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NOVEMBER



**THE  
CORPSE  
HANGS  
HIGH**

BY H.Q. MASUR

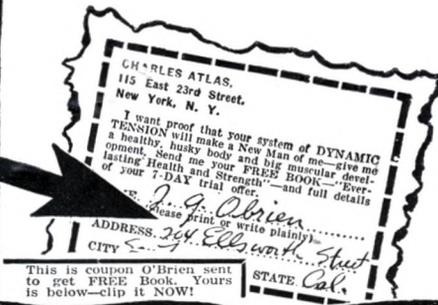
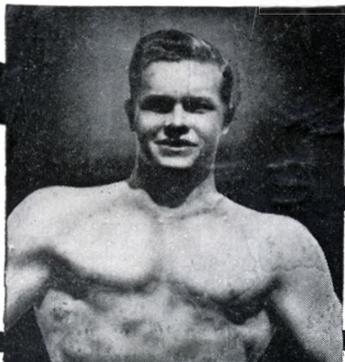
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HAUNTED  
ACRES**

BY LAWRENCE TREAT

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**November, 1941**

**Vol. XLIII, No. 1**

★ **10 New, Different Stories—No Serials** ★

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*In this crime merry-go-round Detective Falcon grabs the brass ring that proves to be a lethal link to the grave.*
2. **YOU'LL END UP BURNING!** . . . **Fredric Brown** 30  
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*This actor writes his own script—with the Grim Reaper as director.*
5. **HELL'S HAUNTED ACRES ("Baxter" Novelet)** . . .  
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*Baxter invades desolate swamp-land and falls into a quicksand of intrigue.*
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*Little Benny Infortunato, dip artist, faces a double dilemma.*
7. **HOMICIDE CAT'S-PAW** . . . **Murray W. Mosser** 79  
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8. **DOOM'S IMPOSTOR** . . . **C. William Harrison** 89  
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10. **THE DEVIL'S MISSION** . . . **Guy Fleming** 100  
*Man Wanted—to be the guest of honor in a funeral march.*

*Cover by Norm Saunders*

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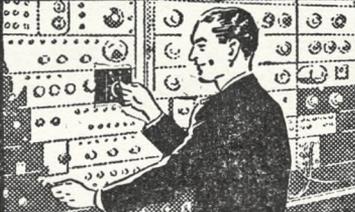
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# The

*Sensational  
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*He lunged frantically  
out of the chair.*

## CHAPTER I

**I** DUG the gun out of my holster sling and tucked it into the side pocket of my coat. I kept my hand around the butt and my finger inside

the trigger guard. The gun is a 9 m/m Luger with a special three-inch barrel and packs enough wallop to stop a medium-sized army tank. A little guy like me, no more than five-five and a half, even in Cuban heels, needs

# Corpse Hangs High

By H. Q. Masur

« Dames, diamonds, and double-cross! That was the crime merry-go-round Detective Galahad Falcon rode—only to grab the brass ring that proved to be a lethal link to the grave. »»



something more than a toy to back him up.

I tossed a quick look up and down the dingy hotel corridor, noted that it was deserted, then knocked three

times on the door of Room 619. A deep voice called out:

"That you, Falcon?"

"Right," I said. "John Galahad Falcon."

The door swung open, and I sidled in, keeping my back to the wall. Then I saw this guy and I was glad—mighty glad—that I had cleaned and oiled and loaded a fresh clip into the Luger. There was a cool ten thousand dollars stuffed into my wallet and I wasn't taking any chances.

The upper part of his face was covered with a black mask, but I could see the bright glint of his eyes behind the narrow slit. He was a tall wiry chap, wearing a gray tweed ulster buttoned high above his chin. He kept the brim of a soft fedora pulled well down over his forehead, so of course there wasn't much of his face that was visible. Only the long slash of a thin-lipped mouth.

He closed the door and turned the key. Then he faced me and asked in a voice that sounded like stripped gears: "Have you got the money, Falcon?"

I tapped my breast pocket. "Right here. Where's the diamond?"

His smile revealed a black tunnel where a front tooth was missing. The thin black mustache wrinkled up under his nose. He buried his fist somewhere inside the ulster and pulled out a small green box about two inches in diameter.

"The Star of Africa," he announced, and there was a kind of reverence in his voice. He shook his head. "It's a bargain at ten grand. I ought to get more, but when Charlie Trogon makes a deal he sticks to it."

I've been handling sparklers for some ten years, excepting the two-year recess at San Quentin, and I know stones almost as well as an Amsterdam dealer. So I wasn't letting this crook slip me anything but the real article. Some pretty smart guys have been fooled by expert paste imitations.

There was a heavy rubber band around the box and I had to free both hands to pull it off. I plucked off the lid and peered inside. The little green box was as empty as an Armenian's belly after the first World War.

"Hey!" I snarled, jerking my eyes up. "What are you trying to pull off—"

It was strictly a sucker punch, telegraphed all the way from China, and gathering speed along the road. It caught me unprepared, off guard, and his fist exploded against my jaw, snapping me clean off the floor like the recoil of a Singapore gun.

A blast of light like a Very flare blinded me, pinwheels spun and boomed inside my brain, and then I went into a total blackout. I don't know how long I lay there like that, but when I finally pried my eyes open, my head felt like somebody was drilling for oil in it. The first thing I saw was the little green box. It was lying right in front of my eyes with the lid still off, and very empty.

**I** PUSHED to my feet. My chin was swollen, my lip was cut and bleeding badly. Suddenly I remembered the wallet, made a quick stab, found it in my pocket. The relief that swept over me was short-lived, for when I opened the wallet I could see that Mr. Charlie Trogon had already been at it. The ten grand was gone.

I just stood there, using words.

This was fine. This was just dandy.

After all my work, building up a rep as one of the best private dicks in the business, specializing in hot ice, I now found myself jammed into a neat bit of trouble. Back in the old days I used to heist the stuff myself until that two-year stretch in San Quentin. And then I'd had plenty of time to figure out the angles. I figured I had glommed maybe thirty grand worth of sparklers, but all I'd ever taken from the fences was less than twenty per cent of that amount.

I took all the chances, the fences made all the money, and there I was on the rock pile swinging a pick. No percentage in that. So I blew East, pulled some strings, grabbed myself a private op's license, and contacted a couple of insurance companies. I'd done some good work for them, re-

covered a few important pieces, and had made a decent pile.

Then, two days ago, my phone rang, and some guy tells me he has stolen the Star of Africa. The Star is one of the biggest pieces left in any private collection and worth a cool hundred grand. But he says it's too hot to handle and he will sell it back to the owner for ten thousand dollars, a quick turnover. Will I act as contact man?

I told him I would. That's my business. On a straight percentage basis, and no questions asked. No cops. No double-crossing. Everybody in the game knows me and knows I can be trusted.

So I went to see the owner of the Star, Mr. Christopher Tyndall. I gave him the story straight and he was willing. Even more—he was delighted. He handed over ten grand with which to consummate the deal.

But I had muffed this one.

I staggered into the bathroom and got a faucet running in the washbowl. A dash of cold water and my face began to feel like something again. I turned and groped for a towel, blinking.

I never got that towel, and I never dried my face. The bathtub was at the other end of the room and there was a guy in it, but he wasn't taking a bath. He didn't, as a matter of fact, need one. What's more, he would never need anything again in this world except perhaps a respectable embalming job and a burial plot.

He was as dead as a bullet hole directly between the eyes could make him.

He was a short round man with a heavy paunch, close-cropped hair, small fat lips pursed in surprise. He was wearing a pair of tortoise-shell glasses, and under their thick, astigmatic lenses his blonde eyelashes were magnified like little matchsticks. The blood was still percolating from the bullet wound.

I did not touch him. I did not call the cops. I simply spun around and

got the hell out of there as fast as my legs would carry me.

**M**Y FIRST stop was Finnegan's Bar where my partner, Marie Brand, was waiting for me. Marie had worked with me in the old days, and now that we were treading the straight and narrow, I found her a huge asset. Besides which she was the only girl I'd ever met who could manipulate my heart into doing nips-ups.

If you've never seen Marie then you have something you can look forward to. Her flaming red hair sweeps casquelike over her shoulders. Her mouth is always parted in a smile as crimson as an open wound, and her eyes, powder-blue and wide, will run you a temperature. Her figure is supple, svelte—and simply staggering.

In a silver fox jacket, bought with some of the take from the famous Urqhart case, she certainly looked like class. So much so that the bar hounds were jamming up around her, fighting to set up the drinks.

You couldn't really blame them. Every time Marie crossed the street a couple of cars collided. When she looks at you, you think you're in a steam bath. If you should kiss her—well, just don't let me catch you, brother, that's all. Remember the Luger.

I eased in beside her and gently laid the gun down on the bar and everybody faded like a group of pickpockets suddenly spying a battalion of harness bulls. Marie looked at me, and she must have seen something in my expression, because her smile vanished and she pushed over her own jigger of absinthe. I got hold of it and tossed it down.

"Don't tell me," she said in a voice that was a little breathless, "you didn't get the Star."

I nodded glumly. "Right."

"What else?"

"Somebody knocked me kicking and took away the ten grand."

Marie caught her bottom lip be-

tween white teeth and stared at me. "That," she observed sagely, "is bad, very bad."

"It is," I informed her, "even worse than that."

She crooked a polished nail at the bartender, ordered two more absinthes apiece, then faced me and said: "I'm holding my breath. Go ahead."

I leaned forward and informed her in a small voice: "There was a strange gent in the bathroom with a slug through his thinker."

Marie inhaled softly. "You kill him, Galahad?"

I gazed at her with infinite patience. "Look, Marie, we're on the level now. We're private detectives. We don't kill people, at least not unless they try to kill us first. It's against the law. Remember?"

She sighed. "Trying, isn't it?"

Marie is quite a girl. Her sense of humor often disturbs me. She can drive a car, shoot a gun, case a bank, heist a diamond, and dance the rumba like a dream. She sat there, sipping at her absinthe, and finally she set it down and showed me the serious side of her face.

"What are you going to tell Mr. Tyndall?"

I shuddered. "What, my pet, would you suggest?"

"The truth."

"Right," I agreed after a moment, "and it will probably make him faint." That showed how little I knew about Mr. Christopher Tyndall.

The Parke Apartments shoved a snooty tower some twenty stories up into the ozone. Mr. Christopher Tyndall possessed a duplex on the fifteenth floor overlooking the park. And that wasn't all he had.

He owned a notable collection of diamonds, the wildest assortment of stuffed birds, and a half-breed wife. This last was only hearsay. A butler dressed in a uniform reminiscent of a Gilbert and Sullivan admiral, opened the door, looked down his nose at my card, took it away after slapping the

door in my face, then opened the door and led me to his master.

You have never seen such a room. It was warm and had a thick musty smell in it. Book shelves fringed the walls from floor to ceiling. But there weren't any books on them. Instead they were laden with stuffed birds. Canaries, owls, parrots, robins, hawks, even a peacock and an eagle. It was a taxidermist's dream of heaven.

Behind a black, solid teakwood desk sat Christopher Tyndall himself. A tall, gaunt man, with deep-set eyes and bony features. He showed a sparkling set of jutting teeth in a smile of welcome. Then he went back to what he was doing.

In his hand he held a live, fat-bellied pigeon and was caressing it with long gentle strokes. I judged that he liked what he was doing but that the pigeon didn't.

He said: "Caught the fat little beggar on the window sill. Ate a whole bag of peanuts. I have your check ready, Falcon. Where's the Star?"

I said: "I'm sorry, Mr. Tyndall, but I haven't got it."

His brows wedged together. He looked up. "I don't understand. Wasn't the thief at the appointed place?"

"Yes," I admitted, "he was there."

"Didn't he have the stone?"

"I don't know. At any rate he didn't give it to me."

Tyndall extended his free hand. "Hm! I thought your proposition sounded too good to be true. I'll press the insurance. Let me have my ten thousand dollars back."

I took a deep breath. Here it was. I told him flatly: "Sorry, Mr. Tyndall, but I haven't got that either."

His frown deepened. "You're joking."

"I wish I was. What happened is very simple. It was a double-cross. I entered the hotel room. There was a man there. He caught me unprepared, knocked me out and took away the money."

TYNDALL'S eyes started to glow like hard bright little fires. He inspected me with the sort of expression a young lady gives to a dead mouse in her bath powder. He unraveled his long body from the chair, crossed over to the window, opened it, and held the pigeon out into space. There was a fluttering of wings and then the bird went sailing off.

Tyndall came back to his desk and pulled open the top drawer. When his hand came out it was holding an old-fashioned, silver-plated Spanish revolver of rococo design. He pointed it at my stomach with a steady aim and said softly:

"So you won't misunderstand me, Falcon, I'm an excellent shot. Most of the larger birds in this room were knocked out of the air by me at long range with this identical weapon. I'll match my gun hand against yours or against anybody else's. So don't get any silly notions. Now I want the truth. Where is the Star?"

I wet my lips and gave a short nervous laugh. You never can tell who has an itchy trigger finger. The Spanish was old, but it could undoubtedly push lead with enough force to penetrate my skin to a considerable depth.

"I haven't got it, Mr. Tyndall," I repeated.

He snorted. "You're a liar. I believe you bought the Star with my ten thousand dollars and that you're holding out on me. You think perhaps you can dispose of the diamond where the thief himself could not."

My ears began to burn. That was a conclusion at which I never imagined he would arrive. It was a dangerous idea, dangerous to me and to my future. Considering there was a dead man in the hotel room, it might lead to a further and more natural conclusion; that I had not even bought the Star back from the thief, but rather that I had murdered him and was now keeping both the Star *and* the ten thousand dollars.

Tyndall again held out his hand.

"Your last chance, Falcon. Hand it over."

I spread my hands, palms open, in front of him. "Listen, I haven't got—"

He didn't wait for me to finish. He snatched at the phone, barked into the mouthpiece: "Get me police headquarters."

If I was going to do anything it would have to be right now. I started toward him, but he lifted the Spanish, released the safety catch, and sighted along the silver-plated barrel. I could see the lead tips of the bullets and the sight stopped me in my tracks.

"Mr. Tyndall," I said, "if you call the cops you're going to jam me up good. There was a murdered man in that hotel room and I have a theory how he got there."

He jerked his eyes at me. "A dead man?"

"Yes," I told him. "Probably the chap who originally stole the diamond. Somebody else got wind of the deal he'd made with me, stepped into the picture, hijacked the stone, then slugged me and took your ten grand."

The corners of Tyndall's mouth tucked inward. "Sorry, Falcon. I don't trust you." And then he was talking on the phone. "I want the homicide bureau." A pause. "Hello. This is Christopher Tyndall, Parke Apartments. I have a private detective here with me named J. G. Falcon. I believe he has just robbed me of ten thousand dollars. I am also of the opinion that he has just murdered a man in the Molineaux Hotel. I am holding him here at the point of a gun. Please send some men up here."

Tyndall repeated his name and address and hung up. I sank wearily into a chair, and stared at him. He kept the Spanish lined on my stomach.

I said: "You shouldn't have done that, Mr. Tyndall."

He shrugged. "Would you have done otherwise in my position? Consider. I give you money to get back a diamond. I get back neither the diamond, nor the money. I know your record. Lately

it's been good. But you did serve a term out West. You know the saying: 'Once a crook, always a . . .'" He shrugged the rest of it away.

## CHAPTER II

**WE SAT** there like that for about ten minutes. In a big city it doesn't take long for a couple of cops to get to a given destination. Downstairs I could hear the banshee wail of a police siren and it was like a trickle of ice water down my spine. Far away a gong sounded in the servants' quarters. There was a short pause, and then abruptly the door opened, and there they were. McKeever and Doyle, two strong-arm boys from the homicide squad.

McKeever was a huge hulk of a cop with a deadpan expression on his wedgelike face. He sauntered into the room, pushed his felt snap brim to the back of his head and let his pallid, apathetic eyes rest on me.

"Hya, Falcon. When we heard your name and that a stiff was involved we came over ourselves."

Doyle, who isn't as big as his partner, maybe only six feet, propped himself against the wall. "I thought you were behaving yourself, Falcon," he said. "Didn't you learn your lesson in that Urghart case?" Doyle had the face of a wolf, long sharp teeth. Both dicks were absolutely on the level.

Christopher Tyndall cleared his throat to gain attention and snapped: "Falcon is a double-crossing rat."

McKeever's dreamy gaze shifted. "What did he do? Where's the stiff?"

"I entrusted him with ten thousand dollars," Tyndall cracked, "and he kept it. He was going to recover the Star of Africa with it and—"

"The Star of Africa," Doyle echoed. "Has it been stolen?"

Tyndall nodded shortly. "It has and—"

"Why didn't you notify the police?" McKeever interrupted.

"Because they would have botched

up the job and it would never have been returned. I want—"

That was his mistake. You can't call a cop a bungler right to his face and keep his friendship. McKeever turned to me and said:

"You tell it, Falcon."

I gave him the whole story, right from the beginning. They stood quietly, listening to me. When I finished, McKeever exchanged a significant glance with Doyle and the big wolf-faced cop lunged at me, burying his paw into my shoulder holster and yanking out my Luger.

McKeever said: "The chambermaid found that guy in Room 619 in the Molineaux and called us. Must've been right after you left, Falcon. The slug went clean through his brain and dropped into the tub. Know what, Falcon? It was a 9 m/m bullet. It couldn't have come from your Luger now, could it?"

Doyle jabbed the short barrel close to his nose and sniffed. "Hah!" was his comment. "Cordite. The thing's been fired recently. Don't tell us it was only target practice against a telephone book, Falcon."

My heart gave a sudden lurch. The thing hit me then. I saw it clearly. "Wait a minute, you guys," I yelped. "That stiff in the tub may have been knocked out first and then chopped down by my gun. The killer could have taken it from me after he slapped me into dreamland, used it, then stuck it back into my pocket. It's a frame, McKeever. I gave up that kind of stuff long ago."

McKeever shrugged. "Maybe, Falcon, maybe."

"But why would I want to kill him? What's my motive?"

Doyle hiked up his brows. "You kidding, Falcon? Why, you might've walked into that room, laid a slug between that guy's eyes, taken the diamond, and kept the ten grand into the bargain. That makes a hundred and ten thousand good reasons why you'd pull the job. With your connections

you might easily realize almost the full amount on the stone."

For a moment my heart stopped pumping. He had seen the only obvious explanation. And now, even to me, the truth sounded a little silly.

I said: "Sure, if it happened that way. But it didn't."

McKeever made himself comfortable on the edge of Tyndall's desk. "You know who the dead man was, Falcon?"

I shook my head. "Listen, McKeever, when I saw that bullet hole I didn't stop to inquire. I got out of there fast."

"Without calling the cops."

"That's right, without calling the cops. And you would have done the same thing in my boots."

Behind his dreamy, apathetic eyes I felt that McKeever was watching me closely to ascertain the effect of his next statement. "His name was Carl Freiling."

"Freiling!" I exclaimed, and then bit my tongue.

McKeever leaned forward. "You know him?"

It was too late to play dumb now, so I said: "I've heard of him. He's a diamond expert for Maddox & Company. He cuts and polishes all their expensive stones."

"Right," Doyle said, wagging his long, narrow head.

**T**HE light was beginning to dawn on my brain. Assuming that at one time this Freiling had had the Star of Africa, then he probably got it from the original thief. To cut up, of course. And in that case he was double-crossing a crook and had decided to sell it back to Tyndall. From where I was standing it looked like the crook had got wise to the little scheme.

I pursed my lips at McKeever. "Did Freiling need money?"

McKeever nodded. "He did. He's got a kid with tuberculosis and he needed a lot of dough to send her out West for treatment. I know what you're

thinking, Falcon, and you're all wet."

"Why?"

"Because the guy who registered for that room was named Charlie Trogon. He was tall, dark-skinned, with a thin mustache and a tooth missing in the front of his mouth. Freiling was short and fat and blond."

"There you are," I said excitedly. "Charlie Trogon, that's the guy who knocked me cold and swiped the ten grand. That's the guy who killed Freiling."

Christopher Tyndall pulled himself out of his chair and drew himself up to his full height. "What is this, gentlemen, a debate? All I know is that I want my diamond. You men are adept at third degree methods. Take Falcon downtown with you and make him confess."

McKeever just stared at him. Finally he drawled: "I think Falcon is on the level—for the time being anyway. Do you want to swear out a complaint against him, or keep him on the job. He doesn't pack a hell of a lot of weight, but when he starts throwing it around something usually happens."

Tyndall chewed that over in his mind. Finally he shrugged. "After all, it doesn't make much difference. The diamond was insured and I suppose I'll be able to collect. I've paid fancy premiums for a good many years. Of course it was a collector's item and I'd prefer to get it back, but I'll tell you what I'll do, Falcon. You recover both the Star and the ten thousand dollars and I'll let you keep the money. That's a fair offer and it seems like—"

He stopped talking and his eyes were glued on the door knob. It twisted and the door swung open and four pairs of eyes swiveled to the vision on the threshold and stuck there.

The woman who framed the opening was small, with an astonishingly well-shaped figure, a deep olive skin, strangely green topaz eyes, almond-shaped and slanting upwards. Her hair was black and as shiny as enamel. She had the high cheekboned face that

is the product of Europe and the Orient. I just stared at her, holding my breath. So this was the Eurasian wife of Christopher Tyndall.

"Ah," she murmured in a softly purring, slightly accented voice. "Excuse me, Chrees. You have guests."

But she did not retire. She held her ground and ran those catlike eyes over each of us in turn. I noticed the peculiar change that came over Tyndall. The hard lines in his face softened, yet at the same time a peculiar tautness seemed to stretch his gaunt body.

"It's quite all right, Tara. Gentlemen, my wife."

I bowed slightly. Doyle dropped his hat. McKeever fumbled with his coat lapels, mumbling something unintelligible. She had that effect on them. And to tell the truth, I myself was not completely immune. She seemed to throw off a sort of electricity.

She said: "Ees something wrong, Chrees?"

"Not at all, not at all, my dear. Just some trouble with the Star of Africa. You know, that little bauble I showed you several days ago. It's been stolen and these men are going to find it."

She glanced at us all very coolly. "That ees very kind of them."

I almost swallowed my tongue. That little bauble! The Star of Africa! Worth a king's ransom. The last of the great privately owned stones never to have been cut up. It must be wonderful, I thought, to be a millionaire.

I said: "I accept your offer, Mr. Tyndall. I have my own score to settle with the guy who knocked me out. I don't like being pushed around and I don't like being made the fall guy in a murder rap." I stood up and beckoned to McKeever and Doyle. "Let's go."

**WE** HEADED for the door and Tara Tyndall moved fluidly out of the way, her moistly painted lips parted in a queer smile. Then I saw

the fellow standing directly behind her. He was leaning on a marble statue of Cupid poised with an arrow.

He had the dark complexion of a Latin, a thin mouth, a long arc of a nose, and the space between it and his upper lip was white as if he'd recently shaved a mustache. I came to a stop directly in front of him.

Behind me I heard Tyndall inhale sharply, and tossing a quick glance over my shoulder I could see the color that had mounted from his neck and was suffusing his cheeks with anger. That he did not like his wife's choice of a companion was evident.

There was a delicate plucking at my sleeve and I turned to find the Eurasian's cool eyes appraising me. "Permeet me. Thees ees Henri Donfrett. You have met before?"

"I—I'm not sure," I said.

Donfrett smiled whitely. Had there been a tooth missing in his front jaw I might have sworn he was Charlie Trogon. By that time McKeever and Doyle were already trekking toward the front door and I pedaled after them. But I kept thinking, this Henri Donfrett would bear watching, a lot of watching.

When I reached the front door which the butler was holding open, I turned back as if I'd forgotten something, snapped my fingers, and inquired: "Where does Mr. Donfrett live? I'll call him later."

"The Plaza Arms, sir."

Down in the street I held out my hand to Doyle and asked him for my Luger. He laughed in my face. "Not until ballistics checks it against the slug that killed Carl Freiling."

When I met Marie for lunch, the afternoon sheets already had the story under a banner headline. There was a picture of me, not entirely complimentary, and my statement of the case was related with a good bit of skepticism.

Marie's face was wreathed in smiles. She said: "Klinger, of American Indemnity, called the office and made us a neat offer to get back the

Star of Africa. Tyndall has put in his claim."

I swallowed a piece of beefsteak. "That's nice. If we find it we collect two fees." I told her about Tyndall's ten grand offer.

Marie kept watching me thoughtfully, her dinner plate untouched. Finally she asked casually:

"When do we leave, Galahad?"

I looked up at her. "Leave? For where?"

She shrugged. "South America—Honolulu—any place."

"Why?" I frowned.

"On account of the diamond, silly. Haven't you got it?"

"I laid down my knife and fork. My appetite was shot. I presented her with a hurt expression in which there was intermingled a considerable amount of disgust.

"You too, Marie? You think I've got that damn diamond? That I killed Freiling?"

"Didn't you, darling?"

I counted up to twenty, strangled some language. "Listen, I've told you a thousand times. We don't steal things any more. We find them. Not only is it safer but there's more money in it. Will you pack that into your gorgeous craw and keep it there?"

She giggled. "Okay, Galahad. I only wanted to make sure."

"Well," I snapped, scarcely mollified, "don't kid about things like that. You just ruined a two-dollar beefsteak." I waved for the check. "Listen, kitten, I want you should hop over to the Plaza Arms and get a line on a guy named Henri Donfrett. Don't mix with him. He may be dangerous. Just ask questions of the doorman and the elevator boys."

"Where are you going?" she wanted to know.

"To see Maddox, the jeweler, the man Carl Freiling worked for."

We parted. My first stop was the office. I wanted to pick up a little .22 spare I had in lieu of the Luger the cops had taken away. In this business

you can feel a trifle naked without a rod.

Our office is on Halsey Street, and since Marie had come into the firm we'd spread it more than somewhat, with new rugs, some modernistic chrome furniture, and a couple of good paintings. You know, the old front.

I crossed the outer room, headed for my private cubbyhole, twisted the knob and stepped inside—and froze just beyond the threshold. The squat barrel of an ugly blue automatic was pointing right at my face.

THERE was a young girl holding it and she was backed up against the desk. She was pitifully thin, with a white hollow-cheeked face and large dark eyes that were red and inflamed. Perhaps twenty years old, her emaciated figure in a worn camel's hair sports coat was trembling violently.

I stood there, scraping back into my memory to kindle a spark of recognition. It was no use. I couldn't place this kid. I said: "Hello, don't you think you ought to put that thing away? It might go off."

"It will, don't worry," she said bitterly. "I may not be strong but I can pull this trigger."

I spread my palms. "Why? Why do you want to do that?"

And then she said it as a simple, unassailable fact. "I want to kill you, Falcon. I'm going to kill you." Her colorless lips made a thin compressed line that quivered as if she might burst into tears at any moment.

"And why do you want to kill me?" I asked.

"Because you—you murdered—my father." She caught back a sob.

I got it then, knew who she was, and a lump welled up in the back of my throat. "You're Carl Freiling's kid."

Two big tears squeezed out of her eyes and traced a damp path down the hollow cheeks. "Yes, and I'm going to kill you just as you killed him, in cold blood."

I started to talk fast. This kid was in a bad way. She was so tied up into an emotional knot that she didn't know what she was doing.

"Listen, Miss Freiling. You don't want to believe all that stuff you read in the papers. I didn't kill your father. And it's important to me to find out who did. Because I'm under suspicion. I was framed, see, but it was such a clumsy job that even the police didn't believe it."

She coughed and her mouth wrenched down at the corners. "I believe it because I know. You promised to give him money. He told me so. Instead you killed him."

My jaw sagged. "He told you I promised to give him some money?"

She nodded. "Yes."

"What for?" I asked.

A dry laugh racked her chest. "The Star of Africa, Mr. Falcon. As if you didn't know."

I stiffened. This was the first important piece of information that had come my way. I only hoped I could talk this girl into letting me follow it through. I tried a new tack, trying to get her goat.

"They tell me your father was the soul of honesty. How come he got into such a shady deal?"

The moment I said it I was sorry. A look of almost intolerable sadness twisted her face. She said very softly: "He did it for me, to get money to send me West because of my—my lungs. But he—he died first."

Her small white fist tightened like scraped bone around the automatic. Her breath accelerated and there was a fanatic look in her eyes. She held the gun out stiffly, whispering: "Here he comes, father. . ."

The explosion of the automatic almost caved my ear drums, but in the very instant that she squeezed the trigger, a fit of coughing shook her body, slightly deflecting her aim. Even so I had seen it coming and I lunged in low. Muzzle flame scorched my hair, and then I had hold of her wrist. One

wrench was enough. The gun clattered to the floor.

I scooped it up and dropped it into my pocket. I felt cold and damp and my shirt clung soggly to my back. That was a close call. She stared at me defiantly.

"Go ahead. Call the police, but some day, somewhere, I'm going to find you and kill you."

I COULDN'T help but admire the kid's spunk. "I'm not going to call the cops. You did what you thought you had to do, and I'm going to do the same. Now suppose you tell me all about it."

She opened her mouth, then closed it. I could see she was tied up inside like a knot in a wet rope. Behind her round dark eyes tension was mounting. Tension and panic and a kind of fear. Probably she thought I would kill her too.

Her eyes were on the open door. I knew what was in her mind, so I stepped aside. She bolted out. I let her go.

I sat down, turning this angle over in my mind. How had Freiling really got possession of the stone? Who was Charlie Trogon? Where did Henri Donfrett fit into the picture—if at all?

I reached for the phone and dialed Christopher Tyndall's number. From the sharp edge of his voice I knew he was still carrying a heavy load of anger. In a way you couldn't blame him. He had just lost an irreplaceable collector's item worth a fortune, and then to add insult to injury he'd been conned out of an additional ten grand.

"What do you want, Falcon?" he snapped.

"Some information. Who else had the combination to your safe?"

"I haven't got a safe. I took the Star from my vault to show to Tara—my wife—then I locked it up in my desk. Somebody pried open the drawer."

"This chap, Dongrett, did he know where it was?"

"I doubt it."

TDA

"Couldn't your wife have told him?"

Silence punctuated my question while electricity crackled softly over the wires. Then Tyndall's voice poured into my ears like some corrosive acid.

"Damn you, Falcon. You've caused me enough trouble. Leave my wife out of this. She had nothing to do with it, understand."

That's love for you. He probably knew she was playing around with Donfrett, but he refused to believe it, refused even to consider that she might have glommed his little bauble herself. But deep down in his heart there must have been that gnawing suspicion, how else explain his sudden violence.

"Sure," I said soothingly. "Sure. I was only covering all the angles."

"Keep that angle out of it," he snarled. "Or drop the investigation."

"Okay," I told him. "It's just that Carl Freiling actually had the Star in his possession."

Eagerness laced his voice. "How do you know that?"

"His daughter just told me, not ten minutes ago."

A pause. "Why, that's fine, that's splendid, Falcon. If she knows where he got it we may really be able to get the Star back." The phone clicked sharply and for a moment I thought he'd hung up, then the line crackled again.

I said: "Tyndall!"

"Yes, yes," he answered. "Get after that girl, Falcon. See what you can find out." This time he really cut off. I sat there, frowning, certain somebody had picked up the extension in Tyndall's apartment and had been listening to our conversation.

### CHAPTER III

I HAD a session with the telephone directory, noted several addresses, then left. My first stop was the swank jewelery establishment of William Maddox. A secretary ushered me into an ornate office on the second floor.

As she opened the door a man emerged and I almost swallowed my teeth with surprise. It was Henri Donfrett. He did not even spare me a glance. Face immobile, grim-mouthed, he stalked out of the room, kept right on going. I didn't have much time to do anything because Maddox himself was striding forward, hand outstretched.

"Come in, Falcon," he invited.

William Maddox was a big, square-faced man, impeccably attired, suavely mannered. He knew me through my work for American Indemnity and the National Jeweler's Association. He indicated a deep, leather chair, extended a beautiful inlaid rosewood humidor and I accepted one of the long Havana fillers that were in it. I lit it with a solid gold lighter.

There were a lot of things I would have liked to ask Maddox, things I knew he would never answer. For one thing, Carl Freiling had been in his employ and there was the possibility that had the stone been cut by Freiling, Maddox with his irreproachable reputation and wealthy clientele, could easily dispose of the pieces for their full value. If that actually was the case, I certainly did not expect Maddox to admit it.

I said: "That man who just left—who was he?"

Maddox lifted his brows. "You think you know him?"

"Slightly. Henri Donfrett, I believe his name is."

Maddox did not say anything. His eyes suggested that I state my business.

"Look," I said, "I know this may not be any of my affair, but just what did Donfrett want here?"

Maddox's expression did not change. "You're quite right, Falcon. It is none of your affair." He puffed on his cigar and let a cloud of gray-blue smoke drift around his face. "I presume you had another reason for calling. What is it?"

I grinned. "About a former em-

ployee of yours. Carl Freiling. You know he was murdered."

"Yes. I also know who the principal suspect is."

"Ouch!" I winced. "And do you also know that Freiling was involved in a crooked deal involving one of the largest diamonds extant?"

He flicked the ash off his cigar and blew a smoke ring. "Where did you get that information?"

"From his daughter. He'd been given the Star of Africa to cut into smaller stones."

I watched him narrowly to see the effect of my statement. But Maddox was a cool customer and he did not bat an eyelash. "Go ahead, Falcon."

"What I want to know," I said, "is this. Could Freiling have done the job at home or did he need the equipment of your establishment? Presuming, of course, that he actually cut the Star."

With a muffled oath Maddox suddenly erupted into action. Color flooded his face and his whole frame shook with almost uncontrollable anger. He came out of his chair and stood towering over me.

"Look here, Falcon, are you trying to implicate me in this thing?"

"Easy, boy," I said. "Easy."

His big hands grabbed at my shoulders and he dug his fingers deeply. "I could kill you for such an insinuation, Falcon."

I wriggled out of his grasp and got up. He reached for me again, grabbing at my throat. I punted a short kick into his midriff and the red in his face turned to purple. Little guys like me have to resort to any fighting tricks that will keep the big lads at bay.

I said: "Watch out, Maddox. A man doesn't get sore so easily unless he has something to hide. Have you?"

He backed away and his fists were great knots of knuckle, bone showing whitely through taut skin.

"Get out," he said hoarsely. "Get out, Falcon, before I do something I'll regret."

I got out. I was thinking that either

Maddox had a terrible temper, extremely touchy sensibilities, or a guilty conscience. There was only one thing left to do, and that was to make Julia Freiling talk.

THE Freiling apartment was on the third floor of a musty old apartment building on the East Side. Old age and neglect lurked in the smell and in the sight of peeling walls. I pushed the bell, heard it buzz inside, and waited. Nobody came to the door. I twisted the knob and it opened.

A bunch of saboteurs could not have done a better job. The place looked like it had been hit by a tornado. Drawers, dishes, rugs, clothes, everything had been jerked out of place and tossed aside. Mattresses in the bedroom were slit open and the lining ripped out of clothes. Every single crevice and hiding place had been explored.

I stood there in the bedroom, looking at the utter devastation, and then suddenly I heard a faint sound. I turned, cocked my ear, tugging at the little .22 I'd taken along in case of emergency. There was only one place that noise could have come from. A closed door which was evidently a closet.

I pointed the .22 at the door and said ominously: "All right, buddy. Come out of there."

No response.

I released the safety catch. "If you're not out by the time I count three, I'm sending a bullet in after you. One, two, thr—"

Slowly the door started to move, then swung open. I almost dropped the heater.

It was Tara—Tyndall's Eurasian wife.

And her small fist was holding the silver-plated Spanish revolver she must've swiped from her husband's desk. She was wearing a three-quarter length mink jacket. A green turban of some diaphanous material was wrapped around her head. Very becoming. And those curious, almond-

shaped topaz eyes were shining at me like bits of wire.

It was one hell of a situation.

There we were, the two of us, with guns pointing at each other, not five feet apart. And her Cupid's bow mouth was parted in a cool smile. Poise, self-possession and nerve like I've never before seen.

"Well, well," I murmured. "Rather embarrassing, isn't it?"

Her smile widened. She answered in that low voice of hers with its faint trace of a foreign accent:

"Not at all. I suspected you'd be here."

I lifted my brows. "Gazing into your crystal ball?"

She made a disparaging gesture. "Thees gun is rather heavy. Neither of us intend to fire at each other, so let us put them up."

"An excellent suggestion." I sheathed the automatic in my shoulder-rigged holster, while she opened a big purse hanging from a shoulder strap. But she didn't put the Spanish away, not at all. She lifted it, aimed carefully at my chest, and the smile rubbed off her lips as if it had been cleaned with an eraser.

Catching me of course completely surprised and unprepared. I could have kicked myself all the way to Peru.

Her mouth scarcely moved as she spoke. "Please, Mr. Falcon. Enter that closet."

"Neat," I applauded. "Very neat."

A vein throbbed in her lovely throat. Her voice was a sibilant hiss. "Get in."

I had spied the key in the outside lock and I knew what I was going to do. I bowed with a bravado I didn't feel, stepped into the closet and got my back against the wall. This thing had to be timed to a split second. The door closed and I was in darkness blacker than Pennsylvania hard coal.

I braced myself, got my foot against the door and waited.

It took only a moment. I heard the first scratch of the key, preparatory

to turning in the lock and I straightened my knee, kicking out with every ounce of strength.

THE door flew open. Tara Tyndall went spinning backward across the room against the bed. The Spanish skidded to the floor. With a high-pitched scream of rage she pounced after it with the agility of a jungle cat.

But I got there first, scooping it up and letting her see into the barrel. I waved a gently reproving finger.

"Naughty, Tara. Mustn't play with guns."

Anger slashed across her face, tinting the cheekbones, imparting a savage gleam to the greenish eyes. She was not cool or poised now, nor did she even try to act so.

"What do you want?" she hissed.

"Information. What are you doing here?"

"I was looking for something."

"The Star of Africa?" I inquired sarcastically. "Why don't you ask your boy friend? Maybe he—"

I jumped back. She almost caught me by surprise. A quick leap had brought her to the side of the gun and she was trying to wrest it from my hand. She saw she couldn't get it and her white teeth sank into my wrist.

I have never before and hope never again to have to handle a woman with violence. But there was no help for it. Either that or lose a hand. When I finished she was a tousled, snarling tiger crouching in a corner by the floor.

I said between tight teeth: "Now, get up and clean this mess."

She stared at me, not understanding.

"A sick girl lives here," I explained. "You're going to put everything back into place or I'm going to call the cops and there will be one dandy stink about the whole thing."

Her eyes were glazed chips of ice. Fury bubbled and seethed inside her like molten lead in a cauldron. But

there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it. I straddled a chair and gave orders like a foreman.

And she worked. She worked hard, something she hadn't done in a long time, her back bristling with restrained anger. It took over an hour and when she had the place fairly respectable I let her go. She turned at the door and her lips were like two pieces of paper, scarcely brushing each other as she spoke.

"I'll keel you for thees, Falcon."

And then she was gone and a cold draft that didn't come from an open window was playing across my shoulder blades.

I got out of there and started for home.

#### CHAPTER IV

**T**EMPORARILY, and until I could talk Marie into matrimony, I was living in an expensive hotel on the West Side. I started through the revolving door when somebody called softly: "Falcon. . ."

I turned. He was a medium-sized chap, blockily built with a square face. Both hands were in his pockets. He'd been lurking by the hotel entrance, evidently watching faces as they came into focus under the lights from the marquee. I didn't know him.

"Yeah," I said. "What's up?"

The hand in his right pocket suddenly made a sharp hard bulge and I didn't need a diagram to tell me what he was holding. He pursed his lips and vented a short whistle. Immediately a black sedan parked halfway down the block lurched forward, braked at the curb in front of us and the back door swung open.

The blocky guy jerked his pocketed gun and said: "In, little man, in."

I tumbled inside. He crowded in after me. The driver kicked the gas pedal and we moved away fast. Square-face ordered me to twist toward the window. He reached around into my shoulder holster and took out, of all things, the silver-plated Spanish I'd got from Tara Tyndall.

"Well, well," he said. "Look at this."

The driver swiveled his head, saw the Spanish and let out a guffaw. "Gal-ahad Falcon, the pint-sized dick and look what an old-fashioned cap pistol he carries. Ain't that nice?"

He tooled the car over to the West Side Highway and we rolled smoothly along beside the glittering Hudson. He had a small, flat pushed-in face that had been battered out of shape, and a pair of cauliflower ears flapped loosely at the sides of his head. It was easy to see he'd been in the ring, but never very good at defending himself. He must have been punched a thousand times.

He called back over his shoulder in a voice rasping through an injured larynx: "It's a good thing you took his juice away, Willy. We wouldn't want him to hurt himself."

Willy had stowed the Spanish away in his pocket and had brought his own weapon into sight, a Colt .45, big and about as effective as my own Luger.

I settled back against the cushions. I said: "Pleasant afternoon for a drive."

"Hear that, Willy?" guffawed the driver. "He thinks he's going for a joy ride."

I shrugged. "Well, just where are we going?"

"You'll find out," Willy assured me.

The car rode like a dream. I wondered where a couple of torps like this had picked up such a boat. Probably stolen. That was good. Maybe a motorcycle cop'd pick us up. Willy took out a deck of cigarets and tossed me one. I got a match out of my pocket and lighted it, tried to make conversation.

"Who put the finger on me?"

Willy said: "As if you didn't know. Charlie Trogon."

Here was that name cropping up again. The guy who'd registered for Room 619 in the Hotel Molineaux, who'd knocked me out and swiped ten grand, who'd murdered Carl Freiling with my gun.

"What's Trogon got against me?" I asked. "I don't even know him."

Cauliflower-ears half twisted in his seat and almost sent the car off the concrete. He righted it with a flip of the wheel.

"Trogon thinks you're gettin' too hot," he told me. "He wants us to cool you off."

"Yeah," Willy added. "Like ice."

**M**Y MOUTH was suddenly very dry. I held the cigaret out the window and the rushing wind sucked it back. Out in the Hudson a procession of gay-colored yachts floated at anchor.

We hit the Parkway for about five miles, then turned off into a side road, rutted, rough, rural. The car pulled off this into a lane. Trees overhung both sides of the road. We stopped.

The sun, a blazing ball in the west, was sinking past the horizon. Willy's blocky face tightened. He said to Cauliflower-ears:

"Get the kerosene out of the baggage compartment."

I swallowed. "What's that for?"

The driver showed me his flatly bashed face. "It's for you, weasel. Charlie Trogon wants you to go up in smoke. He doesn't want you identified."

My tongue seemed to swell up inside my mouth. "Oh, I get it," I said and my voice was not steady. "You're going to blast me and then pour kerosene over my body and ignite it."

"Sure," said Willy, jabbing his gun closer to my chest. "You object?"

"No, no," I quavered. "Have a good time."

Willy opened the door. "Out, sucker, out."

I slid out. My knees were a trifle wavy. My feet sank into the soft earth at the side of the lane.

"Into the woods," Willy ordered.

I stumbled toward the clump of trees. Cauliflower-ears had jumped out and was fumbling with a key at the baggage compartment.

"Okay," said Willy.

We were in a small hollow surrounded by trees that rustled softly in the breeze, completely out of sight of the

lane. In the very center of the clearing was a blackened, charred heap that looked like burnt clothes and rubbish. It had a peculiar look to it. Willy flashed his teeth in a proud grin, and boasted:

"That's a job I did on a cop about a year ago."

My stomach went squeamish. Willy hefted his gun experimentally. I thought of the three people who had threatened my life that day. Which of them would be most pleased at my death? Julia Freiling, the bitter tubercular; Maddox, the sensitive jeweler; or Tara Tyndall, the enigmatic half-breed.

Death was close, very close, and there was only one way to play the cards. I said: "You know, Willy, there are a hundred grand in sparklers at stake. How much are you getting for this job?"

He shrugged. "My price is always the same. Five hundred for knocking a guy off. One grand to make him disappear. It's cheaper if I just gotta wait somewhere and pump a slug into him. But there's a bigger risk if I got to cart him around."

One grand! That's all I was worth to these mugs. I gave a short laugh lacking any trace of mirth.

"Look, Willy," I said. "You know my business. Well, I got a diamond in my pocket worth four times that. Let's make a deal. I'll give you the sparkler and you give me a chance to blow out of town."

Willy's lips spread wide. "What do you know?"

I started to put my hand in my pocket and the grin vanished. "Easy," he barked. "Keep your mittens out where I can see 'em. I'll take the stone out myself." A sort of fiendish light glowed in his eyes. "I can get 'em after you're stiff, can't I? I never leave a corpse without casing his pockets and pulling the labels out of his clothes."

He lifted the gun.

My heart thumped hard against my ribs. "Wait, Willy," I cracked. "Don't shoot. You want to be rich. I'll make

you rich. I know where I can lay my hands on a million dollars' worth of gems. Don't kill me and you can have them all. I don't want anything for myself—except my life. Diamonds, Willy, diamonds and rubies and emeralds, you'll break the jewelry market."

Willy looked startled. His eyes gleamed and he leaned forward, a little tense, a little excited.

"The diamond I got in my pocket," I added quickly, "comes from this collection I'm telling you about. It's a perfect blue-white stone, flawless. Just have a look at it."

Willy said harshly: "Toss it over, Falcon, and let me see it."

"Sure," I said, "sure, Willy," and I stuck my hand in the side pocket of my coat and got it around the little .22 that was lying there and that he'd never looked for after he found the Spanish in my sling holster.

"It's a wonderful thing, Willy," I said and squeezed the trigger.

**C**OVERED up like that it made a lot of smoke and burned a bad hole in a good suit. Willy never knew what hit him. The little .22 slug zipped into his heart, and he stood there for a second, staring at me in disbelief. Then he wavered like a drunk and the Colt slipped out of his lax fingers, burying itself in the soft earth. His knees buckled and he collapsed on top of them.

Usually I don't feel right after a little gunplay. I feel sick to my stomach. But now there was a kind of exhilaration tingling inside me. I felt like I was doing the whole world a favor.

Cauliflower-ears was coming along the dried dead leaves, shuffling as if he was carrying a heavy load. He called out in that whining voice of his:

"You blast him already, Willy? Why didn't you wait for me?"

I stood spread-legged over Willy's body and waited for the little gunman to appear. He broke through the trees into the clearing and stopped short. The can of kerosene he was carrying

fell to the ground. His mouth opened, started working, and his eyes bugged out at me. His battered face went a blotchy white and he muttered in a hoarse croak:

"W-what—"

"Willy had bad aim," I told him. "He shot himself by mistake."

I stepped over to the ex-pug and curled my fingers around his neck.

"Who's Charlie Trogon and where can I find him?"

"I don't know. I swear I don't—"

I raked the .22 across his face. He was just about my size, but right now, with Willy on the ground stone-dead, and the gun menacing him, he was no match for a chipmunk. His knees were shaking and his teeth were chattering.

"Who is Charlie Trogon?" I repeated.

He spat out a string of curses. I waited till he ran out, then I hit him again. I just shoved the snout of the little gun into his mouth and he shut up. A trickle of blood rolled down his chin and he swallowed before speaking.

"Willy made the deal. I never met Trogon."

I couldn't just stand there and keep hitting him all day. As a matter of fact I believed he was telling the truth—such as it was. He was scared enough to give me any information I wanted, provided he had it to give.

"Walk back to the car," I ordered.

He stumbled across the clearing and when he got close enough so I wouldn't have to carry him, I closed my palm over the .22 and laid one just behind his ear. Cauliflower-ears gave the softest sigh you ever heard and sank down to the running board.

I opened the baggage compartment, stuffed him inside, locked it and slid behind the wheel. I sent that sedan spurting away from there like a sixteen-inch shell leaving a coastal defense gun.

Maybe the right procedure would have been to drive Cauliflower-ears over to headquarters and let the boys

down in the basement polish their rubber hose on his thick skull in an attempt to open him up. Instead, I headed for my hotel to see if Marie had left a message. After all, I had sent her out to gather some dope on Henri Donfrett without knowing anything about him. And from the way everybody had been threatening my life in this case I was a little worried about her.

The clerk shook his head after peering into my box, then recalled something and said: "Oh, yes, Mr. Falcon, I saw Miss Brand go up to your suite some time ago."

"Did she come down?"

"No, sir, I don't think so."

I took the elevator up to the fifth floor and tiptoed down the corridor. I stood silently outside the door, grinning. Marie was due for a big scare. I would burst into the room, gun in hand, yelling for her to duck.

Slowly, very slowly, I twisted the knob, then I kicked the door open and lunged inside. I opened my mouth and the yell swelled into my throat and froze there unuttered. I stood planted on the carpet, unable to move.

The sight that greeted me congealed the blood in my veins. It sent the flesh crawling between my shoulder blades.

**A** ROPE was dangling from the light fixture in the center of the ceiling. At the end of it was a noose. And with her neck in the noose there hung a girl, swaying in very slow quarter-circles, her head cocked limply to one side on its broken neck.

She was thin and emaciated and a horrible grimace of agony was fixed upon the hollow-cheeked, bloodless face. The round, dark eyes were wide open and staring. It was Julia Freiling.

A cold vacuum sucked at the pit of my stomach. I have seen violent death many times and in many forms, but I shall never forget that sight, not even if I live to be a thousand years old. Maybe it was the cold shock of finding her in my room so unexpect-

edly, maybe it was the first fleeting fear that had almost paralyzed my brain, a fear that the hanging corpse was Marie. I had for the fraction of a single moment thought that—

*Marie!*

The clerk had seen her come up to this room. Where was she now? Had she been here when the Freiling girl met death? Had anything happened to her? The blood went pounding up to my temples and seemed to swell the veins there to the bursting point.

"Marie!" I called hoarsely. "*Marie!*"

Somewhere in the apartment I heard a faint scratching sound. I tore through the living room, across the bedroom and yanked open the closet door. The relief that flooded through me was so great it left me limp.

Marie was doubled up in the bottom of the closet. A strip of adhesive covered her mouth. She was bound and trussed in such a way that she could scarcely move. Gently removing the adhesive, I found a balled handkerchief stuffed into her mouth. I cut the bonds from her legs and wrists.

Her face was pale and frightened. "Oh, Galahad!" she breathed.

I steadied her trembling frame. "What happened, kitten?"

Her eyes started to blaze and she turned the full fury of their fire upon me. "What took you so long to come home?"

"Business," I said. "And don't vent your temper on me. After all, you were tied up with some of my best neckties and now look at them. They're ruined."

"Neckties!" she grunted. "Humph!"

"Tell me what happened, kitten, from the beginning?" I said.

She shrugged. "I really don't know, Galahad. I knocked on your door. It opened and before I could do or see anything, somebody grabbed me, jabbed a foul-smelling handkerchief against my nose—I think there was chloroform on it—and the next thing I knew I was all tied up in the closet."

I nodded my head toward the living room. "You don't know about—what's out there?"

She frowned puzzledly. "Out there? No." And she started toward the other room.

I reached for her and yelled: "Don't Marie, don't go—"

But she squirmed out of my grasp. When Marie's curiosity was aroused, you could no more stop her than a truck on an ice-sheeted road. She swept over to the door, and I saw her stop short. Her spine stiffened and she covered her face with her hands.

"Good Heavens, Galahad! Cut her down. You can't leave her there like that. It—it's indecent."

"Can't. The cops wouldn't like it."

"Who—who is she?"

"Julia Freiling, the daughter of the man who was shot in the Hotel Moli-neaux this morning."

Marie sank into a chair. I went over to the phone and called McKeever at headquarters.

"Well, McKeever," I said, "I got another one for you."

"Another what?" he drawled.

"Another corpse."

For a full two minutes he stayed on the wire calling me names, all of them fighting words. When he reached the end of his vocabulary he said:

"Falcon, you stay there. Wait for me. And if you touch anything, so help me, I'll take your neck between my hands and I'll choke the living day-lights out of you."

**T**HERE it went again. I sighed. Even the cops were threatening to put an end to a life that was very valuable—at least to me. I hung up and faced Marie.

"Well, kitten, I'm stymied," I admitted. "What do you make of it?"

She pursed her lips thoughtfully. "Somebody thought she knew where the Star of Africa is and tried to make her tell. When she refused they had to kill her."

"But why here?"

She shrugged. "Search me, Galahad."

I thought about it for a couple of minutes and then suddenly an idea

struck me. "Listen to this, Marie, the guy who's at the bottom of the whole thing sent two gorillas after me. They were not only going to kill me, but they meant to burn me to a crisp so that my body would never be identified. Later, when the cops found Julia Freiling hanging here in my apartment, they would look for me to question me. But they'd never be able to find me. What would be the natural conclusion? Simply that I'd killed the girl and beat it."

Marie jumped up and came over to me. "Are you hurt, Galahad? Did those two gorillas—"

"I'm all right," I interrupted.

"Where are they? What did you do to them?"

"They damn near scared the wits out of me," I told her. "Only they were a little careless. One of them's knocking on the doors of hell, and the other is waiting downstairs in the car."

Marie looked concerned. "But he'll get away, Galahad."

I grinned. "Not unless he's Houdini." I told her all about it. Then I asked: "What did you find out about this Henri Donfrett?"

Marie settled down on my lap and made herself comfortable. "Donfrett has a lady friend, a frequent visitor to his apartment."

"Who told you this?"

"The elevator boy. He told me lots of things, what his name was and when he had his night off and—"

"Never mind," I snarled at her. "What does the lady friend look like?"

"Well," Marie judged, "as near as I could make out, she was partly Chinese, with some Serbian, and a dash of straight Anglo-Saxon."

I nodded. "Just as I thought. Mrs. Tyndall! I figured there was something between those two. If he—"

They came in like a rumbling herd of bison. First McKeever, then Doyle, then some plainclothes dicks with a couple of harness bulls tossed in for good measure. Fingerprint men, photographers, an Assistant M. E.

Everybody got busy. Doyle planted himself in front of me and demanded: "Why did you do it, Falcon?"

I paid no attention to him. To McKeever I said: "Your partner has a wonderful sense of humor. If I needed to kill this kid I wouldn't have hung her. And if I had, I wouldn't've done it right here in my own apartment."

McKeever shook his head sadly. "This is gonna look terrible in the papers, Falcon. This poor kid committing suicide in your apartment because she thought you murdered her old man."

"Suicide?" I cracked. "This wasn't suicide. It was straight out and out murder."

McKeever eyed me dreamily. "What makes you so sure, Falcon?"

"Because there isn't any chair near her from which she could have jumped, and she certainly didn't leap into the air and lasso that chandelier by herself. Besides, five will get you ten the M. E. here finds chloroform in her lungs."

McKeever exchanged glances with Doyle. "Who told you?"

"Nobody. I guessed it. Marie here barged in on the killer before he was finished with the job and he had to put her to sleep too."

"That true?" Doyle asked Marie.

Marie gave him a haughty look. "Are you doubting Galahad?"

"Oh, no," said Doyle elaborately. "We wouldn't do that. Why, everybody knows Falcon is the spirit of honesty. He wouldn't tell a lie, not him."

McKeever said: "Where were you all this time, Falcon?"

"Busy," I told him. "Busy with a couple of mugs who were trying to knock me off. Can't you see, McKeever, I must be getting hot on this thing if somebody's trying to put the finger on me?"

"Okay," said the medical examiner. "Cut her down and send for the meat wagon. I'll do a post-mortem at the morgue this afternoon. Dead from strangulation."

The photographers started working.

Flashbulbs exploded in blinding white lights. The print boys went around, sprinkling powder all over the place. Marie grew indignant.

"Easy, boys. Galahad has to sleep here tonight. Who's going to clean up this mess?"

"Not me," I observed sourly. "I'd rather move first."

Doyle had suddenly produced a pair of handcuffs which he was dangling in front of me.

"Here, Falcon, climb into these. The D. A. wants us to bring you in. That slug they took out of Freiling matches your Luger."

FOR several seconds I did not speak. Then my face flushed. "So the D. A. wants a fall guy and he's willing to sacrifice me. You know I had nothing to do with these killings. If I have to warm a cell in the clink, how am I going to clear this thing up?"

I was sore. But I was also scared. The prosecution could frame a swell case against me. Enough circumstantial evidence to convince a jury. According to my own admission I'd gone to the Molineaux to contact a crook. Presumably Freiling. He'd been shot with my gun. The natural assumption was that I'd stolen Tyndall's ten grand, and got away with the diamond, and killed the only man who knew anything about it.

Marie confronted Doyle, letting him see the points of her long polished nails. "How about Charlie Trogon, you dope? Why don't you—"

"Of course," I yelled. "Trogon! Cauliflower-ears! I got the man who can give you the dope on this thing."

They looked at me as if I'd suddenly gone berserk. Swiftly I told them about Willy and the ex-pug now in the baggage compartment of the sedan downstairs. We all dashed into the hall, piled into the elevator and in a moment I was opening the compartment.

McKeever grabbed Cauliflower-ears by the legs and yanked him out. "Come on out of there, you."

The fellow's body slapped limply to the pavement, where he lay inert, unmoving. Doyle stooped, pulled back the closed eyelids, straightened slowly, gave me a long queer look.

"This guy's dead," he said.

McKeever said dreamily: "Boy, when you conk 'em you don't kid."

Marie snapped: "He didn't conk him. They had a scuffle and this monkey hit his head against a rock."

"It's no use, Marie," I told her weakly. "Everything in this case goes wrong. You can't beat it, not even with a club. Can you imagine? The last chance we have to make somebody talk and the guy gets himself dead."

There was a second long delay out there in the street while the print boys and the photographers had another holiday. Finally we piled into a squad car and drove down to headquarters. But the moment we arrived some cop came over and whispered into McKeever's ear.

Face expressionless, the big homicide dick ushered us back into the street and into the car. He spoke to the driver and we were off with the scream of the siren scattering traffic like buckshot from a horn-tipped shotgun.

Doyle was inquisitive. "Where to?"

"Tyndall's. There's been a fight there. Maddox, the jeweler, just phoned in. Tyndall was damn near killed."

"Who attacked him?" I asked.

"Guy by the name of Donfrett. The butler hit him over the head with a book end."

Excitement flared through me. This was it. This was the break I'd been waiting for.

## CHAPTER V

**B**EADY glass eyes, about twenty pairs of them, were fixed unseeingly at us in Christopher Tyndall's study. The stuffed birds were perched on shelves, bookcases, window sills, wherever there was a bare flat surface.

Tyndall was seated behind his desk. His face looked like he'd caught it in the propeller of a Spitfire. Cut, bleeding, swollen, with a shiner under each eye.

Henri Donfrett was leaning against a bookcase, holding a towel to the wound in the back of his head, his features tight, grim, bellicose. He nursed a set of bruised knuckles in his mouth.

Maddox, the jeweler, sat in the far corner, his legs crossed, his square face blank as a piece of paper. At his side stood Tara Tyndall, the Eurasian, holding her throat as if somebody had just tried to choke her. The olive skin was pulled tautly over her high cheekbones, and behind those amazing topaz eyes I could see the shimmering light of stark fear.

Christopher Tyndall extended a shaking finger at Donfrett. "I want that man arrested for assault."

"Assault!" sneered Donfrett. "He's crazy. He attacked me without provocation the instant I entered this room. Maddox is my witness. I beat him up to protect myself. He must have gone crazy."

I will always have a sort of admiration for Christopher Tyndall. From the looks of him he had just taken a severe shellacking, and yet that did not stop him.

Without warning he came up out of his chair in a wild lunge that carried him clean across the top of the desk. He was spitting curses deep in his throat and his bunched fists went flailing at Donfrett like windmills in a storm. One solid punch caught Donfrett clean on the button and sent him reeling to the floor.

Donfrett sat there, shaking his head, staring at Tyndall through glazed eyes. He got slowly to his feet, started to dust himself off, and then, without hauling off, he lashed his fist full into Tyndall's mouth with a blow that made me shudder. You could hear the crack of enamel.

It took McKeever and Doyle and Maddox and the butler to separate

them. Me, I wasn't having any part of it. I just sat back and enjoyed the show. Marie, with cool indifference to the whole fight, had been wandering around the room, and now she was standing over a bookstand, casually leafing through a ponderous volume.

Pretty soon they had everything quiet again.

I said: "I want to ask a question, Tyndall. Maddox got angry when I insinuated that he might have some connection with this case. Now I find him in your house. What brought him here?"

"I sent for him," Tyndall snapped. "Why?"

"So he can sell my diamonds for me. Since the theft of the Star I've lost interest in my diamond collection. I decided to concentrate and devote all my time to birds." Gingerly he touched a tooth that Donfrett had loosened. "Maddox has the outlet and the clients with enough money."

Maddox handed me a dark look. "Tyndall and I have done business before, Falcon."

McKeever was watching us in that sleepy-eyed way of his, but I knew that his mind and body were alert to any emergency. He was letting me make this play in my own way. After all, I had been in from the ground floor, and probably had gathered information of which he was not yet aware. I walked over to Donfrett.

"Well, Donfrett, how do you think you're going to look with your hair shaved off, sitting in the chair, waiting for the juice to snuff out your miserable life? That's one execution I would like to see."

Donfrett's jaw muscles bunched whitely. "What do you mean?"

"Just this. You stole the Star with Tara's help. Then you hired Carl Freiling to cut it up so you could sell the pieces. Probably that's the deal you were trying to make with Maddox when I walked in on you two this afternoon. And then, so you wouldn't have to split the take with Freiling, you killed him.

"Somebody listened in on the extension phone earlier today when I called Tyndall to tell him that Freiling's daughter knew something about the deal her father had made. Probably Tara. She told you about it. And so of course you had to kill the girl too."

Doyle's police positive had appeared in his hand and he was holding it ready for use. McKeever got out a pair of handcuffs and drifted slowly toward Donfrett. But it was the half-breed, Tara, the beautiful Eurasian, who made the play.

SHE let out a long, thin, piercing scream, rushed at Donfrett and threw her arms around him as if to protect him from McKeever.

"It's a lie!" she cried. "It's a lie! You can't take him away. Don't let them do it, Henri. I cannot live without you."

Christopher Tyndall uttered a low, choked sound. His face was drawn, haggard, filled with inexpressible agony. He loved this woman very much, and now that she had openly declared herself, showed him and all the world that she did not care for him, his face seemed to fall apart.

"Tara!" he whispered. "Tara!" And at that moment I saw something in his warped mouth that sent a stream of hot blood to my head.

Tara paid no attention to him and kept plucking frantically at Donfrett's lapels. There was a hissing sound and I turned to find Marie beckoning to me. I crossed over. She put her finger on one of the open pages of the big book she'd been poring over. I read one sentence and that settled it.

I got out my penknife and glided around behind Tara Tyndall. She was so agitated she never knew what I was about. I wanted a lock of that coal black hair. Deftly, with a quick flip of the blade, I cut off a stray bit dribbling down the nape of her neck.

Then I crossed over to the side of Tyndall's desk and confronted him. I said: "Where's your silver-plated Spanish gun?"

He blinked, reached down and pulled open a drawer. I picked up a bronze book end that was lying on the desk and hit him with it. It made a soft, mushy sound. Tyndall, slumped forward, out cold. McKeever cursed. Maddox inhaled sharply.

I ignored them both. I picked up a bottle of mucilage, dropped some on the lock of hair and pasted it under Tyndall's nose. Then I plucked out his handkerchief and tied it over his eyes.

It was him all right. There was no doubt about it. The front tooth Donfrett had loosened had slipped out of the gum and that was what had tipped me off. It may not have been the same tooth Tyndall had covered with black wax back in the Hotel Molineaux, but there was no mistaking the fact that Tyndall and Charlie Trogon were one and the same man.

"Take him, Doyle," I said. "There's your murderer."

For the space of several heartbeats no one stirred.

"Here, McKeever," I said. "Look what Marie found in this book. A trogon is a kind of bird. Get it? *Charlie Trogon!* The same initials as his own. C. S. Christopher Tyndall is Charlie Trogon."

"I'll be damned," McKeever murmured. "Keep talking, Falcon."

"It's easy to understand now," I explained. "Tyndall must have been getting broke. He was afraid of losing his wife. I guess he didn't know he'd already lost her. So he decided to steal his own diamond, cut it up, sell the pieces, and also claim the insurance. And knowing that Freiling needed money to send his kid out West, he enlisted the man's help.

"Then he called me, disguising his voice, and asked me to act as contact man. That was to cover him with American Indemnity who had insured the stone. Proof that it had actually been stolen. Otherwise they would certainly make an investigation and that might lead straight back to him. As a matter of fact it did anyway."

"Why did he kill Freiling?"

"To get rid of the one man who knew about his fraud."

"Did he also kill the girl?"

I nodded. "Certainly. I told him that she knew her father had made a deal with someone concerning the Star. He got panicky. He was afraid maybe Freiling told the girl too much. So he got her to my apartment under some ruse, planning to murder her. A simple shooting did not appeal to him. He had to hang her. In the meantime he'd hired a couple of gunsels to smoke me out and cremate my remains so it would appear I'd killed the girl and run away."

McKeever jerked a thumb at Donfrett. "Where does he fit?"

"He doesn't. But I rather guess he planned on getting the stone before Tyndall beat him to it." I faced Maddox. "Now keep your shirt on," I told the jeweler. "All I want to know is what Donfrett wanted in your office. It may help to clear up the picture."

Maddox said: "I think he suspected Tyndall of stealing the Star all along. He wanted to know if the man had tried to get me to sell any unusual stones. I happened to mention that to Tyndall this evening just as Donfrett walked in. I believe that is what made him fly into such a rage."

I turned then to Tara and asked: "What were you doing in the Freiling apartment?"

**N**OW that Donfrett had been cleared, Tara's confidence and poise had returned. She seemed very happy even though her husband was slated for the hot seat. She hunched up her lovely shoulders.

"I did not agree with Henri. I believed that Carl Freiling had been keeled because he was keeping the stone, maybe hid eet somewhere in his apartment. I went there to look for eet. I took my husband's gun because I was afraid somebody else might come along to look for eet."

You could hear Tyndall's hoarse breathing. He had loved his wife so ardently that he'd killed to make sure

he'd get enough money to keep her. It had been a gamble, but with the Star and its insurance, a two-hundred-thousand-dollar gamble.

There was no love left in him now. Like a cornered, snarling beast he lunged at her, hands outstretched, reaching for her neck. I wouldn't have given much for her chances if Doyle hadn't been there to slug him with the butt of his gun.

I spread my hands toward McKeever. "It's all yours, friend. Better get the register from the Hotel Molineaux and compare Charlie Trogon's signature with Tyndall's handwriting. That ought to help convince any jury. Come on, Marie, let's get out of this zoo."

Marie grinned, made a face at Doyle, wrinkled her wonderful tilted nose at McKeever, and linked her arm in mine. Out in the hallway she murmured: "I'd like to get a couple of those birds. I'll bet we'd find pieces of the Star inside them."

I snapped my fingers. "You have

something there, kitten. Well, it's a good thing American Indemnity retained us on this job, otherwise we wouldn't be getting any fee."

Marie unlinked her arm from mine, opened her purse, and held up a thick packet of bills. I stared at it, startled.

"What's that?"

"The money, silly. The ten thousand dollars Tyndall took away from you in the Hotel Molineaux. I found it in a phony book on the bookshelf while everybody was fighting."

I grabbed Marie by the shoulders. "Confound it, Marie!" I snapped. "That's larceny."

She looked innocent and wide-eyed and terribly hurt. "Why, Galahad, what a thing to say! Didn't he promise you the money if you got the Star back? Didn't he?"

"Well—yes—" I admitted.

"Then stop beefing and kiss me. I passed the most wonderful store on Fifth Avenue today and they . . ."

What can you do with a dame like that? I ask you.

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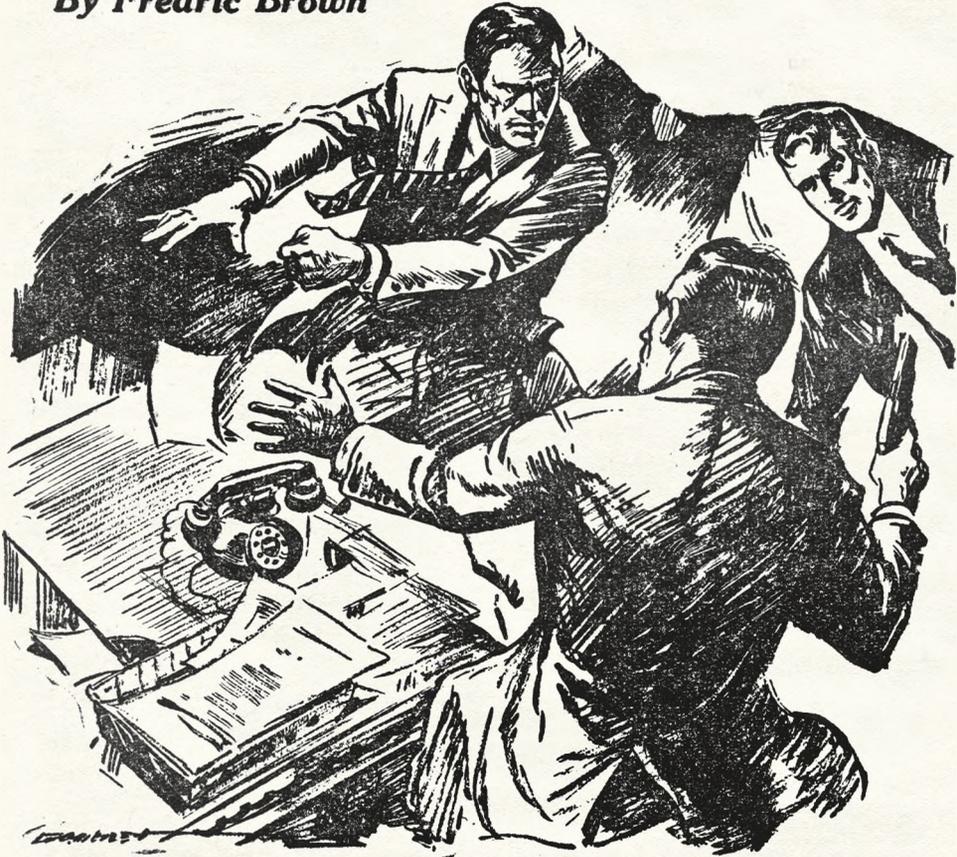
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# You'll End Up Burning!

By Fredric Brown



It was a strange photograph the reporter took. For the film was loaded. And as soon as the shutter clicked, Death took charge of the developing.

THERE was a big mirror back of the bar. Looking at me out of it was a big ugly-looking mug whose clothes hadn't been pressed in a week and who needed a shave worse than another drink. But I liked the guy.

I lifted my glass to him and said, "Hello, Me!" and downed it neat. He downed one just like it, and I winked at him and pushed the glass

to the bartender and said, "Give us each another."

He gave me a funny look but he filled the glass. He said "Y'know, you look like I oughta know you, but I can't place you. I seen you somewhere, though. What's your name?"

"What's in a name?" I asked. Then one of those Gilbert and Sullivan things popped into my mind, and I put my hand over my heart and sang:

"I'm called Little Buttercup,  
Dear little Buttercup,  
Tho' I could never tell why;—  
But still I'm called Buttercup,  
Poor little Buttercup,  
Sweet little Buttercup I.—"

I'd started it softly, but I swung into a rousing fortissimo until I saw the bartender reach for a bung-starter. "Can it, can it," he growled. Then he looked toward the door and I turned my head to see what he was looking at.

Two men had walked into the tavern just as I started to sing. They were well but sloppily dressed, if you know what I mean. One of them was as tall as I—and that's six feet—but built on the order of a bean pole. The other one was stocky and showing signs of flabbiness, although he was still in his thirties. He had eyes like shoe buttons.

They'd stopped just inside the door, staring—*staring at me*. I leaned on the bar to avoid lurching, and turned to stare back.

"Gen'l'men," I said, "if my singing offends you, I'll be glad to make you like it."

But I could tell that it wasn't my singing. They stared like I was the ghost of their great grandfather, but was going to show them where the family treasure was buried. If you get what I mean. Like they didn't know whether to be horrified or elated.

"And if I can't make you like it," I added, "I'll be glad to make you lump it. In fact—"

**S**LIM raised a hand soothingly. "Buttercup," he said, "you sing swell. Beautiful. We love it. But—" He closed his eyes and then opened them and I was still there, so he turned to the guy with the beady eyes. "Monty, do you see what I see?"

Monty said, "I see a ten-dollar raise and shoes for baby. The Old Man will go nuts. He was going to pose a guy with his mug covered up."

I looked at him and then turned around to the bartender. "Baldy," I

demanded, "are these guys all there? That is, if you know them."

"Baldy knows us," said Slim. He came up to the bar on one side of me and Monty came up on the other side.

"Give Buttercup a drink, Baldy," said Monty.

"I had a drink," I told them, "but—well, make it rye again, Baldy. Say, these mugs aren't coppers, are they? If they are, I'll buy the drinks, and make two of 'em arsenic."

The bartender put down two more glasses and reached for the bottle. "They're worse than cops, Buttercup. They're reporters for the *Morning Tab*."

"Newspaper?" I asked hazily.

"You can call it that. Some don't. It's the yellowest rag this side of the coast."

"Now, Baldy," protested Slim "We wear out our plumbing in here every day of the week with that stuff you sell, and you've got the crust to rub in something we know better'n you. We have to write for it, and you don't even have to read it. You—"

"Pipe down, Slim," said the stocky one. "Buttercup, I'm Monty Hague and this bean pole is Slim Tuttle. Mind telling us your name?"

I frowned at him. "Maybe I do mind. What does it matter?"

"On the grift? Listen, Buttercup, I'm not just curious. We can throw something your way. You need money?"

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a lone quarter. "Not yet, but soon," I admitted. "What's the racket?"

"It's honest. It'll take you less than an hour and it's good for a double sawbuck. There's one thing, though. It's getting your picture taken. If You're on the lam, maybe—" he trailed off there, and let it lay.

"Do I look like a crook?" I wanted to know.

He shrugged. "You don't look like a violet. But the reason I wondered

was on account of your being so coy with your monicker."

I busted out laughing. "Listen, pal," I told him, "if you had a handle like Reginald Wilburworth, and you were a bum and maybe even a lush, wouldn't you be coy about it?"

"Forget it," he soothed. "Listen, how long you been in town?"

"Since—well, whatever time it was that the fruit express on the Rio line pulled in this morning."

Slim whistled softly and tapped me on the shoulder so I'd turn around and face him. "Buttercup," he said earnestly, "this is strictly on the side. If you're on the bum, how'd you manage to get a skinful of booze like that? Put me wise—I may join you any day."

I grinned. "I found a billfold with a fin in it. I had to waste two bucks for these shoes, but that left three—"

Monty's voice, a little impatient, cut in. "Don't you want that twenty bucks, Buttercup, or do you?"

I looked at Baldy. "Once more around," I ordered, "On them." Then, to Monty: "Now you can get back to telling me about that twenty. Or could you make it twenty-five?"

He snorted. "You don't even know what we want you to do, and you try to jack up the price! Listen, it's just to let us take a picture of you, back at the *Tab* Office, see? And after that, well—we'd rather you hopped a rattler and spent it somewhere else. Somebody else might spot you and dope out how we got the pic."

"I don't get it," I told him.

"You don't got to get it. You get your double sawbuck, just for posing like we tell you to."

Slim said, "Tell the guy. Soon as he gets there he'll find out it's a hot squat. And he can add it up."

**M**ONTY HAGUE stepped away from the bar so he could look thicker daggers at Slim, without me being in between. He said, "You damn idiot. Broadcast it, why don't you? Now Baldy can add it up too."

Slim picked up his rye. "Aw—" he said, "Baldy's all right. You know how it is in the newspaper business, Baldy. You won't tell anybody, will you, Baldy? We're good customers."

Baldy shook his head slowly. "I won't if you'll tell me what not to tell them. I ain't added it up yet, but I might get the answer later. And if I figger it out solo, I won't promise not to—"

"Okay, okay." Monty's voice sounded resigned. He put his elbows on the bar, and gave.

"It's the Ramloe execution, Baldy. You know, Barry Ramloe. They passed that new rule that there won't be any reporters among the witnesses, see? Well, the Old Man had just paid plenty for a lapel camera for me to wear and when he heard that rule, he says we're going to have a pic anyway. Fake one, see? We set up a replica of the chair that'll pass for a pic, and we *were* going to pose somebody in it with the cloth over his face, see?"

"Yeah, but what—" Bewilderment suddenly vanished from the bartender's round face and he snapped his fingers. "Barry Ramloe! Just before you guys came in, I was tellin, Buttercup here he looked like someone. It's like pictures of Ramloe in the papers. Say, I get it! You're going to pose this guy, and make the shots look authentic. He won't have to have his mug hid."

"Baldy," said Slim, "you can go to the head of the class. But give us three ryes before you start."

"Ummm," I said thoughtfully. "I walked past a cop or two on the way here. If I looked like a wanted killer, how come I didn't get picked up?"

"He ain't wanted no more," said Baldy. "Not if he's in jail waitin' to be fried, like Ramloe is. The cops wouldn't be thinkin' about it."

He filled up our glasses and then looked at me thoughtfully. "Buttercup," he warned, "you better watch out. Maybe it's bad luck to sit in a hot

TDA

squat. Maybe you'll—you'll end up burning."

"Nuts," said Monty sharply. "There ain't any wires to it. Don't let him scare you, Buttercup. Finish that drink, you guys. We got to get back, and we got to stop next door to get Buttercup a shave."

"A round spot on top of his head," said Slim gloomily, "and one leg where the electrode goes."

Monty snorted. "Just his face, you sap. Those other things won't show up on an eighty-line screen. Come on, let's go."

The bartender looked at me sorrowfully. "I still say it's something a guy shouldn't do, Buttercup. You'll end up burning."

I didn't have a chance to reply. Monty had taken my arm and was hustling me to the door. The barber shop was next door, he said, and the *Tab* was just across the street. And he was right.

It was a nice setup they had in a corner of the photographer's room on the fourth floor. That chair looked so genuine that, drunk or sober, I insisted on them pulling out the wires that ran from it into the floor and showing me they weren't connected with anything.

They had two kinds of uniforms ready, one for me and the other for the guy who was to be facing away from the camera and putting the electrode on my leg at the time the shot was snapped.

"Look scared, Buttercup," said Slim, as the photog slipped a second film into the box. "A guy only dies once, and he don't feel happy about it. Listen, Buttercup, I don't feel happy about *you*. I got a hunch maybe. Aw, never mind."

I grinned at him, and then straightened out my face as the photog dived under the cloth. At Monty's orders I turned for a three-quarter view of my face. It put me looking at the doorway and I saw a man in shirt-sleeves start past the door and then turn to look in.

**S**UDDENLY he put out his hand against the doorpost and his eyes bulged out. Whatever wind was in his lungs went out in a kind of strangled gasp that made the others in the room turn toward him too. Even the photog came out from under the hood.

"It's all right, Les," said Slim, ankling over to him. "This ain't who it looks like, Les. Take it easy. This is Buttercup."

The face of the newcomer gradually relaxed. He closed his eyes and when he opened them again, they were normal.

He said, his voice a bit shaky, "Whew, I thought I was seeing things. Nobody told me you were faking a shot on Ramloe."

He leaned against the doorpost, trying to look casual instead of like a guy who'd just been scared half out of his wits.

Slim patted him on the shoulder. "This is just a guy we picked up because he happens to look like Ramloe, Les. Listen, tell the Old Man to come up here, will you? And to bring twenty from the cashier.

"Sure, Slim." The guy in shirt-sleeves went back down the hallway.

When he was out of hearing, Slim said, "Hell, someone shoulda told him. He nearly keeled over."

Monty nodded, and then turned back to me. "It ain't that you're that ugly, Buttercup. Les Kerrin was a witness in the Ramloe case. *The* witness, in fact. Seeing you gave him a jolt. Okay, this is the last shot. Look like you were getting ready for a slug of coffin-juice."

I nodded. "Shoot the lightning to me, Litvinov," I said, and put on a dying calf expression. Another flash bulb went off and Monty came over and unstrapped my wrists.

"The Old Man'll be here in a minute," he told me. "Listen, he and I are going to want to talk to you. We got an idea. And remember, we're right guys. It won't hurt you to level with us, Buttercup."

"Meaning what?"

He grinned. "Meaning not to worry if you've got a shady past. We can take that in our stride."

There was a funny look in his eyes, and I said, "Then what *would* you worry about?"

He didn't answer because two men came in the door and he whirled on his heel and walked over to them. One was the man he'd called Les Kerrin, and the other was a younger man, dressed like Dapper Dan and wearing a moustache that wouldn't have strained a single gnat out of his soup. Their heads went together like a huddle on a three-man football team, and they came over to me.

"This is the Old Man, Buttercup," Monty told me, pointing to Dapper Dan, who smiled at me like a cat at a canary.

"He don't look his age," I said. "Now just give me that twenty bucks."

"And this is Les Kerrin," said Monty. "We got your twenty for you, Buttercup. It's in the Old Man's office. Come on down and we'll get it."

I glowered down at him. "Nuts," I said. "What's the runaround for?"

Dapper Dan smiled ingratiatingly and looped a finger in my buttonhole. "Monty here isn't a diplomat," he said in a confidential tone of voice. "He shouldn't have put things that way. You can have your twenty right now, if you want it. It's in my pocket. With its twin brother. Want one or both?"

"Hmmm," I said reflectively. "That is a horse of another color. It seems a shame to separate them . . . What gives for the second twenty?"

"Ten or fifteen minutes in my office, while you answer a few questions."

"What makes you think I'd know anything interesting?"

Monty said, "It's one chance in a thousand. But if that chance comes up, it's something big, see? We're willing to gamble twenty just to find out we're all wet. Understand?"

"No," I told him. "It sounds wacky. Well, okay—give me that first twenty now, first. I earned that one already. Then I'll let you get stuck for that second twenty."

THE three of them looked at each other, and Monty tried to shake his head, but Dapper Dan turned back to me and shelled out two tenners. Then the four of us went down the stairs to the floor below and into an office marked *Managing Editor*. Dapper Dan sat down in the swivel chair and put his feet up on the desk, which, I presumed, made him owner of the office and the title on the door.

Monty Hague perched on the desk and waved me to a chair. Les Kerrin leaned against the door. Dapper Dan tapped a cork-tipped cigarette against a manicured thumbnail, and then looked up at me.

"But'ercup," he said, "where were you on March fourteenth?"

Huh?" I asked. "Say, if—" Then I grinned at him. "Let me use your phone and I'll call up my social secretary and have him check back the engagement book and maybe he can tell me."

Monty said quietly, "Listen, Buttercup, this is serious. Where—approximately, anyway—were you around that time?"

He held out his cigarettes to me, and I took one and lit it before I answered. "Let's see; I was in New Orleans, Christmas. I stayed there a month or five weeks. I lost my job then and decided to hit the road again. I got vagged in a little town just west of Pensacola. Thirty days making roads, damn their hides. Just because—"

"Never mind that. Then—"

"Tallahasse," I said. "I was in and around there a month. I signed on with a magazine crew, and was able to make pancakes at it. But a month was all I could stand."

I saw Monty exchange a look with Dapper Dan. "Tallahasse," said the

managing editor, "is thirty miles from here. Get that far out canvassing? In other words, were you here?"

"This is Springfield, isn't it? Maybe. I never paid any attention to what towns we hit. But I think I remember the name, and when I hiked in from the yards this morning, I saw a street or two that looked familiar."

"Think hard, Buttercup. Could it have been the fourteenth?"

I blew a smoke ring. "Listen, I should remember the date? This was months ago. I got drunk and they dropped me off the crew in Capitola, and I headed for New York. Since then, I've been—"

"Never mind since then," cut in Monty. "Let me think. Where's a calendar? Oh, I remember, Les. What day of the week was it?"

Les Kerrin stirred in the doorway. "It was a Friday. And it was the last day of that rainy spell we had. Sun came out that morning for the first time in four days."

"I remember," I said. "We holed up four days while it rained. If you canvass in sloppy weather, you can't get in because the huzzifs don't want you tracking up their carpets and—"

"Spare us the lesson in salesmanship, Buttercup. The fourteenth. Where were you?"

"First day after the rainy spell we drove east. An hour's drive. It *could* have been here. I'm not sure."

Monty stood up and dropped his cigarette to the floor. He looked really excited now. He said: "Lookit, Buttercup. Think back. That first day after the layoff. You drive east, stop and canvas. Then you eat when it gets lunch time. Where'd you eat that day? It's Friday; there'd be fish on menus. Where'd you eat?"

I nodded slowly. "I got it. A little restaurant that had swell shrimp gumbo. There was a white counter." I grinned. "I tried to date the waitress, but she wouldn't tumble. The proprietor was a cross-eyed fat guy."

Monty looked at Dapper Dan and his little beady eyes were shining.

His voice was so soft it was just above a whisper. "Steve's sea-food place," he said. "On Twentieth Street, just six blocks from Vetter's house."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Well, boss, was it a hunch?" He held his hands apart as far as he could reach, and then moved them together, with a gesture of narrowing down, until he had them only half an inch apart. "We got him within six blocks!" There was an unholy light in his eyes.

Dapper Dan looked awed. He said, "Gawd, what a story. 'It'll—"

I stood up. "Okay," I said, "where's the other twenty? Give."

Monty whirled back toward me and got off the desk so suddenly he almost fell. He put an arm around my shoulders. "Buttercup, dammit," he said, "this is *big*. The *Tab* can spring a scoop that will turn this town upside down. If your story holds up, *we can spring Ramloe!*"

I shook his arm off my shoulder. "I don't even know the guy. Oh, yeah—I remember. That's the name of the mug I'm supposed to look like. Hey—holy cow, he's gonna *burn*. What's March fourteenth? The day—"

"Yes, Buttercup. The day old Walter Vetter was murdered. Barry Ramloe's guardian."

**I** SPUN toward the door, and Monty grabbed my coat. I cocked a fist to slug him, and then all three of them jumped me. When things straightened out, somebody was hanging to my right arm and somebody to my left, and Dapper Dan was neatly draped around my ankles.

I said unprintable things until I found I'd started to repeat myself, and quit.

"That's it, Buttercup," said Monty. "Calm down now. Nobody says you murdered Vetter."

"Then what's the idea trying to trap me into admitting I was in town here on the day of the murder?" I yelled. "I don't even know the guy! I didn't kill anybody!"

"I know you didn't, Buttercup. We all know you didn't. But listen slowly. Let this sink in. Barry Ramloe wouldn't have been convicted if he hadn't been seen on his guardian's porch on the day of the murder. He claimed he was out of town and couldn't prove it and the prosecution made a monkey out of him on that. See? But you were around, in that neighborhood. It could have been you that was seen, see? That doesn't mean you killed the old guy. It just means the prosecution's case breaks down on Ramloe being there."

"It means," I said, "the cops are going to sweat me. Not for me, pal. I don't like cops."

Dapper Dan sighed and uncoiled himself from around my ankles. He hung on to a trouser cuff with either hand so I'd trip if I tried to run, and he looked up at me pathetically. The middle hair of his moustache was mussed.

"Don't take it that way, Buttercup," he protested. "Listen to reason. It got Ramloe in trouble to be around there because he had motive. A million bucks worth of motive, and when he said he wasn't and couldn't prove—Anyway, you haven't got any motive."

"So what?" I wanted to know. "The cops will try to find one. Listen, come to think of it, maybe it was some other town and not Springfield and anyway it wasn't the fourteenth of March."

"Ramloe fries tomorrow morning. Buttercup!" It was Monty again this time. "Maybe he's innocent. We can get him at least a retrial. What a story!"

"And me," I grunted. "What do I get out of it? The third degree by the cops, and held in jail until the retrial!"

"We'll be fair with you," said Dapper Dan. "Lookit, a story like this is worth thou—hundreds of dollars to the *Tab*. If you have to stick around to be a witness, we'll give—hell, we'll give you twenty bucks a day."

I closed my eyes a moment and then opened them. "Including Sundays?" I asked.

I heard Monty sigh as he let go my right arm. Les Kerrin let go my left, and Dapper Dan stood up and brushed the dust off his trousers.

"Now you're being sensible, Buttercup. Including Sundays." Monty slapped me on the back. "I wish I made that much money myself."

He turned to Dapper Dan. "Well, where from here? The cops?"

The managing editor let out a squeal like somebody had stepped on his tail. "Before we get out an extra? You dumb—"

"Listen," cut in Les Kerrin, "hadn't we better take time to check up on this lug's story? Half an hour won't matter."

"Sure," I said. "Not that it's any of my business except that I'm the fall guy. But hadn't I better take a look at the place where I might have been mistaken for Ramloe? You're still guessing. So I was within six blocks. That's pretty much distance, on the end of your nose."

"He's right," said Les Kerrin. "We got to be sure he'll remember the house, or anyway the street. And we can see if he can remember where he started and about what time it would have been when he hit Vetter's house, see? . . . Listen, I'll take him. I can show him right where he—or Ramloe—was standing when I saw him, and—"

"You?" I asked.

**H**E NODDED. "I was the main witness." His voice got terribly earnest suddenly. "Don't you see what this means? If Ramloe is going to the chair by mistake, it's *my* fault. I testified I saw him there. Now that I've seen you, I know I could have been wrong. See?"

"Were you the only witness?"

"Well, the only one that could make positive identification. But how'd I guess there could be two guys as much alike as you? Lord, if I've—"

He started for the door. "I'll get my coat," he said. "Listen, Monty, you and the boss get together and write the story. Write it up that he remembers the place and was there at the right time, and get the type set and ready to run. But don't roll the presses till I phone you the go sign." He ran out and down the hall.

Monty nodded to Dapper Dan. "But maybe I better go along. In case." I saw him glance at me out of the corner of his eye.

"You don't need to," I snapped. "I won't run out on you. Not if a guy's life may be at stake. That part's just soaking in. I'm sober now. Cripes, do you always entertain guests this way?"

Dapper Dan grinned. "We don't often have guests like you, Buttercup. You're going to put this paper out of the red."

I said, "Tell me what this business is all about. I got a fact here and there. But who's Vetter, and who's Ramloe?"

Kerrin came in just in time to hear my question. "I'll tell you on the way," he said, taking my arm.

My last glimpse as I went out of the door was Monty sitting down at the typewriter on a swing shelf of Dapper Dan's desk, with the managing editor watching over his shoulder. The bell for the end of the first line rang before we closed the door.

Kerrin started talking while we were still heading for the stairs. He talked in the rapid-fire staccato way a rewrite man writes a story from the odds and ends the leg-men phone in.

"Vetter is Walter Vetter of the brokerage firm of Vetter and Slade. Plenty sugar. Vetter I mean, not Slade. And Barry Ramloe was Vetter's ward. Second cousin, but the nearest relative. Anyway, he was residuary heir under the will, and he knew it. A million bucks is enough motive for the police. So when Vetter was found murdered, they questioned Ramloe."

"And he hadn't any alibi?" I asked. We were running down the stairs now. On the way out of the door we passed Slim, and I nodded to him as we went by.

Kerrin said, "Ramloe said he'd been playing poker on a train from Tampa, but he couldn't prove it. This was days later and none of the train employees remembered him, or anyway could swear what day it was. And the men he'd played poker with couldn't be found, if they existed. He hired private detectives even, to find them.

"I knew both Vetter and Slade. I'd had a small account with them. I was calling on Vetter that morning on a matter of business and I saw Ramloe—or thought I saw him."

We were getting into his car in the parking lot back of the newspaper building. I said, "Where'd you see him? Inside the house, or—"

"Coming up the porch steps as I was leaving. I said 'Hullo,' come to think of it. If it was *you*, maybe you remember me."

I shook my head. "Out canvassing, you see and speak to thousands of people. You don't remember them a week after, let alone four months. But I'll probably remember the district, maybe the house. I can figure where I started, and about what time of day I'd have reached this Vetter's house. Pretty close, anyway."

We were driving north, and Kerrin slowed down to swing off the arterial. I said, "How come they took your word against Ramloe's? Maybe you killed the guy."

He nodded. "Theoretically, I could have. But police figure a lot on motive, and I didn't have one. Ramloe had a million dollars' worth. And there were other little things that pointed to him, items of evidence. Not enough to have convicted him if his alibi'd held, but—"

He swung the car in to the curb beside a neat red brick house set back in some trees a hundred yards from the street. I looked out of the car win-

dow at it, and up and down the street. I said slowly but positively, "I never canvassed the neighborhood. Nor that house."

His voice sounded different. He said, "Never mind that. Get out of the car."

There was something hard pressing in the small of my back. Without turning around, I said, "What the hell—"

"Get out. There's a silencer on this gun."

It was a quiet residential neighborhood. Most of the houses were set well back, and screened by trees. He said, "Walk up to the house. I'll be right behind you, the gun in my pocket but aimed your way."

"It's your party," I told him.

I started up the walk toward the house. I said conversationally, "Then you killed this Vetter yourself. And you don't want Ramloe sprung, I take it. Is this really Vetter's house?"

Kerrin didn't answer. I went on up to the door, and stopped.

He said, "Open it. Go on in—we're expected. I phoned while I was getting my coat and hat back at the *Tab*." He shoved the gun in my back again and I opened the door and walked in.

**A** TALL, heavy man with bushy gray eyebrows came through a door at the left of the hall. He said to Kerrin, "Dammit, I told you not to bring him here. What'd you hang up for? I could have suggested—"

Kerrin said coldly, "He's as much your problem as mine, Slade. We can't have that murder investigation reopened. With Ramloe out of it."

The heavy man glared. "Maybe he wasn't around. Why didn't you use your brains, Kerrin? If you'd taken him to Vetter's and he'd not identified it, you could have turned him loose."

"He'd have identified it, Slade. They offered him twenty bucks a day. A bum like this would do anything short of confessing to murder for

that. All right, he's yours. I got to get back."

"Take him in the library. What's the hurry?"

Kerrin's voice took on an edge of impatience. "Don't be silly. I got to get back quick and say he gave me the runaround and got away from me. I can't be gone long and get away with it."

With the gun, he nudged me into a room off the hallway.

I said, "Not that it's any of my business, Kerrin, but you told me you didn't have any motive for killing this Vetter guy. Well, I don't want to die. If I knew what it was all about, maybe I could figure myself an out. Now that you've talked this much, more won't hurt. Give."

I turned around to face him from the other side of the room.

He grinned. "I didn't have a motive. Slade here, Vetter's partner, had plenty. Jail for embezzlement one way, control of the business and plenty dough the other. But he didn't have opportunity; he was in Tallahassee when it happened. But between the two of us—"

The bushy eyebrows of Slade contracted. He said, "What's the idea of bringing him here to begin with, and telling him all that now he's here? Are you crazy, Kerrin?"

Kerrin shrugged. "As he said, what's the difference? I can't see any way out but killing him anyway. But that's your job, Slade."

The heavy man stared at me. "If I gave you a thousand cash and a lift out of town, would you keep going? Or would you come back to try to blackmail me?"

"Nuts," said Kerrin, before I could speak. "He'd come back as soon as he was broke again. Listen, if you're too lily-livered, give me back that gun. I'll shoot him for you, but then I got to get back. You'll have to take care of the body."

This was it. I took a deep breath. "Don't fight over the gun, boys," I

told them. "Unloaded guns are dangerous."

If it had been a bluff it wouldn't have worked. Kerrin snap-sighted at me and pulled the trigger. He pulled it again, and nothing happened.

"I had the license number of your car, Kerrin," I told him. "I went through it in the parking lot this morning and found that gun in the door pocket—before I went into Baldy's tavern to wait for some *Tab* reporters to come in and find me there. We were pretty sure it was you and Slade, but we wanted you to tell us."

Slade turned green. "It is Ramloe!" he gasped.

"In the flesh," I told him. "And the police are on their way here from next door right now. There's a bug in this room somewhere they put there last night, and they've heard everything we've said."

Slade was pale around the gills, but he was taking it. But Kerrin shouldn't have gone in for stuff like this; he didn't have what it took. He was turning that sickly color he'd turned back at the *Tab* office when he'd seen me in the fake hot squat.

Then he broke. He threw the silenced gun at me and, as he started for the doorway to the hall, he whipped something out of his pocket. I ducked the missile. He turned in the doorway and faced me with a little twenty-five calibre automatic in his hand.

"Damn you," he said, and from his face I saw that he'd gone completely off his rocker.

I heard the cops coming on the run from next door but they were going to get there too late. I'd missed the play this time; it hadn't occurred to me he might carry a gun on him besides the one he had in his car. But a guy with his nerves, I should have guessed, probably even slept with one under his pillow.

He hardly sighted for the first shot, and it didn't hit me. I started for him, but I was a long way off, and he'd

have time for about two aimed shots before I got there, at point-blank range.

I SHOULD have tried to duck behind something instead. I was looking right down the middle of that deadly little barrel as he sighted for the second shot, and I'd never have reached him if he'd pulled the trigger.

But a tall, thin bozo with his hat pushed on the back of his head weaved into the doorway as though he'd been listening just outside, and landed a rabbit punch on the back of Kerrin's neck.

It was a lulu; I didn't know a guy so thin could pack such a wallop. Kerrin went one way and the gun the other, and neither of them got up. Slim Tuttle was looking at me wide-eyed.

"Buttercup," he said, "did I hear you say you are Ramloe?"

"Slim! How'd you get here?"

The police were coming in the door. Slim said, "I followed Kerrin's car. I thought those boys were going to put you on some merry-go-round and maybe try a frame just to get a story. I—"

Then the cops were crowding past him, and things were mixed up for a while and I was shaking hands with Lieutenant Murtoyd and Dick Evers, the private detective who had done wonders for me, and it was ten minutes before I got back to Slim.

"Here's the story, Slim. You can phone it in; I owe you more than that for slapping Kerrin down when he went crazy. Sure, I'm Ramloe. The private dick I hired finally found those men I'd played with on the train. All of them. He got me an airtight alibi and dug up some other stuff, too. Yesterday, he convinced the chief that I was innocent and then he and the chief went to the Governor.

"The rest of it was partly Evers' idea and partly mine. We knew Kerrin must be guilty, see? He swore I was at the scene of the crime and I

wasn't. We knew he knew Slade, and we figured him too; that was the only way it made sense. But we didn't have any proof."

"I begin to get it," said Slim. "You got tight in a joint across from the *Tab*, knowing you'd get spotted by a *Tab* reporter for Ramloe's double. Did you know about those execution pix they were faking?"

I shook my head. "That was a break. I figured they'd run me across the street to question me on the angle Monty hit on later—whether I might have been mistaken for Ramloe before. I led them on with the story I told them. I knew Les Kerrin would be called in on it, because he was the main witness. And I figured he'd make a play of some kind that would tip his hand."

"But what if he'd sat tight?"

"He didn't," I pointed out. "I thought he'd get excited, just as he did. He didn't want Ramloe—me—sprung. He didn't want the case busted wide open again."

"And we were pretty ready for whatever he did. We'd planted bugs here and at his own house, in case he took me there, and we had men planted near here, and at Vetter's, and across the street from his own place. I'd emptied the gun in his car."

"Whew," said Slim. "Buttercup—I

mean, Mr. Ramloe—you still took a chance. What if he'd just taken you out of town and got rid of you?"

"I'd emptied the gun. And I'm bigger than he is. He might—oh, there are a lot of ifs, but they didn't happen. Better phone it in, if you want a scoop."

Slim frowned. "The hell with it. I'm through at the *Tab*. The stuff they pull is too much to take. Maybe I'll have to starve and stay sober a while first, but I'm going to get a job on a decent paper."

"I was going to bring that up. I'm buying the *Blade*. I'll need something to keep me busy and I've always— Well, you report there Monday morning."

He looked dazed. "The *Blade!* Mi-gawd, why wait till Monday? I'd like to start tomorrow, or even now."

"Nix," I told him. "We got other things to do. It's no fun to have sat in the death house like I did up to yesterday. I aim to unbend, Slim. This morning's drinks have kind of worn off, but there's more where they came from. Soon as I change these clothes, shall we go back and see Baldy, for a starting point?"

His face looked like the sun coming out after a long, long rain. "Mr. Ramloe," he said, "I mean, Buttercup—what are we waiting for?"

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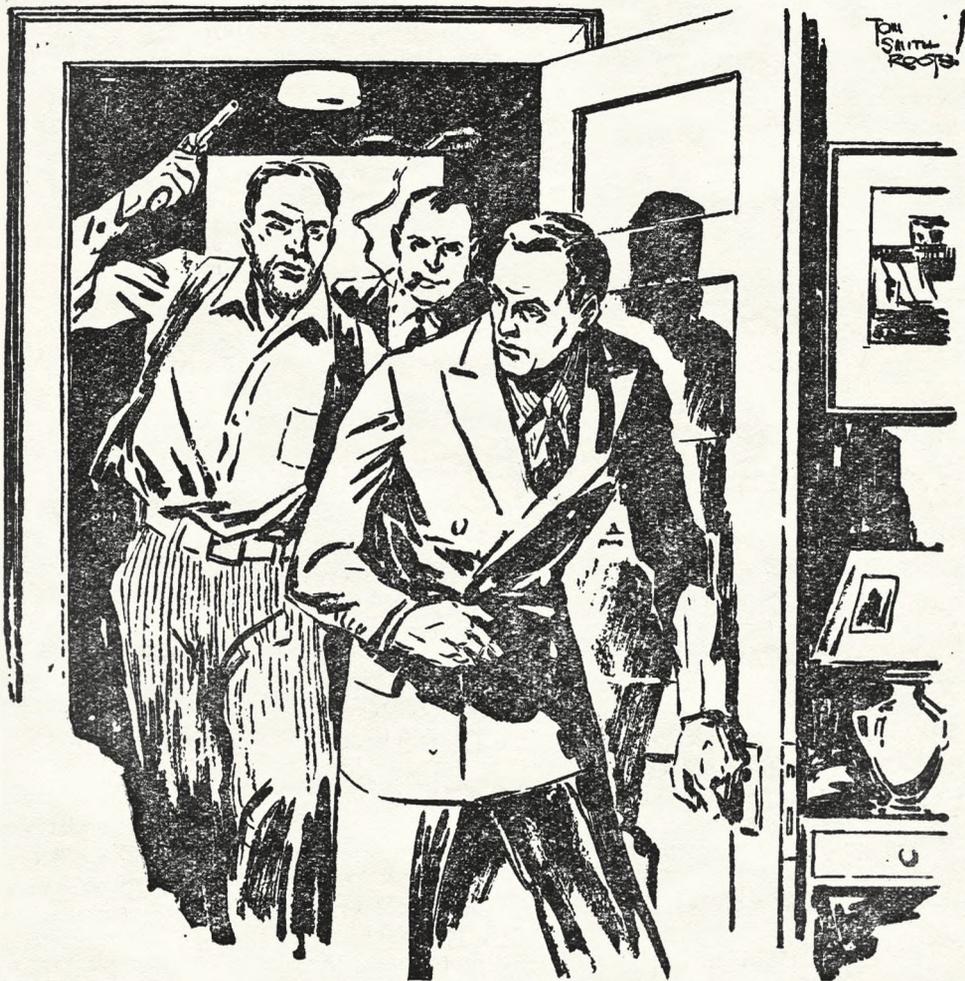
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# Death Plays the Ace



*By D. L. Champion*

**A** *The only thing those hardened criminals could do in their hideout was to play poker. And card sharp Leighton, on the lam, raked in a jackpot of crimson chips.* **B**

**I** SLAMMED the safe door shut with my left hand. I lifted the suitcase from the floor and put it on the table. The automatic in my right was aimed in the general direction of the grey-haired watch-

man who stood over by the window.

He regarded me with neither fear nor surprise. He held his hands half-raised and he shook his head and clucked like a slightly bewildered hen.

"There are times," he announced

without rancor, "when I think the coppers in this town are crazy. There are times when I think they got their badges by sending in box tops like the Junior G-men. There are times—"

"There are times," I finished for him, "when I'm far too jittery to listen to talkative night watchmen. Now you'll remain right where you are for a decent interval of time after I've left. I've taken a lot of trouble on this job. I'm not going to have it messed up by you."

The watchman shrugged. "There's nothing in it for me either way. I can't win or lose. I was only saying about the efficiency of the coppers in this town—"

My automatic interrupted him. I fired two shots into the floor at his feet. I snatched up the suitcase. I ran from the room, slamming the door behind me. I clattered down the flight of stairs into the street. The avenue was shrouded with grey fog. I paused for a moment and peered through it. I descried the dark shadow of Delancey's coupé a block and a half away.

I clutched the suitcase to my breast and sprinted, rather in the manner of Eliza galloping across the ice. Behind me I heard a window raised. The nightwatchman's voice projected itself into the night, crying hoarsely for the police. I slid to a halt by the door of Delancey's car as a long shrill whistle sounded in the distance.

I opened the door and got in. I balanced the suitcase carefully on the ledge of the open window. Delancey glanced at me, then at the suitcase. He said, "To horse!" and stepped on the accelerator.

**T**HE coupé sped through the town like an ugly rumor. Delancey had once driven a taxicab in New York. It was training he had never forgotten. Half a mile beyond the last row of semi-detached houses, he spun the wheel to the left and drove off the state highway.

The tires crunched over a gravel road. The wind swept into my face through the open window. It was difficult for me to distinguish between the pounding of the motor and the beating of my heart.

Delancey's right foot lifted itself from the accelerator, pressed slowly down upon the brake. The coupé came to a halt at the side of the road. I lifted my eyebrows and looked at him inquiringly.

"Is this it?" I asked.

Delancey took his hand out of his coat pocket. Something cold and hard pressed against my shirt front. I drew a deep breath and kept perfectly still. I had been waiting for this.

"That valise," said Delancey. "Give it to me."

I met his eyes squarely and hoped my face resembled that of a bridge expert picking up thirteen spades. I said, "Is this a double-cross?"

"If you must give it a name," said Delancey, "I suppose it is."

"I made a deal with you," I told him. "I gave you five hundred bucks. For that dough you were supposed to arrange my hideout for at least six weeks."

"It's arranged," said Delancey, "and I'll take you there. In the meantime give me that valise."

"You've forgotten the rest of our contract," I said. "For your end you were to get ten per cent of what I got. But you weren't to get it until the heat was off, until after I got out of the hideout."

Delancey sighed. "Contracts," he said, "agreements. I've got a gun. That cancels everything. Give me that valise."

"All right," I said, "I just wanted to know where we stood. I haven't got it."

He blinked at me. The gun pressed harder into my chest. "You mean you haven't got the valise?"

"It's a small car," I said. "Search it."

He switched on the inside light.

Moving the gun a few inches away from me he looked around the interior of the car. There was no valise. Moreover, there was no place where a valise could possibly be concealed. Delancey looked at me thoughtfully over the barrel of the gun. He sighed and swore softly.

"I get it," he said. "You're a shrewd operator."

"I'm on the wrong end of a gun," I pointed out. "Since there seems to be no further object in holding it on me, would you mind putting it away?"

Delancey put the gun back in his coat pocket. "I see it," he said. "You figured something like this would happen. You knew damned well that I'd have to take Highway Nine out of town no matter where we were going. You planted a pal along there somewhere and threw the suitcase out to him."

"Anyway," I said, "it's a nice theory with no obvious holes. Are you taking me to the hideout?"

He shrugged. "What else can I do now? I paid for you all right. I would've taken you there anyway. Even after I got the valise. Now, I guess I've got to wait for my ten per cent. I hope you won't hold this against me."

"You'll get ten per cent of my gross takings," I told him. "I gave you my word on it. I'll hold to it."

"I don't like taking a guy's word," said Delancey. "But as it stands, I guess I ain't got much choice."

"For a fact," I said, "you haven't."

He sighed softly and put the car in gear. The coupé moved ahead through the night. By now some of the emptiness had gone from my stomach. My pulse was quieter. I took a deep breath and wondered whether the hazards of a guy upon the lam were greater than the perils of sitting tight in town and waiting for the coppers.

**I** STOOD on the wide porch of a rambling white farmhouse. In the distance I could hear the purr of De-

lancey's car as he drove away; I could see the evanescent red dimness of his tail light. The fog had lifted now and a quarter moon shed an eerie light over the farm.

I stood for a moment, irresolute. Then from the darkness a beam of light shot out, throwing a halo about me. A voice, hard and flat, said, "Walk toward me. And remember there's a gun on you."

I walked in the direction of the flashlight. It receded before me. A door was suddenly flung open. The flashlight retreated across the threshold. I followed. The door slammed shut, a bolt slid home.

I stood with my back against the door, blinking in the illumination of the room. Before me stood a man with a thirty-eight in one hand and a flashlight in the other. He was unshaven. His neck was thick and his torso was something very close to a perfect square.

Behind him at a round table, the top of which was covered with a blanket, sat three men. One, a tall blond with sharp features, stared at me. On his right, a bearded ancient figure shuffled a pack of cards. The third man, dark and with glittering eyes, piled poker chips mechanically.

I glanced around the room, cleared my throat and said, "I'm Leighton. You can put that stuff back in the arsenal."

The man with the square torso looked at me like a Maharajah at an Untouchable. The thirty-eight remained aiming at my midsection as he spoke.

"All right, Leighton. I understand you're paid up for six weeks. Well, you may be longer than that. Anyway, there are rules in this joint. You may as well learn them."

"At the point of a gun?"

He considered this. "If you've a rod on you, give it to me."

I reached into my pocket and surrendered my automatic. He took it and put up his own weapon.

"Now," he said, "rule number one.

No bright dialogue, see? I don't like comical guys. Two, no personal conversation. Everybody minds his own business here. Three, you're not allowed outside the house. Never, under no circumstances. And last, you're holed up here until twenty-four hours after I leave. That's all."

I lit a cigarette. "When do you leave?"

"That," he said, "is a personal question."

I inhaled, thought it over, and said, "I get it. You don't want anyone to give this hideout away while you're here. You don't trust anyone so you won't let anyone out of the house, just to play safe."

He looked at me with eyes that were chipped obsidian. He said, "That, too, is personal. However, I'll tell you I do trust one guy. Whitey, over there. You may as well meet him and the other boys."

I glanced over in the direction of the blond. He smiled a tight-lipped smile and nodded. The man with the square torso pointed toward the table with his thumb. "The dark guy, there. The one with the hophead eyes, is Raynor. He blows safes. He blew one in Chi last month and left his fingerprints on it. The bearded peasant is Pop Bascomb. He owns this joint. I'm Gresham."

He said it with a touch of pride. I bowed and said, "I figured you were."

He smiled smugly and inclined his head as if I had said I figured he was Lincoln. Then he walked back to the card table.

"Pop'll get you set," he said. "Then if you want to play cards you can join us. It's about all there is to do in this joint. Do you play poker?"

I gave it to him on the level. "Better than anyone here. I'm an expert."

Raynor grunted. "Will you bet on that?"

"Willingly. As soon as I get set."

Pop Bascomb got up from the table. He led me up a flight of stairs to the second story. He assigned me to

a bare whitewashed room. It contained a washstand, two chairs, a closet, and a bed, the mattress of which felt as if it were stuffed with the petrified skulls of dead Ethiopians.

**B**ASCOMB left the room and for the first time in two hours I was alone. I took the socks and shirt from my pockets and stowed them away in the closet. I hung my toothbrush on the washstand, and placed my soap neatly at the side of the basin.

I took out my wallet and counted the cash in it. I had something well over a hundred dollars. That, I decided, should be enough. If it wasn't there was a diamond ring on my finger which was worth a good deal more. I looked at that ring for a long emotional moment. I sighed heavily, limbered up my fingers like a piano player and went downstairs.

It was on my second deal that Gresham noticed my ring. He nodded approvingly and said, "That ice is worth dough."

I looked across the table at him without slowing up the deal. I saw a cluster of diamonds in his tie; two stones both bigger than the one I wore, set in a pair of rings on his fingers. A diamond watch charm dangled from a platinum chain across his flat chest.

I said, "The stuff you're wearing didn't come from Woolworth's," and picked up my cards.

Gresham chuckled. "Damned right it didn't. That stuff cost dough. I like diamonds. So I buy 'em. I get mine the hard way but it's worth it."

I opened the pot, lifted my eyebrows and said, "The hard way? Judging by the last editorial I read on crime you get 'em the easy way."

Gresham scowled. "The easy way?" he said belligerently. "You call it the easy way to stick up a bank single-handed? To knock off a cop and have half the flat feet in the world after you? You call that easy. You're nuts, Leighton. Give me two cards."

We played until dawn. I took things very easy, coming out with a net

profit of less than ten dollars in cash and a much larger win in knowledge of the players. Pop Bascomb was the sort of guy who played them so close to his vest that the cards were practically entangled in his undershirt. Raynor was a manic-depressive card player. By that I mean he went in streaks. On occasion he would bet as recklessly as a drunken millionaire at Bradley's; then he would become suddenly fearful and play as if he were in imminent danger of losing his right eye.

Whitey, the blond, was good. He bet them when he had them, he dropped when he didn't. Gresham was the sort of guy born to lose. He was too arrogant to be a good card player. His ego was such that he couldn't believe it possible for him to lose. He bet that way. He lost.

We got up about noon the following day and the poker resumed. It continued incessantly, with short periods out for eating and sleeping. About noon of the fourth day I began to get results.

Gresham was down to his last twenty dollars. I had something less than fifteen. Whitey, despite his good poker, had been consistently coming in second best, which is invariably disastrous. Raynor was a heavy gloating winner with Bascomb running him a close second.

I dealt another hand. I lost eight dollars on it. Gresham lost twelve. Raynor won. I sighed, looked at the small roll of bills in front of me, and said, "Well, I guess it's time to soak the jewelry."

I glanced across the table at Gresham's diminishing pile. I raised my eyes to the glittering stickpin in his tie. He nodded, irritated.

"Me, too," he said. He took the tie pin from his cravat. He tossed it on the table. He said to Raynor, "Give me five grand on that."

I took a deep breath and my hand tightened on the deck of cards.

"Sure," I said jeeringly. "Give him five grand on it. Win the five grand

back from him. Then get out of here to find the stuff is hot. You're out five grand plus a mouthpiece fee."

I felt Gresham's hot eyes upon me. His mouth twisted and his hand was very close to his coat pocket.

"My ice ain't hot," he said. "I buy it. With cash. I don't like remarks about it. See?"

I SHRUGGED with a nonchalance which I hoped was convincing. I took the ring off my finger. I said, "Okay. You're not asking me for dough. I'm in the same boat you're in. It's Raynor's rap." I took the ring from my finger and tossed it across the table to Raynor. "Give me a few G's on that, too."

Raynor didn't touch the jewelry. He looked at it, distastefully and avaciously, like a fence might look at the Kohinoor.

"How do I know your ring ain't hot?" he said to me.

"You don't. Any more than you know Gresham's isn't. You're gambling, son. That's the point I made a moment ago."

Bascomb stroked his beard and looked uncomfortable. As the only other winner at the table, it occurred to him that if Raynor turned the deal down, he was next.

Gresham marked Raynor's hesitation and his irritation increased. He glanced sharply at Whitey. His voice rasped as he spoke.

"I don't like the attitude of you guys. I don't know why I don't just pull a rod and take all the dough at the table without going through the formality of dealing the cards."

"You don't?" I said. "I do."

He glared at me and if my face was calm, my nervous system certainly wasn't.

"If you did that," I told him, "you couldn't gamble any more. If we couldn't gamble in a joint like this we'd go crazy. I never saw a hide-out in my life where the boys didn't play cards all day. If we didn't, we'd go nuts."

"I can't gamble if I'm broke," said Gresham. "Nor, for that matter, can you."

"We can hock our ice."

"Sure," said Gresham ironically, "there's a pawn shop out there in the backyard."

"We can send someone to town. You said you trusted Whitey."

Gresham considered this and nodded. "Whitey," he said. "Get your hat and coat. Take my pin to town and hock it."

I tossed the ring across the table to Whitey. "This, too," I said. "Get me half a grand."

Whitey got up. So did I. I walked across the room to the sideboard and helped myself to a slug of applejack from the jug there. I returned to the card table with my pulses hammering. Whitey had his hat on. He was struggling into his topcoat when I banged my ankle against the leg of an end table and, striving to keep my balance, bumped into him. For an instant we were locked in a tight embrace.

A moment later Whitey took the jewelry, left the house. I heard the old car start outside as he drove away. Since the game was temporarily suspended, Raynor went upstairs to take a nap. Bascomb engaged himself with some chores in the kitchen. Gresham and myself sat in morose silence, sipping applejack.

An hour passed. The applejack was buzzing in my head, disturbing a memory which I was desperately trying to forget. Behind me, Gresham spoke.

"You're a good poker player, Leighton. If it weren't for the fact that you were losing, I might think you were too good."

"I told you I was an expert," I said, staring out the window, my thoughts at a great distance.

"Well," said Gresham putting down his glass. "I suppose cards is one way to make dough. I got guts enough to

make mine the hard way. At the end of a rod. If anyone gets in my way I let him have it."

I spoke without thinking. The words I uttered were engendered by the strong emotion in my heart.

"You let 'em have it," I said. "In the back. Then you put the boots to the corpse. It takes guts all right."

THERE was a long silence. I turned my head around slowly to see Gresham regarding me with blazing eyes. His automatic was in his hand. I looked at him inquiringly, masking the tremor of fear that ran down my spine.

"That wasn't in the papers," said Gresham slowly.

"What wasn't in the papers?"

"That about me giving him the boots. How did you know about it?"

I silently cursed myself for a fool. I took a deep breath. I said, "It must've been in the papers. How else could I know?"

"It wasn't in any paper," said Gresham. "I read every one." He looked at me keenly for a long time. He stood up and said savagely, "By damn, you even look like him! Why the hell didn't I notice it before?"

The pounding of my heart was like surf drumming on New England rocks.

"What are you talking about?" I said, and there wasn't much conviction in my tone.

Gresham's lips twisted. He leaned across the table so that his face was two feet from mine. The automatic was closer than that.

"I'll tell you what I'm talking about. Three weeks ago I killed a copper. I shot him in the back. I kicked his teeth out after he was dead. The papers never mentioned that last part; yet you know about it. That copper had a kid brother who was a professional gambler. And by damn, *you look like him!*"

I looked as calm as a man with my glands could possibly look, with death

very close to him. I said, "It appears like a string of coincidences."

"It appears," said Gresham slowly, "like a double-cross gone haywire. You wormed your way into Delancey's confidence. You got him to fix a hideout for you. You knew there was such a joint around here. You figured since I was lying low, I'd be in it. Then when you found out where it was you'd tip the coppers to where they could find Gresham. That was your game wasn't it? Well, it won't work. I've got you before you've had a chance to send in your tip."

I strained my ears in the silence. It seemed to me I heard the motor of an automobile in the distance. I said, "What are you going to do about it?"

Gresham looked down at the gun in his hand. He laughed without mirth. He said, "What do *you* think?"

I was positive now. I heard at least two cars and the noise grew steadily louder. I looked into Gresham's eyes. I knew there was no time to wait for the Marines. I had to do something about this myself.

I moved my right foot and my left hand simultaneously. The foot shot forward under the table and landed heavily against Gresham's shin. The hand tipped the table over against his body. His automatic fired twice. Two bullets ripped into the wall well above my head. Then I was upon him.

I clung to his right wrist with my left hand. I smashed my other fist into his face—hard. We rolled in desperate embrace over the floor. I heard the patter of feet as Bascomb and Raynor ran into the room.

I heard the sound of engines drawing closer. I heard the shrillness of an applied brake. Then the sound of a siren drilled into my ears and, at the moment, I thought Beethoven must have written the music for it.

An instant later there were seven guns in the room, including Gresham's, and six coppers.

Gresham, Bascomb and Raynor stood handcuffed and glaring at me as I shook hands all around. For the first time in many hours my stomach felt at ease, my nervous system relaxed. Gresham shook his head slowly, "I don't figure it," he said. "You were never out of the house. How could you call the coppers?"

I grinned at him. "You called them yourself," I said, "when you sent Whitey to the hockshop."

"Me? How?"

"With my ring. I knew there'd be gambling going on here. I played those cards so that both you and I would lose. I wanted you to send someone out to the pawnshop. I wanted him to take my ring as well as anything of yours."

"But why?" said Gresham. "I still don't see it."

"This was planned," I told him, "and my ring was the cue. Every pawn shop in town had instructions to call for the cops when that ring showed up. That's how they got Whitey."

Gresham swore slowly. He thought for a moment, then said. "But what about Whitey? There aren't many guys I trust in this world, but Whitey's one of them. I can't believe he talked. I can't believe he told the coppers where this joint was."

"He didn't talk," I told him. "He didn't have to. You remember when I bumped into him just before he left? I had a crumpled piece of paper in my hand then. A piece of paper locating this place. I dropped it into Whitey's coat pocket when I fell against him. The police searched him and found it."

We drove back to town in the police cars. Somehow I did not feel elated. In my mind was the picture of a big burly guy with a wide honest smile. Avenging him was some satisfaction but not much. I was going to miss him like hell for the rest of my life.

# Voice of Vengeance

By Peter Dawson

Victor Larsen, former actor, was about to essay a new role. A role for which he himself had written the script—in blood-red ink.



VICTOR LARSEN stood in the wings and listened to the roar of laughter which exploded through the packed theatre. Out front, under a battery of spotlights, was his wife, Nadia. And as he watched her perform, his throat muscles tightened and his palms grew moist.

She lounged at the microphone, waiting for the laughter to subside. She was dressed in a low-cut satin gown that flashed and sparkled from its myriad glass beads. She was billed as Nadia, The Woman of a Thousand Faces. Her voice was clear and rich and mellow, and amazingly pliable. She could alter its timber and register in startling imitation of a hundred famous characters.

"And as I left Gable at the studio," she said, as a hush fell over the audience, "I saw Jimmy Durante taking an afternoon siesta behind the wheel of his roadster."

A sudden change transformed her lithe figure. She bent forward at the waist, her elbows crooked clumsily, and her voice became grotesquely harsh and funny.

"There were maybe a hunnert flies—millions of 'em—sunning themselves on my schnozzola. I let 'em alone. Then along comes a bee and gives me a sting. 'Just for dat,' I says—and she waved her hand lightly in front of her face—'everybody off.'"

Although the gag convulsed the

audience, Larsen had heard it before and his face remained immobile, expressionless. He was a tall, slender man, an ex-vaudeville actor, for whose services there had been no demand for a long time.

He had married Nadia six years ago, before she had become famous. Her talents and earning power had increased as his had declined. But he'd stuck close to her, simulating attention and devotion to insure his meal ticket.

Until that one mistake last night when she'd caught him.

Nadia was running rapidly through her repetoire now. Barrymore, Groucho Marx, Hepburn, Garbo, and a host of others. Her face too was unusually elastic, and under the change of spotlamps seemed almost to take on a real resemblance to the characters impersonated.

The applause that greeted the end of her performance was almost deafening. She bowed and walked off the stage. Stamping and whistles called her back. She threw several kisses to the audience and made her final exit.

As she entered the wings she was smiling, but the smile vanished as her eyes met Victor Larsen's. Her mouth grew thin and she walked unseeingly past him. Larsen bit his lips and trailed after her.

She climbed into a taxi parked by the stage door. Before she could slam the door, Larsen was in beside her. As the taxi pulled away, he leaned forward and slid the connecting window shut.

Nadia said: "I thought I told you

TDA

last night. We're finished, Vic, finished once and for all."

"Listen," he pleaded, "give me one more chance. So I made a mistake. It won't happen again."

"I don't care," she said acidly, "if it happens a thousand times. It won't mean a thing to me. We're all washed up, Vic."

"But why—" he started, when she cut him off.

"Why! You dare ask me that. Look, Vic, I can and have stood almost anything. I've watched you lazy around for two full years without even attempting to get another job. I've never complained about supporting you, and you've played the parasite to perfection. I tried to tell myself that you were trained for the stage and that out of it you were like a fish out of water. But inside me I knew it was your character, sheer indolence. I was willing to make allowances even for that, and a lot of other things too. But your chasing after other women—never."

Victor Larsen waved his hands in a desperate gesture. "That girl doesn't mean a thing to me, Nadia."

"Exactly. That's just it. And I don't know how often this sort of thing has been going on. The next time you want to caress some cheap dancer, please make certain her dressing room door is closed. No, Vic, I've had enough. My run here ends tomorrow. I'll leave the next day. I'll catch the morning plane to Reno. You're on your own."

He could tell from the tone of her voice that this was final. And fear began to gnaw at his breast, fear and uncertainty. The future was bleak, dismal. He'd have to go to work, any kind of work, and the prospect was not a pleasant one to Victor Larsen.

His fingers curled around her arm. She shrugged free, and rapped against the window. The driver swiveled his head, nodded at her signal to stop and pulled up at the curb.

She said in a very quiet voice, "Don't follow me, Vic," and got out.

He waved the driver to continue. Two blocks further he stopped the cab. No sense wasting money. He entered a near-by bar and ordered a drink. He sat for a long time, trying to solve the problem, and the more he thought about it, there seemed to be only one solution.

NADIA had been in the big money for several years. A large portion of that had been invested in jewels. She was a good business woman, had never played the market. What stocks she owned were solid and gilt-edged. A man could live for a long time on what she'd saved.

But there was only one way to get it.

Nadia would have to die. And soon. Before the public learned of their estrangement. Before she could make a will or in any way cut him off from his inheritance.

He had another drink and began to lay his plans. Nadia would be home at ten o'clock. The President was scheduled to address the nation over the radio and she would not miss the broadcast. She had been working on a new impersonation of the president's voice, and she snatched at every opportunity to listen to him speak.

That's the way she had always been, every sacrifice for her work. Even though success had been attained, her fetish for perfection continued to drive her unsparingly. She made recordings of her impersonations and listened endlessly for flaws. She sat hours on end by the radio, lost in profound concentration.

A glance at his strap watch showed Victor that the time was at hand. And now that he had reached his decision, the wave of sickening fear that had fitted through his body when the idea first struck him, was cast aside in a sort of grim determination.

He hurried from the bar and found

a pawnshop on Sixth Avenue. The gun was not worth more than five dollars. It was an old battered model, but he made no complaint when the pawnbroker asked twenty for it. Victor did not, after all, have a license.

He did not enter his apartment through the front entrance. The doorman would be on duty and he did not want to be seen. It was quite dark as he ducked furtively through the service door and crept along the basement passage, pressing his body into the shadows. He found the rear stairs and tiptoed swiftly up.

On the seventh floor he stopped outside his own service door to catch his breath. His slender body shook with the pounding of his heart against his ribs. His hands were cold and felt clumsy. He took the gun from his pocket, clenched it tightly, while moisture gathered at the back of his neck. Producing a passkey with his free hand, he twisted it in the lock and swung the door open.

He was in the kitchen and he could hear the drone of the radio in the next room. He knew exactly what he would see when he pushed through the connecting door.

Nadia would be seated very close to the radio, her ear against the speaker, face screwed into a deep frown of concentration, her lips moving with the words, trying to get the feel of rhythm and timing.

Victor opened the door a fraction and peered into the living-room. Nadia was in the precise position he'd expected, seated on the edge of a chair, her eyes turned toward the kitchen, head cocked sideways against the receiver in an attitude of absorption.

Victor Larsen kicked the door wide open and a single step carried him full into the room.

**H**E DREW himself up to his full height, the gun outthrust in his hand, a smile playing on his mouth. For the first time in years he was the

master, in complete control of a situation in which Nadia was involved, and it was much to his liking.

He seemed to swell in height and breadth. He felt powerful, almost omniscient. He stood there, coldly watching Nadia, his smile widening in appreciation of the knowledge that she knew in that one fleeting instant what was coming.

Over the radio he heard the familiar voice, deeply resonant, hauntingly beautiful:

“. . . The world must be made a better place to live in. The rule of violence must come to an end. And you—”

Nadia was on her feet, her mouth a crimson circle. The color washed out of her face. It seemed yellow and oldish. The pupils of her eyes were dark with terror. For a fleeting instant she seemed paralyzed by the sight of the gun. She screamed, “*Victor!*” and he pulled the trigger.

She fell slowly, the blood appearing above the bridge of her nose, and it seemed that the echo of his name was still upon her dead lips. She fell back against the radio. It crashed over.

Victor Larsen did not waste much time. He had to give the police a motive. Burglary. Roughly he stripped the rings from her fingers, making sure to leave tiny, telltale bruises. Now that the deed was done, his entire body was sheathed in a cold sweat. He stepped swiftly into the living-room, drawing on a pair of gloves. He yanked out the drawers, tossed clothing to the floor. He turned Nadia's bag inside out, appropriating the cash.

He left the way he had entered, through the service door, down the back stairs, and out of the basement. Not until he was several blocks away and certain he had not been seen did he draw a full breath. His first stop was a deserted part of the East River. He heaved the gun out as far as he could, listened with satisfac-

tion to the splash and the sucking sound of its sinking. The police would have a fine time finding that, he thought.

He stopped in a store for some paper, wrapped the jewels, and mailed them to himself at General Delivery. Then he went to a movie and killed two hours. When he returned home and found his wife, a quick examination by the police would reveal that she had died long before he'd arrived. . . .

**SERGEANT MONAHAN** said: "Looks like a clear case of burglary. He must have come up the back stairs. You say she'd been dead over two hours, eh, doc?"

The assistant medical examiner nodded. "At least."

Victor Larsen smiled inwardly. So far everything had gone just as he'd planned. Not a hitch in the whole setup. He looked up as Monahan addressed him: "You say she always carried around a lot of jewelry, Larsen?"

Larsen nodded. "Yes." He was the picture of grief, his face drawn, his voice choked up inside of him. For the first time in many years his stage experience stood him in good stead. He said: "I've often told her to get a safe deposit box, but she liked to wear the stuff around."

Sergeant Monahan was sympathetic. He always went easy on the bereaved. When he started puttering about the room, Larsen wanted to gloat. He went into the bathroom and gently rubbed the tips of his fingers together.

And then, abruptly, the smile vanished from his mouth. His spine stiffened and his face turned tissue gray. To his ears had suddenly come a faintly familiar speech, the deep resonant voice known so well to the whole nation.

". . . The world must be made a better place to live in. The rule of violence must come to an end. And you—" The voice was interrupted by a shrill scream laced with terror.

"Victor!"

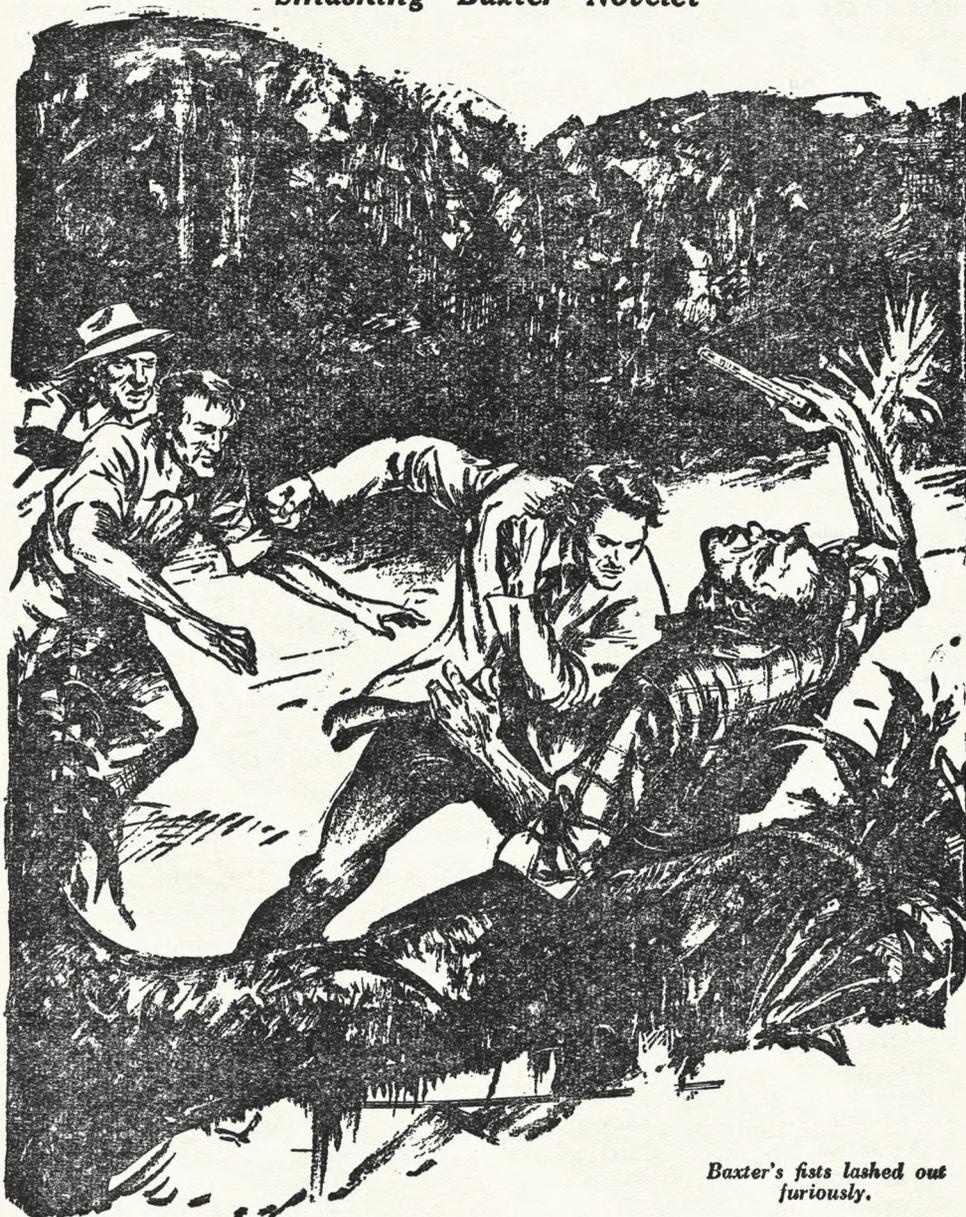
Larsen's heart lurched sickeningly. He couldn't believe it. It was Nadia's voice. His wife's cry. Just as it happened a short while back. And then he realized what had happened. She'd been making a recording of the radio speech. His knees went shaky as Monahan appeared in the doorway with a drawn gun. And the record must have been scratched in the fall, he knew, because he kept hearing the words repeated in those two dissimilar voices:

"And you — Victor! . . . and you — Victor! . . . and you — Victor!"



# Hell's Haunted Acres

*Smashing "Baxter" Novelet*



*Baxter's fists lashed out furiously.*

*By Lawrence Treat*

*Baxter, the All-American sleuth, was over his head in homicide. For when he invaded this desolate swamp-land, he found that the treacherous quicksand of intrigue had sucked him into a quagmire of doom.*



## CHAPTER I

**I**T ALL started in Mobile when Baxter blazed past the receptionist and the stenographers and the secretaries with hardly a glance at their legs, except the two or three best, maybe. Then he bowled into the paneled private office there on the top floor of the bank building, rubbed his mustache and shot fire from his dark eyes.

"I'm Baxter," he said. "Herald Square Agency."

This Hartswell guy stayed in his swivel chair and studied Baxter as if he were a corporate report. "So," he said. "You're the boy that Cotton says is such a world-beater. Says you turn the city of N'Orleans inside out every Tuesday and Thursday, regular."

"Saturday's my night," remarked Baxter. "What's the case?"

"Don't be in such a dang-founded hurry, fella. Take it easy. Slow down. Always plenty of time."

Hartswell leaned back and the light hit one side of his fleshy face and made it shine like yellow mud. He snapped on a little gold lighter that he'd probably got for swindling the county treasury, or maybe just for playing cagy poker and keeping his mouth shut about what he heard. Anyhow, you could see the engraving that started off: "*In Recognition of—*"

Baxter was sorry he'd come, but Joe Cotton, who was the head of the agency, had phoned all the way from New York and asked Baxter to handle the case.

Hartswell said, "Chair? Smoke?" and Baxter took one of each, and waited.

**H**ARTSWELL worked his way round to it. Then he said: "It's about this son of mine. Edward. He ain't bright, Baxter. He ain't quite as bright as most folks, but he grew up powerful big. I bought me a piece of ground out near Dog River and built me a house for Edward. Figured he couldn't harm nobody, down there.

"Well, a couple of years back, Edward kind of busted loose and got in a little trouble. Like I said, he ain't bright and he don't know his own strength. I fixed it up with the help of some friends of mine, and then paid off the widow. Still"—Hartswell stared at the ceiling—"it cost me a nice piece of change. But I ain't complaining."

"You mean this Edward killed a guy?" asked Baxter sharply. "And you bought off the county prosecutor?"

"Well, I reckon you could put it that way, on account of this fella died. But I was careful to see it didn't happen again. Took on two men to watch him, besides the married couple down there that keeps the place. Judd and Madie Allen. They been with me quite a few years.

"Well, I just got word that Edward busted out and done it all over again. I was real sorry to see Judd Allen go. Like I said, he's been with me for years."

"The law gives every mutt two bites before they kill him," said Baxter drily. "Here an idiot has two murders and you want to give him a chance at a third."

"May the Lord have mercy," said Hartswell, "but you got me all wrong. I want you to go down Dog River way and fix things so they won't happen again. Ain't no sense to prosecuting a fella like Edward. Expense to the state to do it, and more expense to keep him after they decide he's touched in the head. This way, I save 'em all that money."

"You can handle your own lousy mess, like the last time," snapped Baxter. "What the hell do you need me for?"

"New prosecutor," observed Hartswell. "Fella that won't listen to reason."

Baxter stared at the big flabby face and wanted to bury his knuckles in it. That was the only way to teach him Baxter couldn't be bought.

But then, Joe Cotton had phoned from New York, and Joe's word was law. He never went off half-cocked and he never asked anybody to do anything crooked.

Baxter gulped and was so mad he couldn't talk. Hartswell oreaked out of his chair, waddled to a big safe and opened it. He took out a thick roll of bills and dropped them on the desk.

"Ten thousand dollars," he mouthed. "Ought to take care of the widow, Madie, and leave a few dollars over for the fellas that look after Edward. You settle for less, and we'll split the difference. My daughter, Gloria, she went down there yesterday—she's the only person living that can handle Edward. He's gentle as a lamb with her. You work this out with her. She's got real good sense. That's her over there."

Hartswell pointed to a picture of the kind of dame you fought wars about. She was laughing around the eyes but the rest of her was a little sad, as if she was sorry for all the trouble the world was going through.

She made a big difference. She was worth going all the way to Dog River, just so he could look at her.

Baxter said, "If it wasn't for Joe Cotton, I'd slap you off that chair and go straight to the police with what you spilled. Murder. Collusion. Don't kid yourself about that and don't kid me."

He stared contemptuously at Hartswell. The gray eyes had turned mean and the mouth bitter. Hartswell knew how to hate, and he'd had practice, too.

"Here's what I'll do," continued Baxter. "I'll drive down to this joint of yours and look it over. I won't promise a damn thing. I may handle it or I may knock off this half-wit of yours or I may come straight back. And if I do, I'll call Joe Cotton right from this office and put it up to him whether I forget about the whole business or turn you over to the cops."

Before Hartswell could even answer, Baxter scooped up the bills, stuffed them in his wallet and stamped out of the office. This time he didn't even notice the two or three stenos with the good legs. He was too mad.

**I**T WAS a three-hour trip, and Baxter churned the dust of a half dozen back roads. He had been traveling inland, but he was heading back towards the bay when he reached the ford. It was a small stream, maybe fifteen feet wide and a few inches deep, but Baxter braked the car and stared at the sign on the opposite bank.

**DANGER — MADMAN AND LIVE  
PYTHON LOOSE**

That was a new one on Baxter. He knew they grew dopes around here, but he hadn't heard about pythons.

Still, you never could figure a Southerner. Maybe somebody was trying to be funny or maybe they saw live pythons instead of pink elephants.

Baxter slipped the coupé into gear, splashed across the stream and stopped again. This time he was impressed. It not only looked as if there was a live python around, but this python could read. Just to show people that the sign meant what it said, the python had killed a dog and left it a few feet away. You could tell a python had done it by the way the ribs of the dog had been cracked and squeezed flat.

Baxter lit a cigarette and felt his gun, friendly and familiar, nestling in the smooth, worn leather of his shoulder holster. He told himself he could shoot a python but a python couldn't shoot back. Then he got out of the car.

He examined the damp ground near the body of the dog and discovered that the python wore shoes and walked around, instead of leaving the wide, flat marks of a snake. Baxter compared the footprint with his own. He was a big guy, but the prints were a full inch larger than his.

He reneged on one of his ideas. This was one python that could shoot. Provided it wanted to, and had a gun, of course. Hartswell had warned Baxter about an idiot with a homicidal mania. It would be a dirty trick to ring in a giant, besides.

Baxter got back into the car and thought about Gloria all the way to the next sign, which read *Hartswell—Keep Out*. Baxter went in, humming. After all, he was going to meet a lady.

He drove leisurely into a parklike enclosure and then reached a big lawn and a low, rustic house. Behind it he could see the glint of water that meant Mobile Bay.

He stopped in front of the porch.

A dame who was built to wear bathing suits got out of a rocking chair and came as far as the steps. Her eyes were gray but she wasn't in

the same class as the girl in the picture.

He climbed out of the car and said, "I'm Baxter. Hartswell sent me down."

"Oh. To investigate the—"

The word wouldn't come out, so Baxter supplied it.

"Murder," he said. "And you're Madie Allen."

She nodded breathlessly. "Yes. But you'll have to excuse me—I left something on the stove. Scotty—he'll tell you whatever you want to know. He's around somewhere." She wheeled, ran around the corner of the porch and a door slammed.

She ran real fast for a widow, too. Usually, when they were that new at it, they dragged their feet like they'd lost their arches instead of their husbands. Still, you never knew from just looking, and a dame with Madie's build deserved the benefit of the doubt. Baxter picked up his bag and went up the steps.

When he opened the door, Gloria didn't throw herself in his arms and swoon, the way he'd sort of dreamt she might. But then Gloria wasn't there. Instead, one of the biggest guys Baxter had ever seen got up from a chair.

"And who might ye be?" the man demanded.

He was about six-four, which brought Baxter's eyes on a level with the guy's chin. It was a long, hard, bony chin, like the rest of him. Usually, when they were that big they went to fat, but this boy was all bone and muscle.

Baxter explained himself in the same pair of sentences he'd used before. "I'm Baxter. Hartswell sent me down."

The big guy rubbed his hands and said, "I'm Scotty Tavish. Tubby Fournier and myself, we were taking care of the young scion of wealth. We took a tender interest in him, Mr. Baxter, and it was a blow to us that he betrayed our trust by killing the man who mowed the lawn."

Around that time, the little fellow crept out of his camouflage and came to investigate. He'd been sitting in a shadowy spot at the side of the fireplace, and the camouflage was a blanket that more or less blended with the walls.

He trotted out now and said, "I'm Manning. Charles Arthur Manning. The herpetologist."

**T**O BAXTER the word sounded like a kind of hiccup and he must have looked bewildered, because the little guy went ahead and explained, in a high-pitched voice that was half laugh and half larynx. "Snakes. I study them in their natural habitat. We know very little about our elongated friends, which is one of the chief reasons many of us fear them."

Scotty dropped his great paw on the little man's shoulder and knocked him off center. "Now, Charlie," said the giant. "Nobody was ever interested in your serpents except Ed, and he kills people and then turns bashful and hides in the woods. So just contain your herpes and let the gentleman and me discuss business. We might even have a wee nip." He drew in a great breath, and at the top of his lungs he shouted, "Madie, me lass—the bottle!"

She brought a brand new quart and a pair of water glasses. Scotty filled them both to the top, muttered, "Bottoms up!" and lifted his glass. When Baxter didn't move, the giant put down his drink.

"Mon," he said. "Is it possible ye don't drink?"

Baxter grinned. "I'm more interested in hearing how Judd Allen was killed than in turning full bottles into empty ones."

Scotty shrugged. "It was a slight affair, and if we could catch Edward again, there'd be no kingdoms lost. Judd was not much of a mon, though Madie was a wee bit upset. He was the only husband she had, and the lass may not snag another."

"How do you know Edward did it?"

Tavish heaved a deep sigh. "It's a surmise," he said. "Judd's skull was somewhat damaged, like a three-minute egg that's struck with the thin end of a shotgun. 'Twas a man's blow, and neither Madie nor the little mon here was capable."

"How about you?" asked Baxter quietly.

"I was on the water with Tubby, with a string and a slice of bait, hoping to catch a flounder for breakfast. But we had no luck, and when we came back we found Judd lying dead on the beach and Edward gone from his room."

"That's a hell of an alibi."

"It's the truth, Mr. Baxter, and I'll give ye a dire warning. I've concluded in my mind to kill the mon that accuses me."

"Nuts," said Baxter.

Scotty slammed his great fist on the table, and the two glasses and the bottle jumped. Madie shot across the room and threw herself between the two men.

"He didn't do it!" she cried. "He and Tubby were fishing, like he says. I was alone in the house, and then they told me, and then we called Manning and he went to the crossroads to phone Hartswell."

"What time did they come back? Scotty and Tubby?"

"Ten o'clock," she said quickly.

"And you didn't miss Judd, or bother about where he was?"

"I was reading and then I went to bed. Judd was up in Edward's—" she stopped suddenly and clapped her hand to her mouth. Then she whirled and fled to her kitchen.

Baxter picked up his whisky glass and sipped it. They were all screwy around here and he didn't want any fireworks until Gloria showed up. After all, he'd come out here to see a dame and not to clean up Hartswell's mess. If it really was Hartswell's.

"How about the python?" said Baxter. "I passed a sign on my way in."

"We don't want strangers," replied Scotty, "and I deemed it advisable to scare them away. Strangers are never fond of pythons."

Baxter began to see it then, but it was all twisted up. Despite the dry feeling in the back of his throat, his voice was casual. "Why'd you kill the dog?" he asked.

"Oh, him. I never cared for the beast and I have a fondness for the realistic touch. I thought a small example of menace would convince the curious. How did ye know it was me?"

Baxter stared at the long, bony face. It reminded him of a trick profile on the side of a mountain he'd seen out in the Rockies somewhere. But this guy made his living nursemaiding a homicidal dim-wit and got his fun cracking dogs to death. He probably kept thumbscrews in his vest pocket and carved up kittens for breakfast. He'd be a pleasure to knock over, when the time came. Baxter wondered whether it had ever been done before.

"You left your damn footprints all over the place," he said contemptuously.

"Aye," said Scotty. "They're of a particular size."

Manning, who had slunk back to the shadows of the fireplace, came out of his camouflage again and said suddenly, "The python's only stuffed, and we've lost half of it."

Baxter snorted. "Will you guys stop clowning and tell me what the hell this is all about?"

**M**ANNING'S high, excited voice answered eagerly. "I used to have a pet python. She was named Myrna and she was very gentle. Edward liked her so much that I presented her to him. That was a few years ago. When she died, he thought a fisherman who lived nearby was responsible, and so he killed the fisherman. Nevertheless, Edward was inconsolable until I stuffed Myrna. Then he became more fond of her than ever,

and it was dangerous to touch her. Even Scotty hardly ever dared, though Scotty was strong enough to handle Edward."

"I've a fondness for Edward," observed the Scotsman. "Like he was my own bairn. He's a simple, direct lad, which are qualities that deserve appreciation. I've rarely encountered them."

"We set Myrna on the lawn," continued Manning. "Edward would come out and play quietly with her, for hours at a time, but Judd hated the sight of her. He used to kick at her whenever he passed, and Edward may have seen him."

"Cause and effect," observed the Scotsman. "To the perceiving mind, the matter is clear as the amber hue of a pint of fine whisky."

Baxter noticed the frown creasing Manning's forehead and said, "Who else didn't want Judd around?"

Manning licked his lips nervously. "Well, Judd never got along with—"

Scotty leapt, grabbed little Manning's collar and hurled him across the room. He went whirling and staggering and banged against a chair. He collapsed into it and lay there breathing audibly, with a slight groaning.

Baxter got up and walked past the giant Tavish. The little man shook his head groggily as Baxter bent over him and said, "Hurt?"

Manning whispered, "No, I don't think so. A trifle jarred, that's all. Scotty gets too rough."

"What did you mean by that statement of yours?" asked Baxter.

Manning didn't answer. His eyes were scared and gazed pleadingly. Scotty towered behind Baxter.

"I've a very nasty temper," explained the Scotsman. "I'm disturbed thinking of poor Edward roaming the woods and afraid to return to his nest."

Baxter said, quietly, "Scotty, you're the damndest liar in the whole state of Alabama."

"I shouldn't be surprised," replied

Scotty. "There be times when I almost fool myself."

"That's easy," said Baxter. "And if you think you can close Manning's mouth by throwing him across the room, you're crazy. So you may as well let him finish the sentence he started a few minutes ago."

Manning's sing-song voice chimed, "I was only saying that Judd never got along with anybody."

Tavish rubbed his hands together. In the dim light of the room he loomed like an evil genie. Baxter thought of the dog with the crushed ribs, and he looked at the huge arms that had done it.

"About Judd Allen," said Baxter. "Where's the body?"

"In the good earth, where it belongs."

"I'd like to see."

Scotty boomed with a quick spurt of laughter. "I'll have no part in such ghoulish proceedings. The mon's under sod, and under sod he'll stay."

"You'll damn well do what you're told," snapped Baxter. "I'm investigating a murder and I'm boss. You'll talk when I tell you and you'll shut up when I get tired of the sound of your voice. You've been running things around here for quite a while. The giant Scot, killing dogs and spouting all the big words he picked out of a book. But that's over, Tavish. You're just one guy who may have committed a murder. So sit down and shut up!"

Scotty's lips curled slightly at one corner as he walked slowly towards Baxter.

"So you think you're boss, do you?"

**B**AXTER waited until the Scotsman grabbed him, and then shot two fierce, pounding jabs. One to the heart and one to the pit of the stomach.

Baxter might as well have pummeled a wooden fence. Scotty merely laughed and lifted Baxter into the air and held him aloft.

"Little mon!" murmured the Scotsman.

Baxter weighed in the one-eighties and was a shade under six feet and strong for his size. He could make mince meat out of the average two-hundred pounder. When he hit a man, he was accustomed to see the guy go down and stay down. For somebody to take a Baxter jab and laugh it off was like meeting a bullet-proof man.

Scotty set Baxter down and Baxter extended one foot, caught Scotty's elbow, gave a sudden twist and jerked his torso back. Scotty shot upward and over Baxter's shoulder and slammed onto the floor. Baxter knew his jiu-jitsu.

He turned and grinned. Tavish got up slowly and shook his head. His eyes held angry lights and seemed to widen at the corner. He reached towards the couch, lifted the huge, ungainly piece of furniture and swung it over his head. He arched his body and hurled the couch with a quick, sudden jerk.

Baxter dived out of the way and scraped his knee on the wooden floor. The couch crashed into the corner of the stone fireplace and dropped heavily. Baxter, still on one knee, watched Tavish lumber forward.

There was a curious chirping sound and something danced around Scotty. Little Manning's high voice squeaked out, "Scotty—don't! Please—you'll kill him! You—"

Tavish stopped and stared down, like a man trying to find out why his puppy kept snapping at his trouser cuff.

"Scotty—you'll kill him!"

Tavish halted and blinked his eyes. "Aye," he said. "I shouldn't lose my temper." He walked over to the small table, picked up his tumbler of whisky and took a deep gulp.

Baxter stuck his hands in his pockets. "Well," he said. "Ready to come out and dig, like I told you to?"

Scotty whirled; Baxter's arm tensed and then relaxed, in delicate balance. He felt himself get set, his fingers loose, his wrist barely flexed. The gun in its holster was firm and

flat and heavy. He was aware only of his hand and the gun, and of Scotty facing him and getting ready for action.

Then Scotty shrugged. "If your mind's made up," he said, "I'll ply the shovel."

## CHAPTER II

**B**XASTER stared down at the man in the plank coffin and bit his lips. He stepped back quickly. The guy hadn't been pretty to begin with, and the blow on the skull hadn't helped. Baxter's old, deep-rooted fear of death came back and made him feel helpless and empty.

Somehow, the giant Scotsman sensed it. "You're a stupid mon," he said. "For a minute, back there in the house, ye almost had me bedeviled."

Baxter peered over the edge of the grave again. "What's that?" he asked.

"Her? Just part of Myrna."

"Let's see it."

"Get it yerself," retorted the Scotsman.

Baxter could see the thick coiling scales of a snake buried there with Judd Allen.

"Why?" he asked. "Why there?"

"So nobody else would lay hands on it and arouse Edward's ire."

Baxter bent down. He heard Scotty step closer, and suddenly Baxter reached for his gun and drove himself forward to sprawl on the other side of the grave. He rolled and looked up.

Scotty was standing there, his shoulders broad and sloping, his hands on his hips. His lips were curled contemptuously. Maybe he hadn't been going to do a thing and maybe he'd been about to kill a guy by the name of Baxter. How could you tell?

Then there was a sound in the woods, the crackling of branches and the swish of dry leaves. Baxter was standing up and brushing the dirt from his jacket when they came into

sight. Gloria, and Scotty's partner, Fournier.

Baxter gave an instant to a short, tubby, bandy-legged guy with a round face, and then he was in love again. She was wearing slacks and a man's shirt. Her hair was like burnished copper and the electric waves she sent out made Baxter vibrate like a high tension wire.

He said, "I'm Baxter. Your father sent me down to take care of you and see what could be done."

She said, "Oh. We've been looking for Edward. I don't know why we haven't found him. He always answers my whistle and I'm sure he wouldn't have gone far, because this is the only place he knows and he's not adventurous."

Baxter said, "I just got here and I've been getting acquainted with Scotty. You knew Judd, didn't you?"

The girl frowned. "Of course. Why?"

"Because," said Baxter, "Tavish sends word that Judd Allen is dead and so everybody believes it. Part of my job is to get proof."

The girl's light blue eyes were questioning. "I don't want to look," she said. "And if it isn't Judd, who else could it be?"

"Suppose," said Baxter, "that Judd killed Edward, instead of the other way round. Suppose Edward's dead. That would explain why you couldn't find him, wouldn't it?"

The girl uttered an exclamation. Scotty grunted, "Mon, your words are tantamount to a statement that Scotty Tavish is guilty of withholding material evidence in a matter of murder."

Baxter watched the big Scot, but his mind was on the girl. If somebody'd make a pass at her, he could put his arm around her and pull his gun. And if nobody made a pass at her, maybe he'd get a chance to do it anyhow.

But she spoilt it all. "I'll look," she whispered.

She stepped forward gingerly and peered. Then she covered her eyes

and turned away quickly. "It's Judd Allen. I'm quite sure."

She shivered and Baxter moved toward her.

"Don't!" she shot out. She turned away suddenly and began running. Baxter stooped and reached into the coffin.

When he stood up, he had half of Myrna in his hand. There was about five feet of her and she was maybe five or six inches in diameter. She must have lost a lot of weight since she died, too, because she felt so light that if he threw her up in the air he was almost afraid she'd stay.

**H**E WALKED back to the house and went up to Edward's room. The windows were barred and the door had a lock and the hinges weren't damaged, which meant that if Edward had busted out, somebody had given him a key.

He thought of Scotty's statement that Edward had killed Judd on account of Myrna, and then he thought of Madie's uncompleted remark that she'd thought Judd was up in Edward's room. Which made either Scotty Tavish or Madie a liar.

Baxter felt the ten-thousand-dollar bulge in his pocket. However this business worked out, he had a suspicion he could keep the ten grand. These guys were more interested in saving their necks than in making a few dollars. It was a happy thought, because here Baxter had a chance to make ten thousand bucks and a copper-haired dame besides.

He examined the room carefully. The bed had been slept in recently and the bath tub had dirt rings around the sides and the closet smelt of camphor. There were clothes in it and two pairs of shoes of different sizes. The larger pair was of dry, cracked leather.

Baxter sat down on the bed and a spider crawled out of the springs and kept him company. Madie had been alone in the house at the time of the murder, and as for Manning, Baxter didn't know. But neither Madie nor

Manning could have smashed a skull as thoroughly as the ruin Baxter had seen in the coffin. The splintered bone looked more like Scotty's handiwork. And whether Scotty had actually done the killing or not, he'd done something that he was trying to hide.

Baxter stepped to the window and looked at the strip of beach. A boat was drawn up on it. Judd Allen had been killed near there. But thus far, the important thing was that Edward hadn't busted out of his room; he'd walked out through an unlocked door. Was that the setup? Giving a homicidal half-wit his perfect chance to kill the guy he hated?

Baxter surveyed the room again. Maybe everybody wasn't built the way he was, but he knew damn well that if he was all alone in the woods with Madie and a couple of other guys, the problem of a moron and his pet python would be just a side issue.

Thoughtfully, Baxter went downstairs and strolled out to the bay. He wished Gloria would show up and act lonesome. He kicked at the sand with his shoe and then strolled back through the clump of trees.

He almost tripped over it, and then he noticed what it was and he gave a yell and jumped back. But it didn't move, because after all, it was only half of a stuffed snake. He bent down and picked it up. It was the rest of Myrna all right. A hollow half of a snake, with beady eyes at one end and some wet leaves caught in the other.

He stuck it under his arm, stamped up the porch steps and entered the living room. Scotty and Tubby and Gloria were sitting there. Madie glided in softly and set the dinner table. She glanced at Tubby and smiled, and he smiled back at her. Scotty was leaning back and sipping his whisky, but Gloria frowned and bit at her lips. She was worried about something.

Baxter walked over to her and said, "I just found this. The other half of Myrna."

She gave him a queer look, which wasn't queer at that, considering what

he'd handed her. Then she took it, but a moment later she dropped it and shrieked.

"It's alive!" she screamed. "It moved!"

She pointed at the short, thick, wavy body. It had fallen on a couple of its curves and it lay there, rocking slightly. Then, as the rocking motion ceased, Myrna's rear half gave forth a squeaking sound and swayed violently.

Gloria screamed again and jumped up. "See!" she yelled.

Baxter stooped and picked it up. He felt a delicate movement inside, and he pulled out the stuffing of leaves and upended the body. A small field mouse leaped out and scooted across the floor. Gloria screamed for the third time, but Scotty leaned back and howled with laughter.

As for Baxter, he merely rubbed his mustache. Because, as the mouse had leapt out, it had practically turned around and squeaked, "It was murder, Baxter, and I can prove it."

Baxter got up and took Gloria's hand. "Have a drink, kid, and then ask Scotty about mice. There's an old Scotch saying about them, but mebbe Scotty forgot."

Tavish said, "It's nae a saying, if you're referring to the same words that flicker through my mind. It's part of a poem of Robert Burns, eh?"

Gloria frowned and quoted it. "The best laid plans of mice and men gang oft a-gley. But I don't understand."

"Neither did the mouse," remarked Baxter. "Let's eat."

**B**XASTER took the worst beating of his career that night. Here he had a dame with copper hair and he was on the inside track and he had moonlight and a strip of beach and all of Mobile Bay for atmosphere. And instead of taking advantage of her presence he had to sit in the middle of a lawn and make love to a python that had died of boredom two years ago.

Strictly speaking, of course, he didn't have to, but for professional reasons it was a damn good idea. So

he tucked half of Myrna under each arm, walked out to the center of the lawn and set her up.

The two halves fitted and they had a complicated way of hitching together. What with nothing but the moonlight to work by, it took him about ten minutes to rig her up. But once she was in place, she had a kind of dignity. He could almost appreciate now what this dim-wit had seen in her.

Baxter stretched out on the lawn, gave Myrna an affectionate pat on the shingles, and waited. He thought about Gloria for a while and then he thought about Edward. Baxter couldn't see how a guy who'd been kept in a cage with a couple of attendants all his life could suddenly break loose and live like a wild man. Particularly if the guy was an idiot.

Anyhow, Baxter's logic was that Edward would come snooping around the house, and if he saw somebody making love to Myrna in the middle of the moonlight, he'd get jealous and attack.

Baxter gave Myrna another love slap and heard a twig break, out there in the woods. He let his hand slide nearer his leather holster. Then, for a while, there wasn't any more noise.

He supposed he should have gone down the beach to visit Manning and find out why Tavish had thrown him around. The little snake investigator had wanted to say something, and though Baxter had had a few bright ideas that told him the case was a lot different from what it appeared to be, nevertheless he had no evidence yet. Scotty was temperamental, Madie was scared and Tubby had his eye on Madie. Maybe that was all there was to it.

Baxter heard the noise out in the woods again. Judging by the effects on Judd, Edward was merely armed with a battleaxe. And so Baxter, with a gun, had no worries. Still, he was a cautious guy and he had sense enough not to close his eyes. Which was one reason

why he was still alive about thirty seconds later.

The rock came out of nowhere, arched just high enough for Baxter to glimpse it, and thudded to the ground as he leaped. He crouched there with the thunder of the boulder still echoing in his ears.

He watched for movement and fired twice at Edward or a branch or a stray bat. He raced forward, shoulders low, weaving and ducking in case there were more rocks. But nobody yelled and nobody threshed around. For that matter, nobody in the house was even paying attention to the shooting.

Baxter stood up slowly, waiting for the guy to give himself away. After about a half minute, he did.

Baxter rushed again and luck sent him in the right direction. He saw someone suddenly, a small guy in a white shirt, rising up from the protection of a shrub and sprinting for the forest. Baxter left his feet and dived. He hadn't made a tackle like that since the time he stopped that Swede full-back on the wrong side of the goal line.

The man felt light as Baxter landed and knocked him flat. Baxter bounced up to his knees and lifted the gun.

Gloria muttered, "You damn fool! You damn fool! Oh, you dope!" Then she began crying softly.

Baxter had nabbed the wrong sister.

He said, "Sorry. Thought you were somebody else. But why the hell did you—" He stopped suddenly. Gloria couldn't throw a rock of that size, and so somebody else was around, after all.

He snapped, "Shut up!" and put his arm around her. She was still crying as she leaned against him and he absorbed the fragrance of her hair. Which was a lot better than chasing a maniac through the woods.

After a while she drew away from him. "I saw you out there, with the python," she whispered. "I knew what you were trying to do. Attract Edward. I circled around to where I'd see him first. I'm sure I can handle him, if I can only find him."

"Well, he was here, some place."

"You mean the rock? Edward wouldn't do that."

Baxter didn't answer. He thought of Judd Allen's battered skull. Edward wouldn't throw rocks. Hell, no! He was too gentle.

But he had a nice sister.

Baxter took her back to the house. He thought of moonlight and water and the strip of beach, and it made a pleasanter prospect than solving a murder for this Hartswell guy. Then Baxter thought of the rock that had been heaved at him and how easy it would be to brain him while he had Gloria in his arms. She was worth kissing, but she wasn't worth dying for. Besides, she'd still be around in the morning.

Just to make sure, he grabbed her by the shoulders and kissed her. She seemed to like it.

"Better go to bed," he said. "Edward won't show up any more. See you at breakfast."

He walked along the waterfront because he figured it was the safest way to Manning's house. Manning held the answer to Judd Allen's murder, and the killer probably knew it.

The Edward theory was an obvious one and, first off, it seemed to explain everything. But Edward had queered himself this evening. He'd kept carefully under cover, he'd heaved a rock from ambush, and he'd stayed hidden when Baxter had gone charging into the woods. All of which were normal and intelligent actions. So maybe Edward wasn't Edward at all. Maybe he was somebody with a good brain and a vested interest in Baxter's death certificate.

### CHAPTER III

**M**ANNING lived in a small bungalow about a half mile from the Hartswell place. Baxter rapped sharply on the door. From inside, the high tenor voice sang out, "Who's there?"

Baxter answered, "Me, Baxter."

He heard the creak of a bed and

slow, dragging footsteps. The porch light snapped on and Baxter stood there blinking and telling himself that a guy who had almost brained him in the center of a moonlit lawn couldn't miss him under a porch light.

Then the door opened and little Manning said, "Come in, quick!"

Baxter stepped into a living room of pine panels, small tables and deep, upholstered chairs. A menagerie of stuffed animals crowded down from all sides. They were mostly birds, but a few snakes coiled peacefully on the tables or tried to wriggle up the walls. And couldn't, being dead.

Baxter said, "You stuff these things yourself?"

The little man bounced his head up and down. "Yes, that's my hobby. Taxidermy."

Baxter walked over to a window and pulled the shades. He wondered how he'd be able to work both words into his report to the main office. Herpetology and taxidermy. Nine syllables to say the guy stuffed snakes. Maybe you needed a Ph.D. or a patent before you could use the words. Baxter wouldn't know about that.

But he did know that Ph.D.'s killed easy, and, as an extra precaution, he made sure the door was locked. Then he said, "Manning, you been living here quite a while, haven't you?"

"A few years. I'm not here all the time, but I come down often."

"And how long since you've seen Edward?"

"I couldn't tell you the date. Not recently, though."

"Seen him within the last year?"

"Oh, yes."

Baxter sat down. "I mean seen him close up. Talked to him or something."

"Well, not close up. But I've seen him at a distance several times, and I've heard him in his room."

"Yeah," said Baxter thoughtfully.

"What did he look like?"

"Something like Judd Allen. A little heavier, maybe, but from a distance they looked the same." He sat down

suddenly. "Baxter!" he chirped. "You mean—"

Baxter shrugged. "Mebbe. I'm just digging around. This Allen guy—did he get along with his wife?"

"Not very well. She was in love with Fournier, but Judd didn't seem to mind. Or at least, he didn't do anything about it."

"Not while you were looking, anyhow. Now tell me something, Manning." Baxter stuck one hand in his pocket and leaned against the fireplace. "You stuffed Myrna. Why?"

"She was too light, at first, and Edward would have ruined her. Dropped her or thrown her around. So I cut her in half and inserted weights in each part and then clamped them together again."

"Weights. Solid ones. Like crow-bars."

Manning nodded. "Iron rods. They were very heavy."

"And they were removed, and then the plan was to bury Myrna with Allen. But half of Myrna got lost. I stumbled on it by accident, this afternoon. But the rod inside—that was the murder weapon, wasn't it?"

Manning didn't have to answer that one. He licked his lips and looked nervous.

"Scotty Tavish," continued Baxter, "didn't want the weapon found. What's his game, Manning?"

"I don't know."

**B**AXTER studied the little man. He was scared and wouldn't give Tavish away. Well, Baxter would crack down later on. First, he wanted all the information he could get in a friendly way.

"You heard Scotty's story this afternoon," remarked Baxter. "That he and Tubby went fishing at night and came back to find Judd lying dead on the beach. Then they came over and told you, and you drove to the cross-roads and phoned Hartswell. Is that the way it actually happened?"

Manning nodded, a sharp, frightened jerk of his head.

"If Edward got out," continued Baxter, "he got out because his door was unlocked. Who had the key?"

Manning looked at the window and then looked at Baxter. The little man's eyes blinked.

Baxter grinned and stuck his hands in his pockets. He was bristling with energy and confidence and having a hell of a good time. He said:

"Don't fold up on me, Manning. Now, when Scotty told you Judd had been killed, did he tell you who'd done it? What I want to know is, whose idea was it first that Edward had done the killing?"

Manning's mouth dropped open. "Oh, my!" he exclaimed. "Oh, my!"

That was when the window got blasted apart. Baxter heard the roar of the gun and he dived at the floor. He saw the shade flap inward and saw the holes in it, and then the lead spray from the shotgun began pumping to the floor.

He whirled to one knee and yanked out his revolver. There were two lights lit. A wall bracket near the door and a lamp a few feet away from him. He fired at the bracket and the bulb disappeared. Then he sprang, grabbed at the lamp, ripped the cord out of its socket and plunged the room into darkness. He was still holding the lamp as he charged toward the door.

The lamp had a spherical brass base and a hunk of lead to anchor it down. It would give him more reach than his revolver butt, and besides, he could keep the revolver in his other hand, ready to fire.

He didn't tell himself all that. He just grabbed the lamp and ran. If he got outside fast enough, the guy with the shotgun wouldn't be expecting him and Baxter might score a blitzkrieg in the woods. They'd been scored in deserts and on the sea and on plains, but nobody had pulled one off in the forest, yet. So Baxter went through the door to pull a blitzkrieg. And didn't.

The guy with the shotgun must have raced for the door, and when

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Baxter charged out, all the guy had to do was swing his warclub.

Baxter never saw it. He was still holding up the lamp in front of him. The warclub smacked it and went right through it and bounced and took off half his skull.

Anyhow, that was the way he felt when he came to. He was lying on the ground, with the lamp a few feet away from him and a lump on his head that would have made him real bright if it had been filled up with brains instead of bruises and blood. His shoulder hurt, too. He moved it a little and rolled to his side.

It was easy to figure out that he was supposed to be dead. The sock that had ripped through the brass lamp would have made pulp out of his skull. Somebody had seen the round lamp, thought it was Baxter's head, and had aimed at it and hit. The somebody had felt the weapon grind through and hadn't bothered with a second look. Baxter had dropped and he had to be dead.

He sat up. His gun was still lying next to him. Maybe that was supposed to show, later on, that the killer had acted in self-defense. Baxter wouldn't know.

**H**E GOT up. His head ached and his shoulder throbbed. He walked quietly into Manning's bungalow and lit a match. Then Baxter blew it out and compressed his lips. A Ph.D.'s brains didn't look different from any others, though Baxter wished that they did. They weren't pretty and they made him feel sick. And sore and kind of helpless and mad.

But he knew a couple of things. That Judd and Manning had been killed in the same way, by the same guy. That Manning, if he didn't know who'd killed Judd, could have made a pretty good guess. And that the guy with the shotgun hadn't wanted Manning to talk.

Baxter stuck his hands in his pockets, and then he really felt bad. The wallet with Hartswell's ten thousand bucks was gone.

Baxter rubbed at his small black mustache. The ten thousand bucks—that worried him. If somebody'd taken it, how the hell was he going to collect his fee?

He woke up around nine o'clock the next morning. The sun was shining and the air was clean and sweet and the lump on his head had gone down to the size of a peanut. His shoulder was still stiff, but it was just a bruise and not a break. He put on a shirt and a pair of pants. Then he heard Stephen A. Hartswell's voice outside the window.

"He ought to be up by now," Hartswell was complaining. "I paid him good money and he ought to be on the job early."

"I tell you," said Gloria, "he worked late. Let the poor man sleep."

Baxter frowned. Here a dame was practically his when the moon was out, and when morning came around she sat on a porch with her old man and called Baxter "the poor man." He should have known better, on account of the copper hair. Dames with copper hair didn't know what the word loyalty meant. He laced his shoes and went out to the porch.

Hartswell muttered, "It's about time," and Gloria smiled and said:

"Hello. Hungry? Because I'll make you some breakfast. Madie went off somewhere, with the two men."

"Thanks," said Baxter. He took her into the kitchen and kissed her, just to start the day right. Because he was pretty sure it was going to end up very, very wrong.

Then he came back and sat down next to Hartswell. "Well? What brought you down?"

"Got to thinking about Gloria, all alone with three men, and it had me worried. So I took out the car and drove over. Got here a couple hours ago. Nice restful place. You find out anything?"

Baxter nodded. "Plenty. I'm going for the sheriff, right after breakfast."

"Sheriff? Listen—you can't do that! You promised you'd clear Ed-

ward or quit, and now you want to have him arrested."

"He won't get arrested," said Baxter. "He's dead."

"You killed him!" yelled Hartswell.

"Nuts. He died two years ago, and Tavish and Fournier have been collecting graft for watching his ghost. Damn good business, too. All pay and no work."

"You damn crazy Yankee! Sit there and tell me Edward's dead, and expect me to believe it!"

Baxter shrugged. "If he's around, find him. Gloria whistles and he won't come. Nobody's really seen him in two years. If he was around, he'd show up when you waved his feed bag."

Hartswell digested the words and then asked a question. "If Edward's dead, then who killed Judd Allen?"

"Scotty, Tubby, Madie, Manning. Four candidates, and take your pick."

"Why would they kill Judd?"

"I'll bite," said Baxter. "Why would they?"

Hartswell leaned back and picked at his teeth. "Baxter," he mouthed. "I think you're one of them loonies."

"Beginning to think so myself," retorted Baxter. And then Gloria arrived with his breakfast.

**B**XAXTER ate heartily and Madie came back in the middle of his eggs. She said hello to Hartswell and started for the kitchen, but Baxter called her back.

"Madie," he said. "You better change your clothes. I'm taking you and Gloria into town."

She said, "If you want," and turned away, but Hartswell called her back.

"You're staying here, Madie. And you too, Gloria."

Baxter said: "What kind of a Southerner keeps his women in the front line when there's liable to be shooting? I could answer that one, Hartswell, but not in front of a lady."

"Who you planning to shoot?" drawled Hartswell. He stood up slowly. "Wait for me, Gloria honey, and

don't let either of them go." He started to circle the porch.

Baxter saw Scotty and the short, squat Fournier cross the edge of the lawn and head toward the beach. Hartswell would meet them behind the house.

Baxter said, "Come on, quick."

Madie smiled, "It'll be a real pleasure to get away from here."

But Gloria said, "You can't! And I'm certainly not going. You heard what daddy said, didn't you?"

Baxter grinned. It looked like he might get some fun out of this, after all. He said, "Listen, toots. You're coming along if I got to pick you up and load you in the baggage compartment. Because Manning got killed last night and I want to bring back a sheriff."

Gloria's eyes widened. "Manning? You mean—murdered?"

Baxter nodded and picked her up. She kicked her feet and hammered at his chest, but he could tell that she liked it. She screamed, "Don't—please!" Then she stopped kicking and said, "I'll go with you. I didn't know about Manning, and neither did daddy. Let me down!"

Baxter hung onto her and didn't move. Here he had a chance to be a caveman, and just when he was rounding into form, the dame decided to come on back into the twentieth century and use her own gams.

"Let me down!" she repeated.

Baxter dropped her with a jolt. Madie said, "Will you stop this act and take me out of here? I get goose-pimples when I think of Manning being dead, so hurry, won't you?"

As they crossed the lawn to reach the car, Baxter saw Hartswell wave to Scotty and Fournier. They glanced at him and the two girls. Baxter wondered whether he was being dumb about this, playing a lone hand and not even letting the women in on it.

He loaded them into the coupé, with Gloria next to him and Madie on the far side, and he had the car rolling before the door had slammed shut. He

couldn't see the three men any more. They didn't fire at him, maybe because they thought he was a good guy and maybe because they didn't have guns, but more likely because he was protected by a harem.

#### CHAPTER IV

HE SQUEAKED around a couple of sharp curves and scraped bushes and then shot out into the swamp land where the little stream ran. He stopped just before crossing the ford. The dead dog was gone, but the sign still told the world about a python.

Baxter yanked on the hand brake. "This is where I get off," he said. "You beat it up to the sheriff's and tell him he's needed. I may have his man all wrapped up and ready, or he may have a little work to do. I don't know yet."

Madie grabbed at his coat. "You know who killed Judd!" She exclaimed.

"Don't you?" asked Baxter.

Madie shook her head. "All I know is that you got something on Tubby and Scotty. But they didn't do it. They were out fishing like they said. You've got to believe that! And you've got to promise you won't do anything—to Tubby!"

Baxter took her hand from his coat. "I know the racket," he said. "I guessed it when I saw the room upstairs. Judd lived there, not Edward. When Scotty and Tubby got here a couple of years ago and found out that Edward was dead"—Baxter glanced at Gloria and saw her lips tighten, but she didn't speak—"Judd told them what had happened and the bunch of you figured it all out. Live here and enjoy yourselves and take Hartswell's money, and pretend Edward was still alive. You don't expect me to shut up about that, do you?"

He glanced in the mirror to make sure nobody was coming up the road. Somehow, he didn't want to lie about the murder, and yet he wanted to get rid of the two dames.

Madie leaned forward. "I don't want Tubby to go to jail. We're planning to get married—I hated Judd. You've got to promise you won't say anything."

"How the hell can I?" asked Baxter gently.

She grabbed for the ignition key and Baxter slapped at her hand and knocked the key to the floor. She began screaming. Baxter snapped, "Shut up!" Then he turned to Gloria. "Pick it up and get going, or you'll lose your chance. They're not going to sit around all morning and wait."

Madie yelled, "Tubby didn't do it—Tubby didn't do it!"

Baxter reached for her. "You little fool!" he snapped. "Here somebody knocked off your husband for you, and you got a boy friend waiting and I can prove he didn't do it. So what's this all about?"

She stopped yelling and looked up and started to smile, but the smile never broke. She just stared, and then Baxter knew he'd waited too long and gummed the works.

Scotty's voice said, from behind Baxter, "If Tubby didn't do it, who did?"

Baxter sat back and tried to get his elbows free so that when he turned around he could draw. But Gloria was pressed up against him and he couldn't reach the holster without wrapping her chin around his elbow, which was bad for his aim. And a shot gone wrong might mean curtains.

Then Scotty had him around the throat and powerful arms yanked him up and tugged him through the open window. Baxter somersaulted and went sprawling and Scotty jumped and shoved a knee through his stomach. Baxter gasped and kicked, and Scotty reached for Baxter's holster and gave a wrench that snapped the strap at the weak spot under the shoulder. Baxter got up slowly. Tubby and Hartswell were standing there. Scotty was waving a holstered gun.

"Short cut to the road," he drawled.

"Ye should never stop to argue with a lass."

Baxter told himself this was serious. Here he'd tried to grab off all the women and leave these guys with nothing but a pair of bodies and a python, and naturally they were mad and wanted to take it out on him. He'd lost his gun, and even though Scotty wasn't likely to use it, he didn't see how he could handle Scotty and a couple of other guys without it.

Tavish said again, "If Tubby didn't do it, who did?"

"Who do you think?" asked Baxter. "Who'd have a good reason to kill Judd and then Manning?"

"I would," said Scotty. "I almost killed the little mon yesterday, right in front of your eyes."

"What is this, anyhow?" demanded Baxter. "A confession?"

Gloria cried out suddenly, "I saw him last night, in the woods. He threw the rock at you!"

Baxter snapped, "You little fool! Get out of here, you and Madie, and let me handle this!"

Scotty said, "Ye'll not leave here!" and started for the car.

Baxter yelled, "Beat it, fast!"

Scotty took one great stride and Baxter kicked him in the shin as hard as he could. Scotty yelped, hopped on one foot and then drew back his fist. He had the gun in it but he wasn't even aware he was holding it.

Baxter ducked and slammed his fist into Scotty's stomach. It stopped Scotty but it didn't hurt him. The car ground into gear, the wheels churned and splashed forward into the stream.

Scotty cursed and swung again. Baxter dropped and the blow jarred off the top of his head. He grabbed for Scotty's wrist and hauled. Scotty sprawled flat and his big hands pawed out. His fist, still with the holster in it, slapped at Baxter's head.

Baxter got his arm in the way and it went numb from the shock. He gripped Scotty's hand and ripped at the fingers. Then the gun slipped loose and Baxter scooped it up.

The report blasted out and Baxter felt the slug tear into his leg. He wriggled loose and squeezed on the trigger three times. Hartswell shrieked and Scotty reared up, a heavy rock in his hands. Baxter threw himself clear and lay there gasping, with his bad leg buckled underneath him and the gun waving in Scotty's face.

"You dumb Scot!" he yelled. "Get back—I don't want to shoot you!"

SCOTTY TAVISH hesitated and then seemed to notice the gun. Tubby had jumped into the high grass at the first shot. Now he came forward cautiously.

Baxter snapped, "Grab that gun and put it where Hartswell can't get it."

Scotty turned and slowly lowered the rock. He saw Hartswell lying there, moaning, with the blood welling up and staining his shirt.

"You shot him!" exclaimed the Scot.

"Sure," said Baxter. "Don't you get it yet? He just tried to plug me. Got me in the leg, and when I fired just now it was at Hartswell. Hartswell, who murdered first Judd and then Manning."

"The little mon? When? How?"

"Last night. That's why I sent for the sheriff. To arrest Hartswell."

Scotty rubbed his long jaw. "I don't understand it," he said.

"I better start at the beginning, then. Edward was dead even before you and Tubby first came here, wasn't he?"

"Drowned," remarked Scotty. "Drowned in a howling storm, and I never set eyes on him."

"Well, he'd killed somebody a few years ago, and Judd knew about it and knew that Hartswell had bought off the prosecution. But when a new prosecutor who wasn't friendly to Hartswell came into office, then Hartswell was wide open for blackmail. Judd tried to shake him down a few weeks ago. That was why Hartswell decided to kill Judd.

"Hartswell sneaked down here. The

iron bar in the snake happened to be a handy weapon and Hartswell used it. That's all there is to the murder of Judd Allen. You and Tubby were out in the boat when it happened, and you were afraid you'd be accused of it. And afraid the Edward fraud would come out. So you figured that if you blamed it all on Edward, nobody could ever prove Edward was already dead and so you'd clear yourself and get out of an embarrassing situation at the same time.

"Hartswell played it your way, too. He must have learned from Judd Allen that Edward was dead. So Hartswell did two things—he sent Gloria down to look for Edward, and he sent me down to investigate. He thought that an amateur girl and an outsider like me would never get to the truth of it."

Baxter stopped for breath. His leg began to hurt him, but he figured he might as well tell Scotty all about it and then take a vacation.

"That was where Hartswell made his big mistake. Because he practically bumped himself off when he hired the best dick in the South. Me."

"You?" said Scotty.

Baxter grinned. "Sure. Me. And he found it out last night when he was hiding outside Manning's bungalow and overheard me pump Manning. Hartswell realized that I could ask the question that would convict him. All I had to do was ask Manning how long he had to wait before he got Hartswell on the phone on the night of the murder. Get it? Manning waited a couple of hours, and that meant Hartswell wasn't home at the time of the murder and had no alibi.

"Hartswell had to do something before I got that piece of information. So he scared me out of the house with a shotgun, bumped Manning and tried to brain me. Only he got me mixed up with a brass lamp, and that was a fatal error. Any guy who can't tell the

difference between me and a brass lamp deserves the chair."

Baxter was sweating and he knew the leg was going to give him trouble, but it was still a pleasure to think of the ten thousand bucks that Hartswell had given him and which were on Hartswell's person right now.

"Just fish in Hartswell's pocket and hand me that black wallet, Scotty," continued Baxter.

Scotty obeyed and Baxter fingered the roll. "This clinches it," remarked Baxter. "He took it out of my pocket last night after he thought he'd brained me. As a matter of fact, it gave him away. Anybody who'd searched thoroughly would have found the dough, but he would have found out I was alive, too. But Hartswell was the only one who knew I had the money. He'd seen me put it in my wallet and he'd seen where I keep my wallet. So when somebody took it without even realizing I was still alive, it had to be Hartswell."

"If ye were so damn sure it was Hartswell," sneered Scotty, "why didn't ye say so this morning instead of going through all this ruckus?"

"How in hell did I know he was going to shoot me in the leg?" demanded Baxter. "And besides, there was the dame. I wanted to duck out with her and let you and the sheriff handle Hartswell, without her knowing I was responsible. But now—"

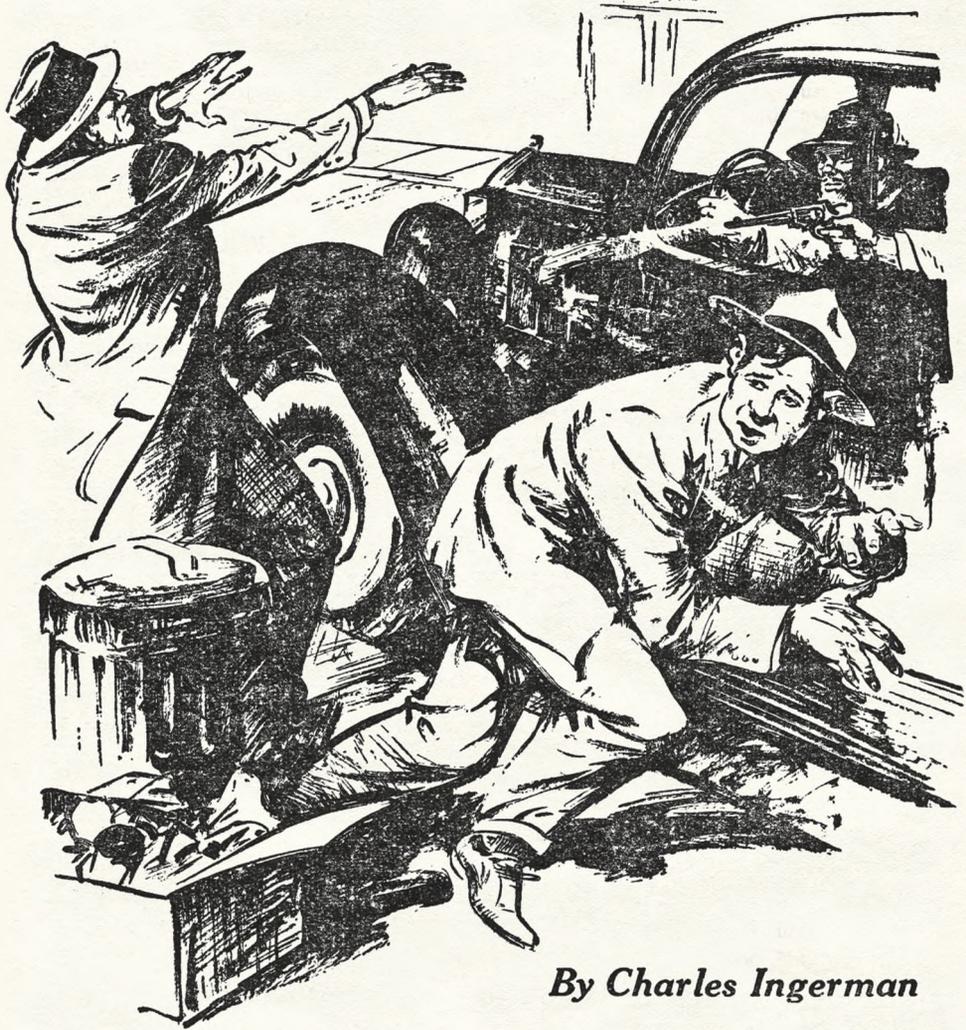
Baxter wasn't happy. Here he'd had a dame nuts about him, and then he had to go and shoot her old man. What chance did he have now?

He rubbed his mustache and told himself it was his own fault. If he'd tumbled to Hartswell early enough, he could have gone after Madie instead. This way, he'd lost both of them. Still, he'd be in a hospital pretty soon and there ought to be plenty of talent around. He wondered what kind of a nurse he'd get.

He was ripe for a brunette.



# The Unwilling Witness



*By Charles Ingerman*

★ ★ ★

*Little Benny Infortunato, dip artist, was impaled on the horns of a dilemma. For not only was he confronted with a lawman's heavy hand—but he faced the shiv wizardry of a desperado duo.*

★ ★ ★

**F**ROM a purely social point of view, you might have said that he was a nice little guy. He was short, tubby, with a round happy face and a quick, friendly smile. His name was Benny Infortunato. The only trouble with him was that he was a pickpocket.

Now, a man's business is his own affair, and all of that, but Benny's business was very, very bad. As he sauntered along Canal Street, on his

way to visit the parole officer, Benny himself realized that. One misstep—just one, mind you—and they'd yank him back to serve the rest of his sentence. Three years. Three long years in the stamping mill. Three to go.

On the other hand, there was that fat wallet up ahead. Benny's keen eyes could discern its outlines on the tall man's hip, and instinct told him that it was a well-stocked wallet, filled with lots of crisp banknotes.

It was a temptation. It was a great temptation and it was a lead-pipe cinch. In addition, there was the deplorable state of Benny's finances to consider.

He took a few quick steps, came up behind the tall man, who was waiting for the light to change green at Broadway. A young fellow with a dolly filled with fur pieces came trundling along the sidewalk. Benny took advantage of that heaven-sent diversion to stumble into the tall man.

It was a minor collision. The tall man snapped around, glaring. Benny smiled his apologetic best, clawed himself erect. The fat wallet was already safe in his own side coat pocket.

"I'm so sorry," Benny said with every indication of abject sincerity. The tall man grumbled something about clumsy clods, glanced at the light, which was green, now, and headed into the street.

Benny started to fade. But before he could turn, he saw the taxi slithering toward the tall man. And as he watched, a hand, filled with a shiny automatic, poked out of the window.

The tall man evidently saw it too. He tried to scramble back. An ugly, hate-filled face showed in the window, and the gun blasted. The tall man choked, crumpled to the black pavement. The taxi spurted ahead.

At the intersection, the cop began honking on his whistle. There were assorted screams from the innocent bystanders. Benny soaked himself in

the nearest segment of the crowd. His nimble fingers flicked the bills from the wallet. The wallet itself, faster than eye could follow, dropped into a wire trash basket.

The traffic cop was pounding up, now. He was standing over the man on the pavement. He was blasting away on that whistle. Other cops, as if by magic, were headed to the spot.

Benny, with miraculous agility, eased himself away from there. He hurried, without particularly seeming to, to the nearest corner. He turned it, and then he ran like hell.

**H**E HAD caught his breath by the time he got to the parole officer's place. His heart was still pounding, but he wasn't heaving like a horse at the end of a race any more. He tucked the booty into his inside breast pocket, straightened his tie, knocked on the door, and he went in.

"Hello, there, Benny!" Parole Officer Dugan said. "Have you been a good boy?"

"I'll say!" Benny wheezed. "I been so good it hurts, Lieutenant Dugan."

"No more dip-art, eh, Benny?"

"No, sir! Not me!"

"You don't want to finish that three-year jolt, plus whatever we could tack on for busting your parole?"

"No, sir! Not me!"

"You still living at the same place?"

"Yes, sir."

"You still working nights, from midnight to eight a. m. in Nick Hydropolis's restaurant?"

"Yes, sir!"

"How do you like it?"

"It's different," Benny admitted cautiously. "It's not what I been used to. Such smells, in that kitchen. Such stacks of dirty dishes to wash. You've no idea."

"It's a good, honest job," Lieutenant Dugan said. "Not everybody would be willing to let you work for them, you know."

"I guess you're right, sir," Benny

answered. "But some day, I'm hoping to get myself a better job."

"That's the spirit," Lieutenant Dugan said. "You keep on working hard, and you'll be mighty glad of it."

"Yes, sir."

"All right, report again at the same time next week."

Benny went away from there. That was one worry less to bother about. But all the way uptown in the subway, he had another worry.

That face behind that gun in the taxi window. Boy, every time he thought of that, he got a chill. Because, you see, he'd recognized that face. It belonged to Heinie Saddlemann.

Only it couldn't belong to Saddlemann, for the simple reason that Saddlemann was in Sing Sing, serving a seven-year jolt for assault with a deadly weapon.

There had to be an angle, somewhere. If Saddlemann was in Sing Sing, he couldn't be shooting tall guys from taxis on Canal Street and Broadway. And vice versa, as the mouthpieces always say.

"Sure, there ought to be some angle, if a guy was smart enough to think of it. On the other hand, Heinie Saddlemann was a tough customer to think of angles on. He was a born killer, and what's worse, he had two brothers, Sammy and Dickie, who were just as big and just as tough as he was. The three of them were a bad combination to cross.

**B**ENNY sat there in the subway, sandwiched between a large, mustached woman who was knitting with bovine placidity and a gaunt workman in coveralls who reeked of garlic. He wished he were somewhere else.

He got off at Grand Central Station from force of habit, because that's one of the lush spots for an ambitious pickpocket, but he hadn't circulated ten minutes before Moran collared him.

"Not working, are you, Benny?"

"Heck, no!" Benny protested. "What you think I am—a dope?"

"Sure," Moran agreed amiably. "I think you're a dope. Also, it would be a pleasure to catch you with your hand in some citizen's pocket."

"Not me!" Benny squawked. "I'm on the straight and narrow. I've got an honest-John job, working in a restaurant. Why, I've just come from reporting to Lieutenant Dugan."

"Then what are you doing here, anyway?"

"Here? Here? Why, I just stopped in to have myself an oyster stew."

"You're headed the wrong way," Moran informed him, not too kindly. "The oyster bar's off on the other side."

"Heck," protested Benny. "I got to get there, first, don't I?"

"On your way!" Moran grumbled. "But I'll be watching you."

"That's the trouble with you cops," Benny complained. "Always suspicious. Always riding a guy, no matter how hard he's trying to go straight."

He marched off, huffily, to the Oyster Bar and ate a steaming bowl of the stuff, little as he liked it. But out of the corner of his eyes, he could see Moran, gliding back and forth outside the door.

Finally, he paid his check, went back outside. "Where to now?" Moran asked.

"I'm going to catch a subway. I'm going home. I worked till eight this morning, and I haven't been to bed yet." This, in a fashion, was the truth.

"I'll see you onto your train," Moran said.

"Always hounding me," Benny moaned. "Just like I was a criminal, or something!"

Back in the subway, this time between a rawboned blonde and a delivery boy who was drooling over a chocolate bar, Benny rode up to Seventy-seventh street.

He was still trying to figure an

angle on the Canal Street affair when he bought his paper on the corner. And that is when he got a jolt. There, in black print on the first page, was the story.

#### DARING DAYLIGHT SHOOTING

Crowds at Broadway and Canal Street were stunned today at eleven o'clock by a daring shooting.

The shots were fired from a moving taxicab. The assailant has not yet been apprehended. The victim of the shooting was Special Prosecutor David Williams.

There was a lot more, a long rehash of the essential information. Benny read it with vision strangely swimming. Somehow he made the sanctuary of his flea-bitten room, sat down limply in his archaic armchair.

He reached into his inside breast pocket, pulled out the booty which he had taken from the wallet. There were four new twenty-dollar bills, a ten, and three ones. Ninety-three dollars, good as gold. There was also a driver's license, made out to David W. Williams, and an assortment of lodge cards.

Benny groaned. It would be his luck to frisk a special prosecutor. Mother, mother, if they ever pinned this on him! He shuddered right down to his little toes at the very prospect.

Somebody knocked at his door, and he jammed the booty into his pocket again, quick as a mouse, before he got up and turned the key.

It was Sime. Sime Grundlin, his pal. Sime Grundlin, con man.

**S**IME was high as a kite. "Boy," he exclaimed. "I didn't think it would come off, I was sure it wouldn't come off. But it did."

"What?" Benny asked.

"Remember that flossy stock I had? American Beauty Mining Company? The stuff Freedman printed up for me?"

"Yeah?"

"I just sold it. Found a sucker and

sold it. Three hundred bucks. How's that?"

"Swell," Benny said, not too enviously. "That's swell, Sime."

"And boy, if you think I'm not going to celebrate. I'll find Maisie and—"

"Look, Sime," Benny said earnestly. "I got a problem. What if you saw a murder? What would you do?"

Sime stared at him, owl-eyed, almost sober. "Do? Do?" he queried. "I'd run like hell, that's what I'd do."

"But suppose," Benny went on, picking his words with care, "suppose the dead man was kind of a big-shot, and that you knew who the killer was? Couldn't you work an angle?"

"Murder I don't have nothing to do with," Sime said virtuously. "Murder I wash my hands of, see?"

"But there ought to be an angle."

"Who got himself killed?" Sime asked.

Benny held up the paper, pointed to the item with a blunt forefinger. "Just a special prosecutor, that's all!"

"No angle," Sime declared.

"But the killer," Benny husked. "Couldn't we put some pressure on the killer?"

"Who was it?"

"Heinie Saddlemann."

"Who?"

"Heinie Saddlemann."

"You're squirrely! Heinie's in Sing Sing."

"He was in that taxi. He did the trigger work."

"You been smoking Mary Warners. He's in Sing Sing. Besides, me, I wouldn't want to tangle with the Saddlemann brothers. Still no angle. You couldn't give me a piece of it."

"Okay," Benny said. "No harm trying, I guess. You'll keep clammed about it, huh? You won't say anything?"

"Me?" Sime asked indignantly. "What you think I am, a punk? Like a grave I'm silent."

"Thanks," Benny said.

"And now, tootle-oo! I got to celebrate. I got to find Maisie and celebrate."

"So long!" Benny said.

He turned the key in the lock again, when Sime had gone. He was tired. He really had been up late the night before. His eyes seemed to be dropping out of his head. His knees felt as if they were made of wet paper.

He tossed the newspaper onto the floor and he tumbled onto the bed, pulled the threadbare blanket over himself, clothes, shoes and all.

In twenty seconds, strange as it may seem, he was sleeping the untroubled sleep of the innocent. . . .

**B**ENNY awoke to the tune of very loud banging on the door of his room. "Open up!" a mean, gruff voice commanded. "Open up, or we'll bust the door down!"

Benny eased out of the bed, praying for the springs to hush. His prayer was answered. He stood on the rug beside the bed, feeling a little dizzy and cold, holding his breath. Maybe he could fool them, whoever they were. Maybe if he was quiet enough, they'd think he'd gone out.

"Open up, you louse!" the mean, gruff voice came again. "We know you're there. We heard you snoring. Open up or we'll bust the door down!"

And there was some more hammering.

Benny felt chilled to the bone. Who? What? He bent over so that he could peer out the window at the clock on the steeple of the church across the way. It was five-thirty.

"Open up, you skunk!" the mean, gruff voice insisted. "I'll count to three!"

Benny wished he were a mouse, an that he could duck down the mousehole beside the bureau. "One!" yelled the voice outside.

Benny wished he had wings, like a bird, so he could hop out the window without smashing to a grease spot on

the pavement down below. "Two!" yelled the voice.

Benny dragged himself to the door, turned the key with sweaty fingers.

"And about time!" thundered the mean, gruff voice.

All the things Benny had wished before were as nothing, now. Now he wished he were somewhere else indeed.

Two big men stood at the doorway, and as Benny stepped back, they stepped forward. Two big men, tough-looking and mean-looking. Sammy and Dickie Saddlemann. Heinnie Saddlemann's rawhide brothers.

"Y-y-yes?" Benny Infortunato stammered. "Y-y-you were looking for m-m-me?"

"Yeah?" Sammy Saddleman gritted. "Yeah!"

"Why?" queried Benny, in a rather thin soprano.

"You been talking too much!" Sammy Saddleman rasped.

"Me?" Benny wailed. "I ain't said nothing to nobody!"

"So?" Dickie drawled, like a judge passing out a death sentence. "Sime Grundlin says different. 'He's in the Diver's Delight Restaurant, and he says plenty.'"

"He's drunk!" Benny proclaimed.

"He *is* drunk," Sammy agreed amiably.

"Also, he's a liar," Benny affirmed.

"Maybe so," Sammy yielded. "But listen to me, punk. Did you or didn't you see my brother in a taxicab around eleven o'clock today?"

"How could I?" Benny whispered. "How could I when he was up the river?"

"He wasn't," Dickie snapped. He got paroled last night. Besides, that isn't the question. Did you see him or didn't you?"

"The light was very bad," Benny growled. "I couldn't tell, one way or another."

"Yes or no?"

"No," Benny surrendered. "I guess I didn't see him."

"I guess that's right," Dickie con-

curred nastily. "If you remember that, you'll be all right, maybe. If you don't remember that, you'll be holding an armful of lilies you can't smell, understand? We really ought to knock you off just on general principles, anyway."

"I'll remember," Benny whispered, shuddering. "Yes, sir!"

"All right. Only, don't forget!"

"No, sir!" Benny Infortunato said.

So they stood looking at Benny for a couple of minutes, the same kind of a look they'd give a body in a coffin, and they set their faces in very ferocious lines, while Benny faced them and felt his temperature drop twenty degrees. Then they turned on their heels, marched out the door again. Benny turned the key with tingling fingers, sank into his armchair, weak and sick.

Thirteen seconds later, there was another knock at the door. "Yes?" Benny breathed.

"Lieutenant Dugan," the Parole Officer barked. "Open up!"

Somehow Benny got out of the chair. Somehow he stiffened his knees enough to walk to the door, open it again.

Lieutenant Dugan stood there glowering at him. "I just saw Sammy and Dickie Saddlemann on the stairs," Lieutenant Dugan rasped. "Were they here?"

"No, sir!"

"That's not what they said. They admitted that they were here."

"Yes, sir."

"So you're consorting with known criminals, eh? I suppose you know what that means?" Benny knew what that meant. It meant three years.

"It—it wasn't what you think!" Benny protested.

"No?"

"No!"

"What was it?"

began to go round and round. The walls seemed to lean in on him. The floor started to pitch like a raft in a typhoon.

"What was it?" Lieutenant Dugan insisted, pretty harshly. "Consorting with known criminals, that's what! Breaking your parole, that's what!"

"No!" wailed Benny, seeing a vision of those long, grey corridors, lined with barred cages and smelling, always, of a strong disinfectant. "No, Lieutenant Dugan!"

"Then—"

Benny had another quick vision. He saw a tubby little man with a happy, round face, lying in a long box. Himself. Candles flickered at his head and feet, and in his arms, he held a sheaf of lilies which he could not smell.

Was ever a man in such a predicament? Three years, plus, if he didn't talk. Eternity, plus, if he did. Frantically, he weighed them in his mind. Frantically, he tried to think of another way out.

Finally, with Lieutenant Dugan standing there, glaring at him, he made up his mind. He took a deep breath, like a man about to dive off a high pier into icy water.

"It was like this, lieutenant," he whispered. "I crossed Canal Street this morning, on the way to your office. I was standing on that corner, waiting for the light to change green, when it happened."

"Oh!" said Lieutenant Dugan. "So you saw Heinie Saddlemann fire that shot?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Why didn't you tell me when you saw me?"

"I wasn't sure. You know how it is."

"But you're sure now?"

"Yes, sir!"

"You're sure, you're sure?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Well, let's go down to headquarters and see what we can do about it."

Benny picked up his hat from the

**A**T THAT moment, peculiar things began to happen to Benny Infortunato. For one thing, the room

scarred bureau, let Lieutenant Dugan out of the room courteously, locked the door after them. Without being told, he walked down the steps ahead of the lieutenant.

There was a small crowd on the sidewalk, at the steps which led from the sidewalk to the door of the brownstone. Quite a few gawkers, plus a cop or two. Benny walked through them, numb. Lieutenant Dugan wrapped firm fingers around his plump arm, guided him into a black auto. Lieutenant Dugan went around, got under the wheel, made a U-turn in the middle of a one-way street, stepped on the gas. . . .

**D** E P U T Y I N S P E C T O R MAHONEY had a kind face. He had kindly eyes, with crow's-feet at the corners from twinkling them. But he had a voice which seemed to have been sandpapered.

"So you saw the shooting?" he asked the dizzy Benny Infortunato.

"Yes, sir."

"And you recognized the man who fired the gun?"

"Yes, sir."

"And now, like any other honorable citizen, you're coming forward to tell what you know?"

"Yes, sir."

Deputy Inspector Mahoney smiled, and it was not a very cheery smile. "Benny," he rasped, "you're a liar."

Benny squirmed.

"You've broken your parole, and now you're trying to bargain with us. You're trying to turn state's evidence against Heinie Saddleman to save your own skin."

Benny appeared anguished. Benny appeared mortally wounded. But there was still a chance. "You've got me all wrong, sir," he moaned.

Deputy Inspector Mahoney smiled at him like sunlight glinting on an iceberg. He paused until the silence in that room was tense. And then he spoke:

"How can you prove that you were on that corner, Benny? How can you

prove that this isn't just a tall story, made up on the spur of the moment because you want to wriggle free?"

**B**ENNY felt blitzed. He saw the swimming black spots before his eyes again. His brain churned. He quaked as he thought of the proof he had—those papers in his pocket. Ninety-three bucks versus three years, plus. It struck him that thirty-one dollars a year is a low salary.

His mind hopped like lightning on a barbed-wire fence. He made a terrific decision. They'd find that stuff any way if they booked him. He pulled the stuff out.

"Just before the shooting," Benny explained damply, "the tall guy—that was Williams, sir—dropped these."

Deputy Inspector Mahoney's black eyebrows arched high. "Dropped them?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you picked them up"—Mahoney leered—"and were just about to return them when the shooting took place?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Money and all?"

"Of course!"

Deputy Inspector Mahoney put on his death's-head smile again.

"You're lying Benny!"

"Me?"

"Yes, you!"

He reached into the drawer of his desk, pulled out a black leather wallet. He flipped it open, so that the gold-stamped initials—D. W. W.—showed. "This was found in the trash container, Benny. We haven't tried, yet, but we can probably lift your fingerprints from it."

Benny stared at the wallet. He was hooked. He could feel cold sweat trickling down his back. He was on the spot, now, no fooling. Already he could hear the judge's grave voice pronouncing his sentence. How much would they tack onto his sentence

for breaking his parole? Another three years? Five? Ten?

Mahoney seemed to be pleased about something. "And that's not all," he grated. "You claim you're working in Nick Hydropolis's restaurant. The truth of the matter is that you've made a dicker with Nick. You loll around in that kitchen, and Nick reports that he's paying you. Actually, it's not so. Actually, you've broken your parole consistently."

"But I'm still willing to be a witness against Heinie Saddleman." Benny murmured, hopefully and desperately. "That ought to count for something, oughtn't it? A bona fide witness in a murder case?"

"Who said anything about murder?" Mahoney snapped.

"But that special prosecutor—that David Williams! He got killed. I saw it."

"He got shot," Deputy Inspector Mahoney countered. "He got shot because he'd sent Saddleman up. It was a revenge shooting. But he didn't die. He's not going to die."

"And Saddleman?" Benny choked.

"We caught him in exactly seven minutes. He confessed to the shooting. There were plenty of witnesses besides you, Benny. We don't need your testimony, see? Heinie's already on his way up the River again."

Benny's mouth turned sour, and there was a pinwheel whirling in his brain. "But Sammy and Dickie Saddleman—they said—"

Deputy Inspector Mahoney grinned impishly. "They'd like to see you alone for about an hour, Benny. They seem to have a little grievance against you."

"No!" squalled Benny. "No, no!" He leaned against the desk and the earth seemed to be shaking apart. "Send me up again!" he whimpered. "Don't turn me loose. They'd kill—"

"Funny thing about them," Mahoney mused. "We didn't know, until an hour ago, that they were accessories in this last shooting their brother did. Not until we picked them

up in front of your rooming house. You tie them to it directly, Benny—just the thing we needed. We didn't know you were a friend of theirs."

Mahoney paused. "Maybe you could ride up the river in the same ship-ment with them?"

Benny shuddered. Benny tried to speak. It seemed that there ought to be something he could say. But his mouth was full of dry meal and there was a horrible dinning in his head.

"Maybe we could even let you share a cell with them?"

Benny was limp. There was no hope in Benny. He was staring, glassy-eyed, at the end of his life.

"Basically, you're a good little guy, Benny," Deputy Inspector Mahoney opened. "You're just off on the wrong rail. You still think picking pockets is better than working for a living."

"No!" gagged Benny Infortunato. "No, I don't! Really! I—I—I!"

"We haven't any grudge against you," Mahoney said slowly. "We'd feel a lot better about it if we could straighten you out, rather than send you up again. That's part of a cop's job, too."

The words didn't make sense to Benny. They were just sounds in the room, bouncing harshly against the walls.

"But what choice do you give us, Benny? How can we help you, if you're not willing to help yourself?"

"Huh?"

"What good does it do for us to catch you, and send you up, over and over again? Why don't you get smart, Benny?"

"Huh?"

"I've got enough here, with a little trouble, to put you behind bars again, Benny. And do you know what I'm going to do?"

"Yes, sir," mumbled Benny forlornly. "You're going to give me the works."

"No," said Mahoney. "We owe you a favor for fingering the Saddleman brothers. I'm going to gamble that you've learned a lesson. I'm going to

play a hunch that letting the Saddle-mann brothers beef you with a prison-made shiv isn't as smart as giving you another chance."

"Huh?"

"We can pick you up any time, Benny. Just remember that. You may go now."

Benny was still dazed. He got to Nick Hydropolis's restaurant at eleven-thirty, sat down in the spare chair beside Nick behind the cash counter.

"Hallo!" Nick greeted him, smiling archly. "You come for to work, huh?"

"That's right," Benny agreed.

"Great shame," Nick consoled him. "Great shame a big shot like you has got to play-act like working in restaurant for ten dollars a wick, just because of silly law."

"Sure it is," Benny concurred.

"Ten dollars a wick, washing greasy

dishes in smelly kitchen," Nick went on. "Awful for gentleman like you."

"Ten dollars?" Benny asked. "You really pay ten dollars a week to dish-washers?"

"Sure!"

"Do you need a dish-washer?"

Nick shrugged. "Always am needing good dish-washers."

"I'll take the job," Benny said.

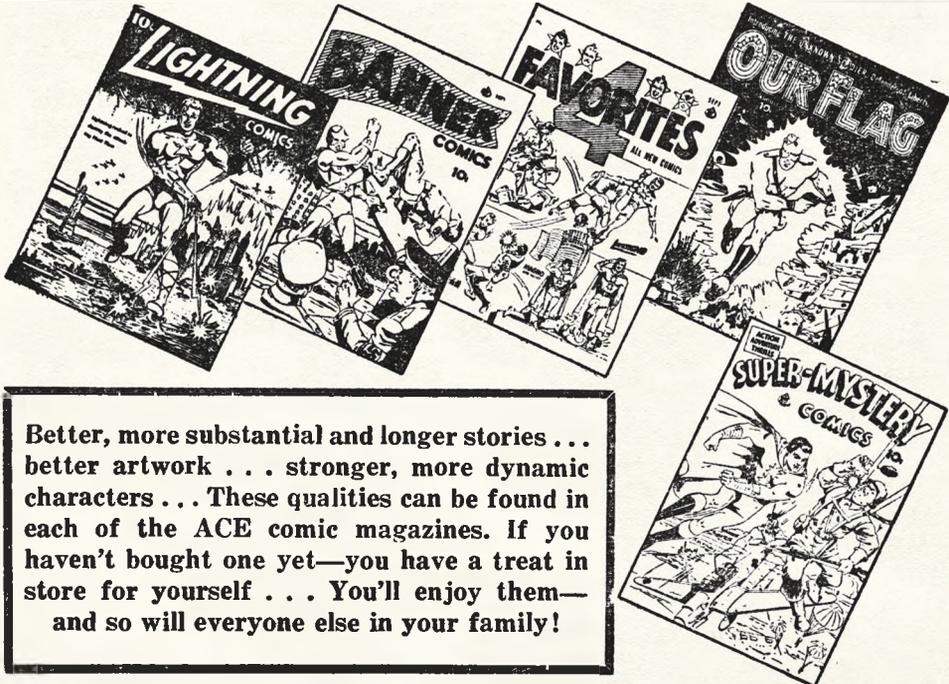
"What? You're making jokes with poor Nick! A fine gentlemen like you working in my kitchen? G'wan!"

"No, I'll take the job," Benny insisted. "Washing dishes. Ten bucks a week. I'll start right now."

"You're kidding! You're making fun!"

"No, I'm not," Benny replied, more serious than he'd ever been in his life before. "I'm not kidding. Confidentially, I'm going to learn the restaurant racket—from dish water up!"

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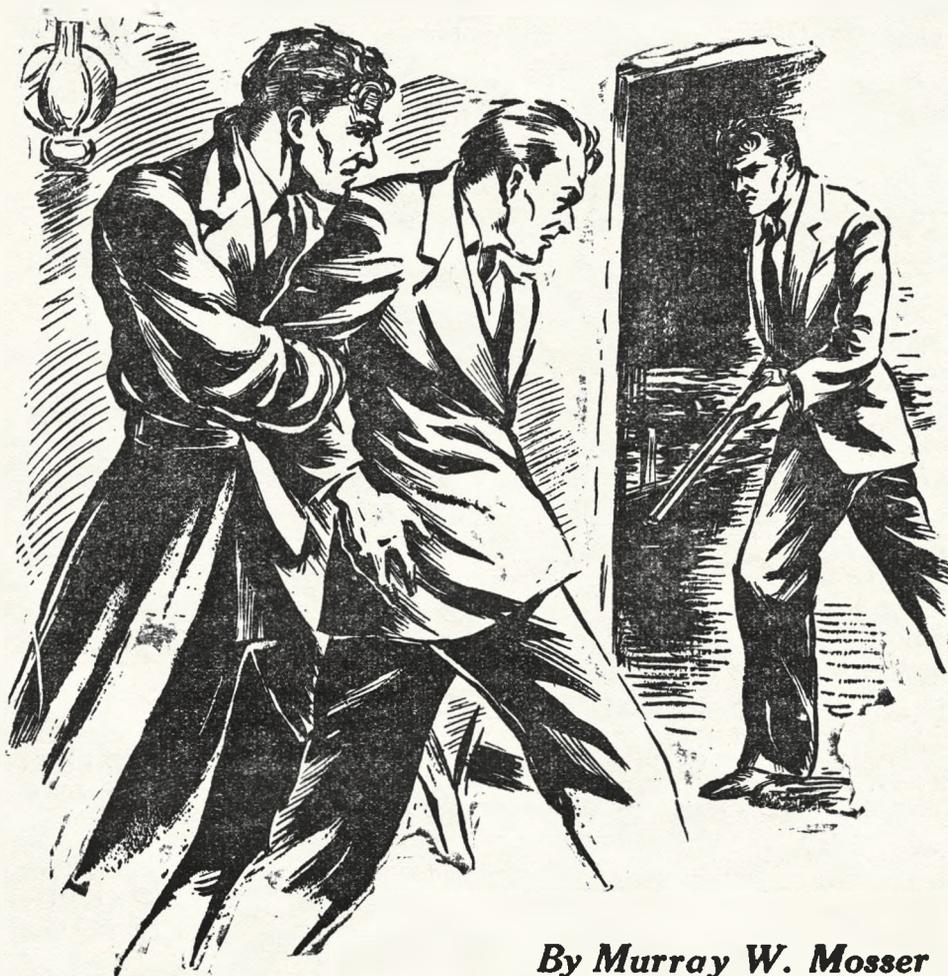


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*When Jimmy Chrome's bullets crashed into the night prowler, Jimmy didn't know that his quick trigger finger made him a . . . . .*

# Homicide Cat's-Paw



*By Murray W. Mosser*

**C**RUMPLING the letter in a big fist, Jimmy Chrome hurled it savagely into a corner. This is what came of listening to advice from the girl you were going to marry. A hell of a way to start a marital career!

Two months ago he had a swell job in Fort Worth. Now here he was in

this little town, ostensibly owner of the best drug store—there was one other—in the place, but he couldn't raise the five hundred necessary to keep him in business.

Retrieving the offending letter, he scanned it again:

We are not bound by any terms our salesmen make until confirmed at our home office.

It is essential for you to make a five-hundred dollar payment before we can ship this merchandise.

Jimmy Chrome kicked viciously at the prescription counter.

To make matters worse, Mary Lou only laughed at his fears when she came in. "Why all you have to do, honey," she said, "is to see Uncle John at the bank. He's always saying the town needs new blood and new businesses. Now he can back up his theories."

Maybe that wasn't such a dumb idea after all. Jimmy had been so busy getting the store started he hadn't had time to meet many people, not even Mary Lou's folks, but Uncle John was the one person he *had* met that he felt was completely human. Centerville was such a damned smug, tight little town, full of small-town folks who resented strangers. Eventually, he was certain, he could learn to like it, but right now everyone seemed to be against him.

**U**NCLE JOHN'S office, with its old-fashioned furnishings and its heavy fragrance of Turkish tobacco pleased Jimmy Chrome. Uncle John himself looked more like a country judge than a banker.

"Mary Lou phoned," he said, shaking hands. "We need ambitious young men with new ideas. Helps the town. And it's only fair we should help them when they're in trouble. Suppose you tell me about it."

Jimmy Chrome smiled suddenly, disclosing even, white teeth. The smile shooed the worry shadows from his face and high-lighted his rugged, six-foot frame. Rapidly he outlined his predicament.

Uncle John studied him with serious eyes. "From what Mary Lou tells me," he said finally, "I don't think we'll have much trouble with your references. You come back in a couple of days."

As Jimmy Chrome was leaving, a secretary handed Uncle John a yel-

low envelope. Chrome didn't miss the worried look on Uncle John's face as the banker read the wire. . . .

The day Jimmy Chrome got his money, Uncle John dropped in at the store. "I know you'll take care of things," he said, "but maybe you won't mind a little advice from an old man. Do you carry burglary insurance?"

Chrome's lips thinned a trifle. "No!" he said brusquely. Then, contritely: "I didn't mean to be rude. I'll show you why I don't need it."

Squatting in front of the safe, he twirled the dial. "I keep only enough money in the cash registers for change." He swung the safe door wide. "A holdup man has to make me open up. When he does, this happens!"

He was suddenly facing Uncle John, a snub-nosed automatic in his hand. He reddened as he found three customers congregated about him. He recognized Bill Graham, Eb Lewis, and Herman Frost.

"Kid stuff!" Graham scoffed. "You'd be afraid to use it!"

"Think so?" Chrome didn't like Graham. Everything about the man antagonized him; the dark, slick hair, the snaky eyes, the sneering mouth.

"Listen!" Jimmy Chrome's voice cut sharp and cold. "My buddy in Fort Worth was the swellest friend a man ever had. We worked together and I was best man at his wedding. A week later, because he wasn't in a position to defend himself in a holdup, he was shot and killed. *I saw him shot down in cold blood!*"

Jimmy trembled with a savage fury, as he always did at the memory. His face was transformed—dead-white except for the splotches of color high on his cheeks. "Do you know what it's like to see your best friend killed? Did you ever have to tell a bride her husband has been murdered and watch the raw agony tearing her heart out?"

"And all because a dirty, hopped-up rat wanted something that didn't

TDA

belong to him! Such scum have to be handled the hard way. After what happened to my friend, I'd welcome a chance to shoot it out with one of them!"

FINDING the night light too dim, Jimmy Chrome snapped on a fountain-pen torch, smiled as he worked the safe combination. Centerville had given his new drug store a fine welcome, and it looked as though he and Mary Lou were all set to middle-aisle it.

Depositing the canvas change bag, his ears tuned in a slight sound behind him. He cocked his head a little, caught a glint of metal in the dim light, and went cold all over as he saw a figure glide from the telephone booth. Snatching the snub-nosed automatic from the safe, Chrome whirled with effortless speed, saw the other's gun jab forward.

The intruder went, "*Uh-hh-hh*," as Chrome's automatic crashed twice, then the man spiralled slowly downward on corkscrewing knees.

Jimmy Chrome stared at him with fascinated eyes. "Hell," he said under his breath. "Oh, hell!"

Suddenly feeling violently ill at the thought he had shot a man, he moved automatically to the big light without taking his horrified eyes from the still form on the floor.

The light cord kept slipping from his nerveless fingers. When he did get the light on, he saw immediately that one of the slugs had found the fellow's heart and he began to shake all over.

Then he saw the intruder's weapon.

"The damned fool," he said numbly. "The damned, crazy fool! Trying to hold me up with a toy gun!"

Picking up the toy pistol, he opened it, found it was full of cigarettes. The stench of burned cordite was strong in his nostrils, and mixed with it, his senses picked up another pungent odor.

Calling the sheriff, he said through

rigid lips, "This is Chrome at the new drug store. I've just killed a man. . . ."

The sheriff stiffened at sight of the body. A slim man, just under average height, he gave the impression of competent bigness. A knife scar had drawn his left eye into a permanent squint. Whirling on Chrome, he said fiercely, "You damned fool! You've shot a poor devil who wasn't in his right mind!"

A hard lump caught in Jimmy's throat. "Guess that explains why he tried to hold me up with a toy." Rapidly, he gave the facts.

The sheriff's eyes were agate-hard. "He wasn't trying to hold you up, mister. Lemuel had a habit of sneaking up on people when he was out of cigarettes and jabbing that toy gun in their backs. He demanded cigarettes and most folks gave them to him."

Jimmy Chrome could feel the color drain from his face. His throat worked as he whispered hoarsely, "Why, that practically makes me a murderer!"

He dropped weakly onto the soda-fountain stool. Behind him, he heard the sheriff using the telephone, and presently the officer admitted two men, a slim bird with a black doctor's bag and a hawk-nosed young fellow who carried a sort of flat, oblong valise.

Jimmy Chrome thought the slim man was probably the coroner, and this impression was shortly confirmed. The hawk-nosed fellow turned out to be a state cop, Bureau of Identification.

Gnawing at his lip, Jimmy Chrome was too sick to be interested in what they were doing. Presently the sheriff came over.

"Reckon what you did was plumb legal," he said frostily. "Lemuel's prints are on the door handle of the phone booth, but not on the receiver. The shots entered his body at about the right angle for you to be crouched in front of the safe. Reckon the coroner's jury will clear you, but you'll

have to stick around for the inquest. I'm telling you *that* as sheriff."

Then the sheriff's right eye slitted to match his left and his voice shook as he said fiercely, "But as a man I'm warning you to get the hell out of town! Folks thought a heap of that poor boy and they're gonna be some sore when they find out about it. You better git!"

Letting his eyes slide to the body, Chrome choked up suddenly. "I'm sorry," he whispered huskily. "I'm terribly—sorry."

There was an awkward moment of silence, then Jimmy Chrome's chin snapped up. He looked the sheriff in the eye and said evenly, "But I won't run. If I've got anything coming to me, I'll take my medicine."

"It's your funeral," the sheriff said coldly.

And it seemed like a funeral next morning with no customers.

**J**IMMY CHROME could see their angry faces through the window as they passed. Never one to give up without a struggle, he stepped out several times with a pleasant greeting. He felt pretty bad when the only answers he got were cold stares.

It was almost noon when he spied Mary Lou coming down the street. *She* wasn't letting him down!

Scanning her trim figure with approving eyes, he thought how lucky he was, getting a girl like that. And walking out to meet her, he noticed what a perfect setting the black dress made for her lovely oval face and dark hair. He was almost upon her before she looked up.

Her large, dark eyes, red-rimmed, said she had been crying. They flashed now with something he didn't understand, something akin to hate, and she started to cross to the other side of the street.

"Mary Lou!" he cried. "Wait a minute!"

She hurried on. He ran after her and grabbed her arm.

"Wait, honey. Let me explain."

Jerking free, she whirled on him, eyes flashing. "Let me alone!" she cried. "Haven't you done enough? I never want to see you again!"

She walked away, her tiny shoes slapping the sidewalk angrily. He gaped after her in stunned surprise. Surely he hadn't heard her right. That couldn't have been Mary Lou speaking.

"Now, son! You can't blame the girl," a voice said.

Jimmy tried to bend stiff lips into a smile. He said, "At least you're loyal, Uncle John." Then, bitterly: "What's the matter with these people, anyway? If a holdup man jabbed a gun at *them*, I wonder how many would stop to ask if he was a crackpot with a toy pistol? But Mary Lou—Hell! I never thought she'd go back on me!"

"You shot her brother, son."

"I—What!"

Uncle John nodded.

Jimmy Chrome thought for a moment that he was going to choke. "She—she didn't even tell me she had a brother!"

"Well, lots of folks aren't proud of crazy kinfolks," Uncle John said sympathetically. "Of course Lemuel wasn't really a halfwit. Before he got hurt he was a bright young fellow, keen as a blade. Then he got a nasty fall and it—well, it did things to his mind. That just about broke Mary Lou's heart. She loved him a lot, but the only time I ever heard her talk about him after that was when she asked me to find him a job. I gave him one—sweeping out the bank mornings."

"You know what, Uncle John?" Chrome said thoughtfully. "I'm just wondering if it *was* an accident. Why would Lemuel hide in a telephone booth and wait until I'd locked up and turned out the lights and opened the safe if he was only after cigarettes?"

Hours later that question was still tugging at his mind. Trying to recall everything that had happened, he went over his conversation with the

sheriff. "Lemuel had a habit of sneaking up on people when he was out of cigarettes," the sheriff had said.

Jimmy Chrome sucked in a sharp breath. *When he was out of cigarettes!*

The toy pistol had been full of cigarettes!

Another thing — that demonstration at the safe!

Had someone sent Lemuel to the drug store, hoping he would be killed? Would anyone want to see Jimmy Chrome lose his business badly enough to murder a poor devil like Lemuel?

It sounded crazy. But then, he reflected, murder never made sense.

He remembered Herman Frost, the town's other druggist, as one of the men who had congregated around him and Uncle John at the safe. Frost was a tall, thin man with parchmentlike skin drawn tightly over cadaverous features. Most assuredly he wouldn't appreciate competition. Chrome couldn't quite picture Frost committing murder on that account, but the man was sullen, unpredictable. Chrome had even heard Frost was a little cracked.

Eb Lewis, the heavy-set, beady-eyed plumber, had been another of the group. Barely an inch-wide strip of skin showed between Lewis' coarse black hair and his bushy eyebrows. He'd tried to pad Jimmy Chrome's plumbing bill and Jimmy had caught him at it. Lewis, notorious for holding a grudge, had threatened to get even.

Bill Graham, the bank's cashier, had been the other. And Graham was in love with Mary Lou. If, Jimmy reflected bitterly, Graham was trying to break up his romance with the girl, Graham had certainly picked the right method.

Of course he couldn't be sure it was murder. He had no proof. But hope stiffened his back. At least it was something to work on. . . .

Walking softly along the street on crepe-soled shoes, Jimmy Chrome

heard a voice from around the corner of a building, "Damned shame about Lemuel. I'd planned to go fishing with him this morning."

"Yeah." Jimmy Chrome recognized Eb Lewis' nasal twang. "He pulled that there holdup stunt on me last night. I only had one cig, but I gave it to him."

Speeding around the corner, Chrome placed Graham and Frost in the group. He grabbed Lewis' lapels and yelled, "What time was that?"

Lewis was plainly startled. "Why, just before ten, I guess." Then his bushy, black eyebrows came together and he snarled, "Who you manhandling, anyway? Get your dirty hands offa me!"

LETTING go, Jimmy Chrome started to turn toward Graham, didn't see Lewis' flying fist until too late. Catching Jimmy in the eye, it knocked him flat. Jimmy came up with every muscle clamoring for battle, but a firm hand gripped his arm.

"What you boys arguin' about?"

Jimmy Chrome started to shake Uncle John off, shook the red haze from his brain instead. Brawling was the very thing he ought to avoid.

It seemed as though there was something he should remember, something that tied in with Lemuel's murder, but for the life of him he couldn't get it.

Rapidly, he explained his theory. "So whoever sent Lemuel to my store is a murderer!" he snapped. "Look! Eb Lewis gave Lemuel *one* cigarette just before ten. Lemuel had to get in the phone booth while I was busy. I waited on my last customer about ten-fifteen. That means whoever gave Lemuel the full package of cigarettes must have sent him to hold me up. And I've got a clue that will tell me who the murderer is!"

Frost said, "He thinks he can alibi out of it!" There was no denying the venomous hate in his deep-sunk eyes as he glared at Chrome.

Involuntarily, Jimmy Chrome shuddered. He could understand the man wanting to hog the town's drug business, but why the rabid hate? The guy *must* be cracked!

Chrome let his eyes slide to Graham as the sleek bank clerk sneered, "You're bluffing, Chrome!" There was hate in Graham's eyes also—a jealous hate. Chrome had the unpleasant feeling Graham would cheerfully slit his throat if the opportunity presented itself.

Moving away, Chrome could feel the hate-filled eyes boring into his back. He *had* been halfway bluffing but he wondered if the cigarettes in the toy pistol wouldn't give him the clue he needed.

Fingering his eye, he winced a little. It was going to be a shiner, all right.

It was almost dark when Chrome finally reached the sheriff's office and explained his theory. Opening a desk drawer, the sheriff said explosively, "Why, hell! That toy pistol and the cigarettes are gone!"

Jimmy Chrome was sure of one thing, now. It *was* murder!

Chrome dropped in on Uncle John at the banker's home. "Looks like I'm going to have a tough fight on my hands, Uncle John. I was wondering if you'll extend that one month note when it comes due?"

Uncle John looked thoughtful. Then his eyes crinkled at the corners, as he smiled suddenly. "I guess I always was a sucker for a good scrapper, son," he said. "I'll fix it up right now. I'm leaving on the night train for a vacation."

Jimmy Chrome's heart sank. Uncle John was the only friend he had left and he wished the old boy would wait until this mess was cleared up.

Leaving, Jimmy met Bill Graham. He supposed Graham was dropping by for last-minute instructions on running the bank while Uncle John was away.

Once again a feeling of missing something of importance swept over

him, but he still couldn't get it. . . .

Opening his eyes into the inky blackness of the drug store's back room, Jimmy Chrome tumbled out of bed. The luminous dial of an alarm clock said it was after midnight.

"Who is it?" he called sleepily.

"Eb Lewis!" Lewis' voice was tight, terrified. "Open up but don't turn on the light. I got something important to tell you."

Reeling a little, sleep-drugged, Chrome opened the back door. The alley was dark as pitch.

The double roar of a gun nearly deafened him and he felt the impact of a body. Off balance, he grabbed the man instinctively as he fell backwards. Chrome, underneath as they hit the floor, heard running footsteps thudding down the alley and felt something wet and sticky on his hands. Struggling from beneath the dead weight, he leaped for the door as the footsteps died out in the distance. He switched on the light.

Even expecting it, the sight of the bloody body was a shock. An ugly hole indicated at least one of the slugs had penetrated Eb Lewis' heart and Jimmy Chrome didn't need a coroner to tell him the man was dead. A cigarette lay loosely in Lewis' fingers.

Chrome looked slowly from Lewis to his own bloody hands and blood-soaked pajamas. Touching the black eye Lewis had given him, he stiffened.

*Someone had deliberately framed him!*

THE stench of burned cordite registered on his senses, and mixed with it, another odor, a pungent odor. His brain raced frantically as someone began pounding on the front door.

Then, suddenly, some of the baffling pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

He crowded trousers over the blood-soaked pajamas, slid bare feet into shoes. The pounding up front stopped abruptly. Slipping out the back, Chrome heard running feet in the alley. More than one pair.

... "Dunno," a voice was saying. "I heard a scream and some shots. Sounded like it came from the drug store."

Chrome sped off in the opposite direction, grabbing a flat piece of iron from the blacksmith's junk pile as he passed.

Centerville's telegraph office closed at ten and the place was dark. As Chrome inserted the flat iron under a rear window, he could hear sounds of the town awakening. The running footsteps all seemed headed for the drug store.

The window catch broke with a sharp crack, loud as cannon fire in his ears. He drew a quick breath, wondering if anyone had heard.

The noise was growing louder on the main street. Jimmy Chrome threw a leg over the sash. If he was wrong now! But he couldn't be!

All during the half hour it took him to get the information he needed, he was tensely aware of the increasing commotion in the street.

Leaving through the rear window, Jimmy Chrome stepped out of the alley as the sheriff and two deputies rounded the street corner in an old, topless V-8. Yelling at the sight of him, one of the deputies raised a shotgun, but the sheriff knocked it down.

"We'll do this plumb legal!" he said grimly.

Then they were out of the car and swarming over Chrome. A deputy hit him in the mouth and the sheriff said sharply, "Cut it, Hank! I know Eb was a friend of yours, but take it easy."

Hank said, "Yeah." Then, as the sheriff turned his back, Hank raised the shotgun. Chrome saw it coming and tried to duck, but the other deputy was holding him. The barrel smashed into his head and the sidewalk seemed to float up to meet him. . . .

Jimmy Chrome came to with an aching head and an angry buzzing noise in his ears. Presently he discovered the buzzing noise wasn't coming from

his head, but from outside the jail. Somehow he made it to his feet and staggered to the barred window. A great, cold band of fear seemed to tighten around his heart.

The buzzing was an angry muttering from the throats of a huge mob!

There must have been three hundred of them and more arriving every minute, overalled men climbing out of disreputable jalopies. Their faces were turned toward the jail in sullen anger. Not bunched tight as yet, they were evidently waiting for a leader. A number carried pine torches.

Chrome found his throat suddenly dry. Stumbling to the barred door, he yelled, "Sheriff!" as he felt for the telegraph copies and found them gone.

The sheriff appeared in the doorway at the end of the corridor.

"Well?"

"I didn't kill Lewis and you've got proof in those telegram copies you took from my pocket. Listen!" He talked rapidly.

The sheriff's squinted eye seemed almost to pop open. "Why, if that's true, you're clear all around!" he exploded. "That is, providin'—" He jerked his head in the direction of the mob.

Chrome knew what he meant. Providing the mob would listen.

"You've got to make them!" he cried desperately.

"I'll try," the sheriff said.

The angry muttering of the mob became a sullen roar. Hank stuck his head in and yelled, "They're comin', sheriff!"

The sheriff ran for the door.

Moments later he was back, his hard features taut, his voice strained as he said, "They won't listen to me, son!"

"Let me try it!"

"They're plumb crazy! They'll tear you to pieces if you stick your neck out there!"

"It's my neck, isn't it? I'm not going to stay in here like a rat in a trap! Let me out, I tell you!"

The sheriff quietly opened the cell

door. His, "Good luck, son," seemed to follow Jimmy Chrome.

There was a terrific roar as the mob caught sight of him. They surged against the ring of armed deputies at the top of the steps. Chrome recognized the cadaverous Frost in the lead, a coiled rope in his hand.

"Wait!" Chrome yelled at the top of his voice. "I didn't—"

He broke off, the hope draining from his heart. That sea of sound roared over his voice until it was lost in his own ears. He saw the ring of deputies go down before the sheer weight of the mob, saw their guns taken from them.

Then the mob swarmed over him, striking him with their fists, clubbing him with the deputies' guns. He felt the blood run into his eyes from a gash on his forehead, felt his arms drawn behind him and bound tightly.

There was a numbness in his brain, a feeling this couldn't be happening to him. *This is something you read about in newspapers, he thought, something that happens to other people. It can't be real. Real people don't act like this, don't go crazy with the lust to kill!*

But the sight of the cadaverous Frost tossing the rope upwards told him it *was* real. His eyes followed the rope as it looped over a horizontal flagpole.

**F**ROST stepped forward, the noose in his hand, his eyes burning pits of hate. Chrome wasn't sure whether it was the impact of those eyes or the scratchy feeling of the rope going over his head, tightening about his neck, that sent the panic surging through him.

Frost and Graham were on the other end of the rope, taking up slack gradually. Chrome fought the growing tension of the rope by standing on his tiptoes. Then he felt the cruel bite of it, labored to draw a breath.

He felt his toes swing free, felt the terrible cut of the rope shutting off

his wind. His chest heaved, his lungs labored for air.

A red haze filled his eyes and all hell seemed to break loose in his brain, and as the red haze closed down, he had the impression a slim form in black was at his side.

*The Black Angel of Death*, he thought.

Then he felt his feet hit the ground, was conscious of the fact he had slipped to his knees. He felt a small, soft, cool hand loosen the rope around his neck. Someway, somehow, he staggered to his feet.

The red haze lifted a little and he gratefully sucked huge breaths of air into his tortured lungs. For a moment he couldn't see, then things cleared a little. There was Graham standing there on one foot, hugging his shin. Mary Lou, her eyes blazing, was storming at Graham:

"You—you— Oh! You ought to be ashamed!"

Chrome looked at the toe of Mary Lou's slipper and damned near smiled. She'd kicked Graham in the shins!

Graham slipped into the crowd like a whipped puppy and a great bearded giant of a man stepped forward to take his place as a sullen roar rolled from the huge throat of the crowd. With a sinking heart, Chrome heard cries of, "String him up!"

"No!" he shouted. "No! I can prove—" But again his words were lost in the roar of the crowd and again he felt the bite of the rope as it tightened around his neck.

Then Mary Lou stepped forward, both hands raised high. A sudden silence fell on Chrome's ears, so intense it almost hurt. For a moment he couldn't believe it. It was incredible that this slip of a girl could control that bloodthirsty mob.

And then he understood. They were ready to listen because she was Lemuel's sister. It was Lemuel's murder that had brought them to the point where they were ready to commit mob violence. Lewis' murder was only the spark that touched it off.

Her voice rang out clearly in the night air. "I want to see Lemuel's murderer punished, but we'd give even a dog a chance to tell his story. Listen to what Jimmy Chrome has to say. You've got him. What can you lose?"

There was a murmur of assent, then Frost yelled, "What's the use of palavering? Let's string him up!"

A roar of approval started in the fickle crowd, but it faded as Jimmy Chrome stepped forward, feeling like a walking corpse.

The crowd melted a little before his determination. "How many of you,"

cigarettes? None of you! Because he only pulled his little stunt when he was *out* of cigarettes!"

Chrome saw a few heads nod. He had to make this good. If he failed. . .

"Now Lemuel planned to go fishing this morning, so he had to sweep out the bank last night. He caught someone stuffing money into a suitcase. Because of his mental condition, he probably didn't know what that person was up to, but the murderer was scared to death and he wasn't taking any chances. He gave Lemuel a pack of cigarettes and told him to go to my store, that I kept the safe full of ciga-



he began in a sharp, clear voice, "can lose your life savings and come up smiling in the morning?"

An astonished murmur vibrated through the mob.

"Mighty few of you, I'll bet. Well, I pulled the trigger, but I wasn't Lemuel's murderer. Someone sent Lemuel to my store to be killed!"

"What're you tryin' to hand us?" a voice shouted.

Chrome smiled with a confidence he didn't feel. "When Lemuel was killed he had a full package of cigarettes. That right, sheriff?"

The sheriff nodded.

"But how many of you ever saw Lemuel hold up anyone when he *had*

rettes and that if he held me up there I would give him all of them.

"This person knew Lemuel would be killed, because I gave an exhibition of what I would do to a holdup man. Frost, you were there. Would you say anyone who held me up stood a good chance of being killed?"

Frost hesitated, evidently torn between his position as leader of the mob and an almost forgotten sense of fair play. Finally he nodded and the crowd stirred.

"I brought the fact to Eb Lewis' attention that whoever had given Lemuel the cigarettes was the murderer," Chrome continued. "Lewis had given Lemuel *one* cigarette, had

seen Lemuel go into the bank, and had passed there himself, seeing who was in the bank. He tried to blackmail this person. The murderer brought him to my room and shot him, because the murderer was certain I suspected him and he thought I had a clue that would pin Lemuel's murder on him. Framed for Lewis' murder, no one would listen to me."

A train whistle sounded in the distance.

"The bank doesn't carry insurance. That means it's *your* money the murderer is stealing. If you'll go to the bank with me, I'll show you the evidence and prove—"

He broke off with a startled exclamation as a figure carrying a suitcase emerged from the bank and hurried toward the railroad station. The heads of the mob turned as one and an angry roar broke from their throats. They surged after the man.

Chrome felt a knife bite at the cords around his wrists. He yelled, "C'mon, sheriff!" and darted into the crowd and was among the leaders by the time they caught the fugitive.

"Why, it's Uncle John Ramsey!" a surprised voice said.

**C**HROME nodded grimly. Somehow he didn't feel so good. "Those Turkish cigarettes you gave away, Uncle John," he said. "Their pungent odor, mixed with the burned cordite, registered on my subconscious mind when Lemuel was killed. Perhaps I should have remembered the Turkish aroma from my visit to your office, but that was also a subconscious memory.

"Later I got a faint whiff of the odor on your clothes and it bothered me. I didn't connect it with the murder until you shot Lewis and I again smelled the mixed odors of burned cordite and the Turkish tobacco of the cigarettes in his hand."

"Look at the money!" someone

cided as the suitcase came open.

"I'll take care of that!" the sheriff snapped.

Uncle John made a sudden motion toward his mouth. Jimmy Chrome leaped forward. "Get a doctor!" he yelled.

Uncle John smiled. "It works too fast, son. Better this way. Guess I shouldn't have told you I was leaving on the night train."

"You made a lot of mistakes," Jimmy Chrome said gloomily. "The first was playing those war babies on the stock market. You can't beat Wall Street at its own game. I remembered how worried you were when you received the wire that day in your office and I found copies of your telegrams."

Uncle John's blue eyes were frankly admiring. "The first time I saw you I said you were smart. Remember? I didn't mean to hurt you, son. I lost a lot of the bank's money and then I had to have a stake to get out of the country. Lemuel caught me and I sent him to your store. It wasn't so much like murder that way. But when Lewis tried to blackmail me I went crazy. I was afraid of what you might know and I decided to pin his murder on you, figuring I could get out of the country and mail a full confession back before they could convict you."

Uncle John's eyes crinkled at the corners and he smiled at Chrome. "I'm — sorry — son," he said and slumped to the sidewalk.

He'd ruined Jimmy Chrome's business. He'd pinned a murder rap on him and nearly got him lynched by the mob, but—

"I'm sorry, too," Chrome said. And he meant it.

He felt a small, soft hand slip into his big one.

"Jimmy—" Mary Lou said.

Uncle John's dead ears couldn't hear her, but it was all right, because her words were meant for Jimmy's ears alone.



# Doom's Impostor

By C. William Harrison

*A schemer plots his own disappearance—too perfectly.*



**S**TANDING there in the deep shadows of the cabin porch, the man said: "I'm sorry, but I seem to have made a mistake. I was trying to reach Granville to get a job in the harvest fields, but I guess I picked the wrong road. And the lights in my car are so bad—I was wondering if you could put me up for the night."

John Seton nodded and said, "Glad to, old man," but no more than that, for already the idea was laying its hold upon him. He waved the man toward a chair and as the man turned to cross the shaft of light that slanted from the window, he watched him and let the idea grow into a tangible pattern upon his brain.

He thought: "If I'm dead, then they won't look for me. I have the money, but the bank won't know that until the examiners come next month. And if I'm dead, they won't hunt me."

The idea took root and grew rapidly, amazing John Seton, for it seemed the plan had always lurked somewhere in an unfathomed corner of his brain.

He crossed the porch and dropped into a chair, feeling the eyes of the stranger upon him. The night was still and dead, with no movement of air in the high pines, and above the smother of earthly darkness stars glittered in the sky like polished nail-heads.

"I'm Walter Newby," the stranger said at length. And then suddenly: "It gave me a jolt, seeing you for the first time. We're near enough alike to

have been brothers—hair, size, features. Had you noticed it?"

Seton said, "Yes, I had," and broke off short because he thought he detected a strained note in his voice. He wondered how he would kill the man, and the thought started his heart pounding against the walls of his chest. But when he spoke again, his voice was casual.

"I'm John Seton," he said.

Newby leaned forward in his chair. "Seton!" he said, and there was faint bitterness in his tone. "I've heard of you, Mr. Seton. You have a bank in Granville. Funny us meeting here like this, you the most respected man in this end of the state, and me—nobody." He laughed shortly.

A blow on the side of the head with some blunt, hard object would be best, Seton decided.

He said: "You mentioned you were looking for work, Mr. Newby. Have you any dependents?"

Newby said: "No one but myself."

Seton thought this was good, for what he was going to do would hurt no loved ones left behind. And as Newby had said, the man was nobody; he had no purpose in life, no station that mattered.

He would drop the man into White Creek, Seton decided, and the turbulent waters and jagged stones along the creek's bed would change his features so that when his body was found nobody would think him to be anyone but who his clothing made him out to be.

Seton said, "A spot of brandy is good these chilly nights," and stood up without waiting for Newby's reply. He crossed to the cabinet behind

Newby's chair, picked up the brandy bottle, and because Newby was not looking then, hit him and caught him as he slumped forward. . . .

**S**TANDING there where the star-broken darkness dropped off into the black of the gorge, John Seton could hear the churn and seethe of rushing water below. He thought it strange that he could remember the insensate plunge of Newby's body without abhorrence. It was as if he had planned such a thing as far back as he could remember, knowing that because of the reputation he had guarded so carefully, he could get away with it.

He went into the cabin and surveyed himself again in the long mirror. He was startled at the change of appearance Newby's clothes, the removal of his close-cropped mustache, gave him. He was no longer a well-liked banker, but rather a work-hunting itinerant, a little dirty perhaps, but not enough to attract undue attention.

He went out into the night, thinking that it would take at least an hour for Newby's body to wash down the mountain stream to Granville, and that it would be best if he got through the town before it was discovered.

He got into Newby's car, and heard the cough of the exhaust and felt the vibrations as the ancient motor started. Because the car's lights were feeble against the black of the night, he drove slowly at first, and it wasn't until the car bounced to a dangerous speed down the rut-riddled road that he tried the brakes and found they wouldn't work.

The steep grade of the narrow

road became an invisible hand that pulled the car on with increasing swiftness, and tiny fingers of fear clutched at John Seton.

He remembered the sharp turn of the road ahead before he could see it, and thought of the sickening drop beyond the bend and the rocks and trees below.

Then the curve loomed before him, and he tried to turn the car, and felt the wheel wrenched from his hands. He was conscious of screeching tires, of being snatched into empty space, of spinning lights and the brain-splitting roar of the crash. . . .

John Seton wakened to find himself in a clean, white-walled room of silence, and to see the officer seated beside his bed. He turned his head, and at his movement the officer said:

"So you've finally come out of it, have you? You'd been better off if you hadn't. We've got a place for murderers in this state."

Seton opened his mouth to speak, but no words came, and he knew then that the crash had done something to his throat.

The officer said: "We found his body in the river, and the note on it. There's only one road up High Knob, so that made you guilty when we found you, that and the bank money in your clothes."

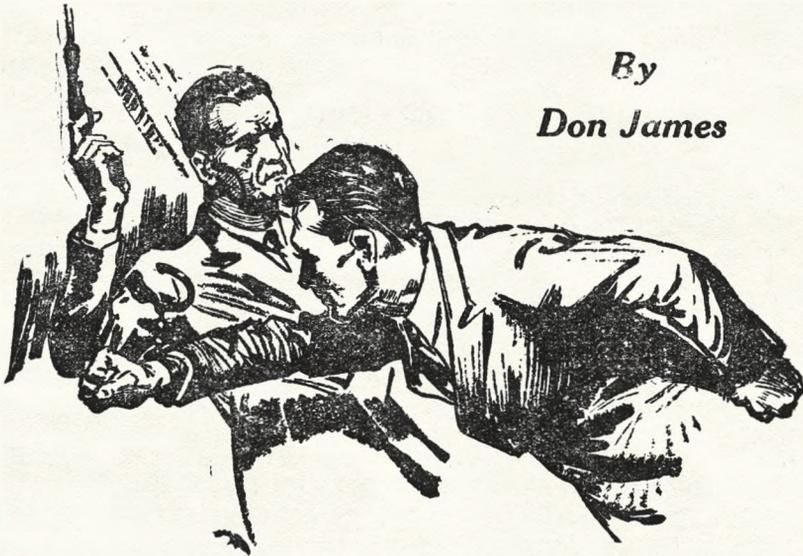
And as horror rooted and grew within John Seton, the officer's words echoed across his brain.

"You tried to make it suicide with that note. But he was too fine a man to steal from his own bank, and you didn't know that no one would believe that note. Newby, you'll go to the chair for the murder of John Seton."



*Sammy Leiber stood condemned. And then his newshawk pals found a clue that pointed to a . . . .*

# Phantom Frameup



*By*

*Don James*

**I**T WAS one o'clock in the morning. We'd put the paper to bed and the presses were already rolling as Dike Lamey and I left the *Herald* building.

We were quiet just as the other boys had been all evening. Maybe more so because we'd spent more time with Sammy than the others. There had been the three of us working together for two years, having our after-work drink every night at Pat Murphy's bar, living in the same apartment house, spending our dough for the same things.

On the street we automatically turned toward Murphy's and then remembered that he was closed this night. Call it Irish sentimentality or what you like, Pat simply closed the doors at six o'clock with a sign reading "Open as usual in the morning" stuck to the door window.

Sammy had been one of Pat's favorites.

Dike hunched his shoulders against the chill and grunted: "Lane's?"

"It's as good as any," I said.

We crossed the street and went into the more ornate bar. A dozen men leaned elbows on the mahogany and the click of chips came from the back room.

Dike and I ordered bourbon and stared sightlessly into the backbar mirror while we waited. There weren't many words to describe the things going through our minds at the moment. Dike's eventual comment summed it up.

"Oh, hell!"

A man's simple expression of futility.

I didn't say anything. Down the bar three men were laughing too loud from too many drinks. Suddenly one of them said: "Listen to this. I got an idea! Just like that guy Kipling!" The others grinned as he started to sing off key: "Oh, they're hanging

Sammy Leiber in the morn-ing!"

A loud guffaw encouraged him.

*"For they're hanging Sammy Leiber in the morning!"*

I put down my drink. Dike was right behind me as I walked down the room in measured strides.

I touched the singer on the shoulder. The man looked around. He was large with podgy cheeks, expensive looking clothes. He might have been a salesman at a convention. He might have been a hot shot racketeer. His smile was too commercial to be pleasant.

"Do you know Sammy Leiber?" I asked softly.

The big man looked at his companions and winked.

"Look, brother," he said expensively. His breath smelled like a distillery. "Do I look like a guy who knows murderers? Mister, Sammy Leiber's getting what's coming to him in the morning. Me? I didn't know Sammy but I knew Flo. Any guy who killed Flo has a hanging coming, see? Me and Flo was just like that!"

He stopped and grinned again. The smirk was sarcastic.

"Join in the chorus, buddy," he said. *"They're hanging Sammy Leiber in the morning!"*

I hit him.

The man was big. He bounced back from the bar, his fist swinging and the grin gone. He seemed suddenly sober. I smashed him in the mouth.

I didn't see any more of that. One of the others pulled a gun. I chopped at his wrist. The third one stepped in. His gun came down hard. Dike grunted and I fell over his body as I tried to get to the man who'd hit him. Something slammed against my jaw. The flash was like red lightning.

**T**HERE was a small crowd around us when I came out of it. Dike was sitting up, his eyes bleary. The barkeep helped him to his feet and a couple of bystanders pulled me up. Someone pressed a jigger of whiskey into my hand. I gulped it.

I looked around. The big man and his two companions were gone. Dike swore steadily and competently under his breath.

"Who was he?" he snapped at the bartender.

The barkeep shrugged and shook his head solemnly. "You walked into something that time. That guy was Fred Zinke. He's from L. A. Owns some joints there in the rackets. You better go easy."

"What's he doing here?"

"He's been around off and on for several months. He bought out the Inn at the edge of town. Opened up gambling in a big way out there. You probably know the joint."

Dike swallowed another drink and nodded to me. We left the place and headed back toward the *Herald*.

"You heard what he said?" Dike demanded.

"I heard it," I said. "He called her Flo. Maybe. . . ."

"Let's go back to the shop and talk it over," Dike said. "We've got to think fast. There may be a chance."

Sammy had met the girl at the Inn. We were having a wild night. Somehow when it was over, Sammy was with the girl who sang with the band. She was small and dark and easy to look at.

We didn't think it would ever happen to Sammy, but it did. When we called it love and kidded him he just smiled. But it was love, all right. They were together whenever they could be, while Dike and I spent more time without Sammy.

Then one morning a highway patrolman found them in Sammy's car parked beside a highway out of town. Sammy was sleeping off a drunk. The girl was dead in the seat beside him. The murder gun was in Sammy's hand.

Now they were hanging Sammy Leiber in the morning. That was why the boys at the *Herald* weren't talking much. That was why Pat Murphy had closed his place.

And all that Sammy had been able

to tell us during the long weeks of trial and waiting was:

"I tell you she was hiding from someone. She wouldn't tell me what it was all about, but she was afraid. She wouldn't marry me because of it. I didn't do it. You've got to believe that. We were at the Inn. I had three drinks and a couple from a bottle in the car afterwards. It was a Mickey Finn. I don't pass out on five drinks. I never saw the gun before."

We believed Sammy, but we couldn't do anything. The jury didn't believe him.

We tried to trace the girl's background. There wasn't anything to trace. She walked into the Inn one day during band rehearsal. She was dressed in slacks and carried a small bag. She'd been hitchhiking. She asked for an audition and talked the leader into it. She got the job.

And now—in the last six hours of Sammy's life—we had our first lead. We'd said good-by to Sammy in the death cell early in the evening. Sammy had wanted it that way.

All of this flashed through my mind as we walked back toward the *Herald*.

"It's a lead," Dike said again. "He called her Flo."

The only name we'd ever known for her was Jane Saxon. No one had known her as Flo. At least no one until the big man from L. A., who now owned the Inn, had called her that.

"He bought the place right after we finished making our investigations out there—or at about the same time," Dike said.

"It's a chance," I repeated. I thought of Sammy in the death cell, how the gallows would look in the early morning light.

THE city room was deserted. We snapped on lights and went to Dike's desk. Below us the presses still rumbled. Dike looked at his watch.

"Five minutes of two," he said. "We've got four hours and five minutes."

"What in hell can we do?" I snapped.

Dike lit a cigarette and slowly exhaled the smoke. After a few seconds he reached for a telephone and put through a call to Lafe Ryan in Los Angeles. As he waited he looked over the phone at me.

"Lafe covers police there. I worked with him once," he explained.

Sound crackled in the receiver and the connection was made. I heard a masculine voice rasp.

"Lafe," Dike said. "Dike talking. I haven't time to explain all this. We're working against a tough deadline. What do you know about Fred Zinke?"

Dike indicated for me to pick up a telephone on the desk in back of him. It connected into his line and he snapped a switch in time for me to hear Ryan's answer.

"Gambler, racketeer, tough mug. I hear he's muscling into your burg," Ryan said. "He's eccentric and thinks he's quite a wit. Likes to paraphrase songs and poems. But don't let that kid you. He's got a record."

"That's what I want," Dike said. "Was he in trouble within the last year?"

"Yeah. The cops think he bumped off some competition. A guy named Houser. But they couldn't pin it on Zinke. There was a girl mixed up in it. Some dame who sang at Zinke's place was supposed to have been with Zinke that night. They think she saw it all. But she's disappeared."

I clenched the phone tightly and held my breath as Dike asked his next question.

"Do you know the girl's name?"

"Flo Graybar."

Dike thanked him and hung up, promising that there might be a story later. Subconsciously we both glanced at the clock on the wall. It was 2:03 o'clock.

"We've got to get the cops on this!" I yelled. "It all checks. Zinke called her Flo. Sammy says she was running away from something. She was run-

ning away from Zinke. She witnessed a murder and knew that Zinke would erase a witness. She hitchhiked up here and got a job at the Inn. Later Zinke decided to muscle in this city and came up to look the Inn over to buy it. He saw the girl. He framed Sammy for the murder. Loaded him with a Mickey Finn, probably the girl, too. Drove them out in Sammy's car, killed the girl, and planted the gun in Sammy's hand. We'll get the cops—"

Dike shook his head.

"All we have is the fact that Zinke called her Flo," he said. "All the rest is theory. I know damned well we're right, but we haven't proof. Not one damned bit. It would take time for the cops to get stuff on it. If they'd even listen. And it's less than four hours to six o'clock!"

"But—"

"We're going to get proof ourselves," he said. "It's the only safe way. At least, we've got to get enough to raise a question in the cops' minds. Enough so that they'll get the governor to stay the execution until they can investigate. And one word uttered just before a saloon brawl isn't enough to convince them, Bill."

He was right.

"What's the plan?" I said. "And for Pete's sake, let's hurry!"

"There's only one plan," Dike decided. "We need a confession from Zinke. We can't build a case against him in three hours."

We stared at each other. The same thought hit us both. Accusing a man of murder is a serious thing. Attempting to get a confession when you're not the law may have terrific repercussions.

Dike voiced it in so many words.

"So what," I growled. "Let's go. We've got work to do."

After the fight at the bar, walking into the Inn was like wandering into a snake pit at night. Dike and I walked past the hat-check girl, ignored the small dance floor, and went straight to the bar.

One of the men we'd met earlier

spotted us and walked toward us. He was slim and dark. His eyes glittered.

"This place isn't open to you," he said softly. "On your way, boys."

Dike grinned. "Forget the scrap," he said. "We were tight. Maybe you don't know us. We're boys from one of the newspapers. We'd like to see Zinke and square ourselves."

The man shook his head. "On your way."

"It's business," Dike said. "A matter of adverse publicity. We might know a way to stop it."

The thin, dark man twisted his lips into a cynical smile. "What is this? A shakedown? The boss isn't interested."

Dike shrugged. "Have it your way. We'll tell Zinke after it breaks that you made up his mind for him before we could see him."

The man frowned and looked uncertainly at Dike and then at me. After a few seconds he nodded. "Wait here," he said. "I'll find out if he'll see you."

When he returned he nodded curtly. "Follow me."

**WE WALKED** up stairs and down a hallway. Halfway to the end a door opened and the other man we'd seen at Lane's stepped out. He fell in beside us. No one said anything as we continued down the hallway to the end door. The thin man opened it and we stepped inside.

Zinke sat behind a desk smoking. He leaned back as we entered and his eyes leveled upon us.

"All right," he snapped. "You've got a story to tell. Tell it."

Dike and I had decided on the way we'd handle the thing. Dike would do the talking.

"It's confidential," he said. "Just the three of us. Send your mugs out."

Zinke laughed. "You're funny," he said. There was no humor in the words.

Dike shrugged. "Okay, we'll let the cops do it. It's going to break in the

morning. We're just being friendly." He paused and added: "Perhaps for a price."

It was a nice piece of acting and I could see Zinke take it in. The crack about information for a price sounded right to him. His eyes flicked to the men.

"Outside," he said. "Frisk them first."

Experienced hands patted our clothing and the two men left the room. Dike lit a cigarette and walked to Zinke's desk. He leaned over toward the racketeer.

"What's it all about?" Zinke demanded.

Dike hit him. It was beautiful. A hard, smashing shoulder blow transmitted into his fist. Zinke's head jolted back and his body sagged. A trickle of blood stained the corner of his mouth, down his chin.

Dike nodded silently toward another door in the room. I opened it. Stairs led down to what was obviously a side entrance to the place.

Five minutes later we had Zinke in my car and were headed back toward town. It was 2:57 o'clock when we entered Dike's apartment. We supported Zinke's body between us as we would a drunk.

I learned things about Dike in the next half hour. He'd picked up things in his newspaper tramping over the country. He knew ways to bring men to consciousness. He knew ways to take them almost back to blackness again, yet letting pain spur the brain alive; to make Zinke's lips tremble and his face pale.

"You killed Flo," Dike barked. "Tell us about it. Talk, Zinke. Talk!"

Zinke's lips were bruised pulp. He shook his head desperately.

"No. . . . no. . . ."

"Talk!"

Dike's fists again. The sound of flesh against flesh. Zinke moaned.

I turned away. It was a lot to watch. A lot to think about. Two guys giving a man the works to make him

talk. I wondered if the cops felt as I did about it. Maybe I'd have stopped Dike, but I remembered Sammy Leiber.

Three thirty-seven o'clock.

"She saw you kill Houser in L. A. You found her up here and killed her. Admit it, Zinke. Talk, Zinke!"

Dike's voice rasped with strain. Sweat studded his forehead.

Then Zinke talked. It wasn't what we expected to hear.

"Get this straight," he mumbled. "I didn't kill her. There was an angle in L. A. Flo knew about it. Some guy up here. She was putting the screws on him."

"You're lying."

Zinke shook his head. We watched him wipe blood from his lips with the back of his hand.

"She saw another bump-off down there. The guy is here. One of the girls told me about it."

"One of the girls working with her at the Inn?" I asked.

Zinke nodded.

"Who's the man up here? Does she know?" Dike snapped.

"No."

"Do you?"

Zinke shook his head.

"You're lying," Dike accused. "You killed her. Talk—"

The door crashed in and two men piled into the room. They were Zinke's men, smart enough to figure the angle when they discovered that their employer was gone.

I took one of them and saw Dike lash out at the other. I wasn't fast enough. It felt like a trip hammer battering into my face. A knee jolted into me and I went down. I rolled and covered my head with an arm. Something heavy hit it. It went numb from the elbow down.

Something crashed behind my ear. That was all. It was dark after that and I remembered no more.

THE apartment was empty when I opened my eyes. Dike and Zinke were gone. Zinke's men had finished

the job on me before they left. My ribs and back ached.

They had Dike. They were capable of taking him for a ride.

I looked at the clock. It was 4:03. In less than two hours Sammy Leiber would stand on a wooden platform. A trap door would open beneath his feet. Rope would jerk tight. The sickening crack of breaking bone.

I shook my head to clear it. It was no good. Fogginess came over me in waves. I stumbled to Dike's bathroom and slushed cold water over my head. I remembered his remedy of ammonia to sober him up if he drank too much. It should clear my mind.

I searched through the medicine cabinet with fumbling fingers. Iodine, aspirin, chloral, ammonia— "Aromatic Spirits of Ammonia."

I slopped a little into a glass, added water and swallowed the pungent concoction. After a few moments my mind began to clear and I felt steadier on my feet. My head throbbed and seemed to pulse to the swollen knob behind my ear.

Somewhere in the apartment Dike had a gun. He'd shown it to me once. I pawed through drawers, into cupboards, trying to keep out the sound of the ticking clock, feeling the weight of Sammy Leiber and Dike upon me, their lives somehow dependent upon what I did.

I found the gun in a piece of luggage. A Savage .38 caliber automatic with a nine-shot clip, it was nested among bundles of letters, old press cards, clippings about the murder of a guy named Lamont. Stuff a newsman is apt to keep. Good stories he'd turned out.

Well, Dike was involved in plenty of murder now. At the receiving end if I should be too late. The gun felt good in my hand.

I glanced over my shoulder as I left the apartment.

It was 4:21 o'clock. . . .

There was a light in Zinke's office. I wondered if I was too late. Were

they holding Dike there? Giving him a taste of what he'd handed out to Zinke? Keeping him there until Sammy Leiber had paid for another's crime?

The side door was unlocked. I stopped outside the door to Zinke's office and listened. I heard the same sound that had sickened me in Dike's apartment. Flesh hit flesh. A man moaned.

Zinke's voice sounded in a laugh. "How do you like it, punk?"

I tried the doorknob. It turned and the door opened a trifle under pressure. I threw it wide open and stepped inside. Dike's gun was solid in my hand. Zinke and the two men saw it. They stepped away from Dike.

"This is my show now," I said softly. "I'm playing for keeps. I want the truth, Zinke. I won't beat you for it. I'll drag you down to the cops and let them talk with you. They're experts. We're only amateurs."

Zinke's eyes narrowed. "Still think I bumped the dame?" he asked.

I nodded. Dike was holding a handkerchief to a face as badly battered as Zinke's. I wondered if they had intended to kill Dike when they were through with him.

Only one thing didn't make much sense. Why let me go? I knew as much about it all as Dike did.

"The boys have been checking," Zinke said. "They found out when the dame was killed. I wasn't in town that night. How could I have given them a Mickey Finn, like this dope says I did, take them out and bump the girl?"

"Your alibi isn't worth a damn," I snapped. "You're still going to tell it to the cops. You can't—"

Abruptly something he'd said echoed in my mind again. Things added up to a new score. My mouth was suddenly dry and I stared at Zinke.

"You told us that Flo saw another murder in L. A. She was blackmailing someone here. Who was the other man she saw murdered?"

TDA

"As far as I know she only saw one murder," Zinke hedged.

"Who was murdered? Who was the man she saw?"

Zinke didn't get a chance to answer. Dike moved with unexpected swiftness. A heavy metal ash tray from the desk beside him flashed upwards and crashed into the overhead lighting fixture. The room went black.

Instantly I dropped to the floor. No one moved for a second. A man cursed in the darkness and metal clicked—someone getting a gun out.

I thought I heard Dike moving towards me. Seconds seemed like moments. I remembered the steady movement of clock hands toward six o'clock. A priest would be with Sammy now. The low voices of men in the early morning. The smell of the prison.

I moved and one of my shoe soles squeaked. A body crashed upon me. A hand felt along my wrist and clamped on the gun. I twisted and jerked. Someone breathed into my ear. I lashed up with an elbow and the man grunted.

We fought in darkness. I got my gun hand free and clubbed wildly.

I took a deep breath and moved away.

"Zinke!" I called. "Who was the other man she saw murdered?"

Zinke spoke from across the room: "A guy named Lamont. That's all I know about it."

Someone snapped a lighter and the faint light spread over the room. I got to my feet and stared down at Dike. He was breathing heavily, taking air between his smashed lips.

"What time is it?" I asked hoarsely.

One of Zinke's men answered. "It's five o'clock."

"You're in the clear, Zinke," I said.

**I** WALKED to the desk, switched on a desk lamp, and picked up a telephone book. It took me a moment to find a number and dial it. I waited.

The ringing signal buzzed methodically in my ear. After a while Pat Murphy's thick voice answered.

"Pat, we've got a chance to save Sammy and one hour to do it in," I said. "You know every bartender in town. Can you find the one who worked at the Inn the night the girl was killed?"

Pat didn't waste words. He said he could and would. I gave him instructions and hung up.

I looked at Zinke. "How do you stand with the D. A.?" I asked.

Zinke nodded silently.

"I can bring him out here?" I said. "You're not involved."

"Why not?" Zinke said. "Maybe I see what you mean. Maybe you're right."

It took me five minutes to convince the D. A. that I might be right. He said he'd come. He'd call the governor before he left and make sure that wires would be kept open.

I glanced at the clock. It was 5:10.

By the time the D. A. arrived, Dike was sitting up, shaking his head groggily. I poured whiskey down his throat and he coughed. One of Zinke's men splashed water into his face.

The telephone rang and I grabbed for it. Pat Murphy spoke.

"You were right. He was there. He stayed a few moments and left again. He didn't talk with anyone, but looked the crowd over. The barkeep remembered."

"That's all I wanted to know," I said quietly and hung up.

The D. A. stood in the room and looked at Dike and then at me.

"All right," he barked. "Let's have it. But it has to be good."

"It is," I told him.

Dike was fully conscious and watching me with a crooked smile.

"You were out here the night Flo was killed," I said to Dike. "You stopped long enough to see that Sammy was with her."

Dike didn't speak.

"You doped the bottle Sammy had in his car. You knew they'd park. You

followed them when they left. They played into your hands and drank from the bottle. The bottle that had chloral in it from your supply you have in a medicine cabinet at the apartment. Knockout drops."

I turned to Zinke. "Tell the district attorney what you told us. That the girl was blackmailing someone here. That she'd witnessed a murder in Los Angeles."

Zinke spoke in brief sentences. The D. A. listened and then looked at me questioningly.

"Who was murdered in L. A.?" I asked Zinke again.

"A man named Lamont."

I whirled to face Dike. "Why are you keeping clippings on that murder, Dike? Why did you have chloral in your apartment? We can check the purchase of that. The druggist will have a record of the date."

Dike's shoulders tightened and he leaned forward.

"You killed the girl because she saw you kill Lamont. She was blackmailing you. You were afraid you'd be taken back to California to face a murder rap. So you killed her and threw the blame on Sammy."

Dike's smile faded and he wiped his lips.

"You jumped Zinke because you had to find out if he knew about it, too," I said. "Knew who the girl was blackmailing. That's why you pulled the snatch tonight and beat hell out of him. If he'd known, you'd have killed him."

Dike still didn't speak.

I walked to the desk where he was sitting and put the gun down. I leaned over and stared into his face.

"If that isn't true," I said, "if you didn't know that I'd guessed the truth, *why did you put the lights out and attack me?*"

**D**IKE'S hand flicked out like a striking snake. He stood and backed. He had the gun I'd carelessly

placed on the desk. Behind me I heard the D. A. inhale sharply.

"All right," Dike said. His eyes were pin-points. His voice had sand in it. "All right, smart boy. You guessed it. But it won't do you any good now. I have more than enough bullets in this gun for the five of you. And none of you will talk."

I froze, hands clenched at my sides, my breath coming hard.

"I killed Lamont," Dike smiled. "Flo saw it. I killed Flo. I couldn't take a chance. She might have talked. She was taking my dough while she played Sammy on the side. I didn't know she was a witness to the murder until she came here. Sammy was a sucker to go for her. Afterwards I couldn't let Sammy live. He might try to find out about Flo. He was crazy about her. He might do something like that. Sammy's smart. He might have blundered upon the Lamont business. So I framed him."

The gun was aimed at me. He intended to pull the trigger. It was in his voice, the way he looked at me.

"It's too bad you found out so late," he smiled thinly. "Too bad for you and Sammy and all of you."

He pulled the trigger.

The empty click sounded loud in the room. I jumped for him and swung with all my weight. My fist caught him full on the jaw. He went down and Zinke's men piled on him.

"How—" the D. A. gasped as I turned.

"I emptied the gun before he became conscious," I said briefly. "I planned it this way. What time is it?"

The D. A. looked at his wrist watch.

"Five forty-one," he barked. "Give me a phone."

I listened as he talked with the governor, watched him nod and sigh as he put the telephone back in its cradle.

"Sammy Leiber won't die on the gallows," he said quietly.

Murphy's place was open the night Pat, Sammy and I got in the back room with two quarts of Scotch. We

were silent, drinking and not talking.

Sammy got up abruptly and took the strap watch off his wrist. He went out and came back without it.

"I could hear it," he said briefly. "I remember how it was that night. I know how it is tonight for him."

I shuddered. When you've known a guy as long as we knew Dike. . . ."

"He murdered," Pat Murphy said simply. "Two people died by his hand and he framed a friend."

"What time was it when you took the watch out?" I asked Sammy.

"Five minutes after midnight."

Pat poured drinks from a bottle and we gulped them. There are times when men deliberately get drunk. There are times when men don't want to think.

The papers said in their stories the next day: "The prison doctor pronounced Dike Lamey dead at 6:12 A. M."

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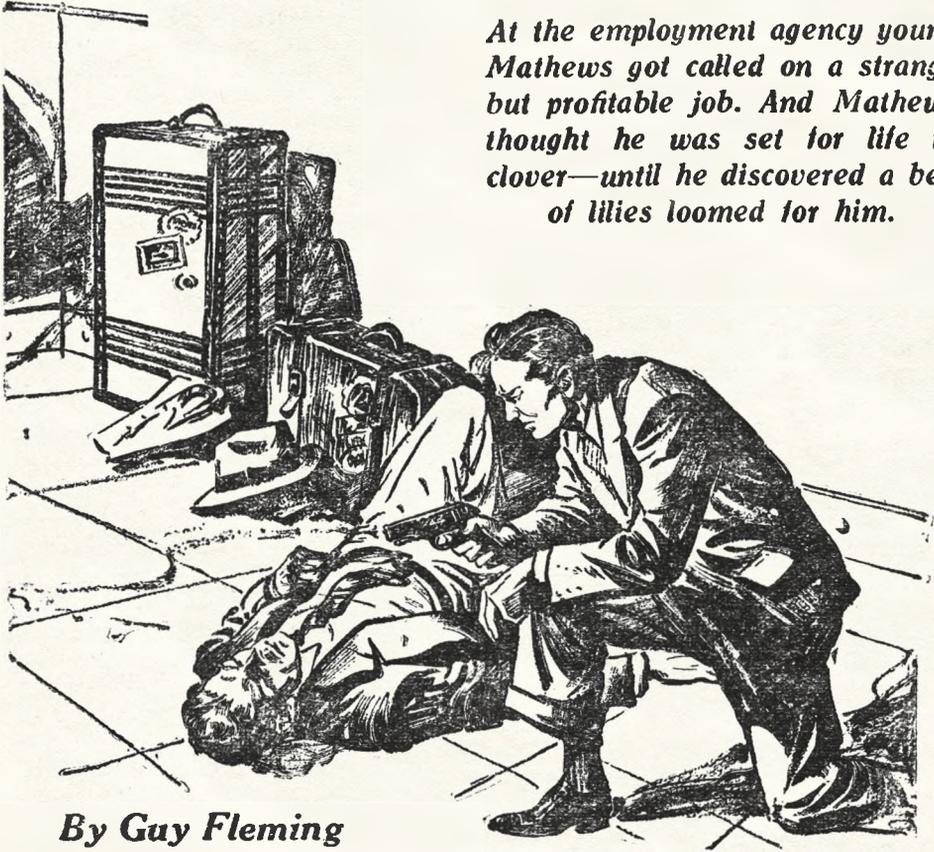
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# The Devil's Mission

*At the employment agency young Mathews got called on a strange but profitable job. And Mathews thought he was set for life in clover—until he discovered a bed of lilies loomed for him.*



*By Guy Fleming*

**T**IGHTLY clasping the slip of paper from the Singer Employment Agency, I pushed through the frosted glass door upon which was neatly centered in gold-leaf the words:

LAW OFFICES  
of  
THEODORE BECKWITH

I was still wondering why a man of Beckwith's standing in the profession should call upon a shoddy Sixth Avenue employment agency for a law clerk when he could pick the cream of the graduating class from any of the major universities. And then I saw the blonde.

She was seated at a reception desk in the exact center of the soft taupe carpet. She flashed me a smile as blinding as the sun on a clear day, and I wished I had spent my last twenty bucks on a new suit. Her mouth was over-red, over-ripe, in startling contrast to her white skin. Her eyes were sea-green, her figure sensuous.

She rose with feline grace and floated toward me. She was noting the shine on my over-pressed serge suit, the frayed trouser cuffs, the down-at-heel shoes. Then her eyes focused on the slip of paper in my hand.

"You're from—"

"The employment agency," I supplied.

Her tight black satin dress hugged the ample curves. Her voice was full and a trifle coarse. She was definitely not the type of receptionist you'd expect to find in the office of so staid and solid an attorney as Theodore Beckwith.

She took the slip of paper, glanced at it, and asked: "Your name?"

"Robert Mathews," I told her.

She led the way to a heavy oak door, swung it open and said, "Mr. Robert Mathews from the Singer Employment Agency," and stepped aside to let me pass.

The broad expanse of the room, the built-in bookcases, the subdued Italian leather chairs, the great carved desk—all indicated class and a big front. Behind the desk sat an imposing figure of a man, the kind of man who fitted into that setting. Gray lightly sprinkled his dark temples, a long aquiline nose jutting over a firmly etched mouth. He waved at a chair facing the desk. I sat down.

He lit a cigar, stared at me through the haze of smoke, then said: "The job pays one hundred dollars."

I gasped. "*One hundred dollars!*"

**T**HIS was far beyond my wildest dreams. Imagine working as a shipping clerk for fifteen bucks a week and going to law school at night, wearing the same suit for a full year, living in a two-by-four bedroom, eating cheap food. I'd given up the job on graduating two months ago and almost worn my legs down to the knees looking for a job in some law office. Without success, until today. And now this almost fantastic offer. . . .

"One hundred a week," I breathed. "I'll do my best to earn it, Mr. Beckwith. I'll—"

"Just a moment." He seemed puzzled. "You don't understand. The whole job only pays one hundred dollars. And that is eighty more than is customary. You're getting a bonus to keep your mouth shut."

I gasped at him. "Don't you want a law clerk?"

"Law clerk! Certainly not. I merely asked the agency to send a man for a single evening's work."

I understood then. In filling the application, I'd put down all my qualifications. So when they got this call from a lawyer's office they had sent me. The disappointment was hard to take. But a hundred dollars seemed like a lot of money. I nodded.

"I'll take the job."

He was frowning. "You've studied law?"

I told him about it.

He shrugged. "Perhaps it's just as well. You'll know what I want. Here's what you're to do. Go to the Elton Hotel this evening at nine p.m. Register for a double room. Bring pajamas with you. When you get there, pull on the pajamas and wait. In the meantime order a bottle of Scotch. Spill some down the drain. Pour a little into two glasses. Muss up the room. Give it an inhabited appearance. Quite soon a woman will arrive. When she takes off her coat you will notice that she will be wearing a negligee. You will—"

I got up. My ears were hot. "I will do nothing of the kind," I said angrily. "This setup smells. I don't know what you're up to, Mr. Beckwith, but I want no part of it. Good-bye."

I headed toward the door. "Wait," he said sharply.

I turned around. He was on his feet.

"Don't be a fool, Mathews. You know my reputation. You know I've been practicing law for twenty years. I'm asking you to do nothing any other lawyer hasn't done time and again. Sit down."

I didn't move. I just stared at him. But it dawned on me suddenly what he wanted.

"I think I understand," I said. "You want me to act as the co-respondent in a divorce case."

"Bright boy. That's it, exactly."

I shook my head. "I won't do it."

He made an impatient gesture. "Why not?"

"Because I don't like framing some poor woman who—"

"Nonsense," he cracked. "We're not framing anybody. This woman wants a divorce. Her husband refused to give her one. She's very rich and so she's buying it from him. For one hundred thousand dollars. He wants, however, to make her suffer. He refuses to be the guilty party. He is compelling her to be the defendant. I am merely arranging the evidence. On payment of the money, her husband will institute divorce proceedings based on that evidence. What's wrong with that?"

The way he put it, of course, it didn't sound so bad. I knew exactly what was supposed to happen. We'd be sitting in the room. There would be a knock on the door. I'd answer it. Several witnesses would look in, see us, note our attire, and simply withdraw. That's all the law called for.

And for that I would get one hundred dollars.

"You see," Beckwith was saying, "you'd really be helping a very fine woman to rid herself of the worst scoundrel who ever drew a breath."

I reached the decision quite suddenly. "All right," I said. "I'll do it."

"Fine." He gave a vigorous nod. "And now I'm going to ask you to sign a statement."

I stiffened suspiciously. "What kind of statement?"

**H**E SHRUGGED disparagingly. "Nothing much. You see, the woman who will meet you in the hotel is rich, extremely rich. We can't take the chance that later you might want to blackmail her, reveal the fact that her divorce was procured by collusion. I simply want you to write a note, asking her to meet you at the hotel. That will prove, if you ever make any trouble, that you must have known her before this incident."

From his point of view it may have been a sensible precaution. I said: "Who is this woman?"

Before he answered, he aimed a direct look at me, and his face was cold

sober and serious. He leaned forward slightly in his chair. "I may as well tell you, because you'll probably recognize her the moment you see her. Her picture has been in the paper innumerable times. The girl you are to meet is Lucy Arling."

The breath welled suddenly into my lungs, and I stood in front of him, saber-stiff and startled.

Lucy Arling! You've heard of her. Everybody has. Born with a bejeweled, platinum spoon in her lovely mouth, she'd inherited some ten million dollars from a pair of doting parents, who before their death had pampered her and catered to her every whim until she'd developed into a thoroughly spoiled brat.

She had I don't know how many motor cars, a yacht, a house on the Avenue, a country place, and an ungovernable temper. She was slim and supple and beautiful. She had all the arrogance of her breed. The man from whom she wanted her divorce was named Count Peter Tagliano. He was, even though she was only twenty-two years old, her third husband.

How do I know all this? Because I read the papers and there has been more printed about Miss Lucy Arling than any onther single screwball debutante in the business. She was a legend, something I knew existed only by hearsay, and yet it seemed that soon I would be able to see her in person, be in the same room with her, tied to her through the invisible bonds of a legal conspiracy.

Beckwith had handed me a pen and a piece of paper. Had I known then what writing that note would mean, I'd have gotten up and gone out of there and put the entire expanse of the continent between us even if I had to walk. But I didn't know, and so I wrote:

*Dearest Lucy:*

*Meet me at the Elton Hotel this evening. I must see you.*

*Love,*

**BOB.**

And there is irony for you. All that stood between me and starvation was a paltry few dollars, and here I was arranging a tryst between myself and a famous glamor girl whose prodigal fame spread half around the world.

Meticulously Beckwith blotted the note, folded it and placed it in a drawer. He picked up an intercommunicator, pressed a button, said: "Come in, Blanche."

And there in the doorway was the breath-taking blonde with the dazzling smile.

Beckwith said: "Give Mr. Mathews five dollars for a hotel room and three dollars for a bottle of Scotch. Put one hundred dollars into an envelope and see that he gets it some time tonight at the Elton Hotel. You have your instructions, Mathews. Good day." And he bent over a legal document in a clear gesture of dismissal.

I followed Blanche through the reception room and as I was leaving I heard her voice saying: "Don't let Lucy Arling get too close to you, Bobby. She's a lulu, that one."

And then I was out in the hallway, minus the slip from the employment agency, but with eight single dollar bills in its place.

**T**HE room in the Elton Hotel was a very nice one, high on the tenth floor. A bellhop had brought me a bottle of Scotch. I did not pour any of it down the drain, but I did let a sizeable draught slide past my throat. It was fine. Very fine. I saved some for Miss Lucy Arling.

The knock on the door was neither timid nor sharp, but it did carry authority. I said, "Come in," and sat stiffly on the edge of the bed, eyes glued to the door, the breath still-born for the moment in my lungs.

The door swung open.

Perhaps the first thing that struck me was her eyes. Wide and restless and a deep amber. The hair was a vivid ebony black and combed straight back in a long page-boy coiffure. Lucy Arling came into the room, trailing

a long mink coat of matchless skins.

Without a word she slipped out of it, flung it carelessly over the arm of a chair and my throat was suddenly a hard constricted knot. The negligee was a frilly thing, scarcely able to conceal her long-limbed, thoroughbred figure. Pouring herself a stiff hooker from the bottle of Scotch, she flopped loosely into a large chair.

Sipping the drink, she eyed me over the rim of the glass, and abruptly asked: "What's your name?"

"Mathews," I gulped.

"You do this sort of thing often?"

I shook my head.

The orange splash that was her mouth parted in a smile. "You're very nice-looking," she said.

"Thanks." I was beginning to feel uncomfortable.

She crowded to one side of the chair and patted the empty space beside her. "Come over here and sit down."

For a brief moment I didn't move because I didn't try to. Then I thought, what the hell! and lifted myself out of the chair. Her long dark lashes were drooping dreamily and the blood began to pound against my temples. But it was not because of her.

The pounding changed to a deep, incessant hum. The furniture began to waver and spin. Everything in the room fused together in a great heap with Lucy Arling sitting on top, grinning at me.

All I can remember was that my knees collapsed under me and I sank off into a deep, bottomless pit. . . .

**T**HERE was dust in my mouth. I tried to push it out with my tongue, but succeeded only in making matters worse. I opened my eyes. My face was pushed full against the green carpet. I turned over and struggled to my feet.

And the first thing I saw were Lucy Arling's legs.

They were projecting out from under the bed, the toe of one slipper twisted at a grotesque angle. I blinked,

sucked in some air and went over to her.

"Miss Arling," I said, and my voice was a hoarse whisper, thick and ragged.

She did not answer. I stooped, got hold of the ankles and pulled her softly into the open. I just stood there with my underlip hanging against my chin and the eyeballs fairly popping from their sockets.

The hair, spread like the frayed ends of a mop over the carpet, was not ebony black, but a bright shining blonde. The figure was not slender and boyish, but full and curvesome.

It was Blanche, Theodore Beckwith's decorative secretary.

The sea-green eyes were open and staring and filled with an expression of startled surprise mingled with fear. The over-red lips were parted, not in a smile, but rather as if she'd tried to emit an anguished snarl.

The bullet hole almost directly above the bridge of her nose was an ugly raw-hipped wound, and the blood that had traced a thick wavering line down to her chin was dried and congealed.

A sudden plunge into ice water could not have awakened me more sharply to full consciousness. Scared? I was almost paralyzed with terror. I had not, of course, the remotest idea of what had happened. But I did know that the room was full of murder and that I was right in the middle of it.

"Get out!" something was shouting in my ears. "Beat it!"

Quickly I pulled off my pajamas and was back in normal attire. And my feet, which had been rooted to the floor, suddenly galvanized into action. I half dived toward the door, twisted the knob and yanked. My hand almost pulled over at the wrist.

The door was locked.

My heart lurched violently against my ribs. Frantically I darted a look about the room. The key was not in sight. I grabbed the doorknob and began to rattle it wildly. Suddenly I realized that someone might hear me.

So I jerked my hand away as if the knob were white hot. I did not want anybody to hear me. Emphatically not.

I did not bother looking for the key. I knew I would not find it. But I had to get out of that place and I could not walk through a locked door. Neither could I call the desk and ask them to send up a passkey. A man does not lock himself into his own room and lose the key. I was afraid such a call might lead to an investigation. I could, of course, hide the body, but was it worth the risk?

I whirled and raced into the bathroom. No exit from there. I stood still, chewing my lip, thinking hard. The window! That was it. The window. I pried open the bottom pane and looked out. Straight down, ten floors. People were crawling along the sidewalk like tiny ants. A steady stream of shining car tops flowed smoothly between them.

My throat was dry because I had seen something else. Not two feet below the sill was a narrow ledge about a foot and a half wide. My throat was dry because I have always suffered from a mortal fear of height.

But by stepping out on that ledge, by hugging close against the side of the building, I would be able to make a precarious voyage to the window of the adjoining room. If that window was closed I would be in a bad way. If it was open I could step into the room and perhaps slip out of the door.

Without weighing the problem further I held my breath and got one foot over the sill. I kept my eyes away from the street because I knew that the sight of that sheer drop would give me a fit of vertigo that might well cause me to tumble into the cavern. It never entered my mind to wait till early a.m. I never thought that anyone in the street might spot me and raise a furor.

I CANNOT describe my feelings with any accuracy as I shuffled sideways along that narrow ledge,

my fingernails digging into the minute crevices between the bricks, seeking some sort of a grip. I know that my ears were singing, that my hands and feet were ice cold and clammy, and that my stomach was a twisted knot of sickness.

Closer, closer, inch by inch, I worked my way to the window of the adjoining room. A feeling of infinite relief surged through me as I noticed that it was open. And then, making one last final stab, I grabbed the edge of the window and hung there for a moment, the sweat gushing from every pore in my body.

And it was while I was crouching there like that, hanging on with the grip of a drowning man, that the light went on. Bright yellow flooded the room and threw me into sharp relief against the windowpane.

The light came from a bedlamp and had been switched on by a long, bony hand which still clung to the pull-cord. Directly under the lamp was a thin, pinched face belonging to a woman with frowsy hair and wide-open puffed eyes. I noted, strangely, the large wart on the left side of her nose.

She stared at me for a full ten seconds and then her mouth opened and the shrillest, longest scream I have ever heard pierced my eardrums. She was terror-stricken, but not less so than myself. And despite her fear, she still had presence enough of mind to grab the receiver off the hook of the telephone at her side, and continue her yelling.

"Help!" she screamed. "Burglars!"

How I ever got back along that ledge to my own room I do not know. But I managed it. I know now that it was a mistake. I should have dived across the floor of the spinster's room and broken out of the door into the hall. Once there I might have been able to make a break for it.

But back in my own room, with the door securely locked against escape, with the dead body of Blanche at my feet, I knew that I was trapped.

Trapped just as securely as if four great bear traps had clamped down on my arms and legs.

The manager, the house detective, a couple of bellhops and a cop or two would come rushing up to her room. She would point mutely at the open window. A quick look and they would know that I had returned here. Her room was the last on that side of the building and I could not have made the turn.

I did not have long to wait.

The knock on the door was crisp, authoritative. I stood quite still, a cold chill sucking at the pit of my stomach. Even had I wanted to, I could not have bade them enter because of the great intolerable lump which had wedged down the base of my tongue.

A key rasped in the lock, the door swung open, and there they were just as I had expected. The uniformed cop was a burly, red-faced Irishman. He'd never encountered anything like this before. But one look at the dead girl on the floor was enough to make him turn and motion the others back out of the room. I knew the house dick because he didn't look like one. No derby, no big shoes, just a neatly dressed young chap with a serious face.

The cop's gun came out and a little of the color left his face. He edged toward me warily. "All right," he said. "All right. Stick out your hands, brother."

The handcuffs clicked sharply and I found my wrists manacled together. . . .

"... **A**ND that," I said, "so help me, is exactly what happened. I know it sounds crazy, but you've got to believe me. You've got to."

Lieutenant Ambrose sat back in his chair and stared at me, incredulity written across his square-cut face. Lieutenant Ambrose knew me slightly. He'd given three extra-curricular lectures at the night school where I'd studied law, lectures on the working of the Homicide Bureau, and I'd

stayed long after class, asking him questions.

He hadn't told me about the room downstairs in the basement. The room they used to try to get you to confess. I'd been in that room since ten o'clock the night before and the light blue, almost invisible bruises in the back of my neck, behind my ears and on my arms were mute testimony to their attempts. Ambrose had just come on duty and taken charge of the case.

He had light gray eyes, almost colorless, and I could feel them probing into me. He said: "I suppose that's the story you told the boys downstairs."

I nodded mutely.

He shook his head. "No wonder they worked you over. It's easy enough to check up. Have you got the slip from the employment agency?"

"No," I told him. "The blonde kept it."

He reached for the telephone. "Get me the office of Theodore Beckwith," he said into the mouthpiece, and while he waited he kept staring at me, his slit of a mouth slightly pursed. "Hello," he said finally. "Beckwith? Ambrose, down at Homicide. We have a chap here who says you hired him to act as co-respondent in a divorce action. That true?"

He listened a moment, then covered the mouthpiece with his free hand and looked at me. "Beckwith says he hasn't handled a divorce action for fifteen years."

"Naturally," I said bitterly, "you don't think he'd risk his reputation by admitting an attempt to fake evidence. Get in touch with the employment agency and see if he didn't call down for a man."

But Ambrose was not listening to me; his attention was focused on the receiver. When he turned to me again, his eyes were narrowed and hard.

"Beckwith was ill in bed yesterday, under the care of a doctor. He didn't even go to his office. He says he can prove that."

I swallowed. "Get him down here. Let him face me and see if he's telling the truth."

Ambrose said over the wire: "Can you come down here right away? I'll consider it a personal favor, Beckwith. I want you to help me clear something up."

Beckwith's office was a scant three blocks away from headquarters and we would not have long to wait. I sat stiffly on the edge of the chair. The door opened and a painclothes dick entered. He bent over and whispered something to Ambrose. The lieutenant's square jaw nodded, and he kept his eyes pinned on mine.

"Look here, Mathews," he said. "About that slip from the employment agency. Where did you get it?"

The question puzzled me. I'd explained all that to him. I tried again. I said: "I was sitting on a bench in the waiting room and a man came over and handed it to me."

"Had you ever seen this man before—at the agency, I mean?"

I shook my head. "No."

Ambrose exchanged glances with the detective. "They have no record of any call from Beckwith's office," he said. "Monahan has just been over there and questioned them about it."

I just sat there and stared at him. I opened my mouth and kept it open without speaking. And at that moment the door opened again and a cop stuck his head in and said: "Mr. Beckwith is here, lieutenant."

"Tell him to come in."

I swiveled toward the door and held my breath. I knew that Ambrose, too, was eying that door sharply, to see what, if any, expression flickered across the face of the lawyer at sight of me.

The tall figure that came into the room was portly, a trifle pompous, and the pearl-gray Homburg was set squarely over his white head. He swung a walking stick at his side.

Ambrose said, "Hello, Beckwith," and I felt suddenly as if a cold hand had reached down and grabbed my

stomach and was trying to pull it, literally, out through my mouth.

I JUMPED up off the chair. My knees were shaking. Moisture had formed all over my back. My hands felt like two lumps of dough. I pointed a finger and burst out in a voice that didn't sound like my own:

"He's lying. He's not Beckwith. This isn't the man who hired me. It's a trick. Listen—listen, Ambrose—"

The lieutenant cut me short. "Easy, Mathews. I've known Beckwith for several years. This is he, all right."

I sank back into the chair. My legs had turned to water and I couldn't stand on them. Everything was whirling crazily around in my brain. The thing was getting wilder every moment. First, the agency never sent me to an office where I knew I'd been. And now the man I'd spoken to was not the right man at all.

"Have you ever seen this chap before?" Ambrose asked Beckwith.

The lawyer scrutinized me casually. "Never."

"Who was in your office yesterday?"

"No one. We keep closed on Saturday."

The lieutenant indicated a chair and Beckwith sat down. Ambrose made me repeat my story from the beginning. I did, and when I had finished, Beckwith—the real Beckwith—sat quite still, staring at me, his eyes wide open in frank amazement.

"What do you make of it?" Ambrose inquired.

Beckwith shrugged. "It's incredible. I can't understand how he concocted such a story in so little time. I think you ought to send him over to Bellevue." He tapped his forehead. "I'll admit Lucy Arling has been separated from Count Tagliano for several months, but there has been no talk, no talk whatsoever, of a divorce."

"But that was Lucy Arling in the hotel room with me," I cried. "I recognized her. I've seen her picture often enough. Let me talk to her. Please,

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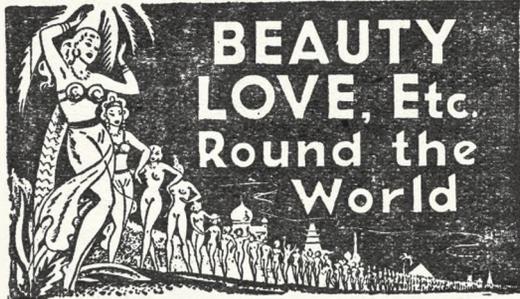
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Mr. Beckwith. Give me that chance." Beckwith pursed his small mouth and shook his head emphatically. "Impossible," he snapped. "She's a very sensitive girl. This thing would upset her no end."

"That would be too bad," Ambrose stated dryly. "Because I've already sent a man up to her apartment. She's due here any minute."

"You have no right," Beckwith said, coloring. "I can't have—"

The lieutenant held up his hand. "This young man here is accused of murder. If he's guilty I'll do my best to send him to the chair. But he's told us a story and I'm going to inspect every angle of it. So far it has fallen down at every point. Personally, I think he's guilty, guilty as hell, but I'm giving him every break to which he's entitled. Miss Arling will have to come down out of the clouds for just a few minutes."

I sat there, licking my lips. So Ambrose thought I was guilty. And why not? What else could he think? They'd found the gun on the floor of the closet. My prints were on it, naturally. The bottle of Scotch had disappeared and they couldn't analyze it to see if I was telling the truth about the knockout drops. The gun of course had been pressed between my fingers.

So far they had not identified the dead blonde. The labels in her clothes had been from big shops and could not be traced. They'd sold thousands of similar garments.

And then, for the third time, the door opened, and there she was.

She was clad in the same mink coat. It was open and this time she was wearing a dress. Her amber eyes were cold and glazed over with frost. She swept into the room, sparing me not even a glance, and turned the full fury of her gaze on Beckwith.

"What's the meaning of this?" she demanded. "Sending detectives after me, dragging me into this vile place."

Beckwith held up a placating hand. "Now, now, Lucy," he said. "Everything's all right. All you have to do

is answer several questions. Have you ever seen this lad before?"

Her eyes met mine and in them there was not the slightest trace of recognition. She turned away, lifting her shoulders. "No. Who is he?"

"Were you," Ambrose injected himself into the conversation, "at the Elton Hotel at any time last night?"

"Certainly not." Her voice was frigid.

"Where were you?"

"I was visiting friends."

I didn't say anything. My larynx was tied up into a knot. It wouldn't have done any good. What could I say against this array of evidence and denials? I was boxed in, trapped.

Ambrose nodded to Beckwith. "All right, you may go. Take Miss Arling with you."

I jumped up. My face was burning.

"No! Wait!" I yelled. "You can't let her go. She's lying. She was in that hotel room. I can prove it."

"How?" demanded the lieutenant.

"By—by—" I stuttered, casting around for an idea I knew I could not find. I couldn't prove she'd been there. Not unless I had eye-witnesses. Which I didn't. My shoulders slumped and I stared in blank discouragement at Ambrose. I felt that for all his patience he was getting fed up. He waved dismissal and Beckwith piloted Lucy Arling through the door and out of sight.

Ambrose and I were alone.

He shook his head. "I'm sorry, Mathews. It was a cockeyed story and I don't know why I went to all that trouble. The D. A. is taking this thing to the Grand Jury sometime today and I think—" He stopped as the phone rang.

FOR a few seconds he listened carefully, then he flung the receiver on the hook, unwound himself from the chair, grabbed a battered felt hat from a peg behind him and said: "Come on, Mathews. Last stop."

He steered me down the stairs,

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shoved me into a squad car parked at the curb and ordered the driver to hit out for the terminal, fast.

I looked at Ambrose. He was frowning and there was disgust on his face. I was sure the disgust was for himself. He could have closed the case and maybe taken the day off. They'd found me in a hotel room with an unidentified dead girl. They'd found a gun. My prints were on it. I had tried to escape. And the story I'd told them was so patently fantastic, no jury in the world would give it credence.

My motive, they'd have insisted, was some sort of a love quarrel. Saying that I didn't know her seemed absurd because how else could I have gotten into a hotel room with her?

We pulled up before the railroad terminal and Ambrose, a tight grip on my arm, led me to the information desk. "When does the Chicago train leave?" he asked.

"Twenty minutes."

He cast a glance around, jerked his head and we headed for the rest room. Something was up and I didn't know what. My throat was parched from talking so much and I pointed at the water cooler near the wall. Ambrose nodded, planted himself solidly by the door. No one else was in the room. I went over to the water cooler and got a paper cup and filled it. I had just lifted it to my mouth when I saw him come out of the washroom.

He was carrying a yellow leather Gladstone with the embossed initials P. T. on it.

The human brain is a peculiar organism. Sometimes out of total darkness, a single thought, brilliant and lightning clear, will flash into its consciousness, filled with significance, and a whole new vista will open up. It was that way now. That man, the initials on that bag—He was Lucy Arling's husband.

I said very softly: "Count Tagliano."

He turned and looked at me. His long aquiline nose quivered slightly.

The thin aristocratic mouth tucked in at the corners.

"Peter Tagliano," I said, "or is it Theodore Beckwith?"

Yes, this was the man who had given me the job, or rather arranged so neatly to frame me for murder. The man I'd spoken to in Beckwith's office.

Very gently he set the Gladstone down on the white tiles. He never took his eyes off me. He was aware, of course, that Ambrose was in the room, but I imagine he did not suspect who the lieutenant really was. All human destiny, it seems, runs on such a ragged schedule. Twenty minutes. Had he taken another train elsewhere, left earlier, we might never have contacted him in time. I knew that Ambrose had sent a man to Tagliano's apartment and learned that Lucy Arling's estranged husband was just leaving the city.

I let him see me put my right hand in my pocket. There was a question in his eyes and I answered it. "I escaped," I told him. "They're after me now. They're going to catch me and send me to the chair. They're going to burn me. I don't care much any more. I haven't anything to lose, except my life, and it isn't worth a hell of a lot. But you framed me. And I'm not letting you get away scot free. I'm taking you out with me, see?"

I had no evidence to connect him with the murder of the blonde, not one single shred of evidence. And so I was trying to force his hand, compel him to make a move. I jabbed my forefinger against my pocket and I pulled my lips back in a snarl. I made a hissing noise.

He moved so fast I didn't have a chance to protect myself. He even caught Ambrose by surprise. His hand flashed under his lapel, the gun came out in one fluid blur of motion and the bright crimson flash was followed by the roar of an explosion. The room exploded before my eyes and I felt my knees hit the tiles.

The sound of another shot almost

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30.50-20	4	4	11.45
31.00-20	4	4	11.65
31.50-20	4	4	11.85
32.00-20	4	4	12.05
32.50-20	4	4	12.25
33.00-20	4	4	12.45
33.50-20	4	4	12.65
34.00-20	4	4	12.85
34.50-20	4	4	13.05
35.00-20	4	4	13.25
35.50-20	4	4	13.45
36.00-20	4	4	13.65
36.50-20	4	4	13.85
37.00-20	4	4	14.05
37.50-20	4	4	14.25
38.00-20	4	4	14.45
38.50-20	4	4	14.65
39.00-20	4	4	14.85
39.50-20	4	4	15.05
40.00-20	4	4	15.25
40.50-20	4	4	15.45
41.00-20	4	4	15.65
41.50-20	4	4	15.85
42.00-20	4	4	16.05
42.50-20	4	4	16.25
43.00-20	4	4	16.45
43.50-20	4	4	16.65
44.00-20	4	4	16.85
44.50-20	4	4	17.05
45.00-20	4	4	17.25
45.50-20	4	4	17.45
46.00-20	4	4	17.65
46.50-20	4	4	17.85
47.00-20	4	4	18.05
47.50-20	4	4	18.25
48.00-20	4	4	18.45
48.50-20	4	4	18.65
49.00-20	4	4	18.85
49.50-20	4	4	19.05
50.00-20	4	4	19.25
50.50-20	4	4	19.45
51.00-20	4	4	19.65
51.50-20	4	4	19.85
52.00-20	4	4	20.05
52.50-20	4	4	20.25
53.00-20	4	4	20.45
53.50-20	4	4	20.65
54.00-20	4	4	20.85
54.50-20	4	4	21.05
55.00-20	4	4	21.25
55.50-20	4	4	21.45
56.00-20	4	4	21.65
56.50-20	4	4	21.85
57.00-20	4	4	22.05
57.50-20	4	4	22.25
58.00-20	4	4	22.45
58.50-20	4	4	22.65
59.00-20	4	4	22.85
59.50-20	4	4	23.05
60.00-20	4	4	23.25
60.50-20	4	4	23.45
61.00-20	4	4	23.65
61.50-20	4	4	23.85
62.00-20	4	4	24.05
62.50-20	4	4	24.25
63.00-20	4	4	24.45
63.50-20	4	4	24.65
64.00-20	4	4	24.85
64.50-20	4	4	25.05
65.00-20	4	4	25.25
65.50-20	4	4	25.45
66.00-20	4	4	25.65
66.50-20	4	4	25.85
67.00-20	4	4	26.05
67.50-20	4	4	26.25
68.00-20	4	4	26.45
68.50-20	4	4	26.65
69.00-20	4	4	26.85
69.50-20	4	4	27.05
70.00-20	4	4	27.25
70.50-20	4	4	27.45
71.00-20	4	4	27.65
71.50-20	4	4	27.85
72.00-20	4	4	28.05
72.50-20	4	4	28.25
73.00-20	4	4	28.45
73.50-20	4	4	28.65
74.00-20	4	4	28.85
74.50-20	4	4	29.05
75.00-20	4	4	29.25
75.50-20	4	4	29.45
76.00-20	4	4	29.65
76.50-20	4	4	29.85
77.00-20	4	4	30.05
77.50-20	4	4	30.25
78.00-20	4	4	30.45
78.50-20	4	4	30.65
79.00-20	4	4	30.85
79.50-20	4	4	31.05
80.00-20	4	4	31.25
80.50-20	4	4	31.45
81.00-20	4	4	31.65
81.50-20	4	4	31.85
82.00-20	4	4	32.05
82.50-20	4	4	32.25
83.00-20	4	4	32.45
83.50-20	4	4	32.65
84.00-20	4	4	32.85
84.50-20	4	4	33.05
85.00-20	4	4	33.25
85.50-20	4	4	33.45
86.00-20	4	4	33.65
86.50-20	4	4	33.85
87.00-20	4	4	34.05
87.50-20	4	4	34.25
88.00-20	4	4	34.45
88.50-20	4	4	34.65
89.00-20	4	4	34.85
89.50-20	4	4	35.05
90.00-20	4	4	35.25
90.50-20	4	4	35.45
91.00-20	4	4	35.65
91.50-20	4	4	35.85
92.00-20	4	4	36.05
92.50-20	4	4	36.25
93.00-20	4	4	36.45
93.50-20	4	4	36.65
94.00-20	4	4	36.85
94.50-20	4	4	37.05
95.00-20	4	4	37.25
95.50-20	4	4	37.45
96.00-20	4	4	37.65
96.50-20	4	4	37.85
97.00-20	4	4	38.05
97.50-20	4	4	38.25
98.00-20	4	4	38.45
98.50-20	4	4	38.65
99.00-20	4	4	38.85
99.50-20	4	4	39.05
100.00-20	4	4	39.25

**TRUCK**      **HEAVY DUTY**  
**BALLOONS**      **TRUCK TIRES**

Size	Tires	Tubes	Price
6.00-20	4	4	\$4.25
6.50-20	4	4	4.45
7.00-20	4	4	4.65
7.50-20	4	4	4.85
8.00-20	4	4	5.05
8.50-20	4	4	5.25
9.00-20	4	4	5.45
9.50-20	4	4	5.65
10.00-20	4	4	5.85
10.50-20	4	4	6.05
11.00-20	4	4	6.25
11.50-20	4	4	6.45
12.00-20	4	4	6.65
12.50-20	4	4	6.85
13.00-20	4	4	7.05
13.50-20	4	4	7.25
14.00-20	4	4	7.45
14.50-20	4	4	7.65
15.00-20	4	4	7.85
15.50-20	4	4	8.05
16.00-20	4	4	8.25
16.50-20	4	4	8.45
17.00-20	4	4	8.65
17.50-20	4	4	8.85
18.00-20			

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caved in my eardrums. I was on the floor now and my chest was burning with pain. But I kept my eyes open and I saw Count Tagliano twist slowly, his mouth open, and go down.

He hadn't counted on that, Ambrose being a cop, I mean, and armed.

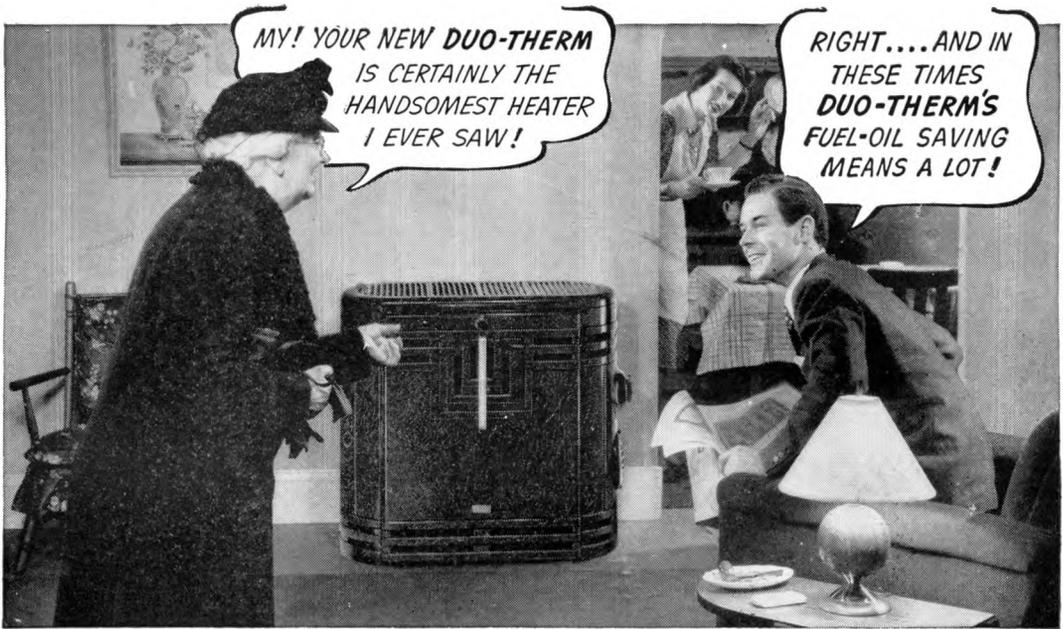
From the red stain on his shirt front I knew the bullet had caught him in the center of the chest. Blood flecked the corner of his mouth. Ambrose wadded a balled handkerchief against his wound.

Tagliano shook his head. "No good," he muttered through clenched teeth. "I'm finished. This was all Beckwith's idea. He'd been milking the Arling estate. He was afraid Lucy would marry again after our divorce and he'd have to give an accounting. He talked me into framing her. We took her picture in the room with the dead body. The note Mathews wrote was to prove she'd gone there to meet him. I was to handle the blackmail end and Beckwith was going to advise her to pay. We could have cleaned up over a million.

"I took Beckwith's place in the office. Then I was to fade. When Mathews failed to identify the lawyer his whole story would sound crazy. I fixed the Scotch for the bellhop, loaded it with knockout drops. The dead girl was a friend of mine. We double-crossed her. I had a man give Mathews the slip from the employment agency with Beckwith's name on it. He was to hand it to any young man seated in the waiting room. I—I . . ."

The effort was too much and his voice trailed off. Blood percolated down his chin. There was a rattle in his throat, and then he lay very still.

I spent one full month in the hospital. But I got out in time to hear Beckwith sentenced to the chair. I heard it in the courtroom where I was the star witness. The D. A. took a liking to me and is making me one of his junior assistants. I like that fine, but if I ever lose the job, I don't think I'll be able to go to an employment agency for another.



MY! YOUR NEW DUO-THERM IS CERTAINLY THE HANDSOMEST HEATER I EVER SAW!

RIGHT.... AND IN THESE TIMES DUO-THERM'S FUEL-OIL SAVING MEANS A LOT!

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**B**EAUTY! Efficiency! Economy! That's what Duo-Therm offers you, in heating with *clean, speedy, convenient, moneysaving fuel oil!*

You get heat fast . . . even on the frostiest mornings . . . because Duo-Therm's new, exclusive patented Power-Air Blower forces a flood of *uniform warm-air comfort* through your *whole house* . . . into every nook and corner . . . from floor to ceiling. And *Power-Air* is adjustable, to give you just the amount of circulation desired.

And remember . . . *only heat that is forced by power* goes everywhere it's needed. Heat that is *not* power-driven rises to the ceiling and "loafs" there.

New Duo-Therm Power-Air saves up to 25% in fuel oil! Now, more than ever before, fuel-oil econ-

omy is vitally important! *Actual tests have proved* that Duo-Therm, with its patented Power-Air blower, gives you floor-to-ceiling comfort . . . PLUS up to 25% saving in fuel oil over a heater without Power-Air! A Duo-Therm with Power-Air gives you *more* home comfort . . . and makes every drop of oil go farther!

**Marvelous new burner!** Modern engineering brings a new peak of efficiency to Duo-Therm's improved *Dual-Chamber* Burner! You now have complete *flame-control* at all settings . . . *more heat* per gallon of cheap fuel! And Duo-Therm is *clean, silent* and *safe* . . . all models are listed as standard by the Underwriters' Laboratories.

Look at these features! A simple turn of the *Handy Front Dial* gives

you just the degree of heat you want . . . and *Coordinated Control* insures proper draft for perfect combustion! Open the *Radiant Door* and enjoy a flood of cheerful warmth. Special *Waste-Stopper* saves fuel.

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**RADIANT-CIRCULATOR,**  
Only \$39<sup>95</sup>  
MODEL 575-2

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# TOTAL COST

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PAYS FOR ALL

## INSURES PARENTS, CHILDREN (Married or Unmarried) BROTHERS, SISTERS and GRANDPARENTS . . . Ages 1 to 65

★ Now, modern life insurance methods make it possible for *all* of your family, including in-laws, to be insured in one policy paying guaranteed benefits for death from any cause.

Instead of issuing five or six policies to include mother, father, sons and daughters, even grandparents, we now issue just one policy that insures them all . . . and at one low cost price of only \$1.00 a month.

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## FAMILY POLICY

INSURES FROM 2 to 6 MEMBERS OF YOUR FAMILY

**\$1,422<sup>00</sup>** For Natural or Ordinary Accidental Death

**\$2,844<sup>00</sup>** For Auto Accidental Death

**\$4,266<sup>00</sup>** For Travel Accidental Death

The figures shown above represent the insurance provided by the policy on a typical average family of five persons.

GUARANTEE RESERVE LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY  
DEPARTMENT 11-L, HAMMOND, INDIANA

**NO AGENT WILL CALL**  
10-DAY FREE INSPECTION OFFER  
**SEND NO MONEY**

### COMPUTED ON LEGAL RESERVE BASIS

To guarantee payment on each death that occurs in your insured family, we have figured this policy out on the strict legal reserve basis, complying with State government requirements in every respect. This is your assurance of *Cash When You Need It Most*. Claims are paid at once . . . without argument or delay. State records verify our fair and just settlements.

Guarantee Reserve specializes in full family coverage, that's why we can offer safe, guaranteed life insurance on your whole family at one low price of only \$1.00 a month.

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To eliminate costly doctor fees, etc., we have eliminated Medical Examination. All people from age 1 to 65, in good health may be included in this new type Guarantee Reserve family policy. No membership fees, no examination fees, no *policy* fee . . . \$1.00 a month pays for one policy that insures all.

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Guarantee Reserve LIFE INSURANCE CO.

GUARANTEE RESERVE BLDG., Dept. 11-L, Hammond Ind.

Gentlemen: Without obligation, please send me at once complete information on how to get your Family Life Policy for FREE inspection.

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