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DEATH!**

By Emile C. Tepperman

**THE COUNTESS
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By W. T. Ballard

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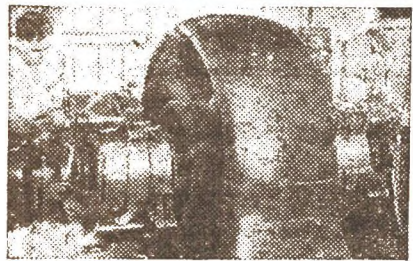
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April, 1943

Vol. XLVII, No. 2

★ 10 New, Different Stories—No Serials ★


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In This Corner—Death!



The roar of gun thunder drowned out his screams.

Smashing Mystery Novolet

By Emile C. Tepperman

CHAPTER I

DRIVING down Central Park West on Monday morning, Tom Atherton suddenly realized why he had been feeling restless and discontented for the last few weeks. By rights, he should have been supremely satisfied with himself.

He was a young and successful real estate lawyer. His income, after three years of practice, was now large enough so that he and Sally Blaine had been able to set their wedding date for the early part of May. He was a respected member of the Bar,

and they were even talking of running him for the Assembly in the 1943 elections.

But Tom Atherton wasn't happy. As he automatically tooled the coupe down Central Park West, his big hands tightened on the wheel, and he found his thoughts slipping fondly back to the years preceding his admission to the Bar. In those days he had worked his way through Law School by boxing every Friday night in semi-pro bouts all around New York. Tom's manager, old Jerry Flynn, had almost cried when Tom quit boxing to take his bar exams.

Tom Atherton smashed a murder car and saved a stranger's life. But the man he saved rewarded him with a death-house frame. And Tom's only friends were the killers he'd foiled.



"Tommy, my boy, it's breaking my old heart you are. You're throwin' away the makings of the heavyweight champion of the world. And for what? For a dusty law office! Stick with me, Tommy, and I'll make you champ in three years!"

But Tom Atherton, with high resolve, had put all that behind him, and become a respectable attorney.

Now he pushed his foot down savagely on the gas and sent the coupe spurting through traffic, wishing he'd taken Jerry Flynn's advice. He was bored—fed up with humdrum existence.

And abruptly—as if the gods had favored his wish—Tom Atherton's humdrum existence came to an end.

There was a pigeon-blue sedan

ahead of him proceeding very slowly and straddling the white line in the middle of the street so that it was impossible to pass. Tom scowled with impatience, and put a finger on the horn button to honk it out of the way. But just as he was about to press the button, he noticed something very queer about that pigeon-blue sedan.

There were four men in it, two in front and two in back. All of them, including the driver, were visible to Tom through their rear window. He could see that they were peering very tensely to the right, in the direction of a large and expensive apartment house. A stocky man in a dark suit and a panama hat was coming out of that house, lighting a cigar.

The thing that made Tom Atherton catch his breath was the fact that one of the men in the rear seat had the window open, and was pushing a queer-looking instrument out. Tom had never seen a real sub-machine gun, except in the movies. But he recognized this. It was pointing directly at the stocky man in the panama hat.

The machine gunner in the pigeon-blue sedan was twisting around sideways and sighting along the gun, with his finger on the trip.

Trained to quick instinctive responses to danger by his ring experience, Tom was already reacting without thought of his personal safety. He stepped down hard on the gas, sending his coupe forward like a shot. He swung to the right, bringing him alongside the pigeon-blue sedan. Then he twisted the wheel violently to the left.

The left end of his bumper tore into the running-board of the sedan at the very moment when the gunner let loose the first burst from the sub-machine gun, filling the air with its rapid, staccato drumbeat of murder.

But Tom's swift maneuver achieved its purpose. The crash of his coupe jolted the sedan hard. The muzzle of the machine gun was thrown violently upward, so that the hail of lead spattered into the air instead of cutting

the stocky man in two as had been intended.

Tom didn't see what the stocky man was doing, for his own hands were suddenly full. The four in the pigeon-blue sedan turned their attention to him. The gunner swung the muzzle of the weapon around to bear on Tom, and his finger pulled the trip again.

Tom Atherton's blood was racing with jubilant excitement. His bumper was locked with the sedan's running board, so that his window was in line with the rear window of the sedan through which the gun muzzle was pointing. He twisted his door handle and flung the door open violently at the same instant that the gunner pulled the trip of the machine gun.

Lead blasted from the muzzle, but it was sharply deflected by the opening door. Instead of riddling Tom, the scorching lead spattered into the framework of the coupe.

At the same time, Tom Atherton leaped out from behind the wheel and put his whole body behind a straight-arm jab into the gunner's face. He hit the man in the mouth and the fellow's head slammed backward. He let go of the machine gun, and it toppled out the window to the running-board at Tom's feet.

The gunmen yelled and scrambled out of the car on the opposite side. Tom jumped out from between the two cars, coming around after them.

Then a police radio car siren uttered a shrill scream and came tearing into Central Park West from a side street two blocks south.

The gunman swung around in sudden alarm. One of them yelled something in a foreign language.

The four of them turned and ran across the street to the park. They vaulted the stone wall and disappeared into the scrubbery on the other side.

The police car pulled up with screaming tires, and two bluecoats emerged with drawn guns. There were several spectators around, and they pointed in the direction taken by the

fugitives. The cops went over the wall after them and the crowd thronged to the fence to watch the chase.

FOR the moment, Tom Atherton was forgotten. Not a soul was looking at him. In the distance, there were other radio car sirens, but all traffic on Central Park West was halted and everybody was absorbed in the chase that was going on in the park.

Tom threw a quick glance over toward the apartment house, but the stocky man in the panama hat was gone. Tom frowned. He knew who that stocky man was. He had seen the man's pictures in the papers many times. Gustave Bennett had been tried for sedition more than a year ago, and had been acquitted by a fluke, together with five or six other defendants.

His picture had cropped up in the papers only this week again, in connection with the current trial of one of his friends in the state court, on a charge of having stolen weapons from a State Guard armory.

Recalling Tom Atherton realized that he had risked his life to save a most unsavory character. There had been ugly rumors of vicious murders and reprisals being carried out by secret branches of foreign organizations. And the papers had printed a long statement by Gustave Bennett, to the effect that a certain secret society was really responsible for the crime for which his friend was being tried.

Tom told himself that he certainly shouldn't have stepped into this feud. He didn't want any publicity like this, because he knew how it would affect the few clients he now had. He threw a quick look around and saw that he was unobserved.

He dropped the machine gun and slid into his coupe. He stepped on the starter and backed up, ripping it out of the fender lock with the pigeon-blue sedan. Then he threw the car in first and shot forward. In a moment he rounded the corner.

He sped west for two blocks, then turned north on Amsterdam Avenue. He breathed a sigh of relief to think that he was well out of the mess. He turned on his dashboard radio, tuned it in on police signals, thinking that he would enjoy listening to the reports on the fray. He drove for ten minutes, and then his equanimity was rudely shattered as a police announcer's voice blasted from the radio:

"Signal thirty-three! Black coupe, license number 8V 282! Attention, all cars! Cars 21, 22 and 26 converge on Amsterdam between 72nd and 86th. Apprehend driver of this coupe, believed to be dangerous killer. This man just escaped after gunfight on Central Park West. Use caution. He may be armed and dangerous. Coupe has bullet marks from machine gun. . . ."

Tom Atherton felt a queer sensation up and down his spine.

That alarm was for him. He—Tom Atherton—was being called a dangerous killer. And the machine-gun bullets. He had forgotten them. Any policeman he passed would notice them.

He pulled over to the curb to give himself a chance to think. He had been a fool to run away. Better to have adverse publicity than to be hunted as a killer. The thing to do was to go back and explain.

He reached the decision and immediately started to carry it out. He shifted to first and prepared to turn around and drive back. He started to pull away from the curb. There was a long low hiss of escaping air as the coupe settled down on the left side.

With a frown, Tom got out and went around in front. Sure enough, the left front tire was flat. The crushed fender had cut into it as he drove.

There was no sense in stopping to change the tire now. There was a drug store diagonally across the street. Tom started across, deciding to phone headquarters at once to tell

them the truth about the fracas on Central Park West.

But just as he got started across the street, a cruising police car came racing around the far corner. Abruptly it swerved into the curb as the policeman alongside the driver pointed toward Tom's coupe.

The police car screeched to a stop. A cop leaped out with a service revolver in his hand. He ran up to the coupe and looked inside, then turned disgustedly and called to his partner:

"It's the car, all right, Mac. But the guy's gone. Ditched it!"

Tom's first instinct was to go over and tell the policemen who he was. In fact, he had already started toward them, when Mac shouted from the police car, "We better get that guy before those Greeks get him. If they lay their hands on him, there won't be enough left of him to question!"

Tom Atherton's jaw hardened. So he wouldn't be through even after he explained to the cops! The rumors had been founded upon truth then! If there was some sort of secret Greek society bent on exterminating suspected pro-Nazis, they'd surely believe he was in league with Bennetz. Tom Atherton would never have peace!

Automatically he kept going across the street and entered the drug store. An idea was beginning to shape itself in his mind. He went into the phone booth and dialed Spring 7-3100.

"Police Headquarters?" he said when he got his connection. "This is Thomas Atherton, an attorney. I want to report my car was stolen this morning!"

"You'll have to go to your precinct station and report it in person," he was told.

"All right," Tom said. "I just wanted you to make a record of it."

HE HUNG UP, feeling clever. He had known that they would tell him to go to the precinct house. He wouldn't go there till the evening, but

meantime the supposed theft was on the record. Now they'd keep on looking for an unidentified gunman whom they would never find.

Very much satisfied with himself, Tom went out of the store and almost collided with the bluecoat, who was hurrying in to report finding the coupe.

Tom walked across to Broadway and took the subway down to his office on Worth Street. His mind, as the train rumbled on, was upon the fight in Central Park West. It was several minutes before he realized that he was being observed.

Two men were sitting at the end of the car, watching him. He had not seen them when he entered the car, so they must have come in behind him. They were big fellows with swarthy complexions. One of them wore a black derby, while the other had a gray slouch hat. The one with the derby had a nick in his right ear, as if a bullet or a knife had taken a piece off it. The one in the slouch hat was chewing a toothpick.

They both had their hands in the pockets of their topcoats. When they saw that Tom Atherton had noticed them, they both got up, crossed the aisle and sat down on either side of Tom. There were four or five other passengers in the car, but no one seemed to pay any attention to them.

They both pressed up close against Tom. He could feel the pressure of the guns in their pockets.

"Good morning, my very good friend," said the one in the derby. "Packy wants to see you."

Tom frowned. "Who's Packy?" he asked.

The one in the derby started to laugh very heartily. He leaned across Tom and shouted to his partner above the rumble of the subway train. "He wants to know who's Packy! What you think of that, Achilles?"

The one who had been addressed as Achilles did not laugh. He gave Tom a sour look and said to the other, "I theenk we geeve heem those works

right here, hah, Julius? W'at's the use breenging heem to Packy? We geeve heem one-two shoots right now. Weeth the loud noise een thees subway, no one hears. W'at you say, Julius, hah?"

Julius shook his head. "Packy wouldn't like it. It would be better to let Packy question him. Then we might find out more about Bennetz."

"Oh," said Achilles. "I have not theenk of thees. You are vairy smart, Julius."

"Listen, you two," Tom said desperately. "What the devil are you talking about?"

Julius gave him a nasty grin. "We saw you, my very good friend. Only for you, our men would have finished off Bennetz. You must be in the pay of those Nazi dogs. For a whole week we have planned the death of that rat. And then you stepped in and ruined it all. You must come with us till we find out more about you."

"I'm not going anywhere with you!" Tom exclaimed.

Julius frowned. "Did you hear that, Achilles? He won't come!"

"Hah!" said Achilles.

"You see, my very good friend," Julius said in a reasonable manner, "Achilles and his family were in Athens when it was bombed. They all died there. He escaped. He would rather kill Nazis than eat or drink. He already got fifteen of them in the old country. You've read in the paper about these pro-Nazis escaping trial recently. We intend to bring justice to them anyway."

A light broke on Tom. "You mean to say that you fellows have been planning all that?"

Julius shrugged. "I leave it to your imagination. Achilles wants to finish you off right here. So maybe you'll change your mind about coming along?"

The guns of the two men nudged into Tom's ribs.

The train rumbled into the station. They got to their feet.

"Well?" said Julius.

Tom looked up at Achilles, and saw

that the big fellow was just itching to pull the trigger of the gun in his pocket. He shrugged. "All right," he said. He got up, and they ranged themselves on either side of him. The train came to a stop and the three of them marched out on to the platform.

Just outside the door, Tom came to a stop. "Wait a minute," he said.

The two killers stopped, keeping close on either side of him. The door of the train started to slide shut.

Tom took a quick step back. His left fist flicked upward, and caught Achilles just behind the right ear in a beautiful rabbit punch.

Julius cursed, yanked the gun out of his pocket.

Tom Atherton shoved Achilles into Julius, then leaped backward through the quickly narrowing aperture of the sliding door. He got into the vestibule of the car. The door slid all the way shut behind him.

Julius jumped clear of the falling Achilles. He raised his gun and fired three times quickly through the glass at Tom.

TOM dropped to the floor and the shots crashed over his head to the accompaniment of smashing glass. But it all blended with the roar of the train. Several passengers from inside the car looked over toward the vestibule. Two or three of them came out to help Tom to his feet. They saw the broken glass, but did not know it had been caused by gunfire.

"You want to sue the subway, mister," one of them said. "I'll give you my name in case you want me for a witness!"

"No, thanks," Tom said. "I guess I'm all right."

He breathed a sigh of relief as the train pulled out of the station. That had been Fourteenth Street, and the next stop was Chambers Street, where he got out. As he ascended the stairs into the street, he glanced around quickly to see if the two gunmen had gotten there by taxi to intercept him, but there was no sign of them.

Tom hurried toward City Hall Square to his office on the twelfth floor of the Bridge Building.

Sally Blaine was already at her desk when he came in. Sally was five-feet-two of trim loveliness, with richly tinted auburn hair and merry blue eyes. She had just gotten her own degree of Bachelor of Laws, and was clerking in Tom's office for her year of apprenticeship before being admitted to the Bar.

Tom leaned over the typewriter and kissed her. She made a wry face, wrinkling up her nose.

"Not in business hours, Tommy," she said.

He grinned down at her. "When we're married, I'll kiss you before breakfast every day. Now I have to be satisfied with kissing you before lunch!"

The telephone rang and she answered it. A look of puzzlement came into Sally's pretty face.

"It's for you, Tom. It's the Police Department. They say they found your stolen car. I didn't know it had been stolen—"

"It just happened, Sally!" Tom said hastily, snatching the phone from her.

"This is Sergeant Griffin talking," the officer at the other end said to him. "We just picked up your car. It was used in a shooting. Want to come down and look at it?"

"I can't get down right away," Tom said. "I—I have to take care of a case in court this morning. I'll be over in the afternoon."

When he hung up, Sally Blaine frowned at him. "Tom Atherton, what's this all about? When was your car stolen? And why did you lie to that policeman on the phone? You know perfectly well that you have no case in court this morning—"

"Yes, he has, lady!" a heavy voice said from the doorway.

Sally's glance sprang to the door and she uttered a little gasp. Tom swiveled around.

The man who had just come in was the man in the panama hat whose life Tom had saved—Gustave Bennetz.

CHAPTER II

BENNETZ was not alone. Four men filed into the office behind him—silent, tense men, heavy and sour of expression. Their eyes never left Tom Atherton. The last one in kicked the door shut and locked it.

Tom's face flushed a dull, brick red. "What do you want?" he demanded harshly.

For a moment, Bennetz did not answer. Then he nodded.

"Yes, Joseph," he said to one of the men behind him. "This is the one who saved me. It is good that you got his license number."

Tom took a quick step forward. "What are you doing here—"

Bennetz raised a mollifying hand. There was a faint hint of a twisted smile on his heavy face. "I have only come to thank you, Mr. Atherton, for saving my life. These are my friends—" he indicated the one he had addressed as Joseph—"Joseph Cleve"—then, nodding toward a second—"and Nicholas Tresca—"

"I'm not interested in you or your friends." Tom said firmly. "I've read all about you in the papers—"

"But, my dear Mr. Atherton! You must remember that I was acquitted—"

"Only because the witnesses had relatives in Europe!" Tom broke in. And now, please go."

Bennetz frowned heavily. "You are not very judicious. I have come to repay you in some small way, for saving my life. Suppose we go into your private office. I would like to discuss some business with you. Surely you will not refuse me a few minutes of your time?"

Tom glanced sideways at Sally. She was white-faced and tense, puzzled by the whole thing. "What do you want to talk about?" he asked.

Bennetz spread his hands. "It is

not something we should discuss in the presence of your secretary."

"You may talk in her presence. She's my fiancée."

The moment he said it, he regretted it. He saw a swift and cunning look come into Bennetz's eyes.

"Ah!" said Bennetz. "Your fiancée!" He jerked his head at his men. "Cleve! Tresca! You know what to do!"

The two men moved forward swiftly, their guns coming into their hands. At the same time, the other two men stepped around the desk and seized Sally by either arm.

Tom felt the hot blood rush to his head. He went straight in at Cleve and Tresca, disregarding their guns. His left fist smashed through past Tresca's gun hand and landed with a wicked thud squarely in the gunman's face. That left of Tom's was what had put him in the top running for the heavyweight championship. He used it now as he had never used it in the ring.

Tresca went backward, almost in a somersault. Tom sidestepped Cleve's swishing gun barrel, which was coming down toward his head. He caught the blow on his shoulder, smashed out again with his left. He felt his fist land, but at the same time something came down on the back of his head like a triphammer.

He fell forward, hanging on to Cleve, clinching as he had often done in the ring to conserve his strength. He wasn't out by a long shot, but at the moment he couldn't co-ordinate his muscles effectively.

He heard Gus Bennetz say, "All right, don't hit him again. Take the girl away—down the service elevator!"

Tom made a supreme effort to pull himself together. The back of his head felt as if it had been ripped open, but he managed to sway away from Cleve.

His blurred eyes made out the shapes of the remaining two thugs, one with a hand over Sally's mouth, the other twisting her arms behind

her. They were going out through the door.

Tom uttered a hoarse yell, lurched after them, Someone tripped him, and he fell flat on his face.

HE PUSHED up on hands and knees, just as the door slammed shut. He thrust forward toward the door and found Bennetz standing in front of him with a small blackjack in his hand.

"Please do not make me hit you again," Bennetz said. "I would not like to do it to a man who has saved my life."

"Damn you!" Tom growled. "Get out of my way!"

He came in weaving, and Bennetz, with a regretful look, raised the blackjack to strike once more. Tom wove around to the right, blocking with his left, and took the weight of the blow on his left forearm. He started to bring up his right, but something hit him hard just over the muscles of his right biceps, numbing his arm. It was Cleve, who had smashed down with the butt of his reversed gun.

Bennetz elucked sympathetically. "Believe me," he said. "I regret to do this!" He stepped in and hit Tom two short sharp blows on the side of the head with the blackjack.

Tom's knees started to buckle, but he gritted his teeth and remained on his feet, all but out.

Cleve grunted. "Sit down!" He put a hand on his chest and shoved him backward into a chair.

Bennetz came and stood in front of him, hefting the blackjack. "You are very foolish to act this way, Atherton. Your fiancée will not be hurt—if you will listen to reason."

Tom closed his eyes. The pain was dancing around in the top of his skull.

"Where did those rats take Sally?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Sally will be all right. Now listen to me. I am only trying to make you a proposition. But you make it very

difficult. If you hadn't saved my life, I would have lost patience with you by this time."

"Forget that I saved your life!" Tom groaned. "Just bring Sally back, and get to hell out of here!"

"No, no, Mr. Atherton. If you are foolish, I must set you straight. I am doing this for your own good. Here—" he took a bulging wallet from an inside pocket and removed ten bills from it, all hundreds—"this is your retainer. You are a lawyer. You have done me a great favor. Therefore, I shall give you a case."

"What case?" Tom asked, trying to drive the fog out of his brain.

"The case is all ready and waiting for you. It comes up in General Sessions this morning. The people of the State of New York against Nathaniel Cleve. He is the brother of my friend here, Joseph Cleve." He leaned over Tom, and shoved the money in his breast pocket. "When you win the case, you get another thousand—and your girl comes back!"

"That case stinks!" Tom exclaimed. "Nathaniel Cleve is accused of receiving explosives stolen from the State Armory. There are two witnesses. How can I beat it?"

"Please do not worry. You will go into court and appear. You will be surprised how easy it is to win some cases!"

THEY went down in the elevator together, and got into a car which was waiting at the curb. As they drove across town to the court, Cleve turned on the radio, caught a news broadcast:

"The police are still seeking the unknown killer who engaged in a bloody battle on Central Park West this morning. . . ."

Tom shuddered. *He*—Tom Atherton—was the unknown killer whom the police were seeking! He glanced sideways, saw that Bennetz was watching him keenly.

"You must realize, Atherton, that your only chance is to play my game.

Suppose you went to the police and told them that Gustave Bennetz has kidnaped your girl. Alone, that information might help you; but coupled with the fact that it was *your* car which was found. . . ."

He let his voice trail off suggestively. "You see what I mean? It would look extremely suspicious. And think also what might be happening to your dear Sally while you were doing this talking to the police!"

"All right!" Tom snapped. "You win. I'll go in and stand up for this Nathaniel Cleve. But I won't try to win the case. I'll just appear as his counsel."

"That is all I want you to do."

"And if Sally doesn't show up safe and sound within one hour after the case is over, I'll track you down, Bennetz, wherever you are!"

When they reached the courthouse, Tom looked around nervously as they mounted the steps. He hated to have any lawyer friends of his see him in the company of these men. But there was nothing he could do about it.

They got upstairs to Part One of General Sessions just as the clerk was calling the case of Nathaniel Cleve.

The jury had already been chosen and the district attorney was rising to address them. Bennetz pointed to a ruddy-faced lawyer at the defense counsel table, who was sitting next to the defendant.

"That is Kurt Allsberg, the lawyer who has been handling the case." He led Tom Atherton down the aisle to the railing, and reached over and tapped Allsberg on the shoulder. "You may go," he said curtly. "You are finished. I have a new attorney."

Allsberg became pale. "But what is the trouble, Gus? Have I done anything—"

"Go, I said! Inform the judge that we are substituting Thomas Atherton for you!"

The judge was watching them with a frown and District Attorney Harvey Grant was scowling.

Allsberg got up and addressed the

bench. "Your Honor, I—I have just been informed that another attorney is being substituted in my place. Mr. Thomas Atherton. I—I assure Your Honor that I knew nothing of this—"

District Attorney Harvey Grant came striding to the bench from where he had been standing at the jury box. "If the Court please, this is an outrage. We refuse to allow any further delay. The new attorney will naturally want time to familiarize himself with the case. It's a trick on the part of the defense to gain more time!"

Bennetz leaned over and whispered in Tom's ear, "Go in there and tell him you don't need any more time. You're ready to go on with the case right now."

"But I don't know any of the facts," Tom protested. "How can I—"

"You do as I say!" Bennetz insisted, giving him a little shove toward the railing. "If you want to see your Sally alive again. . ."

Tom went through the small gate in the railing and stepped up to the bench. "If Your Honor please, I will not require any time. I am ready to proceed at once."

The judge looked over at the district attorney with a puzzled glint in his eyes.

"The defendant is entitled to a thorough defense. How can you hope to defend him properly without preparation?"

Tom shrugged. "If the defendant is satisfied—"

The judge looked over to where Nathaniel Cleve sat at the defense table. "Mr. Defendant, are you satisfied to have this attorney step into this case now at the eleventh hour, without preparation? You must realize that you stand a better chance with a better-prepared lawyer—"

Nathaniel Cleve looked a lot like his brother, Joseph. His eyes were hard, his face heavy, his lower lip pendulous.

"I am satisfied," he said stolidly.

The judge frowned as if he had a

bitter taste in his mouth. He instructed the court stenographer to make a note of the substitution of attorneys.

Tom flushed. He ached to tell both Grant and the judge just why he was here now. But he glanced over his shoulder at Bennett's hard and ruthless face. He thought of Sally Blaine, helpless somewhere in the city. And he kept silent. He swallowed hard, and turned abruptly away, and went over to the defense table where Nathaniel Cleve was sitting.

DISTRICT ATTORNEY GRANT began his speech to the jury. It was a short speech, but it was full of vitriol and fire. At the end he pointed his finger dramatically at Cleve.

"It is to rid the city of men such at this that you are here today, ladies and gentlemen of the jury. When the State produces the two witnesses who actually saw this defendant accept delivery of the stolen explosives, you will have no choice but to bring in a verdict of guilty!"

The judge looked over at Tom, and said, "If counsel for the defense does not wish to address the jury, we will proceed." Tom shook his head, and the judge motioned to Grant, who arose again.

"My two witnesses should be here now," he said. He turned dramatically and called out, "Miss Irene Field!"

There was utter silence in the courtroom. No one answered.

Grant frowned. "Mr. John Turner!" he called.

Again there was no answer.

Tom Atherton, watching Grant's face, saw it turn red with anger. Tom himself began to feel a little uneasy. Somehow he sensed that the courtroom was suddenly imbued with a strange sort of electric tension.

Suddenly the door at the rear of the courtroom opened.

Grant's face brightened. "Ah!" he said to the jury. "These must be my

witnesses. We have had them under guard at a hotel all night."

Every eye turned toward the door. But only one man came in. It was one of the young assistant district attorneys. He seemed to be laboring under a tremendous strain of excitement and consternation. He came through the railing and whispered to District Attorney Grant.

Grant's bony frame stiffened as he heard the assistant's report. He turned and looked at Tom Atherton with a terrible concentrated glare of hatred.

Tom felt himself grow cold all over.

Grant swung around and addressed the judge. "Your Honor, I have just been informed of a terrible tragedy. A time bomb exploded a few minutes ago on the fourteenth floor of the hotel where our two witnesses were kept under guard. They were both killed, together with two bailiffs!"

A great gasp went up from everybody in the courtroom.

The judge turned an ominous eye toward Tom. "Mr. Atherton," he rumbled, "as attorney for the defendant, what do you know about this?"

Tom arose shakily. "I assure Your Honor that I know nothing at all about it."

Grant's lips twisted sardonically. "No wonder you were so willing to come in and take a case without preparing it. *You knew there would be no witnesses!*"

"You have no right to say that!" Tom Atherton gasped. He pushed up from the table and started over toward Grant, but a bailiff seized him by the arm. He saw the judge watching him expectantly, and he suddenly understood that His Honor was just waiting for some pretext to hold him for contempt of court.

His shoulders sagged. There was no way he could prove his innocence, without endangering the life of Sally Blaine. After hearing what had happened to those two witnesses he had no illusions about Sally's safety.

As if in a dream he heard the dis-

trict attorney saying, "In view of the lack of evidence . . . compelled to agree to *nolle prosequere* . . ."

And then he heard the judge saying, "As for you, Mr. Atherton, *please come to my chambers at once.* . . ."

He raised his head and saw that the courtroom had emptied out. Gus Bennetz was no longer there. Neither was Nathaniel Cleve. But a man came up to Tom and whispered, "Mr. Bennetz says to be at the Midnight Club tonight. You'll find your girl there—if you don't talk to the police!"

The man turned and hurried away. Tom was about to follow him when a bailiff took hold of his arm.

"The judge ordered me to escort you to his chambers," the bailiff said.

Tom nodded dumbly and went with him.

CHAPTER III

HARVEY GRANT was already in the judge's room, together with another man whom Tom recognized as Inspector Lansing, Chief of Homicide.

"Mr. Atherton," said Judge Simmons, who was seated at his desk, "I asked you to come here because the developments in court just now have been highly suspicious so far as you are concerned. Inspector Lansing wishes to ask you some questions."

Lansing was standing near the window, with his uncompromising stare fixed implacably upon Tom.

"Mr. Atherton," he rumbled, "two state witnesses were bombed this morning. With them, two bailiffs were killed. As an attorney, you must surely realize your position. It's a murder case now. I want you to tell us everything you know."

"I'm sorry," Tom said wearily. "There's nothing I can tell you at this moment."

Lansing glanced sideways at Harvey Grant, who stepped forward eagerly. "You mean—it might incriminate you? Do you refuse to answer on the ground that it may incriminate you?"

"No," said Tom. "I have done nothing criminal."

"Then you *must* answer!" Grant exclaimed triumphantly.

"I can't tell you anything now," Tom said carefully. "There is a very important reason why I can't. If you'll give me two or three hours, I hope to be free to answer any of your questions."

"Two or three hours!" said Grant. "Are you thinking of leaving town?"

"What about your car?" Inspector Lansing thundered at him from the other side. "It was used in the shooting this morning. From the descriptions given by bystanders, you were the gunman. You reported your car stolen to throw us off the track!"

"That's true," Tom admitted wearily. "But I wasn't any gunman, I just happened to be passing at the moment—"

He stopped, seeing that both Lansing and Grant were looking at him with disgust.

"Isn't it kind of late to spring a story like that?" Grant demanded.

"I tell you it's true. And the girl I'm going to marry is a prisoner of Gus Bennetz. He forced me to appear for Cleve—"

"Stow it!" Lansing barked. "Your story gets worse and worse. Now look here"—he seized Tom by the lapels of his coat and went on, blusteringly—"you'll tell us what you know—"

Tom shook him off angrily, and swung toward Judge Simmons.

"Your Honor," he pleaded, "will you let me explain—"

And he stopped right there, with a queer, sinking sensation in his stomach. He saw that the eyes of all three men were on something that had been pushed up out of his breast pocket in the short tussle with Lansing. Those ten one-hundred-dollar bills were just on the verge of falling out of his pocket. Their denomination was clearly visible.

Tom caught them just as they were about to drop and stuffed them back

in his pocket. But the damage was done. He saw the revulsion in the judge's eyes. And dimly to his ears came Grant's voice:

"So Bennetz forced you to appear for Cleve—with a wad of hundred-dollar bills!"

The district attorney swung toward Judge Simmons. "Your Honor, I submit that there is enough evidence to hold this man as a material witness in connection with the murder of the witnesses in the Cleve case!"

Judge Simmons nodded gravely. "I so order!"

Inspector Lansing put a hand on his arm.

"Thomas Atherton, you are under arrest. In accordance with the law, I now warn you that anything further you say may be used against you!"

Suddenly a desperate haze of fury swept over Tom Atherton. He sent his body into a powerful lunge that tore him free of the inspector's grip.

"Hey!" yelled Lansing and dove for his gun.

TOM swung with his left. The smack of his fist connecting with the inspector's chin was like the pop of a soda bottle. Lansing went backward, out on his feet, and the gun dropped from his nerveless fingers.

Tom swung to the door, ripped it open, and sped out into the corridor.

Behind him he heard a shout and turned in time to see Harvey Grant picking up the gun which Lansing had dropped. Grant dropped to one knee and rested the revolver carefully on his elbow, taking aim at Tom.

Tom kept on running down the corridor toward the exit. A shot boomed out, resounding from the raftered ceiling of the court house, and the bullet whined so close to Tom's ear that he thought for a moment he was hit. The thunderous echoes of the shot cascaded back from every wall as a uniformed guard burst out of one of

the courtrooms and, seeing Tom running, attempted to intercept him.

Tom straight-armed the guard, sent him crashing to one side. He threw another hasty glance behind him and saw Grant, in the doorway of the judge's room, taking careful aim for a second shot. He threw himself flat to the floor, head first, just as Grant fired.

Tom landed on his face and hands, and slid for perhaps five feet, carried along by his momentum. Grant's gun thundered. The slug whined over Tom's head, smashing the glass in the front door.

As Tom slid along the floor he saw that there was a right turn in the corridor a few feet ahead. When he landed, he rolled over swiftly and ducked around the bend just as Grant pulled the trigger for the third time.

Tom stumbled to his feet and ran blindly along the side hall in which he found himself. There was a doorway at his left and he pushed through it so fast that he could not stop when he saw it opened on a flight of stairs. He went careening down the steps head over heels. Somehow, by dint of the good fortune which watches over drunks and fools, he did not sustain any broken bones. He felt bruised and limp, but he forced himself to his feet, and staggered out into an alley.

Everywhere he heard the shouts of men, as they took up the alarm; from behind him, inside the building; from the street in front of the court house, and from the upper floors of the building.

Suddenly he knew the poignant terror of a hunted man. He turned and stumbled blindly down toward the rear of the alley. He saw another door in the side of the court house building, and pushed through it, for he knew that he would surely be caught in the alley. He knew the layout of the court fairly well, and he recognized the portion which he had entered as the corridor to the detention pen. There would be another door

down this hall, opening into the back street.

He fairly ran down the corridor to the back door. He slipped out once more into daylight, and suddenly found himself in a crowd of milling men, some in uniform. They had converged from the street, attracted by the shouts. One of them was an under-sheriff, who knew Tom.

He said, "What's happening, Mr. Atherton? I was just coming in when I heard the shots—"

"It's an escaped killer!" Tom shouted. "Everybody better take cover. He's armed!"

The crowd dispersed quickly, and Tom sprinted across the street, turned a corner, and hailed a passing cab. He climbed in breathlessly.

"Take me to the Midnight Club!" he gasped.

THE Midnight Club was in the upper Eighties, near Third Avenue. Tom walked past it, looking it over. It was too much to expect, of course, that this was where they had taken Sally. The club was not open for business, anyway, for it was still early in the day. However, the front door was ajar, and he could see that there were several waiters and busboys inside, cleaning up and preparing for the day's business.

Tom walked past it once, and stopped near the corner, lighting a cigarette. There was a cab rank at the corner, and the cabby had his radio going. From where he stood, Tom heard the news announcer:

"... All police and law-enforcing agencies are combing the city for Atherton. Any citizen seeing the fugitive is requested to report immediately by phone to police headquarters. When last seen he was wearing a brown suit, brown-and-red tie, and a gray felt hat. He is about six feet tall, blue eyes and fair hair, very well built, as he was formerly a prize-fighter . . ."

Tom grunted, and threw his cigarette away. He thought he saw the

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cabby glancing over at him, but he couldn't be sure. He moved away nonchalantly from the corner, and hurried into the open doorway of the Mid-night Club.

Inside, he stood for a moment, ac-customing his eyes to the blurred light. The waiters and busboys were busy and paid him no attention. He saw a door at the left marked "Man-ager's Office," and he went over and pushed it open and stepped inside.

A burly individual was sitting at a desk, making entries in a ledger. He looked up and scowled.

Tom came and stood in front of the desk.

"Where's Gus Bennetz?" he de-manded.

The manager frowned up at him. "Bennetz? He'll be here tonight—"

"Can't wait till tonight," said Tom. "Got to see him right away. Where can I find him?"

The fellow shrugged. "Who are you?"

Tom grinned. He saw a letter open-er on the desk. He picked it up by the handle, and walked around the desk. The manager started to get up, but Tom pushed him back in the chair. He touched the point of the letter opener to the fellow's red neck:

"In case you don't know it," he said, "I'm Tom Atherton. If you've listened to your radio, you'll know all about me. I'm wanted for so many damned things I don't mind being wanted for killing you, too. Is that clear?"

"W-what—what do you want?" the fellow stammered, squirming away from the cold point of the street.

"I want to get in touch with Gus Bennetz."

"Well, wait, I'll phone him."

"Go ahead. But don't try any tricks."

The manager very carefully picked up a telephone index from the desk, and flipped it over to the N's. He ran his finger down till he hit a number alongside a name. The name was

"Nine Star Boxing Club." The num-ber was Sutter 2-1674.

"That," said Tom Atherton, "is all I wanted to know!" He threw away the letter opener, grasped the fellow's coat by the lapels, and lifted him out of the chair with his left hand. At the same time, he brought his right around in a terrific blow to the fel-low's chin. The man's head snapped back, and when Tom let go of the la-pels, the fellow just subsided into the chair, slumped down, and did not move.

Tom snatched up the phone, called the District Attorney's office. In a moment he had Harvey Grant.

"Grant," he said, "this is Atherton."

He heard a gasp at the other end, and then there was a moment's si-lence.

"Grant! Are you there? I said this is Atherton!"

"I HEARD you," came Grant's voice, very mildly. "I'm glad you phoned. There are a lot of things I want to talk over with you." He was talking in a slow, easy drawl, and Tom's lips tightened as he realized that the District Attorney was having the call traced.

"Listen to me, Grant. I have in-formation for you that will help you get Bennetz and his whole filthy crowd."

"So you're ready to talk?" the District Attorney said. "Well, I'm glad to hear that, Atherton. Suppose we arrange a meeting."

"Look here, Grant. I just got a line on a place that may hold dynamite. Now if I give you the location, will you promise not to stage a raid?"

"Well, that's a fairly reasonable request," Grant said, still in that in-furiatingly slow drawl. "Just why don't you want us to stage a raid?"

"Because Bennetz is holding my girl. Now if Sally is being held at this address your raid might save her. But if those rats are holding her some-where else, and the raid doesn't turn

anything up, then I'm sure they'll kill her."

"Now wait, Atherton," said the District Attorney. "Do you still think you can make me believe that fish story about your girl having been kidnaped by Bennetz? Why don't you come in and give yourself up—"

Tom was standing near the window with the telephone, and it was only by chance that he glanced out and saw the police car which pulled up silently across the street. They had traced the call while Grant had held him in conversation.

"Damn you Grant!" Tom exclaimed into the phone. He hung up, and dashed out into the corridor. He made for the rear, and passed through the kitchen door. Just as the door swung to, he caught a glimpse of the policemen coming in the front. He did not wait to see more, but made tracks out the back way.

CHAPTER IV

HE WALKED the streets for ten minutes, ducking every time he saw a policeman, trying to think as hard as he could. He knew where to find Gus Bennetz now.

The Nine Star Boxing Club was not an unfamiliar name to him. He had boxed there two or three times, in the old days. But the club had long been abandoned. Therefore, it seemed reasonable to believe that Bennetz might be using it as a hideaway. It would be a good place to conceal a captive. So Tom was almost sure Sally was being held there. But the knowledge did him little good.

He didn't kid himself that he could go in there with his bare fists, and take Bennetz's experienced gunners. For himself he didn't care. But Sally's life might be forfeit. No, he must have help. An appeal to the law was closed to him. Grant wouldn't listen.

He racked his brains for some inspiration. And suddenly, he snapped his fingers. He flagged a cab and got in.

"Take me over to the Greek quarter!" he ordered.

"Which one do you mean?" the driver asked. "Downtown? Or uptown?"

For a moment Tom was stuck. Then he shrugged. "Uptown," he said.

Five minutes later he left the cab in the uptown Greek section, and strolled down the street. He saw a restaurant with Greek letters on the window, and he went in. At the desk he said, "Where will I find Packy?"

There was a girl cashier at the counter, but she looked blank. She called over the manager, then two waiters came over too, and they all debated the question of which Packy Tom wanted. Finally the manager shrugged and said, "Iss many Packys. Wich one you wanting?"

"I want the one who has a friend named Achilles, and another named Julius—"

"Aha!" exclaimed the manager. He took Tom by the arm, led him to the door, and pointed down the street. "You going over d'ere—number t'irty-t'ree. D'ere you finding Packy!"

Tom thanked him and walked down the street. Number thirty-three was a three-story brick building, with a store occupying the entire street level. The plateglass window of the store was painted an opaque green, so that passersby couldn't look inside. There was white lettering on the green background. The top line was in Greek, which Tom couldn't read. The second line said:

GREEK-AMERICAN BROTHERHOOD

Antoninos Pakidopoulos,

Pres.

There was a hard and determined glint in Tom's eyes as he stepped up to the store and pushed the door open.

Inside there were some fifteen or twenty tables, covered with red-and-white checkered tablecloths. Several of the tables were occupied by men who were playing checkers, chess, or casino. The room was filled with smoke and the stale odor of tobacco.

At one side there was a bar and a sandwich counter.

The noise of conversation ceased as Tom closed the door behind him. Every eye in the room was turned on him. He saw a lot of hands slip down into pockets, or up toward shoulder bulges.

From one table in a corner, two men arose. Tom tautened, watching them come toward him. They were Achilles and Julius—the two whom he had eluded in the subway.

Julius was grinning like a cat who has cornered a mouse, but Achilles' thick features assumed a murderous scowl. They came up close to Tom.

"How do you do, my very good friend!" said Julius. "That was a dirty trick you played on us in the subway."

"Hah!" said Achilles. "Thees ees those guy w'ich smack me be-ind thee ear. I thenk I gonna break hees neck!"

"My very good friend," Julius said commiseratingly, "you should not have hit Achilles. Achilles does not like to be hit."

"I want to see Packy," said Tom.

Julius snickered. "Haw!" He nudged Achilles in the ribs. "Did you hear that? He wants to see Packy!"

"Sure," growled Achilles. "Sure he see Packy. But he not be seeing so good. Because w'y? Because I gonna geev heem dose works first!"

He spread out both his huge, ham-like arms to encircle Tom's waist. Tom could see the muscles bulging under the Greek's coat, and he knew that once he was caught in that gorilla grip he'd have little chance of keeping his ribs intact. He tried to step back, but the door was behind him.

A LOOK of supreme happiness came upon Achilles' face as he smothered Tom with his huge bulk. His arms started to wrap themselves around his intended victim's body.

Tom kept his elbows close at his sides, and pistoned his fists in-an-out, in-and-out, like the twin cylinders of

an engine. His hard, bunched fists landed four times each, square in the midsection of the big man, burying themselves almost to the wrist in his stomach.

Achilles was forced back by the very power of those blows, and he expelled a great gust of onion-and-garlic breath. He bellowed with rage, and charged in again. This time he wasn't going for a bear hug. He had his two hands held high in the wrestler's stance, for a headlock.

Tom caught a swift glimpse of the rest of the men in the room, all watching with professional interest. They were all sure, apparently, that their champion would soon crack a majority of Tom's bones.

Tom was no wrestler. He knew he couldn't compete for holds with this huge and powerful gorilla of a man. He sidestepped away from the door, flicked out his left to make the Greek keep his distance, and danced away. His flicking left cut his antagonist's lip open, and Achilles' voice thundered through the room in a terrifying murderous roar. He came lumbering forward in a half crouch.

Tom slid over to one side, fainted with his left and then crashed a right across to Achilles' head. It caught him on the side of the temple with a terrible squashing sound, but the Greek only shook his head to clear it, and kept coming in.

Julius was watching intently, with his head cocked on one side, like a referee.

"T'chk, t'chk," he said. "Your chances, my good friend, are very slim!"

Tom was too busy to answer, because the Greek was into him now, clawing at his legs, his neck, his torso, in a wild and vengeful effort to get a punishing hold. Tom kept dancing away and flicking his left, but all he could do was make the giant slow up a bit. He couldn't stop him. He landed two more blows square on the button, but he didn't even get a flicker out of Achilles.

The men all over the room were now buzzing excitedly. They were making wagers on the outcome. The odds on Achilles were eight to one.

A fine sweat was beginning to cover Tom's forehead. Never before in his life had he given ground in the ring, and this was a new experience for him. His most powerful blows were worse than useless. Achilles had an iron jaw.

Tom backed away into a table, and before he could move, the Greek was upon him. He caught Tom's left wrist in both of his hairy hands, and whirled around with the evident intention of sending his victim hurtling over his shoulder.

But even as he started to twist around, Tom smashed a right home just over the heart. Achilles grunted again, and his grip relaxed the faintest bit.

Tom yanked his wrist out of the grip, and with a sudden gleam of understanding he came in at Achilles, disregarding all danger of getting caught in another grip.

He had discovered the Greek's weak spot!

He came in, wide open, smashing rights and lefts to the big man's heart. And suddenly he found he was moving forward, and Achilles was retreating.

He stopped short, straightened the Greek up with a left jab over the eye, and then tried once more for the knockout.

His right smashed in so fast that hardly a man in the room saw the blow. But they all heard the *thwack*.

The Greek was done. Those body blows had softened him for the kill. When Tom's fist landed on his jaw, he just let his arms drop, and he slowly fell forward on his face. He lay still, with his arms outflung.

An excited jabber of voices arose in the room as jubilant takers of the eight-to-one odds rushed to collect.

TOM felt of his hand to see if any bones were broken. Then he wiped sweat from his face. He looked

at Julius, who was clucking with unbelief.

"T'chk, t'chk. Nobody has ever done that to Achilles before. It doesn't seem possible!"

"Well," Tom asked, "do I get to see Packy now? Or do I have to fight someone else?"

Julius grinned. "Come, my very good friend!"

He led the way up two flights of musty stairs, and stopped before a door at the rear. He knocked at the door, and then went inside, motioning for Tom to follow him. As soon as they were inside, he took a gun from his pocket and covered Tom.

"Just to be on the safe side," he grinned. Then he waved toward the stocky man with the close-cropped black hair sitting at a small desk.

"Packy, what do you think? This is the man we invited over this morning, but he wouldn't come. Imagine—he walked in just now of his own free will!"

Packy raised his eyebrows. "What did you come here for?" he demanded.

Tom said, "I want to make a deal with you."

Packy's eyes hardened. "I make no deals with the tools of the Nazis!"

"Listen to me!" Tom said, suddenly earnest. "I'm no tool of Bennetz. I never talked with him before this morning. It was just by accident that I horned in on your men. It was a cold-blooded attempt at murder, and anyone would have done what I did!"

"Murder?" Packy repeated. There was abruptly a terrible opaque look in his black eyes. "Murder? Do you know what the Nazis do to our people in Greece? Is that not murder?"

"But you have no right to commit murder here, because of what those beasts do over there. Besides, Bennetz is an American citizen—"

"Sure, sure he is. And that is what protects him from the law." Packy's fist crashed down on the desk. "But not from us!" He controlled himself with an effort.

"Go on," he said.

"After I saved Bennetz's life," Tom hurried on, "he came down to my office, and kidnaped my fiancée—Sally Blaine. And I had to go into court and represent Nathaniel Cleve, to save her life. Now Bennetz is holding Sally—"

"Where?" Packy was suddenly interested.

Tom shook his head. "Not so fast, Packy. I've come to you, because I can't go near the police. District Attorney Grant has practically forced me to make an alliance with you. But I'm not going to let you go after Bennetz with guns."

"Why not?" Packy demanded. "If Bennetz has your girl, don't you want to see him killed? What kind of blood have you in your veins?"

"This has got to be done my way or not at all," Tom said firmly. "I want to get Sally out of Bennetz's hands. I need your help. All right. In exchange for your help, I'll undertake that Bennetz will stand trial on enough charges to send him to the electric chair. But I won't be a party to murder."

"What do you want us to do?" Packy asked suspiciously.

"I'll need some supplies, and about twenty of your men."

"What kind of supplies?"

"White helmets, like the air-raid wardens wear—"

"Hah!" said Packy. "You don't have to worry about that. We're all air-raid wardens. I run this whole sector!"

Tom grinned happily. "Can you get some stretchers, some stirrup pumps, and some of those smoke bombs that the wardens use in their practice drills?"

"Sure," said Packy. "I can get you all that. But listen, you can't fight Bennetz with smoke bombs and stirrup pumps—"

"They're better than guns sometimes," Tom told him.

Packy shook his head. "It sounds crazy to me." He looked at Julius. "What about it?"

Julius grinned. "You ought to let him try it, Packy. The way he laid Achilles out, I'm all in his favor!"

Suddenly Packy the Greek smiled. He pushed back his chair and got up. He came around and thrust out his hand to Tom. "Okay, Atherton. We'll give you a chance!"

CHAPTER V

TWO hours and twenty minutes later, Tom Atherton got out of a car in front of a building on Old Broadway, close to the river. He presented a strange figure as he stood there, surveying the building. An air-raid warden's armband adorned his sleeve. A white helmet covered his head. And a gas mask hid his entire face.

The building before which he stood was ramshackle and dilapidated, with the paint almost entirely gone. The windows were all boarded up, and there was a sign nailed across one of the lower windows which read:

FOR SALE OR RENT
Inquire of Your Own Broker

The building was only two stories high. On the strip of front wall between the first and second floor windows there was what remained of an old wooden sign which had once sported gilt letters. The gilt was all gone, but the imprint of the lettering was still legible:

NINE STAR BOXING CLUB

Five years ago, Tom Atherton had boxed for a living on Friday nights in this very building. Now it was abandoned apparently. But Tom knew otherwise.

He examined the building for a moment, then he made a signal with his hand. Immediately three more cars sped up from the corner and came to a stop across the street. Men in air-raid wardens' uniforms piled out, some carrying stretchers, others carrying picks and shovels, all wearing helmets and gas masks.

Achilles and Julius were in the first of those cars, and Tom recognized Achilles by his build. The giant came over and spoke to Tom through his gas mask.

"You know," he said, "I t'ink you is one guy w'ich is a good fighter. You an' me is friends, no?"

"Yes," said Tom.

The air-raid wardens gathered around, and Tom started issuing orders in a loud voice. He got a piece of chalk and marked out a square section of sidewalk about ten feet by ten, and motioned to them to get to work. They fell to with a will, using the pickaxes.

There was a cop down near the ferry building, and he strolled over. "Air-raid drill?" he asked.

Tom nodded. "We're working on an incident. A bomb is supposed to have fallen on this building. Ten people are trapped inside. We're supposed to see how fast we can dig 'em out."

The cop hung around for a few minutes, then left. Tom went on supervising the work. All the time, he kept an eye on the Nine Star building. Twice he caught the movement of one of the boards in an upper window. Somebody was watching from inside.

Soon the hole was deep enough for a man to climb down into. One of the men signaled to Tom and he got down and scrambled into it. He saw that they had opened up the exposed section of the building wall, making a hole through which a man could climb into the cellar.

Tom switched on a flashlight and sent its ray probing into the interior. It illuminated the basement with which he was familiar. The fighters' dressing rooms had been located down here, and many a time Tom had waited in one of those cubicles for the signal to go up into the ring.

Julius climbed down alongside him carrying a sack of smoke bombs. "You all ready?" he asked.

"Yes," said Tom. "I'm going in."

"Here's a gun," said Julius, offering him an automatic.

Tom shook his head. "I never shot one of these things in my life. I wouldn't trust myself to shoot straight with it."

"Well, put it in your pocket, anyway. You never can tell when you'll need it. See, this is the safety. You must push it down with your thumb to shoot."

"Thanks," said Tom. He put the gun in his pocket. "Stay here with your watch, Julius," he ordered. "Remember, give me fifteen minutes before you start."

"Good luck," said Julius.

Tom bent down and climbed through the hole in the wall into the basement.

HE FLICKED the flashlight only once, to get his bearings, and then proceeded in the dark. He mounted the staircase leading to the main floor, and gently inched open the door at the top of the stairs.

There were lights there. He could see that the seats had been removed from the auditorium floor, leaving a cleared space. In that space there was now a row of cots and several tables and chairs.

Almost a dozen men were in there. They got their light from a low candle-power storage battery lamp on the floor.

An electric cooker had been set up on the platform where the ring had formerly been, and one of the men was grilling a steak.

The men were talking in low voices, watching one of their number who was peering through a crack in the boarded front window. The man turned around. Tom got a glimpse of a bandage across his nose. It was Tresca.

"Those damned wardens are still out there!" Tresca growled.

"Well," said one of the others, "we'll have to go out the back way and use the boat. We can't stay cooped up in here all night."

"You can't use the boat yet," Tresca told him. "Gus has a job for it."

Another of the men snickered. "Looks like that girl will get a bath tonight. Too bad she has to die. She's a good looker."

Tom felt the hot blood rushing in his veins. He inched his way along the edge of the floor where the light did not reach, heading toward a door at the far side which he knew led to the upper story. There the executive offices of the club had been located. The process of getting across noiselessly was slow and laborious. Once he had to stop and drop flat on the floor in the shadows, for a man came in from the rear, where there was an exit to the old rotting dock.

This man did not come all the way into the room. He merely called out, "Hey, Tresca! Tell Gus the boat's ready."

"Okay," said Tresca, and left the crack in the window. He crossed over to the door for which Tom was aiming, and disappeared through it.

Tom took chances now. He crawled on all fours, moving as fast as he could. He reached the door without attracting any attention and slipped through it. He mounted the stairs quickly, reached the top landing without making a sound.

Light streamed out on the landing through an open door at the head of the stairs. Tom edged along the wall, keeping out of the path of the stream of light, and peered inside.

His questing anxious eyes passed over the five men in that room, and focused on what at first appeared to be a bundle of old clothes on the floor. The bundle was moving violently and Tom drew in his breath sharply.

It was Sally. She was tied hand and foot and there was tape across her mouth.

Tom took out the automatic. Now he was glad he had taken it from Julius.

The five men in the room were talking in subdued voices, but their words carried clearly out to the landing.

Tom knew four of them. There was

one, sitting in a corner and putting a machine gun together, whom he did not know. Bennetz was pacing up and down, nervously smoking a cigar. Tresca, who had just come up, was bending over Sally. Joseph Cleve was lighting a cigarette.

But it was the sight of the fifth man that caused Tom's eyes to narrow. That fifth man was Kurt Allsberg—the lawyer whom Bennetz had fired in the middle of the Cleve trial in order to put Tom Atherton into the case!

It was Allsberg who was talking at the moment. He was rubbing his chin, smiling with satisfaction.

"So far everything has gone off like clockwork. It was smart of you, Gus, to pick that Atherton fool to hold the bag. It would have been bad for me to be on the case when they got word that those witnesses were killed."

Gus Bennetz grinned. "And he made it worse for himself by escaping. Now they'll surely shoot him on sight!"

"Suppose," Allsberg said, "that they don't shoot him? If they catch him alive, he can talk and make trouble for you."

Bennetz shook his head, grinning. He nodded toward the skinny little man who was working on the machine gun in the corner. "If Atherton isn't caught, he's sure to try and get in touch with me. I'll make a date with him and Buzza will keep it, with the machine gun."

"So!" said Allsberg. "Not bad. That will close up every hole. All right. I think I'll be going. Damn those wardens. I'll have to leave on the boat. You can take the girl, too. Land me further down, and then take her out in the river."

"The boat's ready," said Tresca.

"Okay," Bennetz ordered. "You and Cleve carry her down—"

TOM had been waiting, watch in one hand, gun in the other. It was exactly fifteen minutes since he had left Julius.

He backed away from the door, watching the interior of the room and at the same time sniffing the air. His eyes brightened as he caught the fumes of smoke, as yet very light. But the men downstairs had already smelled the smoke, for it was reaching them first. Julius had set off six smoke bombs in the cellar, and the fumes were working slowly upward.

There was a sudden excited jabber of voices from the main floor. Someone yelled, "Fire!"

Someone else down there took up the shout, and at once there was the sound of rushing, panicky feet. The men downstairs were running toward the rear of the building, to escape out on the dock. They all knew what an old fire-trap the building was, and they didn't want to be burned alive.

Tresca and Cleve had just begun to lift Sally Blaine between them when the shout of fire was raised.

Tresca said, "Fire!" and let go of Sally. She dropped to the floor with a thump.

Bennetz swore viciously. The smoke was coming up faster now, and they could all smell it.

"The whole building is going!" he yelled. "We have to get out of here. Leave the girl. Let her burn!"

He led the rush to the door, and Tom, with a grim hard smile on his lips, stepped in to meet him.

Bennetz almost collided with him, but he had no chance to jump backward, because Tom hit him hard on the temple with the barrel of the automatic.

Bennetz sagged in the doorway, and the others in the room scrambled around him in their mad anxiety to get out. Tresca was first. He pulled up short at sight of the automatic in Tom's hand.

Tresca streaked for his shoulder holster. Tom stepped in and smashed a left square into his broken nose. Tresca screamed with pain, and went backward into Cleve and Allsberg, who were pushing wildly out.

Tom came in after them like a

whirlwind, scattering them out of the doorway. He burst through and met the little man, Buzza, who came bounding out of the chair with the still unassembled machine gun in his hands. Tom hit Buzza a backhanded blow that sent him slamming into the wall. Then he jumped to where Sally lay, and turned around to face the gunmen.

Tresca was down on the floor, moaning with pain, but Cleve was just dragging a gun from his holster. Tom set his jaw, snicked the safety catch off the automatic as Julius had shown him, and pulled the trigger.

The gun roared in the room, and Tom was jarred backward by the recoil. His foot moved back, and he tripped over Sally's limp form.

His own shot had missed Cleve by almost a foot, but had buried itself in the stomach of Kurt Allsberg. Cleve fired, the thunder of the shot drowning Allsberg's scream.

The thing that saved Tom was the fact that he tripped. It carried him out of line of Cleve's shot, and the slug slammed through the boarded window behind him.

The room was full of smoke now and Cleve didn't shoot again. He turned with a gasp of panic and ran blindly out into the hall, hoping to escape before the building was engulfed by fire.

Tom scrambled to his feet and peered around the room. Buzza was getting up and pawing at his back pocket for a gun.

Tom's lips tightened. He stepped in, brought his fist up in a short arc to Buzza's chin, and the skinny, murderous little machine-gunner went down.

Tom swung away from him and knelt beside Sally. He ripped the tape off her lips and cut the cords that were tied around her body.

"Tom," she said, "I think you're wonderful!"

He grinned and kissed her, and turned around to face a small army

of police who were crowding into the room.

"Boys," he said, "I'm Tom Ather-ton. But I don't think you'll be want-ing me any more. There's the whole Bennetz crowd, including the brains of the outfit—Kurt Allsberg. These are the boys that blew up the two witnesses and the balliffs this morn-ing. And I think you'll find that ma-chine gun on the floor one of the things stolen from the armories."

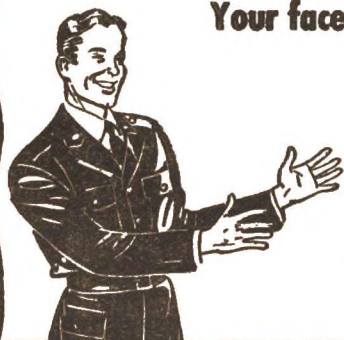
He held Sally close in his arms and smiled down into her eyes, entirely disregarding the bewildered stares of the police.

"Anyway," he told her, "I got a thousand dollar retainer out of this. A thousand dollars will buy us a lot of furniture, Sally. We could get mar-ried now instead of in May."

"And," she added, "you can start kissing me before breakfast from now on!"



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4. CLEAN BLADE in razor by loosening handle, then rinsing in hot water and shaking. Wiping the blade is likely to damage the edges

A Slug for Grandma's Girl



By David X. Manners

★ ★ ★
Joe Gath, private investigator, hired a Hollywood blonde as stand-in for a corpse. But Joe found out too late that Hell's director had already cast her for the star role of a tragedy filmed in blood.

★ ★ ★

IF IT'S good news, it'll keep. If it's bad news, you don't want to hear it anyway. Here I was in Hollywood, wondering how soon I would die. I'd come to California after being wounded, tangling with a Messerschmitt 109 over the English Channel. In front of me, now, was the entrance to the Doctors' Building. I paced back and forth. In there, I knew, was a specialist who could render a final verdict.

"Take it easy, Joe," I told myself.

There was a bullet in my heart muscle. I had been told the least excitement might cause it to move, and out I'd go. I'd just had plenty of excitement back in New York, for I was known there as a detective, and when a case came up I couldn't turn it down. But I couldn't afford to crowd my luck.

And now it happened.

Tap, tap, tap, tap.

I turned. The tapping sound was made by the click of a girl's high heels, hurrying along the walk. Even in the evening dark I could see she was a Hollywood lovely, a raven-haired, sapphire-eyed lush-lush. Then I blinked. On her face was terror and fright as I'd never seen it!

Her hand clutched at her throat, as if to still the pulse there. She looked back over her shoulder in ghastly panic, half running. I looked around myself, to see at what she could be staring. I saw nothing. I didn't see anyone coming after her. And then I noticed the handkerchief lying on the walk, in her wake. Automatically, I bent to pick it up, call after her. But I lost my voice at that moment.

"Take it easy," I whispered to myself. I clutched at my thudding heart.

The handkerchief was wet with fresh blood! And she'd obviously just discarded it.

I stared after her. At the corner, she was ducking into a cab. Luckily, another cab just skirted by, and the driver saw my hail.

"Get that cab," I said. "Catch up with it."

All this didn't happen in Hollywood, strictly speaking. The nebulous eastern limit of Hollywood, I guess, is technically at Vermont Avenue. This happened near Sixth and Westlake. The driver cut to Wilshire, and up through Westlake Park. But he didn't catch up with the cab. He had all he could do to keep from losing it! That cab with the dark-haired beauty in it kept turning and doubling back.

I ran up quite a bill, all the way out

to the Sunset-Fairfax section, before we caught up. Then the girl got out, paid her driver. I'd slipped my own driver a bill in payment earlier, and so I made up time there, and I was close enough to get another glimpse of her face before she turned into the dark shadow of a building.

Her pretty eyes were wide, staring. The ends of her full-lipped mouth were drawn down tight in frozen terror. And two long, sawlike scratches showed plainly on her throat. Then she disappeared into the building. It was a building similar to the bungalow-in-a-court idea. It was an unfinished quadrangle of apartments, all joined together, but each having a private entrance.

I HESITATED a moment before going in, considered the situation. What in hell business of mine was it, butting in? I couldn't go up and say, "Here's a handkerchief you dropped, which I'd like to return." Not that bloody mess!

And what in hell did I come to California for anyway? To go playing drop-the-handkerchief? To go chasing after dizzy dames who'd gotten into trouble?

But the temptation was too great. I'd been a dick too long. I drew in a long breath and went up to the door of the apartment. It was quiet and dark within. I knocked. Waited for an answer. I raised my knuckles to knock again, and then little butterflies were suddenly fluttering up my spine. Someone was groaning beyond that door!

I shoved on the door. It came open. I almost stumbled over the thing on the floor. It was she! The raven-haired pretty!

I pulled on a light, glancing at a raised window in the rear of the small studio room. Then I was down beside her, grasping her cold fingers. A raw little hole showed just below her neckline. This had nothing to do with the already clotted red gouges on her

throat. There was new blood on her blouse. She'd just been shot!

I heard blood rattle in her throat, and I knew a lung had been hit. Then her eyes fluttered open, blankly. I pressed her hand.

"I'm a friend," I tried to soothe. "I'll help. If you'll only . . ."

Her red-lipped mouth opened, and the words came without the movement of her lips. "Don't tell her," she said. "Don't let her know anything's happened to me. Let her be—happy. Don't let—her know anything. Don't let—her ever—find—out . . ."

"No. No," I promised, waiting for more. But there was no more.

She was dead.

I groped weakly for the support of a chair. I looked at her beautiful, still face. Why could anyone possibly want to kill her? Apparently someone had attacked her earlier, but she'd escaped with only those bloody claw-marks on her throat. Then her attacker had waited for her to return home. He'd shot her with a silenced gun, and escaped out the open window.

I held a hand to my own sickly, thumping heart. This dead girl before me was vivid proof of how quickly a person could go out. It reminded me that I had to take it easy. I got up and looked about the room. Lying on a dresser was a picture of a beautiful blonde. Also on the dresser lay an unopened letter and a sealed telegram, and judging by postmarks, they were several days old. They were addressed to Lorraine Locke.

I read both the letter and the telegram. My curiosity demanded answers to a hundred questions. The communications were from Lorraine's grandmother, Bridget. I put together that young Lorraine was Grandmother Bridget's only kin in the world. The grandmother was old and ill, and hadn't seen Lorraine in seventeen years. She was coming to town from Salem, Massachusetts. She wanted to see Lorraine, and then die happy. There had been so much unhappiness in their lives, she wanted

only this. To see her grandchild.

I tried to swallow, but my throat was tight. Somehow this thing touched my heartstrings, slightly rusty though they were. This, apparently, was someone whom Lorraine didn't want to know. Her grandmother, who was coming to see her only granddaughter after a lapse of seventeen years. I'd sort of promised Lorraine that her Grandma Bridget wouldn't know of this new tragedy—ever. But what could I do . . .?

A POLICE siren, wailing in the distance, cut off the thought. At the same moment I noticed a dangling telephone receiver not far from Lorraine's body, and I understood she must have made an attempt to call for help before I arrived.

The police car was drawing closer. I gave one hurried last look around the room and came up with nothing more important than a card with the address of the Hollywood Casting Agency. I jammed that, along with the letter and telegram, into my pocket, dropped the bloodstained handkerchief and skipped.

I was outside, on the sidelines, when the Georgia Street Receiving Hospital ambulance arrived. I left soon after, wondering how much they'd find out about the girl. As for myself, I had doubts about the wisdom of my mixing in this thing. What could I do, anyway? There could be nothing in this for me except trouble. Yet that intrigued me. Once a Sherlock always a Sherlock. That, and an understanding of how her aged grandmother must feel. With my bum ticker, I knew how old people felt—people whose remaining days on earth were numbered. And that this Lorraine's dying thought was to spare such a person pain, filled me with warm affection and sympathy.

Next morning they had Lorraine's picture in the paper. She was put down as a recent arrival in Hollywood. No one knew who she really was. Ginger Loring was the only name

they knew for her, and that was obviously only a stage phony. They didn't even know her right name was Lorraine Locke!

I put down the paper, which I was reading in the lobby of my hotel, and stood up.

"Take it easy, Joe," I told myself.

But I knew I was going to stick my neck out. Like a boy scout I was going to carry out Lorraine's last wish. The telegram stated Grandma Bridget was to arrive at 7:10 that night on the Southern Pacific. I was going to see to it Grandma had her happy day of bliss with her "granddaughter." You know, it sort of made a person feel good inside to be able to accomplish something like that.

I told my heart to behave itself. Then I tucked the newspaper under my arm and walked down Hollywood Boulevard. When I came to the office of Hollywood Casting Agency, I turned in. The card I'd found in Lorraine's room gave me the idea of where I could get the girl I needed.

I stood near the entrance of the building, watching the actors and would-be actors come and go. I tried to pick out a likely girl for the part I had in mind from the droves I saw milling about here. Then I jerked alive. There was the blonde whose picture I'd found in Lorraine's room!

SHE'D just come out of the building. Her face was fixed in disappointment and she walked slowly away. I hurried up beside her, touched her arm. "Excuse me," I said.

She darted a look at me—just one look at my battered profile, mind you—and she started walking faster.

I put the clamp on her arm. "Wait a minute, please," I said. "I've got to talk to you. You must help me."

I guess I sounded pitiful. Her eyes still moved a little suspiciously over me, but there was sympathy in the way her face softened and relaxed. It was a pretty face, a little on the round side. That type will usually comb her hair in a pompadour to give her added

height, but this little blonde had a part, with the hair coming down on one side of her forehead. Her slippers had red heels.

Her mouth quivered. "I'm afraid I don't know you."

I remedied that with a quick introduction. Then I showed her the picture of the dead girl in the paper. It didn't register.

"You don't know her?" I exclaimed. "Well, how come I found your picture in her apartment in the Sunfax Gardens?"

"Sunfax Gardens? Oh!" She seemed to understand then. "I was thrown out of my apartment in Sunfax Gardens last week because I couldn't scrape up enough for my rent. I didn't even have a chance to get all my things. She must have taken my apartment. I guess that's how my picture still happened to be there. And I could probably use that picture in getting a job!"

I looked at her, at the hungry look in her eyes, and I quickly understood the setup.

"Crashing the films?" I said.

"Trying to," she amended. She caught a quivering lip between her teeth.

"How would you like to make fifty bucks?" I said then. "Fifty bucks for some new clothes, a couple square meals, and maybe even some new photographs to spread around among talent scouts?"

She misunderstood. I had to hurry to explain. I started at the beginning, but I changed details. I raised the ante to sixty bucks—I'd have to hock my watch—and I assured her I was legit. All she had to do was play the role of Grandma's little girl for two or three days. I played up the humanitarian aspects, pointing out how important it was to Grandma's well-being. Why, it might even mean Grandma's life itself!

But I made no headway. The girl shook her head, walked off. The traffic signal was in her favor, and she started across the street. She saw the

oncoming car the same time I did. She leaped back to avoid it, but the driver swerved too! I was sure it was too late for anything to save her, but instinct hurtled me forward.

My outthrust hands struck her shoulders, threw her violently forward. She sprawled to her hands and knees, and I shrank back—just as the crazy car skimmed between the two of us! Then I was at the blonde's side, helping her up.

"O-o-ohh! Look at my stocking!" she sobbed, pointing at her skinned knee, and seemingly oblivious to the fact that she had almost been run down.

I helped her hobble to the corner. "Did you see him?" she said, then. "It seemed as if he wanted to run over me! You saved my life." She clasped my arm.

I considered a moment. The "accident" had almost seemed deliberate. But how could it have been? Who would want to harm her?

"He was probably drunk," I said, dismissing it that way. Outside of a bruised knee, she wasn't hurt. "I'll pay for the stockings. And the dress . . ."

THE hem in her mustard-yellow jersey was ripped, and I took her to a tailor shop and had the damage mended. She still seemed a little shaky, and I judged it was from lack of food. She refused lunch, but she let me buy her a hot dog and a coke. By this time we were pals. I'd told her about my getting binged out of the Air Corps by a Nazi bullet, and she'd told me about her orphaned childhood, a stepmother who'd beat her, and her total unsuccess in Hollywood.

I signed her up for the lead role in *Grandma's Girl* at ten bucks a day. Ten bucks was all she'd take.

"Now you forget all about the name of Ginger Loring, which is in the paper," I said. "Grandmother doesn't know that name. You're to be Lorraine Locke. Remember that. Lorraine Locke. Have you got it?"

For a moment she looked as if she didn't understand, then she caught on fast. She arched an eyebrow. "How can I miss?" she said. A balmy California zephyr toyed at the vagrant curl over her forehead, making her look very fetching indeed. "I am Lorraine Locke! I've been Lorraine Locke since I was born!"

"That's the spirit," I said. I grinned back at her. She was a real trouper. "Now this is all you'll have to know to meet Grandma, Lorraine. It isn't much . . ."

I told her a few facts, like that Grandma hadn't seen her in seventeen years, and that from Grandma's letter I gathered Grandma wouldn't know what she looked like. Lorraine couldn't have been more than three years old when Grandma saw her last. Grandma asked her to wear a pink carnation so she'd recognize her at the station.

"But Ginger's—the dead girl's—hair was black," Lorraine said. Her voice was tremulous, uneasy. "Do I have to dye mine?"

I looked troubledly at her titian-blond locks, and then inspiration struck me. "It's bleached, that's what it is!" I exclaimed. "If Grandma remembers you had black hair, you can say you bleached it!"

Lorraine had the same sapphire-blue eyes as Ginger, and that was important.

It made it all sound very cozy, as we walked down the street, but something made me keep looking over my shoulder. Either I was going batty, or my 20-20 vision was cockeyed, but with the tail of my eye I was sure I saw a burly figure dart into a concealing doorway when I looked back! Those butterflies began to flutter in my stomach, and I realized how poor Ginger must have felt the night before. But Lorraine, holding tight to my arm, was blissfully unaware that anything funny might be going on.

Yet nothing happened during the day, except that a light California dew began to fall. At 7:10, a little red-

slipped Lorraine and I were in the beautiful Southern Pacific depot, waiting for the train scheduled to pull in. It pulled in, but no Grandma Bridget.

I scanned every last passenger who came off the train, without seeing one who even approximated the description of Grandma. I looked at the pink carnation Lorraine was wearing, then at her face. The poor kid was awfully scared and I wished for her sake that Grandma would show up and put an end to the suspense. Lorraine kept blinking her big blue eyes and biting at her shining crimson nails which matched the crimson of her slipper heels.

I was ready to give up when a tall man in a double-breasted chauffeur's coat and visored cap stepped up. He said, "Lorraine Locke?" And quickly she took up her cue. "Will you come with me? Your grandmother arrived a little earlier than she expected. We've hired a car."

HE TOOK us out to the parking concourse and suddenly he said, "This is your grandmother."

I looked around to see if he might mean someone else. The dame he indicated was as sharp-eyed and tough-looking a battle-puss as ever came through the wars. She had the gimlet kind of face that would positively make babies cringe in their cribs. And here I'd been picturing lavender and old lace!

"Grandma!" said Lorraine, weakly, and I shuddered with her as she went into the scare-ugly's embrace.

Grandma started to mutter all kinds of choice endearments and her words ice-skated up and down my spine. And then the payoff!

Grandma kept looking right by us, and acted as if she didn't hear us when we talked. The chauffeur tugged at my sleeve. "She's deaf and blind," he said right out loud to Lorraine and myself. "She can't hear what I'm saying now. If you want her to hear, you might try talking into that."

He pointed at a contraption hanging around her neck, and to me it looked more like a stethoscope than a speaking tube. There wasn't much conversation from then on.

We all climbed into a big black sedan she had waiting, and I felt very touched. Touched in the head! For on the way to the car I saw Grandma step out of the way to avoid a puddle. Then she looked down to see where to put her foot when she stepped in the car! She was blind—like an owl! When an auto horn honked near her, she jumped! Deaf—like a fox!

I didn't get it. There was something very horrible about this game, and I was afraid for Lorraine. That dead girl whose role she was playing, had been in some terrible trouble when I'd first seen her fleeing in terror past the Doctors' Building. The marks on her throat indicated there had been at least one other attempt on her life before she was finally shot down. Was my sympathy and concern for a dying wish going to strike all of us on the rebound?

I looked at Lorraine. I couldn't do this to an innocent girl. No good, I felt certain, was going to come out of this!

I grabbed Grandma's speaking tube and began talking fast. I explained I was Lorraine's agent, and that we had a very important engagement. Couldn't she drop us off, and we'd meet her later? Grandma acted hurt and offended, but there was nothing she could do. I was adamant.

Lorraine and I got out on Sunset, near where the first Lorraine—"Ginger"—lived. It was dark, and the drizzle made the air piercing cold. But it felt warm and comfy just to be away from that cake of ice called Grandma.

"We'll just call the whole thing off," I said to Lorraine. My whole sentiment-prompted scheme had been a flop. I tucked twenty bucks into Lorraine's bag. "I wanted to spare the old lady," I continued. "But this tough turkey called Grandma has twenty-

eight-inch armored steel on her top-deck. Nothing could hurt her."

A sudden movement in the shrubbery behind me made me duck, pulling Lorraine after me.

Zi-i-i-nng!

A THROWING-KNIFE zipped in to the eucalyptus tree behind where Lorraine had been a moment before! I whirled. A rocky fist clipped my jaw. My legs jitterbugged. A burly figure crashed through the shrubbery and grabbed Lorraine.

I collared Mr. Burley, and my own right fist made cranberry jelly out of his nose. He slammed a 1-A wallop into my chest, and I felt my heart do a 9-G dive. I thought of the lead souvenir in my heart muscle. Then I forgot it, and I gave out with rights and lefts to make some ersatz hamburger to go with the cranberries.

Mr. Burly landed in the shrubbery. He didn't come out. I looked for him.

"He's gone," Lorraine gasped, her blue eyes wide.

Footsteps sounded, and we both whirled. But it was not Burley. It was Grandma's visored chauffeur.

He'd apparently seen the tail-end of the battle, and now when he saw it was over he acted like he wanted to help. He'd parked Grandma down the block. Grandma didn't know about the fight. But he wanted to know what was up. I explained the attack must have been a mistake. I didn't know what else to tell him.

"They must have thought we were somebody else," I said.

He expressed concern for us. "Won't you come into my car?" He gestured with a knightly wave of his arm. "Can't I take you anywhere?"

Come into my parlor,
Said the spider to the fly . . .

"Oh no," I shook my head, that nursery rhyme jingling through my head. I took Lorraine's hand, led her away.

It was I who was biting nails now. What kind of a mess had I gotten

Lorraine into? Had that chauffeur really come up with intention to help? How come he was so handily close? He'd driven off with granny a couple minutes before.

Lorraine smiled, tried to make it seem bright and spontaneous. Her blue eyes sparkled, but deep down in them was fear.

I studied her face. The California dew had dampened the curly lock that hung over on her forehead. She was a spunky kid.

"You're tired," I said. "It's been a strain."

I got her to my hotel and got a room for her. She'd had no decent place to stay since she was evicted from her apartment the week before. With Lorraine safe now, I breathed a little easier. I told her to lie down and rest. She did. She promised me she would not leave the room.

I had some business to attend to, so I went downstairs to the lobby. I changed a dime into two nickels at the desk, and then sidestepped into a phone booth and put in a call to a contact I had in the local detective bureau.

I asked him if he would get the lowdown on Bridget Locke for me. "It's probably an alias," I said.

The man dug into a remarkably encyclopedic memory, and came up immediately with what I sought. Yes, he believed he knew Bridget Locke, without looking her up in the police files.

"Wasn't she arrested for an ax murder?" he mused. "Massachusetts—1904? If you want, I'll check to make sure. But as I remember, she was charged with killing her husband with a wood-ax. I think they had a poem about her going something like this:

Bridget Locke took an ax
And gave her husband forty whacks.
When the blood had ceased to run
She raised the count to forty-one.

"Great girl, wasn't she?" he said. I gulped as I finally pronged the

TDA

phone receiver. What kind of a family had I bought into? Ax-killers!

I held a hand to my heart. It felt like it had tripped and was tumbling down stairs. "Take it easy Joe," I said to myself. "Take it easy."

I TRIED to digest the ax-killer angle as I walked up the one flight to Lorraine's room. I didn't want to disturb Lorraine, but I knew I had better not let her alone this night. I could sit in a chair and watch over her as she slept, Tomorrow I'd see she got to a place of real safety. But what, exactly, was her danger? And why?

I pushed open the door to the room, and Lorraine wasn't on the bed. I looked about the room.

"Lorraine!" I cried out.

She was gone!

I searched the room, looked out the windows in panic. Where had they taken her? I could find no trace. I stepped out into the hall. How was I going to find her now? I began to swear at my stupidity, but a sharp dig in my side cut me off. It was a gun-muzzle. Before I could mutter my surprise, a hand clapped over my mouth and a voice rasped in my ear, "Keep quiet if you want breakfast tomorrow."

It was Mr. Burley, the original Mr. five-by-five. The gun with which he was poking me was still in his pocket. He took his hand away from my mouth and marched me down through the lobby in plain sight of everybody—as if we were heading for Sunday school. I had a mild curiosity about where he was taking me.

The long, black sedan waited at the curb. The monkey-suited chauffeur was already inside, taking care of Lorraine. In the drizzly darkness, Burley slipped a pair of handcuffs on me, and booted me into the car. He kept his gun on the girl, and the chauffeur drove. The blinds in the car were drawn, and it was too dark and misty to see through the front windshield where they were taking us.

"You brutes!" was all Lorraine could say, and she chewed at her scarlet nails.

When we finally drew up to a house, Battle-ax Grandma was waiting at the door to greet us. It was going to be butchery, short and fast; I could sense that. How could I, you ask? Have you ever seen wolves with their tongues lolling, and wondered about their peace aims? Don't ask me why they wanted to kill us. I wanted to ask someone that myself.

"Bring them in here," said Grandma, hungrily. She was not "blind" or "deaf" any more. That guise had obviously been for the purpose of avoiding answering questions that might have given her away before she'd tricked us here.

The doors and windows were all boarded up. Only the rear door, through which we were forced inside, was clear. I figured to bide my time and wait for a chance at a break. Then I realized I had no time to wait. Chauff and Burley were already unsheathing their guns for the slaughter.

Lorraine was in their line of fire, and I dove headlong at the two of them. Chauff squeezed trigger and in horror I saw Lorraine go down, clutching at her heart. I saw red fury, but that rage did me no good. Burley clouted me with his gun-barrel, and I went down.

I wasn't hurt badly, but I lay still. I'd seen a picture called *Wake Island*, and I'd learned an old Chinese trick about holding fire. I played doggo. I heard footsteps scrape in the room. I felt a hand shove at my shoulder, try to rouse me. Then after a moment there was silence. Grandma, Chauff and Burley had gone out the rear door. I could see the sentinel shadow of one of them, guarding at that portall.

I was stiff with dread when I crawled over to where Lorraine's body lay. Memory of Ginger's awful fate flooded through me.

I clasped Lorraine's soft hand and took it away from her heart. I saw no evidence of a wound.

"Lorraine," I whispered, softly.

She opened her eyes, then winked slowly, bravely.

"I'm all right," she said. "I just pretended."

Her pluck filled me with a warm glow. I whispered, "In this house you're safe if you're dead, I guess." I had to keep her that way until I cased our chances. "I guess I better kill you good."

LARRAINE looked worried as I took her bag and looked in it. I found a small bottle of red fingernail enamel. I spilled it over the front of her jersey blouse. "You're really dead now," I said. I wouldn't have dared leave her without that precaution.

I inched slowly toward the door out which the three had gone. Since this door was the only exit, they apparently weren't worried about our getting away. We were in a deserted house, in a back Hollywood canyon. In the rear patio was a well. Chauf and Grandma were looking down into it, while Burly guarded the door, his gun ready in hand. Chauf had hauled up the well's bucket, and was now trying to rip loose a crossbeam cutting across the well's mouth. It was apparent their plan was to put me and Lorraine down into the well to see if we'd float.

I scuttled back into the dark. I searched for a club — for anything that would help us make a break. I wondered if I could crash through one of the boarded-up windows in the front of the house.

A groan stopped me. It came from behind a door. I pressed my shoulder against the door, and the lock snapped open easily. It was the kitchen of the house, and there in the half-light of fire reflecting from a stove I saw a little old lady bound and gagged in a chair. I'd been looking for lavender and old lace.

Here it was!

I freed her. She gasped she was Bridget Locke.

"What!" I said, and suddenly my

heart realized why Ginger had wanted to spare this person pain. She was sweet and kind-faced and milky-eyed.

"They've taken me prisoner," she murmured stoutly. "My granddaughter was due to inherit an estate, which would have become mine if she were put out of the way. They want to kill her, figuring what I'd inherit would be theirs. I've been in their power a long time."

"They'll never kill your granddaughter," I lied, thinking of poor Ginger.

"Give me a gun," Bridget Locke pleaded, straightening out of the chair. "I'll fight 'em!" She was certainly a peppery mite.

I had no gun. I looked around, and I saw a woodbox. Her eyes followed mine, and she saw what I saw in the same instant. "A hatchet!" she said. "I'll take that."

The little old woman grasped the weapon and a savage light gleamed in her old but sparkling eyes.

She'd killed her husband with an ax, my informant at the detective bureau had told me. I felt like I was living in a screwy, dream-world. But I'd play it to the hilt.

The three were still out in the patio. Chauf had at last ripped the crossbeam off the mouth of the well. I whispered for Lorraine to lie still where she was, and then I stationed Bridget Locke behind the door, but at the last minute I took the flat-headed hatchet from her and took over that post.

"Call 'em in," I said to her. "One at a time."

"Yoo-hoo!" she called through the door, just like any grandmother would.

Burley heard that low-pitched call. He stepped into the room. *Clop* went my tomahawk. Little Lorraine came out of nowhere to catch him as he fell, dragged him aside.

"Yoo-hoo!" called Bridget again.

This time, Chauf answered the summons. I began to feel like a tong-man. *Crack* went the erstwhile chauf-

feur's head. The fake Grandma was in the room then. Larraine tried to handle her, but she proved the toughest of the lot. She clawed, bit and kicked like a wildcat. She wasn't old—she was young and hard. When Bridget Locke saw my disdain to use violence, she took my gentle weapon

She was quick. I realized I could never put a fake granddaughter over with her.

"My girl, my little girl," Grandma Bridget said.

I took her arm. "Prepare for a shock," I told her. I'd have to tell her that her granddaughter—her only



from me and tapped the infuriated "Grandma" one on the noggin. It suddenly became very quiet in the room.

IT WAS all over. And suddenly I was filled with unhappiness. The real Grandma Bridget was a sharp article. She was no doddering, decrepit woman in her dotage, whom you could put any lightly conceived tricks over on

living kin—was dead. She'd soon enough find it out anyway on account of the inheritance. Then we were outside, into the light of outdoors.

"Grandmother!" exclaimed Larraine then, "I remember you. I've seen your picture!"

"Larraine, my sweet child!" said Grandma Bridget.

They embraced. My jaw dropped. I tapped Larraine's shoulder. I didn't

understand. "But—but you're not Larraine. Not—not the real Larraine."

"And why not?" she demanded incredulously. "I certainly am. Have you gone crazy?" She stared at me. "You know I'm Larraine. You told me so yourself the first time we met. You did state it rather queerly, now that I remember. I was surprised how you knew. And I didn't know why you'd want me to play myself. But I figured that since you were a detective, you knew what you were doing."

I clapped a clammy hand to my eyes, and suddenly it all became clear to me. Those letters I'd found in the dead girl's—Ginger's—apartment, were addressed to this blonde girl here. She'd moved from the apartment, and that letter and telegram apparently hadn't been forwarded. The other gal had moved into the apartment and was mistaken by the killers for Larraine! They probably realized their mistake next morning when they saw the wrong girl's picture in the paper.

I went down to the road nearby and hailed a passing motorist. Before long, the cops were in, and everything was fixed up. Larraine was very happy. She would get the dough she needed for clothes—and if looks meant anything it would be the open sesame to pictures for her. The inheritance came from her runaway father who had made a fortune in Chile, in copper, and died there.

At my first opportunity, I took Larraine aside. I didn't like to be nosy, but one small item troubled me very much. I said, "Have you ever heard anything about an ax-slaying back in Massachusetts?"

Larraine's face clouded. "It was a tragedy that blighted my whole

family," she said. "It was grandpa who was slain. Circumstantial evidence caused Grandmother to be held by the police for a while, but she was soon cleared when the real killer—a housebreaker—confessed. But Grandmother was in jail long enough to learn to feel sympathy for prisoners, and those who have spent time in prison. She tried to help them. She hired them for her personal servants.

"That fake Grandma was her maid. The burly man was her gardener. They, as well as the chauffeur, all had prison records. Her sympathy in these cases was misguided. When they found out about her money, they made her a virtual prisoner in her own house."

Everything looked clear and bright now. Then I thought of one other thing. That other girl, Ginger Loring. Her true identity had never been learned. Who was it, I wondered, Ginger hadn't wanted to find out about her death?

I spoke of it to Grandma Bridget. She was deeply moved. "At any rate," she said, "that other person hasn't learned. It is a tragic loss. But, I guess, what one doesn't know doesn't hurt one. The secret of Ginger's death seems safe."

What you don't know, doesn't hurt you, Grandma said. I thought of that next day when, again, I was pacing back and forth in front of the Doctors' Building near Sixth and Westlake, trying to make up my mind about going in and getting the verdict from that specialist about my heart. Finally, I turned away and left. What I didn't know, *perhaps* wouldn't hurt me.

Anyway, I was in a hurry. I had a date with Larraine—and Grandma!



Jap Ketchum Hell



By

Greta Bardet

Pat Murphy's Chinese laundryman had ideas of his own on how to clean up spies. There was a certain Jap he intended to hang up to dry. But Pat discovered that blood does not wash out so easily when it's your own blood you take to the cleaner's.

PAT MURPHY leaned against the wooden counter, and watched the laundryman shuffle over to the shelves which housed the packages of laundry. Slipped feet scraped along the cold concrete floor like dry leaves. Pat turned his head a little, cast his eyes toward the dark doorway which led to the rear of the

Chinese hand laundry. At any moment he expected Soo Yong Wah to come out to him, beaming as usual, for the man before him was not Soo Yong Wah.

There was no sound except for the dry rustle of paper as the Chinese matched the ticket against packages. Pat looked at him again, noted with disinterest the thin cheap clothes, threadbare but clean.

Pat took out a cigarette. "Where's Soo Yong Wah?" he asked, and set the cigarette between long firm lips.

"He go 'way," mumbled the Chinaman, reaching up for a brown paper bundle. He took it down, shuffled back over to the ironing table, set it down. Once more he compared the tickets.

Pat scratched a match, firing his cigarette. "Go away?" he asked, and looked up out of the window. Little of the darkening afternoon light crept down to this basement store.

The Chinaman lifted the bundle to the counter. "He go 'way," he said. "Sebenty cents. Soo Yong Wah my cousin. Go join up China ahmee!"

"Oh, good!" said Pat, and reached into his trouser pocket. "The old buzzard joined the army, did he?"

The Chinaman lifted puzzled almond-shaped eyes. "Buzzah?"

"Oh, friend, friend!" Pat explained, and placed a dollar on the counter.

Instantly the Chinese smiled wide. "Flenn! Flenn! Lee Ching hapee know Flenn Soo Yong Wah. You come laundelly Lee Ching now, yes? Cousin go China ahmee."

"Be glad to."

"Cousin go 'way. Me ketchum laundelly. You come laundelly Lee Ching. Fussaclassa laundellyman."

Lee Ching pulled out a cigar box, laboriously counted out the change, murmuring in his own tongue as he did so.

Pat picked up the coins, and Lee Ching grinned at him again. "You big man. Mebee you join China armee? China ahmee good ahmee. Likum Amellican sohjah."

"Not the Chinese army," Pat

chuckled. "American army. Very soon. Ketchum sohjah boy two week time."

Lee Ching bowed, his face beaming. "Is good. Velly good! I washum laundelly cheap you Amellican sohjah. Allee same China ahmee, Amellican ahmee, allee same ahmee."

"That's right," said Pat, and dropped his change into the China Relief box on the counter. He took up his package.

"You no forget," Lee Ching called after him. "Soo Yong Wah say many good cussimer come to laundelly."

"Sure, sure. Any cousin of Soo Yong Wah is a cousin of mine." Pat smiled, and with a wave of his hand, left the dismal store.

A short time later, he unwrapped his laundry to place it in his chest of drawers. He was a little astonished when a piece of paper slipped from between the shirts and fluttered to his feet. He set the shirts down in the compartment, bent down and picked it up. It was written on a piece of torn white paper, and read:

Honorable friend, Detective Murphy. You go 637 Thirty Street, the West, find Japanese dog. He say he Chinese. Not so. He Japanese spy Hashimura. I go follow now. If true I think Japanese spy he die. I will kill. I true son of China, Soo Yong Wah.

"Well, I'll be damned!" Pat exclaimed, and rushed for his hat and coat.

HE HURRIED to detective headquarters and put the note before Jim Ransome, his partner.

"Hey, Jim! What d'ya think of this? Y'know that little Chinese laundry I bring my shirts to? It seems the old bird joined the Chinese Army, and his cousin took over. But take a look at this note Sco Yong Wah put in my laundry! It looks like the little Chinaman took up Jap spy hunting on his own hook!"

Jim frowned thoughtfully as he finished the letter. "Hashimura! Now that's something! The F.B.I. is looking high and low for that stinking yellow rat!"

"I thought the name sounded familiar. And I don't know how long this note's been written. What about Hashimura?"

"This Jap, the way I get it, managed to sneak into the country about two months ago. The F.B.I. believes he was dropped off a boat near the coast of California, where he swam ashore. He's a dangerous and active saboteur. The cops almost nabbed him around Los Angeles, but before they could slap the cuffs on him, he made a daring escape. They traced him to New York, but that's as far as they got, last time I heard."

"So what's keeping us? Let's go have a look at this address on 692 Thirty Street, the West."

The address proved to be a cheap little boarding house, a crummy brownstone house in the middle of the street. The two men climbed out of their car and entered the shabby building. In answer to their ring, a short, squat woman with a mess of dirty gray hair asked insolently what they wanted.

Pat flashed his badge and got instant reaction. She brightened, shoved pudgy fingers through her hair. "Now wait a minute, coppers. I ain't done nothin'. I run a respectable house, see?"

"We believe you," Pat said quietly, peering down the long dark ill-lit hallway. "You got a Jap livin' in this house?"

"A Jap!" she cried out shrilly, outraged indignance in her tone. "Are you insultin' me? Have I got a Jap livin' in me house! I'll sue ye for slander!"

"Got a Chinaman?"

"That's different. I got one, a Sun Png. Lives upstairs, top floor rear. Quiet duck, he don't bother nobody. What's he done?"

Pat asked, "How do you know he's Chinese?"

She was patient with Pat's stupidity. "Why, by the button! It says, *I am a Chinese on the button!*"

"Doesn't mean a thing. Let's have a look at him."

"Why. . ." she sang out, as she mounted the stairs, "if that guy is a Jap, so help me, I'll fumigate the house. Me! A Jap! Livin' in me nice clean house! I'll brain 'im!" She turned around, her eyes flashing in anger. "If he's a Jap, I'll personally cut his head off with me scissors!"

Pat cautioned her to be silent, and she did, tightening her lips in disapproval. When they reached the third floor, she pointed to the door in question, and Pat stepped up with a gun in his hands. Jim motioned for the woman to step aside, and taking out his gun too, pressed himself up against the wall.

Pat knocked. There was no answer. He knocked again, louder. Still no answer.

"Got keys?" he asked the landlady, who immediately fumbled through a pocket and brought out a key.

PAT put the key in the lock, turned, and flung open the door. He took one step through the doorway and came to a dead halt, a look of horror biting through his face.

The landlady, directly behind him, caught up her breath, made a noise that sounded like, "Googg," and dropped to the floor in a dead faint.

Jim sprang around the door, and the two detectives stared in stunned shock at the body on the floor. It was that of a small man, dressed in blood-washed Japanese garb. A wide sash was bound about his waist, and his feet were encased in white socks. The head had been severed from the body.

Pat's face screwed up with the sickened revulsion he felt, while Jim's face turned green. He clutched his stomach.

"I'm gonna get sick," he warned, "I'm gonna get sick!"

"You do," Pat spat out with a bravado he did not feel, "and I'll bust you one! Go help the landlady!"

Pat had never seen anything quite

so repulsive. It sent waves of nausea churning through him.

The place was spattered with blood.

But the thing that shocked Pat most was that the head was nowhere in evidence. Just the twisted, blood-stained body, with the dark smear between the shoulders.

Jim was busy with the landlady, who was coming out of it. He helped her to her feet, and she reeled unsteadily out of the room.

"Glory be," she moaned, "I didn't mean it! What I said about cuttin' his head off! You know how sometimes you say them things? I was just kiddin'. I didn't do that to him."

"We know who killed him!" Pat said tersely, and Jim led her outside to the hall and left her there.

Returning to the room, he shut the door after him. Pat looked down at the body again. The simple white Japanese toga was blood-soaked at the shoulders, and stiff. One knee was doubled up under him.

It was the white socks on the feet that caught Pat's attention. He bent down, studied the foot a moment. Then to Jim's amazement, Pat reached over, drew off one of the socks, looked at the foot, then turned around, looking for the shoes.

He found the two sandals with leather thongs, neatly standing side by side under a chair close by. Next to them was the weapon which had severed the head.

"That's the baby that did the decapitation." Pat pointed to the sword, and rose to his feet.

"But Pat," Jim said thickly, his eyes trying to avoid the ugly scene, "where's the head? I don't see the head!"

"So look around, look around!" Pat growled.

Jim's eyes widened, as he gawked stupidly. "Who me? I should look—I don't wanna find the thing!"

"You probably won't!" Pat said, "but look anyway!"

Pat bent down over the knife. "Some sword! I never thought Soo

Yong Wah had it in him. Decapitation! Ugh!"

Apprehensively, Jim began his search under things, here and there, spending a long time with places he knew the head wasn't.

Pat stepped over to the telephone and called headquarters. That done, he rummaged through things too. He found papers in the desk which proved conclusively they belonged to Makl Hashimura.

In one of the pockets of the gown was an identification, proving that this was the spy the F.B.I. was looking for. There was also a valuable paper which proved this man had most certainly been active in sabotage movements.

THEY looked through every nook and cranny of the small, cramped apartment, but did not unearth the head.

"Well!" Jim sighed, mopping his brow, the color back in his face again. "Of one thing I am sure! You can kiss Soo Yong Wah good-by. We'll never see that guy again!"

"I agree with you!" Pat said, and threw some papers down on the desk.

"But who cares?" Jim said lightly. "This ain't exactly murder, except that Soo Yong Wah could have been a little less—well, less violent! This Hashimura was a dangerous spy, an enemy to the country. This ain't murder, it's war!"

"Yeah," grumbled Pat, "but I think we ought to find him any way, if only to pin a medal on the guy. One Jap less. Except—" His eyes slid back to the body. "Decapitation!"

Jim lifted heavy shoulders. "So maybe his tong went in for that sort of thing with enemies of their government."

"First time I ever heard of a Chinaman being a head hunter!"

"So he wanted a trophy!"

"I wonder if Lee Ching knows where Soo Yong Wah is."

"Well that's it!" Jim exclaimed. "These Chinese stick together. Soo

Yong Wah didn't join the army, but is hiding out because he did this to the Jap."

"That's logical."

"Still—it ain't nice cuttin' heads off people!"

"Japs," Pat reminded him, "ain't people!"

"You got something there, Pat!"

Not many minutes later, the two men hurried down the wooden stairs which led to the cellar store of the Chinese hand laundry. Lee Ching crept out of the murky shadows and smiled widely when he saw Pat Murphy again. He bowed politely, looking at Jim. "More cussimer?"

Pat shook his head, leaned easily over the counter. "No. I want you to tell me where Soo Yong Wah really is."

The smile froze, then slowly faded. "He go 'way. China akmee. He go 'way."

"How long you ketchum this business?"

"Ketchum laundely? Two, three day, mebee."

"Tell me, did Soo Yong Wah ever speak to you about Hashimura?"

A light flickered in the almond eyes. "Hashimura?" he repeated slowly. "Is Japanese name!"

"I know it."

"You no say Japanese name in Lee Ching laundely!"

"Hashimura? The name means nothing to you?"

"Me no know Japanese." Lee Ching's voice rose excitedly. "I kill Japanese I see him. I kill dog like true son of China."

"I understand," Pat sighed, and reached slowly into his shoulder holster. He brought out a gun, hefted it, eyeing Lee Ching who paled visibly.

"Thissee gun," Pat told him and smiled.

Lee Ching nodded slowly, his eyes refusing to leave the gun.

"One bullet," Pat explained, "and you dead duck. You ketchum?"

"I—ketch—um."

"Now that we understand each oth-

er, if you don't mind"—Pat continued to hold that smile on his lips, but his fingers tightened around the gun—"you will please take off your slippers."

"Sl-slippah?" the eyes came up, met his.

"Yeah, slippers! Take 'em off! And now!" Pat's voice seemed to fill the store and carried authority.

The man mumbled something, hesitated but an instant, then looked at the gun again. He quickly stepped out of his slippers, and stood back on the cement floor in socks.

"Thanks," Pat said with sarcasm. "Now take off a sock."

There was a silence while Jim shifted weight uneasily.

"Take off your socks!" roared Pat, and Lee Ching jumped to oblige. With a quick yank a sock was off. He stood there, one foot bare, and seowled irritably.

Pat brandished his gun. "Okay, Jim, slap the handcuffs on him. He's it!"

"Now wait a minute, Pat—" Jim began.

IN THAT instant Lee Ching sprang toward the counter, his hand reaching in under it. But before he could withdraw it again, Pat's gun barked once. The man stiffened, with supreme effort brought his arm up. There was a gun in his hand.

Pat's gun blazed again. The man lurched against the counter, his finger pulled against the trigger of his gun, but the bullet went wild. He folded to the floor and lay still.

"But—Pat! I don't get it! Why did you want to slap the handcuffs on this bird?"

"Because he isn't Chinese, see? This guy here is Hashimura, and the body we found is that of Soo Yong Wah! The way I figure it, Soo Yong Wah followed Hashimura, ready to rub the Jap out just as soon as he made sure he was a Jap. Sometimes, you see, it's very hard to tell.

"I think Soo Yong Wah went up to the Jap's place to stick a knife in him, or maybe shoot him. But Soo Yong Wah wouldn't go in for any fancy decapitation! You see, a corpse without a head makes a Chinaman look pretty much like a Jap.

"We were supposed to think Hashimura dead. That would then give him a chance to get out and do some real damage in this country. The F.B.I. was closing in on him, and Soo Yong Wah somehow got wise. Hashimura acted. Instead of the Chinaman killing him, he killed Soo Yong Wah, dressed him up in Jap clothes, cut his head off, and beat it.

"He had to hide out someplace, so he came here, pretended he was Soo Yong Wah's cousin, and almost got away with it.

"Naturally, he didn't know that Soo Yong Wah, knowing I was a detective, would think it advisable to send me a note in the shirts. So Hashimura hid out here for a while. He didn't light the lights, and it's pretty dark down here. Any Chinese coming in here, would get a fistful of trouble, see? Is everything quite plain now?"

"Yeah, fine, Pat, fine. But how the hell'd you know, with the head missin', that it was a Chink, not a Jap?"

"Simple! Hashimura entered this

country illegally just two months ago, right?"

"Yeah."

"Hashimura spent most of his life in Nippon?"

"Yeah."

"Well, Jim, Chinese wear slippers on their feet. The Japs wear sandals with thick leather thongs. These thongs come up between the big toe and the second toe. That, Jim, gives those two toes a tendency to spread pretty wide apart from each other.

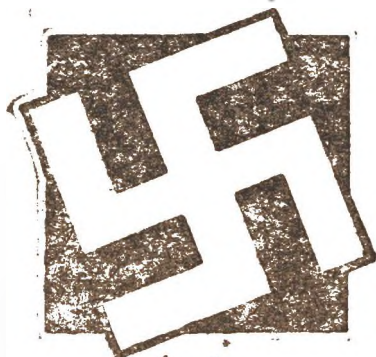
"You see, I thought it was funny, when I looked at the feet of the corpse, to find that the toes were all close together. And yet thonged sandals were under the chair, and the toes should have been spread apart. That's why I had to have a look at this guy's toes. I knew that the body was that of a Chinese, not a Jap.

"Soo Yong Wah was missing, and this was not the body of Hashimura. Two and two adding up to a lot of things! So take a squint at 'Lee Ching's' toes!"

Jim did, and sure enough, the big toe was quite noticeably spread apart from the others.

"That," said Jim, "is what I call keepin' up on your toes!"

Pat Murphy set his head back and laughed.



Just
A REMINDER!
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War Savings Bonds & Stamps

Homicide Oil Strike

By O. Dennis

The murderer had left no clues so he had no qualms about having a bite with the sheriff. But his first mouthful was to be the appetizer of that last dinner the state would soon be serving him.



JACK WALTERS peered out of the car window, muttered, "Lemme see, it ought to be right along here if somebody hasn't cut it down. Oh yeah, there it is." He

pulled the car off the road into a dense growth of sumac at the base of a large old birch tree. Before climbing out, he changed to a pair of coarse work shoes and drew on gloves.

Crawling between the barbed wire strands of the fence, his feet carried him unerringly down the dim path and across a field. Then he stopped suddenly and stared. A tall skeleton framework rose above him, black against the night sky.

"The derrick!" he breathed, still awed by the memory of the news item in a corner of the city paper.

"New Gusher Comes in at Dalton," it read. "After a quarter of a century of grubbing out a bare existence on a stony farm, Jed Walters becomes rich overnight. He states, however, that his mode of living will be little changed . . ."

"Damned penny-pincher!" Jack glared at the derrick and thought about his half-brother. "Probably had plenty of money when I wrote him for the loan of a couple of centuries last winter. But all I got was a reminder that Pa's will had taken care of any claim I had against the estate—one stinkin' dollar bill!"

Shoving his hands into his pockets, he went on toward the hip-roofed barn visible above neat straight rows of trees. As he cut through the orchard, he picked a good-sized apple from a low-hanging limb and bit into it. It was green and sour, so he shyed it at a cat that leaped from the back porch on his approach.

He stepped into the pump-house built around the base of the windmill, lit a match and looked around. Picking up a heavy spanner-wrench, he tried the weight of it in his hand.

At the kitchen door he pounded loudly and waited. A moment later an upper window was raised and a voice called out, "Who is it? What d'yuh want?"

"Come on down, Jed," he answered, "and make welcome to your kid brother."

There was a pause followed by the clumping of unlaced shoes coming down the stairs. Through the kitchen window Jack saw the gaunt figure of Jed, clad in a nightshirt tucked into overalls, set a kerosene lamp on the table.

"Why didn't yuh come on in?" Jed growled as he opened the door. "Yuh know good and well I never lock up."

Jack stepped into the room. "Uh-huh, and get a load of buckshot in the belly. Not me."

Jed sat down and tipped his chair back against the wall. "Well, what kind of trouble are you into now?" he asked harshly. "Sneaking home in the middle of the night. What d'yuh want this time?"

"No trouble, Jed. I've just come to collect my share of the take from that oil well down back of the orchard." He leaned against the door frame. The hand holding the big spanner-wrench behind him tightened its grip.

Jed's weathered face was grim and hard. "Pa didn't aim fer you to have nothin' off this place, ever, because of the way you treated him and carried on after he was bedridden. Though I s'pose you'll get it after I'm dead unless I will it to somebody else."

"That's just the way I had it figured," Jack said, "so I'm here to see that that doesn't happen. I'm going to collect—soon." He stepped forward quickly, swinging the heavy weapon. Jed raised his arm and tried to dodge.

"Jack," he cried hoarsely, "don't!" But the blow fell. There was a crunching sound, like the cracking of an egg shell. Jed's chair tipped forward with a jolt and spilled him onto the floor. He lay very still.

Jack stood over him a moment, breathing hard, before he leaned down to feel for a heart beat. Satisfied that there was none, he stepped over the body and went out. Tossing the wrench into a clump of weeds beside the barn, he hurried to his car and drove off. Miles away he stopped on a bridge and threw the shoes and gloves into the swift water.

Long before dawn he drew up in front of his apartment building in the distant city, went up and went to bed as casually as though he had just come in from a late-session poker game.

IT WAS in the afternoon two days later when Jack drove again through the hills to Dalton. This time he drove right down to the square, parked before the Butler House and went in to register. From there he strolled across the street to the sheriff's office in the court house.

Quint Edwards had taken on a bit of weight since he and Jack had gone to the Hilltop school together. Aside

from that he was the same eager-eyed, redheaded kid who had read Sherlock Holmes and gone out and bought a calabash and a magnifying glass.

As Jack came into his office, he rose from his desk, extending a friendly hand. "Howdy, Jack," he said. "Too bad you had to wait for something like this to happen before you came home for a visit."

"Yeah, I know," Jack said ruefully, "but you remember I didn't exactly take to farming. And then Jed and I didn't hit it off so well. But say, have you got a line on who did it? Your wire didn't tell much and the city papers didn't give it more than a small paragraph."

"There ain't much to tell yet," the sheriff replied. "I was out there within twenty minutes after I got the call from Joel Newton. He'd gone over just about daybreak looking for a stray calf, saw a light in the kitchen window and walked in. And there Jed was—dead."

"How was he killed?" Jack wanted to know. "Couldn't it have been an accident?"

"No, it was out and out murder," Quint asserted. "I got out there before the place was trampled by half the folks in Lake County. Found the murder weapon for one thing, a big old spanner-wrench layin' in a patch of ragweed by the barn. And then—well, I found several things."

"I'd like to look the ground over myself," Jack said. "Let's run out there."

The sheriff looked at his watch. "It's gettin' kinda late. Suppose we go out first thing in the morning?" He rose and put on his hat. "Fact is I'm about due out to the house. Why don't you come on home with me to supper?"

"Thanks just the same, Quint, but I stopped and ate back in Eltonville."

"Well, anyway we can go over to Joe's and have a beer."

"Don't mind if I do," Jack grinned. He waited while Quint locked up the

office, then walked with him across the square to the taproom.

"Draw two, Joe," the sheriff ordered as they sat down, "and a couple of cheese on rye."

Turning to Jack he said, "You won't find many fellows around that we went to school with. Gone to the city, most of them."

"That's the smart thing to do, unless," Jack laughed derisively, "unless you go into politics."

He looked up, surprised, as the waiter placed a sandwich along with the mug of beer before him. "Hey, I didn't order that," he protested.

"Oh, that's all right," the sheriff said, spinning a coin to the waiter. "I ordered 'em. They're a special kind of cheese. Go ahead and try it."

Jack took a cautious taste and washed it down with a swallow of beer. "Not bad," he admitted, and bit a large half-moon out of the sandwich.

"This sheriff job," Quint was explaining, "is more than just being a politician. It's work. I spent three months in New York studying police methods when I was first elected. I go back now for short courses every summer."

He emptied his glass and turned to summon the waiter. "Whoop, I'm sorry!" he exclaimed as his elbow shoved Jack's sandwich, plate and all, clattering to the floor.

"Hey, Joe," he called, "couple of beers and another cheese sandwich." He leaned over and picked up the scattered pieces. "Damned careless of me," he muttered and carried them over to the bar.

Returning to the table, he glanced at his watch. "Oh gosh, guess I'll have to run, Jack. The missus will be waiting supper." He finished off his new glass of beer, paid the waiter and hurried out.

THE next morning after a late breakfast, Jack strolled over to the courthouse. "Hi, Sherlock," he

greeted the sheriff. "Ready to go out and do some deducting?"

Quint looked up from his desk gravely. "No, Jack. There is no more deducting to do. The case is practically closed." He stood up slowly and dropped a big hand on Jack's shoulder. "I am arresting you for the murder of your brother."

Jack pulled away. "You're crazy as hell!" He backed across the room, then stopped. "You're trying to bluff me, Quint, but it won't work. I suppose there's an election coming up and you'd like to get a feather in your cap," he laughed nervously.

"I'm sorry, Jack, but I've got to do it."

"Nuts, you can't pin it on me! I haven't been within two hundred miles of here for almost five years."

Quint contradicted him. "I can prove in court that you were within twenty feet of where the body was found, on the night of the murder. And you are the only person who could benefit by Jed's death."

Jack fought back the panic that threatened to send him plunging to the door. His mind went back quickly to that night—the trip, the killing, the careful planning that couldn't have gone wrong.

"I don't believe it!" he said.

"Remember last night in the taproom?" the sheriff asked quietly. "You had a cheese sandwich?"

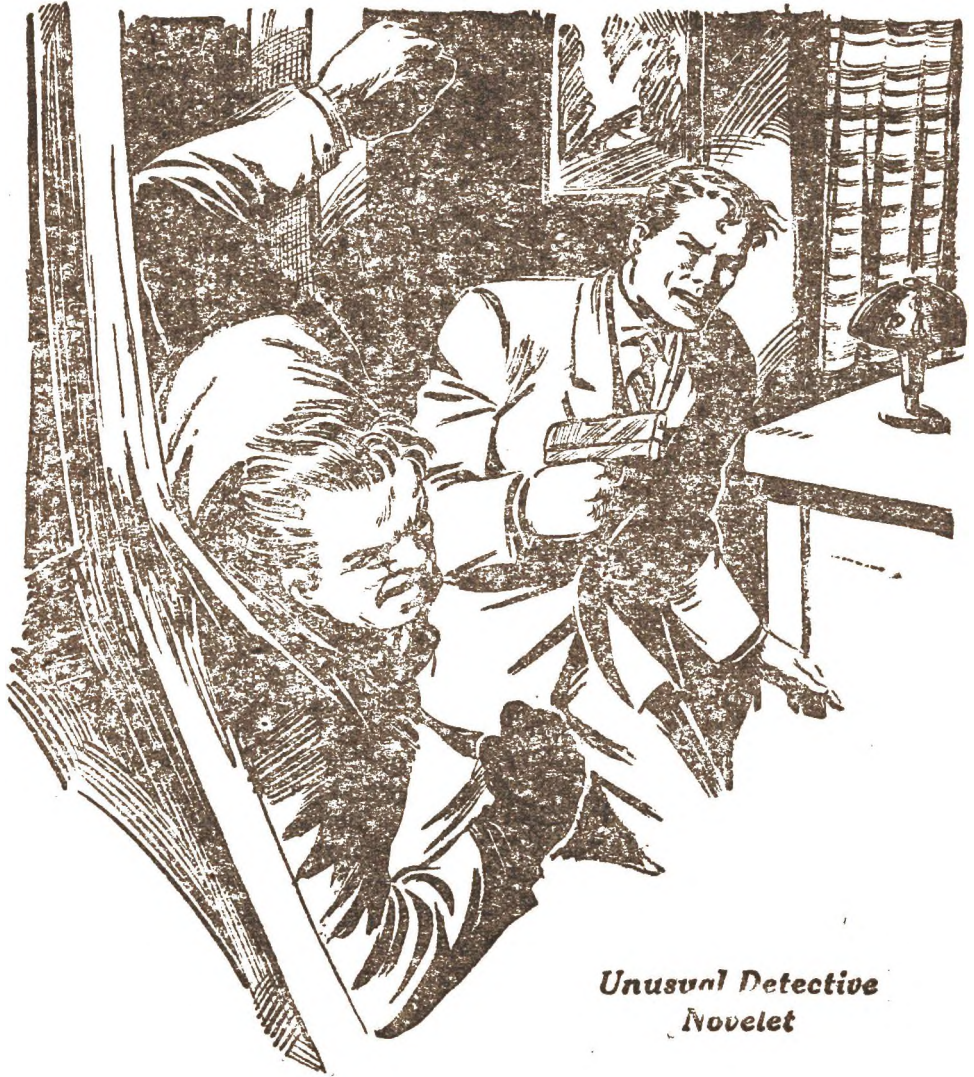
"Why, yes, but what of it?"

"I've been setting up free lunches for all my suspects in this case," Quint informed him. "I knocked the sandwich on the floor purposely. Saved enough of the cheese to get a perfect bite. And the pattern of your teeth-marks checks."

"Checks with what?"

"With the teeth-marks in a green apple I picked up beside your brother's porch. I knew they couldn't be Jed's. He hasn't had a tooth in his head since last spring."

The Countess



*Unusual Detective
Novelet*

By W. T. Ballard

★ ★ ★

The blonde asked Bill French to call up a man and say she'd be late. But it was the Grim Reaper that kept her appointment on time. And it was Bill that looked like he was going to be late—the late Bill French.

★ ★ ★
46

and the Killer



The gun barked as the door smashed in.

CHAPTER I

IT WAS pouring. If you've never been in California during one of the real rains, you have no idea. That is, unless you've been a marine and slopped around in the tropics. I've done both, so I know. I should be out there now, and I would be, but an overfriendly bug took a nip at me down in the Canal Zone some years back and the navy doctors said nix.

I was standing there in the drug store doorway, thinking that life was

a pretty funny thing. Here my old outfit was poking Japs out of the jungles, using bayonets to do the poking, and I was standing watching Sunset Boulevard traffic crawl along through the biggest rain we'd had in a lot of years.

What with the rain, the dimout, and the gas rationing, traffic wasn't much to speak of, but it was going so slowly that it took one car a long time to pass a given point.

The given point was me, the car was a big black coupé of the five passenger type and the girl was a blonde. Her

dash lamp was strong enough to act like a baby spot and it threw enough light up into her face for me to get a vivid picture of blonde beauty.

I've been around Hollywood long enough to know most of the picture girls by sight and this little blonde was someone that I had never seen before. But judging by the car and by the fox furs that made a ruff at her neck, she was someone important. That is, if you figure that dough makes people important.

Her car wasn't doing more than eight or ten miles an hour. She was headed west and the rain was coming directly against her windshield in a driving curtain which ran over the slender blades of her active windshield wipers as if they were not there.

I knew she was looking out at the world through a curtain of moisture that must have been a quarter of an inch thick, and that her visibility was practically zero.

She was going so slowly that the light changed before she could make the intersection. She brought the big car to a stop opposite me.

I saw her turn and look in my direction, then she leaned forward and rolled the glass down in the curbside door.

"Hey," she called above the noise of the pelting rain. "Want to do me a favor?"

I couldn't have been more surprised if an angel had stuck her head out of a cloud and asked if I wanted the next dance. "Why not?"

She gave me a smile, and even in the slender light from her dash lamp, it looked like something special. "Call Charley Fabor. His number is Hillside, 5-2808. Tell him that I'm coming but that I need an outboard motor. The name is Pat Malone."

"Howyuh, Pat? I'm Bill French."

"I'm wet," she said. "Here's a nickel for the call." It fell in the doorway beside me with a little ringing sound. "Got the number?"

"Sure," I said, not bothering to tell

her that I already knew it. "So long, Pat, and good sailing."

"So long, Bill." The light had changed and she put the big coupe in gear, moving forward into the driving storm. I watched it until the tail lights were a wet red blur, thinking what a lucky guy Charley Fabor was, to have a girl like the one in the coupé, braving storm and weather just to see him. I turned, searched for the nickel and went into the store.

THERE wasn't any business. Pop Martin's customers didn't have web feet. I grinned at the old man behind the cigar case and moved toward a pay phone in the booth at the rear of the store.

Pop said, "She ain't working, Bill. Someone stuck her with a slug."

"A fine thing," I told him. "Can I use yours?"

"Sure," he said, "but you'll have to call operator. It's extended service from downtown."

I went back into the prescription room and dialed Central, gave her the number and waited. Charley Fabor answered himself.

I said, "This is Bill, the super-sleuth. How are you, pal?"

He laughed. "Fine, what are you calling for, a little blackmail?"

"Never touch it," I told him. "I leave that for you lawyers and politicians. I was standing in Martin's doorway and a blonde swam by in a coupé. She tossed me a nickel and asked me to call, said she'd make your joint if her water wings hold out, but she'd be a little late."

His voice changed a little. There wasn't any laugh in it now. "Thanks, Bill, and do me a favor, pal, forget you saw her."

"That's asking a lot," I told him. "She's really something to forget." But I realized suddenly that I was talking to a dead wire; he'd hung up.

I went out, bought a couple of packs of cigarettes and some vino and headed for the jalkopy. It started, which was a miracle, and I headed

TDA

home, my front wheels breaking water like the prow of a lifeguard cutter in a heavy sea.

I'D BEEN asleep a long time. It was like coming out of a well, to drag myself awake and reach for the phone. But it wasn't the phone that was making the racket, it was my apartment doorbell.

I fell out of bed and went around on my hands and knees, looking for slippers. The bell kept ringing all the time as if someone was in a hurry. I found the slippers finally under the bureau, switched on the light, grabbed a robe and padded across my little living room to the door.

Dick O'Connor and another man were outside. They both had on raincoats and their hats were very wet. I judged from that that it was still raining.

"The top of the morning, noon, or night to you," I said brightly. I didn't know which it was and I didn't care. I was sore at being ripped from my nice comfortable bed just when I'd begun to get used to it.

O'Connor didn't think this funny. There were few things in life that he thought truly funny. He was a long, thin, uncomfortable-looking man with a nickel-sized bald spot on the top of his head which kept growing year by year. The bald spot worried him, his food worried him and his job worried him. It should have, he was Captain of Detectives, acting head of the Homicide Squad.

"Not funny, Bill." He looked around the apartment as if he expected to find a couple of saboteurs hiding under the rug. "You know Burntouski."

I didn't know Burntouski. He looked like a football player with a thick short body, sturdy legs and a round head set on the end of almost no neck at all. But he had a nice grin and he winked as if to tell me not to take the captain too seriously.

When we shook hands, his fingers

bone-crushed mine until I'd have traded the hand in on anything.

"What's on your mind?" I kicked the door shut and turned around. "I suppose you didn't pull me out of bed just to tell me it was raining?"

"No," he said. "You made a phone call tonight, you made it from Pop Martin's drug store, you called Charles Fabor?"

He didn't stab at me with his finger as he spoke, but the effect was the same.

"So what?" I said.

"Then you don't deny it?"

I stared at him, and I could feel my eyes getting narrow. I still wasn't fully awake, but I'd been at my game too long not to heed the little bell of warning that was jangling in my brain.

"Why should I deny it?" I demanded. "Since you know so much, it's a bet that you've already talked to Pop Martin. I suppose you traced the call through Central, because I had to use an extended service phone.

"But I didn't intend to deny it. What's wrong with my calling up Charley Fabor? He's important as hell now, but I've known him for a long time. I knew him when he wasn't."

"Who was the girl?" O'Connor was watching me like a cat watching a mouse.

"What girl?" I was stalling now. I was fully awake too. Something was going on that I didn't know about, and I wanted to find out before I threw around any more answers.

"The girl Charley Fabor was expecting. The girl that you called to say would be delayed?"

"Look," I told him. "I make it a rule in life to play fair, to trade with everyone, even-steven, including the cops, but this little game is getting one-sided. You're asking all the questions. Suppose I throw you a couple and see what the answers are. What goes on? Why so interested in my private telephone life? What brings you

out at this hour, knocking on a poor man's door?"

O'Connor glanced at his stooge, then back at me. "I suppose you didn't know that Charley Fabor is dead?"

"Dead?" That stiffened me, the same way that a right to the jaw would have done. "Dead—Charley? You're crazy!"

"Save the heroics," he advised. "Charley Fabor was murdered sometime between twelve-fifteen and one-thirty this morning. He died of a gunshot wound, said wound being in the right cheek. The bullet traveled upward and lodged in the brain. Now that I've answered your questions, quit stalling; who was the blonde?"

"So you know she's a blonde?"

HIS thin lips tightened like a nut cracker. "We know a lot of things, Bill," he said without emotion. "We know enough to slip a collar on you and make it stick if you try any tricks, so don't try."

I pretended to look pained. "Since when did I try any tricks?"

"Only when you thought you could get away with them," he said. "This is one time that you can't, so don't try."

"Look," I told him. "I'm going to tell you the truth."

"That will be a novelty."

"Okay, wise guy," I was getting sore, "your jokes are as corny as you are. Keep on, find your own blondes. I'm going back to bed."

He shot out a long bony hand and fastened it onto my shoulder. The hand looked thin, so did the arm, but there was a lot of strength in both. He swung me around as if I were a top and yanked me toward him, using the collar of my robe for a handle. "Don't make me get tough."

His thin, knife-blade face was inches from my own. His nose was the biggest part of it. It jutted out like the beak of an angry bird.

I had an impulse to hit it across the bridge with the edge of my hand, but I quelled the impulse. In my game the

sops can cause you plenty of trouble. They usually do, but there wasn't any sense in making things worse than they were.

"Look," I told him. "You've known me eight years. You should know by this time that the tough guy act makes me stubborn." I went on to tell him what had happened. I hardly expected him to believe it, but I was surprised.

"It checks," said Burntouski.

I looked from one to the other. "What checks?"

"That's what the druggist told us," Burntouski admitted. "He was watching you from the door, and he heard what you said to Fabor."

"And her name was Pat Malone?" O'Connor had loosened his grip on my collar.

"That's what she said."

"And you didn't recognize her?"

"I did not."

"Or get her license number?"

I lied for the first time. "It was pretty dark, and raining to beat hell."

"It still is," said Burntouski. He sounded as if he did not like rain.

"Get your clothes on," O'Connor told me. "You might be needed."

I didn't argue. I went back to the bedroom and climbed into my things.

CHAPTER II

IT WAS still raining. I sat in a coffee pot on Seventh and ate bacon and eggs while I read the morning papers. The headlines were:

Leading Attorney Killed. Police Seek Mystery Woman. Then a lesser head over a two column drop: *Private Detective Sees Blonde.*

The private detective was me. There was a bad picture of my puss occupying one side of the page while the other had a cut of a Nazi general who had distinguished himself by being captured. Not very good company, I thought, but the article was a swell ad.

Because the reporters didn't have a thing on Fabor's murder, they gave

me the big play, reciting the screwy story word for word and ending up by a line in heavy type: *Who Is Pat Malone?*

On page two, there was an artist's drawing of what the blonde might look like from my description, with a caption: "Have you seen this woman!"

No one had, including myself, because it did not look anything at all like the blonde. There was a long article about Fabor. He'd started out as an assistant prop man on the old Triangle lot in Culver, a good many years ago. But pictures didn't seem to be his line, so he studied law at night.

In law, he'd gone up fast. He'd known quite a few big shots in the old days, and the contacts had helped in his new business. Gradually he'd become known as the movie lawyer, the Mr. Fixit for the picture business.

Where else his connections went was a matter for speculation. No one knew exactly, but a lot of cases were settled in Fabor's office that never got into court.

I'd done work for him from time to time, and I guess I knew him as well as the next guy. He didn't have any really personal friends. He was a kind of lone wolf.

I finished my breakfast and headed for the office. It wasn't much of an office. I didn't keep a regular girl. There was a call service and when I wasn't in, I merely threw a switch on my telephone and my calls went down to the service.

I keyed the door open, gathered up a bunch of mail which had been shoved through the slot in the door, went on across the little waiting room and pushed open the door of my private hangout. It should have been empty aside from my scarred desk, two files, and a couple of chairs. It wasn't.

There were two men in the room. One was seated at my desk, going lazily through the contents of the drawers. The other stood at the window, but his back was to the glass. He

He was facing me as I came in and there was a gun in his hand.

I stopped dead, then I said slowly, "I'm glad you boys made yourselves at home."

The man at the desk looked up. He was about my size which meant pretty close to six feet. His hair was dark, and shiny as if coated with a glaze of shellac. It was heavy hair, bunched up on either side of an even part which divided it exactly in the center.

His eyes were dark and round and almost glassy with their lack of feeling. They stuck out a little as if his stiff collar was tight. His face was nut-brown and he could have been called handsome. His name was Campella and he operated the biggest dance school on the coast.

The man beside the window was Lew Crouse. He was tall and gangling as if enough wire had not been used when they put his arms and legs on. He was a small time private detective who was always one step ahead of losing his license. He specialized in divorce suits and like matters.

CAMPELLA sneered a little. "Banker's hours, huh? We've been waiting an hour for you to show up." He swept the papers he had been examining into the desk drawer and closed it with a bang.

I looked at Crouse. Under my eyes he got nervous despite the gun which was pointing in my general direction. "I'm not going to forget this, Lew."

His tongue made an almost complete circle of his lips. "Look, Bill, you don't understand."

"I understand enough," I told him. "When my door is locked, I expect people to wait in the hall, or else go away. How'd you get in here?"

"The fire escape. Your window wasn't locked."

"Now isn't that careless of me." I stepped in, ignoring his gun, and used my heel to close the door. "Get up, rat."

Campella's face reddened, then

darkened and his prominent eyes glazed a little with hate. "Better change your tone, Billy. I'm important."

If there's one thing that I dislike worse than being called Billy, it's for some punk to start throwing his weight around.

"So you're important," I sneered. I ignored Crouse and his gun, reached across the desk, gathered in a fistful of the dance man's coat and yanked him clear of the chair.

"I'll show you how important you are." I dragged him toward me across the desk, put the heel of my free hand against his rather generous nose and pushed. The nose flattened out over his face and tears leaped out of his eyes.

"Hey," said Lew Crouse in a tone which told how little he enjoyed the business. He came forward and rammed the gun between my shoulder blades.

"Quit it, Bill. Quit it or I'll blast you." His voice quavered as he said it and rather spoiled the effect, but that quaver did more to make me quit than any threat he could have made.

Lew Crouse was scared, and I don't like guns in the hands of scared men. I let go the front of Campella's coat and stepped back, easy, so that I didn't frighten Crouse into squeezing the trigger.

"All right, what do you rats want?"

Campella had slid off the desk on the far side. He straightened his coat, then felt of his nose gingerly, then used a handkerchief on his streaming eyes. Not until he had returned it to his breast pocket did he say:

"I'll remember this, French."

"I hope you do," I told him. "Maybe next time you have ideas about crashing into my office and going through my desk, you'll remember what happened this time. Okay, talk, what do you want?"

"Those papers that the blonde took from Fabor's safe last night."

I stared at him. I didn't have any

idea what he was talking about. "What papers?"

His face got nasty. "Look, French, just because the cops are thick-headed enough to believe that phony story you handed them, don't get the idea that we're green too, because we aren't. We know that you were in on the deal. We know that you called Charley Fabor to the phone at eleven-five, that while he was gone, he left the safe open, and when he came back, the papers were gone. It was nice timing, pal, lovely timing."

"You know a lot." I'd been wishing that they would go away. Now I didn't want them to, at least not until I found out something more. "Keep talking. What were the papers?"

He gave me a smile in which a lot of white teeth showed gloamingly, like a wolf grinning at a treed trapper. "Stop stalling. Just tell us where the papers are and. . ."

I SAT down on the edge of the desk, tucked the mail I'd picked up from the reception room floor under my leg, found a sack of Golden Grain and built myself a cigarette.

"These papers," I punctuated the words by licking the smoke and then putting a match to the crimped end. "They should be worth a little dough."

I caught the gleam in Campella's dark eyes. "Now we're beginning to see things the same way."

"Are we?" I pretended surprise. "I haven't heard you mention any dough as yet."

"Five hundred," he said.

I just chuckled. "I thought you said dough. Listen, Campella, my rodent friend, you aren't dealing with Lew Crouse now. Lew would sell his soul and yours too for fifty bucks. This is Bill French you're talking to."

"Leave me out of it," Crouse muttered.

I didn't even look at him. I was watching Campella without appearing to.

He licked his fat lips angrily. He'd have liked to wipe me from the map.

I knew that without being told, but for some reason, he was afraid of me.

"Okay," he said, trying not to appear anxious. "How much do you think they are worth?"

"Well," I was stalling. "That's hard to judge, pal. The market price of anything, depends on what kind of a market you can find for the goods you have. Shall we say ten grand?"

He choked. "Ten grand, you're crazy."

"Yes," I said. "I'm nuts. Besides, a man is dead, a man that was mixed up in this business. Supposing I was to go to the cops and tell them that you were around asking questions about Fabor's papers. What do you think the cops would do?"

"You wouldn't dare."

"Wouldn't I?" I pretended to consider; then I reached across, clicked the switch which turned on my phone and picked up the instrument, dialing operator.

"Give me police headquarters, sweetheart. I haven't time to look up the number. I'm being murdered."

She gasped and then gave me my connection, quick. I looked across at Campella. He was sweating.

When the sergeant answered I said, "Hello, Sarge, wet weather, huh?"

He growled, "What goes on?"

"This is Bill French," I told him. "Dick O'Connor around?" I waited and looked at Campella. "Last chance, sweetheart."

He hesitated and as I said, "Hi, Dick," he nodded violently. I held up one hand, thumb and forefinger making a circle to show that I understood. "Anything new on the Fabor kill? There isn't, huh. I just called up to thank you. I got a nice spread in the daily sheets. Yeah, sure, you can't buy that kind of advertising. Good-by." I cradled the phone and looked at Campella.

"Next time you sit in a game, wise guy, be sure that you hold the cards."

"All right," he said. He was breathing heavily. "Where are the papers? When can I get them?"

"Where is the money?" I mimicked his tone. "When can I get it?"

"You don't expect me to carry that much money around in my pocket?"

"You don't expect me to carry those papers around in my pocket?"

We stared at each other like a couple of strange bulls fighting over a guy in red underwear.

"All right," he said. "I'll have the money at two o'clock. My office, you know where that is."

"I may not be able to make it quite by two," I said cautiously, glancing at my watch. "I'll do the best I can."

They filed out. Campella didn't offer to shake hands and the only friendly gesture that Lew Crouse made was to slide the gun into his pocket so that it would be out of sight. But I noticed that he kept his hand on it. I locked the door, and then I sat down to think.

At least I'd learned something. Some papers had been taken from Fabor's open safe during the time that Charley had been talking to me on the phone. Those papers were worth ten grand to Albert Campella, and Campella or someone had seen Fabor between the time I phoned and the time of the murder. Otherwise, how would they know that the papers had been stolen at that particular time?

But what were the papers, where were they, and who was the mystery blonde as the papers called her? That reminded me. I picked up the phone, called a friend in the motor vehicle department and asked him to check the number of the blonde's coupé and see to whom the car was registered. Then I looked at my mail.

THE letter had no stamp on it. There was my name and address, but there was no stamp and no sign of a post mark. I sat there at the desk, turning it over slowly as if I was afraid to open it.

Then I laid the bulky envelope face downward on my desk, used my penknife as a letter opener and slit the envelope. Inside was a collection of papers. I read through them carefully.

They were the kind of papers that are issued to refugees admitted to this country since the trouble in Europe started. They belonged to a girl who was described as Marina, Countess di Chenilli.

There was a passport with a picture of the girl. I studied the picture with careful attention. There was something very familiar about the face, but the hair was very dark. Could it be my blonde? I did not know. It was possible that with a carefully fitted wig, or with her dark hair lightened, it might be.

But after all, I hadn't had a very clear view of the blonde. I went on through the papers. The Countess was described as an Italian national, whose mother had been an American and anti-fascist, who was being permitted to enter her mother's country on a diplomatic passport issued by our embassy at Lisbon.

It was interesting but it didn't make sense. What had Charley Fabor been doing with these papers? Why did Albert Campella want them? Who had put them into the envelope and shoved them through the mail slot of my door?

That last thought made me smile a little. If Campella and Crouse had looked into the ante-room and examined the mail, they would have found what they wanted, but they had come by way of the fire-escape. They had gotten no farther than my private office.

I put down the papers and picking up the phone, called a newspaper friend.

"Look," I said, "is there any book on Italian nobility like *Burke's Peerage* or something, that you can use to check up on a gal with a title?"

"What would you be doing with a girl with a title?" he demanded.

"You'd be amazed," I told him. "Save the humor and get me the dope on a Countess di Chenilli."

"How do you spell it?" he demanded.

I spelled it and he hung up, calling

me back some twenty minutes later. "She's the granddaughter of old Patrick J. Malone of Angles Camp, Virginia City and any other mining camp you want to name." He sounded excited. "What's the story, Bill?"

"Nothing," I said. "I saw a picture in a magazine and I liked her looks."

"You're a liar," he said, "and if you let the other boys get to it without giving me a break, I'll haunt you for the rest of your life."

I hung up on him and started to put the papers into the desk, then I thought better of that and stuffed them into my pocket. At the worst, Albert Campella would hand out ten grand for them, and ten grand was a lot of war bonds.

I GOT a cab and told the jockey to take me over to the library. There I went through the files hunting information on this Patrick Malone. There was a lot of it. He'd come out to San Francisco in the late fifties, a boy of seventeen, jumping his ship. From there he went to Angles Camp, moving on across the mountains to Virginia City in the sixties.

But he hadn't made his fortune in the mines. He'd made it building railroads into the later gold camps of Southern Nevada.

He'd been fairly old then and he'd married late in life. His daughter was born in Goldfield about the turn of the century and she married Count di Chenilli in nineteen-twenty. The old man had been dead for thirty-five years.

It still didn't make much sense. I glanced at my watch and saw that it was well after two. I wondered if Campella was chewing his nails, waiting for me to show up at his office with the papers, but I didn't head toward his place. I headed toward the suite of offices that had belonged to Charley Fabor.

The girl said that Fabor's partner was too busy to see anyone. Her cheeks looked a little *puffy* as if she

had been crying. The whole place had the feeling of a morgue.

I told her that I knew Hall would be busy but that this was of the utmost importance. I had to see him and now. If I didn't, I'd have to go to the police.

That got some action, and ten minutes later I was facing Marcus Hall across his big desk. He was a little man, with thin hair and a dried nut-cracker face. His eyes were protected by rimless glasses. I knew that he was smart, that he had been a 'aw clerk for a big firm when Fabor had met him and taken him into partnership.

Fabor hadn't known much law. He said once that Marcus was his law library. Fabor had been the salesman, the trial lawyer; Marcus Hall had furnished the ammunition.

He looked up and his face was more pinched than usual. "What is it, Bill? It's got to be important to take up today. I'm not myself."

"Sure," I said. "I know. I feel about the same way. That's why I'm here. You read the papers, you know about the girl that had me call Charley. Any idea who she might be?"

He shook his head. "The police have already asked me that. I haven't the slightest idea. I didn't know many of Charley's friends. I seldom saw him outside the office."

"Does the name Patrick Malone mean anything to you?" I was watching him closely when I asked, and it seemed to me that his eyes changed a little. But it was hard to tell behind the shelter of his glasses.

"No," he said slowly. "No, it doesn't?"

"What about the Countess di Chenilli?"

He still shook his head. "I'm certain that I've never heard the name."

I was getting nowhere fast. Maybe Hall was lying. I didn't know. It's hard to tell about guys like him, their faces resemble nothing so much as a dried-up lemon. Still, what would he gain by lying? I almost pulled those papers out and spread them on his

desk. Then I changed my mind and rose.

"Maybe I'm on a blind lead," I said. "I just thought that it might help clear up Charley's death."

I was almost to the door when he spoke. "Don't do it," he said in his dry precise voice. "Don't go digging around, Bill. You can't do any good, you'll only do harm."

I looked at him hard. I didn't get it at all. Here his partner, the man that had lifted him from a law clerk to a partnership in one of the leading firms of the country was dead, and he was asking me to lay off. That just didn't make sense. Or did it?

I thought about it all the way down the hall to the bank of elevators. Maybe it did. Maybe it would pay to give a little more attention to Mister Marcus Hall.

It was still raining when I stepped outside, but the worst seemed to have passed. Now it was little more than a drizzle. I turned up my coat collar and started down the street. Someone fell into step with me and I looked across my shoulder to see Burntouski.

HE LOOKED more like a football player than ever, his thick body buttoned tightly into the rain coat. "Having fun, chum?"

"You know it," I said. "I just love paddling around in the slop. It's my duck blood."

"Haven't found that blonde yet?"

I stopped. "Are you by any chance following me?"

He just grinned, and I added, "When I find her, you'll know it. I'll lead her to the nearest church and the organ will be playing as we march down the aisle."

"Like that." He sounded interested.

"Like that," I assured him. "She came into my life like a burst of rain drops."

"Can I be best man or has Albert Campella got the job sewed up?"

I stopped again to look at the detective. I decided that I'd been un-

derestimating him. "Did you have a good time at the library while I was there?" I asked.

His eyes batted at that one, and I stopped to motion for a cab. "You might as well ride," I told him. "It will be dryer than tagging along behind."

He grinned a little and shook his head. "No, I think I'll get some lunch."

Back at the office I found that the motor vehicle department had called. I called back and my friend said, "I found out about that coupé. It's registered to Marcus Hall of Brentwood."

"Thank you," I said, hanging up slowly. Marcus Hall was a liar. Marcus Hall had said that he knew no Patrick Malone, and yet the blonde that gave me that name had been driving his car.

The phone rang before I had a chance to think, and it was Campella. He was angry. He said harshly, "What is this, a stall?"

"Why should it be a stall? I told you that I didn't carry the papers around in my pocket." As I spoke I felt the front of my coat just to make certain that they were in place.

"I've been thinking it over," he said. "I think that you were just stringing me this morning. I don't believe you knew anything about the papers. I believe now that you told the cops the truth in the first place."

"Do you, now?" I said. "That's very sweet of you, Campie old boy. I wonder what the Countess di Chenilli thinks."

There was dead silence at the end of the wire for a long moment. When he spoke his voice sounded like the dry crackling of crumpled wrapping paper. "So, you have got them."

"I know where they are," I corrected him. "I never said that I had them, my friend."

"When can you get them to me?" He was all eagerness now. "The money, I have it here, spread out before me on the desk."

"I don't know, Campella. Maybe I've changed my mind."

"Changed your mind?" He was almost shrieking into the phone. "How can you change your mind? A bargain between gentlemen is a bargain!"

"Who's a gentleman?" I demanded. "I never made any claims in that direction, pal."

He was so angry that it was difficult for him to speak. "What is it now? What is it that you wish?"

"The price," I said, "is going up."

"The price," he almost strangled.

"Sure," I said. "I told you this morning that the price of anything is governed by the demand. I've got another bidder."

He said something else, but I hung up. I thought that if I let him stew awhile, I might be able to get more out of him later on.

CHAPTER III

THE rain increased with the darkness. It was pouring by eight o'clock and knowing my car, and how easy it got wet, I chose a cab.

It was no fun riding down into Brentwood. The civilian authority wasn't kidding and neither was the army; when they put on a dimout, they really staged one.

The house which Marcus Hall had built did not look big from the outside, but it was deceptive as a lot of the houses in that district are. I dismissed my cab and walked along the wet street, my head pulled down into my shoulders, wishing I were a turtle so that I could draw it all the way in.

There was a faint gleam of lights around the curtain which was the only indication that the place was occupied.

I went up the walk to the shelter of the little porch and pushed the bell. A scotty somewhere in the rear started to bark. You can always tell a scotty, they seem to enjoy it without really meaning it.

I punched the bell again and inside

chimes sounded a faint musical note, then there was the sound of a chain being released, the door opened and I was staring into the blue eyes of my blonde.

She didn't recognize me at once. I couldn't blame her for that. She hadn't had a very good look as I stood in the drug store doorway, and the picture in the paper could have belonged to anyone.

"Yes?" she said.

"Hello, Pat Malone." I pulled off my soaked hat and slammed it against my leg. I expected her to show surprise, to scream, or maybe even faint. She fooled me, she merely said, "I've been expecting you. Come in."

I went in. The hall had a thick white carpet which looked expensive, and the water was running off my coat. I didn't know what to do about it, but the girl was practical.

"This way." She led me down the hall and through a door into an expensive kitchen.

"You can drip all you please here." She took my coat and put it over the back of a chair. "Now, shall we go into the living room?"

"This is all right," I told her. "So you've been expecting me?"

She nodded. "I've been hearing Charley Fabor and Dad talk about Bill French for years. I couldn't believe that anyone who was that smart could fail to track me down. Thanks for not turning me in to the police."

"I didn't know who you were then," I said. "I might have."

Her eyes showed that she didn't believe me. I sat there at the kitchen table, trying to figure her, trying to decide what was going on.

She said, "Who did kill Charley?"

That stopped me too. "You should ask me," I said. "You saw him last night."

She shook her head. "No," she said. "I didn't see him last night."

"But you were headed that way?"

"Yes, I was headed that way, but there was a lot of water on the street as you may remember. My car stalled

when I tried to go through one of the cross streets. I tried to get it started, but had no luck. I stayed there until a milk truck hauled me out at three o'clock this morning."

"And you got the driver's name and address." I was being sarcastic.

"I did not." She flushed a little but she showed no anger. "I didn't even notice what company he worked for. That's not an impossible story, Bill French. I'm not the first person that's gotten stalled in one of our rains and had to sit there all night."

"I hope that some of the jury has had the same experience," I told her.

HER eyes widened a little at that, then narrowed. "So you think that I killed Charley Fabor?"

"Look," I told her, "I don't know what to think. I was standing peacefully in a drug store doorway, watching the rain go by, and a girl drives up and . . ."

"I'll tell you about that," she said. "I had an appointment with Charley, and I was very late. You know how he was about being kept waiting. Then I stopped at that light and looked over and saw you. I'd been trying to decide for blocks whether I'd stop and telephone. When I recognized you, it was like an opportunity sent from heaven."

"Recognized me?"

"Certainly," she said. "You don't think that I go around, throwing nickels at strange men? I've seen you numbers of times around the office."

"And I didn't see you? Impossible."

She gave me a little smile, then was very serious. "I hoped that you'd believe me. It might make things easier."

"I might," I told her, "if I knew what your real name is."

"Name," she looked startled. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm trying to find out whether you're Pat Malone or the Countess di Chenilli."

"Oh." Her face tightened a little. "So you know about that, too. Is

there anything that you don't know, Bill French?"

"Plenty," I said. "I don't know who killed Charley Faber although I've a hunch that the cops think I do. They've been making my private life their own all day."

Fear leaped into her face. "Did they follow you, out here?"

"I hope not," I said, "and I tried to make certain that they didn't, but I can't be sure. But don't change the subject, Countess."

"Don't call me that." I was seeing her angry for the first time. "You don't know anything, you're just shooting in the dark."

She was the second person that had accused me of that. For her, I had an answer ready. I pulled the envelope from my pocket and spread the papers so that she could see but not reach them.

She stared at the papers for a long time, then her eyes shifted to my face. "Did you kill him, Bill French?"

I said, "You really don't believe that, do you?"

"Then what are you doing with those papers?"

"I thought," I said quietly, "that I might sell them to you. I've been offered ten grand already. I don't think that is quite enough."

"Ten thousand!" Her face looked drawn and there were tiny wrinkles about her mouth. "Who offered you ten thousand?"

"A man called Albert Campella."

"Of course," she said. "It would be. If you didn't have those papers, I'd swear that he was the murderer."

"Who's he acting for?" I asked. "Where is this Countess di Chenilli?"

"There isn't any Countess di Chenilli," she said. "At least we don't think that there is."

"Look," I told her. "Let's stop playing games. All day I've been chasing around, getting nowhere fast. Tell me the works."

She thought it over for a long moment in silence. "It's really quite simple," she said. "You see, my

grandfather was Patrick Malone's partner."

I didn't see. It didn't make any sense at all.

"They were partners," she went on. "They built railroads and things, and they made a lot of money. Then they split up, and my grandfather lost most of his."

That much was easy enough to understand. A lot of men had made money and then lost it, but where. . .

SHE interrupted my thoughts by continuing. "Pat Malone's daughter married this Italian Count, and went to Europe to live. From what I can gather, he was a rather typical fortune hunter. He spent his wife's money quickly.

"Old Pat didn't like that very much. He lived to be almost a hundred, but he still had some money left when he died. He was afraid that the count would get his hands on it, so he tied it up in trust.

"The income was to go to his daughter, and when her husband died and she returned to the states, she was to get the principal.

"But if her husband outlived her, the trust was to go to her child or children when di Chenilli died and not until then. And then only providing that they came to the states.

"I see."

"You don't," she said. "If there were none of Pat Malone's children alive at the time of his son-in-law's death, then the money was to be distributed among the heirs of his old partner."

"Your grandfather?" I guessed.

She nodded. "My grandfather. Dad and I are the only heirs."

I whistled softly. "And the trust, does it amount to much?"

"Nearly three millions."

I whistled again. "But I still don't see where Albert Campella comes into this?"

"Don't you," she said. "Well, as far as we can learn, there aren't any of

Pat Malone's grandchildren living. There was one, a girl. She'd be Countess di Chenilli if she were alive. But according to a newspaperman who was in Rome in Thirty-nine, she died."

"Well?"

"Well," she said. "If you read the papers, you know that a general named di Chenilli was killed in Africa. That was the old Count, Malone's son-in-law. The trust can now be distributed."

"So?"

"So if the countess is dead, the money would come to my father and me. If she's alive, it goes to her, providing that she comes to the United States."

"I should think," I said, "that it would be possible to check with Italy, even if we are at war. There must be neutral sources through which you could get the information."

"There are," she admitted. "The countess is listed as dead."

"Then . . ."

"Campella used to know the family," the girl explained. "Campella's story is that the countess was anti-fascist and fled the country, but since her father was high in the party councils, they tried to cover up her flight by claiming that she is dead."

"At any rate, this girl that Campella is putting forward as the countess has those papers," she indicated the ones which I still held, "or rather, she did have them."

"I get the picture," I said, "all but one thing. How did these papers, passport and things get into Charley Fabor's hands?"

The blonde smiled a little grimly. "That was the one mistake that Campella made. He was careless. He didn't bother to find out who the other heirs to the trust fund were. I suppose he thought that he had sufficient evidence and that it would be a walkaway."

"Charley was his lawyer already, so he brought the papers to Charley, never knowing that Charley's partner was one of the heirs."

I CHUCKLED. I knew Charley Fabor enough to judge how he would have reacted to a situation of that kind. At heart, Charley Fabor had been a crook, not a small time crook. He wouldn't bother to touch anything where less than a million or two were involved. But a thing like this would have started him thinking.

"So he kept the papers and started dickering with both sides. I suppose he offered to lose them conveniently if you people would split the pot with him?"

She nodded. "That's exactly what he did. We wouldn't play. If this girl is really the countess, we don't want a nickel, but if she isn't, we're not going to let that dancing master walk away with three million dollars."

"And you were going out to Charley's to talk it over last night?"

She nodded. "Dad couldn't. Dad was so shocked that his partner would do a thing of this kind, that he couldn't even talk logically. I was going out there."

"And you never got there," I continued. "You sat in your car all night, and while you were sitting in your car, Charley Fabor was being murdered?"

Her face hardened. "What are you getting at?"

"Me?" I shook my head. "Not a thing. I'm just thinking how all this is going to sound to the cops."

"Are you going to tell them?"

"Where was your father while this was going on?"

Fear leaped up into her eyes and she said quickly, too quickly, "Here, at home."

"Can you prove that?"

"Why, yes, he said. . ."

"Look," I told her, "a man's own word isn't a very good alibi."

She got mad, then. "If you're insinuating that my father killed Charley Fabor. . .?"

I rose, stuffing the papers back into my pocket, and picking up my wet coat. She watched me carefully. "Where are you going?"

"Home."

"Have—have you got a car?"

I shook my head and she rose also. "I'll drive you. You'll never get a cab out here at this time."

"It isn't necessary."

She didn't pay any attention. She went into the hall and returned in a couple of minutes, wearing a raincoat, then she led the way down a short flight of steps leading into the garden.

The car might have stalled on the preceding night, but it was running smoothly enough now. We plowed through the rain along the empty street as if we were the only two living people in a dark, deserted world.

I watched her let go of the wheel with her free hand. I watched it slide into the coat pocket. I watched her ease it out, and then I reached over and grasped her wrist before she got the gun entirely clear of her pocket.

"I wouldn't do that."

Her face was white, set and stern in the light from the tiny dash lamp. The car slowed as she kicked out the clutch and struggled to free her wrist.

I took the gun away from her. "When you carry a gun," I said, "don't put it in an outer pocket where it will show."

"I hate you."

"Okay, just drive me to Hollywood and you can hate me all you please. I broke the gun, dumped the shells out of the window and put the gun into the glove compartment. Neither one of us spoke during the long drive. At the corner of Sunset and Vine, she pulled to the curb and I got out.

"Goodnight, Countess."

She reached across and slammed the door in my face.

CHAPTER IV

I DEBATED on what to do first. Then I decided to go home. Maybe it was lucky that I did. I got a cab and made up Franklin toward my

apartment house. There was a little more light here than there had been in Brentwood, but not much. I got out, paid the driver, and turned to sprint for the doorway. Behind me the window of the cab fell inward.

It was made of shatter-proof glass but it wouldn't stop a bullet and that bullet had cut within an inch of my head. The cab man squeaked like a frightened rabbit, but I wasn't worrying about him. I could see the dark shape of a man a couple of hundred feet away beside the corner of the next building.

My own gun was under my arm and my rain coat buttoned. There wasn't a chance in hell of getting it out. I started to run, not for the doorway, but toward him. It sounds crazy. It wasn't so crazy as it sounds.

He'd expected me to dive for the shelter of the apartment entrance. He'd been leveling that way. My move caught him off guard, and he couldn't know that my gun wasn't in my hand. He fired once, the bullet cutting the rain drops above my head, then he turned and dived for the shelter of the alley.

I dived at the same time, turning half around, and making the apartment door before he could fire again. In the street, the cab motor raced, and the hack went away from there fast. That driver wasn't curious enough to stick around and find out what was going on.

I paused long enough to get a gun into my hand, and then I took another look at the street. Nothing moved, there was no sound from the direction of the alley.

I'd have been a fool to go after him and I didn't. I went on up to my apartment, my gun still in my hand. It must have looked like a cannon to the little Filipino who was sitting with his back to the wall beside my door. He started to run but I stopped him with a word.

"Juan, what are you doing here?"

He came back slowly, eyeing the gun. I dropped it into my coat pocket,

unlocked my door and motioned him in.

He went with evident hesitation. "I hear shots?"

"I see," I had a vision of Campella and Lew Crouse threatening Fabor.

"You call on phone," said Juan. "Boss, he slip paper out of safe, go answer phone. Men follow."

"Yes, go on."

"Boss, slip me paper. Men no see."

"How?"



"So'd I," I told him, "but they missed. What is it, Juan? You wanted to see me?"

"You get papers I leave at office?"

I stared. "Oh, so you're the one that left them. How come?"

"Boss-man tell me."

"He did huh?" I was interested. "Suppose you tell me about it, Juan."

Now that the gun was no longer in sight he felt more at ease.

"Two men come see boss last night," he said. "Two men threaten him, want papers."

"He drop on far side of chair. I see, they no do."

"But why bring it to me?"

"Boss write your name on envelope while telephone. I see envelope, think maybe he want you should have paper."

I GOT it then. Campella and Crouse had gone out to Fabor's to try to recover the passport and other papers. Fabor had managed to slip the papers from his safe and drop them on the floor, behind his chair. The boy, watching from some concealed place, had seen him drop them. Then my phone call had come. Fabor went out to the den to answer it. While he was talking he had scribbled my name on an envelope lying there.

Meanwhile, Crouse and Campella had followed him. While they were in the den, the houseboy had slipped in and retrieved the papers. Finding the empty envelope beside the telephone with my name on it, and knowing that his boss was in danger from these men, he had put the papers into the envelope and taken it down to my office.

It didn't make sense and yet it did. Juan knew me, knew I was a detective, and that I had worked for Fabor many times.

"So you took it down to my office?"

He nodded. "No think come here," he admitted.

"Then you went home and found Fabor's body and called the police?"

He nodded. It all checked. The boy had told the cops before that he was downtown at the time of the murder.

"Me make mistake?" he asked anxiously.

"No," I said. "You did the right thing, Juan. It's strange how things work out."

He didn't quite understand and I didn't bother to try and explain. I found a twenty and gave it to him. "Don't tell anyone about the papers."

"No, sar. Thank you, sar." I let him out and came back as the phone rang. It was Campella, and he sounded as if he were losing his mind. "Where have you been?"

"Out getting bids on those papers," I told him. "I'm coming over to get your latest in a little while."

I hung up, looked around for a hiding place, saw the post of the brass

bed and unscrewed the top. The papers just fitted into the tube. Then I went over to Campella's.

It was a nice place if you like dancing academies. Personally I don't. Campella put on a lot of swank. The office had thick rugs and modernistic furniture, but I wasn't fooled. A man could get hurt in that place as well as the next, especially with Lew Crouse leaning against the wall, his hand on the gun in his pocket.

Campella was at his desk. He tried to smile when I came in, but it wasn't such a good job. His eyes were as watchful as a cat's and his thick mouth twisted when he spoke. "Twelve grand. It's my last offer. Take it or leave it, Bill."

"Don't be hasty," I pretended that I hadn't even seen Lew Crouse. "We've got a lot of things to talk about, and we won't get anywhere if we start shouting at each other. First, I want to meet this di Chenilli girl. I'll do business with her, not you."

His eyes almost crossed. "Are you crazy?"

"Maybe," I said, "but fetch her out, that is, if there is a Countess di Chenilli."

His face got ugly at that. "There is one all right. We'll prove it in court, papers or no papers. You can tell Hall and his blond daughter that."

"Maybe I will," I said. "Fetch her out. I never met a real countess."

THEY brought her in. She was a small girl with black hair and eyes, very cute if you ask me. I grinned a little but she looked at me blankly.

"What's the matter?" I said. "Can't you talk?"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I can talk." But she didn't say anything more.

I looked at Campella. "You've got her well trained, Bert."

His heavy face reddened. "I don't like cracks like that. I'm merely helping the countess. I knew her family."

"You're a nice guy," I said. "Just

a nice guy, going around, spreading sunshine and cheer."

Then my voice hardened. "You are like hell. You're one of the world's biggest fools. Here you've almost got your fat fingers on three million bucks, and you're all going to lose it if you keep on squabbling."

Lew Crouse had edged forward. "I don't like you, French."

"Shut up," said Campella. "Let's hear what he's got to say."

"I've got to say plenty," I told him. "I don't care whether sweetheart here is a countess or a scrub woman. There are papers to prove her a countess. But the Halls aren't going to take this lying down. They think that the real countess is dead and they'll fight you through every court in the land. Why don't you two get together and split the pot? If you keep battling, neither of you will get a dime."

Campella's heavy lids drooped so that they partly masked his bulging eyes. "A nice thought, but they wouldn't deal with us."

"I can make them deal," I said.

He stared at me, "And what do you get out of it for acting like a boy scout?"

"A third."

He squealed as if I had stuck him with a knife, but I said harshly, "Don't be a fool. I've got your papers and you can't move without them."

We argued back and forth for fifteen minutes and finally I agreed to take half a million for my cut. Then I went to the phone and called Marcus Hall. I told him if he ever hoped to see a dime of the money, he and his daughter had better get up there quick. They got there in thirty minutes and they weren't friendly when they walked in.

I lined them up and I did the talking. I showed them that if I turned the papers over to Campella, they didn't stand much chance. It was better for them to take what was offered.

The blonde's eyes were burning as

she looked at me. "And I thought you were a nice guy," she said. "You're nothing but a rat. You're worse than Charley Fabor was."

It was the countess' turn to talk. I found out that once she got uncorked, she could talk, but plenty. She said that she wasn't making a deal with anyone. She wanted her dough and she was going to have it. I let her finish before I cut in.

"Look, sweetheart, you're a foreigner without papers; a word from me and the immigration authorities will pick you up. Just because Italians aren't on the enemy alien list anymore, doesn't mean that the F. B. I. isn't still watching. Your goose would be cooked in a minute, you stupid little doll."

"Stupid," she lost her head. "Who's stupid, you big chiseler? Go ahead and tell the F. B. I. You haven't got a thing on me, I was born in Brooklyn—"

CAMPELLA tried to stop her, but but he was too late. I grinned at him. "The Countess of Flatbush, I presume. Look, pal. You should have your stooges keep their mouth shut. Now, we've got one little other matter to clear up. Why did you kill Charley Fabor?"

He snorted. "I didn't. Do you think that I'm crazy?"

"Sure," I said, "you probably are; but the way it sizes up, you were threatening him when his houseboy slipped out of the joint. When the boy came back, he was dead."

"I don't know a thing about it," said Campella, staring at the blonde. "We left right after you called. The cops say he was killed after twelve. I was back here by midnight. I got a dozen witnesses to prove it."

"The cops aren't sure of the exact time," I cut in.

"I didn't do it." He was stubborn. "I didn't even threaten him. It was Lew Crouse who threatened him. I made him lay off."

"Why was Lew so interested?"

"I promised him a hundred grand

if we pulled it off. He'd have burned Fabor's feet if I let him."

"So," I said, looking at Crouse.

"Ask her," Campella was pointing toward my blonde. "Someone got the papers from the safe while you were phoning. It must have been her."

"No," I said, "it was the houseboy. She wasn't out at the house, she never got there. Her ear was drowned out and she sat in it until almost morning."

"Sure he did," It was Lew Crouse. "I saw him. I . . ."

Hall nodded. "Yes. I went there. I found Charley dead. I must have left just before the houseboy. I . . ."

My ears heard his words, but I



Someone let a long low breath escape in relief. It was Marcus Hall. I looked at him. "What's the matter, pal? Been suspecting your daughter?"

He nodded. "I have." In his relief, he seemed eager to talk. "She didn't come in, and I got worried, so I went out to look for her . . ."

"And went to Fabor's," I filled in for him.

wasn't thinking about them. I was watching Lew Crouse. "So you saw Marcus Hall. How did you happen to see him, pal? What were you doing out there?"

He licked his lips. "I . . ."

"You went back out there after Campella came here. You couldn't forget that hundred grand that you were going to get. You were very sore. You threatened Fabor. You told him that there wasn't any Campella along to keep you from torturing him this

TDA

time. You said that you didn't believe the story about the papers being stolen from the safe.

"He jumped at you, and you shot him. You were leaving when you saw Marcus Hall arrive . . ."

"No."

"Yes," I said. "Didn't it occur to you, my friend, that maybe I wasn't in bed; maybe I'd gone out to Fabor's myself; that maybe I saw you out there? You were afraid of me, Lew. You took a shot at me in front of my apartment tonight. It was dark, but . . ."

Lew Crouse was taking another shot. He's always been a nervous man with a gun. He swung it upward and the bullet crashed against the wall so close to my ear that it was filled with flying plaster.

I'd thought that I was ready. I hadn't realized how fast he was. My own gun was in my hand and I knew that I had to hit him. If I missed, he was going to drive the next one home.

I knew it and I didn't miss. I put one directly into his forehead as Burntouski used his football shoulders to crash down the door.

They asked a lot of questions. They thought that I'd shot Lew to quiet something of my own, but they were finally convinced. The blonde asked some too. She said:

"But if you saw him out there, if you knew that he took a shot at you. . . ."

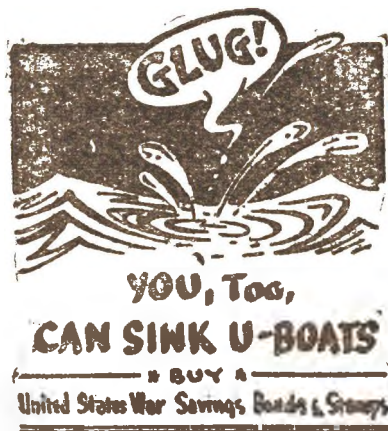
"I was lying," I told her. "I was safe in my bed. I didn't go slopping about in the rain when I didn't have to, especially when death was floating around too."

"You're a convincing liar," she said. "I'll never believe another word that you say."

It began to look as if she were telling the truth. It took me five months to convince her that I wasn't kidding about the proposal.

It's bad, marrying a girl with money, but she hasn't got that three million yet. Maybe she never will; the court doesn't like European records, and things are so mixed up over there that it may be years before they get straightened out. Anyhow, I got the blonde.

Oh, I forgot to tell you, her name was Patricia Malone Hall. I finally got around to asking her.



When Doctor Troxel wrote a prescription in bullets, he forgot to watch out for a

Lead Poison Hangover

By Cliff Howe



REACHING beneath his stained smock, Doctor Edwin A. Troxel took out his watch. He cleared a space amid the jumble of test tubes, pipettes and graduates on the laboratory bench, and laid the watch down. Shoving back his left sleeve and grasping his wrist between his right thumb and forefinger, his lips moved soundlessly for a full minute.

"Hmm, perfectly normal," he mused. "I've always wondered what the reaction might be. I must remember to check again—after I've killed him."

He slid off the high stool and crossed the room, seated himself behind the flat-topped desk facing the door, and leaned back, reviewing his plans.

"The perfect crime," he assured himself. "Perfect because of its very simplicity. No alibi to go wrong, and no worry about disposing of the corpse; the police will do that for me."

Opening the desk drawer, the doctor revealed two guns, an automatic, registered in his own name, and a cheap nickel-plated revolver that he had picked up in a pawnshop months previous. *Yes, it's foolproof. And this time, he thought, I'll not bungle the job.*

Then he closed the drawer quickly as loud voices sounded in the hallway below. He smiled and waited, a fat old spider, listening to the buzzing approach of a fly.

He was still smiling when the door

slapped open and a tall young man limped into the room, followed by a gray-haired little man in a white housecoat.

"I told him you weren't in," the little man apologized, "but he'd already seen the light up here. I tried to stop him, but—"

"That's all right, Stephen," the doctor said. "Now that he's here, I'll see what he wants. And that will be all, Stephen."

"You'll see what I want," the young man mocked bitterly. He stamped the length of the laboratory and faced the older man across the desk. "You know damned well what I want. And I'll get it," his voice rose to an angry shout, "if I have to tear you limb from limb!"

"Paul, calm yourself," the doctor soothed. "You must remember, my dear nephew—"

"Don't 'my dear nephew' me, you old buzzard!" Paul raved. "I'll—" he choked to a stop, leaned forward, his gloved hands clenched on the desk top. "So help me, I'll—"

Doctor Troxel only smiled, as the door closed, shutting out Stephen's frightened face. He waited until the creaking of the stairs assured him that the old servitor was on his way down, then he spoke:

"That is just exactly the way I expected you to feel about your Troxite, Paul," he said. "And I rather hoped that you would put it in just such words."

"You admit then, that Troxite is mine? That you stole the notes from my files while I lay half dead in the

hospital after the explosion in my lab?"

"You are wrong," the doctor corrected him, "It was before the explosion."

"So it was no accident, after all. But now that I have disappointed you and recovered, am up and about again—what's left of me," Paul said bitterly, "you brazenly claim Troxite as your own, not even changing the name. You knew I'd read of it in the papers, how do you expect to get away with it?"

"My dear Paul," the doctor was enjoying the cat-and-mouse game. "The newspaper publicity given me, and the demonstration of Troxite in demolition tests at the Army proving grounds, did just what I'd hoped it would do. Brought you charging in here shouting threats and recriminations."

"I'll do more than shout," Paul leaned over the desk. "I'll—" He stopped as the doctor's hand crept up from the desk drawer gripping the automatic, holding it steady.

"You'll only make it quite necessary that I shoot you, kill you," the doctor laughed, "in self defense."

"You—you can't do that and get away with it. They'll catch you."

The doctor's finger whitened on the trigger. Paul read the look in his uncle's eyes. "No, don't—"

The sharp crack of the shot stopped him, jarred him back on his heels, swaying. His left hand came up and clutched at the round black hole that widened rapidly to a dark splotch on his coat front. He lurched forward, his right hand clutching at the desk for support. The gloved fingers slid along the edge, then, like a derailed train, slipped off. Paul Troxel crashed to the floor and lay still.

Dropping the lethal gun into the drawer, the doctor took out the revolver and calmly walked around the desk, straddled the prostrate form and fired a single shot into the glass door of a bookcase, at a point to one side of the chair he had just vacated.

He carefully wiped his fingerprints from the gun and placed it on the floor, close to the outstretched hand of the dead man.

"There," he said aloud, "That is that." He reached for the telephone and was dialing police headquarters, as old Stephen, breathless and trembling, burst into the laboratory.

THE tall detective said, sauntering in from the hallway, "I just talked to your man, Stephen; your story checks. Clear case of self defense."

"There'll be an inquest, of course," the chunky headquarters man put in quickly from his perch on the high stool. "You'll have to be there, purely routine, you know. But the case is closed as far as we're concerned." He slid off the stool and moved toward the door. "We might as well go back and write up our report."

"Good night, gentlemen," the doctor said from his chair behind the desk. "I appreciate the way you have handled this, truly a regrettable—" He stopped, as the telephone rang, and answered it.

"For one of you, I guess," he said, holding out the handset. "Police Headquarters."

The tall thin man crossed the room, hooked a leg up on the corner of the desk and spoke briefly, "Danvers speaking. Yes—Yes—No—Well, I'll be damned." He dropped the phone on its cradle, then repeated, "Well, I'll be damned."

Without another word, he reached into his hip pocket, brought out a pair of handcuffs and snapped one of the bracelets on the surprised doctor's wrist.

"Me and Braley," he said, "can live it down in time, overlooking a thing like that. But you—" He jerked the dazed doctor to his feet. "You won't, you're on your way to the chair right now. O'mon, let's go."

The doctor jerked at the steel chain savagely, then found his voice. "What is the meaning of this? You've just ad-

mitted that I have a clear case of self defense. You can't arrest me!"

"That was before they took a look at your nephew, down at the morgue. That's when he put the finger on you."

"You—you're crazy! How could a dead man implicate me, put the finger on me, as you say?"

"Yeah, wait a minute," the chunky detective put in, "what goes on?"

"I'm coming to that," the thin man answered. "You see," he explained, turning to the doctor, "when they check in a stiff down there, the first thing they do is to strip 'em, take their clothes off. See?"

"Yes, I suppose so," the doctor said impatiently. "But what—"

"This guy, your nephew, pulls a gat out of his pocket and takes a snot at you, held it in his right hand. That's been your story. Are you staying with it?"

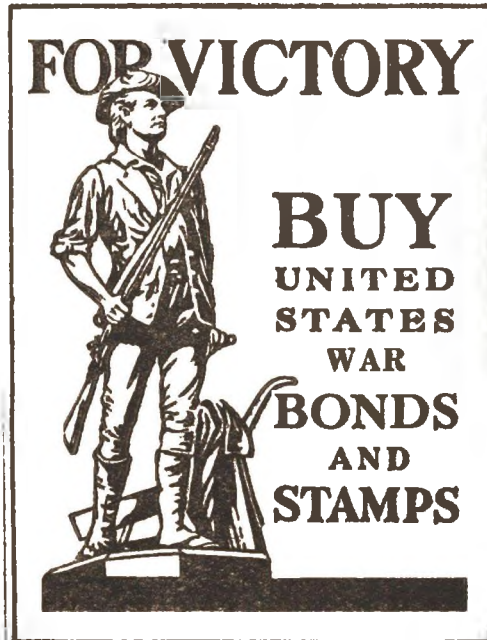
"Yes, of course," Doctor Troxel came back quickly. "That is the way it actually happened."

"And it's perfect, open and shut," the thin detective said, "except—well, it seems that fate took a hand."

"What do you mean?"

"Your nephew had a glove on, over one of these jointed, artificial hands. His own was off at the wrist."

"Yeah, I get it," the chunky headquarters man said, "Fate took a hand."



I Harried a Witch

"Dizzy Duo" Yarn



*I hear somebody fumbling at the knob
and I switch on the light.*

By Joe Archibald

"I harried a witch," said Snooty Piper just after making his getaway from a babe who knew Lincoln. But before the Widow Lumpkin could emancipate that bottle of giggle-water Snooty found, the nutty newshawk found himself a hat's breadth away from a corpse.

SELECTIVE Service has cut into all business, even crime, and news has been very scarce at the *Evening Star* for several weeks. The most exciting police news me and Snooty Piper garnered since the invasion of North Africa was all about an ambulance-chasing case where one lawyer was suing another.

It seems that when crime does not play, barristers are also hard put to it to get their regular rations. It was a lawyer from Chelsea who chased an

ambulance all the way to Back Bay and when he caught up with it, he found a lawyer from Medford already sitting beside the hit-and-run victim and preparing a case. There was a big fight that ended up in court.

We also were on the spot when a character in Winthrop refused to pull his curtains down at night even though it might mean that a Nazi sub would sink a ship or two. Dog-face was so desperate he put the story on the front page, right under a story

headlined: *Rommel Smashes Marathon Record!*

"I would like to bump into a crap game, Scoop," Snooty says one morning. "It would be as exciting as another Sacco and Vanzetti case if the dice happened to be fixed, huh? Let's go to the Greek's. Police reporters are about as much use for the duration as pogo sticks. I wish they would hurry up and call us 4F's."

We go to the bistro and relax. The Greek turns on the radio and three voices as harmonizing as two riveting guns and a pneumatic hammer give out with one of those advertising theme songs that are more painful than the death of a thousand cats:

So you-u-u-u say gettin' dates is tough.
So your sweetie treats you rough!
Okay, we've heard enough.
It's because of that old dandruff!

"Get a bottle of Ban-Druff today. B-A-N—D-R-U-F-F. Be sure it is Bilby's Ban-Druff. Now we will go and visit the Crumpits once more. Yesterday, if you remember, Grandpa Crumpit had accidentally struck oil in the backyard when digging a grave for his faithful old tomcat, Garibaldi. Was it the oil burner fuel tank he hit? Let . . ."

"Shut that off!" Snooty yelps. "Or we will take our business elsewhere, Nick!"

"So she will be the pleasure," Nick says. "So much is on the cuff I am now going up the sleeves, Piper. Put them in writing, hah?"

"Don't antagonize him," I says. "Where else is our credit good?"

"Oh, the Crumpit fam'ly, Nick?" Snooty says. "It is my favorite. Let's see if gran'pa struck a gusher. I can't wait, can you, Scoop?"

We listen to the soap opera and then mark up four more beers. After which we amble over to Boston Common. When we cross it and come out on Beacon Street, a gendarme's prowler car whizzes by and it is one time we know the cops are not just out to get some panatelas.

"Something must have happened," Snooty says. "There goes another boiler."

We start running down Beacon Street and, as we leg it, we see that the cops have pulled up six blocks away. A crowd is gathering when we finally pant our way up to an old-fashioned residence. Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy and three helpers are walking up the steps and Iron Jaw suddenly gets stuck between the old wrought-iron bannisters on either side of the steps.

Iron Jaw is a human cruiser of the Kongo class and his noggin is just as thick as the armor plate on a Jap battle boat. Me and Snooty Piper are about convinced that the mayor keeps O'Shaughnessy on the payroll just to break down doors for the other cops.

Me and Snooty spring one of the iron bannisters so Iron Jaw can squeeze himself forward.

"With the food situation as it is," Snooty says, "how do you put on more weight, Iron Jaw? There is enough suet on you to supply all the grease salvaging depots in the East."

"So it is you again," Iron Jaw growls. "How did you know there was a corpse in there?"

"Why, it is news to me," Snooty says. "Imagine that, Scoop!"

THERE is a corpse inside. It is draped over a big couch of the vintage of '98. A little bony old doll is sitting on an antique, wringing her hands and quoting from the Good Book. The appraiser of the departed is taking an inventory of the cadaver, which is or rather was a character with side whiskers and a little bulbous nose. He wears an old bathrobe over an old-fashioned nightie.

"H-had he been drinkin'?" the widow asks.

"Can't smell much on him," the medical examiner says. "Was he an ol' soak-er-did he imbibe freely?"

"Tell me where you could get it free," Snooty butts in.

"Shut up!" Iron Jaw yelps.

"Why-er-he did not! I am the president of the Daughters of Priscilla Women's Christian Temperance Society," the widow says.

In due time we find out that the deceased's name was Lucius L. Lumpkin and that he had a tea and coffee business down near India Wharf. The blue-blooded Beacon Hillman had not gone to his office every day and did a lot of his business at home which was the reason for a secretary being in his house most of the time.

The taker of shorthand appears and looks as scared as an Italian taking a peek at a picture of Schickelgruber. He is an angular number of about sixty summers and he wears an eye shade and sleeve aprons. For a odd well along toward the Styx, he has quite a mop of salt and pepper hair.

"Who are you?" Iron Jaw snaps at the arrival.

"Roscoe Upham. I was—er—Mr. Lumpkin's amanuensis."

"Come again," Iron Jaw says and lets his jaw drop.

"He means he is or was his private sec.," Snooty explains.

"Awright, Upham, you talk English from now on, see?" the flatfoot says. "Never mind double talk. Who found the body?"

"I did," Roscoe says and starts chewing his knuckles. "First I thought he was asleep but then I saw a feather that come out of the sofa on his mouth an' it didn't move. So I says to myself he is not breathing and if he wasn't, then—"

"You are all dressed like you was going out," Iron Jaw says to Mrs. Lumpkin.

"I just come home awhile ago," the old dame says. "I was visitin' a sister in Salem. I spent the night an'—"

The corpse expert keeps working on the remains and finally he turns and says he thinks it is murder.

"It can't be, Scoop," Snooty says. "We have not had any so long—why—was he stabbed?"

"Not a mark on him," the medical

character says. "I have a hunch he was given a permanent Mickey. But why should I tell you newspaper—you keep out of this."

"Where was you last night?" Iron Jaw says to the secretary as he pushed Snooty into a corner.

"Why, let's see now. Oh, yes. I am so forgetful. There was a second degree going on at the Knights of rhythithia in Dorchester and as I attended, that is where I must have been."

"No kiddin'," Iron Jaw sniffs. "Well, before we are finished with you, you will git a taste of the third degree and you won't ride no goats."

"Beg pardon?"

"Who else besides you had a reason to rub out Lumpkin?" Iron Jaw bellows. "You think anybody else was here last night?"

"If it was poison," I says. "Did it occur to you that the deceased might have ushered himself over the great divide?"

"Why, of course," Roscoe says. "He said just the other day—"

"You keep your mouth shut, Roscoe Upham!" Mrs. Lumpkin says and looks typhus germs and cobra phlegm at the secretary.

"Sorry, ma'am."

"So! A secret between you two, hah?" Iron Jaw yelps. "Now we are gettin' somewhere."

"Wanna bet?" Snooty asks and Iron Jaw gets very nettled and says he will throw us both out the next time we cross him.

"It has nothing to do with the mur—what's going on here," the widow says and starts weeping into a hanky. It is then that Roscoe Upham pounces on an ash tray and lifts it up to sniff at some pipe dottle.

"Now what?" I says.

"Mr. Lumpkin did not smoke a pipe," Roscoe says. "Neither did I."

"How about you?" Iron Jaw shoots at the widow. "Er-skip it—it was just a slip of the tongue. Well, somebody was here last night after you went out, huh, Upham?"

"Yes, I am sure. I emptied the ash tray before I left for my lodge. This tobacco is the kind used by Mr. Lumpkin's nephew, John Alden."

"I will not stand no more kiddin'," Iron Jaw ululates. "Even I know John Alden is dead."

"Oh, he is named after him," the widow snuffles. "Way back he was related to the real John. So John was here last night, was he? Maybe it would interest you all to know that he was going to get half of Mr. Lumpkin's money when the old—when Lucius died."

"Yes, this is the tobacco he uses all right," Upham says. "Full of perique—"

"Go pick up this jerk an' bring him here," Iron Jaw yells at some cops.

"Tell us where, O'Shaughnessy."

LUCIUS' widow tells us that John Alden is with the Miles Standish Insurance Company on Boylston so the gendarmes go after him. He is being grilled like a weenie at a picnic a half hour later. He is a citizen about forty and is wrapped up in a double-breasted he never walked up two flights for. He has a weak chin and little orioles' nests under his washed-out blue peepers.

"Don't look at me like that, you old quail," John says to Mrs. Lumpkin. "No wonder he knocked himself off. In his own house he would git crowned for drinking a root beer float. He said he was going to do it if she kept him on the pap diet."

"You tried to make him drink, you no-good reprobate!" the old babe says. "I got him reformed and you kept bringing him that liquid of iniquity."

"It was White Horse," John Alden says and we laugh.

"He changed his will while under the influence of that vile liquor you made him drink," Mrs. Lumpkin screeched, and Iron Jaw and all of us stick fingers into our ears.

"So he wanted a snort once in

awhile," John Alden says. "So what? He begged me to slip some of the bug juice to him."

"Yeah!" Iron Jaw says. "And you did with some kayo drops in it, you murderer! Nobody else had a motive as the secretary wasn't in the will. He needed a job at his age so what would he get but the relief roll if he snuffed Lucius out? Mrs. Lumpkin could've gained by Lucius living ten more years as by that time Lucius could find out what a rat you was and changed the will so she would get it all. How is that for figuring it, boys?"

"I never hoped to live to see the day," Snooty says. He goes over and looks at the remains and comes back with a funny look on his pan. "That nose wasn't ever tinted that way by just a snifter a day, Scoop."

"Have some respect for the dead, you ghoul," I retorts.

The widow agrees to let the law perform a post mortem on Lucius and the corpse expert has the boys carry out the cadaver and place it in a dead wagon. Iron Jaw orders the whole house searched for a bottle. Mrs. Lumpkin gets up and says they will over her dead body.

"Okay, sister," Iron Jaw says, "if you want to join Lucius. Piper, tell the medical examiner to come back as we will have another case to—"

"Oh, what will my sisters of the Temperance Society think!" Mrs. Lumpkin wails. "If the papers say there was a bottle in my house, I will be disgraced. This is an outrage. I will sue the police department if—"

Iron Jaw and his crew ransack the Lumpkin house from top to bottom and it is in a little nook in the attic under the eaves where they find the empty hooch bottle. Mrs. Lumpkin carries on very disagreeably and Iron Jaw sends Roscoe, the secretary, after some sleeping pills for her.

"What do you think?" I says to Snooty when Iron Jaw sniffs at the bottle. "This is a case where you seem to have a back seat behind a post, huh? It is a clear cut open and shut case

to me. John Alden's slip was not waitin' until he got outside to dump the bottle."

"I am puzzled," Snooty says.

IT IS next day that Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy arrests John Alden for the murder of Lucius Lumpkin. It is just after the autopsy showed that the deceased had sippec too much chloral hydrate. What is more, they took John Alden's fingerprints at headquarters and tied them up with the prints found on the label of the murder bottle.

"If Roscoe had been a butler in-

are saying downtown that nobody ever broke open a murder so fast. Alden confessed he visited Lumpkin and brought him a quart. He says he is innocent, though. Why don't you start ribbin' me, Piper?"

"I would have to dig down three feet in your torso to find one of them, Iron Jaw," Snooty says. "Anyway, it couldn't be ribs that hold your giblets in, but iron barrel staves. Please leave us alone."

"Sure, you green garter snake," O'Shaughnessy says and goes out humming a tune.

Snooty says for me to shut up be-



stead of the amanuensis," Snooty says as we mull over the rubout in the Greek's, "we would suspect him as all butlers are suspects when there is a stiff lyn' about. It is an old-fashioned one like Sherlock Holmes worked on. Even the names are out of date."

"If any assassin was ever caught as cold as a Nazi on the steppes, it is John Alden," I says. "They found out he was head over heels in debt and wanted to marry a doll who would not weld with a citizen in debt. He is tied up tighter than holiday traffic in an army camp."

"Don't look now," I says. "But here comes Iron Jaw. He looks like a cat that has just fallen into a vat of very fresh calves' liver, Snooty."

Iron Jaw crows. "Well, boys, they

fore I say anything. He wants to think. An hour later he seems to be getting nowhere. "Well, tomorrer or next day I think I'll go and see the widow and get some inside stuff for Mr. Guppy, Scoop."

"I am gratified to know you have sense enough not to stick your snoot in this case," I says. "You are improving, Snooty."

We go over to see Mrs. Lumpkin forty-eight hours later. The wrinkled squab says she is just back from the interment of Lucius but does not look too unhappy. She says she will be glad to tell the fourth estate anything that will help put John Alden in the hot squat.

While Snooty asks some questions that have no sense, Roscoe Upham comes in and he does not look

like an unemployed amanuensis. Roscoe looks very chipper and asks would we like a sniff of coke.

We take the beverage and then go out. A block away, Snooty says, "Scoop, there is a citizen with dark skin hiding out in a fuel pile somewhere. That is no house of grief. You see, with John Alden put out of circulation, the sugar Lucius left will go to the widow."

"Now look here!" I says with some venom. "I will not be a party to accusing a little old widow of assassinat' her husband."

"She couldn't have," Snooty admits. "She was in Salem. But that is where witches comes from, huh? You think she rode a broom back durin' the night? A witch does not have to worry about gas rationin', Scoop."

"You are goin' off the beam again," I says.

A WEEK goes by. John Alden languishes in the hoosegow while the D.A. and the defense lawyer each cook up nifties for a jury. The public is beginning to forget the rubout as the Russians are still chasing the Nazis all over up and down the steppes.

Then one morning, Snooty Piper runs across the floor of the city room and waves a paper in my face. "Look, Scoop!" He points at three sticks of news on page eleven.

I read it fast. Roscoe Upham of 1904 Beacon Street is suing the Bilby Ban-Druff Corporation. It says Roscoe was influenced by extensive radio advertising to try Bilby's Ban-Druff. He did with dire results. He had never had dandruff but used it to make sure he would not and now he really was losing his scalp in a hurry. Roscoe was suing for fifty thousand dollars.

"Can you tie that one, Scoop?"

"It is a panic," I says. "I hope he wins so then we won't have to listen to the Crumpits anymore."

"Let's review the Lucius Lumpkin rubout," Snooty says. "Lucius liked

his snorts and did everything to smuggle the giggle water into the house. Mrs. Lumpkin, crusading with vim and vigor for the temperance forces, watched him like the Gestapo. I wonder if there was many places in the house she hadn't nosed into to root out the elixir of Old Nick, Scoop?"

"I still don't get it," I says. "Shut up. I got some rewrites here."

"Fifty thousand," Snooty says. "Exhibit A against the Bilby Ban-Druff Company would be quite important, huh?"

"Are you sane?" I ask Snooty.

"A life is at stake," Snooty says. "I think I will go over to the Greek's and concentrate."

"I'll see you later, I'm afraid," I counter and start hammerin' the typewriter.

I find Snooty in the oasis two hours later. He has a bottle of Bilby's Ban-Druff. He is studying the label on the bottle.

"Now what?" I ask. "I have been thinking too, Snooty Piper. John Alden brought Lucius the hooch and he poured him a glass. While the deceased was drinking it, Alden took a bottle of bye-bye chemical out of his pocket and got ready to load the second one. While the two of them killed the bottle, John Alden kept feeding the poison to his victim. He deserves the sizzle divan."

"You forget that Lucius was not supposed to have consumed too much of the happy water when the corpse appraiser gave him the up and down, Scoop. The big question, Scoop, is where did the whole quart of stuff go? Don't tell me Mrs. Lumpkin is a toper!"

"Don't be silly," I says.

"I am going out to see the widow this aft, Scoop. Why not come along? I just want to case the joint."

"The murderer is hiding out there?" I says putting on a stage expression of astonishment. "Why I should have thought of that, Snooty."

"This is no joking matter," Snooty says. "I will leave the bottle of Bilby's Ban-Druff here until we get back. The Greek won't touch it as his dome needs furniture polish, not tonic."

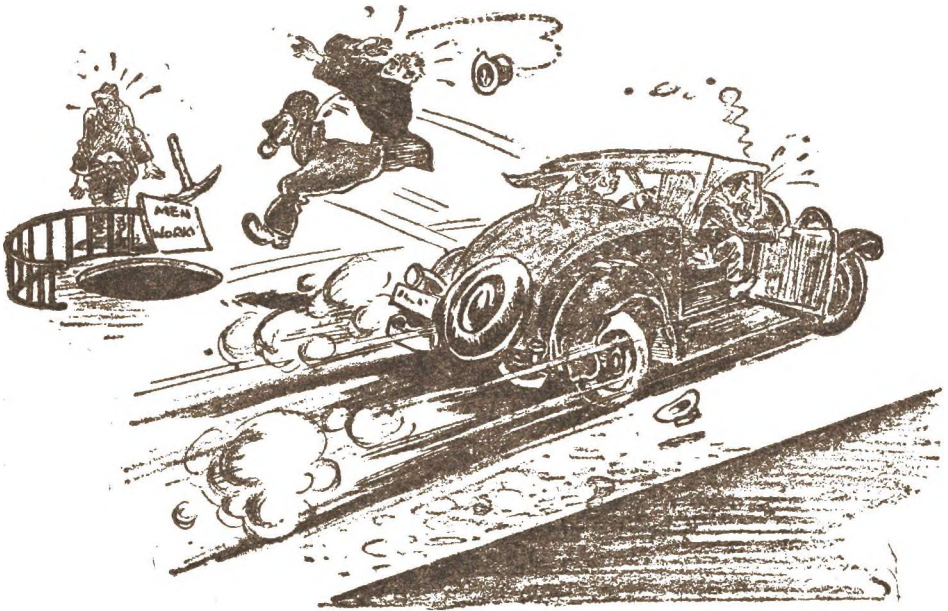
We call on Mrs. Lumpkin again. We just ask about John Aiden's past and get plenty of it, true or not. During the course of the tete-a-tete, we learn that Roscoe Upham has moved his belongings to a little apartment over the garage.

"After all, it would not look very

"Did you notice the size of the Bilby Ban-Druff bottles?" Snooty asks and then walks away from me.

I GO TO our rooming house which is now in Cambridge due to the gas shortage. I peel off and relax and wonder what kind of a doll Snooty is kidding while I read a detective story.

I drop off and do not wake up until one in the morning. Then I hear somebody fumbling at the knob and I switch on the light.



respectable for him to be here with a widow, would it, gentlemen? Tee-hee."

"That is right. You should not play with fire, hah!" Snooty says and gets the quick brush-off.

After we are ordered out of the Lumpkin mansion, Snooty is grinning like a hyena following a load of carrion. He says he has a hunch bigger than two camels.

"I will see you tonight, Scoop," he says. "Sometimes there are things to do I would not ask even you to help me with."

"Thanks," I says dryly. "What are you up to?"

Snooty Piper comes in and he is a mess. His green coat is ripped up the back and he has a slice on his chin. He is puffing like an old hogback going up a long grade and he is clutching something to him.

"She was no shy country maid, huh?" I ask him.

"It is not funny, Scoop," Snooty says. He sits down and unwraps a bottle and places it on the table. It bears a label and the biggest letters say: Bilby's Ban-Druff.

"What is that dropped out of your pocket with that handkerchief?" I yelp and get out of bed and pick it up before Snooty can reach it. It is a

black piece of cloth with holes cut out of it.

"You robber!"

"Oh, shut up, Scoop," Snooty says. "It was quite a battle. I wonder if I'll be as hale and hearty at sixty as Roscoe."

"Wha-a-a-a-a?"

"Look, Scoop. I was desperate as a citizen's life is at stake," the crackpot says. "I wondered if Roscoe Upham was hanging onto that bottle for dear life so it would be safe for the suit against Bilby's Ban-Druff Corp. I say to myself I bet he wouldn't even turn it over to his lawyer until a day or so before the trial."

"Why, you crook, you?" I says. "No wonder you played lone wolf."

"I'm sure he didn't get a squint at me," Snooty says. "It was dark in his flat over the garage. When I finally spread him on the carpet, I pointed a gun at him and I says to hand over the bottle of hair tonic. He did and then I poked him one more and fled."

"I will pack my trunk in the morning," I says. "It is a crime to harbor a criminal."

We do not sleep all night. It is late the next morning when we are at the *Evening Star* that the news hits the city room. Roscoe Upham has accused the Bilby Ban-Druff Corporation of having sent a man to attempt to murder him and to steal the evidence that was going to cost them fifty grand. He has filed another suit against Bilby and Company for felonious assault, breaking, entering and robbery with armed weapons.

I get Snooty in a corner and accuse him. "I get it now," I says. "How much did the Ban-Druff outfit pay you to steal that evidence, huh? I bet you got ten thousand bucks at least. You come across with—I mean—that is a terrible crime, Snooty Piper. You better leave town."

"I have all the answers ready, Scoop," Snooty says. "I am thinking of an innocent man gettin' broiled in the Charlestown grill. Quick, let's go

to the police lab and get this stuff tested. First we will pick up Roscoe."

"Now I know you are crazy," I says.

"I will phone him first," Snooty says and goes into a booth.

I wait for the half-wit, my dome cradled in my hands.

"Everything is okay," Snooty says. "Come on."

We stop and get Roscoe Upham. He shows the effects of his brawl with Snooty.

"I was passing by last night and saw somebody running out of the driveway," Snooty says. "Newspaper men are always afoot at night, you know. I was sure the character was a thief so I flew at him and we had quite a tussle, Mr. Upham. I almost subdued the criminal and he dropped this package when he run away. What was my amazement to find this bottle of hair tonic. So I remembered the suit you had against the Bilby Ban-Druff people—"

"Mr. Piper, how can I ever thank you?" Upham yelps and almost hugs Snooty. I lean against a fence and hang on and shake the feathers out of my neggin.

"Look, we better get this down to the lab and have it analyzed right away," Snooty says. "Before it is stolen again and the contents emptied. The police will look on and their testimony—"

"Let's," Rosecoe says. "Oh, wasn't it a miracle you happened by at that time? It would have cost me all that money I am going to win and—I could faint."

"You can say that again," I gulps. "For me."

WE GO to the lab and produce the bottle of Ban-Druff. The experts test it and give us a report.

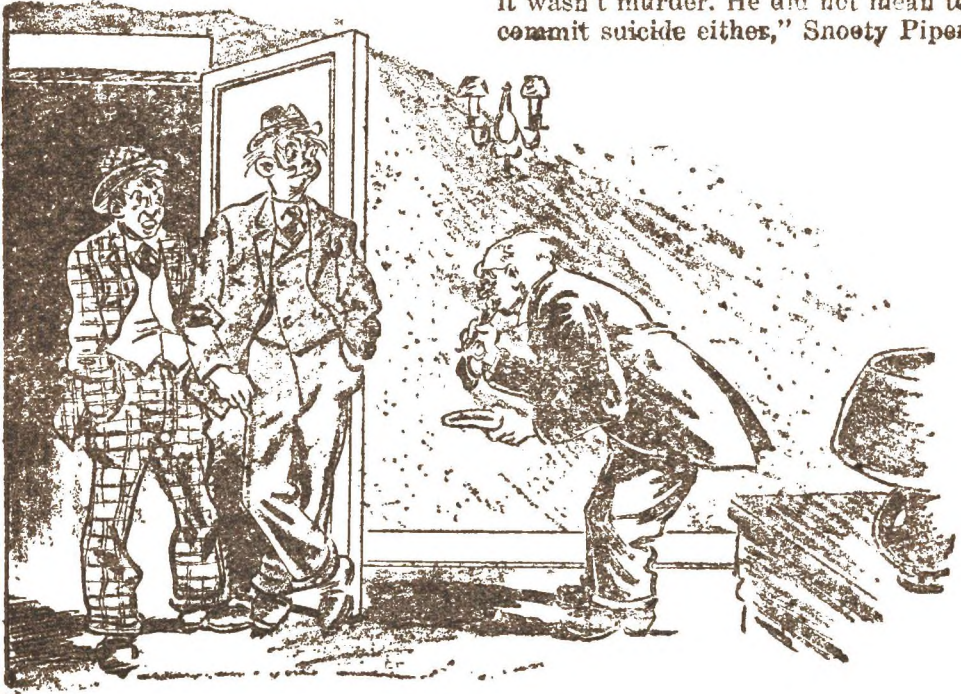
"The cheapest grade of whiskey we ever saw," the technician says and Snooty Piper grins. Me and Roscoe Upham do a little blackout and have to be revived.

"What did you say?" I ask the lab experts. "That is dandruff cure. It

gave these citizens here, dandruff. You mean to say—?"

"Now test this bottle," Snooty says. "It is an unopened bottle of Bilby's Ban-Druff."

The lab sharks go to work once more. They tell us later that it is a good grade of patent medicine with quite a slug of chloral hydrate in it.



Chloral hydrate is the base of all good dandruff antidote.

"That is the clue I got the other day," Snooty says. "After listening to how Lucius Lumpkin had to hide his firewater from his squaw. Mr. Upham, are you willing to swear that that was the same bottle of Ban-Druff you poured onto your scalp the last time?"

"I am. I can show you where I marked it with an X. Also you saw where I had the stopper put back on with adhesive tape," Roscoe says. "This is most confusing, gentlemen."

"This will save John Alden for his Priscilla," Snooty says. "This will make Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy drink a whole quart of the Ban-Druff, not

that it wouldn't take a truck load to have effect on his ticker. Let's all go and see the D.A."

"What are you trying to pull off here, Piper?" Iron Jaw yelps fifteen minutes later. We are all in with the D.A. and Exhibit A is on the table in front of us.

"Why, I can prove Mr. Lucius Lumpkin knocked himself off and that it wasn't murder. He did not mean to commit suicide either," Snooty Piper

announces, putting his feet up on the D.A.'s desk. "That lab test on the Ban-Druff proved it."

"Go ahead," the D.A. said. "I'll give you just ten minutes!"

"Awright," Snooty says. "Roscoe Upham here, the late Lucius Lumpkin's amanuensis, testified a few minutes ago that this was the stuff he used on his hair. Now, look! Iron Jaw knows what the widow thought of demon rum. Mr. Upham also knows Lucius tried every way to smuggle giggle-juice into his menage and keep it there. So the night the accused, John Alden, brought Lucius, the deceased, the bottle of rotgut, Lucius got a swell idea. You will have to listen close as this is a toughie. Now—"

"It is all tripe," Iron Jaw yelps, "I never heard such—"

"To go on," Snooty says. "Lucius and John had a couple of hookers together. After John left, Lucius wondered where he would hide the remains. He gets an inspiration. He remembered that in the medicine closet was two Ban-Druff bottles, one empty and one about full. He pours the hooch into the empty one and figures to tip Roscoe Upham off in the morning. Then he hits the hay.

"It is during the night he wakes up and says he better not take a gamble with his precious elixir, so he goes downstairs to get it out of the medicine chest.

"Don't forget, Lucius was half asleep, and half in the bag, and he did not turn much light on. He grabs the wrong bottle and sneaks off to hide it. Before he caches it, he figures to have a couple more snorts.

"Now in the dark it is known that citizens sometimes cannot tell the difference between one beverage and another, like warm milk and blood for instance. Anyway Bilby's Ban-Druff smelled like redeye and contained plenty of alcohol.

"After he took the hookers, he hid the rest of the stuff and went back to bed. Either that or he was stricken before he could get in bed. Anyway, the chloral hydrate and the hooch Lucius had absorbed had ganged up on his ticker which was not much in the pink. There!"

"That is right," Roscoe the sec. says. "There was an empty bottle there in the morning. I thought Mrs. Lumpkin tossed it out. Oh, cripes, I

been rubbin' that cheap booze in my scalp ever since."

"Okay, Philo Holmes," Iron Jaw yips. "Where is the evidence? Ha-a-a-a-ah!! Unless you produce that real bottle of Ban-Druff Lumpkin drank from, we still give Alden the works."

"I have no doubt it will not be hard to find," Snooty says. "Roscoe, will you take a policeman with you and go over and look in and about the nook where Lucius stashed the empty. I imagine it would be there. Iron Jaw, to break up a scalp treatment case, you got to use headwork."

Beacon Street is not far from La-Grange Street. Roscoe and the cop are back in less than half an hour with a partly filled bottle of Ban-Druff. Iron Jaw gets up and drags himself to the door, his pan the color of a frog's bib. The door slams behind him and then something flies through the transom and bounces off Snooty's noggin. It is a police badge.

"He'll be after it tomorrow," the D.A. says. "This time I got a good mind to keep it."

They let John Alden out and he tells us Lucius always gives ten bucks for a bottle of rye. He made about nine dollars profit on every deal with a refill. He says to keep it under our hats.

Me and Snooty get out and leg it up Tremont Street. "Why didn't you just go to Roscoe and ask him for the evidence in the first place?" I says.

"Why, it never occurred to me to do that, Scoop. I'm so used to doing things the hard way. Well, that is our luck. No murder yet."

Sometimes I should kill Snooty Piper.



Uneasy Lies the Body

By
Stuart
Friedman



O. K. Smith bought an ad in Satan's black book. Only he didn't figure on getting a receipt in the form of a still warm corpse.

AT FIVE his dozen phone salesmen had been gone half an hour. O. K. Smith, manager of that most unique and strictly legal enterprise, Peerless Advertising Agency, waited alone. The boss was coming in. He had cleaned up the big room, reducing the havoc wrought by the day's labor into something serene and tidy like the city dump on a Sunday.

A former top sergeant with a

temper and physique to match, Smith was no fawner. But he wanted to please this boss. Her name was Emily Janwert, a black-eyed white skin gam-in. An inherited streak of larceny made her love Peerless more than any of the banks, factories or other respectable enterprises of her father's estate.

The door opened and she came in, walking in that quick breathless way.

O. K. Smith started to beam. The pleasantry stuck to his broad homely face for an instant. Then it vanished. He glared at the man who had followed her and who stood now in the doorway, half in, the other half poised for instant flight. Then, like a volcano bursting through tissue paper, Smith started for the man.

"Get out, Sparrow!" he bellowed. "I told you—"

"Smitty!" Emily stepped into his path. She pressed slim fingers against his arm, looked up pleadingly. "Let him in."

Sparrow smiled from one side of his mouth.

"Greetings, Oswald," he said.

"Oswald!" O. K. Smith choked. The terrible secret of that name was more closely guarded than his feelings for the wide-eyed girl standing before him. He looked down at her.

"Why? What's this snake doing crawling around after you?"

"I'll explain," she said. She turned a moment. "Come in, Sparrow."

Sparrow walked in, closed the door after him. The slight thin-faced man moved to the opposite side of the big table on which the Peerless salesman worked. He touched bloodless fingers a moment on the third phone of the six on that side, raised his eyebrows at Smith.

"My old workbench," he said, sliding lazily into the chair by the instrument. "Just like old times almost."

Smith glanced contemptuously at him, then back at Emily. He took a deep breath.

"I'd do most anything you wanted, Emily," he said, "but I wouldn't stay if you hired him back. My boys aren't saints, but there's one thing I never would stand for—a thief. You know he stole—"

"I know," she said worriedly. "Smitty, sit down and listen—this is something I got into—"

"He talked us out of sending him to jail," Smith said grimly. "Don't let him cry himself back into a job. I could overlook what he stole, but you

know the kind of gratitude he showed. Started another agency. Tried to chisel all our accounts away. Lied about us. Broke in our files and got our customers. Now his so-called business is a bust, he wants back."

Emily stood facing him primly.

"When I called you I was at the Amherst Stables. I was supposed to get the contract for Peerless to publish the Annual Horse Show Program for them like always," she said, then paused for a breath. She looked accusingly at Sparrow, then back at Smith. "Sparrow had talked to some of the women on the program committee on the sly—and—and we only get half the contract—"

"Half?"

"Half, Oswald," Sparrow said amusedly. "Peerless versus Sparrow Advertising Agency. If we sell more than you, we get all the profits."

"Sell?" Smith snorted. "With what? You haven't any salesmen. You cheated them on commissions, and they quit you. They're working for me, Sparrow. Furthermore the printer has got you blacklisted for non-payment. He won't print for you and neither will anybody else."

"Oh!" Emily said. "Smitty—I—I made a bet with him—he was so infuriating and smug there in front of that committee that I had to call his bluff."

"What did you bet?"

"Peerless—the—the agency—"

"Against—"

"Sparrow Agency," she said just above a whisper.

SMITH started to laugh, but his attention was focused on the door. A brisk little man scanned the interior, nodded at Sparrow, then walked in. He set his briefcase on a cleared space of the phone table, opened it.

"Brettsford," he said importantly. "Attorney for Sparrow Advertising Agency. I have here the contracts supplementing the verbal contract between Miss Jannert and my client, stipulating that the business known

as Peerless Advertising Agency be turned over to Sparrow Ad—”

“Bluff,” Smith said contemptuously. “A bet has no legal status. Miss Jannert won’t be tricked into signing anything.”

Brettsford uncapped a fountain pen as though he had not heard.

“Miss Jannert,” he said, nodding to her, holding out the pen. “You are aware that your agreement, though oral, was made before witnesses . . .”

Smith stepped past her, took the pen. He recapped it, shoved it in Brettsford’s pocket.

“Goodby,” he said. “You can leave the contracts. Miss Jannert’s attorneys will be in touch with you about them—”

“Chisler. Cheap sport!” Sparrow cried suddenly. He scraped back his chair, leaped to his feet. “You little welcher, Emily Jannert. I might have known how good your word was!”

There was more but Smith was already around the table. He caught Sparrow’s shoulder, twisted him around savagely.

“Put them up, Sparrow. Fast.”

“I refuse to fight you,” Sparrow said, backing away. His eyes were fastened on O. K. Smith. “Brettsford,” he called shrilly. “Witness that I keep my hands down.”

“Touch him and we sue,” Brettsford cried. “We warn you—”

Smith’s whole body came up under the blow that ended on Sparrow’s chin. The man’s head snapped back and he stumbled away from Smith. One hand clutched at a chair, then, weaving crazily, he fell to the floor. His body rolled half under the table. Sparrow lay very still on his right side.

Brettsford rushed around the table, pushed brusky past Smith. He went to his knees. Smith watched the lawyer crawl under the table, peer at Sparrow’s face. He heard the lawyer mumble. Finally he crawled back out. He got to his feet slowly, brushed at the knees of his pants. For a moment he just looked at Smith.

“You broke his neck,” he said. “You killed him.”

“Nonsense.”

Brettsford half-turned, opened his palm outward toward the fallen man. “See for yourself. Feel his pulse.”

O. K. Smith saw the quickening in Emily’s eyes, the terrible whiteness of her face. She ran around the table, got to the floor beside Sparrow. Smith saw her lift the inert wrist, saw her fingers probe for the pulse. She looked up at him, the life going slowly out of her face.

“He is dead.”

Smith went into a quick crouch, took Sparrow’s hand from Emily. He held his breath, straining every nerve. A slow numbing fear swept over him. His big fingers pressed, hunted—there was no pulse.

Brettsford crawled under the table again. He pressed his ear against Sparrow’s chest. Smith watched tensely. After an ageless time the lawyer lifted his face.

“No.”

FOR a long time after the three of them had got to their feet no one spoke. Then Brettsford turned, picked up the handset of a phone.

“What are you doing?” Emily cried.

“Calling the police,” he said turning, facing them from over the instrument. “Smith is a killer. A brutal cold-blooded killer!”

“It was an accident,” Emily said.

“Smitty, it was—”

“Of course,” he said dully. His arms hung limp at his side. He wet his lips. “Sure.”

“Put down the phone,” Emily said tensely. “It was all my fault. From the start. Don’t call the police.”

“I know my duty,” Brettsford said coldly. He swung around, started to dial.

“No!” Emily caught Brettsford’s arm. “You can’t tell the police it was murder. There must be a way—”

The lawyer put down the phone.

“How much?” he said quietly.

“A—a thousand dollars.”

Brettsford snorted irritably.

"How much does this sound worth: Smith was furious because he was going to lose his job when my client won the bet he made. He rushed at Sparrow, picked up a phone, struck him under the chin. . ."

"Why—that's not true!"

Brettsford smiled. "Isn't it?" he he said. He blinked, waited. "Five thousand."

"Who'd believe this cheap shyster?"

Smith cried hotly. "Pay him nothing. I'll chance it with the police."

"No, Smitty," she said, her eyes very bright. "If not murder, they might arrest you for manslaughter and you'd go to jail. And I couldn't—couldn't run Peerless without you."

"I've got it," Brettsford exclaimed. "We'll get Sparrow away from here—bring a car around back after dark. I'll drive him out the highway, send the car over an embankment."

"Who?" Smith asked suspiciously.

"No matter what I say, the cops would be suspicious after Miss Jan-ner's public encounter with him out at the Amherst Stables over the advertising contract. As you pointed out Mr. Smith, who'd believe me, anyhow? Most likely they'd be able to make quite a little case against you, Mr. Smith. You fired him, you threatened him—"

"I'll give you the money," Emily said quietly. She turned her face to Smitty, put her hand over his. "It's all right. Don't be stubborn. It's not much money—"

"Cash, of course," the lawyer said.

"He'll blackmail you from now on," Smith declared in exasperation. "Emily, this is a racket—"

"Of course," Brettsford said amiably. "Like the Peerless Agency. Only instead of threatening to boycott some poor little business man if he doesn't kick through with a ten dollar ad in some little program for some silly little event that nobody ever heard of, I want five thousand. And I'm doing my customer some good—quite a bit more than you do with your ads. I

couldn't blackmail her. I'm a party to this—racket."

"Emily," Smith said huskily, "this is a big thing. You don't have to do it. You wouldn't be involved. . ."

"Yes, I would," she said softly.

"Let's get this done," Brettsford cut in. His sharp eyes scanned the room, noted the door to Smith's small private office. "That's it. Take Smith inside. The door's got a Yale lock. The cleaning woman or anybody from the building wouldn't be likely to get in there. Let's get him out of sight. Hold him by one shoe. I'll take the other and we'll pull him in there. Don't touch him anywhere! We'll want no unaccountable finger bruises on the flesh."

Finally they had Sparrow in Smith's office. Smith closed the door, letting the lock snap into place.

"I'll wait here," he said. "Phone when you're ready with the car."

WHEN it began to grow dark Smith shut off the lights of the office. He'd prefer that no one knew he was here.

He began to worry about the actual removal of that body. One of them would have to stand lookout in the corridor while the other dragged Sparrow to the elevator. There'd be the problem then of transferring the corpse from the freight elevator to the car. Brettsford had warned about bruising the dead flesh. Smith realized the police and Medical Examiner could make plenty out of just such marks as lifting the body would produce.

Every small detail loomed ominously. In a sudden panic the question of rigor mortis struck him. How long did it take to set in? He peered closely at the luminous dial of his watch. Two hours! Where was Brettsford? Had something happened to Emily?

If that body stiffened in a stretched-out position, they were lost. A man didn't drive a car lying down. There'd be investigation that would lead inevitably back to him and to Emily.

The police would find out the truth or surmise something worse. And there couldn't be anything much more damning than this conspiracy.

The minutes dragged. He found himself sitting motionless for seconds at a time, imagining he heard the voices of police leaving one of the elevators in front. Smith jerked to his feet, paced the room in agitation. What had happened? Two and a half hours now! Suddenly the presence of that dead body in the other room became unbearable. Every minute of delay in getting him out, far away from Peerless, was vital.

His fists knotted and he jammed them tight against one another in front of him. He cursed himself for those huge fists and that temper of his. He'd forgotten his strength. Sparrow was a small man and he should have known! Smith took a breath, stood a second pressing the heels of his hands to his forehead. But why had Sparrow taunted him? Sparrow was no hothead usually. He was wily, controlled. A schemer.

Then Smith had the answer. There was only one reason the little sharper had goaded him by calling Emily names. He had *known* Smith would hit him. That's why he'd brought Brettsford, as a witness. They had planned to sue for assault. Sure—Brettsford had threatened that. The business about trying to get Emily to sign a contract to validate the bet she had made had just been part of the scheme. Something for excuse to become involved in a fight. But it hadn't worked—not for Sparrow.

Smith jumped suddenly at the sharp peal of a phone.

"Smitty! Why did you go back to the office?" It was Emily and her voice was keyed in excitement.

"Back? I haven't left. Where's Brettsford?"

"I don't know—he's been gone ages. I gave him the money—"

Smith cursed. "The lousy shyster! He never intended to come. He's skipped town by now—I could kick

myself through seven states for letting you get gypped out of that money!"

"Don't talk about the money. Oh, Smitty what are you going to do? Listen, I'll come down with my car—"

"No! Stay away," he said rapidly. "Listen—I've got it. Brettsford gone. He won't be here to lie about what happened. I'll call the cops, tell them the truth, that Sparrow and I got in a fight—hold on. One of the phones is ringing. . ."

Smith laid Emily's line down, scooted along the table to catch the other. He felt a queer sensation as he realized it was Sparrow's old phone ringing. . .

"This is Brettsford," said a muffled voice. "I've got the custodian out of the way with a fake call to one of the offices. There's a laundry truck parked at the service elevator. Beat it down to the alley, get the driver. The pair of you load Sparrow in a clothes hamper. The driver knows where to meet me. Hurry before the custodian gets back down there."

The wire went dead. Smith ran to the other phone.

"Brettsford came. Call you later, Emily."

SMITH ran out of the office, hurried to the swift front elevator now. After an eternity a door opened and he was whisked to the street floor.

Smith weaved his way back through the stair entrance into the narrower rear corridors. When he came to the alley door he stepped out swiftly. He stopped dead. His heart suddenly seemed to pinch. The alley was empty!

Then the sound of a guttural voice sent his heart racing. Smith whirled about.

"Whattaya doin' back here?"

The custodian, a burly fellow in overalls, hovered in the doorway, eyed him warily.

"Needed a stretch," Smith said, his throat dry. "Been working late. I'm manager up at Peerless Agency."

"Oh?" the man said.

From somewhere down the dim corridor came the sound of a phone call. The custodian let it ring, his eyes studying Smith. Then, without a word, he turned, went to answer.

"Fourteen-ten? There is?" Smith heard him say. "Be right up."

"Brettsford's fake call," Smith thought.

He peered anxiously toward one and then the other end of the alley. Where the devil was that laundry truck? Hadn't Brettsford said the laundry truck was already waiting? And hadn't he definitely told Smith the custodian was *already* out of the way? What was Brettsford pulling?

Smith went back into the building, took the few steps to the open freight elevator. Stepping on, he ran the cab down half a floor, then hoisted open the big sheet-iron door that opened onto the alley.

He felt his nerves edging as he stepped into the alley once more. He peered from one to the other end of the alley. Minutes, seconds even, were important. He tensed, listening. His hopes rose and died with each car passing along the streets at the ends of the alley. None of them turned in. He glanced at his watch. Five minutes had gone since that janitor answered the fake call. He'd be back—angry, suspicious.

Smith wet dry lips, took long strides up the alley, wary, ready any moment to run back if the car came from the other direction. He felt the muscles of his stomach begin to convulse. Tiny stabs of nervousness broke over his back and shoulders like heat rash.

Now every step increased the certainty that something was radically wrong! He snapped up his wrist watch. Ten minutes! That call the custodian had answered hadn't been a fake. If it had the man would have been back long ago. Brettsford had tricked him. What if the shyster had got him out and sent the police, so that his absence would look bad?

Then he heard a shout.

"Who's on that freight elevator? You out there—stop!"

There was a heavy thump as the custodian took a running jump down onto the steel floor of the open cab. Smith ducked his head, bent into a dead run. That man must not know he had been loitering out there, tampering with the elevator. He heard the determined shouts, the pounding of the custodian's running feet. Smith rounded the corner of Eleventh Street, trotted a few paces, slowed abruptly to a walk.

He heard the man come thumping out of the alley. Smith blended casually with the moderate crowd of pedestrians. He tried to tone his quickened breathing to normal as he heard the half trot of the man coming abreast of him. Smith became interested in the display of a ladies' hat shop. The custodian was about to pass. Then he spotted Smith.

"You," he said. "Say, mister."

Smith glanced at him frowning.

"Oh," he said. "You're the custodian. Something wrong?"

"Wasn't you just now on that freight?"

"Nope. Just strolling since I saw you." Smith looked at his watch "Well, better get back to the grind."

IT HADN'T been smart, he realized the instant he got back into the office. He closed the door behind him, stood trying to collect his thoughts before switching on the light. That janitor would remember. He'd be a natural for the cops to question. They'd put together the fact he'd fooled around the freight elevator and the length of time Sparrow had been dead. They would figure the accident story was a fake, that he'd murdered Sparrow coldly, then tried to get rid of the body, been foiled. . . For moments he felt almost faint, as though the blood had fallen into his legs, making them leaden.

The phone rang. He went to it, lifted it slowly.

Emily.

"Why are you staying there? It's over, Smitty."

"What is? What's over?"

"The—the accident. It was on the radio. The police call. The car went over the first curve on Highway 8. It burst into flames. Smitty, come out here. . ."

He slammed the phone down, strode quickly to the door of his office. He keyed it open, reached inside, snapped on the light.

The body was gone.

He stared grimly, at first uncomprehending. It didn't make sense. Brettsford couldn't have got in either the outer agency office or this private one. Brettsford couldn't have removed the corpse. But it was gone. Smith crossed the small space around the desk, tested the window. Locked. Not that removing Sparrow's body secretly by means of an office above or below made sense. It was just reflex.

There was only one way a corpse could walk. And that was for the corpse not to be a corpse at all. Then he remembered the only other time he'd seen anything like that happen. Twenty-five years ago in France a cocky doughboy in his company had pulled a kid prank on a shavetail doc.

Automatically the young doctor had taken the pulse of this doughboy, hospitalized for some reason. There hadn't been any pulse. The prankster had laid dead still, his eyeballs rolled back, and his companions from the beds on either side had solemnly informed the doc the man had died some time before. At any rate the doc was taken in just like he and Emily had been.

The doughboy had had a handkerchief wadded and pressed tightly between his arm and body. It had cut off the flow of blood in the artery leading down the arm. Smith cursed. He and every man in the company had tested that trick—and he had let Sparrow fool him. Smith recalled now that Brettsford had been the one to listen at Sparrow's chest, not he or Emily.

It all fell into place, Smith reflect-

ed. Even the phone call supposedly from Brettsford.

It was nice theory—but there *had* been a wreck—

O. K. Smith skimmed down the B's in the phone directory. Brettsford. Yes, he lived between this building and the scene of the wreck on Highway 8.

SMITH timed the cab. It took seven minutes to get to the flaming wreck of Sparrow's car. Plenty of time since he had left the office to go down to the alley. Sparrow could have come by Brettsford's, driven on out here—and there would have been time for an argument, a fight—a murder!

He walked toward the cluster of city and state police, found the lieutenant in charge.

"One man or two in that car?" Smith said, after introducing himself.

"One," the lieutenant said, looking over the rim of the highway to the burning wreckage below. The car was in spotlight, circled by men with fire-fighting equipment. The lieutenant pointed to a pair of stretcher bearers moving slowly up the face of the hill in the light from a second spot.

Smith and the lieutenant moved to the point the stretcher men were heading for. As they came over the crest, the lieutenant drew back the sheet, grimaced.

"That isn't Sparrow," Smith announced. "It's Brettsford."

"And it's not kosher," the lieutenant said. "It's murder. By a thousand-to-one freak, there was no glass breakage in that car. But the M. E. says this guy's throat was cut with jagged glass. So you, Mr. Smith, should begin to talk."

With some relief Smith told it all from the very beginning. The lieutenant's expression didn't change at all as Smith told of the bribe to Brettsford, their plan to dispose of what they had thought to be a corpse.

"Suckers," the lieutenant opined. "Give us this Sparrow's description. He's not far. Had to be in that car."

Back in town at headquarters, he repeated the whole story. The lieutenant lay back in a swivel chair and put in a question now and then. The statewide call had been out on Sparrow for an hour. From time to time the lieutenant phoned the radio room. Then he leaned forward.

"Smith, I'm willing to believe you in case we catch Sparrow and find the five G. But it'll be your word against his. He'll probably deny the whole thing if he's as cagy as you think."

"I think," Smith said slowly. "I think I made him lose his head once..."

The door was flung open. "They picked him up—just radioed in. He's got the money."

"Bring him in here," the lieutenant said crisply. "Smith, tell me—you said he might have slipped—"

"He used the phone in my office—my private office. No one can get in without a key though a person could get out. Maybe his prints are on the phone."

"Gimme the keys," the lieutenant said, rising.

In twenty minutes they brought Sparrow in. He was surly. He'd had time to think over a story and he stuck to it. Finally the lieutenant got to his feet, walked over and glanced at the stenographer's shorthand notes.

"You're lying," he said, turning on Sparrow. "You say you weren't in the Peerless Agency. You say Emily Jannert paid off your attorney \$5,000 to get you out of competition. You collected the money from your attorney and that's all you know."

"Yes."

"You haven't worked at Peerless in three months, Sparrow. But your fingerprints are on the inner office phone. You got scared when you heard Smith tell Miss Jannert he was calling in the police to make a clean breast. You knew you'd be caught in fraud so you used the inner office phone, called him in the outer office, got him to leave so you could get out."

"All right. I pulled a fraud. That's not murder."

"Have it your way. We know Brettsford took the money. You have said he was acting for you and you are a party to a major crime. Listen, Sparrow, you were driving that car—because Brettsford's prints aren't on the ignition key or key case. They aren't on the steering wheel."

"All right. I was driving. We were leaving town. We were arguing and he jolted my arm—we went off the road—I jumped clear is all—"

"Lock him up," the lieutenant said wearily. "Even if we can't prove when we find the glass he used to cut Brettsford's throat, that he did it, no difference. You admitted the pair of you were committing a major crime. Death occurring during the commission of such crime is murder and they hang you just as high."

"That all for me?" Smith said.

"Yeh, but c'mere," the lieutenant said. He had his arm cramped to his body tightly. His wrist was held forward, palm up. "Go on, feel. I got it."

Smith grinned, touched the pulse.

"O. K. You're dead. Only I don't believe it. I wouldn't believe anything, any more—except there was a girl who thought I was worth \$5,000."



Mail Me My Tombstone



By
Charles Larson

When that detective story writer was called out to solve a locked-room murder, all he could think of was an invisible man who could crawl through keyholes. Only the keyholes were plugged. But the unseen slayer got through just the same to sling a deadly missive at the writer.

ELLEN said softly: "Hey."
"Um?" I raised my eyes.
"Could that be the telephone?"
For a solemn moment we listened to the mad jangling from the kitchen.
"Damned if I know," I murmured.
"I can't hear a thing for the ringing."
"It's probably just me," Ellen admitted. Gently she kissed me.

But the phone kept on. Eight times. Nine. Ten. Eleven. And finally Ellen sighed and said: "No use. Maybe if I kicked it . . ."
She slid off my lap, moved toward the back of the house, and I smiled after her pretty figure and reflected on the blessings of marriage. A year and a day. At first it had raised merry hell with my writing, but the novelty

of having her around wore off after a while, and the writing was easier and better because I had someone to write for.

In the kitchen the phone stopped when she answered it. I leaned back in the chair and wondered idly who it was. My agent had said he'd call—but it was too early in the morning, not yet nine-thirty. Probably for Ellen. Bridge. Shopping. A shower for a new bride.

"Jim . . ."

I turned my head, startled. She'd come back so quietly I hadn't heard her at all. Slowly I blew my breath up over my face. "You walk like a cat, say pretty," I said.

"Right now I feel like a cat."

"What?"

"Never mind."

I twisted around in the chair, looked up at her. "What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing." Her voice was sharp. She picked at an imaginary bit of dust on her blouse. "Go answer the phone."

Puzzled, I stood up. "Who is it? My agent?"

"Not unless his voice is changing."

I walked warily toward the kitchen. Already I felt guilty and a little ashamed, as though I'd been caught sneaking a solitary drink.

I squeezed into the narrow space between the refrigerator and the breakfast table and picked up the phone. "Hello?"

"Jim? Oh, Jimmy darling . . . I'm so glad you're home." The voice was very feminine, very frightened—still, very relieved.

I said: "Oh?" It was asinine, but as far as I knew, I'd never heard the voice before. I glanced over the mouthpiece at Ellen who'd wandered into the doorway behind me, and shrugged.

There was a long awkward pause while the voice thought it over, then:

"Jim . . ."

"Yes."

"You don't remember me?"

"I'm sorry, really . . ."

"Rita Manning."

ONCE I fell off a barn onto my head. Nothing like this. *Rita Manning. Rita Manning.* A thousand years ago I'd loved her—not the way I love Ellen, but sharper, quicker. In the seconds before I answered, I remembered a hundred emotions I thought I'd forgotten. Aching happiness, childish despair. Long lazy college evenings, hot Sunday afternoons, and the sad trail of rain down a paneled sorority window.

"Rita," I murmured.

"Jimmy, listen. I'm in terrible trouble and we have to talk quickly. They think I'm calling my lawyer."

I shook my head. "What?"

"They think—"

"Who does?"

"The police. Will you please just listen?" The voice was tired.

"Yes. All right. Go ahead. I'm listening."

"Everything happened so quickly. Do you know Steven Loring?"

I'd heard of him. A big-time gambler. Too big to touch. I said: "I think so."

"He's dead."

"So?"

"Don't say it like that! I loved him."

I raised my eyebrows. "I'm sorry. I thought—wasn't there a doctor?"

"Doctor? You mean John. No. We were divorced two years ago. And he wasn't a doctor, he's with the government. He keeps after me, but—I loved Steve. And now they're holding me for it."

"Holding you for what?"

"The murder of Steven Loring! Don't you ever listen? My heavens, Jimmy . . ." She was crying softly.

"Oh," I said again. "Oh, I see."

I'd heard, but I hadn't heard. Murder? It happened only in my stories, not in real life. And if it did happen in real life, it happened to men like

Dillinger and Nelson, not to people I knew.

I said: "Where are you? I'll come over."

"I'm at Steve's house. Thirty-ninth and Klickitat."

"Steve's house!"

"Don't make me explain now. We haven't time. But believe me, Jimmy, I didn't do it. I have three men who'll swear they heard shots from inside the house while I was with my mother."

"What men?" I asked.

"One is Steve's next-door neighbor, a man named Switzer. He was mowing his lawn when it happened. Another is the postman on this route. The last I'm not too sure of. He's a—a seedy looking little person who was delivering handbills. His name is Morris Lugg."

I changed the phone from one ear to the other and wiped my sweating hand on my trousers. "Then what on earth are you worrying about? It sounds like a clear case of suicide to me."

She laughed a little. "You and I seem to be the only ones who see anything clear in it. Everything points to suicide. The shots these three men heard, the fact that Steve's door was locked on the inside, everything—and still they . . ." Her voice broke and she stopped.

"And you want me to prove that it was suicide?"

"Yes." Her voice came faster. "You can, Jim. I've read your stories. You've studied murder. You know the tricks . . ." Suddenly her voice dropped. "Listen, they're coming back. I'll have to hang up. You'll come?"

I said "Yes," and in the next second the connection was broken.

Slowly and silently I turned.

"Wrong number, no doubt?" Ellen asked sweetly.

I looked at her long black hair. "No," I said quietly, "that was Rita Manning. I knew her once at college."

"Like the palm of your own hand, probably."

"Please, Ellen . . ."

"Jim, when a strange woman shouts 'Jimmy, darling' in my ear like a drunken harpy before I can even open my mouth . . ." She stopped and swallowed. I could see that her mind wasn't thinking funny thoughts at all.

I said: "Sweet, look . . ."

"Who was she?"

"An old friend. I haven't seen her for years." I brushed past her into the dining room, and picked up my coat and hat.

Behind me Ellen's voice was much lower. "And where are you going now?"

"She's in trouble. Murder. I've got to help her." I shrugged into my coat, and turned back. "Darling . . ."

But she wasn't there. She'd slipped past me into the bedroom.

I slapped my hat against my leg and walked slowly toward the front door.

STEVEN LORING owned more houses than the President, but the one he'd been killed in, or had killed himself in, was the only one in which he actually lived. The rest were gambling palaces. There was still a sizable crowd around this one when I climbed out of my car and it wasn't easy to get through.

At the door I told the sweating cop I was Miss Manning's lawyer and he passed me inside.

Rita was waiting. She was still the same, more mature, more sure of herself perhaps, but otherwise—the same. She smiled at me, held out a black-gloved hand, and said: "Hello, Jimmy."

She'd been crying. I noticed that first. I said: "How goes it, Princess?"

"Poorly, thanks. You?"

"I never change. For me the whole world gloweth."

She held tightly to my hand until a flash bulb exploded in the far corner

of the room, then she said: "Steve's over there."

"I'd better take a look. You don't mind?"

"Go ahead."

She dropped my hand and I walked slowly across the blue Chinese rug to a gold sofa. Another flash bulb exploded, and for the time a breath is held, the faces of the men grouped around the body of Steven Loring seemed to be looking into Hell.

I touched one of them on the shoulder. He glanced at me and moved aside.

Steven Loring hadn't died happy.

He'd been a big man, but he looked little and pinched lying there. There were two bullet holes that I could see. One, almost free of blood, in his temple, the other in the center of his chest.

I said: "I'm Miss Manning's lawyer. What happened?"

A gray-suited plain-clothes man raised his brown bald head and stared at me. His ear lobes were tremendous and his face was long and sad. A bloodhound of a man. He said:

"What do you know already?"

"That Steve Loring committed suicide at about nine o'clock this morning. That you're holding Miss Manning on as feeble a bit of evidence as I'll be likely ever to find. Enough?"

The man laughed without moving his lips. "Gimme a drag on that before you throw it away," he said.

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing. Except that it wasn't suicide, that he was killed around four this morning instead of nine, and that a more obvious suspect to a murder never lived than your spotless Miss Manning."

"Four this morning?"

The tiny, thin-haired man who'd moved to make way for me cleared his throat. "I don't want to be disagreeable," he began, "but—"

He stopped when I stared at him and his small ears reddened. "Switzer," he said.

"Go ahead, Mr. Switzer."

"Yes . . ." He swallowed seriously and looked at the lapel of my coat. "I keep telling them that I heard shots when I was mowing the lawn this morning around nine o'clock. They came from here. Of course," he switched his look to the other lapel, "if it had been only me, I probably wouldn't have said anything about it. But two others beside myself heard them and I don't think th—"

"He's right," someone else said. I turned and saw the postman Rita had told me about. He was better than average height, and light-skinned. Blue eyes. Clean-shaven. Scandinavian.

"My name's Ejernson. I'd just turned to come back down the walk when the gun went off. It was very plain."

"Very plain," Switzer agreed, nodding vigorously.

"Well?" I said to the plainclothes man.

He was picking his teeth with a match. Lazily he smiled. "You're so damn gullible," he murmured, "I almost hate to do this. But just for laughs . . ." He took the match out of his mouth and looked over the heads of the men around the sofa. "Doc?" he called.

IN A MOMENT Doc waddled over. He was monstrously fat, but hard. His skin was brown instead of white. His eyes were clear and sharp, and the hams swinging at his wrists looked oddly capable.

"Our medical examiner," the plainclothes man said. "Doc, tell us the story of the shots that didn't go off."

"Loring? He was killed sometime after three and before five o'clock this morning. It's hard to say. The temperature . . ."

"And it couldn't have been suicide?"

"Not a chance in the world." Doc leaned, puffing, over Loring's body. "You see this wound in his temple? Almost free of blood. The point is

that his heart had stopped pumping when the wound was made."

The plainclothes man smiled slowly at me when he'd finished. "Well, Mister . . ."

"It looks good," I said.

"Doesn't it, though? Now suppose you brood about it awhile and maybe talk to your client. Fell her how shaky the leg she's standing on turned out to be. Explain to her that discarded lady-loves make good murderers. . ."

I heard them laugh, and I heard the squeak of their shoes as they walked away, but I didn't look up. It was much worse than I'd expected.

Behind me someone coughed.

When I turned, the postman, who'd come up with Mr. Switzer, said: "You're a fool, you know. One of the biggest."

I pushed my head forward. "What?"

"You're like a little kid. Papa says grass is red, so grass is red. Why in hell don't you look for yourself?"

"I don't follow you."

"What is there to follow? I heard two shots this morning. I'm not in the habit of imagining shots. And when the police came, every door in this room was locked on the inside. What do I care about powder burns? What do I care about the amazing lack of blood from the temple wound? Maybe he shot himself in the chest and when he found there was too much pain, he shot himself again in the head.

"And maybe an ambitious cop who sees a chance to bring in an easy conviction, ignores the suicide theory, wipes a little blood away, and hints to a fat M. E. that it would be better to play along with him. . ."

It was fantastic, the whole thing. Yet. . .

"All doors were locked?" I asked.

"Doors *and* windows. On the inside."

I bit my lower lip and looked at the floor.

A perfectly locked room. . .

"The front door," I asked suddenly, "was it locked or bolted?"

Switzer said: "It was bolted. The lock had been broken once when someone had tried to force it, so Mr. Loring put on a bolt. I know. I helped him."

Bolted. No pass-key then. But wasn't there a way, with a bent pin and a piece of string, to pull a bolt from the outside and to draw the pin and string out of the room?

QUICKLY I made my way to the front door. I wanted above everything else for my idea to be wrong. If it was, if there was no way at all for a murderer to get in and out of the room, there had been no murder. It had been suicide. Juries would be impressed by a locked room. It was something they could understand.

At the door, I kneeled, my heart pounding, and stared at the floor.

There was no light showing; there was no room for it to show.

If the bent pin trick had been worked, where had the string and the pin gone? Normally in such cases, the pin, which has been looped over the out-thrusting bolt handle, was fastened with string which led either under the door or through a keyhole. Thus a person standing outside the door could pull gently on the string until the bent pin had drawn the bolt, after which, the bolt handle having dropped downward, the bent pin would slide off onto the floor. It was then only a matter of seconds to pull the string *and* the pin under the door, and presto! A locked room. Bolted on the inside. Unsolvable.

This time, however, no pin could have been drawn under the door because *there was no space beneath to go through.*

I got to my feet.

Switzer was looking at me anxiously; Bjornson, curiously.

I said: "If a murderer got into this room, it wasn't through this door. I'd stake my life on it."

"Then it *was* suicide?" Bjornson asked.

"There are dozens of ways it might have been done. I merely said that through this door wasn't one of them."

"Well, for Pete's sake, man, check the rest."

"Yeah." I rubbed my lip, looked around me.

First, the other doors.

There were two of them, one into a bedroom, one into a dining room. Oddly, both were fitted with bolts. On the bedroom bolt a thin layer of dust lay undisturbed. And the other was much too stiff to have been pulled by a pin and string.

The windows next. Three windows. And in each case a covering of dust lay on the sills.

I found my heart beating faster and my throat felt big in my collar.

I crossed to the fireplace, squatted uncomfortably in the ashes, and looked up the chimney. Soot undisturbed.

Behind me I could hear Bjornson tapping the walls. It was a last child-like gesture of defiance, because now there could be no doubt.

The room had been sealed.

It was physically impossible for anyone to have entered after Steven Loring had pulled the three bolts.

I rose calmly, brushed off the knees of my pants, and glanced around the room. In the corner by the sofa, the bloodhound-like plainclothes man was talking to the fat M. E. and a kid in shirt sleeves. They were laughing and I thought: *Laugh, damn you. Laugh good and hard, because, brother, someone else's turn has come.*

Smiling a little, I crossed the room toward them.

The medical examiner looked up first and said: "Ah. Our indefatigable lawyer. Join us, little friend. You should be interested in this."

"So?"

"Yes. We're the bearers of news."

"Sounds like a meeting of the clan. I've got some dirt myself."

The doc nodded his great head slightly. "You're our guest. Do go on."

"It's nothing, really. Except that I've checked every feasible place where a murderer might get into this room—and found them all plugged. Only one man was here last night. Loring himself. I'm sorry."

Doc was silent for a moment. Then he said, without taking his eyes off me: "Tell him, son."

The young, good-looking kid in shirt sleeves flushed a little. "We—I just checked the murder gun for prints," he said, "There are two pair on it. Loring's. . ."

". . . And Miss Manning's," the plain-clothes man finished. He pulled a match quickly across the seat of his pants, cupped his hands and held the flame to the end of his cigarette. In a moment he murmured, "Now—you were saying. . ."

The boy wasn't lying. The plain-clothes man, maybe. Not the kid. He was too young and sincere and filled with righteousness. The prints might not be Rita's—there surely hadn't been time to check them with hers, but there *were* two pair. Someone else had been in the room. I didn't know what to say. It called for something funny but I couldn't think of anything funny. I was through with Rita; I loved Ellen—still to see Rita in prison, and finally executed—not a pretty thought.

"Well. . ." I said, I raised my hands a little from my sides and dropped them.

I had to have time to think. Wordlessly the three of them watched me as I turned and walked toward the door.

BEFORE I reached it, Switzer came running over. He hadn't heard what the law had said; he was still red hot with detecting.

"I've found something," he told me.

"Not now."

"I don't know. It might be important."

Wearily I looked at what he had. It was a long, powerful insect spray-gun. "Switzer," I said and stopped. I couldn't go on.

"I know," he murmured, reddening, "but this is still Winter, you might say. What on earth would a guy be doing with a spray-gun? Everything else in this room has a use. Not this thing."

"What do you imagine the murderer did with it?" I asked.

"I don't know. Poison maybe. He could have filled it with some kind of poison and sprayed it at Loring. . ."

Gently I smiled. "Switzer," I said, "how was Loring killed?"

He frowned. "He was shot."

"Um. With a gun. They've found the gun. It was in Loring's right hand. They don't need to look any further for a murder weapon. *So what in hell are you bothering me with that thing for?*" I brushed past him, trembling, and strode out the door. Behind me I could hear his small, "Oh."

Outside, the sky was gray and overcast, and the first sprinkle of rain was pockmarking the sidewalk. Bjornson was standing, hands in his pockets, talking to a raincoated cop. He glanced up at me when I moved past him and said: "How goes it? She cleared?"

"No."

I crossed slick wet grass to my car, jerked open the door and got inside.

"What do you mean?" Bjornson asked. He'd followed me and was peering in the window.

"It's simple enough. They found her fingerprints on the gun. Heaven only knows how she did it, but—"

"Her fingerprints? That's bad, isn't it?"

"You might call it that, yes," I said.

"But they couldn't be her prints."

"No," I said, "they couldn't. But they are." I stamped on the starter, released the brake.

"Where you going now?"

"I don't know. There must be something."

Silently he watched me shift gears,

then he murmured: "You love her, too. . ."

"Too?" I looked at him.

He jerked his head back over his shoulder. "They tell me *he* loved her."

"Oh." I looked at the instrument board. "Yeah. Maybe he did."

"Mister. . ." The postman glanced away. "I don't know why I'm messing in this thing. But—sometimes I get hunches. I don't think the girl did it." He laughed softly. "Everything points to it, it's all but decided—and yet—" He shrugged. "I heard two shots this morning."

I paused. "What do you know about this Lugg fellow?" I asked suddenly.

"Lugg?"

"He claimed he was delivering handbills. He said he'd heard shots too."

"Oh, yes. Lugg."

"Well?"

"To tell the truth, I didn't notice him a whole lot."

"No." I stared through the windshield at the tightly woven mesh of raindrops. "No," I said, "very few people did."

I raced the motor. "I'll see you," I said.

He stood back. I let the clutch in and started for home.

THE house was cold when I got inside. I moved into the dining room and turned on the heat. "Ellen?" I called.

No answer.

I saw the note when I snapped on the lights. It was on the dining room table, under the chandelier, and it said something that couldn't possibly have happened:

"Don't try to find me, Jim. I'm leaving. Second fiddle doesn't interest me at all."

Stunned, I read it again. All at once I felt silly and conspicuous, and I wandered into the living room and sat down in my chair by the radio. I couldn't seem to put one thought after another in my mind. *Why had she done it?* I wondered. *Where had she*

gone? It was all so—damned improbable, like a fairy tale.

In fact, everything that had happened to me today was improbable. Dreams I've had have had more sense to them. For years I'd made my living by having detective heroes solve improbable murders and yet, when I was confronted with one myself, I was as helpless as a baby.

How could *anyone* have gotten into that room?

The invisible man himself—would hardly—

I frowned.

Invisible man?

For a moment I forgot about Ellen. I forgot that the house was cold and there would be no dinner and no laughing. Because I was suddenly and sharply conscious that there *might* be a way to get into the booted room, a way that I'd overlooked by virtue of its being so terribly obvious. And if I could find that way, the finding of the murderer would follow almost immediately.

It all hinged on an ancient homocidal trick called "mental invisibility." It was a slim chance, but a chance. In everyone's mind certain people and things are invisible, mentally invisible. In other words, certain people and things are seen so often that the brain ceases to register them. Can you describe the last waiter who waited on you in a restaurant? Or the page who brought you your book in the library? How many stairs are there leading to your front porch? You walk them every day. . .

I got my hat and coat quickly, and turned down the seat again. If I could get back in that room. . .

Rain was falling in uneven stanting sheets when I got outside, and although it couldn't have been past three o'clock, it might have been midnight for the darkness.

The street was empty except for my car and another half way down the street. I got in, started the motor, and headed again for Steven Loring's house.

THE cop at the door was nice about it, but he had his orders, he said. Maybe if I got an O.K. from the chief. . .

"Look. . ." I said patiently.

He shook his raincoated head.

"I've got to get in there!"

"Are you gettin' tough with me?"

There was, I saw, no use arguing with him. Maybe, if it hadn't involved crawling to the bloodhound-like plain-clothes man—

I said: "I'm sorry I have to do this."

"Do what?" he asked softly. He stuck his chin forward.

That was wrong.

I hit him in the stomach and once on that conveniently placed chin. I caught him under the arms when he fell and eased him gently to the rain-soaked porch.

Then I walked inside.

The room was dark and chilly. Once in it, I didn't know what on earth to look for. Whatever it was, I'd have to find it quickly. The slumbering uniform outside wouldn't slumber forever. Something so obvious, no-one would notice. Something so obvious.

A floorboard near the back wall creaked.

Instantly I flung myself to one side and toward the noise. Heaven only knows what I had in mind—certainly not what happened.

I ran straight and furiously into a wall.

When the noise and weaving in my head had stopped, I picked myself off the floor, found a light switch and pushed it.

Dead ahead of me, on his knees like a fat Chinese waiting for the ax, was Mr. Switzer. His rear was toward me, his face was buried in his arms. Beside him lay his insect-sprayer.

Weakly I said: "You?"

For a time there was no sign of life; then slowly the rear went down, the head came up, and Switzer said: "What?"

"Couldn't be," I mumbled.

"I wasn't satisfied," Switzer explained, clearing his throat nervously,

"to—let things go so easily. I—thought maybe this sprayer meant more than it seemed to." He beamed shallowly at me. "Fall down?" he asked.

When I didn't answer, he picked up the sprayer and smiled beyond me.

ly completely around. Enough around anyway to see the second shot about to come.

I dropped to the floor behind the sofa and the second shot plowed through it and showered lint and scorched cloth onto my head.



"Hi," he said. He nodded toward me, still keeping his eyes on the doorway.

"Fell down," he said.

I almost didn't look. I was tired and my head still hurt. If that damned cop had recovered so quickly. . .

I raised my arms slowly. "All right," I said, "you got me."

The bullet caught me high on the left shoulder, slammed my arm against the wall, and turned me near-

Then silence.

"I have four more," the voice of the postman, Bjornson, said. "Come out. Over in a second."

I couldn't understand. Even yet, it was beyond me. Bjornson, the postman. I said: "Why? For Pete's sake, Bjornson. . ."

"Still alive? And squirming, no doubt. Steve squirmed. Please deny loving her. He did. Make it complete."

"Deny loving whom?"

"Fine. Now I say 'Rita,' and you

say 'Rita!' as though this is the first time you've heard the name. Go on."

I couldn't help it. I said: "Rita!"

Bjornson laughed.

Little by little things were beginning to fall into a semblance of sanity.

"I followed you to your home," Bjornson said. "After I found that you couldn't help Rita at all, I determined to kill you. But about the time I drove up, you came rushing out, and headed this way. . ."

"You're John," I said. "She said you worked for the government, but I didn't—I never—"

"She divorced me. What a laugh! She still loves me. She must have suspected I had something to do with it when she saw me, but did she talk? Did she say anything at all?"

"But—why Steve? Just because he. . ."

"No. I got to gambling. I lost. Not fairly. I couldn't pay. How could I pay on my salary? So I came to ask him for some time. Rita was here with him, and he didn't even let me inside the house, just told me no. He hated to leave her long enough to even tell me no."

BJORNSON'S voice was becoming lower now and strangely sad and gentle. Slowly I raised my head. The postman was standing by the door, his black slicker shooting off tiny spears of yellow light when he turned. His gun was hanging listlessly against his side. Beside him, his back to the wall, and his plump insect-sprayer laden hands raised, stood Switzer.

I said: "And the locked room?"

His voice rambled on as though he hadn't heard me. "I came back around four this morning. It was easy to say I'd heard shots when I was on my regular route. Two fools even substantiated me." He breathed deeply. "You were right about the pin and the string. I couldn't believe you hadn't found it out when you began explaining."

And I saw.

As quickly and as clearly as that.

As long as there's space for it to be drawn through, the pin and the string will work. I'd been incredibly stupid. When I'd made sure the pin couldn't have been drawn out through the keyhole or under the door, I'd considered the whole possibility closed. But in this room, as in a thousand front rooms in a thousand houses, there was an opening almost as big as a man's fist. I'd looked at it a dozen times and I hadn't seen it. Mental invisibility. But I saw it now.

That opening was the built-in mailbox at the left of the door.

What could be sweeter? What would suggest itself to a postman as a means of undetectable breaking and entering faster than this?

I breathed: "The mailbox. That was it, you. . ."

Lightninglike the gun came up once more, leveled at my stomach.

"Pray, mister," Bjornson said.

The index finger was whitening on the trigger when it happened. A loud wheeze came from above Switzer's head, and when Bjornson turned his startled eyes, they caught almost the full blast of the insect-sprayer.

The few seconds he was turned away were enough. I vaulted awkwardly over the sofa, sprawled shouting into him, and together we hit the floor. Viciously I pounded whatever part of him was closest, and my hands came away red and wet. One of his feet caught the pit of my stomach, kicked, and the pain spread over me in tiny rhythmical waves.

"Get your head out of the way!" I could hear Switzer screaming.

I slashed outward with my crooked elbow, caught his mouth full on, felt the bite and tear of loosened teeth in my arm. Again the elbow, again the hot blood and the sting of teeth.

Swearing, I twisted back, and sitting on the floor, with one hand caught in the neck of his black slicker, I lashed forward with my right fist. His head rolled comically with the blow and more blood sprayed over me.

I had to hit him twice more before

the eyes closed and the head stayed lax and loose over his shoulder.

And it was over.

While I sat there, waiting for the nausea in my stomach to quiet, Switzer said a little angrily: "Why didn't you get your head out of the way?"

"How the hell could I?" I mumbled.

"I'd have got him. You did O.K., but if you'd got your head out of the way. . . ."

It was then someone kissed me.

Quickly I jerked around and my eyes looked straight into Ellen's.

I couldn't speak. It was hard even to breathe. I said: "Darling. . ."

"Don't. I heard." She was kneeling beside me, and now she got off her knees and sat on the floor. Her eyes were moist and hurt. "I—I had to get a look at any gal who could take my husband away from me."

I murmured: "That gal doesn't live."

"I want to go home."

"Sure." I paused. "And you won't leave? Nothing will have changed?"

She looked suddenly uncomfortable. "I won't leave," she said. "But—Jimmy—we have company—"

"Company?"

"Yes. I . . ." She glanced away. "When I got to Mom's tonight, I met her coming out and we just got in the car and turned back."

"Your mom is a wise mom," I said. "She made you stop and think?"

"No. She's leaving Pop for a couple of days. They had a fight. . ."

We looked at each other for a long time and then the laughter started, deep inside us, and we sat on the floor and whooped and shouted and laughed until we were both crying.

It was good to laugh again. . .

*"THIS year...
I'm giving double!"*



Finger on the Rope

By Richard Dermody

*The theft was a pipe until you remember a pipe has a hole in it
a wise cop can see through.*



CHARLEY looks like a policeman, big and burly, until you notice his eyes. The butler stared at the badge on Charley's broad

palm and gave a little bow.

"Mr. Vandegrant is entertaining this evening," he said. "I will tell him you are here."

Before he closed the door behind us, I glanced at the black car out in the driveway. The Kid was slouched behind the wheel, perfectly relaxed. This was old stuff to Charley and the Kid.

The butler came back. "Mr. Vandegrant will see you in the small study," he said.

The study wasn't so small and it was dripping with class. Mr. Vandegrant was a little old man but he was class too. He smiled at Charley.

"I hope my income tax is in order," he said. "I can't think of any other reason a federal agent would be interested in me."

Charley pulled his gun out of the shoulder-holster. "This is just a plain stickup, mister," he said.

The old man was startled, but he didn't lose his smile. "This is very interesting," he said. "I hope you do not intend to molest my guests."

"That's right," Charley told him. "Take it nice and easy and nobody'll get hurt." He pushed out his big chin. "Where's the rope?"

The old man was puzzled. "I'm sorry," he said, "but I don't understand."

"Your wife's pearls," Charley told

him. "The rope that set you back fifty grand."

The old man looked at Charley, his eyes narrowing a little. "That means fifty thousand dollars, doesn't it?"

"Sure," Charley pointed the gun at the old man's middle. "Quit stalling. We want that rope, and we want it quick."

The old man nodded. "I can understand your impatience," he said. "But the necklace is in my wife's bedroom. She is the only person who can open the safe."

"Okay," Charley said. "Get her in here."

The old man picked up a phone on the big leather-covered desk beside him. "Ask Mrs. Vandegrant to step into the study, please," he said into the mouthpiece.

When the old lady came in, the old man broke it to her gently. "These men have come for your pearls, dear," he said. "I do not think it would be wise to resist." He offered her his arm. "Shall we go upstairs?"

The old lady looked at the gun in Charley's hand and she turned a shade paler, but she took the old man's arm as if he had asked her for the next polka.

"Certainly, darling," she said. "Whatever you think best."

It wasn't the way I thought it would be. It was too easy. I was sweating and my knees shook a little as we went up the stairs.

WHEN the old lady turned on the lights in her bedroom I saw her press a little red button on the wall beside the light switch. I didn't think

anything about it at the time. I've wondered since what would have happened if Charley had seen her press that button. I'm glad now he didn't see it.

The old lady's fingers trembled when she twirled the dial and she had to stop a couple of times and start over. Just as the safe swung open, the horn on the car outside blasted—two long, one short. The Kid wanted us to hurry.

The necklace was in a black box about a foot long. Charley snapped it open to make sure the pearls were there and shoved it in his pocket.

"Flatten out on the bed and count a hundred before you move," he told the old couple.

The Kid had the motor roaring when he hit the driveway. I just made it into the back seat. As we burned the gravel, Charley shouted, "What's the beef?"

The Kid jerked a thumb over his shoulder. I glanced out the back window as we swung onto the highway. A red light was flashing on the roof of the Vandegrant house. A siren wailed down the road behind us. I remembered the red button on the wall, but I didn't say anything. We had the pearls and that siren was a long way off.

I was five minutes late getting into

the office the next morning and the boss gave me a sour look. I didn't mind. In a week or so, after Charley cashed the necklace, I would tell the boss where he could put his sour looks.

The man that came up to my desk just before noon didn't look like a policeman. I had to look at the badge in his hand a couple of times before I realized what was happening. He kept his voice low, "You made a couple of mistakes, son."

I pulled my eyeshade off. The office looked good to me. Even the boss looked good. "What mistakes?" My voice sounded a long way off.

The detective smiled at me, "You spent too much time with Charley and the Kid," he said. "Those two crooks are still on parole. We check up on the people they hang around with."

I still couldn't believe it. Nobody had seen us going or coming from the Vandegrant house. There hadn't been a single car on the road.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

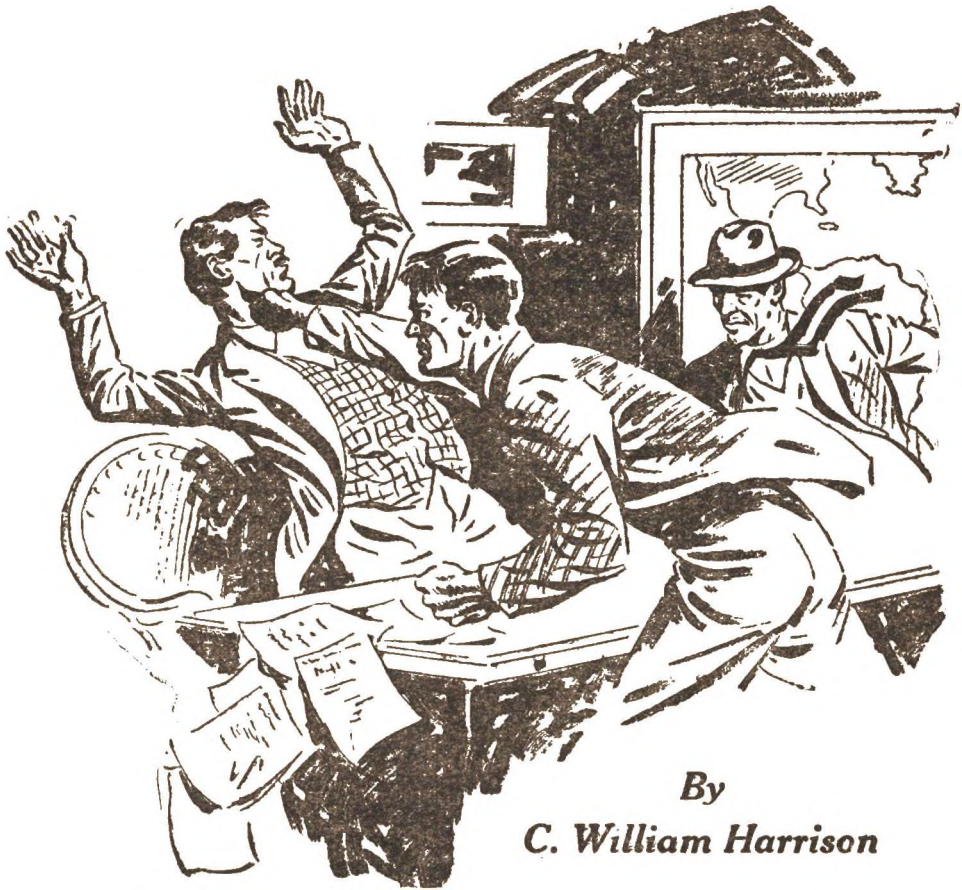
The detective shook his head. "Charley told the old man that the pearls had cost fifty thousand. The old man paid a hundred thousand dollars for that necklace, but it was insured for fifty. We figured that somebody in the insurance company office had put the finger on the rope."



THIS
PIG BANK'S UNSAFE!

Invest your money in United States
WAR SAVINGS BONDS AND STAMPS!

Murder Bitten—Twice Shy



By

C. William Harrison

|| Hugo Ditmeir scratched an enemy and found a rat. But he ||
|| didn't count on also finding a corpse. ||

YOU could paste a small square of rat hide under his nose and slant his black cowlick a little lower over his eye and have a double for the omniscient Omnipotent of Germany. I didn't like him the first time I saw him three weeks ago. He looked too much like Adolph, but that wasn't all. He even acted like Adolph, so I guess that makes his character a clear enough picture for anyone to understand. You wouldn't have liked him either, unless you were landed here some dark night from a Nazi sub along with a load of sabotage equipment. In that case, to hell with you.

To top it all off, this guy's name was Adolph—Adolph Krummer. Crummy, I called him, and I meant it just the way it sounds.

We were in Krummer's study the day it all came to a head, and for ten minutes he had been pacing the floor in short, choppy strides, working himself into another of his nervous tantrums.

He hadn't paid me the least attention since calling me into the room. That was just one of his nasty little ways of scratching up a man's irritation. He liked to parade his importance. He knew I was afraid of him,

and he made a whip out of my fear.

He stopped his pacing and swung in behind his desk, sat down on the edge of his chair. He planted both of his soft white hands on the mahogany top of his desk and stared at me with mocking contempt in his black eyes, an irritating half smile on his thin mouth.

"You hate me, don't you, Hugo?" he said.

My name is Hugo Ditzmoir.

I looked at him levelly, and said, "Yes."

He seemed to find an inhuman pleasure in that. His chuckle was a sound like paper rubbing paper.

"You're afraid of me, aren't you, Hugo?"

I TRIED to get a grip on myself, but my temper slid out anyhow. He had an ugly way of whipping up a man's anger. He was like a man pulling strings of a puppet, and I might as well have tried to put mercy into Heinrich Himmler as to have held back my outburst.

"Why shouldn't I be?" I flared. Everything that had been damned up inside me for three weeks came pounding out. You can whip a man only so long, and then he cracks. Even if he's scared, he'll fight back. It was like a hot wind blowing across my brain. I kicked out of my chair, leaned across his desk, throwing my voice at him:

"Why shouldn't I be afraid of you? You live here in this country, smug and sure of yourself, playing kind and good because you've taken pains to build up that reputation, and all the while you've been working under cover with the Nazis. I couldn't prove that, but I can guess it from the way you've talked and acted."

Krummer's smile was a sneer. "Sometimes a man shouldn't guess too much," he said.

I should have been warned then. I didn't even realize what he said until later, and then it was too late.

"You didn't want a secretary when

you hired me. You just wanted someone you could play Fuehrer with, and you knew you'd be safe with me. Fear was your weapon. It would go hard on my relatives back in Holland if I didn't crawl to you every time you used the whip. Well, I'm not crawling any more."

What I said scared me. It scared him. I hadn't meant to go that far, but there was no turning back now. The way his sneer faded crowded hatred through my better judgment. I should have remembered what he could have done to my uncle and grandmother back in Holland, but I didn't. I had cracked his bluff. It was he who was scared now. It was in his eyes, in the sagging of his thin mouth.

"What do you mean?" he demanded hoarsely.

I laughed at him. "You know what I mean."

Panic got into his eyes, and he shrank back in his chair. His leg shifted, pushing against the floor as though to brace himself. There was a faint metallic humming sound that I was only vaguely conscious of.

"Don't kill me!" His voice was a thin scratching sound.

Maybe this sounds rough, but I enjoyed watching terror climb through his eyes. You'd have been just the same under the circumstances. Figure it out for yourself. For three weeks, day and night, he'd been shoving me around. I was born here, and I'm used to being treated like a free man, not dirt under the feet of a guy like Adolph Krummer. He'd cussed me, and slapped me around, even tried to make me "Heil" him when he came into the room. I don't go for that kind of stuff. Neither would you.

So I got a kick out of piling my threat against him.

"You ought to be killed," I said harshly. "You asked for what you're going to get."

I grabbed him by the front of his shirt, jerked him over the desk, twisted his collar tight until his face turned blue-red. All the while that

faint humming sound was sawing at the edge of my brain. Krummer's panic came out in a thin slavering cry.

"Hugo, in heaven's name!"

That's when I hit him. He saw the blow coming, and I thought there was a split instant when his panic changed to a flicker of grim satisfaction. But I wasn't sure. His head snapped back and he stumbled loosely against his desk chair. The chair toppled, and he struck the floor on one lax shoulder and his weight rolled him over on his back. He didn't move after that. He was out cold.

Or maybe he was dead then!

That was what I thought when I saw the headlines in the *Times-Journal* two days later. *Adolph Krummer Murdered!* That is what the newsboys yelled.

I bought a paper with my heart smashing against the walls of my chest. I was on Washington street, and the tide of the noon-hour crowd was hitting me from all sides. I backed into a doorway, and I thought the newsboy was watching me in an odd way. I turned toward the store window, and blood was beating against my temples like a trip-hammer. Everything in my mind was churning down one wild channel, like a voice shouting in every corner of my brain:

"Maybe you murdered him! Maybe you killed him when you hit him!"

That is what the newspaper said. Each black word jabbed its accusing finger into me.

Krummer's secretary, Hugo Ditmeir, hunted as killer! German-born philanthropist believed killed because of anti-Nazi activities. Slain by a shotgun blast, he had been dead two days before his body was discovered . . .

Killed by a shotgun! But I had only hit the man with my fist. I hadn't used that shotgun! I didn't even own one. But Krummer had owned one, a .16-gauge he had told me to replace in his gun rack one day. Someone had

murdered Krummer with Krummer's own weapon.

THERE was a picture of me on the front page of the paper, a duplicate of the photo on the chauffeur's license Krummer had insisted on my getting when he hired me.

I had been stunned at first, but now my thoughts were coming fast, scared thoughts that dropped like red-hot rivets through my mind. I was being hunted for murder! My picture was in the paper where every man in town could see it. I felt like an animal being driven into a trap. I tried to settle my thoughts and decide what to do.

I should give myself up. I was innocent. But that thought was crushed under another. I couldn't prove I was innocent. I couldn't prove anything because I was a little guy, and everybody knew and liked Adolph Krummer. He had built up a reputation with his philanthropies to local hospitals and relief agencies. Nobody would believe me.

Suddenly I realized I hadn't heard the newsboy's shout since I had bought my paper. I pulled my hat brim low, and turned away from the store window. The newsboy was still watching me, over his shoulder now, and he was weaving through the crowd toward a cop on the corner.

I looked away and tried to be casual as I moved away from the store to drift with the crowd. Instantly I heard the newsboy's shrill cry over the grumbling traffic.

"Hey, copper! There he goes—the guy that killed Krummer. I seen his pitcher in the paper! That's him in the straw hat—"

I threw my hat away. It's foolish, but I thought that would help me get away. You'll do a lot of foolish things and think you're being smart when you're scared. A man saw me throw my hat away, and stopped and stared at me. I lengthened my strides and shoved past him.

The cop's yell hit me from a dozen yards behind. "Hey, you!"

I broke into a wild run. A woman screamed "Here he is!" She was short and heavy, and she clawed at me as I went past her. It was all like a nightmare. I was running, but I couldn't run fast enough. My feet were like lead, and everything seemed to be in slow-motion, with yells and screams slicing the air from all sides.

Fists were swinging at me, hands were clawing, but I didn't feel them.

Someone was yelling wildly, "Nazi! Nazi! He murdered Ad Krummer!"

A man lunged at me and I knocked him back, and went past him without seeing him fall. The crowd thinned out, and I saw an alley close ahead, but there was a young fellow in a collegiate sweater at the mouth of the alley watching me tensely. His mouth was tight and his face was a little white. He had shoulders that seemed to fill the alley.

I tried to trick him, I swung out toward the street and then lunged sharply toward the alley. But I hadn't thrown him off balance. I guess he must have played a little football too. He hit me like a pile-driver just below my knees. I crashed to the pavement, rolled over, kicking savagely. I got free, but he was there in front of me when I plunged to my feet.

He said, "Nazi, are you!" and his fist was like an axe smashing against my jaw. I didn't even feel the mob clawing at me as I went down. . . .

A VOICE was saying, "You murdered Adolph Krummer!" when I came to.

I said, "No," and it was a hoarse, scared word. I opened my eyes, and there was a bright white light spilling down on me. It was hot, and I closed my eyes.

"You murdered Adolph Krummer!" another voice said. It was a thick and bludgeoning voice.

"I didn't kill him. I hit him, but I didn't kill him!"

I opened my eyes again, and there were vague black shapes all around me. I tried to get out of the chair I

was in, and a hand shoved me back.

A voice that was somehow a little kinder said, "You'd better come clean, boy. You're Hugo Ditmeir, aren't you? You were Krummer's secretary?"

"Yes, but—"

"You had a fight with Krummer, then ran away."

"But I didn't kill him!" I said hoarsely. "I didn't run away. I just left his place. I didn't kill him."

A man sneered. "He's clean and pure like all of his kind."

I tried to get to that voice, but was shoved back into my chair roughly. "I'm not a Nazi," I sobbed out.

The same voice said contemptuously, "He's cryin' like the rest of them will cry someday."

"Cut that out, Reagan!" It was the quiet voice again, almost sympathetic. "Look here, son. We don't like to do this to you. You can make it easier on yourself if you'll tell the truth. Believe me, you haven't got a chance. Any court in the country would convict you even if you don't confess. You might as well tell it all now. We've got the shotgun you used."

My thoughts were all tangled up. My head was filled with fear, and the white, hot glare of the light spilling down on me, and the stubborn, unbelieving pound of those voices.

I said, "But I didn't murder him, I tell you. It's the truth, can't you see that? We had a fight, and I hit him, but I didn't shoot him. You'd know that if you'd check the shotgun for finger—"

I broke that off. The thought came into my brain like an icy blade. If the killer was smart enough to let me take the blame for his job, he'd be smart enough to leave that gun clean. *I had handled that shotgun!* My prints were on it!

Reagan's voice sneered, "You got the idea, Ditmeir. Your prints were the only ones on that gun."

It was like a weight smothering my brain. I couldn't think.

The sympathetic voice filtered

through me. "Look here, son. I'm Lieutenant Webber, and I want to get this over with. I don't like this kind of work. I got a boy about your age. His name is Tommy, and he's in the army now. Were you going to be drafted?"

He seemed to be trying to make it easier for me. "Next month," I said dully. "But I didn't kill Krummer. What can I say to make you believe me?"

I didn't get an answer. I heard Lieutenant Webber say, "All right, Joe," and there was a movement beyond the smoke-traced rays from the flood lamp.

I thought, *I won't say I did it if they will me*, but that didn't make much impression in my mind. I suddenly knew that sooner or later I *would* confess, even if I hadn't committed the crime. Because there was a limit to how long a man could stand the inexorable hammering of these accusing voices. The heat and glare of the lamp did something to his brain. There wasn't any rest for a man when he got tired, always that stubborn battering of voice and light and heat until he no longer had the will to protest his innocence.

It would be like that, I thought. It seemed strange I didn't hate those detectives for what they were doing to me. It was their job, and they had their reasons, good reasons. They didn't mean any injustice. They had their evidence against me. They were convinced I was guilty, but there are loose threads in every law of justice. I had been caught in a tangle of those threads and the web of fate was rapidly closing an unbreakable net around me.

THE flood light blacked out and a ceiling light snapped on. The room seemed gray dark after the hot glare of the flood, but I could see the men who had questioned me more clearly. They were big and solid looking, with unmasked contempt in their eyes.

Only one of them was below average height and I knew instantly he would be Lieutenant Webber. His temples were shot with gray, and there were weather-wrinkles around his eyes, and there was a shadowy trace of bitterness around his mouth. He was a man who had never been able to form a crust to protect himself against the tragedies he had been brought in contact with. He had been marked by them, and showed it.

I said, "Thanks," as though he were an old friend. He bit his lips together faintly, and shrugged.

"Let's go," he said.

I stood up because I knew I was supposed to, and a detective started me toward a door. I didn't realize how much I had been beaten by that mob on the street until I began walking. Each muscle had its lump of pain in it, and my clothes were ripped in a dozen places.

I thought, *Are they going to beat me now?*

We went down a short, windowless hall, through another door and down an iron-railed coil of stairs. I could hear the faint rumbling of traffic through the wall. All the while I fought the fog of unreality that clogged my mind. My thoughts began to loosen up. This was real; it was life or death.

I was taking the blame for another man's killing. Someone had murdered Adolph Krummer after I had knocked him out and left the house. The killer had kept his fingerprints off the shotgun as a matter of self protection, and I had been framed by circumstances.

We went into a room that was oddly damp and cold. There were three long, waist-high tables, and a white sheet covered one, outlining the shape of a man's body. This was a morgue, somewhere in the same building that housed Police headquarters.

A little man wearing thick-lensed glasses straightened behind his desk, and Lieutenant Webber said, "That's all right, doc." The little man shrugged, and bent back to his papers.

They led me to the sheet-draped slab, and I could see a dictaphone on the other side of the body. It was the same model Adolph Krummer had kept in his study. I looked at Lieutenant Webber, but he wasn't watching me. He bent to the machine, and there was a click, then a scratching on the record cylinder.

A metallic voice—the voice of Adolph Krummer—said, "I have always tried to be a fair and just man. I am Adolph Krummer, and I have never willingly hurt any man. What I am doing now is for my own protection, and in the interest of Justice. Since hiring Hugo Ditmeir as my secretary, I have felt he has designs on my life. I am trying to give him the benefit of all doubt, and therefore am not discharging him from the work he apparently needs, nor am I bringing him to the attention of the authorities. However, I feel a recording such as this will be of great value to the police, should he make an attempt on my life at some future date."

Horror knifed through me. So this was why he had sat behind his desk when he had baited me into those arguments! He had been recording my voice, building up a case against me.

He must have wanted me to kill him!

It was fantastic, unbelievable.

Through the dictaphone, my voice damned me. "You're a damn Judas, Krummer. You can't get away with this for long. The time is coming when you'll be paid off."

The voice ended abruptly on the metallic scratching of the needle on the record.

I said harshly. "But he didn't record it all. Only *my* voice. He was a Nazi agent and he threatened to have my uncle and grandmother in Holland killed if I didn't—"

A detective flat-handed me against the cement wall with a flare of temper. "You dirty liar! Ad Krummer was one of the finest men in this city for

twenty years. Don't try to throw your filth on him."

He jerked the sheet off the slab. "Take a look at your work, and then try to lie out of that!"

There was Adolph Krummer just as I had seen him last, only his face was torn and ugly, made that way by the blast of the shotgun. He had on the same dark tie and white shirt, splashed now with dry, red-brown splotches.

I tried to say, "I didn't do it," but my voice wouldn't come. I could only stare.

MY VOICE broke the scratching of the dictaphone. "Damn you, Krummer, don't preach that to me." I remembered that day a week ago when he had told me I should turn Nazi. "I know where I stand. You'll change sides if you know what's good for you."

I squeezed back against the wall, trying to escape my own voice. Each word was like a hot hammer pounding my brain. My finger slid into a hole in the wall, and I felt the harsh tingle of current from an empty plug socket, but that didn't mean anything to me then.

Krummer had wanted me to kill him! That was all I could think of. Why? For what reason? There was no reason. It didn't make sense. No man wanted to die. No one in his right mind would try to goad a man into murdering him. Yet the dictaphone recording, the way Krummer had got my fingerprints on his shotgun, showed a cold-blooded planning to that end.

Krummer's body wore that same gray suit and part of his left pants cuff was down, showing a trace of lint and dust that had collected in the fold. I stared at it, and it began to mean something.

A line in the newspaper came back to me. Krummer had a half brother, an only relative named John Krummer, who had taken a plane here. John had been vacationing on Atlantic

City, if I remembered right, but I wasn't sure. There were a dozen wild thoughts funneling through the core of my mind.

Was that a small callous on the index finger of the corpse's right hand? But that didn't mean anything. Nothing would mean anything unless I got out of there for a while. A short while, my thoughts begged, an hour, or just a few minutes.

Lieutenant Webber was watching me with weary accusation, and I thrust my hands into my pockets. I felt a quarter, the two pennies the newsboy had given me in change. I singled out a penny, gripped it.

"Are you ready to confess now, Hugo?" the detective lieutenant asked.

I shook my head, raking the room with desperate eyes. I took my hand out of my pocket, flattened myself against the wall over the light-plug box.

My voice coming out of the dictaphone was like the verdict of a jury, the squeeze of a hangnoose, the inexorable finality of an electric chair.

"You hate me, don't you Hugo?"

"Yes."

A humming pause.

My voice again. "You ought to be killed. You asked for what you're going to get."

Adolph Krummer's plea. "Hugo, in heaven's name!"

There was the blast of a shotgun. I thought, "So I was framed!" The killer had switched on the dictaphone when he had fired his murder blast!

I pushed the penny into the plug box. I felt pain rip through my fingers; there was a sputter and crackle, then the room lights went dead.

A man shouted, "Get him!"

I dived to one side, and felt groping hands scrape across my shoulder. I ran toward the door through which I had entered the room and halted without touching it. There was a light outside showing through a crack in the door, a light on another circuit.

I would be seen the instant I opened that door.

Lieutenant Webber's voice came quietly through the tangle of noises. "Don't shoot unless you're forced."

I faded to one side toward another door I had marked, and bumped into the coroner coming away from his desk. He uttered a startled cry and then I found his jaw and hit it.

Webber's voice said, "To the left—he's over there."

There was a scuff of shoes through the blackness, and I sent the coroner's sagging body toward those sounds. A man yelped, "What the—here he is! I got him! Strike a match, somebody!"

The other door opened onto an alley drive, and it was dark outside. I don't think they saw me when I went through. I broke into a run and I didn't stop until I was two blocks away, back on Washington Street.

I CAUGHT a cab and gave the driver Adolph Krummer's address and sat there on the edge of the seat while he threaded through the night traffic. We hadn't traveled two blocks when the sirens began squalling. The sounds raked the town from all sides, wild and ugly, like the blood cry of a wolf pack.

The driver called back over his shoulder. "Something big must have happened."

I said, "5548 Guilford, and I'm in a hurry."

There was a light in Krummer's study when we drove up. The street seemed empty, but when I climbed out of the cab there were suddenly plain-clothes cops all around me. I didn't have a chance to break away.

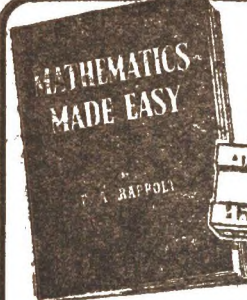
Lieutenant Webber said, "You had a good hunch, Joe." And then to me, "You're not smart, son."

I said, "Take me inside, Lieutenant. That's all I want."

He frowned, watching me intently. "Why should we?"

I didn't know how to answer him. "I'm not sure, but—"

He shook his head wearily. "You're



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not the only work we have to do, son."

I broke in desperately. "If you want a confession, you'll have to take me inside."

John Krummer met us at the door and led us into the study. He was shorter than Adolph, and where Adolph's face had been sallow, John's showed the fresh burn of the sun. A question was in his glance, but he said nothing until we got into the study and then he spoke quietly:

"This must be the man who killed my brother."

Nobody answered him. They were watching me, waiting. I didn't know what to do, where to start. I didn't have much to go on. I turned to the lieutenant.

I said, "I'd like to go upstairs first."

He shrugged. I went to Krummer's room, with Webber close behind me. It was a simple room, and Krummer had had the reputation of being an unpretentious man who didn't parade his wealth.

There was a comb on the dressing table, and I looked at the black hairs in the teeth. I handed it to Webber, and asked him to pocket it, and his eyes were sharp and bright on me. I opened the closet door, but what I had faintly expected to find wasn't there. It was a disappointment that shook the thin framework of hope I had built up.

We returned to the study, and hostility clamped tight around me. They were all impatient, watching me as though on guard against some trick. I turned to John Krummer.

"Would you give me a cigarette?"

He shrugged. He shook a cigarette out of a pack into his right hand and I took it.

"A light?" I asked.

He handed me a paper packet of matches, and I gave it to Webber. "You do it," I said. Webber's eyes were like drills boring into mine. I sucked smoke into my lungs, but it didn't settle the jumping of my nerves.

The silence that dropped through the room was something that had a taste and smell to it. Webber showed plainly that he sensed something going on and couldn't understand it. The rest of the detectives were getting irritable as their patience frayed out. John Krummer was calmly impersonal.

I said to Krummer, "I came here to make a statement. Would you mind writing it down?"

Krummer hesitated. Webber said intently, "It would help, Mr. Krummer. There's something smelly here. Joe, watch the windows. Mack, take the door. Ditmeir, you've already used up your luck. Be careful."

JOHAN KRUMMER sat down behind the desk, lay a sheet of paper before him, picked up a pen. I took a long breath. Krummer was waiting, expectant. He was left-handed.

I said, "I, Hugo Ditmeir, herein accuse John Krummer of murdering his half-brother—"

Krummer stopped writing, jerked out of his chair, his face draining pale behind its overlay of burn. He swore harshly. "You're crazy."

Lieutenant Webber snapped sharp and brittle, "Ditmeir, I've heard your last lie!"

Krummer dropped his pen, and backed away from the desk. Webber started toward me, but something in my tone halted him. I was desperate, and I sounded desperate. He was a cop, but he was not too hard. I had counted on this sympathetic streak in him. I spoke quick and sharp, hitting John Krummer with my words.

"You're the man I thought was Adolph Krummer. It was you who hired me, because you had to have somebody to fill in your plan to get your brother's money. You had to have someone to take the blame for your crime."

Krummer said, "You're crazy!"

Webber said intently, "He doesn't even look like Ad Krummer."

"There's enough of a family re-



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semblance to fool me," I said. "I'd never seen Adolph Krummer before, only a news photo or two. No, John Krummer doesn't look like his brother entirely. He's shorter, thinner, but there's no great difficulty in a man filling out the contours of his face. You can buy gadgets from any magic store to do that, and it didn't take much.

"John is shorter than Adolph, but you can buy shoes out of any maga-
zine ad to give the illusion of an in-
creased inch or so in height. That's
what you did, Krummer, and it
shouldn't be hard to prove."

His eyes were turning bright and I
could see fear beginning to shake the
little muscles of his face. But it wasn't
a thing anyone else would notice.

I went on harshly, "That suit of
yours is just like the one on Adolph
Krummer's body."

Krummer sneered. "There are men
all over town wearing suits like mine."

I crowded him hard, trying to
break his confidence. "But you bought
your suit after the cuffless law went
into effect. When you were posing as
your half-brother, you had no cuffs
on your trousers, but you have now.
They're turned up to make allowance
for the difference in length, because
you were wearing your height-in-
creasing shoes when you bought that
suit."

I didn't give him a chance to speak.
His confidence was beginning to
crack.

"You hired me as Adolph Krum-
mer, and played Nazi agent and
threatened me just to make me hate
you. You baited me into arguments
just to record some of the things I
said in your dictaphone. You tricked
me into putting my fingerprints on
that shotgun and all the while you had
the real Adolph Krummer tied up
somewhere in this house.

"After I fought with you the other
day, you brought your half-brother in
here, turned on the dictaphone, and
killed him. That completed framing

me. Then you went somewhere to soak up a lot of sun until Krummer's body was found. But if you'd been in Atlantic City as you claimed in the papers, your sunburn wouldn't be as fresh as it is."

Hatred was a snake crawling around in John Krummer's black eyes. He was cracking up, fast.

"Adolph Krummer was right-handed," I said harshly, "and there are men all over town who will testify to that. But the Krummer I knew—you—was left-handed. You can't lie out of that. You use the fine-toothed section of a comb, gripping the coarse half with your left hand. The comb Webber and I found upstairs in the room you used had loose hairs tangled in it. They could have been put in the position they're in only by a left-handed man.

"You shook out the cigarette you gave me into your right hand, opposite to the way a normal man would have done it. The matches you used out of the packet you gave me had been torn from the left side. Lieutenant Webber is right-handed. When he lit my cigarette he tore his match out of the unused right side of the packet. You started to write down my statement with your left hand, and when the police check the ad you placed in the newspaper to hire me they'll find Adolph Krummer's name had been signed by a left-handed man. By you, killer."

John Krummer's nerve broke. I knew every thought and emotion that flared through his brain, because I had experienced each of them myself. I knew just what he would do before he did it, because I knew just how it was to be trapped and wanting only to escape. An animal feeling, primitive and savage.

And when he baited the detective away from the door with his quick legs, I was there in front of him. He slugged me, but I hardly felt it. He was wide open, too scared to use caution. It wasn't hard to do. He went down like a log when I hit him.

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WHEN they had the cuffs on him and were leading him to the door, Lieutenant Webber turned and looked at me, half smiling.


"You've got an official apology coming," he said. "And if you need work until you're drafted, I may be able to hunt up something."

"I figured on enlisting," I told him. "That right?"

"If they'll take me," I said. He grinned strangely. "Funny," he said. "That's just what my boy said nearly a year ago. He's overseas now—Ireland—and raising seven kinds of hell because they won't let him make a one-man raid across the channel. Great boy, Tommy. He could use a sidekick like you."

Coming from Webber, that was worth more than any apology I could get from the police department.

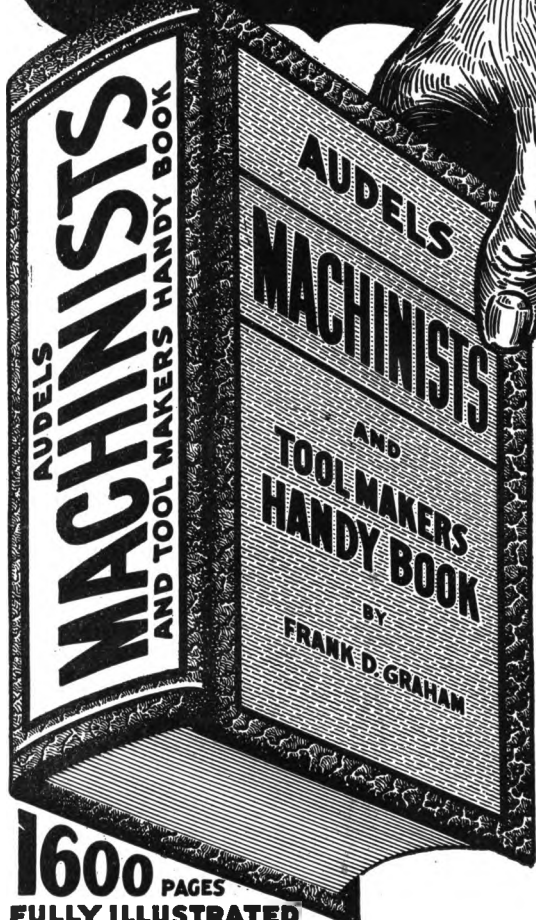
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