

THRILLING MYSTERY NOVEL

SPRING
ISSUE

MAGAZINE

15¢

BUY WAR BONDS
AND STAMPS
FOR VICTORY!



A FAST-ACTION
**MURDER
MYSTERY
BOOK**
COMPLETE
IN THIS ISSUE



Rudolph
Belaschi

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION

LIGHTER MOMENTS with fresh Eveready Batteries

Dated



"What'll I do with it, Sarge? There ain't no carpet!"

"Keep your eye on the Infantry — the doughboy does it!" Won't you lend a few dollars to shorten the war? Buy more War Bonds!

RIGHT NOW, of course, the supply of "Eveready" flashlight batteries for civilian use is very limited. Nearly all our production goes to the Armed Forces and essential war industries. Their needs are tremendous and must come first.

But when this war is over, you'll be able to get all the "Eveready" batteries you want. And they will be new, improved batteries...they will give even longer service, better performance.

*Fresh
DATED BATTERIES
Last Longer*
Look for the date line

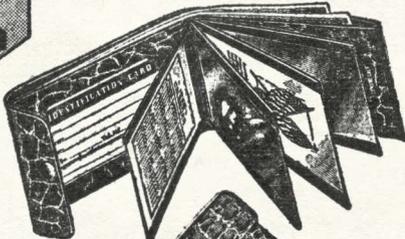


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1 YOU GET *Everything* FOR ONLY \$1.98



\$2.00 Value Smart Alligator Grain CALFSKIN BILLFOLD and Pass Case

Here without a doubt is the greatest Billfold and Pass Case Bargain that is being offered today. This smart Alligator Grain Calfskin Billfold is a masterpiece of Billfold design and workmanship. There's a place for everything. The Pass Case, with its 4 celluloid protected pockets, has ample room for cards, passes, ledge and all identification cards. The Wallet has a generous currency compartment in the back and windows for snapshots and identification cards.

2



\$1.50 Value Smart Alligator Grain Matching Calfskin Cigarette Case

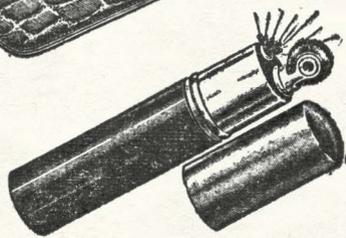
The handsome Cigarette Case is a fitting companion piece to the Billfold described above. It's made from the same smart Alligator Grain Calfskin and is made to hold a full package of TWENTY CIGARETTES. Each Cigarette Case is reinforced with a hidden metal reinforcement that holds the case in shape and prevents your cigarettes from bending or breaking. The case fits neatly into your vest pocket or breast pocket without bulging.

Guarantee
We guarantee that you cannot buy this sensational 3 in 1 offer for this low price anywhere in the country today. Your money back if you can duplicate it at this low price.

50c Value Famous CIGAR LIGHTER

Cigarette Lighters have been plenty scarce. Virtually none have been manufactured for several years now and we feel fortunate in offering you the famous-prewar type, all metal FLAME-MASTER lighter in a beautiful matched two-tone finish. Measuring only 2 1/2 inches in length, this "fool-proof" lighter works unflinchingly. Just a few drops of fluid and your lighter is ready for months of carefree, unflinching service.

3



YOU GET \$4. WORTH OF QUALITY MERCHANDISE FOR THE AMAZINGLY LOW PRICE OF ONLY \$1.98

Men everywhere ask us how we can make this sensational 3 in 1 offer for such a low price! Tremendous buying power is the answer. More than 1,000,000 satisfied customers have bought and are using our Billfolds. Don't be misled by the low price! We guarantee this to be \$4.00 value or we want you to return the Billfold, Cigarette Case and Cigarette Lighter and get your money back in full. You are to be the sole judge. If this sounds to you like a fair, honest-to-goodness, man to man offer—and we're sure you'll agree it does—then fill out the coupon below and rush it to us. We'll ship your smart Alligator Grain Calfskin Billfold, the matching Cigarette Case, and the FLAME-MASTER lighter, all for \$1.98 plus a few cents COD Charges.

HERE'S A USEFUL BEAUTIFUL GIFT THAT WILL GLADDEN THE HEART OF THAT BOY IN SERVICE!



Ask any service man what gifts are most appreciated and you'll find that a Billfold, Cigarette Case and a Lighter are high on the list of most wanted and most useful articles. Imagine how pleased any boy would be to receive all three at one time in a matching set such as this. A gift to last for years and one he'll remember always.

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Gentlemen: Please rush me the complete set of smart Alligator Grain Calfskin Billfold, the matching Cigarette Case and the FLAME-MASTER Lighter COD for only \$1.98 plus 15c Federal Tax on Billfold only a few cents postage. I must be more than pleased or I will return in 10 days for full refund.

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I enclose \$1.98 plus 15c tax with my order to save all shipping charges. Ship the 3 articles to me all postage charge prepaid.

THRILLING MYSTERY NOVEL

MAGAZINE

VOL. XXIII, No. 1

SPRING ISSUE

Price 15c



Featured Book-Length Mystery Novel
Selection

THE EVIL STAR

By JOHN SPAIN

Mysterious doom stalks as a deadly wave of crime sweeps the Pacific Coast—and Detective Steve McCord is plunged into a welter of intrigue when three beautiful triplets, like avenging furies, bring murder to town!....

11

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Thrilling Short Stories

COLD WEATHER FOR KILLING..... Donald Bayne Hobart 69
Mugs Kelly goes to Lake Placid—but not for sports

STINGRAY Barry Perowne 73
Inspector Mifsud stubbornly claims Mr. Porfirio isn't dead

HERE COMES THE CORPSE!..... Sam Merwin, Jr. 80
Parke Gardner faces knockout drops, bullets and booby traps

And

THE LINE-UP..... A Department 6
Where readers and the editor meet

Next Issue's Complete Novel: **THE WHISTLING HANGMAN,**
by BAYNARD KENDRICK

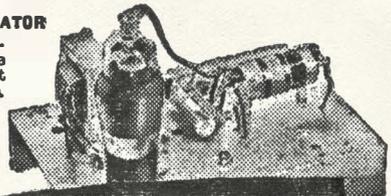
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Read our companion magazines: Detective Novel Magazines, Thrilling Detective, Popular Detective, G-Men Detective, Black Book Detective, Thrilling Western, Thrilling Ranch Stories, Thrilling Wonder Stories, Thrilling Sports, Thrilling Love, Thrilling Football, Popular Western, Popular Love, Popular Sports Magazine, Popular Football, Texas Rangers, Air War, Sky Fighters, Everyday Astrology, West, Masked Rider Western, Range Riders Western, The Rio Kid Western, Exciting Love, Startling Stories, Popular Crossword Puzzles, Best Crossword Puzzles, Army Navy Flying Stories, Rodeo Romances, Exciting Sports and Exciting Western.

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Win Rich Rewards in Radio



The LINE-UP



A DEPARTMENT WHERE READERS
AND THE EDITOR MEET

THE warm summer night pressed closely around Mrs. Colling-Sands as she stood on the sixth-floor terrace of an apartment in Doncaster House, exclusive New York apartment hotel. Far above her lights gleamed faintly from the Dryden Winslow suite on the fifteenth floor. Somehow she felt uneasy as she thought of Dryden Winslow, the mysterious millionaire back in America after a long sojourn in Australia.

She shuddered faintly, remembering the words of Winslow's daughter, Gertrude.

"He's coming back to die," Gertrude Winslow had told her. "The best specialists in the world have given him only days or hours of life."

The young girl's voice had been edged with bitterness. She had never seen her father. He had always been a far-off shadow. He had never understood the loneliness of a girl—loneliness for someone close as only a father or a husband can be.

The Whistle of Doom

Mrs. Collings-Sands looked above her, blinking as the lights of a window in 910 shone in her eyes. Suddenly above the light, lost somewhere in the mounting darkness, she heard faint cracking sounds. They ricocheted from the terraced building, bouncing from wall to wall. Then she heard a sharp, vibrant whistle that merged with a strangled scream.

She lurched backward against the terrace wall to dodge the misshapen mass that hurtled past the lighted window of 910 to crash on the terrace before her.

Knuckles pressed violently against her teeth to stifle her screams, she gazed in stricken horror at the battered form of Dryden Winslow!

This is the dramatic opening of the tense, exciting \$2.00 mystery book featuring Captain Duncan Maclain, the famous blind de-

tective, assisted by his Seeing Eye dog, which we are publishing in our next issue by special arrangement with the author and William Morrow & Company:

THE WHISTLING HANGMAN

By
BAYNARD KENDRICK

While Dryden Winslow's body was plunging nine floors to destruction Duncan Maclain was playing chess with Rudolph Bleucher, the hotel manager. But once the news of the tragedy had been relayed to Bleucher, Maclain threw his special talents into the investigation.

The police were inclined to call it suicide or an accident. But Maclain, whose powers of observation were so keen that he discerned things more readily than many another man gifted with sight, came to the quick and startling conclusion that Winslow was murdered.

The Mystery Deepens!

When the police finally came around to agreeing with Maclain they were puzzled by the shots Mrs. Colling-Sands had heard before Winslow's body had hurtled to the terrace beside her. Despite the shots there were no bullet wounds in Winslow. Whereupon Maclain again startled the police by suggesting that they begin a ruthless hunt for a whistling hangman!

The whole story unfolds in **THE WHISTLING HANGMAN**, by Baynard Kendrick, one of the top-flight modern day mystery writers. It's a fast-moving baffler filled with mounting suspense and unexpected twists and surprises!

You'll like Captain Duncan Maclain, the courageous and resourceful blind detective.

(Continued on page 95)





GEE what a build!
Didn't it take a long
time to get those muscles?

SHOWER

No SIR! - ATLAS
Makes Muscles Grow
Fast!

Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?



LET ME START SHOWING YOU RESULTS LIKE THESE

<p>5 inches of new Muscle</p> <p>"My arms increased 1 1/2", chest 2 1/2", forearm 7/8".—G. S., W. Va.</p>	<p>What a difference!</p> <p>"I have put 3 1/2" on chest normal and 2 1/2" expanded.—F. G., N. Y.</p>
<p>Here's what ATLAS did for ME!</p> <p>John Jacobs BEFORE John Jacobs AFTER</p>	<p>For quick results I recommend CHARLES ATLAS</p> <p>"Am sending snapshot showing wonderful progress.—W. G., N. J.</p> <p>GAINED 29 POUNDS</p> <p>"When I started, weighed only 141. Now 170.—T. R., N. Y.</p>

CHARLES ATLAS

Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in international contest—in competition with ALL men who would consent to appear against him.

This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

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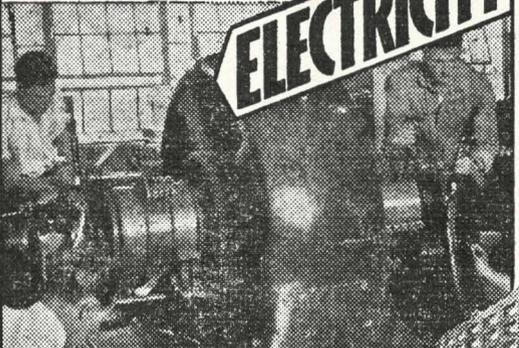
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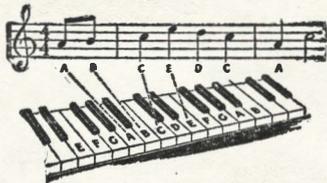
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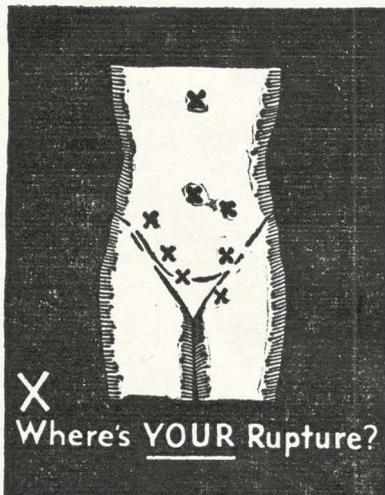
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the [★]evil star

by JOHN SPAIN



Detective Steve McCord is plunged into intrigue when three beautiful triplets, like avenging furies, bring murder to town!

I

"I'VE GOT a funny one," Hammerschlag said. Hammerschlag was a detective sergeant working out of the Missing Persons Bureau. Passing Mc-

Cord's open door and seeing McCord with his feet on the desk, it was second nature for Hammerschlag to pause and observe that he had a funny one.

Sometimes he really had, though McCord always pretended to be skeptical about this.

Mysterious Doom Stalks When a Deadly

McCord spread his feet a little. "I'll bet," he said. He was a long man, long and thin, with an amiably cynical mouth and the eyes of an intelligent but disillusioned spaniel. He ran the Homicide Detail, nights. "I'll bet."

"Well, I have," Hammerschlag said aggrievedly. He felt around in a sagging coat pocket of the baggy blue serge and brought out two halves of a sadly mutilated cigar. These he fitted together with great care and joined precariously with a moistened cigarette paper. "I think she's faking," he said.

"Who?"

"Ain't I been telling you? The girl!"

"Oh." McCord watched Hammerschlag's futile struggle to draw smoke through the battered cigar. Presently he relented and got Captain O'Meara's private box out of the desk. "Here, have one on the house, Dutch."

"Well," Hammerschlag said, "I don't mind if I do." He put his own masterpiece back in his pocket. His bulbous nose savored the skipper's Havana. "Whee-ee!"

"Maybe you'll be a captain some day," McCord said. "Then people can steal your cigars." He took his feet off the desk so that he could scratch a match on its already scarred surface. Smoke billowed from his well-blackened briar. "What's so funny about the girl?"

"Well," Hammerschlag said—he nearly always began his sentences with "Well"; the brief hesitation gave his mind time to catch up with his mouth—"well, they bring this dame in around seven o'clock tonight and she's got a concussion and a flock of bruises, like a car hit her."

"And you think that's funny," McCord said.

"Now look, I didn't mean it was funny. I mean it's—now—"

"Peculiar?"

"Yeah, peculiar. On account of there ain't a thing on her in the way of identification." Hammerschlag blushed as McCord pretended to be shocked. "Now there you go, always jumping to conclusions. Of course she had her clothes on."

"Then how do you know there are bruises?"

Hammerschlag was outraged. "I'll have you to know that us cops have got morals just like anybody else."

"That's right," McCord said. "Cops are just like everybody else." He sighed. "Well, let it pass, Dutch. You could have found out about the bruises from Doc Stein."

Mollified, Hammerschlag continued: "So

they put her in Receiving, and the doc goes to work on her. After a while he brings her around, but she claims she don't remember nothing. Hell, she don't even remember who she is. At least this is what she claims. I think she's faking it."

McCord was really interested now. "Why should she be?"

"You tell me," Hammerschlag growled. "All I know is I got a hunch. She's faking a loss of memory that ain't really so, and I got no time to go chasing down shoe label leads and one thing and another. So I call in the boys with the cameras and we get a picture and rush it down for the next editions of the morning papers. He looked triumphant. "I'll fix her."

"A fine business," McCord leered. "I hope she had her clothes on."

"Darn you, Steve," Hammerschlag yelled, "all we took was her head!"

"I still say it's a fine business," McCord insisted. "How's she going to remember anything if you took her head?" He stood up as Hammerschlag dashed the skipper's cigar to the floor. "All right, Dutch, let's go down and have a look at her. That's what you really wanted, isn't it?"

"Well—"

"But I'll have no more of your insults," McCord said sternly. "I'm only doing this for the good of the service, understand? Esprit de corps, that sort of thing."

HAMMERSCHLAG made an inelegant sound with his mouth. "You oughta go on the radio." He bent, retrieved the smoldering cigar from the floor. Wiping the chewed end on a coat sleeve he replaced it between his lips. "You know what you are? You're nothing but an educated heel."

McCord picked up the inter-office phone. "The educated heel speaking. Well, a guy just called me that. Look, Jake, I'm going down to Emergency for a minute. Anything comes up, you can get me there."

Eight o'clock in the evening is a dull hour in the detective division. There was the click of teletypes. Here and there a phone rang. A civil clerk with a batch of reports came out of the press room, where he had probably been giving the legmen a preview of the night's doings before passing the information on to its proper destination, the desk of Inspector Regan, the night chief.

McCord and Hammerschlag caught a down elevator to the basement. The receiving hospital adjoined the police garage and an ambulance was just clanging its way up the

Wave of Crime Sweeps the Pacific Coast!

ramp. Hammerschlag, panting a little, pushed through double swing doors, past the receiving desk presided over by the horse-faced Miss Kling, and paused outside the open door of one of the semi-private cubicles. Dr. Stein and a nurse, both in stiffly starched white, were staring resentfully at the girl on the cot.

ed it. He patted the doctor's shoulder. "Forget it, Doc. We know who she is."

Stein was surprised. "You do?"
"Of course." McCord carefully refrained from looking at the girl. "Some of the boys found her purse."

Hammerschlag's mouth fell open. McCord stepped on his foot. And then, quite sudden-



Her deep blue eyes regarded the new arrivals without interest (Chap. I)

The girl was beautiful. Even without rouge and lipstick, and with her blue-black hair drawn straight back from her forehead she was beautiful. Blue eyes regarded the new arrivals without interest.

"I can't understand it," Dr. Stein said irritably. "She's as normal as I am, yet she can't remember." Stein was a gnome-like little man. "I simply can't understand it."

McCord essayed a stratagem so old that apparently even Hammerschlag had discard-

ly, he turned his eyes full on the girl. "Who hit you, hon?"

Something very like terror flared in her eyes for an instant. Then it was gone and her face was utterly blank again. "I can't remember."

McCord shrugged. "All right, don't worry about it, sister." He turned and went out. Hammerschlag and Dr. Stein followed him.

"What's the big idea?" Hammerschlag wanted to know.

"Your hunch was good, Dutch. The lady is faking." He drew a slow breath. "Not only that, she's scared to death, and if I were you I wouldn't leave her alone for a minute."

Dr. Stein took off his glasses and pointed them at McCord's nose. "You were lying about the purse."

"That's right." McCord nodded. "She knew I was lying, too, when she stopped to think about it. But it caught her off guard. There's nothing wrong with her memory. The trouble is, she remembers too much."

"You mean she knows who did it and won't talk?"

"I think so," McCord said soberly. He didn't like people who went around beating up young ladies as beautiful as this one. "Anyway, it's your case, Dutch, though I wouldn't exactly call her a missing person."

Hammerschlag sighed heavily. "It's just that Regan thought Missing Persons could get an identification quicker than anybody else." He made a fist of a hamlike right hand. "By God, she can't do this to me."

"There's always her picture," McCord reminded him. "The papers ought to be on the streets pretty soon now." He rode an elevator back up to his own office. Somehow he couldn't get the girl out of his mind.

Despite her good looks, there was a certain indefinable hardness about her. Another girl under the same circumstances would have had hysterics or something. This one was thinking every minute.

What she was thinking about was a deep dark mystery, and mysteries always rode Stephen McCord like a nagging woman. He was just about to call Hammerschlag when one of the phones on his desk came to life. Answering it, he recognized Inspector Regan's voice.

Regan was terrifically upset. "You, McCord! What do you know about this dame down in Emergency?"

"Not a thing," McCord said. "At least nothing beyond what I told Hammerschlag and Doc Stein. Why?"

"Because she isn't in Emergency any more," Regan yelled. "She isn't anywhere in this whole damn building."

II

THE night chief of detectives was not a large man, but he was dynamic. He barged into McCord's office, cursing a blue streak and loudly wondering what the police department was coming to. Without in the least looking like the cartoon character he gave the impression of an irate Jiggs. Behind Regan, a lumbering and apologetic Saint Bernard, came Gus Hammerschlag. McCord just sat there.

"By God," Regan bawled, "I'll see you broken for this night's work!"

McCord leaned back in his chair. "I'm supposed to be running the Homicide Detail."

"You're a dick, aren't you?"

"I've been called that," McCord admitted, "among other things."

Regan's jaw muscles bulged. "Then prove it. Get busy and find that girl."

"All right," McCord said. He waited till Regan had finally stamped out before even pretending to notice Hammerschlag. Then, still quietly but with no lack of interest, "What happened, Dutch?"

Hammerschlag looked miserable. "Well, Steve, it's just one of them things, I guess. Inside of ten minutes after you left there was an airplane crash, a streetcar accident and a three-alarm fire. In the excitement the girl managed to walk out. She even took her clothes."

McCord tamped tobacco into his pipe. "Don't let it worry you. When the papers hit the street somebody will identify her."

"That's the hell of it," Hammerschlag groaned. "We ask a couple million people do they know this girl, and when they come in and say they do, we ain't got the girl. The papers are going to rib hell out of us."

McCord hadn't thought of this angle, and of another even more appalling. It seemed a simple enough matter to trace the missing girl once you found out who she was. But there was now a new danger.

Suppose the girl, on the loose, was once more spotted by the guy or guys who had beaten her into unconsciousness? Suppose they really made a job of it on the second try? She'd be picked up out of some ditch and then the department would be held responsible for her death. Not so good. McCord decided. He got up and went to the squad-room door.

"Outside, gang. Out on the streets and look for this girl." Aided by Hammerschlag he pieced together an excellent description, including the clothes. "If you can get copies of the early home editions you'll find her picture spread all over the front pages."

The room emptied. Hammerschlag still stood there. "Steve, I'm sorry as hell about—"

"Forget it," McCord said. He picked up a phone, got the radio room and found that Inspector Regan had already put the girl's description on the air. Presently Hammerschlag went away. McCord was at the locker, getting out his topcoat, when footsteps paused outside his open door. He turned. He swallowed.

The girl he was looking for; the girl a thousand other cops were looking for, was standing right there in his doorway. She was even

more beautiful than he had remembered her. "Pardon me," she said in a perfectly composed voice, "I'm looking for the Missing Persons Bureau."

McCord felt little icy prickles race up and down his spine. He made his voice carefully casual.

"Oh," he said. "Oh yes, of course." Fixing her with a calm eye, like the hypnotists are supposed to do, he edged around her and closed and locked the hall door. "Now, baby," he said through clenched teeth, "you and I are going to have a little talk."

"I—I don't believe I quite understand."

Beautiful, he thought. And crazier than seven hundred whirling dervishes. He decided to be nonchalant about it. "That makes two of us, darling." He leaned a finger on the annunciator switch. "Get me Regan and Hammerschlag."

The girl stared at him. Angry color had come into her cheeks and her voice shook a little. "See here, is this the Missing Persons Bureau or isn't it?"

"Oh yes," he said. "Yes, this is the Missing Persons Bureau." In reverse, the lettering on the ground-glass panel of the hall door said that he was a liar, but he didn't think she was in any condition to notice. His smile was engaging. "It's a lovely night, isn't it?"

"You know what I think?" the girl demanded. "I think you're crazy!"

"They always do," McCord said under his breath. There was a sudden banging at the hall door. The girl pivoted slowly, eyeing him with macabre intensity. He unlocked the door. Hammerschlag and Regan almost fell on their faces. McCord waved a casual hand, directing their attention to his guest. "There."

Hammerschlag sucked in a great gulp of air. "I'll be God damned!"

Inspector Regan, no less surprised, drove at once to the point. "Where in hell did you get her?"

"It's nothing," McCord assured him with a trace of smugness. "Nothing at all. Just give Homicide an assignment. You lose 'em, we find 'em."

Hammerschlag moved purposefully toward the girl. "All right, sister, why did you run out on us?"

The swift anger on her face was replaced by sudden terror. She raced for the door. Inspector Regan tripped her. Almost before she hit the floor she began screaming. The sound was worse than eighty-seven sirens.

"You're all crazy," the girl panted.

"Oh, yeah?" Regan pinioned her flailing



McCord stood by the bed, watching Charity, when behind him a door opened (Chap. IV)

arms, looking helplessly at McCord and Hammerschlag. Outside, the corridor rapidly filled with detectives, reporters and the usual gang who hung around at night. Quite without warning the girl bit Regan on the wrist. He let out a howl.

"Take her away!" He practically hurled her into the arms of two dicks from the Safe and Loft squad. "Toss her in a tank and see that she stays there, by God!"

Between them they wrestled her out and along the crowded halls. Her screams drifted back to the now augmented group in McCord's office. "You're all crazy, I tell you. Crazy as March hares!"

McCord wiped little beads of sweat from his forehead. "Damned if I don't think she's right, at that." A couple of new faces boiled to the surface in the maelstrom beyond his open door and he recognized Saul Saracco and his attorney, Webb Fallon.

Saracco had a press-damp copy of the morning *Times* in his hands. "That the gal you were looking for?"

INSPECTOR Regan snatched at the paper. Over his shoulder McCord could see the girl's picture under the glaring caption: "Do You Know This Girl?" Regan flung the paper from him and began sucking at his bleeding wrist. "The little hellcat." He broke off to stare at Saracco. "What's your interest in this?"

"None," Saracco said. He was a big man in his early fifties, broad and flat of face, well-dressed, aware of his own importance but not objectionably so. He lobbied for the construction interests, the paving and street-lighting blocs, and there were some who said he had a fist in other things less respectable.

"Then what are you doing here?"

Saracco smiled, showing very white teeth. "Webb and I heard screams and thought it might be fun to watch you boys beating hell out of some poor kid that probably snitched a pocketbook."

"I didn't mean that!" Regan snarled. "I meant here—at Headquarters."

"Oh." Saracco was not unaware of his audience. "Well, the truth of the matter is that a friend of mine was picked up for drunk driving. Mind?"

"Mind! I'm damned glad of it." Regan had run into Saracco's influence two or three times and didn't like the big man very well.

McCord engaged Webb Fallon in conversation. "You're looking well, Counsellor." He couldn't have told you why it occurred to him to ask Fallon about the girl. "You wouldn't happen to know the little lady, would you?"

Fallon looked mildly startled. "You mean you don't?" He was a lean handsome man of forty-two or -three, dark-eyed, dark-haired

except for interesting touches of silver at the temples. In spite of a leaning toward fop-pishness he was admittedly one of the best court actors in the state. Now that Old Man Gilbert was gone, Fallon was the headman at Gilbert, Fallon and Gilbert.

McCord shook his head. "We don't, and that's a fact."

In Fallon's dark eyes there was a trace of humor. "Try asking her?"

"Once," McCord said. "She doesn't like to be asked. It makes her nervous."

"Women are always a problem, aren't they?" Webb Fallon probably knew what he was talking about. He didn't exactly have to fight them off, but he never seemed to have any trouble filling vacancies either. He nodded pleasantly, and presently he and Saul Saracco took themselves away.

Hammerschlag was recounting to the reporters the manner in which the girl had first been brought to the department's attention, her escape and later reappearance. Inspector Regan stamped out. Gradually the room emptied and McCord sank into his own chair.

After a time he remembered all his own detectives, not to mention those of the other bureaus and the uniformed division, who were out combing the city for a girl who was once more in custody. He pulled a phone toward him and canceled the order.

"Pardon me," a feminine voice said, "can you direct me to the Missing Persons Bureau?"

McCord opened his eyes. He shuddered violently. "Again?" Then, convinced that it couldn't be, that this was just an illusion, he once more leaned back and relaxed.

This illusion was persistent. "I said—"

"I heard you," McCord said, adding, "but I don't believe it."

"What?"

"Well," McCord said, "you're nothing but a vision, a figment of my imagination, a pixie, a—" He suddenly opened his eyes very wide. This girl had the same face, the same blue-black hair and startling blue eyes, but her clothes were not the same. Not only that, she carried a handbag and a folded newspaper. McCord hastily attained his feet.

"I beg your pardon. We've had a rather trying time of it around here the last hour or so and I'm not quite myself. I believe you said you wanted the—"

"The Missing Persons Bureau." A faint frown creased an otherwise perfect brow. "It's—it's about my sister." She held out the newspaper.

"Oh." McCord, in accepting the paper, managed to touch her hand. He still wasn't sure that she was real. "Oh yes, about your sister."

She was becoming annoyed with him. "I

always understood that policemen were—well, efficient.”

“Oh, we are,” McCord assured her. He put on a great show of efficiency by picking up a phone and calling the detention cells upstairs. “McCord speaking. Have you still got that package that Regan sent up a little while ago? That’s just ducky. Hang on to her.” He cradled the phone, once more addressed the alleged sister of the package upstairs. “Your name, please?”

She gave him a small smile this time. “Martin—Faith Martin.”

McCord acknowledged that by introducing himself. “Lieutenant McCord. And your sister’s name?”

“Hope Martin.”

“All right, let’s go up and see her,” McCord said. He took the girl’s arm. The arm was firm and round under his hand. Reassured, he began to notice other things about Miss Martin. There was not that hardness back of the eyes, at the corners of the mouth, that he had seen in her sister’s face. “Are you familiar with your sister’s—umm—friends? Any idea of who would wish to do her harm?”

“Why no! That is, as a matter of fact I haven’t seen or heard from Hope for over a year.” And then, a little breathlessly, “Is she—is she hurt badly?”

“Oh no,” McCord said. “What I mean to say is, not very much.” He wondered if he looked as idiotic as he sounded. “I’m sure that after she sees you she’ll be quite all right.” Going up in the elevator he looked down at the most beautiful profile in the world. He resisted the impulse to put an arm around her waist, assisting her from the car as the doors opened at the top floor.

“This way, please.” He ushered her down the whitewashed concrete corridor to the cell blocks. There was no need to ask for further directions, for the first Miss Martin was making herself heard far and wide. Standing in front of a barred tank a bulky matron in gray denim was looking longingly from the prisoner inside to the sap slung at her right wrist.

The girl with McCord clutched the bars. “Charity!”

Abruptly the cacophony ceased. “Faith!”

THE two girls stared at each other for one amazed instant. Then, as one, demanded, “What are you doing here?”

Miss Faith Martin turned indignant eyes on McCord. “This isn’t Hope. This is my sister Charity!”

McCord licked suddenly parched lips. “Now wait a minute, you mean to tell me that this isn’t the girl in the picture?”

The young lady behind bars gave every indication of going crazy again. “Of course I’m not, stupid. That’s what I’ve been trying

to tell everybody!”

McCord knew then that he had been working too hard. He forced himself to look at the young woman who only a moment before he had thought he’d like to have at his side forever.

“Then you’re not—you must be—”

“Of course,” Faith Martin said scornfully. “Anybody but a policeman would have known it long ago. We’re triplets and where is our sister Hope?”

“I wouldn’t know,” McCord said sadly. “I don’t believe I even care to know.”

III

POLICE Headquarters was a madhouse for the next hour or so. What Inspector Regan had feared had come to pass. They had a bona fide missing persons case, with two positive identifications and a formal demand for the person of one Hope Martin. The department faced charges of gross negligence, false arrest and one thing and another.

In addition there was a veritable barrage of phone calls from without, all purporting to identify the missing girl. At least half of these were utterly worthless. The other half identified the girl as either one or the other of her two counterparts. Hope Martin herself was still missing.

In Hammerschlag’s office the battle raged, Hammerschlag and Regan versus the Misses Faith and Charity Martin. McCord, on the sidelines, sucked at a dead pipe. He was not pleased with his own participation in the affair.

Miss Charity Martin, it developed, was a sort of glorified schoolteacher, something known as a supervisor, had been attending a national convention of supervisors being held in Los Angeles. Practically the entire convention had called up to identify the girl in the picture as Charity.

Miss Faith Martin was not so well known, though she had ample identification, including a passport, on her person. Faith was secretary and traveling companion to a wealthy old lady named Van Dorn. It was pure coincidence that the three sisters, each unaware of the whereabouts of the others, should all land in the same city at the same time.

It was this point that graveled Inspector Regan the most. It could not be coincidence. It was a subtle plot by the opposition to make the department ridiculous in the eyes of the taxpayers.

Miss Charity Martin didn’t give one little darn about the taxpayers of Los Angeles. She had been manhandled and thrown into a cell for no reason at all. And what would her fellow supervisors think? And where was Hope?

Faith was less vituperative. Presently, catching McCord's eye, she rose and came over to his side. "You know, it really isn't such a coincidence as it seems," she informed him. "After all, this is a logical stop on a pleasure tour around the country. And as for Charity, isn't Los Angeles one of the notable convention cities?"

"That takes care of you and Charity. It hardly accounts for Hope." He was finding it very difficult to stay angry with Miss Faith Martin. Especially with her standing so close to him. She was, he decided, much more beautiful than either of her two sisters. "Maybe you'd better just run over it again," he suggested.

She wrinkled her nose. It was really quite a lovely nose. "Well," she said in the tone of one explaining the rudiments of arithmetic, "we decided a long time ago that we didn't want to be triplets."

"Praiseworthy," McCord conceded, "but a little odd."

"I mean, we were going to be individuals, not exhibited collectively like—" Blue eyes lifted to his. "You're not laughing at us?"

"No," McCord said gravely.

She nodded, as though she'd known he wasn't the kind to laugh at things like that. "So we just separated, that's all."

"I see." When he smiled some of his thirty-two years dropped from him and his mouth was no longer cynical. "So Charity became a schoolteacher and you a secretary to old ladies with money. And Hope, you said, is a dancer, and the last you heard from her was in San Francisco."

"I—I understood she was on the stage." Then, meeting his eyes squarely, "I may as well tell you. She is a—well, at the Fair they called her a bubble dancer."

MCCORD gave no sign that he was startled. As a matter of fact, his one brief interview with the missing triplet had convinced him that she knew the facts of life. That and her condition was almost proof positive that she was mixed up with some pretty tough people.

"Do me a favor, Faith Martin?"

"I—I don't know." She shivered a little. "About Hope—you said that—"

"That's what I mean," he nodded. "We've got to think about her. On the face of it, we cops are pretty dumb, but the circumstances are a trifle—well, unusual." He pointed the stem of his pipe at her. "Here's what I want you to do. Persuade Charity to go back to her hotel, and you go back to yours. It's only going to make finding Hope a lot more complicated with you two roaming around. You see that, don't you?"

"Yes, I think I do. You mean that Charity and I will be constantly mistaken for Hope

if we're not out of circulation." She put a slim white hand into his large brown one. "All right, I'll have a talk with Charity."

She crossed to where recriminations were still being hurled back and forth over Hammerschlag's desk. But whatever Faith Martin said to Charity Martin, the results were almost immediate. The two girls, escorted by an unwontedly polite Inspector Regan, withdrew. Hammerschlag, exhausted, flopped in his desk chair.

McCord took a sheaf of scrawled notations from one of the detectives working the telephones. Out of the whole batch there was only one that seemed to offer any definite promise.

"Look, Dutch, here's a call from the guy that runs the Hotel Metropole. Says the picture looks like a Hope Delancey, a guest. It's a theatrical hotel, and the first name—"

Hammerschlag snatched at the paper. "That's my meat, baby!" He stood up. "Mind taking over here for a little while?"

McCord hesitated. He had work of his own to do. But it looked as though nobody in City Hall was going to get any work done until this business was cleared up. "All right, go ahead."

"Even if it don't turn out to be anything, it'll be a relief to get out of this bedlam." Hammerschlag lumbered out.

McCord dropped into the vacated chair, put his feet on the desk and appeared to doze. From time to time he accepted a new batch of reports or took a call relayed from his own office. One of these was from the San Francisco police department, wanting to know if he or Captain O'Meara had turned up anything new on the murder of Public Works Commissioner Welles.

Welles had been shot to death in a San Francisco hotel, so it was San Francisco's case, but they seemed to think Los Angeles ought to help solve it because the commissioner hailed from there. The guy on the phone said, "Why the hell can't you shoot your own commissioners?"

McCord said that he'd be very glad to oblige, especially since he didn't like Welles' successor any better than he had Welles. The case was three months old and a dead duck as far as he was concerned, but he had an odd thought as he hung up.

He remembered Saul Saracco and Webb Fallon, his attorney, hanging around headquarters earlier. Saracco, as spokesman and chief lobbyist for the paving and street-lighting interests, might have had a reason for knocking off the public works commissioner.

Then he remembered that Faith Martin had told him her sister Hope had last been heard from in San Francisco. He wondered if Hope might possibly have knocked off the commissioner. You might as well suspect all

San Franciscans, past and present.

Just on the off chance, McCord picked up a phone and called the Traffic Division. He was informed that one of Saul Saracco's henchmen had really been arrested for drunken driving. That seemed to dispose of Saracco's—and Webb Fallon's—presence at Headquarters.

Nothing new developed in the Hope Martin case for perhaps half an hour when the hall door opened and a man came in. He was a very young man, very fat, with pink-and-white cheeks and a rosebud mouth. Everything about him but the clothes he wore was effeminate.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I'm looking for a Miss Faith Martin, whose picture—"

McCord did not tell the young man that the newspaper photo was not that of Faith. "Yes?"

"Why should it be a disappointment to me?"

The corners of McCord's mouth drooped. "It was just an idea I had. The girl in the picture is Faith Martin's sister Hope. Faith is, or should be by now, safely back at your hotel."

"And this—this sister?"

"We can't find her," McCord confessed. His manner was now candid, rueful. "We had her once, but she got away."

Again there was something like a lambent flame behind Egbert's pale eyes. "Then she's a criminal?"

McCord would have denied that he was more than ordinarily sensitive, but it seemed to him that there was an aura of evil about Egbert Van Dorn. He could almost have sworn that the young man before him hated Faith Martin with an utterly consuming hatred. McCord stood up.



The landlady had started for the phone when a third man hit her (Chap. X)

THE young man carried his handkerchief in his sleeve. He took the handkerchief out and touched it daintily to his forehead, his rosebud mouth. "Is she—is she—dead?"

McCord had a rather vague impression that the effeminate young man hoped she was.

"Well," he said blandly, "not quite. Did you wish to see her?"

"Oh, no!" the pink-and-white young man said hastily. "I—er—just—" Embarrassment overcame him and he again had recourse to the handkerchief. A faint odor of lilacs issued from it.

"You are, perhaps, a relative?"

"No, I am just in— Well, you see, Miss Martin works for my mother. I am Egbert Van Dorn."

"I see," McCord said. He couldn't quite make up his mind about Egbert. There was something vaguely repellent, almost sinister, about Egbert's veiled interest in Miss Faith Martin. McCord's chair creaked. "I'm afraid I have something of a disappointment for you, Mr.—ummm—Van Dorn." He watched the young man's face. "The lady in the picture is not your Faith Martin."

All the pink ebbed from Egbert's cheeks. "But she must be!" And then something very like a veil slid over the pale-blue eyes.

"Where were you between five-thirty and seven o'clock this evening?"

"Why—why, having dinner with my mother!" And then swift anger replaced the surprise. "Why should I have to account to you for my time?"

"You don't," McCord said shortly. For a brief moment it had occurred to him that possibly Egbert was responsible for the attack on Hope Martin, in the mistaken belief that she was Faith. But Egbert's ready answer, his obvious surprise, were too convincing to be doubted. He pointed his pipe at the door.

"In fact you can be on your way any time you feel like it, and the sooner the better." With smoldering eyes he watched the indignant young man depart. Then he lifted a phone and asked the operator downstairs to get him the Beverly-Plaza. Presently Faith Martin's voice came to him, cool, carefully contained.

"Yes? Mrs. Van Dorn's secretary speaking."

"Stephen McCord, Faith."

"Oh?" She caught her breath. "Then you have news?"

"In a way," McCord said. "Not exactly news of Hope, though we have a lead. This

concerns you. I've just met Egbert."

She was definitely startled this time. "You—you have?"

"Egbert doesn't like you very well," McCord said.

"Don't be silly. He wants to marry me!"

"Oh, he does, does he?" In sudden savage disgust he flung his pipe at the wall. "Look, Faith—pardon me, Miss Martin—what does Mrs. Gretchen Van Dorn think about the idea?"

"Why, she's in favor of it!"

"And you?"

"See here, Lieutenant McCord, I don't know by what right you are making my personal affairs your business!"

"Sorry," he said stiffly. "My mistake." He replaced the phone and retrieved his pipe. He just had it going nicely when Inspector Regan stormed in. He saw by the look on Regan's face that something had happened of far greater import than a somewhat silly mix-up over three sisters who looked alike. "What gives, Skipper?"

"Hammerschlag," Regan said. "That Martin bitch just knocked him off."

IV

THE Metropole had never been a first-class hostelry, and now, after twenty or thirty years of serving traveling salesmen and theatrical second-raters, it would have had an awful argument making even the third team. But it was still patronized well enough to support a house dick. It was he who furnished McCord and Regan most of the meagre details on the shooting of Gus Hammerschlag.

The night clerk contributed nothing beyond the fact that the girl had come in around seven-thirty, got her key and apparently gone up to her room. Shortly after that the clerk had seen her picture in the papers and had called in. On Hammerschlag's arrival he had given him the girl's room number. No, he had not heard the shots, nor had he seen the girl go out again.

The house dick was a short, thick-bodied man who wore his hat on the back of his head and looked as though he would enjoy peeping through keyholes. His name was Repp.

"Sure I heard the shots," he said, "but it would take me a little while to find out where they came from. There's damn near four hundred rooms in this dump."

"You didn't have to look in all of them," Regan said nastily. He was feeling pretty bad about the Dutchman.

McCord watched a deputy medical examiner fooling around with the huddle of baggy blue serge which had been Gus Hammerschlag. He was going to miss Hammerschlag

pausing at his door and remarking that he had a funny one. Curiously, he felt only a little of that vindictive rage that is supposed to motivate a police department when one of its members is killed.

It was all so senseless, the girl's fear of the police, a fear which had led her to pretend amnesia and later to run out on them to avoid further questioning; and, if you believed the evidence, had now prompted her to do murder to avoid them. It hinted that she herself had been guilty of some as yet unknown crime, and this didn't gibe with the beating she had received at the hands of someone else.

Out in the hall there was a bunch of reporters and curious, thrill-hungry guests, kept in check by some squad-car bulls, but in here it was very quiet. McCord's own staff of technical experts had not yet arrived. Repp, the house dick, was explaining for the third time just how he had happened to hear the shots.

It appeared that he had been on the floor immediately above this one, trying to eject a drunk from the room of a woman who later turned out to be the drunk's wife. He had seen no one in the halls.

"The broad must have lammed right after she let him have it. Nobody saw her go through the lobby, so she probably used the service stairs or the freight elevator."

McCord put in a question. "She ever have any visitors?"

"Not that I know of. She's only been here two or three days."

"Registered from where?"

"San Francisco."

McCord gestured at the wall telephone. "Ask the clerk, will you?" He looked around the room. It seemed to him that the girl had been on the point of checking out when interrupted by Hammerschlag. Some of the dresser drawers had been pulled out, and there was a half-filled suitcase open on the luggage rack. "Ask him about her luggage too."

The deputy medical examiner stood up, brushing absently at his knees. "Three slugs, all pretty close up, all apparently from the same gun. Looks like a thirty-eight. I'll get 'em out now if you're in a hurry."

McCord looked at Inspector Regan, who shook his head. "Your case. You claimed to be a homicide dick. Now let's see you do something about it." Abruptly he turned away, came back to stare down at Hammerschlag's body. "A good cop," he observed to no one in particular. "Dumb but—well, a good cop."

"A good cop," McCord agreed soberly. He hoped his own epitaph would read that simply and sincerely. He wished Regan would do something beside just stand there look-

ing like that. He wondered how many of the hundred-odd detectives under the inspector really understood the guy.

He wondered what Captain O'Meara, his own immediate chief, was going to say to him on the morrow. He remembered that he had given Hammerschlag one of O'Meara's cigars.

Repp, the house dick, banged up the phone. "No visitors." His muddy-looking eyes searched the room. "There was a small bag besides the suitcase—kind of an overnight bag. Must have taken that with her."

A KNOCK on the hall door preceded the boys with the technical paraphernalia. Some men with a stretcher came in and presently took Hammerschlag away. The deputy medical examiner went away. Regan put his eyes on McCord's face.

"The papers are going to make a circus out of this triplet business. And everybody in the department, from the commissioner on down, isn't going to like it very well. Your case. Get busy on it." He went out and McCord could hear him wrangling with the reporters.

On the dresser were three or four eight-by-ten theatrical poses of Hope Martin. If there had been any doubt in McCord's mind that this was the missing triplet's room, the photographs would have cinched it. She was like Faith, just as both girls were like Charity, the third sister. Seen separately, it would be no trick at all to mistake one for the other.

In the room next door a radio suddenly blared the tail end of a news broadcast. On the back of one of the prints there was the rubber stamp of the San Francisco portrait studio that had made it. He put the print in his pocket, watched the technicians finishing up, getting their stuff together.

"I'd like to know if there's been anybody else in this room recently," he told the fingerprint expert. "Anybody but the girl and Hammerschlag and the help."

The telephone rang. An agitated feminine voice said, "This is Charity Martin, Lieutenant. Is Faith with you?"

"With me?" He frowned. "Why should she be with me?"

"Well," Charity said tartly, "I haven't been able to find her anywhere else."

McCord's mouth made a thin hard line. "Where are you now?"

"At Faith's hotel, of course! You told her to stay there, didn't you?" And she isn't here, is she? So I thought—"

"I see," McCord said. He took a deep breath. "Just wait for me there, will you, please? I'll be right out."

The Beverly-Plaza was a tremendous hostelry spread over acres and acres of ground. An integral part of it was the Palm Grove,

a supper room patronized by hundreds of outsiders. Checking the movements of any one particular person was next to impossible.

McCord found this to be true in the case of Faith Martin. Apparently no one had seen her leave. She had not turned in her key at the desk. At McCord's elbow, Charity was getting more jittery by the minute. "I can't understand Faith doing a thing like this. Right after you told her to stay here."

McCord looked down at her. Strangely enough, when he was with one of these girls the others sort of faded out. "I told you to stay put, too," he pointed out quietly.

"But there was a reason for me!" Charity protested. "When I telephoned Faith and found she wasn't here, I had to come over, didn't I?"

"Sure," McCord said. "Sure you did." He had not as yet told Charity that one of her sisters was now suspected of killing a cop.

Suppose Hope had had access to a radio? In this manner she could have learned that Faith and Charity were also in Los Angeles; she could have discovered their whereabouts and, finding herself in a jam, appealed to Faith and asked for a meeting. That would certainly explain Faith's absence. McCord compressed his lips.

"You wouldn't by chance have heard from Hope?"

Charity was obviously startled. "From Hope? Why— You don't think that—"

For the first time some of the tension in him showed in his voice. "All right, we'll skip that for a moment. You've talked with the Van Dorns?"

"Of course. They thought Faith was still in her room."

McCord took her arm, walking her toward the elevators. "Let's go up and talk some more." They got in a car along with a dozen opulent looking guests, were lifted to the seventh floor and went along a quiet corridor to the Van Dorn suite.

IT was Egbert who answered McCord's knock. "Oh, hello, there!"

"Hello," McCord said. Over Egbert's shoulder he could see a very ancient lady in stiff black taffeta and a black lace cap. She was rocking placidly in a chair which the management must have disinterred from the basement especially for her benefit, for the rest of the apartment was modernistic, exquisite in its expensive simplicity. McCord decided that if she were really Egbert's mother Egbert himself must be at least ten years older than he looked. That would make him around forty.

"Well, Egbert," the old lady said tartly, "are you going to invite those people in or aren't you?"

Reluctantly, Egbert stood aside. McCord

left Charity to her own devices and crossed the living room to the lady in the rocker. "I'm Lieutenant McCord of the Homicide Bureau, Mrs. Van Dorn." He showed her his badge. "It may be necessary for me to ask you some rather personal questions."

"The rich," she said, "are used to personal questions." Bright black eyes held a glint of humor. They shifted to where Egbert was pouring himself a good stiff jolt of Scotch. "Put it down, Egbert."

He put it down sulkily, like a petulant little boy forbidden the cookie jar.

"Egbert hates me," the old lady said with every evidence of complacency.

McCord felt his stomach muscles try to tie themselves in knots. He wondered if he himself weren't slightly unbalanced.

Mrs. Van Dorn was now examining Charity with brightly probing eyes. "So like Faith," she marveled. The bright eyes fixed McCord with bird-like intensity. "Egbert is going to marry Faith, you know."

"So I understand," McCord nodded. He watched Egbert, who in turn was watching Charity. He had the feeling that this was all very interesting, but that it wasn't getting him anywhere. Again he turned his attention to the ancient and unpredictable lady in the rocker. "About Faith going out, did she, perhaps, get a telephone call?"

Mrs. Van Dorn shook her lace-capped head. "I do not spy upon people. Except Egbert," she added maliciously. "Egbert is queer, you know."

"Mamma!"

"Well, you are," his mother said.

McCord wrestled with the impulse to gnash his teeth, forced himself into the role of the polite but efficient policeman. "May I have a look at Faith's room?"

"Of course." Mrs. Van Dorn waved a fragile, blue-veined hand at a door. "That one belongs to Faith. Mine is on the other side of this. Egbert's is directly across the hall."

Charity followed McCord into her sister's room, closed the communicating door and sagged weakly against it. "They must be crazy!"

"Or we are," McCord said. There was no sign of a hurried departure, none of a struggle. Obviously, Faith had left of her own accord. He went to the phone, got the chief operator downstairs.

"Lieutenant McCord speaking and this is police business. Have there been any calls to this room in the last hour?" There was a moment's wait, then: "Just one? How long ago?" Presently he cradled the phone and looked at Charity. "She had a call from one of the house phones down in the lobby."

Charity's blue eyes were definitely frightened now. "You think it was Hope, don't you?" A little fiercely she caught his arms.

"Why is Hope hiding out like this? And who could have—"

"Worked her over?" McCord's mouth drooped. "I can't give you the answers to any but the first one, darling." He made his voice deliberately brutal. "She's hiding out—this time—because less than an hour ago she shot and killed a pretty good friend of mine."

"You're lying!"

"No." He imprisoned her wrists, held her tightly against him. "I don't want to hurt you, baby. You remember Hammerschlag?"

Against his chest her voice was muffled, uncertain. "He was the—the fat detective. The funny one."

"Yes." His own voice shook with swift, uncontrollable anger. "He found her and she shot him. And now your other sister is doing her damndest to help her get away."

Quite suddenly Charity's knees buckled under her and she was a dead weight in McCord's arms. Not ungently he carried her over to the bed. He was standing there watching her when behind him a door opened. Thinking that it was Mrs. Van Dorn or her son Egbert he did not turn. "Would you by chance have some ammonia around?"

There was just the briefest whisper of feet on the thick carpet. He caught a flash of a face that looked vaguely familiar, an upraised arm. Then something descended on his head with crushing force and he plunged into utter blackness.

V

BLINDING light struck at his eyeballs and for a little while he knew pain and violent nausea. A thousand devils with iron mallets beat out an anvil chorus inside his skull. Then someone lifted his head and forced pungent liquid down his throat.

A starched, professional voice said, "Breathe deep, through your mouth, son," and McCord obediently breathed deep through his mouth, and presently found that he could open his eyes and keep them open. After a while he could even identify the room he was in and some of the faces which ringed the bed on which he lay. He discovered that the starched, professional voice belonged to a white-haired man who had Physician and Surgeon written all over him. A gray-faced, hard-bitten man who later turned out to be one of the house dicks stood beside the doctor. Gretchen Van Dorn and her son Egbert were at the foot of the bed, and on the left-hand side was a girl whom McCord at first took to be Charity Martin. Then he saw that it was her sister Faith. Charity was nowhere in sight.

McCord sat up and this brought into his range of vision a man standing at some little distance behind Faith. The man was Webb



McCord saw the dull sheen of metal at the car's window and went for his gun (Chap. XII)

Fallon, counselor extraordinary, whom McCord had last seen down at police headquarters in the company of Saul Saracco. For the moment McCord accepted the phenomenon of the attorney's presence. "Where is she?"

The doctor thought he was still off his nut. "Who?"

"The girl!" McCord shouted. He pointed a finger at Faith Martin. "Your sister Charity."

Her lips moved awkwardly. "I—I don't know."

Mrs. Van Dorn, grown taller and not quite so fragile, touched Faith's arm. "There, there, dear, it's going to be all right." Jet black eyes, bright with malice, examined McCord. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, young man, bellowing like that." She sniffed. "And if you're asking us to believe that a snip of a girl like Charity Martin could deal you a blow that—"

"I'm not. Charity was out cold when"—he licked his lips—"when whoever it was came into this room and conked me." He remembered that he was a cop, and that there were a lot of things that needed explaining. Certainly he was not going to be intimidated by Gretchen Van Dorn, no matter how many millions she had. With some little difficulty he attained his feet, put out a hand to steady himself against the doctor's shoulder.

The house dick thrust a chair forward. "Better sit down, chum." He looked at Egbert. "Got anything to drink around here?"

Egbert gulped, said he would see, and went into the living room adjoining. When he came back he carried a decanter and a glass. His breath said that he had taken the brief moment out from under the watchful eyes of his mother to sample the decanter's contents. His blue eyes were frightened. "Here."

McCord emptied the glass, blew out his breath. "Now." He tried standing again, found that he could do it without assistance. One whole side of his face still felt swollen out of all proportion. Catching sight of his reflection in a mirror he saw that a swiftly darkening bruise the size of the palm of his hand extended from the hair line to just below the left cheekbone. His strap watch said that he had been unconscious for something over twenty minutes. It was a quarter of eleven. He stared from face to face at the group surrounding him.

"Charity was here, with me, when I went bye-bye. She isn't here now. I want to know where she is."

THAT bought him exactly nothing. Both Egbert and his mother swore that whoever had attacked McCord had not entered by way of the living room. The first they

had known there was anything wrong was when they had heard a sound as of a body falling—probably this had been McCord's body—and even then they had not immediately done anything, figuring it was not theirs to question police methods.

But after a time, concluding that McCord and the girl must have left, Egbert had entered and discovered McCord out cold on the floor. He had called his mother. Then they had telephoned down to the desk asking for a doctor, and in response had come the house detective with the resident physician.

McCord looked at the house dick. "The girl either walked out or was carried out. I take it you haven't just been twiddling your thumbs."

"Look, copper, I don't need anybody to tell me my business. The minute I found out from the Van Dorns that there was a girl missing I put a check on it."

"And found out what?"

"Well, so far," the guy admitted, "what we've found out wouldn't choke a gnat, but—"

"All right, we'll skip that." McCord put hard eyes on Faith Martin. "Where have you been?"

"I just went out for a walk about the grounds."

"I told you to stay here."

"I know, but I— Well, I just felt the need of a little air, that's all."

"Now I'll tell one. You didn't just 'feel the need of a little air.' You didn't just go out for a walk. You went out in answer to a telephone call, an urgent call, asking your assistance, and you—"

Her eyes closed and she swayed, put out a hand to steady herself. "I didn't!"

"You did."

In a tone she might have used on Egbert, Gretchen Van Dorn said, "See here, young man, I won't have you bullying the child."

Some inner emotion stronger than fear of his mother prompted Egbert to say, "Be quiet, Mother. Lieutenant McCord is only doing his duty."

Gretchen gave him a hard stare. He subsided.

Webb Fallon spoke. "You'd better tell him the truth, Miss Martin." His voice was soothing and McCord was again reminded of the man's success with women. "Miss Martin is by way of being my client, you know. If we find she needs an attorney. Personally, I don't think she will, but there's no doubt that her sister Hope is going to need one rather badly."

McCord's face gave no sign that he saw anything unusual in Fallon's being there. "Out drumming up trade, Counselor?"

"If you like." Fallon was composed. "It struck me as an interesting case." He crossed

to Faith's side. "Just tell him the facts as you told them to me, Miss Martin."

She nodded, accepting his word for it. "Yes, that would be best, wouldn't it?" She looked McCord straight in the eye. "Hope did telephone me. She said she was in serious trouble and needed my help, so I—well, I gave her what help I could, that's all."

"Making you an accessory," McCord said. As always, when talking to any of these three ladies, it was difficult to remember that he was a police official working at his trade.

"No." Webb Fallon said. "Miss Martin—this Miss Martin—was unaware that her sister was being sought in connection with the murder of Sergeant Hammerschlag."

At the mention of murder Egbert Van Dorn looked at his mother with an I-told-you-so expression. McCord recalled his earlier impression of the strange young man's emotions regarding Faith Martin. Certainly for a man alleged to be on the point of marrying her, he had the damndest reactions.

McCord was reminded of his own last talk with Faith, the telephone conversation in which she had told him somewhat acidly to keep his nose out of her personal affairs. Perhaps it was because of his dislike for Egbert that he refrained from making the caustic comment Fallon's statement deserved.

All he said was, "Can you prove that, Counselor?"

Fallon gave him one of his handsomest smiles. "Can you prove otherwise?"

McCord couldn't. It was perfectly possible that Faith had not had access to a radio. Still, it was unlikely that she actually could have talked to her sister without definite knowledge of the jam Hope was in. McCord looked at the doctor, at the house dick. He was not unaware that his own position must appear pretty ridiculous. It was always funny when a cop got taken.

"I think we can dispense with you gentlemen. If there's anything comes up I'll let you know." He waited until they had reluctantly departed. Then he addressed himself to Webb Fallon. "Whether she did or did not know that her sister is a murderess—"

F AITH refused to be ignored. "She isn't!" "I myself maintain that there's a reasonable doubt. Until she is apprehended, we are not arguing that you—the police—haven't a right to your own opinions." From an expensive leather cigar case he extracted a thin expensive cigar; a thin jewelled lighter evoked aromatic smoke. "All I am sure of is that my—ummm—young client here was thoroughly surprised when I broke the news to her."

McCord put the flat of his hand to his throbbing temple. "So it was you who broke

the news. May I ask why you thought that necessary?"

"Certainly," Fallon said, "I told you. It appealed to me as an exceptionally interesting case. The moment I learned of Hammerschlag's murder it occurred to me that, guilty or innocent, Hope Martin was going to need experienced counsel. Being unable to get in touch with her I thought of her sisters. Indeed I thought it possible that she might contact one or the other of them, and through them I could persuade her to give herself up."

"That makes you one up on the police." McCord made a bitter mouth. Again he addressed himself to Faith. "All right, Hope told you she was in trouble. If it wasn't killing a cop, what was it?"

Her blue eyes were still definitely antagonistic. "She didn't—wouldn't—tell me. She said it was better for me not to know what she was afraid of. In fact I was to tell no one that I'd seen her, because—according to her—the knowledge that I had would put me in the same danger she was. She needed money. I—I gave her what I had."

"And then walked in and told the first stranger you met all about it." McCord made no effort to disguise the fact that he thought she was lying.

Fallon made a disparaging gesture. "That ought to prove something or other to you. Miss Martin didn't know that her sister was suspected of murder."

At the same instant they all remembered that Charity, as well as Hope, was now missing. McCord was the first to do anything practical about it. He called Regan at headquarters.

"That's right," he said presently, "there's two of them gone now." He waited till his superior had exhausted the entire encyclopedia of invective. "Any news on the first one?"

Hope Martin was still being sought. And yet, McCord thought bitterly, she had been able to walk into the Beverly-Plaza, telephone her sister from a public booth, meet her, put the bite on her, and then walk calmly out again.

In answer to a query from Regan he said, "No, I'll bring her down if you want me to, but I don't think it will do any good." From the tail of his eye he watched Webb Fallon and Faith Martin hanging on his words. "I'm satisfied she's telling the truth."

"And what about the other one? This—this what's her name—Charity?"

"I don't know," McCord said tiredly. He thought that Charity would presently walk in with a story about having had to see a man about a dog. Was anything being explained to the even half satisfaction of anybody else?

Hope was so afraid that she'd run away from the protection of an entire police department, taken time out to kill a cop and then run away again. Sighing, McCord told Regan he was coming in and was on the point of hanging up when Regan said excitedly, "Wait a minute. Here's something!"

McCord could hear paper rustling, the jumble of voices. Then Regan again: "One of your boys got a line on a Hope Delancey out of the San Francisco department. She was questioned in the Welles kill."

"Why?"

"She was registered in the same hotel—on the same floor, by God!"

McCord was conscious of four pairs of eyes watching him. "That's nice. Anything come of it?"

"No. There was no tie-up." Regan cursed. "But now, by God—"

"Well, I'll see you later," McCord said. He disconnected.

Webb Fallon was talking pleasantly to Gretchen Van Dorn. He stopped that to look at McCord.

"News?"

"No," McCord lied. He looked around for his hat, found it did not fit very well because of the swollen temple. "Well, I'll be running along now. I'm sorry if I—"

At this moment the hall door was flung open and Charity appeared, just as he had known she would. The story was not immediately forthcoming, of course. There was that brief interlude of utter astonishment; then sisterly exclamations.

BUT presently that came to an end and Charity expressed herself willing, nay, eager, to answer any and all questions pertaining to her disappearance. She remembered fainting in McCord's arms. After that it was all a blank until she awakened inside a car, between two utterly loathsome men who insisted on asking her silly questions like where was her sister Hope, and what did she know about a letter Hope had written.

Of course she hadn't known anything—not that she would have told them if she had—and after a while it appeared that even they had become convinced that she was telling the truth, so they had let her go. She exhibited a somewhat disheveled condition and discolored bruises on her wrists as evidence. Her mouth quivered.

"It was pretty terrible for a while."

McCord concentrated on tearing down Charity's patently manufactured tale, or at least knocking a couple of holes in it.

"These men—there were two of them, you say?"

"There was another one, too. He drove the ear."

He nodded. "All right, three, then. Can you describe them?"

She described them at great length, though the car had been traveling without lights. Her description would have fit almost any three men taken at random from a crowd at, say, Seventh and Broadway at high noon. One of them, though, sort of coincided with McCord's own blurred recollection of the guy who had hit him.

"Now about the car—what kind of a car was it? Did you get the license number?"

No, she hadn't been able to get the number. And after they'd pushed her out on somebody's front lawn, by the time she'd looked around, the car was gone. The car itself, she thought, was a Cadillac, or maybe a Buick. It *could* have been a Chrysler. When you were being tortured, or practically, you weren't exactly accountable for minor details.

"No," McCord said. He looked at Webb Fallon. "I take it that she's going to be another of your clients?"

"If she needs me," Fallon said. His voice was laden with sympathy. "It seems to me that when she appears in court—if she ever does have to appear—it will be in the guise of plaintiff rather than defendant. Your job would seem to be finding the hoodlums who attacked her; who apparently carried her out right under your nose."

Five pairs of eyes examined McCord as though he were some particularly disgusting kind of worm. He regretted ever meeting any of them. He said his good nights and descended to the lobby where his first act was to enter a phone booth and call his own desk at headquarters. He was not too surprised to find his immediate superior, Captain O'Meara, in charge. On his showing he wouldn't have blamed them if they'd fired him.

"You can stop looking for the second one, Skipper. She's back." He explained the gruesome details. After a time he said, "I don't know. My guess is that they're all lying. We'd better put a man on each of them."

O'Meara was a quiet, repressed man whom a lot of people thought cold and aloof. But at least he didn't yell at you. "The Van Dorns too?"

"Suit yourself. But I want the two girls and Webb Fallon covered every minute from now on."

"You'll wait there?"

"Yes." McCord went out and bought a newspaper at the cigar stand, found a deep chair commanding the elevators. The type swam giddily before his eyes but he was able to assure the reinforcements when they arrived that the quarry, in toto, was still upstairs.

VI

IN the same receiving hospital cubicle where it had all started, McCord suffered the ministrations of Doc Stein and listened to Stein's caustic comments on the dumbness of cops in general.

"The guy sapped you down and then put his foot in your face as an afterthought." It seemed that the sapping-down was the reason for McCord's recurrent dizziness and nausea. Preoccupied with the bruise, which showed, McCord had been unaware of the minor fissure in his skull, which didn't. He was aware of it now, for the gnomelike police surgeon was apparently taking a fiendish delight in exploring the newly shaven area.

Flat on his belly, McCord watched a pair of neat, black-shod feet—all he could see of Captain O'Meara—and hoped Stein's razor had not given him a tonsure effect. He felt that it was bad enough to look like a monkey. They didn't have to make him, physically, look like a monk.

"This is going to hurt a little," Stein said. He began to suture McCord's scalp with something that felt like a red-hot ice pick.

Sweat beaded McCord's forehead and ran down into his eyes. "That isn't a rolled roast you're working on, you know."

"Hah!" Doc Stein said.

O'Meara's feet swelled and swelled until they blotted out everything else in the room. Distantly, faintly, a disgusted voice said, "Well, here we go again."

When next he opened his eyes the walls, the ceiling, Captain O'Meara's face had a kind of wavy, undulant look, then they steadied and were in clear, sharp focus. McCord discovered that he felt surprisingly well. Doc Stein was rolling down his sleeves and looked smugly pleased with himself.

O'Meara's voice was flat, emotionless. "Feel up to answering a question or two, McCord?"

"Sure," McCord said. He pushed himself to a sitting position. Nothing untoward hap-

pened. He wondered why everything was so quiet. Then he saw that he was no longer in the little semi-private cubicle.

He was in Doc Stein's private laboratory. Beyond the closed door he could detect the sound of voices, and it was no trouble at all to visualize a dozen or so reporters quizzing attendants as to this latest development. He looked at O'Meara's bleak, granite-hard face. "I suppose they're riding us as usual?"

"Unh-hunh." After a while O'Meara said, "Not only the legmen—everybody from the Commissioner on down. Regan doesn't think you know what you're doing."

"That why he routed you out of bed?"

"I'd have come down anyway," O'Meara said. He frowned at the tip of a swinging shoe. He was a medium tall, almost slight man who seemed to be a composite of varying shades of gray. "You think this has got anything to do with the Welles kill up in Frisco?"

"You know as much about that as I do," McCord said shortly. He neither liked nor disliked O'Meara. "Regan said one of the boys had dug up the fact that the girl had been registered in the same hotel at the time."

"That all you've got?"

"Yes."

"Now about the girl's sisters. Strike you as funny they should all land in this town at the same time?"

"It did," McCord said. "I don't know that it does now." He gave O'Meara the gist of Faith Martin's explanation. "You'd have to meet them, and some of the people they know, to realize that their being here in a bunch is only one of the peculiar things about them."

DOC STEIN went out. His going eased the situation, because in a way Stein was responsible for Hope Martin's escape. O'Meara must have felt that too, for his man-

[Turn Page]



ner became a little less crisp.

"I understand you told him and Hammerschlag the girl ought to be watched every minute."

"It was obvious she was faking the loss of memory."

"But you yourself didn't do anything about it?"

"No." A slow flush mantled McCord's face. "Look, am I being stood in a corner for not running the whole damned department?"

"You were a little out of line in sticking your nose into Hammerschlag's case in the first place, weren't you?"

McCord pressed the palms of his hands to his temples. "My God, that again." He stood up. "All right, so I was out of line."

"You'd better go home, McCord."

McCord stared at him with sudden burning anger.

"I'm damned if I will. Regan said it was my case."

"Regan meant it was Homicide's case," O'Meara said in a flat voice. "I'm running Homicide."

"So I'm to be the goat!"

O'Meara shook his head. "No. You've been injured in line of duty and you're being temporarily relieved from the case." He regarded the ash on the tip of his cigar. "Look at it my way, McCord. Both of these Martin girls—Charity and Faith—should have been covered from the time they left headquarters. If they had been, we'd have the other one by this time."

It was true. And apparently there was no use in pointing out that at the time it hadn't been Homicide's affair. Hammerschlag was still alive. The fact that the whole thing was as much Inspector Regan's fault as his, McCord's, had nothing to do with it. Regan and O'Meara were politicians.

"All right," he said, "I'll take the rap—up to a point."

O'Meara's voice halted him at the door. "You recognize this hood that sapped you?"

"No."

"Know him if you see him again?"

McCord shook his head. "Sorry."

"Sure it wasn't the girl who did it? The one who—ah—fainted in your arms and who you let get away from you?"

"So that's it," McCord said. "I'm supposed to be covering up for somebody. May I ask why?"

"She's a beautiful girl," O'Meara said. "In fact I understand they're all beautiful."

McCord fought down red rage. "You left out something. Besides being a sucker for a pretty face I was probably influenced by Gretchen Van Dorn's millions."

"I didn't say that, McCord."

"No, you didn't," McCord agreed. "Just the same I wouldn't bear down too heavily

on the idea that you're twenty years older than I am."

VII

THERE was a young lady in his apartment. Ordinarily McCord would not have minded this, but at the same instant he also discovered that his rooms had been searched. He thought that was carrying intimacy a little too far.

The lady was, naturally, one of the Martin triplets, and it was getting so that McCord had little or no trouble distinguishing them one from the other. Almost immediately he identified this particularly brazen vandal as Charity. With admirable repression he came in and closed the door and leaned his back against it.

"Surprise, surprise."

Charity appeared neither surprised nor embarrassed. A finger marked her place in a book she had been reading, and beside her in an ash tray a cigarette smoldered.

"You certainly are a terrible housekeeper," she observed. Her free hand disparaged the living room's disarray. "I don't see how you stand it."

"I'm a cop," McCord said. "Remember? I have none of the finer sensibilities." He took off his hat, tossed it on a chair, crossed to the door of the kitchenette, then to that of the bedroom, discovered that mice had been in here too, looked at himself in the dresser mirror. The bruise on his cheekbone now had an interesting mother-of-pearl effect. He returned to the living room and took up a stance directly before his attractive if uninvited guest.

"And now, darling, perhaps you'd be kind enough to tell me what you were looking for."

She was startled. Not frightened, just startled, and very prettily too. "I? Why, whatever do you mean?"

He leaned down and took her face between his two hands. "Let's not quibble, pet. You've done everything to this place but take the stuffing out of the mattress. You heard me coming before you were quite through, and you arranged yourself and your props to give the impression that you'd just dropped in for a cup of tea." He put a knee in her lap as she started to struggle, lowered his hands to her throat. "Go on, baby, tell me it was three other fellows."

She seemed genuinely frightened now. "I—I think you must be crazy!"

McCord's fingers exerted a little additional pressure. "That was your line when we first met, remember? Try something new, like yes, I did it, but it really wasn't me, it was my subconscious."

She just sat there and looked at him, and

presently tears grew in her wide blue eyes—eyes so deeply blue that they were almost violet—and hovered on silken, soot-dark lashes, and finally one of them fell off and ran down her cheek. McCord noted with some surprise that it left no telltale smudge of mascara.

He took his hands away and said angrily, resentfully, "God damn it, now why did you have to do that?"

"Because—because you hurt me, you big lug!" She accepted his proffered handkerchief, and presently from its folds there issued a query that put him on the defensive: "Why must you always be so suspicious?"

"Suspicious!" He mastered an intense desire to throttle her again. He asked God a question. "Dear God, do you think I'm suspicious?"

"But it's so—so silly!" she protested. "Why should I search your apartment?"

"Why should anybody?" he demanded. It occurred to him to take an actual inventory of his losses, if any. He discovered a spare watch and some cuff links missing. The thief might possibly raise forty dollars on the lot, presuming that the thief ever decided to try. He thought the attempt was unlikely.

He couldn't think of any other object, though, until he remembered that Charity herself had mentioned a letter, presumably written by her sister Hope and inimical to the best interests of somebody, probably the three men who had carried Charity out of the Beverly-Plaza, only to turn her loose after half an hour. Back in the living room he found his uninvited guest examining her reflection in the mirror of a gold compact.

"Mind standing a frisk?"

"A—a frisk?"

"A search of your bag, your person. I've got to find out something and that's the quickest way to do it."

A SLOW flush crept up from her throat. "Then you do think I took something?"

"I've got to find out," he said stubbornly. "Some stuff of mine is missing."

She drew herself up straight and proud, "Very well."

After a time he had to admit that she wasn't in possession of any of his property. He was suddenly embarrassed.

"All right, so I'm a heel, but the only other way would have been to take you down town and have a matron do it." And when she still continued to look at him as though he had just crawled from under a rock: "That would have meant booking you for breaking and entering, or at least illegal entry."

"There was still another way."

"Sure, I know. I could have taken your word."

"But you didn't."

"I'm sorry." It occurred to him that somewhere in the vicinity there ought to be one of the detectives assigned to tail the two available sisters and their self-appointed attorney, Webb Fallon.

"I've got to go out for a minute or two. Will you wait here for me?"

"Have I any choice? You're a policeman, aren't you?"

"There's even some doubt of that," he said shortly, remembering that Captain O'Meara had relieved him from the Martin case and that if O'Meara found out he was still involved, he, McCord, might rate a more or less permanent suspension from the department.

He used the automatic elevator to the small, desk-less lobby, pushed through double glass doors to the street. There were perhaps half a dozen cars parked along the immediate block and in one of these he found a dick named Wankowski. The car itself bore no insignia.

"How long has she been here?"

"Fifteen, twenty minutes," Wankowski said. He was a squat, beetle-browed man of fifty; a little soured by the knowledge that younger men had gone farther. "Say five, six minutes before you showed."

"You knew it was me she was coming to see?"

"I thought maybe," Wankowski said drily. "She read the names on the mailboxes, so after a while I did the same, and yours was the only one I recognized."

"Where else has she been?"

"Her own hotel—the Mayan. In there maybe half an hour, changed clothes, came out, cab, here."

"All right, keep on her," McCord said. He returned to his apartment, discovering that Charity had been moving about, putting things to rights. He wondered if she had decided to forgive him. Her color was still a little high. He chose to concentrate on the present. "Don't bother with that stuff. They'll take care of it in the morning."

She looked at him. "No more questions?"

"No."

Her eyes were violet pools. "You must have talked to that detective who's been tagging me around."

McCord managed a casual "Unh-hunh," and let it go at that.

"He's one of the things I wanted to talk to you about." Her hands toyed with a small gold trophy he had won on the police pistol range. "You haven't exactly a trusting nature, have you, Lieutenant McCord?"

"Should I have?" He went over and tried to see the back of his head in the console mirror. All he could see was the upper edge of Doc Stein's dressing. He felt of it gingerly. "Look, darling, I've had about all I can

take tonight. Let's not fight any more."

She came and stood behind him, on tiptoe, so that he could see the reflection of her face over his shoulder. "Poor head." Smooth, cool fingers rubbed the back of his neck.

So that's it, he thought. The wench is now going to give me the old allure treatment. It occurred to him that Webb Fallon might have sent her to find out if the police knew anything about her sister Hope that they hadn't spilled. He decided that he had nothing to lose in an exchange of confidences.

He turned and put an arm around her waist, tentatively, trying to see how far she was willing to go in return for the privilege of pumping him. Apparently she was willing to go at least that far.

"Look at me."

Her eyes were quite devoid of guile. "Is it true that you have been relieved from the case?"

HE wondered how she had found that out. "Temporarily."

"Why?"

"Because I'm supposed to have let your pulchritude—yours and Faith's and Hope's—influence my better judgment."

"Captain O'Meara must be a very stupid man."

McCord didn't think O'Meara was stupid. Nor did he think that was the real one for his being sidetracked. He didn't know the real reason; he couldn't even guess at it, unless O'Meara was making him the goat as an alternative to having the whole bureau turned into a political football.

"Oh, I don't know. O'Meara may have had something there."

"Now you're just being gallant."

McCord laughed at her. "And what are you being, hon?" He thought it was odd that in a matter of four—well, say five—hours they could have reached this stage of intimacy. With his eyes wide open and a mind fully awake to the possibility that she was seeking to use him, it was a little frightening to find that nothing mattered except the nearness and the sweetness of her.

He tried to tell himself that under the same circumstances he could feel this way about her sister Faith, possibly about Hope, but it was no go.

He bent and kissed her with unexpected tenderness.

"All right, I did have you tailed. Faith too, and that excellent and surprisingly generous attorney Webb Fallon." He led her unresisting over to the divan, sat beside her. "Can you blame me? I was—well, rather fond of Hammerschlag."

"Then you really think Hope killed him?"

"I don't know," he confessed. "There are a couple of reasons why I think she mightn't

have, but she must have a pretty good idea of who did."

"Will she—will they—I've heard stories of how policemen feel when one of their number is killed. I—I just can't bear to think of her being—" Again she had recourse to McCord's handkerchief.

"She won't be. If she were a man the boys might get a little careless with their guns, but she'll be all right." His eyes grew watchful, cagey. "Even if she did it, Fallon can probably get her off with a ten-stretch."

She leaned her head against his shoulder. "You don't like him very well, do you?"

"That's natural," McCord said. "We're on opposite sides."

"But don't you think it's funny he should have—have looked up Faith and offered his assistance?"

McCord didn't tell her how funny he thought it. True, it was possible that there was a connection between Hope Delancey, *née* Martin, and the murder of Public Works Commissioner Welles. The San Francisco police had thought there might be. Then too, that prince of lobbyists, Saul Saracco, had certainly known Welles.

Connecting links could be Saracco's appearance at police headquarters immediately following publication of Hope Martin's picture, and the subsequent approach to the remaining Martin sisters of Webb Fallon, an attorney who numbered among his more important clients none other than Saul Saracco. The trouble was Saracco and Fallon had come down to the bureau to bail out one of Saracco's satellites. Incidentally, there actually had been a guy picked up for drunken driving. While there, Webb Fallon had learned of the Martin triplets, and of a case which promised tremendous publicity.

"They all do it," McCord said. His fingers touched the glossy blackness of Charity's hair. "This must be pretty tough on you, darling." After a while he said, "On Faith too."

"It could mean the end of us both," she admitted. "School boards are notably skit-tish about scandal. So are the very rich, for that matter." She turned and looked at him. "I suppose that sounds mercenary to you, but I may as well be honest.

"It's people who never had any brothers or sisters, that coin phrases like 'Blood is thicker than water' and that sort of thing." She thought about that for a moment. "I don't say that I wouldn't help Hope if I could, but I can think of half a dozen friends who are as close to me as my sisters have ever been."

MCCORD pretended to think it wasn't callous. He remembered hearing others afflicted with relatives say much the same thing.

"Then you looked me up merely to find out how much of a chance she has of beating the rap?"

"I—I don't know," she said in a low voice. "Perhaps it was because I was frightened and you seemed so—so sort of understanding, and then you were hurt, and everybody seemed to be blaming you for what really wasn't your fault, and—"

He was surprised to see new tears forming on her lower lashes. He was even more surprised to find himself believing her, or almost. He himself attended to the tears this time. "You're sweet."

"And your door was open," she said.

"Of course it was."

After a time she straightened, began doing things to her hair. "Did you know that Mrs. Van Dorn had left all her money to Faith?"

"The hell she— Is that a fact!" He now had a beautiful motive for Egbert's dislike of the young lady he was allegedly intending to marry. But though this was a sop to his own vanity, McCord couldn't for the life of him find it germane to the business of Hope and a dead Hammerschlag.

"I suppose there are strings to such a bequest."

"Gretchen Van Dorn seems to be a rather peculiar mother. She doesn't like Egbert—but she doesn't want to abandon him, and her fortune, to the wolves after she is gone. Faith is supposed to assume the responsibility of both."

"Marrying Egbert before, or after, Gretchen storms the pearly gates?"

"Before."

McCord found the situation incredible, but after a moment's thought he realized that it was no more so than some of the other things that had happened in the last few hours.

"How does Faith feel about the arrangement?"

"She can't quite make up her mind. Mrs. Van Dorn has been awfully nice to her, and she doesn't dislike Egbert, but—"

"The feeling isn't mutual," McCord said.

Charity regarded him with some surprise. "So you sensed that too. What did Faith have to say?"

McCord lit a cigarette.

"Told me, not very politely, to mind my own business."

The phone rang. By his wrist watch it was almost two in the morning. He wondered if they had located Hope Martin. "Yes?"

Gretchen Van Dorn's voice, slightly tinged with asperity, wanted to know if she was talking to Lieutenant McCord. He said she was. She said, "Young man, someone has robbed me of my jewels."

If he had needed anything else to make his day complete, this was it. He just stood there for a moment petrified. He found him-

self speaking as though to a perfectly normal person.

"You're accusing me of the theft?"

"Certainly not," Gretchen said. "I think Egbert took them."

"I see," he said presently. "May I ask just why you troubled to call me about it?"

"See here, young man, you're a policeman, aren't you? If this were New York I'd see that the commissioner took steps to keep public servants from talking to poor old women taxpayers as though they were—were scum!"

McCord thanked God that this wasn't New York. "I didn't mean to be rude. I'm a homicide detective. I only investigate murders."

"And you don't appear to make much headway with them, either," Mrs. Van Dorn said waspishly.

"I know," McCord said. "Do you want to formally charge your son with the theft?"

That stopped her. "Well—"

"Then I'd advise your reporting the robbery to the Robbery Detail. And the branch office of your insurance company, if the jewels were insured."

Curiosity prompted him to ask the value of the missing gems. Mrs. Van Dorn said somewhere between seventy-five and a hundred thousand dollars, she supposed.

"It isn't the money, it's the—"

"I know," McCord said. "It's the principle of the thing." He hung up with the feeling that he had not heard the last of Gretchen Van Dorn, nor of her jewels. He would not have been surprised to find some of them sewed in the pockets of his newest suit, the one his tailor had delivered just that afternoon.

Turning, he became conscious of Charity there at his elbow. Her face was pale.

"Stephen, do you suppose—I mean, could Faith have—"

To himself McCord said, "Well, Jesus W. Ker-riste!" Aloud he said, "Now that's a fine sisterly thought for you." He took her face between his two hands. "Listen, if you're planning on becoming the last of the Martin line you're certainly lined up on the target." He kissed her soundly on the mouth. "Now go home, will you? I'm tired."

VIII

AT the fountain in City Hall Drug McCord ate a ten o'clock breakfast and read the early editions of the afternoon papers. In rough tweeds and black brogues he looked and felt pretty good, considering. The bruise on the side of his face could have been no more than the result of a minor altercation with his wife, had he had one.

The papers headlined the Hammerschlag kill, carrying a picture of the Dutchman when he had been a harness bull. There was

also a picture of Hope Martin under the caption: "Wanted For Questioning!" Captain O'Meara's official statement was a masterpiece of words without meaning. He had managed to kill the story of Faith's clandestine meeting with her sister Hope, and the attack on Charity and McCord was carefully played down.

McCord was surprised that O'Meara had let him off so easily. Chief-of-Detectives Regan said that he had called O'Meara in, not because he felt any lack of confidence in Lieutenant McCord, but because developments warranted putting every available man on the case.

Gretchen Van Dorn's jewel robbery rated only a stick in the regular news columns, though a feature writer did venture the opinion that the robbery was only coincidental to the Hope Martin case. There were no pictures of either Egbert or his mother. Webb Fallon's name was mentioned as the attorney employed to defend the Sisters Martin.

McCord folded the paper carefully, put it in his pocket, paid his check and crossed the street and the broad expanse of terraced lawn surrounding City Hall. The sun was warm on his back, and the air was clean and fresh in spite of the traffic in and around Civic Center.

He was still a little sore at O'Meara, not so much for the dismissal itself as for the manner of it. Nor could he shake the thought that O'Meara had had some ulterior motive. Passing through the crowded rotunda on his way to the police department he ran into Saul Saracco and again was reminded of the influence the big man was supposed to wield around the Hall. He wondered if perhaps this influence hadn't reached out and touched O'Meara. He gave Saracco a polite nod.

"How are you, Saul?"

"Fine," Saracco said. "Just fine." He looked as though he would have liked to look like Edward Arnold. He did, a little. "How's the case?"

"You interested?"

Saracco's full, hearty laugh was also reminiscent of Edward Arnold. "Apparently my attorney is." His eyes were as hard to read as a couple of jet marbles. "Give that guy something in skirts to defend and there's no holding him."

They entered the cool marble corridor from which various doors and cross arteries gave access to the labyrinthine workings of a big city's police department. Some of the doors were open, and behind them men in shirt sleeves, in uniform and out, shouted and sweated and swore at each other, or into telephones.

About to push through the double glass doors leading to the detective bureau Mc-

Cord said, as though remembering that Saracco had asked him a question, "I'm not on the case any more. O'Meara's handling it personally."

Saracco gave him a sharp glance. "Sore about it?"

"Hell, no," McCord said. "It was nothing but a headache."

SARACCO'S eyes touched the livid bruise. "I guess it was, literally." And then, casually: "You think there's anything to this idea that the Martin girl was mixed up in the Welles kill?"

"I don't know any more about it than you do," McCord said. "Why?"

"Welles was a friend of mine," Saracco said shortly. "I'd like to see somebody handed the rap for knocking him off."

"You're doing business with his successor, aren't you?"

"Naturally," Saracco said. "I'm selling something. The Commissioner of Public Works buys what I have to sell."

"Or else," McCord said. "I don't suppose you've remembered anything that could help San Francisco—on Welles?"

Saracco shook his head. "I gave you all I knew on the first try. His widow, maybe? Welles liked to play around some, and maybe his wife—"

McCord nodded. "I'll look into that, Saul." He opened the door of Identification, went in. There were perhaps a dozen dicks going through the files. A couple of these had witnesses they were showing the picture books to.

It was the picture books that McCord himself was interested in, for in his mind's eye there was still the memory of the guy who had conked him. There was nothing for it but a painstaking, possibly fruitless search of the big steel racks swung against the walls.

At eleven-thirty he was still at it when Captain O'Meara came in. O'Meara looked surprisingly well, assuming that he had been working all night.

"You're not due on till four."

Sudden anger glinted in McCord's eyes. He carefully kept it out of his voice. "Have you changed the diapers on all the rest of the boys?"

O'Meara frowned. "What the hell's got into you, Steve? You're nursing something, and I don't like it."

"You started it."

O'Meara shook his head. "Regan started it."

McCord appeared to think that over. After a while he said, "Saul Saracco tell you I was here?"

"He said he'd seen you, yes."

"He suggested you ought to send me home again?"

O'Meara made a fist of his right hand, looked at it thoughtfully. "Saracco doesn't make suggestions to this police captain. Is there any reason why you think he should have made such a suggestion?"

"He's interested in the Wells-Hope Martin case. You pulled me off of it."

"I see," O'Meara said quietly. And then, as one reasoning man to another: "It strikes me we're going at this thing the wrong way. Let's try it with the assumption that I'm as honest as any cop can be under the system. Say I did pull you off, not because someone asked me to—but because I thought it was good politics for my department. You haven't stayed off."

"It keeps getting shoved down my throat."

"But you still didn't come in and tell me about it," O'Meara said.

"Did I have to?" McCord demanded. "Wankowski's report told you Charity Martin had been up to see me. And the Robbery Squad has probably been around to ask what you knew about the Van Dorns. At least I referred the old lady to them."

"What did the Martin girl want?"

McCord grinned. "She wanted to tell me what a very stupid man you were."

"Oh?"

"And she seemed to know a hell of a lot of things that nobody outside of the department should have known. I couldn't figure out how she was getting this information unless someone inside was letting it slip."

"That could happen without its being me," O'Meara pointed out. For the first time he appeared to notice what McCord had been doing. "Find what you were looking for?"

"No."

"Think you will?"

"I don't know."

"You lied to me last night, didn't you? You saw the guy that conked you. Ask yourself who's been holding out on whom?"

"Want me to stop looking?"

"No."

McCord discovered that somehow he had been put in the wrong. "A little while ago I tied up the Welles kill with the Hope Martin case. You yourself asked me about it last night. And this morning, first crack out of the box, who mentioned it again?" He answered his own question. "Saul Saracco."

"Yes," O'Meara said. "Well, good hunting, Lieutenant." He went out.

McCord began again the interminable task of looking for a needle in a haystack. At twelve o'clock he knocked off to give his eyes a rest. In the communications room he found that the missing Hope Martin had been seen here, there and everywhere, but running the various rumors down had resulted in exactly nothing.

A couple of Robbery Squad dicks cornered him in the main corridor. One of them, a guy named Hahn, said, "Look, Lieutenant, what's your slant on this Van Dorn outfit?"

McCord was sympathetic. "You've talked to them, then?"

"Till we were blue in the face!"

The other guy said sourly. "When they weren't talking to us. The old lady thinks it's Egbert, though she won't come right out and say so. Egbert thinks it's Faith Martin, and he doesn't mind saying what he thinks. As alternatives he gives us anybody that was within a mile of the suite last night." He spat.

"Egbert is just about the most helpful son of a bitch we've ever run across. He says we could maybe suspect his mother. We tell him she's got seventeen million dollars, so it ain't hardly likely she'd steal her own jewels just to collect the insurance. He comes back with the idea that if that is so, why should he have to steal 'em either? Ain't the seventeen million as good as his?"

"Only it isn't," McCord said. "I understand the old lady has left it to Faith."

"Now why the hell," Hahn wanted to know, "didn't some of them mention it to us?"

"You might kind of keep an eye on Egbert," McCord suggested. "He may be trying to frame Faith for it in order to get his mother to change her will."

"By God, that's a thought!"

McCord had another one. "I suppose there's no doubt that these jewels really exist?"

"Hell, no," Hahn's partner said. "About a dozen guys on the hotel staff seen 'em. Besides, there's the insurance policy with all the main pieces listed. There's a star sapphire worth twenty grand that the old lady was gonna have made into an engagement ring for Egbert to give to this Faith Martin. To kill the curse, she says. She says it's all on account of the curse that these things are happening."

McCord was intrigued. "What curse?"

"Ain't we been telling you?" Hahn demanded. "This stone is suppose to be bad luck. Seems like the rock has been in her family for a long time. It's called the Ayvil Star, on account of her people's name was Ayvil, I guess, only somebody thought up this *Evil* Star business, and the thing stuck."

McCord said, "But if all the stuff is as well-known as that you shouldn't have any trouble locating it." With which encouragement he took himself back to his picture books. At twelve-thirty he still hadn't found his man but he remembered that Charity too had seen the man.

It was possible that confronted with an actual photograph her vague impressions might

crystallize into a positive identification. He went over to the Records desk and had just gotten the Hotel Mayan on the phone when Captain O'Meara came in.

◉ 'MEARA was as nearly excited as he ever got. "Well, they've finally located her."

McCord replaced the phone. "Hope?"

"Unh-hunh. Rooming house over on Towne Avenue. The landlady saw the papers, went out and got the beat cop. He's there now, holding her for us."

"Sure it's her?"

"The beat cop got her to admit her identity. Want to take a little ride?"

"Sure."

They went down to the garage, picking up a uniformed driver and a dick named Han-neman on the way. Going across town they found traffic pretty heavy, but O'Meara never let his drivers use the siren unless there was a real need for it, and in this case there didn't seem to be. They were on Fifth Street, headed east, when somebody less conservative than the skipper of the Homicide Bureau gunned a siren wide open and kept it there.

"What the hell?" O'Meara said, and leaned over the driver's shoulder and prodded the radio's volume control. Sound flooded the car.

"Cars sixty-seven, one hundred thirty-two, three hundred five, go to seven-fifteen Towne Avenue. Signal twenty. Cars sixty-seven, one hundred thirty two—" O'Meara snapped the switch. "All right, Mike, let's get there." Mike kicked the siren alive and the big car surged forward.

McCord looked at O'Meara's profile. "Our address?"

O'Meara's face was gray, strained. "What do you think? Signal twenty means shooting and I don't think it was kids with BB guns."

They swung recklessly into Towne at the same instant that a couple of prowl cars screamed into it from the other end. A third prowl car was already in front of a two-story frame house that needed paint.

Just as McCord and O'Meara and Hanne-man unloaded, the two uniformed bulls from the stationary prowl car came barging out of the hall door. One of them recognized O'Meara.

"Petrovich got it, Captain. Three times in the chest, once in the face. Not over two minutes ago." He ran for the car his partner already had in motion, tossing over his shoulder the information that witnesses said three men and a girl had run out and gotten in a car which disappeared in the direction of Seventh Street.

O'Meara nodded at McCord. "All right,

send the other cars after 'em." He and Han-neman went inside.

McCord spent two minutes finding out that the killers' car was a 1941 gray-and-brown Buick, a '39 Plymouth, no particular color, and a Caddy. He couldn't find anybody that would even guess at the license plates. He finally gave up trying and sent the two remaining prowl cars away to look for any car whatsoever that had three men and a girl in it.

Inside the house O'Meara was questioning the landlady. She wasn't much help. Two men had rung the bell and said they were detectives, and where was the beat cop with the girl? She'd given them the room number and they had gone upstairs. Then there was a lot of shooting, and she'd screamed and started for the phone, when a third man came in and hit her. She didn't remember any more.

A transient roomer said he'd heard the shots, but by the time he'd got his door open the three guys and the girl were already on their way out. It was he who had called the police the second time.

"All right," O'Meara said in a flat, hard voice. He started up the stairs, saw McCord. "What were you doing on that telephone?"

"What telephone?"

"The one in Identification!"

McCord remembered that he had indeed been using the phone when O'Meara had arrived with the news. "Why, I was—" He saw what O'Meara was driving at. It was now going to be Lieutenant Stephen McCord who had tipped someone off where the girl could be found, who was now responsible for the killing of a second cop. Red anger blurred his vision.

O'Meara said, "I may not be able to prove it, but you know where you stand with me from now on." He turned and went up the stairs.

IX

THE inscription on the pebbled glass door read: "Chief of Detectives," and below that: "Enter." Entering, McCord was impressed, as always, with what a nice job Inspector Regan had. Closing the door effectively shut out the world of noise and confusion, cigar smoke and sweat that was the Detective Bureau.

The anteroom was big enough for two desks and half a dozen comfortable leather chairs, with plenty of room left over for pacing, if you felt like pacing. Deep-piled green carpet covered the floor, and there were opulently full drapes at the tall windows. There were no cuspidors in evidence. One of the broad, flat-topped desks was empty.

At the companion desk a neat, middle-

aged woman with iron-gray hair typed precisely, efficiently, though without any great speed.

"Hello, Julia," McCord said.

"Hello, Lieutenant." Julia Cardigan had a nice voice, but she was careful about using it. She was polite, impersonal. "Inspector Regan will see you in just a moment."

"Fine." McCord sometimes wondered what went on inside Julia's head. He thought that probably she knew exactly why he, McCord, was there, but her manner gave no indication of it.

Beyond the tall windows afternoon sunlight was so strong it seemed to have actual texture. Along the walks and the wide granite steps leading up to the hall flowed a constant stream of people. A woman in widow's weeds stood in the shadow of a monument and fed peanuts to avaricious pigeons.

Deputy Inspector Lowenthal came in, nodded at McCord, sat in the vacant chair behind the uncluttered desk. Like all policemen above the rank of captain he didn't look like a policeman at all. He could have been the minister of a congregation made up of the United States Chamber of Commerce and its wives and daughters.

Under Julia Cardigan's desk a discreet buzzer sounded, and she gave McCord a nod. He opened a solid-paneled door and went into Regan's office. Here again was quiet dignity and refinement, and the influence was noticeable in Regan's manner. It was as though a shirt-sleeve character had donned a cutaway coat.

"One thing you've got to understand around here, McCord. We've got to have a certain amount of discipline."

"Sure," McCord said.

"O'Meara is willing to let it go with a ten-day's suspension. If you want to argue that you'll have to do it before the Civil Service Board. And if you do that the commissioner himself is going to be against you. You know how he feels about Civil Service."

"Sure," McCord said again. "Charges?"

Regan kept his voice level. "Whatever else there is, O'Meara didn't do any talking. You cursed him out before witnesses. If you get away with it, others'll think they can." He thrust a yellow form at McCord. "Insubordination. Ten days without pay."

"All right." McCord picked up the carbon copy, put it in his pants pocket. His tone was mild. "I guess I had it coming."

"You did," Regan said. "Don't think I'm giving O'Meara all the breaks, either." He so far forgot his surroundings as to permit his anger to show in his voice. "Damn it, McCord, there's two cops dead. This girl is making monkeys out of the whole department."

"Somebody is," McCord said. He drew a deep breath. "Well, thanks for this and

that." He went out. In the corridor a couple of reporters tried to get him to say what he thought of the case. "See O'Meara," he said shortly. "He's handling it."

"But good God, man, the leak that tipped her pals off must have come from here!"

They were right, but proving it would be as difficult as proving that he himself was innocent. Whoever was responsible certainly wasn't going to do any talking about it, and he was in no position to put the screws on. O'Meara might try, provided it wasn't O'Meara himself who had passed the word.

HE recalled O'Meara's stopping to pick him up, their leisurely progress across town. It was almost as though O'Meara had been deliberately stalling. It occurred to him that perhaps his own temporary freedom from routine might be a good thing. In a sense he was now a free agent; certainly he owed no allegiance to the guy who had just had him suspended. It was odd, then, that feeling as he did he should deny to the reporters that the leak had originated in headquarters.

"It doesn't have to be that way," he pointed out quietly. "It seems likely now that she's working *with* a mob, not running away from them. If that is so, then naturally they'd have known where she was. Say one of her boy friends happened to be hanging around and saw the landlady get Petrovich off his beat. The boy friend simply called in some reinforcements, that's all."

"That doesn't add up with the fact that she'd been worked over by someone the first time you ever saw her. It doesn't add up with the visit to her sister Faith."

The least talkative of the pair put in his oar. "And what's behind all this cop-shooting and one thing and another?"

McCord shrugged. "By me."

The first guy pretended to have just thought of something. "What did Regan want with you?"

McCord managed to look mysterious. "A special off-the-record job for the commissioner. Don't quote me."

"But it hasn't anything to do with the Hope Martin case?"

"No." McCord nodded pleasantly and went on down the hall to the Communications room. A dozen cops were keeping track of the county-wide search for the car in which Hope Martin had last been seen. McCord thought of Charity and of his assurance that Hope would be given every consideration when apprehended. That assurance wasn't worth the powder to blow it to hell now.

The orders were to shoot first and ask questions afterwards. Patrolman Petrovich, in dying, had touched the match to the al-

ready smoldering fury occasioned by Hammerschlag's death.

McCord knew that the next time he saw Hope Martin, if he ever did, she too would be dead.

On the point of entering the Bureau of Identification for another try at the picture books he saw Captain O'Meara and the dick named Hanneman at the Records counter. An encounter at this particular time might result in his being denied access to the files.

He decided to postpone finishing the job until later, when perhaps he could induce Charity to help him. Thinking of Charity reminded him that she might have heard the latest news concerning her sister Hope, and if she had she was probably having hysterics somewhere. From a public phone booth in the first-floor rotunda he called the Hotel Mayan and was informed that Charity was not in.

Another nickel bought him the privilege of talking to Gretchen Van Dorn at the Beverly-Plaza.

Recognizing his voice Gretchen said, "Well, young man, have you found my jewels yet?"

McCord restrained the almost overwhelming impulse to tell her what he thought of her jewels.

"No, ma'am."

"A fine police department, I must say," Gretchen sneered. "If this were New York—" She sighed. Her agile mind swept on to something else. "Egbert is sulking in his room because Faith has gone to lunch with that handsome Fallon person. What do you make of him?"

A little weakly McCord said, "Of Egbert?"

"Please don't be obtuse," Gretchen instructed him. "You know very well I meant the Fallon person."

"I don't know," McCord said cautiously. "He's supposed to be a pretty nice guy, for a criminal attorney. And at his trade they don't come any better."

"Then you think his interest in Faith is purely professional?"

"Well—"

"He strikes me as the sort who could very easily turn a young girl's head," Gretchen said. "Has he any money?"

"He's not in your class, if that's what you mean. I haven't heard of anybody suing him for non-payment of the butcher's bill."

"I wish you'd come out and talk to me," Gretchen said suddenly. "Come and have lunch."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"I don't know—just things." Then, as though ashamed of the momentary weakness, "Are you coming or not?"

McCord thought he was as likely to run into Charity there as anywhere. "All right." He hung up and went out to his car.

X

McCORD was not particularly gifted, with the camera eye, but he had accustomed himself to a quick and fairly reliable inventory of immediate surroundings. Entering the main lobby of the Beverly-Plaza he had no trouble spotting as detectives two men who were trying to look like house guests.

Obviously they were replacements for Wankowski and Healy, and just as obviously Faith and Charity Martin must be somewhere in the vicinity. He went over to the nearest one, who seemed terrifically interested in a *Saturday Evening Post*.

"Hello, Sorensen."

Sorensen's lips scarcely moved. "Get out of my line of vision, will you? I'm not losing this babe again if I have to pin myself to her pants."

Obligingly McCord moved around behind the big chair. "Which one you on?"

"Charity," Sorensen said. "Well, anybody can have this job that wants it."

"So you lost her?"

"Uhh-hunh."

"Any idea where she went?"

"If I had that kind of ideas I'd be a lieutenant, wouldn't I? Or at least a sergeant."

"I suppose so," McCord agreed. "What time was that?"

"Ten-thirty to twelve. I picked her up again at the Mayan at noon, tagged her here about one. She asked at the desk for her sister and was pointed to the Colonial Room. Mayo says her sister's in there with a guy named Fallon."

"Mayo have any trouble with his subject?"

"If he did he wouldn't admit it," Sorensen said sourly.

"Well, I won't mention it if you boys don't," McCord said. "You hear about Petrovich?"

Sorensen nodded. "One of the house dicks told me."

"Think your plant could have had any part in that?"

Sorensen was indignant. "For an hour and a half she could have been out committing mass murder for all I know."

McCord remembered that last night Miss Charity Martin had been quite aware of Wankowski tailing her. He thought it not unlikely that she had been just as aware of Sorensen this morning.

"Well, keep punching," he told Sorensen, and crossed to the main elevator bank and caught an up car to the seventh floor. On the point of knocking on Gretchen Van Dorn's door he was conscious of being watched, and turning, discovered Egbert with an eye applied to a crack of the doorway opposite.

Realizing that he had been seen, Egbert pretended that McCord was the one person

he most wanted to see.

"Could I speak to you a moment, Lieutenant?" His voice managed to convey the idea that the fewer people who knew about whatever he intended to confide the better.

McCord went into a room whose somewhat austere luxury was softened by the addition of cushions, bits of silk, some rather fine erotica masquerading under the guise of art, the pervasive but not unpleasant odor of incense. With the air of a boy sneaking out behind the barn to smoke corn silk Egbert got a bottle of Canadian Club.

"Mother doesn't like me to drink, but I—well, what else is there to do?"

AFTER a while he said, diffidently, not looking at McCord, "You don't like me very well, do you?"

McCord denied that he had any feeling one way or the other. "What did you want to see me about?"

"Well," Egbert said. "It's about mother, but—" He looked a little frightenedly at the hall door, finally went to it and satisfied himself that there were no eavesdroppers. "You must have noticed that she is—well, somewhat peculiar?"

McCord nodded. "I'll go that far with you without an argument."

Egbert was relieved. "Well, what I wanted to find out was whether you thought she was peculiar enough to—to justify having her—"

"Locked up?" McCord suggested.

Egbert flushed. "It sounds pretty terrible when you say it right out like that, doesn't it?" He again had recourse to the bottle of Canadian Club. "But my God, you don't know what it means, being treated like a six-year-old."

"You could always get a job," McCord pointed out. Oddly enough, he was beginning to feel a certain sympathy for the young man.

Egbert laughed hollowly. "Who would be silly enough to hire an orchid like me? Do you know anybody?"

McCord had to admit that he didn't. "How old are you?"

Egbert confessed that he was crowding forty. "And in all that time I've never been permitted to have an idea of my own."

"Well, it looks like you've finally managed to get hold of one," McCord said. "About your mother, I don't know. You might get a lawyer's opinion."

"Do you think Mr. Fallon is a competent attorney?"

"He's competent enough," McCord said, "but I'd advise against him for two reasons. One, he's a criminal attorney. Two, he seems to be cultivating Faith, which means that he'll be on your mother's side." He watched

Egbert from the corners of his eyes. "That's if your mother intends to leave—has left—the bulk of her fortune to Miss Martin."

"Doesn't that prove she's crazy?"

McCord shook his head. "Not necessarily. It's being done every day. Right or wrong, she thinks you incompetent; she's afraid somebody will take you for the works." He thought of Faith, whom for a little while he had preferred to either of her two sisters. "I shouldn't think marriage under certain conditions would be so hard to take."

Egbert almost attained dignity when he said, "I've been bossed by a woman ever since I can remember. I can't look forward to another period of servitude with any degree of enthusiasm."

"Perhaps Miss Martin won't be as strong-minded as your mother," McCord encouraged him. "What happens to the money if you don't marry the lady?"

"The lady gets it anyway," Egbert said sullenly. "She doesn't know that—at least she pretends she doesn't." He broke off to stare hopefully at McCord. "Doesn't it seem logical to suppose that if one sister is, uh, crooked, all of them must be?"

McCord's dislike of the curious old-young man was returning. "It doesn't work out that way. Statistics show that—"

"To hell with statistics. What's to prevent her marrying me and then shoving me off the deep end?"

McCord looked at him. "You've mentioned that possibility to your mother?"

"My God, yes. She says Faith wouldn't do a thing like that!"

"Well, maybe she wouldn't," McCord said. "Anyway, I think I'd take a crack at it." In the light of recent events he found that he could look at at least two of the triplets with emotions inspired only by their physical attractions. "Me, I think I'd jump at it if there wasn't a dime involved. What've you got to lose?"

A cunning look came into Egbert's pale-blue eyes. "You might tell my mother that it isn't me that's stalling."

McCord had a brief and not very pleasant feeling that something pretty horrible was incubating in the mind behind those eyes. He wondered if it had occurred to Egbert how simple it would be to marry the girl and then have her knocked off afterward. Or for that matter, to have her knocked off right now, thus leaving his mother without any legatee other than himself.

"Well, good-by now," he said, and crossed the hall and knocked on the door of Gretchen Van Dorn's living room. Waiting, he wondered what all this had to do with Hope Martin and the killing of a couple of cops. He wondered what it had to do with the three-months-old killing of Public Works

Commissioner Welles. He wondered if it wouldn't be smart to utilize his enforced vacation lying on the beach somewhere.

GRETCHEN VAN DORN put an end to these mental incoherencies by opening the door. "Well, young man, I must say it's about time!" She wore her black taffeta dress, or another just like it, but had discarded the black lace cap of last night. Her hair was fine-spun silver. Eyebrows, probing, bird-like eyes were jet.

"Yes, ma'am," McCord said apologetically. "I was—unavoidably detained."

A waiter was setting up a table in the bay formed by three of the living room's windows. Below, bright in the afternoon sun, an umbrella-dotted lawn surrounded a turquoise pool. Poised on one of the diving platforms a sweet young thing in a bathing suit the exact color of her body might have been posing for the rotogravures. When it became evident that nobody was going to encourage her to get the suit wet she descended the ladder and disappeared beneath one of the umbrellas.

A second waiter came in, pushing a double-decked cart on which were covered dishes. He and his partner presently took themselves away, and Gretchen Van Dorn and Lieutenant Stephen McCord discussed broiled lamb chops, the weather, a mixed green salad, the New York police versus the Los Angeles Police, the Martin triplets and three bottles of stout.

After a while, replete, Gretchen leaned back and said "What did Egbert want with you?"

McCord said amiably, "You and Egbert must have a fine time spying on each other."

"Don't be impertinent, young man," Gretchen admonished him. "What did Egbert want?"

"He wanted me to tell you that it wasn't he who was holding up the nuptial ceremonies."

"Hah!" Gretchen sneered. "Did he tell you what he did with my jewels?"

Smoke from McCord's pipe tinted the air the exact color of Egbert's pale eyes. "He didn't even mention them."

"How would you like to work for me?" was Gretchen's next question.

McCord had the odd thought that maybe it was Gretchen Van Dorn who had managed to get him suspended, just so she could offer him private employment. He pretended to consider the idea.

"What would I have to do?"

"Find things out. Protect me."

He lifted a quizzical eyebrow. "Protect you?"

"Certainly," Gretchen said with a trace of asperity. "I'm no fool." She leaned forward,

put both hands flat on the table. "Why do you suppose I haven't left my money to Egbert? Because if I had I'd have been dead long since."

McCord was startled. "You mean he'd—?"

"Of course," Gretchen said, adding complacently, "As he did his father."

"Do you mean to sit there and tell me that Egbert killed his father?"

She nodded. "Hoping to get his money."

"You have proof of this?"

"I know what I know."

McCord was tempted to go back and help Egbert file a charge of insanity against his mother. "So you want me to protect you from Egbert?"

"Oh, no," Gretchen said. "I've fixed him by making it unprofitable." She let him see her eyes. "No, it's occurred to me that Faith—well, perhaps not Faith herself, but her sisters—I mean, wouldn't they be interested in seeing her come into a lot of money?"

MCCORD wondered if it wouldn't be a good idea to see a psychiatrist himself.

"Look, you're just imagining things. Hope is wanted by the police for a couple of murders. She isn't likely to profit by what you do or do not leave her sister Faith. And as for Charity—" He remembered that Charity had managed to lose her police escort for an, as yet, unexplained hour and a half this morning. "Anyway, murder isn't as easy a thing to get away with as you seem to think." He stood up. "Why don't you leave your millions to some foundation?"

Gretchen sniffed. "Foundations!" Quite suddenly two tears leaked out of her eyes. She brushed them away angrily. "A lot of good you are. And I'd taken such a fancy to you, too."

"You've certainly taken a funny way of showing it," McCord said maliciously. "I don't know why I should be concerned with your troubles. But for what it's worth, here's a piece of advice. Assuming that there's anything at all to this screwy idea of yours, you wouldn't have anything to worry about if it wasn't for the money."

"Don't wait until you're dead. Split it up between Egbert and Faith. Give it to 'em now." He smiled down at her. "And don't forget to hold out enough for current expenses."

She regarded him with acute disfavor. "There you go, suggesting that I buy immunity instead of offering me the protection I deserve."

"In New York, maybe." His sneer was not as good as hers had been.

"Then you won't help me?"

"How can anybody help a vindictive, unmanageable old woman who wants to govern everybody's life?" He pointed a finger at

her. "This marriage you've got your heart set on—or at least you did have half an hour ago—isn't going to stick. If Faith is the kind to marry him just to get your money, then she'll damned soon get rid of him after she got it."

From a pocket of her black dress Gretchen got out a square of Irish linen. "And if she's doing it just because she's—she's fond of a vindictive, unmanageable old woman?" After a while she said. "Besides, I worry about Egbert."

"Sure," McCord said callously, "you worry about him cutting your throat."

There was a knock on the door, and presently there entered the Misses Charity and Faith Martin. Curiously, when confronted with two of the trio simultaneously, he was able to view them almost impersonally. It was like looking at a shop window filled with identical hats. Separated, either of the two ladies might have made him believe that black was white, but now he found that he could regard them with detachment.

"Hello, darling," Faith said, addressing Gretchen, not McCord. Her glance had touched him briefly, not to say frigidly, and it was obvious that he could have been the proverbial worm. She went over and knelt at Gretchen's knee, put her face down in Gretchen's lap and began to cry. "Oh darling, something terrible has happened." Between sobs disjointed phrases came out, leading to the conclusion that Faith was now aware of her sister Hope's latest involvement with the law.

Over the bowed head Gretchen glared fiercely at McCord. "You knew about this," she accused him.

"Well, yes," he admitted uncomfortably.

"And didn't tell me!" A thin, blue-veined hand caressed Faith's shoulder. "We'll do something, you just wait and see. We'll hire detectives, we'll—"

You old hypocrite, McCord thought. He turned his attention on Charity, still standing beside the door, looking as though she, too, could have used a lap to cry in.

"Who told you—Fallon?"

SHE nodded.

"And where did he find out?"

"I—I don't know."

With his eyes on a single loveliness McCord found his impersonal attitude evaporating. "Stop looking at me as though I were the hangman."

"But you can't deny that you are!"

"The hell I can't," McCord grated. "I just got suspended because of you and your funny sisters." Impelled by an emotion he didn't bother to identify he attempted to put an arm around her. "Look, I came out here to help you."

She pushed him away. "Help me!" Violet eyes regarded him scornfully. "With those men still following me and Faith about as though we were c-common criminals."

"They're not my doing." He remembered that they really were, though. "And, anyway, you ought to be damned glad that they're there. You're being protected from a repetition of—" He recalled the real purpose of this visit. "Listen, I want you to go down town with me and look at some pictures."

"I thought you'd been suspended."

"I have, but that doesn't stop me from—"

"Of course not. You're a policeman, a— a bloodhound."

"Oh, my God!" For a moment he almost forgot that hour and a half for which the young lady hadn't accounted. "Why don't you try to use that lovely thing you call your head?"

"You claim to think Hope is innocent. It's obvious that whatever she has done, or whatever is being done to her, is tied up with the hoods who knocked me over last night and took you for a ride. Help me identify any one of them and we'll have something tangible to go on."

Gretchen Van Dorn said crisply, "He's right, of course. I'm sure we all want to get this business cleared as quickly as possible."

By this time Faith had recovered. She addressed her sister. "I think so too, Charity, darling. Mother Van Dorn has been telling me that—that Lieutenant McCord is really a very nice man, and if it's true that he's lost his job because of us, I think we ought to co-operate with him."

Charity appeared to find a modicum of logic in it. She suffered McCord to lead her out.

In the car, and trailed by a stubborn if not exactly invisible Sorensen, they started down town. Presently it occurred to McCord that he could be doing a little preliminary spade work on the way.

"I want you to think back to the time you spent with those men. Wasn't some name mentioned? Didn't they call each other anything?"

"I do seem to recall—" She turned and looked at him. "It was something about a—a Turk, or a turkey, or— Oh dear, I just can't remember!"

"A turkey," McCord said. "Turk." And then the words meant something. The guy's face came back to him and was linked with a name. His mouth tightened. "What you heard was 'Tirk' or 'Tirkell.'" A guy named Eddie Tirkell had once worked for Saul Saracco in the days when Saracco had been active in the construction racket and there had been trouble with the unions. He remembered too that Eddie Tirkell had killed

a guy and had drawn a rap for manslaughter. That meant his picture would be in the files.

In the Bureau of Identification the name Tirkell bought McCord a three-year-old card from the records, and this pointed him to the proper section of the photographic files. But the likeness of Eddie Tirkell was no longer there. There was nothing but a nice blank rectangle of lacquered metal.

XI

IN THE eleventh floor of the Commercial Exchange Building there was only one door with Saracco's name on it. "Saul Saracco, Inc."

There was no indication of what business Mr. Saul Saracco was engaged in. Other offices along the corridor all invited you to use: "Entrance, 1124." If you wanted to see, for instance, the district agent for Cement Products, Inc., in 1107, you went to 1124. It was the same with Allied Amusement Enterprise, in 1163.

All in all, it appeared that Room 1124 was a sort of clearinghouse for a dozen or so utterly dissimilar projects, and that if Mr. Saul Saracco himself directed their various activities he must be a very busy man indeed. The young lady at the information desk in the outer office said so, and would Mr. McCord care to wait?

He took a chair in a row of six or eight against the wall. Two other gentlemen also were waiting and they examined McCord with casual interest. Neither they nor the staff of five employees behind the mahogany rail appeared to know he was a cop.

Of the five beyond the railing, three were girls. Two of them looked like girls you would find in any other business office and they were doing about the same things. The lady at the information desk was different. There was a sleekness, a hard arrogance about her chromium perfection which suggested the *ne plus ultra* in female hotel clerks.

The two men were pasty-faced automatons who ran bookkeeping machines, big ones, the kind you find in banks. Indeed, McCord had the impression that down the hall somewhere there would be an office labeled: "Security Branch Banks, Incorporated," but the entrance would still be Room 1124.

He wondered if an inquiry about Eddie, "Turk" Tirkell would ruffle the blonde's calm. He wondered if it would ruffle Saracco. Probably not, he thought. At least not to the point where Saracco would put his face in his hands and sob out a confession.

McCord merely felt that he now had hold of enough intangibles to justify pursuing a certain line of investigation. Summed up, these intangibles presented a rather impres-

sive array, not as evidence, but for the purpose of bolstering the theory that Saul Saracco knew more about the Hope Martin case than a certain cop named McCord. Looking at the thing with objectivity you had:

1. Saracco's presence at headquarters immediately following her escape.

2. Hope Martin had been questioned by the San Francisco police in the death of one Commissioner Welles. Saul Saracco had known Welles.

3. Saul Saracco had still been present at headquarters when it was established that Hope Martin had relatives, to wit: the sisters Faith and Charity Martin. Whose attorney had subsequently looked up these sisters, offering assistance? Saul Saracco's.

4. Who again had been at headquarters immediately prior to the tip-off which had made possible Hope Martin's second escape from the police? And who was in a better position than almost any other outsider to know exactly what went on? Why, Mr. Saracco, of course!

5. What hoodlum had knocked a certain lieutenant of detectives cold and assisted in the kidnapping of Charity Martin, probably under the mistaken apprehension that she was Faith? A gun named Eddie Tirkell, formerly identified with Saul Saracco.

6. Who had rather gone out of his way to suggest to McCord that Commissioner Welles' wife might have killed the commissioner? Why, Mr. Saracco.

7. Who might have been able to exert pressure in certain quarters ending in McCord's being relieved from the case? This was substantiated by the removal of Eddie Tirkell's picture from the files.

Suppose that Eddie himself had recognized the possibility that McCord had caught a glimpse of his face?

SUPPOSE he had reported this possibility to his employer? What more natural than that McCord should be expected to look through the gallery? Captain O'Meara had actually discovered him in the act on the heels of Saul Saracco's entry into O'Meara's office.

Unfortunately for either Saracco or O'Meara, or both, the possibility that he might get hold of a name to fit the face hadn't occurred to them. Thus they hadn't bothered to destroy the data in the card index. Having built it up piece by piece, McCord proceeded to knock it full of holes. Saracco had a perfectly logical reason for being at headquarters last night. One of his men *had* been arrested for drunken driving. And as for Webb Fallon, it was natural for him to have accompanied Saracco in the effort to spring the drunken driver. He was

Saracco's attorney. But he was not Saracco's attorney to the exclusion of all other clients. And the Faith-Hope-Charity Martin case did offer infinite possibilities for the kind of publicity a criminal attorney likes.

All right, so Saracco had known Commissioner Welles. So had about a million other people. But *because* he had known him, it was not outside the bounds of reason that he really did want to see Welles' killer punished. Thus the hint to McCord about Welles' widow.

True, Saracco had once been the employer of Eddie Tirkell, but there was no evidence that he still was. Nor could you say for a fact that Saracco instigated the removal of Eddie's picture from the files.

So why am I here? McCord thought gloomily. Did he hope to frighten Saracco into some damaging admission? It was kind of silly when you thought about it. On the other hand, he couldn't have a general alarm put out for Tirkell. For a period of ten days he was no better than a private citizen.

Suppose a general alarm were issued. The way information had been leaking from police headquarters lately there was no chance that such a search could be kept quiet. Saracco would hear about it. And Eddie Tirkell would hear about it too.

It was at this point that McCord decided he was tired of waiting. He got up, gave the platinum Miss America a nod, said he would be back after a while maybe. He had not taken more than half a dozen steps along the hall when almost at his elbow he heard loud voices coming from behind a solid-paneled door.

One voice said angrily, "It's got to stop, I tell you!" and a second voice, Saracco's, said, "I don't know what you're talking about." And the first voice said, "All this—" and then there was the sound of a blow.

McCord retreated to the door he had just left, so that when the other door opened he could see and be seen without actually being caught in the role of eavesdropper. Sure enough, the door opened and Webb Fallon emerged. His handsome face was as pale as the handkerchief he held to a bleeding lower lip. Behind him in the doorway Saul Saracco could have doubled for an angry but regretful Edward Arnold.

"Now wait a minute, Webb. There's no use—"

Both men became conscious of McCord at the same time. Surprise darkened Fallon's eyes, and he made one quick swipe with the handkerchief and tucked it in his breast pocket. "Hello, Lieutenant," he said evenly.

"Hello," McCord said. He looked at Saracco. "I'd about given up waiting for you, Saul. There are a couple of other guys in there and I thought I'd drop back later."

The tiny furrow between Saracco's eyes went away. "No, stick around." He motioned McCord inside. "Webb—" For so powerful a man his voice was curiously hesitant.

Fallon held himself rigid. "Yes?"

"I'll see you later?"

"If you like," Fallon nodded. He strode down the hall toward the elevators.

Sighing, Saracco followed McCord along the short passage connecting with his private office.

"You'd never believe it, how vain that guy is. He needs glasses like nobody's business." He watched McCord's face. "I suppose you noticed his mouth?"

"Why, yes," McCord said. "He run into something?"

Saracco chuckled. "Fell over a chair, by God." He indicated the chair, a massive one with a tall back. McCord decided he could accept the story without appearing too naive.

"Pride goeth before a fall."

SARACCO'S booming laugh raised echoes in the big room.

"And that was written in the days before they had optometrists too." He busied himself at an ornate Chinese Chippendale bar. "Well, here's to crime."

"To crime," McCord said. They drank.

Saracco pressed an annunciator switch. "Tell those mugs they can scram, Julie." He sat, pushed a cigar humidor across at McCord. "Now."

McCord took his time. "I don't think there's anything to your angle on Welles' wife," he said after a while. "I saw her again this afternoon and she doesn't strike me as the type."

"Didn't someone tell me that you were taking a little—ummm—vacation?"

"Probably," McCord said drily. He admired his host. "People are always taking you into their confidence. Nobody told me I couldn't work. They just said I wasn't going to get paid."

"And you love your work," Saracco nodded.

"Not particularly. I'm just stubborn, that's all." He emptied his glass. "Mrs. Welles doesn't deny that her husband liked to play around. She just says he ran mostly to blondes like—well, like that chrome-plate lovely you've got in the outer office."

"Julie?" Saracco chuckled.

McCord looked at him with polite interest. "You don't think so?"

Saracco shrugged heavy, perfectly tailored shoulders. "As I recall it, I didn't mention any particular woman in the case."

"No, you didn't and that's a fact," McCord said. He examined the tip of his cigar. "That one was my own idea. I mean, the Martin

girl and the commissioner being registered in the same hotel and all."

Saracco sighed. "I'll be frank, Lieutenant. I don't like Laura Welles because two or three times she's dropped hints that I contributed to her husband's delinquency. I thought I'd—well, sort of pay her back for those. Besides," he banged the desk top with a flattened hand. "God damn it, she as much as intimated that I shot him myself."

"But you didn't," McCord said.

Saracco gave him a sour smile. "Welles' bank accounts ought to show that he and I got along all right."

"He died pretty well heeled," McCord admitted. "Mrs. Welles spoke to me about that. She knows a large part of it must be graft and she'd like to return it, only she doesn't know who to return it to." His smile was a trifle cynical. "Seems there's no provision made in the city charter for getting money stolen from the taxpayers back into the fiscal system."

"'Stolen' is a harsh word," Saracco said. "You understand that I wouldn't admit any of this before a jury. It's just that I want to set your mind at rest and put a stop to these damned rumors that his wife seems bent on starting. They're bad for business."

McCord stood up. "Then I'll ask you two direct questions. Do you think there's any connection between the Welles kill and this Hope Martin business?"

"Meaning the Martin girl might have killed him?" Saracco leaned back in his chair. "I don't know. That's one."

"The second one is about an old friend of yours—Eddie Tirkell."

Not a muscle twitched in the broad face opposite him. "That punk! What's he done now?"

"I thought I recognized him on the street the other day," McCord said. "He reminded me vaguely of something else. You happen to have his address?"

Saracco leaned forward and spoke into the annunciator again. "Julie, do we happen to have Eddie Tirkell's address? You remember, the punk who got sent up to Quentin for a rest."

Julie said she would see. Presently she said that all she had was Eddie Tirkell's old address. Saracco copied that down, passed the slip of paper to McCord.

"Then you haven't seen him since he got out?"

"Would I? A guy like that can fool me once, but not twice. He's poison."

"Well, thanks a lot, Saul." He descended to the lobby and entered a phone booth. To a supervisor he gave his badge number, requesting that all calls originating in Saracco's office in the next half hour or so be tabulated. He hoped someone would try to

reach Eddie Tirkell by phone. He remembered that he was no longer a working part of the law's mechanism.

"No, don't bother to call me at headquarters. I'll get in touch with you." Emerging from the booth, he drove out to the address on West Sixth Street, which turned out to be a small bachelor hotel, formerly owned by a heavyweight champion. Eddie Tirkell wasn't registered there.

At five-thirty McCord called the supervisor back. No phone calls at all had emanated from Saracco's office. Either Saul Saracco had shut up shop and gone home for the day, or he had anticipated McCord. No longer having anything to lose by sharing his knowledge McCord called headquarters and left word for Captain O'Meara that the man who had knocked him cold was a torpedo named Eddie Tirkell. He then went home.

XII

THE evening papers were full of the shooting of Patrolman Petrovich and the continued search for Hope Martin. It appeared that the earth had opened and swallowed the escape car. Some additional details concerning the actual shooting had come to light. Though undoubtedly taken off guard by the raiders, Petrovich was held entirely blameless. He had used all ordinary precautions. The unbuttoned flap of his holster showed that he had tried for his gun when attacked. He was cited as a brave and intelligent officer.

There was no public mention of McCord's suspension. Nor was there any suggestion that Faith and Charity were implicated. The feature writers had gone to considerable trouble to sketch in the backgrounds of the triplets who didn't want to be triplets.

Obviously, any story about Faith would have been incomplete without a detailed description of her employer and the seventeen millions of dollars, which also involved the theft of the Van Dorn jewels. There were speculations as to the possibility that the jewels were in some way connected with Hope Martin's seeming penchant for killing policemen, or at least being present when they were killed.

Some of Charity's sister-supervisors had already left the city. There were hints that school boards in general ought to be more careful in their selection of teachers, supervisors and so on. You gathered that there might be thousands of female Fagins operating on our impressionable youth.

On the point of laying out his dinner clothes he gave some little thought to the matter of his gun and shoulder harness. Was it better to look slightly lumpy when dining

with a lady, or should one risk the possibility of being shot without being able to do anything about it? McCord had not forgotten that both Hammerschlag and Petrovich had died because they had been caught, figuratively speaking, with their eyes closed.

He decided that because his striped jacket was a double-breasted one he could wear the shoulder clip and gun without being too conspicuous. Dressing leisurely, he occasionally paused to continue his perusal of the evening papers, and on the second page of one he presently ran across an Associated Press dispatch under a San Francisco date line.

A night club proprietor by the name of Max Formosa had been shot and killed last night in his California Street apartment. Police stated that the "club" catered to underworld characters and featured floor shows that verged on the Rabelaisian. It was believed that Formosa's death was the result of an "underworld feud."

The thought occurred to McCord that Los Angeles seemed also to be the scene of something resembling an underworld feud. It next occurred to him that Faith Martin—or was it Charity?—had described Hope as a dancer specializing in routines that left little to the imagination. He put in a call for the dick named Arnstadt in San Francisco.

Arnstadt was the guy who seemed to think Los Angeles ought to solve the murders of its own citizens, even if they did happen to get knocked off while visiting by the Golden Gate.

Presently Arnstadt came to the line. "Hello, McCord. What's new down in that hick burg you call a city?"

McCord advised Arnstadt to look in the census books and find out which of the two towns was crowding third place in the nation's list. "I see by the papers that you've lost one of your own upper crust. Guy named Formosa."

"Unh-hunh. What of it?"

"Your case?"

"No."

"Whose is it?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"If I tell you will you find out something for me?"

"Maybe."

Without heat McCord said, "I don't have to tell you. I can call the bureau direct." He couldn't—but he saw no reason to inform Arnstadt of his own predicament. "This may help you on the Welles job, but if you don't want to play ball—"

"Who said I didn't want to play ball?"

[Turn Page]

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Arnstadt demanded. "All right, what do you want to know?"

"I'd like to find out if Formosa knew Hope Martin—if maybe she'd worked for him or something."

There was a brief pause before Arnstadt said, "Think she knocked him off?"

"If she did she's growing wings," McCord said. "She was here last night and again this morning." He considered that. "Still, it's a possibility. A plane can make the trip each way in a couple of hours."

"That's an angle that can be checked," Arnstadt agreed. "What gave you the idea in the first place?"

"An AP dispatch," McCord said. "She seems to be the kind of girl who might have worked in the kind of show Formosa gave his customers." It occurred to him that Mr. Saul Saracco was reputed to have an interest in some of the warmer night spots down here in Los Angeles. "Listen, this has got to be off the record, understand? If you call me back in the next couple hours I'll be at the Belvedere Gardens." He gave Arnstadt the number.

At the other end of the wire there was a dry, mocking laugh, "Politics?"

"Some," McCord admitted. He hung up with the uncomfortable feeling that Arnstadt knew as much about his business as he himself did.

A half hour later, at a quarter of eight, he parked his car in one of the curving drives leading up to the Hotel Mayan and used a house phone to announce his presence to Charity. She said she would be right down.

It would have been funny, this constant and fruitless surveillance, if it hadn't been for the memory of Hammerschlag and Petrovich. Come to think of it, the surveillance hadn't been so damned constant at that. Healy had lost Charity for an hour and a half this morning. He went over and spoke to Wankowski.

"How's it going?"

"So-so."

"Nothing new?"

"No." It was clear that he had heard of McCord's suspension and had probably been warned against divulging any information. He was respectful, but his eyes did not quite meet McCord's. He was aware that the vagaries of department politics made it not unlikely that McCord would be back at his desk tomorrow.

"Forget it, Jack. In your spot I'd do exactly what you're doing." He watched a slow flush mount beneath Wankowski's dark skin. "It might save you a little trouble if you knew in advance that I'm taking her to the Belvedere Gardens for dinner."

"Thanks, Lieutenant."

"Forget it."

When Charity came down he saw that beneath her make-up her face was white and strained. Too, her greeting was a trifle aloof, considering that they'd got on so well that afternoon. She wore a dark tailored suit that accentuated the smooth curves of her body. Her eyes were quite no longer violet; indeed he could not be quite sure they were blue.

"What's the matter, hon?"

SHE looked past him, searching for Healy or Wankowski. "Nothing." She did not see Wankowski, because he was no longer in sight.

They went out to the car and, tucking her in, McCord was conscious of the scent of her blue-black hair in his nostrils. It was almost unbelievable that nature could have endowed three separate and distinct personalities with so nearly an identical loveliness.

The fact that she was one of three was confusing. He went around and climbed in behind the wheel and they rolled down into the pleasant bustle of Wilshire Boulevard. Store windows were bright with the new fall offerings, and theater traffic was beginning to tax even the six-lane artery. The night had turned chill. McCord looked at the rear-vision mirror, could not distinguish Wankowski's headlights from the hundreds of pairs stretching away behind him.

After a while he said again, "What's the matter, hon?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry if I'm not exactly vivacious. I had a wire from my school board a little while ago. They think it would be wise if I"—her laugh was tinged with bitterness—"resign."

McCord's mouth tightened. "Because of this business of Hope?"

"Yes."

"The stiff-necked, sanctimonious bastards!" He put a hand on her knee. "And did you?"

"Naturally." And then, after half a dozen blocks of silence, "I suppose in a way you can't blame them. School boards must be careful of scandal."

"But damn it, this isn't your scandal at all. You haven't done anything. Don't they have tenure back there—Civil Service?"

"I could fight it," she admitted. "It wouldn't do me any good. You ought to know that better than anyone else. You're out of a job too."

Quite suddenly he laughed, and presently she joined him and they became very gay, pretending they were glad they were free and uninhibited. This was their night to howl, McCord insisted, and when they were shown to a table he proceeded to get slightly

drunk on three martinis, one right after another.

A couple of dances carried them past the hors d'oeuvres and a clear soup, and with the entree they had a floor show. Then they danced again, and by the time coffee and brandy was served them McCord had decided he was in love. Definitely, this time.

He began telling Charity about an idea he had; a little place on a river, or maybe a small lake, where he could have a boat and his own private dock. The implication was that all this would be doubly nice if he had someone to help him enjoy it—someone like Charity, say.

He leaned forward and covered her hand with one of his own, becoming very earnest indeed. "My idea is that in the winter time we could go to New York maybe, and see some shows, and—"

"Dear me, is this a proposition or a proposal?"

"You would think of something like that. Here a lonely old man is pouring out his soul to you and you have to get practical." He became indignant. "I suppose you don't think I have a soul?"

"Of course you have," Charity nodded. "A policeman's soul." She disengaged her hand. "All the time you've been telling me this you've been sitting there wondering where I went this morning. Don't bother to deny it. Your—Captain O'Meara—has been doing his best to disprove my story that I just went window-shopping along the Miracle Mile."

For McCord the spell was broken.

"That's O'Meara. I didn't ask you about it, did I?"

"But you knew about it," she insisted.

"Can I help it if people tell me things?" Again he leaned forward. "Listen, you can believe it or not, but my interest in this is not just that of a cop. I'm trying to help you."

Her eyes were distinctly violet now. "Help me—how?"

He watched the dancers on the sunken floor. "Suppose I could prove that Hope is a victim of—well, of circumstances, not the coked-up criminal she seems to be? Your funny school board would fall all over themselves apologizing. I know it would help Faith. Old Gretchen Van Dorn is getting a little itchy, whether she admits it or not. She's perfectly capable of changing her will."

"You don't really believe any of this, do you? About Hope's innocence, I mean. You're just telling me because you—" She broke off, avoiding his eyes.

"Because I think I'm in love with you?" he demanded. "If that was all, I wouldn't give one little damn if your whole family belonged to the Purple Gang. Certainly I

wouldn't care if you got your job back, because you wouldn't need a job."

BUT now that the case had once more raised its ugly head it was impossible to ignore it. Gradually it was borne in on McCord that she was feeling this business of Hope rather keenly. You could discount blood ties all you wanted to, and when things went along smoothly maybe you meant it. But let an emergency come along and you wanted to be in there pitching. It was almost as though she were ashamed of what he had been led to believe was a perfectly natural emotion. He wondered how old she was. Twenty-two, maybe? Twenty-six? Surely not more than twenty-six. He didn't ask her. "What's Faith doing this evening?"

Faith, it seemed, was having dinner with Gretchen and Egbert and Webb Fallon. A trifle cynically Charity observed that Mr. Webb Fallon's motives seemed almost to dovetail with those ascribed to himself by McCord.

"Perfect strangers are going out of their way to be nice to us."

McCord insisted that he was no longer to be included in the category of perfect strangers. "After all, you did rub the back of my neck last night." He grinned at her. "And if I remember right, there was a little matter of a—"

"A kiss?" She shrugged that off. "Pure hysteria, the need for somebody's—anybody's—shoulder to cry against."

"We must get hysterical again some time," McCord said. He saw a waiter coming along the narrow aisle with a portable telephone. The call was from Arnstadt. Partially drowned out by the noise the orchestra was making, Arnstadt said that the deceased Max Formosa had indeed known Hope Martin.

"She worked for him off and on," Arnstadt said. "She worked a lot of similar spots until the town got religion and closed them up. Maybe that's why she moved down to that sinkhole of iniquity you call a city."

"I see," McCord said. "No other connection? She just—ummm—worked for him?"

"You've got an evil mind, pally. If she was brewing his morning coffee I haven't found anybody that will say so."

"You check with the airports?"

"I haven't found anybody that will say they saw her there, either," Arnstadt said. And then, reluctantly, "I will admit your hunch was good up to a point."

"I'm a very smart fellow," McCord agreed. "You must pay us a visit some time and learn how we do it." He disconnected. The waiter took the phone away. People were looking at McCord as though he might be Louis B. Mayer. He discovered that Charity was

looking at him too, though not exactly with the same inference.

"Was that about—Hope?"

"What makes you think it might be?"

"Don't play with me, Stephen. It was about Hope, wasn't it?"

He nodded gloomily. "I'm not playing with you. I just don't want you hurt any more." But after a time he gave it to her straight. "Another killing, up in Frisco. I asked Frisco to find out if she'd known the man."

Her hands played havoc with one of the Belvedere's napkins. "She had?"

"Yes," he said. "Let's get out of here."

They went out to the foyer where he got his hat from the check room.

Outside, it was definitely cold now, and faint wisps of fog were drifting in from the ocean. Putting her in the car McCord said, "Would you mind stopping by the apartment with me for a moment? I want to get a top-coat."

Her profile was pale, cameo-hard. "And then what?"

"I don't know. We could go for a drive maybe."

"Will you try to find out if anything more has been heard of her?"

"If you like."

"All right." She sat perfectly straight, perfectly still for the entire fifteen minutes it took him to reach the apartment.

Uncomfortable, angry with himself, McCord forgot even to look for the trailing lights of Wankowski's car until he was actually in his own street. Then, cutting his lights, he saw Wankowski's turn the last corner, brighten, halt, fade into nothingness. He went around and helped Charity to the sidewalk.

They were on the lowermost of the three steps to the entrance when he sensed, rather than heard the approach of still a third car. This one, too, was without lights, rolling smoothly, silently in the opposite direction to his and Wankowski's. He saw a blurred white face at the rolled-down window, the dull sheen of metal that was not a part of the car.

An outflung arm knocked Charity away from the lighted doorway. He flattened himself against the pavement. Powder flashes brightened the blurred white face inside the car and gun sound racketed up and down the street. A ricocheting chunk of lead kicked cement dust into McCord's face.

The car picked up speed. It was nearly opposite Wankowski's car when McCord shot its left rear tire out. It swerved drunkenly, swooped up over the curb and collided with a tree. Then McCord, on his feet now, saw Wankowski erupt from his car and begin shooting at something that moved in the

darkness beyond the tree. There was no answering fire, but Wankowski continued to shoot until his gun was empty. McCord ran up, discovering that the shouting he heard was coming from his own mouth.

"Stop! God damn it, stop!"

Wankowski looked at him, surprised. "What the hell's the matter with you?"

McCord ran across to the huddle of clothes under the shadow of trees. Three out of Wankowski's six slugs had nailed Eddie Tirkell dead center.

He was already well on his way to wherever it is that guys like Eddie Tirkell eventually go.

XIII

AT MIDNIGHT the police had a positive identification of Eddie Tirkell as the man who had conked McCord and, together with two others, kidnapped Charity. From the landlady of the Towne Avenue rooming house they had a positive identification of the same man as one of those who had shot Patrolman Petrovich and vanished with Hope. Thus a definite link between the two events was now established.

But the motive behind those events were still as obscure as ever. Eddie Tirkell's person, his car, his room—this last located through the contents of his pockets—gave no information whatsoever about his recent activities. In Inspector Regan's outer office waited McCord, Charity, Wankowski, the dick named Healy (recently roused from sleep) and a couple of Regan's own personal stooges whose duty it seemed to be to see that none of the others communicated with the outside world.

Each of the four had already been questioned once by Regan and Captain O'Meara, sitting in a sort of trial court in Regan's private office, but the obvious intent was to grill them again. Beyond the closed communicating door Regan and O'Meara were combining the minor witnesses in the hope of picking up something new with which to confute the statements of McCord and Charity and Wankowski.

Healy's admission that he had lost Charity that morning was not new; he had incorporated that in his report. But he was being detained anyway, possibly in the hope that his presence would serve to trip Charity up. Regan professed a belief that her story of having gone window shopping was ridiculous.

Charity looked surprisingly well, McCord thought. She had come through the ordeal of being knocked down and witnessing a running gun fight, not to mention dodging a few stray bullets herself, with an exterior calm that was little short of amazing. Her

unusually high color was due to none of these things.

It was occasioned by a feeling that McCord himself frequently experienced when dealing with the official mind at work. He leaned toward her, striving to exude assurance.

"They do it every time, hon. Cops always seem to think it's the victim who's to blame."

"But it's so—so silly!" Charity protested. "That man, that Eddie Tirkell—it's perfectly obvious that he was trying to pay you back for identifying him."

McCord nodded. "That's what's worrying them. They're wondering how he knew I'd identified him." It was worrying him a little too. As far as he had been able to learn, the general alarm broadcast had not mentioned McCord's name in connection with the pick-up order. There had been a leak somewhere, unless Eddie had been gifted with psychic powers. McCord himself knew that Saul Saracco had known that he was looking for Tirkell.

He recalled his interview with Saracco, and his subsequent attempt to trap that gentleman in communication with Eddie Tirkell. Saracco needn't have used his own phone. But for that matter he had no more reason to suspect Saracco than he had to suspect certain members of the police department.

Of one thing only was he sure. Somebody didn't want the Hope Martin case cleaned up; at least not in the direction McCord had been heading. But there was an awful lot of killing going on. It couldn't go on forever.

McCord wondered if Eddie had been sent after him, not so much to get rid of him, McCord, as to get rid of Eddie himself. That led him to again speculate about Wankowski. Had the stocky detective just been afflicted with a nervous trigger finger? Or had he deliberately shot and continued to shoot until there was no possibility whatever of Tirkell being able to talk afterward?

WANKOWSKI and Healy were agreeing that a cop led a dog's life, and if O'Meara—yes, and Regan too—weren't satisfied with results they could damn well get themselves some new boys. Healy's particular beef was that his superiors expected one man to watch three separate and distinct hotel entrances. From his remarks and the glances he occasionally threw at Charity it was clear he didn't think she had slipped him accidentally.

Charity moved a little closer to McCord, as though for protection. "That man would like to kill me, I think."

McCord thought it was funny that a schoolteacher should so readily have been able to detect the fact that she was being

tailed by experienced men. He said,

"Did Webb Fallon tell you you might be shadowed, or was it just womanly intuition?"

"You're as bad as the rest of them. Suppose we go back to last night. Did some naughty men take Charity Martin out from under your very nose? Did they apparently carry her out through a crowded hotel lobby, and put her in a car, and scare the wits out of her and—" She wrinkled her nose in memory. "So there! Is it any wonder that from then on a girl would go around getting kinks in her neck from looking over her shoulder?"

"But you knew these were cops," McCord said. "If I remember rightly, you complained about it last night."

She was indignant. "You think I can't tell a cop from a—a gangster?" She considered that. "Besides, they didn't offer to molest me like the others, did they?" She proceeded to powder her nose, obliterating the two freckles. "I think I'll call up Mr. Fallon and ask him to get me out of here." She yawned. "I'm tired."

Jealousy gnawed at McCord's vitals. Just because he was handsome and talented and glamorous did Webb Fallon think he could go around impressing two of the triplets? "Listen," he said earnestly, "I'm not going to give Fallon an argument on Faith. He can have her. Hope too, if he can find her. But you I saw first, and you don't need Fallon to get you out of here. All you've got to do is stand up and walk out, and if those two monkeys by the door want to make an issue of it—" He rose to his feet, his manner portentous.

Charity regarded him admiringly. "My hero." She leaned back in her chair and crossed silken knees. "No, on second thought I think I'll save you for an emergency."

"Hah!" Reluctantly, McCord resumed the chair beside her.

"That reminds me," Charity said, "have I thanked you for saving my life yet?"

"No, you haven't."

"Then I do," Charity said. "It is a very small, very worthless life, but I appreciate your saving it for me. I'm going to count the bruises, like beads, and I'm going to say, 'He loves me, he loves me not,' and if it comes out even—"

Whatever she intended to do if it came out even remained forever a mystery, for at that moment the corridor door opened and Webb Fallon came in. His eyes went directly to Charity.

"Are they detaining you against your will, Miss Martin?"

The two watchdogs couldn't quite make up their minds what to do about him. He was one of the town's leading legal lights. One of them said, "Now wait a minute,

Counselor," in a half-hearted sort of way. Under his breath McCord said, "Speak of the devil."

Charity said, "But such a handsome devil." She stood up and answered Fallon's question: "Yes, they are.

Fallon's eyes, lazy, amused, looked at Regan's two dicks. "I don't seem to find any record of an arrest. Is there one?" Obviously there wasn't any, and he knew very well there wasn't. They shuffled their feet, regarded the door to Regan's office, hopefully. When Inspector Regan stood there they were terrifically relieved.

REGAN and Fallon stared at each other. Watching them, McCord likened the two men to an angry lion and a ringmaster who knew all the tricks.

Regan said with affected heartiness, "Well, Counselor!"

Fallon nodded politely. The briefest of gestures indicated Charity. "Have you any further business with my client?"

"No," Regan said. "I was just going to tell you you could go." And then, his leashed temper fraying a bit around the edges, he again transferred his attention to Fallon. "Just the same, I'd like to know how the hell you—"

"The radio, of course." For the first time Fallon appeared to notice McCord. His smile was friendly. "I understood Miss Martin was dining with the lieutenant. One of our more wide-awake commentators announced a gun fight involving the lieutenant. From there it was but a step to looking for her somewhere in the neighborhood of headquarters.

"Faith has been quite worried about your safety, Charity. It was she who asked me to find you." His manner was that of an old friend of the family. "So I think perhaps we'd better go reassure her."

"Yes," Charity said. She gave McCord and the rest of the room a bright nod. "Well, it's been nice to have met you all so informally like this."

McCord got rather violently to his feet. "I'll go with you."

Regan looked at him. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because there are still some things O'Meara and I want to discuss with you," Regan said. He kept his voice level, but the effort showed in the tiny ruptured veins in his nose, his cheeks. "If you don't mind?"

"And if I do?"

"You'll probably have to stay anyway," Regan said, "even if you turned out to be another of Mr. Fallon's clients." A brief, bitter smile touched his mouth as he looked at the attorney. "I don't suppose he is—yet?"

"No," Fallon said. His gray eyes asked McCord a question.

McCord shook his head. "Not unless you don't hear from me in the next two or three days." Without looking at Charity he went past Regan and into the inner office. Captain O'Meara was at the tall windows. He did not turn even when the door closed behind Regan, and the Chief of Detectives shot him an angry glance, shrugged, and dropped into the chair behind the too-big, too-expensive desk.

Abruptly, Regan pounded the desk. "God damn it, what's got into you two? I won't have it, understand?"

O'Meara pivoted slowly. "You won't have what, John? Either I'm running my department or I'm not."

"A hell of a fine job you're making of it lately," Regan grumbled. "You wanted McCord out of the case. Well, he's out. Now what else do you want?"

"He isn't out," O'Meara said levelly. "He's never been out."

McCord's fingers curled about his pipe. "People keep pushing it at me," he said quietly. "All right, say that I've been doing a little pushing myself. A man has his pride."

Regan glared at him. "A police department's no place for grandstanding."

O'Meara said in a tight harsh voice, "You knew about Eddie Tirkell this afternoon. You and the girl both. What I want to know is why you didn't mention him till a couple of hours afterward."

"There didn't seem to be any hurry," McCord said. "Somebody in the department knew about him before I did."

"What do you mean by that?"

"His picture's been lifted from the files," McCord said. "And don't say it was I who took it, either."

A bleak smile touched O'Meara's thin lips. "Are you saying that I did?"

Regan thrust his chair violently backward. "God damn it—"

"No," McCord said, answering O'Meara's question. "I'm just mentioning it as one of the reasons I thought I'd do a little investigating on my own first."

"Such as what?"

McCord shook his head. "I'm still on my own. Unless you want to cancel that suspension."

The Chief of Detectives spat out a flake of cigar wrapper. "Well—no."

"Then that's settled," McCord said. "I'll tell you this: Eddie Tirkell could have gotten the tip from just two places—headquarters or Saul Saracco."

Neither Regan nor O'Meara appeared surprised that he had been to see Saracco. "There's one other possibility," O'Meara

said in his flat, emotionless voice. "There's Charity Martin."

"All right, she knew about him too. Though it was through her that I learned about him in the first place."

"It strikes me," Regan said sourly, "that you're getting pretty thick with the Martin sisters."

"My business," McCord pointed out. "My personal business."

O'Meara studied the tips of his shoes. "Like Tirkell?"

"You might ask Wankowski about Tirkell," McCord said quietly. "All I did was shoot out a tire."

"Yes," O'Meara agreed, "all you did was shoot out a tire. Well, if the Inspector is through with you, that's all for now."

XIV

McCord decided that one o'clock in the morning was not too late an hour to go calling. Indeed, under the circumstances, he decided that the hour was just right. Besides, Webb Fallon's apartment lay almost in a direct line on his way home. He parked at the curb opposite the Hollywood Towers and regarded the imposing façade.

He felt that the projected interview might be the inspired move of a very great detective. On the other hand it might well be the sort of thing you'd expect from a very great fool. The odd thought that he was acting like a lovesick youth—he put from him as unworthy.

It was a matter of no consequence to him whether Fallon had delivered Charity to her sister and then retired from the scene. What he really wanted to see Fallon about was the alleged incident of Fallon's falling over a chair in Saul Saracco's office. He wondered if the two men had patched up their quarrel, or if perhaps he could use it as an entering wedge to split them wider apart.

He wondered what Fallon had been on the point of saying when Saracco's fist so effectively interrupted him. Was it possible that "All this—" could be construed to mean "All this *killing*?" Fallon, he thought, would not be the type to condone mass murder. He was more the sort who would prefer diplomatic means to direct action.

Apparently someone in the Hollywood Towers had been throwing a party, for a lot of people suddenly began to debouch from the lobby, getting into various cars parked up and down the street. McCord decided this was as good a time as any to make an entrance without having to be announced.

He did not pause to analyze his reasons for wishing to arrive unheralded. Indeed had you intimated that he hoped to surprise Charity in the act of viewing Webb Fallon's

etchings he would have called you a liar. No, there was not a jealous bone in his body. He simply felt that it would be better if Fallon weren't expecting him.

An elevator boy, preoccupied with the departing guests, saw nothing unusual in McCord's assertion that he had forgotten an apartment number just given him by the night clerk. McCord had carefully avoided the night clerk, but the boy didn't know that. He refreshed McCord's memory and let him out at the tenth floor. "First turn to your right, sir."

Traversing a length of quiet hall carpeted ankle-deep with maroon broadloom McCord took the first turn to the right as directed and presently found himself before a walnut-and-ivory door which looked like the outside portal of a colonial mansion. There was even a brass knocker, though the management had thoughtfully furnished an auxiliary means of summoning the occupant, in case you didn't want to arouse the neighbors.

McCord pressed the mother-of-pearl button set discreetly in the right-hand door frame. For a long time nothing happened, nothing at all. He couldn't even hear a buzz from beyond the panel.

A little indignantly—he hadn't gone to all this trouble for nothing, by God—he again assailed the buzzer, finally essaying a sort of shave-and-a-haircut effect: dum-diddi-umtum—dum-DUM. This didn't seem to be getting him anywhere either, and he was on the point of really going to town with the brass knocker when at last the door opened. He was face to face with the platinum lovely from Saul Saracco's office.

She was not glad to see him. Surprised, maybe, but not glad. "What's the big idea?"

Though a trifle surprised himself, McCord carefully pretended that he had known she was there all the time. Also, being something of a detective, he concluded that if she were there, then Charity was not. He gave Fallon credit for being smart enough not to get his dates mixed.

Indeed it seemed likely that Fallon himself was not there, else it would have been he who answered the doorbell. Unless, of course, Gorgeous here was a permanent adjunct. McCord made his smile genial, convincing, admiring.

"I'll bet you thought Webb had forgotten his key."

It turned out that this was an exceedingly good guess, but it still didn't gain him admittance. She eyed him coldly. "So what if I did? That doesn't explain you."

McCord looked past her into a small foyer whose walls were alternately glass brick and blue-tinted mirror. The mirrors multiplied his own reflection and that of the blonde until there seemed to be quite a crowd present.

The blond goddess was equally shapely from all angles.

DRAPED carelessly over a chair a lush brown beaver coat said that she was not a permanent resident of the apartment. McCord wondered if she had a key or if she had used the fire escape.

"Webb asked me to drop in on my way home," he said, adding as corroborative evidence that he had seen Webb down at headquarters a little while ago. He had a minor inspiration. "Probably the Martin girl detained him longer than he expected."

She was pretty good at dissembling, but she could not quite control the brief, swift widening of the eyes, the tightening of the full lips that told him his shaft had struck home. Abruptly she stood aside. "Come in."

In the big living room he took off his top-coat, folded it neatly, laid his hat on top of it. He discovered that she had helped herself to a drink, so without being asked he did likewise. Her green eyes watched him, curious, speculative, as he moved about the room, carrying his glass and occasionally taking a sip from it.

He decided that she must have a key to the place. Therefore she had every reason in the world to be interested in Webb Fallon's attentions to another woman. He wondered how best he could play this unexpected development to his own advantage, and studying her face for some sign of a break he made a rather startling discovery.

In spite of her youth and the difference in coloring she was very like someone else he knew. Thinking back to the first time he had seen her—that would be this afternoon, in Saul Saracco's outer office—and to the subsequent interview with Saracco himself, he remembered that Saracco had called her Julie. At the time it had meant nothing; his mind was busy with other things. But now, alone with her like this and sensitive to impressions, the similarity of both features and name were too strong to be ignored. Quite suddenly he said,

"You're Julia Cardigan's daughter, aren't you?"

She looked at him. "What's wrong with that?"

He denied that there was anything wrong with it. "It just never occurred to me that Julia was old enough to have a grown-up daughter, that's all."

He remembered Julia Cardigan as he had last seen her, a calm, efficient, middle-aged woman whom he had thought at the time probably knew more about running the detective bureau than Inspector Regan himself did. He thought what a swell tie-up this must make for Saul Saracco: the mother in a highly confidential post in the police de-

partment; the daughter employed in his own office.

Not that the arrangement was so unusual; in any big city there are dozens of similar examples. But just the same, it was curious how everything kept coming back to Saracco. McCord was affected with a small excitement, as is a man who finds a package of new razor blades he had forgotten about. He put his glass down on the mantel over the pristine fireplace.

"Been working for Saul long?"

She shrugged. "A couple of years." Clearly she was thinking about something else. "Tell me some more about Webb and the Martin girls."

McCord smiled at her. "Jealous?"

Her green eyes hated him. "Why should I be?"

"Why shouldn't you be?" McCord countered. He helped himself to one of Fallon's excellent cigars. "Hell, I am." He sighed. "The things I've done for those babes, and then to have them falling all over themselves to curry favor with this—this Casanova—" He appeared cut to the quick by the injustices of the world. "How about you and me going some place and getting stinko, baby?"

She shook her head, no. After a while she said, "Not just yet, anyway." But as though the idea suggested something to her she went over and slopped some more bourbon into her glass. Her hands were shaking. "I hear you drew a suspension. Was that over these Martin bitches?"

McCord had a little difficulty concealing his distaste for such a description applied to Faith and Charity. About Hope he could not say, but he didn't think Faith and Charity were bitches. Not Charity, anyway. No, certainly not Charity. His voice was sullen. "Unh-hunh."

"That's a God damned shame," Julie said. She came and stood beside him, not offering herself, but not withholding, either. It occurred to McCord that she was already quite drunk. The suspicion became a certainty when she attempted to set her glass beside his on the mantel and missed the ledge by six inches. The glass shattered on the hearth at their feet.

Neither paid any attention to it; the blonde because she obviously didn't give a damn, McCord because he realized that such an opportunity for getting inside information might never again come to him. He put an arm around her, bent her far back over it and crushed his mouth against hers. They were like that when Webb Fallon came in.

Of the three, Fallon was certainly the least embarrassed. Julie's confusion took the form of a kind of sullen triumph; and I-told-you-so expression that said, "You aren't the only one who can two-time people, Mr. Webb

Fallon. You want to play promiscuous I'll show you what the word really means!" Her mouth was slightly smeared, her eyes a little crazy.

NOW here is a fine, bawdy wench, McCord thought. He wiped lipstick from his own mouth, looked at Fallon with a kind of fatalistic expectancy.

"Not Julie's fault. I—I guess I just had a little too much to drink."

Fallon was politely amused. "The gentleman at all costs, eh?" He laid his hat and stick on a table, shrugged out of his topcoat. The bosom of his dress shirt was unrumpled, a white shield *sans peur et sans reproche*. He was a knight clothed in dignity and a clear conscience.

"If I may hazard an opinion, it's Julie who's had a little too much to drink." His gray eyes were only mildly reproving when he looked at her. "Don't you think you'd better run along home, pet?"

Julie tossed her head like a high-spirited horse. "Sure, Julie, you run along home. Don't bother to ask me where I've been, because really it's none of your business. You're just a common, cheap little slut that—" Quite suddenly her legs gave way under her and she collapsed in a sobbing huddle.

Fallon looked at McCord. "This promises to be a little more difficult than I'd imagined. Perhaps—" A quizzical eyebrow suggested that maybe McCord wouldn't mind being the one to leave first.

McCord got his hat and coat, put them on. "I take it that you delivered Miss Martin safely to her hotel?" This was partially for Julie's benefit; he knew she was listening, and he didn't want her to forget the initial cause of the current contretemps.

Fallon nodded gravely. "Quite." At the hall door he said, still courteously, "You must drop in again some time, Lieutenant. I imagine there are a number of things we could discuss."

"That's what I thought," McCord said. He looked at Fallon's handsome mouth. "Saracco hurt you much?"

Gray eyes mirrored polite surprise, nothing more. "Saracco?"

"Sure," McCord said. "In his office this afternoon."

"Oh, that," Fallon touched his lower lip gingerly, though there was no visible swelling. His eyes were thoughtful, recalling the incident. Presently he chuckled. "I can readily see how you got the impression that it was Saul. Especially if you were, shall we say, eavesdropping at the door?"

Behind them, in the living room, Julie's sobs had dwindled to a brief, intermittent sniffing. McCord said, "Then it wasn't Saul?"

Fallon countered that with a question of his

own. "Did Saul tell you it was?"

"No."

"Then perhaps you hadn't better let it prey on your mind too much," Fallon suggested. His smile was gently derisive. "As I remember it, I fell over a chair."

McCord nodded. "That's what Saracco said."

"But you don't believe it?"

McCord opened the door. "I believe you and he have managed to get together on the story." His smile was as gently derisive as the attorney's. "I hope you'll be as lucky in all your dealings with him."

"I'm sure I will be," Fallon said.

"Luckier than—well, that guy up in San Francisco, for instance?"

Briefly, very briefly indeed, something showed in Fallon's eyes that was certainly not polite amusement. "Who was that?" Abruptly he laughed. "Don't tell me you're thinking of Saul in connection with Commissioner Welles again."

"No," McCord lied. "This was a guy named Max Formosa. Used to be in the hot spot racket." He got out his pipe, looked at it thoughtfully. "Some of the boys on the Vice Squad tell me Saracco has a finger in a few of the hotter spots down here." His eyes lifted suddenly. "Hope Martin used to work for this Formosa, Counselor. I just thought you'd like to know." He watched Fallon's slender, well-kept hand tighten on the doorknob till the knuckles showed white. Then, satisfied that he had planted the seed he had come here to plant, he turned on his heel.

"Good night, Webb."

"Good night," Fallon said.

He was still standing there in the doorway when McCord looked back from the turn in the corridor.

XV

DETECTIVES Hahn and Koestler of the Robbery Squad were waiting for him when McCord got home. They were the two who had asked his opinion earlier about Gretchen Van Dorn and Egbert and Faith in the matter of the missing Van Dorn jewels. They wanted his opinion again, they said, coming out of the small glassed-in office as he rolled down the ramp to the basement garage.

McCord turned his car over to the sleepy-eyed night attendant and invited them up to his apartment for a drink. They said no, they didn't think they'd better. They appreciated it and all that, but the fact of the matter was that they were in a spot, kind of, and maybe he could give them some advice, and they would certainly be obliged if he could, and in any case they didn't think they'd better

have liquor on their breath when they turned in their report.

"Although," Hahn said, licking his lips, "a dram of that panther serum you gave us once before wouldn't go bad." Hahn was the more uncomfortable of the two. He and McCord and Koestler moved over to the door of the automatic elevator, out of earshot of the attendant.

Waiting for the car to come down from somewhere around the tenth floor McCord eyed his visitors without any noticeable degree of affection. "All right, lugs, get it off your chests. I may as well tell you, though, that if it's anything requiring influence around headquarters I haven't got any. Everybody from Regan on down holds his nose if I get within a hundred yards of the hall."

"Maybe that's why we come to you," Koestler said. "Not," he added hastily, "that we think there's anything to it. It's just that you gave us the low-down on this Van Dorn outfit once, some angles we hadn't thought about, and we wanted—" He looked at his partner, apparently finding it difficult to put into words just what it was that he wanted.

The elevator came down, thumped solidly against the bumpers in the pit. Hahn said, "Well—uh—the truth of the matter is, we get a tip maybe we'd better search this Faith Martin's room again, so we go out there and wait around till she's some place else, then we do—in a refined way, of course—and what do you think we find?"

McCord's eyes were suddenly bright and intent. He hazarded a guess that was not really a guess at all. "The Van Dorn jewels?"

"Right," Hahn said. He was not particularly jubilant about it.

"All of them?"

"Well, no," Hahn said. He stared at the tips of his bull-dog shoes. "We find enough to make it open and shut, though, even if the old lady hadn't identified them. This—now—Evil Star sapphire was in the lot." His rather prominent Adam's apple moved up and down a couple of times and he spat. "We find 'em in the hem of a window drape." Heavy-lidded eyes looked at McCord. "We don't find 'em when we looked there before."

"You think it's a plant?"

Hahn sighed. "We don't know and that's a fact. Could be. The tip and all, and us finding them where they wasn't before, and the old lady thinkin' it was Egbert in the first place, and what you tell us about the set-up—" He paused for another deep-drawn breath. "Still and all, there's nothing that says the gal couldn't have hid the stuff some place else till after we'd shook the joint down."

"You brace Egbert about it? How'd you get the tip—by phone?"

The answer to both of these questions was "yes." They hadn't been able to trace the call, and Egbert wouldn't admit that it was he who made it.

"But you know how this Egbert punk is," Koestler said. "Everything he says you can take two ways, and like as not you'll be wrong even then." He made an exaggeratedly effeminate gesture. "Me, I get so interested wondering whether he is or he ain't that I kind of lose track of what he's saying."

McCord still didn't know what was worrying these guys and he was becoming a little impatient. "All right, so you found the stuff and went to the old lady with it. What did she say?"

"We found *part* of the stuff," Hahn corrected him.

McCord nodded. "Okay, part of it." He remembered that by Faith's own admission she had met her sister Hope and given her what help she could. He wondered, not for the first time, if the "help" hadn't been some of the more readily disposed of pieces of the Van Dorn loot.

Under the circumstances it was conceivable that Egbert might have made the phone call to the police, yet have had no part in planting the stolen gems in Faith's room. A congenital snoop like Egbert would be wide awake to any opportunity offered him by which he could undermine Faith's influence with his mother. But he needn't have created the opportunity.

TOGETHER, Hahn and Koestler accomplished a fairly believable recital of what Gretchen Van Dorn had said and what they had said. Though startled and obviously upset by the implications of their find, Gretchen had rapidly recovered her usual form, observing acidly that how did she know it wasn't Hahn and Koestler themselves who were trying to frame Faith with the job? They could have recovered all of the loot in some place other than Faith's room; they could have withheld part of it for themselves, using only an irreducible minimum with which to incriminate an innocent girl.

Koestler said profanely that it was patent Gretchen herself didn't believe this. She was just fighting shy of the almost inescapable conclusion that her trust in Faith had been misplaced. When it was suggested that Egbert had stolen and planted the stuff she professed herself unwilling to believe that either. Pinned down, she had flatly refused to sign a complaint against anybody until she'd had time to "think it over." Then she said that she wouldn't sign any complaint at all, ever. She would take care of the matter herself.

Hahn took up the harrowing tale. "She even threatens that if we do anything about it

she'll swear she just remembered *giving* the stuff to Faith. We ask her don't she want the rest of the junk and she says no, the hell with it. Then she offers us"—Hahn avoided McCord's eyes—"well, she offers us a hundred bucks apiece if we'll just forget the whole thing."

McCord was genuinely amused. "So naturally you took it."

"Well—"

"And then you got to worrying about your skipper wanting to know what the hell had happened to the case."

"It ain't only that," Koestler protested. "We could give him the story off the record. What we wanted to see you about is— Well, you think the old gal will keep her mouth shut about the two hundred bucks or don't you?"

McCord shook his head. "My advice to you is to put the whole thing down on a report, making about seven carbon copies, including the two yards she tried to bribe you with. Don't forget to put in that you accepted the money as evidence of the attempted bribe." He watched acute disappointment register on their faces. "Sorry, but you asked for my opinion and I'm giving it."

After a while Hahn said reluctantly, "Yeah, I guess you're right. With anybody as unpredictable as the Van Dorn biddy, it could be dynamite." He looked from his partner back to McCord. "Well, thanks anyway."

McCord opened the elevator door. "You still don't want that drink?"

They said they didn't, and took themselves up the ramp to the street. McCord ascended to his apartment and went to bed. But when sleep presently came to him it was filled with all sorts of horrific visions and he got little good from it.

He dreamed that he hung suspended above a vast seething cauldron tended by a giant with a Cyclops eye, and looking closer he discovered that this eye was an enormous star sapphire. In the boiling, bubbling molten contents of the pot faces appeared, sank, only to appear again; faces tortured, malevolent, pleading, triumphant. Inspector Regan's face was there, and Captain O'Meara's, and the dead ones of Hammerschlag, Petrovich, Eddie Tirkell.

Again, he was being relentlessly stalked through a dank and noisome labyrinth by a malignant specter bent on destroying him, and though this specter's body outlines were blurred, becoming nothing more than a huge and ominous shadow, the face was quite clear and sharply etched. It was the face of Saul Saracco.

With the utter lack of continuity peculiar to dreams, McCord next saw himself pinioned

by three Circes, extraordinarily beautiful, unbelievably vicious. While two of them twisted his arms and legs from his torso, the third pressed her wanton mouth to his, telling him that he mustn't mind her sisters; that it was all in fun. In the background danced gleeful fiends; fiends with the heads of Webb Fallon, Egbert Van Dorn, Julia and Julie Cardigan, mother and daughter; Detectives Wankowski, Healy, Hahn and Koestler.

And while he was dreaming these things an old lady by the name of Gretchen Van Dorn met an ugly and violent death.

XVI

THE living room of the Van Dorn suite was so full of cops it was difficult to move without stepping on one. There were plain-clothes cops and harness bulls and technicians, all apparently busy at specific chores but managing to convey the impression that they were just running around in circles. Even Captain O'Meara himself finally got sick of it and shooed some of them out.

Through a doorway on the left, in Gretchen's bedroom, a deputy medical examiner could be seen filling out a report, and on the bed beyond him lay the subject of the report, now mercifully hidden by a sheet; mercifully, because the slight body had fought stubbornly to retain the spark of life and the result was not pretty. Death by strangulation usually isn't.

Under the sheet there were marks of fingers on Gretchen's throat, brutal fingers, and on her wrists there were other marks. As nearly as it could be determined without an autopsy the time of death had been fixed at between three and four o'clock that morning. It was now nine-thirty and the police had been there something less than half an hour.

Outside, it rained, a slow, chilling, depressing downpour, and because of the leaden skies it was necessary to have the lights on in the suite. They looked feeble, unnatural, and their pale-yellow glow turned the faces of those in the room a sickly saffron.

In the second bedroom waited Egbert and Faith and Charity, under the watchful eyes of Detective Wankowski and Healy. Charity had arrived under escort almost coincident with McCord's own arrival. Egbert, roused from sleep, or at least from a semblance of it, still wore pajamas under a hastily donned robe of heavy, quilted mauve silk. His face was pale, sullen, and he stood well apart from the others, his eyes touching them only briefly, and then almost furtively.

On the face of Faith the marks of tears were clearly evident. Hers was the only sign of grief. It was Faith who had discov-

ered the tragedy. Out in the hall the management of the Beverly-Plaza wrung its hands, but not out of sympathy over the death of one of its guests. McCord looked around for Webb Fallon, was surprised not to find him, for if ever there was a time the Martin sisters needed counsel this was it.

Though O'Meara had not yet done so, he was on the point of arresting Faith for the murder of her employer and patron. Summoned to the scene by an authority with which he could not argue McCord was forced to admit that if he were in O'Meara's shoes he would have to do the same thing. The evidence was preponderantly against Faith Martin and nobody else.

After a time O'Meara came over and spoke to McCord with a rather notable lessening of his recent animosity. "What do you think of it as far as we've gone?"

"I don't know how far you've gone," McCord said carefully. "From the looks of it, it's open and shut against Faith. She had the opportunity and one of the best motives in the world—about seventeen million dollars."

O'Meara looked at him curiously. "You've seen the old lady's will?"

"I've heard about it," McCord said. Through the open bedroom door he watched Egbert's pallid, expressionless face. He remembered that Gretchen had asked him, McCord, for "protection," though insisting that she had nothing to fear from Egbert so long as he couldn't profit from her death.

As though reading his mind O'Meara said, "Egbert is out, I guess. According to him, if the old gal had lived another twenty-four hours he'd have been sitting pretty. She was going to change her will, and he admits that after that he might have done it." One of his rare smiles touched O'Meara's mouth. "I'll say this for him, he doesn't even pretend any emotion but hatred for his mother. Not before, not since."

"Do you know for a fact that she was going to change her will?"

O'Meara shrugged. "If she wasn't, why now? Why was she killed at this particular time? Why not last month, or next?" It appeared that the chief of Homicide had a rather interesting theory about this. "For my money, Egbert is for once telling the truth."

"Mrs. Van Dorn had an excellent reason for changing her will—if you don't already know, I'll tell you about that later. So under the terms of the old one, the girl has to do the job now or never, relying on all the smoke of her sister Hope's doings to cloud the issue." O'Meara narrowed his eyes. "Maybe relying on Webb Fallon a little bit too, if the going gets tough."

McCord got out his pipe, eyed its blackened bowl with distaste, finally put it away

and lit a cigarette instead. "You don't think there's a connection between this job and the others?"

"Do you?"

McCord shook his head. This was a point that had been bothering him ever since the cops had awakened him this morning with the news of Gretchen. The rest he had been partially able to piece together, making a pattern of sorts. A little wild in spots, and illogical and impossible of proof, but still a pattern. But this newest development just didn't seem to fit.

If it had been Faith who was killed, or even Charity, his theory would have remained fairly sound, whereas the murder of Gretchen Van Dorn was something that by no possible stretch of the imagination could be chalked up against Saul Saracco. The thought did occur to him that Saracco could probably use seventeen million dollars as well as the next one, but he could see no way in which Saul stood a Chinaman's chance of getting his large hands on this particular seventeen million.

And as for Egbert, McCord reluctantly had to agree with Captain O'Meara. Egbert would have been infinitely better off just to let things ride. Presumably the finding of her stolen jewels, at least a part of them, hidden in Faith's room had finally convinced the old lady that her trust in the girl had been misplaced. Thus Egbert need only have waited for the natural result of such a conviction.

As matters stood now, the money belonged to Faith, and would remain hers until such time as they sat her in the lethal gas chamber up at San Quentin. Presuming, again, that that celebrated criminal attorney, Webb Fallon, didn't get her off with a vote of confidence from the jury. No, Egbert seemed definitely to be in the clear on this one.

"Let's go talk to the suspect," O'Meara suggested.

McCord looked at him. "Why me?" He found himself oddly diffident about going in there and meeting Charity's eyes. For that matter he didn't exactly relish an encounter with Faith, for he had been rather more fond of Faith than of either of her sisters in the beginning. "I'm still supposed to be in the doghouse, remember?"

"Don't think I've forgotten it," O'Meara said. "There're just some angles you can help me clear up, that's all." His gray eyes were hard, uncompromising. "Being a friend of the family, you might say."

McCord let that pass. It occurred to him that he was by way of being a suspect himself; possibly not the actual killer, but at least an accomplice. He found that looking at it through O'Meara's eyes he could even

find a motive of sorts. Say that he, Stephen McCord, together with the two available Martin sisters had ganged up on Gretchen.

Faith would get Gretchen's money. It was not unreasonable to suppose that she would be grateful for their help, was it? So he and Charity would get married and live happily ever after on their share of the proceeds. He wondered if something like that wasn't at the back of O'Meara's mind this very minute. He wondered if in their entire three years' association he had ever known what was at the back of O'Meara's mind. "All right," he said shortly, and followed the older man out of the surrounding bedlam into the comparative quiet of Faith's bedroom.

At a nod from O'Meara Detectives Wankowski and Healy took themselves out and shut the door. McCord assumed that Wankowski had explained his putting three slugs into Eddie Tirkell to everybody's satisfaction. At least he was still functioning. O'Meara assumed a cheerful attitude; crisp, incisive, but cheerful. "Now," he said, addressing the room at large, "let's see if we can't work this thing out."

Faith and Charity and Egbert looked at him with about equal amounts of enthusiasm, which was nil. Egbert looked as if he could stand a drink from the bottle of Canadian Club he kept cached in his room, perhaps two or three drinks. His age showed on him this morning. Charity gave McCord a brief, impersonal nod which intimated that she acknowledged knowing him but wasn't especially happy about it.

Under a transparent white rain cape she wore a green wool suit, and on her head was a casual rust-colored felt with a jaunty green feather. Her eyes seemed more green than blue and there were two spots of angry color in her cheeks. She and Faith looked like a before-and-after-taking ad. Faith was definitely below par.

O'Meara began on Egbert. "I understand that a couple of the Robbery Squad boys talked to you last night." He appeared to be looking at Egbert, but he was really watching Faith. "Something about your—er—mother's jewels, wasn't it?"

Egbert stared at the floor. "Well—"

"They seemed to think it was you who phoned in the tip," O'Meara prompted him.

Egbert lifted pale-blue eyes. "That's ridiculous!"

"Is it?" O'Meara needled him gently. "Isn't it a fact that you stood to gain by discrediting Miss Martin, here, in the eyes of your mother?"

In spite of the effeminate mauve robe Egbert attained a kind of dignity. "Miss Martin and I were about to be married."

"That's hardly answering my question,"

O'Meara said dryly. "Even in marriage there's a difference between the husband holding the purse strings, and the wife." He became almost genial. "If you're anything like I am, you'd rather it was the husband." Obliquely his eyes again rested on Faith's profile. "I put it to you that under the terms of the existing will it isn't necessary for Miss Martin to marry you, or in any way to share the estate."

IT WAS clear now what O'Meara was trying to do. While apparently attacking Egbert he was in reality strengthening his case against Faith. Obviously he had seen Gretchen's will and had learned from it what Egbert himself had hold McCord: that Faith was the sole beneficiary, whether or not she married Gretchen's son.

Egbert nodded sullenly. "I suppose that's true."

"What do you mean, you suppose? You knew it for a fact, didn't you?"

Egbert shuffled his slippers. It could have been he who was accused of the murder. "Well, yes, I did know it."

"Did Miss Martin know it?"

"I—I couldn't say."

For the first time Faith entered the conversation. "I didn't know it, and it wouldn't have made any difference if I had. Gretchen's—my employer's—intent was clear. So far as I was concerned, if I didn't choose to carry out her wishes I had no right to the money, even to a part of it."

O'Meara's tone was mildly triumphant. "But you admit that you weren't too crazy about the prospect of such a marriage?"

Charity interposed a tart query. Patently she bore her sister's intended fiance no love whatever. "Would you be?"

Faith shook her head in a not-too-spirited admonition. "Charity!" She returned her attention to O'Meara. "I've told you all I know about it. Those—those policemen you mentioned are alleged to have found part of the stolen jewels in my room. They went to Mrs. Van Dorn with the information, and later she and I talked about it."

"You mean quarreled about it, don't you?"

Faith looked at him steadily. "No."

"Then she didn't threaten to change her will?"

"No."

O'Meara put suddenly hard eyes on Egbert. "That kind of makes a liar out of you, doesn't it?"

Egbert shrugged. "I have no means of knowing what Miss Martin was disturbed about—well, about all this unpleasantness that's been going on, the notoriety, that sort of thing." A slow flush dyed the unwholesome pallor of his face.

"Frankly, I was suspected of taking the

jewels myself. Indeed it is not impossible that if I had taken them I might have used them to change my mother's ideas about Faith. As you yourself have said, I was not in too pleasant a position, facing the prospect of release from one woman's domination only to succumb to another's." He became extremely earnest. "I should like you to understand that I have nothing whatever against Miss Martin. In fact, if it weren't for my mother's coercion I might have—"

Charity's lip curled. "It's swell of you to say so, Eggie. I'm sure my sister appreciates it."

"That'll be enough of that," O'Meara said. His mouth tightened. "This is a murder investigation, young lady."

Charity refused to be squelched. "One thing you seem to be overlooking, Captain. Even admitting that Mrs. Van Dorn intended changing her will, and that Faith knew about it; admitting that Faith had ready access to Mrs. Van Dorn's room, and thus the opportunity to do what was done, doesn't it strike you that she must have realized suspicion would fall directly on her?" The transparent rain cape glistened as she made an impatient gesture. "I hardly think my sister is that much of a fool."

O'Meara gave her a polite, aloof smile that yet had in it something of a cat about to pounce. "Have you any other suggestions? Say an alternate suspect?"

Charity looked at Egbert as though she would like to suspect him, but obviously he wasn't going to benefit by his mother's death. "No."

"I'm always glad to listen to suggestions," O'Meara said. And then, very casually: "For instance, I listened to one just this morning. About you. Someone suggested—indeed stated for a fact—that you arrived at your own hotel at a little before two this morning, that almost immediately you went out again, not returning until after three." He spread his hands. "In short, no one knows exactly *where* you were at the time Mrs. Van Dorn—ummm—died."

Charity's eyes were definitely green now. "All right, just for fun let's say I did it. What was my motive?"

O'Meara was quite ready for that. "My dear young lady! Isn't it reasonable to suppose that you would share in all the sudden wealth to which your own sister fell heir?"

McCord took a step forward. "Now wait a minute, Skipper."

O'Meara ignored him, continuing to bear down on Charity. "With the rather remarkable record for homicide established by your other sister—Hope, isn't it?—we shouldn't have much trouble convincing a jury that it sort of runs in the family."

A little sigh escaped Faith. Then quite without warning she sagged and crumpled up at O'Meara's feet.

XVII

GUASTI'S, a couple of blocks down Spring Street from Civic Center, was a popular luncheon spot for jurists, lawyers, the upper crust of the bail bond racket and in fact for anybody who wanted to spend two dollars for lunch and had business in the neighborhood. At one o'clock it was pretty crowded, but not too crowded to make room for a man of Webb Fallon's calibre and reputation, and for his two guests who by inference must be equally important.

The *maitre* rather ostentatiously removed the length of plush rope blocking off one of the more secluded booths, slid the table aside so that Charity and Fallon might enter, slid it the other way to make room for McCord. He was very happy to see Mr. Fallon again, he said, and still being happy about it he clapped his hands for a waiter.

Fallon dismissed them both presently, after a brief consultation over the menu with Charity and McCord, and leaned back and surveyed the room with that comfortable assurance peculiar to a male star counting the house just before curtain time.

He looked a little like a male star at that, McCord thought. The touches of silver at his temples could have been artificially applied by one of Hollywood's specialists in that sort of thing, say Percy Westmore. The general effect was Colmanesque. You could see that some of the women in Guasti's were not unappreciative.

And oddly enough McCord himself was not repelled. It was as though, way down deep, Fallon the man was laughing at Fallon the poseur, a sort of tongue-in-cheek attitude which said, "What the hell? This is part of my stock in trade."

Charity was bearing up surprisingly well under the strain of the morning's events and her sister's ultimate arrest. Her eyes were clear and unafraid and her manner toward McCord was no longer antagonistic. Possibly this was because Fallon had expressed complete confidence in the outcome of the case, and in McCord's ability to help, if he would.

McCord's peculiar position, in that so far as the police department was concerned he was neither fish, flesh nor fowl, made him, according to Fallon, an ideal ally. He could work with a semblance of authority which private detectives could not have, yet be under no obligation to report his findings, if any, to his superiors. It was clear that the counsel for the defense had with uncanny accuracy divined McCord's personal feeling

ror the accused's sister and was counting on that more than on the policeman instinct to solve a puzzle.

Of the missing sister, Hope, there had been no further word. The police were still looking for her, but this latest murder had overshadowed the others, at least so far as the papers were concerned. Attempts to check up on Eddie Tirkell's recent associates had netted the department exactly nothing. To all intents and purposes he could have been a lone wolf, and the men operating with him just a figment of somebody's imagination.

Presently Fallon said, "We must begin, of course, with the assumption that my—our—client is innocent." He looked at Charity to see how she would take the professional reference to Faith as just a "client." She didn't flinch. Fallon's eyes studied McCord, across the table. "Right?"

"That's as good a place to begin as any," McCord nodded. He wished he could believe it.

"I may as well tell you," Fallon said, "that I have a personal interest in this. I didn't in the beginning. I have now." It was clear that he was announcing his purpose of freeing Faith, not for just the additional fame it would bring him. Also he was defying McCord to hold the incident of Julie Cardigan against him.

McCord said nothing, but thinking of Julie reminded him that she was another connection between Saul Saracco and the handsome man across from him. Unlike the newspapers he had not forgotten Hammerschlag and Petrovich, nor the attack on his own life by Eddie Tirkell. But that these things had a bearing on the present situation he could not bring himself to believe—at least not a direct bearing.

He remembered Captain O'Meara's stated theory: that the murder of Gretchen Van Dorn was an attempt to take advantage of earlier events as a kind of smoke screen, and he found that he could, with reservations, subscribe to that. But that Saul Saracco was directly involved he could not believe. Off and on during the morning he had toyed with a variation of another of O'Meara's theories.

In the attempt to break down Faith, O'Meara had built up almost as good a case against Charity, based on her lack of an alibi for that fatal hour between two and three o'clock, and on the premises that she would share in the spoils. Analyzing that, McCord had the interesting thought that it might have been neither of the two visible sisters, but the missing triplet, Hope.

might have said to herself, "Well, here I am with a couple of murders already chalked up against me. Once more isn't going to make much difference in what they do to me, and if I can do those sisters of mine a favor by knocking off this wealthy old dame, why not? Especially in view of the fact that Faith snatched the old gal's jewels to help me."

A sort of murder-out-of-gratitude theory.

McCord filed it away at the back of his mind for possible use by Fallon when Faith was being tried by a jury of her peers. It might involve an admission by Faith that she actually had stolen the jewels and used part of them to aid her sister, but at least it would get her off with a possible two-to-ten stretch instead of the death penalty.

Fallon's pleasantly incisive voice cut into McCord's thoughts. "Very well, then, our only hope is to pin the job definitely and conclusively on someone else."

McCord stared at him. "You're not suggesting a frame, I hope?"

The stem of Charity's cocktail glass snapped under the sudden pressure of her fingers. "That rather sounds as though you think she's guilty."

"I didn't say that, hon."

"You meant it."

Fallon spread oil on the troubled waters. "We can't afford this sort of thing, you know." He gave Charity one of his brilliant smiles. "Even if he does mean it, it's just as well for us to have an insight as to how the police mind works. Then we'll know what we're up against."

And to McCord: "No, I wasn't suggesting a frame. In spite of my experience I'm still naive enough to believe there are honest cops and I think you're one of them. I'll admit that in an extremity I might try a frame. I'd hardly attempt to make you a party to it."

McCord moodily watched their waiter laying a clean napkin over the spot on the cloth occasioned by Charity's spilled cocktail. "Thanks."

"Love comes to a policeman," Charity said acidly. "In a pig's eye it does. Once a cop, always a cop."

McCord looked at her. "What do you want me to do, confess to the job myself?" His mouth drooped. "Incidentally, don't think O'Meara hasn't already had that interesting thought."

"But I'm sure you convinced him differently, didn't you, darling?"

Fallon sighed. "I hope I never have to put you two on the stand."

For a little while they addressed themselves to the salad and the entree. McCord gloomily considered Charity's worried loveliness, wondering why the hell neither

CERTAINLY Hope had no alibi; at least if she had she wasn't around where she could be asked about it. Theoretically, Hope

she nor the imprisoned Faith could get worried to the point of actually telling the truth, or at least something that would sound like the truth to the prosecuting attorney.

Take Charity, for instance. During that fatal hour between two and three, she maintained, she had just gone out for a walk. Now was it reasonable to suppose that an attractive and presumably normal girl would pick that time in the morning to roam the streets, unaccompanied, just for the exercise? McCord derived a certain sardonic satisfaction from the fact that the reason she was unaccompanied was Captain O'Meara's pulling her shadow off the job for questioning in another matter. Not that it would have made much difference, he supposed.

Again he was reminded that for a school-teacher—or equivalent—Miss Charity Martin had a knack almost amounting to genius for detecting the presence of police tails and rather successfully eluding them. On the other hand, practically everybody connected with the case appeared able, at will, to enter and leave such busy hostleries as the Beverly-Plaza and the Mayan without being seen by anybody at all.

Then take Faith. Here was a young lady accused of having stolen goods in her possession. McCord didn't for a moment doubt that Detectives Hahn and Koestler had actually found the stuff where they said they had. So very well, they had gone to Gretchen Van Dorn with their find.

Now wasn't it reasonable that Gretchen and Faith would have had a pretty heated session about it? Accusations and rebuttals, that sort of thing? But no, according to Faith they had just "talked" the matter over, like discussing the weather or something. And nothing had come of it, nothing whatever.

Apparently the only dramatic moment in the whole affair had come this morning, when O'Meara's oblique accusation of Charity had so upset—or frightened—Faith that she had curled up in a dead faint. Under his breath McCord said an unlovely word.

He wished that his course in criminal psychology up at Berkeley had stressed a little more heavily the peculiar quirks of the mind female. Offhand he could not think of even a morphine-riddled pickpocket who would offer the kind of explanations these Martin triplets asked you to accept as gospel.

Webb Fallon, replete, leaned back and lifted a quizzical eyebrow at his companions. "I don't suppose there's any use in delving very far back into Mrs. Van Dorn's past for the killer."

"Why not?" McCord asked with heavy irony. "Maybe as a girl she belonged to the Mafia, or fifty years later got mixed up with the Purple Gang." He avoided Charity's outraged glare. "The only thing about that is

that they wouldn't have left part of the jewels in Faith's room and tried to make it look like she did it. They'd just have put a nickel in the old lady's fist and let it go at that."

Fallon nodded. "I know it sounds silly. I was merely trying to eliminate certain possibilities before coming to the point." His smile linked Charity and McCord, seeking to bridge the gap that persisted in opening between them. "The point being—Egbert Van Dorn."

MCCORD was not particularly impressed. "Well, I'll tell you about Egbert—"

Charity interrupted him. "No, I'll tell you about Egbert." She became earnest. "Egbert hated his mother, and though he tries to hide it he hates Faith." She nodded her head vigorously. "I prefer Egbert as a suspect rather than my sister."

"Naturally," McCord said. And after a while, "Show me a motive—a good motive—and I'll suspect him too."

Fallon said quietly, "All right, I'll show you a motive. In fact I'll give you a choice of two motives, either of which would be conclusive if we could prove it." He built a church and steeple out of his fine, well-kept hands.

"I think we're all agreed that Egbert did hate his mother, and not without cause. Undoubtedly she made his life a small hell on earth, and his only possible reward—inheriting her money—vanished when she became enamoured of Faith and made a new will in her favor." He looked curiously at McCord.

"You've had several conversations with him. With his mother too, I believe. Isn't it a fact that he anticipated marriage with Faith in the same light as he regarded his mother's domination?"

"Unh-hunh."

"Very well, then." Fallon became a trifle didactic. "Here we have a man in an intolerable situation. He can not but regard Faith as a usurper, the pretender to the throne to which he feels himself entitled. His one hope, now, seems to be to disabuse his mother's mind of the belief in Faith's integrity. I've no doubt that all this unpleasant business in which the third sister, Hope, is mixed up led him to exert a certain amount of pressure on his mother?"

Remembering his first meeting with Egbert, McCord could find no fault with Fallon's logic thus far. He admitted as much.

The attorney resumed the hypothetical line of Egbert's reasoning. "But he finds his mother stubborn, unwilling to believe that because one sister is"—He paused to look uncomfortably at Charity, who had grown a little pale. "We may as well face it, you know."

"I am facing it," Charity said. "One of my sisters is a fugitive. The other is in jail. You needn't bother to mince words with me."

Fallon nodded. "Thank you. That makes it easier all around." Nevertheless his handsome mouth expressed distaste for the job. "So in spite of everything Egbert can't persuade his mother to revoke her decision regarding Faith—not, at least, through the indirection of Hope's difficulties." He drew a breath.

"His next thought might very well be something of a more direct nature; something, say, like the theft of the jewels and the deliberate implication of Faith in that theft."

McCord shook his head. "Even granting that—the idea isn't original with you, by the way—you haven't proved a motive for murdering his mother. Whether or not it was a frame, the fact remains that Gretchen was finally convinced and was on the point of disinheriting Faith."

Fallon's smile was faintly derisive. "We have only Egbert's word for that."

"Well, sure, but—" Conscious of Charity's regard McCord felt himself flushing. "My God, you'd think I was trying to put a rope around your sister's neck!"

"Of course you're not," Charity said tartly.

"No, damn it, I'm not!"

Fallon made mildly disparaging noises. "I'm afraid we're not going to get anywhere if you persist in this sort of thing. Perhaps you don't realize what a really serious predicament Faith is in." He sighed. "Believe me, I know. If I have to go into court with her; if I can't in the meantime produce a fairly legitimate alternative—" His shrug was expressive.

"Well, to go back: let's just for the sake of argument say that Egbert is lying; that even with the finding of the jewels in Faith's room his mother refused to be convinced. Suppose that she accused Egbert himself of the theft, possibly threatened to prove it. Fear, or rage,

might have induced him to become a matricide."

McCord would have denied that he was an uncommonly stubborn man, but it seemed to him that the facts hardly bore out Fallon's theory.

"I'm afraid the fear and/or rage angle is out. Gretchen ought to have known her son better than anyone else, and she professed the belief—to me personally, and rather smugly too—that she had tied Egbert's hands. In other words, much as he may have wanted to, he wouldn't kill her unless he could see a profit."

Fallon was triumphant. "All right, who profits if Faith is convicted of murder?"

McCord hadn't thought of this angle. He supposed that if it were proved that Faith had committed murder for the money, then the money would revert to the only other legitimate heir. Certainly no process of law would concede Faith's right to inherit and, in turn, bequeath the proceeds of her crime to her own relatives.

Therefore, unless an alternate was mentioned in Gretchen's will, Egbert would eventually and inevitably come into his own. He tried to envision Egbert with the kind of Machiavellian cunning necessary to the consummation of this plan and found that he could with practically no trouble. It would entail a wait, but Egbert had been waiting for a long time anyway. "You must have something there, Counselor."

Charity was enthusiastic. "Of course he has." For a moment she even forgot to dislike McCord. "Why it's as plain as the nose on your face!" She turned a radiant smile on Fallon. "Now all we've got to do is go down and tell that old district attorney about it and he'll have to let Faith go."

McCord and Fallon exchanged a wry grin. "I'm sorry," Fallon said, "but it isn't going to be quite as simple as all that. You may believe it, I may believe it, but the prosecutor

[Turn Page]

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isn't going to. Not without proof, and the burden of proof rests on us."

Charity's enthusiasm was only slightly dampened. "Then we'll get proof!"

"I'm sure we will," Fallon agreed. But it was clear, at least to McCord, that he was not too optimistic. The state had a case and it was going to take a hell of a lot of argument to shake them loose from it. He looked at McCord. "Anyway, it's something you can start working on. And if you need any money—"

"Thanks," McCord said. And after a while, "I'm not sure about the ethics of this. After all, I'm still a cop. But—" He watched Charity's eyes begin to turn green again. "Well, the hell with it. I'll see what I can do."

But oddly enough, when presently he left them and went out to his car, he did not immediately look up Egbert Van Dorn. He went out to see the wife of Commissioner Welles instead.

XVIII

AN ELDERLY maid he had seen the day before let McCord in and showed him into a small sitting room bright with chintz and flowers. Beyond French windows a terraced rear lawn, washed clean by the rain, sparkled in the afternoon sun, and there was the smell of fresh moist loam from the borders of petunias. On the hearth a small fire burned crisply, its warmth pleasant on McCord's shins.

He wondered what he was going to say to Welles' widow that he couldn't have said yesterday. It was a ticklish business at best, and he wouldn't have reopened the inquiry from this angle had it not seemed to him imperative to divorce, once and for all, the previous killings from that of Gretchen Van Dorn. If there was a connection he wanted to know it. And if there wasn't, he wanted to know that too, and quickly.

When Laura Welles came in her manner was somewhat less reserved than it had been. Indeed she seemed almost glad to see him. "How do you do, Lieutenant?" She offered her hand and he took it. She was a moderately tall, quite handsome woman somewhere in the late forties. Carefully coiffed iron-gray hair lent her dignity without making her look old. "Have you something new for me?"

"Well, yes and no." He watched her sit gracefully in a wing chair facing the windows. He himself took up a position so that his own face was in shadow. "How far are you ready to go to see that your husband's killer is punished?" He made a faint gesture of distaste. "I know that's putting it pretty brutally, but—"

She shook her head. "I told you yesterday some of the things I felt about Jim—about my husband. While he was alive I couldn't—wouldn't—do anything to hurt him, but now he is beyond the power of anyone, anything, to make him suffer for his sins, and if an exposure of those sins will also expose the rotten system which caused them—" Quite suddenly she stood up. "I'm ready to tell you whatever I can."

"Thank you." Hands in his pockets, McCord took a slow turn about the room. "I'm going to be quite frank with you, Mrs. Welles. Certain events, practically a whole chain of them, have led me to conclude that Saul Saracco was instrumental in your husband's death." He lifted a hand as she would have interrupted him.

"No, I don't say that Saracco did it. As a matter of fact I can't prove that he was the instigator. Perhaps if I had a strong enough motive I could go on from there, but until I have something of the sort all the rest is meaningless." He sighed.

"In a city the size of ours, in any city half its size, you don't go around prying into the affairs of men like Saracco without their hearing about it." He looked at her. "I didn't tell you this yesterday, but I drew a ten-days' suspension which may or may not have been due to Saracco's fine Italian hand."

Her eyes had a curious amber glow. "But you're going on with it anyway?"

McCord shrugged. "Hammerschlag was my friend. A lumbering, clumsy, not-too-bright hulk of a man, but my friend. If I have to break every statute in the books to get this killer I'm going to do it."

SHE nodded as though she could understand his feeling like that.

"There was another policeman too, wasn't there?"

"Yes."

"And this—this Hope Martin?"

"We'll never find her," McCord said with utter certainty. "The Pacific Ocean is too big and too close." He explained that. "For a while everything that touched her, or seemed likely to touch her, came in for a terrific amount of attention from somebody. One of her sisters was kidnaped and subjected to questioning. Even my own rooms were searched, presumably for a letter she had written." He drew a slow breath.

"But since her latest disappearance nobody has been bothered, except that a man named Tirkell tried to gun me out because I had recognized him from a former attack. Clearly, then, any danger from her to party or parties unknown has been removed. I don't think they'd leave her body lying around where it could be discovered and become an

embarrassment." His smile was almost whimsical.

"You see, as long as she isn't found, she can always be Hammerschlag's killer. And Petrovich's, and possibly your husband's."

Involuntarily Mrs. Welles shivered. "Then it's pretty hopeless, isn't it?"

McCord's smile was no longer whimsical. In fact it was not really a smile at all, but a kind of grimace occasioned by the tightening of his jaw muscles. "I told you I was through playing this game according to ethics. All I need is to be sure in my own mind."

"Yes," she said, and put out a hand to steady herself as though all the strength had gone out of her legs. After a while she said hesitantly, "Would it help you to know that Jim—my husband—was at the breaking point? That for months before he went away his sleep was nothing but one horrible nightmare after another?" Again she shivered.

"He was the kind of man who had no business being a thief, you see. In spite of all his efforts he couldn't quite kill off that thing we call conscience." She drew herself up. "If he hadn't been murdered I think he would have shot himself eventually. I think that possibly that is why he went to San Francisco—to be away from me, to relieve me, a little, of—of the necessary details afterward."

McCord literally forced himself to speak casually, to betray no sign of his mounting excitement. He mustn't frighten her mind back into the silence from which it had momentarily emerged.

"I see. Did the Commissioner ever discuss with you what it was that was troubling him?"

Her voice, her manner, were almost somnambulistic now. "No, he never spoke of it to me. But I knew. I used to hear him, nights." With a visible effort she roused herself. "Do you remember an earthquake we had early last summer? The one in which recent additions to several school buildings crumbled?"

The skin over McCord's cheekbones suddenly felt as stiff as a board. A hundred and thirty-odd kids had died in that quake; a quake that was scarcely more than a minor temblor and should have killed no one at all. "I remember," he said in a voice he had difficulty in recognizing as his own. "Faulty construction was blamed, but nothing was ever done about it."

Laura Welles' smile was the kind you sometimes see on the face of a condemned man when they're strapping him in the death chair. "My husband helped kill those children. By buying and passing upon the work and materials sold the city by Saracco's interests he killed them as surely as if he

had used dynamite." She held out a hand to McCord.

"I wish you luck, Lieutenant." Then, quite steadily, she led him to the door, and it was not until he was down the hall that he heard her first racking sobs.

XIX

THE afternoon papers carried the story of Gretchen Van Dorn's murder, replete with a lot of details concerning Faith Martin's arrest and arraignment. She was being held without bail. There was one new development. Police laboratory technicians had definitely established the fact that the strangler had worn gloves.

None of the several pairs of gloves belonging to Faith showed traces of having been used for the purpose, but it was held that she had probably gotten rid of the ones she had worn. Mr. Webb Fallon, attorney for the defense, was quoted as saying that the charge was ridiculous, that no one but a congenital and experienced criminal would have been aware that gloves could be identified with the wearer almost as readily as fingerprints.

In fact the whole thing was ridiculous, he said, and but another example of the common police practice of grabbing the nearest suspect without regard for the actual evidence. He further intimated that steps were in progress to apprehend the real criminal, though he carefully avoided mentioning Egbert's name.

It was not until McCord switched on his car radio that he again became aware of Egbert's potentialities. Egbert's latest exploit had occurred too recently for the papers to have caught it, but the news-casters all hopped on the item with gusto.

It seemed that Egbert, apparently a little short of ready cash and asked by the management of the Beverly-Plaza to vacate because they were tired of cops and the kind of publicity they had been getting, had walked into a Main Street pawnshop and tried to unload some of the missing Van Dorn jewels.

Naturally the hock shop boys, warned earlier by the police to be on the lookout, had been cagey and attempted to stall him. He, in turn, had gotten a little cagey himself and had vanished before the cops arrived. They were now literally combing the city for him.

As an afterthought it was mentioned that the district attorney's office saw no reason as yet to release Faith Martin. It was held that even if she had not stolen the jewels herself; if, in fact, Egbert had framed them on her, she was still the prize package in the matter of Gretchen's murder.

In other words the case against her remained in status quo. Framed or real, the theft was the reason for Gretchen threatening to change her will, and the impending disinheritance was the motive for Gretchen's murder. The prosecutor announced that he would be very glad to have a talk with Egbert, however. When and if.

At a little after four o'clock McCord decided to drive home and change clothes, for though the ones he had on no longer stank of wet wool the morning's rain had done the creases little or no good. Crossing town he considered such additional bits of information as he had been able to pick up to substantiate Laura Welles' story.

They didn't amount to much, really, except that certain underlings in the Department of Public Works remembered the former commissioner as being highly nervous and unreasonable for several weeks prior to his death. McCord had not been able to bear down here as he would have liked to, for he was in the position of a man with a tremendous potential weapon, yet unable to decide just how it could be used.

In fact he was not sure it could be used at all. Certainly if Saracco got wind of the direction McCord's investigation was taking he would immediately start plugging all possible loopholes, if there were any, which McCord was beginning to doubt. In his own mind he was now as sure of Saracco as he was that two and two made four, but he still lacked that one indelible bit of proof which would make the rest of the case authentic.

Armed with a photograph of Saracco, surreptitiously borrowed from a newspaper morgue, he had approached various officials and attendants at the airports, trying to place the man as having been a passenger on a San Francisco plane on or about the date of Welles' murder. The three-months' time lapse worked against him here. No one remembered, and there was no record of a passage being booked under Saracco's name.

Not that he had expected there would be, though he was almost certain that Saracco had done this one particular job with his own hands, instead of entrusting it to henchmen as he had with the others. It was the sole reason for the thread of panic that ran through the whole business. It was the one and only theory that would fit the peculiar actions of Hope Martin. McCord could easily imagine the big man's regret at not having put a bullet through Hope Martin immediately following the slaying of Welles. It would have saved a lot of trouble later.

As he parked before his apartment house and entered the small dim lobby McCord saw a pudgy, dejected figure seated on an up-ended suitcase in the shadow of the stairs. It was Egbert. They looked at each other

for a long moment, McCord with complete and undisguised astonishment, Egbert with the sullen, yet apologetic air of the truant returned to take his medicine.

"Well," McCord said finally.

EGBERT rose, reluctantly, stiffly, as though he had been sitting there a long time. "Could I?"—he licked his lips—"could I talk to you for a few minutes, please?"

"Sure," McCord said. Recovering from his first and quite justifiable surprise he now appeared to take the phenomenon of Egbert's presence as a matter of course. He punched the button of the automatic elevator. "You know the cops are after you?"

Egbert's womanish mouth expressed bitterness. "Would I be here otherwise?"

McCord refrained from reminding his unexpected guest that he himself was a cop, deciding that if Egbert chose to forget it, he could too. They went up, Egbert lugging the suitcase as if it were the one thing left in the world to which he could anchor himself.

In the apartment McCord ran the shades up, letting in wan yellow light from a sky that was rapidly becoming overcast again. The maid had been in and everything looked neat and in its proper place. There was no sign that prowlers had again intruded. Shedding hat and topcoat McCord went out to the kitchen and mixed a couple of stiffish drinks. Returning, he handed one to Egbert.

"Now," he said genially, "you wanted to talk to me about what?"

Egbert emptied his glass with the eagerness of a man marooned on a life raft for days. A little color came into his pale cheeks, either from the stimulant or from embarrassment. "Well, it's like this," he said presently. "I thought I could—could make some kind of a deal with you."

McCord sampled his drink. "Oh?"

"Yes," Egbert said. Though a little vague as to details it appeared that he had heard, somewhere, that it was possible to make deals with policemen. You traded them something they wanted for something you wanted. In his case, all he wanted was immunity and the small loan of, say, fifty dollars to tide him over until he could get in touch with his mother's attorneys in the East.

McCord eyed his visitor with something approaching admiration. "So that's all you want, is it?"

"Yes," Egbert said.

McCord appeared to consider the request not unreasonable. "And in return I get—what? The jewels you didn't plant on Faith Martin and couldn't unload at the hock shop?"

Egbert was now terrifically embarrassed, but admitted that this was indeed what he

had to offer. "I realize that I"—again a pink tongue came out and moistened parched lips—"that what I did was not—not ethical, but you must see that I had provocation." He nodded his head, confirming his own opinion. "Tremendous provocation."

"I suppose so, from your point of view," McCord agreed.

"Besides," Egbert said eagerly, "there is no formal complaint issued. My mother refused to sign one, even though she was convinced that Faith was the thief."

McCord looked at him curiously. "You're really not giving anything away, chum. What you're doing is confessing to something you've been caught at." He shook his head. "I can't see much of a bargain in your offer."

"But it will help Faith!" Egbert protested.

The hell it will, McCord thought. It'll tie the noose so tight around her pretty neck that even Webb Fallon can't get her out of it. He regarded Egbert with speculative eyes, wondering if perhaps this wasn't Egbert's intent. He decided not. The old-young man before him just wasn't the type to figure out anything more complicated than framing the jewel theft on someone. He would be a one-move chess player. A distinctly unnice young man, in fact a nasty young man, but not too subtle.

"Look, Egbert, just for the record again, were you telling the truth about your mother's decision to change her will?"

"Of course." Egbert nodded his head vigorously.

"Exactly what did she say?"

"She was going to take the money and put it into a trust fund for me. She said you advised her to do something of the sort."

McCord could not remember whether he had or not, but he did recall making various suggestions which would relieve Gretchen of what appeared to be her chief worry. "It was after this that she had the 'talk' with Faith?"

"Yes."

"You didn't happen to be listening outside the door, did you?"

Egbert didn't even bat an eye. "I tried but I couldn't hear anything." Resentment crept into his tone. "Besides, it was about that time that Charity and Mr. Fallon came along, so I went back to my room."

McCord sighed. "Well, whether you've meant to or not, you've done a pretty good job of cinching Faith for the gas chamber. She had to do what was done, and do it last night, or lose herself seventeen million dollars." He scowled as the thought occurred to him that it could just as well have been Charity. Doubtless Faith had recounted for Charity's benefit the result of her interview with Gretchen.

Egbert's mouth grew sullen. "I haven't said anything that I didn't say this morning to all the other officers. Except, of course, about the jewels." Blue eyes, suddenly unveiled, were sharp, suspicious. "Are you going to help me or aren't you?"

"I don't know that I can," McCord said thoughtfully, adding not so thoughtfully, "Even if I wanted to." His smile held a hint of wolfishness. "You see, Egbert, even though there's no complaint against you on the theft, and presumably the stuff will be yours eventually anyway, your job of framing an innocent person is a crime. In fact it might be considered by some that by doing what you did you indirectly contributed to your mother's death." He nodded at the open bedroom door. "You'd better wait in there for a while."

It seemed that in spite of his rounded, effeminate body Egbert could, on occasion, be as fleet as a deer. With a bleat of terror he bounded not for the bedroom door, but for the hall. McCord stuck out a foot and tripped him, fell on top of him and clipped him neatly behind the ear with a short hard right. Egbert subsided.

Presently McCord stood up, breathing scarcely faster than normal, got a spare pair of handcuffs from a table drawer and hauled his prisoner into the bedroom. It was not until some little time later that he remembered Egbert's suitcase and went through that looking for the rest of the jewels. He did not find them. Apparently Egbert had had some idea of holding them out until assured his offer was going to bear fruit.

Almost absent-mindedly McCord went downstairs and found them wrapped in a handkerchief in the janitor's broom closet off the lobby. Returning to the apartment he dropped them carelessly into the suitcase, and then, his eyes still on some far-off horizon, he picked up the phone and dialed Webb Fallon's number.

"McCord, Counselor. I think we've got something we can use."

"Good. What have we got?"

"Egbert," McCord said. "Here. In my apartment. You know where that is?"

Fallon said he did. He said happily, "Hold everything, my good fellow. I'll be right over."

McCord disconnected and went over to the windows and looked at the indigo hills with a Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer sunset behind them. Beyond the closed bedroom door he could hear Egbert stirring, but he knew he wasn't going to stir very far because one of the handcuffs was fastened to a radiator pipe. In about fifteen minutes there was a knock on the door and he let Fallon in. Fallon looked around, couldn't see Egbert and lifted his expressive eyebrows at McCord.

"Don't tell me our bird has flown?"

"No," McCord said. He jerked a thumb at the closed door. "He'll keep for a minute. There's something I want to talk to you about first."

"All right." Fallon took off his hat and topcoat, lit one of his thin dappled cigars. "I'd like to know how he happened to walk in on you, though." He blew a perfect smoke ring. "Or did he?"

"Unh-hunh." McCord explained Egbert's arrival and Egbert's idea of a deal. "I don't think we can hang the kill on him without a few synthetic props, but I'm willing to try if it's worth enough to you to play ball on something else."

Fallon stood perfectly still for a long moment. "Now wait a minute. You don't think he's guilty, is that it?"

"That's right," McCord nodded. His face, his voice, were curiously wooden.

"But you're willing to frame him for the rap if I do certain things in exchange?"

Again McCord nodded. "Unh-hunh, that's the general idea." He began to talk in a low monotonous tone. "There's not much use in going into the somewhat specious reasoning that if Egbert hadn't done what he did, then Faith wouldn't have had to do what she did." A crooked, half-ashamed smile touched his mouth for an instant.

"I tried that out partially for Egbert's benefit, but mostly for my own. It sounded like hell." He drew a slow breath. "No, there's something I want that just seems more important to me than Egbert, that's all. I'm going to get it anyway, but you can shorten the time."

FALLON studied the growing ash on the tip of his cigar. "I'm listening," he said after a while.

McCord got out his pipe, stoked it thoughtfully, not looking at Fallon, not looking at anything in particular.

"It stacks up something like this: I talked to Commissioner Welles' wife again this afternoon and I found out why he was killed. He was killed because he just couldn't take it any more—the memory of those wrecked schools and the kids that were in them. He was on the ragged edge, and if he cracked as it looked he was going to, he'd haul a lot of other people down with him." McCord began pacing the room with slow, even steps.

"Either running away from his conscience, or intending to commit suicide, he went up to San Francisco. Saracco knew about it, or found out about it, and chased him up there and did what had to be done."

Fallon appeared pleasantly interested, no more, no less. "Why did it have to be done?"

"I just told you," McCord said sharply. "A

suicide was bound to raise a stink and there'd be a hell of an investigation. Whether or not he left a note. A murder could be put down to a lot of causes, but not suicide."

There was a brief, weighted silence before Fallon said, "I'm not arguing with you, either for or against. I'm just curious as to how you arrived at this theory, that's all."

McCord licked his lips. "It would be a job that Saul would want to take care of himself. The rest—Hammerschlag, Petrovich, the girl, even the guy up in Frisco, Max Formosa—he could have hoods like Eddie Tirkell handle those, but he didn't know he was going to need them at the time. It looked like a nice private little chore that ought to be kept private." Little beads of sweat glistened on his forehead now, and in the half-light his skin had a yellowish cast.

"It was Saul's tough luck that Hope Martin saw him, either as he was leaving Welles' room, or somewhere along the way. I think he must have seen her too, but let it slide, thinking he'd never see her again."

"She was questioned by the San Francisco police," Fallon interjected quietly.

McCord looked at him. "A girl like that," he said, "a girl who knew her way around, would be apt to keep her mouth shut even if she actually saw it happen. She'd rather be a live dummy than a dead witness." After a while he went on.

"So things in her line got a little quiet around Frisco, and this guy she used to work for, this Max Formosa, gave her a card to Saul Saracco down here, saying Saracco might put her on to something." He spread his hands.

"The minute she saw Saracco she remembered where she had seen him before, and Saracco knew she remembered. Scared, she tried to save herself with a phoney story about a letter she'd written. Saracco couldn't be sure it was a phoney. He had his boys work her over, trying to find out, but somehow she got away from them. That's when the cops picked her up and brought her into the receiving hospital."

Fallon was politely incredulous. "And still she didn't talk?"

"Would you have?" McCord demanded. "Formosa probably gave her quite a build-up about Saul—how the big guy had the police department in his pants pocket and so on." He blew out his breath. "I saw her, talked to her. She was as scared of cops as she was of Saul's torpedoes."

"So she ran away," Fallon said.

McCord nodded. "So she ran away." He took another turn about the room. "And you and Saul haunted headquarters till she was located." Quite suddenly he began to shake.

"That's where Hammerschlag ran into a belly full of lead, remember? Somebody got

there ahead of him, not soon enough to get the girl, but still looking for a letter that never existed." He held out a hand, palm up, and appeared to find something of great interest in it. "The next morning it was the same. Somebody got to her again, just ahead of the cops. That's when Petrovich died."

Carefully, meticulously, Fallon flicked an inch-long ash into a tray. "You're suggesting that I was a party to all this?"

McCord shook his head. "I don't think Saul came clean with you in the beginning. Still, he's been your client for a long time. I'll give you this: when you did find out what it was all about you tried to stop it, some of it, what you could. You went out to the Beverly-Plaza hoping to get a line on the girl through her sisters." He put his pipe away without ever having lit it.

"But Saul had the bit in his teeth. He wouldn't wait. That's why all the rest of it happened; that's why he hit you in the mouth when you gave him an argument."

Fallon's handsome face still expressed nothing more than courteous attention. "And you want me to do what?"

"Give me some names," McCord said hoarsely. "The names of the torpedoes that helped Eddie Tirkell."

"Then in reality you haven't any proof of all this?"

With a tremendous effort of will McCord made his voice as calmly casual as Fallon's. "I can get it without your help. It'll just take time. Give me some names and maybe I won't pin Welles on him, but I'll get him for Hammerschlag and Petrovich."

Fallon patted a polite yawn. "I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about, Lieutenant. Not in connection with Saul Saracco." He moved toward the phone. "About Egbert, I think I'll decline your kind offer and just let the police have him as is."

McCord let his hands drop to his sides. "I hope you know what you're doing, Webb."

"I think I do," Fallon said evenly. "I usually know what I'm doing."

McCord vented a short bitter laugh. "Even with Max Formosa getting it up in San Francisco? A guy who did nothing but introduce Hope Martin to Saul and might remember it?" He shook his head.

"How long do you suppose it's going to be before Saul gets to worrying about *you*?" He went over and laid a hand on top of Fallon's, forcing the phone back into its cradle. "Better help me put him away, Webb. Then you can breathe again."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

McCord let out a pent-up breath, slowly, carefully. "All right, Webb, it's your neck." He withdrew his hand, turned and crossed to the bedroom door. "Come on, Egbert. Time to go bye-bye."

XX

AT SIX thirty that evening Egbert Van Dorn was arraigned before a magistrate and formally charged with the murder of his mother. A cop in the property room, more enterprising than his fellows, found in one of the ruffled satin pockets of Egbert's suitcase a pair of men's hand-stitched suede gloves which, under the microscope, turned out to have infinitesimal traces of oil and skin on their fingertips. Not on the inside. On the outside. The skin matched that on Gretchen Van Dorn's throat.

At six thirty-two the prosecuting attorney professed himself willing to release Faith Martin on her own recognizance, and presently according to due process of law and order she found herself a free woman.

There was quite an emotional scene between Faith and Charity, the two sisters Martin present, and a cynical reporter was heard to observe that it was too bad the other triplet couldn't be there too. A couple of sob sisters took copious notes on what the ladies were wearing, and what with one thing and another it was some little time before Charity could get to a phone and tell McCord the glad news. "Isn't it wonderful, darling? And aren't you surprised?"

McCord said that he was indeed surprised. He was, too. Not only surprised, but very, very thoughtful when he agreed to meet her at the Crillon for dinner. It seemed that Webb Fallon was arranging the party, just for the four of them, to celebrate his client's speedy release from durance vile.

"Shall I wear the tails I haven't got, or will just a dinner jacket do?"

Charity sniffed. "I must say you don't seem very enthusiastic!"

"Oh, but I am," McCord assured her. "The only thing is, I knew all the time that Faith didn't do it." This was a lie. "Well, half an hour or so, then."

"Good-bye now," Charity said, and the phone clicked in his ear. He repaired to the shower whistling a melody.

It was considerably more than half an hour, though, before he put in an appearance at the Crillon. In the meantime he had had a talk with Julie Cardigan, another with Captain O'Meara and still a third with Chief of Detectives Inspector Regan. He thought that among the three Saul Saracco was almost sure to get the word he wanted him to get.

A *maitre* at the main entrance to the Empire Room said that the rest of Mr. Fallon's party had already arrived, and led McCord down three broad, shallow steps and skirted the dance floor through a press of tables and people. In the orchestra shell a rhumba band was just taking the place of the big com-

mercial outfit advertised on the marquee outside, and in the lull there was the pleasant rumble of voices, the tinkle of silver-ware.

At the far side of the room a woman's laughter rose shrill and strident, stopped as suddenly and finally as though her escort had strangled her. The thought again reminded McCord of Gretchen Van Dorn, and it was a little difficult for him to muster an adequate smile for Charity and Faith and his host when they greeted him.

"You're late," Charity accused him. "We've already had two cocktails."

McCord looked at the hovering waiter. "Then you'd better make mine a double."

The girls decided they would have no more; Fallon said that he would join McCord in a martini, very dry and without either olive or onion. Faith regarded McCord with eyes which seemed a little shadowed by recent events. "Don't tell me I've disappointed you again, Lieutenant."

McCord shook his head. "Lord, no. Do I look as glum as all that?" His smile became a trifle less forced. "The fact is, you're to be congratulated, not only on your release, but on an attorney who could wangle it so speedily."

Across the table, Fallon laughed musically. "God knows it wasn't I." He accepted his glass from the returning waiter, lifted it in a toast. "To the persevering policeman in the property room. He should have a medal."

"I'll drink to that," McCord said. He did. "Though it strikes me you're being pretty modest, Counselor. It was you who pointed the finger at Egbert again by figuring out a motive so oblique that it escaped the rest of us." He looked at Faith. "He tell you about it?"

"Yes." A little additional color crept into her cheeks and it seemed clear that Fallon had told her other things, of a somewhat more personal nature. With one of her forks she drew little patterns on the tablecloth. "I don't know whether I can explain it, but in a way I sympathize with Egbert. His wasn't exactly a bed of roses."

YSTER cocktails, in ice-rimmed crystal, arrived. The rumba band induced thirty or forty couples out on the floor. McCord said in a curiously stiff voice, "This hasn't been a bed of roses for any of us. I wish it was over."

They all looked at him in surprise. Fallon said sharply, "It is over. At least as far as we here are concerned."

"No," McCord said. He began to talk quietly, with little or no inflection. "I think there must be times when something in the air, or in the stars, affects a group of people, influencing them to do things they have never done before. Some of us—like Saul

Saracco—go sort of kill-crazy." He looked at the palm of a hand. "I myself have felt it." And then, suddenly raising his eyes to Fallon's. "Haven't you, Webb?"

Fallon's butter knife hung poised above a toasted cracker. "I don't think so." His warm smile encompassed Faith and Charity. "McCord, in spite of himself, is like all cops. He gets an idea and worries it, like a dog with a bone." Only a remnant of the smile still clung to his lips when he again looked at McCord.

"You're my guest and I can't very well tell you what you should or should not say, but it strikes me that regardless of the merits of your alleged case against Saul it should have no part in an occasion which is supposed to be something of a celebration."

McCord regarded him steadily. "If anything I say isn't pertinent to the four of us here I'll pay the check myself. I tried to choose another time and place—late this afternoon, remember?—but you wouldn't play."

The two girls were watching him as though they thought he might be slightly drunk. Fallon sighed. "Go ahead, then. Get it off your chest."

McCord didn't look at them but it was clear his next words were addressed to Faith and Charity.

"Has anyone told you about Hope—what I believe, and what circumstances almost prove has happened to her?" And when neither of them answered he went on, giving them the gist of his earlier conversation with Fallon.

"You see, it all adds up. If it hadn't been for Hope, then Saul Saracco wouldn't have had to do what he did—except for Commissioner Welles, of course—and if Saracco hadn't done those things Mr. Fallon wouldn't have been led to you." He waited while their waiter served the entree, though after it was served no one seemed disposed to eat it.

"And if Mr. Fallon hadn't been led to you on Saracco's business he wouldn't have learned certain facts regarding Gretchen Van Dorn's peculiar will; facts which in turn led him to conclude that by exerting his very captivating personality, by putting a lady in jeopardy and then neatly extricating her, he could win the young lady's affection and later gain control, through marrying her, of a rather sizable fortune."

Charity, white-faced and still, stared at him as though he were an utter stranger. On Fallon's handsome face were signs that he was only controlling himself by a tremendous effort of will. Faith drew a slow, uneven breath.

"You're suggesting that Webb—that Mr. Fallon—didn't rely entirely on chance to accomplish all this. In other words, that—"

McCord nodded. "Yes." He looked at Fallon. "You really shouldn't have put those gloves in Egbert's suitcase, Webb. At least not when you did." His eyes became remote, a little regretful. "You see, I had just searched it rather thoroughly before you came up to my apartment this afternoon."

A faint, almost imperceptible tremor shook Fallon's frame. Then he was quite himself again. "You're accusing me of Gretchen's murder?"

"Yes."

"And of framing Egbert for it?"

McCord's mouth made a firm hard line. "That's right, Webb."

Abruptly Fallon laughed. "Let's just forget for a moment that we are accuser and accused and look at this bit of alleged evidence strictly from the legal point of view. Can you prove it?"

"No."

"Well, then—" Fallon's shrug was expressive.

STILL neither Faith nor Charity said anything. They were frozen, immobile spectators at a battle of wits in which they could have no part. McCord moistened his lips.

"No, I can't prove it, Webb, but you know it and I know it. And there are times when a cop who is sure in his own mind is justified in doing things he couldn't if it was only guesswork." He unbuttoned his coat, exposing the fact that beneath it he wore his shoulder harness and gun.

"This afternoon I offered you a deal on Saracco, but that was before I knew you yourself were a killer. When that cop found the gloves where only you had had an opportunity to put them he automatically canceled any possibility of such a deal." A small cynical smile touched his mouth.

"Also he cinched you for any possible kind of a frame I could think up to get you where the law couldn't." After a while he said almost carelessly, "I saw Julie Cardigan this evening, Counselor." He looked at Faith. "Julie is a girl who has been a little jealous of Webb's attentions to you and was ready to believe the truth when she heard it. She was even ready to spot him for me, to get even."

Fallon's face was suddenly white. "You didn't—she couldn't—"

"Yes," McCord said. Oddly enough he felt no triumph in the breaking up of the man before him. He felt only a swift, consuming fever to do what had to be done, to get it over with and then to be off somewhere, anywhere, alone.

"Convinced that there was no legal way to get you, to pay you back for ditching her, Julie finally decided to let Saul Saracco get you. She gave me the names you wouldn't,

Webb, and by this time the cops are picking the guys up that the names belong to. Saracco knows that, Webb; he knows too that with something to go on the cops are going to make those boys sing, and that when they sing it's going to be all up with Saul Saracco. We'll pin him for Hammerschlag and Petrovich, for Hope Martin and Max Formosa. What he doesn't know is that it was Julie Cardigan who helped me out on those names, Webb. He thinks it was you."

"He doesn't—he can't believe it!"

"Oh, yes. He believes it so much that he's going to be a big help to us in convicting you. In an effort to pay you off for what he thinks is a double cross he's going to tell us you were privy to, a party to, his own crimes. In addition he'll tell us about your plans for marrying seventeen million dollars." McCord exhaled gently through his nose.

"Provided, of course, he doesn't get to you in a more direct manner before his boys sing and give us an excuse to pick him up."

Fallon hurriedly thrust his chair back. "Pardon me, I must get to a phone."

"Sit down," McCord said.

And like an echo somebody else said, "Yes, sit down, Webb," and big Saul Saracco emerged from the crowd on the dance floor and shot Fallon three times in the head.

McCord made no move for his own gun until Fallon actually sprawled across the table, almost in his lap; until he saw Wankowski and Captain O'Meara plowing a lane through the dancers. Then, quite calmly, he said, "That's the big one, Saul."

Saracco nodded. "The big one." For an instant they were two men alone, isolated from all the rest of the room; two men who at last knew all there was to know about each other. Saracco sighed gustily, lifted his gun at McCord, hesitated for one brief fatal second. In that second McCord shot him squarely in the mouth.

In Inspector Regan's office a half hour later were five persons: Regan himself, Captain O'Meara, McCord, Faith and Charity Martin. Out in the big luxurious anteroom Deputy Inspector Lowenthal and Julia Cardigan kept the reporters at bay.

Faith still looked a little sick, more than a little bewildered. Charity apparently, was made of sterner stuff. Her face was quite composed, her gloved hands lay quietly in her lap, and if her eyes were slightly more green than violet that was to be expected. They had seen sudden and violent death.

O'Meara's gray face could have been carved from granite, so deeply etched were the lines in it. There was no apology in his voice when he said to his superior, and McCord's, "Saracco gave us the slip, but it was only because we didn't expect him to make so public a thing of it." He turned bleak, un-

compromising eyes on McCord. "I'd like to know how he knew where Fallon would be at exactly that time."

"You knew it," McCord said.

O'Meara's eyes narrowed. "Meaning that I told him?"

MCCORD shook his head. "Not necessarily. You're hinting that it was I who arranged the showdown. I'm merely pointing out other possibilities." He looked at Regan. "I told you too, remember?"

Regan flushed angrily. "God damn it, McCord, admitting that Saracco had a pipe line into headquarters it doesn't follow that it led either to me or O'Meara." In a sudden access of rage he pounded the desk.

"Forget that for a minute. We'll clear it up, now that the rest of it is out in the open. Forget your lousy suspension and the reasons behind it. You're a cop. I'm a cop." He turned furious eyes on O'Meara. "The hell with what actually happened. We've got to make this look right for the department."

O'Meara shrugged. "You can't cover up something if you don't know exactly what it is you've got to cover up." He looked at McCord. "You used somebody to put the squeeze on Saracco. Somebody other than Webb Fallon. I want to know who."

McCord's mouth made a stubborn line. "No." And when O'Meara would have interrupted he said carefully, "Fallon will make sense if you think it over. I put the fear of God into him last night, and again today, when I told him Saracco would start worrying about him. As a matter of fact, we don't know that Saracco wasn't already worrying.

"He and Fallon had already quarreled, and though it may have looked like they'd patch it up he wasn't one to let even a possible menace get very far out of his mind. Nor was he one to underestimate Fallon's ability to sense his own danger. It's true that each thought he had enough on the other to cancel off, but just the same either was a pushover for the right kind of suggestion."

"Then you admit that you made the suggestion?"

McCord nodded. "If you like. I won't sign a statement to that effect."

Regan snorted. "Who the hell said anything about signing anything? All we want to know is where we stand." He stared with bright intent eyes at O'Meara. "Isn't that all we want?"

O'Meara let his shoulders droop in resignation. "If you say so. I only run part of the division."

"Well, then." For the first time Regan addressed the two girls directly. "You're both familiar with the theory Lieutenant McCord built up?"

They nodded. Charity, looking at McCord, seemed on the point of saying something but changed her mind.

"But you understand that there was nothing we could do—that it was all just theory, regardless of what some of us may have suspected?"

They said they understood that too.

Regan made irascible noises deep in his throat. "Your sister Hope's part in the business was unfortunate but—well, understandable. It'll have to come out, to make the rest of the facts gibe. We'll whitewash her as much as possible but you may as well realize right now that it won't be much. She was practically an eyewitness to a murder and she kept her mouth shut."

"Yes," Charity said steadily.

"Then you don't bear us any ill will?"

"No," Charity said.

Faith said nothing at all for a long moment. Then, oddly enough, her mind reverted to Egbert.

"What's going to become of him? I don't"—a slow flush mantled the stained loveliness of her face—"I don't mean about the money. I—I couldn't touch a cent of it. I mean the—"

"The jewels—the way he tried to frame you?" Regan snorted. "God Almighty, I forgot all about that." He looked at O'Meara, shook his head, looked back at Faith. "What do you think we ought to do?"

"Let him go," Faith said. She appealed to O'Meara, of whom she seemed to be more in awe than she was of Regan. "Gretchen would want it that way, I think. Can't you—can't you just somehow forget it?"

Abruptly O'Meara smiled. It was a bleak smile, not a very humorous one, but probably it was the best of which he was capable.

"I suppose that really we ought to have a complaining witness to make it stick. If you don't choose to complain I don't know of any way we can make you."

She stood up, held out her hand. "Thank you."

Charity, too, stood up. As her eyes encountered McCord's he saw that they were almost violet again.

"You wouldn't know where a couple of waifs could sleep tonight, would you?" For just the barest perceptible fraction of an instant her mouth quivered. "Egbert and Faith aren't the only ones the better hotels don't want. I've been kicked out of mine, too."

McCord looked at her. "There's my apartment," he suggested. "Remember?" It seemed a hundred years since he had found her there, apparently in the act of ravaging it, and had ended their first quarrel by kissing her good night. He saw that she remembered. "It's been needing the woman's touch for a long, long time." he said.

I shoot the gun out of his hand



COLD WEATHER FOR KILLING

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

Private Investigator Mugs Kelly is invited to spend a week at Lake Placid—but not for winter sports!

USUALLY outdoor sports aren't up my alley, and when it comes to winter stuff that goes double. So what happens? "Mugs" Kelly, private investigator, becomes a big he man of the wide open spaces—that's the way it works out.

It all happens when Joe Langston and Fred Clark catch me in a weak moment and give out with the high pressure sales talk on the delights of spending a week in the mountains up-state. Since Langston is a press agent and Clark a publicity man for a hotel chain, they make it sound wonderful.

"You'll love it, Kelly," finishes Langston.

"Skiing, bobsledding, skating and a swell bunch of people."

"I get enough of that right here in town," I says. "I'm tired of people in bunches."

"Guess we'd better tell him, Joe," says Clark, who is a red-faced man who looks like people think a farmer should look, but he wouldn't know a Holstein from a Plymouth Rock. "It's the only way."

"Yes, I guess you're right, Fred," Langston says. "It might spoil things for him though."

"All right, boys," I tell them. "I'm not here—you're just talking to my astral spirit

—and don't I look natural."

"Not with your face," says Langston.

I resent that. Maybe I do have what might be considered rugged features, but I claim I could never win an Ugliest Man In The World Contest. Well, maybe I might come in second, but not the winner.

"Let's leave my face out of this," I tell the boys. "What gives?"

"We're selfish," says Langston. "We don't want you to spend the week with us up at Lake Placid entirely because we like you, Kelly. We need protection."

"That's right," says Clark, "we're afraid we might be murdered!"

I give them the double take. They look as if they mean it. I'm just a detective at heart, so I get interested. As far as winter sports are concerned I'd be a flop as a pilot of a kid's sled, but I'm happy with Homicide. Morbid, but true.

"Who is going to murder you two, and why not?" I ask.

"We don't know," says Langston, who is big and sandy-haired. "Six of us are going up there for the week—seven, counting you. It might be any one of them."

"The sinister half-dozen," I says. "Or am I thinking about the eggs I've been buying lately. But go on, why should you think you're candidates for a coffin?"

"Yesterday a man phoned me," says Clark. "I didn't recognize his voice, but he said, 'Keep away from the cabin if you want to live.' Then he hung up."

"Maybe it was Uncle Tom," I suggest. "But what's this cabin stuff?"

"The six of us have a big log cabin up there in the mountains," says Langston. "We go there for a week every winter when it gets cold enough." He frowns. "But that's all we know. Will you come along with us this time, Kelly? We're leaving in the morning."

"Professionally, yes," I says. "As an amateur sportsman or something—no!"

LANGSTON looks at Clark and sighs. Clark nods.

"How much for your services?" asks Langston.

We talk business, and it is agreed I spend the week with them as their guest, though actually I'm to be on the job as a private detective, and I'm supposed to keep them from getting killed. Which isn't nice work, even if you get paid for it.

I meet Langston and Clark at the train the next morning. There are two other lugs with them. They are all dressed in winter clothes just like I am, and they are carrying skis. I learn the other two men are named Keith Blakely and Norton Hill.

"Just got word that Jim Grant and Bill

Dover won't be able to make it," says Blakely. "Jim is sick and Bill has a big business deal coming up."

"Too bad," says Langston. "I'd hoped we'd have all six members of the Merry Muscle Men's Club with us this time."

"Is that the name of this outfit?" I ask. "Or did my ears deceive me?"

"Not your ears," says Langston. "They're too large to miss a thing, Kelly."

Right then I decided Joe Langston is a man I can learn to hate in one easy lesson. Ever since yesterday he has been picking on me as though he thought I was a mandolin—and me the banjo type.

We took a train and we rode and rode. Finally we arrive where the snow is deep and the hills are way up there. Keith Blakely is fat and loud-mouthed and thinks he is the life of the party. Norton Hill is a thin-faced man who says nothing at great length. When he smiles a couple of times it reminds me of ice breaking on a pond.

I learn, that from where the bunch has their cabin, Lake Placid is so far away it is little more than a distant rumor. I find the cabin is a good sized place, after we walk miles getting there, and if the bunch of rugged pioneers I'm with built the shack, they had an assist from four carpenters and maybe two masons.

After the gang settles down they decide to go skiing. Since I don't know how I tell the quartet of Merry Muscle Men that I'll stay at the cabin and keep the home fires burning. They all seem to feel my being left to my solitude is a swell idea. I began to suspect I was the skeleton at the feast, and we hadn't even eaten yet.

They all leave and I go wandering around the shack, looking the place over. There is a gun rack in one room with a dozen hunting rifles standing up in it. Evidently my pals go hunting during the right season. Near the gun rack is a big wooden box with the lid nailed down.

I get looking at that box and feeling like Pandora or Goldie Locks or whoever the dame was who opened some sort of a chest and caused a lot of trouble for the world in general.

"Don't do it, Kelly," I say to myself. But do I listen? I should say not.

So I find a hammer and a screw driver and manage to get the lid off the box. I look inside and find the box is packed with expensive looking fur skins. I don't know a mink from a rabbit pelt off the hoof but I get the idea this little collection is really worth plenty of dough.

I'm standing there staring at the box, and feeling cold, even though I'm wearing heavy trousers, and a windbreaker over my flannel shirt. There is a gun in my shoulder

holster, under the windbreaker, but so far as getting at the automatic in a hurry is concerned I might as well have buried it under a pile of hay.

All of a sudden Joe Langston steps into the room. He's got a revolver in his hand and he is pointing it at me. He looks at the open box of furs and frowns.

"I'm sorry you opened the box, Kelly," he says. "Now that you've seen those furs I'll have to kill you before the others get back."

"Why?" I ask backing toward the gun rack. "Are those pelts a secret or something?"

Langston is one of those men who like to boast about anything they do. He just didn't know when to keep his mouth shut.

"I was up here a week ago and stole those furs from a trapper," he says.

"You mean there's trappers in New York state?" I ask in surprise.

"Plenty of them," says Langston. "I had the stuff all packed and ready to ship to New York. Was coming up here this weekend to do it—then the rest of the Merry Muscle Men decide to come up to the cabin for a week."

"So you try to scare them away, by phoning them—and giving them one of those messages like Clark got telling him if he came to the cabin he would be murdered," I says. "But four of your pals didn't scare."

THE killer nods and gives me a nasty grin.

"That's right," he says. "When Clark insists that we go see you and hire you to come up with us and protect us I had to string along with him. I figured that I could tell the rest that the box was my personal property—and they wouldn't want it opened after we got here."

"And being dumb I have to open the box and get myself into a nice mess," I says. "Am I stupid!"

"Don't touch those guns," he says. "Come here."

I move forward. He looks like he has a nervous trigger finger, and I'm not anxious to die. He takes some rope out of his pocket and does a neat job of tying my wrists together, still keeping his gun close where he can shoot fast.

"There's fifty thousand dollars' worth of furs in that box," he says. "I killed a man to get them—so one more murder wouldn't matter."

He steps back toward the rear door of the room. He's still covering me with his gun—and I edge toward the rifle rack again.

"I'm sorry I have to kill you, Kelly," he says. "I been trying to get you sore so you would quit the case and go back to New

York, but you would stick around and open that box."

From the wild look in his eyes I figure this is it. He's going to shoot. Then all of a sudden he makes a funny kind of gurgling noise and pitched face downward to the floor. I see there is a knife sticking in his back—and know somebody stabbed him from the doorway behind him—but I don't see anyone there now.

"Murderers must come in bunches around here," I mutter dazedly. "Now who killed him and why?"

My first thought is to get my wrists free, so I stick the rope in my teeth and start chewing. It's not my idea of a delicious meal—but I get the rope chewed through enough so I can break it, and I'm free. Then I get my gun out where I can reach it easily.

"Now all I've got to do is find a murderer of a murderer," I says. "How do I do that?"

A few minutes later I hear voices. The rest of the Merry Muscle Men have returned. They start shouting for me and for Langston. I didn't think that Langston could hear them. I also got a feeling that I was going to have a lot of explaining to do. When those other men found me with a corpse lying around and an open box containing a collection of expensive furs, they wouldn't think that Langston and I had been playing marbles.

Finally Clark, Blakely and Hill come walking into the room. I see there is a lot of snow on Clark and Blakely's clothes but Hill looks pretty dry. So right away I begin getting ideas.

"Why, it's Langston!" says Clark. He stares down at the body. "And he's been stabbed!"

"He's also been murdered," I tell him, trying to beat them all to the punch. "And one of you lugs did it."

"Nonsense!" snaps Blakely. "You don't really expect us to believe that, do you, Kelly?"

"You should," I say. "Listen—I'll tell you just what happened."

I give it to them fast, but not missing any details. How I got curious and opened the box and found the furs in it. How Langston appeared with a gun in his hand, admitted he had stolen the furs and tried to warn the others away from the cabin by the death threats to them over the phone in New York.

"Somebody did phone me and warn me not to come up here," says Blakely when I get that far. "I thought one of my friends was trying to play a joke on me, particularly because I was sure I recognized Langston's voice over the wire."

"I got the same sort of message," Hill says quickly. "But I didn't pay any attention.

It sounded like a gag. Go on, Kelly."

"Just as Langston was going to kill me," I go on, "somebody gets him with a knife from the doorway behind him. I don't know why, unless the murderer hated Langston and hoped to frame me with the killing."

"I never liked him, to be frank about it," says Blakely.

"Neither did I," Hill says. "Murdering a trapper in order to steal seventeen mink pelts and all the rest of those valuable skins shows the sort of a crook he was at heart."

"All the same it wasn't nice of you to kill him," I says, and I have Hill covered with my gun. "Particularly when you were his partner in the fur stealing deal, Hill."

"What are you talking about, Kelly?" growls Hill. "I had nothing to do with it."

"Oh, yes, you did," I says. "In the first place your clothes are pretty dry, which means you came back here to the cabin before Clark and Blakely did, heard Langston talking to me, and stabbed him."

"That's a lie!" shouted Hill. "I knew nothing about the murder or the furs until I came in here a few minutes ago."

"Then how did you know Langston stole seventeen mink pelts?" I ask him. "He never told me how many there were, and I sure didn't count them."

Norton Hill goes wild then. He draws a gun, and I have to shoot it out of his hand. At my orders Clark and Blakely grab him and search him. They find a hunting knife sheath on him—it is empty since the knife is still sticking in Langston's body. After seeing that holster, there is no doubt in anyone's mind that's where the murder weapon came from in the first place.

"I'm glad I hired you, Kelly," Clark says. "Why if we had come up here alone with Langston and Hill, both Blakely and I might have been killed to keep us from knowing about those furs."

"That's right." Blakely shuddered as he glanced at the corpse. He looked like he was going to be very sick. "I—I might have been killed."

"You're a good detective, Kelly," Clark says.

"To steal a radio gag," I tell him. "You're only saying that because it's true!"

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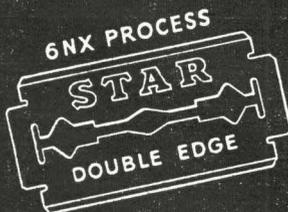
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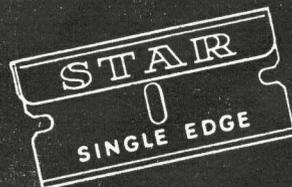
COMING NEXT ISSUE

*DON'T BE CHEEKY,
MISTER!*

*WHY NOT?
I SHAVE WITH
STAR BLADES!*



4 for 10¢



Mary Sheldon saw the knife in Mr. Porfirio's body



Inspector Mifsud tries hard to convince Mary Sheldon that Mr. Porfirio isn't dead, but—

STINGRAY

By BARRY PEROWNE

AFTER the destroyer had picked up the survivors from the liner, Mary saw nothing more of the ingratiating Mr. Porfirio, who had so kindly insisted on lending her his overcoat. She understood he was detained with slight injuries in Sick Bay.

While they were in the lifeboat, she didn't know he had been hurt. She felt she would like to see him, to return his coat, and make sure he was all right.

When the survivors landed at Gibraltar late the following afternoon, there was still no sign of Mr. Porfirio. Mary remembered he had mentioned being in business in Gibraltar. She resolved to look up his address.

But she was so exhausted from her experiences she slept all through the next day. The day after, her first need was shopping. She had lost not only all the costumes she was taking to a theatrical party in Naples, but most of her personal belongings.

It was while returning to her hotel from a visit to the police station to certify her identity, that her attention was caught by the legend, JOHN PORFIRIO—GIFTS, on a plate glass window in the steep, narrow main street.

Mary crossed the pavement, expecting to find the shop shut, for it was the lunch hour. The glaze of the sun trembled between the

tall, bleached buildings. There were few people about. The shop door stood half-open, inviting her. She entered.

After the glare outside, it was a moment before her eyes became accustomed enough to the gloom to see that there was nobody behind the counter. She laid her shopping parcels on the glass top and looked about her.

The shop was crammed with such curios as camel's neckbands, prayer rugs, yataghans, slave bracelets, censers. There was hardly room to move. Only the counter itself was clear. A little, barred cage at one end of the store was marked "Cambio."

Mary rapped on the glass counter for service.

Across the shop, a mirror in a lacquered frame reflected her. She was a slim, tanned young lady, with honey-colored hair, dressed in a powder-blue frock with white belt.

Faintly, a clock ticked somewhere. The tiny sound seemed to measure the stillness of the place. The quarters were dim and hot, smelling of perfume and cigar-smoke, and of something else—the taint of burning cloth.

Mary called sharply, "Mr. Porfirio!"

The ticking of the clock seemed to linger, then hasten, then linger again. There was no other sound, no movement anywhere, no opening or closing of a door, no footstep.

A curious anxiety swept her. The odor of burning cloth was unmistakable. She walked to a tall screen in the shadows at the back of the room. Glancing behind the screen, she looked into another silent room.

Through the motionless strings of a bead curtain hanging in a doorway at the rear of this second room, she glimpsed a dazzling hot courtyard. The rear quarters of the shop were as littered as the street room. Her eyes roamed over a confusion of divans, ottomans, carpets, coffee tables, opened and unopened packing cases.

A tiny column of smoke spiraled delicately upward from a litter of sacking beside one of these open packing cases. A smoldering, red ring recoiled slowly, widening over the sacking, from a half-smoked cigar that had been dropped there.

Beside the flame, Mr. Porfirio lay on his left side, quite still on the floor, his wide dead eyes on the packing-case, his right hand twisted behind him.

Before Mary could scream, a light, quick step fell in the courtyard. A shadow obscured the sunlight behind the bead curtain. Then the curtain was swept aside.

The man who entered was young, slender, lithe and dusky. He wore a white suit. He didn't see Mary. He was a Hindu. His eyes were fixed on Mr. Porfirio. He didn't check or hesitate, but went straight to the body,

ground out the cigar and smoldering sacking with his foot, dropped to one knee, and pulled Mr. Porfirio over to his back.

Mary saw the hilt of a knife deeply driven into Mr. Porfirio's chest.

Her knuckles pressed hard against her lips as she drew back until she was behind the screen. Then she crossed the front room of the shop quietly and stepped into the street. The brilliance and fervour of the sunshine enfolded and blinded her.

WHEN Mary reached the police station, the officer who had interviewed her that morning about her documents, was still there. He was a bulky man, with heavy jowls and a grey, close-cropped head. His name was Inspector Mifsud. Before the war, his special province had been contraband. That morning he had told Mary of the ingenious methods used by "contrabandistas" running tobacco out of Gibraltar into Spain.

Inspector Mifsud rose from his desk with surprise at Mary's return.

"I've something serious to report, Inspector," Mary said excitedly, and she told him what she had seen in Mr. Porfirio's back room.

The inspector asked only one question:

"You know John Porfirio?" He spoke with a slight accent.

"I met him when he joined the ship at the Barbados," Mary replied. "His family was evacuated there from the Rock. He had some trouble, but he was allowed to go out to visit them. He was hurt when we were torpedoed. When I saw the shop in the main street, I thought it might be his."

The inspector touched a bell on his desk.

"I will go to Porfirio's at once", he said. Then, to the blue-uniformed sergeant who answered the bell, "Abremis, you will drive Miss Sheldon to her hotel."

At the hotel, waiting anxiously for some word from the inspector, Mary kept thinking about the Hindu. She wondered about the impulse which had prompted her to conceal her presence from him. The more she thought about it, the more certain she was that the Hindu had not come unawares upon Mr. Porfirio. The Hindu had known very well that Mr. Porfirio was lying there.

A little after four o'clock, word was brought to her that an officer was waiting in the lounge to see her. She went down at once, expecting to find a police officer. Instead, an American lieutenant smiled at her.

"Miss Sheldon? My name's Royd, Bill Royd. I haven't bothered you before because, after all, a torpedoing entitles anybody to a couple of days' rest. But I'm hoping you may be fit enough to talk business now?"

He looked at her eagerly. He was lightly built, with coppery hair and friendly eyes.

"Was it you who wanted to see me?" Mary inquired.

Bill Royd nodded. "Will you have a cup of tea with me while I explain?"

Lieutenant Royd's explanation was simple. Attached to the British, he had the job of putting on shows from time to time.

"A sort of Anglo-American effort," he said. "There are a lot of our boys on the Rock."

He was due to put on a show the following Saturday night, and was having great difficulty in scraping one together.

"That is too bad," Mary sympathized.

"I've culled a bit of talent from among our own boys and the British boys," he laughed. "I've borrowed one or two acts from the cafes. But it's no Irving Berlin show. Naturally, from the moment I heard you were here, I've been hoping you'd help us out."

"I'd love to, of course, but—"

SHE was thinking of Inspector Mifsud, of the possibility of questions to be answered, perhaps an inquest to attend. And just then, as she hesitated, she saw the inspector crossing the hall outside the lounge doors. She jumped up.

"Pardon me for a moment, Lieutenant."

She went out to the hall. The inspector's numerous chins creased in a broad smile when he saw her.

"Ah, Miss Sheldon, I have good news for you!"

He cupped a huge hand under her arm, led her to a cane settee across the hall, sank down beside her.

"Mr. Porfirio ees in very good health!"

"In good health?" Mary looked at him blankly.

"Mr. Porfirio," Inspector Mifsud said, "was not on thee premises at time you were there. Shōnan Ram, the Heendu assistant, yes. But not Mr. Porfirio! You were mistaken. It must have been some treeck of shadows, some treeck the heat play on the imagination. You have been through much, the torpedoing. And the heat—" He patted her hand. "Nevertheless, you were very right to come to me. Here are thee parcels you left on thee counter at the shop."

Not until he was gone did Mary's bewilderment begin to crystallize into profound incredulity. Had she dreamed what she saw in that back room? It wasn't possible!

"Forgotten me?" a voice asked amiably.

She looked up to Bill Royd's amused eyes.

"You look bewitched," Bill remarked when Mary did not speak.

She drew a deep breath, gathered her parcels, and stood up. Inspector Mifsud was the policeman. Why worry?

"That show of yours," Mary said.

"Yes?"

"Include me." Mary replied. "And if the

cup of tea is ready I certainly do need a pick-me-up."

At the tea table Mary made final arrangements for the show before returning to her hotel room. She discovered that she liked Lieutenant Royd very much.

Upstairs, when she had left the Army man, it wasn't easy to push what had happened from her mind. The more she thought about Mr. Porfirio the more certain she was of his death.

If Inspector Mifsud believed that she had dreamed what she'd seen in the curio shop, then Inspector Mifsud had been deceived. She found herself haunted by the memory of the slender, quick-moving figure in white, the Hindu with the searching hands. Was he Shōnan Ram? Was he dead now, as well as Mr. Porfirio?

She couldn't seem to make up her mind whether she ought to do something. But what?

The next day, she threw herself into the rehearsal of Bill Royd's show with a feeling of relief at the chance to escape her intolerable preoccupation.

The theatre was old but opulent. It had curtained boxes, a great deal of gilt, and an extravagant number of chandeliers. Bill Royd's show must have been one of the oddest mixtures ever attempted. It ranged from a red-hot orchestra of troops to a Spanish gypsy scene played by a girl called Maruja—also red hot. The dancer was accompanied by a blind guitarist called Don Pedro.

Don Pedro was a gaunt, elderly man with dark glasses. Both on and off the stage, he wore rope-soled sandals, a threadbare black cloak and a Cordoba hat. On and off the stage he was guided by a saddle-colored, yellow-eyed dog.

Don Pedro's dignity was extraordinary. His guitar-playing was magnificent, perfect for Maruja's fiery *jotas* and *madrileños*.

"The best thing in the show!" Mary said enthusiastically, watching them rehearse.

"Except the girl from home," Bill Boyd smiled at her. "Don Pedro's a character. He was a refugee from Spain during their Civil War. The British haven't the heart to evacuate him. He scrapes a living somehow around the cafes, he and that mutt of his. It must be about the only dog left on the Rock. Pedro always goes over with the troops. They think him a sort of Don Quixote."

Maruja's castanets clattered an insolent, defiant tattoo. Her supple body writhed. Her red heels struck the boards with faster and faster rhythm.

"Ole!" Don Pedro intoned.

His guitar throbbed. The light flashed in his dark glasses. The dog lay with lowered head, yellow eyes watchful.

THAT night, Bill took Mary to a dance at the British mess, to which he was attached. Afterwards, they walked in the moonlight on the bastion.

There, the stone parapet dropped fifty feet into a moat of shadow. The wire entanglements between a road below and the water's edge were softened by moonlight. The wide bay itself glimmered in cool silver. Far across the water, a cluster of pin-point lights marked the town of Algeciras. Single lights were scattered, lonely, round the dark arc of the shore, to another cluster of lights. Only a few hundred yards distant was the Spanish frontier, La Linea. But here on the broad bastion was only moonlight and the black shadows of the date palms.

A breeze stirred the fronds with a dry rustle.

"Last rehearsal tomorrow," Bill remarked as they strolled. "Saturday morning. You'll have only two, Mary."

"I'll do my best," Mary promised.

All the afternoon the conviction had been growing that she would have to go again to the curio shop on the main street.

Until she saw Mr. Porfirio with her own eyes, and talked to him, she would never believe that the scene in the room behind the shop had been an illusion. Yet, the thought of going there again, the thought of that shop door standing half open to the shadowed interior, gave her a sultry feeling around the heart.

Now, as she moved beside Bill, it occurred to her to ask him to come to the shop with her. Her spirits lifted. She wondered why she hadn't thought of it before.

As she turned to him, from the shadow of a date palm, there came a growl so unexpected that it checked her involuntarily.

A voice spoke sharply in Spanish. Then it said in English, "Do not be alarmed."

"It's Don Pedro," Bill said. "What are you doing out so late, Don Pedro?"

The guitarist rose from the stones beneath the palm. His cloaked figure merged with the shadows, but moonlight through the fronds touched his aquiline face with pallor and his dark glasses with cold gleam.

"The *teniente*, is it not?" Don Pedro remarked. "And the American *señorita*? I walk here every night after my performance. The coolness is good after the heat and noise of the cafe. There is a moon?"

"Nearly full." Bill grinned.

"The night smells of moonlight," Don Pedro affirmed. He flicked a corner of his cloak over his shoulder. "With permission, I will walk a little way with you. I have been considering a suggestion for my performance with the *chica* Maruja. If you approve, we might try it in rehearsal tomorrow."

When they reached Mary's hotel, Don Pedro's suggestion was still under discussion.

Mary said nothing to Bill about coming with her to the shop on the main street.

Next morning was the final rehearsal. There were hitches, difficulties. It went on all day.

When Mary left the theatre, Bill was still busy with a thousand details. It was evident to Mary that if she wanted Bill to come to the shop with her, she would have to wait until the show was over.

Mary walked down the main street. The pavements were thronged. The cafes, the *tabacerias*, the souvenir shops were all open and doing a roaring trade.

JOHN PORFIRIO—GIFTS was open, too.

As Mary approached the shop, she saw three American privates enter.

She stood for an instant, conscious of the heavy thump of her heart. The opportunity was so obvious, so glaring. The three soldiers had been provided by fate. She walked quickly into the shop.

ONCE more, it was a moment before her eyes became accustomed to the tawny shadows of the interior. Then she saw the three soldiers, at the counter. A Hindu was before them. And Mr. Porfirio! Mr. Porfirio, thick-set and bald, a cigar in his mouth, was bargaining over a set of slave bracelets!

He looked up and stared curiously at Mary. Then he consigned the soldiers to the care of the Hindu. Smiling, he came across the shop.

"A pleasant surprise, Miss Sheldon! Why, tonight I am hoping to see your performance. See, I have a bill about it in the window. I did not know you were so celebrated!"

Mary felt as if she were dreaming.

"I—I came to see you before—about returning your coat, and—"

"Ah, that coat! What do I want with a heavy overcoat now? Henceforth I stay on solid land. Once was enough!" He chuckled. "I tell you," he said, lowering his voice confidentially. "You give it with my compliments to old Don Pedro who is in your show. I know him. He is very poor. He will be glad. And you?" he went on, dismissing the coat. "You are recovered? Ah, but I have only to look at you! When am I to show you the Rock? Yes?"

"I'm just waiting for a ship." She broke off, suddenly alarmed.

"What is it?" Mr. Porfirio asked, following her eyes. "My assistant, Shōnan Ram? You look at him as if he were a ghost! Something is wrong?"

"Nothing," Mary said hurriedly. "I—I'd love to have you show me the Rock some day. But I must fly now. I shall be late for the theatre."

She walked out into the street, wondering if she were stark, staring mad.

Not only was Mr. Porfirio alive, not only had she seen him, shaken hands with him, talked to him, but the Hindu behind the counter, whom Mr. Porfirio had called Shōnan Ram? The Hindu was rotund, shiny, rumped, a totally different person from the Hindu she had seen in Mr. Porfirio's back room!

It was still with the feeling of one living in a sinister dream that Mary walked on to her hotel. She packed the few things she needed, tossed Mr. Porfirio's coat over her arm, and set out for the opera house.

By the time she reached the theatre, she had definitely decided to speak to Bill the moment the performance was over. She would ask him to decide whether something very strange indeed was going on, or whether she were a case for a psychiatrist.

Don Pedro's tall, cloaked figure was entering the theatre ahead of her.

She stopped him and gave him the coat, with Mr. Porfirio's compliments.

Backstage, soldiers were shifting scenery. Maruja was clattering her castanets. Bill Royd was here, there and everywhere, in an effort to co-ordinate a seeming bedlam.

For three highly active hours, Mary forgot everything but the show.

After the cheering, stamping and piercing whistles brought down the final curtain, she returned to the dressing room and found Inspector Mifsud standing there. He was scowling.

Maruja, who shared the dressing room, was just behind Mary.

"*Que hay?*" Maruja asked.

The inspector answered curtly in Spanish. Maruja, with a grimace and a flip of her castanets, went away.

The inspector moved ponderously to close the door, but Bill Royd appeared suddenly, forestalling him.

BILL came in, closed the door, stood with his back to it.

"I'm in on this, Inspector," Bill said grimly. "I've told you I'm quite certain Miss Sheldon is on the level. We would have done better to put her in the picture the moment she came to you. I'm going to put her in the picture now, before any questions are asked."

His brown, lively eyes went to Mary.

"All you need to know, Mary, is this," Bill went on. "My real job in Gibraltar is Security. A lot of our boys and a lot of our material are passing through the Straits. It's my job to see they pass through safely. Entertainments are a sideline—if you like, a cover. Now, hold onto your hat!"

Mary waited for Bill to continue.

"The Hindu you saw in Mr. Porfirio's back room was I. The man you saw lying on the floor with a knife in his chest was not Mr. Porfirio, but a cousin of his, enough like him to be a brother, or to pass as Porfirio himself in that dim shop. He was called Bartolo Verano, Sergeant Verano of the Gibraltar Police!" He added considerably, "There's a chair just behind you!"

Mary sank into it, her grey eyes fixed on him, seeing him, not as he was, but with his clear skin darkened, his coppery hair dyed. She swallowed.

"If you tell me the rest is a military secret," she said, "I shall—I shall—"

"I told you I was putting you in the picture," Bill said. "All right. You saw a little fat Hindu in Porfirio's shop this evening, didn't you?"

"So you know I've been there?"

"We know," Bill replied, "because one of Inspector Mifsud's men and one of mine are planted in that shop. The little Hindu, Shōnan Ram, is Porfirio's assistant. While Porfirio was in the Barbados, Shōnan Ram, who was running the shop for him, brought us an interesting bit of information. It linked Porfirio with a team of enemy agents."

Bill glanced at the inspector. "We believe the workers here on the Rock give information," he said. "Inspector Mifsud and the British Security boys and I have been trying hard to root them out. For reference purposes, we call their organization, Stingray."

Mary was conscious of Inspector Mifsud's eyes.

"Surely you can't think that—"

"I'll go on," Bill interrupted her. "Porfirio was due to return from the Barbados. We decided to keep him under observation. We thought if we let him function in his shop again, we might discover what his contacts were. Unfortunately, when the torpedoing happened, the captain of the British destroyer who picked you people up, wasn't taking any chances. He knew Porfirio was an agent. He clapped him straight in the brig, and radioed us to that effect.

"The captain was probably right from his point of view," Bill went on. "From our point of view, it gummed up the plan. It happened there was a ship in the West Indies that very day, going on to Malta. We had what we thought was a bright idea. Sergeant Verano was enough like Porfirio, we thought, to pass for him in that dim shop. So we let the news creep around that Porfirio had returned."

"Nice going," Mary said.

"You know better than that," Bill said grimly. "You saw Verano with a knife in his chest, didn't you? Oh, he was enough like

Porfirio, all right, for a Stingray man to make contact.

"But he wasn't enough like Porfirio to get away with it. The Stingray man spotted the trap and struck first. Shōnan Ram was at lunch. I acted as a Hindu assistant. I was there for just the eventuality of a Stingray contact. I heard Verano fall. When I got to the back room, the killer was gone. When I reached the courtyard, he was gone. And it was I who came back into the room when you saw me. I never dreamed you were there till Mifsud arrived at the shop and told me."

"But I still don't understand," Mary said. "That was Mr. Porfirio whom I spoke to in the shop this evening."

BILL nodded. "We tried everything to make Porfirio talk," he said. "We failed. When Verano was killed, we took Porfirio out of jail and put him back in his shop, with two men concealed, ready to jump him at the first false step. This hushed up Verano's murder. It might, we hoped, get the Stingray people so puzzled as to what had happened that they'd try to get the lowdown.

"It was a long shot, but we were desperate," Bill admitted. "Big things are moving. The Stingray men are getting information to Spain. We know it, but we can't find out how they are doing it. They've got some channel of communication that we can't get on to. We are pretty desperate."

Bill studied Mary. "We had to be sure you didn't talk to anybody about what you'd seen," he said. "So I attached myself to you, put you in the show to keep you busy. You were friendly with Porfirio on the ship. Inspector Mifsud here was inclined to be a little suspicious of you. What do you feel now, Inspector?"

"I feel," the big man said slowly, "that she is like you say, on thee level. But there remains one question—"

"Exactly!" Bill said. "Mary, when you went to the shop tonight, Porfirio managed to say something to you that couldn't be overheard either by Shōnan Ram or the men we had planted there. Right under the noses of our men, he got some sort of message to you, didn't he?"

"Message?" Mary said. "He only—"

She broke off. She looked from one to the other of the men. They were watching her intently. "Yes?" Inspector Mifsud asked.

"Do you remember a little lecture you gave me on the methods of the *contrabandistas*?" Mary questioned.

The inspector stared at her, his swarthy jowls drooping.

Mary caught her breath. "If we hurry," she said, "we may be just in time!"

She walked straight past them, out of the room, and out of the theatre.

It wasn't very far they had to go. It took only a few minutes. When they came to a side street near the bastion where she had walked with Bill the night before, Mary's heart was in her mouth. She knew that they might be too late. She believed that whatever it was that Mr. Porfirio had brought from the Barbados, was sewn in the lining of the coat which he had so kindly insisted upon her borrowing. Unsuspecting, she had taken it ashore for him. It was so obvious to her now. Whatever it was, it might be already on its way to Spain.

The broad bastion was white with moonlight. Date palms cast shadows over the rocks. The place looked deserted. But as her eyes searched anxiously along the bastion, her heart leaped. She almost cried out in her excitement. Moving tranquilly toward the steps which led down to a sunken road, was a blind man with a dog. Don Pedro was taking the air after his performance, as was his custom. "Quickly!" Mary said to her companions. "Quietly!"

She moved toward the blind man with Bill at her side. Inspector Mifsud lumbered at their heels. The cool breeze rustled the palm fronds. The gap between them and the blind man narrowed. All their shadows were black on the white stone.

Don Pedro glanced over his shoulder.

What he did then, showed that he was not blind. He apparently recognized them. He stooped quickly over the dog.

If Bill didn't realize what he was doing, Mary did. She knew because of the little lecture Inspector Mifsud had given her about the methods of the *contrabandistas*. How, among other things, they trained dogs to swim across the corner of the bay to La Linea with waterproof packages stuffed with American and English cigarettes.

"The dog, Bill!" Mary cried. "Get the dog!"

Don Pedro shouted at the animal. "*Anda! Anda! Go!*"

The dog did not race down the moonlit steps to the sunken road, and across the road and through the wire entanglements. The dog did not do what it had been carefully trained to do. The dog saw people running toward his master, threatening his master. The animal's head went down. Springing forward to meet these enemies, the mongrel came like a black shadow.

Mary saw the lithe form hurtling at her. She saw the flash of white teeth in the moonlight, as she threw up her arms across her face.

Bill, lunging, caught the dog by the throat. The great bulk of Inspector Mifsud charged

Don Pedro, knocked him flat and fell on him.

As Don Pedro's flashing knife clattered to the stones, Mary ran forward to snatch up the musician's fallen cloak. Her concern was for Bill, who was still struggling with the dog. "Here!" Mary cried. "Tie the dog in this cloak."

Bill caught the black garment in his hand and hastily trapped the squirming mongrel in its folds.

After one wild moment, it was all over. Inspector Mifsud had handcuffed Don Pedro, and the police officer stood exclaiming to himself. "*Por Dios!* And we let the blind man keep his dog. *Por Dios!*"

Bill's arms reached under the cloak to the trembling dog and unstrapped the animal's shoulder harness. Stepping back, the lieutenant tested the leather with his fingers.

"Microfilm," Bill Royd said, "at a guess."

Mary gasped. "And I was the stooge who carried it into Gibraltar for him."

Bill looked at her with a grin.

"Stooge be darned! This is the finish of Stingray." He hoisted the sacked dog over his shoulder. "Let's get going."

As they left the bastion, the date palms

stirred with a dry rustle. Across the corner of the bay shone the cluster of lights which marked the frontier of La Linea.

By the time Don Pedro had got through talking at the police station, he had put a noose around his own neck for the murder of Sergeant Verano. And he had, as Bill had prophesied, finished Stingray for keeps.

All sorts of people, including some with red tabs and rows of medal ribbons, were congratulating Mary. It was all very gratifying. The only thing was, no one would tell her exactly what it was that Don Pedro had so promptly transferred from Mr. Porfirio's overcoat to the dog's harness. All they would tell her was that it had been smuggled out of the U.S. to Mr. Porfirio in the Barbados. The rest, it appeared, was a military secret. Everyone looked insufferably smug and pleased about it, but no one would tell her a thing.

Even after she became engaged to Bill, he wouldn't say a word—just looked complacent. It was too infuriating. But there was nothing to be done about it. It was just one of those things you have to wait until the end of the war to find out.



A strange whistle, a torn Gideon Bible, and a key-making machine are the clues with which Duncan Maclain solves a baffling death mystery in *THE WHISTLING HANGMAN*, by Baynard Kendrick, next issue's complete mystery book!

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There was a thud and a sound of breakage, and a rain of plaster.



HERE COMES THE CORPSE!

By SAM MERWIN, JR.

Tomorrow Parke Gardner will be wed—if he can survive a night of knockout drops, bullets, and booby traps!

A MINUTE after he'd downed the glass of champagne, he knew there was something wrong with it. A moment before, the private dining room of the Ritz Carlton in Boston had been in clear focus. Around him, alike in dinner clothes and looking strangely like penguins topped by well-cared for, well-bred Boston faces, had been men he had known all his life—men with names like Lawrence, Adams, Hallowell—solid Bostonians all.

Lew Harges, his cousin and best-man-to-be at his wedding on the morrow in old Trinity Church, had been lifting his glass in a toast.

"To charming young Sally, whose beauty is matched only by her bravery in marrying a man like my cousin, Parke Gardner," Lew Harges had said. "Parke Gardner, a man we all know to be unworthy of her, the lucky scoundrel. In short, let us lift our glasses to the bride!"

As he had drained his own glass, Parke Gardner had thought of Sally Raymond, even then preparing to dance as the star of the show on the roof upstairs, even though tomorrow was her wedding day. Then his eyes had rested on two male faces that did not belong with the rest of the party—as alien as Martians or men from, say, E Street in South Boston. He'd felt a fleeting moment of worry as he studied them.

One was the lined, sallow, young-old face of Chuck Raymond, Sally's brother. Parke Gardner had felt those black eyes watching him narrowly from that almost yellow face, studying, weighing him over the rim of a glass. He distrusted Chuck Raymond as he distrusted any man who would tour the cabaret circuit with a kid sister, acting as her duenna, manager and heaven knew what else.

On Parke Gardner's other side, about to leave the party early to go upstairs for the show, was Win Carton, Sally's dancing partner. He was theatrically lean, graceful and fine of feature, with slick yellow hair that looked like a toupee, and blue eyes that were light with anger. At least Carton made no bones of how he felt about Parke Gardner putting his partner out of circulation.

For a moment, Parke wondered what he was getting into in marrying Sally. It had been a mere ten-day romance and, after all, what *did* he know about her? Then he thought of Sally, as he'd first seen her, of her glowing natural dark vitality, her soft ready wit, her full lips and smooth skin and laughing eyes, and curves that were firm from dancing, yet softly yielding. And he told himself he didn't care.

They were to honeymoon at Sea Island for six weeks. Then it was back to the big house around the corner on Commonwealth Avenue, the big house that had been so empty since Parke's parents had died almost a decade before. Lew Harges was doing it over for Parke and his bride, and Lew was not only a cousin, but a recognized genius as a decorator and interior architect.

At that point, the room began to tip and fade, and sickness exploded inside Parke Gardner like a demolition bomb. For a moment, he gripped the table, struggling for self-control. The dizziness passed, but he knew the respite was not for long. Someone had slipped him a mickey. He remembered how a mickey felt from one disastrous experience with one in college years before. He had to get out of doors.

How he ever excused himself and got down in the elevator and across Arlington Street into the Public Gardens, he was never to know. The last thing he remembered was the equestrian statue of Washington silhouetted against the sky. As he went by it,

George seemed to waver a little—as if he were about to fall off his horse and on top of him.

WHEN Parke Gardner came to, he thought he was back again in France, trying to dig into the soil to dodge Nazi machine-gun bullets. He felt one fan the air just above the nape of his neck. Then something hit, making his head ring like a gong, forcing him to thrust his face down, and leaving an ache that pulsed sharply across the back of his head.

Suddenly, he realized this was no dream hangover from the war. This was real. There was a tearing pain above the base of his skull. Something hot and warm was running down his neck, into his collar, something hot and warm and sticky.

Then he heard footsteps, steady, implacable footsteps, drawing near. Some instinct told him he had to play dead. Just by the way his head hurt, he knew he wasn't too badly hurt. He only hoped it looked bad, as he made a quick, unobtrusive motion of his head to see where he was. He saw only the rim of something irregular and white, bordered by smooth gravel—and the footsteps sounded as if they were on a gravel walk.

He was lying there, doubled over and helpless, waiting for the feet to appear when the whistling started. It came softly from the middle distance, accompanied by a slapping sound, as well as the tread of heavy feet. As the whistling grew louder, he made out the tune. It was an old Irish melody his governess had taught him as a child—*The Low-Backed Car*.

A muffled curse sounded near by, then the lighter but grimmer footsteps faded quickly. Parke Gardner knew what the slapping sound was now. It was the beat of a club against a man's thigh. The whistler was a cop.

Parke took advantage of the respite to lift his head and look around. Astonishment almost drove the pain from his head. He was sitting in the driver's seat of one of the swan boats in the Public Gardens pond. His face had been flattened against the neck of the metal bird. It was no wonder he had not been able to see anything but white.

The whistling faded then as the cop turned away on another path. Parke Gardner put a hand to the back of his head, found a tear in his scalp just above the base of his skull. The bullet had been plenty close. His hand was dark with blood as he looked at it. His stomach felt unpleasant.

He eased back down again as the steps came back—the steps that meant danger—and he cursed himself for being too sick to move. This time he arranged himself to have a better view of the path. He lay as if

dead, but his eyes were in shadow, so he could keep them open. If the fellow who'd shot at him tried it again, he might have time to roll into the water. And another shot in the night ought to bring the cop back on the run.

Closer, closer, the footsteps came. Then, so suddenly he almost started, he saw the feet, clad in black patent leather Oxfords under well-cut dinner trousers. They came to within ten feet of him, then stopped. He must have moved a little, for a familiar non-Boston accent spoke.

"Are you all right, Parke?" the voice said. "I've been looking all over for you."

The voice sounded almost worried. Well, Parke could understand that. He lifted his head, wincing with pain, and looked up into the hard dark eyes of Chuck Raymond, who was looking at him, puffing silently on a firefly that was a cigarette.

"I seem to need a hand," Parke said, and his voice came from a long way off. "How do you suppose I managed to get here?"

"I wouldn't know how you did it," Raymond answered, "but I guess you must have walked it. A pass-out on a swan boat is something new to me."

Raymond didn't have a gun in evidence, so he evidently didn't intend to take another shot at him here, Parke thought. Maybe, Parke thought further, with a shiver he did not entirely control, Chuck Raymond didn't enjoy shooting at a live target.

He had a bad time keeping his legs under him when he did get onto the walk.

"How'd you get this?" Raymond asked him, seeing the blood on his coat and collar, and spotting the wound.

Parke Gardner laughed shakily. Say, if this fellow wanted to play it politely, he could go along with him. Just then he didn't feel up to a rough and tumble, anyway. A little time might help.

"My impression is that somebody took a shot at me," he said.

He waited for Raymond, who was half holding him up, to have a violent reaction. But it took a long time in coming, for Sally's brother was just then examining the furrow in the back of his scalp.

Raymond whistled through his teeth.

"Could be," he said finally. "Funny, I thought I heard a couple shots. Then I shrugged it off as an automobile backfire. You're only creased, but on top of passing out, you'd better get home. Got any first-aid stuff?"

"Yeah," Parke said. Then, "It's all right. I can make it now."

THIS fellow was a cool one. He reminded Parke of a big Bavarian captain he'd had a run-in with on one of the Ranger

raids after Dieppe. The Jerry had been plenty sure of himself—and got a commando knife through his gizzard for his cockiness. That occasion had been as close as Parke had ever come to enjoying killing a man. Maybe, if he played along with this fellow, he'd get an opening later.

"Any idea who did it?" Chuck Raymond asked.

Parke stifled a grin as they walked slowly toward Arlington Street. The fellow was getting nervous, wondering whether he'd been spotted in the act. Parke wondered if Raymond had got rid of the gun when the cop went by, but decided it was unlikely.

"Are you kidding?" Parke replied equivocally. Let Raymond stew in his own juice. A nervous enemy was a lot weaker than a cool one.

"Guess you wouldn't know who did it, the shape you were in," Raymond said.

Now Raymond was kidding *himself* along, Parke thought. Well, let him.

They crossed Arlington to Commonwealth. Parke Gardner could see the massive pile of the big house that represented home. There were no servants, would be none sleeping in till the redecorating job was done. But he could slip through the door fast, and slam it shut.

He had already turned the key in the lock, was pushing open the massive iron grille door when he realized it wasn't swinging as smoothly as it should. His senses, jarred rudely awake by the bullet wound and what had followed, were hyperacute, otherwise he might not have noticed it. Just then, anything out of the ordinary rang an alarm bell in his brain.

So he gave the door a push without following it in—and the whole big house seemed to come down around him with a crash. There was a thud and the sound of breakage, and a rain of plaster, wood, and rubble.

"What the—" Chuck Raymond gasped.

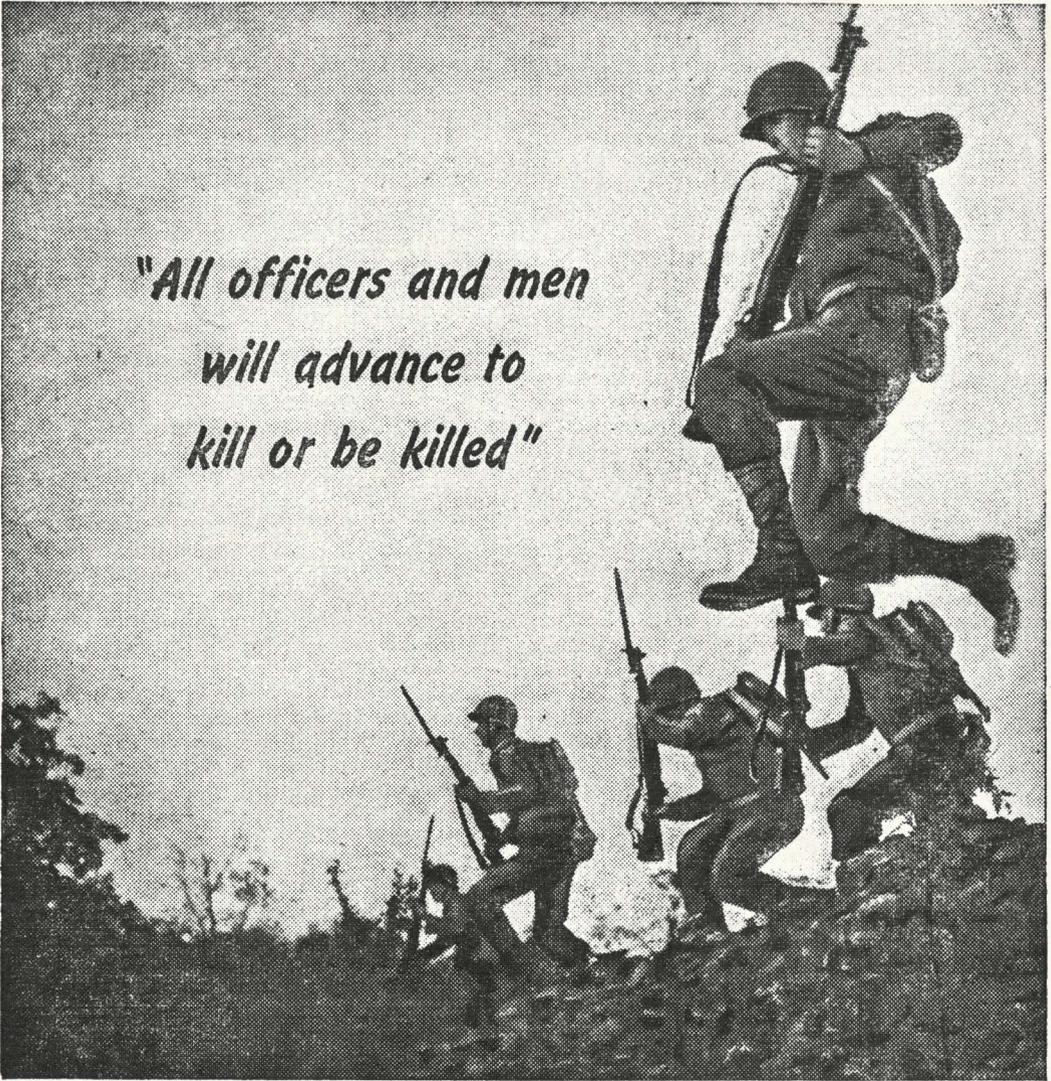
A white cloud of plaster dust billowed past them. Then Parke Gardner and Chuck Raymond were shoving in over the rubble and boards and ropes that littered what was ordinarily one of the finest parquet floors in Boston.

"Wonder if the lights still work?" Raymond found the switch and turned it on.

The lights came on, revealing the great hall of the house, a full two stories high, as being a mess. The scaffold, on which the decorators had been standing to re-do the plaster above the front door, had fallen. And there were other remarkable features. From the debris, it was evident that far more than plasterers' utensils had been stacked on the board. Fragments of what had been

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*"All officers and men
will advance to
kill or be killed"*



THIS IS NO DREAMED-UP HEADLINE—no “tone poem” conceived on an inspired typewriter. It’s the way the army explains the command “Fix bayonets—charge!” Only the Infantry has it put to them in these words. As one doughboy said: “I’ll remember those eleven words the rest of my life.”

Remember? How can he forget them? They describe the climax of the Infantryman’s assault—they describe the most cold-blooded action on a battlefield. Yet Infantry officers and men have advanced, countless times, to kill or be killed ... at Saratoga ... at New Orleans ... the

Argonne ... New Guinea ... Salerno. There’s no rescinding this order—no retreating—no nothing but *plain killing*.

Right now, the men of the Infantry are advancing—advancing to the order of “kill or be killed.” Remember this the next time you see a doughboy on furlough. Remember this the next time you almost forget to write that letter. Remember it till your dying day. You can’t pay the doughboy back—but at least you can be forever mindful of *his* role in this fight for freedom. His last command may be to “Fix bayonets—charge!”

"Keep your eye on the Infantry—THE DOUGHBOY DOES IT!"

a heavy, blue-and-white, porcelain umbrella stand lay on the floor. Other shards lying around indicated the board had been piled with an entire set of porcelain figurines, and various other heavy objets-d'art from around the house.

"All junk," said Parke, trying to stifle his nervous reaction to the succession of shocks he'd had tonight.

But Chuck Raymond wasn't listening. He was studying the ruin, his eyes narrower than ever in his sallow face. He shook his head and moved to the door.

"Look at this." He went to the front door, pushed it shut.

A rope was tied to the door knob, a rope that ran up over one of the pulley blocks that had supported the now fallen scaffold. With quick, long fingers, he untied the knot, pulled the scaffold back into place, retied the rope end in its proper place beside the door.

"Nice booby trap," Parke observed.

It had been a pip. If he'd gone on through the door, he'd be deader now than a London buzz-bomb victim. There must have been a couple of tons of stuff set on that scaffold, ready to land on him. All at once he felt his teeth begin to chatter.

The murder attempt had failed, just as the shots in the Public Gardens had failed. And now its preparer was patching it up again, destroying the evidence, Parke thought. Come to think of it, what evidence had the would-be killer left behind him? A doctored drink at a bachelor's dinner, a couple of unwitting shots in the dark, a fallen decorator's scaffold in the front hall of his own home.

PARKE GARDNER was more certain than ever now that his drink had been doped. No mere overdose of alcohol could have flattened him so fast. He'd been doped, shot at, nearly killed by a planned disaster at home. He thought of that fellow the mobsters had insured and then tried to kill years before in New York—"Iron Man" Haggerty, wasn't it?—the fellow they poisoned and ran over and pushed off cliffs, but who refused to die.

Then, again, he felt those black eyes on him. Chuck Raymond was looking at him queerly. Again he checked his jumping

nerves. Exasperating, wasn't it, that after so much trouble he wasn't dead? He knew he was still a little drunk with shock or liquor or both.

"You'd better let me fix your head," he heard his future brother-in-law saying.

Raymond came over and took Parke's arm firmly, led him toward the stairs.

"It looks to me as if somebody doesn't like you very well," he said.

"You're telling me!" Parke exclaimed.

The son of a gun! He wondered what the next try would be like, as Raymond half pushed him up the stairs. Maybe the fellow would stick a needle into him full of something to make it look like heart failure. He'd tried about everything else.

"You'd better get into pajamas and get some sleep," Raymond said when the scalp wound was dressed. "You've got a date tomorrow noon with my sister—and you want to keep it. Better keep your door locked."

"I can take care of myself, thank you."

As soon as Parke had said that he realized how foolish it sounded. So far, his record in taking care of himself had been about zero. He glanced at Raymond, who stood there, hands in his coat pockets, staring at him from those strangely black eyes. Parke wondered if his brother-in-law-to-be were going to shoot him right then and there.

"As you wish," the young-old man said presently. He lifted his left hand in salute, turned and left the room.

Parke listened as Raymond's footsteps sounded softly on the carpeted stairs, then more loudly as they trod on the rubble in the hall two floors below. He shivered. Those footsteps were very reminiscent of the deadly tread he had heard on the Gardens path.

The fellow hadn't killed him after all. Parke felt a great bound of relief inside himself. He sat down, tried to figure things out. Maybe Raymond hadn't dared shoot him here in his own house.

The bound of relief took a drop down to his heels. He ran a hand over his aching forehead. He could see the whole plot with dreadful clarity now—and it had to be a plot. First, there had been the mickey to knock him out at the party. He had drunk plenty of champagne, and a pass-out, par-

(Turn to page 86)

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933, OF THRILLING MYSTERY NOVEL MAGAZINE, published quarterly at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1944, State of New York, County of New York, SS. Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and County aforesaid, personally appeared H. L. Herbert, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of THRILLING MYSTERY NOVEL MAGAZINE, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit: 1. That the names and addresses of the Publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are: Publisher, Standard Magazines, Inc., 11 East 39th Street, New York, N. Y.; Editor, Harvey Burns, 11 East 39th Street, New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, H. L. Herbert, 11 East 39th Street, New York, N. Y. 2. That the owner is: Standard Magazines, Inc., 11 East 39th Street, New York, N. Y.; N. L. Pines, 11 East 39th Street, New York, N. Y. 3. That the known bondholders, mortgages, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None. 4. That the two paragraphs next above giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing a claimant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds or other securities than as so stated by him. H. L. HERBERT, Business Manager. Sworn to and subscribed before me this 3rd day of October, 1944. Eugene Wechsler. My commission expires March 30th, 1945.

New Sickness and Accident Plan Pays \$25 Weekly Benefits

**Costs Only \$12 a Year—Down Payment \$2.50—
Hospital Benefit Included**

NEWARK, N. J.—The 58-year-old North American Accident Insurance Company of Chicago announces a new plan that pays \$25 a week for 10 weeks for both stated accidents and sicknesses. Plus an additional \$25 a week for 4 weeks for accidents requiring hospital confinement. Yet the total cost is only \$12 a year. The purpose of this new Premier Limited Double Duty Policy is to bring sickness and accident protection within the reach of men and women who do not have large savings with which to meet sudden doctor or hospital bills, or lost income.

This new plan also has a double-indemnity feature covering travel accidents. You receive \$50 a week if disabled by an accident in a bus, taxicab, street car, train, etc., and \$75 a week if the accident requires hospital confinement. There is another new special feature that pays up to \$25 cash for doctor bills, even for a minor accident such as a cut finger. In case of death by a common accident, the policy pays one thousand dollars cash to your family. Two thousand dollars if caused by a travel accident.

In addition, it covers many common sicknesses such as pneumonia, cancer, appendicitis, etc., paying the weekly benefits whether confined to home or hospital.

The entire cost is only \$12 a year, and that applies to men and women between the ages of 15 and 64 inclusive. Between the ages of 65 and 75 the cost is only \$18 a year. Protects you 24 hours a day. No reduction in benefits regardless of age. No medical examination is required.

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ticularly by a bridegroom on his wedding eve, would excite only ribald comment.

His would-be killer had probably plotted to bring him back here to the house then, and shove him through the front door and—*whammo*, down would have come the booby trap. Result—no more Parke Gardner, no police suspicion, no autopsy. It could hardly, in view of the booby trap, have been planned any other way. The only thing out of focus now was the shots in the Gardens.

He screwed up his forehead trying to figure it out. It was enough to plague a Nero Wolfe. Something must have gone wrong with the plan—but what? He gave it up finally, as restlessness overcame him and made sustained thought impossible. All at once, he had to see Sally, had to make sure she was not connected with this conspiracy.

His head hurt as he stooped over to pluck a fresh evening shirt from his bottom drawer.

SALLY and Win Carton were just finishing their second show of the evening when Parke entered the roof garden, looking much like his normal self except for a slight greenness around the gills and a white cocoon of bandage taped neatly across the back of his head. The headwaiter bowed him to his usual table, just off the dance floor on the left.

Win Carton, lithe and graceful, was whirling Sally, in a cloud of dull gold chiffon, through the air, as Parke took his seat. He slowed his own spins for the final step, at which point he saw Parke sitting, watching. He faltered, almost dropped the girl to the floor. His forehead suddenly gleamed with beads of sweat.

At the end of the number, he bowed Sally offstage almost rudely in his haste, let her come back for her encore alone. She saw Parke then, and slipped back, without changing her costume, to sit with him. A faint line of worry was etched between her brows.

"I heard you got sick at your dinner," she said. "Are you okay?" She leaned forward, her arms folded on the table. "Thanks for coming up here. I know it's supposed to be bad luck, but I've been worried."

"Make that two," he said ambiguously to the waiter, who was hovering in attendance. And then to Sally, "Some wag slipped me a mickey finn during the toasts." Just being near her, he felt any doubts he may have had about her dissolving.

"Parke, that's awful!" she said. "And, darling, what happened to your head? It's all bandaged up."

"Let's just say that I fell." His face was grim, but it softened as the concern mounted

in her eyes. No, Sally was all right. She had to be. That meant Chuck Raymond had to be all right too—or did it?

It was then that he thought of Win Carton, and the dancer's odd behavior. Carton didn't like him one bit, Parke knew, felt he was depriving him of his means of livelihood by marrying Sally and thus taking his dance partner away. Carton had been to the Commonwealth Avenue house more than once for after-the-show suppers during the last ten days. Parke supposed he could have got a key.

"Good night, honey," he said to Sally, leaning across the table to kiss her briefly. "I came up because I wanted to tell you I was all right. See you tomorrow."

"You'd better," said the girl. She cupped a slim hand under his chin, and drew him down for another kiss. "If you don't, I'll sick Chuck on you, and he can be a mighty mean hombre when he's crossed."

Parke asked the maitre d'hotel where Win Carton's room was. In a matter of minutes, he was knocking at the door. After long seconds of silence, the dancer came to the door and opened it, poked his head out.

"Oh," he said, startled. "So it's you."

"There's a rumor to that effect," said Parke, pushing his way inside.

He had never been in Carton's room before. Various homey touches had been introduced here and there to remove the hotel stigma. He spotted a brown cushion with the legend "Never complain, never explain"

[Turn page]

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printed on it, a large picture of Sally peeping coyly over one bare shoulder, and a large white polar bear skin tossed over the bed to give it a couchy appearance.

"Why did you have to come here tonight?" The dancer's face worked with emotion. "Wasn't taking Sally away from me bad enough? Why do you have to keep rubbing it in?"

"Cut it!" said Parke, with an unusual lapse from politeness. "You know you're upset only because you're too lazy to hunt for another partner."

He strode over to the bureau, where something gleamed from under a carelessly humped towel—a towel that looked sadly out of place in the over-neat chamber. The item under the towel was a thirty-eight caliber revolver.

"That's mine!" screamed the dancer. "You can't take it away."

"Perhaps not," Parke said. "But the police can—unless you have a permit."

He looked the gun over carefully, fending off the dancer's rush with an elbow. The revolver showed no signs of having been recently fired, which meant little. Carton could have cleaned it.

A top drawer yielded a box of cartridges that was two-thirds full. Parke put them in his pocket, then emptied the gun's cylinders, and put those bullets in his pocket too.

Carton had sunk helplessly back on the bed, completely unnerved. Parke suddenly had a clear understanding of what the distraught dancer might have been planning with the gun.

"I'll leave you the gun," Parke said. "You wouldn't want to cut up your pretty throat with a razor, so I guess you're safe enough from doing anything rash." He pulled out his checkbook, wrote a check for a thousand dollars, waved it in the air to dry it. "This may help tide you over until you get a new partner."

"You can't buy everything with money," said the dancer, nervously indignant. Even now, his sleek yellow hair was perfectly in place.

"Call it payment in advance, if you wish," said Parke. "I'd like to know what happened at the party tonight after I got sick."

"Payment," said the dancer slowly. "That's different." He ran a hand over his sleek thatch. "Why—nothing much happened. Chuck went out to look for you when you didn't come back—Chuck and your cousin Lew Harges and some of the others. Things broke up after that, I guess. I had to go upstairs."

"Okay," said Parke. "Did you take a hand in the search?"

"Not till the first show was over. Then I took a look around the Gardens when no

one seemed to have found you. Frankly, I didn't care."

"Did you have your gun with you?" Parke asked quietly.

"Goodness no," said Carton. "Do you think I want to shoot anyone?"

"I guess not," said Parke. "Good night."

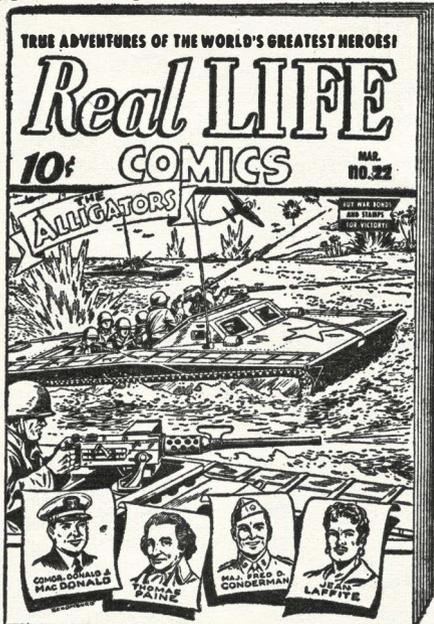
HIS head hurt like blazes as he left the dancer behind him. So far, his visit had only added to the puzzle. He couldn't figure out that attack in the park yet—unless, perhaps, Carton had found him lying there and had shot at him out of sheer hatred for his stealing Sally from his act.

Parke threw the cartridges into a waste bin on Arlington Street as he walked back to his house. There he took another and more careful look at the debris of the booby trap. It had been carefully arranged, all right—but by whom and when? It was odd, he thought as he went over the mess, that nothing valuable seemed to have been taken.

He made as careful an inventory of the wreckage as its shattered remains allowed. There was the umbrella stand. There were the ugly porcelain figurines, an old brass elephant an aunt had sent his father for Christmas, a heavy ebony stool, hideously carved, that some family friend had picked up in a Colombo bazaar years before, a small iron

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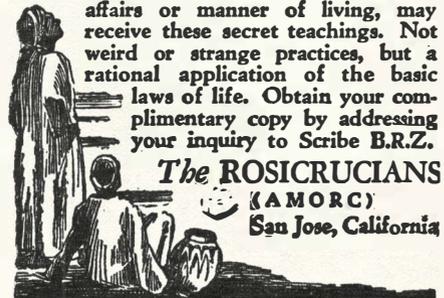
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cannon ball, set in an oaken stand, which had been used as a doorstep upstairs.

"It's crazy," he muttered, "or is it?"

A totally new conception of the crime and its creator was suddenly being born in his mind. It was negative—it wasn't evidence in the courtroom sense—but it was as damnable pointing toward the guilty person as a confession.

The Gardner house was really a palace of treasures—of old Paul Revere silver, of Duncan Phyfe tables and sideboards, of the arts and crafts of the ablest of old New England silversmiths and cabinetmakers. Yet here and there, as in any lived-in house, monstrosities had crept in.

They were purchases by error which were kept because they could be put to use, gifts from relatives and so on—like the umbrella stand, the figurines, the elephant, the stool, the cannon ball. In short, just about the house's entire roster of atrocities had been gathered from this or that floor and room and put into the booby trap.

With shaking fingers, Parke lit a cigarette and sat down on the bottom step of the stairs. He considered his suspects. Chuck Raymond, even if he knew much about objects d'art, hardly knew the house well enough to make such a selection. As for Win Carton, the dreadful combination of things he carried with him—the pillow and the rug among them—ruled him out from the start. This murder had been arranged by someone with taste.

Anger swept over him like a tide—anger not only at what a person he trusted implicitly had tried to do to him, but anger at himself. Thanks to being a snob, he had refused to see what should have been evident from the first. He swore softly but violently as he stood up.

There were no taxis in sight, and his own car was in a garage over on Stewart Street, but it didn't matter. He hadn't far to go. His face was grim as he strode down Commonwealth, turned right on Clarendon, past Marlborough and left on Beacon. As he pressed the button on the door to a ground floor apartment in the rear of one of the low, modern houses so newly built there, he knew what he had to say.

"Oh," said Lew Harges when he saw who it was. "Come in, Parke. Glad to see you're on your feet again. What can I do for you?"

"Just this," said Parke, pushing inside, into the long living room with its exquisite decorations. "Tell me why in hades you shot at me in the Gardens tonight? It doesn't fit with the rest."

LEW HARGES took it calmly. Clad in dressing gown and slippers, he moved to a drum table beside the sofa, picked up a

cigarette and lit it. Parke watched him carefully. He knew his cousin was dangerous. "I don't know," Harges said. "You gummed up the works when you got out of the Ritz under your own power. I thought it was pretty neat extemporizing. At first, I thought of picking your pockets. Then everyone would have thought it was some bum from the Common who shot you. But that cop came along, and then Chuck Raymond."

"Okay," said Parke. "That's all I wanted to know. Now I'll beat your ears off."

Lew Harges did something fast with a drawer of the table, and came up with a gun.

"Oh no you're not," he said. "You'll do nothing of the kind. You haven't got a chance, Parke. Better stay where you are."

"It won't do you any good to kill me, even here," said Parke. "I'm unarmed, so you could hardly call it self-defense."

"In case you don't remember"—Lew nodded toward the service revolver in his right fist—"this is *your* gun. I oiled it up just in case. It shouldn't be hard to convince the police you came in here to kill me and I got it away from you—say over jealousy of Sally."

"But if it's money you're after, why wipe me out?" Parke felt cold sweat break out on the bridge of his nose. His anger had made him rush in here like a fool.

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"I figured that as long as you died before you married Sally, I'd get the bulk of your estate," Harges explained. "Frankly, when I learned you had appeared at the Ritz a while ago to see Sally, I just about gave up. But thanks to your visit here, I have another chance."

"You idiot," said Parke. "I drew up a new will in Sally's favor yesterday. If it was money, Lew, why didn't you ask for it? I'd have given it to you. I know your business is shot."

"It's more than money." Lew's eyes had grown a shade darker at news of the new will. "It's the house. It's always burned me up to see a barbarian like you owning a treasure house like that with no more appreciation of it than one of my plasterers—no, even less."

It was then that hope surged again in Parke. He saw the face at the window behind Lew Harges—a tough, sallow, familiar face. He knew the sands were running out, but at least there was a chance. Harges prolonged it then, by asking a question.

"Tell me, Parke, how did you get on to the fact it was I?"

"Your own good taste," said Parke. "You selected the junk for your booby trap a bit too carefully. Once I saw that, it was easy"—he kept his eyes on the window, watching Chuck Raymond clamber onto the sill—"and the rest fell into place. Who had a better chance to arrange that trap than the decorator? Who had a better chance to slip me a mickey than the host? Oh, it was a snap, once I got the right slant."

"I never thought you'd—hey, that old gag won't help you, Parke." Lew Harges smiled faintly as his cousin nodded toward the window.

Chuck Raymond kicked in the window with his foot at that moment, and in spite of himself, Harges swung around to face this attack from the rear.

"High-low!" yelled Parke as he launched himself just above the rug.

The now frantic Harges whirled back to—
(Turn to page 94)



Fight

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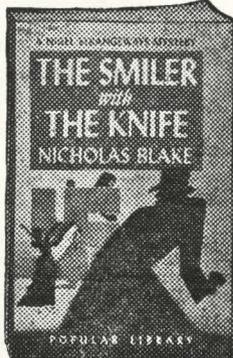
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ward him. But it was too late, for Parke was already in on him, low, and Chuck Raymond, with a war whoop, came diving high through the broken window to hit him from the other side.

The gun went off harmlessly into a side wall. Harges hit the floor with a sickening thud and didn't even quiver. Parke picked up the gun, rose and helped Chuck Raymond to his feet. He studied his sallow-faced brother-in-law-to-be with new respect.

"Where did you learn that one?" he asked.

"Guadalcanal," said Raymond. "How about you?"

"Channel Coast," said Parke. "I didn't know you were at Guadal?"

"I don't like to talk about it," Raymond said with a sheepish grin. "A mosquito washed me out." He touched a finger to his yellow face. "I got the granddaddy of all malaria cases. The docs won't let me work. That's why I've been traveling around with sis. Some job for a man, and don't say you haven't been thinking so too."

"Forget it," said Parke. He extended his hand. "How come you turned up in such Desperate Desmond style just now?"

"You don't think," said Raymond, "that I'm going to let Sally's future husband wander around town with a killer on his trail the night before her marriage? I've been shadowing you every foot of the way. I had a devil of a time finding the alley entrance, or I'd have been here sooner."

"Well," said Parke, looking down at the still unconscious Lew Harges, "it looks as if we're going to need a new best man. I guess I'd better call the police."



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(Continued from page 6)

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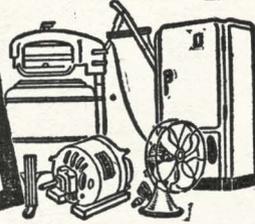
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| <input type="checkbox"/> Surveying and Mapping | <input type="checkbox"/> Sheet-Metal Drafting | <input type="checkbox"/> Cotton Manufacturing | <input type="checkbox"/> Traffic Management |
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- MAKING
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 - Medicine Cabinet
 - Combined Cabinet and Bookshelves
 - Fire Screen
 - Double Stepladder
 - Deck Chair
 - Table Lamp
 - China Cabinet
 - Modern Sideboard
 - a Burglar-proof Hinge
 - a Shelf Bracket
 - Objects of Metal
 - Rustic Garden Bench
 - Rose Pergola
 - Greenhouse
 - Furniture Repairs
 - Panelling a Room
 - Replacing Sash
 - Cords
 - Lifting Flooring
 - Draught Prevention
 - Picture Framing
 - Glass Cutting
 - Fitting & Replacing Window Panes
 - Fitting Hinges
 - Fitting Shelves
 - Converting Spare Room into Workshop
 - Using Garage as Workshop
 - Choice and Care of Tools
 - Wax Polishing, Fuming, etc.
 - Choice of a Lathe
 - Sheet-Tin Work
 - Bent Wire Work
 - Etching on Brass, Copper and Steel
 - Paperhanging
 - Interior Painting
 - Graining
- And many other things you'll have FUN making and doing with help of this new book!**



Household Utility Items—Make ironing boards, step-ladders, kitchen tables, workstands, clothes driers, utility cabinets, etc.



Things Decorative, Useful—Have fun making book-cuts, coffee tables, hearth rails, etc. You'll get real pleasure in seeing them finished in your home.



For Garden—Make a 2-light garden frame for plants—or beautify with rustic seats and benches, rose pergolas, bird feeding tables, even complete greenhouse, etc.



Nursery Needs—Make hard-to-get things like a baby's folding crib, medicine cabinets, work stands, lamps, cake tins, ash trays, etc.



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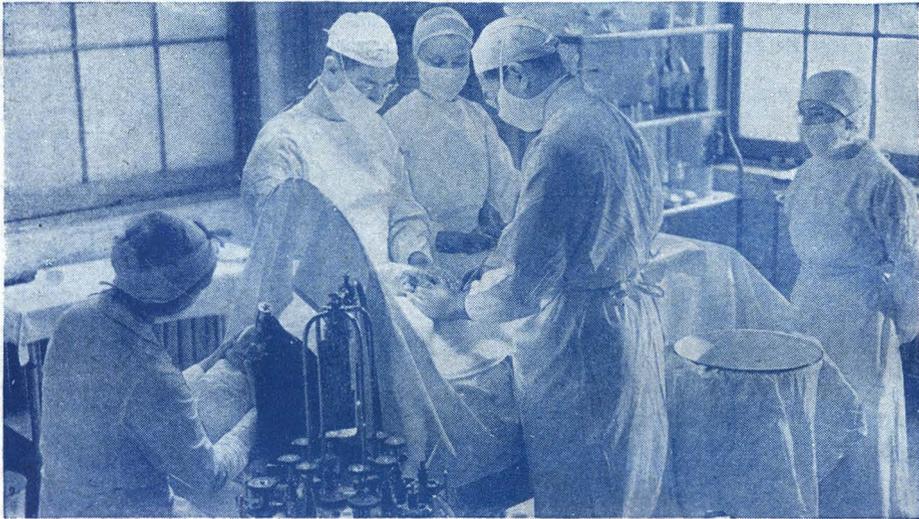
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