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Coward's Kill

A Mystery Novelet

By ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

The 9TH DOLL

A Nick Ransom Novelet

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

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THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. LXII, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

AUGUST, 1948

Featured Mystery Novelet



COWARD'S KILL

By ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

When gambler Ted Storme meets "Feet" Dorgan, underworld boss, he faces big odds in an impromptu game with death!

9

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- THE 9TH DOLL Robert Leslie Bellem 42**
Kitty Culpepper's hobby was mildly repulsive to Nick Ransom until it led to a case of murder which was anything but mild!
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It was up to Grant Williams to prove himself innocent of murder
- DON'T WAKE THE DEAD Frank Morris 99**
Rick Luggan was suspicious of the scared little man

and

- HEADQUARTERS A Department 6**
Where readers, writers and the editor meet

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Headquarters

THERE in the lobby of the Heather Hotel, the beautiful Reva Savoy smiled ever so sweetly and said: "You look okay yourself, Walter Bonner!"

"Except for the face," the young man answered.

"That's okay too. I like them grim!"

So begins the featured novelet in our next issue of **THRILLING DETECTIVE MAGAZINE**:

DON'T TELL ANYONE

By J. Lane Linklater

It is but a few minutes later that the apparently wealthy Reva hands Bonner eleven one-hundred-dollar bills. One of them is his fee. The others are to be placed as a bet—on the horse Atom's Apple at the track that afternoon in the seventh race. The odds will be between fifty and sixty to one.

Bonner thinks it a mighty good idea, as he is broke and has considered taking up the career of a "private eye" for some time. But—a hundred bucks, just to lay a bet on a horse?

Of course, Bonner is given to understand there will be a certain amount of danger. Also Bonner wants to know why this beautiful and wealthy girl is so sure the horse will win. According to the newspaper handicapper, the nag is a "dog" and is given no chance whatsoever. And at those odds—

Reva assures Bonner that she knows the owner of the horse, one Jack Adams, and that while the thoroughbred wasn't "held" in his previous tries, he wasn't at his best. This will be it, she is sure—or as sure as anyone ever can be about a horse race. The words of the old song are still true—"horses don't

bet on people." Bonner agrees to take the assignment. What can he lose?

The Tall and Short of It

Breaking away from the girl, Bonner collides with a very tall gentleman whom Reva introduces as Sid Towne. The story is that he is *the* one in her heart. And, strangely enough, on the way to his appointment with the girl, Bonner has run into the Jeff of the Mutt and Jeff combination. It is that tiny little man, the one they call Arthur Detman.

Reaching his own modest apartment, Bonner notices something wrong with his clothes closet. Swinging the door open, he faces the business end of a gun, said gun being in the hands of a chap in a green sports outfit. Acting quickly and courageously—you'll find that's the way Bonner usually acts—he overpowers the intruder and takes away the gun.

The green-clad chap declares himself to be Chet Martin. As for his business in Bonner's apartment—that's a secret. Bonner chases him out of there. He phones Reva Savoy and tells her about it. She sounds very chilly and takes the attitude—*do you want the assignment or don't you?*

Watch Your Step—Or Else!

Martin isn't gone long before Bonner is visited by a stoutish gentleman claiming to have a "financial" interest in Reva Savoy. The stoutish gentleman introduces himself as Amos Dunlop, president of the Dunlop Chemical Company and director in multitudinous other concerns. He tells Bonner, quite ominously, that Reva isn't as wealthy as most people think. Her sole income is

Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet

derived from the Zebra, an unsavory night club, catering to thugs and gunsels, of which the notorious Rex Sturgis is manager. Before he leaves, Dunlop warns Bonner to watch his step—or else!

Walter Bonner, in a high state of puzzlement, drives to the track in his car. After the sixth race, he goes to the hundred-dollar window. There he meets Jack Adams, the owner of the horse. Bonner realizes his actions are being "checked" from every possible angle. What is he—a pawn in a mysterious game?

The Body in the Car

But when he gets back to his car and opens the door, he begins to realize what he has let himself in for. There, on the back seat and all crumpled up in a bloody mess, is the body of the green-clad chap, Chet Martin!

Was this before or after the race? Did Atom's Apple win—at the phenomenal odds of 56 to 1? Who killed Chet Martin? The answers to these and many other exciting questions are in **DON'T TELL ANYONE!**

And we're certainly not telling you—just yet. We've just given you a little peek under the curtain—and next issue the curtain rises on one of the year's sweetest mysteries!

The Berkes Are Back

If you hire a man and he does a good job, you usually hire him again when you have another opening. That should also go for a couple—if you can use 'em both. The couple we're going to hire again—and we're sure you'll be glad to hear it—are Dwight Berke, sports editor of the *Journal*, and his charming photographer wife, Gail. They'll be back in:

MY VOTE'S FOR MURDER

By Carl G. Hodges

This will be one of the featured novelets in that rip-snorter of a forthcoming issue!

It is just after election and Di Berke and his pretty wife are on their way over to the celebration at the Broadview hotel. That's where the local radio station—WDAY is located, Mike Reynard—emcee.

For an occasion such as this, Reynard's sister has come to town. She is known as Honey Hendrix, and has the reputation of

(Continued on page 109)

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Do you have that constant urge to write but the fear that a beginner hasn't a chance? Then listen to what the former editor of *Liberty* said on this subject:

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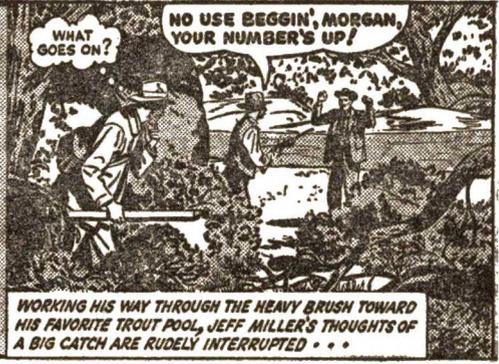
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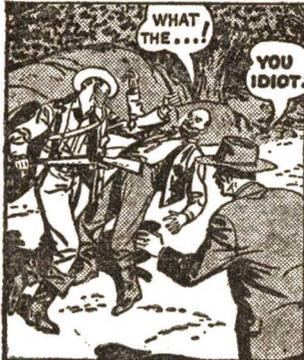
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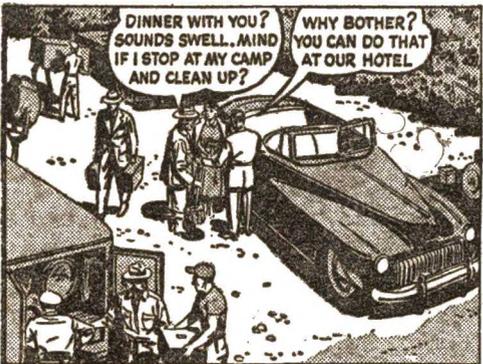
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YOU IDIOT!



I FEEL LIKE A FOOL! IT ALL LOOKED SO REAL
IT'S OKAY, SON. WE'LL SHOOT IT OVER



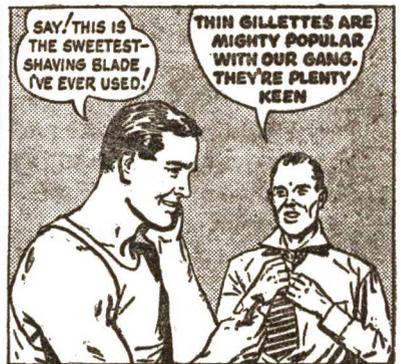
THAT'S THE WAY THE SCENE WAS SUPPOSED TO END
THIS BEATS FISHING. SHE'S LOVELY
CUT!



DINNER WITH YOU? SOUNDS SWELL..MIND IF I STOP AT MY CAMP AND CLEAN UP?
WHY BOTHER? YOU CAN DO THAT AT OUR HOTEL



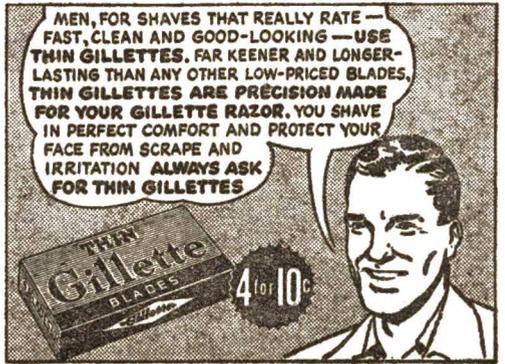
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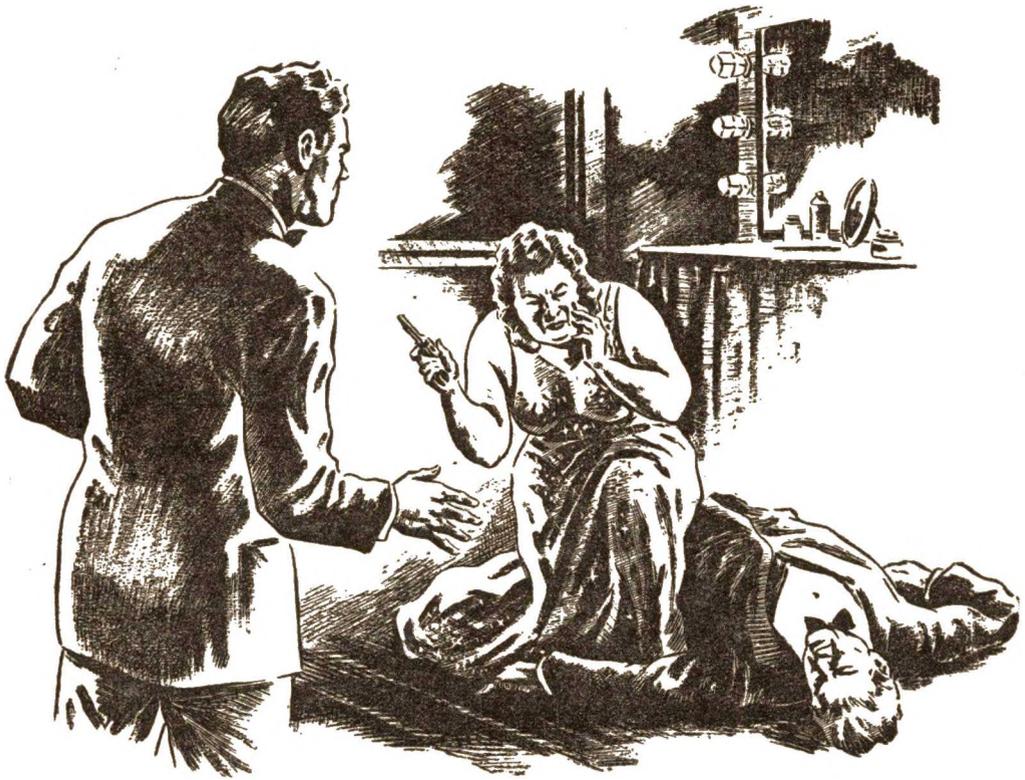


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LATER THAT EVENING

COWARD'S KILL



a novelet by

ARTHUR LEO ZAGAT

When gambler Ted Storme meets "Feet" Dorgan, underworld boss, he faces big odds in an impromptu game with death!

CHAPTER I

THE MAN FROM TEXAS

IF THE man who stood at the long bar on the mezzanine of Tom Goslin's Biarritz Casino on Long Island was aware that he was marked for death, he gave no evidence of it. Long-limbed, lithe in his impeccable dinner suit, he was young, about twenty-five or -six, but his narrow, bony face was an expression-

less mask as he watched a fly that had got itself half-drowned in a spill of cordial and crawled along the blue-mirrored bar top, its wings sticky and useless.

From some three or four yards away, in the buzzing, convivial crowd along the counter, a girl eyed him owlshly.

"Why, Jock?" she asked her baldish, rather obese escort. "Why's he all alone?"

Why's everybody not talking to him?"

"That, Mimi my dove, is Storme." Jock Haddon, Broadway character about town, seemed to think it was a complete answer. "Ted Storme."

Even Mimi Barton recognized that name, though she was more familiar with another variety of "bohemians," those she knew in Greenwich Village where she was making her home, while playing at learning "art." It had been on the impulse of the moment that she had come to the Biarritz with Jock Haddon, for she was sure a girl could not learn too much about all kinds of people in New York. And now she was learning plenty.

As Jock mentioned the name of the gambler, Ted Storme, Mimi's violet eyes widened.

"The man they say never loses a bet!" she exclaimed.

"Darned near," Haddon agreed. "Too near for the wise mob he's run ragged since he hit Broadway about six months ago. Those pretzels can't figure out if he's so straight they crack up trying to fit their curves to him, or if he's the slickest operator who ever came to town."

"From where, Jock? From where did he come?"

"You ask him that, or anything else personal, and he'll freeze you so hard they'll wrap you in wax paper and label you Birdseye."

"Not me, he won't." Mimi tossed her honey-hued clipped curls. "Watch me go to work on him." She started away, was dragged back by a sudden, fierce grip on her arm. "Keep clear of that bird," Haddon said huskily, black lights flickering in his too-small eyes. "Stay away from him unless you're looking for trouble."

"Trouble?" The girl wrenched free and faced him, her body taut in the shimmering white sheath of her strapless frock. "From you?"

"No, not from me. I'm on to your little tricks. I mean bullet-trouble." He glanced fearfully at their neighbors, dropped his voice to a murmur. "Storme took ten thousand from Feet Dorgan in the floating crap game last night and Dorgan got the notion he did it with a pair of educated ivories. That bird's

blazing hot, what I mean, and anybody near him's liable to get burned with him. Look, honey, the lights are dimming. Let's get to our table before Jennie Wrenn comes on."

"Hang Jennie Wren. I like your Ted Storme and I'm going . . . Oh-h-h!" Mimi stopped short. "Someone's starting to talk to him. Is he one of Dorgan's—"

"Torpedoes?" Haddon stole a quick look, shrugged. "I never saw him before, but that don't mean anything. Could be he's some out-of-town gungel Feet's imported to iron Storme out."

"No-o!" Mimi moaned. "Oh no, Jock. He's too nice."

Then the rush to get to the tables carried them down the short flight of carpeted steps from the mezzanine.

WITH the crowd gone, one could see the innumerable tiny silver bees—B for Biarritz—that studded the bar front, blue mirror-glass like its top, and the dozen larger, golden ones that were poised along its inner edge to conceal plebian beer taps. But it was the living fly at which the man who had ranged himself beside Ted Storme jabbed a gnarled forefinger.

"Pertinacious little cuss, ain't he?"

"Very."

Storme's eyes, the color and seeming hardness of chilled steel, flicked to the speaker and flicked instantaneously away. The glance had photographed every detail of the gaunt, leather-textured countenance, including the healed bullet-trough that angled down from beneath grizzled hair. A big man, taller than Storme and solidly built, the stranger obviously was ill at ease in a tuxedo as obviously newly bought.

"Hades nor high water," he drawled, "ain't a-goin' to keep that jigger from gettin' to the back edge of this shelf."

"Not the back," Storme corrected. "I've been watching that fly for five minutes. If and when it leaves the top of this bar it will be over the front edge."

The big man's face hardened. "I think he'll go over the back, and down in Brazos County we back our opinions with our cash. What do yuh say, stranger?"

"Suits me." Storme produced a well-stuffed wallet. "For how much?"



Two men came through the door, guns clutched in their fists. "You will not move," Ashton Lee said tonelessly

The Texan looked at the fly again. It was still crawling toward the back of the bar.

"For one thousand," the challenger said.

He brought out of his trouser pocket a roll of bills almost as thick as his fist, started counting fifties down onto the blue mirror. A bartender moved nearer, started polishing the bee-hidden draught arm opposite them. In the shadows at the far end of the counter a thin, ferret-faced chap stiffened, black eyes glittering.

"Nine-fifty," the big man finished his count. "One thousand. There yuh are, stranger." The roll he thrust back into his pocket but little reduced in diameter. "Cal Carroll don't back water for nobody."

Storme covered the money with ten hundreds. Applause splattered from the big room behind him and he turned to look.

Far across the now dimmed room blue satin curtains swirled apart to unveil a stage high-banked with men in yellow satin monkey-jackets, their instruments glinting as they blared an entreaty to Richard to open the door.

A spotlight noosed a microphone staff that grew upwards at the stage's front, center, with brilliance. A roly-poly little man trotted into the bright disk, brown derby canted back on plastered-down hair, loudly checked coat and pants ludicrously too tight.

From somewhere in the dark a whiskey-slurred voice called, "Hi, Sam Slats!" Others shushed it.

Behind Ted Storme's back the fly suddenly stopped short, inches from the bar's rear edge and flattened itself down on the glass.

"Come on!" the barkeep whispered. "Come on, baby. There's two grand ridin' on your back."

In the room Sam Slats took hold of the mike rod, his round, goggle-eyed face bisected by a clown's grin.

"Thanks for the greeting, customers, but you ain't fooling me. I know you didn't come here tonight to listen to my gags. You came to be present at a great event in the history of the American stage—the return from retirement of that tinv songstress, that diminutive in-

terpreteess of musical classics who won the hearts of your fathers and your grandfathers with her own inimitable voice."

He turned to the left, held out both arms in a gesture of welcome.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the one, the only Jennie Wrenn!"

And was butted out of the spotlight by the spangled pink buttocks of an enormous female who had galloped from the stage's darkened right wing.

Applause thundered as she loomed above it, blonde-wigged, flabby-jowled, and threw kisses, using both bare, bulging arms. On the mezzanine the barkeep swore softly as the fly started moving again, slantwise across the bar toward its front.

Storme came around, smiled without humor.

"You lose, my friend."

"Not yet," Carroll grunted. "It can still turn back."

"It can, but I don't think it will."

"Okay, Mr. Storme. I've got another thousand says different."

"No."

"No?" The Texan stared unbelievingly. "It's a fifty-fifty bet, ain't it?"

"PRECISELY. That is why I won't make it."

The bartender snorted disgustedly. Below the balcony the applause faded and from the stage Jennie Wrenn said, "Hello suckers!" She laughed girlishly. "Your warm greeting brings tears to my eyes, and that reminds me of the fellow who came back from a month in Florida all tanned but with his eyes red and puffy. When his partner asked him how he got that way, he told him about the blonde he'd met on the beach—"

She went on with the smoking room yarn, but on the mezzanine the fly reached the bar's front edge, went over it and dropped to the floor. Storme picked up the sheaf of bills.

"The drinks are on me," he said, expressionless as before. "I'll have mine as usual, Jim."

The barkeep looked at Carroll.

"Give me the same," the Texan growled, and then to Storme, "Yuh win, but yuh'd a won twice as much if yuh was a real sport."

"I'm not a sport." Storme stowed his winnings in his wallet, dropped two singles on the bar. "I'm a professional gambler. I don't risk my money on any proposition that doesn't give me a percentage in my favor." Oddly enough, now that the issue was decided he seemed gripped by a tenseness that had not been in evidence before. "I told you I'd been watching that fly for five minutes. In that time it approached the rear of the bar three times and turned back each time because it was frightened by the reflection of the big golden bee in the mirror."

Carroll's jaw dropped. "I'll be everlastingly hornswoggled." He reached for the tall glass the bartender had set in front of him, gulped a swallow, choked on it, and stared at the white liquid left in the tumbler, on his raw-boned features a mixture of disgust and amazement. "C-cow juice," he spluttered. "Milk!"

A FAINT smile touched Ted Storme's thin lips but did not ease their grimness.

"In my business, Carroll, I can't afford to drink anything stronger. If I'd been doing so tonight, for instance, I might not have noticed the single time you forgot to call me 'stranger' and used my name instead."

The audience whooped as Jennie Wrenn and Sam Slats engaged in Webstersfieldian slapstick.

"Yeah," the still-faced Texan acknowledged. "Yuh was pointed out to me." His right hand dropped into the side pocket of his coat and made a bulge there. "I got some business with yuh ought to be done where it's more private." He looked down along the room's side wall to a small door over which a red light burned. "I reckon that gives out on the car-parkin' corral. S'pose we go thataway."

"Very smart," Ted Storme murmured. "If we left the front way, the coatroom girls and the doorman would see us together and they might remember afterward. Down there everybody's looking at the stage." He finished his drink, turned down the empty glass. "Let's go," he sighed. "Let's get it over with."

CHAPTER II

A CHILD'S PLEA



AM SLATS ducked a buffet from Jennie Wrenn's big hand.

"Hey, Jennie!" he panted. "Maybe the customers'd like to hear you sing the 'Gay Caballero'."

"Aw, no." Pink-spangles wriggled in embarrassment. "Not that!" Lavish grease paint could not hide the crowsfeet under mascaraed eyes, nor the unlovely loose skin at an aged throat. "I couldn't. Ruhlly I couldn't."

"How about it, folks?" Slats appealed across the footlights, and affirmatives roared back at him out of a clatter of silverware on Tom Goslin's bee-sprinkled chinaware.

Jennie nodded to the orchestra leader. The strains of the bawdy tune blared out.

The scent of expensive perfume was heavy in the big room that was lit only by shaded electric candles topping the porcelain beehives on each table.

"Jock," Mimi whispered to her companion. "Isn't that Dorgan over there?"

Haddon let his look slide to the table, next but one to theirs, toward which she jerked her dimpled chin.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, that's Dorgan all right."

"I don't see why everybody's so scared of him," Mimi said. He was a little man all sleek tailored curves, his face round and apple-cheeked under a mane of snow-white hair gleaming silkily in the dimness. "He looks like Santa Claus."

"Some Santa Claus," Haddon muttered. He took the girl's dimpled chin in the V of his thumb and forefinger. "If you're getting ideas about Dorgan, skip it. He's a wolf that eats up honey-sweet little gals like you for dessert."

"Jock!" Mimi gasped. "Look over there, by the wall."

He turned, saw the lean figure that moved smoothly along blue silk drapes, and the taller form that kept close alongside.

"Ted Storme and that other man, Jock," Mimi said. "That . . . What was

it you called him? That gun—"

"Gunsel." Haddon was a little pale around the gills. "Taking Storme out."

"There's another one, Jock!" whispered the girl. "Sneaking along behind them."

A spray of light from a canted candle shade fell across the weasel face of the thin-bodied individual who'd lurked in the shadows at the end of the bar.

"Him I know, Mimi," said Jock Haddon. "That's Gull Foster, of the Dorgan mob. Guess Feet's taking no chances on his imported killer slipping up."

"Killer!" The girl's pupils dilated. "Jock Haddon, how can you sit there so calmly when . . . We've got to do something, Jock! We've got to save . . . Ohhh! They're going out that side door to the parking lot and that Foster's hurrying to catch up. Jock!"

"Keep still, you little fool! Do you want . . . Oh, Christopher!"

Mimi had pushed up out of her chair. Haddon grabbed at her, but she evaded him, was running toward the steps leading from the mezzanine. . . .

Ted Storme went through the side door just ahead of Carroll, stepped to one side as the Texan came through. Storme's rock-hard fist failed to the big man's midriff, another to the jaw which the first blow had brought down within reach. Carroll sagged, folded down on the threshold, but before he had stopped falling Storme already was feet away along the building's wall.

Glare from a naked three-hundred-watt bulb over the attendant's booth at the entrance glinted on car windows but toward the casino's rear a small shed made a patch of Stygian black. He reached this cover, glanced back as a sudden burst of sound came from within the larger building.

The door out of which he had come was slitted open again. "Gull" Foster squeezed through, shut it softly, stared down at the limp, sprawling Carroll. Traffic sound seething past the high black hedge that divided the lot from the highway was threaded by the shrilling of a traffic cop's whistle. A woman's voice cried out thinly.

Foster peered through the rows of parked cars, started toward them, hesitated, then turned back and bent over

the stunned Texan. But a thud of running feet from the gate leading to the lot jerked the black-pollled little thug erect again.

His gesture of his hand toward his lapel was paralyzed by a hoarse bellow.

"Reach, you! Grab air or I'll let some into you!"

A burly cop pounded toward him, revolver out. Foster's arms lifted.

"It's okay, Officer," he said suavely. "My friend here had a snootful and I brought him out here and he passed out. I was just lookin' after him."

"Lookin' after his jack, you mean."

The policeman glared at Cal Carroll's plethoric bill roll which was clutched in the little thug's raised left hand, jabbed his gun muzzle into Gull Foster's midriff, slid his own free hand under the tuxedo jacket's flap and brought out a flat, lustreless automatic.

"All right, punk," he growled. "Let's have your wrists."

FOSTER held them out and nicked silver clicked around them just as the gray-haired parking lot attendant limped up.

"Hey, Grady! Hey! I seen you dive past me and . . . How'd yuh know what was goin' on?"

"Gal in a white dress comes sailin' out uh the Casino to where I'm directin' traffic, peaceful-like, and tells me someone's bein' bumped in here." Officer Grady plucked the roll of bills from his prisoner's reluctant grasp. "Listen to them horns blattin' out there on the crossin'! I ought to be out there an' I ought to be takin' this lush-roller into the house, and I ought to be doin' somethin' about this stew he was friskin'. Now how—"

"Yuh don't have to do nothin' about me, mister." Cal Carroll sat up, dazedly rubbed his jaw. "I'm not stewed. Not on milk, but—" He gulped, his eyes focusing on Foster. "Hey! Where's—"

"Your cash? Here." The cop held it out but jerked it away from Carroll's reaching hand and shoved it into his own pocket. "Sorry. Got to hold it for evidence. You'll get it back from the magistrate in night court, *after* yuh've signed a complaint."

"What complaint?" The Texan lum-

bered erect, big hands fisting. "Yuh can turn this pipsqueak loose, Officer. I'll take care of him myself."

"Nix," Grady refused. "Nothin' doin'." He turned to the lot attendant. "Yuh got a phone in that booth of yours, Pop, I can call the house for a squad car from?"

He pulled at the chain linking Foster's wrists and the little group got moving. Quickly it was hidden from Ted Storme by the black bulk of a limousine. Storme smiled thinly in his cover.

"I better get distance between me and here before Dorgan puts some more of his hoods on me," he muttered.

He drifted along the wall of the shed in whose shadows he had crouched, got past its corner—and stiffened. A sound half-heard, a feel of movement in the shadows, sheathed his body with iciness. . . .

On the sidewalk before the wide, white-painted steps that climbed to the front entrance of the Biarritz, Mimi touched the back of Jock Haddon's hand with a finger.

"I couldn't, Jock," she said pleadingly. "I just couldn't let him be killed without trying to do something to stop it."

"So you ran out here to call copper." Haddon's face was the color of yeast. "With Feet Dorgan himself watching you, three tables away. Here." He shoved a bundle of electric-blue velvet at Mimi. "Here's your wrap. If you've got any sense at all you'll grab a taxi and keep going right out of this town, but whatever you do, keep away from me. Do you hear?" His voice became a snarl. "Keep away from me. I don't want that snake after me."

He wheeled away, stumped stiff-legged back up the stairs.

"Jock!" the girl sobbed, the gleaming wrap trailing from her arms. "Oh, Jock."

And then what was left of color drained from her small face as the revolving door through which Haddon had vanished disgorged a little man with snow-white hair, a Santa Claus tummy that bulged his starched shirt-bosom, and twinkling, bright blue eyes.



"Lookin' after his jack, you mean!" The policeman glared at the bills clutched in the thug's left hand

The doorman flipped an obsequious finger to his cap visor.

"Your car, Mr. Dorgan?"

"No, thank you, Bill. I'm not leaving. I just want to speak to that young lady."

"Feet" Dorgan started down the stairs toward Mimi and she knew it was no use to run. No earthly use. . . .

The sound that had held Ted Storme rigid came again. A tight sob. Vague reflection of light from the casino's white-painted side showed him its source. Apprehension drained out of him, was replaced by amazement as he stared at the little girl, scarcely thigh-high to him, whose small grimy face was tear-strained as she twisted in distraught little hands a knee-length plaid dress.

"Hello," he said softly. "Where did you come from?"

Enormous eyes lifted to him in the dimness. The child's lips quivered.

"Don't be afraid of me, sweetheart." Storme's low voice was gentle. "I'm not a boogie man. I'm only Ted, and if you'll tell me what's the matter I'll try and help you.

THE big eyes studied him with vast solemnity. What they saw seemed to content the waif. She spoke, all in one breath.

"I'm Susan, and Mom's awful sick and I took a nickel from her pocketbook and came on the bus to tell Gram, and the man won't let me in."

He squatted down, but even then his head was above hers.

"What man won't let you in where?" he asked.

"The man with the gold flies on his collar. In the Bee—Beer . . . In that place. I told him Gram works there but he chased me away and I sneaked in this lot and hid, and then the cop came after me. . . . Don't let him get me, Ted!" She snatched at his sleeve in sudden panic. "Don't let the cop get me!"

"Whoa! Whoa up, Susan. The cop wasn't after you. He was after a bad man and he caught him, but the cop's still out there by the gate so I guess we better talk low so he won't hear us. Now, look. Are you sure your Gram works in the Biarritz?"

"'Course I am. She gave me the paper

from the agency for my treasure box, with the address on it and what bus to take, 'cause this is the first time she's working since I was little."

The corner of Storme's mouth twitched at that. She was no bigger than a minute now. About eight, he judged.

"Mom an' me were so happy Gram had work again," she went on, "That we romped in bed like we used to, and all of a sudden Mom got all white and fell down on the bed and wouldn't answer me." A sob caught in the tad's throat.

"Steady." Storme drew the warm little body to him. "Steady, honey."

"It's Mom's heart, Ted, and Gram wasn't there to make her better, and I didn't know what to do."

"Why didn't you call a neighbor?"

"I didn't dass't. We don't dass't talk to the neighbors or—or anybody 'cause if we do, *They* might find us."

There was so much of fear implicit in the eerie statement that the nape of Storme's neck prickled.

"They? Who?"

"The—the bad men who took Daddy away."

The police? But why should an old woman and an ill one and a child be hiding from the police?

"Well, Susan," Storme said, "in that case we'll just have to get Gram. Look. Go around in back of this big house here and you'll find the door to the kitchen. You go in there and if you don't see your gram—"

"In the kitchen? What would Gram be doing in the kitchen?"

"Isn't she a cook or—or something?"

"A cook!" There was in the way Susan said it a child's scorn for an adult who is being more than ordinarily stupid. "'Course not. Gram's vohdvil's greatest star!"

"What's her name?" Storme demanded. "What's your gram's stage name?"

"Jennie Wrenn."

"Jennie—" Muted by the casino's wall, the ribald strains of the "Gay Caballero" were just ending in a muffled storm of applause. "Good Lord, I can't let you hear . . . Listen, Susan!" He caught back what he'd been about to say. "Your Gram can't be bothered

while she's working, so I'll tell you what. See that cream-colored convertible over there—the one with the top up? That's mine. I'll ride you home in it and we'll get a doctor."

"No. I've got to go in there and get Gram.

"You can't honey. It—it's a bad place for little girls."

"Then you go get her for me."

"I wish I could, Susan. I certainly wish I could, but there's a man in there who . . . Well, I don't, dass't go in there."

"You promised, Ted." The child's look was accusing. "You promised if I told you what was the matter you'd help me."

The skin of Storme's face tightened over its bones and his lids narrowed.

"So I did. I did promise you." His look drifted to a door in the side wall of the Biarritz, much nearer its rear corner than the one from which he had come. "All right. I'll get your gram for you." He lifted erect. "You go and sit in my car till I come back, and remember to keep very, very quiet."

His head turned to the black hedge along the parking lot's outer border, beyond which a police car's siren wailed to silence.

CHAPTER III

ON THE SKIDS



ON THE sidewalk in front of the Biarritz Mimi heard the wailing of the police car siren behind her, but she didn't turn. Watching shiny patent leather pumps come down the stairs toward her she was thinking, with strange inconsequence, that they were too small to explain why their owner was called Feet Dorgan.

"How small your feet are," said Little Red Riding Hood.

"The better to walk on your grave with, my dear."

Quite suddenly blue eyes in an apple-cheeked moon of a face were twinkling merrily into hers.

"Jock Haddon's a heel." A small red

mouth murmured the words. "But that's no reason you should have to go home so early." Pudgy fingers were clammy-cool on the hot skin of Mimi's arm. "Come and join my party, my dear."

Mimi's tongue-tip licked her lips. "I . . . Thank you, but—but I'm not feeling well."

Behind her the police car's siren moaned again, going back the way it had come and Dorgan was looking past her, his eyes suddenly the color of an ice-covered lake under a winter sky.

She turned to look, too, saw a green and white car sliding by and in it two policemen and Gull Foster and the big man who had taken Ted Storme out of the Biarritz, but not Storme. He must be . . . No! The cops wouldn't be taking those two away so quickly if they killed Storme.

"The best medicine for what ails you," Dorgan purred, "is a glass of Veuve Cliquot."

The cold fingers on her arm urged Mimi toward the steps and she was climbing them beside the man people called Feet for no reason she could figure out.

They went through the revolving door, past the check-room. Mimi saw Jock Haddon at the bar and he spied them and choked on his highball. Dorgan jerked a chin at him.

"That phony's going to find out he's made one wrong play too many," he said, loud enough for Jock to hear.

Jock's glass slipped from his hand and spilled, and scared as she was Mimi couldn't help laughing at the way his eyes bugged out of his head.

On the stage Jennie Wrenn and Sam Slats were swapping jokes and everybody at the tables was laughing. The fingers on Mimi's arm stopped her and Dorgan said:

"Here she is, folks. Say hello to—er—"

"Mimi," Mimi filled in for him.

The two men at the table looked up at her but the big brunette sitting there, her dusky-red mouth bitter, just kept on looking at the stage.

"That's Bert Judson," Dorgan said, nodding at the younger man, a slim fellow, his close-shaved jaw bluish with

hair under the skin. "And the bald-headed shrimp is Judge Ashton Lee."

"A judge!" Mimi exclaimed. "A real judge?"

"No." Lee's voice was as pale as his dough-hued face. His eyes were big and scary behind thick glasses, and his smile made Mimi feel crawly. "Just a lawyer."

"The best mouthpiece in ten states," Dorgan said. "The statuesque Juno there is Norma Wayne. Be nice to Mimi, Norma. She isn't your rival—yet."

"I'm not worried." The brunette's voice was almost as deep as a man's, and the slow, velvet-lipped smile that went with it was like a slap in the face. "I know too much about you, Henry Dorgan, for you to put me on the skids."

"Watch it, Norma." The blue-white frost was back in Dorgan's eyes and his voice was suddenly deep-throated. "You'll pull that line once too often. Maybe this is the time."

Mimi would have been paralyzed had he spoken to her like that, but Norma merely shrugged her gorgeous shoulders, picked up a champagne glass and sipped from it. Mimi sank into the chair a fussy waiter had brought for her.

"Oh, Judge," Dorgan said. "I'll have to take care of that little proposition by myself. Somethin's come up you'll have to get busy on right away."

The lawyer got up and Dorgan took hold of his lapel, moved with him into a clear space nearby.

"Guess some of the boys got into a jam," Mannie ruminated. "Well, Lee will spring 'em. He's some fixer."

Mimi was fascinated by the way the lawyer's long, thin fingers kept writhing over one another while he talked with Dorgan. He nodded, went away toward the wide stairs to the mezzanine, and Dorgan came back to the table and sat down. He didn't say anything, just sat there chuckling to himself and listening to Jennie Wrenn singing a song about two sailors and a girl and what happened when her father came home unexpectedly.

Bert Judson took a napkin-wrapped bottle out of the silver bucket on a stand beside him and spilled champagne from it into the fresh glass the waiter had put in front of Mimi. She drank it in a hurry and her nose tickled, but she began to

feel a little better.

Outside, Ted Storme peered in through the half-inch slit he had opened between the stage-door and its jamb. The corridor inside was crowded with chorus girls waiting to go on, so he dared not enter yet.

APPLAUSE died away and Sam Slats and Jennie Wrenn ran off. The orchestra swung into "The Flight of the Bumblebee," played fast, and girls poured out onto the stage. They wore headresses of black fur with great glittering glass eyes and feelers of black ostrich feathers fastened to them so that they looked exactly like bees' heads. Shimmery wings fluttered from the girls' shoulder blades. Three not very big patches of yellow silk was all the rest they wore.

They started dancing and buzzing.

"Look kids," Mr. Dorgan said to his party. "I've got something to attend to backstage." He got up. "Take care of Mimi, Bert. Don't forget I want her to be sitting right here when I get back."

"She'll be here." Judson chuckled. "Don't worry, Boss. She'll be sitting right here at this table."

"Make sure that she is."

The fat little man started walking away but somebody called him over to a table and he stood talking to the people there. Norma Wayne's maroon-enamelled fingernails tapped the side of her glass. Her black-lashed, brooding eyes moved to Mimi.

"Look, youngster," she said. "If you're doing this just to spite the boy friend, my advice is to get right up and get out of this."

"Nix," Bert growled. "Lay off that stuff." He filled Mimi's glass again, and his own. "The smartest stunt you ever pulled, sweetheart, was to run out on that Haddon heel the way you did and look such a cute trick doing it."

"Did I, Bert? Did I look cute?" Mimi took a big swallow of champagne and wished Jock could hear this. "Was that why Mr. Dorgan came after me?"

"Why else? You don't think Feet Dorgan chases every skirt he puts his peepers on, do you?"

"Tell me, Bert. Why do they call him that? Feet?"

Judson's smirk faded and he looked uncomfortable.

"I'll tell you, Mimi," Norma said, lighting a long, rose-tipped cigarette. "People who cross Harvey Dorgan have a way of turning up with the soles of their feet burned to a crisp." A slow smile grew around the cigarette between her dusky lips. "See?"

The champagne glass chattered against Mimi's teeth. That lawyer, she thought, has gone to take care of Gull Foster and the big gungel from out of town. He would find out who had sent the cop in to the parking lot to save Ted Storme and when he came back he would tell Dorgan. *Feet* Dorgan.

Dorgan had told Bert Judson to keep her there and he would. She would still be here when Judge Lee came back.

The noise of the band beat against Mimi's ears, beat into her skull. The bee-girls came dancing down off the stage, were dancing among the tables to give the Biarritz's customers a closer view of their "art"—and their flesh. Bert unwrapped the napkin from the bottle and held it up against one of the spotlight beams that followed the dancing girls around.

"There's just about one drink left," he decided. "How's for you killing it, Norma?"

"Swill it yourself, Bert." The brunette dragged her sables around her. "I've got to see a man about a dog." As she got up, her bag, a big one of platinum mesh as fine as hair, thumped against the table edge as though it held something heavy. "That is, of course, if you have no objection."

Bert shrugged, filling his own glass. "The boss didn't say nothing about keeping you here."

"That's right. He didn't." Norma was taller than Mimi had expected, and her lustrous black gown sheathed a figure Hedy Lamarr might well envy. "Maybe that will turn out to have been a mistake."

She glided away toward the mezzanine. Something about the way she moved reminded Mimi of the black panther she once had seen in the zoo.

"Huh!" Judson muttered. "She's sure taking it hard."

"Taking what hard?"

"Feet's going for you."

"For me!" Bubbles of laughter pricked Mimi's tonsils. Or was it the champagne? "Where do I shine in with her?"

Bert blinked at her owlishly. "No-where's," he replied, frankly. "But you're not a bad piece of fluff and the boss is ripe for a change. The way he stepped on Norma before, when she cracked wise, was the tip-off she's on the skids. Well" — he shrugged — "it's no buttons off my vest. Here's to crime, kid."

"Down the hatch."

Mimi drank. It didn't do any good. She was still cold. Awfully cold. Judson's glass tipped over as he put it down, and his grab for it only knocked it over. He was pretty high. Mimi got an idea.

"If you'll order up another bottle, Bert," she said, "I'll come around there and sit by you."

How was she going to work this? If she could only think. If the drums would only stop pounding at her head!

CHAPTER IV

THE MUSIC STOPS



THE pound of drums was wall-muffled in the backstage corridor, ill-lit and redolent of grease-paint and body-sweat. Ted Storme had flattened himself against a plyboard partition, shielded by the half-column that jogged out of it.

He had heard the chorus girls rush out and had slipped in here, but Sam Slats had come into the passage with Susan's gram and gone into her dressing room with her. They were talking now, just the other side of this thin wall. Storme could hear them almost as well as though he were inside.

"I'm through," Jennie Wrenn was saying, her voice husky with fatigue. "I haven't got it any more, Sam."

"Through?" the roly-poly little clown snorted. "Through, she says she is and her just after rolling the town's toughest audience in the aisles."

"With what? With a line of burlycue hokum makes me feel dirty all over. *Urrgh*. If I wasn't at my wit's ends how to buy groceries for Vi and Susan

I'd have slapped the script in Tom Goslin's mug."

"Shucks, Jen, the Goose has got to give the customers what they want. Say, I didn't have time at that rush rehearsal to ask you how that red-headed daughter of yours is."

"Bad, Sam." A sigh quivered through the plyboard. "That pump of hers . . . I've had her all over—Boston, the Mayos at Rochester, every place I heard there was some doc knew something about tinkering with busted tickers."

"And no soap, eh?"

"Not even suds. Worst of it's the way we've dragged little Susan around . . . Is that lassie a sweetheart, Sam!" Warmth came into the dreary tones. "I . . . If anything ever happened to her, I'd cut my throat."

"Yeah. I guess you would. Say, all that running around and doctoring must have cost you plenty. So that's where the sock you retired on went to."

"That's where it went to, old-timer. Didn't take long. Five years. And now if you don't get out of here and give me a chance to rest, you'll find yourself doing a single on the two A.M. show. Go on now. Take a powder."

Ted Storme squeezed hard against the wall as the door just beyond the jog opened and shut again. Sam Slats' foot-falls plodded away down the hall and another dressing room door creaked open. Storme started out, pulled back behind the column again, his throat drying.

The last man he wanted to see had come into the corridor, down there at the other end. Feet Dorgan.

He glanced back toward the entrance and decided he couldn't make it unobserved. The fat man's heels clicked on bare wood as he neared. Storme held his breath, his body taut. Dorgan was just the other side of the pillar when he stopped coming on. Jennie Wrenn's door rattled open, was shut again.

"You!" The woman's voice inside the room was startled. "Get out of here!"

"I'm disappointed, Jennie," Feet Dorgan purred. "I expected a warmer greeting after all these years."

"Warm? Hot's the word for what I ought to give you! A red-hot poker for choice." Despite the bravado of the

words, Storme detected a quaver of something like fear. "Are you getting out, or do I have to call Tom Goslin to throw you out?"

"Go ahead and call him. See if he'll throw out his angel."

"His what?"

Dorgan chuckled. "The Goose is just fronting for me. I own ninety per cent of the Biarritz."

"You own—" Heavy breathing came very distinctly through the thin plyboard. "So that's how—"

"Art Rand got you booked into here. Five hundred for the week, with options. You snapped it up, figuring you could grab a quick stake and drop out of sight again before I got track of you. Where you made your mistake, Jennie, was using the old name."

"I had to use it. It's the only thing I've got left to sell. But I—"

"Didn't give Art your home address, told him you'd come to the office to check on whether he'd found a job for you. You thought you could keep covered that way."

"I'm still covered. If you think you can make me tell you where Viola is—"

"I know I can. And you do, too, old gal. You haven't forgotten why they call me Feet Dorgan."

A SHARP inhalation.

"No, I haven't." The sound of it told Storme it was said through stiff, suddenly white lips. "How could I forget when every time Vi's heart acts up it reminds me how it got that way?"

"You shouldn't have let her go to the morgue," Dorgan chided. "The police would have accepted your identification."

"Ben Castle was her husband. I had no right to keep her away." Jennie Wrenn checked herself. "But that's water under the bridge five years ago. Suppose you do locate Vi, what then? You'll be no nearer finding out where Ben cached them numbers racket collections he gypped you out of."

"I won't be, eh?" The fat man's tone was still suave. "We got it out of Ben, just before the cops hopped us and I had to put lead into him, that he'd told her where he hid it. She knows where that seventy-five thousand is, and she's

going to tell me."

"Not in a million years she won't."

"So you think."

"So I know, Dorgan. Listen. Last week we didn't have a cent left in the house and I darn near went on my knees to Vi, begging her to go get a little of that money, just enough to keep us from starving. She wouldn't. She said—get this, Feet Dorgan!—she said eating food with the money that cost Ben his life would be like eating a piece of Ben himself. Someway that swag, wherever it is, has come to mean Ben to her. Do you think she's going to turn Ben over to you? Do you think you can make her! Viola Castle's got the best protection against your cute little tricks anyone could have, a heart that'll conk out the minute you start on her. You didn't think of that, did you?"

Ted Storme relaxed, the cords in his neck aching as though they had been taut for hours.

"Maybe," Dorgan was saying slowly, "I didn't. Or maybe I remembered something you seem to have forgotten." He paused, and the suspense was agonizing. "Such as that your daughter Viola has a daughter of her own."

Silence again in that dressing room, for ten pounding heartbeats in which the blare of the band from the stage outside was somehow obscene.

Then, "No!" Susan's gram moaned. "No! Not even you can be that low."

"Can't I?" Storme heard as he stepped around the pillar, closed fingers on a chipped doorknob and started to turn it with slow, infinite precaution against any sound that might warn the man who was saying, "For seventy-five grand I can be . . . Stop! Get back, you old—"

A gunshot's flat pound cut off the sudden, startled shout. Inside the room a heavy body thudded to the floor. A single saxophone brazenly declared, "That's All-ll," and the muffled music stopped. . . .

People started to applaud as the show ended on the saxophone's brazen, "That's All-ll." Mimi clinked her glass against Bert Judson's. "Here's to crime," she giggled.

"Drink 'er down, Bert ol' top."

"Mudinyereye," Bert mumbled, and emptied his glass. but Mimi once more

managed to spill hers into the silver ice bucket between them without his noticing.

The handclaps gave way to a rapping of little wooden hammers on tabletops, a clatter of silverware on plates. Judson's hand fumbled for the bottle, didn't quite make it, dropped to his side. The music started to play again and the applause to die down. Bert Judson looked blearily at Mimi, slumped over on the table, and cushioned his head on his arm.

Her throat got so tight she could hardly breathe. The bee-girls were on the stage again, dancing an encore, but all Mimi saw was eyeball-white glittering between Bert's almost closed lids. She put her hands on the table-edge to push up.

"Where's Dorgan?" a languid voice asked. Ashton Lee goggled down at her through his thick glasses.

MIMI'S mouth opened but she couldn't make words come. The bald little man had on a dark-blue top-coat and his pallid fingers writhed on the brim of a Homburg hat that matched it in color. His look went to Bert, came back to her.

"Where's Dorgan?" he asked again.

"He—he went backstage."

Lee's fingers stopped writhing, but the way they crumpled the hat's brim was worse.

"How long ago?"

"Right after you left."

"Norma go with him?"

"No. She went to the—"

Before Mimi could say where the lawyer was on his way toward the door at the end of the stage, Mimi got to her feet, plucked up her wrap and started the other way, toward the front door.

She wanted to run, but she couldn't. Her legs felt as if she were wading through water up to her waist but she got to the mezzanine stairs somehow; somehow climbed them. She kept going, however, through the lobby, through the revolving door, down the wide entrance stairs. She stopped short at their foot, terror flaring into her eyes as she spied the traffic cop she had sent into the parking lot to save Ted Storme talking to the slim, black-haired killer Jock Had-

don had told her was Gull Foster.

The cop saw her. Pointed to her. Gull nodded and started coming across the gutter.

CHAPTER V

THE SHOW MUST GO ON



STEPPING into the grimy dressing room, Ted Storme's brain registered the fat body sprawled on the uncarpeted floor. But not Jennie Wrenn. Dorgan, a splotch of crimson marring the silken white of his hair above the stare of his sightless eyes. The actress, her huge, pink-spangled bulk backgrounded by the black rectangle of an open window was straightening up from a feral crouch, and her hand held a pearl-handled revolver. A woman's weapon, but still deadly at this close range.

"Hold it," Storme said quietly as he pulled the door shut. "I'm on your side. I know you had good reason to kill him."

"Reason to kill him?" she repeated dully, apparently too dazed to be startled or afraid. "But I didn't. I didn't have anything to kill him with."

"What's that in your hand? A powder-puff?"

She looked down at it, a sort of horror coming into her face.

"I . . . It came in through the window." Her features were ghastly under their mask of make-up. "I—" She stared up again at Storme, pupils dilating. "I started for him and he yelled, 'Stop!' and there was a crack and this flew in through the window." Her brow knitted. "Some—someone must have shot him from outside."

"And threw the gun in here to fix you in a kill-frame." Storme said, and moved swiftly across the room. "Which you've made perfect by putting your prints on it." He reached the window, leaned out. "State you're in I'd lay a hundred to one you're not lying, but I'm the only one who'd believe you." He looked out on the casino's dark back yard. The kitchen, a one-story addition, loomed blackly to the left. "Your only chance to beat the frame is to find the real killer and you haven't a whisper of a—"

The rattle of the door knob, behind him, cut him off. Storme vaulted over the sill, lighted catlike and twisted, peered in over the sill in time to see the door shut again behind a shiny-pated little man in a dark-blue topcoat, eyes monstrous behind thick, round lenses.

"Lee!" Jennie Wrenn breathed, her head back to the window. "Ashton Lee!"

Light glittered on Lee's glasses as he looked at the gun in her hand, looked at Feet Dorgan's body. A flicker of obscure satisfaction passed across his pallid countenance.

"I advise you to plead self-defense, my friend," he said. "Dorgan attacked you, you shot him to save your honor. We should not find it difficult to convince a jury."

"We?"

"My testimony as to what I saw and heard as I entered can either substantiate that story—or send you to the chair." Teeth showed in a bland—and sinister—smile. "I'm sure your daughter will not compel me to the latter regrettable alternative by refusing to tell me where she hid the money Ben Castle stole from—"

Running feet thudded in the corridor.

"Quick!" Lee snapped. "Tell me where she is."

"I'll burn in perdition first!"

"You'll burn, Jennie, but not in—" Knuckle raps cut him short, and someone called urgently, "On stage, Jennie Wrenn! They're yowling for you and Slats!"

"No!" the lawyer screamed shrilly. "Don't shoot me too! I didn't—"

The door burst open, let into the room a heavy-set, shirt-sleeved man.

"What the devil?" he barked, and gagged as he spied the corpse but kept on going, plucked the gun from the woman's hand. Then he wheeled to Lee.

"She was going to shoot me, Tom! the lawyer was jabbering. "She shot Dorgan and she was going to shoot me!"

"Shut up, you yellow pup." Tom Goslin looked disgusted. "Your hide's safe now." He turned back to the woman. "Gosh, Jennie! If you had to do it, why'd you have to do it in here?"

"I didn't, Tom! I—"

"Save it, old gal. Save it for the cops. It breaks my heart to have to turn you

in, but what can I do? Okay, shyster. You got the nerve to stay in here and keep an eye on her while I go phone the Law?"

"Yes. Yes, of course." Ashton Lee gave a good imitation of a man just reprieved from death and still shaken. "As long as you've got her gun."

Goslin went out. Lee smiled.

"You should have accepted my offer while you had the chance, Jennie Wrenn," he said.

Storme saw the old woman's hand squash on the window sill behind her.

"You'll have to tell the police where you've been living with your daughter," Lee said, "and they'll tell me, and so I'll have my chance for a little talk with her."

"Maybe." She was still undefeated. "And maybe Viola won't be there when you get there. Maybe somebody will beat you to her and take her where you can't find her."

TED STORME knew that this was meant for him. His countenance was gaunter than ever, his mouth more bitter when he reached the cream-colored roadster in the parking lot and slid in under the steering wheel. Susan sat up.

"Where's Gram?" she asked.

"She can't come just now, honey."

"But you promised. You promised you'd bring her to me."

"I did, and I'll keep that promise." His tone had all the solemnity of a vow. "But Gram's act's onstage." The motor purred to life under the long hood and the car was moving. "Whatever happens, the show must go on."

"Yes," the child sighed. "Yes, I know. The show must go on."

The roadster nosed out of the lot but paused briefly at the cut curb to let a black and red taxi roll past toward the main entrance to the Biarritz. The taxi blocked Gull Foster off from Mimi, stopped right in front of her and she grabbed at its door handle, wrestled it open.

"Help me!" she sobbed to the man inside. "Please help—"

Her throat locked. He was the big gunsel she had seen taking Ted Storme out of the casino to kill him.

Foster came around the back of the cab.

"Gotcha, you little stool pigeon," he snarled.

Strong fingers grabbed Mimi's wrist, pulled her into the taxi and a leg shot out of the door, planted a big foot on Foster's face. He flew backward but Mimi didn't see where he landed because the door slammed shut.

"Get after that yaller car afore we lose it and you're out a sawbuck!" the Texan yelled.

The cab leaped into fast motion, skidded around in a U-turn that piled Mimi in the far corner of the seat.

"If that doodlebug don't quit gettin' in my hair," she heard, "he's liable to get hurt. What was he pesterin' yuh about?"

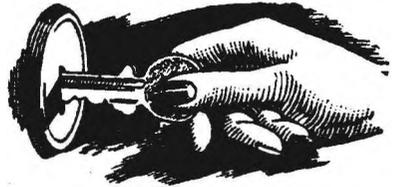
Mimi's heart bumped her ribs. It came to her that the cop had only just told Foster about her and that this one don't know why he was after her.

"Oh," she said, straightening up. "He

[Turn page]

Sh-h-h-!

Don't tell anyone when
you discover the key to
the mystery in



DON'T TELL ANYONE, by J. LANE LINKLATER

THE YEAR'S SURPRISE NOVELET—FEATURED NEXT ISSUE!

made a pass at me and I didn't like it, and he didn't like that."

And then her breath caught again. The roadster they were trailing was rounding a curve in the highway ahead. Light from a car coming this way lit up the face of the man who was driving it, and she saw who he was.

Ted Storme!

The roadster straightened out of the curve.

"Gram's in trouble," Susan said with conviction.

Storme's nostrils pinched. "What makes you think that?"

"Your sayin', 'The show must go on.' That's what good troupers always say when they're in despr'it trouble. You can tell me about it, Ted. Gram always tells me when there's trouble. She says facing it is half the job of licking it."

She had courage, this chestnut-curled tot. "All right, honey. I'll tell you. The people you've been hiding from have found your grandmother."

There was darkness now on either side of the broad concrete highway, a darkness in which the wind from the roadster's speed roused a rustle of unseen shrubbery. Susan's whisper was no louder than that rustle.

"What are they going to do to Gram?"

"She'll be all right till I can figure out how to help her. How to clear her from the murder-frame! 'I promised I'd bring her back to you and I always keep a promise, but I'm sure she wants me to take care of your mother first.'"

"Gram would. That's the way she is."

"So I thought."

This road was a main artery down the Island's North Shore. Far ahead lights made a glow over the clover-leaf intersections where the routes to the various bridges to the city sorted out.

"Gram didn't have time to tell me where you live, Susan," Storme said, "and I've got to know it now because I've got to know which road to take."

Storme's fingers tightened on the steering wheel. The orange blink of a "silent policeman" flitted past. A closed hot-dog stand was a black mass drifting by in the night.

"We live on East Ninety-third Street," Susan said. "Near the old brewery by the river."

There was a lift in Ted Storme's voice as he observed, "That means over the Triboro Bridge and down the East River Drive."

The world in which he moved might hate him but he had won the trust of this clear-eyed child. He was too elated to notice the red and black taxi that followed him, far behind.

THE house where Susan lived was one of a dismal row of identical five-story tenements fronting the narrow side street, empty and desolate at past two in the morning. A pinpoint of light burned in the vestibule, but the hall within was unlighted, and uncarpeted stairs ascended from dimness to obscurity.

Climbing them, Ted Storme breathed the odors of vermin-riddled wood and moldering plaster, of cabbage and Parmesan cheese and garlic, of sweat-rotted clothing and unaired bedding and unwashed bodies, all merged in the miasmic aura of poverty. From behind scabrous doors came snores, a sick infant's fretful whine—

He stopped short, hand tightening on the child's hand he held. Below, the vestibule door had creaked open.

His tautly listening ears heard no entering footsteps, no human sound below there.

"Come on, Ted." Susan tugged at him. "We've got to go all the way up."

"I thought your mother had a weak heart."

"She never goes out, and the top floor rear's the cheapest rent."

"I see."

They got going again and reached the top landing at last. The door to which Susan pulled Storme and opened shut them into darkness ominously silent save for a *pit—pit* of water from some leaking faucet.

Her hand disengaged itself from his. He heard her patter way from him, heard a chair scrape, and blinked in the dazzle from an overhead fixture. The child climbed down from the chair she had mounted to reach the pull chain.

"Wait here while I see if Mom's decent," she whispered, and went across the room toward a closed door.

This was a kitchen. At least it held a

gas range, a sink and gray slate laundry tub, and an old-fashioned ice-box, but there was also a round dining room table at its center, oilcloth covered. Along one wall was a cot bed and a rickety bureau with innumerable photos stuck around the mirror's ill-fitting frame.

"Mom," Susan called, opening the door. "Are you decent, Mom?"

CHAPTER VI

RESCUERS



NO ANSWER. Storme started toward the child, chiding himself for letting her face alone what might be inside that room.

"Mom!"

A bedspring creaked, releasing the breath that hung on Storme's lips, and as the crumpled plaid dress was swallowed by darkness the shadow of a voice came from within.

"Susan! Susan, baby. Where have you been?"

"To the—to where Gram's working. You had a spell and I went to get her to come home and make you better, but she couldn't come."

"You shouldn't have gone all that long way. I just fainted dear, and . . . Who's in the kitchen?" Terror flared into the faint voice. "Whose shadow's that on the floor?"

"Ted's, Mom. Gram sent him to take care of you."

"Light the light, Susan," the mother's voice said, and then more loudly, though still feeble, "You in there! Why are you hiding from me?"

"Not hiding, Mrs. Castle." Storme went through the door into abrupt brightness. "Merely waiting until Susan told you I was here."

This room was almost filled by the double bed on which Viola Castle lay. The deep-toned green silk of lounging pajamas, threadbare but still somehow reminiscent of luxury, outlined the terrible emaciation of her long body. Her disordered hair was a crimson flame about a hollow-cheeked, triangular face sharpened by suffering, and out of which gold-flecked brown eyes as large and terror-filled as a doe's at bay laid them-

selves on his face.

"I don't know you," her blue-tinged lips whispered.

"No reason why you should." The hand that Susan had taken was only skin and long, delicate bones, but its nails were meticulously cared-for. "You've never seen me before and the first time I ever even heard of you was tonight, when your little daughter told me about you. So"—Storme smiled reassuringly—"you see you've no reason to know me, certainly none to be afraid of me."

"You—you're not—"

"One of Dorgan's gang? No." There was no time for finesse. He would have to chance the effect on her of what he must tell her. "But I've got some bad news for you. Er . . . How about your going out in the other room for a while, Susan, while I talk to your mother?"

"No!" Viola Castle's free hand flung up. "No! She won't leave me alone with you."

Storme shrugged. "Very well. She'll have to hear, then. Listen, Feet Dorgan is dead, and your mother is under arrest for killing him."

"Did—did she?"

"No, but she's going to have a hard time proving it, and in the meantime what's left of his mob are hunting you. She found a way to ask me to take you and Susan to a place where you'll be safe from them."

"You're lying!"

"Why should I?" His eyes were on the flutter of heart blood in the dreadful hollow of the woman's throat. "To kid you into telling me where that money is hidden? You wouldn't tell that to your own mother to keep your child from starving." The fingers of the upthrown hand spread with startlement. "To eat food bought with it, you told her, would be like eating your husband."

"You know that," she whispered. "You could know it only from her."

"Precisely. Please believe me, Mrs. Castle. Please believe me that your mother sent me to protect you from your enemies. Please come with me to my own quarters, where you'll be safe from them."

"Let's, Mom," Susan broke into the momentary pause. "Let's go with Ted."

He's nice. He's good and kind and—and we can trust him, Mom. I know we can."

"The instinct of a child," Storme urged, low-toned. "You're her mother. You should know how right it must be."

Viola Castle's eyes were still large-pupiled but, studying him, some of the fear went from them.

"Very well," she sighed. "We'll go with you."

"Good."

They decided there was no need to take time for her to change. It would be enough if she put on stockings and shoes while Susan packed the battered suitcase she hauled out of a closet. Storme discreetly withdrew to the outer room, half-closing the door between, and tried to stem his impatience by looking at the photos that encircled the speckled dresser mirror.

THE autographs sprawled across them evoked echoes of Homeric laughter out of times past. Eva Tanguay. Pat Rooney. "From Eddie Leonard to a great-hearted trouper, Jennie Wrenn." Great-hearted was right. He had an odd fantasy that these old friends of hers were asking him something and in his mind he answered them.

"I won't let her down. She wants me to take care of those two she loves first, but when I've got them safe in my home I'll do my best for her."

A muscle twitched in his cheek and his head twisted to the sound of foot-falls in the hall just outside.

The dark door rattled with a touch on its knob.

Before Storme could get there it was opening. The light showed him Cal Carroll, tall and sinister in the widening slit, left hand on the knob, right hovering near his tuxedo's side pocket.

"I got tired waitin' for yuh downstairs," the Texan rumbled. "So ah come on up."

Storme recalled hearing the vestibule door open and Susan's telling him that they were going to the top floor, rear.

"Quite a climb, isn't it?" Storme said.

Did Carroll's not coming right on up after him mean he was unaware of the Dorgan mob's interest in the Castles? Likely. He was, after all, an out-of-towner, probably imported for the single

job of murder.

"Okay," he sighed, trying it out. "Let's get going."

But Cal Carroll shook his head. "No need to go anywhere," he said. "I can give yuh what I've got for yuh right here."

"The devil you can!" Ted Storme grunted, bunching muscles for a struggle he had no chance of winning but which might make enough noise to arouse the house and so bring at least temporary safety for Susan and her mother. "You—"

Once more breath caught in his throat. Carroll had stepped aside and a girl was coming in through the door ahead of him, her honey-hued short hair tousled, her violet eyes drowsy, her bright blue velvet wrap parted on a white shimmer of satin.

"This is Mimi," the Texan said, pushing the door shut.

Storme's mouth twisted. "Brought a witness along so you can be sure of collecting?"

"Collectin'?" The big man looked puzzled. "For what?"

"The job you came here to do, of course."

"I don't get yuh."

"I do, Cal." The girl put a hand on his arm. "He thinks the same about you that Jock and I did, like I told you in the cab. He thinks Dorgan hired you to kill him."

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat! I clean forgot." Carroll chuckled. "Shucks, son. I never heard of this Dorgan maverick till Mimi here told me about him, and as for gunnin' for yuh, I ain't had a shootin' iron on me for more years than you're old."

"No? Then what was it you put your hand on in your pocket when you invited me to walk out of the Biarritz with you?"

"In my . . . Leapin' bullfrogs! So that's why yuh slugged me. Here!" The Texan's hand went into that pocket, came out with something it thrust at Storme. "This is what I've been huntin' yuh for ten months to give yuh."

It was an oval piece of porcelain not quite big enough to cover a man's palm. Its edges were chipped and the colors in which a young woman's face had been

painted on it were faded, but the eyes that looked out from under the piled-up pompadour of a bygone era were wistful, the mouth sad and sweet.

"She looks like you," Mimi said.

"My mother," Ted Storme murmured, the hand that closed over the miniature trembling a bit. "Where did you get this, Cal Carroll?"

"She gave it to me the day she told me she'd decided between me and my best friend." New lines seamed the older man's leathery skin and his eyes were bleak as his voice. "That night I shook foot loose from where I figgered I wasn't wanted any more, bein' that kind of fool, and lost track of 'em. Long afterward I cashed in big, but I found out there was one thing I couldn't buy with money, and that was the only thing I wanted—somebody that belonged to me and me to them. I started out to backtrack 'em and found out—"

"Skip it," Storme snapped. "What you found out is my business and no one's else." But some of the hardness had gone out of his tone and his expression. "What I want to know, right now, is why you didn't tell me all this at the Biarritz bar instead of—"

Carroll laughed whole-heartedly.

"WRANGLIN' yuh into that fool bet?" he said. "I wasn't none too shore yuh was the Ted Storme I hoped yuh was, and that was the only way I picked to check. When yuh turned yore back on that fly like it was two bits yuh had ridin' on it instead of a thousand iron men, I knew ah'd come to the end of the long trail." Carroll chuckled reminiscently. "That minute I could have been standin' in front of Peg Dillon's honkytonk watchin' Rod—watchin' yore pa stake a hundred-thousand-barrel oil well on a scrap between a doodlebug and three ants and never turn a hair when he lost."

"He told me that story once." Storme was at last convinced the bronzed outlander was what he said he was. "But you must know hundreds about him that I've never heard." His gray look drifted to the bedroom's half-closed door. "They'll have to wait, though, till—" He checked, slid an arched-brow glance to Mimi and away again.

Carroll caught it. "The lady's all right, Ted. If it wasn't for her, might be neither of us would be here. She saw that Foster doodlebug trail us out of that honkytonk and run out in front."

"She's the girl in white who sent the policeman into the parking lot?"

"And has been havin' an all-fired rough time of it ever since. This Dorgan ranny got hold of her."

"Dorgan wasn't so bad," the girl protested. "It was Foster and Bert Judson and that awful Judge Lee."

Storme's nostrils pinched. "You were with Feet Dorgan's party?"

"Not at first. I went there with Jock Haddon, but afterward I was at their table."

"I want to talk to you." Excitement pulsed in Ted Storme's voice, repressed but electric. "You're coming along to my place with . . . Excuse me."

He whirled, thudded heavy-heeled into the bedroom. Viola Castle was up, supporting herself by a hand on the bed's footboard, her flaming hair neat, orange-red rouge livid on her ashen lips.

"You heard?" he flung at her.

"Yes, Ted. They sound all right."

"This mess may be working out better than we had any reason to hope. Hey, look. You can't make it down all those stairs, the state you're in. I'll have to carry you."

"Will you, Ted? I—I think I'll like that."

Her frail body was no weight at all in his arms. Hers went around his neck and her cheek nestled against his with a child's sigh of contentment. But Susan was troubled.

"What about Gram, Ted? You promised you'd bring her home to us."

"That I did, honey, and I'm beginning to hope now that I may be able to keep that promise."

It was Carroll's turn to look bewildered when they came out into the kitchen, Storme carrying a woman in green pajamas with a shabby coat thrown over them, a little girl lugging a valise almost as big as herself.

"No time to explain now, Cal," Storme said. "I'll tell you about it in the car. Grab that bag and come along."

"Yuh're Rod Storme's son, all right," the Texan chuckled as they started out

and down the stairs. "That kind of sing-in' note in yore voice. He used to get it, just like that, when he was on the prod. 'Come along, Cal,' he'd say, his eyes as gray and hard as diamond bits. 'Come along. We got a job to do.'"

CHAPTER VII

POKER DATE



AL CARROLL sat with Mimi and Ted Storme in the gambler's almost monkishly ascetic living room. The sleep of exhaustion had overtaken Susan even before they had reached here and they had persuaded her mother to lie

down with her in the bedroom.

"Two minutes after this Ashton Lee gets to that police station, I was wonderin' if they wasn't goin' to jug me for the crime of bein' robbed," Cal was saying. "Shucks, I says. Give me back my roll and I'll call it a day. Lee shakes hands all around and beats it out in such a tearin' hurry he don't even wait for Foster, and that doodlebug grabs a cab and takes out after him, so I got to wait till another one comes along."

"Lee got back to the Biarritz in time to walk in on Jennie Wrenn four or five minutes after Dorgan was shot," Storme said. "But I'd like to know how much earlier he got there."

"Don't tell me yuh're figgerin' he may be the one done the shootin'."

"Well, think it over. We can discard any theory that some enemy of Dorgan's just happened to be prowling around in the lot behind the dressing room and just happened to see him through that lighted window. The killer must be someone who knew Dorgan had gone backstage, and where. And look at Lee's behavior when he walked in there. He showed no surprise at finding Dorgan a corpse but went right at the old lady, foisting on her a self-defense plea that would avert suspicion from the real murderer and at the same time give him a lever with which to extract from her or her daughter a lead to the seventy-five thousand dollars which incidentally, is motive enough for any killing."

"Look, Mr. Storme." Mimi leaned for-

ward eagerly. "Judge Lee didn't know Dorgan was going backstage till just before he went back there himself. I know, because he asked me where he was, and that must have been right the very minute Dorgan was being shot."

"Was it?" Storme's fingers drummed on the arm of his chair. "Mimi—do you remember the music ending with a single saxophone phrase that sounded like, 'That's All'?"

The girl's effort to recall screwed up her pert features till she resembled some pigtailed tad in a classroom.

"I don't . . . oh, yes, now I remember. There was just that one sweet sax singing, 'That's All-lll.'"

"Good. Now was that before or after Lee showed up?"

"Before. I'm sure it was before. Bert Judson was just drinking his last glass of champagne and then he passed out, but the people were clapping and yelling. I almost cried because I was afraid they'd wake him up, but they didn't and I started to get up, and just then Judge Lee was there, looking down at me through those awful glasses."

"That ties it up." Storme looked triumphant. "I heard that saxophone too, a half-second after the shot and I'd had time to get into the room and talk with Jennie Wrenn before Lee appeared."

Carroll seemed puzzled. "Just what does that prove, Ted?"

"That he had time to establish an alibi. Look. He and Dorgan must have planned to talk to the old lady together, *before* he went to the police station to fix things for Foster. He rushed back as soon as he could, but instead of coming in through the front entrance he went backstage. Remember, he still had his coat on when he talked to Mimi and he'd have had a tough time getting past the checkroom girls that way. He drove into the parking lot and went around in back of the casino, spied Dorgan where he knew he would be and blasted him. He threw his gun into the room, and dived into the Biarritz through that same fire exit we came out of."

"Gee, Mr. Storme!" Mimi exclaimed. "You're wonderful. The only one I could think it might have been was Norma."

"Norma?"

"The brunette I told you about, the

girl Dorgan told she might be cracking wise just once too often. Even I was scared the way he looked at her, almost as scared as Jock was when he heard Dorgan say about him, 'That phony's going to find out he's made one wrong play too many,' but Norma didn't turn a hair. She was burned up, though, I could tell that. And then she went to the powder room and never came back. And the way her bag bumped against the table, I was sure she might have a gun in it."

Carroll chuckled. "Don't I recall yore sayin', Ted, that the murder gun was little and pearl-handled? A woman's weapon."

"Or the kind a man might carry if he didn't want the fit of his dress clothes spoiled by a bulge."

"Mebbe. But Lee wasn't wearin' dress clothes."

STORM acknowledged that to be true. "Nevertheless," he insisted stubbornly, "this murder—the shot from the dark, the way Susan's grandmother was framed for it—isn't the act of a jealous woman or even a frightened one. It's the work of a cowardly rat, and that description fits Ashton Lee. With ten times Feet Dorgan's brains he played second fiddle to him for years. He cooked up all the ingenious rackets for which the Dorgan mob is notorious and was content to take the crumbs Feet handed him. Why? Because he was terrified of Dorgan. He was afraid with every cowardly fibre of his rotten soul of Dorgan's ways of beating down opposition, his ways of extracting information."

He pulled in a breath, gray eyes glowing. "By this time Feet Dorgan's on a slab in the morgue, Jennie Wrenn is in a cell, and Ashton Lee is at home. I'm going to talk to Lee tonight. And I'll bet you the thousand dollars I won from you, and a thousand more, that I'll extract from him the information I'm after."

Mimi's chair fell over as she came up out of it.

"You're not—" Her fingers were at her mouth, her face greenish. "You're not going to burn his feet!"

"What do you think?" Storme's nos-

tril's flared, his eyes were gray agate, and his mouth straight-lined, grim. "Do you think I'd stop at that?"

The girl stared at him horror-stricken, but abruptly Carroll was chuckling.

"Got yuh, Ted. Calm down, gal. He's just a-goin' to run a whangaroo on him. Laughin' hyenas, son, I shore would admire to watch yuh in a good hot game of no limit poker."

"You'll get the chance to tomorrow night—if I'm still around. Even rats are dangerous when they're cornered." Storme came lithely erect. "I'm going to ask you to stay here, Cal, and keep an eye on Susan and her mother. Mimi, I'll drop you wherever you say."

"Hold on." Carroll lifted to his feet. "Where do yuh think yuh're a-headin'?"

"To Lee's apartment up on Fifty-first street. That's dangerous, I know, but I can't bring him here, not with the Castles here, and there's no other place I can find at this hour where I can be sure of not being interrupted."

"Yes there is, Mr. Storme." Mimi was herself again. "I live alone in an old-fashioned flat with thick walls you can't hear anything through. You're welcome to use that if you want to."

"Sounds like just what the doctor ordered, but I hate to drag you into this."

"I'm in it already, ain't I?" Her pointed little chin seemed suddenly to take on new firmness. "You're going to use my apartment."

"Okay. Where is it?"

"East Eighth Street. Two-twenty-one. The ground floor, on the right as you go in."

"Check."

Storme strode to the phone on a small desk between two monkscloth-draped windows, and dialed a number. The ringing signal's burr was cut off by an irritated rasp.

"Storme calling," the other two heard him say. "Ted Storme. I know it's four-thirty in the morning, but you want to see me tonight."

The watching two saw a grim smile lick his tight gambler's mask.

"I said you want to see me, Judge Lee. That is, you do if you want to beat Feet Dorgan to the seventy-five grand Ben Castle cached five years ago."

Mimi was startled. "Dorgan's dead," she whispered. "Why does he say that?"

Carroll spread his hands. "Dunno, unless he's got some reason for wantin' to know has it been on the radio yet."

Evidently it had not, for Storme was saying, "I'll be hanged if I'll split it with a guy who's put his hoods on me to burn me down, but I can't get at it without one of you helping, so you're in luck." And after a pause, "Like the devil I'll come there! You're coming to me, Lee. Alone . . . Of course you don't know where I live, and you're not finding out now. You'll meet me at two-twenty-one East Eighth Street in half an hour. The ground floor, right. Walk right in. The door will be unlatched."

Storme dropped the instrument into its cradle, turned. "Okay, Mimi. Let's have the key."

She snapped open the rhinestone-studded little envelope strapped to her wrist, fumbled in it, then looked up, eyes widening in dismay. "I—I haven't got it. I gave it to Jock when we started out and he never gave it back!"

"That's nice. That's just fine."

"Oh, it isn't so bad. There's a way of opening my door without a key. But I'll have to go along and show you."

"I don't like that. You—" Storme caught himself. "It's only ten minutes from here. Can you drive a car?"

"No, I can't."

"Then this is what we'll do. Cal will come along and drive you back here after you've let me in. We'll have to take a chance on leaving those two alone here for twenty minutes. Let's go. . . ."

AT THE turn of the century, the four-story, brownstone house where Mimi lived had been the home of some wealthy family. Now it had been cut up into small, furnished suites but it still preserved some of its ancient dignity. The entrance hall was wide and high-ceilinged, the dark mahogany staircase was baronial in its proportions.

Mimi led the men to a door deeply embrowned in a marble niche.

"A boy I used to know found out how to do this one time when we had a scrap and I locked him out. You push in on this loose part of the jamb, see, and down hard on the knob."

The door swung open silently, let them into a narrow, dark hall.

"Just a second," the girl whispered, "and I'll light up for you."

As she moved away, Ted Storme pressed the latch-button to hold the bolt back, pulled the door shut. There was a moment of tar-barrel blackness, a click. Yellow luminance struck from beyond the wall-corner that concealed Mimi. A low, startled scream came from within the unseen room.

"You've kept me waiting a long time."

It was a man's voice, blurred with drowsiness. "I fell asleep."

Storme relaxed as he heard Mimi's voice, not frightened but indignant.

"You've got a nerve, Jock Haddon, using my key to get in!"

"I had to, kid. I couldn't go home till I'd told you how sorry I am I acted like such a heel, back on Long Island."

"Get out of here, Jock. Get right out!"

"Give me a chance, honey. Please give me a chance to tell you. You can't blame me for going off my trolley with the rep Feet Dorgan has, and when I saw he'd nabbed you—gosh, Mimi! I clean lost my head. All I could think of was to pour a couple drinks down and then beat it out of there, but soon's I hit the sidewalk I got thinking how you've been so sweet to me and all, and what do I do the first sign of trouble? I ditch you."

"Listen, Jock—"

"You listen to me," the fellow pleaded. "Let me finish. I was still too scared to go back in there but I remembered I had your key so I grabbed a cab and come straight here."

"Straight here Haddon?" Storme asked, stalking into the stuffy room. "Are you sure of that?"

CHAPTER VIII

TEAMWORK

 BLOOD draining from his sensuous lips, the fellow in Mimi's apartment goggled at the sudden apparition.

"Storme!" he squeezed from his dew-lapped throat. "Wh-hat are you doing here?"

"I'm asking the questions, Haddon."

Storme was past Mimi, standing rigid in the center of the room. "I asked you if you came straight here from the Biarritz bar, without making a detour."

"I don't know what you're driving at," Haddon said surlily.

"You lie." Storme advanced on him slowly, menacingly, and behind Storme Cal Carroll entered, slipped an arm around the girl's waist. "You know exactly what I'm driving at. You wouldn't be here if you didn't."

Jock Haddon backed from the slowly advancing, ominous figure. "Not after hearing what Dorgan said as he passed you with Mimi," Storme accused. The wall stopped Haddon and he flattened against it, yellowed cheeks quivering. "What was it again, Mimi?" Storme asked, not turning his head. "The exact words?"

The girl licked her lips.

"Tell him, sweetheart," Carroll rumbled. "Tell him."

"He—he said, 'That phony's going to find out he's made one wrong play too many.'"

"That's it," Storme sighed. "You heard him say that, Haddon. It meant to you that you were fingered for a rub-out because you'd let your girl try to save me from his torpedoes, and you were terrified. But you're not terrified any longer or you wouldn't have come here to whine your way back into Mimi's good graces. No. You'd be putting as much distance as you could between yourself and Feet Dorgan's torpedoes. Right?"

There wasn't any answer. There was no sound at all save Jock Haddon's hoarse, heavy breathing.

"Why did you have the courage to come here?" Storme's relentless inquisition was resumed. "Why are you no longer afraid of Feet Dorgan? I'll tell you. You know Dorgan is dead. That hasn't been put on the radio yet, so you couldn't know it if you'd come straight here from the Biarritz bar. I'll tell you how you know. Before you left the bar you saw him go backstage and when you left it you went around in back of the casino. Standing there in the dark, you saw him come into a lighted dressing room and you shot him through the window and threw your gun into that

room to frame Jennie Wrenn with the killing."

"You devil!" Jock Haddon squealed. "You were watching me."

Cal Carroll swore softly and Mimi whimpered, but Ted Storme's expression was as granitic as before.

"No, Haddon, I wasn't watching you. But that was a rat's crime and you're a cowardly rat, and cornered rats can be vicious. I realized that Dorgan's threat might have terrified you beyond terror, might have given you enough of the courage of desperation to grab the opportunity to strike back at him. But that kind of courage doesn't last, so I gambled that if I accused you of the crime you wouldn't have nerve enough to deny it."

"Great stuff, Ted!" Carroll applauded, coming up beside him. "Yuh had the kind of animal that beefed Dorgan fingered out correct, only yuh picked on the wrong rat. He ain't squeezin' out of it either. Tracin' that pearl-handled gun to him ought to be easy, and the wax test on his paw'll show he fired it recent. Yuh'll have Susan's grandma out of the calaboose by mornin'."

A choking sound from Mimi jerked Ted Storme's head around to her, and past her to the doorway from the hall, to the slender, ferret-featured individual who had stepped in, stub-nosed automatic snouting from his hand.

Another man came through, a man wearing a blue topcoat and blue Homburg hat, light glittering on thick lenses, a gun in his gloved fist also.

"You will not move," Ashton Lee said tonelessly, "unless you want lead to shatter the young lady's spine. Gull! Will you please make sure that they are not armed."

"Pleasure, Judge." Gull Foster's nose was strapped with adhesive plaster, the area around it blue with bruises, and his lips puffy. "Only I'd sure like the chanct to work the big gazebo over."

"PATIENCE, my dear fellow. You may have the opportunity."

Foster moved to Storme, patted him from head to foot, looking for a gun, while Haddon, his back to the wall, watched out of hopeless eyes.

"It was most considerate of you to

leave the door unlatched, Mr. Storme," Lee continued. "I scented some sort of trap, thought it wise to reconnoiter before letting you know I'd arrived, and what I heard, listening from that passage, was most interesting."

"Okay, Judge," Foster interrupted. "They're all clean."

"Thank you, Gull. Step back here where you can keep the girl covered, and shoot her down at the first untoward movement anyone makes. You may turn around slowly, gentlemen."

They complied. "Look here, Lee," Ted Storme said. "I suspected you of murdering Feet Dorgan and got you down here hoping to wring a confession from you. Now it's developed that Haddon's the killer, there's nothing between us."

Lee's fingers seemed to writhe on the butt of his gun. "Wrong. You wish to clear Jennie Wrenn of the charge against her and I prefer it to stand."

"So that you can use it to bring pressure on her daughter? Sorry, Lee. I made sure to put Viola Castle and Susan where you can't find them, before I did anything else."

Lee shook his head. "No go. They're in your flat or you would have had me meet you there."

"Okay. They're in my flat." It might be a game of cards these two were engaged in, so quietly was each verbal trick played and topped. "You don't know where that is."

"Wrong again. Your telephone is unlisted, but I have a connection that enabled me to have your call traced."

Ted Storme's hand made a little gesture of defeat that Lee acknowledged with a wholly evil smile.

"So you see," he continued, "all I have to do now is arrange matters so that you and your two friends—and Haddon, of course—shall not upset a situation which is much to my liking. Much as I abhor violence, the only certain way in which I can do this is to silence you."

"In plain English," Cal Carroll growled, "yuh're goin' to gun us."

The glittering lenses moved to him. "Precisely. These walls are thick enough to muffle our shots. Neither Foster's weapon nor mine is registered with the police and when they're found here in the apartment of a—shall I say

bachelor girl?—beside your bodies, the natural conclusion—"

A half-shout, half-squeal from Haddon jerked Foster's automatic toward him, and in the next instant Carroll dived under the orange-red streak from the thug's gun, slammed him down in a bone-jarring smash as Storme's flying tackle, only a breath later, crashed Ashton Lee to the floor.

THE thud of fists on fleshed bone ended almost as quickly as it began. Jock Haddon darted past the tumbled sprawl of bodies, but reeled down, his ankle clamped by the Texan's gnarled fingers. Carroll raised himself, turned his leather-seamed countenance to Mimi.

"I told yuh this Gull Foster was goin' to get hurt if he kept on pesterin' me," he drawled. His taut smile drifted to Storme. "How yuh doin', Ted?"

"Not so good, Cal." Coming up to his knees, Storme looked sick. "Lee's head hit this chair as he went down and I'm afraid his rotten skull's smashed."

"Afraid, he says. Shucks, boy, that means you can live a normal life again. The kind of hombres him and Dorgan was, yuh can lay yore whole bankroll they're the only ones in the gang know what they was doggin' her ma an' grandma about. But yuh're like yore old man, all right. He never gunned out a black-hearted owlhooter that he wasn't sick over it for weeks." The tall Texan chuckled. "Another thing reminded me of old Rod was the way yuh took off for Lee the second I jumped for this weasel. Shore took me back to the time we worked the same trick once when we was in a mite of trouble in a gully on the Brazos."

"Trick?" Ted Storme gaped. "What trick? What gave us our chance was Haddon's howl of terror!"

"Terror nothin'," Carroll grinned. "That was a yelp of pain, son, when I kicked my heel back into his shinbone. An' if yuh think yuh're the only one can figure how a galoot'll act in a particular set of circumstances, the reason I went for Foster in the same motion was because I knew from the way Lee handled his gun he wouldn't get a shot off till yuh'd sized up what was happenin' and got to him."

DANGEROUS PICKUP

Slowly the Greek
doubled up and col-
lapsed to the floor



by
Don James

Like a nightmare, the fear of capture haunts hitch-hiking Jimmy Cathedral while he plans to rob the girl beside him!

THE girl picked him up west of Livingston. She braked the coupe to a smooth stop and tapped the car horn. He broke into a trot and caught up with her.

"Want a lift?" she asked.

"I could use one."

"Get in."

He sat back in the seat, glad to be out of the summer sun. As the car picked up speed, wind swept through the open windows and was a relief from the hot deadness of the afternoon.

She was young and pretty. Her gray

eyes looked as if they might be blue sometimes. Her nose was straight and small. Auburn hair was held back by a wide ribbon. Beneath a summer dress the feminine symmetry of her body was slim and true. She handled the car with a nice ease and she liked speed.

"You're taking a chance," he said.

"Picking you up?" She gave him a quick smile.

"Picking up *anyone* on a highway."

"I suppose so. I've never thought much about it. You looked hot and it's a long way to Bozeman — or wherever you're going."

Bozeman was too close. He'd better get as much as he could.

"Butte," he said. "Going that far?"

She reached for a pack of cigarettes wedged behind the lever for the windshield swipe. She offered one to him. He took it, pressed the lighter, and lit their cigarettes.

Then she said, "Yes, I'm going to Butte."

He knew that she had debated telling him. She was thinking that she could say Bozeman and get rid of him there. If she said Butte, it was almost committing herself to taking him that far and by the time she reached Bozeman maybe she wouldn't want him in the car. That was the reason he had told her it was dangerous to pick up hitch-hikers. It was sort of a reverse psychology, he thought. She would think that a dangerous man would not warn a girl as soon as he was in the car.

He drew smoke deep into his lungs and squinted at the road. A rattlesnake usually warns before it strikes, he thought.

The highway curved and for a short stretch the car sped into the sun. The girl flipped down the sun visor on her side. The angle of sunlight made his side of the shield a transparent mirror in which he could see himself with the approaching ribbon of road coming at him through the background.

HE DIDN'T look so bad. In Livingston he'd spent some of his last two dollars for a razor and blades at a dime store. He had shaved at the railway station. They wouldn't be watching there unless a train were going through

from the east.

The shave had helped. His face looked young and lean. His eyes were as clear and gray as the girl's. His suit was in good shape and the striped blue shirt was clean. His hat was all right.

They left the straight stretch and entered a canyon. It was cooler and there was the smell of evergreens.

"Nice country," he said. "Is Butte your home?"

"Billings."

Small muscles tightened through him. He kept his eyes on the road and drew quietly at his cigarette.

"I guess it's a good town," he said casually.

"I like it. It's not very large, but it's a good place for living. Where is *your* home?"

"Chicago," he lied.

"I've never been there."

"It's okay."

They overtook a truck. It demanded her full attention and he looked at her again. She had long, good legs. Above her knees an automobile registration card was strapped to the steering post. It was made out to Thelma Bonner with a Billings address.

Near Butte, he thought. I'll let her drive as long as I can.

They went through a small town and he tried to look as if he belonged with the girl and the car. A fellow and his girl. Brother and sister. Newlyweds on a honeymoon. Anything but what it was.

She turned on the radio and got dance music from Bozeman. That was good because she was content to drive and listen. If she talked she would ask questions. It was better with only the music and the thin sound of tires on the blacktop.

Bozeman looked old and weathered. They drove through at reduced speed and the hum of tires rose in pitch as they went on.

"Not much of a town," he said.

"The state college is there."

"Your school?"

"I went to the U in Missoula." She glanced at him. "You?"

"I didn't finish. A war came along."

"You could go back."

"Maybe. I've been thinking about it."

Didn't she know you never can go back? You can't pick it up where it was. You left school and you went to war and a lot of things happened and you came back. That's when you learned what things can do. Maybe you're not the same any more. You can go back all right! You'll go back if they ever catch up with you. But not to the university.

The platter program ended and the news came on. The girl listened casually, but he was as tightly strung as a violin string.

It was almost the first item. Little more than a bulletin. The radio announcer said:

"John Dmitro, proprietor of a Billings cafe, is dead, and a man identified as Happy Gorman is critically wounded as a result of an attempted holdup this morning. Police are conducting a state-wide search for Jimmy Cathedral, race track employee, who is believed to have been Gorman's partner in the attempted robbery. . . . At Helena, the Supreme Court upheld the decision of Judge—"

The hitch-hiker stopped listening. Jimmy Cathedral — that's me, he thought. They're looking for me. And "Happy" probably is dead by now.

The girl was humming to herself as if she were thinking of something far away. The newscaster's voice rattled on and the tires sang and the car wound its way over the highway.

After they left Whitehall he began to plan how he would do it. The easiest way was to get her to stop and then knock her out. A short, right jab to the jaw. He would find a little-used side-road and follow it a few miles. He could tie the girl and leave her. Later an anonymous phone call would send help to her.

At Butte he could find a car that night and switch plates. The coupe was like hundreds of the same make. The exchange of plates might not be noticed by the owner of the other car for weeks.

THE highway climbed over the Rockies. Traffic was heavier and it was not until they were near Harding Drive, the long drop from the mountains into Butte, that it thinned.

Abruptly he said, "Feels like we're getting a flat. Maybe you'd better stop.

I'll take a look."

"It doesn't steer like it."

"It's hard to tell sometimes with these cars."

"I'd better get around that curve first," she said.

She eased the speed as they rounded the curve. Cathedral swore under his breath. There was a roadside clearing with a spring. Two cars of tourists were parked. He couldn't sock her with half a dozen witnesses. She stopped the car and he got out, glanced at the tires, and got back in the car.

"My imagination," he said and forced a grin. "They're okay."

"Good. We're almost to Butte."

There was no chance after that. They swept down the grade, through a canyon to the treeless plateau below Butte. In the city she drove toward the center of town and turned left to a residential district where she stopped in front of a large brick home.

"My aunt and uncle live here," she smiled.

They got out of the car.

"Well, thanks for the ride."

"I was glad to have your company." She said it like one man telling another. Her gaze was frank. Suddenly he was glad that it had turned out as it had.

He saw a smile lurking in her eyes. He wasn't sure. There might have been some hidden wisdom there, too. Maybe she knew what had almost happened. People talked about a woman's intuition.

She gave him a pleasant nod and left him. He watched her go to the door and then walked away. He could see office buildings in the business district and headed toward them. After a while he glanced at a corner street sign. Washington and Broadway. A block south was the Y. M. C. A., a large, fresh-looking building with a corner electric sign.

He remembered that Sammy Jones had talked a few times about the "Y" when they were on Saipan. Sammy was the only Butte man he had ever known and Sammy had told him that the "Y" in Butte was a good place.

"They give the school kids free memberships. It's sort of like a community center," Sammy had said. "A lot of good guys live there."

Sammy had been proud of everything in Butte. Sammy Jones who was buried in Saipan and who would never see Butte again.

Cathedral hesitated on the corner and wondered if he had enough money for a room. He could do with a shower and some sleep. He had a dollar and seventy cents and he needed food. He walked toward the business district and found a small cafe on Broadway.

He ate a dinner sandwich. An evening newspaper was on the counter. He read the headlines and then the story about himself. The whole state was looking for Jimmy Cathedral. He felt self-conscious as he read the story and pushed the paper away.

When he left the cafe it was almost dark. He walked down the street beneath flashing signs. There was a bar crowded with men and he went in and to a back room where gambling was as wide open as he had ever seen it in Reno or Vegas.

He mingled with the crowd around the crap table and watched the play. He began to think of the girl again. He couldn't forget the wise look in her eyes when she had said good-by. Maybe she had guessed. He forced her from his mind. It was something to forget. He lit a cigarette and glanced around. Then he saw the cop.

He was a big, Irish-looking man who stood behind the players at the turn of the table. His coat was open and had spread so that Jimmy could see the holstered gun under the armpit. He was a cop, all right. He looked like a cop. And he was watching Jimmy. Maybe he was idly looking at Jimmy as a man does when he is killing time. It was hard to know and Jimmy felt the tightness through him again.

He glanced away indifferently and watched the table. Somehow the movement of the crowd had shifted him to the rim. The man next to him rolled and lost. The dealer spilled dice from a leather cup.

"Take a couple, mister," he said to Jimmy.

JIMMY set a smile on his lips. If he shook his head and drew back and created a small disturbance elbowing

through the crowd, the cop would notice him more than ever. He glanced toward the cop and the man was gone, but someone had wedged in close behind him. It was the cop.

Jimmy took the dollar bill from his pocket and asked for halves. He put one on the line and rolled.

"Seven he rolls!"

Another coin joined the one on the board. Jimmy dragged it. The cop pressed close behind him. Jimmy rolled a six and made it on the third try.

"He makes his point! Get your money down!"

Jimmy let it ride and rolled an eleven. Sweat edged down from his hat band. The cop was jammed so close to him that he could feel the hard bulge of the gun pressing into his shoulder.

He rolled another seven. A murmur went around the table.

"He's hot! Place your bets. Get it down. He's hot!"

The houseman's voice was like a bad record. Jimmy wiped sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. The cop moved slightly.

He rolled an eight and made it. A seven came up. He let the money ride. He rolled nine and made the point. Maybe he'd crap out and be able to leave the table gracefully. He had to get away from the cop. He had to know if the cop was waiting for him. He dragged all but a dollar.

"Your luck running out?" the cop asked.

There it was! When your luck ran out they had you.

"Think so?" Jimmy asked quietly.

"It has to, sooner or later."

Jimmy rolled five for a point. He rolled and seven came up. Another murmur ran around the table. The hot player was through.

He pocketed his money and took a deep breath. Now he'd know. He'd turn and walk out of the place, or he'd turn and the cop would take his arm and say, "We want you, Cathedral."

There was only one way to learn. He turned and grinned at the cop. "You can't go broke taking dough."

"That's right," the cop said. He stood sideways so that Jimmy could get by him. Jimmy walked out of the place and

into the street. He started west and the perspiration still crept from his hatband.

After a few blocks he pulled the money from his pocket and counted it. He had run his money into thirty-one dollars. He remembered the Y. M. C. A.

He shut his eyes against the small, clean Y. M. C. A. room and the events of the day began to return to his mind. It began four days before, actually. That was the day he met Happy Gorman.

He had known Happy in L. A. before the war when he had the part time job taking tickets at the dance hall so that he could go to school in the day time. Happy was a small time guy playing on the fringes of the big-time rackets. A short, heavy-set guy with black hair and brown eyes.

Happy was playing the horses at the race track in Billings. It was a grass-root meet running for three weeks. Jimmy's ticket had taken him as far as Billings and he had been broke. In a paper at the station he read about the track opening. He found the managers and came out with a job pitching programs.

The third day he ran into Happy and, because they had known one another in the old days, they began to spend time together. Happy needed money and tried to borrow from Jimmy, but Jimmy didn't have it.

That was this morning. They went to the Greek's to eat at about eleven and Jimmy offered to buy the meals. They were the only customers. The Greek was counting money at the end of the counter by the cash register and filling out a bank deposit slip.

They finished eating and went up to the Greek. Jimmy had a dollar bill ready. That was when Happy edged in front of him and pulled the gun.

The Greek stared at the gun and his eyes grew large.

"What?" he whispered.

"It's a stickup," Happy said harshly.

"Sure—sure. You take the dough, mister."

BUT the Greek had nerve. He reached beneath the counter and his hand came up with a nickel-plated revolver.

All of it happened before Jimmy knew

what was going on. There was no warning. Happy simply had edged in front of him with the gun. The Greek's eyes looked wild.

Jimmy found his voice. "For Pete's sake, Happy!"

Then the Greek shot and Happy jerked back as if he had been kicked. He began to pull the gun trigger and the Greek looked startled. A small hole suddenly was in his white shirt. Other holes dotted the shirt and the Greek jolted with each one. Slowly he turned sideways and doubled over and crumpled to the floor behind the counter.

Happy whimpered, "Gosh—oh, gosh!" like a little kid. He went to his knees and his hands pressed his chest. He fell forward and his face smashed against the floor.

The door from the kitchen opened and a man with a frightened face stared at Jimmy. "Hey! What's going on?"

Jimmy got out of there. No matter what he said, it could only read one way to the cops, that Jimmy Cathedral had been in the attempted stickup with Gorman. The thin-faced clerk at the hotel where they stayed would tab Jimmy for them, but it would take time.

He walked quickly until he was several blocks from the place. He had a suitcase and stuff at the hotel, but decided against returning. There might not be that much time.

There was a bus leaving for Livingston when he reached the station. He got on just before the door closed.

There had been Livingston, and then hiking down the road for a pick-up. He had a plan by then. He needed a car, and one that would not be too quickly reported as stolen.

A fellow had to save his own skin. Maybe it was like atom chain reactions. One thing starts it off and it spreads. Happy had killed the Greek in a stickup and Jimmy had been with Happy and the cook had seen him. Jimmy Cathedral could never convince the cops that he had no part in the stickup. So he had to save his own skin and he had made his plans, and then the girl had been lucky.

Outside a siren screamed and he sat up. The siren went by the building and became faint with distance.

Tomorrow, he thought. Tomorrow I'll get my ride and a car. I'll get to the coast.

Finally he went to sleep. . . .

The next day he was walking in the last block on Excelsior street before it became the westbound highway out of Butte when the girl stopped at the curb beside him.

"Good morning!" she smiled. "Wasn't Butte your destination?"

He realized that he was glad to see her again. "I thought it was yours," he said. "I'm going on."

"How far are you going?"

"Seattle."

She reached over and opened the door. "Get in. I intend to be in Spokane tonight. That should help you."

"Plenty." It seemed familiar in the coupe again. There was a fresh pack of cigarettes on the dashboard ledge. She had changed to slacks and a sweater, but she still wore the ribbon on her hair. She flipped the car into gear.

"You must have a name," she said.

It was Jimmy Cathedral, but if he said it, she would stop the car or swerve into a filling station and scream for help.

He thought of another name fast.

"Frank Simpson," he said. It was a good, common name that did not sound like a man running away from the cops.

"I'll call you Frank," she said. "I'm Thelma Bonner—or did you see it on the registration slip?"

"I saw it."

"Have you a job waiting on the coast?"

She wasn't probing. She was trying to be friendly.

"That's right."

"What kind of work do you do?"

He hesitated a second. "Electrician."

"Do you like it?"

"It's all right." If she asked anything more he was going to have a tough time finding answers. "I haven't been at it long."

"Is that what you did in the Army?"

"How did you know I've been in the Army?"

She smiled again. "The way you look. You were, weren't you?"

"Four years."

"Overseas?"

WHAT was the difference? That was something the cops probably didn't know. "Most of the time."

"Just out?"

"Several months."

"You were a long time getting home."

"Too long." And too long away, and too much to get used to again.

She kept her eyes on the highway. "You've had breakfast?"

He knew what she meant. If he hadn't, she would stop somewhere and buy one for him. That was why she avoided looking at him.

"A good one."

"Then we'll settle down and try to make some time."

"If you want me to drive, let me know."

"Later, maybe. I like driving. Would you turn on the radio? Try KGIR at Butte. Maybe there's some music."

He played with the dial. Music came from the loud speaker and the familiar whir of the tires became a drone. The highway was old and built of concrete with joints between the slabs. The joints made a methodical break in the tire noise.

He gazed at the country, clean and western in the morning light which made him think of his late teens when he had the craze for western novels. He shut his eyes and thought back to then and wished he were there. If you could only stay at that age, it'd be swell!

Yesterday he had planned to take this car from the girl and things had gone wrong. Now he was glad they had. If she got him to Spokane that would be good enough. He could safely take a bus from there and he had the money. At least, it would get him most of the way to Seattle. Or he could grab a freight, or hitch-hike. He'd be away from Montana and that was the important thing.

They had lunch in Missoula.

"I want to see some friends for an hour or so," she said. "I'll probably have lunch with them. I'll pick you up in front of the Florence Hotel at about one-thirty. Is that all right?"

Asking *him* if it would be all right! He grinned. "Fine."

There was a radio on the backbar of the cafe where he ate, but he didn't ask

them to turn it on for the noontime news. He didn't want to do anything to attract attention to him.

He walked through back streets until one-fifteen and went to the hotel. She was five minutes late and looked as if she had enjoyed her visit with friends.

Several miles from Missoula she glanced at the dashboard and frowned. "I should have bought gas."

"Stop at the next town and I'll buy it."

She shook her head. "But you can drive a while if you like."

"Any time you say."

She didn't stop at the first town, but drove for some time before she drew in at a service station and they got out. The attendant filled the tank and she paid him. Jimmy got behind the wheel and she told him that she wanted some candy and went into the station where a small rack displayed bars.

While she chose her candy a car drove into the station and a state patrolman got out and nodded to the service man. A second patrolman stayed in the car.

Jimmy felt blood drain from his face and he glanced nervously at the girl through the open doorway. She was motioning to him. He swallowed hard and got out of the car and went into the station.

"I didn't know what kind you'd like," she said with a smile.

"Anything," he answered casually.

The cop was watching him now and his eyes were narrowed. Jimmy picked up several bars and gave the station man fifty cents.

"You've got a dime change, mister."

"Keep it," Jimmy said. He was at the car now and slipping behind the wheel. The girl was getting in from the other side. Jimmy kept his eyes away from the patrolman and stepped on the starter. From the corner of his eye he saw the patrolman stroll toward them.

"Jimmy Cathedral," the cop said.

Jimmy tried to stop it, but it was no use. He knew that his body had become tense and that the cop knew it—the set of his head, the stiffness of his neck. The cop had spoken his name and Jimmy had acknowledged it by the deception of his body's reaction.

THE engine whirred and caught. He gunned the car out of the station and clamped down on the gas.

The girl spoke then. "What's the matter? What's wrong?"

"Keep still and you won't be hurt."

"Won't be—what do you mean? Stop! I've got to know what this means."

"Shut up."

He glanced into the mirror. The patrol car was after them. The girl turned and saw it. She gasped sharply. The engine whined and the car swayed as the road twisted into a canyon.

Suddenly the girl reached for the ignition key. Jimmy snapped a hand down hard on her wrist. She jerked back with a cry of pain.

They skidded around a sharp curve to a short run of straight highway paralleling a railroad track. They picked up more speed and Jimmy took the coupe into a blind curve.

The car began to skid. Frantically he jabbed at brakes. The coupe careened and was off the road, hurtling down a bank into thick brush. They crashed and the car tipped slowly to one side. Jimmy cut the engine. The girl no longer was in the car. The door was open on her side.

He got out and looked toward the highway. He could barely see it through the dense shield of poplar and willows. Behind him a stream rippled in the stillness. A car screamed around the curve above, straightened, and swept down the road. The patrolmen had failed to notice the wreck.

The girl was a still, crumpled form on the ground. One leg was twisted beneath her. A thin trickle of blood seeped from the corner of her mouth.

Somewhere a train whistle moaned and he thought of the railroad track. He pushed through the underbrush to a narrow stream, jumped it, and scrambled to the railway fill. The highway had curved from the town. The track was straight through the canyon. The train was moving slowly towards him. He remembered that it was a freight they had passed.

He watched it stop for water. It would be there a while. There was an upgrade coming into the canyon and the train would be moving slowly when

it passed. He could grab it easily.

It was a tough break for the girl. The cops would come back and find her, but not before the train had passed and he was on it. From then on he'd have to play the cards as they fell.

Now he had maybe ten minutes and the girl was on the ground near the car. Maybe she was dead. He didn't like to think of that.

Abruptly he left the roadbed and made his way back to the wreck. The girl had not moved, but her eyes were open and she watched him as he came near and knelt beside her.

"Is it bad?" he asked.

"My leg is broken. I hurt inside."

Her small, even teeth clamped down on her lower lip and he saw pain in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"I think I know," she whispered.

"You're Jimmy Cathedral. The radio mentioned you yesterday and the morning paper had a story."

"That's right."

"I thought you were decent."

"I didn't have anything to do with it. It was Happy's idea."

"I liked you. You didn't make a pass. After I stopped I was afraid. I almost didn't wait for you there by Livingston."

"I'm not so decent. I was going to ditch you—tie you up—take your car before we hit Butte. You looked wise afterwards. I thought maybe you'd guessed."

"I didn't. I just liked you."

"Can I do something for you? Your leg? Maybe I can straighten it out. They'll find you."

She shut her eyes. "I hurt. My leg and inside. Don't move me. Why don't you go?"

"I will. I've got to. I haven't a chance if they get me."

"You'll always be running away . . . Jimmy Cathedral."

"Look, I've got to. It wasn't my fault and I didn't do anything but they won't believe me."

SHE opened her eyes again. "All right. Do you think they'll find me? I—I think I need help—soon. It's getting awfully hard to—talk—"

Her head sagged listlessly to one side.

Coldness was deep inside him and his fingers trembled as he reached for her wrist. The pulse was there, but he couldn't be sure how strong it was.

The train whistle cut through the mountain air and into his consciousness like the scream of a siren through a nightmare. He had to get back to the track.

He hadn't realized how small she was, nor how soft and warm her skin looked, nor the way a girl's hand could look when it was relaxed and softly curved.

He could hear the puffing exhaust of the huge engine as it picked up speed. All he had to do was jump the creek and grab an armload of boxcars as the train went by. The girl moaned and a car sped by on the highway above.

Okay. She thought he was decent and she was wrong. There was nothing decent about him. He was a guy on the lam. He was Jimmy Cathedral getting out of this country.

"You'll always be running away," she had said. So what? He had been running away before—from settling down, from trying to kill the restlessness. What else can a man do when he's all loose inside and he has to keep moving? What difference if he's running away from the cops or from himself?

"Me decent? Aw, rats!"

He turned toward the track and took two steps. Decent? The only decent guys he'd ever known had been over there. Like Sammy Jones of Butte.

He stopped and stared at the creek. He remembered how they had scampered away from the Jap machine-guns. There was the tall, blond kid from North Dakota who had suddenly stumbled and sprawled. He remembered how Sammy Jones had thrown himself down, turned, crawled back and tried to drag the tall, blond kid with him to safety. And the way the Jap gunners had made Sammy's body jerk with an onslaught of fire so that Sammy stayed with the blond kid.

"So a fellow can be wrong," Jimmy said. "A fellow can be wrong." . . .

THERE was a crusty old doctor in the small town and they used the undertaker's coach for an ambulance because there was no other ambulance. Four men came with them to carry the

girl gently to the highway.

The hospital had once been a large residence and Jimmy waited in what had been the living room until the doctor came out of the surgery. Sweat was cold on Jimmy's forehead as he looked at the man.

"Well?"

"She'll be all right. Shock. Clean fracture of her leg. All right internally, but she'll be sore for a while."

"That blood from her mouth?"

"She cut the inside of her lip."

The highway patrolman was standing directly behind Jimmy. He had just come in. Now Jimmy turned to face him.

"Okay, mister. I'm Jimmy Cathedral."

The patrolman nodded. "I don't know about this deal. A lot depends upon the girl. She can bring charges."

"What's the difference? You've got me on the Billings deal. I wasn't part of it, but there's no use telling you."

"That's why we wanted you. We wanted to know if your story checked."

"With what?"

"The Greek didn't die at once. He lived about ten minutes. He said he didn't think you knew what Gorman was up to. Gorman said you didn't and he's still alive and able to talk. The cook saw most of it through the hole in

the wall they use to pass food. He says you looked as surprised as the Greek when it happened. The Billings boys just wanted to question you. They're pretty well convinced that you were clean and took it on the lam because you were scared. Cops know that people are human—they're human themselves—but wrecking the car and what happened to the girl, and evading arrest is bad."

JIMMY swallowed hard and stared at the uniformed man.

Suddenly he knew how good it was not to be running away.

"One thing," the cop said. "You could have grabbed that freight, but you came after help for the girl even when you knew that it was curtains for you, or thought it was. At least, you were decent."

"I hope she thinks so," Jimmy whispered.

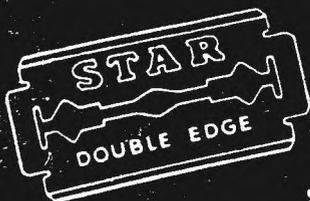
The doctor said, "She's conscious. Asked how she got here and I told her you got help. She said, 'I knew he would' and smiled."

Then a very strange thing happened to Jimmy Cathedral and afterwards he felt a little embarrassed about it. He drew himself up to military attention and smiled at the patrolman.

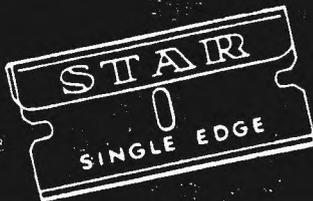
"Yes, sir," he said. "That's it."

STOP, OR
I'LL SCREAM!

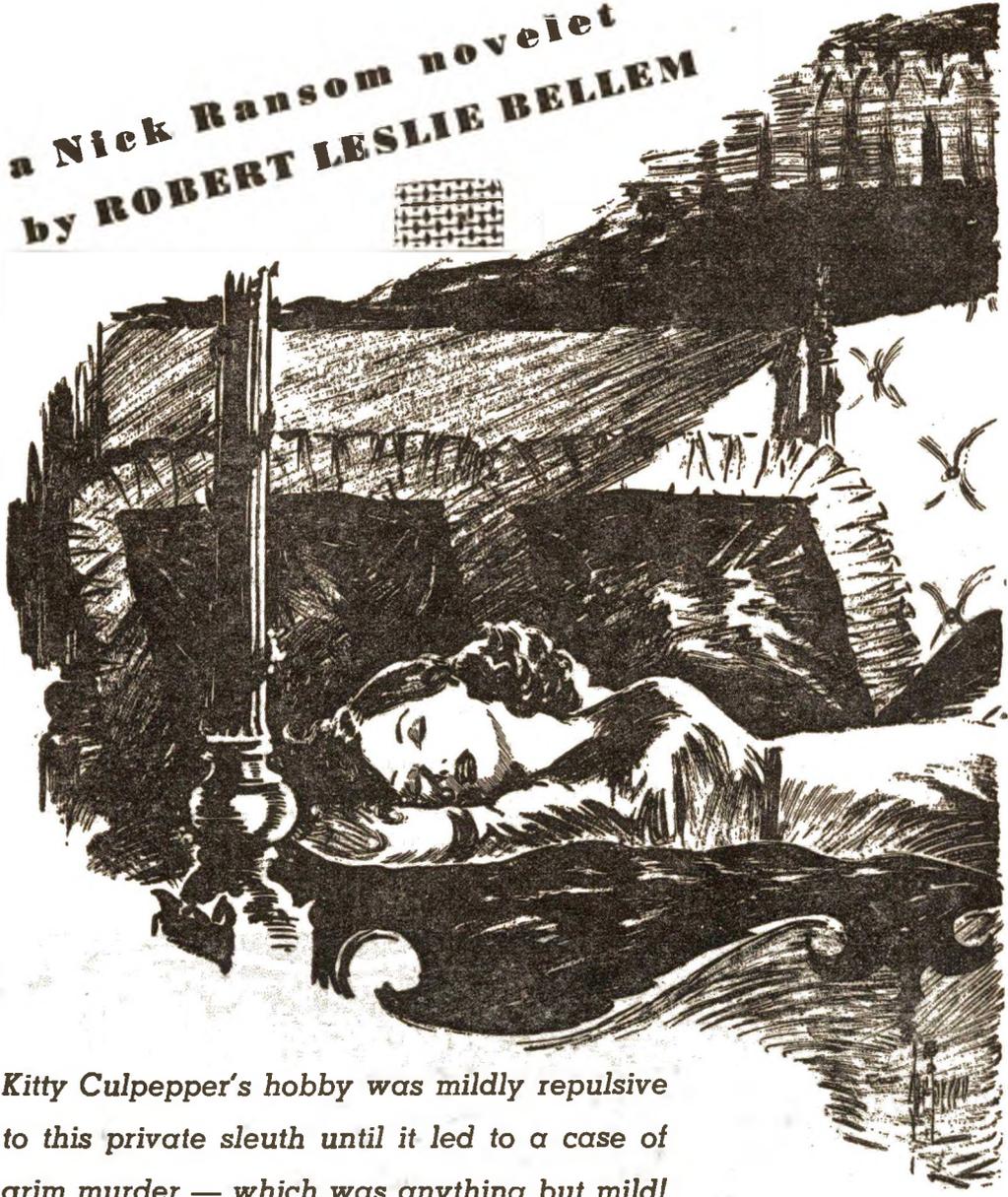
NOT NECESSARY,
DEAR. I USE NEW
STAR BLADES!



4 for 10¢
also 25¢ pack
STAR SEALECTED



a Nick Ransom novelet
by ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM



Kitty Culpepper's hobby was mildly repulsive to this private sleuth until it led to a case of grim murder — which was anything but mild!

CHAPTER I
DOLL FUNERAL

SOME PEOPLE make a hobby of collecting things. Not me. Canceled stamps bore me, antique furniture gives me a pain in the neck, and foreign coinage leaves me cold. Any time some

wild-eyed enthusiast buttonholes me and starts spouting about his valuable files of punched street car transfers, my interest rapidly ripens to apathy, and I take a powder just as fast as I can politely wriggle off the conversational hook.

That's why I didn't feel too happy



THE 9th DOLL

when I jabbed my thumb at Kitty Culpepper's doorbell that evening. Kitty was the kind of collector who rode her hobby with spurs and a buggy whip; who rammed her specialty down your throat until you begged for mercy. Which meant that I would presently be knee deep in dolls—big dolls and little

dolls, bisque dolls and china dolls, rag dolls and Dresden dolls, dolls that said "Mammy" and blinked their eyes and wet their pants and, for all I knew, ate limburger cheese sandwiches on rye. With onions.

The thought was mildly repulsive. I dismissed it and gave the bell button

another helping of thumb.

A tall blond butler with the profile of a Greek god opened the portal to my second ring, regarded me haughtily down the length of his patrician nose and then changed his arrogance to dismay.

"For heaven's sake!" he said. "Another one with a broken head!"

"Who, me?" I demanded, and touched the top of my noggin indignantly, finding no fractures. "You must be goofy."

Then I realized he wasn't looking at me; he was looking past me, staring down beyond my brogans at something on the floor of the portico which I hadn't noticed in the darkness when I first ankle up to the premises. Light from the open doorway now revealed it, and the butler scurried around me to pick it up.

It was a doll with its conk caved in, as if somebody had slugged it with a niblick. The flunky breathed noisily through his matinee-idol schnozzle as he inspected the damage. Then he looked at me with suspicion if not actual accusation.

"Did you do this?"

"Don't be foolish," I said. "I quit playing with toys when I was a mere lad of thirty, just around the time I swore off corn-silk cigarettes and began smoking opium." In a more serious tone I added, "Speaking of dolls, if Miss Culpepper is adorning the tepee you might tell her Nick Ransom has arrived. It's okay. I'm no autograph pest. I'm a private pry with an appointment. I was sent for."

HE GRUDGINGLY ushered me into a rectangular reception hall not quite so vast as the Pasadena Rose Bowl, but much more impressive. Hand-hewn oak beams supported a high arched Gothic ceiling, faded antique tapestries draped the walls like a museum display, and an array of carved comfortless chairs stood at spaced intervals in a sort of military precision that made your spine ache just to look at them.

The floor was of hardwood parquetry, waxed to the gloss of an ice skating rink and just as treacherous to walk on unless you had cleats in your shoes. The butler didn't have cleats. He started toward the rear, skidded, almost fell on his

asterisk and righted himself by a mighty contortion.

"Opium!" he snarled, limping off. "A wise guy."

Time passed. I set fire to a gasper, smoked it down to a half-inch butt and peered around for an ash-tray where I could snub out the ember. No ash-tray. Then I noticed some purple velvet portieres covering a doorway on the left; decided they might mask a place for me to douse my tobacco. I shoved the drapes aside, stepped through and gave vent to a sudden:

"What the devil?"

I was at a funeral.

A multiple funeral—for dolls.

The room was small and dimly lighted by candles. It was not much more than an alcove, really. Six little silk-covered shoe boxes were arranged on card tables in a semi-circle, each shoe box lined with white satin and containing a broken doll. No two of the dolls were alike as to dress or appearance, but they all had one thing in common. They were smashed. Some had arms or legs missing and some had busted heads like the one on the front porch, but all were beyond repair and ready for the trash barrel.

The way things looked, though, they were going to be given a complete burial service instead of being consigned to the nearest city dump. There were even some miniature floral wreaths and some tiny sprays on easels scattered around to make the funeral atmosphere complete. For a long moment I stood there bemused, wondering if I might be having hallucination. Then the cigarette scorched my fingers and I dropped it, stepped on it. The movement helped to snap me out of my flabbergasted trance.

I gulped a couple of times, got my composure back, and started figuring the answers. Here in Hollywood you run into plenty of eccentric characters and screwball capers. The picture industry is like a magnet that draws crackpots from all over the country. But a mass funeral for six busted dolls—well, that copped the Academy award for downright wackiness. Unless you happened to know Kitty Culpepper as well as I did.

Kitty was the screen's mystery woman. Nobody seemed to recall just how she'd got to the West Coast five years

ago, although several of her rival she-male stars on the Perfection lot maintained she had ridden in on a broom. Which merely went to show she wasn't too popular with her own gender. But then quails like Kitty rarely are. My own guess was that she had hitch-hiked. At least I knew she had arrived without a nickel, because I was the guy who paid her first week's room rent.

In those days I was operating a cinema stunt outfit entitled Risks, Incorporated—movie thrills furnished at fifty bucks per broken neck. I doubled in the danger sequences for some of the biggest names in the galloping snapshots; had a trained staff of professional daredevils to handle any overflow assignments I couldn't take care of personally.

One morning the Culpepper cutie had barged into my office looking for work. She had a Southern drawl thicker than cornmeal mush, a figure like a bachelor's dream, a ridiculous rag doll under her arm, and steadfast determination in her dark, enigmatic peepers.

"I want a job, Mr. Ransom," she had firmly announced. "I want any kind of work you've got to offer. I'll climb mountains, charm snakes, jump off bridges or dive into saucers of boiling oil—for money. I'm desperate."

Desperate, my adenoids. She was hungry. I knew the signs, because I've been hungry myself. I slipped her a sawbuck for coffee and bagels, got her a room in a run-down fleabag, and jawed a casting director pal of mine into hiring her as an extra in a mob scene. She was too beautiful to waste on the stunting racket; too fragile, too daintily exotic. Making her hang off cliffs by her toenails would have been as incongruous as cutting up dill pickles in your champagne.

TO MAKE a long story interesting, she photographed like some Oriental goddess. Within two or three months she was playing bit roles; inside a year, leads. By the time I folded Risks, Incorporated, and opened my private investigation agency Kitty Culpepper was a top star in Perfection Pix and had come to be known as Hollywood's mystery woman.

The mystery woman angle started as

a press agent's pipe dream. Kitty didn't mind giving publicity interviews, but she wouldn't go for any mention of her past, or her real name, or where she had come from. Her life before she hit California was strictly her own business. She even got rid of her Southern drawl so phonetic experts wouldn't be able to spot her origin.

This, of course, was a natural for the fan mags and gossip columnists. Then when she began to collect dolls, the story was perfect. Kitty the glamorous; Kitty and her intriguing hobby. Kitty Culpepper, who spent great gobs of geetus on miniature wardrobes for her collection, and then gave exhibits of the dolls for charity. Kitty Culpepper, who kept the movie wolves at a distance, who confined her romancing exclusively to the make-believe world of celluloid, and declared she wouldn't marry the handsomest man on earth. Kitty the gorgeous, living in spinsterish splendor with a mansion full of dolls. The public ate it up.

Until now, though, I had never taken the doll routine seriously. I knew her stash was infested with them, but I thought it was all part of the act. Yet here were these six busted figurines reposing in their improvised shoe box coffins, patently indicating that the Culpepper cookie had gone overboard on the subject.

Well, I mused, sometimes it's a mighty narrow line of demarcation between a hobby and a mania. As to how the toys had got broken, I wasn't even trying to guess.

From behind me a slithery sound intruded as somebody gave the portieres a nudge on their pole rings. I jumped. "I beg pardon, sir," a voice said, and I jumped again, but higher.

The voice belonged to the matinee-idol butler. He had sneaked in on me while my attention was elsewhere, and if he had been an assassin he could have slit my weasand before I knew what hit me. I gave him my ferocious scowl, the one I intimidate babies with.

"Jeeves," I yodeled, "don't *do* that!"

"The name is Smedley, sir. Sorry, sir." He leered. "I didn't mean to frighten you, sir."

"Not frightened," I said truculently.

"Startled. A private detective is always on the dodge. Enemies, you know. Besides, a guy gets edgy at a funeral for smashed dolls."

"Quite so, sir. Weird, is it not? Sometimes I wonder if Miss Culpepper mightn't be going a trifle off her rocker the past few days. Not that you'd blame her, considering." He didn't amplify this curious remark. "Incidentally, sir, she will see you now. In the music room, if you will follow me."

"Fine. By the way, have you any idea why she phoned me to come over here in such a yank?"

"I have several ideas, sir, but perhaps you'd better ask her yourself."

I trailed him from the alcove and across the reception hall's glossy expanse, walking carefully so I wouldn't go skidding neck over tincup. My acrobatic days are past; I'm growing brittle.

"Do you think it's about the dolls?" I persisted.

He looked back at me, started to answer. But he never got the words out, because just then a scream shrilled from somewhere in the rear, high and harsh as a bandsaw ripping into a hardwood knot.

CHAPTER II

BLOND AMAZON



THE instant I heard that marrow-curdling yelp I lit a shuck toward the source of the sound. As I ran I unpacked the .32 automatic I always tote in an armpit rig for emergencies. Something told me this might very well be an emergency, senior grade.

Fast as I moved, Smedley was faster. He churned along ahead of me with his hip pockets dipping lint, scuttled through an archway under forced draft. I tried the same maneuver and a throw rug threw me and sent me sailing south while my gat sailed north. I landed with a jar that nearly dislocated my tripes.

I floundered around a while, trying to shake the bees out of my bonnet. And then somebody said:

"Get up, you fiend! But make no false moves or I will shoot you like a dog. I

have your gun."

Gradually the fog drifted from my glims and I glued the flabbergasted glimpse on a giantess. She had hair the yellow of ripe Minnesota wheat and the clear Scandinavian complexion that goes with it. At a guess, she must have weighed two hundred pounds—not an ounce of it fat. And sure enough, she had my roscoe. She was aiming it at my gizzard.

I staggered to my full height of six feet plus, and the Amazon topped me by at least four inches. For all her heft, she was gorgeously proportioned. She wore a sort of nurse's outfit, white and starchy, but no amount of starch and stiffness could conceal the curves under the cloth. She had everything it takes to make a man pucker up and whistle like a freight engine, only hers came in the large economy size.

"So at last you show yourself," she declaimed in a resonant chest tone. She had the chest for it, too, along with a trace of accent. "I have caught you red-handed!"

"Now wait a minute, Tutz," I said mildly. "Better stop seeing so many B pix. They're corning up your dialogue. What's with this red-handed fiend sheep dip?"

"What is it but red-handed when I hear a scream and run from my room to find you here with a gun by your side?" she answered, with an elaborate sneer that showed the even whiteness of her teeth. "And who but a fiend would destroy as you have destroyed?"

Just then the butler came blipping through the archway, drawing her attention.

"Smedley!" she widened her big blue peepers at him. "What is it? What is wrong?"

"It's Miss Culpepper. She's fainted in the music room, and—there's another smashed doll!"

"She needs me!" the big jane squalled. "Here, take this!"

Planking my fowling piece into the flunky's fist, she raced away in a cloud of waffle batter.

Smedley evidently didn't like guns. He juggled mine as if he had been presented with a live cobra. I reached out, relieved him of it.

"Thanks," I said. "Now let's go see about Miss Culpepper and the smashed doll." I nudged him into motion. "Lead the way and make it hasty. It's high time somebody gave with the explanations around here." Then, as an afterthought, "Just who the devil is that hefty tomato in white?"

"Hulda? She's—she's Miss Culpepper's personal masseuse. Figure conditioner, she calls herself."

Nervously he piloted me along a hallway, then down two steps into a combined conservatory and library. Shelves on three sides of the room were stacked with books and record albums. The fourth side was largely glass, a good deal of it French windows. A radio phonograph, a grand piano, a couple of divans, some easy chairs and a few floor lamps made up the furnishings.

Recumbent on one of the sofas lay Kitty Culpepper, slender and alluring in yellow silk lounging pajamas that clung to her contours like melted honey.

Hulda hulked massively over her, stroking her temples and massaging her wrists and murmuring what sounded like Swedish incantations. Then, coping a gander at me, the blond Amazon did a fast double-take. Alarm spread over her broad map as she piped the gat dangling in my duke. Then she planted herself firmly in front of the divan like a shield.

"You will have to kill me before you touch Miss Kitty!" she announced. "I will protect her with my life!"

"More of that B picture dialogue," I said. "You really ought to cut it out before it gets habit-forming. Now just what goes on here?"

"As if you did not know, you—you doll-breaker!"

"Good lord, woman," Smedley bleated, "so that's why you were aiming a gun at him. You thought—" He made a disgusted gesture. "Why, this is Nick Ransom. He's the private detective Miss Culpepper sent for."

"P-private detective?" Hulda reddened to the roots of her taffy hair. "Are you sure?"

I STARTED to show her my badge and credentials, but it wasn't necessary. The Culpepper quail chose that moment

to open her dark optics and snap out of her swoon. She saw me and moaned:

"Nick! Oh-h-h, Nick, I'm so glad you're here! Nick, save me! I—don't w-want to die—like *that!*" And she stared over toward one of the French windows.

I stared, too and felt goose pimples as big as persimmons growing on my brisket. And no wonder. In the darkness just outside the window there was a French doll dangling from a length of cord lashed around its broken neck like a hangman's noose.

Even as I glommed a swivel at this macabre sight, Hulda bleated like an enraged banshee and barreled toward the window. She opened it and hurled herself out into the night, screaming her intention to catch somebody and rend him limb from limb. It was a noble sentiment indeed, but I don't take much stock in noble sentiment.

In fact, I'm pretty cynical about human nature. I tapped Smedley on the shoulder.

"After her, pal. Grab her and fetch her back. See that she stays on deck until I find out what's behind this dizzy rhubarb. That applies for any other servants in the joint, too. Including yourself, if you get what I mean."

"Yes, sir. You distrust us." He put his kisser up close to my ear. "Confidentially I don't blame you. But at least there's only Hulda and me to worry about. The maid, the cook and the chauffeur left this afternoon without notice."

He sprinted over to the window and raced in pursuit of the masseuse.

Meanwhile Kitty Culpepper seized my hand, pulled me alongside her on the divan. Her hair was bluish black and page-boy bobbed, her skin had a clear creamy purity that brunettes seldom possess, and her features were symmetrically perfect, like sculpture. The slight Oriental slant of her eyes added a touch of exotic mystery that made you think of harems and Circassian slave girls and the perfumed pages of the Arabian Nights.

When I found myself harboring thoughts like that I decided I must be getting soft in the steeple. I looked at Kitty and wondered if she realized I

was making mental passes at her.

She shivered delicately. "Nick, somebody wants to murder me," she said in a tremulous voice.

"Hunh?" I said, forgetting about the mental passes.

"It's true. It started a few nights ago when someone b-broke in and pulled the arms and legs off one of my prize bisque dolls. It was an antique I'd bought in London. I paid a fabulous price for it, and . . . Nick, I was heart-broken. Dolls mean more to me than they do to most people. They're like—well, almost like a family. The family I've never really had. I guess the psychologists would call it a frustration complex or something. You know, because I've never married, or had children."

"Sublimation is the word."

She nodded. "That's it. Anyhow, I—I thought the doll should have a funeral. Was that silly of me, Nick?"

"Yeah," I said frankly.

Her lower lip quivered. "Next night I found two more, broken. Their heads shattered. As long as I had fixed a funeral for the first one, I didn't like to discriminate. And Nick, I—I accused the servants of smashing them."

"Whereupon everybody ups and walks out except Smedley and Hulda, huh?"

"That's right. Then, this evening, I found another three more dolls destroyed. That made six!"

"Which you put in shoe box coffins," I said. "And this one outside the window is seven." I indicated the hanging figurine. "Plus the one Smedley found on the front porch when I came in. Or didn't he tell you about that?"

She shrank back. "No. No, he—he didn't." Her voice was barely above a whisper. "Eight broken dolls! Now do you see why I asked you to come, Nick? Can you understand it's a series of warnings telling me I may be next?"

"Pet," I said, "this is preposterous. Who would want to rub you out? And for what reason?"

"I can't answer that. I don't d-dare."

"Are you trying to hint it's something out of your past? Some time, some place, you pulled something on somebody who's now turning up for a slice of revenge? Is that it?"

"Please don't ask me, Nick. Just protect me. Don't—let me be killed!"

I ALMOST bought it. I came within an inch of swallowing everything she had told me, hook, line and bait. Then I happened to tab the sidewise glance she gave me, the studied, calculating glitter that came into her glims and went away again. It was only a brief flash, a flicker that vanished instantly like a magician's rabbit. But it put me hep to the setup. A sudden hunch told me I had been on a sleigh ride. Nick Ransom, sap. Nick Ransom, prime pat-sy for a publicity pitch.

Without saying anything I stood up, ankled across the room to a phone and dialed a number out of my mental card index file. At the other end of the connection, Stuart Froelich came on the wire. In a town overrun with press agents, Froelich was one of the best. For years he had been head of the press relations department on the Perfection lot at a fabulous salary—and he was worth every nickel of it. He could manufacture headlines faster than Kaiser makes Frazers, and if you laid all his publicity stories end to end you'd go blind reading them.

"That you, Stu?" I said. "Nick Ransom here. Here, being Kitty Culpepper's tepee. Could you dash over for a conference, kid? I'd like to check with you on the details of this busted-doll gimmick before you release it to the reporters."

He chuckled. "So Kitty broke down and told you, eh? Okay, coming right over. See you in a jiffy."

Since he lived just a couple of streets away, that would be a promise easily kept.

Quietly I cradled the phone, turned to the Culpepper muffin.

"I'm ashamed of you, hon, trying to run that kind of whizzer on a pal. I'll stand hitched for a lot of things, but not a press agent shenanigan. And don't deny it, because I just jockeyed Froelich into a confession. He'll be here presently to confirm it."

"Nick—"

"Star Has Funeral For Smashed Toys. Hires Famed Detective To Hunt Doll-Destroyer.' Yeah, babe. I admit the

headlines would be terrific. But you can include me out."

She came off the divan in a fluent flurry of motion, while a sudden gush of brine brimmed from her peepers and ran down her complexion in little rivulets of melted mascara.

"I hate you!" she said, and pelted out of the room.

Sure she hated me. Nobody likes to be exposed in something ignoble. When you get caught you naturally dislike the guy that uncovers your deceitfulness. As for those shamed tears—well, phooey. Any actress as competent as Kitty can cry on cue. I was not impressed.

Off in another room, she screamed.

Still I wasn't impressed. I'd heard her do it before, a while ago when she had pretended to faint here in the music room. She had fooled me then, along with Smedley and the massive Hulda; but not any more. I was through being a sucker. All I wanted was to stick around until Stu Froelich showed up, so I could let him know what I thought of him.

Then I intended to go home and soak up a jorum of Scotch—kill the bad taste in my mouth.

"Nick!" Kitty said.

SHE was at the doorway, quaking like jello on a dining car table, and her face was as pale as a kalsomined wall.

"Nice makeup, hon," I said. "You applied it fast, too. Very effective, that pallor. And those shakes look almost genuine. What's the weenie this time? If it's sympathy you're fishing for, I'm fresh out."

"Nick, I—I want to show you something."

"Tonight I've seen everything," I said bitterly.

"Please, Nick. Come with me. Please!"

"Come with you where?"

"My—my boudoir."

I cocked an eyebrow and tried to look raffish. "Aren't you forgetting the censors?"

"Nick!" she said, and her voice sounded as if it were haunted. "Nick, don't be like that! There's a dead girl in my room!"

CHAPTER III

DEAD GIRL ON THE BED



SO NOW it wasn't a broken doll, it was a dead girl. I stopped being raffish and said darkly:

"If this is another one of your antics, watch out. I can take just so much malarkey, then I blow my wig."

I went with her along the hallway to a door that stood ajar. She pointed to this and gulped.

I edged her aside, pushed the door all the way open, and barged into a room as opulent as a movie set and twice as fantastic. Two of the walls were done in quilted white satin from floor to ceiling, with crimson buttons between the tufts like drops of gore in whipping cream.

Along the third wall ran a lengthy dressing table flanked by French windows. The fourth wall was a mammoth mirror, the biggest single installation of looking glass I've ever gandered. Smooth and flawless, this overwhelming monstrosity had a pale greenish tint which caused your reflection to resemble an overripe cadaver. It gave me the jim-jams.

The boudoir carpeting was of cream-tinted velour with a furry nap that foamed up around your ankles like the froth on an acre of freshly spilled beer, only instead of smelling like beer it had a definite fragrance of Chanel Number Five. And in all this scented implausibility there was just one piece of furniture—a canopied four poster bedstead the size of Rhode Island, equipped with scarlet pillows and a black silk counterpane.

When I copped a slant at the bed I saw that Kitty Culpepper hadn't lied, after all. There was a corpse on that black counterpane—a cute little brown-haired filly as diminutive as one of Kitty's dolls and just as lifeless. Some dirty disciple had pistoled her through the ticker, thereby rendering her defunct.

I pinned the glimpse on the Culpepper cupcake. "Okay, who was this frail?"

"I—I don't know." She was lying.

It showed in her eyes, tintured the tone of her voice. "I walked in and found her there. It was horrible, Nick!"

"It will get worse before it gets better if you persist in doing what you're doing," I said grimly. "The cops won't be as easy on you as I am. Now tell me the truth before I make my call."

"Call? Nick, do you have to bring the police in on this? I—I mean—"

"Don't ask foolish questions. I'm stretching a point by giving you a chance to speak your piece before the bulls get here. Better take advantage of it while you can."

She came close to me, gave me a long searching look. Then her shoulders sagged.

"All right. The girl is—is Deborah Smedley. My butler's wife. His former wife. They were divorced just two weeks ago. She had started—well, going around with other men. and—"

"Well, for Pete's sake!" I made a disgusted gesture. "Why in the name of your Aunt Maria would you lie about that? Why tell me you didn't know her?"

"Because I—I'd had a quarrel with her before she and Smedley separated. Smedley's a nice guy, Nick. He works hard, and he loved her. and—and she was rotten to him. She broke his heart. I meddled. I thought maybe I could do him a favor by bringing her to her senses. I asked her to come see me, and I—I told her off. She got sore and said ugly things to me. She even accused me of being—well, interested in Smedley. If you can imagine anything so absurd. Me in love with a servant!"

"He's a mighty handsome hunk of stuff."

"To me he's merely a butler. When his wife pulled that on me I lost my temper. I said things I shouldn't have said."

"Threats, for instance?"

"Yes, Nick. And the servants overheard. Now she's d-dead. Murdered. On my bed? I'll be suspected. Oh-h-h, Nick, what am I going to *do*?"

"Tell the truth and take your chances," I said unfeelingly.

I was still pretty annoyed by the publicity routine she had tried to horse me into, and while I didn't actually suspect

her of having anything to do with the croaking of Smedley's doll-like wife, the thing was strictly a case for the Homicide cops. I turned, stalked from the boudoir and went back to the sunken conservatory, headed for the telephone.

A GUY was standing in front of it, over by the grand piano; a dapper little character in brown tweed slacks and a hound's-tooth sport jacket as quiet and unobtrusive as a riot in a boiler factory. His face was sharp enough to slice salami and his curly black hair had a white blaze from widow's-peak to crown, as if it had been parted with a paint brush. He had one blue eye and one gray one, giving him a humorously lopsided look that went well with his wide-mouthed crooked grin. He was Stu Froelich, the Perfection publicity chief, and he tossed me an airy greeting.

"Hi, Hawkshaw. What's new in snooping?"

"Murder," I said, and started around him.

He blinked his mismatched glims at me.

"Hey, what gives? You look like a man that just found a bug in his Wheaties."

"No, I look like a man that just found a corpse in a boudoir. Step aside while I phone Headquarters."

He blocked me. "Now wait a minute. Fun's fun, but leave us not carry it to extremes. After all, a broken doll—"

"This doll's real," Kitty Culpepper said from the doorway, and came down the two steps into the music room. She faced Froelich, a harried grimace twisting her kisser. "It's Deborah Smedley. My butler's ex-wife. You remember her."

"Sure I do. What about her?"

"She's dead. Murdered. On my b-bed."

He closed his gray eye, stared at her with the blue one. "I'm being kidded, of course," he said uncertainly. When she didn't answer, he turned to me. "It's a rib. Right, Nick?"

"Wrong. It's a kill."

"But—but when you phoned me to come over here you didn't say anything about a murder."

"Nobody knew about it then. Except the murderer."

He was starting to sweat. "Good grief! So that's why Smedley wasn't here to let me in when I rang the bell. That's why I found the front door unlatched and walked in." Momentarily he lost his voice, then it came back. "You mean he shot her and got away?"

"I wouldn't know," I said. "If Smedley did it, he used a gat with a silencer. There was no report. I don't even know what the jane was doing in Kitty's bedroom. It's plain she must have burgled one of the French windows, but don't ask me why."

"Maybe I can guess the answer to that," Kitty said.

"Yeah?" I peered at her. "Okay, give."

"Well, I told you how she accused me of—of being interested in Smedley. Maybe she sneaked in my room hoping to catch us together." She blushed furiously.

Froelich combed a finger along the white blaze bisecting his curly black hair.

"And then Smedley saw her from outdoors and let her have a silent bullet! That I'll buy."

"Don't be too swift," I said. "I'm not defending the guy, but isn't it an odd coincidence he'd be toting a noiseless roscow at that particular moment? Besides, what about his motive? The quail wasn't his wife any more; they'd been divorced. So what valid reason would he have for knocking her off?"

"There you've got me, Sherlock."

I turned again to the Culpepper cutie. "Let's try a new angle. You admit the smashed-doll story was publicity hokum."

"Y-yes."

"And when you tried to sell me the idea that somebody out of your mysterious past was gunning for you, was that hokum, too?"

"Yes. Yes, it was."

"But where did you get the notion?" I went on. "Did you dream it up, or did it have a secret basis of truth?"

"I don't think I understand you, Nick."

"You've always kept your past covered up," I said. "Is it possible you really did do something to somebody, some time, somewhere? Someone who

would have reason to hate you and crave revenge? And, knowing this, did you subconsciously make it part of the story you fed me?"

Her color was bleaching out. "If you mean did I have enemies, the answer is no. I made that up."

"Don't lie to me, hon," I warned her. "This is murder, remember. Suppose there actually was somebody gunning for you. Suppose he showed up tonight, just when you were pulling your publicity caper on me. Suppose Deborah Smedley chose this same night to go snooping through your boudoir. The lights were low and the killer came to your window, saw her, mistook her for you. He fired, and the girl died in your place. Make sense?"

"No, Nick. It doesn't, because—"

"Better not say that to the cops," I growled. "They'll demand full cooperation. You'll have to tell about your past, name the party who hated you enough to want to kill you. You're the only person who can furnish a line on the guilty guy. Refuse to play ball and you'll be in a jackpot, hon."

SHE shivered under the clinging yellow pajamas.

"But I don't know anybody who'd want to m-murder me. And my past has n-nothing to do with it. I've kept it a secret, yes. But only because it's not glamorous enough. I was poor white trash in the deep South. I grew up in an orphanage, never knew my parents. I worked in the cotton fields and then as a—a servant, a kitchen slavey. I'd be laughed out of pictures if the public knew my real background. I'd go back to being a nobody again. I don't want that to happen, Nick. It mustn't happen!"

Stu Froelich moved casually to the two steps into the hallway. He beckoned me, then drew me out of Kitty's earshot.

"Let's make a deal, gumshoe. What's your price for keeping Kitty out of this hassle? She's worth millions to Perfection Pix. And Perfection's investment in her has to be protected."

"You wouldn't try to bribe me, would you?"

He smirked. "Don't go ethical on me, pal. I'm Froelich, remember? You and

I have known each other for years. We've been swacked together, made passes at the same squabs, traded the phone numbers in our address books. You love cash like Scotch loves soda. Here's your chance to collect."

The worst of it was, he was right. I'm always on the make for a buck. I'm trying to save up a retirement fund so I can fold up and live on my fat before some sharp apple writes my name and address on a bullet. By the same token, I won't cover up a murder; not for money, marbles or beefsteak.

"Get away from me, Buster," I said.

"Look, I'm only suggesting we move the corpse out of here and put it somewhere else for the cops to find."

"Sorry. No dice."

His narrow mush darkened. "My studio drags a lot of weight in this man's town. There are ways of getting a snoop's license jerked, you know."

"First bribery, now threats," I said.

"Threats I take from nobody."

I made a fist, looked at it. Then I hit him with my other hand, the one he wasn't watching. He landed on his back; stayed there.

I strode back to the phone, called Police Headquarters. Kitty didn't try to stop me. Presently I got my friend Ole Brunvig of the Homicide Squad.

"Nick Ransom this end," I snapped.

"Dust your diapers out here to Kitty Culpepper's igloo with a meat wagon. I seem to have discovered a murder." Then I mentioned the missing servants, Hulda and Smedley described them and suggested a radio pickup order on them. "I don't know where Hulda fits in, but Smedley is the dead doll's former hubby. Got it?"

"Got it," Brunvig said, and rang off.

I started to hang up but never got around to it. Something descended on my noggin with the impact of a pile-driver. A bank of Klieg lights blazed in my skull; went out. I went out, too.

NEXT ISSUE

MY VOTE'S FOR MURDER

A Dwight Berke Novelet

By CARL G. HODGES

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

A NEW WAY TO PAY BRIBES



RAIN on the roof was drumming the thin shingles like a demented jazz musician full of marijuana. Somebody said, "I pass," and somebody else said, "Raise you five," and another voice chuckled, "Your five and five more.

How many cards, Ransom?"

Ransom didn't answer. I squeezed my glims shut and wondered if Ransom was holding a pat hand. I wondered who Ransom was. A quiet guy, obviously. The strong, silent type. Played his cards close to the vest. Very admirable. I liked Ransom. I decided I must get to know him better.

Not right away, though. I was too drowsy. Rain on the roof puts a man to sleep. But it was funny how my head ached. Pretty heavy rain, to raise a lump on your dome. I stirred in a hard chair and smelled whisky.

I smelled nothing but whisky. Rye, from the pungency of it. I don't care for rye. Scotch is my dish, preferably Vat 69. I had a flavor of rye in my mouth just the same. Somebody must have poured it into me with a funnel. Or maybe it was the rain. Maybe it was raining rye.

"Ransom wins another pot," somebody said enviously. "He clipped us for five C's that time. He must be close to seven grand ahead. Lucky heel."

"Drunk's luck," another voice came in. "Look at him. He's bottled to the nostrils. Ransom, the lush."

"Hey, I'm Ransom!" I said suddenly, and opened my eyes.

I was in a sort of rustic cabin, seated at a plain deal table with three guys, two of them strangers. The third was Stu Froelich. Stu had a mocking grin on his kisser, a sardonic look in his mismatched peepers and a stack of currency in front of him.

"Welcome back to life, Sherlock," he said. "It's your deal."

"You slugged me," I said, slowly and distinctly.

"Sure. I've been slugging you with rye all night. Shuffle the cards and deal.

"You're delaying the game."

"You slugged me with a blackjack or something, and there's no game to delay."

"No game, the man says. What do you call draw poker, a parlor trick?"

"I haven't been playing poker. I've been unconscious."

He looked at the other two guys. "The unconscious part we buy, eh, boys? But when he says he hasn't been playing poker—" He aimed a finger toward the table before me. "How do you think you won that seven thousand dollars? I should be able to do as well while unconscious. I'd be a millionaire."

Sure enough there was greenery in front of me; piles of it.

"Oh," I said. "A new way to pay bribes. Makes it look legal." I stood up. "You slugged me after I phoned the Homicide Bureau."

His pals joined Froelich in a gush of guffaws. "That was some rib you pulled on your friend Lieutenant Brunvig," one of them cackled. "Man, will he be sore when he finds you sent him out to Miss Culpepper's house on a wild goose chase."

"Wild goose chase?" I said. The situation was filtering into my gray matter, now. "So that's how it is."

"You really shouldn't have done it, Nick," Froelich said. "Suppose Brunvig can't take a joke? I tried to talk you out of it." He added piously, "But you were so plastered—"

I kicked my chair backward. "That's enough! I get the picture. You conked me and carted the murdered wren out of Kitty's joint so the cops wouldn't find her. You hid the body some place and then brought me here, wherever here is, and got two of your studio stooges to sit in on this counterfeit card game. A pint of whisky down my gullet kept me blotto until everything was fixed, then you let me come to. Meanwhile, Kitty will be telling Brunvig and his Homicide minions there never was a corpse on her bed."

"Which there wasn't," Froelich said, perfectly deadpan. "Kitty will explain to Brunvig about the broken dolls."

"Ah! So you're letting that story stand."

He lifted a shoulder. "Why waste a

good publicity break? Sure we'll let the doll story stand. Kitty will tell how she called you in on the deal and you arrived drunk and she threw you out because she wouldn't hire an intoxicated detective. She'll be astounded to learn that you subsequently phoned Headquarters and reported a murder in her home. She'll deny it, naturally. She'll be indignant. She'll suggest you may have done it in a drunken attempt to annoy her."

He had it all figured out.

"HOW nice," I grated. "That certainly cooks me at Headquarters. That fixes me up just fine."

"You'll be okay," he said. "The boys and I will front for you. Won't we?" he asked his two stooges, and they nodded amiably.

"We'll say that you joined us right after Kitty gave you the bum's rush," he went on, "and that we've all been together ever since. And that you phoned the murder report from her as a practical joke."

"Which also furnishes you with an alibi covering the time you were disposing of the corpse, eh?"

"What corpse?" He grinned. "There was no corpse. You imagined it. You've been playing poker the whole evening, and you've taken seven thousand bucks away from us. What more do you want? You're feeling no pain."

"But you will," I said, and dived at him.

I'm not as brittle as I thought. I sailed through the air and the table overturned under me, scattering cards and folding money and smashing Froelich backward. His chair tipped on its hind legs, dumped him on his shoulder blades. I landed on top of him, caught him by the throat.

"Now tell me where you hid the dead jane!"

"Hey, boys!" he yelped.

His two pals were already leaping at me. One jumped spang on my kidneys and the other aimed a kick at my short ribs which luckily didn't land. I've still got a stunt expert's rapid reflexes, and I learned years ago how to take punishment without permanent injury. When the first guy romped on my back I re-

laxed, permitted myself to go pudgy at the exact instant his weight struck.

That's a shock-absorbing principle. You ride with the blow and smother a lot of its force. And when the second bozo kicked, I twisted sideways. This threw the first one off me, sent him toppling. It also caused Froelich to take the kick intended for me.

He let out an agonized yell and bucked convulsively, sending me rolling across the floor to carom against the punk who had leaped on my kidneys an instant before. We locked together like two embattled pretzels and started wrestling, no fouls barred.

I can more than hold my own in that kind of a brawl, but I was unprotected from Froelich and his remaining stooge. They converged on me from two angles, and in desperation I put my thumbs under the eye sockets of the ginzo I was grappling with and announced that I planned to pop them out like grapes.

The guy gave up the hold he had on me, tried to claw my hands away. Freed of his clutches, I lurched upright and dragged him with me, hurled him full at Froelich and the other lad. He crashed into them and they all went down.

While they were righting themselves, I reached under my coat and felt a very satisfying object indeed. It was my .32 canning. I whisked it out.

"You made a mistake, Stu," I said maliciously. "You forgot to dehorn me while I was unconscious." Then I added, "The first one who moves wins a hole in the head."

"Which includes you, Ransom," a new voice rasped as the cabin door was shoved open.

Then Ole Brunvig of the Homicide Squad barged over the threshold with his service .38 drawn and cocked. Tall and cadaverous, in a soaking wet suit of funereal black, he looked like an underfed mortician with dyspepsia, as somber a cop as ever harbored stomach ulcers. He squinted around the room at the scattered geetus and cards, the over-dumped furniture, the two stooges and Froelich standing motionless under the menace of my rod.

"Break up the tableau," he rasped.

"Who the devil d'you think you're fooling?"

"Fooling?" I said. "Now look, Ole—"

"Don't you Ole me, you heel. From now on, to you I'm Lieutenant Brunvig and forget this personal-friendship hogwash. Sending me out to Miss Culpepper's house on a fake homicide call! Suddenly he called out through the doorway, "Turn off that rain!" And to me, "Drop your gun, wise guy."

I dropped it, concluding that I was dealing with a maniac. Nobody but a maniac would command a rainstorm to stop; not even a cop with the authority of Ole Brunvig.

But oddly enough, outside the cabin the rain stopped.

WHILE I was trying to digest this astonishing occurrence, Stu Froelich started talking fast.

"I can explain everything, Officer. Ransom and the rest of us were having a little game, see, when all at once he accused me of dealing off the bottom. He was drunk."

"That I can believe."

"It's a lie!" I yelled. Nobody paid any attention.

"Then the fight started," Froelich continued, "and I don't know how it might have ended if you hadn't come in. Imagine Ransom having the crust to pull a gun on his pals."

"Pals, my elbow!" I caterwauled. "You conked me, kidnaped me to this cabin out here in the great open spaces!"

Froelich gave Brunvig a significant smile.

"Great open spaces. That proves he's drunk when he can't even remember we came here to the studio for a quiet little poker session." He spread his hands. "Too bad you had to walk under the rain machine to find us. I had turned it on and lit the red lamp outside the sound stage to look like a scene was being shot, so we wouldn't be disturbed."

Resentment flooded me as I realized how I'd been hornswoggled. This was no backwoods cabin; it was a movie set on the Perfection lot.

"Curse you!" I exploded. "I see the real reason you brought me here. It was to keep me away from Brunvig until tomorrow. You probably figured to slip

me a doped drink before taking me home, then by morning I'd be so confused I'd think the kill caper at Kitty's was a figment of my boozy imagination." I turned to Ole. "Get it? Tomorrow you could question me until Hades froze solid, but my answers would sound like double-talk."

"They sound like double-talk now."

"There was no double-talk about the brawl I was having when you walked in!" I railed. "I was fighting to get out of here and contact you." A thought struck me. "How did you trace me here?"

"That was easy. You'd mentioned a missing butler and masseuse, but they were both there when I got to the Culpepper house. Neither of them knew anything about a kill, though. Smedley was plenty upset when I said his ex-wife was the alleged murder victim. Then Miss Culpepper explained how it must have been your fool idea of a practical joke. That soothed him."

"Kitty's clever at making folks believe what she wants them to believe," I sneered. "Evidently she sold you a bill of goods, too. I don't suppose you found a corpse in the joint?"

"No corpse. Only some smashed dolls." He looked a little baffled. "That's something I don't quite get."

"A publicity gag," I said. "Skip it. You were telling me how you traced me here to the studio. That was shrewd work."

"Yeah." He preened himself. "Miss Culpepper said you had been there about the dolls but she'd sent you packing because you were plastered. Then the masseuse mentioned that just as she and Smedley got back to the house she noticed somebody helping you into a Packard convertible and driving you away. She thought the car was Froelich's, as far as she could recognize it in the dark. I did a little checking, got its plate numbers from Motor Vehicle and put out a radio reader. Pretty soon a motorbike cop reported the Packard parked outside the Perfection lot."

"Police organization, it's wonderful," I said.

Ole's surly mush darkened. "You'll think so when you inhabit a cell for turning in a false murder alarm. And

when you get out you won't be a private dick any more. That I promise."

"Not even if I show you the dead wren's remainders?"

"It's all in his head, Brunvig," Froelich said, "and it came out of a bottle."

"Still trying to blow down the beef for your studio's sake, eh, Stu?" I said. "Hoping to keep Kitty out of a homicide mess by calling me a liar." I turned to Brunvig. "Look, Ole. You were plenty smart, locating me so fast. I'm not so stupid myself. From what you've told me I know where to find that corpse."

"From what I've told you?"

"Sure. Hulda saw Froelich stowing me in his car. That must've been immediately after he slugged me. He had to get me out of the Culpepper house before you arrived. Therefore he didn't have time to dispose of the murdered muffin. The most he could have done was hide her somewhere right there in the igloo. It's obvious he didn't put her in the Packard or Hulda would have noticed."

"Well, yes, but—"

"Did you frisk the place thoroughly when you were there?"

"I didn't frisk it at all," Brunvig said uneasily. "I merely took Miss Culpepper's word for it that your report was phony."

"You're too trusting," I said. "We'd better get over there in a hurry, before the corpse can be removed. And while Hulda and Smedley are still on tap."

"Hulda and Smedley? You think maybe they—"

"I think we'd better get moving."

"Listen!" Froelich yeped. "I'm not going to take any part in an idiotic search for a body that doesn't exist. Come on, boys!" He beckoned his stooges. "We're leaving."

"Stop them, Ole!" I said. "Bring them along or Froelich will phone Kitty and warn her we're on our way."

Brunvig rubbed his chin stubble. It made a scratchy, sandpapery noise. "Maybe you're right. But heaven protect you if you're running a swift one on me, pal." He stooped, got my dropped heater, pocketed it. He waved his own roscoe at Froelich and the two studio yes-men. "Let's all take a ride."

I didn't like the way he said it. He

sounded as if it might be the last ride I would take in a long, long time.

CHAPTER V

THE DOLL IN THE CLOSET



NOTHING had changed in the Culpepper stash, seemingly. Those busted dolls were still in their funeral alcove and two more had been added—the one Smedley had found on the porch and the other one I'd seen hanging by the neck outside the music room windows.

Smedley himself looked a trifle pallid, which was natural for a guy who recently had heard a denied report that his ex-wife was defunct. Hulda's statuesque blonde proportions had not diminished in the past hour, nor had she discontinued her protective attitude toward Kitty Culpepper, who was still languorously embellished in that clinging yellow lounging pajama outfit.

When Kitty lamped me trooping in with Brunvig, Froelich and the two stooges, she recoiled as if she had been slapped with a wet herring. The sudden fear in her dark glims mutely proclaimed that she knew the jig was just about up.

"Hi, hon," I said. "Want to lead us to the body and save time? Or must we search for it?"

"Body? What b-body?"

"Okay, play innocent. See what it buys you." Then I said to Ole, "According to the time-table we worked out, Froelich didn't have a chance to move the corpse out of the house. And Kitty isn't sturdy enough for that kind of work. She wouldn't risk it anyhow, with Hulda and Smedley around. Smedley especially. If he saw his wife's body he'd blow the lid off. Therefore—"

The butler grabbed my arm. "Are you still claiming Deborah is d-dead? Murdered?"

"Yeah."

I shook him off, and he put a hand to his glims as if trying to brush away a nightmare. Then he darted a spiteful glare at Froelich and the Culpepper quail, a glare almost malevolent.

Froelich licked his lips nervously.

"This whole thing is fantastic! Ransom saw a broken doll and was so drunk he thought it was a dead girl. Isn't that so, Kitty?"

"Y-yes. Yes, of course."

Brunvig gave me a speculative look. "I believe you were about to make a point when you were interrupted. All right, make it."

"Thanks," I said. "It's this: I don't think Kitty dared move the body. Consequently it's probably still in her boudoir. That's the logical temporary hiding place. My guess is that Froelich figured to come back later and take it away where it would never be found. Then I would never be able to prove my contention that a murder had been committed. My testimony would be laughed off as the ravings of an alcoholic." I started walking. "Let's prowling the bedroom, get this settled once and for all. Mind the floor," I added. "It's slippery."

Presently, I led the parade into Kitty Culpepper's sumptuous sleeping quarters. Brunvig looked somewhat sandbagged by the white padded walls with their crimson buttons, and when he nabbed a slant at himself in the green tinted mirror he instinctively felt his pulse to make certain he was alive. Having assured himself of this, he made straight for the mammoth four-poster, kneeled down, and peered under it.

"No corpse," he announced.

"Then try the closets."

Kitty flinched. "There aren't any c-closets. Anybody can see that."

"You mean you haven't got a place to keep your Sunday clothes?" I said. "Oh, come now." When she refused to answer, I turned to the statuesque Hulda. "You tell us, Tutz."

"Of closets I know nothing," the masseuse said stolidly.

"Loyalty is admirable in its place," I said. "But when killery is involved, everybody that lies is under suspicion." I looked at the handsome but haggard Smedley. "How about you, bub?"

His face worked. "I've always had the highest regard for Miss Culpepper," he said thickly. "She's been very good to me. But—I loved my wife. I kept right on loving her even after she fell for someone else and divorced me. If she's dead, I—I want to know it. I

want to be sure."

He ankleed to one of the satin walls, studied it, pressed a red button. A panel swung open on hidden hinges, disclosing a wide closet that ran the full length of the room. The closet was crammed with costly she-male attire, but that wasn't all it contained.

I beckoned Brunvig. "Here's the murdered doll, Ole."

SMEDLEY moaned and sagged against the wall, staring incredulously at his defunct wife. Brunvig bugged his eyes at the corpse and then whirled, waving his roscoe like a symphony conductor's baton.

"Who croaked her?" he caterwauled. "Come on, sing!" He approached Kitty Culpepper. "Well?"

"Believe me, I don't know anything, except I found her on my bed, and—"

He turned on Smedley. "You knew exactly where to look. If you pulled this kill, say so now and save yourself a session with the rubber hose."

"I've told you I loved her, sir. You don't kill the one you love, even though you've lost her to somebody else. Why not question Mr. Froelich? He's the man Deborah fell for."

That was the last link in the chain, the one missing piece I had been hoping to find.

"Okay, Stu," I said. "Tag—you're it."

The Perfection press agent tensed. "Just a minute, gum-shoe. I admit I hid that corpse to keep Kitty out of trouble. But you've got no grounds for accusing me of murder."

"You're guilty," I said. "That's plenty of grounds. I started suspecting you when I first talked to you in the music room; when I first told you about the kill. You said, 'You mean Smedley shot her and got away?' That was a bad slip, pal, because I hadn't mentioned the murder method. How could you know she'd been shot?"

"Why, I—I assumed she had been."

I sneered. "It was guilty knowledge. But I had no evidence against you—only my suspicions. I could see how you'd worked the stunt, of course. There was no silenced gat involved. You live just a couple of blocks away. You could have

drilled the girl in your own stash, then lugged her over here and sneaked through the boudoir window and planted her on the bed and gone home again in plenty of time to get my phone call. Then you drove back here in your car, full of spurious innocence."

"You're insane!"

"No, just foolish. I made a mistake when I failed to pinch you at the start. Instead, I thought I'd string you along until the cops arrived and then turn you in. That gave you a chance to swat me senseless. I was a dope to turn my back on you. But nobody can be perfect all the time."

His mismated glims held the glitter of fear. "You can't prove a word of this!"

"Give me time," I said. "Let's look at the devious scenario you chose. You had a good reason for that. Murdering the jane in a commonplace way might have involved you in the investigations, but by planting her on Kitty's bed you had a plausible excuse to step and dispose of the body—with my help, you hoped. Your every move was supposedly for the studio's benefit, ostensibly to protect Perfection's investment in Kitty. She was your fall guy. You knew she'd have to clam up in self defense. You invented the busted-doll publicity gag in advance, as window dressing for the murder, but the routine came unstuck when I refused to play ball. Then you had to improvise a plant to discredit me."

He ran a hand through the blaze in his hair. "Ridiculous! Why would I go to all that trouble to kill a girl I hardly knew?"

"Smedley just furnished the answer," I said. "You're the bozo his wife fell for. Maybe you promised to marry her, a promise you didn't intend to keep. You're not the marrying kind. I know. I've been on too many parties with you. Maybe she started putting the pressure on. A lot of dames have been knocked off by boy friends who got tired of them. And I'll lay six, two and even we'll find a roscoe somewhere among your effects, a gun that will match with the slug in Deborah Smedley's heart."

I was bluffing on that. I was firing

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Flaming Death

By GEORGE METCALF JOHNSON

When racing cars mysteriously become torches of doom, ace newshound Rusty Collins follows a hunch around the track!



RUSTY COLLINS, *Inter-city Tribune* sports editor, slipped a sheet of yellow flimsy into his typewriter, and paused to light a cigarette. His desk phone buzzed.

"A man to see you, Rusty," the switchboard girl said. "Something about the midget auto races tonight."

"Okay, Sally. Shoot him up." Collins replaced the handset. Under his lean fingers the keys began clattering:

Local midget fans will get the first of their twice-a-week thrills tonight at Lakeside Motordrome. Silk Miller is favored to continue his winning streak. That mystery motor of Al Purcell's has plenty of moxie, and Miller knows what to do with it.

Yet many hope to see "Wild Bill" Simko make Al's pilot eat his dust. They don't like some things about Miller's driving. Last week's crack-up, which gave Johnny Thornton a free ambulance ride, smelled like deliberate mayhem. Nor have fans forgotten what happened to Monte Larcomb. But midget racing is a tough racket.

A grotesque, scar-faced apparition materialized at the head of the stairs, sidling forward like a crab on bent, twisted legs. Rusty stared inquiringly.

"You're Collins?"

"Yeah."

"Here's something might interest you." Rusty's caller extended a scrap of brown wrapping paper. On it was a message, crudely printed in lead pencil, which read:

Silk Miller:

The next race you drive will be your last.

When the Grim Reaper swings his checkered flag, a pilot is all through.

You've been warned, Lead-foot.

Rusty read it and grunted. "Where did this come from?"

"Miller got it in the mail yesterday. I thought you might find a spot for it in your sports round-up, and slip me a little moola on the side. See?"

"Yeah? And who are you?"

"Pete Hollister. I follow the race circuit with a welding truck—to make emergency repairs."

"And how come you have the veiled menace?"

"I was doing a welding job for Purcell this morning. Silk Miller was there. He showed the paper to Al, and then went off leaving it on Purcell's desk. So I gave her a home. Worth anything?"

"No. I think it's a phony."

HOLLISTER shrugged his twisted shoulders. "Could be. But for my money somebody's out to get Silk or put Al Purcell behind the eight ball. Both those palookas have plenty enemies. Miller has sent too many drivers to the hospital for a chap that craves to keep his health. You saw Monte Larcomb's car burn?"

Collins nodded. "Not a pleasant sight."

"And it's a lot less pleasant to be belted into the bucket seat of a burning job. Monte was laid up for five weeks. He got considerable loose conversation off his chest during the vacation."

"You trying to sell me the idea Monte's behind the black hand communique?"

"All I'm trying to sell you, mister, is the build-up for a story. I don't guaran-



Davis was dead when they dragged him from the ruins of the blazing car

tee a thing. The paper's mebbe phony, like you say. I wouldn't know. It could be genuine. Larcomb could have mailed it. So could other race pilots, plenty of whom hate Miller's insides. Here's another angle. You might inquire where Al Purcell got the motors which take his two race cars to town."

Rusty's thin features remained expressionless. "So I'm inquiring. Right now. Give."

"They're from designs of a young guy named Fred Tyler. Purcell financed him, and after he'd gotten places, Al froze the punk out. Tyler had been sap enough to sign an agreement with his eyes shut. He thought they were going into production on a big scale.

"Purcell had different ideas. He figured there was more quick cash in racing than building engines. I'm telling you, mister, that motor of Tyler's is a sweetheart. Only now it belongs to Purcell, not him. I don't say Tyler's back of the plot—or Monte Larcomb—or any particular guy. You might ask Al about the mechanic he fired, and his fight with "Swede" Lindstrom, Wild Bill Simko's owner. But get this. Somebody sent that warning to Miller and whoever it was will be heard from again."

"That's what you think."

"No dice, huh?"

"Not yet. Of course I could be wrong and, if anything blows, I'll play ball with you, paying whatever the tip is worth. Meanwhile leave the poison pen item with me. Oke?"

"Yeah," and the caller departed. Rusty wondered, pityingly, what had struck him. He looked as if he'd been run through a cement mixer.

Stands at Lakeside had a capacity of 6,000, and by eight o'clock it was a sell-out. Rusty strolled into the pit enclosure, where a score of tiny racers were being groomed.

Al Purcell, cigar at a cocky angle, stood beside his car, a sleek little blue job trimmed with chromium—the Purcell Special, Number 1. Al's Number 2 was at another track. He didn't believe in competing against himself. Nearby was his driver, conspicuous for the crimson silk shirt to which Miller owed his nickname. He had the capable jaws of a man who could take care of himself, no

matter how tough the going.

Purcell saw Rusty, and stepped forward truculantly.

"Listen, Collins. What's the idea of giving us the works in your sports column today? Sounded like you were accusing my pilot of dirty driving."

"Did it?" Rusty countered.

Before Purcell could carry on, the pit steward appeared, checking sheets in hand. "Get your car out on the track, Al," he said. "Pronto."

Then the amplifier blared: "We're all set for the opening event, ladies and gentlemen, the first qualifying heat. Eight cars, ten laps. Here's the line-up. In the front tier on the pole is Silk Miller, driving the Purcell Special, Number 1. Beside him Bill Simko, car 17..."

Collins was in his press box seat by time the cars were placed.

"Let 'em roll," called the starter. Pushing crews shoved, and high-compression motors came to life with a spiteful crackle of exhaust. The baby racers slowly circled the oval, keeping their original positions. They rounded the final hair-pin, and there was a deafening burst of noise as each pilot gunned his powerplant. Like bullets the doodlebugs whizzed forward.

SILK MILLER managed to steal a length on the field, and the starter refused to flag them off. On the second circuit Miller kept his place. They were green-flagged.

Even Collins, immune to most competitive thrills, found his heart speeding up as those eight cars tore recklessly into the first bend. He had a nameless hunch that the sinister message was after all not a phony and that hell might break loose on the narrow, crowded track at any instant. But what could happen out there, under the eyes of 6,000 spectators? He leaned forward, nerves taut, staring at the kaleidoscopic swirl of smoke-belching midgets.

Miller came out into the south straightaway in front by a length, gradually pulling farther from the field. By the end of Lap Three he was four car lengths ahead. Into the first hair-pin he zoomed again, tires screaming.

With the suddenness of exploding

dynamite, as if spontaneously, the hood of Number 1 was a mass of flames which flared back, snapping hungrily at the pilot's face. He lost control, and his car shot sideways to strike the crash-rail with terrific force. Through the smoke horrified race fans glimpsed Miller fumbling at the buckle of the safety belt. Then he went limp in the bucket seat.

"Good heavens!" Rusty Collins muttered.

Red lights winked around the oval, while the starter frantically flagged all contestants to a stop. Mechanics were sprinting towards the blazing car. Intuitively Collins knew they would be too late.

Sprayed chemicals smothered the blaze. Silk Miller was rushed away in the ambulance, the wail of its siren rapidly fading with distance. The announcer's voice came:

"Ladies and gentlemen, while we all deeply regret the serious accident to Silk Miller, it must be remembered that auto racing is packed with hazard. The pilots recognize the risks involved—and willingly take their chances. How badly Silk was burned is not known. As soon as word comes, you will be informed of his condition. Meanwhile, since a state law requires the presence of an ambulance, we crave your indulgence until it returns. Thank you."

Canned music brayed from the loudspeakers, striking contrast to the grim tragedy just enacted. Purcell's maintenance crew dragged their damaged car to the pits, while Rusty stared into space, trying to make some sense of this dire confirmation of Pete Hollister's tip.

He knew that racing motors, revved until tortured metal glowed cherry red, could blaze up suddenly. A leak in the fuel line or a flooded carburetor, spilling over the exhaust manifold, might do the trick. But Rusty discounted such plausible explanations. An unknown had warned Miller that Death waited to flag him off the course. There just had to be a connection between his fate and the warning. To believe otherwise was stretching the thin thread of coincidence too far.

Rusty's brain raced on. Some explosive dope in the fuel? So fantastic as to be absurd. Purcell's car burned a special

mixture, built up on an alcohol base, and it came in sealed five gallon cans. Equally impossible seemed any kind of time bomb. An incendiary bullet? The speedway was surrounded by a high board fence. No possible spot outside from which a potential murderer could fire.

But, explanation or not, Collins knew that Silk Miller had been murdered. He left his seat and went down to the pits, where a group of sober-faced pilots and grease-monkeys were gathered about the remains of an \$8,000 race car. Purcell looked sick. Rusty drew him to one side.

"Silk's dead, isn't he?"

"What do *you* think?" the car owner said savagely. "Take a gander at the hood. The metal ran like melted butter! How could a driver be exposed to such heat and come through alive?"

"Any notion what set her off?"

Purcell shook his head. He said nothing about the mysterious warning, nor did Rusty mention it.

The ambulance at length returned, and a minute later came an announcement that Silk Miller had driven his last race. But the show must go on.

RUSTY'S story was spread on the front page of the first edition next morning.

PILOT DIES IN BLAZING CAR, the headlines shouted, followed by the sinister query—Was Silk Miller Murdered?

The write-up stated that evidence hinted very strongly at foul play. This evidence, in possession of the newspaper, would be available to the authorities should they wish to conduct an investigation. The scoop created a sensation, selling thousands of extra papers.

Collins was hardly at his desk when the phone rang. "Hollister to see you." Rusty expected this—was ready for it.

A twisted grin curled the cripple's lips as he sidled awkwardly across the floor. "Wha'd'you say now, Bud? Did I call it?"

"You win. I took it up with Colonel Read. Here's an order on the cashier for a yard. Satisfactory?"

"Sure. Thanks, Chum." He turned to go.

"As you were," Rusty stopped him.

"There might be more where that came from. I expect to hear from police headquarters. I'll have to tell 'em where I got my inside dope, so they'll be putting the finger on you. What'll you say?"

"Only what I told you yesterday. That's all I know."

"Fair enough. Chances are someone from our rival sheet, the *Evening Blade*, will camp on your doorstep. Don't talk."

"I catch. I'll trail with the *Trib* as long as you treat me right. Now about last night's party. I'm wondering was it aimed mainly at Purcell, not Miller."

"You mean Silk was on the spot merely because he happened to be driving Al's car?"

"Why not? And Purcell owns another midget powered by a Tyler engine, with Butch Davis in the bucket seat."

"A pregnant thought, which will bear following up. By the way, where can I locate you—just in case?"

"Nights I'm with the racing outfits. Daytimes my truck's usually in Caldwell's garage on Front Street. I do his welding."

While Hollister was on his way out a summons came to Rusty from Cyrus Read, owner and publisher of the *Intercity Tribune*. With Read in his office was Captain Henry Sanford, of the Homicide Squad.

"Captain Sanford is here about that story," Read said. "I told him it was your baby."

"What evidence of murder do you claim to have?" the Headquarters man demanded.

"This anonymous threat received by Miller the day before he died."

"Humph!" Sanford took the slip of paper and eyed it skeptically. "Probably don't mean a thing."

"That's what Miller thought, until Lap Four of the first heat, last night."

"Any race driver might have the tough luck to check out in a blazing car. It happens all the time. How could it be murder?"

"That's the sixty-four buck query, Captain. The city hires you to dope out answers. I'm a newspaper man, not a dick."

"But you made it into a big noise, splashed all over the front page." Sanford's voice was loaded with suspicion.

"News stories have been faked."

Read broke in angrily, "The *Intercity Tribune* is above news fakery, Captain Sanford. We are glad to co-operate with the police, but resent having our motives impugned."

Colonel Read's paper had been hammering the department for some time past, alleging corruption and inefficiency. It charged that advancement came through influence rather than faithful discharge of duty. Sanford had even been cited as a typical instance of this nepotism—promoted over the heads of older and more able officers solely because the Police Commissioner was his father-in-law.

SANFORD'S face flamed a dull red. "I know just how eager you are to co-operate, Colonel. Skip it. What's the low-down on this note, Collins?"

"A pit welder named Hollister brought it to me yesterday morning. He claimed to have obtained it from Miller, and thought the tip might be worth a piece of change for use in my sports round-up. Both Silk Miller and Purcell, who owns the car Miller drives, have made many enemies at the various tracks, but I felt sure the whole thing was phony, until the fiery chariot interlude. You can't laugh that off."

"I can make a mighty good try. However, I'll talk to Purcell and Hollister. We'll attempt to trace the warning—if it actually was mailed." And Sanford left.

Read said, "I'll detail another man to cover your routine stuff, while you stick to this, Rusty. Find what Purcell and Hollister tell Sanford. A statement from Tyler, too, if you can locate the fellow; his side of the deal by which Purcell got control of the Tyler engine. And what's the name of that driver, the one so badly burned when his car caught fire after Silk Miller rolled him over?"

"Monte Larcomb."

"That's the fellow. Find where he was last night. We scored a smash hit this morning. I want a hot follow-up for today's final. You know the angle as concerns the police. Roast the higher-ups, while conceding that the general run of patrolmen are thoroughly honest, but disgusted and discouraged at an intol-

erable situation. Keep passing the ball."

Rusty went out and located Purcell in the shop where his cars were tuned for competition.

"Sanford been around?" Rusty asked.

"Yeah."

"What did you tell him?"

"That much as I hated to admit you were ever right about anything, this was one time you clicked," Purcell growled.

"You flatter me. Seriously, Al, granting murder, how in blazes was it done?"

Purcell shook his head glumly. "Rusty, I haven't the foggiest notion. All I'm sure of is that the blaze was no accident. If there ever was a fireproof racing car, the buggy Silk drove to his death was it. Try and pound the idea into Hank Sanford's thick skull!"

"Al, you'd like to see Silk's killer burn?"

Purcell swore feelingly. "I'd throw the switch myself. Silk was no angel. He got away with rough stuff on the track, but he could take whatever the other pilots dished out and come back for more. Hang it, I liked the cuss."

"Okay. And I want to bust this case for my paper. What say we bury personal differences and pool resources?"

"That goes with me, Rusty."

"Fine!" Rusty nodded. "Now the guy responsible was sore at Silk, at you, or at the two of you. Who's your best bet?"

"Fred Tyler. Off the record, I pulled a fast one at his expense. I admit it was hitting below the belt, but— Oh, the devil with it. Fred tried to get an injunction against me and failed. Not a legal leg to stand on. He came in here a few days ago, and accused me of stealing his engine. He warned both Miller and me to quit using it—or else. Looks like Tyler made good his threat."

"You told Sanford all this?"

"Sure I told him. His comeback was, 'How could Tyler make the car blaze up?' And I couldn't answer that one. Hank claims your paper is yelling murder because Read wants to give the department a black eye."

"Skip Tyler for a spell," Rusty said. "Could Monte Larcomb have done it?"

"He might have been glad to. And Monte was down in the pits last night."

"Then he had opportunity, such as it

is. As much as anybody. Any other grade A suspects?"

"Three pilots. But they were all entered in the same qualifying heat with Miller. Unless one of 'em had fixed the car before hand, which don't seem possible."

"What about that mechanic you fired?" Rusty asked. "And a car owner named Lindstrom?"

PURCELL stared at him. "You sure do get around, Rusty. The mech was Milt Jacobus. Did he burn me up! I'm paying the grease-monkey good wages, and what does he do but watch his chance to slow the timing on Number 1? Swede Lindstrom—he owns the car Bill Simko drives and, as you probably know, he had to take second money to my car's first. He bribed Milt to slip me the double x, and took him on as motor tuner-upper right after I fired the cuss. He and Jacobus were at the track last night, only I don't see how either of 'em could have pulled the raw stuff. Hang it, I don't see how *anybody* could have!"

"Somebody did, Al, or our murder theory is washed out. What about Pete Hollister?"

"Oh, the welder, huh! He's a whiz with an oxy-acetylene torch."

"I don't care if he can play Schubert's Serenade on the blasted thing. Would the welding excuse give him the chance to load a race car with sudden death?"

"Gosh, no!"

"Those mechs you've got now, Al. D'you trust 'em?"

"Absolutely. Rusty, for my money it's between Tyler, Swede Lindstrom, and Milt Jacobus—or mebbe Larcomb."

"You may be right. Here's a stray notion, Al. Butch Davis, your other driver. Assuming Silk was polished off indirectly to strike at you, why isn't Davis a candidate?"

"Just as if I haven't been worrying about that," Purcell retorted grimly. "But it won't happen again."

"What's his driving schedule?"

"Tonight at Ocean View; tomorrow at Glenway municipal track; Friday at the Blue Jacket Stadium; next day in Philly. I've been spending most of my time with Silk's unit. Now I take personal charge

of Butch Davis and car Number Two."

"What can you tell me about Tyler?"

"Lives alone in an apartment at Seven Twenty-five Park Street. Quiet chap. Not many close friends. Engaged to a good-looker named Glenna Warren. Turned down by the army because of bum eyes. Last I heard he was designing another motor."

"Where does Lindstrom hang out?"

"Somewhere in Philly. You'll have one heck of a chore checking on that turkey. But he should have his car at Ocean View tonight."

Rusty drove to 725 Park Street. Tyler had a back suite on the first floor. He was not at home. The care-taker, when finally located, did not remember just when his tenant had last been seen.

Next he looked up Glenna Warren. She proved to be a brunette, easy on the optics both as to face and figure.

"I'm trying to locate a friend of yours, Miss Warren. Fred Tyler. No luck at his apartment. Have you any idea where he is?"

She rested a hand against the door, as if to gain support. "Why do you wish to see him?"

She seemed nervous—on edge. Perhaps Sanford had already been there. Rusty grinned disarmingly.

"I'm not going to bite Mr. Tyler. What's the matter? Is he in a jam?"

"Of course not! Why do you say that? Who are you, anyway?"

"Just an honest newshound trying to get ahead. Collins is the name."

"Oh!" Startled recognition dawned in her eyes. "You wrote that story in the *Tribune* this morning!"

"Yes. All I want from Mr. Tyler is a brief interview about the racing motor he designed. The one he claims Al Purcell gypped him out of. Be a pal, Miss Warren. Give me a break and I'll give Tyler one. Where is he?"

"I don't know," she said dully. It sounded like the truth.

"Queer he'd drop out of sight and not tell you where he was going."

Her eyes were troubled as they searched Rusty's face. "Do you suppose anything could have happened to him?"

"I guess not. Nothing serious." Rusty spoke comfortingly. "He'll probably show up in a day or two. Well, thanks

anyway, Miss Warren."

He was mulling this over as he went down to his car. "She knows the boy friend threatened Purcell, and is scared pink he may have had a hand in Silk's death. That might not have been in the original scenario. Say Tyler set out to ruin an engine, found he'd killed a man in the process, and took a powder."

THE set-up at Ocean View was similar to that of the Lakeside speedway, save for slightly smaller capacity. Rusty found Purcell in the pits, brooding over his Number 2. "Butch" Davis, a lank veteran of big car competition, did not look worried.

Down near the end of the enclosure Hollister's truck was parked. From it came the sharp hiss of Pete's acetylene torch.

Rusty located Lindstrom's job, Number 17. The owner was supervising engine adjustments being made by the mechanic, probably Milt Jacobus. He wondered how far Lindstrom trusted the grease-monkey. A mech who had been faithless to one employer might stray again.

Various racing units kept pretty much to themselves, and no cars were left without someone conspicuously on guard. Silk Miller's fate, and the sensational developments implied in Rusty's story, had not improved morale.

Collins lingered in the pits until time for the first heat, again conscious of a strange premonition that tragedy hovered above the oval, bright under the glare of powerful floodlights.

The eight cars were flagged off. Butch Davis jumped into an early lead, and held it. Each time he slashed around a hair-pin on shrieking rubber, Rusty forgot to breathe. Absolutely nothing out of the ordinary happened. Purcell's midget came home an easy first.

Rusty returned to the pits as Al's car was wheeled in. "False alarm, huh?" he said in a low tone.

"Looks that way. Gosh, Rusty, I hope so. I sweated blood every second Butch was out there. But I'm keeping my fingers crossed."

There followed other qualifying heats. Davis did not appear again until the first of two semi-finals. As before,

Rusty anticipated disaster, thankful that it did not materialize. In winning, Davis broke the track record for fifteen laps.

The twenty-five lap feature race was late getting under way. Davis, because of fastest time in his semi-final, had the choice position, in front on the pole. After two false starts they were green-flagged. There was a scrappy dog fight at the first curve, but Butch had a heavy foot on the gas pedal and a skilled hand on the steering wheel. He led into the far straightaway, a bullet on wheels. Not another car could match his speed. Butch rounded the west end of the oval, and flashed by the starter's post, already two lengths to the good. Along the crash-rail bordering the pit enclosure he streaked, and cut sharply into the curve.

Then from the hood of Number 2 spurted tongues of flame. Instinctively Davis flung up an arm to protect his face. It was a dreadful repetition of Silk Miller's fate. The car spun out of control towards the infield, where it crashed a haybale pylon and turned over, blazing furiously. Davis was dead when finally dragged from the smoking ruins.

Rusty got his car from the parking lot and burned the highway for home. There was a story to write, but first he went to his rooms, procuring flashlight, gloves, and a burglar's jimmy, souvenir of a newspaper exploit of years back.

Two blocks from 725 Park Street Rusty abandoned his car, going the rest of the way on foot. Stealthily he slipped through the service gate, and around to the rear. No light showed from Tyler's apartment. Rusty tried the windows; all locked. He used the jimmy, and the catch let go with a sharp metallic click.

Off in the distance a clock struck midnight. From an upstairs apartment a radio blared. Within Tyler's rooms utter silence. Rusty climbed up over the sill, and in.

He pressed his flashlight switch. This was the bedroom. Nothing to indicate that it had been used for several days. Rusty explored, passing on into a combination living and work room. There was a draftsman's board, and an unfinished engine drawing on it. Nearby was a stand of technical books, most dealing

with automotive subjects, two on advanced chemistry, and one volume covering high explosives. No evidence that the place had been searched by police.

The outer door had a bolt. He shot it home, to guard against untimely interruptions. But further search disclosed no murder clues other than the books. As clues they were not too promising.

A DOOR from the street opened. Footsteps came along the hall, stopping at Tyler's apartment. Someone tried the knob, then knocked lustily. Collins made for the rear window. This could be the cops. News of the second flaming car death, phoned from Ocean View, might have stirred the local force from its lethargy.

"Bust her in!" Sanford's voice. It was the cops.

Rusty swung his feet over the window sill, and dropped. Fingers closed on his shoulder. "Not so fast, you—"

Words broke off in a snap of teeth as Rusty uncocked a powerhouse from down under, and his captor wilted. Then Rusty cut for a fence separating the rear of the apartment house from buildings fronting the next street.

The jimmy, all possible finger prints carefully wiped off, he dropped in a convenient trash can. Unchallenged by the police, Rusty gained his car, and headed for the *Tribune* office.

Contrary to his custom at this hour, Cyrus Read was there. "Anything happen at Ocean View? I waited—on suspicion."

"Plenty happened," Rusty told him, mentioning also his stopover at Tyler's apartment. "All I got there for my trouble was a small library of technical books. I wonder if the secret of what made those cars blaze up is buried in their pages."

Rusty had two callers the following morning. First was Pete Hollister.

"I read your piece in the paper. Sure was hot stuff. Being's my tip sent you to Ocean View last night I oughta rate another bonus."

"It's ready for you. What blows up next?"

"I wouldn't know. Purcell's out of racing until he repairs his cars and signs

drivers. Repairs won't take long with the staff he's got. May have trouble getting top hands to run 'em. Tyler been heard from?"

"Guess not. Between you and me, Pete, I'm beginning to think Tyler's nose is clean. I'm working on a new angle now."

"What is it?"

"That happens to be my business—a military secret. You just take care of your own knitting. If you pick up anything worth printing, let's have it."

The second caller was Glenna Warren. "Mr. Collins, do you really think Fred was responsible for those horrible tragedies?"

"I haven't accused him."

"Not in so many words, perhaps. But your story sounded bad for Fred."

"It merely suggested certain details so obvious that they could hardly be missed. It can't be denied that circumstantial evidence points very strongly at Tyler. And he made some pretty wild threats."

"I know. That was very foolish. But Fred's no cold-blooded murderer."

"Why did he run away?"

"I don't know. But I'm not ready to admit there was any murder. Coincidence could explain the fires. Or some defect in the motors Fred designed."

"I'm afraid not, Miss Warren. Miller was warned that Death would flag him off the track. He didn't heed the warning, and he's dead. Davis wasn't warned, to my knowledge at least, but the same thing happened to him. These engines have had plenty of use and no fires. I can't see anything but foul play."

"Some other pilots then. Perhaps Monte Larcomb."

"Murder always involves opportunity plus motive. Larcomb had both for the first night, but no opportunity the second time since he was driving in a race a hundred miles from Ocean View. Fred has motive enough. We have to admit that. As to opportunity, we can't say."

"I know Fred's innocent. If I could only prove it!"

"The blackest mark against Fred is his fading out of the picture. Here's what may have happened. Someone else in some as yet undiscovered manner caused Miller's death. Fred had no alibi

—realized what a spot he was in because of his threats to Purcell and the driver. He lost his nerve and vanished, forgetting that it would be taken as proof of guilt. Panic often makes people do foolish things. He wouldn't dare communicate with you because it might tip the police off to where he is."

"I hope you're right. Anyway, thanks for the help. Good-by, Mr. Collins."

RUSTY felt sincerely sorry for her. She was a nice kid. Then the intercom phone sounded. "Rusty?" It was Read. "Come down to my office right away. Captain Sanford wants you."

The Homicide man sent Rusty a sour glance. "I don't like the way you wrote up that accident at Ocean City. You've been riding me these last few days. I don't have to take it."

"So sorry," Rusty rejoined smoothly. "We'd love to give you and your department a great big E for effort, Captain, if you'd only do something to deserve it!"

Sanford glared. A sound-proof room and a section of rubber hose would have been right down his alley. Lack of these essential props cramped his style.

"Skip it!" he growled. "You broke into Fred Tyler's apartment last night. You slugged one of my men!"

"Did I now?" Rusty inquired. "Gosh! Breaking and entering! Resisting an officer yet! So I'm under arrest?"

"Argh!" Sanford ground his teeth in helpless rage. Then strode abruptly from the room.

Read spoke soberly, "Sanford's pretty intimate with some very tough characters. Watch out, or you'll be on the receiving end of a one-way ride."

"He's too yellow," said Rusty, dismissing it.

That noon he was headed for lunch at his favorite grill, and started to cross the street, thoughts more on the mystery of the flaming midgets than traffic. As Rusty stepped from the curb a speeding car abruptly swerved his way. He jumped back not a second too soon, staring wrathfully after the vanishing vehicle. Its registration was so dirt-smearred as to be illegible, nor had Rusty even a glimpse of the driver.

"Blind fool! What's he trying to do

—kill me?" Then something clicked in Rusty's brain. That was it! Someone was trying to kill him! Sanford? Or the guy who did in Miller and Davis? Was he getting closer to a solution than even he himself suspected?

Towards the fag end of the afternoon he went around to see Al Purcell, whose mechanics were at work on the fire-damaged cars.

"Seen that?" Al handed him a late edition of the *Evening Blade*.

Rusty glanced at the headlines, muttered, "Ouch!" and hastily skimmed the story. Tyler had surrendered to the authorities that morning, with a reasonable excuse to explain his absence, and a perfect alibi for the time when Purcell's second pilot was victim of an alleged assassin.

Rusty mentally consigned the Police Commissioner, his son-in-law, and most of the department to the fires of Sheol. All this material, while readily finding its way to the *Blade*, had been kept from the *Tribune*.

The story went on to say that Tyler had been released after questioning by the police, who had never taken seriously the *Tribune's* loud shouts of murder.

The *Blade* also printed a statement by Commissioner Graham bitterly criticising the *Intercity Tribune* for seeking to make political capital out of two fortuitous race track casualties. Graham asserted, in part:

It is deplorable when the charge of murder is raised, and faithful members of the department are castigated, because they fail to apprehend a killer who exists only in the over-active mind of a newspaper writer. We can only hope that Colonel Read may profit by this experience, and in the future curb his weakness for the sensational side of journalism.

Rusty tossed the copy aside, and reached for a cigarette.

"How d'you like that, Al? Two fortuitous race track casualties. Fortuitous is a two-buck word. I didn't dream Graham's vocabulary included it. Or can it be he's got him a ghost writer?"

"The devil with Graham! I know, and you know, that my boys were murdered."

"Sure. But how? Tyler seems to have a clean bill. Larcomb is out, and so far I can't fit Swede Lindstrom in."

"Know what I think, Rusty? Some of this here now atomic radiation—"

"You feeling all right, Al?"

"No. I feel terrible. I'm going bats trying to figure out what made those cars of mine blaze up."

"You won't find an answer in the Bikini report on Operation Crossroads. How soon will you be ready for the track again?"

"I'll have Number One right here in Lakeside tomorrow night."

"What about a pilot?"

"I've signed Bud Manning, originally rated high as a big car operator. He switched to midgets, and was cleaning up on a mid-west circuit when racing went out for the duration. Getting Bud was a bit of luck for me."

"He doesn't figure your jobs are too hot to handle?"

"Well, I had to up the ante some. Off the record, he drags down fifty per cent of the prize money."

"Considering what the car might win," Rusty said, "Manning's prospective take is far from spinach. Nice—if he lives to spend any of it. The guy strikes me as very brave—or very foolish. Could be both."

WHEN Rusty returned to the paper he found a letter on his desk, the inscription printed in pencil, as was the enclosed missive—

Collins:

Keep your nose out of you know what, unless you want to follow the trail blazed by Miller and Davis. This noon you got the breaks. Next time your luck will be out.

Rusty buzzed the switchboard. "Colonel Read in his office?"

The Colonel was. Rusty paid his boss a call, tossing the note on Read's desk.

The editor's face was serious. "What's the reference to noon today?"

"I was nearly clipped by a hit-and-run."

Read's eyebrows went up a notch. "So? Better watch your step."

"I aim to do that little thing, Colonel." Rusty tapped a pocket. "My roscoe's out of the moth balls and in circulation."

"This last development would seem proof that our murder theory is right. No point in passing it on to the authorities, however."

"Right," said Rusty. "Sanford would yell fake."

"But we're getting on slowly. Any new leads?"

"One more or less blind hunch, which I'm following up tomorrow. What we want may be in the back files of an auto racing paper over in Jersey. Wish me luck, Colonel."

Rusty was very busy that evening and the first part of the following day. When he finally reached the motordrome, he had put in a long and busy morning. It was nearly race time when he showed his pass to a uniformed patrolman, Mike Hatfield, who was on duty near the entrance.

"Hi, Rusty!" he called waving.

Rusty joined him. "Mike," he said, "you're a regular guy, but destined to keep on pounding a pavement because you're too honest to play the game according to local rules. I think I'll give you a break which might mean a promotion. How'd you like to arrest the man who bumped off Silk Miller and Butch Davis?"

"I always thought those pilots were murdered. No kidding, Rusty, have you got the goods?"

"Brother, have I? What I've got will give the Commissioner and his son-in-law the blind staggers. Want in?"

"What are we waiting for?"

From behind the packed stands the amplifier sounded off:

"Ladies and gentlemen, pole position in the first qualifying race goes to a newcomer, Bud Manning, whose time trial equaled the track record. Manning drives Al Purcell's ill-fated Number One, the car in which Silk Miller was killed. Beside him in . . ."

"No time to lose," Rusty muttered. "Here's the synopsis, Mike. Listen carefully."

"Let 'em roll," they heard the starter call, and there came the crackle of exhaust as cars were pushed off. The eight midgets were circling the oval when Rusty and Hatfield reached the pit enclosure. Then the sudden burst of noise as they neared the starting line. The green flag swung from the starter's box above them.

Rusty sent a glance around the pits. Way down at the end, near the crash-

rail, was Hollister's truck in its customary spot. He nodded to Mike. Unnoticed by pit attendants and hangers-on, they moved swiftly towards the welding truck. By now the cars were half-way around the oval.

Roar of motors drowned the noise Rusty made as he climbed to the driver's seat of the welding truck. Manning's car, out in front, was heading up the home stretch at the end of lap one. Within seconds it would hit the hair-pin directly opposite Pete's truck. Rusty could dimly see a vague form flat on the flooring, squinting along what looked like a stubby sort of gun. This was it!

RUSTY jumped as something said *puft* almost in his ear. There was a dazzlingly brilliant flash of fire close to the crash-rail.

Hollister, crippled though he was, fought furiously. Mike Hatfield, scrambling in from the rear end past welding equipment, turned his flashlight on the battle, and rocked Pete to sleep with his gun butt. He and Rusty dragged the unconscious man from his truck.

Everywhere was wild confusion. The race had been stopped, and the harmless blaze was being drenched by an extinguisher. Excited men thronged about Rusty and the police officer.

"What goes on?" the pit steward demanded.

"This is the bird who killed Miller and Davis," Mike cried. "You can thank Rusty Collins that there wasn't another murder tonight. The killer was after Bud Manning this time."

"Pete Hollister? You're crazy!"

Now Rusty spoke up. "His real name is Chris Sutton. He was a big car pilot once. Three drivers teamed against him in a hundred mile event out in Ohio before the war—Miller, Davis, and Manning. They wrecked Sutton's car. It caught fire, and he practically burned to death, coming out a helpless cripple and so badly disfigured his own mother wouldn't know him. Shortly afterwards he was supposed to have died. But Sutton didn't die. All these years he's been waiting for a chance to give those other pilots what they handed him. Okay, Mike. Let's get out of here. I've a deadline to meet."

"You should have been a detective, Rusty," Colonel Read said. His office echoed to the dull rumble of the presses. "But there are a number of points not wholly clear. How did Hollister start the fires?"

"He shot incendiary slugs out of a fifty caliber air gun, a mighty powerful and clever weapon. He probably built it himself. Sutton was an expert tool-maker in a big New Haven gun plant all through the war."

"How could he get away with it? Why wasn't he seen?"

"During one of those races nobody ever pays attention to anything but the cars. And the noise is terrific. Pete's truck provided perfect cover, and he had an easy point-blank target as cars came into the curve. It was almost impossible to miss, and wherever one of those bullets struck—fireworks! The gun was kept in a hidden compartment under the truck flooring."

"When did you first suspect Hollister—Sutton, rather?"

"I can't say definitely. I think it was mainly subconscious, not working to the surface until other suspects were cleared. Of course he had abundant opportunity. When I dug up a motive it was plain sailing. The original scheme centered on Miller and Davis, with Tyler made to order to take the rap. Man-

ning's unexpected appearance offered Sutton a further chance he simply couldn't resist."

"Why wasn't Manning suspicious, after the two pilots involved with him in that plot were burned to death?"

"Suspicious of what? Remember Sutton was supposed to have died way back before Pearl Harbor. When I finally dug the significant facts out of the racing paper files, it seemed pretty obvious Manning's number would come up—but soon. I had to let him bait the trap. Otherwise it's doubtful if the murders could have been pinned on Sutton."

"It was he who tried to run you down? And warned you to lay off?"

Rusty nodded. "I think he suspected I was getting warm."

"Why give you the original tip?"

"Possibly a dim sort of psychologic reason back of that. Besides, he could see no danger, and the chance to make a few quick bucks."

"You did a swell job, Rusty. And the results will go far in helping to clean up the unsavory mess in local police circles. You'll find a substantial recognition—beginning this week."

"Thanks, Colonel." Rusty lighted a cigarette. "Little things like that always help. I'm glad it wasn't young Tyler. I never saw the kid, but he's got a nice girl."

THE 9th DOLL

(Concluded from page 57)

blind, shooting in the dark. But I got results from an unexpected quarter. Smedley apparently bought my theory, and with a sudden un-butlerish oath he hurled himself at Froelich. The press agent's shell of bluster dissolved in visible panic. He pivoted, catapulted toward one of the boudoir's French windows.

THE butler nailed him around the gams with a flying tackle and he pitched headlong through the glass, his unprotected face smashing the square panes. He screamed like a calliope as the splintered shards razored his complexion to tatters. Then I moved in, batted the butler aside, dragged Froelich back to the middle of the room. He was

leaking gravy from eleventeen punctures, all of them painful but none fatal.

"Hey, his jugular is sliced!" I lied like a gas meter. "He won't live five minutes!" Then I said, "Why not confess, Stu? Make a clean breast of it and clear your conscience before you mingle with your ancestors."

"All right," he moaned. "I killed Deborah. She was—threatening to tell—about a trip we'd made—across a State line. She was—blackmailing me."

Ole Brunvig stepped forward, yanked him to his feet.

"That's all we wanted to know. You're on your way to the cyanide chamber at San Quentin."

For once in his life, Brunvig was right.

BANK NIGHT

By DOROTHY DUNN

It was up to Grant Williams to prove himself innocent of killing Gloria James and planning a murder frame, but as he was an escaped convict he knew his chances were slim!



THE sirens were just a dismal wail in the distance now, the searchlight a menace too far away to worry about.

There were other sounds closer to the two men in the darkness of the night—a creek rushing over little stones, a restless wind stirring the leaves of the dense foliage, and the steady whirr of insects, pierced by owl hoots and the bark of a farmer's dog away off to the right of them.

They flopped down beside the creek and lay there on the soggy leaves and twigs. They dipped their hands into the water and gulped air into their aching lungs.

The one with the huge barrel chest and the short, thick neck got his breath back first.

"Well," he said. "We must be the only two that didn't get our stomachs full of Tommy-gun. They mowed 'em down all around us, the dirty shacks!"

The other man just grunted. He rolled over on his side and ran his long-fingered hand through the rumpled black hair that was just slightly gray at the temples. Finally, he spoke.

"We're this far," he said. "What now? These clothes won't get us anywhere."

"Don't worry about that," the fat man said. "The highway is all I need, Buddy. After that, I'm on familiar ground. A car, a bump-off, clothes—then distance. Plenty of distance between me and back there. Want to string along, palsy?"

The black-haired fugitive came up to a sitting position and tried to see the other man through the darkness.

"I don't go for the bump-off," he said.

"No? What was you in for, pal?"

"Murder," said the man quietly. "I was doing life for murder." His words had a bitter sound that came out in a hoarse whisper in the silent place.

His companion laughed.

"Murder! In for murder and you don't go for a simple little road bump-off. That's a hot one. You got a conscience, or something?"

There wasn't any answer for that. The dog barked again and the tall man got to his feet.

"Let's go," he said. "I don't know what the next move is, but we can't stay here. The highway must be close."

"You just string along, Buddy. I'm good at figuring out moves. Bull Carson's the name. You heard of me?"

THE tall man smiled, his lips twisting ironically.

"Yes, Carson. I heard about you long before I joined the guest list at Joliet. You had quite a career!"

"You know it," said Carson, as they waded across the creek. "Nothin' but money in my pockets and the best bunch of hoods in Chi. We picked up thousands without being touched, mind you. And then—just for a gag—I pull the phony hoop trick in the men's room at the Palmer House—"

"Phony hoops?"

"Yeah. Glass rings. You tell the mug who's brushing the nap off your coat in the hotel rest room that you've run up a big check in the Victorian Room. You say you forgot your wallet and are very much embarrassed because the dame is a new one. You say you'd sell your ring for a couple sawbucks. You look like nothin' but money, so the mug grabs the phony hoop and passes over the dough. I was pulling that old trick just for a gag and they nab me. How about that?"



R. J. J.

Grant slugged him again, and this time, because he had a better leverage on the weapon, the man dropped to the floor

"Tough," said the tall man. "But not too rough. You weren't in for murder. They didn't throw the book at you."

"But they did you, huh? Look, palsy, murder has got to be done efficient. When it came to that, I never got careless. In fact, I ain't often careless. Just this time when I was pulling a joker. Me with a coupla bank jobs under my belt, had to get pinched when I was amusing myself!"

"That's the way it goes," said the man with the precise, bitter voice. "Anything for a laugh. It was that way with me, too. Somebody in Chicago is laughing his head off right now, thinking about my life sentence for killing Gloria James."

The fat man stopped in his tracks.

"Gloria James! You're not—"

"Grant Williams? Sure I am—*palsy*."

"Holy Toledo! The dame carver, the chick chiller that used the ice box! Ugh!" Bull Carson gurgled in his fat throat.

"What's the matter? Have you run up against something too tough? Are you scared? Want to run along by yourself?"

"No, not me, pal. You don't know Bull Carson. I'm surprised, is all. Here I am wondering if I can get to my cache for some money and here you are—Grant Williams, the banker, with—"

"Nothin' but money," finished Grant sarcastically. "And all in a bank, too. A bank with a very good burglar alarm. And I can't show my face there. So go back to thinking about your own cache."

"There ain't a bank made that I can't crack," mused Bull Carson. "What's yours?"

"The Erie Trust."

"A breeze! Why, the side door and the back alley of that place is—"

"Acquainted, I see!" Grant smiled wryly. Shortly before Gloria James had been murdered, the bank had been taken for twenty-thousand by some gang of hoods. If Bull Carson was in on that, perhaps he was smarter than Grant had believed from his own cocky little account of himself. And if he were really a bright boy at his trade, there might be hope, after all.

"You could be a help," Carson said softly. "You know the combination of

the vault. And plenty other details. Maybe you'll decide to write a check and cash it yourself, palsy. Think it over."

Williams smiled again as they came out into the clearing that edged the highway to Chicago. That wouldn't be a bad joke, he thought. He could leave his personal check on Hiram Wilk's desk to cover the amount they would take.

He could just see Hiram's face looking more dried-up and more gray than ever. He could see the money-loving eyes looking popped and scared. A calling card—that's what the check would be! A threat, a warning. The last joker in the cards that Hiram Wilk had stacked against him.

CARSON ducked for the ditch and lay flat. Grant Williams followed him, hoping the little hoodlum really knew how to handle the road situation. Every breath of the fresh night air that Grant drew into his lungs made it more important than ever for him to get back to Chicago. Somebody else was supposed to be rotting his life away in Joliet for the murder of Gloria James.

Grant intended to find out who had killed her and framed him so completely. This air tonight was fresh air, but it wasn't free. Grant Williams hadn't breathed in freedom for two years. He mustn't get caught, now that he was this far away from the prison! With any luck at all, he felt sure he could prove that he hadn't done that awful thing to Gloria James.

Bull Carson let a good many cars go by before he ran out into the road and threw himself flat before the gleaming headlights.

Grant caught his breath at the quickness of the action, the daring timing. The big car squealed and skidded to a stop. Carson didn't get up. He wanted to lure the driver out of the car, so the struggle for possession would be in the open.

A girl got out. So that's what Carson had been waiting for! His small eyes had pierced the distance, looking for an advantage. Grant had felt the man's power of selection as the cars had passed by. It was too dark for actual sight, but Bull Carson must have been slick enough to watch for other signs

of a lone woman driver. The speed perhaps, the way she took the curve of the road down there.

And when the right one came along, he didn't waste a second in thinking what would happen to him if the driver didn't stop. He's dumb, thought Grant. But smart in his own way, and daring.

When Carson got to his feet, the girl gave a little cry and tried to get back to the car, a gray Cadillac.

She was young, her small trim body was sheathed in a green suit that looked silky in the glare of the car lights.

Carson grabbed her purse and pulled her toward the ditch. Grant caught the big man's clenched fist and pulled the girl away.

"Let me take care of this bundle," he demanded. "It's been a long time since Gloria James, remember?"

"No time to get fancy," Carson snapped.

"This won't take long," said Grant. "You get in the car and check what money she's got in that bag. I'll be right back. This part of the job is mine."

"You said no bump-offs," Bull demurred. "And this is a necessary bump-off."

"Dames are different," said Grant. "I got my reputation for that! I enjoy it, they said."

Grant pushed the girl ahead of him and when she broke and ran toward the woods, he followed and caught her. They tripped and fell and the girl's frantic, throaty sobs made Grant sicker than he'd ever been in his life.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I had to get you away from that moron. We have to borrow your car and your money, but I don't want you to be hurt. Will you please scream so he'll think I'm killing you?"

The girl screamed. Grant didn't know whether she was being obedient or following her natural inclination.

"Now hide here and listen for a farmer's dog that barks. Later, follow the sound to the house. It must be close. You'll be all right, but don't move until we leave. I've got to hurry, but please accept my apology for this. Sometimes life gets very complicated. That's all I can tell you. Do you understand?"

She found her voice, a whisper.

"You're letting me get away?"

"Of course."

Grant had the scent of her hair in his nostrils and he was holding her gently by the arm. During his years in prison, he had decided that he'd never look at a woman again, but this moment was affecting him strangely. The girl was like a frightened bird, trembling and small. And she was so afraid of him! "Good-by," whispered Grant softly. "You'll get your car back, and your money. I promise."

He took his hand away from her arm and then she reached out and touched his rough gray prison shirt of her own accord.

"Thank you," she said.

GRANT choked down the tightness in his throat as he crashed back through the woods to the car. She had said "Thank you." And she had touched him. That meant that there in the darkness of the woods she had sensed that he wasn't a beast and a killer.

The light touch of her hand had made him feel better than the kisses of any other woman ever had. Her touch made a great difference. Self respect can survive only so long without some small show of confidence from somebody.

Bull Carson had the motor running and as Grant climbed in the fat man shot the car forward.

"You take care of her, Williams? She only screamed once."

"That was just before her neck snapped, palsy," said Grant with a wry grin. "A little trick of mine with dames. She'll keep quiet a good long time."

"Well, her folks won't. I see by her driver's license that she's Marian Norton. Her old man owns half of southern Illinois."

"I've heard of him," said Grant. He didn't add that the Erie Trust had dealt with Norton several times. Grant himself had met the girl's father twice on business.

"She was well-heeled at the moment anyway," said Bull. "No nickel and dime stuff in that purse. Nothin' but money! At least three "C's" in small bills, which ought to tide us over. We'll have a meal, too. Jeepers, what I couldn't do to a meal right now!"

They drove until they came to a road house. *The Blue Goose*. Evidently, the place was not an adjunct to city merry-making, Grant thought. It looked like one of those spots that spring up in the middle of nowhere to attract the farmers for miles around.

Bull stopped the car about a half mile beyond the place.

"Going back there to eat?" asked Grant.

"In these clothes? Don't be stupid. Just wait!"

It wasn't long before two intoxicated bumpkins came reeling down the highway. They were singing "Shine on Harvest Moon" in pretty good harmony.

"I like to sing," said Bull. "Too bad we can't make it a quartet," he added, stepping out of the car with a jack handle balanced in his big hand.

Grant got out to keep him from killing the drunks.

Bull shoved him back.

"You stay outa this, pal," he said. "We had enough murder for one night. The girl had to be killed so she wouldn't squawk too soon about the car. But these mugs won't never know what hit them. We don't have to take chances with murder this time, so you just sit back and relax."

Grant smiled to himself. Bull Carson would have a fine opinion of his companion if he knew that Marian Norton was still alive. And he'd lose respect altogether if he knew that Grant hadn't killed Gloria James either.

So long as they were both outside the law, they could be pulling on the same oar. Grant knew that the heavy hoodlum felt safer with a murderer than he would with a man innocent of any crime.

Bull gave the singing boys two quick taps on the right nerve ends. Then Grant helped him drag the victims off the road. They stripped the pair of their outer clothing and left them asleep in the ditch in their underwear.

Back in the car, Bull complained.

"These duds are too small for me. But you look all right. Like a stump-jumper, maybe, but they fit. You'll have to buy me a shirt and a pair of pants in the next town. We got to ditch these monkey suits quick."

Two hours later, they had disposed

of the prison clothing in an old culvert, Bull had a pair of stiff new work pants and a blue shirt. On the outskirts of Chicago, they stopped for food.

"Now about that bank job," said Bull, drinking his third cup of coffee. "You still want to knock off your own bank?"

"I certainly do," said Grant. "I want to do it tonight."

"Aw, you gotta plan those things!" said Carson.

"I know the bank and I have a plan. After that, I have a few important calls to make."

"You don't want to go around calling on people, chum. Don't forget there's quite a price on your head."

"There's a price on everything, Carson. Including your services tonight. You do what I tell you from now on. Get the idea?"

CARSON grinned. "I get it, palsy. You got nothin' but money and you're hiring an expert. I'm not supposed to walk off with the whole bank, though. All right. Shall we say about ten thousand in money that can't be traced?"

"If you like," said Grant. "But the price includes one Cadillac sedan and one ladies' pocketbook. You'll turn those over to me in a few hours when we part company."

"With pleasure. They'll be hotter than brimstone by that time. Now (if you want the car to change its looks, I've got a friend on the south side who'd help out."

"Never mind, Carson. Let's get started."

"The Erie Trust Company!" Bull chuckled, as they neared the darkened building. "I never thought I'd be walking into that mint with the owner of the joint alongside! You sure the watchman will open the door?"

"I didn't say that," said Grant. "I said he won't shoot me because I was his friend. He'll talk to me, but it's just possible that you may have to use your head. I think I can get the door opened by Fritz, but I'm not sure. We used to have a company signal for after-hours."

"I'd like to know a lot of company signals," said Bull.

They parked the car in the alley and

Bull stayed back in the shadows while Grant walked toward the side entrance. He tapped out the old signal and heard the shuffling steps of Fritz, the grate of the heavy lock.

"Ach, well, Mr. Williams!" Old Fritz didn't even say hello. He went for his gun. . . .

Bull Carson came out of the shadows, taking over with the swift daring that seemed to be a reflex with him. He got the gun away from old Fritz and slammed it down on the watchman's head before Grant realized his intention.

"I didn't tell you to do that!" thundered Grant.

"You didn't have to. I know a mean draw when I see one. That old man wasn't pulling his gun from friendship. He was scared of you. Funny thing about people. They hear you killed a couple of times and they feel funny around you afterward. You better forget all the people who used to know you. Your best friend would turn you over to the cops in nothing flat!"

Bull was tying Fritz up while he talked in an urgent whisper.

"Let's get the cold cash and get outa here, pal," he went on. "After snapping that girl's neck out there in the woods, they'd sit you down in the chair at Joliet. Old man Norton would see to it personally."

Grant's own brain was whirling with thoughts. His time was so short to do what he had to do! They couldn't electrocute him for killing the Norton girl. But she was a greater threat than Bull Carson knew. She wasn't lying mute in the woods. She would have been able to report the theft of the Cady a few hours after the theft. Bull was worried about the time element. He didn't know just how close they were running it.

They went back to a frosted glass door. Grant's name had been removed and he noticed that Hiram Wilk was occupying the president's suite of offices. The door was locked.

"Can you open this office, Carson?"

"A cinch!"

Carson pulled out a ring of keys that he had taken from old Fritz. Grant realized then that experience shows itself in any trade. He hadn't thought about that ring of keys at all.

They went inside and Grant slid back a panel that concealed his personal wall safe. Wilk wouldn't have dared touch the contents of this until the legal disposition of his bank holdings had been made.

"Your work is finished now, Carson. You could get fifty thousand from the main vault, but it wouldn't be any good for spending money. I'll give you a smaller amount from my private stock if you prefer."

Grant counted out ten thousand and Bull smiled.

"That'll do nicely," he said. "I got plenty of that common vault stuff cooling off in my little ice box for the future. I need getaway cash."

GRANT shuddered at the mention of an ice box and his eyes flickered involuntarily toward the corner of the room. Bull Carson followed his gaze.

"Holy Toledo! Was that the one that kept the James cupcake cooled off for a week?"

"That's the one," said Grant shortly.

He remembered the ghastly moment when they had found the body in the built-in refrigerator that went with the luxurious bar in the corner of his offices. He remembered the days that had been spent searching for his missing secretary. He remembered the frantic calls from Gloria's sister, Moira James.

"She wouldn't go off without telling me, Mr. Williams," Moira had said. "Not of her own accord. Something's happened to Gloria. I know it has!"

After the police determined that Gloria was last seen at the bank, they narrowed their search and found the dismembered body in Grant's ice box. Nobody had opened it for several days, it seemed, for Grant had taken a run up to St. Paul that week.

When he came home, the police had him all tied up into a bundle of murder.

They swore that Gloria had written the note, naming him as her killer. The note alone practically convicted him. It convinced the police and the jury that he was a corny Casanova, an ogre-boss who led a sadistic life and had carved up goodness knows how many other innocent young girls.

Yet Grant was sure that Gloria

couldn't have written a note like that. In spite of the handwriting experts, in spite of the print of her left thumb, pressed there in ink on the paper, Grant couldn't believe that Gloria had any reason for writing it. The note was just a part of the complete web of circumstantial evidence that someone had woven around him with the slow patience of a spider.

Some of the hatred for the person who was responsible for his time in Joliet must have showed on Grant's face.

"Don't stay in this office, boss, if seeing that ice box makes you look like that," said Bull Carson. "I'll take my dough now and scram if you don't mind."

"Your'e a little afraid of me, too, aren't you?"

"Afraid? Not exactly, Williams. I've had to kill a few people myself when they got in the way. But a guy that gets a kick out of doing in a dame the way you do gives me the whim-whams. It just—well—it just don't seem decent the way you go at it."

Grant felt an inward chill when Bull Carson mentioned his own murders so casually as something in the line of business and decently done. Considering the man's callous nature, he turned back to the wall safe.

"Here's something I left behind when they carted me off to Joliet, Carson." He held up a four-carat diamond ring that he had always worn on his little finger.

"You mean that rock's real?"

"Take a look," Grant said. "It's yours if you want it. I have a hunch I may get picked up again before I'm out of this, but you helped me get this far and I'm grateful." This last was a lie.

"That's okay, Williams. About the help, I mean. I could see you were new at making a getaway. And thanks. I always wanted a flasher like that and you can be sure I'll keep it to remember you by."

"Sentimental value, they call it," said Grant with a bitter smile. "Now, the car keys, please."

Carson tossed them on the desk.

"The pocketbook is under the front seat."

The Chicago hoodlum slipped the ring

on with pride and tucked the bills into his pocket. He put Fritz's gun into his other pocket, keeping his hand curled around it.

"I'll see you out," said Grant.

They walked past Fritz who was conscious by now and struggling against the gag in his mouth.

THEN Bull Carson faded off into the shadows of the alley, bound for Heaven knows where. Grant hoped that the police would be able to pick up his trail as soon as he tipped them off. The man had no place in a decent world. He'd been sent up last time for peddling a phony hoop. This time, the ring that caught him would be real and it would be too bad with his pockets full of nothin' but money. But it was better for Bull Carson to be in jail than for some law-abiding citizen to be murdered for need of a car.

Grant took old Fritz into the private office, but didn't remove the gag. He wanted him there when the others showed up, but he didn't want to talk to him now. The way Fritz had gone for his gun, he must have as little faith in him as the rest of the world.

It took only thirty minutes for Grant to find what he was looking for in the bank's accounts. He'd spent months of his time in prison, figuring out just how Hiram Wilk might have been covering up the shortages. And here was the proof at last.

Gloria James must have found out, and must have threatened to tell. And Hiram had planned a cunning murder and had framed the only man above him in the bank. Grant was sure of that now.

He telephoned the police and Fritz struggled against the gag, trying to say something. But Grant ignored him and went right on talking.

"Round up Hiram Wilk and Gloria James' sister," he said at last. "Bring them to the bank. . . . No, of course I'm not trying to order the police around. I'm just asking for a chance to prove something. . . . I'll trade you a description of the clothes Bull Carson is wearing for the favor. . . . Don't worry about that. I'm not foolish enough to think I could get away from you."

Finally, Grant convinced the sergeant

that he meant business. He described Bull's clothes and added a description of the diamond ring he might be wearing. They, in turn, promised to bring Hiram Wilk and Moira James.

Only then did Grant release the gag that Fritz was struggling against.

"Mr. Williams, why didn't you let me talk sooner? I've got so much to tell you and you just permit me to sit here."

"You tried to shoot me, Fritz. As soon as you recognized me, you reached for your gun."

"I did no such thing!" said the old man hotly, "I may be getting old, Mr. Williams, but I'm not blind. I saw that thug coming up behind you and I wanted to stop him."

A sudden warmth went through Grant. It was the same kind of feeling he'd had back there in the woods when Marian Norton had touched his sleeve.

"You're not afraid of me, Fritz?"

"Of course I'm not. But I knew that wrong-o that came with you tonight. I got a glimpse of him before, the night the bank was robbed. Mr. Williams, he's the fellow that pulled off that job!"

Grant smiled.

"I know. He's Bull Carson. We escaped together, and he practically told me he did it."

"And you let him get away!" moaned Fritz.

"Sure. But he'll be back. He doesn't know it, but he's much too dumb to shake off the police for long."

"Dumb, is he!" shouted Fritz. "He can't be so dumb when he pulls off a bank robbery with inside help. Somebody knocked me out that night and let him in. I know it!"

The statement hit Grant full force and he gripped Fritz by the shoulders.

"Are you sure of that?" he yelled.

"Did you see who was helping him?"

"I was struck from behind, Mr. Williams, and it's only since you've been away that I know I wasn't knocked out by the hoodlums. I've checked every possible way there is to get in. Near as I can figure, it had to be an inside job."

AT THAT, Grant thumped his hand down on the desk so hard that the name plate of Hiram Wilk rattled.

"What a break, Fritz! If we can prove

it. I know that Mr. Wilk has been stealing money from the bank. He did a clever job of fixing the books, but perhaps he couldn't get enough of the loss accounted for that way. Maybe he was still short ten thousand. So he hires a man to rob the vault. Maybe he guarantees the man ten thousand for the job, lets him take that much, and reports a loss of twenty thousand. I don't know."

Fritz's eyes were shining now.

"I'm glad you're back, Mr. Williams. Mr. Wilk isn't human to work for. None of us like him."

"If I can just stay back, Fritz," said Grant.

They heard pounding on the door then and Fritz listened.

"That's the night signal, Mr. Williams. The police must have Mr. Wilk with them." The old watchman started off to open the door.

The shot came a few minutes later and when Grant looked up he was facing the muzzle of a gun that still smelled of cordite.

It wasn't the law. It was Bull Carson!

"The old man put up a fight and I had to plug him a little," said Bull. "You've got to hide me, Williams. The cops picked up my description from somewhere. I heard it being broadcast in a gin-mill where I stopped for a glass of beer."

Grant didn't hesitate long enough for Bull to get the idea. He dived right into the big frame, crashing against him before the gun went off. Carson hadn't been expecting his "friend" to turn against him and the one shot he fired was late and badly aimed.

But once he tumbled, he fought with animal ferocity. They rolled on the thick carpet, Grant straining every muscle just keep his hold on the gun wrist. They struck the desk and Carson dropped the gun so he could wrap both his bear-like arms around Grant.

The air was being crushed out of Grant against the huge barrel chest and he pretended to go limp, one hand stretching along the carpet toward the gun. He could almost hear his ribs crack as the big man rolled to the side, but he had the gun now and with one furious effort he smashed it against Bull's skull.

It bounced off the hardness of bone and Grant could feel the impact in his own arm, but Bull just released his bear hold and started pushing himself to his feet, his eyes red with fury, his hands reaching for Grant's throat.

Grant got up, too, and slugged him again, getting a better leverage into the blow this time, aiming at the right nerve. He had to hammer the gun down behind Bull's ear before the glaze of unconsciousness dropped like a veil over the small eyes.

He dragged him to the closet, stuffed him inside, and locked the door. Then Grant raced down the corridor to the door. Just as he was bending over the bleeding watchman, the police pounded on the door. They had a man and girl with them.

"You'll be all right, Fritz," Grant said to the watchman, "It's just in the thigh, I think."

In a few minutes, the old man was taken off in the squad car to the hospital and the rest of them went back to the private office.

"This won't take long, officer," said Grant. "And I'm grateful to you for bringing Mr. Wilk and Miss James here."

Hiram was sputtering, his pinched face working strangely. Grant asked them to be seated, noticing that the officer had pocketed the gun that had hammered Bull's skull. Williams had left it on the floor.

"Really, Williams," said Hiram. "I don't mind coming here under police protection, but I should think you'd have better taste than to ask to see the sister of the girl you killed."

Grant ignored him and turned to Moira.

"I especially wanted you to be here," he said gently. "I can explain a lot, but I believe you may be able to supply one fact I need to clear myself."

THE officer—a Lieutenant Flaun—shrugged.

"Get to the point, Williams," he said. "All right. It's very simple. I accuse Hiram Wilk of appropriating bank funds, of falsifying the books, of killing Gloria James and throwing the blame on me."

Hiram Wilk gave a cracked laugh. "The man's insane, officer. He must be, to expect anyone to listen to such a tale. The court convicted him!"

"I also believe that Mr. Wilk instigated a robbery to help cover his shortages," said Grant. "Perhaps Bull Carson can help us out on that."

"Preposterous!" said Hiram, but his voice had a faint quiver in it now.

Grant unlocked the closet and pulled the big man out.

Lieutenant Flaun took one quick look, then snapped the bracelets on him. Flaun slapped him none too gently back to consciousness, and Bull sat up swearing when he looked at his wrists.

"You shouldn't have shot Fritz," said Grant, lying to scare Bull into talking. "You weren't careful about that murder, you know. They burn you for murder, Carson. And they don't like bank robbery, either."

The hoodlum looked around the room with an angry stare. His eyes stopped when they came to Hiram Wilk and his lips curled into a sneer.

"Hello, palsy," he said.

Hiram Wilk began to tremble. The shakes got him like wind through dry leaves. Lieutenant Flaun noticed it.

He looked at Bull Carson. "Do you know Mr. Wilk?" he asked.

"No, he doesn't!" shouted Hiram.

"Oh, yes, I do," said Bull nastily. "If you think I'm going back to Joliet alone, you're dopey. You hired me to pull that bank heist."

"He's lying," said Hiram weakly. "It's a frame-up, can't you see? Williams is his friend. He's saying what Williams—"

"You're dopey again," interrupted Bull. "I know enough about Williams to take him back with me, too. For murder. He choked Marian Norton, copper. You'll find her body in the woods."

Grant smiled. "You're wrong about that Bull. I just told you that to keep you from killing her. She's alive, Lieutenant," he said, turning to Flaun.

"I know that," said the officer. "She reported the theft of her car and described both of you pretty well. She told a strange story."

Bull Carson's face was black and ugly. Hiram Wilk moved in his chair.

"You can see that this—this gangster is a liar, Lieutenant. I've never seen him before."

"Don't pull that," sneered Carson. "I haven't lost my memory, even if you have. Think back to how you got in touch with me. All the copper has to do is hand a sawbuck to Albert Brill and he'll tell them you were asking about a good man."

Hiram jumped up then and made a dive for the door like a little weasel. Grant stopped him and pinned his arms back, squeezing.

"Tell them," he commanded. "Say it!"

Suddenly, the pressure of Grant's arms wasn't needed. The man wilted into a chair and went to pieces.

"All right," he said. "I did take money from the bank. I intended to put it back."

"And Gloria found out about it the day I went to St. Paul?" asked Grant.

"No. It was the next day—" Hiram Wilk turned white when he realized the slip he had made.

MOIRA JAMES put her hand to her mouth, stifling an outcry.

Grant turned swiftly.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I—I just remembered what Gloria said about Mr. Wilk, after the night she had worked very late at the bank and had come home awfully tired and restless. The next morning, she said she'd had the most horrible nightmare."

Moira stopped, her voice shaking.

"Please go on," urged Grant. "You don't know how important this is to me! Did she tell you what she dreamed?"

"That Mr. Wilk was standing over her with a quill pen six feet long—beating her with it. Then she laughed about the dream and went off to work. . . . She never came home. . . ."

Grant wheeled toward Hiram Wilk.

"Beating her with a pen! I knew it must be something like that. The note was the only thing I couldn't figure out. And Gloria couldn't either! Her subconscious struggled with it, but didn't quite get it clear. But we have enough to start with now, thanks to Moira. The night that Gloria worked so late, she must have been hypnotized. Not by you—you wouldn't have what it takes—but

no doubt Lieutenant Flaun can round up the charlatan who did the job for you. That was your mistake, Wilk. Getting people to help you. We'll find them to testify against you."

Great pools of fear lay in Hiram's eyes now and another fit of trembling struck him. He looked like a pitiful, weak old man.

"I'm tired," he whimpered.

"You killed her!" thundered Grant, longing to choke the truth out of the scrawny neck.

"Yes," said Hiram, his voice hysterical. "I had to do it. She was going to expose me. I had to do it, I tell you!"

"And the note was written under hypnosis?" persisted Grant. That was the important thing. That note was what had convicted him.

"No! No! It was a drug, and she didn't remember afterward."

He was moaning when they took him out along with Bull Carson.

Grant took Moira James home in the stolen Cadillac. He noticed the diamond on her hand when he said good night.

"Are you engaged?" he asked.

"Yes, Mr. Williams."

"I'm glad," he said softly. "You deserve a lot of happiness, Moira. Good luck!"

He drove out of town then, through the dawn and into the morning of southern Illinois. At Springfield, he stopped for coffee and found that he had only a dollar in the pocket of the trousers that didn't belong to him. He spent a quarter of it in the ten-cent store, then drove on to the Norton house.

He knew he looked like a stump-jumper—dirty, tired, and unshaven. But he was singing with a strange new joy that was freedom.

Marian Norton was in the garden cutting roses. Her smile was dazzling. Grant bowed.

"I just talked to your father inside, Miss Norton. Your car's back home and your purse is here with a check inside for the cash borrowed."

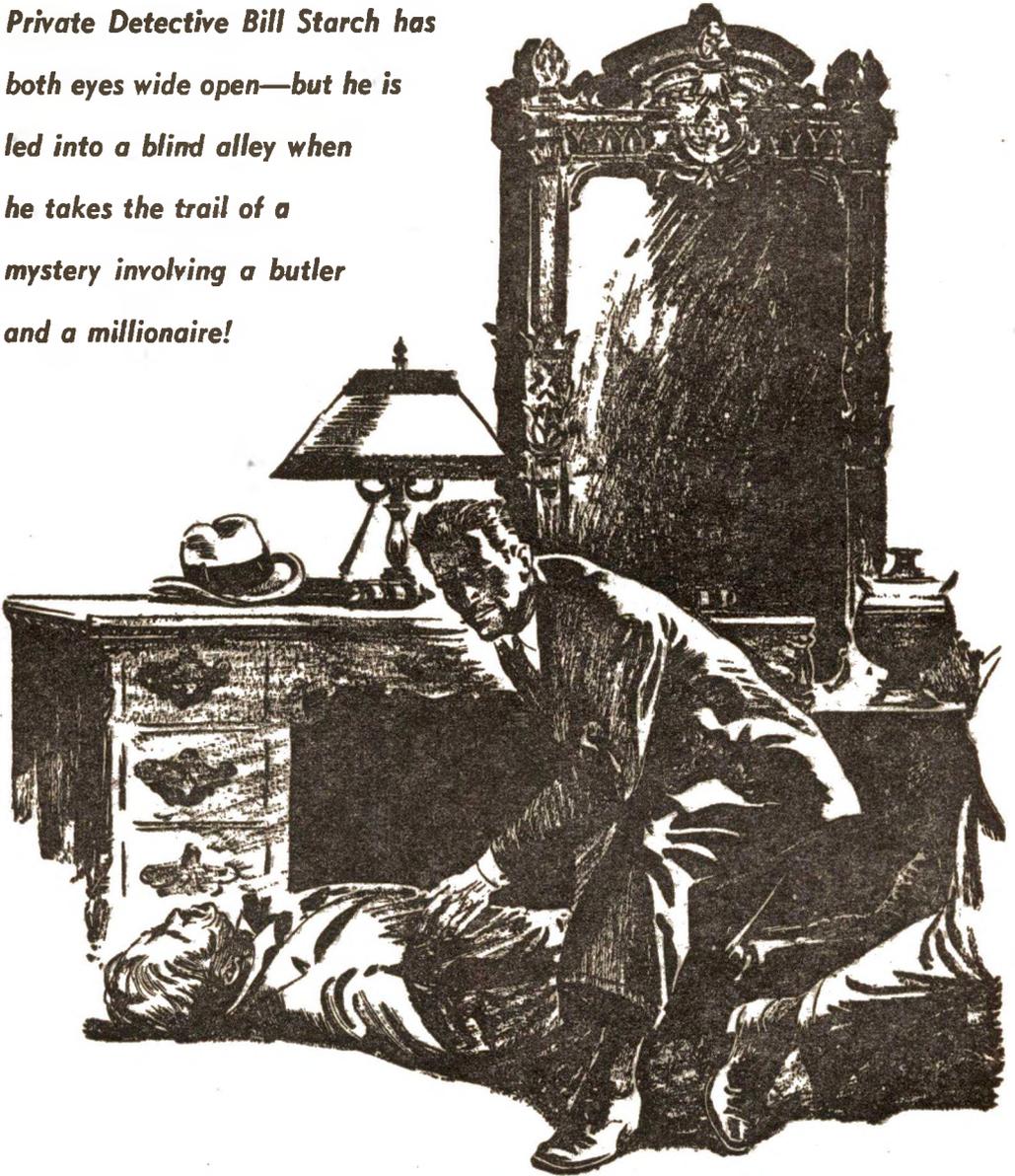
"I knew you'd bring it back yourself," she said.

"I knew that, too," said Grant, realizing she was more beautiful in the sunlight than she'd been in the glare of

(Concluded on page 98)

HOMICIDE'S

Private Detective Bill Starch has both eyes wide open—but he is led into a blind alley when he takes the trail of a mystery involving a butler and a millionaire!



a novelet by **CARL G. HODGES**

THEIR HEADACHE

CHAPTER I

NO CLIENTS—NO BUCKS

IT HAD been raining off and on since noon, and I was down in the dumps anyway. What Marge had told me when I hit Investigations, Inc. at two o'clock only riled me more.

"Sugar," I grunted at her, "what did old man Dilweg say?"

I put down the collar of my trench

I tried to buy a dog tag and make it legal for her to fix my eggs and burn my toast every morning but she wouldn't say "Yes." She still calls me "Mister" Starch. But it was worth twenty bucks a week just to have her around to look at. She's got about a million bucks worth of nice things hidden under about twenty-two ounces of clothes. And that little pug nose of hers is strictly out of this world.



coat and tried to shape my sloppy felt into looking like something besides a tired snap-brim. I lit a smoke and parked my six-foot frame on her desk edge.

When I the States with my atabrine mug and a duffel full of dough,

Right now I wasn't thinking too much about wedding marches and her particular style of architecture.

"Mr. Starch," she told me, "Mr. Dilweg seemed rather perturbed. He said that your services as a private detective weren't worth two hundred dollars a week and he didn't intend to pay the bill you sent."

"He's crazy," I said. "He agreed to pay twenty-five bucks a day and ex-

penses. Dilweg had me chasing all over the state trying to locate a guy by the name of Charles Bryce, Junior. I find Bryce doing a landscape job at Dilweg's own house under the name of Joe Briggs. What kind of a chump does Dilweg think I am? I'll get my two hundred bucks off him or I'll twist his head right off the end of his backbone."

Marge looked at me like she was worrying how long her twenty bucks a week would last.

"Mr. Dilweg was a lawyer before he got to be an oil man and a millionaire," she reminded. "Maybe you'd better go slow."

"Millionaires don't scare me," I said. "I'm full of Starch. I'll go visit the old goat and I'll swipe two C's out of his wallet before the moths can bite me."

I slammed the door behind me as I boiled out of the office.

I crossed the street in the slackening rain and stood under the awning of the First National until the two-fifteen Noble Street bus showed up. I stepped off the curb and went ankle deep in water in the gutter before I hit the bus step. I was peeved to start with, and wet socks squishing around in soggy shoes didn't help my well-known Irish any.

If Elsberry Dilweg had been there then I'd have punched him silly. Just because he owned some oil wells and a couple million bucks he couldn't make a sap out of me. Not for two hundred bucks, he couldn't.

BY THE time the bus reached the outskirts of Springdale and the intersection of the outer drive with 66, the rain had stopped and the sun was trying to break through the clouds. The gutters were running full and the wide expanse of sloping lawn that led up the hill to Dilweg's twenty-room mansion looked fresh and green.

The old goat had his castle in a square block of ground, with the back of it facing north into raw, uncultivated timberland, separated from it by a high brick wall. I walked along the sidewalk on Noble, taking a gander over the low brick wall that hemmed the front of the estate.

I was heading for the iron gate that

straddled a gravel drive that led up the hill to the huge stone house when a shiny black car, with its chromium gleaming, and its spotless glass unmarked by the recent rain, pulled up at the curb ahead of me. A guy in a gray suit and a Homberg hat got out with a leather briefcase.

He was a good-looking guy with a crisp gray mustache over a good-natured mouth. He was about fifty years old and he could have posed for an ad as a successful banker. He was just about my height and weight, but he had good clothes and knew how to wear them.

He had an oval cigarette out and was flicking a pocket lighter. He was getting sparks but no flame. I handed him a paper pack of matches as I came up.

"You must have got that thing from your old maid sister for Christmas," I said. "They never work."

He smiled, and it was nice. "The sister or the lighter?" He lit his smoke and blew it out his aristocratic nostrils. "Thanks," he said. "Going my way?"

We turned in at the iron gate and walked up the gravel road, wet and white in the brightening sun.

"Yeah," I said, "I got a target for today. I'm going to lay down the law for old man Dilweg. He owes me two hundred bucks."

He laughed and his white teeth were nice, too. "I know just what you mean." He put out his hand, friendly. "Roberts is my name—Carson W. Roberts. Mr. Dilweg doesn't owe me anything. In fact, he has been most generous to one of my pet projects."

I had the guy labeled then. "I've heard of you. You're director of some welfare project down in East St. Louis. Handicap Haven, Incorporated, or something like that. My name is Starch—Bill Starch. Private detective."

His eyes turned on me with interest, like he'd never seen a detective before in his life.

"Why on earth would Mr. Dilweg hire a detective?"

He was fishing, but I didn't run with the bait. When I take on a client I keep my trap shut about that client's business. I had a feeling that my profession was a shock to Roberts. I guess I just

didn't fit in with his idea of a private dick.

We didn't say any more, and in a few moments we were standing in front of the big white door on Dilweg's sprawling veranda. Roberts lifted the brass knocker—made like an oil well derrick—and let it drop. I could hear the sound echo in the corridor.

We turned to look down over the hill to the west, where a little knot of men was gathered under a weeping willow tree with a lot of props around it.

"Mr. Dilweg likes weeping willows," Roberts volunteered. "He hired a landscape expert named Briggs to dig up that monster in his home town of East St. Louis and haul it forty miles to re-plant it here. He had to get a special permit from the State Highway Department so they could haul it here over Sixty-six. That shows he loves trees."

I grunted. "That shows," I said, "it's nice to have a couple million bucks." I was getting impatient. "Slug that knocker again, pal, or we'll grow beards before Richard opens the door."

He took hold of the knocker and the pressure swung the door open a little—the latch hadn't caught. Roberts pushed it open and went inside.

"Come on," he said. "It's all right."

I followed him inside and down a hall, about knee-deep in Oriental rugs.

Roberts called, "Elkins!" and then "Mrs. Franner!"

His yell wasn't loud, but his voice was the carrying kind.

Nobody answered the call. The house was quiet.

Roberts looked at me. "Funny both Elkins and Mrs. Franner are not downstairs." He added, in explanation, "Elkins is a kind of butler-handyman. Mrs. Franner is a sort of housekeeper."

He walked through an arched doorway into a paneled room that was undoubtedly a study. Then he stopped. He turned back suddenly. His eyes stared wildly. His mouth gaped open. He made a lot of funny noises deep down in his throat.

I saw IT, too.

I bumped past Roberts in a hurry, and moved over the big Chinese rug, fast. I knelt in front of the desk. But there wasn't any need for haste.

ELSBERRY DILWEG was as dead as he would ever be. His featherweight five-foot frame, in rough gray tweeds, was lying face-up on the floor. His eyes were as prominent as white buttons on black shoes. His gray hair, what there was of it, made dead ear muffs on each side of his bald head.

Both his hands were gripped in agony around the handles of a pair of long, slender paper shears buried in his heart. There wasn't much blood; only a quiet seepage marked his vest.

I got up. "I saw my share of dead Nips on Guadal," I said. "They hadn't been dead long. Dilweg ain't, either. We better take a gander around the joint. You take the upstairs. I'll take the downstairs."

Roberts' mouth was still hanging open. He had nothing but fear on that classic mug. He was frightened silly.

"Snap out of it, bub," I said. "The killer might still be in the house."

He pointed woodenly at the wall behind the desk. I turned to look. An oil painting had been moved sideward in the paneled wall and the door of a small safe yawned open. I jumped across Dilweg's body and stuck my hand in the safe. It was empty.

"That don't prove anything," I said. "There's a lot of papers on Dilweg's desk. Maybe he took the stuff out himself."

I heard a door close softly somewhere. Not far away. I jumped for the hall. A man's shadowy figure darted across the opening at the north end of the hall.

"The killer!" I screamed at Roberts, who had followed me. "Let's nab him!"

The unknown was faster than a shadow. He moved like a cat. I skittered across the Orientals like a kitten on a tin roof, trying to keep my balance on the polished floor. I dived. My hands grabbed the unknown guy's jacket. He squirmed and gave me a straight-arm that made my tonsils bounce in my throat. And my feet slipped from under me and I hit the floor with a crash that made my teeth rattle.

My quarry was out the side door and streaking down the east lawn like all the demons were after him. He took that low brick wall without breaking stride and vanished into the timber. He

could have topped the record for the four-forty hurdles on any college cinders in the country.

I had a little brown-colored metal ring in my hand that I'd torn off the shadow's jacket. A metal ring about an inch in diameter. I looked at Roberts.

"Where was the guy hiding?"

Roberts pointed, his face still green with fright.

"There's a clothes closet under the stairway that leads to the second floor. Behind the closet is a door that leads down stairs to the garage."

I opened the closet door. A light clicked on automatically. The closet was empty, except for a cheap raincoat on a hanger and some hat boxes on a shelf. On the floor was a tiny blob of white stuff that felt like ground glass, and half of a light brown coat button. I gathered the stuff and put it in my handkerchief.

Roberts was nearly tongue-tied with fright. "Where's Elkins?" he chattered. "Where's Mrs. Fanner? Are they dead, too?"

I thought the guy was about ready to keel over, he was that green around the gills.

"Take it easy, chum," I said. "One corpse at a time is par for the course. There's nothing to suggest the killer was in the wholesale business."

"What are you going to do? You're a detective."

"Right now I'm gonna call the cops. Homicide's their headache, not mine. I'm only a private eye—with a client rubbed out—and me two hundred bucks poorer than I ought to be."

CHAPTER II

HOMICIDE TAKES OVER



CALLED Homicide at City Hall and told one of Fleming Morf's stooges that there was a little matter of a dead millionaire demanding their attention. Roberts sat on the edge of a chair while I was calling. He puffed on a cigarette and gawked nervously at everything in the room except Dilweg's body. I felt sorry for the guy. Sudden death was too much for him.

"Let's take a look around the dump," I said.

He followed me like a lost dog. We went through everything upstairs and then repeated downstairs. Nobody was in any of the rooms, and it didn't look as if anybody had ransacked the joint for dough. Maybe the killer had got what he wanted in that safe in the study.

We went downstairs to the garage. Roberts turned on a light somewhere. The garage was a concrete-floored room thirty feet square, with heavy wood-paneled walls. There wasn't a thing in the room except a black four-door peerless, license 408-284. No bench, no oil drums, no tools, no cabinets, no nothing.

Raindrops still glistened on the black finish of the car, and the windshield was still smeary except where the twin windshield wipers had swept the rain away. I knew that sedan hadn't been there long. It had stopped raining only fifteen minutes ago, just before I'd gotten off the Noble bus.

I got in the car and sat behind the wheel. I glanced in the rear-view mirror. I could see Roberts standing behind the car, lighting another cigarette. His hands were shaking. I hated to think how he would crack up when Detective-lieutenant Fleming Morf and his rubber hose boys started working on him.

I got out and walked toward the bare wall in front of the car. When I got three or four feet away, I heard something click. A wide wooden panel slid sideward in the wall and there was a yawning black opening, paved with concrete, sloping gently downward.

Roberts was at my shoulder. "That's a special driveway that goes under the house and comes out on the north side of the grounds," he told me. "It allowed Mr. Dilweg to drive out of the grounds without backing. The door operates with an electric eye. You opened the door when you broke the circuit with your body. The outside garage doors operate the same way."

"Are millionaires too proud to back a car?" I asked.

"I take it you've never met Mr. Dilweg in person," Roberts said.

"No. He hired me by telephone."

"He had a stiff neck. He couldn't turn

his head without turning his whole body. It happened in an oil-well accident several years ago."

I heard footsteps on the hardwood upstairs and I felt sorry for Roberts.

"Let's go up and face the inquisition, chum. Morf and his stooges are on the scene."

We went up quietly and walked to the study. I expected to see Morf and his muscle men, but what I saw was a guy kneeling by Dilweg's body. His eyes were staring. He was skinny and tall and neat in a brown suit and a brown hat, but he had on a black bow tie on a white shirt. His face was as pale as paper and his Adam's apple jumped in his throat when he saw us.

He got up.

"I just came back from the bank," he stammered at Roberts. "I wasn't gone more than half an hour. Then—this. It was my fault—for leaving him alone."

I had an idea that this guy wasn't shedding any tears over Dilweg's demise.

"We found your employer just a few minutes ago, Elkins," Roberts said. "Mr. Starch and I." He introduced me to Dilweg's butler.

I grunted at Elkins. I didn't like the waver in his eye and the oil in his voice. "What bank did you go to?" I asked him.

"The First National."

I looked at my wrist-watch. "Come again. That bank closes at two-thirty."

"I just made it," he said, "and I just got back on the Noble bus."

"Was Dilweg here when you left?"

He hesitated for a long time, like a swimmer getting ready for cool-off. Then he made up his mind to answer.

"No, sir. Mr. Dilweg was just driving in the south gate as I got on the bus to go to the bank."

"How'd you know it was Dilweg you saw?"

His thin face got red. I couldn't tell whether he was angry or cagey.

"I know the license number. Four-o-eight, two-eight-four. Then he said, emphatically, "It was Mr. Dilweg, all right."

"I'm only a private eye, Elkins," I said, "but I've got a two-hundred-dollar stake in this murder. Is Joe Briggs still

working for Dilweg?"

"No, sir. Briggs has not been working here for several days."

"Fired?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Was Briggs a visitor here today?"

A GAIN that queer hesitation, like he was weighing his words on a scale of caution.

"Briggs was here early this morning," he said then, "but I really don't know whether he wanted to see Mr. Dilweg or Mrs. Franner. Briggs said he'd return later."

This guy was cagey. He didn't throw in much information for free.

"Did Briggs come back any time before you left for the bank?" I asked.

"No, sir."

I had never seen Joe Briggs wearing eye-glasses, but a guy can never overlook anything in a murder case.

"Did Briggs ever wear eye-glasses, Elkins?"

Elkins said, "No, sir" emphatically, and one of my theories went out the window. Maybe the ground glass I'd found in the closet where the killer had been was an eye-glass lens, but if Briggs didn't wear glasses then he wasn't the guy that had scissored Dilweg to death. . . .

Two of Morf's baggy-pants stooges came into the study first, like a vanguard. They acted like two-bit dicks act on hardwood floors and Oriental rugs.

Detective-lieutenant Fleming Morf brought his cock-sure, overbearing fat swagger into the room like a calliope following the elephants. His round head was like a pool ball with ash-tray hair clipped short so that it stuck up like a curbing on his wrinkled street of forehead. His eyes were cold, and they got colder when he saw me. He grinned without humor at the stooges, who watched him.

"The foul-ball is here," he said.

I patted my hands together. "Clap hands—here's the hero. Where's your rubber hose and your brass knucks, tough guy?"

Morf ignored me. He looked at Dilweg's body like it was a piece of cold fish on a platter. He made a face at his stooges and they started to go over the

joint like a vacuum cleaner. Then he looked at me.

"Start talking," he said.

I told Morf all about finding the body. I told him all I knew about Carson Roberts and John Elkins and Joe Briggs and Mrs. Lilli Franner. I told him about the wet four-door sedan downstairs and about the guy Roberts and I had flushed out of the closet. I even gave him my handkerchief with the broken button and the ground glass I'd scooped off the closet floor. And I gave him the shiny metal ring I'd grabbed off the guy's jacket.

He put the stuff in his pocket.

"Why can't you cheap divorce dicks keep your paws off evidence in homicide cases?" he growled.

I got white around the lips. "Some of these days I'll divorce you from your teeth, chum. Me pickin' up the stuff didn't change it any."

"Keep your shirt on." His eyes glinted. "The guy you traced for Dilweg? Is he around? Does he wear glasses?"

"You're barking up the wrong tree," I said. "The guy in the closet wasn't Joe Briggs. Briggs don't wear glasses. And Briggs misses on another count."

I didn't tell Morf, but the metal ring I grabbed was off an Army jacket, and so was the broken button. I know a little about them. I wore one.

Morf passed the dirty crack without comment. "If you looked for the guy in the closet what kind of a guy would you look for?"

"One about five-feet-eight. Medium build. Wears glasses. He's a war veteran. And he probably wears leather heels on his shoes. Rubber ones wouldn't crush an eye-glass lens to powder. And if you see him, you better move fast. He can run plenty fast."

"That story fit in with yours?" Morf growled at Carson Roberts.

Roberts had quieted down a lot. He nodded. "Exactly."

"Why'd you come here to see Dilweg?"

"I had an appointment with him," Roberts said.

"What about?"

Roberts' answer surprised Morf so much he nearly swallowed his tonsils.

"The purpose of my visit is none of

your business, but I have nothing to conceal. It had to do with Handicap Haven, Incorporated. Mr. Dilweg has been very generous to the project."

Morf's face was red as a spanked baby's behind. "What's Handicapped Haven, Incorporated?"

"A charitable rest home in East St. Louis for the needy blind, deaf, epileptic and crippled. We take them in and try to rehabilitate them and make it possible for them to learn to take care of themselves."

He said it with a gleam in his eyes and a flush on his face like it was something swell and he was proud of it. Morf looked ashamed of himself, and for Morf, that was quite a job.

To save face, and keep his rep as a tough mug he whirled on John Elkins and punched the butler's thin chest with a stubby hand for emphasis.

"Where's the old man's housekeeper? This Mrs. Lilli Franner. Where is she?" she?"

"I don't know," the skinny butler said. He backed away from Morf's threatening face and he was trying to gulp down his Adam's apple.

MORF dogged him and his heavy fist curled into a tight ball and he shoved Elkins roughly backward.

"Come on. Skinny, don't act cagey with me. With one woman alone in a twenty-room house with you and Dilweg, you don't lose track of her. Where is she?"

Elkins' face was green with fear, and his scrawny arms went up to shield his face. Morf's left hand jabbed hard at Elkins' chest and the skinny guy went backward on to the leather davenport. Morf glared at him.

"Do I have to let the boys work you over?"

Elkins cowered back, trying to squeeze his body into the cushions.

"She's gone," he got out.

"Talk. Skinny! And you better make it good!"

"Mrs. Franner. Mrs. Lilli Franner. She came here in answer to an ad I put in a matrimonial paper. I got her a job with Mr. Dilweg as a sort of housekeeper. We were going to be married, and then go into business together with

our savings."

Morf grinned as if he enjoyed Elkins' misery. "So you fell for that moth-eaten one? Now your savings have gone blooey, I bet. Along with the dame. Give me the story. From the beginning."

Elkins sat up, trembling. "She had six thousand dollars in cash. If I would put up the same amount, we'd put it in a safe deposit box I had at the bank. Then we'd get married and go on our honeymoon. When we got back—"

Morf grinned some more. "Go on. This is gonna be rich."

"We went to the bank," Elkins stammered. "I put my money in a big envelope. I asked for hers. She blushed, and said it was pinned inside her dress. She took the envelope with my money in it and went into a private booth, and when she came back the envelope was sealed and she'd written across it, 'Property of Mrs. and Mr. John Elkins'."

Morf said, licking his lips, "Go on."

"I wanted to buy a little delicatessen I know about, but she kept putting it off. I started to worry about it. I even wondered about the money. But the box was in my name and I had the only key. This afternoon I went to her room to talk to her about it. I found a note on her dresser saying that she'd been called to Duluth by the sudden illness of her sister. All of her things were gone, like maybe she didn't intend to come back. Then I remembered that she had told me once before that she had no relatives except a brother."

"You're slow on the up-take, Skinny. Then what did you do?"

"I went to the safety deposit box at the bank. The envelope was there, just like I'd left it. But inside was only a thick pile of white paper cut to exactly the same size as paper money. There was a good bill on the top and the bottom of the pile—the rest was just paper."

Morf laughed, and I could have punched him in the nose.

"The gal's plenty clever," Morf said. "Switched the bills out and the dummy paper in while she had you buffaloed with blushes. She put a good bill on each side of the pile in case you got suspicious and tore the envelope."

He acted more like he'd found six grand than just learned that Elkins had been fleeced out of that much.

"You're out six Gs, my skinny friend," he said, "and I've got an idea that your blushing violet might have stuck Dilweg with them shears, too. Scissors come natural to women. And I ain't positive but what you and her was in cahoots."

"I want my six thousand dollars back!" Elkins said.

I butted in. "I lost a client when Dilweg got himself punctured, and I lost two hundred bucks. What's it worth to you if I get back your six Gs, Elkins?"

"Five hundred dollars! Five hundred dollars!"

"Make it two Cs, chum," I said. I got a stake in this now, showing up our muscle-brained Homicide here."

Morf grunted. "I'll get your six Gs, Skinny, at the same time I pick up the killer. And I got an idea that Duluth'd be a good place to start looking."

CHAPTER III

THE LADY IN THE LITTLE HOUSE



BUNCH of guys came in then—a couple of pencil boys from the *Journal* and a photographer. The flash bulbs popped with me and Roberts and Elkins and Morf looking down at Dilweg's body. The reporters talked to Morf for

about ten minutes, then lifted the phone and called their city desks.

While they were busy on the phone a couple guys came in with a big wicker basket and they dumped the millionaire in and carried him away. When you're a croppie, it don't make much difference to the coroner whether you got ten million or ten cents.

Morf glared at the coroner. "A dame flew the coop. Think she could have eased that shiv into Dilweg?"

"Nix," the coroner said. "No soap. Whoever pushed that scissors had a lot of push. The wound was bruised where the handles sank into the flesh. I'd say it was a man did the job."

I had a different idea myself, but I

grinned at the detective from Homicide.

"You'd better hurry your bloodhounds to Duluth, Rover Boy."

I started for the door.

"Hold it, Divorce Dick!" Morf said. "Where you think you're going? I haven't given you a clean slate yet."

"Are you goofy?" I said. "Dilweg owed me two hundred bucks. But that ain't motive enough for me frying in the chair. You've done your dirty deed for the day. You've got a corpse and you think you've got a suspect. Do your stuff. I'll be at my office any time you want to get me so you can four-flush some more."

I left Dilweg's mansion and hopped the Noble bus back to the loop. I went to the local library and spent an hour in the newspaper reference room. There wasn't too much stuff on Dilweg, because he hadn't gone much for publicity, but there was enough for me to piece together a few facts.

Dilweg had been raised and educated to the law in East St. Louis. In his early days he specialized in corporation law and managed to starve to death. Then he got into politics and did all right. He wound up as state's attorney for St. Clair county. Then he got into the oil business, and horse-shoes and four-leaf clovers rained all over everything he touched, and he got to be a millionaire.

He had married young, he had no kids, and his wife had died about twelve years before. He had been about sixty-nine years old. He had traveled a lot and had seldom been at home in the big mansion. He had spent almost a year in Canada before he had returned to his mansion less than a month before. He hadn't been back to East St. Louis in more than ten years, although his only charity was the Handicap Haven, Inc. that I'd heard about from Carson Roberts. There was one item showing a picture of him writing a check for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars in favor of Handicap Haven, Inc.

I didn't know exactly what I had expected to find. I'd been looking for something—anything—that might tie up Briggs, or Elkins, or Roberts, or Mrs. Franner with a motive that would make sense in the killing of the old millionaire. I didn't find anything. I didn't

even uncover any scent of a nameless guy who might have it in for Dilweg enough to stick a scissors in his heart.

The only thing that intrigued me was the fact that everybody in the case seemed to be tied up in some way with East St. Louis. Carson Roberts had his Handicap Haven there, Dilweg had got his start there, Mrs. Franner lived there, and Joe Briggs ran a landscape engineering outfit there. Maybe it might pay off to check the East St. Louis angle.

By the time I got back to the office, the *Journal* extras were on the street and Marge's eyes were bugged out as she read the big black headlines:

MILLIONAIRE MURDERED!

She was wriggling that top-flight torso of hers in ecstasy and I wished I had been a better salesman for the idea of eggs and toast with her across a breakfast table.

"Mr. Starch!" she warbled at me. "Isn't it thrilling?"

"Your grandmother's antimacassar," I said. "Slip your gears into high and get me the police commissioner of East St. Louis, pronto. Mr. John Webster, otherwise known as Jawn."

In five minutes I was talking long distance to a guy that knew more crooks than you could shake a stick at. And the tough ones tried their best to steer clear of his bailiwick. I knew a trigger that beat up his gal because she drove him through the burg once when he was drunk and not able to sit behind the wheel.

"Jawn," I told the commissioner over the phone, "do me a favor and keep your eyes peeled for the three-fifty I.C. There might be a jackpot on it. Forty years old, looks thirty-five; shape like Sheridan, gams like Grable, and a yen for men. The old matrimonial racket. Six Gs and a millionaire murder. Elsberry Dilweg. The name the dame used here was Mrs. Lilli Franner." I gave him a full description I'd got from John Elkins, then I said, "I'll be seeing you in a few hours, Jawn, and buy you a short beer."

I TALKED Marge into loaning me her jalopy. I pointed the radiator south

on 66 and kept her perking until I pulled up in front of the city hall down in East St. Louis. Jawn Webster was glad to see me, but he sloshed cold water all over my hopes of finding Lilli Franner so I could collect two Cs from Elkins.

"My boys," he told me, "have covered every train and every bus into this burg. We've worked the hotels and the motor courts. We had men on bridges into Saint Looney, just in case she by-passed us. No soap. Where'd you get the brainstorm that she'd hightail it down here?"

"The butler she flimflammed says she came from here in answer to an ad in a matrimonial magazine. And she left a note for her amour saying she'd gone to Duluth. So, with six Gs in her poke, I figured she might go in the opposite direction."

A guy came in the office, chewing on a toothpick.

"Boss," he said to Webster, "the boys tell me that Lilli Mason is back in town. Just got back in a car, with a guy. You don't suppose Lilli could have taken a flyer in high finance? One name or another wouldn't make any difference to Lilli."

Webster grinned. "Lilli is put together pretty good. Could be. With a chassis like hers, she could even make Starch thaw out. We might make a call on her."

"You intrigue me, Jawn", I said. "You're the second guy that's described her wheelbase as out of this world. Maybe I better take a gander."

Jawn didn't like the idea. "Better let my boys bring her in. She runs a call joint and I think there's a few crap tables in some of the back rooms. There might be some blackjacks around."

"Tell me where, Jawn. I know this burg pretty well. No use of you flushing out quail if we haven't located the right bush."

He told me, and I got in Marge's jalopy and rode about eight blocks.

Lilli Mason's place was a two-story frame, clean and tidy and freshly painted. It had a little patch of lawn in front, where a stone Negro was aiming a stone hose in the direction of the front gate. The little porch was nearly hidden with climbing green vines.

The door opened to my push on the bell and a tall gal with chalk-white skin smiled at me.

"Come in", she said, and she made a casual effort to pull her skin-tight wrapper together.

I walked in and took a gander around. It was clean and nice but the air smelled like maybe the windows hadn't been open for twenty years.

I grinned. "Sister," I said, "you can go right on with your other work. I want to see Lilli Mason."

"You're a cop," she said, like she'd say "You're a worm." Her eyes got wide and her smile went down the drain.

"You catch on quick. Where's Lilli?"

"Upstairs. Second door on the right side of the hall."

The gal left me like I was a leper and went into a big room that was evidently a reception room for customers and left me to walk up the carpeted stairs. I heard a buzzer pop off above me, and I wondered if my wrapper-clad friend had warned Lilli that trouble was on the way up.

I walked down the hall to the second door on the right. It was in a little jog and just beyond the door was a sharp angle in the hall. It was pretty dark and awful quiet. I looked around for any rubber-heeled guys with blackjacks, then I rapped my knuckles on the door panel.

A voice—a real nice voice said, "Who is it, please?"

I listened to a little devil in me and said, "Open up, baby, and feast your hungry eyes on Little Lord Fauntleroy."

The door opened and I caught my breath. A guy just don't expect to see stuff like that just by opening a door.

I took hold of the door jamb. Lilli Mason was quite a package. She was tall and willowy and her skin was white and firm. Maybe what she had was forty years old but she'd taken pretty good care of it. She had dark hair and dark eyes.

That wasn't all she had. It was the way she was put together. All she had on was a bra and a pair of panties, only partly concealed by a robe that was as effective as barbed wire. It protected the property but it didn't obstruct the view.

She smiled at me and her teeth were something, too.

"Put your eyes back in their sockets, mister, and come in. We're all friendly here."

I said, "I'd rather you'd put on some more clothes and come with me, Lilli. Lilli Franner. We got a little talking to do about six Gs and a pair of paper shears and a dead millionaire."

She was scared. Her right hand went to her throat and her robe fell open. Maybe that's what took my mind off my business. Maybe that's why I didn't hear anybody on the carpet behind me.

Something slammed against the base of my skull. Red and green lights and paper shears and girls in loose robes danced a dizzy jig in my brain. I felt myself folding up at the knees. The floor came up and hit me, hard. A vision of September Morn shivering ankle deep in blood stamped my brain.

Then I passed out, cold.

CHAPTER IV

HANDICAP HAVEN



BEFORE I saw Lilli Franner again, a couple of hours had passed. It was five minutes of eight and the lights in the ceiling hurt my eyes. I was sitting in a leather chair in Jawn Webster's office in the city hall, rubbing my fingers over a bruise on the back of my skull, near my right ear.

Webster told me I had been sleeping in that chair, after they dragged me in from my encounter with the sap in Lilli Mason's boudoir. I was all right, he told me, according to the doctor.

Fleming Morf had come down to East St. Louis in a squad car at eighty miles an hour when Webster had notified him that they had picked up Lilli Franner and her boy friend. And one of Webster's plainclothesmen, a guy he called Dave, stood by the hall door now, his strong white teeth gnawing on a toothpick.

There was a rap on the door and Dave opened it. Lilli Franner walked in, escorted by a uniformed cop. I knew that shape and that face, eyen if it was the

first time I'd seen her with so many clothes on.

She came in and Dave closed the door behind her, grinning.

Lilli saw me. Her eyes laughed. Her lids had a kind of reptilian look to them. Lilli could be plenty tough, even when she was laughing.

Tough enough to stick scissors in anybody.

"You can put your eyes back in your sockets, mister," she said to me.

I knew what she meant. I got red in the face and I felt of that bruise on my dome.

"Lilli," Webster said, "you're facing some tough raps. Not only theft, or working a con game, but murder. Changed your mind? Want to come clean?"

"Copper," Lilli said, "you're missing the head pin. I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're too polite, John," Morf broke in. "Slap her teeth in!" Then he said to Lilli, "Listen! You lifted six grand off John Elkins. We expect to get it back. And we want a good alibi or we'll put you in the clink for killing Elsberry Dilweg. First off, where's Elkins' six grand?"

Lilli didn't scare easy. "I told Webster and I'm telling you. I ain't talkin' till I get a lawyer. Put me in the clink and see if I care. I'll get sprung so fast it'll curl your hair."

Webster spread his hands wide in resignation.

He looked at me.

"Got any ideas, Bill?"

I felt the bump on my head. "Let Morf take her back and put her in the hoosegow. Along with the guy that conked me. Whoever he is."

Webster grinned and explained to Morf, "Our impetuous friend here got himself conked on the noggin while he was enjoying an eyeful of Lilli. Lucky I'd put Dave on Starch's tail. Dave nabbed Lilli and her boy friend before Starch had hit the floor."

Webster made a signal to the uniformed cop.

"Bring in her boy friend. Maybe we can make *him* talk."

Dave went out, too, and Morf squirmed in his seat. He pounded his

horny palm on the arm of his chair.

"Give me ten minutes alone with him," he growled, "and I'll slug him into talking."

The door opened and Dave and the cop came back, with a guy between them. I sat straight up in my chair. The guy was about five-eight. He was chunky, but catlike and quick. His nose was like a button stitched in the middle of a brown face.

I gawked at Webster and Dave. "Is this the dame's boy friend? Is this the guy that slugged me?"

"Right," Webster said. "Ever see him before?"

"See him before!" I yelled. "He's the guy that Dilweg hired me to trace under the name of Charles Bryce, Junior. And all the while he was working for Dilweg under the name of Joe Briggs. Can you tie that?"

Morf wouldn't let me steal the show. He got up and stuck his mug up close to Briggs.

"You're on the spot, lover," he said. "My boys nosed around back home and they found out that a guy in a four-door Chevvy picked up a dame with a classy chassis just about the time Dilweg was bumped off. And Elkins, the butler, said you was at the place in the morning. I figure you waited around for Elkins to leave the mansion so the coast was clear, then you killed Dilweg, and brought the dame down here."

Briggs' face didn't change. He was calm enough, for a guy faced with a murder rap.

"Why would I want to kill the old man?" he said. "I was working for him."

"Elkins kind of intimated that Dilweg fired you."

"He hired me to landscape the oil company's property here in East St. Louis. I left some of my crew at his place to finish the job on the weeping willow." He shrugged his shoulders. "I admit I waited across the street from Dilweg's for Lilli. I brought her down here in my car. But I didn't know the kind of business she was in, and I didn't know about her con game with Elkins. She told me Starch was a suitor who had been annoying her. That's why I slugged him."

I BROKE in to Webster.

"Did you give Lilli's joint the once over?" I asked.

I was getting anxious about Elkins' six grand. If I got that back I stood to be two Cs to the good.

"We couldn't have done a better job with a vacuum cleaner," Webster said. "But we didn't find hide nor hair of Elkins' dough."

Morf wasn't done yet and he put the coal on the fire that made me hate him.

"So there ain't no reason why you'd kill Dilweg, eh?" he said to Briggs. "I ain't the sap that Starch is, Briggs. He trailed you all over the State of Illinois and never tumbled to the truth. I did. I checked the papers for a lot of years back. Your old man was sent to the pen by Dilweg when he was the prosecutor down here. That's why you changed your name from Charles Bryce, Junior, to Joe Briggs when you entered Aggie College. And that's why you scissored Dilweg. To get even with him for sending your old man to the pen. Revenge, pure and simple."

Briggs didn't scare easy. He was as calm as calm. "Why would I wait fifteen years to kill him and rob him. Revenge don't stay hot that long."

Morf chortled. "That's enough." He said to Webster, "We'll hold this cookie till a better suspect comes along. The newspapers held back on the robbery angle. The only way Briggs could know that Dilweg's safe was cleaned out was because he cleaned it out himself. I'll take him back and shove him in the clink. We'll make an open and shut case."

"Is there anything more logical than to think that a millionaire's murder might have money connected with it?" Briggs said.

"Morf," I said, "I don't think Briggs stuck Dilweg."

Morf glared. "You'd miss clues on your upper lip, right under your nose. You didn't even know Briggs' old man was a convict, railroaded by Dilweg."

"Something else I do know, Big Shot. I know that Carson Roberts and I flushed a guy out of Dilweg's closet right after we found his body. That guy wasn't Briggs. Until we find that guy,

we won't come up with Dilweg's killer."

"Phooey!" Morf snorted. "I'll pin it on Briggs and the dame."

"Homicide's your headache. I'm hunting for Elkins' six grand. And I've got an idea I'm going to make a chump out of you. I'll have a little talk with Carson Roberts over at the Handicap Haven and we'll come up with a dozen reasons why Briggs couldn't have killed Dilweg."

I walked over to Handicap Haven, Inc. It was only three blocks from the city hall. It was a big rambling building of unfaced brick, three stories high. Almost all of the windows in the joint were lighted, but the light seemed dim, like somebody was saving electricity. I don't suppose a blind guy, though, can tell the difference between a forty watt bulb and a thousand watter.

I pushed the buzzer and a guy with thick glasses opened the door a little way so I could see inside. It wasn't too clean or too light. He looked funny when he saw me.

"I thought I told you—" he said. Then he grinned and said, "I'm sorry. I thought you were someone else. Somebody who has been asking for Mr. Roberts two or three times and I don't think Mr. Roberts ought to see him. I think his life might be in danger."

I had butterflies inside me. "Danger? Why?"

He opened the door wide. "Come in," he said, "and I'll take you to Mr. Roberts."

I couldn't see his eyes behind those thick-lensed metal-rimmed glasses of his but I followed him down the hall to a door marked "Office." There was a familiar look about him, but I couldn't peg him exactly. The rims on his glasses made him look like an owl. He was as nervous as a cat on a tin roof.

"Who is the guy that's been trying to see Roberts?" I asked.

He said it simply, but it hit me right between the eyes. "John Elkins, Mr. Dilweg's butler."

He seemed to enjoy my shock. Then he said, "Follow me."

"What gives?" I said. "This is the office right here, ain't it?"

"Yes," he said, "but Mr. Robert isn't there right now."

I followed him down the hall about fifteen feet and he opened a door and held it for me. I walked into a dirty room with a table and a bed and a dresser. It was empty. Roberts wasn't there. I whirled around.

"What is this?"

THICK Glasses had shut the door behind him and flicked the key in the lock. His hands were in the pockets of his brown jacket. The metal ring was missing from the left side at his waist. I knew well enough I'd grabbed that ring off the guy we'd flushed out of Dilweg's closet.

I cursed myself for being such a sap. I grinned at him, but my stomach was brushing my backbone.

"Go ahead and shoot, killer!" I said. "You can fry only once for killing Dilweg. Killing me won't raise the ante."

He took his hands out of his pockets. He didn't have a gun. I swallowed my heart and it started beating again.

He smiled, but it was a nervous grimace. "I didn't kill Dilweg, Mr. Starch. I proved it to Mr. Roberts and I can prove it to you."

"How'd you know my name?"

"I saw your picture in the paper with Mr. Roberts and Mr. Morf, and Elkins."

I couldn't get the proper pitch.

"We found Dilweg's body and a couple minutes later we flush you out of a closet and you ran like the devil," I said. "Were you waiting for your portal to portal pay? Or did you hide there when we came into the house and interrupted your getaway?"

"I'll tell you the whole thing and you can use your own judgment," Thick Glasses said. "I'm Blake Hobson. I was technician fifth class in the Army. I got burned around the eyes on Okinawa. I came back and found out that fifteen acres and a shack I owned had been bought by Dilweg for back taxes while I was in the Army."

"Wait a minute, bub. There was a moratorium on Service men's debts."

"I know. And I had eighteen months to reclaim and pay up before Dilweg got a clear title. But Dilweg took over while I was gone, sunk an oil well and brought it in. When I came back from Service I took a job with Mr. Roberts

here. Then I went to see Dilweg about my land."

"And grabbed the first thing that came to hand—a paper shears—and stuck him with it. Losing an oil well is a good motive for murder."

Hobson quit grinning. "I didn't kill him, I tell you. I went to see him. I saw some guys around a weeping willow tree. They were some of Joe Briggs' crew and I recognized them. Then I went up to the house and in the side door. Dilweg was already dead on the floor. I got scared, and started to beat it, fast. In the back hall, somebody slugged me. When I woke up, I was on the floor of the closet, my glasses busted and a bump on my head."

He showed me a bump on his skull, back of the right ear, the same place I had been slugged by Joe Briggs in Lilli Mason's place.

"I opened the closet," Thick Glasses continued, "and you guys were coming at me. I beat it. You know the rest. That's the truth, so help me God."

"Why'd you run? Your story was just as good then as it is now."

"I knew Dilweg was dead. How was I to know you guys hadn't killed him?"

"You work for Roberts. Why run from him?"

"You forget my glasses were broken. I didn't recognize him. It wasn't till I saw the pictures in the paper that I knew who it was in Dilweg's house." He touched his glasses. "This is an old pair I had around before I got mustered out."

"I got to tell Morf, chum. I'm no sleuth for the city. I'm just a private eye."

"I haven't told you everything," Hobson said.

"Let your imagination run, bub," I told him. "Nothing can possibly jolt me now."

"When I ran away from Dilweg's house, I didn't go far," Thick Glasses said. "I hid in the timber till dark. Then a tall, skinny guy came out of the house and hid something behind a loose brick in the wall in front of where I was hiding."

I grinned. "Bring in some false whiskers and a submarine and you got a new Perils of Pauline."

CHAPTER V

SURPRISE SUSPECT



HOBSON went to the table and opened the drawer and came back with a thin, flat package, wrapped in brown paper.

"There's the proof," he said to me. "Read it."

I did. "I'll be a monkey's uncle," I said. "Even money says this stuff was taken from Dilweg's safe." I looked at him closely. "Is John Elkins the guy that cached this?"

"I've only seen Elkins' picture in the paper. The guy who cached the package is the one who was here tonight asking for Mr. Roberts."

"Why do you think Mr. Roberts' life is in danger?"

"I think Elkins killed Dilweg, and I think Elkins believes that Mr. Roberts knows he did and is trying to prove it. So Elkins wants to put Mr. Roberts out of the way."

"Have you told this story to anyone else?" I said.

"Yes. To Mr. Roberts. That's why Mr. Roberts refused to see Elkins tonight."

"Where's your boss now?"

"I don't know. He left shortly after Elkins was here the first time. I don't know where he went."

"Did Mr. Roberts say anything when you showed him the package that had been taken from Dilweg's safe and then cached by Elkins?"

"He said it should be turned over to the police immediately."

"I think you've got something there," I said. "We're forty miles away from Morf. Would you trust me to deliver it as evidence?"

"I was hoping you'd offer."

He handed the package back to me without hesitation.

"Now," I said, "maybe you can let me out the side door or something. I don't want Elkins to be hanging around and slug me in the dark by mistake."

Hobson led me downstairs to a concrete-floored basement. It was full of work benches and machinery, and it smelled of leather. There were a half-

dozen automobiles in the middle of the big room. The light was dim and I couldn't see things plainly, and he didn't offer to turn on more lights. Maybe it was a good idea, if somebody was hanging around outside with murder in his heart when he found the right victim.

I remembered the article I'd read in the library back home.

"How many handicapped guys actually live in Handicap Haven?" I asked Hobson.

"About twenty-five blind men," he said. "They live in dormitories on the second floor. But there's about a hundred and twenty-five who work here in the daytime. The blind ones make belts and billfolds and other leathercraft. The deaf and crippled and epileptic make brooms and stuff and polish automobiles."

"Got a list of the cars polished here in the last few days?" I asked.

"Yeah. But only by license numbers. Mr. Roberts always took care of billing the customers. Here's the book."

It was a little book. One of the last entries in it was a car with license number 408-284. Dilweg had had his car polished at his pet project.

"That was free," Hobson said. "For other jobs we usually get ten bucks."

He let me out the side door of the basement. It was as dark as the inside of the eight-ball and my skin was prickling on the back of my neck. But I acted as brave as I could and walked up the alley to the sidewalk. Then I walked back to the city hall to pick up my borrowed car.

I knew I had some pretty potent evidence in my pocket that somebody had taken out of Dilweg's safe, and I had no doubt that the same someone might get pleasure out of sticking a pair of paper shears in my gizzard to get it back.

But somehow I just couldn't add up all the angles to the case to make sense. If Elkins had killed his boss I couldn't figure where the con game on Elkins' six grand fitted into the picture. I don't believe in duplex mysteries. I believe that all murders are solved by finding the single thread of motive that is responsible for letting a human out of this world.

IT WAS nearly one o'clock in the morning before I hit the hay, and I slept like a hammered steer. When I got up, at about eleven bells, I phoned Morf, to tell him about the package Hobson had given me.

"Which one of your two suspects is gonna fry for killing Dilweg?" I said.

"A guy named John Elkins," he said. "Carson Roberts brought in a stooge of his by the name of Blake Hobson. Hobson seen Elkins cache a package that was taken from Dilweg's safe. And Hobson tells me you took the package. You better bring it down here pronto or I'll put you in the clink for holding back evidence."

"Last night, Genius, you swore you were going to hang the garland of guilt around the necks of Lilli Franner and Joe Briggs. How come you changed your mind?"

"We never found no six grand no place, did we? And they come up with an alibi and they got witnesses to prove that they was at the Hog Hip eating lunch at the very minute Dilweg was stuck. They're in the clear. But I'm holding them here, along with Roberts and Hobson. When you bring that cache down here, I'm going out and put the heat on Elkins, and I'm taking the whole kit and kaboodle along with me. I'll get this thing down in black and white and Elkins will sign his John Henry."

Something close to inspiration clicked in my brain.

"I'll be down as soon as I shave," I said. "And I'll bet the one you put the bracelets on will surprise you."

I went down to the city hall and Morf grabbed the cache out of my hand like it was engraved with gold.

"Put the whole gang in squad cars and bring them along!" he roared at a couple of stooges. He frowned at me. "We don't need any more help from you."

"Give me a break," I said. "Elkins is a client of mine. I get two hundred bucks if I get his six grand back."

"All right. Come on."

We all drove out to Dilweg's mansion in three squad cars piloted by Morf's stooges. Morf pounded on the front door like he was storming the walls of

Jericho. Nobody answered. The house was quiet as the tomb. Elkins didn't show up.

No wonder. When we finally got in the joint we found out why. Elkins was on his bedroom floor upstairs. He was flat on his back in some loud-striped pajamas. There was a bullet-hole in his right temple and a .45 automatic in his right hand. He was dead.

Morf did a lot of strutting around like the hero in the last act of a melodrama. He looked the body over. He handled the gun with a handkerchief and gave it to one of his stooges. Then he looked around at his audience and spoke like an oracle, and he spat most of his words in my direction.

"He's been dead for eight or ten hours. I'd say he shot himself a little after midnight or thereabouts. He probably woke up to the fact that somebody had discovered his cache of the stuff he took out of his boss' safe and he knew the jig was up. Our whole murder mystery is all washed up. Elkins killed his boss and now he's bumped himself off."

"Why don't you come out of the kindergarten, Big Shot?" I said. "Elkins didn't kill himself. A schoolboy ought to know that."

Morf got red. "Huh?"

"That's a forty-five automatic, bub. If Elkins killed himself, where's the ejected shell?"

Morf got still redder and his stooges looked all over the joint for a cartridge case. They couldn't find it.

"Somebody bumped Elkins off," I said. "Somebody that Elkins knew pretty well or he wouldn't have been in his bedroom in his pajamas. Maybe the ejected shell got stuck some place on the killer. I read about a case once where a murderer got trapped because he stepped on an ejected shell and it stuck in his rubber heel. They hung him." Then I said, "Bring the herd downstairs, Big Shot, and I'll name the killer. I had a hunch about the solution this morning. Now I'm sure of it. Too bad I didn't figure it out last night. I could have saved Elkins' life and made myself two hundred bucks."

"Who are you, to order people around?" Joe Briggs said plenty ugly.

"You're only a private gumshoe, and a punk one at that."

Lillie Franner was putting lipstick on her full lips. "That's telling him, honey," she drawled.

Briggs had lost his yen for Lilli. "Shut up!" he snapped.

"Mr. Starch is doing his best," Carson Roberts said, in that aristocratic voice of his. "The least we can do is cooperate."

"Thanks," I said. "Too bad we all don't see eye to eye."

"Downstairs, punks, and make it snappy!" Morf hollered.

WE ALL went downstairs to the study and Morf seated everybody. Then he glared at me.

"All right, get out your ouija board. Who's the killer?"

"You're getting this for free," I said. "How about letting me do it my way?"

"Okay, Dick Tracy."

"We'll start with the killer right here in the study," I said. "He had a fuss with Dilweg. He picked up the paper shears and killed him. Then he figured he couldn't just walk out of the house without providing some kind of a motive for murder. So he took the papers out of Dilweg's safe and planted them in Elkins' room."

"Then the killer came downstairs, and just managed to get out of sight before Blake Hobson came in the side door. Then he had to give himself time to provide an alibi so he slugged Hobson and put his body in the closet while he made his getaway."

Morf got up and paced the floor. "That's imagination. That ain't evidence. I'd look silly going into court with that."

"The things the killer did here ain't important," I said. "It's the things he did *before* and *after* that tripped him up."

"Your riddles annoy me. Speak up or shut up."

I grinned at Morf and then at Hobson. "Day before yesterday the deaf guys at Handicap Haven polished a four-door sedan. License number Four-o-eight, two-eight-four. They got a record in a book at Handicap Haven."

"So what?"

"That was Dilweg's car. Yesterday afternoon the killer drove Dilweg's car through the rain from East St. Louis and put it in the garage downstairs. The guy that Elkins testified to seeing drive in the gate just before Dilweg was killed was *not* Dilweg but the killer in Dilweg's car."

"Are you crazy?"

"The car's still downstairs. Go down and sit behind the wheel. The rear-view mirror is set for a guy six feet tall. Dilweg was only a little over five feet. He couldn't have used the rear-view mirror."

"How'd the killer get away?" Morf growled. "The boys working on the weeping willow tree didn't see nobody but Hobson."

"Simple," I said. "Very simple. The day before, he'd left his own car, exactly like Dilweg's, in the garage downstairs, and drove Dilweg's to Handicap Haven to have it polished. After he killed Dilweg, and slugged Hobson, he went down to the garage and drove his own car through the tunnel under the house. The boys at the weeping willow tree couldn't have seen him."

"You're still guessing," Morf said.

"Am I? He drove his car around the block and parked by the iron gate. His car was dry—in spite of the fact that it had stopped raining only when I got off the Noble bus and walked across the street. So his car had to be in a dry place less than a minute before I saw him park it. There isn't another place within a mile—except the garage downstairs.

Morf grinned at Carson Roberts, who was fidgeting with his Homburg on a corner of the davenport.

"He's put the finger on you, Roberts. What you got to say?"

"I'm confused," said Roberts. "I can't imagine why Mr. Starch would think I would kill Mr. Dilweg. He was a benefactor, not an enemy."

"I can fill in the motive, Roberts. Dilweg was a benefactor. Over a period of years he's given several hundred thousand dollars to you and your Handicap Haven. He thought you were providing living quarters for the handicapped, feeding them, and taking care of them generally. You had them making brooms

and leathercraft and working on cars on a commercial basis. You provided living quarters for only twenty-five blind men. The balance of Dilweg's money you appropriated to yourself. Dilweg found it out, threatened you with exposure—and you killed him."

Roberts was still fiddling with his Homburg. "There's a little matter of a dead man upstairs. Elkins. Why would I kill him?"

"Elkins lost six grand to Lilli Franer. He figured to get it back from you. Because he was the only man alive that knew it was *you* and not Dilweg who drove Dilweg's car yesterday afternoon. He visited you in East St. Louis last night. He wanted to see you and blackmail you. You followed him home and killed him, and made it look like suicide."

Robert's lips for the first time had an ugly twist.

"You seem to know all the answers. I wonder if you know the answer to this?"

His left hand dropped the Homburg and I saw the gun in his right hand. It was an ugly little pea-shooter and I had an idea he could hit what he shot at. It was a .32, but it looked like a cannon because it was aimed at my belt buckle!

CHAPTER VI

KILLER IN THE DARK

MORF didn't have a rubber hose and his stooges couldn't help him, so he just stood there with his round eyes popping out and his lower lip trembled so much his teeth rattled.

Roberts moved the gun from side to side to cover all of us.

"I'm walking out of here," he said, in that aristocratic voice. "The first one who comes out that door after me, gets a bullet in his middle."

He didn't sound aristocratic any more. And I had a sneaking idea that it was only his wish for haste that stopped him from putting a slug in my ticker.

He backed through the door into the hall. Then I could hear his feet pounding on the hardwood floor as he ran down the hall to the north.

I leaped for the doorway. And an Oriental rug saved my life. My feet went out from under me as a rug skittered on the floor. I went down. And the bullet Roberts had promised smashed into the door jamb and a white splinter of wood tore loose.

I scrambled up and grabbed a Louis XIV chair. Roberts was tugging at the door that led to the garage downstairs with his left hand, and he snapped a shot at me from the .32 in his right. That slug whistled by me so close I could smell hot lead.

I heaved the chair forward across the gleaming floor. It skittered crazily, but stayed on course, and slammed toward Roberts. And then the door came open under his frantic tugging and the zooming chair missed him and crashed through the door opening. I heard it bouncing down the stairway to the garage floor.

Roberts leaped through the door and his steps boomed as he ran down. I hit the door and jerked it open to utter darkness. I was outlined at the head of the steps. A bullet tore into the padding in the shoulder of my coat and I could feel the burn of its scratch on my hide.

I crouched low and pulled the door shut behind me. Utter blackness was all around. I heard Roberts' muffled curses as he stumbled over the Louis XIV chair. My hands searched the wall in frenzy. They found a switch. I flicked it. Nothing happened.

Butterflies went berserk in my stomach. I was in a tight spot. A killer was below me in the dark. A guy who had killed twice and had nothing to lose if he killed again. The killer had a gun and knew how to use it. I was unarmed.

I couldn't see the killer and I couldn't even hear him move. He might be anywhere in a thirty-foot square room.

The killer couldn't see me, either. But he knew by now that I didn't have a gun. And he knew that I was on that stairway. He had three bullets left and my skin crawled with fear, expecting hot lead to blast me.

I couldn't retreat. The minute I opened the door behind me my body would be outlined against the light from the hall. So I bent forward until my groping hands found the step under me.

I lay down like a snake, head first, and let my body slide down the steps. My ears were so finely tuned to danger that I could hear the scrape of my coat buttons on the edge of the steps.

A bullet roared through the darkness and I heard it smash into the door at the head of the stairs. The flash showed me Roberts' shadow, standing six feet from the foot of the stairs, his feet fumbling with the wreckage of the Louis XIV chair.

I squeezed my body tight to the steps. Roberts had two bullets left. Two bullets.

I squirmed downward. Another bullet crashed. And I heard a sudden low hiss of breath. I knew Roberts had located me by the flash of his gun.

At that moment the stairway door was jerked open and I heard Morf bellow his head off in fear as Roberts' last bullet smacked into the door and threw splinters of wood into the detective's face. Morf turned yellow and jumped back and closed the door.

I scrambled to my feet and dived off the stairway at Roberts' crouching body. Roberts sidestepped and I sprawled on the concrete. The skin peeled off my palms and I felt warm blood.

There was more light now, or else my eyes were getting used to the dark. Roberts grabbed the chair and hurled it across the room toward the paneled wall. I knew what he was trying to do—break the circuit on the electric eye and open the paneled wall as a means of escape.

I lunged at him in desperation. I heard the chair shatter against the wall. Something slugged out of the dark and slammed into my skull. Pinwheels flared in my brain. I folded up like an accordion and went down on the concrete floor.

In my dizzy brain I heard a crash like two locomotives meeting head on. And then I laughed like a crazy man—and everything went black. . . .

THREE hours later I sat in a chair in my office and acted like a hero while Marge "oh-ed and ah-ed" all over the place with her eyes bugged out like headlights in the rain. She shaved a

little patch of hair off the welt of my skull where Roberts' gun butt had raked it. And then she stuck a strip of tape on my noggin.

"Isn't it thrilling?" she purred. "You solving two murders right under the noses of the police! Tell me all about it."

"There wasn't nothing much to it, Sugar," I said. "When I went down the stairs after Roberts I flicked a switch. When he slugged me and threw the chair to open the paneled wall, it didn't open because I had turned off the electric eye. In the dark he ran into the wall and knocked himself colder than a can of last year's mackerel. It was easy for Morf to put the cuffs on him."

"Why did Roberts kill Dilweg?"

"I told you. Roberts was flimflaming the old man out of a hundred grand a year with his phony Handicap Haven. Dilweg found it out, gave him thunder and threatened to expose him. So Roberts killed him."

"Why did Roberts kill Elkins?"

"Elkins knew Roberts was guilty of murder, and tried to blackmail him. Roberts had to kill him, too."

"Mrs. Lilli Franner. Where does she fit in?"

"We found out more about her. She's been married four times. But her maiden name was Roberts. Yeah, she was Roberts' sister. In addition to his Handicap Haven racket Carson Roberts was the unknown publisher of a matrimonial sucker paper on the Q.T. in East St. Louis. Roberts got Lilli into Dilweg's

house thinking maybe she could charm the old man into marrying her. Dilweg didn't go for that. So Lilli and Roberts settled for the six grand they milked out of Elkins. We even got Elkins' six grand back from Roberts, excepting a thousand he gave to Lilli for her share in the swindle."

"How about Briggs?"

"He was a sap that fell for a dame. But the soldier, Hobson, will do all right. We found out Dilweg had had his lawyers looking all over the armed forces for Hobson. They were always a step behind him. In the old man's will, he set up a trust fund for the guy—all the profit from the oil well he sunk on the kid's land."

Marge moved around and I saw things in her eyes that I'd never seen before.

"I think you're wonderful," she whispered down my neck. "Everybody's happy."

I held my head in my hands. "Everybody but me. I told homicide it was *their* headache. But I lost two hundred bucks when Dilweg was bumped off. I lost two hundred more when Elkins kicked the bucket. Morf got his name in the paper. Hobson got a barrel of money. All I got was crude haircut with a gun butt. Looks like homicide's *my* headache."

"Would this do for an aspirin?"

Marge said, and she kissed me square on my big mouth.

Three days more and it'll be legal for her to boil my coffee and burn my toast.

BANK NIGHT

(Concluded from page 79)

the car lights. "I don't know how one knows things like that, do you?"

"It would be hard to say." She held out her hand then. "Hello," she said.

He inspected her hand.

"No ring, Miss Norton. I'm glad to see that."

"I'm glad, too."

Grant dug in his pocket for the Springfield purchase.

"Would you accept a phony hoop?" he asked. "Just for a day or two?"

She laughed.

"A *what*?"

"Glass ring. All I could afford this morning."

"It's beautiful!" she said, her eyes misty. "And I really mean that. I don't care how poor you are."

Grant Williams loved the look in her eyes, the way she smiled. He had nothin' but money. No, that wasn't true. He felt that he had more than that now. A lot more.



Squidy lay face down across Luggan's doorway

DON'T WAKE THE DEAD

By FRANK MORRIS

It looked too easy to Detective Luggan when the scared little man paid him five hundred to deliver a package!

LUGGAN tossed off his drink, took his feet off the desk and yawned hugely. The clock in the Hall of Records tower across dark Spring Avenue said it was ten and time for little private eyes to be in bed. He picked up his coat from the back of the swivel chair, shrugged into it, gathered up the

Grant reports and crossed to the office safe. Then the doorknob rattled.

He swung around, frowning. A shadowy figure loomed on the frosted glass door leading to the hall, and the doorknob rattled again, imperatively. Luggan stuffed the Grant reports into his pocket, stepped over, turned the key and

flung the door open in one deft motion.

The man who staggered into the office was small and skinny, with a sallow face, pale like the underside of a halibut. He clutched a round newspaper-wrapped package to his heaving chest and hastily closed the door behind him. He wore a camel's-hair coat over the tan suit that clung to his skinny shoulders. He had a bulging egg-shaped head fringed with coarse dark hair. He sucked in his breath and licked thick red lips fearfully.

"Thank you. Thank you," he said hoarsely. "Are you Mister Rick Luggan, the private investigator?"

Luggan nodded and inspected his caller curiously. Queer bird, this. The guy was hopping around like a Mexican jumping bean, and the end of his nose seemed to tremble.

"Turn out the light," the frightened man said, walking to the window and still clutching the package as if his very life were wrapped up within it. "My name's Horace Squidy. My father died this afternoon, and I'm being followed."

"Quiet down," Rick ordered, switching out the light. "Nobody's going to follow you in here. Why are they after you? How many of them are there?"

A LATE trolley rattled by, and Horace Squidy turned from the window.

"Two of them," he mumbled. "Brutish looking fellows. They've been after me since eight o'clock, when I left father's house."

Horace Squidy placed the round package on Rick's desk and looked at the private detective appealingly.

"I want to hire you for a couple of hours." He yanked out his wallet, extracting a sheaf of bills. "Will five hundred dollars be all right?"

"Five hundred dollars is always all right," Rick clipped, rubbing his square chin thoughtfully. "But it depends on what you're hiring me for. I don't like deals with shyster tricks included. *Comprenez?*"

"Nothing shady, I assure you." Squidy wagged his cranium like a semaphore. "Just deliver this package to me at Suite 728, Hotel Commander, sometime tonight."

"What's in the package?" Rick's blue

eyes were hard and bright.

Horace Squidy's hands fluttered over his coat buttons like frightened white butterflies.

"A wastebasket—a rather important wastebasket," he said.

"I would think so, for five hundred bucks." Rick's voice was dry. "All right, I'll bite. What's in the wastebasket?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing." Horace Squidy's thin lips quivered. "Please, Mr. Luggan. You can inspect the package. I think the men following me want the wastebasket. I can't afford to lose it!"

Rick Luggan stepped abruptly to his desk and ripped the newspaper off the package. The wastebasket was of an ordinary variety, made of twisted rattan, and painted with a design Rick didn't bother to examine. It was empty. Rick turned it over and over, and finally put it back on the desk.

"Anything concealed in the rattan?" he demanded. "Jewels—dope—anything?"

"No." Horace Squidy shook his balding head negatively. "I know it sounds queer, but I can't explain any more just now. Just deliver it to me at the hotel."

"I heard you the first time," Rick said tersely. He picked up the money Squidy had counted out and stuffed it into a pocket. Then Luggan opened a desk drawer and pulled out a printed blank. "All right, sign here," he said pointing to the bottom line. "It's one of our printed contract forms. Merely shows that you hired me to represent you in this case."

While Squidy scratched a dime store pen across the form, Rick glanced quickly around his office. His own wire wastebasket stood beside a filing case in one corner. Rick gathered it up and wrapped it in newspaper, then put Horace Squidy's wastebasket in his safe, slammed the steel door, and twisted the combination savagely.

Horace Squidy looked bewildered.

"You came in with a package and you leave with a package," Rick said rapidly. "Otherwise, the guys on your tail will know you dropped it here. You go down, hail a cab and go directly to your hotel. I'll tail your shadows. I want to know who those birds are."

"I—I'm scared," Horace Squidy stut-tered.

"So am I." Rick Luggan grinned. "I don't like delivering an empty wastebasket—especially when big tough thugs are interested in same," he said shoving the false package into Horace Squidy's thin arms. "But I like five C's pretty well. Let's push, as they say in the Marines."

He followed Horace Squidy through the door into the white-walled corridor, and instantly realized his mistake. Two hulking figures lurched from the dark archway leading to the stairwell, and Rick yanked Squidy backward and reached for his gun. Orange flame blossomed in the darkness and Luggan heard his client scream. Squidy spun sideways and the detective glimpsed agonizing horror on the man's pinched face.

Rick Luggan was mad. Mad at himself for letting his client step into such a trap; mad at the two gunmen who sought to kill him. The shamus dived downward and slithered across the dirty tile floor to the slim protection of the wall. His gun came free of its shoulder brace and he fired at the black stair opening. The shot echoed thunderously in the narrow confines of the hall, and Rick saw fire lance again and again from the killers' guns. Squidy had dropped his package seconds before, to stumble back along the wall clutching at his chest, then topple face downward across the doorway to Rick's office.

Rick hugged the cold tile and grimly fired again. The figures melted back into the stairwell darkness. Once more their guns spat flame, and white-hot pain tore across Luggan's head. He lifted himself to his knees, ran a hand over his face and felt blood run warm between his fingers. The corridor tilted crazily and the stairwell rushed at him like a black angel of doom. A red mist floated over his eyes and he tasted salty tears of pain on his lips. Dimly he heard feet pounding in the hall. Then, like that other time on Saipan, Luggan passed out. . . .

TH**ERE** was a pinpoint of light in the abyss, and a thousand blacksmiths pounded angrily on a thousand anvils inside his brain, while a torturing devil

stabbed blazing pitchforks of pain into his temples. Luggan lifted his hand and brushed desperately at the curtain of unconsciousness. His tongue moistened parched blood-caked lips and gradually the pinpoint of light took shape and became an electric bulb in the ceiling. He turned his head and recognized the battered outlines of his own oak desk.

Rick groaned and heaved himself to his feet. He wagged his head back and forth and staggered to the wash basin. He turned on the faucet and winced with pain as he splashed cold water on his face. The wound wasn't so bad; the bullet had skimmed his head, gashing out a red welt along his right temple. He cleaned the gash and patched it with adhesive. Then he remembered Squidy!

Luggan jerked the office door open. The white corridor was mockingly empty and the entrance to the stairwell yawned mutely. There were traces of blood on the tile floor, but it could have been his own. Luggan closed the door and went to the window. The clock in the tower said eleven o'clock. Just one hour had passed since his doorknob had rattled. He got a drink from the bottle in his filing case and tried to think.

One thing was certain—Squidy had been in his office. The wastebasket in his safe and five hundred American dollars testified to that. But why had the killers removed Squidy's body? And why had they hauled him, Luggan, back into his office? His newspaper wrapped wastebasket was gone but he could understand that.

The private eye grimly reloaded his stub-nosed automatic. There was a way to find out—Suite 728 at the Commander Hotel ought to supply a few answers. He pulled the hat low over his eyes to conceal the bandage he had applied and went out.

The Commander was a swank mid-town hotel. Luggan rode silently up in the elevator and walked down the gold and orchid corridor.

Rick pressed the bell of room 728.

The door opened slowly and Rick Luggan looked into the dark bright eyes of danger. The girl was svelte in a white evening gown that clung lovingly to the sweeping lines of a well-curved figure, and her raven black hair was combed

straight back and gathered in a shining bun at the nape of her neck. Her face was a pale and lovely mask. The deep red of her lips curved in a smile that was pure invitation, and long lashes shadowed the purple of her eyes. She was the kind of a girl a man might live for—or kill for. Rick pushed past her into the white and silver living room.

"All right, baby," he said, smiling cynically, "you can start talking. I'm Rick Luggan, and I want to know all about the guy who owns this beautiful dump—and maybe you."

The girl pushed the door closed and followed Luggan into the room. Her wide hips swayed as she walked and her every movement was rhythm and grace. Rick glanced swiftly around, noting the closed door that led to other parts of the suite. A radio played softly in a corner, and the floor lamps shed dim light on the rose-colored carpets. His eyes took in the flowers in bright pots along the wide windows. The girl shoved a cigarette into a long ivory holder and sank down on the divan.

"I love to have strange men burst in on me at midnight and insult me," she said in a husky theatrical voice. "But since you're here and I'm bored, you can stay." Her eyes swept over his tall figure. "Not bad, in a crude sort of way. Luggan, you say? My name is Carla Teresi. What are you, a truck driver?"

Rick regarded her flintily. "You know my business," he said flatly. "But since you want to play—my being a truck driver wouldn't make any difference to a dame like you. Come up for air, cutie. Where is Horace Squidy's body?"

A slow flush crept into Carla's smooth cheeks.

"Straight from the shoulder, aren't you? Mr. Squidy isn't here at the moment, but if you're looking for a body"—she leaned back and stretched and gave him a languorous smile—"why don't you look under the beds?"

LUGGAN saw there were two ways to play it—his way and hers. He sat on the divan beside her and plucked the cigarette from her holder. He took a long drag from the butt and crushed it out in a tray.

"Okay," he grinned thinly. "Have it

your way. What's the score, baby?"

"Score? I don't even know what game you're playing. Would you like a drink?"

"I'd love one," Rick assured her. He watched narrowly as she strolled to the bar and poured whiskey into amber glasses. He was trying to fit glamorous Carla into the life of pinched-face Horace Squidy. He shook his head as she handed him the drink.

"I don't understand it," he confessed. "What a beautiful doll like you is doing in Horace Squidy's apartment."

"Maybe I polish the furniture around here," she said flippantly and winked at him over the rim of her glass. "Here's to you, handsome."

Luggan lifted the drink and caught a whiff of chloral hydrate. He uncrossed his legs and somehow his toe tipped over the cocktail table. It crashed on the rug, and the glass top splintered.

"Sorry," he said, contritely.

Carla bent to straighten the table, and the hired cop calmly poured his drink down the back of her beautiful neck. She jumped to her feet, gasping as the ice rolled down her bare back to the floor. Luggan came off the divan, gun in hand.

"That's all I wanted to know, baby," he clipped. "Knockout drops mean you're in this, too. Let's see who else is around."

Luggan walked quickly across to the side door and jerked it open. A broad-shouldered heavyweight in a tweed suit bowled out, fists flailing. He was almost as big as Rick Luggan, but slower, much slower. He had a moon-round beefy face, with squinty little blue eyes like gimlet holes set close together over a bulbous nose. His hair and ragged mustache were light brown, and on one side of his blunt jaw was the white cicatrix of a past knife slash.

Rick slipped sideways and clipped the man behind the ear. The big man crashed onto the rose-colored carpet, arms akimbo! Rick spun on Carla. Her lovely eyes were wide now with fright, and she shrank back toward the hall door.

"Over there," the detective ordered thinly, and waved his gun toward the windows. "And keep your beautiful mouth shut unless you want to talk to the police."

He jerked the heavyweight into a sitting position and slapped the man's beefy face, rocking it back and forth. The man groaned and opened his eyes. Rick clipped him backhand across the mouth.

"All right, wise guy," he gritted. "Your little act is over. You and the girl friend are taking me to the guy who's running this shindig, savvy?"

The man glared at Luggan with killer eyes. Rick backhanded him again, gashing his knuckles on the man's teeth. A thin line of blood trickled from the heavyweight's thick lips.

"Savvy?" Rick repeated, cocking his fist.

The man nodded and Rick pulled him to his feet.

"Where?" he snapped.

"Cliffside," Carla Teresi said from across the room. "I'll get a coat." Her shapely shoulders were trembling and she gazed at Rick with a curious mixture of admiration and despair. "It's right there in the hall closet."

They made an odd looking trio as they crossed the hotel lobby—the girl in the silver fox coat and white evening gown, the big man in the tweed suit, glum and downcast, and the tall man walking behind, hand in the pocket of his tan sport coat. They piled into a taxi at the curb, and Carla gave an address in swanky, suburban Cliffside. She leaned back on the cushions as the cab glided out on the deserted boulevard.

"I don't know anything about this," she said, glancing at Rick appraisingly. "I'm just going along for the ride."

"It may be a long one," Rick said to Carla, his gun in the heavyweight's ribs. "A guy died in the corridor outside my office and somebody's going to get my receipt for the job. You, beautiful lady, wouldn't look good strapped in the electric chair."

CARLA'S eyes opened wide. "Murder? Listen, you can let me out right here. I'm not getting mixed up in any murder!"

"Shut up!" Heavyweight snarled. "This guy is off his head. Squidy will fix it."

"Squidy better be a good fixer," Luggan

said dryly, "and have a direct wire from heaven—or hell!"

The house at Cliffside clung to a dark mountainside high above the wind-swept ocean. It was just one A.M. by Rick's wrist watch when the cab pulled up in the drive and he herded his charges toward the door. He told the cabbie to wait. The walls of the massive stucco loomed like the ramparts of a Spanish grandee's castle, enclosing a sinister silence, through which their footsteps echoed hollowly as they walked down the loggia. Rick hung on the bell, keeping the gun concealed in his pocket.

The man who opened the door was a squat replica of Heavyweight. His fat jowls overhung his collar and his cheeks were a dark olive brown. Close-set black eyes regarded Carla, Heavyweight, and then Luggan. His gaze was freighted with suspicion.

"What the blazes you want?" he rumbled. He fixed his gaze on Heavyweight. "What goes on, Al?"

Al jerked a thumb at Luggan.

"This guy wants to see the boss." He leered at Carla. "She came along for the ride."

Luggan dug his elbow hard into the big man's ribs, and Al gasped in pain. His lips drew back from yellow teeth, and he snarled like a cornered fox.

"I'll do the talking," the shamus clipped. "You—Apple-nose," he addressed the man in the doorway, "get your boss down here fast, unless you want your teeth kicked in."

Apple-nose looked the hard-faced private eye up and down, then retreated a step. For a moment, Rick thought he would close the door.

"My name's Joe," the squat man mumbled. "All right, come on in."

Rick entered last. Joe motioned the trio into a huge, beamed living room opening off the foyer, where the embers of fire still glowed in a stone hearth.

Luggan motioned Carla and Al to chairs, and put his back to the fireplace. He fixed his eyes on the entrance. He was ready for anything, fingers wrapped around the butt of the automatic in his pocket. Ready for anything, that is, except the man who walked into the living room.

It just couldn't be Horace Squidy! Luggan saw that same pinched up face and bulging forehead, egg-shaped dome and retreating chin. But there was a difference; the detective could see it now. This man wasn't Horace Squidy, much as he looked like him.

This man was at least five years younger than Horace. He was dressed in a tan suit much like the one Horace had worn, but his hair was dark brown; Horace's fringe had been almost black. This man had bright blue eyes; Horace's eyes had been a slate gray. No, this wasn't the same man. But at a casual glance he looked enough like Horace Squidy to be a twin; he certainly was some relation.

Rick shrugged. If this man wanted him to believe he was Horace Squidy, let him go ahead. Maybe he could learn something that way. Horace Squidy was dead, shot to death before his eyes in the corridor outside his office.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Luggan." The pinched face widened in a smile. "You didn't have to come out so late. Our business could have waited until tomorrow."

"Nothing waits till tomorrow," Luggan growled. "What kind of an act is this? First you're dead—then you're alive. A couple of things need explaining, and quick!"

Squidy stopped on the other side of a massive mahogany table. His blue eyes were impassive.

"You were paid to deliver a wastebasket to me," he said, "not to ask questions. Do you have the package with you?"

So that was why he was trying to pass himself off as Horace Squidy.

"I'm not a complete fool," Rick assured him. "The wastebasket is put away in a safe place. You get it when I get an explanation." He tipped his hat back from his temple, exposing the bandage. "Maybe you're a ghost, but there was nothing spectral about the slug that clipped me tonight. What kind of game are you playing, Squidy? I don't like being a sucker."

JOE moved threateningly into the room, but Squidy waved the heavy-jowled man back.

"It's simple enough," he said imperturbably. "I returned to the hotel and when you didn't bring the package, I came out here to my home for the night." He glanced at Carla. "Are you all right, dear?"

"Don't call me dear." The brunette's dark eyes sparkled angrily. "The man is talking about murder, and that's something I want no part of. I go no further than handing a nosy investigator knock-out drops."

"My secretary is a little upset." Squidy moistened his lips with a nervous tongue. "Since you are here, Mr. Luggan, we might as well arrange for delivery of the package. I'll send my men with you into the City and you can deliver the wastebasket to them."

"I don't think so," he said. His voice was deadly quiet. "You don't seem to remember the shooting in the hall. Why you aren't dead, I haven't figured out yet, but I'm not your fall guy."

Rick glanced sideways as Al's chair squeaked, but the big man was just shifting position. When he looked back at Squidy, the private detective was facing a gun. The dome-headed man's eyes were hard.

"Better be reasonable, Mr. Luggan," he clipped. "I want that package bad enough to"—he waggled the gun suggestively—"go to any lengths to get it. Al, take that weapon from his pocket."

Heavyweight rose with a leering smile, and removed the automatic from Rick's coat pocket.

"Blast you!" he snarled. "This is for the slapping around you hand out." He balled his hamlike fist and slammed Rick across the jaw. The private detective's head jerked back and he staggered against the table. Al swung again, and pile-driving pain drove into Rick's ribs. Squidy waved the gun.

"None of that," he ordered sharply. He spoke in an undertone to Joe. "All right, take him along. You stay here, Carla. And Mr. Luggan"—his voice was freighted with warning—"we want no foolishness. Just that wastebasket."

They marched outside and climbed into the cab Luggan had had wait. The driver grinned at them, thinking of the large round numbers on his meter.

Rick Luggan silently watched the pale

street lights flash by as the cab buzzed up deserted Seaside Boulevard. Joe and Al squeezed him from either side, sitting with arms folded over broad chests. Rick could feel the muzzle of his own gun poking his ribs from underneath Joe's armpit.

He stared stonily at the back of the driver's neck, thinking. He could turn the wastebasket over to the two thugs and forget the whole thing. He had his five hundred. But Rick Luggan realized he couldn't step out now. Somewhere, there was an answer to the puzzle and he had to find it. If he handed over Squidy's wastebasket, he handed over his life—for he knew instinctively that they would kill him on that instant.

"Where we going?" Joe growled. "I want to get this business over with."

"We'll go to my office." Rick leaned forward and gave the driver the Spring Avenue address. He thought he felt the squat gorilla's shoulder tremble, but maybe it was the cab jolting.

"Why your office?" Joe's heavy jowls sank. "How come your office is open at two A.M.?"

Rick smiled thinly. "Maybe you'd rather go to a police station." His voice was cold, hard. "You don't like my office, do you, Apple-nose? It's open—it's always open for business like ours."

Joe turned threateningly in the seat.

"Don't call me Apple-nose—" he began.

"Shut up," Al ordered. Joe's big companion dug the gun into Luggan's side. "You too, smart guy."

The cab pulled up in front of the two story brownstone building housing the detective's office, and Al stepped down to the curb, followed by the private eye. As his feet hit the sidewalk, Luggan whirled and whipped the cab door closed in Joe's face. There was a fleeting moment of surprise in Al's beefy face and he swung his gun around. Luggan caught the blow on an arm. He gritted his teeth and drove his fist hard into Heavyweight's bruised mouth. Al grunted and sat down on the sidewalk. The detective sped across to the shelter of the building foyer. He ran up the marble steps three at a time and took the corridor in long strides to his office.

Inside he got a spare gun from his desk and went to the window. The cab was speeding away, in the direction of the Commander Hotel.

RICK LUGGAN sighed and wiped the sweat from his tanned forehead. He hadn't thought they'd risk following him into the office, to face an almost certain gun.

Luggan got the wastebasket from his safe and stood it on his desk. He inspected the brown rattan container from every angle, even cut into the material to locate any hidden article, but there was nothing. He examined the bottom to see if it was false, but it was just a thin sheet of metal. The design on the basket claimed his attention. A string of bright colored flower pots containing Holland tulips circled the upper rim of the basket. Below these, around the base, Rick saw a painted seascape, with white sailboats climbing blue waves. He frowned and rubbed his head. Flower pots? The sea? That didn't ring any bells.

The wound in Luggan's forehead began to throb. He went to the filing case for his bottle, found it empty and crossed to the closet for a fresh bottle. The detective jerked the light switch upward, and froze in his tracks. Slumped in a corner of the closet, under the shelves, his jaw gaping horribly and the front of his camel's hair coat soaked with dried blood, was a pinched-face man. It was Horace Squidy!

For the second time that night, Rick Luggan's senses reeled and his mind refused to believe his eyes. But his amazement was shortlived. He stepped briskly into the closet and bent over the body. The coat was torn where killer slugs had ripped into the man's chest. Luggan felt the hands, and found them stiff. Four and a half hours, he thought, was time enough for rigor mortis to set in. Rick's heart pounded as he switched out the light and closed the closet door. Now things began to make sense—the dead didn't wake. He glanced at the wastebasket, and somewhere in his mind a single bell tolled. He scooped up the basket and raced for the door.

There might still be time!

It seemed to take forever for the cab to cross town. Every red light went against them as Luggan sat tensely on the edge of the rear seat urging the driver on. Slow moving milk trucks got in the way, and at a railroad crossing the cab waited interminably for a freight to pass. The driver wanted to talk, to know why Rick was in such a hurry, and tried to tell him about his kid's new tricycle. The shamus finally tossed the man a ten dollar bill and angrily ordered him to shut up.

A single cluster of lights burned inside the Commander Hotel lobby as Luggan plunged through the revolving doors and walked briskly up to the desk clerk. He flashed his state shield briefly.

"Detective." He ripped the word at the astonished bald-headed clerk. "Get Sergeant Clancy on the phone at the Twelfth Precinct Station. Tell him to get the Homicide Squad rolling to Suite 728—and give me a pass key."

The clerk paled and nodded. He handed Luggan the key, and the private eye raced for the elevators.

"After you let me out at the seventh floor, take this elevator down and keep it down until the police come," Luggan told the boy. "And if you hear any shooting, find a place to hide."

The gold and orchid corridor was deserted. Rick bent in front of 728, fitted the key in the lock and swung the door open gently. He stepped inside and set the wastebasket down. Across the room Carla Teresi looked up from a magazine. Her dark eyes widened with surprise.

"You again!" she gasped. "Don't you have a home?"

Luggan laid a finger across his lips. His feet made no sound on the thick rose-colored rug as he crossed to her side.

"Where's your boss?" he asked softly.

She nodded silently at the connecting door. Her words were a fierce whisper.

"Listen—I don't have anything to do with murder."

The detective quieted her with a gesture. "I know. How about the mugs—they in there, too?"

She nodded again. "Came in ten minutes ago, pretty excited."

"They're not nearly as excited as they

will be," Rick grinned thinly, "when the State shoots the juice to them. Get out into the corridor, baby. The cops are on the way."

Carla rose and left the room. Luggan crossed swiftly to the flower pots arranged along the window, and sat them on the floor. His deft fingers pried at the broad sill, and the board came loose easily. Luggan reached a long arm into the opening and his hand came out with a long metal box. He smiled in quick satisfaction. The wastebasket hadn't lied. Sea under flower pots. Quickly he opened the box and scanned the papers it contained. His smile broadened.

HE WAS putting the sill back as the connecting door opened.

"Carla," a rasping voice said, "the boss wants you."

Luggan reached for his gun.

"Hello, Killer," Rick clipped, as Joe's squat figure appeared in the doorway. "Come on out—with your hands up."

Joe's close-set eyes darted to the window. He reached for his hip and crowded back. The detective's automatic leaped in his hand, and through the blue gunsmoke he saw Joe stumble forward to his knees. Swiftly Rick circled the divan, keeping his gun trained on the doorway, and through the narrow opening he saw Al's heavyweight figure lunging for cover. Luggan fired again, and his bullet tore into a mirror, filling the suite with the tinkle of broken glass.

In the silence following his shot, the eye spoke again.

"The game's over, Harold Squidy. I've found your uncle's will and his letter, telling his fear of you. You'll never have that money now, Harold. Your uncle hid the will right here in your cousin's suite, and gave him the wastebasket when he died. You knew that wastebasket contained a clue to the location of the will. Come out alive, cousin killer, if you want to—otherwise, you come out dead!"

Al's big frame loomed suddenly in the doorway, gun spouting leaden death. The big man rushed the divan, and Luggan had time for only one shot. The heavyweight crashed over a table and his thick arms wrapped themselves around the detective's chest. Tearing

pain ran into Luggan's lungs as the big man's arms tightened like hot steel bands. Red spots danced before the private dick's eyes, and he caught a fleeting glimpse of something white overhead. A vase came crashing down.

Al's grip relaxed and the cop slipped out from beneath the killer's limp body. Carla stood over him, red lips compressed grimly, in her hands the broken remnants of the vase.

"Thanks, Baby," Rick grinned quickly. "That makes us even."

He walked to the doorway and into the bedroom. Harold Squidy's round-shouldered figure covered in a corner behind the bed. Rick jerked the man to his feet and led him out into the living room. He shoved the dome-headed man into a chair.

"Cousins," he said to Carla. "Only this one was left out of his uncle's will. Too blasted mean. For a while he had me buffaloed. I knew all the time he wasn't Horace, but couldn't quite make out the

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set-up. Now about those knock-out drops, Baby—"

"He told me you were a snoop and he wanted to turn you over to the police." Carla lit a cigarette nervously. Her smooth cheeks were warm with color and her deep red lips glowed invitingly. "I didn't know any different," she added. "Not for a while."

Rick smiled and his eyes slid over the sweeping curves of her graceful figure. Through the window the rising wail of a siren tore the night.

"Okay, Baby, after we explain to the cops, we'll have plenty of time for everything."

Three Top-Flight Novels

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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 7)

being the best lady bowler in the whole wide world. She may have muscles all right—but they're nice, rippling muscles and all in the right places. Honey Hendrix can evoke the wolf-whistles from the boys present at this political shindig—or anywhere else for that matter.

Along the hall, Di and Gail pass three interesting local characters ostensibly on their way from the party. They are Tom Duffy, editor of *The Banner*, the rival paper of Di's sheet, and his two henchmen, those two disappointed office seekers, Blair Summers and Luke Street. What are they doing at the affair since they are of the opposition? Are they jackals, seeking some untasted carrion the lion might leave behind?

The lion, in this instance, is the newly-elected mayor, Dave Nance. Entering the reception hall of the radio studio, Vi notices that His Honor—to be—isn't present. Inquiring of old Dan McGuire, ex-commissioner and party stalwart, Berke is informed that Nance is taking a shower. They can hear the hiss of the running water from where they stand.

Di Berke and his wife are there to do a job—Di to interview, Gail to take pictures. With the photogenic Honey on the job, the picture-taking comes first. It's a good thing too, for the lady-bowler has been flirting outrageously with Di.

Flashbulbs and Bullets

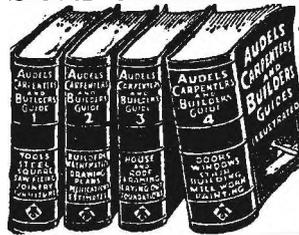
There is the popping of one flashbulb, then another. There might be "too much exposure," Gail says icily, whereupon Honey glares. Almost as if synchronized with the second flashbulb, comes another sound from the shower-room—the sound of a shot. Strange too, because they can still hear the hissing of the water.

Led by Berke, the men rush in and find the mayor dead, lying on the floor under the shower, a .44 revolver in his hand. It looks like a clear case of suicide. Back in the reception-room Dan McGuire says so.

"It may look like suicide," answers Berke. "But a lot of people would like to see Dave Nance dead—including you." Then to his photographer wife; "Come on, baby. We have a story to do!"

[Turn page]

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By C. S. Montanye

As we all remember, no one knows Broadway any better than our Johnny, not only Gay Street itself, but who's who and what's what thereon. Just now the dizzy alley is all agog about someone who skims about on the stuff that is "better for drinking than sliding around on". By this, Johnny Castle means ice—you know Johnny for those wisecracks. This yarn fairly crackles with them.

On the ice and the star of that big revue, "Frozen Follies of 1948," is one Suzette Darcy—really just a cute kid from Minnesota. But she can skate, reminding everyone of the great Sonya in her heydey. And when it comes to beauty, Suzette has curves that will put to shame the classiest of her figure "8's". Not only has she a figure. Her face is that of a goddess, crowned by a mass of copper-bronze hair.



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Johnny Castle is glad he's up close, there at the Palladium, where the big extravaganza is holding forth. It gives him a chance to look around. Present in a stage box is Amos Tinsey, of Suzette's home town. He's known to the World as the Flour King and purported to have given the skater the fabulous Emory emeralds.

Trust Johnny to spot everybody—not only the high but the low. There's Nicholas Caduro, not satisfied to be the head of two or three rackets—he wants to head 'em all. Also there is his henchman, George Bister—weak on brains, yet mighty strong on brawn. Their presence in the music hall bodes no good for Suzette—or her emeralds.

Naturally Johnny wants to know "what's the pitch" as far as their presence is concerned. Libby tells him that the contract for the skater's endorsement of Perfect Petal Cream is right in her handbag. She and the reporter for the Orbit are to go back to the star's dressingroom, after the performance.

But Johnny is destined never to see Suzette Darcy as a living, vibrant creature again. The flesh is marblelike where the make-up stops. An ugly red stain spreads across the front of her dress, even as he watches. Strange—he saw her on the stage as a thing of beauty at 11:30. At midnight she is a corpse!

Johnny brushes by a frantic girl on his way to call the police. He learns that she is Nan Tinsley, the flour tycoon's daughter.

[Turn page]

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Thank you Mr. Field. Mr. Daniels is one of the most prolific and conscientious of writers. His work is well-deserving of your praise. The character of Gilbert Clark is one of his newer creations.

Here's another boost from away around on the other side of the world:

I think THRILLING DETECTIVE is one of the better, if not the very best detective magazine. Away up here, we read it from cover to cover. When we have finished, we pass it around to all our friends. Don't ever let us down!—Edward L. Talbot, Anchorage, Alaska.

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Thanks for the tip, Ward, but you'd be surprised how many letters we get boosting Race Williams and Nick Ransom. You ought to be pleased with this issue. We try to suit the wants of the majority. We're grateful for praise. But if you have a peeve, let's know it! The more letters, the better the magazine—and both compliments and criticisms are welcome. We'll print excerpts from many more missives in coming issues.

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See you next issue and happy reading to all!

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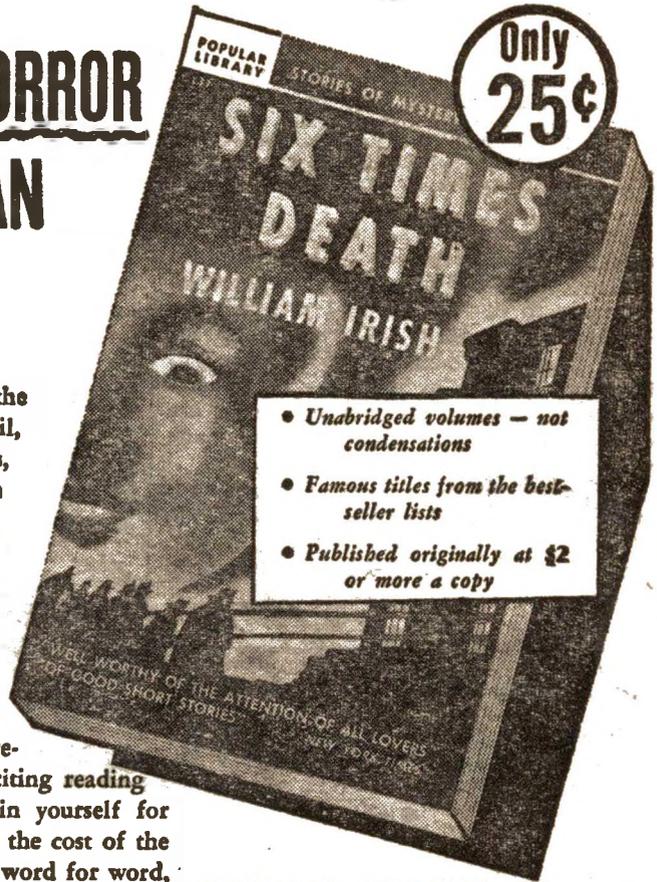
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