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- THE SCARLET HERITAGE**.....Westmoreland Gray 10
*Andy Gunn, F. B. I. Ace, Stalks the Texas Woods in Quest of a
Diabolical Murder Machine Menacing All Within Its Grasp!*

TWO COMPLETE NOVELETS

- MURDER BY REQUEST**.....John Chambliss 50
*Crime and Treachery Confront a Tenacious Private Detective Who is
Catapulted into a Grim Wrestling Match with Death!*
- TWO-WAY TICKET FOR DEATH**.....George A. McDonald 78
*Detective-Lieutenant Dan Hartley Plunges into Fast Action when
He Takes the Gory Trail of a Murderous Kidnaper!*

THRILLING SHORT STORIES

- DEATH'S UNDERSTUDY**.....Owen Fox Jerome 44
A Blues Singer Plays Favorites and the Reaper Strikes a Chord
- THE FAT MAN**.....Robert J. Pearsall 74
Desert Doom Follows in the Wake of a Jewel Thief!
- RACKETEER RETIRED**.....Harold de Polo 99
A Mysterious Nemesis Pursues Archie Lugano in His Wooded Retreat

SPECIAL FEATURES

- FAMOUS CRIMES**.....Illustrations 72
The Case of the Jealousy-Crazed Killer, Told in Pictures
- HEADQUARTERS**.....A Department 106
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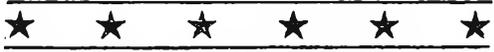
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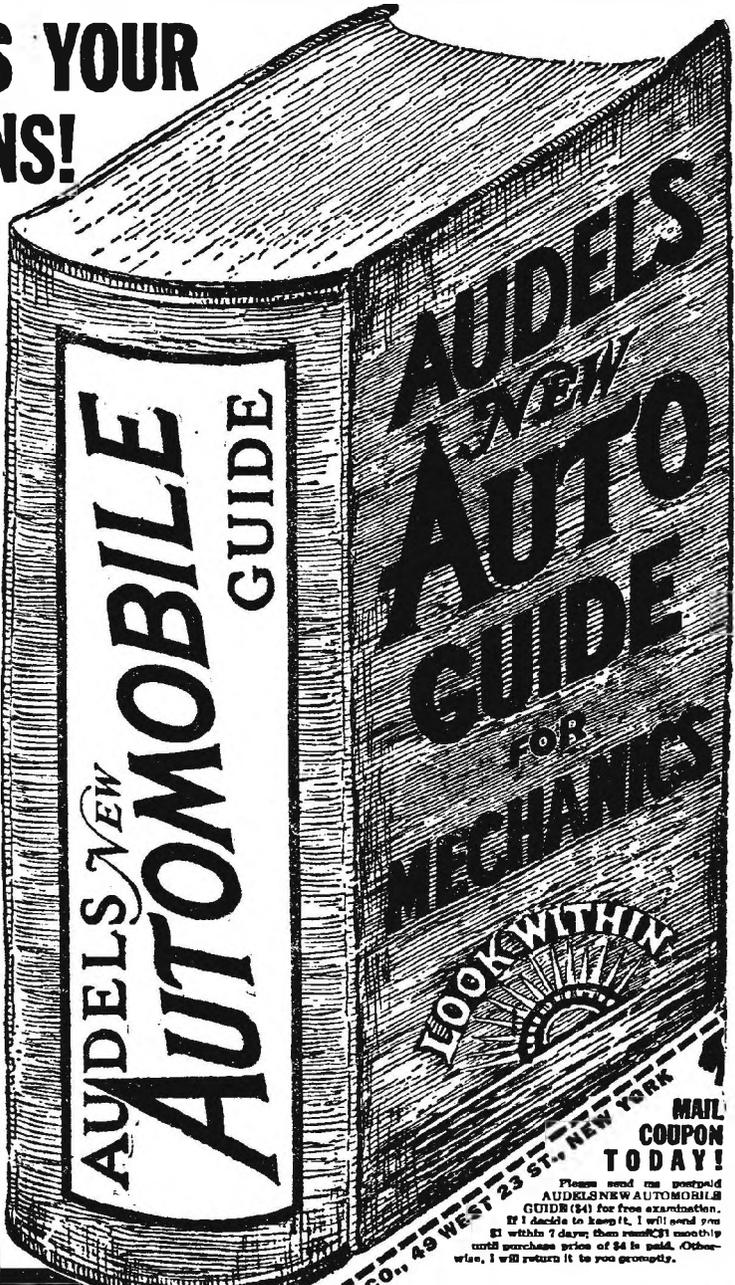
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Come Within Its Grasp!*

By **WESTMORELAND GRAY**

Author of "Murder in the Front Yard," "Scourge of the Border Patrol," etc.

CHAPTER I SINISTER GUEST

THERE wasn't any doubt about it. I should have gone by my office when I got back from Santa Anita.

But I suppose I was remorseful over the forty bucks I had lost, and if you think that forty bucks isn't a slice right out of the heart of a thirty-year-old lawyer with an ailing practice, then you need your head examined. Besides it was near-

ing seven o'clock, and I knew that the efficient blond young lady who looks after my appointments and office welfare had long since rouged her lips, powdered her nose, locked up and gone home.

So I drove straight to my apartment without giving the office a fair thought.

WHAT a night to start passing up bets!

Leaving my coupé at the curb in front, I went into the foyer, stepped into an empty elevator and punched the button for my floor. Out on the sixth I walked along the corridor, turned its angle, and stopped at the door of my apartment. The instant I inserted the key, I knew something was wrong. The door was unlocked, though I remembered locking it that morning.

A tingle of warning went down my spine. And I have made it a habit never to ignore those hunches. In my humbler moments I sometimes thank that habit for not now being several feet under ground with a neat headstone marking my last resting place.

I silently turned the knob enough to loosen the latch, then instead of barging through standing up, I dropped flat on my stomach and pushed the door open. The room was as dark as the inside of a black cow, and I would have made a beautiful target with my six-foot-one limned in the doorway against the dim hall light.

It was close enough as it was. Something went *pss-ss-sst!* like somebody with a bad cold sneezing, and a little streak of orange-colored light whipped from across the room, going through the doorway right about where my thumping heart would have been if I were standing. The bullet cut angrily into the alabaster of the hallway, and then there was silence.

I knew that my unseen enemy's automatic had a silencer on it, and that he'd have to handcock it before firing again. I didn't have a gun, but I meant to put some objections in his way before he had the chance for another shot. I reached out and groped along the wall for the extra light switch I had had specially built into the floorboard of the wall, a foot from the door casement.

You see, I had served three years as a special agent of the F.B.I., and you sometimes can't saw off one of those jobs behind you as cleanly as you'd like. A few mugs still wandering around would like to try to slice off my bright young legal career, especially when they get hopped up. That was why I'd had that switch built like that.

My finger touched the button, and the lights came on in the room. And I was crouched on my knees like a runner at the gun, ready to spring.

I didn't spring. This man was doubly cautious. He had laid aside the gun with the clumsy-looking silencer, and was aiming a deadlier naked one at me.

"Hal-loo-oo!" he drawled, insultingly personal, insultingly mocking. "I've heard you was a wise guy."

Even if he hadn't shot at me, I am sure I'd have had an aggravated and violent dislike for him. Sitting in my best armchair, he was a squatty hombre, big around and thick across, but low and short-legged.

His face was big, moonlike and flaccid-looking; his lips sensual and sneering. His pale blue eyes under thick half-lowered lids were insolent. His soiled Panama hat was on the back of his head. Thin lifeless patches of sorrel hair were over his ears.

He was about half drunk. His eyes were bloodshot, and the reek of liquor came across to me.

He stood up, waddled over to me,

slapped me over for weapons, and finding me unarmed, nodded me toward the center of the room. He heeled the door to.

"Sorry about squirting that lead at you from the muffled gat, brother," he said. "Guess I was a little jittery. Ax-shept m' apologies."

"What you're sorry of is that you didn't hit me," I answered bleakly. "How did you get in here?"

HE wheezed and squatted back into the chair. He slipped his gun back into its hideout shoulder holster, waved his thick, pudgy hand airily.

"Oh, I'm good at things like that."

"All right," I growled. "What's the game? State your business and get out of here fast. See how good you are at that."

His gaze was blinkless. "Keep your shirt on brother."

He had a deliberate way of slurring his words, making them antagonistic, insulting. He was one of these professional tough guys; an intimidator. More than likely his shot had been the result of sheer jitters.

I catalogued him as ex-a-lot-of things, probably an ex-cop, ex-private dick or even an ex-third-rate pug.

"Sid down, sid do-own! All I want now is a little friendly talk."

"Get it said," I snapped. I was moving sideward. My Smith and Wesson .38 automatic was in a concealed drawer of the living room table about six feet away.

"Okay, ok-a-a-ay! But you stand still, brother!" He fiddled his fingers along the lapel of his coat, near the bulge his gun made.

He leaned forward, chubby hands on chubby knees.

"You got a letter today, pal. A screwy letter. You got a check for

two grand. The letter asked you to do certain things. All I'm here for is to tell you not to have any part of it, friend. Not any pa-a-art of it, see?"

I have played enough poker not to let him see that I knew nothing about a letter or two grand.

"The shot was by way of emphasis, huh?"

"Forget the shot—forget the shot, see? Ain't I apologized for it?"

I saw it now. If that silenced gun had got me, well and good. But he didn't care to cause a four-alarm hullabaloo by blasting off the unmuffled gun now.

"This letter you got was from an old guy who's nuts, see? He's asking you to step into the buzz-saw—the bu-u-uzz saw, friend. I'm telling you not to. Just be sensible, thassall. He sent you a check. Well, there ain't any strings on the check. Go ahead and cash it, spend the dough. Have a good time, see? But forget everything the old crack-pot tells you in the letter, get me?"

"You're nuts!" I answered. "Is that all you've got to say?"

HIS flaccid brow knitted. "Say, listen! Lis-ten, pal! Maybe you don't get me. I'm telling you to forget anything old Phineas Hemphill wrote you. I'm saying don't go to Pineville, Texas." He drummed his fat fingers on his coat lapel. "Is that plain enough?"

Phineas Hemphill! Pineville, Texas! That nearly bowled me over. At first I had thought this man was plain slap-goofy. But I knew a Phineas Hemphill. He had been a professor at the State University, one of my teachers when I was there ten years ago.

I took another step sideward, half advanced toward him. "You can't scare me, you cheap rat. Start talking before I lose my temper and kick hell out of you."



Suddenly the door opened

Pure bluff, and I was scared as hell inside. Those fingers, itching for that gun; those nervous face muscles; those unblinking eyes. You never can tell what that kind of guy will do. I bluffed to distract his attention from the fact that I was right at the table.

"Now, don't cloud all up. Listen! My side ain't stingy. Have sense. I don't like to hurt guys. Rather fix things up with cash. We'll match that two grand. Take the old screwball's money and ours too. All you gotta do is set right here in Los A— and forget you got a letter, see? And forget all about a dame named Mary Somerville!"

He talked glibly, but what he was saying was the same as Greek to me. He drew a pad of currency—with his left hand—from his hip pocket and laid it on the table.

My fingers itched for the touch of the table edge, to feel along its gnarled ridge for a concealed spring. And in spite of the fact that I knew this man meant to keep me out of whatever affair he was referring to, either by cash or death, I began to boil. An offered bribe has always been to me like a red flag waved before a bull.

"Go to hell!" I grated, not using discretion. "You can't bribe me, you rat!"

A SLOW, heated flush was rising, reddening his thick neck bulging over his tight collar, turning his fat face almost crimson. His lower lip protruded, thick lids lowered over his eyes, which were deadly as they stared insolently into my face.

"I tried being friendly, pal. Friendly, see? But you want it the hard way. The ha-a-ard way, see? Did old Hemphill tell you that the job he wanted you to do might get you a pine kimona? Then I'll tell you. How'd you like to be watching roots grow?"

Then I hit him. I'm fast with my fists, weigh a hundred and ninety—and I'm not a bit fat. And I learned to deal out knuckles when I was in the F.B.I.'s training school for special agents. My fistful of knuckles, doubled hard, hit his soft face when his gun was halfway out.

His short legs slipped from under him. He hit the polished hardwood on his stomach and rocked forward on his face, feet kicking up.

HE SCRAMBLED around, got one elbow under him. Blood drooled off his chin.

His little, mean eyes looked kind of glassy. And he was cursing, and his gun coming up.

But I hadn't been idle. I touched the button under the edge of the table, the small drawer leaping out. Before the fat man could get his gun up and in line, my own .38 was staring him in the face.

"Want to try it, short man?" I said. "How'll *you* like to watch roots grow?"

His fingers unclasped from about his gun, and it dropped noisily to the floor.

He got up slowly, a muscle jerking in his face.

I waved my gun toward the currency on the table. "Get that damned money and put it in your pocket!"

He complied sullenly. I kicked the gun on the floor across and under the divan, laid the one with the silencer down and sent it skittering too.

I found enough stout drapery cord to tie him up like a Christmas package. My pent-up resentment went into the job and I did a good one, thoroughly gagging him to boot.

Then I turned out the light and went out of there.



There was Burleigh Tobian!

CHAPTER II

SPECIAL DELIVERY



I DIDN'T slow down until I parked at the curb of the building that houses my office. I rode up to the darkened tenth floor, and let myself in.

In the little hiding place under the edge of my desk where the stenographer puts such things, I found the letter. It was a special delivery and was post-marked "Pineville, Texas." I ripped it open with avid curiosity.

Two oblong pieces of crisp water-marked green paper fell out. They were cashier's checks for two thousand dollars each. One of them was made out to me.

The letter read:

Dear Andy:

This missive proves that I haven't lost sight of you since those days long ago when you were an unwilling student in my class of Zoology II back in State University. And because I have kept up with you and know what you have been and done, I believe you are the one with whom I can trust a very grave, secret and dangerous mission.

Two cashier's checks for two thousand dollars are enclosed. One of these is for your expenses and part payment of your fee for the assignment. The other you are to deliver to a young lady named Mary Somerville whom you will find residing at Apartment E, 24 Los Felice Boulevard, in your own Los Angeles.

You are to constitute yourself as a body-guard to the young lady, for I fear that she is in imminent danger. The actual truth is her life is in jeopardy, and will be in your hands. I know from following your career in the F.B.I. that you have the courage to undertake such an assignment. You are to escort Miss Somerville to my home here near Pineville, Texas. No doubt she will need some persuasion to come, though I am writing her such explanation as is safe to give her now.

You are charged, Andy, with delivering Miss Somerville here safely. The matter is vitally important to the young lady's future. And I can not stress too strongly that both of you, from the moment you receive these two communications, are in grave peril of your lives. Further than that I cannot ex-

plain, and it is safer that you do not try to communicate with me. And speak to no one concerning this matter.

I caution you to be alert for your own safety as well as for hers. By all means keep yourself armed and be watchful of strangers. You will be much better rewarded on completion of this assignment, which I am certain you will accept because it is the urgent wish of an old friend and former teacher of yours.

With fond affection, your humble servant,
Phineas Hemphill.

I laid the letter down, a little floored. Peril, jeopardy, danger? It all sounded melodramatic as a "B" picture, but I knew old Phinny hadn't stretched things, from my encounter with the waddling fat guy now tied up in my apartment.

Old "Phinny the Prof." Breaking into my life with a thing like that after all these years! I hadn't seen him since I had squirmed through his classroom lectures ten years ago. He had been a bore and a pedagogue, but a human and friendly old codger.

I remember that, during my freshman year, he had married a sharp-tongued widow with three spoiled sons of about my own age, and she had henpecked the life out of old Phinny until she'd died of ptomaine poisoning five or six years ago.

Phinny had come into a lot of wealth later, I had heard, from an old family estate at Pineville, in the edge of the East Texas oil fields. The old man was famous as an anthropologist, going on research expeditions carrying him into remote portions of South America, Africa and the Malay interior. Later he had retired to Pineville as a gentleman of wealth and leisure.

The thing sounded cracked, but there were those two checks for two grand each. And I needed the money—which is the rankest kind of understatement.

As for the danger— Well, as a

special agent for the F.B.I. I had learned that danger is only relative. The odds against you are in inverse ratio to your ability to look out for yourself. I have known what it was to be scared, to sweat with fear. But I'd learned the knack of forgetting fear quickly, and not living it over and over again. That latter kind of fear is what breaks men's nerve.

Miss Mary Somerville was listed in the directory and I dialed her number. She came on the wire and I told her who I was and mentioned Phineas Hemphill's name.

"The thing is out of the question," she said crisply. "I don't know Mr. Hemphill, I've never been in Pineville, Texas—and I don't want to go there. I think the man must be a crank or a fanatic. I can't quit my job and go on a crazy chase like that."

"Didn't he explain things to you?"

"No. His letter to me explained nothing except that I was in danger of my life—which did seem absurd—and that I was to come with you to Pineville on a matter vitally important to my future. He did say that more information would come by special delivery mail, and that I was to speak to no one except you about the matter. I haven't got any such special yet. Don't waste your time, Mr. Gunn. I'm not interested in the trip. I'm not going."

I was warming up to the girl. Her voice sounded young, lively and full of sense, determination and self-reliance.

"But your check for two thousand," I reminded her.

"Probably it's as phony as the letter."

"Not on your life. Old Phineas Hemphill is known for his sterling honesty. Will you be at home in an hour?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then I'll drive over for a talk, and bring the check. Maybe by then you'll have the special."

"I'll take the check, of course. But I warn you, Mr. Gunn, you'll be wasting your time."

"I don't think so." I chuckled, and added, "at least I'll be trying to earn my fee."

I got in my coupé again and headed back to my apartment, thinking in terms of a shower, fresh linen and a suit that wasn't quite so baggy at the knees. There had been something in Mary Somerville's voice and manner and attitude—

ALSO I was wondering what the devil I was going to do with the moon-faced fat man trussed up in my living room.

I might have saved myself the wear and tear on my brain. When I got there he was gone—waddling legs, big paunch, cut lip and all, along with his artillery I had kicked behind the divan. His means of escape lay frankly among the cut silk drape cords. A lowly safety razor blade, which I had no doubt obligingly left lying around somewhere handy enough for him to wriggle to get it.

I cursed myself gently for a fool, went back down, climbed into my coupé and headed for Mary Somerville's apartment.

The place on Los Felice where Mary Somerville lived was a nice looking four-apartment building, stucco, tile-roofed, with a patio and strip of green in front of it, and palms and a couple of eucalyptus trees. I tooled the coupé to the curb, switched off the lights and got out.

I gave the house a good once-over. Evidently the peril old Phinny had mentioned had already started functioning in a large way and I didn't want to be caught napping

again. I felt better because I now had my gun in its spring-clip holster under my arm. But there was nothing to arouse my suspicions here and I went on in and rode up to the second floor, where I knocked on the door of Apartment E.

The girl let me in herself, and I could see at once that she lived here alone. One of these bachelor girls, I guessed.

And she was plenty pleasant to look at. Not one of these softly beautiful fragile creatures, but a girl with plenty of "wire" in her. Her dark hair was swept straight back from her high, smooth forehead, then allowed to choose its own way, and the result was as carelessly charming as the studied coiffures of the smartest glamour girl on the screen. She had large eyes, with high, sharp brows over them, and one of the eyebrows had a quaint way of perking up higher than the other. Her face was not the perfect oval, but faintly thin with character and muscles in the cheeks. Her chin and nose were both straight and pretty fine.

I SAID I was glad to meet her and I meant it. "I'm Andy Gunn," I told her as I went in and sat down.

"Now, you listen to me," she said, before I could open up on her. "I like Los Angeles and Hollywood, where I work. I've got a good job and I'm not going to jeopardize it running off to any town I never heard of before—like Pineville, Texas. I'm curious to know what this is all about, of course. But I'm not taking on any, that's all. I'm a script girl out at Century-Colossal. I get seventy dollars a week—and I like it. I ought to. I worked hard for five years to work up to it. Some day I may have a chance to be a director—like the only woman director in the business now. Be-

sides, I think that letter sounded crazy."

I grinned. It was evident that she was proud of her job, and I like people who are proud of their jobs.

"At least," I said, "there's nothing crazy about this." I took out the check for two thousand and handed it to her.

She seemed to waver about taking it. "I don't know. If I don't take Mr. Hemphill's proposition up, I ought not to accept the check."

I liked that about her, too. She was square—and that much money must have been quite a temptation.

"There was nothing stipulated against it," I told her.

She took the check, looked at it for a moment, then nodded, folded it and tucked it away in her purse on the table.

"Don't you know anything of what this is all about?" she asked.

I shook my head. "I was hoping you'd know something by now."

"No. I haven't received the special delivery, though my letter said it was mailed at the same time. But I do know the letter said I was in danger. And I'm beginning to believe it. When I got home today—it was my afternoon to get off early—there was a man working with the lock of my apartment door. He moved away quickly when I came up. But twice later I saw him lurking—yes, lurking is the word—in the corridor out there. Once he started to speak to me, but I ducked back in the apartment and slammed the door."

"A fat bald-headed man who waddles when he walks?"

She nodded.

"If you see him again," I said, "He'll have a bruise on his chin and a cut lip. He was at my apartment, too."

She looked at me then with something of a sparkle in her eyes, a look that I hoped was new apprecia-

tion. She began to laugh, a soft low chuckle which ended up with a silvery ring. And just then her telephone began to ring.

She answered it. "Hello? Yes, Mrs. Feltman. Thank you, I'm expecting it. Send him right on up with it, please."

She looked at me. There was excitement in her eyes. "It's the special," she said.

It should have taken the elevator no more than thirty or forty sec-

tween the two floors. Then it started down.

"The stairs!" I cried and the girl pointed down the corridor.

I went pounding down them, took the mid-turn on the fly and came out on the run into the hallway below. Up front a man was going through the wide entranceway door. He looked short and squat, waddled as he ran, but that was the most I could tell about him before he was gone.



It was a white face beneath the water

onds to rise that one floor, but I had waited more than a minute before I realized that I had been so interested in Mary Somerville that I had forgotten old Phinny's warning to be on the alert. I think the idea struck us both at the same instant—that something had happened to the postman on the way up.

I flung out of the apartment and across the corridor to the elevator in about four strides, calling to the girl to wait in there, but she was right behind me. I saw at a glance that the elevator had stopped be-

The elevator was open; even with the lower floor. The postman inside it was crumpled on the floor. His cap had rolled into a corner, there was a bruise on his forehead and his half-open eyes looked glassy.

That was all I took time to see. I went running out the front door. Luck was with me. The man was plunging into the shadows of a eucalyptus tree. I leaped across the *patio* and went sprinting after him.

"Stop where you are or stop lead!" I yelled.

I drew up short near the tree, plenty leery. I didn't know whether

he had gone on or was hiding there. Sidling over, I found the shadow of a palm beside some kind of an evergreen shrub. I stood there, very still, and watched the shadows under the tree.

CHAPTER III

THE THING IN THE ROOM

 SO LONG I waited that my hopes began to sink. I felt sure my quarry was gone. Back of me there were voices and excitement in the apartment house, and a man and woman appeared in the doorway, scared and meek, peering out cautiously. But I kept my eyes glued on the gloom under the tree. Something stirred there.

I moved. I shot out of my covert like a bolt, straight at that movement. A bulky shadow turned to run. I hit it in a flying tackle. It was soft and it grunted and arms flailed at me, feet kicked at me. One of the arms was something more than an arm. Something hard cracked down on my shoulder. My adversary had swung his gun.

I gave the legs a jerk that sprawled the man. I pounced at him. But he was quick. He scrambled away from me and I only grabbed a handful of trouser-leg. It was jerked from my grasp. A big foot kicked me in the ribs. It hurt like hell. The hand with the gun swung at me again. I managed to dodge it, swung my fist. It took him in the chest, knocked him clear of me, and he whirled around to run like seven devils were after him.

But I had stopped. I had seen something fall from his clothes, something light that lay now on the ground at my feet. I stooped swiftly to pick it up, and while I did the man got away, disappearing

down a side street that crossed Los Felice Boulevard.

Carrying the package I went back to the apartment house. I gave it a glance under the light. It was small and flat, about the size of a legal-size envelope. It was tied and well sealed with gummed tape. It had a special delivery stamp on it, and a label, with Miss Mary Somerville's name and address and the return address of Phineas Hemphill, Pineville, Texas. Old Phinny's special delivery! The very thing the man had fought to obtain, he had lost in the fight! I tucked it under my coat and went into the lobby.

Several people had gathered around the postman, who had come to and was sitting up in a chair. Somebody had given him a drink of brandy, and he was able to talk. When he had got on the elevator, he said, a short, fat man had hurried up and got in with him. Soon as the door was closed the man had stopped the elevator and slugged him across the forehead with a pistol. When he came to he no longer had the package.

"He'll get his," the postman finished grimly. "He has committed a Federal offense. Postal inspectors will run him down."

I got Mary Somerville aside and we went back to her apartment. I took the flat package from under my coat and handed it to her.

"Open it and read it. Then if it is something you want me to know about, let me examine it."

Her back to me, she was busy snipping cord, ripping gummed tape, slitting paper. Suddenly her body stiffened and she gave a sharp little cry of disappointment.

She turned to me, blank astonishment in her face. The contents of the flat package were in her hands, and I leaped to examine them.

They were nothing but a dozen neatly folded blank sheets of paper!

"Do you suppose that the fat man got away with the real package and dropped this one as a decoy?" the girl said.

"No. This package has the real Pineville postmarks on it."

"Then Mr. Phineas Hemphill is a crazy man."

I shook my head. "Our fat, waddly friend would not have attempted to steal a dozen blank sheets of paper. There's more back of this than that. Something happened to this package sometime between the time it left old Phinny's hands and when it was placed in the mails. Whatever this means, it's important enough for somebody to threaten murder and risk Federal imprisonment for interfering with the mail."

The girl was looking squarely at me, but there was an abstract, thoughtful look in her eyes. She bit her lip.

"That's right," she said, and finally: "I'm going to Pineville as you asked."

"Good! How soon can you leave?"

"Tomorrow. I'll phone my studio tonight for a leave of absence."

She did not know that, after I had pretended to go home, I came back and spent most of the remainder of the night in a shadowy corner of the corridor outside her apartment. For I had taken to heart the warnings of old Phinny and the threats of the waddling fat man. But nothing happened that night and a little before dawn I returned to my own apartment for a couple of hours sleep.

She met me at the Southern Pacific station at eleven that morning. I believe it was as much the promise of danger and adventure as her curiosity about the mystery that prompted her going. She was quite evidently getting a thrill out of it all.

I had made our reservations—a compartment for her and a lower berth for myself. And I had come to be rather hawklike in my watchfulness. But if our fat Nemesis was anywhere in the crowd about the station, or among those who boarded the train, I did not see him.

During most of the trip I roamed the length of the train, back and forth, back and forth. I felt the responsibility of this girl's safety like a heavy weight on my shoulders. And not knowing just what to look for kept me always in suspense and doubt.

Once, just out of Phoenix, I thought I got a glimpse of a waddling pair of short, fat legs up ahead in the aisle of the smoker. But though I sprinted ahead and bowled over a couple of passengers, I did not find the man who had snarled threats and shot at me in Los Angeles. And I never saw the legs again on that train.

OUR journey called for an overnight stay in El Paso. I stuck close by Mary Somerville's side as we disembarked. I looked constantly behind our taxi as we rode to the hotel. But so far as I could tell, no one followed us.

We managed to get adjoining rooms on the sixth floor and when the girl entered hers, I went in ahead of her and looked it over carefully.

"Lock your door and leave your key in the lock on the inside," I told her and then bid her good night.

I took the same precautions in my own room. It was a warm night and I left the windows about half open. I sat up until after midnight, smoking, getting jittery and listening constantly for some sound from Mary Somerville's room. Every fifteen or twenty minutes, I'd go out

into the corridor and walk by her door. Several times I examined the lock. Everything seemed to be in order.

Finally I turned in. I must have been nearly an hour getting to sleep. Twice I awoke, but there was only silence in the room and even beyond it. Outside the city below was in a slumbrous hush. I turned over and went to sleep again.

I don't know what woke me. I know I woke with a start and I was suddenly in a cold sweat. I stared around into utter gloom and an unnerving sound was in my ears.

It was the whimpering, hurt cry of a child! Not loud, but penetrating—and edged with pleading, terror and pain. And it was coming from somewhere in my room.

THEN I saw the eyes. Small beady, bright ones, glittering with a feverish luminosity in the dark. And they were right over the foot of my bed. My gun had been under my pillow. It was in my fist now. But I could not shoot. What manner of thing would I kill if I fired?

A quick little stir of movement and the eyes were gone. I lunged across in the darkness, gun upraised for a blow, and made a mighty one-handed grab. My crooked arm closed on empty space. I rolled out of bed, got my feet on the floor and stumbled toward the wall, groping for the light switch. Nothing was visible in the pitch dark but the greyish rectangles of the half-open windows. But there was an odor in the room, a feral scent, which in spite of its faintness was slightly sickening.

Finally my finger touched the switch and lights came on. I glared about me. Nothing was in the room. Nothing. Nothing except my bags, my clothes, my own things just as I had left them. I pushed open the

bathroom and searched it. It was just as empty.

Then I went to one of the windows, poked my head out. I stared up and down and to both sides. Sheer smooth walls, broken only by opaque dark windows. And a stark perpendicular drop of seventy or eighty feet to the paved areaway below.

Nightmare? No, I told myself. Someone, something, had been in my room. I'm a grown man, not specially given to hallucinations or wild imaginings. Those little eyes, that whimpering cry, that unpleasant body odor—they were all real. I *knew* they had been in the room. Now all were gone. How?

A thorough search showed up nothing missing. And the door was still locked, the key in the lock on the inside.

My thoughts then went to Mary Somerville. The windows seemed to be the only possible way my intruder—whatever it had been—could have entered. And I wondered if her windows were open now, leaving her liable to such an intrusion.

I disliked to disturb her. Much less did I wish to alarm her with details of my own rather unnerving experience. But I did go out in the corridor and examine her door. It was locked, just as when I had last inspected it. I put my ear against the panel. There was only silence and I assured myself that the girl was all right and sleeping soundly.

Back in my own room, I closed the windows, turned out the lights and smoked a couple of cigarettes before attempting sleep again. It must have been an hour before I dozed off.

This time there was no doubt about what waked me. It was a sharp scream of terror that cut through the hotel quiet and through

my sleep like a knife. This was no whimpering, childish cry like those I had heard before. It was a hysterical shriek of mortal fear—and it came from Mary Somerville's room next door!

And it kept up—frenzied cries for help, intermingled with screams of sheer horror. In a bound I was out of bed, crossed the floor and flung open my own door. Then I was down the corridor yanking frantically at the knob of her door. It was still locked! The girl was still screaming!

Frantically I fought that knob.

"Mary! Mary! Miss Somerville!" I called out.

I pounded. I yelled. I rammed against the stout door.

Then there was silence beyond the door. Deathly, suggestive silence. And as I listened that silence was broken by a long-drawn sob.

People were coming from the other rooms, in various states of undress. A porter came running down the corridor. The elevator operator left his machine and came.

"Help me!" I ordered. "We'll break the door in."

Three of us backed off and rammed against the door. It held against our efforts. We rammed again and again, other men in the crowd adding their weight. Finally the metal of the lock rended, wood split, and the door flung open.

After long, groping seconds of suspense, lights came on.

Mary Somerville in pale blue satin and lace pajamas lay in a huddled heap on the floor beside the bed. There were scratches on her hands and arms, from which little beads of blood seeped. Her head was thrown back, exposing the soft ivory column of her throat. And at the base of it, dangerously near the jugular vein, was a long thin wound from which a red stain

spread to saturate the lace and satin of the jacket of her sleeping garment.

In two strides I was over to her, feeling for her pulse.

"A doctor! Get a doctor quick!" I snarled over my shoulder to the porter.

Instantly I was flooded with relief. Her pulse was strong, but fast and excited. I turned my attention to the wound in her throat. I could have shouted out for joy then. It was but a shallow flesh wound, only little deeper than the skin. But I knew she had had a very narrow escape. For that wound could only have been made by some weapon as sharp as a razor!

SHE moaned and was coming to. I picked her up in my arms and laid her on the bed. I glared around the room. People were staring and asking questions. I silenced them with a look. The house detective pushed through them.

"What is this?" he demanded.

"Looks like an attempt at murder," I growled. "Get busy and try to find the murderer. Look for a fat, bald-headed man. Search the rooms on the floors above and below this. Her open windows are the only place anyone could have come into her room."

Mary opened her eyes. She was looking at me, but I knew she could not see me. She was still blinded with the terror of what she had been through. She began to sob and struggle. I held her hand, rubbed her wrist and spoke to her gently.

"Something—t-touched me in my sleep!" she sobbed. "I screamed—and—and fought it. It—" she shuddered—"It was—little—and *furry!* It scratched—and struggled—bit and spat at me!"

And that was the upshot of it all. Even after the doctor came and administered a hypodermic and had

dressed her wound and the scratches and pronounced them superficial, she clung to her story. The search of the hotel rooms netted nothing. No fat, bald man was found. Nothing else suspicious.

But though Mary reiterated again and again the thing that had attacked her was small and furry, and had scratched her, I knew that that sharp, clean wound at the base of her throat had been made by some keen, razor-edged blade.

CHAPTER IV

MURDER IN THE WRONG ROOM



PINEVILLE, Texas, was a town teeming with many kinds of people and many kinds of activities. A fevered sort of place, its street cluttered with big, mud-splattered cars, trucks loaded with machinery, oil-well casing and building materials.

It was a town of weathered tar-paper shacks, pine "shot-gun" houses, and blatantly new brick mansions. It was surrounded with oil derricks and littered with that heterogeneous debris of materials which inevitably lies in the wake of the first flush of an oil boom.

No one met us at the station, for I had not wired Phineas Hemphill when we would arrive. I had thought this the better part of discretion.

We found a rent car driver who knew where the Hemphill place was and he agreed to drive us there.

Immediately we left the town behind on a somewhat rutted gravel road, the air of bustling activity disappeared. We wound through acres and acres of pine forest as primeval as though civilization had never touched it. Here and there it was broken by clearings in which were small farms, looking run-down, gone to seed.

"The old Hemphill estate had more'n fifteen hundred acres o' this kind o' land," the driver told us. "An' I understand some of it's been leased for ten to twenty thousand dollars an acre. Some oil folks say the biggest oil pool yet lays right under a part o' the Hemphill land. Some guys have all the luck." He heaved a great sigh.

It was quiet and cool in here among the pines, a study wholly in deep green and bright blue—the green of the close-hovering pines and the blue of the sky above. But there was the suggestion of something terrible about it too, and more than once I felt Mary Somerville, sitting beside me, shiver violently. She had not been fully able to forget her experience in that El Paso hotel room, and I knew that she was tense with suspense as to what she would learn when we met Phineas Hemphill.

My interest in Mary Somerville, I shall have to admit, had gone far beyond the professional by this time.

And I had learned more about her, having delved into her past with her to see if it might furnish some motive for the strange things happening around her.

Mary was sure that her past had nothing to do with these events. She had been reared in an orphan's home, both of her parents having been killed in a train wreck when she was only a year old. She knew nothing of her parents and had no known relatives, but she was quite sure that Somerville was her real name.

However, she was not the kind to let such things worry her, and after finishing high school and business school, she had got the job with the picture company which had led to her present work. She had been too busy working, too interested in living, to lose time or sleep over

things that had happened when she was a year old.

We came upon the Hemphill place suddenly, after a sharp bend in the road. It was nearing dusk, the sunlight was failing, and shadows of the bordering pines were creeping across the great old white house and its grounds. It was an old Colonial house with big white columns that rose up in front of it from ground to roof. A veranda ran across the entire front. There were long windows with green shutters, and lush Virginia creepers climbed all over the weathered, white-painted walls like a dark blotch.

A great peacock was strutting on the fence near the driveway, and as we swung through the entrance it gave a piercing, unnerving scream. Involuntarily Mary grasped my arm, and the color ebbed suddenly from her face, leaving it pale and distraught.

I patted her shoulder and said: "Get a grip on yourself, Mary. It's only a peacock."

But its scream had sounded like an unearthly banshee.

The car wound over the graveled drive among the shrubbery of the grounds, and drew up at the side entrance of the big house.

Old Phineas Hemphill came out to greet us. Behind him moved the Hemphill butler, whose name I soon learned was Winkler. And in the doorway at the top of the steps, I saw Burleigh Tobian, Hemphill's eldest stepson, looking much older, harder and more dissipated than when I had last seen him some ten years ago.

"Glad to see you, Andy, my boy," old Phinny cried in his cracked voice, sticking out a wrinkled, claw-like hand. "You look fine—much the same. You're matured of course but it becomes you. So this is Miss Mary Somerville?"

I did the honors. Old Phinny studied the girl. It was a searching appraisal. And I was studying the old man. His strict, ascetic and sallow face was more wrinkled, his scant grey hair wilder than ever. And always something of a fanatic on the subjects he pursued, his faded eyes had now more of a glitter than I had seen in them before. Also, there was something dogged, adamant, intolerant in his face with its deep carved lines. For some strange reason it made me uncomfortable.

"We have come a long way, Professor Hemphill," I said. "And we want a great many questions answered right off."

A QUICK, wary look came in his eyes, the shaggy brows knitted together in a sudden frown. His lips pressed together and he touched them with his finger meaningly.

"Later," he whispered. "Later. Come right in. Welcome to the Hemphill home."

I looked about. Did he distrust Burleigh Tobian, his stepson? Or was it Winkler, bending to lift our baggage? Winkler was a tall, thin man with a narrow face, high cheek-bones, and a sharp, aquiline nose. One of his eyes seemed bad and he peered at you one-sidedly, stretching his neck out, like a wary bird, poised either for flight or attack. I noticed that Mary instinctively drew back from him. In fact she was clinging to my arm now.

"Andy, you will remember my stepson, Burleigh Tobian," old Phinny said. "And Burleigh, this is Miss Mary Somerville, of Los Angeles."

Burleigh Tobian said, "How d'you do?" indolently to me and turned a deliberate and insolent stare on the girl. On closer view I could see how dissipation had marked him. His cheeks and nose had a network

of fine blue veins under the skin. His skin had that oily texture of a constant liquor drinker's, his palms were soft and moist as he lazily extended a hand to me. There was a faint film over his eyes, and an aroma of bay rum and alcohol about him. But unmistakably I saw a look of half-veiled hatred as he stared at Mary Somerville.

"Winkler will show you to your rooms," old Phinny's querulous voice went on. "Dinner will be in half an hour. Cocktails in the living room if you care for them."

Winkler, stooping with the load of our luggage, led us up the wide, old-fashioned stairs, down a high-ceiled corridor.

HE stopped before a door. "This is the young lady's room," he whined. "Yours, Mr. Gunn, is the one next. That is as Mr. Hemphill requested."

After the butler had stowed our baggage in our respective rooms and departed, Mary and I stood in the corridor a moment. She came close to me, caught my hand, clung to me a moment.

"I—I'm frightened," she whispered.

I gave her a grin which I hoped was reassuring. "Nonsense. We're all okay now. And soon we'll know what it's all about. Old Phinny is a right guy."

"He looks crazy out of the eyes!"

"He has always had that little glitter in his eyes—and he's always been a very sane man."

But when I was in my own room and washing up, I wasn't so sure. There's only a faint line, they say, between genius and insanity; and old Phinny had always been something of a genius in his work in anthropology. And I did not like the looks of Winkler, nor the way Burleigh Tobian stared at Mary.

Twenty minutes later Mary and

I went down together to the huge living room, lighted by a great hanging chandelier, and with its long windows from floor to ceiling like black panels against the night outside.

There was a sullen mutter of low talk as we approached the wide entrance, but it stopped instantly as we stood on the threshold. Five faces were turned toward us, but there was one on which my stare was riveted for long seconds, and I confess I got the sharpest shock that had so far been given in the affair.

It was the flaccid, moonlike face of the squat, fat man whom I had encountered in my apartment in Los Angeles!

Old Phinny was bustling forward. "You met Burleigh outside, Andy. And these are my two other stepsons—Guy and Conrad. You'll probably remember them from your college days."

When I could take my glance from the surly face of the fat man, I looked at Guy and Conrad Tobian. I'd have known them, of course. Older, matured, they had changed less than Burleigh. Guy was studious-looking; thin, stooped, with thick-lensed glasses, long black hair, thin lips and a sharp, pinched nose. He had long-fingered hands, and his face was pale with a bright spot of color at the top of each cheekbone.

Conrad Tobian looked what I had known him to be back in college—a weakling. His face was a little effeminate in appearance, his eyes shifty, his movements nervous and uncertain. And he had a jerky way of speaking.

When introductions had been acknowledged between Mary and the two, old Phinny turned to the squat man.

"And this is Mr. Henderson, another guest, a friend of my son Burleigh."

There was either loathing or fear in old Phinny's voice, for it quavered a little. Yet I knew it was freighted with sarcasm, too.

"I have met Mr. Henderson before," I said grimly. "You made a quick trip from California, Henderson."

The man was nearly drunk. There was an empty glass on the table at his elbow now, and undoubtedly he had emptied it several times. Also he was in an ugly mood. His face screwed into a snarling expression, his lower lip protruded an inch, and his thick lids drooped over his mean little eyes as he stared up at me.

"Maybe, my friend, you'd better not bring that up, see? Don't bring it up."

Burleigh Tobian pushed forward. "What's this all about anyway, Hemphill?" he demanded of his stepfather. "These two strangers—why are they here, huh?"

HIS bloodshot eyes were hot and accusing on the old man. Hemphill seemed to cringe, and I got a fleeting impression that he was deathly afraid of his stepson.

"It—it will all come out soon, my dear Burleigh."

"Bah!" Burleigh said, and turned away disgustedly.

"Mr. Hemphill," I said, "this man Henderson is a traitor to whatever hospitality you have extended him. He threatened me and tried to kill me in Los Angeles—and he tried to break into Miss Somerville's apartment. I ask your permission to put him out of your house."

Henderson made a vulgar laugh in his throat. Old Phinny shot a quick affrighted glance at Burleigh, whose back was turned as he poured himself a drink. Hemphill lifted his hands.

"Please, Andy, no violence. I'm sure there has been a misunderstanding."

Burleigh Tobian swallowed his drink and turned toward us. "Misunderstanding, hell! You're playing with dynamite, you, cracked old fool, and it's liable to go off in your hands!"

Henderson swayed to his feet, waddled toward me. His pale blue eyes looked fuddled, but his fleshy face and neck were scarlet with rising anger.

"If you say I was in Los Angeles last few days, you're a damned liar!"

That flashed all over me with a sort of inner combustion. It occurred to me all of a sudden that I hated this despicable squab of a man more than anybody I had ever known. My arm was cocked, ready to punch hell out of his repulsive face, when suddenly there was a hand on my arm.

"Please!" Mary Somerville said.

I stood over him, glared down at him, my breath hissing between my teeth, unable to squelch my desire to mash in his face.

Then Winkler broke the tension. He appeared in the doorway and announced:

"Dinner is served."

That was quite the most unpleasant meal I have ever experienced. Strange and ugly emotions seethed under the surface. And I sensed a sinister thread of fear and hostility running through it all. Phineas Hemphill was afraid of Burleigh Tobian. Conrad Tobian, the jerky-voiced one, seemed weak with some secret apprehension, and his eyes were shiftier, his pecking movements as he ate, more uncertain. Guy Tobian appeared troubled and seemed to withdraw into himself behind his thick glasses. Burleigh Tobian seemed bluffing, indolently watchful, like a cat playing with a mouse. Mary sat still and white-faced, frightened by it all, barely touching her food.

"Hack" Henderson, as I'd heard him called, appeared to sense none of this. He was too drunk, too filled with his pet peeve of the moment—myself. He ate nothing, but ordered more drinks, and sat sinking lower and lower into his squatting body, eyeing me malevolently, muttering more to himself than to any of the others.

"Gum," he suddenly blurted out, "y' been warned. Y' been wa-a-arned, see? But you stuck y' neck out, friend—stuck it wa-a-ay out, see? Shtoo late now to draw it back. Y' lied about me being in Los A. I'm gonna—"

"Henderson!" Old Phinny had got control of himself. His voice was stern, sharp as steel. "Mr. Gunn is my guest. Unless you control your remarks, I'll have you thrown from my house!"

Hack Henderson slowly rose with great dignity. "Okay—oka-a-ay, gran'pa. I c'n tell when I'm not wanted. Okay! Guess I'll turn in, so y'can have a li'l peace'n quiet."

He gave me a black look, made a ludicrous attempt at a low bow, slowly swung around in a great circle, swayed precariously, then walked with ponderous dignity from the dining room. Through the open doorway I saw him mount the stairs using the balustrade for both a guide and a support, and waddle laboriously upward and out of sight.

CHAPTER V

THE KNIFE



WE made short shrift of finishing dinner. There was a movement back to the living room. Conrad Tobian uncertainly offered me a cigarette, but I thanked him and took out one of my own.

"I smoke Perique tobacco," I said. "Like to try one?"

"Afraid—it might be—a little strong for me," he returned in his jerky voice.

At the door of the living room I caught old Phinny's sleeve. "I think it is time some explanations were made," I told him firmly, in an undertone. Burleigh and Conrad Tobian were watching us.

"Certainly, certainly," Hemphill said, shot a glance in Burleigh's direction, and turned to lead Mary and me back down the hallway.

His study was a close little room, littered with the oddments of the work he had loved. Hundreds of books on zoology and anthropology filled the shelves. Skulls of both humans and animals were all about and in a corner was a full skeleton of some anthropoid ape. I saw Mary recoil from the sight of these things and she took a position as far away from them as she could before she regained her composure. Hemphill carefully closed the door.

"We can talk here," he said with an air of conniving. "Now of course Miss Somerville knows why she was brought here?"

"She does not," I said testily. "And it's high time she was given full explanation."

Hemphill's shaggy brows went up in amazement. "But the special delivery package I sent you?"

"Contained twelve blank sheets of paper."

Old Phinny stared at me. He stared at Mary Somerville. He sank slowly into a chair.

"What? What!"

For a moment he was frightened, then his fear was replaced by anger. His lined old face went white with fury, and his wrinkled, clawlike hands clenched themselves into white-knuckled fists.

"Burleigh!" he whispered huskily. "Burleigh—it's his work. But how did he get hold of the package?"

He took control of himself, looked at me. "Burleigh has—er—been a trial to me, Andy. A black sheep, I'm afraid— Luckily the papers I tried to send Miss Somerville were only copies of the real documents."

I caught his shoulder. "Look here. Out with this now. What does all this mean?"

He frowned, then shook his head. "Knowledge without the proof will be dangerous. Too much of the secret has leaked already."

He got up with sudden determination. "Please bear with me. I must leave, and I may be gone an hour, two hours. But I'll return before then surely. I'll have everything to show you then. Proof of what I shall tell you. But I dare not speak without being able to turn over the proof to you."

I caught his shoulder. "Oh, no, you don't, Hemphill! You're not running out on us until you tell what this is all about!"

HE smiled his old friendly smile then. "I assure you, Andy, that you can well afford to wait."

"What are you trying to do?"

"I'm trying to make this young lady a millionairess," he answered, and dodged to the door.

He turned however, and came back. "I charge you with Miss Somerville's safety, Andy," he whispered. "There is danger, even in my own home." He hesitated. "Watch Burleigh. I hate to say it. He is my stepson. But I don't trust him. I am afraid of him for you."

He went out of the room then, and left Mary and myself staring at each other. She sat in a chair.

"I wish I was back home in Los Angeles," she said.

I put my hand on her shoulder. "You're going up to your room and get some rest," I told her firmly.

"I couldn't close my eyes to save my life," she said.

But I persuaded her. I went up to the her door with her. "I've got some work to do," I told her. "I'll call you as soon as Mr. Hemphill gets back."

What I wanted to do was have a session alone with my fingerprint camera. I had kept one of the outfits when I got out of the F. B. I., and often used it in private investigations. In one of my handbags also were the wrappings of the special delivery package Mary had received in Los Angeles, but I had had no chance to get at it with the fingerprinting apparatus. I intended to lift them, then get fingerprints of the members of this weird household for comparison. Perhaps such a comparison would tell us who had tampered with old Phinny's letter—if anyone.

Old Phinny's reluctance to tell us his secret, I recognized as characteristic of him. He was a pedagogue, a scientist. Even in class-room he had never made a statement without a mass of reference to back it up. In our present situation, though, I was hard put to humor him. If we were really in peril, this delay in knowing what it was all about was certainly doing us no good. I found myself once more doubting old Phinny's sanity. I heard his car drive off, and wondered where he was going.

The downstairs of the house seemed deserted. I had seen nothing of the Tobian brothers. Only the old butler, Winkler, had been creeping about, peering in his one-eyed, sidling and disconcerting way.

I opened the door of my room, stepped in—then growled an oath. Sprawled on my bed, flat on his back, and snoring heavily was Hack Henderson.

It was easy to understand. I had not locked the door and the fat man, leaving the dining room in his drunken huff, had been too confused

by liquor to hunt out his own room, which must be the one right across the hall from mine, and had flopped on the first bed he came to.

I grabbed him by the shoulder and shook him roughly. He only grunted, groaned a little and rolled over. I felt like yanking him out and kicking him from my room. With the pent-up resentment I had against him, that would have given me great pleasure.

I decided on a more gentlemanly action though. No use starting another brawl with the man now. I'd be working with my fingerprinting in the bathroom down the corridor until old Phinny returned. By then maybe Henderson would have awakened and could be tossed out of my room.

With the bag containing the camera, solution trays and the developing chemicals to be mixed, as well as my powders and the wrappings of the special delivery package, I went on to the bathroom. I worked there for forty or fifty minutes. I took off several sets of prints, though not all of them clear, for of course the package had had many handlings in its twenty-five hundred mile trip through the mails.

MY NEXT job was to try to find whose fingerprints would match some of these. Old Phinny's would be on the wrappings, of course, but they should not be on the blank sheets. If they were, it would mean that he had hoaxed Mary Somerville into coming here to Pineville. The best place to find Hemphill's prints, I decided, was in his study downstairs. So I went down and went over the room of skulls and anthropoid skeletons in short order.

Still the old man had not returned from his mysterious jaunt. I looked at my watch. He had been gone an hour and fifteen minutes. I was beginning to worry a little about his absence, but decided to allow him

his full two hours before taking any action about it.

Back in the bathroom, I found that old Phinny's fingerprints were on the wrappings but not on the sheets of paper. That meant that someone else and not the old man had put those blanks in the package. That left, in this household, the butler, Burleigh Tobian, Guy and Conrad Tobian. Hack Henderson could hardly have placed the blank sheets in there, or he would not have tried so desperately to steal the package in Los Angeles.

Still, a checking would do no harm. The fingerprints of Mr. Henderson might be of value later—and they were easily available. I should have no trouble taking them while he was asleep.

With a smudge pad and slip of white paper I went down the corridor to my room, turned the knob, and pushed in.

I was wholly unprepared for what I saw. I'm sure I dropped the paper and pad, and I know I immediately lost all thoughts of taking Henderson's fingerprints.

He still lay sprawled on his back on my bed, but he was no longer snoring. The bedside lamp was burning and it shed a faint radiance on his form. But my eyes were glued to his face and throat.

His eyes were open, staring, glassy. His mouth was slack and gaping, his head twisted back in a grotesque way. And he lay in a great welter of blood which saturated the bed coverings. He was dead, one glance told me.

His fat throat had been horribly, savagely cut!

The sight of Henderson mutilated, his head nearly severed from his body, rocked me back on my heels. I had had nothing but contempt for the man in life, and there had been a time or two when I could cheerfully have throttled him.

Now I had only sympathy for him, and a determination to solve his murder.

But greater than that, a more savage thought was searing into my brain. He had been killed in my room, while lying on my bed. Hack Henderson, unwillingly had given his life for me. He had been killed by mistake. The murderer had intended his knife for my throat!

It was a gruesome, repugnant thought. But there was a thing or two I could not understand about it, at this moment. Even in semi-darkness, Henderson's short, fat body should not have been mistaken for mine. And the bedside light was burning so that the fat man should easily have been recognized.

This murder would look pretty black against me. I had quarreled with Henderson, had almost struck him in the living room. If I was not to be accused of his murder, I had to move pretty fast to find the real killer. Who could it be? With all the motives hidden, as they were in this affair, theories were hard to develop. And I was not to look for someone with a motive against Henderson—but someone with a motive against myself! It gave the affair a strange and difficult twist.

First I closed the door. Then I turned to look the room over. A window near the bed was open. I stepped across and looked out. The wall of the house was rank with the great climbing, creeping vines. They looked as if they might support a human form, and I decided that this was the way the murderer had entered. It seemed impossible, with me working just a little distance away, in the bathroom, that he could have come and gone by the corridor door without being heard.

It was only a two-story house, so there were no windows above the ones of this room.

I thought over the possible suspects. At the top of the list was

Burleigh Tobian, admitted by old Phinny himself to be a blacksheep and wastrel. There was Conrad, an apparently ineffectual person, shifty, nervous, uncertain; a weakling. And Guy Tobian, the retiring, studious stepson, who had been old Phinny's lieutenant in all his research and study, and seemed to be as immersed in the work as the old man.

Did one of the three brothers have a reason for wanting me out of the way—and Mary also, since she had been threatened and warned? Had one of them struck down Henderson, thinking that the fat man was myself?

Then there was old Winkler, the butler, with his creepy ways and one-eyed peering and sullen silence. And I wasn't forgetting Phineas Hemphill himself who had caused Mary and me to come to this house, and had left us earlier in the night. I peered about the room and wished that the old man had spoken before he had departed.

THEN I saw the knife. It lay on the floor between the bed and the window. Stooping swiftly I picked it up. It was an ordinary kitchen paring knife with a short steel blade which had been whetted to razor sharpness.

This brought back thoughts of the attack on Mary in the El Paso hotel room. Such a knife could have made the wound she received. Was it possible one of the inmates of this house had been in El Paso that night, had known where to find Mary Somerville and myself?

I had been careful in picking up the knife. I wanted to test it for fingerprints. Perhaps the killer had been unwary.

A soft footstep sounded at the door. Shocked suddenly with a realization of the situation I was in, alone in the room with a murdered man, with the murder weapon in my hand, I looked hastily about for a

place to hide the knife. But I was not quick enough.

The door opened inward, and Burleigh Tobian stood in it.

CHAPTER VI

STRANGE FINGERPRINTS



TWISTED, thin-lipped smile was on Tobian's rather handsome, dissipated face, insolence and mockery in his eyes.

"Pardon the liberty, Gunn," he said. "I want to talk to you. What has that old fool Hemphill told you?"

Then he saw the red-stained, bloody knife in my hand. His eyes went involuntarily to the bed. His body stiffened. He walked across, looked down on Hack Henderson's form. He went violently pale for a moment, then the lines on his face deepened, and it became a set and rigid mask as he turned toward me.

"So you murdered him." There was contempt and hatred in his voice. "Because he got drunk and ugly—you couldn't take it. You cut his throat. You'll burn for this, Gunn. I'll see that you do. Hack Henderson was a friend of mine. I'll see that you burn for his murder."

"I won't burn, Tobian," I answered evenly. "I didn't kill him."

Tobian gave a low, mocking laugh. "Caught red-handed—and you say you didn't do it! Give me that knife."

I didn't intend to surrender the knife. If there were fingerprints on it I wasn't going to give Burleigh Tobian a chance to wipe them off.

Passion was in his face. I could see it, raw and flaming. He took two steps toward me.

"Give me the knife, Gunn, you damned dirty killer!"

I got set to give him a quick blow to the jaw. Then I saw the automatic he had taken from his coat pocket. Its bright snub nose was

pointed at my chest. I held the knife out.

"Be careful with it," I said. "There may be fingerprints on it. Don't smear them."

"You bet I won't," he returned savagely. "They'll help put you in the electric chair."

He reached out to snatch the knife; but before he did there was an interruption. A sharp cry from the corridor door. Mary Somerville stood in it, white-faced, wide-eyed, as she stared at us, and beyond us to the corpse on the bed.

Burleigh Tobian half turned toward her, opened his mouth to speak. Then I swung my blow. It came up and took him on the point of the chin. Tobian reeled backward, his feet tangling. He put his hands out in front of him, and the gun slipped from his fingers.

I caught it up.

Tobian leaned against the dresser and looked at me with dazed eyes.

"I'm sorry you had to see all this, Mary," I said. "Henderson has been murdered—and Burleigh Tobian accused me of killing him."

I waved the gun at the man. "Collect yourself," I ordered. "Get to the phone and call the sheriff. Nobody's going to monkey with any of the evidence until the law takes charge."

He went out of the room. I pushed Mary gently into the corridor, then closed the door on the tragedy. Conrad and Guy Tobian came into the hall. They stared at their brother, then looked at me.

"Wh-what happened?" Guy Tobian asked, his eyes widening behind their thick lenses.

"Hack Henderson has been killed. His throat slashed."

Guy Tobian went grey. He seemed suddenly weak, looked around him for a seat and finally sank into a chair against the wall. He mopped his face.

"Hack Henderson!" he moaned. "My God!"

Conrad, the youngest of the Tobian brothers, stared at me, seemed stunned for a moment out of his weak, vacillating ways.

"Wh—who did it?" he asked in his jerky, quivering voice.

"We don't know *yet*," I said. I had a sudden useful idea. "I'm glad you are all here. I'm going to take fingerprints of all of you."

"We're—there are fingerprints at the—at the—in there?" Conrad quavered, pointing at the closed door.

"Undoubtedly."

Retrieving my smudge pad and paper from where I had dropped them in the murder room, I took the fingerprints of the three brothers. Burleigh submitted with a sort of condescension, bluffing, faintly sneering at me; Guy appeared unperturbed, matter-of-fact about it; Conrad seemed jittery, and his hands trembled as he pressed them to paper. I also called up Winkler and took his prints.

I gave Mary the gun I had taken from Burleigh Tobian.

"From now on," I told her, "I want you to be right by me, everywhere you go." I grinned rather weakly at her. "I feel safer about you when I can see you."

I opened the door of her room, went in, crossed to the windows, closed them all, locked them down.

"Whatever you do," I whispered to her, "keep your windows closed when you are alone in your room. Whatever this menace is, I'm sure it comes through the open window. It was so in El Paso. I'm sure it was so in my room here tonight."

But as I turned away from the windows, a sound came from the outside. It came through the night, from out toward the east of the grounds where the close-hovering dark pine trees made a wall of black in the gloom. A familiar sound; I

had heard it once before that night in the El Paso hotel room. And an unnerving one.

It was the pitiful thin wailing cries of children in terror or pain. It was shocking, an obscene thing in the quiet night, and I stopped short in my tracks, listening, and I swear that the short hairs on the back of my neck must have risen like hackles.

Mary said, "Oh!" and grasped my arm.

Then abruptly the cries gurgled off, ceased. The sudden silence was more gruesomely suggestive than the cries themselves.

BURLEIGH TOBIAN was in the open doorway of Mary's room. He grinned mockingly at me.

"Don't let it get you, Gunn," he drawled. "They're harmless enough. It's only Old Hemphill's Capuchins."

"Capuchins?"

"Monkeys. Specimens, you know, in his work. He brought them from South America to study them. They are called weepers—ugly, noisy little devils."

Conrad Tobian was just behind his brother. "Something must be disturbing them. They don't make a noise this time of night unless something bothers them."

"That's right," Guy Tobian said from the hall. "I'll go see about them."

"I'll go along," I told Guy. I was suddenly interested in the monkeys. I had heard a cry like that in El Paso, the night something *furry* had attacked Mary, the night I had seen little beady eyes at the foot of my own bed.

The three of us went out of the house, Mary, Guy Tobian and myself. Tobian led us around flower beds, shrubbery and a sundial, toward the rear. We passed the façade of out-buildings, black in the night.

Over near where the pines ran up

to the grounds was the monkey-house, a small affair, with rather wide-spaced iron bars across the front of it. It was in deep darkness, hushed with a quiet that suggested death, and while Guy was groping for the light switch, I got a strong whiff of that feral scent, that savage body odor which had met my nostrils that night in El Paso.

Then the lights were on and we were staring beyond the bars into the cage.

MARY let out a little shriek of horror. Guy Tobian groaned and muttered an oath under his breath. All of us stared with utter repugnance.

There were three small monkeys huddled pitifully on the floor of the cage. All three of them were dead. Their tiny throats had been savagely cut, their heads nearly severed from their bodies. They were hideous sights, with their wizened dead faces like the faces of old, old women, their little eyes open and staring, their small bodies grotesquely heaped in their own blood on the floor.

I heard Mary give a sob of pity. "It's a wanton outrage," Guy Tobian said in a choked voice. "Innocent little monkeys—never hurt anyone." He looked at me with an appealing gesture. "Who could have done such a thing?"

I shook my head. I was already beginning to form an idea, but I had no intention of divulging it now.

"How long has your stepfather had the monkeys?" I asked.

"About a year and a half. He studied their characteristics a great deal. Originally there were four of them, but one escaped from the cage about five months ago, and we supposed he must have died in the pines. We never found him."

We walked grimly back to the house. Guy Tobian told his brothers what had happened.

"Good riddance," Burleigh said callously. "I despised the dirty little creatures."

Conrad looked sick and distraught about it, while Old Winkler moaned and peered toward the shadows in the hall in his spooky, one-sided way.

My own mind was filled with the horror of its thoughts by then. If I was guessing right, a cold-blooded, unreasoning murder machine was loose on the place, a thing which hid in dark places and was as likely to leap out and strike one person as another. And its strike was death!

I was determined to redouble my vigilance, to keep Mary Somerville always within my sight. I loosened my gun a little in its holster, and I had a constant inclination to look over my shoulder, to peer behind everything I came to.

Removing my trays and other fingerprinting equipment from the bathroom to Hack Henderson's unoccupied room, I beckoned Mary in there with me and locked the door. I set to work, with her watching me with interest. The lights of course were darkened and I had put a ruby globe in one of the sockets in place of the regular one. I carefully took the prints from the blood-stained knife, developed them, and while they were drying turned on the lights.

I could hardly restrain a gasp when I looked at the result. They were like the fingerprints of no human hand which I had ever seen. It was a grotesque and twisted sort of hand, with ridges and whorls that were heavy and thick, more like those on the soles of a foot. But if they were the prints of any hand at all, it was one that was old and creased and crisscrossed with wrinkles.

I did not let Mary see my face as I studied that print. I knew that she could not read into it the things that

I could, and I wanted her spared the thoughts that I was having.

Pushing the film aside, I took out the fingerprints I had taken from Winkler and the three Tobian brothers. Quickly I compared them all with the many sets of prints I had lifted from the wrappings of the special delivery package and its blank sheets of paper. I found old Winkler's prints on the wrappings. Then my eyes snapped. Conrad Tobian's prints were on both the wrappings and the blank sheets!

Undoubtedly Phineas Hemphill might have given Winkler the package to mail for him, which would account for the butler's fingerprints. And undoubtedly if, as old Phinny had claimed, the package had been pilfered and blank sheets substituted, it had been Conrad Tobian, the shifty and uncertain weakling brother who had done it instead of Burleigh whom the old man suspected.

"That's all, Mary," I said grimly. "I've got a few words to say to Conrad Tobian now."

We turned to leave the room, when suddenly Mary grasped my arm and pointed to the floor near the door.

Protruding from the crack under the door was a small white folded slip of paper. How long it had been there, or whether it had just been pushed beneath the door I did not know.

At any rate I leaped to the door, unlocked it, jerked it open and swiftly peered up and down the hall outside. The hall was deserted.

I stopped and picked up the paper, unfolded it. Mary and I read it together. It was hastily written, but in a fine, well formed, old-fashioned script.

Unless you get immediate protection, both yourself and Miss Somerville will be murdered, Mr. Gunn. She is the heiress to the Hemphill estate, and when her identity is proved, its millions will belong to

her instead of Phineas Hemphill and his stepsons.

Mary Somerville, I think, was more astonished than I, for I had already made a vague guess at something of the sort. If the note was true, then Mary must be the granddaughter of old Joseph Hemphill, Phineas Hemphill's cousin, from whom the old professor had inherited all this wealth of oil lands.

MARY was too stunned to know whether to be overjoyed or chagrined. She was simply incredulous. She sank down in a chair.

"I don't believe it—I can't believe it!" she kept saying.

"It must be true," I told her. "Nothing else could account for the vindictive way we were threatened and warned not to leave Los Angeles. Or for that attack on you in El Paso."

"But why would Henderson be murdered?"

"He was killed by mistake in an attempt to get me. The murderer evidently thought I had already been informed of the secret."

"Do you think the killer is—is Burleigh Tobian?"

"I don't know yet. Don't forget it may be Old Phineas himself. He—I hate to say it—he may have had me bring you here so he could put you out of the way. The cashier's checks and the blank sheets of paper may simply have been lures. Old Phinny's mind works in queer ways. And it looks bad, his disappearing almost as soon as we got here. Then Henderson was killed soon after Hemphill disappeared."

She looked shaken and frightened. I caught her hand and pressed it.

"Don't worry. We won't give them the chance—"

She returned my hand pressure firmly, looked up at me.

"I'm glad you're here, Andy." And I felt inordinately proud of that.

CHAPTER VII

THE SAWMILL POND



ONE THING was certain. I intended to find old Phinny as quick as possible, and have this thing out with him. His affirmation or denial of the truth of the note would immediately show where he stood.

Burleigh, Guy and Conrad Tobian sat moodily in the lower hall when we went below. I faced them.

"We're going to find your stepfather," I announced. "It's long past time he had returned. But before we go I want to ask a question or two of you, Conrad."

Conrad's effeminate face went deathly pale, and he blinked his eyes.

"What do you want—to know?"

"Why were your fingerprints on the sheets of paper in that package Hemphill sent to Miss Somerville at Los Angeles?"

The man looked stricken. He tried to speak and couldn't. He gulped twice. Then Burleigh Tobian broke out in a loud harsh laugh.

"My dear, innocent brother!" he mocked. "Too shy and diffident to touch anything—yet he purloined the pa-a-per-r-fs!"

Conrad turned a tortured face on his eldest brother. Then he looked back at me. "I—I—why, my stepfather gave me some sheets to wrap for—mailing." He jerked out. "I—didn't know what was on them."

Burleigh guffawed again. "That's a good one, Conrad dear," he taunted. "Imagine old Hemphill ever asking you to turn your hand to do anything—much less anything important!"

"It's really true," Conrad insisted.

I dismissed the matter. Conrad's guilt concerning the package was in his face.

"All right. We've got to find Hemphill. He didn't say where he was

going when he left, but he drove toward town. One of you will go with Miss Somerville and me. The other two stay here to wait for the sheriff."

Conrad volunteered to go, in his uncertain way. Burleigh offered his car which was in the garage, he said.

Burleigh's car was a big coupé and Conrad Tobian drove.

We followed the winding graveled road through the pines.

A mile and a half from the Hemphill house our headlamps picked up the bulk of a car parked beside the road. "It's the old man's car," Conrad said hesitantly.

We pulled cautiously up beside it. I had my hand on the butt of my gun. I got out and peered in through the car windows. There was no one in it.

With a flashlight then I began looking about on the ground around the car. This told me nothing.

"There's an old abandoned sawmill just back in the pines from the road," Conrad Tobian said. "It's been a favorite place of the old man's lately. He's had something on his mind, and he's been going in there to sit on the bank of the pond and brood."

The weeds on the edge of the road were disturbed, as if someone had trampled on them. Conrad took the flashlight and led the way. There was the barest path through the tall, close-growing pines. A hundred odd yards from the road we came onto a ragged clearing, half in the shadow of trees, half in grey moonlight. We saw the low, tumbled, sway-backed black building with its sagging boiler at one end.

The mill-pond was beyond the building, a serpentine little stretch of still, stagnant water. Black shadow lying across one end of it made it like a dark, evil mirror, but barely disturbed by skittering insects. Its edges were rank with reeds.

Flashlighting our way we started a search of the bank. We called Hemphill. Our voices came back hollowly to us from the pines.

Then the glow of the flashlight struck something right at the pond's edge. It was a white face beneath the inert surface of the water. I stopped still and directed the light full upon it. It was old Phinny's face, old Phinny's thin form down there, one scrawny, clawlike hand projecting above the surface.

I tried to shield the sight from Mary, but she had already seen. She recoiled with a shudder. But she was a brave girl. The next moment she had recovered, and she stood and held the light while with Conrad's halting, mincing help, I pulled the body, dripping, onto the bank.

Close down over it, I examined the corpse carefully with the light. There was no sign of a wound on it.

"I—I've been having my doubts about the old man," Conrad's fitful voice said. "Been acting queer. Must have fallen in—and drowned—or else killed himself."

Breaking off a long reed, I measured the depth of the pond at that point.

"It wasn't an accident and he didn't kill himself," I stated. "A man can hardly drown by himself in a foot and a half of water. He was murdered, probably held under until he drowned."

We left the body there for the local coroner. Our drive back to the Hemphill's place was a grim and foreboding journey. I was filled with graver apprehension than at any time during the harrowing night. Soon the officers for whom Burleigh had phoned would be arriving. The murderer would move fast now, if he hoped to put Mary Somerville and me out of the way before the secret of the girl's identity and her inheritance rights became publicly known.

And I watched Conrad Tobian, not

forgetting that he had the same motive as his brothers, that apparently weak and vacillating as he was he might be the man behind these crimes. But he kept his eyes on the road, his white, rather effeminate face set and tragic.

In the lower hall of the Hemphill house, Burleigh and Guy Tobian still lounged, while old Winkler stood in the background, peering at us as we arrived, stretching his thin neck.

Mary was white and trembling.

"I—I think I must go to my room for a little while," she whispered. "Seems like I can't stand any more right now."

"Don't any of you leave this hallway," I said to the four men, and left Conrad to tell of his stepfather's death while I went up with Mary to her room.

Opening the door, I turned on the lights and looked the room over. Nothing appeared suspicious. Her windows were still closed. Nothing was in the closet or the bathroom adjoining. There was no other means of entrance except the corridor door.

I CAUGHT each of her shoulders, held them firmly, looked down into her face.

"I want you to be safe, Mary. Keep your door locked. Open it for no one except me, and wait for me to speak."

I left her then, went back down into the hall. I faced the four men there. All, even the butler, were suspects in this hideous murder game that was being played. For with Mary out of the way, the three brothers stood to inherit the Hemphill millions. And no doubt Winkler, old Phinny's faithful servant for years, was included in whatever will the old professor had made.

"One of you is twice a murderer tonight, and more than twice an attempted murderer before tonight," I accused grimly. "But your little

game, this farce, is over. I know that Mary Somerville is the missing heir to the Hemphill oil wealth. I'm calling into town now to give that information to the news press service, putting it on the wire, so that it will be blazed across the pages of twenty newspapers in the morning. It will do you no good to kill now. Your secret will be exposed."

My gun was in my fist, and I held it so that it took them all in. I watched their faces, but if there was anything but surprise in them I could not read it at that moment. I moved to the hall telephone, watching them, took down the receiver.

I JIGGLED the receiver half a dozen times. There was no responding click, no hum of the wires. The telephone was dead. The murderer, then, had apprehended my very move and had cut the wires. That meant he was more determined than ever to go through with his plot.

Burleigh Tobian laughed harshly as I turned back from the phone.

"Nice little grandstand play, Gunn—that fizzled out!"

"Nevertheless," I gritted, "the murderer is checked. In a few minutes at best the sheriff will be here. If one of you tries to leave this hallway before he comes, I'll shoot to kill. I'm holding the cards now."

Burleigh Tobian opened his mouth for a rejoinder. But he never spoke, and the next second I had forgotten these men here in the hall, forgotten that I held a gun on them, forgotten everything except that Mary was alone in her room upstairs.

For her hysterical and terrified shriek had come down the big stairs, hung quivering and vibrant with fear in the hushed air, then ceased abruptly as two shots rang out.

I was halfway up the stairs in leaping strides.

Probably under ordinary circumstances I could never have done the

thing, but in the heat of my excitement and apprehension for Mary it was easy. I hardly knew I did it. Without slowing I lunged against that locked door and smashed it open as if its steel lock had been pewter.

I brought up short on my heels, the others right behind me.

The lights were on, Mary stood in the middle of the room, her eyes wild and terrified, her face a beautiful tragic mask. She was swaying, the back of one hand against her mouth, while in the other limply hanging one was her still smoking gun, the one I had taken from Burleigh Tobian and given her. She seemed transfixed with horror.

Relief came swiftly into her face when she saw us in the door.

"It—it was the thing again," she cried, her voice breaking with hysteria. "The small hairy thing, just like in El Paso. I was lying across the bed when it leaped on me—tried—to—to cut my throat. I grabbed the gun and fired—must have frightened it."

I caught her shoulders, shook her gently, for she was on the verge of a faint.

"Mary! What was it?"

"I—I don't know. Barely saw it. It's in there now—hiding—"

She was pointing toward the half open closet. In two strides I was across, probing among the hanging clothes with my gun, peering into the shadowy recess. Something stirred back in the dark corner, something small that whimpered.

I cursed myself for a blundering fool. Forewarned, I had looked over this room, then allowed Mary to enter it with this thing hidden in it. Yet who would have looked for a murderer no larger than a good-sized house dog? The thing could have been hidden easily.

I closed the closet door.

Moving across to the bed, I looked around it, saw the red-stained knife

that lay on the floor near the foot of it; the knife that had so nearly been put to Mary Somerville's throat. I picked it up, glanced at it. The stains were nearly dry.

Burleigh and Guy Tobian were at the corridor door, old Winkler behind them, looking in with his side-long glance. I kept my gun in my hand. "Come in, all of you!" I ordered. "It is the showdown. I think I can now name the murderer."

They moved into the room; Guy grave, studious, reserved, behind his thick glasses; Burleigh still bluffing, still a little mocking, but now evidently frightened; Winkler staring at me like a poised bird.

I moved to the door, called Conrad from where he had sunk into a chair down the hallway.

"I—I—the shock," he said, almost groveling in his manner. "Could not stand any more of—it."

CHAPTER VIII

A WOMAN'S SOLUTION



CONRAD TOBIAN was actually ill, craven with fear. His characterless face was the color of wet ashes. Perspiration was on his thin lips, on his forehead. He shuffled hesitantly into the room and I closed the door. I lined them all against the wall on the opposite side from the closet.

"We might as well understand each other," I said harshly, gesturing with my gun. "If one of you makes the least suspicious move I will kill you. I can take no chances. I am dealing with the coldest-blooded murderer I have ever heard of."

Someone cleared his throat with a hoarse sound.

"One of you has trained a small, innocent animal to commit murder at your bidding. The little Capuchin monkey that you all supposed had

escaped from its cage did not escape and die in the woods. It was taken from its cage, hidden out, and trained by one of you to slit the throats of live things—with knives like this!" I held out the red-smearred knife I had taken from the floor.

"It was a fiendish and shrewd plot. A monkey could enter through a window or other small aperture impossible for a man. And the real murderer did not have to be on the scene. But it had a grave flaw. Once freed, with the knife in its paw, the monkey became a killing automaton, out of control. He may kill victims the murderer never intends he should. And now, in the end, I think he will betray his master to us!"

I kept my gun alertly on them, watching all four of them. They were still as statues and their faces told me nothing new.

"But before that," I said, "I want to show you that I have the angles on the whole case. The plot is checked and no move will help the murderer now."

"Get on with it," Burleigh Tobian growled.

"Okay! It's obvious that Mary Somerville is the missing heir to Joseph Hemphill's rich estate. That Phineas Hemphill, in trying to reinstate her, has had to work against the connivance of all three of you—his stepsons. All three of you, and maybe Winkler, have plotted to prevent her from claiming her inheritance. But one of you entertained the idea of murder as the perfect preventative. He conceived the fiendish plan of training a monkey to kill.

"One of you, likely Burleigh, sent his good friend and tough guy, Hack Henderson, to Los Angeles to try to bluff or frighten Mary and me from coming to Pineville. All of you distrusted the others, each keeping his scheme secret from your brothers. Conrad pilfered the package that old

Phinny sent Mary, but didn't dare send no package at all, so inserted blank sheets of paper. Hack Henderson thought he was stealing the real goods when he slugged the postman. Then he wired back when and how we were coming to Pineville.

"One of you, with murder in your heart, hurried to El Paso, with the little killer monkey hidden in his baggage. He located us registered in the hotel. He managed for a room just over us, where the monkey, each time armed with a knife, was let down on a leash—first to try my window, and then Mary's.

"These attempts failed and the killer must have been desperate. He reasoned that as soon as we reached Pineville the secret would be out, and it would be too late to kill then.

"But by a miracle old Phinny did not tell us at once but started to town, undoubtedly with the intention of waking the cashier of the bank there and getting his evidence from his lock-box. He had to be stopped. The murderer followed him, or hid and rode in the car with him. At the old sawmill he killed Hemphill, simply by holding his head under water until he drowned. This killing, looking like an accident or suicide, not only sealed the old man's lips, but would enable the killer to inherit at once.

"Returning to the house, the murderer next plotted to get me out of the way, for he thought I already knew the secret of Mary's identity.

"Again he gave the monkey a knife and let it out on its leash, through a window from which it could climb the vines to my room. But Hack Henderson had pre-empted my room—and he died in my place. It must have been a terrific shock for the murderer when he first saw me alive after that!"

I think every one of them there, from the three Tobians to old Winkler, were spellbound by what I was saying.

"After that the monkey broke loose from his leash and went on a rampage with his sharp little knife. Trained to expect applause when it killed some live thing, it went to the cage of its companions and gleefully slit their throats after coaxing them to the bars.

"But its master recaptured it before the monkey betrayed him or committed other depredations. The little animal was hidden right here in Mary's room, again with a knife in its paw. Mary has escaped from its murderous attack, thank God! But the monkey is still here."

Moving backward toward the closet door, I felt for the knob with my hand that still held the knife.

"And now"—I was almost shouting in my wrath and excitement—"I am depending on that little animal to tell me which of you hatched and executed that diabolical scheme!"

I turned the knob and opened the door.

SOMETHING whimpered back there, a troubled murmur in a minor key, but nothing came forth. I reached farther back and shook the clothing hanging from the racks.

The small terrified live thing shot out of the closet door, bounding past my legs like something fired from a sling-shot. It struck the floor, leaped again, to the dresser, to the foot of the bed. It bounced here, there, all about the room. It went under the bed, came out, all the time giving forth a pleading, childlike cry.

At last it leaped upon the chain supporting the chandelier and clung there, frightened, palpitating, alternately covering its small, ugly face with a paw and blinking at us with frightened little eyes. Its forepaws were stained with blood, the blood of fat Hack Henderson and three little Capuchins it had so wantonly murdered.

"All right, Conrad," I demanded, "what is its name? What do you call it?"

Conrad gulped hard.

"His name is—Pedro."

I looked at Burleigh. "Call him," I ordered. "Call him 'Pedro'—coax him!"

Burleigh stared at me with black stubbornness in his face. I gestured grimly with my gun.

"Pedro," Burleigh said thickly. "Come, Pedro, come, come!"

The little monkey blinked at Burleigh, but clung to his perch.

Then at my orders, Conrad, and then Winkler spoke to the monkey. It hung onto the chandelier chain, looking at them with blinking, distrustful, glittering little eyes.

"All right, Guy!" I commanded, levelling my gun.

Guy Tobian threw back his lean, ascetic face, and gave a short laugh, a discordant, mirthless sound in that tension-charged room. The lights danced on his thick glasses.

"All right, I'll call him, Gunn!" he said loudly, with a taint of madness in his voice. "Why shouldn't I call him? He's mine, I trained him. It was easy. I knew monkeys. I had studied with my stepfather, been on research expeditions with him. Look! See what happens when I call him!"

He snapped his fingers.

"Here, Pedro!" he called.

CHAPTER IX

THE MASTER'S VOICE



THE monkey gave a small, pleased cry and scrambled down from his perch. It bounced from the bed to the dresser, from that to Guy Tobian's arm and scrambled up on his shoulders where it made happy little murmuring sounds.

But in the moment that I had had my eyes on the monkey, something

happened. Guy had reached back and taken a gun from under his coat, firing as it appeared. I saw the streak of flame, felt something white-hot bore into my forearm, felt it go numb and frozen, and dazedly saw my gun slip from my fingers.

Guy's short laugh sounded again. "I took the precaution to arm myself before coming into this room, Gunn. You are not watchful enough, my dear fellow. And now, why should I not go ahead with my plan?"

He moved his gun so that it played on Mary Somerville. I was groggily trying to bring the scene back into focus before my eyes.

"My dear brothers are too craven, I'm sure, to kill for what they want. But they would be eager to cover up my killings—with the rewards so great. The multi-million-dollar Hemphill estate! As for old Winkler, who would come in for a good share by Hemphill's will, he could either be a loyal servant—or a dead one!"

He laughed again and his voice had sunk to a silky, deadly monotone. Every person there was white-faced and rigid—except Guy. The blood had rushed into his sallow cheeks, suffusing them. His eyes glittered weirdly behind his glasses. His mouth was twisted and triumphant. The monkey on his shoulders chattered happily, blinking, glancing around the room.

"There is but little time. The officers will soon be here. So before then I must proceed to eliminate the missing heiress to the Hemphill estate—and the one other hostile person who knows the secret. As for all the evidence that old Phinny so carefully and so secretly gathered, it is still in his private lock-box in the bank in town. It will be delivered unopened to his heirs—and very thoroughly destroyed. There is no time, then, like now, no place like here!"

He raised his gun and aimed it at Mary Somerville.

Shock and horror constricted my throat. No one spoke, could speak, except old Winkler, who blurted in a horrified voice: "But—but, Mr. Guy, this is an awful thing!"

For an instant Guy Tobian turned and glanced sneeringly at the old servant. And in that instant my senses came suddenly back to me. I took a desperate chance. I flicked the knife, which I still held, forgotten, in my left hand. It went across the room like a tiny beam of light, and its point stuck into the wall, perhaps a foot above Guy's head.

So quick had it happened that I think Guy Tobian did not notice it. But the little monkey noticed, saw the knife in the wall there within its reach. A look of gleeful and malicious mischief came into its little face. It reached up swiftly, wrapped its small paw about the handle, and jerked the knife free. Then it looked brightly about as if expecting applause, reached down and sank the short sharp blade into Guy Tobian's throat, ripping it horribly.

Guy had started to speak again, but his mocking, triumphant words died with an awful gurgle in his throat. He turned slowly about, the gun in his hand sinking, while great gouts of blood splashed out over his chest. He stared blindly at us all as his knees gave way. Then he doubled up and fell forward on the floor.

The tension broke with a babble of voices and a small bedlam. But all I knew was that Mary had rushed across and thrown her arms about my neck, pulling me tightly against her as she wept convulsively, but with relief, against my shoulder. And I held her still tighter with my one good arm while the other, though bullet-pierced, dangled forgotten at my side.

The next day I lay upstairs in bed, my arm dressed and bandaged,

with Mary acting as an efficient nurse.

"But who," she asked, "slipped that note under the door to us?"

I grinned. "I'll bet Winkler could tell you all about that. He was loyal to old Phinny but afraid of the brothers. He wanted us to know our danger, but was afraid to be seen talking to us."

The packet of evidence from Phineas Hemphill's lock-box in the Pineville bank was turned over to Mary that afternoon. While the sheriff, coroner and county detectives were going through the house in their investigation, Mary and I examined the packet together.

THE papers proved Mary was the granddaughter of Joseph Hemphill, who had bought and built up the big estate.

Joseph Hemphill had been a domineering old man. Twenty-five years ago his daughter, Mary Hemphill, had married a man to whom he had objected. He vented his wrath on her and tried to break up their marriage. They fled from his persecution to California; they changed their name to Somerville to keep him from tracing them.

When Joseph Hemphill later repented and wanted his daughter and her husband back, he could find no trace of them. He had hunted desperately for them through the years, until he had died seven years ago. He never knew that they had been killed in a train wreck and their baby daughter reared in an asylum.

The estate went to his next of kin—a cousin, Phineas Hemphill. But on his deathbed Joseph had charged old Phinny with finding his daughter or her heirs, so they could inherit what was rightly theirs. Thus the Hemphill estate would not have become Phineas Hemphill's in clear title until seven years had passed.

Old Phinny had been loyal to his

trust. He carried on an intensive search through detective agencies. But it was a secret search, for he distrusted all three of his stepsons, and he feared Burleigh, who had always been a scapegrace and black sheep. He did not know what might happen to the heir, his posthumous message said, if Burleigh should learn her identity before her claim could be proved.

When Mary Somerville had been located by old Phinny's detectives, and full proof was ready that she was the rightful heir, the problem of getting her safely to Pineville came up. Then he had remembered me and my service in the F.B.I. He had written me and entrusted me with bringing her from Los Angeles.

All proof necessary to establishing Mary's claim was in the packet. Photographs, old newspaper clippings, addresses, Mary's baby fingerprints taken in the hospital where she was born, and those taken when she had entered the orphans' home. It was conclusive. "It will stand up in any court," I told her.

But something else was on my mind. And I had to get it off my chest.

"You're all set," I said, "and tomorrow I'll pack my bag and be pulling out of here."

She turned on me with a kind of

shock in her eyes. "But, Andy, I thought you and I—"

"And you'd have been right, honey. But that *was*—and this *is*. I had meant to ask you to marry me. What kind of a heel would I be, when I barely make enough to buy coffee and sinkers for myself, figuring myself as fit for you with your millions?"

She laughed but I didn't. She saw I meant every word.

"You wouldn't leave me when I need you so badly as a lawyer to establish all my claims and manage the legal difficulties of the estate, would you?"

"No, but that—"

"And you don't think I'd be a cheap skate about your pay, do you?"

"Well, I—"

"Your pay will be half of the estate. When you're making all that money you'll surely be in position to marry me."

"Mary, that's not—"

"And you'd certainly be an old tightwad not to hire a corps of assistants to do the work. Then we could take a cruise to Honolulu. I have always dreamed of spending my honeymoon in Honolulu!"

I could think of no argument against that. Perhaps it was because I didn't want to!

Next Month: THE BLIND SEE BEST, a Novel by MARIAN SCOTT

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DEATH'S UNDERSTUDY

By OWEN FOX JEROME

Author of "Doubling for Death," "The Golf Club Murder," etc.

THAT grim old hag men call Fate sometimes will display an ironic sense of humor and hand out a wallop with the kick of a Missouri mule. When she does, it makes things easier for the police department. Take the Golden Pheasant murders, for example. Let's get it straight as quickly as we can—the police never did.

The Golden Pheasant was a swanky night club that cost plenty of jack to decorate, equip, staff, and open. A small community could have existed nicely on the rent alone. Mark Thornton, Wall Street angel, financed the project because Beatrice Bond

could sing and wanted her name up in electric lights.

From the first, the club clicked and was popular. The tabloid columnists said it was successful. Maybe it was. That's a matter of relativity. Anyway, the place got the patronage, and customers came back. But the overhead was too high for the gross take to make any money unless they made a clip joint of it. That eventually, would have been fatal. So Mark Thornton ponied up about a thousand bucks a month to meet the deficit, and things went along swimmingly for all concerned—until Tony Jarde started playing the club.

Jardo was what might be called a political racketeer. He had never been identified with the gangster element during prohibition, but he was a recognized power in that unsavory morass of American life known as politics. He was the streamlined, twentieth century model of the old ward heeler. He made and broke political puppets, trafficked in public careers, and sold juicy plums.

Beatrice Bond was a buxom, deep-breasted blonde whose vivid, sensuous lips and husky contralto voice made men look twice. Tony Jardo looked three times. And one morning a scrubwoman found Mark Thornton shot to death in the dressing room in the basement. The Homicide Bureau raised hell and the tabloids raised a big stink, but the job was never pinned on anybody. Jardo found himself promoted to the position of angel; he exerted his political influence, and the uproar gradually died away. It meant an extra thousand berries per month, but Beatrice was worth it, and Jardo never whimpered.

THE husky-throated blues singer thought it a pretty good arrangement, too. Thornton had been past sixty; Jardo was only forty. But she made the mistake of falling in love with Tony Jardo. In a way, that was understandable. Jardo wasn't such a bad-looking egg; he was tall, dark, with a strong and rugged face that was just sinister enough to hold the attention. He had a smattering of culture, a veneer of polish, and he fancied himself as a gifted amateur actor. Occasionally, at informal parties, he did character bits or classical sketches which, in his opinion, laid the great actors of the day in cold storage.

At one of the parties, scrambled in haphazard fashion as many Manhattan parties are, a phrenologist got mixed up with the alcoholic cel-

ebrants. His name was Gaylord, not that it makes any difference. Gaylord's own bump of humor was practically an abyss. He was so serious and literal about everything that he was screamingly funny without being aware of it. Or maybe it was the liquor.

Before the neighbors reached the point of pounding on the walls or calling the police, Gaylord was prevailed upon to give a few skull readings. His findings, good or bad, were received with roars of mirth and *risqué* comments to the subject whose head was under his probing, questing fingers. In turn Tony Jardo submitted to an analysis. He had just rendered a couple of famous soliloquies from Shakespeare and was quite prepared to be found a Mansfield in hiding.

Gaylord's searching fingers brought only general characteristics to light, and there was no levity. The phrenologist did not mark this significance. When he had just about finished exploring Jardo's cranium without revealing any startling facts, Beatrice Bond cast a flattering glance at her man and sought to evoke the statement that she knew he wanted to hear.

"Just what great profession is Mr. Jardo really fitted for, Professor?" she asked in her husky voice which set men to dreaming of tropic moons, surf on the beach, and Hawaiian music. "What is his most artistic talent?"

Gaylord, to whom Jardo was just an odd name for a man met on a drunken party, considered this question thoughtfully. He ran his fingers over the Jardo pate once more. Then, in perfect seriousness:

"I think he would have made an excellent butcher," he announced.

There's one more factor to be taken into consideration before we steam up to the blow-off. While content to be an angel, Tony Jardo was

no fool. When the management of the Golden Pheasant saw a chance to pep up the receipts by the added attraction of such a drawing card as Philip Forsythe, Jardo endorsed the idea.

Forsythe was the actor Jardo secretly flattered himself to be. A veteran of the stage and a consummate artist, Philip Forsythe, alone, meant crowded tables. The actor was about Jardo's age, the same height, and build, and general contour of head and shoulders. When you've said this you've covered it all except one little point. Forsythe, too, fell for Beatrice Bond. And he damned near got her. All he lacked was the bank account.

"There is something elemental about you, Beatrice," he told her one night, "that draws a man like honey draws a wasp. It isn't physical, although it may have its origin there, but it's an inner flame—perhaps the refined lance of animal magnetism from which all the dross has been burned away. I don't know. I only know that you are in my blood like a fever. You run riot in my brain. I crave you like a perishing man on the desert thirsts for water."

Beatrice ate up this kind of wooing. With his background of eloquence and command of language, Forsythe had a fire that Jardo lacked. But he was too piercing in his perception; at times he frightened her with his analyses. And he was a hundred percent correct about the elemental angle. Beatrice had never got past the premise of self-preservation. So she weighed matters carefully and stuck to Jardo. With his predatory nature, he was more on her primitive level anyhow. And Beatrice was smart enough to realize that she couldn't have them both.

However, being led on to a certain point, the place where he began to make a nuisance of himself, and

then being denied, didn't set so well with Philip Forsythe. In the theater his word may have been a sham, but in real life he played marbles for keeps. His allusion to honey and wasps was an insight into his character that Beatrice would have done well to have remembered.

Inevitably the two men clashed. When they did, they made a good job of it; they damned near tore a wing off the Golden Pheasant. It happened the evening just before the last performance when Tony Jardo caught Forsythe and Beatrice locked in an impassioned embrace. Whether or not Beatrice enjoyed the thrill is beside the point. She got plenty of thrill when Jardo barged in, growling like a wounded beast, to jerk the actor around and land a sock on his face.

FORSYTHE staggered against the mirrored wall, upset a potted palm, and cracked one of the mirror panels with his elbow. The blow smeared his face so badly that there was no midnight show featuring his Chinese mandarin act. But the fight which now ensued gave the customers their money's worth.

Forsythe came out of that dining alcove like a whirlwind. Had the phrenologist examined his head, he would surely have said that here was a first-rate pugilist buried behind a mummer's mask. Whatever else besides an accomplished actor he may have been, Philip Forsythe was no coward. He gave Tony Jardo a very bad five minutes. Beatrice Bond, her hands clutching her own throat, enjoyed the vicarious thrill of seeing two snarling male animals fight over her questionable favors. Before Jardo managed to subdue the actor, both of the combatants were battered and bleeding and half naked. And the adjacent area was a wreck.

"Now, damn you!" grated Jardo, as a bevy of waiters lifted his van-

quished enemy and carried him to the dressing rooms downstairs. "You keep away from Beatrice Bond or I'll beat your head off."

"You," mumbled Forsythe painfully through thick lips, "are a ham at everything you do."

Of course the affair was hushed up, but it was grapevined around, and for three weeks the Golden Pheasant had to turn the crowds away. When his face returned to normal, Forsythe went on with his work quite as though nothing had happened. Jardo took to spending the whole of every evening at the night club, sitting at his accustomed table and glowering at the actor. Beatrice basked in the spotlight of undercover publicity. A heartless jade.

What is that crack about experience being a dear teacher? Anyway, that's one that the otherwise erudite Forsythe never learned. His pursuit of the blues singer became positively hectic. Frustration often has that effect on a determined man. And Jardo couldn't watch the both of them every minute. But he needn't have worried about the faithfulness of Beatrice. That woman had already cast her vote. Jardo was the favorite; he had money, and he had already killed once for her.

BUT Forsythe put the pressure on, and it was Beatrice who buckled first. She had to appeal to Jardo. That night, after the midnight show, Jardo cornered Forsythe. Beatrice and a retinue of waiters fluttered anxiously in the background. But there were no fireworks.

"Get your hat and coat, Forsythe," said Jardo grimly. "Come along. I want to talk to you."

"And I rather think it's time I discussed a few points with you," the actor agreed.

They left the Golden Pheasant together. That was the last anybody

saw of them until Tony Jardo came back, at five o'clock in the morning to take Beatrice home. Forsythe, he said, had promised to lay off his love making, and had gone home.

When Jardo left Beatrice at the door of her hotel, it was the last anyone connected with the nightclub saw of him. The tabloids hit the streets the next afternoon, and this time the newspapers blew the lid off:

MURDERER OF JARDO SOUGHT BY POLICE

Anthony Jardo, political leader and economics expert, was found dead in his apartment at noon today by his Filipino manservant. The Park Avenue apartment was a shambles, indicating that a terrific battle was fought between Jardo and his assailant. The victim was shot twice through the heart by a weapon of .32 caliber, according to the ballistics experts. The gun was not found.

The Filipino, coming to work at noon, discovered his master in his dressing gown on the bedroom floor, his head under the foot of the bed. The features were practically beaten to a pulp and then hacked at by some sort of knife. This is obviously the crime of a sadistic burglar. The Homicide Bureau is investigating the life of Jardo for possible clues and motives.

The police—

What the police thought is irrelevant. They didn't think, but they were, as usual, expecting an arrest within twenty-four hours. What the columnists thought is more pertinent. They pointed out the fact that it seemed to be fatal to be an angel for the Golden Pheasant.

And the police annoyed the hell out of the management and staff of the night club without getting anywhere. Nobody knew much about Tony Jardo. Philip Forsythe hadn't been located yet, but he was in the clear by Jardo's own statement at five o'clock in the morning. The police said they would come back to interview Forsythe at midnight.

Beatrice Bond, a frozen icicle on the outside, a raging volcano within, was in her dressing room getting ready for her "Lady in Red" number when she became aware of slight

sounds in Forsythe's room next to her. It didn't make any difference to her what Jardo had said and what Forsythe might say. In her heart she knew Forsythe had killed his rival.

She became suddenly tense and rigid. While she listened, she gripped the edge of her dressing table, and stared at her own reflection with burning eyes. Intimate little sounds that would have been meaningless to the laity told her that the actor had come to his dressing room and was going about the business of making up for his mandarin character.

Beatrice Bond got to her feet, her face as hard and white as a death mask. How, in Heaven's name, could a man, after committing a murder, come quietly to work just as though nothing had happened?

With fingers that trembled, she swiftly took a tiny automatic from her handbag and went to the door of her room. Her knees were shaky at first, but by the time she was in the dimly lighted, narrow corridor, she walked with the resolution of a Minerva. Under her hand, the door to Forsythe's little cubicle opened noiselessly, letting in a little light from the angle of the steps which led up to the stage.

Seated at his dressing table with his red-rimmed, yellow robe about him, holding a mirror in his left hand, sat the actor calmly applying a black grease pencil to his eyebrow. He was almost entirely made up. When he whirled around at her entrance, she saw the drooping Chinese mustache on one side of his face. On the stand was a newspaper with screaming headlines, and a pearl-handled .32 revolver lay on top, the barrel pointing at the word "Murderer."

"Forsythe!" Beatrice hissed, her voice almost inarticulate with fury. "Damn you for a rat! You killed my man!"

And as he opened his lips to protest, she pulled the trigger of her deadly little weapon once—twice—three times!

THE man uttered a choking cry as he dropped his hand mirror, bent over to claw at his chest, and toppled to the floor. He came to rest with the left side of his face uppermost at his slayer's feet. There was practically no make-up on this side of his face. As her mad gaze focused on him, Beatrice stared in fascination. She bent over and closely examined the dead actor's face. And suddenly she screamed.

This was not Philip Forsythe. It was Tony Jardo!

Forsythe's had been the mutilated body, the butchered body found in Jardo's apartment and identified as Jardo by the Filipino servant. After killing the actor, Jardo had appeared publicly to take Beatrice home and had cleared the actor of suspicion of his death. Then he had craftily assumed the identity of the dead man, leaving the murder of Jardo an unexplained mystery for the police to worry about.

Crazy! Of course. But Jardo was a little mad. He was in a jam and had to think fast. He had always wanted to be an actor, and this was a perfect out as he saw it. What he intended to do eventually, nobody would ever know now. But he had made a bad mistake by not taking Beatrice Bond into his confidence.

As for Beatrice, she had Annie Oakleyed her own meal ticket. And that grim hag called Fate must have been choking on her laughter.

* * * * *

How do I know all about it when the police couldn't figure it out? I ought to know. I'm Beatrice Bond. After I shot Tony Jardo they gave me the rest of my life to think it over.

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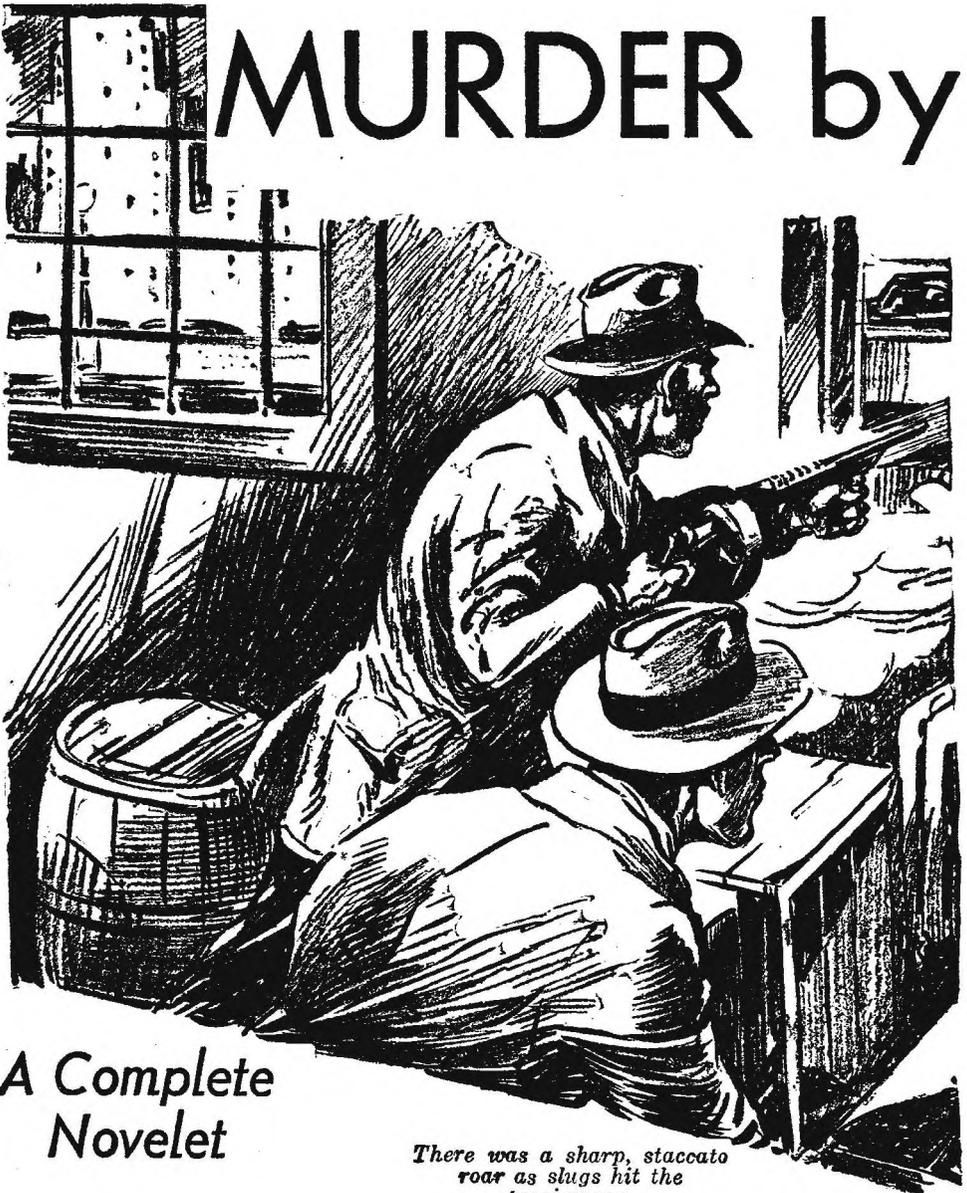
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There was a sharp, staccato roar as slugs hit the touring car

CHAPTER I

DEATH ON THE SPEEDWAY

THEY were three hard babies.

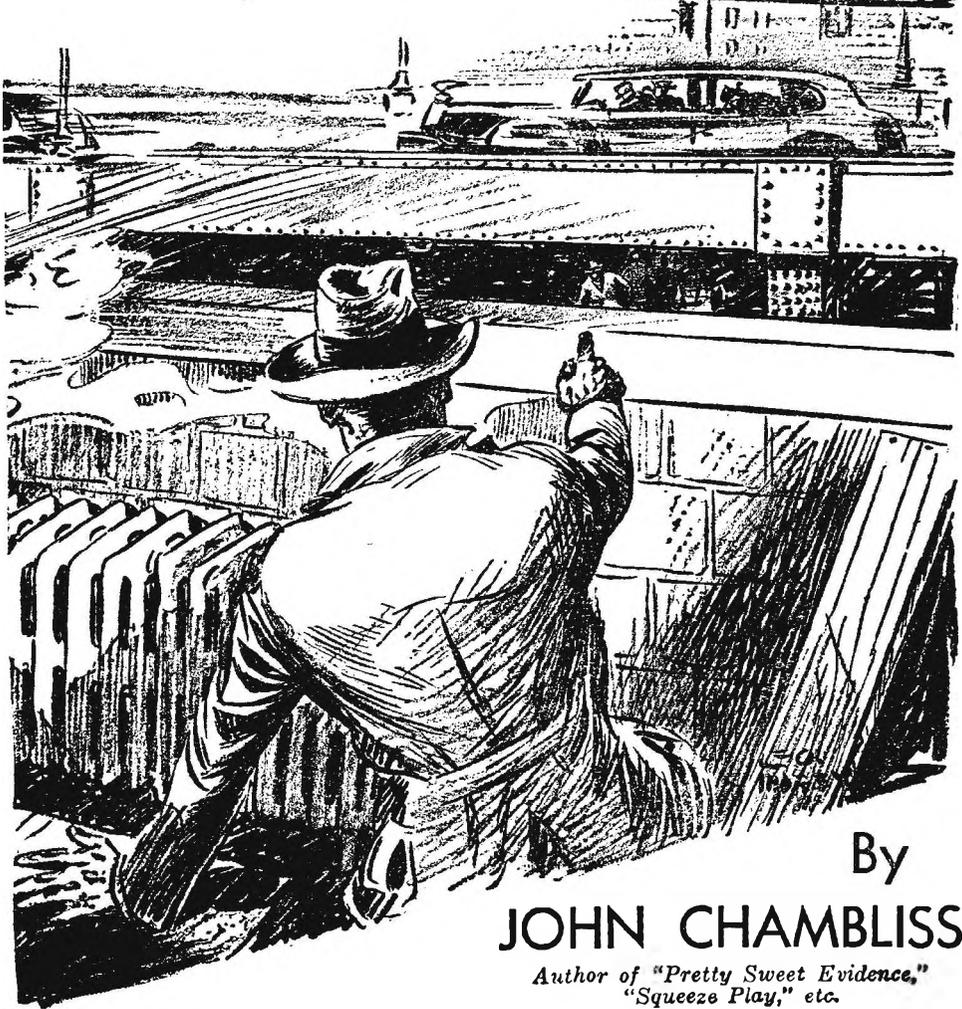
Anyone could tell that from a glance at the car as it passed down Morton Street. Any-

one who watched them get out of the car around the corner on West Street, where it parked before a vacant warehouse, would have been quite certain.

There is something about young gunmen that advertises their trade. Older men, veterans in crime, may

Crime and Treachery Confront a Private

REQUEST



By
JOHN CHAMBLISS

*Author of "Pretty Sweet Evidence,"
"Squeeze Play," etc.*

acquire the stolidity of ordinary citizens.

Young criminals wear plaster posters.

They stood on the sidewalk while the car was being locked. It was a new, shiny, dark green job. In wedge formation they went from

the curb to the door of the warehouse.

They were almost unnoticed. There are not many pedestrians on West Street at any time, not even at five o'clock in the evening. And West Street isn't really a street. There is only one sidewalk—on the

Dick in a Wrestling Match with Death!

east side—and only one set of “street” buildings. The street itself is three times the breadth of an ordinary one, and its middle one-third is darkened by the elevated vehicular highway. Beyond that lie pier sheds, the Hudson River.

The three hard babies entered the warehouse door after one of them had unlocked it. They closed it behind them and went in single-file up a flight of dusty stairs.

The place was gloomy, but made alive by the hodge-podge of traffic without—trucks on West Street, a shining river of passenger cars on the elevated highway. It was a warm, balmy June evening, though the interior of the vacant warehouse did not respond to it.

At the top of three flights, the young men entered a front room. They had been chatting and laughing among themselves, mostly about a large flower box which one of them carried. He laid it down on the floor.

“Heavy son of a gun,” he said, and then walked over to the window.

The others stood in the doorway and watched him. Stooping, his hands anchored on his hips, he gazed out at the railing of the speedway, thirty yards or so away and slightly below the level of his face.

The deep continuous sound of northbound traffic nearest him was like a deep humming siren in the room. He spoke without turning.

“This ain’t gonna be no pipe. It’s a good thing I went to Plattsburg one summer.”

“What’d I tell you, Ed?” one of those in the doorway said, grinning widely. “It’s your party. Good thing that railing is as low as it is.”

Ed snorted. He returned to the flower box and broke a cord. Lifting out a deadly-looking submachine

gun, he began giving it a careful once-over.

“Whatsa time?” asked the one who had not spoken so far. He was the shortest and darkest of the three hard babies.

“Ten after,” advised his mate, looking at his wrist. He uptilted a grey hat to show blond hair, neatly parted. “Whosis said they’d probably go by about five-thirty. Plenty of time.” He kicked the flower box into a corner and went into a dance routine, holding an imaginary partner and humming, “Da—tatata—bumpadump—bump da—tatata—”

“Cut it!” snarled Ed, jerking about. “Want somebody to hear us?”

“Blondy” desisted, grinning sheepishly. Ed squinted along the sub-machine gun’s sights carefully, and then slipped the drum in. He squatted and skated it across the floor to the window. Dust rose from grey suede gloves slapped together as he straightened.

“Listen. I’ll get behind that packing case in a minute and sight down the speedway. It won’t be hard to spot the car as soon as it gets in sight, ’cause it’s a long tan touring. And I can hit the monkey if I throw enough shots. The catch is the getaway, with all them trucks to hold up the heap.”

“Ain’t it so?” said Blondy cheerfully.

“Be ready to get down there the minute it’s over,” Ed ordered. “You’ll go first. Mort stays behind with me and covers me going out.”

BLONDY leaned against the door frame, holding an automatic. Ed went to the window, opened it a few inches and remained there, looking out at the passing cars with a meditative scowl on his thin face. . . .

Lou Garfield’s imported long tan touring car was parked in front

of the five-story brick building on Nassau Street that housed his office. Marilyn O'Day, driving the little yellow roadster her father had given her for Christmas, parked behind it.

"How's that, Dad?" she said, switching off the ignition.

Barney O'Day grunted, getting out. "Miracle you found a place at all on this damn street."

It was surging with home-going clerks and crawling cars. The girl had found the only vacant curb space. They entered the building and rode up to the fifth floor in a small, wheezy elevator—a short, quick, flamboyant man in a brown checked suit, and a lovely, slim, blue-eyed girl a head taller than her father.

People who wondered how Barney O'Day, the manager of prizefighters and wrestlers, happened to possess a daughter who looked like Park Avenue, had never seen Barney's wife who had died the year before.

"Going to be long, Dad?" Marilyn asked as they walked down the hall.

"Can't. Garfield and all of us ought to be leaving for the Garden in ten minutes. Dunno why he wants to see me at this late hour." He opened a door whose frosted glass carried black lettering:

LOU GARFIELD, SPORTS PROMOTER

They entered a shabby outer office. "Well!" said the girl, smiling.

A tall young man with red hair was looking surprised and pleased, as though this was a lucky break.

"Hello there! Didn't know you were coming down here. How're you, Barney?"

O'Day nodded. "Forgot you were on hand, Regan. Garfield still worried that some gangsters want to kill him? Any more threats? He in his office?"

The redhead jerked a thumb. "Max Santo's with him."

O'Day crossed to another door, whence came voices, and passed inside. The tall young man and the slim, pretty girl looked at each other. He had a brown, pleasant face, an engaging grin.

"What is it, Jack? You mean Lou Garfield retained you as a body-guard?"

"Last night," he nodded. "'Course, you've heard about the three rodents who tried to murder him yesterday afternoon. He doesn't want to get bumped off, at least not before tonight's wrestling match."

She sat down in a desk chair and fiddled with her handbag. "I didn't know private detectives hired out as mere bodyguards," she observed.

JACK REGAN flushed. "This one does—when there's fifty dollars a day in it, and business is lousy."

"I see," she said, and there was a silence.

There was a newspaper on the desk, turned to the sports page. A headline said:

ODDS FAVOR TINY STEVE MORROW
OVER THE MASKED MEXICAN
TONIGHT.

And in the first column:

The American wrestler is judged in so much better condition by experts that thousands will probably see the most publicized wrestling match in many years at Madison Square Garden tonight. Lou Garfield predicts a last-minute sellout. Barney O'Day, manager for Morrow, thinks the match will lead to the championship.

"Is there any danger?" the girl asked, looking up from her glance at the paper.

A pair of broad, grey-clad shoulders shrugged. "Doubt it. A mystery why someone wants to knock off Garfield at just this time." He changed to irony. "I wouldn't have taken the job if there was. I'd hate to cause you to lose any sleep."

Her eyes blinked at him. The

yellow spring suit and dinky little hat were anachronisms in the sordid office with its walls decorated with pictures of sporting figures.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

"I'm nuts about you, and you know it," he said. "That's why I make those cracks. If you'd just marry me—"

The dinky hat and auburn hair were shaking. "You're nice. I like you. But I'm stubborn. See that chin?" A slim finger touched the skin below her smiling lips. "Like Dad. He fought his way up. I want to see you click. You were a cop for three years and then they made you a detective, and that was fine. Then you inherited three thousand dollars and decided to go in for yourself, and you took that office in Times Square and picked up Joey Sprague. Private detectives. But I want to see you click."

"Not bodyguard a sports promoter, eh?"

"I didn't say that," Marilyn murmured.

The inner door opened.

"All set, Regan?" a man asked, as he strode in.

Lou Garfield was a good-sized man with sandy hair, sleek jowls and no eyebrows to speak of. The most successful gentleman in his line since Tex Rickard, he resembled that wizard of ballyhoo in that he staked everything on his luck, was willing to take a small match and build it up. The affair tonight was an example. "Tiny Steve" Morrow was not the champion and little was known of the "Masked Mexican," except that he was a sensation south of the Rio Grande. Barney O'Day had scouted him there, but was keeping his opinion to himself.

Garfield had plunged deeply. It was whispered that this was to be his last sports venture, that he was shipping, and wanted to retire.

Regan nodded to him. "Any time."

A tall dark man who looked like a Spanish undertaker and who was Max Santo, the manager for the Masked Mexican, sidled past Garfield and tipped his hat to the girl. He had once been a wrestler himself, and looked it.

"See you later, gents," he said. "I'm taking a hack." He passed out of the office.

"We're leaving now," Garfield said. "Barney's going with us. Miss O'Day, I guess you'll have to drive up alone."

The party broke up.

DRIVING uptown, seated beside Garfield's chauffeur, young Regan stared ahead and submitted to his thoughts. They were disquieting. It is never pleasant to have the object of your affections skeptical of your ability.

He was twenty-six years old and impatient. He had made good as a cop, had traded a small reputation on the police force for none whatever as a private dick, besides tossing three thousand dollars into the pot. It was mostly gone.

Bodyguarding, even for such a publicized figure as Lou Garfield was just now, wasn't the best job in the world, but it paid money. A man couldn't be choosy.

They were on the West Side highway and speeding. A third floor window in a warehouse ahead was slightly raised. Regan saw a man's face peering from the window and something shining in the late sun.

He stared. Then he whirled in the seat. Barney O'Day was talking and Lou Garfield was reaching for a paper on the floor.

"Down! On the floor!" Regan waved. "A guy there with a machine gun about to—"

The rest was drowned out. Suddenly there was a sharp, crackling

noise, powder flashes from the window, a whining in the air and things hitting the touring car. The drone of traffic fore and aft provided a background.

Regan sank lower. He clutched the chauffeur by the collar, dragging him down. His right hand held a revolver.

"The brake!" he shouted.

More shots! They were opposite the death window, passing it. Flying steel was hitting the car. A scream and a groan from behind.

Regan got the emergency brake with his left hand. The shooting had ceased. They were past the window. He yanked the brake and rubber screamed as he was thrown forward against the dashboard, while horns honked behind. He leaped out.

"Hospital!" he yelled at the chauffeur. "Next exit. St. Vincent's!"

He looked in the back. Lou Garfield in his grey suit and Barney O'Day in his checked suit were both down on the floor, both suits bloody.

CHAPTER II

FOR PRIVATE PURPOSES



CAPTAIN JOHN CURTIS, precinct commander at the Charles Street police station, which is but a few blocks from Morton and West Streets, said quietly to the witness:

"And then it was curtains?"

The red-headed private dick answered through his hands. He was seated and his bandaged head was bowed.

"Go look at that pillar under the Ninth Avenue El. It ought to have some of my blood and hair on it."

The detectives' room was packed with plainclothes men and the officers in uniform. Faces were tense,

and there were a lot of faces.

"Nobody's blaming you," the police captain said. "Sliding down a stanchion from that elevated speedway is no mean trick. You did all you could."

"I'd have caught them—that hackie could outdrive 'em—but they beat the Ninth Avenue traffic light and then it caught us. We were halfway over when the truck rammed us and knocked me off the running board. The sedan was heading for Eighth Avenue then. That's all I know."

"If you ask me, Skipper," a short, plump man in the front row said bitterly, "you ought to pinch the punk who was driving that truck. He heard the cab's horn and saw the chase!"

Captain Curtis shrugged as Regan looked up wearily at Joey Sprague who had spoken. His stocky little partner laid a hand on his shoulder.

A phone rang.

The captain turned to pick it up as all movement ceased in the room. Everyone was eyeing him as he set it down.

"Hospital," he confirmed. "Lou Garfield wasn't hurt. But"—as relief began to show—"it's murder all the same! They got Barney O'Day instead."

Regan came up slowly out of the chair, his eyes glassy.

"Riddled," said Curtis. "Garfield ducked just in time, it seems, and O'Day got the slugs intended for him."

Regan was standing. Joey Sprague took hold of his arm. "Take it easy, Jack."

A dick who knew Regan well bent across the desk and whispered something to the captain, who said with sudden commiseration:

"I didn't know that, son. It makes it tougher for you."

"They sure?" Regan was hoarse.

"O'Day was dead when they got there."

Regan turned with a dazed air and took his hat from the top of a filing cabinet.

"If you're through with me—"

"I am. The sedan ought to turn up shortly; it was probably stolen. No telling immediately about the killers. We'll have to question Garfield again, though he swore last night after he was shot at in front of his home that he didn't know why anyone would want to kill him. Unless it was a gambling bunch still remembering what happened a long time ago. So long, he says, that he can't remember the names of any of the mob who once tried to force him to work with them in a set-up.

"Maybe he don't remember—we've only his word for that—maybe he does. They may have him too scared to talk, whoever they are. All Garfield says he does remember about them is that some threats were made to get him, much like these new anonymous ones he's been getting the last week or so. Says he laughed 'em off and forgot 'em, but now— Well, none of it does us any good if he can't—or won't—even give us a line on who threatened him."

THE captain paused a moment, tapping his fingers thoughtfully on his chair arm.

"Between us, though," he remarked, "what do you know about that Max Santo? I understand he isn't very well known here in the East."

Sprague answered him. "Nobody knows much about him. He's from the Coast. Picked up the Masked Mexican in Mexico City, and on the next match the Mex laid down and went to sleep and the customers yelled dope. Santo claims the fellow has a weak heart, but maybe

he's a phony. What's that got to do, though, with anybody trying to kill Lou Garfield?"

"Probably nothing. You can't remember anything more, Regan? Is your head any better? You dropped to West Street just as the sedan was swinging into Christopher— Didn't you even notice the driver?"

Regan bent his head, closed his eyes tightly and squeezed his forehead with a blood-smeared left hand. Blackness pressed upon his brain and for the moment he saw nothing but the face of a girl. Then another picture was superimposed upon it and he was under the elevated highway, revolver in hand, while the sedan with three figures in it came toward him. He heard again a cop's whistle, saw people running. Then the car was swinging wide and for an instant he glimpsed the face of the driver, a rosy-cheeked blond youth in a grey hat.

"Remember?" the captain urged.

Regan opened his eyes. He was remembering, but he said nothing—in Brooklyn, two years ago, black-jacking the blond head of a lookout man in a stick-up. He looked at the captain. Then he shook his head.

"No," he said, as he turned wearily and walked out with his partner.

"Garfield's probably gone on up to the Garden for the weighing in and examination," Joey Sprague said on the sidewalk. "I better hike up there and take over, if he wants me."

Regan assented without having heard him.

"What are you going to do?" Sprague asked.

"Kill a couple of guys before midnight."

Sprague turned fishy eyes toward Regan at the savagery in that voice. But they left Regan's face to watch a yellow sport roadster that was jouncing down Charles Street to-

ward them. A man was driving it, but a girl sat beside him. Sprague touched Regan's arm.

"Marilyn O'Day. Rickey Keefe driving her."

Regan didn't move. The roadster braked at the curb, ten feet from them and from the outside door stepped a dark, wiry man whose sharp, good-looking face was clamped in grim lines. He flashed around the radiator of the car and up to Regan.

"Good Lord, fella, we just heard! I was at the Garden when Marilyn got there. What's going on, inside?"

"They got away," Regan said tightly.

Rickey Keefe had been a middle-weight under Barney O'Day. Now he owned a night spot, moved in gambling circles. A sinewy hand closed hard on Regan's shoulder.

"Better talk to Marilyn," Keefe muttered. "She's in a fog." He went on into the station house.

Joey Sprague, fleeing the scene, raised his hat to the girl in the yellow roadster. Regan took a few steps.

She was sitting up straight and stiff and he wasn't sure that she saw him. The redhead's throat was dry. He had thought Marilyn would be crying; this was worse.

"Marilyn."

Her blue eyes, wide and misty, turned on him.

"Is it really true? They killed Dad?"

"It's true, Marilyn. He's dead at St. Vincent's."

She bowed her head. The dinky hat was twisted in her fingers, and wavy auburn hair fell about her neck. She began to sob.

Regan reached in and caught one of her hands. She did not take it away. He stood there on the sidewalk and listened to the girl cry.

"Were—were you hurt?" she choked.

"No."

"Just—what—happened?"

"The killers were in a vacant warehouse overlooking the speedway. Trying to get Garfield. He's been getting threats pretty steadily and then getting shot at yesterday. They shot with a submachine gun. Garfield was on their side, but he had bent down to pick up a paper from the floor of the car just as they cut loose."

"But who are they, Jack? Why are gangsters trying to kill Lou Garfield? Why did they try last night?"

REGAN looked into her eyes and shook his head slowly.

He heard breathing behind him. Rickey Keefe had returned.

"Haven't got a thing, have they?" Keefe said. "Not even a glimmer who it was."

"No," said Regan. "Did you see anything yesterday?"

When Garfield had been shot at the afternoon before, in front of his home, the gambler had been with him.

"I was too busy ducking bullets, fella," Keefe said grimly. "There were three of 'em, probably the same monkeys that did the job today. I asked Garfield if he had any idea who they were, but he claimed to be dumb." Dark eyebrows went in different directions. "Now I've heard some hot ones, but I never heard of a guy being shot at without having an idea what it was about!" He added musingly: "I wonder if the match will go on?"

Marilyn's fingers were making a wreck of her little hat; her mouth trembled dangerously; suddenly she was crying again, shaking. Rickey Keefe trotted around the car and slid behind the wheel.

"You'd better go home, kid," he said comfortingly. "See you later, Regan."

"No!" The girl sat up. "I'm going to the hospital and see dad! I have to see him again!"

Regan's head shook violently at Keefe.

"You don't want to do that, kid," the little gambler said. "I'll handle things at the hospital. You'll see him again, but not now. You don't want to see him the way he is now."

"I've—got—to!" sobbed Barney O'Day's daughter. "I'm not afraid. I've got to see him again." She clenched small fists and sat up, her underlip quivering. Brushing the hair from her eyes, she gazed at the windshield and went on in a small, choked voice: "They said he was a roughneck. They kidded him about his clothes and the way he walked and talked. But I knew him, and—"

She turned suddenly to Regan. "You've got to catch them—you understand! You've got to get those men who did it! You were there. You couldn't stop it, but you were there. If you don't catch them—"

The roadster purred into life. Regan stared at wide, glittering blue eyes. Then Rickey Keefe's dark profile lifted in curt farewell, the yellow car moved away and the dick was left standing on the sidewalk.

* * * * *

A TAXICAB droned up Eighth Avenue with a single passenger in the back. A bank clock at Thirty-fourth Street wore both hands pointing at the sidewalk. The cab turned east into Forty-second Street. Regan dismissed it. He idled before a bar and grill, presently went inside.

The bartender, burly in a white polo shirt opening over a hairy chest, drew a glass of beer and joined him at the end of the bar.

"Doncha ever work, Red?" he greeted. "I been thinkin' about that offer you made me at lunch today

and I'll take it up." Regan was sipping his beer. "Twenty to ten on Tiny Steve? I'll take it. They're sayin' the Mex is hot."

Regan studied the half empty glass. "Already laid it, Mac," he lied. "Forget it." He leaned across the bar. "Where's Happy Glennon living these days?"

Small eyelids drooped. "Who wants to know?"

Regan tilted his glass.

"It's Forty-third, Red," the bartender said quickly, "but Happy's leveling now. Don't ride the guy! It's that old Morris Hotel."

"Who said he wasn't leveling? This is something else."

"All right, but he don't stoolie either, whatever you want. What's up, anyway? Thought you was strongarming for Lou Garfield." The barman was curious, if behind the times.

Regan smiled. "Quit," he said shortly.

He went to Eighth Avenue, thence to Forty-third Street, then west again. There was a parking lot on the south side and then a six-story yellow brick building with a lobby smelling of old leather, cigar smoke and lye soap.

"Just tell me who you want, brother, and I'll answer the questions," the clerk said coldly, leaning over the desk.

Regan finished turning the register at page three.

"Now that's mighty swell of you," he said and walked away.

The elevator let him out at the top floor. He raised a hand and knocked on the last door. It was opened by a tall, bony man in an undershirt, whose long, drooping face and heavy-lidded eyes were dolorous in the extreme.

Regan greeted him. "Was downstairs looking for a monkey, and saw your name in the register. Got a job?"

"Happy" Glennon nodded sadly. "Bus boy. Nights. C'm in, Red."

Regan went in. He sat on the bed and looked out the half open window toward Times Square and theater lights. Above roofs could just be discerned the traveling lighted letters on the Times Building.

"How's it going?" he asked, putting a cigarette in his mouth and offering the open package.

Happy Glennon sighed, laid the cigarette over his left ear, relaxed in a chair.

The room was small, as sad as its occupant.

"It ain't fun, Red," he said gloomily. "Better than stir, but it ain't fun. It's hard to keep away from 'em—y' know, the others."

He smelled of soup and cabbage and dirty dishes. His big bony hands were odorous with other men's food.

"Ever see Blondy Fritz Ebhart any more?"

"Not in a long time. Guess he's been keepin' his nose clean since he beat the rap that time in Brooklyn. Dunno how he did it. Las' time I saw him he was livin' with Ed Schenck and Mort Hanley in a flat on Avenue A. Dunno where."

"Guess he's shooting pool in Jake Hardesty's place," Regan suggested.

"That's where I saw him. Come to think of it, he was living somewhere near—"

Regan drew on his smoke, meeting the suddenly straight gaze from the sad eyes.

"Y're pumpin' me, Red! What do you want him for?" It was a new voice, indignant, scared.

Regan stood up. "Nobody knows I came here. Use a fiver?"

Happy Glennon accepted the green bill; then he cried:

"That was dirty! Makin' a stool outa me! And I thought you was my friend!"

"Look," Regan pointed.

The ex-con turned and gazed from the window. Lighted letters two blocks distant galloped around the Times Building, spelling a sinister message:

THREE — GANGSTERS — SHOOTING
— AT — LOU — GARFIELD — ON —
WEST — SIDE — HIGHWAY — MUR-
DER — BARNEY — O'DAY — MAN-
AGER — FOR — TINY — STEVE —
MORROW — WHO — MEETS —
MASKED — MEXICAN — TONIGHT —
POLICE—

Glennon spun, his watery eyes bulging.

Regan was backing off. "I was there. Bodyguarding Garfield— Blondy Fritz Ebhart drove the get-away."

CHAPTER III

THREE HARD BABIES



LOU GARFIELD said above folded arms:

"The match is going on. It's got to."

Reporters' heads nodded. Garfield chewed an unlighted panatela.

He raised a hand to a bruise on his right temple, looked at the finger, put the hand in his pocket.

"It ain't fair to me," whispered a voice from a far corner, "but I'll go on."

A cub reporter, distrusting his memory, scribbled on paper:

Tiny Steve Morrow said it wasn't fair to him, but he would go on. Probably thinking first time in four years go into match without Barney O'Day outside his corner.

Camera bulbs popped. The white mountain in the corner blinked his eyes and waved getaway.

In another corner, a tall, sleek pillar of flesh the color of an old razor strop blinked eyes also but was otherwise impassive. Whatever emotions stirred in the olive, hairy

chest was concealed by the triangle of black silk across his face.

Two sports writers were badgering the Masked Mexican. How did he feel now about the match? Why did he wear his mask all the time instead of just during matches? Did he think the murder of O'Day would affect Morrow's style? Was he nervous about his first match in the United States?

Answers came in accented monosyllables.

"FOR cryin' out loud," Joey Sprague growled, "why don't you buzzards leave 'em alone?"

"Get out—all of you!" Garfield's bark reverberated in the long, narrow dressing room. "We're an hour late as it is. The boys want to get back to their hotels and rest. They've only got three hours left. This business should have been done this afternoon at the association offices, instead of here."

"But where's Max Santo, Lou?" A veteran sports writer cocked a curious and distrustful head. "He left you fellows down at your office, didn't he? To come up in a taxi? That was a couple of hours ago. Why isn't he here?"

"How do I know? Go out and find him. Haven't I got enough to worry me, with one of my best friends killed instead of me—with-out you fellows yammering for interviews?"

"Okay, forget Max Santo. The question is: Who told off those three mobsters to put you on a spot? Who wants you killed?"

Garfield, less ruddy and less pick-and-span, waved an angry hand. "Get out. I tell you I don't know. Don't you think I'd tell the cops if I did?"

He looked at his watch. Joey Sprague's fat body, pale face and fishy eyes drifted to him as Regan's partner stood placidly at his elbow.

The room began to clear. There was a knock at the door. A reporter opened it, going out, and Rickey Keefe stepped in and shuttled dark eyes here and there, with no more expression on his face than on his knife-creased trousers.

Two fingers wiggled at Garfield. "Busy?"

"Do I look like I'm loafing?"

"I can wait." The little gambler walked down the room, away from the others. He waited with his back turned while he punched at a mat on a rubbing table.

The veteran sports man paused in the door and looked back over a shoulder at Garfield and then at Keefe before disappearing. Joey Sprague sat down in a straight chair and scowled, while he studied his fingernails thoughtfully. The Masked Mexican drew on a dressing gown and went out with a trainer.

Garfield had turned. "Wait?" he said to Keefe. "For what? What do you want?"

Rickey Keefe slowly turned. "It's important," he said. "And private."

There were only three men in the room now. Joey Sprague came slowly to his feet. There was no deception about the bulge on the left side of his coat.

"Well?" he said to Garfield. "You're paying me. But that's the only door to this room."

"Door?" Garfield snarled. "Stay in here! I don't know what this guy wants! What are you—"

"Important," said the gambler softly, clearly enunciating the word. "Know what I mean, Garfield?"

For an instant, Joey Sprague heard nothing but the feet and voices in the corridor outside. Then Lou Garfield faced the dick, with the cigar in the other side of his mouth.

"Okay," he said in a slow voice. "Stand outside the door."

As Sprague walked toward the

door, Garfield pivoted slowly, following him with his gaze, and Rickey Keefe did the same.

* * * * *

THE tall man missed the combination shot and backed off slowly, shaking his head in slow wonder. His eyes did not leave the green baize of the pool table that was third in line at the back of Jake Hardesty's place on Avenue A.

Regan saw him from the swinging door that led to the front and to the bar. He didn't come in. Presently the door was swinging where he had been.

At the bar he drank another beer, joined a knot of men who were talking about Barney O'Day's murder, news of which had just come over the radio. Regan said the cops would have the killers by midnight, because they were tracing the flower box in which the rifle had been carried.

"Hell!" said the bartender. "That damn dyspepsia of mine!" He put down a shaker and went away, holding a thick hand to his stomach.

Regan finished his beer and drifted out.

A block north, on the other side of Avenue A, a row of old houses had been remodeled into apartments. From a chain store doorway across from them, Regan saw Ed Schenck leave Jake Hardesty's pool room and start toward them at a quick walk.

Some distance south of Regan, Schenck, the tall man who had been playing pool, left the sidewalk and crossed the street obliquely. He mounted the steps of the third house in the row.

There was an outside door, a mail box vestibule, and then an inside door. With the vestibule light making a grey patch of his hat, the tall man paused there, did something with his right hand. Regan heard a rattling. A moment after-

ward the inside door was swinging shut.

Regan waited. Lights showed behind four windows, on different floors. No shadows moved behind any of the shades. The red-headed young dick left his doorway, walked up the street a short distance, crossed over, came back. In the vestibule of the third house there was enough light to read the names between the six mail boxes and the six apartment bells. One card had three names—ordinary names that didn't mean anything.

A man came out with some bottles in a paper bag and without glancing at Regan, went out to the street. Regan caught the door before it closed, and entered. He regarded a carpeted hallway and a flight of carpeted stairs. He mounted the stairs.

At the top of the third flight he turned about and stole down slowly, planting his feet on the inside end of the treads. Then three yards of second floor hallway, and he stood before the door to the back, north apartment.

A radio, very low, was playing "Christopher Columbus," and Regan could hear voices, dimly make out words.

"Dump—de—dumpadump da tata—Aw, nerts. You'd think O'Day was the first gink we ever killed. What they gonna trace that flower box by? That's junk! Mort swiped it out of an ash can!"

Regan knew the voice of Blondy Fritz Ebhart when he heard it. He was hearing it now.

"Awright, awright," Ed Schenck growled. "Gimme a snort."

A girl's voice sounded at Regan's elbow, without a door to muffle it:

"What do you want, mister?" It was a hard, metallic drawl.

Regan turned his head, saw a powdered, rouged, lip-stick-decorated face framed in black hair. Clutched

in the girl's arms was a paper bag, smelling of liverwurst. She wore a dark, tight-fitting dress, sleek silken hose and rubber-soled sport shoes. She had come up the stairs without a sound.

He didn't say anything. Her eyes resembled Marilyn O'Day's in color, but in nothing else. She opened her mouth wide.

"Mort!"

She dropped the bag, grabbed Regan's shirt collar, kicked his shins. He threw her away. The door opened as he spun. Mort Hanley's dark face glared at him above a gun.

"Git him!" choked the girl, scrambling to her feet. "He was standin' there listening! He's a bull!"

Hanley's left hand drove forward, balled on Regan's coat front and jerked. As the redhead was pulled off balance, the dark man hit him in the back of the head with the gun.

Regan saw a table in the middle of the room, locked his hands behind his head and dived for the floor beneath it.

The door slammed as he landed. A bottle of milk rolled. The girl was inside and babbling, but nobody heard her.

"Who the hell?" Ed Schenck rasped, and pushed over the table. He dropped on Regan's head as the dick was trying to roll.

THERE was a lull, broken only by panting.

"Okay, shut up!" Schenck snapped at the girl.

Regan's nose was flattened against the floor. Something hit him in the head—

When he came back from where he had gone for a few moments of unconsciousness, Ed Schenck was saying:

"Sure. He spread it and then

tailed me. It's the gumshoe body-guard. Musta made one of us, seein' us in the car. There couldn't have been a leak."

Regan was spread-eagled on his back, held down. His hands were under him and were going to stay there. He was on the floor.

The table was several feet from where it had been. Blondy Fritz Ebhart's lips were exhaling beery breath onto Regan's face from a few inches off. As the dick saw Schenck arise from tying his legs, the blond man said:

"You damn' louse!" and hit Regan in the mouth.

"Awright." Schenck was standing, his hair mussed. He flattened it with his palms. Ebhart, squatting over Regan, went on hitting him in the mouth.

"Awright," said Schenck again, regaining his breath. "Let up a minute, Fritz. Put that rod down, Hanley."

Hanley was somewhere out of sight.

"I ain't in favor of bumpin' him right off," his voice came grimly. "Why don't you phone the Big Boy?"

"Shut up! You'll do what I say. Let up, Fritz."

"You damn lousy cop!" Ebhart repeated furiously, and stood up. He kicked Regan in the ribs, yanked out a handkerchief and wiped his hands.

"Awright," said Schenck. "We'll fix him like I said."

There was an instant in which nothing happened. Then Schenck went out of sight. The radio became very loud. Schenck came back.

"Big Boy, hell!" he snarled. "That Mex!"

"Gawd! You ain't really going to! Not like that! In cold blood!" It was the girl protesting. "He ain't done nothin' to you"

"Shut up!" snarled Schenck.

Ebhart moved off toward the girl, who cried out shrilly. A chair fell over. Clothes rustled. There was panting, chuckling from Ebhart, then a low, pleading whimper from the girl. Ebhart came back while the girl continued to whimper like a bruised child.

"Next time I'll do that myself, Fritz," Mort Hanley's voice said. "She's my broad. She helps pay for this flat."

"Yeah? You mean next time I'll break her arm instead of lettin' it go. You tryin' to tell me something?"

"Pipe down!" gritted Schenck. "This ain't no time to fight. Forget the dame. We gotta fix this badge and blow."

Something landed on Regan's head. It was Ebhart, sitting on him. Schenck moved into vision, knelt beside the dick. A third body held down Regan's legs.

"Let's go," grunted the blond man and grabbed Regan's nostrils with both hands, vising them together as Schenck clapped both palms over the redhead's mouth and bore down with his weight.

Regan tried to fight and couldn't. He tried to get air through a corner of his mouth, but Schenck had big hands. His nostrils might as well have been sewed together.

For about a minute there was no noise in the room but the blaring radio, the scuffle and shimmy of Regan's body, hoarse breathing and curses from the laboring Schenck and Ebhart.

Then something ran frantically for the door, which was flung open.

"I ain't going to stay!" the girl's voice shrilled despairingly. "You three have done one murder today and I didn't say nothin', but I ain't going to stay and watch you strangle that feller like that! I'm going to call a cop!"

The door slammed. Sobs came

back as light footsteps ran down the stairs. In the room a chair was kicked over.

"Fritz," Mort Hanley gulped, "come back here! Don't—" The door was slammed again.

Regan was abandoned. From below sounded shots, a scream.

CHAPTER IV

THE MASKED MAN



REGAN sat up. He was alone in the room, which looked as though an army had marched through it. The tall man and Mort Hanley could still be heard pounding down the stairs. Blondy Ebhart apparently had already reached the lower hallway.

Regan freed his legs. He couldn't find his gun. Without a hat he ran out and down the stairs. A taxi whizzed past, going north, with Ebhart and a glitter of steel beside the driver, Hanley in the rear, Ed Schenck hanging to the running board. Southward, another car was hurtling past.

Regan banged through the two doors of the vestibule, landed on the sidewalk. He heard a girl yelling hysterically. Toward him came a dark-blue, heavy coupé with a low license number. The screams came from it. A girl in a dark dress was beside the driver, struggling in his grip. As the car flashed past, following in the wake of the taxi, Rickey Keefe, in the car, staring straight ahead, ignored the redhead on the sidewalk. An instant later the coupé was a block away, and Regan fled the scene.

In a shop on Fifth Avenue he bought another hat, straightened his clothing before a mirror and then went across the street to a pay telephone. He knew that neither Lou Garfield nor Joey Sprague were

at the Garden. Garfield had gone to his home on East Thirty-seventh for a rest before the match, and Regan connected with his partner there.

"Where've you been?" Sprague demanded sharply. "Also where are you now?"

Regan told him.

"Y' mean, you cornered 'em and then the punks got away! Cripes, fella, you better keep out of sight! Tell Captain Curtis that and he'll break you in half. Where are they headed? What'd they say? Who paid 'em off to put the heat on Garfield?"

Regan answered none of those questions. "Where's Max Santo?" he asked.

"He didn't show up at all at the Garden. The Mex came and went alone. Garfield won't answer questions, either. Maybe Santo's at his hotel. And you say you saw Keefe? I figured Keefe for a hand in the game myself. Where you going now?"

"Look 'em up."

REGAN hung up and went out. A taxi answered his hail. Following orders, the driver cut back to Avenue A and drifted uptown all the way to Forty-second, while the dick looked vainly at parked taxicabs. He changed instructions and they went west.

There was no dark-blue, heavy coupé with a low license number parked anywhere near the Fifty-fourth Street Hotel where Keefe lived. A clerk said that Rickey Keefe had not been in since five o'clock.

Regan bought a late paper, killed twenty minutes in the lobby, but Keefe didn't arrive. The paper was four hours old, had been on the stands before Barney O'Day's murder, so naturally had nothing about it, though extras now were on the

streets, providing good publicity for a second-rate wrestling match.

In another cab, he was driven to Eighth Avenue, past Madison Square Garden and queues of people, then turned uptown again.

The Olympic Hotel, on West Sixty-second, is an old-fashioned, twelve-story stone building, catering largely to Latin-American guests. Max Santo and the Masked Mexican had made it their headquarters. Regan discovered on his arrival there that he was one of several at the desk—the others being reporters who were trying to find Max Santo.

"Not in, not in!" called the clerk. "Haven't seen Mr. Santo since early this afternoon. Haven't heard from him. Yes, the Masked Mexican is up in his room. Resting. Not to be disturbed."

Regan heard curious talk. He went back to the bar and knitted his brows over a glass of beer.

Then he left the hotel by a side entrance.

Coming out of an elevator on the tenth floor of the Times Building twenty minutes later, he saw a light behind the frosted glass panel of the door on which was the sign:

REGAN AND SPRAGUE
PRIVATE DETECTIVES

He walked past it, came back on tiptoe and listened. He heard a low sob.

His key was noiseless until it snapped the lock, then he kicked the door open.

"Reach, whoever you are!" he rapped, while his right hand balled in an empty pocket.

A girl with wavy auburn hair, and who wore a yellow spring suit whirled about with a cry.

"Marilyn!" Regan said, and Barney O'Day's daughter stared from tear-dimmed eyes.

Her hat and handbag were on his

desk. There was no one else in the office.

"Jack! I've been wondering if you would come. Remember that key you gave me one time and said if there was ever any trouble to come here and stay? I used it, Jack. I couldn't stand it—at the apartment, after the hospital. There were so many reporters—"

He nodded, not taking his eyes from her. "I'm glad you came," he said, fully conscious for the first time how badly his lips were swollen.

She came slowly to where he stood. Her blue eyes searched his face.

"You've been in a fight," she said. "Have you found the gangsters who killed Dad? Are you hurt?"

"No," he said. He started to take her hands but didn't. "I'm in a hurry, Marilyn. Sit down and forget I came."

He brushed past her. Kneeling before his safe in the corner, he knew she was watching him. He opened the safe, took out a .38 revolver, dropped it in his coat pocket. A ring of keys jingled in his hand as he slammed the steel door shut, rose and faced her.

She didn't say anything, just watched him. He didn't say anything, either. Going out, he made sure the door was locked before he returned to the elevators. On the street he again hailed a taxi and

rode rapidly back to the Olympic Hotel.

He did not stop at the desk, but headed straight for the elevators. The sixth floor corridor was empty, when he left the car. Regan walked slowly along the faded carpet. He had been afraid there would be a cop at the door which he stopped beside—the Masked Mexican's door.

Beyond it was silence. A hotel elevator droned past the floor. Regan had the ring of keys in his hand.

The door opened slowly as he manipulated a key and turned the knob. It was a big room, he softly entered, sweet with the smell of flowers. He saw no one, then he heard breathing from an adjoining room and he stood still.

The sound was deep, regular, but it carried a conscious effect, appearing to be less like that of a man asleep than like one pretending to be. Regan walked quietly, carefully, across the carpet, past bouquets and wreaths with cards written in Spanish, until he could see through a crack in the half open door.

A long, dark, sleek man, in a yellow bathrobe, was lying on his back on a bed with his bare legs making a V. His hands were beneath his head; he was masked. With each purr of breathing, his chest rose and fell. He seemed to be alone there.

Regan took a step backward.

[Turn Page]



HOLLYWOOD NEWCOMER GIVES STAR PERFORMANCE!

Gloria Rich achieves stardom in her first big movie "Outside of Paradise", a Republic Picture. Here's another Star Performance you'll rave about—a quick, clean shave with Star Single-edge Blades! 4 for 10¢. Star Blade Division, Brooklyn, N. Y.



STAR SINGLE-EDGE
BLADES 4 FOR 10¢
FOR GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS

There was a frown between his eyes.

He turned and crossed the room silently to another connecting door which was closed. He opened it. This was another bedroom, larger than that in which the masked man lay asleep. Regan closed the door behind him.

His nostrils picked up traces of body sweat as he sat on the edge of an unmade bed and looked thoughtfully here and there. There was another odor in the room, faint, unpleasant, but he could not be sure what it was. It was rather the sort of odor of which a man does not want to be sure.

The dick roamed here and there. The frown between his eyes became permanent. His expression was that of a man who, seeking a nail file in his dresser drawer, smells a dead mouse.

He was standing still, looking at a large trunk plastered with Mexican labels, that stood against a wall. The unpleasant odor was connected with that trunk.

He stole back to the door, listened. Then he returned to the trunk and, working with all the care of an antique dealer, he unknotted ropes, sprung hasps, picked a lock.

Lifting the top carefully, he looked inside.

A man's body was doubled up in Z shape inside the trunk. He was a big creature, dark and hairy and naked save for a pair of pajama trousers. He had been there some little time, maybe a couple of days. There was, however, no sign of violence.

Regan did not recognize the broad, flat face. The man might have been a Spaniard or a Mexican. He had a huge neck, bulging muscles, long hair. He was dead as dead could be; what was more, it was many hours since he had been anything else.

A telephone whirred in the room behind. He spun about. The distant bed creaked, naked feet padded across the floor, and the phone was lifted.

"What?" the voice of Max Santo said. "*What?*" And then, after a long pause: "God! All right. I'll come down."

* * * * *

A BOY on the corner of Eighth Avenue and Sixty-second Street, across from the Olympic Hotel, was clutching a sheaf of extras, yelling that the odds were down on Tiny Steve Morrow to beat the Masked Mexican.

From a fourth floor window of the Olympic Ed Schenck watched him, while the lights went out in a suite two stories above him. The tall Schenck turned.

"I know this much!" Rickey Keefe, pale, scared, said from the chair in which he sat. "It was Barney O'Day you were after from the start, and not Lou Garfield! The Garfield play was a fake. You didn't really try to kill him yesterday, when I was with him. Nor today."

Ed Schenck grinned coldly. "So you come here to tell us that, after learnin' about this room from Hanley's moll! Cripes, fella, you must be tired of livin'!"

Blondy Fritz Ebbart, leaning against the old-fashioned mantelpiece held two guns on Keefe. It was a large room. The two beds were undisturbed, except that Mort Hanley was sitting on the edge of one, staring at the floor. His coat and hat were where he had tossed them a half hour ago, when they had arrived.

"He's loco," Ebbart said. "Hay-wire! Imagine walkin' in on us like this! Wait till Santo hears this in a coupla minutes."

Keefe nodded stiffly. "Santo. I knew he was in it. What I want

to know is, why did you kill Barney O'Day?"

No one paid him any attention. Ebhart rolled his eyes, contemptuously regarded his pal on the bed.

"And you was afraid I'd killed your dame, Hanley! That tramp!"

Mort Hanley stood up suddenly.

"Count me out," he muttered, making for the door. Ebhart blocked him, cursed him, sent him back to the bed, crimson and silent.

The blond youth looked at Schenck.

"Some fun! We get smoked outa that scatter on Avenue A and have to chase up here; we got a badge on our tail that knows who we are; we got this big-timer campin' in our laps, just asking to be knocked off, and now Hanley wants to quit. I say kill 'em. Kill 'em both! Right now! By hell, I'll do it myself!"

A knock drummed the door just as Schenck was starting forward, waving hands and shaking his head emphatically.

"Lay off!" he snapped. "Take it easy. It ain't time yet."

Ebhart cursed, went over and sat in a chair, watching Hanley and Rickey Keefe. The tall thug walked to the door.

Max Santo entered the room and looked around slowly, his gaze finally centering on the gambler? He pointed a finger in mute inquiry at the little dark man in the chair.

"That's just another worry," Schenck complained, nodding. "He turned up right after I phoned you. Been messin' around on his own. Says he knew last night the shooting we did at Garfield was a phony, the way we blasted high. And he spotted Mort Hanley last night. Found out about the flat through some punk and chased down there just as we were mopping up after catching that dick. He—" a finger jabbed air toward Keefe—"snatched

Hanley's skirt, took her to a hospital and made her talk."

Max Santo nodded impassively.

Blondy Ebhart stood up, twirling his guns and beginning to smile. Santo stumbled forward, fell on his face as something hit him in the head.

"Drop 'em, Ebhart!" a voice snapped peremptorily.

Holding a cocked revolver at his side, Regan stepped into the room.

CHAPTER V

CLEAN-UP



MORT HANLEY began to laugh. The others watched Regan and the blond youth. Blondy's guns had stopped twirling.

"Hiya, dick," he drawled, contemptuously.

"Hiya."

Ebhart's guns had locked in position, one pointing at the floor, the other at the ceiling. Hanley had stopped laughing.

Regan stepped past Max Santo. The blond thug's face had turned a lemon color and he couldn't seem to make his hands operate. Regan slugged him in the side of the head, jolting him with a knee as he fell, grabbed up the guns and put the wall at his back.

"I guess it's Christmas," he said. "Close the door, Schenck."

It slammed. Max Santo sat up a few feet from Ebhart. His nose was bleeding. He took out a silk handkerchief and mopped it thoughtfully, stopping to regard the spotted silk after each dab. Rickey Keefe arose and walked to Regan's side.

"I beat you here, but I'm glad to see you Red," he said. "Maybe it wouldn't hurt if I had one of those guns."

Regan knocked him down. The gambler fell over Ebhart. Sitting up, he was cool.

"You nuts?" he asked hoarsely.

"Get off that bed and join the floor party," Regan called to Hanley, who stood up promptly. "Okay, bud," he said, and shrugged.

"You, too, Schenck."

When they were all on the rug, Rickey Keefe said again, impatiently: "You nuts, Regan? Think I'm in this deal?"

"I'm working on the answers," Regan told him. "Not sure yet. Sit on your jaw for a couple of minutes." He pulled a chair up, sat down carefully, holding the cocked gun away from him.

"How the hell did *he* get here?" whispered Schenck.

"Shaggin' Santo," said Mort Hanley.

Rickey Keefe was sitting upright, straightening his tie, watching Regan's face with worried eyes. He waited. Regan made a speech.

"The Masked Mexican had a weak heart. It stopped pumping two days ago. Instead of an unknown sensational wrestler, Max Santo had a couple of hundred pounds of dark meat on his hands, in a hotel room upstairs. The Mex is dead. But nobody knew. Molina—that was his name—must have died in his sleep. Santo saw a big purse turning into an obit notice two days before the match. So he stuffed the man from Mexico into a trunk."

Keefe was fish-eyed. "Cripes!" he whispered.

Max Santo wasn't paying much attention, still mopping his nose.

"Santo and you were pals, Keefe," Regan said, "and he had already tipped you to lay your bets on Tiny Steve Morrow, because the Mex was a false alarm. That's the way I'm guessing it. With the Mex dead, but nobody knowing it, Santo went to you with the bad news. No match. All bets off. You lose a killing."

The gambler was shaking his head from right to left, wordlessly.

"So you cooked up a plan," Regan accused. "Max Santo would take the place of the Masked Mexican. He used to be a grunt man himself and was the Mex's size and approximate weight. Their skins were the same color. He would wear a mask all the time, talk with an accent. When the Mex had to appear anywhere, Santo would be there. The rest of the time he would be Max Santo. He would wrestle Tiny Steve Morrow himself, and probably do just as well as the Masked Mexican would have been able to do."

Keefe's head was still going back and forth. "You've got it. You've got it. But it wasn't me."

"Must have been. It was money you both wanted. It was a big risk because, no matter how good it went, Santo would have to have the Mex die suddenly or disappear shortly after the match. You went to bat with that."

"He's smart, ain't he?" Ebhart said hoarsely to the rug.

"But you'd forgotten something, you and Santo," Regan went on. "That Barney O'Day had scouted the Mex in action, down in Mexico City. And Barney had more wrestling knowledge in one of the checks on his suit than your average fan gets in a lifetime. He'd know the Mex's style. Mask or no mask, he'd spot a phony. You either had to drop the plan, or have him put out of the way."

"Perfect!" Keefe said. "You've got it."

Somebody knocked at the door. Regan stood up.

"You murdered him," he said grimly. "Barney O'Day, not Garfield. You were never trying to kill Lou Garfield. That was just a red herring. You were after O'Day, so the match could go on."

Rickey Keefe nodded silently. He watched the dick with fascinated eyes. Regan walked for the door.

"This will be the house dick. I phoned him, after Santo led me here."

He opened the door. Lou Garfield's large, clean-shaven face was smiling coldly above a Luger.

"You had it almost pat, Regan," he said. "Except it was me planned the whole job with Santo—not Rickey Keefe."

He had a small fat man by the collar.

REGAN sat on the edge of the table a couple of minutes later. Things had changed.

Rickey Keefe sat beside him. Garfield and his Luger were in the middle of the room. Max Santo was in a chair, still busy with his nose. The house dick was lying on his face on the floor, with Ed Schenck and Mort Hanley using him as a love-seat. Ebhart stood by the door, dilating his nostrils over two guns.

"All correct," Lou Garfield was saying, "except for a couple of things. It wasn't gambling that made the plan. It was that Lou Garfield would be busted high, wide, and handsome if that wrestling match had to be called off. Get the line?"

The red-head grunted. "Had every nickel sunk in the promotion, huh? Couldn't stand to lose it. Mean it was your idea to make it look as if three gangsters were after you, so you'd have a clean nose when they erased Barney O'Day, by 'accident?'"

Garfield nodded, his left hand stroking his chin. "My idea," he said boastfully. "After I realized we'd have to dispose of Barney. Of course, I had to pick a lad who could handle a tommy gun and plan it so there'd be no danger of getting me, too. Ed won a medal at Plattsburg one summer. And I was almost on the floor of the car when he cut loose."

Regan looked at the Luger, then at Rickey Keefe.

"Guess the drinks are on me," he said wryly.

"Skip it." Keefe briefly nodded.

"Nine twenty-five." Garfield was holding up his left wrist and its watch. "Max, you better get back up to six-sixteen and get ready to leave for the Garden. Did I say this wasn't going to change the plan? Consider it said." He turned to Regan.

"I left your partner taking a snooze in my living room, while I slipped out the door."

"He was up late last night," Regan drawled.

Santo, nervous and irritable was standing. His nose had finally stopped bleeding.

"I been the sucker since we started," he said. "Now it's worse. I wouldn't have had a chance with Morrow anyway, but after the sock that lousy copper gave me, Morrow will take me to pieces."

"Who cares?" Garfield smiled. "You're getting the Mex's purse, aren't you? Take a powder. We'll handle these wisenheimers."

"How?" You ain't got but ten minutes. You ought to be at the Garden yourself right now!"

Lou Garfield turned his head, looked at Schenck. Schenck pointed to Ebhart.

"He's got a Max, if that's what you want," the tall gangster said.

The blond youth, having pocketed one gun, was already screwing a silencer on the other.

Garfield got out of the way, shoving Santo for the door.

"Let him out, Ebhart."

Blondy Ebhart walked toward Regan and Keefe. Max Santo looked backward from the door, his eyes wide. Ebhart had the stage. His rod was ready.

"Get the hotel gumshoe up there with 'em," Ebhart ordered. "And

what about addin' Hanley to the collection?"

"Cut it out, Fritz!" cried the swarthy thug.

"I'm getting out," called Santo. "Shut up while I open this door."

He opened it and started out. They heard a grunt, an oath. He tumbled backward. The door swung wide. Something jumped out of the way, and then Joey Sprague's head and shoulder appeared around the doorframe and a gun smoked from his hand.

Garfield staggered, lost his Luger and sprawled headlong after it. Schenck yelled to Ebhart as Regan leaped for the bed where his own revolver lay. As the blond young thug came about fast, Mort Hanley was pulling out his own automatic. "I been waitin' for this!" he said grimly and shot Blondy Fritz Ebhart in the back of the head, three times, taking practically everything away but his jaw.

The rest of Blondy hit the rug, landing on Garfield who had himself landed on Santo, who had fallen on the house dick. The floor was a tangle. Schenck, Hanley, Regan and Keefe however were still on their feet.

And Regan had his gun! He fired at Hanley. The swarthy killer waltzed backward to the bed, sat on it, grinned, and emptied his gun in the direction of Regan and Rickey Keefe.

THE gambler threw up his hands, tumbled forward, and joined the collection on the carpet. Joey Sprague dropped Schenck with one well placed shot he managed somehow to get in as the men fought over the floor, just as Regan gave Mort Hanley a slug in the stomach that straightened him out, loosened him on the edge of the bed. Hanley's gun slid off, then he slid off himself—and there were seven men,

alive, dead and wounded, on the floor.

Sprague was on his feet, too, standing in the doorway.

"Watch Garfield!" he yelled.

Regan kicked out at the promoter, not shooting because of Rickey Keefe. His toe missed the upraised Luger, grazed Garfield's cheek, rose high in a punt. The shots grazed his pants as he slipped and fell. He got hold of one of Garfield's ears and nearly twisted it off, at the same time using his gun as a hammer.

Sprague's "He's cold," stopped the beating.

Regan stood up.

"I started thinking how I'd never liked that big ape, and faked a nap," Joey Sprague said. "He got a phone call and came here."

"Yeah," said Regan. "He was backing the works. Keefe was leveling. We got 'em all right here like a bunch of chickens." He hoisted Rickey Keefe by his armpits as Sprague picked his way into the room, scowling curiously, holstering his gun.

"Hey, you!"

The gambler opened his eyes. He was bleeding from the mouth. "I could use a doctor," he said.

"The phone, dope!" Regan snapped to Sprague. "Then call the cops."

Joey Sprague put in two calls while Rickey Keefe passed out and was carried by Regan to one of the beds. Max Santo, meanwhile, had recovered from the belly jab at the door and was coming to his feet. He gazed at the muzzle of Sprague's gun, hypnotized.

"I never wanted any part of it," he mumbled. "Garfield sucked me in. He had O'Day's murder bought and paid for before I heard of it. I'll take a plea as accessory and turn State's evidence. What do you say to that?"

"You're a lying heel," Regan's plump little partner sneered. "Get over on that bed, face down."

Santo shrugged and obeyed orders. Sprague leaned over Ed Schenck, whom he had only wounded, and hit him in the face with his free fist.

"That's for Barney O'Day!" he said fiercely. "He gave me a good tip once. Wait till the cops roll up their sleeves."

Schenck lay back and said nothing.

Regan was at the door. "Listen, I'll be back in a half hour," he announced rapidly. "You won't be cleaned out before then. Shoot Keefe to a hospital and give the boys a story."

Sprague grinned. "Soft, huh? Should I phone Madison Square Garden and tell 'em to make it an amateur night?"

"Suit yourself."

In the corridor Regan saw doors

opening and people staring and calling back and forth. He closed the door behind him and walked to an elevator, paying no attention to anyone. The lobby downstairs was crowded. Revolver shots are audible quite a distance.

A bluecoat tried to grab Regan, but the redhead ducked him and escaped by the side door. He grabbed the first taxi in sight. His reflection in its glass made him blink his eyes.

"Cripes, Jack, if you're a rod," the driver protested, "take another hack! I got a wife and—"

"Shut up," snapped Regan. "I'm a cop." He climbed into the cab and slammed the door.

"Well? Where to, Chief?"

"The Times Building," Regan said.

He settled back as they pulled away from the curb. Marilyn would be anxious—he must not keep her waiting.

IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

DEATH TAKES NO VACATION

A Novelet of Diamond Doom

By PHILIP KETCHUM

AND MANY OTHER BREATH-TAKING MYSTERY STORIES



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Famous Crimes

The JEALOUS-CRAZED KILLER!

A BUNDLE CONTAINING THE TORSO OF A MAN'S DISMEMBERED BODY WAS FOUND BY A FATHER AND TWO SONS WHILE THEY STROLLED ONE SUNDAY AFTERNOON DURING JUNE, 1897, THROUGH A LONELY WOODS NEAR THE OUTSKIRTS OF NEW YORK CITY.

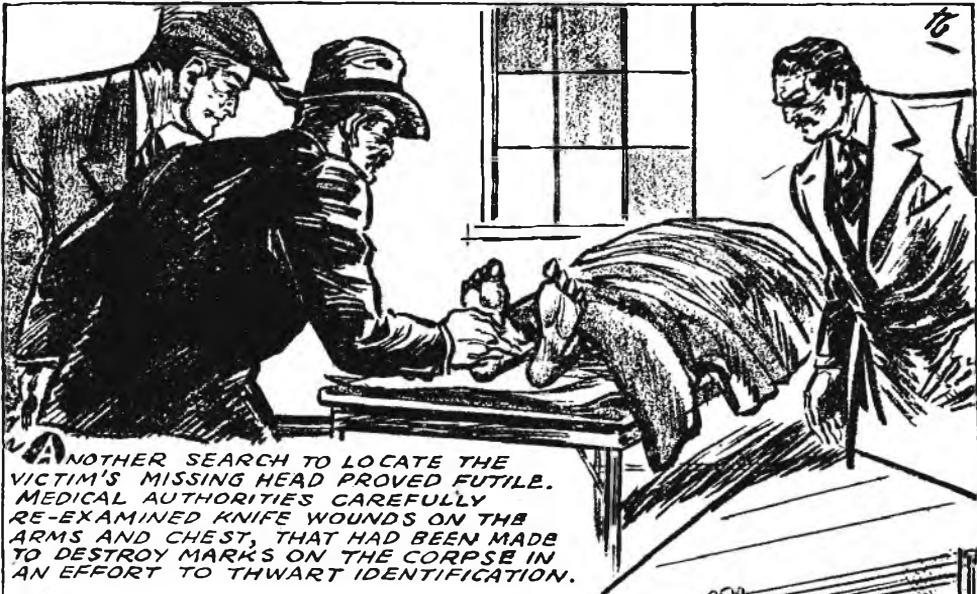
HORRIFIED AT THIS GRUESOME DISCOVERY, THEY HASTENED TO NOTIFY THE AUTHORITIES. THE POLICE LEAPED INTO AN INVESTIGATION AND SOON ALL FRAGMENTS OF THE DISMEMBERED BODY, EXCEPT THE HEAD, WERE FOUND.

THE PARTS WERE LOOSELY WRAPPED IN A RED OILCLOTH, THAT WAS MARKED WITH A VERY DISTINCTIVE DESIGN, AND OVER THIS WAS A HEAVY BROWN WRAPPING PAPER, CARRYING THE TRADE MARK OF A STORE IN NEW YORK. QUESTIONING THE STOREKEEPER, THE DETECTIVES WERE INFORMED THAT THIS QUALITY OF PAPER WAS USED BY THE HARDWARE DEPARTMENT TO WRAP SAWS. THIS INFORMATION CORRESPONDED WITH THE DEDUCTIONS OF THE DETECTIVES, AS THE BUTCHERY OF THE CORPSE INDICATED THAT A SAW HAD BEEN USED IN DISMEMBERING THE BODY.



UNABLE TO TRACE THE PURCHASE OF THE SAW, THE DETECTIVES DECIDED TO CONCENTRATE ON THE OILCLOTH CLUE IN AN EFFORT TO IDENTIFY THE VICTIM. FINALLY, AFTER VISITING HUNDREDS OF STORES, INVESTIGATORS FOUND A STOREKEEPER IN LONG ISLAND CITY WHO REMEMBERED HAVING SOLD SOME OF THE CLOTH STAMPED WITH THIS DISTINCTIVE DESIGN, TO A DARK-COMPLEXIONED WOMAN A FEW DAYS BEFORE THE BODY WAS FOUND. THE MERCHANT DID NOT REMEMBER HER NAME OR ADDRESS ---- ONLY HER DESCRIPTION AND THAT SHE SEEMED TO BE IN A HURRY WHEN MAKING THE PURCHASE.

HOWEVER, IN SPITE OF THE TIRELESS EFFORTS OF THE DETECTIVES, THE AUTHORITIES WERE UNABLE TO MAKE ANY FURTHER PROGRESS TOWARD SOLVING THE CRIME.



ANOTHER SEARCH TO LOCATE THE VICTIM'S MISSING HEAD PROVED FUTILE. MEDICAL AUTHORITIES CAREFULLY RE-EXAMINED KNIFE WOUNDS ON THE ARMS AND CHEST, THAT HAD BEEN MADE TO DESTROY MARKS ON THE CORPSE IN AN EFFORT TO THWART IDENTIFICATION.

THEN, ONE DETECTIVE NOTICED THE PECULIAR SHAPE OF THE MAN'S FEET ---- THEY WERE FLAT AND SPREAD OUT ABNORMALLY. THE SOLES WERE COVERED WITH HEAVY CALLOUSES

"SURELY," OBSERVED THE KEEN-EYED SLEUTH, "THIS MAN WORKED IN A TURKISH BATH, AND ----". AN IMMEDIATE CHECKUP OF BATH ESTABLISHMENTS BROUGHT FORTH THE FACT THAT A YOUNG MAN NAMED WILLIAM GULDENSUPPE, A RUBBER, AT A THIRD AVENUE PLACE IN NEW YORK, HAD SUDDENLY DISAPPEARED A FEW WEEKS BEFORE THE CRIME



ABOVE -
MRS.
AUGUSTA
NACK

BELOW -
MARTIN
THORN

AT GULDENSUPPE'S BOARDING HOUSE, DETECTIVES NOTICED THAT THE LANDLADY, MRS. AUGUSTA NACK, RESEMBLED THE WOMAN WHO WAS REPORTED TO HAVE PURCHASED THE RED OILCLOTH.

UNDER QUESTIONING, SHE BROKE DOWN AND CONFESSED A SORDID STORY OF LOVE-MAD JEALOUSY. ANOTHER BOARDER, MARTIN THORN, HAD MURDERED GULDENSUPPE, FOLLOWING A VIOLENT QUARREL OVER THE COMELY MRS. NACK. BOTH MEN WERE INFATUATED WITH HER, AND THE LANDLADY FAVORING THORN, HAD PARTICIPATED IN THE GORY DEED TO RID HERSELF OF THE QUARRELSOME SUITOR. THEY HAD DISMEMBERED THE BODY AND ATTEMPTED TO DESTROY THE EVIDENCE OF THEIR CRIME.

MARTIN THORN WAS ELECTROCUTED AND MRS. NACK WAS GIVEN A FIFTEEN YEAR SENTENCE FOR TURNING STATE'S EVIDENCE.

THE FAT MAN

Desert Doom Follows in the Wake of a Jewel Thief Until Deering Gets a Fourteen Carat Idea!

By **ROBERT J. PEARSALL**

Author of "Color of Doom," "Grim Finish," etc.

"HOW long? In the name of heaven how much longer can he stand it?"

Upon Sandi's heat-struck brain the question pounded maddeningly, parching and tormenting it as the burning, sickening sands tortured his feet. How long could Deering stand it?

How long can Sandi himself stand

Sandi had dropped it, according to plan, with a sputtering, futile motor.

That part had been easy enough. But this interminable tramping through blistering sand, in the stifling heat, was a different matter. Sandi hadn't thought it would be as hard as this.

He clenched his fist, muttering. He was fit as an athlete, tall, muscu-



He flung the revolver forward

it? He had fought vainly against that thought. The monotony of the first question had become intolerable, but the second terrified him.

Still they tramped painfully on, through thorns and sand, under the blighting sun.

Sandi was in the lead. Deering trudged behind, *kept* trudging behind. Far back on the desert, on a sheltered flat, lay the plane where

lar, hard as a board. Deering was fat, grotesquely fat. His ponderous, quaking belly reached almost to his armpits so that he walked, or rather waddled, with thin arms projecting queerly. His legs were slim, appearing ridiculously inadequate for the round lump of fat they carried. It seemed impossible that such a man could stand the heat and exertion. Yet he followed along uncomplaining

and quiet; like a patient, hungry dog.

Sandi felt for his gun and knife. How he longed to finish the business that way! Only the boss had said, "Don't kill him. Never kill anybody. Let 'em die."

That was how it had been plotted when the Los Angeles "Police Teasers" had learned that Deering, a jewelry salesman, was flying East with a hundred thousand dollars in jewelry samples in his belt. Deering was to be steered to Sandi, a private pilot, who would offer him speed and cut rates. And when they were down in the Mojave desert, Sandi was to walk him until he dropped.

"And when he's down," said Vandeleur, the Teasers' big shot, "take the stones and hike for the Colorado River and the railroad. You'll be all right, but whatever happens stick to our rules—don't kill him, let him die."

Murder will out, but everything else can be hushed. Such was Vandeleur's creed. And so far it had worked. Local police and Federals were trying hard to discover who was responsible for the revival of big-time crime in L. A. and vicinity, but anything but murder could be covered, said Vandeleur, and it seemed that was the case.

And out here on the desert, with only buzzards for witness, Vandeleur's orders still bound Sandi. In spite of his urgent desire to whirl, shoot, and end this mockery and this torture.

ONLY toward the end of this third day, it seemed as if agony would master Sandi. His lips were bleeding, his tongue swollen, his body a furnace. His canteen had been empty since morning, and his body was well-nigh empty of moisture, too. He was reminding himself how buzzards and wandering coyotes would pick Deering's bones past recognition, and was reaching for his revol-

ver when from behind came a gurgling sound.

Glug—glug—glug! When Sandi turned, Deering had his canteen to his lips in pretense of drinking. It must be pretense, for Deering's water must have all gone yesterday! They had started with a canteenful each, and Deering had drunk more freely than Sandi. But Deering smacked his lips and made a joke, and for the moment Sandi put aside his murderous intention in sheer befuddlement.

"Don't kill him. Let him die," Sandi's lips moved soundlessly.

Faster and faster he walked, for surely he, all bone and hard muscle, could tire out this fat man yet. He never looked back, but knew Deering must be nearing the end of his tether, for Sandi was nearing the end of his own. And then they were entering the real desert, where not even cacti nor the flaming yucca, struggling in parched arroyos, broke the eternal sweep of the sand.

Living, moving sand. Sand that invaded the province of the air, and opened like flour beneath the men's feet, but dragged at their tired legs as would a clinging morass. And ahead was worse, for they could see the south wind playing with the light soil, unfolding pestilential banners of yellow dust, launching sandwhirls to right and left in malignant assault on any form of life.

And still Deering's feet slogged up and down behind Sandi. How long? How long? Suppose he lasted until they entered the smother of dust? Fear pulsed maddeningly in Sandi's brain. *There* was death, but to the south was life, running water, a railroad.

He would do it now! To hell with Vandeleur! With no witnesses but those grey, grim carrion birds, following, ever following, what did it matter whether Deering died or was killed? Sandi would do it now, but as he reached stealthily for his gun,

from behind him came the most maddening thing yet—a shrill whistle!

Sharp and clear, a carefree, ribald melody, as from lips moist with the iced drinks of Hollywood's Brown Derby. This from Deering! And Sandi's lips were the center of his agony. They were parched as desert bones, save where dust oozed from dust-caked membrane.

Sandi whirled and stared. Bewilderedly, he brushed his red-rimmed eyes. Here on the desert where water was life and where there was no water, Deering's moon-shaped face was jovial as a barkeeper's. Deering stopped whistling, and his rotund body—not quite as rotund as it had been—quivered strangely as he chuckled.

“YOU don't seem to be enjoyin' this, Sandi.”

“Enjoyin'—” Sandi's croak could get no further.

“Now me, I'm thinking of them hungry buzzards up there. All the time followin', followin', and prayin' to their bird-god, 'Let 'em die—let 'em die.'”

Sandi's heart thumped. “Let 'em die,” he croaked.

“Of course! Of course! And we don't die.” Deering chuckled and winked meaningly.

God in Heaven! Deering *knew* what had been planned for him, and why! Paralyzing fear seemed to spread outward from Sandi's heart, set his muscles twitching.

Deering's face seemed to turn into a Gargoyle mask, twisting with mockery, and he worked his lips and spat—*spat* on the desert sand. Spat freely!

To Sandi, the universe turned dead, framing that incredible monster Deering, who had cheated death, cheated the desert, cheated him. Cobra-swift, he flung the revolver forward, pulled trigger. It clicked harmlessly once; again. Deering was coming forward in a fast waddle.

Sandi dropped the gun, and before Deering could reach him, he thumbed his knife open and struck murderously.

He struck low, where no bones would be in the way. The knife met resistance, then sank to the haft. A hand gripped Sandi's shoulder, flung him sprawling. But that one thrust had done its work, he thought. And as he whirled up, his eyes went to Deering's bulging paunch.

Like a piledriver blow, amazement drove the breath from him. From the wound he had made, *water* was flowing.

Water dribbled and steamed on the hot sand. Water for which Sandi's tissues were perishing. Sandi never knew how he got to his knees, trying to catch that water in his hand, to lap it.

The flow ceased. A heavy hand clamped on Sandi's shoulder. Deering held him easily with that one hand, while his other hand closed the rent Sandi's knife had made.

“No drink yet, Sandi. No drink for you until—”

Sandi shrank under the narrowed, icy eyes of the man-hunter. He began to tremble.

“Who are you? What—”

“Name's Mattson. Maybe you've heard of Mattson.”

“You, Mattson! A Fed—just come to the Coast!”

“Yeah! I thought you might've heard of me.”

Sandi stammered, shrinking from the real issue—that of Mattson's purpose here.

“But why—why ain't you dead?”

“With sixty feet of rubber hose filled with water inside my shirt? And your cartridges in my pocket?” Deering laughed shortly. “I emptied your gun last night. Now, Sandi, I've got you. Everything you know, I'm goin' to drain out of you, till you're as dry as this desert. Everything you know about the Police Teasers you're goin' to write.”

From a pocket he drew pencil and paper and thrust them at Sandi.

SANDI snarled. "You louse! You think so."

"Oh, don't bother cussin' me. It was mostly the Chief thought this up. But it was simple enough once we knew the Teasers' rule, 'Don't kill 'em, let 'em die.' An over-fat jewelry salesman, flyin' East with a fortune—naturally, he'd be allowed to die on the desert. So I was built up—two ways. In my waistline and also as a jewelry salesman, with jewels from the five and ten. Now, Sandi, you're goin' to talk."

"The hell I am!" But Sandi was shrinking.

"And you're goin' to tell the truth. You're goin' to write answers to questions that I'll ask—and I'll know the answers to some of them. You're goin' to tell me enough about Vandeleur and the Teasers for us to drag 'em all in. If you slip on a single

question that I know the answer to, no water for you. And I'll walk you and walk you till you're done for. Then I'll let *you* be buzzard food."

"You—you've got water yet?" mumbled Sandi.

Deering let some slip from under his thumb, and Sandi fairly pawed the air. "For God's sake, don't—don't waste it."

"Then you'll write—*right*," said the Federal man grimly.

Sandi hesitated, then something drifted between the flaming sun and himself. The somber flapping of great wings came to him. The carrion birds were flying low. Sandi shuddered uncontrollably.

"I'll write," he croaked. "Give me a drink first so I can breathe without burnin' up, and I'll write."

But the man-hunter grinned. "This ain't the Brown Derby, fella. Out here, drinks is pay in advance, and you'd better start payin'—or writin'—*now*."

IN NEXT MONTH'S ISSUE

JUMBLED JUSTICE

A Smashing Crime Novelet

By WILLIAM DEGENHARD

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By
GEORGE A.
McDONALD

Author of "A Date With Doom,"
"Whispering Death," etc.

CHAPTER I MISSING MEN

SOMEHOW the case didn't ring true to Dan Hartley. It wasn't that the evidence didn't jibe. The trouble was that it jibed too perfectly, fitted like the pieces in a finished jig-saw puzzle. The tall, lean-jawed detective-lieutenant was suspicious of cases that were solved so easily.

He moved around the third floor workroom, blue eyes roaming restlessly, trying to find something tangible that would support the doubt in his mind. He studied the position of the overturned chair, examined again the scratches on the window sill. His bushy brows tangled in a scowl. The rope marks and the bits of hemp on the chimney up on the flat roof had seemed to clinch the case. If that didn't, the absence of footprints or ladder marks in the

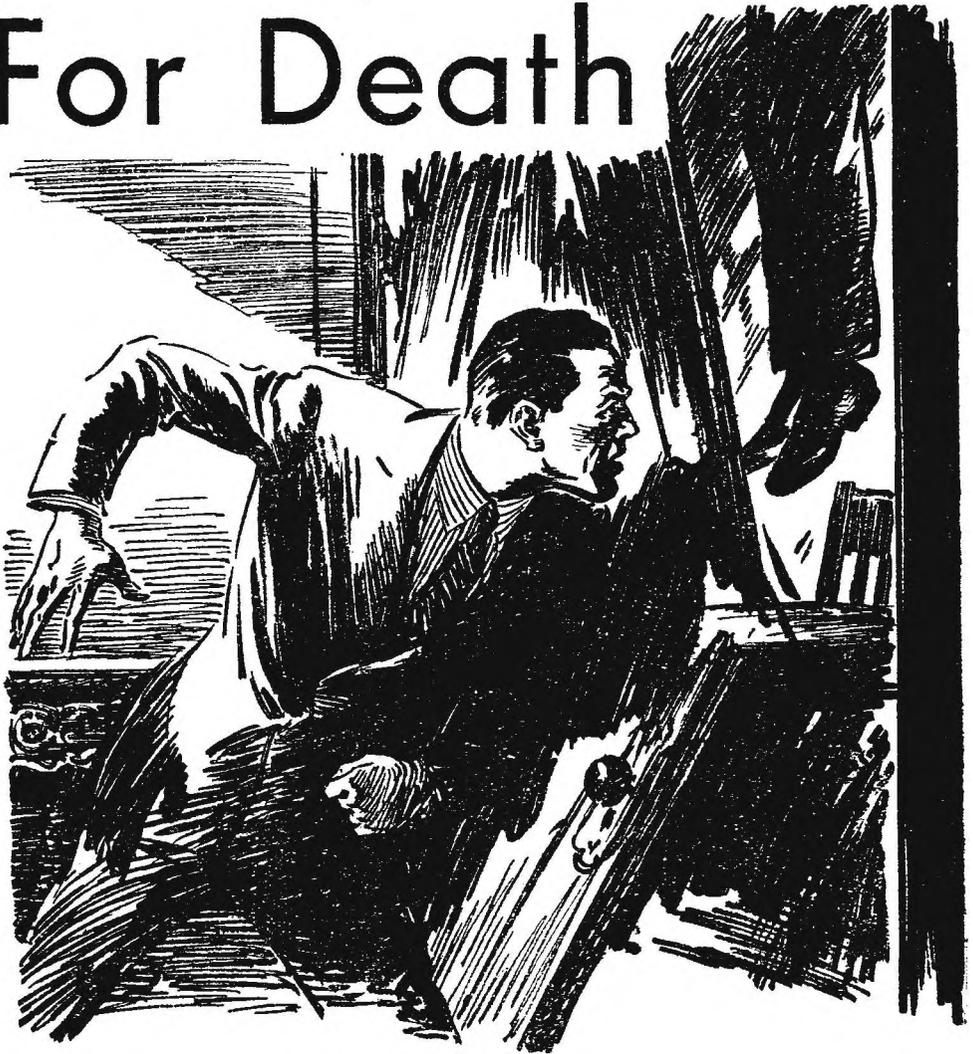


ground below the window, confirmed the theory.

Dan Hartley shrugged his wide shoulders. It sounded screwy, but it had to be that way. The kidnaper had climbed to the back porch, then up to the flat roof. Tying a rope to the chimney he had lowered himself to the wide window ledge, dropping into Joel Roderick's study and workroom.

Detective-Lieutenant Hartley Plunges into

For Death



Hartley's rush carried him into the room

Then he had either slugged the missing publisher unconscious or doped him.

After that it was easy.

Fastening the rope to Roderick's body, the snatch artist had climbed back to the roof, hauled his victim up, then carted him over the roof, down to the porch and lowered him to the ground. A car, parked in the deserted street in back of the big

house, had probably been waiting.

Hartley leaned against the window frame, drawing absently at his dead pipe. Swiftly he reviewed the facts.

Joel Roderick, wealthy publisher and jewel collector, had gone up to his workshop as usual, after dinner the night before. His wife, Vida, had read for awhile in the living room. She had gone up to the third floor

Action in Pursuit of a Murderous Kidnaper!

a little after nine, talked with her husband for a few minutes.

Roderick had been working on a stack of manuscripts then. Mrs. Roderick had left him and retired early, with a bad headache. Her maid had brought her a sedative and she had slept soundly all night. She had discovered Roderick's disappearance next morning when she had discovered that his bed in the adjoining room hadn't been slept in. She had gone up to the third floor, to find the disordered room empty.

Allan Jarold, the publisher's brother-in-law, had attended the local movie show. He had arrived home around eleven, had seen the light still burning in Roderick's workroom. He had gone right up to bed. He slept in the wing of the house farthest removed from the scene of the kidnaping, so had heard no sound of a struggle. Nor had the servants, who slept on the first floor, heard the kidnapers.

That was what bothered Dan Hartley most. Granted that the snatchers had worked with clocklike precision and the utmost of care and silence, it didn't seem reasonable that someone hadn't heard a noise. The big lieutenant frowned at the note, printed in a disguised hand, directing the family to await instructions and to comply with them if they wanted to see Roderick alive again. The note had been left on the table with the manuscript Roderick had been reading.

Hartley rapped his pipe bowl on the heel of his hand, stuck it in his pocket. His voice was flat and toneless as he said to Sergeant Grady:

"Guess we've covered everything here, Sam. Take the boys back to Headquarters. Have someone go over this note for prints. Make a check on that red hair we picked up. It's probably Mrs. Roderick's—it's about the same shade of red—but study it under a glass; the root

looks funny. I want to ask a few more questions and nose around out back a little, before I come down."

Detective-sergeant Grady flicked a salute, pounded stolidly out of the room. He thought his superior was screwy to be doubting the evidence they had picked up. But he knew Dan Hartley was a smart detective, the ace of the local force. He had seen Lieutenant Hartley's hunches work out before.

Vida Roderick, her pale face framed in a halo of smoothly combed red hair, stood in the living room door as the lieutenant's tall figure came down the stairs. Hartley judged she was about thirty-five, probably ten years younger than her husband. He knew they had been a devoted couple. No possibility of the lovely, grief-stricken wife being an accomplice could exist.

Allan Jarold, her brother, who stood beside her, was almost automatically ruled out. He was a skinny, blond-haired man, a few years younger than his sister. Jarold had some money and did a lot of traveling, living with the Rodericks when he wasn't abroad. He got along nicely with Roderick and sometimes acted as the publisher's agent in buying precious stones when in Europe.

RIGHT now, Jarold had a bad case of jitters. His face was ghastly, he acted as badly broken up about Joel Roderick's disappearance as was the publisher's wife.

"Are there any clues, Lieutenant?" Jarold asked. "Didn't you find anything that will lead to the capture of Joel's kidnapers? God! It gives me the creeps. Daring to snatch him, with half a dozen people asleep in the house. The fiend who got Joel is no ordinary criminal, Lieutenant. Someone with brains and devilish ingenuity committed that crime."

"You're telling me?" clipped Hartley. Then he shook his head. "Nothing much in the way of clues. The note may tell us something. I'm no expert but I make it a woman printed that little message. We have a couple other things that might give us a line on who pulled the job. It shapes up about like I told you. He was evidently dragged up to the roof, then down the back-way. I'm going to check and see if there was a car out there for the getaway."

"Please find him!" Vida Roderick pleaded tearfully. "Don't let anything happen to Joel."

Hartley nodded somberly, pulled out his pipe again, hung it in the corner of his mouth.

"There's some queer angles, Mrs. Roderick," he said. "But I guess we can straighten them out."

THE housekeeper's round, red face had a scared, weepy expression as Hartley strode through the long hall to the back of the house. He saw the trim, shapely figure of the maid in the kitchen, stared at her for a second. It wasn't the nifty, silken-clad legs below her short black dress that creased the corners of the detective's blue eyes. Something about the piquant, olive-tinted face framed by black hair, topped by the perky little white cap, struck a faint note in Hartley's memory.

It was just a flickering thought, that refused to crystallize. Dan Hartley shrugged, then went out the back door.

He crossed the lawn, went out the drive, halted at the edge of the street, dragging spasmodically on the cold pipe. His eyes slitted on the oil spot in the road, almost in front of the drive. The oil looked fresh. So did the print of the tire tread just ahead of it. Fresh, as if the kidnap car had stood awhile, dripped oil for the tire to pick up when the

jallopy started off with Roderick a prisoner.

Hartley moved along the edge of the lawn, pulled an old envelope from his pocket and started to make a crude sketch of the pattern of the tread from the print. He hunkered down to get a better perspective. A faint scar showed across one print, as if the tire that made it had been damaged. The detective leaned forward to check it more closely. As his head bent, his grey fedora was suddenly whipped from his head.

Instinct prompted Hartley to fling himself full length in the road. His eyes stabbed at the hat, spotted the neat hole drilled through the crown. He rolled swiftly, back toward the grass.

Dirt kicked up in his face as he crawled and scrambled for the shelter of a clump of bushes near the edge of the lawn.

His brain started to race. Someone was gunning for him with a silenced rod! He calculated his former position swiftly, while his hand was snaking a .45 pistol from a shoulder clip. Judging from the trajectory of the bullet, the sniper must have been near the left rear corner of the house, to have drilled that hole in Hartley's grey snap brim.

Smoky eyes raked the building, but not a sign of life showed there. His own lightning-fast scramble and draw had driven the assassin to cover. Hartley crept around the bush, his bleak glance still riveted on the house as he scooped up his hat and started a zigzag course toward the old mansion. He knew the chase was futile. But he grimly hoped the killer would risk another shot. The puff of smoke might betray the assassin's position.

But no further shots were fired. Hartley's long legs swung around the corner, searched the ground for footprints, an ejected shell, anything

that might give a hint as to who tried to pot-shot him.

His lean face had a grim, bleak look as he turned back to the door. Suspicion that the kidnaping was a phony crime was deepening into conviction. Snatch artists wouldn't hang around the scene of a job to see what happened. Nor would a professional risk trying to kill a police officer unless cornered. There was more to Roderick's disappearance than just a snatch for ransom money. Some deeper, more diabolical plot lay behind the kidnaping.

Hartley thumbed the hole in his hat. Muscles ridged along his lean jaw. He knew now the calibre of the criminal he was trailing; knew that he was up against a ruthless, cunning enemy who wasn't going to let the life of a plainclothes man stand in the way of success of his plan.

Dan Hartley's lips thinned in a mirthless grimace. A twelve-fifty skimmer ruined on him. Two inches lower and the skull beneath it would have been ruined, too.

A CHILL went down the detective's spine. He was going to have to watch his step. The two-inch differential might not be there the next time.

Hartley dropped his hat on the table in the hall before he went into the living room. He shook his head in answer to the mute question in Vida Roderick's eyes.

"Nothing out there to amount to anything," he said tersely.

Her hazel eyes clouded with tears, her slim, pointed fingers tore at a wisp of lace in the lap of her dress. Hartley looked around.

"Where's your brother, Mrs. Roderick?" he asked suddenly.

"He went down to the cellar to get some brandy. He thought it would help my nerves—and his own, too. Allan feels terribly. He and Joel were like brothers. The poor

boy has been almost sick since it happened."

Hartley checked with that statement when Jarold came in a minute later. The blond man's face had a greenish tinge, his hands shook perceptibly as he put a bottle of fine old brandy on the table.

"You look like a drink would do you some good, young feller," the detective commented. Jarold gave him a sickly grin.

"Guess you rate me as a sissy, Lieutenant," he said apologetically. "It's mostly nerves. My stomach gets upset when my nerves are jittery. I've always been that way. Makes me feel like a damned weakling."

Hartley nodded. When he had been overseas he'd seen bigger men than Allan Jarold show the same symptoms. Some of them had brought home decorations for bravery. Others had proved to be cowards. It didn't mean anything either way.

He accepted the glass of brandy that Jarold gave him. A little color came into Jarold's cheeks as he tossed down his own glass of the fiery liquor. Mrs. Roderick barely touched her lips to her glass.

Hartley hooked his elbows on the back of a Cogswell chair, rested his weight on them, his lean face a somber mask.

"Someone who knew this house pretty well pulled this job," he said abruptly. "Is there anyone of your acquaintances who would have a reason for hating your husband?"

Vida Roderick's eyes opened wide on the detective's face. Then her glance darted to Allan Jarold in a startled, surprised look. The blond brother-in-law fooled with his glass a minute. Then he looked up. He started to talk in short, jerky sentences.

"No use in our being polite fools," he rasped. "Our suspicions may be

correct, Vida." His weak chin stiffened, his tone was defiant as he went on.

"We think Joel's partner, Brad Carper, may know something about this. We told you Joel got a couple of crank letters about some books he was planning to publish. He thought they were from crack-pot authors. But I'm not so sure. Carper and Joel had been quarreling about the publishing policy of the firm. Joel wanted to go after the circulating library trade. Brad Carper wanted to stick to the old, conservative stuff, in spite of the fact that they'd lost money for two years on that type of stuff.

"It wound up by Carper closing his bachelor flat and starting on a cruise. He said unless Joel changed his mind about printing hot love stuff, exposés and books like that, that they'd split the firm when Carper got back. I'm wondering if those first notes, which we couldn't find today, weren't written by Carper."

Hartley looked thoughtful. He wished he'd had a chance to see those crank notes. Jarold said they had been threats of trouble for Roderick if he published some of the manuscripts he had under consideration. There might be an angle there at that. Hartley asked some questions about the questionable manuscripts. Neither Jarold nor his sister knew much about the business. Some of the stuff was trashy. Some scripts were loaded with dynamite, Jarold said. Roderick had admitted he had one manuscript that would blast the city administration out of City Hall.

The police lieutenant thumbed his chin. He knew Carper casually. Joel Roderick's partner had the reputation of being stubborn and hot-headed. The detective remembered the kidnap note in the disguised feminine hand. Carper was quite a

playboy, he had a lot of girl friends, some whose reputations were not too immaculate.

"Any other reason for suspecting Carper?" Hartley asked tonelessly. "A business split-up is hardly a motive for a crime like this."

"Brad was sore as hell because Joel outbid him on the Twin Star diamond, last month," Jarold said hotly. "It's a magnificent stone, the best in Joel's collection. He didn't know Carper was after it because Brad had a proxy bidding for him. But Carper swore Joel knew, and outbid him just for spite. And he swore he'd get even with Roderick for the dirty trick he'd pulled. They're both collectors of note, but they never fought about gems before. I think Carper is out for revenge."

Swift thoughts went shuttling through Hartley's head. He thought he began to see a glimmer of light in the maze. His thoughts were broken by the peal of the doorbell. A minute later, Vida Roderick gave him a quick startled look as they heard the housekeeper in the hall say:

"How do you do, Mister Carper. Step right into the living room. Mrs. Roderick is in there."

CHAPTER II

THREE TIMES IN AN HOUR



ALLAN JAROLD'S jaw went slack as he stared blankly at the big man with the unruly mop of thick, black hair, who stood in the doorway. Bradford Carper had a lean, dark face. His deep-set, brown eyes flicked swiftly and almost unseeingly over Jarold, as he nodded.

"Hello, Allan," he said curtly.

He ignored Hartley entirely, went over to Vida with outstretched hands.

"Brad!" she said. "I thought you had left town."

"I came back—to patch things up with Joel," he said gravely. "We acted like kids. I—I saw in the morning papers that he had disappeared. I came out to offer my help."

Hartley wondered if Brad Carper's visit hadn't been timed pretty closely with the shot that had just missed him. He sized Roderick's partner up unobtrusively while Carper talked to Vida Roderick in low, sympathetic tones. The bushy-haired, dark-skinned man was an enigma. Hartley couldn't tell whether Carper's solicitude was feigned or genuine.

Vida told him what had been done, introduced him to Dan Hartley. Carper's eyes probed the detective's face steadily as he fired questions at the lieutenant. Then he asked:

"What's to be done, Hartley?"

"Wait for a contact," Hartley answered. "There'll be a note or a phone call demanding a ransom. We may be able to pick up the trail then, if we haven't dug up anything in the meantime."

Vida Roderick's face went white and miserable.

"I don't know what to do, if they demand a big ransom," she said faintly. "I can't raise much cash."

"Don't worry about that," Carper said. "If they demand money, you let me know. I'll advance the cash. And don't let the lieutenant talk you out of meeting the demands. Pay first, then let the cops get the criminal. Joel's life is worth more than a few thousand of dollars in the bank. But the cops can't see it that way. It isn't their lives that are at stake."

Slow anger stirred in Dan Hartley's heart. He liked Carper less than before.

"More lives are lost through interference from outsiders in these cases than through failures of the

cops, Carper," he said slowly. "Mrs. Roderick would be crazy to turn over a big ransom without tipping off the police. Even if she could afford it—which I don't think she can."

"That's outside your province, isn't it, Lieutenant?" Carper rasped. "I said I'd take care of the financial end."

HARTLEY said nothing, but color stained his cheeks. Vida Roderick was quick to step into the breach.

"We'll raise the money somehow," she said hurriedly, "even if we have to sell some of Joel's collection. But we won't take any steps without consulting you, Lieutenant Hartley."

The big lieutenant nodded.

"Could I see that gem collection?" he asked. "I've got a screwy idea this case may hinge around the jewels your husband owns, instead of around the publishing business. I'd like to have a gander at that last stone, the Twin Star diamond."

His eyes were on Carper's face, but he found it a dark, inscrutable mask. If Carper still harbored any resentment about being outbid for the stone, he kept the fact hidden.

"Joel keeps most of the stones in safe deposit," Vida Roderick said. "But I think the Twin Star is still here."

She crossed the room, touched a concealed button in the moulding and a section of the paneled wall slid back. She twirled the knob of the hidden wall safe a minute or two, then reached in and brought out several jewel cases. Allan Jarold took them from her, brought them over to the table.

Brad Carper's face showed interest and enthusiasm as the auburn-haired woman opened the cases, displaying the scintillating gems. Hartley was no expert, but he judged the stones he saw must be worth thirty or forty thousand dollars.

Finally Mrs. Roderick came to a square, hand-tooled leather case. As the lid flew up, light sparkled brilliantly on the facets of a peculiarly cut diamond. It must have been the centerpiece in a brooch or tiara at one time, for it was too large for a ring setting.

With Mrs. Roderick's permission, Hartley picked up the stone, turned it in his hand. His heavy brows puckered in a frown, he glanced at Carper, then handed him the stone.

"I used to be on the jewel squad," he clipped. "I know something about ice. That rock don't look too hot to me."

CARPER needed but a single glance. His eyes widened on Vida Roderick's face.

"It's an imitation," he said flatly. "A darned good one, but an imitation, nevertheless. Did Joel say anything about keeping a duplicate here, to fool burglars? It's an old stunt with collectors."

"You mean—that isn't the real Twin Star?" Allan Jarold demanded. "Are you sure, Carper? We saw Joel put it in the safe himself, last week, after the auction. I don't think the safe has been opened since. Was it, Vida?"

She shook her head.

"Of course I'm sure," Carper answered, almost contemptuously.

"Joel must have known it was a fake. He'd never be fooled on a job like that."

Jarold still looked surprised and bewildered, but his sister agreed that Joel must have put the real stone in his safe deposit box. She had a key. She said either she or her brother would check the box the first thing in the morning.

Carper left a few minutes later, again assuring Vida that he wanted her to call on him for any possible help, financial or otherwise. Dan Hartley remembered he hadn't eaten

since breakfast, except for the sandwich and milk the housekeeper had fixed for him at noon.

The laboratory men should have their reports ready by now. Hartley said he'd ask the housekeeper a few questions, then beat it back to Headquarters. Vida Roderick said wanly that she thought she would try to rest.

Mrs. Dillon, the housekeeper, repeated the story she had already told, almost word for word. Her mistress had read for awhile, then had gone upstairs. The maid had brought up hot milk and a sedative around ten. The housekeeper said she had seen Mrs. Roderick going up to the third floor sometime later; she thought it was around eleven, but she wasn't sure.

Hartley checked her on that point, Vida Roderick had placed her visit to the third floor nearly two hours earlier. The housekeeper was obdurate. She hadn't seen her mistress' face and the hall was dimly lighted. But there had been no mistaking Vida Roderick's red hair nor the black and gold dressing gown she wore.

Hartley started to question Mrs. Roderick again, then remembered she had gone to lie down. He decided to let her rest; he could check the point later. He went out to the garage, draped his lanky frame behind the wheel of his sedan and started to tool back to Headquarters.

Conflicting thoughts occupied his brain as he rode down Maple and turned west on Franklin. The Roderick house was on the outskirts of the city and there was scarcely any traffic on the quiet, residential streets in that part of town. Hartley tried to shape the meager facts he had into some semblance of a theory. He knew any conclusion now would be guess work, but guesses sometimes helped.

He was deep in his thoughts when

the big, dark sedan tore out of a side street. The big bus was riding without lights, hitting all of sixty. And it was headed square for Hartley's sedan.

The detective got a blurred vision of two faces—a man's and a woman's—through the windshield. Then the quiet street abruptly became the vortex of violent action.

Hartley jerked at his wheel, cut his flivver toward the sidewalk. A cemetery wall loomed up in front of him. Swearing fervently he cut the ignition, jerked the wheel the other way, tried to ride the curb.

He was sliding from behind the wheel, toward the right hand door, when the big bus crashed him. Hartley saw it was going to be a glancing blow. His right hand still gripped the wheel and he tugged at it wildly. A giant elm tree was directly in his path.

Then he was catapulted against the door as the cars crashed. His sedan quivered and shook, hit something and came to a jarring stop that smacked Hartley forward against the dashboard. He swore again as he picked himself up, surprised that his neck wasn't broken.

ANGER seethed in his brain as he saw the dark juggernaut hurtling down the street. Hartley raked his own sedan with a swift glance. The left side was badly crumpled, the front door was twisted and hanging loose.

Without any hope of success he turned the ignition key, stepped on the starter. The motor caught, coughed explosively. It was hitting on five or six of the eight cylinders.

Stubborn wrath flamed in the big detective's eyes as he slid behind the wheel, snapped the car into reverse and backed away from the tree that had kept him from crashing the wall. A second later he was rocketing down the street, one hand

wrapped around the wheel, the other hanging onto the broken door.

Deep in his heart, he knew the chase was futile, but his brain was aflame with hatred. Two attempts on his life in two hours was rubbing it in. But he kept on; there was a chance that the crash had damaged the would-be death car, or that a tire might blow. Doggedly he crouched behind the wheel, racing through the gloom, following the zigzag course the car ahead set, through the outskirts of the city.

The big sedan hit Ten Mile Road, then leveled out, sailing up the incline that led to the Seventy-six mine, like a bird on the wing. Dan Hartley cursed morosely. The murder car was fast pulling out of sight. But his jaw was still grim as he stepped on the gas, getting every bit of possible speed out of his battered car. He took curves on two wheels, silently praying he wouldn't meet any cars coming down, for a sheer drop of a hundred feet bordered the right hand side of the road now.

Probably pursuit was insane folly, but anger still clouded his judgment. It was only a mile or two more to the mine entrance and there was no other road down. He still had a chance to pen his would-be killer—that man and woman—at the top of the mine road.

He lifted his foot from the gas pedal, let his battered car slew around the last curve. Then breath caught in his throat, his stomach started to do a flip-flop.

Ahead of him, across the road, loomed the black sedan. There was no room to swing on either side of it, no time to brake his car to keep from hitting it. And it was angled so that the crash would take both cars down the precipitous drop to the mine pit below.

Hartley's left hand jerked loose from the broken door. It swung and banged as he twisted the wheel, tried

to cut inside the derelict car. But it was hopeless. Ten yards more—then the crash that would ring the final gong for Detective-lieutenant Dan Hartley.

Thoughts tore through Hartley's brain with lightning speed. Certain death loomed ahead! A broken neck or a mangled body! The broken door, swinging wide, gave him a coherent idea. Grabbing the frame of the car he pulled and threw himself through the opening.

He lifted his arms to shield his face, tried to let his body go limp as he twisted in the air, then crashed against the hard macadam. As he slid and rolled, all the flesh seemed to tear from his bones. Then pain was blotted out as his skull hit the pavement. Dimly he heard the crash of the cars as they tumbled over the cliff. Then blackness engulfed him.

When he came to, stars twinkled above him. He blinked his eyes, tried to lift his head, then groaned and dropped it back. Pain racked his skull, but he was still alive. His neck was not broken.

A few minutes later he fought down the nausea that clawed at his stomach, and hitched himself up to a sitting position. He saw that he was in a trench by the side of the road and realized that the soft dirt at the shoulder of the pavement had partly softened his fall. Gingerly he tried all of his limbs and found that no bones were broken, unless the pain in his shoulder and hip indicated fractures. Skin was ripped from his legs and arms, his clothes were nearly in shreds. But he was still alive. He still had a chance to trap the murdering devil who had kidnaped Joel Roderick and had made three ruthless efforts to wipe out the detective whom he feared knew too much about that kidnaping.

Hartley levered himself erect. It

took all of his fortitude to keep from groaning or crying out as he started propeling his pain-racked body down the long descent to the city below. He weaved and staggered like a drunken man, and blood oozed and dripped from his cuts and lacerations.

He made the three miles down to the city. But he made it on nerve alone.

CHAPTER III

KIDNAP—AND MURDER!



DAYLIGHT was breaking in the east before Lieutenant Hartley was able to flag a car and get a lift back to his bachelor quarters. He spent a good hour bathing, washing his wounds and bandaging them. Not until then did he call the desk at Headquarters and wearily report that he'd been banged up in an accident. Then he dropped into bed like a dead man.

When he limped into Headquarters five or six hours later, he learned that Joel Roderick had been ransomed. A call had come through the desk at eleven, the night before. A woman asked for Hartley, but wouldn't leave any message. Then she had called again at nine this morning, when she had said she was Vida Roderick, and had left word that her husband was home. The kidnapers had contacted the family and demanded fifty thousand dollars. Allan Jarold had raised the money, from Joel's safe and through Carper, and had gone out to meet the kidnapers.

The money had been passed over, then Roderick was tossed out of the racing car as the snatch artists made their getaway. He was battered and bruised, either from being thrown from the car or because the kidnapers had worked on him; and he had been drugged and was still

in a stupor when Jarold had reached home with him. That was as much as the police had been able to learn.

Hartley's wide mouth twisted in a crooked grin. He said he knew just about how Roderick felt for he had taken a nose dive from a car himself, the night before.

Dan Hartley still figured the kidnap was screwy. He spent a half hour expounding that belief to the commissioner in the chief's private office. When he came out the big lieutenant's jaw had a craggy look. The kidnap squad got ready to hunt cover. The big boy was on the war-path, and someone was going to get hurt.

Hartley headed for the Roderick house, firmly convinced that he had the mystery of Roderick's kidnaping almost solved. One link was missing. Had it been Brad Carper and one of his many women friends he had seen in the murder car the night before? Or had the couple been Vida Jarold and her brother? Or Carper and the red-haired wife of the kidnaped man?

He knew his hunch might be entirely wrong. The pair in the car could have been people who hadn't appeared in the plot at all. One thing Hartley did know, and that was that he had to work fast. The criminals not only had proved themselves resourceful and daring, but they were cold-blooded killers.

Vida Roderick's face had lost its drawn, harried look when she met Hartley in the living room.

"He's back home, Lieutenant Hartley!" she said joyfully. "My husband is safe!"

There was no emotion in Hartley's voice as he said: "Yes, I heard about it."

"We tried to get you, when the call came last night. Police Headquarters couldn't reach you. Allan got fifty thousand dollars from Brad Carper and met them out on Moun-

tain Road. Poor Joel! He had been frightfully beaten. But he's alive, thank God!"

"Where is he now?" the lieutenant asked.

"He's still asleep. He had been drugged or doped and couldn't talk when Allan brought him home. We put him right to bed and he's been dead to the world ever since. I'll go up and waken him now, if I can. He should be recovered from his horrible experience by now, after more than twelve hours sleep."

"I'd like to talk to him," Hartley said evenly. "It may not be too late to pick up the kidnapers' trail."

Perplexity clouded the big detective's eyes as he watched Vida Roderick go up the stairs. His suspicions began to fade. This beautiful woman couldn't be hooked up with the crooks. She was too happy to have her husband back, even at a cost of fifty thousand dollars. Then he shook his head. He'd met she-devils who looked even more innocent than Vida Roderick.

His thoughts were interrupted by a startled cry from the second floor. Hartley's long legs carried him to the staircase in a rush. Vida Roderick's voice was shaky as she called down:

"Joel's gone! He's not in his room!"

PANIC gripped her. Her hand went up to muffle a scream, color drained from her cheeks, stark horror showed in her eyes. Sure she was about to faint, Hartley braced his body to catch her if she pitched down the stairwell.

"Hold everything, Mrs. Roderick!" he clipped. "He may have come down to the kitchen for something to eat—or gone up to the workroom."

The housekeeper ran out as she had heard her mistress' cry. She shook her head in answer to Hartley's staccato questions. Mr. Rod-

erick hadn't come down to the kitchen, she said. She hadn't seen him since he had come home.

Hartley asked where Jarold was. Vida thought he had gone down to the publishing office to see that things were all right there.

"We'll find your husband up on the third floor," the detective said, but his voice lacked conviction.

THE door to the workroom was locked. The pallor increased in Vida Roderick's face as she looked at Hartley with tortured eyes.

"He never locked his door, Lieutenant," she said huskily. "Something's wrong. I know it!"

Hartley's knuckles beat a loud tattoo against the panels. There was no response. He knocked again.

"Look out, Mrs. Roderick!" he clipped.

The big detective stepped across the hall, took a swift stride and threw his hundred and seventy pounds against the door.

Pain racked his bruised body at the impact. The shoulder he had injured the night before hurt like the hammers of hell. But the lock splintered. The door flew open.

Hartley's rush carried him into the room. He braced his feet, trying to halt Vida Roderick at the threshold. But he was too late. She uttered a choked cry, a low moan of anguish, then collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Dan Hartley felt wobbly himself. His stomach started to pitch as he stared at the thing hanging in the middle of the room. It dangled limply from a rope strung over a heavy, old-fashioned chandelier. One end of the rope was tied to the valve of a radiator.

The other end was a noose around Joel Roderick's neck. And Roderick was dead!

Hartley's narrowed eyes raked the room, photographing every detail.

He saw and memorized the position of the chair that might have been kicked from beneath Roderick's slippered feet; saw the note that was stuck behind the platen of the typewriter, saw the bruises and welts that marked Joel Roderick's purplish face. He stood there for a second or two, his lean, bony face a bitter mask. Then he galvanized into swift, smooth action.

Using his handkerchief to pick up the handset phone he called Police Headquarters.

"Send Sergeant Grady and the Homicide detail up to the Roderick house!" he told the desk sergeant. "Have the medical examiner come up in a hurry. Send along the reports on the exhibits Grady brought in for microscope and analysis work yesterday."

He cradled the phone carefully, went to the top of the stairwell and shouted for the housekeeper. She puffed up the first flight of stairs.

"Your mistress fainted," Hartley called sharply. "Bring up some smelling salts or aromatic spirits. Where's the maid? I want her to telephone for Jarold. We need him right away."

"The maid's gone," the housekeeper said wrathfully. "It was her night off last night. She hasn't come back yet. It'd be good riddance if she never came back. Humph! That Marie and her high and mighty airs."

The plump, worried woman was still muttering to herself as she went into Vida's room for restoratives.

Dan Hartley's brow was furrowed as he went back into the workshop. Roderick's red-headed wife was stirring on the floor. Kneeling beside her, the detective helplessly chafed her wrists and breathed a sigh of relief when Mrs. Dillon appeared to take charge of her mistress.

They carried Vida Roderick out into the hall. When she had been

revived, Hartley gently told her to go lie down. There was nothing she could do to help. Her shattered nerves needed rest.

When the women had gone down, Hartley carefully removed the note from the typewriter. He read it with smoldering eyes, cursed softly as he finished. It read:

Vida:

Forgive me, dear, even though I'm not worthy of it. I was caught in a web of scandal. Another woman, of course—one who made me pay exorbitantly. The ransom was part of the price I paid her confederates. I can't pay any more so I'm taking the easiest way out.

Joel.

Hartley folded the note carefully, stuck it in an old envelope in his pocket. He walked over to Roderick's body, eyed it somberly from head to foot, pulling thoughtfully at his cold pipe. Moving a little closer, he saw that Roderick's slippers, which were apparently fairly new, were badly scuffed at the toes.

His blue eyes widened as they moved upward and his glance fixed on the dead man's hands. Artistic hands they were, with long, tapering fingers that had been carefully manicured recently. But now the nails on both hands were cracked and torn.

Hartley's lean face glowed with excitement. He carried a chair over beside the body, mounted it and carefully scrutinized the rope, using a pocket glass to magnify the strands. There was a bleak expression in his eyes as he climbed down again.

Allan Jarold arrived home just as Sergeant Grady and his corps of fingerprint men, cameramen and plainclothes men arrived. The blond man ran up both flights of stairs, rushed into the room, then nearly collapsed. He took one look at the limp body. His face had a greenish tinge, his knees got rubbery. Hor-

ror weighted his voice as he gasped: "Joel—a suicide? Good Lord, Lieutenant! What could have made him do that?"

"Your guess is as good as mine," Hartley said tonelessly.

He turned to Grady. "Case every inch of the room, Sam," he ordered. "Furniture, walls, floor, and windows. And especially the typewriter—body, carriage and keys. Have Nelson take a few shots of the body from different angles, especially centering on the relative position of Roderick's feet and that chair. Then we can cut it down for the medical examiner to work on."

Jarold watched in white, stricken misery while the Homicide crew went into action. The medical examiner came a few minutes later. Jarold asked if he could leave before they took the corpse down and Hartley grunted an assent, advising him to stay around the house. He might be needed.

TWENTY minutes later the lean-jawed detective was assembling his reports. The doctor said death had been undoubtedly caused by strangulation, pointing to the red welt around the dead man's neck in proof. He said Roderick had not been dead long, not more than two or three hours.

Hartley nodded and took the reports from the fingerprint men. Mixed prints showed around the window sills and the table. The overturned chair showed prints that matched those that had been taken from Roderick's body. They had no better luck with the typewriter keys. Prints of all ten of the dead man's fingers showed on the keys and on the space bar.

Hartley scowled morosely, went over and looked over the keys himself.

"Come here, Grady!" he called excitedly. "Take a look at the 'p'

and colon keys. See how only the side of the print shows there? The other keys were hit with the ball of the finger. But only the side of the little finger hit the key, just as the side of the thumb hits the space bar."

Grady looked blank. He nodded: "Yeah, I see it. But what of it, Dan? What do you make out of that?"

"I might make out that Roderick didn't type that suicide note," the detective clipped.

"You mean—that he didn't do the Dutch? It wasn't suicide?"

"I mean it was murder! One of the cleverest I've ever run across. Perfectly planned and almost perfectly executed. The killer slipped up, though, when he sat the dead man in front of the machine and tapped out that message, by placing Roderick's limp fingers on the right keys.

Most of the letters show on the plate, but he didn't manage the little finger so well. It left a side print instead of a full one.

"And the murderer made another mistake when he hung the dead man. The hairs along the rope between the chandelier and the radiator are all pulled back, showing that there was a dead weight on the rope when it was pulled over the chandelier. If Roderick had fastened the rope, then slipped the noose around his neck, and kicked away the chair, the strands would be smooth or pressed flat to the rope.

"It was murder, Sam! No doubt about that!"

"Murder! Cripes, Dan! Kidnaped and then murdered. Somebody sure had a mad on this guy. Going to tell them downstairs?"

"Not yet." Hartley's voice had an ugly tone. "I want to sew this thing up in a hurry. I think I know all the answers."

CHAPTER IV

GIRL FRIEND



HARTLEY went around the room like a lean hound, his eyes raking every inch of the floor. Near the door he stopped, dropped to his knees and brushed up some white powder he found there. He touched it with the tip of his tongue, made a wry face.

"What is it, Dan?" Grady asked.

"Plaster, I'd say. We'll have the chemists down at the lab make sure. Come on, feller. I've got places to go."

Allan Jarold, still looking green and miserable, joined them in the hall. He asked a lot of questions going downstairs. Hartley gave him evasive answers. Vida Roderick's bedroom door was closed and Hartley said for no one to disturb her. But a few minutes later he got an opportunity to tell Sergeant Grady to post a couple men outside to make sure that no one left the house.

Down on the first floor he asked Mrs. Dillon if the maid, Marie, had returned.

"Not yet," sputtered the housekeeper. "And I'm going to tell the mistress to send her packing when she does come back."

"You won't have to," Hartley said tonelessly. "She won't be back."

"What do you mean?" Jarold asked sharply. "Has—has anything happened to her?"

"Yeah. But it happened long before she came to work for your sister. I thought she looked familiar. I checked up on some of the prints down at the Rogue's Gallery this morning. Marie, your maid, is better known to the cops of half a dozen cities as Marzelle Gautier. She's one of the smoothest female crooks running loose today. There's

a dragnet out to pick her up, right now. I had one of the boys put in a call to Headquarters. when I learned she had faded. Figured she did a getaway with at least part of that ransom money."

He turned to Jarold, asked suddenly:

"Have you heard anything from Brad Carper today?"

Jarold looked surprised. He shook his head. "I called his place from the office this morning," he said. "He wasn't there, hadn't been back since he went out with me to get the money last night. We went down to a money lender on River Street. Brad seemed to know him, for the fellow got the fifty thousand out of his safe right away without any question. Brad said it would cost Joel an extra thousand interest for twenty-four hours. Carper wanted to come along with me, but the telephone message said I would be watched and if anyone accompanied me or tried to trail me the deal was off and Joel would be murdered. I dropped Carper off near his garage. He said he thought he'd drive through the park, but I figured he meant to trail me, so I took a lot of false turns. I wonder—"

Suspicion suddenly freighted Jarold's voice.

"You don't think—he and that maid were in collusion, do you?" he asked shakily. "He knew a lot of flash people, gamblers, racketeers and that type."

"I've been doing some wondering on that subject myself," Hartley said grimly. "I'll have Grady telephone Headquarters and see if Carper can be picked up. I want to go down to the publishing office, Jarold. I'd like to have you show me around down there. We might pick up something that will throw some light on Joel Roderick's death."

Jarold assented willingly. As

they rode downtown Jarold expressed shocked surprise and wonder at his brother-in-law's suicide. There could be no reason for Roderick to take his life, Jarold insisted, unless overwork had weakened his mental balance. He asked Hartley if there was any possibility of foul play.

"Hard to tell," Hartley said tersely. "Suicides have been faked. But coming on the heels of the kidnaping, it seems kind of screwy. If his enemies wanted Roderick rubbed out, why didn't they bump him off while they had him? They could have done it after you had turned over the ransom money."

JAROLD couldn't figure the answer to that one. But he kept doggedly insisting that Roderick couldn't have had a reason for taking his own life.

They found the publishing office deserted when Jarold unlocked the door. He explained to Hartley that he had dismissed the force when Mrs. Dillon called him and told him of Roderick's death. Hartley nodded and asked Jarold to show him Roderick's private office.

They went through the big outer office, then along a corridor past a group of smaller offices. Jarold nodded his head at the opaque glass marked:

MR. RODERICK

Hartley twisted the knob, pushed open the door and halted on the threshold.

"I expected something like this," he muttered under his breath.

Jarold peered past the detective's big figure and cried out in amazement. The office looked as if a hurricane had hit it. Papers strewed the floor, drawers had been pulled out and emptied, filing cabinets were all awry. The door of the office safe swung open and most of

its contents were piled in disorderly confusion on the floor.

"What does it mean?" Jarold asked shakily.

"It means that a murderer failed to get what he wanted from Joel Roderick," Hartley clipped harshly. "He made a daring daylight attempt to find the object of his series of crimes down here."

"You think that it was one of the hot manuscripts that motivated the crime? It looks as if that's what the burglar was searching for."

"Manuscript hell," snorted Lieutenant Hartley. "This burglar was not after any manuscript. He wanted something a damned sight more valuable. He wanted—the Twin Star diamond!"

BACK at the house, Hartley looked disappointed when Sergeant Grady told him no word had been received concerning the search for Marzelle Gautier and Brad Carper. The lieutenant got on the phone himself and gave orders for to have every effort made to bring in the pair. Every available man was to be detailed on the job, he insisted.

His next move puzzled even Sergeant Grady, who watched with skeptical eyes as Hartley went out across the back lawn and strode down to the edge of the road where he had spotted the tire tracks. Grady saw Hartley punch the crown of his hat with his forefinger, put it on, and then saw him kneel by the roadside. Hartley seemed to be trying to imitate an owl as he turned his head slowly backward, keeping his body stiff as his head twisted. Finally the neck-twisting ceased. Hartley was staring directly at the house.

The big fellow was non-committal as he strode back into the house.

"I'm going to look around down in the cellar, Sam," he snapped. "Tell

your man outside that it's me down there. I don't want him mistaking me for a burglar."

Grady wrinkled his brow, then followed Hartley's imperceptible nod, and went out.

Hartley pounded down the stairs, halted a minute to orient himself. He flicked a quick glance around the big room, taking in the big, old-fashioned boiler, the coal and wood bins and the rubbish barrels and boxes around the floor. He walked across the cellar to a window near the corner of the house. Muscles tightened along his jaw as he saw a box on the floor beneath the window.

The detective climbed on the box. It creaked beneath his weight but held long enough for him to peer through the window. He nodded grimly. His crude surveying had been good. From this window a sniper would have a perfect alignment on the road where Hartley had knelt when the shot drilled his hat.

Pushing the window frame he found it swung out easily. One point in the mystery was cleared.

Dan Hartley was just stepping down from the box when the cellar lights clicked off. The big fellow wasted no time in hitting the floor. Glass tinkled in the window above him, showered down on his shoulders. He inched forward on his stomach, gun in hand, his eyes slitted to catch the blue and orange flame that would betray the position of the silenced gun.

No second shot came. The cellar was silent as a tomb. Hartley waited a full minute, then tried his pocket flash, held it at arm's length as he circled the floor with the slender cone of light. Then he swore under his breath. His little scheme had not panned out. He had laid himself open, hoping to draw the killer out. But the cautious mur-

derer was not risking a gun battle with the detective ace.

Hartley climbed to his feet, still damning himself for a dumbbell. He started a slow, methodical search of the cellar, a search that ended in one of the empty wood bins. There he picked up a smooth, lacquered contraption that looked like a set of Japanese screens made of thin panels of wood.

Exultation tingled in his voice as he said, half aloud: "That finishes it!"

He took the tall, wooden boxlike affair upstairs under his arm. The phone in the hall rang as he headed for the living room and Hartley scooped it up, spoke into the transmitter. He listened a second or two.

"Okay," he said tonelessly. "Nice work, feller. Bring her right up to the house. I'll be waiting."

He went out to the kitchen, asked Mrs. Dillon if she knew where Allan Jarold was.

"He's up with Mrs. Roderick, I think," she said. "I saw him going upstairs about fifteen minutes ago. Just as you went down cellar, in fact."

"I just wanted to know where to find him," the detective said.

He went out to the yard and found Sergeant Grady.

"Come on in, Sam," he said. "Our case is about sewed up. They picked up Marzelle Gautier with one of her boy friends. She was hiding out down at Daly's hotel. I wanted to clean that joint out six months ago. It's a rats' nest of red hots. The boys are bringing Marzie right up."

Fifteen minutes later, a squad car tooled up the drive and came to a screeching stop. Hartley was at the door as two plainclothes men got out, each gripping the arm of the flushed, flashing-eyed, black-haired Marzelle Gautier. When she saw the big lieutenant, she started to lash him with invective.

"You big tramp!" she cried. "I'll have you busted for this. You've got nothing on me! I'm not wanted for anything. These thugs of yours can't throw me around and get away with it!"

"Button your lip," Hartley said flatly. "We're not accusing you of anything. I just wanted to know why you left a nice soft job here all of a sudden."

"I got fed up with drudging in this dump, flatfoot," she snarled. "I don't have to answer to a bunch of dumb dicks every time I quit a job, do I?"

"Skip it," Hartley said wearily. He looked toward the car. "Did you bring her boy friend along?" he asked the detective.

"You didn't say anything about him," a plainclothes man said. "We wasn't even going to take him in, but he got lippy and then took a sock at Grogan when he went after the dame. We'll have him sent up, if you want him."

"Never mind," Hartley muttered. "Bring her along, up to the third floor. Grady will show you the way. I'll be up in a second or two."

Marzelle Gautier gave Hartley a funny look. She started to voice a squawk, then shrugged her shoulders. Hartley's eyes were bleak as he watched her slim, tailored figure mounting the stairs. Then he picked up the folded, lacquered panels and pounded up after them.

CHAPTER V

TORTURE MACHINE



TOPPING in front of Vida Roderick's door, Hartley knocked and stuck his head in. Allan Jarold was talking in a low, but vehement tone to his sister. They both looked a little startled as Hartley spoke.

"I'd like to have you and your brother come up to the third floor, Mrs. Roderick," he said levelly. "I think I can show you something about your husband's kidnaping and death."

Vida Roderick turned white and looked at Jarold.

"Certainly, Lieutenant," she said. "Neither Allan nor I can make ourselves believe that he committed suicide."

Upstairs, Hartley asked the red-haired widow to sit on the day bed that was against the wall. Jarold sat down beside her. Mrs. Roderick started to speak to Marzelle, but the sullen, venomous expression on the girl's face froze the words on her erstwhile employer's lips. The black-haired, dark-eyed beauty slouched back against the wall. Hartley nodded to a chair, told her to sit down. Her red lips curled scornfully, but she dropped haughtily into the chair.

The detective's eyes were circling the room but his interest seemed to center on the lintel above the door. He nodded to himself, then spoke to Vida Roderick.

"Your suspicions are correct, Mrs. Roderick," he said. "Your husband was not a suicide. He was murdered! Tortured and murdered by an inhuman fiend!"

The widow's cheeks grew ashen, words choked in her throat as she asked:

"But why—how—I don't understand, Lieutenant."

Hartley picked up the lacquered box, folded it until it formed a hollow square and fastened it. What appeared to be the cover of the tall, oblong box proved to have a round hole cut in it. The bottom end had a sliding ratchet that could raise or lower it.

"There's the death instrument," grated Hartley. "A Chinese torture box. Your husband was half

drugged when he was put in that thing. At first the bottom was fixed so he could just stand on tiptoes, with his head fitted through that hole. Then his torturers lowered the floor, trying to break him down. When they failed, the bottom was dropped. Roderick was left hanging by the neck in this death trap. His very struggles to free himself, the struggles that first made me suspect murder when I saw his scuffed slippers and his broken fingernails finally caused his death by strangulation. Then the marks around his throat made a perfect set-up for the faked suicide by hanging."

A FAINT shudder went through Vida Roderick's body. Knuckles showed white on her clasped hands. Her voice was harsh and strained as she asked:

"What did the torturers want from Joel? He had no valuable secrets."

Hartley turned, moved back to the door. Then he whisked a chair in place and stepped up on it. His fingers firmly gripped the moulding above the door, tugged and jerked at it.

He almost lost his balance as it dropped on its concealed hinges, swung down and revealed the steel drawer that had been set in the plaster behind the board. The detective pulled the drawer out and stepped down.

"Roderick's death struggle jarred down a little of the plaster," he said. "It pointed the way to the hidden cache that the killers were looking for."

He fumbled inside the steel box a second, then brought out a square leather jewel case, almost the duplicate of the one Vida Roderick had shown him the night before. Hartley flipped open the cover and stared for a second at the glittering gem inside. Then he suddenly

tossed the box. It landed in Jarold's lap.

Jarold stared at it with fascinated eyes.

"The Twin Star diamond!" he muttered. His startled eyes lifted to Hartley's face. "Why did you give it to me?" he asked. "It belongs to Vida—or probably to Brad Carper now. We sold it to him for the ransom."

The detective's face hardened as little lines etched themselves around the corners of his mouth. His voice had a harsh, rasping sound, like the noise of a file on steel as he said:

"I gave it to you, Jarold, because you wanted it badly enough to murder your brother-in-law to get it—after you had faked a kidnaping to get him so you could torture him into revealing the hiding place of the Twin Star diamond."

Jarold's face went white. He sat, crouched and tense, staring wildly at Hartley. Then screaming like a savage jungle cat he leaped from the day bed, straight at Hartley. His hand was clawing inside the waistband of his trousers.

"You are not getting another chance to use that gun," grated the detective.

He took a swift step forward and his big fist hooked viciously under Jarold's ear. The would-be killer went down like a poled ox. Hartley swung around to Grady.

"Get that gun away from him, Sam," he snapped. "I was sure I could bluff him into making a play with it. He jumped right into the hot seat when he tried that little stunt."

Then, seeing the dazed, bewildered look on Vida Roderick's face, the detective said gently:

"This is tough on you, Mrs. Roderick, but you might as well get the whole story at once. Somewhere in his knocking around your brother met and fell for Marzelle Gautier,

a hell-cat adventuress if there ever was one. Jarold probably spent all of his money on her. Marzelle wanted more. She has a handsome husband that she supports through stunts like this.

"I make it that she talked Jarold into grabbing off some of Roderick's jewel collection, the Twin Star in particular because it could be cut up and sold piecemeal for a tidy sum. Marzelle got a job here to show Jarold how to pull the job. Night before last was the set time. When you went to bed, Marzelle brought you a sedative that was doped enough to make sure you wouldn't hear anything.

"Then she put on a red wig and went up to the third floor. The housekeeper saw her, thought it was you, for your figures are about the same, and in your dressing gown, Marzelle could get away with it.

"It fooled your husband, too, long enough for her to get in and jab him with a hypodermic of dope. But evidently it didn't put him out immediately. He put up a fight and grabbed a couple of hairs out of the wig. That was another link in the solution. Our microscopes showed the hair I found was human hair, but the ends had been imbedded in glue."

GRADY was listening in rapt attention.

"So that's why you figured the kidnaping was a phony," he blurted. "I thought you were screwy then. It looked like a clear cut snatch."

"Roderick never was kidnaped," Hartley grated. "They tortured him right up here. That's how he got so bruised and beaten. He wouldn't tell where the stone was. Finally he must have passed out on them. They didn't dare turn him loose, so Marzelle figured out the kidnaping stunt. They doped him again, then

carried him down to the cellar, hoping to work on him some more.

"But Jarold sensed that I hadn't fallen for the kidnap stunt. He tried to get me out of the way twice. Once by trying to drill me from the cellar window, then again when they thought they had dropped me down the Seventy-six mine. Figuring they had handed me a one-way ticket to hell, they came back to work on him some more. They faked the kidnaping return to fool Mrs. Roderick, and also to raise some money for Marzelle. She'd done a lot of work without getting anything.

"Jarold probably figured he could buy her off with the fifty grand. But Marzie's a sticker—she wanted the Twin Star and made Jarold go after it again. I showed you what happened when they put Roderick through the Chinese torture. That finished the plan—especially when Jarold couldn't find the hiding place of the stone down at the plant, the only other spot he could think of where Roderick might have kept the stone.

"They thought the faked suicide and the note would settle the case. Vida wouldn't want her name dragged through a scandal. But they forgot that they'd tried to bump me off—and the Hartleys are part elephant. They never forget."

MARZELLE GAUTIER'S eyes were like coals, set in the whiteness of her face. Her lips flattened over her white teeth. Her voice, laden with hatred, was steady—almost mocking—as she said:

"Very, very pretty, Dick. But how are you going to prove this pipe dream in court, without any evidence?"

"Damned easy, sister," the lieutenant clipped. He turned to Jarold who was just sitting up on the floor.

"This is just a family party," he said harshly, "so I know it won't go any further. I'm going to give Jarold a little taste of his own medicine. Shove him in this torture box, Grady. We'll see if he won't tell us the truth about this matter."

Grady and a plainclothes man grabbed the pallid, shaking man. Insane terror gripped Jarold. He started to scream like a maniac.

"No—no!" he cried. "Don't put me in that thing! I saw what it did to Joel. I'll confess! We killed him! I didn't want to—she made me—she's the one to blame for it all!"

Disgust showed in Hartley's lean face as he turned away from the quaking wretch. He looked at Marzelle.

"How about it, sister?" he said bleakly. "Think his confession is evidence enough?"

Murderous fury gleamed in the eyes she turned on her partner in crime. She gripped the edge of her chair, while the color drained from her cheeks, leaving her face a strained, white, ugly mask. Then her shoulders dropped.

"That tears it, copper," she said huskily. "I should have known better than to get mixed up with a yellow rat like him. I guess little Marzelle's number is up. I danced—I guess I'll have to pay."

She crossed her shapely legs and her eyes were brooding as they fixed on her dainty, buckled pumps. She leaned forward, fingered one of the wide, rhinestone ornaments on the shoes as if to straighten it.

Suddenly she flashed into action. Slim fingers plucked at the ornament. A slender tube of glass came loose in her hand. She plunged forward, lashed out with the glass tube, raking it across Allan Jarold's wrist. He sat stupefied as Hartley made a quick grab for her.

She twisted, evaded the hand that grabbed for her wrist, and thrust the jagged tube of glass at her own throat.

"You'll never take me to the hot seat, copper!" she croaked harshly. "I'll buy my own ticket—to hell—and it's a double ticket—with a passage for this yellow—punk!"

The poison that had been concealed in the glass tube had already started to course through her veins. Jarold was writhing on the floor in agony. Her bulging eyes were fixed on him, her lips were twisted in an evil leer.

"Good-by—copper," she whispered. "Smart work—keed." Then she pitched over on her face.

Grady blinked, scratched his

bushy scalp and swore under his breath.

"**S**AY, Dan," he asked suddenly, "what about Carper? We better call the hunt off on him. He's the kind of a guy that would raise hell for false arrest if they brought him in."

"They'll never bring him in," Hartley said in a dead, tired voice. "I think they'll probably find Brad Carper at the bottom of the Seventy-six mine—where they dumped him when he went with them to ransom Roderick. I saw some other tracks up there, and I guessed that he'd been handed a ticket for death too. Only his was one way—not a two-way ride, like mine."



THE MYSTERY NOVEL OF THE YEAR!

THE BLIND SEE BEST

By MARIAN SCOTT

—in the next issue of THRILLING DETECTIVE

Change to
Mint Springs
and keep the
change!

A PRODUCT
OF GLENMORE

Ask for this quality Kentucky Straight Bourbon. It's easy on your pocketbook.

RACKETEER RETIRED



He knew how broken glass sounded, socked by a bullet

*Archie Lugano Sees the Firm Hand of Law and Order
in the Mysterious Nemesis Which Pursues
Him in His Wooded Retreat!*

By HAROLD DE POLO

Author of "Chan Takes a Chance," "Too Many Crooks," etc.

ARCHIE LUGANO leaned over toward the adjoining chair and patted his wife's scarlet-fingernailed hand.

It was pretty swell to be up here in Maine where you could get all the quiet and peace you'd wanted all your life.

A slick camp with all the conveniences where you could sit on the

porch and not hear city noises; your own hydroplane, a nifty job, down there on the sandy beach of your private lake; a positive no-worry angle about some bimbo taking a smack at you with a gat or a tommy-gun.

Lugano, who had been called New York's racket king for the past dozen years, suddenly voiced his

exuberance as he looked at that deep sapphire lake under the June sunshine with a border of spruce and pine all around it.

"Ain't we got fun, Babe!" he chortled. "Cripes, but ain't this peace *won'erful!* Just sittin' here; just loafin'; just not worryin'! I worked a long stretch for this, eh, Babe!"

"It cert'n'y is nice and peaceful, Arch," said Babe.

"An' we got it all for the rest of our lives, Babe," said Lugano. "A private lake here where we can spend half the year; some other place we'll dig up where it's warmer for fall and winter; a million bucks—yeah, a cold one thousand grand—laid out in a batch of real copper-riveted securities! This is the life, all right!"

"You're tellin' *me*, Arch?" his wife said. "These five days we been here has been the nicest in my life."

"Peaceful, Babe, peaceful," said the retired racketeer with a prolonged sigh of sheer contentment.

But as he finished his sigh, as he allowed himself a luxurious yawn, there was the tinkle of shattered glass in the window pane behind him.

Lugano knew how broken glass sounded when socked by a bullet, just as he knew that shivery ping they made when they went close to your ear. He stiffened. One had gone pretty close to his ear, all right, and not so far away from Babe's blond and elaborately curled head. Instinctively, his right hand flipped over to his left armpit—but he dropped it when he realized he wasn't wearing a rod.

"What was that, Arch?" gasped his wife, tensely.

Archie Lugano's bean had done a lot of fast working when he had been in the rackets. It worked now. His dark eyes were narrowed and his body ready for action. No second bullet came, and he looked relieved. He waved a casual, airy hand.

"Aw, just some Maine hick out shootin' a deer or a bear or a duck, or somethin'," he laughed. "Don't you worry, honey. I'm tellin' you we got peace up here."

"But this is private land," complained Babe. "The lake, all the woods around it private for miles. We don't have to stand any hick sap—"

"Listen, Babe," said Lugano, his swarthy, rather good-looking face breaking into a self-satisfied smile, "have I ever muscled in on private rackets! Private don't mean nothin', especially up here. Hell, that Scotfield kid that tipped me off to this dump even said these hicks took all the deer meat they had to have, no matter where they took it!"

His wife smiled and relaxed.

"I guess I'm still a little jumpy, hon," she said.

LUGANO again gave himself up to pleasant contemplation.

Although he had always had hundreds of henchmen under his mitt—big shots and palookas, little shots and plain punks—it struck him as funny that it had been one of the most unimportant saps in his organizations that had handed him this dope on Maine.

One of his lieutenants, Nick Parenti, had said he was going to be away for a couple of weeks on a hunting trip in the Maine woods. When Lugano had asked him how he'd got *that* idea, Parenti had told him a kid hanger-on in the laundry racket came from there and had got him all het up about one of these hunting trips.

That was the way Lugano had met Ben Scofield. Parenti had sent him around, when they got back, with a piece of this here venison they talked about. Archie had got to yapping with the kid and sort of become interested in Maine himself. It had sounded like a sweet place, with all that wild country, for a guy to get peace.

Well, he had it now, all right, and it was better even than he'd figured.

One of Lugano's agents had bought it this spring, from the widow of a wealthy Boston sportsman—this whole lake, three miles long and about two wide, with about fourteen thousand acres. A kingdom.

Kingdom was right—a peaceful

kingdom. Lugano was gonna keep it that way, too. It was thirty miles down a river before you hit a logging road, then you had to go twelve or fifteen before you got on one you could push a car over. Even after that it was about twenty miles to the nearest town. Yep, they named this country right when they called it the Wild Lands.

That was why he'd bought the plane that could carry a pilot and four passengers. A sweet ship—and a sweet pilot, too. Pete Loomis was a war ace—one of them guys that had fought for some French outfit before the U. S. had gone in—not one of them hopheads that most lads in the rackets had been. Loomis could take you off and set you down like riding on a feather bed. Cold and nervy.

His whole outfit that he'd brought up here with him was pretty good. His colored chef certainly knew his stuff and Babe said the chef's wife was the best lady's maid she'd ever had. On top of that, Lugano had the two finest rod guys in New York with him in Goofy Ellsber and Tom Belask. He could keep this place peaceful, all right.

Lugano, in this pleasant and benign mood, had one slight qualm of regret.

Too bad, he told himself, that young Ben Scofield had been rubbed out. Kind of nice, it would have been, to have the kid up here with him. He'd know about all this outdoor hooley that a guy ought to know something about, if you lived up here. Well, that's the way the rackets went. He'd only been trying to help the sap when he'd put him onto Big Butch's tommy-gun squad. It had been just bum luck that the kid had run against Mike Rossman's crew. But he'd been given a swell send-off. More flowers than any hick in Maine had ever seen, probably.

Thank Gawd him and Babe was out of rackets, anyways. He'd had a tough life, all right, and this peace—

But the door behind him, opening softly, disturbed his trend of thought. Sam, his chef, stood in the aperture, a smile on his black face.

"Pahdon me, suh," he said, "but them supplies ain't come up from Bucksville town yet. I—"

"They ain't?" Lugano snapped. "They was promised to be here yesterday. That freight agent and them guides swore we could be sure of it."

"Yassuh, I know, suh," said Sam. "I jus' come to tell you, Mr. Lugano, that I had to 'pologize for not suhvin' none o' them special anchovies fo' a' ap'tizer with yo' befo' lunch cocktail."

"Give us something else, then," said Lugano. "Them guides don't get another job from me, I'm sayin'!"

"No, suh," said Sam.

"Where's Goofy an'—where's Mr. Ellsber an' Mr. Belask?" the retired racketeer asked.

"Went out to explore de scen'ry in de woods, suh."

"Send 'em to me when they get back."

"Yessuh."

"Captain Loomis around?" Lugano asked him.

"Went out early dis mawnin' fishin' fo' trouts, suh, in that outlet de far end o' de lake."

"Uh-huh," said Lugano, with a wave of dismissal. "Tell—ask Captain Loomis to see me when he gets back, Sam."

"Yassuh," said Sam, and returned to his domain in the distant rear of the commodious camp.

LUGANO, who liked his particular brand of anchovies, used a stream of language he had learned in the New York East Side slum neighborhood where he had been born. He did a picturesque job, the gist of his talk being what he would do to the guides who had failed to deliver his provisions. His wife spoke in a soothing voice and patted *his* hand.

"Aw, hon, don't get excited. They had a awful long trip—through them woods on that log road with a horse team; then canoes up the river—"

"No hicks can doublecross Archie Lugano," her husband cut in viciously. "The bums said they'd be

here yest'day, didn't they? I paid 'em plenty gravy, didn't I?"

"I know, but—"

"What was that?"

Lugano cried out the question this time, in a voice as hoarse and tense as that of his wife had been.

"What—was—*what?*" gasped Babe, sudden fear in her big blue eyes.

Lugano was on his feet. He said, with a jaw that sagged at one corner:

"That noise like a bullet—like a bullet that hits metal!"

"You're cuckoo, Arch," said his wife, vaguely

"Cuckoo *hell*," snarled Lugano. "I know the sound of—" He broke off suddenly and yelled: "Damn you, there it goes again, an' I can't hear no gun nor see no guy nor— An' I tell you I know bullets," he finished weakly.

"Maybe it's some boob after another deer or bear or duck," suggested Babe, though she said it in the manner of one whistling in the dark.

Lugano was staring at the lake, at the sky, at the woods. He was staring wildly, probably as some of his victims had stared when they had faced tommy guns in the hands of his henchmen.

Sam, the chef, brought him spinning around as he opened the porch door. The Negro's lips were trembling as he asked:

"Who doin' de shootin', boss?"

"Shootin'?"

"Yassuh. Bullet jus' went through de kitchen winder, over my haid, whilst I was bendin' ovah de stove."

"You're—you're cuckoo," said Lugano.

"No, suh, boss. I—"

"Shut up!" snapped Lugano.

Archie Lugano, suddenly, had leaped off the porch. He stood on the soft pine needles on the ground, leaning slightly forward, his eyes on the plane. He was cooler, now, as he always was when he thought he knew where danger was coming from.

His ears detected several rapid zings made by bullets striking

through metal, and simultaneously he saw the right wing of his hydro-plane begin to dip.

"They're shootin' at the plane!" he cried.

His wife shrieked, he heard his chef moan, but his acute ear caught a few more sinister noises and his equally sharp eyes saw the right pontoon of his ship sink lower and lower into the water.

"SCRAM, Babe!" he cried.

"You—you think it's Mike Rossman's mob?" asked his wife, almost hysterical.

"Scram, I said!" said Lugano.

"You come scram, too," whined Babe.

"To hell with 'em," shouted Lugano. Then his voice rose: "There they go again!"

They saw the left wing of the plane dip, saw the pontoon under it sink, saw the plane settle down, firmly, onto the white sand of the beach.

"An' I kicked up twelve cash grand for it," breathed the retired racketeer.

"Lawsy, lawsy," whimpered Sam.

"I thought you says Mike Rossman would never follow us up here," Archie's wife choked out.

Lugano's face was grim, bitter, even a trifle ironic.

"Damn Charlie Mulcahy!" he said with a grating laugh. "When I told the crazy mick he'd have to kick in twelve grand instead o' ten, this year, for laundry protection, he had a fit. I come clean an' square with the guy an' told him I had to have the extra pair for my plane. He gives it, all right, but he says he hopes the bus sinks under me. Well"—his voice had a hollow certainty—"it sunk."

This didn't pacify Babe. It handed her more worry, if anything.

"But a legit'mate laundry chain man—a legit'mate business man, I mean—he wouldn't send no mob up here to the Maine sticks after you, would he, Arch?"

"I ain't said he would," said Lugano. "I was just sayin' what he said."

"Now we ain't nevah goin' to git

them anchovies, Mr. Lugano," wailed Sam.

"Mercy me, Mis' Lugano," chimed in Sam's wife, who had come to the door. "Them cream an' lotions was in that grocery order, too. So was that Milady's Marv'lous Mystifyah hair restorer! Miss Bellaire, which was in the Follies, says it's the mos' lovelies'—"

Archie Lugano, back on the porch, had turned his back on the lake. His swarthy, good-looking face was again composed. He shrugged broad shoulders and said nonchalantly:

"Aw, just some o' the yokels havin' a joke, maybe. Go on in an' shimmy that shaker. Let's have a drink an' cheer up."

"Gee, hon, but I wisht that Ben Scofield kid had never went an' told you about Maine," said Babe.

Archie Lugano became more composed, after he'd sipped a couple of stiff Martinis and munched his crackers and antipasto. Outwardly, he was the essence of aplomb. He had faced a lot of angles in a lot of rackets—a lot of damn tough *hombres*—and he never had lost yet.

SOMETHING funny here, all right, but he'd run into funny things before. He'd beaten funny things, too. It took a little time, that was all. Yeah, he'd find out what this new racket was, pretty soon. Some tricky Maine twist, probably. No use getting Babe nervous, though. Hell, let it ride and wait it out and have another cocktail while you rode and waited.

"Hi, Sam," he called lustily.

"Comin' suh," the chef's voice came somewhat faintly from the kitchen.

"Mix up another snort, Sam," said Lugano.

"Fo' jus' the missus an' yo'self, suh?"

"Them other bums ain't showed yet, have they?" snapped Lugano. He added, with one of his hard smiles and hard laughs: "They prob'ly know popguns was goin' off."

"Yassuh, yassuh, I— But yere
(Continued on page 104)

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(Continued from page 103)

comes Cap'n Loomis, suh," Sam said quickly.

"Where?"

"Down there by that outlet river. He's walkin' 'long the shore. He wen' in a canoe."

"Exercise is good for birds that do too much ridin'," commented Lugano. "Go make it snappy on them cock-tails."

"Yassuh, Mr. Lugano."

Pete Loomis, just then, came into Lugano's view. The airman, Lugano thought, was not walking with his accustomed swagger. There was something down-in-the-mouth about him. Lugano, who was wise enough to know he ought to keep his pilot in good humor, called cheerily:

"Just in time for a cocktail, Captain. Step right up."

Pete Loomis, although moderate in his drinking, nevertheless did enjoy a cocktail before meals, Lugano knew. This time, however, the flyer didn't answer. Instead, he walked to the plane, stuck his arms akimbo, and stood staring at the shattered pontoons.

"Hey, Captain, I said to come on up and have a drink," yelled the retired racketeer, trying to be jovial.

Slowly Loomis turned a bleak face on his boss. He spoke in a speculative drawl.

"So they got the plane, too, eh?"

"Wh—whaddayamean *too*?" cried Lugano, getting to his feet.

Loomis, tall and lean even in his heavy trout wading gear, came sauntering up to the porch. He pulled out a cigarette, lighted it.

"I mean I just lost a peach of a trout," he said quizzically. "He'd have gone a good four pounds, easy. Your friends took him from me, I should explain, with a shotgun."

"Huh?" gasped Lugano.

It sounded as if Babe let out a sob.

"Yes," went on Loomis, his voice biting, "they shot a trout that would have gone four pounds right out of my net. I'd been fishing for a couple of hours, perhaps, and had come to a big pool. I saw a big one rise, and

put my fly over him. He took it. I had a bully fight. Just as I'd beaten him and was lifting him in my net, this shotgun banged out and blew the net and the trout to pieces." He added drily: "A few of the pellets didn't come so blamed far from my hand, either."

"Hell," said Lugano.

"They'll kill us *all* before they finish, Arch," Babe whimpered.

"Here's one boy they won't kill," said the pilot. "Me, I'm beating it. They didn't only shoot my trout, they shot my canoe that I left at the mouth of the outlet. I found a beautiful hole right through it when I got back to it. No—"

"Aw, have a heart, Captain," said Lugano. "Wait till we find out what it's all about, can't you? Hell, it's prob'ly just some hick joke."

"Not the kind of a joke I like," grinned the airman. "No, Lugano, I didn't mind fighting Germans—you could see 'em and you knew what it was all about—but this dirty racketeer warfare doesn't go down with me. Sorry, Lugano, but I'm resigning."

"Listen, Captain," Lugano pleaded, "Wait until—"

BUT the nasal and rather high voice of Goofy Ellsber cut in, shrilly, from around the side of the camp:

"Chief—Chief!"

"I'm right here, sap," yelled Lugano.

Goofy Ellsber, as well as Tom Belask, suddenly came into view. They did not look—most decidedly they would not have to a stranger—like characters that had occasionally been referred to as New York's Public Enemies Numbers Three and Four. They looked like two scared little boys, two badly scared little boys.

Goofy had secured his name, it was rumored, because his brother mobsters had somewhat petulantly averred that he was a mite too anxious to use that trigger finger on the slightest provocation. He was small and slim, even frail, unques-

tionably of the nervous type, so maybe that accounted for his whole body now shaking so noticeably that he might have had the palsy. He couldn't even have held an automatic. He did not look like a public enemy.

Tom Belask, as large a man as his boss, was not trembling. He had, perhaps, passed beyond that stage. A rugged individual, ordinarily, he now appeared to be a flabby and weak one. There was no color in his face, his fairly wide shoulders sagged forward, his arms hung limply. Neither did he look like a man who could hold a deadly weapon or who had ever, by the wildest stretch of the imagination, been termed a public enemy.

"Whaddaya want—you boobs?" snapped Lugano.

Goofy shook his head and rolled his eyes.

"We—I guess we want some o' that peace—yeah, *peace*—that you says we was gonna get in Maine!" he said. "Peace? Boy, but do I want it!"

"I'll take the same," said Belask, feebly attempting to make a feeble joke.

"Spill it—rats," ordered Lugano.

Goofy Ellsber, closing his eyes and brushing a hand across his forehead, tried his best to straighten up and spill it.

"Chief, it's a new racket on me. I an' Tom go out to take a walk—just a peaceful walk—with no rods on. We ain't gone a mile, I don't think, when I see some funny kind of things growin' on a trunk of a tree. Fungus, or somethin' like that, I think they call it. I leans over to look at it closer an'—an' *wham!*" He paused dramatically, then raised his hands high in the air. "Chief," he said, "I swear to Gawd if a bullet don't rip right through that thing! It mighta took my fingers off; it mighta— Chief, ask Tom if you don't believe me!"

"It mighta took me in the leg if I hadn't been standin' far back enough," was Belask's remark.

(Continued on page 107)



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HEADQUARTERS

Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet



THE night is sinister and the dark country road is overhung with grim menace. A speeding car, a crack-up—and a man flung to the road! Mark Sleddon exclaims:

“Good God! It’s—it’s—Vance Lanham!”

Vance Lanham—after four years in jail! A figure from the past—a man considered “as good as dead”—here alive, his very presence fraught with danger!

THE BLIND SEE BEST, by Marian Scott, is the saga of a man who falls into a murder maze webbed with sinister intrigue. After the auto accident, he becomes an unwilling visitor at the home of Marc Sleddon, his best friend.

Gwen Sleddon, the wife of Marc Sleddon, is putting on a good masquerade for the benefit of the entire household. What should Lanham do? How can he tell the truth and ruin the life of his best friend? But things happen too quickly for him—and before Lanham can decide to do anything, Death takes its toll.

Find the Motive!

Crash! A slippery staircase sends old Barnaby, a family servant, to his death, and with that a fiendishly clever plot takes shape. But Barnaby is just a stepping stone to his master, Peter Bryden, the blind father of Gwen Sleddon. Peter Bryden, the kind and gentle philanthropist, who is brutally murdered while asleep! Federal authorities appear—and there seems to be no motive for this ghastly slaughter!

Vance Lanham finds himself in the midst of this baffling mystery, slated to be the victim of an ingenious frame-up! Pulsating thrills, rapid-fire action and startling intrigue make **THE BLIND SEE BEST** a first-rate crime puzzle. You’ll find this

action-packed novel in next month’s issue of **THRILLING DETECTIVE**—together with many other exciting stories of crime and mystery.

A Cyclone of Death

Among the unusual novelets is **DEATH TAKES NO VACATION**, by Philip Ketchum. Jim Clavering, a private detective, in search of a long needed rest, all but gets a permanent one when he barges into a whirling cyclone of death!

Finding a baggage check in his pocket, and being a naturally inquisitive person, Clavering collects the package and—its contents will make your hair stand on end!

That starts the ball rolling, and before you catch your breath, it evolves into a bombshell which explodes with rapid-fire action.

JUMBLED JUSTICE, by William Degenhard, is another headliner in next month’s issue. Anything to please a client—and when Hilary Hack, a crime-solving lawyer, takes a crack at burglary, the result is a series of thrilling misadventures!

Write Us Regularly!

In addition—many other stories that will keep you holding the sides of your chair in breathless suspense! All in all, next month’s **THRILLING DETECTIVE** will provide a gala feast of thrills! Variety is the keynote—and the issue will strike a responsive chord! Just watch and see.

Incidentally, keep those swell letters headed this way. We’d like to know exactly what you think of each issue as you finish reading it—just drop us word via letter or postcard. Your comments, criticisms and suggestions help in planning future issues! Thanks!

—THE EDITOR.

RACKETEER RETIRED
(Continued from page 105)

Archie Lugano stiffened again, waving a hand breezily. His smile and his words were calculated to exhibit disdain.

"Did I hire youse two guys? Did I hire your rods? All right, like the answer to that two-an'-two makes four, the answer to this is go get your rods and get these guys!"

Tom Belask grabbed a better grip on himself. He walked over to the porch steps and sat down. He looked his boss in the eye and spoke simply:

"Chief, it wasn't just shootin' that fungus thing that got us. It was more after that. Maybe it listens funny to you, but I don't mean it that way. Nope, I ain't tryin' for no laugh—now! I'm tellin' you, Chief, so help me, that twen'y or thirty times after that—fifty times, it could be—a bullet smacked into a tree or a bush or a flower a—a coupla inches in front of us! Chief, you couldn't hear no gun go off nor you couldn't see nothin'!"

"Rossman or Mulcahy, the bums," said Lugano. "Damn 'em, when I get 'em, I'll—"

"No, Chief, it wasn't no Mike nor Charlie," said Tony, helplessly and also hopelessly. "It wasn't no city racket stuff. They'da kilt us! No, Chief, this is some—some—I dunno *what* it is, but it's somethin' too phony for me. I'm quittin'. I wanna take that plane down to Bucksville an' hop a choo-choo!"

"Me, too," said Goofy, with all his heat in the words.

"Pardon me, Mr. Belask—Mr. Ellsber—but you don't take the plane," drawled Pete Loomis. "The same unseen marksman—marksmen, I should say, for I do think it plural—punctured the pontoons of our craft so that it cannot be taken from the water. They also shot a most beautiful trout I had in my net, I might mention." He added that with an elaborate yawn. "I, for one, am walking!"

(Continued on page 108),

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(Continued from page 107)

Lugano did not answer, this trip. He did not answer, it is possible, for the reason that no one said anything that called for a reply.

A vast silence, the sort of silence Ben Scofield had assured him he could have with his peace, in the Maine woods, had settled down on the camp of the retired racketeer.

Lugano broke this silence, finally, by saying with almost mock politeness:

"Well, ladies an' gents, let's have lunch."

"Ah, yes," drawled Loomis. "The—ah—the last luncheon, as it were!"

It was, indeed, the last luncheon under the Lugano hospitality for Pete Loomis. He was a pleasantly determined man—as anyone aware of his war record should have known—and he was completely deaf to the pleas of the racketeer. About an hour after lunch, he kept his word about walking.

With a knapsack on his back, he started jauntily off.

Oddly enough, Lugano—for perhaps the first time in many years—made no effort to stop with a bullet a man who was acting contrary to his wishes. Neither did Goofy nor Tom. Both of them had begged Loomis to take them along with him, but the airman had most firmly, although courteously, declined. He had no desire to play nurse to tenderfeet, he had said.

Archie Lugano may have thought that the morning of this exquisite June day had been a trifle harrowing, but he was to discover that it had actually been calm and serene compared to the afternoon and night that followed.

FIRED silently and by unseen antagonists, bullets spattered about him and every member of his outfit at intervals of every few minutes. Every pane of glass in the camp was broken, and when dusk came it was discovered that, somehow, the electric light plant had been tampered with. The bulbs would not light, that was all. Someone, apparently, had entered the engine room way off

in the rear and done something to the machinery.

Neither Lugano nor his rodmen nor his domestic staff—nor his wife, naturally—seemed to have any knowledge about such things.

The black night, after a fashion, was worse, for Lugano had to spend it utterly alone. Sam and Lucy were cowering under the tubs in the kitchen, furniture piled all about them; Goofy and Tom, after much debating, had decided that the low attic was the best place to secure protection; Babe had wisely made up her mind that the cabin of the crippled plane would be the safest spot, and it was there that she tried to take a *siesta* or so.

Lugano—and he had to be given credit for being game, after a fashion—passed his time walking up and down the huge living room, with one lamp lighted, cursing and crying, and beseeching his tormentors to please for Gawd's sake come out and *show* themselves and give a guy a chance to use his rod.

Oddly enough, Lugano's enemies did not shoot out the lamp. They shot all around it, mighty close to it, but they never touched the chimney itself. Somehow, this seemed to make the retired racketeer a bit more nervous. Like—like as if the bums was just having some fun and kidding him.

WHEN dawn came Lugano had enjoyed sufficient kidding. He told his wife, Goofy, Tom, Sam and Lucy, that he was going to stop this crazy racket once and for all. He was going down to Bucksville and get the cops. Yeah, if he had to call out all the police and sheriffs in the whole State of Maine he was going to win this bet. He was going to get peace!

Babe tried to dissuade him, saying that the bullets and the bears might get him and that it was a terrible, awful journey. Goofy and Tom Belask stated, vociferously, that the only way they'd go out would be when they could rent a plane. Only

(Continued on page 110)

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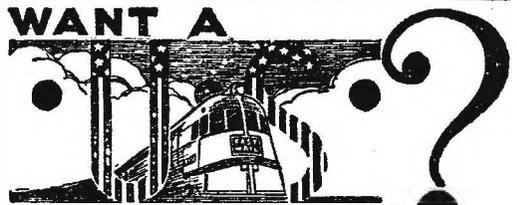
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(Continued from page 109)

Sam and Lucy encouraged him. Cops and sheriffs likewise sounded good to them.

So at ten minutes after four Archie Lugano started!

It was just thirty-two hours and a few minutes later that Archie Lugano got into Bucksville.

As he made his way to the sheriff's office, staggering out of the car he had picked up and groping his way through the doorway, he had lost all traces of any appearance whatsoever of a vicious racketeer. He was, if anything, an object to be pitied. His shirt and trousers were literally ripped to shreds, one of his shoes was gone, and his face and hands were scratched and bleeding. His eyes, puffed up, were nearly closing.

His enemies, whoever they were, had at least allowed him to get here. For that he was abjectly grateful. Only seven or eight times, during the trip, had bullets crashed near him. That was to let him know that they were still on the job, he guessed.

Without being asked, without asking, he slumped into the chair opposite the sheriff. He leaned his elbows on the desk and began incoherently to blurt out his story. His one refrain, his repeated cry, was that he didn't know what kind of a new racket this was and wanted to be told. His other request—also reiterated—was that he asked the law and the State of Maine for protection.

Perley Beeston, a thin little man with a wispy white mustache that drooped dolorously, finally answered the retired racketeer.

"O' course, Mr. Lugano, this ain't official, what I'm sayin', you might put it. Howsomever, Mr. Lugano, it jest occurs to me—me bein' a old native of this here Pine Tree State—that p'r'aps mebbe the gals an' boys an' various citizens o' this locality an' noble State don't happen to like racketeers! That's only a personal opinion, you understand, Mr. Lugano!"

"I ain't a racketeer, dammit—I'm

CANDID CAMERA CATCHES CO-EDS IN

retired!" shouted Lugano, who had once been proud of his fame.

"Seems as though the stigma stays, though, don't it, Mr. Lugano?" suggested Perley gently. He added, thoughtfully: "Yessir, by Judas Priest, I'd come to the conclusion, was I you, that this community an' this boundless State don't even want one lone retired racketeer in their midst!"

"Come clean with me, damn you!" snapped Lugano, his nerves going to pieces.

"Please don't use bad language, Mr. Lugano," said the sheriff softly. "I don't like it!"

Lugano's nerves pulled together a little. He knew when a guy had it on him. He actually flushed as he said:

"My Gawd, Sheriff, they can't do this to me. They're killin' me. They're killin' my wife!"

Perley Beeston nodded, sympathetically, and stroked his mustache. He gazed ceilingward with his light blue eyes and spoke with a sincere sigh in his voice.

"Seems as though I read in some o' them Noo York City noospapers how these here racketeer fellers was awful rough with some o' their victims! Too bad, too bad. It allus did sort o' make me sorry for 'em!"

Archie Lugano got more control of his nerves. He'd put too many men on the spot himself not to know all the tricks. He laughed—a harsh and grating laugh of absolute surrender.

"All right," he snarled. "How much you want?"

The thin little sheriff reached into a desk drawer and extracted a box of cigars. Politely, he tendered it to his visitor.

"Have one, Mr. Lugano. A good smoke is allus apt to compose a feller, I find."

Lugano, fighting for time, fighting for he didn't know what, took one of the cigars and lighted it.

The smoke kind of did feel good, at that, when he inhaled it. But he did not get a chance to do much

(Continued on page 112)

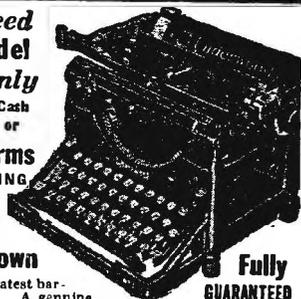
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(Continued from page 111)

inhaling. Suddenly—probably through the opened window—there came the ping of a bullet. Cleanly, beautifully, it took the tip off the cigar of the retired racketeer.

Lugano started to go up in the air, verbally. He didn't, however. He gripped the arms of his chair in time and literally held himself there. Then he removed the cigar from his mouth, looked critically at the end of it, and spoke in something akin to his old voice.

"Nice shootin', Sheriff," he complimented. "I'm still askin' how much jack does this mob want?"

Sheriff Beeston glanced ceilingward once more. He stroked his drooping mustache and spoke in a slightly faraway voice, as if he were communing with himself.

"Mr. Lugano, that is nice shootin', I got to concede. Only one man in town here I know could do it. This ain't official, I ask you to remember. His—yep, his name is Gabe Scofield!"

"Scofield!"

Lugano tore out the word like a madman, and the way his eyes began to bulge made him look like a madman.

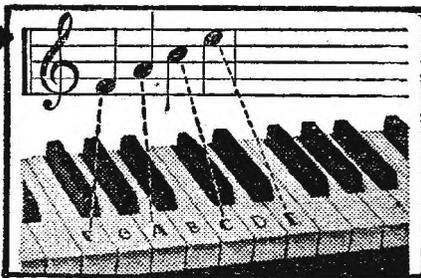
Again—slowly, gently—came the voice of the sheriff of Bucksville.

"Mr. Lugano—an' do bear in mind this ain't official—this is the way I figger it. We'll grant that the folks o' this locality an' the whul State o' Maine don't like racketeers, even retired ones. We got another—an-other angle, like I think city fellers say. We had this boy Ben Scofield, awful well liked in this town, go to Noo York to make his fortune. He didn't. He was a bad un', we got to admit, that went an' fell for temptation—but someone had to put that temptation in his way! He—he got rubbed out or bumped off, howsom-ever these racketeers call it!"

THE sheriff paused, cleared his throat, and went on in the same quiet voice:

"Well—an' this ain't official, don't forget—seems as though, knowin' "

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