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By Talmage Powell

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MARCH, 1945

Vol. L, No. 4

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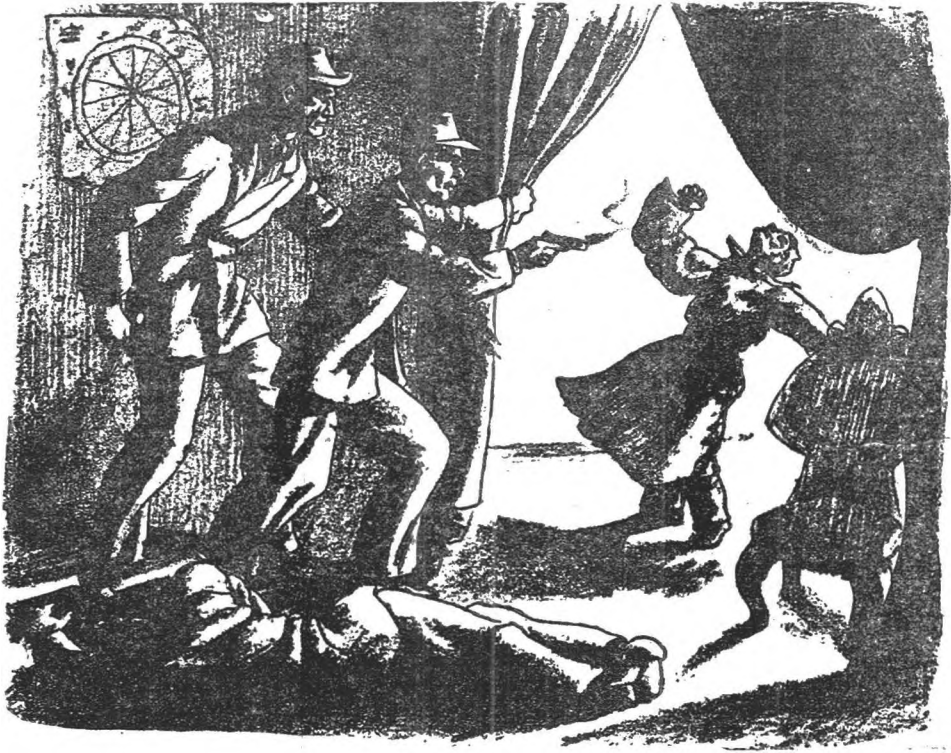
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Dead— But Still Kicking



By Talmage Powell

CHAPTER I

ALL AFTERNOON I had done nothing more exciting than yawn and play solitaire. Across the office from me, at his battered roll-top desk, Abner Murder avidly read a magazine and ate cream puffs. He'd absorbed possibly half a dozen of the cream-filled pastries and I was on the seventeenth game of solitaire, when I heard the quick pecking of spike heels stop before our office door.

I scooped the cards to one side; the chief popped the remainder of the cream puff in his mouth. When the door opened each of us was riffling through a sheaf of papers as if we had all the business in the world.

The woman came forward hesitantly as I laid aside the papers. She was tall and well-built, dressed in black, with only a faint hint of grey in her chestnut hair giving a clue to her real age.

"Mr. Murder and Mr. Jordan?" Her

voice was soft, cultured, but underlying it was a strained, shaken note.

The chief gulped down the mouthful of cream puff. "I'm Murder. What can we do for you, Miss . . . ?"

For a moment she didn't answer. The taut expression on her face, the rigid way she held her body, gave way faintly to shock as she looked at Murder. Her gaze roved over him and his chubby face darkened a little. It never fails—people always believe they're being kidded when they look at the chief's tubby Santa Claus body, his pink, plump cheeks and baby blue eyes, and then learn that his name is Murder.

Under the woman's surprised scrutiny, Murder's smile became grimly sour. I said quickly, "Will you sit down, please?"

With a little start, she realized she had embarrassed Murder and took the chair I indicated.

"I'm Natalie Ferguson," she said, the

Intriguing Mystery Novelet

Is it homicide if the corpse is brought back to life? Detective Abner Murder had to solve that when he tangled with those resurrectionist racketeers. For the one sure victim they'd leave permanently dead would be kill-candidate Abner himself.

strain coming back into her face once more. "Mrs. Horace Ferguson. I want to hire a detective."

In a flash, Murder's smile was sprinkled with honey. He perched on the edge of my desk. "You have come to the proper place, Mrs. Ferguson. Our reputation as champions of justice, conscientious workers is unchallenged. Just what sort of service do you need?"

She fumbled in her large, expensive leather handbag, took out a folded sheet torn from a newspaper. "Do you know my husband?"

Murder screwed up his innocent-looking face thoughtfully. He recited, "Mr. Horace Ferguson. A gentleman of the first water. Retired from business five years ago. Quiet, unassuming, a solid citizen. Lived the life of a bachelor until he married you, Mrs. Ferguson, two years ago. Has no known relatives, no vices."

She was looking at the chief now with a new sort of surprise—and respect. He broke off and smiled easily. "Merely one of the duties of a good private detective, Mrs. Ferguson, to know the leading citizens of his own city."

That was one point the chief was a stickler on. We kept a very complete file.

"Then," she said brokenly, "you know what's happened?"

WE DIDN'T know anything had happened and the chief prepared to stall. He was given relief by Mrs. Ferguson opening the newspaper with trembling fingers.

"Perhaps you haven't seen this, Mr. Murder. This edition came out only a few minutes ago." She sat twisting her hands as we read the printed words. The story was by-lined by a star reporter.

POLICE SEARCH FOR RECIPIENT OF DEATH PROMISE

Since early morning the police of this city have been searching for Horace C. Ferguson who disappeared from his home in Glendale Heights sometime during the night. It is believed that Ferguson is in hiding after receiving a terse note promising him death. The police and also this reporter received

copies of the note, postmarked in this city yesterday.

The note stated simply that Horace Ferguson would die. Upon receiving their copy of it the police made a routine call on Ferguson and discovered that he had fled. Ferguson's wife knew nothing of the affair, nor the whereabouts of her husband.

A strange complication occurred in this bizarre affair at noon today when this reporter received a phone call from a person who identified himself as Doctor Walter Dooley. Doctor Dooley stated that years ago he had begun experiments in which Horace Ferguson was interested. As a result of his interest, Horace Ferguson had willed his body to be delivered to Doctor Dooley within twenty-four hours after death.

Doctor Dooley stated that he had phoned the Ferguson home on a business matter and had learned of the disappearance of Horace Ferguson. Doctor Dooley attempted to ascertain from this reporter the success of the police search thus far. In the event that the unknown writer's threat is carried out, Doctor Dooley stated emphatically that he would return Horace Ferguson to life.

Police have searched for the doctor, but thus far have learned only that no Doctor Dooley has been practicing in this city.

I whistled softly. Murder slowly folded the news story and handed it back to Natalie Ferguson. She controlled herself with a shaking effort.

"You must find him, Mr. Murder! To have all this publicity..." She shuddered. "Horace has always hated publicity; that's why he's lived so quietly. His past is a closed book to me. But he mentioned once in a melancholy mood that evil publicity about his father, who committed suicide when Horace was a very young man, had worried his mother into her grave. He'd do anything to avoid stories such as this, Mr. Murder. That's why he ran away quietly. You must find him—find him without furor, protect him, and return him to me!"

Rising anxiety and fear became too strong to control. She dropped her head on the desk, her shoulders shaking with sobs.

Murder quieted her. I gave her a healthy drink out of the bottle in my desk.

She only sipped it, and I tossed off the rest.

"Now," Murder said gently. "Tell us all you know of this affair."

"I know nothing," she said, "except what I've read in the papers. But Horace evidently is afraid and ran away. Knowing him as I do, he didn't want to worry me and create publicity. When we retired last night, he mumbled something about taking a business trip to-day."

"When I awoke this morning, finding him gone, I assumed that he was on his trip. Then when the police came and showed me the note they'd received, I knew the truth. Fearing for his life, Horace had decided to hide quietly until the danger was past."

"What about this Doctor Dooley?"

She bit her lips, held back tears. "I know nothing of him. It's quite likely that he might know Horace. My husband was never a confidential person. It's a mania with him not to be confidential."

"Is he the sort of person to will his body to an experimenting doctor?" Murder asked.

"I—I don't know. He might—if he were really interested in the experiments. But experiments like this! Dooley said he would return my husband to life, resurrect him, should he be killed!" She shuddered.

Murder gently helped her to her feet. "We'll do the very best we can for you. All our many years of hard-gained experience are at your service." He sounded achingly virtuous. He nodded to me.

"Luke, will you get the checkbook from the desk drawer, please?"

I got the checkbook out, handed Natalie Ferguson a pen. She looked questioningly at Murder. He took a deep breath, held it, smiled, and said, "We will see the affair to a complete finish for, say, a thousand dollars?"

She flinched, then said, "To a complete finish, Mr. Murder." And wrote the lovely check.

THE broad, bald, thick-lipped face of hulking Lieutenant Tim Brogardus darkened angrily as Murder and I pushed into his office. He chomped his cigar. "Ab Murder—here at headquarters! Now we've got to fumigate the place! Haven't they revoked your shamus license yet?"

Murder bit back a retort. "You wound me. I came to offer friendship, Tim."

"Honest, Tim," I said, "we're serious."

He eyed Murder narrowly, not quite believing it. "It can't be that you've read the papers about a killer giving notice to Ferguson? That you're hunting a fee?"

Murder said with perfect, beguiling naturalness, "Tim, I'm honest with you. I've already got the fee. I'm pitching in for all I'm worth." He sat on the edge of Tim's desk.

"If we work together, old pal, we'll be that much more effective. You know what an affair of this sort—a killer giving advance notice of his show—will do to the department, Tim, in the event that Dooley is croaked. The whole town'll be after your scalp."

"So you want to bargain?" Brogardus said hesitantly. I sensed a note of eagerness in his voice. Tim knew as well as anybody around town that behind Murder's baby-blue eyes was a keen brain.

"That's right," Murder said easily. "We've been at each other's throats long enough, spent a lot of good energy scrapping that could have been put to a better use."

"That's true," Tim mused.

"So from now on," I put in, "we work together. And you take plenty of bows for the reporters and photogs, Tim. It's good business."

Tim threw a pencil he was toying with on the desk with a decisive gesture. "It's a deal. Now—what do you know about Ferguson?"

"Nothing," the chief said. "We were just hired thirty minutes ago."

"Tim's face darkened. 'Is that why—'"

"Nix, Tim," the chief said. "I don't know now, but I will before this case is over. Don't go back on your bargain just because at the moment . . ."

"Don't get me wrong, Ab," Brogardus slapped the chief on the back, "I'm going back on no bargain. See that you don't. I was hoping you knew something. Because the department doesn't know a damn thing!"

"What about the note you got?" Murder asked.

"Not a fingerprint on it. It had been written by cutting letters out of the newspaper and pasting them on a white sheet of note paper."

The chief thought this over, jumping a little as Tim's telephone screamed in the momentary silence.

Brogardus picked up the phone. As he listened, his heavy jaw dropped. He rose slightly out of his chair. "Who is this? Hey! Don't hang up! Clancy! Out there on the switchboard, Clancy! Trace that call!"

He slammed the phone down, jammed his hat on his bald head. We caught him at the door.

"The bargain, Tim," Murder reminded.

Tim's voice was sour, grudging. "It's your luck to chisel in at the payoff! Some dame just told us where we could find

Horace Ferguson. In a cheap rooming house at Thirteen-fifteen Pratt Street. She said to bring the medical examiner. Ferguson, she thought, is dead!"

AS WE roared to a stop before the grimy structure of Thirteen-fifteen Pratt Street, two cars skidded to a halt across the street. Four reporters from two different papers spilled out of the cars. Murder, Tim, myself, a blue-coated cop, and the puffing medical examiner were almost swamped by the reporters as we hurried up the grimy stone steps.

One of them yelled, "A dame phoned me, Brogardus. What gives?"

Tim thrust them aside, charged on up the steps. They tagged along. The whole crew of us banged inside the house. A trembling landlady in a voluminous apron confronted us.

Tim shouted, "Where's the room you rented last night to Horace Ferguson?"

At the sigh of all this officialdom, she backed up. "Ferguson?"

"Oh, hell, then maybe he rented the room under another name. A small man with a long face, black eyes, very quiet . . ."

"That's Mr. Smith. In Room Nine at the head of the stairs."

The flood of cops and reporters surged by her. Tim drew back his bulk to smash the door of Room Nine down. But a key grated in the lock. The door swung open.

A smiling, fence-rail man dressed in baggy grey was framed in the doorway. His bald head was hunched forward on his thin shoulders. His face had an intense look; the smile made you think of a grinning skull.

His burning eyes swept over us. "How do you do, gentlemen? I am Doctor Walter Dooley. I arrived a moment ago in response to a phone call from some young lady, unknown to me who . . ."

Tim shoved the doctor to one side. He pointed to the man lying on the cheap, paint-peeling iron bed. "Is that Horace Ferguson?"

Doctor Dooley nodded. "Shameful. He's dead."

The medical examiner pushed by us, touched Horace Ferguson's face. He pulled back Ferguson's eyelids. "Doctor Dooley is right. This man has been dead for hours. He's cold. Rigor mortis is even beginning to give way to cadaveric flaccidity. From the looks of the pupils of his eyes I would say he has been poisoned. You'd better call in the homicide tech man, Brogardus."

One of the reporters had been edging nearer. "What was that statement you made, Doctor Dooley, about bringing Ferguson back?"

The skull-like head bobbed. "Quite true. Several years ago, I began experiments. Resuscitated a few rabbits. Mr. Ferguson became quite interested when I wrote to him—I knew Mr. Ferguson in another city many years ago. My experiments completed, he promised me his body in the interest of science. But now," he shook his head sadly, "under these circumstances, I fear the body belongs to the police."

"You're darn right it does!" Brogardus shouted. Then he whirled, with the rest of us, as a piercing scream came from downstairs. It was the housekeeper, sounding as if she, too, was getting acquainted with death. The reporters went white as the scream poured up the stairs.

Brogardus was rattled a moment, whirled to the blue-coated cop, "Stay here, Milligan." All of us, except for Milligan and Doctor Dooley, were on Tim's heels as he clattered down the stairs.

WE HEARD a pounding and sobbing behind a door at the back end of the hall. We surged into the close, gloomy depths of the house. Tim yanking at the doorknob. It took us almost five minutes to smash the door down. Its ancient oak was well-seasoned; in its day, this old brownstone house had been firmly constructed.

The door gave with a screaming of tortured hinges. Neighbors were swarming in the hall and with the reporters' babbling, it was a scene of utter confusion. The landlady was huddled in the back of the closet, midst stacks of dingy linens.

Brogardus hauled the near-hysterical woman out. "It was awful," she sobbed. "The man came walking in the front door. Without saying a word, he pulled a long knife. He shoved me in the closet, slammed the door, and I heard him running out of the house."

"Did you know him?" the chief asked.

"I've never seen him before."

Brogardus scanned the crowd in the hallway. "By now," he said bleakly, "the man will probably be a dozen blocks from here." His face set in lines of angry frustration, he let out a roar that sent the crowd surging back.

"Get out of here! All of you! One of you reporters call headquarters, get me some help down here." He bellowed again at the crowd, "I'll arrest every person that ain't out of this hall in five seconds."

As the hall cleared, we tramped heavily back up the stairs. The M. E. mopped his brow and shook his head. Brogardus muttered sourly under his breath. The reporters, except for the one who had gone to phone, clung to our heels.

We got back to Room Nine. The door was closed. Tim rattled the knob. The door was also locked, no answer coming from inside. Cursing softly, he threw his weight against the door. The chief and I added ours. Gradually the door gave, smashed to the floor.

Milligan, the blue-coated cop, was sitting in the middle of the floor dazedly holding a lump on his head. Doctor Dooley and the corpse of quiet little Horace Ferguson were gone.

Tim shook Milligan until the bluecoat's teeth rattled. "What happened?"

Milligan climbed slowly to his feet. "It happened so fast I don't hardly know."

"You darn well better know!" Brogardus raged, "or I'll have your shield!"

"You'd no sooner got down the steps," Milligan gulped, "than that closet door there opened and two men sprang out. One jabbed his gun in my ribs and told me to keep quiet. The other covered Doctor Dooley and said, 'Doc, we're taking the corpse—and you're going along.' Then the yegg covering me tapped me on the head. That's all I know."

"Part of it is clear enough," Murder said. "The attack against the housekeeper was staged to give the boys in the closet time to do their work up here. Evidently they went out the fire escape, with the corpse, to a car waiting in the alley. They're blocks from here by now, what with us breaking down two doors, clearing out the confusion."

"Mulligan, how did Doctor Dooley look when the yegg threw the gun on him?"

"I thought he'd croak from fear," the cop said. "He actually turned green."

"Did you recognize the yeggs? This piece of devilry indicates plenty of planning and organization."

Milligan mopped his brow. "I'll say! The rodmen that jumped out of the closet were Harry Brewer's boys."

"Wow!" I said. "Brewer only has more men working for him than there are cops on the force. Are we in for a merry time!"

Brogardus nearly had apoplexy.

CHAPTER II

THE house that Horace Ferguson had built in his publicity-hating lifetime was a castle-like structure of wood, painted white, with plenty of eaves and gables and a long, cool porch. Natalie Ferguson answered our ring. She stepped back from the front door, invited us in.

"I have something very difficult to tell you," the chief said.

Her face whitened. "He—he's dead . . . ?"

Murder nodded. Natalie Ferguson swayed, closing her eyes. We sprang beside her. In a strangled voice, she managed, "I'm . . . I'm all right. I won't faint on you."

She went in a huge living room, dropped in a chair. I spotted some brandy, poured her a small one. She took it gratefully.

"Tell me," she said with quiet control.

Murder told her the whole thing, asked if she knew of any connection between her husband and Harry Brewer. She said that she knew of none.

The chief rose. "If you don't mind, Mrs. Ferguson, I'd like to look over your husband's room."

She rose with grief-laden heaviness, and we followed her upstairs. Horace Ferguson's room was big, rambling, with an antique bed, and bureau to match. Murder stood in the middle of the floor, looking the room over carefully. Then he crossed to the bureau, knelt, and reached under it. His hand withdrew holding a half-filled bottle of shaving lotion. He handled it gingerly, wrapping it in a handkerchief and dropping it in his pocket.

He looked around the room once more. "You certainly have an excellent housekeeper, Mrs. Ferguson. My wife would like to steal her."

I frowned at him, wondering why he had taken that bottle of shaving lotion, which had been hidden from my view by the bureau. I also wondered about the remark concerning the Ferguson housekeeper. But Murder seemed to know what he was doing, watching Natalie's face closely.

She drew a startled little gasp. "That reminds me, Mr. Murder! The shock of learning—of my husband, made me forget for a moment. But while I was out today, there was a prowler in this house!"

"A prowler?" I asked.

She nodded. "You see, all the servants are gone today. I can't imagine why a prowler should have come here. Nothing's been stolen. I wouldn't have even known anyone had been here if a chair downstairs hadn't been misplaced. I got so looking then, from basement to attic. Nothing had been taken. But the dusty doorknob to the attic interested me very much."

Murder's chubby face glowed. "Yes?"

She frowned. As if we might not believe her, she said haltingly, "Somebody came in this house while I was gone and polished all the doorknobs!"

I know from the way they felt that my eyes goggled. Murder stared also. Natalie Ferguson looked from one to the

other of us in a half-frightened manner. "It's true, I tell you!"

The chief broke in easily, "And we believe you, Mrs. Ferguson. We'll drop around again later. Good day."

We rode a cab back uptown. I asked the chief why he had snatched the half-filled bottle of shaving lotion. All I got was, "I'm trying to think faster than a killer, Luke. Now pipe down and don't disturb me." He was in a deep haze all the way downtown. Those blue eyes of his, thoughtful now, were not looking so baby-like.

We got out of the cab in front of the Oates Building. Night was creeping over the world and I was getting hungry. But I knew there'd be no letup in Murder's surge of energy for awhile now.

ENTERING the Oates Building, little tingles began to chase along my spine. Harry Brewer's offices were here, on the third floor. We walked up. I patted my hip pocket to make sure the old equalizer was still there. Brewer liked to play rough.

A light glowed behind the glazed glass of the office. The legend on the door read, *Harry Brewer, Sports Promoter*. That, of course, was only a front. From this office he ran a big string of baseball pools, shady books, collected tax on the poker and sundry other games of chance around town that moved from hotel room to hotel room. The big games that didn't have to move nightly were Brewer's own.

A blonde with a chiseled face was slipping into a tweed coat in the outer office. Anger was etched on her garish face.

The chief said, "Is Mr. Brewer in?"

"How should I know? I only been working three hours overtime today!" She flounced toward the door. "Try that office there!" She huffed out.

We tried the office marked, *Mr. Brewer, Private*.

Brewer looked up from back of his desk as we entered. The office was probably Brewer's conception of the office of a Hollywood producer—huge desk, indirect lighting, pastel rug in which you sank to your ankles.

Mr. Brewer himself was a mass of muscle, his face a mass of scar tissue. He'd come up in the world in the old school of rough and readiness. No matter how much polish he tried to affect, that face of his was a reminder of a couple years as a barroom bouncer.

"You're Abner Murder." His piggy eyes flicked to me. "And you must be Luke Jordan."

"We're flattered," the chief made a little bow, the mockery of which caused Brewer's heavy, twisted lips to tighten.

We moved forward in the room. Harry Brewer stood up straight behind his desk. His clothes had been tailored to make him look slim, but there was enough muscle in evidence on his arms and bulging chest to make my mouth dry. I'm supposed to be the strongarm half of our agency, while Murder does the brainwork. I didn't fancy strongarming Harry Brewer.

Pleasant enough, Brewer said, "What's on your mind?"

"Murder," the chief said.

Brewer didn't say anything.

Abner Murder continued, "A short while ago, one Horace Ferguson, who didn't have an enemy in the world—much, was murdered. His corpse was stolen by two men identified by a cop as working for you. Now give."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Babyface, and I don't like the tone of your voice." Brewer stalked around the desk like a lumbering bear. "While you're healthy, there's the door."

Murder laughed thinly. "We've faced your kind before, Brewer. Every town has your kind. They never last. Because too many guys like me and Luke know what to do with them." Murder eased to one side, using the old stunt of putting Brewer between us.

"The cops, Brewer, maybe sometimes get entangled with legal processes. Unless they've got evidence against you, they can't touch you. But Luke and I don't have those restrictions, eh, Luke?"

All the hunger I'd been feeling had congealed in a cold, unappetizing lump in the pit of my stomach. I forced a hearty note into my voice, "Sure thing, chief!"

With a shamus on each flank, Brewer hesitated. He hunched his shoulders threateningly. "You guys don't know what you're letting yourself in for! When I—"

He broke off as the door across the room flung open. Whoever opened the door, spoke, before he saw Murder and me. "Everything's set, Harry. We got the corpse and—" The dark, thin man broke off as he saw the chief and me. He was held rigid, staring at Murder's automatic.

"Come in," the chief said grimly, "and finish your story. Brewer, your boss, was just feeding us a pack of lies."

With a bulllike bellow, Brewer flung himself at the chief. I swung from the floor, gun in hand. But the gun barrel only clipped Brewer's shoulder. It was like hitting rock.

He smashed Murder in the chest with his hamlike fist. The blow sounded like a huge kettle drum. Enough, I thought in

that flashing instant, to stop the chief's heart. Murder dive-bombed the wall with a thud, tottered to his feet.

I hit Brewer once, laid open his cheek with the gun barrel. Then those huge arms found their way around me, and I felt my ribs cracking. The door through which the dark, thin man had come spilled a small army of the thin man's chums. They swarmed over the chief. I saw him go down under about four of them.

Brewer tossed me into the arms of the pack that surged our way. It was give and take—with those boys giving and me taking. Then one of them had the mercy to remove me from my agony with a blackjack.

I WOKE UP sitting in one of Brewer's tan, leather-upholstered chairs. Murder was sitting near me, shaking his head groggily. A big blue lump perched on his right cheek.

Brewer planted his feet before us. "You guys came here to get me to talk. All right. I'll say one thing. The cops haven't got a thing on me. Unless there's a body they can't prove murder. Neither can they prove I swiped a body, until they can produce it. That ought to be clear even to you.

"I'm gonna be good and ready if you two ever poke your noses around here again, understand? It'll be a pleasure to shoot a couple of trespassers. Now get out of here. And stay out!"

He nodded to the men encircling us. The chief and I were grabbed by half a dozen pairs of hands attached to human bodies in which the milk of human kindness had long ago curdled. The hands dragged us through the front office, down the corridor, and gave us an ungentle heave down the stairway. I managed to keep my skull from getting fractured until I crashed to a stop on the landing. The chief almost crushed my ribs as he bounced end over end down the stairway, thudding on top of me.

I lay there a moment, gagging with pain. Murder helped me to my feet. A white deadliness had taken the pink from his cheeks. His eyes were chips of cold, blue ice.

"We're gonna get Harry Brewer, Luke!"

"That makes me feel swell. However, I might add, when?"

Dusting himself off, he said, "In due time. Too many rods around him now."

I didn't say it, but it occurred to me that when Due Time came, I'd as soon be on my vacation.

We repaired our appearance as well as we could with our handkerchiefs, went

downstairs to the street. Darkness was almost complete, street lights glowing like overgrown fireflies. I leaned against the wall of the building a moment, letting my head clear in the cooling twilight air.

A yelling newsboy passed and Murder bought a paper. It was there—all over the front page. The four reporters had done their jobs well, sensing the biggest story to break in the city in a long while.

They recounted the death notice given to Horace Ferguson. They told his flight; his murder; of the disappearance, under the very nose of Brogardus, who represented Law, of the dead body of Ferguson. I felt a little sorry for Tim. The reporters jibed mercilessly with the fact that he couldn't prove murder without a corpus delicti, and he'd let the corpse get snatched.

The story also made capital use of the fact that the mysterious Doctor Dooley, who'd promised to resurrect Ferguson, had been kidnaped along with the corpse. Wild speculation had it that Dooley would be forced to perform his experiment. One feature writer went into great detail, recalling the work of Doctor Alexis Carrel, who had invented a mechanical heart back in the thirties and had actually sustained organic life with the apparatus.

MURDER crushed the paper in his hands. He stepped to the curb, whistled at a cab, and we got in.

I kept mulling the idea over. After awhile I said, "Chief, what if this nutty Doctor Dooley should actually succeed?"

"Oh, Luke!"

"Okay, old-timer. People once thought Pasteur was nutty, too, when he discovered a few little microscopic bugs caused hydrophobia. Think of the miracles sulfa drugs and penicillin have brought about."

"Well," he said wearily, "if this crackpot should resuscitate Ferguson, which is impossible, there'd be no murder charge, for no one would be killed."

"All right," I said, digging deeper into my idea, "what if somebody—unknown as yet—wanted Ferguson dead for a few hours or few days, because of some urgent reason that we do not know yet. But after these few hours, this unknown somebody has accomplished his purpose, and now wishes to squirm out from under a murder charge."

"If Ferguson came back hale and kicking, the unknown purpose that required killing would have been accomplished; yet, Ferguson being alive, no murder charge could be pressed. There's nothing

on the statute books at all to indicate homicide. Get what I mean?"

"Sure," the chief said. "You think somebody had to murder Ferguson for a short time in order to accomplish a purpose. The purpose accomplished, Ferguson is to be resuscitated."

"And a moral, but not a legal, killer can snap his fingers in the face of the law."

The chief sighed grumpily, "Now what sort of straitjacket would you like, Mr. Jordan?" He leaned over, tapped the hackie's shoulder, and we got out.

We entered a crowded restaurant. Everybody was neglecting his food, devouring instead the newspaper story of the kidnaped corpse and the doctor who'd bring him back to life.

Murder and I made our way to the washroom. I soaked my aching head, and we made ourselves presentable, though Murder was unable to hide the blue mouse that Brewer's co-workers had left on the chief's cheek.

We came out of the washroom. I was looking forward to a very liquid dinner, as the restaurant served fine cock-tails. An interruption presented itself in the form of the dark, thin man we'd seen in Brewer's office.

Murder stiffened. "You've got a nerve, tailing us."

"Nix," the man had a whining voice. "It ain't that at all. The cab driver who brought you here is one of Brewer's boys. That's how I located you. Brewer keeps the cab driver on duty near the Oates Building, just in case Brewer wants to know where somebody has gone who might have left his office and hired this cab."

"All right," Murder said grimly. "The hackie got a phone call from Brewer and your boss sent you here."

"Sure, now. See, Brewer just wants to make sure there's no hard feelings."

"There's no hard feelings," I said. "There's just no feelings at all. I could shoot Harry Brewer like a rat."

The thin face went even darker; a smile came with effort. "See, now. I'll step close to you. Poke your gun in my ribs. Go on, slip your hand in your pocket."

Murder slipped his hand in his pocket, jabbed with his gun. The thin man grunted, forced the smile again.

"See, now. No monkey business from us—none from you. The boss is gonna let you in on this early. He don't want no hard feelings. He don't want you having things on your mind and getting in his hair. So he's gonna prove to you that he ain't committed no crime. Coming?"

Murder said abruptly. "Get going."

CHAPTER III

NEARLY a dozen cars were drawn up at the curb before the Oates Building. Some of them bore official police emblems, others were press cars. Reporters and police were getting out of them in a swarm as Murder and I pushed the thin, dark man ahead of us out of our cab.

Even the commissioner was present. Tim Brogardus spotted us. "Hello, Ab. How've you been coming?"

"Not so hot. What is all this?"

Brogardus shrugged. "We simply got a call from Brewer asking us to hurry down here. I questioned him this afternoon, but haven't got a shred of evidence to do anything else. The cop said the two yeggs who snatched the corpse and Doctor Dooley worked for Brewer. But we can't even prove that. I've been running myself ragged since I questioned Brewer, learned not one thing. Now he tells us it is even worth the job of the mayor to get down here in a hurry. Said he had something that would bust this town wide open."

Brewer's heavy voice came from the huge, arched doorway of the building. "This way, gentlemen!"

He turned, disappeared. After a little milling about, the mystified crowd followed him.

Brewer threw open the door to his large outer office with a sweep of his hand. All the reporters and cops stopped dead. The silence was stifling. I heard a watch ticking.

Brewer had placed his enormous leather-upholstered couch against the far wall. On the couch lay the body of Horace Ferguson—his chest rising and falling in peaceful, deep sleep!

I heard a reporter gasping for air. A cop in plainclothes whispered tight oaths, as if his throat had been sprinkled with alum.

Then I heard a scream and Natalie Ferguson came tearing past me. I hadn't noticed her in the crowd.

As if she were on a stage with the gentlemen of the press and police seeing a restricted, ghastly preview, she pushed through the crowd, ran across the room and knelt beside her husband.

"Horace!" Her violently shaking hands fondled his face. She rose, stood facing us, her hands outstretched, tears streaming down her face. "He's alive! He's warm. And breathing!"

The grip of tension broke. Voices rose. But Brewer's thundering voice silenced them. "Just a moment! Doctor Dooley would like to say a word to you!"

A door at the side of the office opened

and Doctor Dooley emerged. He was everything I had imagined the experimenting man of science to look like. His skull-like face, his thin, bent body, shining bald head and burning eyes brought to my mind a mental picture of him laboring in a laboratory late at night.

"Gentlemen," he intoned. "You have witnessed the first miracle! Horace Ferguson's faith in me has not gone unrewarded! Your own medical examiner, late this afternoon, pronounced him dead. No one can doubt that word of authority. Yet now Horace Ferguson lies before you living and breathing.

"I am quite ready," his voice rang, "to submit Mr. Ferguson to any test by any medical man in the world. And you can print that!"

A reporter back in the crowd shouted, "How do we know that's Ferguson?"

"A fair question," Doctor Dooley smiled patronizingly. "All pioneers in every field of science have been doubted at the moment they announced their great discoveries." He turned to Natalie Ferguson.

"Surely you, of all people, can recognize your own husband?"

"I know every hair on his head! That's my husband!"

A gasp rippled over the crowd.

The washing sound seemed to bear Dooley up on its tide. He held up his hand for silence.

"I beg of you, gentlemen, to examine this man. Make absolutely sure that there is no fakery here, that this is not another person in the disguise of Horace Ferguson. I first administered an antidote for the poison with which he was murdered. Then I resuscitated him. At present he is in a deep sleep from a sedative. He will sleep about forty hours—until his strength has fully returned. Then, gentlemen," Dooley's voice rose to a dramatic pitch, "Horace Ferguson can tell us who murdered him!"

That sank into the shocked crowd, and Dooley added quietly, "Now examine the man, please."

THE sweating medical examiner stepped forward, stripped Ferguson's shirt back. Ferguson's chest rose and fell with smooth regularity. The M. E. adjusted his stethoscope with trembling fingers. After a crackling moment, he rose, licked his lips, and said, "This man's heart is beating like an athlete's!"

Dooley smiled broadly. He pointed to a portly man standing near me. "Mr. Heffling of the *Gazette* is the dramatic editor of his paper. Mr. Heffling was a well-known actor and an ace makeup man

in Hollywood. Will you examine Horace Ferguson, Mr. Heffling?"

Heffling mopped his face, stepped forward reluctantly. His practiced hands roamed over Ferguson's face, pressing and wiping. He stood up. "This man doesn't have a milligram of makeup on him. It's absolutely impossible that this sleeping man is in any sort of disguise whatsoever."

"As if the statement of Ferguson's own wife wasn't enough!" Dooley added. "I . . ."

"Just a second, please," Abner Murder stepped forward. "There's one thing all of us know does not lie. Fingerprints."

A hush gripped the room.

"Luke and I visited Mrs. Ferguson earlier this evening," the chief went on. "A prowler had been in her house and had polished all the doorknobs. The doorknobs was the only fact apparent to her at the time. Now it's evident that someone had been in that house—perhaps a dozen men, each taking a room—and had wiped Horace Ferguson's fingerprints out of existence in his own house.

"This entire case has presented very careful planning and organization to the finest detail. This planning is shown by the manner in which the police were distracted at the exact moment for the successful theft of Ferguson's corpse in the rooming house.

"But," the chief smiled bleakly, "someone made a tiny slip in all that careful planning."

Dooley's face whitened; Brewer edged to one side. I eased my fist around my gun in my pocket.

Murder took out the shaving lotion bottle he'd found at Ferguson's house. "Here is the slip, Doctor Dooley."

"I don't know what you're talking about! This is insane!"

The angry muttering of the crowd cut him off.

"This bottle of shaving lotion hasn't been out of my possession since I found it where it had dropped behind Horace Ferguson's bureau. This bottle was the only thing overlooked that bears Ferguson's fingerprints!"

A lanky fingerprint man stepped forward. "I get you, Murder. I'll check the prints right now!"

We stood in a strained hush while the print man and an assistant dusted the bottle and took an impression of the sleeping man's fingerprints. I kept the eagle eye on Brewer and Dooley who looked as if they didn't like the temperature in the room.

The print man compared the two sets of prints under a magnifying glass. He locked up, ashen-faced. "This test isn't

thorough. But it doesn't need to be thorough. Any fingerprint man will recognize in a moment that the prints on this bottle of shaving lotion are identical with the man sleeping on this couch! Unless the entire science of fingerprinting is utterly false, this sleeping man is Horace Ferguson!"

The chief looked as if he wanted to melt right out of that crowd. But there was a grim set to his pudgy jaw. He bore the sudden nerve-wracked laughter of the reporters in silence.

Dooley was saying, "Yes, you may have pictures gentlemen! Mr. Brewer has graciously, in the interests of science, allowed me future use of this office. From this night on I shall sleep here, eat here, work here!"

Flash bulbs began popping. Brewer preened and put his arm about Dooley's shoulders.

Murder looked at Brewer and said, "Brewer, the scientifically interested—bah! Luke, let's get out of here!"

We pushed out of the crowd. In the corridor a hand reached past me to pluck at Murder's arm. We turned. It was the fingerprint man.

"Ab," he said, "there's more than one set of prints on this bottle." He tapped his pocket, where the shaving-lotion bottle lay, carefully wrapped.

"Probably the prints of Ferguson's wife," Murder said.

The print man shook his head. "I sneaked a look at her hands. These prints are too big for that." He listened a moment to the raucous eagerness of the reporters to question Dooley, watched the flash bulbs pop.

"Dooley and Brewer are sure riding the crest," he said grimly. "Just for the hell of it, I'm taking these other prints down to headquarters to check them!"

"Luck to you," Murder sighed. "Phone me if you find the prints belong to the Big Bad Wolf. I'll be at home." He turned.

"Come on, Luke. I can't stomach any more of Dooley's drooling over the zombie he's revived."

We left the party.

JO-ANN, Murder's blonde young wife, opened the door to Murder's small white cottage at our knock. She looked at the chief, saw the bruise on his cheek, the almost beaten look in his eyes. She looked at me questioningly.

"We've seen everything," I said. "A dead man cheated the chief out of a murder case by coming back to life."

"Damn it, Luke!" the chief said. "I don't believe it. There's bound to be a slip somewhere."

"Maybe," Jo-Ann said, "it's back in the kitchen."

Murder and I looked at each other, then at her.

"A character came to the house about an hour ago," Jo-Ann said. "He said he'd seen in the paper that Natalie Ferguson had retained you. He called at your office, got this address from the phone book, and came here. He'd been waiting. He darn near invited himself to coffee in the kitchen."

Murder frowned. "You shouldn't have . . ."

"I was perfectly safe," she said firmly. "I kept a relative position to him so that I could slam a door in his face. Anyway, if you can risk your neck the way you do . . ."

"All right, all right," the chief said. "Let's see your character."

We walked to the kitchen. The character was sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee and helping himself to the stock of cream puffs Jo-Ann always kept on hand for her sleuthing husband.

The character jumped to his feet, smiling broadly, at the sight of us. He was dressed in a moth-eaten dinner jacket, a white shirt with a grimy collar, a food-spotted black bow tie. The mustache he affected needed trimming. A haircut on his long, reddish-brown locks wouldn't have made the dogcatcher sad.

"Mr. Murder!" he beamed. He handed the chief a limp, dirty calling card, which read:

ISAAC RAMEY, Astrologer
430 Cowan Street

"I peer at your future in the stars"

"I'm sorry," the chief said. "But I don't want a horoscope."

"By the mighty sign of Libra, the balances, weigh your words! Do not be as hard-headed as Aries, the ram." Dauntily he took the calling card from Murder's fingers, depositing it in the pocket of his threadbare coat for future use.

"I am here, Mr. Murder, to make you a proposition." His grey eyes became shrewd. "A proposition concerning Horace Ferguson."

Murder came to life, grabbed Isaac Ramey's lapels.

"Tut, tut, Mr. Murder," Ramey said, disengaging himself, "do not manhandle me. Twenty-five years ago, I was a lowly servant in the home of Horace Ferguson's father. They lived in another city at that time. I am in possession of a fact from Mr. Ferguson's past which would interest you greatly, since you have been retained by Mrs. Ferguson. She, of course, will put forth the cash for this

fact. However, since you are her representative . . ."

"Give," Murder snapped his fingers.

Isaac Ramey drew himself up haughtily at the finger snapping. "Sir, I am not here to give information. I am here to ask you if you would be willing to buy—with your client's cash—a piece of information that Doctor Walter Dooley would like to have very much."

"What is it?" Murder asked.

"Will you or won't you buy, Mr. Murder?" Ramey the star-gazer countered obstinately. "I assure you that if this information is not worth what I am asking, I shall refund in full the price paid. You see, I have another party interested in it. I am here now to see if you will buy, then I shall contact the other party. The highest bidder gets the information."

"Just like that, huh?" I said.

"Just like that," Ramey assured me. He looked back at Murder. "Do the words 'Silver Mountain, Idaho' mean anything to you, Mr. Murder?"

"Not a thing. Look here, if you've really got something, I'll talk business."

Isaac Ramey stood a moment, then said, "Very well. I shall see the other bidder, get his offer and drop around again this way."

"But—" The chief lunged as Ramey, with deceptive speed moved through the back door. We dashed out after him, heard him crash through Murder's garden. Then a motor coughed asthmatically in an old trap over on the next street. Murder and I mopped our faces with our sleeves and went back toward the house.

"Slick old seedy dude," I said. "He knew that if we thought he had some real dope, we'd not let him get away. That's why he left his car over on the next block, why he made a point of being in the kitchen to talk to us so he could dash out the back. He'll see this other party. If he has any real information, it'll cost somebody several grand."

THE phone was ringing as we re-entered the house. Jo-Ann called, "It's for you, darling."

I followed Murder to the phone. He took the instrument from Jo-Ann's hand, listened a moment, and breathed, "Say that again!"

He hung up. "We're going back out again, Jo-Ann. Sorry, hon, to leave you alone here at night."

She sighed, said she was getting used to it, and told me to take care of him. As we left the house, Murder said, "Luke, the call was from the fingerprint man at headquarters. He's been very

busy, checking the extra set of prints on that bottle of shaving-lotion."

"And they belong to . . . ?"

"An ex-convict named Moe Fowler. The last trace they had of him, Fowler was an attendant in a private mental sanitarium owned by none other than our Doctor Dooley. A long distance call informed headquarters that Fowler is still working in Doctor Dooley's sanitarium."

"A long distance call?" I echoed blankly.

"Doctor Dooley's sanitarium," Murder informed me, "is in the little village of Silver Mountain, Idaho!"

"The place the crackpot astrologer, Isaac Ramey, mentioned!"

"Precisely! Silver Mountain, Idaho is thousands of miles from here. How did the fingerprints of an attendant in a secluded private mental sanitarium there get on a bottle of shaving-lotion in Horace Ferguson's room?"

CHAPTER IV

ISAAC RAMEY'S tattered calling card had given his address as Four-thirty Cowan Street, which Murder and I approached from an oblique angle from across the street.

In pale moonlight, the small cottage looked much like its occupant, worn and seedy. The lawn was a tangle of high grass about our feet.

No lights were glowing in the cottage. We skirted it, edging along a rutted driveway to keep the cinders on the drive from crunching beneath our footsteps. Then Murder gripped my arm tightly. Ahead of us, up the drive, sat the dark hulk of an automobile. It might be Ramey's; it might be someone else's. We'd never seen Ramey's car.

We eased on around to the back of the house, Murder pausing long enough to see if there was a driver's license in the interior of the car. If there was one, he didn't see it.

The backyard was littered with garbage. I almost upset a can, caught it, and breathed, "You think there's somebody in there, chief?"

"If there is, you'll advertise our presence with a clattering garbage-can, or you'll stump your toe and curse."

Not me. If there was someone inside that house, we made a much better target than he would if he saw us.

Then when we were at the short flight of wooden steps leading to the back porch, we heard the slam of the front door. A light flashed on up front some place. We could see the reflection of it

through the window, splashing on the weedy lawn at the side of the house.

Murder and I ran on tiptoe up the wooden steps to the back porch. He had his hand on the doorknob, when someone in the house yelled. A gun vomited raucous thunder in the night. Another burst of gunfire followed and the light went out.

We heard a hoarse cry, a heavy thump, swiftly moving footsteps.

I headed off the back porch. Murder seized my arm. "This way! We'll crash through and surprise him!"

We hit the back door together and the flimsy lock burst. We staggered into a kitchen. I hit a cabinet of some kind, sending pots and pans clattering.

Murder surged on ahead in the darkness. I recovered from my encounter with the cabinet, my teeth set, and followed him. Perspiration drooled off my face, ran down my back in a widening rivulet.

I listened to the thump of my heart, thinking that some day this job with Murder was going to prove too much for the old ticker. The thought was torn out of my mind by the swift blasting of a gun. It was down the hall ahead of us, fired three times.

Plaster showered over me. My nose picked up splinters as I dived into the floor. Murder's gun flamed. I rolled against the wall, making myself as small as possible. I fumbled for my own gun, but my trembling hand was having trouble finding my pocket.

I dragged the gun out just as another shot lanced toward us. I felt the wind from that one. Then Murder and I were moving forward. We both fired back. It was short and sweet; it hadn't been ten seconds since we'd crashed the back door. It had seemed like ten lifetimes.

Running feet thudded ahead of us. We headed toward the sound, reached the front of the house as a dark shadow fumbled at the front door. Murder and I cut loose. The shadow whirled, firing in desperation. Then the shadow ahead of us crumpled and hit the floor with a thud. We heard the gun bounce away from the huddled, dark heap.

Away in the distance sirens were howling. Murder turned on a soft light in a lamp. I knelt over the man we had shot. He'd taken a couple of painful ones, but would pull through okay when the cops arrived and got him in a hospital.

"Know him, Luke?"

I nodded. "One of Brewer's boys. He's out cold. Where is our friend Isaac Ramey?"

We glanced around. The room was

done in a fortune-telling motif, heavy drapes, much the worse for wear and age, hanging over the walls. A gilded chair. Signs of the zodiac and a chart of the heavens hanging by a window.

Then we heard a heavy groan behind one of the drapes. Murder jerked it aside. We'd found our friend.

Isaac Ramey looked at us with glazing eyes, crimson widening over his chest. He opened his mouth with a long, slow effort, gasped, "Gemini." Then he was gone.

"Gemini," I repeated softly. "What the hell was he trying to say, chief?"

"He wasn't trying. He said it. He was talking in his own language."

"You mean the guy is a foreigner?"

Murder sighed disgustedly. "Why don't you find a good school and take a course in sleuthing? Sometimes I wonder why I pay your salary."

"Because," I cut back, as we eased out of the house, "nobody else is fool enough to work for you."

"I won't argue with you, Luke; if you want to admit you're a fool . . ."

"Can it," I growled. "Those sirens are closer. We'll have to waste half the night telling the cops what happened. Where are we going, anyway?"

"To see a person about a killing."

BACK downtown, I heard newsboys hawking it. People were gathered in clusters about newsstands, reaching for papers. The extra was on the street, splashing it in banner heads. It seemed the whole town had woke up or had deserted night spots and late shows to talk about it. Every bit of it was there. I read over Murder's shoulder.

The whole story was repeated. Every detail was there. There was only one possible conclusion to draw: a new medical miracle had happened. Every shred of evidence pointed absolutely to the fact that a man had been killed and resuscitated.

Murder threw the paper from him into the gutter and started legging it. I hurried along the sidewalk with him.

Lights blazed in the Oates Building. A babbling mob of people swarmed about the doors, spilling out in the street. It took Murder and me a full five minutes to shove our way inside. There, it was worse. It was like fighting our way through a jungle to push through the packed humanity on the stairs, in the upper corridor.

The name of Doctor Dooley was on every tongue; every person in that mob had followed the story from the beginning. Now that it had reached its burst-

ing climax, rocking the city, people were shoving to get a glimpse of the man.

We reached the door to Brewer's office. Behind us in the crowd, we heard two of Brewer's hoods shouting their way through the corridor. They passed us, escorting a waddling woman who was loaded with jewels and who simpered at every step. One of the hoods said to her:

"You see, Mrs. van Loftingwell, we promised you could see him when we phoned."

"Doctor Dooley!" she simpered. "To think that I shall see him!"

We passed another bejeweled woman in the outer office. She was saying something about the last spirit medium she had visited. The whole office was full of people who represented enough wealth to buy several battleships and pay cash for them.

One of Brewer's men saw us coming, worked his way to us. The chief thrust his gun in the hood's rib and said:

"Take us to your boss and Doc Dooley."

The hood hesitated. Murder jabbed harder with the gun. The hood's discretion won over his shallow valor; he turned and we followed him.

Brewer and Dooley, alone in the adjoining office, turned as we entered. Brewer stepped toward Murder.

The chief set his teeth, smashed the hood who had let us in the office over the back of the head. The hood crumpled without a sound, out cold. Brewer took a step back, color draining from his face.

He recovered a trifle, looked at the gunman on the carpet, licked his lips. "I'll have your scalp for that, Murder."

"No," the chief said. "I've got yours—and Dooley's. Dooley, the murderer!"

Dooley clenched his fists. "You'll eat those words . . ." He decided not to step forward as Murder inched the gun up.

"Too bad there are people like you in the world, Dooley. With your intelligence and education you could have done a lot of good. Unfortunately you committed murder, let loose a lot of evil that's hurt others. It's going to hurt Mrs. Natalie Ferguson very much when I tell her that her husband is dead. But she gave me a thousand berries to see this thing through to a finish—and that's exactly what I've done."

"You're crazy," Brewer laughed shakily, "Horace Ferguson is as alive as you are."

MURDER grimaced. "Can't we be frank with each other? I know the whole setup. I know that twenty-five years ago, Horace Ferguson's family was other than he has led the world to

believe. I know that an unfortunate bit of publicity about his father's suicide led to his mother's worrying herself to the grave. This experience produced a phobia, a downright mania in Horace Ferguson's mind, a mania to protect himself and any woman he might ever marry from publicity. A mania that led him to put his feeble-minded brother in a mental institution; keep the fact secret from the world that there was insanity in his family. That probably was the contributing factor in his father's suicide."

"Ferguson's brother!" I gasped.

"His twin brother," the chief said. "Ferguson, as I have explained, hid this feeble-minded twin in an institution. Sometime in the past he put the twin in Doctor Dooley's sanitarium in Silver Mountain, Idaho. Is it clearer now, Luke?"

"Part of it. I see that you're driving at the fact that the man who is now living is actually Horace Ferguson's twin. But how did you know?"

"Two very clear clues, Luke, right under your nose. Follow this closely: Dooley, planning to put his scheme in motion, shipped the feeble-minded twin to this city before Dooley himself ever left his sanitarium. Dooley wanted to stay behind a few days, make sure the twin's leaving created no comment in the institution there. Then Dooley followed by train—alone, in case his movements should be checked.

"Incidentally, since Dooley hired criminals like Moe Fowler to work in his sanitarium, the place was likely little more than a racket itself. This racket was much bigger.

"Dooley, beforehand, had enlisted Brewer's aid. When the feeble-minded twin arrived here, probably in the company of a yegg, the twin was kept under cover by Brewer.

"Dooley, arriving by train, had in his possession a shaving-lotion bottle he knew this twin of Horace Ferguson's had handled. That shaving-lotion bottle was deliberately planted in Ferguson's room for us to find. Fingerprints would prove conclusively that the 'resuscitated' man was Horace Ferguson. So you see the prints on that shaving-lotion bottle were not actually Ferguson's at all, but his twin's.

"Dooley had to make it appear that Brewer was snatching him, that they were unwilling companions until the so-called miracle united them in the common interest of science. If he had been seen in Brewer's company too much before hand, suspicion might have been aroused. So he pretended to be fright-

ened—as the cop told us—when Brewer's yeggs snatched him and the corpse of Ferguson in the cheap rooming house.

"Now—since Dooley knew he couldn't be seen around Brewer before the advent of his miracle. Since he knew it would be risky for him to visit the place where the twin was hidden, Dooley decided to play safe and bring something along from his sanitarium which he was positive bore the fingerprints of the twin, so necessary to his scheme. That would save him from the risk of having to go to the hiding place and obtain prints. So he brought the shaving-lotion bottle. Unknown to him, the bottle also bore the prints of Moe, who, unfortunately from his viewpoint, had a record.

"Those two sets of prints could only mean one thing—that the lotion bottle had come from the sanitarium thousands of miles away; that the prints we thought were Horace Ferguson's were actually someone else's.

"When I heard Isaac Ramey's last word, I knew without a doubt that this someone else was Horace Ferguson's twin brother. Ramey had known the Fergusons from way back, knew of the existence of the twin. He guessed the rest, tried to sell out to the highest bidder. His greed caused him to get killed.

"I already had a pretty good idea of the whole scheme. When Isaac Ramey breathed 'Gemini' I was positive of it; for 'Gemini' is the astrological term meaning, literally, twins."

DOOLEY sat down slowly like limp drags collapsing. Sweat stood in oily looking drops on Brewer's forehead.

"But why all the build-up, chief? Giving out the stories . . ."

"Part of the motive. Dooley sent out those notes promising death to Horace Ferguson. Also he promised at the same time to revive Ferguson. Good reading. Attracted attention. And he wasn't even started yet. He disguised his voice as that of a woman, after he had murdered Horace Ferguson, called cops and reporters and told them where to find Ferguson's body in the rooming house.

"He had them all on hand—unimpeachable witnesses, a reliable M. E. to swear that Ferguson was dead. He was

making it as dramatic as possible. At the same time he was marshalling his facts so that in the end there could only be the conclusion that he had succeeded in bringing Ferguson back. He succeeded in getting the corpse from the house with the aid of Brewer's organization. Then he merely stayed under cover until he was ready to substitute the twin—under the influence of a strong sedative to keep him from talking.

"Dooley summoned half the officials of the city here, after preparing his fingerprint hoax which I tumbled for, and showed us his miracle. The city was already at a fever heat. Now with the statements of officials that Dooley's experiment had been successful, they're crushing the building just to get in and see him.

"Brewer's men, all over the city and in all the offices of this suite, are selling insurance—yes, insurance. Every superstitious bookie who can afford it, every big-shot criminal, every neurotic man or woman of wealth, will have paid Dooley and Brewer a million, maybe even ten million, to promise to bring them back when they kick the bucket. That's the whole scheme and the entire reason for the build-up. Tomorrow night, Dooley and Brewer would have collected a double fortune apiece and quietly disappeared."

Brewer lunged at me with a bellow. I remembered the kicking around he'd given us, and almost bent my gun barrel over his head. Dooley sprang at the chief. Murder knocked him kicking.

We looked at them, lying unconscious. I said, "Going to be tough telling Mrs. Natalie Ferguson her husband really isn't alive. The ugly part of murder is always the nice people that get hurt. I'm going to phone Homicide, the Riot Squad, get the whole damn force down here. We'll teach a few neurotic suckers not to be suckers, and round up Brewer's boys."

I watched the prone forms of Dooley and Brewer and sighed. "Chief, when a case comes along that you can't solve, we'll wrap it in cellophane and deliver it to the lads that said no crime is perfect and that crime doesn't pay."

He sighed and said, "You'll have me blushing, Luke!"



Hellion in the Hills

By Ted Stratton

The tricks of hill men can be hell for a hidden-out hot-shot.



FROM the crest of Chestnut Ridge deep in the Ramapo Mountains, Stewart Conklin listened to the fast-traveling car that sped along the curling road.

"Going too gol-ding-d fast," Stewart informed a blue jay that scolded from a nearby rock oak.

The twilight-lit valley floor slept. The green leaves of the thick woods were like an unrolled carpet over the rocky terrain. Three distinct clearings, a quarter-mile apart, showed where John Wilkerson, the Sturrs and Ez Higgenbottom lived.

Reddish hill dust boiled over the woods to indicate where the car traveled. "If'n some'un," Stewart advised the excited jay, "don't tell that danged fool to slow for the turn, he'll—"

Crash! The cacophonous sounds of a car piling into a rock.

"—crack up," Stewart finished.

It would take him a good five minutes to reach the scene. With long strides, Stewart threaded down the steep slope and crossed the tumbling brook. He bent his weight solidly into the wooded rise, and presently came out on the road a dozen yards below a blind S-curve. A maroon-colored roadster leaned against a rock off the road.

"Yep, done a good job," Stewart said.

Hot water dripped from the crumpled radiator. Long diagonal cracks splintered the shatter-proof windshield. The right front tire had blown out. Nobody was in the roadster.

"Skedaddled," Stewart said. "Couldn't been hurt much, I reckon."

The oncoming roar of a second car sounded along the road. Stewart turned curiously. "Regular race course," he mut-

tered, listening. "An' coming too fast too, the fool. If'n some'un—"

Brakes squealed. A dilapidated car slewed around the curve, jolted to a stop. A red-whiskered driver wearing a battered straw hat clambered over the side of the car. He jerked out a gun.

"Jehosaphat!" the driver exploded, noticing Stewart for the first time. "Stewart Conklin," he roared, "where-at is the driver of that wreck?"

"You know the fool, sheriff?" Stewart said unhurriedly.

"Know him! Why he stuck up the Pluckemin Bank! Killed Ed Flowers, the teller, and beat it off with six thousand dollars, cash money."

"Dfd, eh?"

"Did! I happened to be a-setting across the street in my car and trailed him up here. Figure he's cutting cross-hill to the Turnpike."

"Then he was a fool, sheriff, not knowing the road. He won't get too far, 'thout a car."

"Any cars handy hereabouts, Stewart?"

"None 'cept Gus Eggert's an' that's a mile t'other side of Ez Higgenbottom's."

"Got to get moving," the sheriff snapped, hustling into his car. "You come, Stewart. I'm deputizing you. 'Course you won't help much, but come anyhow."

Leisurely Stewart climbed into the car without opening the door. The road twisted like a copperhead beneath its overhanging canopy of leaves, and night hesitated a couple of strides distant. The sheriff edged his car past the wrecked roadster.

"What you figure he'll do next, Stewart?" the sheriff asked.

"He knows you was a-trailing him?"

"Sure. That's why he was in such a hurry. Must a-heard somewheres what a gun-toting fool I am. Why nobody's

TDA

dared kill anybody with me sheriff since Abe White axed his wife and—"

The car breasted the first clearing. "Stop," Stewart said. "This is the Wilkerson's place. We'd best take a look-see with John."

The sheriff unholstered his gun. "Ain't taking no chances on a feller that 'ud shoot poor Ed Flowers, and Ed with a family."

THE lonely Wilkerson one-story house sat atop a little rise. A path ran up-hill through rank, uncut grass. In a low spot alongside the path stood an old-fashioned country well with a dip bucket hanging on a rope attached to a long stout cedar pole. Stewart walked with an animal-like grace that contrasted sharply with the sheriff's short steps. A man came to the open door and leaned against the jamb.

"Howdy, John," Stewart said cordially, stopping ten feet from the sagging porch.

John Wilkerson grunted. "What in tarnation's all the racket, Stewart?" he asked casually.

"Trailing a feller what robbed the Pluckemin Bank and killed Ed Flowers. You see him go past?"

"Only killer in these parts," John drawled, "is a thieving bear what killed my best sow. If'n I get my sights on that bear—"

The sheriff snapped, "Did a stranger pass on the road?"

"What kind of a looking man?" John asked.

"Stocky with a dark face and store hat and dark clothes."

Night strode across the clearing. "Ain't seen him," John said. "Bet he took to the woods when he heard your old rattletrap a-coming."

They turned to go, Stewart, turning at the well, called back. "Where's Jenny to, John?"

"Berrying with the Sturrs an' ain't in yet."

"Now that's too bad," Stewart said pleasantly. "I'd like for the sheriff to meet Jenny. She's prettier than a mountain flower."

"Come along," the sheriff ordered curtly. "Can't catch no killer the way you mosey."

"Getting a drink," Stewart called to John.

He grasped the butt end of the pole,

lowered the bucket into the well. It splashed hollowly, filled. Stewart bent his weight easily and lifting the bucket, set the bucket on the well curbing. "Swell water and thanks," Stewart called to John Wilkerson, but Stewart hadn't tarried to drink.

The car roared off, plunged around the first bend and Stewart said, "Slow and I'll drop off easy-like."

"What next?"

"Your killer is at John's a-holding a gun on Jenny, that's what."

The car slowed. "You sure?"

"Fact. Seen his tracks heading in to John's in the dusty road."

"He could have cut on through."

"He's there, sheriff."

Stewart climbed on the running board. "Park on out of hearing and wander back quietlike. Don't want anyone killed."

"Damn," the sheriff thought a moment later after Stewart had left. "Clean forgot to hand him my gun. That killer's got one for sure!"

Stewart stalked the road like a cat, cut through the woods noiselessly and came out by the Wilkerson's well. In the lamp-lit kitchen he could see dark-haired Jenny with a handkerchief gag in her mouth. A stocky man with a bloodied bandage on his forehead finished tying Jenny to a kitchen chair. Stewart could hear the killer's words.

"Fooled that lick sheriff," the killer told Jenny. "I'll be down off the mountain inside an hour."

Stewart wondered what had happened to John, as the killer, gun in hand, left the house. Very carefully Stewart leaned heavily on the butt end of the well-pole, lifted the dangling bucket of water until it was poised directly over the path. Black against the streaming light from the doorway Stewart could see the killer, hear him stumbling and cursing down the rough path.

The killer neared the well. "Hey!" Stewart called.

The killer stopped. Up came his gun. Stewart straightened, took his weight off the pole. The bucket plunged downward. A gun blazed in the darkness, then—clump-splash. The heavy bucket landed on the killer's head. He dropped like an axed steer at slaughtering time. Water gurgled from the bucket and chuckled as it ran off down the hill.

Stewart bent over the motionless man, shook him. "Hit him dead center," he chuckled. "Prettiest shot in the dark I ever made, too!"

Then he shouted, "Sheriff! Safe to come now!"

Long strides carried him up the hill and into the house. He stripped the gag from Jenny's mouth. Eyes wild with terror, cheeks pale and mouth like a rosebud. Pretty, Jenny was, just like Stewart had said.

"John!" Jenny gasped. "In the bedroom!"

John Wilkerson lay on the bedroom floor. A gash on his forehead dripped blood. Stewart dragged John into the kitchen. "Don't worry, Jenny," Stewart said. "He won't have more'n a headache after this. Hill people are tough."

Stewart fetched water from the drinking pail in the sink and bathed John's face. The sheriff panted into the kitchen. "Where's the killer?" he demanded, brandishing the gun.

"On the path," Stewart said. "Dead to

the world where I dropped that bucket of water on his head."

"How did you know for sure, Stewart, the killer was in here holding a gun on pretty Mrs. Wilkerson?"

"John told me."

"Hold on there," the sheriff roared. "I heard what John said an'—"

"Ain't what hill folk says is important," Stewart interrupted calmly. "Mostly it's what they're thinking."

"But—"

"John said Jenny was off a-berrying with the Sturrs. That was the same as saying she was right here in the cabin and couldn't come out. Why not? Stood to reason the killer was here a-holding a gun on her while John stalled you and me along."

The sheriff shook his head in puzzlement. "I don't get the part about not being berrying with the Sturrs."

Stewart laughed. "That was the easiest part, ifn' you know hill folk. The Sturrs is such old folks they just set and rock on the front porch, sheriff."

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Scream Theme

By Bruno Fischer



Ira Bly was the laziest sheriff Tonks County ever had. Even a scream of terror couldn't speed him up. But when crime tried to stop him dead, Ira was slow but sure—to hang a killer.

IT WASN'T much of a scream, and it wasn't close. Ira Bly heard it only because the afternoon was so still. The vast bulk of his body hunched over the edge of the dock stirred a little, but the fishing pole remained motionless in his hands.

You couldn't tell about distant outcries. Boys playing always sounded like mayhem. The shrill squealing of young girls sometimes chilled your blood before you found out what it was.

Anyway, the sound wasn't repeated. Ira scratched half of his nose, unbuttoned his shirt to let the sun bake his massive chest, and fell into a comfortable half-doze.

A man's voice roused him. It said,

"There's a yokel fishing. We can ask him."

Lazily Ira Bly looked over his shoulder. At this place the highway curved to within a hundred feet of the lake. A man and a woman were approaching the dock through the path in waist-high wild grass. Either the man hadn't thought his voice would carry to Ira, or he hadn't cared if it did.

Their clothes, as well as their manners, announced that they were vacationists from one of the summer hotels on the other side of the lake. The man wore white pants and a shirt as dazzling as the sun—the kind city folks considered proper country wear. The woman wore shorts and hardly more than a ribbon of red

material above them.

"Hey, Hiram," the man called. "How do we get in touch with the local constabulary?"

Mildly Ira Bly said, "All yokels ain't named Hiram," and turned his head back to the lake. Long ago he had learned not to let vacationists get under his skin. Most of them were decent enough, but now and then you got this kind.

"Bryan, that's no way to speak to anybody," the woman said. Ira felt the rickety dock quiver as she came out on it to join the man. Again Ira turned his head, and an attractive pair of bare legs were inches from his eyes. He looked up, and there was plenty more skin on display. His eyes dropped.

"What he meant," the woman explained as if addressing a child, "is how can we get in touch with the local police?"

Ira Bly pulled in his fishing pole and lumbered to his feet. There was so much of him that it seemed to take a long time for all of it to come erect. The woman seemed startled by the sheer size of his uncovered chest. His fingers fumbled awkwardly to button the somewhat ragged shirt. Two buttons were missing.

"The only local police, ma'am, is the sheriff." And Ira remembered the scream he had heard twenty minutes ago.

The man said briskly, "A deputy will do. Where can we find one?"

"Ain't no deputy," Ira told him. "Tonks County's a mighty small county. What's up?"

THEY didn't answer him. They looked at each other as if trying to decide if it were any of his business. The man was slight, dandified, with a face as smooth as a baby's. And there was something wrong with the woman's eyes. She was a rather attractive brunette with wide black eyes, but the pupils seemed indrawn, as if reluctant to look out at the world.

"All we want to do is to report a stolen car," the man said.

Ira grinned with relief. "Don't want the sheriff. He won't do you no good. Ain't no machinery in the county for tracing stolen cars. Just give the state police a ring, and they'll take care of you." He waited for them to go away so that he could return to his fishing.

"The sheriff should be informed," the man persisted.

Ira shook his head. "You want that car back, mister, you see the state police. Sheriff is the laziest man you ever saw. Never wanted to be sheriff, but the voters keep electing him. Dirty trick."

"We've heard about him," the man said with a slight smile. "Doubtless he's as

incompetent as you say, but the fact is that he's the local law."

The woman said testily, "Don't you see what he's after, Bryan? He won't tell us anything until you give him a tip."

"No, ma'am," Ira said with dignity. He sighed. "Guess I'm your man. I mean, I'm sheriff of Tonks County."

They stared at him, at the tall spread of him, at the shirt which couldn't quite be buttoned, at the shock of straw-colored unruly hair dangling over his brow.

Then the man laughed. It was not a flattering sound. "We haven't time to be kidded," he said.

"Got my badge somewhere—I think." Ira dug into four pockets before he found it.

The woman glanced at the badge and then quickly away. Rouge made two garish spots on her cheeks, and her hands fluttered. Ira wondered again about that distant scream.

"Well, it's about time you up and confessed you're the law," the man said. "My name is Bryan Foster. We're staying at the Lakeside Inn. An hour ago we started to drive to the village to do some shopping. There's a pleasant shady spot over there and we stopped for a little while." He waved a hand.

Ira nodded. The lake curved in to form a little cove fringed by tall oaks. It wasn't far from the dock of the highway, but the trees formed a curtain around the spot, making it desirable for picnickers by day and young folks by night.

"We've heard how lovely that place is," the man went on, "so we parked on the road and walked down to the water. When we returned, the car was gone."

Ira kept looking down at the woman. She was watching the road as if expecting the stolen car to come along at any moment.

"Did you scream or yell or something, Mrs. Foster?" Ira asked her.

"Mrs. Foster?" she muttered and turned to him, frowning. "My name is Marie Griffin. Mr. Foster is only—well, we've known each other only a few days."

"Miss Griffin was driving to the village this afternoon," Bryan Foster put in, showing his teeth. "At lunch she mentioned it. I said I needed razor blades and some magazines, so she graciously offered to take me along. It's her car. I didn't bring mine. My wife is using it to visit her mother, while I am taking a well-earned rest up here."

"Did you cry out, Miss Griffin?" Ira asked again.

"Why would I cry out?" Her eyes lay fully on him now, but he had an impression that she was not really looking at him.

"Let's say, miss, when you seen your car gone. You didn't give a kind of yelp or nothing?"

"How ridiculous!" Marie Griffin said. "Aren't you interested in the description of my car?"

"Sure, miss. Won't do no good taking it down here. You drive to my office with me, and I'll give the state police a ring. Like I said, ain't nothing I can do myself." He stooped to pick up his fishing pole.

"I see the fish weren't biting today, Sheriff," Foster observed when he saw Ira leave the dock empty-handed.

"Wasn't fishing to catch fish," Ira told him. "Gives you an excuse for sitting in the sun without folks talking about how shiftless you are."

Foster shot a quick, amused smile at Marie Griffin. She remained dead-pan, apparently not in the mood to find humor in the weak-mindedness of a country yokel. Her mind seemed centered on the loss of her car.

IRA'S battered sedan was just off the road. He opened both doors and the woman started to get into the front seat. Then she looked at Ira. Her red mouth twisted as if with distaste at the idea of being squeezed in close to him. Instead, she got into the back seat, where Foster followed her. Ira flushed, though he was just as glad he didn't have to endure a half-clad woman sitting practically on top of him.

He swung the car toward the village. The ancient motor wheezed up a steep, curving grade. When Ira reached the top of the rise, he saw that a section of the skimpy guard rail was gone, as if ripped away by a giant fist. Right at that spot a white state police car was parked. Ira came down on the brakes.

"Pardon me a minute," he said as he kicked the door open.

From that side of the road, the ground dropped steeply down to the lake. State Police Sergeant Rob Kean was standing ankle-deep in the waters of the lake which lapped the foot of the bank. With his hands on his hips, he glumly surveyed the mass of junk which had once been a swanky two-toned coupé.

Ira turned his head back to the road. Foster and Marie Griffin were peering out at him from his car.

"What kind of car'd you have?" Ira called. And when she told him, he said, "Looks like we found it."

He clambered down the sheer bank. It wasn't as hard getting down as it looked, but to a car hurtling off the road, it was deadly.

"You'll get your socks wet, Ira," Sergeant Kean warned amiably.

Ira grunted and let his feet sink into mud and water. He sloshed over to the wreck. "How about the driver, Rob?"

Kean nodded toward the wreck. "Behind the wheel. Or he was. Most of the motor is on what's left of his chest."

"Dead, eh?"

"Couldn't be deader. It's a miracle the heap didn't burn, though it wouldn't have made any difference to him. I'd say he came up the hill like mad, didn't figure the turn would be so sharp, and lost control.

"Where does that dame think she's going?"

Marie Griffin was sliding down to them. Foster tried to help her, but she brushed aside his hand and continued down on her own. Her face wore a stunned expression, as if she couldn't quite believe that that could have happened to her car.

"Her car, Rob," Ira explained. "Stolen. We were looking for it."

"So that's why the guy drove like that! How long ago?"

"Maybe half an hour. Just about a minute after it was stolen, I guess."

Kean nodded. "I bet a dozen cars passed and none of the drivers stopped to investigate why the rail was broken. I came along about five minutes ago."

Ira waded over to the car. It lay on its side. It must have bounced off the bank a couple of times on the way down, because it looked as if it had been squeezed in a press. The uppermost door was crumpled stuck.

Ira gave up trying to fight it open and stared down through the window. The motor had been shoved through to the seat, pinning the driver so that his torso was held sideways.

Taking a deep breath, Ira dipped a hand through the window. He could just about reach the shock of hair on the lolling head. The head was sickeningly out of shape, though there didn't seem to be too much blood on the face. Ira's hand impulsively withdrew a little distance, then returned to turn the face upward by the chin. Almost at once he straightened up.

SERGEANT KEAN was talking to Marie Griffin and Bryan Foster. They had come down as far as the water line and were seated against the bank. Above them, at the broken guard rail, the inevitable crowd was beginning to gather.

"Well, he didn't get far," Kean was saying. He glanced around at Ira. "Didn't you take my word he was dead?"

"Sure. But who was dead? That's Georgie Wheat. I mean was."

"So you knew him?"

"Know everybody in Tonks County." Ira thought that over, then corrected himself, "Practically everybody. Georgie Wheat, he had one of these here teeny cameras—candid cameras or something, they call 'em. Hung around hotels and took folks' pictures while they was bathing or playing tennis. Then he'd sell the pictures to 'em, or try to."

"That guy?" Kean said. "Those pictures were only an excuse for being on hotel grounds. He'd steal anything the guests left around loose. Jim Anders called me last summer to get after him. Anders didn't want him arrested; just wanted him scared off."

"That was Georgie," Ira agreed. "Not bad, but couldn't keep his hands off valuables. Gave me a pain. Always had to keep after him."

"And today he decided to go in for bigger things," Kean grunted. "Only he didn't get far."

Ira looked along the shore. He couldn't see the dock from which he had been fishing, though it was less than a mile away. The contour of the shore hid it.

"Guess I heard him scream," he muttered.

"You mean this Georgie Wheat?" Kean asked.

"Guess it was him. Guess it was when he was falling in the car. Just that one scream."

Bryan Foster frowned at him. "And you mean to say you didn't come to investigate?"

Ira's shoulders heaved in a gigantic shrug. "Wouldn't've done him any good, anyway."

"Good heavens!" Foster said. "And you're the sheriff!"

Marie Griffin spoke for the first time. She was on her feet, staring at the wreck. "But what about my car? He smashed it to bits. What will I do?"

They all looked at her in astonishment. She was tottering on the slope and wringing her hands. She seemed to be close to hysteria.

"Isn't your car insured?" Kean said.

"But not for that!" she shrieked. "The liability insurance I carry is for damage to somebody else, not if my car is damaged. I'll never collect a cent."

There was an uncomfortable silence. Foster gave the sheriff and the sergeant an apologetic look, as if he were responsible for her. Then he said sharply:

"You've nothing to worry about, Miss Griffin. I'm sure you carry theft insurance, and that ought to cover in this case."

Marie Griffin subsided. "Are you sure?"

"I'm not positive, but I think so."

Grimly Ira kicked a stone at the edge of the water. "There's Georgie Wheat's mother. Nice old lady. Thought a lot of her son. Don't know why, but that's mothers."

"He was a thief!" Marie Griffin burst out. "He deserved—" Her voice broke. She buried her face in her hands.

"Naturally Miss Griffin has had a severe shock." Foster split a wan smile between the two other men. "Is it all right for me to take her back to the hotel now? I imagine one of the people up on the road will give us a lift."

Kean waved a hand in dismissal. "I'll be around in a little while."

Foster helped Marie Griffin up the bank. Ira and Kean watched her in silence until she was out of sight.

"Women!" Kean growled. "There's a dead man in that car, but you don't catch her giving a thought to him."

"Not women," Ira argued mildly. "They're all right, most of 'em. Just some folks ain't." He scratched his nose and waded back to the car.

He was still poking around in the shambles when the wreckers arrived. They set the car upright and got the body out. Ira hated to be close to dead people, but he forced himself to search the clothes.

"Looking for valuables he filched?" Kean said sardonically.

Ira pushed his bulk erect. "Georgie's camera. Always carried it in his pocket. Never saw him without it. Stole a mite now and then, but like I told you, made a living taking folks' pictures."

"Maybe it fell out as the car was falling."

"Don't see how," Ira said. "It'd be somewhere in the car. It ain't."

"It couldn't have been valuable."

"Valuable?" Ira returned to dry land and shook water out of his size thirteen shoes. "Don't know. Only he always had that teeny camera, and now he ain't."

"For the laziest man in the state," Sergeant Kean said with a grin, "you sure like to fuss around. I've got to get an official statement from Miss Griffin, the car owner. Coming, or are you going back to your fishing?"

Ira looked longingly at the lake. He sighed. "They keep electing me sheriff, so I guess sometimes I ought to do something for my pay."

IRA BLY'S sister had once told him that a man restores his spirits by taking a drink and a woman by changing her clothes and renewing her makeup. In

a modest white tennis dress, Marie Griffin leaned back in a reclining chair on the Lakeside Inn veranda and answered Sergeant Kean's routine questions. Ira thought that she looked even more attractive now, than she had in less clothes, and a lot more sure of herself.

Except for her eyes. They still seemed to be hidden behind a mist.

Bryan Foster stood at her side with bored patience. There wasn't much he was asked; he had only happened to have been a passenger in her car.

Once, during a lull while Kean was busy writing, Foster said, "By the way, Miss Griffin, you needn't worry about the insurance. I've been inquiring and it seems you can collect."

"Yes?" she muttered indifferently. She had put her head back and closed her eyes.

Ira suppressed a yawn. "Red tape puts me to sleep. Never go in for it myself, though the D. A. gets sore. Be going."

Kean shrugged, bent over the printed form, and write some more. Ira wandered down the veranda. A number of guests were bunched a short distance away, fascinatingly watching Miss Griffin being questioned. Jim Anders, the manager of Lakeside Inn, was among them.

"So they've got you working, Ira?" Anders greeted him.

"Naw," Ira grinned sheepishly. "Rob Kean does the sweating for me." He moved on.

When he turned the corner of the building, he heard one of the men guests with Anders say, "Is that the hick sheriff I've been hearing about? They say he's a joke. He looks it, too. If I ever want to fool the law, I'll come up here."

"Don't kid yourself," Anders retorted. "I'll stake Ira against any—"

Ira didn't hear any more. He wasn't interested. He shuffled into the lobby, got a couple of addresses from the clerk, then drove to his tiny, seldom used office in the village. There he made two long-distance telephone calls, all the time worrying over the bill he was running up for the county.

From his office he drove to his little cabin on a hillside. He fried eight eggs, ate them with a loaf of pumpernickel, and topped the meal off with a quart of milk.

At the last moment before leaving, he thought of changing his shirt for one which had a full quota of buttons. Then he turned back once more to change his shoes and socks. They had dried, but they were mud-caked. After all, he reflected, the sheriff of Tonks County ought to give some appearance of dignity.

It was turning dark when Ira sham-

bled from his car on the road to the little cove in the lake. With the aid of a flashlight, he searched the ground between the great oaks which grew almost to the shore. Daylight would have been better. He was ashamed of himself for not having thought of this an hour ago.

His search revealed nothing. He hadn't expected it to. Under a tree he shed his clothes and got into a pair of swimming trunks as big around as a beer barrel. Then he stepped into the water.

He didn't swim. When he was ankle-deep, he waded along the shoreline with curiously mincing steps. The bottom here was sandy; his bare feet would be able to feel anything bigger than a pebble.

The shore sloped gradually. It took him a long time to work his way out in a sweeping arc before he was in up to his knees. Across the lake the moon was coming up—a silver coin chipped on one side. He didn't need his flashlight.

Once he stopped dead and peered toward the shore. He thought he had heard somebody coming. Lovers infested this particular spot at night, but it was still a bit early for that. He guessed he'd look pretty foolish if somebody came across him.

A katydid made a racket, but that was all. Ira continued his slow, painstaking search of the cove bottom with his bare feet.

Water was starting to lap his swimming trunks when he found it. He ducked under and came up with a miniature camera.

"Yup," he said aloud to nobody but himself. "Had to be." He waded ashore to his pile of clothes.

THE blow came while he was bending over his clothes. Somebody stepped out from behind a tree and hit him with a rock, or something as effective as a rock.

Any other man might have had his skull split open. Ira pitched forward on his face. Nausea twisted his stomach. As he lay doubled over, fighting to retain consciousness, he felt a hand on his wet back.

Somehow he twisted, flailing out, and touched a leg. The leg leaped away, and then the foot attached to it kicked him in the ribs. Again Ira's face hit the ground, but he did not stop trying to get up.

Later he knew that that was what saved his life. It paid to be as big as he was. Even when he was only half-conscious, his size could strike such terror that his assailant dared not come within reach of his hands.

Ira didn't know how long it was before he could stand on his feet. His assailant was gone. So was the camera he had found in the water. So were his clothes.

For a long minute he stared down at the ground, trying to clear his dazed, aching head, so that he could understand why anybody should steal his clothes. Then he had it.

Groggily he stumbled through the oaks to the road. His car was still there and the key was in the lock. That didn't make sense in view of his missing clothes. Then seconds later it did. The motor refused to turn over. He raised the hood and saw that the wires were a mess.

Leaning against his car, Ira Bly fought the sickness that turned his powerful limbs to rubber. He shook his agonized head like a wounded lion. No time to be sick or weak. He had to get moving.

Headlights appeared going the right way. Ira did a weary dance in the middle of the road. The car stopped with a jolt. Ed Speer, who owned the grocery in the village, stuck his head out.

"You crazy, Ira? Where's your clothes?"

Ira sank into the seat beside Speer. "Lakeside Inn," he gasped. "Hurry!"

Speer's eyes glistened as he shoved in the gear. "After a crook, Ira?"

"Worse. Lot worse."

Speer dumped him off in front of the main porch of the hotel. Guests blinked in bewilderment at that mountain of naked flesh hurling itself stumblingly across the porch and into the lobby.

The desk clerk yelped in outrage, "Bathers must enter through the rear."

Ira said, "Where's—" and had to stop for breath. He wished his head would stop spinning.

"Ira!" Jim Anders came in through the porch door. "What in the world is it, man?"

"Miss Griffin's room. Hurry!"

"If you'll explain—"

"Her room!" Ira bellowed.

Anders decided to humor a madman. "If you're looking for Miss Griffin, she's not in her room. I saw her walk off about ten minutes ago."

"Alone?"

"At the moment she was alone. She was strolling toward the lake." Anders scowled at the mat of hair on Ira's chest. "I wish, Ira, you wouldn't treat this hotel as if it were your private bathroom. You might at least—"

But he was speaking to a disappearing back. Ira Bly was hurling himself away from the hotel in a series of frenzied lunges, which, in his weakened state, was the closest he could come to running.

UNDER the rising moon the hotel's private beach lay placidly deserted. It was a good distance from the hotel porch, and Ira stopped to draw air into his lungs.

Not here. He could see quite a way in either direction, and nobody was here.

Though there was one blind spot, where the boat dock jutted out into the water. Again he was in motion. When his bare feet slapped the smooth planks of the dock, he heard a thin, gurgling cry which would have been inaudible from any greater distance.

They were in the water just beyond the farther end of the dock. He glimpsed two heads, the dark-haired female one and the close-cropped one; then the woman vanished.

Ira kept running until the dock was no longer under his feet. At the fringe of that gigantic splash, he came up face to face with Bryan Foster. He felt the woman thrash under water. Foster gasped in terror and turned in flight. With Foster's weight released from her shoulders, Marie Griffin bobbed to the surface.

Ira caught her. "Can you swim?"

She sputtered and flailed wildly, but he saw that she could at least manage to keep afloat. He left her and started after Foster.

It wasn't much of a race. The water had revived him somewhat. Like most big men, Ira was more graceful and more at ease in water than on land. Besides, he was stripped for swimming, while Foster was encumbered by his clothes.

When Foster realized that he was caught, he turned in a futile attempt to fight the man who was nearly twice his size. Ira handled him the way he would a resisting drowning man. He knocked him out and towed him to the dock.

Marie Griffin had pulled herself up the ladder. Like Foster, she was fully dressed, her wet clinging white tennis dress looked like a second skin. Weakly, she raised her head as Ira hauled Foster onto the dock.

"He tried to drown me!" she wailed. "He pushed me off the dock and was holding me under the water!"

"Sure," Ira said. "Guessed he would. Dangerous to help somebody get away with murder."

Abruptly Bryan Foster leaped to his feet. He must have been feigning unconsciousness for some time, because he moved quickly now. Ira's hand shot out, caught an ankle, and Foster thumped full-length on the dock.

Foster sat up and spun. Ira slapped him hard and closed bone-crushing fingers over one slim wrist. With a sob, Foster subsided.

"You city folk," Ira said without heat. "Call me Hiram. Call me hick. Think you can get away with anything, even murder."

Marie Griffin brushed wet hair from her face. "You mean it wasn't by accident that you happened to be here?"

"Don't believe in accidents," Ira said. "Even when they look like accidents, like Georgie Wheat dead in your car."

NOT far off Ira could see the lights of the hotel, but nobody was coming this way. For a little while he'd have privacy with these two, and he could use it.

"Start with you and Mr. Foster stopping off at the cove on the way to the village," Ira said conversationally. "Men and women who hardly don't know each other don't stop off at places like that. Spot's for neckers, especially married men like Mr. Foster, who can't let anybody see them making love to another woman."

"And that scream. Wasn't Georgie I heard scream when he went over the bank in your car. I'd've heard the car fall, too, wouldn't I? That scream was nearer, from the cove."

"What are you trying to say?" Foster demanded.

"Let's see." Ira turned to him. "Miss Griffin acted too scared for only her car being stolen. It was insured for theft, wasn't it? Then, when we was standing around the wreck, why'd she suddenly start yelling about losing the car? Didn't sound right, not with the car just having killed a man, even a sneak thief."

"Tell you what it was. Nerves. Standing there and knowing the dead man in the car hadn't been killed in an accident, but knowing how he had been killed—well, Miss Griffin's nerves couldn't take it. She had to say something; had to be worried about something to hide what she was really worried about."

"You got the jitters, Mr. Foster. Rushed her back to the hotel where she could get a grip on herself."

Foster lay back on the dock, panting. "Why would I want to kill a yokel I never saw before?"

"Sure, yokel." Ira sighed. "Everybody's a yokel, but you're smart. You know what happened, but let me tell you. Georgie Wheat was at the cove. Snapped pictures of you and Miss Griffin kissing or something. He didn't mean no harm. Wasn't no blackmailer. Figured maybe you'd like to have those pictures after he developed them. You seen him taking the pictures and you lost your head."

"A while ago I called up your home, Mr. Foster. Talked to a maid or some-

body. You married a mighty rich woman, and you don't do a thing to support yourself. Your wife, Mr. Foster, would maybe kick you out if she learned you was making love to another woman. All she'd need was to see the pictures Georgie took."

"Like I said, you lost your head. You didn't know Georgie would sell the film to you. Maybe you figured it was a blackmail scheme."

Ira turned his head to the white shape on the other side of him. "Hit Georgie with a rock, didn't he, Miss Griffin?"

"Careful, Marie!" Foster warned. "If he pins anything on me, you'll be an accomplice."

The woman placed her knuckles against her mouth and swayed from Ira.

"Guess it was a rock," Ira mused. "Nothing else you'd have handy would do the trick. That's when you screamed, Miss Griffin—when Mr. Foster split Georgie's head open. Guess he didn't mean to kill Georgie; just wanted to get that camera. But there was Georgie dead, and there'd been a scream."

"Couldn't just walk off and leave the body there. Car might've been seen parked on the road, while somebody else heard the scream. Could be you two was seen walking to the cove from the car. No, couldn't leave a murdered man there. Better to make it look like an accident."

"Accomplice? You wasn't then, Miss Griffin, but you let him talk you into becoming one. So he tossed Georgie's camera in the water, carried Georgie's body through the woods, dumped it in your car, and drove up the grade. Ran the car off the bank when nobody was around. Then you two walked back looking for somebody to tell your car was stolen. First one you saw was me fishing."

DANCE music drifted from the hotel; above it floated the high-pitched laughter of women. For a little while silence lay over the dock. Under the moon Ira looked like some gigantic naked heathen idol squatting between the man and woman. He had plenty of time to finish the whole mess right here.

"Of all the hick cops!" Foster burst out. "You call that proof?"

"Oh, proof," Ira said amiably. "Figured you would toss the camera into the cove. Later you worried about it, Mr. Foster. Tide might go out, and maybe you didn't throw it far enough."

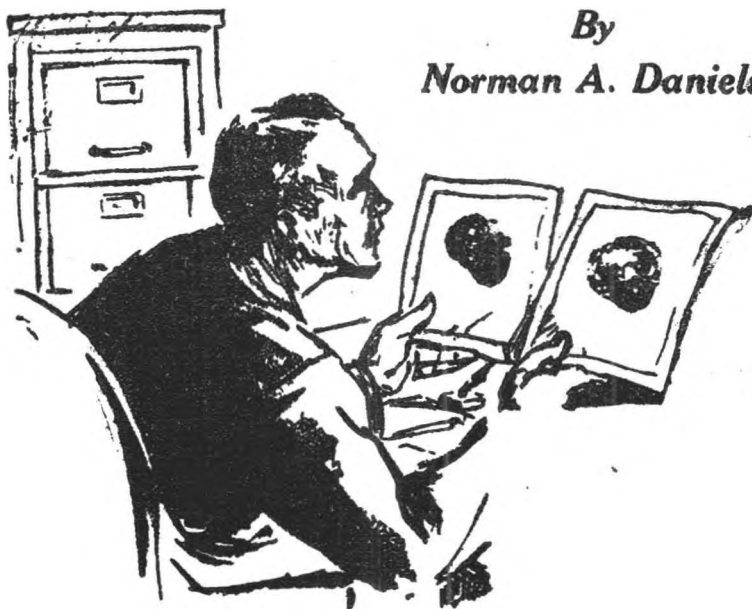
"After dark you came back and seen me find it. I was mighty careless, only my skull is tougher than Georgie's was. You had me pretty near out, but you're

(Continued on page 52)

Murder Makes a Splash

By

Norman A. Daniels



Patrolman Ross learned two things from his fireman toes—how to sift the ashes of a red-hot crime and how to smoke out a killer's confession.

NOBODY ever did find out who saw him first, but a passerby, probably theater-bound for it was early evening, let out a yell and pointed a finger skywards. Scores of pairs of eyes followed, and gasps of horror came from many lips.

Patrolman Robert Ross looked up and blinked. There, on the edge of the roof twenty stories above the ground, was a man slowly backing toward his doom. Not of his own volition for a powerful stream of water played on him, forcing him back, playing with him as a cat would play with a cricket. Letting him think he was free, then turning on him again.

Patrolman Ross didn't waste much time before he was legging it across the street toward the entrance of that building. There were more screams. He

stopped and looked up once again.

The man was falling, turning over and over like a tiny doll, but getting bigger and bigger with each instant. Then Ross saw another man stagger to the edge. It seemed as though this second figure threw out his hands and suddenly was dangling in space, held up by some kind of support quite invisible from the street.

Patrolman Ross went through the lobby of the building like a streak. As the police department's star baseball player he was pretty fast. He was using all his speed right now.

"Up—straight up to the roof," he told the operator. "One guy just fell off and another is hanging there. Make this thing believe it's a P-38."

The elevator started up at full speed. The operator was excited.

"Copper, this cage only goes to the nineteenth floor. The twentieth is some kind of a loft. They don't use elevator service. You gotta walk the last flight."

"Walk, my hat," Ross grunted. "I'm ready to fly."

He slipped through the doors as they opened, found the stairway, and took the steps four at a time. Long legs made

better speed than the elevator. Then he was on the narrower stairway to the roof itself. At the top he tripped and nearly took a header over a length of fire hose stretched across the floor.

He rushed over the rooftop. Reaching the edge he peered down and saw the man was moaning weakly and clinging to what seemed to be a radio aerial wire.

ROSS grabbed the length of wire extending over the edge. He braced himself firmly and began a slow, steady pulling. One strong jerk might dislodge the man who must be weak from his ordeal and from supporting his own weight so long.

A dark head and perfectly white face came over the edge of the roof, but the man wouldn't let go of the wire. He clung to it even as Ross pulled him across the rooftop to safety. He clung to it so tightly that Ross had to pry his fingers loose.

"It's okay now, mister," he said. "You're all right. Can you talk?"

"Roy . . . Roy . . . he went . . . over . . . He's dead!"

"He sure is," Ross said. "What happened?"

"Help me to sit up. There . . . better. Much better. My head is swimming. I feel like a dishrag. Look like one too, I guess. All wet from that hose."

He was wet. The outer clothing was well soaked, but under his buttoned coat he wasn't damp except from perspiration. Ross urged him to talk some more. The man complied.

"My name is Peter Barcroft. Roy Jeffreys and I—he's the one who went over—run a wholesale jewelry business in this building. Roy noticed something wrong with our stock and called my attention to it. We put in an order for an accountant to go over our books."

"Yeah, okay," Ross said. "But you act as if somebody is a murderer. Now I saw the hose forcing Jeffreys overside. What I want to know is, who handled the hose?"

"I'm coming to that, officer. Feel a lot better. Nerves steadier. I wondered about our bookkeeper and secretary—fellow named Mallory. I went into the next office to ask him about it. He had the safe open. There was a brisk fire going inside the safe. He was burning all the books."

"Where is Mallory now?" Ross demanded. "That guy's a killer, and it's my job to nab him."

"I don't know where he is," Barcroft answered with a sigh. "Let me go on, will you? I called Roy. By that time Mallory was running down the hall and we went after him. We're on the eighteenth floor. We saw him head for the roof so we followed. It was dark when we got here. We started looking for him, then he turned that fire hose on us."

"That I already know," Ross said. "What happened afterward?"

"He kept forcing us a little at a time, back to the edge of the roof. Then he sent Roy over. I tried to charge him, but no one can resist the force of a stream of water like that. I was next. He kept taunting me. I tell you the man was out of his mind."

"You don't know what he did after you went over, of course?" Ross asked. "He may be downstairs. I'm going to have a look. You'd better stay here in case some of the boys from Headquarters show up."

They came before Ross could reach the roof door. Sergeant Stokes of Homicide was in charge. Ross repeated Barcroft's story.

"We've got the whole building surrounded," Stokes said. "If he's still here, he won't get away. Ross, you can go back on your beat now if you like."

Ross noticed that Sergeant Stokes did say "if you like." Ross drew more courtesy from his ranking officers than most cops, because Ross was the star member of the Police baseball team. He'd personally shellacked the Fire Department two weeks before.

"Mind if I stick around?" Ross asked. "Just for the experience."

"No, go ahead, only keep your nose out of things," Stokes warned. "Too many of you fledglings are looking for a chance to solve some case and get your chevrons. You'll find they have to be earned the hard way."

STOKES talked to Barcroft for a few seconds, then stamped over to the fire hose. He carefully draped a handkerchief over the brass nozzle to preserve fingerprints and assigned one man to stand guard at that spot. Then he went downstairs with Barcroft in tow.

The still badly shaken jeweler led the

way to his offices and hastily poured himself a drink from a bottle he found in his desk drawer.

"There is no use looking for Mallory," he said. "He beat it long ago. Oh, you'll get him. How I hope you get him. The safe is in the next office if you want a look."

Stokes did and Ross tagged along dutifully—the great teacher and the meek pupil. The safe, a large one, was opened wide. Ashes from various records still smoked, but the papers were completely destroyed and had even been stirred up to prevent a whole piece of ash from giving any clues. There was a pint bottle beside the safe. The odor of gasoline was pungent. Quite apparently, Mallory had first doused the papers with gas, then set them afire to do a thorough job.

"Well, it's a cinch anyway," Stokes advised in an almost fatherly manner. "You won't learn much from this case, Ross. We know how the crime was committed, the motive, and even the identity of the killer. All we have to do is throw out an alarm and haul him in."

"Yes, sir," Ross said with a frown. He went back to Barcroft's office, stood there, and stared at the jewel merchant. Barcroft returned the stare and shifted uneasily in his seat.

"Did you want something, officer?"

"No, nothing at all," Ross said. "I was just thinking how lucky you were. Man alive, if that wire hadn't been there! Now, suppose you give us a few tips on where to hunt for Mallory."

"I have his record here," Barcroft declared. "I'll turn it over to the sergeant. It gives Mallory's address, previous occupation, and such. Personally, I don't know a great deal about him. It did occur to me that he always wanted afternoons off when there were big horse races going on."

"That kind of a mug, huh?" Stokes said heavily as he came into the room. "We always find something like that. Ross, you can go back to your beat any time. This case is open and shut."

"Sarge," Ross said, "can I talk to you for a minute? Aside."

Stokes shrugged and went over to a further corner. Ross spoke in a low voice while Barcroft watched them somewhat angrily.

"Let me stick around, Sarge. I've got a hunch in this case. There's something

wrong. I can't lay my finger on it, but it's there just the same."

Stokes frowned. "Well, I did win ten bucks on that last inning you pitched for us. Okay. Stay as long as I do. That won't be very long. I think you're way off the beam, Ross. This thing is—"

"Open and shut," Ross finished. "I know. That's what worries me. It's shut too tight."

Ross wandered across the office, in the opposite direction from the room where the safe was located. There was another door in this new direction. He opened it. The office was dark. He blinked a few times and was sure he saw a bundle of rags on the floor. At least it looked like a bundle of rags. He went over and prodded it with his foot, then let out a yell. It was a bundle of rags all right—stuffed with a human form.

When the lights went on, Barcroft gasped one word, "Mallory!"

Stokes knelt beside the prone figure. "He's dead. Poison, I think. He's got one of those paper cups clutched in his hand. Looks like suicide to me. The easy way out, when he knew he was licked. Ross, phone Headquarters and tell them to send back the medical examiner."

"Okay," Ross said, but he stood close by the water cooler and its attached paper cup dispenser. He reached down and drew one of the cups out. Then he shrugged his shoulders, went back into the main office and phoned. Stokes and Barcroft came out a few moments later.

"I never thought he'd do that," Barcroft said. "Just didn't strike me as the type."

"You never can tell," Stokes wagged his head solemnly and then spotted Ross again. "Thanks, Ross, for helping out. We're all finished here. Murder, attempted murder, and suicide. The killer took his own life. That paper cup had a lot of some violent poison in it. See you later."

ROSS nodded and walked out of the office, but he didn't return to his beat. Instead, he proceeded back to the rooftop. With the aid of his flashlight he studied everything from the location of the still guarded hose to the aerial wire to which Barcroft has clung. He checked the other end of the wire. It was securely anchored to the elevator housing that jutted above the rooftop.

There was a water tower beside it,

with a ladder going up the side. Ross rubbed his chin and walked back to where the fire hose lay. A fingerprint man was dusting it.

"Find anything?" Ross asked conversationally.

The fingerprint man looked up. "Not a thing, Hawkshaw. The guy who handled it either wore gloves or wiped the brass surface good and hard. And since when did our star pitcher take to being a detective?"

"Since the minute that poor guy came flying over the roof chased by a stream of water from this hose," Ross commented sourly. "I got me a badge. It's tin, sure, but a gold one doesn't make any Sherlock Holmes out of its wearer."

"Says the cop who wants one." The fingerprint man grinned.

Ross went downstairs again. He saw Barcroft and Stokes walking slowly down the hall toward the elevator, apparently to wait for the medical examiner. Ross slipped into the office and hurried to the room where Mallory lay dead. He violated more sections of the police rulebook than he'd ever read and digested.

First, he turned the corpse flat on its back and searched every pocket. Next he checked all around the floor, the sink, the top of the water cooler. Paper he found in the dead man's pocket, he sniffed of good and hard. The trouser pocket contained a fresh handkerchief, not even unfolded. There was another, in similar condition, in the breast pocket of Mallory's coat. Ross straightened up, walked through the main office, and stuck his head out the door.

"Sarge, mind coming back here? You too, Barcroft."

"Now what? Stokes demanded. "I thought I told you to get back on your beat."

"You did," Ross smiled, "and you added something about winning ten bucks . . ."

"Well, what is it?"

"I just wanted to know if you were all finished with the case," Ross said. "You know—open and shut stuff."

"Certainly I'm finished," Stokes growled. He was getting sore and it showed on his face. "What's the big idea?"

"To me," Ross said, "the case was open too wide and shut too tight. I'm

arresting Mr. Barcroft for murder. Two murders."

"Are you off your trolley?" Stokes roared.

Barcroft laughed. "Good heavens, this patrolman did save my life and I'm grateful to him. But I resent any such accusation as the one he made."

"Just the same it sticks," Ross declared stoutly. "You're under arrest. I'll tell you just why."

"Please do." Barcroft walked around his desk and sat down. "Naturally I'll be very interested."

"Take Mallory—the man you said burned those books and ran onto the roof. Then it seems he came down here to kill himself with poison. He took one of those paper cups out of the dispensing machine, put poison into the bottom of it, filled the cup with water, and swallowed the stuff."

"Well, didn't he?" Stokes demanded. "I looked for any signs of a struggle which might infer murder. There were none."

"No, there weren't," Ross agreed. "The way I see it, Barcroft put some poison into one of those cups, re-inserted it into the dispenser, then had a few words with Mallory to make him sweat good and plenty. Mallory went for a drink, took the poisoned cup, filled it and drank. He died, just as Barcroft planned. It was a neat murder if some motive for suicide was established."

"And the proof which turns me into a murderer?" Barcroft demanded.

"There isn't any," Ross confessed. "Not pointing to you, but evidence to show it wasn't suicide exists. Mallory died instantly. He had no time to dispose of anything, so what happened to the bottle or the paper in which he kept the poison? Would he be apt to go around with a handful of the stuff? Or just throw it loose into his pocket? Heck, no. That stuff was in the paper cup when he filled it, and Mallory didn't know it."

"Perhaps," Barcroft suggested smoothly. "Mallory had everything prepared, just as you outlined."

"Mallory was no fool," Ross declared. "He'd have taken his chances and run for it after the murder. Also, there were no prints on the hose nozzle. They'd either been wiped off or the killer used gloves. Mallory carried two handker-

chiefs, neither had been used to wipe off the nozzle. He had no gloves. There isn't a pair in all these offices. I looked."

STOKES issued a grunt. "Ross, you're off balance. Making an accusation like that is bad."

"Letting a murderer go is worse," Ross said quickly. "I think Barcroft is the thief. I think Roy Jeffreys suspected him, but wasn't sure. Barcroft knew an examination of the books would show he swiped plenty of his partner's profits. So he sent Mallory to get his fatal drink of water and left him in that room dead. Then he yelled to Jeffreys about the fire in the safe—which he'd set himself. He probably told Jeffreys the same story—about seeing Mallory running for the rooftop. Jeffreys went up there. Barcroft started the hose, knocked him off, and then dropped over the edge of the roof himself, being very certain that he clung to a stout wire, well fastened."

"Now look," Stokes said patiently, "if you weren't the best ballplayer we ever had, I'd bust you. In fact, maybe I won't be able to stop it anyhow if Barcroft prefers charges."

"Which I will not do," Barcroft declared smugly. "After all, the officer saved my life."

Ross squirmed and ran a finger around his collar. If he was wrong, this would be the finish of a good cop.

"Mainly," he went on. "I'm going by the condition of Barcroft's clothes. He was wet, sure, but not wet enough. Know what I think? He climbed the water tower and dunked himself. But he didn't dunk far enough or long enough. He was wet only up to his waist."

"Officer," Barcroft said with exaggerated patience, "Mallory played the hose on our legs to trip us and sent us over the side of the roof."

"If he did that, you'd be drenched, from head to foot," Ross declared. "I know and I can prove it. I suggest, Sarge, that you check Barcroft's safe deposit vaults, the safe in his home, and any place else where he might have hidden stuff . . ."

Barcroft was suddenly standing. He held a stubby little gun in his fist.

"I'm getting out," he said. "Fast. The

medical examiner will be here shortly. He'll have three bodies to work on instead of just Mallory's. I'll also have a nice two hundred thousand in diamonds and rubies I bought with the firm's money and which Jeffreys didn't know about. You two will wear leaden ornaments in your hearts."

Ross was swinging his nightstick very gently. The leather thong slid down off his wrist. He flipped the stick back hard, then forward and let it go. Barcroft fired once. The bullet whizzed past Ross's head, but the nightstick slammed home—flat against Barcroft's face. Ross followed it, diving across the wide desk.

In a moment handcuffs clicked. Sergeant Stokes panted excitedly.

"He's yours," he told Ross. "Yes, sir, yours, Ross. He fell for a nice line of mullarky, but it makes no difference what he fell for so long as he fell. Nice work, bluffing him that way."

"I wasn't bluffing, Sarge," Ross said. "About what happened to Mallory and Jeffreys, that was cold reasoning. But what I said about the fact that Barcroft should have been soaked by the fire hose was absolute truth. Believe me, I know."

"Just exactly how?" Stokes asked. Barcroft started to curse. Stokes snapped a command to shut up.

"Remember that last ball game? The one you won ten bucks on? Sarge, I gave those firemen the works in that inning. Every blasted one lost his shirt on the game. They were good and sore at me. So what happened?"

"Well, four nights ago I went to a fire. The boys in red saw me and a couple of them squirted me with their hose—one just like that one upstairs on the roof. They hit me low and I flew back about twenty feet. I was soaked from head to foot. I was wearing a light outer coat too, but that didn't help. No kidding, I couldn't have been wetter if somebody held me under water for an hour."

"Just the same," Stokes declared, "this is your pinch."

"No, yours," Ross answered. "Homicide is your job. Anyway I had a good edge on you. Call it practical experience."



Killers Keepers

By David X. Manners



Detective Tony Piddle had one more day to spend before he could claim those thirty thousand orphan simoleons. But twenty-four hours might be too expensive when bystander guns filed counterclaims and the undertaker held the jackpot.

FINDERS KEEPERS, losers weepers," I said to myself, repeating that old nursery rhyme. I'd been saying it over and over to myself until I was magenta in the face. You know the way a guy keeps saying something to try to talk himself into it?

I know I've got the rep as the cluckiest detective in seven states, and that I wouldn't know my own nose in front of my face if it wasn't screwed on there. But it didn't take a brain trust to know that, though five months and twenty-nine days had passed since I'd found those thirty thousand frogskins lying on the sidewalk in a bag, a lot could happen in

the last twenty-four hours before all that dough was legally mine.

"Finders keepers . . ."

I was sitting in a side booth at Goody's Bar, sweating worse than the beer glass I held in my hand. I'd just watched Tubby, my partner, leave. Good old Tubby! It was nice of him to try to encourage me, telling me that I'd be sure to come off with the dough, when all that cash was certain to come between us. Poor Tubby—

"Hey, Slob!"

I jerked up from looking in my beer, expecting it to be Tubby who addressed me thus. But if it was Tubby he'd grown considerably in the last two minutes. As

well as sprouted a new crop of skull foliage. This fellow was tall as a yawn and wide as a box car. He had hair growing out of his ears and on the back of his hands, too. Tubby is a little gink who can walk around under tables, wearing a top hat. In spite of his name, he totes no more suet than a chin whisker.

"Beg pardon?" I said to this gorilla.

"You, Slob." He jerked a thumb toward the door. "Outside. I want to talk to you outside—Slob."

I crimsoned. "My name's Tony Piddle," I said, wondering how he knew that secret name that only Tubby called me. I may weight 240 pounds and wear size 16 brogans, but it's really not fat. I'm really pretty solid!

"I don't care if your name is Slob or Jerk." His dark, ugly eyes bored right through me. "I want to see you outside. It's about the thirty thousand."

He turned his back, and started walking toward the door like he meant business.

I felt the goo swish around inside me and begin to drain out. I don't take the bum's rush from anybody, but maybe this fellow did have something important on his mind. He'd mentioned the thirty thousand! Good gravy!

"Finders keepers—"

My voice quavered and broke as he turned around and looked darkly back at me. "You coming?"

I DROPPED a silver fifty cent piece on the booth table in payment for my four beers, and squeezed outside. The gorilla was waiting for me.

He let his dark eyes travel over me. A crooked smile tugged at his tight mouth as he looked at the belt going around my girth.

"I've often wondered," he said. "What keeps 'em up, in a case like this?" He was referring to my pants.

I had a snappy comeback all ready, but before I could utter it, he said, "My name's Gorham. I just wanted to tell you that all those simoleons you found are mine."

He handed me a card.

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I snagged something suspicious in his tone and in his card, right then. They didn't go together, and I began to feel better. If the thirty thousand was his, would he have to be telling me about it?

"Good!" I exclaimed, brazenly. "Why don't you go down to Police Headquarters and claim it?"

He kept quiet a minute as some people went by. "You don't believe it's mine, do you? Well, it is. And before I'm through I'll prove it to you. But there's a very good reason why I can't go down and claim it. A very good reason why I want you to go down tomorrow, claim it, and then turn it over to me. I got it illegally!"

Two large gentlemen whose lifework I was sure wasn't all sweetness and light emerged out of the background at that moment to hover protectively behind monkey-mush Gorham. The shades of evening were falling a little too fast for me.

"Okay. Sure. I'll get the money for you." I grinned kinda silly, waved his card as I took a step back. "I've got your card and phone number. I'll get in touch with you as soon as I get it tomorrow." I turned to go.

"Not so fast!" Gorham's voice was a thunderclap.

The two men swept in on either side of me. They had their hands poked forward in their coat pockets, like you can pretend you have a gun. Only I didn't know if they were pretending. I suddenly wished that autumn dark didn't come so early, and that New York passersby would look once in a while to see what's going on around them.

Gorham tilted his head toward a long, black hearse parked at the curb, only it wasn't a hearse, it was a limousine. "I want you to come with me."

It definitely wasn't a dinner invitation. I may write poems on occasion, and like to smell flowers, but there's a point when I can get crowded too far.

One of the men stepped to open the car door. In a minute they'd have me cooped!

Squa-ash! Down I brought my size 16 brogan on James Pennyweather Gorham's foot. He bellowed like a brass horn, and reached for his mashed tootsies. *Socko!* In lammed my fist to the side of his head.

Un-nh!

It was me who made that last sound. One of Gorham's nasty punks had sneaked a wallop into what is sometimes unflatteringly called my forward turret. My first *un-nh* when the blow landed was followed by a second *un-nh* when I landed—on the sidewalk.

Gasping for breath, I saw Gorham's two boys closing in on me for what looked like the kill. A small knot of passersby, halted by the fray, looked on without so much as raising a pinky!

I kicked out and tumbled the first tough coming at me. But before I could grunt to my feet, the second was closing in! Then it happened.

TDA

OUT of the crowd stepped a man in a chalk-striped grey suit and wearing a homburg. He swung the cane he carried and clipped the tough coming at me. He straight-armed Gorham away, and out of the tail of my eyes, I saw a second man step out of the crowd to tie into my attackers as my rescuer spirited me into a drifting taxicab.

"Whew!" he said.

"Whew!" I said, puffing like an autumn wind. I turned to the sharp-beaked man. "They really had me, Mr—"

"Mr. Swoop," he filled in, like I wanted him to do.

"Swope or Swoop?" I said. The name Swoop fit him almost too well. He had a thin, pointed bill, like a hawk. "I can't thank you enough."

"Swoop," he verified. "And it wasn't just accidental that I happened along. I'd heard you were in the bar." He grinned slyly. "You see, I have a job for you."

"You know me then?"

"Why, everybody knows Detective Tony Piddle!" He nodded his homburg head. "That's why I've come to you. I want the best. I've got a job to be done."

He had my ego cooking all right with that. But now with me in line to receive thirty thousand long greens the next day, I wasn't specially interested in any detective jobs. I hadn't been for weeks. And, perversely, ever since I'd found that money, partner Tubby and me had been flooded with offers of all kinds of fancy dick jobs. Six months ago, I'd have been slap-happy to have the offer of a bill-collecting route.

Swoop saw my hesitation. "It's really a very simple job. I have an idea I'm being watched, spied upon. I want to know who's doing it. If you'd care to join me at dinner, I'll explain more fully."

At dinner—?

This was a job for little Tubby, all right. I had no business getting tangled up in some case when I already had more on my hands than I could juggle. Gorham & Company had attacked me back there in front of Goody's, tried to force me into their big, shiny jalopy. Their idea was probably kidnap me and keep me safely in their power, until I'd collected the thirty G's from the Lost Property Custodian, and turned it over into their hungry hands.

Hungry? That reminded me. It was past dinner time. What kind of an ingrate would I be to pass up a dinner invite, when the gentleman offering it had just saved my pinfeathers?

"I'd be dee-lighted!" I said, showing all my dental beauty. I'd have a chance to think over what my next move would be, while we chewed chow.

The car lurched to a sudden stop on a Village backstreet. We got out. It was a kind of crummy looking joint. Here I'd been figuring that any man who wore a homburg, and carried a cane, would probably put on the feedbag in a place like Charles', the Lafayette, or maybe Chambord.

But then I saw that the reason he carried a cane was because he walked with a limp.

He saw me notice it. "These blessed new shoes." He made a wry face. "I'm breaking them in, and they've worn a blister."

We sat down at a table. Swoop took off his shoes and massaged his foot while we waited for the waiter. When that pomaded worthy arrived, I ordered anti-pasto, vichysoise, ravioli, cutlet parmagiano, beans and potatoes garni, for a starter.

Swoop said, "I'll have the usual."

The waiter fetched the stuff up, and all Swoop got—was a glass of milk! I felt like an ignominious worm, getting all that big dinner and him getting just milk. I insisted I have the same. I was a little disappointed when they didn't give me any argument.

The waiter brought me a glass of milk too. I sipped at it. It wasn't milk. It suddenly all became clear to me, and I felt like a worse stupe than ever. That was a New Orleans fizz Swoop had, and now I had the same. Swoop looked pleased.

These drinks that mix cream and alky have never agreed with me. I was only halfway through the potion, and Mr. Swoop had divided up into a half dozen reasonable facsimiles of same. I couldn't get him in focus.

"What's the matter, Tony, don't you feel well?"

The last thing I remember was Mr. Swoop shaking me imploringly by the shoulder. My head swelled up into a barrage balloon. Somebody stuck a pin in it, and I felt better.

"OOH!" I groaned and turned over. I sat up with a start. I was lying on my bed in my own little basement apartment on Washington Place!

I had all my clothes on. My coat and shirt were stiff with—blood! I'd been hurt!

I battled my way up off the bed. I ripped open my shirt that was a brown-stained mess. I'd been in that restaurant, drinking, when I must have passed out. How—?

But I wasn't hurt. There wasn't a scratch on me anywhere. Yet I was covered with bloodstains, as if maybe I'd been carrying someone who'd been hurt.

I scratched my noggin. I didn't remember being mixed up in any bloody stuff. And I didn't like it on my clothes. That guy Swoop—that eaglebeak must know something about this!

I took off my shirt and went to the bathroom. I washed the shirt out, being careful the water was cold, because hot water sets the stain, and then you're kaboodle. Sunk.

But there was still a lot of the gravy on my coat. I put on a clean shirt, wrapped a lot of gauze bandage on my hand, and took the coat to the cleaner right next door.

I pointed at my bandaged hand as I laid the coat on the counter. "I cut myself."

He looked at the bloodstains and shook his wise old head. "Sorry, sir, but it can't be cleaned. It would have to be washed. The lining in there would all shrink up."

I groaned at the verdict. But suddenly I quit groaning and grabbed the coat. I didn't have to worry about saving an old zoot like this. Today must be *tomorrow*! The day on which the thirty thousand queer would be turned over to me for my very own!

I headed out of the shop. Two cops were standing at my door. When they saw me, they hustled right up. If those two lugs with Mr. Gorham who hopped me at Goody's were big, you should have seen these two minions of the law.

They looked me over. One of them spotted the coat over my arm. He grabbed it.

"Ah-hah!" he said.

"Ah-hah—what?" I didn't like it. They had their police prowler car, motor idling, at the curb.

The cop jabbed his finger at the bloody coat. "This proves it!"

The other cop shoved me. "Get in that car. We're arresting you for the murder of James Pennyweather Gorham. Anything you say will be used against yuh!"

"Hu-unh?" But I wasn't as surprised as I sounded. Even a dumb bunny could have seen this setup.

"Get in that car, Fat-pants!"

They gave me another shove. I didn't want to get in that car. I had wanted to go to Police Headquarters to collect my moolah. But at the moment the only 30,000 they'd give me would be volts in Sing Sing!

I got in the car. And I really mean in. Brother, in. Forty-inches-across-the-pants in. I saw the coppers begin scratching their thatches over the little problem of how they'd ever get in too. That was my cue to step on the clutch, and flip the gear flipper.

I shot up the block in that little buzz-

bomb. My two police pals who'd been holding on the car doors did ju-jitsu backflips.

I waltzed that police jalopy around the corner, another corner, and ditto. I hauled up and got out. The safest place for me would be right back where I'd dumped those coppers. That was now just around the corner. So there I headed.

I PEEKED cautiously around and the cops were gone. I went up to my house. A man stepped out of the doorway and put the bite on my arm.

"Piddle, you did it," he gasped. "You made it away from them bulls. I was coming here to find out how you were, and I saw it."

I did a double-take. It's the fellow with the homburg and cane—Mr. Swoop!

He started me moving toward a cab parked across the street. "You saved my life last night. Now I'd like to repay by doing what I can to help you."

"Saved your life? Last night? Repay me? What are you talking—"

There wasn't time to say more. I had to duck inside that cab as two police cars went scooting by, crying their heads off.

"Don't you remember?" Swoop was beside me. "That cheap faker, Jim Gorham, jumped me outside the restaurant last night, and you killed him?"

"I did?" And then I saw the tight grin on his razor-edge face, and caught on.

He chortled. "Now maybe we'll be able to come to some understanding about that \$30,000!"

The cab was making fast time up the avenue. It was suddenly all clear. Gorham and Swoop were both after that thirty thousand of mine. Swoop had beaten Gorham's time and gotten me under his thumb with one and the same killing. He could turn me in for Gorham's murder any time if I didn't behave!

"You dope!" I growled. "You've gummed it pretty. How do you expect me ever to collect my money from headquarters now with every cop looking for me?"

Swoop said, "I didn't intend for the cops to suspect you—yet. It's an unexpected turn. But we'll figure some way out."

Like a bean-brain, I blurted. "You killed Gorham! The thirty thousand really was his, even if he did get it illegally. You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to the Homicide Bureau and look up what unsolved murders there were six months ago. Gorham musta murdered somebody and taken that thirty queer from him. We'll dig the bullets out of that old corpse!"

I leaned over, with a sudden dazzling inspiration. I jerked up the pants on Swoop's limpy leg.

"Tight shoes, hah?" I pointed at the bandage around the leg. "That's where Gorham musta shot you recently when you had a brush with him. I'll get a police surgeon to dig the bullet out of there. Then we'll compare it with those we find in the corpse. That oughta give the cops a line on who really killed Gorham. It'll show you been scrapping with him. Or maybe we'll compare the bullets in Gorham with those in the corpse!"

I was sweating like a horse, after having given out with that last prodigious brainstorm. I looked at Swoop and his little eyes were popping grape pulps. I knew that in all that wild flurry I must have hit upon somebody hot, or he wouldn't have been so gangrene around the tonsils.

He grinned like weak tea. "So you're going to the cops? I'd like to see that—with what they want *you* for!"

The cab stopped just then for a light. A cop was in the middle of the intersection, handling the traffic. I leaned out the window and yelled:

"Officer!"

Swoop choked on a curse. But it was too late for him to do anything. The traffic flatfoot came over.

"Officer!" I stepped out of the cab, pointed at Swoop. "Hold this man! He tried to steal my wallet! When I tried to get it back, he threw it out the window. Just a minute while I go down the street and pick it up."

I set off on a run. At the corner I ducked into a subway kiosk. Downstairs, in the arcade, I spotted a sandwich shop. I couldn't resist. I had three frankfurts. I traced a couple figure 8's in the bottom of a cup of coffee with my spoon, then gulped the brew down. I started uptown again. I got off near Tubby's and my office, next to Bryant Park.

FOOTSTEPS pounding behind me trickled into my consciousness. I heard a voice yell, "Hey!"

The only door I saw around to duck into was one marked *Women*.

I did a fast ring-around-the-rosie around a change booth and made a swan dive for a phone booth. I got jammed up, squeezing in. Someone tapped my back, just about at my kidney.

"Hey, Slob!"

I let out a sigh of relief at the familiar squeak of that voice, and quit the battle with the phone booth door. There was Tubby, batting his wide eyes, his derby shoved back on his pate.

"Slob," he began. "I—"

"Tubby!" I said. "I been looking all over for you. I was just going up to the office to see if you were there."

I reached down and took his shoulder. I led him out of the subway so fast, he had to trot to keep up.

"Slob, I been looking all over for *you*," I heard him say. "I wanted to tell you—"

"Never mind," I said. "If it's about the thirty thousand duckets, I just about got that all cleared up."

"You have?"

"Listen to me." I poured it out, quick and hot, like soup out of a pot. "That thirty thousand is illegal stuff. A gent named"—I dug out the card—"James Pennyweather Gorham killed somebody to get it. That's why he can't go to the cops to claim it. He wanted me to claim it for him, but another gent—a hawk named Mr. Swoop—wants me to claim it for him. This Swoop killed Gorham."

"But—" little Tubby began. His eyes were wide, perplexed. It's great to have a guy like Tubby around, so at least once in a while you can feel smarter than somebody.

"This is what we do," I said. "Six months ago, Gorham murdered to get that thirty thousand. So we gotta go to the Missing Persons Bureau and find out who disappeared or was killed about that time. Gorham killed him, in that robbery."

"How could you prove it?"

"Prove it?" I snorted. "Oh, yes, prove it . . ." Then I remembered. "There's a bullet in Mr. Swoop's leg that undoubtedly came from Gorham's gun. If it tallies with bullets in the body of the dead man—poof!—we got proof."

Tubby tipped back his derby even farther, and scratched his bald head. "But maybe this guy you say Gorham killed wasn't shot. Maybe he was hanged, or gassed, or shoved off a high building. And, anyway, it all happened six months ago. Slob, if you'd listen—"

I breathed impatiently. "I'm beginning not to like the way you call me Slob. The Missing Persons Bureau has records of everything if it happened **six years** ago, or six thousand years ago!"

Tubby knew I was mad.

I REACHED down and nudged his shoulder. "This way to the M.P.B. The Missing Persons Bureau, to you."

"Oh, yeah?" said a voice, and it wasn't the little brown bear's.

Two cops suddenly loomed like a blue wall in front of us!

I grabbed Tubby's hand, and started to turn. Two other cops sprang up like mushrooms behind us! "This way to the P.H.," one leered nastily, indicating a

waiting police car. "Police Headquarters, to you."

"I tried to tell you, Slob," Tubby whimpered. "I tried to tell you that—"

"Shar-r-rup!" I rasped irritably. Now things were a mess! I not only wouldn't get the thirty thousand spools of velvet, but they were going to truss me up for the murder of that gorilla, Gorham.

I was thrust in back with one cop, Tubby in front with another. The car whipped the wind down to Centre Street, but the breeze couldn't cool the fevered thoughts churning behind my brow.

The car pulled into the alley. We were hustled inside a hearing room in Police Headquarters. There were more cops, and newspaper reporters.

"That's the little snip!" exclaimed a kinda familiar looking tough guy in civvies, as we came in. He pointed an accusing finger at Tubby! "I thought he ran a respectable detective agency. Six months ago, I went to him and gave him that thirty thousand dollars of mine for safekeeping. He appropriated it for himself!"

"Huh?" The word jerked from me. I looked to Tubby.

"I didn't appropriate it," Tubby's forehead could not have had more worry-wrinkles if he was a hound dog. "What better place for safekeeping is there than Police Headquarters? That's where I saw to it the dough went. You can't blame me for trying to get a little publicity at the same time, can you?"

"Maybe not," the police chief smiled with sad indulgence. "Perhaps you were guilty only of an error in judgment, rather than any wilful violation of the law."

What was Tubby talking about? He said this guy had given him the money!

The police chief took out a little black bag from under his desk. It was the one I'd found—the one with the homeless thirty thousand! He zipped it open, counted over the bundles of fodder inside, and then he handed it all over to the tough gent with the familiar look.

Tubby and I were suddenly being ignored. I was all in a muddle, except for one thing. I poked Tubby's shoulder urgently. "Come on. This way!"

He opened his eyes wide. "Hey, where you goin'?"

"I'm not gonna fry for Gorham!"

He shook his derby. "That's what I was trying to tell you back there before the cops picked us up. I convinced them you was in the clear on the Gorham kill. It was me who arranged for them to pick us up and bring us in."

"You arranged—?" All the thousands of questions in my noggin suddenly swung back into focus. "And I suppose

that guy gave you the money? I didn't find it!"

Tubby nodded quickly. "Sure, you found it—after I planted it there on the sidewalk for you."

I couldn't say anything.

"That was the publicity angle. I figured the new notices on you finding all that dough would needle our business. I guess you gandered that that scene you saw here was a phony-baloney."

"Huh?"

"The guy who pretended to claim the dough," Tubby went on, "I guess you recognized as the corner cop you say hello to every morning. They figure that turning the dough over to him is a sure way to get Mr. Swoop to show his hand. The moment Swoop tries to lift the dough from the cop, he'll be grabbed."

Tubby made a gesture and a sound like somebody getting cord-choked.

"A guy really did leave the dough with you," I said, just to get my position straight, "and you let me go ahead and find it, without telling me you put it there for me to find?"

"Aw, don't feel so bad, Slob. It was only fun." Tubby tilted his head. "Come along now while we trail after and watch Mr. Swoop try to grab that velvet."

ALREADY the coppers and others were beginning to mill out the door. I sulked. But with a purpose. The minute I saw I wasn't watched, I made a hurried sneak out the back door. Tubby, if he noticed I was missing, would probably figure I was lost in the crowd.

I grabbed a hack for East 29th Street. I didn't go in the morgue's front way. I went around to the shipping and receiving entrance. The couple men nailing up pine coffins paid me scant attention as I breezed by. I acted too much like I knew where I was going.

I walked out through the refrigeration room, and up a narrow corkscrew staircase to the back hall. I hadn't been at the morgue in months, but I still knew my way. I walked on by the cadaverous gent who sat behind a desk with the Undertaker's Book, for registering new arrivals, in front of him. The door on the Missing Persons Bureau was locked.

It shouldn't have been locked at that time of the day!

I hurried on through an autopsy room to another door. Just as I figured. Whoever had locked the bureau's front door hadn't known enough to lock the back entrance!

I walked directly into the file room.

I walked up to a man poring over a folder he'd just taken from an open file drawer. "Hello, Mr. Swoop," I said. "Did

you hear about the cow that ate blue grass?"

He turned. "No."

"It mooded indigo," I quipped, and before he could recover, I let go a lolla-palooza to his beak.

Bing, bang, bing! It was fast and furious. Two tough monkeys—apparently the same ones who'd been working for Gorham before—came to Swoop's rescue.

I butted one in the chest. "That for you—turncoat!" I sat down on the other one.

Gong! Down I went as a gun barrel bent over my head.

There was a terrific crash. But it wasn't me hitting the floor. It was coppers—millions of them—smashing in through the front door. Why, even Tubby was with them!

"I noticed you'd sneaked off," he gasped quickly. "I remembered what you said about coming here, and told the cops. They liked your game better'n theirs."

Swoop and his two thugs were manacled. The cop who's been on duty in the morgue division of the Missing Persons Bureau was untied. Swoop's crew had tied him.

I pulled away from the sympathetic cops inspecting the shiner my eye had picked up. I stumbled to the opened file drawer Swoop had been burrowing into. I picked out the envelope Swoop had just found. It was marked *Identity: Unknown*. In the dossier was a medical report, a clothing list—and a handful of .38 slugs that had been dug out of that particular body!

I turned with them toward Swoop.

"You got me." His beaked head fell. "Ballistics will tie them up with the bullets that killed Gorham. But I had a *right* to kill Gorham! He was muscling in on my game!"

A cop grabbed a photograph out of the file envelope. He showed it to Tubby. "Is this the man who turned that thirty thousand over to you for safekeeping?"

I took a quick peek at the picture and I knew why poor Tubby was looking sickish. Who could identify a guy after he'd played tag with fishes in the river for a week?

"It could be," Tubby admitted. "But what difference does it make? I still wouldn't know *who* he was. All he told me was that somebody was threatening to rob him, and he wanted the dough safe. He didn't tell me his name. Swoop musta killed him without knowing he'd already turned the dough over to me."

"I guess it doesn't make much difference at that," the cops admitted.

No difference? What was the matter

with these coppers? I was beginning to get riled. Did I have to do all the work? "I'll find out who he was," I declared brashly.

"Let it go," Tubby said.

"Aw, never mind. Let it go," said the cops.

WHAT was the matter with them? "I won't let it go!" I turned fiercely on Swoop who was cringing in the grip of two stalwart bluecoats. "Are you going to tell who this poor guy you killed was, or will I have to—"

"It will be a pleasure to tell you who the guy was," Swoop said brightly. He grinned like somebody enjoying sweet vengeance. "His name is—or was—Albert J. Dingle. He lived at 3407 Restful Drive in Kokomo, Indiana. He just made the thirty thousand in oil, and he came to the big city to take in the sights."

"There!" I turned proudly to my audience. Wow, what publicity this was going to be! I'd really cracked this case wide—and by myself.

"There, *yeah!*" said Tubby, glaring balefully.

"Huh?"

I didn't savvy it at all—bean-brain that I am—until I got Tubby outside.

"What is all this?" I said then. "What did I do?"

"What didn't you do, Slob?" he chopped back. "If you hadn't opened your yap, the rightful owner of that dough might be forever unknown—or at least unknown long enough for you to collect that thirty thousand as yours—ours, I mean."

"Hunh? You mean I—?"

"That's what I mean! now—now that dough will go—to Kokomo!"

I got bold. "Thirty thousand—gaffoole! What do we care!"

It made me happy to have Tubby feel he was the smart one. But I was grinning up my sleeve. Still, it was no time to let him know I'd been hep to what was going on ever since that day six months before when that "Albert J. Dingle" had stopped at the office.

Eavesdropping at Tubby's door, I'd noticed Tubby forgot to ask him his name. So I'd gotten it from Dingle on his way out.

Tubby was going to get the surprise of his life when Police Headquarters found out what I'd found out six months ago—that there was no such gent as Albert J. Dingle in Kokomo—and came carting that thirty grand back to us.

Sure, I looked it up. Kokomo—

Kokomo? Good gravy!

The town I looked up was *Kalamazoo!*

Ollie Slade was a snaky gunslinger. But when he holed up in that hideout den, his triggers were no antidote to the . . .

Fangs of Fortune

By David M. Norman



D EPUTY SHERIFF DON BAKER parted shrubs and looked at the cabin in the clearing just ahead. Slowly he drew a heavy gun out of its holster and cocked the trigger.

Beside him was Joe Geary, runty woodchopper, who was shaking badly. When Baker put a hand on Geary's arm, the smaller man almost cried out in alarm.

"Take it easy," Baker said. "You're a mass of nerves. Now, Joe—before I move up on that cabin—are you positive you saw what you told me?"

"I ain't blind. It was Ollie Slade, just

as plain as could be. He drove up, got out, and went into the cabin. Soon as I saw him heading there, I knew something was wrong, because the cabin is always boarded up until the owner comes here for the hunting season."

"All right," Baker said. "What else?"

"He got the door open by using some kind of a chisel on it. He went in, but came out again, quick, and got back into his car. He drove it to the cliff overlooking the lake. First off, I thought he was going to kill himself. He got the car going awful fast and jumped out just before it went over the cliff and down

to the water. It disappeared immediately."

"And you're positive it was Ollie Slade."

"Weren't the papers full of his pictures? Didn't the radio tell what he looked like? It was Slade all right. But, Sheriff, you should have brought a lot of men with you. Slade is a tough man, a killer."

Baker nodded. "I know that, but I figure I'm his equal. Yep, Slade is a bad one. He killed two or three people. He busted out of a prison van and got away. He looted a small bank a few days ago. I think he'll shoot it out, because capture only means the chair."

Joe Geary shivered. "Sheriff, you think maybe if I just sort of stayed in the background. . . . Honest, I'm no good at this kind of thing."

"Stay here," Baker advised. "If you see me go down, run for help. Well, here goes."

Baker's six feet of bulk was hard to conceal, even in those northern New England forests. Gun in hand, finger lightly resting against the trigger, Baker was moving up to try and take a murderer, bank robber, and escaped convict. Take a man known to be willing to sell his own bloody existence only at the expense of several police officers' lives.

Ollie Slade had stuck up the little bank in Putnam the day before. He probably needed cash to go into hiding. Baker smiled grimly. Little things tripped up big-shot crooks like Ollie Slade. The eyes of a lowly woodcutter named Joe Geary, for instance.

BAKER lay prone, studying the cabin. He knew it very well, for whenever the owner came, Sheriff Baker usually hunted with him. He'd even slept in the cabin half a dozen times. But a knowledge of it meant little except to emphasize the difficulties that lay ahead.

Every window was heavily boarded up. The door was stout and could be locked from inside. Ollie Slade would certainly be awakened and start shooting. Baker shrugged and started closer. He reached the door of the cabin without incident. Apparently the man was fast asleep, exhausted by the five-state alarm and chase.

Baker tried the door latch very gently. It was locked from inside. He squared his shoulders. It was time to take chances. If he couldn't get in, Ollie Slade couldn't get out either. It was a stalemate which a little tear gas, shot under the door, might break. But Baker had to know if Slade actually was in there.

He banged on the door with his gun butt. "Slade! Open up! You can't get

away! Open the door and throw your gun out!"

There was no reply. Baker banged again, then shrugged. The cabin seemed to be empty. Slade was a man of violent temper. He'd have responded to the challenge. Baker yelled for Joe Geary, and the woodchopper hurried up.

"Nobody answers," Baker explained, "so I'm going to break down the door. Get me one of your axes."

"Sure," Geary said. "I was cutting a tree just yonder when I first saw Slade. I dropped my ax. It must be still there. Won't take a minute."

He returned swiftly with a sharp lumberman's axe. Baker hefted it, stepped back, and let go. The blade sliced through the stout door easily. In a short time he had cut away the section surrounding the lock. A good shove now would send the door wide.

"Take this flashlight," Baker told Geary. "Stand aside, but when I go in, throw the beam into the cabin. Don't be scared. If Slade is playing possum, he'll shoot at me, not you. Ready now?"

Geary licked dry lips and nodded. He turned on the flashlight. There was a bright full moon, but within the boarded-up cabin, artificial light would be essential.

Baker hit the door with his shoulder and it burst open. He was propelled into the one room affair. The flashlight streaked through the darkness, wavered, then centered upon a very quiet form lying in a twisted heap in the middle of the floor.

As Baker looked, something moved out from close by the body. It was a four foot rattlesnake. Baker's gun blasted. The snake coiled and twisted as it died.

Then Baker's gun boomed again, and a second snake went scurrying toward the fireplace. Baker's eyes automatically followed it, helped with the light Geary was spraying on the floor. The snake disappeared beneath the fireplace and Baker saw dim, dying embers in the grate.

He started to back out. "Don't come in, Geary," he warned. "The cabin is full of rattlers. Hand me the flash and then stand clear. I think Slade is dead, but I have to get him out to make certain."

Baker drew on a pair of heavy gloves, fair protection if a rattler happened to strike. He saw one and fired. The snake died, its head blasted off. Baker cautiously reached down and seized the arm of that limp form, secured a good grip, and started hauling him out.

There were two more rattlers curled up beside the corpse, evidently seeking

its waning warmth. Rattles sounded ominously. Baker, still holding the dead man's arm, pumped a bullet into one of the snakes. The other made tracks for the fireplace and disappeared.

OUTSIDE the cabin, between keeping a wary eye out for the snakes, Geary examined the dead man. It was Ollie Slade all right. Geary hadn't been mistaken about that.

"He certainly got what was coming to him," Baker said softly. "Look at those bites. A dozen of them. Slade was apparently trying to get out, but there were too many rattlers. Geary, you'd best run to town and get Doc Trent. Have the undertaker come up too."

"Ain't you coming with me?" Geary asked nervously.

"No, got work to do. I'll clean out those rattlers so we can hunt through the cabin. Slade is known to have carried a lot of money with him. Didn't you say he had a brief case?"

Geary nodded. "Yep, black one."

"Slade swiped that at the bank he stuck up and filled it with cash. Get going, Joe."

After Geary had hurried away, Baker entered the cabin very cautiously with his gun freshly loaded. Those rattlers were deadly little squirming things. They could hide in all sorts of unlikely places and strike plenty of times without the warning of their rattles.

He lit two modern gasoline lanterns which furnished plenty of light, approached the fireplace gingerly, and saw where the snakes had gone. It was quite clear just what had happened. The snakes were having their winter sleep beneath the fireplace. Slade had started a roaring blaze; the heat brought the snakes to life and they had come out to investigate.

Slade, city bred and unused to such things, must have lost his head and caused the snakes to stampede. Baker found a pair of tongs, secured one live ember, and thrust it into the hole. Two rattlers came scurrying out and he shot them. Then he looked into the fireplace again for more embers. He saw several blackened pine cones, but no good-sized embers. He had to get rid of those snakes. Another roaring fire would drive them out.

Baker went over to the wood box, raised the lid, and kept his gun handy. He took out the wood with the tongs. Rattlers could conceal themselves very nicely in that box.

The wood was ash and oak, slow to start burning, but long lasting. He heaped these in the fireplace and waited

for them to catch. It would take some time, so he started hunting Slade's brief case. It wasn't there. He pried under the mattress of the bed, into drawers and even looked behind pictures on the wall. There was no brief case and no money.

Baker frowned. If Slade had locked himself in with the brief case of money, where was it now? Nobody else had gained admittance. Baker gave some thought to the idea of Slade's gang meeting here and taking the money from him.

He went back to Slade's body and examined it again. The man had been dead only a couple of hours, for the flesh was not yet stone cold despite the fact that it was nearly zero weather outside.

Then Geary returned and the place swarmed with men. Baker warned them against entering the cabin. He went inside. Pretty soon the fireplace became hot enough to drive out the rest of the snakes. Baker promptly shot them. Finally he poked a stick down into the snake den and made sure it was empty.

He walked outside. Slade's body had been removed, the medical examiner stated formally the death was due to snakebite and that Slade had been dead between three and four hours. That was all. In a short time everyone had gone back to the town.

Geary sat on a tree stump. Baker walked over to him. "Joe, I didn't find that brief case you told me about. I wonder if he forgot and left it in the car?"

"No," Geary said promptly. "I watched him throw it out of the car just before he jumped. Then he picked it up and went to the cabin. If it's gone, some of his pals must have come here and got it."

"I suppose so" Baker agreed thoughtfully. "If that isn't so, you can bet they'll come looking. Thirty thousand dollars is a lot of money. That's what Slade had in his brief case."

"Do you think that maybe they'll believe we got it?" Geary asked, his eyes growing wide in horror.

"Nobody can figure out what a band of killers like Slade's gang will think," Baker said. "Better be on the lookout, Joe. They're bad medicine. They'll shoot anybody who stands in their way."

"What'll I do if I see anybody?"

"Be as quiet as possible until you're sure they've gone. Then come for me. And stay away from the cabin where Slade died. Good luck, Joe. Thanks for telling me about Slade."

"Y—you're welcome," Geary gulped.

"Honest, do you think Slade's men will come here?"

"If they haven't got the money already, they will. Good night, Joe."

Sheriff Baker moved off and vanished in the darkness. Geary shivered, cast one horrified look at the cabin and the spot to which Slade had been dragged. Then he broke into a run, heading straight for home.

JOE GEARY kept a cabin somewhat similar to the one in which Slade had died. He bolted into it and hastily locked the door. Then he checked every window, dared not turn on lights, and sat huddled and cold near the dark fireplace.

Not more than ten minutes went by before Geary heard footsteps. Not exactly the tread of heavy feet, but the significant snapping of dry branches on the ground. Geary felt sweat break out all over his body. He seized the gun, but before he could even begin to raise it, a shot crashed through the window. The bullet hit the stone fireplace, ricocheted crazily. Geary did a nose dive toward his bed.

He crawled under it, still holding the gun. Many minutes went by, then he heard more steps. This time they came boldly up to the door. To Geary's immeasurable relief he heard Sheriff Baker's voice:

"Joe! Joe Geary! Are you all right? Joe, where are you?"

"H-here," Joe called back in a shaky voice. "I—I was hiding in case they thought they got me and entered. I was going to shoot 'em down."

"Shoot who down? I was half a mile away when I heard one shot and came back. Who was it, Joe?"

"Slade's gang. Must have been them. They're after me."

"But why? What do they want with you?"

Geary's nerve was coming back. He was getting angry at Baker for his persistent and irritating questions.

"Because maybe they think I know what Slade did with his money. I wish I'd minded my own business, Sheriff. Slade hid the brief case someplace. Those killers must believe I got it. There's no other answer."

"But you don't know where the brief case is," Baker said slowly. "Slade may have hidden it—true, but there's another reason why they pick on you, Joe. I know what it is."

"Tell me. For gosh sakes, Sheriff, tell me."

Baker shrugged. "You turned Slade in, and his gang is after revenge. If it

was the brief case, they'd hardly try to kill you right off. Rather, they'd make you a prisoner and torture you until you talked. I'd better stick around for the rest of the night. In the morning I'll organize a posse, and we'll sweep through the woods."

"Will you stay here?" Geary pleaded. "You'll maybe save my life."

"I'm going to post myself outside," Baker said. "They'll think I left for town, but I'll double back and stand guard. The cabin will be kept under observation every second. If you hear anything, sing out, but don't start shooting unless you're sure it isn't me. Is that okay, Joe?"

"Got to be, I suppose," Geary grumbled. "I'd rather have you right in here beside me though."

Baker started toward the door. "What kind of a guard would that be? They'd only kill the pair of us. You forget—or maybe you didn't even know—that Slade's gang numbers over a dozen deadly killers. Try to get some sleep if you can. I'll keep watch."

"Sleep!" Geary muttered. "How can a man sleep when he's liable to be killed any second?"

AFTER Baker left, Geary hastily bolted the door, seized his rifle again and pushed a chair over to the wall between two windows. They'd have a hard time getting him now, because he could cover the other two windows and the door very nicely.

About an hour went by. With each passing minute, Geary felt more secure. After all, Sheriff Baker would maintain a constant patrol all around the cabin and shoot anybody who moved. Geary's eyes closed. He fought sleep, but not too successfully.

Then his nostrils twitched, his eyes opened sleepily. Suddenly he was wide awake. He smelled gasoline. At first he thought it might have come from one of his lanterns, but a quick check showed he was wrong. Ferreting in a drawer, he found a flashlight with a rather weak ray. It was strong enough to show him what had happened.

Gasoline was coming underneath the door. Already the floor was soaked with the highly inflammable fluid for an area of about three feet. More was soaking in every moment.

"They're going to burn me out," Geary gasped. "They'll shoot me if I get through the flaming doorway."

His knees wilted, and he shook with violent spasms of terror. Where was Sheriff Baker? What had happened to him? It made little difference now. The

application of a match to that gasoline would finish it all. Geary made up his mind fast.

Maybe they thought he was still dozing. If he yanked the door open and bolted for the forest, he might get away. Certainly if he waited there, he'd either roast to death or be shot down as he exited through the fire.

He sidled up to the door, shivering at the sight and smell of the gasoline. He listened for a few seconds. Then, not daring to wait longer, he carefully raised the latch, gave the door a hard shove, and catapulted through it.

There was a single shot and the bullet hissed above his head. With a shriek, Geary streaked for the darkness of the forest, dived into a bush, and lay hugging the ground. It occurred to him then, that Sheriff Baker was either dead or he'd lied about standing guard. At any rate, Geary knew he was hopelessly at the mercy of the gang.

He tried to make his panting more silent as he clung to the earth. Something had to be done. He waited a few minutes, heard nothing, and saw no lurking shadows around his cabin. He headed deeper into the woods and made a half circle of the cabin. Then he struck due north in the direction of the cabin where that gangster leader had been bitten to death by rattlers.

There was a trail between the two cabins, and he moved along this. Suddenly he stifled a cry of fear and dodged behind the thick trunk of a tree. Something lay across the trail—something that looked like a man. The form didn't move.

Geary levelled his rifle and approached warily, wondering where he was getting the nerve to do this. But he had to see who that was. A little closer he recognized the clothing of Sheriff Baker. He lay with one arm flung out, the gloved hand gripping his gun. Apparently, they'd slipped up behind him.

Geary didn't take time to see whether or not the sheriff was dead. That made little difference now. He cut around that portion of the trail and made his way closer to the other cabin.

WITHIN sight of it, Geary ducked into the forest again, and now he had to use that weak flashlight. He went up to a freshly cut tree stump. He'd brought the tree down himself only a few hours before.

He went down on his hands and knees, removed gloves, and dug bare fingers into the dirt. The outer crust was fairly hard because it had been partly frozen. Beneath, the dirt was soft and dry. His

fingers closed around the handle of a brief case. He dragged it out, shook the dirt off it, and kept looking around in the darkness nervously.

He opened the case and reached inside to caress the thick sheaves of currency. Geary had always wanted money and now he had it. Plenty of it. He started to get up.

"Stay where you are!" a harsh voice ordered. "Drop that brief case, mister, and drop the rifle too. Come on—or you'll be riddled."

The voice changed and Sheriff Baker strode into view.

"You'll get a fair chance, Joe. A trial by jury, I expect."

"I—I thought you were—were dead!" Geary burst out.

"No. I was play-acting. I knew darned well you'd swiped the brief case full of money, just like I knew you got Slade into that cabin and contrived to kill him very cleverly. I guessed you'd hidden the money. The only way to make you get it was scare the daylights out of you.

"It was me who fired the shot through your window and spilled gasoline under your door. I thought the money might be in your cabin. You'd get it quick under the threat of its burning up."

"I—I found the money. Slade hid it," Geary sobbed. "I didn't kill him. Honest I didn't."

"Save your breath and speeches for court," Baker said. "Slade probably offered you some money to provide a hideout, and you brought him to that cabin. First though, you got several rattlesnakes and put them under the fireplace. They were easy to handle in this cold weather. Then you built a big fire of dry pine, which gives the quickest and the most heat.

"There was nothing but pine in the fireplace, Joe, and only oak and ash in the wood box; so I knew Slade hadn't built the fire. The axe you loaned me had splinters of pine on it, too, and you'd been cutting ash until you went after the pine for the fire."

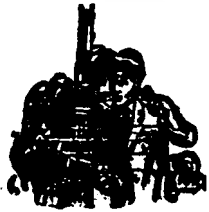
"You can't prove anything," Geary shouted desperately.

"I think I can, Joe. First off, somebody had to put those snakes under the fireplace, because they didn't go there themselves. Not at this time of year. They've been hibernating for months and not beneath this fireplace. The owner was up three weeks ago. We had a big fire going for days. If the rattlers had been there, they'd have come out then. Been terribly cold since, and rattlers don't travel in cold weather."

Token from Tokyo

By Emil Petaja

¶ When those Jap fiends freed Alan Kane from their torture hole, they handed him the key for a death house trap at home. ¶



THE small ferret-eyed man across the table eyed Alan Kane's drawn features and blazing eyes apprehensively as he downed his drink.

"Ain't much more to tell, Al." He put on a look of heavy sympathy. "Looks like your old partner Lackey took it for granted the Nips got you. So—he declared himself full owner of the Downey Street Garage! And you rotting in a Jap prison camp! Disgusting!"

Lamby Coin spit on the floor to show how disgusted he was.

Alan sat very still. Subconsciously he watched Coin crush out his cigarette until it burst its paper, but still kept on smoking. It was untidy and ineffectual, like Lamby himself.

Coin's quick, nervous chatter continued, "Y'see, Al, nobody here in L.A. knew you was a Jap prisoner. We all figured you got yours. And you not having a family nor nothing, Lackey thought—well, you get it.

"Murton said he saw you in Frisco las' week, but I could hardly believe. . . ."

He dribbled off when he caught Alan's look.

Alan's haggard features moved over the familiar panorama of Jerry's Bar.

The long mirror. The neat row of many-shaped bottles. The cuspidors. The juke box.

He had remembered all this, and millions of other things, sweating in that Nip barb-wire corral. Eating swill no self-respecting hog would touch. Bracing himself nightly for seventeen brands of flaming hell because they thought he had information.

Waiting. And—yes—praying. Dreaming of the garage, the neat little busi-

ness he had worked ten years for, before the war. Lackey, flush with a sudden windfall, begged to come in on it, so he had let him.

Suddenly, by some miracle, he was traded out. The Japs figured he was good as dead, anyway.

Down to skin and bone. Tortured until his brains were a little curdled.

They figured wrong—*damn their filthy hides!*

He was okay. Swell. Good as new. Except when he got too worked up about anything. That and the sight of blood.

The docs had kept him in San Francisco a week. Then he hooked a ride down to L.A., eager to get back to his garage.

And now he found out.

Burl Lackey, his 4F partner, took over the whole cheese for himself. Why, with the money Lackey owed him, his share of the business amounted to less than one-fourth!

Alan stared at his hands. They were shaking.

Then he saw Coin staring at him, with a peculiar satisfied smirk on his wizened face.

"You look plenty flush, Coin," he said. "When I left you were whining around for a job. Now you're sporting loud tailored suits. How come?"

Coin tittered. "Oh, I got angles."

"Yeah? Jake Barron and his car-snatchers?"

Three years ago he suspected Coin of dipping his fingers in the rackets. Now he was sure of it.

Coin grinned uncomfortably.

"Naw! I'm a car dealer now. Wholesale!"

"You?"

"Sure. And I got my eye on Lackey's garage, so don't worry about him! He's up to his ears in IOU's, and I hold most of 'em! You know what a spender Lackey

always was. Why, he won't own the Downey Street Garage after—"

Alan saw red. He seized hold of Coin's silk collar and twisted.

"Listen to me, Coin! You keep your fishhooks off that garage. It belongs to me, get it!"

"Sure, Al."

Quivering, he made another mess of a half-burned cigarette, and started to get up. Alan held him back.

"Where's Lackey now?"

"Why—at the garage, figuring how to keep it! I gave him 'til tomorrow to—"

Alan shoved him down in his seat and started away.

"Listen, I'll be the one to settle with you tomorrow, Coin! As for Lackey, I'm going over there right now and give him what he's had coming a long time!"

OUTSIDE the October night was chilly. Downey Street was deserted. Street lamps hung diffused under the moonless sky.

Alan could barely see the sign over the garage.

Burl Lackey, Proprietor. Alan's name had been painted out.

His fists balled in his coat pockets as he strode grimly up to the heavy sliding door. It wasn't locked. He started working it open.

"What'd you think you're doing?" a clear voice rang out.

Alan whirled. The sudden flare of a flashlight made him blink.

"Why, it's Mr. Kane!" Cop Pat Keegan was slapping his back jovially. "Glad to see you, boy! Come to see Lackey, did you? He's in there, all right."

Cop Keegan put his bulk to the door, and it slid open. Alan thanked him and went in.

He pulled it shut behind him and stood there for a moment in the familiar surging darkness. He could hear Keegan going down the block, whistling.

As Alan's eyes acclimated themselves to the dimness he saw that business must be good. There were three rows of cars. And the nostalgic oily smell he remembered.

Sure enough, a dim light glowed in the tiny back office. Lackey must be there at the desk, squirming over his debts.

Alan took a few seconds to just stand there and be glad, then he started for

the office. He was halfway across when a sharp sound echoed in the gloom.

He felt an icy chill at the nape of his neck.

He ran toward the office door, stumbling over an oil can. It made a terrific clatter.

Then he clutched at the door jamb, kicking the door full open. His brown eyes widened. His head jerked back convulsively.

Sprawled over that familiar battered desk was his partner, Burl Lackey. Blood ran down the sloping top. It dripped, dripped.

And right in front of Alan, at his feet, lay a revolver he recognized immediately as his.

The sight of blood. . . . His hands began shaking violently. He started to whimper like a lost puppy. A thousand remembered horrors leaped to his tortured mind.

He couldn't even hear Keegan shouting and tugging back the big front door. The livid horrors filled every crevice of his brain.

Stumbling forward blindly, he brushed past the grotesquely angled corpse, and fled out of the open back door into the alley.

Behind him Keegan yelled.

Alan ran. His breath came in rough sobs. His mind was a torrent. The sole thought that possessed him was, *I must get away! I must get away!*

It was almost dawn when he crept stealthily up to his shabby little Main Street room. He was like a haunted thing. Haunted by a living fear.

Without switching the dangling light on, he flung himself down on his unmade bed, and pressed his fevered face deep into the pillow.

If he could only forget. Forget!

Insidious sleep came to him, at last. But it was only a shallow mockery. It couldn't give him surcease, it was hideous with nightmare.

Evil yellow faces sprouted around him in the burning dark. Evil hands beckoned.

"No! No!"

Claws yanked him to his feet. He was pushed protestingly down long black corridors.

Questions. Endless questions, phrased in clipped Jap-accent.

"Where is base. . . . How many troops. . . ."

No answer.

Then the persuasion began. The torture.

"No! Don't. . ."

His own screams awakened him, and he found himself being hustled to his feet.

"Wake up, Kane!"

Somebody shook him.

Finally he was able to force his eyes open. He stared around him, at the two policemen holding him up—leading him toward the door.

"W-what—?"

The cops exchanged glances.

"We're arresting you, Kane! For the murder of Burl Lackey!"

"LISTEN, son," the grizzled police captain said earnestly, "we know you've been through a lot. We know the treatment you got over there in that Jap camp didn't do you any good, and that Lackey tried to pull a fast one.

"We'll do all we can for you, Kane, but—you've got to come clean!"

Alan blinked at the circle of grim faces that surrounded his chair. He gripped the chair arms until his knuckles went white.

"But I told you—I didn't do it!"

The captain shoved a gun in his face. "This yours?"

Alan licked his dry lips. "Yes. Somebody must have swiped it out of my room."

One of the cops laughed. Captain Williams shushed him.

"You were hauled in four years ago for driving without proper license, weren't you, Kane?"

Alan swabbed a quivering hand over his wet forehead wearily. "I guess so."

"That means we got your fingerprints on file. And our expert has matched up those fingerprints with the ones on this gun!"

Alan heard him through a heavy fog. There seemed to be something he ought to remember, but the effort was too much.

"And Keegan here saw you go in the garage just before the shot was fired!"

Alan's dazed eyes saw Officer Keegan standing by him, touching his arm. His lined face was the picture of misery.

"Yes, Captain Williams, I saw him. And I'm sorry I lived to see the day. Why, I've known young Kane for years,

and a finer boy you never saw!" He squeezed Alan's arm.

"Listen, Alan, my boy, come clean. Tell Captain Williams you done it. They'll be fair with you. I've got my duty to do. I'll have to tell them I all but saw you plug him!"

"There's such things as extenuating circumstances. Your condition, and all. The court will be lenient. Come clean, Alan. It's best, I'm telling you. They got you dead to rights!"

Alan blinked dully into Keegan's emotional face. He shut his eyes fiercely.

"No! I didn't kill him! I didn't!"

There was a leaden silence.

Then the door at the far end of the room opened. Footsteps clicked along the slick floor, up to him.

"Hullo, Al."

Alan's eyes raised a trifle.

"Coin!"

The sporty dressed mobster grinned. He looked ill at ease among all these cops.

"Yeah, Al. I heard about you, so I came over to the station. I thought maybe I could help."

"Who you kidding?" growled Captain Williams disgustedly. "I had my boys drag you in as a witness."

Coin shuffled uneasily.

"You're Lambert Coin?"

"They call me Lamby."

"What's your racket?"

"It ain't no racket. I own a couple garages."

"Oh, yeah. I heard about you." Captain Williams looked him up and down with unconcealed contempt. "You a friend of Alan Kane's?"

"Sure. I usta work for him."

"Did you see him at any time last night?"

"Sure. We had some drinks at Jerry's."

"When was this?"

"Around ten, I guess."

Captain Williams cleared his throat.

"How was Kane feeling then?"

"A little nervous, maybe." Coin licked his thin lips.

Alan's head had dropped to his chest. Despair and defeat had blanketed his mind.

"The bartender told us you and Kane had quite a conversation. What about?"

Coin fished for a cigarette and lit it nervously, talking through the corner of his mouth.

"Well, Kane seemed plenty hopped up about Lackey. He was packing a rod. He showed it to me. He said he was out to get him!"

LAMBY'S words filtered through Alan's tortured mind. Alan climbed groggily up on his feet.

"That's a lie!"

Keegan pushed him back gently. Coin was smoking fast, his nostrils flaring.

"No, it ain't, Captain!" he screeched. "I swear it ain't! Kane was out to get Lackey and looks like he done it!"

Sulphurous redness flared over Alan's brain.

"What you pulling off, you rat!" he cried. "You told me about Lackey, yourself, last night! It was the first I'd heard—"

"Easy, son," Captain Williams urged. He turned back to Coin. "You say he threatened Lackey?"

"I'll say he did!" Coin screamed. "Ask Jerry! Ask anybody!"

Alan's mind wrestled with itself. It was clearing a little. He must think—*think!*

Coin went on eagerly, piling up evidence against him.

"I hate to be the one to pin it on Kane," Coin finished blandly, "but I'm strictly for law and order. I'm funny that way!"

He snuffed out his cigarette in his own unmistakable way, looking around him self-righteously.

Alan's eyes widened as he watched. He stared at the still-smoking butt.

Then he leaped up.

"You're a hell of a liar, Coin! Now I know why I *couldn't* have killed Lackey!"

"Yeah?" Coin sneered. "Why?"

"For one thing, because *you* did!"

Coin seemed to shrink. But with effort he drew himself up and began to laugh.

"Funny, eh, Captain? I think the guy's nuts!"

Captain Williams' face was bewildered but serious.

"What's the gag, Kane?"

Alan flung out a wild laugh. All at once he was very, very happy about everything. He was happy because he knew his

mind was all cleared up now—and that it would stay that way for good.

"Listen," he began. "Coin has a motive. Lackey owed him money and couldn't pay up. Coin was supposed to get the garage if he defaulted, but now that I'm back all that's changed. I've got a legal claim on that business, seventy-five per cent of it, and Coin's mortgage won't hold water. So, in order to get the garage—probably for his racket-pals to use in their car-snatching games—Coin had to get rid of us *both*. He planned a neat frame-up, soon as he discovered I wasn't dead, to pin the rap for—"

"Sure," broke in Captain Williams. "We follow all that. But how are you going to prove you *didn't* kill Lackey, and he *did*?"

Alan turned to Cop Keegan. "When you went in Lackey's office last night, did you notice a cigarette on his ashtray? Still smoking—and messed up *like that*?"

He pointed to Coin's cigarette.

Keegan stroked his chin.

"Come to think of it I did. But couldn't Lackey—"

"Lackey smoked a pipe!"

Captain Williams sighed. His eyes narrowed on Coin hopefully.

"Well, that puts an edge on a case against this rat, but—if it wasn't for the fingerprints on the gun! *Your fingerprints!*"

Alan laughed rawly.

"My fingerprints! That's a laugh! Those must have been planted there some way, Captain, because—I haven't got any fingerprints!"

Coin had perked up at the captain's words.

"No? Where are they?"

In answer, Alan shoved his palms out where all the cops could see. His fingers were raw red, flayed—but steady now.

Captain Williams stared.

"W-why, the skin's been torn right off! They ain't healed up enough to leave any prints yet!"

Coin howled and made a dash for the door. Keegan caught him.

"What's happened to them?" he asked Alan huskily.

Alan's mouth went tight.

"Ask a Jap," he said.



Hold the Hot Lead

By

Rex Whitechurch



Because he was crime-smeared, the doctor dared not turn that murder slug over to the cops. And he dared not hold it either. For in that deadly hide-and-seek game, other bullets were sure to come a-calling.

BIG BERTHA, the ambulance, was inextricably a part of my daily existence. More than half my time was spent within her windowed walls and under her padded ceiling. Although she screamed like a huge cat as she avalanched through the crowded traffic lanes, she was just a big bright kitten to me. But now I sat there, with that ball of lead in my closed fist, feeling the ambulance weaving and dashing against the wind.

I knew I was making a mistake. That little ball of lead against my palm signified that I was making an indelible error.

It was a .38 slug, misshapen, and marred with scratches and grooves which were tattle-tales to police science.

I felt a million eyes had seen me pick it off the ambulance floor, that my secret was known to thousands. The sweat streamed down my face. Yet I was chilled by the sight of snow falling through the windows of the big cat and the realization of what pawed at my brain.

Keep it, Charley, Big Bertha seemed to whisper to me. Keep it. Only by keeping the bullet can you save Maurova!

Yes, that was why I was doing it. I

wanted to save the woman I loved, wanted to extricate her from the police quagmire she was bogged down in. It was sinister and destructive to my scruples.

But other men had done as much for the women they loved. I was no different; I was no stronger; I was no better than others who had committed crimes for the sake of their coveted ladies.

Alone with the corpse in the thundering, catapulting red ambulance, with the little missile that had dropped out of the dead man's head burning my palm, I sat with eyes unseeing, ears unhearing.

Alex Anderson had expired, had gasped his last breath with my feverish hands on his face. That final jerking of relaxing muscles, the gentle tremor of his body, the staring of his glassy eyes, the tallowish pallor, all told their own story. I put a little mirror over his mouth and slowly drew it away. There was not a blur on it, because Alex Anderson was dead.

For a moment I was too paralyzed to move, to think, or to make a decision. But my fumbling had found the wallet in my white jacket, opened it, and dropped the incriminating bullet inside. I thrust

the wallet back then. In that fleeting second I perpetrated a crime for which I would eventually have to pay.

Sure, I knew Maurova had shot Anderson. I didn't think of it as murder, although the police did. It surely must have been in self-defense. Anderson had gone to her apartment to seal her lips, to keep her from bringing him into court for stealing the bonds she had given him to sell for her. The broker must have tipped his hand. In a blind impulse of fear and frantic worry, she had acted before he could act. And she had used the gun Bob Craley had given her.

I saw it all as it paraded before me. Alex Anderson, an alcoholic curbstone broker, had won her confidence and had gained possession of the bonds she had worked so hard to buy. She had been in need of funds, I knew, due to her father's impaired health. She was keeping the old man at Palm Springs. She didn't want him to miss any of the attention top-grade physicians could give him.

And in that tumultuous moment when her troubles overcame her common sense, she told Bob Craley that she thought Anderson had stolen her bonds after she had properly signed them over. Craley, a society photographer who wanted to marry her, had given her a gun to use in case Anderson came there to harm her.

Why had he given the little radio songstress the gun, you ask. Why hadn't he advised her to go to the police? The answer is simple. He loved her, wanted to marry her, and knew her father had served a long term in prison for embezzlement. He feared that if she went to the police, all this would come out and injure her big following on the air.

I spoke in the tube to Red Barnett who was at the wheel of the swaying crimson ambulance. The siren that I knew so well, no matter how far away I was when I heard it, was blasting the soft stillness to pieces like a rocket bomb soaring to destruction and screaming like a big angry cat. Big Bertha was streaking through the snowy intersections like one of those rockets.

"Never mind, Red," I said, "you can rein her in now. This guy has just signed St. Peter's register."

I READ that Maurova had been questioned at police headquarters by Inspector Haig Davelleto. She had denied the murder charges. She said she had been out, had returned to her apartment, and had found Anderson dead in the living room.

The police found out all about her bonds then. But because they had no actual proof of her guilt, they released her.

Oh, they had the gun and her fingerprints were on it, but they were not sure it was the weapon.

They would have to have that slug before they could tell.

I heard the buzzer whine through my apartment. I opened the door.

A tall man in a black overcoat stood in swirling snow on the stoop. He wore black clothes to match. He had grey temples and black elongated eyes. His face was smooth, but there was something somber, sad, unsmiling about him. He entered the living room, stopped and peered at me curiously.

"Doctor Carlton?" he asked.

I nodded, waved him to a chair. He sat down without removing his overcoat, holding his black soft hat on his knees.

"I'm Inspector Davelleto," he said. "I'm sorry to be intruding on you like this. But you were the interne in the ambulance with Alex Anderson, the broker. It's a matter of importance to us—what I'm about to say."

I nodded, helped myself to a cigarette from the heavy wrought-iron box at my elbow, and waited. Oh, I knew what was coming.

"We can't find the bullet," the inspector said suddenly. "It's the one thing we need to help us reach a solution, to eliminate or to incriminate a suspect. Since we've thoroughly searched the ambulance and the apartment where the crime took place without finding the bullet, I thought you might know about it. It's the coroner's opinion that the missile was jarred out of the wound while he was in the ambulance."

As cold inside as a refrigerator, with my face stiff, I said, "I know what you mean, Inspector. But I can't help you. I wouldn't have noticed. The slug evidently went through his head and dropped out on the other side. Maybe it was lost at the morgue. You've looked around the morgue?"

The inspector gestured with his cigarette. "I've looked everywhere," he admitted. His eyes sharply clamped themselves on my impassive face. He arose, buttoned his long overcoat.

"Well, there's no use drawing this thing out, Doctor," he said placidly. "Since you cannot help me, I must look elsewhere."

He crossed to the door, skewed around with his hat in his hand. "You are well acquainted with the young woman at whose apartment the body was found?"

It hit me with hard, cruel force. I stared back at Davelleto, unblinking.

"Yes, I know Maurova."

"She said you knew her," the inspector replied.

TDA

I drew a deep breath, glanced at the glowing tip of my cigarette. "I'm sorry," I said, "to be unable to help you, Inspector. But most emphatically I did not see the bullet."

"Well, good night, then," he said.

THE door closed on him. I stood looking at it. I was as if he had closed the door of a tomb and left me in it, a corpse, as devoid of emotion as any corpse could be.

It was later that night. I had not stirred from my apartment. Several times the telephone rang, but I didn't answer. I was afraid Maurova would call. I didn't want to talk with her; it would be dangerous to do so.

But now the buzzer whined through the house again. I had made myself a cup of coffee and was lying on the davenport when I heard the summons.

Going to the door, I saw my caller was Bob Craley, the society photographer. He wore a camel's hair coat that was polka-dotted with snow. His thin face was pasty white.

I stepped aside and he came in.

"I thought I'd drop around for just a moment, Doc," he said. "I hope you don't mind?"

"Not at all," I said. "Take a chair by the fire."

"I'll not take my things off," he said. "They've been trying to get you from the hospital," he added. "Have you been here long?"

"Yes," I admitted. "But I was sleeping soundly and didn't hear. Anyhow my ambulance driver will come after me if it's urgent. He usually does."

"I know how you feel, doing the work of four because of the war." Craley helped himself to one of my cigarettes out of the wrought-iron box. "It's sure snowing out tonight. But—I came here to talk to you about Maurova. I reached her apartment right after she found the body, before the police came, before you got there. The gun was still lying on the floor. They say it's stamped with her fingerprints."

"Yes, so I've read. Besides, Inspector Davelleto was here."

"Looking for the bullet?"

"That's right. I didn't see it."

"Doc, what the devil happened to it?" he asked quickly.

"I can't say," I rejoined. "I didn't see it."

"They claim the only place it could've been lost was in the ambulance." His eyes locked with mine, then he quickly looked away.

"Well, I'm afraid they're barking up

the wrong tree," I said. "How is Maurova?"

He rubbed his nose and let out a deep sigh. "They've got her over at headquarters again and are going to hold her a while. They seem to think she shot Anderson."

"How long do you suppose they'll hold her?" I said quietly.

He shrugged. "I don't know," he admitted. "Maybe they'll keep her, lock her up."

"Listen, Doc, we've all three been chummy. The cops know it. I came here to warn you. I wanted to come here before now, but had to watch my chance. I sneaked out here. The inspector thinks it's funny they can't find the bullet. I'm afraid they'll call you in."

I stared at him, unblinkingly. I was just as cold as ever inside.

Craley grimly closed his hand and made a funny sound. "They're going to choke everything out of us, you know. I guess they've got the idea you found the slug, maybe removed it from the wound. Knowing she shot Anderson, you might have decided to shield her by concealing the bullet."

"That's something they'll have to prove," I said succinctly.

"They'll be mean about it," Craley stated.

The truth was trying to kick up another fuss in my brain. I stared hard at the photographer. But I was sure I didn't give myself away. I shook my head and sought to keep a grip on my nerves.

"All they need is that slug to send her to the gas chamber," he proclaimed. "They have the gun with her prints on the barrel and butt. The bullet will show whether it came from her gun."

I hit out at him. "Why go over all that? We've been over the ground and I don't have the bullet."

"I came to ask you if you had the slug, will you please destroy it? It's the only way we can save Maurova."

"If I had it, I'd consider doing that," I said. "I don't know for sure what I'd do. In the first place I wouldn't know if it was the right missile. I've not been trained to tell bullets apart after they've been fired. Doesn't it seem crazy that I'd grab up a piece of cold lead and hide it, not knowing?"

"Sure," he conceded. "That's why they've left you out of it up to now. But the inspector thinks it's awful funny and—"

"You think they're going to grab me up?"

"For questioning, yes," he said. His shrewd little eyes shifted over my face.

He was trying to see behind the mask I'd turned to him.

"You didn't need to trouble yourself coming over here, Craley," I said a moment later. "I didn't find the bullet. No doubt it'll turn up. When it does, they'll have the truth."

He nodded, turned to the door, a tall blond guy with wide shoulders. He buttoned his coat.

"I'll call you if I learn anything new," he promised.

I thanked him and he went out.

I WAITED for them to call me that night, but in vain. None of the police appeared, and finally I went to sleep. The winter sun was streaming through my bedroom window when I woke up.

I walked out to the stoop and got the paper. Snow was falling quietly in the narrow little street. White feathers swirled around the high thin steeple of the miniature church on the corner. But people were busy up and down the sidewalk scooping ermine from the cement as fast as it fell. I took the paper and went back to my apartment.

Police unable to break down suspect's testimony! They'd questioned Maurova all night. She had not furnished a satisfactory alibi for the time she was supposed to be away from her apartment. She said she had gone for a brief walk. She couldn't have been out of the house more than thirty minutes. Yet they couldn't make her admit knowing anything about the crime. And she had left her door locked.

The phone tinkled. I lifted the handset. The low sepulchral voice of Inspector Daveletto stabbed at me in the transmitter.

"Good morning, Doctor. Sorry to disturb you so early in the morning. Did you find the bullet?"

"Certainly not," I snapped. "As I informed you yesterday—"

"Well, you see I got to thinking, it could've fallen into your trouser cuffs, one or the other, or something like that."

I couldn't answer.

He went on quickly. "Will you please examine your clothes, those you had on when you made the ambulance call, just to make certain? To make my report complete?"

I wondered vaguely why he was giving me this chance. Of course there was but one sane answer to the question. He knew I had the bullet and had concealed it. Taking me over to headquarters in that event wouldn't produce the missile. Obviously the tall inspector was playing a smart game. He was letting me stew on my own fire.

"I've looked," I said suddenly, "and it's not here. Of course I walked a considerable distance from the hospital last night. If it did get snagged in my cuff, it surely dropped out. I shall be glad to walk back over the route to make certain."

He sighed. "Okay, if you don't have it, you don't have it, Doctor. Never mind going to look for it in the snow. But there's something I wish to tell you. I think this is a good time. We don't think the girl committed the murder. After grilling her all night, I'd lay odds she's telling the truth and doesn't know who killed Anderson."

"We've checked her story about taking the walk. We have found two witnesses with proof that she was two blocks away from the apartment house when the shots were fired. All in all, I'd say she's a victim of raw circumstance. But of course we'll have to find the bullet, before I can say for sure."

It had reached the point where to stand any more strain was next to impossible. If I wasn't careful, I would crack up. I sat and gazed hard at the telephone. For all I knew, Inspector Daveletto had pulled another smart one. That guy was no fool.

I put on my overcoat and walked out of the house. I walked swiftly and doggedly toward the hospital. I didn't stop, even when Craley hailed me from a press car and pulled in at the curb. I kept on walking and heard the door click. Now the photographer came up and fell into step with me.

"Listen, Doc," he breathed, "they've changed their minds and don't think Maurova killed Alex Anderson. They've got an idea now it was done by someone who went to the apartment house with the broker, and after fighting with him for some reason, shot him with Maurova's gun. Or that's what they say."

"Personally, I think it's all just a nice little trap, because they figure you're holding the slug. They believe if you'd go that far to protect her, you're in love with her."

"They can all go to hell," I said gently. And I plodded on. The snow whispered around my ankles, pouring up from the pavement in little twining clouds.

"You hold that bullet, Doc," Craley warned me. "Don't step into their trap!" He spun and was gone before I knew it.

I walked on to the hospital. A voice was speaking low inside my brain. A trap! They thought I was in love with Maurova. They thought I was lying and holding the leaden pellet to save her from death. What Craley said proved it was a trap. How would the bullet tell

them whether Maurova shot Anderson or who shot him?

THE crimson ambulance rocked, weaved from side to side. The wheels spun in the newly fallen snow. The siren shrilled, long crescendos of sound that lifted the hair on the neck of the city. Death, blood, and more blood. Some lived but were so mangled, death would have been a blessing. Working patiently with those who wanted to die, trying to frustrate death, death who has no compunction. Rocking and catapulting as babies were born and old men died and young women turned on the gas in despair. Big Bertha ripped through the lanes of crowded traffic.

Red Barnett bent above the wheel, took hazardous chances, his heart no doubt beating in unison with the swift revolutions of Big Bertha's wheels. Always, all day, it was like that, and I didn't have much time to think.

Then I went back to my apartment, unmolested by the police. I had seen nothing of Inspector Davelleto.

When I turned on the light, I knew at once that somebody had searched my place. In every direction I saw where things had been disturbed. Even the bedding. They hadn't even taken time to put the pillow slips back on.

Rather crude, I thought. After all that smart work, Inspector Develleto had turned out to be disappointing. I could have laughed out loud to think they had considered me so dense.

I put on my smoking jacket, sank into a deep chair, and picked up the evening paper. The buzzer whined insistently.

With reluctance I opened the door. Bob Craley stood in vortexing snow, his head tucked down in the wind. He brushed past me, went into the living room without looking up.

"Come on," he said, "let's talk fast!" His face wore a strained expression, his eyes held an ominous glitter. "I've been trying to get you all day."

"Why?"

He rubbed his snow-wet face. "The bullet! I got to see you destroy it! They're closing in for the kill. You've been nicely framed in it, too. You give me the slug, and I'll take that responsibility off your shoulders. They'll never know and—"

"Are you crazy?" I said, calm and cold all through. "Have you lost your mind? I told you I didn't—" What was the use?

He was peering at me. I heard the snow whispering that came through the door I'd forgotten to close. He had one hand in the pocket of his camel's hair coat.

"You're giving me that bullet—do you want to die for killing a rat? He'd sold

her bonds. He was going to kill her to shut her mouth. She had to shoot first and she was ready. She had that little gun I'd given her. She was frantic with worry and fear. It was all she could do."

I let Craley go on talking, not hearing the rest of what he said. I turned off one of the stand lamps. The room danced with spectral shadows. I turned my back to him and walked to the heavy wrought-iron cigarette box, the pirate's chest Maurova had given me last Xmas.

The photographer came slowly, catlike behind me.

"I thought you wanted to help her," he rasped. "But you're just like all the rest of them. You plan to give that bullet to Davelleto."

I slued around, glared at him. "How did you get into my apartment today?" I asked coolly. "Who let you in?"

He took a quick, backward step and got white in the throat. Slowly the pallor spread upward over his face.

"What—"

"Don't lie," I went on, still cool. "You've been lying all the time. But you've overplayed your hand. For some reason you're afraid, not for what might happen to Maurova, but for what might happen to you. Today you let yourself into my apartment and ransacked it for the bullet."

"The police did that," he hissed. "You fool, they—"

"No," I said, "they don't work that way. I thought at first it might have been the police, but I have found out they didn't come here. Davelleto was telling the truth. Maurova couldn't have done the shooting. Somebody went there with Anderson, somebody who sat in the little deal with him. It was you."

"She left her apartment locked, but you got in the same way you got in here, with a skeleton key. Anderson wouldn't split the spoils with you, so you shot him. That was the reason he stole the bonds in the first place, figured you could keep her from going to the police."

CRALEY was no longer astonished; he was now deadly cool. His eyes glittered at me. I was stabbing in the dark, but I was hitting home.

He let smoke stream out of his nose. He flicked the cigarette in the grate.

"You're guessing," he sneered. "You'd have no way to know all that. But since you're guessing close to what happened, I can't take chances. I don't care a damn where the bullet is just so they don't find it. With you not here to tell them what you did with it, they'll never turn it up."

"I'm calling the police," I said. "You take it easy."

"Take your hand off that phone!"

He came toward me with the gun in his pocket pointing at me. "You'll never turn me in, Doc." Then he fired and I heard a bullet sing through the room. It struck a lamp. Glass clattered to the floor. He couldn't shoot through his pocket like that and shoot straight. But there was a chance—

I sprang away from him. I twisted away across the rug to where that iron box stood on the Turkish coffee table. It was the only thing I could think of to use. He was leering at me, stepping closer. His feet made no sound on the green pile rug.

Then there suddenly came out on the cold winter air that scream—from the big red ambulance that was catapulting through the traffic lanes, shrilling so the stillness of the city recoiled, hid, and fell to pieces in the repercussion. Save for that screaming siren, it was as quiet as a graveyard. Harsh, blatant, eerie sound that stopped at nothing, not even walls made to keep it out.

"The police!" I shouted.

He cocked his head on one side, hearkening. Taking advantage of his mistake, I lashed out with that heavy weapon. I aimed it desperately at his head. And I twisted forward, letting my weight go with it. I knew when I let go, he couldn't escape the impact. It caught him on the left side of the head over the ear. It sent

him reeling crazily, drunkenly into the wall.

Blood spurted out and penciled a streak down across his camel's hair coat. He lolled there, against the wall a moment. Just as the shrieking, wailing, blood-curdling siren seemed to jump right into the little room, Craley let go and crumpled down, his back to the wall, the whole front of his coat stained a deep cherry red.

I'd called Inspector Davelleto, who said he'd be right over. Then I went to answer the summons at the door. I could see Red Barnett standing there in the snow. Beyond him, in the street, Big Bertha was quivering after the desperate run. She was a crimson beauty in white fur trimming.

"Come on, Charley," Red said, "there has been a big factory fire. Every ambulance in town has been commandeered. It's a helluva night—"

Then he stared past me at the inert figure on the floor, nodded, gulped, and his kindly eyes popped wide open.

"Hell's bells," he exclaimed. "I guess you needed Old Bertha here, Charley. That guy ain't playin' possum!"

Red came into the room as I slid over the pile rug to seize the little pebble of lead from Craley's gun which had caromed off the broken lamp.

I knew with that bullet in my wallet and the one on my sweating palm, I had the answer to the question that Inspector Davelleto was working overtime to learn.

Scream Theme

(Continued from page 25)

yellow, Mr. Foster. You grabbed the camera and ran. Snatched my clothes on the way, and then messed up my car.

"That wasn't smart, Mr. Foster. Figured you'd delay me. What you did was tell me you wanted to delay me. Easy to guess why. You knew Miss Griffin would break down if she was accused to her face of helping you cover up murder. So you had to get rid of her. Her body'd be found in the lake tomorrow. Everybody'd think she'd fallen in and drowned. Even if somebody guessed you'd drowned her, Mr. Foster, it couldn't be proved."

All that speaking had made Ira somewhat breathless. He had about reached the end. Here on the dock Marie Griffin would accuse the man who had tried to murder her, and that would be that.

"That's the way it stands, Miss Griffin," he said. "Save your own hide by turning state's evidence. Take my word. Okay?"

Slowly she removed her hands from her mouth. "Yes," she mumbled. "I'll—" Then she shrieked.

With his free hand, Bryan Foster had slipped a knife out of a pocket. He was sitting up. Moonbeams glinted on bright steel plunging toward Ira's heart.

Swaying sideways, Ira caught that thin wrist when the knife was inches from his ribs. His fingers contracted. Foster moaned; the knife clattered to the dock.

"You make me tired, Mr. Foster," Ira said disgustedly as he kicked the knife into the water.

Assistant-manager Wilmark could only cover up his underling underhandedness by triggering himself a . . .

Gunfire Promotion

By Dave Grinnell



FOR a man who was going to do murder for the first time, Joseph Wilmark was a mighty cool specimen. But then, his type would be. He had always been egotistic and efficient. That the thing he was about to do, he had never done before in his life was merely because he had never had any occasion for it. Once in every ambitious man's career there comes a time when murder can make the most effective short-cut to success. Wilmark's time was now.

He looked up at Sanderson's house. It was dark save for one light on the second floor. That was Sanderson's room. Wilmark's narrowed, black eyes glanced once again up and down the street, found it silent and deserted. Without more ado he walked up to the entrance, climbed the three short steps, and turned the knob of the door.

The door opened. Wilmark expected it to. Sanderson did not know it, but the door had been off the latch since that afternoon when he had returned from the Army board.

He had been all set to sell his furniture, settle his affairs, and go off to his induction past the week following. After having been in the war-worker class, they had changed his rating to 1-A. But now—they had rejected him. Some internal trouble nobody had ever suspected had slapped him down into the 4F class. The doctors had agreed and had been quite determined about it.

He called the office when he got home. That was when several of the boys managed to drop in on him during their lunch hour for a consolation drink. Joseph Wilmark had come along with them. When they left, he unobtrusively snapped the door latch off the lock.

Wilmark hesitated a moment in the dark hallway to get his bearings, then moved silently up the stairs. At the top, he heard sounds of typing coming from

Sanderson's room. He stepped silently up to the door under which the light was showing, then knocked briefly.

Sanderson, seated at his desk near the window, his back to the door, frowned perplexedly a moment, gazed at the letter he had almost finished, glanced at the half-dozen other letters already enveloped and stacked neatly for mailing.

The letter was addressed to a second-hand furniture dealer. It carried the information that, due to rejection by the Army, he had to cancel the appointment to call that week for an estimate on Sanderson's furnishings. Sanderson was nothing, if not methodical. That was how he had come to be the well-paid office manager he was.

"Come in," he called in response to the rapping on his door. He swivelled in his chair, opening his eyes in surprised recognition as Wilmark entered, smiling.

"Hello, what's up? What brings you here at this hour?" Sanderson said, greeting his assistant-manager. He knew most of his office staff very well and often saw them after hours. But there was something about Wilmark's smile. . . .

Wilmark walked over to him. "Just happened to be passing and saw your light. Thought I'd drop up for a moment to ask what arrangements we'd be making for the new reconverted work week."

It occurred to Sanderson that this was rather an odd topic to discuss at that hour. He could have brought it up tomorrow at the office. Sanderson shrugged mentally. Wilmark was certainly efficient enough. No doubt, he had it on his mind and wanted to reach some solution. *Good man, Wilmark, he thought, would have made a good replacement for me if I left.*

The same thought had been in Wilmark's mind for weeks now, until it had almost become an obsession. He never mentioned it to anyone, but if Sanderson didn't go into the service when their plant dropped its war work, there were also certain indiscretions in bookkeeping that had been on Wilmark's mind. The only way of covering them up. . . .

"Wait a moment, will you, while I get this letter finished," Sanderson said. "Maybe you can drop these in the mailbox when you go down. They're going to those furniture dealers I told you about. They were supposed to come tomorrow to appraise this stuff, and these written cancellations have to go out tonight. I don't want them making trips for nothing if I can help it."

Turning back to the machine, Sanderson typed a few more lines, pulled the sheet from the typewriter and signed it. He folded the letter, licked the flap and stuck it on top of the pile of letters. Wilmark had been standing several feet behind him. Sanderson's eyes opened wide as he turned in his seat once again and saw the thing in Wilmark's hand. He started to speak, but the word became a curious yelp and the sharp snap of the silenced bullet was the only sound in the room.

A small, black spot appeared between Sanderson's eyes. Before it began to get a bit red, he slumped back in his seat and, losing his balance, fell forward.

WILMARK stood a moment more staring silently around the room. He was still amazingly calm, cool, collected. He hadn't lost his nerve, he thought elatedly. He knew he wouldn't. He never did in emergencies. His eyes traveled over the room carefully. He saw the letters on the dead man's desk. A slight smile broke his thin-lipped features for the second time that night. He reached over, scooped them up with his gloved hand.

Then he left the room, closing the door carefully so that it locked. He went down the stairs and out into the street. Everything was still peaceful. He walked quietly to the corner, dropping the letters in the mailbox he found there, and went on home.

The letters, he thought, would be quite a good blind. The mailman would pick them up about an hour later, and that would help throw the police off on their timing. They might even think that Sanderson had forgotten to lock the door when he left, and that upon returning, he had found an intruder going through his belongings.

The story didn't hit the papers until midday. The whole office was tense with

the shock. They sat reading the account of the story, what there was of it, in the news, and wondering. The body had been found by Sanderson's housekeeper who cleaned up the place for him in the morning. She called the police, but they couldn't find anything.

It was about three o'clock that afternoon that Detective Lentz and two patrolmen dropped into the office. They asked the girl at the switchboard to let them speak to the assistant manager. She directed them to Wilmark's office while the clerks and the rest of the staff gaped after them, unable to do any work.

Wilmark stood up. "What can I do for you, gentlemen?" he said. "Anything I can do to help clear up . . ."

Lentz stared at him coldly for a moment. "When did you see Sanderson last?" he asked abruptly.

Wilmark wasn't flustered. "Yesterday, at lunchtime," he said. "Several of the men here were there with me."

"You didn't see him last night, then?" Lentz went on as coldly as before.

Wilmark's eyebrows went up. "Of course not," he said slowly, keeping his voice low. But he wondered what they knew. Lentz gestured to the two policemen, who stepped to Wilmark's side, preventing escape.

"That's a lie, and that's all we wanted to hear. You're under arrest for murder," the detective snapped, keeping his voice equally low. It was impossible. They couldn't. Wilmark gaped his astonishment.

"How do you dare—" he started to say, but Lentz interrupted him.

"Sanderson put the finger on you himself, Wilmark. He wrote a letter last night to a furniture dealer. Mailed at midnight. It cancels an appointment he had for today, but there's a postscript. When the dealer called Sanderson half an hour ago to say he was sorry, the girl told him. He came right over to us with the letter. Want to see it?"

Wilmark took the letter and his eyes went hastily over its formal contents, dropped to the postscript. He read:

Just as I finished this letter, the friend I told you about who wanted to get that rolltop desk dropped in. His name is Joseph Wilmark. He's my assistant at the office. Why don't you give him a ring?

BUY ANOTHER WAR BOND TODAY!

Hide and Go Shriek

"Dizzy Duo" Yarn



By Joe Archibald

Maybe there was murder, and maybe not. But when Snooty Piper, the crackpot crime hound, sniffs the spoor of a sucker's pseudo-guilt, it's sure suicide to the security of Boston's Back Bay brotherhood.

IT IS not often that my will power is too much for Snooty Piper. But one night when he comes in to our room and says he has arranged a very boisterous evening for us and two dolls, I put my foot down.

"If you can budge me out of this overstuffed chair, then you can expect to be elected head of the world peace conference."

"Look, this one would be different," the Scollay Square Casanova says. "It is a new canary I got, Scoop. I know any friend she would have would be a piperoo!"

"No good-lookin' chick ever pals with one as good-lookin', Snooty," I says. "It is the unwritten law."

"Awright," the crackpot gripes and lays out his new green suit, overcoat, and hat. "Go on an' hibernate, Scoop. Wait'll I come home and tell you what went on."

"I can wait," I reply.

Snooty Piper breezes in at eleven. He looks about as elated as Hitler reading a dispatch from East Prussia. "Why, I says, 'no lipstick on your phisog? You don't smell of One Twilight in Paree, and your breath would make a hit at a temperance meetin'. Now I've seen everythin'."

"No, you haven't," Snooty sighs and sits down on the bed. "She crossed me. She had tickets for a lecture at a church in Cambridge and took her aunt with her. There was an old goat there, the Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy of the gay nineties, who told all about crime durin' the days Lillian Russell played with dolls. He told about how the horses run away once while he was drivin' the patrol wagon. He said he raided the biggest corn silk smoking gang of all time. I'm through with dames, Scoop."

It is the best laugh I get in months.

"The babe's aunt sits between us all evenin', Scoop. She asked my intentions. Where is the spirits of ammonia?"

ABOUT a week after Snooty Piper's debauchery, he gets a call from Abigail Hepplethwaite, an old bantam who lives in Back Bay and who has more clams than all the sea-food joints from here to Honolulu. We got acquainted with Abigail three years or more ago while solving a terrible crime.

"She says it is very hush hush, Scoop," Snooty says. "She does not want the cops in on it. She makes the appointment for five o'clock this P.M."

"What can we lose?" I says.

We arrive at Abigail's forty-nine-room bungalow on schedule. Abigail looks as much in the pink as the racing dope sheet she has been perusing.

"Sit down, boys," she invites. "What's cookin', good lookin'?"

"You tell us," Snooty replies.

"Okay," Abigail says. "I got a problem, Mr. Anthony. A friend of mine, Carrie Brandish, has a nephew named Seymour who was going to marry Peregrine Rudge. It seems that Carrie handed over the last fifty grand she had in her poke to finance the courtship for Seymour. Everything went fine until just lately. Peregrine came to me and told me something she promised Seymour she wouldn't tell. She made me promise I wouldn't, Piper, but I got to tell somebody or Carrie Brandish won't ever escape the paupers' roost."

We fan ourselves with our hats. "Go on, Mrs. Hepplethwaite," I says. "It can't get no worse."

The doorbell rings, and a very willowy doll wearing a mink coat that could pay off the mortgage on a dozen homesteads in East Lynne trots in.

"Peregrine!" Abigail says. "Why, is anything gone worse than it was?"

"I just had to come here, Mrs. Hepplethwaite," the Back Bay canary says. "I couldn't just sit in my room and wait until the phone rang telling me Seymour had committed suic—"

"Look, Kid," Abigail says to the distraught doll. "I went and called in some help, such as it is. In a way they are private investigators, and the cops are always mad at them. Tell them your story, Peregrine."

She does. She says Seymour got acting as morose as Hitler. He finally broke down and said he was mixed up in a murder. He wouldn't tell her who the corpse was, as he is not sure of his name himself. All he knew he stood near the victim when he was erased.

"It is funny the cops never found a corpse," Snooty says.

"The murderer told Seymour he would take care of it," the society squab gulps out. "He said for Seymour to get out so he would not be mixed up—"

"Where was this slaughter house?" Snooty inquires, always discreet and tactful.

"Seymour wouldn't say. Oh, this is terrible! You see he will always be open to blackmail now he is to marry me," Peregrine sniffles. "How can I marry him if I won't ever be sure if he helped kill somebody?"

"This should be easy, Snooty," I sniff. "There is a corpse where nobody can find it. Nobody knows where it was made a corpse. Seymour won't talk. Let's give it to Iron Jaw."

"No, please!" Peregrine says and puts her arms around Snooty. "I couldn't stand the awful pub-pub—"

"It was just I thought you two goons might get to Seymour an' break him down," Abigail says. "Isn't it exciting for us to know there was a rub-out and the cops don't?"

"It is positively a scream," I says.

"We will find Seymour," Snooty says. "Leave it all to me, Babe—er—Peregrine. Go ahead an' cry it all out on my shoulder as I am in no hurry—"

WE GO to the club where the Harvards play gin and contract. The clerk says he has not seen Seymour Brandish for three days. We go where Seymour worked in a real estate office on Boylston, but a fat citizen tells us Seymour has not showed in a week. We try six hotels and three night clubs the character frequented, but to no avail. So we give up for the nonce and trek to the Greek's.

"It looks like he took a powder," I says.

"I wonder what kind," Snooty sighs. "Arsenic, heroin, or just plain coke. I wonder where anybody would hide a stiff."

"Let's see, they are usually from five feet five and up, and about eighteen inches across and up. I can think of only about three million places you could store a corpse, Snooty."

"Let's forget it, Scoop."

"Shake! You are a pal at last."

It is only three nights later that me and Snooty Piper are standing outside a certain whoopee nook near Park Square trying to get the courage to go in, when who comes out but Peregrine Rudge. She is worn on the arm of a very sartorially perfected character who appears to be well in the chips.

"Why—er—say!" the aristocratic male suddenly yips. "Just one moment, my dear. These two persons fit the description of the ones who have been following me. Especially the person lacking the chin. Come here, you!"

"Who was your cocker spaniel yesterday?" Snooty says. "That babe with you can tell you why we—"

"Indeed?" Peregrine shoves out haughtily. "I never saw this riff-raff before in my life!"

"You are Seymour Brandish?" Snooty snaps.

"Of course."

"You seen a corpse around?" Snooty needles.

Three muscles in Seymour's pan jump. "Why—er—I cannot understand you. They must be demented, Peregrine. Let's go on, shall we?"

"He means we must be nuts, Snooty."

"I know the English language!" the crackpot yelps. "I wish I could figure what goes here."

"It looks to me like a gag on Abigail's part," I says. "She likes her fun, Snooty."

"I'll call that old babe up an' burn her earrings off," Snooty says in a temper. "We could of got arrested or slugged for this. I'll get hunk with that old flibbity-gibbet!"

We go down to the main bastille in Beantown and see if there is any crime news. Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy, a detective we know only too well, laughs in our faces as we enter the establishment.

"Say, Piper, I just heard where there is a body. In a dump outside Charles-town. It is either of a Dodge or a Buick. Go and look for foul play."

"How did he hear about that?" Snooty grinds out. "Abigail again. She—aw-right, I'll go right down, you big slob and take a police doll with me, as maybe I will need a woman's ignition."

"Look, Iron Jaw," Snooty picks up the gland case's big derby. "I saw a swell trick on the stage last week. You cut a hole in the top of a derby—like this. Then you cover it with a cloth an'—say, Scoop, I forgot. You need two derbies to do this trick. Come on—!"

Iron Jaw chases us all the way to the Charles River, where the Harvards row the Yales each spring. We are amazed to see quite a crowd lining the bank, as this is not spring but the middle of January. More than that, two big cops are pulling something up the bank and it is not an eel.

"It is a stiff!" Iron Jaw yelps between gasps for oxygen. "What in—?"

"Couple of kids spotted it, O'Shaugh-

nessy," a cop says. "On ice and packed in as nice as a haddock. It's a big one."

"Don't throw it back in," I says. "Snooty, that is a bullet hole in his bosom. It is a murder!"

In due time we have the corpse appraiser on the job. He says the remains have been frosted in the Charles for over a week. All identification has been ripped out of the character's plaid suit. Nobody knows him from Adam even if it is six hours past eve.

"Where's his hat?" Snooty asks.

"He won't catch cold," I sniff.

There is nothing to do, it seems, but cart the cadaver off to the city icebox. Me and Snooty sit on a bench on the bank of the Charles and watch the dead wagon shove off.

"It is quite a mystery," Snooty says. "I still say no citizen would be out this month without a hat. Let's walk along the shore, Scoop."

"It is five below," I says. "Why couldn't we have found this corpse near a furnace?"

We walk up and down, up and down. Finally Snooty Piper finds a slouch hat about a quarter of a mile from where the stiff was discovered. It has initials in it. They are M.F.T.

Snooty looks over the hat. "It did not belong to the corpse," he says. "It is too small."

"I have heard at times of a high wind blowin' skypieces off citizens' noggins," I point out. "If we had looked another three hours I bet we would have had eight hats," I sniff.

"Could be," Snooty says.

LATE the next afternoon we hear that Iron Jaw O'Shaughnessy has been credited with some of the most remarkable detective work in the annals of crime. It seems the big flatfoot, at the morgue, has discovered that the corpse had not finished with a dentist; that when he had peeled some composition off snags of teeth in the front of the deceased's mouth, he had told his contemporaries that the victim was going to have porcelain caps put on. We read about it in the *Evening Star*. There is the description of the character's unfinished dental work.

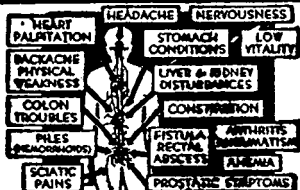
"I get it, Snooty," I says. "A dentist will recognize the work, come to the cops, and give the name of the corpse. It is almost unbelievable, isn't it?"

"Why didn't I notice the teeth, Scoop? If it had been a horse—I still must be dreamin'. Iron Jaw really has a brain? What will they find out next?"

It turns out to be quite a case. The

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fingerprints of the corpse happen to be exactly like a set on file at the main hoosegow. They belonged to a very shady person known as The Bishop.

We go down to the bastille and learn that the deceased had not been heard from in over twenty-five years, since he did a three year rap for getting a widow's inheritance mixed up with a bunch of cut-up newspapers. It appears that if there was a con game that The Bishop never heard about in his time, it had never been invented.

"So he was in Boston, huh?" Snooty says. "He got mixed up with other uncouth citizens and got erased. Well, how will Iron Jaw find out what name he was goin' under when he was nudged off, Scoop? To find out where he lived, you got to get his name, huh?"

"He should have left a name and address with the dentist," I remind Snooty.

It is just what The Bishop did. A dentist soon read the account of the finding of the cadaver. He identified the corpse and admitted it was once a patient of his. Hubert K. Wilshire owed him a hundred bucks.

A Hubert K. Wilshire lived at the Hotel Kinsmore near Copley Square. Three hours after we heard Iron Jaw went up there, we visited police headquarters and asked for the big ox. Iron Jaw is stomping about like Ferdinand who has found out the Borden cow has gone snorting with another bullock.

"They give some guy the stuff that was in that room," Iron Jaw trumpets. "The dumb clerks don't remember what the geezer looked like. What chance has the cops?"

"Hah," Snooty says. "You got a corpse and know the name it used last and that is all. It is almost as bad as me and Scoop lookin' for a corpse somebody thinks he helped make an—Scoop, I feel faint. Git me some water."

"I hope you got nothin' worse than leprosy," Iron Jaw howls. "Look, don't let the papers print the name of Hubert Wilshire yet. If the guy's pals are still around, they'll git scared an' scram! Until we tell you—their's the D.A.'s orders I almos' forgot—"

I give Snooty some water and take him outside for fresh air. "What seems to ail you, palsy?" I ask solicitously.

"Don't ever go to lectures," Snooty warns me. "They make you imagine the worst things. But just the same I got to see a guy. If you wanted to know who made the most double plays durin' Hans Wagner's time, you would go an' ask Hans Wagner, wouldn't you?"

"I always thought epileptic fits had to be born in anybody," I says, eying

Snooty askance. "Tell me again why you was rejected by the Army. And don't lie. What is this schizophrenia?"

"I will see you at the roomin' house, Scoop."

WHEN Snooty comes home that night he looks quite mysterious. He is grinning like a cat that knows where a mouse takes its daily dozen. "How much moolah you got, Scoop?" he asks.

"Eleven bucks. Why?"

"Then we got fourteen between us. We should be able to spend at least a half hour at El Fumidor. I see by the papers that a party is to be given Peregrine Rudge and Seymour Brandish at the chic joint. I got some plans that are amazing, Scoop."

"I could call them somethin' different," I says. "I will not go to that joint."

"Then let the eleven bucks you got go," Snooty says. "Now I got to have the clams, Scoop, or get rough. This is one of the most important—"

"The eleven bucks will go," I sigh. "But I go along with them. I am thinking of splitting up with you, Snooty."

We go to the El Fumidor and get some dirty looks as we pass the doorman. It is about nine P.M. Snooty gives a waiter three fish and tells him to let him know when the engagement party from Back Bay arrives. Then we sit at our table behind a post, order beer, and get some more very nasty looks.

A doll comes out and sings. Some more canaries, wearing just enough to satisfy the Boston statutes, prance about for five minutes, and Snooty's neck looks like the plumbing under a washbowl as he peers around the post.

"Some pin-ups, Scoop," Snooty says. "I wonder if I wrote a note to the red-head, would she—?"

It is then that the waiter whispers to Snooty. Snooty nods and waits for ten minutes. Then he gets up and goes toward the hat check concession. I figure he has forgot me so I join him.

"Remember?" I says. "I come with you."

"Keep out of the way," Snooty says and grins at the hat babe. I grab hold of a post when he flashes a badge. Snooty says, "Easy, Toots. Don't say nothin'. I would just like to check the hats of the males who just come in with the swell society pheasant."

"Yeah," the keeper of the kellys says. "Why not, Mister?"

Snooty gets six hats, four soft ones and two derbies. He ogles the sweatbands in the chapeaux, then thanks the dame, and asks what she does in her

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spare time. She says she tries to make her cozy little flat look comgy when her spouse, a wrestler showing at the Boston Garden, comes home after a hard day.

"Don't no swell dame ever marry an anemic?" Snooty says to me as we take over our table again. I notice the crackpot is shaking like he had palsy over at the checkroom. I order four beers. We make the brew last while eating a pair of chicken sandwiches.

Snooty keeps watching the big table over near the dance floor where Peregrine and Seymour are being feted.

"Did it ever occur to you, Scoop, that Abigail was not ribbing us?" Snooty says. "Why would that swell Back Bay cup-cake go along with the rib? That marble-puss could not act in a grammar school production of *Two Gentlemen and Verona*. Here is a character who nearly goes nuts, because there is a corpse on his mind. Then he blossoms out as happy as a tick on a fat sheep, and Peregrine refuses to even recognize us."

"Look, Snooty, if you know somethin', you should tell the cops," I says.

"I am not sure yet," Snooty says, then grabs me by the arm. "Shhh!"

"What goes?" I choke out.

"Don't let them see you, Scoop. Keep your face turned the other way, until I say it is all right."

The spiffy caravan struts past and does not notice the riff-raff anyway. Snooty is turned around in his chair and is watching them retrieve their wraps and hats. When they evacuate *El Fumidor*, he says:

"Seymour and M.F.T. wore derbies, Scoop."

"Come clean or I will wrap this water pitcher around your thick skull!" I says.

"Awright. I went to see the old time slewfoot who lectured at that church orgy," Snooty says. "He remembered The Bishop. He told me about the rag with the shill playing into the part of the sucker. The shill gets the mark and takes him to the store and shows him how to beat the bulls and bears because they happen to have inside quotes from Eastern Union. At first the mark wins some dough, and then the mark is mitted for his whole bankroll.

"When he makes a beef, the shill's Brain uses the cackle bladder after the shill claims the mark was robbed and shoots his boss with a Betsy loaded with ersatz capsules. So the mark sees he is in on a rub-out and does not dare follow up his squawk. The shill promises him to dispose of the cadaver and to make himself as scarce as nylons in China."

"Waiter," I says. "Have you some smellin' salts?"

"Why, pal? You didn't see the bill yet?"

"Nothing could scare me now," I says. "Awright, Snooty, I won't ask you nothin' ever again."

We get a bill for ten eighty-five. For eight beers and two chicken sandwiches. Snooty pays, leaves a fifteen cent tip, and we are as clean of legal tender as a crocodile is of ostrich feathers.

"The Bishop was a sucker," I says. "He could of opened a night club and never would have been worried by cops."

BRIGHT and early Snooty Piper is up and is indulging in more Nero Chan mental technique. He has the hat he found near the edge of the Charles River in his lap.

"I must call Abigail," he says, and slips out of the room. I can hear him talking when he contacts the old babe.

"Yeah . . . Yeah . . . So she says Seymour had a nervous breakdown, huh? Imagined things, huh? Yeah . . . How much dough you said Peregrine said he lost? All of the fifty grand, huh? Yeah. You can say that ag'in. You know me an' Scoop thought you was takin' us for a ride. Yeah. Yeah . . . I see . . . Yeah."

Snooty comes back in and I says, "Yeah."

"Who gits over a nervous wreck in less than a week, Scoop? Abigail says Seymour not only told Peregrine he was an accessory in an assassination, but also that he had lost all his clams."

"He had quite a roll last night," I says. "When a doll snapped his map, he pulled out enough hay to pay her off to feed all the beef that will fatten in Texas for the next fifty years. I happened to get a gander at him."

"We will call up Dogface and say we are trailing a big scoop," Snooty says. "I found out where Seymour Brandish lives. What big stock market character leaves for his store—er—office before nine-thirty or thereabouts? To play safe, we will be outside his pueblo on Beacon Street at eight-thirty. He could tell us who slew The Bishop."

"Huh?"

"Sure, he was the mark mitted by the shill."

"Stop," I says. "I have stood everything from you, but I will not listen to that dizzy double-talk. Where did you learn it?"

"It is the lingo of the geezers specializin' in the old rag, Scoop. Let's see, about ten days or two weeks ago we had the highest wind in history, didn't we?"

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Remember it blew Dogface from in front of the *Evening Star* and loaded him in a garbage truck four blocks away. It was mostly likely the night The Bishop was exterminated. Seymour shrugged away a corpse that wasn't really there, but really was all the time. Maybe he does not even know it."

I hold my head in my hands. Everything starts getting black. I know what it feels like to be planning a very heinous crime. It is a good thing there was not a trench knife or a Roscoe handy, or at this writing I would most likely have been getting the top of my dome clipped for the hot squat. After a while I get hold of myself.

"All right, Snooty," I says. "Have it your way."

We are across the street from the old yellow brick house on Beacon at eighty-three sharp and are hiding in a doorway. At nine, Seymour Brandish, dressed like a clothing ad, minces down the steps, pauses and takes a long deep breath. Then he ambles uptown like he owned Lloyd's of London.

"Come on, Scoop."

We hound Seymour all the way to a very respectable-looking building on Boylston Street, and watch him go into the elevator. When the lift comes down again, we brief the up and down jockey.

"Where did the citizen with the big grey overcoat, derby hat, and faun-colored spats get off, Buster?" Snooty asks.

"Huh? Oh, him? A big shot. Tenth floor. He is one of them investment guys it looks like."

We go up to the tenth floor and spot an office with two entrances. On one door it says, Plymouth Rock Investment Service, Inc. "This must be it," Snooty says.

"Let's be calm about this, Snooty," I says. "Who could ever suspect Seymour Brandish of murder?"

"Once he suspected himself, Scoop."

WE GO IN. Snooty tells the female on guard he would like to see Mr. Standish or somebody about investing some clams. The doll has eyes as penetrating as a puma's. Her makeup is thicker than a clown's.

"Who recommended you?" she asks and crushes a cigarette into an ash tray like she is quite angry with it.

"Er, a Mr. Hubert Wilshire," the imbecile says. "I am Ezra Boysenberry."

"Woo woo," says the fresh skirt and goes into a big office and closes the door. She soon comes out with a tall, cadaverous, well-groomed citizen we have seen before. She says:

"This is Mr. Trelawney. He will speak with you."

"Mr. M. F. Trelawney?" Snooty inquires as the charter takes us into a big office.

"You said a Mr. Wilshire sent you?" Trelawney asks. I have a feeling it would be no worse for us if this firm was conducted by Karloff and Lorre. "When did you talk to him last?"

"Why, only two days ago," Snooty says.

Trelawney's cigar trembles like a plucked banjo string and ashes drop down on his vest. "That's imp—"

"Why?" Snooty asks and he does not sound very polite.

"Well, that is, he left town—"

"I wouldn't say so," Snooty says. "He is in town this minute. He can be seen anytime—"

The sweat is beginning to ooze out of Trelawney's pan. I look toward a door leading to another office and see it open a crack. For once I says to myself, "You get prepared, Scoop Binney!" There is a big bottle of ink standing on top of a file cabinet not two feet away.

"Let's be frank," Snooty says. "Wilshire is on a slab at the morgue and has been there for quite some time. The cops remembered him as The Bishop. He was a pal of yours, M.F.T. Where's Brandish, huh? We—"

Seymour jumps out then. "Tsk-tsk," Snooty says. "You know what they say about eavesdroppin', Seymour."

"Wilshire? Merton, you told me he left town!" Seymour yelps at M.F.T.

"Shut up!" Trelawney says. "Why come and tell me, you two?"

"It is silly seein' as how you knocked off The Bishop. I found your hat near the Charles River, pal," Snooty says. "Why didn't you tell your partner things like that? Want to see the citizen who worked the cackle bladder on you, Seymour, after he took you for fifty grand? It was this M.F.T. who shot The Brain with the blanks, huh?"

"Merton—they know all—you told me Wilshire left town!" Seymour gulps. "Then you—!"

"Look out, Scoop!"

"Watch yourself, Snooty, as I am way ahead of you," I says and grab the big bottle of writing fluid just as M.F.T. pulls out a desk drawer. The trouble was that I slipped just before I let it go. It got Snooty Piper a glancing blow and rendered him as bowlegged as a Sioux Indian packing two hundred pounds of jerked meat on his back. Seymour is very horrified and weak at the knees, so he is not much help.

M.F.T. shoots at me twice from only

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two feet away and does not kill me. It is almost unbelievable. Then he throws the Betsy away and comes at me with his bare hands. I evade his rushes long enough to become armed with a three pound copy of Who's What in Boston which I nail him with.

M.F.T. catches it right where he smells and staggers backwards. I follow up fast. When the rough boy collapses near the water cooler, I push the thing over on him and sit on him myself.

"Okay, Scoop!" Snooty says. "I got Seymour at the point of a Roscoe."

"Throw it away as it is full of blanks. It must be the Betsy that they use for a prop," I sniff. "See if you can find something to tie M.F.T. up with. An' call the cops."

SNOOTY told the D.A. everything. "It had to be like that," he says. "There was a corpse and then there wasn't. This Trelawney was The Bishop's shill. When Seymour put up a squawk that he was swindled in a stock racket in that store, M.F.T. made out he was mad at the boss, too, and shot him with blanks. Just as he shot The Bishop, the old crook bit down on a bladder filled with blood and made out he was mortally slain.

"M.F.T. says for Seymour to scram and he'll hide the cadaver. Well, after that, maybe a week or so, M.F.T. contacts Seymour and says it was all a gag. He had a fight with the big boss and made him fork over part of the dough that was snatched—"

"Yes," Seymour Brandish cuts in. "He told me Wilshire left town to run his own racket. Then he gives me back twenty thousand dollars and points out to me what a nice business it is if you try the receiving end. Oh, I was a fool! I was weak! I came to the store with Trelawney. We had two suckers lined up—but I didn't help kill no one, I swear! I didn't know Wilshire was dead until—oh, this is horrible. Oh, what have I done?"

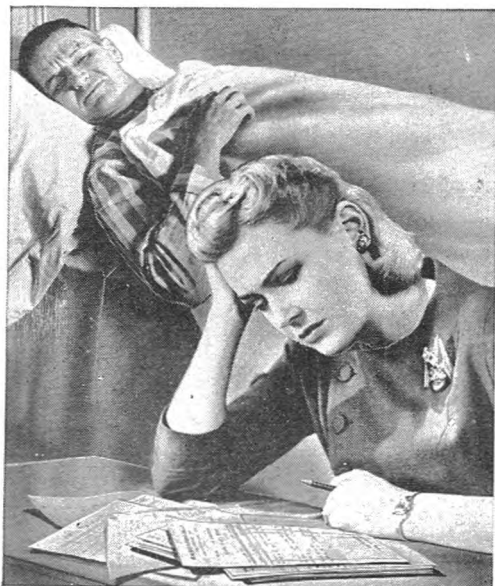
"Just tryin' to milt the easy marks is all," Snooty says. "That was quite a layout, D.A. The store—a completely outfitted phony brokerage office with clerks and a board. Look, that Betsy with the blanks could have fired real ones at The Bishop, so give it to ballistics. I would like to have that cackle bladder we found for a souvenir though."

Iron Jaw sits there mumbaling and with his eyes crossed. "The rag—the shill getting the mark—getting him to a store—a cackle bladder—ha-haaa!"

"Better take him out," I says to a cop.

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