

AHC-T074

FALL 25c

**TRIPLE**

THREE NOVELS IN ONE MAGAZINE

# DETECTIVE

A THRILLING PUBLICATION



**Murder Stalks Burlesque**

**DON'T WAIT UP FOR ME**  
by Larry Holden



**"Scream—And You Die Now!"**

**IN AT THE KILL**  
by Wilbur S. Peacock



**Dead Men Have No Wives**

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

Reducing Specialist Says:  
**LOSE WEIGHT**

Where  
It  
Shows  
Most

**REDUCE**

MOST ANY  
PART OF  
THE  
BODY WITH

**ELECTRIC Spot Reducer** • Relaxing • Soothing • Penetrating Massage

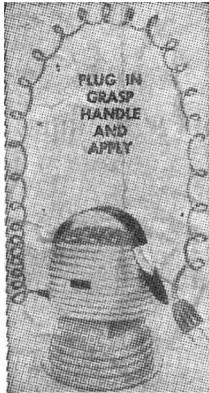
**Spot Reducer**



UNDERWRITERS  
LABORATORY  
APPROVED



FOR GREATEST BENEFIT IN REDUCING by massage use spot REDUCER with or without electricity—Also used as an aid in the relief of pains for which massage is indicated.



PLUG-IN GRASP HANDLE AND APPLY

Take pounds off—keep slim and trim with Spot Reducer! Remarkable new invention which uses one of the most effective reducing methods employed by masseurs and Turkish baths—MASSAGE!

**TAKE OFF EXCESS WEIGHT!**

**Don't Stay FAT—You Can LOSE POUNDS and INCHES SAFELY** Without Risking HEALTH

**L**IKE a magic wand, the "Spot Reducer" obeys your every wish. Most any part of your body where it is loose and flabby, wherever you have extra weight and inches, the "Spot Reducer" can aid you in acquiring a youthful, slender and graceful figure. The beauty of this scientifically designed Reducer is that the method is so simple and easy, the results quick, sure and harmless. No exercises or strict diets. No steambaths, drugs or laxatives.

With the SPOT REDUCER you can now enjoy the benefits of RELAXING, SOOTHING massage in the privacy of your own home! Simple to use—just plug in, grasp handle and apply over most any part of the body—stomach, hips, chest, neck, thighs, arms, buttocks, etc. The relaxing, soothing massage breaks down FATTY TISSUES, tones the muscles and flesh, and the increased awakened blood circulation carries away waste fat—helps you regain and keep a firmer and more GRACEFUL FIGURE!

**YOUR OWN PRIVATE MASSEUR AT HOME**

When you use the Spot Reducer, it's almost like having your own private masseur at home. It's fun reducing this way! It not only helps you reduce and keep slim—but also aids in the relief of those types of aches and pains—and tired nerves that can be helped by massage! The Spot Reducer is handsomely made of light weight aluminum and rubber and truly a beautiful invention you will be thankful you own. AC 110 volts. Underwriters Laboratory approved.

**TRY THE SPOT REDUCER 10 DAYS FREE IN YOUR OWN HOME!**

Mail this coupon with only \$1 for your Spot Reducer approval. Pay postman \$8.95 plus delivery—or send \$9.95 (full price) and we ship postage prepaid. Use it for ten days in your own home. Then if not delighted return Spot Reducer for full purchase price refund. Don't delay! You have nothing to lose—except ugly, embarrassing, undesirable pounds of FAT. MAIL COUPON NOW!

**SENT ON APPROVAL—MAIL COUPON NOW!**

**ALSO USE IT FOR ACHEs AND PAINs**



**IT SLEEP:**  
Spot Reducer  
nothing its  
up by  
you



**MUSCULAR ACHEs:**  
A handy helper for transient relief of discomforts that can be aided by gentle, relaxing massage.

**LOSE WEIGHT OR NO CHARGE**

**USED BY EXPERTS**

Thousands have lost weight this way—in hips, abdomen, legs, arms, necks, buttocks, etc. The same method used by stage, screen and radio personalities and leading reducing salons. The Spot Reducer can be used in your spare time, in the privacy of your own room.

**ORDER IT TODAY!**

**BODY MASSAGER CO., Dept. B-996**  
318 Market St., Newark, N. J.

Please send me the Spot Reducer for 10 days trial period. I enclose \$1. Upon arrival I will pay postman only \$8.95 plus postage and handling. If not delighted I may return SPOT REDUCER within 10 days for prompt refund of full purchase price.

I enclose \$12.98. Send Deluxe Model.

Name .....

Address .....

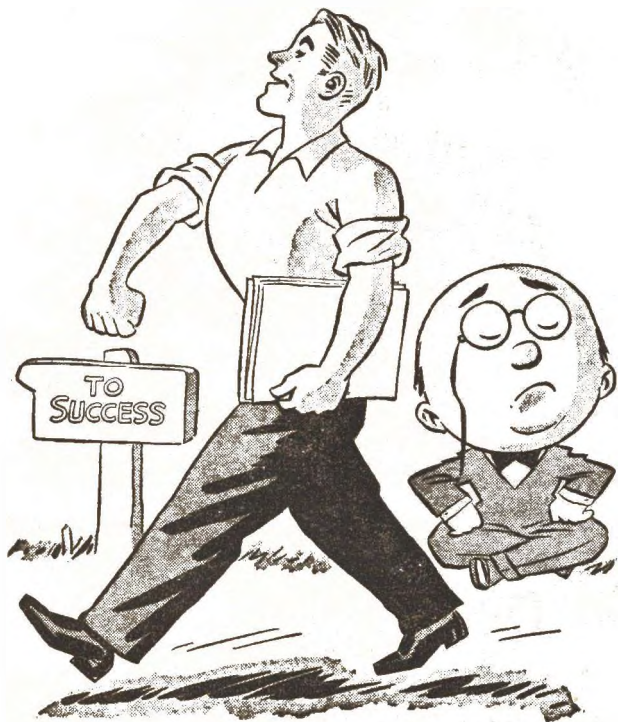
City ..... State .....

SAVE POSTAGE—check here if you enclose \$8.95 with coupon. We pay all postage and handling charges. Some money back guarantee applies.

**LOSE WEIGHT OR NO CHARGE**

MAIL THIS TO: BODY MASSAGER CO., DEPT. B-996, 318 MARKET ST., NEWARK, N. J.

# How to pass a genius



All of us can't be geniuses. But any ordinarily talented mortal can be a success—and that's more than some geniuses are.

Now, as in Aesop's time, the race doesn't always go to the one who potentially is the swiftest. The *trained* man has no trouble in passing the genius who hasn't improved his talents.

In good times and bad times, in every technical and business field, the *trained* man is worth a dozen untrained ones, no matter how gifted.

The International Correspondence Schools can't make you into a genius. For more than 60 years, however, I. C. S. has been helping its students to become *trained, successful leaders*—and it can do the same for you.

Mark your special interest on the coupon. Don't be like the unsuccessful genius who wastes his life in dreaming of what he intends to do. Act now!

For Real Job Security—Get an I. C. S. Diploma!

I. C. S., Scranton 9, Penna.

## INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS



BOX 59276H, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

(Partial list of 277 courses)

Without cost or obligation, send me "HOW TO SUCCEED" and the opportunity booklet about the field BEFORE which I have marked X (plus sample lesson):

- |  |   |   |  |  |
|--|---|---|--|--|
| <p><b>ARCHITECTURE and BUILDING CONSTRUCTION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Air Conditioning—Refrig</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Architecture</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Architectural Interior</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Building Contractor</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Building Maintenance</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Carpenter and Mill Work</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Estimating</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Heating</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Painting Contractor</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Plumbing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Reading Arch Blueprints</li> </ul> <p><b>ART</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Cartooning</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Commercial Art</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Fashion Illustrating</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Magazine Illustrating</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Show Card and Sign Lettering</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sketching and Painting</li> </ul> <p><b>AUTOMOTIVE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Auto Body Rebuilding</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Auto Elec Technician</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Auto-Engine Tune Up</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Automobiles</li> </ul> | <p><b>AVIATION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Aeronautical Engineering Jr.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Aircraft &amp; Engine Mechanic</li> </ul> <p><b>BUSINESS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Advertising</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Bookkeeping and Accounting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Business Administration</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Business Correspondence</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Public Accounting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Creative Salesmanship</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Federal Tax</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Letter-writing Improvement</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Office Management</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Professional Secretary</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Retail Business Management</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sales Management</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Stenographic-Secretarial</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Traffic Management</li> </ul> <p><b>CHEMISTRY</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Analytical Chemistry</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Chemical Engineering</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Chem Lab Technician</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> General Chemistry</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Natural Gas Prod. &amp; Trans.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Petroleum Engineering</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Plastics</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Pulp and Paper Making</li> </ul> | <p><b>CIVIL STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Civil Engineering</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Construction Engineering</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Highway Engineering</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Reading Struct. Blueprints</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sanitary Engineering</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Structural Engineering</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Surveying and Mapping</li> </ul> <p><b>DRAFTING</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Aircraft Drafting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Architectural Drafting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Drafting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Drafting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Mine Surveying and Mapping</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Plumbing Drawing and Estimating</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Structural Drafting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Drafting</li> </ul> <p><b>ELECTRICAL</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Engineering</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Electrical Maintenance</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Electrician <input type="checkbox"/> Contracting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Lineman</li> </ul> <p><b>HIGH SCHOOL</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Commercial <input type="checkbox"/> Good English</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> High School Subjects</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Mathematics</li> </ul> | <p><b>LEADERSHIP</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Foremanship</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Supervision</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Leadership and Organization</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Personnel-Labor Relations</li> </ul> <p><b>MECHANICAL AND SHOP</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Gas—Electric Welding</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Heat Treatment <input type="checkbox"/> Metallurgy</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Engineering</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Instrumentation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Supervision</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Internal Combustion Engines</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Machine Design-Drafting</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Machine Shop Inspection</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Machine Shop Practice</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Mechanical Engineering</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Quality Control</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Reading Shop Blueprints</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Refrigeration</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Sheet Metal Worker</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Tool Design <input type="checkbox"/> Toolmaking</li> </ul> <p><b>RADIO, TELEVISION</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Industrial Electronics</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Practical Radio TV Eng'ing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Radio and TV Servicing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Radio Operating</li> </ul> | <p><input type="checkbox"/> Television Technician</p> <p><b>RAILROAD</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Air Brakes <input type="checkbox"/> Car Inspector</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Diesel Locomotive</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Locomotive Engineer</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Section Foreman</li> </ul> <p><b>STEAM AND DIESEL POWER</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Combustion Engineering</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Diesel—Elec. <input type="checkbox"/> Diesel Eng's</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Electric Light and Power</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Stationary Fireman</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Stationary Steam Engineering</li> </ul> <p><b>TEXTILE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Carding and Spinning</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Cotton, Rayon, Woolen Mfg.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Finishing and Dyeing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Loom Fix'g <input type="checkbox"/> Textile Deal'g</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Textile Eng'g <input type="checkbox"/> Throwing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Weaving and Weaving</li> </ul> <p><b>MISCELLANEOUS</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Domestic Refrigeration</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Marine Engineering</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ocean Navigation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Professional Engineering</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Short Story Writing</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Telephony</li> </ul> |
|--|---|---|--|--|

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Age \_\_\_\_\_ Home Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ Zone \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Working Hours \_\_\_\_\_ A.M. to P.M. \_\_\_\_\_

Occupation \_\_\_\_\_

Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools, Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada. . . Special tuition rates to members of the U. S. Armed Forces

**TRIPLE****THREE NOVELS IN ONE MAGAZINE****DETECTIVE**

Vol. 12, No. 2

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

FALL, 1955

**3 FEATURED NOVELS****DON'T WAIT UP FOR ME**

Because he had a way with women, burlesque strippers and all, Clem joined the show to get a key to murder—or die trying

**LARRY HOLDEN 8****IN AT THE KILL**

They said Dan Freeman was dead and buried, but Dan came back with a gun in his hand to kill the woman who had framed him

**WILBUR S. PEACOCK 58****THE BODY IN THE TRUNK**

Though keeping a threatened man alive was dangerous business, Caro would keep you from the devil—if the price was right

**H. Q. MASUR 88****PLUS**

<b>THE READERS' JURY</b>	<b>Harold Gluck</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>STICKY-FINGERED</b>	<b>J. S. Endicott</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>THRICE BLESSED</b>	<b>J. L. Benton</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>GROUNDLED</b>	<b>Bess Ritter</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>THE CASE OF THE ODDLY TWISTED NECK</b>	<b>Harold Helfer</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>MURDER, MY DARLING (A Short Story)</b>	<b>Frank D. Millman</b>	<b>110</b>
<b>LAW AND DISORDER</b>	<b>Crime Oddities</b>	<b>113</b>

**Jim Hendryx, Jr., Editor**

"In at The Kill," Copyright, 1950, by Better Publications, Inc., and originally published in Popular Detective, November, 1950. "The Body in The Trunk," Copyright, 1947, by Standard Magazines, Inc., and originally published in February, 1948, Thrilling Detective.

TRIPLE DETECTIVE—Published quarterly and copyright, 1955 by LITERARY ENTERPRISES, INC., 1125 E. Vaille Ave., Kokomo, Ind. Editorial and executive offices, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Subscription (12 issues), \$3.50; single copies, \$.25; add 40c for Canadian, 75c for foreign and Pan-American subscriptions. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at Kokomo, Ind., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Manuscripts must be accompanied by self-addressed, stamped envelopes, and are submitted at the author's risk. In corresponding with this publication, please include your postal zone number, if any. Names of all characters used in stories and semi-fiction articles are fictitious. If the name of any living person or existing institution is used, it is a coincidence. Fall, 1955, issue.

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.



**KNOWLEDGE  
THAT HAS  
ENDURED WITH THE  
PYRAMIDS**



## **A SECRET METHOD FOR THE MASTERY OF LIFE**

**W**HENCE came the knowledge that built the Pyramids and the mighty Temples of the Pharaohs? Civilization began in the Nile Valley centuries ago. Where did its first builders acquire their astounding wisdom that started man on his upward climb? Beginning with naught they overcame nature's forces and gave the world its first sciences and arts. Did their knowledge come from a race now submerged beneath the sea, or were they touched with Infinite inspiration? From what concealed source came the wisdom that produced such characters as Amenhotep IV, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, and a host of others?

Today it is known that they discovered and learned to interpret certain *Secret Methods* for the development of their inner power of mind. They learned to command the inner forces within their own beings, and to master life. This secret art of living has been preserved and handed down throughout the ages. Today it is extended to those who dare to use its profound principles to meet and solve the problems of life in these complex times.

### **This Sealed Book—FREE**

Has life brought you that personal satisfaction, the sense of achievement and happiness that you desire? If not, it is your duty to yourself to learn about this rational method of applying natural laws for the mastery of life. To the thoughtful person it is obvious that everyone cannot be entrusted with an intimate knowledge of the mysteries of life, for everyone is not capable of properly using it. But if you are one of those possessed of a true desire to forge ahead and wish to make use of the subtle influences of life, the Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) will send you *A Sealed Book* of explanation without obligation. This *Sealed Book* tells how you, in the privacy of your own home, without interference with your personal affairs or manner of living, may receive these secret teachings. Not weird or strange practices, but a rational application of the basic laws of life. Use the coupon, and obtain your complimentary copy.

## *The* **ROSICRUCIANS**

**SAN JOSE**

**(AMORC)**

**CALIFORNIA**



**AMENHOTEP IV**  
Founder of Egypt's  
Mystery Schools

*Use this  
coupon for  
FREE  
copy of book*

-----  
SCRIBE N.Q.Y.  
The Rosicrucians (AMORC)  
San Jose, California

Please send free copy of Sealed Book  
which I shall read as directed.

NAME.....

ADDRESS.....

CITY.....



## THE GENTLE ART OF SHOPLIFTING

By HAROLD GLUCK

**S**HOPLIFTING is on the increase in the nation's stores and will become more of a menace with the growth of self-service merchandising. This warning was recently sounded at the annual convention of the National Retail Dry Goods Association. One suggestion given to fight shoplifting was to display merchandise in such a manner that the pilferer becomes conspicuous when he or she tries to steal it.

The tricks of the shoplifter are well known to the detectives, private patrolmen and spotters. I was at the side of a private patrolman in a department store. He pointed to a woman we could see but she couldn't see us.

"Her hesitation in picking a dress from that rack is just for show," he said. "She's waiting for a clear field when she can walk to the side and stuff it under her coat." And, sure enough, that's what happened!

I was at the side of a spotter in a large retail dress house. From her vantage point she could sweep with her eyes every inch of the section below.

"Why do we catch them? Because each time a woman figures out what is a new way of shoplifting, she makes her mistake. Others have tried it before and were caught. The oldest stunt is to take two dresses into the dressing room. Put one on under the dress and return the other. Sometimes a woman will take only one dress into the dressing room, leave her old dress behind, put her coat over the new dress and walk out."

In the days when muffs were the fashion, the "dainty" shoplifter would go for small items like handkerchiefs, gloves, and stockings. In a flash they would go into her muff. Sometimes they worked in pairs. One to watch and distract the attention of the clerk while the other did the stealing.

A modern version of the "muff technique" was used by a mother who stuffed items into

her little child's oversized storm suit.

Many large self service grocery stores have signs forbidding customers to bring packages or bags into the merchandise sections. They picked up a man with a trick box. Outside it looked as though it were a suit box securely fastened with cord. But the side flap moved inwards and in a flash he could shove items into the box.

Ever see a coat with nice inside large flap pockets into which you could shove many items? I have and it was a honey of an idea. But they got the guy.

One great store uses a version of the "Hey, Rube" circus call to cut down on shoplifters. Employees are taught how the shoplifter works. Then when they see one in action, they go to the phone and call "212" which is the code number for their protection office. Then the store dicks go into action. If a phone is not available, the employee merely sings out "212" and the employee nearest a phone calls in.

Sometimes a shoplifter tries to figure out a perfect scheme. Here is what one woman did—she bought the item in the morning and got her sales slip. Then in the afternoon she stole a duplicate item which she shoved into the store bag. When caught she threatened to sue for false arrest. But she forgot one small detail. There was a serial number on the sales slip. Thirty more sales had been made since she purchased that item. They could figure out about when she had been in the store. Her story that she'd just bought it crashed to pieces.

In one store where I worked, one of the sales-girls said to her friend, "Shoplifting is so easy. God helps those who help themselves. I'm going to shove those gloves into the top of my stockings."

The store dick, hiding behind the cashier's desk, pinched her and added, "God help those caught helping themselves."

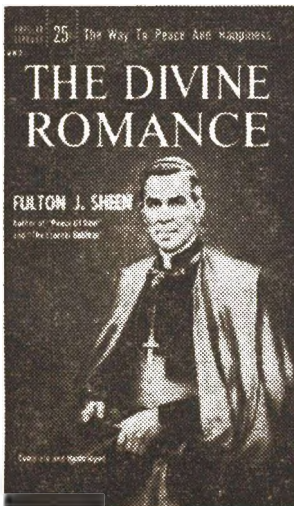


*For You—Whatever Your Faith May Be...  
An Inspiring, New Pocket-Size Book*

## THE DIVINE ROMANCE

by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen

A 25c POPULAR LIBRARY Book



Whether you are Protestant, Catholic or Jew, you'll find inspiration and reassurance in the pages of **THE DIVINE ROMANCE**.

Millions of Americans will read and enjoy **THE DIVINE ROMANCE** because of its universal theme. *You'll* enjoy reading it too.

*Another outstanding POPULAR LIBRARY book. Buy it today at your favorite pocketbook dealer.*

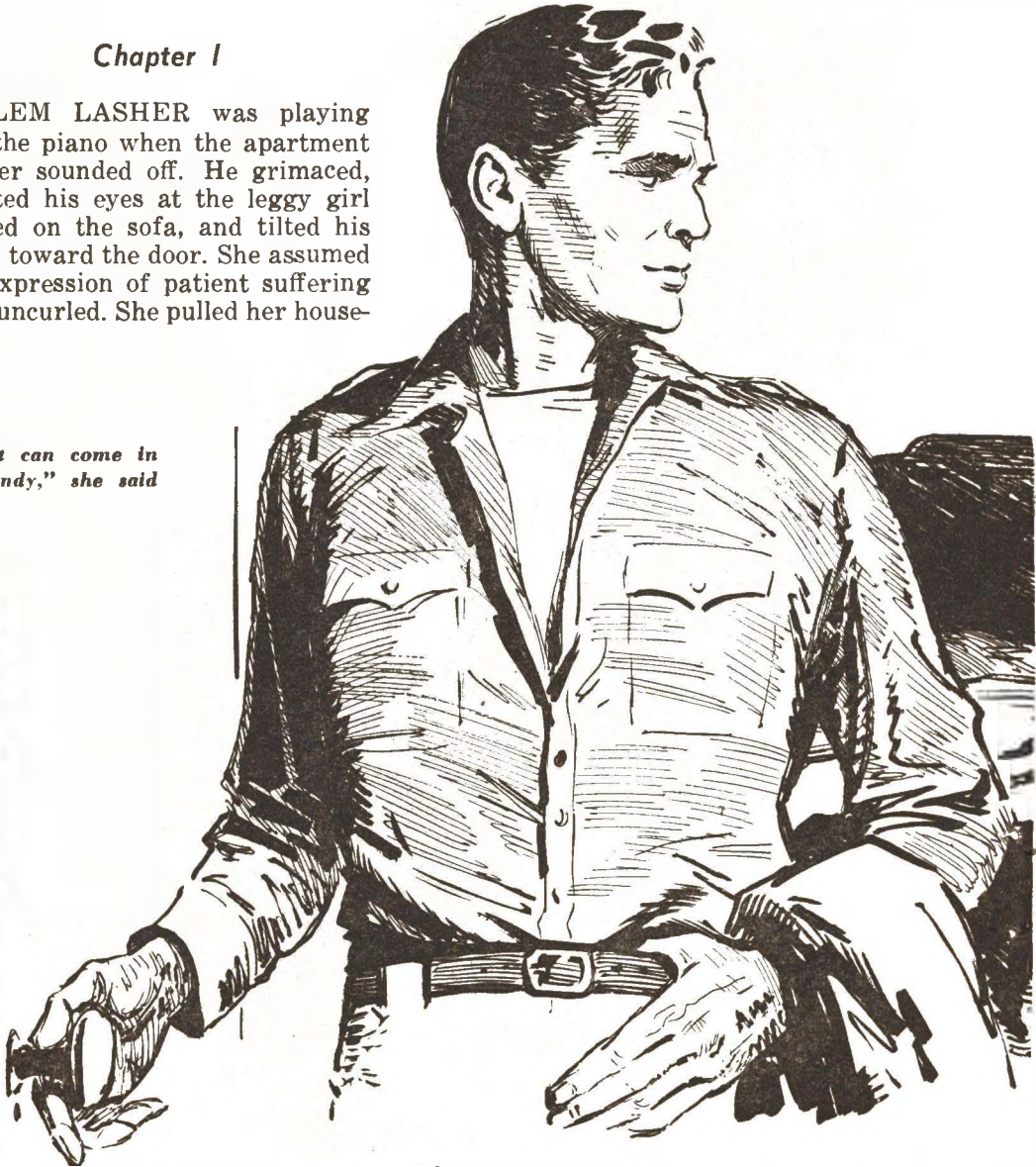
# Don't Wait

A Novel by **LARRY HOLDEN**

## Chapter 1

**C**LEM LASHER was playing the piano when the apartment buzzer sounded off. He grimaced, slanted his eyes at the leggy girl curled on the sofa, and tilted his head toward the door. She assumed an expression of patient suffering and uncurled. She pulled her house-

*"It can come in handy," she said*





# Up For Me

*A few strippers carried a key to murder, and because he had a way with women, Clem joined the burlesque show to get that key—or die trying*



## Two burlesque queens aren't much fun . . . when

coat less revealingly around her and strolled toward the door as if the last thing she had in mind was letting anybody into the apartment that night. She was a handsome girl but with the kind of sulky face that all Clem's girls seemed to acquire after a while.

Clem missed three chords in the progression and went back over them, swearing softly. He was a big man with harsh red hair, a tough angular face and blazing greenish eyes. There was nothing delicate or poetic in his touch. He seemed to wrench the music from the piano with the sheer savagery of his attack. His fingers stabbed at the keys as if he were actually gouging the notes out of them. But there was more to it than just noise. It was music. It was angry, there was ferocity in it, but it was real. It was gutbucket. He always played gutbucket when he was "ironing out the kinks."

Two strangers from Duluth had taken him for eighteen hundred at stud that afternoon, and it was the same grinding run of luck that he'd been having for the past month. There were kinks.

He played for twenty minutes after the girl brought two men back into the apartment with her, even though he knew they were sitting there fidgeting on the sofa, but when he finished he had drained some of the furious frustration out of himself. He slipped a cigarette between his lips and turned on the bench.

One of the men on the sofa was fat Ben Morgan, the theatrical agent, who was perspiring a little more than usual. The other was a quiet, compact man whose right arm hung in a black silk sling.

"Say, that was okay, Clem," Morgan's smile was a very unstable commodity. "Ever think about playing professionally? You've got something."

"What I've got," said Clem dryly, "would get the piano abolished as a

musical instrument. Nice of you to drop in at any old hour, Morg. Nice to see you, even if it is two A.M. Is there something on your mind, or did you just come up to show me how pretty your friend looks with his arm in a sling."

The girl gave a short, brittle laugh. "I warned them," she said. "I told them exactly what to expect, but they didn't have sense enough to go home." She dropped into the lounge chair and threw her long, beautiful and very unreticent legs over the arm of it, staring at her fingernails as if wondering whether or not to sharpen them on the upholstery.

"Be quiet, Marthe love, or I'll boot your pretty little butt out of here. Did you say something, Morg?"

MORGAN glanced at the compact man and licked his lips. "It's about Sonny Lind, Clem," he said.

"Oh yes, the kid with the voice. How's he coming?"

"Well," Morgan laughed nervously, "he isn't coming at all, Clem. He went."

"He did? Well!" There was a sharpening edge under Clem's polite tone. "Where did he go?"

"We don't know. Uh—this is Al Vance, Clem. He's a private detective. I put him on the job a week ago when Sonny disappeared," Morgan's voice became hurried. "We've been working every minute on it, Clem. We haven't left a stone unturned."

"Is that where you thought you'd find him?" asked Marthe brightly. "Under a rock?"

Clem ignored her and said to Morgan, "I seem to remember that Sonny Lind was to open in the Aztec Room in about a week."

"Tha—that's right, Clem."

"And I also seem to remember that I've got a thousand dollars invested in Sonny Lind, one way and another—singing lessons, clothes and so forth. But he seemed like a nice kid. I liked

## one of them is stone cold dead in front of you

him, and he could sing. And it was on my say-so that Kraus was willing to give him a spot in the Aztec Room. If he flopped, okay; that was the chance I was taking. But when I invest a thousand dollars in somebody, and he just plain walks out without giving it a try, I think I have a right to be irritated, don't you, Morg? What I mean to say is, if you don't think I have a right to be annoyed, please tell me."

Al Vance, the private detective, smiled faintly; but Morgan was becoming increasingly nervous, and Clem's calm, polite voice did nothing to soothe him. Clem was not a calm man, and Morgan could feel the seething fury



behind the big man's words. He made an aimless, helpless gesture with his plump hand.

"Listen to me, Clem," he pleaded, "just listen to me for a minute, please. This isn't the first time Sonny walked out. He did it twice before."

"Well, that changes everything—doesn't it? As long as it's only a personal idiosyncrasy, we can forgive him, can't we?"

"Just give me a minute, will you, Clem? Please? I didn't find out till too late that Sonny was a periodic lush. But this last time is something different. You tell him, Al."

Morgan sank back into the sofa cushions and shakily pulled the handkerchief from his breast pocket. He had dreaded this. He had dreaded this from the minute Sonny walked out. He

had dreaded it, he admitted to himself, from the minute Clem Lasher had invested the thousand dollars in the kid. Clem wasn't a mobman or anything like that, but there was a wild violent streak in him, and you didn't want to be around when it erupted. He had gained a momentary respite, however, by passing the buck to Al Vance.

CLEM TURNED on the piano, struck three harsh chords, and then brought his fists crashingly down on the keys. He jumped up and strode across the room to the cellarette. He clenched the neck of the Scotch bottle and stood staring down at nothing.

Every day, every day, every day he had been losing, for a month now, and the bankroll was showing signs of wear and tear, but that was all right. When you had a bad streak, you had to ride it out. You couldn't get off and sit in the park and wait for your luck to come back. You had to sweat, but you had to take it. You had to take it when you had three of a kind and the two pairs across the table turned up a third ace for a full house. Time and time and time again.

You had to take it, or the next thing you knew you'd be betting with scared money, and when you started counting your chips that way, your nerve was gone, and when that was gone you might just as well forget there's such a game as stud, and make up your mind that without your nerve you're only a half man for the rest of your life.

But this Sonny Lind, this was something you could do something about. This was something you had to do something about. If you took this laying down, you were finished. When you put a thousand dollars in somebody and got him booked into the Aztec Room, he damn well opened in the Aztec Room on schedule or you knew the reason why, and if you could do something

about it, you did it. And if you didn't do it, you got somebody else to shave you from then on, because you wouldn't be able to look yourself in the mirror.

He picked up the Scotch bottle and four glasses and walked back across the room. Morgan watched him anxiously. Al Vance was merely watchful. Marthe was on the verge of some more smart talk, but when she saw the thin set of his mouth she just murmured: "They can never say I didn't warn them."

Clem impassively filled the glasses and passed them around. He pulled over the piano bench and straddled it. He pointed a long bony finger at Al Vance.

"Give," he said.

Al Vance tasted his Scotch. He was as neat and economical as a cat in his movements. And as self-sufficient.

"I'm not a private detective," he told Clem in a matter-of-fact voice.

"So?"

"So I didn't want you to start off with the idea that I'm Bogart's little brother. I'm just a skip-tracer. I find people. That's all. I find deadbeats who try to run out on their bills. I usually work for the Central Credit Bureau. I just took this on as a favor to Ben Morgan."

"He's not paying you?"

"He's paying me."

"Then it's not a favor."

"It's still a favor. I've let my steady trade go for a week. There's no future in this wildcat stuff. That makes it a favor."

"What do you want me to do, send you a Mothers' Day card?"

"All I want you to do," said Vance calmly, "is to forget for ten minutes that you can lick any son of a bitch in the house and listen to what I have to say."

Clem looked at the compact little man and there was a gleam of admiration in his eyes. "I'll forget," he said. "Now what do you have to say?"

"I traced Sonny Lind to the Lyric Theatre in Hoboken. The Lyric is a burlesque house on Hudson Street. He

was singing there. He was half swacked most of the time, but never so drunk that he couldn't go on. They told me that for the week he was there, he was almost as popular as the strippers, and that takes some singing in Hoboken."

"That takes some singing any place, including the Met. So he out-sung the strip-girls?"

"Everybody liked him. He was a likeable kid. They called him Joe College because he looked like a college kid with his curly blond hair and baby-blue eyes."

Clem said sourly, "Yeah." He had invested a thousand dollars in the curly blond hair and baby blue eyes. And the voice. The kid did have a voice. A genuine gold-plated larynx. Baritone. And a delivery as intimate as black lace panties, a real bedroom voice. But he wasn't a pantywaist. There was masculine timbre in that voice. Men liked him. There was no creepiness about Sonny Lind. Sonny was built like a fullback.

"So?" said Clem impatiently. "Why the build-up?"

"The build-up is to show you that everybody I talked to liked the kid. That was Tuesday, three days ago. Monday, Sonny disappeared."

"You mean he went someplace else and you haven't been able to find him!"

AL VANCE picked up his drink with his uninjured left hand and took a sip. He looked at Clem over the glass. "Do you want to hear the rest of it?" he asked. "Or have you made up your mind to lick everyone in the house?"

"Keep that up," said Marthe, shortening the garter on her stocking, "and he will."

"Pay no attention to her," said Clem mildly. "She's just a sick friend I sit up with every once in a while, but I have an idea that shortly she will become permanently healthy . . . So Sonny disappeared for the second time. You mentioned it as if there were something special about it."

"That's what I don't know." Al Vance did not look quite so self-sufficient; he looked puzzled. "Maybe he walked out, and maybe he was carried out. I don't know. On the Saturday before, after closing, he went to a party given by a Mr. DeGroot. Don't ask me who Mr. DeGroot is, because I don't know and I haven't been able to find out. I was able to pick up a few crumbs, but that's all. I got this from one of the chorus girls. Mr. DeGroot gives parties, apparently for business associates. He gets the girls for the parties from the burlesque house and pays them fifty dollars.

"Now if I were in a court of law, I wouldn't be able to swear to the reason he pays them fifty dollars for going to a party, so let's just leave it that he pays them the money to entertain his guests, possibly by singing and dancing. The chorus girl I talked to had never been at any of Mr. DeGroot's parties. She said virtuously that she wouldn't dream of going to one of his parties because she had *heard* things, but balanced against that was the fact that she was very homely, skinny and wore those things on her chest."

"Falsies," said Marthe. "But how did you know?"

"My sick friend," said Clem, "is getting healthier by the minute. Continue, Mr. Bogart."

The girl shot him a venomous glance and let her housecoat fall open, as if by accident, showing the high lift of her breasts and the smooth curves of her thighs.

"Who's for dancing?" she drawled, stretching her arms over her head. "These deep philosophical discussions bore the pants off me, which, believe it or not, is a hell of a thing."

Ben Morgan gave her a nervous, fascinated glance and looked quickly away—but the commercial part of his mind was rapidly cataloging the places in which he could sell a body like that. What would he call her? The Torso? Yes, that was a good one. The Torso . . . But only after Clem Lasher had kicked

her out, which would be in a very few hours. The Torso.

Neither Clem nor Al Vance paid any attention to her whatever. Vance went on calmly:

"I admit I blanked out entirely on the DeGroot parties. I couldn't get a thing out of any of the other girls, and DeGroot wasn't in any of the phone directories of Hudson, Essex or Bergen Counties, the three that converge on that area. But I did get this much. On Sunday, Sonny appeared with a terrific hangover, but he wasn't drinking. According to the manager of the Lyric, he was in a very subdued mood. He seemed to have something on his mind. His singing was lousy. He sang gutbucket down there, and when you sing gutbucket you can't have anything on your mind but gutbucket."

Clem said stodily, "Right," but there was another gleam of appreciation for this tight little man in his eyes.

"On Monday," said Vance, "Sonny disappeared. He was entirely sober. He sang in the matinee, but he never showed up for the evening show. Just plain disappeared. No trace, no nothing. Left his wrist watch, wallet and everything else in his dressing room. He never carried his wallet, so that doesn't mean anything, but he always carried his wristwatch in his pocket. Don't ask me why, but he did. He'd won it for basketball or something, and it wasn't like him to leave it behind, from what I hear. But he did."

"I remember that wristwatch. He showed it to me the first time we met. It was a trophy. He was state amateur heavyweight boxing champion," Clem remarked.

"And the first time he and I met," said Marthe dreamily, "he made a pass at me. When your back was turned of course, darling. It was right here in this apartment. You went to the bathroom to shave or something, and he made a pass at me. A very *hard* pass. To the day you die, you'll never know what I did about it." She smiled on Ben

Morgan, as if she knew the commercial plans he had for her. "I don't know what it was he had, but he was willing to share it, wasn't he?"

CLEM GAVE Al Vance the bare bones of a grin. "My sick friend has entirely recovered, I see. Pay no attention to her. These are merely the joys of complete rejuvenation. DeGroot. That's a Dutch name, isn't it?"

"Yes. I also looked up all the DeGroots in the New York directory. I can tell when some people are lying, but not everybody. DeGroot is a pretty common name, and there are DeGroot's scattered from here to California. So which DeGroot gave the parties that included the willing little girls from the Lyric Burlesque Theatre? I don't know. I don't even know if it has anything to do with Sonny Lind's disappearance, or even what Sonny Lind's disappearance has to do with DeGroot. This is just information that I'm passing along to you."

Clem considered this, trying to keep his temper under control. His big, bony hands kept clenching and unclenching. This was something he was going to have to do something about, personally—to keep his self-respect, to keep his nerve.

"You're leading up to something," he said finally, in a controlled voice. "This has all been preliminary. Right?"

"Right."

"All right. Let me have it."

"You see this?" Vance leaned slightly forward and touched the arm in the sling.

"I see it. So?"

"I got a bullet through the shoulder."

"A special bullet?"

"A special bullet. Meant for me, personally. I have nothing to put my finger on, but I'm sure of it. I was staying in Burr's Hotel in Hoboken, and on Tuesday night I got a phone call. The man spoke with an accent, and he sounded as if he had a grudge. He said he'd heard

that I was asking around about Sonny Lind—he called him Joe College—and he told me that if I wanted to know the score to come up to the park at the end of River Street at eleven o'clock that night. I was to tie my handkerchief around the top of my right arm so he'd know me. I was to sit on that bench on the little parapet facing the Hudson River."

Clem breathed, "Sucker."

"How was I to know? I know now, and so do you, but would you have known then? I doubt it. I was only looking for a runaway baritone, and who gives a damn about a baritone, except maybe a tenor or a basso. Me, I'm just a skip-tracer. So I went. I tied a handkerchief around my right arm, feeling as silly as hell, and sat on the bench facing the Hudson River. Well, I thought, if Hitchcock can do it in the movies, I can do it in Hoboken.

"But Hitchcock never had anybody shooting at him with anything but a camera. This character shot at me with a gun. He got me from behind, and it knocked me clean off the bench. That was Tuesday, three days ago, and I've been in the Hoboken clink for three whole days, trying to tell a roomful of very tough Hoboken detectives that I didn't crack the skull of the Dutch sailor they found in the bushes behind the bench I was sitting on. And do you know why it was such a tough job convincing them?" Vance asked with a sudden bitterness. "Do you know why?"

Clem said, "Yes."

"You know?" For the first time, Al Vance looked surprised at anything that happened. "Or are you guessing?" His eyes sharpened. "What do you mean, you know?"

"It's obvious."

"It wasn't obvious to me!"

"Think it over."

Al Vance thought it over. He nodded. The girl in the lounge chair laughed shrilly.

"He says, think, and you think, just like that!" she snapped her fingers.



Clem yelled  
"Get down!"

"Isn't he wonderful? That's why I'm crazy about him, all the time, twenty-four hours a day."

**B**EN MORGAN, now safely out of it, watched her despairingly. With that body, he could do something with her. Make money for both of them. But if she insisted on needling Clem Lasher, she was going to have a body you wouldn't want to see on a dog. Why did she keep asking for it? Didn't she know Clem Lasher was nitroglycerin, and you had to handle it in specially prepared rubber kegs?

What was she asking for, a hole in the head? My God, a girl like that, with a talent for showing her legs and stuff, she should ask for a hole in the head! Two minutes alone, he could set her straight; but two minutes alone—with Clem Lasher sitting over there, his eyes like atom bombs—was out of the question. A pity. A real pity. A body like that. It was a real commercial body. There was money in it . . .

Al Vance said, "I was a sucker. But would you have thought it in my place?"

Clem shook his head. "I wouldn't have been in your place. If he called from a place from which he couldn't talk, he wouldn't have called from there. Too dangerous."

Al Vance hesitated, thought it over, and then said, "Right."

"Very well. So he said he would meet you at eleven that night. I gather that there was an interim of several hours. So why couldn't he have waited an hour, or two hours, before he called you, so that he could call you from a place that was safe? He could have done that very easily. And if he could have called you later, he could have given you all the information over the phone without all that abracadabra about handkerchiefs around your left arms and benches facing the Hudson River and parapets, and all the rest of it. That's the reason I said you were a sucker. When you consider how private a public phone booth really is . . . Unless he asked for money. Did

he ask for money?"

Al Vance said ruefully, "No, he didn't ask for money. But I thought—" He made a sharp gesture with his left hand. "Hell, Lasher, I was only looking for a squirt of a baritone on a toot, not a murderer, and with your permission, dear old pal," he showed anger for the first time, "I'm bowing out of this shenanigan. I've been shot through the shoulder, and I've had a rough time with the Hoboken cops for the past three days. I'm tired. I came up here tonight only because I wanted to help Ben Morgan. I don't like being shot at, and still less do I like being hit when I'm shot at, and still less than that do I like *you* after I've been shot! You're a—"

Clem said, "Al—"

"Well?"

"You're hysterical."

**A**L VANCE looked down at his shaking hands, at his empty glass, raised his head and gave Clem a cold grin.

"I'm hysterical," he admitted. "I'm not a private detective, I'm not Bogart, but I've been shot and I don't like it. I've got a wife and two children, and they won't like that I've been shot, especially my wife. If I'm hysterical, I've got a good reason. I'm not accustomed to this. Most of the people I skip-trace don't shoot at me. They curse me and try to throw me down the stairs, but they don't shoot at me. There's something too damned final about a gun to suit me, so as I said before, I'm bowing out of this shenanigan, and if you and Ben Morgan want to carry it on, that's your business. Me, I'm going home to my wife!"

Clem said, "What was that character's name—DeGroot?"

"DeGroot," Vance said.

"And the manager of the Lyric Burlesque?"

Vance thought for a moment. "McNulty," he said.

"And McNulty likes gutbucket?"

"McNulty?"



"Yes, McNulty! He hired Sonny Lind, didn't he? And Sonny Lind sang gutbucket, didn't he? So McNulty must like gutbucket or he wouldn't have hired Sonny Lind. If you know of any reason why McNulty should have hired Sonny Lind without liking gutbucket, let me know before I start sticking out my neck!"

Al Vance looked at Clem with a new respect. According to Ben Morgan, Clem Lasher was merely the angel who had put up the thousand to get Sonny Lind going. But angels, even if they were explosive, only squawked to their lawyers. Here was a character who was going to stick his own neck out! It didn't add up, not in Al Vance's reckoning of Ben Morgan's clients. Clem Lasher didn't seem to fit into that niche.

Al Vance touched his sling significantly. "Before you start sticking your neck out," he said pointedly, "think this one over. Two inches to the left and it would have been the back of my skull. I have an idea they were only warning me to keep away, only warning me to—"

Clem's hand lashed out and swept the Scotch bottle and the glasses from the cocktail table that stood in front of the sofa on which the two men were sitting. He glowered at them, clenching his big hands.

"A warning!" he said heavily. "A warning. They tried to frame you for a murder and you call it a warning! If they hung you by the neck, I suppose you'd call that a warning, too! Or blasted your head off with a double-barreled shotgun, or wound you up with piano wire and sank you in the Hudson River. My God, how much of a warning do you need, or how are you going to interpret it? A warning to keep away! I thought you were smarter than that. That wasn't any warning, you damned fool! They meant business!"

Ben Morgan turned the color of veal fat, and made strangled, ineffectual noises in his throat. Al Vance held his wounded shoulder with his good hand, as if to reassure himself that he was

still alive.

And before them were Clem Lasher's blazing green eyes. Clem leaned forward, his bony hands knuckled on his knees.

"I don't give a damn who they are. There's only one thing that matters to me. Two things. I sank a thousand bucks into this kid, and I gave my word to Kraus that he'd open in the Aztec Room a week from today. He's going to open in the Aztec Room one week from today, if it kills me!"

## Chapter II

**A**FTER BEN MORGAN and Al Vance had gone, Clem stood at the hall door snipping pieces from his thumbnail with his teeth. His eyes were remote and cold, veiled with a kind of thoughtful blankness, the expression they habitually took when he sat down to a session of stud. His shoulders were hunched. He looked distastefully at the thumbnail he had been gnawing and shoved his hand into his pocket. A scowl deepened on his wide, thin mouth and he stared speculatively at the panel of the closed door.

He had a feeling that he had rushed Al Vance out of the apartment just a little too fast. There were things that had been left unsaid, unprobed. It was his own fault, of course. He had a quick, impatient mind that went leaping far ahead of plodders like Al Vance. He should have sat patiently and dragged every scrap of information possible out of the man.

"The hell with it," he said softly.

He turned and walked quickly back through the living room toward his bedroom. Marthe was standing at the celarette, pouring herself a drink of brandy. He gave her a casual nod as he went through the doorway. Bleakly, she watched him go, and then raised her glass. Her hand was shaking a little. She had gone too far tonight. She knew that. She had needed him just once too

often. She drank down her brandy and shuddered as she replaced the glass on the cellarette. So this was the way it ended, not with fire and smoke, but with the impersonal chilliness of a good-by kiss in a railroad station. She walked across the room and stood in the bedroom doorway.

Clem had changed into battered tennis shoes and old blue jeans and was buttoning up a faded Army shirt.

"Going somewhere?" she asked. Her voice was very small.

"Fishing," he said, shoving the tails of the shirt into his jeans. He looked around the room as if making a last minute inventory.

"Hoboken, Clem?"

He went to his chest of drawers and took out a handkerchief. "Could be." He whistled tunelessly as he gave the room another narrow sweeping glance.

She walked over to the chest of drawers and felt in the back of the drawer he had opened for the handkerchief. She brought up a short-barrelled .38 and held it out to him.

"You're taking this, aren't you?"

"Hell, no."

She looked at him with growing wonder. "It could come in handy," she said, "even for Clem Lasher, the Great."

"I don't want it." He went to the chair over which he had folded his slacks and took the wallet from the back pocket. She followed him, still holding the gun.

"Just how tough do you think you are Clem?" Her voice was incredulous. "Exactly how tough do you really think you are? They warned Al Vance off with a bullet, and he went. You're not the type to leave that easily. I know you. Do you think the bullets are going to bounce off you? Do you think you're that tough?"

"Still needling, sweetheart?"

"No, I really want to know. I know you're tough, but I want to know how tough *you* think you are, going against people with guns with nothing but your

bare hands. Or do you think the minute you walk into Hoboken they'll say, 'Oh God, here's Clem Lasher; back to the rat holes, boys.' Is that how tough you think you are? You're going to make a better target than Al Vance. You're bigger. And on top of that, your idea of getting things done is to make everybody furious within the first five minutes. I'll say this much for you—you are tougher than Al Vance. It's going to take three or four bullets to get rid of you. Maybe even five or six. You're going to make an awfully homely corpse, Clem."

CLEM PUT two five-dollar bills in his pocket and threw the wallet on the bed. Despite his heavy losses during the past month, the ~~wallet~~ was still well filled.

"The apartment rent has been paid to January first," he said. "If you need any spending money, I think you'll find all you want in the wallet."

"So you're really running out on me."

"Not running, sweetheart; walking."

"You make it awfully easy for a girl to hate you, don't you, Clem?"

He shrugged and walked out of the room. She followed him. He went to the cellarette and took a mint bottle of whisky from the cabinet. He put it into his hip pocket. Marthe stood, biting at her full underlip.

Suddenly her eyes flickered crazily and she jerked the gun up and thrust it against his stomach. Her knuckles whitened and her finger tightened on the trigger.

"Now let's find out how tough you are with a bullet in you!" she cried hysterically. "We might as well find out now and save you the trip over to Hoboken."

He looked down at the gun. "So long, sweetheart," he said. He turned his back to her and walked to the hall door.

She hurled the gun after him with a full overhand swing. It struck him between the shoulder blades and fell to the floor. He did not look back.

"Damn you, oh, damn you!" she screamed. "Look! Clem, just look!" She stood facing him with a high, hard lift of her chin. He had glanced back over his shoulder.

"Yes, look at me," she said in an ugly voice. "I used to be yours. But now I'm going to find somebody who hates you as much as I do, and I'm going to him. I'm going to him on the condition that he breaks you, one way or the other. I know you now. Clem Lasher. You're tough only because you're afraid of losing your nerve. That's the one thing you're afraid of. You're not tough; you're just plain scared!"

He nodded. "You could be right," he said thoughtfully, and walked out.

It was a short walk down Broadway to Times Square, where he took the subway to Cortland Street and the Hudson Tubes station. Hoboken was just across the river. He sat in the corner of the car with one leg thrown up on the yellow rattan-covered seat.

He thought bleakly about Marthe. She was not the first who had lived with him, but she was a blueprint of all the others—cool, beautiful, insouciant girls. Expensive, but worth it—up to a point. Until they decided they had a proprietary interest. It had always ended in bitterness, hysteria, and jagged, ugly scenes. When they decided they knew all about him, they tried to devour him.

It was as depressing as any pattern repeated and repeated and repeated again, and he had a feeling that a man got the kind of woman he deserved. Except that with Marthe and all the others it had been strictly C.O.D.

Clem didn't realize the train had stopped until the conductor plodded through the car and said wearily, "Hoboken, bud. All out. This ain't a hotel."

HE WALKED up the stairs to the street level. There was a slight salty breeze coming in from the Hudson River, damp and a little chilly. The superstructures and booms of two freight-

ers at the dock were gaunt, stiff silhouettes against the glowing New York skyline. Hoboken was asleep, and even the saloons were closed along the dark length of River Street. It was three-fifteen in the morning.

Clem had only a few meager bits of information. Sonny Lind had worked for McNulty, manager of the Lyric Burlesque house. McNulty lived in Burr's Hotel on Hudson Street, liked gutbucket, and his favorite gin mill was the Schiedam House on River Street. Not much to go on, but the swimming pool is always bigger than the springboard.

The old Lyric was just around the corner on Hudson Street, a few minutes' walk from the subway station. It had been a young theatre fifty years ago, but now the marquee that overhung the sidewalk had such a tired look that passersby often cast apprehensive glances at it. The title of the present show was *Guys and Gals*. The shadow boxes on either side of the doorway were plastered with publicity stills of girls as nude as the law allowed, and judging from the pictures the law was pretty-broad-minded in Hoboken.

The star of the show was a plump Chinese girl named Soo Loo, and her picture left no mystery about her charms. Another featured specialty was a girl named So-So Dolan, who had a very wholesome grin on a pug-nosed Irish face. The rest of the girls were average show-girl types, a little too blond in the hair and a little too hard in the eyes and mouth.

So this was where DeGroot enlisted the girls for his parties. The photographs were the tip-off of the kind of parties they were. It was a cinch that nobody sat around sipping dry sherry, and if anybody held anything at these parties, it certainly wasn't a conversation.

Well, there it was. There was part of the answer on DeGroot. You gave rough parties for rough people. But what would that have to do with Sonny?

Clem scowled at the pictures and walked across the doorway to the other shadow box. His eyes widened. There was a picture of Sonny Lind. The name under the picture was Joey Smith, but it was Sonny Lind, all right. You could never mistake that All-American grin. Clem looked closer at the photograph. The eyes were very heavy-lidded in the picture, and the grin was sloppy around the edges.

"Plotzed," muttered Clem disgustedly.

Sonny Lind was advertised as the hottest scat singer in the country, part of the current show, *Guys and Gals*. Clem stepped back to look at the marquee again. The current show was *Guys and Gals*, and it would play through the following Saturday. If Sonny was in the show, he certainly couldn't have disappeared. How much can you disappear on a stage unless you're Houdini? Somebody was giving somebody the business.

CLEM WALKED BACK to First Street, where he had seen the dismal lights of an all-night lunchroom across the way from the subway station. The counterman was leaning against the cash register yawning over a copy of the Hudson Observer. Two cops were hunched on stools gnawing at a pair of doughnuts and noisily slurping hot coffee. They gave Clem a disinterested cops' stare when he walked in, measuring him for a brief moment, as if filing his description away in their minds for future reference.

Clem said, "Coffee and a minute steak on a bun," to the counterman, and walked to the phone booth in the rear. He did not really want the steak, but it was an expensive item and his ordering it would tell the cops that he wasn't a bum. It would save questions and maybe trouble. Hoboken was a river-front town, and in the small hours of the morning the cops were rougher on stray characters.

Clem called Burr's Hotel and crisply

told the mumbling clerk that he wanted to talk to Mr. McNulty. He could hear the clerk yawn into the phone.

"Call him in the morning, mister, or leave a message. I can't wake him up at this hour."

"You can't wake him up at this hour," Clem mimicked him. "All right. I'll come down there and wake him up myself. Is that what you want? This is important. Put him on or I'll come down there and take care of it personally."

There was a silence and then Clem heard the buzzing ring of the house phone. Within a few minutes a sleepy voice came on.

"For God's sake," it said, "what now?"

"You McNulty?" Clem deliberately slurred his words.

"Yes. I'm McNulty, but there are times I wished I wasn't. Who's this?"

"Lemme ask you a question, Mr. McNulty. I just wanna ask you one question. You ever hear of Art Tatum, Mr. McNulty?"

"What is this, a rib?"

"No sir. Never rib when I'm talking about Art Tatum. Greatest piano player in the whole world, except me. Gutbucket piano, that's me. Best gutbucket piano you ever heard. You wanna hear the best gutbucket piano you ever heard? That's me. Want a job. Broke. I'll play you the best butjucket . . . You come to the Schiedam House t'morrow. You hear what I'm saying? You come to the Schiedam House t'morrow and you'll hear the best buck bucket piano you ever heard. Now wait a minute, I wanna tell you something. . . ."

McNulty said disgustedly, "Ah, hell!" and hung up.

Clem was grinning a little when he walked back to the counter for his coffee and minute steak on a bun. McNulty was sore now, but musicians were supposed to be nuts. It was a trademark. McNulty would be in the Schiedam House when it opened the next day. This was a better way to get his atten-

tion than walking into the Lyric cold sober and asking for a job.

Clem straddled his stool and bit into his minute steak on a bun. He had expected a piece of fried armor plate, but it was good juicy beef. Both cops were watching him now.

One of them finally said, "Work around here, Red?" A flat suspicious question.

Clem nodded. "Lyric Burlesque. Just talked to McNulty on the phone. Go to work tomorrow. Hot piano. Taking Joey Smith's place."

**T**HE COPS relaxed, looked at each other and winked, and one of them said, "Some guys have all the luck. What a way to make a living. Backstage with all them dames running around. How'd you like working in the burlesque, Al?" he asked the counter-  
man.

The counterman said sourly, "I got a wife and kids."

The cop made a few good-naturedly obscene remarks about wives and kids, then asked casually, "Where you staying, Red?"

Just as casually, Clem said, "I was thinking of Burr's Hotel. Is it okay or is it a crumb trap?"

"It's okay, but don't try bringing any dames up to your room. They're fussy."

Both cops slid back off their stools, wiped their mouths with the flat of their hands, buttoned their tunics, yawned and straightened their caps. One of them patted Clem on the shoulder.

"Good luck, Red," he said. "But if we hear of any six-foot-two redheads with green eyes and an S-shaped scar on his right thumb holding up Al here for the cash in the till after we leave, we'll know just who to look for." He went, "Haw, haw!" but there was no humor in his flat gray eyes.

The pair of them marched out and a few seconds later the prowler car purred away from the curb like a stalking leopard. Clem looked at the counterman.

"What gives around here?" he asked. "They did everything but frisk me. Are they on the mayor's welcoming committee or something?"

"Or something," said the counterman. "They're on the prod. You're lucky they didn't take you down to headquarters just for the hell of it. They pulled two characters out of here at eight tonight—just for the hell of it."

"How come?"

"Another killing down in Hudson Park. It's getting to be a regular cemetery down there. Three days ago a Dutch sailor was knocked off, and tonight around seven another one was knocked off. This place is getting to be worse than it was during prohibition when all the Jersey beer came out of Hoboken. I worked in a deadfall on River street in those days and believe me, we had fresh meat to cart off to the morgue. I got a funny feeling it's starting all over again."

Clem felt a familiar anticipatory tingle down his spine, that tingle that came when he had a queen in the hole, an ace-king-jack combo showing on the board and the last card about to be dealt with a topheavy pot in the middle of the table.

"I don't get it," he said carefully. "Prohibition's long gone. You can even buy liquor in the drug stores these days. What's there to fight about?"

"Well, here's the way I figure it," the counterman spread his elbows on the marbletop and lowered his voice confidentially. "You know what the taxes are on liquor? Eighty per cent, ninety per cent, and in some cases a hundred per cent, two and three hundred per cent. This is a shipping town, see. The freighters come in from South America. Okay."

"The customs go over them, but you know what a boat is. There are the big holds and the little holds and there are bulkheads and all that stuff. A captain or a chief mate that knows his stuff can hide an elephant in one of them boats

and you'd never know unless it had pups.

"Now here's what I think, and here's what I know, too. Somebody's been bringing in tax-free liquor. South American rum, Spanish cognac, Scotch. Get the picture, Red? Without taxes on a



case of cognac, you can clear a hundred bucks net on a case. That's big business. So who moves in? The muscle-men, the hotrods, the boys with the organization. The next thing you know we're carting the fresh meat to the morgue again every day. Now I ask

you, does that add up or don't it?"

CLEM LOOKED toward the door through which the two cops had marched. He remembered their flat, suspicious eyes—but he still couldn't buy this smuggled liquor idea. It took a lonely stretch like the Florida keys to bring in liquor in any paying quantity. The best you could do here in Hoboken, with all the official supervision, would be a few cases here and there. No, it didn't add up. There was something else, something not so bulky, something that could be handled much more easily.

But there was an organization working, all right. It had all the earmarks. Two killings within three days. It could be a coincidence, but then there was the shooting of Al Vance. He had only been winged, but it was still part of the setup.

The counterman dropped his voice another notch and said, "And you can't tell me, Red, that the cops don't know what's going on. I know cops. I bet you they even know who knocked off that fresh meat up in Hudson Park. I'll lay money on that. But they have to make a show for the papers and they pull in a few bindle-stiffs, show them the goldfish down headquarters to schmooze the voting public. and all the time they're being paid off by the boys with the organization.

"To tell you the truth, Red, I wouldn't of laid one to ten fifteen minutes ago that you wasn't on your way to the goldfish bowl. That short cop—Catlin, the one built like a billboard—he likes nothing better than sharpening his knuckles on somebody's noggin. some poor bird like those two they dragged out of here tonight. Know what I mean?"

Clem said slowly, "Yeah." The short, wide cop had had that look.

"Now just between you me and the lamppost," said the counterman, "if you don't have that job with the Lyric tomorrow, I'll give you a hunk of advice.

Blow. Get out of here. Go to Jersey City or Weehawken, or someplace, but don't hang around Hoboken, because the first thing in the morning they're going to be checking with McNulty, and unless you like a mess of cops shoving their knuckles in your snoot, you'll blow. You don't have that job yet, do you? It don't make no difference to me, but when Catlin ast you that question, I could tell you didn't have no job with the Lyric. Maybe you braced McNulty and all that, and maybe you'll get the job tomorrow, but you ain't got it now. Either sew up that job first thing tomorrow with McNulty, or get the hell out of here while you still have two legs to walk on."

Clem finished the last of his coffee and stepped back from his stool. He wiped his mouth with a paper napkin.

"You ought to play poker, Al," he said.

"I did, Red. And that's why I'm a short order cook with a wife and kids today. Now don't get me wrong, kid. I like cops when they're people; but when cops start to act like cops, brother, you can have them. If you're short, I can let you have a buck or two to make Weehawken."

Clem laid one of his two fives on the counter and said, "Thanks. I'll keep it in mind."

He scooped up the change, knowing better than to leave a tip on the counter, and walked out saying, "See you, Al."

Al said morosely, "Blow, kid, blow. There's nothing here for you but trouble. You got a trouble-face, and a face is the one thing you can't fool me on. You got a trouble-face."

### Chapter III

**C**LEM HAD a feeling, when he walked out of the lunchroom, that the prowler car was lurking just around the corner, waiting to see where he would go and what he would do. He walked to River Street and turned north. The

prowler car was not around that corner, and he realized that the corners were all in his mind, the result of the counter-man's dark prophecies. But he did not try to fool himself that the two cops had forgotten him. Catlin, especially, had not looked like a cop who forgot very easily. Perhaps even now Catlin was checking up with McNulty in Burr's Hotel.

Thank God he had called McNulty, and thank God he could play the piano. There was that much if the prowler car came charging back and picked him up. He could always play the piano for them—if they didn't break his arms first.

River Street was dark and brooding. On the east side of the street was the high fence that guarded the warehouses of the steamship companies. It was a silent street of many saloons, old houses, and drunks sleeping in the shadowed doorways. A sheet of newspaper performed a slow, weird dance in the middle of the street as a puff of breeze from the river stirred it. There was no moon.

Clem strode northward. It was chilly and he walked with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders hunched. His mind was milling fiercely over the memory of that photograph of Sonny Lind in the shadow box beside the door of the burlesque house, and the first time his name was called he did not hear it. The second time it was called, he started and whirled. A man was running awkwardly toward him. It was Vance, holding his wounded arm tight to his body as he ran.

"I got something I want to tell you, Lasher," he panted.

Clem grasped him by the coatfront. "And there's something I want to ask you," he interrupted, scowling. "I was just over at the Lyric. How come they're advertising Sonny Lind in the current show? His picture's up on the board."

"I know, I know. He was in the show when it opened, and they didn't change

the billing when he skipped. That's all."

"That had better be all. How did you know I was over here in Hoboken?"

"I went back to your apartment. Your wife—"

"She isn't my wife."

Vance gave him a sharp glance. "She led me to believe—"

"I don't care what she led you to believe. She's not my wife. "How did she lead you to believe?"

"She called you her husband and said you'd left right after we did and that you were going to call her back in about an hour and I could give her the message."

"So you gave her the message, I suppose," said Clem with thin sarcasm. "Anything else you gave her? Your wallet maybe? Or didn't she ask for it?"

Vance turned on his heel and started to walk away. Clem caught him by the left arm.

"Sorry—sorry," he growled. "But she milked you, that's what."

"Go to hell."

"I said I'm sorry, didn't I? I'll send you a singing telegram if you want, or would you rather sit in my lap?"

VANCE jerked his arm from Clem's grasp, but he didn't walk away. "Well," he said finally, "for you, I suppose, that was a pretty handsome apology."

"Okay. I apologized, so let's forget it. What'd you tell Marthe? Anything important?"

"I told her I thought I had a line on DeGroot."

"Why didn't you tell me when you were in the apartment the first time, damn it?"

"You practically kicked us out, that's why," said Vance coldly. "And it was only a hunch, anyway. It was something I got from one of the chorus girls at the Lyric, and after we left you I remembered it. I had to look it up to be sure."

"And you told it all to Marthe."

"Twice. She made me repeat it."

"I'll bet. And she probably wrote it down, too."

"She did."

Clem saw the stubborn set of Vance's chin and he said impatiently, "Okay, okay, nobody's blaming you, but you'd better let me have it before any more of my wives turn up."

"You're a daisy, Lasher, a real daisy. Here—" he took something from his vest pocket—"the darling wedding ring."

Clem reached for it and then stiffened. "Hold it!" he whispered.

A car had drifted up River Street and stopped at the corner of Second, a block back. A man darted from a doorway and ran to the car. He stopped for a moment at the driver's window, pointed up the street toward Clem and Vance, and then dived into the back seat. The car came rushing toward them with a surge of speed.

Clem yelled "Get down!" and dived for the sidewalk, trying to pull Vance after him. But he had grasped Vance's wounded arm, and the man jumped back with a cry of pain. At the very last moment he became aware of the speeding car. He took a panicky step and then flung up his left arm as if to protect his face.

A shotgun roared twice as the car swent by. There was a third blast and a crash as the slugs tore through the plate glass window of the tavern behind Clem. The car tore up the street to Fourth and disappeared around the corner with a scream of tires.

Clem cried "Vance!" and scrambled to his hands and knees.

Ten feet away, Vance was lying on his back. Clem leaped to his feet, took three steps and turned away, sickened. Vance had taken two loads of buckshot in the face and chest. Nobody, not even the undertaker, was ever going to be able to do anything for Vance now.

And then the deathly silence was



pierced by the scream of a police siren. Clem threw up his head. The sound came from the south of town. He gave Vance a last glance and sprinted the block to Hudson Park. He ran in the shadows of the trees, keeping off the paths. He looked back over his shoulder and saw the sweeping headlights of the police car turn into the curb where Vance lay. A few moments later another prowl car turned into River Street from Third.

Clem cut diagonally through the park toward Hudson Street, running as hard as he could. As he passed a low-hanging rhododendron bush, he tripped over something and sprawled headlong, rolling over and over. He caught a confused glimpse of someone leaping at him, arm upraised. He rolled again and lashed out with his feet. His right foot connected solidly and there was an agonized grunt. The man fell and curled, twitching, holding his groin with both hands.

CLEM jumped up and ran on, swearing because he could not afford the time to see who his assailant had been. It took him over half an hour to reach the north end of Washington Street, keeping in the shadows, while the police cars rolled slowly by, the cops flashing their lights in every doorway. There was an open diner near the bus station at the head of Washington Street, and Clem slipped into it. If he were going to be picked up, it would be better to be picked up there instead of ducking around on the open streets.

A stout, gray-haired woman sat on a high stool at the cash register reading a copy of *Exciting Love* magazine. She took off her glasses and gave Clem a sleepy smile. On the radio Guy Lombardo and the Royal Canadians were playing *Because*. Clem ordered a cup of coffee and a hamburger.

At least, he thought grimly, I'm being well fed tonight. But the hamburger gave him an excuse to hang around

the diner longer. If necessary, he'd even eat a piece of pie.

As the woman turned tiredly away to flatten the hamburger on the grill, Clem took from his pocket the ring that Vance had thrust into his hand just before the shotgun blasts.

He held it on the palm of his right hand and scowled at it. It was a wedding ring, all right. A *darling* wedding ring, Vance had called it. *Darling!* Clem gave his head a little shake. Vance didn't talk like that. Maybe he had misunderstood. Maybe Vance had said Darline's wedding ring. Darline, the dame he had gotten it from. That would be more like it.

But there was something wrong with that, too. It wasn't Darline's wedding ring. It was Helen's. What Clem had first taken for a flowered engraving around the outside of the band was actually the girl's name. Helen.

That was a funny way to put a name on a wedding ring, around the outside. Most wedding rings had the name or initials inside—Bill to Mary, or WS to MG, 1955. There was nothing on the inside of the ring but 14-k. A cheap ring. He examined the ring more closely. It said Helen, all right, and the rest of the designs were shallowly engraved flowers. A hell of a wedding ring that was, with no husband's name. Maybe she didn't have a husband.

Anyway, there was the ring, and through it Vance had gotten a line on DeGroot. Probably through Helen, the chorus girl at the Lyric.

The woman served his hamburger and cocked her head at the sound of the police siren that had risen again.

"The Mickey Mice are having a busy night," she said.

"The what?"

"The Mickey Mice. The Cops. That's what we call them. Mickey Mice."

"What's going on?" Clem asked casually. "A riot or something?"

The woman answered just a little peevishly. "I don't know. Sometimes I

think they play with them siren things just to hear them squeal. Anything else? A piece of pie, a doughnut?"

"No thanks. How come you call them Mickey Mice?"

The woman shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe because sometimes they think they're so funny."

She plodded back to her stool at the end of the counter, back to her dream world between the covers of the *Exciting Love* magazine. She put on her glasses and very shortly a rapt expression flowed over her tired face like balm.

Clem finished his hamburger as slowly as he could. He could still hear the police cars working the town like bird dogs. He looked down at the woman. She finished her story. She closed the magazine, smoothed the cover with her hand, and put it carefully under the counter.

"Anything else now?" she asked him.

"Yeah," he said. "Is there a Salvation Army or something around here where I could bed down for the rest of the night?"

"What's the matter? Broke?"

He laid forty cents on the counter, just enough to pay for his hamburger and coffee. With his left hand, he worked a hole in his pocket, and then turned the pocket inside out for her to see the hole.

"That's the pocket I picked to put nine bucks in," he said.

**H**ER EYES measured him and then turned to the open window, through which came the keening of the questing sirens. She tilted her chin toward the door behind the counter.

"There's an army cot back there in the storeroom where the cook sometimes flops when he's too soused to go home and face his wife. You're welcome to it."

Clem said gravely, "Thank you, miss."

She watched him with a kind of yearning approval as he ducked his bright red

head to go through the low doorway. She cleared off the dishes, wiped the counter with a damp cloth and went back to her stool. This time she did not reach for her magazine.

The storeroom was a seven-foot cubbyhole just off the kitchen. Clem stretched out on the cot. He was tired, but sleepless. Whenever he closed his eyes he could see that car stop again at the corner of Second Street, the man dart from the doorway and point up the street at him and Vance; and then the other man in the park at the north end of River Street.

That was organization, plugging River Street at both ends while they waited for the car and killers to show up. But he couldn't believe in that counterman's theory of liquor-running—even if you could clear a hundred bucks on a case of Spanish cognac, which he doubted. Liquor was too bulky to bring into a busy port like Hoboken. But what the hell were they bringing in? It had to be something big to support an organization.

He heard a masculine voice say noisily, "Hi-ya, lover girl," and he was out of the cot in a flash with his eye to the cracked storeroom door. He could not see much, but he caught a glimpse of blue cloth and brass buttons as the two policemen entered the diner.

The woman did not answer. The policeman laughed.

"We shouldn't of disturbed her, Joe. She hates to be disturbed when she's thinking about love. You should see some of the stuff she reads. *Exciting Love*, *True Love*, *Hot Love*. You wouldn't think it to look at her, Joe, but she's a real lover girl."

The woman said woodenly, "In for the usual free load, boys?"

"Uh-uh. Not tonight, lover girl. We're looking for a character. Have a character in here during the last hour or so?"

"What's he look like?"

"No description."

"What'd he do?"

"That's what we want to ask him."

"Well, as long as you don't know what he looks like and don't know what he did, I'll grab the next character that comes in and you can take him down to headquarters. You don't want a big one, do you? The little ones are easier to bounce off the walls down there."

"Come on, come on, sister, we're not kidding around. Anybody been in here during the last hour? If so, we want a description."

"Nobody's been here."

"Okay. I hope we never find out different, lover girl. Let's go, Joe."

Clem caught another glimpse of them as they walked to the door, and a few moments later he heard the *whirrr* of the prowl car starter.

The woman came within the range of his vision and he saw her lean on the counter. For a long while she stood there, unmoving, and then she turned and came heavily through the doorway. When she opened the door to the store-room, he was sitting on the edge of the cot, smoking a cigarette. He looked up at her. She was bulky, black and featureless, a silhouette against the light from the outer room.

"The cops were just here," she said tonelessly.

"I heard them."

"They were looking for you."

"I know."

SHE WAS silent for a moment and then said more warmly, "I had a feeling you wouldn't lie about it. Just as I had a feeling they were after you when you first walked in. There was dirt on your face and you were breathing like you'd been running. Did you shoot that fellow like they said on the radio?"

"No, but I was with him when it happened. They came down the street in a car and shot him as they passed."

"I don't want to know about it!" she interrupted hurriedly. "I don't want to know nothing. I didn't think you did it

when I heard it on the radio. You're like my first husband. He wouldn't shoot you or stick a knife in you. If he wanted to beat you up, he wouldn't do it on a dark street. He wasn't very lovable, but I was crazy about him. He didn't look like you, but you're two of a kind. But you didn't have anything to do with it. You couldn't have, because you were sitting out there at the counter eating a hamburger when we heard the three shots. You can sleep here till you wake up. I'll leave word. I own half the place. You'll find a razor and comb on the shelf over the sink. Now you'd better get some sleep. And don't tell me nothing about nothing, cause I've done enough lying as it is. Get some sleep."

She went out and closed the door. Clem brooded down at the cigarette that was burning away between his fingers. Nobody had ever stuck out his neck to help him before, not this way. They had lent him money, sure, but they always expected it to be paid back. This woman didn't expect anything.

After a long time he fell asleep, but the kind of sleep that left him unrefreshed and tired when he awakened. The sun was on his face through the small window, and there was the sound of rattling pots and cutlery from the kitchen. He went to the small sink and washed, shaved, and combed his hair. He stared into the cracked mirror on the wall. His face looked gaunt and grim and there were shadows beneath his eyes, and when he grinned it was a wolf's grin. The savage bones were more pronounced in his hard jaw.

When he walked out of the cubby hole a thin man in a soiled chef's cap looked up from the gas range where he was cooking vegetables. He gave Clem a mild smile.

"Have a good snooze?" he asked. "Belle said to give you breakfast."

"Thanks, but I'm not hungry. What time is it?"

"About ten-thirty."

"Ten-thirty! I've got to beat it. Tell Belle thanks for me, will you?"

"She didn't do it for thanks, but I'll tell her. Sure you don't want breakfast? I got a nice ham slice."

"Thanks, but I have to see a man about a job, and I'm late."

"Luck."

He took a bus down Washington Street to Third and walked over to River Street. This was very close to the spot where Vance had been shot and he avoided looking at it. He turned right.

**T**HE SCHIEDAM HOUSE was half-way down the block. A dapper little man with a clever simian face was standing at the bar drinking Holland gin from a cocktail glass. Clem had a hunch that he was either a racetrack character or McNulty, manager of the Lyric Burlesque.

Ignoring the sharp glance he got when he walked in Clem shuffled to the bar and said thickly, "Gimme a shot."

He spread a dollar bill on the bar. He had two shots and the dollar bill disappeared. He looked around and saw the piano in an alcove at the rear of the room. He went over to it and sat down on the rickety stool.

His fingers trembled slightly as he reached for the keys. He stared at them. They were actually shaking. The tremor was visible. He was nervous. For the first time since God knew when, he was asking somebody for something; nervous because McNulty could give—or withhold—this lousy two-bit job. A gust of anger swept through him, and he plunged his hands at the white and black maw of the keyboard. The buzzing silence of the bar-room was rocked under the assault of furious rhythm that beat from the piano. After he finished, he sat scowling down at his hands.

A voice at his elbow said dryly, "You're not better than Tatum. You're just louder."

Clem looked up in the face of McNulty. "Take it or leave it," he snarled.

McNulty's jaw dropped. He flushed, but instead of answering Clem, he turned to the barkeep.

"What do you think?" he asked. "This comedian calls me up in the middle of the night, wants a job, so I come down here to listen, then he tells me to take it or leave it. Now, honest, what kind of way is that?" he complained.

The barkeep chuckled. "If you give him the job, you better get him an armor-plated piano. Do that, Mac, and I'll come down to your lousy theatre just to see him tear it apart with his bare hands. He sure gives it hell, doesn't he?" There was a tinge of admiration in his voice.

McNulty turned back to Clem. "You sure do," he said. He was grinning.

Clem stood up abruptly. "Go to hell," he said, and strode toward the door.

McNulty ran after him and plucked at his sleeve. "Ah, now, wait a minute, bucko," he said. "If it'll make you feel any better, you got something. Don't ask me what, because I don't think there's a name for it, but you got it. The nearest I can come is, if the Dempsey-Firpo fight had been set to music, that'd be it."

Clem stopped. "Yes or no?" he demanded.

"I dunno, I dunno. I'm trying to make up my mind, so wait a minute, will you? But I'm telling you, bucko, you're a risk. When you really got into that piano, you made me feel like starting a riot. Not sore, mind you, just—well, violent. And me I'm a peaceable guy. I'm afraid to think what'll happen when you start playing for a houseful of the kind of goons that come to see a strip act. Okay, okay, you're hired. Maybe they'll wreck the joint and I can collect the insurance. Now let's get back to the theatre and see where we can fit you."

**A**S THEY LEFT the Schiedam House Clem demanded, "What happened to that singer you had, that guy you called Joey Smith?"

McNulty grimaced with sour humor. "Where I come from," he said, "Joey Smith is a dirty word."

"Cut it out, cut it out. I asked a question. What happened to him?"

Trotting at his side, McNulty looked up at Clem with amazement. He said finally, "You do everything just the way you play the piano, don't you? Nothing happened to Joey Smith as far as I know. He borrowed dough from everybody in the theatre—he was into me for two hundred—and then took a powder. He was certainly a guy that was out for number one first, last, and always. You know him or something? He put the bite on you, too?"

Clem said shortly, "Never heard of him."

McNulty opened his mouth to retort, then closed it. He made a small gesture with his hands. It sure took all kinds to make a world. This one was a daisy, all right.

There was a black sedan parked in front of the theatre. The rear door hung open, and two men lounged against the front fender. One was thin and wore a light raincoat. His right hand was sunk in the pocket of his coat and was bulkier than a hand ought to be. The other man was a monolith of muscle. He fed a stick of gum into his mouth and his massive jaws moved stolidly.

As Clem and McNulty came around the corner to Hudson Street, the thin man leaned an eighth of an inch closer to his bulky companion and whispered liplessly.

The big man rubbed the palms of his hands down his thighs. He pushed himself away from the car and started diagonally across the sidewalk toward Clem and McNulty. He walked with his big head thrust forward, his eyes on the spot behind Clem's right ear where he would swing in with a looping left. He was as inconspicuous in bulk and intent as a Sherman tank on that drowsy sidewalk.

Clem saw him coming and stopped,

shoving McNulty violently away from his side. The big man growled and, being single-minded, leaped in swinging a long left for that spot behind Clem's ear. Clem ducked and the curved arm scythed harmlessly over his head. He straightened and hit the man on the chin as hard as he could.

The big man staggered back two steps, his arms flailing for balance. Clem hit him in the stomach with a hooking left, and then smashed up with his right fist as the man bent double, straightening him again. He seized him by the coat front and rushed him across the sidewalk toward the car where the thin one, swearing thinly, tugged at the gun in his pocket.

The gun whipped out and the man took a sideward step, yelling, "Hold it, Lasher!"

**B**UT HE had waited too long, had been too confident, had relied too much on the muscles of his companion. The gun had barely cleared his pocket when he was smashed against the side of the car by the body of the thug. He uttered a bleating cry of pain as Clem jerked the heavy man away and slammed him back again. The gun clattered to the sidewalk, and Clem kicked it into the gutter. He reached around the big man and hit the thin one a glancing blow on the side of the head; but he had had to release the heavy man who, almost unconscious, sagged against Clem, clinching with the convulsive strength of an instinctive fighter.

The thin one fell to his knees, scrambled away from the car on all fours, and then bolted up the street, disappearing around the corner before Clem could untangle himself from the heavy man's frantic grasp. Clem hooked his fingers in the man's nostrils, pulled back his head and chopped him across the jaw. With an exhalation that was almost a sigh of relief, the big man slumped to the sidewalk and lay motionless.

Clem ran to the corner. There was no one in sight except two boys about ten years old pitching pennies to a crack

in the sidewalk. He could see them eying him warily as he strode up.

"Which way'd he go?" he demanded.

The boys looked up at him with a bland shrewdness that was beyond their years, measuring him, classifying him. But there was something cowed about them, too.

One of them said brightly, "You lookin' for somebody, mister?"

And in the same spurious tone, the other piped, "A guy or a dame, mister?"

They backed away from Clem, standing separated, ready to dart left and right with the cunning of experienced street kids. They were as alert as little wild animals, young foxes of the alleys and backyards.

Clem dug into his pocket and brought out two crumpled dollar bills. "A buck apiece," he said. "Which way'd he go?"

The boys looked at each other and mutely shook their heads.

"I'm not a cop," said Clem. "Do I look like a cop?"

"But you ain't from around here," said the farthest kid defiantly.

That was it. He was an outsider, a foreigner. He wasn't a local. It was a tip-off, all the same. The man he had chased was a Hoboken hood, and the kids knew him, or had recognized him. They wouldn't squeal to an outsider. But time had passed, and now it was too late. He balled the two bills and flipped them to the kids.

"If you were my kids," he said heavily, "I'd make you join the Boy Scouts and learn something."

He turned and strode back up the street, but he could not resist a glance over his shoulder. The kids thumbed their noses at him and jeered.

"Aaaah, go soak your head, Brick-top!"

"Lookit the hair on him. His brain is rusty!"

CLEM FELT a passing gloom as if a dark cloud had momentarily obscured the sun, but he shook it off as he rounded the corner.

The heavy man was crawling aimlessly on the sidewalk like a blind mole, and McNulty stood to one side, watching him, an expression of shock blanking his clever face. He licked his lips and looked wide-eyed at Clem.

"What was all that?" he stammered.

Clem hooked his fingers in the collar of the crawling man's coat, and started dragging him toward the theatre.

"Open the door," he ordered McNulty.

McNulty fumbled a key from his pocket and opened the door to the lobby. Clem dragged the burly man inside. He looked around, saw the swinging doors to the auditorium, dragged the man through and into the dusty silence beyond the lobby. As the doors swung, creaking, he saw McNulty dart into the office beside the box office. He ran out and caught McNulty just as the theatre manager was lifting the phone from its cradle.

"I—I was just calling the police," McNulty sounded as if he were still in a state of shock.

Clem dropped the phone back into its cradle. "We don't need the police," he snapped. "I don't want them. This is personal. Come on."

He took McNulty's unresisting arm and marched him into the auditorium. The heavy man was crawling blindly across the carpeting, mumbling.

Clem shoved him into a sitting position against the barrier behind the last row of seats and snapped at McNulty, "Get me some ammonia or smelling salts."

McNulty scurried away and returned within a few minutes with a bottle of ammonia. Clem uncorked it and held it under the burly man's nostrils. The man's head jerked up. Clem pulled out his handkerchief, soaked it with ammonia and clapped it over the man's nose. The man pushed weakly against Clem's wrist. Clem took the handkerchief away.

"What's your name?" he demanded.

The man cringed. "In-wey mostly

call me Pudge," he whimpered.

"Who was that guy with you?"

"I—I dunno. He just—"

Clem clapped the ammonia-soaked handkerchief over Pudge's nose and mouth and held it there with both hands. Pudge fought feebly, but Clem bore down with muscle and weight until Pudge's eyes rolled up in his head. He pulled the handkerchief away.

"Now who was that guy with you?" he asked grimly.

"We—we call him Crackers."

"Crackers what?"

"I dunno. No . . . no!" He put up pawing hands to fend off the ammonia-soaked handkerchief. "Honest, I don't know. We just call him Crackers, honest. I dunno!"

"Okay. You don't know. What's the pitch on that caper you just tried to pull?"

**T**HERE was a liquid, begging expression in Pudge's eyes. "I—I—"

Clem dug his thumbs savagely into Pudge's neck on either side, just at the hinges of the jaw.

"All I've got to do, is push," he grated, "and you'll flip your lid. Give me the pitch!" He released the pressure slightly.

Pudge moaned and his trembling fingers fluttered at Clem's hard thumbs.

"I dunno," he whispered, "I dunno. I was playing pool down the Acme Bar. Crackers comes in and offers me a saw-buck to give a guy named Lasher a going-over and shove him in a car. He brings me here and you're the guy. That's all I know, mister, honest. That's all I know!" His voice rose to a terror-stricken scream.

McNulty cried hysterically, "Let him alone, Lasher. Let him alone!" He pulled at Clem's rosy shoulder with ineffectual hands.

Clem hunkered back on his heels, glancing up at McNulty. "Keep out of this," he said almost absently. He pulled the palm of his hand down the side of his jaw, scowling at the now

thoroughly disorganized Pudge, who twitched fearfully every time Clem moved.

"This Crackers," said Clem, "he's a local hotshot, that right?"

"Yeah, yeah, that's right, that's right, that's right all right."

"Is he supposed to belong to a mob or something around here?"

"I—I never—"

Clem merely leaned a little closer and Pudge squealed and wrapped his arms protectively over his face.

"They—they said the Hudson Dusters!"

"The Hudson Dusters? What are you giving me? There hasn't been a Hudson Duster since Eighteen-ninety."

"It's just a name, mister. Just a name they use, and I don't even know if Crackers belongs. It's just what they say."

Clem muttered at McNulty, "That's kid stuff, Hudson Dusters. These days." He turned back to Pudge. "You're going to do a job for me."

"Sure, mister, sure. Anything you say!"

"But you're a little afraid of Cracker's gun, eh?"

"Well, sure, mister, if a guy's got a gun and—"

"I'm not afraid of Cracker's gun, and I'm going to show you something."

He dug iron fingers between the two bones of Pudge's elbow. The man arched and screamed. Clem released him immediately.

"That was nothing," he said. "I didn't even bear down. I just wanted to give you an idea. Now here's the job you're going to do for me. You're going to find out all you can about Crackers—his full name, the mob he's supposed to be tied up with, how many times he's been sent up and what for, and where he's living. Got it?"

"Yeah, yeah, I got it. I got it!"

"Smart boy." Clem sprang lithely to his feet, extended his hand and jerked Pudge to his feet. The man swayed,

steadied himself on the barrier, looked apologetically at Clem.

"I—I'll get it for you, mister. I'll get it."

He sidled past Clem and lurched through the door held silently open by McNulty. Clem walked quickly across the back of the auditorium to the mens' room. When McNulty walked in after him a few minutes later, he was bent over the sink, retching painfully. McNulty leaned against the doorframe.

"Well!" he said sardonically, "I didn't *think* anybody could be that tough!"

Clem raised his head from over the sink and looked at him.

McNulty said hurriedly, pushing the door open behind him, "Just kidding, Lasher. I was just kidding."

#### Chapter IV

CLEM WAS backstage, sitting on a prop bed used in one of the many bedroom skits, smoldering over a cigarette, when McNulty came through the wings from the opposite side of the stage with a ginger-haired, snub-nosed girl, whose generous mouth was pursed in lines of ironic patience.

McNulty introduced her as Ella Dolan, the chorus captain. "So-So Dolan," he amplified nervously. "She's got a specialty in the show."

Then Clem remembered. She was one of the strip-girls whose photograph was outside in the shadow box, the one who had looked so amused that anyone should pay good money just to see a few square feet of female skin, the wholesome looking one.

McNulty stammered to Ella, "This is —this is Clem Lasher. He plays a piano," and ducked out down the stairs beside the electrician's board.

Clem felt himself flush as Ella Dolan surveyed him from head to foot with that same air of ironic patience.

"That's all we need around here," she said at length. "Another of Mac's protégés. What are you, a lush, a chaser, a hophead, or just a plain louse?"

Clem let his eyes rise from her feet to her ginger hair as slowly as a snake climbing a tree, and this time she flushed.

"Why do you like to strip in front of a lot of morons?" he asked deliberately. "Are you an exhibitionist, or have you done it so often here and there that it doesn't make any difference anymore?"

The blood ebbed from her cheeks. Her hand licked out and slapped him across the cheek. Her eyes glittered angrily, and his grin glittered back at her.

"We were even," he said, "till you slapped me. I'm not a lush, a chaser, a hophead, or a louse. I might be an S. O. B., but I'm not a louse. Now, why do you strip for the goon-boys?"

"I like it. I like to take my clothes off. There's nothing I'd rather do!"

"You're a liar!"

His grin glittered again. His hand shot out, grasped her left wrist, twirled her, flipped her on her back on the bed beside him. He bent over her, kissed her—at first brutally, but then with a foreign softness. He released her and sat up, looking away.

"I'm sorry I did that," he said jerkily. "Not sorry because I kissed you, but—I'm sorry. I apologize."

For a few moments she lay unresisting, soft, on the bed, staring at him with wondering eyes. Her hand rose shakily to her mouth and touched her lips. She pushed herself up, rested on her elbows. Something hardened in her face.

"That pays for the slap," she said. "With interest. Satisfied?"

He thrust himself away from the bed. She stood up.

"Let's start all over again," she said. "I'm Ella Dolan, and you're Clem Lasher. I'm pleased to meet you." She held out her right hand.

HE HESITATED and then took the offered hand. "Pleased to meet you, too, Dolan," he said.

She regarded him thoughtfully. "I



can't believe that you came here to play the piano. You don't look like a man who'd be satisfied to make a living that way."

"What was that crack you made before about McNulty's protégés."

"Poor Mac, he's always letting some talented heel talk him into something."

"Oh yes. He was telling me about that. A kid named Joey Smith."

"A kid!" Ella Dolan snorted bitterly. "Joey Smith—if that's his right name—hasn't been a kid since the Hoover administration. He had everybody fooled with that big Eagle Scout grin of his. Everybody took him for a kid. Even I did, and I'm not easily fooled. But he was a little drunker than usual one night and he let it drop that he was born during the first World War. Figure it out for yourself."

Clem scowled. That made Sonny Lind around thirty-eight. He certainly wasn't any kid, though he had sure looked it with that curly hair and boyish grin.

"What kind of heel was this Sonny—I mean, Joey Smith?" he asked.

"He was a revolving heel. He was a heel no matter how you looked at him. When he walked out of this theatre, he took almost a thousand bucks with him. Not bad for a week's work, eh?"

"What do you mean? He tapped the till? He knocked off the box office?"

"It wouldn't have been as bad if he had. He suckered all of us with that All-American grin of his. He took poor old Mac for a pocketful, he cleaned out the stage hands with a pair of dice that could do everything but whistle *Dixie*, and even I lent him fifty. Me! Picture that. And I'm supposed to know my way around. What gets me sore is that he didn't even have to pick our pockets. He just asked us for it and we gave it to him."

"He sounds like a smooth operator."

"He was smooth, all right. He let drop that he had taken some sucker over in New York for a thousand, too. For singing lessons, no less. That guy

must really have been a sucker. But the worst he did around here," she added broodingly, "was to Helen."

"Helen!"

"Yes. One of the chorus girls. She was crazy about him. L-o-v-e—love, the real thing. She had two hundred in her grouch bag, and he took that. But that wasn't enough for Joey Smith. He really put the slug on the poor kid in the end. She got tight with him one night and woke up the next morning in a hotel room with a big fat old Dutchman, who, it turned out, had slipped pal Joey a hundred to fix it up for him. Helen was almost crazy when she got back to the theatre that day. She was going to fix Joey. I told her to forget it, but if I'd known what she had in mind, I'd have stuck to her like tar to a fender."

"Just what did she have in mind?" asked Clem carefully, fingering the wedding ring in his pocket.

"She jumped in the river," said Ella flatly. Her eyes narrowed. "Hold everything, Lasher. You've been pumping me for the past ten minutes. What's your interest in Joey Smith?"

Clem said grimly, "I'm the sucker from New York, the one he took for a thousand bucks for singing lessons."

**E**LLA WHISTLED. "You're not my idea of a sucker," she said.

"I won't be Sonny Lind's idea of a sucker, either, before I get finished. That's another one of his names—Sonny Lind."

Ella said eagerly, "He's still around Hoboken, Lasher. I saw him yesterday on Ferry Street in a gray convertible longer than Methuselah's beard. He had a couple of public-enemy type citizens with him. For a minute I had the wild hope that they were taking him for a ride, but no such luck. They were laughing and joking like happy politicians."

"Good. I wouldn't want anything to happen to him."

"Let me help, Lasher. I'll do everything I can. First just give me time to get the nearest baseball bat. I just

want to be around to see the expression on his face. That is, if you leave enough of a face for him to have an expression."

"This is all under your hat, Ella Dolan. As far as anybody else around here is concerned, I'm just the piano player, understand?"

"Anything you say, Lasher. I'd give an arm and a leg to get Joey Smith or Sonny Lind or whatever his name is over a barrel. But do you mind if I say something?"

"Go ahead."

"Those two citizens in the convertible with him. They weren't anybody's playmates. If you played with them, you'd stand a good chance of going home feet first. Be careful."

"I will."

"No you won't. You'll charge in with your chin out, swinging with both hands. Mac told me about that hassel you had out there on the sidewalk. You were just plain lucky, Mac says, that the man in the raincoat didn't get his gun out a split second earlier. Mac picked that gun up out of the gutter where you kicked it. Make him give it to you . . . What's the matter?"

Clem muttered. "Be right back." He ran across the stage, out through the stage door and up the alley to the front of the theatre. The black sedan was gone.

McNulty was standing in the lobby, watching him. "They took it away about fifteen minutes ago," he said. "Two characters the size of boxcars. I didn't argue with them."

Clem slapped his fist into the palm of his right hand. "There isn't any chance that you took the license number, is there?" he demanded.

"Not a chance in the world," said McNulty promptly. "You as good as told me to mind my own business, and this was one time, bucko, that I was only too pleased to."

Clem eyed him hotly, but this time he kept his mouth shut.

McNulty went on conversationally, "You know, bucko, I'm not a bad guy. I don't know what kind of trouble you're

in, and I'm not asking. If you want to tell me, okay; if you don't want to tell me, okay, too. But sometimes it's nice to have friends, if you know what I mean."

Clem said shortly, "I'm doing all right."

McNulty shrugged and turned away to greet a squat man, who was walking diagonally across the street toward the theatre. "Hi, Catlin," he said. "How's the boy?"

Catlin tilted his chin at Clem. "This monkey play the piano for you, Mac?" he demanded in a hard, flat voice.

McNulty shot Clem a swift glance and answered, "That's right, and he's pretty good, too."

Catlin swung around on Clem. "Where'd you go after you left the lunchroom last night?"

Clem recognized Catlin as one of the two cops he had seen in the lunchroom just before meeting Vance.

"I went up Hudson Street to Burr's Hotel," he said.

"You're a liar! I just checked with the hotel and you was nowheres near it, then or ever."

"I didn't say I went in, did I? When I got there, I found I didn't have the price."

"You're a liar again! Al down at the lunchroom said he gave you change for a five."

**P**ULLING OUT the lining of his pocket, Clem twiddled his fingers in the hole he had made there the night before. "That's where it went right through there. I had forty cents left, and I went down to that diner by the bus station at the other end of Washington Street. I asked the dame there if she knew of a Salvation Army where I could get a flop for the night, and she let me use a cot in the back room. Now what the hell is that all about? If somebody held up the lunchroom, it wasn't me."

"Don't get tough. What time did you get down to the diner?" Catlin still

sounded hard, but not quite so sure of himself.

"I don't know. I lost my watch in a crap game in Albany. Wait a minute. Right after I walked in, we heard three explosions, and the dame said, 'There goes the gasworks again,' or something like that. That help?"

Catlin pressed his thin lips together. Then with an air of great cunning, he shot out, "When was the last time you saw Alfred Vance, wise guy?"

Clem let his face go blank. "Who's he?" he asked.

Catlin stepped close to Clem and gath-



### STICKY-FINGERED

**A**RRESTED for shaking hands with a woman in the center of a busy Detroit intersection and tying up traffic, a taxicab driver explained: "I was signaling to make a turn and this woman comes staggering out of a bar. When she saw my hand sticking out of the taxi window, she grabbed it and started shaking it, and I just couldn't get loose."

—J. S. Endicott

ered his shirtfront in a big fist. "Don't lie to me!" he grated. "You lied twice, and I don't like it. I've got a good mind to take you down to headquarters and sandpaper you down a little just for the hell of it."

McNulty saw Clem's eyes narrow, and he sprang across the sidewalk, thrusting his thin body between the two men.

"Now, wait a minute—wait a minute," he begged. "We don't have to have any trouble. Hell, Catlin, Lasher's

story should be easy enough to check. If it doesn't check, that's the time to get tough. But I've got an idea it's going to check. He'd be a damned fool to give you a story like that if it wouldn't check, wouldn't he? Let's be sensible."

Catlin pushed out his jaw at Clem. "You'll be awfully easy to find if you ain't here when I get back," he said heavily. He turned and walked up the street, his heels hammering the sidewalk with barely suppressed fury.

McNulty looked at Clem and said ironically, "So you're doing all right, eh? You're doing just dandy, if you ask me. In just about a whisper you two would have been rolling all over the sidewalk. Don't you know it's against the law to smack a cop in this town, no matter how wrong he is? You'd better file that for future reference. The food in the local hoosegow is lousy, they tell me."

Clem looked up the street after Catlin, without answering.

McNulty said, "That was a straight story you gave him, wasn't it?" He looked a little worried. "That Catlin's a mean one, bucko, and from here on in, right or wrong, he's going to hate your guts. You'll be better off if you're right."

But Clem was not listening. He was thinking of that woman in the diner and how she had said she would give him the alibi because he reminded her of her first husband or something. She had seemed sincere, but now he could not help wondering how she would feel about it in the cold light of day, with a hardboiled cop like Catlin just aching to take her apart and doing his damndest to break her down. It was a chilly feeling.

### Chapter V

**C**LEM HAD two spots in the show, neither of them a solo. He played the music for what McNulty called the parade-in-one, which was nothing more than four chorus girls walking listlessly

up and down the apron of the stage in front of the curtain, while the stage hands changed the scene for the next skit. There were two parades, one just before the intermission, and one just before the big production number that closed the show. There was no piano on the stage, so he had to play from the orchestra pit.

He played angrily and undoubtedly with effect, because later one of the chorus girls, lightly clad in a few strips of nylon, went backstage where he was sitting on a prop trunk, smoking. She leaned against his knee and moaned that she would just love to have him do the music for her specialty next week, and maybe they ought to get in a few rehearsals in ahead of time.

He took the cigarette from his mouth. "Do what?" he demanded.

"Th-the music for my specialty next week," she stammered. "Mac's letting me do a strip number. H-he lets the girls take turns. Like Ella Dolan this week. You could do the music. I mean," her voice turned sultry again, "if we could get in a few rehearsals, Mac would let us have the key to the theatre in the mornings and we could kind of get the number in shape. . . ."

He looked up into her slow, insinuating eyes. "Why don't you go and put some clothes on?" he asked.

Her eyes widened and she backed away from him. "Well, pardon me for living!" she said haughtily, and walked across the stage, switching indignantly.

Ella Dolan's strip number closed the first half of the program. Wrapped in a white terry robe, she went back to Clem.

"I'll bet you didn't even catch my number," she accused him.

"Sorry," he said, "I was thinking."

She put her hand on his arm and smiled.

"To tell you the truth, Clem," she said, "I like you better for that. I like you better than if you'd been in the wings with your eyes standing out on

stalks the way some of the characters we've had in here do. What did The Heat Wave want with you?"

"The who?"

"The Heat Wave. That chorus girl, Eve Barnett. I saw you give her the brush-off."

"Oh her. She wanted a rehearsal or something."

"Rehearsal!" Ella chuckled. "There's a girl who'd rehearse with anything in pants. Have you found a place to stay yet?"

"McNulty got me a room in Burr's Hotel."

"Good. Well?"

"Well what?"

"Aren't you going to ask me to have dinner with you between shows? They serve a nice seafood platter down at the Clam Broth House."

Clem shook his head. "Sorry, honey, but I've got some looking around to do."

"What are you worried about, Clem?"

"I'm not worried."

"If you're not worried, you're certainly practicing to be. What is it? Is it that cop, Catlin? Don't scowl at me like that; Mac told me all about it. He's worried, if you're not. Catlin's something to worry about. He's poison mean. He was a local jerk before they gave him a gun and a badge, and now he's got delusions of grandeur. Watch out for him, Clem."

"I'm not worried about myself, I told you!" Then he added heavily, almost reluctantly, "I'm worried about a dame who stuck her neck out for me. She had no reason to, either. I didn't ask her. She's an old dame, around fifty. I reminded her of her first husband or something. I didn't get it then, and I still don't get it."

"Never mind. She's probably got an angle. Everybody has an angle."

"Beat it, will you?"

"All right. You rattle with it for a while. Sure you won't take me down to the Clam Broth House for dinner?"

"Beat it!"

"See you tonight, Clem."

He lit another cigarette and stared introspectively through the veil of smoke.

**A**FTER the matinee—or rather, directly after his number—he left the theatre, walked up to Washington Street and took a bus to the north end of town. There were several customers at the counter of the diner, and the gray-haired woman, Belle, was drawing two cups of coffee from the shiny urn. She started and spilled a little of the coffee into the saucers when she saw Clem sitting at the end of the counter. She looked away from him and kept her head down as she went back to the grill and made a Western on rye.

It was five minutes before she was able to get away from the trade to take a cup of coffee up to him.

"There was a policeman up to my apartment this afternoon about you," she whispered.

"I know. He saw me first. Did he give you a bad time? Did he get tough with you?"

"He—he asked me all kinds of questions I couldn't answer. I just told him you were in here when we heard the shots. I don't think he believed me. He made me go over it again and again and again, but I told him the same thing all the time—you were in here when the guns went off."

"He didn't get tough, did he?"

"No, nothing like that. But when he left, he said he'd be back. He sounded real nasty."

"Listen," Clem plucked a menu from between the pepper and salt shakers. "If they really come after you, pull your neck back in. Tell them I pointed a gun at you. Tell him I made you say those things. Tell them I scared you."

"But—you didn't shoot that fellow, did you?"

"No, but I was right there when it happened, and they might be able to prove it. I don't want you to get it in

the neck just because you tried to do me a good turn. Understand?"

"I—I'm scared," she confessed in a barely audible voice. "He scared me. He was more than nasty. He was—I don't know, all I know is I knew I'd scream if he kept it up another minute."

"All right," said Clem with unaccustomed gentleness. "If they come to you again, just tell them that I threatened you with a gun. They won't do anything to you."

"I—I'm sorry. I thought I could stand up against them, but I can't. I didn't know what it would be like."

"That's all right. Stop worrying. You may never see them again. Now get me a breaded veal cutlet."

There were tears in her eyes when she turned away and walked hurriedly up the counter. She disappeared through the door to the kitchen instead of calling the order through the small cutout, and it was several minutes before she reappeared.

Now, he knew, it was up to Catlin. What way would the Catlin jump? He smiled grimly at the pun. He didn't think there was much real bloodhound in Catlin, but there could be a lot of bulldog. He might hang on. It could be bad if he did. That would mean a bad session down at headquarters. But on the other hand, Catlin had not shown back at the theatre, and there had been plenty of time.

He ate quickly, and went out without talking to the woman again. He gave her a wink when he paid the check and left.

**H**E WAS standing just outside, lighting a cigarette, when the gray convertible came rolling down Fourteenth, turned into Washington and picked up speed. He dropped his cigarette and took two steps after it, staring.

Two big muscular men were in the front seat, Sonny Lind was in the rear seat—and beside Sonny lolled Marthe!

She turned her head at the sound of

Clem's roar from the curb. She looked directly at him, raised her hand in a mocking salute, and deliberately turned away, whispering something to Sonny Lind. A moment later, the car disappeared into the moving wall of the heavy traffic.

Clem looked wildly around for a taxi stand, and then ran across the sidewalk to a bus driver who was lounging against the side of his bus, smoking.

Clem bellowed, "Damn it, aren't there any cabs in this town!"

The bus driver snatched the cigarette from his mouth, startled. "Next corner, mister," he said.

Clem sprinted up the sidewalk, scrambled into a cab and snapped, "Down Washington Street. See if you can spot a gray convertible."

But it was five-thirty, and the late afternoon traffic was pouring into the city from the Lincoln Tunnel, from Weehawken, from Union City. Big, high-sided trucks hemmed them in more effectively than a herd of elephants, and even the agile cab had to crawl at their pedestrian pace while Clem fumed impotently in the back seat.

They went all the way to Ferry Street, at the southern end of Washington, without another glimpse of the convertible. Clem ordered the cabbie to go back by the next street north, and he sat tensely on the edge of the seat. His head swiveled from one side to the other, watching the parked cars as well as the steadily growing stream of traffic.

They were wedged in a school of faster moving lighter cars and small trucks when Clem caught sight of the convertible drifting eastward away from the curb, but it was half a block before the sweating driver could dart between two panel trucks to the side of the street to let Clem out. Clem flung him a crumpled bill and shouted for him to wait.

The convertible was gone by the time he reached the cross street, and the crowds were so thick that he had to do

some nimble broken-field running to get through to Washington Street. He climbed high on the City Hall steps, but he could not see the car in either direction, north or south, though with its top down it would have been easy enough to spot in that host of business traffic. He plodded back to his waiting cab.

"We're going up and down every street in this damned town," he grimly told the cabbie. "I've got a feeling they're in here for the night, and we'll find them."

The cabbie looked at his wild red hair, his bleached army shirt, his disreputable jeans.

"That'll cost you, mister," he said flatly. "You got the dough?"

Clem gave him five out of the money McNulty had advanced, and the cab nosed out into the traffic, beginning what was to be for Clem five of the most frustrating hours he had ever spent. It was almost eleven o'clock that night when he climbed stiffly out to the sidewalk before the old-fashioned brownstone front of Burr's Hotel.

"Thanks for the buggy ride," he said sourly to the hackie. "We should have brought a picnic lunch."

The night clerk was drowsing at his desk in the dim lobby. The stairway to Clem's room on the second floor smelled like old books kept too long in a closed closet. Burr's was a preserved relic of the 1890's.

Clem opened his door and his hand froze on the knob, the knuckles whitening. Propped comfortably with two pillows on his bed, smoking a slim, freckled panatella, was Sonny Lind.

## Chapter VI

SONNY grinned lazily and waved the cigar. "Come in. Lasher, dear old pal," he drawled. "Pull up a chair and let's gum over the dear dead days beyond recall."

Clem closed the door very slowly. He

took the key from his pocket and locked it. His eyes were icy.

"I've been looking for you, Lind," he said evenly.

"Well if that isn't the darnedest coincidence, dear old pal," Sonny's voice was airy and faintly derisive. "I've been looking for you. But that's life for you, isn't it? Ships that pass in the night."

Clem ignored the flippant tone. He was feeling that stern exhilaration that sometimes comes to very good prize fighters who have gotten their opponents into an inescapable corner. He locked his hands behind him and looked down at the bed.

The bedside lamp threw a strong light on Sonny Lind's face and Clem could see now that the man was older than he had supposed him. It was the big grin that erased the years, and Sonny was only smiling faintly now. The laugh lines at the ends of the eyes and from the sides of the nose to the ends of the mouth now became creases. Sonny looked hard-bitten, callous, and cynical.

He also looked prosperous. The Glen plaid suit he was wearing had cost between two-fifty and three hundred, the nylon shirt around twenty-five, the tie about fifteen, and the benchmade Scotch grain brogues another fifty. Counting the wristwatch, tie clasp, cuff links and ring, he was wearing about a thousand dollars' worth of haberdashery and jewelry. He was a big man, an inch shorter than Clem's six-foot-two, but heavier.

"The only reason I'm not beating the face off you," said Clem with controlled anger in his voice, "is because it has a certain commercial value. But don't count on it."

Sonny reached out a long arm and pulled the straight chair to the side of the bed. "Sit down, friend Lasher," he said soothingly. "Let's talk about a few facts of life, and maybe after it's all over we'll be soul-mates." He gave Clem that big All-American grin, but this time Clem could see there were teeth in it.

As Clem sat down in the chair, Sonny dipped his fingers into the breast pocket of his jacket, took out a folded wad of bills and dropped it into Clem's lap.

"Eleven hundred iron men, dumb chum," he said. "Your original thousand plus ten per cent interest. Now we're even."

Clem counted the bills. There were eleven crisp C-notes. He put them in his pants pocket. "Not quite," he said. "I gave my word to Kraus of the Aztec Room that you'd open there next week, and you're going to open if I have to drag you in with your ears nailed to a wheelbarrow. That's a fact of life, and don't think it isn't."

Sonny looked mildly uninterested. He drew at his cigar and savoured the smoke before replying. "Oh, Lasher, Lasher," he sighed, "you act tough, but I'm afraid at heart you're just another beautiful dreamer. Of course I'm not going to open in the Aztec Room next week or any other week. My boss wouldn't like it if his sales manager exhibited himself in a common saloon."

"Sales manager? What do you sell, Lind—cancer?"

A flash of pure viciousness slashed across Sonny's face like a lightning stroke. "I can sell, Lasher," he spat. "I can sell anybody anything. I promoted a G-note out of you, and I sold myself into the job I got. I'm not just a male thrush, and don't you forget it! I can promote anything, anvwhere, any time!"

"Yeah," Clem nodded, "and you even promoted two hundred bucks from a kid named Helen down at the Lyric Burlesque."

**T**HE SINGER became very still. The smoke was a straight thin ribbon from his cigar. "What's that supposed to mean?" he asked woodenly.

"They found her in the river."

"So? I threw her in?"

"No, but just as good as, when you walked out on her and peddled her when she was plotzed to a fat kraut. I'll re-

member that one, Lind. An another fact of life that I'm keeping in mind is Al Vance. Vance had some kind of line on you, and they tore him apart down on River Street last night."

"Al Vance had no kind of line on me at all. I didn't have anything to do with that!" He squirmed up from the bed on a hip and an elbow and gestured agitatedly with his free hand. "I had nothing to do with that, nothing!"

"No? Maybe it was your boss, then. DeGroot."

"Who?" Sonny Lind looked genuinely puzzled.

Clem repeated, "DeGroot," and narrowly watched Sonny's face for a flicker of recognition, but there was none.

Sonny relaxed back against the pillows. "Wake up, Lasher," he said, "wake up. You're asleep in the deep. There isn't any DeGroot, I didn't knock off Al Vance, Helen Swensen was a neurotic squarehead, and I'm not going to sing in the Aztec Room or any other room except from now on in my bathroom. So take your eleven hundred bucks, count the extra hundred as sheer profit, and write it off the books."

Perhaps it was the smug complacency, or perhaps it was the underlying sneer in Sonny Lind's voice. Whatever it was, at the sound of it, fury shot up in Clem and he lunged out of his chair with a guttural snarl. He seized Sonny by his hand-stitched lapels, shoved them up under his chin, thrusting his head back into the pillows at an agonizing angle, and ground his knuckles into the straining throat.

"Nothing gets written off the books, Lind," he panted, "until you open at the Aztec Room. And after that—" he tightened his savage grip—"I'm going to take you apart like an Erector set. Now listen to me"—Sonny Lind made strangling sounds. He arched violently on the bed and struck at Clem's head, but Clem's spread elbows broke the blows in the middle.

The closet door opened behind the

chair that Clem had just vacated. A thick-bodied man stepped out noiselessly. In his hand he held a twelve-inch length of garden hose, stuffed with bird-shot and plugged at both ends. The thick-bodied man leaned over, raised the blackjack, and brought it down with dispassionate force just behind Clem's right ear. Clem collapsed across Sonny Lind's chest. Sonny swore, thrust him away, and squirmed out from under and up to his feet. He stood breathing painfully, and then reached down, tangled his fingers in Clem's harsh red hair and twisted brutally.

The thick-bodied man said stolidly, "He is unconscious, boss. He cannot feel. If you so wish, I will make it that he will scream when he recovers his senses." He slapped the shot-weighted length of garden hose against his broad palm. "It will not take much. Just a tap here and there, but I know how to do it. He will scream and beg to be killed."

Sonny thrust Clem's head back against the mattress and shook his head, smiling thinly. He shook from his hands the strands of red hair that stuck between his fingers.

"No, Piet," he said. "We've got other ideas for our dear old pal here. He's going to be the knot that ties up a little package that's been lying around open since last night. He's going to be the fall guy. That's an Americanism, Piet."

"I know what a fall guy is. The victim, no?"

"No, he's not the victim. Piet—you have no sense of finesse. First comes the victim, and then comes the fall guy." Sonny had recovered his airy jauntiness. "The fall guy trips over the victim or rather, he doesn't trip; he's pushed. That's a joke. son."

"A joke?" Piet wrinkled his forehead. "I do not think Grotius would appreciate a joke. I think Grotius would prefer this carrion out of the way."

Sonny slapped Piet's beamed shoulder and chuckled. He was in a thoroughly



good humor.

"Don't you worry your little pointed head about Dexter Grotius. Dexter and I see eye to eye. Say, there's an idea for a lyric. Dexter and I see eye to eye and we'll all have pie in the sky by and by. I'll have to write music to that."

Piet scowled, and then said impassively, "I think we go now back to Grotius. I do not think he will like this leaving this garbage alive."

"You do not think, period," grinned Sonny.

### Chapter VII

CLEM HEARD them go out of the room. He heard the heavy, guttural voice of Piet, though he could not distinguish the words, and he heard the door slam. He was not entirely unconscious, but every sense had been paralyzed by that experienced tap from the shot-filled hose. It was a long time before he could even groan. The room was nothing but a luminescent fog with no clearly defined outlines. When he was finally able to move one hand, it was as if an anvil had been shackled to it with anchor chains.

His brain would not work. He was numb. With more effort than he had ever expended before on anything, he was finally able to move both hands. It exhausted him. His face felt as if it were grinding into the mattress of the bed. Slowly, one by one, his muscles began to function. His mind was a pulsating field of darkness. It was nothing but the basic instinct of self-preservation that caused him to roll from the bed, hitting the floor with a bony jar, and crawl feebly toward the door of the room.

When Sonny and Piet slammed the door in leaving, the ancient, unoled catch had failed to snap into its slot and the door had bounced back a good three inches. Balancing precariously on hands and knees, Clem nosed open the door with the side of his jaw to allow him

passage through. There was no deliberately planned progression, but his instinct told him to get out of that room.

He felt the harsh jute threads of the carpentering in the hallway under his fingers and he turned left toward the end of the hall away from the stairway. There was no thought in this either. It was instinctive memory. At the left end of the hallway was the fire escape. Twice his arms collapsed under him, grinding his face into the rough carpet; twice, with infinite effort, he raised himself and continued his snail pace toward the fire escape.

He remembered later, chiefly from the bitter bite of iron against his lips, gums and teeth, falling against the iron grillwork of the fire escape, pushing himself up again on shaking arms and legs, crawling down, down, down, licking the taste of rust and flaking paint from his mouth. But mainly there was no memory, except that of movement—movement away from that room, and down to the foot of the fire escape.

He did not pass out entirely when he fell from the end of the fire escape into the alley at the side of Burr's Hotel. His mind had begun relentlessly turning again, and when he felt hands hook under his armpits, he reached back weakly tried to claw them away. When his fingers failed, he tried to turn his head and bite. He could not let himself be dragged so helplessly.

A VOICE murmured soothingly and pleadingly at his ears—but Sonny Lind's voice had murmured soothingly—and he tried to fight even when a cool hand was pressed to his cheek and forehead and something warm and wet dropped against his face. He was dragged up, shoved and propped, and something slammed against his right arm.

The next sound he could identify—the rhythmic burbling of a car motor. He was in a car, then, a moving car. He

was beginning to see a little, to think a little. A hand swam up toward his face and there was a small half-pint flask in it.

A voice in which the hysteria was barely submerged said, "Take a drink, Clem! Take a drink, then let me have one. Are you hurt?"

He clasped the bottle in both hands, held it to his numbed lips and let the liquid pour down his throat. At first it had no taste, no flavor, no bite, but then suddenly he felt it, a warmth spreading in his chest like feeler roots, spreading down into his legs and up into his arms, into his throat and head, giving him strength.

He swallowed, coughed, and swallowed again. He turned his head and saw Ella Dolan crouching over the wheel of the old car, her face strained.

"Here," he said, holding the flask to her lips.

She drank, sucking air on the sips. She pulled back her head, and he took the flask away, corking it.

"Feel better, Clem?" she asked shakily. "You looked like death when I dragged you out of that alley."

"Alley?"

"Yes. Next to Burr's. You came down the fire escape. But thank God you did. All the police in Hoboken are out after you. I got you away just in time."

Memory came back with a rush. "Sonny Lind!" he said tersely.

"I don't know about that, but they're after you for killing a man named Vance on River Street last night. Clem—"

"What?" he asked harshly.

"Will you tell me the truth? Wait a minute before you get mad. I'm getting you out of Hoboken because—God help me!—I think I'm in love with you. Clem, you didn't kill him, did you?"

"No! I wish to hell people would stop asking me if I did." He clenched his hands on the edge of the seat on either side of his thighs, bent his head and

took several deep breaths to relax himself. Ella didn't speak.

They were out of Hoboken now and were climbing a steep winding road. Clem looked through the window.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Jersey City. I swapped apartments with Sam, the electrician. Don't worry about Sam," she added. "He doesn't know I'm taking you there, and anyway he owes me some good turns."

THE APARTMENT was on Ditman Street, on the brow of the hill overlooking Hoboken. Clem stood in the window and looked down at the city. He could hear the faint banshee wails of the police sirens and see the lights of moving cars. Ella came out of the kitchen with a bottle of bourbon and two glasses. She smiled wanly at him.

"I think both of us could use a drink," she said.

She crossed the room and dropped onto the sofa. She wore a belted camel's-hair topcoat, and when she crossed her legs he saw a flash of long, well-curved thigh, as if she were wearing nothing under the coat.

"Sit down, Clem," she said, patting the cushion beside her. "You're getting yourself all wound up, prowling up and down the room like that."

He grimaced and sprawled on the sofa. As he did, some loose change fell out of his pocket. Ella bent to pick up a coin that had rolled against her foot, and when she straightened, her eyes were distended. In her hand she held the wedding ring that Vance had given Clem. She shrank away from Clem.

"Where—where did you get this?" she whispered.

He looked absently at the ring in her shaking fingers. "It was given to me."

"It's Helen's!"

"I know. Her name's on it." He was still brooding over Sonny Lind.

Ella stared at him with growing horror. "She—she was wearing this the night she disappeared, and the next day

she was found in the river." The words came out jerkily.

He scarcely heard her. She sprang to her feet, her features distorted.

"You were with her that night!" she shouted hysterically. "You were with her, because she was wearing this when she left the theatre that night. What did you do to her, Clem?"

He looked up, scowling. "Do to who?" he demanded.

She put her hand to her mouth, moaned and backed away from him. She



### THRICE BLESSED

**I**N NEW ORLEANS, a pretty red-headed woman, upon learning she'd married a man who already had three other wives, told police:

"I'm determined to put him out of circulation, but I'm afraid if he starts talking to me, I'll drop everything. There never was such a marvelous man."

—J. L. Benton

turned and ran for the door. It was locked, and she tugged frantically at the doorknob. He jumped up, strode across the room, and pulled her away from the door. He held her by the shoulders and shook her.

"What are you trying to do?" he growled. "Wake up everybody in the neighborhood? What's the matter with you?"

She beat at his chest with her fists. "Let me go! Let me go!"

"Go where?"

"The police, that's where! Let me go!" She bent and bit his hand.

He snatched it away, caught her up

in his arms, strode back across the room and threw her onto the sofa. "Now what the hell's the matter with you?" he snapped, standing over her.

She thrust Helen's ring into his face. "That's what's the matter with me," she cried shrilly. "That! What did you do to her that night, Clem?"

He stared at the ring, uncomprehending. "Me?" he said. "Me?"

"Now I'm beginning to see it. She didn't jump in the river. She didn't commit suicide. You killed her!"

"I—*what!*" His jaw tightened. "Have you gone crazy? I haven't killed anybody. I never even knew the girl. The ring was given to me by Al Vance the night he was shot. He seemed to think it had something to do with—Sonny Lind."

He prowled to the window and brooded down the lights below. What could that ring have had to do with Sonny Lind? Had Al Vance been killed because of the ring? And Helen? Suicide was too pat, and the river too handy. He swung around.

**D**ID YOU ever hear of a guy named DeGroot?" he demanded.

Ella shook her head.

Clem swore. "Damm it, he's in it someplace. Vance was told by one of the chorus girls that DeGroot threw some interesting parties."

Ella faltered, "If it was Helen who told him, he might have misunderstood. She used to speak with a strong Swedish accent. We kidded her about it. We called her smorgasbord. Clem"—she looked pleadingly at him—"I'm sorry I threw that wingding."

"That's okay." He began to pace the room. "Did you know about these parties the burlesque girls went to? They were paid fifty dollars."

"I knew about them," she said almost inaudibly. "If—I even went to one of them. They were awful." She began to cry. "Clem, I'm so sorry I said what I did to you."

He cut her off with an impatient wave of his hand. "I said okay, didn't I? Let's forget it. I want to know about the guy who ran those parties. Are you sure it wasn't DeGroot?"

Ella sat huddled on the sofa, her hands limp in her lap. "It was a foreign name, but it wasn't DeGroot," she said dully. "I don't remember what it was. They called him Dex. He was some kind of bigshot. A businessman. I didn't stay around long enough to find out anything. When I saw what kind of party it was, I got out."

"What kind of business was he in?"

"I don't know. Something to do with shipping. I think. Most of the men at the party were from the North Dutch Steamship Company. I didn't understand what they were saying most of the time. They spoke Dutch."

Clem stopped and snapped his fingers. "This Helen," he said, "are you sure she was Swedish, not Dutch?"

"She was Swedish. Helen Swensen."

"But maybe she could understand Dutch?"

Ella looked up and regarded him, open-mouthed. "Why yes," she said, "yes, she could. She could speak Swedish, French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, and German. We used to laugh about it. We used to say she could speak every language in the world except English."

"Now we're getting someplace!" His lips pulled back in a mirthless grin. "Helen overhears something at the party. She's nuts about Sonny Lind. She tells him what she's overheard, and the next thing we know Sonny Lind is in the chips. But in the meantime he gives her a rough time, and in revenge she hints something about this stuff to Al Vance. Not very much, but enough to scare Sonny and the guy he's working for, so they get rid of Helen. Then they get rid of Al Vance. Does that sound to you as if it adds up?"

Ella covered her ears with her hands and cried hysterically, "Stop it!"

His head jerked up and he eyed her

with astonishment. Then, in two swift strides, he crossed and sat down beside her. He put his arm around her.

"I'm sorry, honey," he said in a softened voice. "I'm all wound up, I guess."

ELLA TURNED her face into his shoulder and clung to him. "You kept hammering at me," she whimpered.

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. I'm an ingrate. You do me a good turn, and I kick you around."

"No, you're worried, that's all."

"Worried hell! I'm sore. I've been pushed around and I don't like it. So what do I do?" His mouth curled in disgust. "I take it out on a girl who's trying to give me a hand. Brother, am I a prize package!"

"No, darling, no!" She raised her face, smiling through the glisten of tears. "You're just not used to having people help you. that's all. You've always been—self-sufficient."

He laughed shortly. "That's just a nice way of saying I've been an arrogant bastard. It's just come to me that ever since I've hit Hoboken, I've been helped by all kinds of people. I wouldn't have gotten to first base with my alleged self-sufficiency. The counterman at the lunchroom wanted to lend me money; that woman in the diner covered for me with the cops; McNulty gave me a job; you got me out of a bad spot. I've been kidding myself all my life. I can do all right, all by myself. The hell I can! The hell anybody can. Even poor Al Vance gave me a hand. Lasher the Great—Lasher the great jerk!"

"You're tired, darling," she touched his cheek. "You're just tired."

"Tired? Yeah. Sick and tired. Sick and tired of me."

"Let's go to bed. I'm worn out and so are you. We can't think straight anymore. . . ."

He took a deep breath. Fatigue was like a heavy hand pushing him deeper into the cushions.

"Okay," he said. "I'll sleep out here

on the sofa."

"You don't have to. There are two beds."

He smiled tiredly. Forget! Just as if it were some books he had brought home to work on, the way he used to in the old days when he was a hungry certified public accountant.

"Yes," he said with a gentleness that was more familiar now than it had been. "we'll forget all about it until tomorrow." He kissed her lightly on the cheek and rose to his feet. "Now, where's the sack?"

"That room." She pointed. "I'm going to take a shower. Do you want to take a shower?"

"After you," he said sleepily.

She turned off the light and he fumbled into the bedroom in the darkness. He quickly stripped off his clothes and dropped into the bed. His mind was churning, but there was a heaviness. He closed his eyes.

They opened with a jerk when he heard her come into the room. The room was not as black as it had been when he had first come in, still dazzled from the light. There was a glow from the thin horned moon. He saw her throw off the topcoat she had worn. She had nothing on underneath except the beaded G-string and the wisp of brassiere that she wore for her specialty in the theatre. She was not beautiful the way Marthe was. Marthe's beauty was diamond-hard perfection; Ella's had a radiant warmth, deep-breasted, full-thighed. Clem closed his eyes again.

A moment later the covers lifted, and he heard the whisper of her body against the sheets.

### Chapter VIII

**A**N ALARM CLOCK awakened Clem the next day. Ella, again wearing her belted topcoat, was standing in the doorway of the bedroom with the tinkling clock in her hands.

"I thought you'd be mad if I didn't

wake you, darling," she said apologetically. "It's two in the afternoon." There was something tremulous in her smile.

He said, "Oh Lord!" and sat up, but then he remembered that dawn had been lifting in the eastern sky when they had gone to sleep that morning.

"Come here," he ordered.

She came hesitantly across the room. He took her wrist and pulled her across him, dipping over her, brushing her lips with his.

"I'm crazy about you, but I suppose you know that by now," he said in an accusing voice.

She raised her fingers and touched his lips lightly. She smiled. "I was afraid you weren't going to say that," she whispered.

"Well, you're going to hear a lot more of it from now on!"

He kissed her again and pushed her away. He rolled from the bed, wrapping the blanket around him, toga fashion.

"I'm going to take a shower," he said. "Then let's find out what the score is."

She darted out into the living room ahead of him, and when he followed she was hurriedly gathering up a newspaper that was scattered on the sofa.

He watched her for a moment and then said. "Let me take a look at that for a moment."

"Take your shower first, darling." She gathered up all the papers in an untidy bundle in her arms.

"I'll take a look first." He took the papers from her.

She watched him bleakly as he sat down in the lounge chair at the window and spread the paper on his knees. His eyebrows went up at the sight of a two-column picture of himself at the top of the front page.

The accompanying story really did a job on him. He was wanted for "questioning" in the murder of Alfred Vance. That was expected, but the body of the story was a shock. Somebody had been very, very smart. There was a state-

ment from Benjamin Morgan, a New York theatrical agent.

"According to Morgan," the story said, "he and Vance paid a visit to Lasher, a notorious New York gambler, on the eve of the killing. Vance and Lasher quarreled violently over a debt which Vance refused to pay, claiming that the card game in which he lost the money had been dishonest. Morgan alleged Lasher told Vance to get up the dough, or else."

"After leaving Lasher's apartment, Morgan said, he persuaded Vance to pay the debt for his own sake, and lent him the money to do so.

"When they called Lasher to settle the debt, they learned that Lasher had left to sit in on a floating poker game on River Street in Hoboken. Vance, fearing Lasher's notoriously violent temper, wanted to settle the debt that night, and went to Hoboken to find Lasher.

"I wish now I had gone with Vance," Morgan said, "for when next I heard of him, he was dead."

The story ended with the statement that Officer Frank Catlin had broken Lasher's alibi for the time of the killing and concluded with a quote from Police Chief Sullivan.

"Lasher is armed and dangerous. If you recognize him on the streets, phone your nearest precinct station. Do not attempt to apprehend him without police aid. He is violent and will shoot to kill."

CLEM WHISTLED and looked up at Ella.

Her face was white. He grinned at her.

"You don't believe this stuff, do you?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No, but I didn't want you to see it. At least not till you had something to eat."

"That's female logic for you. Don't give a man bad news on an empty stomach. Come here." He held out his hand

and when she came to him, pulled her down into his lap. "It's rough, honey," he said soberly, "and it might even get rougher. I want you to go back to the theatre. I don't want you mixed up in this. And no arguments." There was a thin gold chain around her neck, and he twisted it on his finger. "I might as well tell you now there's a dame mixed up in this. Her name is Marthe, and I went with her for a while. We never did hit it off. This story in the paper is her doing. She's getting even. She—"

He stopped and stared at the chain wound around his finger. There was a wedding ring at the end of it, a duplicate of the other, except that this one had Ella's name on it instead of Helen.

"Where did you get that?" he demanded.

"That?" she looked down, bewildered at the sharp change in his voice. "That's—that's what they gave all the girls at the party. Each of us got a wedding ring with her name on it. Just a kind of souvenir. We all thought it kind of funny, but kind of nice, too."

Clem said exultantly, "That's the first real line that I've gotten. These rings had to be specially made. I'll find out where they were made, and then I'll get a line on DeGroot, or whatever his name is!"

"How will you do that?"

"Stop in at a few jewelry stores. The name on the ring doesn't mean anything, but the floral engraving is probably a stock design. Somebody might recognize it."

"You're not going out of the apartment! Oh no, Clem! They're looking for you. Your picture's in the paper. Clem, listen, let me—"

"I will not let you!"

He lifted her from his lap and as he started to gather up the newspaper, his eye fell on a small item.

#### Hit-and-Run Victim

The body of a man identified as Vincent "Pudge" Riordan was found on Ferry Street early this morning.

He saw Ella watching him narrowly, so he grimaced and threw the paper into the chair as he got up. "Lousy picture of me," he said. "The photographer tried to make me grin like an ape."

"Don't go out, Clem. Please don't!"

"I've got to, honey. I can't spend the rest of my life here."

He turned and went into the bathroom to take his shower. She didn't try to stop him again, but when he was ready to go, she handed him a hat.

"It's Sam's," she said. "But you've got to cover that red hair of yours, darling. It stands out like the San Francisco fire."

It was half a size too large, but a strip of newspaper in the sweatband remedied that. He kissed her and walked swiftly to the door. He turned and grinned at her. She was standing before the large mirror that hung over the drop-leaf table across the room. She looked so forlorn that he went out quickly before he weakened and stayed with her.

There were many jewelers in Union City and Jersey City, but both those places were uncomfortably close to Hoboken. His best bet would be Newark. The trip took him three quarters of an hour in Ella's old Chevy. He left the car in a parking lot and walked up Market Street.

A NEWSBOY ran by him, holding aloft the latest edition of the *Newark Times* and shrieking, "New victim in gambling kill, read all about it. New victim in gambling kill—"

Thinking first of Ella, Clem felt the cold touch of dread. He suppressed the wild urge to shout after the boy, who was already halfway down the street, and walked to the next corner. He stopped beside a newsstand to light a cigarette.

The sense of relief was so flooding that he felt weak for a moment. It was not Ella—it was Ben Morgan. He was able only to glimpse the story over the

match he held to his cigarette, but the whole story was in the lead. Morgan had been shot and killed in his own apartment as he was in the very act of calling police headquarters. For protection, authorities believed.

My God, he thought, walking away, how big was this thing, and what was at stake? This made the sixth killing, including the two sailors. What could be worth all this butchery? Morgan had not been killed merely to hang another murder around Clem's neck. Morgan was timid—that was the answer. He had always been afraid of Clem, and with Clem still free he must have been frantic to recant—despite what payment he had gotten from DeGroot & Company.

But now the police of two states were looking for him. With another killing chalked up against him, Clem knew his time was running out. The chips were down and still he held no playable cards!

He went into the first small jewelry store he came to and laid the "Helen" ring on the counter. "I'm getting married next week," he said. "I got this for the wife. She thinks it's okay and she wants me to have one with my name on it for one of them double-ring ceremonies. Can you fix me up?"

The jeweler took the ring in his hand, gave it a brief glance and dropped it contemptuously on the counter again. "Cheap novelty," he said. "I only handle quality merchandise. Just look at the engraving on that. So shallow you could scratch it on with a pin. Here, let me show you something fine." He dexterously snatched a tray of wedding rings from the case and set it before Clem. "First class goods and I bet you I sell for less . . ."

"I know, but she likes this."

"So she likes that. All right. I can have one made up for you."

"Special?"

"Sure it has to be made special."

"I can't afford that. I got this in Seattle. They had them in stock and it

only cost five bucks extra to have the name put on. Sure you don't have nothing like that in stock?"

The jeweler started toward the back of his shop, sneering over his shoulder, "Go back to Woolworth's. Maybe they have some left."

Clem flushed and walked out, curbing his temper.

CLEM was given similar treatment in several jewelry shops, but stubbornly, he continued to trudge along. It was eight o'clock and quite dark when he plodded into a tiny shop at the south end of Broad Street. He put the ring on the counter and mechanically repeated his story. The old man behind the counter looked with interest at the ring and shook his head.

"No," he said, "no, I'm sorry. Where did you get this one, young man?"

Clem said wearily, "Seattle."

"Ah yes, perhaps that is the reason."

Clem looked up sharply. "The reason for what?" he asked.

"I handled these about a year and a half ago. A salesman came through and left me a few samples. When I tried to order some, I got no response from the company. They probably moved out west."

Clem's hands tightened on the edge of the counter. "Do you remember the name of the company?"

The old man thought for a few seconds. "No, I'm sorry I can't help you, young man. I threw the salesman's card away, not having any reason to keep it."

"But can you remember where they were from?" Clem asked desperately.

"Hm. Yes. I think I can. They were from Hoboken. Yes, that's right. Hoboken. But I'm afraid that won't be much help to you, young man. I wrote to them several times and received no answer. I don't want to give you any false hopes."

Clem backed toward the door. "Thanks," he said. "Thanks a lot!"

He took a cab back to the parking lot.

He wanted to stop and call Ella, but he didn't know Sam's last name. He knew she would be worrying. It irked him to have to stay under the speed limit across the Turnpike, but it would have been insane to risk being stopped for speeding. He parked in front of Sam's apartment and ran up the steps eagerly, with a sense of anticipation. He wanted her in his arms again. He waited impatiently until the front door clicked open in answer to his ring.

The apartment door was standing partially open, and he started in, calling, "Honey—"

He saw just the barest flicker of movement in the mirror over the drop-leaf table, a movement behind the door he was opening, a figure bulking larger than Ella. Without halting his stride, he gripped the doorknob and flung himself sideways into the door, smashing it into the man who stood behind it. He rounded the edge of the door in almost the same motion, this time slamming it shut. He hooked twice into the jaw of the figure that staggered against the wall.

The man fell limply against him. Clem hit him once again on the jaw and stepped back as the man sagged to the floor. A gun skittered across the wooden flooring. Clem snatched it up. The man on the floor rose shakily to his hands and knees, toppled and rolled over on his back. It was Sonny Lind.

"YOU rat!" Clem said softly, and hit him behind the ear with the flat of the gun.

He straightened and looked around. "Ella!" he called anxiously. "Ella—" He ran into the bedroom. She was spread-eagled on the bed, her wrists tied to the headboard, her feet to the footboard. A towel was stuffed into her mouth. Her topcoat had fallen open. Her eyes filled with thanksgiving at the sight of him.

Clem pulled the gag from her mouth and snapped the ties that bound her to



the bed. She flung her arms around him and clung convulsively to him.

"Did he hurt you, honey?" he asked tightly. "I'll kill the—"

"No, no, Clem. He didn't lay a finger on me, except to tie me up. But he was going to kill you. Oh, darling, I almost went out of my mind!"

"I'll take care of Sonny Lind!"

"No, darling, no. Please!"

"I don't mean that way," he soothed her, kissing her. "He's going to be a big help to us. I've got a lead. Where's the telephone directory? Look, while I'm wrapping up that little bundle of joy outside, you start going through the Hoboken directory for wedding ring companies. I'll explain when I get back."

There were no more ties left on Sam's meager tierack, but Clem stripped off Sonny's belt and strapped him to the radiator. Sonny's eyes opened glassily and he groaned as Clem pulled the belt tight.

"That's only the beginning, friend," Clem told him grimly.

Ella came out of the bedroom. The topcoat was once again wrapped concealingly around her. She heard Sonny's groan and cried, "Clem!"

"I'm not hurting him, honey—not yet. He's opening in the Aztec Room next week. I gave Kraus my word, and I've never broken my word yet. What'd you find in the book?"

"N-nothing yet. I'm worried about Sam. What did he do to Sam, Clem?"

Sonny said, "Nothing. Just tied him up. Honest, I didn't hurt him! The minute I found you'd swanned apartments with him, I just tied him up."

Clem said shortly, "You'd better be right, pal. Now, if you feel like talking, you'll save yourself a lot of grief."

Sonny clamped his teeth tight. "I'm not talking," he said.

"You'll talk."

Ella looked up from the phone directory. "I've got two, Clem," she said.

"Fine," he said with his eyes on Sonny Lind. "What are they?"

"The Forget-me-not Company on Hickory Street and the Darling Wedding Ring Company on Elm Street."

Clem saw Sonny's jaw sag when Ella read off the name of the Darling Wedding Ring Company. He remembered what Al Vance had been saying just before the death car had swooped down on him. "The darling wedding ring—"

"That's the one," he said with satisfaction. "The Darling Wedding Ring Company."

Sonny strained against the belt that strapped him to the radiator. "Wait a minute, Lasher," he said desperately. He was sweating. "You can do yourself a lot of good—"

"With two murder counts against me?" Clem mocked him.

"They can be quashed. Just let me talk to a certain guy on the phone. He can show you more money than you've ever seen before in your life!"

"The way he showed Ben Morgan, for instance? No thanks, dumb chum. But is there anything you want to tell me, pal?"

"Yes!" Sonny spat viciously. "You'll be dead before morning."

He reached out and brought up his fist to the point of Sonny's chin. Ella gasped. Clem looked at her.

"Don't feel sorry for a rat like that, honey," he said somberly. "I should have taken him apart. Is there something we can tie him up with?"

"There's a clothesline in the kitchen."

"Let's go."

**T**EN MINUTES later, Clem slipped out through the back entrance of the apartment with the bound and gagged Sonny Lind over his shoulder, while Ella drove the car around to the side street. Clem dumped Sonny on the floor of the back seat and covered him with a blanket he had brought down from Sam's apartment.

It was a tense and silent ride back to Hoboken. Clem stopped the car a block north of the Darling Wedding Ring

Company on Elm Street. "Go back to the Lyric," he whispered to Ella. "Park behind the theatre. Give me an hour. If I don't see you or call you by then, call a cop."

"But what do you expect to find, darling?"

"God only knows," he muttered. He leaned through the open window and kissed her. "Remember. Give me an hour."

He turned and walked down the street while the car turned east toward Hudson Street.

The Darling Wedding Ring Company was in a red brick factory building on the corner. On the main floor was the Marple Import & Export Company. The second floor was occupied by the Darling Wedding Ring Company, Wholesalers. Clem scouted the building very carefully. There was a loading platform on Steuben Street, the main entrance on Elm Street, and another side entrance down the alley. There was a light in the basement where the night watchman was probably having a snack, but the barred windows were so dirty that Clem couldn't see through them.

But the thing that impressed Clem was that none of the glass-paneled doors showed any of the distinctive cross-marks of a burglar alarm, a strange thing for a building that housed a wedding ring company with an inventory of gold. All the first floor and basement windows were barred, however. At the far end of the alley a fire escape zig-zagged up the side of the building to the roof.

Clem eyed the fire escape. By climbing to the top of the first floor window, he would be able with luck and a jump to reach the supports of the first landing of the fire escape. To pull down that rusty ladder for an easy ascent was out of the question. It would scream in its rusty grooves like a thousand strangling cats.

The climb to the top of the window bars was easy, but once there, he had to

turn cautiously and crouch, holding on with the fingertips of one hand. He took a breath and leaped, reaching desperately for the narrow angle of iron. He wrapped one hand around it, swung, feeling the iron bite into his palm, and then clawed himself up for a grip with the other hand. He hung resting, and then raised himself as if he were chinning the bar, hooked an elbow over the edge of the grilled platform and pulled himself silently up to the level.

He sat for a moment with his head against his drawn-up knees. He had to wait until the lights stopped flickering before his eyes. He touched his back pocket to reassure himself that Sonny's gun was still there, and then began the stealthy climb to the roof. He stopped at each landing to try the windows, but they were all locked.

He prayed as he went over the lip of the roof. If the entrance to the roof was by a door, he would have to smash a lock, and noise had been the one thing he had dreaded. He looked around swiftly. There were several chimneys, but no curving hooded form of a door leading down into the factory. He breathed more easily. That meant that there was merely a scuttle. He found it beside a chimney, an oblong wooden frame covered with asbestos shingle to keep out the rain. He lifted it cautiously, laid it to one side, and crouched over the opening, listening.

There was no sound from below, no footsteps of a night watchman making the rounds. He lit a match and held it down into the blackness. Twelve feet below was the floor. A ladder leaned against the wall, but he couldn't reach it. He would have to drop, but if he hung by his hands from the scuttle, it wouldn't be too far.

CLEM rubbed his hands down his thighs and lowered himself over the edge of the scuttle until his legs dangled free. He rubbed his hands again on his shirt, gripped the edge and hung free.

It was an eerie sensation, dropping into that pit of darkness with nothing below to see but the empty blackness. He let go. The drop was really short, but it seemed that he fell forever, and then his feet hit hard. A board in the flooring gave way with a soggy crunch, and he fell sideways, clawing desperately, knowing that the four-story stairwell was to his right.

He struck the railing around the stairwell with the small of his back. It gave, and for a moment he thought it would splinter and hurtle him down into that lethal darkness. But it held. Then, far below, something crashed on the lowest floor. Even before he reached for his back pocket, he knew what it was. Sonny's gun had twisted from him. He flattened on the floor. The boards smelled wet, like the underside of a flat rock, old and rotting. He heard a door slam open far below, and voices. A light sent shadows dancing up the stairwell.

He heard a grumbling voice, "Now, what the hell?"

And another voice, "Take the doors; I'll take the windows."

Running footsteps went pounding, receded, gradually returned, and the voices coupled again.

"Okay with me. How's it with you?"

"Nothing busted. Nobody came in."

"This place gives me the willies. Every night something comes apart. One of these times the whole damn joint's coming down. Want me to tell you something? It's been condemned four times, and each time the boss—"

The voices diminished again as their owners stamped resentfully down the stairs to the basement, the door slamming shut this time. Clem breathed again.

He raised himself cautiously. The boards did not creak. They were beyond the creaking stage. They were sodden with wet rot. He was on the fourth floor of the factory building. The thin horned moon threw a discouraged light through

the grimy window at the far end of the hallway. Now he could see the stairway downward, and the doors on either side of the narrow passage. He swore softly, remembering the gun, but he walked toward the first door. It opened easily and showed a large empty room, lighted by dirty windows. The second door showed another large empty room. He crept down to the third floor. It was a duplicate of the fourth, both in layout and emptiness.

He scowled in bewilderment. What the hell was this? Hoboken was a shipping city, with floor space at a premium even in so dilapidated building as this. This floor space could have been rented not by the foot, but by the inch. Yet here were two entire floors as empty as a chorus girl's mind.

He listened over the railing of the stairwell. The only sound was a muted drip-drip-drip of defective plumbing. He descended to the second floor, the floor that housed the Darling Wedding Ring Company, testing each tread before he let down his full weight. But these steps were no longer capable of creaking.

**T**HE FIRST door, another duplicate of the doors of the third and fourth floors, let him into a large room filled with machines. Milling machines, engraving machines, polishers, lathes, a small smelting furnace—all the equipment that might be expected in a jewelry factory.

At the end of the room was a plywood partition between the shop and the office. Clem felt his way down the room toward the office. The machines or their benches did not feel clean and dry as machines and benches should feel in an active shop. They were furry with thick dust, as if they had been unused for months. The office, by contrast, was clean and neat. The windows shone from the street light on the corner, and he did not have to light a match to see his way about. There was a large desk, a bank of new filing cabinets, and a

large safe.

Obviously, the shop outside had not been used for a long while. Nothing had been manufactured there, except possibly the souvenir rings for the party. But the office had probably been used that very day.

He went to the files and in the A-B drawer he found the books. His eyes lighted. Here was something he could understand. The books showed the pulse of the business.

He carried the books to the desk, pulled out the chair and sat down. There was a curious feeling of going back ten years, going back to the starvation days of his C.P.A. service. He shook his head and lit a cigarette. He opened the books.

De Groot, or whatever his name was, used a simple double-entry bookkeeping system. The Darling Wedding Ring Company was a wholesaler, and the Accounts Receivable ranged from coast to coast, name after name, wholesaling on a big scale. It was not until Clem leafed through to Accounts Payable that his eyes really opened. During the past year, the Darling Wedding Ring Company had purchased over seven million dollars worth of gold from licensed refineries, at the legal rate of thirty-five dollars an ounce.

Clem stared at the figures and whispered to himself, "*Seven million!*" That meant that the Darling Wedding Ring Company had bought over six tons of gold during the past year!

**L**OOKING for a pencil and paper, Clem pulled open the middle drawer of the desk. There he found a small package of business cards that described one Dexter Grotius as president of the company. That fitted. Ella had said that the man who had given the parties had been called Dex. Dexter Grotius. D. Grotius. There was DeGroot, the elusive. A girl with a heavily laden smorgasbord accent might easily make D. Grotius into DeGroot.

The books were very simple, and

within twenty minutes Clem figured that after deductions for overhead, payroll, manufacture and distribution, the Darling Wedding Ring Company had made a net profit of thirty-five thousand dollars. That wasn't bad going, but it certainly was no important money, not important enough to—

*Manufacture!*

Clem sat bolt upright and turned his head to stare at the doorway to the shop. The last entry in the ledger bore the date of that very day, yet it was obvious that the shop had been unused so long that dust had settled thickly over the machines. There hadn't been any manufacture. If that one item was false, the whole bookkeeping system was fake.

He jumped up and strode to the filing cabinet, and the first thing he found, filed under "L," was a loaded Luger; but he wanted to see the orders received for non-existent wedding rings.

It was not until he ran across an order from K. Feinsod, Jeweler, South Broad Street, Newark—the shop that had told him it had written several times and had received no answer—that Clem realized this impressive stack of orders and accounts was stuffed with dummies.

The Darling Wedding Ring Company had purchased over seven million dollars' worth of gold, but it had no customers and manufactured nothing. . . .

The door opened behind him, and he whirled. The man was two paces into the room before he saw Clem. His jaw dropped and he stood for a paralyzed instant as Clem dived at him. He cried out and took a step backward, clawing for the gun under his left armpit. He tripped over the doorsill, his arms flailing the air. Clem hit him on the point of the chin with a hard right, then twice again as he crumpled.

Clem dragged him into the office, ripped off his tie and belt, and bound his wrists and ankles behind him. He snatched the gun from the watchman's

shoulder holster and crouched beside the door, waiting for the second watchman, who would surely come after having heard the sounds of the scuffle. He held his breath, but all he could hear was the water drip. After an eternity, he heard heavy footsteps on the floor below, followed by the slam of a door. The quiet, except for the dripping water, was absolute again. The second watchman had gone back to the basement.

Clem ran lightly down the stairs and listened at the door to the basement. There was a muffled metallic crash as if the watchman had thrown something into a garbage can. Clem stamped heavily on the floor and then flattened against the wall. The watchman came running up the stairs and when he burst through the doorway, Clem slapped him across the back of the head with the flat of his gun. He went down as if his legs had been cut off at the knees. Clem trussed him as he had done the first watchman and took his gun, shoving it into his own back pocket. Though he was sure there had been only two watchmen, he went cautiously down the steps into the basement.

**T**HE LIGHTED ROOM was about thirty feet square, and piled in front of the doors of the freight elevator were about twenty bulky wooden crates. They were all addressed to a Z. Van Der Sluys, Rotterdam, Netherlands, and lettered on the sides was the notice: Machinery—Proof Presses—Handle with Care.

Clem looked quickly around the room and found a pinch bar hanging on a nail beside the elevator. He stripped off the side of one of the crates, splintering the wood. It contained a dozen proof presses, bench models. Clem knew enough about printing and presses to know that they were authentic.

It was a simple piece of machinery, about twenty inches wide and forty inches long. There was a bed on which

the type-filled chase was laid, and a heavy cylinder that rolled on a track to make the impression from the type to a sheet of proof paper. At one end was the inking slab, a thick flat sheet of steel about fifteen by twenty inches.

It was obvious to him now that the Darling Wedding Ring Company had rented the two upper floors of the building and kept them empty to conceal the fact that no rings were being manufactured on the second floor. That fact had led him to the conclusion that the Marple Import & Export Company on the first floor had to be a dummy of the Darling Company. It was possible, of course, that the Marple did make authentic exports, but—

His eyes narrowed. His hand shot out and he felt the thickness of the inking slab at the end of the proof press. It was three inches thick, and solid. It shouldn't have been solid; it should merely have been a steel shell. In inking type to make a proof, a printer used a light rubber roller, and the inking slab didn't have to sustain any real weight. But this was solid—and three inches thick.

Clem grinned, and slid the edged tip of the pinch bar diagonally across the plate. The dull steel finish curled up from it like a potato peel, and as the pinch bar moved across the slab it left behind the broad shining gleam of yellow gold. The inking slab was pure gold!

He felt rather than heard the humming sound—or rather, he felt the cessation of humming, as if a powerful motor had suddenly been shut off. He ran to the window, scraped an inch of dirt from the glass with his fingernail, and peered out to the sidewalk. A long black limousine had stopped at the curb, and men were spilling out of as speedily as ants from a trampled ant hill, and as noiselessly.

He ran up the stairs, by-passing the unconscious watchmen, to the fourth floor. He was sure that the men at the door below were not police—police did

not ride around in limousines. He was just as sure that all exits from the first floor were covered. His only hope was the roof, and he didn't know how much of a hope that would be.

He took the ladder from against the wall, staggered a little under its soggy weight, and thrust it up into the oblong of the scuttle to the roof. He scrambled up to the roof, and as he turned to haul the ladder up after him, something exploded against the back of his head and he felt himself tumbling head first into the midnight cave below the scuttle.

### Chapter IX

CLEM CAME OUT of unconsciousness coughing and fighting the ammonia fumes from a rag held against his nose.

A voice said peevishly, "That's enough, that's enough. Don't choke him to death."

The shadowy half-world swam into focus. He was back in the office of the Darling Wedding Ring Company, seated again at the desk. Standing across the room, facing him, was a plump, slightly bald, middle-aged man in horn-rimmed glasses.

"You have caused me a good deal of trouble, Mr. Lasher," he said accusingly. "You have made yourself a general nuisance for the past twenty-four hours."

Clem was still thick-witted from the effect of the blow on the back of his head and he mumbled something unintelligible.

The man remarked, his voice still peevish, "The watchmen have orders to call me every hour and report. When they did not do so, well—" he waved his hand—"you can see for yourself."

Clem shook his head. His eyes cleared. Standing against the wall behind the middle-aged man was Marthe, her eyes wide with a dawning fear, her hand to her mouth. To Clem's right was the thin gunman Pudge had called

Crackers. Crackers was still wearing his raincoat. To Clem's left was the thick-bodied Piet, a stranger to Clem. Both Piet and Crackers held guns.

Clem looked at the balding man and said, "You're Grotius—Dexter Grotius?"

"Yes, but that is of no importance at the moment. What is of importance, Mr. Lasher, is that you have been going through the company's books. You discovered something?"

Clem saw the journal and ledger still lying open on the desk before him. He flipped them with his hand and laughed.

"You call these books?" he asked recklessly. "A second-year student in a commercial high school would see through these books in half an hour. They're pitiful."

"So?" Grotius frowned. "And what is so pitiful about them? I keep the books myself, and so far the auditors have not been able to find anything wrong with them."

"If they didn't find anything wrong with them, they must have been awfully anxious to get out for a beer. I spent twenty minutes on them, and I discovered that you were buying gold and black-marketing it abroad. I haven't worked at accounting for ten years, so you can see what a real auditor could do to you."

Grotius licked his lips. "That's nonsense," he said defensively. "You found the gold in the basement. You saw the proof presses—"

Clem grinned as he leaned over the edge of the desk. "But why did I go down to the basement to look at the proof presses, Grotius?" He slapped the books with the back of his hand. "The whole story's right here!"

He was bluffing, but he could see he had Grotius scared—Grotius was a fair bookkeeper, but unacquainted with accounting. But Clem also knew that death lurked at both elbows in the persons of Crackers and Piet, but the gamble of it sharpened his wits. He pointed

a long finger at Grotius and said scornfully:

"For instance, take your cost-system —" He started out on a long line of technicalities, hardly pausing for breath.

It was all gibberish, but Grotius stared at the books as if they had suddenly sprouted horns, hoofs and a pointed tail.

GROTIUS was sweating, and the sudden death at Clem's elbows was receding. Grotius was sold. Clem shot out his finger again to clinch it before anybody could speak and spoil it. He had Grotius panicked and hypnotized, and Clem wanted to live long enough to get out of the factory.

"Here's the way the figures shape up, according to your books," he lied. "You buy seven millions of gold at thirty-five dollars an ounce. You resell them to the European black market at from seventy to a hundred dollars an ounce, a profit between a hundred and two hundred per cent. Right?"

Grotius said mechanically, "But there are expenses—"

"All right, all right," Clem interrupted. "But that much profit is worth protecting, isn't it?"

"Yes—yes."

"Okay," Clem spread his hands. "Why not take me in and let me protect it for you?"

Grotius was nodding assent when the office door slammed open. Clem's eyes widened. McNulty, the manager of the Lyric Burlesque, strode in—not the McNulty Clem had known, but a sharp-eyed, dangerous McNulty.

Grotius bleated, "Mr. McNulty, the books. He says. . ."

"Shut up, you kraut-headed jerk!" McNulty's cold eyes darted at Clem. "What kind of bill of goods you selling him?"

"Strictly borax," said Clem coolly.

"I might have known. I should have had you cooled the first time I laid eyes on you, Lasher. I could see you were

trouble!" He turned on Marthe. "I thought you were going to deliver him registered mail, insured."

Marthe looked pleadingly at Clem. She tried to speak, but couldn't. Clem tried to divert McNulty's attention.

"You sent Sonny Lind after Ella and me," he said.

McNulty said contemptuously, "What the hell did you think I was going to do, let you go to the cops and send me Valentines? When she ran out on the show, I knew she was going to you."

"And you knocked off Helen Swensen, Al Vance, and Ben Morgan."

"Cut it out, Lasher, cut it out, or there won't be a dry eye in the house. But in case you're interested, the Ben Morgan end of it was your pal Sonny Lind's idea." He swung around on Grotius. "I work like hell to make an organization and keep it together. I'll admit Sonny Lind was my mistake. I thought he had something on the ball. But this smooth-talking jerk! I told you to get rid of him, didn't I? Okay, let him have it, Piet!"

Grotius croaked piteously and crossed his arms before his face. Piet stolidly shot him through the head. The bullet slammed Grotius back against the wall and he fell to the floor.

"Now the dame," said McNulty metallically.

Marthe cried out. Clem flung himself at Piet. Crackers shot Marthe, then leaned across the desk chair and hit Clem across the side of the head. Clem dropped, clawing down the sides of Piet's legs, but he managed to keep his consciousness.

He sat on the floor and grinned fiercely at McNulty.

"You'll have to think of something special for me, Mac," he giggled almost drunkenly. "You'll have to think of something very special. Half the people in Hudson County know I was out after the Darling Wedding Ring Company. Protect your profitable investment, McNulty."

McNULTY regarded him stonily. "Brother," he grated, "I'd give half that investment to have Piet break every bone in your body, one by one, slowly."

"Go ahead, Mac, go ahead."

McNulty flapped his hand sharply at Piet. "Get him on his feet," he ordered.

Clem almost screamed as Piet tangled his thick fingers in his hair and pulled him upright.

"Shove him against the filing cabinets," said McNulty. "And get out of the way. When the police walk in, he's going to be found right there, robbing the joint, shot down by the watchman."

Clem steadied himself against the cabinets. "Don't you want my fingerprints on one of the drawers, pal?" he taunted McNulty. "It might come in handy. The police sometimes get nosy about things like that. They say fingerprints don't take after death. Try to make me put my prints on one of the drawers!"

"I can make you do it, all right." McNulty regarded him with an icy smile. "Piet here knows some very useful tricks. Two minutes with Piet and a mother would eat her own baby, fried. But here's one of your own. Lasher, the one you tried on Pudge Riordan, the fingers in the throat at the sides of the jaw. Give him that one Piet. The top of his head will come off!"

Clem cried frantically. "No, McNulty, no! I'll give you my prints. Look, I'm opening a drawer. . . ."

He jerked open the "L" drawer. He snatched out the Luger from behind the file of fake orders and dropped to the floor, blasting the first bullet up into Piet's broad, unmissable chest. He squirmed over on one hip and snapped the next shot into Crackers, who flew back against the wall as if jerked by a rope. Clem dived flat for the floor as McNulty's shot slammed over him. He came to rest on his elbows, peering into McNulty's lowering gun, his own gun pointing up into McNulty's face.

"A showdown," said Clem evenly. "Go ahead—pull your trigger. I'm watching your finger. When you pull, I pull. Let's see who gets out of it alive."

McNulty crouched not six feet away, his gun pointing down at Clem, who lay prone on the floor, his gun as steady as if set in concrete. They faced each other, immobile. It was McNulty who broke first.

"I'll make a deal with you, Lasher," he said. "There's plenty in this for both of us."

At that moment there rose the wail of a police siren. McNulty's face twitched. Clem shot him through the right shoulder, lunged forward with a shove of his legs, and scooped up McNulty's gun. He glanced at the clock.

"Right on the dot!" he grinned. "I gave Ella an hour to call the cops. . . ."

The Aztec Room was filled to capacity. Clem and Ella had a ringside table. The third chair at the table was occupied by a man with a cold, still face. His name was McNamara and he was from the FBI.

"Listen, Lasher," he said impatiently, "we appreciate what you've done in breaking up this gold smuggling ring, but we want this missing witness and killer you've been hinting at. Bringing me here tonight—"

Clem interrupted him with a wave of his hand as Kraus, who was not only manager of the Aztec Room but his own M.C. as well, ran out to the middle of the floor carrying a microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, fellow Aztecs and other savages from the wilds of Jersey," said Kraus. "Tonight we are introducing a new singing sensation, Sonny Lind."

Clem leaned over the edge of the table. "I'll give you your witness and killer after this number," he said to McNamara. "I gave my word to Kraus that Sonny Lind would open here tonight, and I've never broken my word yet."

He grinned over at Ella, and reached for her hand. ● ● ●





# “LOCK ME IN A PSYCHO WARD

*...or I'll kill myself!*

*“Why do I suffer this uncontrollable urge to slash my own wrists?”*

You won't want to miss this gripping account in REAL Magazine of a man desperately fighting off an unexplained urge to commit suicide! Told dramatically, in the man's own words, this story is typical of the high-tension suspense to be found in every issue of REAL Magazine.

Buy your copy of **REAL** Magazine today  
On sale at all newsstands



# IN AT THE KILL

A Novel by WILBUR S. PEACOCK

*They said Dan Freeman was dead and buried, but Dan came back  
with a gun in his hand to kill the woman who had framed him*

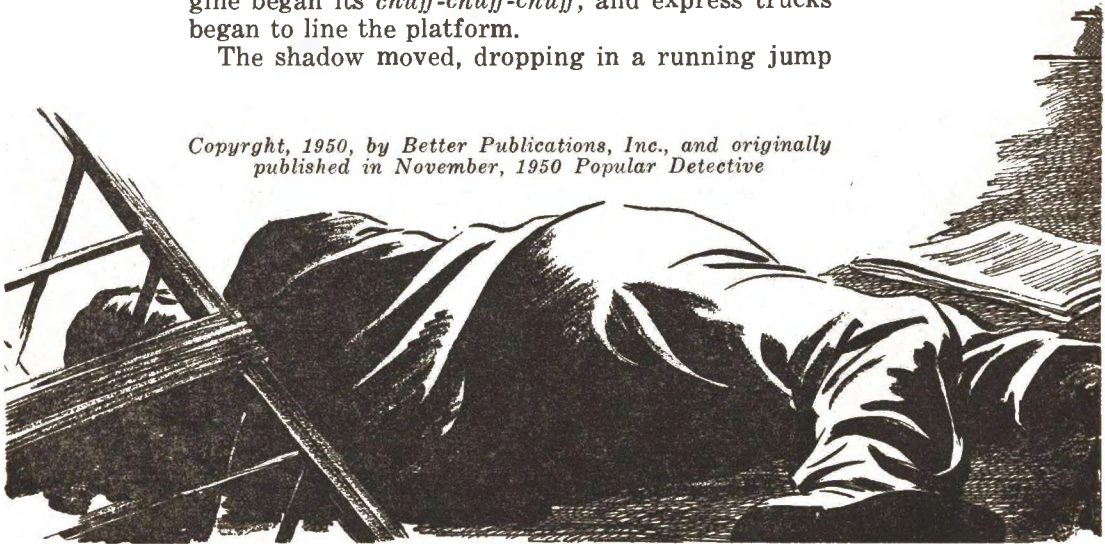
## Chapter I

**T**HE Limited came through at nine, lights shining yellow against its dark sides. Its whistle bellowed at the city's edge, and the sparks spurted toward the roadbed as brakes began to set. Block signals grew green eyes, and the Limited dropped speed to thirty, coming into the yards.

A shadow stirred between two cars, dirty hands gripping the hangers, the white blur of a face swinging back and forth, studying the ground, searching for yard detectives. Ahead, a switch engine began its *chuff-chuff-chuff*, and express trucks began to line the platform.

The shadow moved, dropping in a running jump

*Copyright, 1950, by Better Publications, Inc., and originally published in November, 1950 Popular Detective*





and going forward in a twisting half-fall, then caught its balance and dodged to safety behind a cattle car. A man yelled a challenge, and the blade of his lantern's light slashed brightly through the wavering shadows.

But the tramp was moving too fast, going forward, certain of his ground now. The yard bull was a hundred yards behind when the racing shadow scaled the fence and began a run down the alleyway. Within seconds there was no pursuit, no sounds other than those of a great city tossing fretfully in its sleep.

The shadow was panting now, ragged sobbing breaths. It stopped at the alley mouth, fighting for control. A few cars moved on the street. A block down, a patrolman tried doors in casual vigilance. The shadow watched the cop for a moment then, satisfied, stepped into the street and went along the walk.

Now the shadow was a man. He walked with the quick, easy stride of a person with a destination in mind. A mustache warped the curve of his mouth, and his cheeks were dark with two days' whiskers. There was no expression on his face. Only his eyes were alive, and they were like those of a hunted animal, darting, wary, ever moving.

His clothes had once been good, but now they were stained, marked with oil from a tank car, blurred with engine soot. They were a bum's clothes. The hat belonged to a tramp, too, battered out of shape, serving only to keep out the slight chill of the night. The man staggered a bit, as though he were lunk.

But he wasn't drunk; he was hungry and tired. Eighteen hours he'd ridden the cars, and he could still feel the vibrations slamming at his tired and aching muscles.

I need something to eat, he said to himself, and that self-speaking had come in the last nine months, when he had been alone, when he'd been afraid to talk to anybody else.

A DINER sign blinked red and blue letters into the night. He crossed the street with cautious steps, palming open the door, after a quick survey through the windows. Steamy odors piled at him, and he licked his lips, sitting at the counter, far away from the door, close to the second exit.

"Coffee," he said. "Coffee and two hamburgers."

The counterman stared a moment, figuring angles, and the man showed silver coins in his hand.

"Sure, bub," the counterman said and flipped meat into the griddle.

"It ain't my idea," he said, turning from the urn and setting coffee on the counter. "Boss's been getting tough. Too many bindle stiffs been eating, then running. And—" his tone was judicial but uninterested—"you gotta admit you ain't a Fancy Dan."

"Yeah, guess you're right," the man said, spooning sugar. "I could stand a bit of cleaning up."

His eyes stared at the counterman's, and after a moment the other turned back to the grill, shivering slightly. The man's eyes weren't quite normal. They were piercing and direct, dark hatred swirling in their depths.

A newspaper rattled on the counter as the man drew it toward him. His gaze went over the front page, then his fingers turned the pages slowly, searching for news—particular news. When at last the fingers stopped their movement, they were fists on the edge of the paper, rigid.

"Vera!" the man whispered bleakly to himself and studied the picture of the woman.

She was just as he remembered, just as beautiful and brittlely hard as she had been the day she'd married Dan Freeman. And now—he read the text slowly—she was going to marry Clarence Kolb, publisher and editor of the paper which carried the story.

The man felt then the cold weight of the gun held between shirt and belly, and he wondered what it would be like

to kill the woman. Not pleasant, he thought, but justified.

"Thanks," he said to the counterman when the sandwiches were set before him. "Better fill the cup again."

He ate hungrily, steadily, not as he once had, but in the way he had now, as though the food were strength to be put away and hoarded for a coming crisis. There was no pleasure in the task; it was a job to be done as quickly and thoroughly as possible.

Through, he rolled and lit a cigarette, staring blindly into space for a time. The counterman, hunched over a pulp magazine, glanced up from time to time, then shrugged and returned to his reading.

The bum fumbled in his shirt pocket, retrieving and spreading a strip of newsprint torn from the front sheet of a newspaper. Two pictures were there, one of a man clean-shaven and young, smiling a bit at the camera. "KILLER," the caption read beneath his picture. The other was that of an older man, gray touching his hair. "VICTIM," his caption read. The story began:

Clarence Kolb and Vera Winters today identified the body of a man slain by a hit and run driver as that of Miss Winters' former husband, Dan Freeman. Freeman, wanted for the murder of his partner, J. C. Hastings, a year ago, has evidently been badly mangled. The remains were identified by Miss Winters and Mr. Kolb. Final proof was found when fingerprints, taken at the time of Freeman's arrest, tallied with those of the body. City officials—

The man balled the clipping in one callused hand, then dropped it on the counter. The hatred was back in his eyes again, and he rocked a bit in his muted anger.

"More coffee?" the counterman called, and the thrall was broken.

"No," the man said, and laid coins on the greasy counter, then slid them to the counterman with a deft flick of his fingers.

He stood, stopping to crush out his cigarette, then went toward the door.

The counterman shook his head a bit in sympathy.

"Looking for work, bub?" he asked.

"Maybe!" The man paused with his hand on the door. "What's going on?"

"Subway being dug first of the year, out along the Strip. Hiring men now down at company offices. Good pay, I hear, if you don't mind digging a hole."

"Thanks. Maybe I'll get down that way."

**T**HE counterman shivered. "Not me," he said. "I'm sticking above ground. Too much like being buried, that's what."

The other man laughed for the first time, his eyes bright and hot and without humor.

"Being buried won't bother me any, at least not now," he said thinly.

"Yeah!" The counterman spread his lips, waiting for the punch line, ready for the laugh. "Why don't it bother you?"

Even the laughter was gone now. Burning eyes ranged to the counterman, and the voice was deceptively mild.

"Me, I'm dead," the voice said.

Then the man who had been a shadow in the train yards, and who before that had been a murder fugitive, and who before that had been Dan Freeman, revolved the door knob with steady fingers and stepped into the night. His stomach was full and his nerves were steady. A gun was at his waist and Vera waited somewhere for unsuspected death to seek her out.

Dan Freeman went down the street, dark laughter touching him at the look his words had painted on the counterman's face. Then the laughter was gone, and he was a killer returned to the scene—not to look, but to kill again.

Full cycle Dan Freeman's trail had come, and now he was back where he had started, and murder walked softly at his side.

The suit which he bought was third-hand, and the shirt and underwear and socks had long since lost their new-

ness. But they were clean, the suit had been pressed, and Dan Freeman covered his nakedness with them, feeling better than he had in days. Only his shoes remained of the old outfit, and they made hard noises on the floor as he walked toward the exit of the public shower.

He pushed through the swinging door, conscious that the attendant was gazing critically at his transformation.

"Fit pretty good, huh?" the man said, sucking at a frayed toothpick. Muscles bulged the terry cloth of his sweat shirt.

"Fine," Dan Freeman said, "I'll take them."

The attendant nodded. "Thought you would. Most guys do. They'll cost you ten bucks and your old clothes." Thumb rubbed on long finger. "And a buck for the shower and use of the razor."

"Thanks," Freeman said, and laid two bills on the counter.

"See you around, fellow," the attendant called.

Then Dan Freeman was outside, and a swelling exultation lay in him. He was dead; the papers said so, the police said so. His body was buried deep, and now the police would mark his case closed for good.

He turned and paced the walk, edging through the crowd instinctively, as he had done for so long, as though some hard hand might reach out and grasp his shoulder at any moment. Neons glowed red and blue and green, and show windows were bright with merchandise. A policeman, directing traffic, stared at him a moment incuriously, then swung back to his work.

He could feel the small roll of bills in his pocket—sixty dollars, the last of the harvest money. It would last; it was enough. After tonight, he would go away and start again in some far town.

He shivered, thinking that. He'd seen too many towns, too many places, in the last nine months. He could never stop for long, could never stay. Always the law was behind him, and always he must flee. But now, with a man buried under

the name of Dan Freeman, he knew the end of fear had come.

He saw the store then, saw the name in great block letters along the front, and a sickness came to his mind. WINTERS,' the sign read now. A year before it had been "FREEMAN AND HASTINGS." Once he had owned a partnership in it; now it was Vera's.

He swore harshly, hoarding his hatred, feeding it, watching it grow. She had betrayed him. She had been a traitor, and now the store and all that had been his was hers.

"I'll send money, Dan," she'd promised so many months before. "Just let me know where you are, and I'll send the money."

**B**UT there hadn't been any money; there'd been the police, waiting, guns drawn, to take him into captivity. Only freak luck had saved him then. After that, he trusted to his wits. She'd betrayed him, as he sensed she might, and now everything was hers.

He tightened his abdominal muscles against the cold bulk of the gun, liking the feel, living again the coming moment when she would read the message in his eyes. There would be no words; there would be but the infinitesimal instant of eternity in which she would understand his purpose. Then he would do what he had come a thousand miles to accomplish.

He liked the thought, turning it over and over in his mind. It was ugly and vicious, yet he accepted it, as he had learned to accept many things in the passing months.

Standing before a jewelry store window he rolled a cigarette, licking it into a smooth roll, then twisting the ends. He scratched a match on the folder, feeding the flame to the cigarette, eyes still intent on the store across the street.

"Hold it, Mac," a voice said at his side, and he flung his head about in sudden startled movement.

"What?" he asked.

"Hold the light." A man was bending forward, fresh cigarette dangling from

his mouth, his eyes as black as the night sky overhead. "Thanks," he finished, and took the light.

"Sure," Dan Freeman said, and fought the urge to run.

He saw the knowledge come then, saw it flicker into life. Icy fingers touched his heart, and the beating of the pulse at his temple was a drum stroke, harsh and urgent.

"Thanks, Mac," the man said and turned away.

Dan Freeman dropped the smoking match, uncaring, wondering what the man would do now. He'd seen the dark laughter come to the man's eyes; he'd seen the slow recognition; and now the city was a trap, for another knew he was not dead, that he had returned.

He threw away the cigarette, taking two slow steps toward the other man, then hesitating, thoughts milling wildly. Maybe he was wrong, maybe Lampry hadn't recognized him. Maybe the reporter was half-drunk as he always had been.

Lampry turned then, revolving slowly and staring back. His thin face was chalk-white in the neon glow, his eyes black pits. He turned and stared deliberately, then finished the circle and went on. A moment later, he was around the corner and gone.

Dan Freeman shivered, remembering things. Lampry had been the vicious one, those many months before. He'd crucified Freeman in his "I Spy" column. He'd tried and found him guilty even before a date for trial had been set. He'd done his best to burn Dan Freeman.

And now, Dan Freeman knew, Lampry had seen and recognized him. He'd turned and walked away, and even now he must be racing for a phone, parading the words of a scoop across his mind. He'd played no fool, inviting death, by crying out his discovery when it had been made.

Dan Freeman shivered, the coldness of something other than the weather reaching into his body. His simple disguise of a mustache and no glasses had

meant nothing. Within minutes he would be trapped, with police watching all exits. He knew now that he should never have returned, but the knowledge had come too late.

From far away came the mournful whistle of a train. It marked an exit from the city, it was a passage to other places, it was safety.

He stood irresolutely, estimating and evaluating the situation, fear uncoiling lazily in him like a lethargic snake. Carl Lampry had recognized him, yet in reality that meant nothing. Let Lampry talk, nothing would be proved. Too much red tape would have to be slashed before any action would be taken. And with the Freeman-Hastings' case closed, the police would be skeptical.

Dan Freeman smiled grimly. There was still time to accomplish his task. A man burned no hotter for two murders than for one, and that was only if he were captured. He'd made a mistake in appearing in the neighborhood of the store he and Hastings had built, but he'd rectify that by leaving now.

**H**E TURNED and went back the way he had come, waiting at the corner for the light to change. Casually he glanced back along the street, and then again came the thudding triphammer of his heartbeat.

Carl Lampry was there, just about at the neon-lit corner, walking steadily, head tilted a bit forward in concentration. He had his quarry now, and within minutes he would be at Freeman's side.

Panic struck Dan Freeman. He lurched forward, taking long heavy strides toward the taxi waiting for the light. His hand slapped at the door handle, and he jerked the door open, taking a lifting step before he saw the taxi was occupied.

"I'm taken, mister," the driver said. "What's the matter? You blind?"

"Look—" Dan Freeman began, and a quick backward glance disclosed that Lampry was walking faster.

"I'm taken," the driver said again.

"Get outa the door."

"Miss," Freeman said to the passenger, "would you share the cab? It's a matter of life and—"

"Dan—Dan Freeman!" the girl said then, and the startled surprise in her voice was like a whip across his face.

Freeman recognized her then, recognized the smooth sheen of her hair, the delicate curve of her lips. Almost a year was passed now, and she was as he had always remembered her.

"You've made a mistake, lady," he said, and his foot came from the running board. He'd practised those words in his mind for months, but now they were strange and alien to his tongue.

"Dan—wait, Dan!" She was calling his name and leaning forward, hand outstretched to stop him.

He slammed the door, blind terror swinging his head about. Lampry was almost at the corner now, tilting his head even more, trying to peer past Freeman into the cab. The light had changed, and the traffic policeman was shrilling his whistle, his hand waving angrily for the taxi to move.

Dan Freeman whirled, spinning about the end of the taxi and darting across the street, oblivious to the squealing of brakes at his side. He heard Lois Hastings' cry at him as the taxi began to move. He plunged to the far walk, catching one quick glimpse of Carl Lampry pinned to the curb by passing traffic. Then he was wrenching at the gleaming door handle of a parked taxi and flinging himself heavily into the rear seat.

"Irving and Seymour Streets, fast," he snapped to the driver.

And only when the taxi was speeding along the street, when Carl Lampry and Lois Hastings were far behind, did his breathing ease. He rolled and lit a cigarette, amazed at the trembling of his fingers. It had been close, too close. Carl Lampry and Lois Hastings, one the reporter who'd crucified him in the paper, and the other the slim daughter of the man who had been his partner, the man they had claimed he murdered.

He began to swear, tightly and terribly, beating his free hand on his knee. Now the city was indeed a trap, now his anonymity was completely gone. For nine months he had run. An hour before, he had been safe. Now he was resurrected, Phoenixlike, and his coming alive had put him on the run again.

He muttered a savage curse and stared blindly into the night.

## Chapter II

**W**HEN a man's hatred feeds upon itself for a year, when a man is alone, with too much time for thinking, then his hatred does not shrink, but grows apace. It grows constantly till, at some future time, it explodes into life with murderous violence.

And such hatred was Dan Freeman's.

A year before, his hatreds had been vague dislikes, his life a thing of definite unvarying pattern. The store occupied his business life, and he owned a few other pieces of property throughout the city which demanded a modicum of effort and time to control.

His private life had been comfortable, his home managed efficiently by Vera. That there was little love in her for him he had come to accept as part of marriage. That she did not respond to his moods, that she thought his friends stodgy, and talked against them so much and so often that at last they drifted away—well, he accepted that, too, as part of the marriage bargain. That she was loyal, in her own way, he had taken for granted. And to find that her loyalty never passed her own selfishness had come as a shock from which he had never recovered.

For months he had brooded, imagining things, twisting them in his mind, until at times he could not remember where fact ended and fancy began. His hatred of Vera had developed during those months until now there was a drive within him greater than his will, greater than any urge he had ever felt.

He felt that drive now, trying to force him out of concealment, and he clenched





*Blood drained from her face when she saw him*

his hands, watching the house across the street, the home which had been his.

It was smaller than he remembered, the yard skimpier, the fall-denuded trees strangely forlorn. The bushes needed pruning, and for a moment this was a year before and his anger drifting toward the sloppy work of the yard man.

Then he laughed shortly. The house wasn't his, nor the trees, nor the bushes. Nothing was his. He was an outcast, a returned murderer, and nothing he could do would change that fact.

He shrugged and went along the walk, nerves tight now, the revolver heavy in

his side pocket. His eyes were those of a prowling wolf, and he stared along the street, wondering if anybody watched.

The bottom step still squeaked, and he went past it and onto the porch, treading lightly toward the door, a pulse beating at his temple, the sheen of cold sweat on his face.

He'd waited long for this moment, too long.

The minute of waiting was ages long. He licked his lips, fighting the urge to run. Then it was too late. The porch light came on, and the door was opening.

"Yes?" Vera said.

A year had aged her beyond belief. Either that, or he had been blinded to her those many months before. Her hair was still a soft cap of gold, and her figure was smooth and curved, exciting and dangerous to his thinking. But the difference lay in her face. Her lips had thinned and her eyes were cold and suspicious. Now he could see that clever makeup mitigated the first fine lines and coming wrinkles.

"I'd like to talk to you a moment, Miss Winters," Dan Freeman said evenly.

"About what?"

"About us," Dan Freeman said, then turned a bit so that the light caught him squarely in the face.

She went backward, stumbling a bit, one hand lifting in terror to her mouth. Blood drained from her face, leaving the makeup stark and brutal against the skin.

"Ah," she whispered. "Dan!"

He came through the door, heeling it shut, and now the gun was in his hand, vicious and terrible, rock-steady.

"I've come back, Vera," he said, fighting the trembling of his tone.

"But you're dead!" Her eyes were fear-filled mirrors, staring.

He came at her, one slow step following another. He could feel the shaking now, reaching from his voice to his body, until he had to fight for control.

"Not dead," he said. "No, not dead, Vera." Mockery came to his eyes and mouth. "I came a long way for this moment, Vera."

**S**HE shook her head, one hand outstretched as if to halt his advance. He took another step, and she backed, matching his stride, trying to get away.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

He cut her short. "Everywhere," he said. "Running like a dog, eating like a dog. Vera, I've taken more than any man should take. And—" his voice slashed at her like a whip—"I've come back to exact payment."

She tried to run, and he took two driv-

ing steps and caught her with a brutal hand. She fought for a moment, then stood motionless, mouth slack and quivering now.

"You wouldn't dare!" she whispered.

"Wouldn't I?" he said savagely. "Wouldn't I, Vera?"

He threw her away, watching coldly as she fell. Her hands pressed against the floor, and her gaze never left his face. She wet her lips.

"Get up," he said.

She didn't move.

"Get up or I kill you there."

Her mouth came open.

"Scream," he said softly, "and you die now."

She came to her feet, following the command of the heavy gun, retreating toward the living room. Even in her fear she was beautiful, shoulders high and proud, body lithe and supple. She was like he had remembered, and despite himself memories came flooding back, bright tender memories utterly alien to this moment.

Vera entered the living room, and he followed, forcing her ahead, while he drew the three shades at the windows. She sank into a chair before the threat of the gun, and he towered over her, a vague indecision in him.

"I sent the money!" she cried then.

"I swear I did, Dan!"

"Yeah!" His breathing was harsh and ragged in his throat. "Yeah, along with the police.

"No!" She shivered as though with a chill. "I didn't tell the police. I sent the money, as you asked. Then when I heard you had walked into a trap, I waited for another letter, waited to send you more money at another place."

Dan Freeman shook his head. "I didn't write," he said fiercely. "Do you take me for a complete fool, Vera?"

"I— I—" She went silent, shrinking back, fascinated by the gun. It was then that he saw the tension of his forefinger had laid the hammer almost entirely back. "Please, Dan!" she whispered.

"I'll wait," he said. "I can wait." The

hammer eased back, but the gun did not waver. "Who was identified as me?" he demanded.

"You—I mean we thought the man was you," Vera said then. "I swear to you Dan, I sent the money!"

"Quit lying!" Dan Freeman said savagely.

"He was a hit-and-run victim," Vera said fearfully. "The police called me and I went down to the morgue. I thought it was you."

"Yeah!" Dan Freeman felt the twitching at his cheek. "I suppose he looked like me?"

She swallowed convulsively, hands tight on the chair arms. "Enough," she said. "Your—his face had been smashed by the accident, and the top of his head crushed. But the hair, even the arm tattoo—well, I thought it was you."

Dan Freeman rocked a bit on wide spread legs. Get it over with, his mind cried out. Shoot her to death, and run for it. She deserves it. She tricked and doublecrossed you, now make her pay for the months of misery she's given you.

Vera read the thoughts swirling in his mind. She read them and returning color drained from her face.

"No," she said, and shook her head. "No, Dan, I'll give it all up. I'll give it back."

"Sure," Dan Freeman said harshly. "Sure, you'll give it back!"

"I will, I swear it." She was bending forward. "I've kept it for you."

"How?" The rage in him was under control now, and strangely the first thread of pity twisted through his hate.

"It's in my name. The court put everything in my name when I—I received the divorce."

"Divorce?"

"Yes!"

**D**AN FREEMAN laughed softly, his eyes burning at the woman. This was his wife, the woman who had sworn to share his life, and now she sat and talked of divorce.

"You work fast, don't you, Vera," he

said. "My money was more important than my life."

Vera was silent, watching, and the sheen of fear in her eyes was breaking like spring ice. Calculation was growing.

"I'll draw out the money in the morning, Dan," she said at last. "I'll give you what there is."

"And if I say 'No'?"

"You won't." She was braver now, watching his face. "Take the money, Dan, take it and leave. I'll send you more later."

He laughed aloud, he couldn't help himself. This was the same story, the same pattern, of months before. Sure, Dan Freeman, run, run like a scared dog. Help will come, I swear it.

"Not this time—not after you've seen me," he said, and he remembered then that others had recognized him, too.

"I won't tell, I promise!" Vera bent forward, intent now, reading the indecision in his mind.

Dan Freeman knew then that he had lost. Nine months he had spent in learning to hate this woman, and in as many minutes his resolves had completely vanished.

The gun in his hand meant nothing now. It was just a polished piece of murder machinery, and he had not the power to squeeze the trigger. Even nine months of hiding and dodging couldn't turn him into a killer, and the knowledge was a refreshing wind in the fury of his thoughts. But because now he knew that only escape lay ahead, he tried to carry the farce through.

"No!" he said viciously and lifted the gun. "I don't believe you, Vera. You've lied before."

"No, Dan, don't!" Vera cried.

He lifted the gun as though to finish his task.

"Please!" Fear twisted her face into a mask. "Listen, Dan, please listen! I know something, something you want to know."

"What?" He didn't care, but he had to answer.

"I know who killed Hastings."

Dan Freeman went cold at the words.

They meant nothing in a lot of ways; long ago all hope had vanished from his heart. Hastings was dead and he, Dan Freeman, was wanted for the murder. After a time he had accepted the fact that never would the true story of his partner's death come out. And now, when all hope was gone, words lashed at him, and their meaning was terrible in its intensity.

"Who?" he said. "Vera, if you're lying, I'll shoot you to shreds."

"I'm not lying, I swear I'm not!" She had the whip hand now, as she'd thought she would have, and courage was coming back into her face, courage and a hint of her old arrogance.

He caught her shoulder, savagely, ignoring her sudden cry of pain. His knotted fingers shook her brutally, rocking her in the chair.

"Talk," he said. "Talk before I beat it out of you."

She struck his hand away. "Take your hands off me," she said viciously.

"I'll—" Dan Freeman began.

"You'll not do a thing," Vera said. "Not now, not ever. Oh, maybe I'll talk, but you'll listen first."

"To what?"

"To this. The courts gave me everything with the divorce, and you'll sign a paper giving me everything. Then I'll—"

The door bell rang harshly, breaking into her words. It pealed twice, then fell silent. Vera turned her head from Freeman to glance at the hall door, then looked back.

"Who is it?" Dan Freeman asked.

"I don't know," Vera answered.

The bell rang again, the sound vibrant and ringing.

"Whoever it is knows you're in here," Dan Freeman said.

Vera nodded.

"Get rid of him."

"No!"

**F**REEMAN hesitated, licking his lips, listening to the insistent ringing of the bell. This house was a trap, a cruel, dangerous trap, and he swung

his head, wanting freedom.

"Run, Dan!" Vera said then. "Run!"

He was suddenly hard, hard in a way she could not fathom. He couldn't kill her, not in cold blood, but this hardness went almost as far.

"Answer the door," he said. "Speak loudly and get rid of whoever is there. I'll be here, so don't be foolish."

The visitor was holding the door bell button down now, holding it solidly while the bell rang its alarm.

Vera smiled, and she was the woman Dan Freeman had known so many months before. Cold calculation narrowed her eyes, and she smoothed the cloth over her chest in one swift movement.

"You're licked now, Dan," she said. "I can scream."

"You'll die on the second cry."

"All right, but you'll die, too." She came from the chair, head barely to the line of his chin. "I'll make a deal," she finished. "I want what the courts gave me. Sign it away, and I'll tell you who killed Hastings."

Dan Freeman felt the great shuddering of his body. He knew this woman now, knew her capacity for lying, and yet he had no choice.

"All right," he said. "Answer the bell, then come back. I'll make a deal."

She smiled at him, then went to the door, arrogance in every line of her body. She was harder than he could ever be.

He ducked to one side, slipping through the door into the dining room and flattening out of sight against the wall. He swallowed convulsively. This was a fool play, a stupid play, yet he must see it through. He had to trust her for this one minute.

He heard the door come open. "Hello!" Vera's voice said brightly. "I didn't expect you tonight."

Something fell. It fell in the front hall with a dull, mushy sound. Something else fell, and a third object toppled, too. The sound were muffled, as though the objects had landed upon a thick rug.

Then there was silence.

Dan Freeman waited, waited while the seconds passed in torturous parade. Then knowledge came to him, and he cursed aloud, realizing that Vera had darted through the door to safety with the visitor.

"Fool!" he said aloud, and went through the door, racing across the living room.

He hand-turned into the hall, speeding toward the open door, wanting to catch the fugitives before they could reach safety.

His foot caught on something, throwing him forward. Instinct tightened the muscles of his hand, as he lunged for balance. The gun roared like a cannon, glass splintering from the tiny door window.

Then he was falling, going forward on hands and knees, falling through the doorway and onto the porch. Cement skinned his hands, and the gun skidded in a shower of sparks across the porch and disappeared into the darkness. He drew his hands beneath him, plunging them at the cement, lifting up to regain his feet.

He heard a soft step behind him, and began his turn. He heard a soft grunt of exertion and the *whish* of displaced air. Then hell exploded in his head, expanding in fiery agonizing splendor. He felt the cement grinding into his face. Then the night closed in and there was nothing but the ebon blackness of empty space.

### Chapter III

**V**ERA was dead. She wasn't hard and arrogant now; she was just a dark huddle in the hall. Nothing had fallen; those sound had been the killer's blows crushing the top of her golden head. And now the gaudy crimson was thickening and clotting on her cheek and the stained rug.

Dan Freeman leaned against the door frame, breathing in great shuddering gasps, pain still rocketing in his head. Skin was smashed at the back of his skull, and his left hand went up gingerly,

exploring. Blood marked his fingers, and the slight touch brought a whimper of agony from his throat. Whoever had struck him down had almost killed him.

Nausea sickened him, and he fought for control, not lifting his eyes from the body of the woman who had been his wife. A car whirled past in the street, and still he stood in the doorway, unable to move for the moment, caught in the coils of rage and grief and grinding fear.

Vera wouldn't talk now. What she knew was gone with her life. She was dead, and the dead do not talk. She was gone, as he had intended her to be, and the shock of her death spread through Dan Freeman's mind like ripples from a rock-struck pool.

He saw the murder weapon, a slim length of black steel, and recognized it as a tire iron. He left it lying on the porch, stumbling inside the house, too ill to think clearly for the moment. He closed the door, then went past Vera's body and toward the bathroom. A wash cloth turned crimson as he mopped at the cut on his head, and the biting shock of iodine from the cabinet cleared the cobwebs from his mind.

He moved fast now, wondering if the gunshot had been reported, listening for the first wails of the siren. He cleaned the lavatory, then rinsed the cloth and hung it on the rack. He returned to the front hall and paused a moment over Vera's body, wry laughter touching his mouth.

This was it, he knew, the start of another pursuit. The police wouldn't be so skeptical now about his being alive. Lampry's and Lois Hastings stories would be listened to and, with Vera dead, the search would begin again.

He had to get away, had to make his escape. But he needed money for that. Fifty dollars wouldn't go far; he needed big money, a lot of it.

He rifled Vera's purse, retrieving it from the bedroom and emptying it on the magazine table. Thirty-one dollars and some change. Still not enough.

He stood in indecision, plotting his

course of action. Help was needed, a great deal of help. And the only answer lay in Clarence Kolb. The publisher had helped him before, arranging the escape from the city jail, paving the way with cold hard cash. Now he would have to do it again, now he must prove his friendship for the final time.

Dan Freeman laughed bitterly. That friendship was strained at best, and with Vera dead, it probably no longer existed. Kolb was a big man; he could not risk his position.

Yet Dan Freeman realized he had the means of forcing help. Kolb had helped him before; he could be blackmailed into helping again, for exposure of his first aiding of Freeman would bring a charge of murder after the fact, along with lesser charges.

Yes, Clarence Kolb would help. Willingly or unwillingly, he would help.

Freeman stepped to the door, twisting the knob and pulling it open. He caught his breath, closing the door swiftly, seeing the police radio car cruising slowly along the street. The shot had been heard. Anybody on the street would be questioned about it. And recognition might come if a spotlight caught him in its glow. He went back along the hall and through the kitchen, unlocking the rear door and stepping through. Moonlight limned the arbor with silver, and the houses across the alley were squatting black monsters.

He paced along the path, going through the gate and along the alley, treading quietly, measuring his chances.

ONLY then did he remember the gun that had skidded from his hand. It lay beside the porch, marked with his fingerprints. And that thought recalled others. His prints were on the doorknob and the iodine bottle and on Vera's purse.

He whirled and went back down the alley. A flashlight stabbed a cone of brilliance from the back door of the house he had just left, and in the reflected glow he could see the cop who held the light. He began to run, and

then the voice cried out for him to stop.

He cut across the street, wincing at the stinging snarl of the bullet lancing at his back. The officer cried out again.

Dan Freeman plunged ahead, searching for safety. At last he ducked between two houses, going toward the far street. A dog snarled from the safety of its miniature house, then went silent as he raced past. He dashed ahead, seeing the car in the driveway, slowing his speed and pausing to stare through the front window. The keys were there, and he caught open the door and slipped onto the seat.

He heard a startled, angry cry as he drove off. Then he was floorboarding the pedal, driving the stolen car recklessly down the street. Somewhere in the night a siren began its banshee wail. The chase had started. He was the quarry. As Dan Freeman or a nameless tramp, he was doomed for Vera's death. Fingerprints would trap him.

The case was open and shut. As a tramp he'd murdered her for her money. As Dan Freeman, he'd slain her for revenge.

He sobbed deep in his throat and headed the stolen car into the traffic on Springer Boulevard, making one last dash to safety—the safety he would force from a man whose fiancée the police would declare—and prove—Dan Freeman had killed.

The alley behind the *Tribune* Building was dark and deserted. The tires made little whispering sounds on the paving. At last Dan Freeman spun the wheel and drove the stolen sedan into a hiding place between a huge truck and a wall at the end of the loading platform. He cut the motor and the lights, sighing softly in relief.

His hands shook as he lit a cigarette, and he turned his head, searching the night, nerves crawling along his spine. Then he stepped from the car and slid along the platform toward the open door. The mingled odors of heat and oil and ink piled at him, and he peered into the building, alert as a prowling dog.

The corridor was empty. Somewhere presses pounded in steady ground-shaking rhythm. Lights gleamed at regular intervals, and a partially loaded cut-truck sagged tiredly on worn rubber tires.

He slipped into the corridor, moving with quick steps toward the elevators at the rear. Voices came through a doorway, and he went past, catching a quick glimpse of men tying papers for newsstand delivery. Then he was at the first elevator, pulling at the door. It



### GROUNDING

**WHEN** a certain man won a helicopter for writing the best letter on the subject, "Life Is More Fun With a Helicopter," he didn't get the flying machine—because of institutional regulations. It seems that he was an inmate of Ohio State Penitentiary at the time of the contest.

—Bess Ritter

came open and he moved inside, finger stabbing at the 18 button. Cables slapped and a motor whined, then the lift was going upward.

He leaned against the wall, feeling the trembling again. A man could take only so much, and he had almost reached the breaking point. Thoughts whirled in his mind, vague nebulous questions, without form and substance. He knew now how stupid his return had been, knew that he should have accepted the situation and never returned. Now he was back, and now he was in a trap from which he might never escape.

The elevator stopped at Eighteen, and

he pushed open the door, stepping into the hall. A man, sitting far down the corridor, glanced up curiously from a newspaper, then dropped his eyes again, stretching a bit in the straight chair. Freeman felt tension go, certain he was unrecognized.

He forced himself to move at an even pace along the hall, coming at last to the unmarked door which was the rear entrance to Clarence Kolb's office. He held his breath, trying the knob, wondering if Kolb still kept it unlocked. The knob turned easily beneath pressure, and he entered, closing the door behind him.

**T**HE room was empty. Files were ranged along the walls, and two chairs were near a desk. This was a file room, handy for Kolb, used for correspondence and reference papers.

His feet made no sound on the rug, and he moved to the far door, listening intently, gently turning the knob. The door opened a crack and, peering through, he saw that Kolb was alone, dictating into a mouthpiece cupped in his hand.

Dan Freeman swallowed hard, then pulled the door open and slipped through. For a moment he went unnoticed. Then the publisher looked up, frowning.

"What do you want?" he snapped, and glared through rimless glasses. "If you want to see me, make an appoin—" His voice broke, astonishment widening his eyes. "Freeman! You're Dan Freeman!"

"Hello, Kolb," Dan Freeman said.

The publisher came upright from his chair, striding about the desk, his hand outstretched. Shock still showed in his features, but a smile was on his lips.

"I thought you were dead!" he said. "Good gosh, man, it's good to know you aren't." He caught Freeman's hand, held it tight. "Sit down. Did anybody see you come in? Where've you been? Yes, this will be a shock to Vera."

"Vera's dead," Dan Freeman said abruptly, and watched the shock return

again to Clarence Kolb's eyes, the hardening of his face. Suddenly doubt and suspicion touched the man, and he was a stranger.

"How?" Kolb said brittlely. "Dan, you didn't lose your head and—hurt her?"

"No," Dan Freeman said shortly, "I didn't kill her."

He went past the man, feeling as he always did like a boy or a midget. Clarence Kolb was tall, incredibly so. "Six feet, eight" he always bragged. And around him any man was short and all women petite. But he carried little weight with his height, for his body was angular and bony, and stooped a bit at the shoulders.

"What happened?" Kolb asked, and Freeman whirled.

"I went to see her," he said viciously. "Somebody rang the bell, and when she answered, she was killed. The killer knocked me out. That's all I know."

He could still read the suspicion in the publisher's eyes, and his own face went hard.

"Why the hell should I kill her?" he snapped.

Clarence Kolb licked his lips, watching, then slowly retraced his steps to his desk. He sank into his chair, reaching for the intercom.

"No!" Dan Freeman said.

"Easy," Kolb said, and flipped the switch. "Do not disturb me until I call, Miss Manners," he said to his secretary, then opened the switch again. "Let's hear the story, Dan."

Dan Freeman sank into a heavy chair, eyes burning anxiously. "There isn't much to tell," he said. "I saw the newspaper story about your identifying some man as me. I thought it was safe to come back. I rode a freight into town, cleaned up, then went out to see Vera. After she was killed, I came here."

"Nobody saw you?" Clarence Kolb tented long fingers, his gaze keen and piercing through his glasses.

"Carl Lampry and Lois Hastings," Freeman admitted. "It was just plain bad luck."

"Then they know you are in town." Kolb reached for cigarettes, thrust the box at Freeman. "Nobody else?"

"No." Dan Freeman accepted a light. "What did they say?"

"I didn't talk to them. I ran when I knew I had been recognized."

"To Vera's?"

"Yes."

Clarence Kolb rubbed his chin, staring down from his superior height in the chair to Freeman. His eyes were cold behind his glasses.

"Why come here?" he asked.

**D**AN FREEMAN shrugged, nerves taut and strained. "I needed help," he said. "I've got to get away. If I'm caught, I'll be crucified. I won't stand a chance."

"You ask too much," Clarence Kolb said. "I helped you once, Dan, because I thought you were innocent. But I can't play on your side all of the time." He waved his hand. "Good heavens, Vera's dead! How do I know you didn't kill her for revenge?"

"I swear I didn't." Perspiration made oily drops on Freeman's face. "You've got to believe that."

Clarence Kolb was silent, estimating and evaluating the situation, and Freeman watched him with agonized eyes, wondering what the answer would be.

"I can't do it," Kolb said at last. "You're asking too much. I spent ten thousand dollars to get you free before. I paid that out to clear the way for you. My money isn't inexhaustible."

Freeman leaned forward, tone suddenly savage. "You were repaid, you know," he said. "Vera repaid you every dime."

"No, she didn't." Kolb shook his head. "The store was in a jam. Hastings' insurance company didn't pay off because you were supposed to have murdered him, and you can't collect under such a situation. No, Dan, I didn't get a dime back."

"Well." Dan Freeman clenched his fist. "I didn't—"

"Forget it," Kolb said sharply. "It



doesn't matter now. But you've got to understand I can't just keep paying out. Friendship goes only so far."

"Yes, I understand," Freeman said, then spread his hands. "But you've got to help me this time. You'll never see or hear of me again."

The phone rang, and Kolb lifted the receiver.

"Yes," he said, then glanced at the watch on his right wrist. "I'll have it within the hour," he finished and cradled the receiver.

Freeman watched, scrubbing out the cigarette fire in the desk tray. Minutes were passing, precious minutes. By now, the police would be looking for him. The description wouldn't be good, but still he would be in danger. And routine questioning, along with fingerprinting, would pin Vera's death on him.

"I'm asking for the last time," he said.

The publisher blew smoke at the ceiling. "I'll make a deal, Dan," he said. "Sign a quit claim to some of the property you own, and I'll finance you this one time."

Freeman laughed grimly. "What good would that do?" he asked bitterly. "The courts gave everything to Vera."

"I'd forgotten." Clarence Kolb frowned for a moment, then nodded abruptly. "We'll pre-date the agreement," he said. "Date it as of a year ago." He smiled. "I think we'll get away with it."

Dan Freeman nodded eagerly. "That's it," he agreed. "Sure, I'll do it." His hands were tight on the chair arms. "What? The store?"

"No!" Clarence Kolb said. "There was suspicion, and talk before that I had helped you escape. Better make it a house or a piece of property or something like that. That would be easier to cover in the records."

Dan Freeman frowned. "There's some property out on Jackson Heights, about ten acres," he said, remembering. "And there's a house on Howell Drive."

"The property—what kind is it?" Kolb asked.

"Bare land, except for a filling station. I bought it on speculation five years ago, thinking the Government would build a factory out there. Then the factory was built the other side of town."

"What's its value?"

"I paid eight thousand. Probably worth ten or twelve now, with the inflated prices."

"All right." Kolb reached for a desk pen. "I'll take that, and give you two thousand in cash. That will square us up."

A door closed softly at the side of the room.

"How cozy," Carl Lampry said nastily. "A murderer and his partner. And getting all squared up." He leaned against the wall. "Cut me in, gentlemen."

#### Chapter IV

FOR a few moments the tableau held. Clarence Kolb's face grew whiter by the second, his incredibly tall body rod-stiff in his chair. Dan Freeman caught his breath, fear pulsing like a physical pain through his body. Only Lampry was calm, and he leered in half-drunken triumph across the room, finger moving against thumb in a movement unmistakable in its meaning.

"Get out," Kolb said at last, and his fist clenched, cigarette butt shredding, fire dropping along his leg and into the cuff of his trousers.

Frantically, he bent to brush the sparks away, and he swore in sudden pain, shaking his hand. Then drawing a splinter of glass from the ruptured skin he threw it in the wastebasket. He sucked the finger, glaring at the reporter.

"How did you know I was here?" Freeman asked harshly.

Carl Lampry grinned, rubbing thin hands together. "A birdie just told me," he said. "I've got lots of little birdies, planted everywhere, and they sing like anything for a few bucks a week." His tone grew hard. "Do I get cut in, or do

I sing a bit myself?"

"You're fired, you blackmailing rat!" Kolb said. "I warned you you'd overstep yourself some day."

He dabbed at his bleeding finger, tiny streaks of blood marring the whiteness of his handkerchief. His face was cold and hard, and his hatred for the reporter was strong and violent.

Dan Freeman watched. Events were coming too fast for him. Even the exigencies of the past months had not hardened him to everything. He shivered, realizing the hold Lampry had now on both him and Clarence Kolb.

"You did a good job, Freeman, or whatever you call yourself now," Lampry said. "It didn't take you long to knock her off."

Kolb lunged to his feet. "You crazy fool," he cried, "Dan didn't beat in his wife's head! You can't pin something like that on him!"

"Yeah?" Lampry sucked idly at his lower lip. "That's what you say. Me, I don't care. I just want a slice of the pie."

"What pie?" Freeman asked, and muscles were tightening in his legs, ready for instant action.

Lampry shrugged. "How do I know?" he admitted. "But, boys, I'm going to be in at the kill, you can depend on that."

Freeman came from his chair, walking slowly toward the door. Lampry straightened, no fear in his pale eyes, his narrow face tilted characteristically like a parrot's head.

"I don't like you, Lampry," Dan Freeman said softly. "I never did."

"Wait!" Kolb said.

"Wait, nothing!" Dan Freeman snapped, and his right hand drove in with every bit of power in his shoulders.

Lampry tried to move. He half-turned, and then the blow caught him, smashing him against the wall, pinning him there. Freeman threw his left and then the right again. A thin trickle of blood came from Lampry's mouth, then the reporter was sagging, slipping,

consciousness gone.

Dan Freeman stepped back, watching the man drop to the floor. Exaltation sang in him. It was a small victory, but at least he had struck at something. At least, he wasn't taking anything now.

"Is he dead?" Kolb asked.

Freeman shook his head. "Just cold," he said. He reached for the knob. "I'll get in touch with you after awhile," he said. "Have the money ready and the papers. I'll call and let you know where to meet me."

"But—" Kolb began.

"I'll call you," Dan Freeman said, and went through the door.

He crossed the smaller room, then went into the hall, walking swiftly toward the elevators and stabbing at the button. A red light glowed immediately, the door swung open, and he stepped into the lift, feeling the swimming of his stomach as the elevator dropped at top speed.

"Five," he said on impulse.

"Five," the operator said a moment later, and Freeman stepped from the car.

THE HALL was shadowed and empty, light spilling from a doorway fifty feet away. He walked along the hall, glad of the impulse which had placed him on this floor. Sanctuary was here; this was place where the police would never look. Here he could hide for a couple of hours, long enough for Kolb to gather together two thousand dollars for his escape.

He stepped through the lighted doorway, seeing several long tables, one cluttered with stripped newspapers, the others bare. A white-haired man glanced up from a desk at one side, pausing in his gluing of newspaper strips to a sheet of cardboard.

"What's on your mind, young fellow?" he asked.

"Uh, I want to look at the issues of November, last year," Freeman said, searching desperately for an excuse to stay.

"Freeman, eh?" the old man said. "Lot of interest in that story since they found his body." He came creakily from his chair and went toward a side door. "Back in a minute," he called.

Dan Freeman smiled thinly at the old man's back. A lot of interest in the old case! Well, he should have—the man the story was about.

He sat down at an empty table, leaning back and lighting a cigarette. This was the morgue, the newspaper morgue; here it was that all issues of the *Tribune* were back-stripped and kept in file.

"There," the file man said, dumping an armload of papers on the table.

"Thanks," Dan Freeman said shortly.

"You're welcome," the other man said and returned to his interminable pasting.

It was strange, this reading of the old case again. Dan Freeman felt a dull wonder that such things could have happened to him. His life had been so circumscribed, so natural in all ways, that the words telling of the case read like the story of a stranger. One account began this way:

The top of his skull crushed by brutal blows. J. C. Hastings was discovered murdered last night in his office by—

Dan Freeman shook his head, remembering those frenzied hours when he had plead his innocence to skeptical, grim men.

A later story read:

Lois Hastings is still a patient in the Community Hospital, a victim of hysterical coma since her discovery of the body of her father, J. C. Hastings, who was brutally murdered three days ago.

It was horrible, thinking of Lois fighting for her sanity inside the sterile walls of a hospital. Once they'd been engaged; but that had been before he'd met Vera, before Vera's soft lips and softer words had given him dreams which never became reality.

Dan Freeman felt the cold lump in his stomach again, as he had felt it so many months before. Everything had been frenzied then, accusation follow-

ing accusation. Hastings' hatred for him had been common knowledge to all their friends, as was their increasing worry about the need to refinance the store.

"Sure," one detective had barked, "you were clever as all get-out. Hastings hated you for jilting his daughter. You could use his insurance money for refinancing the store. Yeah, mister, including the fingerprints, it all ties up."

They'd found the prints on the paper weight, ignoring, deliberately ignoring, the fact that the weight belonged on his desk, that he'd naturally handle it every day. Hastings had been battered to death with the paper weight, and Lois had been found unconscious near the office door.

The police had brought him in, questioning him, browbeating him, keeping him awake, denying him relief. He'd have confessed to anything, if they'd kept it up. And even though he hadn't broken, at last the warrant had been issued, and a preliminary hearing set.

"Not guilty," he had pleaded, and a date for trial had been decided upon.

He had plotted in his mind, knowing he wouldn't have a chance in court to escape the chair. He'd made an airtight plan, then had gone to Kolb for help. The publisher had been reluctant, but had at last agreed, and his money had paved the way to freedom. After that had come the months of wandering, working in obscure places, always living in fear of being trapped.

**A**ND NOW? Dan Freeman swore tightly to himself, crushing his glowing cigarette out beneath his foot.

He'd had no alibi the night of the murder. Business had kept him in the store until late. Then he'd walked for an hour in the darkness, trying to find an answer in his mind to his problems, centering about the store and his home. His home had needed refinancing, too, but not in a monetary way. It had needed spiritual help. Somehow a wall had come between him and Vera, somehow the marriage had failed. And al-

though he had blamed himself, he still knew that Vera had found other interests which to her were becoming increasingly important.

The charge of murder had come as a shock. The days had passed like a horrible nightmare, without end, without surcease from terror. And only later, when he had been running, had he been able to reassemble some of his thoughts and bring them into coherent shape.

But even then he had found no answer. He'd had no known enemies. Hastings had incurred the enmity of many people, but none of them had ever been suspect. He had been the fall-guy, and the frame had been perfect.

And now, sitting at the table, reading the story of the past, Dan Freeman knew how far he had come. He was marked; he couldn't escape; destiny had constructed a path from which he could never stray.

He lit another cigarette, turning pages from story to story.

He read Carl Lampry's *I Spy* column. The man was a brute, a self-appointed judge and jury, barely skirting libel in many ways. He was a dirty columnist, powerful in his way, and what he wrote of Dan Freeman made him look guilty long before his trial.

He found the scareheads after his break from jail. His picture had been run day after day. Kolb was his friend, yet he was a newspaperman, too, and he'd played the story for all it was worth. Basically, it was fair, yet even Kolb could not keep out the little sensational touches which made the story one to be carried by all wires to all parts of the country.

Freeman was still reading when footsteps came quietly across the floor and stopped at his side. His head turned, and he caught his breath.

"Hello, Dan," Lois Hastings said softly.

Dan Freeman was held in thrall. He couldn't break and run; he could only sit. Sweat marked his forehead suddenly, and the nagging ache from his

bruised head became a surging pain.

"Something, miss?" the file man said from his table.

"Nothing; thank you," Lois Hastings answered. "I just wanted to talk to my brother."

"Okay!" The man boredly began his pasting job again.

"What do you want?" Dan Freeman asked, and the words were barely a whisper.

"To talk to you."

"Why? What about? How'd you find me?"

She sat down in the chair next to his, laying her purse and gloves aside. Her eyes were very clear, their gaze almost impersonal.

"About Dad and you," she said. "I thought you might come here. I found out from the elevator operator that a man of your description got off at this floor."

"So!" He was edging his chair back, inch by imperceptible inch. Any moment now he'd have to make a dash for safety.

"I knew you'd come to Clarence Kolb for help. He helped you last time, didn't he?"

"Get to the point." His mouth was dry. He could feel the pounding of his heart.

"I want to help, too."

He stared. He could not help the surprise which twisted in his mind. This wasn't right; this didn't jell. This was a trick of some kind.

"Why?"

"Because I know you didn't kill my father."

He caught her shoulder, caught it in savage fingers, and only when she cried out did he loosen his hold.

"Something wrong, miss?" the file man asked, and a lead weight was suddenly in his hand.

LOIS HASTINGS smiled. "It's all right," she said. "Come on, Dan."

He got up reluctantly from his chair, afraid to make a scene, yet unable to find any way out of the predicament. Her words swam in his head, whirling,

whirling, until they were a blur.

"Where?" he asked.

"We'll ride," she answered. "My car is outside."

She lifted purse and gloves from the table and turned away. Automatically he followed, conscious that the file man was watching. Then they were in the shadowed corridor, going toward the elevators.

Dan Freeman caught her arm, whirling her about, holding her motionless. His voice was strained, without intonation.

"What did you mean, you *know* I wasn't guilty?"

Lois faced him squarely, her eyes level with his chin, no fear in her soft features.

"I saw you leave the store that night," she said. "I watched you walk away. Then I entered, and a few minutes later I found Dad dead." Her tone was soft, too. "I knew you weren't the killer, Dan."

He shook her, savagely, unrestrainedly, and she didn't fight.

"You let me hide like a dog! You didn't tell your story to anybody?"

She shrugged free of his hands, touching her shoulders with slender fingers. Pain lay in her eyes.

"I was afraid," she said simply. "I don't make any excuses! I was afraid. Eventually, I knew you'd be caught and brought back, and then I would give my testimony. But with you gone, I didn't dare talk, for whoever killed my father was still free."

"And so?" Dan Freeman prompted.

"And so I thought you were dead," Lois explained. "There was a story in the newspapers, and reporters bothered me. Then tonight I saw you and realized some mistake had been made. I've searched for you these past hours."

"And now what do you expect me to do?"

"I don't know." She turned and went toward the elevators, her voice drifting back. "The police say you killed Vera. They don't call you by name, but they have your fingerprints. You won't be

safe here."

He marveled at her control. He might be Vera's murderer, and yet she turned her back and walked ahead of him. She knew he was in town, and yet, despite the evidence against him from months before, she had not told the police. He was suddenly grateful.

Her finger touched the signal button, and he came to her side, waiting, feeling the throbbing ache in his head. Hope was burning in him again, built on a few words which in themselves meant nothing.

The elevator door slid open, and they entered. A passenger removed his hat. The door slid to, and the operator moved the control. The car jerked, almost toppling Lois, and Freeman reached out, catching her and holding her upright with his right arm.

"Sorry!" the operator said, and dropped the elevator smoothly.

Dan Freeman held Lois upright, feeling the ache in his thigh where her heavy purse had swung and hit. She smiled at him, then stood erect, and he absently rubbed his leg.

The other passenger had toppled forward, striking the wall and crushing his hat. Mouth set in obvious irritation, he brushed the gray felt, then thrust his hand inside and smoothed out the wrinkles. With a slight tap of his fingers, he drew a crease into the hat again, and set it jauntily on his head.

"Main floor," the operator said, and the door came open.

In the hall, Lois started toward the outer door, but Freeman touched her arm.

"I can't take any more chances," he said. "I've been recognized by three people already. I'll duck out to the alley, and you can pick me up there."

Her eyes searched his face for a moment, then she nodded slightly. "Five minutes," she said, and turned to walk across the lobby.

**HE** WATCHED her leave, then went down the cross hall until he was at the building's rear door. He glanced

back automatically and saw that the elevator operator was watching him. Then he pulled the door open and went into the night.

It was long after midnight, and the moon was on its downward trip, stars twinkling like elf lights in the sky's ebon blackness. A cool wind sighed through the brick tunnel between buildings. Farther down were the loading platforms and, squinting, Dan Freeman could see the dark shadow of the sedan he had stolen, still hidden in its pocket.

He could hear the sleepy life of the city, the roar of trucks along the street, the *ding* of traffic lights changing, even the soft shadow of music coming from some nearby bar. There was a peace here utterly alien to the turmoil within his mind.

A thought nagged at his consciousness, vague, tenuous, and he could not grasp it. He scowled into the night, moving away from the door and leaning against a side wall. Absently he rolled a cigarette, licking the thin paper and sealing the tube, then twisting the ends. He struck a match and lit the cigarette, then flipped the stub away, watching the glow die on the pavement.

Nervousness touched him, and he tried to estimate the passing of time. Surely five minutes had passed by now. He drew smoke gratefully into his lungs, flicking ashes away.

There was a parallel here, he thought wryly. The alley was deserted, as a street had been when Hastings had been slain. It amused him strangely to wonder, if he turned and went back into the *Tribune* Building, if he would find somebody dead.

He drew on the cigarette, the glow enveloping his fingers—and the whip-crack of a shot came to him only after the bullet slashed at his sleeve, jerking his arm.

The cigarette fell in a flash of sparks. He was spinning, crouching, straining to find the hidden marksman.

The gun spat twice, sound rocketing between the walls. One slug lifted brick dust from the wall behind his head,

and the second ricocheted with a ban-shee wail.

He saw gun flame, saw it flaring against the darkness of a door shadow at the loading platform. Twice more it glared in foot-long spurts of brilliance. But he was running now, and he did not hear the slugs searching for his life.

He cut down the alley, running, racing, dodging from side to side. His hand gripped a railing guard at the alley's mouth, and he hurtled onto the walk, not looking back. A few passers-by turned to stare and, four blocks away, a patrolman's whistle shrieked a shrill alarm.

Dan Freeman felt the fear clamping about his heart. The cop's nightstick beat a brisk tattoo on the sidewalk, and far back a woman screamed at Freeman's running figure.

He saw the subway entrance ahead, green lights glowing, and plunged ahead, darting down the steps. His fingers dug frantically into his pocket, finding coins, and he dropped a dime into the turnstile and pressed through.

A train was at the platform, and he raced for the closing door, squeezing through, then leaning against the closed door for support. His heart was hammering, blood pounding at his temples. A glimpse he had of the blue-coated patrolman darting onto the platform, then the train was moving, gathering speed along the dark tunnel.

Who? he was thinking. Why? And there was no answer in his mind.

## Chapter V

**C**OFFEE steamed redolently in the cup, and Dan Freeman stirred it absently with a dulled spoon, eyes staring into space. A train whistle sounded two blocks away, and he shivered, knowing that within minutes he'd be on his way to nowhere again.

The visit was over, for it had not been more than that. The nightmare was finished, and now he would try to disappear. He had eighty dollars in his pocket, but he'd had less in the past.

Somehow, he'd get by.

Things had happened too fast for him. Vera was dead; he'd been recognized, and somebody had tried to murder him. He hadn't an answer to any of the questions in his mind and no way of obtaining any. He was through, washed up, and there was a wry sense of relief in him to know that everything was over. Let the police think Dan Freeman was dead in a city grave. All he wanted now was peace.

"Hey!" The voice of the counterman cut into his consciousness. "I get you now. You're the bum who was in here early tonight."

"Yeah!" Dan Freeman forced a grin.

"Well, you look a lot better. What'd you do—hook up with that subway work gang?"

"Not exactly." Freeman drank his coffee, not looking at the counterman.

"Oh!" The counterman paused in his cleaning of the griddle. "Well, look, Mac, it ain't any of my business, but if you're figuring on riding the rods out of here, you'd better be careful. Cops are everywhere. They're stopping everybody at the yards and along the tracks."

Dan Freeman lifted his head. "Thanks, he said. "I appreciate the tip."

"Aw, forget it." The counterman flushed. "I been on skid row a couple of times myself." He frowned. "And maybe you better pick up a hat some place. Doesn't look natural, not having one in this kind of weather."

"Sure, sure!" Freeman said.

He caught the memory then, caught and tagged it with his thoughts. A hat! A hat crushed out of shape, then re-blocked and creased by steady fingers. The man in the elevator had reshaped his hat, not five minutes before the slugs had hammered at Freeman in the alley.

He was suddenly shaking, thought following thought, idea building on idea. Coffee slopped from the cup, and he braced it with both hands.

"You all right, Mac?" the counterman said. "You look funny."

Dan Freeman stood up, and suddenly

a light was glowing deep in his eyes. He was remembering things, little things, inconsequential details which were building into a pattern. There were holes in the design of his thoughts, but they could be—would be—filled.

"Thanks," he said, and laid a nickel on the counter. "Thanks a lot."

"For what?" the counterman asked.

"For resurrecting a corpse," Dan Freeman said, and went toward the door.

"You're bats," the counterman said, and talked to himself after Freeman was gone. "First, he's dead, then he's digging up a corpse. Huh, he thinks he's Dracula."

He shrugged philosophically. Sometimes being a griddle jockey was hard on a guy's nerves. Surreptitiously, he reached for his hidden bottle. This called for a drink.

Outside, Dan Freeman walked steadily toward the hack stand at the corner. He opened the door and sank onto the seat, while the driver yawned sleepily, turning his head for direction.

"City morgue," Dan Freeman said.

"Okay, Mac," the driver said, and shifted gears.

The ride was long, but Freeman gave no heed. Thoughts whirled in his mind, violent constructive thoughts, and a sense of exultation touched him. Now there was a chance, a slim chance, but one which had to be taken.

**E**ARLY morning traffic whirled by. Most of the city was dark, neons gleaming bravely at the few cars and pedestrians. The taxi caught the speed of the signal lights, having to stop but once. At the morgue, the driver flipped his flag.

"Buck, twenty," he said.

Freeman stepped to the walk, handing two bills to the man. "Keep the change," he said.

He went up the three steps, opening the door and going along the hall. A drop light was over a desk, and a night man stirred lazily.

"Can't do it, mister," he said, after

he heard Freeman's words. "Tain't like most stuff. This is police business." He stared at the twenty-dollar bill in Freeman's hand. "Course," he amended, "seeing as how you're maybe a relative, everything would be all right."

"I'm his grandfather," Dan Freeman said in wry mockery.

"Sure, sure," the night man said, and disappeared into a back room.

He reappeared moments later, a manila folder in one hand, the other reaching for the bill. He crumpled the money in dirty fingers, then extended the folder.

"This is what you want," he said.

Dan Freeman opened the folder, seeing the stiff cards, the official police pictures. "Daniel Freeman," was the name typed on the head of the first report.

He looked at the pictures first. The body had been badly smashed. Evidently the car had dragged it quite a way. The top of the skull was crushed, and one arm was broken. Dan Freeman could see no resemblance between himself and the corpse, other than the general build, particularly with the face so completely ruptured.

He looked at the picture of the corpse's right arm, seeing the bold outline of the tattooed anchor and wreath. He had one like it on his right arm.

He studied the official reports. The clothes had been good, carrying cleaning marks which established them as belonging to Daniel Freeman, but there were no personal effects, other than a knife and a few dollars in change.

"Find what you're looking for, mister?" the night man asked, and Dan Freeman nodded.

"I found it," he admitted, and handed back the closed folder. "Thanks, Pop."

The man fingered the crisp bill in his pocket. "Any time, mister, any time."

Dan Freeman left the building, a great pulse beating in his throat. He was almost ill with the excitement of his knowledge. He went directly to a cigar store across the street, slipping into a phone booth and making three calls.

"Thirty minutes," he said in each, then pronged the receiver.

A wall clock said four-twenty when Dan Freeman entered the *Tribune* Building. The thunder of presses still vibrated through the floor. He crossed the lobby and went along the hall to the bank of elevators.

"Eighteen," he said to the operator of the first, and felt the surge of power as the lift shot upward.

At Eighteen, he went along the hall, entering Clarence Kolb's private office through the front door. There was no secretary on duty now; the reception office was bare and silent. Voices sounded from behind the lighted glass of Kolb's office, and Freeman turned the knob, entering softly, then closed the door and stood with his back to it.

"Where've you been?" Clarence Kolb said from behind his desk. "What's so vital you must drag these people up here at this ungodly hour?"

"Hello, Lampry," Dan Freeman said.

The reporter said nothing, staring sullenly from where he sat on a leather couch. A cut had dried at the corner of his mouth, and his lips were lumpy from Freeman's blows.

"Dan," Lois Hastings said from where she sat beside Kolb's desk, "why didn't you wait for me? What was the shooting about?"

"In a minute," Dan Freeman said, and his gaze went about the room. "No police?" he asked.

"Of course not," Clarence Kolb said vehemently. "Now, let's get to the bottom of this. What's on your mind, Dan?"

**D**AN FREEMAN drew a short breath. "I know who the villain of this piece is," he said. "And to be absolutely melodramatic, I'm going to point him out."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, grow up!" Lampry said, and reached for the liquor carafe on a side table.

Lois Hastings said nothing, shrinking back in her chair, purse gripped tightly in slender ungloved hands.

"You know what you're saying?"



Clarence Kolb asked shortly. "You can prove it?"

"Yes!"

Clarence Kolb lifted his desk phone. "Then let's get the police up here."

"No!" Lois Hastings said sharply.

The publisher's hand laid the phone back in its cradle, his eyes speculative as they glanced from the girl to Dan Freeman. Lampry snorted in wry laughter, then filled his glass again.

"Get on with it, master-mind," he said sneeringly.

"All right." Dan Freeman frowned slightly. "We'll go back to the night Hastings was killed." His tone was bleak. "I didn't see anyone or anything on the streets, as I stood outside the door of the store. A few minutes later, the killer smashed in my partner's head."

"Nice job you did, too," Lampry broke in.

"Any of us could have done it," Dan Freeman said. "Lampry, because he's a dirty blackmailing louse. Kolb, because he was my friend and might have been arguing with Hastings over my decision to break with Hastings. And Lois, because she had fought with her father before. However, the killer's motive went farther. He killed Hastings just to get me out of the way, wanting to frame me."

"Why you?" Kolb said, watching from shadowed eyes.

"I'll come back to that," Freeman said. "Anyway, I was charged with murder, and Clarence helped me get free. A week or so ago, I saw the story in the *Tribune* about the finding and identifying of my body here in the city. Naturally, I came back. My reasons don't matter."

"Vera!" Lois Hastings said softly, and Lampry laughed harshly.

"Maybe," Dan Freeman said. "Anyway, I returned. Two people recognized me—you, Lois and Lampry here."

"Kolb knew, too," Lois said fiercely, "I called him."

Clarence Kolb nodded. "True," he admitted. "But that was after I'd seen

Dan myself."

"Vera was killed," Freeman said, ignoring the interruption. "I was struck down. The killer used a tire iron. I came here, seeking help, and Lampry broke in. I knocked Lampry out and went downstairs to the Tribune's morgue, and there Lois found me. I left with her, waited in the alley. There somebody tried to shoot me to death. I ran again, ending up at a hamburger stand near the railroad yards."

Clarence Kolb shook his head. "It doesn't make sense, Dan," he said. "You haven't proved a thing on anybody."

"Hear—hear!" Lampry cried.

Lois Hastings opened her purse, retrieving cigarettes and matches. She lit a cigarette, eyes watching Dan Freeman inscrutably.

"It boils down to this," Freeman said. "The man who was identified as me was planted for that purpose. The killer knew I would read the story and return, which is exactly what I did. He wanted me out of the way once and for all."

Kolb toyed with a paper knife, swinging his gaze from person to person. Lampry hesitated in the pouring of a drink. Lois didn't move.

"The man was tattooed with the same mark as is on my arm," Freeman continued. "He was dressed in my clothes. Cards had been switched in police files, so that his fingerprints were marked as mine."

LAMPTRY set bottle and glass aside, sitting a bit more erect on the couch. His eyes weren't drunk now; they were keen and alert.

"Go on, master-mind," he said thinly.

"Vera helped there," Dan Freeman said. "She didn't want me back at any time, for she intended to marry Kolb."

"We were to be married," the publisher admitted.

"Why?" Freeman asked.

There was no answer, and Freeman turned to Lampry. "You're a rat," he said coldly. "Why haven't you been fired from here long before this?"

"Guess!" Lampry sneered.

"Because you know where the body is hidden!" Freeman said. "You know that Clarence Kolb killed my partner."

"You're crazy, Dan!" Kolb snapped, bending forward. "Don't even suggest such a thing."

Lois Hastings flicked ashes into the tray, face like white marble now.

"Yeah, you're crazy," Lampry said viciously.

"All right," Dan Freeman said. "Maybe I can prove it. There are some open spots, but they can be filled." He drew a deep breath, conscious of the perspiration on his face and hands. "Hastings was killed by Kolb—why, I do not know—and you, Lampry, found out about it. You didn't give a hoot about Hastings, but you saw a perfect chance to frame me. You, I think, were the outside interest Vera had at the time. You and Kolb threw me to the wolves, Kolb to save himself, and you to gain Vera.

"Then Vera threw you over. You'd made a slip, and she figured out who the real killer was. She wanted money and position, and Kolb could give them to her. But she didn't want to give up what I'd left. She forced Kolb to set up a hit-and-run kill job which would apparently remove me from the scene. Kolb killed the man, after he'd been tattooed and made to wear some old suit of mine.

"I appeared on the scene, and this was Kolb's opportunity. He killed Vera and left me framed for the killing. Later, when I asked him for help, he was in a position to attain his ends."

Publisher Clarence Kolb shook his head, whiteness across his cheek-bones. His long hand dropped the paper knife, and he stared at Freeman.

"You can't do this to me, you know," he said stiffly.

"Maybe," Freeman said. "We'll see."

"Why?" Lois asked sharply.

"The land of mine in Jackson Heights," Dan Freeman answered. "It's valuable now, incredibly so. A subway's being built which will cut directly beneath my property. Kolb wanted that."

"You're crazy!" Clarence Kolb said, but perspiration beaded his face now.

"Three of you knew I was in town. Only Lampry or Kolb could have obtained Vera's help and my old clothes. Lampry couldn't have known about the tattoo on my arm. Vera was killed to remove a menace, and you, Kolb, knew I would come to you for help, thus enabling you to get the Strip property."

Dan Freeman paused, licking at his dry lips, wondering when the break would come.

"It holds," he said after a moment. "For a smart man, Kolb, you made a lot of mistakes. First, letting yourself be blackmailed. Second, going through with the hit-and-run deal. Third, killing Vera. And fourth, trying to kill me in the alley."

Lampry moved on the couch, bending forward. "That makes me an accessory after the fact, Freeman," he said. "You haven't proved a thing, and I don't think you will."

DAN FREEMAN smiled, and his eyes were bitterly triumphant. "My partner's head was battered in, as was the skull of the man identified as me. Vera was slain the same way. The *tops* of the heads were smashed, Kolb, and that means the killer was incredibly tall, otherwise the blows would be slanting." He touched his head. "You knocked me out from behind, Kolb, on the left side of my head. You're left-handed, Kolb, and the blow would have to come from a left-handed man."

"You knew how Vera was killed, yet I hadn't told you how she died, and the police report hadn't come through." Dan Freeman shifted a bit on wide-spread legs. "My gun went off at Vera's," he finished, "breaking glass. There's glass in your trouser cuff, Kolb, which a police checkup will prove came from that door."

Clarence Kolb was rigid now, one hand touching the leg of his trousers absently.

"Vera's death didn't shock you," Freeman said. "You knew she was dead."

Your only interest lay in gaining title to that property of mine. Once I'd signed, you'd probably have killed me, as you tried to do in the alley."

Lois Hastings gently crushed out her cigarette in the tray, then folded her hands on her lap. Her gaze swung from Freeman to Kolb, then back again. Lampry did not move, his narrow face drained of color, panic building in his eyes.

"It will hold," Dan Freeman said. "The police will find the tattooer who duplicated the design on my arm. They'll check the tire-iron, and the lab will find out plenty, even though you probably wore gloves. They'll find out you switched fingerprints, and they'll discover the ink on the new card isn't almost a year old. They'll check your height against how tall the killer must have been to kill as he did. They'll—"

Clarence Kolb snatched at the drawer of his desk, and when he towered to his feet, a gun nestled in his long fingers.

"You're smart, Dan," he said viciously. "You haven't missed much."

"You're the killer, then?" Dan Freeman breathed.

"Yes, I'm the killer." Kolb jerked his free hand at Lampry. "Search him," he said. "See if he's armed."

Lampry shook his head. "No," he said. "I'll get in no deeper."

Fury turned Kolb's face livid. "They know too much, Lampry," he said. "You play on my side or theirs. Take your choice."

"You can't do it, Kolb," Dan Freeman said.

Kolb laughed. "You came back, killer," he said, "and attacked me. Miss Hastings was shot accidentally while I was killing you in self-defense."

"Don't help him, Lampry," Freeman warned.

"Make a choice quick," Clarence Kolb said. "You figured out Freeman wasn't dead. You figured it gave you a hold on me. You've blackmailed me until the end is almost reached. Decide."

Lampry came slowly from the couch,

agonizing indecision in his face. His head swung from man to man.

"I don't like it," he began.

"Mr. Kolb?" Lois Hastings said evenly.

Her bullet caught him as he turned. It caught him beneath his chin and bored a hole through his head. Blankness slashed at his eyes, knowledge of action a fleeting shadow. She fired twice more, and the bullets turned his gigantic height about, spilling him over the chair.

He fell, folding like a rule, back held by the desk, head scraping against the wall. The chair caught his middle, then spun, and he crumpled to the floor.

Lampry tried to run. He took two steps, and then Dan Freeman caught him, whirling him about. Freeman threw two blows, viciously, shoulder-weighted, and Lampry hurtled back to the couch, face slack, mouth puffed and bleeding again.

Then, and only then, did Dan Freeman turn to look at Lois.

SHE was crying now, the gun a blued blot on the rug, her slender shoulders rocking in a torrent of sobbing. Her hands were before her face, and when Freeman sat down and threw her onto the couch beside him, she buried her face on his shoulder.

"I killed him!" she cried over and over. "I killed him!" She shivered, hands holding him close. "Oh, Dan, forgive me. I was going to kill you tonight. I thought you had killed Dad, and I meant to shoot you! I meant to get you in my car and—" her voice broke, muffled, against his coat.

He toed the gun, remembering how slugs had fought for his life once before tonight. He wanted no more of guns or violence.

"Easy, Lois," he said. "Everything will be all right."

And suddenly he realized everything would be all right, everything would be almost as it was before.

He heard the mournful whistle of a

*(Concluded on page 112)*

# The Case of the Oddly Twisted Neck



*A true story of the strange death of a pretty housewife*

By **HAROLD HELFER**

**T**HE NECK wasn't broken. It just had a peculiar twist to it at the back. Sheriff Ellingson kept staring at the strange turn of the neck and what it was attached to—the body of the pretty woman in the kitchen of her rural home.

Except for that strange twist of the neck, there was nothing to indicate any violence. The kitchen showed no signs of a struggle. There were no bruise marks or scratches on the woman.

The sheriff of Coos County, Ore., turned to the dark-bearded man with the luminous eyes and the wasted body slumped in the chair. This was Arthur Covell, brother-in-law of the dead woman. A helpless cripple, he had to be car-

ried up and down stairs and from one room to another.

But he apparently had a brilliant mind and had established a reputation as an astrologist. Some of Hollywood's leading actresses wrote him to inquire what the stars had in store for them.

But he could tell Sheriff Ellingson little or nothing about his dead sister-in-law, lying on the kitchen floor only a few feet away. He'd been busy in his room charting the stars, he explained, when his young nephew, Alton Covell, 16, came running to where he was, shouting that his stepmother was on the floor of the kitchen and seemed to be dead. Alton had then carried the physically helpless astrologist to the phone and

he'd called Fred Covell, his brother and the woman's husband.

The bearded astrologist said he'd heard no outcry or any unusual noises, that he knew of no one who might have wanted to harm Ebba Covell, his sister-in-law.

### Suspicious Sheriff

The sheriff talked to Alton and Lucille, his 14-year-old sister, but elicited no pertinent information from them. They too said they had no idea how their stepmother had come by her death.

Sheriff Ellingson then conversed with the other member of the household, Fred Covell, a chiropractor. He gave the impression of being utterly shocked at his wife's death. He said she was very much alive when he left her a few hours earlier to go to his office in Bandon, a town five miles away from his home.

But apparently there'd been no one else at the rather isolated Covell home-stead that morning. So it must have been someone connected with the household who had brought about the woman's death. Unless, of course, the sheriff thought, she'd died of natural causes. Just dropped dead. People sometimes did.

But he kept looking at the oddly twisted neck. It wasn't the kind of thing you'd get in a fall. It looked more like it had been wrenched. From what the sheriff could gather, the pretty housewife had had a perfectly normal neck before, so he couldn't help but assume that the bizarrely-turned neck had something to do with her death. But a medical examination showed that the neck had not been broken, that the twist had not caused the death. What had caused it was not apparent.

Nevertheless, the sheriff arrested Fred Covell, the husband, though he vociferously proclaimed his innocence. Sheriff Ellingson did this because he felt that the strangely out-of-shape neck meant that there was something

queer about the pretty woman's death and because, by a process of elimination, it almost had to be the husband if there was anything untoward about Ebba Covell's demise. Alton and Lucille, the stepchildren, were too young for pre-meditated murder. The bearded astrologist with the bright mind in the degenerate body couldn't very well do anybody in.

Still, Sheriff Ellingson wasn't satisfied with the case. There just wasn't any "proof" about anything. He sent for Luke S. May, a Seattle criminologist.

May spent many hours prowling about the Covell home and found himself immensely absorbed by a tablet he found in Arthur Covell's room. The tablet was filled with queer markings, astrological signs and hieroglyphics.

"What's this astrology business got to do with this woman's death?" a deputy asked.

### Crime Expert

"It's not exactly an astrology matter," May explained. "This is a code, a code using astrological symbols. But it's really Arthur Covell's diary."

The Seattle criminologist admitted he had no idea what any of the diary said, but he declared he intended to "break the code" and find out. He wrestled with it for several days, but it turned out to be worth the effort.

It not only prevented a possible miscarriage of justice and set the wheels of justice on the right track, but it may very well have prevented a series of strange deaths of people, perhaps all with oddly twisted but unbroken necks and without any real indication of how their deaths were come by.

The code revealed not only that Arthur Covell had plotted the death of his sister-in-law, but that it was to be merely a prelude for an orgy of such murders.

Ebba, his sister-in-law, it seems he just plain didn't like and that's why he wanted her removed. but the indications

were that her death was in the nature of an experiment, as well as a manifestation of hatred. If he could get away with her murder, then, his diary indicated, he intended to continue the pattern, with his victims this time being people in the vicinity who would will him their money and property, apparently having been influenced to do so by his astrologic propaganda. The next victim was even listed—J. Ira Sidwell.

The bearded cripple caustically pooh-poohed all this, said that an astrologist's recording of his delving into occult matters must not be taken as literal facts, that it wasn't even known for sure how Ebba Covell had come to her death.

"But we do know," Criminologist May informed him. "I had the body exhumed. There was a discoloration about the nose and mouth."

### Home-grown Svengali

The man with the wasted body seemed genuinely startled. "Apparently that is one thing you're unaware of," May told him. "But chloroform, while usually leaving no indication of its presence on a living person, brings about a discoloration of the flesh upon death."

"You may as well confess," May went on. "We know that you used Alton to do the actual dirty work. He's confessed."

The sharp-minded man with the black beard and the degenerate body made a statement in which he admitted that

he'd prevailed upon his husky 16-year-old nephew to grab his stepmother by the neck from the back and, holding her tautly, apply a cloth soaked with chloroform to her face until she became limp with death. (He'd held her by the neck so tightly that, as she struggled, it had twisted.)

The astrologist went on to say that the astrologist had transformed Alton into a robot instrument of his bidding, completely under his influence, without independent thought, like a puppet whose actions are reproduced by an unseen mastermind. "Alton is entirely innocent," the bearded invalid said. "I used him and his strength as though they were my own."

Alton himself said, "I don't know what made me do it. I just can't understand why I did such a thing."

But, although there were some who thought it was a hard verdict, the 16-year-old youth was given a life sentence. The electric chair was meted out to the Oregonian Svengali.

One of Arthur Covell's last requests was for an astrological chart so he could "see what forces have been working against me."

Four men had to carry his wasted, crippled body to the electric chair. If he'd been in the mood for such a thing, it might have given the bearded astrologist's sense of fatalism a touch of wry pleasure to count the number of steps that his body had to be borne up in order to reach the chair. There were thirteen.

Featured in our next issue

## STACKED DECK

*A Novel of a Death Gamble*

By **NORMAN A. DANIELS**

PLUS TWO OTHER EXCITING MYSTERY NOVELS



# The Laugh Hit of the year!



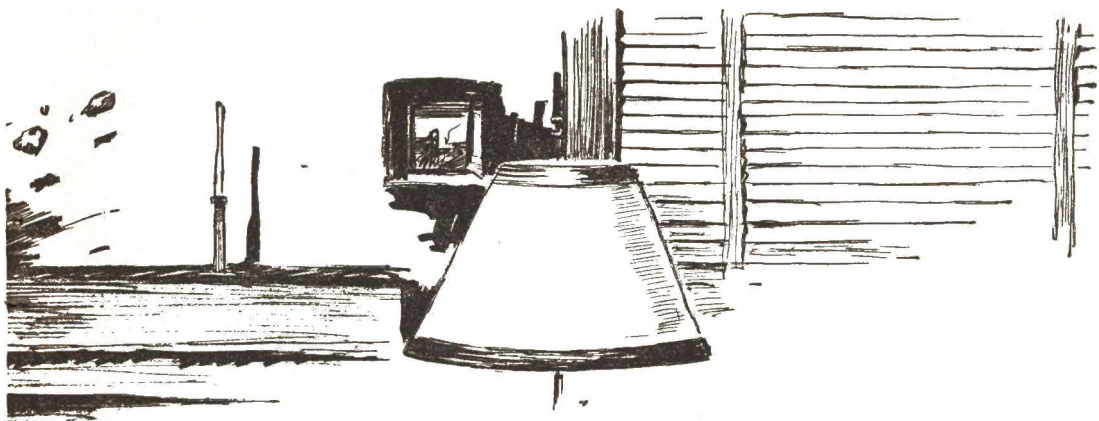
**84 Pages of  
Rib Tickling  
Cartoons!**

**Buy your copy today - on sale at all newsstands - only 25¢**



# THE BODY IN





*Keeping a threatened man alive was dangerous business, but Caro would keep you from the devil himself—if the price was right*

### *Chapter I*

**A** FILIPINO houseboy in a white mess jacket let me into the salmon-pink villa, took my panama, towed me across a hall wide enough for a track event, and put me into a bamboo chair on the flagstone terrace. I sank back and looked at a lawn as smooth as broadloom and as green as jade. The hard bright sun glistened on Biscayne Bay, and a breeze shuffled the palm fronds like maracas.

All this tranquility was abruptly shattered. There was a low sustained growl that welled

*Copyright, 1947, by Standard Magazines, Inc., and originally published in February 1948 Thrilling Detective.*

# THE TRUNK

A Novel by H. Q. MASUR

into a heart-chilling and snarling bark. Bounding toward me across the lawn was the biggest and most vicious-looking beast I have ever seen. It was a Great Dane in a mood fiendish enough to rip me to shreds. I came up off the bamboo chair like a frightened deer and grabbed the chair with both hands, legs thrust out as a shield.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I gave her my attention.

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

"Kill him first," I said.

That startled her. She laughed a bit nervously.

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

"Sure."

"But the law?"

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

"Yes," she said dubiously. "But what

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

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

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

"What makes you so sure?"

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

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

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

You could guess his age as anywhere between forty and sixty. Easy living and blended alcohol had kept him well-preserved. He got himself comfortably lodged in a wicker chair and settled his eyes on me.

"How much do you want, Caro?"

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

"For what?" I asked.

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

"How much have you got?"

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

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

He scowled darkly. "That's an insolent question. I don't understand it.

You're a private detective. What are your daily rates?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Walter Hylan."

"Who is he?"

"My nephew."

I looked at him surprised. "Why?"

"Because he wants my money."

Maxwell Leising was serious. His lips were tucked in grimly. Behind the bold façade of his ruddy face I could see that he was scared. I thought about it for a moment.

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

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

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

"And if she had none?"

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

"I see. Continue."

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

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

"You still have the letter?" I asked.

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

"Later. What happened then?"

"Nothing for awhile. We ignored the letter, of course. Had the tone been different Maxwell would have offered the boy some help. But to make an outright demand and threaten him like that—" She gestured vaguely, shaking her head. "Anyway, last night, Maxwell, who suffers from insomnia, heard a noise on the balcony outside his bedroom window and saw the shade of a man fidgeting with the lock.

"Maxwell keeps a small gun under his

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I laughed. "Well, it's something to think about. It gives you an idea of

what I may run into. Okay. What do you want me to do?"

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

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

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

Leising took out a check book and glanced at me inquiringly.

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

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

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

"Perhaps," he muttered testily. "But don't judge my circumstances by this house. We only lease it. We like to travel around between here and California. We spend all of my income."

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

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

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

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

## Chapter II

"A chat with Hylan seems in order."

She regarded me anxiously. "But you'll be back here this evening. We'd like you to stay overnight."

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

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

I glanced at my strap watch. One o'clock.

I had some lunch and spent the rest of the afternoon testing the spring of a tubular steel chair in the frayed lobby of the St. Francis.

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

There was a back stairway and I might have missed him. I went over to the clerk and asked the clerk to ring Hylan's room again to make sure he hadn't slipped in.

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

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

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

"There. You see. He's still not in."

"Okay," I said. "When he comes back tell him Count Dracula was here."

The clerk just stared.

I WENT out and climbed into the coupé and nursed it out of the city onto the boulevard. On my right the sinking sun, a lurid scarlet ball, had washed the brightness out of the sky, leaving it a bruised plum color. My new tires hissed nicely on the cooling macadam. Hibiscus plants bloomed showily along the road around the cabbage palms, and in the neglected spaces between estates there was a violent growth of saw grass and wild fig trees.

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

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

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

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

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

His face was placid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She blushed prettily. "Oh, I can sleep

demanded eagerly.

His brows snapped up, then he keep me awake. We'll keep the balcony door open so that he can get in. We'll have a surprise ready for him that he'll not soon forget."

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

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

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

"My dear," Leising interrupted her, "I don't like this any more than you do. We're novices at this game. Caro here is an old hand at it. As long as we have consulted him we must let him handle it in his own way."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leising boomed a relieved laugh. "Well, Malcolm! Come in. This is a surprise."

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

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

**T**HE Filipino appeared with a serving table and I eyed the Haig & Haig with mounting respect.

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

"You probably read about him," Leising stated, pouring the drinks. "Stephen Caro. Private detective."

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

Leising smiled faintly. "Caro is here professionally."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You don't say!"

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

"About the will?" asked Hagar.

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

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

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

"Such as what?"

"Hastening the prospect of inheritance."

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

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

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

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

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

"Where is he staying?"

"At the St. Francis."

"And you haven't seen him yet?"

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

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

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

"You'll be safe enough then."

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

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

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

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

"How about a lime pit?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I had decided to double back, when the report of a shot fractured the night.

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

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

I lay very still, hearing that blasted dog bark, waiting, and when nothing else happened I got up and cautiously completed my search, fervently praying that the Dane was chained with links

no weaker than the *Queen Mary's* anchor.

When I got back to the house I found Mr. and Mrs. Leising huddled together near the window. I glanced around.

"Where's Hagar?"

"Haven't you seen him? He followed you out."

Mrs. Leising stared. "That shot! Did —did you get him?"

"No," I said. "I didn't fire it. But I don't mind telling you that it missed taking off my head by less than two inches."

"How dreadful!" She was white. She looked badly shaken.

"You found no one?" Leising asked.

"Not a soul."

Footsteps crossed the terrace and Hagar joined us, puffing softly.

"You drew a blank, eh, Caro? So did I. That shot scared me green. We're lucky he didn't clip us."

"Are we?" I asked pointedly, searching his face.

"Who do you think it was?" he inquired blandly.

"Mrs. Leising got a pretty good look," I said. "How about it?"

"All I could see was the outline of a man's face."

"Young?"

"I couldn't tell."

"Oh, I'll wager it was young Walter Hylan all right," Malcolm Hagar announced with conviction. "No doubt about it." He nodded emphatically. "A man like that is a menace. He ought to be behind bars." He glanced at a pocket watch. "It's late. I have to be going now."

He shook hands cordially all around and departed.

"Where is Hagar staying?" I asked.

"At the Victoria," volunteered Leising.

The more I thought about the man the less I liked him. In retrospect the intelligence in his eyes changed to shrewdness, the bland manner to slickness.



MRS. LEISING announced that she wanted to retire, and left us. I accompanied her husband to a master bedroom on the second floor. Of the room's three exposures the one facing the bay had a small balcony with trellis work reaching to the ground. Anyone could get up or down without too much trouble. As soon as he undressed he swallowed a sleeping tablet and almost immediately began to snore.

I managed to stay awake most of the night, but caught some rest toward early morning.

No one showed up. No one tried to get into Leising's room. The night passed uneventfully. Doubtless we had scared the intruder away earlier in the evening.

At ten o'clock the Filipino showed up with breakfast and spent fifteen minutes rousing his employer. The job really needed a sixteen-inch salute.

After breakfast I drove back to the city and went to my office for a look at the mail. There were four letters, one a circular from a correspondence school in Cincinnati on *How to Become a Detective* and offering a fingerprint set and a magnifying glass absolutely free if I registered within five days. The other three were bills, and I filed them away for future reference.

After lunch I went over to the St. Francis and sauntered up to the chinless clerk, who recognized me immediately.

"Hylan went up about twenty minutes ago," he said. "Shall I call him?"

I shook my head. "He's expecting me. What room is he in?"

"Four-O-Six."

I stepped into the naked-ribbed elevator cage and bounced upward. I found Hylan's door and drummed briefly against it. There was no response. I knocked again. Still no answer. I rattled the knob and called out:

"Open the door, Walter."

To my surprise it swung back slightly, showing me a narrow segment of

face and a single red eye that regarded me solidly, without favor.

"Yes?" he demanded.

"It's time for a little chat," I told him amiably.

"Not with me," he said, and started to shut the door.

I put one hundred and ninety pounds against the door and he slid back into the room. I stepped in and kicked the door shut with my heel. I looked at him. He stood there his fists clenched at his sides, his breathing labored.

He was wearing a rumpled seersucker suit. His features were sharply hacked out of a blocky face as brown as a chunk of mahogany. His mouth was as thin as a knife slash, and his eyes were jumpy. His brown hair was cropped close, and he stood just below medium height.

"Take it easy, Walter," I said, and dropped into a chair.

I shook out a cigarette for him which he refused with a curt shake of his head. I got it burning for myself.

### Chapter III

THE room, I saw, held a bed, bath, bureau, suitcase, and an ancient trunk. Walter Hylan planted himself solidly in front of me.

"What do you want?" His voice was muffled.

"To talk."

"About what?"

"Your uncle."

A muscle jumped in his throat. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"The name," I said, "is Stephen Caro. Private investigator."

He frowned over that, not liking it much. Then he bent forward, his chin thrust out.

"My uncle sent you?"

"I'm working for him," I said.

"Doing what?"

"Making sure you don't kill him."

"Making sure I—" He gave a hollow, unnerved laugh. "You're kidding."

"Not at all."

He swallowed slowly. "My uncle is crazy. I don't even know what he looks like. You're both crazy."

"Maybe. What kind of a gun do you carry, Walter?"

"Gun?" His voice ascended a full octave. "Gun? Why would I want a gun?"

I shrugged. "Pointed in the right direction and fired it might bring you a lot of money. That's usually a pretty good motive for murder."

He gave a shrill hoot was was supposed to be derisive but lacked conviction. Then his eyes became pensive.

"My uncle is scared, isn't he?" he said. "I don't blame him. He knows he influenced my grandfather into making that fool will, cutting us off, and now he's afraid I'll break it."

"You're not cut off," I said. "Only until he dies."

"Yeah, but he can live for fifty years. That's the same thing."

I nodded. "He's scared. Naturally. Not because of the will but because you tried to sneak into his bedroom and because you've been firing your gun off around his house."

Hvlan stared at me. His tongue licked at his lips.

"That's a lie!" he said.

"Is it? You were there last night."

He stood rocking on the balls of his feet. Affirmation was apparent in his eyes.

"Why didn't you come around the front and ring the door bell?" I asked.

He snorted. "What good would it do? Every time I phone they tell me he's away on a fishing trip."

"So you sneaked around the back for a look."

"Yeah." He got truculent. "What about it?"

"Only this. When I chased you into the dark you thought it was your uncle, and pumped a shot at me. I don't like that. Walter."

His face grew stiff and stubborn. He

didn't say anything. I extended my hand, palm up.

"Walter," I said, "that gun is going to get you into trouble so deep a derrick won't be able to hoist you out. Hand it over."

He shook his head and said slowly, spacing the words as if he were trying to convince himself:

"I—haven't—got—a—gun."

I sighed irritably. "All right. You asked for it."

I got to my feet and moved toward him. He backed up, stopping when he reached the wall. His lips were suddenly rough and dry in a damp face. Moisture covered his forehead. His skin glistened like oil. When I was close to him he lashed out wickedly with his right. I snapped my head sideward so that his fist barely grazed the side of my jaw.

"Careful," I said. "You'll get hurt. Now behave yourself."

He plugged his left into my stomach and other words got lost in a rush of wind like a punctured tire. I doubled over and then straightened in time to block another one.

I pinned him back against the wall, fanned him thoroughly. He was not carrying a gun, not even a penknife, but that did not mean no weapon was in the room.

I spun him away, bent over the suitcase, and began dumping its contents onto the floor. I had it about half-empty when I heard him say:

"Caro!"

**A**N ODD urgency in his voice stiffened my spine and brought me around to face him.

A short-barreled automatic was pointed squarely at my chest. His eyes held a brittle shine between narrowed lids, and all the color was pressed out of his lips, leaving them white and determined and mean.

"Stay where you are," he whispered. "Don't move."

"You're a fool, Walter," I said.

"Shut up! Move back against the wall."

There was no help for it. He was wound up tighter than a watch. I moved back.

"Turn around," he ordered.

"Now listen, Walter—"

The gun jumped. "Turn around."

I turned. My nose was less than two inches from the faded wallpaper. I heard a shuffle and I knew it was coming. The impact was terrific. My head exploded into a blinding flash that lasted for a splintered instant. A trumpet blast sounded against my eardrums. And then I went tumbling into a bottomless well whose increasing blackness engulfed me into oblivion. . . .

The lump on my head was the size of an ostrich egg. I tested it gingerly. Then I floundered to my feet and the walls went into a drunken dance. The hinges in my knees had come loose. I grabbed a chair and fell into it, and waited for my brain to get solidly anchored again in my skull.

The walls steadied, but the frayed green carpet rolled toward me like sea waves. After awhile that stopped and I managed to stagger into the bathroom to wash my face.

I examined myself in the mirror.

"Steve, old boy." I said, "let that be a lesson to you. Never turn your back on a guy you think may have a gun. Shame on you."

What I needed was a drink, but first I decided to have a look around the room.

The suitcase turned up nothing of interest. The trunk was locked. I wedged my knife handle under the hasp and sprang the lock. I pulled the trunk open, then jumped back with a startled yelp.

The guy popped out at me, out of the trunk, like a jack-in-the-box!

It was one of those things that's hard to believe even though they happen before your eyes. Malcolm Hagar had been right there in that trunk all the time. He shot out, thumping softly

against the floor, rolled over on his back and stared up at me, grinning.

I stood there paralyzed. My eyes hung out like grapes as I stared at the floor.

Hagar's voice was frozen and vacant and a little surprised. In that last moment before the life went out of him he had sensed what was coming. His plump lips were peeled back, leaving his excellent dentures naked to the orange gums.

The tiny red hole over his left eye had not leaked much, and above it the round bald dome of his skull glistened in the sunlight.

I am no medical expert but I knew this much—he had been stuffed into that trunk after rigor mortis had begun to set in. Then the muscles, stiffening unnaturally in the cramped space, had snapped him out when he was suddenly released.

The reason for Walter Hylan's fright was all too clear. No wonder he had wanted to get away.

I decided to have a look at Hagar's pockets. I was stooping over him when a knock sounded on the door. Two sharp, authoritative raps. My back arched like a cat's back and I crouched forward, listening. The knock sounded again, hard and impatient. My skin tightened.

Slowly I turned and watched the door. A key rasped in the lock. My eyes jumped wildly around the room seeking a way out, and finding none.

Mentally I groaned. Here it was again. The Leisings had paid me hard cash to keep their names out of a scandal.

My mouth was cotton dry with disgust when the door swung open and a man stepped heavily across the threshold, saw me, and stopped dead in his tracks.

He dropped his small black eyes to the body on the floor, let them crawl up to settle on me again, and then began to curse.

SERGEANT LEON GIDEON of the Miami Homicide Detail knew all the words. He was a heavy-set man with plenty of loose meat on his frame, a bleak white face that seldom saw the sun, dark crafty eyes, and dark hair that clung moistly to his perspiring forehead. We had crossed wires more than once, worked together on several occasions, and in one instance I had pulled him out of a jam.

Behind him, the chinless clerk stood with a ring of keys, gaping into the room bug-eyed. Gideon turned to him.

"Beat it down to the lobby," he said in a surprisingly low-pitched voice. "And keep your mouth shut."

He closed the door, shuffled over to Hagar, inspected him dispassionately, pulled out a huge handkerchief the size of a face towel, and mopped at his face.

"Okay, Caro," he said. "Who is this guy?"

"The name," I told him, "is Malcolm Hagar."

"You knock him off?"

"Don't be silly. The guy's been dead at least two hours. It takes that long for rigor to get started. I got here only about twenty minutes ago."

"The guy who rents this box. Where is he?"

"Probably on his way to Mexico. He clunked me and took a powder. Here, feel this." I presented the back of my skull for his inspection, but he let it go.

Gideon's eyes moved carefully around the room, missing no detail. Then he sighed.

"I am going to ask you what you're doing here, Caro," he said quietly, "why you came to this room, and you're going to give me a cute answer about privileged communications and the rights of clients. Then I'm going to tell you that this is murder and make a lot of threats, and you're going to act like a martyr and dish up a package of lies. All this will take up a lot of time, so let's get started now. What brought you here?"

"Neatly stated," I said, grinning,

"and I have half a mind to tell you the truth. But first let me ask you the same question. What brought *you* here?"

He blinked at me, shrugged, and said, "A telephone call."

"From whom?"

"The usual guy. Mr. Anonymous."

"Telling you what?"

"That if I came up to this room I would find evidence of a crime."

"And you—"

"No! That's all!" A sudden rush of blood mottled his white face. "You're always doing that, Caro. I'm asking the questions here today."

He folded his eyelids until only the dark pupils were visible. There was anger in the slash of his mouth.

"Curse it all, this is a resort city, Caro!" he exploded, "And we're trying to keep its reputation clean. Maybe you like this sort of thing because it brings you clients and gives you free publicity, but it's a black eye for the Department. The hotel owners and the newspapers will ride the commissioner and he'll climb on my back, so I'm going to work it out on you. I can do you a lot of good and I can do you a lot of harm. I want you to level with me? What's the deal?"

I looked at him. "Don't you want to get the doctor up here before this thing cools off?"

Without a word he swung to the phone and put a call in to Headquarters. Then he tipped his head to me.

"All right, Caro. Talk."

"The chap who had this room is named Walter Hylan," I said. "He'll come into a lot of money some day when his uncle dies. That is, if some cop's bullet doesn't cut him down first. This uncle was scared Hylan had decided to hasten the process of inheritance and hired me to protect him. I simply came up here for a chat with the boy."

Gideon ducked his head at Hagar's body. "And found this?"

"Yes."

"This the uncle?"

"No. A friend of the uncle's."

"What was he doing here?"

"I don't know."

"Why did Hylan kill him?"

"I don't know that, either."

"Go ahead and guess."

"Some other time. I don't feel up to it."

"The uncle got a room here?"

"No. He rents a house on the bay."

"Same name? Hylan?"

"Uh-uh."

"All right. What is his name?"

I SHOOK my head. "I can't tell you that. Now take it easy, Gideon. Let me talk to him first. He'll probably come forward himself."

The sergeant's face was grimly and stubbornly set, but he nodded.

"I'll put Hylan's description on the wires," he said. "What does he look like?"

I gave him a careful and detailed record of Hylan's appearance which he scratched in his notebook. By the time I finished the invasion was on, and technical men from the Department were swarming all over the place. I took advantage of the confusion created to slip quietly into the hall and down the back stairs, keeping my eyes peeled to see if Hylan had ditched the gun anywhere. He hadn't.

At the first phone booth I called the Leising menage. A woman's voice answered.

"Mrs. Leising?" I asked softly.

"Yes. Speaking."

"Stephen Caro. I have some news. I want you and your husband to lay low and not say anything. Malcolm Hagar was shot to death a short while ago."

She gasped. Silence for awhile. I listened to electricity crackle along the wires. After a moment she spoke again, her voice as tremulous as a willow in a wind.

"Malcolmn shot? Who—did it?"

"I don't know," I said. "He was killed in Walter Hylan's room. The cops are

there now. They think Walter did it. I spoke to him briefly, then he stuck a gun under my nose and ran away. I found the body in his trunk."

She gasped again.

"If I'm not out to see you," I said, "it's because the cops have a tail on me and I don't want to lead them to your place. Understand?"

"Oh, yes," she whispered. "I'm so frightened, Mr. Caro! Will Maxwell be safe?"

"I think so. Where is he now?"

"On the terrace."

"Hylan has no way of knowing that the cops won't be hanging around there waiting to nab him," I said. "Just sit tight."

She said she would and we hung up. I put a long distance call through to Milwaukee to a private dick there with the astounding name of Sergai Murphy.

"Hello, Caro," he said. "Long time no hear. What's on your alleged mind?"

"A small job," I said. "Get me some information on a guy named Malcolm Hagar and wire it in."

"Can do," he said.

"Another thing," I told him. "While you're at it, dig up whatever is available on a family named Leising."

"That's the name of a beer in this burg."

"The same family," I said.

"Sure thing. That all?"

"For the time being, yes."

I hung up and went out into the street, and through the corner of my eye I spotted one of Gideon's men lounging in a doorway, elaborately examining a folded newspaper. He put it away and started moving after me.

I paused, hesitated uncertainly, then stalked off in the opposite direction. Across the street another one of Gideon's men took up the trail. I had to grin. Two of them. In a way that was a compliment.

I stepped out briskly and led them a merry chase. Some two hundred blocks later I dropped into a moving picture

to rest. One of them followed me in and the other stayed outside. When the film was over I had a leisurely supper and went home to bed.

I fell asleep with a picture in my mind of Leon Gideon frowning over a report of my afternoon's activities.

### Chapter IV

**N**EXT morning I was reading about it over a pot of coffee when the phone rang. I picked it up and Sergeant Gideon's voice was in my ear.

"Nice work, Caro," he said, and there was smugness in his voice. "Running my boys ragged on a fool's errand. But I'm not sore. No, sir. Not this morning."

"All right," I said. "You're happy. What happened? They make you a lieutenant?"

"Not yet. But they might. We picked up Hylan."

"Where?" I kept the excitement out of my voice.

"In a hash joint. He was in there stoking up when the radio broadcast his description. An off-duty cop was on the next stool, spotted the likeness, saw how nervous he was, and started to quiz him. Hylan got panicky and bolted. The cop nailed him with a tackle."

"Was he wearing a gun?"

"Yup." Gideon was highly pleased.

"Ballistics test it?"

"Yup. It's the same rod that plugged Malcolm Hagar. Come on down to Headquarters. We want you to make a statement about what happened in the hotel room."

"Right," I said.

I finished my coffee, took a shower, donned a tropical worsted suit touched off with a canary yellow tie, plucked my panama off the shelf, sauntered to the door, and had my hand on the knob when the bell suddenly got hysterical. I pulled the door open.

A girl was standing there. She put a tiny nickel-plated revolver against my nose and followed me as I backed up

into the living room, making small futile motions with my hand.

She was twenty or so, small-boned, with sable-black hair parted in the center, a firm, determined chin, good carriage, dark brown eyes that were as cold as frozen puddles of coffee, and lips that should have been full and kissable but were pulled in tightly against her teeth. She spoke in a dull voice.

"I'm going to kill you, Stephen Caro," she said calmly.

I said nothing. My throat felt as if I'd swallowed a billiard ball.

"Yes," she repeated, like a child reciting a lesson, "I'm going to kill you." Her eyebrows were bent together in a wavering line of concentration.

"Kill me?" I croaked. "Why?"

"Because you're a dirty, conniving, double-dealing no-good crook. Walter says so."

"Walter Hylan?"

She nodded solemnly. "Yes."

I gave my head an emphatic shake.

"Walter is mistaken."

"Oh, no. Walter is never mistaken."

She didn't know much about guns. The safety catch on this one had not been released. It required only a flip of the thumb, but that took a practised finger. I felt better. I even smiled.

"Where is Walter?" I asked.

"The police have him," she said in a monotone. "I was supposed to meet him in a restaurant. I was just going in when I saw a man start to speak to him. I don't know what he said, but Walter ran, and the man caught him. I was frightened. I waited on the corner, but a lot of police cars drew up and took him away. It's all your fault. I guess you ought to say your prayers, Mr. Caro, but I can't wait. It took me all night to get wound up to it, and I'd better do it now."

Her face was as brittle as a piece of glass. It seemed as if the movement of any muscle would have cracked the too taut skin. She extended the gun at arm's length and squeezed it like a

rubber ball. The trigger was locked and nothing happened. Suddenly she looked frightened. A shiver ran the full length of her body and she stared at the gun.

That was when she saw the safety catch and understood. She shoved her thumb under it clumsily. And that was when I danced in and clipped down on her wrist. It was also the moment when two other things happened almost simultaneously.

The gun bounced out of her hand and exploded. It was a small gun, only .22-caliber, and the report was not loud; more like the sharp rap of two boards. Behind me a small plaster cast of Victor Hugo disintegrated like Hiroshima.

**T**HE GUN slid along the carpet and I was on it with the agility of a scared squirrel. She looked at the gun and at the broken statue. She began to cry. It was as if somebody had pulled the stopper out. Her face fell apart and she put it between her fingers and sat down on the floor and cried harder.

I put the gun in my pocket and let her get it out of her system. After awhile she stopped sobbing, and finally her shoulders grew quiet. I helped her into a chair. She took her fingers away from her eyes and showed me a tear-streaked face.

I went over to the cabinet and got out a bottle of my best Irish whisky and poured her a stiff drink. She took the glass with both hands and put the whisky down like milk.

"Feel better?" I asked.

"Yes. Please, can I have my gun back?"

"Later, maybe. Unloaded. Where did you get it?"

"In a pawnshop. I'm sorry about the statue. Are you going to have me arrested?"

"I don't know. That depends on how you answer my questions. What's your name?"

"Judith," she said tonelessly.

She sat with her hands folded in her lap, resigned and subdued. I saw that her lips were full and naturally red. Relaxed, with the tenseness gone, her figure was nicely rounded.

"What's Hylan to you?" I asked.

She lifted grave eyes. "My husband. We were married last month."

Surprised, I was silent for a moment. "You came here on your honeymoon?"

"Hardly." Her smile was faintly wan. "We haven't money for that sort of thing. Walter came down alone, but I was afraid he'd get into trouble so I followed him. He—he's so impetuous."

"What kind of trouble?" I asked.

She searched my face, pondering whether to talk, then seemed to make up her mind.

"About his Uncle Maxwell," she said tiredly. "Walter never bothered much about his grandfather's estate. Of course, he always knew that there was a lot of money, but he always felt he could make his own way. His mother had been cut off and he was willing to let matters stand that way. But after we were married he needed money badly, and he made inquiries in Milwaukee and learned about everything and came down here for a talk with his uncle."

"He needed a lot of money, you say? What for?"

Her mouth got strained. "For me. I have to go to Arizona. My lungs."

"Now let's get this straight," I said. "When did you get into Miami?"

"Yesterday morning. I called Walter from the station and he came down and met me. He was on edge. I knew right away something was wrong. We never have had any secrets from each other and I made him tell me. He said he'd found a dead body in his room and that he'd hid it in a trunk. He was going to try to get rid of it and he wanted me to wait near a phone booth until he called me." She paused, swallowing painfully.

"Go ahead." I prompted.

"Early in the afternoon the phone

rang and I answered it. He told me that everything had gone crazy. He said his uncle had hired you to get him into trouble. He said you accused him of firing a gun. He wanted me to meet him in a restaurant and we were going to run away."

I nodded. "That was when he was caught?"

"Yes." Her lips quivered.

"And you actually thought I had framed him?"

"What else could I think?"

I shook my head. "So you bought yourself a pongun in a pawnshop and came here to kill me."

Her eyes were dull and lifeless. "Without Walter, I no longer cared what happened to me. He was sure his uncle had sent you after him and I felt I had to do something to get even."

I sighed, and bought myself a long one from the bottle of Irish.

Then I broke it to her straight, because she would have to know it sooner or later.

"Now listen carefully, Judith," I said. "I didn't frame Walter, and I had nothing to do with the death of Hagar. Walter's in a jam up to here. If the cops can solve a murder soon after it's committed it's a feather in their caps. The rap would fit Walter nicely and they'd like to tailor him for it. They may be able to do it, too. I don't know whether he's guilty or not, and I can't promise to help him. I'm going down to Headquarters. I want you to stay here, in my apartment. Don't even go out to eat. There's food in the refrigerator. If anyone calls or any message comes you'll know where to reach me. Will you do that? Can I rely on you?"

She gazed at me tragically, with her lip caught between her teeth and nodded. . . .

**S**ERGEANT LEON GIDEON rubbed his hands together when I walked into his office.

"Prett g od. eh, Caro?" he said jubi-

lantly. "Killer caught less than twenty-four hours after he smoked out his victim. I'll get a citation for this."

I nodded sourly. "The boy confess?"

Gideon shook his large bleached face and mopped at his forehead with his oversized handkerchief.

"Not yet. He's a hard nut to crack. But we don't need a confession. The body was found in his room. The murder gun was found in his pocket. He was trying to make a getaway after slugging you. We know that the body had been in his trunk and that he planned to get rid of it. There isn't a jury in the world that won't convict him on evidence like that."

"How about a motive?" I asked. "Got one figured out yet?"

He pushed his mountainous stomach against the edge of his scarred desk and aimed a blunt forefinger at my nose.

"That's were you fit in. The cadaver must have been connected in some way with Hylan's uncle. You're going to tell us about it."

Gideon was no fool. Few cops are. He was bound to make the proper assumption. "One question." I said. "Did you check ownership of the gun?"

Gideon nodded. "Yup. It was registered in Hagar's name. He was licensed to carry it."

I lifted my brows. "So-o?"

"And don't look for anything in that, Caro," he said, with a large negligent gesture. "because you won't find it. They probably had a fight. In fact they did have a fight. There was a bruise on the dead man's skull where he'd been slugged. Hylan took the gun away and shot him with it."

I hadn't known that, because Malcolm Hagar had been lying on his back, the bruise concealed. I looked down at my shoes, thinking, and then I looked out the window. I brought my gaze back to Gideon and asked if I could see Hylan.

"You'll talk first," he snapped.

"No," I said stubbornly. "I'll see Hylan first."



Our glances met like crossed sabers. Then Gideon dropped his eyes and shrugged.

"Why not?"

He was too pleased with himself to argue. He had a clear case. He spoke into a box and we sat back to wait.

Presently the door opened and a cop shoved Hylan into the room. He looked like the wrath of Satan. He looked like he had been caught in a threshing machine. He gave me a hot glare, his legs spread, his face stiffly sullen.

One eye was plum-colored, swollen, almost closed. A dark bruise smeared his jawbone. His nose was puffy, with a drop of congealed blood hanging under it. His tie was yanked around under his left ear. The right sleeve clung to his coat by a thread. But he was not broken, and his nostrils flared with defiance.

The back of my neck started to burn. With a sudden fury I swung on Gideon.

"Curse it, man!" I growled. "Must you do that? Must you beat a guy half to death to make him confess? One guy against a whole police department? I thought that stuff went out with Hitler's Gestapo. It's enough to make a guy sick at his stomach. Why can't you get your evidence by using your brains instead of lead pipe?"

Gideon took it with surprising mildness.

"The boy's a killer," he said.

"Not until the jury say so."

## Chapter V

**H**YLAN had been listening, astonishment apparent in his one fairly good eye. He had not expected to find a champion in me. The brief tirade I had launched in his defense had been unexpected. I switched my attention to him now.

"Anybody ask you if you wanted a lawyer?" I asked him.

He shook his head.

"You don't have to tell them one

blessed thing. Listen, Hylan, I don't know whether you're guilty or not. In the meantime I'll stick to the old American system of assuming a man is innocent until he's proved guilty. You're standing alone now. You can accept what help I'm willing to give or refuse it. You're probably worried about you-know-who. Stop worrying about her. I saw her, and she's all right."

He drew in a deep breath, the tightness around his mouth slightly relaxing.

"Will you answer a few questions?" I said.

He ducked his head in a short nod.

"Good," I said. "Did you know Malcolm Hagar?"

"The dead man?" He shook his head. "No."

"When did you first see him?"

"After breakfast. I came into the room and there he was."

"Dead?"

"Yes, sir. Shot."

"Where was the gun?"

"On the floor, near the bed."

"Go on. What happened then?"

He spread his fingers stiffly.

"I guess I got panicky. I didn't know what to do. Maybe I should have called the cops. But I couldn't think straight. I was afraid of trouble. I thought if I hid the body in the trunk I could get rid of it later and nobody would connect me with the crime."

"And you don't know how he got in your room?"

"No, sir. That's the truth. I swear it."

"And you told all this to the cops?"

He bobbed his chin. "Ten times."

I centered a look on Gideon who raised his massive shoulders and let them drop.

"I couldn't swallow a story like that," Gideon said, shaking his head from side to side. "Not without a large dose of bicarbonate of soda. I'd wind up with indigestion."

"Sure," I growled. "So you tried to make him change it by knocking his teeth out." I turned to Hylan. "You're

new down here. You don't know any lawyers. I'll send Manny Gerber over to talk to you."

Gideon's fist connected with the top of his desk in a solid wallop.

"Just a minute, Caro. Who are you working for?"

"The lady with the scales," I said irritably. "You used to know her. Remember? Justice. Now, don't fly off the handle. Manny may not even touch this case. On the other hand—" I grinned at him—"he may even ask for a writ of habeas corpus."

"He'll never spring this lad, not with what we got on him."

"Maybe. But he'll force you into making a formal charge."

Gideon yelled out a name and the cop who'd delivered Hylan stuck his head through the door.

"Take him away," he snapped. "And be careful you don't scratch him."

I looked at Hylan. "Go ahead," I said. "And sit tight. And remember you talk to no one without advice of counsel."

The cop led Hylan away. When we were alone Gideon fixed me with a baleful glare. The swivel chair groaned under his weight as he slumped back.

"By hell, Caro, I ought to kick the bejabbers out of you. Yup, and the next time you tangle in my hair I'm gonna do it. Now get the devil out of here."

I took a stick of spearmint from my pocket and placed it upon his desk. I grinned at him.

"Here," I said, "chew on this awhile."

I went out, softly closing the door.

I got back to my office just in time to catch a Western Union messenger and sign for a telegram. Under a Milwaukee dateline it read:

Malcolm Hagar charge of Trust Department Merchant's National Bank. Discharged for irregularities in accounts. Not prosecuted. Aaron Leising died 1925. Daughter Clara ran away with musician Herbert Hylan. Whereabouts unknown. Son Maxwell left Milwaukee for Mayo Clinic 1926. Chronic pernicious anemia. Married Glendale, Calif. Present location Miami, Fla. More to follow.

MURPHY.

THE BUSINESS about Hagar did not surprise me. I had never liked the look in his eyes. I read the telegram three times, then I called the Leising home. This time Maxwell answered.

"Caro speaking." I said. "You're safe now, Leising. The cops have your nephew in custody, and they're doing their best to pin Hagar's murder on him."

He inhaled deeply, and after a pause made a clucking noise.

"That's terrible. Tell me, Caro, do you think Walter did it?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure. I think he's entitled to some sort of a break. On an outside chance that he's innocent I'm sending a lawyer over to see him."

"I'll back you on that, Caro."

"And foot the bills?"

"Naturally. After all, he's my sister's son."

"Good. Incidentally. I made inquiries in Milwaukee about Malcolm Hagar and turned up a few startling facts. Did you know that he was booted out of the Merchant's National because some of the bank's funds kept sticking to his palm?"

"You don't say!" Leising seemed shocked.

"How about your income? Has it fallen?"

"Hardly. It's been the same for years."

"At any rate," I said, "I think we ought to dive into the whole thing right now. The bank may be keeping something from you. I want your okay for a full investigation."

"Certainly. If you say so, Caro. Can you come out to the house for a conference. We ought to have Mona's views on all of this."

"Half an hour." I told him.

Next I phoned Manny Gerber and gave him the story. He promised to get to work on it immediately. Then I read the telegram again, pulled out my bottom lip, let it snap back, and went down to the street and got my car out of the parking lot.

Mona Leising herself opened the door. In the bright sun her blond hair had a metallic glint. It was the Filipino's day off, she said, and would I come out to the terrace where it was cooler.

I followed her through the hall. Outside, a breeze rippled the cobalt surface of the bay. The palm fronds whispered like crumpled tissue paper. I saw the Great Dane snoring on the lawn beside the terrace, strapped to his stake. He opened one eye and saw me and made his throat rattle.

"Quiet, Siegfried," Mrs. Leising ordered. He subsided and went back to sleep.

I sat down.

"Maxwell will join us in a moment," she said. "May I fix you a drink?"

I shook my head. It was too warm for alcohol. "Not now," I said.

"Some lemonade then. We always keep it in the refrigerator."

She glided away and returned a moment later with a long yellow drink, ice clinking against the glass. She handed this to me. "Make yourself comfortable," she said. "I'll call Maxwell."

A few minutes later when they both joined me I handed her the empty glass. They sat down. Leising ran his long fingers over the cement-colored hair. I glanced at the woman.

"Your husband gave you the latest developments?"

She nodded. "Yes. I can't quite agree with him—or with you. If Walter really killed Malcolm Hagar, I don't see how we can help."

I didn't say anything.

"You'll remember that we hired you so there wouldn't be any publicity," she continued. "Now Maxwell tells me that you want to pry into Hagar's activities. I see no point in it."

[Turn page]

---

ADVERTISEMENT

---

## DO WE HAVE TO DIE?

Forty-three years ago in forbidden Tibet, behind the highest mountains in the world, a young journalist named Edwin J. Dingle found the answer to this question. A great mystic opened his eyes. A great change came over him. He realized the strange power that knowledge gives.

That Power, he says, can transform the life of anyone. Questions, whatever they are, can be answered. The problems of health, death, poverty and wrong can be solved.

In his own case, he was brought back to splendid health. He acquired wealth, too, as well as world-wide professional recognition. Forty-three years ago, he was sick as a man could be and live. Once his coffin was bought. Years of almost continuous tropical fevers, broken bones, near blindness, privation and danger had made a human wreck of him, physically and mentally.

He was about to be sent back home to die, when a strange message came—"They are waiting for you in Tibet." He wants to tell the whole world what he learned there, under the guidance of the greatest mystic he ever encountered during his lifetime of travel

throughout the world. He wants everyone to experience the greater health and the Power, which there came to him.

Within ten years, he was able to retire to this country with a fortune. He had been honored by fellowships in the world's leading geographical societies, for his work as a geographer. And today, 43 years later, he is still so athletic, capable of so much work, so young in appearance, it is hard to believe he has lived so long.

As a first step in their progress toward the Power that Knowledge gives, Mr. Dingle wants to send to readers of this magazine a 9,000-word treatise. He says the time is here for it to be released to the Western World, and offers to send it, free of cost or obligation to sincere readers of this notice. In addition he will give to each of them a 64-page book showing the astonishing events the world may soon expect, according to great prophecies.

For your free copy of both works, simply send a postcard or letter to The Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. R-228, Los Angeles 4, Calif.

"Naturally," I said. "You wouldn't."

Her brows rose in a high arch. "Just what do you mean?"

I DID not answer her, for at that precise instant the Dane suddenly reared into the air with an agonized yelp and leaped toward the terrace. The strap snapped him short. He twisted in mad-air and fell sprawling. His fangs were bared in a fearful grimace and the heavily labored breathing was harsh.

"Siegfried!" Mona Leising screamed.

She was on her feet, watching with huge frightened eyes.

But it was too late. The brute was beyond her reach. Beyond anyone's reach. Red stain appeared in his spittle and a shudder like a powerful electric current ran through the huge frame. He barked twice, deep in his throat—short, horrible, strangled sounds. Then he tumbled awkwardly over on his side. The paws gave a last convulsive kick and he was gone.

Mrs. Leising turned slowly to me, horrified.

"The lemonade," I said. "I poured it over the side of the terrace. It must have made a puddle which he drank."

The skin was stretched so taut over her face that it looked like scraped bone.

"How—did you know?" she said, at the end of a long trembling breath.

"Deduction," I said. "Or maybe only guesswork . . . No, Leising. Stay where you are."

The man had shoved his chair back and was edging toward the doors, his face working. He saw me caress my left lapel and stopped short, some of the rich blood leaving his face.

"It started when I began looking for a motive for Hagar's murder," I said. "What brought him to Walter's room? And why should Walter kill him? He didn't even know the man. He had nothing to gain from Hagar's death. When I questioned Walter he told me he had phoned here for an appointment. but that you kept putting him off. Why? Was it because you were afraid to see

him? The implication was clear that you had something to conceal.

"Then a wire from Milwaukee informed me that Maxwell Leising was an incurable anemic. Anemics are pale, but look at you! Your face is charged with blood. You remember I suggested once that Walter Hylan might be a phony. It struck me that could work both ways. Maybe you were the phony."

His lips curled and he laughed nastily. "You must be out of your mind."

"Not at all. Don't forget the lemonade your lady slipped me. That talk about investigating Hagar's activities was meant to needle you into some kind of action. You were afraid an investigation might turn up the fact that you are not Maxwell Leising at all. So you tried to poison me."

He bent forward, eyes cold. "Where is the real Leising?"

"Dead," I said. "And I don't know where, or whether he was murdered or died a natural death. It doesn't really matter. However it happened, you had to keep it a secret or his wife would lose the tremendous income from the estate. Because the trust terminated on his death. So you took his place, which was a neat and clever trick—impersonated him, staying far from Milwaukee, always traveling.

"Endorsements on checks were carefully forged. The bank never got suspicious. And you got away with it smooth as silk—until one fine day Malcolm Hagar showed up and caught on to your scheme and demanded a split. You didn't like that, but there was nothing you could do. Even so, there was plenty to go around."

I paused, but neither of them said a word. Then I went on:

"Hagar never learned what had happened to the real Leising, either. You remember how he kept asking me questions about getting rid of a body. He was trying to scare you, probably intending to brace you for a bigger cut. Then Walter showed up."

Mrs. Leising had turned a blotchy white. Her mouth was pulled taut.

"It occurred to you that Hagar might be tired of getting his blackmail piece-meal," I went on. "He might go to Walter Hylan and offer to let him in on a way to end the trust and the estate immediately. For a fair-sized cut, of course. So you kept an eye on him. And when he went to the St. Francis you followed him there, took his gun away from him and killed him in Walter's room. That ended Hagar, and also got Walter off your neck."

The man who was not Maxwell Leising looked at me with hard eyes.

"Once we establish the deception the rest will be easy to prove," I said.

**M**R. LEISING'S face crumpled like a house of cards. She whirled.

"It was all your idea!" she bleated. "You made me do it! You killed Maxwell in California. You killed Hagar. I won't go to the chair with you. I won't!"

"Shut up!" he snarled. The back of his hand left a welt across her cheek.

She gave a low moan and sank to the ground in a faint. The man spun and bolted. But I was ready for him. I pumped one shot from the Colt that caught him just behind the right kneecap. Both feet flew out from under him and he pitched headlong with a scream.

That settled it. Later when they were both locked up. Sergeant Gideon threw it at me.

"You're a publicity hound and a lone wolf and a meddler, and some day you're going to get it. and I'm going to laugh my head off."

He could rave and rant all he liked. It was nothing but jealousy. I got my satisfaction when I put Walter and Judith Hylan on a plane for Milwaukee and sent Manny Gerber to help clear the estate.

"Thanks for everything. I'll send you a check," Walter said.

"Sure," I said. "And don't be bashful. Add a couple of ciphers to the total."

Heck! The cost of living was way up.

## EAT ANYTHING WITH FALSE TEETH

If you have trouble with plates that slip, rock and cause sore gums—try Brimms Plasti-Liner. One application makes plates fit snugly without powder or paste, because Brimms Plasti-Liner hardens permanently to your plate. It relines and refits loose plates in a way no powder or paste can do. No need to pass up your favorite foods. With plates held firmly by Plasti-Liner, **YOU CAN EAT ANYTHING!** Simply lay soft strip of Plasti-Liner on troublesome upper or lower. Bite and it molds perfectly. Easy to use, tasteless, odorless, harmless to you and your plates. Removable as directed. Money back if not completely satisfied. Special Bonus Offer! Send only 10¢—we send you 35¢ package of Tri-Dent Denture Cleaner! Hurry, offer expires Nov. 30, 1955. Plasti-Liner Inc., Buffalo 11, N. Y.— Dept. 49.



### BRIMMS PLASTI-LINER THE PERMANENT DENTURE RELINER

#### EARN TO \$1500 MONTHLY — MEN NEEDED

Many types of Jobs. Laborers, Clerical, Mechanics, Truck Drivers, Engineers, Supervisors, etc. Chance to travel. S. America, Europe, Africa, USA, etc. Many benefits. Fare paid by employers. No Employment Fees. Application Forms. For information and quick reply, Write Dept. 75-W.

**NATIONAL EMPLOYMENT INFORMATION**  
1020 Broad, Newark, N. J.



#### Find URANIUM!!

GEIGER COUNTERS for uranium detection. All models and sizes — from low-cost, portable to super-sensitive airborne units. Prices start at \$37.50. Also TREASURE DETECTORS and MINERALITES. • FREE INFORMATION •

**Detection** CORP. Dept. 27-A  
5528 Vineland, North Hollywood, Calif.

## Free Book on Arthritis and Rheumatism

### HOW TO AVOID CRIPPLING DEFORMITIES

Explains why drugs and medicines give only temporary relief and fail to remove the causes; tells all about a specialized non-surgical, non-medical treatment which has proven successful for the past 36 years. Write for this 44-page FREE BOOK today.

**BALL CLINIC, Dept. 504, Excelsior Springs, Mo.**

Make money!

ADDRESS and MAIL  
POSTCARDS at HOME

Write today!

MR. KAY, BOX 14, BELMONT, MASS.

## Free MATERNITY STYLE CATALOG

SAVE MONEY—Shop by Mail! FREE catalog pictures hundreds of exclusive maternity fashions. World's Largest, Complete Selection, Dresses, Suits, Mix & Match Separates, Sportswear, Girdles, Lingerie; \$2.98 to \$22.98. Catalog mailed in plain envelope.

**CRAWFORD'S**

Dept. 47, 8015 Wornall, Kansas City 14, Mo.



*When it comes  
to murder,  
nothing—  
but nothing—  
can be  
overlooked*



by  
**FRANK D.  
MILLMAN**

# Murder, My Darling

**C**OME in, Martha, and be very quiet. You didn't have to keep ringing that bell! I'm shaky enough as it is. Come in—don't mind the darkness. I've just done it, Martha, and I haven't had the courage yet to turn on the lights. It will be easier to speak to you and regain my strength in this silent blackness. I've done it, Martha. You can only stay a few minutes and then you must leave, for I've work to do—disposing of her body.

Here, sit beside me. That's a sofa over there just a little over to your left. Certainly is dark in here. I can't see much of you at all. Just the slim mass of your shape against the darkness.

Why do you pull away when I try to kiss you? Oh yes, I understand. Sorry. I can't blame you. This is hardly the time or place. It's best we remain apart while I talk. There will be plenty of time for love and embraces later. Plenty of time for us to get away and forget this—after I've gotten rid of her body.

**Y**OU know you're early. But then you didn't really know I was going to kill her. Good girl! You're taking it grand. Just relax there and try not to think. Not to think. It's bad to think too much at a time like this. Listen calmly. We'd planned it the other way; remember? Gloria was supposed to come back from the party about ten p.m. I'd asked her to come home early as I had something important to discuss with her. I was waiting for you, of course. I suppose Gloria, in the back of her mind, knew what I had to ask her.

You were to come at midnight. Then, at that late hour, we'd confront her and demand a divorce. She'd be surprised and frightened at the hour and our sudden determination. And if she refused again, as she's refused my pleas a hundred times before, she'd never get another chance! I would have sent you home and waited until she had finally gone to sleep again. Then . . . I'd kill her.

Quickly. As painlessly as possible.

I didn't follow the plan, Martha.

It was to be a perfect crime? No! I've heard enough and seen enough, I know there is no perfect crime. It's like I told you darling, the average criminal who tries for a perfect murder trips up on his own fancy work. That would have been stupid, a total waste for me. She's my wife; it wouldn't have taken very much brilliant police work to establish a sure-fire motive. The old reliable one, Martha.

The best way is to do the job quickly, brutally . . . and then get! Speed. Distance. Get far away from the scene of the crime fast, that's the way. Sure the police'll know who did it and why, but they've got to catch you first. That isn't so easy if you've got a head on your shoulders, and you've been around like I've been. And if you've got nerves of steel . . . well, maybe that's where I fall short. Always had bad nerves. Jumpy. Scared right now, even while I'm talking. But you're okay, Martha.

You're awful quiet. You haven't said a word since you came in. But I understand. Pretty much of a shock. You're scared and trembling like me inside, but you keep a poker face. Of course, I can't see your face in the darkness. But you know what I mean.

The blackness and the talking is soothing; fixing me up. My heart's stopped pounding like a trip hammer. By the time you go, I'll be all right. Ready to do what has to be done. You're shivering, sweetheart. Well, I'll be through in a few minutes and then you can go straight home.

You see she came home early, Martha. At, I guess it was nine-thirty, she walked in. It was dark and still as a graveyard, just like now. I let her stumble around in the dark while I tiptoed softly up to her. She never put on the light, never uttered a word. I intended only to tell her that you were coming, that you were going to demand a divorce and get it . . . one way or another.

I never asked her, Martha. I never had

[Turn page]

## CABINETMAKING



### Low Cost Home Craft Course Now Available

Make money. Become a skilled woodworker. Interstate's new woodworking course tells and shows how to turn out hundreds of professionally constructed and finished wood projects with hand and power tools. Twenty-two profusely illustrated manuals. Over 1,000 pages. Over 75 projects. Written by expert instructors. The only complete course available today! Get full information without obligation . . . today.



Write for **FREE** Booklet

**INTERSTATE TRAINING SERVICE**  
SCHOOL OF WOODWORKING  
DEPT. F-78-K, PORTLAND 13, OREGON

## ACCOUNTANT

SEND FOR FREE SAMPLE LESSON

Executive Accountants and C. P. A.'s earn \$4,000 to \$10,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. We train you thoroughly at home in spare time for C. P. A.'s examinations or executive accounting positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Personal training under supervision of staff of C. P. A.'s. Placement counsel. Write for free book, "Accountancy, the Profession That Pays," and sample lesson.

**LASALLE Extension University, 417 So. Dearborn St.**  
A Correspondence Institution, Dept. 20329H, Chicago 5, Ill.

## STOP TOBACCO



Benish the craving for tobacco as thousands have with Tobacco Redemter. Write Today for free booklet telling of injurious effect of tobacco and of a treatment which has relieved over 300,000 people.

In Business Since 1909

**FREE BOOK**

**THE NEWELL COMPANY**  
153 Clayton St. • St. Louis 5, Mo.

## OLD LEG SORES



Easy to use Viscose Applications may heal many old leg sores due to venous congestion of varicose veins, leg swelling or injuries. Send today for a **FREE BOOK** and **NO-COST-FOR TRIAL** plan.

**T. G. VISCOSE COMPANY**  
140 N. Dearborn St., Chicago 2, Ill.

## RUPTURED

BE FREE FROM TRUSS SLAVERY

NOW there is a new modern Non-Surgical treatment that permanently corrects rupture. These Non-Surgical treatments are so certain, that a Lifetime Certificate of Assurance is given. Write today for our New **FREE** Book that gives facts that may save you painful and expensive surgery, and tells how non-surgically you may again work, live, play and love and enjoy life in the manner you desire. There is no obligation. **Excelsior Hernia Clinic, Dept. 8805, Excelsior Springs, Mo.**



## BE A Nurse

MAKE \$50-\$60 A WEEK

You can learn at home in spare time. Choice of careers: practical nurse, nursing aide, hospital attendant, infant nurse, nurse companion, doctor's office, etc. Course endorsed by physicians. 56th year. Equipment included. Men, women, 18 to 60. High school not required. Easy tuition payments. Trial plan. Write today.

**CHICAGO SCHOOL OF NURSING**

Dept. 4210, 28 East Jackson Blvd., Chicago 4, Ill.

Please send free booklet and 18 sample lesson pages.

Name.....  
City..... State..... Age.....

the time. All of a sudden it came to me . . . *what's the use?* What good was asking her again? I knew her answer by heart:

"I'll never give you a divorce as long as I live, John!"

But she never had a chance to say that, Martha. It happened with the speed of a thought. One moment I was stepping toward her, the next moment my hands closed like cold vises about her throat . . . squeezing tight, squeezing the life from her, merciless in the tightening of my deadly grip. There was only a low gurgle from deep in her tortured throat before she died.

I'm sorry, Martha. There's no need for me to punish you with the details—it's cruel of me to recount all this. But I must talk or burst. She had a lovely neck, a skin like creamed satin. A neck like yours. She was beautiful, but a devil to live with.

"Her body is under my bed now. After you leave I'll figure out some way to dispose of her body. Nothing elaborate. It is enough that they do not find the corpse too soon. We must have a head start. We must have time.

Getting up already? I suppose you're right. You might as well go now. Go straight home. Try to get some rest until I come for you. I'll be over as soon as I'm through. No, I won't kiss you goodbye; it's not goodbye. It's good night for a few short hours and then we'll be together always, darling. Good night. Close the door softly, won't you?"

SHE'S gone. It's good to rest in this quiet darkness for a while. Soothing. Ah! I've rested enough! There's work to do. The light switch. How bright. Blinding! What you miss in the dark! I can't see yet. Ah, I'm all right now. Gloria. Got to drag her body out from under the bed. What a ghastly job!

There is comes. She's terribly light. Merciful God! What have I done? This isn't Gloria. It's—it's Martha! But how? How? I've just been speaking to Martha . . . No, I couldn't have killed Martha. I killed my wife . . . I couldn't. . . .

Then I've not been speaking to Martha but to Gloria, my wife. She's gone to the police, of course. Got to get away. Fast. Martha, darling, I didn't mean it—not you. You must know, wherever you are now, you must believe me when I say I never dreamed it was you. I'd rather have cut my own throat. But you weren't supposed to come until midnight. You were too early. What happened? Did you change your mind?

I've got to escape.

But how can I leave?—without you? Where would I go? The banks are closed. I haven't any money at hand. And Gloria will be back any minute with the police.

I didn't mean to kill you, darling. I'd rather have cut my own throat. *Cut my throat.* That's it. My old razor in the bathroom—the straight-edged one I haven't used in years. The police won't get me. You won't get me, Gloria. I'll get that divorce, Gloria, you devil. I'll get it in hell! ● ● ●

---

## IN AT THE KILL

(Concluded from page 83)

train far in the night, and suddenly that part of his life lay far away.

Lampry would talk, and Lois would testify, and the end of his running lay close at hand. He could feel the sobbing easing in the slender girl in his arms, and he wondered if in the future he could ever regain a part of the past.

Then he reached out his hand and caught up the desk phone. He laid it

aside, dialed O, then spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Operator," he said, "get me Police Headquarters."

He was smiling as he gave his message, and his free hand held tightly to Lois' shoulders. Hope was in him again, hope and eagerness and a desire to live.

"Lois," he said gently, "everything will be all right." ● ● ●





# LAW AND DISORDER

Crime News Oddities  
by  
HAROLD HELFER

**A** BURGLAR jimmied open the window of a Philadelphia lady and demanded \$15.00. But instead of protesting she willingly paid and thanked him. The sash had been stuck tight, it seems, and she'd been trying unsuccessfully for months to get someone to come and fix it for her.

In Seattle a student complained to the police that somebody stole his overcoat, so absorbed was he in his class at a detective school there.

Cheung Kwok-Pang, Hong Kong shoeshine boy, put the finger on the man who attacked him. He did it in the very unique way of biting off one of the attacker's fingers and handed it to the police as evidence.

A citizen of New Toronto, Canada, staunchly denied that he'd bitten another man in a street fight. "I couldn't," he declared, "because my teeth had been kicked out."

Upon being recaptured, an escaped Portland, Maine, prison inmate told the warden he'd broken out because he'd made an error playing on the prison ball club and was afraid the other inmates would be "down on me."

A New Orleans girl complained to authorities that a young man she'd been dating had tried to get fresh with her. In outlining his case, the prosecutor said the young man had sought to fondle her the first night but on the second night "did not repeat his error." Whereupon the judge declared he couldn't call it an error, because that was just an opinion.

## High School Course at Home

Many Finish in 2 Years

If you did not or cannot finish high school, here is your opportunity. Study in spare time at home. Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to residential school—prepares for college exams. Standard texts supplied. Credit for subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. Diploma awarded. Be a High School graduate. Start studies now. Free Bulletin. Send coupon.

AMERICAN SCHOOL, Dept. H758  
Drexel at 58th St., Chicago 37, Ill.

Without obligation, please send FREE descriptive booklet.

Name.....

Address.....

Canadian Residents: Complete Canadian Course Available.  
Write American School, 1610 Sherbrooke St. West, Montreal.

## FREE FOR ASTHMA

If you suffer with attacks of Asthma and choke and gasp for breath, if restful sleep is difficult because of the struggle to breathe, don't fail to send at once to the Frontier Asthma Company for a FREE trial of the FRONTIER ASTHMA MEDICINE, a preparation for temporary symptomatic relief of paroxysms of Bronchial Asthma. No matter where you live or whether you have faith in any medicine under the sun, send today for this free trial. It will cost you nothing.

FRONTIER ASTHMA CO.  
462 NIAGARA ST.

184-A FRONTIER BLDG.  
BUFFALO 1, N. Y.

### fight cancer with a CHECK



### and a CHECKUP



give to  
AMERICAN CANCER SOCIETY

# Has Happiness Passed You By?



Rose Dawn, Official Scribe of the Mayans, says: This free coupon can bring powerful help to you — such as these members of the Mayan Order have received. Read what they say.

**THE MAYANS**  
 BOX 2710, DEPT. B105  
 SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

Yes, I do want to know how to use the cosmic wisdom of the ancient Mayans.  
 Send me your free book, *Mayan Mysteries*.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_  
 ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_  
 CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_

"The nice thing about belonging to the Mayans is I never feel alone."



Leila Wilkerson Ayer, Massachusetts

"Not results, but miracles have happened to me with my Mayan teachings."



Mary L. Ginihan El Paso, Texas

"You will never know the comfort and happiness I have gained through my lessons."



Amelia Bancroft Dallas, Texas

"I had been searching for truth many years. The Mayans made everything clear."



Helen Madrid San Leandro, California

"My life is richer, happier, more abundant; proof I am following the Mayan Way."



Estelle Swenson Willoughby, Ohio

"I wish everyone could be helped as I have been through Mayanry."



Lima Greenwald Caldwell, Michigan

"Mayan Companionship is all that Mayans the world over testify to—and more."



Alice H. Papineau San Bernardino, California

"Every desire that I have had has been given to me since my membership."



Gladys E. Lucian San Luis Obispo, California

"The lessons have done more for me than all knowledge gained prior."



G. L. Anderson Forest Grove, Oregon

"I am amazed such a wonderful group exists. What I have gained from your teachings!"



Cora Bassett Cranston, Rhode Island

"The most notable result thus far is inner peace and ability to relax."



Gerald F. Hall Scotia, New York

"Mayanry is an inspiring companionship that enriches life. It has given me new faith and understanding."



Irene Harrington St. Louis, Missouri

# HERNIA SUFFERERS



**AMAZING NEW  
Freedom & Comfort**

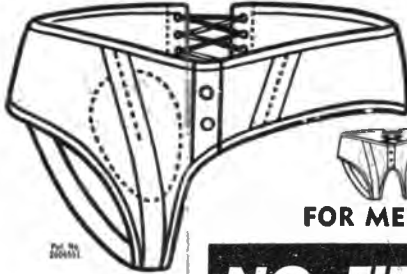
*the  
proven  
way!*

with Patented

# RUPTURE-EASER

T.M. Reg. U.S. Pat. Off. (A PIPER BRACE TRUSS)

OVER 1,000,000 GRATEFUL USERS



RIGHT OR  
LEFT SIDE

**\$3<sup>95</sup>**



Double  
\$4<sup>95</sup>

FOR MEN, WOMEN AND CHILDREN

## NO FITTING REQUIRED

Just give size and side—your size is the measurement around lowest part of abdomen!

A strong, form fitting, washable support designed to give you relief and comfort. Snaps up in front. Adjustable back lacing and leg strap. Soft flat groin pad—no torturing steel or leather bands. Unexcelled for comfort, invisible under light clothing. Excellent as an after-operation support. Wear it with assurance—get new freedom of action!

### NO STEEL OR LEATHER BANDS

You get effective, scientific relief without those dreaded steel and leather bands that make hernia affliction such torture. RUPTURE-EASER support is firm, gentle—you'll realize a new lease on life with the comfort and assurance RUPTURE-EASER brings you!

### BLESSED RELIEF DAY AND NIGHT

RUPTURE-EASER is just as comfortable to sleep in and to bathe in as it is to wear! Soft, scientific pad pressure keeps you safe, awake or asleep. Those who need constant support welcome RUPTURE-EASER'S blessed relief.

### INVISIBLE UNDER LIGHT CLOTHING

Wear RUPTURE-EASER with new confidence under your lightest clothing. No more visible than any usual undergarment—no revealing bulk to hide. Even worn under girdles and corsets comfortably!

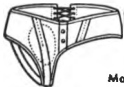
### WASHABLE AND SANITARY

Yes, you can wash your RUPTURE-EASER as easily and safely as your other undergarments. A quick sudsing keeps RUPTURE-EASER just as fresh as new.

SOFT FLAT  
GROIN PADS

NO STEEL OR  
LEATHER BANDS

WASHABLE,  
SANITARY



THERE'S NO SUBSTITUTE FOR PROVED PERFORMANCE RUPTURE-EASER

### 10 DAY TRIAL OFFER

(Mail Orders Only)  
Money back if you don't get blessed relief!

**DELAY MAY BE  
SERIOUS—MAIL  
COUPON TODAY** ➡

(Note: Be sure to give size and side when ordering)

**PIPER BRACE CO.** Dept. TF-105  
811 Wyandotte Kansas City 5, Mo.



PIPER BRACE CO. 811 Wyandotte, Dept. TF-105, Kansas City 5, Mo.

Please send my RUPTURE-EASER by return mail.

- Right Side  \$3.95      Measure around lowest part of my abdomen is
- Left Side  \$3.95
- Double  \$4.95      ..... INCHES.

We Prepay Postage Except on C.O.D.'s  
Note: Be sure to give size and side when ordering

Enclosed is:  Money Order  Check for \$.....  Send C. O. D.

Name .....

Address .....

City and State .....



Please Give Me A Home

At Almost

**NO COST**

Your **NEW, Real, LIVE**  
**MINIATURE DOG**

I'll be happy to send you without you paying a penny, this lovable, young, miniature DOG that is so tiny you can carry it in your pocket or hold it in one hand, yet it barks and is a reliable watch dog as well as a pet. You can keep it in a shoe box and enjoy many amusing hours teaching it tricks . . . active, healthy, intelligent and clean. Simply hand out only 20 get-acquainted coupons to friends and relatives to help us get that many new customers as per our premium letter. I enjoy my



Miniature Dogs Are Intelligent — Easy to Teach Tricks.

own lively, tiny dog so much. It is such wonderful company that I'm sure you'll simply love one yourself.

Please send me your favorite snapshot, photo or Kodak picture when writing for your Miniature Dog. We will make you a beautiful 5x7 inch enlargement in a handsome "Movietone" frame **SO YOU CAN TELL YOUR FRIENDS** about our bargain hand-colored enlargements when handing out the get-acquainted coupons. Just mail me your favorite snapshot, print or negative NOW and pay the postman only 19c plus postage when your treasured enlargement arrives and I'll include the "Movietone" frame at no extra cost. **LIMIT** of 2 to any one person. Your original returned with your enlargement and frame. Also include the **COLOR OF HAIR AND EYES** with each picture, so I can also give you our bargain offer on a second enlargement artfully hand colored in oils for natural beauty, sparkle and life, like we have done for thousands of others.

I'm so anxious to send you a miniature dog that I hope you will send me your name, address and favorite snapshot, right away and get your 20 enlargement coupons to hand out. Mrs. Ruth Long, Gift Manager.

MRS. RUTH LONG  
DEAN STUDIOS, DEPT. X-422  
211 W. 7TH ST., DES MOINES 2, IOWA  
I would like to receive the miniature dog  
Please send me premium letter and 20 coupons

Enclosed find.....snapshots or negatives for enlarging. (Limit of two.)  
Color.....Color  
Eyes.....Eyes  
Color.....Color  
Hair.....Hair  
Name.....  
Address.....  
City.....State.....

**DEAN STUDIOS** Dept. X-422, 211 W. 7th St. Des Moines 2, Iowa

Up to a \$10 Portrait Studio Value Only \$1.

Any Photo Copied

**20**

**BILLFOLD PHOTOS**

**\$1**

Sent on Approval

Double-Weight, Silk Finish, Portrait Paper. Each (2½ x 3½ inch) PHOTO is beautifully DECKLE EDGED.

**50 for only \$2**

(Send No Money)

Just to get acquainted we will make you these NEW artistic, **BILLFOLD PHOTOGRAPHS** that are the rage for exchanging with school mates, as gifts and enclosures with greeting cards or in correspondence. **SEND NO MONEY**, just enclose your favorite snapshot or any size photo for 20 or 50 **BILLFOLD (Wallet) SIZE PHOTOS** (one pose) suitable for framing and keepsakes. Used by thousands of students, teachers, job seekers, parents, movie stars and others. Original returned with your order. Pay postman on arrival plus a few cents for our C.O.D. and postage or enclose the money and we prepay. **3-day service.** Portrait studio quality and satisfaction guaranteed. Please send within 15 days to

**MOYLAND STUDIOS** Dept. 86, 211 W. 7th St., DES MOINES 2, IOWA