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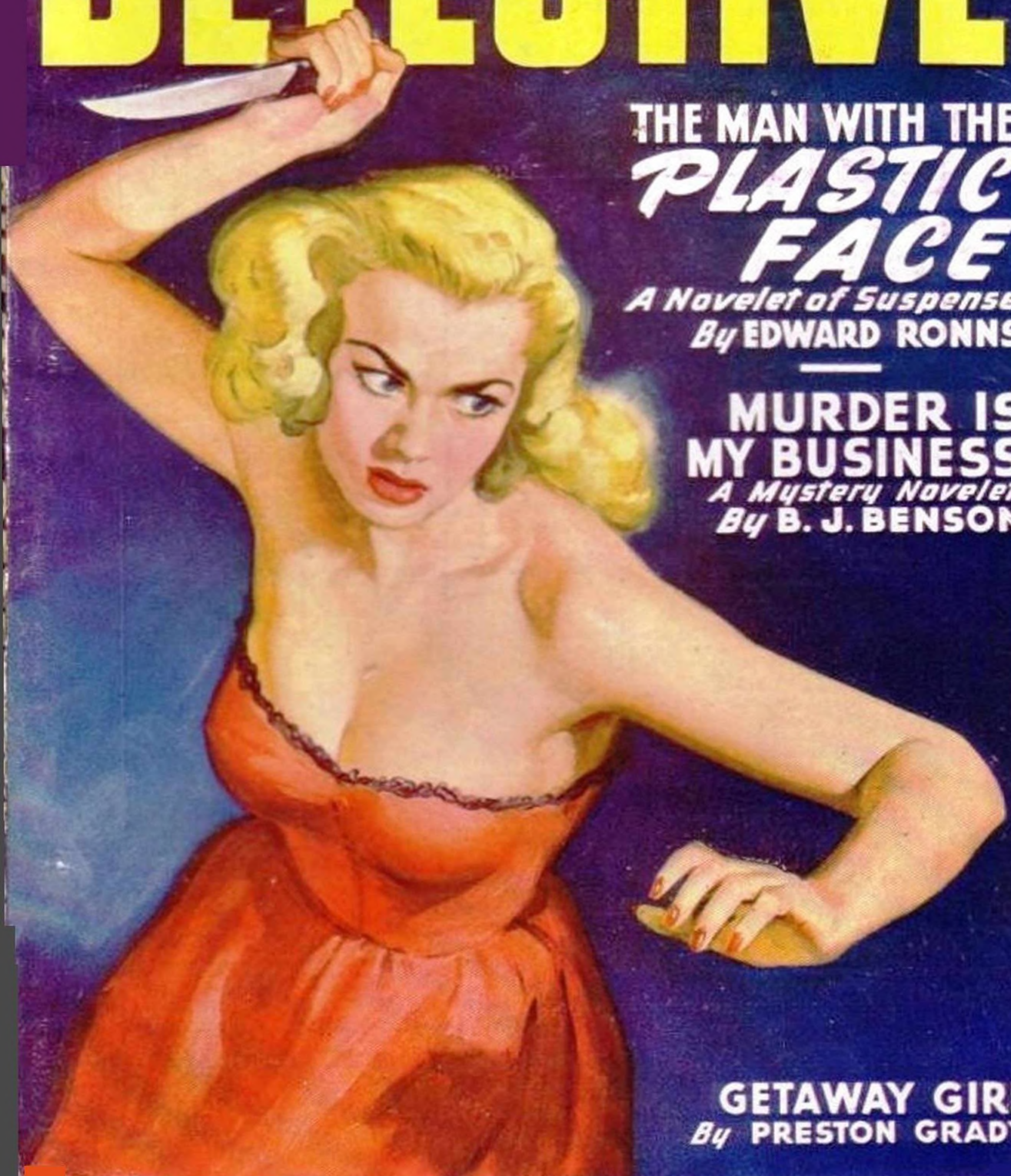
DETECTIVE

THE MAN WITH THE
**PLASTIC
FACE**

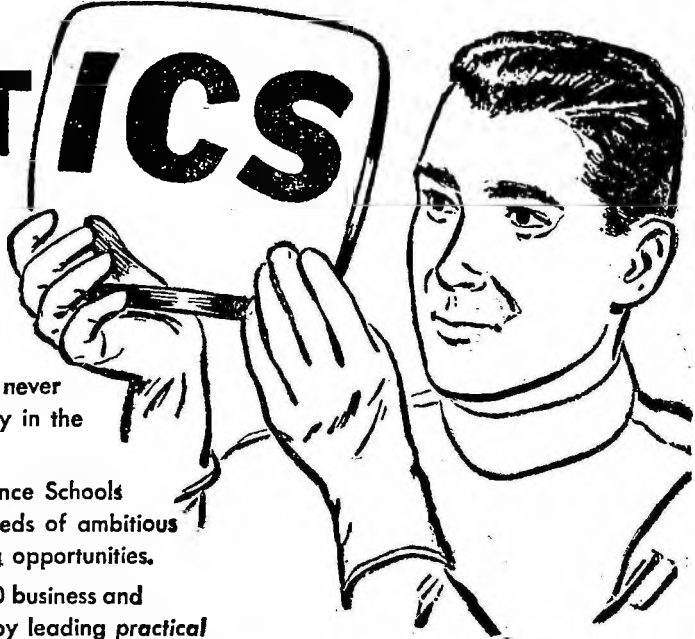
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By EDWARD RONNS

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A Mystery Novelet
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Vol. LXVI, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

June, 1950

Featured Mystery Novelet



THE MAN WITH THE PLASTIC FACE

By EDWARD RONNS

Barney Johnson had to die before he could ever hope to protect Lenore Holmes from the killers, but coming back from the dead could only mean one thing—a murder rap!

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Another Complete Novelet

MURDER IS MY BUSINESS..... B. J. Benson 38

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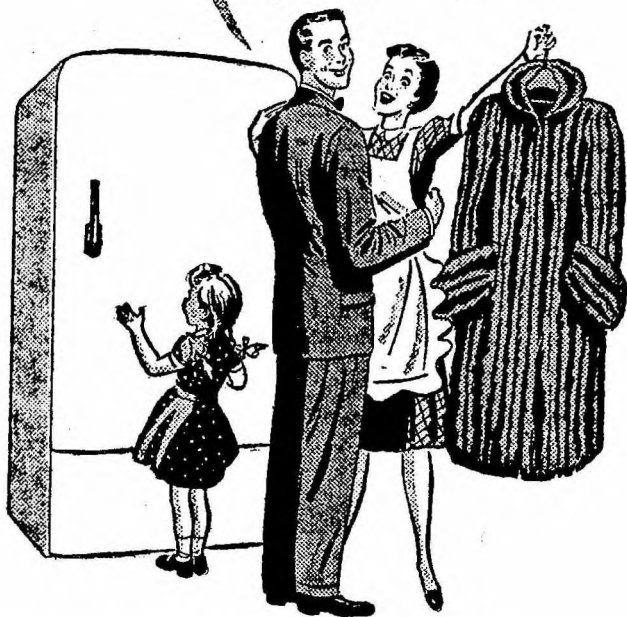
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HEADQUARTERS..... The Editor 6

A department where readers, writers and the editor meet

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Headquarters

IN OUR next issue, two-fisted and wise-cracking Nick Ransom gets mixed up with a cookie—a cupcake—a muffin! Say, what are we talking about? But of course you know that's only the ex-stunt man's parlance for a swell-looking gal. And all this means, friends, that we're announcing Nick's welcome return in **MURDER STEALS THE SCENE**, by Robert Leslie Bellem!

All you flocks of movie fans, too, will be glad to learn that Nick Ransom, private eye, is back in his old stamping-ground at the studios of Hollywood with cameras a-grinding, mysterious sets, the machinations of office and executive intrigue, beautiful and glamorous stars—

Leave us stop right there—for it is a breathtaking, curvaceous blonde “with a figure gorgeous enough to make a marble gladiator whistle like a piccolo with hiccups” who starts all the trouble. Of course Nick expects anything *but* trouble, as his ancient jalopy galumphs along the road that winds beside the blue Pacific just as the white fog comes wisping in.

A Sock on the Bean

Nick is on his way to the Hotel Vista del Sol-Mar, home of the swankiest of the swank. A client has sent for him and he's to report to the Casa del Paramount group of bungalows. Nobody but the *crème de la crème* would stop there and Ransom has visions of at least a hundred-dollar-a-day fee. He doesn't expect a sock on the bean, especially by anyone connected with this Venus, who comes pearly-dripping out of the swimming-pool.

But a sock on the bean is what he gets!

You see, the “muffin” turns out to be Norma Delwyn, who inherited the Del-Lux studio from her hardworking father, and in spite of her beauty, is producing on her own, aided somewhat by her inebriate brother Wally. Nick Ransom knows she is engaged to that scion of society, Curly Terhune.

Ransom is introduced to Norma, now in terry cloth dressing-gown, by Annie, her hatchet-faced maid. Inside the cabana, instead of tea and cakes—or perhaps something even a little stronger—Nick Ransom is introduced to the business end of a revolver, held in the dainty lady's dainty hand. Instead of being asked to track down a criminal, the detective is actually accused of a crime!

The Sword of Damocles

It seems that someone has forged a promissory note on the studio, for a whale of a hunk of jack. Not content with that, this same “someone” has stolen the master-negative of the last reel of the latest Del-Lux motion picture. With the production about to be released, they can't even grind out retakes, because the star is in Rome tied up in another film. So this is the Sword of Damocles that hangs over a beautiful blond. The gorgeous lady emphatically says she knows who did it all. It is none other than Nick Ransom and his “partner”!

In vain does Nick protest his innocence. He explains that he never had a partner. But the ugly end of that pistol keeps coming closer. The fire in the snazzy blonde's lovely eyes grows more threatening. It looks as if she meant business.

Now we all know Nick Ransom has

Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet

wormed out of tighter scrapes than this and to be punctured by a beautiful cookie—well, that's asking too much. So thinking fast as well as acting fast, Ransom overcomes a woman with a womanish object. He throws a dainty pillow at the gal's gun arm, then dumps her with a heartless flying-tackle. Dear, sweet little Norma—do you give up now to the big strong man?

Woman's Wiles

Yet ever since Delilah made a sucker out of Samson, the male of the species never seems to know when he's won. Norma twines her beauteous arms around the private eye's neck. He inhales the dainty scent of her hair—her lips meet his and cling in an ecstatic kiss. At last, while the detective's senses swim, freeing her lips, the lady calls out:

"Hit him, Annie!

And hit him Annie does! Now we ask you—is that a ladylike thing to do to the former head of Risks, Incorporated? Get out of this one, stunt-man!

When Ransom finally comes to, he finds himself nicely trussed up in some sort of partially canvas movie set that had evidently been photographed as a ship state-room. He foggily remembers being carried there by the doorman of the Casa del Paramount, who is known to him only as Cecil. Wally Delwyn, the dipsomaniac brother, assisted in the trek. Nick Ransom now hears a muffled groan.

Alongside him and also tightly bound is one Pat Freecroft, impecunious Englishman, who has often worked on any and all sorts of odd jobs for Nick. Maybe that's what Norma meant when she accused him of having a partner. One word leads to another—accusation is followed by recrimination, until it appears as if the Briton is about to confess, at least about the forgery.

Silent Death

Then suddenly, with a horrible gurgle, even while Ransom is talking to him, the voice of Pat Freecroft is stilled. Courageously working loose from his bonds, Ransom definitely knows that the Englishman's voice has been stilled forever. The man has been stabbed, right through those canvas walls already mentioned. And Nick Ransom was

[Turn page]



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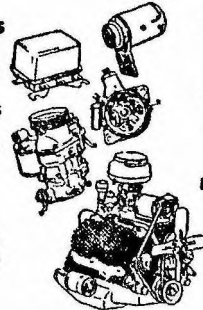
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right there alongside him all the time, but heard and saw nothing!

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You'll find Nick Ransom at his wisecrackingest as well as his twofistedness—to coin a couple of words. You'll also meet a swell cop in Lieutenant Ole Brunvig. All in all **MURDER STALKS THE SCENE** is a grand Nick Ransom yarn. You'll like it!

Walker in the Shadows

Coming up also we have **WALKER IN THE SHADOWS**, by Eleanor Hammond.

Even at this day and age, there are goofs wandering hither and yon who claim that a woman cannot write as well as a man—particularly in the case of a mystery story. If you have that notion—just get it out of your head right now, because this yarn is going to change your mind—fast!

This is not a knock-down-and-drag-out yarn. Mr. Bellem and his Nick Ransom creation have just given us a generous slice of that. This tale is a story of suspense in every sense of the word. But don't get it into your head that it's slow. It'll have you on the edge of your seat. It'll send tingles up and down your spine. It'll make you grip the sides of your chair!

You see, Madeline Vane doesn't hear voices. She hears the tap-tap-tapping of a heavy blackthorn cane as she walks a lonely road, late at night. The sound is always behind her—as if someone were following her. She knows where one significant cane is, as it stands in the corner of the hall of the eerie old mansion where she lives with her Aunt Gracia Carver. That is the cane that used to belong to her husband, Derek Muire.

Of course Madeline *couldn't* be hearing the step belonging to lame Derek. He has been dead now for seven years. Yet how did she happen to pick up that paper napkin in the Mi Favorita Restaurant? On it was that drawing he always made as a "doodle"—the scrawl of the house with the two windows and in one window the word "Grim" and in the other window, "Grin."

No one else but Derek Muire could possibly have done that!

A Bone of Contention

But all this is five years ago and Madeline has married again, to happy-go-lucky, ever jovial Tommy Lane. The only bone of contention between Madeline and Tommy is that Aunt Gracia won't sell the stately and mossy old mansion. You see, the business district of the little town is creeping uptown and the old house and the grounds have become very valuable.

It would be better for Tommy and Madeline if Aunt Gracia did sell. It would be much better for birdlike little Cousin Lilly too, she who is always getting a "small loan" from Madeline—a loan that will never be repaid. For Cousin Lilly is an old, old lady. It can't really be true that she actually *saw* Derek. Anyway, there will be ten thousand dollars at least coming to her if Aunt Gracia should pass away.

There's that wild night when Tommy comes home from the fraternity dinner and Madeline is *sure* she heard those steps behind her on her way home. That was the night that the poor old watch-dog, Skipper, was beaten to death—his head clubbed in with a heavy cane. Then there was that other time when Aunt Gracia's portrait as a girl of fifteen had been viciously slashed, again and again! When that was discovered, Madeline became worried even about herself. For since early childhood she knew she had these spells of somnambulism—she walked in her sleep!

But when they do break down the door to find out the cause of Aunt Gracia's piercing shrieks, they see body of the poor woman with her skull crushed like an egg-shell, just as the dog's was. Standing over the corpse, the bloody blackthorn cane actually in her hand, stands a wildly dishevelled

(Continued on page 95)

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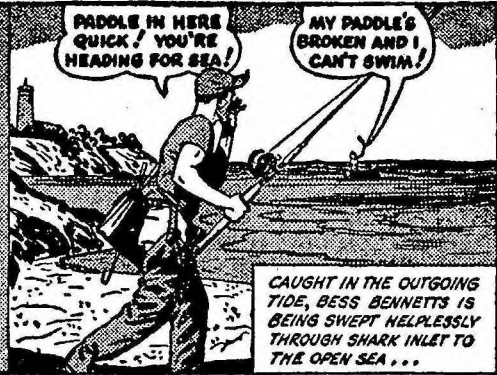
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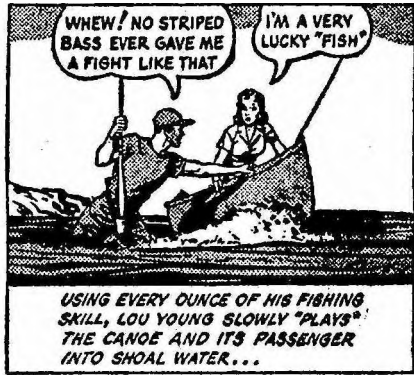
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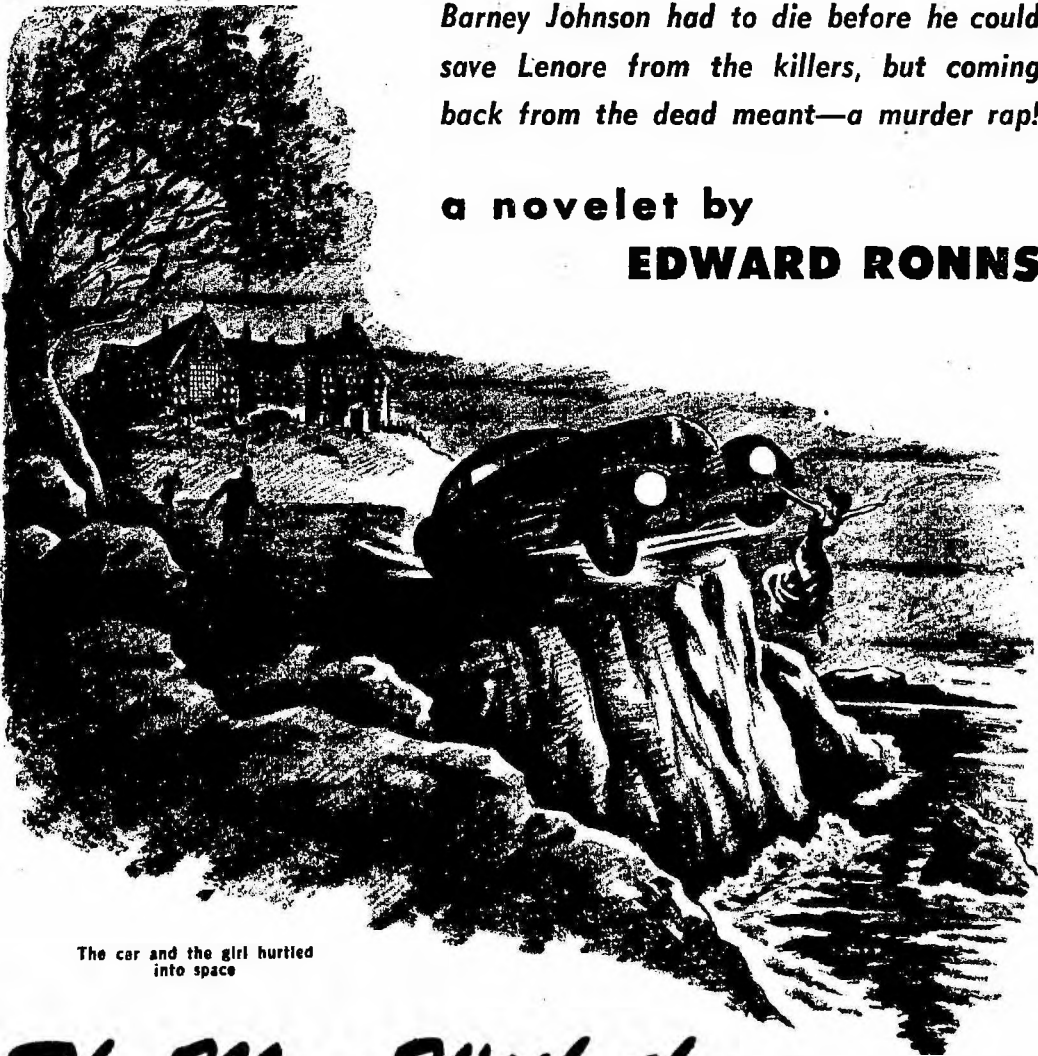
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a novelet by

EDWARD RONNS



The car and the girl hurtled into space

The Man With the

PLASTIC FACE

CHAPTER I

A HEEL THERE WAS

HE HEARD the footsteps coming—oh, so softly. He knew it was a dream, but the shackles of the nightmare were unbreakable.

Struggling, he listened to the girl's swift footsteps that rushed upon him as he lay helpless, the girl's high heel no longer a frivolous foible of fashion, but

a deadly black spike. He would have screamed, but the nightmare was one in which he couldn't scream. The heel came down at his sensitive face—and he felt the pain again—past and present whirling together in a maelstrom of subconscious agony. . . .

Barney awoke, his hand grabbing for

the arm that shook him. The cop who had awakened him pried Barney's fingers loose.

"Come out of it, Johnson. Wake up, boy!"

The fog of Barney Johnson's dream became vapor that solidified into the four walls of his prison cell. Barney blinked into the stolid, flat face of the uniformed cop who stood by his bunk. The cop's face seemed to be all in one plane, his broken nose pushed in to emphasize his lack of prominent features.

"Dagget wants to see you," the cop said. "You been having that dream again?"

"Yes," Barney said.

"How is your face?"

"It hurts," Barney said. "What there is of it."

He slid his legs over the edge of the cot and found his laceless shoes, their shape loose and easy on his feet. The little window beyond the bars was dark with the night. The air inside felt hot and stuffy.

"What time is it, Malloy?"

"Two in the morning."

"That Dagget," Barney said, "works overtime."

"He's one baby who never sleeps," the cop grinned.

He followed Malloy down the yellow-lighted corridor of the precinct station, then up a flight of creaking stairs to the top floor. It was a warm night in late September, and the quality of the air wasn't bettered by the antiseptic smell in the old building. When they passed an open window, Barney could hear the hum of the sleeping city. He lifted a hand to his face, then paused before his fingers touched the skin.

He shivered in spite of the heat.

THE detectives were greeting him with all the trimmings. He couldn't tell how many there were in the barren room. Only the desk was in the light—under a tin-shaded lamp that shed a cone of yellow on Lieutenant Dagget's smooth gray hair.

Here we go again, Barney thought. He blinked into the cold, cobalt blue of Dagget's eyes.

"Sit down, Johnson. Make yourself comfortable. You can smoke, if you

wish. How do you feel?"

"I feel fine," Barney said.

Malloy said, "His face hurts, Lieutenant."

Dagget watched Barney seat himself in one of the hard oak chairs. The lieutenant looked tired. Little veins of red showed in the whites of his eyes. One of the men behind Barney's chair sighed. The room smelled strongly of human perspiration.

"We'll go over it again, Johnson," Dagget said.

"Without a lawyer?" Barney asked.

"You don't need a lawyer. You're innocent, you say. In any case, we just want some information from you as a material witness. You aren't even on the books, Johnson."

"Not even after forty-eight hours?" Barney asked.

"You haven't been well. You got a nasty kick in the face. You've been delirious most of the time."

"Have I?" Barney asked. "Now you're making me out to be a psycho. As if my face isn't enough."

"Your face is plenty. Who kicked you?" Dagget demanded.

"A horse."

"Come on, now. Who did it?"

"I don't know who kicked me, Lieutenant." It was the same question, over and over again, Barney thought. They figured his resentment would break him down. But he wasn't ready to break. Not yet. "I really don't remember," he said.

"Any ideas at all? Was it Mr. Murch? At least, was it a man or a woman?"

"I couldn't tell," Barney lied. He thought of the high-heeled shoe that had ground into his face. "I didn't see it coming."

"What brought you up there in the first place?"

"To her bedroom, you mean?" Barney grinned.

"Sure. Your room was on the second floor, wasn't it?"

"I told you, before," Barney said. "I heard the girl—Lenore Holmes—screaming. I went up to help her."

"Why do you refer to her by her maiden name?" Dagget asked sharply.

"She's your wife, isn't she?"

"Yes."



The next instant, the girl leaped at Barney in demonic fury

"Well, then?"

"We don't know each other very well," Barney said. He heard the cops snicker, behind him. "I just think of her that way, that's all. We were separated almost as soon as we were married. I was overseas for four years. I was in the hospital since then, up until two weeks ago." He touched his face at last. "I didn't think she'd care for me with this plastic job—and she didn't."

Barney paused. He sensed a gathering in the room, as if the detectives were drawing closer to him. Fear made a cold, raw knot in the pit of his stomach, and he moistened his lips slowly.

Dagget's voice lashed at him.

"Tell us the truth, Barney. Tell us all about yourself in the hospital, and how your wife's uncle found you there."

"Is that important?"

"Everything is important. Just tell us."

Barney drew a deep breath. "All right. It began in the hospital, last spring, when I didn't care much whether I was alive or dead. I'd been living with my face in bandages for years, and I still needed one more operation. Sam—Dr. Katz, that is—let me have visitors. One of them was Stephen Murch, Lenore's uncle. I didn't want to see him. People winced when they looked at me. But Dr. Katz promised I'd soon be able to take up a normal life again. I didn't even know if I wanted that. I'd just taken my law degree when I entered the army, and I figured I'd just get out of the hospital to starve with all the rest of the legal eagles."

Barney paused. "You want all this stuff?"

"Tell us about Murch," Dagget persisted.

"All right."

BARNEY swallowed and squinted into the glare of light. One of the detectives lit a cigarette, and the scratch of the match was loud in the stillness.

"This Stephen Murch came to see me every day," Barney said. "You know what he looks like—stout, genial, thick white hair. He had a persuasive way of talking that soon got all the facts of my life out of me. I knew he was wealthy.

You could see it stick out all over him."

"Wait a minute," Dagget interrupted. "Did you know this visitor, Stephen Murch, was your wife's uncle?"

"No, not then."

"When did you find out?"

"When he told me. He came right out with it one day and asked me to come home to Lenore. I didn't know any Lenore. He said she was my wife. I told him he was crazy, because I didn't have a wife, and he said I was just unwilling to remember it, after all I'd gone through, and because I was sensitive about my face. It was embarrassing. I honestly couldn't remember. He scared me a little, he was so sure I was Lenore's husband."

"But you couldn't remember," Dagget said flatly.

"He showed me her picture."

Barney's hands felt cold and he kneaded his knuckles in his lap. He remembered the portrait Stephen Murch had shown him that day. It was that of a girl in her twenties, with a smooth clear face and smooth blond hair and large, fine eyes. She was a lovely girl. He remembered thinking it was a pity he really didn't know her.

"Her picture didn't mean anything to me," he went on. "Then he showed me a copy of the marriage certificate. It was dated September 11, 1943. My name was on it, all right—Barney Johnson. Same age, too—twenty-eight. I figured immediately that she'd married someone with the same name as mine. I told Murch he'd made a mistake. The funny thing about it was that I couldn't remember what I'd been doing on that day. I've lost track of a lot that happened in the past few years, but I didn't think I'd forget a thing like getting married."

Barney paused again. Nobody said anything. Dagget's face was patient, waiting. Barney remembered the years since that grenade went off in his face as a kind of nightmare, a memory of endless pain, the discomfort of a Nazi prison camp, and a temporary loss of identity in the shuffle that followed the war's end. When he tried to recall the month that preceded his being shipped overseas, he also recalled the binges he'd gone on with buddies from the barracks.

Those had been wild, hectic days, with many lost nights.

Dagget's voice broke up his thoughts.

"What finally decided you that this Lenore girl was your wife, and that you had really married her?"

"Sam Katz—my doctor. He agreed I was just unwilling to remember, because of my face and all that had happened to me since I was wounded. Sam treated me as if I was his personal creation. He made this face you're looking at now, Lieutenant. He pointed out that I ought to accept Murch's invitation and live at his house and see Lenore. Sam said it would end the confusion in my mind."

"But you still didn't remember her?"

Barney felt frightened. "No. Murch said I married her one day and walked out on her that night. I never thought of myself as the kind of a fellow who'd pull a deal like that. But Dr. Katz said I'd been through a lot, and even if Murch was mistaken about my identity, what did I have to lose?"

"Lenore never came to see you in the hospital. We checked that. How do you explain it?"

"Murch said my desertion had made a strong and unpleasant impression upon Lenore's mind."

"You mean, she hated you?"

"I don't know," Barney said.

"Did you see her the day you left the hospital?"

"No."

CHAPTER II

BODY IN THE BEDROOM



BARNEY remembered the day he left the hospital. He remembered staring at his face in a mirror. The face that stared back at him was that of a stranger. Dr. Katz' ideas of his good looks were exaggerated, but at least he wasn't a monstrosity. His thick black hair was the same, and a small moustache grown to cover an unavoidable scar on his upper lip was neatly trimmed.

The face that regarded him with steady, wondering gray eyes was square

and hard and tanned. Behind its immobility, there was puzzlement, and watchful waiting. You had to scrutinize that face carefully to detect the little scars along the ridge of his jaw and behind his ears. Barney worked his mouth to flex his facial muscles.

"Good, eh?" Dr. Katz asked, pleased with himself.

"I'd feel better about it if I knew I wasn't poking this nose you gave me into something that doesn't concern me."

"You'll be all right, Barney. Just take it easy."

"Are you married, Sam?"

"Sure, I'm married."

"Do you like it?"

"I like it fine."

"What's your wife's name, Sam?"

"Lisa."

"Mine is Lenore," Barney said, and he grinned at the mirror. "I wonder what she really looks like?"

"You'll find out this afternoon. Good luck to you."

"I'll need it, Sam." . . .

The room in the precinct station was quiet. Then Lieutenant Dagget sighed and one of the detectives came forward and gave Barney a lighted cigarette. He sucked the smoke hungrily into his lungs. His face ached. He didn't want to touch it, but he had to now, fingering all the raw, unfamiliar planes of the face that had been built up for him over a period of tortured years.

"Keep talking," Dagget said. "Tell us what you know about Stephen Murch. Tell us about his house."

"I don't know too much about it," Barney said. "He showed me his art salon when we rode uptown in a taxi the day I left the hospital. It's difficult to remember much about it—I'd been in the hospital for so long that the crowds and the streets confused me. His house is like an art salon, too—full of sculpture and canvases. Mrs. Avery is the housekeeper. Murch is a bachelor." Barney paused, suddenly angry. "You know all this. Why ask me about it?"

"Did you see Lenore the day you got to that house?"

"No."

"She wasn't in? Or didn't she want to see you?"

"Murch said she wasn't in. I don't know if it was the truth. He apologized about it and said I'd have to be patient."

"When did you first see Lenore?"
"Four days later." . . .

HE KNEW she was in the house. He remembered hearing her voice, and occasionally her footsteps on the floor above his room. The situation made Barney want to pack his bag and get out of that strange house, but it was Lenore's footsteps that kept him there. They were as nervous as his own, and they aroused his curiosity.

That first night, when he lay staring into the darkness of his room, he heard Lenore talking to Murch. The man's tones were persuasive and persistent. The girl's were cold, adamant. Several times he wished to telephone Dr. Katz, because the whole thing was a mistake and he didn't belong here. But each time he changed his mind, stubbornly, his curiosity winning out.

On the fourth day—a dreary, rainy morning—he lost his patience. Murch had gone down to Fifty-seventh Street. Barney was having breakfast alone when the telephone rang and Mrs. Avery waddled down the hall to answer it. She listened a moment, then plodded upstairs, leaving the receiver off the hook. Barney rose decisively. There was no sound from above. He picked up the phone.

"Who is this, please?"

The receiver hummed for an awkward moment. Then: "This is Miss Babson—Andrew Temple's office is calling Mrs. Johnson."

"She isn't here," Barney said. "May I take a message?"

The woman hesitated. "Is this Mr. Johnson?"

"Yes."

Softly and quietly, the receiver clicked and the line went dead. Puzzled, Barney didn't hear Lenore come downstairs until she stood behind him. Her voice slapped at him.

"May I ask who that was?"

He turned slowly to look at her. His pulse went erratic, and he wanted his voice to be calm. *This is my wife*, he thought. She was taller than he had

guessed, although her photo had given no hint of her figure. No photograph could do her justice, was his next thought. And then: *I never saw this girl before. I never married her. I would have remembered.*

Her face was quiet, but her large gray eyes blazed with anger. He felt shocked. There was nothing but the anger and a cold disdain in her expression. No curiosity at all about his appearance, in his rebuilt features. She wore a snug-fitting dress of wine-colored wool, with a wide leather belt hugging her slim waist. There was a simplicity about her costume that was expensive.

"That was Andrew Temple's secretary," he said quietly.

"And you told her I was not at home?"

"You haven't been home to me. Who is Andrew Temple?"

"My lawyer," she said quickly. "He—"

"What do you want a lawyer for?"

She was breathing quickly, and the hand that touched her long, shining hair trembled. Her gray eyes slid away from his steady gaze for a moment, then returned. Her smile was twisted.

"They've changed you, haven't they?"

"You mean you don't recognize me?" he asked quickly.

"It isn't that. But you needn't think that any tactics you may devise will help you establish yourself here again."

"Look, Lenore," Barney said, "I don't know what this is all about, but I certainly don't intend to force myself upon you. Tell me. Am I your husband, or not?"

"Of course. Legally, at any rate."

"You're absolutely sure?"

Her eyes slid away again. "Aren't you sure?"

"No," he said bluntly.

She smiled. "More tactics—but it won't work. Mr. Temple is arranging our divorce at all possible speed. Reconcile yourself to that at once. Better still, you could move out of here and make things easier for me. But I don't expect that from you."

The girl turned abruptly and went upstairs again. Barney didn't follow. He stood in mute surprise, watching her. . . .

ONE of the cops gave Barney a glass of water. It tasted stale and warm. Through an open window behind him he heard the mournful hoot of a switch engine in the freight yards. He wondered what time it was, and guessed it was close to four in the morning. Dagget seemed exhausted. The detective's smooth gray hair was ruffled, and his eyes looked frustrated.

"Let's get back to the murder that took place last Tuesday," Dagget said. "This fellow's name was George Stryker. Did you know him?"

"Stryker worked for Murch in the art gallery," Barney said. He wondered how much he should tell, and then decided to tell all of it. "I met Stryker when I went to the art gallery on the day of the murder. The more I had thought about it, the more I figured Murch was the key to my troubles. I felt I ought to know more about what was going on. For one thing, I resented Murch's implied suggestions that Lenore was—well, odd."

"Off her trolley?" Dagget interrupted.

"He implied she was unstable. I didn't think so. That was how I happened to go down to Murch's art salon the day of the murder. I wanted to talk to Murch about the situation. I wanted out, I guess. But he wasn't in his office. I met George Stryker there, instead."

Barney remembered George Stryker alive as well as dead. He had been a tall, somewhat elegantly dressed man, with milky blue, prominent eyes. His hair was the color of withered cornstalks, and his hands floated in a vague, disembodied manner when he talked.

"You quarreled with Stryker," Dagget said flatly.

"He did the quarreling. He seemed

upset about me—about my showing up from the dead, so to speak. He seemed to know all about me, and about Lenore, too. He said Lenore hated me, and he asked me what my price was for Lenore to buy me off. He was so upset about it that I asked him if he was in love with Lenore, himself."

"What did he say to that?"

"He said he'd always been in love with her, and that I didn't stand a chance with her now. That's all."

"That's all? You just walked out then?"

Barney nodded. "That's the extent of the quarrel, if you want to call it that. But I didn't kill him."

"All right. Let's talk about the murder."

"I don't know much about that."

"Just tell us what you know. George Stryker was killed in your wife's bedroom that night. Tell us about it."

Barney's story was essentially the truth, except for a few careful omissions. At nine-thirty that evening he'd heard the sound of a quarrel in Lenore's apartment above him. He didn't recognize the man's voice. The quarrel was brief, reaching a crescendo that ended in Lenore's sudden scream and the sound of a shot.

By the time Barney reached Lenore's room, the house had been plunged into darkness. In the gloom, he had seen nothing in Lenore's bedroom except for the sprawled figure of George Stryker. He saw no one else, neither Lenore nor Stephen Murch. Someone hit him on the back of the head as he plunged into the room. He went down, and someone kicked him deliberately in the face—the high, fashionable feminine heel that he remembered, but which he refused to tell Dagget about. It was his own business, he thought, with sudden angry resentment.

Several people, it seemed, had conspired to make an absolute fool of him. Not only that, but they had put his liberty and perhaps his life in jeopardy. Normally, he would have considered Lieutenant Dagget perfectly competent to take care of things—but not in this case. Barney answered what questions he felt necessary, and, as dawn came, he was taken back to his cell.

NEXT ISSUE

MURDER STEALS THE SCENE

A Nick Ransom Novelet

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER III

CLUE OF THE TRUNK



THE next morning Barney was released from custody. Andrew Temple and Sue Babson, his secretary, were waiting for him in the receiving room.

Temple was a tall man with wavy gray hair and an aristocratic face. Sue Babson was almost as tall, dark-haired, wearing a smart pin-stripe suit. She was as smoothly attractive as her expensive dress.

Her eyes smiled at Barney as she tucked her hand in his arm and led him to the front door of the precinct station.

"This is Andrew Temple, Lenore's counsel," Sue Babson said. "Do you mind if we accompany you? Mr. Temple has taken care of your release here. It wasn't easy, but it's been done. Our car is just outside."

The car, a bright new Cadillac, was parked near the corner of the sunny street. An elevated train rumbled overhead as Barney paused beside the pale green sedan. He didn't get in.

"I appreciate your help," he told Temple, "but you're Lenore's lawyer, not mine. You're getting her the divorce, aren't you?"

"This is not as simple as a divorce," Temple said. He looked extremely neat, with a small gray moustache and a gray topcoat and Homburg. "This is a problem of murder, and while I do not normally take criminal cases, I have the family's interests at heart, and I am determined to do all I can to spare them what discomfort and humiliation may come of the police investigation."

"Do you think I killed George Stryker?" Barney asked.

"If we thought that," Sue said, "we wouldn't have obtained your release."

"But I'm not sure Lenore would approve of your rescuing me like this, Mr. Temple. Did she send you here?"

"Lenore did not send me," Temple said soberly.

"We don't know where she is," Sue Babson added. "The police haven't been

able to locate her since the night of the murder. Her uncle, Stephen Murch, has disappeared, too."

"But you two must know where they are," Barney objected.

"We don't. We hoped you would know. You were there when Stryker broke into the house and was killed, weren't you?"

"I don't remember much of it. Someone kicked me in the face." Barney looked at Sue Babson's shoes. They were trim suede pumps, totally unlike the frivolous French heel that had gashed open his cheek. "If you don't think I killed Stryker, then you must believe that Lenore is the murderer."

"Precisely," Temple said. He jingled the car keys in his gloved hand, impatiently. "This is not the place to discuss it, however. Let's get in the car. We can go to my office."

"If it's just to ask me again where Lenore is," Barney said, "you're wasting your time. I'm not ungrateful for getting out of that cell, but I had plenty of chance to think there. I don't know where Lenore is. But I intend to find out."

"How?" Temple asked sharply.

"I don't know yet."

Sue Babson touched his hand. "Really, we're only trying to help you and Lenore out of this frightful mess, don't you see?"

"No, thanks."

The lawyer and the girl exchanged irritated glances. "I hoped we might cooperate. Johnson," Temple said coolly. "I must warn you that your personal welfare alone is not involved. Lenore is in danger, as you must realize, and if you know where she is, I would advise you to move with caution."

"I'll do that," Barney promised. "Thanks again."

STEPHEN MURCH'S brownstone house was empty. Not even Mrs. Avery, the housekeeper, was there when Barney let himself in. He had expected to see a cop or two on the premises, but there was no one at all.

His footsteps echoed with a hollow whisper down the hall. In his own room, he saw that everything had been tidied, with fresh linen placed on the bed. Bar-

ney drew a deep breath and went upstairs to Lenore's apartment. The door wasn't locked, and he stood undecided for a moment, aware of a strange excitement. The last and only time he had been up here was when Stryker was murdered.

He turned into the little sitting room, frowning. A fresh shag rug was down before the fireplace where Stryker had died. Otherwise, nothing was changed. The room had an impersonal, transient air, as if Lenore had been living here only temporarily.

He glanced into the bedroom, opened the closet doors, looked in the bath. There was no sign that anyone had been here since the night of the murder. He had hoped there would be a message for him. After all, Lenore was his wife.

But there was no message.

Shortly before noon, Barney crossed Fifty-seventh Street to Stephen Murch's art salon. The windows on the second floor were shielded by drawn blinds, as if the place were closed. He went upstairs and tried the door anyway. It wasn't locked.

Inside, the long floor was a place of gloom and shadows, remote from the crisp autumn weather outside. He looked at the walls, covered with paintings, and at a section of the floor given over to American Empire furniture. Then he turned toward George Stryker's private office.

Sue Babson met him in the doorway. Her dark hair was braided atop her fine head, and her red mouth smiled amusedly. A patent-leather bag swung from her trim shoulders.

"How pleasant to meet again so soon!" she laughed. "I thought you were a policeman, but they don't seem to be here."

Barney followed the girl into Stryker's office. Somehow he wasn't too surprised to see Temple's secretary again. She had been searching the place. Several file drawers were open, and manila folders were strewn over the hooked rug. The girl perched gracefully against the desk and examined her white gloves with fastidious care.



Barney could see only a portion of his face, but he knew who the dead man was

"I suppose you wonder why I'm here. Temple sent me, of course, to pick up what I could. We simply must locate Lenore before the police do. The longer she remains in hiding, the more damaging the case against her. Imagine what the police are thinking!"

"Perhaps they released me this morning in the hope that I can lead them to Lenore," Barney frowned.

"Can you?"

"Not yet. I don't know if they've followed me, or not. I've been thinking about Stryker, and how little I know about him or why he was killed. And how little I know about my wife."

The girl let silence hang in the air after his words. Barney noticed the way her lashes lay dark on her cheek, and he felt impatient, with a rising fear inside him.

"Well, tell me about George Stryker," he said. "I know he hated me, but I don't know why, except perhaps because of Lenore."

"Stryker was always insane about Lenore," Sue said. "Both before and after you married her so suddenly. He tried to convince her you were dead, after the War Department sent that telegram saying you were missing in action. All of us, except Lenore, agreed you were dead. She remained morbidly convinced to the contrary, though."

The word stuck like a splinter in Barney's mind. "Morbidly?"

"Well, you showed no sign of caring for her. Of course, when you showed up, we thought Lenore might try again. But she immediately demanded that Andy get her a divorce from you."

"Let's get back to Stryker," Barney said. "He loved Lenore. He wanted to marry her. How did she feel about that?"

Sue Babson shrugged. "Nobody could tell what Lenore was thinking. She keeps things to herself, like her utter faith in your return, even though you made her life miserable. Anyway, she kept everything you sent her from overseas, you know."

Barney felt a rising wind howl through his mind. "What things did I send her?" he demanded.

"Why, she kept your souvenirs in that trunk you shipped from Bavaria. Hasn't

she given it back to you yet?"

"The trunk?" Barney said. "I forgot about it." He changed the subject abruptly. "What does Temple really think about the murder? Surely he doesn't believe Lenore killed Stryker!"

"If you didn't do it," Sue shrugged, "it would have to be Lenore, wouldn't it?"

"Not necessarily. What about Stephen Murch?"

"Well, yes. But—there was no one else in the house, was there? You didn't see or hear anyone?"

"No," Barney said hopelessly. "Just Lenore."

HE HAD lunch on Fifth Avenue, and once he thought he saw Sue on the crowded sidewalk outside the restaurant window. Afterward, he took a cab to Brooklyn, and all the way over, he was aware of a tan convertible following him. It didn't bother him. He had expected to be followed. His destination was no secret—yet.

Dr. Katz lived in a rambling, bungalow-type house near the shore. The lot was large, and Barney heard the sound of a woman and children on the back lawn. He waited, after ringing the bell, watching the curve of the street as the taxi disappeared. But there was no sign of the tan car up to the moment when a maid opened the front door and admitted him to the doctor's office.

Inside the house, the laughter of Sam's wife and children was muted and far away. The doctor's den was flooded with warm sunlight, and Barney was greeted with a firm handclasp.

"Well, I'm glad to see the police let you go, Barney. Who killed that man?"

"I wish I knew." Barney accepted a deep leather chair and a cigarette and watched Sam fill his pipe. The little doctor's nervous energy was more apparent than ever. Sam's thin face was brown from long hours on the tennis court. The delicate fingers were steady and strong as they held the match over the pipe.

"Maybe I shouldn't have suggested you return to your wife."

"No, that's all right," Barney said. "It's just a mess, that's all, and I've got to clean it up. I walked into this,

Sam, and I feel as if I'd knocked over a hornet's nest. The worst of it is, I don't understand what's going on. Neither does Lenore. Don't ask me why I should be worried about her—after the reception she gave me. But I have the feeling she's as mixed up about it as I am."

"And you want to help her?" Sam asked quietly.

"If I can find her," Barney said, nodding. "Nobody knows where she and her uncle have gone."

"I read the papers." Sam frowned at Barney's tense figure. "Relax, boy. It's not as bad as all that."

"First they thought I did it," Barney said. "Now the cops and her lawyer think it's Lenore. Her lawyer is the one who sprung me. He thinks I know where she is."

Sam rose and went to his desk, dug up a small key ring, and tossed the keys toward Barney. The doctor's large, gentle eyes were unusually sober.

"She needs help," he said abruptly. "She wants to see you."

"Lenore? How did you—"

"She telephoned here—three times. She wanted me to send you to her, if you came here."

Barney was on his feet, excited. "But why should she—?"

"She had sense enough to realize that I'm your only friend. You'll find her in Surfside, Barney—a village about thirty miles east, on the north shore. She's in a cottage at Twenty-nine Ocean Avenue. You'll have to drive there, but you can take my car."

Barney looked at the car keys in his hand. "Did she say what she wanted me to do? Did she say anything about the murder?"

"She has a nice voice. I liked her. She didn't say whether she killed this Stryker person or not. And I didn't ask."

"All right, Sam." Barney drew a deep, steadying breath. "I'm upset, naturally. I've been wanting to see her ever since I was kicked in the face that night."

The doctor studied Barney's cheek. "No harm was done."

Barney's grin was hard. "It wasn't the heel, but the principle of the thing, that hurt. I don't care much for a wife

who kicks her husband when he's down."

"Now look, Barney. I thought you wanted to help her—"

"I do. Either into the chair or out of it, whichever she deserves. And I appreciate your help, Sam. Tell your wife I'm sorry I couldn't stay to meet her and the kids."

"You'll be back," Sam said. "We'll have dinner together. Just take it easy, will you?"

"I can't," Barney said. "I'm going to see my wife and get her to talk to me for a change—even if she hates me."

"That's a matter of opinion," Sam said, his eyes wise.

CHAPTER IV

TRICKED



AT TWO o'clock Barney turned into Ocean Avenue and looked for Number 29. Red-leaved maples edged the winding street, and through gaps in the hedges he could glimpse the blue, sunlit waters of the Sound. The place was a small summer cottage, with all the window blinds drawn. He drove slowly past to the next corner and parked, then walked back along the grassy pavement.

The simple batten door, painted barn red, seemed tightly shut. He looked for a bell, found none, and tried his knuckles. There was no sound from inside. He looked up and down the empty street and checked the number again. The sound of the door opening made him turn his head sharply back to the entrance.

Lenore looked as if she hadn't slept for several nights. She wore a tight-fitting blue sport suit, and he suspected she had been wearing it since the murder. Her golden hair swung on her shoulders. Her smile was stiff, almost formal.

"Hello, Barney. Come in, please. Quickly."

She shut the door and leaned back against it, and when he turned from surveying the small, shabby room, he saw the gun in her hand—a Colt .380 with a bright steel barrel that hadn't been

blued. Lenore's voice seemed unreal and uncertain.

"I hoped you would go to Dr. Katz. I didn't know where else to get in touch with you, after I heard on the radio that the police had let you go. They haven't followed you, have they?"

"Not that I know of," Barney said. "Put away the gun."

She looked surprised, then handed the weapon to him.

"You don't have to worry about me, Barney. I haven't slept much, and I wasn't sure who was at the door."

"Suppose it hadn't been me?" he asked sharply.

She looked blank for a moment. Then abruptly she was shaking. He could hear her teeth chatter, and he put his arm around her and led her like a child to a chair near the fireplace.

He was sharply aware of how she felt under his touch. It was the first time he had touched her, and instead of sitting down, the girl swung abruptly into him, huddling within the circle of his arms, her face averted. Barney felt awkward.

"Hey. It's not as bad as all that."

"I'm s-scared, Barney!"

"It will be all right. Don't worry."

His words sounded inadequate, even to him, but her shivers began to lessen.

"Don't let me go yet," she whispered.

"I thought you hated me, Lenore," he said.

"I thought so, too."

"But you don't, any longer?"

"You—you've changed. I've been trying to straighten it all out in my mind, ever since the day you took that phone call and we talked. I think I've been wrong about it all, Barney, but—I just don't know anything for certain."

He still held the Colt in his hand. "This gun," he said. "Is it yours?"

"Yes."

"Is it the one that killed George Stryker?"

She pulled away from him as if he had slapped her. "I don't know. Uncle Steve gave it to me. He brought me here and told me to stay here."

"Why?"

She swallowed painfully. "He said the police wanted to question me. He implied—he said I was in danger."

"Did he say you killed Stryker?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"But you sound as if you aren't sure of it yourself," he said impatiently. "What's the matter with you? Are you going to claim amnesia, or something? I won't believe it."

Her head came up. "I'm not asking you to believe anything. It's just that I don't know what really happened. George somehow got into the house. He made a scene—about you, of course. Then the lights went out and I screamed—and then I fainted."

"You didn't faint until after you kicked me, remember?" he said grimly.

SHE stared at him, seeing the scar on his cheek as if for the first time. Her face drained of color. She shook her head mutely, standing before him like a slender child awaiting punishment.

"Oh, no," she said. "I'd never do that to you, Barney."

"Then who did?" he demanded.

"I don't know."

She began to shiver again, but this time he didn't go near her. He looked at the gun in his hand, unsnapped the magazine, and checked the cartridges. There was one bullet in the chamber and five others in the magazine. The gun had been cocked and ready to fire, with the safety off. He snapped back the barrel and ejected the remaining cartridge angrily. He smelled the barrel, but he couldn't tell if it had been fired recently. The gun seemed clean, without powder or leading stains.

He looked resentfully at the girl. "Uncle Steve gave you this? When was he here last?"

"When he brought me here. He hasn't been back since."

"Have you heard from him? Or anyone else?"

Lenore's voice was flat. "No, Barney."

He realized suddenly that she had turned away from him, inside herself, and he felt contrite. Perhaps it was her attitude of being without hope now, whereas she had been happy enough to see him at first, looking to him for help. He felt anger as he watched her small, huddled figure in the chair.

"What about Temple and his secre-

tary?" he asked. "They're looking for you, too."

"I suppose they think I killed George?"

"That's the general idea," Barney admitted. He thought of something Sue Babson had said. "I've been wondering about the trunk I shipped to you from overseas. Do you know where it is?"

Lenore's shoulders stiffened. A stray beam of sunlight touched her blond hair. Her voice was suddenly cautious.

"It's somewhere around. Is it important now?"

"I was just wondering," he said.

Lenore looked on the verge of hysteria again. "Do you want me to give myself up, Barney? Is that what you came here for?"

"I came here to help you," he said, surprising himself.

"It was a mistake," Lenore said. "When I called Dr. Katz, I thought you could clear things up for me. But you're like the rest of them. I should have understood—when Uncle Steve brought you from the hospital. I know what you want now. I know whose side you're on." She paused, her voice breathless, working up to anger. "Probably you will say I have a persecution complex, but I know now that you're all against me. I can't expect help from any of you. The best thing you could do, Barney, would be to leave me alone, let me make my own decisions. Either that, or call the police. The telephone is over there. Call them and get it over with."

He walked over to the phone, testing her, noting the number. He looked at the girl, but her eyes were defiant, with

nothing but contempt in her gaze. He put the phone down as the operator began to question him for a number.

"I'll get out," he said. "But I want you to stay here, Lenore. Somebody's got us both tangled up in a nice, sticky web, but I'm going to fight my way out of it, if I possibly can."

He put the Colt in his pocket and went to the front door. The girl didn't move.

"Will you stay here until I get back, or can call you?"

He saw her hesitate and bite her lip. Her hand scrubbed her cheek in indecision. Then she said quietly:

"All right, Barney. I'll wait for you."

THE street was still empty when he left the cottage. He made a U-turn at the dead end overlooking the water and returned to the corner by coasting, the engine silent, and braked behind a box hedge through which he could glimpse Lenore's house. He was just in time to see a black coupe pull out from her driveway. Lenore was at the wheel.

He wasted no time fretting over his failure to search for her car, but his thoughts were grim as he slammed his car into gear and took off after her. Once on Northern Boulevard, he had no difficulty following her without making himself conspicuous. She returned to Manhattan by way of the Queensboro Bridge, and he was a block behind her when she turned off Fifth Avenue at Rockefeller Center and parked in a loading zone in front of the marble façade of a bank.

Barney slid his car into a space behind her and hoped no traffic cop would

[Turn page]

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come along. The girl was moving fast now, her long legs twinkling as she dodged through the crowd on the sidewalk and vanished into the bank. He didn't follow her inside.

She was gone less than three minutes, although it seemed like three eternities while he waited. When she came out, she still moved swiftly, her face pale and determined. She looked neither to right nor left as she got into the black coupe again.

What happened then took place in a matter of moments. Lenore's car paused for a pedestrian dashing across Fifth Avenue against the light. Another pedestrian left the curb and hurried toward her car—a short, stout man with a halo of white hair and a pink, cherubic face. Barney just had time to recognize Stephen Murch as he yanked Lenore's door open and climbed in beside her, ignoring the angry horns of blocked traffic that resulted.

Barney swore softly and eased his car after them. The girl's coupe swung across the avenue and sped eastward. Barney trod the gas pedal to follow—and the light changed. A cop's whistle shrieked, and the next instant he was checked by the impatient cross-traffic roaring across his path. By the time the light changed again, pursuit was hopeless. He had no way of guessing Lenore's destination.

Yet he felt convinced that Lenore hadn't expected Murch to pop out of nowhere, into her car. He had the feeling she had been as surprised as himself. And he didn't like it. . . .

SUE BABSON swirled the swizzle stick and set the cocktails down on a hammered aluminum tray. The dark-haired girl wore an afternoon dress that had the grace and simplicity of a Grecian robe. Her smile touched only her lips.

"Have one of these," she said. "They'll pick you up."

"I had a hard time finding your place here," Barney said. "You do pretty well for yourself."

The room overlooked the Hudson River. There was a remote hum from traffic on the West Side Highway, and beyond that, dark against the setting

sun, was the grim line of the Palisades and the delicate span of the George Washington Bridge. Like Sue, the rooms were in the best modern taste. The ornamental fireplace was framed in a blocky rectangle of blond oak, a motif reflected in the other furnishings.

He watched Sue bend forward a little as she poured the cocktails. A mass of thin silver bracelets jingled on her wrist as she took her drink and toasted him.

"To a new world."

The Manhattan was potent, suddenly reminding Barney that he'd had no dinner. He put the glass down carefully.

"I couldn't find either of you at Temple's office," he said. "You keep pleasant working hours, I must say."

"You might consider," Sue smiled, "that the disappearance of our best client while under a murder charge constitutes an emergency. Andy is getting private detectives to find your wife. She's quite a wealthy young lady, you know."

"I don't know much about that," Barney said.

"You ought to learn. You're her husband, aren't you?"

He looked to see if there was a challenge in her eyes, but there was only her smile. Her lips were wet and provocative, and he suddenly wondered what would happen if he kissed her.

"Private detectives aren't necessary," he said. "I know where Lenore is. It didn't take me long to find her."

"You haven't found her!" the girl said sharply.

"Why should I lie about it?"

She looked shocked and angry. "You wouldn't be here with me, if you knew where she was. Where did you locate her? Andy ought to be informed."

"I might have told you," Barney said quietly, "if you hadn't followed me halfway across Long Island this morning. You could have come with me just for the asking. Why did you do it?"

"But I didn't—" The girl cut herself off impatiently, laughed with embarrassment. "It was Andy's idea. Some notion about your loyalty to Lenore. Have a dividend, Barney."

"I've had enough to drink."

"Listen, did you actually see Lenore and talk to her?"

"Of course."

"What did she say about me, Barney?"

He felt surprised. "We didn't discuss you at all."

"She dislikes me," Sue said. "She's told the wildest tales about Andy and me." Her voice was a quiet plea. "Barney, tell me where she is. You have no idea how important it is."

BARNEY said, "You're concerned about something more than a murder charge against your client, aren't you?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Let's not waltz around with it too much. If you want to know where Lenore is, then tell me what it's all about, about Stryker and Lenore and me and Murch. Even swap, Sue."

She looked despairing. "You imagine things. You're sounding off like Lenore, all right. I can believe that you've really seen her. I can't imagine what she told you, unless—" Sue's voice rose a little—"unless she admitted that she killed George Stryker."

"Would it please you, if she did?" Barney asked flatly.

"You seem to be filled with a lot of her nonsense, all of a sudden. I thought you were sensible, Barney. Don't you know that Lenore killed Stryker? She tried to pin it on you, because she hates you, just as she hates everybody else. If you can't see that, then I'm going to give up hope for you."

"What about her Uncle Steve? He's helping her. I saw them together, you know."

The girl tried to compose herself, but her fury burst out of control. "He wants her money, you fool! He doesn't make peanuts out of his art gallery! Murch has a taste for good living, and his one grip on that is through Lenore. Of course he's with her. He'll stay with her right up to the moment they strap her in the chair! And then her money will all be his!"

Sue paused, breathless. Barney found himself comparing this girl to Lenore, but it only left him confused. Sue swung away, returning to the drinks, her back toward him for a moment as she faced the table and the tall French windows.

Through the gauzy curtains he could see the red brick wall of a terrace, and beyond that, the sun was a huge orange disc setting over the black cliffs of the Palisades. He took the new glass from Sue's hand and wondered about her intense interest in the whole problem.

He wondered about it, but his thoughts were hazy as he finished his drink. He stared wide-eyed at the setting sun, as if it were a hypnotist's orb, and then his eyes closed. There was a humming in his ears. He dropped the glass, and the sound of the shattering crystal startled him and he struggled halfway up from the deep chair.

The girl stood before him, her figure wavering in the uncertain dusk. Light shimmered in pure amber through the second drink she held in her hand. She hadn't touched it. He felt his arms go heavy with exhaustion. It was too much of an effort to get up from the chair. He couldn't make it.

He stared at the girl with glazed eyes. "What—did you—do this for?"

She moved back a precautionary step, watching him as he struggled to get up, to fight off the drug she'd put in his drink. He had no chance of winning. The last thing he remembered was her laughter as he lost his balance and pitched forward out of the chair, sprawling on the rug. And then the sun went down.

CHAPTER V

MURDER TWO

LENORE said, "I don't have it. I admit I went to the bank. I didn't know Barney was there, too. I couldn't have given him anything, could I? You would have seen it if I did."

She spoke into darkness. There was no light in the room, and all she knew of its shape and dimensions was her memory of being guided in here an hour before. She gripped the arms of her chair and tried to recall what she had just said. It was true. It must be true. Her mind couldn't be playing tricks on her, as her questioner insisted. She cocked her head, listening.

"Lenore, I am rapidly growing impatient with you. This is a place of safety for you. You need not fear me. But I must have your cooperation, even though you deny me any information."

"What's so important about what you want to know?" she cried. "What can it matter?"

"It matters a great deal. More lives than Stryker's may depend on it." The voice was gentle but persistent. She strained her eyes to see the other's figure in the dark room.

"More lives?" she asked.

"Of course. One cannot turn back now."

"But I've told you, I don't have it," Lenore whispered. "I don't know anything about it."

"Why did you go into that bank?"

"I needed some money."

"You didn't withdraw any. You went to your safe deposit vault. What did you take out of that box?"

"Nothing," she said sullenly. "I didn't go there."

"You are a poor liar, my dear. What did you do with what you took out of that vault?"

She didn't reply. She heard soft footsteps approaching her, and she tried not to flinch when a hard hand slapped brutally across her mouth. She stifled her cry in a kind of sob and slumped back in the chair, her whole body quivering, tightly withdrawn for another blow.

"You will tell me soon, my dear." . . .

FLASHES of light interrupted the darkness when Barney rolled over, groaning, and sat up. He had been sprawled on the floor, on his back, and he had no idea how long he'd been staring blindly at the ceiling. The light came from an advertising sign that defaced the Jersey side of the Hudson, exploding through the tall terrace windows with irritating regularity.

His stomach was in a nauseating turmoil. He found he was holding something tightly clenched in his fist, and he stared at the sleek metallic shine of it and made a sound in his throat. It was Lenore's Colt .380.

He swayed to his feet and cursed in a dull, frustrated monotone. The apart-

ment was dark and empty and silent. Sue Babson was gone. One of the chairs by the fireplace had been overturned, but he paid little attention to it. His stomach demanded immediate attention and he staggered into the bathroom.

It was some time before he thought to look at his watch. It was eight o'clock, which surprised him. Evidently Sue had been too hurried to prepare a thorough dose of the chloral hydrate that had knocked him out. By all rights he should have slept soundly for several hours yet.

He felt a consuming rage, now that he was more himself. He quit the bathroom, still holding the gun, and paused in the short hallway that opened into the bedroom on one side and the kitchen on the other. Nothing of what had happened made much sense, except that it all seemed part of a malicious pattern involving the use of himself as a dull-witted cat's-paw for some objective he still didn't see clearly.

The bedroom was empty. So was the kitchen. He went back to the living room, an alarm ringing in the back of his head. There had to be some motive for knocking him out, aside from delaying him in his return to Lenore's cottage. He palmed the glass knob of the terrace window and stepped outside. The night was mild. The terrace wall bulked darkly over the sheer drop to the Drive, far below. He watched the lights on the highway for a moment, and searched the terrace with some care. No one was here.

But when he returned from the terrace he saw he was not alone, nor had he been from the time he awakened. The overturned chair by the fireplace had hidden the body before. Approaching it from this side, he saw the dark, ugly bulk of the dead man, face down on the chenille rug, as if he'd crawled there and then collapsed to die.

The rug was puddled widely with blood, and more blood was crusted on the man's snowy hair. Barney could see only a portion of his face, but the short, plump figure and the white hair told him that part of his search was over, most unpleasantly.

The dead man was Stephen Murch. He had been shot in the head, and from

where Barney stood, the bullet that killed him most likely fitted the Colt he now held limply in his hand.

His breath went out in a long, shaken sigh. He looked from the dead man on the floor to the gun in his hand, and panic hammered his thoughts to wild fragments. He had to fight an impulse to get out and run and never stop running. It was his anger that kept him there. He was now being used as the fall guy for murder.

He thought of Lenore. He had last seen her with Stephen Murch, in her car. He wondered where she was and what was happening to her, and his fears for himself gave way to a more urgent worry over the girl. He moved away from the dead man, thinking quickly of various courses of action he might take.

He was not a detective. He had no desire to examine Murch's body. He felt confident that no clue was left except what pointed to himself as the killer.

Quite suddenly he saw the pattern of the web that was closing around him. A long-missing husband, returning to a wife who didn't want him—his move into Murch's house would be construed as his imposing upon Lenore. Now that Murch was dead, there was no proof that he had been argued into the situation. It would look as if he had killed Lenore's friend, George Stryker, in a fit of insane jealousy, then removed Murch from his path to the girl's fortune. The next step was logical, too.

Lenore was going to die—and he'd be blamed for it.

Lenore would be next.

Barney moved at last, quitting the room and the dead man and turning into the bedroom again. He opened the closets first, looking at the racks of dresses, the hat-boxes, and then at the shoes neatly ranged on little wooden shelves attached to the inner side of the door. There were six rows of shoes, of all styles, but he discarded most of them for the evening slippers. He passed them by until he came to two pair with extremely high French heels.

He weighed the fragile little shapes of leather in his hand and frowned, trying to remember, but his memory was

deceptive. He couldn't be sure. He put the slippers back and turned to the front door of the apartment.

The corridor outside was hushed, faintly scented, and gratifyingly deserted. Barney locked the door behind him. The Colt was secure in his pocket now, and he checked to see if the bulge was noticeable under his tweed coat. He didn't think anyone would know it was there.

He turned down the hall to where a ruby light glowed, indicating the automatic elevator was in use. He could hear the whine of the motor as the cage ascended, and for a moment he hesitated.

Then he turned quickly away from the door around an ell in the corridor that led to the fire stairs.

It was just as well. The elevator chose to stop at this floor. Barney waited out of sight, listening to the hiss of air as the door opened. A man's footsteps sounded on the asphalt tile hall, and someone spoke.

"Apartment Seven-B, Clem. It's this way."

Barney felt a shock of recognition shiver through him. It was Lieutenant Dagget's voice. He couldn't miss the Homicide man's cool tones. He had listened to Dagget fire questions at him for forty-eight hours, and the memory of that soft, implacable voice would be with him forever. Apartment 7B was Sue Babson's apartment.

He didn't risk looking around the corner to confirm his guess. He waited until he heard the door close, and then he retreated toward the stairs, fighting down the impulse to run. The seven flights of steps seemed endless, and his shoes made an ungodly clatter on each of the steps. His knees trembled. He had only a few minutes, he knew, before the alarm went out and the building would fill with cops. But he didn't run.

When he reached the ground floor he walked across the hushed lobby as casually as the couple ahead of him. He returned the doorman's nod and stepped into the street. The man and woman who walked ahead turned toward the Drive. Barney swung around the corner in the opposite direction, toward Broadway.

It was the nearest place he could be sure of getting a taxi.

TIME became a torrent that he struggled hopelessly to check. Every minute was precious, slipping through his fingers despite his frantic efforts to make the most of them. Worst of all, he had to control his urge to rush through what he had to do, both because he dared not attract attention, and because he had to be certain of his moves in spite of the flying minutes.

At nine o'clock, Fifty-seventh Street was fairly deserted along the block in which Stephen Murch's art gallery was situated. It took ten minutes to find an alley that led through rubbish-heaped courtyards to the rear of the building, which showed a shabby, ancient aspect in contrast to the glittering, modern facade that faced the street. An old fire escape brought him to the second-floor level, where two cats scuttled out of his way. Enough light came from the kitchen windows opposite the courtyard to let him see his way clearly. He tried the dusty, ancient windows on the fire-escape platform.

The first was closed solidly with a dozen layers of paint between sash and sill, but the second was open two inches from the top, and gave him some hope. Yet when he tried it, it failed to budge. For a moment he considered smashing the dusty pane—but that might attract attention. It was certain that there were private watchmen hired by the art galleries in the block.

He set to work with patience on the window frame, trembling with the controlled use of his strength that finally jarred the top window down another inch. He pulled again, and again, and each time the window jogged downward a small distance, until suddenly it yielded and there was an opening large enough for him to wriggle through.

He was inside for twenty minutes, taking up the search of George Stryker's desk where Sue Babson had interrupted earlier that day. The net result was two items. In Stryker's telephone book were listed two numbers for Andy Temple. They had been in the little leather notebook for some time, for other numbers had been listed after-

ward under those two, on the page indexed 'T.'

The second item was a snapshot of a tall, dark-haired man in an army uniform who looked vaguely familiar to Barney, although he was sure the man was no one he had ever known.

He took both the snapshot and the notebook when he finally left.

CHAPTER VI

THE NEXT MOVE



IT WAS at nine o'clock that Lenore closed her eyes and whispered, "Don't do that to me again. Please don't." Her voice was sick with pain and revulsion. "Don't touch me again, please!"

There was a faint light in the room this time, coming through the open doorway, and even though her eyes were closed she could sense the silhouette of her tormenter against the yellow rectangle. Cigarette smoke drifted through the room. The windows behind her were open, and, as if to add to the nightmare quality of her position, she could hear the rumbling thunder of an angry surf, the sound of a Bach concerto, and the murmur of polite social voices. Mingled with the scent of the cigarette was the sharp tang of the sea. She felt cold, and she shivered as the voice addressed her.

"These methods are as distasteful to me as they are painful to you, my dear. It only remains for you to answer my question, that is all, and then this distressing business will be ended."

"How can it be?" Lenore whispered. "You'll have to kill me."

"Why?"

"Because I know what you want now."

"But there wouldn't be anything you could do about it. I have been in the company of a number of people tonight. No one dreams you are here. Of course, the alternative to your being cooperative could be a convenient suicide. We have a little cliff here, one that is appropriately titled Suicide's Leap. It's not hard to see that remorse over the treatment you have given your husband, or the slaying of George Stryker, would be construed as ample motive for your self-destruction."

"I didn't kill George," Lenore said. She looked at the glow of the cigarette against the dark. She wondered what sort of party was going on in this big house by the sea. The pianist had turned to Grieg now. "I don't want to die," she said.

"Of course you don't, child. So I shall ask you once more. Where is that trunk Barney sent you?"

She was silent. She looked up and saw that the cigarette was quite close to her now, and the dark bulk of her inquisitor blotted out the yellow rectangle of the doorway. She shuddered.

"Please. Don't touch me," she breathed.

"Where is that trunk? You gave it to someone, didn't you?"

She nodded. "Yes." She had to force the word out, and with it came a deep, helpless sense of defeat. "Yes, I did."

"To whom?"

"Barney."

"When?"

"This afternoon, at the bank. I ordered it sent to him at Uncle Steve's house. I thought—whatever's in it—he should have it. It's his. I realize now why you brought Barney back to me. I understand now all those persistent questions about it, and everyone's attempt to make me believe he was dead."

There was triumph and pleasure in the other's voice.

"My dear child. Barney is dead. He's been dead for some time now."

SAND hissed under the tires of the blue coupe and rattled against the fenders. The rutted road made the headlights bob and weave, shooting far out into the night as the car topped a rise and coasted down a steep descent. Ahead was a long, gleaming stretch of sand and beyond, in the black night, were long, thunderous ranks of breakers. Barney started to brake the car, and Sam Katz spoke.

"Keep going," he said. "You'll attract attention if you stop here."

There was a white-painted railing at the dead end, the road terminating abruptly in a wide, asphalted area designed for parking. Behind Barney, a street lamp glowed feebly against the blustery darkness of the Atlantic Ocean.

There were a few cars in the parking area, and several of the beach cottages they had passed were still lighted. The large house on the bluff to the east was ablaze in every window, giving every evidence of a sociable weekend party.

Barney cut the engine, and the sound of the wind and the surf filled the night. There was no sign of the occupants of the other cars parked in the area. He started to open the door, and the little doctor restrained him.

"Take it easy, Barney. Let's not go off half cocked."

"We've wasted enough time already, Sam," Barney said.

"We have to be sure of what we're doing."

"All I'm sure of is that Lenore won't live long unless we get to her."

"Why worry?" Sam said. "She isn't your wife, Barney."

Barney was silent for a moment. "Yes, I know that now." His hands were tight on the wheel of Sam's car. He looked sidewise at the doctor's small, compassionate face. "She isn't my wife and I never married her at all, but I still feel responsible for what's happened because I fell for all that hocus-pocus Murch handed out."

"How long have you been sure about it?"

"I don't think I was ever really convinced from the very beginning. I just let myself drift into it as the easiest way out."

This time Barney got out of the car before Sam could object. The wind coming from the sea felt raw and cold. Barney turned toward the big house on the bluff beyond. He could see a number of cars parked on the circular driveway up there, and through the windows of the house he glimpsed people in evening clothes. He touched the Colt in his side pocket and felt Sam Katz move beside him.

"I'm not sure we shouldn't have called the police. That's what Lisa—my wife—suggested. I'm not at all sure we're wise, trying to do this by ourselves."

"I told you," Barney said. "The police will be looking for me for Murch's murder. By the time I got through explaining what happened to me this time—if they believed any explanations at all

—anything may have happened to Lenore. It may have happened already.”

“Listen, Barney, you’re awfully anxious about that girl.”

“Of course I am.”

“She kind of got under your skin, didn’t she?”

“What of it?”

“Nothing, I guess.” The little doctor drew a decisive breath. He was carrying a tightly wrapped roll of canvases under one arm. “Shall I leave these here, Barney?”

“We’ll lock the car. Nobody will take them.”

“But it’s a fortune, Barney—”

“Leave them here. That’s our bargaining point.”

“All right.”

IT HAD been a wild two hours since Barney had left Fifty-seventh Street. Partly because he wasn’t sure of his next move, and partly because he wanted to know if Lenore had called Dr. Katz again, he had telephoned Sam—and Sam had news for him. A messenger from the bank at Rockefeller Center had arrived with a claim check to a trunk in storage at a midtown warehouse. The note that accompanied the check was hastily scribbled and of little information, yet Sam had gone down to claim the trunk and investigate its contents. When Barney called, the next move was obvious. A sixty mile drive out on Long Island’s south shore followed, and a preliminary check on the owner of the house here. He had obtained the address from Stryker’s notebook.

Throughout the anxious drive, Barney’s thoughts were in a chaotic whirl of fear for Lenore’s safety. He didn’t stop to analyze his emotions toward the girl. It had taken Sam, just now, to put it into words. Lenore had gotten under his skin. More than that, he thought. The whole fraud of his marriage, as he now could prove, wasn’t too bad, in a way.

He liked the thought of having Lenore as his wife.

But if he didn’t hurry, she would be lost to him forever.

“Listen, Barney,” Sam gasped. The path to the house from the beach was

sandy, and the trail yielded under their weight so that the little doctor was breathless with the climb. “Barney, how are you going to go about this? Are you just going to barge in there? That won’t get us anyplace.”

“Have you any other ideas?”

“Maybe we should scout around a little first.”

Barney shook his head. “We haven’t time. Let’s go.”

He went up the path before Sam could object again. He could hear music now, the sound of a concert pianist playing Grieg. The cars in the driveway were all big and expensive, as befitted the huge old house on the dune overlooking the sea.

The upper windows of the house were dark, as was the north wing. A long shimmer of glass indicated a greenhouse on the back lawn, and a cigarette winked against the vast, windy darkness of the sea beyond. Another couple in evening dress stood on the front steps, talking quietly.

Barney pushed back his dark hair with an impatient hand and went by without a second glance.

Dr. Katz followed hard on his heels into the house.

The pianist was in a music room to the right of the broad center hallway, a bald man whose beautiful hands were coaxing music from an enormous white grand piano. He was surrounded by a small but respectful group of rapt listeners, and there was no conversation going on in here. Barney paused in the doorway for a moment, and someone touched his arm.

It turned out to be a tall, insolent-looking butler.

“I beg your pardon, sir. Are you looking for anyone?”

“Your boss,” Barney said.

“He is engaged just now,” the butler said. “As you can see, we have guests. Perhaps tomorrow morning—”

“It’s important that I see him now,” Barney said.

The butler looked confused. He glanced at Sam Katz’ diminutive figure and bobbed his head.

“If you gentlemen will please wait in the study?”

“We’ll wait right here,” Sam said,

CHAPTER VII

KNIFE AGAINST GUN

and deliberately raised his voice. "I like people. I like to look at them and have them see me—then everybody knows where we are. You understand?"

Heads began to turn away from the pianist, frowning at them. The butler beat a quick retreat. "Yes, sir. In a moment."

"I want witnesses when we meet this guy, Barney," Sam said.

There was no one familiar in the music room, and Barney turned back to the hall. There were open doors on the left side, the rooms being given over to several tables of bridge. He knew none of these people, either. It occurred to him that if Lenore was here at all, she would be upstairs in one of the darkened rooms, or in the closed north wing of the house. Sam padded up the steps after him.

"Shouldn't we wait for the butler to come back?"

"What makes you think he's going to hurry?" Barney grunted. "He'd keep us waiting until he got Lenore safely hidden from us—if she's still alive, and around here."



HE FELT his stomach muscles flutter when he actually put it into so many words. It was one thing to say it, and another thing to credit the situation with reality. If he was too late now, he would be late forever, and Lenore would be lost. It didn't seem possible, and he had to remember the body of George Stryker and Stephen Murch to make himself believe that what he feared could and probably would happen unless he was successful.

He touched the gun in his pocket and felt its reassuring weight, but it was a useless thing until he found what he was seeking.

"You take the left hall upstairs," Barney told Sam. "I'll go to the right. Make it fast."

He couldn't hear the piano or the polite conversation of the guests below,

[Turn page]

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although the house failed to shut out the ever-present rumble of surf at the foot of the bluff. The sound and smell of the sea penetrated everything up here, and Barney suspected that these rooms had remained closed all summer. He moved fast, opening door after door on empty, shrouded furniture. He came at last to the service stairs at the end of the hall, where light filtered up from the kitchen and pantry. He could hear no sound from down there, or from Sam Katz at the opposite end of the house.

On impulse, he started down the narrow staircase and stepped out into the big old-fashioned kitchen, with its nickel-plated coal stove next to a modern electric range, a big oaken table cluttered with platters of canapes, and the working space beside the sink filled with liquor bottles and the makings for cocktails. There was no one here.

He started to turn back to the stairway to rejoin Sam when he heard the footsteps. They were moving quickly down the hall toward the swinging door on the opposite side of the kitchen. The sharp, decisive click of high heels came walking right out of a nightmare, and he felt an instantaneous cold sweat, while his face promptly burned where he had been kicked the night of Stryker's death.

They were the footsteps that had haunted him ever since. They came on inexorably, and they were almost at the door before Barney made any move at all. And then he put his hand on the gun in his pocket.

The door swung inward into the kitchen, and for a moment he heard a muted burst of laughter from the guests in the other rooms of the house. Then Sue Babson came into the room.

Barney saw her shoes first—high heeled, French patent leather designs of a frivolous nature he would never forget. Her evening gown left her smooth shoulders bare. Her dark hair, braided in a regal coronet, gave her lovely, oval face an air of aloof calm. She came in as if she didn't recognize Barney's tall figure. She turned toward the refrigerator, hesitated a moment with her shapely back toward him, then turned away as if she had forgotten something, and reached for the swing-

ing door.

Barney was there ahead of her, blocking her escape.

"You're pretty good," he said softly. "No screams, no starts of surprise. But you weren't expecting to see me, were you?"

The girl's shoulders squared, and she drew a deep, shuddering breath. Her face was pale, and a corner of her mouth twitched down, making the smile she gave him a distorted grimace.

"How did you get here, Barney?"

"In a hurry," he said. "I couldn't get away fast enough from that little souvenir you left with me."

She regarded him steadily. "What souvenir, darling?"

"Stephen Murch's dead body."

"Stephen—" The girl seemed genuinely surprised and shocked. She looked at him oddly. "You're lying to me."

"I wish I were." Barney reached for a hook on the swinging door and dropped it home, effectively barring any interruption from the houseful of guests.

It seemed quiet in the kitchen, except for the sound of the nearby surf. The girl looked at the locked door and retreated two or three steps until her hips jarred the oaken table in the center of the big kitchen. Something shimmered far back in her dark eyes. It could be fear, or shock—Barney wasn't sure.

He watched her deep, uneven breathing. "You drugged me and planted a gun in my hand and Stephen Murch's body," he said. "Why?"

"I—I have nothing to say about it."

"Yes, you do. You have lots to say. You'll talk about it to the police when they find the body in your apartment. The last I saw of the place, Lieutenant Dagget was knocking at the door. They're probably looking for you to do some talking right now. But, first, you're going to talk to me about it."

THE girl's hands were tight around the edge of the table. Her composure was infuriating.

"You're a strange man, Barney," she said. "You meddle in things that are best left alone. You would have been all right if you hadn't started going into this yourself, after the police released you. You did very well—not talking to

them when they questioned you."

"I kept silent for Lenore's sake."

"And you came here because of Lenore. I begin to see things more clearly now."

Barney made an impatient gesture. "Why did you drug me?"

"To keep you from interfering for a little while longer."

"Was Murch killed because he interfered, too?"

"I don't know anything about that."

"It was done in your apartment, while I was out cold. It was done with my gun—or the gun Lenore was given by Murch. Who actually killed him—you or your boss?"

"I don't know. I couldn't say." Sue was cold. "I really see no reason why I permit you to question me. I'm going to call the police and tell them you're here."

"Go ahead," Barney said. "That should be interesting."

The girl didn't move. Someone came down the hall from the front of the house and tried to push open the kitchen door. The hook snapped tight, but didn't yield. Barney didn't take his eyes off Sue at the interruption. He heard her quick breathing above the scuffle of footsteps in the hall, and someone out there muttered in disappointment. A woman said something about finding the butler for more drinks, and then the footsteps went away.

Sue Babson went around the table and leaned on it, eyeing Barney's tall figure. "I could have screamed, you know."

"But you didn't."

"What do you want?" she asked. "Why are you here?"

Barney didn't answer at once. His eyes swung deliberately over the woman's bare shoulders, her expensive evening dress, the diamond bracelet that adorned her left wrist.

"Andy Temple does well by himself, doesn't he? It took a little digging to learn about this place of his here on the shore. Quite a house, quite a party—and quite the expensive private secretary."

Sue Babson flushed and bit her wet underlip.

"Where is Andy, by the way?" Bar-

ney went on. "And where is he keeping Lenore?"

"She isn't here," the girl flashed.

"Oh, yes, she is. I'm sure she is. What I'm not sure of is whether you two have killed her already."

"Are you accusing Andy and me of killing Lenore?"

"Not yet," Barney said. "You'd better pray I never have to. But I am accusing you two of killing George Stryker, kicking me in the face—and finishing off Stephen Murch this evening."

"Oh, that's ridiculous."

"I can prove it," Barney said. "I know all the whys and wherefores of the whole business. I know why you have Lenore hidden away somewhere around here, and what you want from her. But you won't get anything from Lenore. She moved just a little too fast for you and her Uncle Steve. Steve didn't really double-cross you, you know. What you're after is Lenore's trunk, the one her husband sent her from overseas, and you thought Steve got it from Lenore. He didn't. Lenore sent it to me. I have it now, and I know what's in it."

"I knew Andy made a mistake," Sue Babson said queerly. "I warned him about you. But he wouldn't listen. No one listened to me. And now—"

SHE moved faster than Barney had thought she could. She had the drawer to the kitchen table open while she was talking, and the quick move of her hand was like a flicker of light, as she threw the bread-knife at him. The sharp blade snicked past his head and thudded point first into the kitchen door behind him. The next instant the girl leaped at him, her fingers clawing at his eyes, her figure transformed by demoniac fury.

Barney ducked, knocked down her arms, and slapped her hard across the cheek. Sue Babson staggered back, a little whimper of dismay forced between her teeth. But that was the only sound she made. Evidently she was unwilling to bring the attention of the house guests to herself and Barney. She lunged again, and then abruptly checked herself as Barney drew his gun.

"Let's not keep waltzing around like

this," he said. "Behave."

"You wouldn't use that on me," she gasped. Her eyes defied him, searching his face while she fought for breath. Her evening gown looked disarranged. "You wouldn't dare."

"I would and I will," Barney said.

"Look," she said. "You have the trunks, the paintings?"

"I do."

"Lenore is here. I admit it. But you won't find her unless I help you. Perhaps we can make a deal. Andy would be willing to compromise."

"And if I don't?"

"Then whatever happens to Lenore will be on your head. I promise you that."

Barney spoke with mounting impatience. "Look, you're convinced when I say I know the whole scheme and understand at last everything that's been going on. I know Lenore isn't my wife. She never was. The man she married, a man with the same name as mine, is undoubtedly dead. He gave Lenore a rough time of it for a while, but he died in the war and perhaps he's best forgotten—except that Lenore still thinks I'm her husband. She's convinced of it because Murch and you and Andrew Temple worked hard enough to make her believe that her husband had turned up with a plastic surgery job done on his face. I suppose it was just luck that made Stephen Murch stumble on me in the hospital, with the same name and a war record similar to that of the original Barney Johnson. And then and there he had his bright idea of using me as a cat's-paw in foisting me upon Lenore as her real husband."

Barney laughed shortly. "He almost had me believing it, too, except that there were a number of things that soon persuaded me otherside. Stryker let it slip, out of spite and jealousy, with the definite statement that I was not Lenore's husband. Besides, there was the matter of the trunk of souvenirs I was supposed to have sent her from overseas. Granted I might have married her while on a binge and forgotten it. But I certainly wouldn't have sent her anything later on, if I had. This forgetfulness on my part would have to be rather remarkable to persist only

on the one subject of Lenore. I never sent her anything of mine from Germany. I didn't know she was alive. Someone else, though—her real husband—did. And what he sent Lenore was the mainspring of the whole plot that used me."

CHAPTER VIII

OFF THE DEEP END



WHEN Barney paused, it was quiet in the kitchen. It seemed as if a sudden hush had come over the whole house. He watched Sue's deep, heavy breathing and weighed the gun in his hand. He grew aware of the ticking of a kitchen clock, and his voice became a little hurried.

"You all wanted that trunk—but Lenore had a morbid fixation about her husband's death. She believed he would return and that she had to keep his things intact, perhaps as a question of personal honor, because she planned to divorce him and return everything that belonged to him. No amount of argument could persuade her to part with that trunk, and none of you ever learned where she kept it. Yet you all knew what was in it—all of you except Lenore, that is. The real Barney Johnson had made a deal with Murch to dispose of what masterpieces he could 'liberate' while in the occupation forces in Germany—and he was pretty good at finding and possessing for himself some fabulous canvases that would bring a fortune here in the domestic art market. Stephen Murch's art gallery was a perfect channel through which the paintings could be disposed of, once you got them from Lenore. But she wouldn't give up the trunk.

"That's where Stephen Murch dragged me into it. By posing me as Lenore's husband, he hoped she would turn the trunk over to me, and then it would be a simple matter to get it away from me before I ever suspected its real worth." Barney's smile was wry. "You gave me quite a waltzing around, at that. But things dragged and became a little tight between you. For one thing, nothing

seemed to be happening in the matter of the trunk. For another, Stryker was in love with Lenore and got too restive at the thought that I was living with her. Jealousy drove him to make a scene in which he came dangerously close to spilling the beans—he was in on the whole deal, of course—and you or Andy Temple shot him to keep him quiet."

"It was stupid," Sue Babson said quietly.

"Of course. On the other hand, it broke up the stalemate by giving you a hold on Lenore that might force the trunk and the paintings into your hands. The only thing that went wrong was that Stephen Murch decided to double-cross you and Temple by hiding Lenore in that cottage. Then he watched her until she showed up at the bank for her safe deposit box, where she kept the claim check to her husband's trunk. She sent it to me from the bank, but Murch didn't know that, and he intercepted her too late—after she got back in her car. You and Temple then caught them both. Murch had to be killed for his treachery, and matters came to a point where you had to use violence with Lenore to get the trunk, or else.

"What led me out here were two things: First, I finished examining Stryker's desk, which you failed to do. He had a snapshot there of a man who could have been Lenore's husband, but never me. I know what I used to look like, and it was never like that. The other thing I found was Temple's address here, much used, which indicated you were all in cahoots with each other. The trunk itself was the clincher, of course."

"You don't have it," Sue said. "We watched Murch's house. It never came there."

"It came to the house of a friend of mine, where Lenore sent it. Once we saw the paintings, everything became clear except for one thing—the fact that Lenore might still be killed for something she no longer had in her possession. But you'd have to kill me and my friend now, you know. There's no point in going on with Lenore."

"Your friend?" Sue asked briefly.

"He's here with me, in the house. So you see—"

"You're not alone?"

"Of course not. I know what I'm up against when I tangle with you and your friend Temple."

Sue took a deep, shuddering breath. "And if we let Lenore go, what about the paintings? Do we make a deal?"

"Let me see Lenore first."

"But—"

Barney moved the gun a little, and the girl's eyes touched it and lifted to his face. She shivered.

"I'll dictate the terms," Barney said. "Take me to her."

"All right."

THE night seemed to have swallowed Sam Katz completely. The little doctor was nowhere in sight as Barney followed the tall girl through the back kitchen doorway into the windswept gloom of the back lawn. The surf crashed sullenly below the lip of the bluff fifty yards away. Once or twice the girl stumbled on her high heels as she led the way along a flagstoned path toward the greenhouse set against a tall hedge.

He saw that the shimmer of windowpanes did not extend the full length of the structure, but ended in a conventional wall of novelty siding at one end, evidently a work-room of some sort. Light struck at the door from the windows of the main house behind them. The sound of the surf was louder and more insistent here. Barney tried to control the rising tempo of his pulse as he followed Sue to the doorway.

"Andy was keeping her in here," the girl said.

"Go on in."

All this time he hadn't really let himself believe that she would be here, and that he would find her in time. His stomach was tied in a knot as he stepped through the doorway into the small darkened room beyond, where Sue's figure stood in a dim attitude of taut waiting. Then he saw Lenore.

She was tied to a sturdy oaken chair, her back to a window that faced the sea. Light followed him into the room, laying a shallow wedge of yellow across the muddy floor to the girl's figure. Her eyes seemed blind, without life or hope. Barney stood still, aware of a long sigh coming out of him as he looked at her.

Lenore's mouth was swollen, and there was an ugly, mottled bruise along one side of her jaw and another across her cheek. Her blond hair was disheveled, no longer sleek and shining. He watched her battered lips move feebly as she lifted her head.

"Let me die," she whispered. "Go ahead and kill me."

"Lenore—" Barney began.

"Go away."

Sue's voice was brittle. "Well, here's your girl, Barney. That's my part of the bargain. Remember I helped you, whatever happens. As for the paintings—"

Barney's hand was tight around the gun in bitter anger at what had been done to Lenore.

"I made no bargain with you. Where is Temple?"

"I don't know. I thought he was here."

Temple wasn't in the room. Barney waved Sue against the wall and approached Lenore, working swiftly on the bonds that tied her to the chair.

"Lenore," he said gently. "This is Barney. I've come to take you home."

"You're dead," she said dully.

He laughed, helping her to her feet. She would have fallen if his arm hadn't supported her firmly around her waist.

"Hardly dead," he said. "It's really me, Lenore. Don't you understand? Everything is all right now. You're all right. You don't have to worry about anything now."

A glimmer of recognition came into the girl's blank eyes, and her mouth twitched.

"You're not my husband."

"No, but I'm Barney, all right."

"Temple said you were dead. He killed Uncle Steve and George—"

"I'll get him," Barney said grimly. "Sam's probably got him cornered now."

AS IF to support his words, there came the sudden definitive report of a gun, echoing loudly and shockingly from outside. Afterward, he wasn't sure what it was that made Sue defy his own weapon. Perhaps it was the shot, or the sudden realization that it was all over for her, that what Barney knew added to Lenore's testimony was enough to

convict her and Temple several times over. Or perhaps it was the promise of retribution in Barney's voice that stirred the dark-haired girl into violent action.

She gave a smothered exclamation and, ignoring Barney's gun, darted for the door before he could warn her to halt. She moved swiftly, her long dress swirling over the floor, and then she was past him, plunging through the open doorway into the salty night.

Somewhere, at the same time, a car motor raced and roared against the background of the jealous surf. The wind hit Barney's face like the slap of a wet towel as he left Lenore and dived after the running girl. He didn't cry out, for some reason that was inexplicable even to him. Perhaps he subconsciously knew what was going to happen, although it took place so fast that there was little time in which he could have done anything, anyway.

He saw instantly that the house had been put in a state of alarm. The guests were milling about in excited patterns, and several had poured onto the lawn and driveway, calling loudly for an explanation of the shot they had heard. Barney felt quick fear for Sam's safety. The little doctor hadn't been armed. The shot could have come only from a gun in Temple's hand. Then his attention was caught by the bright glare of headlights as a car roared around the driveway that circled the house toward the back lawn and the greenhouse.

The headlights bounced and swooped and cut like twin knives through the night as the heavy car quit the graveled road and plunged across the lawn, gathering speed by the second. For just a moment Barney saw Sue Babson's stark figure as she stood, frozen and statueque in her horror, on the very lip of the bluff that overhung the angry surf below. Her thin scream was cut off almost before it began as the car hit her, and then, in a twinkling, the girl and the car were gone, hurtling into empty space that dropped into the ocean below.

Barney shuddered. He felt weak and cold, and the gun weighed a ton in his wet hands. He started to run for the edge of the cliff, but he knew it was no use. Someone shouted behind him, and

he saw Sam Katz trotting over the dark lawn well in advance of the panicky guests from the house.

"Barney!"

"Right here," Barney said. "Are you all right, Sam?"

"Yes. How's the girl?"

"Okay. Was that Temple in the car?"

Sam nodded. His small face was gray with shock. "He cornered me in the house. I told him you were here and that the cops were coming. He didn't believe me until he saw you and Sue Babson go into the greenhouse. Then he shot at me—pure venom, I think—and ran for his car." The little doctor shivered and drew a deep breath. "When he saw Sue, I guess he figured he ought to take her with him. Anyway, neither one will have to stand trial now. I guess that's what he wanted."

Barney looked over the shattered wooden railing that guarded against the drop into the surf. There was nothing to be seen but dark, windy air and the angry turmoil of white breakers streaking the night below.

"Call the cops," he said wearily. "And an ambulance, too. Though I don't think there will be much use for them now."

FOR the first time since midnight they were alone. The police had come and gone, sorted out the guests from the principals and sent them all home, except for Barney and Sam and Lenore. A hoisting truck had been maneuvered down on the beach and, with the aid of headlight beams, was struggling to recover Temple's car from the surf. In the big kitchen, however, the silence was warm and restful and comforting.

Lenore sat at the table, wrapped in a blanket, sipping hot coffee. Sam Katz had temporarily disappeared. Barney filled a cup for himself, put the percolator back on the stove, and set his cup down on the table across from the girl.

She had managed to recover some of her usual appearance, even to the extent of lipstick on her mouth. But her eyes

were aloof and withdrawn when Barney faced her squarely.

He wondered for a moment what he looked like to her.

"So now we come to us," he said then.

"There's nothing to come to, is there?" Her voice was polite and impersonal. "We're not married after all, are we?"

"No, we're not," Barney said. He waited a moment, but she was studying her coffee with an intense interest. "I'm sorry I fell for the whole gag, and I regret what's happened because I let myself get into this thing. On the other hand, it's done some good."

"Has it?"

"You're free now," he said quietly. "You don't owe me anything, of course. But you're not haunted any more. You need have no fear of your husband ever coming back."

"He was a brute," Lenore said, so quietly he could hardly hear her. "He was sadistic and unnatural—"

"He's dead now," Barney said quickly. "You can forget him—and me, too, if you wish."

"Of course."

"But I won't forget you," he added. "I don't want to. My one regret—"

"Yes?" Her interest had suddenly quickened, and she lifted her face toward him at last. Something began to glimmer deep in her wide eyes. In spite of her bruises, she looked lovely. She looked wonderful. *I vote her the girl I always want to find in my kitchen,* he thought.

"You're just saying that, about not forgetting me. You don't mean it."

"I always say what I mean," Barney told her. He grinned, and the smile was contagious, for Lenore grinned back at him.

"Barney, darling—"

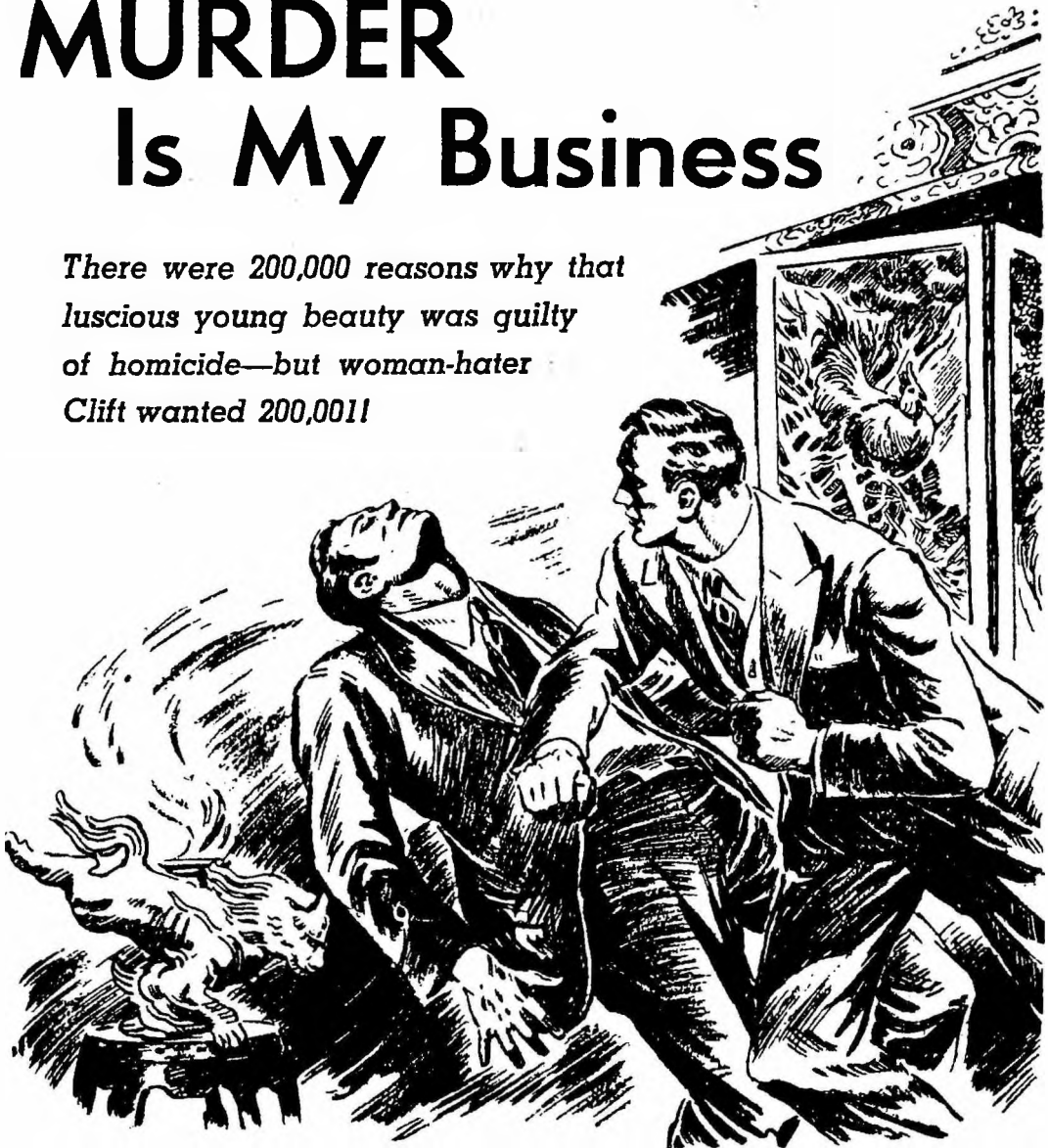
"Sam will be my best man," he said, rising and going around the table toward her, watching her face change and the tension go out of her, watching her eyes shine. "As soon as we can, sweetheart, we'll make it legal."

NEXT ISSUE

WALKER IN THE SHADOWS a novelet by **ELEANOR HAMMOND**

MURDER Is My Business

There were 200,000 reasons why that luscious young beauty was guilty of homicide—but woman-hater Clift wanted 200,001!



I hit him so hard he bounced twice

CHAPTER I

WATCH THAT ALIBI

THE girl at the switchboard was small, dainty and demure. She pulled one of the plugs out, looked up at me, then fluffed her black hair.

"Mr. Clift," she said, and she made a face. "How many rods are you packing today?" She pointed her forefinger at

my midsection and crooked her thumb twice. "Pow, pow."

"You've been seeing too many movies," I mourned. "I always leave my big flintlock musket at home when I come into the office. What makes you so beautiful, Mimi? And so early in the morning, too."

"I get plenty of sleep," she said tartly. "Our big handsome investigators



a novelet by
B. J. BENSON

board Life Insurance Company. Underneath, in the lower right hand corner, it said Oscar R. Elwin, Chief Investigator, in small gold letters.

I opened the door and went in.

The man at the big walnut desk was fat and bald and he had a bland face with an innocent expression on it. The expression fooled nobody, least of all me. I'd been working for him four years.

He looked at a gold wrist watch on his big hairy arm. "My watch must be fast," he murmured to nobody in particular. "Imagine that? It says ten o'clock."

"You remind me of my old first ser-

never take out the office help."

"We're always too busy," I said sadly. "Speak to the boss. Tell him to put the bull whip back in his closet."

"You speak to him," she said, wrinkling her pert nose. "He's waiting for you now."

I tipped my hat, made a little bow and opened the swinging gate. I went down the cool marble corridor until I came to the frosted glass door that read Sea-

geant," I said, grabbing one of the big leather chairs. "Why don't you put a time clock around my neck?"

"A millstone would fit better. I've been waiting an hour. I've got the whole file here for you. You can go to work on it immediately."

"On what?"

HE SCRATCHED his bald head. "Don't you ever read the papers?"

"Nope," I said. "Not me. I ruined my great big beautiful eyes reading the fine print on the policies. The ones the company puts out to fool the public."

"Henry Horton is dead. Murdered yesterday evening about seven-thirty. Every paper in town is screaming banners on it."

I yawned. "I suppose he had a two thousand, twenty pay life policy with us and you're holding out again with the dough."

"He's got one for a hundred thousand. One with a double indemnity clause in case of accident."

"And under the terms of the policy murder is an accident."

"Thanks. So you *have* learned something in your four years here."

"And," I said, "you don't want to pay, as usual."

"I don't know why I put up with him," he sighed, addressing the blank wall. "Why do I? Help isn't hard to get any more." He swiveled the chair around to me. "Henry Horton was president of Horton and Company, Investment Counselors. He was sixty-two years old. His first wife died some years back. He married again about two weeks ago. His second wife is out of the line at the Casablanca Club. Third girl from the end. Getting any ideas now?"

"You mean she didn't marry him for his wavy gray hair and his pearly store teeth."

"I mean he changed the beneficiary only three weeks ago. From a charitable organization to his new wife. And, furthermore, he was murdered in his private office with a .25 automatic."

"A woman's gun."

"Yes. Four little pellets in him and her alibi to the cops is about as weak as those you give me for coming in late."

"And no gun on the premises."

"No gun," he said.

"And you're getting just a wee bit suspicious."

"Me and the cops both."

"She still in circulation?"

"Yes. You know the way Lieutenant Rosenblatt works."

"Rosy's smart," I said. "After all, murder is his business."

"Yours, too," he said coldly. "The file's ready. You can take it along with you as you go."

"You want to save the company two hundred gees," I said, getting up. "You're a noble person, boss man. You want to see justice done."

"The police will see that justice is done. That's their department. Our job is to see that it's a clean case. If it's clean, we pay. We love to pay. A big claim like that is good advertising."

"Don't give me the old baloney," I said. "I've been working here too long."

"I'm glad *you* call it working," he said. "Oh, one more thing. Watch yourself when you go up against Mrs. Horton. They say she's something to see. Don't go soft on us."

"Me?" I asked. "Look who he's talking to. There's only one thing I hate worse than insurance companies. Women."

THERE was a mob outside the Gaylord Arms and the harried doorman looked at me and tugged at his starched collar. He motioned to the cop at the door. The cop came over and I showed him my papers. He scratched his jaw then called over a plainclothes man. They both looked me over carefully then waved me in.

I took the elevator to the penthouse.

When she opened the door I stood there with my mouth open like a fish out of water.

Elwin had said she was something to see, but that covered a lot of ground. She was tall, about five seven. She wore a tight fitting black dress with a single gold ornament and the figure that went into it made me want to whinny like a stallion. Her hair was long and wavy and a natural golden brown. She had big deep blue eyes and long lashes and a perfectly curved mouth. Her skin was like delicate porcelain and when she

smiled hello, I saw perfect teeth. I didn't dare take more than one look at chiffon clad legs in high heeled black pumps. It would have been too much for me.

"Hello," she said again.

I woke up and began to fumble in my breast pocket. "Clifford Clift," I stut-tered, tearing my eyes away from her. "Seaboard Life Insurance Company."

She wasn't smiling any more. Her soft mouth quivered for a moment as she hesitated. Then she shrugged her lovely shoulders and stood aside to let me in.

"Sorry to trouble you so soon," I said with a sickly grin, as I went through the ebony and white doorway. Inside, the apartment was luxuriously carpeted, silk cushioned, air conditioned and streamlined, and worth all of the fifteen thousand a year the file said they were paying.

She motioned me to an ultra modern divan.

"What did you say your name was?" she asked.

"Cliff Clift," I said slowly, with special emphasis on the *t*.

"Sounds like a speech impediment," she said.

"My parents' fault," I said. "They wanted me to have a rhythmical name. I've never been able to live it down."

"What do you want, Mr. Cliff?"

"Clift," I said. "I'd like to ask some questions if I may. It's about your husband's insurance."

"I know all about his insurance. Did you come to pay it?"

"Not quite, Mrs. Horton. It's a big policy. Including the double indemnity it runs into two hundred thousand dollars."

"And I suppose," she said, "the company thinks there's a catch in it."

"Your husband was murdered, Mrs. Horton. That's classified as accident, and it means a double payoff. Seaboard will pay. All I'm here for is to find out if your hands are clean."

"You mean if *I* murdered him," she said bitterly, "I don't collect. Is that it?"

"Well," I said. "Yes, if you put it that way."

"Did it ever occur to you or the com-

pany that I don't want the money? That I don't want anything? That I just want to be left alone?"

"I don't get you."

"You heard me," she said. "I don't want the money. You can take it and stuff it into—into the biggest vault Seaboard has."

"I don't think I have anything to do with that," I said. "If the claim is legal, we'll be glad to pay it. We have to pay. There are state insurance laws."

"Then what did you come up here for?"

"To see if you have a better alibi than the one the police have."

"A better what?"

"Alibi. Your alleged movements at the alleged time of the alleged crime."

"The police seem satisfied with my story."

"Because you're not in custody? Don't let that fool you, Mrs. Horton. They're smart in this town. They work quiet-like."

CHAPTER II

NO GUN, SHE SAYS



HE looked a little frightened now. The bold front had been so much shellac and now I knew it. The trouble was that she looked so helpless and so beautiful that I had all I could do not to take her into my arms and

comfort her.

"What do I do now? she asked, and her voice trembled just a little.

"It might help if you told me about it," I said gently. "Everything that happened yesterday."

"I'll do better than that," she said. "I wouldn't want you to get the wrong impression of things. I'll start from the beginning."

"Go ahead," I said. "I'll make myself comfy. You can start when you were born. I'll bet you were a cute baby."

"I'll start at the Casablanca," she said. "I was dancing there under the name of Lona Blake. That's my real name. Maybe I wasn't very good as a dancer, but they didn't require much more than something decorative. Henry

Horton dropped in quite often and the first thing I knew I was going out with him after the show. Oh, I've been around, all right, and I knew what the score was and I didn't have any illusions. But it was one of those things that fool you. The exception to the rule. Henry Horton was different. He was a widower and there were no kids and he was a lonely man in his late fifties."

"Sixty-two," I said.

"All right. Sixty-two," she said. "Yes, I married him and I know what you're thinking. But there were no deals made. No money or property settlements. I didn't even know about the insurance until the police told me about it. Do you believe that?"

"Sure," I said. "And I believe in Santa Claus, too."

"All right," she said. "So we got married and I quit the club. That was two weeks ago. There was no honeymoon because Henry couldn't get away at this time. I moved in here. I was flattered and even honored to be his wife. I liked Henry. I liked him a lot. Maybe it wasn't love, but it was the closest thing to it." She stopped and looked at me. "You don't believe that, either."

"Frankly, no," I said. "But don't mind me. I'm an awful cynic."

"So here I am. I don't know anything about Henry's business. Stocks and bonds, I guess. But Henry has been working late the past two weeks. Like he did yesterday."

"And you stayed home all the time."

"Yes," she said, her voice rising. "I stayed home. I stayed home last night. I read a book and listened to the radio."

"The maid will testify to that," I said.

"It was the maid's night off."

"The cook then."

"No cook. I do my own cooking."

"There are others ways," I said. "You got telephone calls."

"None. But I made a call. It can be traced."

"To whom?"

"To my husband's office. He has an unlisted number to his private office. I called him at seven-thirty. There was no answer."

"And no record either. Not on a dial

telephone, you know."

"After nine o'clock the police came. They told me Henry was dead. They said the medical examiner timed the death at about seven to seven-fifteen."

"Who found the body?"

"Mr. Gregg," she said. "He was one of Henry's most trusted employees. He had come back to the office for some papers. Henry's door was locked from the inside. Mr. Gregg broke in with one of the night elevator operators. That's all I know."

"And the door was locked from the inside. How did the police figure that out?"

"I don't know."

"What about the weapon?"

"The gun? It was never found."

"I don't mean that," I said. "It was a .25 caliber. The kind of gun a woman would use. Did you ever own one?"

HER eyes turned to me briefly, but she didn't answer. She rose and walked over to one of the casement windows. The room was still. Somewhere a clock ticked steadily away. She came back and sat down again.

"Where is it?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "Honestly, I don't. Henry took it away when I unpacked here. He noticed it in my luggage. He said he didn't like to have it around the house."

"And you don't know what he did with it?"

"No."

"Did the police ask you about a gun?"

"Yes. A Lieutenant Rosenblatt asked me about it."

"You said nothing, of course."

"No. I don't know why. I was scared, terribly scared. After the police left I looked through the house. I thought perhaps it was still around."

"They'll find out about it. They're probably checking now. Where'd you buy it?"

"It was given to me by a friend some time ago."

"Who?"

"It doesn't matter now. He was killed six months ago. There's no sense bringing his name into it."

"They'll find out anyway," I said. "You're getting in deeper all the time."

"Henry could have had the gun at the office," she said desperately.

"I wouldn't depend on it. What about a motive to all this? Did you think about that?"

"You mean why would anyone want to kill him? I don't know. He was so kind and decent, he couldn't have had any enemies."

"Who do you think you've been kidding?" I sneered. "What about you? Tired of waiting for Henry to die? What about your old boy friend? Too much trouble to sneak out to meet him?"

Her face went white and her hands gripped the chair. She half rose out of the seat.

"Get out," she whispered. "Get out of here before I call the police."

"Now don't tell me there was no boy friend," I said.

"Get out," she said again.

"The papers are carrying his picture, and yours too. His name's Nelson Paddock. Ever hear of him?"

"No."

"That's funny," I said. "The guy claims he's been seeing you on the side. What does your lawyer say?"

"I haven't got a lawyer," she said. Her voice was listless now—as though she didn't care any more. "I haven't anybody. Not even my maid Ellie. I sent her away."

I stood up and went over to her. She was clasping and unclasping her fingers.

"No alibi," I said softly. "No motive, no gun, no boy friend, no lawyer, no maid, no friends. Nothing. The whole set-up is so crazy that I believe you. Get your things. We're getting out of here."

"Where are we going?"

"We're going to talk to some people. Maybe—if we're lucky—we'll find ourselves something."

I HAD my car parked around the corner and it was nip and tuck all the way. We had to shake off a dozen reporters, cameramen, sob sisters and flashlight bulbs. Even my old buddy, Sam Jones of the *News-Herald*, got a stiff straightarm, necessarily and regretfully from me, which sat him down bewildered on the sidewalk.

We drove down to the Seaboard In-

surance Company and up to the seventeenth floor. I rushed her by the wide-eyed Mimi and down the corridor to Elwin's office.

I whisked her right by it and opened the door to the emergency stairs. We clattered down to the fifteenth floor. There we took the elevator to the second where we raced down the steel stairs to the basement. I got her out through the rear of the building and across the back lot to Federal Street. We grabbed a passing cab.

She half fell inside. Then she turned and looked at me breathlessly.

"Silly, isn't it?" I said, settling down beside her. "But we had to get rid of the cops. Right now they think we're upstairs in my office."

"You mean we were followed all the time?"

"Rosy had at least two men on you."

"Won't they get angry with you, Mr. Clift?"

"Call me Clift. Angry? No, they love it. Keeps them on their toes. The thrill of the chase and all that sort of thing. All the same, maybe I'd better ask for a transfer after this one. Well, our first stop is Twenty-three Laurel Avenue. The home of Mr. Norman Gregg."

"Why Mr. Gregg?"

"He found the body, Lona."

"How did you know his address?"

"Don't ask me. My boss man handles all the details. He gives it to me in a plain manila folder. All pre-digested."

Number Twenty-three was old and shabby and the woman who answered the door was thin and angular. Her dark hair was coiled severely and tightly on the top of her head and her face was gaunt, her mouth thin and small and prim. She had a good figure and she wasn't more than fifty. But she looked at us with disapproval, as though anybody younger was distasteful to her.

"Mrs. Gregg?" I asked.

"I'm Martha Simms, the housekeeper," she snapped. "There's no Mrs. Gregg."

"Mr. Gregg then."

"He's not home. Now you reporters get away from here."

"This is Mrs. Horton," I said. "It's very important we see Mr. Gregg."

She looked sharply at Lona and her lip curled a little. "So that's Mrs. Horton," she sniffed. She turned and her eyes glared at me. "He was an old fool."

"Who was?" I asked.

"Henry Horton. Marrying a young hussy. Why this frilly little thing here is young enough to be his granddaughter. It serves him right."

"Why?"

"Because it was disgraceful and indecent, that's why. A man like him had no right to."

"You knew him pretty well?"

"Knew him?" she asked. "He was here often enough. Liked my cooking. He spent most of his evenings here before he got married again. Now he's dead. It's poor Mr. Gregg who's had the shock. He was the one who found him last night. The radio said Henry Horton was slumped over his desk with his head cradled in his arms. Oh, I wasn't surprised."

"I'll bet Mr. Horton was," I said. "That's why we're here to see Mr. Gregg."

"You'll have to wait here," she said. "I'll see if he's in."

She shut the door in our faces.

"Lovely person," I said to Lona.

We waited. Martha came back and opened the door.

"In the living room," she said.

CHAPTER III

THE SKUNK



HE furniture was old and ponderous. The man sitting there was about sixty-five and he was wearing old tweeds in a black and gray weave. His face was big and flabby, with a wattle of flesh dangling from his chin. The face sagged beneath pouched eyes and the skin was specked with tiny blood vessels like the threads on a dollar bill.

He rose and came over to us. He was surprisingly tall. He put out his hands. The fingers were square and blunt and freckled.

"Mrs. Horton," he said sadly. "A ter-

rible tragedy. Terrible tragedy. Come sit down. I've been so unnerved by what happened that I haven't left the house. The doctor gave me something last night and it hasn't worn off yet."

"This is Mr. Clift," Lona said. "He—"

"Her attorney," I said quickly. "We thought we'd go over the matter with you if you're well enough to discuss it."

He shook hands with me. His grip was firm and hard.

"Certainly, sir," he said. "I owe it to Henry. Sit down. I'll have Martha bring in some sherry."

We sat down. I took out my cigarette case and offered cigarettes around. Lona took one, but Gregg shook his head.

"Thanks," he said. "But I don't smoke."

"Mr. Gregg," I said. "We'd like to hear what you found last evening."

"Well," he said, "I left the office at five o'clock as usual. After supper, I remembered that I had wanted to take home the Grand National prospectus. I wanted to work on the figures and have them ready for H.H. in the morning. I went back to the office. It was about eight o'clock. I rode up the elevator and I told the operator to wait as I would only be gone a minute. I opened the main office door with my key. Then I noticed the light coming out from under H.H.'s closed door.

"I knocked. There was no answer. I tried the door, but it was locked. I called the elevator man and we broke in. There he was, bent over the desk with blood all over the front of him. There was a chair drawn up to his desk as if he had had a visitor. In his right hand was the telephone receiver, off the cradle. A vain attempt to call for help, sir. We didn't want to touch a thing in the place so we rode down to the lobby and used the phone there. The police came right away. The medical examiner said he had died an hour or so before I got there."

"Complete and concise," I said. "Thank you, Mr. Gregg. You have a retentive memory. But what about the elevator operators? Didn't they take anybody up or down about the time of the murder?"

"Oh, yes. Quite a few, sir. It's a big

building and a busy one."

"It wouldn't make any difference," I mused. "The door to his private office was locked from the inside."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm not much for believing hocus-pocus," I said. "There was another way to get in and out."

He hesitated and looked over at Lona.

"It's all right, Mr. Gregg," Lona said. "You can tell him."

HE LOOKED at her again. "There's a small, private automatic elevator that leads directly from the lobby up to Mr. Horton's private office. Mr. Horton has the only key and it was found on him. But didn't the police tell you all that, sir?"

"The police don't always tell us everything," I said. "In other words, anybody who had a key could have ridden up that elevator and come directly into Horton's office without being seen. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"And they could leave the same way, too."

"Yes. But there was only one key."

"You needn't try to protect me, Mr. Gregg," Lona said. "He'll find out anyway." She turned to me. "I had a key, too, Cliff."

"Still have it?"

"Yes."

"It never left your possession?"

"No. I don't think so."

"Mr. Gregg, does anyone else know she has a key?"

"No, sir. Only me."

"Why didn't you tell the police?" I asked.

"Why?" He looked at me surprised. "Look here, sir. I've been with Horton and Company forty-five years. Started in as a clerk under Mr. Horton, Senior. When he died a number of years ago, young H.H. took me completely into his confidence. A few weeks ago, when he decided to get married again, he saw fit to generously award me with a quarter interest in the business. Don't you think I owe him and his family some kind of loyalty, sir?"

"What family? I thought he had nobody."

"Mrs. Horton," he said patiently. "I

was tickled pink when he married again. He was a lonely man. Many a time he'd come over to my house for dinner and an evening of chess. He had a tricky Philidor defense and he always gave me a bad time with it. But best of all, he liked Martha's cooking. Funny thing about H. H. He was old-fashioned along those lines. He wanted a wife who could cook."

"And young Mrs. Horton here, don't tell me she can cook?"

"Yes. You wouldn't think an attractive young girl like that could cook. But she's a fine person and she made him very happy. Now she has my loyalty, too."

"Thank you, Mr. Gregg," I said. "I sure admire your loyalty." I stood up and nodded to Lona. "Let's go visiting again."

When we got back into the cab, I gave the driver the address. I looked out the window at the black sedan that made the U turn and fell in behind us.

"I know what you're thinking," Lona said. "Every step we go, it looks worse and worse for me."

"Every step we go," I said, "I find more and more lies. And every step we go, the cops go along with us."

She looked quickly out the rear window.

"They're right behind us," I said. "I guess they had Gregg under surveillance, too. We walked back into them again."

"What was that address you gave the driver?"

"Now I am surprised," I said. "I thought you'd recognize it."

THE apartment was furnished in Chinese red, lime green and lemon yellow and on the fireplace he had a real pair of Iberian bronzes. He burned incense, too, and he himself was a perfect match for his surroundings. He was tall and thin and slightly stooped, with slick blue-black hair, long sideburns and a pale, pasty complexion like the under side of a mackerel. He was wearing a maroon smoking jacket with white piping on the lapels.

His name was Nelson Paddock.

I stood in the doorway as he looked Lona over. His eyes started up from

her beautiful, perfectly formed legs to the top of her soft hair. He licked his chops and for a moment I almost expected to see a pair of dripping fangs. He looked over at me and his eyes narrowed. Then he smiled.

"Hello, Lona," he said, but there was a little hesitation in his voice. "Come on in."

She stepped in ahead of me. Then she turned to Paddock and let go with her handbag. It caught him square across the side of the face and he staggered back.

"You lounge lizard," she said, and she brought the bag back again. I caught her arm.

"Wait a minute," I said. "I handle the muscle work."

"He's a liar," she said angrily. "I never saw this gigolo before in my life."

"I'm her attorney, Mr. Paddock," I said.

He laughed uneasily. "Lona's got quite a temper," he said. "She's angry about the publicity. I'm a gentleman up to a point, and I'm usually very discreet. But my discretion ends when the police show up."

"I suppose they had to twist your arm," I said. "How'd they know in the first place?"

"I thought it was my duty to talk to the press. I've been real chummy with Lona for years. There was no reason for it to discontinue. After all, Mr. Horton wasn't as young as he used to be."

She made a rush for him. I put my arm up.

"Why'd you call the papers, Paddock?" I asked.

"The police would have found out soon enough and I didn't want to get caught in the middle. I've learned it always pays to cooperate."

"You're a nice guy," I said. "And this is a nice layout for a nice fellow like you. What do you do for a living, or is that too personal?"

"Oh, I have investments. Certain investments."

"I have an idea what you mean," I said. "And I suppose you're always open to a good proposition."

"Always," he said with a nasty smile.

"Where were you last night?" I asked.

"Last night? I was at my club having

dinner. The police gave me a clean bill."

"Did you have a date with Lona afterwards?"

"Yes. Then I heard the radio news. I thought it best to forego the pleasure. It was a shame, too," he leered. "She's such a delectable morsel that—"

I hit him. I hit him so hard that he bounced twice to the floor on the seat of his pants. I picked him up by the collar and I was going to let him have it again, but I saw his jaw was slack and his eyes glazed.

I took out my handkerchief and wiped my hands. "Let's get out into the clean air," I said. "I feel as though I've just touched a dead skunk."

CHAPTER IV

200,000 REASONS



AT THE elevator I pushed the button. "It's only five floors down," I said, "and only one more to the basement. You should find a service entrance there. You'll walk down."

"Me?" she asked.

"You," I said. "Let's not get involved in manners now. As it is, I've got my neck stretched out so far I feel like an ostrich. But I want to keep you on ice a little longer if I can."

The automatic elevator came up and the door opened. I stepped in and thumbed the *hold* button.

"I'm going down this way," I said. "and I should draw away some of the bloodhounds. They'll probably leave a man outside because they'll think you're still in here. You get out back and over to Gregg's house. I'll contact you there. The cops will set up a hue and cry before long, but I don't think they'll suspect you're anywhere near his place."

"Thanks, Cliff," she said softly. "You didn't believe him, did you?"

"No. I'm giving you credit for better taste than that. He wasn't your type at all."

"But why would he say such things?"

"Why? Beats me. I should have sat him up and asked him with my fist down his throat. I've seen his kind before. Always looking for angles where there's a dirty dollar to be made. Maybe he

saw your picture in the papers and figured that any publicity is good publicity."

"Thanks, Cliff," she said again, and she squeezed my arm. "It was wonderful seeing you defend my honor the way you did."

"Go on," I growled, feeling my ears tingle. "Get out of here before I change my mind and turn you over to the cops."

She smiled. "You're not as tough as you make out, Cliff. You'd make a good husband for a real nice girl."

"Get along with you," I said. "I can't stand women. They make a prize sap out of me."

THE girl at the switchboard was still small, still dainty and still demure. She pulled one of the plugs out and looked up at me.

"Here he is," she said and she twitched her little nose. "Our handsome young woman hater. We've been trying to get you everywhere. You go right into Mr. Elwin's office, young man. And you'd better gird your loins. You have company."

I tipped my hat, bowed slightly and went through the swinging gate. There I stopped.

"Do me a favor, Mimi," I said. "While I'm in there, get the help wanted section out of the paper for me. I'll be looking for a job on my way out."

"You always say that," she said sweetly. "Being Seaboard's only eligible bachelor, you're practically indispensable around here. Was that Mrs. Horton with you before?"

"How did you ever know?"

"I recognized her from her pictures in the papers. I'd make a good investigator."

"Besides you knew I was working on the case."

"Uh huh. Wasn't it clever of me? She's very beautiful. But she didn't come out again and neither did you. Where did she go?"

"I must have lost her," I said mournfully. "And I looked in all my pockets, too."

I went down the marble corridor until I came to the frosted glass door. I opened it and went in.

Somebody said, "Hello, Cliff."

I looked at him without surprise. He was short and stocky, with big shoulders and a pudgy face. He had a short square nose and a ruddy complexion. His fine black hair was closely cropped. There was a pair of horn rimmed glasses over his eyes, a short stub of a cigar in his teeth, and a deceptively friendly smile on his face.

"Lieutenant Rosenblatt," I said, and I salaamed twice.

"Sit down, Cliff," Elwin said, from behind his big desk. "The lieutenant wants to converse with you."

"I can tell you're mad at me, Rosy," I said. "You don't like me any more."

"We love you, Cliff," he smiled. "The whole police force is crazy about you. In fact, all the boys have been inquiring for you. You're so young and so handsome and they say you're such a good boy to your mother."

"Thanks," I said. "My modesty prevents an answer."

"Okay," he said. "Where is she?"

"First tell me what you want her for."

"The D.A. wants her. He wants her brought in for a little talk. He's going to hold her for the grand jury."

"Fast work," I said. "You think he has a case?"

"He thinks he has. I'm only a cop. I was supposed to keep her under wraps. Which reminds me—"

"There's no case," I interrupted. "She didn't do it."

"Say, who you working for anyway?" Elwin moaned. "If she didn't do it, it'll cost Seaboard two hundred thousand frogskins."

"You must have an adding machine for a brain," I said to him. "Doesn't the human element enter into it at all?"

"That's not my department," he said.

"My department is to bring Mrs. Horton in," Rosenblatt said gently. "I'd hate to lock up somebody in this room for obstructing justice, or for accessory after the fact. I like him. He's good to his mother."

"Murder is your business, Rosy," I said. "You know that this doesn't even have a formula."

HE ASKED, "Does it have to make a pattern? Do people have to leave clues sprinkled around?"

"It would help nicely," I said, "if you found some blond hairs. Or a compact, or fingerprints, or a gun. Or even a lacy handkerchief with initials on it."

"Is that all?" he asked. "You forget the signed confession and the photograph of the crime being committed."

"Sure," I said. "You haven't got a thing and you know it. Furthermore, you're confused because the case is filled up with a lot of mumbo-jumbo like locked doors and secret elevators and no alibis and a missing gun. The tabloids are having a field day and the whole thing sounds so wild and woolly that it doesn't even make sense."

"It's simple enough," he said, puffing calmly at his cigar. "The Horton Company has owned that building for years. Some time back they enlarged their offices. They found one of the service elevators went right by the boss' new private office. All he did was remodel it into a self service job for his own personal use. Now we find out that Mrs. Horton also had a key to the elevator. Want more?"

"Yes," I said stubbornly.

"Okay. Horton was expecting nobody last night. He had no appointments. Then there was a chair drawn up to his desk with only his prints on it. That chair was drawn up for a woman. Horton was too big a man to do it for anybody else. Want more?"

"Go on," I said.

"Then we find that a certain Captain Perkins, an Air Force flyer, gave Lona Horton a .25 S and W automatic before she got married. She didn't mention it when we asked her."

"What about the motive?"

"It seems to me," he said mildly, "that two hundred thousand bucks is a pretty good motive. Besides, I imagine Horton left a pretty big estate."

"What about this Paddock?"

"A phony. The slimy kind that wants to get his hands on some long green stuff for keeping his dirty yap shut. We'll handle him."

"What about Captain Perkins? Where is he?"

"Killed six months ago on a routine training flight."

"It beats me," I said glumly. "I guess I had it all wrong."

"I know," he said gently. "I don't blame you. I saw her, too. Maybe she could have planted a better alibi, and maybe all the ends don't quite fit in. But when it comes to women, you can't set any rules down. I know. I've been married for thirty years and I haven't figured my wife yet."

"All right," I said. "I'll bring her in."

"Just tell me where she is," Rosenblatt said. "We'll bring her in. She couldn't be at your house doing your cooking, could she? We've got a man hanging around there."

"Cooking?" I asked. "You mean she really cooks?"

Then it hit me.

"Where is she, Cliff?" Elwin asked.

"I'm dumb," I said. "No wonder I never get a raise in pay. I'll bring her in myself. You have my word, Rosy."

He started to say something. Then he hesitated and looked at Elwin. Elwin nodded.

"Word of honor?" Rosenblatt asked.

"Word of honor," I said. "No tail. Keep the bloodhounds off. I don't want to involve an innocent third party."

"No bloodhounds," he said. "But hurry up. The D.A.'s waiting."

"Mr. Clift is our hardboiled woman hater," Elwin sighed. "Our best man. You know what he looks like now, Lieutenant? Like a lovesick calf."

CHAPTER V

LAST ACT



I WENT home first. I got the short barreled, Colt Banker's Special out of my drawer and put it in my pocket. Then I drove out to 23 Laurel Avenue.

When Martha opened the door, I stood there with my hat in my hand. She looked at me with hostile eyes.

"I've come for Mrs. Horton," I said.

"Good riddance," she hissed. "I hope they burn her for it."

"You don't like her, do you?"

She didn't answer. She glowered at me as I went in. They were sitting in the living room. The sight of Lona made

me jump a little inside.

"Hello," she said.

"Hello," I said. "Hello, Mr. Gregg. I've got to take her back with me. The D.A. wants her."

"They're going to lock me up," she whispered.

"There wasn't anything I could do," I said.

"But we must do something, sir," Gregg said. "We won't spare any expense. It's all so perfectly ridiculous. Mrs. Horton wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Then maybe you'd better come along, too," I said. "Because somebody in this case is lying like hell."

"Lona told me," he said. "Paddock."

"Somebody beside Paddock," I said. I looked down at the hat in my hand.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"The telephone call Lona made to the office at seven-thirty. She said there was no answer. Yet when you found the body at eight o'clock, the receiver was off the hook and in Horton's hand. You said you didn't touch a thing. You called the police from the lobby."

"Go on."

"It's only a small thing," I said. "But she would have gotten a busy signal. That means somebody is lying."

"That's right, sir."

"Then we come to the gun," I said. "Horton took it away from Lona last week. How would he have disposed of it? I'll tell you how. If I was a big operator like Horton, I would have called Mr. Gregg into my office. I would have sat behind my fancy desk and I would have said, 'Gregg. Get rid of this weapon for me.' And Gregg would have said, 'Yes, sir.' Just like that. Only Gregg never got rid of it."

"You're trying very hard to say I killed him," he said.

"Well, frankly," I said, "I thought so at first. I don't like coincidences. You're a methodical man, Mr. Gregg, and you seldom forget things. Right?"

"Right, sir."

"But the one night you forgot something and went back to the office, that was the night your boss was murdered."

LONA said, "That *was* odd."

"He didn't do it," I said. "He waded all through it, but no matter

where I turned, I couldn't see a motive. I could see a motive in you, Lona, but it was timed so badly and with no alibi and with your own gun, that the pieces wouldn't fit."

"Then who?" Lona asked.

"Well," I said. "It leaves only one other person. Martha."

"Martha?" Lona said. "But that's fantastic, Cliff."

"It's downright crazy," I said. "But this is the screwiest case I ever saw, anyway."

"But why?" Lona asked. "How?"

"Because Horton was a lonely old widower," I said, "and he liked home cooking and he spent many an evening at Gregg's house. And he got to know Martha pretty well. He liked the way she ran things and he liked her cooking. Maybe he even liked her a little and maybe he took her out once in a while. Now, suppose he even made promises or she thought he did. She would have made a good match for him. It was a perfect setup for her. All a woman would ever dream of. But then you came along and grabbed him right out from under her eyes. That's quite a jolt for a person to take."

"But even so," Lona said.

"I can't figure a woman's mind," I said. "Maybe she brooded. Maybe she plotted. Maybe she just sat back and hated. But Gregg brought the gun home and it gave her an idea. You take an old bachelor like Gregg. His housekeeper knows all his business. She knew Horton was alone at the office last night. So I'm assuming she wasn't even in the house when Gregg got home. She came in about seven-thirty and I'm guessing that Gregg found out what she had done."

"You have a wonderful imagination," Gregg smiled.

"Let me imagine some more," I said. "It put you in a tough spot. You're a pretty good fellow and you don't like to see anybody get hurt. There was still another key to the elevator and you had it. That's a reasonable assumption. You were Horton's most trusted employee. You came up the private elevator and you found Horton dead. Then you tried to muddle things up. You locked the door from the inside and you put the

telephone in Horton's hand. You left the way you came. The next time you came up, it was with the elevator operator. But although you had covered Martha pretty well, you made a big mistake. You didn't realize then that you had inadvertently involved Mrs. Horton in the crime. Worse still, it made you an accessory after-the-fact to the murder."

"It doesn't seem to be much to go on," Lona said dubiously.

"There's more," I said. "Remember when we were here before? Martha said she had heard on the radio that Henry Horton was found dead with his head cradled in his arms. Was he?"

"No," she breathed. "He was found with one arm stretched out holding the telephone."

"That was the way Martha had left him," I said. "With his head in his arms. And," I said loudly, "you'd be surprised what else the police can dig up. Things like furniture polish on gloves and carpet lint on shoes, and even the gun. But best of all, they'll have Gregg on the stand. And when they get through with him, he'll be taking a rap, too."

IT WORKED. There was a rustle in the doorway. The three of us turned to look at her.

Her mouth was pinched and there were two red spots high on her cheeks. In her right hand was a small, blued steel, ivory gripped automatic.

"My gun," Lona said.

"Yes," Martha said. "Your gun. Mr. Gregg shouldn't have gone back. I told him not to. I pleaded with him."

"Loyalty," I said. "The guy has it bad. Not only to his employer, but to his employee, too."

"Henry Horton," Martha said acridly. "He did make promises to me. You know that, Norman Gregg. Then that young girl, that child, came along and changed everything. He had no integrity. He deserved to die."

"Fine," I said. "And he is dead. Now put the gun down like a good girl."

"No," she said. "Because I'm going to use it again."

"Put the gun down, Martha," Gregg said sternly, getting up from theavenport. "You can't hope to accomplish anything with that."

"Keep away," she said, and she meant it. "There's one thing more to do. I'm going to destroy that young hussy. She's ruined all our lives."

I had to do it. There was no other way. I moved the hat around to Martha. I fired two shots through it. The first one missed, but the second plowed through her arm.

She screamed and the gun dropped from her hand.

Gregg ran over to her as she stumbled forward. I saw the tears in his eyes as he ripped off his tie and made a tourniquet below her elbow. I looked stupidly at the two holes in my twenty dollar hat.

"I'm sorry," I said, looking at Gregg. "I tried not to. There was no other way to do it."

He didn't answer. I bent down and put the Colt away in my pocket. Then I turned my head because I was suddenly sniffing expensive perfume. Lona was standing very close to me. Our noses almost touched as I straightened.

"That was very brave," she said, and her eyes were wet.

"Sure," I said. "Cliff is great when he goes up against women and little children. If you've got any puppy dogs that cause trouble—"

That was as far as I got. Her arms were around my neck and her warm soft mouth was over mine. After a while she let go.

"It won't do you any good," I said, but my knees were wobbly. "Women always cause me trouble."

"You'll learn to like them," she murmured.

I looked into those big blue eyes and I almost bayed like a hunting dog.

"Maybe," I said. I reached out and put my arms around her. "Try it again. I'm the type that takes an awful lot of convincing."

Three Novels in Every Issue of TRIPLE DETECTIVE—25c Per Copy at All Stands!

*Sara Gilbert finds
the missing ruby
set with murder
and studded
with peril when
she dares to enter—*



"Put your hands up, Captain," Sara said

the House Across the Street

By JOHN L. BENTON

BLACK shadows shrouded the cloudy night and there was a hint of rain in the air. The girl's face was a pale blotch in the feeble light, and there was fear in her eyes as she watched the house across the street.

It was an ancient, rambling structure that had known better days. A faint light gleamed through the half-drawn blind of a window on the first floor.

"Waiting for someone?" a harsh voice rasped in the night.

Sara Gilbert gasped as she heard it. She turned to find a tall, thin man, with gray hair, standing near her on the sidewalk. He was glaring at her.

"Why have you been watching that house?" He caught her wrist and twisted it ruthlessly. "I'll teach you to spy on me!"

"Let me go!" Sara cried, pulling away from him as he released her wrist. "I didn't know it was your house."

The gray-haired man laughed mockingly. Then his expression changed as he heard the sound of footsteps. Some-

one was coming along the street. He suddenly seemed afraid.

"I've got to get out of here," he muttered. "It might be Burton, or someone else, after me."

Apparently, he had lost all interest in the pretty, auburn-haired girl in the smart little suit and the tam perched on one side of her head. He turned and ran, to disappear in the darkness of an alley farther along the street.

The sound of the footsteps ceased. Apparently, whoever had been approaching had stopped for some reason. It was very quiet again. Sara glanced anxiously at the old house and just stood there, waiting, for what seemed a long time. Finally, she heard a sound that startled her.

It was a muffled shot, that seemed to come from somewhere inside the old house. With an effort, Sara suppressed a scream.

"They got John," she murmured brokenly. "I told him he was foolish to go back there!"

"Who is John?" asked a quiet voice at her side.

PEERING, Sara discovered a tall, handsome, dark-haired young man standing beside her. He was smiling down at her. He had approached so quietly, and she had been so intent upon watching the house, that she hadn't realized he was there until he spoke.

"I'm George Burton, private investigator," he said. "Who was that man I saw you talking with, a few minutes ago?"

"I don't know," Sara said. "Never saw him before in my life. But he gave me quite a scare. He seemed to resent my watching that house across the street. I'm sure I just heard the sound of a shot coming from there, and now I'm more worried than ever. Suppose John is dead?"

"Who is John?" Burton asked abruptly. "What was he doing in that house?"

"He is John Murphy, a cousin, and my nearest relative. He works for a big jewelry store—Martin and Moore, it's called. This afternoon, he was given a ruby to deliver—called the Crimson Flame. John brought the ruby to that house across the street. Mr. Elliott Field, a millionaire, lives in the old place."

"I know," Burton said. "By the way, what's your name?"

"Sara Gilbert. Anyway, John was to deliver the ruby to Mr. Field and collect a check for ten thousand dollars. But when Mr. Field examined the ruby he claimed it was a fake stone and went into an awful rage."

"Sounds like a fast version of the old switch trick," Burton observed.

"I know," said Sara. "John was sure he had the right ruby when he left the store. He tried to tell the old man that, but Mr. Field acted like he was completely crazy and chased John out of the house with a cane."

"Strange about that shot," Burton said. "I thought it would be reported by now, and have been waiting for the police to arrive. That's why I haven't tried to investigate yet."

"I wondered about that," Sara said. "I—I keep thinking that John Murphy may be lying in there dead!"

"You mean Murphy came back here tonight?" Burton asked in surprise. "Then he must have found Field was right about the ruby being a fake."

"It was a fake," Sara said. "John found that out before going back to the store. He was sure they would suspect him, so he didn't dare go near the place until he had the real Crimson Flame. He was certain Field had tricked him, so he came back here to try and steal the real ruby later today."

"How do you know all this?" Burton asked. "What are you doing here?"

"John phoned me this afternoon, told me what had happened and that he expected to get the real ruby. He said that if I didn't hear from him again by eight-thirty tonight, to come here outside the house and wait. It must be after nine now."

"It is," Burton said. "At least nine-thirty. We better try to get into the house and see what's wrong."

"That man you saw running away said, 'Burton or someone else may be after me,'" Sara informed Burton, as they walked across the street toward the old house. "He was tall and gray-haired and had a rather weather-beaten face. Do you know him?"

"Of course—must have been Captain Bill Carter," Burton said. "He always talks wildly. I am after him, have been looking for him all evening."

They reached the old house now. It was a place that had known generations of Field families, but for the past fifteen years Elliott Field had lived here alone. Sara found there was something bleak and dismal about the place, as they stood on the dark porch and Burton rang the bell. They could hear it ringing somewhere in the back of the house, but no one came to let them in.

"Have you ever seen the old millionaire?" Burton asked the girl.

"No, I never did," Sara answered. "Did you?"

"I've never seen him," Burton tried the doorknob. "Why, this is open! I should have tried it before."

The door swung wide as he shoved against it, and they stepped into a long, gloomy-looking hall. The door closed behind them. Sara gasped and moved closer to Burton. There was a faint smell

of gunsmoke lingering in the air. When she saw the feet on the floor, Sara shuddered. She was certain it was John Murphy lying there.

"I—I told you so," she said. "He did shoot John!"

The body was lying in a room to the left of the hall. Through the open door the feet and legs were all that could be seen.

"I must know if it is John," Sara said, as she walked toward the room. Then she halted. "I can't do it. You better look first, George."

"All right," Burton said. "I've seen dead men before."

THE INVESTIGATOR stepped into the room and disappeared from view. Sara remained in the hall, waiting anxiously and feeling lost without him being no longer near her. How strange it was to feel that way about a man she hardly even knew.

"Unless John Murphy is old and has gray hair," came Burton's voice, "this isn't him!"

Relief swept over Sara as she heard the words. At least the dead man wasn't John. That meant he was still somewhere around the house, or perhaps he had managed to get away. She stepped into the room and then stood listening. From out in the hall there came a tapping sound.

It puzzled her at first, and then she realized it was someone walking with the aid of a rubber-tipped cane.

"Someone coming," Burton said. "The killer returning to the scene of his crime?"

Sara stared at the still figure lying on the thick rug, an elderly man with a bullet hole in the forehead just below the white hair. There was no doubt in her mind that it was Elliott Field who was sprawled there lifeless.

She turned and faced the door as the tapping of the cane in the hall grew louder. Then the same tall, thin, gray-haired man she had encountered out in the street stood there staring into the room, an oddly carved cane in his left hand. Sara wondered why he had been using the cane in the manner he had, since he was not blind.

"So you killed him, as he said you

would, Burton," the thin man said, staring at the body on the floor. "I was a fool and thought Field was just talking nonsense when he said that might happen. So I left him alone while I went for a walk. And now he is dead."

"A nice bluff, Captain Carter," Burton said, "but it won't work. There isn't the slightest reason for my having killed Field, and you know it. Besides, I happen to know the truth!"

"What are you talking about?" snapped Captain Carter as he walked into the room. "You young men always think you are so very clever."

"This morning, Elliott Field phoned me," Burton said. "Claimed he had heard I was a good private detective and wanted to engage my services. His proposition sounded all right, but I was working on a case and couldn't see him before tonight."

"All very interesting," Captain Carter said coldly. "But that doesn't explain why Field is dead. Murdered by a bullet from a forty-five. Just why did Field need a private detective?"

"Field said he was afraid he might be killed by the captain of a tramp steamer, who blamed Field for an old crime," Burton explained. "A robbery the two men committed thirty years ago, and from which the captain claimed Field got away with all the money. That captain was you, Bill Carter! Field gave me a good description of you over the phone and asked me to find you and question you. I have been looking for you all evening."

"I know," said Carter. "Field told me a man named Burton was after me for that old crime. Claimed that you were after us both for that old robbery and if either of us tried to escape you would shoot to kill." The captain scowled. "So he did try to get away, and you shot him."

"Sorry, Captain," said Burton, "but your bluff still won't work. Only the man who murdered Field would know the caliber of the gun before the wound and bullet are checked—and you said he was killed by a forty-five."

With a yell of rage, Carter raised the cane and hit Burton a hard blow on the right shoulder. Burton winced. Carter tried to hit him over the head, but the

detective grabbed the cane. He wrenched it out of the captain's grasp and tossed it aside.

"That will be about enough of that," Burton said, as he grabbed the other man. "I can be as rough as you can."

They reeled and struggled around the room, knocking over a lamp shade, upsetting a chair and even jarring the pictures on the wall. It was a terrific fight.

Sara picked up the cane that had dropped to the rug. As she watched the men struggle, she unconsciously gave the two ends of the stick a hard tug. The handle and a short section of the cane parted from the longer end. The handle was hollow and a big red stone dropped out of it.

"The Crimson Flame!" Sara cried, dropping the stone into a pocket of her suit coat. "So that's how Field worked the quick-switch trick."

Burton and Carter were still fighting. The captain was trying to reach his gun, and Sara realized that if he succeeded the battle might end fatally for George Burton. She stepped forward, holding the short end of the cane by the handle as she would a gun.

"Put your hands up, Captain," she said, thrusting the simulated weapon against Carter's back as Burton held him. "I've got you covered."

WHEN Carter raised his hands above his head, Burton released him and stepped back. Sara knew that the captain had not discovered the secret of the cane. Burton found the big forty-five automatic in a holster beneath the captain's coat and snatched the gun out of leather.

"All right, you've got me," Carter admitted. "Guess that's the way it has to be. I've been hanging around trying to get back the money Field stole from me when we committed that robbery thirty years ago. But Field was broke and getting any cash out of him seemed hopeless."

"Until you found he had worked the old switch trick and got the Crimson

Flame from the jewelers today," Burton added. "I suspect you tried to get the real ruby from him, but when he refused to tell you where he had hidden it, you shot and killed him."

"You're right," said Carter. "He mocked me, laughed at me. Said a blind man could find the ruby without much trouble. But I couldn't find it."

"You must have left the house while Field was still alive," Burton said. "You saw Sara watching the place, scared her, and then ran when you heard my footsteps. But you circled around fast, got back into the house and shot and killed Field. What about the young man from the jewelers—did you kill him, too?"

"No, he is down in the cellar, bound and gagged," Carter said. "I helped Field knock him out. Field was going to claim that Murphy not only tried to give him a fake ruby, but also proved to be a petty thief that we found sneaking around the house." The captain scowled. "I sure would like to know what became of that ruby."

"Here it is," Sara said, drawing the stone out of her pocket. "It was in the hollow handle of that cane you were carrying around, Captain. The handle I made you think was a gun."

"So that's what Field meant when he said a blind man could find the ruby without much trouble!" exclaimed Carter disgustedly. "I have been wandering around the house using the cane as a blind man might do in the hope that, some way, it would help me find the ruby."

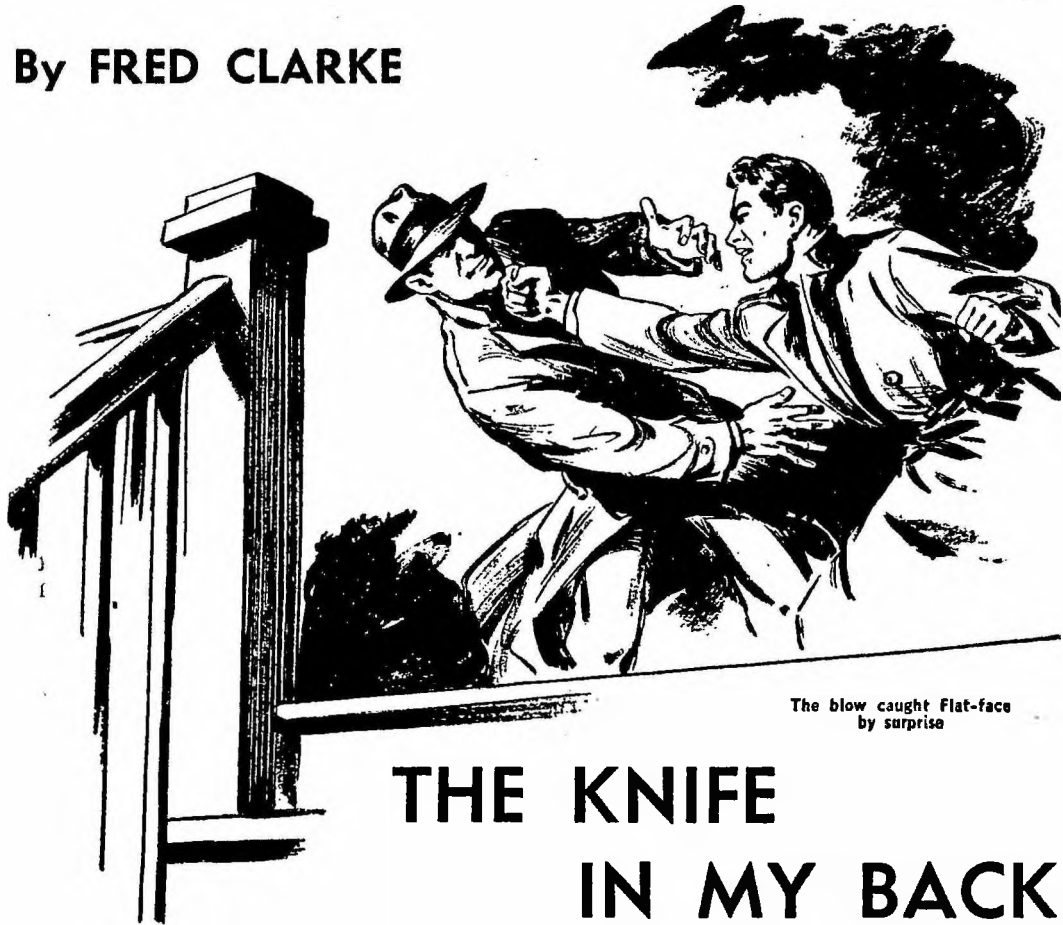
Sara felt relief sweeping over her. John Murphy was safe and apparently unharmed. There was no doubt in her mind the captain had been telling the truth about that. John could take the ruby back to Martin and Moore and explain what had happened.

Carter would be turned over to the police, of course.

She glanced at Burton and found herself wondering what it would be like to be kissed by a good-looking, young private detective. Maybe it would be possible to find out. Maybe.

Read Our Companion Magazine BLACK BOOK DETECTIVE—20c Everywhere!

By FRED CLARKE



The blow caught Flat-face by surprise

THE KNIFE IN MY BACK

When a golden reward lures Detective Shell after a knife-killer, what really glitters — is sharp steel in the dark!

I IGNORED Mabel's frantic signals from the switchboard and strode into the boss' office.

"Listen, Sam Griffins," I said, "do I get that week off you owe me, or don't I?"

Sam's mouth flew open in surprise. "Wh-at?" he said against a cloud of cigar smoke. "I told you yesterday that when you've been here a year—"

"I'll get two weeks off," I finished, plunking my palms onto his desk. "Which means I'm entitled to one week for being here six months. Now do I get it or not?"

The swivel chair squealed against his weight. "Look," he wheezed. "I'm not the owner of the International Detective Agency. I don't make up the rules. I'm only manager of this branch, and the rules say you gotta be here one year to get vacations."

"You can make exceptions, can't you?" I countered.

"Not in your case," he said. "You aren't exactly in the company's good books. I still haven't explained the accusations you made against the city engineer in the bribery case. Givin' that yarn to the papers could have cost me

my job."

"It was a long shot," I admitted. "But it took the heat off the contractor long enough for me to prove him guilty. And now I've got an angle on that hospital dope robbery last week. There's a ten thousand dollar reward and I want a week off to try for it."

"Just a minute, Shell," Sam said. "I've already told you that case belongs to the D.A. The reward is bait for some stool-pigeon, not an invitation for every shamus in the country to start tampering with the evidence."

"Did you tell the D.A. my angle?" I asked. "That a few nights after the robbery I was driving by that warehouse owned by Loopy Exeter? That I spotted a suspicious looking character climb out a window and got his license number and name?"

"Yeah," Sam said. "I admit Loopy Exeter got out of the can just a week before the robbery. But look at the facts! Loopy is a small time punk. He and his gang have knocked over gas stations and stuff like that. But this dope job is big. It was planned by somebody with more brains than Loopy Exeter."

"But the brain and him might have been partners," I countered. "If I can find Loopy Exeter, I'll find the man who's behind him. So do I get my week off?"

"No! You're assigned to a client who'll pay us a fee. Get on the train tonight for Spring Falls and look up this party. Now beat it!"

I scooped up the tickets and expense money he tossed onto the desk.

"Yeah!" I said. "Maybe I should open my own agency."

I MADE a helpless gesture to Mabel on the switchboard and went down the stairs to my car on West street. I got in, stuffed the train tickets into an inner pocket while glancing at a summary of the Pine Falls case. An old lady and her husband who ran the grocery store were missing money from the till. That was at Pine Falls. Right here was a case where morphine worth two hundred grand on the black market had been snatched while on its way to the General Hospital. A rooty-toot job which had left two attendants bleeding to

death on the sidewalk while the gunners drove off in a van.

Only I had to go to Pine Falls.

I noticed the memo said train time was five o'clock, which gave me one hour to pack a razor. I left my car in the alley and had walked around to the apartment door when I saw the crowd.

It was an accident crowd. You can tell by the way they keep shifting around for a better view. I had worked my way into the hall before a harness bull clapped a hand on my shoulder.

"Outside—outside!" he said.

"Yeah? What's happened?"

"Some dame get's a snootful of dope and decides to cut her own throat. Beat it!"

I picked up my ears. "Dope? What kind of dope?"

"How should I know. G'wan."

I circled the building to the back door. There was a blue coat planted beside it. I'd never broken into my own apartment building before, but it didn't look hard. A window on the side let me into the furnace room. I slid into the hall and climbed the steps until voices drifted from a third floor suite.

I stepped in, looked at the group of men who stood around a gray blanket which made a tent over the body.

"Evening, gents," I said casually. "Why, if it isn't Sergeant Oscar Martin."

Oscar spun around as if he'd been pinched. "Shell!" he spluttered, his size twelve face turning purple. "Did that moron at the door let you in?"

I glanced at the red-haired girl who sat shivering on the divan, then back to Oscar. "Sorry, Sergeant, but I house-broke. If you can call entering your own premises 'house-breaking,' care to introduce me to the corpse? I live on the floor above, so we're neighbors."

"You was neighbors," Oscar said, as I peered under the blanket. "And maybe that's why she bumped herself."

She might have been a pretty girl. With the fancy work on her throat, I couldn't tell. She was a blonde wearing a neatly tailored street suit.

"Who is she?" I asked.

"Name's Peggy King," Oscar said. "According to her room-mate, she worked at some cosmetic factory."

"The moron at the front door said she had a skinful," I reminded him.

"So the doc told us. Don't they keep you busy at International? How come you're so interested in a smelly suicide?"

"Who," I asked pointedly, "ever told you this was a suicide?"

OSCAR glanced at the men around him.

"He's a smart shamus," he explained with a sarcastic wink.

"Ever see a knife suicide that didn't leave hesitation marks?" I asked. "Look at her throat. Not a nick other than the one which cut right through. Even a hopped-up suicide hasn't got that much nerve. They always leave at least a few marks where they've been trying to work up courage."

Oscar sucked fat lips. "Blow, Shell," he said heatedly. "I don't need you monkeyin' around here."

"Okay, okay. I'm due out on the six o'clock train. How about prints on the knife?"

"There wasn't none," Oscar said. "But the dame is wearin' gloves. Now mind your own business!"

He called over the red-headed girl on the divan, and she said she was Marva Hall. She told how she'd come in and found Peggy on the floor, how the blood was awful, and how she'd run out screaming for the police.

"Do you know if she ever took dope before?" I asked.

Oscar wheeled. "Scram, shamus," he said. "This ain't your caper."

I wagged a finger at him. "Maybe the young lady wants to engage the International Agency," I suggested. "If so, I'd have a right to be here."

"Well, she doesn't," Oscar said. "And if you're goin' to catch the five o'clock train, you have fifteen minutes."

I shrugged, turned away as he continued his questions. My eye caught a sheet of note paper on the dresser. It was the start of a letter in a girl's handwriting, addressed to Mr. Guy Bonn. Something heavy seemed to run in my throat, hindering my breathing. I snatched up the paper.

"Did you write this?" I asked the red haired Marva Hall.

She shook her head, wonderingly.

"Get out!" Oscar roared. "Tommy, throw this dumb shamus out!"

I waved him back. "Okay, I'm going. And it isn't to catch any train. Oscar, you happen to have stumbled on an important case."

It was nearly five when I reached the office, but I went up on the chance of catching Sam Griffins before he left. I was surprised to see Mabel still at the switchboard.

Her eyes widened. "Didn't you go to Pine Falls? Gosh, J. P. Coater just arrived from the East. You'll catch—"

"Naughty, naughty," I silenced her, pretending not to be impressed by the agency head's unexpected arrival. "Don't announce me, sweetheart. I think the surprise approach will be best for what I've got to hand in."

I burst into Griffins' office. His eyes popped. "Why you—didn't you go to—"

"Hello, Mr. Coater." I waved to the dignified looking man in the dark suit. "No, Chief. Instead I stumbled onto something really hot."

GRIFFINS was set to explode. "Well?" "A girl named Peggy King was shived tonight," I said. "Only, for some reason, whoever did the job filled her with dope beforehand."

"So what?"

"Look, Sam, didn't you ever back a long shot? Last week, two hundred grand of morphine was snitched by hijackers. Now a dame is full of the stuff with her throat cut. Isn't that a connection?"

Sam spluttered. "You idiot! You passed me up a paying client on evidence like that?"

J. P. Coater straightened his head. "You were assigned to a client?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. But I thought this more important to the agency."

"You have a new client? Someone who will pay the standard rate for your services?"

"No, sir. But if it leads to the stolen morphine, there's a reward—"

"We work for a fee, Mr. Shell, not for rewards we may never collect."

I dug my knuckles into the desk and gave him my bombshell. "This girl who was killed," I said, "had been writing to

a Mr. Guy Bonn. He happens to be a man I tailed from Loopy Exeter's warehouse window a few nights after the heist."

I waited, letting the connection sink in.

"I'm playing a hunch," I admitted. "But I've played them before and won. I'll win this one."

"Not on our time," Mr. Coater said. "We cannot excuse an agent deserting a client because of a—hunch. You're fired."

I stiffened. "Okay, and I'll come up with that ten grand reward. Wait and see!"

I stomped out of the office, past Mabel and down to my car. I was raging. I'd boasted about starting my own agency. Now it looked as if my boast had come true. Only instead of a client, I had a hunch. A hunch that Loopy Exeter could lead me to whoever planned this robbery. And Mr. Guy Bonn could lead me to Loopy.

To start with, I looked up Guy Bonn in the phone book. He wasn't listed. Neither was he in the city directory or the retail credit almanac. Yet Guy Bonn was my only clue—which meant I had to fool Oscar Martin into giving me his address.

I drove to Headquarters and found Oscar in the lab room.

"Hi, sleuth," I greeted. "Well, the old man agreed to accept Marva Hall as a client whether she pays or not—so I came in for some info."

His eyes narrowed. "Yeah?"

HE GLANCED over his shoulder at the lab technicians, then jerked his thumb toward the door. I followed him to his office, perched on his desk while he squeezed into a swivel chair. He was a huge man with a mottled face which hinted of an inner toughness.

"There ain't going to be any investigation," he said thickly. "Marva Hall has been sent home."

I nearly toppled over. "But you—"

"The D.A. put the lid on it," he said. He held up two gelatin capsules, each about half an inch long. "We found these in the dead girl's room—full of dope!"

I met his eyes. "There's a ten grand reward on the dope case," I said. "I've

got one lead—Guy Bonn—only I don't know where to find him."

"What're you suggesting?"

"You could find out where he holes up. You could tell me. If it pans out, we could split the reward money."

The hard look on his face changed into a dollar sign. I felt easier.

"Yeah, that's a fact," he mused. "I could use some of that dough." He extended his hand.

I figured he meant to shake on a deal, offered my own. The next thing I knew I was sprawled across his desk, wincing in pain. The rat was squeezing my fingers.

"Only get this," he said between clenched teeth, "if you get caught over there, don't expect me to help you out."

"Leggo! You're breaking my hand!"

"You understand? Get in any trouble over there and I've never heard of you."

He released me, jerked his thumb at the door. I went out, along the corridor and waited on the street. There were one or two kids kicking a tin can along the gutter. Across the street was a black Caddy with three men in it. One of the men got out and crossed over toward me. His face was hammered flat from too many years in the ring. He wore a black topcoat, pinched tight at the waist, and a black snap-brim hat. He stood by a store window inspecting me in the glass.

Within a minute Oscar Martin and another man came out of the police station. Oscar handed me a rolled up magazine.

"Here's the issue with the quiz contest in it," he said jovially. "Don't forget—I get half of anything you win."

I watched them move down the street together. The man by the store window walked hurriedly back to the Caddy.

I strolled in the opposite direction, flipping the pages of the magazine. On page twenty an address had been scrawled on the fly leaf. It was 227 Larch.

I tossed the magazine into an ash can on the corner, started to cross the street to my car when a lady screamed:

"Look out! Eeee-ow!"

GLANCING up sharply, I saw the Caddy hurtling toward me. I was in

the center of the street, directly in its path. The woman screamed again, and I caught a quick glance of the flat-faced boxer in the front seat behind the wheel. He was hunched forward, his face twisted savagely as he shot the car straight at me. Its tires dug into the roadbed, whining from the torture.

The hair on my neck bristled, sending a chill of electricity down my spine. The Caddy must have left the curb as I walked from the police station, made a U-turn and followed me to the corner. The driver had been clever, waiting until he was a few yards from me before stepping on the gas.

The woman on the curb was still screaming, waving her hands frantically above her head as I dived toward the sidewalk. The Caddy shot past with a roar as I landed on my stomach, rolled toward the curb. A man ran over, picked me up. My body ached in a hundred places, but no bones were broken.

"Those screwball drivers," the man said. "The town's full of them."

My cheek felt raw. I thanked him, limped up the street toward my own car. I drove quickly away, cutting across town while keeping a sharp lookout in the rear view mirror.

Number 227 Larch proved to be a frame building with faded curtains in every window up to the third floor attic. I let myself into a dimly lit hallway and saw a flight of stairs covered by a threadbare rug.

The first door on my right had a card on it reading, "Mrs. Hennessy, Caretaker," and working my knuckles brought a thin old lady with a suspicious face. I told her I was a friend of Mr. Bonn.

"Number Nineteen, top floor," she said. "Only he ain't been in all day."

I thanked her, walked along the hall until she shut her door, then I darted up the flight of stairs.

There was a fire landing on the second floor front. I peered out, saw the black Caddy slide to the curb two floors below. A man got out of the back seat, entered the gate, then circled the house toward the back. It was Flat-face. In the pinched-waist coat, he stood looking at the house for a minute, then came up the front stairs.

That was swell. They were coming

at me from two directions-

And upstairs was Guy Bonn who was my only lead in a two hundred grand robbery.

I went up, listened outside Room 19. There wasn't a sound. I tried the door. It wasn't locked. I slipped into a small room with the window shades pulled, fumbled for a wall switch which gave us a fistful of light over a dressing table.

Us.

Me and the guy on the bed.

The tough little, crumpled little, dead little guy with the knife in his throat.

I waited, having trouble to breathe, then tiptoed over. He wore pants and a vest over a white shirt stained brown down the front. I touched his face with my fingers. It was cold, hard.

All day, Mrs. Hennessy?

SOMETHING bright caught my eye. I stooped down, retrieved the small gold chain, about two inches in length, that lay in one of Guy Bonn's carpet slippers. There was nothing to match it on the dresser. There was some loose change, a pocket comb, a key ring with keys, and a bottle of Madame Runge face-cream. The cream seemed incongruous.

Outside, a stair squeaked in the hall.

I moused to the door, let myself into the dark corridor and listened. The footsteps were on the landing below, coming up slowly. It had to be Flat-face.

There was a phone on the wall. I dialed a number and quietly asked for Sergeant Oscar Martin. After what seemed an interminable time his gruff voice answered.

"This is Lauri Shell," I breathed. "I'm at Bonn's. You've gotta come and get me—"

"Why, you fool!" he yelled. "Get away from there quick. Bonn is a Federal man planted to work his way into the gang! Do you want to ruin the whole pitch? Beat it, Shell!"

He slammed down the phone.

I sweated. So Oscar had been put wise about Bonn! A Federal man! And now Oscar was pretending ignorance of our whole scheme. Leaving me to take the rap—

I cradled the phone, spun around as a footstep sounded on the landing.

I SHIFTED my weight from one foot to the other, making the boards creak beneath me. When I moved quickly up the hall. I caught one glimpse of Flat-face as he padded toward the noise, his head cocked to one side. My fist lashed out, connecting with his jaw in a blow that must have caught him by surprise. He'd expected me to be six feet away, where the noise had come from. He rocked back, crashed into the wall with a grunted oath.

I darted down the stairs, raced for the landing on the first floor before hearing him charge after me. On the front porch the man by the Caddy looked up with his eyes popping. I skipped across the lawn, vaulted the fence as someone ran along the side of the house.

"That's him!" a voice shouted. "Mow him down!"

I scrambled for the safety of a stone wall bordering the next house, and pounded through the yard to the alley. Footsteps followed me. The Caddy careened around the corner, its tires tossing back cinders. A gun started to bark, sending lead slugs into the garage wall above my head. I ducked into the garage as Flat-face came through the yard and hopped onto the running board of the car as it sped by.

I stayed crouched. It was a good bet they'd make one more pass down the alley after turning at the street.

So Guy Bonn was a Federal agent trying to learn the same thing I was. That meant my hunch had run up a dead end street. And what was worse, I was now holding a front seat ticket for the D. A.'s investigation into Bonn's murder.

Oscar Martin had run out on me, that was for sure. I'd have a merry time explaining how I'd got Bonn's address and why I'd gone there.

Keeping my eye peeled, I slid into the lane, thankful the Caddy had disappeared. It was getting late and I didn't know where to go or what lead to follow. Loopy Exeter and the man who was using him, might just as well have been ghosts. I walked around to my car and headed toward home. No one followed me this time.

The next morning I was determined to start again. I was stubborn enough

to want to learn the truth and mad enough at the gorillas who'd tried to kill me to want to square things.

And the more I thought of it the more I wondered about that jar of Madame Runge face cream that had reposed on Guy Bonn's dressing table. He just hadn't looked the type to use face cream, either Madame Runge or any other. Had that been a clue I didn't know the meaning of? Could a face cream plant tie into a two hundred grand dope count and two murders?

Possibly—for I remembered Peggy King had worked for a cosmetics firm.

The drug store on the corner had a copy of the Manufacturers' Yearbook. Madame Runge's was listed as a small cosmetic outfit under the single ownership of someone named Walter Dieth. The address was in a semi-industrial district on the east side. It proved to be a frame building fronted by an office which was occupied by a thin man in his shirtsleeves and a blonde who pecked at a typewriter.

I walked up the block, wondering how to approach things, when suddenly my eyes popped in excitement. Parked in the alley was the black Caddy which had tried to mow me down.

I went back, entered the front office. Behind the clerk was a door which led to the innards of the factory. Somehow I had to get through that door.

"What'll it be?" the clerk demanded.

The blonde secretary was slitting a letter with a paper knife. The letter had Mead and Co., Insurance Adjustors, in the upper right hand corner.

"Good morning," I said pleasantly. "I'm from Mead and Co. I believe you're expecting me."

The clerk looked puzzled.

"It's about the account," I said. "I'm the field man Mr. Mead promised to send in to look over the plant."

He shifted uncomfortably. "Well—I dunno—"

"It won't take long," I said, producing a notebook. "Just a check of the fire equipment, escape doors and things like that."

He nodded, opened the door behind him and shouted for someone. A young girl wearing overalls and a snood responded.

"Show this gentleman around the plant," the clerk said gruffly.

He held a gate open for me. I smiled pleasantly, then followed the girl through the door.

We were in a large room filled with girls in rows who were doing something to glass jars which moved along endless belts. The noise was steady, but not troublesome. Along the wall were cases marked Madame Runge's. They were addressed to cities like Chicago, Philadelphia and Great Falls.

There was a door on the right marked No Admittance. It intrigued me. I let the girl in slacks get five steps ahead, then I slid through the marked door and closed it quietly.

MY SKIN felt as if it had been sprinkled with itching powder. I peered down a dark corridor, wishing I'd had sense enough to bring a gun. I hadn't thought it necessary at the time, coming to a face cream plant, but then I hadn't known the Caddy would be parked outside.

My shoes felt like lead as I moused the corridor. A door opened and I hugged the wall as a man stepped out, heading away from me. But suddenly he wheeled around.

Flat-face!

He came close, his lips twisting as he reached beneath his left arm. But drawing a gun takes time. Especially when you have to reach under a double-breasted coat. And being in a hurry was part of my business.

I landed a haymaker smack on his chin. My arm flashed pain to the elbow, but he staggered back and crashed to the floor. I leaped on him, fumbled for the gun, then used it to sap him on the side of the head. He belched air like a bellows and lay still.

Ahead was a shaft of light from an open door. A shadow moved across it. I padded up, peeked in.

A big man, his back toward me, was standing over rows of glass jars on a bench. Into each he pushed some gelatin capsules like Oscar Martin had found in the dead girl's room. He didn't know I was watching.

"Get 'em up." I said.

It acted like an electric shock. He

stiffened convulsively, then whirled around. I gestured with the gun and he lifted both massive hands above his massive shoulders. I prodded him away from the bench, split open one of the capsules, and a white crystallized powder spilled over my thumb.

"Morphine," I said, "which is exactly what I hoped for—Mr. Walter Dieth. So you're the brain behind the hospital dope snatch—and these capsules are going to prove it. Pretty smart at that—using a small time face cream plant to smuggle the stolen dope into any city you chose."

His face showed no emotion now. "You aren't from the police," he said calmly.

"No. But they'll be here soon. I'm just a dumb shamus who had a hankering for the ten grand reward."

He smiled. "Ten thousand? I could make you a far more appealing offer than that. What would you say if I offered you fifty thousand to forget all about this?"

I'd have said it was a lot of dough—if I hadn't noticed his hand lowering toward a monkey wrench resting on the table.

"Keep 'em up," I reminded him, prodding with the gun. "I think, when the cops get here, I'll be able to give them the complete picture. You had Flat-face and his gorillas handle the dope snatch and bring the stuff here. Only it took you a few days to get the morphine in the capsules and start putting it in the face cream jars. In the meantime you discovered that someone posing as a crook was actually a Federal agent. Guy Bonn suspected the dope was here, so he got chummy with one of the girls working in the plant. She probably didn't know what was going on in this part of the building, but managed to snoop around long enough to pinch a few of those gelatin capsules to give Bonn. Right?"

HIS eyes darkened.

"So you gave her a shot of the snow in order to get her on a talking jag." I went on. "When she told you who the agent was, and where to find him, you had one of the gorillas give her a shiv. Then the same thing hap-

pened to Bonn."

Dieth's lips smiled again. "You can't prove that part, my friend."

"No?" I dangled the two inch length of gold chain I'd lifted from Guy Bonn's carpet slippers. "Guy Bonn managed to grab this from whoever knifed him," I said. "I notice you wear a tie clip, Mr. Dieth. Undo your vest. Let's see if the chain is broken off."

He smiled faintly, and did as he was told. His tie clip was there, but so was the chain that went around his tie.

"What now?" he said.

I hesitated. He saw the gun waver and made a slight move to come at me.

Then something hard pressed between my shoulder blades, while a voice said, "Drop that heater, shamus. And I'll take that gold chain!"

Walter Dieth leaned over to grab my gun before it hit the carpet. I glanced over my shoulder. Loopy Exeter's gray-eyed face was grinning at me as he snatched the chain from my fingers.

"Nice work, Loopy," Dieth said. "Now you can handle him the same as the others. Lucky thing he brought along the broken chain from your tie clip. It's long enough to hang you."

Loopy lifted a sharp bladed knife from his hip while Dieth levelled me with the gun. Loopy came closer, his bright eyes gleaming. I sweated, my fingers fumbling around one of the heavy jars of face cream on the bench. Loopy grabbed my lapels, raised the knife to shoulder level.

As he started the thrust, my foot lashed out, striking him on the shin. He fell backward with a bellow of pain and rage. I whirled on Dieth, making a wide circular motion with my arm. His face twisted as he jerked the gun upward.

At the top of the circle, I released the face cream jar. It flew straight at him with the speed of a baseball. He ducked back, and the bullet from his gun splattered into the ceiling.

It only took him a thin second to regain his balance. But it was all the time I needed to hammer one vicious blow to the point of his chin. He thudded to the carpet as I scooped the gun from his grasp.

Loopy was on his knees, clawing frantically beneath his left arm. His face was flaming anger as his gun swung toward me. I fired. The bullet took him in the chest, knocking him to the carpet. A small hole showed on his vest. It spouted red, like water from a rusty garden hose. His career with a knife was over.

I lurched across the room to where Dieth lay by the bench. He was breathing, but unconscious. I hadn't known whether the jar I threw had hit him or not, but it must have, for there was a purple spot the size of a silver dollar between his eyes. He would be quiet for a while.

I went into the corridor, past Flat-face and into the room where the girls worked against the hum of those endless belts. The one in slacks and the snood who was my escort came up and smiled.

"I thought I'd lost you," she said. "This way, please."

Then she saw the gun in my hand and her face went dead under the pancake make-up. I walked back to the front office where the clerk and the blonde typist goggled at me while I called police headquarters.

I told Oscar Martin everything I had and made it clear I was claiming the reward. Then I called Sam Griffins. He started to growl at me, but I cut him short by saying I'd rung the bell on that dope robbery.

"And listen, you wall-eyed baboon." I told him, "phone J. P. Coater, and tell him you're offering me my job back."

"Oh, all right. I suppose he'll agree. You're not starting your own agency?"

"You knew all along this town wouldn't support another agency, didn't you, Sam?"

"Sure. But I thought you'd have to find it out for yourself. Get on the six o'clock train this evening and handle that Pine Falls case—or else!"

"Or else what?" I demanded.

"Or else you're fired." Sam said.

There was a click in my ear as he hung up.

"Guess maybe I will at that," I told the startled looking clerk.

He slammed the gun against
Tosca's face



GETAWAY GIRL

By PRESTON GRADY

That crazy client guaranteed to die within a year, but the killers Detective Vellum faced wanted to do business—now!

THIS was the screwiest proposition I had ever heard. The fellow wanted to bet me five grand he would die or kill himself within a year.

He wandered into my office on a sultry September morning a few days after I'd almost lost my license in an insurance deal over some stolen jewelry. I was

feeling pretty low. I was sitting with my feet propped on the pulled-out bottom drawer of my desk and when he came in he looked so little like a paying case that I almost didn't take my feet down.

He was probably not yet thirty, but he looked as if he might be an old man

in ten more years. He was about five nine, not over 160, faded blue-gray eyes, brown hair and with a small birthmark on his neck. His cheap suit was neatly pressed, but fraying at the cuffs, and his hatband was sweatstained.

"Mr. Paul Vellum?" he asked, hat in both hands in front of him. The hands were calloused, scrubbed to surface cleanliness, but with indelible dark streaks.

"Yes," I said, finally deciding to get off my spine.

"My name is Leroy Maples. I came to see you because I need help, and I read your name in the papers the other day."

"That beats me," I said. "If you read my name in the papers the other day, the stories insinuated that I was a crook. You don't look like a man who would come to a crook for help."

"Well, no, sir. Nothing crooked," he said, perching on the edge of the client's chair, hat still in both hands. Light from the window on his thin face brought out an earnest strength I hadn't seen before.

He swallowed a few times. "I've got to have five thousand dollars right away," he blurted then. "I don't have the kind of security the banks would take, but it is mighty good security just the same, and if you let me have the five thousand dollars I can guarantee you that you will double your money in less than a year—probably much sooner."

All that came out in an almost hysterical rush.

I PUT my elbows on the desk. "Try it again—slower."

"My only asset," he said, "is a ten thousand dollar life insurance policy. I've had it four years, but I checked and the cash surrender value is only six hundred dollars. But I'll be dead within a year, and then it'll be worth ten thousand dollars."

"How do you know you'll be dead within a year?"

"The doctor admitted four months ago that I had less than a year to live. You can ask him. Dr. Howard Fleming, Professional Building."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Hodgkin's disease—acute stage. I haven't got a chance."

"Why aren't you in a hospital?"

"It wouldn't do any good. They've stopped treatments. It's just a matter of a short time."

"What have you got to have five thousand dollars for right away?"

He looked down at his hat. "You don't have to know that, do you?"

"It would help to understand my—security."

"Listen, Mr. Vellum," he pleaded. "I'm on the level about this. I'll assign the whole ten thousand dollar policy to you. If I'm not dead within a year, I'll kill myself. The suicide clause in the policy was only effective for a year when I first took it out." His eyes were bright and feverish now.

"Any contract based on your suicide," I said, "would be illegal. I couldn't collect on it. I couldn't sue you if you recovered and decided not to kill yourself. And these suicide ideas seldom last."

"You could do something about it."

"What?"

"That's why I came to you. After reading about you in the paper."

"About my being unscrupulous?"

He reddened. "Well, yes, sir. I'd give you a suicide note, undated. It would be perfectly logical because of my physical condition. If I welshed—well, the papers said you wouldn't stop at murder."

I leaned back. Whew.

"You're experienced at that sort of thing," he argued. "It would be easy for you to arrange my death to look like suicide if I welshed. But I wouldn't welsh, Mr. Vellum."

Traffic noises rumbled up through the open window. He was looking at me with his lips slightly parted and sweat on his forehead.

"You working?"

"Yes, sir. Bleecker's Garage on Decatur Street."

I picked up the phone book, found a number and dialed. After some argument I got my party.

"Dr. Fleming, this is Wallace speaking, at the Community Motors on Grace Street." If there was such a firm I didn't know of it. "We have an applicant, doctor, for a job as mechanic. His name is Leroy Maples. He admits his physical condition is not good, but claims he is

able to work. Good mechanics like him are hard to find. We want to know what kind of work he can safely do, Doctor. Confidentially, of course."

I listened a couple of minutes.

"And about how long do you think we could depend on him for such work, Doctor? I mean, will he get better?"

I listened some more. "Thanks, Doctor." I hung up.

"Where do you live, Leroy?"

"Three-two-eight Locust Avenue."

"Married?"

"Yes."

"Children?"

"No."

I asked him some more questions, got some answers which sounded on the level, and told him I'd get in touch with him in a day or two. He seemed brighter as he left. Don't ask me why.

THE address was in a section which had been built up with war housing, now become substandard because of the haste with which it had been slapped together, but still a respectable neighborhood. The Maples occupied one of a group of six bungalow apartments around a small court.

He was on the four-to-midnight shift at his garage. I parked in the shade of a low-spreading oak about fifty yards up and across the street and waited. The guy, so far as I could figure, was sincere. His condition *was* hopeless, his treatments had stopped, and yet he had to have five grand right away. I still wanted to know what for.

About a quarter to four he came out of one of the apartments. He was in coveralls, a mechanic's cap and had a lunchbox in his hand. I got a brief glimpse of a slender woman in a flower-figured wrap in the doorway. It had to be his wife, Leona.

He got in an old and battered coupe at the curb and drove off. I couldn't even hear the gears change. If I knew my man, the car body probably held a perfectly tuned motor.

The circle of shade I was in spread to the center of the street. People who had left work at five o'clock began arriving home.

She came out in a snug, light green coat that hugged the beautiful lines of

her flanks, and a green toque with a red feather on her rippling blond hair. Even from a distance she was a knockout. She walked south. I let her get a block ahead before I started my motor and eased out from the curb.

I passed her in the middle of the next block. In the rear view mirror I saw her turn left at the corner. I turned left at the next corner, left again, and so circled the block. When I made the third left turn, into the street she had taken, I saw her getting into a sleek tan convertible which evidently had stopped to pick her up. Cagy, she wasn't giving her next-door neighbors a look at the boy friend.

I drifted past them as the man in the convertible had his head turned to say something to her on the seat beside him. I recognized his dark, saturnine profile. Vic Tosca. A guy I suspected was involved in the two jewelry store stick-ups on which I had been unsuccessfully beating my brains out.

They headed downtown. I gave them a block and a half headway. The flashy convertible was easy to follow. That's the trouble with men like Vic Tosca. They are usually up to things in which they would be better off if they were inconspicuous, but their love of showing off makes them easy to spot.

He hit the boulevard traffic and my job was easier. Twenty minutes later he drew up before a new apartment house in which the rents would probably run at least two hundred a month. He found a parking place at the curb and got out, saying something to the woman and leaving her in the car. He started toward the doorway.

A thin kid in a snapbrim hat stepped out of the recessed entry with a fist in the pocket of his sports jacket. They stood talking a moment. Anyone having no reason to notice might have paid no attention to the thin kid's fist in his pocket. But as my car came abreast, I saw Tosca turn, with the kid behind him, and head back for the convertible. The kid, apparently, had a gun on him!

I rolled past. A car was trying to pull out of a parallel parking space ahead of me, having trouble jockeying from a tight position, and I stopped just behind it as if waiting for the

space. It was dusk now, and even though Tosca knew my face, I knew he wasn't likely to spot me.

Turning my head, I saw him go around to the right hand side of the convertible, followed by the thin kid. The woman slid under the wheel and Tosca got in, the kid, with that gun in his pocket, getting in, too.

With Leona Maples driving, they passed me, picking up speed in second. By now the car on which I had pretended to be waiting had twisted out of the parking space. It pulled off, between me and Tosca's car. I followed.

It was dark enough for headlights. Tailing the convertible toward the outskirts of the city, in dark stretches whenever I got another car between us I would occasionally turn off my lights for a stretch, and when the convertible was for a moment or two out of sight around a bend cut them back on.

Traffic was still heavy on River Road—with people who worked in the city outbound to their homes in suburban towns. By judicious use of my lights, I didn't believe they would spot me. Leona Maples, driving, was not the kind to be alert for a tail. Vic Tosca, probably with a gun muzzle in his side, had no reason to hope for one. The thin kid would be keeping his eyes on Vic.

WE PASSED the last small shopping center and were in an orchard and truck farming area. Traffic thinned and I began to get worried about being noticed, tried to keep a car or two between us.

The convertible slowed and made a right turn. It couldn't have been a cross-highway—I knew none was there. I turned off my lights again, let the car ahead of me pass the intersection, and slowed down for it. It was a dirt road, little more than a lane, with fruit trees thick on each side.

The moon had not come up and there was a hint of rain in the air. Several hundred yards ahead I saw the convertible's headlights and followed warily in the darkness. The black land was flat, the road not too crooked, and I could remain a good distance behind yet

keep the beams of the convertible's lights in sight.

After a few miles those lights suddenly cut sharply left, slowed and stopped. Instantly I switched off my ignition and coasted to the side of the lane, barely wide enough here to permit another car to pass. The convertible's motor was silent and I guessed we had reached our destination.

Frogs croaked. On foot, I crept up the dark road. Apple trees were thick on each side and the sweet odor of the fruit cloyed the still, hushed air. A dimly lighted window, shade drawn, came into view. It was a cottage well back from the road.

I advanced slowly. If there was a watchdog, I was out of luck. Leaning over, I moved silently through shrubbery to the window which showed light. The shade lacked a couple of inches of reaching the bottom of the pane. I peered in.

Vic Tosca lay glaring against a far wall. From a livid welt across his darkly handsome face, blood was beginning to trickle. Leona Maples stood nearby, her eyes wide with horror. Her full, ripe lips were gaping. She looked like a girl who had been playing with matches and was now amazed to discover herself in the midst of a conflagration.

The thin kid had his snapbrim pushed back on his head. His face was pimply. At his shoulder stood a thickset, bull-necked man only a few years older.

The thin kid was cursing Tosca in a vicious, obscene monotone, gun in hand. "Get on your feet," he snarled.

Tosca struggled erect. The thin kid slammed the gun in his hand against Tosca's face. Tosca stumbled back against the wall, blood spurting from his nose. He crouched there, hands splayed, eyes darting from one to another of his captors like a cornered beast.

"You might as well talk," the thin kid told him. "You ain't gonna leave this place alive if you don't."

"I haven't got the stuff," Tosca mumbled through his bruised lips. "I passed it on up the line."

"How come?"

"I couldn't make a deal with the insurance company."

"Who's the fence?"

"Manny Lapham, from Chicago."

"He's got it all now?"

"Sure. The payoff ought to come through any day."

"He's lyin', Ralph," Bullneck said.

"Manny Lapham ain't been in this town."

"You still claim Manny came here and got the stuff from you?" Ralph asked.

"That's right," Tosca said.

Bullneck kicked him in the groin. Tosca doubled over with pain, gasping hoarsely, and sank to hands and knees. Bullneck kicked him in the face. Tosca's head snapped up as if his neck were broken. He shook his head shaggily, like a dog. His long hair was in his eyes. His mouth was a bloody horror.

"Back on your feet, you doublecrossing rat," Ralph sneered.

Desperately Tosca caught the leg of a dining table and pulled himself up to sprawl his arms on the surface. His twisted necktie, collar and lapels were a gory mess. His fingers worked convulsively.

"Stand straight," said Ralph. "Put your hands up. Go through him, Bat."

With a supreme effort Tosca obeyed. Bat moved around behind him and began throwing articles from Tosca's pockets on the table. Letters and papers, cigarettes, lighter, fountain pen, pen-knife, billfold, change, handkerchief. Ralph poked through the litter with the muzzle of his gun.

"Nothing here," he said. And to Tosca, "I went through your apartment an hour ago. I tore the joint apart. The stuff ain't there. Where is it?"

"Manny Lapham came down from Chicago and I turned it over to him," Tosca said. "We ought to be gettin' the dough in a day or two."

LEONA MAPLES' mouth was working as if she were trying to scream, but only a high-pitched whimper came out.

"Go on and scream, sister," Ralph said in an aside. "Maybe you oughta screamed the other day. But there ain't nobody around to hear you now."

He cursed Tosca again for a liar. He gave the table a sudden shove. Tosca

was catapulted from it. He landed against the wall again and sank to a sitting position, bracing himself with his hands on the floor.

Bat caught him by the hair, pulled him half up, and slammed a sledge-like fist into his stomach. Tosca sank again, drooling senselessly.

I left the window, sidled along the wall and dodged across the front of the house to the parked convertible. From its far side, I began searching. There had to be some evidence of the loot. Vic Tosca had masterminded the stickups and the two gun-happy morons had turned the stuff over to him for disposal. Now they were impatient. They were hot. They wanted to go places.

If there had been no sign of the stuff in Tosca's apartment and none on his person, it had to be somewhere. Maybe he had ditched it on the way out here. He wouldn't have turned the jewelry over to a fence without some kind of receipt. Maybe he still had the jewelry. I found what I was looking for tucked between the seat cushion and the back of the car seat.

I crouched on the far side of the car and risked a cupped beam of my pencil flash to make sure.

As I started to straighten, Bat came bulling out of the house. He headed for the car. I always pack a sap, a habit carried over from three years on the police force before the war, and I figured I'd need it now for Bat's thick skull. I got it off my belt and waited.

Bat reached the car, opened the door on the other side and started pawing around the cushion. They must have had the same idea I'd had. I slipped around the back of the convertible and, as Bat leaned over, let him have it behind the ear. He slumped under the wheel, out cold. I tapped again, behind the other ear, to make sure he wouldn't interfere, then got my gun in my hand and turned to the house.

I eased open the front door. I walked silently down a short hall. Ralph's viciously thin voice was still cursing Tosca. I stepped into the room's doorway. Ralph was half turned toward me, his gun hanging at his side.

"Hold it," I said.

He turned. His gun flashed up, his

face contorted. I shot him in the chest, high on his right side.

This time Leona Maples achieved a scream. The scream went on and on, keening at the top of her voice. Her arms were rigid at her sides, her green eyes popping.

Ralph's gun fell from his lax fingers. His mouth dropped open with surprise in his pimply face. His left hand groped puzzledly to the wound in his chest.

There was a telephone. In ten minutes I had a couple of uniformed men from a prowler car on hand, and in another half hour, three detectives from Headquarters.

"O.K.," I said. "Here are your heist guys. Vic Tosca planned the stickups, but he was too good to pull 'em himself. He imported these two hoodlums. They pulled the heists and turned the jewelry over to him to fence."

"Where's the jewelry?" a fat detective named Baker wanted to know.

"Don't rush me," I said. "I've taken plenty on this case. You and your newspaper stooges have done your best to ruin my reputation. All I was interested in, you said, was getting the jewelry back for the insurance company, and to the devil with justice."

"But look, Paul," said Baker. "You don't have to get sore. Everybody knows insurance companies would rather pay off to get stuff back than to pay the full amount of a claim. It's all just business."

"It wasn't that way in the papers," I said. "I was a heel. All right, here's your case all wrapped up for you. Ralph and Bat will finger Tosca and the other way around. With the three of them, you won't have any trouble building your evidence."

"What about this dame?"

Leona Maples sat in a daze, watching me with the eyes of a whipped spaniel.

"She just happened to be out for a ride with Tosca when Ralph threw down on him," I lied. "Ralph brought her along because he didn't know what else to do with her."

"What about the jewelry?" Baker asked again.

"Get one of your prowler car men to bring my car up from down the road and we'll go get it," I said, giving Baker

my car key.

Leona sat between me and Baker. I drove them back to the city to the Union Terminal. At the baggage room I turned in the check I had found behind the car seat and got a briefcase. All the jewelry was in it.

"Drop you off at Headquarters?" I asked Baker.

WHEN he got out he said, "Paul, I'm sorry about that stuff in the papers. The reporters around here went off half-cocked. Next time, when you're on something like this, work with us, won't you?"

I didn't say anything. He went in the bleak stone building carrying the briefcase. I headed for Blecker's Garage.

"All right, toots," I said. "Spill it."

She had been frozen with shock, but now she was quietly sobbing. She couldn't have been more than twenty-two or -three. A luscious fluff. An armful, maybe. Those bedroom eyes. Those ruby pouting lips. That figure that was enough to set a man wild. Nuts. She was a conscienceless little tramp.

"I didn't know what they were doing," she said.

"When?"

"When they left me in the car and went in that jewelry store."

"You drove the getaway car both times?"

"I—I suppose you'd call it that."

"So you didn't know what you were doing," I said. "That's a laugh. If not the first time, what about the second?"

"Vic told me I couldn't be blamed. I didn't hold up anybody. I was just helping his friends by driving for them."

"He was planning to leave town with the stuff, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"And you were going with him?"

"Yes."

"What kind of lie did you tell your husband?"

"I told him I had innocently given these friends a lift and was being blackmailed for it. That somebody would turn me in unless I paid five thousand dollars."

Leroy Maples—sucker. Maybe this babe could make a man who loved her

believe anything. She certainly had everything it took. And then some.

"I—I was going away with Vic. Roy hasn't got long to live, and there was nobody else for him to leave money to, and—"

"But you couldn't even wait decently for him to die? Is that it?"

"Vic had to go. I loved him. I wanted to go with him. He said I might as well get all I could. Roy wouldn't be needing the money."

The junk stores and beaneries along Decatur Street were garish, busy and noisy. I pulled up in front of Bleecker's Garage. I gave a boy with a shine box fifty cents to go in and get Leroy Maples.

He came out wiping his hands on a wad of waste. He pushed up the beak of his mechanic's cap with a lean forearm.

"Out," I told Leona. "On your feet."

She scrambled from the car and threw her arms around him, sobbing again, her cheeks tear-stained. I got out and he looked at me questioningly. I told him the truth. All of it.

She clung to him. She winced at my every word as if it were a blow.

"I didn't know what I was doing, Roy!" she cried. "I must have been crazy! I was just infatuated!"

"And so," I said, "I was able to ease her out of it. The cops are satisfied. Even if they start to wonder who drove the car, they're indebted enough to me now to overlook the point. She won't have to go to jail."

There were tight lines of agony about his mouth. His knuckles were white on his clenched fists. He looked at the wad of waste in his hand as if he had never seen it before and dropped it. He shrugged free of Leona. Revulsion and nausea were in his eyes.

"I won't be home tonight, or ever again," he told her.

"But Roy, listen—I—please listen. I love you—" The tears were streaming.

He turned away toward his work. She dropped to her knees.

As I drove off I heard him say, "I don't give a damn, baby."

He left her there on the sidewalk.



Nick Ransom is accused of being an extortioner and forger, faces the menace of a gun-wielding glamour girl, collects a woeful conk on the head and finds himself

"tied up" in more ways than one when he responds to a client's call for help—but it's all in a day's work for a private eye!

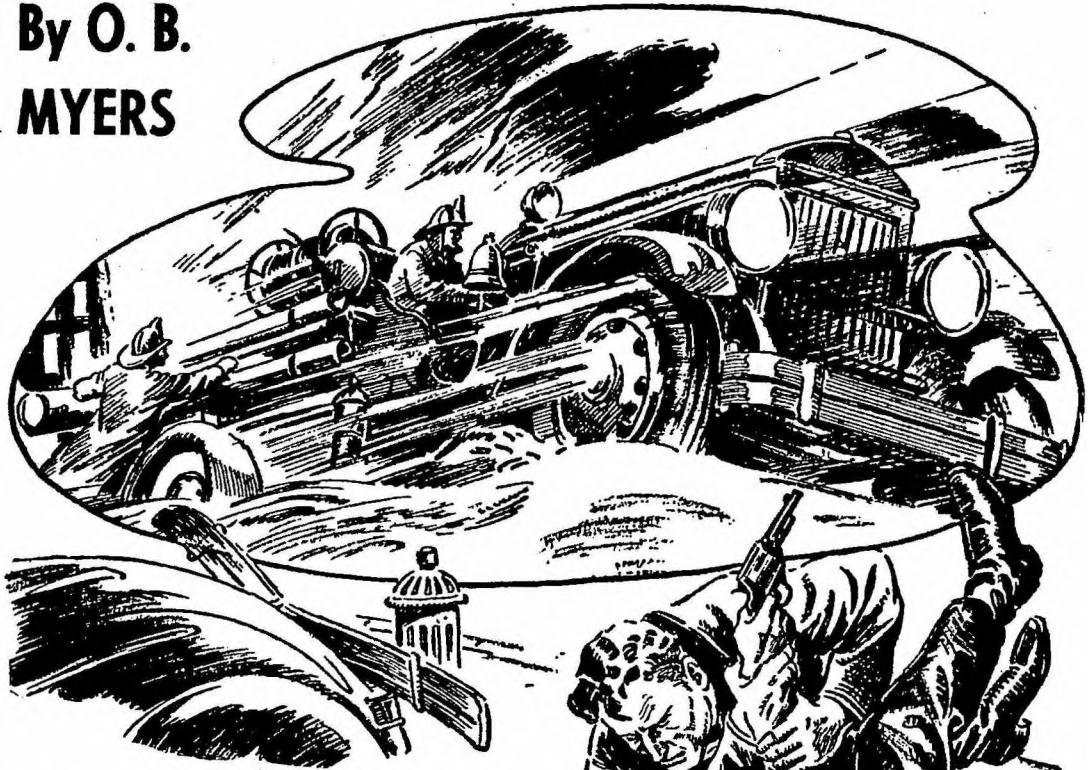
MURDER STEALS THE SCENE

A Swift-Moving Mystery Novelet

By ROBERT LESLIE BELLEM

COMING NEXT ISSUE—PLUS MANY OTHER THRILL-PACKED STORIES!

By O. B.
MYERS



Bo Grippen learns that
underworld ethics

is a—

CODE of DISHONOR

—used as a
cover-up for
double-crossing!



BO GRIPPEN sat humped on the round stool, his elbows akimbo on the black plastic counter. His lean pale cheeks showed the need of a shave, his eyes were bleary and tired and his muscles stiff, for his few hours' sleep had been snatched sprawled on the hard seat of a day coach. He felt half asleep, dulled by fatigue.

Yet an instant later he was wide awake, every muscle rigid, as if an electric needle had been jabbed into a live nerve.

The waitress, herself sleepy-eyed at seven o'clock in the morning, had set the cup of steaming coffee down before him and then moved across to the other side of the U-shaped counter. Here she

slapped knife, fork, spoon, paper napkin, and a printed menu card down in front of the square-shouldered young man who had just taken a seat over there. Bo's eyes, following her lazily, came to the face under the snap-brim fedora—and there they froze.

There wasn't anything extraordinary about the face, or the man to whom it belonged. In fact, he bore a rough resemblance to Bo himself. The features were regular, with a rather prominent jaw and cheek-bones, the eyes wide-spaced, the nose sharply chiselled. Where Bo's hair was straight and blond, the other man's was dark and curly, and his ruddy complexion contrasted with Bo's flat pallor.

It was a face that Bo would never forget.

A train rumbled slowly out of the station. The heavy vibration permeated the ground and the structure of the building, and caused the untouched cup of coffee to rattle faintly in its saucer.

"I must get outta here," thought Bo.

His hand went into his pocket, and very slowly he slid a quarter under the edge of the saucer. His arms braced against the edge of the counter, ready to lift his weight off the stool. At that instant the man opposite said something to the waitress, and raised his head. Their glances locked, as if in a vise.

The waitress disappeared into the kitchen. Somewhere outside, a locomotive hooted huskily. Dishes clattered, and a coffee urn gave off a faint but steady hiss. A tremor of highly charged emotion travelled through Bo's body, like a brief but deadly electric current.

"He hates me," thought Bo. "He hates my guts."

But he did not move.

The level stare from across the counter did not waver, but slowly, almost imperceptibly, it underwent a change. In those keen gray eyes appeared something suspiciously like a twinkle. Their owner, without shifting his gaze, rose backward off his stool, and with deliberate absence of haste ambled around the vacant space at the base of the U. Bo's eyes followed him, as if held by a magnet. He slid onto the next stool, keeping his hands in plain sight on the counter.

"Day," he said bluntly, but softly.

"Jerry Day. Remember me?"

Bo had to swallow twice before he got voice to answer.

"Yes . . . Yes, I rember you—copper."

To the slightly hostile emphasis on the last word the other man paid no attention. He motioned to the waitress to bring his grapefruit juice to this side, and swallowed a generous gulp.

"Been back in town long?" he asked casually.

Bo, striving to relax, jerked his head over his shoulder.

"Just came in half an hour ago, on a rattler."

JERRY DAY nodded. "What was it they gave you? Five to ten, wasn't it? That would be—let's see . . ." His eyes half closed as he made a quick mental calculation. "Forty-five, wasn't it? You must be out on probation, for good behavior, eh?"

"That's right." Bo's lip twitched. "You got a good memory."

The man at his side chuckled softly. "That's my business. Besides, you're not quick to forget a guy who put a bullet in you."

Bo's jaw hardened. "I never put any bullet in you. That wasn't my gun they picked up. I wasn't carryin' one."

He stopped, sensing his own futility. But the reception accorded his statements surprised him.

They were statements that he had made often before. First to the uniformed sergeant who leaned over him as he lay sprawled, sick and bleeding, on the pavement outside the Ten-Star Restaurant and Grill. Later, to the lieutenant at his bedside in the hospital, and then to the lawyer they had assigned him. And later still, in the courtroom under oath, to the judge and jury. And each and every time, as he knew perfectly well, they had been received with obvious disbelief. They had all taken for granted that he was lying.

Yet now, to his astonishment, Jerry Day showed none of the outward signs of skepticism whatsoever. He accepted the remarks, apparently, at full face value. He didn't even shrug.

"In that case," he remarked quizzically, "you probably figure that you got a raw deal out of it."

Bo had, of course, figured something very like that. But he wasn't going to let any cop hear him complain. Especially the cop whose thigh-bone had been laid bare by a slug from that very gun, who had lain writhing on the sidewalk only a few feet away.

"What's the difference?" muttered Bo sullenly.

He remembered with photographic clarity that hectic half-minute in front of the joint on West Twelfth. The wailing moan of the siren somewhere out of sight in the night—the brief moments of racking suspense, until the blinking red searchlight came careening around the corner. The dash for the door, to warn the 'boys' inside. The shriek of brakes, the figure leaping from the running board, the shouted command. And then the mad confusion, the blasting roar of shots from all sides at once. The lash of terror, the searing finger of pain along his ribs, and the stunning impact of the projectile that had slammed him gasping to earth.

And then the long weeks in the hospital, the questionings, the threats, the pleas. Followed by the gloomy austerity of the trial, and the deadening finality of the verdict.

"What's the difference, now?" he repeated bitterly.

JERRY DAY shrugged, and gave him a sideways glance. "Not a bad suit they issue now, eh? Might be a twin to mine—except that mine set me back sixty bucks."

Bo glanced down at the plain but serviceable gray serge. It was, as Jerry said, not a bad suit—except that Bo was intensely conscious of the fact that it had been issued to him upon departure from State's prison, and kept imagining that other people would be conscious of the same fact.

"Last time I saw you," he countered, "you were wearing a blue suit, with shiny buttons."

"Yeah. I was in a prowl car, then. Now I'm a detective, second grade. Plain clothes, but longer hours. I guess they expect me to be smarter than I was then."

He proceeded to demolish a couple of fried eggs and a plate of toast. When he

had signalled to the waitress to bring him a second cup of coffee, he turned again to Bo.

"You goin' to stay in town for a while, Bo?"

Bo hesitated. The truth was, he didn't know. After looking forward to this day for nearly four years, he still had no plans. He had returned here because this city was the only home he knew.

Not that it had ever given him much of a home. His mother had run off with a Cuban acrobat when he was eleven, and his father had died in the alcoholic ward two years later. After that Bo had shifted for himself, with the accent on shifting. His address a back room or a vacant lot, his school the streets, his bed the back seat of a car parked in a garage, his associates others like himself, or worse. And his work, when he had work, just enough to put a few meals into his ravenous stomach.

Jerry Day read his hesitation correctly, and did not wait for a reply. "If you could use a job, Harry Hirsch needs a car washer, nights, over at the Peck Street Garage. Interested?"

Bo's eye brightened momentarily. A regular job! But then his lip curled in a skeptical sneer.

"Yeah? And what makes you think he'll want me?"

Jerry eyed him coolly. "He wants a car washer who will wash cars. Not a hoodlum who will use 'em for beds, go joyriding after midnight, and pull a fast one on the cash register in the office. If you want to work, on the level, I'll speak to him about it."

Bo declared savagely, "I'm through with hoodlums. I want to work, on the level."

It was a statement made by practically every man who was ever discharged from prison. Some of them were simply lying. Some meant it when they spoke, but didn't have the guts to stick to it. A very, very few made it come true. But there was some note in Bo's voice that made Jerry nod solemnly.

"I'll see Harry this morning. Maybe you can start tonight. I'll tell him about you. And I mean, all about you. There's no use kidding him. He'll find out sooner or later anyway. Better to lay it on the line right now. Then everybody knows

where he stands. After that, it's up to you."

BO, STUNNED by this offer, was searching for words to express his gratitude. But before he spoke, he was engulfed by a wave of suspicion and distrust. A favor from a cop? It went against all his experience, violated everything he had learned in his harsh career. The cops, he had been taught, were always on the 'other side', always to be feared, hated, and mistrusted. According to the code by which he had grown up, a cop was always against you, never for you. If he did anything for you, it was only to exact some favor in return. Bo guessed immediately what that favor would be.

"No!" he growled abruptly. "Forget it."

Jerry peered at him sharply. "What's the matter?"

Bo scowled. "I'm 'keepin' my mouth shut."

Jerry, no fool, guessed at once what was behind that scowl.

"Listen," he said patiently. "I haven't asked you for anything, have I? And I'm not going to. As you said yourself, what's the difference now? The State claimed that was your gun, that you shot me with it. You claimed it wasn't, that somebody else threw it down next to you—but you wouldn't tell us who. All right. That's your idea of playing the game, and you stuck to it. So what? The other guy, who was pulling off the stick-up inside, never got caught, while you've been doing your time. But it's all water over the dam, now."

Bo looked sullen, half convinced.

"Don't you see? It's too late now to open your trap. Nobody cares. You've done your stretch, you've paid up. And as for me, the case is closed. I'm not interested. I'm not trying to make a stool pigeon out of you. I'm interested in seeing you go straight, only because that means one less crook for me to chase. If you don't want the chance, to heck with it. But if you take it, and then muff it afterward, or turn on me—watch out for yourself."

He picked up his check, glanced at it, and counted out some silver on the counter. He was on his feet and turning

toward the waiting room when Bo seized his sleeve.

"I'll go see Harry this noon. And—and—"

"That's all right," said Jerry gruffly. "Luck to you."

The first week was tough. Bo had been doing light bench work in the shoe repair shop, and no heavy exercise, beside which car washing was back-breaking labor. His hands blistered, his muscles were sore and stiff, his lungs ached. After a ten-hour night, he had scarcely energy enough to eat before lunging into bed in the third floor hall bedroom he had taken, around the corner.

But he stuck with it. The small manila envelope that was handed to him on Friday morning had a lot to do with that. It was almost the first legitimate full-week's pay he had ever earned, and he hated like poison to spend the crisp, new bills. They seemed, to him, to have quite a different feel from the money that had been given to him with the plain gray suit.

HE SAW almost no one. His boss, Harry Hirsch; the front man who sold gas and oil and fixed flats up to midnight; and the mechanic who opened up the shop at seven each morning. That was all. He wasn't on the streets during the daytime. In the early evenings he generally took in a single feature movie before going to work. And Peck Street was a long way from the East End, where Packy Figart and his old pals of the Highpockets gang hung out.

He never saw any of them, and if by chance any of them saw him, he was not made aware of it.

It was a dull life, but a least he was keeping out of trouble. At the end of the second month the boss raised his pay. Only a tiny raise, but still a raise. It gave him the feeling of advancement, and he bought himself a new suit. Not gray. Blue serge.

Of course he didn't wear the suit to the garage. There, he was dressed as usual in hip boots, a waterproof wind-breaker, and an old baseball cap. He had just lathered the right side of a new Nash sedan, and picked up the hose to

rinse it down, when he heard a rapping on the door up at the head of the ramp.

It was three o'clock in the morning; the front man had left long ago. A customer, perhaps, getting in late — and probably drunk. But he did not hear the purr of a motor from outside, and consequently did not raise the big door, but simply unlatched and swung open the small access door set into the panels of the larger one.

For a moment he saw nothing but a blurred figure against the darkness of the empty street. Then suddenly he recoiled as if a gun had been jammed into his ribs.

"Well, Bo, don't you know me?"

The voice was deep and full-throated, yet at the same time repressed to a grating half-whisper. He remembered it, and the round face under the peaked cap, only too well.

"Yeah . . . Yeah, I know you, Nig."

Without waiting for an invitation the other man stepped through the opening and with the heel of his hand flicked the door shut behind him. He was short, ruggedly built, with powerful shoulders and long arms. His face was flat and lightly pock-marked, and his small eyes wore a constant gleam of animal cunning.

"Anybody around here, Bo?" he asked sharply.

Bo stared at him steadily, with ill-concealed distaste.

"No, only me. Come on in the back."

Bo clumped down the short ramp, scowling. The unexpected appearance of Nig Scarpino, at one time his cell mate in the Big House, gave him more than a shock of surprise. It reawakened memories that he had been striving to forget, and at the same time posed an indefinable but ominous threat for the future. At the foot of the ramp he turned and examined his visitor in the light.

"Where did you come from?"

Nig grinned maliciously, thereby exposing the lack of two teeth on one side of his lower jaw. "Same place you came from!"

Bo winced. He did not need to be reminded of that.

"I didn't mean that. I thought you hailed from Utica?"

"That's right." The big man sprawled

on the front bumper of a Dodge coupe. "But I got some pals in this burg, too. And besides, you told me to look you up, didn't you?"

BO NODDED SILENTLY. Those days seemed, now, a long way off. As a veteran inmate of the institution Nig had, at first, been helpful. He had given Bo numerous tips on shortcuts and ruses by which the worst effects of imprisonment could be avoided, or at least eased. Now Bo wished that he had refused the proffered friendship.

"How'd you find out where to find me?"

Nig ducked that question obliquely. "Aw, it gets around," he shrugged. "You got a good set-up, here?"

Bo picked up the hose and began to spray water adroitly.

"I'm makin' a living," he said bluntly, and added with a certain emphasis, "on the level."

Nig grunted. "How'd you get the job?"

Bo's tone was flat. "A cop got it for me."

"A cop!" Nig's small eyes narrowed. "You ain't been squealin'?"

Bo's jaw hardened. "No, I ain't been squealin'!"

The other man retained for a moment his look of suspicion. Then his features relaxed again into their lop-sided grin.

"No, you wouldn't. You know enough to stick by the boys, all right. You're a good egg, Bo. You and me ought to do okay."

Bo went right on manipulating hose and sponge. Nig borrowed a cigarette, lolled at ease, and did most of the talking. It came out that he had no money, no job, and no place to live. With this predicament Bo was not unfamiliar. He reflected that he had been in the same position not long before.

He took care of the first handicap by a loan of ten bucks on the spot. He solved the problem of a place to sleep by telling Nig to occupy his bed nights, while he himself used it during the daytime. It was the least he could do for one who called himself a pal. When it came to a job, Nig snickered.

"Don't worry about that. I can take care of myself."

Bo was surprised. "You mean you got a job lined up?"

The other man nodded, and his tone dropped cautiously.

"Somethin' good. Want us to cut you in, Bo?"

Bo realized abruptly that Nig was using the word job in a different sense. He picked up his chamois with a determined air.

"No. Cut me out. I'll stick to this, for a while."

Nig's expression was both amused and skeptical, but he made no further comment at the time. He rose and yawned.

"Guess I'll go and hit the sack for a few hours. Remember, Bo; nix on the chatter. I'll be seein' you."

As a matter of fact, for two men who were living together, they saw very little of each other for the next week or so. Bo always started for work before Nig came in, in the evenings, and upon his return in the morning he generally found the bed empty — and unmade. His guest seemed to be very busy with his own affairs, which was quite agreeable to Bo. When they did meet, their conversation was of trivialities. Nig never referred to his 'job', and Bo, true to gangland's code of the tight lip, never asked. Yet the situation left him uneasy and tense.

Bo had seldom seen the cop, Jerry Day, and then only by apparent accident. Now he ran into him on the street three times in four days. Whether there was anything more than accident behind this Bo did not know, but it made him thoughtful.

THEIR GREETINGS, previously, had been casual and cheery, with no reference to Bo's past by either one. Now they were stiffened by a certain restraint. Bo thought the other eyed him closely. He waited for a question about Nig Scarpino, but it did not come.

"Harry tells me you're doing okay," remarked the detective.

Bo reddened at once. "You been askin' him, huh?"

"No, not particularly. I just happened to bump into him yesterday, in the bank." He took notice of Bo's nervousness, and asked quietly, "Anything on your mind?"

But Bo simply shook his head in stubborn silence. He had nothing to tell, and wouldn't have told it anyway.

It was the second night after that when Nig appeared at the garage shortly after midnight. He was nervously mouthing a much chewed cigar butt, and there was a suppressed excitement in his manner that boded no good. But he sat around on a running board, while Bo went on washing, for almost half an hour before he brought his dilatory remarks to the point.

Finally he asked if Bo was interested in making two C's.

"Two hundred bucks?" Bo stared at him. It was impossible to say no. Who wasn't interested in two hundred dollars? "For what?"

Nig grinned his crooked smirk. "We got a little job comin' up. Any night now. A simple trick, just like pie. All we need is a car, for maybe half an hour."

"A car?" Bo's voice was cold and level.

"Just to use," explained Nig. "You don't have to show at all. I take it out; I bring it back. You get your split. Okay?"

Bo put down his sponge, screwed down the spigot, and waited until the water no longer burred from the nozzle of the hose. He stood before Nig, feet apart, and his voice was as flat as iron.

"The answer is no," he declared. "I want no part of your job. I told you to cut me out of it. I don't even want to hear about it."

Nig stared in astonished disbelief at his steely glare.

"What's the matter? You want a bigger split?"

Bo tried to explain in words of one syllable.

"Listen. I told you I'm workin' here on the level. That's what I meant. I wash cars. Also I watch 'em. From midnight to seven that's my job, and I'm doin' it. No cars are goin' out of this place, unless the owner takes 'em. You and your pals can pull anything you want, but don't pull me into it. Just leave me alone."

It was impossible to misunderstand his blunt finality. Nig rose, shrugging heavily. "Have it your way, fella. Be,

a dope."

He turned back, crafty suspicion in his expression.

"You ain't spilled anything to your friend the cop, have you?"

Bo retorted angrily. "No, I haven't blabbed. If he knows you're in town, he didn't get it from me. And he won't be gettin' anything from me, either. I know nothin', I can't spill nothin'. Right?"

Nig nodded in glum satisfaction. "Right. Stick to that, kid, and we're pals . . . See yuh later."

Nig appeared at the garage again the next night, shortly before one A. M., though for what reason Bo could not discern. He loafed around, talking little, for fifteen or twenty minutes, and then with a muttered remark about hitting the hay plodded up the ramp. Bo heard the street door slam behind him.

But, as Bo was to discover later, Nig had not departed. After slamming the door from the inside, he had merely retreated into the gloom between the ranks of parked cars, and waited.

HALF AN HOUR later there came a banging from the big door. Bo turned off the water and went up to answer it. It was a customer, Hoge by name, in an old Mercury coupe, and it was obvious as he stepped out unsteadily that he had plenty under his belt.

"Put her away for me, will you, son?" he mumbled. "'S'all I can do to make my front door on foot. G'night."

Bo bade him good-night, and ran up the big overhead door. He slid into the coupe, of which the motor was idling, and gunned up the upper ramp to the second floor. It belonged, he knew, in a space in the rear corner, rather difficult to jockey into without scraping a fender right or left. It took him several minutes of backing and filling to get it properly stowed away.

He switched off the engine, and was immediately aware that he heard the purr of another engine from somewhere below. Another customer coming in late? Perhaps. But almost as quickly as he heard the sound, it faded away slowly into the distance.

A nameless misgiving seized him. He

jumped out of the coupe and hurried down to the main floor.

The overhead door was still wide open, as he had left it. There was no sign of any car that just come in. On the other hand, he saw at once that a car had just gone out. Near the door there was a gap in the ranks. Space Number Five. He knew without pondering that that space belonged to the new Chrysler convertible owned by Lillian Andrew. He knew also that the convertible had been there earlier, because he had washed it and parked it where it belonged less than two hours before.

He guessed immediately what had happened. Nig Scarpino, failing to get his consent, had simply taken the bull by the horns.

Bo began to curse bitterly under his breath. For a night-man to allow a car to go joy-riding out of his garage was bad enough in any case, especially if something happened to the car. But in his own case, it was ten times worse. In view of his record, he would be immediately suspected, at least of complicity. He was definitely on the spot. That car, with its walnut panelled body, was easily recognizable. If it got smashed up, or even spotted near the scene of a crime . . . Damn Nig!

His wrath flowed quickly into action. Without stopping even to strip off his awkward boots, he ran up the ramp to the second floor. Without hesitating, he leaped into the Mercury coupe, he just left there. The key was in place, the motor warm. It came out of its corner much easier than it had gone in. He shot down the ramp in second and, leaving the door wide open, wheeled into the street.

It was rather like finding a needle in a haystack, except that certain factors narrowed his search. For one thing, there was little or no traffic at that hour, and but few cars standing on the streets. For another, he knew that Nig was not working alone, and his companion was very apt to be one of the Highpockets mob. Bo headed across town for the East End.

He pulled first into Horton Avenue. Every building, every lamp post, was familiar. He had grown up on these sidewalks. Moe's delicatessen still stood

on the corner of Elm, the windows now blank and dark. Next to it was the firehouse, a pale, rosy light gleaming over its closed door. Bo rolled quickly past.

AFTER SEVERAL blocks he turned a corner, then turned again. He went up one street and down another, giving a sharp scrutiny to every car he passed, whether it was in motion or parked. Few places were open. Fulco's bar, the diner on East 7th, a chop suey joint on Wilson Street. He slowed to peer anxiously at the cars that stood before them, and rolled on. He eyed vacant lots, and driveways.

He ground his teeth in bitter disappointment. Considerable time had passed. He had combed the East End from the railroad to the river, without finding what he sought. If Nig's 'job' was out of town, perhaps at some roadhouse, then he would long since have picked up his partner and gone. The prospect looked dim.

Bo headed west, but he still slowed at every corner to peer up and down the cross streets. Sliding across Morgan Avenue, he suddenly stiffened and stood on the brake. After a second look he went into reverse, backed a few feet, and then turned right. As soon as his headlights swung to bear, he was sure that he was right.

There were not many of those new convertibles with that fancy body work, and the maroon top was distinctive. Bo's eyes narrowed, and his fingers took a fresh grip on the steering wheel. In seconds he crept quietly along the asphalt.

The Chrysler was parked near the middle of the block, against the left-hand curb. Morgan Street was one-way here, and during the day was crowded with heavy traffic, both pleasure and commercial. Now it was deserted and silent, with only an occasional street lamp giving back reflected gleams from windows of stores and tenements.

There were no lights on the car, and as he rolled abreast of it he saw that the seats were empty. He hesitated, then let in his clutch again and rolled on another hundred feet or so. Here he pulled up to the curb, turned out his

lights, switched off the engine of the coupe, and stepped out.

Again he hesitated. He had no specific plan in mind. If he caught up with Nig, he intended to tell him what he thought of him. But Nig was nowhere in sight. Nor was anyone else. There stood the convertible, sleek and powerful.

A rough scheme outlined itself in his mind. He would leave the coupe locked, and get into the Chrysler. If the keys were in it, well and good. If not, he knew how to short out the switch. He would drive it back to the garage, leave it there, and come back on foot for the coupe. That would leave Nig and his companion stranded high and dry — a contingency that bothered Bo not one whit.

With this general idea in mind, he started back up the street on foot. But he had taken only a few steps before he came to an abrupt halt. Across the street was a three-story storage warehouse, its windowless front rising grim and dark. Next to it, in a vacant lot, some corrugated sheet metal garages leaned against each other. Just beyond them rose an old, two-story, wooden building.

It had originally been a private house, but the ground floor had been extended to the sidewalk line and modified to make a store. Plate glass windows faced the street, and a large but cheaply constructed sign proclaimed: **FACTORY OUTLET — Haberdashery — Men's Clothing.** Smaller posters pasted to the glass announced a sale.

HE WAS LOOKING, however, not at the front of the building but at the back. In the all-pervading darkness his eye had been caught by a flicker of light. Above the low roof of the rear-most garage rose a wavering column of thick, oily smoke, illuminated from below by a dull crimson glow. As he looked, the glow brightened, and a single tongue of flame licked up against the clapboards.

Fire! Man's primitive, instinctive fear gripped him in an instant — and with good reason, for he knew the situation. He was familiar with these streets and buildings, having played handball against the side of that warehouse as a boy. He knew that there were rooms

upstairs over that store where people lived. And in this neighborhood, in these days, doubtless several families were crammed into the rooms, with one wooden staircase for an exit.

He darted an anxious glance up and down the block. All the buildings were dark, silent, shuttered. But at the far corner, beyond his car, a street lamp burned atop a pole, and the same pole supported, at shoulder height, a box. He wheeled and ran.

He was almost there before he noticed that the box was not red, but green. Not a fire alarm box, but a police call-box. He never hesitated. The cover was not locked, and he grabbed the telephone instrument inside.

"Fire!" he yelled into it. "Fire! Morgan Avenue, the block—"

A cold, level voice interrupted. "Who is this, Clancy?"

"No, never mind! The 400 block, on Morgan—the clothing store in the middle of the block! But people are sleeping upstairs! Hurry, there's no alarm box here—"

The voice was still cool and incisive. "Okay, the alarm is in. Now who is this?"

"This is—I just happened to be here. It makes no—"

Bo suddenly realized that he was talking to a cop.

"Who is this?"

He tossed the instrument back into the box. The voice continued to come from it, small and distant, but angry.

"Who is this?"

Bo was running back up the street.

His purpose at no time had been to interrupt or expose a crime. But certain suspicions had been forming in his mind, and they were now reinforced. Along the alley between the garages and the side of the tenement building he saw two figures running out toward the street. He was too far to see faces, but one was heavy-set, thick-shouldered, and instantly familiar to him. The other, slighter in build, was also vaguely familiar.

Each carried in his hand what looked like a ten-quart oil tin. These they tossed into the waiting Chrysler, and climbed in themselves. While Bo was still too far away to interfere, the motor

purred and the car, without lights, began to move.

He guessed the whole sordid scheme immediately. An arson job! He had heard them discussed more than once. A fly-by-night merchant, in business difficulties, loaded up with stock and took out maximum insurance. Then, after surreptitiously removing the bulk of the valuable items, he hired a firebug to set a blaze. After the store had been gutted, proof was almost impossible.

THE MERCENARY nature of the crime shocked Bo less than its callous inhumanity in this instance. To set a fire was one thing, but to set it in a highly inflammable tinder-box where people, perhaps including children, were sleeping on an upper floor—that was more than he could stomach.

The Chrysler gained speed, and passed him just as he reached the side of the coupe. To try to stop it was futile, and anyway Bo's first thought was for the occupants of that second floor.

But then a window across the street was thrown up and a man's head appeared. Whoever he was, he used his brains. He heaved something heavy, an ashtray or a cup. It shattered a front window over the store, giving abrupt warning to those inside. At the same moment Bo heard the faint moan of a siren, not far away.

He sprang for the coupe and jammed his foot down on the starter. Before the engine was turning over, the convertible had rounded the corner and disappeared. Bo slammed into gear and gave her the gun. He took the corner on two wheels.

Several blocks ahead he saw the lightless convertible shoot under a street lamp. Some distance beyond, coming toward him, he also saw the glaring red headlights of the first fire truck. As he roared to speed in second, he then saw the Chrysler slow down and careen a corner to the right. Its occupants were obviously not eager to be seen in the neighborhood by the fire fighters, and were trying to keep out of the way of that truck.

Bo swung wide and took the same corner close to thirty, shifting into high as he did so. His tires shrieked in pro-

test, but he had gained the distance of nearly a block. Ahead of him the other car slowed at East 4th, then kept straight on. Bo shot the intersection recklessly, and gained a little more.

At 3rd the convertible again turned right, doubling back. The fleeing firebugs evidently figured that if the apparatus was coming from one direction, the way to avoid it was to go in the other. But they did not realize that engines and emergency trucks would be dispatched from more than one firehouse simultaneously.

Bo was now less than a hundred yards behind. In quick succession they flashed across Morgan. In one darting sideways glance Bo saw that the first fire truck had pulled up in front of the burning building already. He trod on the accelerator.

They roared down the long block toward Horton. Here 3rd joined four other streets which ran in at odd angles to form Marcy Square. It was hardly large enough to call a square, and its confusion of shape was heightened by a pedestrian 'island' near the middle formed by heavy iron stanchions standing here and there on the concrete. The convertible slowed a little. Bo was close.

The car in front of him started to make a left turn. A siren screamed. A hook and ladder was racing along Horton from that direction. The driver of the Chrysler changed his mind. The car rocked on its springs as he tried to reverse his turn. The stanchions were in his way. He braked down, swinging wide.

STILL ANOTHER CAR loomed out of the narrow canyon of Alden Street. This one, like Bo's, was a small coupe, and it was coming fast. The chief difference, which he had no time to notice, was that atop its roof was mounted a powerful spotlight which poured a focussed beam straight ahead into the square.

The siren shrieked angrily. Tires squealed as brakes were slammed on. Voices yelled. The convertible, careening around the island the wrong way, headed for the continuation of East 3rd.

It was one of those moments when a man acts first and thinks afterward. Bo

tramped on his accelerator. He shot straight across the path of the hook and ladder, which only by a miracle avoided crushing him and only took off his rear bumper. He whizzed straight across the middle of the square, bowling over stanchions right and left. At the far side he caught up with the Chrysler in the mouth of East 3rd, and deliberately sideswiped it on the right.

The other car swerved crazily, mounted the curb, grazed a lamp post, and brought up with a resounding crash against a store front. His own coupe, swerving in the opposite direction, half slid into the curb. Two tires blew out with ear-splitting reports. As it groaned to a halt, the door on the left side flew open, spilling him to his knees in the street. He was dazed and shaken.

An engine roared, somewhere. Voices shouted commands. Feet pounded on the pavement. He shook his head to clear it. The running feet came toward him. He looked up, recognized Nig, fleeing from the wrecked Chrysler, head down. From behind him a voice yelled again. Bo thrust out his arm. A shot rang out, echoing in the empty street. A hot pain seared his rib.

It was like a re-play of an old film. He was to discover later that the bullet got him within an inch of the similar wound, five years earlier. He toppled, but caught Nig's ankle. The two rolled in the street. He grabbed an arm, locked it, aware that the hand gripped a pistol. Then other hands seized both of them, jerked them apart. In a wave of blinding pain Bo saw red, then black.

It was a minute or so before he came to. Two men in uniform stood nearby. He remembered the coupe with the spotlight. Police go to fires, as well as firemen, especially after a report from a police call-box. One of them was handcuffed to a slim, cringing figure. Bo looked again. Packy Figart! Leader of the Highpockets mob—so that was who Nig had been working with!

Nig himself was seated on the curb, his back against a post. He was not injured, but he was pale with fear. Nevertheless, his eyes retained a gleam of their customary cunning. Jerry Day stood over him.

"All right, come clean, big boy! What

were you doing in that car? And how about that fire on Morgan Avenue?"

Nig protested loudly. He knew nothing about any fire. He denied everything except a harmless joy-ride. Harmless, except to the car.

THEN his darting glance noted that Bo was conscious. He saw the expression on Bo's face. He began to babble like a brook.

"I can't tell you nothin' about any fire, copper. But I can tell you somethin' else. Somethin' you never knew before. About that stick-up in the Ten-Star, five years ago. Bo, here, was never in on that. He wasn't luggin' no rod. It was Packy had the rod; Packy Figart. I know, because I got it for him in Utica, two weeks before. I can tell you the serial number. I'll swear to it."

Packy emitted a low growl of rage.

Bo stared at Nig, and his features were twisted in scorn and disgust. Nig was squealing, squealing like a pig. Nig, the guy who always urged others so vehemently to clam up. And Bo knew why.

Nig was on a spot, facing an arson rap. But it would take Bo's testimony to clinch it. Bo was the only person who had seen Nig at the scene of the fire. So, to placate Bo, to buy his silence, Nig was blurting out this old truth that Bo had guessed long ago, even though by doing so he knifed Packy Figart in the back.

Bo saw in a flash that the code of silence was a sham and a delusion. There was no code among thieves. They had no more concern for each other than for so many snakes. They used the myth of the closed mouth, when it suited them, to shield themselves. But when they were in a tough spot, they broke wide open.

Jerry Day looked down at him. "That right, Bo?"

"That's right. And now I'll tell you something else. I got here by following these two hoodlums from Morgan Avenue, where they had just set the fire in the clothing store."

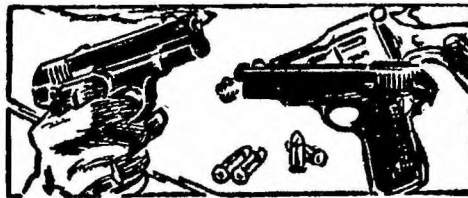
He went on to describe in detail just what had happened. Nig raved and cursed, but to no avail. Jerry nodded gravely.

"Good lad, Bo. We'll get you to sign a statement on that, later. Here's the ambulance for you now. Take it easy, fella."

They lifted him in gently. Peering out the back, Bo noticed what was left of the Chrysler, crumpled into the store front. "Gosh, Mrs. Andrew is going to be sore about her car!"

"Don't worry about that," Jerry told him. "The insurance company's reward for an arson conviction will be plenty to put her car back in shape. And incidentally, the fire chief just passed. He says the fire is out, and nobody hurt—thanks to a prompt alarm."

Bo heaved a mighty sigh of relief.



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The surprise came when I found
George Wilks wasn't alone in
the house



Last Stop for Murder

By BENTON BRADEN

A lie, a quarrel, a woman's disappearance—Stanford added them up and began looking for a grave, secret and shallow!

THE minute I saw this Henry Dalt I knew he was either scared, angry, or ill. His face was white and his hand shook as he registered for one of my cabins. He was a tall, very well-dressed, prosperous-looking man. I couldn't say he was a handsome man, because there was something about his face and black eyes that I didn't like.

I probably take a closer look at my guests than the average tourist-court proprietor. I was sheriff of this Nevada county for an even twenty years and

had got in the habit of observing people closely. I quit the sheriff's office when I was fifty and built this tourist court.

That was three years ago, and I've been doing even better than I had hoped. My place is full up almost every night the year around, being on a transcontinental highway.

"Mr. and Mrs. Henry Dalt." That's the way he registered. I handed him the key and told him it was the fourth cabin on the row to the west. I went outside the office and watched him as he got

into his car, an expensive sedan, and pulled down toward the cabin. I saw them get out and enter the cabin and observed that Mrs. Dalt was a tall woman, with a good figure.

There was just one more thing that I noticed that night. Although Henry Dalt had remarked that they had driven a long way that day and were very tired, they didn't go right to bed. They had pulled in about eight o'clock, about an hour after dark. Their light was still on when, my last cabin rented, I went to bed myself shortly after midnight. I walked by their cabin once and I could hear them talking.

From that, I concluded that Henry Dalt hadn't been scared or ill. He had been mad when he registered. He and his wife had had an argument and they continued it after they had gone to their cabin.

This conclusion was strengthened three days later when I chanced to pick up a copy of an Oakland newspaper that had been left in one of the cabins. On the front page there was a headline, with a news story:

MRS. HENRY DALT STILL MISSING

Vivian Dalt, wife of Henry Dalt of Makin, New Jersey, who disappeared the day after their arrival in Oakland, is still missing. The couple, after a transcontinental trip by automobile, reached Oakland Tuesday and registered at the Hotel Avlon. Mrs. Dalt left the hotel Wednesday morning after informing her husband that she had some shopping to do. She has not been seen or heard of since. The police have not been able to trace any of her movements after she left the hotel.

Mr. Dalt is a manufacturer of builders' hardware and he had come to Oakland for the purpose of establishing a West Coast plant here. Naturally the distraught husband is concerned now only with finding Mrs. Dalt. The police are leaving no stone unturned in their efforts.

I'll admit my eyes were bulging a bit after I read that. Now, I've never been anything but a country sheriff and make no claims to being a big-shot detective. But it was easy for me to do some deducing right there.

ON MONDAY night, when he had arrived at Valley Courts, Dalt had been so mad his face was white and his hands were shaking. He and his wife had sat up until the small hours, although they had made a long drive that day. The

only conclusion was that they had been arguing about something. They had driven on into Oakland, some two hundred and seventy miles, the next day and registered at the Hotel Avlon. The following day Mrs. Dalt had mysteriously disappeared.

I was willing to wager a fair sum right there that Vivian Dalt hadn't disappeared of her own volition. Henry Dalt had managed that disappearance for reasons of his own. Those Oakland cops were wasting their time if they were trying to trace her movements. What they should be looking for was her body. There was no doubt in my mind that Vivian Dalt was dead.

I got Joe Humphrey to look after the place while I was gone, hopped in my car and drove to Oakland. I went to the cops and gave them my facts and my conclusions. I'll admit that after an hour I was a bit chagrined.

Those cops were polite enough, but they gave me the brush-off. I guess they thought I had let my imagination get the best of me after I had read the story in the newspaper. Or maybe they thought that I was taking advantage of the fact that the Dalts had stayed in my tourist court by trying to get my name in the newspapers.

Well, I couldn't blame them too much for going slow on my story. There are a lot of people who will think up gags to get publicity. The cops hadn't seen Henry Dalt as I had seen him, white and shaking, and they wouldn't take my word for it. I could see, too, that they were completely sold on Henry Dalt. Apparently he had been doing a nice bit of acting as the grief-stricken husband.

Dalt had told them he had given Vivian about five hundred dollars in cash before they had started west and he was sure she hadn't spent more than five dollars on the trip. The cops had the idea that Vivian had simply walked out on her husband for reasons best known to herself. They were sure she would turn up in a matter of time.

But, from what the Oakland cops told me, I knew they had made every effort to find her. If they hadn't been able to get a line on her there was no use of my trying to find her—or her body. I don't know my way around too well

in cities. If I tried to find Vivian I'd probably wind up by getting lost myself. I know mountains and deserts and that's about all.

So I gave up and went back to Spring Valley, Nevada. But I couldn't get the thing off my mind. Maybe I was just a little bit burned because those big-city cops hadn't taken my theory seriously. Maybe I just didn't like the idea of Henry Dalt getting away with murder.

There was one thing I was very curious about. What had Henry Dalt been so mad about when he had registered that night? It couldn't very well have developed during a quarrel that had started on a trip. There was a more sound reason for his anger. That quarrel had deep roots to it. I reasoned it went back to some matters or affairs in their home surroundings. The answers to the quarrel and his anger might be found in their home town of Makin, New Jersey.

I worried over that for a few hours and then decided to do something about it. After all, I've got quite a little balance in the Spring Valley National Bank and a trip might do me good after hitting the ball hard for so many years.

I got Joe Humphrey to take over again. Then I drove to Reno, about forty miles, and caught a local plane for Salt Lake City. From there I caught a through plane to New York City.

It was about seventy miles out to Makin and I got there at ten o'clock in the morning. I soon found out that Henry Dalt was well enough known in Makin. His factory was the largest industry in the town. I took a taxi out to the plant and went into the general offices. I decided I might as well start out by going in and asking for Dalt.

I found his name on a door and walked into a reception room. A nice-looking little brunette was sitting at a desk there.

"Mr. Dalt is out of town," she said, her eyes clouding a little. "He's out on the West coast and I'm not sure when he will be back."

The thought popped into my head right then that there would hardly be anyone better qualified to give the low-down on a man than his secretary. If

I could get her to talk, I might find out something.

"I heard a rumor he was out of town, but thought I'd come out and see for myself," I told her. "I heard something about his wife disappearing in Oakland."

"It's true," the brunette said. "We're all upset about it. They drove out there in their car. Mrs. Dalt vanished the day after they got there. The police have been trying to find her, but they haven't been able to get anywhere at all, yet. Of course, Mr. Dalt will remain there until they find out something definite."

"That sounds a little peculiar to me," I told her. "Is there any truth to this story that's going around that they had had some trouble before they left? A disagreement of some kind?"

"I never heard of such a thing," she frowned.

"I guess there's nothing to it, then," I said. "A secretary like you, that's been around Dalt for a long time, would know if there had been any trouble between Dalt and his wife."

"But I haven't been here a long time," she said quickly. "I've only had this position a little over a month. I got the job after Mr. Dalt had the trouble with—"

SHE BROKE off abruptly and clamped her lips together, as she realized that she had said more than was perhaps discreet. I made up my mind I was going to find out what this trouble was about, and with whom.

Now, I'm an ex-sheriff but I am also a deputy sheriff. Pete Hawkins, my deputy who succeeded me, made me a special deputy sheriff so I could flash a little law around my tourist court whenever it became necessary. I don't draw any salary, but I have the authority and a badge. I pulled back my coat and gave her a quick glimpse of that silver badge.

"You—you're an officer?" she stammered.

"That's right. Not a local officer—I'm from the West. I'm working on the Dalt disappearance case. I hope it won't be necessary for me to get a local detective to come out here and back me up. Maybe you'll tell me about this trouble

you mentioned."

"I don't mind, since you're an officer of the law," she said. "I really know very little about it, anyway. I got this job because Mr. Dalt's former secretary quit. I wasn't here then, but some of the other employees told me about it. He and his old secretary had a big row right here in this office. He accused her of being negligent in the handling of some important papers that were missing. She got mad and I guess it was pretty bad. They screamed at each other and she finally yelled that she was quitting and walked out. I took the job two days later."

"How have you found it here?"

"I like it fine. Mr. Dalt has been very kind to me. I guess Cora Wilks had been here so long that she thought she owned the place."

"How long had she worked for Dalt?" I queried.

"About three years."

"That's not such a long time," I suggested.

"No, but they all said she did as she pleased. Maybe Mr. Dalt got a lesson there. At least, he's never shown any signs of trying to—well, date me—"

"He dated Cora Wilks?"

"That's what they all say." The brunette shrugged. "They say that he was seen out in the evening several times with her by employees. Out at road places and night spots. Of course, I don't know anything about it myself. But you know how employees gossip among themselves."

"Did Mrs. Dalt ever find out about Cora Wilks—that Dalt had been going out with her?"

"I don't know," the brunette said. "I never heard it mentioned, if she did."

I had a pretty good idea that Vivian Dalt had found out about it. But the employees hadn't known that she had found out or they would have gossiped about it. I asked the brunette some more questions, but the only other thing I got from her was the address of this Cora Wilks. And her description.

Cora was a tall blonde, with greenish eyes. She would have been a beauty except that her nose was not quite straight. It must have been broken and set improperly at one time and the small im-

perfection marred her looks.

I took a taxi out to the place where this Cora Wilks lived. It was an old two-storied white house, not a bad-looking place for a rooming house. When I rang the bell a severe-faced, prim old lady opened the door and looked at me with disapproval. I told her I'd like to talk to her on a confidential matter. She took me through the hall, into a scantily furnished sitting room and offered me a straight-backed chair.

"My name is Luke Stanford," I said. "I'm a police officer. I don't want to misrepresent myself. I'm from out West. I'm checking on the case of Mrs. Henry Dalt of this city, who disappeared in Oakland, California, a few days ago. I thought probably you'd rather talk to me alone, than have me bring two or three uniformed cops out with me."

"You're right on that," the old lady admitted. "But I can't imagine what information I could give you that would help. I've read about Mrs. Dalt, of course. But I've never even met her, or Mr. Dalt."

"I think you have a roomer who knows them," I said. "Her name is Cora Wilks. She worked as secretary for Mr. Dalt for three years."

"That's true, Mr. Stanford, but I know nothing about that," she answered. "But I'd be glad to call Miss Wilks down here. I think she's in her room now."

"No, I'm not ready to talk to her yet," I said quickly. "I want to find out more about her relationship with the Dalts first. I've been told that Henry Dalt and Cora Wilks were seen out together often, that their relationship may have been a bit closer than—"

"Mr. Stanford," she interrupted a little harshly, "I can assure you that I know nothing of any such affair. My roomers who are single women are not allowed to bring male guests into this house. Where they go and who they go with when they are out is none of my concern. I have never seen Mr. Dalt. Miss Wilks has never entertained any man in this house—excepting a brother, who came in to see her occasionally. George Wilks, his name is. Close relatives are excepted by my rules, of course."

"Has Cora Wilks got herself another job?" I asked.

BEFORE she could answer, someone rapped on the door and the door opened at the same instant. A tall, very good-looking blonde stood there. There was just a slight crook in the bridge of her nose.

"I'm going out, Mrs. Headridge," she informed. "I probably won't be back for two or three days. Going to visit my brother in Philadelphia again. I thought—" At that instant, Cora Wilks turned her eyes a little and saw me. She hesitated for just a second, then finished her sentence. "I thought you'd better know I'd be away."

She closed the door without waiting for a reply from Mrs. Headridge.

"That was Miss Wilks," the landlady explained. "Would you care to have me call her back, so you can question her?"

"No," I said with emphasis. "But I'd like to ask you just one more question. Has Cora Wilks been away before, in the last ten days or so?"

"Yes. She was away about three days," Mrs. Headridge replied. "I believe she left Sunday and returned Wednesday. Maybe it was Thursday. I'm not sure. She visited her brother in Philadelphia. They had some business to transact together, she said."

I thanked Mrs. Headridge and left. I knew about all I wanted to know, now. When I went back to New York I had a picture of Vivian Dalt. I also had an enlarged photograph of Cora Wilks that one of the Dalt employees had taken on a firm picnic.

I landed in Reno late the next afternoon. By the time I ate dinner and got my car, it was dark. I started the drive to Spring Valley. I figured I had this case all wrapped up, now. All I had to do was find the body. That shouldn't prove too difficult.

The car was rolling along at about forty miles an hour when I got the idea that I was being followed. I slowed down. The car behind me made no attempt to pass, although I gave it plenty of room. I speeded up and the car behind me adjusted its speed to mine. I wasn't too happy about this. I didn't have a gun on me, and I was in a spot

if the driver of that car had designs on me.

He did. The car finally started to pass me. It didn't speed up like a car ordinarily does in passing, but just came up on my left very gradually. I waited till it was almost abreast of me, then I slammed on my brakes as hard as I could. That car wasn't expecting the maneuver and that was what saved me.

The guy had to start blasting before he was set. He cut loose with three quick shots that tore into the side of my car. But they were wild because I was skidding to a stop, while he hadn't been able to slow his car. I cut my switch, jerked the right door open and dove out onto the shoulder of the road. I kept rolling, expecting another volley.

But it didn't come. The gunman knew he'd have a hard time finding me in the dark, and he wasn't sure that I didn't have a gun. He put on speed and his tail lights grew fainter, then vanished.

I couldn't be sure that he wouldn't park down the road and have another try at me as I went by. So I got back in my car, turned around, backtracked two miles, and returned to Spring Valley by another road.

The first thing I did when I got back to my place was to get a forty-five and swing it under my shoulder. Then I went and saw Harry Stedman, who has a Boy Scout troop. I told Harry I would donate twenty-five bucks to his troop if they'd do a little job for me, and Harry agreed quickly.

Next morning, we took that bunch of kids in a truck out the highway east of Spring Valley. We drove out about ten miles and then started to work back. My idea was that the boys would spot a hastily dug grave in one of the little clumps of woods at the sides of the roads. I figured that the grave would be within half a mile of the road. It just had to be, I thought, as I re-enacted Henry Dalt's actions in my mind.

The big tipoff to me had been when Cora Wilks had stopped at the sitting room to speak to Mrs. Headridge. She had broken off speaking for just a second when she spotted me. She was a cool one, and had recovered from and concealed her surprise in an instant.

But I saw the flash in her eyes. It was a flash of recognition. Cora Wilks had seen me before.

Where had she seen me? It could have been only one place—that was after Henry Dalt had registered at Valley Courts and I had stepped outside the office with him. Cora Wilks had been sitting in that car.

I had guessed wrong there on one point. Henry Dalt hadn't been angry, he had been scared, upset, suffering from a nervous reaction that had hit him after he had murdered his wife.

IT WAS plain enough, now. Henry Dalt and Cora Wilks had planned the murder of Vivian Dalt long in advance. After I had been sure that Cora Wilks had recognized me in Makin, I had had a confidential talk with a Mrs. French, Vivian's sister. Mrs. French had told me that Dalt had asked Vivian for a divorce six months before. Vivian had refused it.

Also, Vivian had furnished the money that went into the Dalt plant and she owned most of the stock. She had told Dalt that she might bring a divorce suit and cut him off without a penny, if he didn't stop running around with his secretary.

Dalt and Cora were crazy about each other. So they planned to murder Vivian, cover up the kill, so Dalt would inherit everything from his wife.

That screaming scene in the office when Cora had quit had been the first move in their scheme. It was sufficient to convince everybody that their little affair was over. Dalt made up with his wife, made her believe that he had turned over a new leaf. Vivian, so her sister said, was happy about it and had been in high spirits when she had started on the trip West with Dalt.

Dalt had made that same trip four months before, on the pretense of opening up a branch plant on the West coast. Spring Valley had been the logical spot for the crime. He had timed his approach to Spring Valley so he would get there just about dark. He had arrived at my tourist court an hour after dark, so I knew he hadn't wasted a moment.

A few miles out of Spring Valley he had driven off the road and killed Vivian

—at a spot he had selected on his previous trip. It was bound to be a small clump of woods where the grave would be hidden. He'd had to work fast, to kill her, dig even a shallow grave, bury his wife in it, cover up the grave so it wouldn't be noticed by a casual observer. Then he had to drive on and pick up Cora as he came into Spring Valley.

Cora had flown out, come to Spring Valley from Reno by bus, waited for him at the edge of town. She had got in the car and they had driven boldly up to the Valley Courts.

No wonder Henry Dalt's face was white and his hands were shaking. No wonder he hadn't gone to bed early. He and Cora had something to talk about.

He had had to work fast to do it all in an hour. That was why I reasoned that the body had been buried close to the road and not more than ten miles out. I was wrong there.

It's fairly flat in the valley there and there aren't so many wooded places that would afford a hiding place for a grave. The Boy Scouts did their job thoroughly, but they didn't find any grave. I gave them the twenty-five bucks and went back to my office at the court.

I had guessed wrong somewhere along the line. I did some hard thinking. Finally, I went over to the courthouse and checked some records.

An hour after dark that night, I drove out into the country east of Spring Valley and parked my car. I got out and walked about a quarter of a mile. It wasn't too dark. The stars were shining and the outline of a small farmhouse loomed up clearly before me.

I approached the house from the rear and walked to the front on the right side. Faint light came from a window. I stooped and looked. Beneath the bottom of the shade I had a fair view of the room.

A man was sitting beside a plain wooden table, reading a newspaper. I saw a bottle of whisky standing near his left elbow. I went around to the front and stepped up on the porch. I tiptoed across it, fumbled till I felt the doorknob in my hand, turned it without making a sound. The door wasn't locked. I opened it and walked into the room.

The man who had been sitting at the

table got to his feet and scowled at me.

"You got a nerve," he said harshly, "coming in my house without even knocking!"

"We never bother to knock out here," I said easily. "I guess you're not acquainted with the customs in this section. You must have come here from the East."

"I've been out here for years," he said. He was a short, rather stocky man, with watery blue eyes.

"Not on this forty acres, you haven't," I told him. "You bought this place about two months ago."

"What if I did!" he snapped. "It's my business, ain't it? If I take a fancy to a place, I've got a right to buy it, haven't I?"

"Fancy? Just what kind of a fancy did you take to this place, Wilks?"

"My name is Fox," he said, but I could see his face pale a little. "Jim Fox."

"Your right name is George Wilks," I corrected. "You took a fancy to this place because it was situated just right for the purpose that you—or rather, Henry Dalt—had in mind. Your sister, Cora, told the truth when she told Mrs. Headridge that she was going to visit her brother to attend to some business. Only, Cora didn't go to Philadelphia to see you. She flew out here. Also she neglected to tell Mrs. Headridge that the business she was to see you about was murder."

"You—you must be crazy!" George Wilks said, but there was no strength in his denial.

"I guessed wrong at first," I went on. "I thought Henry Dalt had pulled the job by himself, murdered his wife and buried her close to the main highway. But I couldn't find a grave there. And when I got to thinking it over I came to the conclusion that he could hardly have murdered his wife, buried her in a lonely grave, and got to the Valley Courts within an hour—without having a spot of dirt on his suit, without even getting a little clay on his hands."

"I also reached the conclusion that Cora could hardly have come out here by herself, in a strange country, and met him on a road at night without some help. And I thought of you and how it might have been done."

GEORGE WILKS was staring hard at me as I kept pouring it on: "It was simple, wasn't it? You came out here and bought this place two months ago. When I checked the records at the courthouse I found this was the only place that had changed hands recently. Yes, you had everything ready, you and Cora, when Dalt turned off the main highway and drove in here that night. You had the grave ready and I'll bet it's close to the house, because you wouldn't want to carry the body of Vivian Dalt too far. Either you or Dalt killed Vivian the moment they arrived. Cora took Vivian's place in the car. While you disposed of the body Dalt and Cora drove right on, drove to my place for the night, then on to Oakland."

Wilks' eyes were popping by now. I continued relentlessly:

"Their only problem was to be sure that no one got a good look at Cora before she, impersonating Vivian, could do the disappearing act. They got away with that end of it. They'd probably got away with the whole job, if Dalt hadn't been shaky after the kill. Murder was a new thing for him and, in spite of the fact that he had a good plan and had executed it perfectly, he couldn't quite cover up his reaction after the murder. He was pale and trembling with the realization he had just committed a most cold-blooded murder."

"You needn't bother to get your hat, Wilks. Put your hands up while I frisk you. Turn around—"

I'll admit I got a surprise then. I hadn't bothered to draw my gun. After twenty years as sheriff I am pretty quick on the draw, even for a Nevada sheriff. I wasn't worrying any about George Wilks beating me to a first shot. The surprise came when I found out that George Wilks wasn't alone in that house.

There were two doors behind Wilks. They opened at the same time. I saw Henry Dalt coming through one door, Cora Wilks coming through the other. They both had guns in their hands and were raising them to open up on me. George Wilks yelled and went for his gun in the same instant.

I had stepped up to the table when ordering Wilks to turn around. I could have beaten any one of them to the

draw, but three was different. I had to act fast. I shot my right hand out and knocked away the coal-oil lamp that stood on the table. I dove to the floor at my right as the lamp sailed across the room. The draft smothered the flame and it didn't explode. It crashed on the floor at the left.

Henry Dalt got in the first shot, but I was diving away and he missed. I rolled in the darkness. I was careful not to get near a window, where the faint light from outside might outline me. George Wilks wasn't so careful. He didn't make any sound as he moved, but he walked right in front of a window. I think his idea was to circle to the front door and do a sneak exit. I shot at his dimly outlined figure and I knew I was getting him in the shoulder where I aimed. I rolled again after I had fired.

Henry Dalt and Cora Wilks obviously hadn't had the proper training for this kind of situation. They both saw the flash of my gun, and the loud blast in the darkness was too much of them. They opened up for all they were worth. The roaring volley of shots was proof enough that they were emptying their guns. It's always comforting to a greenhorn to empty his gun into the darkness.

I waited until the sound of the shots had died away and the room was still again. I heard George Wilks groan where he had fallen on the floor. I went George one better. I let out a terrible moan and another. I put it on thick.

"I got him!" Henry Dalt's voice was

shaking in triumph and elation. "I got him, Cora! You go in the kitchen and get that other lamp, while I reload my gun. We've got to get out of here in a hurry. We'll leave him here dead, and then get away as fast as we can. There's a good chance that he hasn't told anyone what he knows. A hick sheriff like him would want to grab all the credit. Get the lamp quick, so we can fix things up and get out of here."

I heard Cora go out. I could sense that Henry Dalt had moved close to the table. I saw the light coming, then saw Cora as she stepped back into the room. Right then, I came up behind Henry Dalt and jabbed my gun in his back.

"Put the light on the table, Cora," I told her, as I glanced down at George Wilks to make sure he wasn't going to try a comeback. "It's just as Henry told you. We'll fix things up and get out of here in a few minutes."

Well, whether those Oakland cops like it or not, I got my picture in their papers, with yards and yards of stories when the reporters went to town on the details. Later, I got a check from Mrs. French, Vivian Dalt's sister. She said she hoped it would cover all the expenses I had incurred in solving the murder case. From the size of the check, she must have thought I had spent a couple of years on the trail.

The grave of Vivian Dalt? Well, George Wilks must have been a mighty lazy man. He didn't have to carry her over ten feet, to roll her in that shallow hole he had dug under the front porch.



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MURDER Cuddles Up



by **ARTHUR J. BURKS**

MURDER is born of hatred, the desire for revenge, or hot anger at a given moment. Lon Bund's murder scheme grew out of hatred of a somewhat unusual kind. It began on Camargo Plantations, in Central Brazil, when a caboclo whose name Lon could not remember came running to him with a halfgrown paca cradled in his arms. While Bund had never seen either a wild or tame paca he had eaten the meat of many; it was the best food, properly prepared, to come out of the wilds. Now he had a chance to study the animal.

"I would sell him, American senhor," said the caboclo. "My family starves for bread. The animal is beautiful, is it not?"

"For an overgrown rat," retorted Bund, "it isn't difficult to look at. How much?"

"A hundred cruzeiros, American senhor," said the caboclo. "Five dollars

Lon Bund didn't know the chance he took when he trained a jungle rat!

it would be—in your estimable money."

That meant, Bund decided, that if in the utterly unlikely event he wished ever to buy this or any other paca, he could get it for ten cruzeiros.

The animal seemed very tame. Its huge eyes, which stood blackly out like marbles beside its rodent nose, were moist, humid, friendly—a little sleepy, too, since it was broad daylight and the paca was an animal of the night. This one was about the size of a small scotty; it would grow to three times that size. Its two biting teeth up front were already almost an inch long, he noted. The animal tapered forward from a rounded tailless stern to a pointed nose. It had four toes and the rudiments of a fifth

on each foot. They were unlike any other toes he had ever seen.

The caboclo held the paca with its back against his chest, its head over his left arm, while with his right he stroked the animal's smooth, glistening fur. That fur, brown and alive, was whitely dotted along the animal's flanks. Its muzzle was flanked by whiskers at least four inches long. Lon Bund put out a hand to pet the paca's head. The paca moved as fast as a snake striking, as fast as the surucucu which lived with it in holes in the jungles. A sharp pain flashed through Lon Bund's hand. Blood spurted from four punctures in Bund's forefinger into which the paca's teeth had plunged. It was razor-fast and razor-sharp, and hatred for the animal immediately took possession of Lon Bund. It was the same hatred he had had all his life for anything or anybody that had ever dared oppose him.

"It is only that you are a stranger," said the caboclo, almost in tears. "My children handle him all the time."

To prove it he gave the squirming animal to a small girl who held it so that that murderous muzzle was against her neck. The paca cuddled close, kissing the child with lips and tongue.

"Fifteen cruzeiros," said Lon Bund.

The haggling began. Bund bought the rodent for thirty cruzeiros, hating it all the time, being hated by it. Yes, he knew that he and the paca were enemies; he could read it in the apoplectic protruding black eyes. He carried the animal in a basket, out of reach of his hands, back to his quarters. What he had intended to do with it before having it served up for supper, he hadn't quite decided.

But whatever it was his plans underwent a change. He resolved to make the animal a pet. He turned it loose in his bedroom. He gave it nuts, fruit, lettuce; it ate everything. Lon Bund was persistent; by bedtime that first night the paca came to his bandaged hand for food. In a week the paca no longer threatened him with its queer, sleepy

lunings from shadowed corners and the box he had built for it to sleep in.

He became truly interested in the paca. Then he made the discovery which inspired a murder "accident." The paca responded oddly to vibrations. It behaved as if its whiskers felt certain vibrations, that the vibrations then made it go a little crazy, as if it had eaten of loco weed or had hydrophobia. Out of the discovery grew the sequence which was the plan of murder.

THE man he wished to murder lived in a house right behind that in which Lon Bund lived. He was named Ralph Gall and he was all the things Lon Bund would never be. There were, to Bund, ample reasons why he should hate the man. Gall was loved by everybody else on the plantation. Murder wasn't especially serious in some parts of Brazil, but if somebody happened to murder Gall, Gall's friends would tear the murderer limb from limb. An "accident" was different. The final link in the chain was this—Ralph Gall loved animals. Almost any animal would go straight to the man's arms. Gall, he knew, would never have been bitten by the paca. He chuckled as he began to develop his scheme, to work, plan, and train his strange pet.

He discovered the paca's response to vibrations outside the usual range of the human ear quite by accident. He was playing with the animal, laughing when it ran across the slippery floor of his bedroom, when it slipped and fell and slid and looked amazed that such things could happen to it. Quite by accident Lon Bund rubbed the horny palms of his hands together. The paca jumped, spun around in the air—sank his teeth into the padded leg of the easy chair, ripped and tore like an angry dog. Then it desisted, looked confused, troubled.

Lon Bund, not sure that his hands had wrought this, rubbed the palms together again, like Pilate washing his hands. Again the animal responded, as if the almost inaudible sound caused him

active pain. And he sank his teeth into whatever was nearest.

Lon Bund's training of the animal took a new form. He studied his pet with all the interest a scientist could have displayed. He found he could control its play, its behavior, with sounds produced by his palms, by rubbing his own cheek—and the effect was different when he was shaved from when he was sporting a day's, or two days' growth of beard. By rubbing his forefingers together he could send the paca into a queer little dance.

The animal, uttering a small sound like a whimpering baby, stood with its hind feet but jumped up and down with its forefeet, throwing its whiskered muzzle and head about like an impatient stallion. Lon Bund found something indescribably hideous in the animal's response. He would rid himself of it when Ralph Gall had been paid off in the proper coin.

The paca, when Lon Bund laved the backs of his hands, jumped into the air with both feet, twisting and writhing, tossing its head. After his experiments, during which he set up a whole series of vibrations to each of which the paca always responded in the same way when that way was repeated accurately, Lon Bund overcame his repugnance of the animal by taking it in his arms, cuddling it against his chest, its muzzle over one shoulder or the other, neck held against the animal's head. The paca liked to snuggle, lying very still in that warm nest, forgetful that the vibrations had all but driven it mad.

Knowing what he intended to teach the animal to do, Lon Bund shuddered every time he held it against his neck in such close proximity to the jugular vein. But the beast must become accustomed to it. Dozens of times Lon Bund had seen Ralph Gall hold monkeys, catias, baby peccaries and other pet animals like that. Gall had a private menagerie and every animal in it loved him. His menagerie did not contain a paca. Ralph Gall, the first time he saw

Lon Bund's paca, offered him twice what he had paid for it. Bund refused.

He began locking his doors and drawing his curtains after the idea really flowered. Providing the dummy figure of Ralph Gall called for some ingenuity and took considerable time. But he had plenty of time; the paca must grow until its teeth were big enough to make absolutely sure! He made the dummy himself, locking it in the closet when he was out of the room, keeping the key in his pocket. Each night, as part of his play, he placed the paca in the cradled arms of the cloth dummy, its head on the dummy's shoulder, close against the dummy's neck.

Then, he rubbed his palms together and the paca ripped and tore at the nearest tangible thing which might possibly be causing him pain. It was a vicious thing to watch. After it had ripped a hole in the dummy the paca dropped to the floor, whimpering and confused, and Lon Bund soothed it in his own arms, petting it, helping it to forget. The paca had a short memory, for night after night, without hesitation, the animal allowed itself to be placed in the arms of the dummy, there to go suddenly, briefly and murderously berserk when Lon Bund rubbed his palms together.

SLOWLY the paca grew, all too slowly for Lon Bund. Often Ralph Gall persistently made him a new offer for the paca and Lon Bund as persistently refused.

Night after night the murder play was run in Lon Bund's bedroom, with the door locked and the curtains drawn. Sometimes Bund laughed a little too loudly and other people heard and wondered if perhaps this American who seemed to have fallen so much in love with a paca were not going a little crazy.

There had been warnings, too, about the paca.

"No wild animal ever really trusts a human being," was the gist of the wisdom of his plantation colleagues.

"Sooner or later they all turn on him. The least they do is run away when mating season comes."

"I'd be sure and cage that beast while I slept if I were you," said the Plantation manager. "You never know. After all, it's just a huge rat."

Lon Bund paid no attention to any of them, once he was sure he had won the confidence and friendship of the jungle rodent. Every night he placed it in the dummy arms of "Ralph Gall," rubbed his palms together, watched the paca rip out the dummy's neck with its two-inch, razor-sharp teeth that resembled surucucu fangs. Every night he soothed it in his own arms. Then he freed it in his bedroom while he carefully repaired the damage the animal had done to the dummy. At first he caged it. Then he became convinced he would never have cause to fear the animal. It ran free after dark, or slept under his bed. Sometimes he wakened in the night to hear it gnawing at the baseboard, a door jamb, or padding around over the slick floor, hunting a way out to the wilds. The padding of its four toes was a strange unearthly sound.

Killing Ralph Gall with the teeth of Nemesis—his name for the paca—became an obsession with him. Time after time he dreamed of the details of it. In his dream he carried the paca to Gall in his arms and said, "If that last offer of yours is still open I'll sell you this beast. I'm going back to the States."

Each time he saw the pudgy face of Gall light up, saw the man's arms come out to grasp the paca, cuddle it in his shoulder, nuzzle against his neck. That he would do it like that he knew, for he had allowed Gall to handle the paca several times and always he had done it like that—and Nemesis had snuggled. Each time it had been difficult for Lon Bund to refrain from rubbing his palms together. In his dream he always refrained because Gall had not yet paid him the sixty cruzeiros he had offered. Dead men didn't pay bills, was the way the dream ran. So, in his sleep, Lon

Bund never rubbed his palms together.

He was almost sorry when he knew that the time had about come. There was a vast satisfaction in anticipating murder. When Ralph Gall was dead he would have nothing to look forward to until he made another enemy.

He tried out the paca on the dummy for the last time, the last night Ralph Gall was to be alive. It worked perfectly as it always had. Tomorrow he would sell the animal, take the sixty cruzeiros, then give the murder signal, bringing about the "accident" that would horrify him as much as it would everybody else on the Plantation. He went to bed early that the time might pass faster. He slept quickly as might a man with a perfectly clear conscience. Now and again he chuckled in his sleep. The room was charged with his hatred for Ralph Gall, allowed free rein now that he had made up his mind, set the time.

On the floor, under the bed, around the bed, the paca, almost full grown now, padded. There was a difference in the animal, too, as if something deep inside it told it the truth, warned it, keyed up its animal nerves to fighting pitch. The eerie padding of the four paws on the slick floor went on, hour after hour, but Lon Bund did not waken. The aura of hatred in the sleeper became a growing fear in the jungle beast whose endless line of forbears had lived their lives with fears and survived because they had heeded them.

LON BUND chuckled, rolled over on his left side. His arm slipped down, back of the hand almost touching the floor. The paca had countless times been fed from that hand. Night was the normal feeding time of his kind. He padded to the hand, sniffed at it, rubbed his whiskered muzzle against it, did his queer little forefeet dance—like a tiny eohippus responding to the invisible jerking reins of an invisible rider—backed away, looked up.

Then he went up into the bed and snuggled against his master, the first

time he had done it while his master slept. It was safe there, soothing. He wasn't even afraid when his master shifted to lie on his back, making the paca's usual arm-cradle in his sleep. He snuggled in the warmth of it, sighed, slept. His long whiskers tickled the neck of Lon Bund.

Next morning Lon Bund did not come out for breakfast. There was a noise in his room, a wild noise, a whimpering, a crying, the paca's voice of terror. Even before they opened the door the others knew that something had happened to make the paca start hurling his body at the high windows in his efforts to escape.

Lon Bund did not respond to shouts or hammering on the door. The hammering made the paca inside increase its efforts to escape. When the door finally crashed in the paca made his supreme effort. As the men crashed in the paca crashed out through the glass of the window. The Americans on the plantation stared at the horror the paca had left behind him. Lon Bund lay on the floor, dead. Blood smeared his bed, his garments, and the floor. They didn't even have to turn the man or straighten him out to see that half his neck had been ripped away. He had bled so much and so quickly he had not even been able to call for help.

His face showed a story none there could read—not even when Ralph Gall was sent for to ask whether he had any idea why Lon Bund should have kept a dummy resembling Gall in his bedroom. But Gal's face went dead white as he looked from the savage gashes in Bund's neck to savage gashes in the neck

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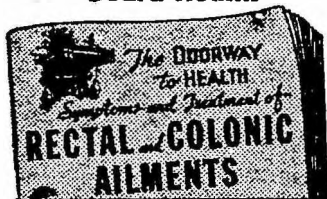
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of the dummy which Lon Bund, that last night, had not bothered to repair.

"He meant to murder me, trained the paca somehow," Ralph Gall said. "Poor innocent animal, I'm glad it got away! I hope it makes it to the nearest jungle before a dog gets it."

"I," said the plantation manager, "would hate to be the dog that tackled that animal! I warned Bund not to let the beast remain loose at night. I wonder just what happened."

"I only see," said Gall, "that the paca did to Bund what Bund intended he should do to me—and that I've already had several narrow escapes. But how did he make the animal bite—and keep it from biting him all this training time? I could figure it out from the evidence here, but nobody will ever know because Bund can't tell. Maybe he left a diary!"

But Bund hadn't left a diary and the others never knew just what had happened in his bedroom that night. Never knew that again Bund had dreamed of the carrying out of his murder scheme, with a slight difference. He had given the animal into Gall's hands and Gall had cuddled it against his neck in just exactly the right place. Then Gall, while Bund trembled with eagerness, dug into his pocket awkwardly with his free hand, paid over the sixty cruzeiros. How could they guess that at almost that moment the paca had really snuggled down, not in Gall's shoulder, but in Bund's, that his whiskers against Bund's neck had induced the altering of the dream, produced the sixty cruzeiros, and caused Bund to rub his palms together in his sleep?

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HEADQUARTERS

(Continued from page 9)

old lady, laughing hysterically—none other than the birdlike Cousin Lilly!

Naturally, the police, under Lieutenant Miller, claim the little old lady couldn't have given vent to such vicious blows. There is a madman loose, undoubtedly. Could it be Derek, who somehow or other isn't dead? Could it actually have been the old lady, greedy for her share of the estate? Find the answer in this eerie, creepy, spine-chilling novelet, folks!

There'll be our usual constellation of short detective and mystery stories to round out a tip-top issue.

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SCARCELY any gripes this issue, we are very pleased to state. Maybe, after all these years, we're really learning to pick out stories that please everybody. Anyway, we're glad you all seem to like them—and we certainly try to give you the best fiction obtainable anywhere!

The discussion, pro or con, regarding the knock-'em-down detective versus the intellectual sleuth, seems to be simmering down, although scores of epistles still keep coming in.

[Turn page]

*When a Bodyguard Needs
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—Joe E. Schuman, Bronx, N. Y., N. Y.

Thank you Joe! As far as we are concerned, you've hit the nail right on the head. Don't you worry about us quitting either. Just as long as there are readers and writers (being without the latter contingency never occurred to us) and printer's ink and paper, and nice folks like yourself to encourage us, we'll keep clicking and thanks a lot. Next case:

We all think your magazine is swell. We're in a lonely part of the country here and we look forward to the next issue of **THRILLING DETECTIVE** as if it was a long lost friend. Keep up the good work.

—Mrs Arthur H. Banton, St. David, Ariz.

Much obliged to you Mrs. Banion. We'll

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—Minnie Wells, Philadelphia, Pa.

Keep those letters and postal cards streaming along in folks. Every one of your epistles is carefully perused and studied, whether it's among the limited number selected for quotation in this department or not. A million thanks to all you kind readers who have gone to the trouble to write in. We appreciate the effort you have taken and are duly grateful.

We hope to see you all next issue. Kindly address all letters and postcards to The Editor, THRILLING DETECTIVE, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Meantime, happy reading to you!

—THE EDITOR

NEXT ISSUE'S HEADLINERS



MURDER STEALS THE SCENE

A Nick Ransom Novolet

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