

5 Detective NOVELS

Magazine

25c SUMMER



FEATURING

DEATH ALL AROUND ME
BY NORMAN DANIELS

MURDER IN FLORIDA
BY E. HOFFMANN PRICE

KILLER COP
BY PHILIP WECK

WINGS OF THE DARK ANGEL
BY WILLIAM HOPSON

HEADS—IT'S MURDER
BY W. T. BALLARD

A THRILLING
PUBLICATION



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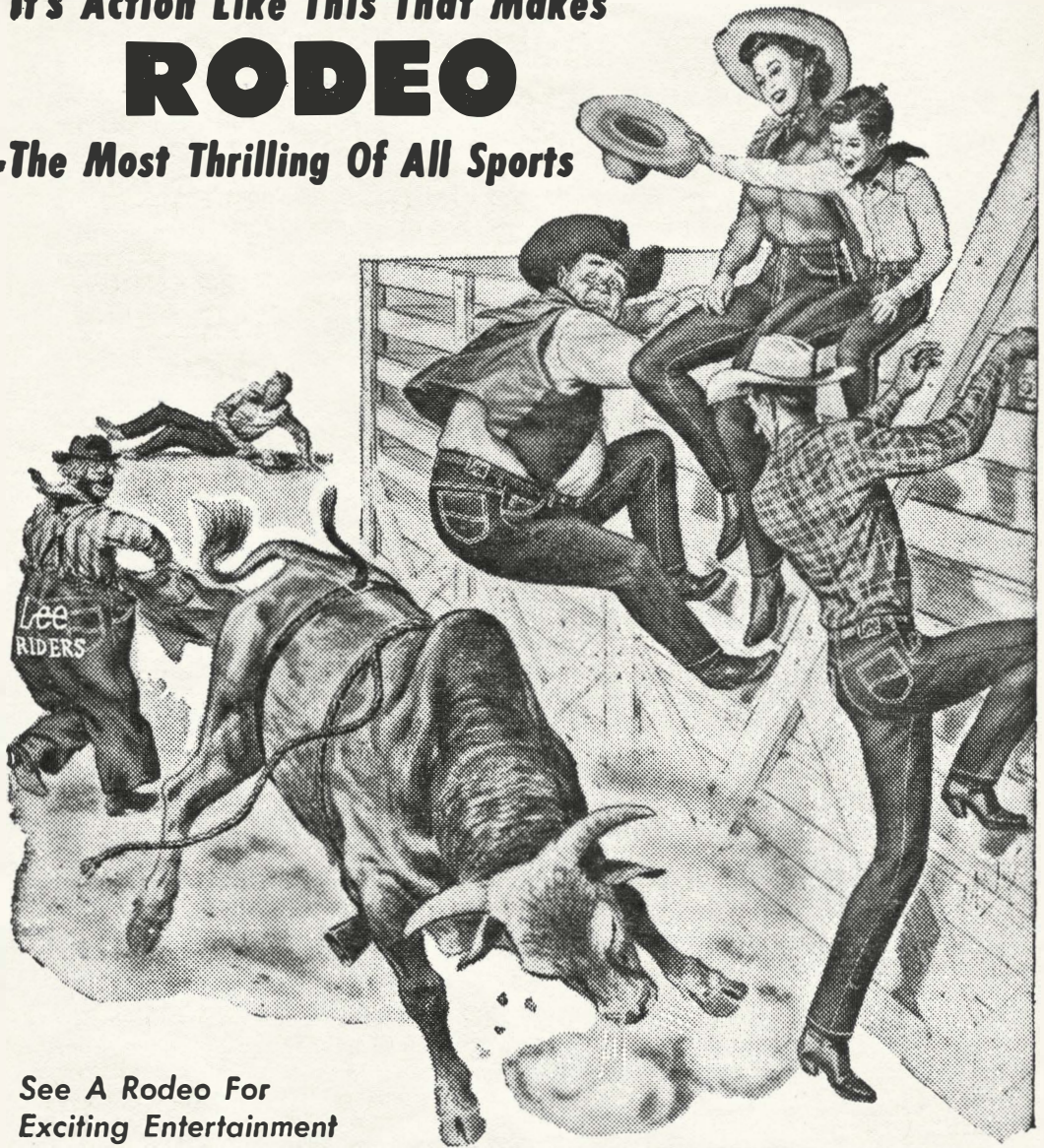


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5 Detective NOVELS Magazine

SUMMER, 1953

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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MORRIS
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Editor

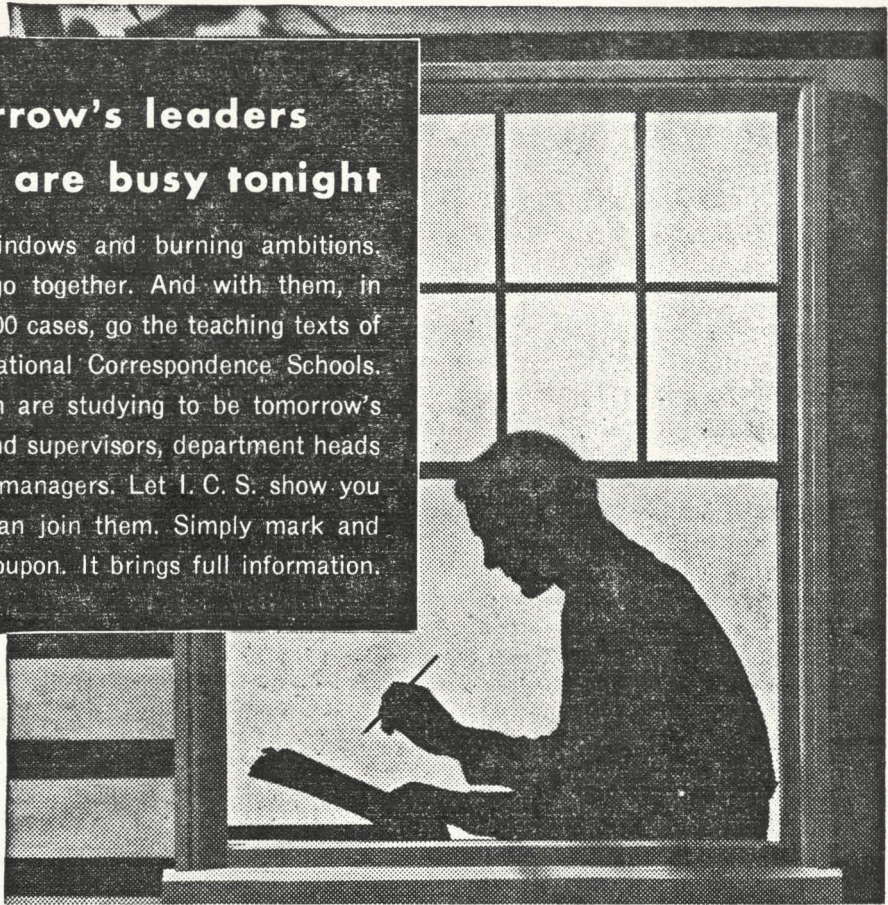
Vol. 8 No. 1

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FIVE DETECTIVE NOVELS MAGAZINE. Published quarterly and copyright, 1953, by STANDARD MAGAZINES, INC., at 1125 E. Vaile Ave., Kokomo, Ind. Editorial and executive offices, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. N. L. Pines, President. Subscription (12 issues) \$3.00; single copies \$.25; foreign postage extra. Entered as second class matter at the Post Office at Kokomo, Ind., under the Act of March 3rd, 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. Summer, 1953, Issue. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

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the LOWDOWN

Here's the Payoff On Gambling Comeback Money



AS PART of every major interstate bookmaking syndicate's operation there is the apparent necessity for maintaining agents in the vicinity of the major horse-racing tracks to handle the syndicate's last-minute bets there. This practice is commonly referred to as the betting of "comeback money." How did it get this name? Possibly because some of the offtrack or illegal handle is coming in to the mutuel machines. There are probably two reasons for these transactions.

First, the comeback money may represent large bets which illegal bookmakers are unable to "lay off" among themselves, bets which no one in the bookmaking organization desires to hold.

Second, the sending of large bets to the tracks reduces the odds on the horse involved, so that if it should win the odds which the illegal bookmaker would have to pay would be considerably less than if the comeback money had not been placed. And also, such a bettor collects on the winning tickets at the track.

Bookie's Bookies

Strange as it may seem to you, these "bookie's bookies" maintain that they hope that the horse selected by them for the betting of comeback money will lose. They explain that the procedure is merely a balancing of their books. And that in many cases, because of the much larger amounts bet on other horses in the race, they maneuver themselves into a position where they cannot lose, no matter which horse wins.

Those race tracks which are members of the Thoroughbred Racing Association frown on the handling of comeback money and refuse cooperation and use of track facilities

to the agents of these betting commissioners. An official of the Thoroughbred Racing Protective Bureau explains the practice in terms of money this way:

"Let's say a man goes to his bookie and bets \$200 on a horse. The bookie knows that man normally is a \$10 bettor, so he's suspicious and to protect himself against a large loss he lays off part of that bet with a bigger bookie.

"The big bookie, in turn, might have an unusual amount of play on the same horse. He distributes some of his risk to commission houses in St. Louis, Chicago, Cincinnati, or Miami. That commission house is loaded with \$20,000 worth of bets on one horse. let's say. The horse is 10 to 1 and if it wins the commission house will lose \$200,000.

Odds Knocked Down

"The commission house phones an agent somewhere near the track and instructs him to bet \$5,000 on the horse. The odds promptly are knocked down to 3 to 1. If the horse wins, the payoff on a \$2 ticket will be \$8 instead of \$22, in addition to which the commission house collects on its \$5,000 bet to help pay off on the \$15,000 worth of bets it held. And, of course, they have all the money bet on other horses in the race.

"Naturally, they don't lay off all the money, because gambling is their business. If the horse loses they pocket the \$15,000 they held minus the \$5,000 they bet, and meanwhile they've insured themselves against taking a terrific beating."

Still think you can come out ahead when you lay two bucks with your favorite bookie on the corner?

—Harold Gluck



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WHENCE 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?

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58NSC

LONG ARM OF THE LAW



FIVE Virginia hospital orderlies were seized by police for using embalming alcohol in the morgue for drinking purposes.

A KENTUCKY man was arrested for working both ends against the middle—he worked in a distillery during the day and sold moonshine at night.

AN IRISHMAN who needed hair to line a horse collar, was taken before the bar of justice for clipping the tails of four ponies which happened to come by his farm.

AN OKLAHOMA resident was carted off to a jail cell for drunken and reckless bicycle riding.

FOUR Vancouver citizens were seized by officers for pushing each other into a zoo moat in order to entertain the inhabitants of the monkey house.

IN OKLAHOMA, a bootleg suspect was given a 10-day jail sentence for consuming the half pint of "evidence" against him during a recess in his trial.

AN ENGLISH tattooist was arrested for needling a design on a lady on such a spot that she can't wear low-necked dresses without causing comment.

A MICHIGAN man was carted off to court for making his wife move 26 times in order to avoid bill collectors.

THE MALE half of a deaf Chicago couple was taken before the judge for speaking to his wife in abusive sign language.

AFTER THE entire police force of an Indiana town took a competitive examination, a patrolman was promoted to chief and the ex-chief was demoted to pounding a beat.

AS A law-abiding San Diego motorist came to a stop at an intersection, was about to turn and held out his arm as a signal—somebody came along and snatched off his wrist-watch.

HARTFORD, CONN., police are looking for a strong-backed thief who made off with a 300-pound anvil.

THE police chief of a city in Washington ordered appropriate decorations for the walls of the jail's cell for drunks—pink elephants and green snakes!

OWNERS of a grocery store in Anchorage, Alaska, expressed the wish that burglars would pick on someone else for a change. The store has been burglarized nine times over the period of a year.

Death

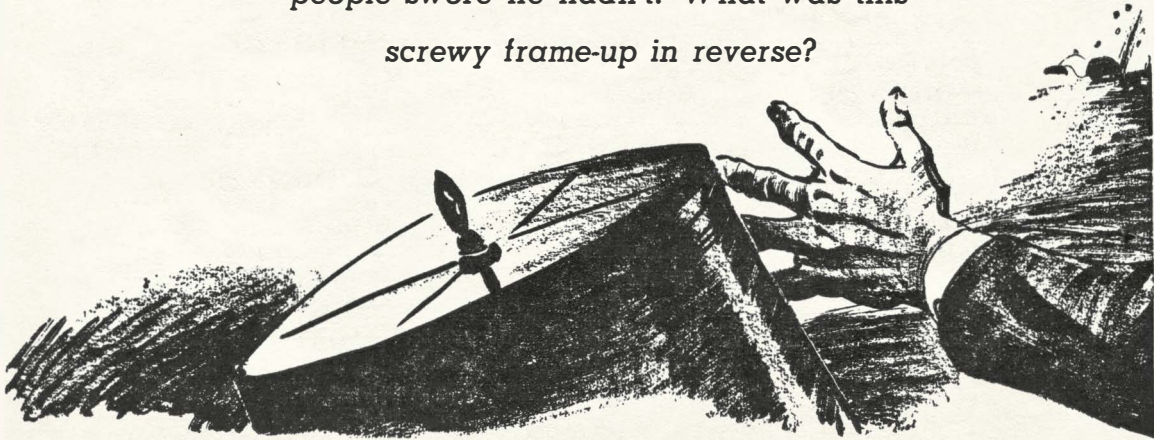
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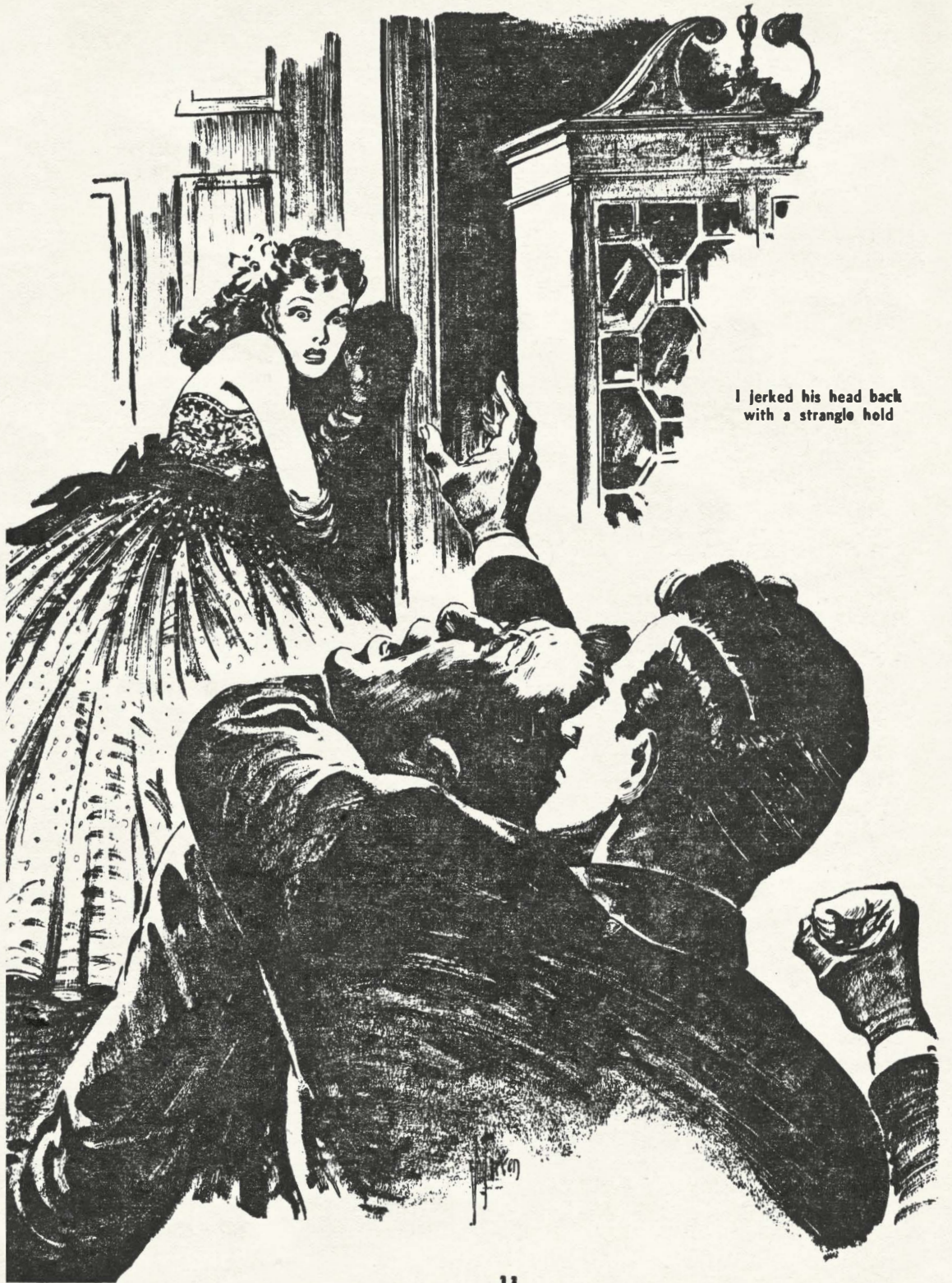
A Novel by **NORMAN DANIELS**

Chapter I

IT WAS one of those West Side blocks which had been slipping for years. As yet, it hadn't quite reached the pushcart-and-sidewalk-store-display stage, but it was slightly beyond the baby carriage, lounging men and howling kids stage. In five or ten more years it would be down as far as it could go, and the local ward heeler would start campaigning for subsidized housing.

Johnny Craig knew he had killed a man, yet four people swore he hadn't. What was this screwy frame-up in reverse?





I jerked his head back
with a strangle hold

It was a section I was very familiar with and most of my professional career had been spent in areas just like this. I knew them from one end of the city to the other. Which made my job a little easier. You can always collect long overdue money from people you know something about.

I walked into the one-man barber shop near the middle of the block. The barber was busy sleeping, but when I pushed the door open, a bell tinkled and he came to life. He ran to the chair, held up a rather dirty sheet, and then threw it onto the chair in disgust. He knew me.

"Hello, you louse," he said.

I sat down next to a chair heaped with ancient dog-eared magazines. "How have you been, Nick?"

"Okay—until you showed up. What is it this time?"

I said, "Take it easy, Nick. I'm not here on business."

He seemed doubtful. "You don't need a haircut," he said.

"You're damned right I don't—not at the prices you robbers charge these days. Nick, I treated you okay, didn't I?"

"Well—maybe." He wasn't too sure.

You have to be patient in these things. "You owed a hundred and sixty bucks on your barber chairs. I could have had them taken out and you wouldn't be in business."

"Okay. You treated me fine."

"I let you off at so much a week. I didn't make a dime acting like a bill collector."

"I said you treated me okay."

"Now you can do me a favor."

He picked up a razor and started stropping it for want of something else to do. "Somebody else in a hole, huh?"

"Not too much. Do you know Mrs. Haven? She lives in the next apartment house."

The razor caressed the leather very slowly. "What about Mrs. Haven?"

"She bought an electric dishwasher eleven months ago from a mail order house. There's ninety bucks due on it."

THE razor moved faster, and he laughed. "An electric dishwasher in this neighborhood? Mr. Craig, there

ain't another woman on the block who'd want an electric dishwasher, except Mrs. Haven."

"Does she work, Nick?"

The razor moved even faster. "Well, there's some who call it work. Not being a woman, I don't know myself."

"Come off it, Nick," I said. "You know what I want—information, so I'll know whether or not to yank the dishwasher out or give her a chance to pay for it."

"You're in a lousy racket, Mr. Craig."

"They don't come any worse." Who was I to disagree?

"Ain't you a lawyer? A regular, honest lawyer?"

"That's right."

"Then why do you bother people by collecting bills? Answer me that one."

"Because I'm a rotten lawyer, Nick. Because I have to eat and I keep half of what I collect."

He lifted the razor off the strop, held it at eye level, and studied the edge lengthwise.

"She's a very loose woman, Mr. Craig."

"So who's interested in how she makes it? Does she make enough?"

"In this neighborhood? I have to chisel on my prices, the bar down the street makes its own hooch so they can sell it for twenty cents a shot. Use your own judgment."

He closed the razor, and I got to my feet. "Well, I'll have to see what I can do. Nick, should I give her a break?"

He shrugged. "In this block everybody needs a break, Mr. Craig. Sometimes she's got money, sometimes she ain't. Mostly, she ain't because when she gets her hands on some, she buys gin. Gallons of it. Between times she borrows from me but she always pays me back, see?"

I made up my mind then. If she could buy booze, she could pay for a luxury item. I went out on the dirty, squalling, brawling street. It was about five-thirty and everybody who lived here was home. Half of them sat on the front steps. A man in typical neighborhood uniform—an undershirt and old pants—threw an apple core toward the gutter. He wiped his face with the back of a grimy hand, cleared his throat and

spat. It was a lovely section.

Several steps led up to the apartment house door which was made of brass grillwork. Once there'd been glass on the other side of the grill. That had been a long time ago. I stepped into the lobby, and the assorted smells of cooking cabbage, fish, and garlic welcomed me. I was so used to it I hardly noticed.

The mailbox said Mrs. Joan Haven lived on the third floor. I went up there, moving from daylight to semi-gloom as I climbed the stairs. There were half a dozen apartments on the third floor. Mrs. Haven was especially stylish. Her name was typewritten on the piece of paper thumbtacked to her door.

It was a weary business, and I often wondered how I'd drifted into it. Need of money, I suppose. In the law business, it's a matter of reputation. If you become known as a patient, diligent guy, you turn into a title searcher and spend the rest of your days working over dusty record books. Defend a couple of punks and get them off, and you're a criminal lawyer. Take civil suits and sue the hell out of people who should be doing the suing, and you're a smart civil lawyer. But collect a few bills and—you're a bill collector with a degree. I knocked on the door.

SHUFFLING, slipped feet approached the door and it opened on a woman who'd become fat through carelessness. She'd probably been a knockout in her day, but there wasn't much left of her. She had washed-out blue eyes, hair that was no longer blond and was too dirty to be called any real color. She wore a shapeless house-dress, a couple of sizes too tight, and she had legs like an eighteen-year-old chorus girl.

"Mrs. Haven? Joan Haven?"

"Yes," she said. The voice came from an alcohol-scratched throat, and her breath was gin laden.

"My name is Johnny Craig. I'm a lawyer."

"A lawyer?" Her faded eyes grew wider. "Who sent you? What are you gonna do—try to make a deal?"

"The Messick Corporation sent me.

You haven't paid for your electric dishwasher."

The hope that gleamed in her eyes went out as if it had been forcibly withdrawn. The corners of her mouth went down. She shrugged, walked away from the door, and went over to a battered mahogany table on which stood a bottle half full of gin. She poured some of it into a smudged tumbler.

"Come in and close the door," she said. "Do you think I want my nosy neighbors to know?"

I closed the door. "Look, Mrs. Haven, we can work something out. I don't want to take the washer back."

She took a long drink of the stuff, and it went down like water. "You can have it, mister. The damn thing busted three months ago."

"Then I've got to have the money," I said.

She looked me over the same way a man looks over an interesting girl. She finished what was in the glass. I looked right back at her. She flushed slightly.

"Go ahead, say what you think of me. I'm a busted-down, heel-blistered old bag."

"Cut it out, Mrs. Haven. All I'm after is the money."

"Yeah. I'm after the same thing only I don't get too much any more. You think maybe I can pay that bill?"

There was a twenty-one-inch TV set in the corner, with a heavy bust of somebody on it. The protective glass plate was so grimy I wondered how she saw the picture tube. There was one of those new posture chairs, a thing made of leather with back rests, knee rests, foot rests, and everything that a drunk might get a lot of comfort out of. I had a hazy idea she liked to sleep in it with the back tilted far down so the alcohol would stay in her brain longer.

I'd met her kind before. Well, not exactly her kind. Her kind of woman owes money like everyone else, but they move around so fast you never can catch up with them. Apparently she'd lived here for a long time or Nick wouldn't have known so much about her.

"We can arrange some way to pay it off a little at a time."

"And if I don't?" The booze was making her belligerent.

"That TV set looks as if it was worth what you owe on the washer."

That one sent her into gales of laughter and aroused the craving for another drink. "Hell," she said, "I owe three hundred on that beauty. Come again, mister."

I sat down. It looked like one of those cases. "You admit you owe a balance on the washer?"

"Sure I do. What of it?"

"You seem to have some pride left or you wouldn't worry about what the neighbors thought. If I take it out, there'll be a lot of talk."

"Did I say I wouldn't pay for it?" She hoisted herself onto that contour chair. If she'd been younger and cleaner, she'd have been very interesting. Her legs still were.

I said, "That's much better. How will we work it out?"

"You come back—lemme see—what day is this?"

"Tuesday."

"I know that. The date?"

"The fourteenth."

"Yeah. You come back tomorrow, and I'll give you twenty bucks. Twenty bucks every fifteenth of the month until it's paid for."

"Is that the best you can do?"

"It's all I'll do. Take it or leave it."

"I'll be back tomorrow," I said.

COCKING her head on one side, she asked sharply, "You got a card or something, mister?"

"All I've got is a bill."

"Funny they should send a lawyer. You sure you're a lawyer?"

"Look me up," I said. "I have an office in the Brill Building."

"Gimme the phone book," she said, as if she were used to giving orders and having them obeyed. I got the phone book. She opened it and glanced at me again. "Craig, you said?"

"John Craig."

She found the right page, ran her finger down the column and came to my name. "Well what d'ya know!" she said. "It's here."

"I told you it would be."

She threw the phone book on the loor. "How come they hired a lawyer? Ain't there any bill collectors left?"

"I do this as a side line," I explained.

There were alcoholic overtones in her speech now. "You're a good-looking guy. Nice build."

I shook my head. "Uh-uh. I'm not in the market."

She laughed harshly. "Well, you can't blame a girl for trying, Johnny. Lemme see the bill."

"What for? You know you owe the money."

"Lemme see it, damn you! Maybe I don't think you came here about a bill at all."

I took out the fat pocket secretary I carried, flipped through the papers it contained, and came up with her bill. I started to hand it over.

"Bring me a drink too, Johnny. A big, stiff drink."

I poured the tumbler half full of gin, handed it to her, and laid the bill on her lap. She didn't pay any attention to it. I sat down again and lit a cigarette. She put all the gin down in a couple of fast swallows. If I'd been as loaded, I could have stepped off the Empire State Building and floated down.

"Okay. I'll pay the bill," she said. "Twenty bucks tomorrow night. Come back around nine."

"At night?"

"Sure, at night."

"I don't want to waste time. Haven't you got the twenty now?"

"If I had, would I be telling you to come back tomorrow night? Don't get me sore, pretty boy, or you can go scratch for that dough."

I looked for an ashtray. There wasn't any. I glanced at the floor and knew why. That was her ash tray. I dropped the cigarette and stepped on it hard as I got to my feet.

"How are you so sure you'll have money tomorrow?"

She closed her eyes, opened her mouth, and started to snore. Before I reached the door, she turned on her side. I was half tempted to whack her, just for the hell of it, but I figured maybe she would pay up and half of ninety bucks is forty-five bucks and my office rent was coming due. I went out into the hall.

Halfway down it, an apartment door was open. On a bare floor inside, sat a

couple of kids. A girl about seventeen, with long blond hair, and a boy about two years older in a blue-and-white polo shirt. Their arms were around one another, her head resting on his shoulder, and they sat before an old radio through which a torch singer droned a popular number.

This is a city of incongruities. By the time I reached ninety, maybe I'd make up my mind if I liked it.

Chapter II

WITH two fingers I typed half a dozen reports to mail order houses which had sent me bills to collect. The results of the previous day's work. My take was sixty bucks, and I didn't consider it too bad for a young lawyer who wasn't rising very fast.

At least, I wasn't chasing ambulances the way so many others were. Especially the lawyers who shared this big office with me. My name was on the directory in the lobby, all right. To reach me, you had to get through a receptionist first. No easy matter if you were trying to collect money from me. Otherwise, anyone got through. A visitor would pass from a decently appointed reception room into an office which occupied half the floor of this big building. Inside this big room were forty cubicles, each one big enough to hold a desk, a filing cabinet, and two chairs. You could actually be comfortable if you didn't have long legs. I did.

The lawyers who occupied these quarters changed as often as the days of the month. I was considered an old-timer because I'd been there a year and a half. Most of the boys found themselves something better. One good case and they were on their way. None of the good cases ever seemed to hit me. Here you could get a will or the papers for a real estate transfer drawn up cheap. You could get a man to defend you in night court or even take your case to Common Pleas. Everybody here seemed to have a specialty, something they'd drifted into. I'd drifted into collecting bills.

There was one advantage in being a combination bill collector and lawyer. If you met a stubborn case, you could

fill out a writ of replevin and have it served right away. Or start a civil action easily. The big mail order credit houses knew this, and that's why I got plenty of business. Too much sometimes, because it kept me so busy chasing I didn't have time to take on a regular case with a retainer and regular fees.

I gathered up my mail, plastered stamps on it, and carried it out to the corridor where I dumped it down the mail slot. It was eight o'clock. There were twenty bucks waiting for me at Joan Haven's place, and half of twenty bucks is ten bucks. Worth going after. In my line of work it doesn't pay to be proud.

I ate in a joint around the corner and laughed at my old dreams about when I'd be in practice and have people paging me in fancy hotels and restaurants. What the hell, I thought, the food was good here, it wasn't expensive, and everything was clean. So what if a sweaty guy, smelling of stale perspiration, wanted to sit at the same table? I could always move.

I finished my coffee, then took a downtown bus and walked west a couple of blocks to where Mrs. Haven lived. Things hadn't changed since the day before. Maybe there were more men sprawled out on the steps, more kids helling around. You could hardly tell the difference. I climbed the stairs, stepping between a couple of blowsy women who didn't see me at all. I went to the third floor and knocked on Mrs. Haven's door. Nobody answered.

I knocked again. People who know a bill collector is coming sometimes freeze into silence when he knocks. I was used to it, but even people in debt can't stand listening to someone bang on the door for half an hour. So I continued to use my fist on the panels and when my fist got sore, I used my foot.

I KNEW she was in there, because light came from beneath the door and she wasn't the type who'd unnecessarily run up an electric light bill. I hammered with both fists in a crescendo much like that used for the final effects in a fireworks display on the Fourth of July when they let everything go in one

big finale. That did it. Somebody was coming toward the door.

The key turned, the door was snapped open, and I blinked in surprise at the man who stood there. I don't know what he'd have looked like all dressed, but in his underwear he resembled a small mountain. He had thick eyebrows, curly hair, a big stomach, and shoulders like an ox. In socks, he stood about six feet two. He had black eyes. Just now, they were full of fire.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"I came to see Mrs. Haven—by appointment."

He reached out a hand and took hold of my shoulder. The bones didn't quite break. He hauled me inside and slammed the door.

"By appointment, huh? I told that lousy bag if she played around—"

Mrs. Haven was in the bedroom. I could hear springs squeak. "Who is it, Sammy? What's wrong?"

"Keep outa this, Joan," the big guy said. "I'll take care of him. And then I'll take care of you. Play around when you say you won't, huh? I told you what'd happen—"

He was still holding my shoulder in a viselike grip, and I grabbed his arm. I might as well have tried to dislodge a bear trap. The arm was thick and hairy and all muscle. He used his left hand to backhand me across the face. It hurt like hell. I smashed him in the breadbasket. He smiled at me—a thin sort of smile—and he reeked of gin.

Over his shoulder, I saw Mrs. Haven stagger into view in the doorway, and all of a sudden I thought I knew what made this big guy sore. I guess I would have been, too.

"Tell him—" I started to yell at her.

The hand on my shoulder switched to my throat and started to squeeze. This man was drunk—ugly and drunk. He didn't know his own strength. I might be killed. Far back in my mind a voice floated. It was that of a top sergeant who'd said, "You guys will have to fight for your lives and you don't do that like gents. You club a man, gouge out his eyes, knee him—"

I brought up my right knee sharply. The big guy did have a weak point. He yowled in pain and let go of me. I

scampered in the direction of the door, but he caught me before I reached it and if he'd been in a rage before, it had now reached a murderous pitch. I must have hurt him plenty, because sweat was pouring down his fat face. He whirled me around. I started pumping my fists.

Mrs. Haven stood in the doorway, watching it all. From the way she looked, she was too drunk to interfere or to attempt an explanation which the big guy would believe anyhow. He had registered in his mind the fact that my purpose in coming to see Mrs. Haven was the same as his, and naturally he was good and sore.

He gave me a shove, and I went flying backward into the room. That was when Mrs. Haven found her voice. It was shrill and still gin-cracked.

"Sammy, kill the bum! Go on, bust his fancy neck for him. He ain't got any right to bust in here like this."

Sammy didn't need any encouragement from her. Maybe he wouldn't have killed me, maybe he'd have stopped short of murder, but I couldn't be sure. I looked for something to heave at him.

That bust of Mozart or somebody was still on the TV set. When I went flying back, I hit the set, and that drew another scream from Mrs. Haven. The big guy had me cornered now. He was coming toward me slowly, spread-legged, fists raised and looking like big clubs. If he started using them on my head, there was a good chance he'd kill me. I half turned, grabbed the statue. I'd thought it was the usual cheap kind, made of plaster of paris, but this was metal and very heavy.

I didn't have time to think. He paid no attention to the upraised statue but bent and started to aim his first punches at my stomach. If they connected, they'd tear my insides loose. I smacked him on top of the head with the statue. I didn't pull the blow, and the weight of the statue made it a very heavy blow.

HE STARTED to fall. His hands clawed at my clothes, but he kept on falling until he was on his hands and knees. I stood up there, the statue raised. I meant to use it if he started to get up. He didn't. He dropped over

on one side. His eyes were wide open and they seemed quietly resentful, almost to the point of tears.

I put the statue back on the TV set, took off my hat, and wiped my face. It was wringing wet. Mrs. Haven hadn't moved and she didn't now. She just stood there, watching me.

"You were a witness to this," I said, "I had to slug the crazy fool."

She shuffled forward a couple of steps, looking straight at me. "Why'd you come back? Why?"

"Don't be an idiot. You said you'd have twenty dollars ready for me."

"What'd I tell you yesterday? I was plastered. What'd I tell you?"

"To come back. You were going to start paying off your bill."

"Don't gimme that. What'd I tell you?"

I didn't pay much attention to her. The big guy was too limp. I knelt and slapped him smartly on the face and his head rolled loosely. That didn't help, so I drew back my hand to slap him again and that was when I saw the blood. His head had been lying in a pool of it.

I ripped open his undershirt, laid my ear against his chest, and heard a whole lot of silence. I looked at him again. This couldn't be. The guy had no right to be dead. I slapped him a couple of more times and listened again. He was dead, all right.

Mrs. Haven seemed to know it, too. She was in the middle of the room, with both hands pressed against her temples and her mouth wide open as if she thought she was screaming. I tottered to the nearest chair and fell into it. What a mess!

"He's dead, ain't he?" she said in a voice that didn't seem to belong to her.

I said, "Yes." My voice wasn't mine either.

"You killed him. Damn you, you killed him!"

"I didn't mean to. I couldn't help it. I thought he was going to kill me—"

I stopped short. Why was I apologizing to this creature? Certainly it



I smacked him on top of the head with the statue

was no time for weakness. I got up and walked over to her. "Now, listen—you know exactly what happened. That's how you're going to tell it. Straight and square."

"You killed Sammy!"

I grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her hard. "It was self-defense, damn it." I was shouting almost as loud as she had.

"Right in front of my eyes you killed him. Sammy was a good guy. They didn't come much better'n Sammy. And you killed him."

I said, "Keep up that chant, and I'll slap you silly. Go put some clothes on. I've got to call the cops."

Her eyes snapped wide open, and she grabbed my arm with both hands. "No cops, you hear me? No cops."

I looked over at the corpse. "What do you suggest we do with that?"

"I don't care, but you ain't calling no cops. I'm getting outa here."

SHE headed for the door, suddenly realized she wasn't dressed for the street, and ran past me into the bedroom. She slammed the door—which seemed rather like an unnecessary precaution. I sat down again and held my head. I cursed Sammy mildly. I just couldn't let go at a dead man—not the way I wanted to. I was a little sorry for him, too. He'd thought that I happened to be another slob in Joan Haven's life and that he was being given a doublecross. She'd probably made Sammy a lot of cockeyed promises. I heaved myself to a standing position. There was just one thing to do. This needed the police. I walked to the bedroom door and tried to open it. I couldn't.

"Mrs. Haven," I called. "Open up."

"Get outa here, you lousy killer!" she yelled back.

I said, "I'm going for the police—unless you have a telephone here."

"No cops," she screeched. "I'm telling you, no cops!"

"We have to get the police. Can't you understand that? You stay here. I won't be long."

I went to the door and stepped into the hallway. Nobody eyed me curiously. In this dump, noise didn't mean a thing. You could murder a man in a fight, and

nobody would even notice the racket. I'd proved that. I descended the stairs slowly, treading heavily on each step. I didn't want the police any more than Mrs. Haven did. If I could think of any way out—

I reached the street without meeting anybody and walked a couple of blocks east to a busy avenue. I wandered into a bar and ordered a drink. That was a mistake. Alcohol set my brain to whirling, seeking some remedy for all this. I was even so cockeyed as to try to figure how I could sneak the dead man out of there and let him be found somewhere else.

Before I went too far on that tack I got out into the air again. If I kept thinking that way, I'd find myself in a real jam. As it stood now, I'd killed Sammy in self-defense. I had had legitimate business in Mrs. Haven's apartment. I didn't even know who the dead man was, and therefore the most astute cop couldn't find a motive for murder.

I wandered a couple of more blocks. What was I trying to make up my mind about? There wasn't any question about what I had to do. I started looking for a cop. There wasn't one in sight. I turned back. Why had Mrs. Haven been so insistent that I not call the police? Because she had been entertaining Sammy?. In the face of violent death, what difference did that make to a woman like her?

Maybe I was hoping she did have a good reason. Maybe that's why I went back to the apartment. It was a little after ten by now, and everybody had gone inside. All the steps were cleared, no kids romped in the gutters, no men in undershirts chewed over their problems. I went up the stairs and met nobody. Mrs. Haven's apartment door wasn't quite closed. It looked as if it had been slammed but had sprung open a notch. I pushed it all the way open and went in.

Sammy was just as I'd left him, like a bad dream come true. I called Mrs. Haven's name, and there was no answer. Suddenly alarmed, I hurried to the bedroom. Half the dresser drawers were open, and a lot of clothes were flung around. I ran to the kitchen. The sink was full of dirty dishes. The elec-

tric dishwasher, one of those roll-away, portable models, stood in a corner, dust and grease covered. I went over and kicked it hard.

So she'd run out. I should have expected it. Well, there wasn't anything I could do now. I went back to the bedroom for another look around. I saw a telephone on a little table beside the bed. So she'd had a phone and wouldn't let me know. Playing for time so she could get away. I cursed her and picked up the phone. I started to dial 0, then stopped and replaced the phone. I sat down heavily on the bed. I must have stayed there a long time. I'm not sure.

Then I went back into the living room and took another look at Sammy. My stomach heaved over a couple of times, and I got out of there. On my way to the street I started feeling that first numbness which comes of despair. Without Mrs. Haven to back up my story, I could be held for murder. It was something I had to face.

There was a corner drug store two blocks away. I bought six packs of cigarettes, a toothbrush, toothpaste, a razor, and shaving cream. I also bought two-handkerchiefs, sealed in packets. The phone booth was in the corner. I stepped into it and glanced at my watch. It was eleven-fifteen. The police weren't going to like me any better for my delay in reporting the murder. I dropped a dime in the slot, dialed 0 and asked for police headquarters.

I said, "My name is John Craig. I'm a lawyer with an office in the Brill Building. I killed a man a little while ago. The body is in the apartment of Mrs. Joan Haven on the third floor of 2235 West 19th Street. I'll be waiting for your men in a drug store at the corner of Eighth Avenue and West 21st Street."

Chapter III

AT THE station house, they took the razor and shaving cream away from me, but left the rest of the stuff. Half a dozen men questioned me. A stenographer typed out a long statement which I read, lawyer-wise, before I signed it. When they led me to a cell, it was dawn. I fell asleep very soon.

The clank of a key in my cell door wakened me. It was broad daylight. I knew where I was the instant my eyes opened. A turnkey said, "Lieutenant Barr wants to see you, pal. You can have a minute to freshen up."

I ran some water in the tin basin, scrubbed my face and neck, found my comb, and made myself as presentable as a guy can be who has had his tie and belt taken from him. I had to keep one hand in my pocket to hold my pants up as I walked ahead of the turnkey. He led me up a long, dismal corridor and then nudged my shoulder to indicate I was to turn into an open doorway. I passed through what looked like the city room in a newspaper office. There were small oak desks with men sitting at them pounding out reports. Nobody even looked up.

Then there was another corridor off which were a lot of offices that reminded me for all the world of my own place. I came to a glass door lettered Lieutenant Brad Barr. I twisted the knob and went in.

I hadn't met Lieutenant Barr before. He was a slim guy with a hatchet face and sparse gray hair. He had snappy brown eyes and a generous mouth for his kind of face, and small, neat ears. I thought I liked him, then realized what he'd do to me and I didn't like him any more.

"Sit down, Craig," he said.

I perched myself on the edge of an oak chair. It was as comfortable as a rail fence. He leaned back, looked me over for a minute or two, and then held up the statement I'd signed during the night.

"I read it. Very interesting," he said.

"Not sensational though," I said.

"The newspaper items are." He shoved a paper across the desk. "You're a lawyer, and the newspaper boys didn't know how important you might be. There was no time to check up before the morning editions, so they ran hog wild. Nice picture of you, though."

I remember someone shooting off a flash bulb in my face. At the time, I'd been too numb to have it register. It was a good picture. I looked very handsome, in a drawn sort of way.

"If they'd known what sort of a flop

you are as a lawyer, they wouldn't have bothered, believe me," Barr said.

I bristled at him. "Now, look here, I'll give you ten to one I make more dough than you do or ever will."

"Oh, hell," he said. "Sensitive punk I've got on my hands this time."

I opened my coat and showed him the label sewed to the inner pocket. "You don't buy suits in that place unless you pay a hundred and fifty. How about showing me where yours came from—or shutting up about this sort of drap."

"Okay, okay," he said loudly. "You're a huge success. Congratulations. Now, about this confession you dictated and signed. Did anybody rubber hose you into it?"

"Nobody did a damn thing but listen."

"That's a novel answer, anyway. Then tell me this, Craig. Why did you make it?"

"Make what? The confession?"

"I'm not talking about dames."

"I don't get it."

"You will. This woman—what's her name?" His eyes ran down the typed pages. "This Joan Haven. You claim you knew her only from the day before."

"That's right."

Barr put the confession paper down slowly. "She must have been an out-of-this-world pushover, my friend."

I TOLD him I wouldn't know about that and put Lieutenant Barr down as a nut.

"Now, let's get this straight," he went on. "You left this apartment the first time around nine-forty."

"I guessed. I got there at nine. I killed the guy five minutes later."

"Who saw you leave?"

"Nobody. Some tenants saw me go in."

"I know that. Your time element checks. They said it was about nine. How come nobody saw you leave?"

"Because I— What's this all about?"

"Did you ever see the dead man before?"

"Never."

"Well, we don't know who he is yet. All we have is the name you tagged him with. Sammy."

"He was just some poor slob who was making a pass at Mrs. Haven and got sore when I interrupted him by banging on her door."

"Perhaps. Now, let me ask you one direct question, Craig. I expect a frank answer and if I don't get it, you'll travel back to a cell and rot there for all I care."

I said, "You charge me or let me go, Lieutenant. Don't forget, I'm still a lawyer and I have a diploma that says so."

"We'll skip that. Okay—here it is. Why are you taking the rap for Mrs. Haven if you hardly know her?"

I fumbled in my pocket for a cigarette, lit it, and exhaled slowly.

"Mrs. Haven was an eyewitness, nothing else. I know she scrambled, because I went back. I'm not taking any rap for her. I hit Sammy on the head with the metal statue I described, and that's all there is to it."

Barr said, "We didn't find any prints on the statue and we didn't find any blood or hair."

"Okay—maybe Mrs. Haven wiped it off. Maybe she thought I'd run out, too, and wanted to protect me."

"Exactly," Barr purred. "Now we're getting somewhere. Why should she do a thing like that for a comparative stranger? In fact, for a man she ought to sneer at. Bill collectors usually are sneered at, aren't they?"

"You may know that better than I do. Now what the hell is this all about?"

"You're covering for her. I don't know why. You were at her place around nine o'clock. That's perfectly clear, more so than you realize. Now stop being a smart guy and tell the truth."

"You want me to cross my heart?" I asked sarcastically. "What more can a man do than call the police, show them the corpse, and sign a confession?"

"A lot more. We want Mrs. Haven, for one thing."

"Well, so do I. She's my eyewitness. She can furnish absolute proof that I had to conk that big, overgrown sap."

"All right," Barr said. "I'm sick of horsing around with you. We've established that you were there at nine. There's no proof of when you left. Sam-

my was killed around nine-thirty—maybe ten. The medical examiner can't place it to the minute. So let's say you were there at nine and she paid you the twenty bucks. Are you following me, Craig?"

"I understand English. I've got a diploma—"

"Skip it, will you? Okay—so you left at five minutes after nine. You went out. Nobody saw you. You got into a cab at the corner of Eighth and West 20th. You told the cab driver to take you to the Club Intime. There you picked up a good-looking dame and went to her apartment with her. Later you got a phone call and left in a big hurry. You returned to the Haven apartment, found Sammy nice and dead. You told Mrs. Haven to scram, gave her time enough, and then called us. How's that for police work?"

I shook my head slowly. I'd met screwballs before, but this guy was at the top of the heap. He whizzed around faster than the guys who were duly examined and put away.

"I suppose none of that registers," he said, his tone quietly sarcastic.

"None—because it isn't true. I never even heard of the Club Intime."

Barr picked up his phone and said, "Okay, Bert."

THE office door opened and a lanky man came in. In his hand he held a cap with a hack driver's badge pinned to it. He seemed nervous and ill at ease.

Barr said, "Anybody here you know, Finch?"

"I make him," Finch pointed at me. There wasn't anybody else in the

room. How could he be wrong?

"Tell it," Barr said. He glanced in my direction. "This is Steve Finch, a cab driver. He has a story to tell."

"I'm listening," I said. "But I won't believe a word of it."

Finch said, "I was parked at Eighth and 20th, like my tally sheet shows. I just finished a butt when this guy ankles up, gets in, and says do I know where the Club Intime is. I ain't heard of it, but he tells me it's over on Ninth, so I go over there and sure enough, there it is. Club Intime. You learn somethin' every day."

I leaned forward. "You took me to the Club Intime?"

"That's right, pal."

"You're nuts," I said and settled back again.

Barr said, "All right, Finch. Wait in the next room and tell Bert to send in another one."

This time a portly, well dressed man, with a cheery red face and a kind of bulbous nose, came in. He walked with short, mincing steps, as if he were afraid his pot belly would pull him over if he relaxed too much.

Barr said, "What's your name?"

He had a thin kind of voice. "I told you—Mike Tambo. I'm the headwaiter at the Club Intime."

"All right," Barr encouraged. "Tell it."

Tambo pointed at me. "About nine-thirty this man came into the club and wanted a table close to ringside. We were not very busy, he gave me five dollars and I was glad to oblige him."

"There's no mistake?" Barr asked.

[Turn page]

AMAZING THING! *By Cooper*

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"None. When I saw his picture—"

"That's all," Barr said. "I'm ready for the next one. You wait."

The third lunatic who entered was a little short of seven feet, but not by much, and as skinny as an anemic frankfurter. He was a smart guy, too. He knew just what to say. Somebody had overtrained him.

"This—" he indicated me with a jerk of his thumb—"was at one of my tables at the Club Intime. He came in at nine-thirty. I know, because our floor show goes on then and he was hardly seated before the lights dimmed. He ordered brandy and soda, some curried chicken, hashed-in-cream potatoes, Caesar salad, coffee, and apple pie."

"Any questions, Counselor," Barr asked me.

"Just one, Lieutenant. What are you framing me for?"

Barr turned back to the waiter. "What's your name?"

"Fred Pizer. I've worked at that club for seven years. It's a nice job. For instance, this man—he gave me two bucks for a tip. Just one at the table and I get two bucks. That ain't bad."

I said, "If you ever try to spend that two bucks, get set to run, because whoever you hand it to won't see it either."

"That's enough, Craig," Barr said. "What else happened with this man, Mr. Pizer?"

"Well, he was alone, like I said, and just across from him—three tables—at Jerry's station—there was this tomato—this doll. She looked at him and he looked at her. Then he raises his glass and she raises hers, and pretty soon he goes over and she comes back to his table with him. So after a while, they go out together."

"What an imagination," I said.

Barr sent him away, but the next witness was something else again. She was about five feet four, weighed around a hundred and ten with about eighty of those pounds distributed in curves. She had hazel eyes, light brown hair that could easily be called blond. She had a small, pert nose and a nice mouth. A very nice mouth. I walked my eyes down her body and discovered she had gorgeous legs. I hoped she'd seen me, too. I wanted her to have seen me that

night even if I wasn't there.

Barr said, "State your name and then your story."

"I'm Cora Kane. Last night I went to the Club Intime. I often go there. It's not far from where I live. I saw Mr. Craig at a near-by table. I was lonely, he smiled at me and then came over. We became friends. Afterwards, we went to my apartment."

"What time was that?" Barr asked.

"We weren't in the club long. I'd say we reached my apartment at ten-fifteen."

"Could Craig have been anywhere else between the hours of nine-thirty and when he left you last night?"

"Why, no."

"You're sure of that?"

I said, "You'd better be, baby."

She gave me a funny look. "We met just after nine-thirty. As I said, by a few minutes past ten we were in my apartment. He didn't get the phone call until about eleven."

"And from shortly after ten until the phone call, he was with you."

"Yes. Oh, definitely."

"You're sure about this?" Barr insisted.

She smiled at him, looked at me, and batted her eyes a little. She said it as calmly as if she were talking about the weather. "I'm very certain. You see, I guess we were both a little steamed up by the time we reached the apartment, because we—well, we got pretty chummy just about five minutes after we got there."

Chapter IV

I DIDN'T do anything. I didn't faint, I didn't scream. I didn't rise to my feet in protest. I just sat there, hoping Cora Kane's fairy tale would really happen. I didn't give a damn if she lied herself blue in the face. Any dish like her could tell those lies about me.

"Well, Craig?" Barr asked.

I didn't pay any attention to him. At a time like this, should a measly homicide lieutenant be important? I looked at Cora.

"It was nice, wasn't it, beautiful? Where was this supposed to have happened?"

"Johnny, I told you not to forget the address. It's apartment 4D in the Admore. You said it was such a cute apartment."

"Yeah," I said. "You were, too."

"I hope I didn't make any trouble for you, Johnny, but these policemen woke me up this morning and asked me a million questions. I didn't know what to say at first. So I thought I'd better tell the truth, just as it happened."

"Just as it happened," I nodded. "Baby, you did real well. I'm proud of you."

"I only did what I thought was right, Johnny."

Barr said, "That'll be all, Miss Kane."

She came over and put her hand against my cheek. It was the warmest hand I'd ever felt. Maybe I was stone cold. Then she put her cheek against mine and finally kissed me just below the ear.

"Poor Johnny, I hope you're not in any bad trouble."

I watched her walk out. She twitched her hips in the prettiest manner. Barr brought me out of that daydreaming.

"Craig, do you want to change your story now?"

I had another cigarette. I opened the match folder as if it were a heavy book, tore off a match, and scraped it. I did everything in slow motion. I needed time to think. I'd heard of frame-ups before—what lawyer hasn't—but this was the first one ever meant to spring a self-confessed killer. I didn't know any of the people the lieutenant had called in, but they told their stories so straight I wondered if I hadn't wandered off in some sort of fog after I busted Sammy's skull open.

"Craig!" Barr snapped.

I said, "I killed Sammy. I hit him on the head with a metal statue. He fell down. I had an eyewitness, but she blew out on me. I walked around, trying to make up my mind, and then I turned myself in. You can believe that or you can believe stuff these witnesses handed you. I'm getting so I don't care much which."

"Look here," Barr said. "The cab driver gave us our lead. He saw your picture in the papers this morning and recognized you. He went to a precinct

station to make a report. We give plaques to cab drivers who help us. They display them and get added tips. They all want to earn a plaque."

"Yes," I said. "Maybe the Club In-time gives plaques, too, and maybe Cora Kane has several of them hanging over her bed. I'm telling you it's all hogwash."

Barr said, "I'll admit you could have killed Sammy before you got into Finch's taxi. But why did you lie about the way you spent the rest of the evening? And what about that phone call you made before you left the club with Cora and the call you got at her flat?"

"What phone calls?" I asked blankly.

HE SHRUGGED. "Cora should have told you that. It's all in the records. You asked for her phone number, then you left her and made a call from the booth in the cloakroom at the club. Around eleven o'clock you received a call—from a woman—at Cora's apartment. She said she had to get out of bed to answer it."

"Did she get out on my side?" I asked. "That would have been nice."

"Damn it, Craig, I'm trying to get at the truth. That Haven woman murdered Sammy. She called you, and for some reason you're trying to take the rap. It won't work. Your story is full of holes."

I reminded him, "You said yourself I could have busted Sammy."

"Yes, because he might have been killed right after nine. We aren't sure. But did you ever hear of a murderer who walked out, took a cab at the next corner, went to a night club, ate curried chicken and apple pie, flirted with a doll, dated her, went to her apartment, and went to bed with her? All in direct sequence immediately after he bumped a man? It's no good, Craig. You're not telling the truth."

"I'm not clamoring for a manslaughter rap, Lieutenant, if that's what you mean. But I don't know where Mrs. Haven is. I never saw her after the kill."

"She phoned you. Admit that."

"I can't—because she didn't."

"Then who phoned you at Cora Kane's apartment?"

"I wasn't at—" I stopped short. This guy was never going to believe me. In the face of all these witnesses, no one else would either. If I persisted in denying their stories, I'd probably be sent to a psychiatric ward. To learn the truth behind this, I had to be free.

"Well?" the lieutenant persisted.

I said, "Oh hell, I was trying to give the Haven woman a chance to sober up so I could get her story. I promised to act as her lawyer. Perhaps that's what made me take the blame. Or I might have been so scared after she blew that I figured out that story about self-defense. Put it all down to the unusual dopiness of a guy who should have known better. Mrs. Haven called me at Cora's apartment and told me she'd killed the guy."

"Now," the lieutenant said, "we're getting somewhere. I want another statement—the truth this time. After that, it's up to the assistant D.A. in charge of the case."

They let me go early that evening. They weren't satisfied, but in the face of the alibi so mysteriously provided for me, they had to let me out.

Some mail had accumulated at my office, but there was nothing from Joan Haven, though I hardly expected there would be. I began thinking of Cora Kane, the blonde with the fairy tale, and the more I thought the more it seemed there could be no better place to begin this investigation than with her. The idea appealed to me so strongly that I was somewhat annoyed by the man I found wandering around the maze of offices outside my own cubicle.

He was an average looking man. You wouldn't remember him more than five minutes, unless you had good reason. He was dressed in dark clothes, was of average height and weight, mild appearing except around the mouth and eyes. His lips were too thin, his eyes a little too bright.

He said, "I'm looking for a lawyer named Craig. I understand he's a bill collector."

"I'm Craig," I said. "I collect bills. Look, even if you want to pay up, I'm a little busy, so let it go until tomorrow—"

"I owe your clients nothing, Mr.

Craig," he said. "I simply have a bill I wish you to collect for me."

I said, "I thought maybe you were someone I'd written to. Sorry, but I'm still busy—"

I STOPPED talking to reflect for an instant. How did this bird know I specialized in collecting bills? I didn't advertise, I never bragged about it, there was nothing in directories, phone books, or the lobby listing to indicate I collected bills. All of a sudden this very average guy interested me.

He said, "I have an attractive proposition, Mr. Craig."

He really wanted to hire me. I asked him into the office where he perched himself on the edge of a chair and never took his beady eyes off me. I listened to his brief story.

I own certain property which is now, in part, occupied by a pawnbroker who owes me a year's rent. He refuses to pay and threatens to beat me up every time I make demands on him. He won't get out and he says he'll be extremely angry if I take any civil action."

"He sounds like the kind of a guy collecting money from would be a pleasure," I said. "You mentioned a proposition."

"He owes me three thousand dollars. You may keep two thousand if you collect the money at once."

"That may not be so easy," I said. "Three grand is a lot of dough."

He smiled thinly. "It so happens that I know he has more than that amount in his safe at this moment, but tomorrow he won't have. Frankly, the man is what's known as a fence—a crook. Perhaps with this knowledge you can force him to pay up."

I didn't go for the idea at all. It was too pat, too convenient, but I was intrigued enough to pretend I'd fallen for the offer of two grand. I said, "What's your name and the details of the account?"

He gave me a legal looking document. His name was Albert Moore and he had an uptown address. I stuck the paper into my pocket.

"You will have to handle this at once, Mr. Craig," he reminded me. "The pawnshop is open until ten, and it's al-

most that now."

"I'll go right over," I told him. "Expect to hear from me tomorrow."

"Very well." He got up, bowed slightly, and got out of there at a rather rapid rate—as if he didn't want to be asked any more questions.

I didn't move for a few minutes. I felt certain this was a plant of some kind. It had to be, and I was going to fall for it, mainly because I wanted to see what would happen. Maybe the idea of a two-grand fee—if the thing was on the level—had a little something to do with it too.

At any rate, I took a taxi downtown to the address Mr. Albert Moore had given me. I was a little surprised to find that there really was a pawnshop there.

A bell tinkled when I pushed open the door, and pretty soon an angular, anemic-looking man came out of a back room. He wore a green eyeshade and had one eye screwed up as if it had grown that way from being closed around a jeweler's loupe too often.

I said, "My name is Craig. I'm a lawyer and I'm here about the back rent—"

He lifted his head quickly in surprise, and even the screwed-up eye opened wider. I leaned against the counter and almost dislodged a bowling ball someone had apparently hocked. It started moving. I grabbed it just in time to keep it from rolling off the counter. That was all I had time for. I heard the door open behind me, and the bell tinkled. I saw the pawnbroker's face, surprised from what I'd said to him, grow even more surprised and then fill with terror. I knew just what was happening. I got a grip on the bowling ball.

Someone said, "Stay where you are. This is a stickup."

It was more than that. It was the reason why I'd been sent here. I was about to be murdered, and the pawnbroker would say the stickup men had shot me for no reason at all, that they were trigger-happy lunatics. It wouldn't make any difference, because I'd be dead, and that's what somebody wanted very badly.

I swung around fast, measured the distance between me and the nearest of

the two men—the one with the gun in his fist—and threw the bowling ball. It hit him squarely in the chest. It must have stunned him, because for some reason the gun didn't go off. He fell on his back and stayed put. The gun flew out of his hand as he hit the floor, and he made no move to retrieve it.

The second thug was pulling his gun when I reached him. His right hand was tangled up with the gun and his pocket, and he was a trifle clumsy with his left, so I clouted him squarely on the nose before he could make any show of resistance.

He gave a yelp of pain, decided he didn't want any part of this, and started running for the door. The first man was on his feet by then, trying to find the gun he'd dropped. It was over near the door, and he went for it. So did I. He heard me coming and didn't bother to stop. His pal had already opened the door and left it open. The second man went through it fast. The last I saw of them they were turning the first corner they came to and neither one looked back.

Chapter V

BY THE time I got back to the hockshop, the owner was mopping his face and was beginning to lose his corpse-like paleness. He made his lips move okay, but nothing came out.

"They're gone," I said reassuringly. My voice had a definite tremolo in it. "We were lucky. Neither of those hoods had much nerve."

He swallowed hard. "I—I—thanks. Yes—thanks very much."

"They'd have cleaned up tonight," I said. "There's that three grand in your safe."

"Three grand?" he asked in something like pure awe. "Three thousand dollars you mean, maybe? I got three thousand bucks? Are you crazy, mister?"

"I'm beginning to think so," I said. "About this back rent you owe—"

"How can I owe rent? I own this building," he said. "What is this all about, please?"

"Forget it," I said. "I must have got

the address wrong. That is, unless you've heard of someone named Albert Moore."

"I do not remember the name," he said.

"Well, don't feel badly. I doubt if Mr. Albert Moore remembers his own name. Call the cops if you like. I'm Johnny Craig, a lawyer, if they want my name. They know me all right."

"Somebody," the pawnbroker said plaintively, "is crazy."

"Yeah—that would be me," I told him. "I'm getting over it fast, though. So long, and I hope I didn't damage your bowling ball."

I decided I'd better do something about all of this—before they tried to get me again. Next time, they wouldn't figure me as being quite so simple. I headed for the Admore Apartments where Cora Kane had said she lived. Maybe that was a fake, too, but I doubted it. The cops had been there to question her.

It was a nice place. Nothing fancy like doormen or lobby attendants, but the building looked clean and the neighborhood was okay. The kind of apartment house where second-string actors and actresses might live or successful career girls. Maybe professional men with their families. I'd have liked to live there myself.

Cora's name was on one of the mail boxes, and I took the self-operated elevator to her floor. I rang the buzzer, heard her coming to the door. She didn't register the slightest surprise when she saw me.

"Johnny," she said in a warm, friendly voice, "come in. When did they let you out?"

I grinned. "Don't make it sound as if I'd just served a prison rap, baby. After all, the most they could make of it was manslaughter."

She wrinkled her nose. "You're making fun of me, Johnny." She closed the door. "Sit down. I'll mix you a drink. Scotch on the rocks, isn't it? Just like last night?"

"Yeah," I said. "Just like last night."

Presently she handed me an old-fashioned glass holding a cube of ice surrounded by good Scotch. I took a sip and looked at her with frank admira-

tion. She was wearing a hostess gown with a zipper than ran all the way down the front. The gown was full and hid her shape. That I didn't like.

"I'm glad you dropped in," she said brightly.

"So am I. After all, though, I was bound to come back, wasn't I?"

"I hoped so, Johnny."

I threw the rest of the Scotch into my throat, put the glass down, walked over, and lifted her out of her chair. I pulled her to me roughly and fiddled with the zipper.

I said, "You're wonderful, baby. I can't forget last night any more than you can." I gave the zipper a good solid tug.

SHE pushed me away with surprising strength, spun around, and pulled the zipper up. I stood there, smiling, when she faced me again. I said, "Okay, baby, I only wanted to see what you would do. I guessed right."

She stepped further back. "You don't have to be so hasty."

"Cut it out, Cora. It worked with the cops but it won't work with me, because I'm the little man who wasn't here—remember? I know the truth, and it doesn't include your allowing me to pick you up and spend any part of the night with you."

"So that's your angle," she said slowly. She started making with the sex again. "If I have to prove—"

I said, "Lay off, baby. I'm not claiming I'm crazy enough to turn down something like you, but not this time. Somebody must have an awful lot on you, Cora."

"Nobody has anything on me, at all. I don't know what you're talking about," she said.

I moved in fast, grabbed her. The gown was partway open then. I bent her back and plastered a rough kiss on her lips. They didn't respond. She was trying hard but she couldn't quite make it. I let go of her, walked to my chair, and sat down with a loud and raucous laugh.

"You act a good bluff, baby, but when there's a showdown you just aren't there. Now what's this all about?"

She angrily yanked the zipper up,

chewed on her lower lip for a moment, sat down heavily and crossed her legs. The one on top moved up and down.

I said, "It's no use, Cora. You lied to the cops, and I want to know why."

"You," she said, "are a plain stinker. Get out of here."

"Somebody either paid you to lie for me or threatened you," I said. "I killed a man in self-defense. Someone doesn't want it to seem that way. I don't know why. Maybe they want the kill pinned on a drunken woman who ran away

myself a little whisky over the ice cube left in my glass on the theory that the cube shouldn't be wasted. Then I went to the bedroom door and knocked on it.

"Good night," I said. "I'll see you again soon. Think over what I told you. I'll listen more sympathetically than the cops."

There was no answer, so I walked out. When I reached the street, I hailed a cab and had myself driven to the tenement house where all this had started. I wasn't sure why I was going back but

FINANCIAL BRAINSTORM

WILLIAM STUART holds the honor of being Connecticut's first counterfeiter. He would buy counterfeit money and travel around the country passing it.

One day, as he looked at a genuine dollar bill, he got a brainstorm. He noticed that there was a circle on it with the figure 1. "All I have to do is to put a 100 in that circle and I can make 99 dollars profit." So he and his pal, Joseph Mills, started to do this simple trick and got rid of many of these altered banknotes.

This started havoc with the banking institutions in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. It was tough to explain to a cheated man, "Yes sir, you have a good note on this bank. But it is only for one dollar." So they got up new plates and printed their notes with the words written over the face as "One Dollar." And that finished the brainstorm. —*Sam Brant*



rather than back up my story or maybe they're protecting her for some reason. I don't know, but I intend to find out, and you know part of the truth."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she said.

"Yes, you have. No nice kid like you would state publicly that I had picked you up and slept with you, not even to save my life—unless it happened to be true, which you and I know it isn't. If you won't talk now—to me—you will later to the cops when I get enough information to convince them this is a rotten deal all around."

She suddenly jumped to her feet, marched across the small living room, entered the bedroom, and slammed the door. I heard the key turn in the lock. I'd been summarily dismissed. I poured

I had a feeling there must be something there to give me a lead. Mostly, I hoped to get a line on where Joan Haven might have gone. I started going over the whole thing in my mind.

Joan Haven wasn't much but she liked and appreciated good things, which indicated she'd probably once had them. According to the barber, she frequently borrowed money but always paid it back. She had promised to pay something on the dishwasher but before making that promise, she wanted to know what the date was. I'd told her it was the fourteenth, and she'd said to come back the next day—the fifteenth. Was it possible she received some kind of an allotment on the fifteenth of each month? If so, it must have gone uncollected this time.

I RECALLED how she'd readily accepted me as a lawyer but not the reason why I came. She'd acted as if she expected an attorney to show up sometime or other and make a deal. More and more, I began to think that Joan Haven was being paid off each month.

She'd been drunk the first day I saw her. So drunk that when I returned, she couldn't remember what she'd told me and seemed to be badly worried that she'd talked too much. Now Joan was gone, vanished. She'd apparently left of her own volition and not been forcibly taken away, which merely added more mystery to too much already piled up.

Then that phony Albert Moore who'd sent me to a hock shop and arranged to have it stuck up by a couple of gents who were going to shoot me down and make it appear that I'd been the victim of trigger-happy stickup men. That trick would have worked, too, if I hadn't been lucky. That kind of luck might not last. Even if I called the whole thing off, maybe whoever arranged all this might still think I was dangerous. Mostly, though, it was self-respect that made me determined to see it through.

Hell, I'd killed a man. I wanted somebody to believe me when I said so.

I paid off the cab driver, walked half a block beyond the tenement where Joan had lived, and then came back. The street was deserted. I entered the building and was starting up the stairs when I remembered the mail boxes in the downstairs hall. I retraced my steps. Sure enough, the rusty one bearing Joan's name had an envelope in it. It must have come today. I looked around furtively before I pried the ancient tin box open with a long key I carried in my case. The envelope fell out and landed on the floor. I scooped it up quickly and went upstairs fast.

The door to Joan's flat wasn't even locked, but I knocked softly just in case a cop had been posted. There was no answer, so I walked in and turned on the lights. Nothing had changed much. The cops had gone through the joint and left it somewhat more untidy than it had been, though that would have been hard to notice. I winced at the chalk

marks that showed where the body had fallen and looked at the dark blob of dried blood only once.

I studied the envelope in my hand then. It had been postmarked right here in town at a midtown post office. There was no return address. Joan's name was typewritten, and the envelope looked like the kind you can buy in any five-and-dime.

I opened it and took out some bills—fifteen twenty dollar bills. Three hundred dollars. There was nothing else in the envelope, and the bills were old and could never be traced.

So I'd been right. Somebody had been paying off Joan, someone who couldn't risk having her involved in a killing, justified or not. I wondered why. Whoever it was had even gone so far as to protect himself by forcing or paying for perjured testimony from Cora Kane, a cab driver, a waiter, and a headwaiter. I thought about going to see those three men but decided against it. I doubted that any of them would even give me the time of day.

Chapter VI

AT LEAST I had something in my hand—three hundred dollars. It seemed odd that with an income like that, Joan would have permitted herself to fall as low as she did. Unless she was trying to forget something. Of course, the answer must be hidden in her past, so I started searching the apartment. Maybe the cops had missed an item or two, and if I could find even one meager clue telling me where Joan had come from, I might have a chance.

It occurred to me that this place must have some kind of a super, and frequently these men knew much about their tenants. I'd discovered that in trying to trace skip cases. I went downstairs and found the stairway to the basement. A man in faded overalls and a greasy cap was rolling cinder barrels toward the back door. He stopped when I walked up to him, then wiped his face with a grimy arm.

I said, "Are you the super?"

He said, "Naw—I do this because I like to strain my guts heaving barrels around. Whaddya want?"

"It's about Joan Haven—the woman who beat it after the killing last night."

"I done all the talking to cops I intend to do," he said. "You guys pumped me dry. Lemme alone, will ya?"

I said, "I'm no cop. Anyway, the police aren't interested in Joan any more. They found her dead a little while ago."

"No kidding? Y'know, I figured it would end that way. Her kind usually wind up on a slab."

"I'm a lawyer from her insurance company. We want to locate her heirs. The policy was made out to her estate, but we can't seem to find an heir. Where did she come from, do you know?"

He spread his dirty left hand wide, put the forefinger of his right hand against the palm and scratched energetically. "Insurance companies have dough, my friend. Plenty of dough."

"If you know anything, you'll probably profit two ways," I said. "I'm willing to pay off modestly, but if through your help we locate the heir to Joan's estate, that person will probably pay handsomely. At least, I'll recommend it."

"I'm interested in what's in my hand right now, pal."

I gave him a twenty of my own money. His fingers closed on the bill, folded it rapidly, flipped it into the pants he wore under the overalls.

"Twenty bucks don't buy much, pal," he said, grinning like an ape. "I'll tell you when it's used up."

"Do you know where Joan came from?"

He said, "Nope—and all the dough you got won't change that answer because it's the truth."

"Okay. How long had she lived here?"

"A year and a half. Paid her rent regularly. We had no kick."

"Did she have any visitors?"

"Are you kidding? Listen, sometimes it was like a parade."

"I mean regular visitors, people who might have known her in the past."

He said, "Nope."

"Did she make a point of visiting anyone special at regular intervals?"

"Not as far as I know, pal."

"Well, what do you know?" I demanded. The guy was getting my goat.

"She was a lush, pal, and luses sometimes get careless with their property. It might have just happened she threw something out one time that she didn't mean to throw out. Something very interesting, if you know what I mean."

"How much?" I asked.

"Five hundred."

Whatever it was this slob had must be important. "Don't be ridiculous," I said. "I'll go to the police if I have to."

HE SHRUGGED. "If you do, chum, there won't be nothing for them to find when they get here. It'll be my word against yours. That's the wrong move, chum. You can do better than that."

"One hundred," I said.

"Four."

"Two hundred, and I wouldn't pay more than that for the original copy of the *Pickwick Papers*."

"I never read 'em, but they wouldn't be as juicy as the stuff I got."

I said, "All right—two-fifty and if you think that's not the limit, I will go to the cops and make you destroy whatever it is you have. Then you won't get a dime."

"You're a tight Joe," he said amiably. "Let's see the two and a half yards."

I showed him Joan's money—her three hundred. I figured she owed it to me. Anyway, she might be in trouble, and it was only fair I use up her money before I dipped into the little I had. Of course, the super didn't have change for the twenties and he wouldn't take two-forty, so I had to give him two-sixty. He brought out a dog-eared, ancient, cheaply made scrapbook.

"Joan heaves this out one night. Like she was mad at it. I happened to be in the corridor so I picked it up. I figured on throwing it away myself but I forgot. The next morning she was sober and she came down to see me, wanting to know had she thrown out any old papers. I told her yeah—if they weren't burned up, they were probably out back in the incinerator. She ran out and rooted around in the ashes like she was plain nuts. I decided maybe that scrapbook was important."

I opened it. The first page contained clips from an upstate newspaper, the

Miller Falls *Daily Eagle*. They concerned such exciting things as engagements, weddings, showers. They were all about twenty years old. I decided to look the thing over at my office. I went there by cab, wondering when I'd get back to earning a living.

In the office, I studied the scrapbook thoroughly. The super had been right. It was an important find, and Joan had reason to go half nuts for fear it might have fallen into the wrong hands.

First of all, I determined that her maiden name was Palmer and she'd married a guy named Harkness. Haven was either a phony or she'd married again. It appeared that Harkness and a man named Sydney Ward had jointly owned a brass foundry engaged in the manufacturing of marine goods—like the brasswork on ships, I supposed.

From those clips I got a chronological history of the firm and especially of Joan's husband and his partner. The clippings were spaced closer and closer, and more social events took place. Joan had apparently been someone of importance.

Then it all came to an abrupt end. The last clip gave a long, detailed story of the death of Joan's husband. It seemed that he, Joan, and the business partner, Sydney Ward, had gone deer hunting, and Sydney Ward had accidentally killed Joan's husband. That had happened eleven years ago. A coroner's jury had absolved Ward, mainly on the strength of Joan's testimony.

THERE was one final clip, not even pasted in the book but simply stuck between a couple of pages. It stated that the foundry business had been sold and Sydney Ward had moved away. It seemed that tragedy was no stranger in Joan's life.

I picked up a phone book. There were four Sydney Wards listed. I called the first one. A man answered and I said, "This is the Miller Falls *Daily Eagle*. I'd like to know—"

"I don't want none," the man said and hung up.

I tried another, received no answer. The third number was that of a Park Avenue address. A woman with a soft voice answered, and I had an idea she

was a servant.

I said, "Is Mr. Ward at home?"

"Who is calling, please?"

"I'm a reporter on the *Daily Eagle*, a newspaper in Mr. Ward's home town—Miller Falls. I'd like to interview him and take a story back home with me."

She said, "Just a moment, sir."

It was a long moment. I know, because I held my breath during most of it. The same woman came back on. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting, sir. If you will please contact Mr. Ward's private secretary tomorrow, arrangements for an appointment will be made. Mr. Ward's office is at the Larch Steamship Lines. However, you probably know this."

I thanked her very much and hung up. I lit a cigarette and tasted the tobacco for the first time in hours. I was relaxed and calm. I was going places. I knew something though I had no idea where it would lead. I put my feet on my desk, leaned back, and decided I was not only a moron but an especially stupid one. Everything I did was sending me closer to jail. I couldn't possibly win and the only conclusion I reached was that I must be an extremely stubborn individual.

Chapter VII

NEXT morning, I felt even more stubborn when I walked into the main office of the Larch Steamship Lines. I already knew something about them and about the owner. It was a fast freight line to South America and Africa and had been started back in the days of the slave trade. It had been passed down through the generations until it reached the last in the line and Rita Larch had operated it successfully until she married Sydney Ward ten years ago and soon afterwards turned the business over to him. It seemed that he'd been selling her brass marine supplies for some time and knew her quite well.

This same Sydney Ward had also known Joan Haven just as well—perhaps better—and he'd accidentally killed her husband on a hunting trip. Things were beginning to add up. Ward, of course, couldn't possibly know me,

so I felt reasonably safe in visiting him for a pretended interview. If I slipped anywhere and he got wise, that was all right with me. I had some other questions I'd like to ask him, too.

The offices occupied a whole eight-story building half a block from the waterfront, and when I asked for Ward, I was sent to the top floor. There, I stepped out of the elevator into a large reception room as modernistic as the steamship line was ancient. Everything was done in pastel, including the receptionist who rated her blond hair about as much as an Airedale would have. I told her I wanted to see Ward's secretary.

"That would be Mr. Galey," she said. If she'd had the nerve, I think she'd have asked me to date her. I didn't enjoy being eaten by a woman's eyes. She plugged into the board, nibbled at me some more while she waited, and at last told Mr. Galey that the reporter was here.

I moved out of her range and pretended to study some old photos of wind-jammers which were hung safely behind thick glass. Light slanted on the glass in such a way as to make a fairly good mirror of it, and when the door behind me opened and a man started to come out, I think I recognized him before he knew who I was. If this happened to be Mr. Galey, private secretary to Sydney Ward, he had an alias, to wit: Albert Moore—with a propensity for setting cute little traps for people he didn't like.

Galey backed into his office and closed the door so quickly I knew I couldn't be mistaken. I was even more sure of it when the receptionist called me over in a voice dripping with honey.

"Mr. Galey is sorry, but Mr. Ward will be tied up until tomorrow. If you can return then—"

I said, "Thanks, beautiful. I'll come back but not entirely because your boss asked me to. Maybe if I stay over another day, I can get to take out a mighty cute girl. Mighty cute."

She simpered and didn't quite look as if she were going to jump over the counter at me, though I think she was considering it. I had a favor to ask of her and I asked it fast.

"May I use that phone, please? A local call."

"Sure," she said. "Go right ahead. Tell me the number you want. I'll get it for you if it's in Siam."

I found a phone book, ran through it, and scribbled down the number of Cora Kane's phone. While I was looking for it, I kept watching that glass case. I was quite certain that Galey opened his office door and closed it again just as quickly as before.

I handed the written number to the receptionist, and she signaled she'd put it through in a second. Someone had her on the wire. Finally she put the call through but she didn't look up at me when I raised the phone and said hello to Cora.

"I don't want to talk to you, Johnny," Cora said. "I don't want to see you again."

I said, "You'll be home at eight tonight, baby, and you'll let me in, because if you don't, I'll go away and come back with the cops. If you run out on me, they'll have you in twenty-four hours. You and I can get together but under my terms. At eight tonight."

DRIPPING the phone on its cradle, I left the office. I had no doubt at all that Galey, alias Moore, had listened in. I was feeling pretty good by the time I reached my office. So good, in fact, that I worked for the rest of the afternoon and picked up fifty bucks for myself.

I made sure I was across the street from the apartment house where Cora lived two full hours before eight, the hour I'd told her I'd be there. I had a good idea that Galey wouldn't want me to see Cora again, not after the threatening way I'd talked to her. The easiest way to prevent it was to stop me, and as Galey had tried once to put a permanent end to my activities, it seemed likely that he'd try again.

I stood in a deep doorway where it was good and dark. I could see who went in and out of the building across the street but I couldn't be seen myself. At seven-thirty a car pulled up and Galey got out and went into the building alone. I resisted the temptation to go after him, and it was a good thing I

did, because when he did come out again, he signaled, and two men came walking rapidly from the north corner of the block. They would have spotted me if I'd so much as stuck my nose out.

They followed Galey into the building. I took a very careful look around and decided Galey had brought only two men. Then I ran across the street, tried the door of Galey's car, and found it unlocked. I opened the door, got in, crawled into the back, and crouched down. If Galey came out with his two friends and I was discovered, there was going to be a swift and brutal finish to a sucker who wouldn't let somebody else take a homicide rap for him.

Galey came out alone. Apparently his two stooges had been left inside to wait for me, believing I'd show up shortly. Therefore, Galey was in a hurry to get out of there. The car moved away, with me crouching in the back, and soon stopped in front of a private dwelling just around the corner from Park Avenue. It was one of those few remaining private homes in midtown and while it didn't front on the avenue, it had an avenue address which was supposed to mean something or other.

I let him shut off the motor before I hauled myself up and wound an arm around his neck. I had to work fast before some pedestrian came along and decided to call a cop. Galey couldn't make a sound as I dragged him into the back seat and pushed him in a corner. Then I pulled back my right fist and slugged him in the belly. I put all the steam the limited quarters would allow into that punch, and it must have hurt like hell because his face went deathly white and then a pale green and he gasped for breath.

"Maybe you have a few more bills you'd like me to collect, you lousy liar," I said. "Or should I go to see Sydney Ward to get some new business?"

He said, "You—you—son of a—"

I walloped him smack on his nose. I felt bone squash and crumple, and Galey let out a muffled yell of pain. I hit him a couple more times in the midsection. Knowing that his nose must be as sore as a boil, I concentrated on that to put over my points. I wasn't peeved at him—not just then. I was too busy figuring

out what I wanted him to talk about and I decided I might as well be direct.

"Where is Joan Haven?" I asked.

"Don't know—never heard—" he started to say.

I pushed his nose down flat again, and it brought a scream of pain from him. I wiped the blood off my knuckles onto his shirt. It was a beautiful white-on-white import job and smeared nicely.

"Joan Haven," I said. "Where is she?"

HE STARTED to droop. His head went down first, then his shoulders sagged, and all at once he flopped over. Both arms dangled limply, and I thought he was out cold.

That was when he went for his gun. It was in a shoulder rig and must have been provided with a spring, because all he had to do was touch the butt and the weapon jumped out into his fist. I jumped on him. He got the gun free, all right, but he didn't get to use it. I knocked him off the seat onto the floor and grabbed his gun hand with both my hands and twisted it until I heard bone snap and felt a shudder go through him. The gun fell, and I picked it up and put it into my hip pocket and yanked him upright again.

A passerby with a little more curiosity than the average big-city type, passed by, slowed, and came back. He peered into the car. By that time I had Galey wedged into the corner and he was holding his head up. I seemed to be talking to him. The curious guy was satisfied and went off. "I grabbed Galey's collar and started twisting it.

"Any break you rated you lost when you pulled that gun, Galey. I'm after information. I'll get it if I have to kill you, and remember this—I've already killed one man. I can do it again. For the last time, where is Joan Haven?"

"I—don't—know," he said.

"Who does know?"

He tried to shake his head, but I twisted his collar a little more. In a moment, he'd start turning blue. He'd taken plenty and was on the verge of giving up. I could tell, so I loosened my grip slightly.

"Does Sydney Ward know?"

"Yes," he said.

"I think you do, too," I said. "But I

always believe in going straight to the top, so you'll take me to see Ward. I've got your gun and if you even try to pull anything—"

I stopped talking. Four good-sized men had come out of the house and were approaching the car. Somebody had noticed Galey pull up and when he didn't appear, these men had been sent to find out what the trouble was. Trouble had my name on it, and I didn't want to tangle with this quartet of assorted mayhem and murder. I pulled out the gun and jammed it against Galey's ribs.

"Tell those goons," I said, "that everything is fine. Crawl in front and drive this car exactly according to my orders. If I have to shoot, the first slug is for you, so don't try any hero stuff. Even Sydney Ward won't appreciate it."

He rolled the window down. "Go back," he told the four. "Go back. Everything is fine. Go back—quickly."

They stopped but they didn't retreat. Galey climbed in front, groaning with every move he made. I watched the four men carefully, but they stayed right where they were, even after Galey started the car and pulled away from the curb.

I told him to take it slow. He had to stop for the light at the next corner. Just as it changed to green and he got started, I opened the door and stepped out. I moved as fast as I could. As soon as Galey returned to that house and reported to Ward, every man Ward controlled would be turned loose to get me.

Chapter VIII

SINCE I had no idea how long I'd have to stay under cover, I had a cab drive me to the hotel where I lived in a small two-room suite. I wanted to pack a few things and then check in at some other hotel and sit out the excitement.

The elevator boy gave me a silly grin when I stepped into the car, but it didn't even register. He was chuckling all the way up, and when I stepped out, he said, "Good night, Mr. Craig. If I see you again before morning, you're whacky!"

Even that didn't click. I was too filled with the idea that I was now an open target for Ward's boys. I unlocked my

door, stepped in, and snapped on the light switch. Somebody had moved my wing back chair so that it faced the windows, and I could see only the rear of it. A spiral of cigarette smoke curled upwards.

My hand shot to my pocket, and I pulled out Galey's gun fast.

"Get up slowly," I said, "an inch at a time."

"Oh, cut it out, Johnny," Cora's familiar voice urged. "You sound like the last act of a melodrama."

I drooped like a twenty-dollar suit in a rainstorm. I knew now what the elevator boy had meant. The fact that I was safe made me feel worse than the tension and excitement of danger had. I went around in front of the chair and sank onto a footstool facing Cora.

"I thought I'd better come to see you," she said.

I didn't jump up any faster than the speed with which a lush puts down a cadged drink.

"When did you leave your place?" I demanded.

"Why, about half an hour ago. You were coming at eight, but you didn't show up."

I grabbed her wrist, pulled her to her feet, dragged her toward the door. I opened it fast, looked out, pulled her to the stairway and down the stairs. When they came after us, let them think we were still in my rooms.

Halfway down, Cora began to balk, so I had to take the time to explain. "I made that date to draw Galey into a trap, but he set one for me, too. A pair of his goons were watching your place. They must have followed you here and they must have seen me come in, too. They won't wait long."

She didn't balk any more. We went clear to the basement and out the service door. I felt reasonably sure we weren't seen, but we ran fast down the side street. There was a movie house in the next block. I bought two tickets, and we went inside and took seats in the last row in the small balcony. Neither of us looked at the screen.

We had all the privacy we needed. There were only a few people scattered around the balcony. I lit two cigarettes and handed her one. I put my hat on my

lap and let her see me slide the gun beneath it.

I said, "Okay, baby, now we talk. Straight talk this time, because you're in as dangerous a mess as I am now that they know you came to me. Not many hours ago they did their level best to kill me. They'll try again, unless I beat them to it, and this time they have to include you in the festivities."

"I know, Johnny," she said softly. "You've got to believe this. I honestly thought I was doing you a favor when I swore you'd picked me up and I alibied you for the time of that killing."

"Who told you to do it?"

"Galey. That is, Mr. Ward did—through Galey. I work for the steamship company. My father is one of the freighter captains. Galey told me if I didn't do exactly as he said, Dad would lose his job and so would I. Then he claimed you were a friend of Mr. Ward and said you were in trouble and that if I lied a little, I'd help to get you out of it. All those others were paid off, too."

"Have you any idea why they wanted me alibied?"

"No, Johnny. When you work for Mr. Ward, you take his orders and never ask questions."

"And I never did get to spend the night with you."

She laughed softly. It sounded like a hoot of derision to me.

I SAID, "Well, even in imagination, it was quite an experience. I'll give you a quick rundown on what I know so far. Joan Haven saw me kill this big lug at her apartment. She knows it was self-defense but she ran out. I think it's more likely she was taken away. Joan was getting three hundred dollars a month. Why, I'm not sure but I think it had something to do with the violent death of her husband eleven years ago."

"But how does all this concern Mr. Ward?" she asked.

"Ward killed Joan's husband."

"Murdered him?"

"I didn't say that, baby. It was a hunting accident. Ward was absolved. I don't know what happened after that and I suspect that only Joan knows the whole truth. Ward is afraid that if she is pinched, even as a material witness,

she'll start talking. I gather she's loose-tongued, anyway."

"But what has it got to do with you, Johnny? Why is Ward after you?"

"Because I saw Joan the day before the killing. She was very tight, had been drinking for some time, I suspect. At any rate, she must have thought she told me more than she did. That scared her and she told Ward. Things moved fast after that. I killed this man and got Joan involved. Ward had to take action and he did."

"Maybe he—he killed this woman," Cora suggested.

"I doubt it. Whatever she has on him must be in some tangible form which would be left behind if she was killed. Otherwise, Ward would have taken care of her long ago rather than shell out three hundred a month for ten or more years. Joan knew what she was doing in blackmailing him but she couldn't cope with me and the killing I committed in her apartment so she must have turned to Ward for advice."

"But where is she, Johnny?"

"I'd like to know, too," I said. "Of equal importance is our futures. Where do we go from here?"

She was scared and moved over against me as far as her chair would allow. I felt her leg pressing against mine. She laced her fingers with those of my left hand. I felt cozy all over.

"I could think of worse places than where we are right now," I said. "But this show won't last forever, and they're bound to sweep us out with the popcorn bags. We've got to find Joan and we can't waste any time doing it."

"Maybe Ward has her in his own home," Cora suggested.

"I don't think so, baby. You see, all of this business with Joan and her husband happened before Ward married Rita Larch, who owns the steamship lines which Ward now runs for her. Ward's wife isn't the type to be mixed up in anything like this, so she'd be kept entirely out of it. What do you know about Galey?"

"He lives at Mr. Ward's house. They're always together."

"Have you ever been at Ward's house? The one around the corner from Park?"

"Oh yes, several times. I'm supposed

to be there tomorrow night. Every time Mr. and Mrs. Ward throw a big party, I have to be there to sort of supervise things. Mrs. Ward is entertaining the family of a South American diplomat tomorrow night. A lot of important people will be there. More than fifty, I was told."

"At least, that will keep him busy tomorrow night," I said. "But his men won't stop looking for us. Let's be practical about this. Let's check into some quiet hotel together."

She gave me a startled look, something like the one she had given me the first time I grabbed her. I laughed. "Take it easy, baby. That just sounds rough. I'll sleep in the tub if I have to. We can't spend the night walking the streets and we've got to stick together."

"I'll do whatever you think best," she said.

"Baby," I told her, "don't seduce me that way."

WE STARTED looking at the movie then. That is, Cora did. I had to take my eyes off the screen every time somebody moved in the balcony, so I really never got to know exactly what was happening. Finally I shut the dialogue and music out of my mind and concentrated on something more important than a movie plot. I had a couple of lives to save, and since mine was one of them. I didn't intend to grow careless in my thinking.

I was fighting an important and powerful man in Sydney Ward, a man who controlled a lot of dangerous gorillas—waterfront characters not noted for their tender mercies. He'd have them cover the city. They'd check hotels from the Waldorf to flop houses.

I nudged Cora. "You said you worked in Ward's office."

She nodded. "That's right. I was in charge of buying food for his ships. Now I supervise the catering when he throws a party like the one tomorrow night."

"Do you have a key to his office?"

"Yes. What's on your mind, Johnny?"

"If there is one place where Ward wouldn't look for us, it's at his own office. What do you say?"

She took a long time thinking about it but finally she nodded. "All right. But

(Advt.)

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I'm not so sure that Ward or Galey even thinks I'm working with you. I doubt whether they have any suspicion of me at all."

I said, "Look, two goons were posted outside your apartment to wait for me. Galey put them there. I saw him. If they followed you, they know you came to see me, and that ends your usefulness to Ward. These guys don't fool around, baby. They'd kill you as fast as they'd blast me."

She shook her head. "Mr. Ward thinks a lot of me. I wouldn't be afraid to face him right now."

"How about the office? For me to hide in, even if you don't think you're in danger?"

"We'll both go there," she said. "I wouldn't want anything to happen to you."

I leaned over and kissed her. She seemed to like it, so I kissed her again, harder, warmer, and with more conviction. Nobody paid the slightest attention to us. It must have been a good movie. I filed away the idea that I should come

back and see it sometime.

The big building where Ward's offices were stood not far from the waterfront, but it didn't even have a watchman. We had to walk up but in no time we were in the main office. Galey's two-room suite of offices was provided with a leather couch. Cora sat down on it and leaned back. She had the kind of legs best described as enticing. Even with death all around me, I thought a great deal about those legs.

We talked for a little while, and then she dozed off. I walked around and came upon a bulletin board on which was posted all the sailing dates of the Larch Line ships. As I interpreted it, no ship had sailed for a week, though there had been four arrivals and one ship was due to sail with the tide about two the next morning.

I sat down behind Galey's desk after I turned off all the lights and smoked a couple of cigarettes while I tried to puzzle it out. I had a lot of facts but most of all I needed Joan Haven to back them up. Until I had her, Lieutenant Barr at police headquarters would never be convinced. Ward had stowed Joan away somewhere. To best him at this game, I'd have to try to determine just where she'd be.

She had something on him, that was evident. She had a habit of talking too much when she was drunk, which was most of the time. Her evidence against Ward was evidently physical and capable of making plenty of trouble for him. So killing her was out. But if he could convince her she was in trouble now—actually wanted for murder—then he could do pretty much as he liked with her. So long as she was on the run, she could hardly go to the cops with whatever evidence she had against him.

Obviously, that was why I'd been alibied by an assorted bunch of paid liars. Ward wanted Joan sought for the murder of that overgrown slob in her apartment. To put the cops on her trail, I had to be cleared, so he had arranged that. He was slick, all right, but he hadn't reached any of the real rough spots yet, and I meant to arrange a few to slow him down, anyway. I was pleasantly contemplating various ways and means of making Ward sweat when I felt the cool

surface of the desk against my cheek. I was too tired to lift my head.

Chapter IX

BELLS—bells—bells! They clamored and jangled with hellish insistence. I didn't want to wake up, but the bells were rattling my eardrums, so I finally opened my eyes. I had no idea where I was at first, but I realized that a telephone, practically in my ear, was ringing like crazy.

Then I recalled that this was a business office, Galey's private office at the steamship lines. The phone continued its shrill clamor for attention. I glanced at my watch. Only a quarter of six. Maybe the phone call was for me. I took a chance and answered it. The only reply I got was the other party trying to hang up softly. I jumped to my feet. This wouldn't be a healthy place for either Cora or me to be found.

I ran to the next office where I'd left her sleeping on the leather couch. She wasn't there. I hurried through the offices, calling her name and getting no reply. She was gone and she must have left voluntarily. I wondered if I'd been a real sucker to confide in her. After all, she had lied for Sydney Ward. A great big and very serious lie.

I had no reason to think she'd have changed for me, but there wasn't time to consider her. In a little while employees would start coming to work. I went over to the bulletin board, studied the schedule of arrivals and departures once more, and then made my way out of the building.

Because I was very close to the waterfront I decided to go looking around, an idea I gave up quickly when I saw all the tough-looking mugs posted around the piers where Ward's ships were tied up. They may have been longshoremen but at the moment they were acting like guards, maintaining fixed posts and watching everyone who came into view. I took good care I didn't.

There was no place for me to go, so I ate breakfast in a side-street beanery before I headed for my own office building. I had to use my key on the outside door. I'd never been in the building so early in the morning. I hated the silence.

In my own little cubicle I pulled a letter basket toward me, laid the gun in the middle of it, and covered it with some old letters. I could grab it fast, shoot in a split second. I wondered what had become of Cora until my head started spinning. Then I turned selfish and thought about myself. I got no place there, either, so I did the next best thing. I went to work.

Some mail had piled up. I typed form letters to people who owed money, filed the information sent me by those to whom they owed money. After the regular business day started, I made a few phone calls, took care of more mail which came in later, and tried a dozen times to phone Cora. She certainly hadn't gone back to her apartment, and I was beginning to worry about her.

By three in the afternoon, I knew I had to do something, so I just walked out of the building and proceeded to Police Headquarters. There I had a talk with Lieutenant Barr, who still thought I was nuts, but he listened to me, anyhow.

AT FOUR-THIRTY, I was back in the office and had made up my mind to finish this thing up tonight. I half expected that at any moment I'd get a call telling me to lay off or Cora would turn up cold and dead. No such call came, so I decided to make one of my own. I phoned Sydney Ward's office.

If Galey had insisted on screening the call, I would have told him to go to hell and hung up, but I was put right through to Ward. He had a pleasant, cultured voice and betrayed not the slightest surprise at hearing from me.

I said, "Mr. Ward, I know you're giving a big party at your home tonight. I intend to be there and I'd like you to arrange things so I can get in."

"Why, I'll be delighted," he said with a chuckle. "And let me commend you on the idea. You'll feel quite safe with all those important people around, won't you?"

"Safer than if I had only your gorillas for company. If there is any trouble, you'll start it and I'll finish it. I won't be swallowed up as Joan was."

"We have much to talk about, Craig," he said. "I'll expect you about nine-thirty. I can't invite you to dinner, but we

might have a drink or two."

I hung up on him, made a thorough inspection of the gun I'd lifted from Galey, and stuck it in my side coat pocket. I killed the time until eight-thirty by drinking three strong cocktails very slowly and tamping them down with a thick steak. When I marched up the steps to the Ward town house, I was looking for trouble and welcoming it.

One of the few butlers left in captivity let me in and handed my hat to a maid who disappeared with it. He asked me my name, didn't bat an eyelash and led me into a large and imposing living room. He spoke to a man in a tuxedo, and pretty soon a chunky, important-looking man with steel-gray hair and a closely cropped gray mustache, came my way. He stuck out a short, powerful arm, took my hand and squeezed it to a nice degree of numbness.

"Nice of you to come," Sydney Ward said, as if I were the financial officer of an international bank. "We should have got together long ago."

I said, "You're a lousy no-good, Ward, and if you get that into your understanding right now, we'll get along better."

The room was crowded with important men and jeweled and perfumed women. Two or three different languages were being spoken, but when I talked to Ward, I had one of my own.

"I'm staying right here, where all these people are, and I'm leaving when they do. We can have our talk, but it won't be a private one, because I don't like the idea of a knife in the back."

Ward's smile never changed. "You came about some sort of a deal, naturally. I'm quite ready to listen if you have anything to offer."

I said, "I killed a man, and you arranged things so it looked as if Joan were guilty instead of me. For that I might be expected to thank you, but I won't. Joan is an immoral lush without a damned thing to offer, but whatever she is, I think you're the cause of it. I want Joan. I'll settle for nothing less."

Ward said, "I wonder if you really think you can get out of here, Craig?"

"I'd bet on it."

"You'd lose," he said. "The moment you appeared, more than twenty men saw you and all of them have orders that

you are not to be molested unless you try to leave. Then they'll stop you and they won't do it gently. If you attempt to tell my guests that you are a virtual prisoner here, they'll laugh at you. Not one will believe a word of it. Try if you wish."

"Why waste my breath?" I said. "However, I might listen to reason if—"

I meant to tell him I'd do anything if he'd let Cora go free but before I could get the words out, there was Cora in a low-cut evening gown coming our way. Her smile was sunny, but it was directed at Ward. She took no notice of me.

WARD said, "Oh, thanks for being so prompt, Miss Kane. I sent for you because I want you to phone a message to Mr. Galey. Excuse me one moment, Mr. Craig."

Her glance met mine, didn't linger, and she spoke a word of greeting for Señor somebody-or-other who went by. Then Ward ripped a page out of a small notebook and handed the paper to her.

"Tell him what is written there and nothing else. Please take care of it at once."

She didn't even glance at the paper as she moved toward a door at the end of the large room. Just before she entered the other room, she looked back and gestured. I was riding high again. Whatever had happened, she was still on my side, and an ally like her was invaluable.

Ward said, "There are drinks—the champagne is especially fine. I'll be back shortly to go on with our little talk but I have to see a client of the firm. Remember, if you try to leave, you won't succeed."

I said nothing, but as soon as he was involved in conversation with a group of men, I drifted over to the bar and had a glass of his especially fine champagne. He hadn't been kidding about that. I wandered about, moving closer to the room into which Cora had gone. I leaned against the door frame, holding the half finished glass of wine in my hand as if I did this every night in the week and was a bit bored by it all. I thumped the door with my elbow.

When it opened, I twisted around and went in fast. Cora closed the door quickly and without a word came up to me and put her arms around my neck.

"I was right, darling," she said. "They didn't suspect me at all. I reported for work as usual this morning. How I worried that you might still be in the office. That's why I phoned you so early—to wake you up. You were fast asleep when I left."

"I'm getting old," I said with a grin. "Usually, under those conditions, I don't sleep."

"Why did you come here?" she asked. "I almost fainted when I saw you walk in."

"Where could I be safer?" I asked. "Ward can't touch me with all those people around. He says I'll never leave, but I think he's wrong. Tell me, what was in that note?"

She lifted it out from the low-cut gown. I'd have doubted she could have hidden an inch-square of tissue paper there, but she'd managed somehow. She gave me the notebook page. Ward had scribbled only a few words on it:

Pass order to sail on schedule and get rid of superfluous cargo two hours from port.

I said, "Fine—just as I expected. Joan is aboard a ship which sails in an hour or so and she's to be dumped overside where the ocean gets nice and deep."

I picked up the phone on the desk. There wasn't the slightest buzz. I heard Cora gasp and turned slowly, the phone still at my ear. Ward had come in, still looking the host and wearing that same warm smile.

"I presume you showed Craig the order, Miss Kane. I thought you would but I had to be certain. Craig, only one telephone in this house is in operation, and the man near it will kill you if you try to use it."

"In front of all those people?" I scoffed. "You'd have a fine time explaining that away."

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "I must have neglected to tell you—all my guests have left during the past ten minutes. My little dinner party was just a prelude to a big reception for a new ambassador, which is being held at one of the big hotels. As of this moment, only a few servants and a lot of my men are in the house."

I said, "He's bluffing, Cora. Don't pay any attention to him."

SHE said slowly, "He isn't bluffing. This party broke up earlier than I expected, although I knew it wouldn't last much after nine o'clock."

Ward said, "I really wish you hadn't gone over to him, Miss Kane. While I realize he is an attractive young man, no one fights me and gets away with it for long. I shall be leaving presently. As soon as my wife is ready. The servants



"This would have been our tenth wedding anniversary if I hadn't strangled her on our first!"

are already going. In ten or fifteen minutes only my men will remain and they have orders that you are to be permanently removed, Mr. Craig. Miss Kane will have to share whatever is in store for you."

I said, "I'd give big odds you shot him in the back."

Ward's eyebrows lifted. "Shot whom, may I ask?"

"Joan's husband. You had a great line, even in those days, and convinced a coroner's jury, but Joan knows the truth, doesn't she?"

Ward shrugged. "Ancient history, Craig, is of little interest to me. If you'll excuse me—"

I said, "Just one more thing, Ward, the most important of all."

I walked up to him as I spoke. I start-

ed swinging from about three feet off and then closed fast. He may have expected it but not quite so suddenly or fast. When I clipped him, I was sure I'd broken his jaw. He went flying backward but in the wrong direction for me. He wound up near the door and got it open.

His jaw wasn't broken either. My luck was running out fast. He said, "Your death was singularly unimportant to me a few seconds ago. Now I wish I could remain and watch you killed. Unfortunately, that cannot be."

My right hand moved toward my pocket where I'd put Galey's gun. I'd never felt a pocket so flat.

Ward gently touched his cheek and managed to twist his mouth into a smug grin. "Your gun was removed ten seconds after you walked in. One of my men is extremely proficient at that sort of thing. Good-by, Craig. Incidentally, the message I wrote on that paper was given to Galey some time ago and my order is being carried out right now."

He stepped back, slammed the door. Cora came into my arms with a tired little cry.

Chapter X

WE SAT down together on a divan, my arms still around her. I said, "It happened like this, I think. Joan was in love with Ward a dozen or so years ago. Ward and her husband were business partners. I'd say Ward wanted the business they ran more than he wanted Joan, but at any rate he murdered her husband, and Joan swore it was an accident. Then Rita Larch came along, and Ward saw a chance to go higher so he abandoned Joan and married Rita. Joan had some sort of concrete evidence, however, and made Ward pay off."

"But Ward is having her murdered right now," Cora moaned. "And we're next."

"His wife hasn't left yet," I said slowly.

"She's usually very slow getting ready. They'll leave in five or ten minutes, though."

I said, "Ward wouldn't dare pull anything in front of his wife. I've got an idea. We'll wait until Mrs. Ward is downstairs and then we'll sail out and

ask to go with her and Ward. So long as she is around, we'll be okay."

"But afterwards? We can't keep them off us forever."

"We won't have to. I'm playing for time—just a little time. Sure, we'll be taking a chance, but that's better than sitting here and waiting until those goons come for us."

Cora said, "The door behind us leads to the end of the reception hall. When they come down from upstairs, we'll have to be waiting—"

As if mental telepathy had brought him, Galey walked in at that moment. I noticed, with considerable satisfaction, that his nose was still badly swollen. He lit a cigarette and sat down.

"There are men posted at each door," he said. "All I have to do is let out a yell. You know, Craig, I think I'll really enjoy this. Mainly because you're a fool, and fools are no asset to the human race."

"So I'm a fool," I said. My eyes slid toward Cora, and she seemed to understand what I meant. She paced up and down. Galey watched her but after a while he got tired of it.

"You're an idiot," he told me. "We actually got you out of a homicide arrest, and yet you start pushing everyone around simply to prove you did kill that friend of Joan. A smart boy would have been glad to see the blame shifted onto someone else."

I nodded slowly. "So that's what you were after. With the cops looking for Joan, and she well aware of the fact, she'd have agreed to let you take her out of the country. You have no intention of killing her, of course, because this evidence she has somewhere would come into the open at her death. But you could wear her down if she was in some stinking South American or African port town. She could never go to the police with this charge hanging over her."

Cora's pacing had grown faster, and she was covering more ground. I glanced her way, and she moved quickly toward the door. Galey was on his feet instantly. To reach her he had to turn his back on me, and I was counting on the fact that he'd try to stop Cora himself without yelling for help. I jumped him from behind. I jerked his head back with a stran-

gle hold and drove a knee into his spine. I held him that way until his struggles stopped and his gasps became weaker. Then I eased him onto a chair and walloped him on the jaw.

As I hurried toward Cora, she motioned for more speed. With her ear against the panels, she must have heard Mrs. Ward coming downstairs. She threw the door wide open, and we moved out so fast that the man posted at the door didn't have a chance to stop us.

AT THE foot of the stairs stood Ward and his white-haired, patrician-looking wife. She was dressed in an evening gown and sables and when she saw Cora, she smiled warmly. The man who'd been at the door was moving up behind us, not quite sure what to do next. I saw Ward give him a covert signal, and he dropped back.

Cora said, "I'm so glad we were in time. Oh—Mrs. Ward, this is a very special friend of mine—Mr. Craig. Of course, you know Johnny, Mr. Ward."

"Indeed," Ward said, and there was a glint of reluctant admiration in his eyes. "He is a rather clever young man, my dear."

"Would you mind terribly if we went in your car?" Cora asked. "Johnny came in a cab, and, well—"

"We'd be delighted," Mrs. Ward said. "Walk with me, Cora. The car is waiting out front."

Ward let them go out first and then fell into step with me. "You cling to life very tenaciously, Craig," he said. "I'll admit this was a clever move."

"I thought so," I said. Ward let me go through the door first. I saw his big car at the curb and, parked double beside, a smaller sedan. As we went down the steps, a man got out of the sedan and approached us.

Ward said, "It makes little difference what you do, Craig. You simply can't get away from me. Prolonging it only makes me angrier—"

The man stepped directly in front of us. I said, "Good evening, Lieutenant." I glanced at Ward. "This is Detective Lieutenant Barr, Mr. Ward."

Ward never lost one iota of his usual aplomb even though he must have suspected what was coming. He said, "I'm

very happy to know you, Lieutenant."

"Likewise," Barr said. "You're under arrest for the murder of Paul Harkness ten or twelve years ago. I've been in contact with authorities upstate but I'm still a little vague on facts."

"Arrest? Murder?" Ward asked in an awed voice.

"Yeah, that's how it adds up, Ward. We took Joan off one of your ships tonight, and she was scared stiff. She was also pretty well oiled up and we had no trouble making her talk."

"That woman is hardly in her right mind," Ward protested. "Don't tell me you believe her wild dreams."

"Well, you see," Barr said, "this is a dream with pictures. When you plugged her husband in the back, Joan had an idea you might doublecross her, too, so she took a photo of the whole thing. She left the negative and a print with a lawyer upstate and he turned it over to the police. A jury won't need more than one look."

Ward glanced at me. "It seems you worked a trick or two, Craig."

I grinned at him. "After that alibi you arranged, Barr wouldn't believe I killed that slob Sammy or that Joan didn't. But he would believe that maybe I'd been trying to protect her, and when I told him

she was very likely aboard one of your freighters due to sail tonight, he had to investigate. When you alibied me, she became a fugitive."

Lieutenant Barr said, "Let's go, boys."

"But you took your own damn good time about it, Barr," I said. "If you'd waited much longer, I'd have been dead and so would a damned swell girl."

Cora had helped Mrs. Ward into her car and now was slowly coming back toward us. I moved in her direction. Now that it was all over, I saw how really lovely she was.

A hand that felt like a bar of steel landed on my shoulder. Lieutenant Barr said, "Where the hell do you think you're going, Craig?"

I said, "You've got your killer. What more do you want?"

"You!" he said. "For knocking off Joan's boy friend. We have her testimony that it was self-defense, but to me a homicide is a homicide, and you're coming back with me until the D.A. says you can go."

Cora watched us move off. The cuff on my wrist was too tight. I hoped the other cuff, around Ward's wrist was tighter. I told him what I thought of him. I think that was the only bright spot in what remained of his life.

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"Don't shoot, copper!" he
cried, raising his hands



*Would the day ever come when the ghost of his
dead buddy would not run at his shoulder? Would
he always be known as a . . . killer cop?*

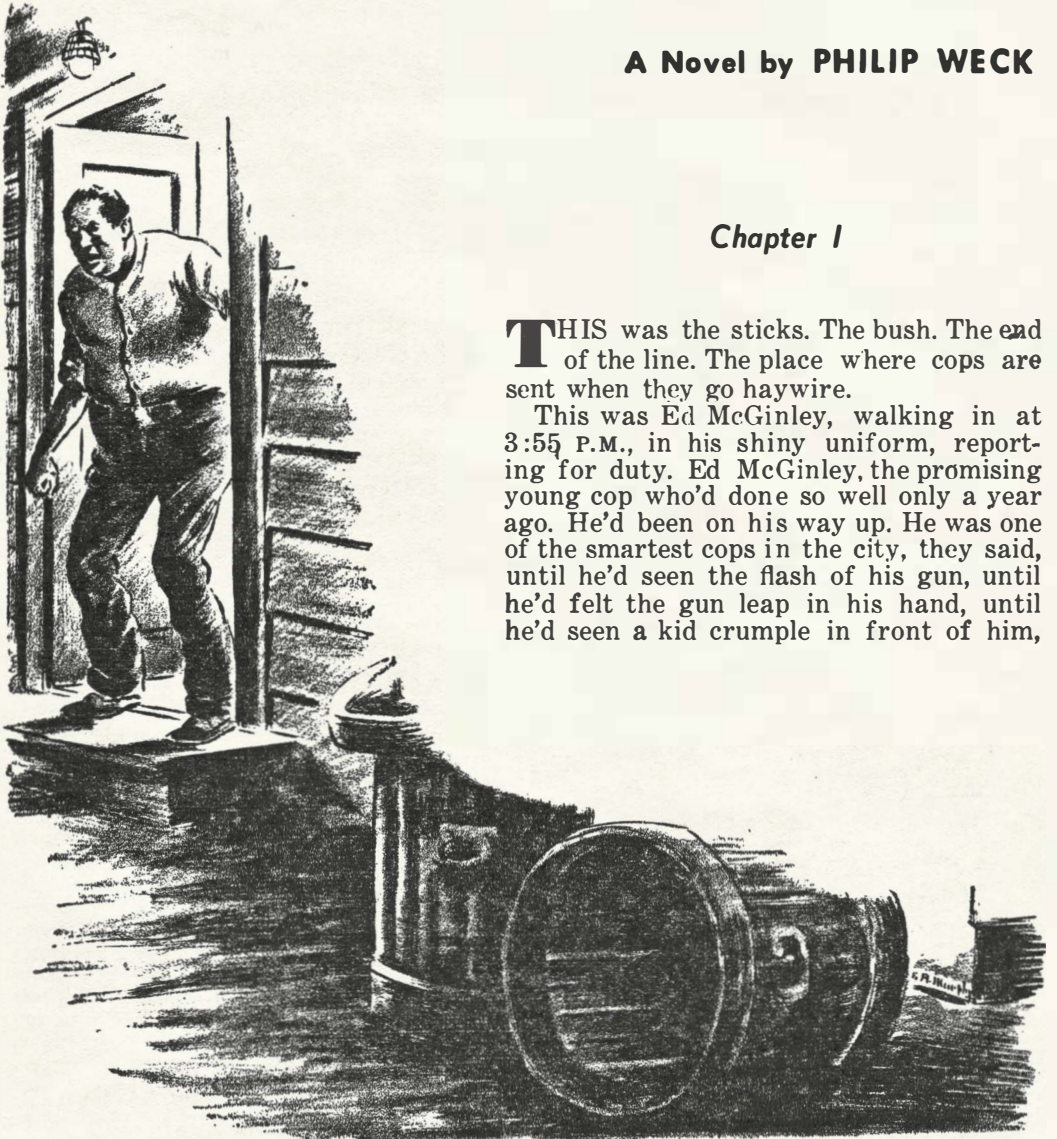
KILLER COP

A Novel by PHILIP WECK

Chapter 1

THIS was the sticks. The bush. The end of the line. The place where cops are sent when they go haywire.

This was Ed McGinley, walking in at 3:55 P.M., in his shiny uniform, reporting for duty. Ed McGinley, the promising young cop who'd done so well only a year ago. He'd been on his way up. He was one of the smartest cops in the city, they said, until he'd seen the flash of his gun, until he'd felt the gun leap in his hand, until he'd seen a kid crumple in front of him,



come apart in the middle, and slump slowly and awkwardly and forever to the street.

McGinley, the killer-cop. Out in the sticks now, out in the bush, wearing a uniform. Shunted aside.

He walked in at 3:55, went past the desk to the squad room, and nobody said a word to him. A dozen men were lounging around, in uniform and plain clothes, and they ignored him as if he didn't exist. They sprawled in chairs and stood near the wall and they didn't give Ed McGinley a second look.

Then Joe Heston came in, the lieutenant. A big man, Joe Heston, big and good-looking and dapper, with a thin mustache across his upper lip. Police Department talk makes a peg for each man in the department, and the label over Joe Heston's peg said, "Skirt-chaser."

"Roll call!" Joe Heston bellowed, and the room quieted a bit. Just a bit.

"Abbott!" he bellowed, and somebody to Ed's right answered, "Here!" "Bland . . . Dalrymple. . . Filipowicz. . ." and on down the alphabet. When he'd finished in alphabetical order, he came to the new man, just transferred. "McGinley!"

The room was quiet. Quiet and hostile.

"Here!" said Ed McGinley.

"McGinley!" Heston bellowed again. "McGinley, Edward, Badge Number Four One."

"Here!" McGinley said. They were looking at him, every man in the room.

"You got your gun with you, McGinley?" Heston asked.

The quiet grew quieter and the hostility more hostile, like an unsounded snicker.

"Yes, sir," McGinley answered. That was all, "Yes, sir." His fists were clenched, but his voice was calm and even.

HESTON went on to the orders of the day and when he had finished with them, he yelled, "Okay, get at it!" and they trooped out. All of them, except Ed McGinley who had no assignment yet.

"You," Heston said to him, "wait until the captain gets back, see?"

On a straight-backed wooden chair he waited in that empty squad room, and at five o'clock the Captain came in and sent

for him.

He was a florid-faced man, the captain, named Souder, and he wore his uniform. Day in and day out he wore the uniform with the gingerbread on it. How else would people know he was the captain?

"McGinley, eh?" he asked, staring at Ed from his big, watery eyes. "So you're McGinley?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, we got a quiet district here, McGinley. Not much happening. No chance to get your picture in the papers."

Not unless you could stick your head around from behind that captain's uniform.

"No, sir, nothing much happens out here. I think I'll put you in a squad car, McGinley. How does that sound?"

In a squad car, riding up and down, back and forth, around and around, endlessly. Answering minor complaints. Finding lost kids. Walking into danger when it came, unprepared and unsuspecting. Or, if anything big should break, calling the detectives to take over.

"That's fine, sir," Ed McGinley said.

"Yes, I think I'll put you in with Bland. Do you know Bland?"

"No, sir."

"He's a nice young fellow, pays attention to his duty, keeps his nose out of trouble. I'll tell you something, McGinley."

"Yes, sir?"

"That's what we like around here, men who don't stick their noses into someone else's business. Now you take this patrol you and Bland will be on. It's from Green Street to Laflin, Eighty-Second to Seventy-First. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I don't go as far east as Halsted and it don't go as far west as Ashland. You stay off of Halsted and you stay off of Ashland. Them streets—they're none of your business. You got that, McGinley?"

"Yes, sir," Ed McGinley said.

He got it, all right. Ashland and Halsted, the two big business streets of the district. The taverns and nightclubs, the handbooks and numbers writers, the dice games. The shakedown for the whole district, and a patrolman stays away from it because it goes to the brass, see?

"Yes, sir," Ed McGinley said again.

"That's fine. It's the way we like things around here, McGinley, men who keep their noses clean, see? Now the lieutenant's sent for Bland, and he'll be here in a few minutes."

The captain took his hat from the hat tree, a signal that the interview was over, and McGinley left. Keep your nose clean; keep your hands in your pockets. At least, the captain had said nothing about a gun, had made no reference to his trouble.

BUT not so the lieutenant. Heston was standing behind the wicket in the desk sergeant's place. "Got your orders, McGinley?" he asked as Ed came out of the captain's office.

"Yeah."

"We got nice, respectable, decent people living around here," Heston went on. "We don't want any of 'em shot up. You got that?"

"Yes, sir," Ed McGinley said.

"You understand that, McGinley?" Heston asked again. "Okay. Bland's waiting outside. Get at it."

So he got at it.

The car was parked right in front of the station, engine running, a uniformed copper on the right side of the front seat. Sure, on the right side. Waiting for somebody to drive him around, waiting for someone else to do the work. Ed McGinley was the dog now, the stumble-bum, the bottom rung. He'd drive.

So he slipped in behind the wheel and drove off.

Where do you go when you're a cop driving a squad car? To the left, to cruise around and patrol your streets, watching, waiting for something to happen, listening for your call? Or to the right, where maybe you can pick up a sawbuck or a five spot? Where maybe you can shake down a beer joint or a dice game or a hood who might be violating his parole rules?

Which way do you turn? It depends on the cop, of course, and the district. But on the captain, mostly. And this was Souder's district, and Souder's words still rang in Ed McGinley's ears: "Stay off of Halsted and stay off of Ashland." The gravy was the captain's.

So Ed McGinley turned to the left

without a word from the man next to him, a man he'd never seen before that afternoon. Bland was his name, and he was a big fellow, with big shoulders and long arms and big hands, big in a flowing, loose-jointed way, with thick lips that were constantly open.

Not a word, not a greeting, not even a suggestion from him.

They cruised the district. You watch the punks, mostly, and keep your eye open for drunks and your ears open for your number on the radio calls. And wait. Wait for something to happen or for the dispatcher to speak.

You spot three or four kids, maybe, hanging around outside a hamburger joint. Teen-age punks who might be decent, ambitious boys or who might be hoods on the make. You pull up to the curb near them and just park there and watch them. Let them know the cops are around. Let them know that if they should have something on their minds, they can be called to account. Keep your eye on them for a while and then drive on. That's all.

You drive around while darkness comes and you watch people scurrying home from work, watch boys and girls duck into the neighborhood bars, watch storekeepers while they lock up, watch for anything that might be suspicious.

Still not a word from Bland, sitting beside Ed McGinley, fingering his thick lips with thick fingers.

About eight o'clock, they got their first action.

It was a car, just a big, powerful black car, parked on Laffin Street with three men in it. The two in the front seat were turned toward the rear; the one in the back was leaning forward to talk to them. Just a big, dark, powerful car with three men in it. Three insurance men, maybe, talking over a prospective client, or three neighbors planning a fishing trip.

But you never know, and a big, dark car is always suspicious, especially when the license on the back is bent over a little, just enough to hide the first numeral. So Ed McGinley parked behind them and turned his spot on them.

At once, the man in the rear seat leaped out and ran, and the man in the right front seat scooted after him. Ed

McGinley scrambled out from behind the wheel and ran after them.

Chapter II

ONLY a wrong one runs from the cops. Only a jittery man with something on his conscience, one who's frightened and who may be loaded, ripe for a pinch, running until he can find a spot to drop the gun or the loot or whatever he might have on him.

Down the dark, tree-lined street they pounded, the two strangers and McGinley, and slowly Ed gained on them.

Then the first one veered to the right between two houses, and the second man, strangely, followed him, and Ed McGinley, ten feet behind, plunged into the darkness and the danger and the ambush without slackening his pace.

It was a blind alley with a concrete walk running between two bungalows. Halfway down the length of the houses the concrete walk ended, and a few feet beyond that was a big board fence, six feet high, extending from house to house and cutting off escape.

The first man, a short, wide fellow in a dark suit, banged into that fence and leaped to the top and tried to vault over. But he slipped. He didn't throw his leg high enough and his hands wouldn't hold. He tumbled to the ground, a vague, indistinguishable shadow in the darker shadow of the fence. The second man was taller. He leaped higher, scurried over the fence, and disappeared.

Ed McGinley stopped running. One of the fugitives was here in front of him, crouching in the darkness.

One man panting and crouching in the darkness, another man panting and standing erect. Facing each other. With death only a few inches away.

Just like that, Ed McGinley was in the same kind of spot he'd been in before. The same predicament, the same situation that had brought his downfall, that had hung him on the peg labeled "Killer-cop," that had smashed his career and sent him down to the sticks.

What are you going to do?

Maybe this hood has a gun. Maybe it's in his hand already; maybe his finger is tightening on the trigger. Maybe your

only chance is to shoot first and straightest. Maybe not. Who can tell? Who can see in the dark? Who can distinguish at night between the glint from a man's wrist watch and the glint from his .45?

Three times before Ed McGinley had stood like this, peering ahead of him, reaching for his gun, steeling his body against the blast from a firearm. Twice he had shot first, and the hoodlum had crumpled and died. The other time, the first time, he hadn't shot soon enough. He'd waited while Bill Curry had come pounding up beside him just in time to take the killer's slug between the eyes.

Bill Curry, his closest friend, suddenly dead, leaving behind him a lovely young wife and a child.

Here, from the grave, came Bill Curry. Running heavily, his feet pounding on the cement, his gasps audible. Running into the gun that would kill him—unless Ed McGinley should shoot first.

Twice before Ed McGinley had heard those phantom footsteps. Twice before, after Bill Curry's death, he had faced a fugitive and he had forgotten that Bill Curry was gone. He had remembered only that he had to save Curry's life, that he had to shoot first and fastest.

NOW those footsteps were pounding behind him again. His hand, his right hand, moved; he felt the butt of his pistol; he yanked it loose.

Again—

Light flashed in his face. A pale yellow glow lighted the passageway between the two houses, flaring from a bulb above the door on his left. In the doorway, a dark-haired man appeared, flabby fat and in a dirty undershirt.

Just a few feet in front of Ed McGinley was the fugitive, hugging the boards of the fence.

"Don't shoot!" he cried. His hands were raised. "Don't shoot! For God's sake, copper, don't shoot!"

No longer did McGinley hear running footsteps behind him. The tension in him eased; his finger relaxed on the trigger. Perspiration was standing out on his forehead.

"Don't shoot!" the man cried.

Ed McGinley put his gun back in its holster.

"Turn around," he ordered. "Put your fingertips on that fence and back away from it as far as you can."

With his muscles still trembling, he frisked the stranger thoroughly, and found him unarmed, while the flabby householder in the undershirt watched.

"What's going on?" he asked once, and Ed told him, "Nothing that concerns you, buddy."

Then he marched his prisoner back

"I thought you was stick-ups," he told them. "Naw, I never seen them other two before. I met them in a beer joint tonight."

So it was just a routine pinch. They took him in and turned him over to a detective. He'd be freed by morning at the latest because they had nothing on him in the way of proof, nothing but the certainty that he was a wrong one.

Routine. Things like that happen a

THE PASSAGE OF CRIME

IMAGINE being sentenced to death for eating your dinner in a restaurant! That's exactly what would happen if you were a Mongol and lived under the rule of Genghis Khan, whose famous judicial code, the Yasa, explicitly forbade one person to eat in the presence of another sharing his food on a free-of-charge basis.

Another law that would be extremely inconvenient today, if upheld, can be found on the books of ancient Athens. It punishes people who cut down their own olive trees. The sentence is a heavy 200 drachma fine, half of which is turned over to the informer. But this penalty is light compared to the one that would have been imposed upon George Washington, if he had cut down his famous cherry tree in England. This country, in the 18th century, chastised such offenders with imprisonment, then death.

As a matter of fact, there were so many punishable-by-hanging crimes in the Isles up to the 19th century that anybody who walked anywhere was liable to meet up with a swinging, recently-expired corpse. They were left there as a warning to all as-yet innocents.

But England wasn't the only country where the extreme penalty was meted out for minor offenses. In one of our own states, for example, there's still an ignored law on record that inflicts the death penalty on residents of a neighboring state who are found within state limits!

—Bess Ritter



to the squad car, still parked at the curb. Bland was still sitting in it.

"Where's the other car?" McGinley asked.

Bland shrugged his big, loose shoulders. "This ain't no dual-control job. He got away before I could take the wheel. Who you got?"

They flashed their lights on the prisoner. He was a little man, with a tanned, weather-beaten face and a light scar on one cheek, a man they'd never seen before, perhaps thirty, perhaps forty, named Frank Enright he said. He was on the wrong side of the law unquestionably and gave the lawbreaker's ready and smooth story.

dozen times a night in a big city.

A dozen times a night Ed McGinley would face this crisis, until, finally, those running footsteps became too real, the compulsion too strong, and once more he would shoot, and kill.

Until that happened, he would ride the streets of the sticks with his quiet, loose-lipped partner, waiting and living a dull routine.

They got a call that night—a suspected house prowler—and they investigated and found no one and no evidence. They tagged a car that was following a lone girl along a dark street, and they watched the car speed up and disappear when they were recognized. They picked

Chapter III

up a drunk and, because he was nicely dressed and unarmed, they drove him home.

At 10:30, Bland said, "Head west on Seventy-first. My wife's sick, and I want to see how she is."

So Ed drove silently to 71st and turned and drove west until they came to a street with trolley tracks and a blare of neons and flashing electric signs and heavy traffic—Ashland Avenue. Souder's territory.

"We're out of our area," Ed said quietly.

"So what!" Bland snapped. "I told you, my wife's sick."

ACROSS Ashland Avenue they went, a block and a half, and Bland said, "Pull up here by the street light."

For fifteen minutes Ed waited, listening for the radio call that would send them spurting back to their district. It didn't come, and after those fifteen minutes, Bland returned and they circled and drove back to the area where they belonged.

Routine, that was all. A deadly routine that would stretch on and on until, sooner or later, it would blow up in Ed McGinley's face, explode on him with the flash of his own gun.

At midnight, they stopped in front of the station, and two new cops, the third shift, climbed into the car, two more men Ed never had seen before, two more men who stared at him curiously and said not a word.

He wrote out his report and handed it to Lieutenant Heston.

"Nobody shot tonight, McGinley?"

He didn't answer. Nobody shot tonight, lieutenant. But almost.

Off duty, he hiked all the way back to Laffin Street, where they'd picked up Frank Enright. He went into the area-way and flashed his light around. He clambered over the board fence and through the back yard.

He'd hoped he might find a gun or a knife or burglary loot. Anything that would incriminate Frank Enright. Anything that might, in some vague way, justify the murderous passion that had gripped him while his gun was pointing at the quaking, cornered man.

Nothing was there. Nothing at all.

SO ED MCGINLEY went home. He lived with his brother and sister-in-law in a big old house on the North Side. By one o'clock, when he reached it, the house was dark, the family asleep. In his lonely room, Ed stared out the window into the darkness. Once again in his mind he saw the little man dart from the car, run between the houses. Once again he heard the phantom footsteps echo behind him, footsteps no other man could hear.

Killer-cop. Killer-cop he would be again, he knew, no matter what he tried.

Killer-cop for the fourth time when the next man ran into a corner and turned and faced his gun. Until then, there was nothing ahead of him but the dull routine of a squad car. The routine of quiet little streets in a quiet residential neighborhood on a quiet, deadly patrol. With a man beside you who fingered his thick lips and spoke only when he had to.

The second night it was a street fight between two young men who'd had more liquor than they could handle. A complaint from a woman about her neighbor's noisy brats. A burglar alarm that kept ringing and ringing because of a short-circuit.

On and on while people ate their dinners and did the dishes and put the kids to bed and called the cops with every shadow they couldn't recognize.

Until, at eleven, Bland said, "Head west on Seventy-first."

They crossed Ashland again and parked in front of Bland's house. Some day, Ed knew, their call would crackle out while he was parked there, and he'd have to blare his horn and bring Bland on the run. Or some day, perhaps, Bland's wife would get better, and they wouldn't have to stop.

But not that night. Bland came out, and they swung around again toward Ashland Avenue.

A block from Ashland, they heard the shot. It came from their left, from a dark, lonely street. Then another, and a third. Then the clack of high heels and a woman running toward them.

"Don't stop!" Bland cried. "Don't be a sucker!"

But he was too late. The woman materialized suddenly in front of them, white-faced, running in terror. She saw them, she veered toward them, she came up to the car window.

They were hooked, now, for good. Out of their territory, across forbidden Ashland Avenue, unable, with that telltale number on the car, to ignore the woman and drive on.

Panting, frightened, she gasped out, "They're shooting! Officer, he's killing that man! Stop them!"

"Where?" Ed asked.

She pointed behind her, into the darkness of the street, sucking in her breath heavily, a middle-aged woman made old by fear. Ed McGinley turned in the direction she'd pointed and sped down the street.

First, they saw the man on the pavement, flat on his back, then they saw the other man, a tall blob of shadow against the darkness, running away.

"Get the one who's down!" Ed shouted, slamming on his brakes, and Bland leaped from the car, and Ed drove on, once again pursuing a man who was fleeing.

THE squad car was good for half a block, and then the shadow disappeared. The patter of feet swished off to the left, and McGinley was out of the car, too, and running. Between houses once more, into a back yard, and then an alley. Down the alley, those footsteps still slapping out, still to his left. The man was doubling back toward 71st Street.

A hundred feet from 71st, Ed lost him. Another alley intersected at right angles. He might have turned there; he might be crouching behind a post or in a shadow; he might have stepped into any one of a dozen yards. Ed stopped and tried to still his heart and hear the footsteps above his own panting.

He couldn't hear a sound.

At the last house on the right a gate hung open, and as Ed's eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw it sway slightly. He crossed to it, pressed it open, stepped into the yard.

A hoarse whisper reached his ears. "McGinley!" it said. "McGinley! Over here!"

He whirled and swung the gate shut, and a pistol cracked out.

You can't actually see a bullet pass in front of your eyes, not when it's moving at the rate of eight hundred and twenty-five feet per second. But Ed McGinley saw that bullet whizz by, saw it pick a hole in the wood of the gate, saw splinters fly. Then he was stretched out flat on the ground, facing toward the sound of the pistol, waiting for the flare of a gun.

It didn't come, and he didn't hear anything. He crawled forward and he didn't find anything, either.

This house faced 71st Street, its long side on the first alley down which Ed had chased the fugitive. When Ed reached the street no one was in sight. He holstered his gun, brushed off his uniform, and trudged back through the alley to the squad car and to the body on the pavement. There was a crowd around it now.

"He's dead," Bland said. "A slug in the belly. Take a look at who it is."

Someone had covered him with an old blanket but his face was turned up. A weathered and lined face that might have been thirty or forty. A faint scar ran down the right cheek. Frank Enright, he'd said when they had pinched him the night before. Dead now, shot down by someone who had whispered Ed McGinley's name from the darkness.

You have to report a homicide, to your station and to Headquarters downtown. The district detectives come out and so do the homicide men from Headquarters and the crime lab men and the coroner's office and an assistant state's attorney. As Ed McGinley stared into the dead man's face, the brass were already gathering.

Somebody photographed the body; somebody else examined it tentatively. Half a dozen men were questioning the people in the crowd when a dark sedan pulled up, and a man in a cop's uniform with gold braid on the hat and gold bars on his shoulders got out.

CAPTAIN SOUDER. Sure, he'd be notified. Standing orders, probably. Call the captain on every homicide, every big fire, anything that breaks and might pull a newspaper photographer

to the scene with his camera and flash bulbs. Let the captain know, so he can get there and see his picture in the paper the next day.

He talked to the assistant state's attorney and the deputy coroner and the lieutenant from downtown. Soon the boys who'd been canvassing the crowd brought a woman to him, the middle-aged woman who'd sounded the alarm. She smirked at the captain and waved her arms wildly and pointed at the body and showed the captain how she'd shuddered and how frightened she'd been. Then she pointed at Bland and Ed McGinley.

Jake Hanson, one of the homicide boys from downtown, told Ed and Bland what they'd learned so far.

"This joker's a stranger, see!" he explained. "Nobody around here knows him. There're no papers in his pocket. He pulls up in a car about nine o'clock—the jalopy's down at the corner, and we've got a tracer on its license number already.

"Anyway, he just sits there from nine until after eleven. Then some jerk comes out of a back yard there. This first yokel gets out of his car, and the two of them stand there and talk and pretty soon they're shooting, and this boy—the one who'd been waiting—gets it while the other one scrams. The babe who's talking to the captain now saw it all, she says."

"His name's Frank Enright," Ed said. "The dead one. We picked him up last night."

"That so?" Hanson slipped out his notebook. "Let me get this down. How do you spell it? What did you pick him up for?"

Captain Souder came over and listened while Ed told the story.

"McGinley," he said when Ed was finished, "go back to the station and wait for me. You're off duty now."

He didn't bellow it and he didn't say it vehemently. He sounded like a tired old man with an unpleasant duty ahead.

So McGinley and Bland drove back to the station and got out of the squad car and the two third-shift men got in, and drove off.

"Come on," Ed said.

But Bland, standing there on the side-

walk, fingering his lip, said, "The captain wants to see you, not me," and he walked off into the night.

Chapter IV

BLAND walked off and left Ed McGinley holding the bag. Ed McGinley with his fists clenched, with anger burning in his brain.

Well, what are you going to do, McGinley? Put the finger on another cop? Take the rap alone?

He went into the captain's office and sat down and tilted his chair back against the wall and waited. A good cop is good at waiting.

Within a half hour the captain showed. He plopped himself down behind his desk and put his hat on the blotter in front of him and stared at it. He was old, older than Ed had thought. His big, watery eyes had lines under them; his hair was gray and sparse; his cheeks sagged with the bagginess of age.

"McGinley," he said, and again his voice was soft, "something's going on around here. What is it?"

Surprised, Ed said, "I've only been here two days, Captain. I don't know."

"What happened over there on Marshfield Avenue tonight?"

Ed told him, from the moment he and Bland had heard the shots.

"Didn't you see anything fishy about the setup?" Souder asked.

Just a killer who knew his name, that was all. Ed McGinley said, "No, sir, I didn't."

"Tell me this, McGinley. The dead boy, Enright—you picked him up last night, you say. But his name isn't on the blotter. There's no record he was even brought in. Why not?"

"I don't know, Captain. I brought him here, all right."

The captain sighed. "You came in here with a couple of black marks, McGinley," he said, and he sounded utterly weary. "Personally I don't hold that against you—those things happen to a cop. You go along with me, I'll go along with you. But any cop who crosses me is in for trouble, McGinley."

"I'm not crossing anybody, Captain."

"You come into the district Monday

night for the first time. You make a pinch and you don't report it. There's no record anywhere in the station. The next night the boy you pinch is shot and killed, and who is only a block away, off his post, where he's not supposed to be? You, McGinley. How do you add it up? What's the score?"

Ed McGinley opened his mouth. Then he shut it again.

What are you going to do, McGinley? Put the blame on somebody else and expect the captain to believe you instead of the others? When he's waiting to bust you anyway?

"I don't know, sir," Ed McGinley said.

The captain got to his feet heavily.

"You're under suspension," he said.

"And you're going to stay under suspension until you give me the answers. Put your gun and your badge on the desk."

Ed McGinley unpinning his badge and unholstered his gun and carefully placed them beside that captain's hat with its gingerbread on the visor.

EX-COP Ed McGinley, ex-killer-cop McGinley, took the long way home that night. Maybe he was lucky. Maybe he'd be better off out of uniform, away from a badge and a gun. Maybe the captain was saving him from another killing—and tapping him for a murder instead.

But it just didn't add up. In Pete's, on the edge of the Loop, over a warm, foamy glass of beer, it didn't make sense. The captain was chasing spooks, looking for a deal that didn't exist, afraid of shadows.

Or was he? Sure, the captain wore his uniform every day. Sure, he shoved his mug into a photographer's camera every chance he got. Sure, he played politics to work up to captain. But politics or not, photographers or not, you can't hold down that job and be a complete idiot.

Maybe something was going on.

In George's Green Room, over another glass of beer, it still didn't look any clearer.

Fat Edith's, a few doors from home, where the cops hung out, was almost empty. A long skinny man and a short fat one held up opposite ends of the bar, and Edith herself weighed it down as she leaned on it from behind. Without

a word, she poured a beer for Ed and set it in front of him. Then she switched off the big light in the window and the ones over the booths.

"Closing up, boys," she announced.

They gulped their beer, the short fat one and the tall skinny one, and trooped out, and Fat Edith locked the door behind them.

Then back she waddled to the bar in front of Ed.

"So you done it again, big boy," she said. "Got yourself in another jam."

Ed circled one hand around the glass and didn't answer.

"Why don't you quit?" she asked.

Still Ed McGinley had no word for her.

"I mean it, big boy." She leaned over, closer to him. "Look at me, big boy. I ain't so bad, am I?"

No, big girl, you aren't so bad. Hefty, but a pretty face, an even disposition, a strong and willing right arm.

"This here is a going business, McGinley. There's plenty of money for two. Plenty of work to keep a man busy. We could get along, McGinley, you and me."

He was so startled he couldn't answer.

"How about it, McGinley? I ain't so bad in a lot of ways."

Finally he found his voice. "Look, Edith—"

"I'll show you." She walked around the end of the bar, removing her apron, and she took his hand in her hard, big one. "I'll show you I ain't so bad, McGinley. C'mon."

She led him toward the door in the back of the tavern and the stairway that went up to her rooms on the second floor.

Gently, Ed disengaged his hand. "I'm sorry, Edith," he said. "I guess I'm not the marrying kind."

She stared at him, disbelief on her placid face.

"I'm sorry, kid," he said. "You wouldn't want to marry me."

"Yeah," she said. "I get it. I'm too fat."

ABRUPTLY she marched past him to the front door. There she turned the key in the lock.

"I'm Fat Edith. I'm too fat. That's it, ain't it?" When he tried to protest

she rushed on. "Don't tell me, McGinley! Don't try to kid Fat Edith!" She flung the door open and her voice rose and her cheeks were flushed. "Well, get out! Get out, big boy. Get out and don't come back. I don't care what they do to you now."

"Look, Edith—"

"Get out!" she yelled.

He plodded along, head down, while the soft, slow traffic of a city at night-time whispered by him and a breeze whispered gently, and rain whispered down on him.

He came abreast of a doorway to a building whose front was flush with the sidewalk. A car was parked at the curb near it. He heard another whisper.

"McGinley," it said. "This way, McGinley."

He hit the deck and rolled for the curb, and the bullet chipped the concrete in front of his nose.

He rolled into the street and gathered his feet under him and leaped for the shelter of the parked car as another shot and another whizzed over his head. Then he was behind the auto, shielded, out of range.

Before he could get his bearings, he heard the familiar sound of running feet and saw a shape disappear down the street, and that was all. More shots would attract attention, witnesses, help. This killer wouldn't risk them.

For the rest of the way home, Ed McGinley walked in the middle of the street, cautiously, paying attention to the shadows and the darkness that was too dark. Nothing else happened.

Again that night Ed lay awake in bed, trying to add it up. One thing was clear. Captain Souder had been right. Something was going on.

The man who had whispered his name twice and who had fired at him on two occasions was no incidental killer, fleeing from one crime, recognizing the cop, perhaps, from a newspaper picture or even from an earlier pinch. No, not when he'd set an ambush for the cop, miles away. Not when he'd shown a knowledge of the cop's habits and of the route he'd take home. This man was out to get Ed McGinley.

Who? Why? How did Frank Enright figure?

Ed McGinley fell asleep finally, and the answer that should have been in front of him wasn't there.

Chapter V

NEXT morning he was up early. No four o'clock roll call to rush for this day or, perhaps, ever again. But he had three stops to make to find those answers and he was in a hurry.

The first was at a quiet and tiny apartment way out on the northwest side, the kind of apartment a cop's widow might be able to afford.

"How goes it, Officer?" Sarah Curry asked when she let him in.

So she hadn't heard about the suspension.

"Good," he said. "Good."

He took her hands, both of them, and looked at her eagerly. A redhead, Sarah Curry, with the kind of figure a redhead should have and with laughing gray eyes. You wouldn't think she had a care in the world, a bill over her head, a kid to provide for.

She sat him down on the davenport. "You shouldn't stay away so long, copper," she said. She sat beside him. "Keep that chin up, Ed. Stick it out. It's ugly enough to frighten anybody away."

They laughed—because he was a cop and she was a cop's widow. When you've lived a man's life among men, even while you were growing up, troubles don't form into words easily. You keep the lid on them. Your problems are your own, and you fight a lonely fight against them and you laugh when people expect you to.

Only once did she refer to Ed's troubles. She said, "Vasco had a knife, didn't he? What did they expect you to do?" She was talking about the killing that had busted him. Then she got up and ruffled his hair and said, "Let me get you a glass of beer," and went into the kitchen.

She left Ed McGinley to think it over again.

Sure, the kid had had a knife. What did they expect him to do? . . . But it went from a gun in the hand to a gun in the pocket to a knife and now, with Frank Enright, to nothing at all. Not a thing.

The first one, the one who'd killed Bill Curry—he had had the gun in his hand and was firing it when Ed McGinley shot him again and again. That was all right; that was justified.

Six months later, the second one, in an alleyway beside a car with the tell-tale license that told Ed McGinley it was stolen. He'd had a gun in his pocket, that one, when Ed McGinley heard the feet pounding behind him and knew only that he had to shoot before Bill Curry died. Well, that wasn't so bad. A gun in his pocket that he was reaching for, a stolen car, a long record. "Cop Kills Again," the headlines had said.

The third one, just a month ago. Vasco. A kid, eighteen. Sure, he'd been in and out of the reformatory; sure, he was an addict; he was known as a brutal, wild youth; he had had a knife in his fist. When Ed McGinley had seen the knife, he'd known only that those footsteps echoed in his ears and that Bill Curry was beside him again, dead Bill Curry. The newspapers had ignored the knife, and the record, too. "Killer Cop Slays Once More," they'd screamed.

Now Frank Enright.

So Detective McGinley was Ex-Officer McGinley now. Bill Curry's ghostly footsteps would echo no more. The ghost was back in its grave, and Ed McGinley was licked.

All these things Ed McGinley pondered while he waited for the redhead to bring a glass of beer. All those headlines he read once more. But they didn't mean much beside the headline yet to be written.

Then Sarah came in with the beer.

"Where's the boy?" he asked her.

"He's in school, McGinley," she said. "School. Remember? The place you played hookey from."

They laughed again.

THAT'S the way they'd always been, Sarah and Ed, even when Bill was still around and they'd lived in the same neighborhood. Laughing and kidding each other while Bill was in the kitchen, pouring the beer, or down the street at Fat Edith's to fetch a new supply or out on a different shift from Ed's. Great friends, Ed and Sarah.

But they'd never be anything more

now. Sure, two people can want the same thing with all their hearts. But when you've stood beside her husband and let him die, you can't very well ask her to marry you. Nor when you're a killer three times. Nor when you're out of a job.

That morning Ed left before eleven.

"Come around again, McGinley," she told him when he got up to leave. "Soon. The boy will be sorry he missed you."

Well, maybe he would. Just maybe.

Ed bought a newspaper and read it on the streetcar. Only the top hoodlums get a front-page obituary these days. Frank Enright was a punk; his story was buried inside.

Yeah, a punk, all right. One sentence to Pontiac for assault, one to Joliet for robbery. No big-time connections, apparently. He lived on Grand Avenue near Erie, a rough and tough and tumbledown neighborhood, and he had been rough and tough but a punk nevertheless. And he was dead now.

There was nothing about a cop being suspended. That was departmental news, not for the public press yet, thanks to Captain Souder:

Ed rode on south, out Western Avenue, and then over on 71st Street and to the first block west of Ashland.

It's funny how you can reach the same spot from two different directions and not recognize it. You can drive your partner home, going west, and park in front of his house and you can chase a fugitive down an alley and into a back yard, going south, and not realize that you've reached the same place.

Ed walked into the back yard, where the killer had crouched and whispered his name and shot at him. This was it, beyond a doubt.

Then he went out to the street again and as he was passing the side of the house, he saw the blonde.

Framed in a window that looked down on the gate, she was watching him gravely, her eyes brown and big, her hair a startling, artificial yellow, her mouth wide and smeared with bright red, her face pale with heavy make-up. She smiled at him and waved, although he'd never seen her before.

When he rang the front bell, she answered the door.

"I'm looking for George Bland," he told her.

She said, "Come in," and she closed the door behind him and put the chain on.

"Is George home?"

"No," she said. "But I am."

SHE sat in a chair, carefully arranging her short skirt so that a bare white leg showed up to the knee. A generous figure, Ed noticed, and generous with what she displayed of it.

"So you're the great McGinley," she said. "I hear your rich uncle just died." Languidly, leaning forward so that the skirt slipped up even more, she said, "I love to spend money, McGinley."

Ed said uncomfortably, "What time will George be back?"

"Not for a long time, handsome, if that's what you're getting at. Let's talk about the money."

Ed said, "You're way ahead of me. The richest uncle I ever had died in the poorhouse."

She laughed. "Maybe it was an aunt."

"Tell George I was here, will you?" he asked.

She got up too. "Listen, handsome," she said, "I'm serious. I mean it. We could have a high time on fifty Gs. You and me."

"Sure," said Ed. "If I had fifty Gs. Suppose you tell me something, first."

"Like what?"

"Like what you see out of your bedroom window."

For a moment she stared at him speculatively. Then she said, "It's a nice bedroom, handsome. Try it sometime. And it's a nice window. You look out of it and you see the birds and the bees and the flowers. You'd be surprised the things those birds and bees do."

"What else do you see? At night, for instance."

She shook her head. "Nothing, copper. If you don't know, I don't either. I like to live." With a decisive motion she took the chain off the door. "I'll tell George you were here."

"And you didn't see anything, last night maybe?"

"Not a thing."

Then she pressed close to him. "But if you want to get rid of some of that

money, McGinley, little Dottie is the girl who'll help you spread it around."

Chapter VI

ED MCGINLEY'S third stop that day was back north to the Grand Avenue neighborhood, where cops are poison and informers don't last long. A tough neighborhood. But if you want to know about a man, if you want to know who his friends are and, more specifically, his enemies, you hit his home vicinity. If you want to know who might kill Frank Enright, you hit the bars he probably patronized.

Ed McGinley picked up his first bit of information with his third beer.

It was a sloppy, crummy joint, a block from Enright's rooming house, and the sloppy, dirty bartender eyed Ed askance and said, "Enright? Yeah, sure, I knowed him. I knowed all his pals, too."

"I'd like to talk to one of those pals," Ed said.

"Tell you what." The bartender wiped at an imaginary spot on the bar. "You go two blocks down the street here, see, and around the corner, and they's a little tailor shop. Rocco's. Well, Rocky, he knows a lot about Enright. Ask him."

"Thanks," Ed said. "I'll try that."

He finished the beer and went two blocks down the street and around the corner. Rocco's, the window said. You walk into a spot like that with your eyes open and you never know what. But it was a chance he had to take.

Rocco's was small enough, with a few bright bolts of cloth on a table, a few dingy glass cases, and Rocco himself behind a small counter. Short and stocky, he was in his shirt-sweater, and the muscles of his enormous tanned arms bulged.

He was talking on the telephone when Ed McGinley walked in, and Ed turned over a bolt of cloth with a bright blue stripe running through it.

Rocco said, "Okay, Pete," and hung up the phone and approached Ed. "Looking for a suit, mister?" he asked.

"Could be." Ed pushed the blue stripe aside and turned up a pea-green bolt with a herringbone weave.

"What have you got in mind?"

"Depends on what goes with it."

"I don't get you, mister," Rocco said. "This is a tailor shop."

"Frankie Enright used to buy his suits here, didn't he?"

"Never heard of him, mister."

"I been told otherwise."

Rocco shrugged. "Tell you what, mister. You go in the back room there. Maybe we can make a deal."

As Ed went through the curtain that covered the entrance to the back room, he heard a key click in a lock. He turned around. Rocco, he saw, had locked the



"At our last meeting, our treasurer made a humorous remark that he was going to take the five thousand and skip town! Well, he did!"

front door and he had a gun in his hand.

"We're going for a ride, mister," he said. "A lot of people want to know about Frank Enright."

They'd had time to set it up through the bartender, of course, while Ed was walking from the beer tavern. A car, with a squat, wide, curly-haired man behind the wheel, was parked behind the tailor shop.

"The back seat, mister," Rocco said.

It was a long ride back to the South Side, along busy streets, and no one had much to say. Ed tried it once.

"Enright was a pal of yours, wasn't he, Rocco?" he asked.

Rocco said, "I got no pals, mister."

They turned, at last, into an alley in the Gresham district and pulled up beside what once had been a commercial garage. Its windows were blacked over with paint now and its double doors nailed shut with weathered lumber. The back door was unlocked, however, and in use, and Ed walked through it, Rocco close behind and directing him.

INSIDE there was a barren office, with a table, a cigarette-scarred desk, a few chairs. Lounging behind the desk, a big cigar in his mouth, was a florid-faced, gray-haired, dignified looking man whom Ed McGinley recognized at once.

He was Big Bill Moroni, and every cop in Chicago knew him. Every newspaper reader knew him, too, especially after what the Senate Committee had said about him. Fabulous Big Bill, the gambler, the racket man, the suave, smooth, tough, turbulent boss of the handbooks. He wasn't the Number One man in the local syndicate picture; he might not even be the Number Two man. But he was up there, high up there.

He didn't smile and he didn't get up when they came in, and his voice was neither friendly nor hostile as he said, "Sit down, McGinley."

Ed sat down in a chair beside the desk while Rocco and the other man, the driver, lounged against the wall.

"I hear you're interested in Frank Enright," Big Bill said, leaning back in his chair, his hands folded over his protruding abdomen.

"That's right."

"So are we, McGinley, so are we. And we're kind of interested in you, too."

"What for?"

"That's a stupid question, McGinley. A very stupid question. I don't like smart boys who play stupid with me."

Ed said quietly, "Maybe I'm not very smart, Moroni."

"I don't like that stuff, either, McGinley." Big Bill folded his elbows on the desk and clamped one finger around the cigar in his mouth. "But we'll make you a fair-and-square proposition. Ten per cent."

Ed didn't answer that. He was puzzled. What was Moroni talking about?

"We figure it's like you found it, see?"

A cop makes a pinch, the boy he takes has a wad in his pocket. It's like you picked it up in the street, and ten per cent for what you pick up in the street is a fair-and-square reward. Right?"

"Right," Ed said. "Providing that wad gets where it belonged in the first place."

"Here is where it belonged, McGinley, in case you didn't know. Frank Enright walked out of here with it. Look." Moroni took the cigar from his mouth and stared at its wet end as he talked. "I run a nice, respectable book out here. No fights, no rowdy stuff. Three bills a week ice money to Joe Heston, that lieutenant of yours, regular as clockwork when he shows up. I even close the doors once in a while when the heat's on downtown. But I don't aim to sit back and let anybody knock me off for fifty grand."

"Moroni," Ed said softly, "I can't make a deal with you. My job is to find out who put the slug in Frank Enright."

Big Bill sighed. "I'm getting tired of talking. What about my proposition?"

"Who plugged Enright?"

Spreading his hands, Moroni said, "Who helped him knock us over? Who pulled the job with him and figured a doublecross when Frankie said he lost the dough?"

Ed got to his feet, facing Rocco. "Thanks, Moroni," he said. "All I got to do now is find out who worked with him."

"And hand over the bundle."

"Sure." Ed stepped toward the door. "Only I haven't got it."

Again Moroni sighed. "I guess we'll have to find out for sure, copper."

The man behind him didn't make a sound as he glided forward. Not a floorboard squeaked. But for just an instant, Big Bill's eyes flicked toward him, and Ed McGinley swung around and threw up his left and blocked the chopping rabbit punch aimed at the back of his neck.

HE **CROSSED** a right into the squat man's paunchy midsection, and the man folded up. As his head came down, Ed smashed a left to the jaw. The man sailed across the room and sat down and then collapsed onto his back.

Ed McGinley swung around again and

brought up his left. But this time he was too late. Rocco's gun hand smashed down, the butt of his revolver clenched in his fist. It crashed against Ed McGinley's head, and blackness flooded into McGinley's brain and into his eyes, and his legs tottered.

Vainly, as he slumped to the floor, he struck out, but his fist bounced off Rocco's burly shoulders. Then he was down. The blackness spread, and McGinley's stomach constricted, and his legs gave out completely, and his head swirled.

He was lifted into the chair, and a ringing slap on his cheek twisted his head. Slowly the blackness faded.

"What about it, McGinley?" Moroni asked. He hadn't moved from his chair; he was slumped back, relaxed, watching.

Ed shook his head to clear it. Rocco was standing over him, gun in one hand, the other raised for another slap. Behind him, McGinley could hear the driver stir and groan.

"What about it, McGinley?" Big Bill asked again.

His tongue thick, Ed said, "There's one thing you forgot about, Moroni."

"I ain't interested in what I forgot, McGinley. I'm interested in that fifty Gs."

"Yeah, but listen to me. Gimme a chance."

"Okay, go ahead."

Ed spoke slowly, trying to make his words distinct. "You have guards on the door, don't you?"

"Sure."

"Then anybody who knocked this place over had to know about those guards, didn't he?"

"Sure."

"He had to know when to hit and where to grab the money, didn't he?"

"What are you driving at, McGinley?"

Ed said, "It was an inside job, Moroni. One of your boys worked with Enright on it."

"Maybe I ain't forgot about that," Big Bill replied. "Maybe I keep it in mind all the time. But it's got nothing to do with that dough."

"The way I heard it," Ed said carefully, "Enright and Rocco here were pals."

Rocco slapped him again. A brutal, heavy slap that twisted Ed's head around and brought blood spurting into his mouth.

"He's lying!" Rocco muttered. "Lemme get the truth out of him, Bill."

Dimly, Ed heard Moroni say, "Sure, I know he's lying. Go ahead, Rocco, take his belt off."

Straddling Ed's knees, Rocco leaned over and grabbed for the belt buckle.

McGinley threw himself backward as hard as he could, threw his weight against the back of the chair, tilting it over, and brought his knees up with all his strength. Rocco went flying over his head, and they crashed to the floor.

LIKE a cat, Ed squirmed around, got his feet under him. He came up, running for the door. Behind him, Rocco's gun roared into life. A bullet tore through his shoulder, ripping the coat, stinging his skin.

But it didn't slow him down. He was running out the door into the lot, around the corner and down the alley, running and trying to keep his head clear, trying to keep from stumbling and pitching to the ground, trying to make his legs move faster and faster.

He heard a shout and then another shot. They were after him. He spurted to the right, around the garage and toward the street, keeping the building between himself and his pursuers as long as he could.

He hit the sidewalk and turned left. At the corner a cab was cruising by. He waved it down and scurried into the back and said, "Let's get out of here buddy, fast."

He rode to George's Green Room, almost empty in the afternoon, and there he brushed off his coat and pinned the tear in it and carefully combed his hair down over the tender, throbbing lump on his scalp. The skin wasn't broken, and the wound on his shoulder from Rocco's bullet wasn't deep, so he went on.

Last night he'd traveled from the Green Room to Fat Edith's and now he took the same path. Because, slowly and surely, he was adding things up, and Fat Edith could tell him if his sum were correct.

Like, for instance, the whispering of his name when he'd run pell-mell down the alley after Frank Enright was shot. Had the whisperer recognized the figure on his trail, a hundred yards away, in the blackness of the night? Or might he have known that it was McGinley? Might he have expected McGinley?

Or like a man who says his wife is sick when she doesn't look sick or doesn't act sick or doesn't sound sick. If that man's wife isn't really sick, why would he drop in on her, two nights in succession, at different times, when he should have been on duty?

Or like Fat Edith shouting in anger, "I don't care what they do to you now!"

Chapter VII

SHE was alone behind the bar, Fat Edith, this time without a customer, for it was the dinner hour. She eyed Ed McGinley askance, warily, embarrassed, perhaps, and frightened, and she poured him a beer without a word.

"Edith," he said, wrapping his hand around the glass, "you said something to me last night."

"I said a lot of things last night," she replied. "I musta blown my top."

"No." McGinley shook his head. "But somebody almost blew mine. Who was looking for me before I came in?"

"Nobody," she said.

She might have said, "I dunno," or she might have said, "Who'd be lookin' for you?" But she didn't; she said, "Nobody," because she was lying.

"I got a pretty good idea, kid," Ed McGinley said. "I can figure it out myself. But I'd just like you to tell me."

"You can't get him, Ed!" she cried. "You can't touch him! Listen!" She grasped his arm and pulled him toward her, slopping beer over the top of the glass. "I didn't blow my top last night. I meant it—leave him alone, Ed. He's too big for you. Quit it while you're still healthy. We could get along together, you and me."

Ed said, "No, Edith—"

"I ain't no saint," she said earnestly. "I been around. But they didn't mean nothing to me, Ed, none of them. Even Bill Curry—he didn't mean nothing to me."

Ed McGinley unclasped her hand from his arm.

"You lie!" he said.

"Honest," she pleaded. "He didn't mean a thing."

"He never touched you!"

Amazement showed in her eyes, a strange, misty amazement, and she stepped back. "Are you kiddin'?" she asked. "Didn't you know?"

"You're lying!"

"For cripes' sake!" she said.

Ed McGinley stalked out.

"McGinley!" she called. "Lay off him! He'll kill you!"

McGinley didn't hear.

He strode down the street, not seeing where he was going, not noticing the people he passed, not even aware where he was or why.

"Even Bill Curry," she'd said. Fat Edith.

All this time, all these weeks and months of terror and fear, with the ghost at his shoulder.

All these nightmares of what he'd done to Sarah Curry. Of how he'd been responsible for the death of the man she'd loved, the man who'd been such a fine cop, such a fine husband, such a fine father.

It wasn't true; it couldn't be true. If it were—

WAS that why the ghost of Bill Curry had been riding at his shoulder? Because for all these years he, Ed McGinley, had been in love with Curry's wife? Because when Curry had died, something he'd wanted had come to pass—Sarah Curry was without a husband again.

He found a telephone booth and called her.

"Sarah," he said, "it's Ed McGinley. I—"

"Ed, what's happened? Where are you? Be careful, Ed, please!"

"I just talked to Fat Edith, Sarah," he said.

"Fat Edith?"

"Yes, she told me—" He hesitated. "She said—"

"About Bill, Ed? About us planning to separate? Is that what you mean?"

"Yes."

"I didn't want to tell you myself, Ed,

because you thought so much of him. But it isn't important now. What's happening? Some men were here looking for you—that Moroni—and your brother called, and they were over there, too. What's going on, Ed?"

"Nothing," he said. "Nothing at all. But if I get out of it, Sarah, will you—can I—I mean will you—I mean should we—"

"Of course," she told him. "Be careful, Ed."

He hung up and he was whistling as he found the next number in the telephone book and dialed it.

"McGinley, Captain," he said. "Meet me at Seventy-first and Marshfield if you want those answers."

The captain came through. "Give me half an hour, boy. And make them good."

It was getting late. Ed took another cab, all the way back across town, and got out on Ashland Avenue and walked over to Marshfield. Across the street, in the shadows near the corner, an inconspicuous, dark sedan was parked, its driver sitting quietly and patiently, the way a cop sits when he's waiting, wearing plain clothes for once in his life. But it was the captain, all right. Ed got in beside him.

"How long do we wait?" the captain asked.

Ed shrugged. "Not long. It can't be long now."

It wasn't. Within a half hour he drove up in a police car, bold as brass, and parked around the corner and got out. He swaggered, his little mustache showed plainly, as he passed a street light.

"Let's give him a little rope," Souder suggested. "I figured it, when he didn't show up, for a murder call. He should have been there. And when he didn't write up Enright's pinch and didn't turn in your report."

So they waited ten minutes more and then got out of the car and went up to the front door. It was locked, but Souder put his own shoulder to it—and his heart and his weight, too—and they crashed in with a rending, tearing clatter.

Ed ran for the room that looked down on the alley and as he reached it, Heston

came out in his shirt sleeves, snatching at a shoulder holster. Ed grabbed the wrist, slugged Heston once, twisted around with his back to Heston, and bent over.

THAT did it. The gun went flying; Heston screamed. Ed marched him into the living room where Souder had turned on the lights and a frightened woman stared at them, her eyes wider than they'd been before, her face pale.

"It's you!" she cried. "Thank heaven. I thought it was George."

Heston wasn't thankful. "What gives?" he demanded. "What are you, a couple of divorce cops?"

"We're solving a murder, Lieutenant," Ed told him.

"Hah!" he cried. "You'd better have it down pat."

Ed said quietly, "It is pat, Lieutenant. Should I tell you?"

Heston shrugged. "Go ahead."

So Ed told him. "Look, the man who killed Frank Enright was a stranger around here; the neighbors didn't recognize him. Yet he was sneaking between the houses that back on this alley. It could have been you, Lieutenant, leaving this place in a hurry because George Bland came home when you didn't expect him.

"Frank Enright was killed because he couldn't produce the money he'd taken in a holdup of Big Bill Moroni's handbook, and the man who killed him was in on the holdup with him and knew the layout of the handbook. It could have been you, Lieutenant. You'd visited that book every week to collect your graft money.

"The man who killed Enright disappeared over the back yard of this house. That could have been you, too, because you know this house pretty well by now. And the killer knew where I lived. He tried to ambush me that same night."

"It could have been me, sure," Heston said. "But how are you going to prove it? How are you going to make it stand up in court?"

Captain Souder answered him. "We'll find a way, Joe. Ballistics, maybe. Or maybe we can persuade this woman to talk."

She'd been watching and listening,

standing near the bedroom door, wearing only a transparent slip that dropped lower with each deep, frightened breath she took. Peering from one of them to another.

"Sure," she said suddenly, her voice shrill. "Sure, I'll prove it."

She stepped toward the captain, tottering, and she seemed to stumble. But she kicked instead—at a gun. Heston's gun, lying on the living-room rug, where it had fallen.

"Grab it, Joe!" she cried, "Grab it! Quick!"

He did. Before either Ed or the captain could move, he had scooped it up and whirled on them.

"Okay," he said. "Okay, wise guys." He leveled the gun at them.

"What are you going to do now, Joe?" Captain Souder asked calmly.

"What am I going to do? I'm going to get out of town, that's what. And I'm going to take that fifty grand with me. Where is it, McGinley?"

Ed McGinley said, "I don't know."

"The hell you don't!" Heston shifted the gun so that it bore directly on Ed. "Frank Enright pitched it over the fence when you cornered him, see? He went back there when I released him, and it was gone. He thought I'd grabbed it—yeah, I was the second fellow you chased. You caught us as we were just going to split it up.

"Frankie thought I had it and he waited around here the next night and tried to plug me. But I got him first. Then I went back there, where you'd picked him up. And what do I find, McGinley? I find you'd been there before me, nosing around with your flashlight. He saw you, the guy who lives there. . . . Where's that money, McGinley?"

"I don't know," Ed said again.

LOOK, McGinley, I could put a slug right between your eyes, see? I missed you twice before when I thought you might have recognized me, before I realized you couldn't have. But I won't miss this time."

"What are you going to do to me, Joe?" Souder asked.

"I could kill you both, easy. I could write it off, blame it on George Bland. The jealous husband, see? The fellow

who came home and found you playing around with his wife and called the captain for a witness and then shot you both. I could do that easy and I'm going to if you don't hand that money over, McGinley."

They hadn't heard anyone enter the house. In the excitement, they hadn't noticed him and they never did know how long he'd been standing there in the hallway, half hidden by the smashed door, holding his gun in his hand.

But he was there, in the hallway of his own home.

"That's where you're wrong, Heston," he said. "You can't put the blame on me. I know who's been playing around with my wife—I've known for a long time. And you won't plug McGinley between the eyes, because that's where I'm going to plug you."

He fired. Only a split second before the lieutenant squeezed the trigger of his gun. He was only a fair shot, Bland. The bullet didn't go between Heston's eyes; it hit him in the mouth. As if he'd been thrown from a truck, the lieutenant stumbled backward and crashed into the wall and slid slowly to the floor, blood gushing from his shattered face.

The woman screamed. In the doorway George Bland stood and stared, incredulous, at the man he'd just killed. Then the gun dropped from his shocked fingers. Panicked because he'd never killed a man before, even in the line of duty, Bland whirled and ran.

Scooping up Bland's own gun, McGinley dashed after him and circled into the alley, the long, dark, endless alley.

He was only a few feet behind when George Bland slipped and fell and rolled over on his back and lay there, looking up at Ed McGinley.

Ed McGinley with a gun in his hand. Face to face with a fugitive. An unarmed man. Just as he'd been standing, except for the gun Bland had dropped, the night Bill Curry had died, and the nights when those others had died, too, under his bullets.

Slowly Ed McGinley's finger tightened on the trigger. Slowly he raised the gun. A killer-cop, facing a man he could kill. But a man who had killed in his defense—and the captain's. He'd forgotten that because Bland had killed and run—with a gun in his hand.

Behind him came pounding footsteps, a cop running toward them, even as Bill Curry had run to his death.

Slowly Ed McGinley's gun hand rose until the pistol was pointed at Bland. Then, slowly, it sank again. Because the running footsteps were real this time. Because Bill Curry's ghost had been laid forever by a woman called Fat Edith.

"There he is, Captain," Ed McGinley said as Souder came puffing up.

"Yeah," Souder panted. "Yeah. Bland's all right. But he's not the man I wanted."

THEY found the money the next day or, rather, found out what had become of it—three words made by a rubber stamp over the face of a mortgage, stating PAID IN FULL. The man on Lafin Street, the flabby one, no longer in a dirty undershirt, said through the window of his new car, "What are you gonna do? Call the feds? Go ahead. I paid a whopping income tax on it."

McGinley telephoned Big Bill Moroni and told him.

"Yeah," Moroni said, "I heard. . . . What am I gonna do? Nothin', I guess. If somebody puts a slug in that character it won't get me my dough back. . . . But you were wrong, too, McGinley. It wasn't Rocco who was in on that stickup with Enright. . . . Yeah, it was Heston, sure. But the third guy—you know who? . . . Pete. . . . Yeah, the one who drove you out here, the one you slugged."

That was the day Ed bought the ring. Big Bill Moroni closed up his handbook and left town a week later; he mailed the McGinleys a wedding gift. On the day of the wedding Pete's body was found floating in the river. They never did find Big Bill.

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When Prentiss opened the grisly
package, he saw
a head grinning up at him. . . .



"Sit still, Mr. Prentiss," she said

HEADS- IT'S MURDER

Chapter 1

IT WAS murder. There couldn't be any doubt about that. Prentiss stood in the window of the restaurant and watched it all happen.

He saw the little man stop on the far corner to speak to the girl. He saw the black car come

*Copyright, 1940, Better Publications, Inc., originally
published February, 1941 Popular Detective*

A Novel by W. T. BALLARD

He Wanted to Know What Kind of a Game Was Being

around the corner, the black polish of the gun as the bright afternoon sun struck it. He heard the hammer of the rapidly fired shots. Then the little man was falling, and the girl had turned and started to flee.

She ran directly across the side street. As she came toward him, Prentiss saw that she was carrying a package. He had seen it a few moments before, but the little man had been carrying it then. Now the little man was dying on the sidewalk.

Prentiss's long legs swiftly carried him out of the doorway, directly into the path of the girl. She tried to scurry around him like a frightened rabbit hunting vainly for cover, but he shot out a hand to catch her shoulder and stop her in midflight.

He got a shock when she turned her startled face to him. Her eyes were deep violet, so dark that they looked almost purple, and there was pure fear in them.

"Please!" she cried. "Please let me go!"

He snapped his head from side to side.

"Little girls shouldn't run away when they've just witnessed a killing. The police will want to ask questions."

"But I can tell them nothing," she said quickly. "I don't know anything. I never saw the poor little man before. It was terrible, and I can't be mixed up in anything like this. It will mean my life. Do you understand? My life!"

He believed her, but not in the way that she intended. He thought she probably had guilty knowledge of the murder, had probably been a part of it. Perhaps she had managed to place the little man on that corner at the exact time set for the killing. After accomplishing her purpose, she had probably seized the package and was racing away. He kept his grip on her arm and turned to look across the street.

A crowd had gathered around the fallen man. A police car drew up, its squealing brakes making a sharp cry above the rumble of distant traffic.

"Come on," Prentiss said to the girl. "Let's go over and let the cops ask questions."

He turned to look at her. As he did so, something struck him sharply on the side of his head.

He staggered, fighting hard to hold his balance, almost blinded by the force of the blow.

There was an open sidewalk elevator behind him, where men had been unloading canned goods for the restaurant. He staggered backward, his clawing fingers reaching for support. They touched the girl's arm. She tried to jerk away. His hand slid down her arm and clutched the small package in her hand.

The next instant, his foot slipped over the edge of the open elevator, and he tumbled backward into the shaft.

At least ten feet below, he landed on a pile of sacking on the elevator floor and lay there, too stunned to move. He hadn't seen his assailant, but now he had a confused impression that a man and a woman were peering down at him from above. Then two men in overalls ran out of the cellar and helped him up.

One of the men was big and worried. He kept saying over and over, "I told the boss to have that guard rail fixed, that someone was going to fall down. Now he's in for it. If this guy wants to sue—"

Prentiss was shaking his head in an attempt to clear it. He found he wasn't hurt, that the fall, due to the cushion of sacks, had not even bruised him. He insisted he was all right and that there was nothing for them to worry about.

GRATEFUL, the big man stooped, picked up the brown paper parcel, and thrust it into Prentiss's hand. The other took the detective's arm and led him toward the elevator, though Prentiss insisted he was uninjured.

The boss turned out to be a Greek—short, with a close-coupled body and the thick neck of a wrestler. He was worried and his English wasn't good. But he insisted that Prentiss be examined by a doctor and sent for one who had an office in the building.

Prentiss's mind was still fuzzy, and he wasn't thinking clearly. He submitted to the doctor's examination because it was easier to do so than to argue. Finally

Played — So, Naturally, He Dealt Himself a Hand!

he was able to get free from them.

When he emerged from the restaurant, the crowd across the street had dispersed. The body and the police were gone. He looked around, half expecting to see the girl, but there was no sign of her. With a shrug, he crossed the street and walked a block to a cab stand.

The parcel was still under his arm, for he meant to take it to police headquarters. But in the cab, his curiosity got the better of him. Loosening the heavy string, he opened the paper on his knees. What he saw made him recoil in his seat.

Grinning up at him was a human head! It wasn't a large head, and there was no blood. He judged that there had been no blood for a long time, for the



head had apparently belonged to a mummy.

Prentiss had read about head hunters — natives who shrunk the heads of their victims until they were scarcely larger than a good-sized fist. But he had never before seen a mummified head.

For a moment, a feeling of revulsion shot through his big body. Gradually interest replaced it, and he stared at the head curiously, turning it this way and that. It grinned at him sardonically, as if deriving grisly amusement from his surprise. After a few minutes, he rewrapped it in the paper and retied the string. Leaning forward, he rapped on the glass slide to attract the driver's attention.

He had told the man to take him to police headquarters but now he changed his mind and gave the driver the address of his office. He could see the face of Captain Bryte of the homicide squad if

he should suddenly walk into headquarters and lay this head on the captain's desk.

Bryte was a good policeman, a practical officer who had solved his share of murders. But mummified heads would be a little out of his line.

When the cab reached his office building, Prentiss got out, paid his fare, and went to the elevator. In the privacy of his own office, he again stripped the wrapping from the head and studied it carefully. Suddenly he straightened and his lips twitched. He had made a shocking discovery.

The likeness was astonishing, but there could be no doubt about it. It wasn't a real head. It had been made carefully, painstakingly, of papier-mâché!

He let out his breath slowly. For some reason the discovery eased his jangling nerves. Then his brows drew together again.

What was so important about a dummy head that carrying it had caused the murder of the little man? Why had the girl been so anxious to get away with it? Prentiss could think of all the questions, but none of the answers.

He was still trying to figure them out when the phone at his elbow rang sharply. He picked it up.

"Hello," he said abstractedly.

"Is this Al Prentiss?" a man's voice whispered.

"Yes," Prentiss said shortly. He didn't know anyone who whispered.

"You picked up a package an hour ago, just before you fell down the sidewalk elevator," the man told him. "I'll pay you two hundred dollars for that package."

"You will?" Prentiss growled. "That's white of you. And just how do I deliver the package?"

"That's simple," the man said. "You get in your automobile and drive out along Valley Boulevard. After you cross the railroad tracks, drive two blocks more. There's a yellow house in the middle of the third block. It's empty and there's a FOR SALE sign in the yard. You leave the package behind the sign. The

two hundred will be mailed to you."

A CLICK sounded at the other end of the wire. Prentiss replaced the receiver slowly and sat staring at the puzzling head. It was still grinning at him. He found that he rather liked the grin, enough to make him dislike parting with it. Thinking about it suddenly gave him an idea.

He went down the corridor of the building to the end suite where an artist friend of his had a studio. Prentiss unwrapped the head and showed it to the artist.

"Can you make me a plaster cast of this, Pete?" he asked.

Distastefully the artist examined the head.

"Where the hell'd you get this?" he demanded. "What are you planning to do—move to Africa?"

"Don't worry," Prentiss chuckled. "It's not real. It's made of papier-mâché, but I want a cast of it made in a hurry. Can you do it?"

Pete nodded. "It's a cinch. You do it the way you make a death mask."

"How long will it take?"

"Oh, a couple of hours," the artist said.

"Okay. And tint it so it'll look as much like this as possible. I'll get some hair and we'll paste it on."

Three hours later, he was just ready to start for his appointment when he looked up suddenly. He hadn't heard the door of his office open. He had heard no noise at all. But the girl was standing in the doorway, and there was a gun in her hand.

"Sit still, Mr. Prentiss," she said. "Don't make a single move. I don't want to have to shoot you."

He looked intently at her. Her eyes were even more violet now, shadowed and intent. He thought he had seen a lot of women but he certainly had never seen one like this.

"Watch it, honey," he said. "That thing in your hand might go off."

He was trying to make his voice sound easy but he wasn't succeeding. He couldn't help remembering the little man who had died on the sidewalk.

The package with the plaster head was lying on his desk. When the girl

saw it, her eyes widened.

"You mean you haven't opened it?" she blurted.

He kept his mouth grimly closed. She stepped forward, never taking her eyes from his face. With her free hand, she tore one corner of the paper so she could see part of the hair which Prentiss had painstakingly glued on top of the skull. She picked up the package with a little sigh of relief.

There was a closet in the far corner of the office. She motioned toward it with her head.

"Get up and turn around."

He stood up, raising his hands shoulder high. There was something about this girl that told him she would probably shoot if he tried to cross her. She came around the desk, got the gun from his shoulder clip. Forcing him into the closet, she shut and locked the door.

Chapter II

THE closet was small. Prentiss waited three minutes to make sure she was out of the office. Then he put his back against the rear wall and his feet up under the lock, and pushed. The lock snapped, and he sat down hard on the closet floor.

He scrambled to his feet, rushed to the telephone and called the agent's office on the first floor.

"There's a girl coming down in one of the elevators. She's about five-two, has fair hair. She's wearing a blue knitted suit and a little hat that looks like the usual feathered mud pie. Grab her and watch out. She's got a gun."

He slammed down the receiver and dashed out to the battery of elevators. A car was just coming down. He jumped into it, told the operator to shoot it directly to the lobby. They dropped with a speed that made Prentiss's stomach turn over.

He met the building manager racing down the lobby. Together they watched as the elevators spilled their cargoes into the foyer. But nothing happened. The girl wasn't on any of them. Prentiss questioned the starter and the girl at the magazine stand, but neither remembered seeing the girl in the knitted suit. It was five minutes before one of the ele-

vator operators came to his assistance.

"Say, Mr. Prentiss! I took a girl like that up to the top floor. I remember now. She got on at your floor just before that."

Prentiss swung around.

"Watch the stairway," he instructed the manager. Then he jumped into the car. "Take me to the top floor."

They shot skyward. Getting out, he went along the corridor. The fire door which led to the roof was open.

The roof of the adjoining building was the same height. It would have been a simple matter for the girl to step over the parapet, go down the stairs in the next building, and take the elevator to the street.

Prentiss didn't trouble to follow. He knew it was no use, that she had escaped. He went back, called off the men watching the stairways, and returned to his office.

He got the original head from where he had hidden it in the bottom of his steel file, carried it back to the artist's studio. His friend stared at him when he asked for another duplicate.

"Are you going screwy? What do you want another head made for?"

Prentiss didn't tell him about the girl nor much of what had happened. He set the artist to work and returned to his office. There he paced back and forth several times, thinking. Suddenly he stopped and looked down.

A cardboard folder of matches was lying at his feet on the green carpet. He touched it with his toe, turning it over slowly, then stooped and picked it up.

There was nothing remarkable about it. It was an ordinary folder from which a couple of matches had been torn. But Prentiss had a lighter and never used safety matches. Besides himself, no one but the girl had been in his office all day.

Carefully he turned the folder over in his blunt, powerful fingers. The back carried a bright advertisement for the Borneo, a nightclub in the southwest part of the city. Prentiss had never been there but he meant to look at the place. The folder might mean nothing or it might mean that the girl worked at the Borneo or at least frequented it.

He dropped the folder into his pocket and waited impatiently for the artist

to deliver the fake head.

IT WAS well after dark when Sam was finished. Prentiss wrapped the head in a package, carried it and the real one down to the basement garage where he stored his coupé. The original head he put up on a high window sill behind some water pipes. The plaster cast he took with him.

It was beginning to rain a little as he turned the coupé east and drove toward the intersection of Valley Boulevard. By the time he reached it, the rain was coming down so hard that his windshield wiper couldn't keep the glass clear. Prentiss swore and shook his head defeatedly.

If he left the package behind the sign as he had been directed, the paint would run on the fresh plaster. The glue that fastened the hair to the skull would be loosened and the whole thing would be spoiled.

Angrily he turned the coupé around and drove back toward the city. He knew he should report the whole thing to the police. If they found out what he had done, he would probably lose his license as a detective. But he also loved a mystery, and this was no transparent setup.

Al Prentiss was no ordinary private detective. He had spent five years in South America before being called home by the death of his father. In that time, he had acquired a zest for adventure. His father's estate was ample to provide him with all the money he needed. But he had to remain in Los Angeles to take care of it.

Deliberately he had taken out a license as a private detective, hoping that in helping other people with their troubles, he would find some excitement for himself. But until now, little business had come his way, and that little had been routine cases, which he farmed out to another agency.

He had practically decided that he had made a mistake, that being a detective offered no excitement. Then all at once, from the restaurant window, he had seen the little man murdered and taken the package from the girl.

When Prentiss reached the business district, he turned and drove south on Alameda toward Long Beach. Four or

five miles out, he swung off, cutting across to Long Beach Boulevard. After another mile, he turned again.

The nightclub had a big red neon sign, with neon-lighted palms at either end of it. He pulled his car into the parking place and sprinted through the rain toward the club entrance. The door let him directly into the bar.

The long, narrow room was well filled. He stopped and ordered a double martini, extra dry. The bartender was a short, fat man with eyes that popped somewhat like a frog's. There wasn't a hair on his head, even where his eyebrows should have been. It gave him a startled expression.

Prentiss had an impulse to take a soft pencil and draw the man a couple of eyebrows. He didn't. He downed his martini, went along a passage, and came into a big supper room.

It had a lot of potted palms masking the tables. The whole place was badly lighted and packed full with people. There were two orchestras, five Hawaiian strings, and a swing band. Prentiss wondered, as he sat down, what Hawaiians were supposed to have to do with Borneo.

The waiter was Eurasian. The whole place seemed to be Eurasian. Prentiss gave his order, asked for another martini, and lit a cigarette. Then he looked around.

At the moment, the Hawaiians were playing, and the scrape of steel on the strings of the guitars shrilled high above the chatter of voices and clink of glasses.

Prentiss yawned. The whole thing had a synthetic air, but the crowd seemed to be eating it up. His steak came and it was a good one. He ate slowly, had a liqueur with his coffee, and settled back, lighting a cigar. There didn't seem to be anything wrong with the joint. He couldn't see the customers clearly through the gloom and smoke, but there were a lot of them.

The Hawaiians stopped playing after a dusky, well-rounded girl had given a bad version of *Aloha* with an encore of *Blue Hawaii*. The swing band broke into a noisy jam session, and a small girl came out of the door behind the band platform.

Prentiss stiffened. It was the girl who had been carrying the package, the one

who had come to his office. He leaned forward, listened as she sang *Scatter-brain*. She could sing. It was a shame to waste a voice like hers in a dive like the Borneo.

He signaled a waiter, found a piece of paper and scribbled a note:

When you finish, come over to my table. I want to talk about heads—yours and mine.

He saw the man take the folded note, make a circuit of the room, and slip the paper into the girl's hand as she left the platform.

SHE stopped beside one of the shrouded lights. He saw her unfold the note, read it. When she glanced up sharply, he raised one hand. For a moment he thought she wasn't coming. Then she walked toward him slowly, unwillingly, as if she were afraid.

He rose and held a chair for her. She slid into it sideways, her eyes never leaving his face.

"You shouldn't have come here." Her voice was so low it hardly carried to his straining ears.

"Why?" he said, and the word was almost lost in the blare and clatter of the band.

She was leaning toward him, arms on the table.

"Because they'll probably kill you."

He looked at her, his brows pulling down into a straight line as he frowned.

"That's a funny thing to say. This afternoon you were in my office, waving a gun around."

"What did you do with the real head?" she demanded suddenly.

He pretended surprise.

"Real head? What are you talking about?"

"Don't stall, Mr. Prentiss. That head I got from your office was made of plaster. As long as you have the real head, you're in constant danger."

"Why?" he asked interestedly.

She didn't answer directly.

"I can't explain. And the less you know, the better off you'll be."

"I like mysteries," he said.

She nodded. "I know you do. But mysteries don't like you, Mr. Prentiss. Why don't you give that head back to

me, get on a nice boat, and go down to South America? You've got a lot of friends down there. You could have a nice trip—"

He showed his amazement. "What do you know about me and South America?"

"I know all about you," she said.

"But why?" he pursued, baffled.

She moved her shoulders a little. "When you're playing an intricate, dangerous game, Mr. Prentiss, you have to find out all about the other players—or you die."

"Like the little man?"

She nodded. "Like the little man. He made that mistake, Mr. Prentiss. He thought he knew what he was doing. He didn't so he died. Now will you please give me that head?"

Prentiss shook his head gently, his eyes smiling.

"No, I think I'll keep it. I rather like it, you know."

She rose and leaned urgently over the table.

"All right, then. All I can tell you is to leave—and leave here as fast as you can."

"Aren't you making a mistake?" he said. "Remember, all I have to do is go to the police. All I have to tell them is that I saw the little man shot and that you were with him at the time."

"I don't think you will," she stated coolly. "I don't believe you're a fool. Only a fool would do something like that, Mr. Prentiss. Apparently nobody but you paid any attention to me, so it would be your word against mine. There are a number of people who are willing to swear that I wasn't within five miles of that place at the time the little man was shot."

She smiled coldly, purely for appearances, and walked quickly away from him. He watched her go, his eyes narrowed with thought. Then his waiter came over with more coffee.

"Would you care for a little gambling, sir?"

Prentiss turned to look at the man. His face was long and yellow, his hair extremely coarse, his eyes like dark marbles set at a slant. Prentiss tried to guess his nationality, couldn't.

"Why not?" he said.

He finished his liqueur, laid a bill on the small plate beside his check and rose.

Chapter III

WHEN Prentiss entered the gambling room, he saw it was almost as big as the supper room. The waiter had led him down half a dozen steps and through three fire doors to reach the place. It was still early. Only a couple of roulette wheels and one dice layout were running, for there were no more than six customers.

Prentiss took his place at the dice layout, got a stack of silver. When the dice came around, he put five on the line. The dice turned up three-one for his point. He played four the hard way. He drew a snake-eye, then came back with a four and two deuces and got fifteen dollars. After that, he threw a seven.

"You're lucky tonight, bo," the man with the rake said.

His face looked like old ivory, but he was young. Prentiss tried to guess the blend of blood and failed. There was probably some Portuguese and an Asiatic strain.

"With your luck, you ought to try for higher stakes," the man said later.

Prentiss nodded. "And where would I place the higher stakes?"

The attendant jerked his head toward a door at the far end of the room. "In there."

Prentiss picked up his silver and walked toward the door. He pushed it open, expecting to find another gambling room. He didn't.

He found an office, where three men sat far apart around a long table. All three were watching the door. Two were yellow-skinned and they were smiling, but the third wasn't.

Prentiss knew the third man was Sam Jeffries. He'd been a lot of things in his time—rum runner, smuggler, arms runner and gambling-boat owner. Prentiss had known him in Bolivia, had met him again in Chile. He stepped through, closing the door.

"Hello, Jeffries."

Jeffries nodded. "Hello, Prentiss. The boys here—" he indicated the two smiling men with a wave of his big, hairy

hand—“found out you’d been in South America. They figured maybe I’d know you. I knew a lot of guys in South America, so they had me come over.”

“Yes?” Prentiss said.

He wasn’t smiling. He wasn’t doing anything but enjoying the fact that the flat automatic made a comfortable weight at his left armpit.

Jeffries was nodding again. “Yeah. The boys figured I might know you. And they also figured that you might know me and that you might listen to me. This is Mr.—” He hesitated for just a moment. Then he said, “This is Mr. Doe. And the man across from him is Mr. Ray. A couple of nice guys if you get to know them. I used to do business with them south of the Border.”

“Yes?” Prentiss repeated emotionlessly. He suspected now that the two yellow-skinned men were Chinese Comies.

“Sit down, sit down.”

Jeffries had had three or four drinks. His face, which had been burned to the color and toughness of leather by the tropical sun, looked a little redder than usual.

“Yeah, they’re nice boys and they don’t like trouble, Prentiss. It just happens that you butted into a game this afternoon. From what I hear, you butted in by accident, and they ain’t holdin’ that against you. See? But you’ve got something they want, and they’re willing to pay for it. You’ve got a little head. It hasn’t any real value, you understand. It’s kind of a family heirloom. Belongs to Mr. Ray’s family. Doesn’t it, Ray?”

“Very nice heirloom,” Mr. Ray said agreeably. “So sorry to have caused excellent Mr. Prentiss much trouble.”

“You’re not causing me any trouble,” Prentiss told him.

JEFFRIES laughed. “You always were a card, Prentiss. Now you’re a sensible young chap, and this detective gag is more or less a hobby with you. So how would you like to get ten thousand nice, round American dollars and take yourself a boat trip?”

“And if I don’t?” Prentiss said.

Mr. Jeffries looked pained.

“If you don’t, something could just happen to you.” His voice hardened. As

if taking their cues from him, the other two men ceased to smile. “Listen, Prentiss, let’s talk American. You’ve got something these boys are after, and they don’t want any trouble. They’ll give you ten grand for that head, provided you take a boat trip afterward.”

“And if I decide not to take a boat trip?” Prentiss insisted quietly.

Jeffries shrugged. “Then I’m afraid you ain’t never going to take any kind of a trip again. I’m not kidding you, pal. These two lugs mean exactly what I say. What’ll it be—ten grand or a nice, quiet spot in a wet ditch?”

Prentiss was thinking fast. “When would I get the ten grand?” he asked.

Jeffries relaxed, and the two yellow men began smiling again.

“That’s the stuff. I knew you’d see it our way. You got the money, Ray?”

Mr. Ray drew out a long, gold-bound folder from his inside pocket. From it he extracted ten bills which he spread out on the desk. They were highly attractive bills, each one a promise of the United States Government to pay on demand one thousand dollars.

“As soon as you deliver that head, those are yours. And, brother, you never earned ten grand easier.”

Prentiss nodded. “I never did,” he admitted. “All right, the head’s in my car.”

The men at the table looked at each other. Jeffries whistled.

“Boy,” he said, “you’re a cool one! Or maybe you didn’t know it was worth ten grand. Anyhow, let’s go get it.”

He sprang to his feet. Before Prentiss realized what he intended, Jeffries had taken a quick step forward. A gun had suddenly appeared in his hand and was jabbed against Prentiss’s stomach.

“What the hell is this—a double-cross?” the detective grated.

Jeffries’ lips smiled, but his eyes didn’t change.

“No, I’m just being careful.” His free hand streaked out and yanked the automatic from Prentiss’s shoulder clip. Then he stepped back. “All right, let’s go and look at the head.”

They went up a passage, which opened through a trap door in a greenhouse floor, and out into the rain. At Prentiss’s car, they stood waiting while he reached

inside and got the package.

Mr. Ray sucked in his breath sharply as his long talonlike fingers closed over the brown paper. Jeffries seemed relieved.

"I told you he'd be sensible," he said to the yellow men. "I told you a guy like him would know which side his bread was buttered on." He handed Prentiss the ten crisp bills. "Give Mr. Ray your keys. He'll see that your car's taken back to your garage."

Al Prentiss put the money in his

ding his shoulders. The sharp, cold point of a knife was pressed against his neck just under his right ear.

"Please, not so fast."

Prentiss believed Mr. Doe was probably still smiling. He didn't move. Jeffries climbed heavily to his feet. When he spoke, there was no anger in his voice.

"Neatly done," he said. "Neatly done, pal. But when you've lived as long as I have and done business with these heathens as long as I have, you won't be so ready to try tricks. Let him up,

— NOTHING BUT THE TOOTH —

A LITTLE item like a tooth cavity thwarted a kidnaping plot in Manila, P. I., recently.

Go Kong-Hua, a twenty-three year old Chinese, and possessor of the aforementioned cavity, was snatched by five of his armed countrymen, and spirited away to a hideout, where he was forced to pen a ransom note to his father.

After finishing the note, Go was handed a pill.

"What is it?" inquired he.

"A sleeping pill," he was told. "Swallow it."

Go thrust the pill into his mouth—but didn't swallow it. Instead, he used his tongue to force the pill into a hollow tooth—and then fell into a bogus snooze.

Figuring he'd be "out" for many hours, the kidnapers relaxed their guard, and when finally they did get around to checking on their victim, they found that Go—he had went!

—Joseph C. Stacey



pocket. "What's wrong if I take it back?"

Jeffries smiled and spoke in the tone one would use to a slow-witted child. "Because you're not going back, pal! Not right now. You're going on that trip we spoke about."

Prentiss tensed. Suddenly his big fist shot out. He caught Jeffries off guard. The bones of his knuckles hammered against the bone of Jeffries' jaw.

Prentiss turned, started to run—and charged full tilt into a thug who suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

THE thug went down—but so did Prentiss. Fortunately, too, for a bullet whistled over his head as he fell. Then the light from a hand flash was shining on him, and Mr. Doe was strad-

Doe. I think he'll behave himself now."

The yellow man jumped lightly to his feet. Prentiss got up slowly.

"You don't seem to understand," he explained. "I said I'd go on that trip and I will. But I've got a lot of business that will have to be attended to first."

"You're the guy who doesn't understand," Jeffries replied. "You don't have any option in the matter. You're going on the trip and you're going now. It's only because I've got a weak stomach that they don't haul you out into that ditch. So you can go peacefully or make a beef and get hurt. Which'll it be?"

"Peace," Prentiss said.

They led him across the lot to where a big car was parked.

The roads looked oily, wet, and slip-

pery under the driving rain. It took them forty minutes to reach the boat landing, and when they reached it, it was dark and deserted.

Prentiss looked around. He recognized the landing. It was one that had been used by the water-taxis when Jeffries was running the gambling boats anchored offshore.

A man came out of the darkness to meet them—a tall man with a yachting cap and a greasy suede jacket.

"All set," he said.

They went down the long, swaying runway to the float. There was a water-taxi tied to the float, its powerful Hall-Scott motor turning over idly. Two men were in the taxi, and the whole stern was piled high with cardboard cartons.

Prentiss climbed into the taxi. The man in the greasy jacket took his place at the wheel, and they edged out of the slip. The last Prentiss saw was Jeffries standing on the float in the rain, waving to him.

He turned and spoke to one of the men. "Where're we headed?"

The man grunted. The taxi continued down the harbor, and Prentiss realized suddenly that they were running without lights. The constant drum of the rain and the rolling, breaking sea covered the noise of their motor. It was a fine night for ducks.

Off to the left, he had an indistinct view of Long Beach, its bright crescent of lights dimmed by fog that began rolling in heavily as the rain slackened. He wondered grimly if he was ever going to see them again.

The powerful boat shot on. As they passed the breakwater and cut into the open ocean, Prentiss tried to figure out just where they were heading. They seemed to have been riding for hours, and still no light showed on the taxi.

Then the man at the wheel cut the motor, and they sat silently, rising and falling on the empty sea, the crew leaning out and listening. Once he heard one of the men say, "Coast Guard."

HE REALIZED that they were listening for patrol boats, but there seemed to be none. The angry sea with its giant, rolling combers was entirely deserted, save for them.

The boat started running again. Prentiss began to wonder whether the men hoped to run it to Hawaii. Then suddenly a single light showed ahead.

The boat swung around in a half circle and came up. Prentiss moved forward to look out. With amazement, he saw the conning tower of a submarine rising out of the water. The craft came up slowly like some gigantic whale breaking the surface as waves washed across the low-railed deck. Then the tower opened and men poured out.

The speedboat edged in and moored at the submarine's side. The canvas top of the taxi was rolled back, and the men began pitching the cardboard cartons across to the submarine's deck. The speedboat's pilot remained at the wheel, keeping his engine racing, pulling against the hawser which bound them to the submarine. The boat rocked and pitched.

"We brought you a passenger," the pilot shouted across to the submarine.

Prentiss then realized for the first time that he was not heading for South America. Where the submarine might take him, he did not know. It seemed utterly incredible that less than four hours before, he had been quietly having dinner at the Borneo and listening to an American swing band. The ocean seemed empty, abandoned. He knew he could expect no help from anyone but himself.

"Come on, you!" one of the men shouted at him. "Lend a hand!"

He moved aft toward where they were hauling at the cases. He could see them in the indistinct light, not sharply, but plainly enough to show the holstered gun strapped around the nearest man's waist.

He stooped as if to heave up one of the cases. But as he straightened, his clawing fingers curved about the handle of the gun, jerking it free. He jabbed it into the man's side.

"Jump!" The man gave him a startled look. "Jump!"

There was death in Prentiss's voice, and the man jumped. His fingers barely caught the railing around the submarine deck.

The second man had swung around. Swiftly Prentiss reached over and snatched his gun.

"Okay, pal. You, too. Jump!"

The man jumped. The pilot hadn't heard. Deafened by the roar of the motor, he had been watching the pitching waves.

Prentiss raced toward him, knowing he had no more than a few seconds. There was a fire ax in the case on the pilot-house wall. He pulled it out.

The sharp blade went through the howser where it crossed the speedboat's deck. The motor was still racing, pulling against the thick rope, and the boat sprang forward with a sudden jerk that almost knocked Prentiss off the deck.

Startled, the pilot twisted around, realizing for the first time that something was wrong. Prentiss swung down lithely to his side, jammed the gun into his ribs.

"Okay, pal. Back to Long Beach—and make it fast!"

Chapter IV

BEHIND them, men were scurrying across the submarine's deck. A rifle spat, the bullet pinging through the canvas top. Then there was the rattle of a machine gun, and bullets began spraying all about them. Prentiss wasted no time. He raised his gun and slammed it hard against the side of the pilot's head. The man went down without a sound.

Prentiss grabbed the wheel and twisted it, at the same time opening the motor wide. The boat dipped down into a trough between two waves, came up while the gun hammered incessantly behind him. Then they went down into another trough, and the settling fog hid them from the sub's vision.

Prentiss glanced at the compass. He had no idea what course they had followed coming out but he knew that somewhere, directly east, was the American continent. Any part of it would do. At the moment he wasn't particular.

He had little fear of the sub now. They wouldn't dare use their searchlights for fear of bringing the Coast Guard nor would they dare use anything heavier than a machine gun. He knew his boat was probably leaking from some of the bullet holes, but aside from speed, these water-taxis were built to take a tremendous pounding.

The violence of the sea seemed to be increasing. Gigantic walls of green water, twenty feet high, rolled up and swept down upon him, threatening to engulf the entire boat in their swirling depths. He managed to keep the bow up into the sea and gripped the wheel until his arms ached, until they felt as if they were being pulled loose from their shoulder sockets.

The pilot stirred as the water came over the rail and crashed down upon him with stinging force. He groaned and rolled over, shakily got to his knees, and looked around. Prentiss reached down, grabbed hold of the man's collar, and jerked him erect. The man stood swaying, still half groggy, shaking his head to clear it.

"You'd better snap out of it and snap out of it quick," Prentiss said. "If we don't get to shore in a hurry, we're never going to."

Water was beginning to slosh around his feet. He knew they had shipped part of it over the side but not all. Most of it came in through the bullet hole in the hull. The pilot swore hoarsely, glanced at the illuminated compass.

"You been holdin' that course ever since you left the sub?"

"Yes," Prentiss said.

The pilot spat thoughtfully. "Better let me take the wheel. The way you're headed, you'll wind up a hell of a long way from Long Beach." He took the wheel when Al Prentiss stepped aside and spun it partly over.

The boat chugged on through the night. Prentiss looked for something with which to bail. He finally broke open one of the cardboard cartons, dumped overboard the cans of food and used the box without much effect until it was a soggy mass. He threw it away and tried another. The boat went on, pitching, its timbers groaning beneath the fury of each wave.

A lighthouse came up out of the fog, an automatic light that threw its beam in a swinging circle. When it disappeared into the blackness, Prentiss guessed that they were inside the breakwater. The pilot kept driving the boat forward. There was still no running light.

Prentiss stopped bailing and went forward to stand at his side.

"Better turn the lights on, I guess."

The man looked at him sharply, then obeyed with a shrug. The fog was thicker in the harbor. They cut their speed, but it was quieter here, for the waves weren't breaking so often. Instead, they were long, heavy swells, sweeping in and tending to aid the boat's progress.

They chugged into the inner harbor and up the long arm that extended back toward the landing.

PRENTISS was watching the lighthouse, not paying much attention to the pilot. The danger seemed to be gone. He wasn't conscious that the boat had turned until he realized suddenly that they were heading directly away from the lighthouse. He swung around, and shouted a sharp order to the pilot.

The man paid no attention to him. He was driving the boat directly toward the stone jetty. Before Prentiss could reach him, the bow crashed into one of the submerged rocks. The force of their speed carried it up high on the boulders, listing it at a good sixty-degree angle.

Prentiss was knocked flat into the dirty, splashing water on the bottom. He struggled upward just in time to see the pilot scrambling up over the stone jetty.

He followed as fast as he could, slipping and falling as he leaped from rock to rock. The gun fell from his hand when he had to clutch a boulder to keep from tumbling into the sea.

When he reached the top, he saw the pilot a long way ahead, running down between the oil derricks. Then the fog swallowed him, and Prentiss had to give up the chase.

He walked and walked, apparently for miles, until finally he found a cab. He was driven uptown into Long Beach where he caught a car for Los Angeles.

He stopped at his own office to clean up a little, then called the Coast Guard and reported the submarine. The officer in charge listened incredulously and finally ordered him to report to the office in the morning. That done, Prentiss got an owl cab and was driven to the police station.

Bryte of the homicide squad was on duty when he walked in.

"There was a little man shot out on Temple Street this afternoon," Prentiss said. "Did you get him identified?"

Bryte yawned. "Yeah. He worked out at the Carson airplane factory. He was in the office. Name was Yorgensen. We can't figure who would kill him or why. He was a bachelor, no near relatives, lived by himself. Why?"

Prentiss shrugged. "No reason. What'd he do with his spare time—play around the nightclubs, gamble?"

"Hell, no. He lived in a rooming house out on Third Street. He'd been there seven years. He went to the picture show every Wednesday night for bank night. That's the only gambling he ever did. If you ask me, those guys that shot him down made a mistake. They must have been gunning for someone else."

He took his feet off the desk and leaned forward, more awake than he had been when Prentiss came in.

"What the hell do you care, anyway? When are you going to stop playing detective and get that big carcass of yours out of our way? You've never had a case yet and you never will. You're just a fake and you know it."

"A guy has to start some time, doesn't he?" Prentiss said. "I heard about Yorgensen being killed and figured it might be a break for me."

The homicide captain laughed. "Nuts! Get the hell out of here and let me go back to sleep."

Prentiss obligingly left Bryte but he went over and talked to a grim-faced man at the F.B.I. office. The man listened to what he had to say, nodded.

"Thanks. We'll take a look at that nightclub."

He didn't pretend to be excited. Prentiss was disappointed. Nobody seemed to take him seriously.

RETURNING to the office building, he went down to the basement garage. There was one attendant on duty and he was sleepy. The place was almost deserted, but Prentiss's car stood in its usual spot. Jeffries had kept his word.

Prentiss climbed up to the window sill and got the little head from the place where he had left it. By squeezing, he managed to get it into his overcoat pocket. He slipped into his car and drove

out into the wet night.

It wasn't raining, but the fog had settled, making it almost impossible to see the street lamps. He crept along. Every now and then a car, coming the other way, would loom out of the fog like some gigantic animal, its headlights staring like round, misty eyes.

It took Prentiss the better part of an hour to cover the distance to his apartment. He parked the car in the garage behind the building, went up the rear stairs, and fumbled for the back-door key.

A silent figure slid out of the darkness and shoved a gun hard against his ribs. Sam Jeffries' voice held a note of irritation.

"So, you thought you could make monkeys out of us, huh?"

Prentiss didn't say anything, for there was nothing to say. He opened the door and stepped through into the dark kitchen with Jeffries right behind him. The gun dug harder into Prentiss's spine as he found the switch and clicked on the light.

"How'd you happen to be here?" he asked almost casually.

"What'd you expect?" Jeffries said. "The pilot of that speedboat got me on the phone ten minutes after you landed. I've been waitin' around here ever since. Where the hell have you been?"

Prentiss shrugged. "Just coming home."

"All right—in there," Jeffries said.

He poked Prentiss ahead of him into the front room. When they reached it, he backed toward the door that opened into the apartment-house corridor, never taking his eyes from Prentiss. His gun was level, steady.

With his free hand he fumbled behind him, found the door bolt, and unloosened it. Then he opened the door and whistled softly. Mr. Doe and Mr. Ray came in.

Under the intense bright light they looked even more like old ivory than they had before. Prentiss thought they might have been pawns carved for a chess set but he knew these men were no pawns. They were big shots in their own mysterious racket.

He made a little bow as they came in, a bow which Mr. Ray returned instinctively.

"This is a pleasure, gentlemen — a pleasure I had no right to expect."

"No doubt, Mr. Prentiss," Ray hissed politely. "But I'm extremely glad you decided not to go on that trip in the submarine. After you had departed, we discovered that the head which you had so kindly given us in exchange for our ten thousand dollars was, after all, made of plaster. Imagine our consternation."

Prentiss bowed again. "I can imagine, Mr. Ray."

His voice held deep irony, but Sam Jeffries' voice was hoarse.

"For Pete's sake, cut out the etiquette. Listen, Prentiss, you've stalled all you can. You've got just one more chance to turn over the real head to us. If you don't do—" He left the rest of the sentence unfinished.

Prentiss nodded. "Mind if I take off my overcoat? It's awfully hot in here."

Without waiting for permission, he started to unbutton the coat. Jeffries took a quick step forward.

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute! Don't think I'm going to give you a chance to pull another fast one. Let's have a look at your pockets first."

HE PATTED Prentiss expertly, then felt for a shoulder clip. Prentiss appeared nervous. He kept shifting his weight from one foot to the other. Jeffries ran his hand quickly over the top-coat pockets. When he felt the round outline of the little head, he stopped, drawing in his breath sharply.

"What's the matter?" Mr. Ray said. "What has happened, my friend?"

"For cripe's sake, he's got the head in his pocket! Can you imagine that? We figured he'd have it hid out some place careful. Instead, he goes walking around with it in his pocket. What a guy! Come on, get that coat off."

"Maybe it is another head of plaster," Mr. Ray hissed.

Jeffries screwed up his face ominously. "Is it? If you try to pull a fast one again, punk, I'll blow you up so small that the pieces won't even float down through the fog."

Prentiss shook his head, looking angry.

"No such luck." His voice had a bitter ring. "Unfortunately it's the real head."

At least, it's the one I picked up this afternoon."

"Watch him, Doe," Jeffries warned.

He attempted to pull the coat from Prentiss's wide shoulders, at the same time trying to extract the head from the pocket. It wasn't an easy job. He finally swore, drew a knife, and cut through the pocket. The head rolled out into his hand and lay there grinning up at him. Jeffries shuddered.

"What a hell of a thing to be carrying around! The idea of head hunters always got me, anyway."

Prentiss didn't say anything. Mr. Doe and Mr. Ray crowded forward. Jeffries swore at them.

"One of you guys watch this punk. He's slippery as hell."

Ray turned and said something to Doe in a language Prentiss couldn't understand. Doe took out a knife and turned his black eyes toward Prentiss. They looked like bits of jet, for there was no feeling in them. Although the lips still smiled, there was no warmth in the smile. Prentiss knew Mr. Doe would have stabbed him gladly, that, in fact, Mr. Doe was just waiting for an opportunity to knife him.

Jeffries still had the knife in his hand.

"This is the real head, all right," he said to Ray. "This isn't any plaster cast. But how do we get into it?"

"May I?" Ray said.

He accepted the head from Jeffries' fingers, held it up by the hair. It looked as if he intended to scalp it, but instead he rammed the point of the knife under the outer layer of papier-mâché and pried up.

The skinlike parchment covering peeled away. Fitted neatly into the hollow space, between the layers, were folded sheets of tracing paper.

Mr. Ray sucked in his breath with pleasure, and Jeffries whistled.

"Very neat! Very neat!"

"Thank you," Mr. Ray said simply. It was as if Jeffries had paid him a high personal compliment.

They carried the papers over to a table and spread them out carefully. Mr. Doe obviously wanted to join them, for he didn't like the idea of standing and watching Prentiss. The detective knew he was trying to think of something so

he wouldn't have to watch. Suddenly Mr. Doe thought of a way.

Prentiss could see the thought crystallized behind the dark eyes. Mr. Doe hefted the weight of his knife thoughtfully, then stepped forward. Prentiss remembered the way he had slammed his own gun against the pilot's skull and gritted his teeth in preparation for the blow from a heavy knife-handle. But the blow didn't come.

The girl had stepped into the doorway behind Mr. Doe. There was a gun in her hand and it was perfectly level and absolutely still.

"Don't move, any of you," she ordered quietly.

Chapter V

MR. DOE looked as if he were imitating the Statue of Liberty. One foot was advanced a little. The arm holding the knife was still raised. Jeffries and Ray were at the table. They were bending over the papers they had taken from the little head. They didn't straighten.

Nobody moved at all as the girl said to Prentiss, "You might be smart enough to think of collecting their guns."

He got the guns, picking them up joyfully. He especially enjoyed ripping the heavy knife from Mr. Doe's yellow fingers. He shoved the man over toward the wall, then turned his attention to Ray and Jeffries. After disarming them, he pushed them away from the table toward Doe. Then he looked at the papers.

He didn't understand much about it, but he guessed after a glance that they were tracings from the design of a motor—an airplane motor. He turned around and his face was hard. He was beginning to get the idea.

"You were in pretty bad odor in South America, pal," he told Jeffries. "But there's a difference between running guns and liquor—and espionage. I don't know much about it but I hear that in some places they shoot spies."

Jeffries didn't say anything. His leathery face had lost its heightened red color and had turned gray under the heavy tan. Mr. Doe and Mr. Ray had stopped smiling, their faces now yellow masks. The girl advanced a few steps

into the room.

She shouldn't have done that. If she had stayed in the hall, she might have seen the movement behind her. But Prentiss and she were feeling confident. They had no warning that everything wasn't under control until the man moved up behind her, grabbed her gun, and covered Prentiss.

"Drop it, pal!" he barked.

Prentiss had been facing the men against the wall. He had no chance to use the guns he had taken. He didn't even have a chance to turn but he thought that he recognized the voice. It sounded like the one that belonged to the man who had piloted the speedboat.

The man came in, pushing the girl in front of him. Jeffries reached Prentiss first and wrenched the gun from his grasp.

"Very neat, Frank. This almost makes up for letting Prentiss steal the boat."

The man growled something. Prentiss turned around slowly. The girl's face was white. She looked small and scared. She had a right to look that way, for Jeffries swung around at her.

"And what the hell do you think you're doing? You're supposed to be working for us. What do you mean, coming in here with a gun?"

She fumbled as if hunting for words and apparently couldn't find any that suited her. Jeffries took a step forward. His big, blunt fingers left parallel marks on her white cheek.

"That's for getting out of line. But I'm not finished with you. See? Nobody crosses Sam Jeffries."

"Leave her alone," Prentiss gritted. Jeffries' mouth took on a nasty twist.

"Look, pal, don't you go around hunting for trouble. You're going to find a lot of it. I was very nice and very easy on you tonight. If Mr. Doe had had his way, we'd have cracked you on the head out at the Borneo and dumped your body on Signal Hill some place. Well, I'm beginning to believe Doe's right. Search him, Mr. Doe. He should have that ten grand on him, and there's no need to leave that much money on a dead man."

Mr. Doe came forward. He was no more than five feet three, but the way he walked he might have been six-eight. There was a lot of satisfaction on his

yellow face and he decidedly was not smiling. He slapped Prentiss once across the mouth, then he reached into Prentiss's pocket for the wallet, and that was when he grew careless. He shouldn't have got between Prentiss and Jeffries.

PRENTISS reached like a striking snake. He caught the yellow wrist as it reached for the wallet. His other hand caught the front of Mr. Doe's belt. The next instant, Doe's small, patent-leather-clad feet were a good six inches off the carpet. He cried out just once. Then he was hurtling backward through the air—directly at Jeffries!

The yellow man's body struck Jeffries hard in the chest, knocking him backward into the wall. His head cracked against the plaster, dislodging a hunting print that came sliding down to stun him.

Mr. Ray was snatching for the knife as Prentiss charged. The detective caught the man's wrist as he lifted the knife above his head, twisted it back so sharply that the bone snapped. Then he hurled the man on top of Jeffries.

Frank had snapped a shot at Prentiss, but missed. As he fired, the girl jumped sideward, her body striking his elbow and knocking him half around. She caught his gun arm, struggling to keep him busy. Before the pilot could break loose and turn, Prentiss had bounded in.

His hard knuckles struck the man's angular jaw. The blow numbed Prentiss's arm almost to the elbow. But the pilot's knees kinked, and he went down in a twisting motion that made him fall on his face.

Prentiss had hold of the girl's arm and was dragging her to her feet.

"Listen, kid, the back door's open. Run!"

She stared at him with widening eyes. "Run?"

"Yes. Get the hell out of here—quick. I don't know what part you played in this game and I don't care. You came in barely in time to save me from a dented skull. Then you saved my life."

"But why should I run?" she said.

"Because the F.B.I. boys are out in the hall some place," he told her. "I was supposed to give them a signal by breaking the window. I haven't had a chance. But after that shot, they're going to be

here in a minute."

As if in answer to his words, feet came pounding down the hall.

A moment later, the men burst through the door. There were five of them, their guns held ready.

Doe, Ray, and Jeffries were struggling to untangle themselves and get to their feet. The pilot hadn't moved. Judging by the way Prentiss's knuckles felt, he wouldn't move for a long time. Prentiss crossed over to the F.B.I. leader.

"Wait a minute. The girl's okay. She helped me. If it hadn't been for her—"

The man grinned.

"What the hell's so funny?" Prentiss said.

"You are," the man said. "Telling me that my sister's okay."

"Your sister?" Prentiss gaped at him.

"Yeah, my sister. We've been watching the Borneo for some time. We knew they were running a gambling club there, losing more than they could pay off. These guys were clever. They gave the boys a lot of credit—a lot more than they should have had. Then when the boys lost too much, why, they cracked down on them.

"If they couldn't pay off, they had to dig up some plans or use a little emery. It was a nice racket, but we couldn't get inside. We got a couple of leads, and learned that Jeffries was working with the Commies. Only the guys who talked were found dead. My sister's a singer, so we planted her in a place where she and Jeffries could get acquainted. She strung him along and got a job at the club."

AL PRENTISS was looking from one to the other. "And the little man who got murdered on Temple this afternoon?"

"Yorgensen was one of the office men at the airplane factory," the F.B.I. man said. "He found out that one of his boys had sold tracings of this new motor. Yorgensen went down to the club for lunch, got into the back room, and let himself lose a lot of money gambling. The croupier suggested that he go in to see the manager.

"He went into the office when Ray was just putting these plans into this head. Yorgensen pulled a gun, made him wrap the head up, and ducked out the back

way. My sister heard Ray and Jeffries talking after Yorgensen left and trailed him back uptown. She didn't have time to get word to me, so she stopped Yorgensen on Temple Street and tried to get him to give her the package.

"She was talking to him when Jeffries drove by in that car and shot him. Then she ran away with the package. Jeffries came back around the block. He was the guy who knocked you down the elevator shaft. Then the cops came, and Jeffries took her away in his car. He thought she was trying to help him. You see, he was in love with her."

Prentiss nodded. "I can see that. It would be plenty easy."

The girl blushed a little. Her brother grinned wider.

"With your evidence, we've really got these guys. You'll probably have to go down to the office and make a report on that submarine. Evidently the sub's been picking up what information these guys could collect."

"It seems that I didn't help at all," Prentiss said to the girl. "I just gummed things up."

"Oh, no," she protested. "If you hadn't grabbed that package away from me, Jeffries would have got it back. You helped catch them by having my brother and his men wait outside your apartment. I almost spoiled it by walking in at the wrong time."

"Then you think I'll make a detective?" he asked.

She hesitated. "That's not for me to say."

"It definitely is," he told her. "You may not know it, but you haven't seen the last of me. In fact, you're never going to see the last of me—if I can help it."

She was silent for quite a while, watching the prisoners being led out. Just before she left, she said, "In that case you'd better turn your license in. There's one good detective in the family already."

She shut the door quickly and held it. She was a strong girl but she wasn't strong enough. Prentiss managed to pull it open.

When he did, he found her laughing at him. Prentiss had always liked girls who laughed.

Wings of the Dark Angel



He motioned with the
pistol for them to get out

The runaway heiress gave Sam Mead a hard time on a snatch deal

A Novel by WILLIAM HOPSON

Chapter 1

SAM Mead sat in the shade of his small sheet-iron office, scowling out across the white length of the two runways he'd cleared out of greasewood and cacti-studded desert wastes. He pulled the brim of the baseball cap down a little further over the dark glasses and in-

stinctively kept glancing at the sky above the airport. Toward Mexico, forty miles away.

Only one of his three planes, a four-passenger cabin job with a high wing, stood by. One light trainer had been stolen three months before, swallowed up

*Copyright, 1947, Better Publications, Inc., originally published
July, 1947, G-Men Detective*

An Airline Pilot Makes a Three-Point Landing

in thin air until a patrol of Mexican troops had found it down with a damaged landing gear two hundred miles over in Sonora. It had been sitting there in the sun for three months, fabric cracked and windshield discolored from the terrific heat. An eight-hundred-dollar repair job, if a nickel.

Tobie Ralson, his instructor, had taken the other trainer and flown down with a kid student who had won his private wings. They had expected to make a quick, makeshift repair on the damaged gear and then let Tobie fly it out while the kid brought back the new trainer. A one-day job, and they'd been gone three.

Not that Mead was worried about Tobie. The job probably had taken longer than they'd figured. He was sore at himself for not having kept the trainer here and let Tobie use the four-place job.

Student training had completely stopped for three days, and at nine dollars an hour for dual, that was a lot of money which Sam needed badly. And all the time that big ship, good only for charter work, stood idly out there on the tie-down line, actually seeming to grin back at him.

Mead picked up the newspaper he'd bought in town at noon when he'd driven in the six miles for lunch, but soon flung it down. He was restless, disgusted, scowling. He'd just bid in on a lot of Army surplus stuff, hoping to build a hangar with it, and if the bid was accepted by the end of the week, he'd have to get money somewhere. Cash on the line. The Army did business that way.

Out on the highway, a quarter of a mile beyond the east end of the runway, a car swung off lazily and came slowly along the dirt road leading to the office. More students who'd expected Tobie to be back by this afternoon. Mead had been promising for two days that Tobie would be back "that afternoon."

He sat there, almost glowering as the car approached. The scowl didn't help his face any in the matter of looks. At thirty-five, it was tanned, wind beaten, and ruggedly ugly. The dour eyes behind the sun glasses had looked out over

stick and control wheel for more than three thousand hours. A lot of hours, he thought moodily, and what the devil had it got him? A busted-down airport and a flat bank account.

HE DIDN'T get up when the car rolled to a stop. He sat there, smoking, as the heavy-shouldered man with the dark features and Homburg hat got out from under the wheel. The man beside him slid over, and Mead guessed that he was going to take the car back whence it had come. This, maybe—just maybe—might be a charter job.

Then he saw the lovely girl in the rear seat, sitting with a slim, dapper, handsome man, and he knew it. Something clicked. Headlines and pictures in the paper he'd just been reading.

So this was Helen Horton, runaway heiress to the Eastern Trucking Freight Line millions! Somehow Mead couldn't picture the man beside her as the chauffeur she'd fallen for so hard. He must have been hot stuff in his uniform.

"Pardon me," said the man in the Homburg.

"Pardon me," Sam Mead said.

"Would you have a plane for charter?" the man asked, shifting his raincoat to the other arm. That told Sam that they'd come from the East since yesterday, when the headlines first broke. You didn't use a raincoat in the desert very often. Mead wondered idly who the fellow was and what his connection with the runaway heiress and her former chauffeur. Maybe the butler, he thought sardonically.

Anyhow, perhaps it was the Homburg, but Sam Mead just didn't like the man.

"I might," Sam said noncommittally.

"For three people?"

"For three people. And why don't you put the raincoat in the car, Mac? You won't need it out here."

A look of irritation flashed across the other's smooth-shaven face. He shifted the coat again. His lips cut a hard line across his mouth.

"Don't call me Mac, mister," he grunted out.

Below the Border: Peril, Intrigue, Kidnaping!

"Don't call me mister. The name is Sam Mead. You want to rent a plane for a charter trip. I've got a plane to rent for a charter trip. But I usually like to know where I'm going first."

"That," said the man in the Homburg, "will be explained after we get into the air. I—"

"It'll be explained *before* we get in the air," Sam Mead cut in.

He was about to decide that maybe he didn't need the money as badly as he thought. He didn't like the superior attitude of the man, his obvious arrogance, the color of his skin, the set of his shoulders. And by now he positively abhorred that Homburg. A man just didn't



have any sense wearing one any place.

The girl in the car stirred and got out, followed by her companion. She was about twenty-two and had plenty of shape and complexion and blond hair. Some guys, he thought, get all the breaks. This lean, dapper bird with her was really going to get a run for his money and maybe a million or so to call it off when her irate parents caught up with her. The freight line tycoon, according to the papers, had every police outfit in the West on the lookout for her, with twenty-five thousand in cash for the man who brought her back.

Sam shifted his glance to her left hand. No wedding ring as yet. They probably hadn't had time to hunt up a justice of the peace. Papa, in his twin-engined Beechcraft executive job, probably was burning the breeze toward the town a few hundred miles north of Mead's air-

port, where, the papers said, the chartered plane from the East had come down in a forced landing and the girl had been recognized.

The sardonic side in Mead came to the fore. He still sat there in the chair and made no move to get up. Probably the Homburg, he thought. The girl looked at Sam.

"Please, Mr. Smead—" she began agitatedly.

"Mead," he corrected her.

"Mr. Mead, we're in a terrible hurry. Won't you get started?"

"I'm ready to go any time. It's your friend, there, in the gosh-awful hat, Miss Horton."

"So you recognize me?"

MEAD let go a half snort and jerked his head toward the crumpled paper at his feet. "You must have had a good photographer. They even ran one of you, lying on your stomach, in the nude. You were eight months old when it was taken."

The ex-chauffeur—the papers said his name was Roy Duval—moved forward then, his fists clenched at his sides until the knuckles showed white. His face turned red in sudden anger.

Somehow, Sam, now grinning sardonically, didn't blame him. My nerves would be a bit short, too, he thought, if I had that and a lot of dough to boot just within grasp.

"Now, look here," the ex-chauffeur began angrily.

But Helen Horton laid a slim hand on his arm.

"Please, Roy," she said. "Let me handle this. Mr. Mead, we left New York yesterday in a chartered plane, after I'd left a note for my parents about eloping with Roy. I never dreamed they'd be so angry or take such drastic steps. We had a forced landing at night on an Army emergency field and stayed in an auto court until this morning.

"I heard over the radio in my cabin that Dad had got the news flashed to him and was on the way straight through in his big twin-engined plane.

He's probably there by now, with every highway patrol car in the state hunting for us. Mr. Burke, here, hired a car for us, and we drove on through to this town and then headed for the nearest airport. Yours."

She paused, almost out of breath.

"And now?" Sam Mead inquired lazily, enjoying the scowls of both Burke and the bridegroom-to-be.

"We want you to fly us across into Old Mexico. My father has a private estate down in the desert about two hundred miles from here. It's closed now. It has a private landing strip, and you could set us down right there. He'd never dream of looking for us in that place and even if he does, we'll be married and in Mexico, and by the time he finds us, things will have cooled off. I just need a little time to convince him that Roy is not a fortune hunter. Now, will you take us?"

"Sure," he said, getting lazily out of the chair. "We could have been on our way by now if your friend Burke, here, had used some sense. By the way, where does *he* come into the picture?"

"Mr. Burke? He's a friend of Roy's and came along to help."

"Oh," Sam Mead said. "I thought he was the butler."

Something like an inarticulate snarl broke from behind as Mead turned his back and went inside the office. Gear and spare parts and tires were scattered around the desk. An extra prop stood in a corner, yellow and varnished. He wrote on a pad:

Tobie—Gone on a charter to the Horton estate somewhere down in Sonora. Back tonight or tomorrow morning.

Then he picked up his canteen and filled it from the iced water in a fifteen-gallon container on the floor. Many years ago a forced landing and a five-hour walk through burning hot sun had taught him a lesson.

He slung the canteen over his shoulder and went out, locking the door.

"All right," he said. "Let's roll! Twenty-five dollars an hour, including return trip. All my ships are registered with the immigration boys down at Puerto, forty miles from here. There's a landing strip right beside the station. We'll have

to check in and tell them when I'll be back. Won't take more than fifteen minutes."

"All right," Helen Horton said in a tired voice.

Hot sand made crunching sounds under her high-heeled shoes as Duval walked beside her toward the tie-down line. Some guys, thought Sam, get all the breaks.

He put their bags in the luggage compartment behind the rear seat and motioned for the girl and her fiancé to get in. He closed the door and went around to the left-hand side, untying the ropes from the anchor rings on the strut. Burke was already in when Sam Mead slid under the left of the dual wheels, racked the canteen above his head, and closed the door. His eyes went to the gas gauge. Full. He made it a rule to keep them full on the line.

IT WAS going to be a heavy load, but he knew the ship. He turned to Burke, sitting surlily beside him. Burke obviously was boiling over that one about being the butler. But, thought Sam, that's what a guy gets for wearing a Homburg in the desert.

He turned to Burke. "Keep your hands off the controls. Ditto your feet away from the rudder stirrups. And for Pete's sake, put that raincoat back among the baggage. It gets on my nerves."

"I'll keep the raincoat in my lap," was the icy reply. "And for your information, Mr. Mead, I've been in a plane before."

Mead spun the starter and then taxied out on the runway he one day hoped to oil, warming up the motor on the way down to the opposite end of the field. He trundled down, swung around, and set the brakes, checking both left and right mags at fifteen hundred revolutions. Oil pressure was up, and the cylinder head temperature gauge climbed to required temperature.

"We're off," he said laconically and pushed in the throttle between the dual wheels.

The ship rose lazily, and he made a perfunctory circle of the airport while gaining altitude. Flying's greatest danger was on take-offs, and if the motor cut out at full throttle, there were the

X-shaped runways below.

He leveled off at a thousand feet and started droning southward, cutting the revolutions back to nineteen hundred and fifty. No use wasting good gas to land at the immigration station, anyhow. He settled back and reached for a cigarette.

"Smoke if you like," he said to Burke.

Burke grunted an answer and shifted the raincoat in his lap. The desert's mesa gave way to a valley cut by irrigation ditches, and the land below became checkered green squares of alfalfa and flax going to seed. They flew for ten minutes.

"Puerto is just ahead," Mead half grunted to the man beside him as he stuck the butt through a slit in the window. The prop wash sucked it out of his fingers. In the rear view mirror, he could see the girl and Roy Duval. She sat staring out the cabin window, and he could have sworn there was weariness and even indecision on her face. Duval stared out the other window.

Burke had shifted the raincoat, one hand out of sight in the folds. Now his voice came almost gently.

"Friend, we aren't going to land at the immigration station," it murmured in Mead's ear. "You're going to swing wide of it for a few miles to get out of sight and then go right on across into Mexico."

He shifted his hand again in the raincoat's pocket. That sharp hump under the waterproofing wasn't any pipe or finger.

It was the barrel of an automatic pistol.

Chapter II

ABRUPTLY Sam Mead turned in the seat and actually grinned at Burke. The grin turned into a sneer of contempt.

"I didn't really think that you'd make a good butler," he said. "It was just that hat. All you need to complete the picture is a sharp nose and a long, hairless tail."

Burke had edged over closer, gun in the raincoat pocket still steady. His face was tolerant now. He was almost smiling.

"Words," he murmured, "don't mean a thing—now. I'll ask you to say them again tonight under different conditions. A little left rudder, Mead. Swing along

the Border for a few miles. I'll tell you when to cross over."

"Just suppose I don't? Then you'll blast me and order the plane to fly itself to wherever you're going, huh?"

"Mister," Burke said, "in the old days, right after the first World War, I flew liquor across the Canadian Line in an old Breuget biplane. I haven't had hold of the controls in more than fifteen years now and never flew a wheel job. But I still think I could make a good enough landing for the three of us to walk away from. It's your move."

Mead took the hint. The man could do it. He eased over on the left rudder stirrup and watched the compass swing to due east. He looked at the man with the gun again. They had been speaking low enough that the girl and her fiancé in the back seat hadn't heard. She still sat with her face to the window.

"For a friend of Duval, the prospective bridegroom, you certainly want to see a marriage take place," Sam Mead said sardonically.

He reached over and turned on the radio, listening to the stutter that came from the concealed speaker above them. That speaker was on only the newest of planes, pushing the old-fashioned headphones back into the past with the old crystal receiving sets.

"Maybe there isn't going to be any marriage," Burke said softly. "This is a snatch. It was planned three months ago when we swiped that puddle-jumper job of yours to use in getting into contact with old man Horton. But the dumb fool who took it let the main tank run dry before he cut in the wing tanks, and the motor cut out. He crashed."

"Where is he now?" Mead asked idly.

"Buried, mister, buried," Burke answered. "I don't like failures. It set us back three months. By then, Roy was in love with Miss Horton. I got next to him, lent him money to take her out, played the good friend to help them elope to Mexico. That's where you came in again."

The radio was on by now. Static gritted through, and Mead twisted the dials. He got one of the regular stations. It was a newscast. Helen Horton's name came through, and now as an item flashed in, Mead saw in the mirror a

change come over the girl's face. She was upright in the seat, belt strapped across her lap, no longer looking out the cabin window. Her eyes were glued to the place above Mead's head from whence emanated the voice. The announcer said:

"Miss Horton is thought to have stayed in a roadside hotel last night, accompanied by her fiancé, Roy Duval, and a man now identified as Edward 'the Goat' Burke, former gangster on parole from Sing Sing. Burke's connection with Roy Duval, the ex-chauffeur for the Horton family, is not known. It is thought that—"

"Turn it off!" snapped Burke to Mead, the gun in plain sight. He turned and looked at the other two in the rear seat, lifting the weapon for them to see. "Now, just take it easy, Miss Horton, and everything will be all right. Your father is offering twenty-five thousand to get you back. I'm sure he wouldn't mind another seventy-five grand when he finds out you're in bad company."

SAM MEAD looked into the rear view mirror again. Duval was white-faced, and almost horrified.

"Burke," he began almost in a gasp, "this is awful!"

"Cut it out, Roy," the man with the gun advised. "Sorry I had to spend all that dough for you to play up to Miss Horton in your off hours, but business is business. You play along and don't make any trouble, and the two of you will get back safe and sound across the Line. Parental blessing and everything. Old man Horton will be so happy to get his only daughter back, he'll welcome you with open arms and not even miss the hundred grand me and some friends will be spending grand down in Central America. Now, everybody shut up. I'm tired of hearing people talk."

The girl maintained her silence. Beside her, Roy Duval, the ex-chauffeur, seemed dazed. Apparently it was just now dawning upon him that he had been tricked by a man whom he supposed to be a friend.

Mead, glancing into the rear view mirror again, felt almost sorry for Duval. He'd heard a lot about love, read something about it, and seen a considerable pile of it in the movies. Under his hard-

bitten, ugly exterior, there always had been the hope that some day the right girl might come along—the kind he could fall for, as Duval had fallen for Helen Horton. Somehow he found himself in sympathy with Duval.

The man had been hard hit by what had transpired just a moment before.

Mead let the ship drone along. Far to the right, a cluster of dots proclaimed Puerto with its adobe houses and small, circular bull ring. They passed it, fell into the distance beyond, and once more the desert began flowing beneath the plane's blue belly.

Sam Mead flew for ten minutes, waiting. If he could get some kind of signal to Duval, the man might grab Burke from behind while Sam wrestled for the gun. He wasn't worried about the ship. Already it was dressed by the elevator adjusting mechanism to fly hand off on an even keel. He had flown it for as much as thirty minutes without touching wheel or rudder.

Burke must have possessed something of the psychic in his criminal make-up. Or it may have been caution. He turned to Sam Mead, smiling that tight-lipped smile.

"You might have ideas," he said softly. "I know that if I was in your shoes, I'd have plenty whizzing in my head. I think one's buzzing in yours. Whatever it might be, mister, it won't work. I'll blast at the first move. All right, we're out of sight of the station. Just rudder her over and across the Line. Head right down between those two volcanic formations about ten miles ahead and keep going. I'll give you directions."

Mead gave a slight touch to the rudder and eased over on the wheel. The plane banked in a slow, gentle turn, the compass reading almost due south. The invisible boundary line of Sonora passed below. They were across into Old Mexico.

"You seem to know this country pretty well," Mead said.

He caught Burke's tight-lipped smile, almost a grin now. "A man in my racket generally does. You know something, mister? They say that crime doesn't pay. The theory is that a cop trailing a man can make a hundred mistakes and still get back on the track while the criminal ahead of him only has to make one.

That's theory. But when a man plans it out ahead of time, checking everything like a good general, including emergency plans in case something goes wrong, he don't make that mistake."

"In other words," Mead said sourly, reaching for the cigarette pack again, "you were simply visiting on that last trip up to Sing Sing? Just got lonesome for a lot of your pals and went up and paid board to the warden, hah?"

He was baiting the man, hoping to make him careless. He knew that Burke would not shoot unless it came to an actual struggle. Then Burke the Goat would kill and he would kill quickly.

Burke took the bait. His teeth were bared as his lips thinned out.

"Somebody else made the mistake, mister. Burke don't make mistakes. I'm not making one this time. Now, shut up before I lose my temper."

THEY flew steadily over desert studded with greasewood and cacti for an hour and forty minutes, cruising at one hundred and fifty miles an hour. Presently, a range of bare, jagged lava mountains, higher than the others, loomed up ahead with a pass to the right. Under Burke's instructions, Sam Mead flew through and then swung left.

Then he saw the place, about two miles away, in what appeared to be acres of green with a huge white mansion in the center, enclosed by a white wall. Snuggling almost against it, on the east side, was a sheet-iron hangar with a long white landing strip stretching away. Not much wind here, the airman in Mead thought, if they have just one strip. The place is probably protected by the mountain behind it.

He cut the motor and swung down, coming around in a long circle to lose two thousand feet of altitude. He gunned the motor a couple of times to keep the plugs clear and the cylinder heads warm, came in for a landing, and taxied up to the hangar.

Then he saw several things at once. He saw two men strolling out of the hangar, and across the concrete apron, one of them cradling a Thompson submachine gun across his arm. The other man carried a Schmeisser German machine-pistol. Mead's eyes, however, were on two

yellow planes inside the large hangar which had housed Horton's twin-engined plane.

One was the new trainer flown by Tobie Ralston and the kid. The other plane, a makeshift landing gear beneath, was the ship that had been missing for three months. Constriction hit Mead's stomach then.

He remembered what Burke had said about the pilot who had bungled. Buried. Maybe Tobie and the kid were buried out there in the sand, too.

Burke got out, stretching his jaws wide to clear his eardrums. He spoke to Mead and the others.

"All right," he said. "We're home. In pulling a good snatch, there's nothing like using the home of the snatchee's father."

He motioned with the pistol for them to get out and then turned to the two others. He was grinning almost happily now.

"Hello, Choo-Choo. Hello, Joe. Well, here's the bacon, right on time."

He obviously was quite pleased with himself. Mead got out, stretching, and looked at the two men. They didn't look like criminals. Choo-Choo was well dressed, lean, sardonic-looking, in his thirties. He could have passed for an F.B.I. operative.

Joe was in his late twenties, good looking and dark. A Sicilian, Mead guessed.

"So I see," the man called Choo-Choo said. "Bridal couple and pilot. This the guy Mead you planned on?"

"He's the bird," Burke nodded, gun still ready. "And watch him. Watch him close. He's mean and he's tough."

"I like tough fellows," Joe put in softly, his voice cultured. "I'll take care of him."

Burke turned to Mead. "This is Choo-Choo, mister. I call him that because he likes to ride trains. He's a nut about Pullmans. When we're not on a job, he'll ride all the way from New York to Los Angeles just to be on a train. Joe, here, is different. He's a college graduate in civil engineering and was an officer in the Infantry. That means, mister, that he's a whizz on close combat and a wizard with a burp gun—just in case you get any ideas."

"Thanks for telling me," Mead an-

swered dryly. "And thanks for taking such good care of my two ships. I hope an ex-Army officer turned rodent did the same with my pilot and the kid with him."

"That fellow who came in here looking for water?" Joe asked. "Don't worry about him or the kid, Mead. They're locked up safe inside. Don't cause us any trouble, and they'll get out okay. Let's all get inside. It's hot out here, and I can use another cooler offer from Mr. Horton's private stock."

HELEN HORTON and Duval had said nothing. Now, as they all walked up a curved concrete driveway toward a grilled iron gate in the high white wall, she fell in beside Sam Mead.

"Scared?" he asked, looking down.

"A little," she admitted. "But if it's money they're after, Dad will pay up. I'm just afraid that the law will interfere and cause somebody to get killed. If it happens, it will be all my fault."

"Hardly. You were pegged three months ago, before this business with your—ah—fiancé broke. They'd have got you some other way. I'm the guy who's on a spot."

He grinned as they went through the gate and into a "yard" of green that stretched for more than a hundred yards to the big white columns supporting the front veranda. Flower beds of a dozen hues threw color into the white of the house and the lawn's greenness. It was a veritable castle, a paradise costing at least a half million or more dollars. Mead guessed that the water for all this came from a big spring up back of the house, a spring which had turned a desert into a garden.

"Nice little log cabin your folks have here," he said to Helen Horton. He said it more to reassure her than anything else.

"Greenhaven? Father built it just before the war. He liked to come down here in the fall for a couple of months and putter around."

"That's a word for it," Mead said and walked on.

Two Mexican gardeners, working with wheelbarrows and tools, looked up as the party passed. The men were frightened—under strain. Mead could tell from the

expressions on their dark faces. He noted the tools again.

"Where do they live?" he asked casually.

"In quarters back of the house."

"Tool house close by?"

She gave him a startled look. "Why, yes, but—"

Joe moved in alongside Mead. "Burke and Choo-Choo will take care of the others, Mead. You'll come along with me."

They were at the porch entrance now. A frightened Mexican woman servant, probably the wife of one of the gardeners, stood at the door. She said something in Spanish that Mead didn't catch and ran to the girl.

Sam Mead followed Joe around the corner of the west side and for a moment tasted the chance. But too much distance separated them, and he thought of the others inside. Better not, he thought; maybe later. Somebody might get killed.

Concrete steps led down through an opening, cellar doors laid back, and Joe nodded for Mead to descend.

"Thought you might want to see your friends," he said half sardonically. "It's almost supper time. You'll eat upstairs in the kitchen—under guard."

A strong oak door, braced and bolted, barred Mead's way. From above, Joe took a big key from his pocket and tossed it down.

"Open the door, go in, toss me the key, and close the door," he said cryptically. "I'll come down and lock you up."

Obediently Mead stepped into a big cellar room with concrete walls and saw Tobie Ralson, slim, blond, and twenty-eight, staring in open-mouthed consternation. On a bench beside him sat the seventeen-year-old air student.

"Well!" Sam said. "Imagine meeting you here, Tobie."

"What the devil!" Tobie cried out. "What are you doing at this place?"

"Hoping you've got a match," was the reply. "I used up the last one in the book, flying Helen Horton, Duval—the guy I don't think she's going to marry—and a guy named Burke down here for a little deal in Big Finance. With a gun in my ribs."

He lighted the cigarette and elabo-

rated, then asked about the planes. Tobie told him. They'd flown down, managed to land near the damaged craft, but ran out of water and hopped over to the estate they'd spotted from the air.

"And that," he finished, shrugging, "was that."

"We'll just have to stick it out," Mead grunted in reply, seating himself on the bench. "They'll get in touch with Horton some way, collect, and we'll be on our way."

Tobie Ralson stared at him. "Who told you that?" he demanded. "Joe? He was lying to keep you from making trouble, Sam."

"Yeah?"

"They told me different. Last night. When this deal is over, they're going to turn this place into a slaughterhouse. That guy, Choo-Choo, will bump us off—with a burp gun."

Chapter III

IT WAS getting dark in the cellar. Tobie reached up and pulled a chain dangling from a light socket overhead. Dim light flooded the place.

"Gasoline generator with storage batteries out back," he said and sat down again moodily.

The boy stirred, got up, and took a turn around the room. "What do you think will happen, Mr. Mead?" he asked hopefully.

"Tobie just told you, Billy," Mead said and went on smoking. He pulled hard on the cigarette, finally flung it down, got up, and walked around the room. His ugly face had a thoughtful look.

He shoved both hands down into his pockets, trying to picture the kitchen, the man guarding them while they ate, and the probable whereabouts of the other two men. He even went to far as to worry about the Schmeisser machine-pistol should he get hold of it. He'd never fired such a gun.

"Go ahead and pace," Tobie said morosely. "From the looks of things, you ain't going to do much more of it."

But Sam Mead didn't answer. He stopped dead in the middle of the floor, fingers clenched around an object in his pocket. He brought it out and stared at

it—a cheap metal money clip he used to hold dollar bills. Of late, there hadn't been many in it. Right now there was none.

Swiftly Mead went to the door and inserted the clip's flat end into the slot. Then he reached into a shirt pocket and pulled out a new six-inch file.

His big nails had always been far too thick and tough for the average nail file, particularly the poor grade ones made during the war. So Mead had simply taken a file from a tool box, sharpened the tang's end as a cleaner, and used it as a nail file.

He began to work frantically, trying to remember the general shape of the big key. Tobie and the kid were beside him now, getting excited. He filed again, inserted the clip, and eyed the marks on the shiny blued surface. Then he set to work again.

For forty-five minutes he filed the clip, tested it, and probed. Sweat began to bead his forehead, and blood from the needle point of the tang showed where it had slipped and penetrated his pants.

But it was no use. The key wouldn't fit. He straightened up and shook his head.

"Listen!" Tobie suddenly cried and raised his hand. Mead went to the door and put his ear to the crack.

From without came a blurred, familiar roar. It rose, died, then rose again, and ceased abruptly. Sam Mead turned.

"That was a twin-engined job taxiing up and getting the switches cut," he said. "I give you one guess. Old man Horton is here, for some reason."

He went back to work again, and presently footsteps crunched on the steps without. Mead hurriedly placed file and "key" over the door as the lock clicked.

The footsteps retreated. Choo-Choo's voice called from above, "All right. Open it."

Mead swung the door wide. It was almost fully dark by now, but the man's figure was outlined on the grass above. The ugly-snouted submachine gun with its Cutt's compensator was lined down. The compensator had been designed to enable gases to help hold down the barrel in recoil during automatic fire.

"Dinner," Tobie said sarcastically, "is now being served."

"One of them wise boys," Choo-Choo grunted in kind. "A regular funny fellow. But I'll be fixing that in a couple of days, baby. You and me are going to have a talk—only I'm going to do the talking with this burp bazooka. You, Mead, come on up. You other birds stay down there."

"I am very much honored," Sam Mead sneered.

"That's all right, baby. Just take this key and lock that door again. Then toss it up and come after it."

The key rattled down the concrete steps. Mead picked it up. Though darkness had come down, he got a good look at it and mentally photographed its shape in his mind.

"Be back in a little bit, Tobie," he said and locked the door.

CHOO-CHOO had backed off fifteen feet, submachine gun cradled. "Put the key down, baby, and then back away ten paces until I pick it up," he said.

"Guard duty stuff," Mead grinned dryly. "Another ex-GI who didn't want to go to school under the Bill of Rights. The books would have been better, Mac."

"I'm doing all right." Choo-Choo bent and pocketed the key, grinning hard. Mead got the connection then. This man Choo-Choo was the tough trio's trigger man and he looked as though he liked his work.

They went around to the back, Choo-Choo with his submachine gun a safe distance to the rear. The kitchen was a huge place, all white and electrical, with two silent, scared Mexican women scurrying around, getting sunner.

"On into the living room," Choo-Choo said.

The living room looked like Grand Central Station with all its carpeting, paintings, and drapes, it was that big. Joe was there. So were Burke, the girl, and a crisp-looking, gray-mustached man who could be only her father.

Horton obviously was a very angry man, but he wasn't doing the red-faced, explosive, big executive act. He was pacing the floor savagely, head down, thinking furiously, if the expression on his face meant anything.

He made a turn and wheeled on Joe, pointing a finger. "It's not the money,"

he snapped. "The money hasn't anything to do with—"

"Well, I'm certainly relieved to hear that, Mr. Horton," Joe cut in in his cultured voice. "You had me worried. I was afraid you wouldn't like it."

"Hang the money," retorted Horton. "I'd have had to pay it out in income tax. What enrages me is that a group of criminals should use my own estate to kidnap and hold my daughter. I flew down here to short-wave my business manager and find you've even wrecked the radio."

He seemed to see Sam Mead for the first time, with Choo-Choo still ten paces to the rear.

"Don't mind me," Sam said. "I just dropped in for tea."

Horton started to reply, but Burke jerked a hand at him, meaning shut up. He came over, his dark face showing rising, almost uncontrollable anger.

"I don't like you at all, mister," he said in that thin-lipped way.

"It's probably a coincidence," Sam Mead replied sardonically, unimpressed, "but I wouldn't care to kiss you, either."

Joe began to laugh softly, watching Burke's face.

"Don't swing on him, Eddie," he said. "That boy'll hurt you. And now that nearly everybody has had their say, suppose we get down to business."

"I haven't got any," Mead grunted. "You rodents ruined it all by taking away my two trainers, plus one mighty good pilot."

"How about radio?" Joe asked. "Can you fix a radio, Mead? You handle them on a plane. Burke, here, got the brilliant idea that some of the Mexican servants might try to use it and jerked out a few wires. Very bright boy—Burke. He never takes chances."

"So he told me. So I fix the radio? So what?"

"I want to use it to call my business manager in New York," Horton cut in. "We're ham licensees. He keeps one in the office and another at home, so that I can call him at any time of the day or night when I'm down here. He'll get a hundred thousand dollars in cash from my bankers in a matter of hours and be down here on the quiet in a fast plane. Then we can pull out."

Mead went over to a mahogany table, took a cigarette from a box, a match from an ivory lion's mouth, and lighted up.

"I wouldn't advise you to do it that fast," he suggested.

"What's the matter?" Horton snapped. "You in on this?"

Mead shrugged his big shoulders. "It's not a bad suggestion," he admitted. "I could use a fourth cut to fly these monkeys toward Central America and save my neck at the same time. Because

to play wet nurse to tough little boys. Come along, baby."

Joe looked at Burke dubiously, then back to Choo-Choo. "I don't know. You might get ideas. We might not get the radio fixed, and that would be very bad."

"He'll get back in one piece. Come, baby."

They moved down the long carpeting past a huge curving stairway, that led to the rooms on the upper floor, and went through the hallway and out onto the porch. The stars were out. The soles

EMBARRASSING MOMENTS

IN ST. PAUL, MINN., the law definitely believes in meting out punishment to fit the crime. A truck driver, caught tossing rubbish about a street, was sentenced to spend 5 days, tossing garbage—to pigs on a pig farm!

IN DETROIT, A THIEF accosted a woman shopper on the street one almost below-zero night, and demanded money. Instead of cash, however, she let him have a carton of milk—right over the noggin. The carton broke, and the milk, which streamed down all over his face, froze almost instantly. Frozen-face yelped and fled.

IN LEWISTON, ME., a certain man should have left well enough alone. Rather than shell out with a mere 50c fine for a traffic violation, he fought the case—and ended up paying a \$100 fine, plus \$16.18 in court costs!

IN BELVIDERE, ILL., police recently fined a parking meter salesman, of all people, for a parking meter violation.

By JOHN L. BENTON

after you pay off, you and everybody else present—except three—aren't going any place. *That's* the payoff!"

"Ah," Joe said. "Your pilot's been talking. I forgot about that. My mistake."

MEAD grinned and glanced at Burke. "Aren't you the boy who doesn't make mistakes?" Then he went to the radio with its mass of dials and buttons and lifted an end of the table upon which it rested. Stepping in behind, he surveyed the works with a critical eye.

"Well?" Burke half snarled.

"I can fix it. I'll need some needle-nose pliers and a small screwdriver. I think we can get by without solder. They're in a kit in my ship."

"Okay," Joe replied. "Come along and we'll get them."

"Let me go," Choo-Choo cut in. "I like

of their shoes made sharp sounds on the paved driveway as they went down toward the gate and the hangar beyond.

Choo-Choo was a bit off to one side—far enough to be safe from sudden attack—though even the darkness failed to hide the new, thoughtful look on his clean-shaven face.

"What happened to Horton's pilot and the shrinking bridegroom-to-be?" Mead asked.

"That cry baby?" Choo-Choo grunted, meaning Duval. "We locked them both in the hangar shop. That Duval is really a character. A pretty boy driving a car but a whiner when the going gets rough. Old Horton was a bit tickled when she broke their engagement right in front of us all. Said she should have known better in the first place. Said he wouldn't mind her marrying one of the truck

drivers, just as long as the guy had a spine made of something besides jelly."

The gunman was silent again for a few moments. They went through the gate. Then Choo-Choo spoke again.

"About you taking a fourth cut, baby," he finally said. "It would work. Joe, Burke, and me make a good combination. Joe's the brains with his college education and Army officer training. Burke knows most of the police angles, 'cause he's served stretches in two state and one fed pen during the last twenty years. But there always has to be another guy. That's where I come in."

"There always has to be," Sam Mead agreed. "And I sorta get the idea you like your work."

"I guess you'd call it that— Wait a minute until I light a smoke. Just stand over there."

He got a cigarette out and reached for his lighter, cradling the gun under one arm. But the distance was still too great. Mead stood. The lighter flared briefly, went out, leaving a glowing cigarette end in the night.

"Yes, I like it. I had an aunt who beat me. She beat me every day until I ran away and then she put me in an orphans' home. There they beat me some more. I used to lie in bed at night, not crying, just listening to the trains go by. I dreamed of getting on trains and riding. I came out hating everybody in the world. But no cheap stickups for baby. I got wise. I went to school. I learned how to dress. I learned how to rub out, too. That's my job, baby."

"Nice work if you can get it," Mead said cryptically.

"I can get it. But you can come in. We're going to Central America with a hundred grand. We're going to invest it, down in a certain country. A lot of it in printing presses, more to the Commies and other crackpots. We're going to bust that little republic wide open and get rich, running in guns, bringing politicians, extortion, blackmail. A three-man revolution. Joe planned it all. Says he needs another good war to keep him from getting rusty. Joe's got brains."

"He hasn't too many," Sam Mead said. They were at the plane now, which still set outside on the concrete apron. Near by, gleaming in the night, was an all-

metal, twin-engined job with double rudders. "If he did have, he'd be using that college education and Army training for something besides a sucker racket."

HE OPENED the right-hand door and reached inside, fumbling for the tool kit. Choo-Choo's voice came from behind him. Hard.

"One last chance, baby."

"I'll have to think it over."

"You're the one who hasn't got any brains. We could use a pilot like you."

Mead heaved out the box, somebody else—probably the servants—having already removed the luggage.

"I was wondering," he said, "how you figured on going south. It's a long walk through this desert. Shucks! This canteen's leaking."

Choo-Choo chuckled. "This combination don't make mistakes. Joe's a bright boy. He took two hundred and fifty hours of flying this last year, planes being pretty handy things to go places in these days. Incidentally, we were tickled when that guy who drove us to the airport this afternoon reported to Burke about you taking delivery on this new crate. Up till then we figured on having to buy or steal one."

"You should have known I'd just give you this one for the asking. Blast this leaky canteen!"

He took it down from the rack and placed it on the floor. It was of two-gallon capacity with a long shoulder strap. For a metal container with a supposedly split seam it was remarkably dry. Mead's big hand gripped the strap. Behind him, Choo-Choo laughed softly.

"Too bad for you, baby, that Joe never took some twin-engine time. Then we could have gone south in style in Horton's big job. I told him—"

He still had the gun cradled. He tried to get it down and into action as Sam Mead wheeled and swung, letting the strap go. A yell came out of Choo-Choo as the canteen struck him in the chest and bowled him backward. He screamed when Mead landed on top of him from a running dive.

He had dropped the gun and now he tried to dodge the big fists coming down. It didn't work. The smashing blows drove the back of his head into the con-

crete. Mead lifted him, with a good grip, by the hair and smashed his head down again. Then he rose and drove the point of a shoe against Choo-Choo's jaw and broke his neck.

He bent and picked up the submachine gun.

"Thanks for the memory—*baby*," Sam Mead said to the recumbent killer and sprinted for the cover of the fence, knowing that Choo-Choo's cries must have been heard in the house.

The distant front door opened. Light flared through. It was blotted out again, and a man's footsteps came running. Then they suddenly faded out into dead silence, and only the howl of a distant Mexican coyote could be heard in the night.

"I should have known Choo-Choo might get careless, Mead," Joe's voice called. "But you forgot one thing. Night patrol work is my specialty."

"I'll be seeing you among the rose bushes," Mead answered.

Then he turned and sprinted back toward the twin-engined plane.

Chapter IV

MEAD made it and went around to the metal door, opened it, and crawled inside to the pilot's compartment. He clicked on the instrument panel lights, knowing their glow couldn't be seen from without. In their low glow, he examined the submachine gun, never having fired one.

On the left side, a small thumb lever lay toward the stamped word *Auto*. Opposite was the word for single fire. That was simple enough. He set it for single fire. That was simple enough. He set it for single fire. Two other words, *Safe* and *Fire*, covered another thumb lever. That was simple. You pushed it from *Safe* to *Fire*.

Mead cradled the gun and looked out through the windshield, hand on the landing lights switch. He'd come back to the plane because he'd remembered that the pilot had blasted the tail around to the hangar, leaving the nose of the ship facing the iron gate. Mead switched on the bright flood lights. White beams poured in through the grilled iron gate and flooded the whole section of the lawn

and one side of the house.

He ducked out, grinning hard at the sudden burst of cursing that came from somewhere within the yard. That, he thought, is no way for even an ex-Army officer gone bad to curse.

He ducked out of the lighted area, cutting a running circle for the west end of the fence. The pilot and Duval, locked in the hangar shop, had better remain there. Duval was useless, and the pilot was unarmed. Better let them stay where they were.

Sam Mead circled all the way to the northwest corner of the estate's fence before climbing over. He dropped inside into darkness with a grunt. Two small cottages were near by and, close to them, what must be the tool shed. Keeping to cover, Mead slipped into the tool shed. He chose two short-handled shovels, carrying them so that they made no sound.

Then he melted past the kitchen and lost himself among the yard's flower beds and vines on the east side, where a trained killer with a German machine-pistol lay waiting.

Two white stone cougars, mounted on concrete pedestals, loomed up. Mead dropped behind one of them, straining his eyes.

"As they say in the movies," he muttered, his stomach tight, "*this* is it."

"Hey, Mead. I heard you come over the wall," Joe's voice called. "I know you're in the yard. What happened to Choo-Choo?"

About forty yards away. Just down below. Mead shifted the gun's mechanism to full automatic fire and let off the safety. He'd have to be careful. At five hundred a minute, that little magazine holding a dozen or more shells—sixteen, to be exact—would squeeze out fast. He lined the gun under the cougar's stone body and, with his left hand, gripped a spade. He half rolled and threw it into a group of rose bushes twenty feet away.

A burst of burp-burp machine-gun fire answered amid lurid flashes Mead let go with a quick squeeze of about five shots and then ducked as a startled yell came from Joe.

Suddenly Joe's laughter, bitter and sardonic, filled the night.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he called out

from another position. "I fell for it. Me falling for one like that. Must have been because I didn't credit an amateur like you with sense enough to try it. I could have used you in my outfit, Mead."

"I was too busy, flying C-54s over the Hump," Mead grunted back dourly.

He was back of the cougar now, twenty feet away.

"You won't be flying any more of them after tonight."

"You won't be going on any more patrols, either," Sam Mead half snarled.

He kept straining his eyes back over his shoulder toward the house and wondering about Burke. Where was the man? Was he in the yard, too? Why hadn't he cut in? Maybe too many of Horton's guns were in the house, and Burke didn't dare leave. Mead turned his attention down below again.

THE lights of the plane were flooding up the driveway, and in the stretch of darkness between lay Joe. He couldn't cross that broad avenue of light. He'd have to be good to get past Mead and behind him.

Mead started crawling again, moving along past a row of rose bushes. He worked his way onward for forty feet, then froze as movement came from his right. He threw the second spade, and to his surprise four shots—from a pistol—answered. Sam Mead swung the gun and squeezed quick. Three shots. He heard a scream, saw Burke's body falling, a blur in the night, then fell flat himself as the machine-pistol cut away a half dozen roses within a foot of his head.

"Two down, one to go," he yelled to Joe. "And, Joe, you're not fooling me now. That burp gun is empty. I'm coming in. You weren't packing a pistol that I could see."

He rose and crashed his way through the bushes, ignoring the thorns. He trotted across a bed of flowers and plunged straight into the bushes whence had come the last burst of fire.

A man's figure rose up out of the leaves. He caught a glimpse of two arms swing high and threw up the submachine gun across his face as the Schmeisser came crashing down.

"Damn you!" Joe panted, and then

they closed in.

Sam Mead knew his man. Scientific dirty fighting. He instinctively twisted his body, and not a minute too soon. Joe's foot drove into his hip, and Mead grabbed it. He fell, twisting, wrenching hard, and felt the bone snap and heard Joe's grunt of pain. But he was still afraid of this man. Afraid to close with him. A mistake would be fatal. So Mead jumped to his feet, still gripping Joe's ankle.

He began to swing Joe in a circle while the man cursed and tried to free himself.

No man but a person of Mead's build could have done it. He walked thirty yards, still half swinging, half dragging his victim until, again, the stone cougars loomed up in the darkness.

By now Joe knew his purpose. He fought the harder against this implacable, hard-bitten man whom he and his friends had so badly underestimated. A final cry that was half curse broke from him as his body swung and his head and shoulders smashed into the wide-open, stone-fanged mouth of the ominous cougar.

Then Mead let him down.

He stood there a moment, panting, wiping at a trickle of blood on his cheek where one of the rose bush thorns had penetrated. He heaved a big sigh, swallowed, and bent over, heaving the broken man over one shoulder.

Lights were still on everywhere as he strode in through the kitchen and on into the huge living room. The girl and her father seemingly had not moved. They stared as he dumped Joe onto the carpet. Blood covered one side of Joe's face, and his left leg was twisted queerly. He was breathing.

"What happened?" Horton demanded. "We thought a new war had broken out down there. There's not a gun in this house that I could find—they hid them somewhere—or I'd have been down to help you. Where's Burke and that other fellow?"

"In purgatory, I hope." Sam Mead answered. "Got a drink? I need one."

"You bet I've got a drink." Horton said, reaching toward glass-enclosed shelves. "*Habanero*. A Mexican brandy I'll match against any in Europe."

Helen Horton came over, laying a slim hand on his big arm. There was a tear in the sleeve, and the touch of her hand did things to him.

"Are you all right?" she asked anxiously.

"No," he growled, "I'm not all right. I'm plenty mad." And to Horton, pouring liquid into a whisky glass, "Haven't you got a bigger glass than that?"

Horton chuckled and reached for a water tumbler. "Now here's a man after my own heart. Do you know something, Mead? I can still get behind the wheel of a semitrailer Diesel outfit and show any of my three hundred-odd drivers a thing or two. Here."

Mead took the tumbler. He drained half of it, cleared his breath, and drained the other half.

"That," he said, "is more like it."

HORTON chuckled. "That is seventy proof. I suppose you know you've got twenty-five thousand dollars coming."

"I suppose you know that I'm going to take it, too," Sam Mead told him, putting down the glass. "I've got to oil some runways."

Horton looked almost startled. "Oil them, you say? Helen said you didn't have much of an airport. Well, by a strange coincidence, I happen to have a finger in a big street-paving company back East. Just for the devil of it, Mead, I'm going to have equipment loaded on my trucks and do the job for you. Oh, don't get me wrong—I'm not a generous man. But this business tonight has given me a new lease on life. Now that it's over, I wouldn't have missed it for the world." He looked over at his daughter. "What are you going to do—go back East and be a good girl?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I'd be a freak among my friends now, with

all this publicity. I'll stick around while you pave the airport."

Footfalls, soft on the carpeting, came from behind. Sam Mead instinctively whirled, his nerves still not settled by the huge drink. Tobie Ralson and Billy came striding in. Tobie saw the now groaning figure on the floor, assumed that everything was in order, and grinned.

"Well," he said, "imagine meeting you here."

"How the devil did you get out?" Sam Mead demanded. "Choo-Choo had the key."

Tobie grinned again and flung an arm around the kid's shoulders. "Billy did it. The little devil used to fool with locks in his workshop. I'm promising him twenty hours of free flying time—Hey! Drinks!"

He made for the now almost empty *Habanero* bottle.

"So?" Horton said again to his daughter. "You're going to stay for a while?"

She nodded. "Yes. It was half boredom that caused me to run away with Roy, Dad. But, Mister Big Man, I won't be bored for a while. I'm going to ask Mead, here, to teach me to fly. As usual, you'll pay the bill."

Horton let go a snort. "All right, stay out here. And I hope to high heaven that he's just fool enough to fall in love with you and marry you and take you off my hands."

"He's a little too ugly at sight," she said calmly. "But he'd be a good antidote for a man like Roy. He looks just mean and tough enough to make a pass at me. Will you teach me to fly—Sam?" she asked.

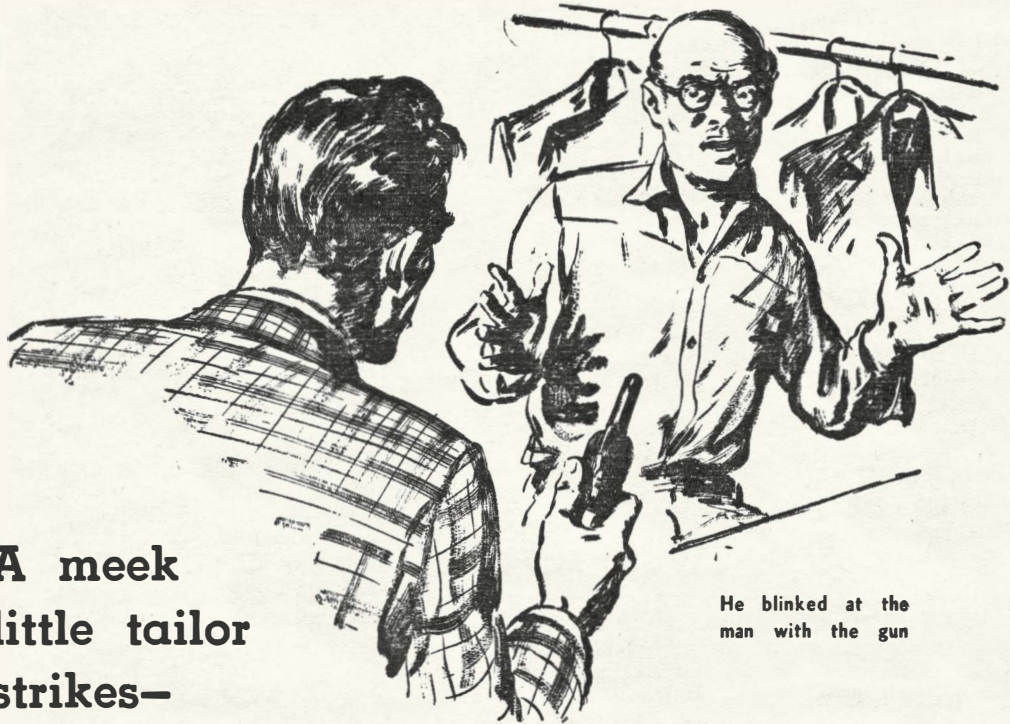
"Okay." He nodded, the drink making him feel normal again.

Some guys, he thought, get all the breaks.

The Phantom and Muriel Havens at their best in **MURDER'S AGENT**,
a novel by Robert Wallace in the Summer Issue of—

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A meek
little tailor
strikes—

He blinked at the
man with the gun

While the Iron is Hot

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

MR. BRIDGEWATER looked up from his pressing machine, and his eyes blinked behind his strong glasses. The big man in tan sports clothes, standing just inside the back door of the shop, was holding a gun pointed at the tailor and beckoning to him with a finger of his other hand.

The perspiration on the bald head of the little tailor was not altogether due to the midafternoon heat. His heart had jumped into his throat, and his indigestion had started to kick up. He left his machine with the upper part still down on a pair of slacks and walked on trembling legs back through the aisle of hanging garments and stopped to blink at the man with the gun.

Mr. Bridgewater couldn't have asked the man what he wanted if he had tried. But the man told him, anyway, in a low voice which, along with the gun, carried considerable authority.

"Look, Mac, there's been an accident. This gun just went off, and a bullet lodged in the brain of a sap that didn't do what I told him to. Y'understand, don't you?"

Mr. Bridgewater got the general idea and nodded, while his hand went to his aching stomach. He looked at the gun.

"I guess so," he said weakly.

"That's fine," the man continued. "The cops kinda got traffic held up around the block, so I'm gonna visit with you till it opens up a little, y'understand. Off the

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record. You know. That'll be all right with you—won't it?"

The man's threatening gaze convinced Mr. Bridgewater that it would be all right. He nodded.

They both heard the steps coming down to his half-basement entrance and the click of door handle. The man with the gun slid quickly into the dressing booth beside the rear door. But he kept the pistol in Mr. Bridgewater's sight.

"Wait on the customer, but I'll be covering you."

The customer was a lady.

"Wasn't it terrible about poor Mr. Horowitz?" she asked while Mr. Bridgewater found her suit on the hanger and started wrapping it. "They say that robber just went in and asked to see diamonds. Then he pulled a gun and made Mr. Horowitz go to the back and open his safe. Then he shot him. Poor old man. You and him was friends, wasn't you?"

Mr. Bridgewater's throat went dry. So it was Mr. Horowitz this man had killed.

"Yes. We played pinochle together every night. Him and me and Delehanty. We were friends."

"I bet Mr. Delehanty would like to get his hands on the murderer," the woman said, paying her bill and picking up her package. "And I bet you would, too."

"I sure would," Mr. Bridgewater said. "If I had my hands on him, he'd be sorry."

THE WOMAN was gone, and the tailor looked furtively toward the rear of his shop. The killer, standing half out of the booth, crooked his finger. Mr. Bridgewater walked back toward him, like a man marching to the execution chamber.

"I've got it all cooked up," the killer said. "This block is gonna be hot for several hours yet, and you're shorthanded. I'll run that pressing machine for you—in case anybody comes in. I'm your new presser—but I wouldn't want anybody to know just how new I was. That'll be all right with you, won't it?"

The little tailor managed to agree to the intruder's suggestion.

"Yes, you're my helper, in case anybody comes in."

"That's the idea." The killer beamed. "Between customers, you can show me how to run that gadget. Who knows? I might get a suit pressed for you."

The man took off his coat and hat and put on a blue smock which Mr. Bridgewater kept for his extra help to wear on certain occasions. Then he led the way to the pressing machine.

"How do you work this, Mac?" he asked. Then he looked and said, "Ain't those pants almost cooked?"

Mr. Bridgewater looked at the pants smoking in the pressing machine and groaned.

"Seven-dollar slacks! And he'll swear they cost fifteen dollars when I go to settle with him."

Another woman came in.

"Have you got Sally's coat ready?"

Mr. Bridgewater gulped. "No, Mrs. Meaders. I've got such a rush. Come back in a couple of hours."

"You said you'd have it!"

"Look. You go on home, and I'll send it up by Tommy Nevins as soon as he gets out of school. He's delivering for me."

Mr. Bridgewater got Mrs. Meaders out just as a pair of uniformed cops came in.

"See anything of a man in a tan plaid coat and slacks? About six feet, hundred and eighty pounds."

Mr. Bridgewater swallowed and looked around. The killer brought the top of the pressing machine down on the slacks, and steam hissed. His eyes never left Bridgewater's. His blue smock was unbuttoned; his hand was in quick reach of the gun in his hip pocket.

"No," Bridgewater answered, wiping his forehead with his sleeve. "They didn't catch him yet?"

"No, but we will. We got the block surrounded. Mind if we look around?"

The two officers began searching the dressing room, shoving back the door curtains. Mr. Bridgewater felt a chill run up his spine. They'd find the man's coat and know he had lied. That was some kind of a criminal offense, he thought.

One of the cops opened the booth where the man had hidden, while Bridgewater held his breath. Then the cop dropped the curtain.

"Nothing here, Ed."

They walked back along the racks of clothing, and one of the cops stopped.

The crook's coat was hung among the garments waiting to be cleaned.

"It was a coat like this, he was wearing, from the description we got."

"That's Mr. Wilson's coat," the tailor managed to say.

The cops passed on down the line and went out the door. Mr. Bridgewater sat down on a chair, too weak to stand. The killer looked up from his pressing machine.

"Not bad, Mac," he said. "I'll remember you if I ever need a hideout again."

Mr. Bridgewater groaned and started hand pressing Sally Meader's green coat. . . .

Tommy Nevins came in grinning. "Anything to deliver, Mr. Bridgewater? I just passed my examinations. Goin' into six B next term."

"That's fine, Tommy. Yeah, I got a lot of stuff to go, and they're all howling for it. Come here."

Mr. Bridgewater walked down the line of finished garments and picked out a small gray suit and brushed it, put it on a pasteboard hanger, and handed it to Tommy.

"Take this suit to Apartment 1-B, next door," he said clearly. "And give him this message. Tell him my new presser burned his pants up so he can't wear 'em this evening. Tell him he can wear this suit if he likes, but if he don't like it, tell him I said he could go lay his head on a subway track. Tell him I never liked him and I don't want his business, anyway."

Tommy's eyes popped open. "But Mr. Bridgewater! He'll get sore."

SHUT UP," Mr. Bridgewater snapped harshly. "Don't talk back to me. I'm running my business. I know it ain't his suit, but it's the only one he's gonna get from me. Now, what'd I tell you to say?"

"But Mr.—"

Mr. Bridgewater cut him off with a high-pitched bark. "You heard what I said! Now, tell me what I said tell him?"

Thoroughly frightened and puzzled, the boy repeated Mr. Bridgewater's message.

"All right," Bridgewater snapped.

"And after this, don't tell me how to run my business. Now get out—and hurry back."

As Tommy went out the door, the killer turned and grinned coldly.

"Blaming me for burning the man's pants, eh? Well, I'm big hearted, Just charge it against my wages."

Bridgewater was wringing his hands.

"Is this a business?" he groaned.

"Trouble, trouble, trouble!" He turned as another customer came down the basement steps and entered.

"Now what do you want?"

"My suit."

"Oh, sure." Mr. Bridgewater found it and wrapped it up and rang up the money. "They get that robber yet?" he asked.

"No, I guess he got away. Most of the cops are gone now. All except a couple at each corner, looking over everybody who goes out of the block."

The man picked up his package and left.

Mr. Bridgewater started toward the back of the shop.

"Where you going?" the killer asked.

"Back to the washroom. My indigestion's killing me. I've got some bicarb back there."

"Don't. I'm going to leave you, now that things are quiet out in the street, and I want you to help me select a traveling suit. What have you got that will fit me?"

Mr. Bridgewater gulped. "You can't take any of those suits," he objected. "They belong to my customers. They'll get mad. What'll I tell 'em?"

"Why," the killer said, "just tell 'em I borrowed it. You'll do that, won't you?"

The killer walked down the line of suits on their hangers, looking them over. He stopped and lifted one off the rack and looked at it.

"Now here's a nice number," he said. "Suppose I try it on for size."

"But that's a policeman's uniform. He's off duty."

"Good." The killer grinned, shucking off the smock which hid the gun in his hip pocket. "You get the idea. A cop off duty, who happened to live in this block—he could walk right out through that line, couldn't he? The cop that owns this won't mind, will he?"

"No, I guess not," Mr. Bridgewater stammered.

"I thought not," the killer said, opening the cloth curtain to the dressing booth. "Now you just stand there and see nobody don't disturb me while I get into me new uniform."

Mr. Bridgewater stood in front of the booth until the killer came out. The uniform fitted him neatly, even to the slight bump over the hip, where his gun rested, and the tailor got still sicker when he saw that the man had spotted a uniform cap hanging on a peg.

The man surveyed himself in the pier glass and was satisfied.

As he gave himself a final glance of approval, the front door was opened, and a big man in shirt sleeves came in. He was fuming. Behind him came Tommy with a suit over his arm.

"What's this batherin' baloney about me suit bein' ruint?" the man roared. "Is it touched in the head, ye are, Bridgewater? Sendin' me one of those old suits?"

"Just a minute, just a minute," the harried Mr. Bridgewater answered. "Just as soon as I finish with Officer Delehanty."

"Officer Delehanty?" the newcomer repeated. "What's that?"

"Yes," Bridgewater said quickly. "This is Officer Delehanty. I've been sewing up a rip in the arm of his coat, where he caught it on a nail. I want to see if it's all right."

Mr. Bridgewater caught the uniform coat sleeve and lifted the arm, showing the mended rip so the newcomer could see it. "That's a good job," he said proudly, "even if I did do it. You'd never know there was ever a tear there, would you, Mr. Delehanty?"

"No," the killer snapped impatiently. "That's all right. That's all right. I'll be getting along."

The man in shirt sleeves sucked in his breath and looked at the crook.

"I've heard of Delehanty. Lives in this block, don't he?"

"Yes," Bridgewater answered. "Right next door."

"That's fine." The customer's jaw was square. "I've been having an urge to meet this Delehanty face to face. I wanted to give him—this—"

THE CUSTOMER'S big fist balled up, shot out like a piston, and caught the killer a glancing blow across the chin. The killer knocked over a woman's dress form as he hit the floor, digging for the gun in his hip pocket.

The dress form fell over on the killer just as he got his weapon out. The killer shot the dress form square in the heart.

The shirt-sleeved man dived into the melee, caught the killer's wrist with one hand and the gun with the other, and ripped the weapon out of his fist.

The killer kicked the dress form in the stomach. The irate customer brought the gun barrel bouncing down half a dozen times on the killer's head. Finally the killer lay on his side trying to shield his head with both arms.

The customer got up and stood in his torn shirt sleeves, the gun covering the uniformed crook, his face red with rage.

"So ye'd steal me decent Irish name and me uniform, too, would ye? Who ye think ye are, anyway?"

"He's the man who killed Horowitz," Mr. Bridgewater said. "I was afraid you wouldn't figure out that I wanted you to come."

The real Officer Delehanty laughed.

"Not come a-running when ye sent word ye'd ruint me best uniform and rubbed it in my face, so to speak? I almost punched ye before I heard ye call that crook by me own name and showed me the tear in me uniform."

He turned to the killer, "Come on back to a dressing room and get me clothes off your dirty carcass this minute. Come on, Bridgie, and tell me what happened while I'm watching him."

Bridgewater had his hand across his middle.

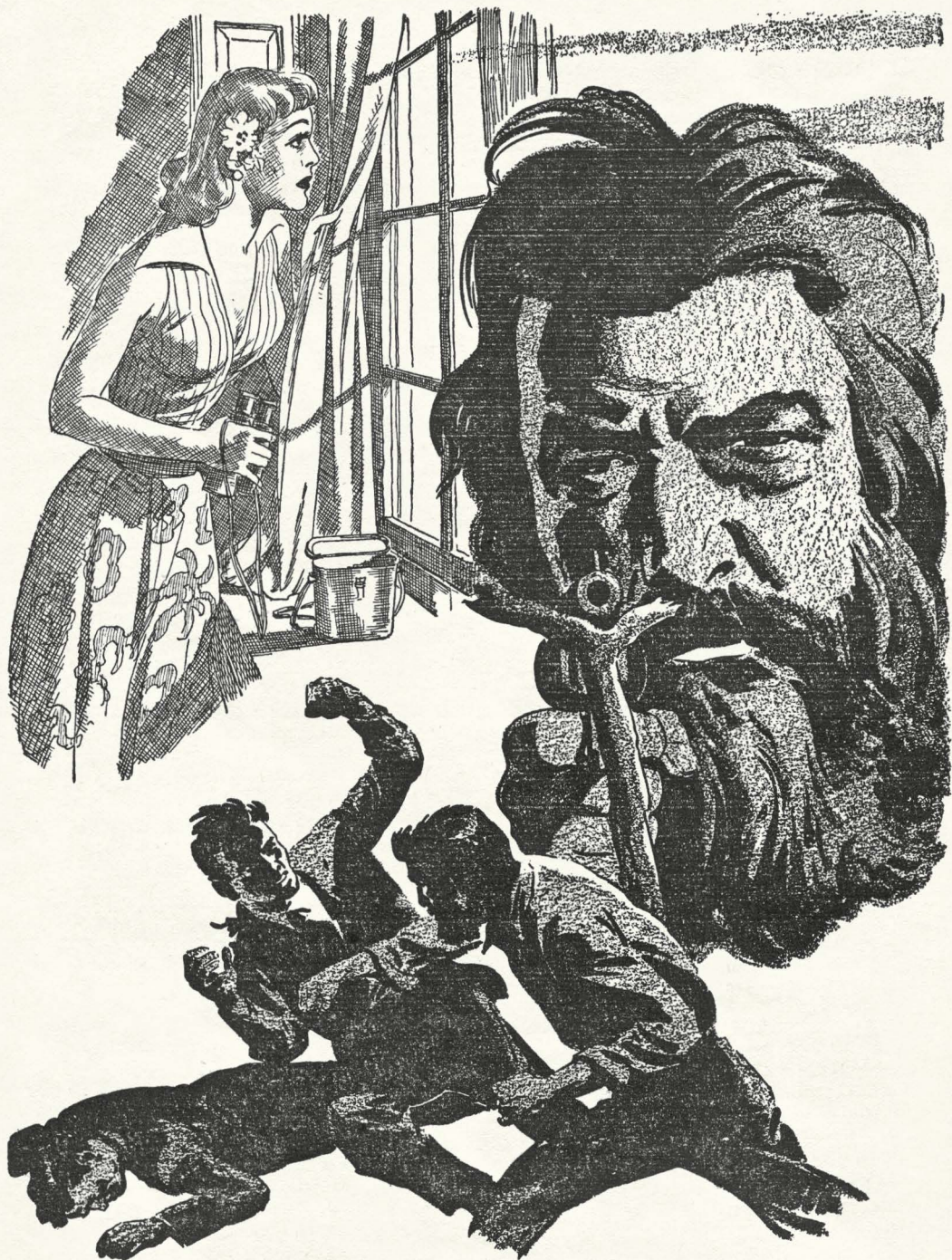
"Look, Delehanty. Ever since this started, my indigestion's been killing me. Wait till I take some bicarbonate of soda, will you? I'm hurting like crazy."

Little Tommy spoke up proudly. "That's what I told Mr. Delehanty. You talked like crazy."

"Like crazy?" Delehanty grinned. "Tommy, Mr. Bridgewater is a smart man. He ought to be on the cops."

"On the cops?" Mr. Bridgewater moaned. "Ain't I got trouble enough?"

He downed the whole glass of bicarb without stopping. ● ● ●



*When his client was cooled before the case was solved,
it left this private eye somewhat on a hot spot. . . .*

MURDER IN FLORIDA



A Novel by E. HOFFMANN PRICE

Chapter I

WHEN I pulled up to Ryan's Last Stop Service Station, the tall man in the office jumped a foot and jerked away from the cash register. That told me plenty, and so did this business of looking relieved when I poured myself from behind the wheel.

"I guess you're Mr. Ryan," I said. "I'm John Carmody. The agency in Saint Augustine sent me out."

He wiped some imaginary grease on

his clean overalls and poked out a nice white hand.

"Yes, I'm Charles Ryan," he said a little nervously.

That was probably a plain lie. He acted like a man expecting to be tapped on the shoulder. He had a long face and sunken eyes and a thin nose. An educated fellow, I'd say—maybe a professional man but certainly not a grease-monkey.

"Where does a fellow eat and flop?"

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I asked him. "And what's the trouble?"

Ryan pointed to the second-floor rooms over the grease rack and washing stall. "

"Up there. I don't get to town often but I have plenty of canned provisions."

If he sold a dollar's worth of gas a week, it was a miracle. The station was Florida Moorish with peeling stucco. All that part of Anastasia Island was low sand dunes, rolling over the cement curbs that some real estate genius had put in to bait customers. There weren't more than half a dozen houses, as far as I could see, and they all looked lonesome and haunted. A few hadn't even been finished. There I was, making headquarters at what had started out to be the village center.

The Last Stop Service Station was shaped like an E with the middle bar missing. One wing, with dirty, broken windows, had been a lunch counter, delicatessen, and grocery, judging from the blistered letters on the glass. The other wing, with arches to let in the salt breeze, was mostly garage space. The biggest laugh was the four gas pumps out in front.

"What's all this that's threatening you, Mr. Ryan?" I asked again.

He poked his head a little farther forward and squinted toward the highway that runs the whole length of Anastasia Island. His eyes were blue and worried, with veins standing out on the whites. I couldn't decide if he'd been drinking too much or not sleeping enough. He had a weakish sort of mouth that didn't match the rest of his face. A nice fellow with a good voice, only I wouldn't want him on my side in a knock-down-and-drag-out fight.

No, Ryan wasn't his name, not by a damn sight. The Ryans are a fighting tribe, like the Carmodys.

"Well, there's a bearded man hanging around, shooting at me," he said.

It would have been silly to ask him if he ever shot back and if not, why not. He just wasn't the type.

"When and where?" I asked.

RYAN looked helpless. He made a gesture at the sand dunes. "I don't know exactly. From all directions. Usually at night."

"How about the sound?" Boy, was he dumb!

"There isn't any sound. He must use a silencer."

That meant the other guy was a businesslike man. Still and all, Ryan had been close enough to see that the guy was big and had a beard, and he hadn't got his head shot off. That was funny. The shaggy man was a screwball, or Ryan was, or they both were. I didn't ask him why didn't he call the bluecoats. That'd be rotten for my business.

"How did it all start?" I asked when he turned to the glassed-in room where the dusty cash register was and showed me the stairs that led to the second floor. "What's in back of it all?"

Ryan fished a butt out of his pocket and got his lighter going. I turned down his offer of a cigarette.

"Hell, no," I said. "Not when I got half a cigar left."

While I was waiting for Ryan to start talking, I looked out across what decided not to be a town. One of the houses, the nearest, didn't have any broken windows. But that wasn't what caught my eye. It was the flicker of light, as if a mirror, for a second, had caught the sun. I didn't say anything about that but I was wondering plenty.

"Can you shoot?" Ryan finally asked.

My answer made his eyes bug out. Before he had even seen my hand move, I had a gun pointing at his stomach.

"Ever see it done faster?"

That brag was purely a business matter. He admitted he hadn't. Then he twisted his face into a sourish grin, one of the kind with memories behind it.

"If you handled cards that way, you'd make a million," he said.

That was a laugh. Maybe you know that place in Saint Augustine, the one with a bric-a-brac front and horseshoe arches with colored tiles. Well, it's a club. They let me in without a card and they let me out without my dough. So I was glad to take this job. A pal at the agency had told me about it. His men were busy with divorces and things like that and they'd turned Ryan down. But I needed gas money to San Francisco and before long, I'd have been eating egg stains off my tie.

"Who lives in that house over there?"

I still didn't tell him about the flash in the window.

"A Cuban lady. She hasn't been here long."

"Oh, you mean she took a powder on account of Havana politics?"

"Exactly," said Ryan and frowned plenty.

"What's wrong with her—halitosis?"

His grin reminded me of a warm gin fizz.

"She's my best customer. But the threats didn't start till she moved in."

I noticed a little round hole in the stand that held the cash register. Reaching for my pocket knife, I began digging.

When I got the bullet out, Ryan explained in a hurry.

"That was fired one night when I got through waiting on a customer who came in from the highway."

The slug wasn't awfully big, but something about it was funny looking to me. I didn't know just what.

"This slug mighta killed you," I said bluntly. "When do I get my advance dough?"

"Right now, Mr. Carmody."

"Skip the mister. They call me 'Honest' John."

HE LOOKED at me, kind of amused and shrewd. "You used to be a policeman, I would wager.

Ryan meant I didn't look dumb enough to be called "Honest," so I must be a crooked ex-bluecoat. My uncle, the one Ryan had used for a namesake, had a face pretty much like mine, only a little rounder and redder, and he didn't carry his liquor so well. The handle I had was a rib, though. They winked when they called me "Honest" John. I was on the square but I couldn't prove it.

Ryan knelt at the floor safe which was flush with the concrete. Anyone trying to steal it would have had to haul away the whole floor slab. I saw what must have been at least a thousand bucks in worn bills. He dug up my down payment and spun the dial to lock the safe.

"You might as well trust me whole hog or not pay me," I said.

Ryan gaped like a dead bass.

"What do you mean?" he blurted.

"Buddy, how can I go to bat to protect your business if I don't know the score?"

"All you're supposed to do is find out about that prowler," he mumbled and fidgeted. "Do you understand?"

"Oh, all right."

I ran my car into the garage. Like I said, that took up most of the left wing of the Moorish palace. It had a lot of arches, facing into the E and also facing Sunset Beach and the ocean. His car, a six-cylinder job, was standing in the corner. He gave me some overalls which I put on. Then I took my suitcase upstairs.

I waded ankle-deep in dust. My room was at the end of the hall that ran in the direction of the drive. The furnishings were dirty and flimsy, and the bath was across the hall. My windows faced sand dunes one way. From the others, inside the E, I got a slanting look at more dunes and the ocean. Through two windows in the opposite wall, I could see the main highway that runs the eighteen-mile length of the island. Ryan pointed up the hall.

"There's the kitchen," he said. "Up at the other end is the living room. On the right are empty rooms. You might take a look around."

Opposite the kitchen door was a little cross hall that led to steps going to the rear. There were coquina block walks, half buried in drifted sand, and a little patio enclosed by a wall about waist-high. Before I made my inspection, I stood there grinning at my new overalls. Ryan caught the point.

"After all, it's plausible, having you here. Picnic and week-end parties do stop for gas, even if they can't get frankfurters, film, cokes, and so on any more."

"No good," I said, shaking my head. "I'm buying you out, get it?"

He nodded. Then I heard an engine below.

"There's a customer now," he said.

It was a last year's convertible. Nile green with chrome trim, not much heavier than my bus, though longer, and about forty more horsepower. It was made for speed, and so was the dame at the wheel. I hurried down.

"Fill her up?" I asked, polishing the windshield.

The red hat bobbed, and so did the black curls. She had a nice smile and nicer eyes—big, dark ones. I couldn't

Chapter II

see much more, because she didn't get out, but I knew she'd look good.

"Where's Mr. Ryan?" she asked, looking me over.

"I'm the new pump twister. How about a grease and polish job?"

I ran the tank over. It needed only three. She laughed, but the joke was on her, after all.

"Later, maybe," she said.

"I'll call for it," I told her, "and deliver it."

"Business must be good if Mr. Ryan needs a helper."

THAT was a razzberry, but the way her nose crinkled a little with her smile made it nice.

"I'm buying Ryan out," I explained shortly.

"Oh."

That sobered her just a shade. She dug up some silver out of a red-and-white handbag that matched her dress. Then she waved a sweet little mitt, gave me a heart-stopping smile over her shoulder, and fed that straight-eight whirlwind a quarter of gas. The spattering gravel nearly broke a window. She went helling toward the central island highway in a cloud of sand.

Ryan came out and looked after her with soft, narrowed eyes. When the dust was settling back, he turned to me and smiled weakly.

"You've met our neighbor, Valeria del Rio," he said.

She wasn't too smart, tanking up for three gallons—not after I'd seen that funny flash from her window. But I didn't tell Ryan.

"She hasn't got a Cuban accent," I said.

He sniffed. "Many of them come to the States for their schooling, those who can afford it."

I thought of the gravel kicking up from her wheels. She drove like a Cuban, all right, and she had a high-class Spanish complexion, like Jersey cream and magnolia blossoms. That dame might be a lookout for smuggling unsuccessful Cubans into Florida. She might also be turning a pair of field glasses on Ryan's Last Stop Service Station. Pretty good name—the last place any customer would stop.

IT WAS getting dark. Ryan gargled straight rye while I heated up a can of chili and made coffee on the electric range. The kitchen was in the center of the E, looking toward Valeria's house. I was wondering whether she went for honest faces and whether she could cook. When the percolator started bubbling, Ryan didn't look so worried any more. He even began to wipe the whisky from his chin.

The kitchen had quite a bit of first-floor canopy reaching out in front of it. The whole building cast a long shadow, which lost itself in the shadows of the dunes and the brush. That didn't mean much, and I didn't bother to wonder why Ryan squatted in a corner. I snapped on a light and stirred the chili.

"Come and get it," I said.

The second he got up, a window smashed to bits. I heard a *chuckling* sound. Something hit the door jamb.

"Down!" I hollered; diving for the corner and snapping the wall switch. But Ryan had ducked.

There hadn't been any blast. The slug I picked out matched the one I had dug out of the office. From where Ryan and I had been standing, I couldn't tell whether it was meant for me or for him. Then I felt foolish about not having risked a gander out over the drifted sand. Somebody had plenty of moxie, sniping before it was fairly dark.

"He's g-got a silencer, I t-told you," Ryan stuttered.

"Nuts!" I snapped. "Judging from how the slug went in, it's an air gun. But it'd kill you deader'n hell if it hit. They make 'em powerful these days."

It began to look like I'd earn my first seventy-five bucks. But if I caught the shaggy man, I was fixing to shave him with a tire iron, the one on the desk in the downstairs office. It all smelled as if that del Rio gal had made a quick report to the gunner.

Ryan got nicely plastered that night. He needed the relaxation after the few months of what he had gone through. He'd been there about a year and a half, he had told me. Judging from some odds and ends I found in one of the rooms, a dame must have been there. Anyway,

with me to look things over, he could let his nerves unkink a bit.

My looking was a dead loss the next morning. Whatever footprints had been made in the sand had been blotted out by the wind. There was nothing in sight but the main highway down the center of the island, which varies from half a mile to two miles in width.

The station was on a cross road, about halfway between the highway and Sunset Beach. It was lonesome as hell at night and pretty desolate by day. Sometimes, way off, I could see boats landing for beach parties, though most of the swimming was near the Saint Augustine end, where a bridge comes from the mainland to the island.

That night, I made a prowl among the scattered cottages, looking for the place where the shaggy man camped. I didn't expect to see him, though. He already seemed too foxy. There wasn't any chance of frisking Valeria's house, either, because she was staying home.

When I came back, Ryan was practically sick. He just stood shaking and pointing. There was another busted window and another slug in the window sill.

"So it's hide-and-peek, huh?" I asked quietly.

"Shoot that scoundrel—" Ryan's voice cracked.

"Buddy, you'll have to wait till I catch him first."

THE job began to drive me so batty that I greased my car and Ryan's and waxed them both. I started sorting out the junk, tools, old hose, lawn sprinklers, battered coffee urns, and the rest of the stuff that was stacked in the storeroom and in the wash stall. The garage floor was an inch deep in crankcase drippings and grease. If things got tense enough, I'd probably clean up even that mess.

But to restore Ryan's confidence, I had to spend some time tossing chili cans in the air and popping them with my double-action .38. When I got kicked off the Force and they called me Honest John, with a wink, I threw all my medals in the sewer. But a guy doesn't forget how to shoot.

Valeria came over to have her tires checked.

"It's so lovely today, I think I'll go out to Summer Haven," she chattered, powdering her nose and eying me over the rim of her compact mirror. "I love the solitude out there."

"Yeah, it's nice down there, but I don't like that toll bridge at Matanzas," I chipped in, referring to the one at the south end of the island. I was thinking: "Nuts, madam. Do I look sappy?"

It was just as well I didn't frisk her house. She came back too quick, just like I'd had a hunch she would. She waved at me from the green convertible.

That afternoon, a V-8 pulled in from the highway. It had enough horns for two jobs that size, so I charged from the patio in the back and made a dive for the windshield.

"Where's Ryan?" the sandy-haired guy at the wheel snapped at me like he owned the place. He wore tweeds and had a horse face.

"Do you want gas or don't you?" I asked suspiciously.

The other guy was dark and roundish-faced, smooth and good-looking, with a little black mustache and an expensive green tie that went just right with his brown suit. I was willing to bet his socks matched his tie. They were both slick customers. They smelled of hair tonic, shaving lotion, and high-class soap. The dark fellow's coat bulged a bit, and not from bum tailoring. I guess I didn't like him because he reminded me of the boys at the club where I'd got cleaned out.

"Listen, you smart hick," the dark man gritted, sliding out of the seat, "we want Ryan. This is Ryan's Last Stop Service Station, and we've made a stop."

He had long hands. One of them was making absent-minded brushing movements up and down his vest buttons.

"Easy, Borda," the horse-faced fellow said and left the wheel.

When he passed around the back of the car, I half turned. Then Borda made a false move. I don't think he wanted to shoot. He just wanted to sap someone. But he got a shock when my gun barrel clipped his knuckles and knocked his Colt to the gravel. I didn't want to shoot, either—not just then.

"You dirty skunk!" he hollered. Then he looked at his buddy. "All right, Hale how do you like our pal's new mug?"

"Hail or snow, I'll take on both of you rats," I said easily. "How about it, greasy puss? Pick up your gat if you want to play."

Borda nursed his bleeding knuckles.

"Now, take it easy," Hale said.

Ryan clumped out of the door and stood there, looking sick. Hale poked out his hand.

"My old pal! Long time no see, *Ryan*."

"We been looking for you," Borda said. "So it's come to this."

He pointed at me. I still had my gun out, ready for action.

"Then it was Claire, after all," Ryan muttered, sort of dazed.

"Claire, all right," Hale answered, chuckling as sympathetically as a coyote. "Sweet kid. You might have known she'd get lonesome out here in the sand dunes. You're awful dumb, Charlie."

He chuckled. "Is this the way to treat your pals, Charlie?"

BUT he backed toward me, and I frisked him. He didn't have a rod. It looked like Borda was the guy to watch, after all. I picked up Borda's rod and pocketed it.

"Want them herded to town?" I asked.

When Ryan shook his head, Borda winked at Hale.

"He's glad to see us. We got messages from home."

"That's right," Ryan admitted glumly.

Seeing those two skunks holding him over a barrel, I was all for quitting. When a man won't take your help, how can you do anything for him?

"All right, mug, you're fired." Hale took out a silver case and fished for a smoke. "Charlie doesn't need you any more."

That was Ryan's business, but Hale's crack was strictly mine.

"I was paid in advance," I said. "I'm earning it."

I reached and snagged the cigarette case out of his hand. Before he could move, I tossed it up, drew, and drilled it with a slug. Hale and Borda blinked.

"Now, if you gents are staying, I'll give you a hand with your baggage," I said. "I'm Honest John Carmody, in case you didn't get the name the first time."

"The pleasure nearly overwhelms me," Hale grunted.

He was sore about his cigarette case, but Borda just shrugged. He didn't seem to mind my having his gun, and that was something I couldn't understand.

After supper, which I fixed up, I mixed a rye and soda and hung around in the living room. It was all glassed in like a sun parlor and it was over the garage section. When I found a blind spot where I couldn't be sniped, I sat down to read and smoke a cigar. I picked on the living room because it was across the hall from Ryan's room where the pals were in a huddle.

They weren't talking loud, and that was a bad sign. I couldn't hear enough to do me any good, though I gathered it was about money, Tulsa, running out, and debts on the cuff. Once Ryan poked his head out. Hale, the horse-faced guy, was right at his back. He gave me a dirty look.

"That mug don't have to listen, does he?"

"It's handy having him there when I want a bottle or something," Ryan explained in a hurry.

"Have him bring us a couple and get the hell out!" Borda snapped.

I took that smiling and got two fifths out of the case in the kitchen. I shook out three trays of ice cubes. The fourth one jammed, so I had to use the big butcher knife I fished out of the sink. It was a bit rusty, but it felt heavy as a sword. Naturally I stuffed a fifth into my own pocket. When I came back, Hale looked sociable.

"Get yourself a bottle, too. No hard feelings. Hell, you just did your work this afternoon."

I showed him my side coat pocket. "I already got one."

Borda grinned. "Drink deep but make sure you wake us up early."

I guess my face fooled him and Hale. Theirs didn't fool me, though. When I got to my room at the far end of the hall, I took one tiny snort. Before anything happened to Ryan, they'd try to cool me first.

Blankets are good for more than just to sleep under. I wadded mine up, did some tricks with the table lamp. It was a gag with whiskers on it, but it's the old ones that work. That's why they last long enough to get old. Anyway,

when I got through, anyone from the ground would have sworn it was Honest John Carmody slumped in a chair, drunk as a fifth of good whisky will make anyone but a he-man.

The huddle down the hall wasn't over when I went out, barefooted, after locking my door. For a second, I thought of going down the back stairs to listen under Ryan's windows. But everyone was quiet, and those back stairs creaked like a wet fiddle. I wouldn't risk it. Anyway, I had bigger business. This was a double play, you understand. Ryan might have a gun of his own stashed somewhere, and someone might steal it to do a bit of playing with me.

Either I'd nip the shaggy man or else Borda or Hale. They weren't wild. They didn't have beards, and Ryan really had been surprised when he'd seen them. I wasn't even trying to get the score, it was so complicated. The only sure thing was that Ryan's two pals wouldn't knock him off until I was buried in the sand dunes.

Naturally Ryan must be some sort of crook. But he was human, and a nice guy, with maybe just one mistake to his credit.

Chapter III

THE grease rack wasn't a comfortable place to squat. The wind and concrete made me plenty unhappy, and I couldn't hear a thing from upstairs. Like I said, Ryan's room and the Hale-Borda cell faced the other way. But where I sat, it was easy to watch the angle from where the dummy upstairs was nicely visible.

Later, I heard enough to think someone was parking his crullers. Someone else was snoring or muttering. It wasn't long after when I got a hunch that someone was prowling around from the back of the station. The moon wasn't high enough to help, and the wind killed little sounds. The dunes and brush threw tricky shadows. I finally caught sight of the fellow, but I couldn't even guess whether it was Borda, Hale, or the unidentified prowler.

Whoever he was, he had a gun, a long-barreled job. Also, he had a forked stick. It's surprising how neat you can

make a long-range shot with a revolver if you have a gun rest. The gent with the artillery was across the road now, right where my dummy made a nice target. That was getting personal, so I had to cut in, quick. If the boys upstairs heard the shot and figured I was cooled, there was no telling what'd happen to Ryan. But a guy can't be everywhere at once.

I edged for the gas pump and gained a few yards. Though he had murder in his heart, I still didn't want to pop him off. He was fidgeting around, getting set. I could tell that from the off-and-on glint of the blued barrel which had worn spots that picked up the light. When I gained another few yards, there wasn't much time left. He was too intent to notice what was happening behind him.

"Put it away!" I hollered.

Just then, he shot, and a window splattered behind me. But he had heard me sing out. He jumped and cursed, just startled enough to get rattled. I saw the gun shift a bit, but the first flash had exposed his position. He shot at the sound when I moved. That was a mistake, so I let him have it. You can't talk to a guy who thinks he's killed a drunk and then finds out he had an audience.

He was still kicking a little when I got to him. The gun was a long-barreled Luger, almost as accurate as a rifle. The guy was Hale.

Well, that was a nice start. Borda would feel different about his business with Ryan. So would Valeria del Rio and the shaggy man. Hale, I began to figure, must have had a gat stashed in the car. Like a dummy, I hadn't frisked the bus. A fellow sometimes get absent-minded, so I went up to talk to Ryan before I forgot something else.

When I got back to the second floor, Borda staggered out of the bathroom and into the hall. Getting so sloppy drunk in such a short time meant that he'd tried to do a week's drinking in an hour or two. Maybe he was celebrating my death. The bleary look he gave me when he stumbled unceremoniously toward Ryan's room left me wondering.

Ryan was long-faced and cold sober. He sat twiddling a glass and staring at the floor. He didn't look up when Borda came in and he didn't pay any attention

to me till I said:

"I told you I ought to run these mugs in. Hale tried to knock me off. Maybe you heard the shot."

Ryan dropped his glass.

"When?" he blurted. "What shot?"

With the wind and the way the room faced, a small bore gat might not be noticed.

"Hale made a mistake," I said. "He's out in the sand, not being interviewed."

Borda straightened up. He spoke slowly, a little too carefully, and blinked. But he wasn't crying.

"So you went and done it, huh?" he muttered.

"Come on and look," I invited.

I jerked my thumb toward the hall and herded them ahead of me.

"He tried to shoot you, and you shot him," Ryan was saying. "My God! My God!"

HE DIDN'T seem to like violence. I guess that was why he had run out on something and tried to hide from his pals. It was all too cockeyed to be thought out, so I didn't try. I just showed them the dummy in my room and pointed at the hole, halfway up on the window. Glass had fallen inside. Chunks of it lay on the sill because the drawn curtain had kept it from spattering around.

He thought it was me, only I was downstairs—and sober. I hollered at him, but he wouldn't listen."

"So you knew he'd gun you!" Borda whispered.

"I had a hunch one of you would try."

"What for? Hell, we weren't sore. You were just doing your job. You didn't know."

"Okay. Listen, Borda. Even if you do find another gat, don't try anything. Look at Hale first, out there in the sand."

I turned to the door.

"Where are you going?" Ryan asked.

"I'm phoning the cops. Being a detective, I have to. From what I've seen since I've been here, you probably don't want them around. That's just too bad."

But I didn't phone. I'm not an expert lineman, so I couldn't. The black gadget box had been pried off the wall, and broken wires poked out. Someone had picked up the heavy tire iron off the desk

and smashed the phone with one blow. The iron was hefty, with a round handle and a long blade. It had been shaped out of the spring leaf of a big car. The guy who used it had laid it back within a couple of inches of the dust marks that showed where it had been. Deliberate, all right.

I noted a fresh smudge of grease on the wall near where the phone had been. Probably it came from the guy's hip, in which case he was about as tall as me, Ryan, or Borda. Also, grains of greasy sand lay in the dust on the floor, but I couldn't track the fellow past the crushed rock drive. He must have been squatting in the garage. In that case, he had watched me cool Hale. The phone had been okay when I'd come down for that job. Somebody was strictly neutral where Hale and I were concerned.

When I went upstairs, Borda and Ryan were in Ryan's room.

"Wise guy, you figured I'd be cooled," I said to Borda. "So you gummed up the phone so Ryan couldn't squawk."

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

I yanked him out of his chair. He stood blinking, wobbly and groggy. There wasn't any grease smudge on his coat or his pants pocket. "Maybe you didn't do it," I said.

"Hale coulda done it," he mumbled stupidly.

"No go. The buzz box was okay when I went past it. Anyway, you and Ryan are material witnesses, and I'm still reporting to the cops. I'm driving to a phone."

Borda didn't care. He shrugged jerkily and stumbled down the hall.

"What have they got on you?" I asked Ryan.

"That's my business," he said almost defiantly.

"Suit yourself. Here's my guess. You're holding out dough on Borda and the late Mr. Hale. A jane by the name of Claire spilled your hide-out."

"I wish it had been the bearded prowler instead of Hale," he retorted.

"I'm not a skeet shooter. How much do you want for seventy-five bucks—Armageddon and the burning of Rome? Do you know that Valeria del Rio has been watching this dump with spy-glasses?"

Ryan reared up straight.

"No! What makes you think so?"

"I saw the reflection of lenses. A couple of minutes later, she came over to buy some gas she didn't need—a stall to look me over and find out what the latest score was. My idea is that she's teamed up with the shaggy man. Do I have to tell myself everything or will you save me some time?"

RYAN just sat there and looked tired. What I had said about the gal was more or less bluff, to open him up. But he wasn't talking.

The way things looked now, Borda was too drunk to be dangerous. As long as I was circulating around, he wouldn't have the nerve to cool Ryan. Also, Borda had enough interest in Ryan to block any monkey business the shaggy man might pull. But Hairy-face couldn't have been a killer, or he'd have taken Ryan long before I arrived.

Anyhow, that's what I figured, when I headed downstairs to drive for the nearest dog stand or wherever there might be a phone. If I always figured things out right, I'd be a genius and not a cut-rate detective.

As I left, Ryan was doing some tall frowning. He was good at meditation that got nowhere. A fellow gets that way when he's been hiding out a long time. Gambling and some dame—that was how it sized up—hiding out from mugs he owed money and afraid they'd take it out of his hide since it wasn't in his pocket. But he wasn't broke, with that roll. Well, what some people consider being flat would make another guy rich. When they're down to their last hundred grand, they dive out of windows.

Then I got a real shock. Valeria del Rio was hoofing it down the drive, all breathless and worried, except for that high-powered smile. She had teeth that were good enough to model for advertising. Her shoes were all dusty, and one of those perfect legs showed through a long runner. But she hadn't been pawed. Nobody had made her get out and walk.

"Oh, Mister—"

"Carmody, madam. Honest John to you. Where's the long and rakish car?"

"That's why I'm walking. I ran out

DID YOU KNOW

THAT in England, during the Norman rule, if a person, other than an Englishman, was slain, the people living in the district in which the crime was committed were compelled either to produce the murderer in a hurry, or shell out with a stiff fine . . .

?

THAT in France, a judge always wears a black cap when pronouncing the sentence of death . . .

?

THAT the Dum-Dum, or soft-nosed bullet, which expands on striking, was named after the town of Dum-Dum, in Bengal, India, where it was originally manufactured . . .

?

THAT in a court of law, a confession, though admissible as evidence against the person who made it, cannot be admitted as same against his accomplices . . .

?

THAT 50 per cent of the youth doing time in reformatories in this country are mentally deficient—and that the same thing holds true of from 25 to 50 per cent of adult prison population . . .

?

THAT the average prison stretch in the U. S. (for major crimes) is slightly over 5 years. . . .

?

of gas. Would you mind bringing some along? It's not far."

It was no use telling her I had urgent business. Also, by being a Boy Scout, I might have a glance in her shack.

"It's going to be a bit tough. The boss's car is down for a valve grind, and mine's got a bum battery. But I'll walk it."

"I hate to trouble you. I'll go back myself. I don't mind."

That was baloney. She wouldn't listen when I insisted I could find the bus myself. When she agreed to come along, I said:

"You must've done some heavy driving since this afternoon."

She flipped her hand to include the island and the mainland.

"Oh, all over. I love Florida."

If Valeria had ever spoken Spanish, I was the Sultan of Sulu. Those Latin languages leave something on your tongue that you can't get rid of.

"How's things in Cuba?" I asked casually.

She sighed, looked up at me, and shook her head. Her eyes looked like she was heartbroken.

"Mr. Ryan told you, didn't he?" she replied.

"Yeah, but not half enough."

She changed the subject when I said I was homesick for dear old Havana. That proved she was a phony. I'd never been there, either.

Chapter IV

LESS than a mile away, we found the Nile green convertible. That was the shortest mile I ever hoofed, and I don't like walking. They must have paved the highway with air or something.

Valeria hoped we'd get better acquainted when I took over the filling station. So I dumped the fuel in. She leaned over and opened the door. I drive a lot and, naturally, I always head for the wheel. Before I knew it, I was at the controls.

"Say, can you beat that?" I said. "Like it was my own bus. I guess I was thinking in that direction."

"Like it?" She smiled.

"Plenty. And it's in good company,

Miss del Rio."

"Valeria, please."

Well that made it cozy. I certainly didn't boot that high-powered bus on the way back. I nosed it into her garage.

"How about using your phone?" I asked. "Ours is out of kilter."

"Don't you have the toughest luck!" I liked her laugh. Hearing it was like drinking a case of champagne. "Come right in."

The bungalow had regular beach cottage furnishings, wicker and this and that, mainly velours-upholstered. But everything was as clean as if she had a dozen servants per square yard. Before I got into the living room, I knew there wasn't a shaggy man hanging out there.

It wasn't that there were no men's hats on the rack. It just didn't have that messed-up look. The only thing out of place was a pair of field glasses on the window seat which faced Ryan's Last Stop Service Station. I got just one glance, but it was enough. They were twelve-power Zeiss, and the lenses were big enough for night work.

"Nice place you got here, Val," I said admiringly.

"Simple, but I love it."

I stepped to the phone. Then I learned a few things more, such as why Valeria had given me the wheel of her car. She wanted both her hands free, and not to put her arms around me. Her idea was to poke a gat into my ribs. It'd been in her pocketbook all the time. Naturally she didn't know I was going to walk right in to phone.

"Never mind that call," she ordered. "Just wait and don't move."

"I guess you'd fire," I said sarcastically but I was bluffing. She meant business.

"Of course, I would. I'm alone, and you might be a prowler."

"Nice field glasses you got," I led off, making small talk. "Great for watching Cuban ships offshore, huh?"

She didn't answer. But I got a glimpse of her, reflected in one of those polychrome mirrors. It was streaked, though not enough to spoil the view. Her make-up was redder than ever against that white face, and her mouth was too thin to look kissable any more. Valeria was waiting for something to happen, and it

wasn't all in the bag. She was worried. "Mind if I sit down?" I asked.

I BEGAN to see a way out. It was that look from the corner of her eyes, toward the window that faced the filling station. She was trying not to let watching what I was doing split her attention.

"Stay where you are," she snapped.

"Look here, if you're going to plug me and make a good story, you better drill my chest and not my back. And don't forget to muss up your hair a little."

She sniffed. "A burglar's a burglar, even with his back turned."

"Listen, baby, I got flat feet. My dogs are killing me. How about sitting down or at least shifting my weight? Say, what's wrong with Ryan, and what are you interested in him for?"

"The dirty thief—" She cut short. "So your feet are tired? Try walking a little. Go slowly to the hall."

She prodded me across the room. We went down the hall. When we got to her bedroom, I didn't have a chance to look around. All I could see was that the rug was torn, and the dresser had old cigarette burns on it, and there were a lot of clothes in the closet.

"Inside!" Valeria had an expressive way of jabbing with a pistol. "Way inside to the end."

There wasn't a chance of turning. I walked until a lot of sweet-smelling clothes surrounded me. Suddenly the bar that the hangers were hung on flopped loose, and Valeria's wardrobe half smothered me. Before I could tear all that chiffon and stuff off me, she'd slammed the door and locked it. I heard her pushing the dresser against the door just to make sure.

"Now stay quiet," she said.

I didn't make any moves until I heard her winding up that green car in the garage. Then I began giving that panel hell, but there wasn't enough room for action. Some doors are easy to bust open, piece by piece, only this wasn't one of them. I guess the contractor made a mistake and put in a good one.

It got so hot inside that I began to choke, and my shoulder was hurting. Finally I wadded up a bunch of her clothes and made a buffer. That helped me hammer the door, but still I was

getting nowhere. I got up a heavy sweat, just from wondering how things were moving outside.

When the panel began cracking, I did a Houdini. I got my feet braced so I could use my shoulder for shoving. That didn't do a bit of good for a while. Then everything let go, including the dresser in front.

This was no time to phone the cops. I was sure of that the minute I broke loose. Before I got within jumping distance of the station, my hunch worked out in a large way.

Things were happening. What they meant, though, I didn't have the slightest idea. Two guys were grappling near the gas pumps. One of them was big and lean. He wore overalls and had a beard that was dark and shaggy, hiding his face almost up to the cheek bones. The other fellow was Borda and he was getting the worst of it.

I quit wondering where Ryan was when the shaggy man shook Borda loose. Neither had heard me pounding through the sand. He socked Borda a honey. The slick guy went limp and smashed against the ethyl pump. For a second he hung there, then slowly crumpled up.

The shaggy man dusted his hands, grinned, and made a dive for the brown leather briefcase that lay on the crushed rock. The boys had been kicking it around during the scuffle. One of the straps had come loose. With the lights I'd left on, down below, it was easy to see. I made a dive for the bearded man.

"Drop it, mug!"

HE WAS no slouch. He didn't break that scooping motion at all. I was ready to knock him crosseyed, even if huge shoulders did fill that flannel shirt. But he just heaved the briefcase and smacked me in the face. The loose strap flicked my eye. For a split second I couldn't see. So my swing missed just enough for me to rasp my knuckles on his beard. It was like a horse's tail.

He nearly took my head off. I knew he didn't have a hammer in his hands, so it must have been his fist. I guess I could have pulled my gun but I didn't like shooting after that Hale business. Anyway, this gent seemed to enjoy using his dukes.

I clinched long enough to clear my head and then I handed him a nice one. He slammed against the wall, and some stucco cracked off. Then I saw more of the briefcase that had socked me. Cigar coupons weren't poking out from under the flap. They were bonds or stock certificates—a bale of them!

Borda lay on his face, shaking all over. His bloody hands clawed the crushed rock, and his face was like hamburger. He was making funny sounds, as if his mouth were too small for his tongue. I saw all this while I took a jump for the bearded man. He yelled something, and then we tangled.

After taking care of Borda, he should have been winded but he was tough. We tripped and hit the crushed-rock drive. That cut the shoulders out of my coat. I heard a woman screech. The bearded guy hollered. Letting go with one hand, he looked like he was flagging the girl to check out.

That gave me a chance to shift around and crack his head against the gas pump. It didn't hurt him enough to notice. He cut loose with his knee, but I was moving, and the wallop caught my chest. That pried us far enough apart for a fresh start. I was dizzy now, and if the dame was still shrieking, I didn't hear her.

The bearded guy got to his feet. I was on my knees, losing time. So I made a dive and tackled him. He crashed down, and a couple minutes more—or maybe it was hours—settled him.

When I got to my feet and could stand without grabbing a gas pump, I saw that Borda was sitting up and feeling his face.

"Where the hell have you been?" he croaked. "Where have you been?"

"Taking gas to a dame's car. I just came back. What's happened? Who's this guy here?"

"He killed Ryan!" Borda wiped his bleeding mouth. "Brained him and knocked me silly. I heard them battling and came downstairs and tried to stop him."

"Get a rope or a wire before this Tarzan snaps out of it."

I stood by, ready to boot him down if he made a quick comeback, but Borda was fast enough. Then I began to won-

der about the briefcase and the dame. Both were gone, and I heard an engine winding up, down the cross road. With my head whirling, I couldn't be sure but I was willing to bet it was Valeria and her convertible.

There was no sense trying to chase her. I couldn't catch that bus with any of the three around the filling station. I wasn't even sure whether she was heading for the Matanzas Bridge or toward Saint Augustine.

So I went to see the corpse.

Chapter V

BORDA was sober but he smelled like a liquor warehouse that had been hit by a bomb. He was plain soaked with rye. Without staggering, though, he led me to the foot of the stairs that came down from the kitchen, in back, where there was a walk made of coquina blocks. Toward the other end, I saw Ryan lying under the steps.

He was gripping that big butcher knife from the kitchen. A flashlight was still glowing under him. He had flopped across it. There was enough reflection from the stucco to show me that his skull had been smashed practically in half. He was twitching and making choked sounds. How he did it, I don't know, with his face sunk in the sand. The tire iron had done a real job of murder.

There wasn't any use moving him or trying to do anything for him. That was the sickening thing about it. I was glad when he stopped twitching and choking. He had been handed two socks across the head, and either one would have been plenty.

Then I saw why the knife was there. He had been prying up one of the coquina blocks of the walk. It lay to one side, and underneath it was the print of a briefcase. The only footprints I could see were a couple of skidded ones, and the twisting wind was swiftly driving sand into them. All I heard for a second was Borda's heavy breathing. He was still winded, almost as badly as I was, and getting a little dizzy.

"Where were you?" I demanded.

"Upstairs in my room. I felt rotten. Then I heard the riot below. I looked out

the window and saw the bearded guy smack Ryan. He would have got away if I hadn't come downstairs."

"Did you see a dame around?"

"When? Hell, I had my hands full."

He looked like he had. I tried another tack.

"How about the briefcase?" I rapped out.

"What briefcase?"

"The one Ryan had stashed under the coquina block. You and Hairy-face were kicking it around when I came along."

"I didn't notice it."

"The hell you didn't! Listen, guy, you haven't been anywhere yet. You mean you didn't know Ryan had some dough around here?"

Borda's grin was painful.

"Sure, I knew. That's what we came here to see him about. But we didn't know where he kept it."

"What was it for?"

Borda sat down weekly on the bench.

"He owed us some dough because of gambling on the cuff back in Tulsa. He ran out. Hale and I followed him. We owned the Happy Hour Club and we couldn't afford to lose sixty grand that way. We came out here when his girlfriend told us about this Last Stop Service Station."

"And he promised to pay off tonight?"

"He said he had it buried somewhere else. He began promising us that tomorrow he'd fix us up."

So far, it was straight enough. But I was wondering about the bearded guy and Valeria. I asked Borda about him.

"Another wise guy, playing tramp and looking for a cut," he explained. "That jane must be the front for the tramp. He had poor Ryan scared."

"Ryan, hell! What was his real name? It'll come out, sooner or later, now that he's dead."

"Oh, all right—Ryerson, then. I don't know who the tramp is or anything, except he beamed Ryerson."

HE WENT with me to Valeria's house when I wanted to phone. The place was dark. If I hadn't busted out of the closet, she and the bearded gent would have made a clean walkout. He'd shave, and there'd be no description of her until someone found me. Having a prisoner

wasn't any satisfaction. Borda chuckled when I hung up, after telling the cops the whole score.

"Two corpses, one prisoner."

"Buck up, Carmody," he said. "After all, you haven't lost sixty Gs because someone beamed a guy before you could collect. Let's look the place over and figure out where the dame went."

This mess left me with a couple of things to think about. Having my client knocked off made a monkey of me. Then I was wondering how the cops would look at my party with the late Mr. Hale. But I didn't have time to worry. I was too busy digging into Borda. I ended by wiring my prisoner to a chair while I went upstairs to look around. Ryerson's suitcase was packed.

"He didn't want to see the cops and he was checking out," Borda said. "I was pretty drunk and sick. But when I heard a noise in back, I looked out my window. I saw that Ryerson had a knife and a flashlight and was digging. That made me wonder if he was going to pay and run or just run. Before I could holler, the tramp with the beard came up and slugged him. He never had a chance."

"So you ran down to head off the killer?"

"That's right."

"Sick and drunk but you got going, anyway?"

Borda grinned. "What would you do for sixty grand?"

"Hell, I don't know." But there were a couple things I did know, though I wasn't telling him. "Suppose you go to your room and wait. Don't mess around with anything in Ryerson's room. I want to talk to the guy with the beard."

I followed him to his door. I couldn't tell whether he had been packing up or had just stopped unpacking. His suitcase was on a chair, full of stuff and wide open.

"You looked out that window?" I pointed.

"Yes, that's the one."

I went to it and stared down. Ryerson looked funny, huddled over the flashlight. At that distance, I couldn't see the shape his head was in.

"Too bad," I said. "It would have been an easy shot from here."

Borda gave me a dirty look.

"If you hadn't taken my gat, I'd have done it. It would have been easy."

I guess it was my fault, but I wasn't too sure, after all. So I went downstairs. When I asked the prisoner who he was, he politely told me his name was George Lake and he wasn't worried about a thing. He wasn't surprised when I said Ryerson had been bumped off.

"I didn't do it," he said. "It must have been Borda."

"So you know the boys?" I blurted.

His mouth twisted and his beard twitched. His eyes got so narrow they looked like blue murder.

"Rather!" he answered.

"How does that del Rio dame fit into this?"

"I never heard of her." He said it flat and level.

"Don't be like that," I said. "She snatched the briefcase stuffed full of bonds while you and I were mixing it. I wasn't too dizzy to hear and see."

"That's her business," Lake retorted from behind all that wire beard. "It's her money. Ryerson stole it, and I helped her reclaim it. If you want her as a material witness, you have my sympathy. Try to bring her back to Florida. Anything I say can be used against me, and I don't give a damn."

"You know the answers."

"I ought to. I'm a lawyer. That is, I used to be."

LAKE had courage, all right—guts, not bluster. With a murder rap hanging over him, he was positively cheerful.

"You like Valeria del Rio?"

"Plenty," Lake admitted. "But what is that to you?"

"Ryerson was my client. If you killed him—and it looks like you did—you're my meat if it takes 'til judgment day. If you didn't, I'm all for you."

"You're not boosting Borda?" he asked suspiciously.

"I wasn't working for him. But look here, Lake." I stuffed a cigarette into his mouth. "Valeria is a long way from home. If Borda found Ryerson, he can find her. You won't be on deck to look out for her any more."

He laughed in my face.

"No good, Carmody. You want to find

Valeria and that briefcase. So did Hale and Borda."

"Oh, all right. Let's hear your story. I like stories."

Lake grinned. He was the happiest guy I ever saw wired to a chair.

"I was waiting for Ryerson and Borda to run out, once you had shot Hale," he began. "I was sure they'd want to leave before the police arrived. Investigation might have exposed the hidden bonds, negotiable paper that passes on delivery. It's like cash, you know."

"Yeah, I know, only I never owned any. You heard me give it to Hale?"

Lake grinned. "Mister, I saw it and liked it. I was squatting in that garage at the time. Yes, I was intimidating Ryerson with air-gun shots to make him run out so I could nail him with the loot in his hands. But I didn't kill him. You know I could have any time before you came here and nearly any time after. It would have been easy."

I admire nerve, and Lake had plenty. He was talking now the way he wouldn't later. Battered, tired, and a big job just finished, he was considerably shaken. Who wouldn't have been?

"So you beamed Ryerson? You were sore, thinking of living in the dunes for weeks."

"Don't be stupid, Carmody. While I was waiting, a man came out of the office. He looped around the vacant store and raced toward the rear. I didn't hear any voices or wrangling. A minute later, a man came back. It was Borda. I tackled him as he headed for the car that was farthest from Ryerson's."

"Then you came up, damn your hide, as I was pounding Borda silly. I'd seen Ryerson, through a window, packing a suitcase. Therefore, I knew the loot would be dug up. But the man I tangled with was Borda, and he was carrying a briefcase. The idea was to have Valeria run away with it while I toyed with you. I didn't know you were a detective."

"You know now, and getting kayoed isn't my idea of toying. You're on the spot, pal. Valeria needs a lift. Well, do we play ball?"

He laughed in my face again. I was beginning to get tired of it.

"I still don't know a thing about you."

"Oh, is that it? Weren't you the guy who pried the phone off the wall?"

"Yes, I did that."

"Why?"

"So you couldn't call the police after you settled Hale. I wanted you to go to Valeria's to call them, figuring on having you kept there. That would make the odds against me a little better—only Borda and Ryerson, and both ready to run out."

That sounded right, but there was a catch.

"If you thought I was a mug and not a legitimate detective, why'd you think I'd want to phone?" I asked him.

"I was playing every chance. If you hadn't wanted to call, she'd have got you into the house some other way. Now what?"

"So you're asking me things, huh? All right. Suppose you ask me what weapon killed Ryerson."

"Well, what did kill him? It wasn't a gun, or I'd have heard it. Ask Borda. He knows."

"That tie iron you used to jimmy the phone," I shot out. "It'll have your fingerprints."

He made a good job of spitting, considering that his mouth was bruised.

"You'll wipe them off if I tell you about Valeria?" He grinned.

There wasn't anything more to do with that guy. Between him and Borda, one of them had cooled Ryerson. Each accused the other, and it was up to me to figure which was the one. I had a hunch, but it would take plenty of proving. What made the job even lousier was that the cops might pick the wrong guy. Then what chance would I stand?

Chapter VI

FOR a while, things began unreeling. The sheriff, a long, hatched-faced fellow, came out with a couple of city detectives from Saint Augustine, which is the St. John County seat. One of them was a tall guy named Castro and he looked a little like Borda used to, before he got his face lifted—smooth, darkish, and with sleek hair. The other was a guy with an undershot jaw and eyebrows like nail brushes. He was stocky, and his puss was square and tough.

It was Sheriff Haley who worried me, though. He just stood there, teetering on the balls of his feet and sucking his pipe and saying nothing. He let Castro do all the looking, and the other fellow, O'Toole, did the tobacco chewing. Then there was a second carload of fellows with cameras and fingerprint stuff. A nice time was had by all, except the two stiffs and the prisoner.

"I didn't brain Ryerson," was all Lake would say. "He was a skunk, and I would have beaten him silly. I wouldn't have used a weapon."

It wasn't my party for the moment. I was busy because the sheriff went out to see Hale, who was still lying there in the sand.

"So you let him have it, huh?" he asked grimly.

"What would you have done, Sheriff? If I was a shooting person, wouldn't I have let that bearded guy have it instead of taking this beating? Hell, he nearly killed me."

The sheriff nodded.

"Yeah, Lake did nearly do that." He fumbled with his droopy mustache and jerked his thumb back toward the filling station at the prisoner. "He sure did give you hell. Only Borda says you hated Hale's guts."

"He did, huh?" I was losing patience. "You saw that dummy. These two guys came to squeeze dough out of Ryerson. I was working for Ryerson and that's why I was in the way."

"You could have thrown something," Sheriff Haley said stubbornly.

"If I took a shot at you, what would you throw? A slug?"

"Sure," he agreed. "I would. But he was shooting at a dummy. That's different."

I tried to draw him a picture that would be real simple.

"It was his second shot that made me give it to him," I said, like talking to a kid.

"Oh, I guess I forgot that," he admitted.

"Do you want to pinch me or leave it to the D.A. to decide?"

"Well, you're a private detective. If I don't pinch you, you'll be messing around, getting in people's way. I guess I ought to pinch you."

The sheriff was a practical fellow. He ended by figuring there was no use doing anything until he'd seen the D.A. That was his general method, anyhow—doing nothing and letting Castro and O'Toole and the fingerprint man handle the job.

When I finally headed for town, I was wondering how I stood on this business of plugging Hale. I didn't like Borda's face. He probably couldn't twist the story enough to keep me in a jam but he might get me into one for a while. It might be enough to get me indicted, say, or jugged until the D.A. got wise.

Why should Borda try that? Well, I was pretty sure he'd killed Ryerson. He wanted me discredited as a witness, which would leave him and his story the main prop of the case. That way, he'd not only be free of suspicion but he'd have a chance to find Valeria del Rio and the bundle of dough.

One thing was lucky. He couldn't change his story to make me the guy who had brained Ryerson. But discrediting me—you know what happens to a guy and his testimony, once he's been under suspicion—would be a worthwhile move.

Like I said, I was sure that between Borda and Lake, Borda was the one who had cooled Ryerson. But that would take lots of proving. At first, Borda didn't know I was locked in a closet, so he was fussed up. Once he learned where I'd been, he got real bright and cheery, and a gent who's lost sixty grand hasn't any business cheering up.

IT WAS lucky that my pal at the agency went to bat for me. He knew the right people. The sheriff softened a bit, and I ended up at the little hotel near Fort Marion, overlooking the Bridge of Lions and Vilano Beach and the breakwater.

There was a radio in the room. I turned it on, being tired but not sleepy. The air was crowded with police calls. They wanted the highway patrols to look for a green convertible, with a black-haired dame, supposed to be heading for Georgia.

Any other way out of Florida would take too long. Someone would pick her up. I wondered if she'd be foxy enough to take that risk and beat it, just by doing the unreasonable thing.

I was beginning to nod when my phone rang. It was Valeria, all breathless!

"You're not mad at me, are you?" she asked.

"I ought to be after that rotten trick," I grumbled.

She laughed. "If I'd known—if Uncle George had known—who you were, everything would have been different. I listened to the news flashes."

"Say, where are you?"

"A couple of blocks away." She gave me the name of the place. "Why should I run out? As soon as I had time to think it over, I called on the police and turned over the briefcase. Evidence, you know."

"But the highway patrols are looking for you!"

"They were," she corrected. "You're way behind the times, and so is the radio. I want you to help me clear Uncle George."

Getting George Lake out of that jam began to sound already like a tough job. According to the news dispatches on the air, his fingerprints were the only ones on the blunt instrument.

"Lady, am I a magician?" I said to Valeria. "It'll cost you plenty, so why pick on me?"

"You were there. You saw them all, just before it happened. I don't care what it costs. Come over right away, won't you?"

What else could I do? Among other things, I needed dough badly, and someone had made a monkey of me by knocking off my client. In a way, though, I didn't want the case. Supposing I ended by proving that George Lake had cooled Ryerson? But I went over to see her. I wanted to, anyhow.

Valeria's hotel wasn't far from Bay Street. There was no lounge private enough, so I planted myself in a deep chair in her room. She put up a brave front, but her eyes were desperate. They got under my skin.

"What's the score?" I led off. "Now that you know who I am, tell me."

"Ryerson was my uncle's law partner, back in Tulsa. He embezzled all the securities from my mother's estate. You see, Uncle George was executor without bond. He hadn't got permission from the administrator to turn the securities over to me—about a hundred and ten thou-

sand in negotiable paper."

"Let's get something else straight. You gave me just the room number, not your registered name. Who are you, anyway?"

"The name is Lake, like my uncle's. Del Rio was camouflage. This embezzlement happened while I was in the East, at school. Ryerson had never seen me, so I furnished a front for Uncle George."

"Ryerson left him holding the bag?"

SHE nodded. "He gambled a lot, though we didn't know it then. When it was discovered, the securities were missing from the partnership deposit box, the probate judge lifted the roof. Uncle George's story wasn't good enough to keep him out of jail. I did my best, but they sent him up. Naturally, the firm of Lake and Ryerson was finished. Everyone was sorry for poor Mr. Ryerson, who left town. Nothing could be proved against him, you see."

"So you picked up the trail from Claire, Ryerson's girl friend?"

"That's right," Valeria answered. "That was when she came from Florida and began running around with a fellow named Hale. Claire Wayland didn't know me and she let a few things slip. So when Uncle George got out, I helped him by taking that cottage near the service station. He lived in the little cellar room he dug under the house. The idea was to intimidate Ryerson until he ran out with his loot. Then Uncle George was going to catch him."

"You see, my uncle couldn't prove Ryerson had the bonds until he caught him with them. An ex-convict's suspicions aren't well received. The reason I picked up the briefcase and ran was to avoid the chance of a slip. No matter what happened later, Uncle George's reputation would be clear. He wanted it that way."

"Only he ends up looking a murder rap in the eye."

That shook her but only for a second.

"He'd rather be accused of killing a thief than have people think he had robbed me!" she retorted.

I could understand that.

"How about Hale and Borda?" I asked.

"Hale, I think, is the one who led Ryerson into gambling on credit, then

blackmailed him into stealing. When Ryerson did embezzle to save himself, he decided he might as well keep the loot and get a fresh start in life."

That made sense. Like I said, Ryerson looked like a decent chap with just one weakness. After seeing his partner sent up on a bum rap, he got sore at himself and at Hale and Borda. He didn't have nerve enough to confess and clear George Lake, so he ran out. Then his girl crossed him, and the wolves tracked him to Florida.

"What are you scowling about?" she asked finally. "Must you bite that cigar in half?"

I looked up and shook my head.

"Thinking always hurts me. When you said they blackmailed Ryerson into embezzlement, it gave me an idea. Every trick works two ways."

"What do you mean?" She leaned forward eagerly and caught my arm.

"I'm not saying now. It's pretty thin, but the gag might work. It looks like the only chance, anyhow. If it wasn't for Uncle George's fingerprints on that tire iron, Borda would be in the jug with him."

"Is it that bad?" she blurted, white-faced.

"Fingerprints are hard to beat."

"But he didn't do it!"

"Maybe he didn't, baby, but the cops have a case. Your uncle had a motive. He could have been sore enough to kill Ryerson. Do you think I'm a magician, making the police back down? I'm liable to make a chump of myself, like I've already done twice tonight."

She had gorgeous eyes, and now they were full of tears. When she caught both my arms, her nails dug right in.

"You've got to help me! Can't you risk failure? Don't be so proud, you big gorilla!"

"I'm sorry for you and your uncle. Honest, I am. But if I get on the job, I might find out he really had done it. If I do, it'll kill his last chance of making a defense. My client was knocked off, and I'm not pulling my punches. Would you like that?"

Her chin lifted. "You can't scare me. Uncle George didn't do it."

"Okay, baby, you asked for it. I'm on the job."

For a second she looked at me as if she were going to kiss me. And then—!l be damned if she didn't!

I walked out, trying not to breathe and figuring it would sure be hell if Lake really had cooled Ryerson.

Chapter VII

NEXT morning, I had a session with the D.A. and got myself all squared about Hale. That part was easy. But when I told him he didn't have a snowball's chance against Lake, he flared up. He not only flared up—he sprang up and glared.

"You're crazy! It's plain larceny, taking Valeria Lake's retainer. Look here!" He threw me some enlarged fingerprint photos and the rest of the picture stuff. "Lake handled that tire iron. He had the motive and the opportunity. We found that air-gun of his. He admits he tried to drive Ryerson crazy.

"The rest of it is easy. Lake kept under control until he had the bonds and then he cracked. Why would Borda do the job? You were away. Ryerson was packing up. The securities were dug up. According to your own story, Ryerson was too timid to fight back."

That was a pretty good mouthful. There wasn't much I could say, so I just sat looking at the photos of the tire iron, the corpse, everything. I'd made the D.A. sore on purpose, and he'd bitten. Then to calm him down, I said:

"To hell with you. I'll handle the case free. I'm not blackmailing Valeria Lake."

I didn't tell him about the photos. The case looked a shade easier, though not enough to brag about. No amount of argument that Lake hadn't done it was worth a dime. I had to prove that Borda had done it, which the photos wouldn't do. So I checked out and had a word with Lake's lawyer. He was a nice chap but a pessimist who had advised Lake to plead guilty to manslaughter or second degree. Then he'd put Valeria on the stand. Murder for such a dame is seldom frowned on.

Lake was stubborn as a pig, but I persuaded him to let his lawyer tell the reporters he was pleading guilty. That'd get on the air in time.

I spent the afternoon out at the Last

Stop Service Station. I walked up and down those creaking steps. I looked down from Ryerson's room, Borda's room, the bathroom. I squatted in the grease of the garage. I ran back and forth, figuring how I'd go about conking a guy, squatting under the steps that led from the second floor. Finally I dug up the mate to the tire iron and practiced conking a fellow. If anyone had seen me, he'd have said I was nuts, but there was nothing but sandpipers and gulls around. Maybe I was nuts, anyway.

At last, I laid the tire iron near the phone, checked up on the liquor supply and found it had been seized for evidence. It all came back to the blackmail which Hale and Borda had used to make a thief of Ryerson. So I drove back to Saint Augustine to do some blackmailing myself.

First, I called Valeria and told her to drive out, run her car into a cross drive, and hide in the sand dunes.

"Never mind the details," I said. "Just watch the station and listen. Whatever you hear will be evidence, unless it's me being shot in the back."

Then I went to see Borda. I found him in the lobby of a flossy hotel, one with a \$2,000,000 price tag on its souvenir postals. Saint Augustine has more big hotels per square yard than any other city on earth.

Borda had a good cigar in his face, and four more in his breast pocket. They reached up from the blue-edged handkerchief that went with the gray suit and red-striped tie. His face wasn't quite fit for a screen test, but then neither was mine, after George Lake had worked us over.

BORDA didn't lose that contented look when I barged in. He had no business being contented when he was out sixty grand he had almost collected. A dealer in hot paper would easily have given him that for Valeria's legacy. I picked a *Juan de Fuca* from his pocket and threw my old cigar away.

"You got your nerve, you cheap mug!" he said.

"So have you, looking so cool after losing the dough you and Hale figured on grabbing. You're wearing a contented-cow look because George Lake is taking

the rap. Otherwise, you'd have a face longer'n the bridge with the lions at each end."

"What do you mean?"

He knew, but I told him.

"You slugged Ryerson. You crabbed a nice job I had. I'm broke, but you still got dough. You're the sole owner of the Happy Hour Club, now that Hale's dead. What do you say we play ball?"

"Wait a minute, fellow. Why should I want to play ball?"

"Come on out to my car. We can talk better."

He came along. I went into my dance before I touched the starter.

"It's this way, Borda. The cops have muffed things. There's a lot that doesn't add up, out there at the Last Stop Service Station. Things happened too fast while I was hauling gas to Valeria's stalled car. They happened so fast that you got a goofy story. If you hadn't, you'd be with the cops, sweating, instead of stalling here as a material witness against an innocent guy."

"What would you say happened?" he came back.

"Well, you already had a hunch that Ryerson figured a run-out, so you faked being drunk. Most of that liquor was spilled on your clothes from a bottle, not from your mouth. The bathroom didn't look right for anybody claiming he was sick. Your clothes didn't."

"So what? The cops aren't interested in my health. Go ahead and tell them, sap."

"That's because they don't think the way I do. I'm going out to make that place a genuine last stop for you, pal. It's gonna be your last stop, unless you suddenly get smart. What makes you think you can knock off my client and crab a nice job?"

"Oh, putting the bee on me, huh? Try it."

I sat back against the cushions and laughed. Then I dug into my pocket and handed back the automatic I'd taken away from him.

"I don't believe in petty larceny. This is yours." I jerked the slide back and held the gat so he could see when I let go. A cartridge slipped into the chamber, out of the clip. "My compliments. If you think you want to pay me with

this instead of in cash, pick your time."

He sat looking at the gat. He pumped out a shell and frowned. Then he looked up, satisfied the gun hadn't been tinkered with and that the action was okay. He hefted the cartridge he picked up from the floor. It weighed right, so he grinned a little. "Been funny if you'd handed me blanks and claimed self-defense."

"Hell, I knew you'd look. Now, maybe you'd rather settle in cash, after all. Hale didn't have a chance gunning me, and neither do you."

"Honest John," he guffawed, and winked.

"Listen, you rat, I was a square cop!"

"That why they call you Honest John?"

I was really sore, getting a rib from him. Then I caught myself. All those dirty winks were coming in handy.

"Well, look here, Borda. Lake's decided to plead guilty. Defending his niece's legacy and trying to square his own reputation will make it a bit easier. He'll claim he saw Ryerson's knife and then he struck. What can I do? I ain't really selling Lake out. He just hasn't any guts."

"Where do I come in?" Borda was puzzled.

NO ONE can prove Lake didn't do it," I explained. "Unless they prove that you did do it. The D.A. will drop Lake like a hot rock, but only if someone makes a case against you. And I'm the guy that'll do it, you rotten heel, unless you square up for the job I lost with Ryerson."

"You can't prove it. You're nuts."

"All right, I'm nuts. I don't want your dough unless you think I rate it. Five grand is the price, and a man should earn what he's asking. So before you pay off, I'm going to prove to you I'll really be earning five grand."

"Huh! Why'd Lake cop a plea?"

"Because he's crazy about his niece. If he doesn't play ball, she'll be nailed as an accessory—hiding him before the crime and helping him get away."

He got a fresh cigar, and I handed him my lighter. He was thinking.

"You really figure you can throw out a case like that?" he asked finally.

"Brother, I've offered to prove it to you in private. I'm going to act out the crime the way you did it. When you see, you'll reach for your dough. And I can't cross you. If I did, I'd joke my head out of an accessory-after-the-fact rap—concealing a criminal. Right?"

"Yeah, you're right." He wasn't frowning any more. He was that smooth, slick smiler, except for the gauze and tape on his face. "Show me."

It was getting near dusk when we headed out over the bridge and passed the ostrich and alligator farm at the north end of the island. It didn't take us long to cover the fifteen miles to the Last Stop Service Station.

When I got out of my bus, I knew it was going to be somebody's last stop—Borda's, George Lake's, or mine. Borda followed me into the office, and I pointed at the tire iron.

"Just like the one that killed Ryerson," I said, "except it hasn't got Lake's fingerprints on it. It's wiped clean."

Borda began rubbing his vest buttons, slow and languid.

"Now what?" he breathed.

That worried me. He'd made that same kind of move the last time he had tried to pull a gun on me. If he got ambitious when my back was turned, I wouldn't be clearing George Lake, and my reputation would make Borda okay with the law. If I beat him to it, I'd be behind the eight ball. I couldn't make this case against a dead man. Then that Hale business would sink me if I got Borda before he began resisting arrest.

Boy, I was sweating, and my stomach felt funny. I glanced around for a second, wondering if Valeria was hid out of sight and yet was close enough to hear things.

"While we go upstairs, I'll explain," I said. "I'll be Ryerson. You'll be yourself. And we'll imagine Lake is squatting in the garage."

"I like games," Borda said, chuckling.

"Don't be afraid of handling that tire iron down there. You'll use a handkerchief the way you did when you hit Ryerson."

He tightened a bit, then shrugged.

"The cops thought of that one, sap," he retorted.

"Okay, okay. Lake's greasy hands left

prints that your handkerchief didn't blot. Transmission grease is like that. But don't worry about being framed by that iron. The original one is with the D.A."

"Get going!" he snapped, impatient now.

"All right. You're in that room, drunk."

HE WENT over the threshold into the room while I walked into Ryerson's room.

"I'm packing a suitcase," I called. "You're not really drunk. You know he's trying to dig up that loot and run out before the cops get here. If Valeria, you, Ryerson, and I get questioned about Hale, someone is going to spill about stolen securities. Then you'll be out of luck for keeps. Ryerson takes a rap. You both want to run out, and you know he's trying to do you another double-cross."

"Mind reader, huh?" Borda sneered. "That ain't worth five grand."

I came out and went into the kitchen.

"I got a flashlight and a heavy knife," I said. "Heavier than this little one I just picked up. I hear you snoring and mumbling. It fools me. I tried to get you drunk and I don't know you're faking. So I'm going down those creaky stairs to the back to dig under a paving block."

"All right. Are you doing it or just talking?"

"I'm doing it. While I'm doing it, you'll see you were a damn liar. You cooked a fast story and it's lousy. If I hadn't nailed Lake, the cops would have grabbed you and you'd be sunk. But they're so happy about Lake, they didn't think about the cockeyed things."

"Such as what?" He was polishing his vest buttons. But his eyes told me he was afraid to draw, even if I had both hands full with a flashlight and a knife. "Put up or shut up."

"When Ryerson went down the back stairs, you knew what for. You couldn't sneak down after him, because the creaking would give you away. You didn't have your gat, so you ran down the front steps which are solid. At the phone, you picked up the tire iron and sneaked along the side of the building toward the back. Lake saw a man, and it wasn't

me nor the Sultan of Sulu."

"Nuts! The D.A. doesn't believe Lake."

"I do, Borda. You needed a weapon because Ryerson had a big knife. You ran up behind him and beamed him. Then you came back the same way you went. When you headed for your car, Lake tackled you."

"No good," Borda said but he licked his lips, and his eyes narrowed. "I was in my room. I heard Lake mix with Ryerson. I watched it from my window. When I saw him drop the tire iron, I went down and tangled with him. You saw the fight."

Chapter VIII

YOU can see what kind of mess I was trying to clear up. Each story sounded logical, and the breaks were against Lake. But I was ready for the payoff and praying Borda would bite so that Valeria would hear. I needed a witness to anything he'd say when I popped it to him. He let out a deep breath. My story seemed to have caused a bit of strain. He was itching to use his gun but he was afraid.

"There's one bad slip the D.A. will see when I talk to him," I said. "Go down and grab that tire iron as if you were going to slug me when I squat over the bonds. See what kind of fingerprints you'd leave. Then use that iron like you were trying to pry a phone off the wall. Same whorls and loops but in a different position, because your fingers will be spreading from a different grip."

"What about it?" he grated.

"Just this. The prints on the iron in the D.A.'s office show that Lake couldn't have made them while smashing the phone. The D.A. never tumbled because he had the case in a bag. Is that worth five grand for me to shut up?"

"You dirty—" That slipped. He looked foolish, clenched his fists, then relaxed and smiled. "You'd try to put the bee on me for that? It ain't worth a cent!"

I laughed right out, half turned to the door.

"You haven't heard the rest. Wait till I go into my act." I was talking over my shoulder as I headed for the stairs. "You made one more slip that's an all-time high. It's as good as hanging yourself."

"What?" His snarl nearly made me jump and draw.

"You said you were at your window, kind of leaning out and looking down, so you could see Lake cool off Ryerson. It all hangs on that. You saw him hit twice."

"Sure I did. Hell, don't I have eyes? Wasn't there a moon?"

I was almost to the ground now, and he'd come to the head of the steps. They creaked loudly under my weight. I still had my back turned, but I twisted my head a little to one side to watch him when I said:

"The window's open in your room, just like it was. I'm going to squat like Ryerson did. You poke your head out and see if you can watch me. From that window, you couldn't see him. The landing blocks the line of sight from up there!"

"Huh!" His jaw sagged, and his hands opened and closed.

"Yeah, you described the socking perfectly, only you couldn't see it from there. You could have from the bath but not from the one you pointed to. Is that worth five grand? It's worth that much to Lake."

"You—you damned liar!" he yapped.

"I'm squatting. Go to the window and look."

He said something, kind of choked, but I didn't answer. When he stumbled down the cross hall, his feet thumped like clods on a coffin in that empty house. I took the last couple of steps real slow, looking around intently for a glimpse of Valeria.

The stairs, in case I've forgotten to mention it, just came out from the landing but hugged the wall. You get the picture. One of the coquina slabs of the little patio was well under the overhang of the stairs.

I squatted with my back to the window, the flashlight playing on the place where poor Ryerson had made his last stop. Borda was thumping across the floor of his room. I could count the steps. They stopped. Maybe I lost count, but he must have been at the sill. I hoped Valeria would not get hysterical and ruin it all. The payoff was hanging on exactly what Borda did and said when he looked out to see if my story was worth five grand.

HE DIDN'T say a thing. Suddenly a window jerked up with a smash. I had forgotten to tell him I'd lowered them all just a couple of inches too much for him to lean out easily. I stayed squatted, but it was tough waiting. I could feel the sweat running down my face. Maybe it was dumb, letting him have his gun, but I'd had to or he'd have been afraid to come out.

Card sharps have a move they call "forcing" a card. You think you're "selecting any card in the deck," but you actually have it pushed on you. You couldn't grab any but the planted one. No wonder the fellow can tell the spots on you, huh? Well, I did the same with Borda, only I forced a window on him.

He had spent a rotten half hour, thinking he wouldn't be able to see me. Naturally he couldn't from the window I "forced." He'd said, offhand, that he was looking out of one of the two. When he pointed, everybody had let it go at that. Why wouldn't they? Nobody was making a point of exactly which window. A window is a window, isn't it?

So there he was, above me. He was thinking about Lake's fingerprints, how they would crab the case and how that would make the D. A. look for another suspect. I'd shaken Borda on two plays. One was faked, the other real enough. He couldn't take it, and I was wondering whether I could.

The window that was jerked up was the one through which he could see me too damned easily. He began firing while the sash was still rattling. He must have had his gat out before he made a move. Just then, a dame screeched like a fire siren. It was Valeria, getting nervous about me, I guess.

That spoiled Borda's shooting for a split second. A slug kicked up sand while I rolled away from the flashlight and wedged myself against the back of the bottom step. He was pouring lead and hollering, half crazy:

"You dirty heel! You think you can pull that?"

Splinters hit me. I couldn't risk letting him empty his gun, so I let him have it. He was too wild to have sense enough to duck or run. He was just killing mad. He jerked back over the sill, and his half empty gun dropped to the sand. Before

he could recover enough to run out, I dashed up and grabbed him.

Borda wasn't hurt bad. I had got him once, high in the chest near the shoulder. My other shot had gone wild and clipped some tape from his cheek. When a guy is pumping away at you, it isn't like target practice.

Valeria was out in the open now. She followed me, but I made her stay in the hall. I guess it made her sick when I picked Borda up and slapped him down.

"I'll tear your head off!" I snorted. "Trying to plug me in the back, huh? Thought you could try that a second time, huh?"

He was bleeding like a stuck pig.

"I'll leave you here to drip dry if you don't cough up. You did it, didn't you?"

The unlucky mug had been running into one snag right after another and now he'd missed making this my last stop. He was half crazy. "Sure I did!" he screeched. "Try to make it stick! I'd do the same for you! You—"

He'd heard Valeria's yelp. That had probably saved my hide, because I couldn't turn around to face him until he'd opened fire. But he wasn't using his bean. Before he had sense enough to shut up, she had heard enough. When he realized she'd tuned in on the works, he nearly collapsed. So we hauled him to town.

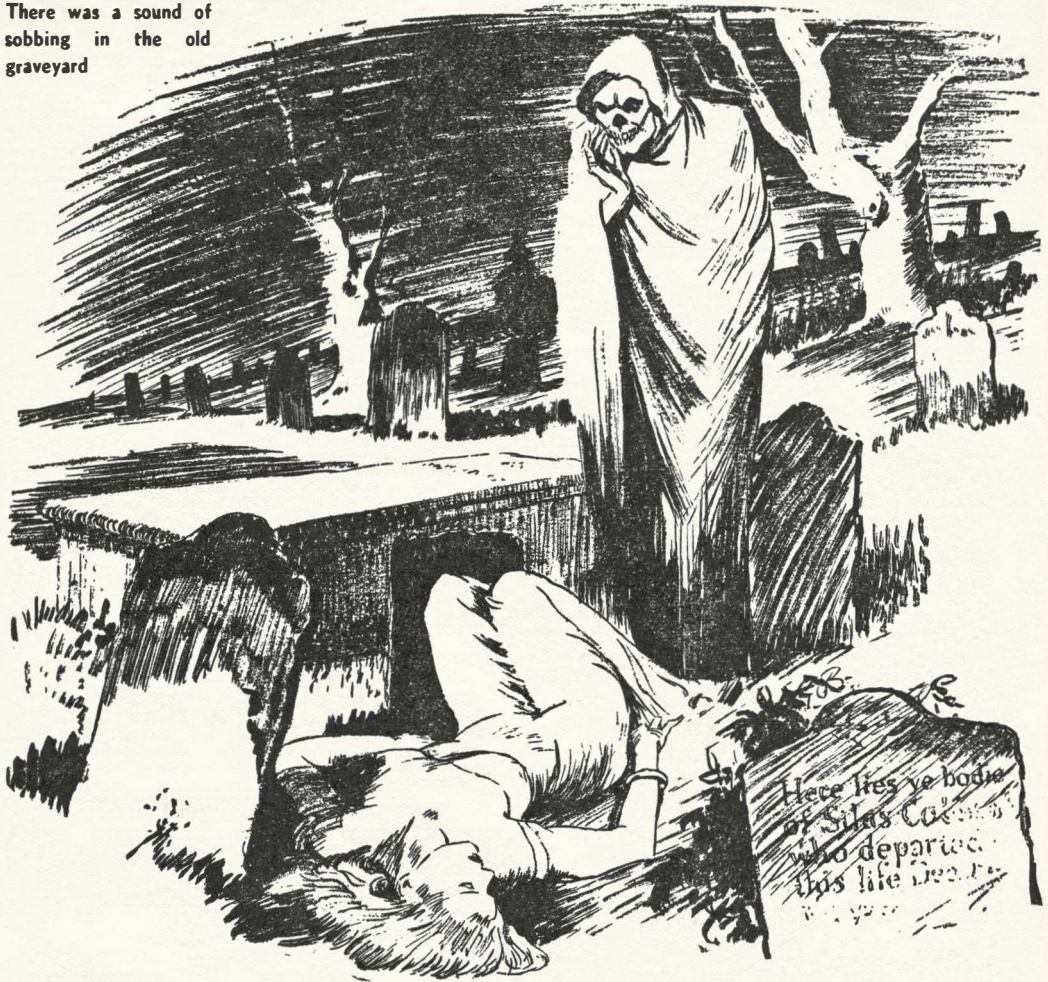
The way it turned out, it hadn't been absolutely necessary for me to give him a chance at my back. The position of Lake's hands when he used the tire iron to jimmy the phone got the D.A. off on a fresh start, and Uncle George walked out clean. Borda's trying to hose my back with lead was what made his rap tougher.

I heard later it was Borda's last stop, and he got complete service.

George Lake is back in Tulsa, practising law without a partner. He's on top again, like he deserves to be. He's okay, even if he did nearly knock my head off. And every once in a while I get a card from Valeria.

Yeah, a card. If I were ten years younger and didn't have a bald spot and red face like my Uncle Charlie Ryan, maybe I'd have got more than a card. But what the hell, a guy can't have everything, can he?

There was a sound of
sobbing in the old
graveyard



Candid Camera

By SEABURY QUINN

The horror he tried to capture was seared on his soul

SULKAS reeled the film tight on the spool of his small camera, set the lens cap firmly in place. Then he smiled out across the haze-dimmed vista of the Mall with all the complacency of one who has done a day's work well. The

last four frames had been used up that afternoon. Surely one of them would bring a prize.

His candid camera shots had won him honorable mention three successive Sundays in the *Times-Mail's* gravure sec-

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tion. One of those he'd made today was bound to put him in the money. They'd like that eight-foot, thirtieth-second shot of the blond child with her hoop, or the park squirrel as it hung head down against the bole of an oak tree. Animals and children always went across big, he reflected. This time he had something.

Autumn haze was in the air. Autumn shadows marched across the flagstones of the Mall. In the west, the live coals of the sunset slowly died beneath the ashes of twilight. South of the park, the towering apartments were transfigured in the soft blue dusk until they looked like castles in a Maxfield Parrish painting. Lights were blossoming in their windows. Behind them in the midtown section, flashing signs flaunted their semaphoric sales talks.

"You are a camera artist?"

Sulkas turned with a start. The question came in a deep, courteous voice, yet somehow he was vaguely frightened. A second ago he had been all alone, for this section of the Mall was deserted. He had not even heard a footfall on the flagstones.

"Not really an artist," he replied with belated civility. "Just an amateur looking for unusual shots. Besides, photography's not actually an art—"

Just why he stopped, he could not say. He didn't consider photography an art, like painting or sculpture. There was no reason why he should claim it was. Yet beneath the stranger's glance his words ceased as abruptly as if he had caught himself talking blasphemy in a priest's presence. Again he felt that little, scarcely noticeable qualm of nameless dread as he looked at the man beside him on the bench.

There was no reason for it. The stranger was a foreigner, but there were many foreigners in New York. A long, loose cloak, like a naval officer's, enveloped him. His hat was a broad-brimmed black felt. His clothes, too, seemed to be a dull black that caught and pocketed the light. His skin was olive and his long, thin lips were intensely red. About him was the pleasant smell of scented bath soap and fine powder. Underneath the perfume, though, lay the faintest suggestion of another odor, like the hint of decay.

"Not an art?" the deep, genteel voice answered in an almost shocked tone. "My dear sir, it is more than art. It's nature! The painter at his best can but show beholders how he saw a scene. Photography grasps the fleeting fraction of a second and holds it for eternity. How, save by photography, can we record the stress of great sorrow, delight, or terror? How can a painter, daubing artificial impressions on canvas, or a sculptor, cutting lifeless puppets out of lifeless stone, imprison such great moments of supreme emotion for the future? Only photography can do this."

"You're probably right," Sulkas said hesitantly.

HIS UNEASINESS was increasing. The low-spoken, well bred insistence of the argument seemed emphatic and fanatical, as if it had been shouted. When the stranger stripped a black glove from his hand, drew out a gleaming black case, and selected a long cigarette from it, Sulkas looked at him in fascination.

The bared hand was white as marble, with long tapering nails as red and pointed as a woman's yet Sulkas knew they were not manicured. A match flared suddenly. Its little point of orange flame seemed to be striking garnet flashes of reflection in the deep-set eyes. Smoke wafted toward him like a cloud of heavy incense. It, too, had that vague charnel odor.

"Emotions," continued the stranger, "they are the only things that count. The world waits for the man who can capture sorrow, delight, or terror for the ages. My young friend, think of that next time you train your camera on a child or squirrel in the park. A thousand other men are taking similar pictures. They may achieve a paltry prize from some newspaper. But is that fame, success? No, my friend, that's mediocrity. Fame and recognition wait for the successful man, but he who would succeed must dare to defy convention."

He rose and turned south toward the city. The echo of his laugh came softly, almost mockingly, as he walked off.

Sulkas watched him, wondering. How had he known about the little girl with her hoop and the squirrel on the oak

tree? He hadn't been there when Sulkas made those shots, yet— For the first time Sulkas noticed the stranger's limp. He leaned heavily upon a black malacca cane, hobbling as if one of his feet were deformed. A puff of breeze snatched up the long black cloak, raised its hem until it seemed to flutter like the wings of a giant bat.

The sun was sinking like a stricken ship into the tossing sea of cloud-rack in the west. Suddenly it disappeared. With its going, shadows closed down on the world like an extinguisher upon a guttering candle. A gust of wind came keening through the almost leafless trees. The feel of it was like an icy spray against his face. Sulkas shivered as he turned up the collar of his topcoat. There was no moon. Everything around him appeared dim and indistinct, unreal as ghosts are unreal or objects on a foggy night. . . .

ALL NIGHT the stranger's mocking advice stood out in his memory like the afterimage of a flash-bulb's brilliant glare upon the retina.

"A paltry prize from some newspaper. That's mediocrity. . . . He who would succeed must dare to defy convention."

His ambitions of yesterday seemed childish. Why should he work to win a paltry prize from some newspaper? Fame and fortune waited for the man who dared. Well, why not? There was Hajos, rich and famous for his camera studies, and Carmody and Fischbein, hardly less well known. Why shouldn't Sulkas force his way into their select company? Why should he seek no higher goal than honorable mention or a miserable five dollars for his artistry?

It was a lovely autumn morning, cool and brisk, with sunlight sparkling on the tiny pools left by the melting frost. The sky above the half-bare trees was as blue as a china plate. A high-key day, he mused, almost too much light. The shadows would be sharp and harsh. He'd have to watch out for halation, keep the shutter closed down to a mere pinpoint—

"Oh, I'm sorry, little girl!" he exclaimed as he lurched against the broken picket fence before the vacant house. Sunk in his thoughts, he had walked, unseeing, into a small child who occupied

the center of the sidewalk, with a kitten clutched against her threadbare jacket.

Sulkas looked at her carefully. Everything and everybody came within his range of possibility for camera study. The day before he would have snapped her picture as she stood there with the kitten in her arms. Probably he would have called it "Pals" or "The Little Mother."

The child was photogenic, no doubt of it. Her large eyes and her little pointed chin, the slim, small throat and the brush of straight black hair made her ideal photographic material. The decent poverty of her dress, worn coat, patched skirt, and several-times patched shoes, the pinch of malnutrition in her cheeks—there was pathos in the love of a slum child for her pet.

"Why not?" he asked himself. Plainly as if they were spoken in his ear, he heard the stranger's smooth, persuasive words: "Fame and fortune for the man who can depict the ultimate in sorrow, delight, and terror. . . ."

He slipped the lens cap from his camera, swung the instrument before him as an army officer hangs his binoculars.

"Let me see your kitty," he said as he held his free hand toward the child. "What's her name?"

The little girl dug one scuffed shoe into the bare earth bordering the footpath. Childhood's innate suspicion of the good faith of grownups made her clutch her pet closer to her. Head bent until her chin was resting on the kitten, she looked obliquely up at him.

"Give me that cat!" With a snatching grasp he dragged the kitten from the grimy little hands and held it high above his head. "I'm going to kill it."

The child went suddenly rigid. Her lower lip began to quiver, then dropped and curled up like a frosted flower petal as her mouth squared with a quick retch of agony. Tears came to her eyes, rolled in big, slow drops down her thin cheeks. Her hands were clasped before her in a piteously entreating gesture.

Sulkas flipped the trigger of his camera. The light had been just right, he had maneuvered the child into just the proper position. Lighting, distance, timing—everything was perfect. He had made an ideal shot.

"Capture sorrow," the stranger had advised.

Sulkas had bettered the instructions. Here was sorrow, blended with surprise, fear, and entreaty. A little, life-starved child was pleading for the return and the life of the thing which she loved most dearly. Here was something real at last. His feet were on the ladder. He was climbing to success and recognition.

With the squirming, mewling cat wedged underneath his arm, he headed down the steep street toward St. Mary's Park. Behind him he could hear the child's thin, piping wail. Once he looked back. The little girl had thrown herself face-downward on the grass. With her head cupped in her folded hands she was crying in a strangled plaint of anguish.

"Kitty, kitty! O my little, little kitty!" . . .

THE IDIOT stood in his front yard, grinning fatuously at passers-by. Sulkas noticed him as he went past—a giant's bulk of body, fat but not soft, with vacant, lack-luster eyes and a mouth that sagged and drooled. His head was hideously deformed as if it had been molded in wax and squeezed out of alignment while still warm. His whole body was massive and grotesque as the monster of an insane artist's drawing. An animal he was, a thing that knew the world only because of its impact on his five senses.

As Sulkas reached the little iron fence that shut the idiot's play yard from the street, the uncouth creature bobbed and grinned at him. Once or twice, as he might have tossed peanuts to the bears in Bronx Park, Sulkas had thrown the imbecile a bit of candy. Now the oaf came shambling toward the fence, both hands outstretched, a half-apologetic, half-ingratiating leer upon his malformed features. Sulkas paused in mid-step, almost in midbreath. He swung his camera into position.

"Here, catch!" he called peremptorily, and tossed the little cat into the idiot's outstretched paws.

The fat cheeks creased and wrinkled as the grin grew deeper. Laughter bubbled up between the thick, slack lips with a noise like the gurgling of a spate of unclean water in a waste pipe.

"Purty, purty!" cried the idiot as he ran hands trembling with delight along the terrified kitten's sleek back. His voice was high and thin and childish. Somehow it was horrifying, that weak treble coming from that monstrous bulk. "Purty, purty pussy!"

Sulkas' finger was upon the camera trigger, but some inward warning bade him hold the pressure. The kitten, terrified by the great fingers fumbling over it, had writhed and struggled to get free. Failing that, it had lashed out with its claws, etching a bright trail of blood across the hand that held it like a vise.

It was amazing how quickly the laughter died in the big, malformed face. The pendulous lips drew inward as if they were a purse whose string was tightened suddenly. The puffy lids came down across the senseless eyes and veiled them till they were mere lines of pale color. The huge fists knotted.

The kitten had no time to scream its dying agony. The soft ball of fur lay still where it had been thrown on the grass. There was a rising roar of laughter. It churned and boiled as if its force were so great that the idiot's gaping mouth and open throat could not provide enough room for its escape. Rolling like the thunder of a beaten kettledrum, it betrayed no joy, no merriment, no gladness, only the amusement of a senseless devil watching the antics of the tortured damned.

"Now!"

The command seemed to come from somewhere in Sulkas' inner consciousness, yet from an outside source as well. He clicked the trigger of his camera. Then he hurried down the street with his spine cold, the waves of demoniac laughter rolling after him. . . .

ON mauve paper, almost as thick and heavy as a blotter, the letter was written in violet ink in a great sprawling hand that took a line for each six words. Brief to the point of curtness, it was like a royal command.

Come to see me at your earliest convenience and bring negatives of the two pictures published in today's Times-Mail

That was all, no punctuation, no salu-

tation, no complimentary closing, not even a date. But the thrill of it raced through Sulkas' veins like brandy. Hajos, the great cameraman had addressed a letter to him with his own hand.

The *Times-Mail* had accepted the two prints he'd sent them. The crying child he had called "Bereavement." The laughing imbecile he had labeled "Idiot's Delight." Both had won honorable mention. First and second prizes had gone, respectively, to pictures showing a blond child trundling a hoop and a park squirrel hanging head down on the trunk of an oak tree. The irony of it had brought a bitter laugh to his mouth, but the letter from Hajos washed it away.

Feverishly he made ready for the interview, chose and discarded half a dozen ties, fussed and fumed while knotting them. His fingers shook so he could scarcely make them do his bidding. The subway seemed to crawl as it bore him downtown. The crosstown bus seemed slower than a snail as it bumped through the traffic. But finally, with a heart that beat so wildly it was almost stifling him, he stood before the great man's door.

"Hajos" was the only word upon the ground-glass panel, without a given name or statement of his calling. But what need was there? Hajos was Hajos. Nobody knew if he had any other name. Certainly he never used it if he had. As to his calling, would anyone add "painter" to the name of Michelangelo, or "sculptor" to Rodin's? In all the world of photography there was no name so famous or so potent as Hajos, yet Sulkas had come by personal appointment!

A soft light burned above the gleaming desk in the center of the antechamber. Everything about the room was black. The black composition floor gleamed like polished jet. Dull, soot-black walls and ceiling gave back no gleam of light from the black-shaded lamp. The furniture of polished ebony was upholstered in black silk brocade.

In the coned rays of the desk lamp he described the man at the desk, lighted like an actor on a darkened stage. The lean, sardonic face had eyes as black as coal, with heavy brows like circumflexes over them. The hair, dead-black as the bushy brows, was brushed back sharply,

showing a widow's peak on the forehead. A long, hooked nose; a wide, almost colorless mouth; long, sharply slanting jaws that terminated in a long, sharp chin made it a terrifying face. It was the face of one who knows the weaknesses and wickedness of others and holds aloof in scorn, indifference, and contempt.

Sulkas stopped upon the threshold and drew in his breath so sharply that he seemed to sob. For just an instant panic caught him by the throat. The black-globed light threw curious shadows on the farther wall. For a fleeting instant it seemed that he saw the figure of a tall and slender man in black with a wide hat and long, enveloping cloak—the stranger of the park. Then reason took the reins again. Of course there was no body there.

"Mr. Hajos?" he asked tentatively.

"Not 'meestair,' please," the thick, harsh voice reproved. "Those who call Hajos 'meestair' insult heem. Hajos iss Hajos. It iss enough."

"I'm sorry." Sulkas swallowed his embarrassment. "You wrote me—"

"Yess." The man's reply was like a hiss. "You haf the prints of those pictures? Good. Giff them here."

When he took them in his long, thin dead-white hand, he sat silent, looking at the little negatives as he held them against the light.

"You haf the master's touch, younk man," he pronounced. "Emotions are the only things that count. The world waits for the man who can imprison supreme emotion and preserve it for the ages. Yess."

Sulkas shivered till he thought his teeth must be chattering. Hajos had used practically the same words the stranger in the park had used! He choked down the fear that had possessed him. Hajos had laid the films on the desk and put one long white hand palm down on each side of them.

"I want them," he declared.

"Of course Mr.—I mean Hajos," Sulkas stammered. "You're entirely welcome."

"No man iss welcome to anything. Everything must be paid for, and money is the cheapest thing to pay. I shall pay for them." From the desk drawer, Hajos

drew out a sheaf of bills and tossed them uncounted to Sulkas. "Take that as earnest money on our bargain. Tomorrow, or the next day, or the next day after that, perhaps, you make the last print of the trilogy?"

"I don't think I quite understand—" began Sulkas.

A sharp, impatient exclamation from Hajos cut him short.

"You onnerstan' me well enough, I theenk. Here—" he took the little films between his thumb and forefinger—"we haf prints of sorrow and elation, no? Ver' well. Now you go out and get me a print of horror, terror, fright. What you call it iss no matter. You know what I mean. You get me a print of someone who has just found out some dreadful thing he knows cannot be so iss so. You onnerstan'? You bring that print to me, and then we really begin to talk business. Yess. Now go. Hajos would be alone."

THUS summarily dismissed, Sulkas went out. He hesitated in the corridor. His head was whirling. Hajos had complimented him, said he had the master's touch. Hajos had commissioned him to take a picture. Hajos had bought his negatives. For the first time, Sulkas looked at the sheaf of bills clutched in his hand. He hadn't thought of counting it, but—one, two, ten, a dozen—twenty fifty-dollar bills were in the bundle!

Hajos, the greatest master of photography in the world, had bought two films from him for a thousand dollars! He had bought two films from him for a thousand dollars! He had bought them from him, Paul Sulkas, who only yesterday had almost wept with disappointment over failure to receive a ten-dollar first prize from the *Times-Mail* for those same pictures! . . .

The idea did not come to Sulkas full-formed. He built it up a little at a time, picking, choosing, selecting, discarding. Finally, as a picture puzzle or mosaic is at last completed, he worked out the pattern. All was ready—actors, scene, and plot. Only the performance waited, and the time for that, too, he had fixed upon.

The Stephans who lived out past Woodhaven, were giving a Hallowe'en party. Between their cottage and the

city was a long, deserted stretch of desolate country. Almost in the center of it was the old Mount Holly Cemetery, graveyard of ten generations of Long Islanders, burying place for slaves when slavery was as legal in New York as in Virginia.

One plot, a little briar-grown patch of wasteland in the corner of the fence, had been reserved in olden days for the burial of suicides and executed felons, spies, and traitors. That would be the ideal spot, and Valborg Pettersen should help him. It would be pretty rough on Val, but when he'd conquered stubborn fame and made reluctant fortune come to heel, Sulkas would make it up to her and more. Besides, she would do anything for him. He knew that she'd forgive him.

He had known Valborg since they had been in grammar school together. From a chubby, tow-haired, apple-cheeked Norwegian lass, she'd grown into a tall, statuesque, lovely woman. Copper hair reached down to her knees and she had steadfast blue eyes, a fine skin, and teeth that showed as white as milk behind the vivid crimson of her long, firm lips.

Sulkas, with his eye for beauty and proportion, could not remember having seen a body that stood so straight and proudly as hers. Moreover, she loved him. Sometimes he felt unworthy, for hers was not a cheap and showy affection, but the deep, abiding love that women of the Northern races give to only one man in a whole lifetime. Any time he chose to ask her, she would accept him, he was certain. But with the artist's concentration on his work, with ambition battling frustration, he had temporarily held back an avowal of affection.

Somehow it put heart into a fellow, especially one with artistic temperament—and Sulkas never doubted he had that—to know a beautiful girl was waiting for him, needing only his first word to declare her love with all the open-hearted fervor of her generous nature. She'd go to the Stephans' party with him, of course. They'd drive out early in the evening, spend the night in games and telling ghost tales. Then—

"It can't fail, it's sure-fire!" he told himself exultantly.

A thought bothered him for a moment. Valborg had been feeling rather low lately. The doctor had said her heart was not quite up to par, cautioned her against late hours and too much exercise or excitement. But that was all a pack of nonsense. What did doctors know about it, anyway? They always had to find an ailment when a person called on them, otherwise they couldn't justify their fees. . . .

RED APPLES had been ducked for, fortunes told. The guests had danced to music from the radio. Now, with the empty plates of the repast stacked in the kitchen, they gathered in the firelight to spin ghost yarns. All the old favorites were paraded—the Golden Arm, the Monkey's Paw, Wandering Willie's Tale. Sulkas had grown restless. In a little while good nights would be in order, and he had to set his stage.

"Speaking of hauntings," he said abruptly with raised voice, "did any of you know that old Mount Holly Cemetery is supposed to be infested with a specially malignant specter?"

A little murmur of awed negatives went round the firelit room.

"Mount Holly, right over there by Ridgewood? Tell us about it!"

This was better, he thought complacently. Now to work.

"There doesn't seem to be much known about it, really," he began with a light cough of deprecation. "The origin of the legend seems to have been lost. Some say it is the ghost of a sorcerer executed by the Dutch for witchcraft. There's another version that declares the specter is the wraith of a traitor who betrayed a company of Continentals to the British. Judging from the things I've heard, I'd say it is the ghost of a slave who set fire to the farmhouse of his master and was trapped and burned to death himself.

"Just whose the ghost is seems a mystery, but there are some pretty well authenticated stories of its appearance especially on Hallowe'en. It must be an unpleasant-looking thing enveloped in a long white winding sheet, with only a skull and no face, all glowing with hell fire. Its dreadful power is to blast the person who sees it with blindness."

"Blindness?" asked Tim Stephan.

"How do you mean, Paul?"

"All I know is what I've heard, of course. But up to twenty years ago there was an old man out at Rockville Centre. He had been stone-blind for almost fifty years. Until the night he tried to take a short cut through Mount Holly, though, he could see as well as anybody. Better than most folks, in fact. He was a famous marksman and hardly ever failed to carry off first prize at the turkey shoots they used to have on the island every Christmas.

"Well, it seems one night he found himself out late, with no way of getting home but walking. A storm was blowing up. He was in so great a hurry that he decided to cut through Mount Holly. He almost got through. Just as he came to the plot reserved for suicides' and felons' burial, something seemed to rise up from the ground in front of him—a form draped in a sheet, with a skeleton's face all glowing, as if it were incandescent, and eyes as green as a cat's. He stood rooted to the spot with terror. The thing went at him with a dreadful groan. Then, just as he thought it was about to seize him, it exploded."

"Exploded?" came the chorus from the listeners. "What do you mean?"

"I don't mean anything," he answered reprovingly. "I wasn't there. I didn't see it. I'm only saying what he said. The thing seemed to explode, vanish in a blaze of blinding light that left him dazzled—permanently."

No one spoke for a minute. Was this a hoax, a trick to force a final question and make a fool of him who asked it? At last Tim Stephan cleared his throat.

"All right, I'll bite. What do you mean, he was permanently dazzled, Paul?"

"Just what I say. He never got his sight back. They found him the next morning, threshing around the graveyard, barging into tombstones, tearing himself to ribbons on the briars, blind as a mole. He was only twenty then. He lived past seventy, but all the years between he spent in darkness."

A long-drawn exclamation of horror exhaled through the living room, almost as if it were a gust of wind become articulate. Sulkas glanced at Valborg sitting on a hassock by the fire, elbow on knee, chin cupped in one hand, her wine-

red party dress splashed out upon the dark blue of the rug. The dancing fire-light added strength to the rich rose in her cheeks. Lord, she was a beauty!

It was a low, contemptible trick he planned to play. Softly as a half-heard echo, but loud enough to drown compunction, came the words of the mysterious stranger in the park.

"He who would succeed must dare to defy convention." . . .

HE HAD let out almost all the water from his radiator when he had parked in the driveway. They came abreast of the low picket fence that shut Mount Holly Cemetery from the back road he had chosen as a "short-cut." The little gage on the dashboard glowed fiery red in warning.

"The darn thing's empty again!" he groaned.

Valborg turned questioning eyes on him. Throughout the drive she had been silent and tense. Once or twice he'd stolen sidelong glances at her, noticed how she sat with hands clasped in her lap, her eyes directed straight before her, as though she strove to see something beyond her vision's range. His story had struck deeper in her mind than he had dared to hope.

"What, Paul?" she asked.

"My radiator's dry again. I should have had it fixed this afternoon, but I thought I could get by tonight." He shrugged his shoulders in mock resignation. "Looks as if there's nothing to do but get out and rustle up a refill."

"But where can we get water here? There's not a house for half a mile or more."

"Afraid of the fiery ghost of Mount Holly?"

"The fiery ghost?"

"That's what I asked. This is Mount Holly Cemetery." With a vague, all-inclusive gesture, he swung his arm toward the dark patch of tree-grown land upon their right. "This is where the fiery ghost comes rising from the ground. All the same, there's bound to be a well or hydrant there, where I can get a bucketful of water. Mind waiting here, or would you rather come into the cemetery with me?"

"I'll wait," she answered.

"All right." He reached into the luggage trunk and found the canvas bucket, all loaded with his stage properties. "Sure you won't be afraid?"

"I probably will be Paul, but—"

"I'll be right back," he broke in. "If I see the specter coming at me, I'll let out a yell. Will you come to my help?"

"I'll come, Paul," she responded soberly. "You know that—"

"Of course I do," he interrupted. "You're a true friend, Val!"

Reaching through the opened window of the car, he found her hand and squeezed it. In the dashboard light he saw a quick flush come into her cheeks. Poor Val, she loved him so! He was a heel. But through his brain rang the refrain:

"Dare to defy convention!"

"Be seeing you," he said cheerfully and drew himself up to the fence top. "Keep your chin up and your ears open for my cry for succor."

This was going to be almost too easy, he assured himself as he picked a path between the tombstones. He'd been over the terrain that afternoon. There, by the van Repplier plot, where the copse of hemlock made a solid-black background for a white face and blond hair, was just the spot. Workmen had been busy on the old monument, scrubbing it with wire brushes, spraying it with dilute acid to eat off the grime of years. The grass about the base was seared and brittle as if burned wherever the acid had touched it.

"Have to watch this stuff," one of the men had explained when he'd commented on their rubber gloves, aprons, and heavy goggles. "Seems like when this dilute muriatic acid mixes with the moss from these old stones, it forms a poison that just destroys human tissue. If you've got a cut, even a tiny scratch on your hand, it'll give you an infection that'll take a year to cure." Avoiding the acid-scarred patch of turf, Sulkas drew the things from their concealment in the bucket. A Hallowe'en ghost costume—long white linen sheet with hoodlike top to cover up the head, a skull-faced mask with eyes of green isinglass, the little pocket flashlight, with its green bulb, set just below the false-face to illuminate it. Then his camera with its flash-

bulb set in the parabolic reflector—he'd need lots of light for this shot, but the heavy-duty bulb would furnish it.

Everything okay? He checked his equipment once more. There could be no second try if anything went wrong. All was in order.

He drew the ghostly costume over his clothes, set the mask in place, tested the flashlight to make sure it would properly light the skull-face with its green, unearthly glow. Then he swung his camera around his neck and focused it on a spot eight feet away, just where the path broke through the clump of hemlock. Now—

"Val!" he shouted, and excitement lent something like trembling fear to his voice. "Help, Val! Help me!"

VALBORG drew the furred collar of her coat higher around her throat. It had been hard to wear a mask of festive gaiety all evening, to take part in the bantering fun of the party when more than anything she wanted to creep into his arms and beg:

"Hold me tight against your heart, Paul. It won't be for long."

She'd taken it standing that afternoon, like the thoroughbred she was. When Dr. Mendel gave his final verdict, she had smiled at him, chin up, lips firm.

"Haven't you forgotten something, Doctor?" she had asked.

"Forgotten?" His brows drew down in a thoughtful frown. "No, I don't think so, Miss Pettersen."

"Oh, maybe I'm confused. It was a judge I thought of."

"A judge?"

"Yes. You know, when they pronounce the death sentence, they add, 'And may God have mercy on your soul.'"

Now she was alone with her thoughts, and they frightened her. In the faint glow from the dashboard light, her face looked sad. Her cheeks were hollow, and her red lips had a tragic downward droop. If only Paul would tell her, she thought wistfully. She knew he loved her, as much as he was capable of loving anything or anybody but himself. She had read it in his eyes, but she wanted it from his lips. It would be something—

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not much but more than nothing—to carry into the dark with her.

She turned to look into the deep gloom of the old cemetery. She'd be lying in a place like that before the birds came north next spring. She shuddered, and a tiny blue vein fluttered at the base of her throat. There was a thin light, like a silver needle, here and there between the almost bare-limbed trees. The early morning wind souged through them like a ghostly chorus. Farther on, where evergreens were bunched in a small copse, a darker darkness loomed in the night. If only Paul would say he loved her, that he needed her—

The cry came suddenly, astonishingly, pitched shrilly, quavering with mortal dread.

"Val! Help, Val! Help me!"

She was out of the car with a bound, scrambling up and over the crude fence, heedless of the rents the pickets made in her dress, unmindful of the ruin of her satin sandals and silk stockings.

"Where are you, Paul?" she called in answer. "What is it? I'm coming!"

Again she heard the cry, lower this time, seemingly exhausted. A briar reached out thorn-clawed branches, tearing at her dress. She jerked the fabric savagely, felt it rip as it came loose. With one hand she gathered up the dress above her knees. With the other she thrust back the low-hung branches of the hemlocks.

"Paul, Paul, where are you?"

Visions danced before her inward eye. Voices chattered in her mind's ear. She was in a haunted graveyard where spirits of the damned dead walked the earth. Racial memories rose and gibbered at her, the trolls and goblins of her Norse ancestors' folklore, the "sendings" of the Finnish witches, the Erlking and his troop of demon courtiers. The very trees seemed menacing, not soft and friendly like the trees in the park. Gaunt and bare and sinister, they stretched their leafless branches up to the black sky to draw down darker secrets from it.

Her breath was coming faster, and her heart was wrenching like a creature in its death throes. She was sobbing hard, dry, ugly gasps of utter and complete exhaustion.

"Paul! Paul, where are you?"

OUT OF THE blackness before her it came, tall and obscene, the light that emanates from rotting things upon its hare-boned face, a green reflection as from pools of stagnant water in its foul eyes. A winding-sheet, all smeared with patches of grave mold, was flung around it. Teeth, long and sharp and gleaming as a wolf's fangs gnashed in fleshless gums. A groan—half-harrowing outcry of pain, half-wicked, triumphant laughter—came from the lipless mouth.

She stopped abruptly, as if she had run full tilt into a solid wall. One hand went to her throat. Her mouth opened for a scream that refused to come. Everything inside her seemed to knot and contract. Her eyes were starting from their sockets. Her heart gave a cold nauseating lurch as a great blaze of blinding light flared in her face. Then darkness, black as an enveloping cloak, closed on her.

She did not feel the impact as her body struck the ground, for she was almost past sensation. Faintly, as if it were miles off and looked at through a dense shadow, she saw Paul's face above her. Around his shoulders was a wisp of flimsy cotton fabric. Torn aside and hanging around his neck by an elastic was the remnant of a skull-faced mask.

"Valborg!" he was whispering. "Valborg dear, it's all right. It was a joke, a gag to get a picture of you when you thought you'd seen a ghost. It's all right now, I tell you, Val! This is Paul—Paul."

With an effort greater than she'd thought she could make, she raised her heavy eyelids. For just a moment she looked at him in the flashlight's glow. Love was in her eyes and forgiveness. He had hurt her cruelly, mortally, but she was just amazed to find him unkind. A whisper breathed from between her lips.

"Oh, Paul, how could you—and I loved you so—" Then darkness fell—final, absolute, eternal.

"Val!" He bent above her, hands pressed on the seared grass where she lay. "Valborg, listen to me, please! It's all right."

Suddenly he knew it was no use to call, to plead. Those ears that never

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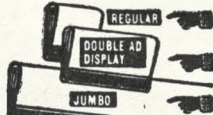
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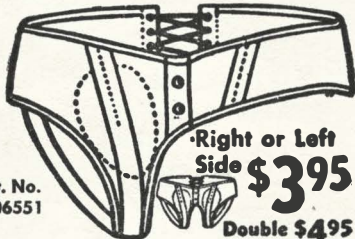
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heard him say "I love you" were past all hearing. Those quiet, tightly parted lips would never speak to him again.

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It was not so much an exclamation as a prayer, forced from him as the realization of his littleness, his pettiness, his utter and complete unworthiness, came to him with a dreadful clarity. Except for his ambition—

Sick pain was clutching at his heart. His eyes were aching with the force of tears that would not be held back. Involuntarily he cupped his palms against his face. A dreadful pain shot down his cheeks and up his brow. A fiery liquid seemed to sink into his skin. He took his lower lip between his teeth to stifle back a scream, but flesh and nerves could endure just so much, no more.

In the blackness overhead, there burst a streak of light as the moon thrust aside the curtains of the overhanging clouds. A web of twinkling stars stretched clear across the zenith, like a chain of diamonds on a background of black velvet. But Sulkas did not see them as he turned his face up to the sky.

There was a sound of sobbing in the old graveyard, bitter with heartbreak and despair. A weasel, scuttling to her burrow in the sanctuary of the cemetery, paused to look at the two forms stretched on the acid-blasted grass. She raised one forefoot daintily, twitched her nose, studying the man-scent.

Then she slipped off noiselessly to her lair.

There was no need for her caution. But how was she to know the man-thing was no menace to her, that he mourned his dead love—and his sight?

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