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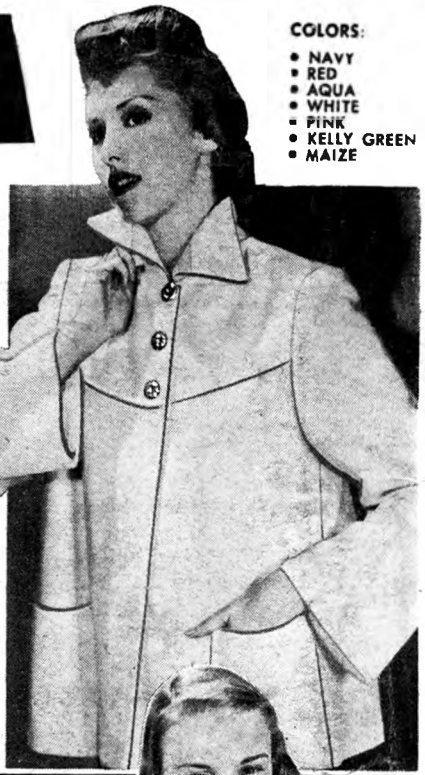

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TRIPLE THREE NOVELS IN ONE MAGAZINE

TRIPLE DETECTIVE

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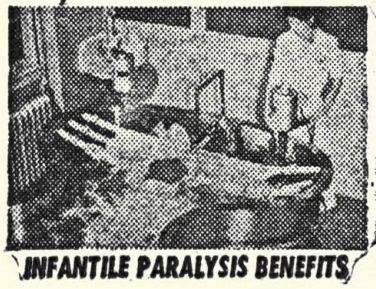

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Mystery Fans and the Editor Look at Crime

HOW many items can you name that are more valuable than gold? There's radium and platinum, sure. Diamonds, too. And emeralds. But we bet there's one fabulously priced luxury you won't guess in a month of Tuesdays as being more precious than fine gold.

Perfume.

That's right. The scent that goes behind the girl friend's lovely, shell-pink ears can't be bought for pennies—not the more exotic kind, at any rate. Per ounce, they can set the splurging shopper back as much as five times the price of 18K dust.

Naturally, anything as valuable as this is going to fall prey to the racket boys, and sure enough it has. According to the figures we have their take runs to a million a month. The angle they work is—perfume counterfeiting, and it has the making of phony money beat a dozen different ways.

The real take is in cologne. Cologne, as you know it, is perfume diluted with alcohol, and an ounce of good perfume will make a half pint of cologne. Three times as many people buy cologne as will pay the big prices for straight scent, so that's what the bootleg boys go after.

They have many things on their side right at the start. Did you know, for example, it's not criminal to counterfeit an exclusive label of any top perfume? It's a civil offense, and the manufacturer who's been pirated can sue for damages, but that's all. The same with containers, packages and fancy stoppers—and the fragrancy counterfeiters imitate all those things. The only real crime involved may be the failure to pay tax to the Internal Revenue people.

What about the legitimate perfume makers, you ask. Why don't they make a noise about it? The answer is they can't afford to. Most of what they get their fat prices for is reputation. They spend millions to build up their trade names. If the bootleg thing got to be common knowledge, their business might be badly hurt.

This is the plush racket that store detective Don Marko runs up against in KEY FOR ANY LOCK, the hard-hitting novel by Stewart Sterling that leads off our next issue.

Don Marko's usual quarry is shoplifters. Nor is he much concerned about the bootleg perfume racket—until murder enters the picture, murder of a nice guy who gets in crime's way. . . .

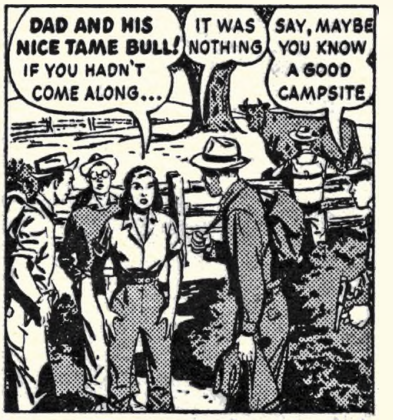
A KEY FOR ANY LOCK is entertainment plus!

It's a nice doll who is murdered in LADY IN THE MORGUE, by Jonathan Latimer, the novel that occupies spot number two in our next issue. This is rowdy, hard-boiled fare—and at the same time warmly human and appealing. It has one of the most memorable punch-line endings in all of detective fiction, and if you want an eye-opener, this is it. Originally published by the Crime Club as a $2.00 book, LADY IN THE MORGUE is an all-time hit.

Rounding out our forthcoming trio of novels will be THE PARADISE CANYON MYSTERY, by Philip Wylie. It's the story of an Olympic champion who accepts a job as swimming instructor at a swank Western resort—and gets shot at the first day. He isn't hurt, but others around the place don't get off quite so lucky. It's a murder puzzle that will keep you guessing—and guessing!

IT WAS NIP AND TUCK FOR JACK UNTIL . . .

JACK ROSS AND HIS GROUP OF STATE FORESTRY STUDENTS ARE LOOKING FOR A CAMPSITE AT THE END OF A DAY-LONG HIKE WHEN . . .



CLOCK Without Hands

Mentally, George stripped her of her clothes. . . .

A Novel by GERALD KERSH

I

SEVERAL years ago, when London newspapers had space to spare for all kinds of sensational trivialities, John Jacket of the *Sunday Special* went to talk with

Timid, sex-repressed George Wainewright ogled the girls, and wished he had the nerve to love one, or better—murder one!

a certain Mr. Wainewright about the stabbing of a man named Benson—whose wife had been arrested and charged with murder.

It was a commonplace, dreary case. The only extraordinary thing about it was that Martha Benson had not killed her husband ten years earlier. It was a dull affair: She was not even young, or pretty. But Jacket had a knack of finding strange and colorful aspects of drab, even squalid affairs. Now he went out on the trail of Wainewright, the man who had found Benson's body, and who owned the house in which Benson had lived.

Even the Scotland Yard man who took down Wainewright's statement had not been able to describe the appearance of the little householder. He was "just ordinary," the detective said, "sort of like a city clerk." He was like everybody; he was a nobody. At half past seven every evening Wainewright went out to buy a paper and drink a glass of beer in the saloon bar of the Firedrake —always the *Evening Extra*, never more than one glass of beer.

So one evening at half past seven John Jacket went into the saloon bar of the Firedrake, and found Mr. Wainewright sitting under an oval mirror that advertised Bach's Light Lager. Jacket had to look twice before he saw the man.

A man has a shape; a crowd has no shape and no color. The massed faces of a hundred thousand men make one blank pallor; their clothes add up to a shadow; they have no words. This man was something less than nondescript—he was blurred, without identity, like a smudged fingerprint. Like a dummy in a shop window with his suit of some dim shade between brown and gray. His shirt had gray-blue stripes, his tie was patterned with dots like confetti trodden into the dust, and his oddment of limp brownish mustache resembled a cigarette butt, disintegrating shred by shred in a tea saucer.

He was holding a bowler hat on his knees and looking at the clock.

JACKET went to the table under the oval mirror, smiled politely, and said, "Mr. Wainewright, I believe?"

The little man stood up. "Yes. Ah, yes. My name *is* Wainewright."

"My name is Jacket, of the *Sunday Special*. How do you do?"

They shook hands. Mr. Wainewright said, "You're the gentleman who writes every week!"

"*Free For All*—yes, that's my page. But what'll you drink, Mr. Wainewright?"

"I hardly ever—"

"Come, come," said Jacket. He went to the bar. Mr. Wainewright blinked and stared at Jacket with a watery mixture of wonder and trepidation in his weak eyes.

"With all due respect, Mr. Jacket, I don't know what I can tell you that you don't already know."

"Oh, to hell with the murder!" said Jacket easily. "It isn't about that I want to talk to you, Mr. Wainewright."

"Oh, *not* about the murder?"

"A twopenny-halfpenny m u r d e r, whichever way you take it. No, I want to talk about *you*, Mr. Wainewright.

"Me? But Scotland Yard—"

"Look. You will excuse me, won't you? You may know the sort of things I write about, and in that case you'll understand how this Benson murder affair fails to interest me very much. What does it amount to, after all? A woman stabs a man." Jacket flapped a hand in a derogatory gesture. "So? So a woman stabs a man. A hackneyed business; an ill-treated wife grabs a pair of scissors and—*pst*! And a good job, too. If she hadn't stabbed Benson, somebody else would have, sooner or later. But you, Mr. Wainewright, you interest me, because you're the . . . bystander, the onlooker, the witness. I like to get at the—the *impact* of things—the way people are affected by things. So let's talk about yourself."

Alarmed and gratified, Mr. Wainewright murmured, "I haven't anything to tell about myself. There isn't any-

thing of interest, I mean. Benson—"

"Let's forget Benson. It's an open-and-shut case."

"Er, Mr. Jacket. Will they hang her, do you think?"

Martha Benson? No, not in a thousand years."

"But surely, she's a murderess, sir!"

"Tell me, Wainewright: Do you think they *ought* to hang Martha Benson?"

"Well, sir, she did murder her hubby, after all—"

"But how d'you *feel* about it? What would you say, if you were a juryman?"

REPORTER JOHN JACKET
—he'd do anything for a story!

"The wages of sin is . . . ah . . . the penalty for murder is the—ahem—the rope, Mr. Jacket!"

"Is it? They don't hang people for crimes of passion these days."

At the word "passion," Mr. Wainewright looked away. He drank a little whiskey-and-soda, and said, "Perhaps not, sir. She might get away with . . . with penal servitude for life—"

"She might even be acquitted."

"Well, sir . . . that's for the judge and jury to decide. But to take a human life—"

"Do you dislike the woman, Mr. Wainewright?" Jacket blinked at the little man from under half-raised eyebrows.

"Oh, good Lord, no, sir! Not at all, Mr. Jacket; I don't even know her. I only saw her for an instant."

"Good-looking?"

"Good-looking, Mr. Jacket? No, no, she wasn't. She was bedraggled. She looked—if you'll excuse me—as if she . . . as if she'd had children, sir. And then she was flurried, and crying."

"This Benson of yours was a bit of a pig, according to all accounts."

"Not a nice man by any means, sir. I was going to give him notice."

"Irregular hours, I suppose—noisy?"

"Yes, and he . . . he drank, too. And worse, sir?"

"Women?"

Mr. Wainewright nodded, embarrassed "Yes. Women all the time."

Jacket brought fresh drinks. "Oh, no!" cried Mr. Wainewright. "Not for me. I couldn't, thanks all the same."

"Drink it up," said Jacket, "all up, like a good boy."

The little man raised his glass.

"Your good health, Mr. Jacket. Yes, he was not a nice class of man by any means. All the girls seemed to run after him, though. I never could make out why they did. He *was* what you might call charming, sir—lively, always joking. But, well; he was a man of about my own age—forty-six, at least—and I never could understand what they could see in Benson."

HE SWALLOWED his whiskey like medicine, holding his breath in order not to taste it.

Jacket said, "Judging by his photo, I should say he was no oil painting. A great big slob, I should have said—"

"He was a big, powerful man," said Mr. Wainewright.

"Commercial traveler, I believe. Make a lot of money?"

"Never saved a penny, Mr. Jacket," said Mr. Wainewright, in a shocked

voice. But he could sell things, sir. He wouldn't take no for an answer. Throw him out of the door, and back he comes at the window."

"That's the way to please the ladies," said Jacket. "Appear ruthless; refuse to take no for an answer; make it quite clear that you know what you want and are going to get it. He did all that, eh?"

"Yes, sir, he did—oh, you really shouldn't've done this. I can't—"

More drinks had been set down.

"Cheers," said Jacket. Wainewright sipped another drink. "Are you a married man, Mr. Wainewright?"

"Married? Me? No, not me, Mr. Jacket." Mr. Wainewright giggled; the whiskey was bringing a pinkness to his cheeks.

"I shouldn't be surprised if you were a bit of a devil on the sly, yourself, Mr. Wainewright," said Jacket, with a knowing wink.

"I—I don't have time to bother with such things."

"Your boardinghouse keeps you pretty busy—"

"My apartment house? Yes, it does, off and on."

"Been in the business long?"

"Only about eight months, sir, since my auntie died. She left me the house, you see, and I thought it was about time I had a bit of a change. So I kept it on. I was in gents' footwear before that, for more than twenty years."

"Making shoes?"

"Pardon *me*, I was a salesman in one of their biggest branches, sir."

"So sorry," said Jacket. "Did Benson yell out?"

"Eh? Pardon? Yell out? N-no, no, I can't say he did. He coughed, kind of. But he was always coughing, you see. He was a heavy smoker. A cigarette smoker. It's a bad habit, cigarettes."

"Tell me, how d'you find business just now? Slow, I dare say, eh?"

"Steady, sir, steady. But I'm not altogether dependent on the house. I had some money saved of my own, and my auntie left me a nice lump sum, so—"

"So you're your own master. Lucky fellow!"

"Ah," said Wainewright, "I'd like a job like yours, Mr. Jacket. You must meet so many interesting people."

"I'll show you around a bit, some evening," said Jacket.

"No, really?"

"Why not?" Jacket smiled, and patted the little man's arm. "What's your address?"

"Seventy-seven Bishop's Square, Belgravia."

"Pimlico: the taxi drivers' nightmare," said Jacket, writing it on the back of an old envelope. "Good. Well, and tell me—how does it feel to be powerful?"

"Who, me? I'm not powerful, sir?"

"Nonsense. You're the chief witness; it all depends on you. Don't you realize that your word may send a woman to the gallows, or to jail? Just your word, your oath! Why, you've got power over life and death. You're something like a god, as far as Martha Benson is concerned."

Mr. Wainewright blinked; and then something strange happened. His eyes became bright and he smiled. But he shook his head. "No, no," he said, with a kind of sickly vivacity. "No, you're joking."

II

JACKET, looking at him, said, "What an interesting man you are, Wainewright! What a fascinating man you really are!"

"Ah, you only say that. You're an author, and you can make extraordinary things out of nothing."

"Don't you believe it, Wainewright. You are an extremely remarkable man. Why, I could make fifteen million people sit up and gape at you. What's your first name?"

"Eh? Er . . . George Micah."

"I think I'll call you George."

"Well, I'm honored, I'm sure, Mr. Jacket."

"Call me Jack."

"Oh, it's friendly of you, but I shouldn't dare to presume. But, Mr. Jacket, you must let *me* offer *you* a little something." Wainewright was leaning toward him, eagerly blinking. "I should be offended . . . Whiskey?"

"Thanks," said Jacket.

The little man reached the bar. It was his destiny to wait unattended, to be elbowed aside by newcomers, to cough politely at counters, to be ignored.

At last he came back with two glasses.

"Mr. Jacket . . . you were joking about —you weren't serious about making fifteen million people . . ."

"You are a man of destiny," said Jacket. "In the first place—not taking anything else into account—you are an ordinary man. What does that mean? All the genius of the world is hired to please you, and all the power of industry is harnessed in your service. Trains run to meet you; Cabinet ministers crawl on their bellies to you; press barons woo you, George. Archbishops go out of their way to make heaven and hell fit your waistcoat. Your word is law. The King himself has got to be nice to you. Get it? You are the boss around here. All the prettiest women on earth have only one ambition, George Wainewright—to attract and amuse you, tickle you, excite you, in general take your mind off the harsh business of ruling the world. George, you don't beg; you demand. You are the public. Nobody? You're *everybody*!"

Mr. Wainewright blinked. Jacket drank his health, and said, "So now tell me some more about yourself."

"Well . . ." said Mr. Wainewright. "I don't know what to say, I'm sure. You know everything already. You want my opinion, perhaps?" In Mr. Wainewright's eyes there appeared a queer, marsh-light flicker of self-esteem.

"Perhaps," said Jacket.

"In my humble opinion," Mr. Wainewright said, "the woman deserves to die. Of course, I admit that Benson was a bad man. He was a drunkard, and a bully, and went in for too many women. He ill-treated them, sir; and he was a married man too. I couldn't bear him."

"Then why did you let him stay in your house?" asked Jacket.

"Well . . . I don't know. I had intended to give Benson notice to quit more than once, but whenever I began to get around to it, somehow or other he managed to put me off. He'd tell me a funny story—never a nice story, but so funny that I couldn't help laughing. You know what I mean? He had a way with him, Mr. Jacket. He must have. He sold Poise Weighing Machines. He told me, once, how he had sold a sixty-guinea weighing machine to an old lady who had a sweet-shop in a little village—it was wicked, but I couldn't help laughing. And then again, his success with the women—But all the same, you shouldn't ought to be allowed to get away with murder."

"All right," said Jacket. "But can we prove that Martha Benson *meant* to do it, eh? Can you prove premeditation? And incidently, there isn't any actual

[*Turn page*]

proof that Martha Benson really did stab her pig of a husband, is there?"

MR. WAINEWRIGHT was shocked. "She must have!" he said. "Who else could have, if she didn't?"

"Anyone might have done it, my dear George. I might have done it. You might have done it. The charwoman might have done it. Did anyone *see* her do it?"

"Well, no. I suppose not," said Mr. Wainewright. "But the evidence! the evidence, Mr. Jacket!"

John Jacket felt a strange, perverse desire to provoke, to irritate this respectable little man. "Evidence," he said, "evidence! I spit on the evidence. A woman comes into a house; a woman goes out of a house. The man she visited is found, stuck like a pig—which he was —with a pair of long, sharp, paper-cutting scissors in his throat near the collarbone. So what? So what, George? He was in the habit of smuggling women into his room?"

"Yes, that's true."

"Say, for example, this man Benson had a woman in his room before his wife — this wretched Martha Benson — turned up unexpectedly. Say, for example, he hides this hypothetical woman in a cupboard . . . Was there a big cupboard, closet, or wardrobe in Benson's room?"

"There *is* a big wardrobe," said Mr. Wainewright.

"Say, then, that Benson, hearing his wife's voice downstairs, hid his concubine in the wardrobe. The wife comes in. She talks to Benson. She goes away. As the door closes, the enraged woman in the wardrobe comes out fighting with a pair of scissors, and—*jab!* An overhand stroke with something like a stiletto. A child could do it. What?"

"Possible, I dare say," said Mr. Wainewright, tapping his foot in irritation, "but I don't see the point. Mr. Jacket—I'm sorry, I mean Jack. Jack, since you say I may call you Jack. If there *had* been any other lady in Benson's room *I* should have known it."

"How could you know?" asked Jacket.

Mr. Wainewright meditated, marking off points with his fingers; he was somewhat drunk. He said, laboriously, "In the first place, I have a respectable house. People can do as they like in my place, within reason, Mr. Jacket. I mean to say Jack, Jack. By 'within reason' I mean to say that people can have visitors . . . within reason, visitors. As the person responsible for the house, I was always on the spot—or nearly always. A person can't be sure of anybody. And as it happened, my little room was next door to Benson's. And I can assure you that Mrs. Benson was the only visitor Benson had that night. Mrs. Madge, the lady who does the cleaning, let Mrs. Benson in. I passed her on the stairs—or, rather, I stood aside to let her pass on the first-floor landing. I had seen Benson only about two minutes before. He'd just got home from Bristol."

"Did he say anything?" asked Jacket.

"He . . . he was the same as usual. Full of jokes. He was telling me about some girl he met in Bristol, some girl who worked in a baker's shop. The—ah, the usual thing. Mrs. Madge let Mrs. Benson in while he was talking to me. He said, 'I wonder what the—the aitch —*she* wants.' And he said that she had better come on up. He'd been drinking. I went down because, to be quite frank, I'd never seen Benson's wife and wondered what kind of woman she could be."

"And what kind of woman was she, George?"

"Not what I should have expected, Mr. Jacket—I mean Jack. One of the plain, humble-looking k i n d. You wouldn't have thought she'd have appealed to Benson at all; he went in for the barmaidish type, sir."

"You never can tell, George, old boy. After that, you went up to your room, if I remember right."

"That's right. My room was next door to Benson's. I mean, my sitting room. I have a little suite," said Mr. Wainewright, with pride.

"Have a little drink," said Jacket, pushing a freshly filled glass over to him.

"I couldn't, really."

"No arguments, George."

"Where was I? Oh, yes. I had some accounts to do, you see, so I went to my sitting room. And I could hear them talking. I couldn't quite get what they were saying."

"But you tried?"

WAINEWRIGHT fidgeted and blushed. "I did try," he admitted. "But I only gathered that they were having a quarrel. Once Benson shouted, 'Go to the devil!' She started crying, and he burst out laughing. About a quarter of an hour later, I should say, they stopped talking. They'd been raising their voices quite loud. I knocked on the wall, and they stopped. Then Benson started coughing."

"Was that unusual?"

"No, not at all unusual. He was a cigarette smoker. In the morning, and at night, it was painful to listen to him. And then his door opened and closed. I opened my door and looked out, and Mrs. Benson was going downstairs crying, and there was some blood on her hand. I asked her if she had hurt herself, and if she wanted some iodine or anything, and she said, 'No, no,' and ran downstairs and out of the house."

"She'd cut herself, it appears."

"That's right, ah . . . Jack."

"That's it, George. Call me Jack and I'll call you George," said Jacket. "What made you go into Benson's room later on?"

Mr. Wainewright said, "He always borrowed my evening paper. I nearly always used to hand it over to him when I'd done with it." He held up a copy of the *Evening Extra*, neatly folded. "When I got back from here—I come here just for one quiet drink every evening, and read the paper here as a rule, you see—I went to his door and knocked."

"And, of course, he didn't say, 'Come

They were the scissors George had used to cut out pictures of pretty girls in bathing suits

in'," said Jacket.

"No. So I knocked again. No answer. I knocked again—"

"And at last you went in without knocking, eh?"

"Exactly. And there he lay on the floor, Mr. Jacket—a horrible sight to see, horrible!"

"Bled a good deal?"

"I never thought even Benson could have bled so much!"

"That shook you, eh, George?"

"It made me feel faint, I assure you. But I didn't touch anything. I phoned the police. They were there in ten minutes."

"Detective Inspector Taylor, wasn't it?"

"Yes, that's right. A nice man."

"He collects stamps for a pastime. Have you any hobbies, George?"

Mr. Wainewright giggled. "It sounds silly," he said. "When I haven't got anything else to do I cut pictures out of magazines."

"And what do you do with them when you've cut them out, George?"

"I stick them in a scrapbook."

"An innocent pastime enough."

"In a way, sort of like collecting stamps—in a way," said Mr. Wainewright.

"Yet you never can tell how that sort of thing may end," said Jacket. "Look at Benson. He got his by means of a pair of scissors."

"That's right," said Mr. Wainewright. "Long pointy scissors. They were part of a set—scissors and paper knife in a leather case. I'd borrowed them myself a few days before. Very sharp scissors."

"Little did you think," said Jacket, "that that pair of scissors would end up in your lodger's neck!"

"Little *did* I, J-Jack," said Mr. Wainewright. "It makes a person think. May I ask . . . are you going to put something in the paper about me?"

"I think so," said Jacket.

Mr. Wainewright giggled. "You wouldn't like a photograph of me?"

"We'll see about that, George. We'll see. What are you doing on Saturday?"

"Next Saturday morning I get my hair cut," said Mr. Wainewright.

"Matter of routine, eh?"

"Yes, sir. But—"

"No, no, never mind. You get your hair cut on Saturday, George, and I'll give you a tinkle sometime. Right, And now, if I were you, I'd go and get some sleep, George, old man. You don't look quite yourself," said Jacket.

"I'm not a drinking man . . . I oughtn't to drink," muttered Mr. Wainewright, putting his hat on back to front.

Poor little fellow, thought Jacket, having seen Mr. Wainewright safely seated in a taxi. This Benson affair has thrown him right out of gear. Bloodshed in Wainewright's life! A revolution! It's almost as if he found himself wearing a bright red tie.

III

ON THE edge of the haze at the rim of the steady white light of sobriety, Jacket began to work out a story about Mr. Wainewright. He thought that he might call it The Red Thread of Murder. Never mind the killer, never mind the victim—all that had been dealt with a hundred times before. What about the ordinary man, the man in the street, who has never seen blood except on his chin after a bad shave with a blunt blade, who opens a door and sees somebody like Benson lying dead in a thick red puddle?

Jacket laughed. In spite of everything, Wainewright had to get his hair cut on Saturday. There was, he decided, something ineffably pathetic about this desperate doggedness with which people like Wainewright clung to the finical tidiness of their fussy everyday lives.

So that Saturday, Mr. Wainewright went to his barber. Friday was New Blade day; Monday was Clean Shirt day; Sunday morning was Bath morning; and he had his hair cut every third Saturday. This was law and order; a system to be maintained. In the life of

Wainewright inevitable laws governed collar studs, rubber heels, the knotting of neckties, the lighting of pipes, the cutting of string and the sticking-on of stamps. He ate, drank, walked and combed his hair in immutable rhythm. He was established to run smoothly forever. Like a clock.

Therefore, today, he had to get his hair cut. But Jowl's display made him stop for a few minutes. Jowl, who owned the antique shop on the corner, had stripped some bankrupt's walls of a great, gleaming yataghanerie of edged and pointed weapons. They hung on sale: double-handed swords, moonfaced battleaxes, mailed fists, stilettos, basket-hilted Italian daggers, Toledo rapiers, needle-pointed Khyber knives, adz-shaped obsidian club-axes, three-bladed knuckle-duster daggers, harquebuses, and a heap of oddments of Sixteenth-century body armor.

Wainewright stood, smoking his pipe, looking hard. He stopped and examined some assassin's weapon of the 1400's—a knife with a spring. You stabbed your man, and—*knutch*!—it flew open like a pair of scissors.

At the back of the window stood a complete suit of jousting armor, with a massive helmet shaped like a frog's head. Wainewright looked up and, as it happened, he saw the reflection of his face exactly where his face would have been if he had been wearing the armor.

Then, in his breast, something uncoiled. He gazed, whistling. "Ye gods!" he said. "Ye gods!" But even as he looked he was inclined to laugh; his reflection was wearing a bowler hat.

Still, why not? thought Mr. Wainewright. But then he remembered that he was an important person, that the glaring eyes of the world were focused on him. He walked across the court and pushed open the door of Flickenflocker's Select Saloon.

Calm! thought Wainewright. Calm! Keep calm! The door of the barbershop was fitted with a compressed-air brake; it hissed behind him and closed with a gentle tap.

As the door hissed, Wainewright stood still, tense. Then he also hissed; he had been holding his breath.

Flickenflocker said, "Harpost one! Quarder-nour late! For fifteen years so I never knew you to miss a second! Eh? *Tsu, tsu, tsu*!"

"Am I late?" asked Wainewright.

"Fifteen minutes in fifteen years," said Flickenflocker. "One minute every year. In a hundred-twenty years, so you could save enough time to go to the pictures."

"The usual," said Wainewright, sitting in a chair.

"Nice and clean back and sides?" said Flickenflocker.

Wainewright nodded. But as he did so he noticed that a peculiar quietness had come over the people in the shop. They were exchanging hurried words in lowered voices and looking at him out of the corners of their eyes. Deep in the breast of Mr. Wainewright something broke into a glow which spread through him until he felt that all his veins were burning brilliantly red like neon tubes. He knew exactly what was being said: *That is Wainewright, the witness for the prosecution in the Benson Murder Case.*

In a clear, slightly tremulous voice, he said, "And I'll have a lavender shampoo."

"Why not?" said Flickenflocker, as his long, sharp scissors began to nibble and chatter at the fine, colorless hair of the little man in the chair. "Why not?"

FLICKENFLOCKER worked with the concentration and exalted patience of a biologist cutting a section, and as he worked he whistled little tunes. His whistle was a whisper; he drew in the air through his teeth, for he had been taught never to breathe on customers. Occasionally he uttered a word or a mere noise, as if he had found something but was throwing it away . . . *Tss*! . . . *Muhuh*! . . . Tu-tu-tu! Oh, dear!

Wainewright liked this strange, calm

barber, who demonstrated no urge to make conversation; whose shiny yellow hands, soft and light as a pair of blown-up rubber gloves, had touched the faces of so many men whose pictures had filled posters while their names topped bills.

For Flickenflocker's was a theatrical establishment, or had been. A hundred photographs of forgotten and half-remembered actors hung on the walls. As small boys cut their names on desks and trees, actors and sportsmen pin their photographs to the walls of pubs and barbershops. Thus they leave a little something by means of which somebody may remember them . . . Even in the grave nothing is completely lost as long as somebody can say: *Lottie had a twenty-four-inch thigh*; or *Fruitcake bubble-danced*: or *J. J. Sullivan could have eaten Kid Fathers before breakfast.* We hang about the necks of our tomorrows like hungry harlots about the necks of penniless sailors.

So, for twenty-three years, singers, boxers, actors, six-day cyclists, tumblers, soubrettes, jugglers, dancers, wrestlers, clowns, ventriloquists and lion tamers had given Flickenflocker their photographs—always with a half shrug and a half smile of affable indulgence. Flickenflocker hung up every one of them; he knew that the day always came when a man returned, if only to look at the wall and dig some illusion about himself out of the junk heap of stale publicity.

They always came back to Flickenflocker, whose memory was as reliable and unobstrusive as a Yale lock. One sidelong look at a profile opened a flap in his head and let out a name. As soon as the shop door closed and your heels hit the street he kicked the flap back and waited for the next customer.

Yet Flickenflocker could talk. Now, while Pewter's flat French razor chirped in the lather like a sparrow in snow and, on his left, the great hollow-ground blade of Kyropoulos sang *dzing-dzing* over the blue chin of a big man in a pearl-gray suit, Flickenflocker talked to Mr. Wainewright.

"You're the man of the moment, Mr. Wainewright."

"Nonsense, Mr. Flickenflocker."

"I can read the papers, thank God, Mr. Wainewright. I'm not *altogether* blind yet, God forbid. H'm!"

"It's all got nothing to do with me."

"No? Your worster enemies should be where that poor woman is now. In your hands is already a rope. A loop you can tie; you can tie a noose round her neck."

"It's the law, Mr. Flickenflocker."

"You're right there, Mr. Wainewright. That's what the law is for. That's what we pay rates and taxes for. You want to kill somebody. Right, go on. But afterwards don't say: 'Huxcuse me, I forgot myself.' Don't say: 'Once don't count—give me just one more charnsh.' A huxcuse me ain't enough—murder ain't the hee-cups. Murderers get hung: good job, too. Poor woman!"

"But murder!"

"Murder . . . Mnyup. Still, in a temper . . . I knew a baker, a gentleman. In . . . in the electric chair he'd of got up to give a lady his seat. So one day in a temper he put his friend in the oven. By trouser buttons they found it out. Afterwards, he was sorry. Still, I didn't say it was *right.* Only I don't like hanging ladies. Na-hah, mmmnyah! Well, you got nerve!"

"Why? Why have I got nerve?"

"Judge, juries: I'd be frightened out of my life."

"But why?"

"They can make black white. White black they can make."

"I've nothing to fear: I can only tell the plain truth."

"And good luck to you! What class of people is a murderer? No class. A man in the prime of life, so she goes and kills. With scissors, eh? She kills her husband with scissors! It shows you. Scissors, pokers—if somebody wants to murder a person, h'm! Even a razor they can kill somebody with. Present company excepted. With a murderer,

everything is a revolver. But what for? Why should she do it to her own husband?"

"For love, I think, Mr. Flickenflocker."

"Eeeeh! Love. In a book they read such rubbish, Mr. Wainewright. For hate, for money, for hunger kill a person. For your wife and children kill a person. But love? Never hear of such a thing."

"We'd better leave that to the judge and jury," said Wainewright, coldly.

"We got no option," said Flickenflocker. "Anyway, it didn't have nothing to do with you, thank goodness."

"It happened in my own house. I was in the next room. It does affect me a *little* bit," said Wainewright, frowning.

"It's all for the best, I dessay." Flickenflocker picked up a pair of fine clippers. "Lots of people'll want to live there now."

"More likely they'll want to stay away from my house, Mr. Flickenflocker."

"Don't you believe it! If there was a body, God forbid, in every cupboard, people'd pay double to stay there."

As Wainewright was paying his bill he said to the cashier, "Is your clock right?"

The girl replied, "It wouldn't be working in a barbershop if it was." Everybody laughed.

A man said, "Dead clever, that!"

Mr. Wainewright went out.

THE city muttered under dry dust and blue smoke; the day was warm. Girls passed looking like bursting flowers in their new summer dresses. Wainewright looked at them. Here—passing him, jostling him and touching him with swinging hands in the crowded street—here walked thousands of desirable young women with nothing more than one sixtieth of an inch of rayon, linen, or crepe de Chine between their bare flesh and his eyesight. Why, ah, why did his destiny send him out to walk alone?

"What's wrong with me?" Waine-

[*Turn page*]

wright asked himself. "Tramps, cripples, hunchbacks, criminals, horrible men deformed and discolored and old—they all know the love of women. What's wrong with me? What have they got that I haven't got? I am a man of property . . . still a young man."

He stared piercingly at a pretty girl who was slowly walking toward him. Wainewright felt that his eyes were blazing like floodlights. But the girl, looking at him incuriously, saw only a small ordinary man.

Mentally addressing the passing girl, *That's what you think*, said Wainewright. *If I told you who and what I am you'd change your ideas quickly enough.* He stopped to look at hats in a shop window. A furry green velour caught his eye, and he decided to buy a hat like that—a two-guinea hat, a real Austrian hat and not a ten-shilling imitation such as Benson used to wear. That, and a younger-looking suit, a tweed suit; a colored shirt, even. . . . Why have I waited so long?

Wainewright was not a drinking man. Alcohol gave him a headache. But now he felt that everything was changing inside him. He was getting into step with life. Now he wanted a drink. He walked jauntily to the Duchess of Douro. Benson had taken him there once before, one Saturday afternoon several months ago. Wainewright remembered the occasion vividly: He had not yet come into his inheritance; he worked for his living then. His aunt was still alive. He was waiting: She could not live forever. His little Personal Expenses Cash book said that Wainewright had had seven haircuts since then. This made five months since his last drink of beer with Benson.

Benson was a tall dark man, strongly built, bright with the sickly radiance and false good-fellowship of the traveling salesman. He resembled one of those wax models that make cheap clothes attractive in the windows of mass-production tailors; he had the same unnatural freshness of complexion, the same blueness of chin, agelessness of expression and shoddy precision of dress. Benson wore Tyrolean hats and conspicuous tweeds. He liked to be seen smoking cigars. Yet, with his fivepenny cigars he was a man of personality with a manner at once detestable and irresistible—

"Have a drink," Benson had said.

"I couldn't, really, Benson."

"You can and will, cocko. There's a girl in the Douro I want to introduce you to. A blonde. Genuine blonde. The nicest barmaid in London. Eh? Come on."

Benson crashed through the grouped drinkers, pulling Wainewright after him. A tall young woman with honey-colored hair, whose face was strangely expressive of lust and boredom, dragged languidly at the handle of a beer engine. But when she saw Benson she smiled with unmistakable, sudden joy. Only a woman in love smiles like that.

"Baby," said Benson, "meet Mr. Wainewright, one of the best."

"Why, Sid! Why haven't you been to see me for such a long time?"

"Been busy. But I've been thinking of you. Ask George Wainewright. We met in the city. He wanted me to go with him to a posh week-end party in Kingston. But I insisted on coming here. Did I or did I not, George?"

The compulsion of Benson's glance was too strong. Wainewright nodded.

"See, Baby?" Benson said to the girl. "Now, what'll we have?" he asked Wainewright.

"I—ah—a small shandy."

"Oh, no, George. Not if you drink with me, you don't. None of your shandies. Drink that stuff and you don't drink with me. You're going to have a Bass, a draught Bass. That's a man's drink. Baby, two draughts."

"He always has his own way," said the girl Benson called Baby.

"Skin like cream," whispered Benson, with a snigger. When the girl returned with the beer he leaned across the bar and stroked her arm. "This evening?"

"No, I can't."

Benson grasped her wrist. "Yes."

"Leave go. People are looking."

"I don't care. I'll wait for you after eleven."

"I shan't be there. Let go my arm, I tell you. The manager's coming over."

"This evening?"

"Stop it, you'll get me the sack."

"I don't care. This evening?"

"All right, but let go."

WAINEWRIGHT saw four red marks on the white skin of her arm as Benson released her. She rubbed her

wrist, and said, in a voice which quivered with admiration, "You're too strong."

"Well, and where are you staying now?" Benson said to Wainewright.

"In my aunt's place still."

"Hear that, Baby? Looking after his old auntie, eh? His nice rich old auntie. Ha-ha! He knows which side his bread's buttered, George, here. No offense, George. I'm going to look you up in a week or two. I want a nice room, reasonable."

"We're full right up just now, Benson."

"Ah, you old kidder! Isn't he a kidder, Baby? You'll find me a room all right. I know."

And surely enough, a fortnight later Benson came, and by then Wainewright's aunt was dead, and there was a room vacant in the solid and respectable old house in Bishop's Square. So Benson had come to live with Wainewright.

And therefore all Britain was waiting for a notable trial and, under rich black headlines, the name of George Wainewright was printed in all the papers, called by the prosecution as witness in the Victoria Scissors Murder.

Mr. Wainewright smiled as he entered the Duchess of Douro. This pub had brought him luck. In this saloon bar he had found power.

IV

THE barmaid called Baby was still at the Douro. Wainewright stood at the bar and waited. "What can I get you?" she asked.

With a gulp of trepidation Wainewright said, "Scotch."

"Small or large?"

"Ah . . . large, please."

"Soda?"

"Yes, please."

He looked at her. She did not recognize him. He said, "You don't remember me."

"I've seen you somewhere," she said.

"I was in here some time ago with a friend of yours."

"Friend of *mine*?"

"Benson."

"Who?"

"Benson. Sid Benson."

"Sid! I didn't know he was called Benson. I thought his name was Edwards. He told me his—Well, anyway . . ."

"If you didn't know his name was Benson, you don't know about him, then," said Wainewright, gulping his drink in his excitement.

"Know what?"

"The Victoria Scissors Murder," said Wainewright.

"What's that? Oh-oh! Benson! Was that Sid? Really?"

"Yes, that was Sid. It happened in my house. I'm Mr. Wainewright. I'm the witness for the prosecution."

She served another customer: Wainewright admired the play of supple muscles in her arm as she worked the beer engine.

"I'm sorry to be the bearer of sad tidings," said Wainewright.

"Sad tidings? Oh! I didn't know him very well. We were just sort of acquaintances. Scissors, wasn't it?"

Wainewright stared at her. "I was in

the next room at the time," he said.

"Did you see it?"

"Not exactly—I heard it."

"Oh," said the barmaid. "Well . . ."

She seemed to bite off and swallow bitter words. "Well, what?" said Wainewright, with a little giggle.

She looked at him, pausing with a glass in one hand.

"That makes one swine less in the world."

"I thought you liked him," Wainewright said.

"I don't like any man."

"Oh," said Wainewright. "Um . . . ah . . . oh, Miss!"

"Yes?"

"Benson. Did he . . .ah . . .?"

"Did he what?"

"Oh, nothing."

"Yes, he did," said the barmaid.

"Did what?"

"Nothing." She turned away. "Excuse me."

Wainewright wanted to talk to her. "You don't like me," he said.

"I don't know you."

"Do you want to know me?"

The barmaid called Baby said, "Not particularly."

"Don't go," said Wainewright.

She sighed. There was something about Wainewright that made her uneasy; she did not like this strange, dead-looking, empty-eyed man. "Do you want something?"

He nodded.

"Another double Scotch?"

Wainewright nodded absently. Baby replenished his glass; he looked at it in astonishment and put down a ten-shilling note.

"You got some silver," she said.

"I haven't got anything at all," said Wainewright. "I'm lonely."

The barmaid said, in a tone of hostility mixed with pity, "Find yourself somebody."

"Nobody wants me. I'm lonely."

"Well?"

"I've got eight thousand pounds and a house. A big house. Big, big . . ." He spread his arms in a large gesture. "Twenty years I waited. I waited. God, I waited and waited!"

"What for?"

A buzzer sounded. A voice cried: "Order your last drinks, gentelmen! Order your last drinks!"

"She was eighty-seven when she died. She was an old woman when I was a boy."

"Who was?"

"Auntie. I waited twenty years."

"What *for*?"

"Eight thousand pounds. She left it to me. I've got eight thousand pounds and a house. Furnished from top to bottom. Old lease. It brings in seven pounds a week clear."

The girl called Baby was turning away. Something like rage got into his throat and made him shout: "You think I'm nobody! You wait!"

A DOORMAN in a gray uniform, a colossus with a persuasive voice, picked him up as a whirlwind picks up a scrap of paper, and led him to the door, murmuring, "Now come on, sir, come on. You've had it, sir, you've had enough, sir. Let's all be friendly. Come on, now."

"You think I'm nobody," said Mr. Wainewright, half crying.

"I wish there was a million more like you," said the doorman, "because you're sensible, that's what you are. You know when you've had enough. If there was more like you, why. . . ."

The swing door went *whup*, and Mr. Wainewright was in the street.

He thought he heard people laughing behind him in the bar.

"You'll see, tomorrow!" he cried.

Let them all wait until tomorrow. They would know then to whom they had been talking. . . .

But on that Sunday, for the first time in ten years, the editor of the *Sunday Special* cut out Jacket's article. Twenty minutes before midnight, formidable news came through from middle Europe. Jacket's page was needed for a statis-

tical feature and a special map.

Mr. Wainewright went over the columns, inch by inch, and found nothing. He telephoned the *Sunday Special.* A sad voice said, "Mr. Jacket won't be in until Tuesday—about eleven o'clock. Tell him what name, did you say? Daylight? Maybright? Wainwright. With an e, did you say? E. Wainwright. Oh, George. George E. Wainwright? Just George? George. Make your mind up, George Wainwright. I'll give Mr. Jacket your message. 'By."

On Tuesday, Mr. Wainewright arrived at the offices of the *Sunday Special* before half past ten in the morning. Jacket arrived at a quarter to twelve. He saw that the little man looked ill.

"How are you, George?" he asked.

"Mr. Jacket," said Mr. Wainewright, "what's happened?"

"Happened? About what?"

"The piece you were going to put in the paper about . . . about . . . my views on the Benson case. Did you . . .?"

"I wrote it, George. But my page was cut last Sunday. On account of Germany. Sorry, but there it is. Feel like a drink?"

"No, nothing to drink, thank you."

"Coffee?"

"Perhaps a cup of coffee," said Mr. Wainewright.

They went to a cafe not far away. Jacket was aware of Mr. Wainewright's wretchedness; it was twitching at the corners of the nondescript mouth and dragging down the lids of the colorless eyes.

"What's up?" he asked, as if he did not know.

"Nothing. I simply wondered—"

"About that story? Take it easy, George. What is there that I can do? Bigger things have happened. Martha Benson is certain to get off lightly. Especially with Concord defending."

In Fleet Street Mr. Wainewright asked him, "Is the trial likely to be reported?"

"Sure," said Jacket.

"I suppose I'll be called, as witness?"

"Of course."

"But I'm detaining you, J-Jack."

"Not at all, George. Good-by."

Jacket hurried eastward. Mr. Wainewright walked deliberately in the direction of the Strand.

PERHAPS Sumner Concord was the greatest defender of criminals the world had ever known. He could combine the crafty ratiocination of a Birkett with the dialectical oratory of a Marshall Hall, and act like John Barrymore —whom he closely resembled. The louder he sobbed the closer he observed you. In cross-examination he was suave and murderous. Yet Concord was an honest man. He would defend no one whom he believed to be guilty.

"Tell me about it," he said to Martha Benson.

"What do you want me to tell you?"

"You must tell me exactly what happened that evening at Number 77 Bishop's Square. The truth, Mrs. Benson. How can I help you if you do not tell me the truth? You are charged—"

"Oh, what do I care? What do I care?" cried Martha Benson. "Charge me, hang me—leave me alone!"

Sumner Concord had strong tea brought in before he continued. "Tell me, Mrs. Benson. Why did you visit your husband that night?"

Martha Benson said, "I wasn't well. I couldn't work. There were the children. I wanted Sid to do something about the children. I *was* his wife. He *was* my husband, after all. . . . I only wanted him to give me some money, just a little, till I could work again."

"Work again at what, Mrs. Benson?"

"I'd been doing housework."

"And it had been some time since your husband had given you any money?"

"Three years."

"You had been supporting yourself and your two children all that time?"

"Yes."

"He had sent you nothing?"

"Not a penny. I left Sid over three years ago."

"Why did you leave him, Mrs. Benson?"

"He used to beat me. I couldn't stand him beating me in front of the children. Then—it was when we had two rooms in Abelard Street near the British Museum—he brought a woman in."

"Are there, Mrs. Benson, by any chance, any witnesses who could testify to that?"

"Mrs. Ligo had the house. Then there was Miss Brundidge, she lived downstairs. I ran away with the children and went to my aunt's place. She still lives there: Mrs. Lupton, 143 Novello Road, Turners Green. Her friend, Mrs. Yule, she lives there, too. They both know. We stayed with them once. Sid used to knock me about. The police had to be called in twice. He wanted to kill me when he'd been drinking."

". . . *In twice,*" wrote Sumner Concord. "Novello Road. Novello Street Police Station, h'm? Take your time. Have some more tea. A cigarette. You don't smoke? Wise of you, wise. He was a violent and dangerous man, this husband of yours?"

"Yes."

"He threatened, for instance, to kill you, no doubt?"

"No," said Martha Benson, "he never threatened. He just hit."

"And on this last occasion. You called to see him—"

"Yes, that's right."

"How did you find out his address?"

"From his firm, Poise Weighing Machines."

"You hadn't tried to find out his address before, eh?"

"All I cared about was that Sid shouldn't find out my address."

"But you were at the end of your tether, h'm?"

"I was supposed to be having an operation. I've still got to have an operation. And I thought Sid might let me have something . . ."

"There, there, now, now! Calm. Tears won't help, Mrs. Benson. We *must* be calm. You saw Sid. Yes?"

"Yes, sir. But . . . he'd been drinking, I think."

"Tell me again exactly what happened."

"I called. A lady let me in. I went up, and Sid was there. He said, 'What, you?' I said, 'Yes, me.' Then he said—he said—"

"Take your time, Mrs. Benson."

"He said, 'What a sight you look.' "

"And then?"

"I suppose I started crying."

"And he?"

"He told me to shut up. And so I did. I think I did, sir. I tried to. I asked him to let me have some money. He said that I'd had as much money as I was ever going to get out of him—as if I'd ever had anything out of him!"

"There, there, my dear Mrs. Benson. You must drink your tea and be calm."

"I said I'd go to his firm. I told him I was ill. I told him I'd go to his firm in the city. Then he hit me, sir."

"Where?"

"In the face—a slap. I started to cry again. He hit me again, and he laughed at me."

"This is very painful to you, Mrs. Benson, but we must have everything clear. Your hand was wounded. How did you hurt your hand?"

"All of a sudden—I didn't want to keep on living. I was so miserable—I was so miserable—I was—"

Sumner Concord waited. In a little while Martha Benson could speak again.

"You hurt your hand."

"I wanted to kill myself. There was a knife, or something. I picked it up. I meant to stick it in myself. But Sid was quick as lightning."

V

THERE was a ring of pride in her voice, at which Sumner Concord shuddered, although he had heard it before.

"What happened then?" he asked.

"He hit me again and knocked me over."

"You fell?"

"Against the bed, sir. Then Sid hit me some more and told me to get out. He said, 'I hate the sight of you, get out of my sight,' he said."

"Above all, be calm, Mrs. Benson. What happened after that?"

"I don't know."

"After he hit you the last time—think."

"I don't know, sir."

"You got up?"

"I can't remember."

"You can't remember. Do you remember going out of the room?"

"I sort of remember going out of the room."

"You got back to your home?"

Mrs. Benson nodded. "Yes, sir. I know, because I washed my face in cold water, and moved quietly so as not to wake the children up."

"That, of course, was quite reasonable. That would account for the blood in the water in the washbowl."

"I dare say."

"Your throat was bruised, Mrs. Benson. Did your husband try to strangle you?"

"He got hold of me to keep me quiet."

"Before you picked up this knife, or whatever it was? Or after?"

"I couldn't say. I don't know."

"I suggest that you picked up this sharp instrument—knife, scissors, or whatever it may have been—*after* your husband took you by the throat."

"Very likely," said Martha Benson, drearily. "I don't know, I don't care."

"You must pull yourself together, Mrs. Benson. How can I help you if you will not help yourself? You picked up this knife, or pair of scissors, *after* your husband began to strangle you with his hands. Is that so?"

"I should think so."

"He was an extremely powerful man?"

"My Sid? Sid was as strong as a bull."

"Yes. Now can you give me a list of the places—rooms, flats, houses, hotels—in which you and your husband lived

[*Turn page*]

together from the date of your marriage until the date of your separation?"

"Yes, I think I could, sir."

"You lived together for several years, didn't you?"

"Nearly seven years, off and on."

"He ill-treated you from the start?"

Martha Benson laughed. "He beat me the first time two days after we were married," she said.

"However, you managed to keep this matter secret?"

"Oh, everybody knew."

"Hush, hush, Mrs. Benson. Everything depends upon your self-control! He can't hurt you now."

"I'm not crying because of that. . . ." Martha Benson bit her sleeve and pressed the fingers of her free hand into her eyes.

"Why are you crying, then?"

"You're so good to me!"

"*You must be calm,*" said Sumner Concord, in a cold, hard voice.

She stopped crying. "Everybody knew how he treated me," she said.

"You must try and remember everyone who might make a statement concerning the manner in which your husband treated you, Mrs. Benson. You must try and remember—"

"Yes, sir, but I'm afraid. I'm afraid of being in the court. They'll make me swear black is white. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say. . . ."

SUMNER CONCORD stopped her with a gentle but imperious gesture, and said, "Mrs. Benson, you mustn't persuade yourself that there is anything to be afraid of. You will be given a perfectly fair trial. The clerk of the court will say to you, 'Martha Benson, you are charged with the murder of Sidney Benson on the 7th of May of this year. Are you guilty or not guilty? And you will say, 'Not guilty.' This, I believe to be the truth. I believe that you are not guilty of the murder of your husband. I believe that, desperate with grief and pain and terror, you picked up the scissors intending to kill yourself, and not to kill your husband."

Martha Benson stared at him in blank astonishment and said, "Me, pick up a pair of scissors to kill Sid? I shouldn't have dared to raise a hand to Sid."

"Just so. He had you by the throat, Mrs. Benson. He was shaking you. Your head was spinning. You struck out wildly, blindly, Mrs. Benson, and it happened that the point of that sharp pair of scissors struck him in the soft part of his neck and penetrated the subclavian artery. You had not the slightest intention of hurting him in any way," said Sumner Concord, holding her with his keen, calm, hypnotic eyes. "What happened after that, Mrs. Benson?"

"I don't know what happened," she cried. "As he let go of my neck, I ran away from him, that's all I know."

"Exactly. You ran away blindly, neither knowing nor caring where you were going. Is that not so? And later they found you wringing your ice-cold hands and crying, while the children lay asleep in your poor furnished room. Is that not so?"

"My hands were ice-cold," said Martha Benson in a wondering undertone. "How did you know my hands were ice-cold?"

Sumner Concord smiled sadly and with pity. "Be calm, my dear lady, be calm."

"But how did you know my hands were ice-cold?"

"They frequently are in such cases," said Sumner Concord. "And now, you must eat your meals and rest and get your poor nerves in order again, Mrs. Benson. You are to banish this matter from your mind until it is necessary for us to talk about it again. You are to leave everything in my hands. I believe that you have been telling me the truth. Now you must rest."

"I don't care what happens to me, sir, but the children—what about the children?" asked Martha Benson, twisting her wet handkerchief in her skinny, little chapped hands.

"Put your mind at rest, they are being well looked after, I promise you."

A shocking thought seemed suddenly to strike her and she gasped, "They can send me to prison for years. And then what would happen to them?"

Rising, and laying large, gentle hands on her shoulders, Sumner Concord replied, "Even if you had known that you were striking your husband, you would have been striking him without premeditation, and in self-defense, because in the hands of this crazy drunken brute, you were in peril of your life, and if there is any justice in the world, you need not necessarily go to prison at all."

Then he went away and obtained the statements of Mrs. Ligo, Miss Brundidge, Mrs. Lupton, Mrs. Yule and half a dozen others. He obtained certain evidence from the police at the Novello Street Police Station. A few days later, everybody began to take it for granted that Martha Benson would get away scot-free.

Because Sumner Concord was defending Martha Benson, the Central Criminal Court was crowded. Mr. Wainewright, glancing timidly from wig to horsehair wig, felt his heart contract and his stomach shrink, and when his fascinated gaze fell upon the hard, white, turtle face of Mr. Justice Claverhouse, who sat in his great robes under the sword, he was seized by an insane impulse to run away and hide. Yet, at the same time, he was aware of a certain spiritual exaltation as witness for the prosecution in Rex *vs.* Benson.

MR. SHERWOOD'S speech for the prosecution was longer than one might have expected. He had put a lot of work into it. If he could hang Martha Benson, snatching her from the protective arms of Sumner Concord, he was a made man. His manner was cold, and precise. His voice was—as one journalist described it—winter sunlight made articulate. As he spoke, members of the public who had hitherto believed that Martha Benson could not possibly be convicted, changed their minds. One or two sportsmen who had laid five to four on her acquittal, began furtively to try to hedge their bets.

Mr. Sherwood's sentences struck home like so many jabs of an ice pick. Here was an angry woman, may it please His Lordship and the members of the jury. Here was an embittered woman, a jealous woman. Here was a woman scorned. She had brooded over her real or imaginary wrongs until at last she had decided on a bloody revenge. Under the cover of the gathering darkness, she had gone stealthily out of her house, to the house of her husband. And there she had stabbed him to death with this pair of scissors, paper-cutting scissors with a shagreen handle.

She left the scissors in the wound,

BURGLARS—Say Your Prayers

IN CANADA there is one church that is not likely to be molested soon again by thieves. Recently, the Very Reverend Wilfred J. Langlois, a former army chaplain, was napping in the library of the residence attached to the Holy Rosary Church when he heard prowlers. Grabbing two revolvers, he raced into the church where the miscreants were at work. They fled, leaving their loot.

Not satisfied, the Very Reverend, though clad only in a bathrobe, gave chase, blazing away with both guns.

Police later found the automobile in which the thieves had made good their escape. The minister had fired six shots in all. There were five bullet holes in the car!

knowing that no fingerprints would be visible on the rough shagreen. Then she slunk out of the house. But her cunning had not been quite deep enough. She had forgotten to wipe her fingerprints from the doorknob on the inside of Mr. Benson's bed-sitting-room door. There were witnesses who could swear to having seen her come and seen her go. She was arrested almost literally red-handed, for she had not yet had time to empty certain bloodstained water from a basin in her room. While her husband's innocent children lay asleep in her bed, the murderess had crept back to wash away the evidence of her guilt. And now he would call the evidence before the court.

At this point, Mrs. Madge was called. She remembered everything. She had let Mrs. Benson in on the evening of the murder. She knew at exactly what time she had let that party in. How did she know the time? She had every reason to know the time because it was time for Mrs. Madge to go home and she had paid a certain amount of attention to the clock. She was not a clock watcher, but she was not paid to stay more than a certain number of hours.

Therefore—give or take half a minute—she could say fairly exactly at what time the lady came to the door and asked for Mr. Sidney Benson and she could swear to the lady. She was in the habit of keeping her eyes open; it was her hobby, sizing people up. Mrs. Benson was wearing a very old, loose, black coat, the sort that the lesser shop sell for a guinea, and one of those black hats you could get for three and sixpence. She was carrying an old black handbag, and her shoes must have been given to her by a lady, a bigger lady than Mrs. Benson, who had worn them out and was about to throw them away. She could take her oath on it that Mrs. Benson was the person she had let in on that fatal evening.

Then came Mr. Wainewright. He had bought a new suit for the occasion—a smart, well-cut suit, with the first double-breasted coat he had ever worn. He had gone to the West End for a shirt that cost eighteen shillings. His tie must have cost as much again, and there was a pearl pin stuck into the middle of it.

Cross-examined, he gave the defense nothing to work on. Then came the turn of the defense.

VI

TO THE astonishment of the public, Sumner Concord did not attempt to break down the evidence for the prosecution. There was no doubt at all, he said, that the unfortunate Mrs. Benson had called on her husband at that time. But he happened to know that she had called in order to plead with him. Benson had callously deserted her and his two children. He was earning a good salary and substantial sums in commission, which he devoted entirely to dissipation. Mrs. Benson, the deserted woman, had been compelled to support the children and herself by menial labor. Medical evidence would indicate that it was necessary for this lady to undergo a serious internal operation in the near future. She had visited her husband merely in order to beg—to beg on her bended knees if necessary—for the wherewithal to feed their children, his children and hers, until such time as she could find strength to go out again and scrub other women's floors to earn the few shillings that she needed to maintain them.

Sumner Concord drew the attention of His Lordship and the jury to the fact that Mrs. Benson had a separation order, but had never received a penny. Her forbearance was inspired by mercy and also by fear, because Sidney Benson, as he was about to prove, had been one of the most murderous bullies and unmitigated scoundrels that ever polluted God's earth. This poor woman, Mrs. Benson, did not care whether she lived or died—her husband, by his persistent brutality and ill-treatment, had beaten the normal fear of death out of her.

Evidence was forthcoming which

would prove that this wretched, persecuted woman had for many years gone in terror of her life and had frequently interposed her broken and bruised body between the drunkenly raging Sidney Benson and the undernourished, trembling bodies of his children. Knowing that in a little while her exhausted frame could no longer support the strain imposed upon it—knowing that the time was fast approaching when she must go into hospital—Martha Benson went to plead with her husband.

Mr. Sumner Concord did not deny the validity of the evidence of Mr. Wainewright and Mrs. Madge. Mrs. Benson believed that she must have killed her husband, and she was horrified at the very thought of it. As for killing him by intention—she could never have thought of that, she loved him too much and she feared him too much. She wanted to kill herself. There was medical evidence to prove that the blood in the hand basin was her own blood from her own hand. That her life was in danger might be indicated by the evidence of eleven witnesses, three of them doctors. . . .

Mr. Wainewright, wondering at the complexity of it all, looked away. He looked away from the face of Sumner Concord, scanned the faces of the jurymen, and blinked up at the ceiling. A piece of fluffy stuff, such as comes away from a dandelion that has run to seed, was floating, conspicuous against the paneling. It began to descend. Mr. Wainewright's eyes followed it. It came to rest on the judge's wig, where it disappeared. Mr. Wainewright was conscious of a certain discontent.

After that nothing of the trial stuck in his mind except Concord's peroration: "Here was a beast. He tortured this woman. She trusted him and gave him her life. He accepted it brutally and threw it away. She had been beautiful. He had battered her with his great bony fists into the woman you see before you. That face was offered to Benson in the first flush of its beauty. He beat it into the wreck and ruin of a woman's face—the wreck, the ruin that you see before you now. She did not complain. He mocked and humiliated her. He made her an object of pity, this mad and murderous bully, and she said nothing. He deserted her, leaving her with two young sons whom she loved very dearly; she was sick and weak, and still she never spoke! The prosecution has raised its voice: Martha Benson suffered in silence.

"You have heard the evidence of those who have known her. She was a woman without stain, a woman undefiled. But when, at last, she went ill—dear God, what was she to do? She wanted nothing for herself. But there were her children. Her husband was prosperous. She asked him only for bread for his children—he laughed in her face. He struck her and ordered her to go. She pleaded—and he beat her. She cried for mercy, and he abused her, reproaching her for the loss of her beauty, the beauty he himself had savagely beaten away.

"At last, driven mad by despair, she picks up the first thing that comes to hand, a pair of scissors, and tries—poor desperate woman—to kill herself. Laughing, he takes her by the throat. These hands, strong enough to break a horseshoe, are locked about her frail throat. Imagine them upon your own, and think!

"She struggles, she cannot speak, she can only struggle while he laughs in her face, because these murderous thumbs are buried in her windpipe. She strikes out blindly, and this great furious hulk of bestial manhood collapses before her.

"By some freak of chance—by some act of God—she has struck the subclavian artery and the great beast has fallen. She runs blindly away, weeping bitterly, half demented with anguish, and when the police find her (which was easy, since she had not attempted to conceal herself, she is crying, and the blood in the basin is her own blood. The children lie asleep and she begs the police to take her away, to take her

away anywhere out of this world. She asks for nothing but death, and there, there is the pity of it! . . ."

After an absence of twenty-five minutes the jury returned a verdict of Not Guilty.

AFTER that, although everyone said he had known from the beginning that Martha Benson would be acquitted, London went wild with delight. The *Sunday Extra* sent Munday Marsh to offer the bewildered woman five hundred pounds for her life story. Pain of the *Sunday Briton* offered a thousand. She took her head wearily and dispiritedly. "Twelve hundred and fifty," said the *Sunday Briton.* The *Extra* said, "Fifteen hundred."

"Calm, gentlemen, calm," said the sardonic voice of John Jacket. They turned, and saw him dangling an oblong of scribbled paper between a thumb and a forefinger.

The *Sunday Special* had given Jacket authority to pay as much as two thousand pounds for Martha Benson's story. Ten minutes before Munday Marsh had arrived, Jacket had bought the story for six hundred pounds.

"Oh, well," they said, without malice, and went away. Pain said, "Today to thee, tomorrow to me, Jack."

So John Jacket wrote fifteen thousand words—four installments, illustrated with photographs and snapshots—under the title of Diary of An Ill-Used Woman. What Jacket did not know, he invented; Martha Benson signed everything—she still could not understand what it was all about. Soon after the first instalment was published she began to receive fan mail: letters urging her to repent, prophecies concerning the Second Coming, and proposals of marriage, together with frantically abusive notes signed, Ill-Used Man. She also received parcels of food and clothes, and anonymous letters enclosing postal orders. An old lady in the West Country, saying that she had wanted to kill her husband every day for forty years, enclosed sixty twopenny stamps.

Martha Benson was taken in hand by a lady reporter, who carried her off to a beauty parlor, compelled her to have her hair waved, and showed her how to choose a hat. In three. weeks she changed; paid attention to her fingernails and expressed discontent with the press. The press, she complained, wouldn't leave her alone, and everyone wanted to marry her. Before the fourth instalment appeared she had received eleven offers of marriage.

Martha Benson had become whimsical, smiled one-sidedly, and took to lifting her shoulders in a sort of shrug. "Men," she said, "men! These men!"

After the fourth week, however, she got no more letters. She was out of sight and out of mind.

John Jacket had forgotten the Benson case when Mr. Wainewright came to see him for the second time, twelve weeks later.

It struck Jacket as odd that Mr. Wainewright was wearing a jaunty little green Tyrolean hat and a noticeable tweed suit.

"Is it fair?" asked Wainewright. "Where do I come in?"

"Come in? How? How d'you mean, where do you come in?"

"Well," said Mr. Wainewright, shuffling his feet, "I mean to say . . . I hear that Benson's good lady got thousands and thousands of pounds."

"A few hundreds, George."

"It isn't that, Mr. Jacket. It's—"

"The credit?" asked Jacket, twitching an ironic lip.

"Who is *she* to be made a heroine out of?" asked Wainewright, looking at his finger tips.

"What exactly are you trying to get at, George?" asked Jacket. "What do you want me to do?"

Mr. Wainewright shook his head. "There was nothing about me at all in the papers," he said. "I've got a story, too."

"Be a pal," said Jacket, "and go away. I've got work to do, George."

"Right." Mr. Wainewright got up.

"Don't be angry with *me*. Things come and things go," said Jacket, "and a story is a nine-day wonder. Wash this murder out of your hair."

Mr. Wainewright said, "Well, you know best. But I've also got a story—"

A telephone bell rang. "See you some other time," said John Jacket, lifting the receiver. "So long for now, George."

WAINEWRIGHT went out without saying good day. Shortly after he had gone, John Jacket, hanging up the telephone, found himself wondering about something. There had been something wrong with Wainewright. What?

Jacket gnawed a fat black pencil.

He had eaten his way to the last letter of the pencil maker's name before he knew what he was trying to remember. He laughed, and said to himself, "That silly little man has gone and got himself up in a furry green hat and a tweed suit. What on earth for?" Jacket felt that he was on the verge of a discovery.

Three weeks later, as Jacket was leaving the office at lunchtime, he heard Mr. Wainewright's voice again.

The little man came breathlessly out of a doorway and said, "Mr. Jacket, sir. Please. One moment. Just *one* moment."

"Well, what is it?" said Jacket, looking down at him with an expression of something like loathing.

"It's something important, sir. Something very important. I give you my word of honor, you'll never forgive yourself if you don't listen to me."

"I'm in a hurry."

"I've been waiting for you here in the street for an hour and a half," said Mr. Wainewright.

"You should have telephoned."

"If I had, you wouldn't have spoken to me."

"True," said Jacket. Then he blinked, and said, "What the devil have you been doing to yourself?"

Mr. Wainewright was dressed in a tight-fitting, half-belted jacket of white stuff like tweed, an orange-colored shirt and a black satin tie with a diamond horseshoe pin, blue flannel trousers, a Panama hat, and brown-and-white buckskin shoes. He had trimmed his mustache to a fine straight line, above and below which Jacket could see a considerable area of tremulous white lip, beaded with perspiration. And he could smell lavender water and whiskey.

"Doing to myself? Nothing, sir," said Mr. Wainewright.

Jacket considered him for a second or two, and then said, "Come on, then. Tell me all about it. Come and have a drink."

"It's very private," said Mr. Wainewright. "It's not something I could talk about if there was anybody around. Look, Mr. Jacket, it'll be worth your while. Come home with me, just for a few minutes."

"*Home* with you?"

"To Bishop's Square—ten minutes in a taxi, no more. I've got plenty of drinks at home. Have a drink there. Ten minutes. I'll show you something. . . . I'll tell you something. Please do!"

"All right, then. But I haven't long."

They got into a taxi. Neither of them spoke until Mr. Wainewright said, "After you," as he unlocked the street door of Number 77 Bishop's Square.

"Lead the way," said Jacket.

The little man bobbed in a shopwalker's obeisance. They passed through a clean, dim passage and climbed sixteen darkly carpeted stairs to the first floor. Mr. Wainewright opened another door.

"This used to be my auntie's room," he said, rather breathlessly.

"Charming," said Jacket, without enthusiasm.

"It was Benson's room, too."

"Oh, I see. The room in which Benson was murdered, eh?"

"Yes, sir. It's my bedroom now."

"And is this what you brought me here to see?"

"No, no," cried Wainewright, splashing a quarter of a pint of whiskey into a large tumbler, and pressing the nozzle instead of the lever of a soda-water siphon. "Please sit down."

"That's a massive drink you've given me," said Jacket. He observed that his host's drink was not much smaller.

"No, not at all."

"Cheers!" Jacket emptied his glass in two gulps. Mr. Wainewright tried to do the same, but choked. Jacket could hear his heavy breathing. "Now, tell us all about it," he said.

"There was," said Mr. Wainewright, swaying a little in his chair, "there was a . . . an astounding miscarriage of justice. What I have to say will shock you."

"Go ahead."

"Sid Benson died just about on the spot where you are sitting, sir."

"Well?"

"The rug, of course, is a new one. They couldn't clean the old one . . . But your glass is empty."

"I'll pour drinks. You go on," said Jacket, rising.

"Listen," said Wainewright.

VII

MR. WAINEWRIGHT said, dreamily: "What I want to know is this: Where's your justice? Where's your law? If justice is made a mockery of, and law is tricked—what do I pay rates and taxes for? The world's going mad, sir. A woman is accused, sir, of killing her hubby with a pair of scissors. It's proved that she did it, proved beyond doubt, Mr. Jacket! And what happens? This woman—a nobody, mind you—this woman does not pay the penalty of her crime, sir. No. She is made a heroine of. She is cheered to the echo. She has her picture in all the papers. She has her life story published. She lives happy ever after. Is that fair? Is that right?"

"What's on your mind, Wainewright? It was established as a clean-cut case of self-defense."

Mr. Wainewright, with extraordinary passion, said, "She was lying! Benson was still alive when she left this house! He was hale and hearty as you or me, after the street door closed behind Martha Benson. Alive and laughing, I tell you. She's a liar. She got what she got under false pretenses: all that money, all that sympathy. 'Ill-Used Woman,' as *you* called her! She never killed Benson."

"What about your evidence?" asked Jacket, pouring half his drink into his host's glass.

"Evidence! Don't talk to me about evidence!"

"You drink up your nice drink," said Jacket, "and go over it all again."

"I hated that man," said Mr. Wainewright. "Who did he think *he* was, that Sid Benson, He was no good. And all the women were in love with him. He was a bully, a dirty bully. A drunkard, a bad un—had to the backbone. He practically *forced* his way into this house. A laugh, a joke, a drink, a bang on the back—and before I knew where I was, there was Benson, in Auntie's old room. I'm not used to that sort of thing, Mr. Jacket, sir. I'm not used to it. He borrowed money in cash, and ran up bills. He told me he'd done a deal with a new department store, for weighing machines—over a thousand pounds in commission he had to collect. So he said. All lies, sir, all lies, but I swallowed 'em. I swallowed everything Benson said. Bad, sir, bad! He was bad to the backbone."

"Why didn't you tell him to get out?"

"I meant to," said Mr. Wainewright, "but he always saw it coming. Then it was a laugh, and a joke, and a drink, and a bang on the back. . . . Tomorrow—he'd pay me tomorrow. And tomorrow he said, 'Tomorrow.' And then he had to go to Leeds, or Bristol. It was drinks and women with him, sir, all the time. He used to bring women into this very room. And I was next door. No woman ever looked twice at me, sir. What's the matter with *me?* Have I got a hump on my back, or something? Eh? Have I?"

Jacket said, "Far from it, old friend."

"And I sat in my room, next door, with nothing to do but get my scrap-

book up to date."

"What scrapbook?" asked Jacket.

Mr. Wainewright giggled, pointing to a neatly arranged pile of red-backed volumes on a shelf by the bed. Jacket opened one, and riffled the pages. Mr. Wainewright had meticulously cut out of cinematic and physical-culture magazines the likenesses of young women in bathing suits. He had gummed them in and smoothed them down. Here, between the eight covers of four scrapbooks, lay his harem.

Wainewright rose uncertainly and took the book out of Jacket's hands. "You think I'm pretty terrible," he said. "But I think there's something *artistic* in the human form, sir. So for a hobby, I collect it in my scrapbooks."

"I understand, I understand," said Jacket. "You were sitting in your room next door to this, with nothing to do but get your scrapbooks up to date, when—Go on, go on, George."

"I asked you here to tell you this," said Mr. Wainewright. "You don't need to—to draw me out. I'm telling you

something. A story—worth a fortune. No need to screw your face up. No need to pretend to treat me with respect. I know what you think. You think I'm nothing. You think I'm nobody. Let me tell you." He pointed to the floor under Jacket's chair.

"Go on."

"Yes, Mr. Jacket. I listened. What happened was as I said in court. They quarreled. She cried. He laughed. There was a scuffle. In the end Mrs. Benson ran out. Just like I said, sir."

"Well?"

Wainewright leaned forward, and Jacket had to support him with an unobtrusive hand.

"Then, sir, I went into Benson's room, this very room, sir," Mr. Wainewright continued. "I knocked first, of course."

"And there was no answer?"

"There was an answer. Benson said, 'Come in.' And I came in, Mr. Jacket."

"You mean Benson was alive after his wife left?" Jacket asked.

"Exactly, sir. I was curious to know what had been going on. I made up an excuse for coming to see him just then. I'd borrowed his scissors, you see, the ones she is supposed to have killed him with. I'd been using them—they were very sharp—for cutting things out. They were part of a set: scissors and paper knife in a shagreen case. I came to give them back—it was an excuse. Actually, I wanted to know what had been going on."

"Go on, George," said Jacket, quietly.

Mr. Wainewright said, "He was sitting on the bed, just about where you are now, in his shirt sleeves, laughing and playing with the paper knife. He started telling me all about his wife, Mr. Jacket, sir—how much she loved him, how much the barmaid at the Duchess of Douro loved him, how much every woman he met loved him. His collar was undone."

WAINEWRIGHT paused and moistened his lips. "His collar was undone. He had one of those great big thick white necks. I had that pair of scissors in my hand. He threw his head back while he was laughing. I said, 'Here's your scissors.' He went on laughing, and coughing—he was a cigarette smoker—at the same time. 'Here's your scissors,' I said. I think he'd been drinking. He roared with laughter. And then, all of a sudden, something got hold of me. I hit him with my right hand. I couldn't pull my hand away. I was holding on to the scissors, and they were stuck in his neck, where his collar was open. He made a sort of noise like *gug*—as if you'd pushed an empty glass into a

basin of water, sir—and simply went down. I hadn't intended to do it. I hadn't even shut the door when I came in. Martha Benson never killed anybody. It was me. I killed Sid Benson, Mr. Jacket, in this very room.

"And so you see, sir. There was a miscarriage of justice. Martha Benson hasn't got any right to be made a heroine out of. She never killed that beast, sir. I killed Benson. But she," said Mr. Wainewright, with bitterness, "*she* gets acquitted. *She* is made a fuss of. *Her* life story is all over your paper. *Her* picture and *her* name is all over the place. And the honest truth of it is, that *I* did it!"

John Jacket said, "Prove it."

Mr. Wainewright drew a deep breath and said, "I beg pardon, sir?"

"Prove you did it," said Jacket.

"Do you think I'm crazy?"

"Of course you're crazy," said Jacket.

"I swear before the Almighty," said Mr. Wainewright, with passionate sincerity, "I swear, so help me God, that I killed Benson!"

Jacket, who had been watching his face, said, "I believe you, Wainewright. I believe you *did* kill Benson."

"Then there's your story," Mr. Wainewright said. "Eh?"

"No," said Jacket. "No story. It's proved that Martha Benson killed her husband and was justified in killing him. It's all weighed and paid. It's all over. You can't prove a thing. I believe you when you say you killed Benson. But if you weren't a lunatic, why should you go out of your way to tell me so?"

Mr. Wainewright sat still and white. He was silent.

John Jacket rose, stretched himself, and said, "You see, George, old man, nobody in the world is ever going to believe you now." He reached for his hat.

"Still, I did it," said Mr. Wainewright.

"I begin," said Jacket, "to understand the way you work. Benson was a swine, a strong and active swine. I see how you envied Benson's beastly strength, and his shamelessness. I think I get it. *You* wanted to ill-treat Benson's wife and betray his girl friends. You were jealous of his power to be wicked. You wanted what he had. You wanted to be Benson. So you killed Benson. But all the while, George, in your soul, *you were Benson!* And so you've gone and killed yourself, you poor little man. You've cracked up, George. You tick unheard, George; you move unseen—you are a clock without hands!"

John Jacket put on his hat and left the house.

HE DID no work that afternoon. At five o'clock he telephoned Chief Inspector Dark, at Scotland Yard, and said, ". . . Just in case. That little man Wainewright has just been telling me *he* killed Benson in Bishop's Square."

Chief Inspector Dark replied, "I know. He's been telling the same story around here. He was in yesterday. The man's mad. Damned nuisances. Happens every time. Dozens of 'em always confess to what they haven't done every time somebody kills somebody. Have to make a routine investigation, as you know. But this Benson business is nothing but a lot of Sweet Fanny Adams. Pay no attention to it. Wainewright's stone crackers, plain crazy. Forget it."

"Just thought I'd tell you," said Jacket.

"Right you are," said the chief inspector, and rang off.

So Jacket forgot it. Great things were happening. Everyone knew that England was about to go to war against Germany. The nights were full of menace, for the lights were out in the cities. London after dark was like something tied up in a damp flannel bag. Jacket, who preferred to work a little ahead of time, was preparing certain articles which, he was certain, were going to be topical.

He wrote a thousand words about a gas attack, under the title They Thought This Was Funny, and had it set up, illustrated with a cartoon from a 1915 issue of *Simplicissimus*. He wrote an

impassioned obituary on the first baby that was to be killed in London, for immediate use if and when the war broke out. He compiled and elaborated monstrously scurrilous biographical articles about Hitler, Goebbels, Goering, et cetera.

But one evening, as he sat refreshing himself with a glass of beer and a sandwich in the Duchess of Douro he saw Mr. Wainewright again. Mr. Wainewright could not see him; a twelve-inch-square artificial mahogany pillar stood between them, and the hot, smoky bar was crowded. Mr. Wainewright, dressed in a tight-fitting black suit with red chalk stripes, was conversing with a thickset sweaty man in a light tweed sport coat.

The conversation had touched the perils and the dangers of the coming night. The thickset man was saying:

"Buy electric torches! Buy bulbs, buy bulbs and batteries! At any price—any price at all, wherever you can lay your hands on them. Buy torches, bulbs, and batteries. Prices are going up by leaps and bounds. A good torch is going to be worth its weight in gold. There's going to be accidents in the blackout. Mark my words. Accidents. And crime. Look out for crime."

"Crime?" said Mr. Wainewright.

"Crime. Forgive me if I can't offer you a drink," said the thickset man.

"Oh, please, have one with me."

"No, no! Well, a small one. You're very kind . . . Yes, crime. Robberies, murders—the blackout sets the stage for robberies and murders."

The barmaid whom Benson had called Baby said, as she put down two drinks: "Are you still on about murders?"

Mr. Wainewright, paying her, said, "You look out. This gentleman is right. You can't be too careful. What's to stop anybody following you home in the dark and sticking a knife in you?"

"I don't go home. I've got no home," said the barmaid. "I live here. You and your murders!"

"Yes, but you go out sometimes," said the thickset man.

"Only on Tuesday, "said the barmaid, with a tired laugh. "If you want to stick a knife in me, you'd better wait till Tuesday." She pushed Mr. Wainewright's change across the bar.

"Tuesday," said Mr. Wainewright.

The thickset man was pleased with his idea. He said, "As I was saying: Assume there is a sort of Jack The Ripper; a murderer without motive—the most difficult sort of killer to catch. The lights are out in this great city. The streets are dark. Dark, and swarming with all kinds of men from everywhere. Now say a woman—Blondie there, for instance—"

"She is called Baby," said Mr. Wainewright.

"Baby. Baby is found dead, killed with a common kitchen knife. There are thousands of kitchen knives. I've got half a dozen at home myself. Say I kill Baby with such a knife. All I need is nerve. I walk past her, stab suddenly, and walk on, leaving the knife in the wound. If necessary I turn back as the lady falls and ask, 'What's the trouble?' Do you get the idea? I simply kill, and walk coolly on. Who could swear to me in this blackout, if anyone saw me? Eh?"

"What a clever man you must be!" exclaimed Mr. Wainewright.

VIII

JACKET, who could see Wainewright's face, saw the scanty eyebrows arch upward, and observed a strange light in the colorless eyes.

"Of course," Mr. Wainewright continued, thoughtfully, "you'd use—in your story, I mean—any sort of knife. Something anyone could get anywhere. A common French cook's knife, say. A strong knife with a point. Um?"

"Any knife. You don't wait to get your victim alone. No. All you need is nerve, sir, nerve! A quick, accurate stab, and walk calmly on your way."

The barmaid Baby said, "My God,

why is everybody so morbid? Murder, murder, murder—war, war, war. What's the matter with you? You got a kink or something?"

"Wait and see," said Mr. Wainewright. "I'm not so kinky as you think."

Jacket, still watching, saw Mr. Wainewright's pale and amorphous mouth bend and stretch until it made a dry smile. For the first time he saw Mr. Wainewright's teeth. He did not like that smile.

THE barmaid raised her eyes to the painted ceiling with languid scorn. Then Jacket heard the *whup-whup-whup* of the swinging door, and noticed that Mr. Wainewright was gone. . . .

A week passed. John Jacket was eating and drinking at the bar of the Duchess of Douro before one o'clock in the afternoon, the day being Wednesday.

"How's life?" he asked the barmaid.

"So-so," she said.

"Doing anything exciting?"

She hesitated, and said, "I ran into a friend of yours last night."

"A friend? Of mine?"

"That little man. You *remember!* That funny little man. Old Murders—I forget what he calls himself. The one that gets himself up like a gangster. Used to go about in a bowler hat. Talks about murders. What *is* his name?"

"You mean Wainewright?"

"That's it, Wainewright."

"How did you manage to run into him, Baby?"

"It was a funny thing. You know Tuesday's my day off. I generally go to see my sister. She lives near High Road Tottenham. I left here about eleven in the morning and there was little what's-his-name: Wainewright. I walked along Charing Cross Road to get the tram at the end of Tottenham Court Road—you like to stretch your legs on a nice morning like yesterday, don't you?"

"Well?"

"I walk to Hampstead Road, and there he is again."

"Wainewright?" asked Jacket.

"Yes. Well, I pay no attention, I catch my tram, I go to my sister's and spend the afternoon, and we go to the pictures. We get the tram back and go to the Dominion. And when we get out, there he is again!"

"Wainewright?"

"That's right. There he is. So my sister says, 'A nice night like this—let's walk a bit. I'll walk back with you.' So we walk back here. Well, when we get to the National Gallery, we wait for the lights to change before we cross the road—there he is again."

"There Wainewright is again?"

"Uh-huh. So I say to him, 'Hallo.' And he says, 'Hallo,' and walks off again along Charing Cross Road. It was almost as if he was following us."

"That's funny," said John Jacket.

"Coincidence, I dare say. But he's a funny little man. Do you like him, Mr. Jacket?"

"No, Baby, I can't say I do."

"Well," said the barmaid, reluctantly, "he seems to be all right. But somehow or other I don't seem to like him very much myself. What's the matter? What're you thinking about, all of a sudden?"

"Nothing. When's your next day off?"

"Tuesday."

"Are you going to your sister's again?"

"I generally do," said Baby, turning away to serve a soldier.

"What time d'you get out?" asked Jacket, when she returned.

"About eleven or so. Why?"

"I just wondered. And you get back before the pub closes, I suppose? Before half past eleven, I mean. Eh?"

"We've got to be in before twelve o'clock, you know," said Baby. "Why do you ask?"

"Curiosity. Your movements fascinate me," said Jacket.

Then the lunch-hour rush began to come into the Duchess of Douro, and Jacket went out.

HE WENT to see Chief Inspector Dark. "Listen, Dark," he said, "you know me."

"Well?" said the chief inspector.

"You know I'm not crazy."

Chief Inspector Dark pursed his lips and said, "Well?"

"You remember that crazy little man Wainewright, the witness in the Benson case?"

"Well?"

"I think he's getting to be dangerous."

"How?"

"You remember how he kept confessing to the killing of Benson?"

"Well?"

"Well, Dark, I believe he really did do it."

"Well?" said Chief Inspector Dark.

"I believe that Wainewright's gone really mad, dangerously mad at last."

"What makes you think so?"

Having explained why he thought so, Jacket concluded: "Wainewright's feelings are hurt. He is determined to make you believe, at any cost."

"Look," said Chief Inspector Dark. "With one thing and another I'm rushed off my feet. I'm shorthanded, and I'm busy. Is this all you've got to say?"

"Keep an eye on Wainewright," said Jacket. "He's after the barmaid Baby at the Duchess of Douro."

"Following her about? So would I, if I wasn't a married man, and had time to spare," said Dark. "Keep an eye on Wainewright yourself. I don't think there's anything to it. I'm shorthanded, and I'm busy, Jacket. Will you take a hint?"

Jacket left, grinding his teeth. "I'll keep close to Baby myself," he said to himself, as he waited for a taxi.

But on the following Sunday, Mr. Chamberlain announced that England was at war with Germany, and ten days passed before John Jacket had time to think of Baby and of Mr. Wainewright.

By then, something had happened.

It happened on the night of September 5, 1939. The Germans had destroyed the 7th Polish Division, and the French army had engaged the Germans between the Rhine and the Moselle. U-boats had sunk British merchant ships. The blonde called Baby had her day off, and Mr. Wainewright followed her. She did not leave until half past five that day.

He had learned something of the technique of pursuit. Instinct had warned him to put on again his dark suit and his bowler hat.

He saw her coming out of the side entrance of the Duchess of Douro. She wore a fur that resembled a silver fox, and a diminutive yellow hat.

Mr. Wainewright followed her to St. Martins-in-the-Fields, and right, into Charing Cross Road. Something had happened to the current of life in the town. There was a new, uneasy swirl of dark-clothed civilians, like tea leaves in a pot, together with a rush of men in khaki uniforms.

BABY walked on: she had to walk. Once she tried to stop a taxi, but the driver waved a vague hand and drove toward Whitehall. So she walked, until she caught her tram. Baby climbed to the upper deck to smoke a cigarette. Mr. Wainewright sat below. When she got out, he got out. She disappeared into a little house beyond Seven Sisters corner. He waited. As he waited he thought:

Nobody believes me. I've confessed to a murder. They throw me out. They laugh at me. They take me for a lunatic. To the police, I'm one of those madmen who go about confessing—saying they've committed crimes they haven't committed. I killed Benson, and I tell them so. But, no! I'm crazy, they say. Good. I'll kill her. I'll kill her with a common knife. When the papers report it, I'll mark it with a pencil and go along and confess again. Nobody will believe.

The light was fading. Keeping his right eye on the ground-floor window of the house into which Baby had disappeared, Mr. Wainewright stepped sideways into the road. He put his right hand under his coat and chuckled. Then

he heard something coming. He hesitated; leaped backward—saw that the truck had swerved into the middle of the street to miss him, and tried to jump back to the pavement.

But the driver, having seen his first leap in that treacherous autumnal light, spun back to the left-hand side of the road and knocked Mr. Wainewright down.

The light truck squealed to a standstill as its rear wheels came back to the surface of the road with a soft, sickening jolt. A woman screamed, and a man shouted. A policeman came running, and as he ran he switched on the beam of an electric torch.

A few minutes later an ambulance came, with a high, flat clangor of bells. Mr. Wainewright was carried away.

He was horribly crushed. But he also had a knife wound. A long, wide, triangular cook's knife—what they call a French knife—was embedded in his stomach.

The surgeon came to the conclusion that Mr. Wainewright must have been carrying the knife in his inside breast pocket.

When, at last, Mr. Wainewright opened his eyes he knew that he was dying. He did not know how he knew, but he knew. A cool hand was upon his left arm, and he could discern—in a big, shadowy place—a white coat and a white face.

"I killed Sid Benson," he said.

"There, there," said a voice.

"I tell you I killed Sid Benson!"

"That's all right, there, there. . . ."

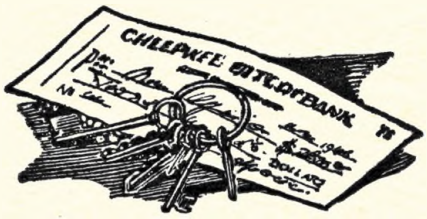
Something pricked his left arm, hesitated, went in deep, and threw out a sort of cold dullness.

Pain receded, tingled, and went away.

Mr. Wainewright said, "I swear I did it. Believe me, do please believe me—I did it!"

"There, there, there," said a whisper.

Looking down at his blank, white, featureless face, the surgeon was reminded of the dial of a ruined clock, a mass-produced clock picked to bits by a spoiled child, and not worth repairing. ●



Next Issue's Novels

A KEY FOR ANY LOCK

by Stewart Sterling

●

LADY IN THE MORGUE

by Jonathan Latimer

●

THE PARADISE CANYON MYSTERY

by Philip Wylie

PARDON MY PISTOL

by Cellblock Sam

IN SAN FRANCISCO, three bandits robbed a tavern of $1000 and twenty cases of liquor and tied up three employes. Then, suddenly aware that it was the Yuletide season, the gunmen undid the bindings on the wrists of the three victims, set a bottle of bourbon and three glasses in front of the men and departed shouting, "Merry Christmas!"

IN WELLESTON, O., someone made off with an entire parking meter and standard—but was considerate enough to cement up the hole in the sidewalk.

A GUNMAN held up Mrs. Lydia Felly in Madison, Wis., took two $10 bills from her purse, hesitated a moment, said, "Here, I'll split them with you," then shoved one bill back at her before taking off.

A THIEF stole the car of Mayor Grover Ray, of Headland, Ala., while he and his family were downtown attending a movie and then two days later considerately returned the auto to the very spot from which he had taken it.

A MAN OF HIS WORD was the bandit who tied up Watchman James Mills in Chicago and looted the company's safe. As soon as his chores were done he called up the police station and reported the robbery so that the watchman could be rescued.

IN LOS ANGELES, two bandits entered a small florist shop determined to loot its cash drawer. The cash drawer contained very little and the proprietress pleaded with the thieves not to take her receipts. She was a poor widow. The bandits placed a five dollar bill of their own in the drawer, picked up a carnation each, and departed.

THE CHIEF of a band of Hamburg, Germany, car thieves, now serving a jail sentence, has, as a token of his repentance, invented a "theftproof" lock for cars.

IN WASHINGTON, D. C., a drunk used a police call box and summoned police to come and get him. Then considerately waited until they did.

WITH A RECORD of five terms in state institutions, Garry A. Juljev was back in jail again in Los Angeles on theft charges. As he changed into prison garb, the jailers noted this legend tattooed on his left thigh: "Crime Does Not Pay."

ARRESTED for quarreling with a woman neighbor, Mosha Byron, New York City, was freed on his promise to "be a good boy." Mosha is 108.

MRS. OPAL E. CAUGHELL of Pontiac, Michigan, told the man who broke into her house that she had no money for him to steal. Touched, he settled for a ham sandwich.

THE YOUTH who kidnapped and robbed 59 year old Mrs. Sadie Crosner of her car and money kissed her gently on the cheek before departing. "You remind me of my mother," he said.

DICK FARNSDALE found a note on the door of his Redding, California, store which had been looted. The note read: "Get a new lock; this one is too easy."

IN MARBLEHEAD, MASS., a thief entered the local poolroom and made off with—the eight ball!

A Novel by HUGH PENTECOST

MURDER for the

PRESIDENT'S PURSE

I

I WOKE with my heart thumping to the rhythm of the fist that hammered on my bedroom door. For a moment I didn't know where I was—only that fear, which had been kept under iron control for weeks, seemed to explode to the surface in this off-guard moment.

A full August moon streamed through the open windows and I quickly oriented myself. I was in a little country inn just outside the town of Centerville. There was nothing to be afraid of. I was on a holiday. The fear was the result of a practical joke in very bad taste, and I was allowing my nerves to play tricks on me.

"Hello!" I called out. "Who is it?"

"Tex," said a hard, flat voice.

I scrambled out of bed and went over to the door and unlocked it. Tex stood there, all six-feet four of him, with that dead-pan expression on his angular face

This is the story of four ex-GI's who seemed blessed with a peculiar talent for picking long shots—and getting themselves killed by a man who was . . . dead!

which never changed, no matter what his mood might be. I think Tex will stand before the recording angel in those high-heeled cowboy boots and the wide-brimmed Stetson. He wore them even with a dinner jacket. He wore them now, plus a pair of pants hastily belted over an undershirt. He had a jacket over his arm.

"What's wrong?" I asked him.

"Trouble down at the stable," he said.

"One of the horses?"

He shook his head. "Ducky."

"What about him?"

"It looks like the old man killed him," Tex said.

"You're crazy!"

"Get moving," Tex said. "There's a trooper waiting for us dov stairs."

He stood in the doorway while I pulled on some clothes. I asked him what had happened.

"I don't know any more than you do," he said. He was rolling a homemade cigarette. "All I know is, Ducky's dead."

We went out together. I saw by the clock over the room clerk's desk that it was three A.M. Outside, a State trooper waited for us in a police car. It wasn't over half a mile to the stable, which was one of many surrounding the famous Happy Days Track. Tomorrow was the beginning of Imperial Week, classic meet for the harness-racing kings, and all the stables were filled. Ours was at the south end of the grounds.

ORDINARILY, things would have been quiet at this hour, but most of the stables showed lights, and as we climbed out of the trooper's car we could hear the restless stamping and whinnying of horses and the subdued voices of stableboys.

Our stable was long and narrow, with six box stalls and a tackroom. There was a crowd gathered around outside it, which opened up a path for us as Tex and I followed the trooper into the tackroom.

The first thing I saw was Ducky. He lay on the floor near an old desk that he'd had placed in the corner. I wouldn't have recognized him by his face, because his head had been beaten in and smashed almost beyond recognition. The gaudy sports jacket I knew, but something had been added. It looked as though someone had sprayed blood on it with an atomizer.

The room was a shambles. Furniture and filing cabinet had been overturned. A whisky bottle and glass had been granulated on the floor.

Who ISN'T Who

AS YOU probably know, most detective authors write under two or more names. For example, Q. Patrick is also Patrick Quentin. Cornell Woolrich is also William Irish. Carter Dickson and John Dickson Carr are one and the same. Erle Stanley Gardner sometimes blossoms out as A. A. Fair.

Hugh Pentecost, author of MURDER FOR THE PRESIDENT'S PURSE, is no exception. He has his alter ego, too. It happens to be his real name—Judson P. Philips, the "P" for Pentecost.

Philips was born in Northfield, Mass., in 1903, both his grandfathers being connected with the famous Moody schools there. His mother, under the stage name of Rachel Tannehill, was with Richard Mansfield's repertory company for many years. His father was an opera singer in London and Paris, and there Philips spent his boyhood. But he finished his education in the U. S., graduating from Columbia University in 1925.

He has been a writer ever since.

There were other people in the room, but when I took my eyes off Ducky I saw only the old man and Judith. The old man lay on his back, his eyes closed. His fiery red mustache looked pale against the trickle of blood that ran down from a severe cut over his left temple. He was dead or unconscious, I couldn't tell which.

Sitting on the floor beside him was Judith. Her head was bent over him and her red hair had fallen around her face so that it was hidden. She rocked gently back and forth, her arms clasped around her body as though she were in pain.

"Judith!" I said.

Slowly she raised her eyes, eyes that had always been gay and bright and filled with enthusiasm. They were blank now and without life. She looked at me as though she had never seen me before, and then turned back to the old man.

"Mr. Joslyn?"

I turned toward the voice and found myself confronted by another State trooper. I saw that he was a captain, and evidently in charge.

"I'm Bill Joslyn," I said.

"While we're waiting for the doctor and the ambulance, I'd like to talk to you. I'm Captain Treat, State police."

"Ambulance means the old man's alive?" I said.

Treat shrugged. "He's breathing. Perhaps it would be easier to talk outside."

"We can't leave Judith here alone with—with this," I said.

"We tried to take her out of here," Treat said. "Suffering from shock. She started to scream and fight us off. Better to leave her alone."

"He's right," Tex said, speaking for the first time since we'd arrived. He had just lit another of his homemade cigarettes and his eyes were squinted against the smoke.

We walked out of the tackroom. The crowd of curious stable hands from all over the track grounds had swelled.

"Get these people out of here," Treat

BILL JOSLYN
—to whom life was a gamble!

ordered the trooper who'd brought us from the inn. And then, while the crowd reluctantly broke ground and started wandering away, Treat studied some notes he'd made in a small book. He held it up so that light from the open tackroom door would fall on it.

"What on earth happened here?" I asked him.

"I was hoping maybe you could help us with that, Mr. Joslyn," Treat said. "There are some curious angles."

Curious angles! We had all been living in a state of intense anxiety for three weeks. We had kept telling ourselves there was nothing to be afraid of, nothing we couldn't handle. Yet the possibility of tragedy had been with us night and day. But not this! Not the old man!

How could I throw any light on the "curious angles" without going back and telling the whole story? We had intended to keep it to ourselves, to handle it ourselves, but there was no use pre-

tending any longer. That time had passed.

IT WILL, of course, be said that we should have gone to the police at once. I can only point out that no two people ever see a set of facts exactly alike. They see them through the tinted glasses of their own experience and associations. When this thing started we saw it as private and personal, something we could handle ourselves and wanted to, because of our affection and regard for Carl Shay and our understanding of the terrible stresses and strains that must be motivating his behavior.

To an outsider it would have appeared vicious and dangerous. To us, through our particular shade of colored glasses, it just seemed sad and sick.

To understand how our perspective took on its special tint it's necessary to go back quite a long time. It was in the spring of '44 and we were all part of the mighty force that stormed ashore at the Normandy beachhead and started driving Hitler's demoralized forces back toward the Rhine. That's the way it will read in history books—as though it had been a sort of Fourth of July picnic. Believe me, it wasn't. It was a time of horror and fear for anyone with any sensitivity left.

Most Americans remember that just when it seemed we were part of a victory tidal wave, there came a counterattack that resulted in the now famous Battle of the Bulge. The group that stood out against the enemy will always be remembered. But there were other groups, smaller and unimportant, who faced the same situation. We were one of them.

There were just five of us, holed up in an old root cellar, with our own artillery raking the countryside in the daytime and the place crawling with enemy patrols at night. We were an odd five.

In command was a sergeant named Ryan. There must have been thousands of sergeants named Ryan in the army, but there was only one Ducky Ryan. Sports fans know him, of course. He was an All-American fullback from the Middle West, he had been an Olympic heavyweight boxer, and there was a fable that he had once knocked out a prominent heavyweight contender for a large side bet. He was a good boxer, but the knockout story is probably fiction. He was always smiling, but his eyes were cold and unkind.

I suppose he would have been called a great competitor, but at the time of the root cellar I had seen him only as a soldier, and to me he was sadistic and cruel, with no place in his system for reason. I would have cordially hated him at any other time, but in that root cellar he was a bulwark of strength, unafraid, supremely confident that we would get out of there. His optimism kept us from cracking up.

Then there was Tex Braden. He was tall, thin, with lazy blue eyes. He never spoke unless he had something to say. He was a quiet man, whose strength was nourished by his calm way of thinking things through. Put him down in the middle of a desert island and he would have out-Crusoed Crusoe. His special charm for me lay in his ability to sense your mood and to fall in with it easily and naturally.

Then there was Mark Lewis, small, wiry, volatile. Mark was an actor, and he was at it every minute. He had curly blond hair, gray eyes, and a bubbling charm and wit that never left him. He had a way of breaking his own tensions with some absurd joke or piece of mimicry.

Then there was Carl Shay. Poor Carl. He had grown up in New York's Lower East Side, an orphan, raised by the state, never able to reach any of the things he really wanted in life. Somewhere along the way he had become music mad. He couldn't stay away from concerts. He couldn't get it out of his head. He had somehow scraped up money for violin lessons, but there wasn't enough of it or enough time. He earned his living before the army as a radio repairman.

I think he chose that career because he could have the radio in his little shop constantly tuned to good music.

The key to Carl's personality was frustration. He could never express himself as he wanted, or have time to satisfy his hunger for beauty without the worrying anxiety as to where tomorrow's dinner would come from. Carl resented all of us, I think, because we'd all had chances in life he'd never had and probably never would have.

I am the William Joslyn of Joslyn & Kent, Publishers. I inherited the senior partnership and a comfortable living from my father. My life, before the army, had consisted of reading manuscripts and having three-hour luncheons with authors. It was a nice, unhurried, unanxious life. I survived the army by blacking out all the things I liked in life and concentrating with almost laughable intensity on the job at hand. It was bad at night, when there was no job.

We were about as ill-assorted a group as you could imagine, but in that root cellar we had a common cause that drew us together—to escape with our lives. We stayed hidden in the daytime, praying our own gunners wouldn't drop a direct hit on the roof of our hide-out. At night we foraged for food, dodging German patrols.

II

STRANGELY enough, it was Carl Shay who gave birth to the Big Idea. He was talking bitterly one day about the fact that for the first time in his life he had some ready cash. After three years in the army he'd saved up a pretty fair amount.

"It might be enough for lessons," he said, "or to start a really good business, when you think of severance pay and all. But not me! I got a little security for the first time in my life, and I'm going to die here like a lousy rat in its hole!"

It started the rest of us talking. To varying degrees, we'd all managed to accumulate a little cash.

"If we were to pool it," Ducky Ryan said, "we could pretty near call ourselves financiers."

"What would you say our odds are on getting out of here?" I asked Ducky.

"We'll get out!"

"But the odds," I said.

"About twenty-five to one," Ducky said. He grinned. "Long shots always come in for me. Did I ever tell you about that fight I had with the heavyweight contender? It was out on the coast and—"

"You told us," Tex Braden said in a curt tone.

"I've got an idea," Mark said. "Suppose we do get out. We'd be the long-shot boys of all time. Let's pool this dough of ours, as Ducky said, and use it to play long shots."

"Horses!" Carl said. "I should throw the first money I ever had to the bookmakers!"

"I didn't mean horses," Mark said.

[Turn page]

"Maybe we finance you, Carl—your career as a musician. Maybe we back some unknown inventor. Anything that is a real long shot. If we make it out of here it would be an omen."

It started that way, as a joke. It was just something to talk about. Mark, who could develop enthusiasm over almost anything, finally drew up a contract, the gist of which was that we'd pool our army savings and agree to invest them in the first thing we saw that was least likely to succeed! We all signed it, laughing and kidding. It killed a day for us, anyway.

That night we lost Carl. He went out on a foraging trip and never came back. We couldn't hunt for him during the day because of the artillery. At night we all went out. There wasn't a trace of him. We didn't find his body, nor a fresh grave where he might have been buried by a German patrol. He just disappeared. After two nights of searching we gave up.

The rest of us got out of there two days later, and finally there came a time when the war was over. It seems short when you look back on it. It seemed forever, then.

To celebrate our discharge Ducky, Tex, Mark, and I held a dinner in a restaurant in New York. Mark brought up the matter of the agreement. None of us had taken it too seriously, I think, but somehow, now that we recalled it, it seemed like a pleasantly cockeyed notion. Among the four of us we had about $15,000 to invest, and it was agreed we'd all keep our eyes open for a long shot on which to place it.

About two weeks later Mark called me at my office. He had a long shot for us, a play. We all met for lunch. Ducky, wearing a gaudy sports jacket with a hand-painted tie, reported he was still "looking for just the right thing." Tex, in a neat blue-serge suit, but with cowboy boots and a broad-brimmed Stetson, reported he was acting as local agent for some cattle syndicate in the Southwest. Mark had his play. The author was a friend of his and there was a magnificent part in it for him. Our $15,000 would buy us a quarter interest. If it was a hit we'd get our capital back, plus a nice profit. We'd agreed to keep the original fifteen thousand for reinvestment—provided we ever got it back!

Well, we invested our money, and I don't have to tell you there's no longer shot than a Broadway play. What happened? Well, the play was "The Gray Faun," and after a year and a half it's still playing to standees. It was crazy, but we were rich—and Mark was a smash hit in the play, his future as an actor assured.

There was one small point I must make clear: After a lot of debate, we agreed that if Carl Shay should ever turn up he was to be counted in on the deal. You see, there was still no official evidence that he was dead. He'd been reported missing. There were guys turning up all the time who'd been lost for three or fours years.

WELL, about six weeks ago I had a phone call one morning in my office from Tex Braden. "I'm in Danbury, Connecticut," he said. "Ducky'll stop by for you in half an hour and drive you up here."

"Why do I want to come to Danbury?" I asked him.

"New investment," Tex said laconically.

"What is it?"

"Four ex-Presidents of the United States and Mary Todd Lincoln," he said.

"What?"

"You better come and see it," Tex said. Then, with unusual slyness for him, "There's a beautiful doll involved. Worth taking the day off for, if nothing else."

"What about Mark? He has a matinee today."

"I talked to him. He's leaving it up to us."

"But what *is* the investment?"

"I told you. Four ex-Presidents and—"

"Never mind," I said. "I'll come. Where do we find you?"

"Ducky knows," Tex said, and hung up.

Ducky turned up half an hour later in an atrocious pink-and-chrome convertible. He said it had belonged to some guy in the numbers racket who'd got caught and sent up. There was a built-in bar in the back seat. Somehow, it was typical of Ducky.

On the drive up to Danbury, between intervals of cursing out pedestrians and drivers, Ducky explained he had no idea what Tex had up his sleeve. "Danbury is a hat town," he said. "Maybe we're going to manufacture hats."

"What have hats got to do with four ex-Presidents of the United States and Mary Todd Lincoln?" I asked.

"Maybe they're style names," Ducky said.

It was a gorgeous warm day, and once we'd got onto the parkway I just leaned back and closed my eyes and drank in the sun. It was a little better not seeing where we were headed. Ducky's driving had a tendency to age me.

We hit Danbury in about an hour and a half, and Ducky pulled up in front of the hotel on the main street. There was Tex, tilted back in a chair on the front porch, rolling one of his perpetual cigarettes. He came down to the car, the high heels of his cowboy boots clicking on the concrete of the sidewalk.

"Let's have lunch and you can tell us what it's all about," I suggested.

"You got to see it first," Tex said. "This has to be decided quick. Take the next turn to the left, Ducky." He swung his long legs over the car door without bothering to open it and sat down beside me. The acrid smell of his handmade cigarette brought back that old root cellar for a moment.

He was evidently determined not to talk, so we didn't try to pump him. We wound in and out of back streets and finally off onto a narrow dirt road.

"That driveway," Tex said.

The house by the driveway was a ramshackle, broken-down, once-white clapboard affair. The grass was uncut. Vines grew up over the porch screen so that they must have shut out all the light.

"In the back," Tex said.

The "back" was a surprise. Suddenly the place was neat, the grass clipped, a circular driveway raked and free of weeds. Facing us was a long, low stable such as you see at tracks and fairgrounds. There were six box stalls with half-doors, and a tackroom. It was all spit and polish. There were a couple of trotting sulkies stacked against the wall, the bicycle spokes on the rubber-tired wheels glittering in the sunlight. Horses looked out over the half-doors at us, ears pricked forward. Over the stall doors were the horses' name plates.

I started to laugh. There they were: President Theodore Roosevelt, President Calvin Coolidge, President Grover Cleveland, President Woodrow Wilson—and Mary Todd Lincoln. Mary Todd Lincoln was a golden chestnut with a white star in the middle of her forehead and you could see at a glance that she was cantankerous.

"Are you kidding?" Ducky said to Tex.

Tex ran his tongue along the edge of a fresh cigarette paper. "Five trotting horses," he said. "Good ones. Been winning regularly. They're owned by James T. Thorne, one of the most famous drivers in trotting history. He's seventy-one years old, but he's still the best driver and trainer in the business."

"Interesting if true," I said. "But Tex—"

"What do we want with a stable of trotters?" Ducky demanded.

Tex lit his cigarette placidly. "They'll cost us about half of our profits on the play," he said, "and Mr. Thorne comes along in the deal. At a salary, of course."

JUST then a little Negro boy emerged from President Woodrow Wilson's stall, leading the horse out. He was fol-

lowed by an old man with a soup-strainer mustache that was still as flaming red as a forest fire. Promptly, President Grover Cleveland reached out and bit President Wilson on the rump as he went by. President Wilson started to buck and rear.

The old man turned and wagged an admonishing finger at the biter. "Is that any way to act, Mr. President?" he said, in a high, quavering voice.

President Grover Cleveland, a dark brown gelding, laid back his ears and bared his teeth, but you could see that he was just feeling his oats and that there wasn't anything mean about him. Just playful.

President Wilson was raising Cain with the Negro boy, plunging and rearing. The old man started forward to help, but before he could reach the horse, another person came running out of the tackroom at the end of the stable.

It was a girl, wearing tan jodhpurs and a green turtleneck sweater with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. Her hair was as red as the old man's mustache and it hung down to her shoulders. When the sun struck it, it seemed to shimmer as though it was sprinkled with gold dust.

"What's the matter with you, Jake!" she said to the Negro boy. She reached out and took the lead rein from him. Then she spoke to the horse: "All right, Woody! All right!" Instantly the horse settled down on all four feet and began nuzzling at her.

Tex squinted at her through the smoke from his cigarette. "The old man's granddaughter, Judith," he said. "She comes with the deal, too."

Ducky whistled, long and low. "Lana Turner, you can go home to mother!" he said.

"I know we don't want trotters in the ordinary sense of the word," Tex said. "We wouldn't want to be bothered. But there's a gimmick here."

"And she's gorgeous!" Ducky said.

Tex ignored him. "The old man, after fifty years in the business as a driver and trainer, branched out a couple of years ago and became an owner. If he had a tenth as much business sense as he has horse sense he'd have cleaned up. He hasn't. His horses have been consistent winners, but he's deep in the red."

"That's for me," Ducky said. "The red!"

"The gimmick is this," Tex said. "President Coolidge is a three-year-old. The old man bought him as a yearling and nominated him for the Imperial. That's the Kentucky Derby of harness racing. This is the year. The purse is somewhere around forty grand. The old man thinks President Coolidge has a real chance. So it looks like this to me:

"It will cost us about half our profits on the play to buy him out. Two weeks from now we send Coolidge in the Imperial. If he wins, we clean up. We get the purse, and we sell him for a huge profit and the rest for at least what we pay for it. We stand to make sixty or seventy grand if our luck holds. If it doesn't, we can't lose too much. This is all first-rate stuff."

"You said it," Ducky murmured, his eyes on Judith Thorne.

"The old man has had an offer which he has to refuse or accept today," Tex said. "The trouble, from his point of view, is that the offer doesn't include his services. He loves these horses, and he's been dreaming for two years of driving Coolidge in the Imperial. If his services are included in the deal he'll take our offer. Since none of us know anything about harness racing—"

"Oh, but I'm going to learn," Ducky said. "Definitely!"

Old Mr. Thorne was walking over toward the car now. He had a strange and wonderful dignity despite his comic-opera mustache and his shambling gait. It increased as he came closer and I realized it lay in his eyes—level, clear blue, uncompromising, accustomed to peering through dust and the steam from sweating flanks toward his eventual goal, victory. He stopped by the car without speaking, his eyes on Tex.

"These are my partners, Mr. Thorne," Tex said. "Mr. Ryan and Mr. Joslyn."

THE OLD man gave us each a long, searching look, as if he hoped to find something there. I knew what it was afterward: he was looking for some sign that we loved horses and harness racing; some sign that it wasn't just a money deal we'd come to discuss.

"We haven't had a chance to talk this over, Mr. Thorne," Tex said.

"Count me in," Ducky said. "Beautiful girl, your granddaughter."

"She knows horses," the old man said.

"How did you come to name your horses after presidents?" I asked him.

"I admire horses more than I do most men," Mr. Thorne said. "I changed their names when I bought them. Gave 'em honorable ones!"

"Did you just pick them out of a hat?" I asked.

He gave me a look that said I should have known better. "President Cleveland is a good campaigner," he said. "He won't always win, but he'll take his share. President Wilson is an intellectual

He sneaked up behind Ryan, swung the wrecking bar at his head

type. Always thinking, always trying to figure. He doesn't like advice, but when he gets it into his head to trot his own race he's apt to be voted down. President Roosevelt is a rough rider. He'll climb right up your back if you get in his way. The filly—well, she's too ambitious for her own good."

"And Mr. Coolidge?" I asked.

The old man's eyes had a distant look in them. "Gentlemen, I know you haven't got trot in your heads. I know this is just a business deal with you. I know you wouldn't be thinking of it if it wasn't for Mr. Coolidge and his chances in the Imperial. I'll tell you the truth. He was rightly named, that one. If he doesn't choose to run, high heaven couldn't make him. But if he does—well, gentlemen, then it's boom times."

Tex glanced at me. "Sounds like our kind of a long shot, Bill."

I was thinking about the old man and his dream of raising a colt that would win the most coveted prize in the harness-racing field. I was thinking about his dream of driving that colt himself. I knew Tex had money on his mind, and Ducky the girl. I was thinking that even if it cost me something, I'd enjoy giving old Mr. Thorne a chance at his dream.

"Count me in," I said.

"Then I guess it's a deal, Mr. Thorne," Tex said.

I could almost see the anxiety lift from the old man's back.

"Well, now that it's settled," Ducky said, opening the car door, "let's get acquainted."

III

IT'S HARD to realize, even now, that during those few hours we spent with Mr. Thorne and his granddaughter, so peaceful, so perfect, a sick mind was already weaving a plot against us which was to reduce us, first, to a state of intense anxiety, and, finally, to flat terror. Still, those few hours are a part of the story, since they served to get certain forces in motion that later played a vital part in the whole pattern of violence.

Judith was at the core of it. At first I was only amused by Ducky's attempt to make an impression. I'd made one of those snap judgments which most people pride themselves are accurate, and which so often turn out to have no value. Watching her with the excited President Wilson, I'd simply thought of her as another of those horsy girls I'd run across a hundred times before. They had never impressed me very much. I saw Judith as a girl in pants with a touch of tomboy in her, much too young to be of interest to me.

I found myself much more taken with the old man, who brought each of the horses out of his stall in turn and pointed out details of conformation that were Greek to me. The old man knew all there was to know about harness racing. He knew the blood lines of every trotter from Topgallant to Greyhound, from Blue Boy to Dean Hanover. When he talked about them his voice trembled with the deep enthusiasm he felt. He insisted we stay for lunch if cold ham and salad would do.

He had introduced us to Judith, and I realized, at close range, that she wasn't "just another girl." Ducky saw only the lovely coloring. The moment she spoke to me, in a clear, cool voice, the moment I felt her hand in mine, firm and friendly, I knew that here was something rare and special.

She went off to prepare the lunch, and, of course, Ducky offered to help. As they went toward the house I saw the old man's eyes follow them, and they seemed to cloud over. I wondered if he was simply disturbed by Ducky's brashness, or if he felt protective about Judith with all men.

I found out some facts about her at lunch. She'd lived all her life with her grandfather. I didn't know what happened to her parents, but evidently the old man was all the family she knew. That life had been spent almost entirely at county fairs and at the tracks on the

Grand Circuit. She was an odd mixture of naïveté and sophistication. She'd seen plenty of the seamy side of life. She wasn't at all at a loss how to handle Ducky. I imagine she'd had plenty of experience keeping the Duckys of this world at a distance.

The old man had taught her all he knew, and it turned out she was a crack driver herself. But when, somehow, our story came out and we got talking about our flier in the theater, and when she heard that I published books, it was as though we'd come from a magic world.

She'd never seen a legitimate play, only movies. If she'd had any formal education there was no sign of it. Her eagerness for us to talk about things that hadn't been a part of her world was touching. I felt a curious stirring in me. I wanted to please her. I wanted to protect her.

But whatever I felt, this was Ducky's day. Before lunch was finished he had, in effect, moved in. He was the only one of us who didn't have a regular job. He was, he pointed out, clearly the one who could best handle the business details of our deal.

The old man had told us that there was one meet before Imperial Week at Centerville, and that the horses should be raced. Ducky would stay with our investment, he announced. He would travel with the horses, handle all the financial details, and—he did not add—take care of Judith.

When we walked out to the car after lunch I found myself trailing behind with old Mr. Thorne.

"She's twenty-two, but you might not know it to look at her," he said.

He'd done nothing, so far, but talk about horses and I thought I'd lost a thread somewhere. "She?" I said.

"Judith," he said. "She's a fine-gaited girl, Mr. Joslyn. There's never been a rough hand on the reins. I'd take the whip to anyone who mishandled her."

I realized he wasn't warning me. "Don't worry about Ryan," I said. "His bark is worse than his bite."

I wished I was sure of it. He and Tex were walking ahead with Judith, and I saw he'd managed to slip his arm through hers. I was surprised to find that it disturbed me. I hadn't felt like this since I'd fallen in love in the seventh grade.

WE SAID good-by, Ducky promising to return the next day and arrange the next two weeks of campaigning with Mr. Thorne. I turned and looked back as we drove out of the yard. Judith was straightening the old man's tie. I imagine she'd wanted to do it ever since we arrived, but hadn't wanted to embarrass him in front of us. Nice girl.

There's something reassuring about a warm summer sun and a clear blue sky. It's as though nature had removed all her threats. There's something reassuring about feeling economically secure and able to gamble on something exciting. There's something reassuring, at twenty-eight, to find that your heart can still flutter a little at the thought of a girl you've just met.

I was feeling good when Ducky and Tex left me outside my apartment building.

"You guys can get to see the horses go week ends," Ducky said, "and arrange your vacations for Imperial week. Will you give the details to Mark?"

I said I would. I walked into the cool, dark foyer of the building and I saw that there were some letters in my mailbox. I unlocked it and took them out. Mostly bills, a letter from my partner who was in Europe, and a penny postcard. My name was typewritten on the address side of the card, and I almost threw it away, thinking it was some kind of ad. I turned it over, idly curious. There was one line of typing on the back, and as I read it, amazement turned slowly into a faint, dull chill of apprehension.

"YOU LEFT ME TO DIE," the message read. It was signed: "CARL."

I remember that as I unlocked the door of my apartment the phone was ringing. I was still turning the postcard

over and over in my fingers. It was a slow thing, you understand. At first it made no sense. Then I began to see what it was supposed to mean—and then the slow chill.

The phone was insistent. I went over and answered it.

"Bill? This is Mark."

"Oh, hi," I said.

"What did we buy?"

"What?"

"Your trip to Danbury—I take it you just go back."

"A stable of trotting horses," I said.

"Oh," he said. If I hadn't been concentrating on the postcard I'd have realized that wasn't much of a reaction.

"I just got back to my hotel from the matinee," Mark said. "I found something odd here, Bill. A postcard. I—"

" 'You left me to die,' " I said.

"Bill! You got one, too,"

"Just now."

"What do you make of it?"

"I just walked in the door when you called," I said. "I haven't had much chance to think."

"It must be some kind of a joke," Mark said. He didn't sound amused.

"In terrible taste, if it is," I said.

"It's postmarked 'Boston,' " Mark said. I hadn't noticed, but mine had been mailed in Boston, too. "What are you going to do about it, Bill?"

"Do?"

"Well, we can't just laugh it off," Mark said. "If it's a joke, I'd like to find out who thinks it's funny. If it's really from Carl—"

"Then what?" I said.

"There's no reason for him to be sore at us," Mark said. "We did everything we could to find him back there. He can come in with us any time he shows up. We agreed to that. He should be tickled pink to see us."

"Maybe he doesn't know all that," I said. "He may think—"

"Where has he been for four years?"

"Look, there's no use trying to discuss it over the phone," I said. "Let's get together."

"I can't till after tonight's performance," Mark said.

"Okay. My place?"

"Sure. I wonder about Ducky and Tex. Do you suppose—"

"I only just left them. They haven't had a chance to find out. If they got cards, too, we'll know soon."

We did. Ducky called me about ten minutes later. He had a card, too. He was burning, but he had a different slant. "I've been sick of Mark's kind of humor for a long time," Ducky said. "I'm going over to the theater and mess up his pretty face so the girls won't like him so much."

"Hold your horses," I said. "Mark got one, too. He just phoned."

"Sure, he got one. Naturally, he'd send himself one so's not to give himself away."

"I don't think so," I said. "The cards are postmarked 'Boston.' Mark hasn't been in Boston."

"He could get a friend to mail them, couldn't he? You can fly up there in a couple of hours." Ducky sounded a little less sure.

"It's possible," I said, "that they really came from Carl."

"The guy's been dead for years!"

"Has he?" I asked.

"I don't like it," Ducky said. "I don't like any part of it."

"Mark's coming over here tonight after his show. Why don't you and Tex come along?"

"You think Tex has got one?" Ducky asked.

"I'd say it was a pretty safe bet."

IT WAS. Tex phoned ten minutes after that, and agreed to join us that night at eleven. It's funny, but it seemed we all thought of the same thing at first—a joke. It was as though almost anything would be better than the possibility that the cards were on the level, really from Carl Shay. We had no reason to have any feelings of guilt about Carl. As Mark had said, we'd done everything we could to find him back there in

France—two solid nights of searching.

We couldn't have been expected to turn down our own chance for escape when it came; Carl would have done the same thing if it had been one of us. We had no reason to feel guilty about what we'd done since. We'd checked army records in an attempt to find some trace of him. We still counted him in on our cockeyed agreement. Any time he turned up he could buy in and share such profits as he had never dreamed.

But somehow I felt guilty. Perhaps it's a human failing, the result of a hundred private guilts, to feel guilty when someone points an accusing finger at you: "YOU LEFT ME TO DIE."

Immediately, we found ourselves on the defensive.

Tex was the first one to arrive that night. He came shortly before ten o'clock. He sat in the big leather armchair in my living room, turning a highball glass round and round in his long fingers, squinting through the smoke of a freshly rolled cigarette.

"Our story's been in the papers," he said. "Almost anyone might be pulling this as a gag."

"I don't recall any of the details of Carl's death being in the papers, or, for that matter, his name," I said.

Tex smoked silently for a long time. Then he raised his lazy eyes. "You think it's him?" he asked.

"It could be," I said. "Men are still turning up who were lost or badly injured in the war—amnesia cases, lost identities. It could be."

"I guess if we hadn't thought it was possible we wouldn't have considered counting him in, just in case," Tex said. "But these cards—they sound threatening. Why should he threaten us? Why shouldn't he just come forward and ask us what the score is? He'd find out things were all to the good."

"Tex, a man who's been lost for four years— Well, let's face it. He's probably not very solidly in balance."

"Nobody left him to die!" Tex said.

An unpleasant thought had been occurring to me. We'd searched for him separately those two nights before we escaped. Suppose one of the others had found him, and left him because he was too badly hurt to get back on his own? It would have been dangerous trying to carry or drag a wounded man. Suppose someone *had* left him to die? I glanced down at Tex and saw that his eyes were fixed on me.

"Are you thinking the same thing I am?" I said.

"Maybe," he said. "If it did happen, it wasn't me. And I don't think it was you, Bill. Mark? For all his bravado he was pretty scared out there. Ducky? He'd leave his own mother to the crows if he figured she'd be in his way."

"We're being a couple of low-grade heels," I said. "Let me sweeten your drink."

Ducky and Mark arrived together shortly after eleven. They'd met outside. Mark's blond hair was rumpled and he looked tired. He threw himself down in a graceful attitude on the couch, said, "A double slug for me, Bill, and very little water."

Ducky was loudly angry. "If I find out this is some jerk's idea of humor, I'll break his rotten neck!" he said, and he glared at Mark.

MARK made an impatient gesture. "I know what you're thinking, Ducky. I'm the gagman of this outfit. Well, I never thought there was anything funny about Carl's death. There, but for the grace of God, go I!" His voice was boyish and earnest. "It's not my type of joke, son."

"Look," I said. "If it is a joke, no matter how lousy, we have nothing to worry about. We ignore it and it'll die, because the joker won't get any fun out of it. But if it isn't—if the cards come from Carl—then we have to do some figuring."

"We go to the police!" Mark said. He drank down half his drink. "Those cards are a threat. If they came from Carl he's blown his top and he's dangerous."

"If we wait for the cops to do something we'll all be dead," Ducky said. "We've got nothing for them to go on."

"I suppose we could advertise," Tex said. "Tell Carl we want to see him, because we have a place for him in our syndicate."

"The man thinks we betrayed him, deserted him," Mark said. "He isn't thinking about money. If he was, he could come forward. Obviously, he knows where all four of us live."

"He may have forgotten about the agreement," I said. "It was all sort of a joke at the time, and it was made the day he was—was lost. It may never have occurred to him that we went through with it."

"That's possible," Tex said.

"Tex's idea of advertising in the personals might not be so bad," I said. "We could try the New York and Boston papers. In the ad we simply tell him the agreement held and that we have a place for him."

"Then what?" Mark said, putting his glass down hard on the table beside the couch. "We wait, not knowing whether some jibbering lunatic who's just walking around in Carl's shell is waiting in our rooms, in the theater alley, in the subway crowd, to slide a knife between our ribs. We can't just let it go on, day after day!"

You could see Mark's nerves were drawn tight.

"How can we stop it—until Carl's ready to show himself?" Tex asked quietly.

"If it is Carl," I said, "he's sick. You know all the pressure and frustrations that made him the kind of guy he was. It's ironic that we have provided for him, and that he could have money that would let him have all the things he wanted. We can only get the idea of revenge out of his head by letting him know that. Five minutes' talk with him would straighten him out."

"Invite him over!" Ducky said bitterly. "Send him a telegram care of No Place, Boston!"

"I still like the idea of calling the police," Mark said. "They can trace typewriters, where the cards were bought, go about it scientifically."

"So call 'em!" Ducky said. "They aren't going to give all four of us bodyguards on account of these crackpot postcards. Bill's right. What matters is getting the news to Carl that he's got money in the bank. It's what he always wanted. How about it, Bill? Will you take care of the ads?"

"Sure."

Tex tossed his cigarette into the fireplace. One corner of his mouth curled down in a wry smile. "Poor, ineffective little Carl, frightened of his own shadow," he said. "If anyone had offered to bet me I'd be scared of him some day, I'd have given the longest odds of all time."

Mark turned his head, and there were dark shadows under his eyes. "*Are* you scared, Tex?"

Tex wriggled his shoulders inside his coat. "I like to see what's coming at me," he said.

IV

UNFORTUNATELY I was to find that this thing acted a little bit like surf on a beach. You could see the wave coming and you braced yourself to avoid being knocked down and dragged. Then it hit you and nothing happened, and what was left of the wave ran out, leaving the sand wet and bare, with no sign of footprints, nothing. Smooth, bare sand without a trace of the danger that had been there a moment before. Then, in the distance, you could see the white top of another breaker coming toward you.

The next morning I prepared ads for the papers. Then I had an inspiration and called a friend of mine who was music critic on the *Globe*. I told him a corny story about trying to locate an old army chum who was a composer, in order to give him news that there was money for him. He ran a notice saying that the firm of Joslyn & Kent was try-

ing to locate the "young GI composer, Carl Shay, in order to cut him in on a business proposition that would net him a good many thousand dollars." I figured Carl would almost certainly read the music notes, if he was reading the papers at all.

I also gave out the story to the sporting pages of the local press services, announcing our purchase of Gramp Thorne's stable, and recalling our background, including the fact that we wanted Carl in with us if he turned up. It seemed impossible that one way or another Carl would fail to learn the truth.

For two or three days all of us walked around, looking over our shoulders, detouring dark streets. Then the anxiety began to disappear. The wave had gone out, the beach was clean, the danger seemed to have passed.

Ducky had gone off to Danbury to get our investment working. It turned out that there was a purse for three-year-olds being trotted at the Roosevelt Raceway on Long Island, and it was decided, since President Coolidge was our main interest, to take him down there and leave the rest of the stable in Danbury. Right after that we'd move the whole works to Centerville, planning to enter all the horses in the various races there, with the Imperial as the climax.

The race on Long Island was on a Thursday night, so Mark couldn't be present because of the play. All the racing at Roosevelt is at night. It's a half-mile track, and under the arcs it looks like an elaborate child's toy, the green of the grass unreal, the white fence rails very white. Old Mr. Thorne wanted Mr. Coolidge to go there because they used the Phillips starting gate, which would be used at Centerville the following week.

In the old days the horses used to score for the start, going down the track, turning, and coming up to the starting line, all staying back of the pole horse. If they didn't reach the line even, and all trotting square, it was no go and they'd go back and try it over. The Phillips starting gate has changed all that.

It's a huge yellow automobile with chromium wings, like the skeleton wings of an airplane, that opens up at the back. The horses turn in behind it, and it starts to move, its wings spread out. The horses can't pass it, and they nose up behind it, trotting like a well-trained chorus line. As soon as they pass under the starting wire the car speeds up, the big wings fold in to the sides, and it pulls off the track. The result is always a perfect start on the first try.

I hadn't seen Judith again till that night. Tex and I drove out together and went directly to the stable where Mr. Coolidge was quartered. Ducky, Judith, and old Mr. Thorne were there. Jake had been left in Danbury with the other horses.

Mr. Coolidge had been out on the track for a warm-up spin, and the old man was walking him around under a cooler when we got there. Ducky and Judith were sitting on the top rail of a small paddock, arm in arm.

"Hi!" Judith said, and waved at us. Ducky just gave us a smug smile.

"How does our horse look?" I asked, trying not to notice Ducky's proprietary manner.

"If that warm-up had been the race we'd be spending the money," Ducky said. "Judith clocked him at two-twelve, without any incentive to make him go."

"This is the night he chooses to run?" I asked Judith.

"You can never tell," she said.

SHE WAS wearing a summer print dress of some kind and a little plum-colored jacket. The Long Island breezes are cool even in August. When she looked at me my heart began to do flip-flops again.

"We might as well have a buck on the race," Tex said. "Which one is it?"

"The fourth," Judith said, "and you can't place your bets till just beforehand. The mutuel windows are under the stands there."

I got a break just then. Some character who had something to do with the stable rental came along and Ducky had to talk to him. I stood by the paddock fence looking up at Judith.

"How are things going?" I asked her.

"Just fine," she said.

"I don't think anybody got around to ask you whether you approved of this deal, Judith," I said.

"If it's all right with Gramp, it's all right with me," she said.

"He's still optimistic about the Imperial?"

"He doesn't say, but I guess you know how he feels about it."

"But you're happy?"

"I'm having a wonderful time," she said, and her eyes were very bright. "Ducky's taking me to my first theater tomorrow night."

I felt a slight twinge of pain. "How about having lunch with me?" I said. "I'll take you where you might see some movie stars."

"Do you know what I'd like?" she said.

"Name it."

"I'd like to see your office, where you work, the books you've published."

"Perfect," I said. "Any time tomorrow. The day is yours."

She looked down at me and her smile was full of female wisdom. "You're worried about something," she said.

"Nothing that's any of my business," I said.

She looked away toward her grandfather, who was walking Mr. Coolidge in a slow circle. "Gramp's taught me a lot," she said. "People are like horses—you only have to ride with them a little way to know the essential facts about their characters and personalities."

"So?" I said.

She looked back at me. "So I know Ducky is a hit-and-run driver, Bill. But I'm having fun—seeing things and doing things I've never done before. Is that wrong?"

"No," I said.

"Gramp thinks it is. He doesn't like Ducky."

"I can understand his fear of losing you," I said. "Nobody would seem good enough to him."

"There comes a time when you have to see things, learn things," she said.

"Sure," I agreed. "Only, you have to be certain the teacher knows his subject."

My chance ended there, because Ducky came back. . . .

Just for the record, Tex and I watched Mr. Coolidge go in that fourth race. We watched it from the clubhouse seats, which are on top of the stands, and we each put fifty bucks on his nose.

It was quite a sight from there. First the bugle, and then the horses coming out onto the track behind a rider in a scarlet hunting coat on a spotted pony. They went down the track, turned, and took a few individual warm-up spins to the quarter pole.

Mr. Coolidge was a bay stallion, unusually phlegmatic it seemed to me. He just jogged down to the turn and back. The old man, in a bright yellow shirt and blue cap, rode the sulky as though it were a part of him. The old boys are the best at this game and Gramp Thorne was the best of the best. He knew his horse, kept him unhurried. Some of the others were lathered up with nerves and excitement even before the start.

You could see Mr. Coolidge had power. He wasn't one of your mincing, short-stepping, graceful little trotters. He was big, rawboned, and there was the suggestion of the piston drive of an engine in his long legs.

At last the moment came. The horses swung in behind the starting gate, its wings glittering in the arc lights. They started slowly, gaining speed, and they went under the wire like a team of eight.

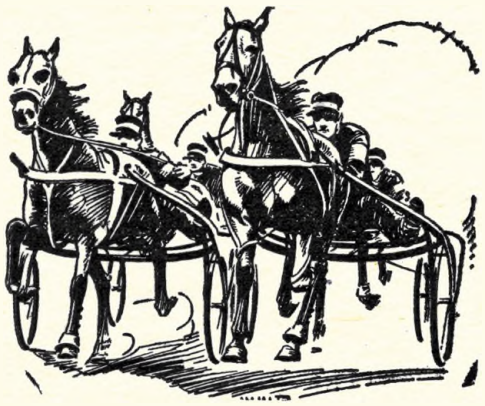
It was quite a race between a couple of horses whose names I've forgotten. Mr. Coolidge was in there, striding long and even, and going absolutely no place! He came under the wire six lengths last, still unexcited, and looking less like a good three-year-old than anything you can imagine.

Tex tossed his cigarette over the rail in a disgusted gesture. "He never even laid the whip on."

"He knows his horse," I said.

"Our horse," Tex said. "Look. Let's go in the dog-food business. We've got quite a few hundred pounds of meat there to start with."

On the way out we stopped for a moment at the stable. Old Man Thorne was



there, walking Mr. Coolidge around again.

"He didn't choose to go tonight," I said.

"Not tonight," the old man said. I couldn't see the disappointment in his eyes.

"I claim it's good luck," Judith said, behind me. "There's more chance he'll feel like it the next time out."

The next time out would be the payoff at Centerville. I hoped she was right, for the old man's sake.

IT WAS about a quarter to one in the morning when I got back to my apartment. I unlocked the door and switched on the lights. There was something lying on the floor—a small rectangle of paper: a penny postcard.

I could almost hear the roar of the wave coming in. My fingers felt stiff as I picked it up. The superintendent must have shoved it under the door.

"YOU LEFT ME TO DIE. CARL." the printed words read.

It was postmarked New York. He was closer, much closer.

As I stood there the telephone began to ring. The other boys must be home by now, too. . . .

It never let up after that until that horrible climax in Centerville. The wave came, louder and louder, until the roar of it was almost unbearable. When there had been no response to our advertisements, I think each of us, secretly, went back to the joke theory. Then, just as we were beginning to feel secure again, it hit us squarely between the eyes. We talked and talked about what to do, and got nowhere, except a decision to repeat our ads and run them daily.

Meanwhile, the Imperial Week was on us. Ducky had moved our stable and its personnel to Centerville. It is called "Imperial Week," but there are actually only three days of racing, with the three-year-old classic coming up on the final day.

I had arranged to take the whole week off, and Mark, who'd played every performance of his show for a year and a half, also made arrangements to have his understudy take over for a week. We engaged a suite of rooms at one of the local inns. "Suite" sounds a little too grand. It was really four adjoining bedrooms.

Centerville is a lovely little town, with huge trees lining its streets. It was quiet when we got there, but we knew that the night before the races started it would overflow and bulge at the seams. Harness-racing enthusiasts from all over the country would be there. And each of us asked ourselves a question in secret: Would there be another person there, unconcerned with harness racing? Would Carl Shay be there, hidden in the crowds, waiting for his revenge, which, if he knew the truth, would be purposeless?

I know I walked the streets of the little town and the grounds around the track, watching, always watching for a familiar figure. Or would he be familiar? I'd never seen him out of uniform. How changed would he be? Would I recognize him at a distance?

Mark and Tex and I arrived in Centerville on a Sunday night. The racing was to begin Tuesday. All day Monday we spent at the track, watching our horses and others work out. There is a fascinating, other-century atmosphere around the stables at the track. This was the world of the trotting horse, once the means of travel for this area—the trotting horse, owned by rich and poor, the democratic horse.

On the roads around this town, now macadam, once dirt, intense rivalries had existed. The local doctor, returning home from delivering a baby, might encounter the local grocery-store owner. Out would come their whips and down the highway the trotters would go in a fast brush. That night the news would be out, that old Doc's black mare had taken the grocery-man's new chestnut in a go from Smith's Corners to the Centerville Courthouse. If you didn't have trot in your head you wouldn't have much chance with the town's prettiest girls.

There's still something of that feeling today. It's still man against man, horse against horse, with long hours of training for gait, speed, and stamina behind it. The harness-horse fanatic has no time for the running horse. "He just goes!" The trotter, to him, is the end-all of training and control and finesse.

I would have loved all this if there hadn't been the sensation that at any moment I might come face to face with a ghost. I knew my friends were operating under the same kind of tension. Tex was unnaturally quiet, even for him. Mark was loudly flamboyant and over-gay. Ducky, to break the strain he felt, announced he was giving a dinner—just out of the goodness of his heart! When I heard that Judith was to be the only guest I felt a faint, sinking feeling.

The party had all the earmarks of an event at which an announcement might be made. I learned that Ducky had ordered champagne, the works. It had seemed that day at the Roosevelt Raceway that Judith had Ducky properly pegged. Had he managed, somehow, to sell her a bill of goods on himself? The idea didn't make me happy.

DUCKY had taken the private dining-room in the inn where we were staying outside the town, and we'd been instructed to dress. I went back to the inn from the track about five and stopped at the desk for my key. There it was again, in my mailbox! A penny postcard, with the same old message! This time the postmark was Newtown, only twelve or fifteen miles away.

I had a Martini and went to my room to dress. Tex was already in the dining-room, alone, when I got there. I didn't have to ask him if he'd received a card, too. The shock of it was written on his face. Before we had a chance to discuss it, Mark joined us, a slightly drunk, very keyed-up Mark.

"I—I think I've seen him!" he said.

I could feel the muscles tighten in my throat. "Carl?"

Mark nodded, and poured himself a Martini from the shaker on the sideboard. His hand shook as he lifted the glass to his lips and drained it. "I got my card while you guys were out at the track," he said. "It came from Newtown, so I thought I'd run into town and have a look around. I thought Carl might be staying at one of the hotels. I thought if I could just get to talk to him—"

"Well?" Tex said, when Mark hesitated.

"No luck at the hotels," Mark said. "But I was walking down the main street and I—I thought I saw him walking along the sidewalk across the way." Mark fiddled with his lighter, couldn't get it going. Tex struck a match and held it to his cigarette. "I shouted at him at the top of my lungs," Mark said. "That was crazy, because he couldn't hear me over the noise of the traffic."

"But you're sure it was Carl?" I said.

"Of course I'm not sure," Mark said. "But there was something about him—the way he walked. I was pretty sure. I got surer right after that."

"How come?" Tex asked.

"I started running across the street to him," Mark said, "still shouting at him. There's a safety island in the middle of the street. I was just stepping off it when I was nearly run down by a bus. When it had passed me I couldn't find him. He'd just disappeared."

"You think he saw you?" Tex asked.

Mark inhaled deeply on his cigarette. "Either that, or it wasn't Carl at all and he wasn't paying any attention. Just went into some building."

"Didn't you hunt for him?" I asked.

"Of course I did. I went into every store and office building for two blocks. Not a sign of him."

"How was he dressed?" Tex asked.

"Some kind of a dark suit," Mark said. "Blue or Oxford gray."

"So we really don't know if it was or wasn't," I said.

"That's the way it is," Mark said.

"Naturally, you were hoping to find him," Tex said thoughtfully. "Sometimes your senses play tricks on you when you're tense."

"I know," Mark said. "And of course we don't know exactly how he'd look now. Still—"

He didn't finish, because Ducky arrived with Judith at that moment.

She took my breath away when she came in. She was wearing a white chiffon evening dress, strapless, her shoulders bare. I guess she had bought it for the occasion, probably with Ducky to advise. It was a lovely dress, but oversophisticated for the occasion. I had the odd feeling that she'd grown up just a little too quickly.

There were more Martinis. Judith refused at first, but finally Ducky teased her into trying one. It was all very gay, very boisterous, and I saw that Mark was quite drunk and showing it, and that Tex was equally drunk and not showing it. If we didn't have food pretty quickly it might be disastrous.

I heard the door to the room open and I turned, hoping it would be the waiter with the first course of the dinner. I guess the others thought the same thing, because they saw what I saw, and suddenly the room was still.

V

STANDING in the doorway was old Mr. Thorne. He was wearing the sloppy cavalry twills he wore in the sulky, a sweat-stained blue shirt, and a peaked driver's cap. In his right hand he carried a short, whalebone whip.

"Get your wrap, Judith," he said.

Color had flared up into Judith's face. I could see she was deeply hurt and embarrassed. "Gramp!" she said. It was almost a whisper.

Ducky was the first to recover. He laughed his cocksure laugh. "Nothing to get upset about, Mr. Thorne," he said. "We're just having a little pre-victory celebration."

"Get your wrap, Judith," the old man said, deadly quiet.

[*Turn page*]

"Wait!" Ducky said.

It was a curious test of strength, with the girl hesitating as though her decision must go with the strongest.

"You've got no call to act as though there was something wrong about this," Ducky said to the old man. "It's just a little private dinner party."

The fingers of Mr. Thorne's right hand shifted their grip on the whip handle. "I hoped," he said, as though he were speaking to all of us, "this wouldn't have to happen till after the Imperial. I been holding onto myself, and holding on—"

"Okay," Ducky said, a threatening note coming into his voice. "Go some place and hold onto yourself some more. Judith's having a good time. Let her alone." He took a step toward the old man as if he meant to push him out of the room.

A strange thing happened. Instead of backing away, the old man stepped forward to meet him, and he raised the hand with the whip in it. "Get your wrap, Judith, we're going," he said. Then, to Ducky, "Stay away from my granddaughter, Mr. Ryan. If you pay her any more attention I promise you you'll wish you'd never been born!"

Ducky stopped in his tracks. He could have smashed the old man like a stick of dry kindling, but there was something in the proud voice, the flinty blue eyes that checked him. There was a tense stillness, broken finally by the rustling of silk as Judith slipped on her wraps. The old man had won the day.

Ducky exploded the moment we were alone. "The old jerk!" he shouted. "He's been on me from the first day! Thinks I drink too much! Acts as though I was trying to kidnap his precious granddaughter!"

Mark's laughter was unnecessarily loud. "Well, what about it, Ducky? Would you say your intentions were honorable?"

"Shut up!" Ducky said. "The girl's free, white, and twenty-one! She can make up her own mind."

"It looks as though she had," Mark said. "By the way, where's the food?"

"The hell with food!" Ducky said, and stormed out.

Mark and Tex and I waited for the food. The wait was too long for Mark. One minute he was chattering about his encounter in Newtown—first, sure it had been Carl; then doubtful, then sure again—and the next he had slid quietly off his chair and under the table.

Tex and I hauled him out and carried him between us to his room. Fortunately, we were all located in a wing on the ground floor. We took off his coat, tie, and collar and stretched him out on the bed.

"At least, he won't do any more worrying till morning," I said.

I felt a little rocky myself and decided on a short walk and then bed. Tex said he was going to try to find a canasta game in the bar or cardroom. I said goodnight to him, and half an hour later I was in bed and asleep. Only to be wakened by Tex pounding on my door to tell me what had happened at the stable. . . .

THOSE were some of the curious angles Captain Treat didn't know. As I waited for him to start asking questions I remembered Mark, and asked Tex about him.

"I didn't even bother to try waking him," Tex said. "He'd be no use even if I could have managed it."

As we waited I suddenly heard the sound of the ambulance siren at the far end of the track grounds. It had come from Newtown, which accounted for the delay. Tex and I waited outside while Treat went back into the tackroom with the intern and the driver, who carried a folding stretcher under his arm.

They brought Gramp Thorne out a few minutes later. Judith walked beside the stretcher, looking neither left nor right. Tex and I might as well have been the uprights that supported the overhang of the barn.

I heard Treat giving orders to the

other trooper. "You ride in with them. Get word to me the minute you have a report on his condition. If he regains consciousness don't wait for me. Take his statement."

The trooper got into the ambulance with Judith and the old man and we watched it drive away.

"What about *him?*" Tex asked, nodding toward the tackroom.

"Job for the local undertaker, after I've got some pictures," Treat said. "Now, if you don't mind—"

He led us back to the tackroom. I took a quick look at Ducky's body again, and then turned my back on it. I thought, for a moment, I was going to be sick.

"I know something about you people," Treat said. "The papers have all carried the story of how you bought Mr. Thorne's string of horses—your little investment syndicate. What was the trouble between Ryan and the old man?"

"They had a row tonight," Tex said. "Mr. Thorne objected to Ducky's paying attention to his granddaughter."

"What kind of a row?"

Tex told about the dinner party and its climax.

"When did all that happen?"

"About eight-thirty."

"Ryan was killed about an hour ago," Treat said. "That would make it a little after two. What would he be doing down here at the stable?"

"You've got me," Tex said.

"Somebody's been drinking," Treat said. "There was a quart of whisky and a glass got smashed in the brawl."

"The old man doesn't drink," I said.

"I understand the Negro stableboy slept in the next barn with some other kids. They were wakened by the sound of stuff being smashed. By the time they got the sleep out of their eyes and got here it was over. They found the two men just about as you saw them, except old Mr. Thorne was lying spread-eagled out, face down."

"There's something I don't understand, Captain," I said. "If Mr. Thorne killed Ducky, how come he was knocked unconscious *afterwards?*"

Treat raised his eyes to me. "I told you there were some curious angles, Mr. Joslyn." He gestured toward the corner of the room. Lying on the floor was a short iron bar, with a sort of crooked handle, like a cane. "Ryan's head was beaten in with that wrecking bar, Mr. Joslyn. It was part of the stable equipment. They used it for opening crates and for breaking the wires on hay bales. Ryan must have been hit with it fifteen or twenty times. The way it looks is that Ryan didn't really put up a fight. He was trying to get away from the murderer. Finally he was trapped in that corner and beaten to death."

"Lord!" I said.

"Here's what's odd about it," Treat said slowly. "Ryan was a fairly powerful man. I can't see him running from a guy. I can't see him running from a seventy-one-year-old man, even if the old man did have the wrecking bar. I don't see how the old man could have done it, unless he sneaked up on him unnoticed. But it didn't happen that way. You can see the furniture's overturned, the bottle smashed against the wall, as though Ryan might have thrown it at his attacker. It seems as though Ryan could have overpowered the old man."

"He could have," Tex said. "Easily. Ducky was a rugged fighter."

"There's another point," Treat said. "I'm not an expert at these things, but I think the old man was struck from behind—slightly to one side and from behind. There isn't another mark on him except the blow that knocked him out."

"Then you don't think he killed Ducky?" Tex asked in a low voice.

"There's a lot of checking and double-checking to do," Treat said, "but it's my opinion—just an opinion, mind you—that the old man and Ryan were in here, talking. I think Ryan was sitting at the desk and the old man was standing with his back to the door. I think someone slipped up behind the old man and

knocked him cold with that wrecking bar. Then whoever it was went for Ryan and finished him." Treat's eyes turned to the body and then quickly away again. "From the fierceness of the attack, you might think it was a maniac!"

QUICKLY Tex looked at me, and I knew he and I were thinking the same thing. "I guess there's something we have to tell you, Captain," Tex said. "I guess there isn't much doubt about who it was."

He told Treat the story of Carl Shay and the postcards. He told it in a quiet, unemotional voice, a thing I couldn't have done. The palms of my hands were damp and clammy and the waves of nausea rolled over me in threatening cycles. In my own mind I was building up a picture of what had happened.

There were Ducky and old Mr. Thorne carrying on their argument about Judith, though how that had come about at two in the morning I couldn't imagine. I could see Carl Shay approaching the stable, perhaps peering in through the window. I could see him reach for the wrecking bar, which was probably hanging on a nail outside the door. I could see him sneak up behind Mr. Thorne and strike him down. Then he and Ducky were face to face.

When it came to any kind of physical encounter, Ducky was—had been—certainly no coward. Yet somehow in my imagination I saw Carl's face, distorted by an insane fury. I could imagine the sight of him striking terror into even Ducky's heart. I guessed Ducky had started to try to explain to Carl that he was all wrong, that we had strung along with him, that there could be money for him. And Carl bearing down on him, hearing nothing, the wrecking bar raised for the kill. In a panic, Ducky had thrown the whisky bottle and the glass at him. Then Carl reached him. Perhaps the first blow stunned Ducky so that he couldn't resist. Then the savage beating, long past the point of necessity.

The inside of my mouth was dry as cotton. Tex had finished his story and he'd asked me something I hadn't heard. He repeated it:

"Do you happen to have one of the postcards on you, Bill?"

I fumbled in the inside pocket of my coat and found the one that had come that evening. I gave it to Treat, who turned it over and over in his hands as though he was trying to find something else there besides the message.

"Newtown," he muttered. Then he glanced up. "I want a detailed description of this man."

Tex and I looked at each other.

"About five eight or nine," I said.

"Not quite as tall as that," Tex said.

"A thin kind of pinched face."

"Dark brown eyes," Tex said.

"No, his eyes were gray. I remember distinctly," I said. " Black hair—a heavy growth of hair on his arms, the back of his hands, and chest."

"A weak mouth," Tex said.

"His lips were always tightly compressed," I said.

We were silent. Treat had been writing down what we said in his notebook. "That isn't too much to go on," he said. "How did he normally dress?"

"We never saw him out of uniform."

Treat shook his head. "There are thirty thousand strangers ready to stream into this town tomorrow. More than that, if you count all three days of racing. We could pick up a hundred guys on suspicion and not hit the right one. You two, and your friend back at the inn, are the only ones who could really spot him."

"Not my favorite job," Tex said.

"We won't get anywhere without your help," Treat said.

"We'll help," Tex said. "We have to, for our own safety's sake."

"We better go back to the inn and get Mark sobered up and tell him what's happened," I said. "Is there anything else we can do for you at the moment, Captain?"

Treat shook his head. "The county

attorney and his crew are overdue," he said. "There's a lot of detail to be gone through before we'll need you again."

WE ALL started out of the tackroom. Just outside the door a small boy stood, cap in hand, looking scared to death.

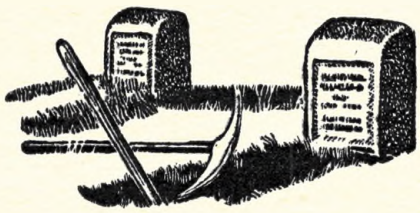
"Well, sonny, what are you hanging around for?" Treat asked.

THE *Lively* CORPSE

THERE are many cases on record of people who were hanged or otherwise executed for a crime—and who lived to tell the tale. One of the more amusing cases of recovery is that of Margaret Dixon, a Scotch woman who was hanged for the murder of her child. Her body was turned over to her relatives, placed in a coffin and started from Edinburgh to Musselburgh where a grave was waiting.

However, en route, the funeral party stopped for refreshment in the village of Peppermill—and there the lid of the coffin was seen to move. It was promptly taken off, and the supposed corpse sat up . . . and then climbed out, not much the worse for wear.

According to the laws of Scotland, Margaret could not be hanged a second time, but having been executed, she was held to be no longer married to her husband. Therefore, the couple had to get married again—which they did a few days later!



"There's—there's somethin' I got to tell you, sir," the boy said, "I'm Buddy Evans, sir, and I'm with the Tracy stables across the way there."

"Well, Buddy, what is it?"

"Me and Jake, the colored boy who works here, and a couple of others were sleeping in the haymow over there, sir. I—I couldn't sleep very good and I got up to go over to the pump for a drink of water. Just as I started to work the pump handle, *he* came up behind me. Scared me most to death, sir!"

" 'He?' " Treat said.

"Mr. Ryan, sir. I thought he was awful drunk, and he had a bottle and a glass in his hands. 'You,' he said. 'You know where old Mr. Thorne lives?' I told him I did. 'Go wake him up and tell him Ryan's down at the stable and wants to see him.' I told him I'd get Jake. He said to never mind Jake. He said to go myself if I didn't want my behind kicked. So—so I went across the street to the boardinghouse where the old man was staying, sir. The lady who runs the place was awful sore when I got her up, but she woke Mr. Thorne and gave him the message. I—I figured I ought to tell you, sir."

"You did right, Buddy. Do you know what time it was?"

"Not exactly, sir. But after I'd got back and was lying down in the mow again I heard the church clock in town strike two."

"You didn't stay around to see what happened?"

The boy twisted his cap in his hands. "Mr. Ryan acted so mean, sir, all I wanted to do was stay out of his way."

"Did you see anyone else hanging around, Buddy? Anyone else you didn't know?"

"No, sir. I didn't see anyone except Mr. Ryan and the lady at the boardinghouse."

"You didn't wait for Mr. Thorne?"

"No, sir. I beat it out of there as soon as I knew he had the message."

I could imagine how it had been. Ducky had changed out of his dinner clothes into the jacket and slacks. He'd probably hung around some local bar till closing time, getting blind, and building up his burn against the old man. He'd probably wheedled a bottle out of the place and gone down to the stable, determined to have it out with Mr. Thorne right then. It would have been like him. . . .

VI

TEX AND I walked back to the inn after that. It was five o'clock or a little later, and it was daylight. Already there was a lot of activity around the stables. Actually, there were some horses out on the track for early spins in the cool of the morning.

When we got to the inn Tex said he'd go back to the kitchen and see if he could rustle some black coffee. "The chef's probably up by now. Mark's going to need a pretty solid treatment. You start trying to wake him up."

"How do I get into his room if he's out cold?"

Tex reached into his pocket. "Here's the key to my room. You can go through the connecting bath."

Our rooms were on the ground level, in an L at the back of the building. Ducky and I each had a room, with a bath between, and Tex and Mark had the same arrangement. I let myself into Tex's room with the key and walked through the bathroom. Even in there I was assailed by the heavy odor of stale whisky. I opened the door into Mark's room.

The shade was drawn and I could only just see the outline of his figure on the bed. I walked over to the window and raised the shade. Then I turned back toward the bed to try to wake Mark. I think I came as close to screaming as I ever have or will in my life.

Mark lay on his back in the bed. His curly golden hair was matted with blood. His eyes were open and fixed in a terrible stare at the ceiling.

This time the nausea caught up with me and I turned blindly toward the window. As I leaned over the sill, gasping for breath, I saw the trampled flowers in the border underneath it where the murderer had come and gone. . . .

My memory of the next stretch of time is extremely spotty. It's like a series of scenes in a movie preview for a coming attraction—disconnected, violent in content.

I remember the sound of smashing china and the sight of Tex standing in the doorway. He had a coffeepot grasped firmly in one hand, but he'd dropped the cup and saucer he'd been carrying in the other. I remember his taking me by the arm and leading me out of the room, murmuring something about being sure not to touch anything.

Then Treat was there, and someone else I identified as the county attorney. There were questions—it seemed like hundreds of them—which I couldn't answer. Tex seemed somehow to stay in pretty good control of his own emotions.

He told how we had put Mark to bed and then separated. He had gone to the bar and there found a canasta partner. They'd played till about midnight, then Tex had gone to his room and to bed.

"Did you look in on Mark Lewis?" the county attorney asked.

"No reason to," Tex said. "I knew he was out like a light."

Shortly before three the trooper had arrived at the inn to get us. Tex had been the first one wakened. He'd come directly to my room to get me.

"You didn't try to get Mark Lewis up?" the county attorney asked.

"I keep telling you, he was dead to the world!" Tex said.

Then it was my turn. There wasn't much to tell. Tex had gone to rustle some coffee. I'd gone into Mark's room and found him dead. I noticed the county attorney eyeing me suspiciously. I could see he was weighing the possibility that I might have killed Mark when I went into the room.

"Those the clothes you were wearing when you found him?" he asked me.

I told him they were, puzzled for a moment, until I realized he was thinking that the murderer must almost certainly have been spattered with Mark's blood. I wasn't, and I'd had no time to change.

After that there was an examination of the flower bed outside the window. There was no doubt about the fact that someone had entered and left Mark's room by the window. There was even a

chunk of earth on the sill. But there wasn't one clear print. August is the dry season and the earth was dusty, crumbly. A peony bush had been trampled down, but there weren't any clear prints.

I remember Treat's theory. After Carl had murdered Ducky, he'd hung around to watch, Treat thought. We were dealing with a crazy man. He'd probably followed the trooper to the inn. He'd have seen the lights go on in our rooms and known where we were located. When he saw only two of us come out with the trooper he'd realized that if Mark was there, he was alone. So, while we were at the stable investigating the first killing, Carl had slipped in the window and polished off Mark. There'd have been no outcry, no sound, because Mark was unconscious when it happened. Mark had never known what hit him.

IT WAS about seven-thirty when Tex and I were finally alone having breakfast in a diner down the street from the inn. I say "having breakfast," but neither of us wanted anything but coffee, strong and black and plenty of it. I remember watching, with a kind of vague admiration, how steady Tex's hands were as he rolled himself a cigarette and lit it.

"Well, Bill?" he said.

"I guess I'm suffering from a kind of shock," I said. "I—I can't feel anything. I can't think straight at all."

"Of course, we'll have to scratch our horses," Tex said. "We've got no driver."

I hadn't even thought about the horses or the race meet. "All I want is to get as far away from here as I can as quickly as I can," I said.

Tex squinted at me through acrid blue smoke. "And after that?" he said.

"How do you mean?"

"Unless Carl is caught it doesn't matter how far you go," Tex said. "He's waited years to catch up with us this time. He'll keep coming after us till he finds us again. Personally, I'm for staying right here and facing it out. We know he's here. We know he'll come after us. I'm for standing my ground and ending things one way or another."

I knew there was sense in what he said. I knew there wouldn't be another unterrified moment as long as I lived until Carl was caught. Tex's lazy eyes had turned toward the window.

"He's out there somewhere, Bill. Probably watching us right now—if Mark *did* see him."

"Cut it out!" I said.

But we both turned sharply as someone slid open the diner door and closed it. I realized we might never hear sounds behind us again without turning that way in fear. It was someone for us. It was Captain Treat, and with him was Judith!

Her face was still the color of chalk, but the glazed look was gone from her eyes. She was wearing jodhpurs and a sweater, with a leather jacket draped over her shoulders.

"Hello," she said stopping by our booth.

I stood up and reached for her hands. They were cold as ice. "Judith, darling!" I said.

Her lips trembled slightly.

"How's Gramp?" Tex asked.

"He—he's alive," she said unsteadily. "He has a chance. Not too good, but a chance."

"Sit down," I said, making a place for her beside me in the booth. "How did you find us?"

"You don't think I'm letting you guys run around unwatched, do you?" Treat said. He sat down next to Tex.

I realized then there was something odd about Judith's being here when her grandfather lay in a Newtown hospital, so close to death.

"I came here because I knew what you and Tex would do this morning," Judith said. She kept looking down at her hands, as though the risk of seeing sympathy in our faces was more than her control could stand.

"Do?" I said.

"You'll scratch the horses from the races they're entered in," she said. "You'll scratch President Coolidge from the Imperal."

"What else can we do?" Tex said.

"I don't care about the other races," Judith said. "Perhaps it would be best if you did scratch your entries. But leave President Coolidge in the Imperial." There was urgency in her low, unsteady voice.

"I suppose we could pick up a driver," Tex said. "You're thinking of what it would mean to the old man, in case he recovers?"

She nodded vigorously. "If he regains consciousness and I can tell him that Coolidge is still going to go in the big race—well, the doctor says his chances may depend on how much fight he's got. It would give him a tremendous lift. And—and I'll drive."

"Judith!" I said.

"Nobody's ever handled Coolidge but me and Gramp. You know how temperamental he is. He'd never go for a new driver, with only two days to get him used to it."

"But, Judith, I—"

"I don't know if a woman's ever driven in the Imperial," Judith said, talking rapidly now, "but there are plenty of women drivers, good ones—Mrs. Harriman, Mrs. Dodge, Mrs. Nichols, Miss Post, Alma Sheppard. There's nothing in the rules, so far as I know—"

SHE LOOKED up, pleading. It seemed crazy to me and I was about to say so, when Captain Treat took a hand.

"I've been thinking," he said slowly. "Naturally, the headlines are going to be black with this story today. Suppose you made an announcement that, in spite of the tragedy and for the sake of old Mr. Thorne, you two are keeping Coolidge in the Imperial and that you'll be on hand to root him home?"

"So?"

"Carl Shay, unless he's got none of the usual shrewdness that goes with lunacy, will realize his chance of getting at you two in the next few hours is slim. Suppose he knows exactly where you'll be two days from now—at the track, watching your horse, two people in a crowd of thousands. Wouldn't that be an ideal time to strike? The chances of getting away in a big crowd are good."

"In other words," Tex said slowly, "we set ourselves up as clay pigeons."

"I'll have men in plain clothes watching you," Treat said. "We'll set a trap for him he can't get out of."

"Suppose he doesn't fall for it?" I said. "Suppose he strikes before that?"

"That's a risk you're running, anyway," Treat said.

"I'm for it," Tex said. "I'm for ending the suspense, no matter what the risk."

I reached out and covered one of Judith's cold hands with mine. "But about Judith in the Imperial—"

"Bill, I've driven many races," she said. "In spite of all the buildup, the Imperial is just another race."

"Do you think, if Mr. Thorne could talk, he'd approve of—"

"He raised me to drive!" Judith said. "I owe it to him now." Her voice rose: "It's my fault that he—that he—"

"Nonsense!" I said.

"I went against his wishes. I was responsible for his row with Ducky. If it hadn't been for that he wouldn't have gone down to the stable at two in the morning. It's my fault!"

"All right," I said. "If the stewards will approve the change in drivers—"

"They will. They've *got* to!" Judith said.

VII

A TWO-DAY wait. Two days in which nerves became as tightly stretched as violin strings. Everywhere Tex and I went we were conscious of Treat's plain-clothes men in the offing. I have to hand it to Treat— he was giving us the best protection he possibly could in the most difficult circumstances.

The chief of those difficulties was that

overnight the sleepy little town of Centerville had turned into the churning, crowded center for all the real harness-racing lovers in the country. The main street and the elm-shaded square looked like a Fifth Avenue traffic jam. Cars from every state in the country were parked around the grounds of the Happy Days Track.

Race-week hospitality at Centerville is a tradition, and everywhere there were luncheons, dinners, parties. People walked in the streets, ignoring automobile horns, because there wasn't room on the sidewalks to accommodate them. Somewhere, camouflaged by this gay holiday crowd, was an insane killer, waiting for his chance to get at Tex and me.

"Pretty near as bad as those days in the root cellar," Tex said.

For my money it was a thousand times worse. Somehow, in the army you'd adopted a fatalistic outlook. Death was to be expected, violent and sudden. You were afraid, sure, but it was a different kind of fear.

The only thing to take my mind off the ever-present threat of catastrophe was Judith. She spent hours of each day at the stable, and all her time there with the three-year-old President Coolidge. She was in and out of his stall, talking to him, petting him, leading him around the paddock in that slow, pendulumlike walk the trotters have. Twice each day she took him out on the track for a workout.

Old Mr. Thorne had constructed a special sulky for her with the foot braces foreshortened. She looked tiny and fragile, perched on the seat behind the big-boned Mr. Coolidge, peering around his flanks through goggles that nearly hid her face. The railbirds commented favorably on her driving.

"I been watchin' her," I heard an old-timer say. "She knows how to make friends with horses, knows how to talk to 'em. I think that critter'll trot for her."

As I watched her send the bay around the Happy Days Track I could feel my heart in my throat. If the big horse broke or lost his footing would her slender arms be able to hold him up? Or would she be thrown and dragged? If it happened in a race she might easily be killed. But the railbirds seemed unconcerned:

"She's got trot in her head. She'll do."

The daily reports on Mr. Thorne were that he was holding his own, but he had still not regained consciousness. The crisis would come in the next twenty-four hours.

"If he only comes to in time to know!" Judith said, over and over. . . .

The day came at last, the day when a courageous girl would drive a dangerous horse race in the hope of saving someone she loved. The day when Tex and I would become clay pigeons!

He and I had breakfast together at the inn. We each read the papers. We'd bought everything they had in the lobby. The murder had brought the lead story on the Imperial onto the front pages. When we'd finished reading we just sat and looked at each other. There wasn't anything to say. There wasn't anything to do but wait.

About then Treat came looking for us. He had a suggestion to make which didn't add to my happiness. "I think it would be wise if you two separated during the race," he said. "There's no use making things too easy for him."

"Easy?" I said. "How do you mean?"

"There's no use giving him the chance to get at you both at once," Treat said. "There's no way of knowing how the attack will come—a gun, a knife, another clubbing. If you separate, and both keep watching, he'll have to make a choice which of you to go after. We'll have a better chance of spotting him, and if anything *should* go wrong—"

"Cheerful guy!" I said.

"—there'll be a better chance of one of you surviving."

I didn't want to separate from Tex. I think it had been his coolness more than Treat's guards which had kept me in one piece during the last forty-eight

hours. I wanted Tex right beside me, but I didn't say so.

"I don't want you just to sit around and wait for something to happen," Treat said. "He'll be looking for you, we know. I want you both looking for him. If you separate, each of you with your own guards, you'll cover a lot more territory."

SO IT was agreed. Somehow the morning passed. At about one o'clock Tex and I walked out through the crowds to our stable. Judith was there, talking to Mr. Coolidge. Jake, the little Negro boy, sat glumly on a stool outside the tackroom. I knew he loved old Mr. Thorne. He actually looked as though he'd wasted away during the last couple of days.

"Any news, Jake?" I asked him.

"'Bout Mr. Thorne? No better, no worse, Miss Judith say."

Judtih came along to where we stood.

"How's Mr. Coolidge?" I asked her.

"Quiet," she said. "Too quiet. He hasn't got a nerve in his body."

"Unlike me," I said, trying to laugh.

She reached out impulsively to me. "Bill, you'll take care? You'll watch out every second?"

It was the first time since that day, so long ago it seemed now, when she came to my office and I'd taken her to lunch, when I'd felt she had any interest in me at all. There was so much I wanted to say to her that I might never have another chance to say, but it was impossible with Tex and Jake there, and Treat's men standing just a few yards away. I managed a grin.

"You can count on it," I said. "And you—you take care out there on the track."

"Just pray that Mr. Coolidge chooses to run, and that Gramp gets to know about it," she said.

I saw one of Treat's men signaling to me. "I guess it's time for us to get going, Tex," I said.

He nodded. "Good luck, Judith," he said.

We started toward the grandstand, with Treat's men trailing us as unobtrusively as possible. We had a box in the stands. There had once been four of us, and we'd intended watching the racing from there. Now it was agreed that I, with two of Treat's men, would occupy the box, and that Tex and his escorts would circulate at the rear of the stands.

As we came to the entrance gate Tex turned to me and held out his hand. "Good luck, Bill."

"You, too," I said.

"We're probably working up to a big letdown," he said. "He may not show. These men of Treat's are pretty obvious."

"I hope to heaven he does," I said. "I can't stand many more days like these last three."

"I'll meet you back at the stable after the first heat of the Imperial," Tex said. "So long."

I watched him stride away on his high-heeeld boots, the broad-brimmed Stetson pulled forward over his eyes, the little brown-paper cigarette dangling between his lips. I hated to see him go.

Well, that was the way it was. I showed my ticket to the man at the gate and went in. I felt like an actor walking out onto the stage in front of an audience and suddenly realizing that I didn't remember a single line I was supposed to speak. I felt alone and scared.

Faces in mass take on a curiously blurred look. Have you ever noticed, at a ball park or a race track, that if you leave your seat for something and then come back, it's often hard to locate your own friends, your own girl or wife? They seem to fade into the whole and become unrecognizable.

The crowd under the covered stands looked that way to me. Thousands of people, buzzing like a great hive of bees, fanning themselves with programs, watching the horses on the track, shouting to beer and cigarette vendors, calling to friends, who looked around blankly, trying to spot them in that neutral sea of faces.

My legs felt stiff as I walked slowly

down the aisle toward our box. A blue-coated usher took me the last few yards, giving me a curious look when he'd glanced at the stub. I suspected he'd read the papers. Perhaps he'd been warned by Treat to keep an eye on me.

I went into the box and took one of the front seats. Treat's two men took the chairs directly behind me. I turned and gave them a sickly smile that I'd meant to be casual and calm. I looked up at the very back of the stands. For just an instant I saw a wide-brimmed Stetson moving at the rear of the crowd, as though it were floating on water. I couldn't see Tex, only the hat.

THE IMPERIAL is trotted in the best two out of three heats. Judith would have to take President Coolidge around the big triangle twice that afternoon, possibly three times. I found I couldn't watch what was going on down there. I kept twisting my neck to look at faces behind me, searching for one that would be familiar, the face of Carl Shay.

Actually, they trotted the first heat of the second race without my seeing any of it at all. It was the loudspeaker over the judge's stand that brought my attention back to the track:

"First heat of the Imperial next on the card—post time 2:55." He started reading off the names of the horses, drivers, owners, names that meant nothing to me except the one: "President Calvin Coolidge, driven by Miss Judith Thorne, owned by Big Chance Syndicate."

There was a buzz of excitement from the crowd. The sprinkling truck was out on the track now, watering down the dust. Horses which would go in other races were taking advantage of the interim for short workouts. Then, much later, I heard the clear note of the bugle. Out onto the track in single file, following a scarlet-coated rider, came the ten best three-year-olds of the year, the lone survivors of several hundred which had been nominated for the race as yearlings. These were the only ones whose owners had decided it was worth putting the final stiff entry fee on the line.

They came slowly, some jogging, some prancing, the drivers representing every color of the rainbow, the sulky wheels glittering in the sun. At the very end of the line came a big bay stallion, jogging calmly, the tiny figure of a red-haired girl perched on the sulky behind him, her slender arms covered by the bright yellow silks, the peak of the blue cap pulled down over her goggles. They went to the head of the track, turned, and then each of them took off in a trial spin to the first turn.

I felt as though I were being torn in two by irresistible forces. The need to keep looking behind me for some sign of Carl Shay was terrific, and the need to watch that girl on the track was equally terrific.

The big yellow car with the starting mechanism attached was on the track now, its chromium wings spread. The horses came back slowly. This was going to be it. Mr. Coolidge might have been lugging the family to a Sunday picnic. He looked like a plug. You could see Judith was talking to him, urging him to keep up with the others. Her whip was poised but she didn't use it.

Slowly the horses wheeled into position behind the starting gate, both horses and men watching one another suspiciously. I saw, with a sinking feeling, that Judith's post position was in the very center of the mass.

They started to come now. From my angle I could only see the heads of the horses bobbing behind the wings of the starting gate. Faster and faster they came toward the wire. You could hear a sort of rising "O-o-o-o-oh!" from the crowd. Then the starters' voices barked: "Go!"

The great yellow car pulled rapidly away. The scrambled field of horses looked like a flying cloud of manes and tails. I had heard enough talk to know that this first brush for position at the turn was vital. The Happy Days Track, built triangularly to give more straight-

away, offered real danger of a jam-up at the first sharp turn.

There was a shout from the crowd as one horse shot out into the lead. My heart jammed in my throat as I saw the driver's colors—bright yellow and blue! Mr. Coolidge had made his choice. He didn't look as if he were trotting as fast as the others, but his long legs in their pistonlike strides were eating up ground and showering it back into the faces of the others.

"Look at that girl drive!"

I held my breath. If Coolidge broke, if he stumbled!

They had fallen into line now, Coolidge in the lead. As they headed for the half-mile post they grew smaller and unreal. They seemed to move jerkily, like automatons, and seen through the fence rails the sulky wheels gave the strange illusion of turning backward.

"Time for the half-mile—1:02!" the loudspeaker droned. "And it's still President Coolidge by a length and a half. Polly Lloyd, second. Greybar—" I couldn't hear the rest.

Square and solid, President Coolidge led the pack to the three-quarter pole.

"Time at the three-quarter—1:32½!"

Mr. Coolidge turned into the stretch, taking the air on his nose, but the rest were bunched close behind. They blazed away at last into the stretch and spread out across the track in the brush for home.

"Here they come, people! Here they come!"

I was gripping the rail of the box, leaning forward. I was conscious of the high, eerie wail of a siren in the distance, but it meant nothing at the moment. I supposed it was some hysterical onlooker with a gadget on his automobile. Flying manes and lathered flanks, and the shouts of the drivers as they lifted their horses for that last do-or-die push.

Whips were forked lightning between laid-back ears—and in front, solid and steady as a rock, was Mr. Coolidge. One ear was cocked back for the voice of the girl, the other pricked forward. You could almost sense how light and sure Judith's touch was on the reins.

There were no chair-warmers in the stands now. People were on their feet, yelling. If Mr. Coolidge could stick it, if he didn't break under the last stern demand on form and stamina, the first heat was his.

"She did it!" somebody was shouting close by. "She did it!"

The horses swept by in a thunder of hoofs. And then—a hand clapped down hard on my shoulder.

VIII

I TURNED like a rusty machine expecting to look into the face of death—and saw only Captain Treat. He was breathing hard.

"All hell's busted loose!" he said. "Somehow, my men lost Tex in the crowd. And there's a fire! Did you hear the siren?"

"Fire?"

"Your stable!" Treat said. "Come on."

I followed him up the aisle. From ten rows higher up I could see the black clouds of smoke billowing up from the south end of the grounds.

"We were standing there—I guess we couldn't resist watching the race," a man was saying to Treat. "It couldn't have been half a minute. When we looked back, Tex was gone."

"I'll break you for this if anything's happened to him," Treat said grimly.

As we emerged from the stands I realized hundreds of people were running toward the fire. A fire truck was rolling along one of the roads that circled the track, hampered by the thousands of parked cars. I could see the stable now, with people around it and angry red flames darting toward the sky.

Just as we reached it I saw someone come out of one of the box stalls leading a horse. He'd thrown a coat over the horse's head. It was Tex!

"Somebody take this critter!" he shouted.

He grabbed the coat when the horse

was secured by a groom from another stable, and darted back into the next stall. I saw that there was only one horse left in the barn—Mrs. Lincoln. She came out a moment later, Tex's coat over her eyes. Then Tex came over to us, breathing hard and wiping his face with his handkerchief.

"Everything living's out of there," he said.

"What happened to you?" Treat asked him.

"I heard the siren, saw the smoke, took it on the lam. I supposed your men were behind me."

"But, Mr. Braden—" It was one of Tex's guards who started to speak. He never finished whatever it was he'd meant to say. We were all of us suddenly frozen with horror by the sound of a scream from inside the stable—a scream of mortal terror that I'll never forget as long as I live. A human scream!

"Good Lord, he's caught in there!" Tex said.

"Who?"

"Carl, of course—who else? He must have set the fire—one way to strike at us!"

Automatically, I ran toward the building. At a distance of about five feet I looked through the window of the tackroom. The walls were already a mass of flame, but I could see the figure by the desk. It wasn't Carl. It was Jake, the Negro stableboy. He was lying on the floor writhing and screaming. And then I saw why he stayed there. The heavy desk had been overturned and he was pinned under it!

I remember I started to run toward the door. I heard Tex shout at me, "Don't be crazy, Bill! You can't go in there!"

"Bill!" That voice stopped me for an instant. It was Judith. She was only a few yards away. She had a horse blanket in her hands and she stopped to submerge it in a pail of water. Then she came running toward me.

"Put this over your head!" she shouted at me.

I covered my head and ran into the burning room. By the time I reached Jake he'd stopped screaming and lay perfectly still. I saw that there was an ugly cut on the back of his head.

The flames were crackling and roaring and I was already choking from the smoke. I tossed aside my blanket and struggled with the desk, trying to move it off him. Sheer desperation gave me the strength. Somehow I managed to pick Jake up and get him across my shoulder. I turned for the door. If the roof didn't cave in on me, I thought I would make it.

But there was someone just inside the door when I reached it—someone who didn't move. I twisted my head around to look up. It was Tex. He stood very still, his eyes bloodshot from the smoke. In his right hand he held a revolver.

"I'm sorry, Bill," he said. "I was willing to share with you. I'm sorry, but I can't let you out of here with that boy."

He raised his arm. I tried to stumble back, still carrying Jake. Then I saw another figure behind Tex, a small figure. A hand shot forward, and in it, steel glittering in the light from the flames, was a bailing hook. As the hook tore into the flesh of Tex's shoulder and yanked, he staggered back.

I dropped Jake and charged at Tex, head lowered, butting him in the stomach like a battering-ram. He went down and I on top of him. He lay very still, gasping for breath.

"Get Jake!" a voice screeched at me. Judith! It had been Judith with that bailing hook!

I turned back to Jake. I hadn't the strength to lift him again, but I got my hands under his arms and dragged him out across the burning floor. As I hit the open, someone took him away from me and someone else doused me with a pail of water. I hadn't realized it, but my clothes were smoldering.

I remember stretching out flat on the ground, face down, trying to suck in some fresh air, as though it were imprisoned in the earth. And all the time Tex's face was before me—sad, red-

eyed, the gun barrel rising to beat out my brains. Tex! *It was Tex!*

I DIDN'T go to see Tex in the hospital where he was being treated for the wound the bailing hook had made in his shoulder. I didn't want to see him. But I got the story from Treat, and I was able to piece some of it together.

I had gone to the hospital myself to have burns on my hands attended to. Judith's hands were burned, too, so badly that she wasn't able to go back for the second heat of the Imperial with President Coolidge. I tried to comfort her in her disappointment.

"Mr. Thorne will be proud," I told her. "The horse proved himself. He'd have won if he'd been able to go back. And you—darling, darling Judith."

"Oh, Bill, he started in after you. I thought he was going to help, and then I saw him reach for the gun. I couldn't make Treat understand over the noise, so—"

"Darling!"

It was in the quiet little taproom of the Newtown Hotel that we put it together. Treat had come from the hospital where he'd got a preliminary statement from Tex.

Tex, it seemed, was in a bad way. He'd gambled his share of our earnings and lost heavily on the market. He'd appropriated funds belonging to the cattle syndicate he worked for, and lost that, too. We none of us knew this. We didn't know he'd been to Boston in connection with his business. We didn't ask him, and he didn't tell us. Tex was always mum about his private affairs and we never pried. It was then he'd got the idea of throwing a scare into us with the postcards. It was his idea to make us think Carl had come back from the grave and was on our trail.

"He told me to tell you, Mr. Joslyn, that he'd never have harmed you," Treat said. "He was very urgent about it. He said half the pool would have got him out of trouble. He said—well, that he'd never had any use for Ryan or that actor fellow. But he said he respected you and liked you. He wants you to know that. If you hadn't spotted Jake and been about to save him, you'd have been safe."

I just sat there, close to Judith, shaking my head. What an act Tex had put on—his pretended fear, his pretended calm!

"But why Jake? What had Jake done to him?" Judith asked.

"It happened like this," Treat said. "The night Ducky Ryan had the quarrel with your father, Tex did play canasta at the inn, as he said. As he was going to bed he ran into Ryan, very drunk. I think he saw a chance for getting rid of Ryan. He suggested to him that he have it out with old Mr. Thorne, then and there. Not to wait till morning. Ryan was drunk enough to fall for it.

"When Ryan had gone, Tex went back to his room. You realize, he had to do whatever he was going to do before your horse won the race—if it did—and the purse was split. He walked through into Mark Lewis's room, and quite cold-bloodedly beat in his head with the butt of his gun. Then he went *out* the window, through the flower bed, and down to the stable. He waited outside till Old Man Thorne came and the argument started. Then, having picked up the wrecking bar, he slipped in, knocked the old man out, and killed Ryan.

"He came back to the inn then, climbed *in* the window of Mark Lewis's room, and went to his own room to wait. The flowers he walked on prevented his making any clear prints; we couldn't tell that the exit had taken place before the entrance."

"But about Jake?" Judith said.

"That had to do with footprints, too," Treat said. "Jake was a good, neat boy. Before he went to bed for the night he'd watered down the earth under the stable overhang and carefully raked it. Later, when the boys were awakened in the haymow where they were sleeping by noise in the stable, Jake ran over there. The first thing he noticed was that his neat raking job had been fouled up with

footprints, several sets of footprints—one of them the *deep imprint from the heels of cowboy boots!*"

"But why didn't he tell us at once?"

Treat shrugged. "He's an ignorant kid, Mr. Joslyn, a frightened kid. By the time he could have told us, those heel prints had been obliterated by hundreds of others—police, other stable hands. It would have been his word against Tex's. Jake hadn't any doubts about who'd be believed. I think, too, he began to try to convince himself that those prints had another significance. Tex had been decent to him. He finally persuaded himself that Tex had been down to the stable some time earlier in the evening, *before* the killing.

"But it was on his conscience. Finally he asked Tex if he'd been down there earlier. Tex assured him he had, but Tex knew he wasn't safe. He knew he had to get rid of Jake before Jake began telling people what a foolish mistake he'd made in thinking Tex might have been there at the time of the killing—that it had really been earlier. Tex couldn't have anyone thinking he'd *ever* been at the stable that night.

"So Tex got an idea. He would burn the stable, with Jake in it. Later we'd discover that Jake had been burned alive in the fire. I think he would have helped us to convince ourselves that it was Carl Shay's doings."

"But how did he manage to slug Jake and set the fire, when your men had lost him for only a minute or two?"

"Those men of mine!" Treat said. "You remember they said they'd been watching the race for about thirty seconds, and when they turned back Tex was gone?"

"Yes."

"We assumed they meant that first heat of the Imperial. Actually, it was during the race *before* that they lost him. They spent twenty minutes hunting for him before they reported to me. By that time Tex had got to the stable and knocked Jake out. He couldn't stop to make certain he'd killed him, so he pinned him down by overturning the desk. Then he set the fire. There wasn't much risk of his being seen. Everybody who could was trying to get a glimpse of the race. And if he was seen he'd make it appear he was trying to put the fire out.

"The ironical thing is that I played directly into his hands when I suggested you separate. Just as Mark Lewis played his game for him when he imagined he'd seen Shay in Newtown."

It was a long time before all the pieces fell firmly into place for me, before I could rearrange my concept of Tex's character into the cold-blooded killer for money he'd turned out to be. It didn't happen right then, because one of Treat's men came to him.

"There's a message from the hospital, Captain. Mr. Thorne's regained consciousness and he's asking for Miss Thorne."

Judith stood up quickly, her eyes bright. "Come on, Bill," she said.

"You want me to go with you?" I asked.

"Bill—Bill!" she said gently. "Don't you know that by now, or must I draw you a blueprint?"

INVISIBLE WITNESS

There was no way to solve the slaying of Ray's father—unless Ray could make the killer strike again!

Owen pushed the safety off and pulled the trigger

by NORMAN A. DANIELS

THE SIGN on the door read "DONALD OWEN, Attorney at Law." It opened into a richly furnished waiting-room-and-outer-office. Roy Owen b r e e z e d through it and came to a stop in front of the receptionist's desk.

Jane West had been in his father's employ for many years and when she looked up and recognized Roy Owen, she was as excited as Roy's mother would have been were she alive.

"Roy!" she cried. "How is the All-American halfback?"

Roy Owen grinned at her, said, "I'm a long way from that and I won't make it, Jane, because I'll graduate from college this fall. Is Dad in?"

"No," she said. "He left about two hours ago. He was expecting you and he stalled around here for awhile, even

though he'd received an urgent message."

"My plane was late," Owen said. "Well, I'll just wait."

"No, Roy," Jane told him. "Your father left this address and said if he wasn't back before you arrived, you could get the car out of the parking space and pick him up."

"Okay." Owen took the slip of paper she handed him. He glanced at it and frowned. "What's Dad doing in a section of the city like this? And in such a cheap hotel?"

Jane smiled. "You know your father. He'll go anywhere if it means he can help someone. I think the call was from a man who is wanted for murder and asked your father to come down and arrange the surrender. And defend him, of course."

"Yes, that's like Dad," Owen said. "I'll pick him up."

They talked college for another moment or two, and then Owen left. He got the car, drove far downtown and finally parked in front of a four-story hotel which had been fashionable about the turn of the century. Everything in the neighborhood had changed, including the hotel. Its windows were hung with grimy curtains and cracked shades.

OWEN consulted the slip of paper and noticed that his father had scribbled down Room 409. Owen walked into the once-fancy lobby. Nobody paid any attention to him. An ancient elevator creaked its way to the top floor. He walked along the corridor until he found the room, and knocked. There was no answer so he tried again.

The second time he made so much noise that a man across the hall looked out. But after a glance at Owen's six-foot, broad-shouldered build, he decided against making any protest.

Owen grasped the knob to shake the door. It opened and he hesitated a moment. The curtains were drawn and even though it was only early evening, the room was very dark.

Instantly he got the sharp odor of cordite. He fumbled for the light switch, but couldn't find it. He headed across the room to raise the shades. Halfway to the window, he stumbled over something soft and yielding. It threw him off balance. He started to fall and one hand flew out toward the back of a chair. It tipped under his awkward grasp and he and the chair both pitched to the floor with a considerable racket.

Dimly Owen heard the door across the hall open again. He wasn't paying any attention to that. As he tried to rise, his hand touched a human face. He jerked the hand back, got to his feet and stood there horrified for a second.

By now his eyes were used to the gloom and he saw why he couldn't locate the light switch. There was none on the wall. The overhead fixture was controlled by a pull cord. He gave it a yank.

Then his breath, which he had been unconsciously holding, was exhaled in a burst of frantic sound. At his feet lay Donald Owen, his father. He had been shot through the left side of his head and already the blood-smeared face was graying in death.

With a strangled sob, Roy Owen dropped to his knees beside his father, half raised the body. "Dad!" he said harshly. "Dad, who did it? Answer me. You've got to tell me. Tell me, Dad! Try to tell me! Who did this?"

He gave up, then. There was no longer any life left in that limp form. Owen gently eased his father's body back on the floor.

Behind him, someone let out an unearthly screech. He whirled. The man who'd opened the door across the hall was already turning to go for help. Owen didn't try to stop him.

Half an hour later Roy Owen sat on the edge of the bed in that now even more dismal room. The police and the medical examiner had worked fast. The air was now full of flash powder instead of cordite. The body had been removed. All that remained was the chalked outline on the tattered old rug.

Lieutenant Keeley, of homicide, puffed slowly on a cigarette and studied the husky young man who sat on the bed. Keeley said, "It's a tough break. I knew your father. Guess every cop did. He fought us to a standstill half the time, but we respected him for it."

"Thanks," Owen said vacantly.

Keeley took another long drag on the cigarette. "We want to find the murderer, of course. The statements you've made up to now aren't of any use at all. So let's have it straight."

"Have what?" Owen looked up. "Don't you think I want my father's murderer caught, too?"

"Yeah, I do. I think you want him caught so much, you intend to do it yourself."

"Now look," Owen protested, "how could I—"

"Wait a minute," Keeley said. "When you came into this room, your father was alive, wasn't he?"

"No," Owen said flatly.

"You were heard talking to him," Keeley went on. "Trying to get him to tell you who shot him. You wouldn't have tried to make a dead man talk. Besides, the medical examiner said he'd been dead only a matter of a few minutes. Now—what did he tell you? Who did he name?"

"He was dead," Owen said stonily. "Dead, I tell you!"

"If you try taking the law into your own hands, you'll be sorry for it," Keeley warned. "Finding the killer yourself might help your ego some, but it won't do your father any good. Nor yourself, when we catch up with you."

"He was dead, Lieutenant," Owen said. "Sure, I tried to make him speak, because I couldn't believe he was gone. But he was."

KEELEY shook his head solemnly from side to side. "You're a lot like your old man. Stubborn as they come and always wanting to fight your own battles. Now, I'm going to mention two names. If your father identified either one of them, say so. The first is Manny Gort."

"Who in the world is Manny Gort?" Owen demanded.

"About a year ago, Manny's brother was tried for murder. Your father took the case and believed him innocent—until he found out witnesses had been framed. Then he pulled out. The killer went to the chair and his brother Manny swore that some day he'd get even with your father."

"Who is the other possibility?" Owen asked.

"His name is Frank Evans. He's a crackpot. About six or seven months ago your father represented him in a civil action and lost the case. There never was much of a case, but it cost Evans his shirt and he swore to get even, too, because he blamed your father for losing."

"Lieutenant, I want to help all I can," Owen said, very slowly and distinctly. "I'm going to help. But when I got here, Dad was dead. He didn't identify his killer. But whoever shot him shouldn't be too hard to find. After all, it happened in his room here, didn't it?"

"According to the hotel records, this room was vacant," Keeley said. "Nobody was supposed to be here. When your father arrived, he went straight up."

"But someone called Dad's office from here," Owen protested. "Dad was asked to come down. His receptionist said whoever called mentioned that he was wanted for murder and needed Dad to help make the arrangements for surrendering himself."

"That was just an angle to get your father down here, Roy," Keeley explained. "No calls were put through from this room. We checked."

Owen got to his feet. "Well, finding that killer is your affair. I've got my own troubles."

Keeley walked to the door with him. "Roy, you're a nice kid," he said. "Take my advice: If you know the killer, let *us* take care of him. Amateurs always bungle."

Owen didn't even bother to reply. He left the hotel, got in his car and drove off in a partial daze. He didn't quite know what to do. The whole world had come crashing down on him. He needed help, advice. He thought of Chet Tyler, a long-time friend of his father. Tyler would know what to do. Owen stopped the car, got out and entered a drugstore, where he used a telephone.

A maid in the Tyler home answered. "Haven't you heard?" she exclaimed. "There was an auto accident last night. A horrible accident! Mrs. Tyler was instantly killed and Mr. Tyler is in Parkside Hospital, badly hurt."

Owen groaned as he hung up. Everything was wrong! But he wondered how badly Tyler was hurt, and the hospital wasn't very far away. He decided to go there.

Tyler was propped up in bed, a little groggy from opiates, but he'd already heard the news. He extended a hand toward Owen.

"Roy, it's horrible! And I can't even help you."

"You've got your own troubles," Owen said sympathetically. "What happened?"

"My car got out of control, went over an embankment. My wife was killed instantly. And now I've lost one of my best friends. Roy, they've got me stuffed with dope, but as soon as it wears off I'm getting out of here."

"You'll do nothing of the kind," Owen said. "You've been hurt, too."

"It's nothing, Roy. Just a few bruises and something inside of me—they don't know what it is—but I'm feeling better. You need someone to help you."

"I've got the whole police force," Owen said. "Funny thing, one detective thinks I know who killed Dad."

"I know," Tyler said. "He telephoned me just before you arrived. He asked me to advise you, as your father's friend. Roy, did your father tell you anything?"

"No," Owen said slowly. "He was dead. I'd rather not talk about it right now. And I've got to leave. Don't worry about me, Mr. Tyler. I can take care of myself. Mighty good care."

As Owen headed for the door, Tyler said, "Be careful, Roy. A man who has killed once won't hesitate to kill again. But, as you say, you can take care of yourself. Hang that 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the outside of my door, will you? I'm going to concentrate on getting rest, so I can leave this place."

OWEN put the sign up. Then left the hospital and went straight to his father's office. He had a key and he let himself in, turned on the lights and walked briskly into his father's private office. It was something of a shock, not seeing his father sitting there behind the big desk, knowing he'd never sit there again.

Owen sat down, leaned back and tried to think. Gradually his nerves calmed. The same careful kind of thinking his father would have summoned, took hold of his brain. The police thought he knew the killer's identity. Maybe the killer did, too. If so, the murderer would have to strike again and he, Roy, would be the target.

Yet just to sit there and wait wouldn't satisfy him. He knew there must be a strong motive for that crime. The way his father had been deliberately lured to that cheap hotel showed that the killer knew his father's willingness to help anyone in trouble. The murder, therefore, had been very carefully planned. Perhaps the motivation was right here in this office—in the desk or the big vault.

Owen started searching. It was impossible to read all the documents, but he did study those on the two men Lieutenant Keeley had named. According to the records, they had plenty of motive and were the types to take just such a revenge.

The jangle of the phone bell made him grab the instrument. The only person who'd call here at this time would be the police. Maybe they'd learned something.

A husky and obviously disguised voice started speaking at once. "Listen, Owen, lay off. If you tell the cops anything, you'll get what your old man got! Lay off, do you hear?"

The phone made a peculiar sort of click in his ear. He hung up, tapped the desk top with his fingers and then his eyes widened slightly. Under the phone, and nearly hidden by the instrument, was a jagged piece of paper with a phone number scrawled on it in his father's particular style of handwriting.

Owen picked up the phone again and dialed the number. It might mean something. Almost instantly, a voice answered, "Police headquarters, Homicide Bureau."

Owen put the phone down without uttering a sound. Apparently his father had looked up the number of homicide. But why? If he'd called it, Lieutenant Keeley would have known that and mentioned it. Therefore it was reasonably safe to assume that his father intended to make such a call, but had never got around to it.

Storing that fact away in his mind, Owen went to work on the vault. He dug into its contents eagerly. There had to be something, some clue. Maybe Lieutenant Keeley was right and one of those two suspects *had* done the killing, but Owen wanted to be positive. He unlocked a small strong box, carried the contents over to the desk and started riffling through them.

It was then that every light in the suite of rooms w i n k e d out. Owen straightened up, but he was unprepared for what happened next. There was a rush of feet. He blinked his eyes, trying to penetrate the darkness. Whoever was running toward him seemingly knew exactly where he stood.

As Owen started to move, the weapon clipped him alongside the head, staggering him badly. Then it came down once more and this time he felt himself falling. It seemed he fell for miles and that he slept for days.

There was nothing but darkness when he finally opened his eyes. He sat up, pulled himself to his feet and swayed dizzily without moving from the spot. When his senses stopped their weird gyrating, he staggered to the desk and tried to turn on the desk light. It wouldn't work. Neither would the wall switch.

He made his way into the corridor. There was a switch box in a porters' supply closet and he found the door to it wide open and obviously jimmied. The switch had been pulled. There were a dozen switches, but only the one controlling the lights to his father's office was open.

Owen closed it and hurried back. Someone had finished the job he, Owen, had started. Documents he'd taken from the vault were strewn all over the floor. It occurred to him then that Lieutenant Keeley had been right and this might be more than he could handle alone. Owen picked up the desk phone.

The line was dead. He went out to the main office, where the switchboard was located. The plug to the phone in his father's office was still hooked up. Owen frowned. That threatening call he'd received had obviously been made direct from this switchboard.

He leaned against the back of the board and wondered why he wasn't dead, why that killer hadn't murdered him, too. If the killer believed, as the police did, that he knew something—that his father had spoken—why had he been permitted to live?

Owen thought he knew the answer to that one: There was something the killer wanted. Something he believed Owen also was looking for. Something Owen's dying father had mentioned. It must be of vital importance to the killer to risk letting Owen live, but it would be through Owen that he'd finally get this mysterious something.

AS HE locked up the office, Owen decided against telling Keeley anything. Warily he got into his car and drove home. In the library, where his

father was accustomed to put in as much work as at the office, Owen started hunting again.

He interrupted to call homicide. He dialed the number from memory and asked for Keeley. The lieutenant happened to be there.

"Is there anything new, Lieutenant?" Owen asked.

"Nothing," Keeley grunted. "We picked up those two suspects I named, hauled them over good, but they had alibis of sorts. We let them go and put a tail on each one. More to protect them from you than anything else."

"Tell me something." Owen disregarded the sarcasm. "Did my father call you, or anyone, in homicide today? Or very recently?"

"No," Keeley replied. "I'm sure he didn't. Why?"

"Nothing, Lieutenant. I just wondered if Dad had any premonition of what was going to happen and tried to head it off by calling you people. Thanks, anyway. It was just an idea."

Owen kept on with his search. He spent better than an hour at it, forcing himself not to think too long or too much on the fact that his father was dead. There'd be time for sorrow later. Right now, he had a job to do.

Yet there was nothing. No trace of any information which might point to the identity of the murderer. Owen even examined a desk portrait of the Jameson twins, his eight-year-old cousins who frequently disrupted the household with their cowboy-and-Indian games. The frame of the portrait was loose, but prying it away proved nothing.

He closed his eyes and wondered if he was at the end of his rope, if all there was left for him to do was wait for the murderer to strike. Just then he heard the front doorbell jangling. He snapped off the lights as he made his way toward the front door. There was a cane rack in the hallway and he scooped up the heaviest cane he could spot. Then he slowly approached the door. The bell clamored again.

"Who is it?" Owen called.

"Roy, let me in." The voice was familiar. "It's Chet Tyler!"

UNBOLTING the door, Owen opened it wide. Tyler hurried inside. He looked pale and drawn. He made a beeline for a chair and sat down in it weakly.

"Mr. Tyler," Owen said, "you're supposed to be a hospital patient."

"The devil with that," Tyler growled. "I've got to help you, and I think I can."

"I could use your kind of help," Owen said.

"Look, Roy, after you left, I did my best to relax and think back on things. I saw your father yesterday. He was worried—very worried."

"About what?" Owen asked.

"I'm not sure. When I walked into his office, he was reading some document or other and he quickly covered it. He usually didn't do a thing like that. Not to me, at least, and I sensed that whatever he'd been reading, he didn't even want me to see."

"You have no idea what it was?" Owen asked.

"No. . . . Roy, when Lieutenant Keeley phoned me, he was certain your father had told you something. If he did, and you can tie it up with these meager facts I just stated, we might have something."

"Dad was dead," Owen said. "I told you that."

"I believe you, Roy, even if the police don't. All right, now let's try this one. About six months ago, your father defended a mobster named Malloy. Maybe you never heard of him, but plenty of people have, including me. He's a big shot and a bad egg all through. He was up for a federal tax rap and your father got him off. But—and get this—your father made Malloy produce all his papers and records."

"You think Dad kept them, and Malloy killed him to get them back?" Owen asked.

"It could be. However, I doubt it went that far. I believe your father made notes from those records, and was about to pull a stunt he'd worked before."

"I don't understand all this." Owen passed a hand across his perspiring forehead.

"It's like this, Roy," Tyler said. "Your father got Malloy off, but he could still have him put away because of those notes he took out of the crook's records. Your father did that before. He got crooks off and then made them toe the mark. He always said that once caught, crooks serve their time and come out smarter than when they went in. They just went back to their evil doings. But he held them in check, drove them away from crime. That was how he thought he could serve the public. It worked before. It would work with Malloy, unless Malloy had more nerve than your father gave him credit for and killed him."

Owen pursed his lips. "To get those records and keep Dad's mouth shut—It jibes, Mr. Tyler! Because a little while ago I was searching Dad's office and someone knocked me out. While I was unconscious, he searched me and all the documents he could lay his hands on. I thought then, there must be something Dad had which this killer wanted."

"Think carefully now, Roy," Tyler said. "A great deal depends upon this. Obviously the documents were not in the office or you would have found them. Perhaps they're here, in this house."

"I searched the library already," Owen said.

"Then is there a place where your father might have hidden something which he knew might be dangerous, which he had to keep hidden?"

"Come into the library," Owen said. "I've got to think."

Tyler followed him into the book-lined room. Owen sat down behind the desk again, covered his eyes and lapsed into deep thought. Then he shrugged.

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Tyler. Dad didn't hide things—"

Owen suddenly stopped talking. His eyes were looking straight at the picture of those mischievous young cousins of his.

"You've thought of something," Tyler said abruptly.

"I have," Owen admitted. "Upstairs, in Dad's bedroom. Come on."

Owen walked briskly up the stairs. Tyler followed much more slowly and used the banister to drag himself along. Once in the bedroom, Owen went straight to the night table and pulled open its drawer. He closed it again.

"Sometimes," he explained, "Dad would shove papers into this table. . . . There's one more place. It's got to be there, Mr. Tyler. Whenever Dad wanted to keep papers from the servants' eyes, he put them in an old shoe box on the closet shelf. Way back, out of sight and reach. I'm betting that's where they are."

"Get them," Tyler said eagerly. "Get them right away, Roy. This is what we're looking for!"

WALKING to the closet, Owen opened the door and stood on tiptoe. He saw the battered shoe box far back on the shelf and lifted it down. He didn't remove the lid, but walked over to a chair beside the bed and sat down.

"Roy, for heaven's sake, are those papers in that box?" Tyler asked.

"You'd better sit down too, Mr. Tyler," Owen advised. "You're a sick man. Relax, will you? I'll look."

He lifted the lid of the box and then put it back on again. He sighed deeply, said, "There are some legal-looking documents in this box, Mr. Tyler. You were right all along."

Tyler strained forward. The hat he held on his lap started sliding, but he saved it in time. Owen put the shoe box across his knees.

"Mr. Tyler, a couple of things about this have bothered me," he said. "One is the fact that whoever knocked me

out in the office knew where the light switches were located, even knew which switch controlled the lights in the office."

"Never mind that," Tyler said. "See what's in those papers."

"The second item," Owen went on, "is the fact that the killer must have had a key to the office. Before dousing the lights, he slipped in and used the switchboard to call me in the private office with a silly warning. This man also must have known how to use the switchboard and which plug went where."

"What are you driving at?" Tyler demanded.

"I think *you* murdered Dad and that you're the man who knocked me out in the office," Owen said calmly.

"Are you insane?" Tyler roared. "I'm ill! My wife was just killed, and I nearly lost my life, too!"

"Maybe you did," Owen said, "but you're here right now and you're partially under the influence of the drugs they gave you at the hospital so you could sleep. You could have slipped out of your room this afternoon. The sign on your door would have kept even nurses from bothering you. You weren't in a critical condition."

"Your father was my friend," Tyler said, his voice lower. "Why should I have killed him?"

"I don't know," Owen admitted. "But Dad used to mention you in many of his letters to me. For the last eight or ten months he hadn't written a word. Something happened between you two. There's a reason, all right, and I think the explanation will be in the documents you want so badly."

Tyler moved his hands. His hat slid off his lap this time, and exposed a snub-nosed revolver beneath the hat.

"What are you going to do about it, Roy?" he asked tensely.

Owen bit his underlip. "I'm betting all this has something to do with the death of your wife."

"You've read the letter she gave your father to keep." Tyler's voice was even, cold and deadly. "You've known all the time and you've been trying to draw me into a trap. It won't work. I can kill you, Roy, just as I killed your father and with the same gun. I know a way to get back unseen to my hospital room, and nobody enters the room when I have that sign hanging on the door."

"You wouldn't want to make a bet on that, would you?" Owen said quietly.

"Why should I bet with a dead man?" Tyler grimaced. "Because you're about dead, Roy! I don't want to kill you, any more than I wanted to kill your father. But a clever, intelligent man like me can commit murder and get away with it. You see, I was given an injection of morphine to make me sleep. They don't knock you out with the stuff. A sick man gives in easily and dozes off. But I'm not sick, nor even badly hurt. I fought off the effects of the dope, but nobody knows that. I'm alibied for the time of your father's death—and for yours."

"If you're faking those injuries from the accident which killed your wife, it means you murdered her, didn't you?" Owen said.

"Yes, Roy, I murdered her. It came to that. Your father knew, and he took my wife's side."

"And she realized you might try to murder her and make it look accidental," Owen said. "So she gave Dad a sealed letter to be opened if she was killed. Dad opened it. He was going to call homicide—he even jotted down the telephone number—but something happened. Maybe he wanted to make sure. Maybe he meant to see you first, give you a chance to make a clean breast of it. But you beat him to it. You lured him to that cheap hotel, to an unrented room, and you killed him there."

"Hand me that shoe box, Roy," Tyler ordered. "Or what's inside it. I can't waste time here. After a certain length of time, a nurse might make a routine check and find me gone. That would be disastrous!"

Owen shook his head. "Mr. Tyler, you

won't get away with it."

Tyler shrugged. "I have—twice already. And I can again. Hand me the box, Roy, or I'll simply kill you and take it away. Personally, I don't care much which!"

"There was a witness," Owen said slowly. "When you murdered Dad, there was a witness, Mr. Tyler."

TYLER'S face got paler. "What do you mean? Roy, your father *did* tell you something. You've known all along I was the killer, but you were playing it easy, to get the proof. To break what looked like an unbreakable alibi. But when you tell me there was a witness to that murder, you're lying!"

"This witness," Owen went on, "was invisible. But he was there and he's tripped you up, Tyler."

Tyler raised the gun slightly. "In half a minute I'm going to shoot, Roy."

"I'll give you what's inside this old shoe box," Owen said. "I only wanted to be sure that you really meant to kill me. Now I know that you do. And so whatever my father hid in this box is yours!"

Owen raised the lid of the box and threw it to one side. His hand dipped into the box and the fingers curled around a fully-loaded automatic. He pushed the safety off, then pulled the trigger.

It was a .45 and the heavy slug ripped through Tyler's chest, high up but with force enough to hurl him out of the chair he occupied. He never squeezed the trigger of his own gun. Owen kicked Tyler's gun aside, hauled him to his feet and propelled him to the bed. Tyler was groaning as he lay back.

"You'll live," Owen said, "but not through any fault of mine. I didn't care where that slug hit you! I suppose you wonder where I got that gun? You remember Dad's nephews—my cousins. Whenever they come here, they practically tear the house apart. Dad kept a loaded gun in that night table because he had a lot of enemies. But when those kids came, he always hid the gun in that old shoe box, so they couldn't possibly find it. I remembered, when I saw Dad's picture of the kids."

"Get me a doctor, Roy," Tyler begged. "Please! I was a sick man when I came here."

"You're going to be much sicker," Owen told him. "The letter your wife wrote to Dad will probably convict you of her murder. If it doesn't, I'll see that you're electrocuted for killing Dad."

"Roy, give me a break," Tyler pleaded. "You don't know what I went through with that wife of mine. She had all the money. She led me a miserable life. That witness you talked about—I believe you now. Look, I'm wealthy. My wife's money makes me a rich man. I'll pay you, and this witness—"

"I wouldn't take your money," Owen said. "And the witness couldn't. It would be like handing the bribe to yourself."

"I don't know what you mean, Roy," Tyler groaned. "Things are all mixed up."

"I mean that witness who was in the room when you killed Dad was your own fear. When you thought Dad had told me something, that fear made you take more chances, drove you here, and from here to the punishment you deserve. A man's own fear can be a powerful witness, Tyler. What's more, Dad didn't tell me anything. He was dead when I reached him. But when that attack on me was made, I knew there had to be something the murderer was after.

"This shoe box contains no papers, but I'm betting that Dad put your wife's letter in a safe-deposit vault. He rented a very big one and was always very careful that no valuable or incriminating papers would ever be around the office or the house."

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

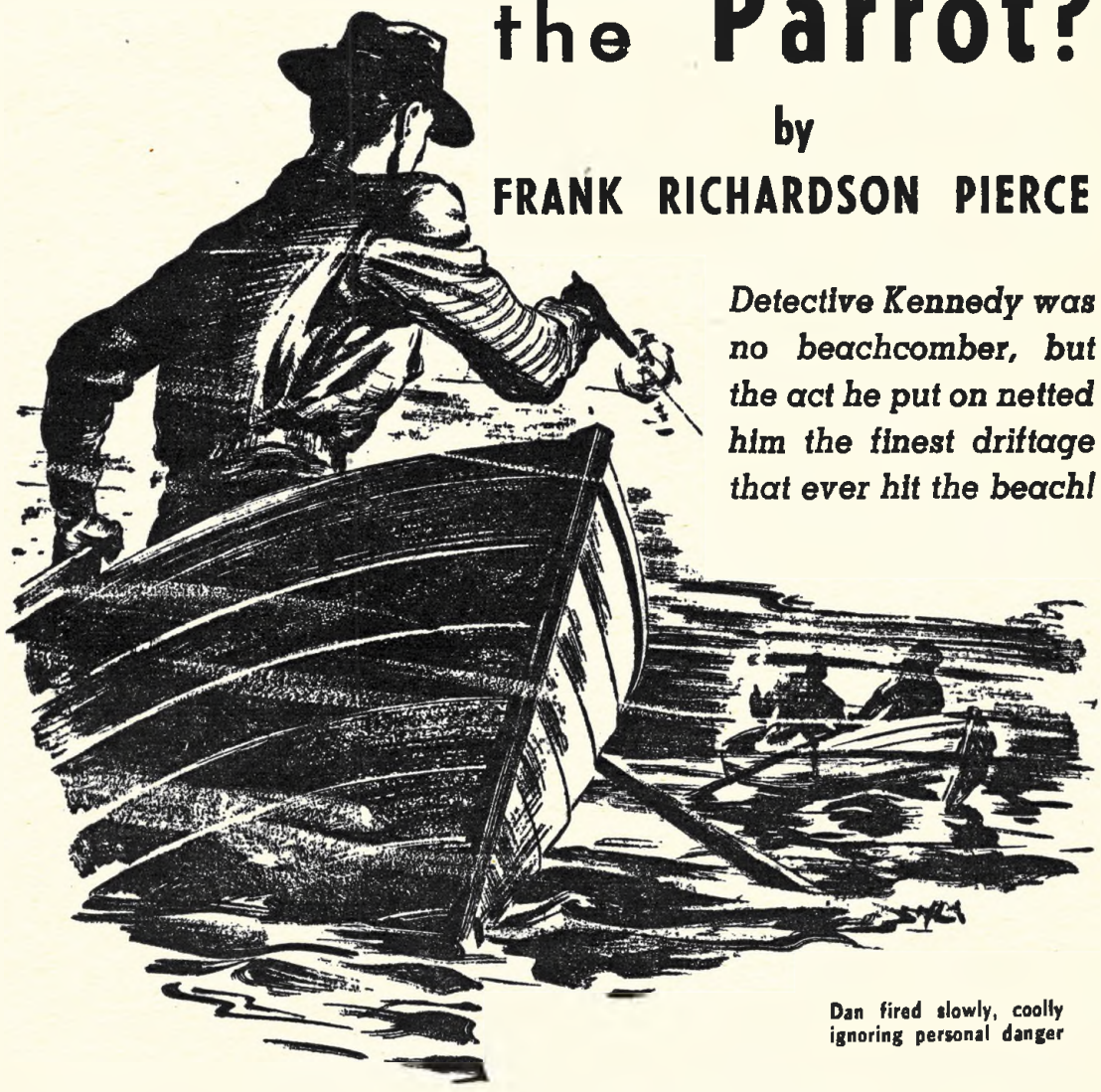
"Make a phone call to Lieutenant Keeley." Owen moved toward the telephone beside the bed. "The rest is up to him—and a judge and jury."

Who Killed the Parrot?

by

FRANK RICHARDSON PIERCE

Detective Kennedy was no beachcomber, but the act he put on netted him the finest driftage that ever hit the beach!



Dan fired slowly, coolly ignoring personal danger

AT TWO o'clock in the morning, Detective Lieutenant Dan Kennedy and his wife, Margie, were awakened by their parrot screaming, "Police! Police! Po—!"

Death cut the last word in half, then Dan heard the soft sound of a feathered body striking a rug and the momentary swinging of the empty perch.

He jerked his automatic pistol from beneath his pillow, then threw a switch on a circuit of lamps lighting the grounds surrounding the house. With the caution of a man whose life had been repeatedly threatened, he peered from the lower left-hand corner of the partly opened window of the ground-floor bedroom.

Ellen Bradford called from the next house, "Somebody ran through our back

yard just now! Joe took after them."

Ellen and Joe Bradford were the sort of neighbors who pitched in when others were in trouble. Dan wished that Joe had remained in bed. It was dangerous following the breed that would prowl around Dan's home.

"Dan!" Margie suddenly gasped. "It's . . . hard . . . to breathe!"

Dan held his own breath, raised the window, switched off the outside lights, then jumped to the ground with Margie in his arms. He crouched in the shadows, afraid a bullet might come ripping through the darkness.

He was remembering the threatening telephone calls that would have cracked a less courageous girl than Margie, and the mailed threats formed of words clipped from magazines and pasted on sheets of paper.

"Ellen, phone for an ambulance," he called. "Margie's passed out. Then call the police department."

Ellen Bradford came over a few minutes later, carrying a heavy blanket.

"I think she was gassed," Dan told her. "Just a whiff, maybe. Pulse isn't too bad, but respiration not so good. I'll be back in a minute."

He took a deep breath, held it, climbed through the window. He raced through the house, turned on the lights, unlocked the front door and emerged, panting. He pulled on his pants and slippers, then went around to a side window and peered in.

Dan could see the parrot on the floor. Another casualty was a mouse which had been sniffing at a baited trap. No doubt of it—Polly, trained to yell "Police" when prowlers were about, had died instantly.

THE POLICE and ambulance arrived together. Dan turned Margie over to the ambulance crew, sent a detective to check on Bradford, then explained his poison-gas theory to the fingerprint man and chemist.

Sergeant Auburn, who had worked on many cases with Dan, came over to him. "Since you licked hell out of three gangs and sent their leaders to the noose or prison, Dan, you've been 'target for tonight' as we bomber boys used to say in the war days. In every mob there's always one or more lads who think they won't make the mistakes the leaders made. Right?"

"Right," Dan answered.

"Barnacle Mike, of the Wharf Rats, was hanged," Auburn went on, "but someone who wants to take over is trying to get himself a reputation by knocking you off. Come here."

He led the way to a point under the living-room window.

The Wharf Rats raided warehouses, smuggled and hijacked other smugglers' loot. Barnacle Mike had made his way to the top by holding a rival under water until his struggles ceased.

"Look," Auburn said. "They bored a hole under the window, inserted a tube, packed the space around the tube with mud so there'd be no leakage, connected the hose to a tank and cracked the valve. The parrot squawked and the job wasn't finished. Here's a piece of heavy cord dropped on a rose bush. Sailor's knot."

"No footprints, so he spread a tarp while he worked," Dan observed. "Deadly cyanide gas."

Dan was thinking of his harness-bull days when he had a waterfront beat. Fumigating ships with cyanide gas had been a touchy job. They marched all hands off the ship, then called the roll. Then they sent men aboard to make a search, on the chance a drunk or stowaway might be hiding out.

He remembered a cat leaping from a sailor's arms and running into a compartment opened by a man wearing a gas mask. But even with blowers clearing the ship, enough gas remained to drop the cat in a matter of seconds. Even when human beings were revived brain tissue had often been permanently damaged.

"That's the deal they rigged for Margie and me," Dan growled.

A cold rage gripped him. It struck Dan that more than revenge was involved. Something big was in the making, and

those in the deal wanted him out of the way.

"They found your neighbor, Bradford," a detective said then. "He was conked on the head. The guy waited in the alley and let him have it. No footprints."

An ambulance surgeon was telling Ellen Bradford, "Just a nasty scalp wound. I don't think there's a fracture. Scalp wounds bleed badly. Your husband's going to be okay. Come along to the hospital with us, if you want."

"I'm sorry, Ellen," Dan said. "They don't come any better than Joe."

A prowl car rolled up and the driver said, "We've got a suspect."

"You check, Auburn," Dan said. "It might help if the guy thinks I was knocked off, or at least knocked out. It might give him confidence to go ahead with his plans. Get me a wire-recording of his voice, too."

"We'll see if he's afraid to go into the house," Auburn said. "If he is, he's our man."

Dan kept to the background while Auburn took charge of the prisoner.

"Go on in the house and sit down," Auburn told the suspect. "I'll be with you in a minute."

Dan wasn't sure, but he thought he saw the man hesitate, then he went inside. Dan went around to the window and listened. The man's name was Hank Brugger, and he was powerfuly built, with thick shoulders and the short, strong arms of a deep-water sailor. His voice was heavy, his face lined and weathered.

"Brugger," Auburn said, "when the boys caught you, you were breathing hard. You'd been running."

BRUGGER thrust his feet out in front of him, and as the light fell on his right shoe Dan said softly to himself, "He's our man. I've never seen him before. Maybe a stranger from out of town. I wonder what's up?"

"I'm fifty years old," Brugger said. "I breathe hard when I walk fast. I'm in coastwise trade, sometimes make a voyage from Puget Sound to the Orient. Been a sailor all my life. When in port some of the boys head for the dives. Me, I take long walks. I like to see how people live. I like to watch the kids play ball."

"At this time of night?" Auburn asked.

"I rode to the end of the bus line, took a walk in the country along the highway," Brugger explained. "When I got back the bus had stopped running, so I walked along looking for a cab headed for town. Then I was picked up."

"Take him down and see if Joe Bradford can identify him," Auburn said to another officer.

He called headquarters, talked briefly, then joined Dan. "Your wife is okay. Bradford is conscious. The chemist checked on the parrot and dead mouse. Cyanide gas. It doesn't look as if we have anything on Brugger."

"It did from where I was listening," Dan said.

"If he's our man, then he's a cool one," Auburn said. "He knew there was gas in the house, or had been, and yet he went in without batting an eye."

"That shows just what a rugged customer he is when the chips are down," Dan said. "He's moved in to take over the Wharf Rats, and he's got to prove he's good enough by knocking me off."

"Shall we hold him?"

"See if Bradford can identify him. I hope he can't," Dan said, and Auburn glanced at him in amazement. "Don't forget the wire-recording of his voice. I want to check with the recordings we've made of telephoned threats."

Auburn nodded. He recalled some of the threats, like: "Mrs. Kennedy, if the cemetery lot salesman calls, better get a plot for Dan. He's going to need it if he doesn't lay off." Or, "This is the *Times*, Mrs. Kennedy. We hesitate to intrude at a time like this, but we would like a photograph to go with your husband's obituary."

A policeman's wife knows a telephone call may bring terrible news, and Margie had resolved to take the worst news, if it came, with courage. But the calls designed to break her had put her nerves

on edge. Around Dan she shrugged them off, though she reported each one because she thought he should know. For that reason, he had installed the wire-recorder.

"If Bradford can't identify Brugger," Dan said, "turn him loose. I want him to play out his hand. It might be a good idea to let the reporters know a detective and his wife are in the hospital suffering from gas poisoning. Tell the boys the department is withholding names for reasons of security. In the meantime, I'll keep under cover. Mrs. Bradford will have to be let in on the deal, but she can keep a secret."

SERGEANT AUBURN carried out orders to the letter and reported to Dan the next day. "Bradford couldn't identify him," he said, "so we turned Brugger loose. I had him tailed to the waterfront. He was cagey, but confident. He contacted a man named Remstead, Remstead was supposed to pick him up, but got scared when your outside house lights went on. He lammed. Do you know Crawford, the importer?"

"Sure," Dan answered. "Imports Oriental goods—jade, art work, museum pieces and all that. The customs boys are convinced he does a little smuggling, but they haven't hung anything on him yet. What about Crawford?"

"There's something big in the wind. I don't know what, but Crawford's involved. Maybe they've got something on him. They talked about a ship named the *Skagit Victory*."

"She operates between the West coast and Orient," Dan said thoughtfully. "There was more trouble in China, the *Skagit Victory* put her sailing date ahead, and cleared just before the port changed hands. Where does Remstead live?"

"In a beachcomber cabin not far from the *Skagit Victory's* pier," Auburn replied. "He moved in about a month ago. He's a tough customer. Brugger bawled the devil out of him. He took it, not because he was afraid but because he thought there was too much at stake to fight back."

Dan pondered the situation for several minutes, then he scrawled on a piece of paper:

A detective and his wife, recently gassed in an attempt on their lives, left for Arizona today to recuperate. It is hoped the high, dry air will prove beneficial.

"That's the general idea," Dan said, handing it to Auburn. "Please have it typed and sent to the newspapers. Check on the beachcomber shacks and rent one. Tell 'em it's for a writer hard at work on a book."

"Yeah," Auburn said. "Writers are people, I suppose, and they don't all look alike. Why don't you go around with a stubble on your face? You've got a good start."

"Sure," Dan agreed. "Informal, loose-fitting clothes, long hours at the typewriter and a vacant expression on my face should turn the trick."

"You haven't told me why you know Brugger's the man who tried to gas you and who bopped Bradford." Auburn seemed annoyed. "Is it a top-drawer secret?"

"Didn't you notice his right shoe?" Dan answered. "Some of Joe Bradford's hair was caught where the rubber heel is nailed on. It's a sailor's trick—yanking off a boot or shoe and using it as a club when there's nothing else handy."

"He had a tarp and a tank with the gas," Auburn said. "Wonder what became of 'em?"

"Lifted a sewer manhole cover and dropped them, likely," Dan replied. "That fellow had every angle worked out. And whatever he's up to now, you can make up your mind he's gone over it thoroughly and checked for possible slips."

Auburn never hesitated when there was a job to be done, but he didn't relish waterfront work. Beaches and wharves were fine when a man was on a vacation, or off duty, but at night there was a cloying dampness, like death, as gray fog sneaked in. Night birds cried dismally. At low tide there was the stench of dying marine life and foul flats.

It was so easy to dump a rock-tied

body into the bay, or to bury it at low-water mark, where the rising tide would cover it. Dan could have it.

DAN AND Margie arrived at their beachcomber's shack one evening shortly after dark. The shack contained a bedroom, kitchen-dining room and living room. A wood-burning range-and-heater kept the rooms warm. There was no fuel problem. The tide daily deposited driftwood on the beach. Dried out, it made good fuel. Each shack included a skiff for fishing and wood-gathering. Here and there were flower boxes, and occasionally a small vegetable garden clung precariously to the bluff above tide water.

By reputation, Dan knew beachcombers minded their own business; asked no questions of others and were friendly, or aloof, as a neighbor wanted it.

To lend something of truth to the "author" story Margie circulated among the neighbors, Dan spent many hours at a typewriter beside a window. He caught up with his correspondence, and surprised old friends who had not heard from him in years.

Three times a day Margie went into action with the battered cooking utensils and prepared good meals, which she served in badly chipped dishes on a wooden table covered with oil cloth.

"It's fun," she said. "I wish we could do it for weeks. Maybe," she added hopefuly, "the *Skagit Victory* will break down."

"You like it here, don't you?" he said fondly. "A vacation has been long overdue us. Trouble is, the crime lads don't take regular vacations."

Each morning he stepped onto the porch to check on gifts from the tide—a long, irregular line of bark, tin cans, bottles and even bits of vegetables thrown from galleys of passing ships. Gulls screamed dismally, or in triumph, depending on their success in hunting food. Dan remembered when the remains of murdered men had been found in the drift.

He saw Brugger and Remstead occasionally, the latter nervous and alert, the former moving with the deep-water man's deliberation, as if the passing of time were unimportant. But unconsciously Brugger often glanced up the channel, as if expecting something.

Dan introduced Margie and himself along the beach as Jeff and Mary Winslow.

"Glad to know you, Winslow," an old-timer in rubber boots, slicker and sou'wester said. "I'm Pete Paxton." It was apparent Paxton had found the answer to avoiding nervous tension. He seemed completely relaxed at all times. More so than Brugger, if such a thing were possible. "Writin' a book, I hear."

"Yes," Dan answered.

"Better ease up a little," Paxton advised. "Your nerves seem a little tight to me. But you're better off than Remstead. His nerves are tighter'n a fiddle string. Bert Jordan, up the beach a ways, is all wound up, too. It ain't worth it. Life's too short. But Jordan's only been here a week. I don't suppose a man can let down over night."

Dan promised to relax. He realized tense nerves not only attracted attention, but might easily arouse suspicion among the old-timers. They might reason a nervous man had something on his conscience. It was something to remember, and to turn to his own advantage. Dan formed the habit of watching Bert Jordan and Brugger through binoculars. Remstead stayed in his shack most of the time.

"Brugger's laying the foundation for his next move," Dan told Margie. "You'll notice he goes fishing every evening, and sometimes doesn't get back until late."

"He doesn't seem to have much luck," Margie said. "Once in awhile he brings in a salmon."

"He isn't supposed to be a good fisherman," Dan said.

Tension mounted as the day for the *Skagit Victory's* arrival drew near. As the drift set in one evening, Dan put off in the skiff. He was dragging driftwood

aboard when Brugger rowed up.

"Hello, Winslow," he said. "Pretty good haul tonight. But you aren't showing a light. Better show one or the Coast Guard will arrest you." Brugger switched on a flashlight protected by a heavy wire screen. "I had a close shave the other night. Almost run down. Wash from the ship nearly capsized my skiff. A man takes his life in his hands at night."

"I hadn't thought of that," Dan said. "Thanks for mentioning it. I'm not much of a night hawk. I won't take chances."

"How's the book going?"

"Had to throw a lot of it away," Dan answered. "It wasn't making sense. It's going pretty good now, though."

He rowed slowly away, thinking, "Trying to scare me off the water at night, eh?"

KENNEDY watched the fog roll in several nights later. Bundled up, he sat on the porch and listened to steamers whistling their warning as they crawled through the gray soup. Far down the channel he heard a deep-throated blast hinting of the blue sea and distant places.

A moment later, he heard the grind of gravel as Bert Jordan launched his skiff. A different sound came from the Brugger area—the stumbling of boots in the gravel.

"Brugger and Remstead are carrying their skiff to water," Dan muttered. "Don't want to attract attention." He went inside. "Let's go to bed, Margie."

"This early?" she asked.

"Yep," he answered genially, pulling the curtain down but leaving a crack that would reveal them moving about in their night clothes. He switched off the light and said, "Now, we'll dress. The chips are down."

He got into his clothes in a hurry, then opened the window and classified the sounds coming from across the water. "Fine night for a murder," he thought. "And murder may be done—but not if I can stop it."

Two rubies glowed, died and glowed again toward Brugger's shack. "Two men smoking cigarettes," Dan said to Margie. "Someone, probably Brugger, is out there in a skiff. That means another man has joined in the deal."

"That's right. Brugger and Remstead have had the cabin all to themselves up to now," Margie said. "Shall I slip up to the grocery store and telephone Sergeant Auburn?"

"Can you manage it without breaking your neck?" he asked. "The trail up the cliff is tricky in spots."

"I've had nothing to do but study every twist and turn," she answered.

She was wearing rubber-soled, canvas shoes, and except for the creaking of a board he heard nothing as she set off. Dan went quietly out the back door, worked his way along the outside of the shack to the beach. He heard the crunch of gravel and it sounded like a man setting his feet to deliver a blow.

Dan ducked, turned, and heard rather than saw a blackjack whistle past his head. He drove his foot into soft flesh and the air left the man's lungs in a tired sigh. Dan was on him instantly. He got the blackjack and put it to work.

"Brugger's beach patrol," he thought. "Either they've figured me out, or else they want no one moving around."

It was all he could do to carry the man to the shack. He tied him hand and foot, wired his legs to a kitchen water pipe, gagged him, then quietly returned to the beach. He carried a pair of oars to the water's edge, then went back and lifted the small skiff and carried it into the water. He got the oars, and paddled until he was a quarter mile off shore.

Sounds came from the shore as well as the water—a radio, the distant ringing of a locomotive bell, the honking of auto horns on the highway along the bluff. But dominating all, and growing louder, was the *Skagit Victory's* fog horn.

Drifting with the tide, listening for sounds closer at hand, Dan had time to think.

Jordan, he decided, was the man of Crawford, the importer Auburn had men-

tioned. He was alone, never dreaming Brugger was stalking him. Perhaps Brugger was alone, but it was possible another was with him. Several men could have arrived at the shack for the showdown.

The ocean liner's blast was close now. She was crawling along and the water rippling from her bow was audible. He could feel the pounding of her propellers as the vibration came through the water to the skiff.

Dan heard oars splashing ahead. A small boat was getting out of the steamer's course. A good idea, Dan decided. A light bump would shatter a skiff, or the suction of water from the propellers overturn it.

THE STEAMER'S whistle echoed along the bluff and the vibrations went through his body. The ripple of water from her bows was close. He heard splashes. Then she was moving past him, rows of lights high above, the fog twisting and writhing in her wake. The skiff tossed violently, and he heard the wash of her waves running along the beach. The small boats were moving about ahead of him. One was being rowed rapidly, the second gently. There was a gentle bumping of wood against wood.

"Jordan's getting the cases the steamer dropped overboard into his rowboat," Dan thought. "Dollars to doughnuts, Crawford is waiting on the beach for him. It's time for me to edge up and get the drop on Brugger and Remstead as they move in to hijack Jordan."

He realized some act must be committed before he could arrest anyone, otherwise a defense lawyer would contend the occupants were a little late getting in from fishing trips and were innocent of all wrong-doing.

He listened for the "hands-up" order. It never came. Instead a shot, timed to the steamer's fog signal, rang out sharply. He heard the echo running along the bank.

There was a single, startled outcry, then a grim, "Give me a chance, Brugger! Give me a chance! I won't rat! Honest . . ." He heard the impact of an oar against a skull, then a sickening gasp.

"Get those cases aboard," Brugger said hurriedly. "Throw Jordan to the crabs."

"Damn it," Remstead said, "his foot is jammed under a bottom board."

"Skip it!"

Cases thudded, then water gurgled, as if the men were trying to sink the skiff with its grim cargo. Dan pushed on the oars, his automatic pistol between his knees. It was like waiting for a bad motion-picture film to come into focus—the gloom, wisps of fog twisting in the air currents—then there were vague outlines of a boat and two men.

"Get 'em up!" Dan ordered. "It's the police!"

"The hell with you!" Brugger retorted.

"You're asking for it, if you move!"

"Sure, I'm asking!" Protected by Remstead's body, Brugger fired.

"You fool!" Remstead yelled. "I'll be killed!"

Dan tried to fire just above Remstead and pick off Brugger, but the bullet was too high. Brugger's next bullet struck the boat at the waterline and Dan could hear water bubbling in. He delayed answering the shot because the wave of some distant steamer was rocking the boat and he needed a steady platform. Brugger's next shot was faulty because his boat was rocking too, and it clipped the gunwale inches from Dan's heart.

"Row, Remstead," Brugger snarled then. "Get into the fog, head for the beach. He can't chase us and row, too."

Dan had anticipated the situation. "Touch those oars, Remstead, and I'll let you have it!" he cried.

"Rock the boat and make a poor target!" Brugger yelled to Remstead. "Stack up those boxes, they'll turn a bullet!"

"Man alive!" Remstead shouted, greed getting the upper hand of fear for a moment. "Remember what's in 'em!"

As if aiding them, the fog drifted in, and through it came Brugger's voice, savage, desperate. "Grab those oars, Remstead, and row! He can't see us."

In order to keep up with the heavier

craft, Danny had to turn his back on it and row hard. He followed the sound of the others' oars, turning his head constantly to make sure a break in the fog wouldn't turn him into a sitting duck.

The moment he counted on came at last—the thud of the other skiff piling into the line of driftwood. He dropped the oars and caught up his gun.

As the fog thinned, the waiting Brugger fired. His quick shot ripped through Dan's hat. But the man, breathing hard from rowing, was no longer as deadly. Dan fired slowly, coolly ignoring personal danger.

"Remstead, throw the guns overboard!" Brugger gasped. "Don't shoot it out! Remember, we were coming in from a fishing trip, this fellow didn't identify himself as a cop, we didn't stop and he shot me. Got that? Stay with it. Two against one. Overboard with the boxes!"

GUNS splashed as Remstead dropped them over the side, but Dan's menacing weapon, close now, stopped Remstead's move toward the boxes.

"Hit the beach," Dan ordered. "Don't touch a thing! Hit the beach!"

Remstead splashed wildly as he rowed. He was falling apart from sheer terror. The burdened skiff grounded fifty feet from shore.

Armed men closed in then and Sergeant Auburn asked, "You okay, Dan?"

"Yes," Dan answered. "Brugger's a stretcher case. Maybe Remstead will need one, too. He's scared silly. Where's Margie? I left a thug tied up in our shack."

"She came back with us," Auburn said. "The thug is under guard. With all that shooting, wasn't anyone killed?"

"Brugger and Remstead killed Jordan. He's out there in the drink," Dan answered. "Haul up the skiff and leave her as is."

"No guard?"

"It'll be okay for awhile," Dan answered. "It'll take all of us to carry Brugger and help Remstead up the bluff."

They moved off, grumbling and cursing as they stumbled over driftwood and into shallow pools. Presently Dan turned back, treading softly as he returned to the skiff.

"Hello, Crawford," he said quietly to a man standing there. "I don't know what's in those boxes, but I had a hunch you wouldn't be far away and would take a chance if we left 'em unguarded. Don't move."

Crawford's silence was long. "It would be worth your while to take a sensible view on this," he said.

"You know better than that," Dan said coldly. "Come along, we're adding you to the collection."

Sergeant Auburn greeted them with a grin. "We've saved a place for you, Crawford," he said. "What's next, Dan?"

"You might keep an eye on the boxes," Dan said. "I'll have one of the boys drop me off at the *Skagit Victory's* pier."

Auburn shook his head. "A lot of loose ends to pick up before we have a watertight case," he said.

"You haven't a thing on me!" Brugger snarled from the ambulance. "Circumstantial evidence."

"A chain with complete links," Dan answered quietly. "A screaming parrot scared you off before finishing the job. Using cyanide gas, cracking Bradford with a shoe, proved a sailor was our man. Then there was a cord with a sailor's knot. After that, it was just a matter of letting you play out your hand."

"Dan, you didn't mention we compared wire-recordings and proved Brugger was the one frightening Mrs. Kennedy over the telephone," Auburn said.

"I'm trying to be objective about this," Dan answered. "I don't want to get mad." He boarded a prowl car and was dropped off at the pier. "Stick around," he said to the driver.

The *Skagit Victory* was discharging passengers, mail and baggage in a blaze of white light. The ship crawled with customs men.

"Hello, Mullen," he said to one of them. "Looking for something special?"

"We got a tip jewels and rare jades were being smuggled in on this ship,"

Mullen answered. "We're going to find 'em if we have to take her apart!"

"I think I know where they are," Dan said. "I've had quite a night. Brugger and several others are in jail, including Crawford the importer. A man named Jordan is dead, in the bay, and we have three or four cases of something on the beach."

"Lead the way," Mullen said. He called several men. "Follow Kennedy's car," he ordered.

As they passed the shack Margie called, "Hot coffee when you have time, Dan."

"I'll be back," Dan promised.

The men lifted the boxes from the skiff and carried them to the shack. Mullen opened a box, expertly and carefully.

"Jade!" Margie gasped.

"Exquisite stuff," Mullen said. "Museum pieces."

"And to think the wretches would risk dumping it overboard," Margie said with growing indignation. "I'd love to own one of those pieces."

"You may be surprised, in time," Mullen answered. "This stuff will be returned to its rightful owners in China, and the Chinese are a grateful people."

CUSTOMS men, boxes and detectives departed finally. Margie sat down weakly. "Go to bed," Dan told her. "I may not get any sleep tonight."

He looked at the telephone. Five minutes later it rang. Hal Rollins, deputy district attorney, got to the point immediately.

"Brugger's attorney is trying to spring him. What about the evidence we'll need? The gun he's supposed to have used on Jordan, and Jordan's body, where are they?"

"Be out here tomorrow morning at daylight," Dan said. "And don't be late."

"I'll be on time. I'll be matching wits against the city's best criminal lawyer, and I can't miss a bet," Rollins said.

Rollins was knocking at the door at quarter to five. "I didn't dare go to bed."

Dan put on the coffeepot, then dressed, while Margie observed proceedings with half-opened eyes. He made breakfast, then the two men sat on the porch and watched the sunlight strike distant mountain peaks and work down to tidewater. The tide was out, and Dan combed the beach with binoculars.

"Come along," he said at last.

Clams squirted water as they walked the beach, and crabs scurried to cover.

"Here's the automatic pistol tossed overboard," Dan said. "Now, we'll go back to the porch."

He searched the long line of slowly moving driftwood with the glasses and finally said, "I think I've spotted something. Let's launch my skiff."

They were breathing hard after carrying the skiff over the tide flats, and the attorney's smart, new suit was wet to the knees from salt water. Dan rowed nearly twenty minutes, then pushed through dunnage and slabs of bark and empty cans to an overturned boat.

With an oar he pushed aside the surrounding drift and peered underneath. A body, distorted by water ripples, hung downward—a strange keel on a boat bottomside up.

"Jordan's foot jammed under a bottom board and held," Dan said. "I'll get a line around the body."

After several futile attempts, Dan stripped off his clothing, dived overboard and managed to complete the job while holding his breath. "That's stuff's cold!" he gasped as he emerged.

He dressed, and they towed the boat to shallow water and righted it. Margie, watching from a distance, telephoned for the coroner.

It was nine o'clock before the coroner came and removed Jordan's body. Dan sat down on his porch and gazed at the water, the forested hills and mountains.

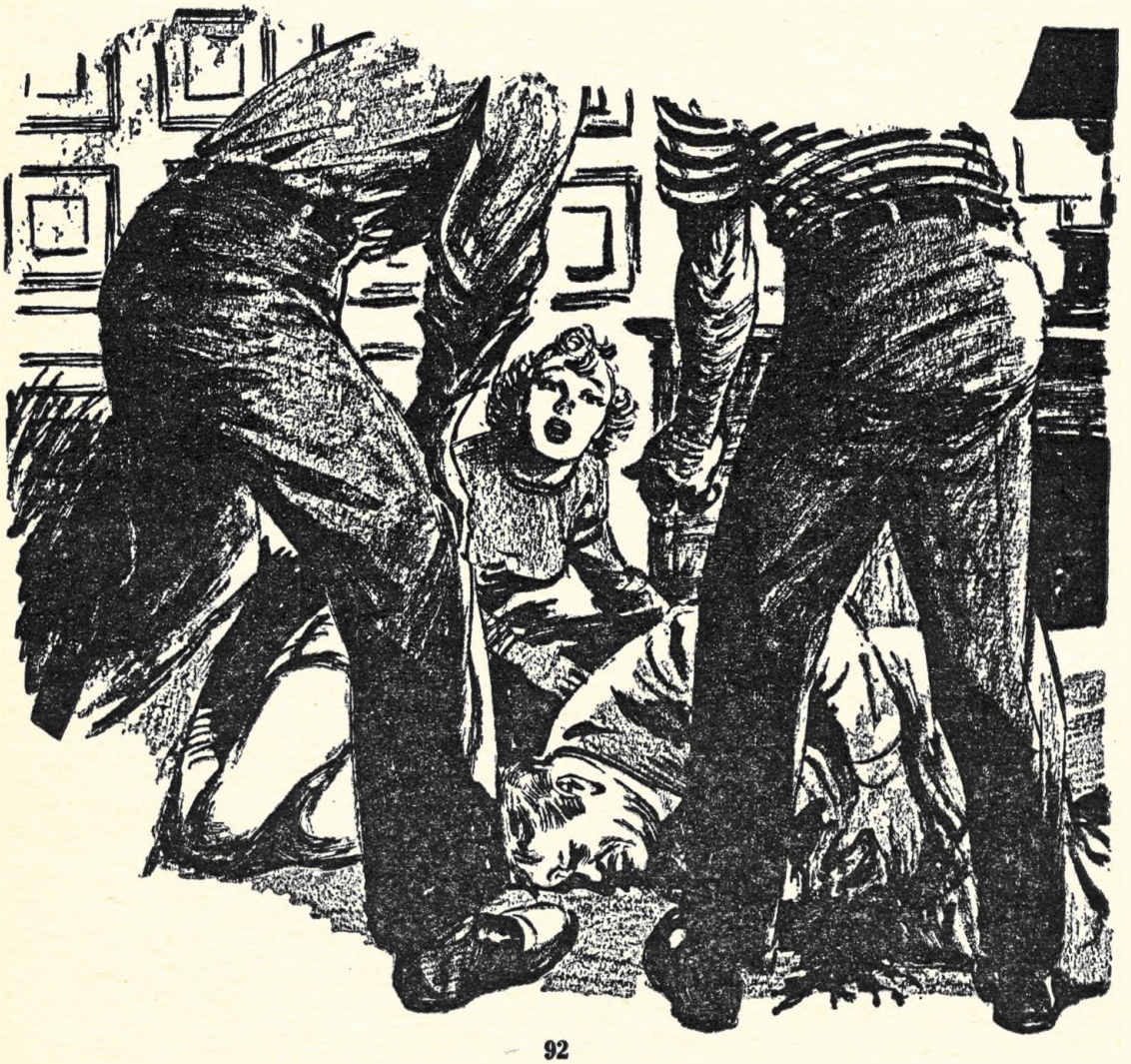
"Case completed, Margie," he said. "You may get a jade trinket out of it."

"Right now," she answered, "I'll settle for being beachcombers until we are rested up. You haven't had a vacation in a long time. What do you say? Shall we stay here and quiet our nerves?"

"Why not?" Dan answered. "Why not?"

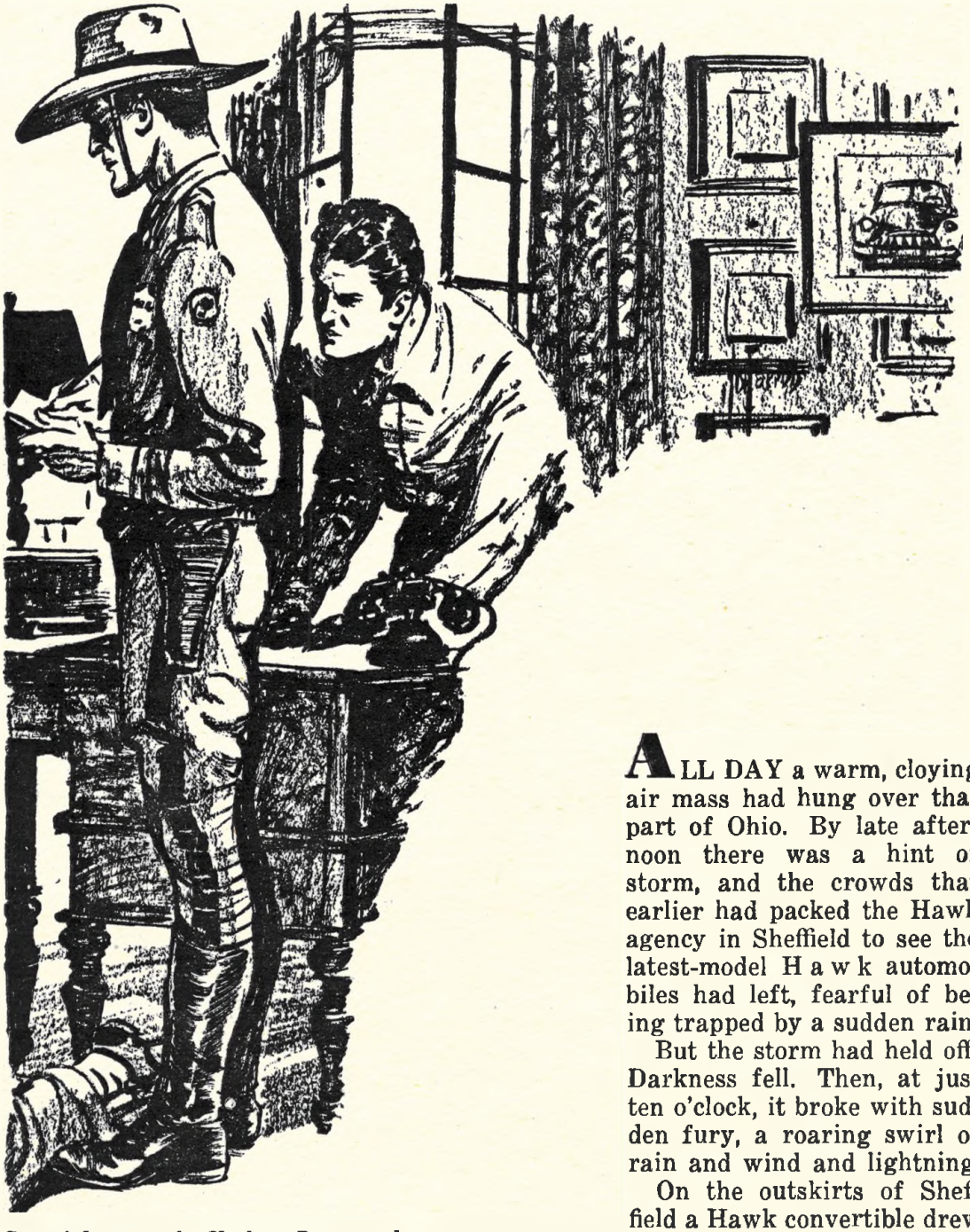
Case of the HOODED HAWK

A Novel by HERBERT BREAN



It was a dirty, money-under-the-counter business, and

Ken wanted to wash his hands of it—but not with blood!



ALL DAY a warm, cloying air mass had hung over that part of Ohio. By late afternoon there was a hint of storm, and the crowds that earlier had packed the Hawk agency in Sheffield to see the latest-model Hawk automobiles had left, fearful of being trapped by a sudden rain.

But the storm had held off. Darkness fell. Then, at just ten o'clock, it broke with sudden fury, a roaring swirl of rain and wind and lightning.

On the outskirts of Sheffield a Hawk convertible drew up before a neat Cape Cod bungalow. The young man in

the car leaped out, ran around, made a shelter of his raincoat and escorted a dark-haired, slim-legged girl up the flagstone walk. They arrived at the front door laughing and breathless and were greeted by a blonde woman whose face was so evenly, so perfectly featured that some people, meeting her for the first time, mistakenly thought they had seen her in minor movie roles.

"Hi, Helen!" said Ken Wilson, as he helped the girl with him take off her jacket. "You tending door tonight?"

Helen Craig laughed the laugh she reserved for the witticisms of attractive young men. "I guess I am, temporarily. . . . Hello, Jane." This in the disdainful tone Mrs. Craig used for younger women.

"Sorry we're so late. All my fault, of course," said Ken. "Are you dry, honey?"

Jane Robbins smiled. "All but my legs. Those big feet of yours splashed me good . . . Hi, Helen! Where're the O'Haras?"

"Your hostess is fixing cheese things and beer. Your host is trying to turn his furnace into an air conditioner. They'll be along in a minute." Helen Craig's hand went to her perfectly coifed head in mechanical motion. "Gordon's in the living room. Come on in. Isn't it warm?"

But having started Jane Robbins toward the living room, Helen Craig turned back and spoke in a low voice to Ken Wilson, hanging the wet coats in a hall closet. "Is Carney at the agency?"

Ken looked surprised. "Of course not. Should he be?"

Carney Craig was the owner of the Hawk automobile agency in Sheffield and Ken was his sales manager. Helen Craig was Carney's wife. Carney was fat, fiftyish and, outwardly at least, placidly good-humored. His wife was still in her early thirties, very youthful in face and figure and waspish in temperament, at least where Carney was concerned. Her present anxiety, therefore, was surprising.

"I guess—oh, I don't know what's the matter with me." She smiled nervously. "Of course you must have left the agency an hour ago."

"Well, as a matter of fact. . . ." He took a package of cigarettes from his pocket and looked at her speculatively. "Smoke? I left there an hour ago, yes. And Carney had been gone some time then. He said he had to drive over to Lawrenceville. It happens I went back to the agency since, though."

"Why?"

"Oh—it wasn't important."

"But couldn't it wait until morning?"

SHE ESSAYED one of her coquettish smiles, but suddenly she ground out the cigarette he had given her and turned away. From the living room beyond came the murmur of conversation between Jane Robbins and Gordon Birmingham.

"What's the matter, Helen?" asked Ken sharply.

"Oh, I don't know—I don't know at all." He was shocked to discover that she was close to tears. "It must be this damn weather. I've felt it all day. I'm glad it's storming—glad! Maybe it'll clear the air. But I wish Carney would get here. I knew he was going to Lawrenceville, but he should be back by now."

He took her by the arm. "Nerves," he said. "That's all. Come in the living room."

She flung his arm away. "It isn't nerves! My nerves are as good as anybody's! It's just—Oh, Ken, why would someone who didn't like him call Carney up at three in the morning?"

She was holding Ken by the arm, talking in a low, tense voice. She didn't want anyone to hear her, and she didn't want him to leave. From the kitchen came the scrape of spoon in bowl as Eileen O'Hara fixed the cheese things.

"Tell me, Ken, what's *wrong?*"

He was tired. It had been a tough day for everyone. Yet he had a strange im-

pulse to laugh at her. What's wrong? What *wasn't* wrong!

"Why, nothing," he said. "The premiere came off just as we planned. The new building is working out fine. Business is good. We wrote fourteen orders today, and we'll do better tomorrow—the threat of rain drove them away."

"It isn't that." She made an impatient gesture; the madonnalike face seemed haloed by fear. "Ken, this happened a week ago. A week ago last night, it was. I always sleep well. But suddenly I woke up—I don't know why. I hadn't heard anything as far as I know. It was after three." Her voice sank to almost a whisper.

From the kitchen, Eileen O'Hara called, "I'm coming, good people!"

"Our twin beds are side by side. Carney was not in his. I called his name. Then I heard his voice, far away. He was talking on the phone downstairs. I couldn't make the words out, but I could tell it was a phone conversation because of the pauses. We have an extension in the bedroom. I picked the phone up. I heard someone say, 'How'd you like the company to know what you've been up to?' There was a long silence. It scared me—I don't know why. Then another voice said, 'We're still in business. We'll discuss that tomorrow night.' One hung up. Then the other hung up. I heard the two clicks. I turned out my light and waited for Carney to come back to bed, but he didn't. I lay there, wondering what it meant. I was scared, I tell you. I suppose I finally dozed off because a long time after I heard him sigh as he climbed in and pulled the covers up. It sort of woke me up, and I began to wonder if I had really heard it. Because . . . because—"

"Because why?" he asked to be polite. Not because he needed her to tell him. He could understand a lot of people asking Carney Craig if he wanted the Hawk Motor Car Company to know what he'd been doing.

But Helen Craig was white and quite literally trembling. Trembling! All because of a conversation she had overheard. He smiled reassuringly.

The smile didn't work. "You didn't hear that voice," she shuddered. "It was terrible. I thought it was Carney's. But it sounded so different . . . horrible . . . if it were Carney's—"

"It was undoubtedly some dope who got him out of bed to complain about his car or something."

"Maybe you're right. It—oh, I don't know why it suddenly started bothering me tonight. But somehow I began to think and *think* about it, and it sounded so terrible, so deadly at the time—"

He gave her a friendly push and she smiled at him, wanly, but still the old, self-conscious Helen Craig smile, and he followed her into the living room.

It hadn't occurred to her that if the call had come from some crank complaining about his Hawk, or about Carney Craig's service, the telephone would have rung in the bedroom and awakened her. Obviously, this was a call that Carney had made. Had it been Carney making the threat, or someone else?

So what? After tomorrow, he would not be working for Carney Craig!

"Hi, Gordon," he said to the slight, well-tailored man who had been sitting with Jane. Gordon Birmingham said, "Hi, kid, how many'd you sell?" and put out a friendly hand.

Ken grinned. "Only fourteen, Gordon. But we'll do better tomorrow."

Birmingham chuckled, a middle-aged man whom golf kept slim and a pleasant sense of humor kept youthful. Outside, the thunder had died away and the rain settled down to a steady tattoo against the white frilled windows.

"You better," he said. "Brother, how nice it'd be to get back to the good old days of the post war, when you could sell everything you could make and the only headache was getting steel." He sighed elaborately and everyone laughed.

Gordon Birmingham was the biggest success story Sheffield had ever produced. The son of a poor widow, he had

gone to Detroit, a scant two-hundred miles away, and had risen through the years to become production chief of the Hawk Motor Car Company. Half of Sheffield knew Gordon Birmingham and the other half pretended to. Now back home on one of his infrequent and brief vacation trips, he was the house guest of the Craigs. The local paper had carried an interview with him tonight on the business outlook.

EILEEN O'HARA, a tiny girl in a tinier apron, came in bearing a huge tray of hors d'oeuvres. "Eddie," she called to her husband below, "come on up and make with the beer . . . Hi, kids!"

They heard Eddie O'Hara's heavy tread on the stair. A moment later, bearing a second tray with bottles, he came in grinning happily, a tall, heavy-set redhead. By comparison, Gordon Birmingham was short and slight; Ken was tall and lean. Yet all three men had something in common: the look of sureness with mechanical things that attaches to men who have grown up around motors. Eddie O'Hara was the Craig agency's service boss.

He distributed glasses to everyone, and when they were settled, sank into a chair and said, "Hey, Ken, what delayed you?"

" 'Business' is what he told me," said Jane Robbins. She had blue eyes and blue-black hair and a profile whose perfection did not stop at her firm little chin. "Where were you really, darling? I mean, I know it was another woman, but which one this time?"

Ken took her hand, sipped his beer and then lay back in the deep chair. It was nothing that should get around town, he reflected. But all these people would know about it sooner or later. Carney, especially. Where *was* Carney?

"Well," he said, "I closed up the place, after what you might fairly describe as a tough day at the office, only it was an automobile agency, and I went home to change before picking up Jane and coming over here. I was just putting on a clean shirt when Lu Trowbridge called me."

"Lu Trowbridge!" said Eddie.

"Who's that?" asked Gordon Birmingham.

"The sheriff. You must remember him, Gordon."

The telephone rang.

"There he is now," grinned Eddie O'Hara. "Get it, will you, wench?"

"Get it yourself, you overgrown oaf," replied his wife sweetly.

Eddie got up, chuckled, "See how she loves me?" to the guests and went to the phone in the hall.

"What?" they heard him say. *"Wha-a-at?"*

Then, "Yes, sure. Sure, Lu." He hung up.

When he came back in the room, he wore a strange expression.

"It *was* Lu Trowbridge," he said. He looked from one to another, as though he could not believe what he was saying. "He wants you down to the agency right away, Ken. Something's happened. There's—someone is dead."

His indirect stumbling conjured more fear than any simple statement could have. Helen Craig's eyes widened to their whites. She suddenly screamed.

"It's Carney!"

Ken leaped to his feet. "Eddie: Is it?"

But Eddie O'Hara shook his head. "No, it's Frank Fliel. Trowbridge just found him outside our agency. His head's all smashed in."

"Oh, no!" cried Jane. "It can't be. Poor Vivian Fliel—with all those children!"

"Fliel," said Birmingham. "Isn't he that nasty little son-of-a-gun you had a few words with this afternoon, Ken?"

"Yes. And I'd have had a few more tonight if I had seen him tonight. He tried to plaster the agency with a big sign, saying the Hawk is no good. That's what delayed me."

Birmingham's face hardened. "Good riddance, I'd say."

Eddie O'Hara said, "We'll go down

Ken heard the irregular intake of her breath and knew she was frightened

with you, Ken."

Helen Craig said, "Where in the world is Carney?"

Her voice fluttered with fear.

II

FRANK FLIEL had been a small, thin man, with greying hair and a hatchet face. He had never amounted to much in Sheffield until the war. Fliel enlisted early and then suddenly he was a national hero. There had been many newspaper stories date-lined Guadalcanal and Kwajalein, lauding his almost neurotic courage and his incredible sharpshooting skill with any kind of gun, and the magazines had printed close-up photographs of the lynxlike eyes that gave Fliel his marksman's vision.

Badly wounded at last, after being repeatedly decorated, he had returned, be-medaled and honored, and had since tried to support his wife, his taste for whisky and his growing brood of children on a scraggly chicken farm well beyond the city limits.

He had also ordered a Hawk panel

truck, which he had never received because Carney Craig had seen to it that what few panel trucks came through from Detroit went to whoever happened to be offering the highest price at the time. This was in keeping with the Craig sales policies, and Fliel finally had angrily taken back his deposit on the order.

Death had dealt terribly with Fliel's face. It had always worn a sly expression suggesting a slightly dissolute fox. But the heavy tire iron that had sunk into his brain like a knife in butter had first been smashed against his jaw, leaving it set in an expression of demoniac leer; Fliel looked as though he were about to break into a mocking laugh. The rain had made his clothing sodden and was still sending bloody rivulets down his cheek.

Ken said, "Ugh," without intending to. He was surprised to find he felt a little sick. Birmingham said, "God!" softly. Eddie O'Hara turned away.

Ken said, "How did you—how did you happen to find him?" and saw that the sheriff was looking at him speculatively.

Behind the sheriff a deputy was painstakingly measuring distances from Fliel's head and feet to the smooth stucco wall of the new agency building and recording the results in a shorthand notebook.

"You told them about the sign, Ken?" asked the sheriff, gesturing toward Birmingham and Eddie O'Hara.

"I was just about to when you called."

"Someone started to put a big sign up on the agency here tonight," said Lu Trowbridge. He was a big, bulky man, with iron-grey hair and deeply creased felt hat. "The sign sort of insulted Hawk automobiles—and Hawk dealers. I happened to be driving by on patrol and scared the guy off. I saw him running across the fields in the dark. It looked like Frank Fliel. Now I'm sure it was.

"I got to wondering whether he might not come back—Frank was a persistent cuss, you know. He proved that on Guadalcanal. So next time around, I drove up into the driveway. My headlights hit that window and it reflected their light back on the lawn, right on Fliel's body lyin' there in the dark. Otherwise I'd never of in the world seen it."

"I guess there's no doubt that he was murdered," said Birmingham.

The sheriff sniffed. "That's for sure, if you study the angle he was hit from. Someone came up from behind and hit to kill. But let's go inside. I'd like to see if he got in, or if anything was disturbed."

"I have a key," said Ken. "And just for the record, I'd like to account for my movements tonight. Fliel certainly gave me reason to want to do something to him. But—"

"Sure, sure," said the sheriff absently. "Let's go in." And when they were inside the salesroom: "Everything looks okay in here. You fellas stay here. I'll just smooch around a minute."

He returned in a couple of minutes and they went back outside.

"Nothin's disturbed in there at all," he frowned. He pulled a big curved-stem pipe from his pocket, packed it, lighted it thoughtfully and said, "I'm going to wait here for that State policeman. No tellin' when he'll get here. But Ken, why don't you give me that account of your movements you mentioned."

Ken leaned against the cool stucco wall of the building agency, out of the steady drizzle of rain. "I'll begin at the beginning," he said.

THERE had been so much to do that afternoon that he had not even left the agency for a sandwich until dangerously close to four P.M. That had been the hour set by the Hawk company for every one of its dealers all over the country to unveil the new cars—a widely publicized "premiere" suitably dramatized by a radio and TV programs tantalizing advertisements, and the symbolic starting of the Hawk final assembly line by a high government dignitary.

When he returned from his brief lunch, Helen Craig, Birmingham, Carney Craig, Eddie O'Hara and the several salesmen were standing in the big salesroom now filled with the exciting redolence exuded by new automobiles. The new Hawks stood like white-sheeted ghosts around the floor, and outside, dozens of curious townspeople pressed noses against the salesroom's big plate-glass window.

"You had me worried," Craig called in his best, good-humored manner. "Can't be late today, you know, Ken. Stand by, everybody. It's just one minute to four."

Ken had put his fingers on the bolt of the front door. Behind him the others stood one to a car, ready to strip off the wrappings. The faces outside watched expectantly. The courthouse clock hoarsely boomed four P.M.

"Let's go," called Carney Craig.

Even above the rattle of the bolt and the first surge inside, he heard the murmur of appreciation as the white gowns slipped from the new cars' gleaming flanks. Those cars had been widely heralded as the most advanced line yet in modern engineering and styling, and the first glimpse at least had not disappointed the crowd. But as they pushed past him, it seemed that many turned to look at him as though to say, "Sure, they're beautiful—but I wish *you* were not selling them, chiseler!"

He shrugged the feeling off and pushed toward his desk through the crowd that was getting thicker momentarily. If all went well, he wouldn't have to put up with this situation much longer.

Landseer, Hawk's newest and fastest-moving rival in the low-price field, was planning to establish a dealership in Sheffield and, sometime before, Ken had quietly started negotiations to try to get it. At the thought of what that could mean to him and to Jane Robbins, he almost smiled. Then he'd show the town what sort of automobile dealer he really was!

"What's this eight and a half to one?" a woman demanded.

PATIENTLY, he explained how and why Hawk was the only car in its price range with so high a compression ratio, and what that meant in gasoline economy. He described the new transmission, and told how the additional body roominess had been achieved.

"Yeah?" said her husband. "When can you get one?"

"We're taking orders on the basis of delivery within a month. It might be less. Production is just getting under way, of course."

"A month! How many heaters and fog lights and radios do you have to order with it, eh?" The man's mouth twisted into a bitter smile. "C'mon, Min."

The grim look returned to Ken's chin as he pushed on. The crowd was especially thick around the pearl-grey convertible, and the remarks he listened for automatically seemed mostly grudging admiration. He passed a familiar blue-serge-clad back and heard Carney Craig say, "We got 'em to you as fast as we could, Woodie. I know that Ken did everything he could to—"

"Maybe there's things you *don't* know, Carney," said the other man.

Ken acted as though he hadn't heard. Working his way around the new four-door sedan, he encountered Helen Craig arm in arm with Birmingham. "And less than eight months ago all we had were hammer models," Birmingham was saying.

"Hammer models? What are they?" she asked wonderingly.

Ha! Carney Craig's wife didn't know what a hammer model was! The heck she didn't!

"It's the first full-size model of a new car in metal," Birmingham explained. "It's hammered out of sheet steel over a full size wooden mock-up. Usually, it's a year at least between. . . ."

Ken had finally reached his desk. His phone was ringing. Katie, who

was both secretary to Carney Craig and the agency's switchboard operator, said, "How's it going, Ken?"

"Fine. Sneak away from the board for a minute and see for yourself."

"Don't think I won't! Detroit's been trying to reach you. Want to take it now?"

"Right. Who's calling—the plant?"

"No, it's not the plant. The name they gave was a Mr. McDonald."

Ken's heart stopped. McDonald was the name of the Landseer regional sales manager.

There was a series of distant clicks. Then, "Hello, hello?" said a quick, irritated voice. "That you, Wilson?"

"Yes." Ken glanced around nervously. With customers and one of his own salesmen standing nearby, this was a swell time to be discussing business with Hawk's chief rival!

"I suppose you fellows are pretty busy right now—" a dry chuckle—"so I'll be brief. I'll be in Sheffield tomorrow to sign the papers for your Landseer agency. We've decided you're the man we want, Wilson, and we're mighty glad to have you with us . . . Well, hello? Are you there?"

Ken couldn't talk. He forgot about the people around his desk, about where he was, about everything except that at last it had come. He was free of Carney Craig, of all the slurs and innuendos, free to show the town what—

"Wilson!" the man on the phone barked. "Did you hear me?"

"Yes, I heard you, Mr. McDonald. It—it just took me by surprise. You'll be here tomorrow?"

"Right. We can iron out the financing then. You still want to put in ten thousand, right? . . . Okay. We can arrange—Well, no need to go into that now. I'll call you after I get in tomorrow. Goodby, Wilson. And once again, we're delighted about it. We know you'll do a fine job for Landseer."

Ken hung up mechanically. He tried to remember if he had said anything that others could have overheard and interpreted correctly. He didn't know, but he decided he didn't care.

"What'll that panel truck deliver for, mister?" said an overalled farmer. He looked at Ken oddly, and Ken suspected himself of smiling into empty space for some seconds.

"Panel truck? Oh, that panel truck." He took the man by the arm. "Let me just take you over and explain about that panel truck." He had never been happier in his life.

"That truck will deliver in Sheffield, with all taxes paid, license, heater and grille guard, as you see it here, for twenty-one ninety-three," he declared. Beautiful, isn't it?"

"And an extra three hundred bucks for you, eh, Wilson?" said someone.

Ken wheeled. Frank Fliel stood behind him. On his arm he wore his once-pretty wife, Vivian, like a faded flower. She looked anxiously at him. "Now, Frankie," she said.

"Soon's I get the dough together," Fliel went on, "I'll be in to take delivery on *my* truck—the one I ordered three years ago."

He smiled wickedly at the people whose heads turned at the loud talk. "I'm going to have a new Hawk truck some day, too. I hain't been able to get it so far 'cause I don't have no trade-in—sold my car when I went into the Marines—and I ain't got the money for Wilson's commission yet. So of course my name stays far down on the list. Hey, Wilson?"

In the circle of people who had turned to listen, someone snickered. Ken felt his face go red and then white.

"Not that I really want a Hawk so bad," went on Fliel. "They really are a lousy car—you know that? Honest! I see one just the other day—last week it was—parked in the lane behind my farm. You know, I got pretty good eyesight. Right away I see somethin' wrong with this car. And you know what it was?"

He paused for full rhetorical effect. "Damn if the wheels ain't off center." He laughed loudly. The crowd snickered. "I mean it. I could tell by the fenders. The wheels were sort of cockeyed, al-

most rubbin' the fenders. Guess maybe they was rushin' too many through the production line that day. But that's Hawk for you. Now, you take the Landseer—

"I been three years waitin' for a car," Fliel went on. "That's 'cause I ain't a friend of Wilson's. Why should I be? A foot soldier never got acquainted with the air corps guys, believe me. We was out *fightin'!*"

QUICKLY, Ken pushed a customer out of his way, feeling rage well up inside of him, knowing he had reached the limits of his endurance and glad of what was going to happen.

Fliel also moved forward. His pale wife was a drag on his arm, but not enough. "We was out *fightin'*," he repeated. "And I'm still man enough to tell any chiselin' skunk—"

Vivian Fliel cried, *"Frank!"* Ken's right arm, carrying his full weight with it, moved up—and two blue-clad arms seized it in a grip of iron.

"Easy, son," said Carney Craig. "Fliel's drunk, and you know it."

Ken tried to push Craig's big bulk away, but Carney had strength as well as bulk. And he was talking in a loud voice intended for the whole salesroom.

"Listen, Fliel, you can't come in here and abuse my men like that. We've never been able to get all the Hawks everyone wants since the war. You know that. Everyone knows it. You've gotta be patient. I gave Ken charge of our sales because I have complete faith in him, and I won't stand for anybody saying the things you just said. Why—" he put his arm on Ken's shoulder affectionately—"the idea that Ken Wilson would accept a bribe is just too silly to anyone who knows him! He—"

Ken pushed savagely at the fat man and started again for Fliel.

This time he was stopped by a different type of person—so slender, and so subtly curved, she looked almost fragile in her starched white pique. Yet, when she moved in front of him, she stopped Ken's onrush even before she spoke.

"How about showing a girl the new cars, honey?" said Jane Robbins casually.

Carney Craig moved around her and grabbed Fliel's arm. "Get going, Frank," he ordered. "A little coffee'll fix him up, Mrs. Fliel. Have him come in and see me tomorrow morning and we'll see what we can do for him. That goes for anyone who wants to place an order," he added for the benefit of the others listening.

Jane took Ken's arm. "Well, what are we waiting for?" she asked brightly. Ken permitted her to lead him to the chair behind his desk while she perched herself on the desk corner. She took cigarettes from the box on his desk, placed one between his lips and then lit them both. She paused for a moment to exhale a cloud of smoke and thoughtfully looked into a large plate-glass mirror behind him. She saw a girl holding a cigarette to a cupid's-bow mouth, a remarkably pretty girl with deep blue eyes and blue-black hair.

"Looks like the U.S. cavalry got here in the nick of time," she observed. Ken looked up sardonically. "I was the U.S. cavalry," she added explanatorily. "Don't you think so? Or don't you think so? And what *do* you think, by the way?"

He continued looking at her. "Or do you think at all? And if not—"

"Oh, shut up," he said. "Golly, it's going to be awful, being married to you."

Jane Robbins laughed. "That's what all my other husbands said. Tell me, if I'm not getting too inquisitive, what took place just now before I walked into 'Craig Sales and Service, New and Used Hawk Automobiles, We Repair all Makes'?"

"A character named Fliel was making a speech."

"About?"

"About the sales manager of 'Craig Sales and Service, New and Used Hawk Automobiles, We Repair All Makes'."

The amusement in her face died. She leaned over to pick an imaginary speck

from his lapel. "Oh, darling, I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he said. "I'm glad now I didn't hit him. It would have just advertised the whole rotten situation to all the town. And what's worse, it might have gotten back to—Hey!"

He grabbed her arms and held her at arm's length. "The news!"

"What news?"

"*The* news. Miss Robbins, allow me to present the owner of the Landseer Automobile Agency franchise in Sheffield."

"Oh, no," she said softly, and even while he stared into them, her eyes grew filmy. "You mean really? At last? Oh, darling I'm—I'm so happy I think I'm going to cry."

"Don't," he said, and chucked her under the chin. "Everyone would know then that you are really happy, women being the contrary things they are. Then they might guess. And I'm keeping this a secret until the papers are signed tomorrow."

"Of course."

She blinked fast and smiled and squeezed his arm, as they both became aware that this tableau was being observed by some of the customers. "You go back to work and sell Hawks—while you can. Do you still think you'll close at nine tonight?"

"On the button. I should pick you up at nine-thirty."

"Good. It'll be a nice party, I think. Although any party I can get you to these days is a good party."

III

DURING the next two hours Ken worked his way around the sales floor several times, seeing that his salesmen were on the job, pausing to greet an old customer or to record the name of a new prospect. Had Sam McDonald been watching his new agency chief, he would have been well satisfied.

Ken had a direct, friendly approach which transcended mere salesmanship. His manner and his record before the war had, in fact, done much to combat the reputation Carney Craig had foisted on him.

But Ken was unaware of that. He knew only one interpretation for the sidelong glances darted at him and for the muttered remarks he half heard.

As he worked, an idea slowly grew in his mind: Why not resign now? He had worked for months, helping get the new building ready for the premiere, but now everything was done. It was not an illogical time to leave, he thought, and by resigning before his own agency became public knowledge, he would separate the two in the public mind.

It was the dinner hour and the crowd had thinned out. Impulsively, he turned down the long corridor leading to Carney's office, passing the desk and switchboard where Katie sat during the daytime. He walked in without bothering to knock and instantly regretted his angry rudeness.

It was like walking in on the climatic scene of a play. Carney's office was handsome. A big stone fireplace at one end and a small red-leather bar at the other broke the gleaming knotty pine walls. In the center of the softly-illuminated room was a big desk whose glass top, as usual, was clear of everything except the latest National Automobile Dealer's Association handbook of used-car prices, a water carafe and a gold pen-and-inkwell set. Illuminated on one wall was an old cracked oil painting of a naked girl whom Carney referred to as Bertha and said had followed him since his earliest days in business.

But it was none of these familiar things that Ken noticed now. Helen Craig's shapely back was to him, arms akimbo, in the traditional attitude of determination, and the words she was addressing to her husband were in keeping.

"You can darned well give me the combination to that safe right now, cheap skate," Helen Craig declared doggedly, "or else you can take out insurance on my rings so I can keep them at home."

Black fury eclipsed Carney's big moon face. He deliberately poured himself a

glass of water from the carafe on his desk, like a man trying to keep his temper, and his hands shook so much he made a clatter with the glass.

"If you think I'm going to give you the combination to the safe with all my business papers in it—" Carney accented each word by pounding the glass on the desk. "Helen, you're a damned fool! Why, even Birmingham told you that this afternoon when you brought it up. Why should I pay for insurance when —"

He caught sight of Ken. "Well, what do you want?"

seen in it before.

He closed the door before she could again draw him into it and, turning, almost bumped into Eddie O'Hara. He caught Eddie by the arm. "Don't go in now. Carney's having wife trouble."

"Wife trouble isn't anything to what he's going to have," said Eddie wrathfully. "You know what he's done on me? He's ordered those cheap two-dollar-a-set rings for me to install in motors instead of regular Hawk rings—because he can save a buck a set on them. I'm going to tell that tight—"

Ken grabbed him. "Not now, Eddie.

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE!

"WILL you please let me have the $50.00 you owe me?" may sound like a perfectly legal request. But it isn't—if the person who writes the message has used a postcard instead of a letter.

This is only one of many obscure laws with which most people are unfamiliar. It's a definitely important law, however, since such an offense as publicly airing a debt can carry a penalty of five years in jail and a maximum fine of $5,000.00.

"Sorry. I wanted to see you about something. I guess it will keep." He started to close the door.

"Just a minute," Helen Craig called. She turned to her husband. "I'll leave it up to him. See what he says . . .Look, Ken. What do you think of a husband who makes his wife keep her jewels in his office safe rather than pay insurance, and then won't even give her the combination so she can get them when she wants to wear them?"

Carney Craig threw the glass at his wife. It was the measure of his rage, for its contents drenched the furniture and carpet. But the glass missed her, struck a leather sofa and dropped unbroken to the carpet.

"Some day, Helen," said Carney Craig softly, "I'm going to kill you." His face contained lines Ken had never

I'm telling you, it'd do no good. Listen." He led the other away from the door, explaining the Craigs' quarrel. "Go on home," he ended. "You have guests coming tonight. Go home and put the beer on ice."

Eddie grinned sheepishly and went back to the garage.

IT HAD been close to eight o'clock, when the threat of a storm had thinned out the crowd, that Ken first noticed the man in black.

He was studying the business coupe with pursed lips, a tall, cadaverous figure in funereal black who carried a furled umbrella. A large pearl stickpin decorated his black tie. Ken got the impression that he was waiting to be approached.

"Any information you'd like to

have?" he asked cordially.

"Yes," said the man abruptly. "When can I get one?"

"We're taking orders on the basis of delivery in a month," said Ken. "It might be sooner, of course, although we've already got a sizable waiting list."

The tall thin man shook an impatient hand. "No, no. I need a car now. *Now!* And I'm willing to pay for it."

KEN SMILED understandingly. "Of course. Lots of people are. The Hawk is simply so popular an automobile that it's—"

Again the impatient gesture. "You misunderstand me. I'm willing to *pay* for one. I want service and I expect to pay for it. I'd give a hundred dollars over the delivered price for a car like that if I could get it in less than a week. And if I could drive this one off the floor, I might go as high as two hundred."

"Sorry," said Ken stiffly. "That would be very unfair to our customers who signed up months ago. We don't do business that way."

A gleam appeared in the man's deep-set eyes. "Maybe I've been misinformed," he said. "Isn't your name Wilson?"

Ken flushed. "It is. And if you want a car, I'll be glad to put your name on the list. But you'll wait your turn like everyone else."

"Everyone?" said the man softly. "That isn't the way I heard it." He turned away.

The thunder was louder and more frequent now. Lightning flashed and snapped steadily above the low-scudding clouds. When the closing hour finally came, Ken was last to leave. Locking the door, he realized that as they had gone out he had not said goodnight to any of the men who worked for him, to whom, as to himself, this evening was the culmination of many long weeks' work.

"You *need* to get away from this place!" he told himself irritatedly. He had surely had enough.

He had been putting on a clean shirt in his room, when the phone rang.

"Ken, can you come down to the agency?"

"What's happened?" he had demanded anxiously. "Who is this?"

"Lu Trowbridge."

It had given him a strange feeling, as though something hinted by the night's oppressiveness was beginning to happen.

"What's the matter, Lu?"

"Well, nothin' to sound so alarmed about. But I can show you better'n I can explain. You better step on it if you don't want to get caught in the storm that's blowing up."

He had stepped on it, and he saw what it was before his convertible braked to a stop in front of the modernistic sales agency that had only recently been completed.

"Guess somebody doesn't like you people so good," Lu Trowbridge said amiably.

Standing against the big plate-glass window of the showroom was a huge section of wall board, hung with festoons of lemons. Someone had printed on it, in dripping red-paint letters:

THE HAWK IS A LEMON AND
ITS DEALERS ARE THIEVES

Stung, Ken pushed open the car door.

"I spotted it when I went by on road patrol just now," said the sheriff casually. "Suppose he figured no one would see it until tomorrow morning, when the whole town would go by on its way to work."

" 'He?' " Ken stopped. "You know who it was?"

"We-e-ll. I heard you had a little trouble with someone this afternoon. And when I turned in here, my headlights caught someone runnin' fast across the field there behind the garage. 'Course, I only got a glimpse of the guy, but—" The sheriff's slow, rumbling voice died.

"Frank Fliel!" said Ken.

"Mind, that ain't a positive identification, Ken." The sheriff raised a hamlike

hand. "I didn't see his face, and it was dark. But if it wasn't Frank—Here, lemme help you with that."

"Thanks, I've got it."

He smeared red paint all over his hands, awkwardly dragging the big sign around to the parking apron in the rear. He returned, wiping his hands on a rag.

"I'm obliged to you for calling me, Lu," he said. "That would have been rough."

"Rough is right," the sheriff agreed mildly. "Fliel's a mean little cuss, isn't he? Well, I gotta get back on patrol. Zandt's sick tonight. Be seein' you."

Watching the sheriff's car pull away made Ken feel curiously cheerful. During the postwar car shortage, Lu Trowbridge had been one of the many Sheffield residents who had waited long, long months for a new car, while Carney Craig quietly sold most of the new Hawks that the company allotted his agency to out-of-town customers whom he could charge a premium price.

Carney had arranged these things personally, either over Ken's head or without his knowledge, and had thus escaped all censure. As sales manager, Ken had borne the brunt of the blame. Just how heavy a burden that was, he was only beginning to learn, now that it was again a buyer's market in which the salesman once more had to compete for customers. Many a former customer—and some personal friends—had let him know in various ways what they thought of the Craig Agency sales policies, now that other cars were available. There was no doubt as to whom they thought had been behind those policies!

But apparently Lu Trowbridge still felt friendly toward him.

Maybe, as Jane had always maintained, more people recognized Carney for the smiling hypocrite that he was than Ken thought. But it's not very likely, he told himself bitterly, and then decided he ought to drive around by himself for a few minutes to cool off. He went for a short ride out Cemetery Street. Then, driving toward Jane's to pick her up and take her to the O'Haras', he managed to whistle in the face of the rumbling thunder.

After all, he was just about through with Carney Craig.

IV

THE DRIZZLE had stopped before Ken finished his story, leaving the night damp and chilly. The sheriff relit his pipé and said thoughtfully, "You went for a ride out Cemetery Street, eh?"

"Now listen, Lu—" Eddie O'Hara began.

"No," Ken cut in sharply. "I know what Lu's thinking. I might have driven back here and caught Fliel trying to put up his sign again or something. Just for the record, I didn't. But Lu has to go into all the angles, Eddie."

"I wasn't thinking nothing like that," the sheriff protested. "I don't figure you done in Frank Fliel. You're just not the type. I think whoever killed Fliel was awful mad or awful scared or something. You don't hammer a guy to pieces like that without havin' some strong feeling about it. Well, you fellows go along. I'm meeting the state trooper they're sendin' over right here. I'll snap the catch on the door when we leave. You'll be around in the mornin' Ken?"

"Sure."

"The state cop will want to talk to you, I expect. But you haven't got anything to worry about it."

It seemed indecent to drive away, leaving Fliel's body lying there with a tire iron protruding from its head, waiting for the coroner.

* * * * *

It was a subdued party that gathered again in the O'Hara living room over coffee and sandwiches. They were finishing eating when Helen Craig said: "Good thing Lu Trowbridge is a friend of yours, Ken. If he hadn't called you—"

"Yes. Let's talk about something else. I'm a little fed up with Fliel and—and with everything else."

"I don't blame you," said Eddie

O'Hara. "But you know I don't care whether Frank was a sharpshooter, or a hero on Guadalcanal, or anything else. He was also a little creep that reminds me of something you see when you suddenly lift up a stone."

"That's no way to talk about a war hero, honey," said his wife. "He's just jealous," she went on archly to her guests, "because all he did during the war was service tanks at Aberdeen."

"That has nothing to do with it," said Eddie O'Hara. "Look at Ken. Ninety-four missions over Germany! He's got so many Oak Leaf Clusters—"

"Aw, shut up," said Ken wearily.

"—that he'd look like a forest, if he ever wore them. But he doesn't go around shooting his mouth off like Fliel did, trying to make everyone think that he won the war all by himself."

Ken wanted to change the subject. "Gordon, what do you people in Detroit think of the Landseer?"

Gordon Birmingham chewed reflectively on a potato chip. "Frankly," he said, "since it's all in the family here, we think they've got a pretty good automobile."

Ken knew that, interpreted into the language of the fiercely competitive automobile world, that meant "They've got us worried."

"But it's nowhere near as good as the Hawk," Eileen O'Hara chided.

Birmingham smiled. "Of course. And I'm not kidding. It's not as good a car as the new Hawk. We've torn both of them down and run them on test, driving them through mud baths and over Belgian block roads, and I know what I'm talking about. We're still ahead of them. But they've got new automobiles coming and if what I hear is true, ones they'll sell two years from now are really terrific."

"Two years from now," gasped Jane. "Do they work that far ahead?"

Birmingham chuckled. "Everyone works that far ahead. But those cars can change a lot between now and then. But whatever happens, they'll be the best damned automobile in their class."

THE WOMEN went out into the kitchen with the plates and Eddie O'Hara went with them for more beer. Birmingham said, "You like the Landseer, Ken?" His tone was negligent.

Ken flushed a little. "Why should I?"

"Possibly because you are going to be their dealer here. Aren't you?"

In spite of himself, Ken's jaw dropped. He started to say, "Why, Gordon," and then laughed. "All right," he said. "I was going to announce it tomorrow anyway, after the papers are signed. But how did you know?"

"Easy," Birmingham chuckled. "We know Sheffield's one of about forty towns they are expanding to throughout the country. I was just thinking today who they might get here. Then I put myself in Sam MacDonald's place and it wasn't hard to dope out. He obviously needs a young, able, experienced, local boy that everyone likes. When I asked myself who fitted that description—"

Ken said, "I'm not so sure of your last qualification. Maybe things aren't quite as rosy with the Hawk agency and its sales manager as you think. You got a sample of it today when Fliel shot off his mouth—the poor guy."

Birmingham's face darkened. "Poor guy, nothing!" he snapped. "But tell me, Ken. I know what's really going on at the agency. I mean, I know what a skinflint Carney Craig is. Doesn't the whole town know?"

"Carney's not only a skinflint," said Ken, speaking low as not to be overheard, "but he's a darned clever bird, with that bluff, friendly manner of his. I'm the guy who has taken most of the raps. And Carney was so smooth about it that I didn't know what he was doing to me until comparatively recently."

"Have there been other incidents? I mean, insults and putting up signs and things?"

"None quite so obvious, if that's what you mean. But there are plenty of people who got short-changed like Fliel did, by Carney simply refusing to deliver cars to them if he could get more money elsewhere. Of course, they didn't neces-

sarily blame Carney." His tone was bitter. "But believe me, they have come to hate the name of Hawk."

Gordon Birmingham crushed out his cigarette with a steady deliberation that bespoke deep anger.

"You and I know," Ken went on, "that not more than one or two per cent of the entire Hawk dealership chiseled like that, nor did any other group of dealers. But there are plenty of people in Sheffield who'd like to have seen that sign decorating the agency tomorrow morning."

Birmingham leaped to his feet in sudden anger and cursed. "That swine is ruining our business," he snapped.

His sudden emotion surprised Ken. He said, "Hell's bells, Gordon, it takes more than one selfish dealer to ruin a company as big as Hawk."

Birmingham gave him a curious look. "And now you're going to give him some competition with Landseer, eh?" he said. "I should think you might have preferred to hang on a while and take over the Hawk franchise from Carney."

"What makes you think he'd want to give it up?"

"What makes you think he can hang on to it forever?" returned Birmingham savagely. "Do you think the company doesn't know what's been going on here? The sales department has had plenty of complaints—plenty! I've tried to talk to him—" His voice dwindled. "And it's a good agency, too. Highly profitable, even without chiseling. I wish I owned it."

"You?" Ken was genuinely startled.

"Sure, me," Birmingham smiled. "There are plenty of Hawk executives who are tired of the hurly-burly of production and competition and would like to retire to a nice little town like this one and run an agency that's a sure twenty to twenty-five thousand a year profit. But you know the unwritten law. No one connected with the company can own an agency."

"I know. And there are good reasons for that rule. If—"

The women returned. "It's midnight, ducky," said Helen Craig to Birmingham, running an affectionate hand over his hair. "Let's us go home. Carney certainly is not going to meet us here now."

They all left together.

KEN LIT a cigarette, a thing he seldom did before breakfast, and stared out the window of his bedroom.

Sam McDonald, the Landseer man, would be in town today. By nightfall, the contract would be signed. Ken was a little shocked to discover that he was too tired to feel any great elation. He angrily crushed out the bitter-tasting cigarette and went downstairs quietly, so as not to wake his mother and their boarder, got his own breakfast, and left the sleeping house. As he drove past the courthouse its familiar dial registered 7:45.

The clock made him think of Fliel; how many times Fliel must have heard it strike, and now would never hear—Nuts! Still, it was strange that a guy who had fought all over the world and come through all right should die so suddenly and mysteriously in his own home town.

When he pulled into the driveway behind Craig Sales and Service, Lu Trowbridge walked out of the garage entrance. Inside the garage, steel clanged on steel.

"Been here all night?" Ken called.

"No," said the sheriff. "We just got here a little while ago. O'Hara let me in,"—Trowbridge looked tired.

A second man emerged from the garage, a tall, lean man whose sun-bronzed face made his blue eyes look off-white. He wore the rather gaudy uniform of a state policeman.

"This here's Ken Wilson, Quinlan," the sheriff said. "Ken, meet Trooper Vic Quinlan."

They shook hands. "What do you make of it, Quinlan?"

Quinlan's handshake and reply were both perfunctory. "Too soon to tell." He looked appraisingly at Ken. "Could we talk in your car a minute?"

"Sure."

"I'll go see if Carney's free yet," said Trowbridge.

They settled back in the Hawk's wide front seat. Quinlan looked straight ahead for a moment, as though marshaling his thoughts. "The sheriff has given me an account of your movements last night," he said then. "Let's see if I have it right. You were last to leave here. You went home and were dressing when he summoned you back. Afterward you went for a short ride—out Cemetery Street, wasn't it?—then picked up a Miss Jane Robbins and went to a party at Mr. O'Hara's."

"That's right." He was glad to observe that his voice and the hand holding his cigarette were perfectly steady. Seized by the natural fear of the innocent under questioning—that he might inadvertently say something that would sound suspicious—he felt anything but steady.

"Mr. O'Hara accounts for your time from then on," Quinlan observed.

"But it's that ride out Cemetery Street that worries you, eh? You figure I might have come back, seen Fliel—"

"I didn't say anything like that," Quinlan cut in quickly. "But the fact is that the coroner examined the body early this morning and he puts the time of death at somewhere between nine and ten-thirty—or centering around nine-forty-five. According to the time chart I've tried to compile, that's just about the time of your solitary ride. Right?"

"Just about."

Eddie O'Hara came to the door of the garage, saw them, waved, and went back in to his work.

"Do you know of anything inside Mr. Craig's office that might have attracted Fliel last night?"

"No. Was he in there? Lu and I went all over the building and found no trace of a break-in."

"He wasn't *in* there, as far as I know. But he must have started in, through the office windows, for a while. His fingerprints are all over the window ledge outside, clearly defined in red paint."

"I see. You might ask Mr. Craig."

"I will as soon as he's free. He seems to be tied up with a very important visitor. Fliel didn't have any reason to like either you or Craig particularly, right?"

Ken was silent. How did you answer something like that?

"I almost had a fight with him yesterday, if that's what you're driving at," he said. "For three years Frank has had his name on our order list for a panel truck. He thought it was time he got delivery. He was sore about it."

"But you didn't think it was time he got delivery, eh, Wilson?"

"Well—yes."

"And who was right—him or you?"

Ken's jaw set stubbornly. After all, he was still working for Carney Craig.

"You had better talk to Mr. Craig about that."

"I will. Right now though I'm talking to you about it."

Ken said nothing, but it was with a feeling of relief that he heard the sheriff's feet crunching the driveway gravel.

"The stranger's still in there, Quinlan," said Lu Trowbridge. "I knocked on the door and Carney opened it only a crack and begged me—he *begged* me, that's just what he did—to let them talk just another three minutes. Then he said he'd be free. I've never seen Carney look like that before, either—He looked positively scared."

"He's been dodging us for half an hour," said Quinlan coldly. "We've waited long enough. Let's make the visitor wait a while."

"I doubt if Carney will be able to tell you very much," said Ken. "He was out of town last night."

Quinlan gave him a curiously level look. "Is that so?" he asked.

As they walked toward the salesroom, the sheriff said, "Ken, do you know anything about a tall thin guy, all dressed in black and carries an umbrella? He's in talkin' to Carney."

"A guy with a big pearl pin in his tie?"

"By golly, I think I *did* notice that. Who is he?"

"I don't know who he is, but he was

in looking at the new line last night. They probably have some business deal on."

"Funny time of day for a business deal," said Quinlan.

"Not for Carney Craig it isn't," said the sheriff. "He's in here every day by seven A.M. Sometimes earlier. He's famous for being an early bird."

V

THE SALESROOM was stuffy with the smell of yesterday's crowds. While the others clumped down the hall toward Craig's office, Ken took off his coat, opened doors and windows, and started a minute inspection of the new cars. The four-door sedan had a long scratch along one fender, probably from a button or buckle, and the convertible's cigarette lighter was missing.

He knew better than to hunt for it. Someone had stolen it as a souvenir or a replacement, but that was his fault; he should have reminded the boys to take all the lighters out, as well as the instruction books and jacks in the glove and luggage compartments.

Katie came in, called "Good morning," to him and went into her switchboard. Almost immediately, the phone rang. Someone wanted the sheriff. Lu Trowbridge listened a few minutes, said, "Okay," and hung up. "Ken?"

"Yes?"

"You know Vivian Fliel, don't you?"

"Jane knows her better than I do. They were in the same sorority at State. Why?"

"I understand she and Frank had a loud fight at the Happy Hour Bar yesterday, after they left here. I sent Zandt out to their farm this morning to talk to her. That was him now. He says Mrs. Fliel tells him she left Frank in town about seven-thirty last night because he was gettin' mean and ornery. She drove out to the farm alone. She was there with the kids all night. I was just wonderin'—"

"Jane knows more about how they get along than I do," said Ken. "But I think they've been fighting like that for years."

Once more the phone rang. Ken answered, said, "Hello, darling."

The sheriff, having waited to see that it was not for him, went outside. Carney Craig walked across the sales floor with angry purpose.

"Ken, I'm worried," Jane's voice said in the phone. "About Fliel, I mean. I know it's silly, but—"

"Wilson, I want to talk to you," Carney Craig broke in.

"Who have you been talking to, honey?" Ken went on. "There's nothing to worry about."

"Put that phone down," snapped Carney. "Did you tell those damn cops I was out of town last night?"

"You won't be in any trouble, will you, Ken, just because of that silly fight?"

"Go 'way, Carney. No, not at all, Jane."

"Damn it, Wilson—!"

"You sound sort of strange, as though—"

"Carney, give me that phone!"

But Craig had grabbed it from him and crashed the phone into its cradle. "Come into my office!"

He turned curtly on his heel, a world of contempt expressed in his certainty that Ken would follow. Ken stood still, in such a white-hot fury that he did not know what to do. He did not want to follow that fat back waddling down the hall, but he had no idea of letting the matter drop.

He waited a long, hard-breathing minute until his feelings were under some semblance of control. Then he followed Carney Craig down the hall, past a curious Katie and into the office.

"Listen, you fat, chiseling son—"

Carney put back his head and opened his mouth in a laugh that was long and loud but mirthless. "I don't know what's getting into this place," he said bitterly. "O'Hara was in here just a minute ago mad as a wet hen because I saved a little money on piston rings. Now the police accuse me of all sorts of things just be-

cause I went to bed early like any sensible man. And they tell me that you said I sneaked out of town."

"I didn't say 'sneaked'! You told me yourself you had to drive over to Lawrenceville last night. Why shouldn't I have told them? It's an alibi for you, isn't it?"

"Mebbe. And I went to Lawrenceville. But that didn't take long. I was dead tired and wanted to get some sleep, so I went home to bed instead of meeting Helen at O'Hara's. The sheriff says he called me at home after he found that sign Fliel put up, and got no answer. Well, mebbe so. I was so tired I could have slept through anything. But one thing, Ken—I'll thank you to stay out of my affairs. Just run your end of the business and don't try to—" Carney paused, and Ken became aware of a curious change in his manner.

"—don't try to make anybody pay you any bonuses," Carney went on, "or accept accessories they didn't ask for. I've told you this time and again, but this is the last time. If I get one more complaint I'm going to—Oh, hello, Mr. Norton."

KEN HAD sensed the meaning of the change before he even turned. A man had quietly entered the room behind him, a tall, funereal-looking man who was dressed, except for his shirt, entirely in black. His black tie held a large pink pearl.

"That will be all, Wilson," said Carney Craig.

"You lousy hypocrite!" Ken snapped. "You money-grabbing liar! You know damned well I've never got a cent more than my salary and commissions out of this place, and sometimes I've had to fight for that. You know who shuffled the delivery lists and—" He moved toward Craig as he spoke.

"That will be all, Wilson," Carney repeated more loudly. He moved significantly close to the heavy fireplace poker.

"Please, please," said the man Carney had called Norton. "Mr. Craig and I have business to discuss."

Ken brushed angrily past him.

People began thronging the salesroom shortly after nine o'clock. This was Saturday; many were farmers.

"Mistuh Wilson, it's gonna be more crowded'n yesterday," said the agency porter, whose daylong assignment during the premiere was simply to go from car to car with a polishing cloth, trying to remove the finger marks as fast as they were made. "It'll be hot, too."

"You're right, Billy. Guess I'll put on my coat, though, and look like a gentleman until it warms up. Hey, where is it?"

He had left it on the chair behind his desk. Now the coat was gone.

* * * * *

Sam McDonald called about eleven o'clock. He had just arrived at the Stratford House, he said, and wanted to freshen up a little; could Ken come over around twelve? They could then talk over any details that remained unsettled and sign the contract.

By now, the salesroom was stifling. Big globules of sweat crawled slowly down Ken's forehead as he listened to the Landseer representative's precise voice. But for the first time since yesterday afternoon, Ken again began to feel excited about what lay in store for him. He was tired and warm, and tensely nervous for a reason he could not quite define; lack of sleep perhaps, and the crowd that swirled continuously about him, bumping and asking questions and making the same remarks over and over.

But relief was at hand; the end was in sight. A few more hours, maybe only two, and he would have the exquisite pleasure of telling Carney Craig to take his job and go straight to hell with it.

"Mistuh Wilson," said Billy, the porter, "I cain't find that coat nowhere, suh. You sure you had it when you come in?"

"I'm sure, Billy. But never mind. It will turn up. And if it doesn't, I had my wallet in my trousers' pocket anyway."

A woman wanted to know whether it

was possible to get the business coupe in a robin's-egg blue. Two boys carrying tennis rackets demanded rather indignantly to know why the hood had been shortened and Ken explained about downward vision angles. A man who had brought his wife along placed an order after being assured that gasolines of the proper octane rating were available for the new motor.

Ken took two other orders—he was doing a good day's work on his last day, he reflected—and it was almost noon when he was approached by a white-haired woman in a well-worn coat and outmoded hat.

"I teach at the country school between here and Lawrenceville," she said. "My car's eleven years old now, and it can't get through another winter. It broke down seven times last winter. I—I really have to have a car. I was—well, I was just wondering. If I placed an order now, is there any chance of my getting a new coupe before the weather gets bad next fall? I can't afford many accessories I'm afraid, but I would take a heater and—well, a radio, I guess. That's customary, isn't it?"

A LITTLE coal of indignation had begun to burn deep inside Ken as she spoke. Now it broke into bright flame. Without answering her questions, he took the order pad from his desk. "Name? Address?" She gave them.

"That business coupe over there would probably be just the thing," he said. "I recommend a heater—you'd need that on cold mornings—but you don't have to take that or anything else if you don't want them. The coupe will deliver here with heater, plates and all taxes paid for sixteen twenty-one forty-five. What are you driving now?"

"A Hawk. A two-door sedan." She told him the year.

"I'll make you an allowance of four hundred and seventy-one dollars and forty-five cents on your car." He filled out the blank. "That means you pay your car and eleven hundred and fifty dollars —which you can spread over eighteen monthly payments. If you'd like that, just sign here."

"But when would I actually get the car?"

"As soon as our show is over—the end of this week."

"But hasn't someone else already ordered it?"

"As a teacher, you have a priority."

Beaming, incredulous, she bent over the form and firmly affixed her signature.

"This is so different from what I expected. I had heard that you—you had to—" She blushed.

"I know what you heard. This is just to show you that it isn't so. Come in on Monday, Miss—" he looked at the order form—"Miss Winslow, and pick up your car."

When a somewhat overcome Miss Winslow had left, he grinned to himself. Of course, there was no such thing as an official priority any more. But Miss Winslow, who deserved one, need not know that. Nor that without even seeing her car, he had given her the top trade-in allowance.

Someone said, "Mr. Wilson." Ken looked up into the thin, brown face of Trooper Quinlan. Next to Quinlan stood Lu Trowbridge, frowning.

"Mr. Wilson, I wonder if you'd mind coming down to the sheriff's office and answering a few questions about the death of Frank Fliel?"

"The sheriff's office? Why should I go there? Someone might get the idea I was arrested." He laughed uneasily. The clock read 11:56. He had to get down to the Stratford House and McDonald.

"Arrest is a word I don't like to use," said Quinlan. "But for your own sake, I think it might be better to talk in some less public place."

"What *is* this?" said Ken. "I didn't have anything to do with killing Fliel! And I have an appointment downtown right now."

"All right, Mr. Wilson," returned

Quinlan steadily. "If that's how you want it. I noticed some reddish stains on the jacket of your suit this morning. The sheriff said it was the one you had on last night. So I took the liberty—I admit I had no legal right—of borrowing it just long enough to take a scraping of the stain and test it."

Ken sighed with relief. "Okay, okay," he said. "For a minute you scared me. I have an important business appointment, and I was afraid I might have to miss it. I can go home and get another coat, if you want to keep that one. Because, Quinlan, when you get the results of the test, you'll learn the red spots are paint. Lu could have told you. I got paint all over myself moving that sign last night."

"I know you did," said Quinlan. "Some of the spots are paint. But some of them are blood."

Everything in the world seemed to stop. "You're—you're crazy," Ken breathed. "I just had that suit cleaned. I put it on fresh yesterday for the premiere. There couldn't be blood on it."

"But there is," said Quinlan quietly. "I ran the preliminary test myself. Now the coroner is typing it to see if it corresponds to Fliel's."

Outside, the hoarse gong of the courthouse clock began tolling noon. Simultaneously, the whistle on the shoe factory began to blow. This was the moment at which he was to meet McDonald.

How could he explain to this police officer what the next hour meant to him?

He was on his feet, although he didn't know how he got there. All the sneers and insults he had to accept, the bitter indignation at the position into which Carney Craig had forced him in the last twenty-four months, boiled up suddenly.

"Look, Wilson," said Quinlan.

With a sudden movement, Ken pushed Quinlan aside. He started walking, slowly and then faster, toward Carney Craig's office.

Quinlan yelled, "Hey!" and lurched after him.

Ken broke into a run, shouldering or side stepping customers. Behind him, Quinlan tried the same thing, tripped over a baby-stroller, crashed headlong.

Ken ran down the long hall and pushed the door open with a bang. Carney Craig stood beside his desk.

Ken smiled bitterly. "You lousy heel," he said.

VI

CARNEY'S usually ruddy face was livid, but his lips were white. His hands were pressed to his big stomach. His mouth was opened wide and it seemed as if he could not close it. From his eyes shone preternatural terror.

Ken moved across the thick carpet for the long, savage right hook that had become the most important thing in the world. But Carney Craig, with a sudden, loud cry, arched his back, threw up his head and fell over backward, while Ken was still two paces from him. As he went down, his head struck a chair.

Ken paused, incredulously. He looked at his own fist. A uniformed-figure moved between him and Carney. Quinlan studied that contorted face only a moment.

"He's dead," he said softly. "That was quick. What did you do to him, Wilson?"

"Do to him?"

It was impossible. He hadn't touched Carney.

"I didn't do anything to him."

Quinlan laughed.

"He's lying, officer," a voice said.

Ken turned. For the second time in this room, he found the man Carney had called Norton standing behind him.

"I was just outside that other door which leads to the service garage," Norton went on. "I heard this fellow burst in and curse Mr. Craig. Then I heard a blow—"

"That was no blow!" cried Ken an-

grily. "He fell over by himself. What you heard was his head hitting a chair."

"I know what I heard, young man."

"What were you doing just outside the other door?" said Quinlan.

"Mr. Craig and I have been in conference most of the morning. As we were talking just now, he had to get some papers to show me some figures. He said they were in his safe and, since he preferred to have its whereabouts kept secret, he asked if I would mind stepping out of the room a moment. Of course I said I would. I was waiting just outside that other door when I heard Wilson burst in through this door."

"Your name?"

"Norton. Abner Norton. I am vice president in charge of sales for the Hawk Motor Company."

"Oh!" Ken was stunned. "So you are Holy Abner."

Norton ignored this. "Well, officer, what are you waiting for?"

"Where's the safe, Ken?" asked Lu Trowbridge.

"How should I know? Carney and I weren't bosom friends, you know."

"Apparently not," said Quinlan drily. He bent over the body a long moment. When he looked up, it was with a curious light in his eyes.

"You claim Wilson slugged him, eh, Mr. Norton?"

"Well, considering what I heard—"

"But you didn't *see* any blows struck?"

""We-e-ll, no, I didn't."

"It's lucky you said that," said Quinlan, getting back to his feet. "As a matter of fact, it looks as though no blows were struck I'd guess that, as Wilson says, his head hit the chair when he fell."

"But what made him fall?" asked Lu Trowbridge wonderingly.

"Poison," said Quinlan curtly. "He must have been dying when Wilson busted in here."

He bent down and smelled the glass and carafe on Craig's desk. "And this is where it came from. It's cyanide—potassium cyanide rather than sodium, I'd say. Somebody put it in his water jug."

"That must have been done since last night," said Ken. "Because when I was in here about six-thirty, he drank some water from the carafe."

Quinlan looked around at the curious faces that framed the doorway. "Clear them out, Sheriff. I want to question everyone separately. I'll start with Wilson. Keep Mr. Norton around. And that repair man, O'Hara. Also, Mr. Craig had a secretary, didn't he?

"*Had* a secretary?"

HELEN CRAIG had pushed past the people in the doorway. She was followed by Gordon Birmingham.

"Has something happened to Katie?" she asked. The desk screened her husband's body from her.

She was in shorts and flame-colored sweater and Birmingham in golfing slacks. With her blond hair loosened by wind and her fair face newly-browned by sun, Helen Craig looked the personification of healthy feminine charm.

She said, "Where's Carney?" And when there was no answer, said it again, and fear sharpened her voice.

Birmingham turned to Ken. "What happened?"

"Carney's dead," he whispered. "Somebody's fed him—"

Helen Craig screamed. She had seen beyond the desk. "No! *Oh, no!*" She threw herself on her husband's body, calling his name.

"Hell!" said Quinlan under his breath. "Get her out of here, Sheriff. Get them all out of here."

Assisted by Birmingham, the two officers gently wrested Helen Craig from her husband and carried her out. Only Quinlan remained in the room with Ken.

"Now then," he said. He bent over Craig's corpse for a few minutes, testing the rigidity of muscles, sniffing,

squinting thoughtfully. He studied the carafe without touching it.

"Do you know whether cyanide is kept on the premises?" he asked.

"Sure. Eddie O'Hara uses it all the time."

"What for?"

"Eddie's always experimenting—mechanically, I mean. He occasionally does some plating, and of course cyanide is a plating-bath component. But he chiefly uses it as a rust inhibitor."

"A what?"

"You keep steel parts that might rust in a cyanide bath until you're ready to use them. That way they don't rust."

"Who could have got at it?"

"Anybody. Eddie keeps it in a can on his workbench, plainly labeled."

"I see. Were you in here earlier this morning?"

Yes, for a little while. Long enough to have a fight, as you may have heard. Carney was sore because I mentioned to you that he was supposedly out of town last night."

"I suppose you might have doctored that water jug then."

"Under Craig's nose? Well, maybe. But just for the record, I didn't."

"I'm glad you put it that way," said Quinlan. "I really didn't think you had. But if what you say about his drinking from it last night is true, the poison must have been put in some time since then—this morning, presumably. Who else was in here today?"

"His secretary, Kati, could tell you better than I."

Quinlan's eyes narrowed. "I forgot about her. I suppose she always filled his water carafe?"

"Every morning. Katie is very efficient. But—that's ridiculous. You might as well suspect Lu Trowbridge."

"I suspect everyone."

Ken thought of Sam McDonald, pacing one of the Stratford House's neat chintz-curtained rooms, revising his opinion of the man he had been going to hire.

"As I mentioned before, I've got a whale of an important business engagement. Can I leave now, if you are through with the questions?"

Quinlan smiled sardonically. "I'm afraid not right now."

"But—"

"Don't worry, Wilson. We'll get the guilty man soon enough."

"As a matter of fact," said Ken, "that may be impossible."

"Why?"

"Because maybe Carney and Fliel killed each other?"

QUINLAN began to look mad. "Maybe you think it's a good time to start being funny."

"Look, Quinlan. Supposing Fliel decided to kill Carney because we haven't sold him a car. He breaks in here last night and poisons Carney's water jug. But, just after he got out, Carney sees him. Maybe Carney had come back to do a little work—he was a hard-working guy, you know, down here early and late. Carney sees what Fliel was up to with the sign—he was going to disgrace the new Hawk. In a fit of rage he kills Fliel. But Fliel, in a sense, has already killed Carney, or at least arranged his death. This morning Carney comes in early as usual, presently gets thirsty, and—bingo!—Fliel kills him from beyond the grave, so to speak. Now, who do you prosecute?"

Quinlan shook his head. "I won't buy that until I've exhausted every other possibility—or find Fliel's fingerprints on the carafe and Craig's on the tire iron. The thing that interests me right now is that two men were killed here, by different methods, but within only fourteen hours of each other. And witihin just a few feet of each other, oddly enough. Do you realize that Fliel lay just outside that wall, not more than ten feet from where Craig's body is?"

Lu Trowbridge stuck his head in the door. "Doc's here, Quinlan."

"Send him in, and keep Wilson out there with the others."

THE OTHERS, Ken found, had been herded into the parts department. Eddie O'Hara was leaning moodily against a metal rack of generator parts. Someone had brought Helen Craig the skirt that went with her shorts and now she sat on a carton, staring at nothing. Birmingham stood near her, looking out the window. Katie, a short, dumpy woman who wore sensible shoes and plastic cuffs over her sleeves, dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief. Norton looked coldly at Ken as he came in and then continued studying a parts price-list on the wall.

Just outside the window, the sheriff's car was drawn up, Deputy Zandt at the wheel. Next to him sat Vivian Fliel.

"What is she doing here?" Ken asked the sheriff.

Lu Trowbridge removed the toothpick from his mouth. "Doc found some scratches on Frank Fliel's face. When he got Frank's face sort of back together, that is. So we asked Vivian to come down and try to tell us whether they were the ones she had inflicted when they had that fight in the bar yesterday." He grimaced. "It was kind of tough on her, but as far as she can figure, they were. Wish Quinlan would hurry up. I've kept her here almost an hour now, because I don't want Zandt to leave until we're all through."

Ken nodded, sat down on the counter and lit a cigarette. Its fragrance was a warm comfort as he thought over the events of the last sixteen hours, trying to sort them into some logical order. Curiously, he presently found himself mentally reversing some of the things he had learned, and when he did that, a pattern began to emerge. The voices Helen Craig had heard on the extension phone, for example.

Then Katie stood before him, blinking back fresh tears. "Oh, Mr. Wilson, isn't it terrible? Poor Mr. Craig—and only an hour ago—"

"Yes, Katie, tell me. Who went into that office this morning?" He spoke in a low voice.

She caught his urgency and answered in the same way.

"That guy Norton was already in with Mr. Craig when I got there at eight," she said. "Then, besides you and Eddie, there was the sheriff and that state policeman and a man named Chelsea."

"Who was he?"

"I'd never seen him before, but he said that yesterday, when you and Mr. Fliel had that trouble, Mr. Craig told him that people could see him today about placing an order. He was in there only a few minutes."

"Oh, yes." Carney wouldn't have wasted much time with him! "No one else?"

"No one else."

"Katie, think back. Did you fill Mr. Craig's water bottle this morning?"

"Of course. I do every morning."

"I see. Notice anything special about it."

"It was empty, that's all."

"Isn't it always?"

"Not often. Mr. Craig doesn't drink—didn't drink—much water. Guess he used it mostly for a chaser with the shot of bourbon he always had at night before leaving. But of course, he always insisted I fill it fresh every morning."

She was probably right, he thought. He himself had had an occasional drink with Carney at quitting time, and the chaser had always come from the carafe.

There was an ash tray near Helen Craig. Ken walked over to it to snuff out his cigarette. He looked at her.

"To think," she said woodenly, "that I insulted him when I drove him down here this morning. He made me get up early to drive him down—Gordon and I wanted the car later for golf. I was mad. He had misplaced his keys to the office and I—I refused to get him mine for a moment. But it was only a moment Ken." She grasped his hand; the large blue eyes were appealing. "You understand? You do, don't you? I

didn't mean—"

"Really, Helen!" said Birmingham. His pleasant features were twisted into a scowl.

"Poor dear," said Katie pityingly.

ALL THE others had gone into Carney's office, one at a time, to be questioned by Quinlan and had not returned. Quinlan himself appeared, gestured to the sheriff, and they retired to the other end of the room and engaged in a long conversation during which Trowbridge seemed to be arguing spiritedly. Presently they returned to him.

"Wilson, was Craig in any financial trouble?" asked the state trouper.

"Not that I know of. Carney never showed me the books; I was just a salaried employe. As a matter of fact, his finances have always been something of a mystery."

"Like where he got the dough to buy this agency," said Lu Trowbridge.

"Sure. But Carney always had all the money he needed. Why, we even paid cash for our cars lots of times, instead of financing them the way most agencies do."

Quinlan looked troubled. He frowned and then carefully took a green slip of paper from his wallet.

"How do you explain this?" he said.

Ken took the paper. It was a cashier's check, made out to bearer, for $30,000 and dated nine days before.

"The bank says Craig had it drawn."

"I can't explain it," said Ken, wonderingly. "Even without knowing much about the agency's financial standing, I know we couldn't have owed anything like this. And I don't know what in the world Carney could ever be buying for that much money. He paid off the contractors on our new building two weeks ago."

Lu Trowbridge grunted. "The whole business ain't worth that much."

"No, you're wrong," said Ken. "It's worth twice that, probably more. Maybe a hundred thousand dollars. But where did that check come from?"

"I found it folded up under the inkstand on his desk."

"That's odd," said Ken thoughtfully. "Carney wasn't careless about money. And that check, technically at least, was as good as cash."

"Sure," said Quinlan. "To me it suggests that he expected to use it in a business deal—with someone he expected to see today."

He took a small box of snuff from the pocket of his tunic and sniffed up each nostril, ignoring the stares of Ken and the sheriff.

"You won't be held, Wilson—for the present," he said. "The sheriff vouches for you, for one thing. But don't leave Sheffield for a while."

"Okay."

"I mean that. If you are caught outside the city limits, it could be misinterpreted."

"I said okay."

Quinlan turned his back deliberately and said to the sheriff, "I've let all the others go. As of now, there's no reason to hold anyone. I asked Norton to stay here overnight, however. He was sore. Seems to be quite a big-shot."

"Why'd you call him 'Holy' Abner, Ken?" asked the sheriff.

"I guess he's the most famous salesman in the auto business," said Ken. "He's famous because he's successful, and he's successful because he believes in what he sells. He's the chief of all Hawk sales. To Norton, the Hawk is a religion. Hence the nickname. He's what you'd call consecrated. When he gives the dealers one of his pep talks at a meeting—well, it's like a sermon."

"I see."

Quinlan said, "I'm going out to the Craigs' and talk to Mrs. Craig. I couldn't get much out of her before. She was pretty badly affected by what had happened."

Ken said, "I'll be around if you want me."

He left the agency as quickly as he could and drove coatless to the Stratford House.

VII

SAM McDONALD was a surprisingly young man, short and peppery-looking, with a fringe of rust-colored hair around a balding head. He had been dictating letters to a public stenographer whom he dismissed as Ken came in.

He said, "Hello, Wilson, I'm Sam McDonald," in the easy, quick way of a man accustomed to meeting many people.

Having said that, he stopped and looked Ken over.

Ken said, "Hi," and stopped too. McDonald said, "I received a very good report on you from our man over in Lawrenceville."

"That's good. I'm sorry about the time. I'm not usually three hours late for business appointments."

"I gather something unusual occurred."

Ken smiled wryly. "I expect you heard what has occurred. Carney Craig has been murdered. The police have been talking to me, among others."

"You mean you are under suspicion?" said McDonald.

"Not exactly. If I really were, I don't think I'd be walking around like this. But—"

"The cops don't know what to make of it, eh?"

"Apparently."

McDonald seemed deep in a thought. "I'll tell you frankly Wilson, I already heard something about what has been happening around the Hawk agency. And I'd be dishonest with you if I didn't tell you that it has altered my thinking just a little bit. I mean by that—" he turned and faced Ken, squaring his shoulders—"I mean by that, I'm not as sure as I was that you are the man for us. I understand you and this fellow Fliel, who was also killed, had some words. I also understand that there was bad blood between you and Craig —that, in fact, there was considerable speculation around town whether it was you or he who was responsible for some of the deals the Craig agency made when cars were in short supply. If it turned out that Craig was killed because of some feud over car dealings—well, I'd rather get a sales representative here whose skirts are clean."

"I see," said Ken.

"I'm just being honest, Wilson."

"Oh, sure."

"On the other hand, if the whole thing is cleared up—"

"Well?" "The deal is still on," said McDonald heartily. "But for the present, it's off. So I'm catching the late train back to Detroit tonight. I can come back again, of course, when things are—well—arranged."

Ken said, "I see."

He had parked in front of the Stratford House in such a hurry, he had forgotten to put a nickel in the parking meter, but luckily there was no ticket tied to the convertible's steering wheel. He climbed in, shook a cigarette out of his pack and punched in the lighter on the dashboard.

When he had inhaled and exhaled the first cloud of smoke, he leaned back against the seat and started thinking the facts over, one by one. It was getting dark and colder when he finally twisted the ignition key, stepped on the starter and headed for Jane's house.

JANE said, "You didn't have any lunch! I'll get you something."

"I don't want to eat. I want to talk."

"I want you to talk. I want to talk myself. I was out at Fliel's this morning."

She was back in the small, cozy living room in a moment with a glass of milk and a plate containing cold chicken slices, vegetable salad and buttered rolls. She poured a glass of milk.

"Vivian Fliel isn't as much cut up as you might think," she said. "I suspect that Frank's death was sort of a relief. I gather he beat her even oftener than everyone suspected. But—do you remember Fliel saying something about

seeing a Hawk in that old lover's lane behind his place?"

"Yes. He said the wheels were off center or something."

"Well, it might have been true. At least Vivian says Frank came into the house one night about a week ago, saying he had seen these two cars."

"Two?"

"Apparently there were two of them. Both black sedans with cream wheels, parked next to each other. He'd been out shooting squirrels, Vivian said. He noticed the wheels of one of them were off center."

"If he thought so, they were. Whatever else you say about Frank, he had eyes like a cat. He'd won every sharp shooter medal in the Marines."

"But Ken—could the cars' wheels really be off center?"

He laughed. "No—never. Except in one case, maybe. But do you want to know something really interesting?" Carney drove a black sedan with cream wheels. Where did Frank see this car?"

"Vivian said in that grove of pine trees that's well behind their place. And I went out there, after I left her, and played detective."

"What did you find?"

"The tracks of two cars."

"Hawks?"

"*Cars*, darling. I can't tell one from another just by the tracks. But the marks were clear. This was under big trees, that protected them from the rain."

"Look!" He took out a pencil and began to draw on a magazine. "Hawk gets all its tires from L.L.&T. Rubber Company and this year they are supplying us with a new tire that has a pattern like this. Recognize it?"

"No."

"Also, the engineers changed the wheel tread a little. That's the distance between each pair of wheels, front and back. Now, Hawk's front wheel tread is wider than the rear. Did you happen to notice—"

"Ken Wilson! Do you think anyone would notice a thing like that?"

"Okay, okay. You did fine without measuring."

"But why all these questions? You sound as if you were trying to play detective."

"I *am* trying to play detective. One reason is, I'm mixed up in this thing enough so that Sam McDonald doesn't want any part of me until he's satisfied I am not involved in any of the various scandals being noised abroad about the Hawk agency. Another is, because I can see that as soon as Quinlan runs out of other suspects, I am going to become the prime one. And the third reason is, that I think I am the only person who knows who the killer is."

"Wha-a-at?"

"Well, I've got a pretty good idea."

"But, honey! I don't see what motive there could possibly be . . ." She stopped and a dawning light appeared in her eyes. "Maybe I do. Both of them, in their way, were injuring Hawk. I mean, Frank was putting up that sign and Carney had made lots of enemies for the company."

KEN laughed. He had been hungry; now he was well fed. He had been weary; now he felt rested and relaxed. Most of all, he knew at least part of the answer. He put an affectionate arm around her.

"No," he said. "That's wrong. It's a good theory, but it's wrong. I don't know everything, but I can tell you this. They were both killed by the same person, but by different means and for different reasons. Frank was killed because he was just an unfortunate fool. He picked last night to play a dirty, contemptible trick, so he happened to be around when the killer was making his preparations to kill Carney, which was his only real objective. But, as Fliel's fingerprints on the window sill showed, he saw the killer. And he was dumb enough to let himself be seen. So he was killed—suddenly—and on the

spur of the moment."

He put down his plate and got up. "I've got work to do, and not too much time. See you, sugar."

Outside, it was pitch dark now. He'd stop off at his house, sneak in the back past his mother and the boarder who would be talking in the parlor, and get his crepe rubber shoes and a flashlight. A tape measure too, he thought, as the motor spun into life under his toe, and maybe a dark sport shirt, since it would make him less visible.

"Just a minute," said a husky voice.

For a moment, he thought of the voice Helen had told of hearing on the telephone. A hand took his arm. Automatically, he thrust it aside and grabbed at the coat which was all he could see.

"Hey," said Jane Robbins. "Why so rough? I decided to go along. Two heads are better than one. And you'll need someone to show you those tracks out near Fliel's."

"Okay, okay," he sighed resignedly.

But it was to the agency that he drove first, after making a brief stop at his home.

The long modern building was utterly dark and when he had let them in with his key, he stood for a second, orienting himself and smelling the exciting, new-car scent he would never tire of.

He inhaled it deeply, realizing with a pang how much all this meant to him, the beauty of the new cars with their sleek fenders, their throaty motor purr, the stimulus of competition for sales, back again for the first time since the war began. . . . At his desk, he found his own water carafe, which was a duplicate of Carney's.

Leading an unusually silent and breathless Jane, he carried the carafe down the pitch-dark hall and into Carney's office. There, he closed the Venetian blinds and then turned on a light. It was a risk they'd have to take, he thought.

"Now what?" she said.

He did not answer, but took out a cigarette while he studied the walls. His eyes never left the pine panelling as he put the cigarette between his lips, flicked his lighter and lit it. Then he began a close, board by board inspection of the walls. But he circled the room without finding what he sought.

He sat down at the desk and stared at the two carafes. The cigarette smouldered and died. Presently, he held the carafe he had carried in up to the lamp and tried to look in it. Then he looked into the one that had held Carney Craig's death potion.

"What do you see?" asked Jane.

VIII

HE DIDN'T answer. He ran an exploratory finger around the inside of the neck of the carafe and pulled something out. Then he pulled out a second something.

"What in the world is that?" asked Jane.

"Two little sections of Scotch tape," said Ken. "Quinlan didn't find them because they couldn't very readily be seen. And being stuck to the inside, they didn't come off when he poured out the poisoned water."

"But why were they there?"

"Because they held a lethal charge of cyanide in place. In lumps, probably. Or maybe—"

"Maybe what?"

"Druggists' capsules. Two big capsules, filled with cyanide, and stuck to the inside of the carafe with Scotch tape. Get it?"

"No."

"Easy. As soon as the water jug was filled with water, the capsule would dissolve, releasing the cyanide into the water. Or, as I said, maybe it was just a hunk of cyanide. It's crystaline, you know, something like salt. And it dissolves practically instantly. As soon as the jug was filled with water, the water was poisoned."

Unconsciously his voice had dropped.

Now they became aware of the silence in the room and of the grim preparations which it must have witnessed not many hours before. Jane shivered.

Ken turned his attention to the desk. The drawers were unlocked so he did not bother to ransack them; what he sought would not be left around—even like a $30,000 check! Besides, Helen Craig had argued about a safe.

He yanked the carpet aside to examine the floor boards, and even moved the desk. It *must* be here—unless, of course, Carney had kept things like that in some secret place at home, or in a safety deposit box. And if Carney did, then he, Ken Wilson, was washed up.

Jane said, "Look, darling," and seeing the expression on his face, stopped.

His fingers trembled as he lit another cigarette. It *had* to be here!

His eyes rested suddenly on the oil painting. He leaped to it and began running his hands over the ornate gold frame. It swung outward on hinges before he even found the catch, and revealed a little square of glossy black steel inset in the paneling, which bore a single heavy steel dial and a handle.

He heard Jane gasp.

Impulsively his hand went out to the handle and tried it.

The door swung open on oiled hinges. And even as it did, he realized he should have expected this, as well as the way the concealing picture had been unlatched.

"He had to get out some papers to show me some figures," Norton had said.

Carney had gone to the safe and had just opened it when the poison struck. He had staggered away and the picture had swung back into place, closing the safe's door, but naturally not locking it.

Ken put a hand inside. There were long, flat jewel boxes, some checkbooks tied together, and several manila envelopes. One of them, unsealed, contained a thick sheaf of thousand dollar bills; another, sealed with big blobs of wax, bore a legend: "To be Opened in Event of My Death."

His fingers tried the heavy blobs of wax and then he thought better of it. He put that envelope back. If he was right, he knew what was in it. If he was wrong, it didn't matter. He examined the contents of the rest. They contained insurance policies and other important but conventional papers. He closed the safe door and restored the picture to its original position.

He said, "That does it, Jane. Let's go for a ride."

AS THE car flashed past the Fliel farm, they caught a glimpse of Vivian Fliel silhouetted in the window against a kerosene lamp. A little farther along, Ken pulled into a side road, stopped and switched out the lights. He helped Jane out and they began walking in almost complete darkness, letting their feet find the road. He located the lane he wanted almost by instinct.

The darker mass of a pine grove loomed against the dark of the sky and they paused a moment to listen. He heard the irregular intake of her breath and knew she was frightened. Nothing else broke the silence except the sleepy chirp of an insect. As they walked on, he occasionally flashed his light on the loamy road before him, but saw no tire tracks.

"At least no other car came in and messed up whatever you saw," he said, and she nodded.

Under the trees, he turned the flashlight on permanently and started a careful examination of the lane. Almost at once, he found it: the tracks of new tires whose crisp, geometric tread had bitten deep into the soft soil. Those tracks were overlaid in places by a second set whose tracks were different and less clearly defined.

The tracks showed the cars had driven in, stopped, backed up to turn around, and then driven out again. There were scuffled footprints at one

point, but he could make little of them.

Fixing his flashlight in the fork of a bush so that it illuminated an area where the tire tracks were especially clear, Ken knelt down and began making careful calculations with his tape measure. He got to his feet after a few moments, whistling softly. The tread of the first car's rear wheels was 57 inches, that of the front wheels was 55½.

And only a new Hawk's wheels had those measurements.

HE WAS strangely silent driving back into town. *This was the payoff*, he thought. What would happen in the next hour would either solve the murders, or make Ken Wilson the laughing stock of Sheffield and perhaps land him in the county jail for obstruction of justice—if not something worse!

Jane, stealing occasional glances at him, was wisely silent.

At the town's one all night drug store, he paused briefly to buy some druggist's capsules and make a series of telephone calls. Then they drove to the agency, went in and Ken turned on the lights. He visited Eddie O'Hara's work bench in the garage and then busied himself at Carney's desk with his own water carafe, some Scotch tape and some whitish lumps of chemical which he handled with extraordinary care. Carney Craig's carafe, he put out of sight in a closet.

As Jane saw what he was doing, she breathed, "You're mad!" and her blue eyes were dark with apprehension.

"Maybe I am. But I'm either going to make myself or break myself," he said simply. We solve these murders and win back the Landseer franchise—or else!"

Quinlan and the sheriff were first to arrive. The state policeman grunted a greeting and took a chair, near the door.

"I hope this is as good as you promised over the phone," said Lu Trowbridge.

They were followed almost immediately by Birmingham, Helen Craig and Norton. Vivian Fliel arrived at the same time and came in with the newcomers. Eddie O'Hara and McDonald walked in next and McDonald and Norton stared at each other in surprise. Katie was last to arrive.

Ken said, "Will you please all find seats?" He rubbed his hands like a master of ceremonies. "I've asked you here because all of you, in various ways, are concerned with the murder of Carney Craig. I propose to hold a brief demonstration—" he gestured toward the water carafe on the desk—"and lay a few facts before you, which should indicate who killed Carney."

There was an audible sniff from Quinlan which Ken thought was contempt until he saw the state trooper taking a pinch of snuff. The others were expectantly silent.

"This carafe," he went on, "is an exact duplicate of the one that was on Carney's desk this morning. The original I have preserved for the police, for use at the trial. But I will warn all of you—this is an *exact* duplicate in every respect." He took out its stopper and held the carafe upside down. "As you can see it appears to be empty, just as Carney's did when Katie filled it this morning."

He put the carafe on the desk and leaned forward like a lecturerer.

"The solution of this crime depended on correctly putting together just a few basic facts," he said. "I say 'crime'—singular—because the murder of Fliel was purely secondary. It begins with a phone call Mrs. Craig overheard about a week ago. She recognized neither voice, although one must have been her husband's, and someone said something threatening about 'how'd you like the company to know what you've been up to?' Since Carney Craig had been chiseling his customers a long time, this presumably was said by an indignant customer. But it occurred to me that it might possibly have been Carney speak-

ing. To whom?

"Next comes Fliel's own revelation of seeing two Hawks parked one night a week ago behind his farm house. One answered the description of Carney's personal car. The other, Fliel's keen eyes told him, had wheels that seemed a little off center. While there are several Hawks around town with a paint job like Carney's, it at least suggested that this might be the meeting arranged for during the threatening phone conversations. And the off center wheels make it really interesting.

IX

"FOR the benefit of those of you not in the auto business," Ken continued, "I'll point out that when a new car is being planned and tested, it is customary procedure to start with the chassis. An engineer wanting to test-drive such a chassis himself over a period of time, will not infrequently have a standard, current-model body put on the new, hand-built chassis and drive it around the country in comparative disguise—unless someone as sharp-eyed as Frank Fliel notices the small, telltale deviation between body and wheels. This suggested someone intimately connected with Hawk since no one else could have such a car.

"Now we come to Fliel's murder. As the fingerprints on the window showed, he had been looking into this office. The killer, in here for a purpose I will presently explain, spotted him, quietly ran out through the garage, seized a tire iron and slugged him as he put up his sign. Now, Lu Trowbridge said he saw Frank run away. Yet when I handled the sign just a few minutes later, I got blood on my coat—as Trooper Quinlan's test subsequently showed—although at the time I thought it was paint. Therefore, Fliel was dead when Lu Trowbridge discovered the sign. It was spattered with his blood. Lu didn't see Fliel's body because of the darkness. But—and this is the important point——it was the *killer* the sheriff saw running away. He mistook him for Fliel because they were both of the same build."

He paused and looked around him. Helen Craig was following every word with parted lips.

"Now for a little re-enactment," he said. "Katie, will you be good enough to fill this carafe with water just exactly as you did this morning?"

They all watched her as she walked out of the room, then listened to the bubbling from the water cooler in the hall.

The instant she put it back on the desk, Ken poured a glass of water from it. For an almost imperceptible second, he paused to sniff the glass's contents before he drank from it. He stood smiling at them in silence for a full minute.

Then he poured a second glass. "Anyone want a drink?" he asked. Quinlan jumped up. "Let me see that," he said, and seized the glass from Ken and sniffed it.

He looked up thunderstruck. "Cyanide! That water's poisoned like the other." But how in the world—I was watching you! You didn't have anything palmed."

"No. Nothing up the sleeve, Quinlan. But something in the carafe. A couple of druggist's capsules, to be exact, taped to the inside. Each capsule contained enough cyanide to kill a horse. It took the capsules a minute or so to dissolve in the water that Katie put in, so I could drink it in safety. After that, the carafe contained a lethal dose. The killer was rigging the carafe in just that way last night when Fliel had the misfortune to see him. And having been seen, the murderer had no choice but to silence Fliel forever."

Lu Trowbridge came forward. "Let me see that," he began.

But someone else stepped in front of him. "Damned ingenious," said Gordon Birmingham and took the glass from Quinlan.

He raised it to his lips and had drained half of it before Quinlan could knock it away.

"BUT why—*why?*" cried Katie some time later.

"That was the subtlest point of all," said Ken. "But also the most logical. It begins with the threat over the telephone—'How'd you like the company to know what you've been up to?' If you assume, as I did, that it might be Carney who said that, then it was the person with whom he was arranging a meeting on the following night who was 'up to' something. But every other clue indicated that the person with whom he had that clandestine meeting was Gordon Birmingham. Gordon was one of the very few who could have a test model Hawk. He was also the only person involved who was of slight, slender built like Fliel.

"So Carney was threatening Gordon with a disclosure of some sort. But what? I thought of how no one ever knew where Carney got the money to obtain his Hawk franchise. But Gordon could have supplied it. And Gordon grew quite unaccountably enraged last night when we were discussing how Carney ran the agency. So he blurted out the truth—as a man will under strong emotion. He said Carney was 'ruining *our* business.' I thought he meant the Hawk company's. But later the real explanation occurred to me. As Gordon was in a position to know, Carney had been running the agency into the ground. Undoubtedly, they had quarreled over it. Gordon saw his investment threatened. And my guess is that Carney was trying to squeeze Gordon into selling his share of the partnership—hence the $30,000 check Carney had drawn the day of their secret meeting. That sum is well below what a half interest is worth, by the way! But Carney thought he could bludgeon Birmingham into the deal under threat of exposing his silent partnership in the agency—very strictly against company rules of course. Incidentally, Quinlan, in the safe, there's an envelope which I did not open, because I wanted to preserve it as evidence. I'm quite sure you'll find it contains a partnership agreement. At least, I know Carney refused to let Helen ever have the combination to that safe."

"And so Birmingham decided to kill Carney," mused Lu Trowbridge.

"Yes. I'm guessing now, but I—well, I've observed that Mrs. Craig did not look on Gordon with disfavor. If Carney was put out of the way, Gordon not only got rid of a dangerous threat, but might well have married Helen Craig. As he himself said, it's an attractive business, and all he would have had to do is prove his claim on half of it to Helen, to keep it all in the family."

"Young man," said Abner Norton. "Hawk will, of course, reassign the franchise here. From what I've seen of you and heard just now, I'm inclined to think—"

"Nothing doing, Norton," cried Sam McDonald. "I saw him first! Wilson, I can promise you a Landseer dealership that will make you more money in the next five years than you'll make with Hawk in a hundred."

Lu Trowbridge chuckled. "Mister, when the town learns what this boy has done, and how Carney Craig made him the scape-goat for all his crookedness, you can be darn sure he'll be successful in any agency he starts."

Ken smiled. Suddenly, he felt tired and spent.

"Thanks," he said. "Thanks to both of you. That will take a little thinking over. Come on, Jane. Let's get going. I want a chance to discuss things with my own silent partner."

"Silent, indeed!" returned Jane with spirit.

But she took his arm affectionately.

●

The only clue to the torch killer was—

The BLACK SLIPPER

A TRUE STORY

by

HAROLD HELFER

THE Prince Charming who found Cinderella may have thought he had his trouble establishing the identity of the wearer of a certain glass slipper, but it was mere child's play compared to the effort put out by one William Wagner in an endeavor to do the same in connection with a very ordinary, black, size 6C slipper.

The very ordinariness of the shoe is what made William Wagner's task so difficult. Hundreds of shoes just like that one had been made and sold over an area of hundreds of miles in which millions of people lived.

Yet Prince Charming couldn't have personally labored any harder than William Wagner in his efforts to learn the identity of the wearer of that black shoe. It wasn't love. It was murder.

The shoe was part of the belongings of a murdered woman. It had been a particularly vicious slaying; she'd been shot, her body soaked in gasoline and set on fire off a lonely New Jersey road. The body had turned into an almost unrecognizable charred mass. The clothing was so badly destroyed there was nothing identifiable about them. The only thing left whole was this shoe, this very ordinary size 6C black slipper.

A Pinkerton Detective

Union County, N. J., authorities, realizing that it was going to be a tough row to hoe to ever solve this killing, but shocked by the brutal crime and deter-

Off a lonely New Jersey road he set fire to her body

mined to do what they could to bring about justice, hired William Wagner, a Pinkerton detective, to do what he could to crack the case.

As any officer will tell you, it's the cases where the victim isn't identified that are the really tough ones. If you know who has been killed, you can generally find some motive for the desired demise. From the very outset, Wagner felt that everything hinged on that black slipper.

It bore the name of the manufacturer, Friedman-Shelby, St. Louis, and this number: 360-85985H. The first three digits, as it turned out, involved only the size. The last figures identified the specific plant which had turned out that particular shoe. A further analysis of the figures also developed these facts: It had been manufactured some time between September 1, 1927, and March 8, 1928, and its style model was No. 2412.

The date business made it especially tough. It meant that, since the body had been found in early 1929, that a good long time may have passed since the purchase of the shoe. And, indeed, to judge from the rather shoddy condition and oft-repaired look of the shoe, there was no doubt but that it had been.

Calling No. 360-85985H

Nevertheless, Wagner obtained a list of the names of the retail stores to which the shipments of shoe model No. 2412, manufactured between September 1 and March 8, had been sent. There were 190 of these stores. It was all just a little staggering and, in comparison, looking for a single needle in a single haystack seemed an out-and-out cinch. But many days had now gone by; the victim of the brutal killing still remained unidentified, stymieing the case before it could get started, and so as a forlorn effort a letter was sent out to the chiefs of police in each of the towns where the 190 stores were located.

The chiefs were told that a woman, apparently middle-aged and of stocky build had been murdered in Union County, N. J., and that she had been wearing a pair of Friedman-Shelby slippers, 360-85985H. The name of the store or stores that had sold that type shoe in his town was given the chief. Would he kindly drop by and inquire of the store if they remembered selling a shoe of that size to a middle-aged, stocky woman?

Of course, it was a kind of desperate thing. Shoe clerks sell quite a number of shoes in the course of a day, let alone during a period of months. They don't usually record the names of customers anyway. The odds, therefore, against anything materializing from Wagner's shoe search seemed fantastic.

And when quite some time had gone by without results, it looked as if this line of procedure had truly fizzled out. But one day Wagner got a call from the Chief of Police of Greenville, Pa. No one there could remember anything specifically about the shoe in question. But the chief had taken a look at his missing persons file and there was a woman who fitted the general description of the Union County murder victim. She was a widow woman, a Mrs. Mildred Mowrey, who had gone off to be with a newly-acquired husband. That had been quite a few weeks ago now, and none of her friends and neighbors had heard from her since, not even a postcard, and they'd become worried.

Wagner had some of these acquaintances take a look at the corpse—and, sure enough, they identified her as the Greenville woman. She'd told them she'd married a man at Elkton, Maryland—that's all they knew. Wagner promptly hied himself to Elkton, discovered the widow had been married to a "Dr. Richard M. Campbell," who gave a Baltimore address.

A False Lead

The Pinkerton man then took himself off to Baltimore. The address turned

out to be a phony. It was that of an empty lot.

But here is where the murderer had made a slip that was as bad as the one in not destroying his victim's shoes. Wagner decided it was more than a coincidence that the address turned out to be a lot. He felt that the killer had deliberately meant to give an incongruous address like that. But that could mean only one thing—the killer was familiar enough with the neighborhood to know that that was the address of an empty lot.

Checking with that in mind, Wagner learned that an H. C. Campbell had lived next door to the lot!

It was comparatively easy to trace Campbell to an apartment in Elizabeth, N. J., where it turned out he was living with his wife of many years and their three children.

Captured by police officers, Campbell readily admitted the murder. He'd been carrying a gun on him, the one with which he'd slain the widow, to shoot himself if the police ever got too close to him, but he'd been taken by surprise. He'd met the Greenville widow through a matrimonial agency and had killed her for her money.

Doomed by a very ordinary black slipper, Campbell paid with his life in the electric chair.

Where's THE *Dope?*

IT CERTAINLY seems to take plenty of high quality imagination to be a successful drug smuggler these days. For the stuff is being shipped into this country via the most eyebrow-raising methods possible.

Morphine, for example, has been discovered by customs officials inside imported tubes of Japanese soybean sauce. Not to mention the quantities concealed in Oriental rugs, hollowed-out heels, women's hats, coffee cans, and false-bottomed valises. One lady even conceived the idea of placing a large portion inside the body of a very dead dog. She wouldn't part with it for a moment—for "sentimental" reasons.

But the trafficker who knows his business doesn't rely on the uncertainties of securing overseas merchandise. Instead, he robs domestic drugstores and narcotic supply houses at the average rate of 130 per month. And when this source fails, no scruple is attached to hiring an old man or woman for five dollars a day.

"You're my parent," he or she is told, "and are afflicted with cancer. This faked clinic card will prove it. It also says that you must have a certain number of grams of narcotic every day."

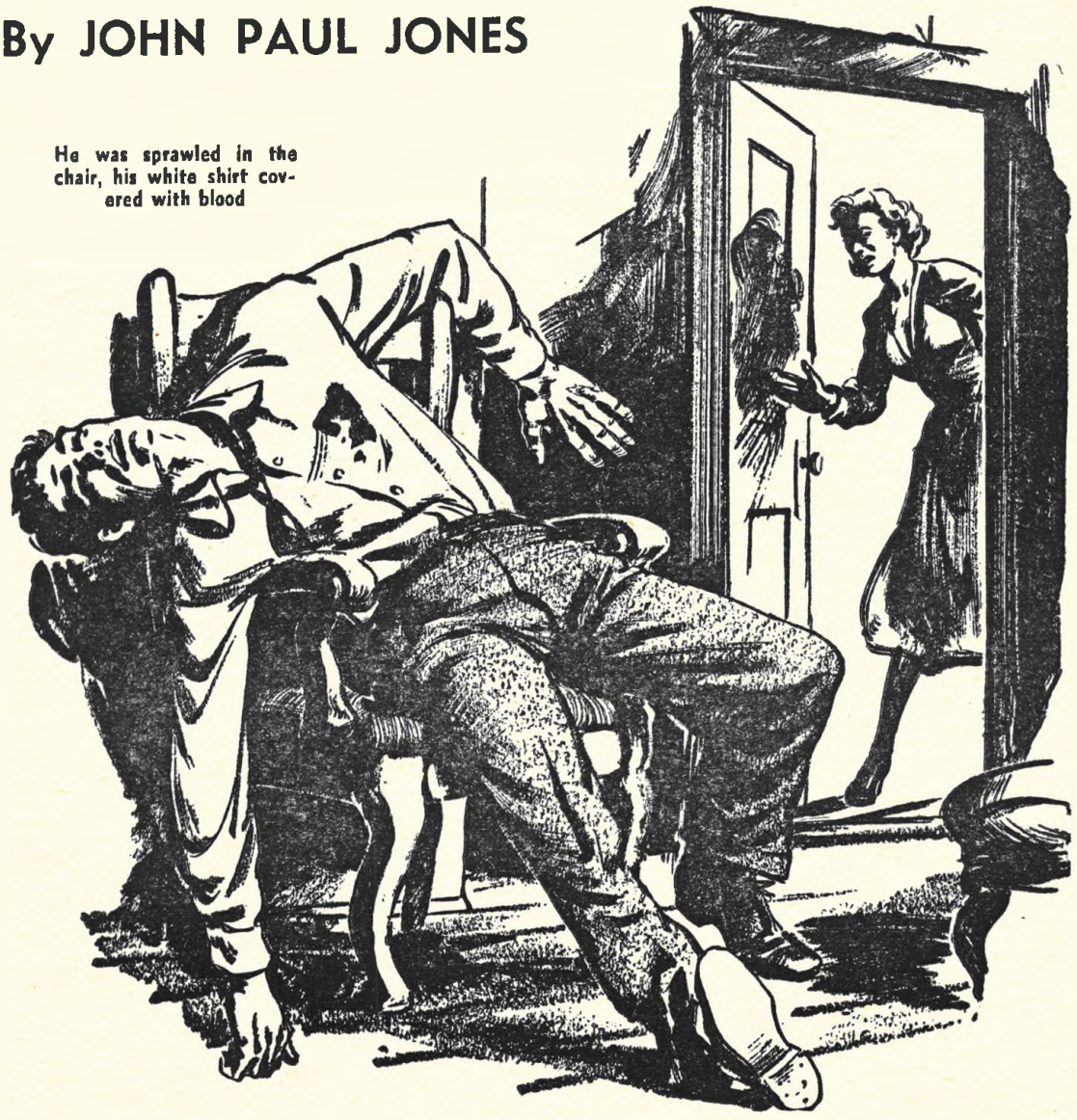
Step two consists of taking "Ma" or "Pa" to an isolated country doctor. He administers one shot. The rest of the dope is handed over to the faithful "son" or "daughter" at later-on intervals because "Ma was too ailing to leave the farm today."

Narcotics agents always eventually catch up with this too-neat little ruse, but often not until much damage has been done.

And plenty of people are busily engaged in such nefarious activities if current statistics are any indication! For although the legitimate need for narcotics is estimated to average about 440 tons yearly, the world produces—and uses—2650 tons!

—Bess Ritter

By JOHN PAUL JONES



He was sprawled in the chair, his white shirt covered with blood

TOO BEAUTIFUL TO HANG

THE SLIM, shapely blonde in the witness chair had everything it takes to influence juries and win acquittals; but she wasn't using what she had. She was getting herself hanged.

The courtroom was packed when I squeezed in between a fat woman and a dapper, cold-eyed man on a front-row bench. The fat woman glared at me. The man gave me a cold, impersonal glance of annoyance and then looked back toward the girl on the stand.

Doris Elston had a face and figure that could have made the jurors ignore facts.

A pair of smooth nylon legs could make Sammy Delray do incredibly foolish things—like confessing to a murder he knew nothing about!

You see legs like hers on the cover of picture mags. But she sat primly upright in the witness chair, hands clasped in her lap, skirt decorously below her knees.

The prosecutor, a tall, thin man with dark, piercing eyes alert and implacable behind shell-rimmed glasses, stood with his hands behind him, his body leaning forward.

"Miss Elston," he said with deceptive suavity, "when did you learn you were not the legal wife of Augustus Hahn?"

Doris Elston's lips quivered. Her fingers worked nervously in her lap.

"A week after . . . the murder," she said in a low, strained voice. "A woman came to my sister's house and said Hahn had married and deserted her two years ago. That there was no divorce."

"Did you know Hahn carried a fifty-thousand-dollar insurance policy, with his wife as the beneficiary?"

The red tip of her tongue moistened her lips. She nodded. "Yes," she said tautly.

The prosecutor flicked a sly, meaningful glance at the jury. The fat woman next to me muttered, "The hussy killed him for the insurance!" The cold-eyed man had his arms folded, looking stonily ahead.

The prosecutor said: "When did you last see Augustus Hahn alive?"

"About nine o'clock." Her fingers worked convulsively. "He came home drunk, and struck me. I took the car and drove to the Wayside Tourist Camp and rented a cabin for the night. I had done it before when he came home drunk. I was afraid of him."

"And when you got to the tourist camp," the prosecutor went on, "you retired immediately into the cabin and remained there until the police found you at six o'clock next morning?"

"Yes," she said.

"Miss Elston, didn't you rent the cabin to establish an alibi? Didn't you leave your cabin secretively and return to the Hahn home—"

"No! No!" she cried. "I was there all night!"

"And when you arrived at the Hahn home," continued the prosecutor inexorably, "you found Hahn in a drunken stupor and shot him to death. Then you returned to your cabin and—"

"No!" cried Doris Elston shrilly. She was gripping the arms of the witness chair. Her breast rose and fell in quick, spasmodic breathing.

"Isn't it true, Doris Elston," thundered the prosecutor, "that you murdered Augustus Hahn in the belief that you, as his wife, would collect his insurance?"

DORIS ELSTON'S face was white. Her slim body arched as though she was about to spring in insensate fury upon her tormentor.

I felt queer little wavering threads of chilling fear begin to wriggle over me. My palms were wet with sweat. I should have heeded that warning. I should have left that courtroom quick. Had Janie, my wife, been with me, she would have known. She would have got me out of there. But Janie was somewhere enroute from Chicago to meet me here in Los Angeles.

"Doris Elston," thundered the prosecutor, "did you murder Augustus Hahn?"

"I didn't kill him!" she cried hysterically. "I didn't! I didn't!"

She sank back in the chair, buried her face in her hands and began to sob. That thing within me began to tug. I was being drawn irresistibly—like a man caught in the undertow of the sea. Only Janie could have saved me, but Janie wasn't there.

I rose, stumbled over the fat woman's big feet. The dapper man gave a hard, disapproving glance. The fat woman growled angrily. I reached the aisle and faced the judge.

No one noticed me. Attention was transfixed upon that beautiful, terrified girl sobbing in the witness chair. In the hushed silence, broken only by her sobs, my voice boomed out, startling as the roll of a drum in a candle-lit cathedral:

"Your honor," I said in a firm, clear voice, "Doris Elston could not have murdered Augustus Hahn between the hours of ten o'clock and midnight on June sixth, because, during those hours, I was with

her in a cabin at the Wayside Tourist Camp!"

There were gasps of startled breaths from the courtroom. Doris Elston jerked her head up. Her tear-stained face stiffened with shocked amazement. Then her dark-blue, tear-glistening eyes pinwheeled with furious anger and revulsion.

"I have never seen that man before in my life!" she cried.

That went for both of us. All I knew about Doris Elston and the murder of Hahn, I had read in the morning papers. I had never seen her before I entered the courtroom. . . .

A husky dick stood beside my chair in the prosecutor's office. The prosecutor's sharp features were flushed with angry rage. He stood menacingly before me, his piercing eyes pools of angry frustration.

"So, your name is Sam Delray and you're a salesman," he gritted. "You made headlines with that courtroom play, Delray, but before I get through with you, you'll wish you had never seen a courtroom! Who is paying you to give Doris Elston an alibi?"

I was sweating. I didn't dare tell the truth. Some guys with compulsion neuroses have only to step over cracks, slap lampposts, or some such silly thing. But those kind of compulsions don't get them into trouble. It's my kind that do. If someone insults a man's wife or girl-friend and he knocks the insulter down, no one thinks anything of it. But me, I got what a doc told me is a Don Quixote complex. If I see a beautiful dame in trouble, I've *got* to help her. It's something inside that forces me. If I told the prosecutor that, he'd have me thrown in the booby hatch. I had to stick to my story.

"No one is paying me," I said. "I can't keep silent and see an innocent girl convicted of murder."

"Innocent?" he laughed derisively. "She's guilty as hell! Even she denies ever having seen you before."

"She thinks more of her reputation than her life."

The prosecutor snorted.

"Then why does she deny being with me?" I said. "Even if she had never seen me before, I offer her an alibi and she refuses to accept it. Why?"

That's what had him worried.

"Delray." he shook a finger at me angrily, "I don't know why she refused the alibi, but I know she's guilty. Why haven't you come forward before? Hahn was killed two months ago."

I WAS scared, but I was in too deep to back out now. I sank or swam with Doris Elston. I didn't know whether she was innocent or guilty. Whatever happened to her, it seemed certain I was headed for a lot of trouble.

"I didn't know anything about the murder until I got back in Los Angeles this morning and read the papers," I told him. "I left Doris that night sometime after midnight and hitchhiked to my father-in-law's farm in Illinois.

"You're lying!" shouted the prosecutor. "How did you meet Doris Elston that night?"

"I thumbed her for a ride, and she picked me up. It was a little after nine o'clock."

The prosecutor leered incredulously. The detective standing beside my chair laughed.

"So, she picks up a total stranger on the highway at night, takes him to a cabin and spends half the night with him? Delray, you're a liar! Murderess, she is, but she was not *that* kind of a girl. It just isn't in her nature to be what you claim. I don't believe it!"

Sweat was wet against my shirt. "A jury will," I said.

"Maybe," and he looked at me grimly, a sinister speculation in his piercing eyes, "maybe you were with her. And maybe that wasn't the first time. Maybe you and she had planned out the murder together!"

My fingernails bit into the palms of my hands. A chill terror was vibrating little shivers of cold that pricked my skin. *Oh Janie! Janie! If you had only been with me!*

"Hahn was a bigamist," I said, grasping at straws. "Maybe he was being blackmailed and the blackmailer killed him."

"Nuts! Blackmailers don't kill their victims! Delray, you'd better come through with the truth. Why are you trying to alibi her?"

I took papers and tobacco from my pocket and tried to roll a cigarette. My shaking hands scattered the tobacco on my clothes. I was tempted to tell him the truth, but visions of the crazy house held my tongue.

"What about the real Mrs. Hahn?" I said eagerly. "She had the same motive."

"She was in Detroit at the time of the murder."

"Maybe a burglar?" I suggested desperately.

"Burglar, hell!" snorted the prosecutor. "At ten o'clock, Hahn's radio was blaring so loudly neighbors called police. They found Hahn in the living room, sprawled out in a chair, dead drunk. A burglar could have moved the furniture out without disturbing him. We've covered every possible angle of this case, Delray. In the end, we'll learn the truth about you. Better come clean now, and it won't go so hard with you."

"Let me talk to her," I said hopefully. "Maybe I can persuade her to tell the truth."

The prosecutor shook his head angrily, then his eyes narrowed with sudden cunning.

"Bevins," he said to the dick who stood beside my chair, "see if she'll talk to him."

Bevins hurried out. I knew he would set a microphone to pick up anything said in Doris Elston's cell.

"Delray, I should lock you up," said the prosecutor grimly. "But I'm going to check your story first. You said you are stopping at the Braggen Hotel. Don't try to leave town. What is the address of that farm in Illinois?"

I knew that I was sunk. If I gave him a phony address, he would prove me a liar; and if I gave him the true address, I would also be proved a liar. I had been on my father-in-law's farm at the time of the murder. I had been there from May until five days ago. I gave him the address.

My thoughts were whirling in mad eddies. I tried desperately to think of some way out of the mess I had got into. There was only one way out: prove Doris Elston had not killed Hahn. I was not foolish enough to place any hope in doing that. Before tomorrow, the reply would be back from Illinois, and, I most certainly would be thrown into jail.

"What about her sister?" I asked.

The prosecutor's piercing eyes fixed upon me with an intent, thoughtful speculation.

"Delray," he said slowly, "it is possible that Doris Elston did not fire the shot that killed Hahn. But she knew that it was going to be fired. I can't figure why you would offer an alibi under the peculiar circumstances you did—unless you were her accomplice and killed Hahn!"

"You're crazy!" I cried hoarsely. "I had never seen her before she picked me up on the road that night!"

"I'm going to give that angle some heavy thinking!" he snapped.

BEVINS, the detective, returned. I was wet with sweat. I shuddered to think of what the prosecutor's thinking might lead him to. He might possibly charge me with being an accomplice, and make it stick!

Bevins opened the cell, let me in and clanged the door shut. Doris Elston was seated upon the iron cot, her hands tight-clasped in her lap. She lifted her face to me. It was like a waxen mask framed by lustrous, golden-tinted hair.

"Isn't it bad enough," she said in a taut, shaking voice, "that I am accused of murder, without you branding me a cheap woman?"

"You're too beautiful to hang," I said and sat down beside her. I took cigarette papers and pencil from my pocket, began to write, even as I talked about her being silly to lie about our affair. I wrote: *Microphone. They're listening. Do as I say, or I will tell the truth about the mur-*

der. I know who killed Hahn. Admit you were with me. Stick to it.

I was taking a long stab in the dark. There had been something about her conduct on the witness stand that made me feel as though she might be protecting someone. She took the note.

As I watched her read it, my heart began to pound. She drew in a quick, sharp breath. I felt her fingers bite into my arm as she clutched it. She finished the note, looked at me. Her eyes were terrified, desperate with pleading. I knew a thrill of exultation. She *was* protecting someone! I took the note, put it into my mouth and chewed it up.

"You've got to tell the truth, Doris," I said. "You were foolish not to have told the police at once. You can't let them hang you for a murder you didn't commit." As I talked, I was writing: *My name is Sam Delray. You picked me up on the road around nine o'clock. I was with you until after twelve. Admit it. Play it up strong. Remember, the microphone.*

She read the second note. I chewed it up. Her face was chalk-white. She was trembling.

"Doris," I said sharply, "do you understand? You must tell them the truth."

Suddenly she began to sob. She threw her arms about me, put her face against my chest.

"Yes, yes!" she sobbed. "I'll tell the truth. Oh, Sam, I should have told the police that morning. B-but it was so humiliating. I-I was so ashamed. I didn't want to hurt my sister, her kids. Sam"—she raised her face and was looking at me with desperate appeal—"I would do anything to protect my sister and her kids."

So that was it! She was actually protecting her sister. Her sister had killed Hahn. I knew every word we spoke had gone into the microphone.

"Everything will be all right, honey," I said softly. "Tell them the truth."

The prosecutor stopped pacing the floor when Bevins took me back into his office. I could see that he was worried.

"What did she say?" he demanded.

"She'll tell the truth," I said, knowing he already knew everything that had been said in Doris' cell. "She was too ashamed to admit it before."

"Bah!" he snorted. He leaned toward me, waggling a finger. "Delray, I am going to get to the bottom of this! Don't try to leave town."

"I would like the addresses of Mrs. Hahn and Doris' sister," I said. "The papers didn't mention where they lived."

He started to refuse me, then went to his desk, looked through his papers and gave me the addresses.

"Remember," he warned me as I started for the door, "don't try to leave town."

Bevins went down on the elevator with me. I pretended not to notice when he signaled a man in a gray suit who was lounging in the corridor, near the elevators.

I hailed a cab and noted that Gray Suit was tailing us in a black sedan.

MRS. TRAVIS, Doris' sister, I had learned from the newspapers was a widow with two children, living two blocks from the Hahn home. The Travis home was a small, white bungalow with bright-red flowers bordering the walk. As I paid off the cab, I saw Gray Suit draw in to the curb halfway down the block.

I rang the doorbell and there followed the patter of racing feet and the shouts of small voices. A little girl with curly, brown hair and laughing eyes looked up at me inquisitively. Behind her, a boy of three observed me hopefully.

"Hi!" said the little girl, with a broad grin. The little boy advanced and said, "We dot a twain. Won't wun."

"Mommy home?" I asked, returning their grins.

A tall, blond woman with haggard face and sad eyes came from the doorway of the living room.

"Yes?" she said, and there was a tension of fear in her voice.

"May I come in? It's about Doris."

"Yes," she said almost in a whisper, and led the way into the living room.

There was an electric train layout on

the floor. The two kids sprawled out in front of it. The little boy looked at me, said: "Boke. Won't wun."

"Run outside a while, children," said their mother.

They got up obediently. The little boy looked at me over his shoulder: "Twain boke. You fix it, huh?"

"Sure." I said, and they went out. I came straight to the point with Doris' sister: "Mrs. Travis, they are going to hang Doris unless something is done quickly. I believe she is protecting someone. Who is it?"

Her lips moved soundlessly. Her hands worked nervously in front of her, clasping and unclasping.

"She thinks I killed him," she said in an almost inaudible whisper. "I didn't, but I had intended to. I went to his house that night to kill him, but he was already dead."

"You were there?" I said incredulously.

"Yes. Doris telephoned before she went to the cabin. Hahn had come home drunk and struck her. It had happened many times before. He was a beast! I got to brooding. After I put the children to bed, I went to his house. I don't know—maybe I would have killed him, I was that enraged. But I found him in the living room—dead."

"What time was that?" I asked.

"About eleven o'clock. When I saw him, I was panic-stricken. I came home. I was afraid. I thought of going to Doris—"

"You thought she had killed him?"

"I went in the back door," she continued as though not hearing my question. "The house was dark. I turned on the hall light. Moonlight came through the window in the living room. It fell upon—He was sprawled in the chair, his white shirt covered with blood."

"Mrs. Travis," I looked at her sternly, "did you kill Hahn?"

Her anguished eyes were filled with pain, but no deception. "No."

"You didn't tell the police you had been to the house?"

"Doris begged me not to. She said it could not help her. It would only result in notoriety for me. She was thinking of the children. She loves them as though they were her own."

"Mrs. Hahn came to visit you?"

"Yes, she and her new fiancé. They were both kind and sympathetic." She looked at me desperately. "If I went to the police, told them I killed Hahn—"

"It wouldn't help," I said quickly.

It would not have helped me. As soon as the prosecutor heard from Illinois, he would have proof my alibi of Doris was a lie. Even if he couldn't stick me as an accomplice to murder, he would be able to give me a hard jolt for obstructing justice

An idea brought a hopeful tingle of excitement. "Mrs. Travis, is there some man deeply in love with Doris? Someone she loves, too?"

"No, I am sure not," she said.

I was convinced Mrs. Travis could give me no information of value. I had reached the end of my resources. I had, by giving Doris Elston an alibi, called the police and the state's attorney dishonest, or at the least incompetent, in their charge of murder against Doris. They would remember that when I came to trial.

"There must be *something* that can be done!" Mrs. Travis said desperately. "Doris did not kill him."

"I'll do all I can," I said, knowing there was nothing else I could do, except surrender myself and confess the truth.

I started to leave, remembered what the little fellow had said about the electric train. I knew something about electrical gadgets. It took only a minute for me to find the disconnected wire. At the sound of the train whirring around the track, both kids raced in, wide-eyed and shouting joyously.

"Man dot it fixed!" shouted the boy.

AS I reached the street, a girl in a bright-green dress with a red scarf fluttering about her shoulders was hurrying from a man who trailed her. He was whistling and calling out to her. The girl gave me an appealing look. As the man came opposite me, I reached out, grabbed him. I let fly with a fist and he went down.

The girl gave a squeal and took to her heels, her dress flying about her long, slim legs.

Gray Suit had driven the sedan up. He stared at me and said. "What the hell do you call that?"

"Compulsion neurosis," I said, and climbed into the car with him.

"We call it assault and battery," he said. "But the guy had it coming."

"Will you drop me off at my hotel?"

"Sure! The boss said to give you our best service." He studied me thoughtfully. He was a husky, square-jawed man, with shrewd, brown eyes. "Fella, for your sake, I hope you make that alibi stick."

I gave him a feeble grin. "I was thinking of catching a plane to Mexico."

"You wouldn't make it," he said dryly. "The D.A. is mighty unhappy over your grandstand play."

"Did you fellows consider that Hahn may have been killed so his legal wife could collect the premium?"

"We cleared Mrs. Hahn. She couldn't have done it herself, and she didn't hire someone to do it. She knew nothing about the murder until she read it in the Detroit papers. She submitted to a lie-detector test."

"But someone could have done it, without her knowing, so she could collect the premium," I suggested.

He gave me a quick, puzzled look, shook his head. "Why? It doesn't make sense."

"It would if the killer knew he could marry Mrs. Hahn after the murder of her husband. Double indemnity on a fifty-thousand-dollar policy is nice money to marry into."

Gray Suit's eyes were studying me with startled interest. "You mention this to the boss?"

"Stop at the first drugstore," I said. "I'll make a telephone call."

He followed me into the drugstore and stood outside the booth. I got Mrs. Travis' number from Information and called her. From her, I got the telephone number of Mrs. Hahn, and her fiancé's name—Phil Darby. I called her number.

A low, throaty voice answered: "Mrs. Hahn."

I said, "Is Mr. Darby there?" She said she would call him. I waited.

I had no reason, no logic, for what I was doing. It was an act of desperation. I suppose a man in the death cell tries up until the last tortured moment to believe he can foil the inevitable.

A man's voice came over the wire: "This is Mr. Darby."

My heart pounded. My hand holding the receiver shook. My nerves were tight bunches of tension.

"Phil," I said harshly, "I want a payoff, and you know what I mean! I am in Room Four-eighteen at the Braggen Hotel. If you aren't there by six o'clock, I'll tell the D.A. the truth about the Hahn murder!"

I hung up quick. When I left the booth, Gray Suit looked at me curiously.

"What did the boss say?" he asked.

"He said you boys would be with me now and until the hour of death."

"We will," Gray Suit chuckled. "Better forget the plane to Mexico."

He took me to my hotel. I went to my room on the fourth floor. My nerves were taut as a hangman's rope. I threw off my hat and coat and began to pace the floor. I sat down, got up and paced some more. Sat down, got up and paced some more. It would be a terrible shock to Janie when I was sent to jail. If only she had been here!

I looked at my watch. It was ten of six. Sweat made me feel sticky. I took off my shirt, went into the bathroom and began to douse cold water over my face. I kept right on splashing water on my face, pretending I had not heard my room door open and close softly.

A voice from the bathroom doorway said: "You have company!"

I WHIRLED, pretending to be startled. Then I didn't have to pretend. The gun I was looking into was a .38, but the hole in the barrel seemed big enough for me to crawl into. I knew the man behind the gun. He was the same dapper, cold-

eyed man that had sat beside me in the courtroom. He was wearing a brown hat, perched at a rakish angle above his grim features.

"What is this about a payoff?" he said coldly.

The telephone shrilled. Phil Darby gave a start, then his lips tightened.

"Answer it," he snapped. "Remember, this gun is ready to go off at the first wrong word! And you'll hold the receiver so we both hear."

I went to the telephone. Darby kept the gun against me as I removed the receiver and held it so we could both hear.

"Delray?" shouted the voice of the prosecutor in a voice of baffled rage. When I told him it was, he yelled, "What the hell do you mean by playing Hearts And Flowers to Mrs. Travis and sending her in here to confess murdering Hahn?"

"I'm not a musician. If her conscience—"

"Conscience, bah! Delray, I'm fed up with your attempts to defeat justice. Mrs. Travis didn't kill Hahn!"

"Of course not," I said. "Neither did Doris."

"Then who the hell did?" he snarled.

I felt the gun pressing into my side. Darby was breathing in short, hard gusts.

"I did," I said, and hung up the receiver.

Darby sucked in his breath and took a backward step. He stared at me with startled amazement.

"Surprised you, eh?" I said. I felt cold goose pimples popping up over my stomach, but I wasn't going to betray my fear to Darby. "You thought you killed him, but you're a guy who does things in a hurry. If I hadn't been there to smother him after you wounded him, he would have recovered."

"You're a liar!" He hurled it out with a blasting breath. "There was no mention of asphyxiation at the trial."

It was an effort, looking into the mean end of that gun, for me to laugh, but I managed it.

"Why should the D.A. complicate his case?" I sneered derisively. "The bullet could have killed him."

"You're a liar!"

I pretended to get angry. It helped cover my fear. "Put down that gun and let's talk business! Doris and I had figured out how to kill Hahn and make it look like suicide. We would have collected fifty thousand dollars. Then you butt in and do a real job of murder, and don't give a damn if it looks like murder because you figure no one will even look in your direction. You're engaged to Mrs. Hahn. You'll marry her and get the insurance. She knew nothing about your plan. That's why she passed the lie-detector test. You figured Doris would get the rap."

"You're crazy!" he said harshly. "I didn't kill Hahn."

"Of course not," I agreed. "But you thought you had. I don't know how you learned about Hahn and the insurance policy, but I'll bet when the cops investigate, they'll find you flew out here from Detroit, killed Hahn and flew back. Maybe you were blackmailing him, knowing he was a bigamist. Then you learned about the policy. Mrs. Hahn was an easy target for you to marry."

"What was this about a payoff?" he demanded harshly then.

My blood yas pounding against my temples. I knew a wild surge of exultation. But, looking into the hard, pinpoints of his cold eyes, my stomach felt like a vacuum. I could read murder in his eyes. I was scared stiff. But I knew I was right: he had killed Hahn!

"I want half of the insurance," I told him. "I'll lose Doris because she'll be convicted. But the world is full of pretty girls."

"You're trying to blackmail me," he said tensely. "You've been guessing, trying to shake me down, thinking I would pay rather than be brought into the case."

"I'm not guessing about you shooting Hahn," I said. "I was there. I heard you come into the house while I was ransacking Hahn's room upstairs. I was halfway down the stairs when I heard the shot—"

"All right, damn' you!" he said in a harsh, tight voice. "I killed Hahn, and

I'm going to kill you—right now!"

WITHOUT realizing it, I had been backing away from him. The back of my knees touched a chair and I flopped down as though my legs had turned to rubber. I was sweating, and I was praying that I had judged the D.A. right.

I was facing the door. Darby's back was to it. I saw the door open slowly, and almost sobbed with relief.

"All right," said Gray Suit. "We have it all recorded. Drop that gun and turn around!"

Do you think Darby dropped his gun and turned around? He did not! He pointed it straight at me and uttered an animal snarl as he pulled the trigger. . . .

I was in a nice clean bed when I was aware of things again. There was a pretty nurse fluttering about, and the prosecutor was there, too. I don't think he was too happy that I was alive.

"Delray," he shouted angrily, "what brought you into this case?"

"Compulsion neurosis," I said wearily.

"Bah! You've lied, deceived, misrepresented, and made me and my office look like fools. If Darby hadn't made a full confession, I'd throw the book at you. How did you know Darby killed Hahn? And why didn't you tell me, instead of—"

"I didn't know," I put in unhappily. "I went into the courtroom out of curiosity. When I saw that gorgeously beautiful girl in trouble— Well, it's like that with me. I got a Don Quixote complex. When I see a beautiful woman in distress, I get an irresistible impulse to—"

"Rot!" shouted the prosecutor.

"Sam!" Doris Elston rushed into the room and came flying to my bedside. She sat down beside me. There were tears glistening in her wonderful eyes. "Oh, how can I ever thank you!"

"Doris," I said huskily, "I have an impulse to—"

"Darling!" came a shout from the doorway, and Janie raced to me. She pushed Doris aside and put her arms about me. "Oh, Sammy, darling!" she sobbed. "I got into town and was looking all over for you, and then I saw in the papers— What have they done to my poor baby?"

Then, as though conscious of Doris for the first time, Janie looked at me sternly.

"Sam, what was this woman doing with her arms about you?" she demanded.

"Nothing," I said weakly.

Just then the prosecutor had to butt in: "He was telling her," he said wryly, "that he had an impulse to—"

"Sam!" cried Janie and looked at me angrily. Then she looked at the others. "You folks leave us," Janie said quietly to the nurse, Doris, and the prosecutor. "When Sammy gets one of those Don Quixote impulses, he is like a rooster in a barnyard."

The nurse squealed.

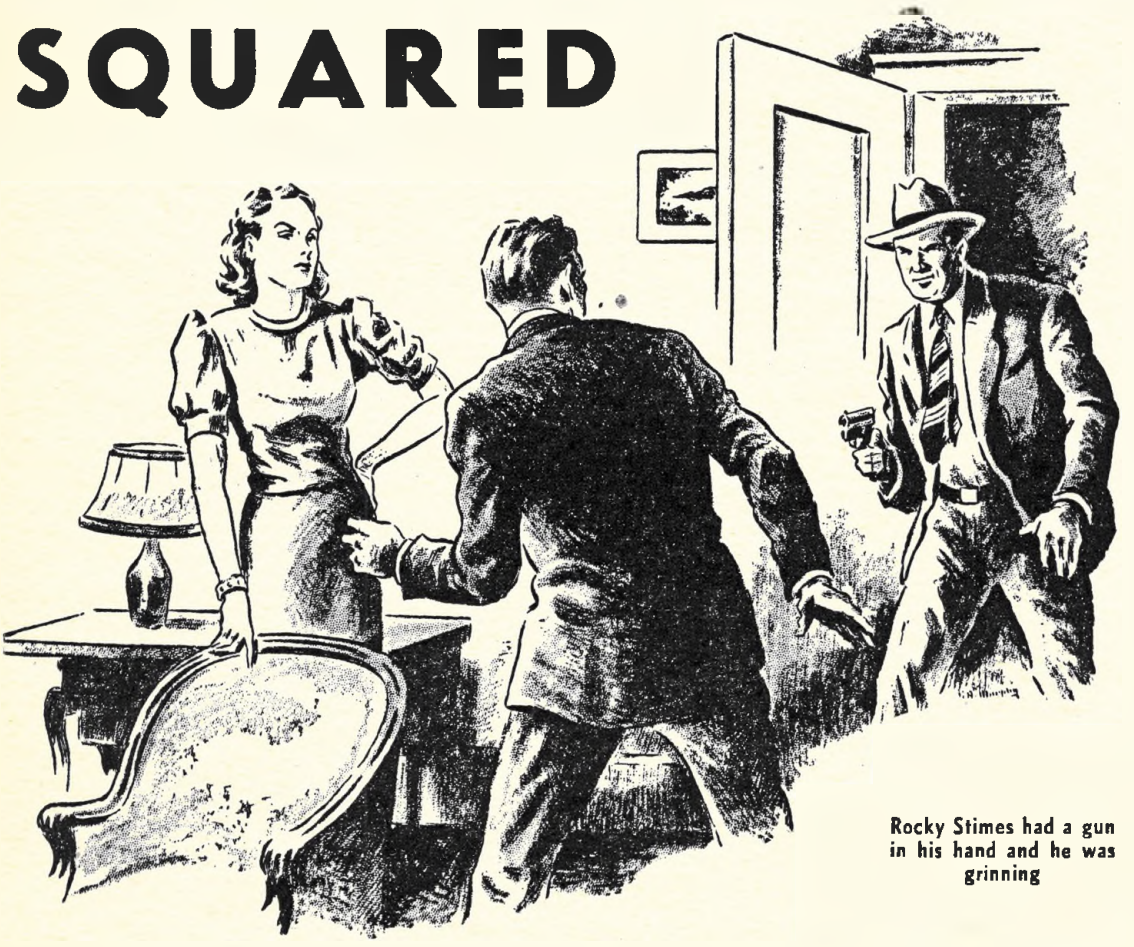
Doris said, "O-oh!"

The prosecutor said: "Rot!"

Janie said to me, "Sammy, you darn would-be two-timer!"

I said, "Honey, you look nice in that swell new hat."

SQUARED



Rocky Stimes had a gun in his hand and he was grinning

By BENTON BRADEN

ROSE DELONG left the elevator at the seventh floor and hurried along through the corridor to her own apartment. She was humming a little, obviously in high spirits. After all, Rose led a most pleasant life. She didn't have to work, had little to do but entertain herself. She got her clothes at the best shops, ate at the most expensive restaurants. And she had this comfortable, almost luxurious apartment at the Heaton Arms.

She reached the door of her apartment, opened it, stepped inside, looked with satisfaction at her long living room. She stood there for a moment, smiling, a woman of not quite thirty, beginning to show signs of plumpness. That worried Rose Delong. She couldn't afford to grow fat.

She closed the door, started to move away, then stopped. It was a bit of white cardboard that caught her eye, brought her to that abrupt halt. Someone had pushed that piece of cardboard under her door while she had been out at that late movie. Slowly she stopped and picked it up, turned it over and read the printed words that had been scrawled on the bottom side.

All Rose DeLong can see is a vision of clutching fingers, for "Clipper" Hart is out of stir—and reaching for revenge. . . .

The smile left her face and she paled. Her mouth dropped open and something like horror appeared in her greenish eyes. Her hands shook as she continued to stare at the words. They read:

I made it in five years, Rose. Now I'll square accounts in my own way. Pleasant dreams—while they last.

Clipper Hart! There was outright fear in Rose Delong's eyes as she turned and examined the door to make sure it had locked when she had closed it. She leaned her back against the door as though to brace it. She had no idea that Clipper Hart was again a free man. Now his face loomed clearly before her as she had last seen him. Then The Clipper, as he was called by the police and underworld, had been on trial before a jury of his peers. The charge had been armed robbery. The Clipper had been charged with doing a one-man stickup in the foyer of an apartment hotel called the Clinton. A Mrs. Nixon, a wealthy old lady, had been the victim, and the loot had been gems of a value of forty thousand dollars.

Rose Delong had been the star witness for the state at that trial. Rose had been living at the Clinton at the time. On the witness stand she had told of how she had happened to step into the foyer just as the bandit was concluding his job. She had had a clear view of the bandit's face just before he, with the loot in his hands, had turned and fled.

Without hesitation Rose had looked the defendant, Clipper Hart, squarely in the eyes and pointed him out as the bandit who had committed that robbery. She hadn't faltered on cross-examination. She had answered every question posed to her by Clipper's attorney in a clear unhesitating voice. The jury had believed her and in less than an hour had brought in a verdict of guilty and fixed Clipper's term of imprisonment at fifteen years.

NOW Clipper Hart was out! This came as a tremendous shock to Rose because everyone had assured her that the Clipper would be lucky to win a parole in ten years. The Clipper must have had powerful friends somewhere because he was out in half that time.

He was out—and he was coming for her. In his own words he was going to square the account. That written threat on the cardboard could mean only one thing. The Clipper was going to kill her for making that identification of him. For five years he had brooded in prison; for five years he had been planning his revenge. Never again could Rose breathe easily as long as The Clipper was a free man.

Rose crossed the room to her phone and called police headquarters, asked for Sergeant Sawyer, waited a minute until his heavy voice replied.

"Sergeant Sawyer?" she gasped. "This is Rose Delong. You may have forgotten me, but I testified against Clipper Hart five years ago and it was my testimony that—"

"I remember very well, Rose," the sergeant cut in.

"He's out, sergeant," Rose said, panic in her tone. "He's only served five years. After you and everyone else told me that he couldn't possibly be paroled in less than ten years. He'll kill me for testifying against him."

"Now, take it easy, Rose," the sergeant said mildly. "You're right about the Clipper being out. I just saw today where he was released on parole. I don't know yet what happened. He must have had some powerful friends working for him behind the scenes. I'll check and try to find out about it. But there's no reason for you to be alarmed. After all, you were just a witness like thousands of other witnesses in similar cases and it's very seldom that a criminal holds a grudge for five years, I mean enough to try to take any kind of revenge on you. So I wouldn't worry about—"

"I've got good cause to be worried, sergeant," she interrupted. "I've just received a threat from him. A card—shoved under my door—saying that he was going to square accounts with me,

That means he's brooded over the case, that he hates me because he knows he'd never have done those five years if I hadn't happened to see him commit that robbery and hadn't testified against him. So now he's blaming me for everything that's happened to him. He'll kill me if he gets a chance. I—I'm scared. I don't know what to do."

"Don't worry. If he's threatened you we'll give you protection," the sergeant said. "I'll be right up to your apartment to check. I'll have you covered by detectives until we get to the bottom of it."

Sergeant Sawyer arrived with one of his men in less than twenty minutes. He frowned hard when he examined the card that Rose had found at her door.

"The words are printed," he commented. "The Clipper will probably deny that it was his work, claim that some of his enemies did it to get him in bad on his parole. Even if the Clipper did put the card under your door he was probably just trying to give you a scare. I doubt that he'd ever make a serious move."

"But what am I going to do?" Rose asked frantically. "Just sit here and wait to see if he's going to kill me? I wouldn't dare walk down the street. He might be waiting to shoot me!"

"Nothing like that, Rose." Sergeant Sawyer shook his head. "If the Clipper is really out to get you, he won't take a shot at you on the street. He's a pretty smart crook. If he is serious about this he'll try to do something clever, try to pull a job that can't be pinned on him. But you needn't worry, Rose. You go to bed and sleep sound. Because from this moment on you'll be covered. There'll be a detective on duty outside all night. When you leave in the day time there'll be a dick watching. So you can be sure the Clipper will leave you strictly alone. He won't want to go back to prison—or worse."

Sergeant Sawyer succeeded in calming Rose's nerves before he left. She was smiling a little again when she closed the door behind him. After all, the Clipper wouldn't dare make a move against her as long as a cop was watching outside her door. Rose sat down and smoked a cigarette, then decided that she might as well go on to bed.

Then the phone rang and she answered it. "So you called the cops right away, Rose," the taunting voice came over the wire. "Well, all the cops in the world won't be able to save you. I've had plenty of time in the last five years to figure out how to do it. It won't be a gun or a knife, but you'll get it just the same. Your number is up and it's up high. A lot of things can happen in the dark Rose. So go to bed and sleep sound. If you don't wake up—"

The voice broke off and she heard a click. Her hands were shaking and her face was white again as she replaced the instrument. The Clipper must be very close to her right now, close enough to know that the cops had visited her apartment and had departed. Rose had the feeling that she would never know another moment's peace as long as Clipper Hart was alive. Bluffing or not—the effect was the same on her. But she didn't think there was any bluff in that cold, relentless voice that had spoken to her over the wire. That voice had held hatred, and an overwhelming desire for revenge.

THERE WAS no use calling Sergeant Sawyer again. He'd just laugh it off and remind her that there was a detective watching outside her door. Rose finally went to bed. "A lot of things can happen in the dark, Rose," The Clipper had said. Rose didn't turn off her lights this night when she got into bed. She left them all blazing. It was hours before she dropped off to sleep. Then she had a dream, a dream that the Clipper had managed to get into her bedroom and had his hands about her throat and was strangling her. She half-screamed as she awakened and sat up in bed. It was another hour before she was able to sleep again.

It was late when she finally awakened and the sunlight was streaming into her bedroom. That sunlight restored her confidence. After all, she had been very foolish to let her fear get the best of her and lose most of a night's sleep. With a detective watching over her there could have been no danger. And maybe Clipper Hart had been just bluffing, trying to throw a scare into her. Things seemed different in broad daylight. Clipper Hart would be too smart to try to get at her when there were cops around. Rose even convinced herself that she might not hear from Clipper Hart again.

At noon, after she had dressed, she decided that she might as well go out. She opened her door with some caution but there was no one in the corridor. When she got down to the foyer a headquarters man rose from a chair and lifted his hat to her.

"Good morning, Rose," he said. "Now don't worry about anything. I'll trail along behind you when you go out. That way, I can watch and see if anyone is taking any interest in your movements. You go right ahead and leave it to me."

Rose smiled and thanked him, went on out to the street. After half an hour Rose was in the business district. She stopped and examined a window display. When she turned—she looked straight into the eyes of Clipper Hart. He was standing about twenty feet from her and he was grinning at her, a crooked, evil grin.

He brought up his hands with the fingers fully extended, then slowly began to close them. Rose couldn't miss that. It was a strangling motion.

Eyes dilated in horror, Rose turned and looked frantically for her police escort. It was thirty seconds before she spotted him. And when, at last, he came up fast in response to her motion, Clipper Hart had vanished. Her eyes searched the moving crowd of pedestrians but she didn't see the Clipper again.

"It was Clipper Hart!" she told the detective. "He stood right there in front of me, made a strangling motion with his hands."

"You sure?" the detective asked a bit doubtfully.

"Absolutely sure," Rose insisted. "I could never forget his face, after facing him from the witness stand for an hour like I did. He was well-dressed—in a brown suit. He grinned at me, made those motions with his hands. It was just the same as though he were telling me that he'd get at me later, and that when he did he'd strangle me with his bare hands."

"I think he's a cheap bluffer," the detective scoffed. "If he really intended to do a job like that, he'd never show his face until he was ready to do it. He'd know that pulling a stunt like this would just make it harder for him when he got ready to act. I think that's his sole idea—to keep you scared. He figures that that will make you suffer some. He'll get tired of pulling stunts like this and you won't see any more of him."

Rose wasn't convinced. After all, she had seen the terrible look in the Clipper's

A READER SAYS:

Dear Editor,

As a regular reader of TRIPLE DETECTIVE I would like to call your attention to a misstatement in the story Death At Cockcrow printed in the Summer issue of that magazine.

The story is good and the illustrations are fine, but it is apparent the author is not familiar with the sport of cocking.

On page 113 the second paragraph from the top in the right hand column reads: "Cockfighting is legally frowned on in every county in the nation, including this one—Bucks County, Pennsylvania." This is not true, as Florida has no law whatever against the sport and at least five other states have no specific law against the sport, only as a violation, if any, as cruelty to animals. The five states are, Georgia, Louisiana, New Hampshire, Oregon and Kansas (except on Sunday). So you see there are a lot of counties with no law against the sport.

In the book "The Art of Cockfighting," of which I am the author, recently published by the Devin-Adair Company of New York City, the laws of every state in the Union on the sport are given.

—Arch Ruport,
Johnstown, N. Y.

eyes. His eyes had looked wild. Maybe the Clipper was a little insane after brooding for five years. Maybe it was his plan to make her suffer for a while before he closed in for the kill. In the end he might be desperate enough, crazy enough to take any chance to get at her.

Rose spent three more hours downtown but she didn't enjoy herself. Her eyes kept searching the crowd for another sight of the Clipper. When at last she returned to her apartment she didn't feel at all safe. How long would this go on? She couldn't live like this indefinitely, not knowing at what moment the Clipper might decide to act. There might be days, weeks like this, with the Clipper hounding her, phoning her, tormenting her. She wouldn't be able to stand the uncertainty of living like this.

She was sitting in her living room when she suddenly realized that something was moving. Her eyes went to the door, then to the floor. Another white card was slowly being pushed beneath the door. Her mouth opened wide and she had to stifle the scream that she wanted to utter. She sat there for two minutes without moving. Then she rose and moved, almost mechanically, toward the door. She stopped and picked up the card. There were just four words printed on it.

Not now—but soon!

She retreated across the room, her eyes still fixed on the door. Clipper Hart had been at her door. He had pushed that card beneath it. Maybe he had a key; maybe he could have opened that door and walked in on her if he had wanted to act, to kill her at that moment. What good would that detective down in the foyer have done her if the Clipper had moved in on her.

SHE RECALLED that there were other ways of getting up to this floor without going through the foyer. Anyone could enter through the basement of the building and take an elevator without being seen by anyone in the foyer. The Clipper had friends; friends that had noted every detail of the building. Those friends might even have rented an apartment in the building. The Clipper might even have an apartment on this same floor right now! No one detective was going to be any protection to her against a man bent on maniacal murder like Clipper Hart. She wasn't going to stay on here, living in dread from one moment to another. There was only one safe thing for her to do.

Rose ran into her bedroom, found a bag, hastily packed a few things in it. A few minutes later she cautiously opened the door of her apartment and looked out. The corridor was deserted. She went down the corridor to the rear of the building. There was an automatic freight elevator there. She pressed a button and the car came up. When she got down to the ground floor there was no one in sight in the loading area. She went through the short court to the side street. She walked three blocks. She gave a great sigh of relief when she was sure that Clipper Hart was nowhere behind her. The Clipper hadn't expected any maneuver like this.

She turned a corner, then flagged down a taxi. She took that taxi for about twenty blocks, then switched to another and she was careful to keep a close watch behind her all the time. In the second taxi she leaned back against the cushions and relaxed. There was a great load off her shoulders. She had to leave her comfortable apartment, leave most of her clothes behind, but she wouldn't be living in constant fear.

After a long ride across the city Rose left the taxi and walked three blocks. Finally she turned and her eyes carefully scanned the street. There were only a few cars in sight, no pedestrians, no taxis. This was a disreputable street in a shabby part of the city. The buildings were old and looked as though they should have been condemned. Satisfied, Rose turned again and entered one of the four-story structures that lined the street.

A few minutes later she was settled in two rooms that had been arranged for "light housekeeping." They were in violent contrast to the apartment at the Heaton Arms that she had fled from. The woodwork hadn't been painted in years and plaster had fallen off the walls in places. The furniture was falling apart, what little of it there was. But these were minor considerations to Rose now. She was sure that she would be safe in this hideout. Clipper Hart would never think of looking for her in this wretched district.

Rose didn't venture out of her rooms that evening. But at ten o'clock the next morning she went out. There were things she had to buy to make herself half-way comfortable in those rooms. She walked to a poor shopping district five blocks away. She was confident that Clipper Hart was far away. Yet she couldn't help but keep looking about for him. But there were no eyes watching her, no one paying her the slightest attention.

She ate her lunch in a small restaurant, then went to a movie. It was nearly four o'clock when she walked back to her rooms. Now she felt absolutely safe. The street was almost deserted and the few people who were moving seemed to want no contact with anyone. Rose could understand that; she knew that there were many persons in this district who had good reasons to hide out.

She entered her building, climbed stairs to the second floor, took a key from her purse, and unlocked her door. She stepped inside and closed the door. It had clicked shut behind her before she saw that she had company. She gasped and froze. She was so overcome with terror that she couldn't even move. For a moment she just gaped.

Clipper Hart sat on a battered wooden chair that was near the wall at her right. There was a broad smile on his face and his bright, beady little eyes were fixed on her.

"Sit right down and make yourself at home, Rose," he said softly. "You and

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I are going to have a little talk. And then I am going to square the account with you."

She turned and grabbed at the doorknob. But Clipper was out of his chair and had her by the arm before she could turn the knob. "You'll stay right here, Rose," he said harshly. "And you'd better not let out a yell or I might act a little more quickly than I had intended. Get over there and sit down in that chair!"

HE PULLED her across the room, pushed her down into an old rocking chair. He looked at her white, quivering face for a moment, then stepped back and laughed.

"You're not enjoying my visit, are you, Rose?" he said. "Not enjoying it at all. You were so sure you had shaken me when you sneaked out of the Heaton Arms and came here. But I was pretty sure you would run for it, Rose. The fact is that I wanted you to run for it. I hoped you would come to some place like this. Because people down in this district don't much care what happens to neighbors. And Sawyer doesn't have any of his dicks planted down here to look after you. Yes, it's a very nice setup, Rose—for me."

"What—what do you want of me?" Rose asked fearfully.

"Now that comes under the heading of foolish questions," he said with sarthat sat in a witness chair five years ago casm. "As I recall it you are the dame and put the finger on me for robbing Mrs. Nixon at the Hotel Clinton. Without your evidence they wouldn't have had any case against me at all. But you positively identified me as the bandit. It was you that got me the fifteen-year jolt. I did five years of it. Five—long—years."

"I—had to tell the truth—as I saw it," she faltered. "I thought—that you—"

"You thought nothing of the kind!" he interrupted bitterly. "You lied! Oh, you even had me fooled for a while. You were a nice looking girl—five years ago. You've put on a little fat since then and the pace has told on you. But then you looked just like a nice innocent girl. You told a story that my lawyer couldn't shake.

"Your blue eyes were clear and steady then and you perjured yourself in a firm and convincing voice. I'll admit you fooled me. You lived at the Clinton too, like Mrs. Nixon. And your story that you just happened to come into the foyer as the bandit turned and ran for it sounded plausible enough. I thought it was just one of these cases of mistaken identity, that you were honestly identifying the wrong guy. That would have just been my tough luck and I wouldn't have held it against you—not enough, that is, to do what I am going to do now."

"It was a case of mistaken identity," Rose cried earnestly, hopefully. "If you didn't do that job. I thought it was you. I was honest about it. If I made a mistake, I'm sorry."

"More lies!" he sneered. "There's no truth in you. You had never seen me before. You never saw the real bandit in the foyer that night. You were not even there."

"I was there," she insisted. "I saw the robber—turn and run. I saw his face—and I thought it was—you."

"You weren't there at all," he repeated grimly. "But you knew who was there. You knew the man who did that job. That man was a suspect in the robbery until you put the finger on me. You lied, sent me up, to take the heat off him. It was two years before I found that out. But news gets around—even in stir. And finally some friends of mine found out the truth, and got the word to me, that you were Rocky Stimes' girl. And it was Rocky that the cops had picked up for the Nixon job. They were grilling him hard—when you made a positive identification of me. I couldn't produce an alibi so they let Rocky go and sent me up for the job. You needn't try to lie out of it, Rose. My friends didn't make any mistake about it. Yes,

you lied, identified me, to save Rocky Stimes. There's a law against things like that, Rose. The law isn't on the books. It's just one of those laws that a man has to enforce himself. You got me five years, the best years of my life. Now you're going to have to pay for that."

A change seemed to come over Rose. Some of the color came back into her face. She wasn't shaking any more. She even smiled a little.

"All right, Clipper," she said almost casually. "You're right. I never saw that stickup in the foyer of the Clinton. And I lied to put Rocky in the clear. I can't say I'm sorry. You're just a cheap punk. Who cared if you got sent up in place of Rocky? Nobody—but you. Now you've caught up with me. And you're all set to take your so-called law into your own hands. I suppose your idea is that you're going to strangle me right here with your own two hands. But there is one thing that you've overlooked, Clipper."

"What?" he demanded.

"You overlooked the little point that I am still Rocky's girl. And that maybe I wasn't dumb enough to hole up here without a little protection. And you overlooked the little item that when I sat down here I managed to get my foot on a little button that was in the carpet. That button was wired, Clipper. To a room above. Where Rocky was holed up. And there is a door that opens from the hall into my back room. A very nice little arrangement in a pinch, Clipper. Now—meet the boy friend!"

Clipper turned and stared at the short, florid-faced man who stepped in from the back room. Rocky Stimes had a gun in his hand and he was grinning.

"Hello, Clipper," he said almost jovially. "I understand you been away on a trip. A trip that lasted five years. Welcome home!"

THE girl stared at Clipper for a moment or two, then turned to Stimes.

[*Turn page*]

"He's just a little mutt with big ideas, Rocky," Rose said. "He's all worked up. Wants to strangle me over the Nixon job. Imagine that."

"I know," Rocky chuckled. "Guys get to thinkin' too hard and go a little bit nuts up in the stir. Now that's the trouble with you, Clipper. Oh, I'll admit it was kind of a tough jolt that we handed you. But killin' Rose here ain't the way out. You got to smarten up, make the best of it. Now all the time I was aimin' to square it with you when you got out. I wouldn't let you or anybody else take a rap for me without payin' for it. I been doin' pretty well lately. I'm in the dough. I can spare five grand. That's a grand for every year you did up there. That ain't such bad pay for doin' time, is it? Now it wouldn't do you no good to bump Rose even if you got the chance which you won't. And if you did bump her you'd get bumped right back in less than forty-eight hours. So you better look at this the reasonable way. What do you say?"

Clipper Hart looked at Rose, then at Rocky for a minute. Then he said, "I'm listening, Rocky."

"Sure. It's the only sensible way to look at it, Clipper. I want to square that rap with you." He reached under his coat and took out three stacks of currency that were tied together with string. "I got five grand right here. It's yours—for doin' that five years. You can take it easy for a long time on that. And all you got to do is walk out of here and forget the whole business. How about it?"

"It doesn't sound bad, Rocky," Clipper said with a faint smile.

"Okay, Clipper. Here's the dough." He tossed the currency into Clipper's dap. "But get this straight. You're paid in full. You don't bother Rose any more. And you don't pop off about me. You're squared!"

Clipper stowed the currency away under his coat. "All right, I'm squared," he said. "This dough makes things different. I'm going to fade out and take

myself a nice vacation somewhere. Buy myself some fine clothes and live at a good hotel. California maybe—or Florida. You'll probably never see me again. So long."

Clipper Hart walked to the door, opened it, went out, closing the door behind him.

"You think he'll lay off me now, Rocky?" Rose asked a bit anxiously.

"Sure," Rocky shrugged. "That's more dough than he ever saw in his life. He was just a cheap burglar. One of those punks that thought he'd made a killing if he got three hundred bucks out of a safe. Besides he knows that it wouldn't be healthy to try to pull anything on me. Don't worry. We won't be bothered no more with him. He'll keep out of our way. After all Clipper is dumb. He didn't even have enough sense to raise the ante. I'd have given him ten grand if he'd got tough and held out—"

Rocky broke off, gulped, made a motion toward his shoulder holster as the door flew open and Sergeant Sawyer and two men charged into the room. Rocky let his hands drop to his sides when he saw he couldn't possibly draw in time to use a gun.

"Clipper!" Rocky raged, his face purpling. "That dirty, double-crossin' rat!"

"You're a good one to be talking about being double-crossed," Sergeant Sawyer said grimly. "After framing Clipper to take your rap. And Clipper didn't figure all these things out. I was the one that finally got tipped that Rose Delong was your girl. I checked and found out it was true, that she had been your girl at the time she had testified against Clipper. I was the one who got Clipper paroled. And I brought him back here and gave him his orders. You were hiding out for the Detweilder job. So we put the pressure on Rose to make her think Clipper was going to get in that apartment and strangle her. It was cops that slipped those pieces of cardboard under her door, a cop that phoned her. All Clipper did was to show himself once

[*Turn page*]

on the street so she could see him. We figured Rose would be so scared she'd run to you for protection. I had four cops and two cars at the Heaton Arms all the time. So when she beat it out the back way it was easy to tail her with those two cars. She was looking for Clipper, not for cops.

"Clipper didn't have too much nerve. We had to put pressure on him to make him come in here and wait for Rose to return. He didn't know about the wire up to you. We did. We also slipped an electrician in here while she was out and wired the room so we heard everything that was said. You've been hiding out so the statute doesn't run in your favor for the Nixon job. And we can send you up for the Detweilder job. That ought to take care of you for a long time."

"That dirty chiseler took me for five grand!" Rocky sputtered.

"You asked for it, didn't you?" Sergeant Sawyer retorted. "The way we heard it over the wire you practically forced the dough on him. I'm glad he got it. He earned it by doing time for you. I got a hunch he'll take that five grand and go straight from here on out. That five years in stir taught Clipper some lessons, Rocky. But I'm not sure that the twenty years or so that you will get will teach you anything. But it will square things. Yes it looks to me, Rocky, like things are going to be squared all around."

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