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**THRILLING**

A THRILLING  
PUBLICATION

ANC

# DETECTIVE



**WINGS FOR  
AN ANGEL**

*A Johnny Castle  
Novelet*

By C. S. MONTANYE

**SUICIDE SCENARIO**

A Nick Ransom Novelet by ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

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# THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. LXI, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

FEBRUARY, 1948

*A Nick Ransom Novelet*



## SUICIDE SCENARIO

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

*A stunt man turned private eye needs every gimmick in his bag of tricks when a homicide pitch in Hollywood hurls him into the toughest case of his career!* . . .

13

*Three Other Full-Length Novelets*

**THE BODY IN THE TRUNK** . . . . . H. Q. Masur 44

*Murder goes haywire when the prospective victim hires Detective Caro in advance—to solve the crime!*

**WINGS FOR AN ANGEL** . . . . . C. S. Montanye 66

*The sports writer and dilettante detective battles with fists, wits and guns when the backer of a Broadway show is killed!*

**BLOOD RED** . . . . . Norman A. Daniels 90

*When young intern Gilbert Clark handles a fatal accident case, he discovers a clue which reveals a diabolical crime scheme!*

*Short Stories*

**WRONG NUMBER** . . . . . John L. Benton 40

*Ambition and envy stir up a seething cauldron of crime*

**WEIGH-IN FOR MURDER** . . . . . Carter Critz 63

*One-way Walker takes part in a three-way tragedy in Brooklyn*

**ONE DIED FIRST** . . . . . Wayland Rice 82

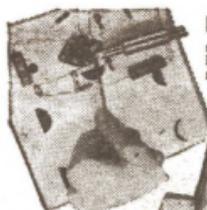
*Prescott was determined to rout out the killer—for Uncle Ed's sake*

and

**HEADQUARTERS** . . . . . A Department 6

*Where readers, writers and the editor meet*

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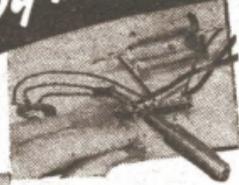
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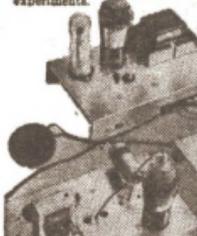
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# Headquarters

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## MURDER OUT OF HAND

By EDWARD RONNS

We really think this sterling author has outdone himself in creating private eye, Barney Forbes. Setting out on an investigation for a client, Forbes sticks a notice up on the door of his office: "Back in two weeks—perhaps."

Barney Forbes follows his instructions, going in a roundabout way to Galveston, where he winds up at the Star Hotel. Here he registers—again as per instructions—as Allan Andrews and is given room 410. The bellboy at the hotel tells Forbes that a young man with fancy shoes seems extremely interested in his arrival.

Fancy Shoes is quite evident in St. Louis and also in Memphis, but Forbes doesn't see him again. Forbes arrives by bus—again as per instructions—at the Crestline Inn, eight miles outside of Sunfield, which is his ultimate destination.

### An Unpopular Character

From the bartender at the inn and also from Willie, who is the window-washer, Forbes finds out that Allan Andrews has been none too popular. There are lots and lots of people here in Sunfield who do not like Allan Andrews a bit.

Forbes finds that out further, as Willie drives him to town in his car. Forbes is shot at with a rifle, as they drive along a lonely road. Willie is hit by shards of glass from the shattered windshield. Whoever is shooting, is shooting to kill. Forbes, getting out of the car, is unable to find the marksman.

Entering the grounds of his purportedly "ancestral" home that night, Forbes is almost run down by a heavy motor car. He escapes in the underbrush and later confronts the driver of the car. This personage turns out to be his alleged "cousin", Roger Sothern. In the car with him is a snappy blonde who introduces herself as Sheila McKay, who says she is Jasper Andrews' secretary. Of course, old Jasper is supposed to be Forbes' "father." In Sheila, Forbes finds a mighty good reason for continuing with the case.

### "Get Out or Die!"

Next day, Barney gets all the dope from Amos Peabody when he meets the old lawyer face to face. You see, when Allan Andrews ran away from home, he broke old Jasper's heart. Only last week, the old man had a stroke.

Peabody is afraid the old man will let his hated rival, Mike Creel, take over the mines and collieries. Forbes tells Peabody that he is sure that somebody *knows* he is only impersonating Allan Andrews. The old lawyer seems very much disturbed by this information.

After a few days, Forbes finally sees the man who is supposed to be his father. There is a tense scene. And when Forbes sees the old gentleman for the second time it is as a

(Continued on page 8)

Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet

# To those who think LEARNING MUSIC is hard . . .

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## HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 6)

lifeless corpse seated in a wheel-chair!

One of the most interesting features of the case is brought to Forbes' attention by Sheila, just before the discovery of the old man's battered body. She tells him someone has left a message for him and leads him out into the foyer of the old mansion. There, scrawled on the mirror in lipstick, is the ominous sentence: "You are not Allen Andrews. Get out or die."

All in all, the Andrews family, with their friends, relatives and employees, make up an intriguing household. In the house, in addition to Roger Sothern, there is also Aunt Jane who is his mother and Tobias, the trusted butler. In Peabody's office, there is old Simon Bray who has a habit of listening at doors. Also there is Mike Creel who wants the coal mines and doesn't make any bones about it. Also, don't let us forget Fancy Shoes!

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### A Dwight Berke Novelet

Your old pal Dwight Berke of the *Journal* and his charming photographer wife Gail, will be back next issue in a smashing novelet. They were with us recently in "Death Throws a Ringer"—remember? This time we'll present:

## HIGHWAY HOMICIDE

By CARL G. HODGES

Berke and Gail are in the Dalton Boys' Cafe, celebrating the victory of the softball team. Gail is sure she has some very good shots of same in her camera. It is a farmer, Olaf Johnson, who brings in word of finding the body. It is the body of Captain Ferguson of the Traffic Squad and he is lying there in the road with a .22 bullet right between his eyes. Of course it was late and on a very dark night.

What was he doing there—did he have a secret date with someone? Why was he in civilian clothes and where was his car?

It seems to Berke, to be a sad end for a

(Continued on page 10)

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**HEADQUARTERS**

(Continued from page 8)

man who faced death so often while wearing Uncle Sam's uniform. He had lost his leg in battle and wore an artificial one. Gail luckily had some flashbulbs with her and took several pictures of the body.

Sheriff Bill Couch says Ferguson wasn't killed there. Of course there was that old feud between the traffic officer and the owner of the saloon, Grady Dalton. It seems that Dalton had once been a cop and it was Ferguson who turned him in for taking "hush" money. There is also the case of Johnny Nick who ran the service station. It was Ferguson's evidence that had once sent Nick to the pen.

They find Ferguson's car and there is evidence that he did have a clandestine date. This seems to cause Howard Coe's ears to prick up. You see—he is the radio announcer on Station WTAX and thrives on gossip.

Gail has taken the Berke family coupe and gone back to the stadium where the softball game had been held. Berke had to get his paper on the phone and do some theorizing concerning the identity of the suspected culprit. Berke finds a brand-new notebook on the body bearing the name, "J. Peter Baxter 850" scribbled in an unknown handwriting.

It is known that Ferguson was killed with a Colt Woodsman Sports model .22. Who would have a gun like that? Somebody in the Springfield Target Club, perhaps. Both Dalton and Nick belong to that club—so does Coe!

**Fast Work**

Reaching the stadium grounds, Berke sees the door of his coupe wide open. Suddenly from within there are wild, piercing screams—Gail! Berke runs toward the car in time to see a strange shape leap into the darkness and escape. Reviving his frightened wife, Berke hears from her that she has been slugged by an unknown stranger and her camera torn from around her neck. They find the instrument where it has been flung in the grass nearby. But the plateholders which contained the pictures of Ferguson's body, have been stripped of plates.

(Continued on page 110)

# What Strange Powers Did The Ancients Possess?

**E**VERY important discovery relating to mind power, sound thinking and cause and effect, as applied to self-advancement, was known centuries ago, before the masses could read and write.

Much has been written about the wise men of old. A popular fallacy has it that their secrets of personal power and successful living were lost to the world. Knowledge of nature's laws, accumulated through the ages, is never lost. At times the great truths possessed by the sages were hidden from unscrupulous men in high places, but never destroyed.

## Why Were Their Secrets Closely Guarded?

Only recently, as time is measured; not more than twenty generations ago, less than 1/100th of 1% of the earth's people were thought capable of receiving basic knowledge about the laws of life, for it is an elementary truism that knowledge is power and that power cannot be entrusted to the ignorant and the unworthy. Wisdom is not readily attainable by the general public; nor recognized when right within reach. The average person absorbs a multitude of details about things, but goes through life without ever knowing where and how to acquire mastery of the fundamentals of the inner mind—that mysterious silent something which "whispers" to you from within.

## Fundamental Laws of Nature

Your habits, accomplishments and weaknesses are the effects of causes. Your thoughts and actions are governed by fundamental laws. Example: The law of compensation is as funda-

mental as the laws of breathing, eating and sleeping. All fixed laws of nature are as fascinating to study as they are vital to understand for success in life.

You can learn to find and follow every basic law of life. You can begin at any time to discover a whole new world of interesting truths. You can start at once to awaken your inner powers of self-understanding and self-advancement. You can learn from one of the world's oldest institutions, first known in America in 1694. Enjoying the high regard of hundreds of leaders, thinkers and teachers, the order is known as the Rosicrucian Brotherhood. Its complete name is the "Ancient and Mystical Order Rosae Crucis," abbreviated by the initials "AMORC." The teachings of the Order are not sold, for it is not a commercial organization, nor is it a religious sect. It is a non-profit fraternity, a brotherhood in the true sense.

## Not For General Distribution

Sincere men and women, in search of the truth—those who wish to fit in with the ways of the world—are invited to write for a complimentary copy of the sealed booklet, "The Mastery of Life." It tells how to contact the librarian of the archives of AMORC for this rare knowledge. This booklet is not intended for general distribution; nor is it sent without request. It is therefore suggested that you write for your copy to Scribe J. M. B.

**The ROSICRUCIANS**  
[AMORC]

San Jose

California

# TOM STOPPED THE RUNAWAY AND THEN...

WATCHED BY HER DAD AND A PASSERBY,  
"BABS" WEBB IS GIVING HER FAVORITE TROTTER  
HIS MORNING WORKOUT WHEN...



STEADY,  
JEB!



JUMP, BABS!

THE FEAR-CRAZED ANIMAL  
SNAPS A REIN AND GALLOPS  
BLINDLY AT THE FENCE



WHOA, BOY!  
IT'S ALL OVER



WHEW! THAT  
WAS CLOSE. ARE  
YOU ALL RIGHT,  
BABS?

TOM ADAM'S  
MY NAME. JUST DRIVING  
THROUGH

YES, THANKS TO  
MISTER...



LUNCH? YOU'RE VERY  
KIND, BUT I'M HARDLY  
PRESENTABLE. BEEN  
DRIVING SINCE  
MIDNIGHT AND...

YOU CAN  
CLEAN UP  
AT THE CLUB.  
COME ON



AND  
HERE'S  
MY  
RAZOR



THIS BLADE'S A  
SWEETHEART!  
MY FACE FEELS  
GREAT!

TOUGH WHISKERS  
ARE NO PROBLEM  
FOR THIN  
GILLETTES.  
THEY'RE PLENTY  
KEEN



I WISH YOU COULD  
SEE ME DRIVE  
IN THE CLUB  
HANDICAP THIS  
SATURDAY

HE'S CERTAINLY  
HANDSOME

SATURDAY?  
TRY AND KEEP  
ME AWAY!



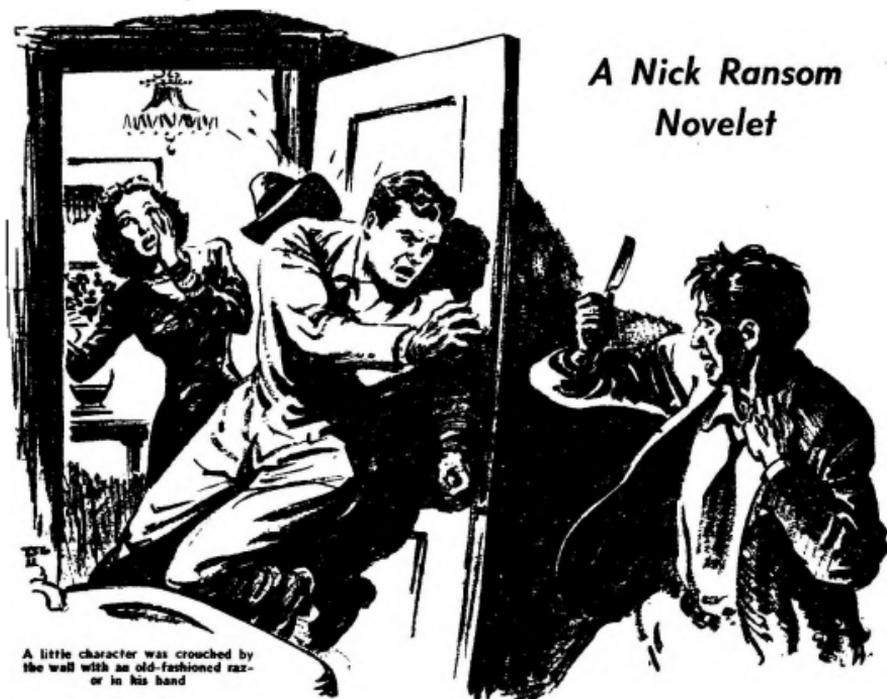
YOU'LL FIND SHAVING IS QUICKER, EASIER,  
AND MORE REFRESHING WITH THIN GILLETTES.  
NO OTHER LOW-PRICED BLADE IS SO KEEN  
AND SO LONG LASTING. AND, FURTHERMORE,  
THIN GILLETTES PROTECT YOU FROM THE  
IRRITATION AND DISCOMFORT CAUSED BY MISFIT  
BLADES BECAUSE EVERY THIN GILLETTE IS  
MADE TO FIT YOUR GILLETTE  
RAZOR PRECISELY. TO GET REAL  
SHAVING SATISFACTION...  
USE THIN GILLETTES



4 for 10¢



*A Nick Ransom  
Novelet*



A little character was crouched by the wall with an old-fashioned razor in his hand

# SUICIDE SCENARIO

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

*A stunt man turned private eye needs every gimmick in his bag of tricks when a homicide pitch in Hollywood hurls him into the toughest crime case of his career!*

## CHAPTER I

### LADY IN DISTRESS

**I**BORE down on my brake pedal, skidded my coupe to an erratic stop on the wet, deserted residential street. A dame was waving at me, desperately.

"Hey, what the devil!" I said.

She came running through the rain, a tall and shapely muffin whose soaked dress plastered itself to her bountiful curves like Scotch tape. Her hair was long and unpent, a black cascade streaming back over her shoulders as she pelted up to me, and the frantic urgency on her mush was enough to give a man the fantods. If ever a tomato was in trouble, this one obviously was.

"Please!" she gasped; "Oh, please!"

Even with the fear in it, her voice had a throatily cultured quality I liked. It was a voice that belonged in a drawing room, not outdoors in a deluge.

She put her hands on the upper edge of my jalopy's side window as I cranked it down. Her nails were carefully manicured, but not painted. I liked that, too. The hands pushed down with the window and then splayed over the ledge when the pane dropped into its narrow slot.

"Please!" she repeated. "Help me! Please."

"Help you how, hon?" I said.

"My husband." She choked on it. "My husband—"

Her face was pale perfection—chiselled lips, high cheekbones, a nose as straight as an Indian's, a complexion that didn't wash off with rainwater. Fine lines ran almost imperceptibly from her flared nostrils to the corners of her mouth, and there were other lines around her dark eyes. The lines might have been more patent in a stronger light, but dusk was lowering, and the storm made it all the thicker.

In a way, that was a break for the brunette cupcake. It made her look about twenty-eight instead of the forty she probably was. Not that there's anything wrong with forty when it's well-preserved and properly cared for.

"My husband—" She choked on it again.

"What about him?" I said.

"He—he's killing himself!" Her knuckles whitened, clenching the sill. "Please! Help me! Please."

I've been a private dick here in movie-town a lot of years. Before that I was a stunt man with my own organization, called Risks Incorporated, but I gave up stunting because snooping seemed easier—and more lucrative. I was wrong about that. A detective takes more chances than a professional daredevil, any way you want to look at it. And he often gets paid off in peanuts—or in bullets.

**J**UST the same, the sign on the door of my lone-wolf agency office on Hollywood boulevard no longer reads "Risks Incorporated." It's been changed

to "Nick Ransom, Investigations." And that name has been hot copy for newspapers and magazines longer than I like to think about. My shabby carpet has been walked on by some of the most important feet in the galloping snapshots.

I've done jobs for producers, directors, stars, bit players and assorted geniuses of every size and gender. I've hauled them out of jams, solved their mysteries, rendered first aid to their romances, and sent a few of them to the gas house up at San Quentin. I've even got a pipe line to Police Headquarters in the person of my friend Ole Brunvig, Homicide lieutenant.

And last but not least, I've got enemies under every second rock.

The enemies are part of the game, naturally. In my racket you acquire them in wholesale lots. Among the characters who hate my interior dimensions there are always some with the nasty habit of trying to install me behind a nice ripe eight-ball or beneath a marble monument.

Experience has taught me to keep my guard up at all times against potential traps; to think things over carefully before making any rash moves. As a means of staying healthy it beats vitamin pills by a mile and six furlongs.

Sometimes, though, you mustn't look too long before leaping and when the brunette quail informed me that her hubby was about to knock himself off, it seemed to be one of those times. In a split instant I reviewed and discarded the idea that I was being shilled into a phony setup.

All the evidence contradicted any such notion.

To begin with, I hadn't told anybody I was going down to Mantan Beach for an early supper of Italian spaghetti and meat balls at a favorite eatery of mine, a place called Tano's. Even if I had broadcast the news, nobody could possibly have guessed the route I would take as I drove home. I hadn't known that route myself until I was headed back toward Hollywood. It was raining, I had a free evening to kill, and I practically allowed my front wheels to choose their own course.

Therefore it was pure luck that had brought me along this particular resi-

dential street. The drenched damsel had flagged me down because I was obviously the only party within hailing distance. She didn't know me from a hole in the ground, consequently she couldn't be pulling a caper on me.

It took me about half a second to reach this conclusion, and another half to bounce out of my tea kettle ready for action. As if on cue, the clouds opened up and soaked me to the rind. You couldn't have found a better storm in a Cecil DeMille production, and I hadn't

in my bare feet and I've got long legs. I scissored them rapidly, the quail steering me at an oblique slant across the curving, tilted street.

It was more like a paved road than a street, winding through one of the hills above Hollywood proper, and lacking the sidewalks you would find farther down. A bare, muddy bluff climbed upward on the right. On the left the terrain dropped off pretty sharply, with a scattering of live-oak and manzanita and wild cactus to keep the earth from washing away completely. There were some clumps of sage, too. They smelled fresh and wet and clean.

I'm not partial to weeds that smell fresh and wet and clean. I'm an indoors man. Give me stale cigarette fumes and the aroma of a Scotch and soda every time.

**T**HERE was a house dead ahead, precariously perched on a shelf of land that jutted off the street and then dropped straight down into the next voting precinct. Seen from the front, the house looked like a red tiled single-story bungalow.

Actually it had two additional stories in the rear, one below the other, following the abrupt contour of the hill and stuck there with glue, probably. I wondered if the contractor who built it had lost many carpenters tumbling down the incline and breaking their necks.

"Here," the brunette jane panted. "We—this is it."

Her front door was open. We barged over the threshold into a living room not quite as large as a cathedral. There was nothing else on this level—just the living room. Its ceiling had big hand-hewn oak beams, its walls were done in watered satin of a bilious purple shade, and some dizzy interior decorator had blown his wig on the subject of throw rugs.

There must have been three dozens of these, all shapes, sizes, colors and textures. An antiqued ivory grand piano with bench, three sofas, four chairs and a refectory table vied with the thirty-six throw rugs for your attention and didn't have a chance in the world.

At the rear there was a field stone



Nick Ransom

been wetter since my stunting days when I earned my living by such routines as diving into rivers and lakes with my clothes on.

California climate, huh! Somebody, I reflected darkly, ought to complain to the Chamber of Commerce.

"Lead the way, baby," I said.

The tall tomato put the grab on my arm, started running. Very few she-males run gracefully. She was one of the few.

She whispered: "Hurry! Please!"

I gave her all the speed she could use. There isn't much lard on my hundred and ninety pounds, I stand six feet plus

replace roomy enough to barbecue a water buffalo, with two crossed shot-guns over the mantelpiece. A staircase led down to the next floor below, where the bedrooms were. The tall dame descended hastily and I trailed her to a closed door, where she made small anguished whimpering sounds in her throat.

"Joe!" she finally pushed a word past the whimpers. "In there." She pointed to the portal, and then beat on it with an ineffectual fist. "Joe," she said, more loudly.

No answer.

"Joe, it's Teresa. Let me in, Joe—please!"

Silence.

"Joe, there's someone with me, someone to break the door down if you don't—unless you—"

More silence.

"Okay, babe, let me have a crack at it," I said.

I tried the knob. Locked, of course. From the inside. I backed off, gathered my tonnage and whammed at the wood-work.

Termites couldn't have done a better job of destruction. The door splintered inward with a roaring crash and I plunged into a tiled bathroom combing toothpicks out of my hair.

"Hey, nix—nix!" I yelped.

Over against the far wall a little character crouched with an old-fashioned straight razor clutched in his right duke. He was a tired-looking bozo in brown tweeds that didn't quite fit, and his peepers were red-rimmed as if from prolonged peering into whisky glasses too frequently emptied and re-filled. He had the shakes. A guy with a worse case of the shakes I never saw.

Behind me, the statuesque Teresa shrilled: "Joe!"

"Stand back," Joe said. His pipsqueak voice sounded as beaten and tired as his face looked. "Both of you stand back unless you want blood on you. My blood!"

"Joe, no, don't!"

"It's too late, Teresa. I told you what I was going to do. I meant it." He brandished the blade toward his gullet, the polished steel glittering in the light from an overhead fixture.

"Stop him!" Teresa's throaty tones vibrated like an imploring cello. "Do something! Don't let him do it!"

Along with caution, another thing you learn in the private detecting racket is to develop fast reflexes. Mine functioned on all eight cylinders. I stepped forward, fainted with my left and chopped upward with my right, tagged Joe spang on the wattles. He dropped like a cut rope. The razor made a metallic clatter falling on the tiled floor.

TERESA picked it up, fast. I picked up Joe. He weighed about a hundred and ten, and his ribs were gaunt. I could feel them through the brown tweed coat. Somehow I felt sorry for the poor little guy.

"Where's some brandy, baby?" I said to Teresa.

"Upstairs." There was a note of victory in her voice, a hint of triumph, swiftly suppressed. "I—I can't—" she stammered. "I don't know how to— to thank you enough for what you've done. You saved—"

"Skip it. Let's get the brandy."

I toted the little bozo from the bathroom, up the staircase and across several acres of living room throw rugs, gently deposited him on one of the sofas. Teresa came along presently with a bottle, not of brandy but of Scotch. It was my favorite kind—Vat 69.

I took it, uncorked it, held it to Joe's flaccid yap and poured some into him. To prove my impartiality I then poured some into myself, too. After all, I was soaking wet from the rain and it seemed like a good way to ward off pneumonia.

Joe sputtered, strangled, blinked his bleary glims open.

"My jaw." He rubbed the bruised place where I'd biffed him. "It hurts. Aches." He waggled it tentatively and seemed astonished to find it unbroken. "Say, I didn't bargain for—"

The tall tomato flurried to him, pushed me away, went to her knees alongside the sofa. There was a lot of very touching "Oh-darling-how-I-love-you" stuff, and some "I-must-have-been-crazy-I-promise-never-to-do-it-again" dialog, all extremely fervent and personal.

I effaced myself over by the fireplace,

torched a gasper and killed some time with the Scotch bottle. Bye and bye the little ginzo passed and started snoring, a circumstance which allowed Teresa to turn her attention my way.

## CHAPTER II

## SKIDROW BUM



IT WAS very nice attention. Teresa tangled her arms about my brisket, fed me a kiss that scorched me all the way down to the shoestrings and whispered:

"I'll never forget you, I'll never be able to repay you!"

"You're doing okay for a starter, hon."

She kissed me some more, pressed herself against me. "If—if you'll let me have your name and address," she said. There seemed less drawing room quality in her voice now, and more boudoir. "So I can call on you later."

"Nick Ransom is the handle, kitten," I said. "I'm a snoop."

Her glims widened. "Nick—Ransom?"

"Yeah."

"The—the detective they write so much about?"

"Yeah."

"The one who used to be a stunt man? That Ransom?"

"That's me, sweet stuff."

She pulled away from me as if I'd suddenly sprouted horns and a forked tail.

"Oh, I—I see."

"You see what?" I said, and pinned the mystified focus on her. I couldn't savor this sudden cooling of her grateful ardor. It didn't make sense.

She curled a lip. "I've heard of your reputation."

"Have you? That's flattering."

"It isn't intended to be. Everybody in Hollywood knows you're always on the make for a dollar." Her shoulders slumped. "I guess you'll be sending me a bill for services rendered."

"Now wait a minute," I said indignantly.

Her glare would have frozen ice cubes. "Be sure to include the cost of

getting your suit dried and pressed. To think, of all the people who might have come along, it had to be you."

"Okay, if that's how you feel," I said. The injustice of her attitude made me resentful. I demonstrated this by taking my handkerchief, wiping her lipstick off my kisser. "Just forget the whole blamed thing." I ankled to the front door. "Forget it—and so will I."

As a prophet I threw snake-eyes on that one. Forget it indeed! An hour later, when the sniveling little guy paid me a visit at my bachelor apartment stash and told me the real story, I found myself up to my hips in a murder mess. . . .

I had been home long enough to peel out of my wet threads, soak my heft in a hot bath and blot up two or three sniffers of varnish remover when there came a tap on my door. The tapping was then repeated, softly, insistently.

I opened up; piped the gaunt little ginzo in brown tweeds. He nervously wiped his wet map on a coat sleeve and said:

"Mr. Ransom?"

"Hi, bub. Come in, come in." He came in. "What brings you out so soon after that suicide hassle on the hillside?"

"I got to talk to you, Mr. Ransom. I looked you up in the phone book and found your address, and—I got to talk to you."

I gestured him to a chair. "Talk to me about what?"

"I'm scared."

"Scared?"

"I'm on the spot to get bumped off."

"Oh come now. For a guy who wanted to croak himself less than an hour ago you can't take that too seriously."

"I didn't," he cut in. "That suicide hassle, as you call it—that was strictly a scenario."

"Now look, Joe."

"My name ain't Joe, it's Willie. Willie Oliver. I ain't married to that black-haired dame. I ain't married to nobody. I'm a bum, see? A skidrow bum. A wino."

I set fire to a coffin nail, stared at him through exhaled smoke.

"Whistle the pitch," I said quietly.

"It's a homicide pitch, gumshoe. Dou-

ble homicide, if I ain't careful. With me as one of the corpses." A shiver shook him, visibly. "You got a drink you could spare?"

I spared him a slug of Scotch. "Talk, Willie."

"Yeah. That broad, Teresa—Teresa Vaughan, her name is. She's a writer over at Paratone. Screen plays." He drank thirstily. "Her husband, her real husband, is Joe Vaughan. I guess he's kind of a lush, the way I get it. All the time plastered. Won't work. Lives off her dough. Gambles a lot. Pops a gasket now and then, goes off his rocker and smashes things."

"Crazy, you mean?"

"Smart crazy. He never does nothing like that when there's no witnesses around. So she says."

**W**ILLIE OLIVER reached for a butt I had just discarded, where it still smoldered and sent up a curl of smoke from the ash tray. He straightened it, took a deep drag. When I offered him my pack he shook his head, grinned wryly.

"I'm used to shooting snipes. I've got so they even taste better than fresh ones."

"Tell me about the Vaughans," I said.

"Teresa, she hunts me up on skidrow yesterday. I used to know her in the old days, years ago. I knowed Joe, too. That was before I went downhill. So she finds me, see, and tells me how Joe is on the whisky skids hisself and is making life miserable for both of them.

"She tells me how he's gradually going punchy but he's too wise to pull any stuff in front of outsiders. She says the only chance for him to level out and fly right is to salt him away in some booby hatch for a while, to stick him in some room with soft walls, sort of, where he can't get hold of no liquor.

"She figures there ain't no other cure. But you got to have at least one unbiased outsider to testify a man is whacky before you can get him committed. And like I say, Vaughan ain't never done nothing screwball in front of no witnesses."

I was beginning to catch hep. "So Teresa schemed up an impersonation

gimmick, eh?"

"Yeah. She offered me a suit of Joe's clothes and two hunnert bucks. She tells me I'll be doing him a favor, maybe even saving his life. This here is the suit of clothes." He indicated the baggy brown tweeds, which didn't fit him too well. "Joe and me's almost the same size, see, only I ain't quite as fleshy. Skipping a lot of meals don't put much fat on a guy."

"Okay, so you're skinny. Go on from there."

He snagged another butt from my ash tray, lit it from the end of the first one.

"Teresa, she tells me all I got to do is put on a fake suicide act while she hauls in some stranger for a witness. Later she will get a sworn deposition from the stranger, see, testifying that Vaughan tried to knock hisself off and had to be restrained. A deposition like that, made before a notary, is enough to salt Joe away. The stranger don't have to appear personally at the sanity hearing, so there's no chance of him meeting up with the real Joe Vaughan and realizing a switcheroo has been pulled."

"That's clear enough," I said.

"Well, I went through with it. Teresa, she gets Joe bottled to the scalp, see, which ain't very hard to do. Then she slips him a capsule, you know, a sedative. He goes to sleep. I put on his suit and lock myself in the bathroom with a razor, and the dame runs out to yell down the first mug going by in a car, which happens to be you. We go into our act, and I guess we done it all right. Anyhow you didn't seem to suspect nothing."

"I was a prime patsy," I said bitterly. "You did fine." I added, with contempt. "But I don't think much of a crumb who'd frame a friend to the looney bin for two centuries and a set of second-hand tweeds."

"So I'm a crumb. Ever been broke, gumshoe?"

"Lots of times. I never turned Judas, though."

He lifted a thin shoulder, lowered it. "That Teresa, she sort of convinced me it was for Joe's own good. And anyhow, I wasn't only thinking about the hunnert fish and the clothes. I could use

I hit bottom with a thud, my gun sent orange flames toward the car, and one of the gangsters emitted an anguished bleat



'em, sure. But there was the future, too. Maybe a chance to get out of cheap flophouses, and panhandling for dimes the rest of my life. I'm coming clean with you. I was even figuring on a little blackmail, later on. I was thinking how I could put the bite on the dame, maybe, after. You know, by threatening to spill how she railroaded her husband and so forth. It looked to me like she'd be an easy touch once or twice a year, enough to keep a guy from starving, anyways."

"The more you talk the more of a heel you turn out to be."

"But I ain't heel enough to go for murder."

We were around to that again. "What murder?"

"Look. You just said you was a prime patsy to fall for the suicide act. Well, I was a patsy, too. I must of had a button loose in my head somewhere to think that dame was leveling with me. She wasn't. I know it, now. Or anyhow I got a hunch."

"Quit beating about the bush. If there's something on your alleged mind, spit it out." I was getting pretty fed up with Willie Oliver's sniveling conversation.

**H**E STRETCHED a hand toward my Scotch bottle. I moved it out of his reach. He sighed and made a sour mouth.

"After you powdered from the house, see, this Teresa broad dishes me my geet and says I better blow on account of she's got to go back to the studio to do some night work on a script. She also asks me where she might get hold of me in a hurry, just in case. Well, with her two bills in my kick I can afford me a room in a fleabag on Figueroa 'stead of the flop on Main Street where I been staying. So I give her the name of this fleabag where I'm going to move to. I'm still dumb to the play. I trust her."

"And?"

"And so I'm walking down the hill when a car comes, barreling behind me without no headlights and dang near gets me. What saved me was, I jumped off the side of the road and fell down the side of a cliff. Like to bust myself in little pieces all over the dad-blasted

mountain. Well, just as I jumped I seen who was driving that car. Teresa. So then I got it. I got it while I was still falling down that bank. The dame deliberately tried to smash me."

"Why?"

"You're a smart dick. Can't you see it? I'm a stumblebum, a nobody from nowhere. If they find me croaked, it won't even make two lines in the newspaper. Who'll care? But being dead, I can't talk."

"Talk about what?"

"About how I pretended I was Joe Vaughan this evening. Which means Teresa can bump him and frame it to look like suicide, with you to testify he already tried to kill himself once and you stopped him, so he must of tried it again later and this time he made the grade. That put her in the clear, see?"

"You're crazy," I said, but didn't quite believe it. There was just enough plausibility in his story to make goose pimples on my spine. Not big ones, but give them time they would grow.

"Am I crazy?" he said. "Then why did she try to run over me in her car?"

"Maybe she didn't. It must have been dark by that time. Maybe you just thought it was Teresa driving."

"I seen her. I know."

"Then maybe she realized you might try to blackmail her later if she sent her hubby to the squirrel pen, so she decided to abolish you and be safe."

"That still makes her a killer, don't it? Anyhow a would-be."

He took another try at the bottle. This time I let him pour himself a jorum. He tossed it down.

"Suppose she was fed up with Joe, like she told me," he said. "Only she wanted to get rid of him permanent, which she didn't tell me. Look, she writes movies. She's good at dreaming up gimmicks and plots and stuff. This whole clambake could be a cover-up for a bump she was planning."

"Hogwash," I said. My voice sounded uncertain.

"Then why did she ask me what hotel she could find me at? Answer me that. I'll tell you why," he answered it himself. "It was in case she missed squashing me with her car, she could get to me later." He shivered. "Me, I don't

want no part of it. I came here and spilled what I know. You can take it or leave it. But nobody ain't going to use me for no clay pigeon. I done my part. Now I'm blowing town."

I opened a desk drawer.

"You're not blowing town, Willie." I showed him the roscoe I'd taken from the drawer. "Not until I do some checking."

"Hey!"

"You and I are going back to the Vaughan igloo. Now."

"But—but I—"

I kept him covered while sliding into a dry suit. This was a hard trick, but I made it.

"I'll give you credit for one thing," I said. "You were heel enough to take dough and help railroad a guy to the booby foundry, but when you decided it was a croakery matter you were honest enough to come clean. That's in your favor. I still think you're haywire about the quail's murder intentions, but we'll look into it just the same. Better be safe than sorry."

"Listen, I don't want that broad knowing I blabbed. She'd get me for it, but good."

"Quiet. You'll be with me. You'll have protection if you need it, which I doubt."

"I'm scared." He wasn't fooling, either. It showed.

I packed my gun in its armpit holster. "I can always put handcuffs on you and drag you, if you insist."

"You win," he said wearily. "Let's go. And never mind making with the cuffs. I never did like them things."

### CHAPTER III

#### SHOTGUN DEATH



HE WENT down to the apartment building's basement garage and climbed aboard my chariot. I kicked life into the motor and went zooming up the ramp, into the slanting rain.

It was a dreary drive to the hills above Hollywood, and the rain fouled me up. I made a wrong turn that put me one street higher on the hillside

than the road I wanted. The night was black, lonesome.

Presently I stopped to get my bearings. We were on an abrupt curve insecurely fenced on the outer edge by a white guard rail. By stepping out and leaning over this, I could look straight down and see the house I was after, directly below on the next spiral street. I also got soaking wet again.

That didn't matter, though. I was growing used to it. Besides, I piped something down there that drove discomfort out of my mind, something that made the short hairs prickle at the nape of my neck. Lights glowed in the Vaughan stash beneath me, both inside and at the open front door. Two guys were lamming out that doorway in the devil of a yank. Two guys with guns.

They both wore tan topcoats and dark hats with the brims pulled low over their pans, so you couldn't tab their features from where I was perched. But there was no mistaking the hoglegs they toted—short-barreled pocket rods, the nickeled steel casting reflections of light with every jerky movement.

One character was chunky, you might say chubby; the other was taller, round-shouldered, hollow-chested. They sprinted toward a Cadillac sedan that could have been black, dark blue or maroon. I couldn't quite tell because it was parked in shadows.

But I did know there was skullduggery afoot. Any time you see armed parties in that big a hurry you can make book there's something illegal going on. They were almost to the Cadillac now, and I realized it would be impossible for me to get back in my own jalopy and drive down the corkscrew street to intercept them. Before I could cover half the spiral distance they would be long gone—too long gone.

Yet I had to head them off, find out what was cooking down in the Vaughan tepee. Maybe it had already cooked.

I tried surprise. I unlimbered my own .32 automatic and raised my voice to an echoing bellow full of spurious authority.

"You down there!" I roared.

The two guys froze.

"Halt!" I sang at them. "Stand where you are. You're covered."

Then, to confirm this assertion, I squeezed my trigger, spanked a slug straight downward. It hit the paving below and whined off into the night with a ricochet humming like an aroused beehive.

That was like touching flame to a pack of firecrackers. Breaking and taking cover, the two gunsels cut loose in my general direction, raked the hillside with bullets. They didn't have me located, but they bracketed me too close to be pleasant.

One pill chocked into the lip of the cliff less than two feet from my brogans, sent an eruption of mud spraying on my trouser cuffs. Behind me I heard little Willie Oliver jittering in my coupe.

"Ooh, what goes on?"

"Whatever it is, it's no tea party," I snapped back at him in tones loud enough to rise above the racketing volleys that yammered and thundered in the rain. "Can you drive?"

"I—yeah—that is, yeah, I—"

"Then get at the wheel and roll that crate around the mountain. Fast. Take it down to the next street and try to blockade it. Get going!"

"But—but you! What are you—I mean—"

"Never mind me," I said grimly. "I'm taking the short cut. I used to be a stunt man. On your way, Willie, on your way!"

Then I climbed over the white wooden guard-rail and went plunging down the slope.

It wasn't a slope, it was a declivity. I lost my footing, toppled head-foremost and crash-dived the whole distance on my mush like a kid on a toboggan. Only you can steer a toboggan. My face wasn't equipped with a rudder.

I scraped past an outcrop of jagged rock, doing about seventy. The rock gashed my left sleeve wide open but didn't even blister me. I was sliding too fast to get burned. A clump of cactus missed me by a whisker, which was a lucky thing for my epidermis. One inch nearer and I'd have looked like a porcupine with a set of ingrown quills.

**A** SLIPPERY, muddy hummock loomed before me, resembling a ski-slide takeoff. I took off. I sailed hell-

ity-boom through the air, churning and twisting harder than a bronc trying to buck its rider.

"Yee-ipe!" I yodeled, and got set for a crackup.

At that, a crackup was better than being perforated by bullets from the two heaters that were spewing at me. The speed of my fall made me a no-good target.

Neither of the gunsels could draw a decent bead on me. They were now crouching by the Cad, trying to pick me off in mid-flight, and failing.

I hit bottom with a thud that jarred the earth.

It jarred me, too. For an agonized instant I felt my skeleton coming apart and my tripes tearing loose. The impact tightened my right fist, convulsively, and the twitch set off the roscoe I was clutching. It sneezed a spiteful, *Ka-Chow!* and sent a streak of orange flame toward the Cadillac. One of the gunsels, the chubby one, emitted an anguished bleat.

"He got me! He got me! The son got me in the arm!"

This was too much for his tall, skinny partner. I heard him make a panic-stricken remark to the effect that anybody who could shoot as straight as that while falling off a mountain was nobody to monkey with. Whereupon both sinister characters scrambled into the Cadillac and lit a shuck for distant parts. I fixed the foggy focus on the sedan's rear tag as it vanished around a bend, managed to catch its numbers and engrave them on my reeling memory. I then staggered upright, blowing about two pints of mud out of my adenoids.

I was in bad shape. My clothes were torn and covered by sticky, gooney wet clay. My complexion felt as if I'd just come out second best in a joust with a nutmeg grater. I had no broken bones as far as I could determine, but if you had laid my bruises end to end they'd have reached to Santa Monica. I wished Santa Monica could have them.

Headlights slid around a curve and a coupe stopped ferninst me. It was my coupe. Willie Oliver scuttled out, blinked at me.

"Gumshoe," he murmured in an awed voice, you look like you bought one of

them beauty shop mud packs. King size." He made a sympathetic mouth. "You hurt very bad?"

"I feel fine—I feel perfectly marvelous," I snarled bitterly. "I feel so good I could whip my weight in mosquitoes. One mosquito at a time." I limped close to him, favored him with a ferocious scowl. "Where the devil have you been?"

He backed off, defensively. "I drove right down as fast as I could, just like you told me. I didn't try no road block, though. I didn't see nobody to block."

"Because the Caddy went the other way," I said grimly. "Okay, never mind. Let it go. Come on."

I headed for the Vaughan house. Willie kept step with me. "I don't get the caper," he said. "Them trigger guys, who do you s'pose they was?"

"I don't know."

"What was they after?"

"I don't know that either. Shut up."

We barged into the house and entered the living room, drew to a sudden halt.

Gulping noises sounded in Willie's gullet, like water having trouble with a faulty drain. "Gah-h-h!" His mush went colorless, then turned green around the fringes.

You couldn't blame him too much for that. Over by the mammoth fireplace there was something smallish that once had been a man—but was only a corpse now. From above the mantelpiece one of the two crossed shotguns had been removed. The shotgun now rested on the floor, near the corpse's right foot.

The foot was bare. Shoe and stocking had been taken off so that the big toe could get into the shotgun's trigger guard. The muzzle of the weapon pointed at the cadaver's face—only the cadaver didn't have a face. A hot charge of buckshot had blown it plumb to hell-angone.

"It—it's Joe Vaughan!" Willie whispered.

"Not any more," I said gently. "He's deader than canceled postage."

So now the statuesque Teresa was a widow, after all.

**I**N VIEW of all the things Willie Oliver had told me, the very thought of the defunct Vaughan's widow set off a chain reaction of possibilities in my

think-tank. This apparent suicide could blame well be murder—a murder planned in advance and executed with the cold-blooded precision of a firing squad. And who had planned the bump?

"Teresa," I said and went prowling through the premises as fast as I could pelt. Down the staircase I clattered, with Oliver at my heels, and into all the bedrooms. No Teresa. Then we tried the floor below that. Still no Teresa. We barged back up to the living room level without finding a trace of the brunette muffin, which was just about what I expected.

"Hey, gumshoe," Willie said.

"Shut up," I barked at him, spotting a phone and making for it.

I twirled the dial so fast it shot out sparks. I got connected with Police Headquarters and asked for my old friend Ole Brunvig of the Homicide Squad. When Brunvig's voice rumbled over the wire I said:

"Nick Ransom here. Take this address"—I gave it to him carefully—"and flag your diapers into the hills as fast as you can ramble. It's a killery beef."

Brunvig sounded affronted. "You would pick a night like this for a thing like that. What's the score?"

"A shotgun score," I said, and briefed the details.

I explained how the luscious Teresa Vaughan had shilled me into a phony suicide scene; how Willie Oliver had later come to me and confessed his role in it.

"So Willie and I rammed ourselves back out here to do some checking and discovered Vaughan with a charge of buckshot in his dewlaps."

Brunvig's tone became ominous. "Dead, hunh?"

"I'd hate to be any deader. Of course it may be that he dutched himself—the signs all point to it. But that could have been a nice hunk of stage dressing. It's entirely possible his ever loving wife blasted him, or had him blasted by a pair of hired hoods. Anyhow she's gone, and the hoods made a clean getaway."

"Thanks to you," Brunvig said.

I bridled. "What do you mean, thanks to me? I practically tore myself apart trying to nab them. In fact, I pinked

one of them in the arm." I didn't mention that this had been an accident. "So don't go blaming me for—"

"You're right I blame you!" his roar rattled the receiver against my ear. "When that Oliver first came to your apartment and told you his suspicions, why didn't you get in touch with me? I could have put out a radio bleat to the nearest prowl car, sent it there to the Vaughan house for an investigation.

"The cops might've caught those two torpedoes red-handed. But no, you had to play it lone wolf. You had to go pussy-footing around making like a story-book Sherlock. The mighty Nick Ransom rides again, and that for the cops. So what happens? A man is dead and two gungels are running loose and the widow is missing, and now you've got the condemned infernal crust to dump it in my lap after it's all scrambled up."

"Ole, now wait."

"You wait!" he caterwauled. "You wait right there, understand me? And if it turns out to be a genuine suicide I'm going to poke you square on the nose for bringing me out in the rain on a wild goose chase. But if it's murder—well, that will be just too bad for your license."

He rang off.

## CHAPTER IV

### WIDOW LADY



FOR A long moment I stared at the phone without seeing it. I then slammed it into its cradle, violently.

"Gratitude!" I growled. "I'll take vanilla."

Willie Oliver cleared his throat. "Hey, gumshoe."

"Well, what in thunder do you want?"

"I didn't hear you say nothing to that bull just now about a pickup order on the Vaughan broad."

"How could I suggest a pickup order when I don't know where she might be picked up?" I said through a jaundiced sneer. "Or do you think she may be hiding under one of those throw rugs?"

"I don't think that, no," he said mildly. "I do think maybe she's at the movie

studio. You know, Paratone. Where she works." He made a vague gesture. "Remember I told you she said she had a script she was going to do some night work on. That was when she paid me the two hunnert hermans and brushed me out, and then she tried to squash me with her car when I was walking down the road, and—well, maybe she did go there. The studio, I mean."

I studied him. "You know, you may have something there."

"Yeah, I thought so, either."

"It's worth a look-see."

"The cops will buy that without no argument, I bet."

"I'm not waiting for the cops," I said.

"But you can't make no pinch," Willie objected.

"The devil I can't. I carry a badge."

"A special officer's badge like all private ops carry. But it ain't worth nothing. Not really."

"It's worth enough," I said, and started to the door.

He shambled along after me. "I don't get the pitch. What's it to you if the Vaughan broad does or don't get nabbed?"

"She tried to make a sucker of me."

"Yeah," he admitted. "She done that, all right."

"I don't like people making a sucker of me. It does something to my ego."

"Hah?"

"I'm conceited," I said. "I like to think I'm as smart as the next guy. When anybody punctures that conceit I get vindictive."

He just looked at me. His red-rimmed glimmers were perplexed. He didn't seem to savvy the psychology I was trying to explain. I wasn't too concerned whether he savvied it or not.

"Maybe the cops won't like it," he said. "You fooling around in something that ain't none of your business. Maybe it'll make them sore at you."

"They're already sore at me. At least Lieutenant Brunvig is, and he's the baby with weight to throw around."

"Well, then—"

"So he's sore. So if I make an arrest and crack the case for him he can take his soreness and like it."

"That's okay for you, maybe, but what about me? I'm in it too deep al-

ready. If I go horsing around with you, hunting that broad, I'll get myself in a sling."

"You're not going with me," I said. "You're waiting here for Brunvig so you can tell him your story first-hand."

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes."

He sidled away from me. "That's what you think. Me, I ain't a bit interested in telling my story to no coppers. I'd get flang in the jug, first thing. I'm leaving."

"You know what that would mean, don't you, Willie? Supposing Vaughan's death turns out to be murder. Considering the part you played in the counterfeit suicide setup, you're an accessory. You helped stage the frame. If you scam, it automatically causes the cops to conclude you're guilty."

"Guilty of what?"

"Guilty of being Teresa's accomplice."

"But as soon as I realized what she was up to, didn't I come to you and spill it?"

"That would all be discounted if you took a powder. You're going to stick around and like it, chum. For your own good."

"I ain't interested in my own good. I'm interested in keeping out of the pokey."

"So you want to be unreasonable, eh?" I hauled out my nippers. "All right. You asked for this, boy."

I grabbed him, snicked one cuff around his bony left wrist and began dragging him over toward the fireplace.

He flapped and struggled, feebly. "Listen, what do you think you're doing? You can't do this to me!"

"You just think I can't," I said. "I'm going to cuff you to Joe Vaughan's remnants, and let's see you walk out with a corpse hanging on your arm. I'm afraid you're going to feel very attached to Mr. Vaughan before this clamback is concluded."

"Aw, no." His pan was as pallid as adulterated milk. "No, you wouldn't do nothing like that. Not to me you wouldn't. Not after I played so straight with you. You ain't that inhuman. You couldn't be. It makes me sick just to look at the guy, the way his face is. You're kidding. You got to be kidding. Cut it out, shamus. I couldn't stand it!"

I felt like a heel, throwing that kind of scare into him. He needed it, though. I had to make him understand I meant business.

I hesitated by the antiqued ivory grand piano.

"It sort of gets you in the stomach, doesn't it?" I said.

"O-o-oh! His internal clockworks were rumbling audibly.

"Well, I'll compromise with you," I said, and snapped the other handcuff on a piano leg. "That ought to hold you. If you're uncomfortable leaning over, you can sit on the floor. Facing away from Vaughan," I added. "It would be a shame to be sick on these pretty rugs."

"But Mr. Ransom, I—"

"Quit whining and sniveling. It won't buy you a blasted thing. And besides, the bulls will uncuff you when they get

[Turn page]

## Kidneys Must Remove Excess Acids

### Help 15 Miles of Kidney Tubes Flush Out Poisonous Waste

If you have an excess of acids in your blood, your 15 miles of kidney tubes may be overworked. These tiny filters and tubes are working day and night to help Nature rid your system of excess acids and poisonous waste.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, head-

aches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Kidneys may need help the same as bowels, so ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 50 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills,

(Adv.)

here." I moved to the field stone mantel-piece. "Look, I'm leaving my bracelet key. It's too far away for you to get to it unless you drag that piano, which is obviously impossible for a party of your physical dimensions. But when Lieutenant Brunvig arrives you can let him know where it is. He'll turn you loose."

"That I have to see," Willie muttered despondently.

"Loose from the piano, anyhow," I said. "You can also tell him I've gone to the Paratone lot to pick up Teresa. Be sure and make him understand why."

"Where will I tell him you're going to take her?"

"To Headquarters for questioning, of course. So long, Willie."

Tossing him my crumpled pack of gaspers and a book of matches for solace, I stirred my muddy stumps out into the rain, climbed into my heap and aimed it in the direction of Paratone.

A studio harness copper stopped me at the main gates, took a gander at my badge and got surly about it. He wanted to know if I thought I was kidding somebody.

"I've got one just like it pinned on me," he said, and thumbed the shield fastened to his glistening black rubber uniform slicker. "They don't mean a thing. To get in here you need an official pass."

"Would it help if I tell you I'm Nick Ransom?"

His sullenness thawed and was replaced by an awe that should have flattered me, but didn't.

"Nick Ransom? *The* Nick Ransom?"

"Yeah."

"Well why didn't you say so? Drive in. Drive right on in. Say, do you suppose you could give me your autograph? I got a kid who's been reading about you for years. I bet there isn't a case you ever solved that he don't know about."

"Some other time, buster." I said. "Right now I haven't got autographs on my mind."

I wheeled past him, threaded my way along the jigsaw-puzzle studio street, went by the two-story administration building and a couple of sound stages bigger than dirigible hangars.

One of these had a small door open, and raw white light knifed out to cut a

widening wedge in the storm and make the rain look like heavy snowdrops falling. Carpenters were at work inside, putting up a scaffolding. Their hammers made steady hollow sounds against a night otherwise soggy silent.

Presently I parked in front of the writers' building, a long, low stucco structure with wide eaves and small high windows which weren't much more than ventilators. Jails have small high windows, too, so the inmates of the cells can't escape. I've heard scenario scribblers who earned three grand a week state that they preferred jail cells. More freedom. And fewer ulcers. In a jail you don't worry about having your option dropped. I trudged inside.

A HEAD of me stretched a long dismal corridor with doors every few feet on either side. The doors had inset slatted panels, like undersized and immovable Venetian blinds. Yellow glow trickled into the hallway from a set of slats at the far end, indicating an occupied room. You could hear the unrhythmic clacking of a noisy typewriter being harried and badgered by somebody using the hunt-and-peck system, but pretty fast at that.

It was Teresa Vaughan, sure enough. I found this out by the simple expedient of barging in on her without rapping.

"Hi, baby," I greeted her without warmth. "Pardon my curly tonsils, but you're under arrest for murder."

I was running a bluff, of course. In the first place I wasn't certain the death of her hubby actually had been murder. I merely suspected it. And in the second place I had no incontrovertible evidence that put the finger on the brunette tomato. Someone else might have made her a widow without her knowledge or consent. It struck me as unlikely, though.

She glanced up from her work, gave me the vacant focus, seemed not to recognize me.

"No visitors," she said. "Go away. Can't you see I'm busy?"

She started typing again. Concentration, it's wonderful.

But maybe this wasn't concentration. Maybe it was an act.

The office was just big enough for a

desk, two chairs, a bookcase and a clothes tree. A damp felt hat and a transparent green ploi film rain cape hung dispiritedly from the clothes tree. Copies of *Variety*, *Film Daily* and the *Hollywood Reporter* were on the lower shelves of the bookcase. The top shelf contained a vase of discouraged flowers, a Thermos water carafe, a drinking glass and a bottle of benzedrine tablets, not quite half full.

There was carpet on the floor, worn in spots as if by much pacing, and a sheet of script in the typewriter. Other pages, black with pencil editing, lay on the desk. For an A picture, undoubtedly. B's they do on the backs of old calendars and cleansing tissue boxes.

"Go away," Teresa said again, not looking up.

I grinned down at her. She was embellished in a severe brown wool dress with padded shoulders and a diagonal row of lighter brown plastic buttons running from the right shoulder downward to the broad patent leather belt, like a bandolier.

You can sew in all the shoulder pads you want to, but it took more than that to fill out a frock in front the way the Vaughan quail filled hers. I kept grinning at her and admiring the glints the ceiling light made in her sleek blue-black hair. My grin held no real mirth, but the admiration was genuine.

Presently her fingers hesitated over the keys, as if her inspiration had struck a snag—if it really was inspiration. Frowning, she blinked at me.

"Oh. It's you."

"Yeah, baby, it certainly is."

"The great detective."

"I've been called worse."

"How did you get here?"

"I keep a stable of pogo sticks."

"Very funny. I must make a note of that in case I get assigned to slapstick comedies." Suddenly she did a perfect double-take and widened her glimmers. "What did you say?"

"I said I keep a stable of pogo sticks."

"No. When you first walked in."

"Oh that." I shrugged. "Let's see if I can remember the exact wording. I think it went something like this, 'Hi, baby. Parden my curly tonsils, but you're under arrest for murder.'"

She pushed her chair back from the desk.

"That's supposed to be a joke, I suppose. You'll forgive me if I don't laugh. My sense of humor doesn't incline toward the gruesome. As a little girl I never got much fun out of sticking pins in kittens' eyeballs or tearing the wings off butterflies. A case of arrested development, I'm sure, but there it is and what can I do about it?" She stood up, glared at me. "Now what is it you want?"

I SHRUGGED, and leaned back against the door.

"I told you. I'm arresting you for murder."

"Oh. Now I get it. The devious approach. First make with the gag lines, then out comes the itching palm. Let's vault lightly but firmly over the intermediate steps and dispense with these vulgar preliminaries, shall we? Just say how much."

"Say how much what?"

"How much money you want. Make it reasonable, though."

"Money?" I said. "I don't get it."

"But you want it. For saving my—my husband from suicide. All right, what's the fee?"

"You seem to hesitate over the word husband, hon."

She ignored that. "What's the fee?" she repeated.

"Look," I said. "The dialog is all mixed up. I never demand a fee for making a pinch. Not from the party I'm pinching." Then I added righteously, "Besides, it isn't ethical to take dough from widows."

Her complexion bleached noticeably. "W-widows?"

"The man said that. That's what the man said."

"I—I'm afraid I don't understand."

"Joe Vaughan is defunct," I said.

"Wh-what?"

"The real Joe Vaughan. The guy you're married to. And I don't mean Willie Oliver."

That got her. She recoiled as if I'd slapped her across the puss with a wet herring.

"I—I—you—I"

"Shall I go on?" I said. "Maybe you'd

better sit down and gather up some strength for the ride to headquarters."

## CHAPTER V

### THE LADY PULLS A FAINT



TERESA sat down. Her eyes were frightened and she put a knuckle to her mouth, nibbling at it but obviously not tasting it. I've seen this done by some of our top actresses on the screen when registering deep emotion, but never

better than Teresa did it. She knew how to project a mood so that it enveloped you and made you forget that it might be as bogus as a three-dollar bill printed with pink ink.

"Willie Oliver." She whispered the name.

I nodded, felt for my cigarettes, and then remembered I'd left them with Willie. There was a deck of a cheap brand on the tall tomato's desk and I helped myself to one, lit it. How some people can smoke such hay is a mystery to me. Suppressing a strangle, I said:

"Oliver has told all. He spilled his insides."

Her peepers were fixed on me as if hypnotized.

"He told me how you paid him two C's to impersonate your alcoholic hubby in that mock suicide caper I witnessed."

"The dirty little doublecrosser," she said dully. "I see the weenie now. He told you so you could come here and shake me down for a payoff. Did you agree to split with him fifty-fifty or are you going to keep most of the squeeze for yourself?"

I shook a reproving finger at her.

"Kindly quit accusing me of being venal."

"Wait. Let me talk. Let me try to get this across to you." She stood up again, interrupting me with a sudden gush of voluble verbiage. "It's true I hired Willie Oliver. It's true I wanted to put my husband in some institution for a while. And I'll tell you why. It was to save him from himself, to restore him to what he used to be. Joe was a decent man once. I loved him. I—I guess I still do, regardless of what he's

done in the past couple of years. Regardless of how he's changed."

"He's changed, all right," I said, thinking of his absent map where the buckshot had done its stuff.

She disregarded my remark. "We've been married a long while; since Nineteen-thirty-two—Nineteen-thirty-two, the first of October." Her tone held echo of fond memories, very touching, very effective. "He made top money as a screen writer. He's the one who taught me everything I know about it. Then, in the war years, he started drinking—and gambling."

"I really think you ought to save this for the cops. They can have a police stenographer take it all down."

She kept on as if she hadn't heard me.

"He stopped working. I had to supply the money for the house, for his liquor, for everything. Including his losses to Eddie Arcady."

Eddie Arcady. That monicker clicked some cogs in my gray matter, made my mental machinery start whirring. Arcady was the kingpin of Hollywood's bookmaking and gambling combine, the character who ran the big syndicate that you never hear much about. He had his fingers in a lot of unsavory pies, up to the elbows. He was reputed to be a bad hombre to buck.

"Joe lost heavily to Arcady," Teresa continued her monolog. "Thousands. So many thousands that it was impossible to pay. Even I couldn't earn enough, hard as I worked. The more Joe lost, the more he drank. The deeper he went in the mire, the more he seemed to lose all sense of proportion. Sometimes he was like a— a crazy man. And Arcady kept pushing him, pressing him. It was a rat race. A vicious circle." She stressed the vicious, made a sour mouth on the word.

"Look, this is all very dramatic, baby, but—"

"Arcady even k-kidnaped him, a year ago. Held him prisoner and sent me a message threatening to torture him if I didn't take up his I O U's. Joe isn't a man who can stand physical pain. Some people are like that. I—I paid off. I had some luck. I sold a scenario to an outside producer and got this

Paratone job about the same time. I went in hock by borrowing against my salary. One way and another, I came up with enough cash to cancel the I O U's. Arcady let Joe go. Unhurt."

"The drama is turning to melodrama. Pretty corny, too."

SHE drifted close to me. She didn't use perfume. She just had a nice clean fragrance, the intangible fragrance of fresh laundry and frequently washed hair and a generous use of bath salts.

"You want to know why I thought up that fake suicide effect? Joe began gambling again. Gambling and drinking, heavier than ever. Committing him to an institution might help the drinking, but the idea went deeper than that. He got in debt to Eddie Arcady again—and Arcady's been ugly about it. Knowing what happened the last time, I was scared. I wanted to put Joe out of his reach, so that there wouldn't be another kidnaping.

"Besides, if I had Joe declared incompetent, it might automatically wash out the new I O U's he had given. Not that gambling debts are legally collectible, I realize. But Arcady has his ways, as I told you. And if I could convince him he was holding the notes of a crazy man—well, it was a chance, a possible way out; at least ammunition for argument. And Joe would be safe."

"Safe." I leered at her. How safe can you get when you're not alive any more, I wondered.

"But Joe would never stand still for a thing like that. Drunk, sober or unbalanced, he's got pride. He'd fight an insanity hearing, fight it tooth and nail. He'd be just clever enough to get a clean ticket, too. He could do it. His mind isn't that far gone." She made a grimace. "So I had to have at least one witness, an impartial witness. I drew you, My luck was bad."

"It was mighty bad, yeah," I said.

"I knew it, as soon as you told me your name and who you were. I knew my scheme had failed. You have a reputation for avarice—and for curiosity. If I asked you for a deposition you'd want to investigate. That would spoil everything. So I did my best to insult

you, get rid of you. I decided to throw aside the whole plan. After you were gone, I paid Willie Oliver and told him to forget all about it, that I wasn't going through with the scheme. So if he contacted you later and sold you a blackmail idea—"

"It wasn't a blackmail idea he sold me," I told her.

She stood directly in front of me. "Blackmail, shakedown, squeeze, call it whatever you like. To keep this from getting back to Joe, I'm willing to pay—within reason."

"No dice, kitten. You aren't putting it over. It's been a nice try, but no soap."

"What's your price?"

"Sorry. I'm not on the market."

"Any man's silence is for sale if the bid is high enough."

She was wrong about that. When there's bumpery involved, my silence can't be bought at any figure. Not even Teresa's, and her figure had copious purchasing power.

"Nope," I said.

"I'll put it another way." She lowered her voice to a whisper, throaty, husky, freighted with a meaning Eve had probably used when she tempted Adam with the first applesauce. "What would be your price to let me go ahead and have Joe committed? Would you be interested in—this?"

She kissed me. Okay, I got a thump out of it. I'm as human as the next ginzo. I liked it fine. I pushed her off me. It took an effort. But I pushed her off me.

"You're wasting your bait, baby," I said.

"I don't offer it to every man who comes along."

"Maybe you should save it for the cops. Remember I mentioned that Willie Oliver told me everything. And I do mean everything—including how you tried to run over him with your car and he jumped down the bluff to save himself."

"I—tried to run over him? That's preposterous."

"There's also the matter of your hubby's violent demise."

"You keep saying that. Is it some more of Oliver's lies?"

"Perish the thought," I said. "With my own glimmers I lamped the gory remains. The bare right foot with its big toe inserted in the shotgun trigger. The face blown off. The ketchup sprayed all over the fireplace."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying what you already know. You never intended to railroad Joe Vaughan to the loony ward. That story was just a come-on, to get Willie to participate. What you really planned was to establish the phony fact that your husband tried to commit suicide. Then you could murder him, frame it to look like self-destruction, and have the testimony of an unbiased witness to clear you."

"No. Oh—no! You don't mean that. You don't mean Joe—"

"I mean Joe is dead, yeah."

She swooned.

IT WAS a lovely swoon, full into my arms. And it was genuine. I tested to make sure. I lowered her into the desk chair, let her loll limply there. Then I lit a match, pried one of her eyelids open, brought the flame close to her walled-back optic. There was no flinching, no reflex action. She was out.

"What the devil?" I said.

I didn't get it. Why should she pull a faint when I told her Joe was defunct? If she'd killed him, she already knew it.

Of course, if she hadn't killed him, that was something else again.

I doused my match, dropped it on the floor, got the chromium-plated Thermos water carafe off the top shelf of the book case and unstopped it. I prepared to unbutton the brunette quail's diagonal buttons and pour cold water down her chest. I wasn't trying a peeping Tom routine, either. In fact, I had my gaze fixed on that silvery Thermos jug.

No sound came through the slatted louvers of the door. There should have been a sound, but there wasn't. I didn't hear as much as a footfall behind me. I didn't hear the knob being turned. All I saw was a reflection of the portal, mirrored in distortion upon the rounded and polished body of the Thermos carafe. The door was opening.

I whirled like a dervish with the hot-

foot. I wasn't quite rapid enough. Two guys came at me, two guys wearing tan topcoats, and hats with pulled-down brims. One was tall, skinny, hollow-chested. The other was chubby and carried one flipper in a bandanna sling, under his open coat. The skinny one maced me with the butt of his snub-nouted roscoe.

Pain ate into my skull like the boring of a red-hot auger. It flowed through my veins the way lava flows. I felt myself falling. Skinny slugged me again. That one I didn't feel. I was unconscious before I landed on the floor.

## CHAPTER VI

### ON PLENTY OF COUNTS



SOMEbody was slapping me across the chops, *splat-whang-splat*; somebody with a palm as tough as a blacksmith's apron. And there was a bunion on my scalp the size of a hockey puck. Every time the spansks landed on my

complexion this hockey puck swelled and throbbed like an abscess.

"Cut that out, whoever you are," I said groggily. "Before I kick all the warts off you."

"Waking up, hey?" a rumbling voice demanded.

I got my eyes open; discovered I was on the floor of the corridor outside Teresa Vaughan's little office. There was a tall, cadaverous bozo in funereal black broadcloth leaning over me, giving me this facial massage and seeming to enjoy it. He looked like an undernourished undertaker with stomach ulcers, but he wasn't. He was my pal, Ole Brunvig of Homicide.

Oh sure, my pal. In a pig's blister he was my pal. He drummed on my mush the way a Sioux Indian beats a tom-tom.

"Come on, come alive," he kept saying. "Snap out of it, Hawkshaw."

I told him I was a sick woman, and would he kindly go spit up a tree. This brought me nothing but some more open-handed whaps on the whiskers.

"Quit playing 'possum," Ole snarled. "Where is she?"

"Where is who?" I mumbled.

"The dame."

"Oh, the dame." I let myself relax. "I'm dying and he prattles about dames." Then I tensed. "What dame?"

"The Vaughan dame. What other one is there?"

I lurched unsteadily from horizontal to vertical, like a character who suddenly finds himself reclining with rattlesnakes. The hall contained two uniformed cops in addition to Brunvig, and I could see another one in Teresa's office. I could also see little Willie Oliver in there, but no Teresa.

"You mean she's gah-guh-gone?" I yeepped.

Oliver came into the corridor and answered that one.

"She sure as blazes ain't nowhere around here, Mr. Ransom." He wiped his nose on a brown tweed coat sleeve.

"Hey, you was right."

"I was right about what?"

"Lieutenant Brunvig, here, he done what you said. He turned me loose. Loose from that piano, anyways."

"Shut up," Ole said.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you tell your story, Willie?" I said.

Willie nodded. "Every word," he said piously. "I even let the lieutenant know you was coming here to the Paratone lot to pinch that broad. So he decided to trail you and see did you need help. He brung me along, see, and when we got here—"

"Didn't I tell you to shut up?" Ole brandished a fist under the little ginzo's smeller.

"Yes, sir."

"Then shut up." He turned a frosty glower on me. "Well, hot shot, start lying."

"What do you mean, start lying?" I demanded indignantly.

"The quicker you get the lies out of your system the sooner I can commence clouting the truth out of you with a rubber hose. Or would you prefer a black-jack? You can have your choice."

I held my aching noggin in my two hands, tried to press away a little of the pain. I might just as well have tried to squeeze vinegar from a bowling ball. It couldn't be done. When I touched the lump on my conk, though, it brought

back a rush of unpleasant but important memories.

"Those hoods!"

"What hoods?"

"The ones I piped lamming out of the Vaughan stash earlier tonight, the ones with guns. You remember, I told you you about them at the time I phoned you. I drilled one of them, the chubby one, and they powdered in a Cad."

"Make your point. You're holding the dice too long."

"Well, they sneaked in here and treated me to a helping of assault and boppery. Knocked me frigid."

"That'll do to tell."

"And they snatched the Vaughan tomato."

"Three more lies and you get a certificate. Two certificates and you win lumps."

"I've got lumps," I said bitterly. "See for yourself."

Ole made disparaging sounds.

"I've seen bigger ones on dill pickles. You could have inflicted that on yourself by butting the wall or something." He seized my lapels, thrust his jaw up close to me. "How much did you collect?"

"Collect?"

"From Mrs. Vaughan."

"Now why should I collect anything from her?"

"Bribery. To let her escape."

I bristled. "Look. Fun is fun, but don't be accusing me of accepting bribes. I told you what happened. Those two gunsels clonked me and toted Teresa away with them."

"Oh. They clonked you."

"Yeah."

"Knocked you unconscious?"

"Yeah."

He smirked triumphantly. "If you were unconscious, then exactly how do you know they took the woman away with them?"

"Because she was unconscious, too," I said.

"Don't feed me that double talk. I asked you—"

"And I answered," I cut across his chatter. "The filly fainted. I was trying to revive her when I got bashed. When a dame swoons, she can't go anywhere

under her own steam. Ergo, she was carried. Who could have carried her? The guys who whacked me. Natch. There was nobody else around."

"Oh, I see. And why had she fainted?"

"I had just told her she was a widow."

"This was news to her, when she killed him herself?"

"Maybe she didn't kill him. Maybe somebody else did. Somebody who hasn't yet entered the picture."

"You mean somebody she'd hired for the job?"

"I doubt that," I said, and meant it.

"Oh. So now you're fronting for her. Trying to cover her."

"Not at all. You asked my opinion. I gave it."

Ole's manner became deceptively mild. I knew the signs. This was the calm before the storm.

"The two hoods you mentioned," he said. "Know who they were?"

"No."

"What was their motive, snatching the Vaughan woman?"

"There you have me."

He blew up like Vesuvius. "You're right I have you! I have you by the short hairs! I'll tell you what happened. Mrs. Vaughan murdered her husband. By a fluke, you got onto it. A decent private pry would have phoned Headquarters right away, but not you. Oh, no! You conducted a personal investigation. Then you came here to the studio to see the dame, the murderess. To arrest her? Phooey! What you wanted was grease. Always on the take for a buck."

His neck bulged over his collar and his cheeks were verging on the purple of apoplexy. Sparks came out of his ears and you could see brimstone dripping from his jowls.

"What did she pay you to let her escape?" he thundered.

"Don't be childish, Ole."

"All right. Dummy up. Help yourself. Maybe you'll change your mind in a cell at the gow. And the gow is where you're going, bub. Because I've got the goods on you. I know what the woman paid you. I know part of it, anyway. I've got the evidence."

"Where?"

"On your mouth!" he roared, jumping up and down. "Lipstick!"

I felt myself blushing guiltily as I remembered how the shapely brunette cupcake had glued her kisser to mine in the little office while trying to sell me a bill of goods. I tried to wipe off the smear from my yap. Ole batted my hand down.

"It's too late!" he yodeled. "You're hooked, hero, you're hooked."

"Would it help if I mentioned a theory that just occurred to me?" I asked him quietly.

He showed me his front teeth, which needed cleaning. "Theory! Sheepdip. You've run your final whizzer on me, Sherlock."

"It's a hunch about the two torperdoes." I said.

"Hogwash."

"And where they might have taken Teresa."

"Fertilizer."

"And who might have bumped Joe Vaughan."

"Sheepdip."

"Now you're repeating yourself."

**HE FLEW** to the towering top of a high dudgeon.

"Curse your impertinent gall, I'll—" Then he subsided as fast as he had erupted. "What theory? What about the two torperdoes, and where they'd take Teresa, and who killed her husband? Talk up while there's time. You're leaving for the bastille in two minutes."

"Meaning I'm pinched?"

"You are indeed."

"On what charges?"

"Aiding and abetting the escape of a suspected criminal, taking a bribe, negligence in the performance of your duty as a special officer, impeding the work of the police and— Let's hear the theory."

I gave him the haughty glimpse. "You hang all those beefs on me and expect me to cooperate? Stew you."

"Stubborn, hey?"

"Obstinate, balky and mulish."

He turned to one of his uniformed flatties.

"Take this—this person out to the squad car. Take Oliver, too. I don't like his face."

"Gee, Lieutenant, I'm sorry," Willie sniveled. "I never liked it much my own self. It's all I got, though."

Ole went on talking to the harness copper.

"Take them both to the car and handcuff them. I'll be out in a few minutes."

"Yair," the copper said, and saluted smartly.

He had a nightstick in his saluting hand, and rapped himself briskly on the forehead with it. "Ouch!" he yelped, and cast a venomous look toward me, as if it had been my fault. "C'mon."

First prodding Willie Oliver with the club and then me, he conducted us out of the writers' building and toward a parked police sedan which stood alongside my own coupe. There was no driver in the cop car, which was a break I had hardly dared hope for. I now decided to press my luck.

I pretended to stumble. I went down on my knees. The harness bull lunged at me. I suppose he suspected a trick. He was right.

"Run, Willie, run!" I yelled.

Oliver started running. The copper swerved by me, with Willie for his new quarry. It was no job at all for me to reach out, snatch his night-stick. He tried to hang onto it but he was going too fast. I got it, thrust it between his ankles.

The cop in question took a beautiful header on a barbered patch of grass, mowed a swath with his chin and fetched up against a property sun dial screaming that he had been stabbed. He then began crawling around on all fours like a drunken bear.

## CHAPTER VII

## JUST A THEORY



SI LEAPED into my jalopy, Willie Oliver bounced in beside me and I kicked the starter, geared into reverse, backed around under forced draft. I slapped into low and fed ethyl to clattering cylinders. It was two skips and

a jump to the studio's main gates. I made it in one skip and a hop.

The guard on duty tried to flag me down but we went past him in a cloud of peanut brittle. I had no time to hand out autographs. We hit the street and started wheeling.

"Gorry, that was marvelous," Willie said. "I thought I'd split a seam laughing at that cop—Oooh, gosh, what's so funny about it for me? I'm a fugitive, is what I am. You got me jackpotted, telling me to run. I shouldn't never of listened to you."

"Quiet. I'm thinking."

"Yes, sir," he said meekly. "Thinking about what?"

I blipped through a traffic light, just as it changed from amber to red.

"About a Cadillac," I said.

"This here heap of yours ain't so bad. I wisht I had one half as good."

"When I speak of a Cadillac I'm not being envious. I'm talking about one specific sedan—dark blue, black or maroon, I'm not sure which." I made a right turn on two wheels and a whisker. "The one those gunsels got away in, up by the Vaughan wigwam." [Turn page]

## "You Are Not Allan Andrews. Get Out — or Die!"



PRINTED in clumsy block letters on one of the mirrors in the Andrews home, the message stared at private eye Barney Forbes. Ever since Barney had consented to take part in a scheme which called for his impersonation of Allan Andrews, trouble had dogged his footsteps. True enough, he was not Allan Andrews—but how did anyone know that?

Follow Barney Forbes as he risks life and limb to uncover a sinister mystery in MURDER OUT OF HAND, by EDWARD RONNS, the suspenseful novel featured next issue. It's a hard-hitting narrative of a gory game played for high stakes and it packs a thrill in every paragraph! Remember, it's in the next issue—together with a sterling assortment of novelets and stories of superior merit!

"Oh, that one. Man, wouldn't it be nice if you could trace it down!"

"We're going to. I caught the number on its rear pads."

"No! Honest?"

"Straight goods."

I spotted a beanery at the next corner, put my tiller hard to starboard and berthed at the curb.

"Look, Willie. Here's a nickel. Go in and use the phone booth. Call the *Citizen-News* and ask for Mike Paffenberger on the city desk. Explain that you're calling at my request."

"Hey, wait. Why don't you phone him your own self?"

"I'm all muddy from that header I took down the embankment up in the hills. I'd be too conspicuous. People would notice me. And there'll be a radio pickup order out for me presently, if I know Ole Brunvig. He'll have my description on the air to every cop car and motor bike bull in the county—including my messy clothes. The less I'm seen right now, the better off I'll be. You look almost respectable, barring the fact that you're sort of wet. Who's going to pay any attention to you?"

"Nobody never does," he agreed wistfully.

"Okay, phone this newspaper friend of mine, Paffenberger," I said. "Tell him I want a number traced through the Motor Vehicle Bureau. If there's nobody at Motor Vehicle, do it through the local traffic division or the sheriff's office. If necessary put it on the teletype to Sacramento. I don't care how he does it as long as he gets me the information I want."

"Which is?"

"The owner of that Cad," I said, and wrote its license number on a scrap of paper from my glove compartment. "Now scoot."

Willie scooted. It seemed an hour before he came back. Actually it was thirty minutes by my strap watch.

"That Paffenberger, he must of got the dope by carrier pigeon," he complained. "It sure was sultry waiting in that there booth."

"The name, pal, the name."

"Oh, yeah, the name. Arcady. Somebody with the monicker of E. G. Arcady."

"E for Eddie," I said, "and we're off

to the races." I slid my gears into second, gunned the motor. "Just what I thought."

"Would that be Arcady the big shot gambler, maybe?"

"It would indeed." I swung left and poured on more coal, tore a howling hole in the storm as I headed for Caluenga and the Freeway. "Arcady the big shot gambler, who was holding a stack of Joe Vaughan's I. O. U's."

"He was?" Willie sounded astonished. "Hey, you think Vaughan welsed on them notes and Arcady sent around a couple of his hard boys to put the pressure on?"

I nodded.

"And Vaughan got tough," Willie said, "so they gave him the business with that shotgun? Aw no, gumshoe, that don't make no logic. Because if they bumped him off, how in blue blazes could they expect to collect?"

I SHOOK my head reprovingly.

"I'm not saying they bumped him off. It's possible they figured to put the snatch on him, as they had done once before—hold him for ransom, until Teresa coughed up the necessary scratch to cancel the I O U's. Only when they walked in they found him deceased, and naturally they didn't want any part of that. So they lammed, which was where I came into the taffy-pull."

"You know, that sounds sensible. The broad had croaked him and they were scared they would be in the middle." He clung to a door handle as we rounded a curve at high velocity. "But you say it was them same two hoods which later grabbed the dame at the movie studio. What about that? How come?"

"Very simple," I said. "They reported Vaughan's death to their boss. Arcady is a resourceful guy if you can believe all they say about him. He realized he couldn't collect from a deceased party, but he might from the deceased party's widow. First, though, he'd have to persuade her."

"So he ordered her brang to him, huh?"

"That's right."

As it frequently does in California, the rain suddenly stopped as if somebody had turned off a spigot. My wind-

shield wiper began chattering and squeaking on a dry surface, and overhead you could pipe patches of clear sky; the twinkling of unveiled stars. I switched off the wiper, swung over to a ramplike exit from the Freeway, whooshed up the concrete incline leading to a cross-over bridge which brings you within a few blocks of Hollywood Bowl.

"Gambling!" Willie mused. "It's sure hard to connect that kind of stuff to Joe Vaughan. In the old days he wouldn't of bet fifty cents to a hundred bucks the sun would rise in the east. Tight as the bark on a tree, Joe was."

"You knew him pretty well?"

"We worked together. For years."

"Doing what?"

"Comedy scripts."

"Oh come now," I said.

Picturing Willie Oliver as a movie writer was as ridiculous as pouring beer in your oatmeal. He made an apologetic gesture.

"So I ain't educated. But you don't need no education to be a gag expert. They used to say I was one of the best idea men in the industry. You know, comical situations, switch routines, things like that. I dreamed them up, Joe put the polish on them and Teresa, she wrote them down. She was our steno before she married him. Then comedies sort of went out of style and the majors quit making them two reels. They went in for B pix instead, on account of double features."

"And you couldn't keep up with the parade?"

"Joe did, but not me. After he got married we sort of drifted apart. Ever notice how friendships ain't never the same after one partner gets hisself a wife? Especially when he's climbing the ladder and you're going downhill. Hey, where are we?"

I had parked in front of an old-fashioned two-story house on a side street. It was a stash with gingerbread curlicues decorating its porch roof, scabrously faded paint on its weatherbeaten sides and a general air of genteel decay hovering over it like an aura.

Dating back to the days when Hollywood had been mostly farmlands and orange groves, it was the kind of relic

you usually find given over to boarding houses or cooperative rooming clubs for extras and bit players. Just copping a gander at it made you think you smelled something musty.

All of which was strictly atmosphere, as contrived and spurious as a movie set on the back lot at Republic. I cut my lights and ignition, got something out of the glove compartment, stuffed it in the side of my left shoe where it rubbed the shin but was hidden by my mud-encrusted pants cuff. Then, tapping myself under my arm to make sure I was rodded, I said:

"Let's go, Willie."

"What's the caper?"

"You'll see." We ankleed across a patch of wet, unkept grass which nobody in his right mind would have called a lawn. Up onto the porch of the dilapidated house we barged. I thumbed the bell.

A Mexican opened the door. He was a good-looking kid in a costume that made him look even better—wide-bottomed black velvet trousers with silver spangles down the sides, a crimson sash hugging his lean middle, a bright yellow sports shirt, a green silk scarf wrapping his throat. He had the prettiest teeth this side of a credit dentist's display case.

"Senores?" he said in a voice as soft and liquid as his dark eyes.

YOU could tell he didn't think much of my bedraggled appearance, though he was too polite to be haughty. He ignored Willie completely. Willie, of course, was used to that.

"Don't worry, José or Pedro or Felipe, or whatever your name is," I said. "I won't contaminate the cash customers by mingling with them in my ruined raiment. But I would like to see Eddie if you can manage to slip me to him without making a scene."

"Eddie, senior?"

"Eddie Arcady. You know, the boss of the shebang."

He made with the pretty teeth. "Of a shebang I know nothing, senior. You have perhaps the wrong address, *quiero saber*?"

"I have not perhaps the wrong address, and let's stick with straight English, shall we? I'm sure you know

straight English. I bet you went to Stanford."

"No, Hollywood High and a year at Cal Tech. Okay, pilgrim, so you've still got the wrong address."

"That clicking I hear in the background," I said. "Don't tell me it's goldfish blowing bubbles in a bowl. I seem to recognize a hint of dice being tossed and a little ivory pea rolling around a roulette wheel. How's business tonight, what with the rain and so forth?"

"Fair to middling. You wanted to see Mr. Arcady? The name, if you please. I'll phone him."

"Ransom," I said. "Nick Ransom and friend." I indicated Willie. "A tourist from Iowa. I'm showing him the sights."

"Nick Ransom. Would that be Nick Ransom, the private eye?"

"Everybody knows me and I don't know anybody," I complained. "A fine thing."

"The price of fame, pilgrim." José, or Pedro, or Felipe, whatever his name was, closed the door on a crack and went away. Bye and bye he came back. "Mr. Arcady is very curious what business a dick of your importance would have with him."

"Couldn't I tell him personally, if I beg real hard?"

"I love this bright, brittle dialog," the Mexican said. "Come in. We go around this way," he added, heading along a hallway which skirted the main part of the joint. "Avoid the riff-raff. Oh, by the way, I wonder if you'd mind being touched by a mere subordinate?"

"Touch ahead." I held my arms out from my sides.

He found the gat in my shoulder rig, lifted it. "Packing heat. Now you ought to know better than that."

"I expected you to glom it. You didn't see me putting up an argument, did you?"

"Well, no." He frisked Willie. "I guess you guys are clean now. 'Come along.' He conducted us to a door, knuckled it. Then he pushed it open, stood aside. "*Buenas noches, señores.*" He turned, went away.

Willie and I drifted over the threshold into a small ante-room. Beyond this was a larger office, but we didn't

get that far. There were two guys in the ante-room, one tall and hollow-chested, the other a chubby character with an innocent baby face and an arm in a bandanna sling.

Well, I was asking for it. Now I had it.

The skinny guy started to be courteous. "Mr. Arcady will see you in his office. Go right in."

"Hey, wait!" Fat Boy yodeled. His smooth infantile mush puckered with sudden vindictive creases. "Don't you recognize this big loogan? He's the one we conked in the Vaughan fraill's office." He narrowed his peepers. "And that mud on him—you know what? He looks like that lug up in the hills that came sailing down trying to nab us. He's the bozo that plugged me in the arm!"

Willie Oliver gave vent to a panic-stricken bleat, turned and tried to cop himself a scam. He didn't make it. Skinny dealt him a vicious rabbit punch across the nape of the neck and Willie went down on his features, twitching spasmodically.

I DIVED at Fat Boy, slugged him in the stomach. He boomed like a bass drum and my fist bounced back as if I'd hit steel springs. His corpulence wasn't lard; it was muscle. He didn't even grimace. With his one good arm he flailed at me, glanced a punch off my jaw that made me back water. I backed right into Skinny.

Skinny locked my elbows from behind. It was a hold you could have broken without half trying if you had time. I didn't get the time. Before I had a chance to pull free, Fat Boy was at me. For a guy with only one useful flipper he did beautifully. He hit me three solid smashes on the map and I felt gore dribbling from my trumpet, felt my kisser puffing like sponge rubber. Then he teed off on my solar plexus.

The poke paralyzed me. All the wind went out of my bellows in a wheezing gush and I doubled over, cramping. I was bent worse than a pretzel as I hit the rug.

From the office beyond the ante-room a voice said:

"What the devil goes on out there?"

"Plenty, boss, plenty," Fat Boy called.

Next thing I knew he was dragging me through the office doorway, dumping me alongside a massive mahogany desk. Skinny lugged in Willie Oliver, who was no longer twitching. I could tell that Willie would be no help to me whatever.

## CHAPTER VIII

### IT'S LOGICAL



**F** COURSE the guy sitting at the massive desk was Arcady. He had bushy black eyebrows, wavy iron-gray hair and looked as if he spent a great deal of time under a sun lamp. His face was ruddy, healthy, ageless as quar-

ried granite—and as completely deadpan. He had probably been a handsome handful in his youth. He was still handsome if you overlooked the thin-lipped set of his mouth, the ice-blue hardness of his glims.

He looked down at me. "Troublemaker, eh?"

I didn't answer him. My cramps wouldn't let me, even if I had wanted to.

"He's the one that shot me," Fat Boy said, "up by the Vaughans'. And he's the one we bopped when we went for Mrs. Vaughan at the studio."

"Yes, I heard you say so in the ante-room. Go get the lady. Bring her here," Arcady ordered.

Fat Boy went out. Willie Oliver and I stayed on the floor together. Skinny stood over us, watchful, alert. Arcady sat quietly at his mahogany desk for a moment, then got up and went toward a side door and waited there. Presently Fat Boy came back. He had Teresa Vaughan with him.

Arcady stopped her at the doorway. Her black hair wasn't as neat as it should have been, I noticed, and her dress looked mussed. This could have happened when she was being toted, unconscious, from the writers' building at Paratone, or it might have been the result of some pushing around after she came to here in the gambling joint. She seemed calm enough, though. Calm, or

maybe resigned. She hadn't noticed me—yet.

"Ah, my dear," Arcady said.

Alongside me, Oliver stirred feebly on the carpet. That meant he was snapping out of his coma. I pressed against him, unobtrusively, hoping he would understand I was warning him to stay under wraps. He seemed to get it. He stopped stirring.

"I must ask you a question," Arcady said to the tall tomato. "Do you mind?"

"Would it matter if I did?"

He shrugged. "A few moments ago a caller sent in his name and asked to see me. The name he gave was Nick Ransom."

Teresa opened her mouth, closed it again without saying whatever it was she had intended to say.

"Nick Ransom, the private detective," Arcady went on. "Does that mean anything to you?"

"I—don't understand."

"Let me put it this way. When I first sent my men to your home and they found your husband's body—"

"You mean when they murdered him."

"Forgive me for contradicting you. They have assured me he was dead when they went in. I have no reason to disbelieve them. They would not kill without orders, and I had given them no such orders. That, however, is beside the point. When they ran from your house they were fired upon by someone who attempted to capture them and failed. Subsequently, when I sent them to pick you up, they found this same gentleman in your office with you, and were compelled to knock him senseless."

"I wouldn't know about that. I had fainted. She looked somehow embarrassed to admit any such feminine weakness.

Arcady nodded. "It now develops that this gentleman is Ransom, the private detective I mentioned, the one who sent his name in to me a moment ago with a request to see me."

"He traced me here?"

"Ah. So he really is working for you."

"No. No, I—"

"Please, my dear, no lies."

"I'm not lying. He isn't working for me. He suspects me of murdering Joe.

He wants to arrest me." She squared her shoulders. "So let him arrest me. At least it takes me out of your filthy hands."

"I'm afraid he's in no condition to arrest anyone," Arcady said. "He's quite helpless." He stood aside so she could get a slant at me. "Quite helpless indeed."

"Speaking of contradictions," I said, and gave Willie Oliver a backward kick that sent him rolling across the room.

Then I raised the mud-encrusted cuff of my left trouser leg; grabbed the object I had stuffed into the side of my brogan before entering Arcady's gambling place. The object was the spare .32 Colt I usually keep in my coupe's glove compartment.

I took quick aim at Fat Boy. My rod sneezed, *Ka-Chow!* and inserted a hot pill in his right kneecap.

A shattered kneecap is plenty painful, they tell me. It generally leaves the victim permanently crippled. Fat Boy screamed like an ambulance siren and crumpled. Just for the devil of it I blasted away his other knee, too. Then I snapped one at Skinny, who had been trying to unlimber his artillery. I got him through the hand.

He collapsed in a chair, staring at where his fingers used to be. He would mace no more unsuspecting characters over the noggin, and Fat Boy would never gain tee off on a dick who was being pinioned from behind.

My bruised puss and battered conk felt better already. I drew a bead on Eddie Arcady as I came up off the floor.

"Try something, bub. Make your play."

"I never buck impossible odds."

Footfalls sounded in the ante-room.

"What's the shooting, boss?" a voice called. "All the customers are fading and—"

"Let them fade," I told the Mexican doorman as he came in and drew to a frozen halt. "It's a better break than they usually get at the dice tables."

His hand stole toward a shiv in his silk sash.

"Don't, you fool!" Arcady said. "He's too fast on the trigger."

"Sensible you," I said. Then, to Oliver: "You okay, Willie?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Get up."

He got up. Teresa Vaughan was regarding him with unconcealed malevolence. He lamped the venom in her look, shivered, and sidled close to me as if for protection.

"Everything's okay, Willie," I soothed him. "Everything's under control."

With a wave of my cannon I got everybody clustered in a close group near the fallen Fat Boy and the seated, bleeding Skinny. This put them all within range if I had to do any target work. It also gave me an unobstructed view of the doors, in case anybody barged in looking for grief.

Nobody barged in. The rest of the joint was oddly silent: a sinking ship abandoned in mid-ocean. Outside, cars were blamming away at a great rate. Not only customers but croupiers, dealers and stick-men, probably. When a throne topples, wise hombres get out from under.

I clenched my heater in one hand, picked up Arcady's phone with the other. I dialed headquarters, got Ole Brunvig and gave him the address.

"Better bring plenty of bandages, handcuffs and help, I told him. 'I've got Eddie Arcady and two of his punctured gunsels for kidnaping, malicious assault, mayhem, extortion and resisting arrest. Also for operating a gambling joint, which I understand is illegal. I've got a Mexican who totes a shiv and may have a record for slitting throats. That remains to be determined. And I've got Teresa Vaughan. Her husband's croaking is solved.'"

"She did it, hey?" Ole grated.

"Oh, no," I said. "Willie Oliver bumped the guy."

Little Willie turned eleventeen shades of pallid as I slammed up the phone.

"Wh-wha-what—what—" he gibbered. "What was that you said?"

"I said you cooled Joe Vaughan. Don't run, Willie. I'll plug you if I have to."

"But—but—"

"You see, chum, you lied to me. You claimed Teresa had tried to run over you with her car, and you saved yourself by jumping down a denil. When I taxed her with this, she denied it. You want to know why I believed her? Because

I'd made a similar leap down that blame mountain, and I got myself copiously banged up. Also I collected about a ton of mud on my duds as I went down. But you have no mud on you, Willie. Therefore you never jumped. You told me that story to tighten the frame on Teresa."

**H**E GULPED noisily. "Aw—" "Then, too, you identified Joe Vaughan's corpse without even looking at it. Even if you'd looked, how could you tell it really was Vaughan when his pan was blown away? Unless you'd been there when it happened. And if you were there, you were concealing some mighty guilty knowledge. Knowledge of your own guilt, maybe."

"Hey, now listen."

"And you were so blasted anxious to pin the kill on Teresa," I overrode him. "Even when it looked as if Arcady's hoods might have done the dirty work, you were quick to point out how illogical that would be. You kept steering suspicion back to the widow, almost like a fixation. Almost as if you hated her and wanted her to take the rap. Why?"

"I ain't talking."

"You don't have to," I said. "I drew you out about your one-time connection with the Vaughans, years ago. I was hunting some possible motive, and you supplied it without realizing you were giving yourself dead away. You and Vaughan had been partners, collaborators. Teresa was your steno. She married Joe; you got aced out of the picture. You went downhill, the Vaughans climbed into the big dough. I guess it festered, eh, Willie?"

"Baloney!"

"So then Teresa found you, asked you to participate in a fantastic impersonation gimmick that would save her hubby from jeopardy. You've admitted you used to be a bright idea man, specializing in switching situations. This was your big chance for revenge. You went along with the phony suicide scene."

"Joe was drunk, doped with sleeping pills. After the scene was played, Teresa

paid you off and brushed you out. She went to the studio. You sneaked back into the stash, dragged Joe into the living room, blasted him to glory with a shotgun and dressed the set to look like self-destruction. But you were careful not to make it too good. Then you came to me and fed me your counterfeit theories."

"It was the broad which bumped him!" he insisted, sniveling.

"No. She proved her innocence two ways. First by fainting the minute I convinced her Joe was defunct; second by accusing Arcady and his gunsels just now. Those weren't the reactions of a guilty wren."

"Then Joe must of really bumped himself off, after all."

"No, he wouldn't," Teresa said quietly. "He c-couldn't. He was afraid of physical pain. Afraid of death. He was a coward."

"The finger's on you, Willie." said.

"You ain't got no proof."

"Your confession will be enough. And the cops will get that." I made my voice sinister. Lacking anything definite and concrete, I was working on his fears, rasping his raw nerves. "They'll beat you and torture you and—"

He dropped in front of the desk, out of my line of fire, went crawling crabwise to where Fat Boy lay groaning. He got Fat Boy's gun, scrambled backward toward the door.

"Okay. I done it! Years it took me, but I got even. I'll burn down the first one that's dizzy enough to try and stop me from leaving here."

I let him go. I'd already heard the trampling of heavy thick-soled brogans approaching. Presently Willie heard them, too. Jumping erect, he wheeled to fire.

Coming in. Ole Brunvig fired first. In a moment Ole said:

"Well, what do you know. I fogged him dead center." He brought in a bevy of bulls. "Okay, I'll take over now, Sherlock."

The ingrate! He didn't even thank me.

Mary glanced at the mirror  
and screamed



# WRONG NUMBER

By JOHN L. BENTON

*Ambition and envy stir up a seething cauldron of crime!*

MARY MARSHALL fumbled in her evening bag, seeking the key to the apartment door. From an open window at the far end of the long seventh floor corridor a chill wind swept toward her, and she remembered it had started to snow as she got out of the taxi and entered the lobby.

"Having trouble?" a voice asked.

She turned to find a man standing in the open doorway of the apartment across the hall. The room behind him was dark and he loomed tall and shadowy in the doorway, his dark eyes gazing at her intently. His suit was blue and his shirt a dark gray, his tie bright red.

The suit and shirt blended with

the shadows so that only his face and necktie were clearly visible.

"No trouble, thank you," Mary said, and she found it hard to make her tone casual and impersonal. "I was just looking for my key."

She found the key and drew it out of the bag, and then glanced up. He was still watching her. She wondered how long he had been standing there. She was sure his door had not been open when she left the elevator and came along the hall, and yet she had heard no sound until he had spoken.

"You are Miss Mary Marshall," he said finally. "I'm Lansing Cooper, and I have a message for you." He stepped out from the shadows and she saw he was older than she had thought at first. "A rather strange message."

"A message for me?"

The wind that blew along the corridor was stronger now. Mary could feel the damp chill through the mink cape she wore—a breeze ruffled her blonde hair. She unlocked the door of her apartment, swung the door open, then turned to Lansing Cooper.

He closed the door behind them as he followed her along the short hallway of the apartment. She switched on the lights in the big living room and turned to face him again. His hair was thick and dark, but there was a lot of gray at the temples, his face was lean, and he wore his clothes with the casual air of one who selects the best of everything as a matter of course.

"I've been trying to think of a way to explain about the message without sounding completely wacky," Cooper said with a smile. "It is hard to do."

"At least it sounds intriguing," Mary said. "Do sit down."

SHE tossed her cape aside and sank into a chair. The clock on the mantel over the fireplace told her it was just two-thirty in the morning. She wondered if she hadn't made a mistake in going to a night club with Tom Bradford after the show, for she was very tired. Still she was very fond of Tom. He was young, attractive, and his work as a first grade detective gave him so little time off that it had been nice to do as he wished tonight.

"About the message?" Mary asked, noticing Cooper was staring at her strangely.

"Oh, yes, about midnight my phone rang," he said. "I answered and a man asked if I lived in the same apartment house with Mary Marshall the actress. I said I believed you lived across the hall from me, though we had never met. He said he had been trying to reach you all evening, but got no answer."

"Naturally, since I was at the theater acting in the show," said Mary. "Go on."

"Here's the silly part of the whole thing," said Cooper. "The man on the phone said, 'Give Mary Marshall this message—tell her this is Barton Thorne calling and she is going to die before morning.'"

"Barton Thorne!" Mary stared at Cooper, and there was fear in her lovely eyes. "But he's been dead for ten years!"

"I told you the whole thing was silly." Cooper rose to his feet and began to pace the floor. "Probably the work of some crank who knows you're a popular actress and wants to annoy you." He paused and stared at her. "Though I didn't like the way he said you were going to die before morning. That sounded like an actual threat."

"You mean you think I might be murdered?" Mary asked like a frightened little girl.

"I doubt it," said Cooper. "But there's no sense in taking any chances. Perhaps we had better report the whole thing to the police."

"And have them think it is just an actress trying to work a publicity stunt?" said Mary. "They will think that you know."

"I guess so." Cooper dropped into a chair. "Tell me about this Barton Thorne, who was he and what happened to him?"

"He was an actor," Mary said slowly. "We both started our careers together fifteen years ago. Just a couple of kids who wanted to go on the stage, and were lucky enough to get a break. We did a dance routine in one of those reviews with a lot of young people in the cast. After that I went in for dramatic acting and Barton kept on as a dancer."

"And you were a success and he never amounted to much," said Cooper. "That it?"

"I wouldn't say that." Mary shook her head. "He was drowned while swimming at a beach in New England one summer about ten years ago. The body was never found."

"Then there is no reason for his threatening your life, even if he was still alive," said Cooper, getting to his feet. "That message must have been a joke. I'm going now, and if I were you I would forget all about it, Molly."

She just sat staring at him as he went toward the short hallway between the living room and the front door of the apartment. For the first time she noticed that he walked with a decided limp. She heard the door open and then close softly.

"Ten years," she thought. "I was eighteen then and Barton was twenty-seven. He did resent my becoming more successful than he was and told me so before he went to New England that summer."

She remembered the note that had been found in Barton Thorne's coat on the beach. He had evidently plunged into the sea fully dressed save for that coat, and in the pocket had been a suicide note addressed to her. "I'm a failure and you are a success, so this is goodbye," the note had read.

Mary stood up feeling very old and tired. Here she was the star of one of the most successful plays on Broadway this season, and only twenty-eight, yet nothing seemed to matter much.

She walked over to the large doll with the wide hoop skirt that stood on a table in one corner of the living room. She hesitated and then turned away. She picked up her fur cape and went into her bedroom. The apartment seemed strangely lonely, almost sinister. Her maid went home nights.

In the bedroom Mary undressed, got a nightgown and went into the bath and took a shower with the door closed. When she had finished she put on the nightgown and came out.

The phone rang and Mary went to it and picked up the handset.

"Hello?" she said.

"Mary? . . . This is Tom Bradford . . .

I don't know why, but I have been worried about you. . . . Everything all right?"

MARY glanced at the mirror of her dressing table as she listened to Tom's voice coming over the wire. Suddenly a hand holding a large pair of scissors appeared from behind a curtain to her left. She screamed as the scissors cut the telephone wire near the base.

She dropped the phone and ran into the living room. She was standing in front of the hoopskirted doll a few moments later, when Lansing Cooper stepped out of her bedroom, the sharp pointed scissors still in his hand.

"I'm glad you didn't try to get away," he said as he moved nearer to her. "That you didn't rush to the door and scream for help. I wouldn't have liked that at all. You see I have planned this for a long time."

"I know, Barton," Mary said. "You see I really thought you were dead. I didn't recognize you at first, your face is changed."

"That's right." He nodded. "I was badly injured in a train wreck ten years ago after I faked that drowning in New England. Plastic surgery gave me a new face. I have been in South America for the past ten years. I didn't want to come back to this country until the war was over."

"You lied to me about having received a phone message, of course," Mary said. "Made the whole thing up to frighten me. But why, Barton?"

"Because I want you to suffer as I have," said Barton Thorne. He glanced at the scissors in his hand. "I wonder if your face was scarred and disfigured if you still would be such a great success, Molly."

"You always called me Molly instead of Mary," she said. "That's why I realized you were Barton Thorne when you left me a little while ago. You forgot and called me Molly then."

"But I didn't leave," said Thorne. "I merely opened and closed the door from the inside and waited there. When I heard the shower running I sneaked into the bedroom and waited for you to come out of the bath."

The way he glared at her frightened

her, but she knew that she had to keep him talking, to prevent him from slashing her face with those sharp scissors he held.

"Why do you hate me so, Barton?" she asked. "It wasn't my fault that I became a dramatic actress and you decided to keep on as a dancer. There are lots of successful dancers in show business—you could have made good if you really had tried. But you didn't try—you just blamed me for your failures."

"That's enough!" He moved closer to her. "I'm tired of talking. Now I'm going to slash that pretty face of yours to ribbons—"

"No, you're not!"

It was a husky, dark haired young man who spoke as he stood at the entrance to the hall covering Thorne with a gun.

"Tom!" exclaimed Mary, moving away from Thorne. "Oh, I'm so glad you got here in time."

"Who in blazes are you?" demanded

Thorne, glaring at the other man.

"Tom Bradford, Headquarters Detective Bureau," said Bradford. "And I've got someone listening on the phone and taking down everything that has been said here in short hand."

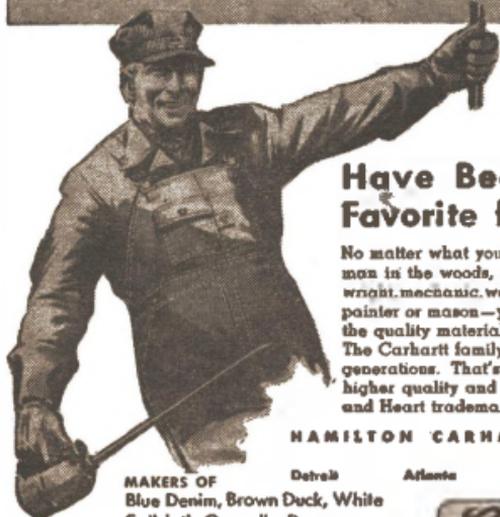
"On the phone!" exclaimed Thorne. "But the phone is useless. I cut the wire."

"You cut the wire on the extension phone," said Mary, picking up the hoop-skirted doll and revealing a second phone on the table. The handset was off the pedestal. "You see I took this phone off the hook as soon as I came in here. I hoped that Tom might still be connected and he was."

"You're under arrest, Thorne," Bradford said. "There's a squad car coming. They better get here soon or I'll be tempted to beat the life out of the man who scared my fiancée the way you did." He looked at the phone and grinned. "Seems to me you got a wrong number, Thorne."

Next Issue: HIGHWAY HOMICIDE, a Dwight Berke Novelet by Carl G. Hodges

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The man spun and bolted, but I pumped one shot from the Colt that caught him behind the right kneecap

A Novelet

# THE BODY IN

CHAPTER I

MISSING NEPHEW

A FILIPINO houseboy in a white mess jacket let me into the salmon-pink villa, took my Panama, towed me across a hall wide enough for a track event, and put me into a bamboo chair on the flagstone terrace. I sank back and looked at a lawn as smooth as

broadloom and as green as jade. The hard bright sun glistened on Biscayne Bay, and a breeze shuffled the palm fronds like maraccas.

All this tranquility was abruptly shattered.

There was a low sustained growl that welled into a heart-chilling and snarling bark. Bounding toward me across the lawn was the biggest and most vicious-looking beast I have ever seen. It was a

Murder Goes Haywire When the Prospective



# THE TRUNK

By H. Q. MASUR

Great Dane in a mood fiendish enough to rip me to shreds. I came up off the bamboo chair like a frightened deer and grabbed it with both hands, legs thrust out as a shield.

"Down, Siegfried!—down!" said a feminine voice.

The animal went down on his belly, slobbering and glaring at me through malevolent red-rimmed eyes. I turned toward the voice, impressed.

She was a pale blonde in her middle thirties, wearing tan slacks and an eye-catching silk jersey shirt. She had a scarlet mouth, an enthusiastic figure and a pair of troubled blue eyes.

"Don't mind the brute," she said, and went over and strapped him to a red-lacquered stake beside the terrace.

"I'm Mona Leising," she told me when she came back. "My husband will be with us in a moment, Mr. Caro. Please

**Victim Hires Detective Caro in Advance!**

sit down."

I sat, watching the animal through a corner of one eye.

"I'd like to ask you a question, Mr. Caro," she said.

I gave her my attention.

"Mr. Caro, what would you do if you were certain, deadly certain, that someone was going to kill you?"

"Kill him first," I said.

That startled her. She laughed a bit nervously.

"Well! The thought never occurred to me. Would you really?"

"Sure."

"But the law?"

I shrugged. "In self-defense you may kill with impunity anyone who is about to take your life or do you grave bodily harm. You can, as a matter of fact, take whatever measures are necessary to prevent injury to a third person. In either case the law protects you."

"Yes," she said dubiously. "But what if the killer sneaks up behind you in the dark with a knife, or shoots you in your sleep, or puts arsenic in your coffee, or a bomb under your bed, or runs you down with his car, or —"

"Whoa!" I held up my hand, smiling. "You've given this matter some thought. You're quite right, of course. If a man decides to commit a murder and plans with any ingenuity, it would be impossible to prevent him." I looked at her closely. "Is anyone planning to kill you, Mrs. Leising?"

"Not me," she said. "My husband."

"What makes you so sure?"

"The circumstances, sir," a male voice spoke from the doorway.

"There you are, darling," the blonde said. "This is my husband, Mr. Caro. Maxwell Leising."

**H**E DID not offer me his hand, and I did not get up. Sturdily constructed, with a thick mop of cement-colored hair, he had a whisky-red complexion, a stiff brushlike mustache, penetrating gray eyes and long slender fingers. He wore a two-toned light blue sport outfit with a figured silk ascot loosely knotted around his firm throat.

You could guess his age as anywhere between forty and sixty. Easy living and blended alcohol had kept him well-pre-

served. He got himself comfortably lodged in a wicker chair and settled his eyes on me.

"How much do you want, Caro?"

I did not like the question, and I did not like his manner of putting it. I stared back at him.

"For what?" I asked.

"To keep me from being killed. In cash."

"How much have you got?"

"Eh?" He sat up, frowning his bushy eyebrows. "What's that? What did you say?"

"What's the size of your bank account?"

He scowled darkly. "That's an insolent question. I don't understand it. You're a private detective. What are your daily rates?"

"That depends," I said coolly. "For catching a wayward husband, twenty dollars a day. For slugging a union organizer, forty dollars a day. For framing a political rival, sixty. And for saving a guy's life I prefer to let him tell me what he thinks it's worth."

He was sitting up stiffly now, his face congested. His chin was thrust out truculently.

"You're attempting to be humorous," he snapped, "and I don't like it."

I shrugged. "That's too bad. I didn't come here looking for work. You sent for me." I stood up. "Where's that Filipino with my hat?"

Leising lifted his hand in an imperious gesture. "Just a moment!" He laughed shortly. "Caro, you're all right. You have spirit and independence—and brains. You'll do. Don't be hasty. Sit down and let's talk it over."

I smiled inwardly. I had known he wouldn't let me go. He was in trouble and he needed me more than I needed his money. Though my exchequer was sadly in need of refueling, I sat down. Mona Leising, I saw, looked relieved.

"Let me ask the questions," I said. "Who is going to kill you?"

"Walter Hylan."

"Who is he?"

"My nephew."

I looked at him surprised. "Why?"

"Because he wants my money."

Maxwell Leising was serious. His lips were tucked in grimly. Behind the bold

facade of his ruddy face I could see that he was scared. I thought about it for a moment.

"Why don't you make a will and leave every last penny to your wife?" I said then. "That would eliminate his motive."

"I can't," Leising declared. "I don't have the money. I only get the interest. Walter is going to kill me for the principal and something has to be done about it."

"Please, Maxwell," his wife said, noting my perplexity. "May I explain? Thank you, darling. You see, Mr. Caro, my husband's father was a very wealthy Milwaukee brewer. He had two children—Maxwell, and a daughter named Clara. Against her father's wishes Clara ran away with a man he considered worthless and he disowned her. Clara never communicated with him, but just before he died he had a change of heart and made a new will creating a trust fund. Maxwell was to receive the interest during his life and when he died the principal was to pass to Clara's children if she had any."

"And if she had none?"

"Then the money was to go to a designated charity."

"I see. Continue."

HER expression was strained and her hands were folded tightly in her lap. She was having more difficulty than her husband in concealing her emotions. Being a woman that was only natural.

"Recently," she went on, "we had a letter from Walter. His parents were dead and he demanded money. He'd been to Milwaukee and learned about the trust fund and had gotten our address from the bank. His letter was nasty and threatening. And it carried an implication that he did not intend to wait until Maxwell was dead."

"You still have the letter?" I asked.

"I think so. Do you want to see it?"

"Later. What happened then?"

"Nothing for a while. We ignored the letter, of course. Had the tone been different Maxwell would have offered the boy some help. But to make an outright demand and threaten him like that—" She gestured vaguely, shaking her head. "Anyway, last night, Maxwell, who suffers from insomnia, heard a

noise on the ballustrade outside his bedroom window and saw the shadow of a man fidgeting with the lock.

"Maxwell keeps a small gun under his pillow and he fired a shot to scare the man away. We didn't call the police because we don't want a family scandal. This morning I felt certain that the man on the ballustrade had been Walter Hylan. So I got the classified directory and started to call all the hotels. Sure enough I found him registered at the St. Francis on Flagler Street."

She paused, watching me closely, nervously kneading her fingers. I knew the St. Francis—a seedy, second-rate dump, and if Hylan was staying there he was certainly in need of funds.

I turned to Leising. "Let me get this straight. You never knew you had a nephew until you received that letter."

"Exactly," he said. "That letter was the first word we'd ever had from Clara's family since she ran away. Walter mentioned that he had never communicated with us before because he had known nothing about his mother's family until after her death when he found some papers."

"Hmm. Did it ever strike you," I asked casually, "that the boy may be a phony?"

"Eh?" He jerked erect again, startled. "I—I don't understand."

"Consider this," I told him, "undoubtedly Clara did have a son. The boy would certainly need papers to prove his claim. But since you've never seen him and have no pictures of him, how can you be sure this one really is your nephew? Suppose Walter Hylan was killed in the war. This lad may be a ringer with an intimate knowledge of your family history."

Leising and his wife stared at each other, literally speechless. Then they turned slowly, open-mouthed, and put their eyes on me, eyes wide with astonishment.

"Oh," Mona Leising said gravely, when she recovered her voice, "that seems rather far-fetched. Those things don't really happen, except in the movies."

I laughed. "Well, it's something to think about. It gives you an idea of what I may run into. Okay. What do

you want me to do?"

"Whatever you think is necessary to protect my husband."

I nodded, running it around in my mind. She was deeply concerned, naturally. Her life was not in danger, but if Leising died the huge income died with him. True, he was her husband and maybe she was fond of him, but a woman with her looks and her figure doesn't marry an elderly gent because of a burning passion. Money would help her to make up her mind.

The thought occurred to me that she probably had not known of the trust arrangement until after she'd married. As it subsequently turned out, my assumption in that respect proved to be accurate.

Leising took out a checkbook and glanced at me inquiringly.

"Five hundred dollars," I said evenly, "will cover me for the time being."

He frowned with annoyance. "Isn't that excessive for your type of work?"

I grinned at him. "Let's not haggle. You're going to pay it anyway. There's no OPA ceiling on my type of work. Sometimes you can save a man's life simply by advising him to leave the country. Sometimes you have to kill half a dozen assorted gunmen, gamblers and blackmailers to do it." I glanced back at the pink building and added, "Besides, you can afford it."

"Perhaps," he muttered testily, "but don't judge my circumstances by this house. We only lease it. We like to travel around between here and California. We live up to the hilt of my income."

"If you find yourself hungry I'll buy you a meal," I said.

"BY GEORGE," he said, unscrewing his fountain pen, "I like to do business with you, Caro. Here's your money."

He filled out the check, waved it with a flourish and handed it over.

"What are your plans?" Mrs. Leising asked.

"A chat with Hylan seems in order." She regarded me anxiously. "But you'll be back here this evening. We'd like you to stay over night."

"We'll see how my visit turns out," I

said.

The Filipino was standing behind me. I don't know who summoned him or how, but there he was, hanging onto my Panama, his flat face expressionless. He led the way back across the wide hall and let me out through the grilled iron door to the boulevard where my coupé was parked, looking like a mongrel at a prize dog show.

I glanced at my strap watch. One o'clock. I had some lunch and spent the rest of the afternoon testing the spring of a tubular steel chair in the frayed lobby of the St. Francis.

The afternoon dragged on and Walter Hylan failed to show. By seven o'clock I had had enough of waiting, of the sleazy lobby, and of the chinless clerk who kept staring suspiciously at me over his comics book.

There was a back stairway and I might have missed him. I went over to the desk and asked the clerk to ring Hylan's room again.

He clucked annoyedly. "That makes the sixth time, sir."

"Seventh," I corrected. "If you don't like your job, quit and buy the joint. If you're still the clerk hop over to that switchboard and ring the room. Squatting around this lobby all afternoon hasn't improved my temper. Don't argue with me."

He flushed, blinked his eyes, tightened his mouth, but didn't look much tougher. He opened it to say something, changed his mind, and then went over to the board. He plugged in, jiggled the switch. He looked up.

"There. You see. He's still not in."  
"Okay," I said. "When he comes back tell him Count Dracula was here."

## CHAPTER II

### FOR PROTECTION



WENT out and climbed into the coupé and nursed it out of the city onto the boulevard. On my right the sinking sun, a lurid scarlet ball, had washed the brightness out of the sky, leaving it a bruised plum color. My new tires hissed nicely on the cooling mac-

adam. Hibiscus plants bloomed showily along the road around the cabbage palms, and in the neglected spaces between estates there was a violent growth of saw grass and wild fig trees.

I found Mona and Maxwell Leising comfortably ensconced in a long dim living room, reading. Leising removed an aromatic cigar from under his mustache and lowered a book.

"Well, my boy," he said heartily. "I am glad to see you."

Mrs. Leising gave me a faint smile. "We were growing a little nervous. Did you see Walter?"

I shook my head. "Hylan never appeared at his hotel."

"Probably at the track," Leising said. "I'll wager he shows up here tonight." His face was placid.

"You don't seem worried," I pointed out.

"No, sir. Not at all. Not with you around." He waved his book at a spot just below my left shoulder and grinned meaningfully.

I shrugged. "You can't hide them in a Palm Beach suit."

The bulge of my shoulder holster was unmistakable, largely because I carry an Army .45. I have always felt that when a man in my business needs a gun he needs one large enough to do a thorough job, and they don't make a piece of hand artillery with more wallop than the Colt automatic.

"You're sleeping here tonight, of course," Leising said.

"Right in your bedroom. If you have twin beds and Mrs. Leising doesn't object."

She blushed prettily. "Oh, I can sleep in one of the guest rooms."

"Good. I'll want a pot of coffee to keep me awake. We'll keep the ballustrade door open so that he can get in. We'll have a surprise ready for him that he'll not soon forget."

"You"—her eyes dilated—"you're not going to shoot him?"

"Maybe in the leg," I said. "Put him out of business for a while."

She swallowed painfully. "Don't you think—"

"My dear," Leising interrupted her, "I don't like this any more than you do. We're novices at this game. Caro here is

an old hand at it. As long as we have consulted him we must let him handle it in his own way."

She nodded and shifted a wide-eyed stare to me.

"Have you—have you killed many people, Mr. Caro?"

"Four as a civilian," I said, shrugging. "I lost count in the war. A Browning automatic rifle is very efficient, especially when there are a hundred Japs howling banzai at close quarters. They really topple. You can't keep score. You can't even keep their blood from spurting into your eyes."

I stopped because her face had sickened, but then she had asked for it, and experience had taught me that the best way to discourage questions of that sort was to lay it on with a trowel. Leising apparently did not share her squeamishness.

"What islands did you fight on?" he demanded eagerly.

I looked at him. "Do you like the ballet?"

His brows snapped up, then he smiled. "I get it. You'd rather not talk about it. Okay. I—"

He was cut short by the doorbell. Its sharp rattle brought him to the edge of his chair, his breath pulled in, his face suddenly strained. I saw the Filipino glide past, and a moment later he reappeared and bowed a man into the room.

Leising boomed a relieved laugh. "Well, Malcom. Come in, come in. This is a surprise."

He completed the introductions while Mona Leising ordered drinks. Malcom Haagar was a plump man in his late forties or early fifties, with a round bland face and not much hair, of no particular color, concentrated mostly above his ears. His eyes were small and dark and intelligent.

He wore a cream-colored suit with a pastel peach tie and white wingtip shoes. Leising it turned out, had known him back in Milwaukee where, until recently, he had been associated with the bank that was trustee of the Leising estate.

The Filipino appeared with a serving tadel and I eyed the Haig & Haig with mounting respect.

## THRILLING DETECTIVE

"Caro." Hagar said my name slowly, while his eyes made a curious survey. "The name sounds familiar."

"You probably read about him," Leising stated, pouring the drinks. "Caro is a private detective."

"Oh, yes, certainly." Hagar was interested. "You were mixed up in that Garson case." He leaned forward. "Extremely ingenious murder method there. I followed it from beginning to end. Extraordinary. Putting acid in the hot water boiler so that when Garson took a shower—" He shook his head and turned to Leising. "You've been keeping secrets from me. I didn't know your social contacts were so varied."

LEISING smiled faintly. "Caro is here professionally."

"Well!" Hagar elevated his brows and wagged a finger. "Come now, Maxwell. I'm an old friend of the family. You know how I like intrigue. Let me in on it."

Leising exhibited indecision and transferred his gaze to his wife. She nodded at him.

"Of course, darling. I think you can tell him about it."

"All right." He turned back to Hagar. "You remember my sister, Malcom?"

"Clara?" Hagar smiled ruefully. "Quite well. I used to squire her around before she made off with that musician. Hylan was his name, wasn't it? You haven't heard from her?"

"No. She's dead. But she had a son. He's here in Miami."

Hagar stared hard at Leising, then he tossed off his drink without a flutter.

"You don't say!"

"At least I think the boy's in town." Leising coughed. He took a drink himself, and related the events of the previous night. "I think he's bent on making trouble."

"About the will?" asked Hagar.

"Yes. He seems to be bitter about it."

"Can't say I blame him. With a wonderful wife like Mona and Scotch like this you're likely to live another fifty years. He'll be an old man before he ever sees any of his grandfather's money." Hagar bent his brows together thoughtfully, then said: "You can't mean that Caro is here to—"

"Protect us. Exactly. Mona's afraid the boy will do something desperate."

"Such as what?"

"Hastening the prospect of inheritance."

Hagar opened his eyes, astonished. "You mean—"

"Precisely. It is not beyond the realm of probability that he may attempt to kill me. People have been murdered for less. Isn't that true, Caro?"

"For as little as a dollar sixty-five," I said. "The Finkel case three years ago in Brooklyn."

"Come now." Hagar tried to brush it off with a laugh. "You're taking this thing too seriously. The man on the ballustrade last night may have been a burglar simply looking for loose jewelry."

"Yes," agreed Mona Leising. "But Watted Hylan is in town and that would be stretching coincidence too far."

"Where is he staying?"

"At the St. Francis."

"And you haven't seen him yet?"

"No. Caro tried all afternoon, but he was not in."

Hagar finally nodded. "Yes, I guess you're quite justified in taking precautions."

"Mr. Caro is staying here all night," Mona said. "In the same room with Maxwell."

"You'll be safe enough then."

Hagar rose and poured himself another drink. Leising glanced inquiringly at me and I handed over my glass. You don't often get a chance to go south with Scotch like that.

The two men settled back and discussed Milwaukee for a time, then Hagar turned to me and began asking questions about murder. I have never met a man with such an insatiably morbid curiosity. He pumped me so hard I got suspicious.

"If you were to kill a man, Caro," he said, "how would you get rid of the body?"

"That's a tough one," I said. "It takes organization and even then the body is more apt than not to turn up."

"How about a lime pit?"

"Too many traces since science has come to the aid of the law. Why? Are you contemplating killing someone?"

He shook his head, smiling. "Oh, no. Not me. No, sir. But I'm very, very interested. How about dropping the body into the bay?"

"Please, Malcom," put in Mona Leising pleadingly, "couldn't we discuss something else?"

He smiled at her. "In a moment. How about the bay, Caro?"

"That might do it," I said. "If you encased the body in a cement block and nobody saw you or got suspicious. However you'd need a couple of men to do the job and that's always dangerous."

"Couldn't it be done a little at a time?"

"A Frenchman by the name of Voibro tried it," I said. "In Paris, in Eighteen-sixty-nine. He bored holes into his victim's head, filled the holes with molten lead and then tossed it into the Seine. But he didn't get away with it. They caught him and he was guillotined."

"Isn't there any way?" he persisted.

FOR Mrs. Leising's sake I put an end to it.

"Sure," I said. "Eat the body. Grind the bones into powder and drop the powder from an airplane."

That did it. That stopped him. It was rough on Mrs. Leising, but it shut Malcom Hagar up. He mopped at his plump face with a silk handkerchief and grinned weakly.

I looked at Mrs. Leising and she smiled at me, and then the smile froze on her lips and her eyes, fixed on a spot beyond my shoulder were white-ringed with terror. She opened her mouth and made a small constricted sound.

I whirled in time to see a shadow fade away from the window. I bounced out of the chair, reaching the window in two leaps, the Colt encased snugly in my palm. It was a double French window and I knocked it open and booted it across the terrace, and was halfway to the bay before I stopped.

I decided to double back, and that was when the report of a shot fractured the night.

At the same instant the Great Dane started to howl and bark and bray, making an ungodly racket. I was framed against the moon like a gallery target. It was a huge tropical moon, like an

open porthole in the sky.

A bullet whistled past me. Then I was flat on the lawn, my nose shoved into the grass. There was no conscious volition getting down there. Years of Army training had made the action a simple reflex.

I lay very still, hearing that blasted dog bark, waiting, and when nothing else happened I got up and cautiously completed my search, fervently praying that the Dane was chained with links no weaker than the *Queen Mary's* anchor.

When I got back to the house I found Mr. and Mrs. Leising huddled together near the window. I glanced around.

"Where's Hagar?"

"Haven't you seen him? He followed you out."

Mrs. Leising stared. "That shot! Did — did you get him?"

"No," I said. "I didn't fire it. But I don't mind telling you that it missed taking off my head by less than two inches."

"How dreadful!" She was white. She looked badly shaken.

"You found no one?" Leising asked.

"Not a soul."

Footsteps crossed the terrace and Hagar joined us, puffing softly.

"You drew a blank, eh, Caro? So did I. That shot scared me green. We're lucky he didn't clip us."

"Are we?" I asked pointedly, searching his face.

"Who do you think it was?" he inquired blandly.

"Mrs. Leising got a pretty look," I said. "How about it?"

"All I could see was the outline of a man's face."

"Young?"

"I couldn't tell."

"Oh, I'll wager it was young Walter Hylan all right," Malcom Hagar announced with conviction. "No doubt about it." He nodded emphatically. "A man like that is a menace. He ought to be behind bars." He glanced at a pocket watch. "It's late. I have to be going."

He shook hands cordially all around and departed.

"Where is Hagar staying?" I asked.

"At the Victoria," volunteered Leising.

The more I thought about the man the

less I liked him. In retrospect the intelligence in his eyes changed to shrewdness, the bland manner to slickness.

Mrs. Leising announced that she wanted to retire and left us. I accompanied her husband to a master bedroom on the second floor. Of the room's three exposures the one facing the bay had a small balcony with trellis work reaching to the ground. Anyone could get up or down without much trouble. As soon as he undressed he swallowed a sleeping tablet and almost immediately started to snore. I managed to stay awake most of the night and caught some rest toward early morning.

No one showed up. No one tried to get into Leising's room. The night passed uneventfully. Doubtless we had scared the intruder away earlier in the evening.

At ten o'clock the Filipino showed up with breakfast and spent fifteen minutes rousing his employer. The job really needed a sixteen-inch salute.

After breakfast I drove back to the city and went to my office for a look at the mail. There were four letters, one a circular from a correspondence school in Cincinnati on "How To Become A Detective" and offering a fingerprint set and a magnifying glass absolutely free if I registered within five days. The other three were bills, and I filed them away for future reference.

**A**FTER lunch I went over to the St. Francis and sauntered up to the chinless clerk who recognized me immediately.

"Hylan went up about twenty minutes ago," he said. "Shall I call him?"

I shook my head. "He's expecting me. What room is he in?"

"Four-o-six."

I stepped into the naked-ribbed elevator cage and bounced upward. I found Hylan's door and drummed briefly against it. There was no response. I knocked again. Still no answer. I rattled the knob and called out:

"Open the door, Walter."

To my surprise it swung back slightly, showing me a narrow segment of face and a single red eye that regarded me solidly and without favor.

"Yes?" he demanded.

"It's time for a little chat," I told him amiably.

"Not with me," he said, and started to shut the door.

I put one hundred and ninety pounds against it and he slid back into the room. I stepped in and kicked the door shut with my heel. I looked at him. He stood there, his fists clenched at his sides, his breathing labored.

He was wearing a rumpled seersucker suit. His features were sharply hacked out of a blocky face as brown as a chunk of mahogany. His mouth was as thin as a knife slash, and his eyes were jumpy. His brown hair was cropped close, and he stood just below medium height.

"Take it easy, Walter," I said, and dropped into a chair.

I shook out a cigarette for him which he refused with a curt shake of his head. I got it burning for myself.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE MAN IN THE TRUNK



**T**HE room, I saw, held a bed, bath, bureau, suitcase, and an ancient trunk. Walter Hylan planted himself solidly in front of me.

"What do you want?" His voice was muffled

"To talk."

"About what?"

"Your uncle."

A muscle jumped in his throat. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"The name," I said, "is Stephen Caro. Private Investigator."

He frowned over that, not liking it much. Then he bent forward, his chin thrust out.

"My uncle sent you?"

"I'm working for him," I said.

"Doing what?"

"Making sure you don't kill him."

His head bobbed up and his mouth opened and he blinked at me.

"Making sure I—" He gave a hollow, unnerved laugh. "You're kidding."

"Not at all."

He swallowed slowly. "My uncle is crazy. I don't even know what he looks like. You're both crazy."

"Maybe. What kind of a gun do you

carry, Walter?"

"Gun?" His voice ascended a full octave. "Gun? Why would I want a gun?"

I shrugged. "Pointed in the right direction and fired it might bring you a lot of money. That's usually a pretty good motive for murder."

He gave a shrill hoot that was supposed to be derisive but lacked conviction. Then his eyes became pensive.

"My uncle is scared, isn't he?" he said. "I don't blame him. He knows he influenced my grandfather into making that fool will, cutting us off, and now he's afraid I'll break it."

"You're not cut off," I said. "Only until he dies."

"Yeah, but he can live for fifty years. That's the same thing."

I nodded. "He's scared. Naturally. Not because of the will but because you tried to sneak into his bedroom and because you've been firing your gun off around his house."

Hylan stared at me. His tongue licked at his lips.

"That's a lie!" he said.

"Is it? You were there last night."

He stood rocking on the balls of his feet. Affirmation was apparent in his eyes.

"Why didn't you come around the front and ring the doorbell?" I asked.

He snorted. "What good would it do? Every time I phone they tell me he's away on a fishing trip."

"So you sneaked around the back for a look."

"Yeah." He got truculent. "What about it?"

"Only this. When I chased you into the dark you thought it was your uncle and pumped a shot at me. I don't like that, Walter."

His face grew stiff and stubborn. He didn't say anything. I extended my hand, palm up.

"Walter," I said, "that gun is going to get you into trouble so deep a derrick won't be able to hoist you out. Hand it over."

He shook his head and said slowly, spacing the words as if he were trying to convince himself:

"I—haven't—got—a—gun."

I sighed irritably. "All right. You asked for it."

I got to my feet and moved toward him. He backed up, stopping when he reached the wall. His lips were suddenly rough and dry in a damp face. Moisture covered his forehead. His skin glistened like oil. When I was close to him he lashed out wickedly with his right. I snapped my head sideways so that his fist barely grazed the side of my jaw.

"Careful," I said. "You'll get hurt. Now behave yourself."

He plugged his left into my stomach and other words got lost in a rush of wind like a punctured tire. I doubled over and then straightened in time to block another one.

I pinned him back against the wall, fanned him thoroughly. He was not carrying a gun, not even a penknife, but that did not mean no weapon was in the room.

I spun him away, bent over the suitcase, and began dumping its contents onto the floor. I had it about half-empty when I heard him say:

"Caro!"

An odd urgency in his voice stiffened my spine and brought me around to face him.

THE short-barreled automatic was pointed squarely at my chest. His eyes held a brittle shine between narrowed lids and all the color was pressed out of his mouth, leaving it white and determined and mean.

"Stay where you are," he whispered. "Don't move."

"You're a fool, Walter," I said.

"Shut up! Move back against the wall."

There was no help for it. He was wound up tighter than a watch. I moved back.

"Turn around," he ordered.

"Now listen, Walter—"

The gun jumped. "Turn around."

I turned. My nose was less than two inches from the faded wallpaper. I heard a shuffle and I knew it was coming. The impact was terrific. My head exploded into a blinding flash that lasted for a splintered instant. A trumpet blast sounded against my eardrums. And then I went tumbling into a bottomless well whose increasing blackness

engulfed me into oblivion. . . .

The lump on my head was the size of an ostrich egg. I tested it gingerly. Then I floundered to my feet and the walls went into a drunken dance. The hinges in my knees had come loose. I grabbed a chair and fell into it, and waited for my brain to get solidly anchored-again in my skull.

The walls steadied, but the frayed green carpet rolled toward me like sea waves. After a while that stopped and I managed to stagger into the bathroom to wash my face.

I examined myself in the mirror.

"Caro, old boy," I said, "let that be a lesson to you. Never turn your back on a guy you think has a gun. Shame on you."

What I needed was a drink, but first I decided to have a look around the room. The suitcase turned up nothing of interest. The trunk was locked. I wedged my knife handle under the hasp and sprang the lock. I pulled the trunk open, then jumped back with a startled yelp. The guy popped out at me, out of the trunk, like a jack-in-the-box!

It was one of those things that's hard to believe even though they happen before your eyes. Malcolm Hagar had been right there in that trunk all the time. He shot out, thumping softly against the floor, and rolled over on his back and stared up at me, grinning.

I stood impaled to the floor. I felt paralyzed. My eyes hung out like grapes.

Hagar's face was frozen and vacant and a little surprised. In that last moment before the life went out of him he had sensed what was coming. His plump lips were peeled back, leaving his excellent dentures naked to the orange gums. The tiny red hole over his left eye had not leaked much and above it the round bald dome of his skull glistened in the sunlight.

I am no medical expert but I knew this much—he had been stuffed into that trunk after rigor mortis had begun to set in. Then the muscles, stiffening unnaturally in the cramped space, had snapped him out when he was suddenly released.

The reason for Walter Hylan's fright was all too clear. No wonder he had wanted to get away.

I decided to have a look at Hagar's pockets. I was stooping over him when a knock sounded on the door. Two sharp, authoritative raps. My back arched like a cat's back and I crouched forward, listening. The knock sounded again, hard and impatient. My skin tightened.

Slowly I turned and watched the door. A key rasped in the lock. My eyes jumped wildly around the room seeking a way out, and finding none.

Mentally I groaned. Here it was again. The Leisings had paid me hard American cash to keep their names out of a scandal. My mouth was cotton dry with disgust when the door swung open and a man stepped heavily across the threshold, saw me, and stopped dead in his tracks. He dropped his small black eyes to the body on the floor, let them crawl up to settle on me again, and then began to curse.

Sergeant Leon Gideon of the Miami Homicide Detail knew all the words. He was a heavy-set man with plenty of loose meat on his frame, a bleak white face that seldom saw the sun, dark, crafty eyes, and dark hair that clung moistly to his perspiring forehead. We had crossed wires more than once, worked together on several occasions, and in one instance I had pulled him out of a jam.

**B**EHIND him the chinless clerk stood with a ring of keys, gaping into the room bug-eyed. Gideon turned to him.

"Beat it down to the lobby," he said in a surprisingly low-pitched voice. "And keep your mouth shut."

He closed the door, shuffled over to Hagar, inspected him dispassionately, pulled out a huge hankerchief the size of a face towel, and mopped at his face.

"Okay, Caro," he said. "Who is this guy?"

"The name," I told him, "is Malcom Hagar."

"You knock him off?"

"Don't be silly. The guy's been dead at least two hours. It takes that long for rigor to get started. I got here only about twenty minutes ago."

"The guy who rents this box. Where is he?"

"Probably on his way to Mexico. He clunked me and took a powder. Here,

feel this." I presented the back of my skull for his inspection, but he let it go.

Gideon's eyes moved carefully around the room, missing no detail. Then he sighed.

"I am going to ask you what you're doing here, Caro," he said quietly, "why you came to this room, and you're going to give me a cute answer about privileged communications and the rights of clients. Then I'm going to tell you that this is murder and make a lot of threats, and you're going to act like a martyr and dish up a package of lies. All this will take up a lot of time, so let's get started now. What brought you here?"

"Neatly stated," I said, grinning, "and I have half a mind to tell you the truth. But first let me ask you the same question. What brought you here?"

He blinked at me, shrugged, and said, "A telephone call."

"From whom?"

"The usual guy. Mr. Anonymous."

"Telling you what?"

"That if I came up to this room I would find evidence of a crime."

"And you—"

"No! That's all!" A sudden rush of blood mottled his white face. "You're always doing that, Caro. I'm asking the questions here today."

He folded his eyelids until only the dark pupils were visible. There was anger in the slash of his mouth.

"Curse it all, this is a resort city, Caro," he exploded, "and we're trying to keep its reputation clean. Maybe you like this sort of thing because it brings you clients and gives you free publicity, but it's a black eye for the Department. The hotel owners and the newspapers will ride the commissioner and he'll climb on my back, so I'm going to work it out on you. I can do you a lot of good and I can do you a lot of harm. I want you to level with me. What's the deal?"

I looked at him. "Don't you want to get the doctor up here before this thing cools off?"

Without a word he swung to the phone and put a call in to Headquarters. Then he tipped his head at me.

"All right, Caro. Talk."

"The chap who had this room is named Walter Hylan," I said. "He'll

come into a lot of money some day when his uncle dies. That is, if some cop's bullet doesn't cut him down first. This uncle was scared Hylan had decided to hasten the process of inheritance and hired me to protect him. I simply came up here for a chat with the boy."

Gideon ducked his head at Hagar's body. "And found this?"

"Yes."

"This the uncle?"

"No. A friend of the uncle's."

"What was he doing here?"

"I don't know."

"Why did Hylan kill him?"

"I don't know that either."

"Go ahead and guess."

"Some other time. I don't feel up to it."

"The uncle got a room here?"

"No. He rented a house on the bay?"

"Same name? Hylan?"

"Uh-uh."

"All right. What is his name?"

I shook my head. "I can't tell you that. Now, take it easy, Gideon. Let me talk to him first. He'll probably come forward himself."

The sergeant's face was grimly and stubbornly set, but he nodded.

"I'll put Hylan's description on the wires," he said. "What did he look like?"

I GAVE him a careful and detailed record of Hylan's appearance which he scratched in his notebook. By the time I finished the invasion was on, and technical men from the Department were swarming all over the place. I took advantage of the confusion created to slip quietly into the hall and down the back stairs, keeping my eyes peeled to see if Hylan had ditched the gun anywhere. He hadn't.

At the first phone booth I called the Leising menage. A woman's voice answered.

"Mrs. Leising?" I asked softly.

"Yes. Speaking."

"Stephen Caro. I have some news. I want you and your husband to lay low and not say anything, Malcom Hagar was shot to death a short while ago."

She gasped. Silence for a while. I listened to electricity crackle along the wires. After a moment she spoke again,

her voice as tremulous as a willow in a wind.

"Malcom shot? Who—did it?"

"I don't know," I said. "He was killed in Walter Hylan's hotel room. The cops are there now. They think Walter did it. I spoke to him briefly, then he stuck a gun under my nose and ran away. I found the body in his trunk."

She gasped again.

"If I'm not out to see you," I said, "it's because the cops have a tail on me and I don't want to lead them to your place. Understand?"

"Oh, yes," she whispered. "I'm so frightened, Mr. Caro. Will Maxwell be safe?"

"I think so. Where is he now?"

"On the terrace."

"Hylan has no way of knowing that the cops won't be hanging around there waiting to nab him," I said. "Just sit tight."

She said she would and we hung up and I put a long distance call through to Milwaukee to a private dick there with the astounding name of Sergai Murphy.

"Hello, Caro," he said. "Long time no hear. What's on your alleged mind?"

"A small job," I said. "Get me some information on a guy named Malcom Hagar and wire it in."

"Can do," he said.

"Another thing," I told him. "While you're at it, dig up whatever is available on a family named Leising."

"That's the name of a beer in this burg."

"The same family," I said.

"Sure thing. That all?"

"For the time being yes."

I hung up and went out into the street, and through the corner of my eyes I spotted one of Gideon's men lounging in a doorway, elaborately examining a folded newspaper. He put it away and started moving after me.

I paused, hesitated uncertainly, then stalked off in the opposite direction. Across the street another one of Gideon's men took up the trail. I had to grin. Two of them. In a way that was a compliment.

I stepped out briskly and led them a merry chase. Some two hundred blocks later I dropped into a moving picture to rest. One of them followed me in and

the other stayed outside. When the film was over I had a leisurely supper and went home to bed.

I fell asleep with a picture in my mind of Leon Gideon frowning over a report of my afternoon's activities.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE GIRL WITH THE GUN



NEXT morning I was reading about it over a pot of coffee when the phone rang. I picked it up and Sergeant Gideon's voice was in my ear.

"Nice work, Caro," he said, and there was a smugness in his voice. "Running my boys ragged on a fool's errand. But I'm not sore. No, sir. Not this morning."

"All right," I said. "You're happy. What happened? They make you a lieutenant?"

"Not yet. But they might. We picked up Hylan."

"Where?" I kept the excitement out of my voice.

"In a hash joint. He was in there stoking up when the radio broadcast his description. An off-duty cop was on the next stool, spotted the likeness, saw how nervous he was, and started to quiz him. Hylan got panicky and bolted. The cop nailed him with a tackle."

"Was he wearing a gun?"

"Yup." Gideon was highly pleased.

"Ballistics test it?"

"Yup. It's the same rod that plugged Malcom Hagar. Come on down to Headquarters. We want you to make a statement about what happened in the hotel room."

"Right," I said.

I finished my coffee, took a shower, donned a suede-colored tropical worsted suit touched off with a canary yellow tie, plucked my Panama off the shelf, sauntered to the door, and had my hand on the knob when the bell suddenly got hysterical. I pulled the door open.

A girl was standing there. She put a tiny nickel-plated revolver against my nose and followed me as I backed up into the living room, making small futile motions with my hand.

She was twenty or so, small-boned,

with sable-black hair parted in the center, a firm, determined chin, good carriage, dark brown eyes that were as cold as frozen puddles of coffee, and a mouth that should have been full and kissable but was pulled in tightly against her teeth. She spoke in a dull voice.

"I'm going to kill you, Mr. Caro," she said calmly.

I said nothing. My throat felt as if I'd swallowed a billiard ball.

"Yes," she repeated, like a child reciting a lesson, "I'm going to kill you." Her eyebrows were bent together in a wavering line of concentration.

"Kill me?" I croaked. "Why?"

"Because you're a dirty conniving double-dealing no-good crook. Walter says so."

"Walter Hylan?"

She nodded solemnly. "Yes."

I gave my head an emphatic shake. "Walter is mistaken."

"Oh, no. Walter is never mistaken."

She didn't know much about guns. The safety catch on this one had not been released. It required only a flip of the thumb, but that took a practised finger. I felt better. I even smiled.

"Where is Walter?" I asked.

"The police have him," she said in a monotone. "I was supposed to meet him in a restaurant. I was just going in when I saw a man start to speak to him. I don't know what he said, but Walter started to run and then the man caught him. I was frightened. I waited on the corner, but he never met me. Instead, a lot of police cars drew up and took him away. It's all your fault. I guess you ought to say your prayers, Mr. Caro, but I can't wait. It took me all night to get wound up to it, and I'd better do it now."

Her face was as brittle as a piece of glass. It seemed as if the movement of any muscle would have cracked the too taut skin. She extended the gun at arm's length and squeezed it like a rubber ball. The trigger was locked and nothing happened. Suddenly she looked frightened. A shiver ran the full length of her body and she stared at the gun.

That was when she saw the safety catch and understood. She shoved her thumb under it clumsily. And that was when I danced in and chipped down on her wrist. It was also the moment when

two things happened almost simultaneously.

The gun bounced out of her hand and exploded. It was a small gun, only .22 caliber, and the report was not loud, more like the sharp rap of two boards. Behind me a small plaster cast of Victor Hugo flew into tiny fragments and disintegrated like Hiroshima.

THE gun slid along the carpet and

I was on it with the agility of a scared squirrel. She looked at the gun and at the broken statue. She began to cry. It was like somebody had pulled the stopper out. Her face fell apart and she put it between her fingers and sat down on the floor and cried harder.

I put the gun in my pocket and let her get it out of her system. After a while she stopped sobbing, and still later her shoulders grew quiet. I helped her into a chair. She took her fingers away from her eyes and showed me a tear-streaked face.

I went over to the cabinet and got out a bottle of my best Irish whisky and poured her a stiff drink. She took the glass with both hands and put it down like milk.

"Feel better?" I asked.

"Yes. Please, can I have my gun back?"

"Later maybe. Unloaded. Where did you get it?"

"In a pawnshop. I'm sorry about the statue. Are you going to have me arrested?"

"I don't know. That depends on how you answer my questions. What's your name?"

"Judith," she said tonelessly.

She sat with her hands folded in her lap, resigned and subdued. I saw that her lips were full and naturally red. Relaxed, with the tenseness out of it, her figure was nicely rounded.

"What's Hylan to you?" I asked.

She lifted grave eyes. "My husband. We were married last month."

Surprised, I was silent for a moment. "You came here on your honeymoon?"

"Hardly." Her smile was faintly wan.

"We haven't money for that sort of thing. Walter came down alone, but I was afraid he'd get into trouble so I followed him. He—he's so impetuous."

"What kind of trouble?" I asked.

She searched my face, pondering whether to talk, then seemed to make up her mind.

"About his Uncle Maxwell," she said tiredly. "Walter never bothered much about his grandfather's estate. Of course he always knew that there was a lot of money, but he always felt he could make his own way. His mother had been cut off—and he was willing to let matters stand that way. But then after we were married he needed money badly, and he made inquiries in Milwaukee and learned about everything and came down here for a talk with his uncle."

"He needed a lot of money, you say? What for?"

Her mouth got strained. "For me. I have to go to Arizona. My lungs."

"Now let's get this straight," I said. "When did you get into Miami?"

"Yesterday morning. I called Walter from the station and he came down and met me. He was on edge. I knew right away something was wrong. We never have had any secrets from each other and I made him tell me. He said he'd found a dead body in his room and that he'd hid it in a trunk. He was going to try to get rid of it and he wanted me to wait near a phone booth until he called me." She paused, swallowing painfully.

"Go ahead," I prompted.

"Early in the afternoon the phone rang and I answered it. He told me that everything had gone crazy. He said his uncle had hired you to get him into trouble. He said you accused him of firing a gun. He wanted me to meet him in a restaurant and we were going to run away."

I nodded. "That was when he was caught."

"Yes." Her lips quivered.

"And you actually thought I had framed him?"

"What else could I think?"

I shook my head. "So you bought yourself a popgun in a pawnshop and came here to kill me."

Her eyes were dull and lifeless. "Without Walter, I no longer cared what happened to me. He was sure his uncle had sent you after him and I felt I had to do something to get even."

I sighed, and bought myself a long

one from the bottle of Irish.

Then I broke it to her straight, because she would have to know it sooner or later.

"Now listen carefully, Judith," I said. "I did not frame Walter, and I had nothing to do with the death of Hagar. Walter's in a jam up to here. If the cops can solve a murder soon after it's committed it's a feather in their cap. The rap would fit Walter nicely and they'd like to tailor him for it. They may be able to do it, too. I don't know whether he's guilty or not, and I can't promise to help him: I'm going down to Headquarters. I want you to stay here, in my apartment. Don't even go out to eat. There's food in the refrigerator. If anyone calls or any message comes you'll know where to reach me. Will you do that? Can I rely on you?"

She gazed at me tragically, with her lip caught between her teeth and nodded. . . .

**S**ERGEANT LEON GIDEON rubbed his hands together when I walked into his office.

"Pretty good, eh, Caro?" he said jubilantly. "Killer caught less than twenty-four hours after he smoked out his victim. I'll get a citation for this."

I nodded sourly. "The boy confess?"

Gideon shook his large bleached face and mopped at his forehead with his oversized handkerchief.

"Not yet. He's a hard nut to crack. But we don't need a confession. The body was found in his room. The murder gun was found in his pocket. He was trying to make a getaway after slugging you. We know that the body had been in his trunk and that he planned to get rid of it. There isn't a jury in the world that won't convict him on evidence like that."

"How about a motive?" I asked. "Got one figured out yet?"

He pushed his mountainous stomach against the edge of his scarred desk and aimed a blunt forefinger at my nose.

"That's where you fit in. The cadaver must have been connected in some way with Hylan's uncle. You're going to tell us about it."

Gideon was no fool. Few cops are. He was bound to make the proper as-

sumption. "One question," I said. "Did you check ownership of the gun?"

Gideon nodded. "Yup. It was registered in Hagar's name. He was licensed to carry it."

I lifted my brows. "So-o?"

"And don't look for anything in that, Caro," he said, with a large negligent gesture, "because you won't find it. They probably had a fight. In fact they did have a fight. There was a bruise on the dead man's skull where he'd been slugged. Hylan took the gun away and shot him with it."

I hadn't known that, because Malcom Hagar had been lying on his back, the bruise concealed. I looked down at my shoes, thinking, and then I looked out the window. I brought my gaze back to Gideon and asked if I could see Hylan.

"You'll talk first," he snapped.

"No," I said stubbornly. "I'll see Hylan first."

Our glances met like crossed sabers. Then Gideon dropped his eyes and shrugged.

"Why not?"

He was too pleased with himself to argue. He had a clear case. He spoke into a box and we sat back to wait.

Presently the door opened and a cop shoved Hylan into the room. He looked like the wrath of Satan. He looked like he had been caught in a threshing machine. He gave me a hot glare, his legs spread, his face stiffly sullen.

One eye was plum-colored, swollen, almost closed. A dark bruise smeared his jawbone. His nose was puffy, with a drop of congealed blood hanging under it. His tie was yanked around under his left ear. The right sleeve clung to his coat by a thread. But he was not broken and his nostrils flared with defiance.

The back of my neck started to burn. With sudden fury I swung on Gideon.

"Curse it, man!" I growled. "Must you do that? Must you beat a guy half to death to make him confess? One guy against a whole Police Department? I thought that stuff went out with Hitler's Gestapo. It's enough to make a guy sick at his stomach. Why can't you get your evidence by using your brains instead of a lead pipe?"

Gideon took it with surprising mildness.

"The boy's a killer," he said. "Not until the jury says so!"

## CHAPTER V

### WHO IS THE PHONY?



HYLAN had been listening, astonishment apparent in his one fairly good eye. He had not expected to find a champion in me. The brief tirade I had launched in his defense had been unexpected. I switched my attention to him

now.

"Anybody ask you if you wanted a lawyer?" I asked him.

He shook his head.

"You don't have to tell them one blessed thing. Listen, Hylan, I don't know whether you're guilty or not. In the meantime I'll stick to the old American system of assuming a man is innocent until the State proves him guilty. You're standing alone now. You can accept what help I'm willing to give or refuse it. You're probably worried about you-know-who. Stop worrying about her. I saw her, and she's all right."

He drew in a deep breath, the tightness around his mouth slightly relaxing.

"Will you answer a few questions?" I said.

He ducked his head in a short nod.

"Good," I said. "Did you know Malcom Hagar?"

"The dead man?" He shook his head.

"No."

"When did you first see him?"

"After breakfast. I came into the room and there he was."

"Dead?"

"Yes, sir. Shot."

"Where was the gun?"

"On the floor, near the bed."

"Go on. What happened then?"

He spread his fingers stiffly.

"I guess I got panicky. I didn't know what to do. Maybe I should have called the cops. But I couldn't think straight. I was afraid of trouble. I thought if I hid the body in the trunk I could get rid of it later and nobody would connect me with the crime."

"And you don't know how he got in

your room?"

"No, sir. That's the truth. I swear it."

"And you told all this to the cops?"

He bobbed his chin. "Ten times."

I centered a look on Gideon who raised his massive shoulders and let them drop.

"I couldn't swallow a story like that," Gideon said, shaking his head from side to side. "Not without a large dose of bicarbonate of soda. I'd wind up with indigestion."

"Sure," I growled. "So you tried to make him change it by knocking his teeth out." I turned to Hylan. "You're new down here. You don't know any lawyers. I'll send Manny Gerber over to talk to you."

Gideon's fist connected with the top of his desk in a solid wallop.

"Just a minute, Caro. Who are you working for?"

"The lady with the scales," I said irritably. "You used to know her. Remember? Justice. Now, don't fly off the handle. Manny may not even touch this case. On the other hand"—I grinned at him—"he may even ask for a writ of habeas corpus."

"He'll never spring this lad, not with what we got on him."

"Maybe. But he'll force you into making a formal charge."

Gideon yelled out a name and the cop who'd delivered Hylan stuck his head through the door.

"Take him away," he snapped. "And be careful you don't scratch him."

I looked at Hylan. "Go ahead," I said. "And sit tight. And remember you talk to no one without advice of counsel."

The cop led Hylan away. When we were alone Gideon fixed me with a baleful glare. The swivel chair groaned under his weight as he slumped back.

"By glory, Caro, I ought to kick the bejabsers out of you. Yup, and the next time you tangle in my hair I'm gonna do it. Now get the devil out of here."

I took a stick of spearmint from my pocket and placed it upon his desk. I grinned at him.

"Here," I said, "chew on this a while."

I went out, softly closing the door behind me. . . .

I got back to my office just in time to

catch a Western Union messenger and sign for a telegram. Under a Milwaukee dateline it read:

MALCOM HAGAR CHARGE OF TRUST DEPARTMENT MERCHANT'S NATIONAL BANK. DISCHARGED FOR IRREGULARITIES IN ACCOUNTS. NOT PROSECUTED. AARON LEISING DIED 1925. DAUGHTER CLARA RAN AWAY WITH MUSICIAN HERBERT HYLAN. WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN. SON MAXWELL LEFT MILWAUKEE FOR MAYO CLINIC 1926. CHRONIC PERNICIOUS ANEMIA. MARRIED GLENDALE, CAL. PRESENT LOCATION MIAMI, FLA. MORE TO FOLLOW.

MURPHY

THE business about Hagar did not surprise me. I had never liked the look in his eyes. I read the telegram three times, then I called the Leising home. This time Maxwell answered.

"Caro speaking," I said. "You're safe now, Leising. The cops have your nephew in custody, and they're doing they're blame best to pin Hagar's murder on him."

He inhaled deeply, and after a pause made a clucking noise.

"That's terrible. Tell me, Caro, do you think Walter did it?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure. I think he's entitled to some sort of a break. On an outside chance that he's innocent I'm sending a lawyer over to see him."

"I'll back you on that, Caro."

"And foot the bills?"

"Naturally. After all, he's my sister's son."

"Good. Incidentally, I made inquiries in Milwaukee about Malcom Hagar and turned up a few startling facts. Did you know that he was booted out of the Merchant's National because some of the bank's funds kept sticking to his palm?"

"You don't say!" Leising seemed shocked.

"How about your income? Has it fallen?"

"Hardly. It's been the same for years."

"At any rate," I said, "I think we ought to dive into the whole thing right now. The bank may be keeping something from you. I want your okay for a full investigation."

"Certainly. If you say so, Caro. Can

you come out to the house for a conference? We ought to have Mona's views on all this."

"Half an hour," I told him.

Next I phoned Manny Gerber and gave him the story. He promised to get to work on it immediately. Then I read the telegram again, pulled out my bottom lip, let it snap back, and went down to the street and got my car out of the parking lot. . . .

Mona Leising herself opened the door. In the bright sun her blond hair had a metallic glint. It was the Filipino's day off, she said, and would I come out to the terrace where it was cooler. I followed her through the hall. Outside, a breeze rippled the cobalt surface of the bay. The palm fronds whispered like crumpled tissue paper. I saw the Great Dane snoring on the lawn beside the terrace, strapped to his stake. He opened one eye and saw me and made his throat rattle.

"Quiet, Brunhilde," she ordered. He subsided and went back to sleep.

I sat down.

"Maxwell will join us in a moment," she said. "May I fix you a drink?"

I shook my head. It was too warm for alcohol.

"Not now," I said.

"Some lemonade then. We always keep it in the refrigerator."

She glided away and returned a moment later with a long yellow drink, ice clinking against the glass. She handed this to me.

"Make yourself comfortable," she said. "I'll call Maxwell."

A few minutes later when they both joined me I handed her the empty glass. They sat down. Leising ran his long fingers over the cement-colored hair. I glanced at the woman.

"Your husband gave you the latest developments?"

She nodded. "Yes. I can't quite agree with him—or with you. If Walter really killed Malcom Hagar, I don't see how we can help."

I didn't say anything.

"You'll remember that we hired you so there wouldn't be any publicity," she continued. "Now Maxwell tells me that you want to pry into Hagar's activities. I see no point in it."

"Naturally," I said. "You wouldn't."

Her brows rose in a high arch. "Just what do you mean?"

I did not answer her, for at that precise instant the Dane suddenly reared into the air with an agonized yelp and leaped toward the terrace. The strap snapped him short. He twisted in mid-air and fell sprawling. His fangs were bared in a fearful grimace and the heavily labored breathing was harsh.

"Siegfried!" Mona Leising screamed.

She was on her feet, watching with huge, frightened eyes.

But it was too late. The brute was beyond her reach. Beyond anyone's reach. Red stain appeared in his spittle and a shudder like a powerful electric current ran through the huge frame. He barked twice, deep in his throat—short, horribly strangled sounds. Then he tumbled awkwardly over on his side. The paws gave a last convulsive kick and he was gone.

MRS. LEISING turned slowly to me, horrified.

"The lemonade," I said. "I poured it over the side of the terrace. It must have made a puddle which he drank."

The skin was stretched so taut over her face that it looked like scraped bone.

"How—did you know?" she said, at the end of a long trembling breath.

"Deduction," I said. "Or maybe only guesswork. No, Leising. Stay where you are."

The man had shoved his chair back and was edging toward the doors, his face working. He saw me caress my left lapel and stopped short, some of the rich blood leaving his face.

"It started when I began looking for a motive for Hagar's murder," I said. "What brought him to Walter's room? And why should Walter kill him? He didn't even know the man. He had nothing to gain from Hagar's death. When I questioned Walter he told me that he had phoned here for an appointment, but that you kept putting him off. Why? Was it because you were afraid to see him? The implication was clear that you had something to conceal."

"Then a wire from Milwaukee informed me that Maxwell Leising was an incurable anemic. Anemics are pale, but look at you! Your face is charged with

blood. You remember I suggested once that Walter Hylan might be a phony. It struck me that that could work both ways. Maybe you were the phony."

His lips curled and he laughed nastily. "You must be out of your mind."

"Not at all. Don't forget the lemonade your lady slipped me. That talk about investigating Hagar's activities was meant to needle you into some kind of action. You were afraid an investigation might turn up the fact that you are not Maxwell Leising at all. So you tried to poison me."

He bent forward, eyes cold. "Where is the real Leising?"

"Dead," I said. "And I don't know where, or whether he was murdered or died a natural death. It doesn't really matter. However it happened, you had to keep it a secret or his wife would lose the tremendous income from the estate. Because the trust terminated on his death. So you took his place, which was a neat and clever trick—impersonated him, staying far from Milwaukee, always traveling.

"Endorsements on checks were carefully forged. The bank never got suspicious. And you got away with it smooth as silk—until one fine day Malcolm Hagar showed up and caught on to your scheme and demanded a split. You didn't like that, but there was nothing you could do. Even so, there was plenty to go around."

I paused, but neither of them said a word. Then I went on:

"Hagar never learned what had happened to the real Leising either. You remember how he kept asking me questions about getting rid of a body. He was trying to scare you, probably intending to brace you for a bigger cut. Then Walter showed up."

Mrs. Leising had turned a blotchy white. Her mouth was pulled as taut as a stretched bow. She was on the point of keeling over.

"It occurred to you that Hagar might be tired of getting his blackmail piece-meal," I went on. "He might go to Walter Hylan and offer to let him in on a way to end the trust and the estate

immediately. For a fair-sized cut, of course. So you kept an eye on him. And when he went to the St. Francis you followed him there, took his gun away from him and killed him in Walter's room. That ended Hagar, and also got Walter off your neck."

The man who was not Maxwell Leising looked at me with eyes as hard as diamonds. Muscles in his neck made hard lumps.

"Once we establish the deception the rest will be easy to prove," I said.

Mrs. Leising's face crumpled like a house of cards. She whirled on the man at her side.

"It was all your idea!" she bleated. "You made me do it! You killed Maxwell in California. You killed Hagar. I won't go to the chair with you! I won't—I won't!"

"Shut up!" he snarled. The back of his hand left a welt across her cheek.

SHE gave a low moan and sank to the ground in a faint. The man spun and bolted. But I was ready for him. I pumped one shot from the Colt that caught him just behind the right kneecap. Both feet flew out from under him and he pitched headlong with a scream like that of a horse.

That settled it. Later when they were both locked up, Sergeant Gideon threw it at me.

"You're a publicity hound and a lone wolf and a meddler, and some day you're going to get it and I'm going to laugh my head off."

He could rave and rant all he liked. It was nothing but jealousy. I got my satisfaction when I put Walter and Judith Hylan on a plane for Milwaukee and sent Manny Gerber along to help clear the estate.

Judith kissed me and blushed furiously. That was just like a woman. Try to shoot you on Monday and kiss you on Tuesday. Walter gripped my hand.

"Thanks for everything. I'll send you a check."

"Sure," I said. "And don't be bashful. Add a couple of ciphers to the total."

Heck! The cost of living was way up.



# WEIGH-IN FOR MURDER

By CARTER CRITZ

*One-way Walker, the expensive hood, takes part in a three-way tragedy in Brooklyn!*

ONE-WAY WALKER lounged in the dark doorway and whistled softly between his teeth, keeping time with a soundless tapping of an expensive two-toned shoe on the cement beneath. Walker had well earned his nickname of One-Way. He was an expensive hood. He could dress and live accordingly. He made his money fast and surely—and his victims died in the same manner. On one-way rides.

Tonight was routine. It was a setup. A quiet Brooklyn street where nothing much ever happened—until it happened. Midnight had come and gone. The street was in bed. A little wind blew the length of it, picking up bits of paper, dropping them after a few yards. The little wind seemed almost apologetic, as if it disliked to intrude even such minor activity into the calm of the street.

Walker waited, and whistled very softly. He was in no hurry. He had all the time there was. Behind him in the dark doorway the Tommy-gun waited, too. It was in a violin case, but to One-Way's ears it made better, more satisfying music than the instrument for which the case had been made.

Walker glanced at his wrist watch—12:20. He looked across the street and his eyes—the cold, pale eyes of a killer—reflected the lights of a small neighborhood drugstore, the only place in the block still open at this hour.

A minute more, and the quick tap-tap of small heels sounded nearby. A girl came along. She paused at the curb, her back to him, and cupped her hands against the small breezes to light a cigarette. She smoke over her shoulder, never looking his way.

"I'll bring him, pal. Just stand easy."

"Get him into the phone booth over there. That's all you gotta do." The words were hardly louder than breathing, but they carried.

"I'll tell him Jake wants him to call—in a hurry." The lighted cigarette bobbed in the painted mouth. "This is it, One-Way."

The girl moved off. Walker assured himself of the presence of the Tommy-gun with a nonchalant touch of his tan and white shoe against the case, and resumed his soft whistling. The girl disappeared around the corner, and Walker crossed the street to the drugstore.

The window display shielded him from the view of those within, except for his head and shoulders. He saw the soda fountain attendant mixing a soda. Two men and a woman were spaced along the marble counter, on the stools. The fountain man, lean and young, glanced casually at him. The others paid no attention to the man outside.

A newsboy came scuttling, a bundle of papers humped on his hip. Walker bought one, pretended to read it, eyes casing the store interior. But he couldn't see the phone booth, and he moved to stand on the platform scale in the entrance way. From there the booth was in sight, and he studied it. He covered his action by dropping a penny in the slot of the scale. Machinery whirred inside and a pasteboard card flicked into the cup.

"Your weight and your fortune," said the sign above the scale. One-Way looked at the card—165 pounds. He turned it over, read his "fortune"—and grinned.

Then, with an easy, confident swing-of his shoulders, he returned to the doorway across the street.

Shortly the girl appeared again. Sadie, he reflected, was quick and efficient. She had a young fellow in tow, and they were both hurrying. She made a flicking motion with her thumb, for One-Way's information, as she entered the store behind the youth. The motion meant that the car was waiting, around the corner. Walker had known that it would be. Butch Bedelio never slipped up on the details. He never let down his hoods. He was behind you all the way. Butch was thorough, and he hired the best. No wonder he had Centre Street running in circles and tearing its hair. Inspector Ballard, down there—and McShane, of Homicide. A couple of punks that oughta be back poundin' pavement.

Sadie must have signaled the car driver, for it came into sight, moving slowly toward him, as Walker crossed the street again to the drugstore. He had the Tommy-gun, uncased and ugly, under his right arm now, and he moved quickly.

His entrance stirred a gasping flurry of movement at the soda fountain. Sadie gaped at him, bit her knuckles in pretended terror.

"Hey!" the clerk began, and goggled at the gun, his Adam's apple working in his thin throat.

The others whirled on their stools, and froze under the menace of the cold muzzle.

"Not a move," Walker warned, "or you get it." Moving with cobra speed and deadliness, One-Way glided on rubber-soled shoes to the rear of the store. With a gesture as casual as if he had been saluting a friend, he lined the gun on the unsuspecting back of the young man in the booth. Flame licked at the leaping, stuttering muzzle of the weapon and the store was filled with sudden, horrible noise.

Glass was still tinkling down from the smashed door of the phone booth as One-way passed the fountain and backed out. The two men sat stiffly, but the woman slid off the stool in a dead faint, her falling body brushing Walker as he went by. Then he was out, and in the limousine, and the gears were

howling in second as the big car picked up speed.

INSPECTOR McSHANE of the Homicide Bureau bulked big and sweating in the middle of the drugstore. Outside, uniformed policemen held back the crowd of curious drawn by the shooting. Death was here—violent death—with its always magnetic attraction.

The technical men from headquarters had not yet arrived. McShane shared the store with a sick and shuddering little group at the soda fountain, and with a dead man, huddled and sprawling and grotesque, half in and half out of the shattered telephone booth.

"It could do for a stock movie shot of a gang killin'," McShane told himself. "Includin' the police sweatin' in the middle, not knowin' which way to turn."

But, heck, these hoods had to make a mistake sometime. They couldn't just bump off one victim after another, and never make a slip—not ever. He had said as much to Inspector Ballard, his superior, but Ballard, badgered and overwrought, had not been impressed.

"Whaddya want, McShane?" he had said. "Charts and a blueprint?"

McShane sighed, turned to Sadie, weeping hysterically at the soda fountain. According to the fountain man, this girl had come in with the victim—or just behind him.

"You can cut the act now, sister," he told her.

The girl gagged on a sob, looked up. "What?"

"You never saw the deceased before—of course not!"

"I didn't!" she screamed. "I just happened to come in—"

"All right. All right." He turned to the fountain man. "Tell me all you saw—and heard."

"The gunman bought a paper outside," the clerk said. "Then he weighed himself—and the scale there. And went away. Then this—other man—came in. The girl was behind him. He started to phone. Then the gunman came back, and—"

"Hmmm." McShane's eyes were narrowed. He fixed a hard gaze on the girl. If he hadn't seen this fluff once at a nightspot with One-Way Walker, then

it must have been her identical twin. And One-Way—they never came back when they rode with him—had been a thorn in police flesh for a year or more. They knew what he was, but they couldn't get a thing on him. No proof—no proof at all.

"Hmmm," murmured McShane, eyes glittering. "Sister, come with me. We're callin' on a friend of yours."

ONE-WAY WALKER sat on the edge of the bed in the bedroom of his nice apartment, lit a cigarette with an easy gesture, and grinned crookedly at Inspector McShane.

"What's the gruff, Inspector? But, first, introduce me to the dame."

"Oh, her. She's the one put Joe Roper on the spot for you—hour or so ago."

Walker blew languid smoke through his nose. "Riddles."

"Riddled, you mean. That cutter of yours—"

"Don't be a fool, Inspector. I've been in bed since ten o'clock."

"Int'resting, Walker." McShane picked up the paper on the table. "Grem-lins bring you this midnight edition?"

Walker looked at the girl and laughed. Sadie laughed, too, but there was a bitter, calculating look in her eyes as she stared at him.

"You forget that a man can have friends," Walker said easily.

"You'll need 'em—where you're going," McShane said. "I'll just take that rod, fella." His own gun fisted in his right hand, he reached under Walker's pillow, drew out a vicious little .32 automatic. Then, keeping a wary eye on his two prisoners, he began going through the pockets of Walker's suit coat, hanging on a nearby chair.

"I give up," Walker drawled. "There's blood on my handkerchief."

"Take it—and wipe that grin with it," McShane said. "I'm arrestin' you for the murder of Joe Roper."

"Because I got a midnight paper, maybe? Leave us not be funny, McShane. My mouthpiece will spring me in five minutes, on that one."

"Your mouthpiece is gonna get his tongue all tangled in his eyeteeth when I stick this under his nose," McShane said, and in the fingers of his left hand held up a little white card.

Walker's fingers, flicking ash from his cigarette, halted suddenly and a little involuntary gasp escaped him. Sadie's breath hissed in the silence.

"A card," McShane said, "with your weight—and the date—and the address of the drugstore where Roper got his! Amazin' coincidence, huh, Walker?" He turned to the girl. "As for you—"

"I never saw this man before," Sadie pleaded desperately. "This is all strange to me. You have to believe that, officer. You have to!"

"Then he isn't the man who came into the store over there tonight—with a Tommy-gun? He isn't—no, you don't, Walker!"

Walker's hideout gun was half-way out when McShane swung his ham of a fist. Gun and gangster hit the wall behind the bed, but separately. Something else hit the wall at the same time—a keening slug from the girl's little .22. In passing, the bullet took the tip of McShane's ear and the last of his patience. The full-arm swing that knocked the gun from Sadie's hand was far from gentle.

"Now," said McShane to the spitting, snarling Sadie, "set you down—there on the bed beside your pal, where I can watch you both—while I make reservations for you, westbound, to Centre Street. One-Way," he added, with a grin at Walker.

They sat quietly while McShane phoned headquarters. While he sat there, waiting to talk to Inspector Ballard, he fingered the weight card, turned it over.

Chuckling, he read the "fortune" aloud.

"You will be lucky in your endeavors! Hmmm." He reversed the card. "Weight, 165—it says here, Walker, I know they always weigh in for ring fights, but that's the first time I ever saw it done for murder!"



I couldn't take my eyes from the sudden death in the red-headed man's hand

# WINGS FOR AN ANGEL

By C. S. MONTANYE

## CHAPTER I

### LIKE A SNAKE BITE

**I** DOZED next to Libby Hart in one of the upholstered stage boxes.

Lib was at her polished best, sleek as a yard of silk, gorgeous as the dames you meet in dreams. I decided I wouldn't trade her for any of the starry-eyed babes romping around the stage of the St. Regis Theater, even with the glamorous Swan Millard thrown in.

It was a full dress rehearsal of a limb-and-look opera tagged, "Let's Have Music!" which was to open that night.

Libby had had a fling at designing the costumes. Mrs. Hart's favorite daughter had more jobs than an employment agency. Every time I looked around she was doing something else to pay her room rent.

This latest grind was right up her side street. I had only to glance in Lib's direction to see the shine in her dark eyes and the excitement that parted curved lips roses could have learned something from.

She was loving every minute of it!

The *opus* was being produced by a party entitled Lee Brand. With my inside connections, I knew that Brand

## A Johnny Castle Novelet



*The sports writer and dilettante detective battles with fists, wits and guns when the backer of a Broadway show is killed—and a lovely chorine may be handed the rap!*

didn't have a hot dime of his own on the line. The entire production had been bankrolled by no less than Augustus Gusman, a little guy with a pointed head who, among other things, was a member of the bar, with a law office on lower Broadway.

GUS had a reputation that needed fumigation. His law practise made shysters look like reputable citizens. Gusman specialized in second-story-down clients—those a floor lower than the underworld. Crooks, bigamists, murderers, extortionists and others of the same mixed breed, paid through the

nasal appendage for an Augustus Gusman defense.

But he didn't always win. Now and then he found a jury waterproofed to his tears. Several of Gus's most important customers had been ticketed for the death house up the shining Hudson.

Now, Libby had informed me, Gusman's principal interest, outside of that which the bank wrote in his book, was Swan Millard. Because of a combustible admiration for the honey-haired Miss Millard, Gusman, according to my heart-beat, had upped an even hundred grand to present Swan to the public in a swoon of elegant costumes, scenery and melody.

THE thought was running through my head when the Millard chick, wrapped in an ermine bathrobe; seated herself on a platinum-plated chaise to tonsil something about those early Monday morning blues.

A whistle shrilled and the director stopped the proceedings.

"Just a minute. You'll have to move that settee down stage. The lighting's wrong. Cut that purple spot and give us a clear amber. The folks who pay sixty want to see what the star looks like. Let's try it again."

I looked at Libby. She looked at me. "Isn't she lovely, Johnny?"

"So is a beef stew. I missed lunch. How about tearing across the thoroughfare and dipping into a trough?"

"Food?" Libby wrinkled her nose. "How can you be so unesthetic? Your mind should be full of beauty at a time like this."

"It isn't my mind," I told her. "It's my stomach."

I could have added that spending a sunny afternoon in a Broadway playhouse wasn't part of my contract with the *Orbit*. That sheet paid the general overhead for sports reporting. Instead of the St. Regis, I should have been over at Pompton Lakes watching "Silent Sammy" Smith get ready for his slam festival at Madison Square the following Friday eve.

The quiet socker was in the feature event there, a so far three-to-five favorite over his opponent.

But Libby had cooed in my good ear. She had said something about wanting me to see what clever costumes she had dreamed up. Accordingly, instead of Sammy's training camp, I was staked out at the music temple, having passed up the noon hour feed bag to be on hand for the rehearsal.

"It will be a hit, won't it, Johnny?" Libby whispered, while Swan reached high for a cadenza.

"I wouldn't bet any of my dough," I told her. "Ask Louie Springer."

"Who's he?"

"The paper's first string dramatic critic. Louie," I explained, "bats a thousand in the theater league. He can pick 'em out of a hat—yours or mine."

"It's got to click," Libby breathed.

"With all of Mr. Gusman's money at stake—"

"Let's order one, with mushrooms!" I began to drool. "Look honey. I've seen an act and a half, and it's strictly high class. But after all an appetite's an appetite and—"

The lights went on and I broke off. The whistle shrilled again. This time the director didn't like the way the orchestra handled the reprise on Swan's melancholia set to music. He gave the company a ten-minute breather and went into a huddle with the band leader.

I had just about talked Libby into a quick chotrani when I got a flash of a little chorine breaking out of the ranks and bobbing and weaving in the direction of our box.

Her name was Bunny Dunlap. Before she had gone in for uplifting the American stage, Bunny, oddly enough, had manipulated plugs in one of the *Orbit's* switchboards. Louie Springer had noticed her one day dealing out wrong numbers and decided she should have another line.

So here she was in the new musical and steering straight for me.

"Mr. Castle! I thought it was you from the time I first saw you!"

Bunny dropped anchor. I could feel Libby stiffen, but I didn't pay much attention. Bunny had a letter in her hand and the kid seemed as nervous and excited as a two-dollar race track bettor with a ticket on a hundred-to-one shot.

Bunny's lips twitched, her blue eyes had a funny, strained look in them and she seemed to be making an effort to keep from shaking off the half-yard of tulle she wore.

I noticed she looked back over her shoulder before she leaned confidentially over the plush edge of the box.

"Mr. Castle! Would you do me a big favor—for old time's sake? Would you keep this letter for me, until later on?"

Before I could say yes or say no she had shoved the envelope she carried into my hand and was sliding apprehensively away.

"Well," I heard Libby exclaim, "I like that! 'For old time's sake.' How old, and what kind of time?"

The envelope was blank. It had been recently sealed. There was still some

moisture on the edge of the gummied flap. I put it in my side pocket, wondering what it was all about.

"Johnny!" Libby opened up again. "You're not listening. You said something about a sandwich."

"Come on."

I STARTED to get up, but sat down suddenly as the lobby doors in the back of the playhouse burst open and in walked the local police force.

At least, from the box, it looked like the entire Department. As a matter of fact it was mostly Captain Fred Mullin of Homicide, flanked on one side by Detective Larry Hartley and on the other by Ed Wheeler, who recently had been made a lieutenant!

I stared, for I had not realized that Mullin and his pals were patrons of the arts. The way they busted in and the march down to the footlights, however, had a strange but familiar significance.

More than once in the past I had come to grips with Captain Mullin. Mostly in matters of murder. The head of Homicide's opinion of me wouldn't have made family reading. My opinion of him couldn't have been broadcast, either. In fact it had always been a case of hate at first glimpse. For both of us.

I gripped the edge of the box, looking and listening. I heard Libby Hart's sigh. I knew what was going through her mind. She was saying to herself, "Here it is again!"

Mullin stopped at the orchestra pit and lifted a hand that looked like a boiled ham.

"Who's the head man around here?" he bellowed, in a voice any actor would have envied. Before he was answered, he continued, "Nobody leaves this here theater! I've got men at all the exits! Nobody moves until I say so—understand?"

In the silence that followed you could have heard a penny drop from a Scotchman's pocket.

Swan Millard broke the quiet. The honey-locked soprano walked down to the footlights, shaded her eyes with a graceful hand and made Mullin the target for her look.

"What's the meaning of this?" she demanded.

Mullin's jaws sagged. Evidently the full majesty of his position hadn't registered with the charm number peering at him.

He glanced at Hartley. He glanced at Lieutenant Wheeler. Then he began to bristle.

"What's the meaning of it, she says?" he roared. "Murder in one of the dressing rooms and she asks questions!"

I bobbed up like a cork. Libby made a grab to hold me. I slipped past her Fatal Apple nail polish and slid out of the box like a quarter horse leaving the stall gate.

"Johnny!" Libby demanded. "Come back!"

But it was an unfulfilled request, one of the few she ever made, too.

The word "murder" always had a curious effect on me.

Something like being bitten by a snake!

## CHAPTER II

### EMPTY POCKET



CAPTAIN MULLIN might have had the exits at the St. Regis blocked. But there wasn't a cop at the baize door that led from the dark aisle outside the box directly to the stage.

That door swung shut behind me. I almost collided with a stack of scenery piled twenty feet high. I went around the painted canvas, reaching the backdrop without interference.

The entire company of "Let's Have Music!" had congregated downstage. Even the scene shifters were listening to what Mullin was dealing out. Which left the way clear for me to go up the fire-proof stairs leading to the tiers of dressing rooms.

But if there were no members of the law to check me on stage, there were plenty at the first landing. Harrigan, six feet of authority with a badge to back it up, met me at the top of the stairs.

"Just a minute, sonny. Where do you think you're going?"

I knew Harrigan, not well, but too well. A former member of the Riot Squad, he had gone from there to the Bomb Detail and finally into the shelter-

ing arms of Homicide. A couple of times I had steered him on the proper way to lay bets on ice hockey tournaments. So that he could collect.

Harrigan recognized me the next minute. Some of his scorch fizzed out. The big mitt he was about to shove in my face dropped to waist level.

"Hello, Johnny," he grunted.

"One side, pal. Where's the corpse?" I tried to make it sound light and entertaining.

Harrigan looked doubtful. Then he must have remembered the sticks and blades would soon be back at the Garden. He nodded surreptitiously at a dressing room a little way down the tier. It had a gold star on the door.

That meant it was Swan Millard's dugout.

"In there. Make it fast. Mullin'll be around here any minute."

I didn't need a second invitation.

Two other plainclothes men gave me dubious glances, but didn't throw in a stop. I opened the door of the dressing room and walked in on—death!

The victim lay up against the north wall of the room. He was draped out along the surbase. He still wore his hat and a pained expression. There might have been a reason for that. A large circle of gore had welled out on the canary yellow of the room's rug, dyeing it a deep and sullen red.

For a minute the hat kept me from getting a good look. I moved in closer, not touching anything but letting the lights around the triple mirrors of a make-up table supply an unobstructed view.

My second glance brought identification. It hit me all at once, fast and hard. I knew the party pushed up against the wall. So did a lot of other people—characters like Nick Rowen, "Sandy," The Finger, Clifford, Harry Clark Shaffer, bad men Gus Gusman had wpt for in the past.

But Gusman was a dead fox now!

I stared briefly at his thin, pinched, sallow face. It was clay gray. I looked at his prominent Adam's apple, jutting out from his pipestem neck like a hot leather in a pickpocket's coat. I let my eyes roam down over his slight, narrow figure and end up at his forty dollar

English brogues.

They must have been size 5A and were shined up like a drunk's nose. I took it all in, Harrigan a foot behind me, breathing through his mouth.

"You know this gent, Johnny?"

"Don't you?"

Harrigan scratched his head. "He looks kind of familiar. But the skimmer throws me. I dasn't touch until Doc Brunner steps in. But the expression on your pan says something."

"I'll swap you." I turned around. "Tell me what you know and I'll furnish the identification."

Harrigan nodded. He said that about forty minutes before some anonymous somebody had telephoned Headquarters with the tip-off. It sounded authentic, and the main building had radioed one of the district's prowling cars. They took a look and then Mullin summoned his flock and trekked north.

ALL that while I had dozed beside the luscious Libby, listening to music and the rumble of my unfed stomach!

"He used to be Augustus Gusman," I told Harrigan, and the other's ears bent in my direction. "Fond memories of jumped bail bonds, damp handkerchiefs, loopholes and phony alibis."

Harrigan's mouth opened. "Yeah? I knew I'd seen him somewhere! Well, I'll be—"

He didn't finish. Out on the tier I heard Mullin coming along, flat feet and voice. He hustled in, squinted at me and went as red as a Times Square traffic light.

"Who let you in?" Mullin barked.

"It's okay, Captain," Harrigan hastened to interpose. "We just got an identification from him."

Mullin glared. His cold, granite-gray eyes, full of dislike and venom, stabbed me like a couple of stilettos. He stuck out his hand-hewn jaw, trying to think up something nasty enough to say. Then what Harrigan had mentioned began to penetrate.

"Who is he?"

The Captain asked it grudgingly. When I tossed off the name and business, Mullin narrowed his eyes and screwed his mouth into a twisted leer.

"Gus Gusman, eh? I never saw him

with his hat on before. And without teardrops on that thing he called a face. What did you kill him for, Castle?"

"Strictly for laughs." I wanted to make it sound humorous. "You know me—a murder a day. Anything for a gag."

"Yeah?" Mullin uncorked the bottle. "I'm sick and tired of finding you every time somebody gets dumped! You know something. Being a comic won't help you any. I've a good mind to take you downtown and lay a hunk of hose on you!"

"Unfortunately," I told him, "I've got an atomic alibi. I came here with a lady and I've been sitting in full view of a hundred people since I arrived, in a stage box out front. Put your hose away, Captain. Remember, I represent the power of the press. I might add that I'm here in my official reportorial capacity."

That should have stopped him, but didn't.

"Yeah?" Mullin encored. "Since when does murder come under the heading of athletic amusements?"

I didn't have to answer that one. The next minute Brunner, bag in hand, blew in and went to work. I retired to the tier outside for a cigarette and the medical examiner's findings.

It wasn't hard to hear the conversation in the dressing room from where I stood.

"Dead about an hour," Doc Brunner announced, after awhile. "Probably a thirty-eight. Through the jugular. Death was instantaneous. Or should have been. The lead's still in there. I'll have to go fishing later."

He added something about sending the basket up and left. I still stuck around. Gusman was good for a front page spread. But before I tuned in on the office, and Bill Jamison who took care of the Violence Department for the *Orbit*, I was anxious to pick up some side lights that might help Bill.

Not much developed, however.

What I did learn was that Mitzi, Swan Millard's maid, opening the dressing room door had stumbled in on Gusman and promptly fainted. A scene shifter had seen her and was administering first aid when the two cops in the prowler had barged in. But, according to my information, neither the scene shifter nor anyone else at the St.

Regis had supplied the tip-off to Headquarters!

I brooded over that. Maybe the murderer? Possibly the killer, after leaving the playhouse? Some gun with a warped sense of sardonic humor, handing the cops the place?

Captain Mullin went into his act. It was all routine. The patter never changed. A quiz program that consumed valuable time and usually turned up little or nothing of any importance. But that was the way he operated and nobody could alter his stereotyped methods.

Yet, oddly enough, Mullin usually bulled his way through to a successful case break. It took time, a lot of ponderous thought and a maximum of luck, but I had to give him his due. In his old-fashioned club-swinging, beat-'em down, bludgeoning manner Mullin crashed through eventually.

His Department had a pretty fair average of solutions to its credit. Though how they were arrived at, the fishy-eyed head man couldn't have told you himself.

**MY EARS** were still hanging out when the Captain happened to catch a glimpse of me. He broke off his interview to come out on the tier.

"You still around, Castle?" He pulled out a watch some brass works had spent days putting together. He held it up and pointed a stubby finger at it. "You've got three minutes to get the heck outta here—unless you want to be taken in for obstructing justice. What'll it be?"

"Watch your blood pressure, Captain," I murmured, and headed for the stairs.

Down on the stage I remembered Libby. I went through the baize door, but the box we'd sat in was empty. Mullin's men had herded the principals and chorus of "Let's Have Music!" over to one side of the theater, where they could be taken up and interviewed in turn.

I looked over there for a sign of Lib, didn't get one, and steered for the lobby doors.

Five minutes later I was in a corner drug store's telephone booth with Jamison on the other end of the line.

Then I started for the office, walking

slowly and thoughtfully. Who had exterminated Gus Gusman? Maybe the Millard rib? She had had plenty of chance, in between costume changes. Undoubtedly she had plenty of reasons, too, even though the shyster had played angel and thousand-granded the show for her.

If the glamorous Swan was innocent, then *who* had done it?

Something hit me like a safe dropped out of a top floor window. I'd completely forgotten the cute little Bunny Dunlap, her shakes, and the letter she had given me to keep for her. All of a sudden I came out of a coma. Bunny's agitation, the way she had looked back over her shoulder, the speed with which she had eased the envelope to me.

From where I stood it began to smell like the little Dunlap babe had been meddling with murder—Gusman's order for a pair of feathery wings!

Quickly I slid a hand down toward my side coat pocket where I had stuck the choline's envelope for safe-keeping. My cigarettes were there, so were my keys. And three books of matches. But no envelope.

That was gone—definitely and completely—like Gusman's last breath!

Yes, the envelope was gone, but—*where?*

It wasn't likely it had fallen out of my pocket. Had one of the cops lifted it in the dressing room of death? That wasn't much good, either. But if it hadn't dropped out, and if the law hadn't helped themselves to it, how had it gone?

It came like a zigzag of lightning.

I remembered my dream girl stiffening beside me when Bunny had approached the box. I recalled the way Libby had fastened her inquisitive, dark eyes on the envelope. I remembered how she had watched me pocket it, in the right side pocket, the one next to her chair.

Libby! That, I told myself, must be it. She had done the light-finger work!

At the *Orbit*, I found Jamison had already left for the St. Regis. There was a pile of stuff on my desk marked "urgent." I swept it into a top drawer and did some hard, fast thinking. That envelope, with whatever it contained, was important. Perhaps Miss Hart

didn't realize how much so. Perhaps Libby, in a touch of jealousy, had torn it up and thrown it to the winds. The thought was horrible.

I reached for the desk telephone. That brought the dulcet tones of Beth Wheaton, the Sarah Bernhardt of the Bell System, gurgling in my ear.

"Yes?"

"Beth, do you remember Bunny Dunlap? The gal who used to sit out there beside you, making the same kind of mistakes you do?"

"Wolf!" Beth said.

"You wouldn't happen to know where she lives?"

"Wolf!" she repeated.

"Because," I went on, "Miss Dunlap's in a jam, or the reasonable facsimile of one. I've got to see her—and soon—or maybe the police will arrive first."

"Oh, it's that way." There was a minute's delay. "Why don't you try Personnel. They'll have her address on file."

"This is lame brain day," I said. "Thanks for the cue."

## CHAPTER III

### CALLERS



UP ON the third floor, I got what I wanted. That came out as "Bonita Dunlap, Telephone Operator," with an address in the West Seventies. I took a copy of it, tried Libby at her boarding house, found she wasn't there, and decided to make a personal call on the Dunlap chick, after a fast sandwich.

The address tallied with the number on the double glass front doors of a narrow, mediocre apartment house not too far from Central Park. I supposed that Bunny lived there with her parents, probably supporting them in a style to which they had become accustomed. And there wasn't much chance that she had moved since she had exchanged telephone numbers for song numbers. In rural Manhattan people didn't move, because there was no place to move to.

I found her name easily enough and rode a self-service elevator to the sixth floor. I rang the bell of Apartment 6F.

I got immediate service. The door was opened—not by Bunny's wrinkled mother. Nor by a snowy-haired father.

Instead, I looked into a pair of long-lashed, violet eyes. They belonged to a cute little trick with corn-yellow hair, a streamlined figure and a pair of stems made to order for climbing bus steps.

"Miss Dunlap home yet?"

The violet eyes gave me quite a play. A lipsticked mouth went into a turned-up-at-the corners smile.

"No, she isn't. Friend of hers?"

"For years. She used to work on the same paper with me."

"Oh, the *Orbit*." The cute trick registered interest. "What did you say your name was?"

"I didn't. If you'll let me come in and wait for Bunny, I'll give you a copy of my autobiography."

"Sure." She held the door wide. "Any friend of Bunny's is a friend of mine. We share this rathole together. My name's Della Roberts."

I followed her into a cheaply furnished living room that looked as if it hadn't been dusted since the Great Flood. Articles of intimate apparel were strewn carelessly about. A pair of nylons were drying, pinned to the lower slat of a Venetian blind. Della Roberts pushed some lingerie aside and made room for me on a sofa that sagged in the middle.

"I don't know what time Bunny'll be in," she said. "She's rehearsing with the new show at the St. Regis."

"Yes, I know."

"Sometimes she meets her boy friend when she gets through. You know, Joey Andra. He dances at the Silver Drum. Personally, I can't figure what Bunny sees in him. I know when he was running around with me—"

She went on, and on. About Joey Andra. About the uneven course of true love. About the two-timing proclivities of the Broadway male. I listened, thinking.

I had more than a deep-seated hunch that Bunny Dunlap knew something about Gus Gusman's murder. And I had a feeling that the letter she had so hastily asked me to safeguard for her had something to do with the shyster's pass-out. What? The more I thought of

it, the more confused and complex it became.

But one thing was sure. I had to see Bunny and before too long.

Della suddenly remembered her manners and went to open a couple of cans of beer. She found an old box of pretzels somewhere, blew the dust off and got real chummy.

We were toasting each other in foam when the doorbell hummed. The yellow-top pursed her red lipsticked mouth.

"That isn't Bunny—unless she's lost her key. Wait'll I go see."

Her heels clicked on the hall floor boards. The lock snapped back and from where I sat on the disconsolate couch I had a triangular view of two callers at the door. Both men.

"No, she hasn't got in yet," Della Roberts was saying. "You friends of hers?"

"Known her for years," one of the pair said. "Mind if we come in and take a look around?"

He followed that up with a push past Della. I set my tankard down as they drifted in. They didn't look good, either of them.

The one who had spoken was a lanky, red-haired man. He puffed on a pipe, curved like a bathing beauty. He had a blank, composed face, deep-set eyes without warmth or light and a creased, protruding chin.

HE WORE a pale tan gabardine suit that fit without a wrinkle. He looked at me and at about that time I began to register. I'd seen him somewhere before. I had a feeling that he was familiar. I couldn't rest a finger on it, but intuition told me he was somebody who had been in the public eye at a time not too far distant.

His companion was slim and dark, a young man slight as a girl. I noticed his small, delicate hands, velvety eyes and hard little mouth. His black hair was brushed up in a series of tight waves and he smelled of lilac. He was in blue, a red carnation in his lapel.

He looked unhealthy, stealthy and sinister despite his build and smallness.

"My name's Fain," the red-haired man said. "My pal's Eddie Beam. We had a date with Miss Dunlap that she"

didn't keep. We thought maybe she'd come home."

"Isn't that funny?" Della said it to them but kept looking at me. "This gentleman's waiting for her, too. I wonder where she went."

"Who's 'this gentleman?'" Fain cut in.

"Oh, I forgot to introduce you." Della laughed, a trifle nervously. There was something in Fain's voice like a sudden frostbite. "This is Mr. Castle. He's a newspaper man. He's on the *Orbit*."

Fain's cold eyes rested on me. "A reporter?" He turned his head and spoke to the little guy. "Coincidence, Eddie."

"Yeah," Eddie said, out of his hard little mouth.

Fain frowned. He took the pipe from between his teeth, stirred its hot ashes with a toothpick and focused his gaze on Della.

It was obvious he had thought she might have been stalling about Bunny not being home. Finding me there, waiting, had apparently reassured him. But not with any degree of pleasure. The frown bit deeper into his forehead and mouth.

"Where can we locate her?"

"Well," Della said, "as I was telling Mr. Castle, she probably met Joey Andra somewhere. She didn't say anything to me."

"Andra?" Eddie Beam interrupted softly. "Isn't he the luggie who hoofs at the Silver Drum?"

"Yes, but—"

"Okay, Len," Beam interrupted again. "Let's shove. I know where Andra stops off. Let's talk to him."

The red-headed man hesitated. For a couple of seconds I didn't think he was going to take Beam's advice. I had an idea he was going to sit down and wait, too. He puffed on his pipe, stared at Della, then at me.

"All right," he said then, abruptly.

The door closed behind them. Somehow I felt quick relief. Their type was familiar. The kind that gunned without asking too many questions.

What did they want with Bunny Dunlap? And where had I seen the one who called himself Fain? The two inquiries merged into one large interroga-

tion point when Della came back from the front door.

"Say," she said, a bit huskily, "how did you like that pair? The way the big one looked at me gave me shivers. Where does Bunny pick up these characters?"

"I think," I told her, "I'll be running along."

Della's lipstick mouth opened. "You're not powdering, Mr. Castle? Just when we're getting acquainted. There's plenty more beer and, like I said, I haven't a thing to do tonight."

"Unfortunately," I said, "I have. When Bunny comes in tell her to call me at the office. This is important."

Downstairs I grabbed a taxi and headed for the paper. All the way along Broadway my brain buzzed. I couldn't get Fain's face out of my mind. The cab was almost even with the Winter Garden when recollection hit me—suddenly and all at once.

I felt my nerves crawl. For a minute I wondered if I were wrong. I hoped I was wrong—but I wasn't.

Fifteen minutes after I was in the *Orbit's* morgue, and had the file I wanted open before me, I began to understand why Augustus Gusman had been permanently removed from the Rialto scene. Fain's true identity came up with that understanding. Two and two made a perfect four, but it ended there.

**WHAT** Bunny Dunlap had to do with the late Mr. Gusman's demise and why the red-haired, lanky man and his miniature companion were so anxious to see her, were still matters for a crystal ball gazer to angle out. Either way, Fain's interest in the little chorine wasn't good.

I put the file away and got back to my desk in time to hear the phone on it ringing.

"For you, Mr. Castle," Beth Wheaton said. "A lady. At least she sounds like one."

"Put her on."

For an instant I thought it might be Libby Hart. Libby boiling because I had walked out on her at the theater. Libby in flames because I was messing around with murder again.

Instead, the somewhat strained voice of Bunny Dunlap came over the wire:

"Mr. Castle? Della says you were up here and that you want to see me. I want to see you, too, as soon as possible. Can you come right up?"

"Wait a minute." I thought I'd play it smart. "How about you meeting me—at Chester Ward's place, on the Square? In twenty minutes."

She said she would and rang off.

The idea of Captain Mullin flashed through my mind. I toyed with it, then shrugged it aside. Mullin would fit in later, after I heard what Bunny had to say.

At least, that was the way I figured it.

Ward's place was a block and half north of the Capitol on Longacre Square.

Ostensibly an eatery specializing in sea-food, the second floor of the place was laid out in a series of private rooms. Folks with lost-week-end ideas could coax any number of bottles along up there in the strictest privacy. People who wanted to stage dice games or revel in romance had a green light and no interference. Business deals were often consummated in the little tuckaways.

The last time I'd been on the second floor was to sit in on a session where the manager of a certain promising welter-weight haggled with the promoter of a Newark auditorium concerning the gate cut he'd receive if his boy went to war with some local set-up. The thing had finally been arranged to everyone's satisfaction except that of the socker himself. Sitting there, the leather pusher had watched his profits go down like the mercury in a Minnesota winter.

There was no sign of Bunny Dunlap in the big square foyer-waiting room. The clock told me I was five minutes early. I got hold of Chester, a hard-bitten man with a tight, worried face. He needed his usual shave and listened.

"Private room? Meeting a doll? I should send her right up when she comes?" Ward grinned crookedly. "You're leaving yourself wide open, kid."

"You mean Miss Hart?"

"What else?"

"It isn't what you think," I told him. "This concerns the law."

"Sure, sure." Ward winked and turned me over to one of his plugugly waiters. "Fix Mr. Castle up with some privacy and tell me the number of the room."

Both private supper rooms on either side of the cubicle I was ushered into were as empty as a beggar's palm. The waiter turned on lights.

"Scotch or rye?" he asked, and eased himself away.

I lighted a cigarette and sat down.

The information I had dug up at the office made headlines in my mind. But I couldn't turn a wheel until I talked to Bunny. I tried to fit her into the murder picture. I couldn't get her in focus. And yet—

Just about then there was a light tap on the door.

I opened it and the little chorine slithered in. Behind her followed the waiter with a bottle, and a carbonated water set-up. He left his tray on the table and departed after a look at Bunny's ankles.

She took off a not-too-bad reefer, fuzzed her hair up with her fingers, took the drink I put together as if she needed it badly, and slumped down in the other chair.

## CHAPTER IV

### BLUE STEEL



SECOND floor business was picking up. I heard the door of the room on the left side of us open and close, a murmur of voices, but I didn't pay any attention. I stared hard at Bunny's piquant face, at her frightened eyes, and noticed the way she clutched her glass. As if it might get away from her.

"It's your cue, honey," I said to her. "What's it all about?"

I said it quietly. She made her gaze level with mine. Instead of answering she asked her own question.

"Where's the envelope I gave you at the theater, Mr. Castle?"

"Let's hear about it before we go into that." I lit a cigarette for her. "Tell me about Gusman. What happened in Swan Millard's dressing room during your

costume changes?"

She shuddered, took a long drag out of the glass and hunched herself together in the chair. I knew that under her make-up she was as white as plaster.

"It was terrible! I—I'm afraid! He saw me coming out of Swan's room. The little guy, the one that smelled of lilacs!"

"Start from the beginning. You were in the star's dressing room?"

She nodded. "Right after the New Orleans number. Swan stayed on for the scene that followed. She asked me if I'd get her shawl and bring it down. It was on the back of a chair. I said I would."

She stopped and her mouth trembled. There was only ice in her glass. I poured, saying:

"So you went to her dressing room to get the shawl. Gusman was there—on the floor—dead?"

"No, he was walking around. He seemed awfully sore about something. He asked me what I wanted. I had just started to tell him when there was a knock on the door. Gusman pushed me into a closet and shut the door. At least, he tried to shut it. But it didn't close entirely. One of Swan's costumes was in the way. There was a crack about three inches wide that I could look through."

She got a grip on herself, or maybe what I had put in her glass bolstered her, and went on.

"Two men came in. One was tall. He had red hair. He was smoking a pipe. The other"—Bunny's eyes widened—"was little. He wore a blue suit and he stood near the closet. That's when I smelled the lilacs. He—he—"

I gave her a minute before I said, "What happened?"

"The red-headed man pulled a gun out from under his coat. Gusman started to talk to him. I heard him say 'Now, let's act sensible about this, Nick,' and the red-headed man said, 'Sensible? Don't make me laugh, you crooked rat!'" Gusman went on talking. He was all excited and I couldn't hear everything he said. But it didn't make any difference. The red-headed man just stood there, pointing the gun at him and I saw it had a silencer on it. The little one kept saying, 'Don't let him box you in, Nick.

Wind it up and let's blow.'"

"So Nick let Gusman have it?"

Bunny gulped and nodded. "It was terrible! I saw the whole thing! Right before my eyes! I'll never be able to forget it! It's haunted me ever since. I know I won't get a wink of sleep to-night!"

"What about the envelope? What's that got to do with it?"

She gave me a wild look. "They both went out of the dressing room after they killed Mr. Gusman. I thought I was going to faint. But I didn't. I guess I was too scared. I waited—it seemed like a hundred years but it must have been only a couple of minutes. Then I grabbed Swan's shawl and went out on the corridor. The little one who had been in the room was at the head of the stairs. He was standing there, half in the shadows, looking back. He saw me. He took a good look before he ran down the stairs."

She broke off again. I started a refill, but she shook her head.

"And that envelope?"

"I thought sure they'd mow me down, too. The minute I reached the stage. I—I didn't know what to do. Then I got an idea. I hurried up to my own dressing room. I got a sheet of paper and an envelope. I wrote down 'A red-haired man named Nick just killed Gusman. I saw it through a crack in the closet door of Swan Millard's dressing room.' I put that in the envelope and sealed it. I figured they might knock me off with the silenced gun, but they wouldn't get away with it. I figured that when I didn't come back and ask you for the envelope, you'd open it and read it."

SHE added more details, but I hardly heard them. So *that* was what was in the envelope! That was what Miss Hart must have lifted from my right side pocket.

"What'll I do?" Bunny asked, her voice tight and unnatural.

I looked at my watch.

"I think we'll both take a ride down to Headquarters. This is a problem for better minds than ours. Captain Mullin can grapple with it. Let's go."

It sounded all right, and the timing

was good, but it wasn't to be as easy as all that. While I was talking I heard the door of the adjoining room open and close. Then the knob turned on our door and that opened.

I swung around. In time to see we had visitors.

A red-haired man and a small guy in a blue suit who brought in a breath of lilac time.

Somehow, the little runt didn't seem very important. Not a quarter as much as the hooded, blue steel gun that shone dully against Nick's light suit.

"Shut the door, Eddie," he said, from a mouth that hardly moved. "I don't want anybody to hear what goes on! Or," he added, "off!"

The noise Bunny made in her throat sounded like water running down a stopped-up drain. I saw her crouch back in her chair, but it was only an impression. Because I couldn't take my eyes from the sudden death in the red-haired man's hand.

A chill began to pack my spine in ice. My scalp tingled. Cold sweat dampened my hands and forehead. I felt an emptiness crawling around the pit of my stomach. And it didn't come from a lack of food this time.

At that moment I realized how right Libby had always been. Murder and sports reporting didn't mix. In the past I'd been lucky. Now, from general appearances, I'd stuck my neck out once too often, and too far!

If I needed any proof of that, I got it the next instant. "Len," as Beam called him, or "Nick" as the late Augustus Gusman had labeled him, walked over and planted himself in front of me.

"Where's the envelope the babe gave you, Castle?"

It took another second for the light to filter in. I got it. The pair had tailed Bunny Dunlap down to Ward's. Then they had walked upstairs, following her and tabbing the room she had gone into. They had ducked into the one adjoining—I remembered hearing the door close—and laid ears against the thin partition.

As easy as that!

The nose of Nick's shooter began to press into me. The chill got chillier. He said it again, the quiet note in his voice

making it sound doubly menacing:

"Hand it over!"

"I haven't got it."

My voice had a tremolo in it that put it an octave higher than usual. Nick's colorless eyes flickered in Beam's direction.

"Give him a frisk, Eddie."

The small, delicate hands went over me with expert precision. Eddie didn't miss an inch. But, as he dumped my personal belongings on the table, and didn't come across what he was sent after, the velvety eyes narrowed.

"No envelope, Len."

"What did you do with it, Castle?" The gun jarred harder. "Talk!"

"I lost it."

Nick probably expected something better than that. The blunt statement stopped him for a minute. He looked from me to Bunny and over to his partner. Then he laughed.

"He lost it, Eddie. Just like that! He lost the letter that can put me on sparks! It's floating around loose."

Eddie stood off and took time out to light a cigarette. "Let me hold this lighter under his chin and I'll get the truth out of him!"

Nick turned the idea over in his mind. I winked away some sweat. Finally Nick shook his head.

"I've got a better plan. Look, the car's around the side street. We'll take these two across town and work 'em out privately. Too many people around here, no elbow room. Besides," he added, "I've got a date in a half-hour."

The little lug with the small, hard mouth and the wavy hair, looked disappointed. He shrugged, and exhaled smoke.

"Down the back way?" he asked.

"Yes. You handle the dame. I'll take charge of this party." Nick addressed his next remark to me. "We're going downstairs, Castle. Don't get notions. I'll be right behind you and this lead spreader works just as good from a pocket."

**E**DDIE went over to Bunny. He moved with a sinuous grace. She got up. In the terrified glance she gave me was a lot of regret for the box she had put me in.

I tried to smile reassuringly. It must have been a ghoulish grimace, the kind of facial contortion featured by one on the way to the gallows.

Eddie took a look up and down the corridor. He gave Nick the nod and we started out and down the rear stairs. They had been put there during the festive prohibition era for the convenience of patrons who didn't want to meet the local police force socially. They were just as good now as they had been then—for Nick's purpose.

He escorted me across several feet of pavement and into a snappy sedan parked at the curb. People were passing. They didn't pay any attention to me or I to them. I had Nick's pocket on my mind and what was in it.

I sat down between Bunny and Nick. There was a third man at the wheel. A quiet, efficient character who seemed to know exactly what was wanted. The minute Nick pulled the door shut the car started.

We crossed Broadway. Hoodlum Avenue was a riot of lights, noise and traffic. I caught a glimpse of the Astor, the Globe, the Times Building. They never looked better. Like illustrations for a fantastic tale that would never be told again.

"So you lost the letter?" Nick murmured, musingly. "I suppose it fell out of your pocket—right into a copper's big paw."

"I don't know where I lost it."

Eddie Beam, silently meditative on one of the pulled-down rear seats, jerked his head up.

"Say," he exclaimed. "I got a flash of Castle at the rehearsal, before we went up to the dressing room. He was in a box with a dame. Maybe he passed the letter to her!"

"What dame?" Nick asked sarcastically. "There's a lot of 'em in this town."

Beam leaned forward. "That's not too tough. I know a hundred people who know Castle. Any of them can tell us who he chases around with regularly."

The empty feeling spread. Things seemed to be going from worse to much worse. Now, if the little gunman had his way, Libby would be dragged in to add to the merriment. And Libby, all un-

knowingly, would probably spill at Beam's first question!

The girl was smart at everything but murder.

The car went as far as Lexington, up that avenue for a dozen blocks and then east again. It delved into a neighborhood where poverty and riches rubbed elbows. Cheap tenements stood a sneer away from lofty layouts crowned with penthouses.

Finally the sedan, slowing, stopped before a three-story, remodeled job that had a modernistic facade and a neat areaway filled with rows of geraniums.

From the exterior the place might have been a high-class club. But it wasn't.

The driver got out of the car. He went up the front stairs and rang the bell. I saw the door open. The conversation didn't last long.

The driver came back. Nick said, "Okay?" and the other said, "Okay."

The gun came out of Nick's pocket.

"All right, Castle. Step down. We're calling on a lady. Don't forget your manners. After you, friend."

Bunny, who had sat frozen all the way over from Ward's place, went up the stairs after us, Beam bringing up the rear.

A small girl in a maid's outfit stood at the door. We filed past her, Nick pushing the gun under his coat so she wouldn't see it. We went on back to a rear room, the maid hurrying forward to switch on the lights.

"I'll tell her you're here," she said, and slid on past.

## CHAPTER V

### GLASS FOR ASHES



THE room we went into was the type they picture in half-buck magazines devoted to the decorating trade. It was done in Napoleonic blue and red. Pickled pine had been tossed around with a prodigal hand. Over the mantel of an unused fireplace a pair of expensive Chinese vases caught and reflected the indirect lighting.

The cream-colored rug underfoot was

moss-soft and ankle deep. The furniture, modernistic as the outside of the house, was upholstered in coffee-colored leather. Brass nail studding glinted. So did a lot of crystal ornaments on some picture window shelves.

Likewise the gun Nick kept trained on me.

"Sit down, Miss Dunlap. You too, Castle." Nick played a host with sardonic graciousness. "Help yourself to some furniture and relax."

Bunny stole a look at me. Her eyes were like jewels, bright and feverish. I dropped into a chromium-armed chair, trying to think and getting more muddled by the minute.

Whose place was this? Who had the maid gone to get?

I didn't have to wait long to find out. Steps sounded on the stairs, in the hall, on the cream-colored rug.

Steps made by bright red backless slippers strapped around curved white ankles.

Swan Millard entered the room and pulled the door shut behind her!

She stood there, one hand on the ornamental knob, her crimson housecoat accenting every curve and contour of her slim, perfect figure, while her gaze, questioning and puzzled, swept over Bunny and me.

"I don't think I understand." Her voice was low and quiet.

I thought that I did. But I was wrong again.

Nick spoke without moving from the spot opposite me.

"This is clean-up night, honey. We're rubbing the chalk off the blackboard. We've got one name erased. There's a couple of others to follow."

Swan Millard's hand dropped from the knob. Her expression changed swiftly. The lids went down over her eyes. Her curved red lips tightened to a scarlet streak.

"What are you talking about? You must be drunk!"

Nick chuckled. "I haven't touched a drop in years. Pass that. Who was at the rehearsal this afternoon with Castle?"

"Don't answer that, Miss Millard," I said, and got the heel of Nick's left hand in the side of my face.

Bunny choked out a muffled cry. Swan walked further into the room. I could see her begin to stiffen, to draw into herself.

"I don't know any of Mr. Castle's friends or who he was with at the theater." She made it sound disinterested, and I could see she was a better actress than I had thought she was.

"See what you can do, Eddie," Nick directed, casually.

The little runt smiled and reached. His small hand went around Swan's wrist. He bent it back and then side-ward. He did it smoothly, effortlessly, and nothing ever worked better. The red lips opened, but Eddie's other hand, clamping over them, muffled the scream that would have emerged.

"Her name is Hart—Libby Hart!" The words came when Eddie pulled his hand away.

"Where does she live?"

I sat and listened while Swan Millard went the rest of the way.

Nick dealt out some instructions. She sat down at a table beside a telephone. Numbly I watched her dial a number. Usually, when I called Libby, she was never home. But the honey-haired beauty hit the jackpot at the first try.

"Miss Hart? . . . This is Swan Millard. Could you come up to my house tonight, now? . . . Yes, there's something important I want to talk over with you . . . Fine . . . Thank you."

She pronged the telephone. Nick nodded.

"Much obliged." His tone turned velvet smooth. "Now, baby, before she gets here we'll take care of something else—you!"

The blue-steel gun moved from me toward her. Nick's hand rose a few inches, his finger closing over the trigger.

**B**UNNY'S gasped exclamation sounded like paper tearing. Eddie Beam did a repeat, grabbing her wrist and clapping his left hand over her mouth.

Swan, the gun on her, promptly fainted.

At least, from where I sat it was a perfect imitation of a faint. Maybe she was acting again. I didn't know, and I

didn't wait to find out.

I was gun-clear. Beam was busy with Bunny and on a pickled pine stand beside the chromium-armed chair was a wedge of crystal used as an ashtray. I caught it up and let it go—straight at Nick!

No big league pitcher ever put more on the ball. It had to be good, and it had to be a third strike!

It was.

The point of the big hunk of glass caromed off the back of Nick's skull with a bone-cracking thud. He dropped the gun and staggered forward, half falling over the slumped figure of Swan. Eddie let Bunny go and drew.

The two shots he angled at me would have made a perfect score if I hadn't ducked down to snatch for the hooded gun that had done the job on Gusman. The quick leanover saved my life. Temporarily, at least, I thought. Twin lead slugs hissed past, inches above me. I got Nick's cannon. It was off safety and ready for use. I squeezed the trigger, blazing away at Eddie Beam as if he were the side of a barn.

I missed as completely as he had!

Bunny was screaming at the top of her lungs. I saw Nick was coming out of it. I had the fantastic idea he was wiping blood away from the back of his red head while he stood shaking it like a horse, trying to clear it.

The little gunman had dived in behind a tall secretary for cover. My next shot splintered its grilled bulge front. Glass broke in a tinkling shower. I heard Beam yelp like a run-over dog. I banged away again in the same general direction, dropping down behind a leather-lined sofa.

No more shots came from the direction of the secretary, but something else dropped over the top of the sofa and fell on me like a load of coal.

Nick!

His arm got a throat-hold. It shut my breath off like the turn of a faucet. His other hand ripped down my arm and fastened over the gun. Croggy though he must have been, Gusman's killer still had enough power to make it child's play. He wrenched the rod out of my fingers. The nose of it dug into my side. All the fleeting thoughts commonly attributed to those about to sink for

the third time rushed chronologically through my brain.

Thoughts of the *Orbit*, the pretty pieces I dreamed up about competitive sports. Thoughts of Libby. How lovely she was, how nice she always smelled, how soft and warm her lips were. Thoughts that included Captain Fred Mullin. Mullin, fishy-eyed and ice cold, saying, "Served him right! I told him it was only a question of time, the nosy such-and-such!"

Other thoughts, clear-cut and distinct. Principally, one of a darkly robed gentleman who carried a large scythe and shook an admonishing finger at me. I tried to remember a quick prayer to murmur on the way out.

Then, before Nick could squeeze the trigger, he let the gun and my neck go the same moment.

Air, piped down to my lungs, sent a roaring noise into my ears. I remember sitting down on the cream-colored carpet and pushing Nick's legs off. I remember staring at him, wondering if he'd had a stroke or something, trying to figure why his eyes were shut and why he was lying with his face pressed to the rug.

It took another minute or two to get Bunny into the proper perspective. Bunny standing a little way off, the crystal ashtray in her good right hand, a fresh smear of Nick's claret on one of its other points.

"I—I guess I've killed him!" she said, her teeth chattering like the castanets in a Latin band.

I began to get up. Then, as I was on one knee, the door with the ornamental knob opened and the dulcet tones of Lieutenant Ed Wheeler zephyred in:

"Get your hands up! This house is surrounded!"

He stalked in, gun in hand, followed by Hartley and several gentlemen in civilian garb, all armed and prepared for any eventuality.

**W**HEELER pulled himself up short. He looked at the unconscious Swan. At Eddie Beam, whose legs were protruding from behind the shattered secretary. At the recumbent figure of the red-headed Nick, at the paralyzed Bunny, and then at me.

"A one-man army, Castle! What do we need your gal friend's call for? We tail you all evening, you shake us and then she throws in a set of directions. But why—when you can knock 'em over with your bare hands?"

I got all the way up.

"There's the one who liquidated Gusman in the dressing room at the St. Regis." I pointed a shaky finger at Nick. "There's his helper, behind the cabinet. You'd better find the smelling salts for Mrs. Gusman. I think she needs them. The faint's on the level. . ."

I rode Bunny home in a taxi about an hour later and turned her over to the gilt-top Della in 6F. Then I got hold of Libby and shared a table with her at the Silver Drum, just as Joey Andra sprang out to tie the patrons up with his Ray Bolger imitations.

Outside of being a little pale, Libby was enchanting in something new and something blue she had designed for herself in between costume plates for, "Let's Have Music!"

"Mrs. Gusman?" she led off with.

"Part of the production price, no doubt." The double Scotch was good, even if it wasn't Scotch. "The only trouble was she used to be Nick's heart in the sweet long ago. Nick Rowen, that is, to give him his baptismal monicker."

"Rowen?" Lib wrinkled her tip-tilted nose. "Isn't he the character who handled that Wall Street stock swindle some years back?"

"A hundred grand caper. Correct. The same one Mr. Gusman wept for, but dried his eyes after the jury sent Rowen away for a long stretch. Why not? He was keeping the hundred G's safe for his red-headed client—also the client's heart interest. A real daily double that paid off in round numbers."

"Or round holes!" Libby put in. "You knew Rowen?"

"Even under the blanket of the Len Fain he's been using since he got out of stir. Enough to send me to the morgue at the office to hunt up some old pictures of him and refresh my mind about his going away party. It just goes to

show you that when you're in the penitentiary you brood and brood. Then when you come out you're all set to do something to put you back—in the death house this time. Funny world, isn't it?"

"A scream." Libby shuddered discreetly. "What happens to the hundred grand now?"

I looked at her quizzically. Surely, she couldn't be as naive as that.

"That dough, darling," I said, "helped pay your fee for designing those handsome costumes. That was the angel money that bought Gusman's wings. He took the money—and the gal!"

She nodded. Joey Andra was doing a whirlwind finish. I waited until he was off and the lights were up.

"Just for your information," I went on, "Eddie Beam, the small punk Rowen got friendly with behind, not in front of the bars, will recover from my not-so-good target practise. So that's about all except I should really do something to show my appreciation for our splendid Police Department."

**L**IBBY laughed. There wasn't any amusement in it.

"What do you mean, splendid, Johnny? It's terrible. Your friend Mullin ought to be impeached or something. I opened that note the girl gave you, read what she had written and telephoned Captain Mullin at five minutes after four. And look at all the time it took before they caught up with you!"

The band was playing a tune that reminded me of something I'd heard before. Or was it that all tunes are more or less alike? This one reminded me of a tune Broadway hadn't heard yet. Something about Monday morning blues. Something Swan Millard had sung in an ermine robe, in a purple spot, on a platinum-plated chaise.

"Serves you right for opening my mail!" I said. "That's one thing I didn't think you were—jealous."

Libby's dark eyes flashed.

"Get another letter from a cute little blonde and see how I perform, Johnny!" she warned.



"Okay, Prescott. He had that punch coming to him"

# ONE DIED FIRST

By WAYLAND RICE

*Prescott was determined to rout out a mysterious killer in order to vindicate the memory of his Uncle Ed Morgan!*

**P**RESCOTT glanced at the dashboard clock and saw that it was twenty minutes after ten. He slowed up a bit then because he wasn't due to pick up Uncle Ed Morgan until ten-thirty and the office building from which he would emerge was only three blocks away.

A little later he saw the crowd, the two police cars at the curb and the ambulance

just pulling away. Its place was being taken by the ominous black van with the small plaque on its side which read "CITY MORGUE."

Prescott felt the butterflies in his stomach then. He wasn't given to hunches, but something told him that his blustering, high-tempered Uncle Ed was in a jam.

A burly cop stopped Prescott as he

tried to get into the towering office building.

"My uncle was supposed to meet me here," Prescott said. "He hasn't shown up. I know something has happened and I want to know if my uncle is involved."

"Yeah?" The cop ceased being bored. "What was your uncle's name, mister?"

"Edward Morgan. I left him here an hour ago and he was to meet me at ten-thirty."

"Stay right here," the cop said. "I'll phone up."

Prescott fidgeted. That hunch was still hot as a blast furnace. The man Uncle Ed had gone to see was a deadly enemy and Ed was impulsive and foolish at times. He claimed that was how he'd become successful, but Prescott knew his uncle's success was due to other abilities, not his browbeating of people.

The cop was coming back, and he seemed excited. Which meant Prescott's hunch was right.

"Twenty-third floor, mister," the cop said. "Use the night elevator. It's self-service and works on buttons."

Prescott brought the cage down, stepped in and punched the proper button. A lean, hungry looking man was waiting at the elevator as Prescott got out. He showed a detective sergeant's badge.

"I'm Sergeant Lacey," he said. "I understand Morgan was your uncle."

"Was?" Prescott whispered. "He—he's dead?"

"Yes. If you can take it, I'll let you see what happened, but I don't want any trouble with squeamish people."

"I was in the second wave at Tarawa," Prescott said.

"Okay, I guess anybody who went through that can face things. It isn't very nice. Come on."

The closed door was lettered: MARK BITTNER & CO. Lacey opened it. The reception room was orderly. They passed through it and into an office marked PRIVATE. Prescott came to an abrupt halt.

The man he knew as Mark Bittner lay on the floor beside his desk, his head in a pool of blood. About fifteen feet to one side in a chair, was Ed Morgan. He was slumped over, almost falling out of the chair. One hand, dangling over the arm, loosely held a .38 automatic.

"The way we look at it," Sergeant Lacey said, "is that your uncle shot Bittner and then turned the gun on himself. Both men were shot in the temple. Both are contact wounds. I mean by that, the gun was shoved very close before they fired."

"Why are you so sure of that?" Prescott demanded. "About my uncle being the killer?"

"Well, in a case of homicide followed by suicide, the guy who holds the weapon is the one who fired both shots. It stands to reason. Come on outside and talk this over."

THEY sat down in the reception room while fingerprint men and photographers went to work. Prescott saw no reason to hold back anything. He explained that his uncle had made an appointment with Bittner, arrived at nine-thirty and entered the building. So far as Prescott knew he had no gun.

"The gun presents an interesting situation," Lacey said. "Maybe you didn't look closely, but there happens to be a price tag still tied to the butt. It even has the name of the dealer who sold it. I've sent a man to pick him up. His statement ought to clear this fast."

"How did you—find out about the shootings?" Prescott asked. "The building is usually empty at this time of night."

"That's another thing," Lacey explained. "A watchman phoned in. He was so excited our operator could hardly make out what he was saying. But when it came through, he told us that Mr. Morgan was killing Mr. Bittner. So he must have heard a struggle, though there are no signs of one. Shouted threats too, I imagine."

Prescott was slowly, though nervously, dry washing his hands. He didn't look at Sergeant Lacey.

"It's all too clear, Sergeant. There are too many things pointing to the fact that my uncle is the murderer. Personally, I don't believe it and I never will. Where is the watchman, by the way?"

"We can't find him," Lacey said. "Probably got so doggone scared he's running yet. But he'll be back. Well, I guess there's nothing for me to do except search the bodies after the M.E. gets through with them. You can go any time you like."

"I'll stick around," Prescott said. "I want to hear what the gun merchant and the watchman have to say."

He was in the inner office when the bodies were searched. Things were happening very rapidly. Headquarters phoned Sergeant Lacey to report that only the fingerprints of Ed Morgan were on the weapon. Then the gun merchant was brought in.

He turned out to be a small, pimply-faced man with myopic eyes behind big glasses, nervous as a hungry cat.

"I committed no crime," he insisted. "It ain't against the law for me to sell a second hand gun. Not in this state—so long as I make a report of it. The guy comes in about seven tonight. He looks at a couple of guns and picked the one I sold him. For thirty bucks. He wanted some bullets so I sold him them too. You can't pinch me for that."

Lacey said, "Take a good look at those two dead men. Which one of them bought the gun?"

The merchant looked, shuddered violently and then steadied himself. Finally he pointed one dramatic finger toward Ed Morgan.

"It was him. I remember he had grey hair and the other guy is bald as an eagle."

Bittner was, too. Only a fringe of white hair showed around the ears. Prescott paid no attention to this testimony. He was still certain that Ed Morgan was not a killer. And while everyone in the room was intent upon the merchant who made his identification, Prescott moved over to the desk on which lay two heaps of personal belongings taken from the bodies.

He picked up a leather key case from Bittner's possessions and quietly slipped it into his pocket. The stuff hadn't been inventoried yet and he was taking a chance the case wouldn't be missed.

It was all over half an hour later, with a verdict that pinned Ed Morgan down as a murderer and a suicide. Prescott left the building and went to where his car was parked. He drove around for twenty minutes, then returned and entered the building again.

He used one of the keys in Bittner's case to open the office door, went in and crossed to the private office. There he turned on the lights and sat down behind Bittner's desk. With another key he

opened the desk and searched it thoroughly.

**I**N THE top drawer lay a small slip of paper. It bore a notation for a dental appointment in Bittner's name made for the following morning. Just on chance, Prescott looked up the dentist's home address and called him. He discovered that Bittner was having some drastic dental work done, but that he had phoned late that afternoon to cancel his appointment for the following day.

"I warned him," the dentist said, "that his tooth might act up. He didn't seem especially interested. And he made no new appointment."

Prescott hung up, far from satisfied, but feeling he'd made a little progress. A man doesn't lightly cancel a dental appointment and risk having a bad toothache, and not even make a new appointment.

There was something else too—a bank receipt showing that a rebate had been made in the rental of a safe deposit box. According to the date, Bittner had given it up just the day before. Prescott now frantically searched the rest of the desk, but without further result.

As he pushed the swivel chair back so that he might close the desk again, his foot encountered a wastebasket. He pulled this out. It was half full of paper, all torn into strips. He dumped these on the floor and tried to sort them out.

One item was a lottery ticket on a horse race yet to be run. Bittner had destroyed it without waiting for the result. There were some old notes he'd apparently endorsed for friends and then been compelled to make good. They were the only evidence on hand by which such a debt could be proven in court, yet they had been discarded too. The other papers consisted mainly of bills and brand new unpaid statements.

He was deeply engrossed in this work and heard nothing until the office door opened and two men walked in. Prescott knew one of them as Harry Bittner, younger brother of the dead man. The other person was a stranger. Both were about the same age—in their late thirties—but there any resemblance ceased. Harry Bittner was as lanky as his dead brother, was bald and as sharp-featured. The other man was heavier, looked very trim and

had a wide, intelligent forehead with dark, frank eyes.

"Hello," Prescott said weakly.

"What the devil are you doing in here?"

Harry Bittner demanded. "You're Peter Prescott. It was your uncle who murdered my brother. You've no right to be here. Ted—watch him while I call the police."

The man named Ted moved closer to the side of the desk and was tensed to resist any attempt on Prescott's part to break away. Harry Bittner picked up the phone.

"Just a moment," Prescott said hastily. "Maybe I can explain a bit."

"Explain what? You have no legal right to be in this office!"

The man called Ted spoke up.

"Take it easy, Harry. Let him talk."

"Thanks," Prescott said. "I know very well that the police have already recorded the fact that my uncle killed your brother and then took his own life. I admit everything points to that. My uncle was identified as the purchaser of the gun. The watchman told the police over the phone that Mr. Morgan was killing Mr. Bittner. All right—that is evidence and I concede it. But I knew my uncle and I know he could not have been a killer."

Harry Bittner put the phone back slowly. "And I say my brother was not a killer. Are you insinuating that perhaps they were both murdered?"

"No, I don't see how that could have happened. It's perfectly obvious that one shot the other, but which one?"

"Mr. Prescott, you're very upset," Ted said. "How in the world could Mark Bittner have shot your uncle, turned the gun on himself and then placed the weapon in your uncle's hand?"

"I don't know," Prescott admitted with a gesture of bewilderment.

Ted looked questioningly at Harry Bittner. "Why did these two men hate one another anyway?"

"I told you that," Bittner said. "They used to be in business. Manufacturing drugs. They had a fight and when it wound up, my brother was out in the cold and Morgan was in full possession of a successful and growing factory. My brother then set himself up in business—the same type—and tried to muscle in wherever Morgan had a customer. It was funny for awhile, but the thing got out of hand and became serious."

PRESCOTT broke in as Bittner took a breath. "All of that is true except for one thing. Your brother almost wrecked the firm by stealing cash out of its accounts. That's why he had nothing when my uncle kicked him out. He'd used up any equity he ever had in the business."

"That's your story," Bittner grumbled. "You've no proof and it doesn't matter anyway. Not now. They are both dead. If there is any motive for a double murder, you and I have it. I inherit my brother's business and you, I understand, take over your uncle's. I don't want to carry on the feud any longer."

"Neither do I," Prescott said and offered his hand. "There is room enough for both of us."

Bittner had Prescott's right hand firmly grasped. He acted so swiftly that Prescott had no chance to resist. A fist smacked him full in the face, half stunning him. Bittner let go of the handclasp then and used both fists. In less than a minute, Prescott was on the floor, badly battered. He'd never laid a hand on Bittner. The first blow had all but paralyzed him so that Bittner had everything his own way.

Bittner said harshly, "Now get out of here. I know why you got into this office. To rig a lot of stuff which would show things were reversed and it was my brother who was the murderer. Well it won't work! I feel like kicking in your foolish face."

Ted seized Bittner's arm. "Easy, Harry. For the love of Mike, you could get into a lot of trouble for this. Even if Prescott is all wrong by breaking into this office."

"Get up!" Bittner shouted at Prescott. "And out. Move fast before I haul off and finish this job. Beat it!"

Prescott found his hat, dusted it mechanically and decided this was no time for retaliation. Ted looked as if he'd join the fight at a moment's notice and Bittner was unharmed, full of scrap, and more than eager to have something started. Getting his head knocked off wouldn't help Prescott in solving this mystery. He walked out of the office on wobbly legs.

The self-service elevator was on the floor, its door wide open. He stumbled into it. Both eyes were already starting to swell. He punched half blindly at the button. The cage dropped. It was a long way down and Prescott had time to think.

He didn't blame Bittner for getting sore, though he did make a mental appointment to meet Bittner later and pay him back for hitting a man while they were shaking hands.

The lift stopped with a jar. Prescott opened the door, started to walk out and came to a stop. He'd accidentally punched the button which had taken the elevator into the basement instead of to the lobby floor. He grunted in exasperation but thought suddenly of the watchman who had been missing up to the time Sergeant Lacey departed. Maybe the man was in the basement somewhere.

Prescott walked slowly down the dismal cement corridors that formed the subterranean quarters of this huge building. He knew that somewhere would be engineers and other service people, but he neither saw nor heard signs of them here.

He called out and his voice echoed back hollowly. Nobody came or answered. He kept going until he was almost lost in the maze of corridors and decided to go back. Once he thought he heard the whir of an elevator, but the self-operated lift was still in the basement.

Beside it were the banks of other elevators. All were grounded in the basement, all dark with their doors wide open. He passed one of them, hesitated and went back. There'd been something on the freshly scrubbed floor of the cage. He stepped inside and found the light switch. He gasped.

What he'd seen in shadow was now revealed as bright red blood, fresh and wet, a small pool of it. He looked up. The blood was coming through the ornamental roof of the car. Prescott closed the car door, raised the lift two floors but not even with floor level. He had to force the door open with an emergency tool fastened to the elevator wall. Then he hauled himself up and out.

The roof of the cage was now only about seven feet above floor level. With the door still open, Prescott jumped up, grasped the top of the car and pulled himself up. He dropped back quickly, his swollen face paling. He knew why the watchman hadn't put in an appearance.

His body was sprawled across the elevator roof, broken and mangled. Apparently he'd fallen down the shaft for a considerable distance. Prescott looked around

to see if any of the offices in this floor were lighted. They were not. He figured there must be a phone somewhere in the basement so he dropped back into the car, closed the door and rode down.

AT BASEMENT level he stepped out and started along the corridor, suddenly realizing that since he had been here last, the weak overhead lights had been turned off. The further he got from the illuminated elevator car, the darker it became. But he kept on going, looking for a telephone.

The corridor gave a sharp turn. He literally ran into the fist. It struck his already sore left eye and he went back under the power of the blow. Sheer surprise handicapped him until it was too late. He was taking another beating by a silent man who was nothing more than a shadow, but a shadow with a powerful punch.

Prescott went down. A foot kicked at the side of his head, but didn't make solid contact. Prescott figured his assailant wouldn't realize that and went completely limp. The man bent over him and Prescott raised both arms. He was figuring on nothing more than a hand-to-hand battle and was totally unprepared for the knife that swept down at him. Fortunately he was rolling as he grabbed for the man, so the knife missed his chest and sliced through the soft underpart of his arm.

The white hot agony made him scream. The yell was strident and loud. Someone shouted deep in the recesses of the basement. The man with the knife turned and ran. Prescott was getting up slowly when he heard the elevator doors close and the mechanism whir.

Two engineers found him. One of them turned the lights back on.

Prescott said, "Call Sergeant Lacey of the Homicide Squad. One of your watchmen is dead—on top of the fifth elevator car. I found him and somebody tried to kill me when I went to hunt a telephone."

Less than ten minutes later Sergeant Lacey was there. He took Prescott into a small office and sat him down.

"You've been banged up good and proper," he said. "I'm having the M.E. look over that wound in your shoulder too. Who did it?"

"Who?" Prescott shouted. "Who else

but Harry Bittner! He put the first touches to the job up in his brother's office. Then he discovered I'd located the watchman and came down here to finish me off."

Lacey shook his head. "Not Harry Bittner, my boy. Somebody tried to kill you. I'll concede that much, but it wasn't Bittner because when this happened, Bittner was in my office getting the low-down on his brother's death and making a formal complaint against you for entering the office upstairs. What was the idea anyhow?"

Prescott said, "A darned good idea. I found that Mark Bittner had cancelled an important dental appointment and made no new one. I discovered he'd destroyed a lottery ticket on a race not yet run. He always was a gambler, but he wouldn't have thrown away a chance to win something. I found he'd torn up old promissory notes on which he might have collected and ripped to pieces all the bills he owed."

"And what does that indicate?" Lacey wanted to know.

"For gosh sakes, Sergeant, it proves that Bittner was suicide bent! He was burning his bridges. He got set to kill himself and then decided to take my uncle with him. He hated him enough to do that. Bittner's business was on the rocks. Uncle Ed told me he'd been borrowing heavily and still couldn't make the grade because Uncle Ed's stuff was better than Bittner's and sold better."

A man with the medical-kit trademark of a doctor came into the room. Prescott stripped to the waist while Lacey went up to Bittner's office. When he returned, the doctor had finished.

Lacey said, "You took an awful punching around, kid. Maybe it did something to you. All those things you told me about—there's no sign of them in Bittner's office."

Prescott groaned. "I knew it. Harry Bittner came to destroy anything which would show his brother was the murderer and shot my uncle. It's got to be him!"

"Maybe," Lacey shrugged, "but that's doing your story no good. No one else saw those papers. We can check on the dentist okay, but the rest of the evidence is needed. A man can break a dental appointment. Heck, I do it every time I can and stall until the tooth aches more than the

treatment will and I'm trapped."

"What about the dead watchman?" Prescott wanted to know.

"Him? That's a cinch. His death was the result of a fall down the elevator shaft. And nothing but the fall. We figure he heard the fight, reached a telephone in another office and called Headquarters. Then he wanted to have an elevator car ready in the lobby floor to bring us up. The self-service lift isn't supposed to be left open under any circumstances. So he unlocked one of the regular cars which he'd brought to the floor. Or so he thought. There was a dark car on the twenty-third floor. Instead he opened the door of another car and walked into the shaft."

"Like I walked into a knife," Prescott grumbled.

"Oh, yes. The knife. We found it. No prints on it, but plenty of blood. You could have used it on yourself, lad. Wouldn't be the first time a thing like that was done."

"But why?" Prescott shouted.

"To clear your uncle's name, of course. Make us think somebody framed that setup and got scared of your prowling. It's logical. Besides we did a test on the hands of both dead men. Bittner's showed no powder from firing a gun. Your uncle's did."

PRESCOTT sighed. "Sergeant, you're the most stupid, moronic, thick-headed cop I've ever run across."

"So my wife tells me now and then." Lacey grinned without animosity.

"She's right. Perfectly right. I'm resigned to the fact that I can get no help from the police, but I'll prove my uncle was murdered anyway. And I'll find the man who pushed the watchman down that shaft because the watchman knew him for the murderer!"

"The watchman told us over the phone it was your uncle killing Bittner."

"Someone could have impersonated the watchman," Prescott answered. "You take too much for granted and adopt the easiest way out. Okay—do as you like. If Harry Bittner swore out no warrant against me, I'm going to work."

"Bittner was good and sore," Lacey admitted, "but I sort of persuaded him it would be foolish to bring all this into the newspapers."

Prescott had a sudden idea. "Say—what

of that friend of Bittner's? Ted something-or-other?"

"If you mean Ted Wilcox, he was waiting right outside Headquarters in Bittner's car. They were riding away right after you phoned for help."

"They think of everything," Prescott said bitterly. "Okay, but I'm still not licked. There's an angle you never thought of and I'm not telling you what it is either. Good night, Sergeant."

Prescott left the building, found his car and drove to his uncle's city office. He let himself in, turned on the desk light and sat down to think.

There were two dead men. Which had died first? That was the main thing to solve because the first to die was murdered. The second was a suicide. Bittner had taken certain steps which indicated he didn't care much what happened to his possessions or health and this was very much unlike the man.

Prescott did have an angle and he proceeded to follow it up by calling a friend who was in the insurance business. From him he learned that all insurance companies filed all policy transactions with a central bureau in Boston and they could furnish information about any policyholder.

Prescott dialed long distance and contacted the insurance bureau which operated all night long. He gave Mark Bittner's name, address and approximate age. Then he waited seven dollars worth of toll call time which was cheap for the tip he got.

Mark Bittner had taken out a one hundred thousand dollar insurance policy less than a year ago. It contained a suicide clause. If he took his own life, the policy was void. The beneficiary was Harry Bittner—he of the treacherous and ready fists—and maybe too-eager knife blade.

It was time to take action. But what sort of action? And against whom? Harry Bittner had an excellent reason now for switching evidence to show his brother had been murdered and not taken his own life. A hundred thousand dollar reason. But Bittner couldn't have been the assailant who used the knife. Nor could his friend Ted Wilcox have done it. Or could he? Prescott frowned heavily. Wilcox had waited in front of Headquarters. Why hadn't he gone in? So that he might drive away, reach this building and try to get rid

of the watchman's body? Only to find it had already been discovered so he was compelled to try and commit another murder? He could have driven both ways in only a few minutes and been back there when Bittner emerged.

It was even logical and possible that Bittner had visited Sergeant Lacey for the sole reason of establishing an alibi for both himself and Wilcox. Prescott thought the answer to it all lay in Harry Bittner's brain and he determined to beat it out of him if necessary.

Prescott opened the outer office door. He heard slithering steps, but when he looked he saw nothing. There was a soft click. One of the fire stairway doors had closed. He was being watched. Memories of the knifing attack returned and he moved warily to the elevators. He made certain nobody was in the car before he got in and descended to ground level.

His car was where he'd left it and he drove away rapidly. Perhaps, he thought, he could find that Harry Bittner was not at home, but spending his time watching his newest candidate for murder.

**B**ITTNER lived in the suburbs, a good twenty minute drive. Prescott crossed a bridge, reached the highway and started rolling at speed. He glanced in the rear view mirror. He was being followed. The headlights stayed tenaciously behind him. To prove it, he made a detour off the highway. The pursuing car stayed right with him.

There was a small neighborhood business center ahead. Prescott turned a dozen corners, twisted over narrow streets and spent thirty minutes trying to give his shadow the slip. Apparently he was successful. No headlights trailed him after that.

He reached Bittner's home, a moderately large place set far back from the street. Prescott parked his car and hurried to the walk to the front porch. There were lights on. He rang the bell and was surprised—and disappointed when Harry Bittner faced him. Behind Bittner was Ted Wilcox.

"Did you come to get your face pushed in again?" Bittner demanded belligerently. "I'm perfectly willing to oblige. . ."

"I don't doubt that," Prescott said. "It may reach such a point too, only this time

I won't be shaking hands. I came here to talk. If you want to listen, okay. If you don't, I'll come back with Sergeant Lacey."

"You don't get in this house," Bittner roared.

Ted Wilcox said, far more mildly, "Oh, listen to him, Harry. What harm can it do?"

Bittner stepped back and Prescott walked in. He stopped, pushed the door shut and put his back against it. Neither of the two men noticed that he quietly fixed the latch so the door was not locked. Prescott had suddenly thought of something that might turn out to be very important. He followed the pair into a living room, but nobody sat down.

Prescott said, "I'm no detective, but I knew a murder had to have a motive. I also felt sure my uncle was not a killer so I looked for a reason why your brother would have tried to pin the blame on Uncle Ed or even managed to set the stage as we found it. The whole thing was impossible, though I thought of plenty of reasons why your brother might have committed suicide. From that point I had to find a brand new motive. That of a man who came upon the scene too late to prevent what happened, but in time to take advantage of it."

"Take advantage of what?" Bittner asked harshly. "What little patience I've got is running out, so talk fast."

"Some other person had to have a reason for removing the gun from your brother's hand and the glove he must have worn. Then putting the gun in my uncle's fist and smearing powder from the barrel on his hand. I found that reason. Your brother carried a hundred thousand dollar insurance policy, void if he died by his own hand. You are the beneficiary. . ."

Bittner swung one, very suddenly, but despite the speed of the punch, Prescott was prepared this time. He rocked back and the blow lost most of its force. Prescott moved in then, fists swinging. Bittner was no amateur at this and Prescott took another good pasting which opened up his already discolored eyes and made the wound under his arm ache like fire.

He slammed Bittner hard with a left, made him dodge and sent a powerful right exactly at the point where Bittner's jaw would be when he moved. The timing was

beautiful. Bittner staggered back, his knees sagged and then caved in. He hit the floor with a thump.

Prescott, breathing hard, turned toward Ted Wilcox. "I wish I hadn't had to do that. Get some brandy down him—and one for me, if you don't mind."

Wilcox shrugged, filled a small glass and handed it to Prescott. As he did so, the sleeve of his extended arm slid back to reveal a white shirt cuff with a thin fringe of blood around the hem.

Prescott took a sip of the liquor while his brain buzzed mightily. Then he started to get up, but Wilcox was faster. There was a gun in his fist.

"I'm sorry," Wilcox said. "I wish this didn't have to happen. Unfortunately, I've had no opportunity to change into a fresh shirt. I've realized for some time that you are anything but a fool, Prescott. Seeing that blood made you guess that I was the man who attacked you in the basement."

"I don't get it," Prescott said slowly. "What's your interest?"

Wilcox laughed curtly. "I loaned Mark Bittner a lot of money and I was to receive an interest in the business. Instead, Bittner squandered the cash trying to fight your uncle. No papers were exchanged except a promissory note. Mark would leave nothing if his insurance was void so—I had to make it seem that he'd been murdered. After all, what difference did it make? They were both dead."

"And what happens now?" Prescott asked.

WILCOX shrugged.

"Well, unfortunately the watchman in that building heard the shots. I was right outside in the corridor when it happened and I entered the office at once. The watchman saw me handling the gun."

Prescott nodded. "I'm beginning to understand. You threatened him with the gun, backed him to the elevator shaft and knocked him out. Then you opened the door of the shaft, threw him down and went back to arrange matters in the office."

"I said you were not dumb," Wilcox smiled.

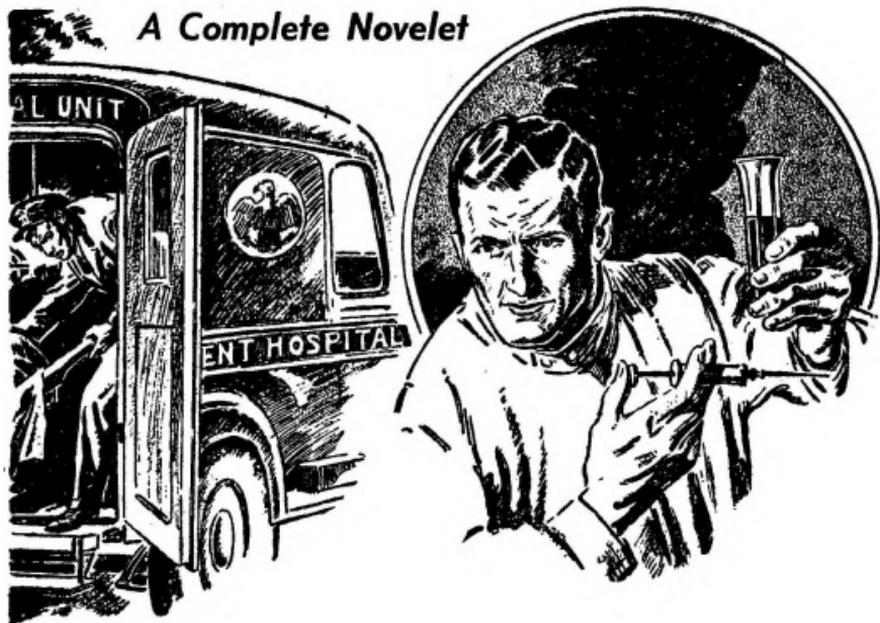
"So—you've committed one murder and now you have to commit two more to

(Continued on page 108)



"Take care of Mother and Dad," she  
whispered. "I can take it!"

A Complete Novelet



# BLOOD RED

By NORMAN A. DANIELS

*When young intern Gilbert Clark handles a fatal accident case, he suddenly discovers a clue which, with the help of medical science, reveals a grimly diabolical crime scheme!*

## CHAPTER I

### ACCIDENT CASE

**D**R. GILBERT CLARK climbed into the back of the waiting ambulance and set his emergency kit atop the stretcher table. He glanced at a slip of paper in his hand, then picked up the telephone which communicated with the driver.

"Two and a half miles north on Route Two-seventy-one. Bad accident. Let her roll, Duke."

Dr. Clark wound one hand around a leather strap conveniently placed, settled

himself firmly on the little stool, and braced both feet. Duke could drive like a fiend, and liked to. Furthermore, this run had all the elements of a bad one and called for speed. The siren was shrieking as they rolled down an avenue of this New England city, and headed for the outskirts and Route 271.

Gil Clark wondered where he had ever acquired the idea that interning in a manufacturing city of about a hundred and fifty thousand population was less exciting, and provided less clinical experience, than work in a huge big city hospital like Bellevue.

During his eight months here he had seen about every type of case any physician en-

counters. But most of all, he had seen emergency cases. This Route 271, between important cities, was not wide enough for a road of such importance. It had been laid out twenty years before when cars slowed down for curves a little.

Now, with the high speed, low slung models roaring along it, the highway was dangerous. Gil Clark wondered how many times he had been hustled out there to pick up the torn and bleeding results of an accident.

Duke knew the road like a book. He sent cars scurrying. A motorcycle cop saw them, made a turn, and scooted ahead of the ambulance with his smaller siren adding to the shrill alarm.

Dr. Clark saw the traffic slowing up and forming into lines. The accident scene was not far ahead now. He unwound his legs from the base of the stool because he knew Duke wouldn't make any more fancy twists of the wheel.

Clark opened a metal cabinet attached to the ambulance wall and laid out heavy compresses, a hypo of morphine, and splints. He would need them. He knew this highway and what it did to the fools who thought it was paved with clouds, and that the speed limit was the maximum speed a car could travel.

**H**E SPOTTED the car a little later. There was only one, which gave him some measure of relief. Another motorcycle cop had made a barrier of himself, preventing any cars from crossing at this point. He signaled the ambulance and it shot ahead. Clark was standing on the footboard before it stopped.

He stepped off and began running. The wrecked car had smashed a gaping hole through a white highway fence and taken most of the fence with it. The car was big, powerful, and expensive. A new model fit for nothing now except a junk yard.

Half a dozen people were around it. Three forms lay side by side. Clark knelt beside the first one—a bronze-skinned, gray-haired man of about fifty-five. A quick examination indicated that he had a fractured left leg, probably a fractured skull, and there was a gaping hole in his side where a part of the highway fence had torn through.

Clark put him down as critical. He didn't bother to inject a narcotic. The man was unconscious, and there were small chances that he would wake up.

The next victim was a woman whose age apparently matched the man's. Her eyes were wide open and still filled with horror and pain. Her lips were flecked with blood. Internal injuries, Clark diagnosed.

"You're going to be all right," he comforted her.

"My husband?" she whispered. "Beverly, my daughter?"

"Your husband is in no danger," Clark lied. "Your daughter looks very good to me."

She did too. Clark thought he'd never seen a more attractive looking girl even if her face was ashen and her clothes torn and bloody.

"I'm going to give you something to ease the pain," Clark told the woman. "When you wake up, we'll have you all patched. Your husband and daughter too."

He expertly slipped the hypo needle under the flesh of her forearm and drove the plunger home.

Then he passed on to the girl. She was biting her lower lip hard. It was obvious that she was in great pain. Clark glanced over his shoulder. Duke and a motorcycle cop were carefully placing the unconscious man on the wheel-table stretcher. Another cop was hurrying toward them with a folding stretcher over one shoulder.

"Duke," Clark said, "put the woman in the ambulance, too. I'll have the girl taken to the hospital in another car."

Someone tapped Clark's shoulder. It was dusk and difficult to see well, but the man who looked down at the intern was short, puny, and wore dark glasses and a snap-brim hat which was pulled down.

"I'll take her, Doctor," he offered. "My car is right in front of your ambulance."

"Thanks," Clark said. "In just a minute or two."

He felt the girl's pulse. It was abnormally high. She regarded him intently.

"Any localized pain?" he asked her. "There are no bones broken. You've a bad cut on your head. How about your abdomen? Does it hurt?"

"Not much, Doctor," she whispered. "Never mind me. Take care of Mother and Dad. I'm young, I can take it."

"Sure you can." He smiled reassuringly. "That's why I'm sending you to the hospital in a private car. Now wait a moment. You can't get up. We'll carry you."

He called for help and a cop hurried

over. Clark gently slid his hands under the girl's shoulders. She winced and stifled a cry of pain. Clark signaled, and she was tenderly placed back on the ground. He prepared another needle, smiling at her confidently.

"The trip to town in the back seat of a car may be a bit rugged," he murmured. "I'll give you something so there will be no pain."

"Do anything you wish, Doctor, but take care of Mother and Dad. Please!"

"I'll be with them in a moment," Clark told her. "And I'll see you at the hospital. Don't worry. I'm certain things will turn out better than you expect."

The cop helped him and the man with the dark glasses hurried ahead of them, leading the way to where his car was parked. It was a big sedan with ample room for this slip of a girl. One fender was badly crumpled. Nobody paid any attention to that.

"I'll put my bike behind that advertising sign and be right back," the cop said. "I'll ride with you to the hospital."

The man with the dark glasses didn't reply. He was behind the wheel and had the motor purring softly. Clark gave the girl one last look, then sped to the ambulance where her parents were waiting.

CLARK got in, slammed the door and Duke started off with his inevitable siren screeching. Clark had to stand up to examine the woman, who was slung above the table stretcher. She was deep in a narcotic sleep.

The man was seriously injured as the intern had already seen. Clark braced himself, seized a pair of surgical scissors, and quickly cut away the clothing around the deep gash in the man's side. Someone had already loosened the clothing, so his job was easy. He broke out a sealed package of compresses which he had left handy, removed one and cleansed the wound. It was not necessarily fatal, as he had at first thought, though there could easily be bad internal injuries.

He laid a second compress on the wound and fastened it into place. The first one dropped to the floor. Then he studied the scalp laceration. He was cleaning this when he gasped in astonishment. The patient was going out fast. Clark picked up the phone, yelled for more speed and seized a hypo of adrenalin. It was no use at all. The man was dead before they reached the outskirts of the city.

Clark leaned back, drew the ambulance

blanket over the dead man's face and tried to puzzle out what had happened. He guessed there must have been copious internal hemorrhage, maybe within the brain, from that terrific bump he had taken. It was not Clark's fault, but he felt as low as if it had been. He thought of the gray-eyed, lovely girl and how she would react.

He was working on the woman when Duke backed up to the emergency platform behind the hospital. Orderlies were waiting. The woman was wheeled away. There was not so much haste with the man, Dr. Max Graham, one of the city's eminent surgeons, peered into the ambulance.

"Good heavens!" he gasped. "That's Clarence Jackson!"

"His wife is badly hurt too, Doctor," Clark said wearily. "So is his daughter. She's coming in via a private car. Ought to be here pretty soon. Mrs. Jackson—that is her name, I suppose—has possible rib fractures, clean break of the right tibia, and general contusions."

"I'll take over," Dr. Graham announced importantly. "Stand by for an assist. We may have to operate."

"Yes, sir."

Clark summoned a nurse and turned over the body to her for delivery to the morgue. He hurried into the hospital, changed to a surgical gown and began scrubbing. Dr. Graham came in and went to work also.

"Tragic," he muttered. "Jackson is one of our most important manufacturers. Grace—his wife—was so attached to him I wonder just how she'll accept his death. We'll have to be careful about that, Doctor. She has a serious chronic heart condition."

Clark did not reply. Holding his dripping arms upwards, he signaled a nurse for surgical gloves and drove hands into them. Then he entered Surgery.

Dr. Graham was an expert, but none too steady this time. Clark had never seen him quite so nervous. But his work was good and Mrs. Jackson was quickly out of any danger, barring thrombosis. She was wheeled off.

Clark stripped himself of gown and gloves and hurried to Emergency. He wanted to see how badly the girl was hurt. Emergency was empty. He located a floor nurse.

"The girl never arrived, Doctor," she said. "You were busy in Surgery and we couldn't question you. Are you certain the driver of that car understood he was to take the

patient to this hospital? Or any hospital?"

"He's a fool if he didn't," Clark snapped. "Phone the neighboring town and see if he took her there."

"We already have. She appears to—well, she's gone. Vanished!"

Clark sped to a telephone and called Police Headquarters. He reached the motorcycle cop who was to have ridden in the car with the girl. The cop was slightly vehement about it.

"That guy just drove off. By the time I got my bike parked, he was gone. Not a sign of him, and nobody seems to know which direction he went. Or who he is. Did you happen to take down his license plate number, Doc?"

"No," Clark groaned.

The cop grew a little more cheerful. "Oh, he probably got scared and stopped at some doctor's office with the girl. She'll turn up okay. When she does, notify the office, will you, Doc?"

Clark hung up slowly. He couldn't understand it, and he did not at all share the motorcycle cop's faith that the girl would appear.

Clark found himself filled with doubts about the whole affair. The death of Clarence Jackson, the disappearance of Beverly, even the accident itself. He started walking toward the elevators, determined on a visit to the morgue.

## CHAPTER II

### DEATH COMES AGAIN



A TALL, slim man about three years older than Gilbert Clark came barging down the corridor. He was followed by an older man. He called to Clark loudly and hurried up to him.

"Are you a doctor or an orderly?" he demanded.

"I'm Dr. Clark."

"Good. How are the Jacksons? How badly were they hurt?"

Clark groaned inwardly. It would be hard enough to break the news about the man's death, but when he had to tell how the girl had vanished, that would be too much.

"Do you mind informing me who you are?" he stalled.

"My name is Lawrence Abbott. Attorney

Abbott. I'm the family lawyer. I'm going to marry Beverly Jackson next week. And this"—he put a hand on the older man's arm—"is Peter Ashley, one of Mr. Jackson's oldest and dearest friends."

Clark took a long breath. "I've some bad news, gentlemen. Mrs. Jackson will recover. It may take time. Dr. Graham is in charge of her case. Mr. Jackson is—dead."

Attorney Abbott closed both eyes tightly, as if he could shut out the words that way. Peter Ashley winced. Then the lawyer spoke sharply.

"You didn't mention Beverly."

"I don't know," Clark confessed. "We were unable to transport more than two persons in the ambulance and a private car was to bring the girl here. I put her in the car, but she hasn't appeared. She wasn't taken to any other hospital either."

"What in the world could have happened?"

Ashley gasped.

"I don't know," Clark said. "She'll probably turn up. Her injuries were serious, but not necessarily critical. And, gentlemen, if you are permitted to see Mrs. Jackson—and I hope you are not—don't tell her a word about this. She's weak, and might not withstand a shock."

Clark opened the elevator door, nodded curtly to the pair, and rode down to the basement.

He entered the morgue room. Clarence Jackson's body lay on a table. He studied it intently. Finally he walked over to an instrument case and took out a large hypo. Using this, he extracted a syringe full of the dead man's blood. It had thickened extremely fast. Clark didn't like it.

He returned to his own office, put the hypo away for later examination and went to work on his report.

Then things began to pop. There were three more ambulance calls, and a patient on the third floor died. Another had to undergo an emergency operation. It was two hours before dawn when Clark, exhausted, finally relaxed.

He thought of the girl and phoned. She had not appeared. He grew more and more worried. Dr. Graham came in, as red-eyed and tired as Clark.

"I wish I knew what had happened to Beverly," Graham said. "Her fiancé and Ashley are raising the devil about it. So are the newspapers and the police. Every doctor within a radius of fifty miles has been called.

The girl wasn't brought to any of them for treatment."

Clark lit a cigarette. "The whole thing has me puzzled. I think we should do a PM on Jackson."

"Why?" Dr. Graham asked quickly.

"I'm not sure. At the initial examination his pulse and respiration were fairly good. I know that abdominal trauma was deep and serious, but death was so sudden. I took the liberty of doing a blood test—that is, I took a sample. The blood wasn't right. I'll show you."

Clark opened his desk drawer. The hypo was not there. He searched every drawer, then inspected an instrument cabinet, even though he was certain he had not put the hypo there.

"That's odd," he said. "It's gone! Oh well, we can take another specimen."

"I wonder," Dr. Graham frowned. "You know that Ashley, Jackson's best friend, has powerful influences in this town. It seems that Jackson had instructed him, in the event of something like this, to take over and have his body cremated at once. Ashley has already obtained possession of the corpse."

"Without an autopsy?" Clark roared. "What's the matter with the medical examiner?"

"Now, wait," Graham urged. "Don't fly off the handle. When you've been in practice as long as I have, you'll grow used to these things. The M.E. made an examination and filed a certificate, stating the cause of death to be accidental. After all, Jackson was driving his own car and inflicted those injuries upon himself. There was nothing suspicious about the affair. An autopsy isn't done in every case of automobile homicide. You know that."

Clark sighed deeply. "If it wasn't for the missing hypo, I'd think nothing of it. Or maybe my suspicions are foolish. None of my business anyway, I guess."

Graham shrugged. "In the case of someone like Jackson and Ashley, most definitely it isn't any of your business. Look in on Mrs. Jackson before you check out, will you? I'm exhausted. Good night, Clark."

CLARK nodded, smoked another cigarette and paced the office. There was something wrong. He searched again for the blood sample and didn't find it. Finally he snuffed out the cigarette and went to the third floor where Mrs. Jackson had been taken.

Her private nurse was coming out and she seemed agitated.

"Dr. Clark," she exclaimed, "I thought my patient was to have no visitors! Yet, while I left her for a few moments, someone went into the room and told her her husband was dead."

Clark cursed, opened the door and hurried to the woman's side. She was conscious and tossing uneasily on the bed. Clark sat down beside her.

"Hello," he said. "We met before. At the scene of the accident, remember?"

"He's dead," she mumbled. "Clarence is dead. Oh, why did it have to happen? Why did that crazy driver—" She tried to sit up. "Beverly!" she asked. "How is she? Tell me the truth. I must know."

Clark pushed her gently back onto the pillow and at the same time he quietly picked up her wrist. The heart beat was too thready.

"Beverly is doing nicely," he said. "Just as soon as you have quieted down and can see a visitor, we'll bring her in. She says you are not to worry. And just who told you about—your husband?"

Her eyes were wide and steady.

"He is dead then? You didn't deny it. I thought I must have been dreaming. It was just a voice. A man's voice, I think. It seemed to be close to my ear. I was dozing. The anesthetic or something made me drowsy. The voice said, 'He is dead. Clarence is dead. Don't let them fool you. He's gone.'"

Clark's eyes narrowed. "You'd better sleep now, Mrs. Jackson. The sooner you get your strength back, the quicker you will be permitted to see your daughter."

She was a tired, sick old lady, and she obeyed his orders. In five winks she was asleep, but Clark still didn't like her pulse. The shock of that bad news had nearly been fatal. He called the nurse and gave her strict instructions not to leave the bedside under any circumstances.

Then Clark went to his own room and without removing his uniform, dropped into bed. He automatically reached for a cigarette, but never picked it up. He was asleep in ten seconds. For the first time in more than twenty-four hours. . . .

The phone beside his bed rang brassily. He tried to fend off the sound by waving a hand toward it, but the phone grew more and more insistent.

He answered in a blurred voice, hardly awake. A man was on the wire.

"Doc, I'm Detective-sergeant Ives. I'm coming up."

Clark used the interim for splashing cold water on his face and brushing his teeth. He looked half-civilized when Ives came in. The sergeant was a man of slight build and looked more like a bank clerk than a police officer. But his blue eyes spoke of quiet efficiency. He sat down on the edge of Clark's bed.

"Doc," he said, "there's something off color with this accident case. Decidedly so. Or hadn't you noticed?"

"More than you'd think, Sergeant," Clark grunted. "What's your angle?"

"Well, the disappearance of that girl is strange, and most important, of course. But I've been out to the scene of the accident. Nobody saw it, mind you. Looked much as if Jackson had lost control of the car, but I'm not so certain. From tire marks I'd say he was forced off the road."

Clark blinked and wished that awful sleepiness would go away.

"Perhaps Mrs. Jackson can be questioned later today," he said. "She'll know the truth."

"She probably did," Ives said slowly. "Maybe that's why she is—dead."

Clark sat bolt upright and he wasn't sleepy any more. "Dead?" he said exploringly.

"Half an hour or so ago. Seems, according to the nurse, that Dr. Graham phoned the room and asked if Mrs. Jackson was awake. Then he wanted to talk to her. Mrs. Jackson took the phone, listened, and then screamed. Something about Beverly being dead too. Then she collapsed."

"The fool!" Clark growled. "What's happened to Graham? Is he getting so ancient his mind's tottering?"

"Graham says he didn't phone," Ives told him. "Claims he was home asleep. The nurse told me the voice sounded like Dr. Graham's. Anyway, the shock of the news killed Mrs. Jackson."

**Y**OUNG Dr. Clark began pacing the floor. "Of course it did," he said. "She had a heart condition which was aggravated first by the accident, then the shock of learning her husband had died. That was something too, Sergeant. A man crept into her room and whispered the news to her. Know what I think about all this?"

"Yes. It's murder. Maybe double, maybe triple."

"I can assure you it's double murder, at least. Mr. Jackson was badly hurt, but he shouldn't have died so abruptly. I was suspicious and took a sample of his blood. I put it in my desk drawer downstairs and somebody stole it. That blood would have given the scheme away and the murderer knew darn well we'd take elaborate precautions to protect Mrs. Jackson. Sergeant, get busy and hold Mr. Jackson's body."

Ives shook his head wearily. "We missed the boat on that one too, Doc. Seems Jackson had a standing agreement—in writing too, because I saw it—with his lifelong friend Peter Ashley. Upon Jackson's death Ashley was to take over at once. He was to have the body cremated in the shortest possible time and prevent either Mrs. Jackson or the daughter from seeing Jackson in death. That isn't unusual, but in this case it certainly balls things up."

"He's been cremated already?" Clark asked.

"About three hours ago. It's ten o'clock now. Doc, about that blood sample. Are you sure it's missing?"

"Let's go downstairs," Clark said. "I'll look again, though I know darn well it isn't there. I think I put the thing in my desk drawer, but right after it all happened, things got busy. I was stepping for hours. Come on."

**C**LARK didn't find the hypo in the desk drawer. It lay on top of the desk, beneath several case history files. Clark called the pathology labs and had a man sent for the blood.

"Do a chemical analysis," he instructed. "Look especially for traces of a quick acting poison. And let me know at once."

Clark looked at Sergeant Ives with steady eyes. "I may have put it on my desk instead of in the drawer. I told you I was busy at the time. Anyway we have it, and that's the vital thing. What are you doing about the girl, Sergeant?"

Ives shrugged. "There's an alarm out, of course. Won't do any good if she was snatched or murdered and the body hidden. All we can do is wait. But not idly, my friend. There are people who must be questioned."

"How about letting me go along, Sarge?" Clark asked. "This is my day off. I don't have to report until tomorrow night. This whole thing began with me. I'd like to see the end of it."

"If there is going to be an end," Ives grumbled. "I'll be glad to have you along. Get ready fast."

## CHAPTER III

## IN THE PHONE BOOTH



LAWRENCE ABBOTT, attorney, was in his office, but he had given instructions he would be tied up all day and could see no one. Sergeant Ives showed his badge.

"That goes for everybody but cops," he announced, as he grinned at

the secretary.

Abbott seemed genuinely glad to see Ives and Clark, when they entered his private office. His first question was about Beverly and he slumped in his chair when he learned there was still no news. Ives came to the point quickly.

"As the family lawyer, you know about Jackson's will, and wills are always pretty good motives at times. Frankly, we are beginning to think this is a case of murder."

Abbott registered no surprise. "When I learned Grace had died, I began thinking along those lines too. But why, Sergeant? There were no better people on the face of the earth than Clarence, Grace and Beverly Jackson. They had no enemies."

"So far as you knew," Ives corrected. "How about who gets the Jackson money?"

Abbott did his best to become business-like. "There is no will. Jackson never made one. By the law of succession, the estate went to Grace Jackson. Upon her death it went to Beverly."

"And who comes after Beverly, just in case she's dead?" Ives queried.

"I'm not sure. Cousin Roger Jackson, I suppose. He is the son of Clarence Jackson's brother. Lives about half a mile from the Jackson home. A lazy slob who has been living on what's left of his own parents' estate. He hated the Jacksons, and it's sheer irony that he may get their property."

Sergeant Ives gave Clark a knowing glance. "I think we'll have to go see Roger Jackson. First, though, what's this about Clarence Jackson leaving orders that he was to be cremated promptly after death?"

"That is the truth," Abbott said. "Clarence

was a sensitive sort and wanted no friend or survivor to look upon him in death. I have a copy of his wish to be cremated at once, right here in my safe. Ashley has another. He got busy on it as soon as the medical examiner turned the body over to us last night."

Ives arose. "Okay. Let's go, Doc. Thanks, Mr. Abbott. We're a long way from finished so sort of stick around, huh? Just in case we need you."

"Until Beverly is found," Abbott said tersely. "I'm not going far. You've got to find her, Sergeant. Why, two days from now, on Friday, we had a date to rehearse our wedding. I've a theory about her. It's silly, perhaps, but possible. Maybe the man who drove her to the hospital had to stop because of a flat tire or something. Maybe Beverly got out of the car and wandered away. Lost her memory, I mean. Then the car driver was afraid to come forward and tell what happened."

"Anything is possible, Mr. Abbott," Ives said. "The longer you're a cop, the more evident that becomes. It's worth thinking about."

Outside, Clark scoffed at the theory.

"She had a crack on the head," he said, "but if there was any amnesia, it would have developed right after she was struck. She seemed normal when I talked to her, and showed no loss of memory."

Ives climbed into the police car.

"Well, he's got a right to his opinions, Doc. Let's go and see this cousin. At least he has a motive."

Clark hesitated. "Sergeant, I'd like to phone the hospital first and ask how they are progressing with the blood sample."

"Sure. I'll wait here. Don't be too long. The cousin may be guilty, and have itchy feet."

Clark hurried around the corner. A large chain drug store was there and he entered by a side door which led well behind the long soda fountain and straight to a battery of isolated phone booths. He deposited a nickel, dialed the hospital, and asked for the lab.

As he waited, somebody turned up the juke box in the drug store. The music of a loud band blared in his ears. He grinned slightly. The phone booths were supposed to be sound-proof, but nothing could stop jive from getting through.

The lab technician came on the wire.

"I gave part of the sample a routine check, Doctor," he reported. "Not a thing. Just normal blood, with a good count. Taken from a healthy person."

Clark felt bitter disappointment. He had set a lot of store on that blood sample.

"Okay. Thanks. Go beyond the routine check, will you? I want a detailed analysis made—and keep some of the blood. I'll call again."

**I**T WAS amazing to Clark that later on he was certain he never heard the explosion. There was just one sudden and violent pain alongside his head. The gray light in the phone booth became inky. He felt himself slipping, down and down, until there was no sensation of any sort any more.

He woke up in the back room of the drug store with Sergeant Ives fussing over him like a mother hen. Clark raised a hand and encountered blood and a shallow gouge along his temple. He sat up, puzzled by it all.

"You're a lucky guy, Doc," Ives said. "Mighty lucky. A bullet caused that. Somebody tailed you into the drug store. While you were busy calling, this guy started the juke box and turned it up high. Then he went to the booth next to yours. He fired through the thin paneling. How do you feel?"

Clark struggled to his feet. "I—I guess I'm okay. Are you sure about that, Sarge?"

Ives held up a battered bit of metal between two fingers.

"I dug that out of the booth wall," he said grimly. "It's a thirty-two soft nose. Softer than your skull, I guess. So Doc, it looks like our little hunch about homicide is panning out. Only I'd like to know why you're so important they had to rub you out. Holding back anything, Doc?"

"No," Clark said. "No, I swear I'm not. Did anyone see the man who shot me?"

Ives nodded. "Little ratty-looking fellow. I've got a fair description of him, and I'd like to compare it with what Cousin Roger looks like. If you feel up to it."

"I'm ready," Clark said. "And more than willing. Let's go."

He was a trifle wobbly, but got over that after a few steps. Ives was wary-eyed as they walked to where his car was parked. He drove in silence out of town and toward the suburban section where Cousin Roger lived, and where the Jackson home was situated.

They passed the Jackson house and Ives tramped on the brake. Both had seen the car parked in front of the house.

"With the lady and master of the place dead," Ives observed dryly, "and the daughter missing, the guy inside will have a good excuse for being there or I'm going to lock him up."

It was Peter Ashley who came out as Ives pulled into the drive. Ashley was pale and worried-looking. He showed no embarrassment at being found in the place.

"Good morning, Doctor," he greeted Clark. "And it's Sergeant Ives, if I'm not mistaken. You gave me a ticket once, when you were a patrolman."

"See how people remember cops?" Ives said. "What's doing, Mr. Ashley?"

"Nothing. I came here to see if there was any possibility of finding a clue. Go ahead and laugh. I just did—at myself. When I got here, I realized I wouldn't recognize a clue if I was hit over the head with one."

Ives disregarded that attempt at levity. "You sure made hash out of this when you had Jackson's body cremated," he said shortly. "If Attorney Abbott hadn't told me of Jackson's pre-death orders about the disposition of his body, I think I'd have pinched you, Ashley."

Ashley sat down on the porch railing. "I wouldn't blame you," he said slowly. "But up until the time of the cremation, I saw nothing out of the ordinary. Except for Beverly being missing, and I thought that mystery would be cleared up and found just a misunderstanding. Then I learned of Grace's mysterious death. I wish I'd disobeyed Clarence's orders."

"So do we," Ives' voice was dry. "Nothing inside the house? That is, nothing unusual?"

"No," Ashley replied. He smiled crookedly. "I've had a key for years. And I'm executor of the estate, so I have a legal right to enter, you know."

"Sure," Ives said. "You didn't see anything of this cousin? Roger Jackson I think he's named?"

Ashley's jaws snapped shut with a definite click.

"Sergeant," he said, "I don't want to appear antagonistic toward Roger, nor get him into any trouble, but if any man is capable of murder for profit, Roger is. He has never worked. He's allergic to it. His own money is almost gone and, I suppose, if

Beverly is found dead or never found at all, he'll reach out with both paws for Clarence's money. He'll get it too, worse luck."

"I asked you if you had seen him," Ives reminded Ashley.

"No, I have not. I don't want to see him."

"We do," Ives said. "Come on, Doc."

ASHLEY closed the door, tested it to make sure it was locked, and followed them. He got into his own car and drove away with tires that screeched to match his temper.

Ives proceeded to Roger Jackson's home. It was not a big house, but badly needed painting. The lawn and shrubs were burned and withered and unkempt. If the appearance of the place was an indication of Roger's type, he would be a slovenly, unshaven bum.

He was not. Roger turned out to be quite young, sleek, and with beady black eyes. Without asking, he prepared three husky drinks and served them.

"Drink up," he invited with a grin. "There's lots more. I've been expecting you, Sergeant. Ever since I found out what happened. I'll answer your question now. I didn't kill Clarence or Grace. I don't know what happened to Beverly. I'm glad they are dead and I hope Beverly isn't found. I hated them. I'd like to come into their money, and I don't mind admitting it."

"Well that's no crime," Ives said. "Though you could be a bit more tactful about it. What were you doing in that chain drug store at Fourth and Carmody Streets about an hour ago?"

"I wasn't there," Roger smiled easily. "Whoever says I was is a liar." He raised his voice. "Joe! Hey, Joe!"

A white-haired Negro who did general work and doubled as a handyman at the local church shuffled into the room.

"Joe," Roger said, "when did you arrive here? How many times have I left the house since you came?"

The old Negro clearly didn't know what it was all about, but he answered honestly.

"I came at six-thirty, sir. Right after you phoned me. You didn't leave the house at all. Not even this room."

"Thanks," Roger said. "That's all, Joe." He grimaced at Clark and Ives. "Well, gents, does that answer all the questions you'd like to ask? As soon as I heard the news, I realized those deaths seemed redolently sour. I knew I'd be suspected because I have a

mighty neat motive. So I called Joe to get here at once. He couldn't lie for anybody, and so—I'm alibied, eh?"

"Somebody took a pot shot at Doc, here," Ives explained. "In that drug store. He answered your description fairly well. It was a poke in the dark. I'm sorry, but cops have to work that way sometimes. Stick close to home, Roger. We may be needing you."

Roger grinned. "I'm staying in this house, in this room, and Joe is going to be here every minute of the day and night. Good day, gents. Come again, any time."

Outside Ives gave his opinion in one ugly word.

"Heel!"

"He is," Clark agreed, "but that alibi is strong. I'd believe that colored man if he told me the sun was blue."

"We're going back to town," Ives grumbled. "Maybe there's something new on the girl's disappearance."

## CHAPTER IV

### BEVERLY'S STORY



THEY were riding past the Jackson house when Clark shouted for Ives to stop.

"The front door is ajar!" he cried. "I saw Ashley lock it. Somebody is in there, Sarge!"

Ives backed up quickly, left the car at the curb and hurried to the front door. He stepped, inside. There was not a sound. Nothing stirred, and yet both men looked at one another and almost felt as if someone had just passed through this hallway.

Clark sniffed sharply. He put his lips against the detective's ear.

"Iodoform," he hissed. "Or some antiseptic like it."

Ives' right hand traveled fast and came back with a gun. He began looking into the first-floor rooms. Clark headed for the stairs, and went up them softly. He was half-way to the landing when the voice came.

"Doctor! Nurse! Nurse, where are you? Where is the darned bell cord? Nurse! Please!"

Clark exhaled so hard it made his lungs ache. He sped up the steps, located the origin of that voice and skidded to a stop as he crossed the threshold of a bedroom. His arm shot out stiff, to hold Ives back. He pushed him hard, toward the door.

"She thinks she's in a hospital," he whispered. "Keep out of sight for a couple of minutes."

Ives nodded and disappeared. Clark raised his chin a trifle. He walked toward the bed. On it, neatly covered, was Beverly Jackson. Her head and eyes were bandaged, but there was no mistaking that finely cut chin below the bandages.

"Yes, Miss Jackson," Clark said. "I'm here."

"Doctor, your voice sounds different," Beverly said. "About my eyes. They feel perfectly normal. Can't you remove the bandages? And how are my father and mother this morning?"

Clark gulped. He drew a chair over beside the bed.

"Miss Jackson," he said in a gentle voice, "I have a few questions to ask. They may seem strange, but they are necessary. Perhaps after you answer them, I'll remove the bandages."

She tried to sit up, but seemed too weak. She settled back.

"Doctor, there is something wrong. I've sensed it. Even last night, before you put me to sleep. Tell me. I'm not afraid. I know Mother and Dad were badly hurt. Perhaps they—"

"First the questions," Clark insisted. "I'm the doctor you saw at the scene of the accident. I gave you something to ease the pain. You probably went to sleep. When you woke up, where were you?"

"Where was I? Why, right here. In the hospital. Doctor, what is this?"

"And your eyes were bandaged when you awakened?"

"Yes, and I'm sure my eyes are perfectly all right."

"You just woke up," Clark went on. "Prior to awakening the last thing you remember is being given another injection?"

"No. It was a pill. Why are you asking me these things?"

"Please—no questions now. I'm going to remove the bandages. Tell me, were you well treated? When your injuries were dressed, was the work painful?"

"Of course not. It was quite skillful, I

thought. Doctor, why don't you tell me about Mother and Dad?"

Clark shushed her and bent to study the bandages. They were expertly applied. He hunted up a pair of scissors and attacked the gauze.

There were additional pads over the eyes. Before removing them, he pulled down the window shades to dim the light. Then he carefully lifted off one pad. The eye beneath it showed no sign of injury. He removed the other and Beverly brought up a hand to cover her eyes from even the subdued light.

"Miss Jackson," Clark said, "something rather amazing happened to you. For quite a number of hours you have been kidnaped. You were not in a hospital."

"Why—why this is my own room!" Beverly cried. "At home! I can't understand."

"Neither can I. Nor my friend, Detective-sergeant Ives. . . Sarge, come on in."

Ives entered the room and Beverly studied him as soon as her eyes adjusted themselves. Clark sat down again. What he had to do was painful, but necessary. Beverly must understand just what had happened. Perhaps she could supply the answer before a murderer made his escape.

QUIETLY and calmly he told her what had happened, omitting nothing. She listened in stricken silence and after he was finished, she cried a little. Then her chin came up and her eyes flamed.

"Tell me what I can do to find the fiend who is responsible for this!" she said firmly. "Please tell me!"

Ives took a hand. He asked her facts about where she had been held. Had it smelled like a hospital, or a doctor's office? Had there been any outstanding sounds or any scraps of conversation? Had she really had a nurse?

The questions all drew blanks so far as helpful answers were concerned.

"Please telephone Larry for me," she implored. "I know how worried he must have been, and how much I need him now."

"I'll do it," Ives said. "Doc, ask her about the accident itself."

Beverly told the whole story. They had been in town shopping, and had stopped to visit Larry Abbott for a few moments. Her father had remained with the attorney while Beverly and her mother did still more shopping. Then they had picked up her father at his club.

"He was angry about something," Beverly

said. "He wouldn't talk about it, but I'd never seen him so irate. I intended staying in town, but I changed my mind. He was driving fast. Too fast, but a car behind us came up even faster. It forced Dad off the road. He couldn't stop or slow down without crashing into this big car alongside. I tried to see the driver, but I couldn't. Then we went through the fence and—and I guess I fainted."

"You were knocked cold," Clark said grimly. "Did anyone else see you in town? Perhaps Peter Ashley? Or your Cousin Roger?"

"We did meet Ashley," Beverly said. "But not Roger. Oh, I can't understand this at all! If someone is after the estate, as your detective friend surmises, why was I permitted to live? It doesn't make sense."

"It will," Clark prophesied.

Ives came back and reported that Abbott was coming out as fast as he could drive his car. Ives chuckled a bit in recalling his conversation.

"That guy got so excited he talked as if he had a mouthful of peanuts. Then he let out a yell that is still ringing in my ears."

Beverly forced a smile. "He's sweet. Now I need him more than ever. Do you mind if I—sort of rest for a few moments? I—I've got to think. My mind is so full of things."

"Go right ahead," Clark said. "If you drop off—and you may, because there is still some narcotic in you—I promise to wake you up the moment Larry arrives. And we'll be right outside your door."

Clark left the door open about half an inch. He and Ives sat down on the steps and both rubbed their chins in complete confusion.

"Sarge," Clark said, "whoever treated Beverly was a doctor, or had medical training. Her scalp was sutured expertly. One thing, though, Iodoform was used on the dressing, and that stuff is passé since sulphur drugs. I can't imagine a doctor so far behind the times as to miss on that. The dressing clearly called for sulphur."

"Yeah," Ives groaned, "and I'm getting set to call for aspirin. There goes our theory of murder to get possession of the estate, Doc."

"Looks like it," Clark agreed. "But don't forget, there is still a murderer to catch."

"Is there, Doc? What killed Jackson? The medical examiner says an accident. The body is cremated. How are you going to prove anything different? And did anybody lay a hand on Mrs. Jackson? No, sir. She had a

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phone call. Maybe she was told her daughter was dead or missing. Maybe the caller made it blood-curdling. Sure she died. Was that murder? Can you commit murder by just talking?"

"Take me back to the hospital after Abbott arrives," Clark said. "Nothing may come of it, but maybe they found something in that blood sample I took from Jackson's body."

Larry Abbott arrived with screaming brakes. He leaped out of the car, raced into the house and up the steps. Passing Clark and Ives, he whacked them on the shoulder and kept going.

They heard him greet Beverly and then—there was nothing but a lot of quiet. . . .

**B**ACK at the hospital, Clark went to his office and sat down to think a bit. Ives had gone back to Headquarters. It was quiet here. he was off duty, and his brain was working smoothly.

He thought about Cousin Roger first, but he seemed to be out of it through his own sly machinations to insure an alibi. And now the complete absence of a motive which had been strong until Beverly returned.

He concentrated on Larry Abbott. An attorney for a rich man's estate often develops reasons for wanting his client dead. But Abbott was head-over-heels in love with Beverly. Would he murder her parents? And if he had manipulated the estate, there was now bound to be an audit. He would be running his legs off to find a hideout by this time.

There was that dear, kind soul who had been Clarence Jackson's best friend—Peter Ashley, with his terrific haste to have the body cremated. Maybe Jackson had been specific about it, but under the circumstances, which were highly suspicious at the least, Ashley should have waited. But what motive did he possess? None that had developed so far.

The mysterious return of Beverly was the strangest phase of the entire case. Why had she been kidnaped, while so badly hurt, and treated by a man who must have known a great deal of medicine, then taken back to her own home while under the influence of a drug? It didn't make sense. If her death or her absence were not desired, why kidnap her at all and take such risks?

There had to be some reason.

Clark thought back on the strange disappearance and reappearance of his hypo full of blood. Maybe they would say he was

crazy, or badly mistaken about the whole thing. Ives had given him a few looks which indicated he believed the hypo had been there all the time. Anyway, nothing suspicious had been found in the blood.

Clark phoned the lab to make certain and got a completely negative report.

It had to be something else!

#### CHAPTER V

#### BLOOD TYPE



CLARK began wondering about Dr. Graham. He had been the Jackson family physician. The nurse had thought it was his voice making the phone call which had shocked Mrs. Jackson to death. Did Dr. Graham have some motive?

Dr. Graham walked into the office just as if Clark's thoughts had summoned him. He sat down slowly and he looked ten years older than he was the night before.

"Clark," he said, "this is the main trouble with practicing in a small city all your life. You get to know your patients too well and you miss them and grieve for them too much. The deaths of Clarence and Grace Jackson have shocked me terribly."

"But Beverly is home," Clark said. "You probably know about that by now."

"She phoned me," Dr. Graham nodded. "Or Larry Abbott did, and I ran out there. Amazing. She's in good shape, her injuries skillfully treated, and the thing carried off so nicely that she never doubted but that she was in a hospital. I'm glad Abbott is there. She needs someone badly now."

Clark half-wished he was the one she needed. He studied Dr. Graham intently.

"Were you the officiating obstetrician at Beverly's birth?" he asked.

Graham shook his head. "No. Beverly was born in Chicago. At the time Jackson had a factory out there and kept moving back and forth from Chicago to the East. Naturally though, I have taken care of her from the age of one until now."

"You did a good job," Clark conceded, "if her beauty is any indication. Odd, isn't it, how she is so fair and her parents were dark-haired and brown-eyed? Her frame doesn't match their more or less pudginess either."

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Oh, well, it happens. Doctor, you realize that I'm new in this city. I know few people, and it handicaps me."

"In what way, Clark?"

"I'm trying to investigate this matter in my own crude manner, and getting nowhere. Do you recall any local physician getting himself into a jam during the last, say, ten years?"

Graham chuckled. "You'd better ask Larry Abbott about that. We were on different sides. Chap named Densmore succumbed to a wave of heavy drinking and kept treating his patients. He slipped—twice. I took action and had him kicked out of the profession. Larry Abbott defended him and lost the case."

"And was this Densmore a big, hulking type?"

"No. Clark. Puny, in fact. I don't believe he's around any more. Haven't seen him, and I don't want to."

Graham left after discussing a couple of current patients in whom Clark was also interested. Clark strolled out to the garage. Becker, the driver, was cleaning his ambulance. He rolled the wheel-stretcher out and began sweeping the ambulance with a whisk broom. He picked up a large gauze pad and flipped it to the ground.

Then Clark's brain clicked. That piece of gauze had come from Clarence Jackson's gaping wound. It was the first sponge he had used in an attempt to stem the bleeding. He leaped toward it, scooped the thing up and raced away to the labs. There he went to work himself.

In ten minutes he knew that this bit of gauze had, at one time or another, been soaked in an extremely poisonous chemical of a type readily absorbed by the blood stream. In applying this poison-treated gauze sponge, Clark himself had killed Jackson!

"Keep quiet about this," he told the lab technician. "Or wait! Do me a favor and type the blood on this gauze. See if it compares to the type you found in the hypo."

Typing required only a short time. The technician shook his head.

"Two different types, Doc."

"Get me your files on Mrs. Jackson," Clark said. "Quickly!"

The young intern glanced at them. Then he hurried out of the hospital, borrowed a car, and drove out to the Jackson home. Larry Abbott and Beverly were together. She had felt well enough to go downstairs

to the living room. Clark had a kit along and he opened it to remove a hypo.

"I wonder if you'd mind letting me have a sample of your blood, Beverly? Just for our files. It won't hurt."

Abbott reared up unexpectedly.

"Look here, Doctor, this is no time to start practicing medicine. Beverly is all right, but she's been through enough."

"Shush, Larry," Beverly said. "If Dr. Clark says it is necessary, why not?"

**C**LARK thanked her and went to work. He put his hypo back into the kit and glanced at Abbott.

"You wouldn't like a little free treatment, Mr. Abbott? Never can tell what will be found in your blood stream."

"I don't like being pricked with your confounded needles," Abbott snapped. "Thank heaven, I chose law as a career."

"It has its points," Clark chuckled. "How is your friend ex-Dr. Densmore these days?"

Abbott curled a lower lip. "I don't know what you're driving at, Doctor. But I wish you'd get out. Beverly and I have much to discuss about her estate. Things which must be settled. I assure you they are as important as—as that sample of blood you just took from her arm."

"All right," Clark said. "I can take a hint. Good-by, Beverly. Dr. Graham will carry on from here. The sample of blood I took is really for him, you know. He wanted to check it for some reason."

Clark returned to his car, got in and headed back toward town. Half a mile along the route, he saw Larry Abbott's car rolling up fast. Clark opened the door beside him, slowed up a trifle and watched the rear view mirror. Abbott was pulling out to pass, but suddenly the lawyer started nosing in. Trying to drive Clark off the highway!

Clark never hesitated. He already had one foot on the running board. Now he put his weight on it, gave the wheel a hard spin and sent his car heading toward Abbott's, and jumped.

He landed lightly, fell, and rolled over a couple of times. He was up fast and running toward the spot a hundred yards further up the highway where Abbott's car and his own were tangled in a jumble of fenders and bumpers. Abbott was behind the wheel, knocked out.

Clark worked fast. He ripped off Abbott's coat, tore the attorney's left sleeve all the

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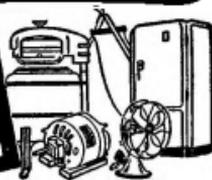
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way to the shoulder and eyed the flesh carefully, especially in the region of the elbow joint, the soft inner part of the arm hinge. He saw the blood spot.

Abbott opened his eyes. They were devoid of much expression, but he knew what the torn shirt sleeve portended.

"You're not even a practitioner yet," he said. "I'll give you twenty-five thousand dollars to start your practice, Clark."

"Say that once more," Clark grunted, "and I'll give you a poke right on the button. Abbott, you had Beverly kidnaped. That ex-doctor friend of yours treated her. I think he also drove the Jackson car off the highway and started this whole thing rolling. You didn't know Beverly was in the car when you signaled him to kill Mr. and Mrs. Jackson. The ex-doc also took a shot at me not so long ago, because I was getting in his hair and yours. I was going to raise the roof about that missing hypo of Jackson's blood, and you knew it."

Abbott's lips were tightly compressed. He said nothing.

"You knew I took that sample of blood from Jackson's body," Clark went on. "You saw me go to the morgue, and followed. That sample would be proof that Jackson had been murdered. Densmore managed to enter the ambulance and substituted a poisoned compress for the sterile one he knew I'd use on Jackson. The blood would contain that poison but even more, it could be typed. So you disposed of it and took a clumsy sample of your own, hoping I wouldn't miss the hypo. I saw the mark of the hypo on your arm. Do you follow me, Abbott?"

Abbott spoke then. "Having planned all this and admitted it by offering you a bribe," he said, "I'm way ahead of you, doctor."

Clark nodded. "I suppose you are, at that. Beverly isn't the daughter of Clarence and Grace Jackson at all, is she? Being their attorney, you knew that. Jackson refused to make a will for some reason or other. He was sore at you the day he died. Maybe you tried to blackmail him, or he decided you weren't good enough for Beverly, and you threatened to talk.

"Jackson had to die. His wife, too, so that Beverly would inherit. No one knew she was not their true daughter. But if Clarence Jackson's blood was typed and Beverly's was also, there would be the devil to pay, eh, Abbott? Ex-Dr. Densmore realized this, and

took swift action. In blood types you can't tell whether or not a man is the father of a certain child, but you can tell very definitely if he is not. The types prove Jackson isn't Beverly's father, and upon his death and that of his wife, the estate would not go to Beverly. She'd be just another poor girl and you aren't the type who wants to marry somebody without a great deal of money, Abbott. If Dr. Graham, the family physician, compared blood types when they were all under his care, he'd have known. That's why Densmore kidnaped Beverly."

"What do you intend doing about this?" Abbott said.

"I'd hate to tell Beverly," Clark said, "but I can't let you get away with it. Of course you'll get the chair, and so will your ex-doctor friend and client."

ABBOTT suddenly thrust out his hand. The heel of it clipped Clark's jaw and sent him reeling backward. At the same time he stepped on the starter and the car motor roared. He backed up, untangled his car from the wreckage. Then he was off, roaring down the highway at breakneck speed. Clark just stood there, watching. He half-sensed what would happen and found himself praying for it.

Abbott didn't turn the wheel at the next corner. There was a high brick wall there. He headed for it as fast as his car could travel. Clark closed both eyes when the car hit. A sheet of flame enveloped it. No living thing remained in that car.

Then he slowly walked down the highway to the nearest house. Sergeant Ives had to be told. Ex-Dr. Densmore had to be picked up, and Clark prayed fervently that Beverly wouldn't have to know the whole truth. Just that Abbott had murdered to get the estate when he married her.

He didn't care who she was nor why the Jacksons had stated she was their own. Clark was thinking of that avaricious, lazy Cousin Roger who would get the estate if the truth became known. Clark decided no one would ever find out from him.

After all, he reasoned, wasn't he a physician, and were not a physician's secrets inviolate?

He was whistling softly as he turned into the path leading to the nearest house.

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**ONE DIED FIRST**

(Continued from page 89)

cover up. After that it will be more and more until you're trapped."

"Oh, no," Wilcox replied confidently. "Not me. I'm no ordinary killer. You just slugged Harry, but before that he was doing a pretty good job on you. Therefore, all that's necessary is to knock you out, fix things so your head will strike the corner of the fireplace—in exactly the same spot where I'll hit you first of course—and let Harry Bittner take the blame."

"Just like that," Prescott said. He heard a creaking sound in the hallway. More than anything else that he'd ever wanted to do, he wanted to cover up that sound. He began talking fast and loud.

"Suppose I don't tamely submit to being slugged? Suppose I jump the gun and you are forced to put a bullet through me? How will you explain that?"

"Quite simple," Ted explained. "I'll say you all but killed Harry and then turned on me. I was compelled to shoot you. Harry will back up my statement that you have acted like a maniac all through this. Even that dumb Sergeant Lacey will testify in my favor. It's no go, Mr. Prescott. In fact, I'll even give you a choice of how you'd like to die."

Prescott moved to the left slightly and Wilcox pivoted to keep him covered. Prescott moved again until Wilcox's back was toward the living room door. He expected the gun to explode in his face at any instant, but he also thought that Wilcox favored his first plan and would try that if possible. Which meant no shooting unless it became vitally necessary.

Finally Prescott said, "I guess I'm licked. What do you want me to do?"

Wilcox eyed him closely for a moment. "You don't seem very agitated for a man about to die. Turn around and walk toward the fireplace. Get moving. I can't afford to wait. Harry will snap out of it at any moment."

Prescott started to turn. Ted quickly reversed his grip on the gun and raised the butt high. Someone spoke behind him.

"Now that's what I call service, Mr. Prescott. You even got him to hold the gun so he can't shoot. Wilcox—drop that gun! Drop it or I'll drop . . . ummm—well, okay, Prescott. He had that punch coming to him. Pick up his gun."

Prescott handed the weapon to Sergeant Lacey and then lifted Wilcox and dumped him into a chair.

Lacey was all smiles. He said, "Well, well, it worked out after all. We've a neat confession complete with motive. Prescott, I'm sorry I made you go through this business, but I figured a guy as mad as you would probably bull right through and flush out the murderer even before we could. So I let you have your head. I've been trailing you, of course. You gave me the slip a little while ago but I figured you were coming here. . . ."

"What took you so long?" Prescott demanded. "I knew you'd be here."

"You—did?" Lacey gasped.

"You found the front door unlocked, didn't you? I fixed that so you could sneak in. And I'm glad you let me go ahead with this. As soon as I found both Wilcox and Bittner here, I knew it must be you who was shadowing me."

Lacey clamped handcuffs around Wilcox's wrists. He said, "The guy who sold Mark Bittner that gun has a police record and he isn't noted for telling the truth. I think Wilcox bribed him. If he did, the guy will sing when he finds out Wilcox is pinched."

"It's finished then?" Prescott asked.

"Why not? We've got everything we need, including a killer. But Wilcox made an apt statement a little while ago when he mentioned the fact that even if he did switch guns and pin a murder on your dead uncle, it meant little. Your uncle was dead."

"Yes, I know," Prescott sat down wearily. "But I thought Uncle Ed might sleep a little better if the truth were known."

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# HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 10)

Fast work indeed—and who would do a thing like that and why? So the whodunit becomes more intricate, with complications skipping hither and yon. There is an air of mystery and creepy terror about this yarn, folks—not that the Berkes lose any of their sense of humor, or are one whit behind with their sparkling wisecracks. You'll like this story.

Another humdinger next issue:

## MAHATMA OF MAYHEM

By Robert Leslie Bellem

This is a Nick Ransom novelet, folks, and that's always good news! You all know Ransom, we are sure—in fact he's got the lead spot in this issue you are reading now—he used to be a stunt man in the movies and founded Risks, Inc. That is why Ransom doesn't get panicky at all when, at the corner of Hollywood and Vine, at three o'clock in the afternoon, he feels that rod poked into the middle of his back!

The owner of said gun, we learn a few minutes later, bears the inappropriate cognomen of Reginald Percival Clancy. Of course this is revealed when Ransom gets the gun, which he does by swinging from a nearby lamp post and giving it to the gungsel with both heels, right in the middle of the stomach. We told you Ransom used to be a stunt man!

Clancy finally tells Ransom that he has been ordered to bring the detective into the presence of Mahatma Guru, the latest "seer" to impose himself among the other phonies of Hollywood. Entering the sinister-looking

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bungalow under his own steam, Ransom finds the place a fit setting for a scene to be played by Boris Karloff—black velvet drapes, weird and mysterious lights, strange hieroglyphics.

The bearded fortune-teller gives forth a strange and mysterious message. He tells Ransom that his own horoscope tells not only of his own death, but of his own murder.

"I have been murdered by a very beautiful woman," says the Mahatma in a throbbing basso profundo. "She is Lola Dulac—my wife!"

Of course Nick Ransom wants to know how come the seer is talking of being murdered, when here he is, right in front of him. Whereupon, the Mahatma opens his robe and shows bloody and fatal wounds.

So here's an entirely different angle! Ransom knows the killer because he gets it directly from the victim's own lips and yet—nothing's settled at all. The mystery just keeps growing deeper and deeper, and Nick Ransom keeps getting deeper and deeper—into trouble.

The result is one of the finest and fastest-moving yarns you'll ever read, MAHATMA [Turn page]

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## OUR MAIL BAG

WELL, well, well! When we published that letter from Mrs. Esteban about writing on the inside of the egg, we certainly started something! That's enough folks—we know how the trick is done now! We'd like to print all the letters we received anent the matter, but that would fill a wheelbarrow as you can well imagine. So we'll just let you have excerpts from a couple of them.

In your October issue I see that one of your readers is troubled about writing under the shell of an egg. You have had many answers to this by now no doubt. But in case you haven't I am enclosing what I found on the subject.

Dissolve an ounce of alum in half a pint of vinegar and with a small pointed brush write on the shell of an egg with the above solution. After the solution has dried thoroughly boil the egg for about 15 minutes. Later all tracings of the writings will have disappeared from the outside of the shell, but when the shell is opened the writing will show on the white of the egg. I found this information in the book called *Fortunes in Formulas*.

I might add that I tried this in a hurry and had no luck. Perhaps I can't boil an egg. But I find that the alum and vinegar solution is the most powerful concoction for stopping after-shaving cuts that I've ever seen. But I always find **THRILLING DETECTIVE** interesting. My preference is for your excellent book-length novels.—Robt. G. Bullock, San Francisco, Calif.

Attaboy, Bob! Glad you found some use from the concoction. Anyway, Ye Ed got a good laugh out of your letter.

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Another letter repeats the formula and goes on to say:

I am a regular reader of **THRILLING DETECTIVE** and I enjoy it very much. In your October issue a reader writes in to say she does not believe that you can write on the shell of an egg and have the writing appear on the inside, which happened in the story "The Egg in the Bier," by A. J. Collins. The formula above is all there is to it. That's exactly what Mr. Collins was trying to say.—William Draper, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

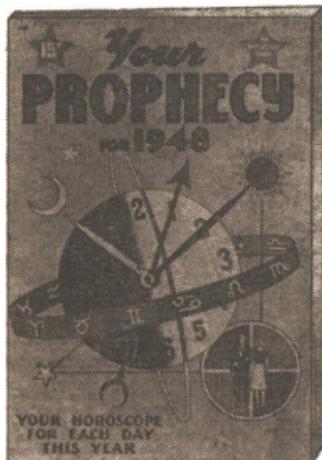
So that ends the egg controversy—we hope. It just "shows to go you" as they say. Thanks to everyone who wrote in about this.

Keep those letters and postals streaming in, friends. Please address them to The Editor, **THRILLING DETECTIVE**, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Both bouquets and brickbats are welcome and we hope to quote from many more of your letters next issue.

See you then, and happy reading to everybody!

—THE EDITOR.

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