I was sure of it from the first. She'll pull through all right."

Kitty said: "You know, darling, you're just as much a hero as if you were storming ashore on Guadalcanal or Saipan. No one could go through more agonies of soul than you, with so many people on your hands. Don't think that I don't understand. I wish I were more serious, more fit to be your wife, you hero."

"You're okay," said Hal, and then Topsy came running out of the house. "Didn't kiss me goodbye. Didn't kiss me goodbye," she chanted, running to her father.

"Didn't see you," said Hal, lifting her in his arms.

"Daddy, what are you going to bring me back tonight?"

"Do I have to bring you back something every night?" Hal demanded.

"Sally James said, after you cut off her ears, and sewed them on again, you gave her some chewing-gum."

"Well, maybe that's so, but I had a tough job sewing back Sally's ears. You see, I'd sewed them back wrong. I sewed her left ear on the right side, and her right ear on the left side, and I had to cut them off and sew them back again. That's why I felt she rated some chewing-gum."

"Really, daddy? Then you're not the swell doctor everybody says you are?"

"No, I'm just a dope, Topsy. Howsoever, maybe there will be a piece of candy for you when I get home—maybe, if my patients don't bother me too much, and make me forget."

MAYOR JOHNSON, passing, raised his hand. "Hiya, doc! How's tricks?" he

Watching the two turn in at the Medical Building, Drake became really interested.

called.

"Same old tricks," said Hal. "Government wants me in the army, but I guess Repton needs me more. I'm doing the best I can."

"You always did that, doc," said the mayor. "If they take you away, we'll start the Civil War all over again."

Hal passed on downtown. In his fifteen years of residence he had come to love the little southern town, with the trees along the streets, and the friendly neighbors. He loved the sacramental feeling of seeing everybody, passing the time of day, exchanging jokes. Repton had become a sure refuge from the filth and horror of the past.

That female corpse was no longer recognizable. But Hal didn't know Fate puts two hooks on her line. She was angling

for him now.

Hal called to old black Mose: "Hello, Mose! How's that kid of yours making out?"

"Fine, Mister Doctor, fine," said Mose, beaming all over his face. "He's breathing through his nose now, like you ordered he was to done. Yas suh, Mister Doctor, he done that ever since you took out those annydoids of his."

"Keep him breathing that way," said Hal, and continued on his course toward his office. He had an operation at the hospital that morning, one of the kind he hated to perform, although the old lady would still have one fairly good eye to see with when he was through. And then there were old Martin's cataracts. It required good judgment to know just when the lens was sufficiently opaque for removal.

And it had required more nerve than Hal thought he could ever summon, to start those eye operations in Repton.

But then, after all, he had had that loaded gun in the drawer of his office desk for fifteen years, ready for use in case Fate caught up with him.

As for Nurse Evans, who had gone down on the *Medora*, two weeks before, Hal hadn't the faintest notion that she was anyone whom he had met before. She had assisted him twice, when the army had called for his services in difficult cases. He had found her a competent assistant. He hadn't liked the way she had stared at him, but middle-aged nurses were often queer. If they didn't get married, they took their duties too tragically.

How could he have guessed that she had assisted him twenty years before, in a hospital in a certain northern city, several hundred miles distant?

REPTON wasn't so crammed with soldiers, now that the detachment had gone overseas, so it was again possible to notice strangers in town, and police chief Johnny Drake prided himself on his observation.

He noticed the two men walking slowly along the street. One had his arm through that of the other, and the other man was carrying a white cane, and seemed either partly blind or paralyzed. The chief watched them, and wondered what their business was in Repton. Although there were some three thousand persons in Repton, even before the army moved in, Chief Drake could spot a stranger instantly.

He walked slowly after them till he met Halloran, on his way to take up his duties at the school crossing. "Notice those two?" he asked.

"Yeah, look like strangers to me."

"They are. Now why would strangers want to come to Repton in times like these? I'm wondering whether the old one, with the glasses, might be in the FBI monthly Law Enforcement Bulletin."

"I didn't get a clear look at him, chief, but I guess I'd best do so."

"That's it, Halloran. Follow them, see what their business is. I'll take the school crossing till you get back."

He stood at the corner, holding up the cars, shepherding the kids across, laughing, threatening, admonishing them, till Halloran came back, some half an hour later.

"They registered at the hotel," said the cop. "Must have come in on the morning train. Old one's called Sampson. Younger one is Smith. They've got a double room together. Didn't state their business."

"You go look up the FBI Bulletin," said Johnny Drake. "See if they resemble anybody there. I'll stay on the job here. Take your time, Halloran."

HAL CURTIS had looked in at his office, then finished his business at the hospital. He'd had to break the news to the old lady that she would have only one eye to see with after he was through, and she had taken it in the proper spirit. "At eighty-five," she said, "I ought to be thankful if I've got one eye. So long as it lasts."

"It'll last," Hal promised her.

The matter of little Billy Ames's tonsils didn't take very long. Hal waited till the little fellow woke up, then gave him a monkey on a pole. Billy crowed with delight, and didn't think about his sore throat. After that, Hal walked through the ward, talking to his patients, and then went to his office on the ground floor of the Medical Building.

He didn't employ a nurse. An eye, ear, nose, and throat specialist doesn't have to have one. He seated himself at his desk,

and made some notes on his records. He opened the top right-hand drawer. In the separate rear compartment was the loaded gun that had been there for fifteen years, waiting, in case Hal's past caught up with him.

There had been five years of blackmail. The fellow had traced Hal to a northern city, had bled him white for all those years. Hal had escaped, thrown him off his tracks, gone south to Repton. Fifteen years of security now—but still, the loaded gun in the rear compartment of the top right-hand drawer.

He sat down, brooding. After those fifteen years of security, it seemed impossible that Fate could ever catch up with him. In the beginning it had been incredible that he could be living free of fear and blackmail. Then, after Kitty came into his life—later still, when Topsy appeared—there had been a long period of suspense. Gradually the tension had lessened. Now, for some years, Hal had lived a life almost free of fear. And yet—what would he do if Fate did catch up with him?

The blue barrel of that gun in the top right-hand drawer wasn't the answer; it was the enigma.

OF THE two strangers who had arrived in town, the one with the white cane was ensconced in his hotel room, listening to the room radio. The other had left him, to stroll along the tree-sheltered streets of Repton.

He stood outside Hal's house, and looked over the picket fence. Topsy, playing on the lawn, looked up and saw him. He called, "Come here, little girl."

Topsy went to the fence. The man asked, "Is this Doc Curtis's house?"

Topsy said: "My daddy is Dr. Curtis, and only his friends call him 'Doc'."

"My, you're smart, ain't you! Where is your daddy now?"

"He's working in his office, curing people's eyes. And I don't like you."

"You don't, huh? You'd like me a lot less if you knew what I'm here for," muttered the man.

Kitty came to the door. "Topsy, come here!" she called. She didn't like the man on the other side of the fence either, and she didn't care to waste time to ask him his business. Topsy ran in, and the door slammed. The man turned, and made his way back toward the downtown district. He'd found out all he'd wanted to know.

Hal's office door was always open, and had his name on it in large letters, and a sign, "Walk in." That saved his patients a lot of trouble. One doesn't want to have to go hunting for a doctor in Medical Building. The man saw the sign, and walked in. Beyond the waiting-room he saw Hal sitting at his desk, and he wetn up to him. He stood in front of him, leering, and yet a little uncertain, possibly a little afraid.

He recognized him as the man he had known twenty years before, only somehow bigger—in mentality, rather than in stature. Hal looked up.

"Well, sir, what can I do for you?" he asked.

"Don't recognize me, doc?"

Hal looked at the little man with faint dislike. It wasn't quite disgust, because nothing human was alien to him. He could see at a glance that the man was a body-servant, one who ministered to the bodily needs of other men. There are of course two kinds of body-servant. One who serves his fellows out of a love of humanity, and is ennobled by that service; the other who capitalizes on human weakness. But Hal had no idea where he had seen the man before.

"I don't believe I do," said Hal. "What's your trouble?"

"Take a good look at me, and cast your mind back," said Hal's visitor. "The name's Newman."

Of course Hal knew now, knew that Fate had overtaken him, although he still had no remembrance of the man's face. Involuntarily Hal glanced down at the top right-hand drawer of his desk, which was slightly open.

"You've had a long run for your money, doc," said Newman. "Fifteen years since you skipped out of Centerown. Twenty since I was your orderly in the hospital back north."

Hal didn't answer. He saw disaster like a living thing, running neck and neck with him.

"Don't seem to recognize me, doc. Well, why should you? A surgeon don't rec-

ognize the orderly who carried out the trimmings. You paid me for five years, to keep quiet on what I knew, and then skipped out on me. You owe me fifteen years' arrears. It's a fair cop, ain't it?"

And, since Hal was still silent, Newman leered into his face. "Don't remember Nurse Evans, do you?" he asked.

No, Hal hadn't the slightest remembrance of any Nurse Evans. To him, nurses had been mere human machines, who assisted at his operations, and wiped his forehead, so that no drop of sweat should fall down upon the open wound, and infect it.

"Well, she was my cousin. I got my job as a corpse-snatcher at the hospital through her. And it happened she was posted here last month. She went down on the *Medora*. But she'd wrote to me that you were here. She wanted justice done. And she hated you, doc, not so much because of that mistake you made, but because all the nurses hated you. You forgot they was just girls. You treated them like robots. She thought you'd gotten away with it too long. That's why I'm here."

"I've paid you thousands in the past," said Hal.

"Yeah, and you slipped away, and you've had fifteen years in this town. It looks like you're comfortably fixed. I'm not taking monthly installments any more. I've been making a few inquiries. I'll say twenty grand, to wind up the estate. How long will it take you to dig up twenty grand, pal?" asked Newman.

HAL hadn't moved all the while Newman was talking. The sight of that blue-metal gun in the top right-hand drawer gave him strength. Only he didn't yet know whether to use it upon Newman, or himself, or both. That problem required consideration. But he'd never go back to the old life of servitude, of being bled by the blackmailer.

"That kid of yours is kind of cute, doc," said Newman. "Interesting at that age, ain't they! I stopped to take a gander at your house. Yeah, you're fixed comfortable, doc. Doing a rush business, too. I'd say twenty grand was letting you down easy."

Hal, thinking hard, said: "I might be worth fifteen, if I put a mortgage on my house, and sold my war bonds, and other investments. It would take time."

"Don't stall, pal. You can raise twenty grand. Your bank knows what you're worth. Mr. Worth and me are moving out of this town on the 1 A.M. train in the morning."

Worth! The name seemed printed in huge black letters on a white background. Yes—Worth! Hal had refused to let that name cross the threshold of his memory those twenty years, but it had always lain dormant there.

"Worth's with you?"

"Yeah. I'm ready to shoot the works."

Hal had been insured, like nearly every doctor, and Worth had got plenty—not enough to recompense him for what he had suffered, but plenty.

Newman looked around the walls. "I see you ain't got the usual medical certificates tacked up," he said. "Henry Crewe, graduate *cum laude* from McGill and Johns Hopkins. You decided not to fake new ones when you took the name of Curtis? Oh, doc, you're in one hell of a mess.

"Lemme give you the straight dope. Old Worth has spent thousands trying to trace you these past twenty years. He's sworn to get you. And he's at the hotel with me. He don't see too well with that one blinker of his. I can tell him it was a false steer. He's had nothing but false steers these twenty years, and he can stand for another. But it'll be twenty grand in cash in this office, at midnight tonight. Cold cash, small bills, unmarked. Or else—well, or else.

"Hell, doc, you're the most notorious case of infamous malpractice in America. Nobody's forgot you. Now, what's the answer?"

"I'll give you my answer here at midnight," said Hal.

"Yeah? Well, what's it going to be?"

"I'll tell you when you're here."

HALLORAN said: "Nope, they don't semble nobody in the Bulletin, and I've looked back two years. And it don't seem reasonable that any Nazi agents would be attracting attention to themselves by pretending to be half blind. The old one, Sampson, seems to be a manufacturer. Smith, the younger one, is his attendant. Seems that Mr. Sampson injured his sight

in a chemical explosion at his works, and can't get around very well by himself."

"Who told you this?"

"Bill Knowles, desk clerk. Smith ain't backward about talking. They're pulling out on the 1 A.M. that goes through to Atlanta."

"What are they doing in Repton?" asked Johnny Drake.

"Sizing up the town. Looking for a place to start a factory. Sampson's got some chemical patent that's coining the dough during the war, and it's going to do still better in peace time. Seems like they're pleased with Repton, only they've got business in Atlanta, and then maybe they'll be coming back."

"Huh!" said Johnny Drake. It might be all right, and then again it mightn't. Somehow it didn't quite make sense, an old manufacturer, half blind, paying that hurried visit to Repton, and leaving for Atlanta in the middle of the night.

"Okay, Halloran," said the police chief. "I'd like for you to take the desk tonight."

"Sure, chief," said Halloran.

Chief Johnny Drake was worried. It might be all right, only something was vaguely stirring in his mind. He hadn't quite plumbed it yet. The set-up didn't look quite right, and the set-up was everything. Why had the old man and his attendant stopped off in Repton?

But there was something more, something that he was trying to pin down, and couldn't at the moment. He knew he'd get it later.

"What time's your patrol turn?" he asked Halloran.

"I'm on night duty this week," answered the cop. "But if you want me for the desk, maybe Brady—"

"No, I'm taking over your duty for tonight," said Johnny. "So I guess I'll go out and get me some supper."

HAL saw his patients through the day, an endless stream of them. A snack of lunch at the restaurant in the building, and then the long afternoon session. An eye, ear, nose, and throat specialist has one thing on the general practitioner; he doesn't often have a visit to pay. Hal's work was done in the hospital and in his office.

The man might have turned the gun on himself if they hadn't intervened in time

Testing vision, mostly. Routine work. One could think, even while one was saying, "Is this better or worse?" He wanted not so much to think as to sum up his position, get everything clear, and know just what he was going to do. Of course, if twenty thousand would have purchased complete immunity for the rest of his life, that would have been feasible. Only it wouldn't.

Take those five years when Newman was blackmailing him, after he started practice in a little northern town, and Newman tracked him down. He'd started paying fifty dollars a month, and ended up with a hundred. Newman demanded two hundred, and Hal had thrown up his practice and disappeared.

No, compliance wasn't feasible, and so Hal hadn't done anything about getting that twenty thousand. He had said, "Is this better or worse?" to the patient in the chair, while thinking of Kitty and Topsy, and the fifteen years of grace that were coming to an end.

He called up late in the afternoon: "I won't be home to supper, darling. Yes, I've got a lot of work. And I've got an appointment with a man late tonight."

"Here's Topsy. Don't you want to talk to Topsy?"

"Hello, Topsy! How's the world treating you?"

"Daddy, what are you going to bring me back tonight?"

"Why, Topsy, you'll be asleep when I get back."

"But you can bring me back something for tomorrow, daddy."

"I'll see," said Hal. He hung up, took one of several packets of candy from the top left-hand drawer of his desk, and slipped it into his pocket. The right-hand drawer was still a little agape, enough for Hal to see inside it. And still he didn't quite know what he was going to do with that gun.

He sat brooding, long after the last patient had left him, looked through some of his case-histories afterward, and waited for the time appointed. Nothing had changed, except that the top right-hand drawer of the desk was slightly more open.

IT was a few minutes before midnight when Newman came, and Hal welcomed his arrival almost with relief. Through the partly open door of his office he could see through the reception room into the outside hall. Medical Building was never shut, and Hal heard the steps of two men on the tiled floor, and then saw them coming into the outer room. As they entered, Hal recognized old Worth.

He had been a middle-aged man that day, twenty years ago; he was an old man now, with a snow-white beard, and he leaned upon Newman's arm. Newman conducted him to a chair, and Worth sat down. Newman came in, the same leer on his face. He strutted in, rather, and took his stance a foot or two away.

"Well, doc?"

It was only then that suddenly, irretrievably, Hal knew what use he was going to make of the gun.

"I said, 'Well, doc?' I'm ready for that twenty grand. I guess you've got it. Hand it over. Well, what are you waiting for? We've got a train to catch."

"I've decided not to pay you anything, Newman. You see, if this was the end, the very end, maybe I would be weak enough to. But you'd only be raising the ante, like you did before. So I'm paying nothing."

Newman's knees sagged, and he put out one hand against the edge of the desk. "Now listen, doc," he said, in a whining tone, "before God, I'll never trouble you again. I'll sign a paper, if you like. But I've got to have that money. You've got it on you. You went to the bank and borrowed it today. Hand it over—you hear me?"

The whine had risen to an imprecation. Hal sat there motionless, all except his right arm, which was slowly, and almost imperceptibly extending itself along the desk, in the direction of the top right-hand drawer.

"No, Newman," said Hal, "it's no use. I didn't get that money, and you'll never see another cent from me. Now do your worst!"

CHIEF JOHNNY DRAKE had done plenty of sidewalk pounding when he was a younger man, and it was rather a relief to renew his old occupation. Not that there was ever anything much happening in Repton. There hadn't been a burglary for longer than Johnny could remember. There had been a few brawls since the camp was established, but the military police looked after the soldiers. On the whole, Repton was just as peaceful as it had always been.

Chief Johnny Drake looked in at the hotel. "How's things?" he asked the night clerk, young Charley Bates.

"Mighty slow for an army town," said Charley.

"Plenty of vacant rooms?"

"A good few. We don't get transients like we used to do before the war."

"How about old Sampson? He's looking for a factory site, I heard?"

"Yeah, that's what Smith was saying. I dunno. They're leaving on the 1 A.M. for Atlanta. Kind of queer. He don't seem altogether right in his head."

But at that moment the creaking elevator stopped, the gate was flung open, and Sampson and Smith appeared. Johnny Drake made himself as inconspicuous as possible, watching them in a mirror behind the night clerk's desk. The old man did seem pretty helpless. Smith had his hand on his arm, and was guiding him.

When they were outside the hotel, Chief Drake nodded good-night to the clerk, and followed them. He could see old Sampson's white cane in the dark, and hear it tapping the sidewalk. The two weren't going in the direction of the station, and, anyway, they had no baggage with them. Johnny's curiosity was aroused. Of course, Smith might be taking the old man for a nightly constitutional, but that didn't jibe, somehow.

It wasn't until the two turned in at the Medical Building, however, that Drake became really interested. Of course the old police chief had been in there plenty of times. He saw at once that the light was on in Hal Curtis's office, but then Hal was a careless sort of guy about little things—often let his light burn all night.

Walking softly, some distance behind the pair, Drake suddenly saw Hal sitting at his desk. That was queer. It was queerer still that Smith was leading old Mr. Sampson into the waiting-room.

Smith helped Sampson into a chair, and walked through to Hal's desk.

JOHNNY DRAKE had once—in the beginning of his career—been what was called a "gumshoe" cop. Like many heavy men, he was extremely light on his feet. Three or four perfectly noisless steps, and he was in the waiting-room. Then the thick carpet lessened the necessity for precaution. Johnny sat down quietly in a chair and watched the drama inside. From where he was, he could see and hear everything.

Hal said: "No, Newman, it's no use. I didn't get that money, and you'll never get another cent from me. Now do your worst!"

"'Worst' is the word," said Newman. "Worth's waiting out there. He's sworn he'd get you for what you did to his eye. Doc, if you really didn't get that dough, we'll wait over till tomorrow. But tomorrow is the last day."

Old Worth, whom Johnny knew as Sampson, was leaning forward in his chair, listening eagerly, straining, like a horse in harness. And now Johnny had the setup—thanks to Nurse Evans's story.

"Damn it, you've got no chance, doc," said Newman. "If you're afraid that I'll be coming back for more, I'll sign a paper, admitting that I'm a blackmailer. That'll hold me, I guess. But it's twenty grand, or else.

"You've got to pay, if you want to keep your reputation in this town, and your home, and your family. Hell, there's no other way out for you. What a sensation when it gets into the papers—the notorious Dr. Crewe, found at last, the man who became a byword in medical circles, *the man who took out the wrong eye!*

"No one's forgotten, doc. There ain't no place where you can hide, except the grave. And old Worth's sworn to get you for what you did to him. He's inside there, but he don't hear very well, and I can tell him it was a false steer. Make up your mind, damn you!"

"I've made it up," said Hal, very softly. "I told you I'd have your answer for you tonight." Hal's hand was now upon the rim of the desk drawer, and still Newman didn't understand.

"You're just a sewer-rat, Newman. You have hounded me long enough. You don't deserve to live. You're not going on living, Newman."

A jerk, and the drawer was out, the contents clattering with it to the floor. But the gun was in Hal's hand. Blue-metaled, dull, yet gleaming in the electric light. A scream broke from Newman's lips. His hands shot up.

"Don't be a fool, doc. I didn't mean—God!"

It was only an instant before the gun was pointing at Newman's heart, but it seemed to Hal like an eternity, while time was dissolved, and the blue muzzle of the gun was slowly mounting. Newman's right hand dropped to his waistband. It never reached it.

The roar of the discharge filled the room

(*Continued on page 94*)

SHERIFF-TOOTH

One terrific movement broke the chain that joined the cuffs. Then he sent Soames staggering.

By
HUGH
SPEER

It seemed a shame to Sam that the ancient and honorable office to which he devoted himself had been stripped of most of its former prerogatives, even including that of "sheriff-tooth". But even so, Sam did not take his duties lightly

SHERIFF SAM SMALL, of Hampton, wasn't the sort of man who complained about trivial matters, but he did resent the morning train that the railroad put on in Summer, because he could never get used to it, and it awakened him at six o'clock, when he was enjoying his beauty sleep.

The purpose of this train was to link up with the New York and Boston expresses that arrived almost simultaneously, a few minutes before six, at Campbell City,

twelve miles away, and deposited their Summer visitors there. At other seasons of the year there were only two trains a day from Campbell City, arriving at Hampton at 10:30 A.M. and 7 P.M.

The lake was a full mile from the sheriff's house, and it was bordered with Summer cottages.

Hearing the train, Sam groaned, and his wife mumbled sleepily: "What is it, Sam?"

Sam said: "That durned train is on again. No morning sleep for me till Fall."

"You ought to learn to get used to it," said his wife waking up. It was an odd fact, but during the twenty-seven years of their married life Mrs. Small had come to worship her husband as the embodiment of all intelligence, detective skill, and kindness. She didn't in the least mind the loss of her own beauty sleep, so long as Sam could be reassured.

They were both awake now, in the gathering dawn. Sam said: "Well, it's another Summer. Durned if I know why I stay on in this job, since the legislature passed that act depriving sheriffs of their police duties, except in cases of emergency. I guess it's just because I like Hampton. But I could get me a job over at Campbell City with the feed grain people that would be worth twice what this brings in. I'd sure like for you to have a little city life, Milly."

"Don't fret about me, Sam," said Milly. "I'm happy here. And remember, you're filling an ancient and honorable office, like you always say."

"Yeah," said Sam. "Sheriffs go back to the dawn of Anglo-Saxon history. Reeves of the shire, we were, and we could put the hue-and-cry on suspects. And did I ever mention 'sheriff-tooth?' That means that landowners had to provide entertainment for the sheriff at the county court. And we attended on the judges, and executed writs. And now that ass Soames, of Campbell City, usurps our ancient prerogatives, and ain't got brains enough to know the history of them. Just a dumb cop who's got to be chief of police. Yah!" said Sheriff Small.

"WHAT were you telling me about Mrs. Stanley coming back last night?" asked Milly.

"Why, I saw Bill Thompson driving her to the lake after the seven o'clock train came in," said Sam. "It's kind of early for her to be up here. I guess Mrs. Kimball will be glad of some female society. She don't often come up with Kimball for the May fishing either."

Milly giggled—and when a woman of fifty giggles at her husband it indicates a deeply happy relationship. "I guess you know what brought Mrs. Kimball up," she said.

"Meaning Mrs. Winters?"

"She got ideas about that woman last Summer, Sam. She kind of guessed it was not only the trout and pickerel fishing that brought Kimball up here in May."

"But she ain't sent Maud Winters about her business. Maud's still housekeeping for them," said Sam.

"That don't prove anything. Mrs. Kimball's the self-containing kind. She'll wait and watch until she's sure. That's why she's keeping Maud Winters on as housekeeper. When she cuts loose—well, I've seen her tantrums."

Sam said: "It's a pity Maud don't stay home and take care of that husband of hers. Since he was released from the mental home, he's been roaming the country, trapping and fishing. He needs a woman to take care of him, poor feller."

"She's no good," said Milly. "I shouldn't be surprised if something was due to break in that situation, Sam."

Something broke at that very moment, in the shape of a wild hammering on the door of the cottage, and the shrill outcry of women.

"Jest a moment," Sam shouted from the window, while he hurriedly thrust on coat and pants. He ran downstairs, and flung the door open.

Two women were outside—Mrs. Kimball and Maud Winters, the housekeeper. They had wraps over their nightdresses, and the nightdresses were spotted with blood.

"My husband's been killed—murdered—his throat cut," gasped Mrs. Kimball.

Sheriff Sam looked at the two women with slow scrutiny. Mrs. Kimball, fifty years of age, slight, delicately built, with graying hair; Maud Winters, a coarse peasant type, with fingers and hands thick

"Take it easy now," he said. "He didn't mean to hurt anybody."

as a man's, but with an exuberance of physical development.

"Who did it?"

"A man, a madman, who broke into the cottage while I was asleep," sobbed Mrs. Kimball.

"My husband," said Maud Winters.

"Wait a minute. I'll come with you right away," said Sheriff Sam. Three minutes later he bundled the women into his ancient-vintage car, and started along the lake trail.

SHERBROOKE KIMBALL was a wealthy manufacturer, who came to the lake twice each Summer, for the Spring and Fall fishing. A hearty type, a man of fifty-odd, with earthy appetites that included both the trout that rose in the Spring and the coarse exuberance of Maud Winters. He wasn't a pleasant sight now, lying on the floor with his throat cut by the pair of heavy garden scissors that was lying beside him, drenched with his blood.

The murder had been a very vicious one. The killer had used the scissors as if he had been cutting some textile tissue, and must have possessed phenomenal strength, or else have been animated by a frenzy of rage.

There had been a desperate struggle, for the dead man had been a strong and haelthy human animal. Furniture had been overturned, and the victim's last moments could be accurately gauged from the trail of blood leading from the bed almost to the door.

The gibbering women had followed Sam into the bedroom. He ordered them outside —pushed them outside without ceremony. He slammed the door on them, and took stock of the situation.

Of course he didn't touch the scissors, but the blood on them, in his opinion, would make the deciphering of fingerprints impossible. Beside the bed an electric clock was ticking softly. Sam felt along the cord, and found it had been cut. The clock was one of those that run for a brief period by the ordinary clock mechanism, immediately after the electric current has been turned off.

The telephone was beside the bed, and the cord of this had also been cut. Evidently the killer had determined to give the women no chance of calling for help, until he had had time to make his getaway.

Sam inspected the cuts in the two electric cords. They were rather crude; they had been done after the killing, for there were specks of blood on the cords, and the scissors had been blunted by the atrocious use to which they had been put.

The women were shouting, and hammering at the door. Sam opened it. He pushed them back as they tried to enter. "I'll hear your stories now," he said. "One at a time. Your husband's dead, Mrs. Kimball, and nothing can bring him back to life. So take it easy. There's never any need for hurry."

"I woke up and heard a maniac fighting with my husband in the next room. I ran in, and then I ran out, because I was scared to death. I saw a big man, a sort of giant, slashing at my husband's throat with a pair of scissors."

"There were no lights on?"

"No, but there was a moon. I saw him plain enough. He was Maud Winter's husband, the madman. But he was cunning enough to cut the telephone cord after he'd killed poor Charles."

"You saw all this, ma'am? He didn't threaten you?"

"It all happened in a few moments. When I ran into the room, I saw my husband lying dead. Winters cut the line, and then darted out of the door."

"What did you do then, Mrs. Kimball?"

"I called for Maud. She was already at the door. We didn't know what to do. I'd have stayed with Mr. Kimball, but I could see he was already dead. So we both ran to your house. That's all I've got to say. You've got to find that murderer."

"We'll get him," said Sam Small. "I was saying, there's never any need for hurry. You're absolutely sure that you recognized Winters?"

"Absolutely. Why are you asking me that?"

"Well, now, Mrs. Kimball, what reason could Winters have had for killing your husband, who's given him work at good wages, every year when he came up?"

"He'd been a case in a mental home, and everybody knew he was crazy. He got shocked in the first world war, and never got over it. Everybody around here knows he should never have been let out. You know that too."

"Maybe," said Sam. "But what for he should have picked on Mr. Kimball?"

"How should I know? Maybe they had some disagreement about some money. You don't ask madmen for their reasons. What are you cross-questioning me for? Do you think I killed my husband?"

"Why did you come up so early this year, ma'am?"

"To be with my husband, of course. Now, are you going to look for Winters, or are you afraid?"

"JEST a moment," said Sam. "Mrs. Winters, you positively recognized your husband as the murderer? Won't you give me your own version of what happened?"

"I was woke up by the sounds of the struggle. I ran into the room, and my husband bumped into me at the door, and knocked me down. I recognized him, of course. Who'd be mistaken in that great ape? Before I could pick myself up, he was gone. Why don't you start trying to find him, instead of asking me fool ques-

tions? Do you think I killed Mr. Kimball?"

"I sure do not," said Sam. "Now take it easy, Maud. Did you see your husband slash the cord of the phone?"

"Yes, that's the last thing he did. He cut it with those scissors, and then threw them down and bolted for the door. I guess he thought, in his crazed mind, that he'd stop our calling for help, and, if he'd been sane, he'd have realized he could be a mile away by the time you got here."

"He's been living with you—I mean, at your cottage out in the woods?"

"I've been supporting him, since he came back, but I don't know what he's been doing since I came to keep house for Mr. and Mrs. Kimball. Why don't you go after him? And we want Mr. Kimball's body removed, and the house cleaned up."

Sam studied her. He didn't like that remark. But then they'd both be suffering from the shock. He went back into the bedroom, and neither of them followed him. Sam wasn't an expert, but he had seen dead people, and there were no signs of rigor mortis as yet. It was a few minutes after six when the women had reached his door. Allowing that Kimball had been murdered about five- thirty, rigor mortis wouldn't begin for at least three hours. And now it was—

Sam looked at the electric clock, and realized that the ticking had ceased. The mechanism had run down. He went up to it and looked at it. Yes, he knew that make of electric clock. Several of the Summer residents had them, because the local electrical supply sometimes went out of use for at least an hour. When the current failed, the mechanism took over for about three hours.

The hands pointed to seven-forty. Kimball had been killed not later than half-past four.

Sam went out. "I'm calling up Police Chief Soames, of Campbell City," he said. "And we'll find Winters."

"But where are we to go? What are we to do? We don't dare stay here, for fear that madman may come back," said Mrs. Kimball.

"You'll jest have to stay here," said Sam, "because Chief Soames will want to question you. You can bolt the door and bar the windows. Anyway, Winters won't come back. And I'm warning you not to go into that room, or touch a thing, till Mr. Soames gets here."

"NOW you stop fretting, Milly," said the sheriff to his wife. "Yep, it's true Mr. Kimball has been murdered—stabbed to death. And both the ladies recognized Winters as the killer. Which being their testimony, of course I've got to go and bring him in."

"Sam, you're not going after that madman? Why, he'll tear you to pieces!"

"Well, my dear," said the sheriff, "I figure that this is one of those cases of emergency, in which this new law requires a sheriff to perform his ancient and honorable duties. Now you jest stop fretting."

"But, Sam—"

Sam reached up to a peg, and lifted down his belt. In the holster was a gun, an ancient, but still serviceable Colt. There was also a pouch attached, with cartridges inside. Sam spun the cylinder. Milly grabbed at his arm.

"Sam, listen to me. You're always so pigheaded when you get to harping on the new law. You're not a young man any more, Sam, and Winters could kill you with his bare fists, if you missed him the first shot. Or even if you hit him. I can't bear it, Sam, I can't—"

Milly broke down in tears. That was one thing that Sam found it hard to take. He looked at her, bowed before him, and he thought of the old and honorable tradition of the Anglo-Saxon sheriffs, which it had always been his business to uphold.

"Milly, darling, be reasonable," he pleaded. "I've got to do my duty, even if I die in the line of it. But I ain't going to die, bringing that dumbbell back with me. Why, honey, if I shirked my job, what a laugh—what a laugh Soames would have on me."

Then it was that Milly showed the mould in which she was cast. She stood up very straight. "Yes, you're right, Sam," she said. "I'm proud that I'm the wife of a brave man, Sam."

At that moment there came a knocking at the door. Sam spun about. "Come in!" he growled.

He thought it was Mrs. Kimball or Maud

Winters. But it was neither. It was a dark-haired, middle-aged woman, of refined carriage, and there was alarm on her face.

"Oh, Mr. Small, has anything gone wrong?" she queried.

Sam's face relaxed. "Why, Mrs. Stanley, I'm glad to see you with us again," he said. "I saw you driving up to your camp last night."

"Sam, you're hiding something from me. If I know anything, I know that old poker-face of yours. Something's happened, I know. I heard such sounds of quarreling last night, coming from the Kimball's cottage, across the lake. It woke me up, and frightened me. The Kimballs aren't that kind of people."

"What time was this, Mrs. Stanley?"

"At twenty minutes after four this morning. I turned on the light, and looked at my wrist-watch. The noise must have gone on for ten minutes. Shouting, and smashing of furniture. I couldn't go to sleep again, I was so worried. I waited about an hour, and then, although it was still night, I called up, to know if anything was wrong, but I got no answer."

"You established contact, ma'am?" asked Sam.

"Yes, their phone rang, but nobody answered."

"Well, Mrs. Stanley, I suppose you've got to know the truth. Mr. Kimball was killed last night. Now take it easy, ma'am," said Sheriff Sam. "Both the ladies have identified Winters as the murderer."

"Oh!" gasped Mrs. Stanley. "Maud Winter's husband? I thought they'd put him away in a home."

"Yep, but he was let out this Spring. Sit down, ma'am. Milly, get Mrs. Stanley a glass of water,"

"I'm shocked beyond all words, Mr. Small. Poor Mr. Kimball! And it might have been myself. I can't go back to my cottage after this. I can't go back until that maniac is captured."

"Naturally, ma'am," said Sam. "I was just starting out to bring in Winters. Now you make yourself comfortable with Mrs. Small here. I won't be long." Sam buckled his belt about him.

"But you're not going alone after that desperate madman?" cried Mrs. Stanley.

"My husband is a brave man," said Milly. "He'll do his duty, under whatever circumstances."

SAM stepped out into the hall, where he had his telephone, and called Chief Soames, of Campbell City:

"Hello, Soames. Yep, it's Sheriff Small, of Hampton. There's been a little trouble over here and I'm turning the case over to you, in conformity with this new Sheriffs Act. Oh, jest murder. Mr. Sherbrooke Kimball. You'll remember him. He and his wife came up early this year, for the fishing."

While the two women listened fearfully, Sam went on to give the gruesome details.

"You see, Soames, both the ladies agree that they identified Winters as the killer. Motive? That's a question for a jury, and it's no part of my business to pin motives on anybody. Where is he? I'm starting out to get him.

"Under this new Act, as I understand it, Soames, I'm deprived of police powers, except in cases of emergency. This looks to me like a case of emergency, seeing that Winters is running wild, and Mrs. Stanley, who's just come up to her cottage across the lake, is scared to go back, and is staying with my wife. So I guess I won't be straining the law if I arrest Winters.

"You'd best drive over here with the medical examiner, and photographer, and whatever other paraphernalia you think necessary, and take the case out of my hands, because you are in charge of police proceedings in this county, and I'm only a small-town sheriff.

"Wait for you and your officers? Why, I've got to take in Winters, Mr. Soames. This looks to me like a case of emergency, and a sheriff has to obey the law. And Mrs. Stanley is afraid to go back to her cottage while Winters is roaming around. Where does he live? You remember the Winters farm at the head of the lake. Used to be good sheep land before he went off his nut. No, I expect to pick him up, and to be waiting for you at my house. If I can't find him, I'll be waiting without him, to furnish you with details. Okay, Chief Soames, good-bye."

"Sam, you're not going to bring that mad murderer back here?" asked Milly.

"I've got to bring him somewhere, my

dear. But Soames ought to be here in three-quarters of an hour, and why don't you two ladies walk down to the post-office, and see if there's any mail for you? I think I'll have the whole mess cleaned up inside an hour."

Sheriff Sam called up Information at Campbell City. "There was a call for Hampton 866 around 5:30 this morning," he said. "Can you give me the exact time? This is Sheriff Small, of Hampton, speaking."

"I'm sorry, but the night operator went off duty at eight o'clock this morning," the voice came back.

"Can you trace the call?"

"Wait just a minute."

Sam held onto the line. Then the voice came back: "A call for Hampton 866 at 5:25."

"Thankee," said Sam, and hung up. He buckled his belt, and went out. It was a lovely morning, and the sun was shining through the maples around the lake. It was a walk of about a mile and a half to the little farm that belonged to Winters. He had run sheep on it successfully before he was stricken with his mental illness.

But Winters hadn't been of the killer type. He had drifted into a kind of schizophrenia, in which the world had grown strange to him, and he had been taken away to the State Asylum, from which he had been released early that Spring, supposedly cured by the insulin shock treatment.

Since then he had roamed, and trapped, and fished, and his wife had taken care of him, in a fashion, until the time when Kimball returned for the Spring trout fishing. Since then the woman had kept house for Kimball, and nobody had known much about Winters, because he lived his own life, and didn't interest himself in anybody.

HE walked into the village about twice a week, and bought his groceries at Madame Beaufont's store, and he seemed all right, except that he was rather vague, and didn't seem to remember his old acquaintances. Of course, Winters was a nut, but he wasn't the killer type. If he knew about the alleged relationship between his wife and Kimball, he'd never expressed himself on the subject.

If ever a man looked like a killer, that man didn't.

Sam strode along the trail toward what had once been the Winters farm, but was now going to ruin. He shook his head as he saw the encroachment of spruce saplings, always the advance-guard of the vegetation that wipes out pastures and fields.

The sheriff didn't seem particularly disturbed as he neared the Winters house. He just walked up, and then he saw Winters seated at the back, not far from the

lake. He was mending his fishing-pole, tying new guides to the bamboo, to contain the line. He looked up when Sam was within about three feet of him, and grinned.

Saul Winters was a huge fellow, some six feet three in height, and built like a bull. When he stood erect, his huge hams of hands almost touched his knees. As Milly had said, if Sam missed the first shot, Winters could kill him with those hands of his. But Sam didn't seem disturbed. He didn't even reach for his gun.

"Howdy, Saul," he said.

"Howdy, sheriff," grinned Winters.

"Know anything about that trouble over to Kimball's camp last night?"

"Trouble? Naw. I useter have enough trouble of my own. Ain't hankering after sharing other folks' troubles."

"Well, Saul, I've got to take you in," said the sheriff easily. "Kimball's been murdered. Now there's no charge against you at present, but we've got to investigate, you understand."

The fact of the murder didn't sink into Winter's consciousness. He looked up with open mouth. "Meaning that you're taking me to jail?" he asked.

"Well—maybeso, Saul. Jest for a time, you know, while we're investigating."

A beaming smile broke over Saul's face. "That's swell news, sheriff," he said. "You know, I'm a nut, and I was put away. And they let me out—I don't remember when. I didn't want to go. And didn't want to come back here. That woman sure made life a hell for me. I begged to be taken back to the asylum, but I had to stay here, and have her fussing and scolding around.

"Then she went over to live at Kimball's, and I've been happy since. I caught three rats yesterday, and four trout. But gosh, sheriff, I'd rather be in jail, where a feller can be free to think, and taken care of, instead of having to cook. And clean up, sheriff. I'm dreading that woman coming back and starting bawling at me because there's dust and dirt in the house."

"Okay, Saul. That'll be fine. Put away your rod, and come up to the house," said Sam.

POLICE CHIEF SOAMES, of Campbell City, had arrived only two minutes before, in a car, together with two members of the Campbell City police force, and the medical examiner, a slight, elderly doctor, with a graying beard; also the police photographer. He stared at the sight of Sam plodding up the trail, with the huge, gangling Winters a few paces behind him. Sam called: "Well, here's Saul Winters, Soames. Ready and eager to surrender, pending investigations."

Soames might have been just as stupid as Sam considered him, but he was no slouch when it came to police work. "Yes?" he answered blandly. "That's good." He moved forward to meet the curiously assorted pair, and extended his hand to Winters, who put out his hand automatically. Soames had him handcuffed in a moment.

The giant stood looking stupidly at his fetters. Soames said, "Haven't you got a pair of cuffs, Small?"

"Oh sure, sure I have. But Saul's a good feller. I knew he wouldn't make any trouble."

"Who's dead?" asked Winters.

"Mr. Kimball, the man you killed," snarled Soames. "Don't play the dumb fool, Winters."

Winters began to blubber. "What for would I want to kill Mr. Kimball?" he asked. "I made him a rod last year, and he liked it. Him and me have been friends a long time."

Soames shook his head, as if he was shaking off a fly. "All I know as yet is what you told me over the phone, Small," he said. "If both those ladies identified this fellow as the killer, I don't understand your bringing him in without handcuffs. You know, Small, I'm not so sure that this new Sheriffs Act, about which you're always kicking, was such a bad thing after all. For one thing, it places trained police officers in charge of investigations."

Winters shouted: "I didn't kill Mr. Kimball. I don't know what it's all about. All I want is to live quiet, and not be bawled at."

"That's quite an idea," said Soames. "A lot of folks would like to live that way. Let's get going, Small."

THE door of the Kimball cottage was bolted, and it was after repeated ham-

mering that it was opened, disclosing the two women in a state of hysteria. Maud Winters screamed at the sight of her husband, and raised two fists, almost as big as his, in an attempt to attack him.

Chief Soames pushed her away. "Take it easy, Mrs. Winters," he said. "We've got him, and there's no cause for worrying any more. Where's the body?"

Sheriff Sam conducted the party into the bedroom. Nothing seemed to have been changed or touched. There was the body of Kimball, lying on the floor, with the run-down electric clock beside the bed. While the examiner inspected it, the photographer conducted his search for fingerprints, and took charge of the blood-stained scissors.

Leaving Winters in the care of the policemen, Soames went back into the hall, where the women were standing. "I understand you both identified Winters as the murderer," he said. "How did it happen?"

Mrs. Kimball gasped: "I was asleep in the next room, and the noise of the struggle wakened me. I saw Winters cutting my husband's throat with those scissors. There was a terrible fight. My poor husband was a strong man. But he couldn't fight that maniac."

"Then he ran away?"

"Yes, after cutting the telephone cord. I suppose he thought that would stop my calling for help."

"Why do you suppose he did it?"

"Because he's insane. You don't ask insane persons for reasons. He shouldn't have been let out. . . . Oh, I don't know how I can go on living now that Sherbrooke's gone!"

"You identify him too?" Soames asked Maud Winters.

"Of course I do! Saul Winters ain't a man, he's a gorilla."

"And you saw him slash the cord?"

"I certainly did."

"Thats enough," said the police chief. He turned, to see Sam standing behind him. There was a cynical look on Sam's face that Soames didn't like. They'd tangled two or three times before, and the sheriff had generally gotten the better of the encounter.

"You've made your own preliminary investigations, I take it, Mr. Small," said Soames in a lofty manner. "I'll look at that cord."

"Cord of the electric clock is cut too," said Sam, stepping deferentially aside.

He raised the severed ends. "Clock ran on for three hours after the electricity was cut of," h said. "You know that make of electric clock. Stopped, as you see, at 7:40. That shows the murder was committed about 4:40. Mrs. Stanley heard the noise across the lake, and fixes it at 4:20. That's near enough."

Soames shouted: "Where were you at half-past four this morning, Winters?"

"I was to home, of course. That's one thing I can do, since that danged woman of mine went away. I can go to bed as early as I like, and git up as late as I please."

"You take a look at the man you killed," yelled the police chief, forcing Winters' head down, like a dog's, toward the body.

Winters blubbered: "That's Mr. Kimball, and I didn't kill him." He straightened himself, the gross body shaking, the face tear-stained. "But I'll kill the feller who did," he shouted.

Sam said: "Now go slow, Saul."

"Why did you kill Mr. Kimball, and why did you cut the cord of the clock, as well as the phone cord?" police chief Soames persisted.

"That's easy," interposed the sheriff. "The killer cut the cord of the electric clock by mistake, being sort of excited. Then realized the mistake when a phone call came from Mrs. Stanley across the lake, and so cut the phone cord too. It's when most folks can use their eyes, their deductions are wrong."

"Mr. Small," said Soames, with a sarcastic intonation, "I was questioning this murderer here. Your deductions may prove of value when the case comes to court, but for the present I should prefer to get first-hand information from Winters."

He turned to Saul again: "We've got no time to fool with you," he bawled. "I want your confession that you murdered Mr. Kimball last night, and I want to know why."

"Now go slow, Saul," said Sam.

SAUL WINTERS didn't go slow. With a terrific movement of his arms, he

smashed the chain that held the cuffs together. Raising both arms, he brought the cuffs down with a force that would have put Soames out for good, if they had landed on his skull.

Soames was quick on the job. He twisted his head sidewise, and the iron struck his right shoulder. But the force of the blow sent him staggering. In an instant the two policemen were on Winters, hammering at his head with the butts of their revolvers. Saul brought one cuff sweeping across the face of one of them, and sent him flying across the room. The other tried to fire. Before he could get his aim, Saul had brought down the other cuff upon his head.

The cop dropped as if he had been poleaxed. The gun fell from his hand, and Saul Winters had retrieved it before Chief Soames could regain his stance. Soames had his gun in his hand, but his arm seemed to have been temporarily paralyzed by the blow. He couldn't raise his arm. And Saul had the drop on him, though he was mentally incapable of understanding his advantage. He didn't try to shoot. He stood still over the body of the dead man, swaying like a wounded beast at bay.

Sheriff Sam took him by the arm. "Go slow, Saul," he said gently. "There's never any need to hurry." And he took the gun from Saul's hand.

The little sheriff put out one arm as Soames came charging forward. "Take it easy, Soames," he said. "He didn't mean to hurt anybody. He's kind of upset, being accused of killing Mr. Kimball. He made a rod for him last Summer, and Mr. Kimball was mighty pleased with it."

The detective who had been sent across the room was coming back, gun in hand. The second one was getting up dazedly from the floor. The photographer had backed into a corner, trying to preserve his apparatus. Outside, the medical examiner and the two women were huddling together in the hall.

Sam held the expropriated gun dangling by the muzzle. He kept his arm across Winters' chest, intervening his own body to protect the man. Winters had passed the violent stage. He was standing with lowered head, like a wounded bull.

Sam said: "Trouble is, Soames, you're too precipitous. You ain't allowed for the fact that Saul has had a hard time, being called loony, and shut up, when all he wanted was peace from Mrs. Winters."

MAUD WINTERS strode into the room, screaming: "I'd like to know just what you mean by that, Sam Small. What are you doing, trying to purtect that raving maniac? Why don't you let Mr. Soames shoot him and be through with it?"

"Because Saul is as innocent as an unborn baby," answered Sam. "As I interpret this new Sheriffs Act, a sheriff ain't allowed to exercise police duties, except in cases of emergency. Judging this was a case of emergency, I brought Saul in. But he couldn't no more have killed Mr. Kimball than you could have."

"Ho, that's fine," blared Maud Winters. "You ain't accusing me of having killed Mr. Kimball, then?"

"Certainly not. You couldn't have. Mr. Soames, why don't you take in Mrs. Kimball? It's as plain as the nose on your face, ain't it?"

Mrs. Kimball shrieked: "He's crazy. You're not going to let him talk any more?"

"Why, certainly," said Sam. "The Sheriffs Act don't specify that a sheriff ain't allowed to talk; it only says he can't exercise police powers except in a case of emergency. If it hadn't been for that, I'd have taken you in already, Mrs. Kimball, ma'am. But the sheriff's office is the most ancient and honorable office in Anglo-Saxon juris-prudence."

Soames blared: "I want that man, Small, and I agree you're crazy. Stand out of the way!"

"Now wait," said Sam, "and hold your horses. There's never any need to hurry. Just listen to deduction. That clock ran three hours after the cord was cut, which puts the murder at about 4:30. And it was 5:30 when Mrs. Stanley called up. She didn't get an answer, but she established contact. Which shows the killer had cut the wrong cord, and so she cut the phone cord then. But she was jest an hour too late to make good on that story that the cord was cut by Saul.

"Another point—if you'll look at them scissors, and then at Saul's and Maud

Winters' fingers, you'll see that nobody except Mrs. Kimball could have got her fingers through them openings in the handles up to the second joint. Mr. Kimball was killed in a frantic, mad tantrum like I've once seen Mrs. Kimball indulge in. But you can't snip through a man's throat with a pair of scissors unless you can use the second joint of the first finger, and the thumb. It jest can't be done, Soames. That's where the muscle power is located.

"The situation's plain as a pikestaff, but it ain't my business to explain it here. After Mrs. Kimball killed her husband, she and Maud Winters agreed to put the guilt on Saul, to save them both, and to rid her of this poor feller, who's as sane as you and me, only he wants quiet, and no more bawling out. Take them in, Soames. Maybe you'd like to give them the third degree first."

Maud Winters shrieked: "You don't give me no third degree. She did it! Of course she did it, because she was jealous of me and Sherbrooke. And I was a fool —a fool, to let her influence me to put the blame on Saul. But my hands are clean!"

"Well, that covers the case," said Sam. "I'm through, and I'm going home, and taking Saul on his way. I've got no further status in this case, under the Sheriffs Act, so far as I understand the purvisions of the same."

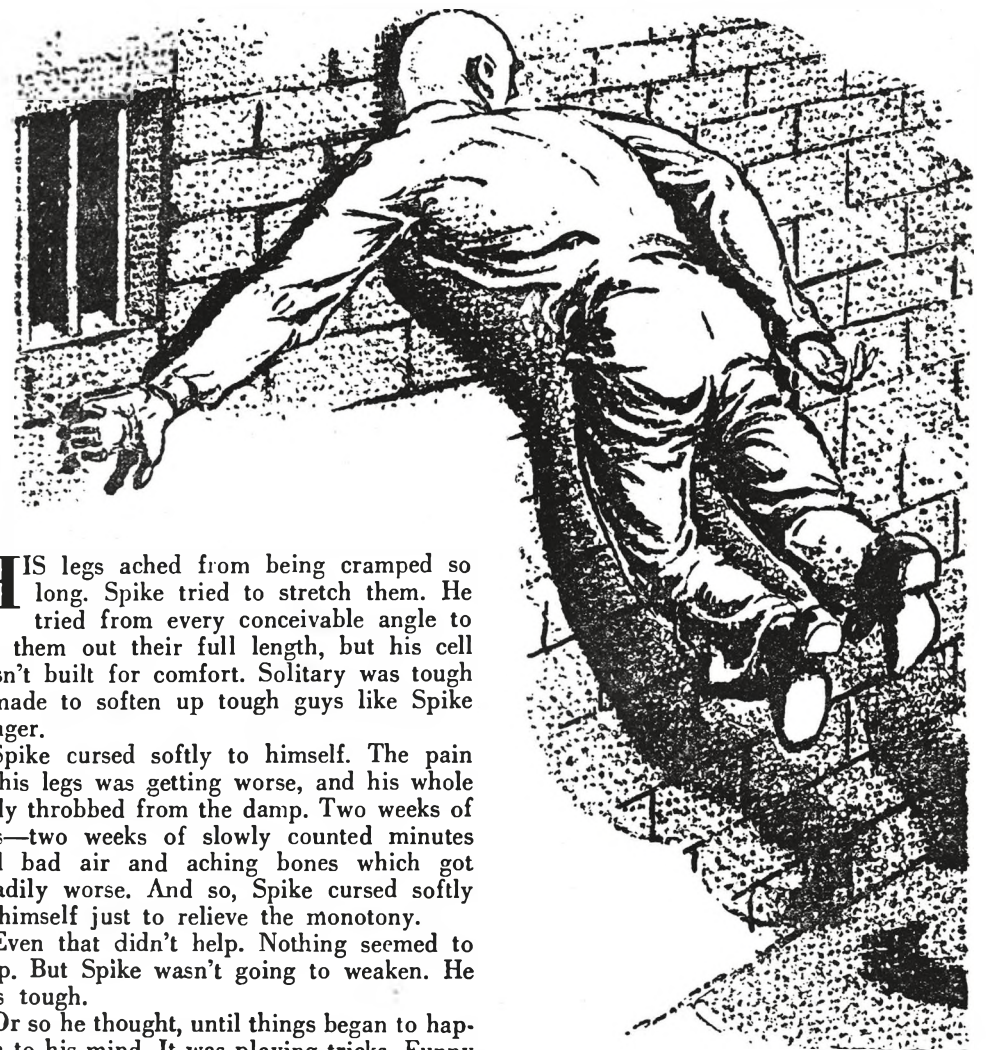
MILLY said: "Sam, it's too terrible for words. But no one except you could have found the guilty party, and saved poor Saul."

"Heck, there's nothing to it," answered Sam. "The only trouble is, folks don't use their eyes, especially ignorant police officers. Only one thing I regret, my dear."

"What's that, Sam?"

"Sheriff-tooth. They don't give that to sheriffs any more. They've got to provide their own entertainment. It's kind of a shame, seeing sheriffs are the oldest and most honorable element in Anglo-Saxon juris-prudence."

THE STIFF



HIS legs ached from being cramped so long. Spike tried to stretch them. He tried from every conceivable angle to put them out their full length, but his cell wasn't built for comfort. Solitary was tough —made to soften up tough guys like Spike Reager.

Spike cursed softly to himself. The pain in his legs was getting worse, and his whole body throbbed from the damp. Two weeks of this—two weeks of slowly counted minutes and bad air and aching bones which got steadily worse. And so, Spike cursed softly to himself just to relieve the monotony.

Even that didn't help. Nothing seemed to help. But Spike wasn't going to weaken. He was tough.

Or so he thought, until things began to happen to his mind. It was playing tricks. Funny tricks. Spike suddenly found himself dreaming about corpses, a whole roomful of stiffs. And the worst of it was, he was dreaming while he was wide-awake.

He knew those stiffs—he knew most of them well. There were a lot of his old friends and even some of his enemies. And they were sitting up in caskets, talking—talking about Spike and saying all kinds of nutty things. Stiffs had no right to do that, not even dead enemies.

"Got to get out of here," Spike told himself. "Got to get out of here, or I'm gonna crack."

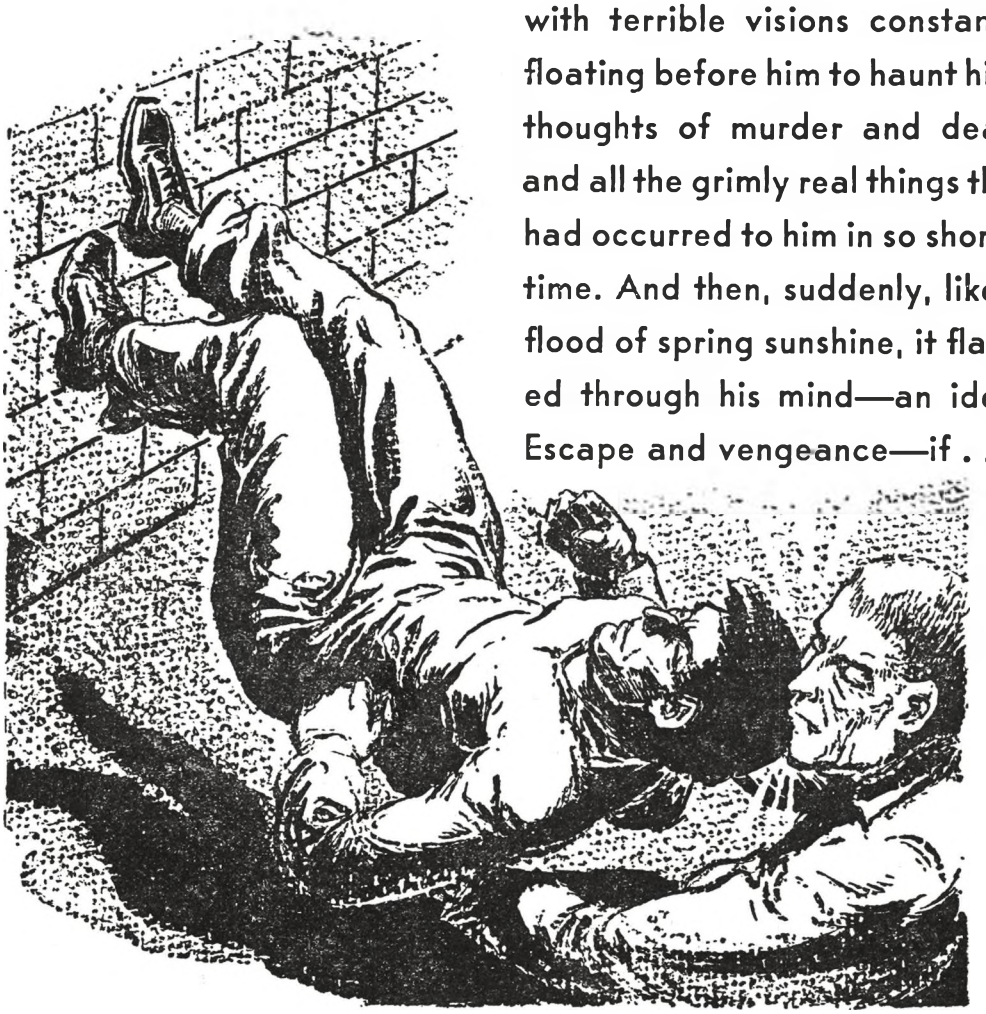
Spike shook his head, trying to get rid of that roomful of dead talking voices. But they wouldn't budge. He gritted his strong teeth and the muscles in his jaw stood out. The lines of his reckless, good-looking face twisted.

Then Spike began to laugh, only his face

IN SOLITARY

BY ACE BALDWIN

It was worse than death itself, Spike told himself. He was going slowly stir-crazy here in solitary, here in this dungeon, with terrible visions constantly floating before him to haunt him: thoughts of murder and death and all the grimly real things that had occurred to him in so short a time. And then, suddenly, like a flood of spring sunshine, it flashed through his mind—an idea! Escape and vengeance—if . . .!



As he fell, his feet lashed out, shoving the white-haired guard into the wall of the dungeon.

became more twisted instead of relaxing. He beat on the door of the cell. He yelled for the guard. Putting his mouth to a peephole in the door, he screamed at the top of his voice.

But even that brought no results. No reply came back except an echo. There weren't even guards outside to answer. Where Spike

was kept, there was no need of guards.

After a time, Spike no longer howled and beat at the door of his cell. Exhausted, he dropped back into a squatting position. His exertions, however, had brought about one result. The roomful of gossiping corpses was gone.

"Phew . . . that's bad! Can't let myself go like that again," Spike told himself out loud. The sound of his own voice was reassuring. It was friendly in the dark loneliness of solitary.

"Got to get out of this place," he told himself for the hundred thousandth time. And for the hundred thousandth time he asked himself just how he was going to make it.

IT was no use pretending he was sick. There'd be no hospital for him. They wouldn't let him out of this coop until he was dead—not after what he had done to that guard. Reager rebuked himself bitterly for letting his temper go that way. Smashing the guy's teeth and breaking his nose had caused himself more grief than the socks had been worth.

"How'll I do it? Can't let them carry me out of here feet-first. Not me!"

Just then, a sound broke in upon Spike's thoughts. It was the hollow clump-clump of a guard cominy down into the tombs. The sound came closer and stopped outside Spike's door. Then a key turned in a special little door, and dark bread was pushed through the opening. An instant later, without so much as a word, the guard locked the slot and went away.

Despite his hunger, Spike did not touch the dark bread. Morbidly he brooded over the corpses he had just seen. That was worse than death itself—slowly going stir-crazy—he told himself. Why eat? Why prolong the agony? Savagely, he stuck a leg out and kicked the bread.

From now on, he wouldn't touch a morsel of food. Spike's mind was made up. Soon, in a few days—maybe a week—he'd starve. Sure, he'd prove he was tough, and a guy couldn't do that if he just waited to blow his top. . . .

Suddenly, it flashed through his mind like a flood of Spring sunshine—the idea! And Spike knew he had the answer. Sure he'd starve himself. And they'd come in to carry him off. It was a desperate plan, but it would work. He'd make it work!

The whole picture unfolded in a minute . . . there were a lot of different guards. He had noted that, telling by the difference in their footsteps as they clumped along the corridor to his cell. And if the guards changed often, that meant war turnover. Confusion! And he, Spike Reager, had a chance of impersonating one of them. Once out of his cell, he'd walk right by the rest of the men on duty and out to his freedom. It was a cinch!

But he had to starve to death first. A tricky smile came over his face as he pushed the black bread to the slot in the door. Sooner or later, seeing a couple of days' ration of bread left uneaten and hearing no sound from the cell, guards would investigate. And Spike would be playing dead—until the door opened.

Reager was so happy with the stunt he had cooked up that he bore the damp and the cramps in his legs almost cheerfully. The only thing really tough to bear was the slowness of the time. The minutes were long, heavy hours. But no longer, now that his mind was on escape, did he see that awful roomful of stiffs, gossiping about him from their caskets.

Thus, two days went by with Spike sustaining himself on one thought alone—freedom. And each time his daily meal arrived, he lay perfectly still. Finally, on the third day, the guard noticed the bread piling up at the slot.

A beam of light played over Spike's inert form. A muffled comment came from the guard outside. This was the moment Spike had waited for. He did not breathe.

And then the light went out.

Reager's heart sank. It would be hard to hold out another day with no food, especially if he was going to be strong enough to act when the big chance came.

But a few minutes later Spike heard more footsteps. Only, this time, there were a pair of them. The fox! He'd gone back for reinforcements. He must be suspecting a trick. That was bad . . . handling the two of them would be almost too much, even for a tough guy.

Once more the light flashed into the tiny cell completely filled by the prisoner. And then, satisfied, for the moment, the guards opened the door.

LYING in a crumpled heap, feigning stiffness proper to a dead man, Spike heard it, another door opened and a couple of guards, dressed the same as he, came out. them talking. Finally, after a minute had passed, they grabbed him by a trouser leg and started to haul him out. Reager heard them swearing, and it seemed that they were pretty weak sisters, judging from the amount of tugging and puffing that went into the effort.

Once outside, Spike tried to peer at his jailers. But when he opened his eyes a crack, he had to shut them again quickly. Even the dim illumination in the corridor was blinding at first.

The two guards, convinced now that their man was dead, picked him up. Spike had to strain every muscle to keep himself rigid until he could get his eyes functioning. And when he could see, he found himself looking right at the back of a white-haired old man who had him by the legs.

"So that's it," Spike said to himself. "That's why he had to get help. He's too old to pick me up by himself."

The prisoner felt the breath of the other guard, who had him by the arms, hit him right on the back of the neck. Reager's head went forward, and then back—with all the strength at his command. There was a thud as his skull connected with something gratifyingly solid. A groan. And Spike's upper half fell to the floor.

But as he fell, his feet lashed out, shoving the white-haired guard into the wall of the dungeon. Like a tiger, Spike was up and after him. The old man turned, tried to cry out—but couldn't. With eyes big and startled, he threw up an arm to ward off the blow he knew was coming.

Spike hesitated an instant, as if undecided. And then he struck. Not with the full force at his disposal, but with just enough behind the punch to put the old man out of action. Reager had to have ample time to do just what he had planned.

By now, the first guard was stirring. Spike went over to him, saw that there was no need to pull his punch on this one, and let him have it. The guard lay quiet.

Turning this fellow over, Spike undressed him. Then, taking off his own clothes, he made the switch. Buttoning the tunic as he went, he ran along the corridor to the stairs at the end which led to freedom.

Cautiously, Spike stepped into the hallway on the floor above. No one was in sight.

Assuming a casual air, Reager sauntered to a door at the end of the hall. Half way to They gave him a friendly greeting. Spike nodded, tense and ready to strike should they challenge him.

But they did not, and Spike reached the end of the corridor. Here he found another stairway leading down into a small open court yard at the rear of the prison. In the yard was a truck, the driver half dozing in the sunlight.

Before the fellow had a chance even to cry out, Spike lashed out again. The blow landed on the driver's temple. And a second later, the escaping prisoner was at the wheel, had the motor started, and was off. Around the corner of the building was a gate and open country.

Guards stood at the entrance. But they just waved to Spike as he drove by.

Reager could hardly believe his good luck. Only the ache in his bones and the gnaw of hunger reminded him that only a few minutes before, he'd been in a little two-by-four cell with the odds all against him for ever seeing the sun again and breathing fresh air. He breathed the good Spring smell hungrily.

Up ahead somewhere lay safety. Without knowing exactly where he was going, he headed due West. Past vehicles, past people on foot and on bicycles, he raced. Nothing could stop him now. There was joy and pride in the heart of Spike Reager.

A few miles rolled by.

And then suddenly it came. The sky opened up and began to hail steel. The people and the cars in the road broke for cover. Everything was mad confusion. Shells were bursting all around.

One hit the truck with Spike in it. And the last thing he remembered was a whine and a terrific explosion, and he was diving out of the car door toward a muddy ditch.

LATER, just how much later Spike could not tell, he opened his eyes. And there in a white-walled hospital, he saw a nurse and a second loot looking down at him.

The loot was saying, "Dunno how to ex-

(*Continued on page* 93)

STILTS FOR THE SAVAGE

By

HAROLD de POLO

OLLIE BASCOMB finished loading up his arms with what he thought were the last remnants of the antiques, as she insisted upon calling them, from his sister Euphemia's station wagon. He had a badly dented tin Dutch oven in one hand, a brass warming pan and a wicker basket with old bottles in the other, and a dilapidated rocker with the back seat slats missing draped around his neck. He said, with a gusty sigh and a satisfied grin:

"There, Euphemy, I cal'late that finishes the job."

"Just a minute, Ollie. The *most* important prize is left," she said, bending over the rear of the station wagon and pulling out something around which a tattered bed comforter had been wrapped. "There, take—no, I think I'll carry them

Sheriff Ollie Bascomb faced the grim job of pursuing a robber who was a would-be killer, in a locality that nature had made dangerous—but the sheriff didn't know how useful a part of his sister's junky antique collection would be to the law!

myself. They are *very* rare, *very* precious, and in *perfect* condition."

"Judas Priest, what else?" wailed her brother. "You got five or six warmin' pans, 'bout the same number o' Dutch ovens, a good couple o' *hunnerd* ol' bottles, fifty broke chairs, dozens o' dooplicates o' all the other junk you brung, an'—an' there jest ain't goin' to be *room* in the house to hold 'em. . . . What *else*?"

His sister pulled out and unwrapped two sturdy oak poles, well seasoned, that Ollie judged to be eight or more feet long. On one end of them, there was a queer arrangement, with spokes, that at first glance looked to be the homemade half of a crude wheel. Around this circular contraption was what was plainly meant to be a tire effect in the form of a section of curved wood. It was perhaps five or

The fugitive said: "You ain't catchin' me, Ollie Bascomb."

six inches in width and was fastened to the pole, holding the spokes in place.

"There. *Aren't* they wonderful?" Euphemia joyously asked. "I am told that they are the best pair ever discovered in Maine. I picked them up at an auction outside of Bangor over two years ago."

The sheriff of Derby, setting down the basket of bottles and the warming pan, removed his battered black felt hat and brushed a hand across his utterly bald head. He blinked his china-blue eyes slowly, in a puzzled fashion.

"But . . . but what in tarnation *be* they?"

"Stilts—legitimate swamp stilts," she cried ecstatically.

"I'm dummed. . . . Never see none, never heered o' none," he told her, stooping and retrieving the basket and brass pan and trudging into the old family homestead.

"Please put those bottles in the *attic*, Ollie," she called after him. "Oh, and that rocker, too. You can leave the warming pan and oven in the downstairs bedroom."

THE sheriff, short and squat and rotund, had a time of it negotiating the last flight of narrow stairs. When he did get to the attic, and put down the bottles and chair, he looked at the various objects that crowded the place from floor to ceiling. He stuck his arms akimbo and stood there, for a moment, surveying the mess. He was shaking his head helplessly and hopelessly.

Known as the greatest birdin' an' troutin' fool in the whul' State o' Maine, he wished that his sister wouldn't get these urges to come up from Bangor, where she taught school, in the month of May when the squaretails were biting. In all fairness, howsomeever, he had to admit that this was probably the Spring fever of the antique collector just as his own passion for fishing was always stronger in him at this same time of the year. Still, he *did* wish he could be out on Saltash River this morning, up by the Old Bridge Pool. Some big lunkers up there, and most likely they'd be hitting a dry fly, the weather what it was. He had a new line he wanted to try out, too, and—

But his sister came tramping nimbly up the stairs and interrupted his piscatorial thoughts. She was as tall and lean and angular as he was short and squat, but she had the family habit of placing her arms akimbo. She did this now and likewise surveyed the objects that crammed the attic, the only difference being that there was a light of keen relish in her eyes:

"Think of it, Ollie. In three more years from next month I'll retire. *Then* what fun I'll have fixing up this old family house and repairing my lovely antiques."

She was a good ten years older than her brother; she had brought him up after their mother and father had died; he had gladly signed over to her, for a quite nominal sum, his half share in the ramshackle homestead, being very happy with his comfortable bachelor quarters in the rear of the county courthouse and jail in Derby; he was extremely fond of her, although just the least bit in awe when he remembered how she had boxed his ears, probably in justice, when he had been a young squirt. Nevertheless, for all of his slight fear of her, he couldn't help saying:

"Euphemy, it all looks like jest a bunch o' *kultch* to me."

She did not, however, become annoyed at his using this New England word that is supposed to describe anything that is not collateral, anything that is considered downright useless. Instead, she shook a finger at him as she might have at one of her pupils, and chided in somewhat mock sternness:

"Remember what our mother used to say, Ollie. If you have anything you don't think you want, if you have anything you feel like throwing away, just put it up in the attic and you'll find a good need for it sometime within seven years. . . . I expect to find a *great* many *useful* things here, when I start doing over this house and rummaging through all these fascinating—"

But a shrill and insistent honking of a car horn, outside, cut her short, and then a voice was yelling:

"Ollie—*hey, Ollie!*"

Mr. Bascomb was not at all loath to scramble down the stairs in answer to this summons.

OLLIE found his deputy, Anse Decker, waiting for him on the porch. The best helper he'd ever had, as the sheriff insisted, was a bit apologetic:

"Mighty sorry to bother you, chief, but without a 'phone here I had to hustle up and see you. Old Jethro Gates has been robbed. His hired man, that Marcum no-good. Slugged him and—"

"Jethro Gates?" cried Miss Euphemia Bascomb as she came out onto the porch behind her brother. "Hmmm. Serves him right, the mean old man. He has *two* grandfather clocks and he wouldn't even sell me *one* of them. Beautiful specimens—really *gorgeous* specimens, Ollie. I offered him *any* price he'd care to set. He——"

"Jest a minute, Euphemy, please," said Ollie gently. "I got to find me out 'bout this here trouble."

"But he *is* a mean old man, Ollie," his sister insisted. "I tell you that he wouldn't even sell me *one*. What use has he for *two*? Said they were family heirlooms, one from his maternal and the other from his paternal side. Ridiculous. He hasn't the place for them, in that shabby farmhouse. I was willing to buy the one with the broken pendulum, that had been welded. He doesn't even *use* it; he keeps it in a storeroom he never *enters*; he—"

"P'r'aps mebbe *I* can talk to Jethro 'bout it, someday, somehow. Meantime—"

"Oh, *will* you talk to him Ollie?"

"Try my cussedest," promised her brother. "Meantime, Euphemy, like I was goin' to say, this comes to be 'ficial business. I got to hear what my dep'ty's got to say. . . . Now, Anse—"

Anse tried to hide his sigh of relief and turned to his superior:

"Pretty serious for Jethro, chief. I mean financially. He went to that farm auction over at East Derby yesterday and bought in the whole herd of cows. Twenty-four hundred and some odd dollars, I understand. They were to be delivered today—owner bringing 'em up—and Jethro was to pay in cash for the bunch. It would be cash, seeing it was Jethro. You know him better than I do. Doesn't believe in banks and keeps his money at home. Had close to three thousand, he said. Marcum got it all."

"How 'd it happen?"

"Jethro said he'd told Marcum about the deal, naturally. Said he'd never let Marcum know where he kept his money. Sent him off to the woodlot this morning to cut some fence rails. When he thought he'd gone, Jethro went over to some crazy cracked teapot on the top shelf of the kitchen cupboard where he keeps his money. Said he wanted to count out the exact amount to have it ready. Marcum must have been spying through a window, he figures, for he came in then with Jethro's shotgun and tried to hold the old man up. . . . Well, you know Jethro Gates," Anse shrugged.

OLLIE did know him, all right. Ollie knew him to be one of he most niggardly, miserly farmers in the whole section. He ran a dairy farm, although he was over seventy, with the help of his one hired man, a not-too-bright individual whom few people would hire even in war times. Jethro hired him, probably, because he worked for low wages.

"Uh-huh."

"Marcum didn't shoot him. He rapped him over the side of the head with the gun barrel. Cut him and stunned him and knocked him down. Then he grabbed the money—all of it—and beat it. A neighbor a few hundred yards up the road saw him running by like a wild man, heading for Saltash Bog. Lost his head completely, I imagine. He—"

"Didn't have much to lose," put in Ollie.

"No," grinned Anse. "Anyway, when Jethro came to a few minutes later he staggered up the road and saw this same neighbor—that Clive Andrews man, by the way. They turned off to the West where Clive had seen Marcum head for. He'd gone into the swamp, his footprints said. He'll drown or get lost in there, the fool."

"Still have the gun?"

"Yep. The minute Clive telephoned me I got busy the best way I could. Can't round up many men or even boys now, with everyone at war or in defense plants, but I got two young lads and three older men. I took 'em out to Saltash Bog and

posted 'em around it the best way I could while I came to get you. . . . Nobody seemed anxious to go in and look for Marcum," he added with a grim smile.

"Don't blame 'em none," conceded Ollie thoughtfully.

No one could have blamed them, at that. Saltash Bog was a stretch of swamp land, perhaps a mile in length and about half that in width, over to the West of the South Derby road. Many, many years before it was reputed to have partially cultivated for the growing of cranberries, but ever since Ollie's kid days, close to fifty years ago, it had been allowed to go back to its original condition. It was now merely a desolate, overgrown area of land, mostly covered with water, of islands and hummocks and very little firm ground for footing. The sheriff knew it well. As a youth, he had trapped muskrats there, but the younger generation today shunned it. There was something eerie and uncanny about it that kept them away.

"The devil of it is, chief, that Jethro has to have that money when the cattle are delivered to his place. Says he got 'em at a bargain. Says that if he doesn't come across with the cash when they get there, the deal will be off. Says the money Marcum got is all he has in the world and that he doesn't know what to do if he can't get it back."

OLLIE didn't seem to hear that remark. He seemed to be thinking, for he blinked his eyes and rubbed at his jaw. He spoke reflectively, as if mostly to himself:

"Bugsy Marcum *did* know that bog. Used to trap muskrats with me there when we was young fellers. He—"

"I should say he most *certainly* used to trap," broke in Miss Bascomb. "Hmmm. He was late to school three or four times a week, during the cruel trapping season. . . . And so were *you*, Ollie, I'd like to remind you."

The sheriff flushed. Maybe he was not flushing at the memory of the punishment his sister had meted out to him; it looked, rather, as if he were embarrassed at the favor he was now going to ask her:

"Eu—Euphemy, I'd like . . . like to ask you suthin'. I . . . I'd like to borry them . . . them precious swamp stilts. I—

"Ollie!"

Her brother, however, made what h thought, and hoped, might be the clinchin argument:

"My soul an' body, Euphemy, I *got* t have them stilts, do I hanker to see Gate an' speak to him 'bout that grandfathe clock."

"You *will?*"

"Uh-huh. I will."

A couple of minutes later she handed them to him, but there was a look of worry on her face:

"You'll be *very* careful of them, Ollie?"

"Sure will, Euphemy. Thanks. Be seein' you later. Meet me to my home for dinner or supper," he cried, as he grabbed Anse's arm and lugged him off toward the car.

IT wasn't so much more than thirty minutes later that the sheriff, with the rare swamp stilts, was at the edge of the bog at the spot where Bugsy Marcum had entered it. He had stopped at the courthouse to pick up his own car, had interviewed Jethro Gates and Clive Andrews, and had sent Anse on a long trip by foot to the other side of the swamp to a point where the footing leading to it would be about the best way of exit.

Ollie, at first, didn't have to use the stilts. Bugsy, plainly, had taken the easiest way in, where there were plenty of hummocks and not too much water or mud to sink into. Following his trail was simple. At first, anyway. Later, it might not be so easy. Bugsy was a thin little wisp of a man—he'd been a scrawny sliver as a kid—and he didn't weigh much more'n a hundred pounds, Ollie figured. The going wouldn't be too hard for him; he wouldn't be so apt to sink down into the bog. Ollie, on the other hand—well, Ollie weighed over a *couple* of hundred, he ruefully reminded himself.

But the sheriff, for all his seemingly awkward build, was about as fast and accurate on his feet as a deer or any other wild thing, and every muscle and sinew in his body was in superb condition from his years of tramping the woods and wading the streams. He could travel, when he had a mind to, as swiftly as all Sal Brookes and the Devil, and as long as the going

Euphemy told him: "Remember what mother used to say, Ollie. If you feel like throwing something away, put it up in the attic and you'll use it within seven years."

was comparatively steady, he put on speed. It took a little neat balancing, though, having to hold a stilt over his head in each hand.

He came to a stretch of ground, in ten or fifteen minutes, where he lost Marcum's footprints. There was an area, maybe a hundred or so feet in diameter, where water covered the soggy earth beneath it for seven or eight inches. He remembered it from his kid days, although there had been only two or three inches of water over this particular section then. Mushy underneath, too, and probably a heap sight mushier now. Looked like he'd have to take to

Euphemy's cherished swamp stilts, when he decided which direction to hit for.

He stood there thinking, for a little while. Bugsy had always been scatter-brained and excitable, even in his sanest periods, but he must be in a regular panic by now. Andrews had told him that when he'd disappeared into the swamp he'd seemed "crazy as a loon". If that was so, even though he knew the bog, he wouldn't try to cross it right off and escape to the mountain wilderness on the other side. Most likely, being badly frightened at what he'd done, he'd try to hole up someplace until he thought pursuit had eased up.

All right. *Where* would he hole up?

AGAIN, with a reminiscent smile, Ollie remembered something from his kid trapping days. Off to the North, maybe a third of a mile away through thick alders, there was a solid piece of ground sixty or seventy feet long and nearly that in width that the boys used to call "the island" in Ollie's kid days. On it, there was an old log lean-to that cranberry pickers had erected so that they might leave their berries there overnight if they wanted to or might store them there in the daytime to keep them from drying up in the sun.

That, Ollie played it, was where Bugsy would make for.

This decided, the sheriff gingerly put his stilts down into the water and mounted on the foot pedals. He rocked back and forth for a moment, at first, but then he steadied himself. Ollie, in company with most Derby youngsters, had done a lot of stilting during his school days. He hadn't, at that, been so bad at it; he had in fact, been blamed good, as he had been at all boyish pastimes. These circular, wheel-like things, though, were a different story, so he took his time before starting out and didn't allow himself to get too confident in the beginning.

He was surprised—and most pleasantly so—when he discovered how easy it was to handle 'em. Crimus sakes alive, it was a *cinch*. He'd at first thought that the feller who'd invented 'em must have been some sort of a fool-headed galoot, but he certainly had to give him credit for rigging up a right smart contraption. Why, the cock-eyed things went along like . . . like as if you were walking on dry land. Faster, you might say. Yessir, even faster. Land sakes, whoever made the first pair was a *genius*. Chances were he'd have sunk in clear to his waist, if he hadn't had these—these *very* rare and *very* precious objects in such *perfect* condition, he told himself with a grin. Saved him a heap of time, too, in making that crossing of water swamp.

He saw that he'd been right, when he got to the other side, about Bugsy making for the island. Footprints showed again, and these led to the old cranberry shelter. He hadn't seen any sign of a discarded shotgun, for which he'd kept a keen eye out, and he reminded himself that he'd have to watch out from now on. Bugsy Marcum was just fool enough, especially being in a panicky state, to open up with both barrels if he thought that anyone was closing in on him. Bugsy had probably made the island long ago—if he *had* made for there and if he'd stayed there—and there wasn't any need to worry just yet. There was plenty of bad ground to cover before that. Nevertheless, he kept his eyes and his ears on the alert.

The going through the hummocky bog, through the thick alders, was tough. It wasn't half as tough as it would have been, though, without the stilts. Ollie was so sure of this that he said to himself, with a chuckle, that darned if he *wouldn't* make a pair of 'em as soon as he had the time. Handy gadgets to have, and you never could tell when you might p'r'aps mebbe have a use for 'em. Just look today. Yep, he'd make a pair, all right, and he immediately began thinking of how he could improve on 'em with modern methods and material. An *eight*-inch rim, for instance—

BUT the sheriff's inventive dreams were interrupted by the loud booming of a shotgun. He assuredly hadn't expected it so soon, for the island was still a good hundred yards off, and his eyes and his ears had seen or heard nothing suspicious. Bugsy sure *must* be panicky. Knowing this, Ollie made a bid to empty that second barrel:

"My soul an' body, Bugsy, you *be* careful," he cried out in apparently crazed terror. "You come nigh to *killin'* me, that

time. I . . . I didn't think you was a *murd'rer.*"

The gun boomed again and Ollie had to chuckle. The pellets hadn't gone a hundred feet through the thick alders, most likely, much less a hundred yards.

"You ain't catchin' *me,* Ollie Bascomb," came the high treble voice of Bugsy Marcum.

Ollie was silent while he teetered on his stilts. From what Jethro had told him, Marcum didn't have any extra shells. He had simply picked up the gun that the dairy farmer always kept loaded. Even so, the sheriff didn't belive in taking *too* many risks when rounding up prospective quarry. He always hankered to bring in his man. friend for life.

Consequently, he balanced himself cautiously on the stilts and pulled out his ancient Colt .45 from the right side pocket of the frayed and venerable canvas shooting jacket that he wore year in and year out. He always felt safer, with that piece of hardware in his fingers. He didn't think he'd have to use it today, howsomeever, in any really serious way. Instead, he raised it over his head and let it boom out just once. Then, when the reverberating report died away, he tried using his voice. He said very quietly and soothingly, in his somehow remarkably persuasive drawl:

"Don't aim to hurt *you* none, neither, Bugsy, but I cal'late I'll have to less 'n you come out easy an' quiet with your hands up. These here big ca'tridges sure do tear a awful hole through a feller."

"Don't . . . don't shoot no more. Please . . . *please,*" came a whimpering cry.

"You got all that money with you?"

"Yeah—sure—the whul' of it."

"Then bring it out together with the gun, Bugsy."

"I'm comin', I'm comin', Ollie."

Ten minutes later Bugsy Marcum appeared. He was a pathetic-looking object, wet and covered with mud as if he had half-swam and half-crawled his way through the swamp. His eyes were dull with fright and his face was haggard, and he was trembling violently as he handed the stolen money over to the sheriff.

"Jest calm down, Bugsy. Nothin' much is goin' to happen to you. I'll see to that. You went haywire an' made a mistake. You go ahead o' me, the way you come in. Don't git panicky an' bog down. Take it easy. I'll foller you, on these here stilts. . . . Take it easy, remember, like I said. I don't hanker to do no rescue work. I want to git back to Gates as soon as I can. After that, by Judas Priest, I cal'late to sneak up to Ol' Bridge Pool an' git me a couple o' trout 'afore I see my sister Euphemy."

IT was close to supper time, instead of the midday dinner hour, before Ollie showed up at his living quarters in back of the courthouse where his sister was waiting for him. His face wore a very, very wide grin of sublime happiness, and even Euphemia's deep frown of disapprobation could not dim it:

"You are very late, Ollie. I went to the icebox and took merely a *sandwich* or two for the large *dinner* to which I am accustomed."

"Well, you're goin' to have a swell *supper,* Euphemy. Seein' I allus carry *some* tackle in my car durin' the season, I went up to Ol' Bridge Pool—'member it—when I finished Jethro's business an' got me in some castin'. Crimus, they was hittin'. Jest take a look in that there creel."

"Finished with Jethro? Did you get that—that half-witted Marcum creature?"

"Sure did. Had to take him fishin' with me, too—oh, handcuffed, all right—'cause I didn't like to stop off here an'—an' disturb *you* in lockin' him up. I jest put him in a cell now. I—"

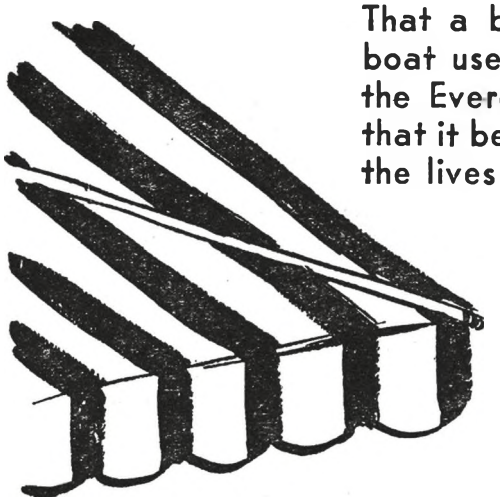
"Hmmm. The same boyhood excuses. You were afraid I might have persuaded you *not* to go fishing, I imagine."

But Ollie still grinned. He grinned wider than ever, in fact, as he chuckled:

"Well, seein' as how you won't look at my trout, p'r'aps mebbe you'll come outside an' see what I got roped to the top o' my *car.*"

There was something in his eyes, something in his voice, that caused his sister to follow him without question. When she got outside, she emitted a piercing shriek of joy that could have been heard as far away as the post office and flung her arms

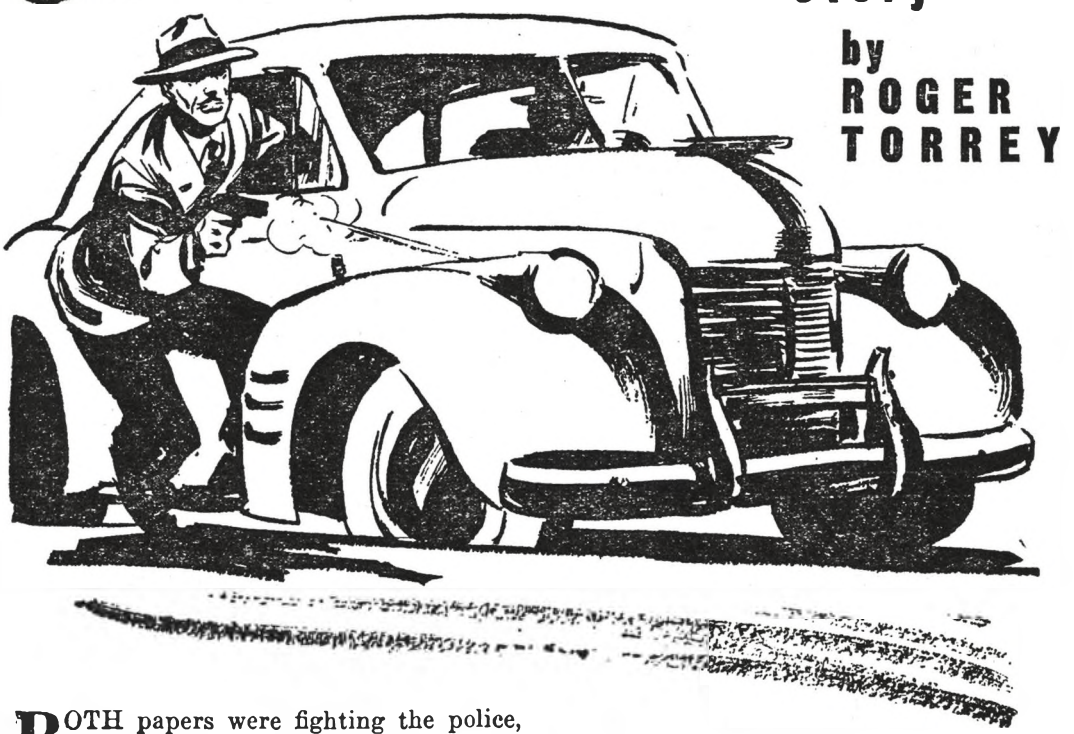
(*Continued on page* 95)



That a business rival might sabotage a boat used for moonlight cruises through the Everglades was understandable. But that it be done in such fashion that it cost the lives of a lot of innocent passengers seemed unlikely. Dan Cleary realized at once that he would never find the killer until he had established the motive

A Complete Book-Length Story

by ROGER TORREY



BOTH papers were fighting the police, and so when I blacked the police eye on an insurance swindle that had been running well over a year, the papers gave me quite a spread. Something I didn't want, any more than I want a hole in my head. Private investigators work better if their ugly mugs aren't splashed all over newspaper front pages.

I hadn't done a great deal of work, either. There was an arson gang working full blast in the Florida resort town, and it had been working for a year or more. They'd buy a business, almost any kind of business that carried a stock that could be sold through black market channels. And the bigger the business the better. They'd insure the stock right to the hilt, then. Up to this point everything would be proper and legal.

And then they'd go all out. They'd move out the bulk of the stock, usually working in broad daylight and with trucks. Nobod thinks anything when they see a truck

EXCURSION TO MURDER

drawn up by a loading platform at the back of a store. They never notice whether cases are being loaded in or out. After the store was down to an absolute skeleton stock, they'd set fire to it. They had a professional supervise this part of the job and he knew his business well enough to get away with it for over a year. Of course a trained arson expert would have caught it, but all they ran into down there was ordinary claim agents, who'd see nothing but a legitimate claim and so okay it.

Then they'd collect the insurance, peddle the stock they'd moved out to some black market operator, and do it all over again.

The underwriters got nervous, however,

Even as I fell, I got my gun clear.

because of too many fires of that kind in a town that size, and so they sent me down to look things over. It was a special commission for me as I'm strictly free-lance. And I drifted around for a week, watched the businesses that had changed hands recently, and one day saw merchandise being moved from a very fancy ladies' store.

FROM there it was routine. I followed the truck to a warehouse, down by the river . . . watched it make a half a dozen trips. I checked the ownership of the warehouse and found it was owned by a man named Bernadette. I picked up Bernadette's trail and found he was pals with four others, one of them Al Grady, who had a record as long as my arm.

Then I went for help to the sheriff, who was also feuding with the local police. He made me a special deputy, loaned me a dozen of his men, and we made the haul. Starting with the dummy owner of the store and ending with Bernadette, Grady, and the three others in the gang.

The store, naturally had been bought through this dummy who ran it, and he cracked all over the place and made the case even solider than it had been.

And the papers got hold of it through the sheriff, who liked publicity, and they raw-hided the cops all over the place, pointing out that it took a stranger in the town only three weeks to break up a racket that had been running under police noses for over a year.

The cops hate private investigators anyway, and having one held up as a model for them really burned them. It was nothing to me but a job and, when the papers wanted a statement from me, I told them that. This was more grist for their mill and they even wrote a couple of editorials about it, pointing out that I did my work in short order and that the police, supposedly paid for the same work, did nothing.

The chief called on me, asking why I hadn't gone to them for help when I was ready to close down, and he almost had apoplexy when I told him I didn't have any faith in his force. I was frank about it—I told him that if his boys hadn't been able to see a thing like that running under their eyes for over a year, they probably wouldn't have been any help to me in making the pinch.

And when he blew up over that, I went even further. I told him I had a notion that if I'd gone to him for help the news would have leaked from the station in some way, and the gang would have been warned in time to skid out of trouble.

It was the same as telling him he had a crooked force, something both papers were harping on, and so the police certainly didn't care for me.

But I had reservations on a North-bound train for the third day after that and so I didn't let any police grudge upset me.

How to spend the three days did, though, and that's why I decided to take this moonlit cruise through the Everglades on the excursion boat.

THESE cruises are quite a thing. The boats are sixty some feet long and the one I picked had benches and love seats all over the upper deck. The lower deck had a dance floor with a juke box for music and a little counter at the end, where they sold soft drinks, sandwiches, and bottled beer. Back of this was the engine room which could be entered by a passageway from the dance floor or from a sort of promenade that ran clear around the boat. On both sides of the boat there were doors leading into it.

The trick, and why the boat ride was so popular, was the way they ran it. If the moon was at all bright, they'd turn off all lights on the upper deck and create a spooner's paradise. If the moon wasn't full they'd turn on a few lights that were strung over the deck, but the lights didn't give out enough light to interfere with love-making.

I didn't care about the popular part of the cruise, if for no other reason than that I knew no girl in town, but I was sort of curious about the Everglades and thought that would be a nice way to see them. I'd heard and read about them all my life, and, with nothing to do but waste time, thought I should see them.

So I booked passage, which meant buying a two dollar ticket at a booth and surrendering it to a man who stood at the

boat side of a gangplank leading up from the pier.

And if I'd known that gangplank also led to murder, I'd never have walked it, believe me.

The boat started off right on time and I spent the first half hour wandering around on the top deck and trying to keep out of the way of as screwy a collection of people as I've ever seen in my life. There were a bunch of young kids who were very frankly necking in the moonlight. There were three couples who must have been well over seventy, probably down for Florida sunshine instead of Florida moonlight.

There were possibly twenty boys who were in the service and the bulk of these spent their time, apparently, looking for unattached girls. There were about ten of the latter, looking for the soldiers and sailors, from the way they acted. There was a middle-aged couple, who were fighting like cats and dogs from the time we left the pier. There were a dozen drunks—one of them stretched out on a bench at the side of the boat, who went to sleep before we'd been gone five minutes.

So I went downstairs to the lower deck and there met Nina.

I was having a bottle of beer at the little counter when she came up beside me and asked for a bottle of coke. Some goofy jitter-bugging couple bumped into her, slamming her against me, and naturally she apologized. And naturally I said it was perfectly all right.

Then she looked me over more carefully, and said: "Aren't you Dan Cleary? The man who's been in the papers so much these last three days?"

I said I was and that was fame and that this was the first time I ever appreciated it.

She said: "I'm Nina Parker. I'm really interested, Mr. Cleary. I've read everything the papers had about it."

I said: "It wasn't anything out of the ordinary. I got a break, that's all. I just happened to run into what I was looking for with no trouble. I might have been three months on the job."

"But you'd have found those people eventually, wouldn't you?"

"Oh sure! If somebody else didn't get 'em first. They were beating the insurance companies and those people never forget. They don't stop until they've got the arsonist or arsonists in the pokey, and most of those people serve their full sentences. If a pardon board goes soft, the insurance companies can usually put enough pressure on them to harden them up."

"It's the most interesting thing I've ever heard. That's the only thing I read, Mr. Cleary. Just detective stories."

By that time I was blown up like a puff-ball.

THE girl was about five-seven and there was quite a lot of her. She wasn't fat or anything like that, but she certainly was well-stacked. Brown-haired, and with brown eyes that had yellow specks in them, like you see in the eyes of some cats. Big eyes, but not cow eyes. She was tanned, but she had the kind of skin that just takes on a sort of tawny glow with it—she certainly didn't have enough tan to hide the belt of freckles that ran across her face below her eyes and above the tip of her nose. On her they looked well.

I found out she was staying at the Royal Palms and thought I was getting along just fine when we had an interruption. A big, impressive-looking man, who was probably in his middle fifties. He had greying hair and looked like he could pose for one of the whiskey ads, representing the successful business man.

He smiled at Nina, frowned at me, and said: "I've been searching the boat for you, Nina. You really must see the moon, my dear. It's simply beautiful from this setting."

Nina said: "Well, after all, that's what we're making the trip for, isn't it. Mr. Cleary, this is Mr. Harknett. Mr. Harknett is my boss."

Harknett made a stiff little bow and said he was glad to meet me. He didn't offer to shake hands and neither did I. It was plain that Mr. Harknett wanted no part of Mr. Cleary and I wanted no part of Mr. Harknett.

Nina said: "It's been nice meeting you, Mr. Cleary. Why don't you give me a ring sometime? There's so many questions I'd like to ask you."

I said I'd certainly do that and that

we maybe could have dinner together sometime.

And then she smiled and nodded—and left with Harknett.

I ordered another bottle of beer and wished Harknett would fall overboard.

CHAPTER II

Up In Smoke

I WASN'T half through my second bottle of beer before I decided that a moonlit cruise was the last place to look for privacy. First was a colorless little man who asked me if I wasn't the famous Dan Cleary. I admitted being Cleary and denied the famous part of it.

He smiled weakly and said: "But you've been so much in the papers, Mr. Cleary. I'm sure they wouldn't feature you so unless you were famous. I thought I knew you from the excellent likeness of you they've been running."

The excellent likeness of me made me look like Gyp the Blood. The newspaper photographer had snapped me with my hat down over my eyes and with my shoulders hunched, and about the only thing the picture showed clearly was the tape on my cheek, covering a rip that one of the arson gang had put there with brass knucks. It looked like something that had been made in Chicago in the early thirties.

He went on with: "I'm an admirer of yours, Mr. Cleary. But it's not alone that. I would like to engage you if that's possible."

I said: "It isn't. I've got reservations on a train going out of here in two more days. And I'm taking a vacation when I get home."

He looked at me wistfully and I went on with: "I'd be no good to you down here, anyway. A man in my business can't operate and fight the police at the same time, and the boys in this town are definitely on the other team."

"Oh, it's no investigation, Mr. Cleary. It's, well, the fact is I'm afraid."

"It's still out. Frankly, bodyguard work isn't worth the fees I charge. And I just don't want to work."

He said he hoped I'd reconsider and I told him there was no chance of it.

Then a big fat woman came up, dragging a little bit of a man with her as though he was a Pekinese. She held out her hand and came right to the point.

She said: "You're Mr. Cleary, of course. I'm Mrs. Jones. Mrs. G. Wellington Jones. This is Mr. Jones."

Mr. Jones mumbled something but held out his hand to be shaken, and I gave him as much of mine as his fat wife had left.

Mrs. Jones said: "I want you to call on us. Tomorrow. Let's say at three—I'm always home at three."

I said "What for?"

She widened her eyes and said: "Why, I'd like to talk with you about your cases, of course. I'm a great psychology student, Mr. Cleary, and I'm sure it would be most interesting to hear about the underworld from one who must know it so well."

I said it was a shame that I had an engagement for tomorrow at that time. That in fact I'd be tied up until I left for the North. She drifted away, huffily, dragging her little man in tow.

My little man hadn't moved from my side.

NEXT were three young service men and I didn't mind them a bit. Anybody that's big enough and old enough to fight for his country is a man in my book, but these kids couldn't have been over twenty-one or two at the most. They said they'd recognized me from my newspaper pictures and had always wanted to meet a private cop. They were polite and respectful, but I'll always think they came up like that to win some sort of bet. Something like 'I bet you're afraid to go up and talk to him' or something like that.

My little man hadn't moved a step, but started talking to me again, just as soon as the soldiers moved along about their business.

Next were a couple of the jitter-bugs and then I got wise. All of them gave me the same gag, about seeing my picture in the papers, but I looked up in time to see the kid that worked back of the counter talking to another couple of people and saw him jerk his head in my direction.

It seemed I was a celebrity and he was showing me off.

The new couple came over to talk with

me and it seemed they were from some little town in Iowa that only had one city cop, and that they'd always wanted to meet one of the kind of guys they'd read about in the papers. They were easy to get rid of, but not so my little man.

He was right with me, like fleas on Fido.

By that time I'd finished my beer and I said to him: "To hell with this! If there was any way I could charge admission to look at me, it'd be different. I'm going upstairs."

And I'm damned if he didn't go upstairs with me.

IT was really beautiful up there. The river was about two hundred feet across, maybe a little more, and the stunted, misshapen trees lined both banks solidly. The boat apparently followed a sort of channel, because it was first on one side of the river and then on the next. The moon was full and it looked to be close enough to touch, and there was almost enough light to read by.

All in all a beautiful night, and it looked even better to me when I saw Nina Parker, standing by herself, by the rail.

I said to the little man: "Now look, chum, there's no chance of me working for you. As I told you, I'm leaving town in two days. And I'm not interested in the kind of work you want me to do. It's just no dice. But I'll give you some advice and not charge you a cent for it. If you're afraid somebody's going to do you bodily harm, go to the police. If you know who the person is, have him put under a peace bond if you can manage it. If you don't know just who you're afraid of, or if there's some reason for not going to the police—and it's none of my affair whether there's a reason against it or not—I'd suggest you go to any one of the three private agencies working in this town and get a man from them to guard you. All three are branches of reputable agencies. Any one of the three can supply you with a guard and he won't cost you a third of what I'd charge you."

"I'd rather have you, Mr. Cleary."

"Mr. Cleary doesn't want the job. And right now Mr. Cleary wants to go girling, if you know what I mean. So I'll excuse you, if you ask nicely."

And with that I went over to Nina Parker, leaving the little man where he was, and looking as though he wanted to cry.

He was none of my affair and I wanted no part of him.

I'd told him the truth. Right then, all I wanted to do was go girling, and Nina was the girl I wanted to go girling with.

NINA looked around when I spoke and seemed glad to see me, and I took that as a compliment. The Cleary family have never been noted for their good looks and my mother always claimed I was the homeliest one in it. I'm as big and maybe bigger than the average man, weigh as much or more than average, kicking around one-ninety, but if my face was my fortune I'm afraid I'd be in debt. My nose has been broken and a couple of times it wasn't set just right. One cheekbone is lumpy and, at that time, the other sported a piece of tape three inches long.

So I knew that Nina certainly wasn't attracted by my looks, and decided it must be my personality, though I couldn't remember anybody else ever being particularly impressed by it.

I said: "Well, fancy this! All alone! No big bad employer."

She said: "Well, Mr. Harknett is like that. Possessive, if you know what I mean. If you work for him you belong to him, or he feels that you do."

I said I was glad that some of the people I'd worked for hadn't felt that way. And that I'd worked for some people I wouldn't be found in an alley with, alive or dead. And then asked if Harknett was a local product or just a visitor.

She said: "Mr. Harknett's main offices are in New York. But then, of course he has branch offices in thirty-two states, Florida being one of them. This is a combined business and pleasure trip you see. He's looking into this office and taking a vacation at the same time."

I said: "Money?" and she shrugged. She said: "Not as much now as before the war, of course. Mr. Harknett is a wholesale food distributor, you see, and with price ceilings and quotas, and the transportation problem and all the rest of it, we're not turning over half the stock we did before the war. I'm his private secretary and don't know a great deal about the financing part of the

business, but from the way I've heard him talk and the letters I've written, I know that things aren't going as they did. I don't think I'm giving away any trade secrets in saying that much—I think everybody knows how conditions are. We could

The third explosion was like the second; it lifted the boat almost out of the water.

sell three times as much as we do, but we can't get the stuff to sell."

"He's the middle-man I've always heard so much about, then."

"Exactly. Isn't the moon simply gorgeous."

I said the moon was even more than that and that I'd never properly appreciated it before. And we got along like that very nicely but for not more than five minutes.

And then a voice said: "Ah, Nina! And Mr. Cleary, wasn't it?"

I said it was Mr. Cleary and watched the big good-looking ape tuck Nina's arm under his own. Watching me while he did it with a sort of "hands off, mister" look on his face. I'd have stuck right there if there'd been any sense in doing it, but I knew I wouldn't have a chance to talk with the girl with him hanging around. So I said that if they'd excuse me I'd go downstairs and have a bottle of beer and, of course, they both said they'd excuse me. Nina acted sorry about having to, but Harknett acted just the other way.

I'd have been perfectly willing to push him over the side of the boat but I couldn't very well do that.

After all, he'd been polite at all times, even if it was the painful sort of politeness.

I WENT below and just had half the first bottle of beer down when the shout came. And whoever shouted must have had lungs like a bellows, because it came loud and clear above the noise of the juke box and the shuffle of the dancing feet of the jitter-bugs.

It was: *"MAN OVERBOARD!"*

I put down what was left of my beer and headed for the upper deck, and I was just head and shoulders above it when the explosion came. Or rather three explosions, with the first two running into each other and the third following maybe ten seconds later.

The first was sharp and clear and it ran right into the sort of muffled roar that made the second. The third was like the second, the same kind of booming roar.

And then the whole back of the boat seemed to turn into a sheet of flame, shooting out from above the engine room, where it was grilled for ventilation.

CHAPTER III

Death In The Water

I KNEW what had happened, even if I didn't know what had caused it. The gas tanks had blown up, and I knew enough about boats to know this shouldn't have happened. Gasoline tanks have a vent arrangement that is supposed to keep them from going like that.

I thought of this even as I looked around the deck for Nina—and I saw neither Nina nor Harknett, though I hadn't left them more than five or six minutes before then. The same voice that had shouted "man overboard" sang out again, though this time with a different tune.

This time it was: "Everybody get a life preserver. We are in no danger."

Even at the time this didn't make sense to me. If we weren't in any danger, what the hell was the sense in getting a life preserver? And about that time the panic started, with some damned fool woman sounding off for the starter's gun.

She screamed: "Fire! Fire! My God! We're sinking! We're sinking!"

One of the service men grabbed her and tried to shut her up, but she was past that stage. She just kept her yap going with that senseless: "We're sinking! We're sinking!" stuff.

Finally, when he saw he couldn't shut her up in any other way, the soldier then straightened her up and hung one on her jaw, but by that time the harm was done. She'd touched off the fuse and half the people on the boat were going nuts, with the other, the sane half, trying to keep a little order.

We were about in the middle of the river and I saw the boat's nose swing over toward the right bank, but with the engines out of commission I didn't think we'd make it. Also I knew we'd ground before we hit solid land, probably fifty feet or more away from it. So I started hauling life preservers out from under the benches where they were stored and passing them around.

I'd say to some one of the panicky ones: "Can you swim?"

If they'd say: "Yes." I'd say: "Then what the hell are you making all the fuss about?"

If they said: "No!" I'd put the preserver on them and snap the buckles on it, not trusting anybody in that condition to do it for themselves. And there were just as many men that had lost their minds as there were women.

The service men were doing just as I was, and whether they were following my example or were working on their own I'll never know. All I know for certain is that a lot of the hysterical ones would either have drowned or gone crazy from fear if it hadn't been for the boys.

And during all this I saw a funny thing. The guy with the voice proved to be either the mate or the head deckhand—a little man in spite of his giant voice. But he was a little giant at that. He was dashing around trying to keep people from jumping into the water, and shouting:

"Don't jump! Don't jump! We'll beach her."

And then he sees a great big lug and stops his shouting and goes for the guy. He hit him three times so fast the noise his fists made sounded like a trip-hammer, even over the insane yelling that was going on, and the big guy doubled at the middle and went down on the deck. Then the little guy kicked him in the face, hauling off and swinging his foot at the guy's face as though he was punting a football.

Of course the big guy went out like a light.

Then the little man spat on him and went back to his stopping people from jumping.

THE boat was slowing and the current was taking us down the river so that we were going three feet to the side to one ahead and we were about sixty feet from the bank. Then we grounded, the bow hitting into the muddy bottom with practically no jar at all. But it hit hard enough to hold, and the back of the boat swung around until we were facing up river at an angle.

Then we started to tip, this because everybody raced to the shore side of the boat. And the gas fire back and in the engine room, suddenly took hold, breaking through the passageway into the dancing place at the same time it broke through to the upper deck. Smoke came pouring

The knives were especially made for scaling fish.

up the two hatchways leading to the lower deck, and the open flame, spurting up from directly above the fire, lit the whole thing up brighter than day, although it wasn't the same kind of light. This was reddish, shot through with black clouds of smoke.

That did it. When we started to tip, people started going into the water, and while the boat was shallow draft and all that, the water was still too deep to wade. I suppose at least fifty went over the side, and whether it was their littleweight that did it or not I don't know, but we pulled out of the mud and went downstream with the current for all of twenty feet.

And then we settled right down, squatting down on the bottom of that river like a hen on a setting of eggs.

We must have been on a bar because where we sank the water was deep enough to flood the engine room and the lower deck, and that cut the fire down at its base, leaving only the deck planking above the engine room still burning.

I saw the captain and the little mate, or the head deckhand or whatever he was,

starting toward this with chemical extinguishers, and then I went over the side. I could swim, and from the noise and the floundering that was going on in the water, I thought quite a few of those who'd gone over the side, couldn't.

I wasn't alone—I had three soldiers and four sailors with me.

About half the people in the water had life preservers on, but they were shouting and screaming as loud as those who hadn't. The service boys and I didn't pay any attention to these. We were looking for those who didn't have strength enough left to shout, or who'd swallowed enough river water to keep them from it.

ONE of the sailors really took over and the lad knew his business. He shouted at us to double up, that we'd get farther that way, and he was right. I teamed up with a soldier and we worked it the simple way. We'd go up to somebody that was in trouble, one at each side, and grab him or her at the same time. With two of us at him or her there was no chance for trouble. We'd tow 'em into the bank then, although the first two we got we took to the boat. After that, they'd gone downstream with the current too far for us to buck the current back.

Of course those with preservers on were paddling and kicking toward the bank, and when they got about thirty feet from it and found they could touch bottom and wade, they got some of thier brains back

and walked ashore.

All told, there must have been around sixty people strung along that bank, running from opposite the boat to a quarter of a mile downstream.

By that time we couldn't find any more customers, and this sailor who'd taken charge got us together.

He said: "Lookit, boys! Bobby and I," Bobby was the one that was teamed with him, "will keep on looking around. We're the best in the water. The rest of you guys go back to the boat and get that little dinghy that's supposed to be a tender, I guess.

Then a couple of you guys take it and start taking these damn' fools off the beach and back to the boat. They're better off there. Somebody'll come and get us. There's room topside on the boat for everybody and she'll certainly have a radio—one of those ship to shore things."

I said: "Okay, chief! How many d'ya suppose we lost?"

He asked: "In the water?"

I said: "Yeah."

He said: "Half a dozen, but that's not all of it. I was looking back when that damned engine room blew up, and if that blast didn't catch another half dozen, I'll eat my hat. They oughtta inspect these boats better."

He and his pal started out searching for people to haul in or bodies to do the same with, and the rest of us waded up until we were opposite the boat, and swam out to her.

Then the two sailors with us helped the mate launch the dinghy and the two of them started out to bring back the people on the bank.

And I went looking for Nina Parker.

SHE was stretched out on one of the benches and she'd been crying. But she held up a hand to me and said: "I thought you were gone, too."

I said: "What d'ya mean, too?"

"Mr. Harknett is gone. At least I can't find him."

"The last I saw him he was with you."

"I know. But after you left he went toward the back of the boat, and I stayed where I was instead of going with him. I . . . I thought you might come upstairs again."

"Thanks, kid."

"Then somebody fell overboard, I guess . . . I heard somebody call that out, and then, right after that, the boat blew up. I've heard that half a dozen people were caught by the explosion and I'm afraid Mr. Harknett was one of them."

"Maybe not, kid. He might have gone overboard with those other damned fools. Could he swim?"

"Oh yes! Very well."

I said: "I wouldn't worry. You know the gag about a bad penny always turning up. If anything will bring him, it will be me talking to you. Every time I start to do it he shows up, Johnny on the spot."

"I know you're trying to make me feel better, Mr. Cleary."

"Sure, kid."

And then I saw the mate or deckhand or whoever he was and said: "I'll be right back, kid. I want to ask this guy a question."

She nodded and smiled and I went over to the little guy. And he spoke before I could.

He said: "Mister, you did a good job tonight. I seen you. You was with them soldiers and sailors in the water, too, wasn't you?"

I said: "Sure. I like to go swimming at night. Is there one of those ship to shore rigs on this boat?"

"Yeah! The old man's already got the Coast Guard coming up after us. The Coast Guard will want to check on this. You know what happened, don't you?"

"I've got an idea. Probably the same one you have."

"Didja hear her when she went up?"

"I did."

"Somebody blew them tanks up, mister. I heard the first crack that touched 'em off."

"I thought the same thing."

He looked doubtful. He said: "I don't know whether it comes under the Coast Guard or the sheriff's office or not. I don't know much about them things, mister."

I didn't either and said so. I know something about the law on dry land and I certainly, at least, would know who had jurisdiction over anything like that, but I didn't know a thing about the law when it came to a crime committed on a navigable river.

I said: "One more thing. Why in the hell did you go to work on that big lug? I saw you put him down and then kick him in the face."

He said: "That guy! I think he's the one that did it. He works for another boat that runs against us."

"Where's he now?"

"Tied up. Say, don't I know you?"

"I don't think so. My name's Cleary."

"That's it. I seen your picture in the papers, mister."

I said I'd see him again and went back

to Nina. And I wasn't back with her for more than ten minutes when I proved myself a prophet in saying Harknett would show up as soon as I started talking with her.

The boys in the dinghy brought him out from shore.

CHAPTER IV

The Little Man

THE COAST GUARD showed up and rescued us, but they didn't let off their boat until they'd taken our names and addresses. We were fourteen less than when we'd left on the excursion, and a thing like that demands an investigation. It was done easily and with no time lost—we just filed past a lieutenant at a desk, and there was no questioning or anything like that at all. It was no time for it. Thirty some odd of our people were plenty the worse for wear and couldn't have stood up under it, and seven had to be carried off on stretchers.

When it was my turn and I gave him my name, he looked up sharply. He said: "Cleary! The same Cleary that's been in the papers?"

I said: "Yes, damn it. I'm getting too much advertising."

"I've talked with the captain, Mr. Cleary. He tells me you rather took hold of things out here tonight."

"I didn't do anything. I didn't get panicky, that's about all."

He grinned at me and said the captain and I had different ideas. And then he got serious again.

He said: "Got any ideas about this thing? I'm asking you because of the business you're in."

I said: "Sure I've got ideas. The gas tanks were blown up. How, I don't know. But I heard the first blast that set the two tanks off. It must have been set under one tank because that tank went first, followed by the other and there was a decided lapse of time between them. The first two almost blended, but the second tank went with a heavier sound than did the one that set it off. One of the men on the boat collared a man he suspected of touching the thing off, but I don't take much stock in that."

"Why, Mr. Cleary?"

"The fellow worked for a rival boat, and as far as I know, that's the only reason he was suspected. Nobody is going to blow up a crowded cruise boat for business reasons. If they were going to blow it up, they'd sneak the charge aboard when she was empty. One's sabotage, but the other's murder."

"That does seem reasonable. We may get in touch with you, Mr. Cleary. It's outside of our jurisdiction, you see, but we'll probably be called in to help the sheriff. He has no equipment for diving, and I imagine a diver will have to go down to see if there's any chance of salvaging the boat. We'll probably be asked to do that."

I said it was a terrible thing to have happen when everybody was just out having a little fun, and he agreed with me. And then I took a cab to my hotel, too tired even to wonder why anybody would blow up a boat and kill fourteen people doing it. Between the excitement and paddling around that river I was really all in.

Even a dumpy girl could look swell in that rig.

The only pleasant thought I had was that there was no chance of catching cold, running around in soaking wet clothes as I had. The weather was too nice for that.

POUNDING on the door woke me up, and I saw it was a quarter after twelve, while I went to the door. Or rather while I hobbled to the door. The exercise I'd taken the night before had stiffened me up so much I creaked when I moved, and my back was so kinked I was stooped over like an old man.

And then I got a surprise. I opened the door and there was the chief himself, with two men in plain clothes with him.

He said: "Morning, Cleary."

I said: "Morning, chief."

"I'd like a word with you."

I stepped back and said: "Sure! Come on in."

In he came with his two side men.

I said: "Like a drink?"

He said: "I'm on duty, Cleary. I never drink on the job."

That was a damned lie but I didn't tell him it was. Instead I got a bottle from the closet and poured myself a slug. I didn't even bother sending down for ice until I'd got it down me, either—a drink was what I felt I needed.

The chief grinned nastily and said: "Solitary drinker, eh, Cleary?"

I said: "I'm an old man and a lazy man. I haven't had any exercise for the last ten years. That boat wreck last night damned near killed me. Besides that, if I want to take a drink, by myself or with somebody, is it any of your business."

He shook his finger at me and said: "Temper! Temper! Remember, mister, I'm here on business."

"You've got no business with me. Right now I'm trying to figure out why I let you guys in here."

"You wouldn't interfere with the law, would you, Cleary?"

"Not with the law. But with some of the guys that are supposed to enforce it and don't."

The chief was thin and sallow, with a big beaked nose. Now he had a tinge of red in his cheeks and more of it on his wattled neck.

He said: "I've spoken civilly to you, Cleary."

I said: "Like merry hell you have. You come in my room and start to needle me about taking a drink. To hell with you. Get the hell out, or tell me what you want right now."

He said: "That'll be easy. They found Stoll, Cleary. That's all."

"Well, who's Stoll?"

The chief turned his head and grinned at one of the cops. He said: "He asks who Stoll was, and he chummed up with him last night. Now he asks who he was."

I said: "I'm still asking. I don't know any Stoll. And I didn't chum up with anybody last night. I'll admit I tried, but I never got a chance."

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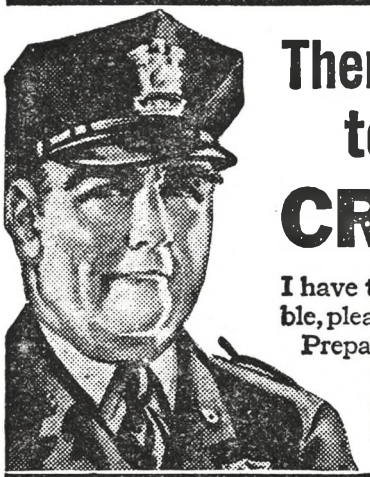

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He was mild enough, but the sawed-off shotgun stopped me.

"What's that mean?"

"I met a girl, but everytime I started to make a little time, some big lout kept getting between us. Not that it's any of your business. I still don't know Stoll."

"Was Stoll the one that kept getting between you?"

"He was not."

"Who was he?"

I said: "Now I've had enough of this. Who the hell is this Stoll? Why am I supposed to know him? What's he got to do with me?"

THE chief tapped a forefinger into the palm of his other hand and said: "I'll take 'em in order, Cleary. Stoll was a special representative of the Treasury Department. You're supposed to know him because twenty people or more saw you talking with him both at the bar on the boat and on the upper deck as well. He's got something to do with you because he was found with a knife in his back, and you're the last man seen talking with him. Now does that answer you?"

I said: "Yes, mister, it does. I didn't know the little guy's name, that's all. He came up to me while I was standing at the bar and asked me if my name wasn't Cleary. I said it was. Then he said he'd wanted to meet the man who'd made chumps out of this town's police force."

I stopped there for a moment and watched more red show on the chief's cheeks and neck. He was burning but trying to keep from showing it.

I went on with: "Then he asked me to work for him and I told him I was going North in two days—that I had reservations for that date. And that when I got North I was going to take a vacation. Then he told me he wanted a bodyguard, that he was afraid. I told him to take it to the cops and that if he could prove the guy he was afraid of had threatened him, he could have him put under a peace bond. And that if he didn't want to go to the cops for any reason, to hire a private cop from one of the agencies here. And that they'd charge him less than a third of what I would. That enough?"

"Is that all there is to it?"

"About that time a bunch of people came flocking over to shake the Cleary hand. All of them seemed to want to meet the man who'd suckered the cops, chief—I didn't ask them over. The little guy stood there all the time, and in between visitors he'd ask me to change my mind. I kept telling him no dice. And then I got sick and tired of people coming over and telling me what a smart guy I was and what saps the cops were, so I went up to the upper deck. The little guy went right along. And then I told him to run along and peddle his papers, that I was going to be busy. So I walked off and left him. That's all of it and if you can make anything of it, you're a better cop than I've seen any signs of you being."

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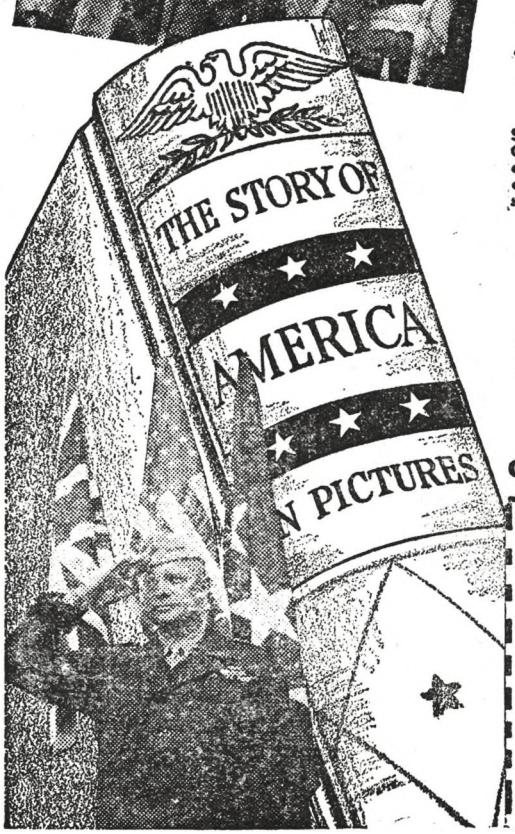

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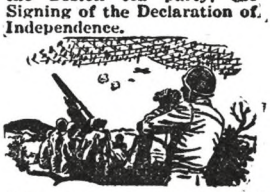

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"You told him you were going to be busy. Busy at what?"

"Trying to make time with this girl I met."

Right then the bellboy with the ice came in and I made myself another drink.

And then I said: "And how do you work into this, anyway. If the guy was killed, what's it got to do with you?"

"His department asked me to look into it until they can get a man down here on it."

I said: "You lie in your teeth, chief. The Government's got an office down here. I'll talk to their man from now on. Now get the hell out and fast, or I'll tell the papers you've been butting in Government business and prove it."

"You'd be rat enough to do it, too, Cleary."

I said: "That does it, chief. I'll make a point of it now. It's something else they can put in headlines."

He left then, and he wasn't looking happy.

CHAPTER V

More Little Man

I EXPECTED A VISIT from a Government man and I wasn't disappointed. Those guys are hell on wheels at all times, and when one of their own men gets killed, they're even faster on their feet. The one that called on me was possibly thirty, big and quiet, and looked as though he made a living selling bonds.

He said: "My name's Collins, Mr. Cleary. Joe Collins. This is a routine call, you understand."

I said: "I've already been called on, Mr. Collins. The chief paid me a little visit."

"What for, Mr. Cleary?"

"To try and rawhide me about your Mr. Stoll. He woke me up and my mind didn't track for awhile. And then I got smart and asked him what business if was of his that Stoll was killed. He told me he'd been authorized to check into the matter until a man could be sent down about it."

"And then, Mr. Cleary?"

"And then I told him to get the hell out. I've had a notion I was due for trouble with that guy and I was right. If my hunches always worked out as well, I'd have made a fortune while the horses were running."

Collins grinned and said: "I'm stationed here, you know, Mr. Cleary. I had a notion you'd have a little trouble with the chief if you stayed in town. After all, he didn't look too well on that insurance business. You can't blame him for feeling hurt about your part in it."

"Why the hell can't I? If he'd been on the job, or kept his men on the job, he'd have caught it himself. I'd have been saved a trip down here and the underwriters would have been saved a lot of dough. The guy either don't know his business or he knows it too well."

Collins grinned again but kept his mouth shut. My feud with the police was none of his affair and he had no business taking sides with either the cops or myself.

I said: "Will you have a drink?"

He said: "I'd like one, Mr. Cleary. Certainly."

"I asked the chief the same thing and he said he never drank while on duty and that he was on duty then."

That was too much for Collins. He said: "Why that ——! I've gone to his office to see him about something and I've found him so blind he couldn't see out of either eye. If fish drink, he drinks like one."

I made a couple of highballs and waited for him to start the ball rolling. And he wasted no time.

He said: "How well did you know Stoll, Mr. Cleary?"

I said: "I didn't know him at all."

Collins looked interested but said nothing.

"It was this way, Mr. Collins. The guy came up to me in the bar and asked me if I wasn't Cleary."

AND then from there I went through the same story I'd given the chief. Collins listened and said: "He didn't say whom he was afraid of, Mr. Cleary?"

"He did not. I don't know whether he knew who or what he was afraid of, for that matter. He was vague about the whole thing. To be honest, he struck me as being a bit off-color. Maybe I shouldn't say that but I thought it at the time, and him being

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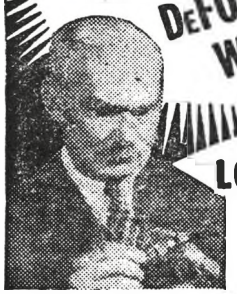

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knocked off like that backs the idea up. Maybe not to you but to me."

Collins looked at the ice in his glass, which was all he had left of his highball. When he spoke, he kept looking into the glass instead of at me.

He said: "Here's what I know about the man, Mr. Cleary. What I'm going to tell you is in confidence, naturally. I never met the man. It's customary for new men going into a territory where we've an office to get in touch with it at once. It's not a matter of courtesy, you understand. It's plain common sense. The local office can always help, being on the spot and knowing local conditions."

"Maybe he was a phony."

"No, it isn't that. Here's what he was working on. There's a lot of money, around eighteen billion dollars, hid away in safe deposit boxes or possibly in old Aunt Martha's china tea pot. The bulk of it belongs to black market operators and tax dodgers—people like that. Money made in the black market can't very well be explained, what with price ceilings and all. A man with say a gross business of a hundred thousand dollars a year, can't very well report fifty thousand dollars worth of profit on the business. He'd be either breaking the price ceiling all to pieces or he'd be buying illegal stock and selling it without making a report of it. Or a man doing a cash business could falsify his books and show a small profit, where actually he made much more money during the year. This extra money is salted away and the Government wants it brought into the open, so that it can be taxed."

I said I wished I had money enough to be able to salt some of it.

Collins grinned and went on with: "That's what Stoll was working on. He was an ex-private investigator himself, Mr. Cleary, and he had a reputation of being a good snooper. And with every man in our department working twenty-four hours a day, the way we are, the Treasury Department thought it best to hire private help. Stoll was a natural for the job—there's several others working on the same thing."

I said: "Well, at least it gives you a motive behind his murder. He probably was on the trail of some big operator, and the guy knocked him off when he got too close. How did you find out about him, Mr. Collins?"

"It was this way. A Coast Guard diver went down inside that boat, early this morning. He found Stoll there, as well as the two engineers. Stoll had no business being down there, but the knife in his back explained that. He'd been killed and then his body had been stuffed clear back behind the gas tanks. I don't know whether you were ever in that engine room or not, Mr. Cleary."

I SAID: "Now what the hell! What would I be doing in the engine room? I certainly didn't kill Stoll and stuff his body behind any gas tanks. He certainly wasn't investigating me. I had no reason for being in the engine room and I never was."

"I didn't mean it that way. Some people are curious about machinery, Mr. Cleary, and I thought it just possible that you'd toured the boat."

"I didn't."

"You can get into that engine room in four different ways, as it was explained to me. From front, back, and from either side. Of course going through the front way is ruled out—a man would have to go past the people who were dancing, as well as those standing at the little bar. Isn't that right?"

"Right."

"Now about the side entrance. The chief engineer stands practically between them when the boat is running. This because the motor controls are in that spot and he had to be there in order to answer signals promptly. The second engineer, in all probability would also be in sight of these doors, checking on the engines and so on. So that rules the side doors out for our murderer."

I said: "They'd be out, anyway. There'd be too many people in sight of either of those side doors. They'd be in plain sight of anyone on either side of the boat and for the entire length of the boat."

"Exactly, Mr. Cleary. That leaves us the back entrance to the engine room, and that was a natural for the murderer. That door opens onto the walk at the very stern of the boat. It leads between the two gas

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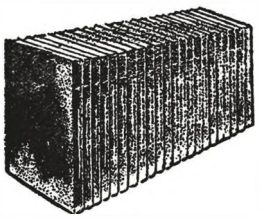

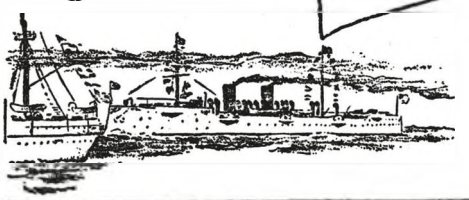

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Name..... *Age*..... *Home Address*.....

Present Position..... *Working Hours* .....*A.M. to*.....*P.M.*

City..... *State*.....

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tanks, and that's where the diver found Stoll's body. The explosion and the fire mutilated him badly, but, oddly enough, only around the legs and body. His identification was in his inside coat pocket."

I made us another highball and thought it over. I said: "How's this for a guess? The killer and Stoll met just outside the door for a talk. It was the nearest thing to privacy on the boat, unless, possibly they'd gone to the men's room."

"They'd have been interrupted there, Mr. Cleary. A person's not supposed to drink hard liquor on that boat and every man that had brought any aboard would be ducking in there to have a swig."

"All right, let's say they met there for a talk. Then the killer put the knife in Stoll and put him in the engine room. He had to put him someplace."

"He could have dumped him overboard, Mr. Cleary."

I said: "Not very well. The moon was almost as bright as day, and there were people all over the upper deck. He'd have floated and anybody that happened to look out over the stern of the boat would have been bound to see him. And there were always people looking back of the boat. They'd stand there and look back at the wake. I did it myself. One or more of them would be almost sure to see a body bobbing around back there."

"You're probably right," Collins admitted.

"But what I can't figure is blowing up the gas tanks. Do you think the killer goes around with a bomb in his pocket or what?"

COLLINS said: "I don't know what he used but there's no doubt but that he went on the boat prepared to kill Stoll. Who would carry a fish knife on a moonlit excursion for any other reason. That's what Stoll was killed with—one of the kind of fishing knives that have a jagged back to the blade for scaling fish."

"Any chance of tracing the knife?"

"Absolutely none. They are sold in at least fifty stores in town. Hardware stores, of course. Then the tackle shops. The auto supply stores as well as the retail stores of the mail order houses. Some to local people, of course, but the bulk of them to transients, down for a vacation. That angle is out."

"Have you found out where Stoll was staying?"

"The other two men in the office are working on that now. I thought of asking the chief of police for help on that, but after what you've told me, I don't think I will. He's already shown too much interest in Government affairs."

I said: "I think I'd ask him, anyway. Only tell him to keep that eagle beak out of the place, after he's found it. He's got sixty men under him and you've only got two."

"Well, maybe," Collins conceded. "But you know, Mr. Cleary, there's little to go on as it is. If I knew who he was tracing, I'd have some hope of breaking the thing. As it is, I've got nothing. For that matter, we don't know for sure that he was killed because of that. It might have been because of a private quarrel."

I thought of the little man and how he'd looked and acted. I said: "You can put that thought right out of your mind. The guy was scared of his shadow. He couldn't have fought his way out of a paper bag and he knew it. He'd run like a rabbit to keep out of trouble."

"And he was a private detective once," Collins said.

I told him: "He'd have been a pip for a shadow job, Mr. Collins. Right now I have to think hard to remember how he looked. He could hang on a man's coat tails and the man would never know it."

Collins laughed and said he'd keep in touch with me, refused another drink and left.

And I put in a call to the Royal Palms, something I'd been wanting to do ever since the chief had got me out of bed to listen to his drivel.

I'd been thinking of her since that time.

CHAPTER VI

Nina

I HAD TO ADMIT that Harknett treated his help very well indeed. Nina had a suite on the fourteenth floor, and in the Royal Palms that's something. Something like thirty dollars a day, anyway.

She looked a little pale, but outside of that, none the worse for what she'd gone through the evening before, and in some ways she looked even better than she had the night before. The lack of color made her brown eyes and brown hair look like something straight from Hollywood, and what it did to the band of freckles across her nose would have to be seen to be believed. She was wearing a house coat, one of the kind that sweep the floor, and one of those rigs can make even a dumpy girl look well.

I said: "You look swell, kid."

She said: "I know it. I put this on because I thought you'd like it."

That made for a nice start.

Then she said: "What was all this mysterious something you said you'd tell me about?"

I said: "I don't suppose you happened to notice the little man who kept pestering me last night?"

"No I didn't."

"I wouldn't have myself, except I just about had to throw him overboard to get rid of him."

"Maybe you did. Maybe he was the one they called out 'man overboard' for. What about him, Mr. Cleary?"

"It should be 'what about him, Dan'?"

"All right. What about him . . . Dan?"

"He's the little man that isn't here."

"You mean he's one of the fourteen that are missing?"

"He isn't missing. They found him this morning. Down in the engine room with the two engineers. A Coast Guard diver found them."

"What would he be doing in the engine room?"

"Dan?"

"Dan."

"I like to hear you say it, kid. The little guy was put there. With a knife in his back."

She had big eyes anyway, and now they got bigger. She said: "You don't mean it . . . Dan."

I said: "The heck I don't. I've had company all morning, well since noon, anyway, because of it. First his highness the chief-of-police. With two of his stooges along with him, so that I wouldn't throw him out bodily. Then a Government man. The little guy worked for Uncle, you see."

She said: "I see. But why should they go to you about him?"

"I was seen with him by about twenty people, according to the chief. And I was the last person seen with him, as far as they know now."

"I see."

"The little guy was checking up on hidden money, kid, but keep that under your hat."

She looked puzzled and said: "Hidden money?"

I TOLD her then what Collins had given me the dope on—about black market operators and tax evaders salting their dough to keep it from showing on any records. To keep from being caught on one and to save paying taxes on the other.

I said: "It isn't like ordinary hoarding, kid. Lots of people tuck money away, just like squirrels hide nuts. But this is big stuff, done to beat the Revenue Department out of dough."

"Was the man killed because he was catching somebody doing that?"

I said: "That's what the Government man I talked with thinks. But they're holding somebody from a rival boat and they're trying to pin the job on him. They're arguing that the guy was aboard to sabotage the boat and Stoll caught him at it. And that the guy put a knife in Stoll to keep him from squealing and dumped him in the engine room then, thinking the blast would destroy any evidence of murder."

Nina said: "There were fourteen people killed by that explosion, Dan. I can't imagine business men doing such a thing. The man who set that blast would know that innocent people would be killed. Nobody would be low enough to do a thing like that, just for money."

"That's the Government man's argument."

"What do *you* think, Dan?"

I said: "I'm keeping an open mind. In the first place, it's none of my business. In the second place, I don't know a thing about it. Stoll might have been stepping on somebody's toes. Stoll might have stumbled on to something he shouldn't have seen."

She said: "It's a terrible thing but I'm sure they'll catch whoever did it. To be honest, I can't be worked up over this man being killed. He was murdered and the murderer should be punished. But in all probability the same murderer also killed thirteen other people by setting the explosion."

I thought of how I'd looked for her, right after the blast and of how I'd seen neither her nor Harknett. I said: "Where were you and His Nibs when it happened? I looked around for you and couldn't find you. And then a sort of panic started and I was too busy to look any further."

"I was . . . well, in the ladies room, if we're going to be personal. Where Mr. Harknett was I don't know. He may have jumped overboard when he saw the fire, I don't know."

I said: "Mr. Whiskers will find out. Mr. Whiskers will find out where everybody on that boat was before the explosion. Mr. Whiskers does business that way. Did I ever tell you I don't like your boss?"

She grinned and said: "Why, no!"

I said: "He's the most interfering man I've ever met."

AND right then, as though it was a stage cue, the phone buzzed gently.

Nina said: "Miss Parker speaking."

And then: "Why, yes, Mr. Harknett. Why, yes. Well, I couldn't for possibly an hour. . . . . I have a caller. Yes, Mr. Cleary. No, I couldn't possibly do that. No, I wouldn't. All right then . . . in an hour."

She turned around with her face flushed and said: "Sometimes I get so mad at that man I could scream. Actually scream. He acts like I was Old Uncle Tom. Maybe he can sell me down the river, but he can't make me like the way he does it."

"The brute!"

She said: "He actually had the nerve to tell me to get rid of you. He wants me to go to the beach with him. I saw all the water last night I want to see for some time, and if I'd thought of it in time, I'd have told him so."

I said: "Did anyone ever tell you you look even prettier when you're mad, kid?"

"No, you idiot."

"Well, you do. I'll run along now and give you a chance to dress."

"Don't hurry, Dan. I've got at least half an hour yet. It doesn't take long to get into a bathing suit and a beach robe."

"I'd like to see you in the bathing suit, kid."

She actually blushed and covered it with: "Why not Nina?"

I said: "All right, Nina. I'd like to see you in a bathing suit."

She went to the phone and called room service for ice and soda, then dug out a bottle of Scotch from the dressing room.

She said: "Mr. Harknett in some ways is very nice, Dan. Look at this suite, and I have no other expenses, either. He even furnishes me with liquor."

"And helps you drink it."

"Well, yes."

"I can buy whiskey, too."

"I think I'd like your whiskey better than this, Dan."

"When can I buy it, Nina?"

She thought and said: "I'll go swimming with him and then I'll just about have to have dinner with him. But then I'll tell him I've got a headache and break away as soon afterwards as I can. Could I call you at your hotel?"

"Sure. The Bolton Arms."

"Then I'll call you as soon as I can get away from him."

Then the boy knocked at the door, with the ice and soda, and I had a drink and left, to give her a chance to get her war paint on.

And if Nina, dressing in a bathing suit, wasn't just about the same thing as an Indian putting on war paint, I'll do a medicine dance on the corner of Fifth and Main, and furthermore, do it at high noon.

The girl was certainly well stacked.

I WENT out of the Royal Palms, turning left toward my own hotel, and I hadn't gone half a block before a nice looking young fellow in a naval uniform met me and stopped.

He said: "Why, Mr. Cleary! Odd, meeting you like this."

He held out his hand and we did the usual, while I did my best to place him.

He said: "I wanted to talk with you last night, but there was too much to do."

I got it then—he was the Coast Guard lieutenant who'd checked us off the boat.

I said: "I'm just going back to my hotel, the Bolton, to have a drink. Why not join me?"

He said: "I'd like that," and turned and fell in step with me. He went on with: "I'd thought seriously of calling you, Mr. Cleary, but I don't like to be a bore. I suppose you know what we found on the boat?"

I said: "From two people I found out. From the chief and from the Federal man here. It complicates things, doesn't it?"

"Yes, indeed. The sheriff advises me he's released the man he was holding. You know, the one that worked on the rival boat."

"I didn't know that. Here we are—we can get to the bar through here."

We went through the street entrance into the Bolton Arms bar, which was foully decorated with palm trees, lousy-looking murals featuring Florida scenes, and which, in addition, was handicapped by being called *THE TROPICAL ROOM.*

It did have a swell stock of liquor, though, and two barmen who were as good as anybody I've ever seen.

And I've seen many a bartender.

We ordered drinks and I said: "Anything else turn up? Outside of releasing the only suspect?"

He said: "Oh hell yes! They've got six, in place of him. Three of them out on Federal bail and three that are trying to make it. I'll bet one of those people who write true detective stories could make one out of all that's happened."

I said: "No doubt."

"It's really amazing, Mr. Cleary. I mean it's something you'd be proud to have done, yourself."

I said: "Don't butter me up, lieutenant. Suppose you tell me about it."

He took a drink of the highball he'd ordered and started right in. He was looking for an audience, anyway, I thought, and he'd certainly found an interested one in me.

CHAPTER VII

More Little Man

IT TURNED OUT TO BE A routine job of putting the collar on six people who might have done the job and who had the opportunity. All of them undoubtedly hated the dead Stoll, but because you don't like a man, don't mean you've done him in.

Collins, doing a perfectly routine job and something every investigator in the business would have done, had called Washington for a list of the violators Stoll had turned in.

Remember, Stoll was working strictly under cover and just turned his findings over to Treasury men, who did the actual arresting. If he'd helped make the pinches, his value as an under cover man would have been lost.

Collins got the list, also over the phone, and compared it with the passenger list of the excursion boat, which Lieutenant Greaves had given him. The six he'd put the bite on were on the boat, and four of them were pretty tough cookies, to hear Lieutenant Greaves tell it.

I pointed out that any black market operator was bound to be tough—that they were taking chances not only with their liberty but with their lives as well. That running outside the law as they were, they had no recourse to it in case of trouble. That they were as open to hijacking as any of the liquor dealers were, during prohibition.

He said: "They didn't make any trouble when Collins and the two men with him arrested them. I wouldn't want to tangle with that man Collins, myself."

He wouldn't have had a chance with Collins but I was too polite to mention it. The lieutenant had looked five years older the night before, probably because he was on duty, and at that time I'd put him down as in his late twenties. I'd already cut that figure to twenty-three or four, and the more I heard him talk, the more I cut it down.

Of course the average man doesn't run into murder and sabotage, all in the same evening, very often, and I don't suppose I should have thought the lieutenant such a kid for being excited about it.

I wasn't excited—I was worried for fear the mess would hold me there in town and make me lose my passage North. Getting out of Florida in these days, with the transportation system loaded as it is, is a major problem in anybody's book.

I said: "Collins certainly did a swell job. I ought to go down and tell him so."

"He's holding them as material witness-

es," the lieutenant said. "How long can he do that?"

I said: "That depends. If he can show the judge that they may have seen something that would lead to a solution of the murder, he can hold them until they have long white beards. Their lawyers will be in there bucking to get 'em out on a writ. Collins will have to show cause for keeping them, naturally."

"Couldn't he book them for suspicion of murder?"

"Not with what he's got on them. He'd lay himself wide open for a damage suit if he did. Of course with them going up for trial, they're not going to fight back very hard. All of them up on black market charges, or just tax evasion?"

"I don't know, sir."

I said: "Well, I'll find out when I see Collins, no doubt."

The lieutenant took another drink with me and left, and I had a couple all by myself.

And then somebody said: "Ah, Mr. Cleary. I was hoping I'd find you here."

COLLINS again. And a doubtful-looking Collins. I ordered drinks for us and moved back to the booth where the lieutenant and I had been sitting and we made the usual small talk until the bar boy brought the drinks.

And then I said: "I hear you're raising hell with that great big derrick of yours, Mr. Collins. I ran into Lieutenant Greaves and he told me all about it. He said the sheriff turned loose the man that worked on the rival boat. That right?"

"Right," said Collins gloomily. "Damn it, Cleary, I don't know whether I've put my neck out or not. This business may tie up with yours—it may turn out to be a straight insurance swindle."

"How come?"

"Two of the men I picked up are two that you got pulled in on your arson business. Bernadette and Grady. I found out that they owned the boat, buying it through a dummy corporation, of course. They were both on it last night and either of them might have touched her off. They're both tough enough to do it, whether it was crowded or not."

I said: "Bernadette hasn't got the nerve,

or I don't think he has. Grady has and no mistake. If he could make a buck out of the deal he'd have blown it up if his own mother was on board. He'd have worked on the angle that if she couldn't swim at her age, she'd never learn any younger."

"It don't seem possible that they'd pull a caper like that, when they're out on bond for doing the same thing."

I said: "I didn't even know they were out on bond. It was out of my hands, as soon as they were picked up."

"They made bail the day after you got them in jail. They made it through a bonding company, though. They were too smart to come out with any of the money they had tucked away."

I said: "That Al Grady would have killed Stoll just for fun, if he'd known Stoll had anything to do with him being turned in. But if Stoll was working under cover, as you say he was, how in hell could Grady know it? Or how could any of the other five, for that matter?"

"Stoll may have slipped up in some way. Maybe they caught wise to him."

I said it was possible—that it looked like all things were possible in that town. And remembered that I'd forgotten to call the newspapers and tell them about the chief calling on me and dragging me over the coals over a thing that happened out of his jurisdiction.

I said, and idly: "If that damned chief knew what Stoll was down here for, he might well have tipped them off. If there's gravy like black market money around, and that—is smart enough to locate any of it, he'd cut himself in on it in a second."

"I wouldn't put it past him," Collins agreed. "I asked him to try and locate where Stoll was living and he promised he would. I ask him for occasional favors and he does the same with me, but you can't say we work together."

I'D ripped into the chief because I was sore at him but the more I thought of it, the more I thought I maybe had something there. Certainly a chief-of-police who was on his toes could catch wise to any extensive black market operation. For that matter he should have caught my arson gang—they were running it wide open. If the chief was crooked, and I was fairly sure in my own mind this one was, he'd either cut in on the racket or take a payoff to look the other way.

Or he could knock them over, if he thought that paid him more. For instance, if he was having trouble explaining a wide open town to the reform element, who might be able to pull enough weight to kick him out of office.

There was plenty to think about on the thing and I gave it to Collins, just as I doped it out. And he sat there, big and quiet, taking it in and thinking it over.

I finished with: "And there it is for what it's worth. At least it's something to start from. You might try and find if either Bernadette or Grady had any dealings with the chief. And, of course, the other four you've collared, as well."

Collins put his finger on the one weak point in the theory. "That doesn't explain Stoll," he said. "Stoll was working under cover. How would the chief know that he was the one who was putting the fingers on these men? There's a sticker, Cleary."

I said: "It would be almost impossible to prove, but I know two ways it could have leaked. Stoll might have talked to some gal, who thought she'd put herself in solid with the cops by telling them Stoll was a Washington spy. Or he could have got himself all drunked up in some joint that had a pigeon in it. The way the cops are running this town means they don't want any outside interference."

"We give them none," Collins said. "My office isn't concerned with the morals and manners of the place. We have our own work to do and that isn't interfering with the way this town is managed. Or mismanaged, if you like that better."

"This police angle is something to think about, anyway."

"It is. How much money do you think they found Bernadette and Grady had soaked away, Cleary?"

"I don't know. If it's all they made from the insurance gyp it's plenty."

Collins said: "A hundred and forty-two thousand, between them."

"Then they spent plenty. It should have run higher than that. They were the top of the crowd—they'd take the top out. Grady'd take more than the top cut, if he could get away with it."

Collins nodded and said: "That's what I thought, but I wanted to make sure."

Right then a uniformed policeman came in the door, stared around for a moment until he saw us, and then headed for us.

He said: "Mr. Collins, the chief says can you come to his office. I go up to yours and the girl there says you said you might be here. So I come here."

I said: "Now that was using your head."

He knew who I was because he glared at me, but he just lifted a finger to his cap and slouched out.

Collins said absently: "Such grammar! Want to come with me, Cleary? This might turn out to be tied in with your insurance fraud."

I had plenty of time to kill before Nina could possibly break away from Harknett and call me. And if I could tie Bernadette and Grady in with that boat explosion, it meant they'd hang for murder, rather than get a sentence for defrauding the insurance people. And the world would be a lot better off if both of them were six feet under ground, rather than walking around on top of it.

I said: "Sure!"

And so I returned the call the chief had made on me that same morning.

CHAPTER VIII

More Murder

THE CHIEF SAT BACK of a littered desk, trying his best to look important but missing it by a mile. He did succeed in looking like a buzzard, though.

He said: "Hello, Mr. Collins!" and gave me a frozen stare.

I said: "The name's Cleary, chief."

He said: "Oh, hello, Cleary."

I grinned and Collins said: "Mr. Cleary is giving me a little unofficial help, chief. Two of the men I'm holding were concerned in the insurance fraud he was investigating. Naturally he's interested."

"Naturally," the chief said sourly "We have found out where your man Stoll was staying, Mr. Collins, At the Rexford—that's down on East Main. A trap."

Collins said: "I know the place."

"I had the boys go down to the morgue, as they went on or off shift, and the beat

man that covers that territory remembered seeing him around there. So I checked and sure enough."

Collins said:: "Now that's what I call co-operation, chief."

"If I got more of it, things would run smoother in this town," the chief said, giving me a meaning look.

I said: "Them that gives, gets."

Collins said: "I'll go down and look the place over. He may have left some notes."

"He may have at that," the chief agreed. "I'll be seeing you again soon, Mr. Collins, I hope. Anything we can do to help, you just sing out."

Collins said: "Thanks, chief, I'll do that. And much obliged."

We left the office and I said: "Somehow I get the idea that the chief doesn't care for me."

"He'd like nothing better than to see me pick you up for killing Stoll. If it was in his jurisdiction, he'd have done it before, Cleary."

"I know that."

"It's driving him crazy to think you're on the inside and he's on the outside, looking in."

I said: "Did you ever happen to think that maybe it's not just jealousy? That it may be worry?"

Collins said: "I was thinking that very thing all the time we were talking with him. I'd watch my step if I were you, Cleary."

I said Mrs. Cleary's little boy was putting his feet down as though there were eggs under them.

NINA called about ten and I broke all records getting to the *SEAVIEW* where I was to meet her. It was a discreet little place that featured very dim lights and a damned good piano player, and I didn't have to wait more than five minutes for her.

She came over to the booth I'd found and I got her seated and an order in for us before she did any more than say hello.

Then she said: "This is exciting. This is like it was when I was sixteen. Go to a dance wth one boy and then at ten o'clock tell him I had a headache and have him take me home. And then go back to the same dauce with another callow young sprout."

"You must have had quite a time."

"Oh, I was a heller, Dan."

"Have a good time tonight?"

She wrinkled her nose and said: "Well, I had a good dinner, if that's what you mean. I spent most of the time listening to warnings about you."

"That makes two."

"Two what?"

"Two people who don't care for me. The chief's the other one. I'm getting so I scuttle past dark alleys."

"You're a wolf, Dan. You mean a girl no good. You have no principles. Anybody in the business you're in has no moral sense. If you had any sense of decency, you'd find something better to do than go around snooping into other people's business."

"I made a good snoop for the underwriters, Nina. There are ten people that are going to say 'Good morning, judge' because of that same snooping. It will be ten less crooks out beating the war effort because of that snooping, kid."

"Dan," she said automatically. "What's the war effort got to do with it?"

"They were in the black market . . . Nina. That's doing the war no good. I take that back. It's doing the other side a lot of good."

"I know, Dan."

"It seems to me that His Nibs is taking a hell of a lot of interest in me and what I do and don't do."

She reached over and put her hand over mine. "You don't know Mr. Harknett, Dan. He's like that. I've worked for him five years, and he thinks he has to look out for me. He's really nice in some ways. He's very kindly. He'll listen to anybody's troubles and, if he can, he'll help them."

"He's certainly trying to help me. The wrong way, though."

"And Dan! I think he's ashamed about the way he acted when the boat started to sink. About losing his head and jumping overboard and swimming ashore. I think that he thinks about how you kept your head and helped people and that he feels ashamed."

I SAID: "Not that it makes any difference, but the cops found where Stoll was staying. Collins, the Federal man was going down to check it when I left him. I'd have gone along with him, but I stayed and waited for your call. I forgot to tell you, hon, that he's also picked up six suspects on the thing and that two of them were in that bunch I nailed."

"I thought they'd be in jail, Dan."

"They're out on bail."

She said absently: "Mr. Harknett puts up bail money for a lot of people, too."

"The hell he does. Does he collect the regular ten per cent fee?"

She looked hurt. She said: "Why, of course not. I told you he was nice about some things. If anybody in his organization gets in trouble, he tries to help them out."

I said that was certainly white of him and that probably the only reason I didn't like the man was that I was jealous of him. Then I was told I was just being silly and that she was beginning to believe I really was a wolf.

It was closing time almost before I knew it.

I said: "It's too damned early to call it an evening. This twelve o'clock curfew is all right, of course, but it's hell for a young lover, like I am."

She said: "Oh you! That Irish blarney!"

I said: "Honest. I do hate to take you back to your hotel so early."

"I know a place," she said thoughtfully. "I've been there three or four times with Mr. Harknett and I think they'd remember me and let me in."

I flagged a cab and asked Nina where to tell the man to go and she told me. I told him: "The Flamingo Club," and asked: "Know where it is?"

He said: "Mister, I know that one and I know a dozen others, or maybe twenty others. The town's lousy with 'em."

"You sound as though you don't care for them."

He said grimly: "Mister, I've got a son in the South Pacific. Your damn' right I don't care for 'em."

I said: "Honey, I guess I'd better take you to the hotel at that. There'll be plenty of other times."

The hacker actually grinned at me.

COLLINS came up just as I was going through the papers, looking for some mention of him picking up his six suspects —and finding none.

I said: "I don't see where you're getting much, if any, publicity out of this thing, J. Edgar. How come?"

"The papers work with us, Cleary. You know that. If we want anything kept quiet, they kee pquiet. They'll have a little bit in the next edition that'll interest you, though."

"Yeah?"

"Remember the man the sheriff held and then released? The one that worked for the rival boat company. The one that was suspected of blowing up the boat?"

"Sure. I never could see that angle."

"What about this? One of the city cops found him about an hour ago. In Prospect Park. His head had been bashed in and then somebody had slit his throat."

"With a fish knife?"

"You knew it then?"

"I did not. I'm a detective, Mr. Collins, and I'll have you know it."

Collins stared at me and I explained. "This is a fishing town. That is, a hell of a lot of people who live here fish a lot. Right?"

He looked puzlled, but nodded and said: "Why of course. This town's famous for the fishing that's in range of here."

I said: "That's it. That's why a fishing knife was used on Stoll. You can buy them in fifty places in town and they're almost impossible to trace. You told me that yourself. So if a person wants a nice quiet weapon to do murder with, one that can't be traced, what could be better than a fishing knife."

"Well, he'd been hit on the head and knocked out. I saw the body and saw the bruises on the man's temple. Then the killer cut his throat. And then dragged the body back of some bushes. This cop was walking by and saw the man's foot sticking out from behind the bush. The bush wasn't quite big enough to conceal him completely, you see. He'd been knocked out on the path, but the throat cutting was done behind the bush."

I said: "I wonder how that ties in?"

COLLINS said grimly: "I know exactly. I don't doubt but that the man was on the boat with the intention of doing a little minor sabotage. If not, why would he take a trip on a rival boat? I'm fairly sure that he had no intention of blowing the boat up. Anybody that worked on a boat would realize that would be murder—that everybody wouldn't get ashore, beside the people the actual blast would kill. He probably meant to drop sugar in the gas tanks —that'll stop a motor. Something like that —emery dust in the oil. Something that would cause trouble but nothing really serious. I think he was prowling around, trying to find something to wreck in that minor fashion. I think he saw something he should not have seen, but that he had brains enough to get away from the killer. The killer probably didn't even see him—the killer probably was pretty well occupied in getting rid of Stoll and in blowing up the boat. I think this man realized the marvelous opportunity he had for blackmail and kept his mouth shut while the sheriff had him, rather than kill the goose that he hoped would lay the golden eggs for him."

I said: "It sounds reasonable. It also sounds as though he knew who the killer was."

"Not necessarily, Cleary. He could have followed the killer after the Coast Guard boat landed you people back here, and found out who he was that way. I think that after the sheriff let him out he contacted the killer and that the killer, who'd be smart enough to know that paying out blackmail is slow death, took the easy way out. I think they met in the park and that the killer, with no warning, cut the man down. And then slit his throat to make it certain there'd be no more of that kind of foolishness."

It sounded logical and I said so.

And asked: "Have the cops any idea at all about the guy? I mean are they tryiig to trace him after he left the county jail?"

Collins shrugged and said: "They're trying to, but I dcn't suppose anything will come of it. Somehow, I'm beginning to think our good chief isn't much of a law officer."

I said: "I'm beginning to think our good chief makes no attempt at being a law officer."

CHAPTER IX

A Miss And A Hit

COLLINS SAID thoughtfully: "What would you think of a man with a job like Stoll's, who had ten thousand dollars in big bills, sewed into the lining of a coat?"

I laughed and didn't answer.

Collins said: "I think the same thing. I think we've got the answer as to why Stoll was killed."

I said: "Sure. And I'll bet if you check deposit boxes in town, you'll find he had a lot more than that. If he knocked down ten grand, he'd have certainly gone for more if he had the chance, and he had the chance. That little man was no chump—he wouldn't keep all the loot in the same place. I'll bet he's got it scattered all over town."

"We'll check it," Collins promised. "What a racket! A government commission to trace black market money. A chance to snoop, legally. And the biggest club in the wide world to wave when he asks for a cut. Government prosecution with practically a sure conviction, against passing out money that came easily. The man could have made a fortune if he hadn't been killed."

I said: "You find anything else?"

"Not a thing. That's why we were searching so carefully. It stood to reason that if he'd made any notes he'd have tucked them away carefully. If he made 'em, he tucked 'em away so carefully I couldn't find them, and I've always fancied myself as quite a snooper."

I said: "Well, it's your baby. What about me talking with Bernadette and Grady? Any objection?"

Collins said: "None at all. Want to do it now?"

"Sure. And get it over with."

We rode down to the Federal Building and Collins led the way, down into the basement, where there was a neat little cell block. A mild little guard was there, but noticed he was armed with a sawed-off shotgun as well as with the customary pistol.

"Everything okay?" Collins asked.

"For sure Mr. Collins," the man said. "It's like lambs the bays are."

Collins said: "Like lions the boys will be if they get a chance to make a break for it."

We passed the guard before I got smart. I said: "Look, Collins. There's a chance that I can make a deal with Bernadette. None at all with Grady. Can you bring 'em out one at a time?"

"What kind of deal with Bernadette. I'm making no deals, Cleary."

"This is on my own. The insurance fraud is all that will be concerned."

"This is no funny stuff, is it, Cleary?"

I said: "You bet it is. I think that if I promise Bernadette he won't be prosecuted, he'll stool. He can take a choice of a ten to twenty or he can talk. He'll talk."

"What about Grady?"

"He'd laugh at me."

"I guess he would at that. Which one d'ya want to see first?"

"Bernadette."

Collins went to get him and I went over against the wall, with the guard trying to pretend he wasn't eating his heart out with curiosity.

And then Collins came back with Bernadette.

BERNADETTE had always been a neat little man and a night in jail hadn't even rumpled his clothes. The only sign of anything out of the ordinary with him was his needing a shave. He saw me and grinned and held out his hand.

He said: "I knew it was coming, Cleary. I'd have got out of it two months ago but I couldn't."

I looked at Collins, who scowled but moved out of earshot. I said: "Why couldn't you get out?"

"You know Grady. Or of him."

"Well, yes."

Bernadette spread his hands and let me figure it out, and I didn't have to be a quiz kid to get the answer. Grady would have killed him for sure if he'd tried to break out.

I said: "You know you're hooked solid, don't you, Bernadette?"

He grinned and said: "Unless my lawyer can hypnotize the jury, I am. And while he's a smart boy, I don't think he's that smart."

"Want to make a deal?"

Bernadette was half French and half the Lord knows what. I thought possibly Syrian. He had soft black eyes and eyelashes that most girls would give their share in heaven to own. Now he lowered them over his eyes and looked out at me as if he were looking through a veil.

He said: "What kind of a deal, Cleary?"

"I want somebody else in this business. I know he's in it but I can't prove it without help. Suppose we dropped the prosecution. I can promise you that. I'll give it to you in writing—have it signed by company officials if you want. That is, before you went on the stand. I'll tell you now, though, there'd be a sort of parole clause, in it. If you were caught in another deal like that, the agreement would be null and void."

"That's fair," he conceded.

"Want to deal?"

"I can't lose."

"I want the chief. I don't give a damn about the cops that were in with him."

Bernadette whistled.

I said: "If the chief goes up on this thing, and he will, the ones that were working with him will turn so honest they'll be in pain. What about it?"

"You're not asking for much, are you, Cleary?"

"Sure! I'm asking for plenty. But if you don't think the ten to twenty years you'll get isn't plenty, also, you're crazy. And you're not crazy."

Bernadette repeated: "No, I'm not crazy," in a thoughtful voice. And then asked: "What about Grady?"

"Grady's out. I'll make no deals with Grady."

"It's okay then," Bernadette said. "What d'ya want?"

"Names, dates, and amounts. A signed statement with them. And you to go on the stand and back it up. You also will have to tell me somebody that witnessed some of it, or it would just be his word against yours."

"I can do that, too. If they also get immunity." He looked at me slyly then. "You missed a couple on your round-up, Cleary.

It would be one of those you missed. He was there at a couple of pay-offs."

"Let's get at it then," I said. "We can use Collins' secretary."

"WHAT about this thing here, Cleary. I know it's got nothing to do with you, but can you get me a break with Collins?"

"I can tell you how you can maybe get one."

"How? Listen, Cleary! I know why he's holding us. He's trying to pin Stoll's murder on one of us. He's holding us as material witnesses. Bah! I saw nothing—why should I be held. But the rest of them could make me the patsy on that. A couple of them could swear they saw me kill the guy. That'd put them out of it. Grady would do it in a second. You know he would."

"So would a couple of the others."

"Listen, Cleary! I know I'm a thief. You know it. I admit it. But I'm no life-taker. I've never been a party to it. What does Cleary want? If I've got it, I'll give it."

"He'd like to know how much Stoll shook you down for before turning you in? And how much Grady gave him?"

"That would show motive for killing the little——, Cleary. I'd be putting my neck in the noose."

"You might be putting Grady's neck in, Bernadette. Collins knows you're smart. He also knows that Grady's both smart and tough. Tough enough to kill a shake-down artist. He know's you're not."

"If Grady knew I spilled anything like that, he'd be a cinch to get me. Or have somebody do it for him."

"Collins shoots straight. He wouldn't tell where he got the dope. He'd frame it in such a way it would look as though it came from somebody else."

"You promise that?"

"I do not. That'd be between you and Collins."

Bernadette studied me carefully and said: "I'll think it over. I'll talk to him."

I called Collins over then and we went up to his office. It took Bernadette three hours to dictate his statement to Collins' secretary and he read each typewritten sheet through carefully before he'd initial it. But he signed the finished statement

before witnesses, and I knew I'd stopped one man's clock.

I knew that after the Grand Jury met, the chief wouldn't be running any longer.

THEN Bernadette made his proposition to Collins

He said: "Mr. Collins, would I get any kind of a break if I told you some things about Stoll?"

Collins said: "What kind of things?"

"About money, say."

I nodded at Collins and Collins thought it over. And then said: "You would. How much depends on how soon I find who killed Stoll. I'm going to hold you on tax evasion and black market charges, but I probably can ease the rap for you there a little. There'll be a fine and a big one, of course, but the jail sentence, if any, would be light."

"Can you arrange it so the information seems to come from somebody else?"

"Meaning you're afraid of Grady?"

"Of course."

"I guess that could be arranged."

Bernadette said: "Well, the little——," and to the startled secretary: "Excuse me, miss!"

He started again with: "Stoll took eighteen thousand from me and fourteen from Grady, this over a three months period. And then we saw that if we let it go on like that we'd be working for him and that he'd bleed us white. Grady was sure he could scare him into leaving us alone, but he couldn't. Stoll said if we didn't keep on paying, he'd turn us in. We told him we'd put the bee on him when we were tried, if he was fool enough to turn us in. But he did it, anyway."

Collins said: "He was forced on that—I'll tell you that much. He was taking in so much knock-down money and he wasn't turning anybody in. Off men like you, who couldn't make a tax return because of the money being black market. He had you over a barrel."

Bernadette shrugged and said: "I'm glad the little—, excuse me, miss! I'm glad he was killed. But I didn't do it."

"What about Grady?" Collins asked.

Bernadette looked at him scornfully and said: "If he had, you wouldn't hear it from me. I'll turn in the chief, he was robbing us blind, too. That's different. But I'd not turn in a man I worked with on a murder charge. And, on oath, I'll tell you Grady couldn't have done it. We were together all the time we were on the boat. That's the truth."

I believed him and so did Collins. And I told Collins I didn't see any reason for talking with Grady and he led Bernadette back downstairs to his cell.

And I started back to my hotel, with the idea of calling Nina.

THEN it happened. It was one o'clock and you don't expect anybody to try to murder you at that hour of the day. Or on a street which was fairly well filled with both people and traffic. But it happened, and not half a block from the Federal Building.

I'd just passed a parked car, noticing quite casually that it was a good-looking parti-colored job. I couldn't have been more than twenty feet past it when I heard somebody shout out.

The voice said: *"CLEARY! HERE!"*

I turned and saw the man standing on the running board of the car. And he shot just as I saw him. I fell toward the sidewalk, and I got my gun clear from under my coat so fast that I was ready to shoot, even as I broke my fall with my free hand.

He shot again, but I'd rolled to the side as I landed, and all his slug did was chip the sidewalk where I'd been.

I shot back then and I didn't miss. I hit him three times in the middle and he fell from the running board, landing on his face. The car started then, passing me, and I waited for it, swinging around on the pavement and still on my stomach, and that time I had to shoot only once.

I got the driver through the head.

CHAPTER X

His Nibs

THERE WAS HELL to pay for awhile and the police finally had to route traffic around the block. When I'd shot the driver, the parti-colored car had swerved and picked up speed and had crashed halfway through the front of a store before its motor stalled. The first man I'd

his gun still in his hand, and the three slugs through his belly had really opened him up. The driver had half the far side of his head gone and there were blood and brains all over the car. When I'd shot, he'd fallen against the wheel and slumped down toward the floor of the car, which accounted for the swerve and the sudden pick-up. His foot had the gas treadle clear to the floorboards and the car had been in second, with a second gear pick-up.

I had my gun put away before the first cop got there, and he stood like a stupid, first staring at the dead man on the sidewalk, and then at the dead man in the car. He had his gun in his hand but he didn't know who he was supposed to shoot.

I went over to him and said: "I did it, officer. I did it with my little water pistol."

He said automatically: "You're under arrest," and then: "*Hey!* You're Cleary!"

I said: "Guilty as charged."

He said: "Ain't the chief going to love this."

I said: "I hardly think so."

Then a fussy, officious little guy bustled up. He had a cute little pod and he looked like he'd swallowed a canteloupe whole. He also had nose-clipped glasses and a bullying air about him.

He said to the cop: "It's all right, Jonas. I saw the entire thing. I wasn't twenty feet away when it happened. The man on the sidewalk back there stood on the running board of this car and shot at this man here." He pointed at me. "This man turned and shot back, so fast I could hardly see it. The man on the running board fell to the sidewalk and the car started. This man," he pointed at me again, "shot as the car passed him. You can see the result. It was a clear case of self-defense and I shall be glad to testify to it. Is your name Cleary, sir?"

This last was to me.

I said: "That's right."

"That's the name the man on the sidewalk back there called out, Jonas. I heard it distinctly. That was a remarkable exhibition of self protection, Mr. Cleary. I don't believe one man in a hundred could have shot so quickly."

I said: "Hell! Make it one man in a thousand and you'll be nearer the mark.

It's my business, you might say."

He looked at me with more attention then. He said: "Why, you must be the Cleary that was instrumental in clearing up these arson cases we've had."

"That's me."

THE little man glared at the cop and then turned back to me. He said: "I shall personally see, sir, that there's no police persecution in this matter. I have reason to believe, sir, that the police are antagonistic toward you."

I said: "That's the most beautiful example of under-statement I've heard in a long long time."

"I beg your pardon!"

"What I meant to say was you can say it again. Antagonistic isn't a strong enough word."

The cop was leaning in the car and staring, in horror, at the man in the car. He said: "My God, Cleary! What did you shoot him with? Half his head's gone."

I said: "I use hand loads with a wad cutter bullet. It's flat on the end, if you didn't know. And the gun's a .44 Smith & Wesson Special."

"I want one like it," he said, still staring at the man in the car.

And then, all of a sudden the street was full of cops, with the chief adding to the confusion by booming up with his siren going full blast.

My new little pal was standing by me bravely. The chief said: "Ho, Cleary! This don't look too good for you."

I said: "Ask my friend here about it, chief, before you blow your top."

The chief said: "Why hello, Mr. Dell."

Mr. Dell then told him and very lucidly just what had happened, and he had the chief so flustered that the chief let me walk away from the scene.

All he said was: "Don't leave town, Cleary, before the Grand Jury clears you."

I said I'd be a good boy and mind him—and thought of how the same Grand Jury that would clear me would indict him. That Bernadette's sworn statement and backing testimony would make the last a sure bet.

It turned out that my fussy little pal was one of the city fathers and had a seat on the police commission.

NINA wasn't in when I called and I wasted no more time. I called Collins, who was thoroughly excited about the street shooting but who'd been too busy to leave his office and tell me about it, and told him what I wanted.

I said: "It was a Federal man who was killed and you should make the pinch. But I want to put the finger on him myself."

"Stoll was no Federal man," Collins snapped back. "He was a civilian employee. We don't do the things he did."

I said: "Calm yourself. I didn't mean it that way. You've got the authority to make the arrest and you damn' well know that I don't want the chief in on it."

He said he'd be right over and I stuffed four fresh shells in Old Reliable and took a fast two drinks and met him in the lobby.

And from there we went to the Royal Palms.

The clerk, at first, was very hoity-toity. He said distantly: "I'll call, sir, and see if he's in."

I said: "Lay off the phone. Is he in or isn't he in?—that's what I asked you."

Collins took a little chamois case from his pocket and displayed a gold badge without saying a word.

The clerk said: "Certainly, gentlemen. I didn't understand. Yes, he's in. The boy will show you."

He punched a buzzer and told the boy who came over to take us to Mr. Harknett's suite. And Collins spoke for the first time.

He said: "And lay off that phone, mister."

The clerk assured us he wouldn't touch the phone and we followed the boy to the elevator. And down the hall to Harknett's door.

I passed the boy a buck and said: "You knock and if he asks who it is, say you've got a message for him marked urgent. Understand?"

The boy said he did—and knocked. And Harknett opened the door himself and stood peering out at us. Collins shoved the boy out of the way and I put my hand on Harknett's chest and really shoved.

And he went back into his room on his heels, waving his arms for balance, and Collins and I went in after him fast.

Nina was sitting on the couch, and she

gave an excited squeal when she saw me, and then sat quietly.

I said: "Okay, folks! The party's over."

Harknett said: "What's the meaning of this intrusion?"

I said: "Oh shut up, pop. We'll tell it to you."

Nina said: "I . . . uh . . . Dan, I . . ."

I said: "You shut up, too, sis."

Harknett said: "I demand to know, Cleary, the meaning of this."

I HIT him in the face then as hard as I could and I didn't do such a bad job of it. I caught him on the nose and he went down but not out, with blood spurting all over his shirt and on the carpet.

I said: "When I told you to shut up, pop, I meant it. Open that puss again and I'll kick your teeth in."

Nina came off the couch and at me, and she raked me from checkbone to chin on her first try. I cuffed her across the face and she went back, with her knees hitting the edge of the couch, and she collapsed there on her face, crying to beat the band.

I said: "Okay, Collins, do your stuff."

Collins showed Harknett his gold badge and said formally: "Mr. Harknett, you are under arrest. Anything you say may be used against you."

I said: "Oh, pop won't say anything. He wants his teeth."

And then nodded toward Nina.

Collins made his speech again. It was only different in that the headliner was changed. Just: "Miss Parker, you are under arrest. Anything you say may be used against you."

Nina just cried a little louder.

I said: "Okay, pop. You were diverting stuff from your warehouses to the black market and faking your books with phony sales to balance your stock reports. You could get a lot more dough for the stuff that way—it was black market prices against ceiling prices and there's a hell of a lot of difference. Stoll caught wise and put the bee on you. You killed him, rather than pay him or have him turn you in."

"That's ridiculous," Harknett said.

I did what I'd told him I'd do—and then had to wait while Collins threw cold water in his face to bring him back to life.

I said: "I love it, pop. Every time I think of what happened on that boat, I love it more. I'd keep quiet if I were you."

He felt of the front of his mouth, where he'd lost his teeth, but he kept quiet.

I said: "Here's how you did it. You arranged to meet him on that excursion boat. You had your little fishing knife all ready. You also had something with you that would blow up the gas tanks, what it was I don't know."

Collins said, with surprise: "I thought I told you, Cleary. Nothing but detonating caps. The same things they use to set off dynamite. Half a dozen wired together will blow a hole in the side of a wall. They found traces of them as soon as they raised the boat."

I said: "So you used detonating caps. You met Stoll at the very back of the boat and on the lower deck. You put your fishing knife in his back. You lugged him into the engine room and left him between the tanks. You tucked your caps under one of the tanks and lit the short fuse you had stuck in one of them. You went out of there and into the river—that's when somebody saw you and shouted: "Man overboard." The caps went off less than half a minute later—you'd fused them short. The first tank blew and that started the second."

NINA sat up on the couch then and said scornfully: "And where was I during all this time?"

"In the ladies' room, sis, right where you said you were. You must have been. You didn't take to the water. You weren't on the lower deck and you weren't on the upper deck. So you must have been in the ladies' room. Simple? Now shut up or I'll kick your teeth in as fast as I did pop's."

She sat back, glaring at me.

I said to Harknett: "You thought it was clear. Then this dope who worked for the other boat company bought in. He came to you and told you he wanted money or he'd tell what he'd seen. He'd been snooping around the boat, looking for a chance to do a little mischief, and he'd seen you put the knife in Stoll. You made a date to meet him in Prospect Park. You met him. You sapped him out, dragged him behind a bush, and cut his throat. What was one more guy when you'd already killed fourteen people.

"I'll give you credit—I don't think you realized that when you set that blast off, you would almost certainly kill a bunch of people. I think you figured the plan as just a way of either destroying Stoll's body beyond recognition or lousing Stoll's killing up so much somebody besides you would be blamed."

Harknett started to say something, then dodged back as I kicked at his face again.

Nina said shrilly: "What about me? What have I got to do with this?"

"You'll have twenty to life, anyway, to do for it, sis."

"Why? How am I mixed in it? Suppose he did it. That don't mean I was concerned."

I said: "Listen, foolish! You let me make love to you on orders. That jealousy gag of pop's here stunk. You were supposed to keep track of things and I saw that you did. D'ya think any jury in the world would believe that you could work for pop for five years as his private secretary—I'll say nothing about any other activities you may have had—and not know what was going on? You stalled me beautifully, only the stall didn't take. You'll be charged with complicity before and after murder."

I waited a minute and then said: "You've said it all, sis. Now shut up unless you want to go on trial with a set of store teeth."

COLLINS spoke for the first time since he'd arrested them. He said: "What a command of language. She used some I haven't heard in years."

I said: "Okay, sis, get your hat on. And keep your mouth shut while you do it."

And that was all of that. Collins booked Harknett for suspicion of murder and Nina on a complicity charge for the same offense.

And I went North the following day, on a reservation Collins had pulled Government weight to get me. What happened afterward I found out by following the papers. All I had to do with what went on was to make a statement, sign and swear to it, and send it to both the local and Federal prosecutors.

The case against everybody concerned was that open and shut.

HARKNETT got the chair, at Raiford, and Nina got twenty to life. Al Grady, because of his record, got a five to seven and a ten thousand dollar fine on top of it, getting the rap because of both black market activities and tax evasion. Bernadette got one year and one thousand dollars, the court taking into account his testimony. The other four that Collins had picked up along with Bernadette and Grady got it all the way from a thousand bucks and a year in jail to three years and three thousand dollars for the fine. All six were on the boat by arrangement—to meet Stoll and try to arrange some pay-off with them that would get him to change his testimony in their favor. They figured that for the right amount of dough he'd go to jail in their place, and they were probably right.

And the chief got fired, beautifully, and the underwriters got him a three to five for being a party to the arson-insurance frauds.

A good time was had by all—all except the fourteen poor devils that went out because of Harknett's murder scheme.

It was a swell excursion, all right. But a excursion to murder.

THE STIFF IN SOLITARY

(*Continued from page* 43)

plain it, but after the big push we started to round up prisoners and came across this guy. He was in a ditch alongside a Nazi meat wagon filled with stiffs. The German military tunic on him was half torn off his torso, but he had one of our dog tags around his neck. Sergeant Spike Reager, it said. Beats me!" scowled the loot, looking down at Spike.

Spike opened his eyes wide and grinned with a couple of front teeth missing. "I'm a tough guy, sir. They don't build Heinie prisons strong enough to hold Spike Reager."

And then the tough guy, with two front teeth missing, shut his eyes again sleepily. But not too sleepily to notice that the prettiest nurse in the U. S. army was holding one hand, while the other was running coolly over his hot forehead.

"...EACH MAN KILLS..."

(*Continued from page* 17)

MIDNIGHT. SUE FARRELL looked at McManus. "It's better this way, I suppose," she said. *"He wanted to kill me, wanted to kill me!"* As if it were past her understanding! "They won't do much with him except commit him, I suppose."

Mac nodded. She looked beautiful sitting in his dead mother's chair, the lamp painting her hair red-gold. He took her upstairs—to his mother's bedroom, kissed her gently at the door.

Before going to bed himself, he went to the bathroom and burned the letter he had taken from Goldie Weber's purse, the typewritten letter signed George—which he, McManus, had mailed to Goldie. He looked at himself in the mirror and decided he looked no different than he had ever looked. He wondered if murderrs always felt like this—felt no remorse.

He thought of the woman he loved, sleeping in his mother's room. He remembered Farrell's sneering words at the hospital—that he, Farrell, couldn't be held responsible. He remembered the faked cut in the screen door, the cut that could have been made only from the inside, by Farrell himself. The way the screen wire bent proved that. Mad? Farrell was certainly mad! The woman? She encouraged him. She deserved to die.

He wondered if the future could ever make this up to him, this thing he'd *had* to do. He started to pray a little, but instead, strangely enough, found himself repeating the quatrain:

"For each man kills the thing he loves,
By all let this be heard:
The brave man does it with a sword,
The coward with a word."

After that, McManus prayed.

NO WITNESSES

(*Continued from page* 27)

with sound. Chief Johnny Drake leaped to his feet. Old Worth, with a feeble cry, lifted himself out of his chair.

But that right hand of Newman's was clutching at his shattered throat. And Newman was tottering, slumping—down on the floor, inanimate, an ugly little human shape in a spreading pond of red.

"GUMSHOE" JOHNNY DRAKE was quick on his feet. He had the gun in his hand before Doc Hal could turn it on himself. He wrested it away. Old Worth was swaying forward, screaming out imprecations. Chief Drake ignored him. He was bending over the thing on the floor.

He reached inside the waistband, and pulled out a gun, and stuck it into the flabby hand, pressing the finger-tips against the handle.

"Lucky I got here in time, doctor. I had my suspicions about these two guys, and followed them in. This fellow Smith tried to hold you up. And you got the drop on him and fired first. That's swell, doctor. There's nothing to worry about any more. I guess the old gent was ignorant of what was going on. There'll be no charge against him—"

Old Worth screamed: "That man took out my good eye—my good eye, instead of my bad one. I've tracked him down for twenty years, and now I've got him. He shot Newman. Where are you, Newman? Newman, if you're dead, I'll see he gets the chair!"

"Ain't you talking kind of wild, dad?" asked Johnny Drake. "Newman's dead. Tried to hold up the doctor, and the doctor was quicker on the draw.

"And you two came to Repton, and registered under aliases, which don't look so hot in any court of law. No, dad, you've got no case. You're through.

"You're in a tight spot, dad, but maybe we can clear you, if you forget that idea that Dr. Curtis ever done you any harm. You see, you didn't see nothing. Because you're stone blind. How do I know? Why, you're carrying one of them white canes that the Lions Club gives to blind folks, and you've got to be total blind to rate one."

STILTS FOR THE SAVAGE

(*Continued from page 51*)

around his neck and hugged him to her:

"Ollie Bascomb, you . . . *you angel.*"

There, resting on burlap bags, securely roped to the roof of his battered coupe, was the grandfather clock that she had tried to buy from Jethro Gates.

"Aw . . . aw, it's jest a little present from a brother to a sister, Euphemy," said Ollie, who rather disliked this affection in public and who was struggling to get away.

"A . . . a present."

"Yeah, I . . . I couldn't *buy* it from Jethro—he wouldn't let me—when I give him back his money. I *tried* to buy it, honest, when he wanted to know what he could do for me an' I said he could *sell* me the clock. He wouldn't. He *give* it to me. He—"

" 'Gave' it to you, Ollie," she corrected him, starting to look stern again. Immediately, however, she must have decided that this was not the time for an English lesson. She smiled and added: "You *are* an angel, though, brother dear."

"I . . . aw, shucks, Euphemy, I couldn't have done it if it hadn't been for *you*," he told her. "Nope, I couldn't have done it if it hadn't of been for them stilts."

"Those stilts. How, Ollie?"

After he had explained to her, briefly, she again stuck her arms akimbo and stood there looking at him, oblivious of the little group of onlookers that had clustered about them, with an expression on her face that was far, far more contented than the one he had worn. Then, with an almost roguish air, she uplifted her right arm and shook a finger in his face:

"What did I *tell* you our mother used to say, Ollie? If you have anything you don't think you want, if you have anything you feel like throwing away, just put it up in the attic and you'll find a good need for it sometimes within seven years. . . . Don't *you* dare call my lovely antiques *kultch* after this, Ollie Bascomb."

The greatest birdin' an' troutin' fool in the whul' State o' Maine had nothing to say.

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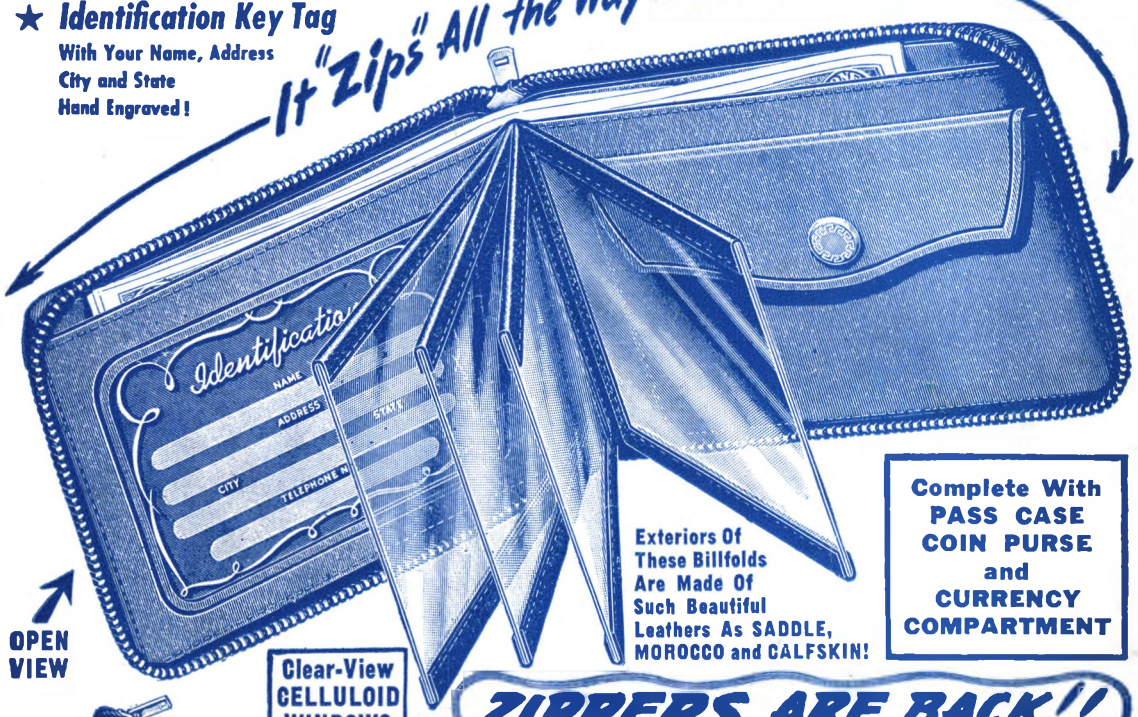

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