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**THE DEAD
CAN'T DIE!**

*THE MYSTERY NOVEL
OF THE YEAR*

by **JOEL
TOWNSLEY ROGERS**

A TIMELY DETECTIVE NOVELETTE
FURLOUGH FOR MURDER

by **FREDERICK C. DAVIS**

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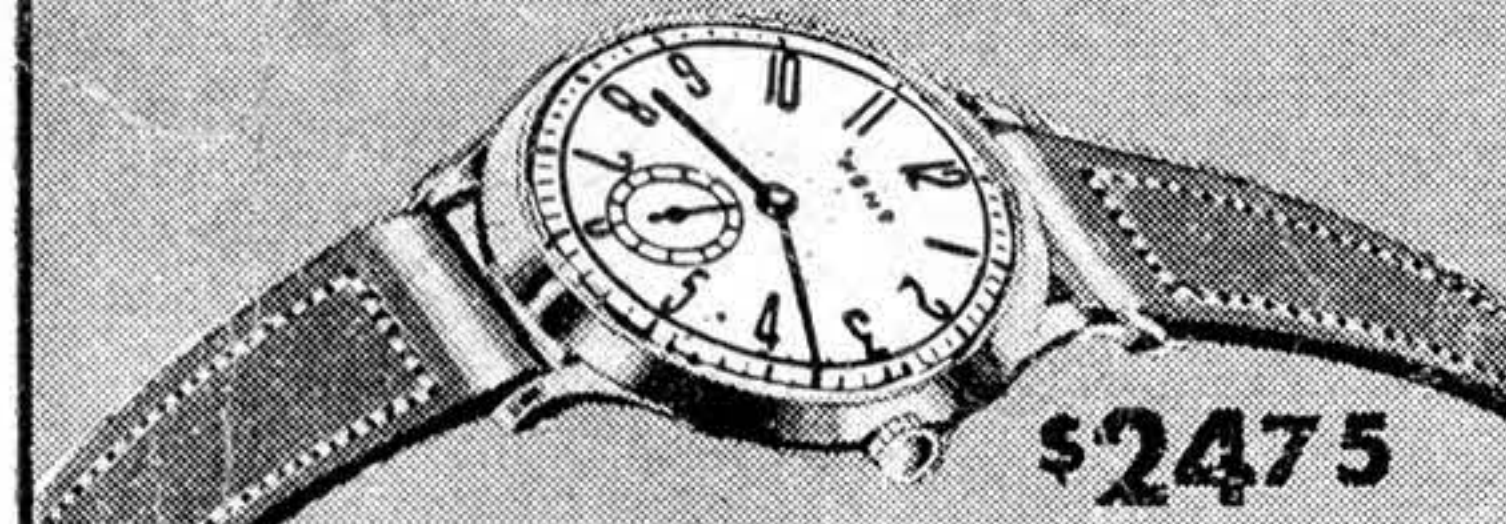
MONEY BACK GUARANTEE



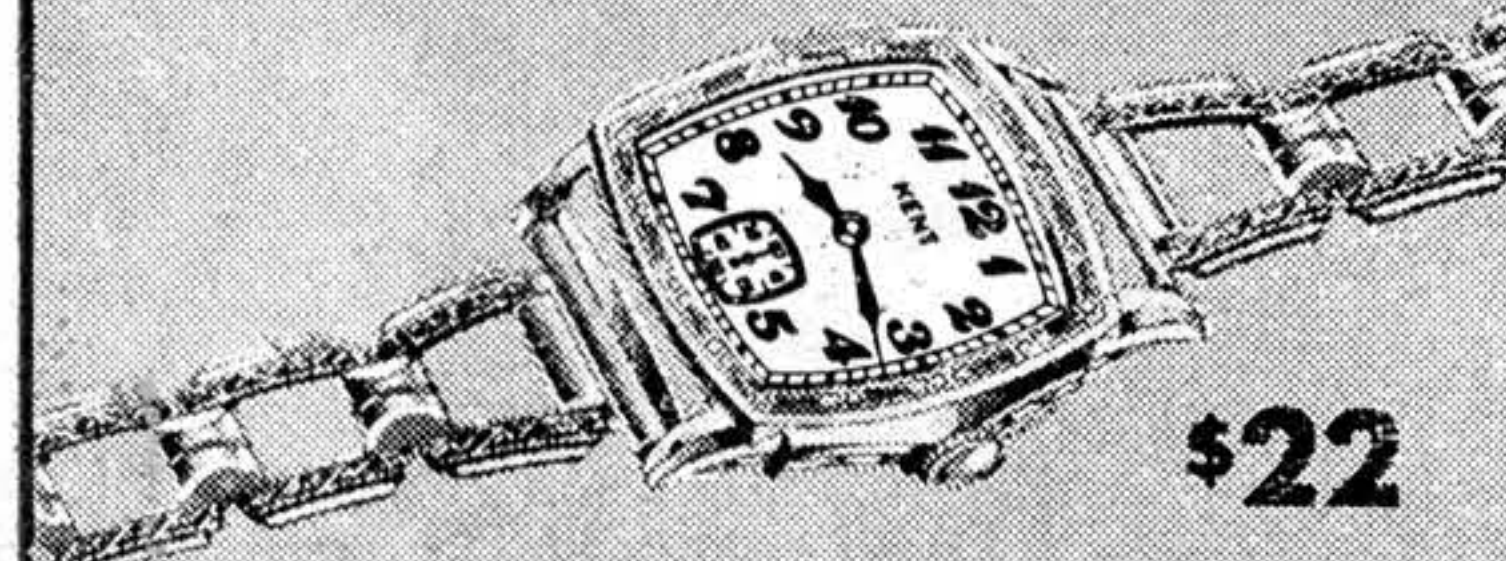
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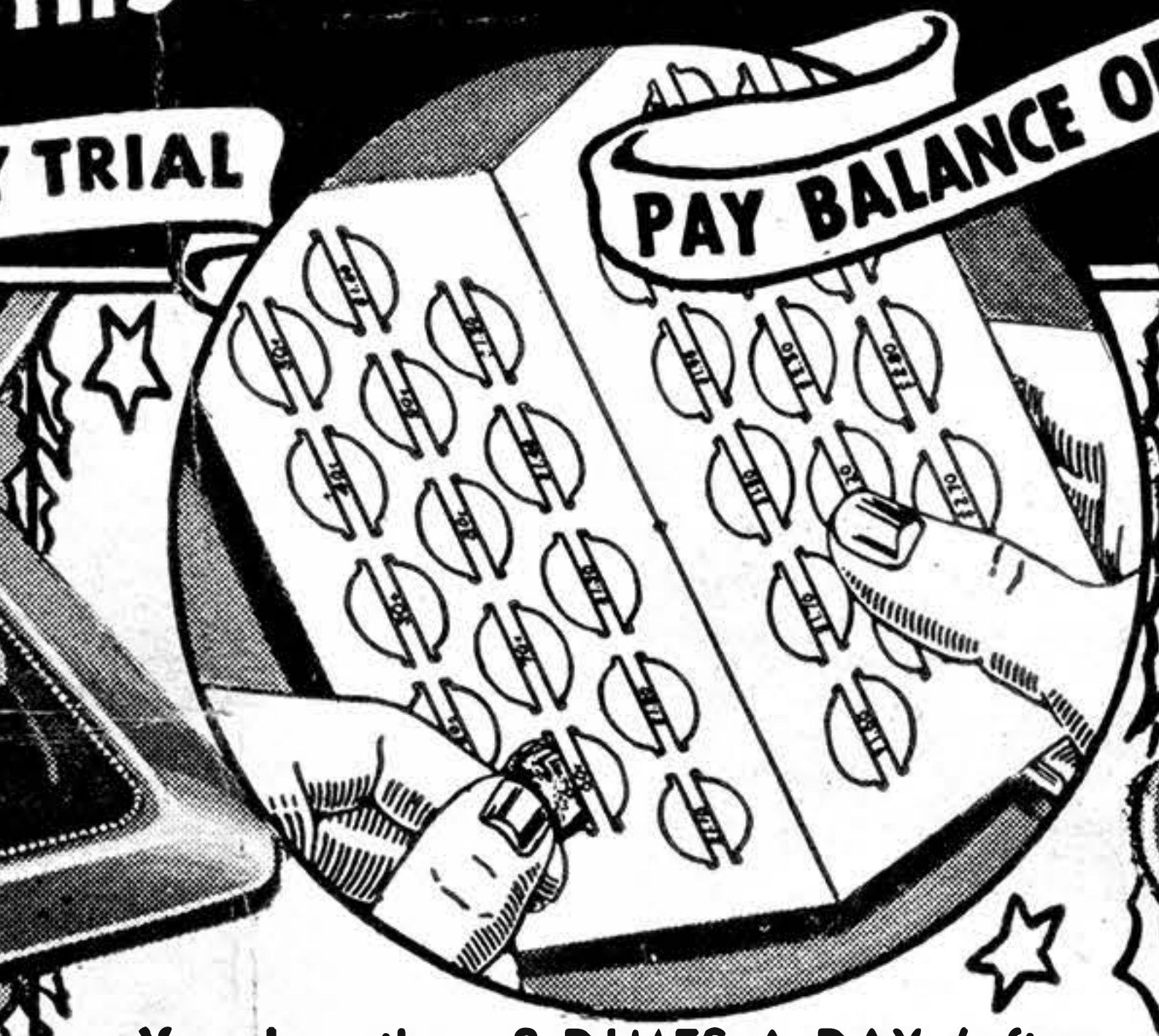
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DETECTIVE TALES

February Issue
on sale December 23



VOL. TWENTY-THREE JANUARY, 1943 NUMBER TWO

Stirring Mystery Novel

- 1. **THE DEAD CAN'T DIE!**.....*Joel Townsley Rogers* 11
From the dark, exotic jungles of Venezuela to the bleak stone and steel city of New York came young Doctor Stiles—who was dead and buried these many years.

Two Gripping Detective Novelettes

- 2. **FURLOUGH FOR MURDER**.....*Frederick C. Davis* 52
Dan Bond's frantic sleuthing worked against time—and himself. For the killer's startling alibi made Dan a candidate for the death house.
- 3. **THE DOUBLE-CROSSING CORPSE**.....*Day Keene* 82
The first break that Detective Lieutenant Jim Blade ever got in his life threatened to break him. For the Scales of Justice he tipped to scoop in the killer let a hundred suspects escape and almost caught Jim himself!

Five Unusual Short Stories

- 4. **DEATH ONLY KNOCKS ONCE**.....*D. L. Champion* 32
Latimer stepped so wide of the law that only death could bring him back.
- 5. **MUSIC FROM HELL**.....*John Lawrence* 43
A murder island, ghostly music and a curse on love make this a truly unusual detective story.
- 6. **TARNISHED SHIELD**.....*Philip Ketchum* 68
Brad McAllister's tarnished police badge could be cleaned only with a killer's blood.
- 7. **DARK IS THE NIGHT**.....*William Campbell Gault* 74
A war-worker bucks the black market of souls.
- 8. **RUBBER COFFIN**.....*Eric Provost* 90
Hot rubber and hot lead can play hell these days with an honest gas station owner.

Short Short Crime Story

- 9. **KILLERS' CURFEW**.....*Kenneth Fowler* 40
When two wrongs make a right guy.

—And—

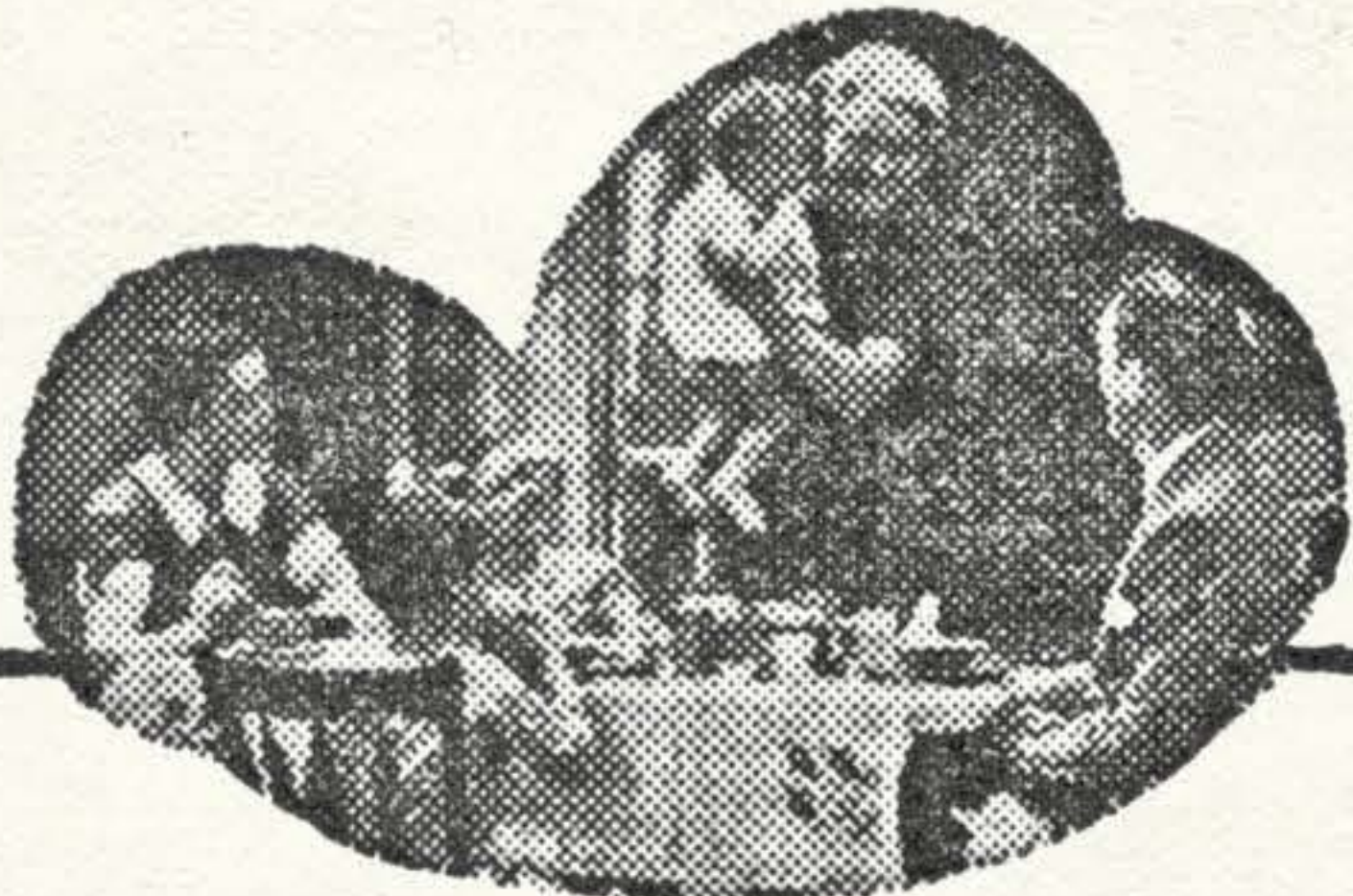
- 10. **THE CRIME CLINIC**.....*A Department* 6
Keep your chin off the ground!
- 11. **ODDITIES IN CRIME**.....*Jon Blummer* 8
Murderers ride an iron horse to freedom.
- 12. **WHEN GANGDOM RULED**.....*Windas* 81
From gutter to ditches.

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THE CRIME CLINIC

“KEEP YOUR CHIN off the ground!” It’s a good idea to follow in most any situation that comes up in life—and especially good to keep in mind during an air raid. If you are caught in the open and have to lie flat on the ground—keep your chin up. For the concussion from an exploding bomb can vibrate the earth enough to knock you cold.

And if you are working in an office or a machine shop and you are dog-tired from overwork, keep that chin up. Keep it up high enough to see the day when our fighting lads will take the last round in this global war and knock the Japs and Germans kicking. Keep it high enough to see the good effects that the war bonds and stamps you are buying are having on our cause. And every bond you buy, just mark it down in your little book as a knockout blow on some Axis jaw.

General George Washington in the days of the Revolutionary War had to keep his chin up. His lot was no easy one. He was made a general—and then he had to turn around and create an army to command. His army was untrained, undisciplined and starving most of the time. A hard bunch to hold together. Washington could never have held them if he had let them see him once with his chin on the ground.

“Black Jack” Pershing, in the first World War, had a mighty tough nut to crack, too. He not only had to be chin-up to his own lads but to all the other Allied commanders. They were looking to him as their last hope; their backs were to the wall. Fresh German divisions from the Eastern Front were moving to the Western Front to take on these untried

Americans. All eyes were on Black Jack. And you know what he did.

And you know what General MacArthur did on Bataan, and what he is doing now in Australia. Did you ever see or hear of him with his chin on the ground?

Glance through your gallery of favorite fiction characters. The ones you remember the most vividly and like the best are hardly the sort to be found with shoulders sagging and chins drooping, are they?

John Smith, that fabulous private detective who has appeared so often in these pages, is, we think, a fine case in point. When the going gets tough for John—when assassins hurl themselves ruthlessly at himself and his beloved Marion—then is the time that John Smith holds his head high and his chin at a fighting angle.

We’ve just heard from the author of the John Smith stories, Wyatt Blassingame, that such an attack is even now being made on John, Marion and Bushelmouth in modern, bustling, war-busy New Orleans—the throbbing nerve center of much of our war aid to China, Russia and the Middle East. The mystery behind the attack is this time so deep and dark that John gains his first clue when the unpredictable Bushelmouth starts a little sideline of his own—the Bushelmouth Johnson Detective Agency!

There’s deep mystery, high adventure and a chuckle or two in this splendid novelette by Wyatt Blassingame. He calls it—“Mr. Smith Goes to Hades.” It appears in the February DETECTIVE TALES—along with novelettes by Day Keene and Dale Clark, together with an unusual collection of shorter fiction and our usual features. . . .

The Editor.



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ODDITIES IN CRIME



In cases where documents are involved, a strong side-light shining nearly parallel to the paper is used by detectives to reveal "pressure pictures." Erasures and indentations stand out clearly enough to be photographed. In one blackmail case the warning notes to the victim were written in pencil on tablet paper. The police gathered up the writing paper of the suspects and were well rewarded for the use of the above method when, on the top sheet of one pad, the words of the blackmail message stood revealed—having been indented when the criminal penciled his message on the sheet above it!



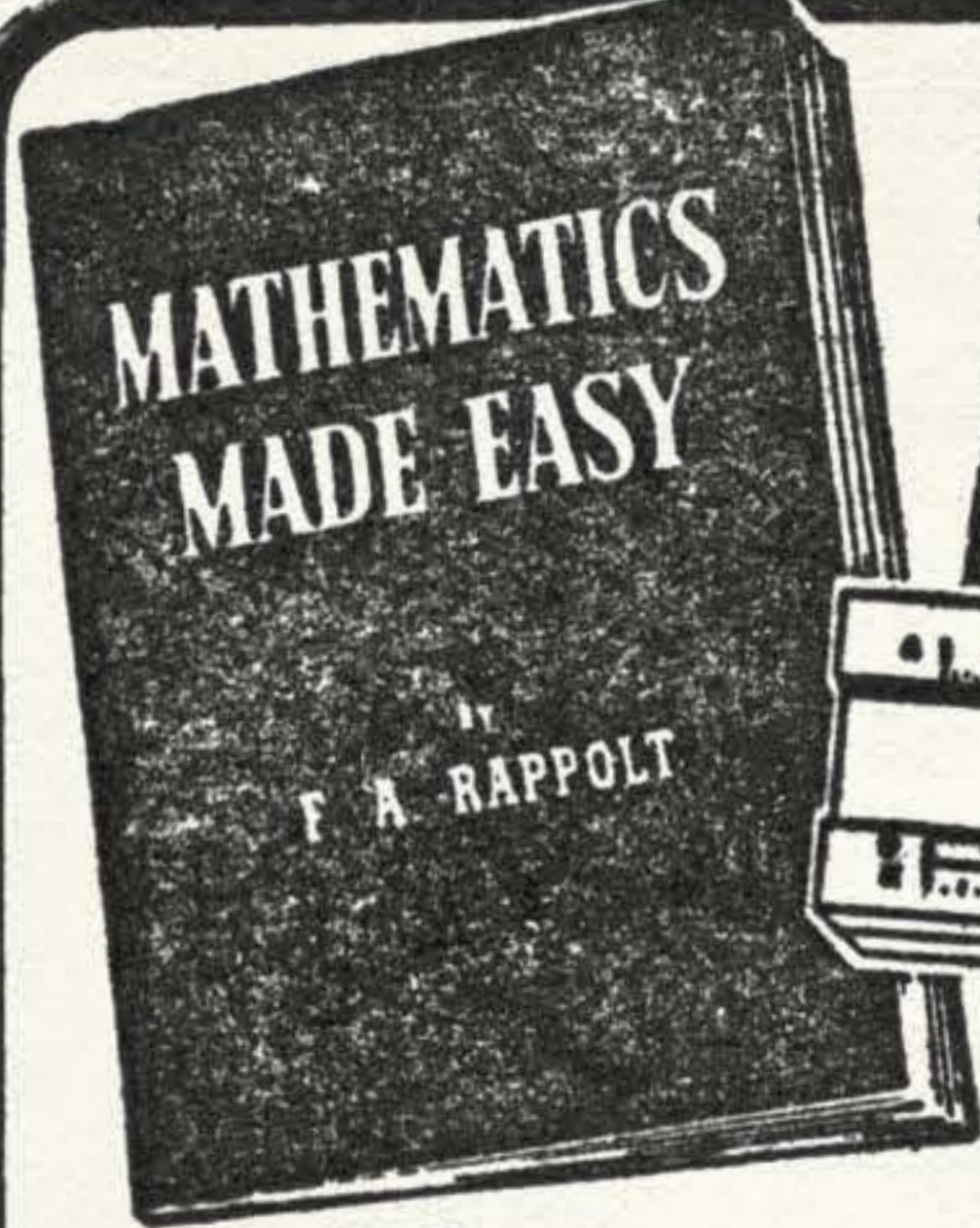
The men suspected of blowing up the mine powerhouse offered the defense that the blast was caused by accumulations of gas or coal dust. The spread of the shattered debris, as noted by detectives, ruled out gas and coal dust and other low-velocity explosives and indicated that a "high", such as dynamite, had been used. Following the flight of the debris, the detectives found bits of wire, clock-works and part of a roll of adhesive tape with which they reconstructed a time-bomb mechanism. In the house of one suspect, adhesive tape was found which matched that found at the scene of the explosion thread by thread in texture and thickness, lengths and number of threads. The suspect's home also contained wire which the detectives examined under the comparison microscope, used by ballistics experts, and proved by markings that the wire was drawn from the same dies as that used in the time-bomb. The metallurgical microscope proved the wire also identical in grain structure. That was enough for the jury. The men went to prison.



All precious stones contain identifying "flaws." Hence, the latest practice of the insurance companies in using microphotographs as an effective means of "fingerprinting" the gems they insure is making times tough, indeed, for the gem thieves.

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I was dizzy
as a dodo



But Liquor Shopping
Is Now a Cinch
by don herald

There are too many labels in the liquor world. I used to be baffled by all those bottles.

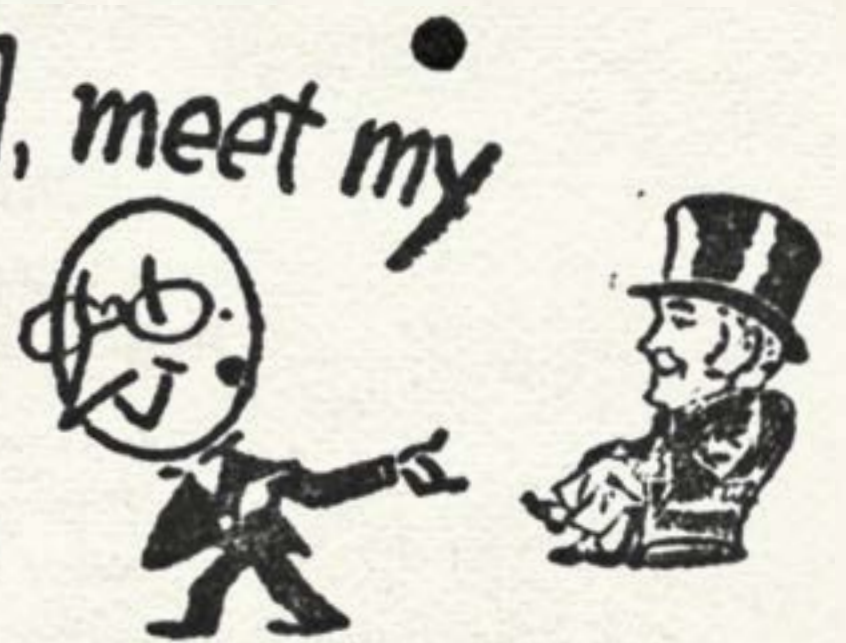
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World, meet my
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Old Mr.
Boston



And every drop in every Old Mr. Boston bottle sings with that craftsmanship which for over 300 years has been the just pride of Old Boston Town.

You don't have to own a complete Old Mr. Boston home bar, right off, as I do.

Just start off saying "Old Mr. Boston" to your liquor dealer, and let Old Mr. Boston grow on you.

THE DEAD CAN'T DIE!



*Stirring Novel
of the Man
Death Forgot*

By

JOEL TOWNSLEY ROGERS

CHAPTER ONE

Meet Henry Jessamon

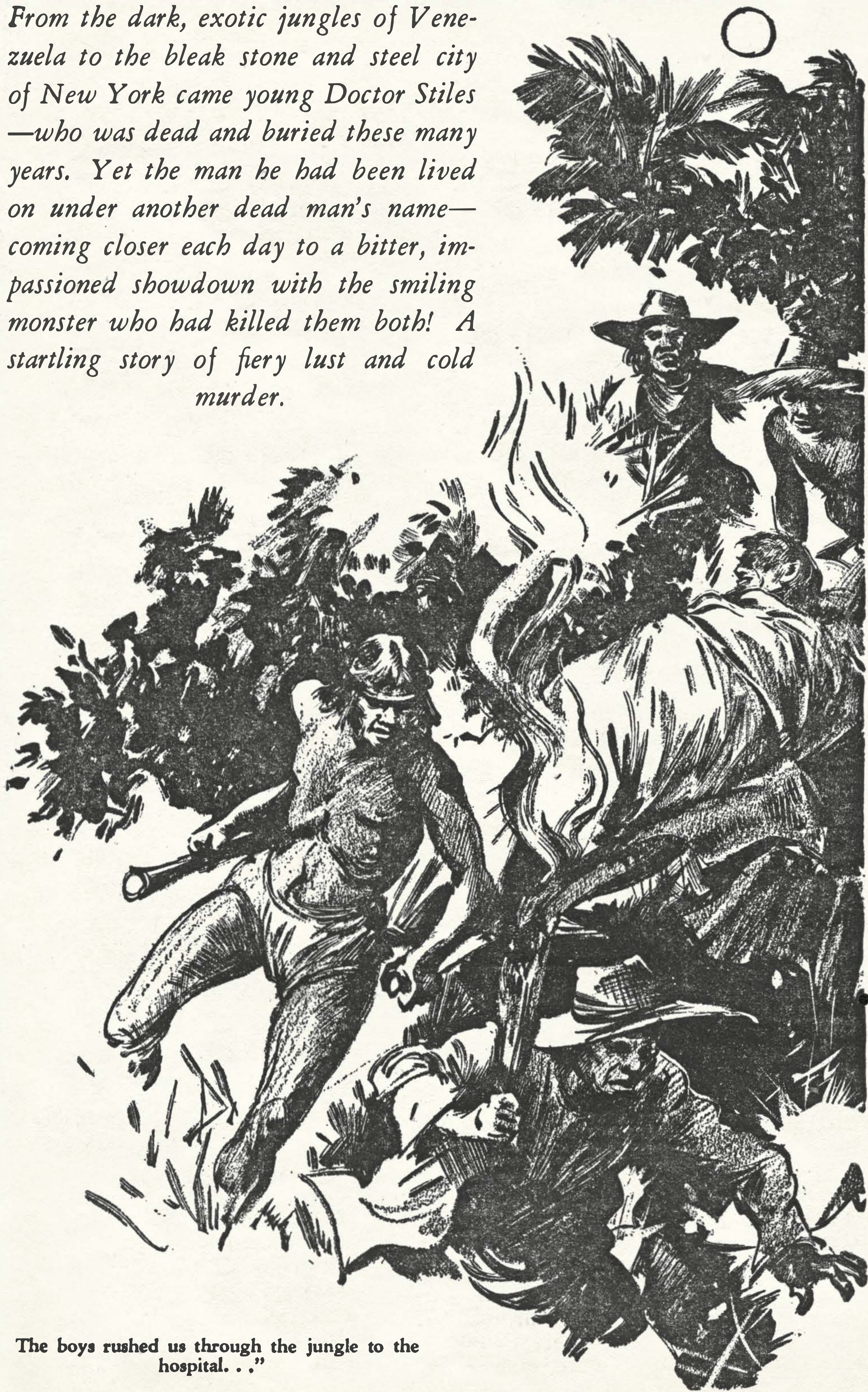
THE MAN who for almost twenty years had been known as Henry Jessamon paused at the door of John Gray's offices. Before entering he removed his weather-beaten hat, brushed his gray unkempt hair with his hand and fingered the knot of his worn tie.

The offices of the Gray Investment

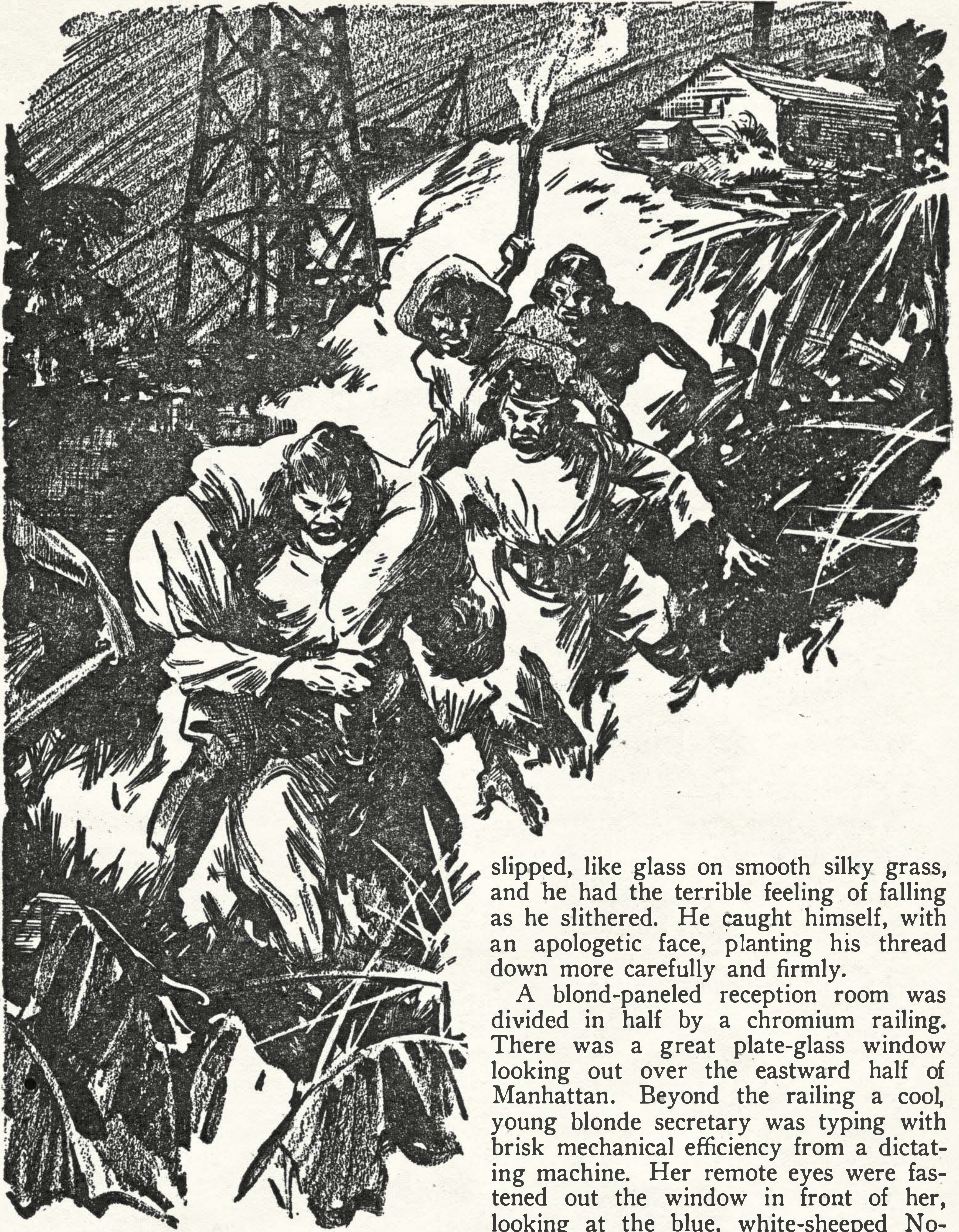
Trust were on the eightieth floor of the great limestone and marble stalagmite which towered a fifth of a mile above the midtown avenue.

It had been almost a year since he had last asked John Gray for money, and John had given him a thousand dollars then. With some impatience and contempt, perhaps—still he had given it. But a thousand dollars doesn't last forever, when a man has no way of earning money. John

From the dark, exotic jungles of Venezuela to the bleak stone and steel city of New York came young Doctor Stiles—who was dead and buried these many years. Yet the man he had been lived on under another dead man's name—coming closer each day to a bitter, impassioned showdown with the smiling monster who had killed them both! A startling story of fiery lust and cold murder.



The boys rushed us through the jungle to the hospital. . .”



was always his last recourse, though he hated almost worse than death itself to have to ask for it.

He opened the door with apologetic caution and slid his lean shadowy body in. The paper-thin soles of his shoes, worn as smooth as glass, were creeping now on silky antique rugs instead of rough sidewalk concrete or gritty corridor marble. For an instant his feet, without traction,

slipped, like glass on smooth silky grass, and he had the terrible feeling of falling as he slithered. He caught himself, with an apologetic face, planting his thread down more carefully and firmly.

A blond-paneled reception room was divided in half by a chromium railing. There was a great plate-glass window looking out over the eastward half of Manhattan. Beyond the railing a cool, young blonde secretary was typing with brisk mechanical efficiency from a dictating machine. Her remote eyes were fastened out the window in front of her, looking at the blue, white-sheeped November sky.

A little sign, *Miss Stiles*, stood on her desk.

She was new, and the office was new. Since he had last come in to see John, anyway. John's offices had always been down in the Wall Street district before. The truth of the often casually made remark that Wall Street was dying was proved concretely by John Gray's removal from it.

So long as John stuck with an investment, a locality, or a man, they were still good. When he got out, it meant that they were done. He had cut away from Wall Street now, as he had cut away from many businesses and men in his climb to wealth and power. Though he had stuck to the man who was known as Henry Jessamon for a long time, out of a sentiment which seemed alien to his nature in other ways.

Miss Stiles, for all her air of cool brisk capability, was young. Not more than twenty or twenty-one, perhaps. It wasn't a particularly uncommon name, of course. Still there was something reminiscent in her profile, in her indifferent eyes. Quite possibly she was Elinor's daughter, the man thought, with a numbness in the depths of his hollow mind.

She had never seen him, of course. She wouldn't know him in any way. He was a man long dead.

He had come in like such a shadow. She hadn't noticed him yet. He fumbled his hat in his lean sensitive fingers, leaning against the chromium railing, waiting for her to turn from her machine. Wondering, while he waited, if the darned patches showed at the elbows of his thin, old tweed suit. The patches which Nora had done so carefully for him last week while she had been in the hospital, with her tireless busy fingers and her tired loving eyes. If he were only wearing a topcoat, in this chill fall weather, he would look a little more prosperous and imposing, he thought. His topcoat was only five years old. It was almost new, comparatively. But he had pawned it last week, to buy a single mottled orchid for Nora, like the great orchids of Loyaquil.

Perhaps it didn't make any difference what his clothes looked like, anyway. A failure and a beggar. Doubtless it was written in the droop of his shoulders and on his hangdog face.

A criminal, too. But that is something which is written on no man's face.

The flat gun in the side pocket of his jacket pressed into his side as he leaned against the rail. He straightened slightly, releasing the intolerable pressure of that reminder. The small, blue poison bottle was in his inside breast pocket, where it would not break.

THE GIRL glanced over her shoulder at him. She stopped her dictating machine. "Yes?" she said impersonally, with fingers poised.

He swallowed his Adam's apple. "Mr.—" he started to give the name of Henry Jessamon to her.

But—as she looked at him with her cool, clear young eyes—there arose in him a queer, perverse streak of honor which made him unable to give a false name to her, even one that he had long used automatically.

"A—a personal call," he said, with a faint stammer. "A friend of Mr. Gray's. I was just passing by and dropped in to see him, if he isn't too busy."

"Your name?"

"Just say an old friend of Henry Jessamon's. An old friend of his. He'll know who I am."

She looked at him penetratingly and contemptuously, he thought. She did not believe that he was a friend of John Gray's, or had ever been one. Still she arose.

"An old friend of Henry Jessamon's," she repeated. "I'll see if Mr. Gray is in."

She went deftly through a door in the blond-wood paneling, which closed soundlessly behind her. The man leaned with both hands on the rail—his mind a little giddy and a strange far-off roaring in his ears—looking out the wide loftly window while he waited for her to return. . . .

A panorama of half the great city lay spread out, from the Battery in the south to the upper reaches of the Bronx and the hazy blue waters of the Sound. New York! The greatest city ever built by man. One person out of three hundred living in the world lived here, beneath his eyes. It was a world in itself for any man; whatever his desires, his ambitions and inclinations.

His gaze, following the blue East River where it bent like a crooked elbow from the hazy Sound down to the Battery, paused and focussed on the massed buildings of the great medical center on the river shore, shining beneath the sun. It was a compact city of science within the greater city, a modern Acropolis of white temples of healing, more splendid and beautiful than any classic temples of the gods.

Science and knowledge. The healing art. The service of humanity. He had had dreams of being a great doctor once. A great surgeon, skillful and daring, devising brilliant new technics which would widen the scope of medicine and make possible the alleviation of many of mankind's ills, performing miracles in the eternal battle against pain and death which no man had ever dared attempt before. He had had the knowledge once. He had had the God-given skill in his hands.

Millions of people. Billions of wealth. New York. Suddenly, as he gazed out, the memory of a day in the spring of '24 came back to him, when he and John Gray had returned from Loyaquil, after John's injury and Henry Jessamon's death—and the termination of the Essandee project there.

Two young, brown, tropic-bitten men just landed from the Venezuelan jungles, en route out to Seattle to cash in on the Jessamon-Gray gold claim. Both of them convalescent—John with his terribly mangled hands from the dynamite explosion still in bandages, himself with the self-inflicted facial wounds which had made him look like Henry Jessamon, and the superficially injured right hand so that he would not have to try to duplicate Henry Jessamon's signature.

IT HAD been the first sight of the city for either of them. John, from Utah and Arizona and Alaska, a rootless wanderer not even sure where he had been born, nor caring, had never been east of the Mississippi before. He had sailed for Loyaquil from Houston. While he himself, though he had been born and brought up in a little Massachusetts Berkshire village not a hundred miles away, was as much a stranger in New York.

They had taken a day for sight-seeing, and had gone up into the Woolworth tower, the highest in those days. The sounds of the city had come up to them in a low continual roar. Like an endless cry of pain, it had seemed to him for the moment, as he leaned on the high parapet with John. The cry of millions of humanity, lost in the narrow canyons of their great stone and steel city, crying inchoately for help. He had felt the city

in that moment—calling to him, who had the surgeon's skill, and to all other men who, because of superior ability, had an obligation to aid and serve those submerged millions.

He had turned to John Gray, to see if John felt it, too. John, with his slender hawk face, his penetrating and purposeful gaze, his mouth that was already a little tight and thin with inner discipline, had been looking out over the city beside him.

"Doesn't it get you, Hank?" John had said, tight-lipped. "Money! Power! Billions of dollars. The biggest, richest city in the world. How would you like to own it all?"

"It would be a little too big a dish for me, I'm afraid," he had replied, somewhat apologetically—for his own feeling had been quite different; he had not thought of owning it. "No, thanks. You can have it yourself, John."

"I'll have it, all right," John Gray had replied, with his hawk look. "All of it. I'm only an unknown guy from the back of nowhere now. Nobody in this town has ever heard of me. Beyond my half of the claim, if the syndicate buys it, I don't own a hundred bucks. But someday I'm going to own—"

And he had swept his hand out.

"They're going to buy the claim, all right, aren't they, John? They said they would."

Something in John's casual tone, in John's indifferent manner, had sent a stab of fright through him. He had been stabbed by a sharp alarm that somehow it might not go through, after all—that even now some unforeseen hitch might develop and there would be none of Henry Jessamon's money for him, in spite of his deception. The money for which he had taken a dead man's name.

"Fifty thousand bucks apiece," John Gray had said, with quiet contempt. "That's not dough in this town. Oh, the syndicate will go through with it, all right. The claim's worth it, and our title's clear. But that's just peanut money. What are you going to do with your share when you get it, Hank?"

"I don't know as I've just thought of it. Live, the chief thing. Nora and I can live—"

"Till it's spent," John Gray had said succinctly. "It seems like a lot to you, and will seem like a lot for a couple of years more. Maybe you can stretch it out for a long time, even ten or twenty years, hiding out in some small town and vegetating. But someday it'll be gone.

"I'm not giving you any advice, Hank," he had added, with his dark brooding look. "It's your dough to use, and use in your own way. It's not mine, and I don't want any part of it. I only want what belongs to me. What I have earned. What I've bought and paid for. But I'm going to make a million dollars with my half. And when I've made it, I'm going to make ten millions. That's something even in this town. That's power. That's money. That's what I'm going to have. And you can have your peanut money and your Nora, till they're gone."

"You're certainly feeling cheerful, John, about Nora and me."

"I look ahead," John Gray had replied broodingly. "It's your own life, and your own way of living it. But don't forget that I offered you something else."

Standing together looking out over the city. Long ago, when they had been young. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Red-Flame Orchids

THE cool-eyed blonde returned, after a half minute or a half hour—the man clutching the rail had lost the time sense, and could not be sure how long. His head was light. He had not eaten for three days, and it was all a little dreamy and unreal. But she was Elinor's daughter, he was sure of it. She had been named Alice, he remembered now.

"Mr. Gray will see you," she said coolly, indifferently, opening the chromium gate for him.

He went through, and through the door in the blond-wood paneling which she held open for him in turn, and which closed soundlessly behind him.

"Hello, Hank," said John Gray without emotion, without inflection, from his desk across the room. "What's in your pocket?"

He sat, John Gray, behind his massive desk, catercorner between two corner

windows with deep embrasures and heavy floor-length blue drapes. The drapes were pushed back, the windows were open on the crisp autumn air. The roar of the avenue came up from eight hundred feet below. Between the windows John Gray's face was in shadow. A great cluster of flame-red, lush-petaled flowers in a deep blue bowl on his desk was the only color and brightness about him.

Orchids, thought the man who had come creeping in. He wondered if John knew that they were Nora's favorite flower. The great wild jungle orchids of the slopes of the Pacaraimas in Venezuela. They had grown in riotous parasite profusion all around the Essandee headquarters camp, fragile, exotic, all the colors of the pale aurora, haunted by huge slow-fanning butterflies as pale as death. The orchids of Loyaquil behind the little hospital hut, and the singing fragrant tropic nights. And Nora in her nurse's uniform, so young and loving, in his arms.

These orchids upon John Gray's desk were huge double or triple cultivated blooms. He had never seen red orchids before. A red of flame, a red of everlasting fire, the deepest red of anything on earth. They had come from John's own hothouses, doubtless. Some prize rare bloom which had been developed by John's high-priced gardeners. They were infinitely richer and more beautiful than the single humble cattalya which he had bought for Nora last week, and which was withered now. He would like to have this great bowlful of flaunting flame-red orchids for her.

Gray and lean, with his chill penetrating eyes, his thin tight lips, John Gray sat with his big square hands clasped together on his desk top, looking measuringly at the tired frayed man who shambled towards him. Gray hair, gray eyes, gray tie and suit. Even his face and his locked hands, in the shadow between the windows, looked all gray. The color of stone and steel which clutch and guard money. The granite-gray of banks.

Only a cunning eye, a very cunning eye, would have observed the fine lace-work of white scars, as delicate as spider threads, around the fingers and knuckle-joints of John Gray's hands. Those fine and almost invisible scars were the only

trace remaining of the bloody mangled things which John Gray's hands had been when the terrified black boys had brought him and Henry Jessamon into the little hospital hut at Loyaquil—both of them torn so terribly by the dynamite explosion.

He had done a beautiful job on John, thought the tired, frayed man. It had been a miraculous job. What skill he had had in those days! Even John had never realized fully just what he had done for him. But if it had not been for him, John Gray would have had no hands. And no life, either. He had saved John Gray's life, let that be put down to his credit. Though Henry Jessamon's life he had not been able to save—the poor devil had been dying already when the black boys had brought him in, with his jaw and half his breast blown away.

JOHAN GRAY, at his desk of money and power, was a man with a good name which had always been his own. A man of shining honor. A man who never violated even an unwritten code.

With Nora, for instance. John must have wanted her for himself, back in those days at Loyaquil. It was inevitable, in that hot and luxuriant tropic atmosphere, in the great orchid-starred nights, with her the only white woman in two hundred miles. Even if she had been only half so lovely.

Henry Jessamon had been frankly and savagely in love with her. He had wanted to fight for her with guns or knives or dynamite, to the finish, winner take all. But it had been enough for John Gray to know that she belonged to another man. Because of that he had said no word, nor so much as made a sign or gesture, to try to steal her away.

Youth and love and death and violence, and the hot steaming jungles of Loyaquil. There was a film over the eyes of the tired, frayed man who had come in. He would like to be back there again, with his good skill, with the young years, with his young love for Nora.

The world seemed hollow now. John Gray himself seemed a hollow shadow sitting behind his great desk across the room, saying, "Hello, Hank. What's in your pocket?"

It was John Gray's characteristic greeting, a meaningless salutation. Instead of saying "How are tricks?" or "What's on your mind?" or "What's cooking?"—he said, "What's in your pocket?" A little ironical, implying that if a man had plenty in his pocket everything must be all right with him.

Beside his locked motionless hands upon his desk there was a tiny ball of paper, no bigger than a pebble. He had cut it from this morning's newspaper, and crumpled it there. He let it lie.

"Hello, John. I just dropped in—"

The frayed man swallowed in his throat. He had crossed the silky rug on his worn paper-thin soles, like a dizzy water-spider creeping carefully on a slick glassy pond. He had reached John Gray's desk, with the timeless roaring in his ears. He slid down into the visitor's chair across from John Gray and sat on the edge of the seat.

"I just dropped in, John. I was just passing by—"

"How much do you need this time, Hank, to save your life?" said John Gray with thin lips.

"A thousand—five hundred dollars would do it," said the frayed man, staring with blurred eyes. "Things still haven't been going very well with me, John. Nora went to the hospital last week. I've got to have money for her."

"I didn't know that she was ill at all," John Gray said without emotion.

"It was very sudden. An emergency operation."

"I didn't know," John Gray repeated.

"She's better now."

John Gray unlocked his square powerful hands. He picked up a pencil from his desk and snapped it in two. He laid the pieces down again.

"Yes," he said. "No doubt she is." His eyes were gray as glass. With a fingernail he rolled the little pellet of paper on his desk.

"Much better," said the frayed man, swallowing. "She's out of danger now. But there are the hospital bills, and she needs rest and freedom from worry. Five hundred ought to carry me along till I can get something, perhaps."

John Gray took a gold keycase from his vest-pocket and unlocked the top drawer

of his desk. He pulled forth a manila envelope, and extracted a small memorandum book from it. There was a sheet of yellowed writing paper in the envelope, too, and a brown withered flower; but he did not pull them forth.

"Have you any idea, Hank, of how much I've passed out to you in the past few years?"

"A lot," said the frayed man, swallowing. "Maybe ten thousand dollars. Nora always kept the exact amount. She always said we were going to pay you back some day."

"Nine thousand, five hundred dollars," said John Gray. "I have the dates and figures. I had set ten thousand as the top. But now that's over." He closed the memorandum book and laid it down. "We'll charge it up to profit and loss."

"I won't ask you again, John," said the frayed man. "I'll try not to. I hate to do it almost worse than death. But I've always counted on you as my last recourse."

"You're an odd kind of blackmailer, Hank," John Gray said with a thin smile. "A blackmailer in reverse. You never understood the principle of your calling, it's quite obvious. The point of the game is that you're supposed to blackmail a man when he has committed some crime of which you alone are aware. You don't blackmail him when you have committed a crime yourself, just because he happens to know you are a crook. It's almost like—well, it's almost like shooting yourself and calling it murder. Or shooting someone else, and calling it suicide. You've got the principle of the thing all wrong. Your intentions are good, I know."

"I never thought I was blackmailing you, John," said the tired man in a low voice.

CHAPTER THREE

The Forged Face

"JUST why," said John Gray, "have you come to me through all the years for money? Because I owed you any? I have never owed a man a dime. Because you once saved my life? You may have saved the lives of a hundred others by your skill. It was your profession, your calling, the thing that

you had taken the oath as a doctor to do, and that you were paid a salary for doing. I have been reasonably cognizant of the obligation, I think, Hank. But sometime or other, the surgeon's bill is paid in full."

"I never thought you owed me any money, John. I—I just always felt—"

"That I had some secret yearning, some frustrated desire, for your mistress—shall we put it?" said John Gray with his thin lips, quietly. "And so you felt you could play me for money because of her? There's a word for it, of course, Hank, no longer than your name."

"I never thought of Nora as my—"

"When a man and woman live together without being married, she is generally referred to as his mistress," said John Gray. "If I have misstated your relationship with Nora Malley, the error is all mine."

The frayed, tired man sat silent.

"Let us look at it from the beginning, Hank," said John Gray. "Henry Jessamon and I had known each other for a number of years. We'd been partners together up north of Nome. We had made our little strike together, fifty-fifty. The claim looked good, but we didn't have the capital to develop it ourselves, so we had offered it to the syndicate. To keep ourselves going in the meantime, we got this job with the Essandee Oil project in Venezuela. We were the pioneer construction bosses, the only white men on it at the beginning. After we had been on it a couple of months, they sent down a young doctor—you. In another month they sent a young nurse, Nora.

"If the Essandee directors had gone through with their original intention, there would have been a big organization eventually. But the project stalled, and there was only us. The three white men—and Nora. Month after month. Good Lord! If there had been ten thousand women, she would have still stood out above them all. I might as well admit it to you now. I knew from my first sight of her that she was the only woman I would ever want. The woman I was born to have, to complete my destiny. I would have given up my hope of Paradise—"

John Gray tightened his lips, and a gray film passed over his eyes an instant.

"My hopes of Paradise," he repeated,

with his lips tight. "And hers, too. To have had her I would have given up all my ambitions for money and power, if she had wanted it. I would have done anything. Henry Jessamon the same. But there was no chance for either of us with her. She was all yours, from the beginning. You and she had gone together like oil and flame. We were just shadows to her. Living in your own orchid-scented Eden, you two. While we lived in hell.

"All right, that was the way the game was. Poor old Henry wanted to fight you for her. He used to malingering on the job, inventing illnesses so as to get himself in hospital where he could be near her. But I'm not a man to torment myself needlessly. I stood clear. I think you can give me my due, Hank. I never tried to cut in, even by a glance at her. What belongs to a man belongs to him. I have a strong sense of property.

"There was that damned explosion. Henry and I both got it. It was the day after the monthly boat from down river had come, bringing orders from the Esandee offices to fold the camp in the next four weeks, and taking Nora back. Henry and I had gone up to move the dynamite cache down from the hills. Maybe we were a little careless, because of the end of things.

"Anyway, it happened. The black boys rushed us down to the hospital. Henry was dead, or the same as dead, when they got him there. There was nothing you could do for him, as I get it. I don't doubt that. He was dead, and that was the end of him. You had buried him before I woke up out of it. In that climate you couldn't wait.

"My own hands were pretty badly mangled, you intimated to me. I thought for a while that I had lost them, I'll be frank, and that you were only keeping the bad news from me. You were worried yourself, no doubt. You had experimented with some unorthodox technic, I rather gathered, which wasn't sanctioned. But your gamble came out all right, and I kept my hands. I give you credit. Hardly a scar."

John Grey flexed the fingers of his big square hands, looking down at them a moment.

"A little awkward and stiff for a long

time," he said. "I had lost a lot of the knacks I'd had, and had to develop new ways of doing things. There was a balance of seventeen odd dollars to my credit in a mail-order bank in Chicago, on which they refused me payment because my signature had changed so. And I still tie my necktie differently than I used to, and hold a gun with a different grip. But I am better off than Henry Jessamon, at any rate.

"YOU and I got to know each other pretty well while I was in the hospital, Hank," John Grey went on quietly, locking his hands together again. "You used to talk to me about your problems. About your ambitions to be a great surgeon. The feeling you had that there was a unique skill in you, which you should put to the service of humanity.

"But you had blotted your life by marrying a childhood flame while still in medical school. A village girl of no particular intelligence, with whom you had nothing in common, as you had at once found out. You were both penniless, and now there was a child, born while you had been down there. There had been no opportunity for you to save a cent of your salary, for everything had to go to their support.

"Yet a surgeon can't start in without any money, without a reputation, and with no experience beyond what he has gained as a company doctor in a remote jungle outpost, without any senior medical men to check his work. You felt that you were good, but you couldn't prove it.

"That was your dilemma and your problem. When you returned to the States you would be jobless, and no better off than when you had come down. There would be nothing for you to do but go back to your small village and hang up a shingle, and try to scratch a living for your wife and child in general practice. Living on credit for the first year or two.

"After five years you might be breaking even. After ten or fifteen years you might be out of debt. But never an opportunity to use and develop your special skill. Instead, letting it rust away—till finally you had lost it completely by disuse.

"And all the time living with an unloved woman, a dull woman, a woman grown whiny and nagging with poverty. And all the more whiny because she would realize she wasn't loved. Yet a woman to whom you had been married by the church, and who believed in it herself, and would never divorce you. While now, here in Loyaquil, you had met your great and one true love. She believed in the church, too, Nora Malley. But her love for you was greater."

John Gray's lips were thin. The frayed, tired man who had been a dead man for almost twenty years sat silent in the big, luxurious office.

"That was your problem," said John Gray. "There were various answers to it, perhaps. One—to do as you had to do, forget Nora, forget your surgery, go back to your wife and child, start in your general practice. But there was no idea in your mind of doing that.

"It wasn't my problem, Hank. I had my own problems and my own life, and my own future that I had planned out for myself. I'm not a man to give good advice. I don't know what is best for other men.

"You weren't asking my advice, anyway. What you were looking for was some way out, whereby you could relieve yourself of your obligations, and continue to have Nora. You had been looking wildly for such a way out ever since you had known her.

"Henry Jessamon's death now might have been an act of providence, you had almost persuaded yourself. You asked me about his personal affairs. I told you of our little strike, for which the syndicate was now offering a hundred thousand dollars. Of how he had been, like me, a man without ties or family. No relatives except a rich uncle down in Texas, whom he had not seen for many years, and who hated him.

"I wondered, I must admit, why you were so interested. You told me then that one time when he had been malingering in the hospital he had told Nora he was going to make a will naming her his heir. With money you and she would be free, you thought. The world and heaven forever ahead of you.

"Lots of men like to talk about making

someone their heir, more or less jokingly. Still it's not at all improbable in the circumstances that Henry Jessamon really had such an intention towards Nora. Only it's something that a man puts off. A man is strong and full of life. He can't quite imagine being otherwise. To make a will seems to be, in a way, holding out a hand to death.

"I have never made one myself, though I have considerable properties to dispose of, and am older than Henry Jessamon was. I will do so sometime, since otherwise the state would inherit, having no heirs at law. The point is that a man puts it off, though I do not question that Henry Jessamon may have had the intention. At least you had that self-justification.

I DON'T know how or when the idea first came to you, Hank," John Gray went on quietly. "The black boys had been paid off, and there were just the two of us, with plenty of time for you to think. Perhaps it was inevitable that it should have occurred to you. Henry Jessamon had resembled you more than a little. The same general type, and more than that. He was ten years older, of course. He had that deep white scar above his left eyebrow that you didn't have. A nose a little bonier and more prominent than yours. A cleft in his chin. But all those small differences in appearance could be taken care of, with your skill in surgery.

"If you were dead, your wife would get the fifteen thousand dollars insurance which Essandee carried on all its employees as a part of their contract, and she would get along. If Henry Jessamon was brought back to life, he would get his fifty thousand dollars, and only his rich uncle would be deprived, who didn't need it, and who wouldn't know or care. You and Nora could live in joy forever.

"There would be the problem of Henry's signature which you might be called on to make. But a hand injury could take care of that. I'd not be able to sign myself, with my hands still like blocks of dead beef, not feeling as if they belonged to me. The syndicate lawyers in Seattle knew me by sight, however, although not Henry Jessamon.

"It was all quite clear in your own

mind, almost down to the last fine detail, when you first broached it to me, Hank. You asked me if I wanted Henry Jessamon's money myself. I told you no, absolutely, that I would not touch a penny of it; it did not belong to me, and I wanted no part of it.

"You asked me if, that being the case, I would certify you as Henry Jessamon, so that you could get it yourself and for Nora. I was a little appalled at the suggestion. I told you that it made no difference to me who got Henry's money, so long as I had no part in it, but that I could not lie. You thought it over for a day or two more, and asked me then if I would denounce you if you tried it.

"Well, you had saved my life, hadn't you? How could I do that? I have my own code and course of action. I have never made myself responsible for another man's.

"So when the boat came back up river at the end of the month, there were two of us that it took down again. Only I was still John Gray, and always had been, and always will be. But you yourself were no longer the young doctor of Loyaquil. You

were Henry Jessamon, with facial wounds and a wounded right hand, and the young doctor was dead. There was a wooden cross, as I remember, with his name cut on it, at the edge of the little clearing back of the hospital hut.

"All right," said John Gray. "We landed in New York, and you went out to Seattle with me, Hank. The syndicate's lawyers asked me off handedly if I could identify you as Henry Jessamon. I told them that you bore a general resemblance to a man who had been employed under that name with me at Loyaquil, though perhaps they had better take your fingerprints and verify them from the records of Essandee, who fingerprinted all their employees as a matter of course.

"The lawyers laughed. Perhaps we all laughed. Because you must be Henry Jessamon. You made Henry Jessamon's mark upon the contract, and you got Henry Jessamon's fifty thousand dollars. And in the pleasant little Berkshire village of Torkford, Massachusetts, Mrs. Elinor Stiles, the widow of young Dr. Henry Stiles, received her insurance money of fifteen thousand dollars.

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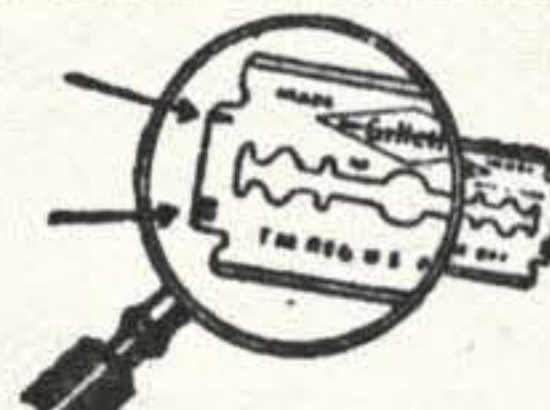
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"And Henry Jessamon lies among the orchids and the ants. No one has ever seen that place again, I imagine. The jungle has taken it back long ago. The cross above him is rotted to decay. The last atom of him has gone long ago to earth. Only you and I know that he is dead.

"I let you get away with it, Hank," said John Gray, with chill eyes upon the tired, frayed man. "I'm not responsible for another's moral code. But if that makes me subject to your blackmail, I'd like to know how you figure it. If I owe you anything, I'd like to know that, too. I never want to owe a man a thing. I like to pay my debts."

CHAPTER FOUR

Tokens of Treachery

THE MAN who had been Henry Jessamon for almost twenty years sat fumbling his hat upon his bony knees, looked with a blurred gaze at John Gray. He did not reply.

John Gray rolled, with his right index finger, the tiny pellet of paper which lay on his desk. He picked it up, and unrolled it, smoothing it with his thumbs. It was no more than four lines of type, from this morning's obituary page. He would not have seen it, it was so small, if he did not make a habit of reading all obituaries.

"Asbury Park, N. J. Miss Nora Malley, aged 37, a registered nurse formerly employed by the Essandee Oil Co., died early this evening in Memorial Hospital."

He rolled it up between his fingers again, and dropped it into his wastebasket. That was all the news that she had been worth, Nora Malley. Early last evening. Perhaps at six or seven o'clock, while he had been having cocktails. Or a little later, while he had been dining or at a show. Nothing had told him she was going. He had not known at all.

"Let us survey your situation, Hank," he said, with an air of impassivity and patience. "You had fifty thousand dollars once. That isn't money, but it isn't beggary and starvation, either. Where did it go?"

The frayed man swallowed in his throat.

"I'm not a good business man, John," he said. "I never was one."

"I know," said John Gray. For he had known from the beginning. "I know," he repeated, with his thin lips. "I warned you, if you remember. I am not a man to give advice. But it was allowable for me to give you a picture of the future. Even so, you might have done much worse. The market crash. The bank failures. You kept going on your own for almost ten years, before you finally came to me. It was longer than I'd expected."

"Nora went back to her profession," said the frayed man. "She kept us going. Henry Jessamon's money itself had lasted only three years. It was as if a jinx had hold of me. Every investment . . ."

"Why didn't you get a job yourself?"

"I tried, John. But all I knew was medicine."

"And Henry Stiles, who had graduated from medical school, and who had a license to practice, was dead," said John Gray with a nod—for he had known that, too, from the beginning. "Still there are certain things which a man who is skilled in medicine can do, where a license makes no difference. Illegal things, but they pay big money. Why didn't you go into that?"

"It's a hard thing to say why. But I couldn't. Even if Nora wouldn't have left me."

"There was always the W.P.A.," said John Gray.

"I've been on that. But they won't let you stay on it forever."

"All right," said John Gray. "There are jobs now. Plenty of jobs. The country is crying for men. You should be able to get something in an aircraft factory or a shipyard, and make a decent living."

"I don't know enough, John," said the tired, frayed man. "I've tried. But I don't know enough even to be a sweeper in a war factory. It's not so simple as it sounds."

"I know," said John Gray. "Well, why don't you enlist? You're five years younger than I am. You can't be more than forty-two. You haven't dissipated, and your constitution is still sound, after they had fed you up a little. You're patriotic, too. You missed the last one. You want to be in this?"

"I stopped in at the enlistment office this morning on my way here, and started to fill out an application. But then I gave it up, John. There was something in it I couldn't answer."

John Gray nodded again, for he had known that, too.

"When you came to the question if you had ever been convicted of a crime," he said. "Essandee fingerprinted its employees, and all prints go for filing to Washington. When the army had classified and tabulated yours, they would be found identical with the prints of Dr. Henry Stiles, of Torkford, Massachusetts, who died at Loyaquil in March, 1924, and whose widow received fifteen thousand dollars insurance. Only one man has one set of fingerprints, of course. And he has them forever. You know that, Hank, as well as I do."

"Yes," said the tired, frayed man. "The only way you can destroy them is by cutting your fingers off. And if you do, they won't take you."

"What other recourse is there for you, Hank?" said John Gray, his voice coming quietly out of the shadows.

"You have always been my last recourse, John," said the frayed, defeated man. "I have always hated to come to you almost worse than death itself. But you have never failed me, when I had to come."

"It must have occurred to you, of course, that eventually that last recourse might fail," said John Gray. "Then what?"

He sat looking at the tired man who had been the brilliant young surgeon of Loyaquil, who had been a dead man too long. He sat looking at this man who had once saved his life. Who had had Nora all these years, though he had been a dead man.

But now Nora herself was dead. The bird had flown away. And he had not even known.

"Nora—" the frayed man moved his lips.

"She can be left out of it," said John Gray, his eyes gray as glass. "She is out of it. The bird has flown away. We are talking of you now, Hank. Of what there is left for you to do. Have you given that any thought?"

THE blurred eyes of the frayed man across the desk swam before John Gray's penetrating gaze. They moved towards one of the open windows. The cool bright noon sky above the city lay out there. The sounds of the street came up from a fifth of a mile below.

John Gray nodded, thin lips tight.

"There's always that, of course," he said. "You have always had it in your mind that sooner or later it must come to that. I rather knew it, too, Hank, from the beginning."

He reached for his dictating machine beside his desk. He pulled it on its stand towards him.

"A notation, Miss Stiles," he said into it. "To whom it may concern, colon. I, comma, Henry Jessamon, comma, declare that what I am about to do is of my own volition, comma, and that no one else is responsible for my act but me. That's all. Please bring into my office as soon as you have typed."

He pressed a button. His blonde secretary from the outer office appeared, with her cool young eyes, her cool efficient manner. John Gray nodded towards the cylinder on the machine.

"A couple of letters and a memorandum," he said. "Right away, please."

She took it and withdrew, with a glance of her cool contemptuous eyes upon the frayed, tired man.

The man who had been a dead man too long pressed his face within his palm. She had been born in December, 1923. She looked so much like Elinor. Yet it was his mouth she had, and other little features—even mannerisms. There must be things within her mind and heart, too. She was quicker, brighter, more intelligent than Elinor. He wondered what her life had been. What it would be, after he was gone. Her name was Alice. That was all he would ever know about her.

"She came from an employment agency," said John Gray, thin-lipped, as if reading his thoughts. "Quite competent and efficient. A little young and sentimental, perhaps, but she will outgrow that. There were one or two others whom the agency sent around. They were about as good, and more experienced. But the matter of who she was weighed down the balance."

"I have done her one good turn, anyway, it would seem," said the frayed man.

"You will do her another," said John Gray quietly. "Although she will not know it. There is no need of discarding the name of Henry Jessamon, as I see it. For her sake, as well as that of her mother."

"Elinor?"

"Mrs. Stiles still idealizes your memory, Hank, you understand. In a way I have kept myself informed about her. It would shatter her pride to learn that you had been alive all these years. It wouldn't be the decent thing to do to her."

The frayed man rubbed his palm upon his forehead. "No," he said. "Elinor must never know. I've always had that on my conscience, above all."

He fumbled his hat in a thin hand, looking at the window with blurred eyes.

"Are you frightened," asked John Gray quietly, with a tightening of his jaw muscles, "are you frightened at the thought of going to join Nora?"

"Frightened?" said the frayed man with blurred surprise. "No, why should I be? That's what I want to do. Where else should I go? I'm only sorry to have been away from her so long. And thanks for all you've done for me in the past, anyway, John. I almost forgot it."

He made a gesture to arise.

"Wait till she has brought the memorandum back before you do it," said John Gray quietly.

"What memorandum? Oh, yes, you dictated something for the girl, didn't you?"

"I might as well be protected from every angle," said John Gray. "I don't like to be too damned cold-blooded about it. But I have a rather strongly developed sense of self-protection."

"I suppose you have," said the frayed man humbly. "I've never had much myself, I guess, or I'd be better off. You've got so many qualities I don't have, John. You see things so much more clearly than I do."

"I'm not advising you to do it, understand me," said John Gray with his thin lips. "If I were a man to give advice to anyone, I would advise you against it. The church that Nora believed in preaches that it is the straight way to hell. I don't

believe in such things myself, naturally; nor do you, I assume. We are both intelligent men, and we look at the world realistically. Still I do not advise you to do it. I have only tried to help you see your situation, Hank, as clearly as possible. The problem is yours, and not mine."

"I won't bother you again," said the frayed man apologetically. "I'm grateful for all you have done for me."

THE door opened again. The cool-eyed blonde came back, laying on John Gray's desk the letters which had been on the cylinder, which she had transcribed, and the memorandum which John Gray had dictated in the name of Henry Jessamon.

"Is that all, sir?"

"Do you remember," the frayed man said, "Henry Jessamon—"

He rubbed his forehead, shutting his lips. The girl was still there. Looking down at him with her cool eyes, impersonally. A seedy bunch of rags and bones he must look to her in John Gray's blond-paneled, silken-rugged offices. She would like to get a broom and sweep him out, he thought from her cool look. Yet a little curious about him underneath, perhaps. After all, she was a woman.

His own daughter.

He wondered if she had ever heard the name of Henry Jessamon. There was no reason that she should. Yet he had a flash of feeling that she might have. He had intended to say something to John about how Henry Jessamon had once challenged him to a duel to the death back there in Loyaquil long ago. But it was all a little confused in his mind, and it made no difference.

"That's all, Miss Stiles," said John Gray with an expressionless face. "Thank you."

John Gray watched her with his gray glance as she withdrew, and the heavy door in the paneling closed soundlessly. His thin lips were bent. She had transcribed the death message with mechanical speed and precision, yet its purport had not registered on her mind as she did so. The perfect automaton.

John Gray would explain afterwards that he had supposed it was just a meaningless threat on the part of poor old

Henry Jessamon. Jessamon had come to him, crying about his troubles and mumbling about suicide, as he had often done before; and to humor the poor fellow and shock him out of it, he, John Gray, had dictated a farewell message, as poor Jessamon had requested him to do. He had merely done it in the hope that it would bring Jessamon back to his senses—not dreaming Jessamon really intended to go through with it. But before he could do anything about it, Jessamon had seized a pen and signed the note, and had rushed to the window and gone out it like a flash.

eyes, uncomprehendingly, at John Gray and at the paper which had been pushed towards him.

“What do you mean, John? I can hear your voice, but you sound far away. I can see you, but you look like smoke. What do you mean—that you want me to die? Why, it’s true, is it? What Nora always said. . . .”

With a dazed gesture he pulled the flat gun from the side pocket of his worn old tweed coat. He laid it shakily upon the desk in front of him.

“I thought it was to be the window,

Wyatt Blassingame—who has another great “John Smith” story coming up in the next issue, also has a rattling good yarn, “The Ghost and the Skeleton,” in the February issue of our companion publication ACE G-MAN!

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He, John Gray, was not so good, it seemed, in suicidal psychology. . . .

John Gray started pushing the typed sheet across his desk, with a big white-laced hand. His eyes blank and cold, he looked at this man who had had Nora all these years, although he had been a dead man. A dead man who had not had the sense to have understood long years ago that there was nothing for him but death.

Why hadn’t Stiles used up the fifty thousand in six months, and done it then, at a better time? Why hadn’t he had the brains to realize that he was a good surgeon only, and that he had killed himself as a surgeon when he had abandoned his identity? He might have done this thing more gracefully long ago. Leaving to John Gray—Nora.

She was gone now. The bird was flown away.

But not this damned man who had kept her from him.

“Well, that finishes it, Hank,” John Gray said quietly, pushing the suicide note across his desk. His eyes were cold as death.

“What, John?”

The tired, frayed man who had once been a brilliant young surgeon, who had saved John Gray’s life, who had been a dead man too long, stared with blurred

Hank,” said John Gray without emotion. “But the gun is as sure a way to hell.”

“The pistol which someone sent me anonymously more than fifteen years ago,” said the frayed man in a shaken voice. “I never knew who sent it, or why. But Nora knew.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The Belated Corpse

JOHN GRAY brushed his fingertips across his desk. “I wasn’t advising you,” he said. “I never advise anyone. But it was within my province to give you an intimation of the future. A friendly warning of what lay ahead. It was too soon, of course. You still had a little money left. You still had Nora. You hadn’t yet completely realized the full state of your predicament.

“The little blue bottle of KCN crystals which came three years later,” said the blurred man, with a working mouth. “I have the bottle with me, too. I never knew who had sent that, either, or why. It reached me when things were at their blackest, and I emptied out the crystals down the drain and put the bottle away deep on a back shelf, for I was afraid of it. And you sent that, too.”

"It was still too soon," John Gray repeated with thin lips.

"And you want me to die now! You've always wanted it."

"What do you think this conversation has been about?"

"I never knew," said the frayed, blurred man. "I never had a glimmering. Call me dumb. I thought from the beginning the evil was all within myself. But Nora knew. The hate and living fear she's always had of you. She told me last week in the hospital when she lay so near to death. She told me you had killed Henry Jessamon, out of black jealousy of him, though you yourself didn't get away scot-free—and that the only reason you hadn't killed me, too, was because you needed me to reach her. She told me that you lured me on to try to get his money, to ruin me and send me to hell. Knowing that if you could only send me to hell she'd gladly go herself."

"Profit and loss," said John Gray. "The bird has flown away."

"I know you now, John Gray," said the frayed man. "Between the windows, with your face like smoke. Behind your desk of money and power. You took me up onto a high place once and showed me all the riches of the world. And because I didn't know you then, I listened to you. But it was her soul you were after, John Gray, through me. It was her white soul that you were born to get. Only you will never get her soul, John Gray, nor will you get mine. For she has prayed too long for me, and I know you now."

"You are quite crazy," said John Gray, thin-lipped. "I have been negligent in allowing you to starve to quite such an extremity. A little food inside your guts and a good stiff drink would make you rational again."

"Say the word Paradise without gagging, John Gray!"

"There is no such place."

John Gray saw that the gun upon the desk was pointed at him, beneath the loose clasp of that thin, numb hand.

"You're crazy, of course," John Gray said. "But not quite that crazy, Hank. You'd like to kill me, I don't doubt it, since most men would like to kill their benefactors when further benefactions

have been refused. But you would hate more to burn. You know too well how our human bodies are made, each joint and nerve, and all the pain of it. It would not be worth while to have to burn, just for the brief crazy satisfaction of killing me."

John Gray looked at the frayed man across his desk. The pupils of his eyes seemed to contract and disappear, and they were as gray as glass.

"You'll burn here and in hell both!" he said. "I promise you!" He gripped the arms of his big leather swivel chair, his throne of power, behind his massive desk. He seemed to start up from it like smoke. He swooped across the desk, clutching at the gun and snatching it.

THE frayed man said, "I'll burn in neither place—and you know it. Did you really think that I, a doctor, could destroy a man's life—even yours?"

He looked at John Gray dully.

"It isn't loaded," he said. "I took the clip of bullets out of it when I got it, and put it away on a back shelf, because there had been a black strangling pall over me, and I had been tempted to use it. The same when I got the blue cyanide bottle. The urge, the black urge to death. Only Nora saved me. She asked me this morning to bring them to you, to have you admit that you had sent them, and for what purpose. But I thought it was only a woman's baseless imagination. I let it pass."

He looked at John Gray from the timelessness, light-headed and eerie, which surrounded him. There had been a muffled explosion. A second ago. A minute ago. As John had snatched the gun. John Gray had settled back in his chair again, between the windows, in the shadows. With a flung gesture of his right hand he swept the gun to the floor.

"Did it go off?" the frayed man asked in bewilderment. "There must have been one you had put in the chamber. I didn't think of that."

"Nora," said John Gray, breathing heavily. "Nora asked you this morning?" His voice rasped. "She's dead—you whining crook. You wanted to make me believe she was still alive, telling me

she was ill but had been getting better, so that you could chisel a few hundred out of me to pay her hospital bills and bury her, and keep on living your damned life for a little while. You won't have her any more, either here or hereafter."

His eyes were blank as glass. He seemed to shrivel, in the shadows, settling down deeper into his chair.

"How—"

"In the papers, you lying beggar," said John Gray, breathing fitfully. "Yesterday evening in the hospital at Asbury. Nora Malley, thirty-seven, once with Essandee. On a back page, two or three lines, obscure and unimportant. If she had been mine, she would have died a queen, covered with red orchids bright as flame, brighter than any at Loyaquil among which you and she had your love, while I lived in hell!

"If she had been mine—but she was always yours. You had her. All these years. For what do you think I have lived this life? If not I, then you won't have her. Go to the window, and jump out. Die yourself, and go to hell!"

The frayed man turned his blurred eyes towards the window at the right of John Gray. The crisp air. The high blue sky. The window ledge was low enough so that beyond it he could see the city spread out in the vast blue distances. The East River, the hospitals along its shore. He took a deep breath, almost sobbing. For a black terrible moment he had almost believed that John Gray spoke from some knowledge which he didn't have. That she had died since he had left her a bare two hours ago, asleep and smiling.

But that could never be.

"Nora is there!" he said with a deep breath of joy. "There by the river. She passed the crisis two nights ago, and she is out of all danger now."

"Nora Malley—"

"Her aunt," said the frayed man. "It was her aunt whose name you saw. The age must have been a misprint for sixty-seven years. Her aunt was head nurse for Essandee for thirty years. It was she who sent Nora down to Loyaquil. She died last night in Asbury. Not Nora. Not my Nora. If you had known that she was still alive, you would still have played for her, wouldn't you? Giving me the

money that I thought I needed. Getting me deeper, deeper. Still egging me on by word and suggestion to commit that last black act. But you will never have her now, John."

"Nora Malley," said John Gray thickly. "Go to hell yourself, you—"

Across the desk John Gray's slumped and shriveled figure seemed to reach forth again like smoke. He swept his hands forward. He swept them across the desk at the frayed man across from him, as if to clutch and strangle with them. But they were motionless and numb, like dead beef only. One of his sweeping arms knocked the blue bowl of red-flame flowers off from his desk, and that was all. Behind his desk he seemed to shrivel, vanish. Though his hands still clung to the desk edge for a little more.

"John!"

Behind his great desk he had vanished. He had slid down from his seat of power.

THERE had been an explosion when John had snatched the gun. A cartridge in the chamber all these years, which John had put there for him, and he had not known about. John's hands had been clumsy, seizing it. His fingers had gone thick on him in that moment.

The frayed man rubbed his blurred eyes, and got shakily to his feet. He stepped around the great desk, clinging to the edge of its smooth glass surface.

The great red-flame flowers lay all over the floor, in the darkness of spilled water.

John Gray lay on the floor with his strong hands spread out. Those white-laced fingers of John Gray's. Only a very cunning eye would have been able to see those scars. The frayed man looked down with blurred eyes, kneeling.

They lay dead and empty now, as dead beef, those hands which he had made for John from the dead hands of Henry Jessamon. Those hands he had made when John had been brought in with the stumps of his hands fingerless, and Henry Jessamon dying. He had never told even John just what he had done. He had wanted to be sure how it would work out, at first, and then he had delayed.

He could never tell John now.

But it had been the hands of Henry Jessamon which had tied John Gray's ties for him, and gripped his golf clubs, and signed his checks, in a different way than he had known before. In the way of Henry Jessamon. And it had been the hands of Henry Jessamon which had pulled the trigger of that gun.

The bullet had gone in just below John's heart. An internal hemorrhage. No blood on his gray vest at all around the small scorched hole.

He arose, the gaunt frayed man—having touched nothing. He went shuffling to the door set in the paneling, and opened it.

"You had better call the police," he said. "I believe they are the ones to be informed. Your employer has just shot himself. I feel a little dizzy. May I have a glass of water?"

The girl sat at her machine, with her fingers poised motionless, with her face half turned towards the door from which he had emerged. As if she had been listening. As if she had half heard through the heavy door the muffled explosion of that shot which had ended John Gray's life. As if, perhaps, it had come to her as no surprise.

She sat there with her cool look; poised, unhysterical, efficient. Elinor would have shrieked and screamed, and flopped around like a chicken without its head. But *she* was his daughter, Alice. Steady nerved in the emergency. Intelligent, as well. When he had said that John Gray had killed himself, she did not ask stupidly if he was dead.

"I will call the police," she said. "His real name was Henry Jessamon. They will have to know."

"His name?"

CHAPTER SIX

Satan's Emissary

SHE pressed her hands to the side of her neck a moment, before reaching for the phone. "Yes," she said. "There's no need of trying to hide it any longer, if it's true. He always called himself John Gray, of course, and nothing else. But I've known almost ever since

I first came to work for him that it wasn't his real name. I've often wondered what lay behind him. What he was trying to cover up.

"You see," she said, pouring out the word in a momentary state of young excitement, for all her look of cool efficiency, "you see my fiance was with Essandee Oil, in their main offices, before he went into the army. He was studying fingerprints in hopes of getting someday into the F. B. I. Just to tease him I got a set of Mr. Gray's fingerprints once from the glass top of his desk, which is always covered with them, and gave them to Jerry. Mr. Gray had mentioned having once worked for Essandee, and I wanted to see if Jerry could really identify them. Jerry matched them up in the company records without any trouble. But they didn't belong to a man who had ever been named John Gray. They belonged to a man who had been named Henry Jessamon.

"I guess that was why I felt all excited inside when you came in, and said you were a friend of Henry Jessamon's. I could tell from the sort of apologetic way you said it that you knew something about him. I've always been expecting someone to turn up, I guess, every time the door has opened. It was just like in a movie. I wondered if he was going to turn white and deny ever having heard the name. But he just said, 'Send him in.'

"I noticed when I was in the room later you called him Henry, too. You said something to him, not thinking, like, 'Do you remember, Henry Jessamon—?' And then shut up. You called him Henry, and he called you Hank. That was my father's nickname, too. When a man changes his name, you can't help wondering what he's trying to cover up. Was he a criminal?"

"Your father, girl?"

"Oh, heavens, no! I'm not talking hysterically, am I? My father was a young doctor, very brilliant. If he had lived, he would be the greatest surgeon in the world. I am somewhat like him, they all say. I hope I am. Was Mr. Gray a criminal, I mean? I suppose I shouldn't ask. But now the police will know."

"He never broke a law in his life," said

the tired, blurred man. A man of absolute integrity."

"Of course," she said. "I suppose so. He was always very careful. But there must have been something he was hiding. Even before I learned he had changed his name, I felt there was something queer about him. I never liked him. Something so cold and inhuman. As gray as glass. I wrote my grandmother about him, and she said my description of him reminded her of a man who had come to Torkford when I was a baby, soon after my father died.

"My mother had died when I was born, you see, and my father a few months afterwards, in South America, and granny brought me up. This man told her he was an insurance inspector, and that technically it was against the law for insurance to be paid to a baby like me, as had been done, and so she must never, never let anyone outside of Torkford know that mother was dead, if they should inquire.

"But granny asked a lawyer, and he said it wasn't so, and the man was just some sort of an imposter. She could tell anyone that my mother was dead, if they asked; though no one ever did. Granny said she or the lawyer never could figure out what his game was. She just remembered him with a hawk nose and thin lips, and eyes as gray as glass. Like my description of Mr. Gray, she said."

So John Gray had known that Elinor was dead. He had known it ever since she died. There must have been some message which he had intercepted down in Loyaquil. Eighteen years ago, when he had first known Nora. He'd been free, even then, to marry her—to marry her and live his own surgeon's life. The tired, frayed man leaned against the door post, swaying. He himself had learned only last week that Elinor was dead.

"He never broke a law," his lips moved. "But he has been called the prince of liars."

"You are ill. You have been through an awful shock," said the girl, with grave young sympathy. "Seeing him kill himself in your presence, after dictating his note. I suppose you thought it was just a silly bluff of some kind. That's what I thought it was, too, when I transcribed it. Men who are really intending to kill

themselves wouldn't dictate a note about it, you wouldn't think.

"But then he really went ahead and did it. What a shock. What a terrible shock to you. I wonder what possessed him. He might have waited, at least, until he was alone. Not giving another man such a shock. It wasn't right."

"My wife has been very ill," said the frayed man. "I did not sleep for several nights. I have not eaten since I've forgotten when. We have been very close together. We have lived together more than eighteen years, in good years and bad. I was afraid that I was going to lose her. That's why I may seem a little dazed to you."

"Oh, I am sorry. I hope that she is better now."

"He didn't know," said the tired man. "He didn't know that we were married. I don't know why I didn't tell him today, but I didn't. An old friend. An old, old friend. John Gray. I didn't tell him, though, that Nora and I were married last week by the church. But he knows now."

THE girl thought: Talking crazily, poor old man. Married more than eighteen years. Married last week. He was bewildered. Confused in all his thinking. Strain over his wife's illness, plus this sudden shock, had got him. He must love his wife very much, the way his face shone when he spoke of her.

Alice Stiles wondered if her father, the cold austere young surgeon, had ever been in love. She knew her mother had. Her grandmother had told her. There had been the young red-haired butcher boy with the laughing eyes whom her mother had been in love with, though she had married Henry Stiles, because he had better prospects. But when her mother had been dying, it had been the red-haired young butcher boy whose name she had been whispering, though he was dead in Nicaragua with the marines.

Alice Stiles was glad that already she herself knew love, and glad that her mother had. She felt vaguely troubled about her father, the cold brilliant young surgeon, who had died so long ago, his life still incomplete.

Poor shocked, sick man.

"You had better sit down on the couch," she said. "I'll give you a drink of water."

His eyes were blurred. The timeless roar of eternity was about him. It had been twilight at Loyaquil, and Nora was standing by the river. Henry Jessamon was holding up a stick of dynamite, drunk as an owl, and saying, *I'll fight any man with this for her. And if I lose, she's your partner in the Jessamon-Gray strike, John. I've put my Hancock on a will. . . .*

Later John Gray talking. . . . *Poor old Henry Jessamon died worth fifty thousand dollars, Hank, and he looked like you, and all you'd need to do would be to make a mark for his name. Nora has a moral right to it, and you'd have money enough to be a great surgeon, and live with her always, while your wife was taken care of. Of course, I don't advise it. I never advise.*

The world roared. *Why stop at fifty thousand, Hank? After all, it's only peanut money. A man can take it, and make ten million dollars. That's really dough. That's money and power. All this town. Look out from this tower, Hank. Doesn't it get you? I'll show you how to get it all, if you'll only say to hell with Nora.*

No, no!

Give me Nora, or else I'll block you at every turn, and in the end you'll rot and die.

No, you'll never have her!

Give me Nora!

You are the devil, John Gray. Go back to hell. . . .

His lips moved. He made a signal with his finger to the blonde girl.

"His name wasn't really John Gray at all," he said. "We always called him that. But it was just a name he took while he was on earth for a while."

"I know," she told him gently. "We discussed that, don't you remember?"

"It was an accident," he kept repeating. "I'm sure of it. He didn't mean to kill himself. The hands of Henry Jessamon just reached—just reached for that gun and killed him."

"Of course it must have been an accident. I'm sure the police will consider that possibility. But, pardon me, don't you think it would be better if we just

let them make their own observations, and come to their own conclusions? It was so simple. He dictated this note—in his real name of Henry Jessamon. I suppose it is still where I laid it on his desk. We can't destroy it very well, can we, even if we are sure it was an accident?"

"We can't destroy his prints, either, which will show that was his name. Of course, it was an accident. But perhaps it would just confuse things if you stayed around. You can give me your name and address, and they can get in touch with you later, if necessary."

He gazed at her with his blurred eyes. She looked like someone he had known long ago. The sense of timelessness was all about him. Something had happened to him which had given him an awful shock. There had been a man named Henry Jessamon whom he had known somewhere. There had been a man like smoke.

"You know," he said humbly, apologetically, "I think I've forgotten my name."

+ + +

"A CURIOUS case, commissioner," the police inspector said, lighting a big cigar that the commissioner had given him. "A curious case, sir."

"Why?"

"It's a clear case of suicide, of course," the inspector said. "He bought the gun fifteen years ago. We've traced the purchase, though nobody knows where he's kept it since. He dictated this suicide note in his own voice on the machine to his secretary, and it was lying on his desk. Stating in concise, direct language that he was Henry Jessamon, and that he was doing it by his own volition, and absolving anyone else from blame."

"He would do that, of course. He was careful."

"Yes, a very careful man. A man of the highest reputation. Yet it's still somewhat of a riddle why he changed his name. He had been known as John Gray to everyone since he first came to New York to plunge into Wall Street in the balmy days of the Coolidge boom. But his name before that was obviously Henry

Jessamon. That is shown by his fingerprints when he was employed by Essandee Oil, and by his signature as Henry Jessamon to the will which he wrote in longhand at Loyaquil in 1924, naming Nora Malley, as she was then, his sole heir, and which was found in a manila envelope on his desk together with a withered orchid. The only will he ever made, as it turned out."

"A lot of money."

"Yes. Enough to tempt a forgery. But all the handwriting experts looked over it, and they were all agreed without exception that Henry Jessamon's handwriting at Loyaquil in 1924 was undoubtedly the same as John Gray's of the present time, allowing for the normal minor alterations of style over the years. A bold square writing to match his hands. He had made that will a long time ago, and then tucked it away and kept it hidden. When he made it he probably never dreamed that it would be worth so much someday to his inheritor. His half of the Jessamon-Gray claim, which he specifically mentioned—'my half of the Alaskan claim I hold with John Gray, together with any and all other properties of which I may die possessed'—was apparently the major item that he considered he was willing. But he ran it later to four million dollars."

"What's curious about that? Nobody knows how much his estate is going to be when he makes a will. Except that it's generally less than more."

"I mean," said the inspector, "it's curious that there was actually a real John Gray, it seems. Like the man we've always known as John Gray, he was without family or connections, and you can't trace where he came from. But he was a friend of Jessamon's, and they made their strike together, and were employed by Essandee at Loyaquil together. The real John Gray's fingerprints were quite different from Jessamon's, of course. His signature, where he witnessed Jessamon's will and again in the Essandee correspondence files, was radically different. The question is, where did this real John Gray go? What happened to him? He just vanishes—his fingerprints and his writing from the earth. And now this man with Jessamon's prints and Jessa-

mon's writing is calling himself Gray."

"Murder, you think?" said the commissioner with narrow eyes.

"We'll never know. If it was done, it was done at Loyaquil; and there would be no trace of the fact after this length of time. The Essandee project there was abandoned to the jungle. The natives who worked on it are scattered. The river boat captain who was the only communication with civilization has died long ago. All we know is that Dr. Stiles was erroneously reported dead, that Jessamon took the name of John Gray, and that he kept Stiles in apparently a hypnotic state, under his control and thumb, for almost twenty years. There must have been hypnotism in it, of course, to cause such a complete amnesia."

"Stiles remembers nothing still?"

"Only vaguely. That he knew a man named Henry Jessamon, and that he knew a man like smoke. And that he's happy to have found his daughter, and that he loves his wife very dearly. He's started in his medicine again. He abandoned it altogether during those long years he was under Jessamon's thumb, though he had much promise once of being a brilliant surgeon. But with a little refreshing he hopes to pick up where he left off, and perhaps get in the army."

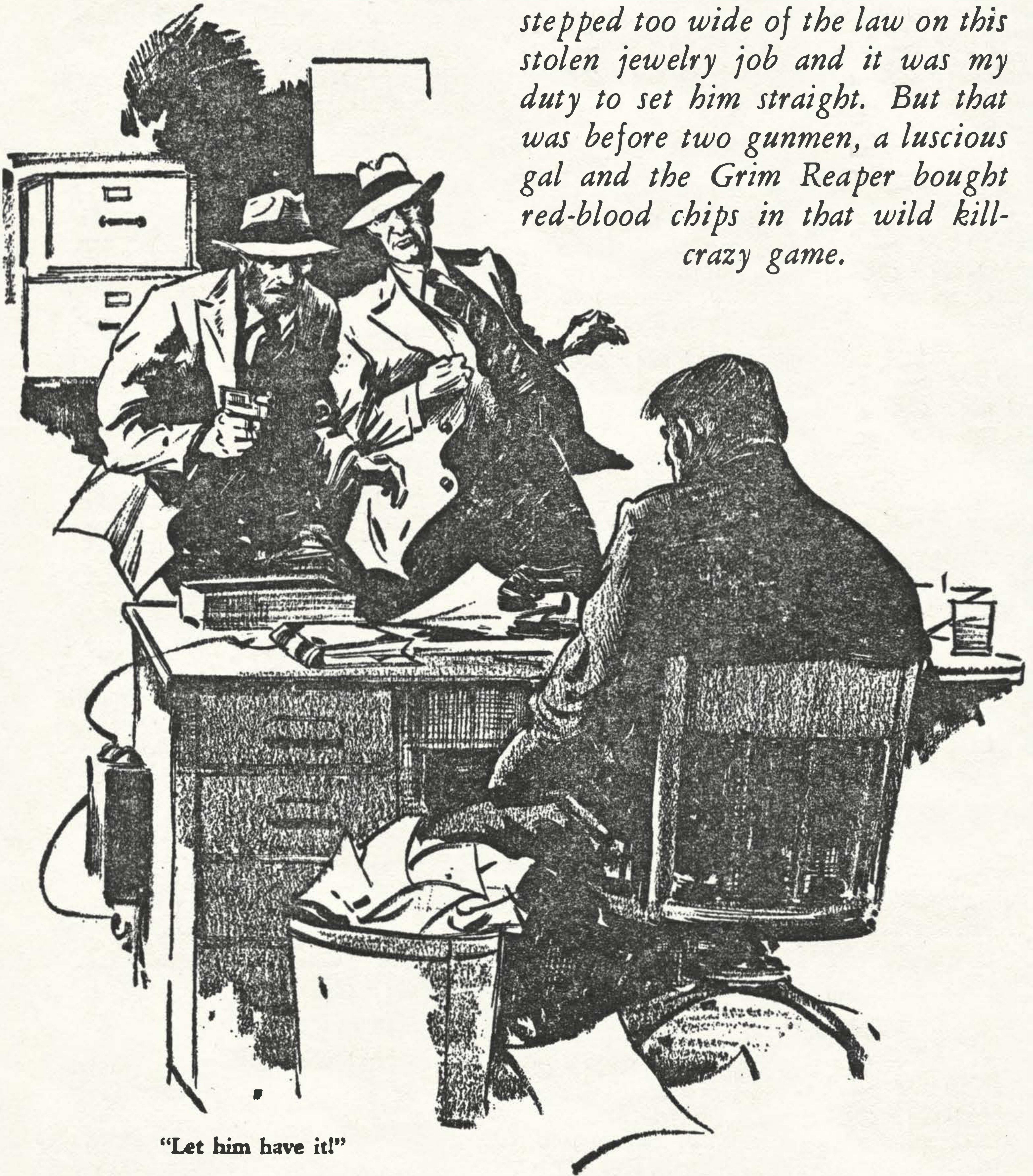
"Well, what's curious about that? That's the way things should be."

"I don't know," said the inspector, relighting his cigar. "A simple suicide, of course. But I was just thinking in my own mind that—well, suppose a man wanted you to kill yourself, and had a note written saying you were killing yourself, and then you decided to kill him instead, with his own gun that he had kindly given you. And you pulled the gun on him and shot him while he sweated and tried to argue you out of it and tried to grab it from you, and then you made the suicide note he had written out for you as if he had meant it for himself, and— Oh, you would have to change his fingerprints, of course. And that can't be done. This John Gray killed himself all right, I mean this Jessamon, and I've got mixed up in my own mind, I guess."

"Perhaps, after all, there was nothing curious about it."

DEATH ONLY KNOCKS ONCE

Private Detective Latimer had stepped too wide of the law on this stolen jewelry job and it was my duty to set him straight. But that was before two gunmen, a luscious gal and the Grim Reaper bought red-blood chips in that wild kill-crazy game.



"Let him have it!"

By D. L. CHAMPION

THE brave golden lettering on the frosted glass of the office door announced that this was the suite of Robert O. Latimer; it announced further that Mr. Latimer was a private investigator. I hesitated in the hall for a moment, and turned the doorknob.

The reception room, a square cubicle shabbily furnished, was empty. I was not surprised. From what I knew of Mr. Latimer's business it did not run to svelte, lovely secretaries. I crossed the cubicle in two moderate strides and opened the other door.

Robert Latimer sat in a chipped swivel chair on the far side of a chipped desk. His hair was on the verge of turning gray. There was a ruddy color in his cheeks and his deep blue eyes stared at me with an expression quite close to blankness.

He maintained an immobile poker face as he looked at me. He did not speak which wasn't particularly odd. Robert O. Latimer hadn't spoken to me for almost six years. That fact, incidentally, went double.

I closed the door slowly behind me. I stared at him and was aware of powerful and mixed emotions surging inside me. I was angry. I was bitter. And there was a very strong sense of pity welling up as well.

I sat down in the chair opposite him. There was a slight tremble in my fingers and an odd break in my voice as I spoke.

"You fool," I said, "you damned obstinate fool. I warned you a hundred times. You were bound, sooner or later, to get into a jam that all your shrewd sharp wits couldn't extricate you from. Now you've done it. You've—"

I broke off. For the moment I could find no more words. Perhaps there was a hint of moisture in my eyes. He still hadn't answered me. His eyes were fixed upon me, cold and I thought, antagonistic, as ever.

"Damn you," I said, "I'll—"

I broke off again. This time for a more obvious reason. I had heard the outer door open. I heard footfalls in the square reception room. I stood up swiftly as an idea to me. I glanced hastily around the room. My gaze fell on another door. I opened it.

I stepped into a closet just large enough to contain my two hundred pounds of bulk. I stood there holding my breath, my ear pressed hard against the panel.

The footfalls sounded nearer. The second door opened. A voice said, "Latimer, you rat. You—"

Another voice interrupted, "What are you making a speech for? Give it to him."

Two shots blasted out. The panel vibrated against my ear. There was a slamming sound, a click and the noise of pounding feet evanescent in the distance. I sprang from the closet. I tugged at the doorknob. It didn't budge. I knelt down

and squinted through the mortised lock.

The key had been turned on the other side. Doubtless the visitors had done this to conceal their crime as long as possible from any casual callers Latimer may have had.

It cost me an effort to turn my head around and look at him. There was a hole in his head and a second one bored into his shirt just above the heart. Blood cascaded over his face, stained his shirt the color of a cardinal's robe.

He was slumped forward over the desk and his hands hung limply at his side, his fingers suspended a scant inch above the floor.

I drew a deep breath and crossed the room to the water cooler near the window. I picked up a paper cup, filled it with water and drank deeply. About to toss the used cup into the receptacle beneath the cooler I noted a tiny blood stain on its rim. It was only then I realized that I had bitten hard into my own lower lip.

I turned my back deliberately on Latimer's corpse. I knelt down before the door, took my pocket knife out and went to work on the ancient lock. Even though my fingers were unsteady it wasn't a very difficult job. The door opened again. I stood up and regarded the unpleasant corpse of Robert Latimer, Private Investigator. I noted a slight film of white foam at his lips. I shuddered and once more was aware of taut churning emotion within me.

I was still staring at the body when the blonde entered the outer office. She was small and beautifully proportioned. Her hair was the color of expensive honey and her eyes were blue as a cornflower. She looked at me, wide eyed, then her gaze traveled beyond to Robert Latimer.

HER eyes opened wider which I had believed impossible. Her chin trembled. Her lips quivered. She ran past me to Latimer's desk. She cried out in a voice that broke just this side of hysteria, "Oh, Bobby, Bobby, what have they done to you?"

She stood at the side of the corpse, supporting herself with one hand on the desk. Her pupils were wet with tears. With a physical effort she pulled herself together. She turned to me.

"Who did this?" she asked. "Who are you? What are you doing here? You killed him, didn't you?"

I shook my head. "I found him this way," I said. "I'm a friend of his. Who are you?"

"His girl. I loved him. We had planned to marry. Only next month we were going to get married. And now—"

Her voice trailed away obscured in a mist of tears. I drew a deep breath and studied her. She was undeniably sweet, undeniably pretty. But knowing Robert Latimer as I did, I doubted very much that he had intended marrying her. It wouldn't be the first time he had told an innocent girl that same tale. She turned her face to me suddenly. She spoke with a desperate impetuosity.

"Look, my name is Helen Maynard. I loved Bob with all my heart. If you were his friend, find out who killed him."

"Well," I said hesitantly, "there are the police."

"Have you notified them?"

I shook my head. "I was just about to when you came in."

She looked at me for a long moment. "I don't suppose I should trust you," she said slowly. "You were here with him when I arrived. I don't know you. I don't know you didn't kill him yourself. But I've got to know who did it. If you were a friend of his you've got to find out."

"I'll try," I said. "But the police—"

"The police," she said. "Bob didn't think much of their abilities. He often said that without stool-pigeons they'd be helpless."

That was true enough. I had heard him say it several times myself.

"Maybe I can help you," she said eagerly. "I knew something about his business. Here's a card with my phone number. Call me in about an hour. We'll talk it over. In the meantime I suppose you'd better call the coppers. If you like, you can say you came up here with me and we found the body together. That'll stop them from maybe holding you on suspicion."

I blinked at her. After all we had been acquainted for something under three minutes. But in that short period she was treating me with a confidence I would

have hesitated to put in a close friend. Moreover, she was offering to lie to coppers in case they should decide that I had a hand in the abrupt demise of Robert Latimer.

She blinked her huge blue eyes at me. She fumbled with her bag. She said, "How stupid. I came out without a handkerchief. Would you mind bringing me one of those paper towels from the other room?"

I marched out and returned with a paper towel. She wiped her eyes and took my arm. She looked up into my face.

"You'll help me?" she said appealingly. "You'll promise to help me find out who killed him?"

"Miss Maynard," I said, "I promise I'll leave nothing undone. I'll do everything I can to send Latimer's killers to the chair."

Lord knew that was true enough. I meant every word of it. "Thanks," she said. "Now you call me in an hour. Don't fail me. Goodbye."

She left the office and I stared, stunned, after her.

I suppose my face is as honest as the next man's yet no one had ever taken me on so much faith before. She had found me with the corpse of her lover. Yet she apparently entertained no suspicion of me. She had pledged me to aid her in tracking down Latimer's murderers, offered to lie to the coppers for me and *she hadn't even asked my name!*

I pulled a chair up to the desk, lifted the phone and called headquarters. I made a long report of the death of Robert Latimer. That done I stood up. Gingerly I wormed my way into the trouser pocket of the dead man. I took out a bunch of keys. I slipped them in my own pocket, closed the door on the corpse and left the office. As I climbed into a taxicab downstairs I heard the wail of a squad-car siren in the distance.

Robert Latimer dwelt in a walk up apartment house. After some slight trouble I found the keys which opened the foyer door and the one to his flat. I let myself in and looked around.

It was a small shabbily furnished apartment, consisting of two rooms and a tiny kitchen. I examined the place carefully. I had no clear idea of what I was looking

for. But it was possible that I might come across something which would throw some light on the death of Latimer. Moreover, now I had a sort of proprietary interest in the place.

I had barely begun my task when I heard a key go in the outside lock. I took up my position facing the door, drew an automatic from my shoulder holster and waited tensely. I brought the muzzle of my gun up as I heard the key knock over the tumblers. The door opened inward.

Two men entered. One was dark, short and heavy bearded. The second was tall, possessed of sandy hair and a pair of cruel gray eyes. They had, however, one thing in common. Each of them carried a gun.

For a split-second we looked at each other. Then, I think, the three of us said simultaneously, "Drop that gun."

IT WAS nice impasse. None of us moved. The pair of them exchanged glances from the corner of their eyes. One of them moved to my right, the other to my left. I recognized the strategy immediately. It was impossible for me to shoot in two directions at the same time. The short man looked more dangerous to me. I kept him covered, wondering if I'd have time to shoot, turn and shoot again before a bullet blasted me apart.

They solved the problem for me. The tall man made a sudden diving tackle. I fired the automatic futilely as I fell to the floor. I hit nothing but the wall. Then the pair of them were upon me. They wrenched the automatic from my hand. One of them belted me in the jaw just for the hell of it, then with a gun muzzle in my back they permitted me to rise.

The tall man said, "Louie, roll the joint. I'll look after this guy."

Louie proceeded to roll the joint with a thoroughness engendered by years of practise. His partner sat down at my side holding his gun very carefully between us. After a while Louie, wearing an expression of utter disappointment, stood before us.

"Jake," he announced, "it ain't here."

Jake looked at me as if he held me personally responsible. "Frisk him," he said to Louie. "Maybe he got it ahead of us."

Louie looked me over and shook his head. He patted my pockets futilely. "He

couldn't have the stuff," he pointed out. "Hell, it's a big bundle. He couldn't carry it in his pockets."

Jake's regard of me became more menacing, more suspicious. "All right," he said, "talk. Who are you?"

I looked down at the gun muzzle and thought with more rapidity than usual. "Me?" I said. "Oh, I'm Jack Latimer. Bob Latimer's brother. The coppers told me he was dead. I'm his only relation so I come into his property. I just came up here to have a look around. Who the devil are you?"

They didn't answer me. They exchanged a long thoughtful glance. "Well, the stuff ain't here," said Jake at last. "Do you think we been crossed?"

Louie shrugged. "Maybe. Let's have a drink and think it over. We'll figure out our next move in a saloon. I always think better at a bar."

"Look," said Jake to me. "We're going now. Maybe we'll go right downstairs. Maybe we'll wait outside the door for five minutes or so. So don't stick your nose out for at least six minutes. Otherwise you might get your head blasted off. Come on, Louie."

They strode from the flat slamming the door behind them. I waited a good six minutes. Then I went into Latimer's bedroom and picked up the phone. I dialed Helen Maynard's number.

A moment later her voice, exciting and tense trickled over the wire into my ear. "I'm so glad you called. I think I have something. Can you come down here right away?"

I could for several reasons. I was most anxious to further my acquaintance with someone who trusted me as blindly as did Helen Maynard.

She lived in Chelsea. It was a small neatly furnished apartment whose pastel walls were crowded with photographs. Some of them amazingly good.

"My hobby," She explained, as I looked them over. "I'm one of those camera fiends. Not bad, eh?"

I conceded that most of them were quite good. Then I came directly to the point which was the murder of Robert O. Latimer.

"I think I know who killed him," she said. "You see, I knew a lot about his

business. I knew about an important case on which he was working."

I lifted my eyebrows. "I thought Latimer was a close mouthed guy. I thought he talked to no one."

Her blue eyes looked like huge violets. "Oh, he talked to me," she said and as I gazed at her blonde loveliness, I was quite willing to believe he had.

"It was a jewel case," she said. "Did you ever hear of the Mastersons?"

I screwed up my brow and looked thoughtful. "Masterson," I said. "Yeah. Owned a bucket of jewelry. Was robbed of it a few months back. Is that it?"

"That's it," she said. "Well, Bobby was working on that."

hidden the jewels. Not even his two confederates knew where they were. That's why they hired Bobby Latimer."

"Wait a minute," I said, "let's get this straight. Arnold's confederates, lying low because the coppers were seeking them, go to Latimer to retain him to find out from Arnold the location of the jewels?"

"Right. Of course the confederates had to keep under cover. They told Latimer to promise Arnold that his share would be kept for him until he got out. They were even prepared to try to help Arnold to escape if he'd reveal the location of the jewels. You see that would help them raise money to arrange the jailbreak."

"So did Latimer see Arnold?"

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"Was he?" I asked. "I thought the cops got the guy that pulled that job. Sent him up a month ago."

"They got one of the guys," she corrected. "Besides, they never got the jewels."

"So," I said, "how does this tie in and what am I supposed to do?"

She looked at me and her eyes were indigo reproach. "I'm trusting you," she said, "trusting you without even knowing your name because I'm a weak and helpless woman trying to avenge the death of her fiance. I want you to track down the killers. I want you to gather the evidence and present it to the police. I can't do it alone. Will you help me or not?"

I chose my words very carefully. "I will do my very best," I assured her, "to see that Latimer's murderers end up in Sing Sing. You have my word."

SHE smiled at me. "All right," she said, "this much I know. A man named Arnold is in prison right now for stealing the Masterson jewels. There were three in the gang. The police only got Arnold. It seems that Arnold had

"Sure he did. Arnold agreed to the deal and told Latimer where the jewels were hidden."

"Well, where are they? And why did he get killed? Moreover, how do you know all this?"

"Why, he told me, honey. He told me all his business. Of course, I don't know where the jewels are but I have an idea."

"Which is?"

"Those two confederates have them. Maybe they refused to pay Bobby's fee. So they killed him and took the jewels. Besides they may have figured he knew too much."

"Well," I said, "it all sounds reasonable. But who are these thugs and where do we find them?"

"That's just it," she said excitedly. "That's where I was so lucky. I remember that Bobby used the phone here a short while ago. He told me he was going to call those two clients. He took a piece of paper from his pocket with the address and phone number on it. When I spoke to you at the office today I sort of remembered that he'd left that paper here. I figured if I could find it we could find the

killers. And I found it just before you called."

"How convenient," I murmured but she didn't hear me.

Off in what I presumed was the bedroom a telephone rang. "Excuse me," said Helen Maynard. She left the room and closed the bedroom door. I went into swift action. First, I opened the purse that was lying on the desk top. I went through it rapidly.

I found a number of things including a little oblong card which bore the day's date and Helen Maynard's name typed neatly on it. I found several keys, one of which was small and intricate. In my book it had been fashioned for but one purpose.

I wandered into the kitchen, found a bottle of Scotch and poured myself a drink. As I obtained a chaser from the faucet I noted an uncovered garbage can beneath the sink. I bent over. In the can were half a dozen paper cups. One of them had what seemed like a spot of rouge on its rim.

I picked it up, examined it. The spot most definitely was not rouge.

I was back in the living room seated comfortably when the girl returned from the bedroom.

"Some fool," she said. "Some fur company who says I owe them money when I never even heard of them. Some of these business people are crazy. But anyway I got that paper for you."

She handed me a slip of paper. Upon it two names, an address and a telephone number had been typed. The names were Louis Montell and Jake Rathbun. I was not in the least bit surprised.

"All right," I said, "and what am I supposed to do?"

"Get the coppers. Go up to that address. The police want those two anyway for the Masterson jewel job. They'll take them in on that. Then you tell the cops what you know about the murder of Latimer. The cops'll make those two talk. They have ways, you know."

"Yeah," I said, "I know. But don't you think you should come along with me? They'll want you as a witness."

She shook her head slowly. "I'd rather keep out of it," she said softly. "The terrible publicity, you know. I come from a small town. I wouldn't want my parents

to read about me in a murder trial, even though I am perfectly innocent."

"Of course," I murmured. "I'll get after these guys right away. But you better stay here in case I want you."

She walked across the room, stood before me her blue eyes boring into mine. "You know," she said, "I think you're wonderful."

She moved her face forward suddenly and kissed me full on the lips. It was quite pleasant.

I took two cops—Sergeant Mahon of homicide and Ritter, his right hand man—with me to go calling on Louie and Jake. Their abode was a railroad tenement in the far reaches of the west side.

THE three of us pushed through the door at the instant Jake opened it. We went in with drawn guns. Louie and Jake gaped at us. Louie recovered first. His hand dove for his hip. There was a sudden explosion from Mahon's gun. Louie yelped. Blood dripped down from a hole on his wrist, stained the dusty carpet on the floor.

"Come on," said Mahon. "You're going with us."

Jake glowered at him. "For what?"

"Robbery. Violation of the Sullivan Act. And murder."

"Whose murder?"

"Robert Latimer's."

I sighed. "You better hold that last charge for a while, sergeant," I said. "Hold 'em on the others."

Mahon looked at me, puzzled. "Why? I thought you said that—"

"There's another angle to the case," I told him. "Send Ritter along to book these boys and you come with me."

We did it that way. Ritter took a hack with his pair of handcuffed prisoners. Mahon and I climbed in a second cab and drove back to Helen Maynard's apartment. When I introduced Mahon to her she looked blackly at me.

"I thought I told you I wanted to keep out of this."

"Sorry," I said. "But I promised you I would spare no effort to track down the killer of Bob Latimer."

"Well?"

"I'm still not sparing any."

Mahon looked around helplessly. "What

the hell's going on? Didn't Jake and Louie fire those two bullets we found in Latimer's body?"

"Sure," I said, "but what's that got to do with it?"

Mahon looked at me as if I had gone mad. Helen Maynard glared and there was a tiny shadow of perplexity in her deep blue eyes.

"What are you trying to do?" she demanded and somehow she didn't seem so soft and helpless any more. "I'm sure those two guys killed Latimer. Examine their guns; examine the bullets. Ballistics will find they check. I know it."

"I know it, too," I said. "I'm not denying they shot Latimer."

"Then," said Mahon, "why did you tell me not to book 'em for murder?"

"I don't deny they shot Latimer," I repeated. "But they didn't kill him."

There was utter silence in the room. "Suppose you clear it up?" said Mahon.

The girl said nothing with her lips; her eyes were furiously eloquent.

"All right," I said. "This Latimer whom I knew pretty well wasn't a very honest guy. He was shrewd and close lipped. He trusted no one and didn't expect to be trusted himself. He operated barely inside the law and sometimes slipped over the edge. I can't quite picture him telling dangerous business secrets to any woman. Even one as attractive as you, Miss Maynard."

"Why not?" she asked in a sharp tone. "We loved each other."

"The hell you did," I said. "You hardly knew him. Let me tell you how I figure it. Your story about Arnold, his confederates and the hidden Masterson jewels is true. I know that personally. I know moreover that Latimer went to Ossining to see Arnold. But I doubt very much that Jake and Louie went to see Latimer, themselves."

"Why?"

"Because they were hot and they wouldn't trust Latimer. They probably knew him well enough to know that if there was any percentage in it for him, he'd turn them in. They sent an emissary. They sent you, Miss Maynard."

"Keep talking," said Mahon, "I'm still baffled."

"I don't think Miss Maynard is," I

said. "But I'll go on. As emissary, Miss Maynard makes the deal for Jake and Louie. Then they got Arnold to reveal the whereabouts of the jewels and promised that his cut would be safely held for him. A jailbreak may even be arranged. This Latimer does. Arnold tells him where the stuff is. Latimer gets it. He calls Miss Maynard, tells her he is ready to deliver it for his fee."

The girl's blue eyes were cold as the Arctic Sea.

"**T**HEN," I continued, "Miss Maynard begins to figure angles. Perhaps she can pocket Latimer's fee and keep all the jewels herself. That would set her up for life. She goes to Latimer's office. She takes the jewels. She leaves. She phones Jake and Louie, telling them that Latimer intends keeping the stuff. Telling them that Latimer has the jewels planted in his apartment and he intends disposing of them himself. She suggests they go to Latimer's office at once and kill him. After all, they had no recourse at law. After shooting him they can roll his apartment and pick up the stuff. So they come in and blast Latimer. As a matter of fact I was there when they did it."

Mahon shook his head. "You're going too fast for me."

"And for me," snapped the Maynard girl. "How could I possibly take the jewels away from Latimer? What did I do, threaten to beat him up?"

I looked her squarely in the eye. "No," I said, "You killed him."

"Wait a minute," said Mahon. "How could she kill him when you say you saw Jake and Louie blast him? How—"

"I'll tell you," I said. "I took a drink of water in Latimer's office. I got some blood on the edge of the paper cup. That paper cup with all the others which were in Latimer's waste-paper basket are now reposing in Miss Maynard's garbage can."

"Why?" asked Mahon.

"Because Miss Maynard, upon deciding she wanted the works for herself, did away with Latimer. She's a photographer. All she had to do was take a vial of potassium cyanide from her dark room and go up to Latimer's office. She knew he kept a bottle in the desk. She asked for a drink.

She dumped the cyanide into his cup. Then she took the jewels, went out and called her thugs to shoot Latimer."

"You mean they shot a corpse?" asked Mahon.

"They shot a corpse," I said. "But afterwards Miss Maynard remembered the paper cups she'd thrown into the basket. She didn't quite know whether or not fingerprints could be taken from paper cups. She decided to play it safe, to come back and retrieve those cups. She did and ran into me. However she went into a fast act, sent me out of the room to get a paper towel and snatched up all the cups in the basket not knowing just which ones she had used."

"You can't prove any of this," said Maynard in a dry voice. "You haven't got the jewels."

"I know where they are. In your purse is a card, dated today, which states you have rented a safe deposit box at the Federated Bank. There is also a key there which is the type used just for safe deposit locks. You sank the jewels there as soon as you had taken them."

"Damn you," she said and I reluctantly admired the steadiness of her voice, "You went through the house when I got that damned fool phone call. Just a lucky coincidence. Just dumb luck."

"You underrate me," I told her. "Sergeant Mahon made that call at my instructions. I wanted to look the place over."

"All right," said Mahon. "You better come along, lady. . . . You did a nice job, Lieutenant Latimer."

"Lieutenant?" said Maynard. "Latimer?"

"Bob's brother," I told her. "We knew he'd seen Arnold in Sing Sing. We figured why. I called on him to tell him to keep to hell out of it. I hadn't spoken to him for years because we never quite agreed on what was right and what was wrong. But this time I thought he was sticking his neck out. I went in to tell him. I found him dead. Because the color was still in his face, because there was a film of foam on his lips, I figured it was cyanide."

She put on her hat.

"You tried to play me for a fall guy," I told her. "You tried to play everyone for fall guys. You wanted Jake and Louie sent up to cover up your murder, also so that they'd never be able to touch you if they figured you swiped the jewels. Then you wanted me to put the finger on them for you. I'm afraid you've lost all around."

She turned around, refused to look at me and said to Mahon, "I'm ready, sergeant."

I jammed on my hat and left the room. The hardest part of the job was yet to come. I had to go home and report Bob's death. For some crazy reason he had always been Mom's favorite child.

MURDER IN A DEAD HEAT!

Mr. Maddox, busiest bookie that ever covered a bet, arrives at Suffolk Downs—and promptly loses his shirt to an old lady who doesn't know a furlong from a filly! It was a big jump from that prim and proper house in Back Bay Boston to Joe Maddox' hotel wire-room, yet Miss Sabintha Clay managed to bridge the gap and come out on the right end of a long-shot wager. But when she wanted to double her win with a second screwball gamble on a nag that couldn't win if he ran alone, Maddox decided to investigate. That was when he was met at the door by Uncle Edgar and his wooden gun, and asked politely to join the "museum of corpses upstairs." It's T. T. FLYNN at his best in a smashing new novel-length racetrack murder mystery.

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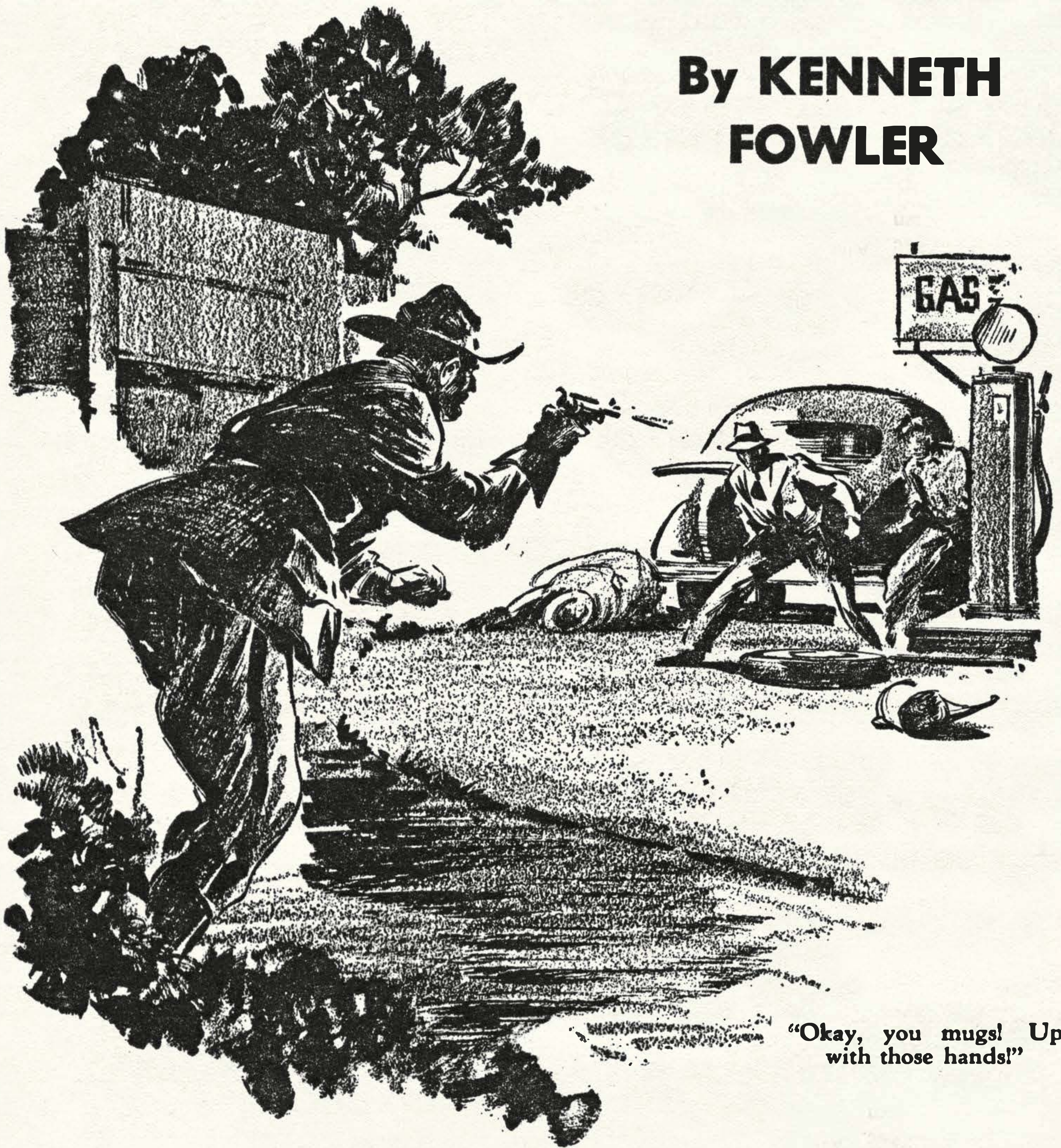
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KILLERS' CURFEW

By KENNETH FOWLER



"Okay, you mugs! Up with those hands!"

Joe's heart and his patriotism were in the right place—but his name was against him. And Joe took a chance on breaking the law to put himself right with the authorities.

"HEY, Joe! Fill 'er up!" Joe heard the voice, frowned as he swung and saw Pat Burke. Since his run-in with Burke over the first gas curfew, he and the big State trooper had been barely speaking. There had been nothing legally compulsory in that earlier seven to seven closing rule, and Molly'd

been sick at the time; he'd needed every cent he could scrape together to make ends meet. But Burke had fixed it with the distributor. He'd had to shut down at seven each night or go without gas.

He walked over and Burke growled: "Sorry about Joey, pal. I just heard, over at Gralicer's."

Joe dunked the hose nozzle into the tank of the trooper's motorcycle.

"Thanks," he said stiffly.

"Tough about losin' your lease here, too," Burke said. "Why'n't yuh get a defense job?"

Joe looked up. He laughed harshly. "I tried that. They don't want guys with names like Maniotti."

Burke stared off thoughtfully. "Your father was naturalized, wasn't he?"

"Sure." Joe hung up the hose. "But that's not enough for these defense guys. Yuh gotta be related to somebody that came over in the Mayflower."

Burke said: "Tough luck, fella, but I guess that's the war." He kicked down on his starter pedal; then as the motor broke into a quick roar: "Don't forget the curfew, pal. I'm still supposed to keep an eye on you birds, remember!"

Joe followed the trooper with a bitter stare. He wasn't likely to forget the curfew. The War Production Board's order was for a maximum 12-hour working day; but to simplify enforcement county gas station proprietors had voted to re-establish the seven to seven schedule, so that actually he had the same old turkey back on his doorstep. Well, he wouldn't have that to worry about much longer.

His thoughts turned to Joey as he wheeled and walked somberly back to his little white stucco office. It had been hard leaving Molly that morning; hard to think of her as she'd been when he'd left her, bent tensely over little Joey's bed and listening with that acute look of pain on her face to his labored breathing.

"Joe," she'd whispered to him, "please come home early. I'm worried, Joe."

He had withdrawn his hand from the fevered brow of the boy on the bed.

"Now it's no good to worry, honey. Doc said he'd pull out of it, didn't he? And then if we can send him to that sanitarium Doc mentioned—"

Molly interrupted him. "That's what's worrying me, Joe. Five hundred dollars—"

"Honey, worrying's not going to help either one of us. Now you keep that chin up!"

Joe had patted the hand of the sleeping child; then he had kissed Molly's drooping, tired motuh. The kiss had come from

his heart, but it had had no spirit in it, no hope.

Five hundred bucks . . . He was a good mechanic; he could have made that much in just a few weeks at Liberty Aircraft. But now he remembered the foreman's words when he had gone there for a job.

"Maniotti, huh? Sorry, bud; you're probably okay, but I can't take a chance." And later he'd heard about the rule that you had to be American from a couple generations back at least. He knew then that he was washed up. He knew that his chance of getting that dough for Joey was practically zero.

At seven, his pump lights out and the pumps locked, he went to his desk to work on the stock inventory he was trying to get done before the new lease-holders took over. At nine, still working, he heard the car drive up and went to the door.

The man coming towards him across the driveway was swarthy, tight-lipped.

"We need some gas, buddy. And we got a flat."

Joe said: "Sorry I can't help on the gas. There's a—"

He stopped, freezing. The man's hand had flipped up to show the blue gleam of an automatic.

"Get goin', buddy. Move fast and yuh won't get hurt."

Joe stared at the gun. "I—I'll need my keys," he faltered. "They're—"

"Okay, get 'em. And make it snappy."

The man followed him into the office, stood directly behind him as he reached up to the key hook. He swung with a start as a second man came through the doorway. The man walked to his phone and with a savage yank wrenched out it wires.

The automatic jabbed him. "Okay. Now step on it."

He snapped on his pump lights and stumbled into the driveway. The car stood backed against his high-test pump, its right rear tire flat. He jacked it up and went to work—slowly.

The second man came over. He leaned into the car and turned the radio on softly. A news announcer was speaking in an excited voice, and with a straining effort Joe caught the words "aircraft company" and "serious loss."

Aircraft company! Maybe these two were . . .

The man in back of him snapped, "Come on, quit stallin'!" and he sensed the man's pent-up tension.

"I got just two hands, mister," he said. "Maybe you—"

"Shut up!" the man cut him off tensely. "Just step on it, that's all."

Joe felt his own nerves fraying under this strain of waiting, hoping. A faint popping that could have been a motorcycle's exhaust came to him from up the road somewhere; then the sound abruptly died, and his hopes sank.

He took out the car's spare and started putting it on. A heavy despondency settled on him. It had been too much to expect, too much to hope for. He finished the last bolt and one of the men clipped: "Never mind the hub cap. Stick in the gas."

Joe straightened with a stiffened slowness, then suddenly tensed. Had that been a rustling sound—over there in his hedge? He listened with an acute attention as he took out his keys to unlock the pump, but the sound wasn't repeated.

"Come on, fill it up!" fumed the man with the gun. "We can't be—"

A figure in gray uniform sprang from the hedge.

"Okay, you mugs! Up with those hands—fast!"

Joe's heart dove. The man with the automatic whirled and fired in hasty panic. But Pat Burke's gun was already at shoulder-level and he deliberately pumped one shot. The man with the automatic spun and fell; at the same instant his companion moved in a crouching leap for the car.

Joe yelled, "Not today, brother!" and swung down hard with the heavy tire wrench. The man crumpled, and Burke walked over. The first man was dead; Burke calmly stooped over the unconscious form of the second and snapped handcuffs on him.

"Nice goin', pal," he said to Joe Maniotti, then returned to the dead man and

made a rapid search of his pockets. His jaw was clamped rigid as he straightened finally with a crumpled paper clutched in his hand.

He fluttered the paper in front of Joe. "Thought one of 'em'd have it," he remarked grimly. "These are plans of a new Liberty pursuit ship—supposed to be faster than the latest Spitfire."

Joe looked at it with a dazed stare. "You—you mean these jerks were on their way from the plane factory? They were—"

"Brother, I mean but positively! I got the alarm about 'em while I was over at Galicer's a little while ago. Then from the hill up there I spotted this lighted pump of yours. Joe, that was fast headwork—switchin' on those pump lights so I'd think you were bustin' the curfew again."

Joe flushed, stammered: "Thanks—thanks, Burke. It was just a lucky break, I guess."

"Brother, it's gonna be lucky for—Hey, wait a minute! You're not goin' home yet!"

Joe Maniotti turned. He stared at Burke in surprise. "You want me—"

"Sure I want you—you lug! I want you to come with me and meet Matt Halliday."

Joe went rigid; he stared at Burke blankly. "Matt Halliday! You mean the president of Liberty Air—"

Burke broke in impatiently: "Listen, fella, you still want that job, don't you? Well, after I tell Halliday what you did here tonight it's in the bag—they'd take you on over there if your name was Schicklegruber!"

Joe Maniotti felt a stiff lump rising in his throat. He thought of Molly, Joey . . . thought with swelling pride of taking his place in that great overalled army of Americans who were "keeping 'em flying"

His eyes met Burke's. "I'll get my hat," he said in a choked voice. "Sure, Burke, I'll—I'll be right with you."

**THE BONDS YOU BUY TODAY WILL BUILD
THE PLANES THAT WILL BOMB
TOKYO TOMORROW!**

MUSIC FROM HELL

By JOHN
LAWRENCE



He was lying on his chest, his head and arms hanging loosely over the side of the dock.

The night was filled with the weird strumming sound that floated across the water from the distant deserted island. That dark, pine-studded island which was cursed with the sin of young lovers—and from which no music should ever come. Yet Fred Banks heard that music—as he learned of another young couple's rendezvous with death!

I KNEW it was coming—knew something was. For three days, a tight, tormenting uneasiness had been growing on me.

I tried to keep Carl Georges in the "ballroom" of my little log hotel after sup-

per. I poked up the blaze of pine logs in the oversize stone fireplace till the waxed floor glittered and the white bearskin glowed on the wall.

"A nasty night out on the water," I said. "A good night to lounge around in front of a fire."

Carl's coal-black eyes revealed amusement. "Pops, you're blowing sour again." He was a handsome devil—black hair with just enough silver in it to make it more romantic. Being an actor, he wore it long. He had the final cut features of his profession, a cleft chin, and a little waxed black mustache so perfect that it might have been manufactured. He was slender-hipped, graceful, with long, dark hands. If there was a flaw in his appearance, it might be that his eyes were just a shade too closely set. He lit a cigarette, loafed against the door jamb. "I came here for a vacation, Pops, not a revival meeting. Remember?"

He flipped the match out onto the veranda. "Or are you going to flash that tin of yours and lock me up so you can keep an eye on me?" He had started this line the day he arrived, as soon as he found that I was the local constable of a crimeless community.

"No," I told him. "I won't lock you up. But listen to me, son. Rosemary O'Hara's father has a devil in him! You're askin' for trouble."

He laughed and slid his slender hands in the slash pockets of his black corduroy breeks. "Hell, Pops, I've debated the issue with tougher guys than him. Don't worry—just a little innocent romance. What's life without romance?" He hesitated in the open door. "I may take a canoe from the boathouse, Pops. Don't get excited if one's gone."

He wandered on out, whistling softly.

I shook my head, filled my pipe slowly and reached automatically for a book.

I DIDN'T open it. Instead, I sat worrying.

For all his personality, Carl was a brash, selfish-minded youngster—if he were a youngster. I couldn't even set his age to my own satisfaction—although he spent most of his time off on canoe trips. He couldn't be very old. I wished he'd chosen some other spot to "get back to

nature" rather than my little twenty-room log outpost in the wilderness. He'd turned a bright eye on Rosemary O'Hara the first night he was here, when I had her in to wait on table. I never asked her in again—but the damage had been done. She'd never seen anything like Carl Georges in seventeen years up at Oliver O'Hara's brat-filled farmhouse.

Not that the O'Haras were farmers. They kept a few cows—in order to sell milk—and an acre or two of truck. Mostly, O'Hara was the local carpenter and builder; Ma O'Hara churned butter and did washing for some of the summer people. But I'd seen Oliver O'Hara, with a drink or two in him, revert to savage shanty Irish. If he once worked himself up over Carl Georges and Rosemary

The wind was rattling the big windows of the long, slender ballroom, and the fire was very inviting. But somehow I couldn't concentrate on my book.

I heard the screen door in the kitchen open, and I started to get up, thinking the wind had blown it in. Half up out of my chair I hesitated. Oliver O'Hara came slowly to the mouth of the hall.

One look at the flush in his gray cheeks and I knew he'd been drinking. He was tall, rawboned, with the map of Ireland on his face. He had heavy, hairy brows and a wild black forelock fell down over his short forehead.

He wet his already moist, purple lips. "Where's that musician at?" he asked huskily. His gray eyes were dull and heavy.

Because Georges, like most actors, could strum superficially on my old piano, he was a musician to Oliver. "You mean Carl?" I stalled, trying to think of something pacifying to say. "He went out somewhere."

"Where's Rosemary? She over here?"

"No." What *was* there to say? "Listen, Oliver"

He had turned and was gone, with his paddling, sidewinding Indian's walk. Before I could move, the kitchen door banged.

I looked at the ship's clock on the mantel. It showed ten minutes to eight. . . .

It showed well after nine when I finally gave up trying to make sense of ten pages of the book. I got up and prowled restlessly, put the little hotel to rights. Even

then, it was too early to turn in. I wandered outside to the veranda and stood looking out over the black restless water, the wind in my face.

That was when I got the odd sensation. There was no other word for it *but* sensation. I found myself instantly leaning forward, straining some inner sense to catch what? Vaguely, it gave me the experience of music, or a sweet relaxation.

Take a generous handful of silver and spread it on the floor. Set a pencil pointing roughly into their center. The coins would be the assorted islands of pine land around the junction of Lake Superior and St. Mary's River. The pencil would be the finger of mainland known as Buckingham Point, up at the head of the thirty thousand islands. It would also be the Buckingham Point Hotel, for my ballroom was built to completely cover the narrow finger of rock out into the water.

If one of your coins were oval-shaped, and directly facing the pencil point across a space representing two miles of water, that island would be *Campment D'Ours*. It was as if the weird sensation were coming at me from *Campment D'Ours*.

I strained in the roiling darkness, but I saw nothing, heard nothing above the wind and murmuring water.

My nerves hummed, and it dawned on me that perhaps a certain subconscious trick was being played on me, nudging my attention toward the island. It had a little history connected with it—modern, and pretty uninspiring—but history.

A youth named Hedleigh Noyes owned *Campment D'Ours*. You've heard of him. Up until the war, he was cutting a wide swath through his father's Chicago packing million. He was one of the ten or twelve families who had establishments scattered over twenty square miles of the vicinity. The Canadian Railroad, years back, had vainly tried to promote this district as summer playground—and incidentally built the tiny, twenty-room log hotel which, on my retirement as investigator for the line, they practically forced on me.

Noyes had shown us a new high in prodigality, having imported special workmen from as far as Chicago to build his place, flinging money around as though its possession pained him.

And he had hired Jim Bristol as caretaker.

+ + +

THAT, perhaps, was why I was drawn toward *Campment D'Ours*. Because what was happening between Carl Georges and the O'Hara girl was a deadly parallel to what had happened two years ago between Hedleigh Noyes and Jim Bristol's stepdaughter, Anne.

Not an exact parallel—but uneasily close. Anne Bristol had come in to do some work in young Noyes' household. She was a pale, pretty ash blonde thing—the English type of beauty, just as her stepfather's immense, powerful figure and blazing red face was Cockney from way back. The good-looking, improvident playboy had been taken with her.

And in a more literal sense, she had been taken with him. Young Noyes had acquired the habit of walking over the island with her. One day he gave her a ring. He tossed it off so casually that she took it as a trinket. It was not till her stepfather got a look at it that she learned that it was a fabulous valuable star sapphire.

Jim Bristol beat her within an inch of her life. The next morning she was gone, and so was Hedleigh Noyes. Evidently the young playboy lacked the courage to stand up to Jim Bristol's terrible rage. To be truthful, it was something to frighten any man, when Jim went berserk. He could crush a man's skull between his hands. And Noyes' wealth and position was no help to him this far from civilization, so to speak. At any rate, when the girl ran crying to him, Noyes had simply up and left in his cabin cruiser, carrying her along. He had not been back since.

And that was the last we ever heard of her. Jim Bristol refused to have her name mentioned in his presence. A rumor drifted back to us that Noyes had turned her loose, not very long thereafter, in Chicago. There was no reason to doubt that; she was a numb-headed little animal, for all her prettiness, and would soon bore a man like Noyes. And as a clincher, someone had, very recently; brought in a Chicago newspaper, revealing that young Noyes

was now about to marry a Chicago blue-blood. Obviously Anne had passed out of his life. But we did not expect her back here—not with Jim Bristol waiting.

The queer part of it was that Jim still continued to operate as caretaker of the island. A lawyer in the Soo administered the place and paid expenses.

So definite, however, was my weird feeling of the moment that I could not quite believe it was only a mental mirage. I thought of calling Jim Bristol and asking if there were anybody or anything on the island. He would know. His island, *Garnet*, was directly behind *Campment D'Ours*, about the same distance away as I was but, because of the terrain, in such position that he could see the buildings on the place from his front door.

I debated—and then suddenly realized that Jim had gone to the Soo a fortnight ago on one of his “monkey business” trips. That’s what he called them. Certain Toronto people, for months, had been trying to convince Jim that *Garnet* was loaded with copper and platinum, if not bauxite, now soaring because of the war. They wanted to drill for it. According to Jim—who knew every foot of *Garnet* like his own hand—they got hold of a faulty electrolytic survey, probably of some other island. He was foxy enough to stand off their offers of a share in the profits and was, he told us, holding out for a fabulous flat cash offer.

My knowledge was not of the best. Even as I considered, my phone rang inside the hotel—three long, two short. When I went in and answered Jim’s heavy, Cockney voice came through our normally ear-splitting static: “’Allo!”

He wanted to tell me to advise Oliver O’Hara that he had just come back, and to kindly re-commence deliveries of milk. I said I would tell him, and then blurted: “Wait a minute, Jim. Is there anybody over at the Noyes place? I thought I heard a noise or something.”

“Noise? In this wind. You must be off you ’ead. Well, wait a minute, I’ll ’ave a look.” I held on for a moment or two. He came back to say: “I don’t see anything, Fred. You been readin another of them ghost books?”

I hung up, but I could not beat down a fidgety uneasiness. I went back out to the

porch, disgusted with myself. A flash of light winked from the island, down at water level. It was like a very brilliant red spark.

And then the sharp crack reached me.

I STOOD there, struck numb. There was nothing at all in my mind except the sinking sick certainty that Oliver O’Hara had finally caught Rosemary and Carl Georges

I had utterly forgotten that I was the Law in these parts. It was seconds before I recovered sufficiently to remember.

I turned and stumbled inside to grab my windbreaker and—after only a second’s hesitation—my cartridge belt and heavy holstered pistol. I hurried back along the veranda, to the stairs leading to my boat-house.

Rosemary O’Hara ran up the steps into the light and stopped, panting. Her deep, long-lashed blue eyes were scared in her thin, delicate white face. “Mr. Banks—did you hear?”

“I heard it,” I said. “I thought you—where’s Carl?”

“I don’t know! I don’t know! I waited for him—over an hour—down by the Cove, but he didn’t come! Oh, I know something’s happened . . . I knew it would—I tried to make him tell me the last time what he was doing, but he just laughed. And tonight Pa’s out—I went home and Ma told me Pa’d took out after us”

“Yeah. I— Wait a minute!” I stopped suddenly, peered at her. “What did you say about the ‘last time’? You mean he’s kept you waiting—not showed up at dates with you before?”

“Oh, yes! He always comes late. But that doesn’t matter now—”

“Come on, then!” I took her arm.

She burst into terrified sobbing as we hurried down. “Oh, my God—if Pa—”

I said grimly, “Whatever’s happened, has happened. Pull yourself together now. Jump in.” I cast off, heaved my little out-board-motored skiff out into the water. We tossed for a minute, till I could turn the engine over, and then we sped swiftly toward the island. I laid my flashlight, alight, on the bottom of the boat.

The motor made too much noise for conversation. Rosemary knelt in the bow, her back to me, her eyes straining into the

watery blackness ahead. We made good speed. We were three-quarters of the way across when she suddenly whipped her head around to the side.

Then she was suddenly up on her feet, yelling at me, her eyes wide and white-ringed as she pointed out into the darkness. I couldn't hear what she was yelling, but her shaking finger moved steadily and she was almost upsetting the boat. I cut the motor hastily, and then I could hear her cry frenziedly:

"Look—look—there's somebody"

I flung the beam of the flashlight hastily around to where she pointed.

Oliver O'Hara was sitting, his oars drifting, in his dinghy. He was cowering. There was no other word for it.

I bent the tiller, sent the skiff bounding around till I whirled up behind him. I cut the motor and drifted. "You—Oliver—what are you doing here?"

He licked his lips. The drink had died out of him now and his eyes were reddened. He croaked, "I—I heard a shot."

"*Heard* it! Did you fire it?"

"No, no—not me!" He gulped, and his turkey neck bobbed frantically. "I—an hour or so back I was up the shore, lookin' fer—fer *her*. I seen lights out on Campadore, up in the guest house. I run over there, around to the back, thinkin' *they* were there. When I get there, they was nobody; the—the place was locked up again. I clumb back in the boat and when I'm just clear, I heard that shot."

I set my jaw. "Throw me your painter! Hurry up! I'm the constable talkin' to you now, Oliver!"

With him in tow, I kicked the motor alive again and we bobbed and pounded for the spot in the blackness where I knew Noyes' dock was.

ROSEMARY saw the body first. I had slowed down the outboard and was hauling in the slack of Oliver's painter to heave him in ahead, when she screamed.

I whipped my flashlight around.

Carl Georges was lying on his chest, his head and arms hanging loosely over the side of the dock. There was no mistaking his black corduroy breeches, nor the loose, still way his arms hung. Rosemary threw herself, sobbing, onto the dock.

When I got up, I had to move her aside almost bodily by the shoulders, so I could kneel down. I tugged the flopping body up onto the dock and turned him over.

His face was dripping from the splashing of the waves, his skin the color of wet sand. One coal-black eye stared frantically. Where the other should have been was a black, bloody hole, and blood, partly watered away, stained his cheek.

There was nothing in his pockets.

I stood up—just as the girl flung herself frantically screaming, on her father, clawing like a wildcat. "*You killed him! You killed him! You drunken old . . . !*"

I grabbed her, pulled her away as he stumbled backwards, his eyes frightened. "No, no, Rose," he croaked desperately.

The girl collapsed, sobbing, in my arms. I held her skinny body, vaguely petting her. I snapped at Oliver: "All right. We'll go up to the guest house where you say you saw these lights." I hesitated. "Have you got a gun on you, Oliver?"

"No," he cried huskily. "I swear—I never done this!"

The sobbing girl tried to writhe and squirm free. "He did! He did it and then threw his gun in the water!"

"Now take it easy, Rosemary. We'll find out what happened, never fear. Come on."

The island was a razorback. A path wound up from the dock, over the ridge and to the little plateau beyond. I flung a shaft of light to the left, where the main house, elaborate, towering, gray-shingled, sat silent and shuttered. I swung the beam round as we turned off to the right. The guest house was a low, shingled cabin with a long, overhanging roof.

Something white fluttered and I swung the flash beam along the pine needles that lay thickly everywhere. A scrap of paper was caught in fallen branches beyond the path. It looked fresh. I stepped swiftly over and retrieved it. It had been crumpled and then thrown away. It was in soft pencil and I recognized the scribbling of the dead man, Carl Georges. It read:

*Pierpont Hotel—3.8.39—19.8.39—4.23
C. N. W. R. R.—Car 132—Seat 4.*

I stared, uncomprehending, trying to make sure it had no bearing on things.

Oliver's hot breath came on my neck.

I turned and backhanded him away. "Stand over there!" I snapped, and stuffed the paper in my pocket as I stepped onto the ground-level porch.

The front door was locked by a rusted padlock. I knew there was no back door. I hesitated only a moment, then located a heavy stick, ran it through the hasp of the padlock and bore down. The hasp squealed out and I palmed the doorknob, threw away the stick and pushed the door inwards spraying light over the interior. I reached in for the light switch I knew to be inside the door, clicked it.

Nothing happened.

Oliver gasped frightenedly, "But—but there *was* lights! Somebody *was* up here! I could see them moving around even from the shore"

"Was there?" I said grimly. "Look at that room."

In the beam of my powerful torch, there was bare wicker furniture in the room before us, and an ancient upright piano. The piano lid was closed, and on top of it lay an old guitar. There was a rusty electric fan on a flimsy table just inside the door.

Over everything was a fine, thick coating of dust, so heavy as to make every object in the room look gray.

I turned to Oliver. "Walk inside."

He gulped, moved hesitantly a few steps in and looked at me over his shoulder.

"Look down," I said. "See your footprints? Where are the marks the 'people' you claim you saw made? A squirrel couldn't walk in that dust without marking it. Rosemary, do you know where the main switch is in the Delco shack?"

"Yes, yes, but"

"Go over there and throw it. And hurry back here."

SHE ran off, still sobbing. A moment later, the paper-shaded globe in the ceiling came alive.

I said, "So you saw lights and somebody moving. That's a stupid story, Oliver." I walked over and lifted the dust-covered guitar, looked at the deep encrustation where it had lain. When I looked at him, his eyes were trapped, stunned.

He whispered: "You—you ain't going to put it on me, Fred! You ain't"

My coat sleeve brushed the rusty guitar

strings as I went to replace it. It gave off a vague singing sound. Weirdly, it jerked me back to the sensation I had had on the hotel porch. I got hold of the thing, dug in my memory for a chord and played it—but the vague nostalgia wasn't there when it was struck fairly. I finally set the thing back and went over to wait, perched grimly on the arm of a wicker chair.

"What . . . what . . . ?" Oliver husked as the girl ran up to the door again.

"You've got just one hairline chance, Oliver. Jim Bristol will be here any minute, when he sees the lights on here. I happened to be talking to him just before I heard that report. I think he told me there was nobody up here tonight. If I misunderstood him, maybe you won't hang. Maybe."

Sure enough, the sound of Jim Bristol's speedy little launch was already audible, spluttering across the two miles of water from his island. We sat silent, listening to it. Plainly, he was putting on speed.

He burst into the little guest cabin exactly ten minutes later, panting, red-faced. He was a huge man, as powerful as a gorilla. The little spiked blonde mustache on his beefy red face looked silly. His steely, water-colored eyes looked at us in astonishment. "What—what you fellers breaking in . . . ?"

I told him, "Carl Georges—that actor who's been stayin' with me—is lying on the dock, shot."

His jaw sagged. "You—you don't mean it."

I said, "I mean it, all right" For a second I lost the thread of what I was saying, as a sudden startling series of thoughts that had been swirling in my head suddenly came to a point. "We—we just caught Oliver here making a quick getaway from the island. He claims there was somebody up here tonight with the lights on."

The big, red-faced Cockney blinked stupidly. "Here?" he exclaimed incredulously. "Tonight? Why—why, he's crazy! I been workin' around outside my place. I would have seed them. Like I told you Fred, there wasn't nothing—"

"No lights?"

"Lights? Hell, no!" A sudden, dawning horror came queerly over his face. He jerked around to look, thunderstruck, at

Oliver. "Why—why you—you done it—killed that bloke yourself and made up the story . . . Hey, Fred, *he* done it! I heard about Rosemary and this actor. By Jerusalem, that's it!" He gulped, strangling with excitement.

I scarcely heard him. I was crumpling the slip of paper in my pocket, my brain suddenly whirling to the startling, terrible conclusion.

"No," I said.

"No?"

"You heard me. You haven't got it exactly right, Jim. Not exactly."

I HESITATED. Even yet, chills were playing up and down my spine and I was incredulous. "Some of it's right. Oliver here did get a brainstorm over those two. Rosemary has been seeing young Georges—was supposed to see him tonight, matter of fact. Only he didn't show up. Instead, he seems to have come here."

Their eyes were like weight on me. "He came here—I guess he's been everywhere else in the vicinity in these last couple of weeks—came here to find something. I suddenly wake up to the fact that he's been prowling around looking for it ever since he got here. Tarnation! He wasn't on any holiday in the first place. He was on a snooping expedition! He found what he was looking for here in this house tonight. And then he was set. Once he had it, he *wanted* to attract attention—a certain party's attention—and, knowing that that party would instantly come rushing, he turned the lights on and made himself at home"

Jim Bristol's water-colored eyes glinted impatiently. "What sort o' nonsense is that?" he asked. "Didn't I tell you—"

"That's right—you did," I said quickly. "I'm putting this wrong. What I'm doing is trying to reconstruct the crime, like they do in the detective books, figure how it *might* have been. Let's put it this way: Say—just for fun—that he did come here and did turn on the lights. Of course it's pretty far-fetched, seeing that he didn't leave any footsteps on the floor—him, or whoever else was here."

Jim Bristol scowled uncomprehendingly, then a sort of worried concern popped his eyes. He gasped, "Hey, now, Fred,

you ain't been readin' one o' them ghost books?"

"It might be appropriate, at that, Jim. What's happened here is kind of like the ghost of what happened three years ago. Rosemary taking up with this Georges—well, it's something like your stepdaughter, Anne, taking up with young Noyes."

Bristol's red face was splotched and angry, and his teeth clenched. His water-colored eyes were gaunt. "Fred Banks, I told you before not to mention"

I hooked a thumb in my leather holster. "I mentioned him because I chose to, Jim. You just keep your place, because I'm kind of het up myself. And I'm the Law, in case you forget it."

I looked over at Rosemary. Her face was trembling, her eyes bloodstreaked. "Rose, I know it's tough for you kids up here—burning with all sort of romantic notions and not much outlet for it. But take my word, you're pretty well rid of this Georges. You can't see it now, but you will in a minute. He wasn't such a nice fellow. Just comfort yourself a moment."

I looked over at the shrunken Oliver. "Let's say you did see lights here tonight—that folks were, as I say, in here tonight. In that case, somebody's certainly gone to plenty pains to make it look like it wasn't so. Now why would they do that?"

I answered myself: "Well, maybe to make it look bad for you, Oliver, although they could hardly know you'd stumble into this like the fool you are. There must have been some other reason, as well. There must be some other reason why, say, a person would be desperate to make it look like this shack hadn't been entered in years. Maybe—maybe they'd even go so far as to take a bucket of dust from outside and, say, turn on that electric fan, to coat the whole room over. Sounds kind of silly, doesn't it? That is—unless you figure that maybe that person—now, mind, I'm just going hog-wild on all this theory—this person met Carl Georges here, lying around, his feet up, maybe strumming on that piano or the guitar. And maybe the party he met here ended up in losing his head and, for some reason, killing him. Then lugging him down there to the dock and setting about to fix the place so it looked like I said. Why would a person do that? Can you think of any reason?"

"Well, I think of one. Just one, matter of fact. *Maybe the party that did it didn't want any attention focussed on this guest-house, no matter what. Maybe he was scared crazy that people would start poking around here, looking for clues or fingerprints or something.* Of course this is all crazy theory."

"Crazy?" Jim Bristol said harshly. "I'll say it is!"

"But just for argument, let's go along with it. Let's say there's something around this house that a certain party is terrified will be stumbled on. Now, it'd have to be something pretty important, wouldn't it? *Something pretty horrible, perhaps, eh Jim?*"

His eyes were gaunt.

"You ought to be able to make at least a guess what it could be, Jim," I urged. "You been caretaker here all along. Kind of funny at that, too—seeing as how the rich young waster that owns the place ran off with your stepdaughter. But at any rate, you ought to be able to make a guess."

"I don't know what you're talking about! You're off your head, Fred!"

I SAID, "No. I'm not, Jim. I'm awfully sharp, right at this moment, Jim—not that it akes much sharpness, now that everything's fallen into line. Now that I see the original mistake that we all made."

"What?"

"Why, in thinking that Anne would be able to get along in the city by herself, after Noyes was through with her. She hadn't any brains to speak of; she was mostly a little native. Natives live by instinct—and once she was tossed out, her instinct would be to run home, no matter what had happened. Dumb, sure, but Anne was a dumb girl. Anyway, it's got to be that way. She couldn't stand up to the city; maybe she lost what money Noyes gave her and was desperate; maybe she still had money and thought it would mollify Jim. Anyway, somehow, some way, Anne must have decided to come crawling back home—within a month or two of when she ran off. Then that makes everything Carl Georges did, logical."

"D-did . . . Carl . . . ?" the girl stammered.

"Yes. He must have met young Noyes in Chicago, probably with Anne. Carl wasn't a nice fellow, Rosemary. He was a pretty sneaky, unscrupulous dollar-hunter. The set-up between Anne and young Noyes would delight his soul. Especially when young Noyes went and got himself engaged to a ritzy Chicago girl.

"A clever shyster could make the story sound terrible—the rich young waster and the innocent girl—inducing her to run off and then casting her adrift. Hell, there's even a legal angle to it—taking her to Chicago. Anyway, Carl Georges saw the possibilities for a shakedown that would keep him in luxury the rest of his life. All he had to do was locate Anne and talk her into it—and he was a damn good talker to women.

"Here—" I showed them the slip of paper. "Here's the record of the key point in his tracing of her. He found that she'd taken the 4.23 Chicago, Northwestern Train out of Chicago on the 19th of August, two years ago, which was just about eight weeks after she left here. That train runs to the Soo, about thirty miles from here."

I expected a break then, but it didn't come. I finished grimly. "So imagine his surprise, when he got to the Soo—and found that the trail died. She got to the Soo—but she never reached here—*according to Jim's story.*"

"But Carl Georges was neither slow-witted, nor clean-minded. He smelt something sour—and he quickly stuck his nose further into it. His original plan of lining up a squeeze on young Noyes had fizzled out, dead, finished—but the chase didn't leave him empty-handed. He suddenly realized that he'd wound up with something else, something entirely different. But it had possibilities even greater than his first scheme. He couldn't blackmail young Noyes under the circumstances, but—once he'd come down here and poked around, found confirmation of what he'd suspected—*then, by the Lord Harry, he knew he could blackmail Jim here.*"

"Blackmail me?" Jim Bristol raged. "Of what? My garden truck?"

"I'm beginning to suspect that you've been fudging us on this deal the Toronto money men have offered you, Jim. Maybe your island isn't so damned bare of metal

as you've insisted. Maybe it's really worth important money—and maybe Carl Georges, while he was in the Soo, found that out, too. He must have—or he wouldn't have bothered with you. And so, in the end, everything worked out fine for him. He could figure out just as well as I can, Jim, what must have happened when Anne tried to come home to a vicious-tempered gorilla like you."

Bristol's eyes were flaming and feverish. "What—what do you mean, Fred?"

"I mean I'm going to tear this shack to pieces, Jim. Maybe under this dust we'll find that Georges had the floorboards up—or the like—that he found where Anne had got to in the end. I'm willing to believe that when Anne came crawling home and you flew into a rage at her that maybe you didn't mean to kill her—but those hands of yours. . . ."

HE sobbed, flung himself at me like a madman, his face twitching. I jumped aside hastily, whacked him alongside the forehead.

Blood ran down his face. He whirled like a wounded bear, hysterical sobs coming from his deep chest, plunged at me—and got me in his terrible big arms.

I gasped, "Leggo, Jim—I'll have to let you have. . . ." and he squeezed the breath out of me in a moan.

I pulled the trigger of my gun against his stomach. The light blew out of his

eyes. His weight came on me, but the crushing, rib-straining hold did not relax. I squirmed the muzzle up a little higher and fired again. He fell away, both his shirt and mine burning from the explosion. He crashed down like a mountain log and lay there, while I beat out the fire on my shirt.

"He wasn't so dumb at that," I panted. "Fixing an alibi for himself on the phone with me—probably a little blasting powder floated on a board with a fuse, so it'd dump itself when it went off—to make it seem Georges was shot after Jim had got back home. . . ."

Rosemary screamed, ran and hid her face in her father's chest.

Oliver stared at me with gaunt eyes. "But—but how did you guess—all that? About Anne. . . .?"

"It wasn't guessing once I got started—once I realized somebody had been in this shack tonight. Run it over and you'll see it's plain, straight logic."

"But—but it was my word against his! How'd you know somebody had been here?"

"Why, that's simple enough, Oliver. That guitar is in tune. Guitars don't stay in tune three days, let alone three years. Carl Georges must have been playing with it while he waited here. Come to think of it, maybe the wind carried a little touch of the sound across to the hotel—there in a vague sort of way, earlier."

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FURLOUGH



His gun swung around, leveled . . .

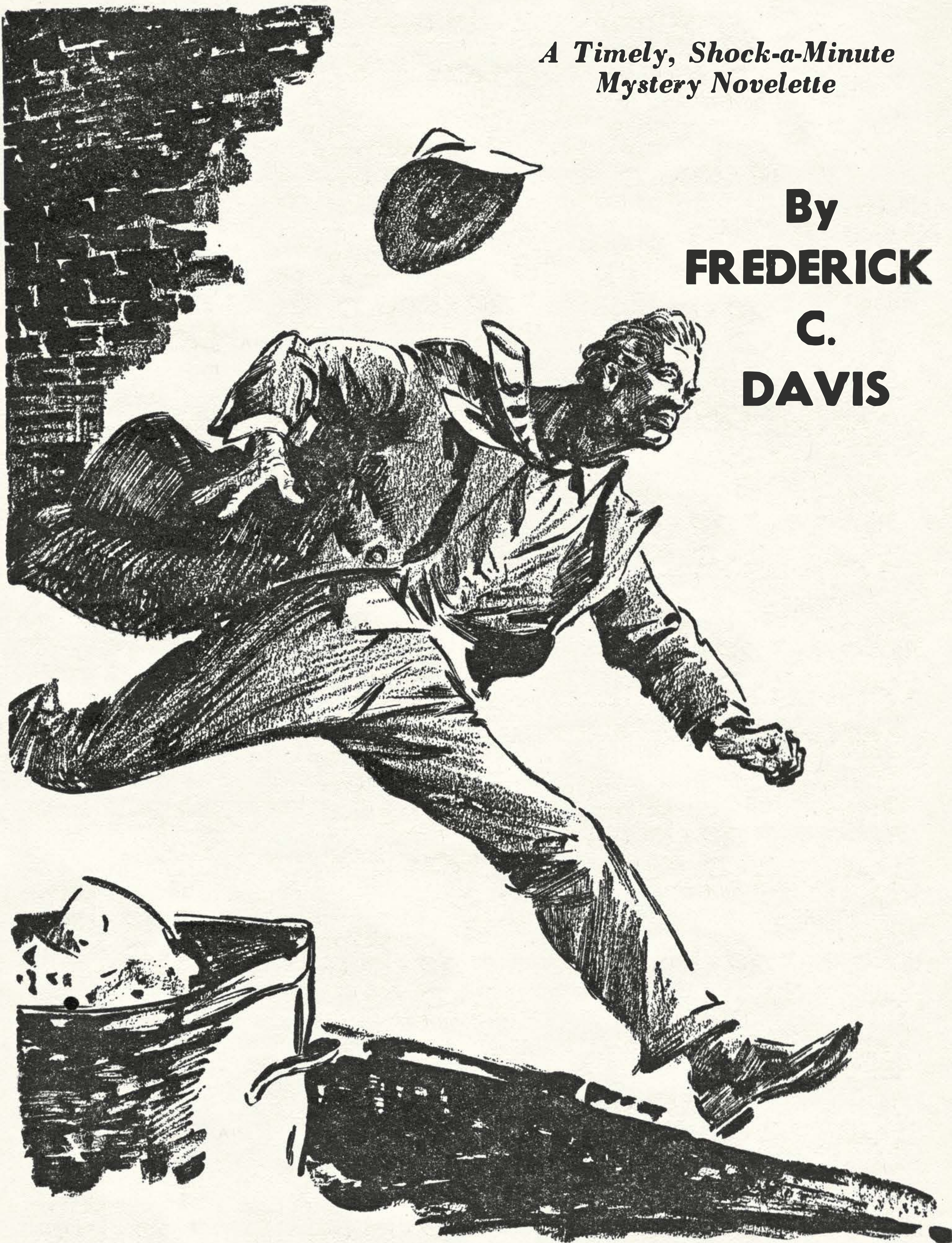
It was only a matter of hours before Dan Bond and Barry Kirk were due at the induction camp. But Barry was a fugitive accused of a cowardly murder. And in short, frantic hours Dan had to clear Barry of guilt, save him the disgrace of Army deserter—and bring him back to marry the girl Dan loved!

FOR MURDER



*A Timely, Shock-a-Minute
Mystery Novelette*

By
**FREDERICK
C.
DAVIS**



CHAPTER ONE

Our Numbers Are Up

THE second blow knocked all the fight out of him. He melted down to the shabby carpet, the neck of

the bottle slipping out of his loose hand, and stayed there, unconscious.

I kicked the bottle out the open door, having no weapon except my knuckles, and kept a wary eye slanted on him as I took up the phone. After a moment the operator said, "Who do you want, Ed?"

"This isn't Ed," I answered. "This is Dan Bond speaking, Alma."

"Dan?" Alma Loomis said from the central switchboard. "Didn't know you ever dropped in over there at Ed Finch's place."

"This is a special occasion—though not exactly a social visit." I watched the hulking, surly-faced man sprawled motionless on the floor. "Connect me with Mark Reece's office in the court house, will you, Alma?"

"All righty." I heard her plugging in. "Mr. Reece called in a few minutes ago to ask the time, so I guess he's still there."

Brandbury was the county seat, a town of about three thousand surrounded by farms and a dozen crossroads villages, and the local telephone company was privately owned. Antiquated and sometimes maddeningly inefficient, it was also pleasantly informal. Nobody ever bothered to ask for anybody else's number. You called for your party by name. The three exchange operators were thoroughly familiar with every subscriber by sight and by voice. Alma Loomis was the one who worked the four-to-midnight shift, and it was almost midnight now. Her way of handling my phone call was typically personal.

Mark Reece answered in a weary tone, "Selective Service office." Being secretary of the board, he had a right to sound weary; he was swamped with duties demanding every ounce of judgment, patience and energy he possessed.

"Dan calling, Mark," I said. "I'm at Ed Finch's place. Please hop right over here. I've found something."

Not wearily this time, but with tense hopefulness, Mark asked, "Something that'll help Barry?"

"Something that'll clear Barry. Come and see for yourself. I'll tell you the rest when you get here."

"Coming!" Mark blurted.

I turned from the phone quickly because Ed Finch was beginning to stir. He was tough and fifty pounds heavier than me, so I looked around for something to help keep him pasted down.

From his bedroom I brought two of his loud neckties. The house was a mess, though Ed himself was a gorilla-size dandy. I used one of his dazzling ties to bind

his thick ankles, the other to lash his hairy wrists together behind his back, and left him squirming there.

Next I searched the place. Ed Finch lived alone in this run-down cottage on the outskirts of Brandbury without a housekeeper. The bed hadn't been made for a week, dirty dishes were piled in the kitchen sink and dust-mice crouched in every corner. My object was a revolver. If Ed had it hidden somewhere close at hand, that fact would clinch the case against him. I hunted rapidly and methodically and in five minutes I was finished.

The gun wasn't there.

Hearing a car approaching, and thinking it must be Mark Reece, I went out into the dark and listened again; but now the sound of the car was gone. Waiting, I stood beside the well—the well in which the truth had been submerged beneath six feet of brackish water these two weeks—realizing again that this case meant far more to me than any other I'd ever tackled.

Necessarily it was also the last case I'd handle for the duration. Day after tomorrow, at 7:10 a. m., I must appear at the railroad station to leave for Camp Moffett along with twenty other Army privates. Technically I was no longer a lawyer and a civilian; I'd already been sworn into the Army and my two-week furlough, granted immediately upon my induction, was already almost up. Though time was very short now, I was doing my damndest to make it possible for Barry Kirk to enter active service with me.

But tonight Barry Kirk was still a fugitive from justice, wanted for murder. Not only that, but on the morning of the day after tomorrow he would also become, automatically, a potential deserter. That was even worse, the way Kay looked at it—and the way Kay looked at it was vitally important to me—but it was going to happen inevitably, unless I could bring Barry out of hiding, clear his name and get him aboard that train thirty-one hours from now. . . .

THE hum of a car came out of the night again, and this time a pair of headlights glared. The sedan swung into the driveway and braked. Mark Reece hastened toward me, but not

alone. He was a spare, quick-moving shadow, and the slender shadow at his side was a girl—Kay.

"I stopped for Kay," Mark explained. He was fifty-odd, a retired attorney, and Kay Reece was his niece. "She's so anxious about Barry, I couldn't keep her in the dark—if you've really got something."

"What is it, Dan?" Kay asked quickly. "Can you actually prove Barry had nothing to do with it?"

"The evidence is right here," I said. "I haven't found the gun so far, but I've got Ed Finch inside and I'm going to make him talk."

Mark asked next, "Have you called Chief Dugley?"

"Not yet. I'll do it as soon as you've seen this setup. Chief Dugley is prejudiced; he'd try to brush me off, but once you're satisfied that this is the answer he'll have to listen. First—"

"Dan!" Kay said in a little gasp. "What's that?"

A muttering voice, a strange thick-lipped babble of protests was audible inside the house.

"Ed Finch," I answered. "He's recovered consciousness and he knows he's in one hell of a jam. Come on in and—"

The next sound brought a sudden chill. Without warning a gunshot blasted. There was no visible flash of fire. The report boomed, echoing everywhere—between the walls inside, and also outside among the trees—and no other sound followed it. For a moment it shocked us to a standstill.

Then we broke the tension of our muscles and ran, the three of us, to the door. There we stopped again, struck with consternation, staring in at the ugly red splash on the face of the man I'd left lying bound hand and foot on the floor. . . .

* * *

Tillson's Garage stood three blocks from Brandbury's main corner. An enterprising man, John Tillson did a brisk, varied business. He carried a big line of spare parts for cars and tractors, sold accessories and batteries, and was the county distributor for a popular make of tire. A mechanic stayed on duty all night to handle emergency calls. On an evening

just two weeks ago, however, the wife of the night mechanic, Bill Church, had phoned John Tillson to say that Bill had gone to bed with a touch of the flu.

It was about two o'clock in the morning when John himself went over to the garage to see if everything was all right. The tire ban had been clamped down a short time previous, a few thefts had been reported, and John was worried about the hundreds of tires stored in the stockroom. He went in alone and unarmed, not really suspecting anything was up, but just to make sure.

Chief Dugley was dozing in the police above the five-and-dime, almost directly across the street, and heard the shots. The three quick, muffled reports were followed by the sound of a truck engine starting up, snorting and grinding off. It disappeared while Chief Dugley hustled over to the garage. He found John Tillson lying on the greasy cement floor with three bullets in his chest, dead.

The crime created a major sensation in Brandbury. Indignation ran high. The murder victim was our most prominent and best-liked business man. He left three grand kids. His widow, a charming woman, was prostrated. It seemed impossible that we'd never again see John breezing down State Street with genial hellos for everybody, or rolling up his sleeves to replace a broken duckfoot sweep on somebody's cultivator. We were all the more aroused because he'd been killed by the type of criminal which we'd grown to feel was the lowest on earth—tire-thieves.

A quick check of the stock showed that John had surprised the thieves when they were just getting started on the job. Only four tires were missing—four new heavy duty 6.00 by 16's. Because the entire stock had been duly reported to OPM, as the law required, their serial numbers were on record. The whole town looked for those four stolen tires. Actually it was a sort of mass amateur investigation. They weren't found—not at first.

Early on the morning of the second day following the murder, Barry and I went down to the railroad station. Twenty-eight other men were there too, all responding to their formal notices of induction into the Army. Their families showered good wishes on them, even though most of us

would be coming back that same day. Kay was there to see Barry off, of course; there was a proud glow in her, and Barry was awkward and wordless. Mark Reece, as secretary of the draft board, was as solicitously busy as if all thirty of us were his own favorite sons. While hands waved the train chugged out, hauling us toward Camp Moffett. We were all pretty excited about it.

That whole day at camp was devoted to a thorough-going physical examination. A corps of medical specialists went over us practically fiber by fiber. Eight of the thirty were rejected. The other twenty-two, including Barry and me, were then formally sworn in. With our right hands raised, and mumbling solemnly together, we became, at that moment, buck privates in the Army of the United States of America.

Two of the men chose to remain at camp, to begin their basic training at once, while the other twenty accepted the usual two-week furlough which was granted so that we could put our civilian affairs in order. The train brought us back to Brandbury late in the afternoon. Almost the same crowd welcomed us; but among them was Chief Dugley. And something had happened to Kay. She looked pale, fearful. I glanced at Barry and wondered what was up.

Chief Dugley grabbed Barry's arm the minute he stepped out of the coach. There was a hard glint in the chief's eyes.

"Where were you, Barry," he asked bluntly, "at two o'clock in the morning, two nights ago?"

"Why, I was in bed, asleep, of course," Barry answered. He lived in a small room he'd fixed up in his greenhouse. "Where else?"

"Well, that's no good," the chief said. "You're under arrest for the murder of John Tillson." His hand tightened firmly on Barry's arm.

Barry tried to laugh. "What kind of joke is this, chief?"

But it wasn't a joke. Dugley's grimness, his few pointed words and the ominous quietness of the crowd soon made it very clear that this was deadly serious. Chief Dugley had found the four stolen tires that day, all four of them on the same car—Barry Kirk's. . . .

WHILE the chief grilled Barry unmercifully inside a locked cell in the county jail, Kay came with me to my office. She sat stiffly in the chair beside my desk, her blue eyes stunned, her lovely face pinched.

"It isn't possible, Dan!"

Of course it wasn't possible. I'd known Barry Kirk all my life. I loved the guy. An awkward, fumbling sort, red-headed and impetuous, he had a broad, boyish grin that came easily. In his little greenhouse he'd grown roses that were blue-ribbon beauties, though he'd never in this world earn more than a bare living at it. He could make mistakes like anybody else, and he'd gotten into his share of scrapes, but certainly he had no talent for thievery and no capacity for murder.

"You'll do your best to get him out of it, Dan, won't you?" Kay said earnestly.

"If I get him out of it, you'll marry him some day," I said. "If I don't get him out of it, maybe you'll marry me instead."

"Dan!"

I gazed at her soberly, thinking how cockeyed and tough it was. You can love a girl to the point of pain and all the while she loves some other guy just as hard, and the other guy is the one you like best among the whole human race. I had to do my damndest to exonerate Barry Kirk so that some day the girl I loved could have him.

Kay and I talked it over. It looked bad; but, promising her I'd do everything possible, I went out, asked questions of everyone I could buttonhole, then hurried over to the jail to find Chief Dugley just striding in. A brusque, hard-minded man, the chief looked particularly sour. I followed him to the iron-barred door of the cell where Barry was moving in restless circles, utterly bewildered.

"In the very first place, chief," I said, "this was not a one-man job."

He gave me a quick, searching look, then scowled at Barry.

"You told me you kept your revolver in the desk in your office, over at the greenhouse," Dugley said in his flat, rasping tone. "But it ain't there, Barry. It's gone. Where'd you hide it?"

Dazedly, Barry could only repeat, "Gone?"

"Barry hasn't hidden his gun anywhere, chief," I said. "If it was the one used in the robbery, it was stolen and not brought back afterward. As for those tires, plainly enough they were planted on Barry. No sane man would ride around on four pieces of evidence that everybody was looking for—evidence that would incriminate him in a murder the instant they were recognized."

"Be that as it may, Dan," Chief Dugley said, "I got my duty and I'm doin' it."

"The man who actually stole those tires knew they were plenty hot," I persisted. "He didn't dare use them himself, or try to sell them. It was risky even to keep them hidden somewhere. The safest thing was to get rid of them somehow, and at the same time stop the investigation if possible. That's exactly what he accomplished by putting them on Barry's car."

"You ain't provin' a thing, Dan," Chief Dugley retorted obdurately. "Just sayin' somebody else did it don't prove Barry didn't do it."

"Barry's car always sat outdoors, alongside his office. Somebody sneaked up during the night, jacked it up and substituted the stolen tires for Barry's set. Barry's were the same size and even the same make; he'd bought them from Tillson a few weeks before the ban. The stolen tires were muddied up a bit, so Barry wouldn't notice the difference. Now he's been caught with them, which was exactly what the real crooks intended."

"Don't you argue with me about it!" Dugley snapped. "You save your talk for the jury. I've seen Judge Bodlen and District Attorney Keyes, and I'm takin' Barry Kirk right now over to a special session of court to get him charged with murder."

Dugley unlocked the iron-barred door and grasped Barry's arm. Barry ambled down the corridor with him, looking like a man trapped inside the incredible realms of a waking nightmare. They went as far as the jail steps together, and there Barry cut loose with an impetuous, recklessly rebellious act that made it look all the blacker for him.

Suddenly Chief Dugley went sprawling, bellowing at the top of his lungs, his jaw marked red where Barry's fist had hit. Just as suddenly Barry was gone from

sight. Running to the steps while Dugley jumped up, dragging his old service revolver out of his hip pocket, I glimpsed Barry skirting to the rear of the jail. I shouted to him to stop, but he raced on—kept going as fast as his long, loose-swinging legs could carry him.

It was getting dark. Chief Dugley's attempt to give chase in a car got him nowhere. Barry had avoided the roads. With natural sagacity, he'd dodged through the woods, waded creeks and skirted invisibly along the fence-rows. The posse that went out later that same night couldn't find a hair of him. The bloodhounds that dragged Chief Dugley across country until dawn wound up by treeing a cat. They might just as well have tried to trail a phantom.

CHAPTER TWO

Hooked Evidence

IN THE *Brandbury Standard* the next day Kay publicly appealed to Barry to come back. I added a statement of my unshakable belief in his innocence and promised to leave nothing undone in my efforts to prove it. No answer came from Barry. He stayed gone.

It was evening again—with Barry still hiding the Lord only knew where—when Mark Reece called me over to his office, which was a courtroom converted to the needs of the Selective Service Board. His face was pinched with worry. Kay looked pale and inexpressibly tired.

"Like you, Dan," Mark said quietly, "Barry is now in the Army. He's an Army private on furlough, subject to Army regulations and orders. Like you, when you were sworn in, he was ordered to present himself at the *Brandbury* railroad station when his present furlough expires, at 7:10 a. m. a week from Wednesday."

"But if he doesn't come back, Mark?"

"If he doesn't come back he'll automatically be listed as absent without official leave."

"And then—if he stays away?"

"He'll be listed as a deserter."

"It's a sweet choice he faces," I said wryly. "Either Barry must come back to face trial for a murder he didn't commit,

with the evidence heavy against him; or else he stays away with charges of both murder and desertion hanging over his head."

"The murder charge will remain at issue," Mark said. "Perhaps it's improbable that Barry will be acquitted, but at least it's not impossible. But eventually there'll be no question at all concerning his status as a deserter. Barry will inevitably make himself a deserter if he persists in staying away."

"Chief Dugley and the State Police may find him—" I said—"but I doubt it."

"Then we've got to bring him back, Dan!" Kay said.

"We'll keep on appealing to him through the papers and by radio, but—" I wagged my head. "I know that guy. He's an individual with his own personal sense of right and wrong, which has nothing to do with the law or Army regulations. As he looks at it, he doesn't belong in all this trouble, doesn't deserve to be locked in a cell, denounced in a courtroom and pointed out as a killer. He feels it's an injustice for him to be hunted like a criminal, but everything waiting for him back here is even more of an injustice; so, he asks himself, why should he choose the greater of two evils? You see, he's handling it in his own proud way. With matters as they stand, we may never see him again—unless he's caught and dragged back to jail."

"But Dan," Kay said again, "we've got to bring him back!"

A loyal light, an almost fierce light, shone in her eyes. Her father, Captain Douglas Reece, had died in the Argonne. Her brother, Lieutenant Duncan Reece, was on Bataan; he was now listed as missing in action. It was impossible, Kay thought, that Barry must stand in their shadow, his head hung, pitch-brushed with the name of deserter.

"There's only one way to do it," I said. "That's to clear his name. He'll come back then, but not before. And that, God help me, is the job I've taken on."

* * *

It was a crazy way to work at it. I might be seen prowling through people's yards at night, and then Brandbury's favorite young lawyer would have some em-

barrassing explaining to do. It was also risky. I might be mistaken for a chicken thief and get myself thoroughly peppered with buckshot. But it was the only way, and I stuck to it; and here, finally during the hushed hour before midnight, I stood beside Ed Finch's well, uncoiling a long rope with an iron hook knotted to one end.

Night after night for more than a week I'd been sneaking about, persistently searching, accomplishing nothing; but at least there was method in my madness.

Having analyzed Barry's predicament, I was logically sure of the truth, even though I had no way at all, so far, of proving it. Two men had planned to steal a truckload of John Tillson's tires for the purpose of bootlegging their loot at fancy prices. They lived in Brandbury; not being professional crooks, and not owning a gun, they'd taken Barry's—he never locked his greenhouse doors. John Tillson had surprised them when they'd only started the job; panic-stricken, they'd shot him and fled. Next they'd planted the stolen tires on Barry's car in order to protect themselves. In all this there were only two leads.

First, Barry's gun. It was still missing. There were so many possible places of concealment for an object the size of a revolver, however, that it seemed impossible to find in time. This first lead, then, was no good; but the second held more promise.

Barry's tires. His set of four tires which the crooks had removed from his car in order to substitute the stolen ones. Four big, heavy tires were not easy to hide. The question buzzed in my mind—where were they now?

I was certain they weren't in use. To use them would be too dangerous. The crooks would fear that Barry might have noted down their serial numbers. Actually, I'd found no such record among the papers in his office; but Kay had told me he'd had a bit of tire-trouble, and she'd described them. One had been vulcanized; another had a patch inside; each of the other two had shallow cuts in their sidewalls. Barry would have recognized them easily; I could recognize them also. No, his tires were not in use, nor had they been sold. They must be hidden somewhere.

How could one dispose of four tires which one must keep out of sight at all costs?

He might store them in his cellar or his attic. Neither of these would be a smart place, but even so, I couldn't get a warrant to search every cellar and attic in Brandbury and all the surrounding villages.

He might bury them; but there were so many possible burial places, in all the yards and all the fields and gardens that a search would be hopeless.

He might throw them into a creek or pond; and again, if he'd done this, it would be futile for me to try to drag every

and my arms aching, I invariably felt that perhaps the tires were really there but somehow I'd failed to hook them. Soon, having exhausted almost every possibility in Brandbury, I faced the even more disheartening prospect of scouting out to the surrounding villages. Now my furlough was almost spent—and Barry's too.

Then, at last, I reached Ed Finch's place. I approached it from the rear, with a hunch that here was a better bet than any of the others. Ed was frequently out of a job, due to his hard drinking. He liked money, and paid fancy prices for his fancy clothes. Sly and mean-minded, he'd consider it very smart to steal a truckload

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pool and every stream for miles around.

Where else. I could think of only one other practical possibility: they might have been tossed into a well. A well close at hand, particularly an unused one, would offer a quick, reasonably secure means of getting rid of them. But how many open wells were there in Brandbury and vicinity? Perhaps hundreds! Yet it was the only plan I could possibly adopt.

DURING the day I scouted about, spotting wells wherever I found them. Late at night, when houses and stores were dark, and the streets of Brandbury deserted, I prowled. I carried a long rope to the end of which I'd attached an iron hook. I lowered the hook into one well after another, swinging and twisting it about in an effort to snag whatever objects might lie in the black depths. I shifted from yard to yard, from street to street, night after night.

In this place a dog would bark, warning me off. In another chickens or ducks would squawk an alarm. I encountered barbed wire fences; I tripped over vines; I stumbled into junk-heaps and bog-holes. My hook brought up old buckets, old lanterns, old chains, and once an old baby buggy. Turning from a well, my back

of tires, bootleg them and get from two to five times their pre-war value. Actually he wasn't clever enough to engineer such a job on his own, but he'd be quick to fall in with such a plan master-minded by someone else.

Lights burned in Ed Finch's cottage as I crept up to his well. As I'd already done thirty or forty times elsewhere, I snaked my rope down into its depths. I'd become expert, able to feel the contour of the shaft bottom, to twist the hook so as to catch a submerged object with very few misses. My pulse began to pound. I hooked something heavy that bumped the stones as I pulled it up. Yes—a tire!

My flashlight showed me exactly the proof I'd labored to find these many nights . . . a tire of the same make and size as Barry's—and this one had been vulcanized!

I left it lying in the weeds, and the other three still resting on the bottom of the well to wait for someone in authority to haul them up. Ed Finch was one of the guilty men, and at this moment he was inside the house.

Quietly I went to the door and thrust it open without knocking. Ed Finch looked up with a start. Seated, he held his position rigidly. He was in the act of pouring

the last of a bottle of rye into a glass—as I moved in on him.

“All right, Ed. It’s caught up with you. You helped to kill John Tillson. Frank Gates was in it with you, wasn’t he?”

Finch sprang up, dropping the glass, hitting out with his clubbed left hand. It grazed my ear. My first blow slid off his cheekbone. Then he had the neck of the bottle clenched in his other fist, had it lifted to smash me over the head. My second punch connected squarely with his jaw. He melted down to the shabby carpet, the neck of the bottle slipping out of his loose fingers, and stayed there, unconscious.

I’d lost no time about making the most of this break. I’d phoned Mark Reece at once; he’d come in a hurry, with Kay; and I’d promised them that this would clear Barry. It would bring Barry back, I’d thought jubilantly—free him of the charge of murder, remove him from the dishonor of becoming a deserter, enable him to leave with me on time for Camp Moffett. Then, without warning we’d heard the shot—the single gun-blast that sent us running to the door of the house.

Ed Finch lay there in the center of the room, still bound hand and foot with his gaudy neckties, an ugly red splash on his face—dead, silenced.

CHAPTER THREE

Perfect Alibi

WHILE Kay and Mark stood there in the doorway, stunned and uncomprehending, I skirted around the house. Another road passed not far to the north. Someone using a car—I recalled having heard it—had stopped nearby, had come quietly across the adjoining field and had fired through the screen of an open window. Just as I found the bullet hole in the screen I heard the car again—the sound of a motor fading away.

To give chase would be hopeless. The car would be back in Brandbury, even before I could get a message through to Chief Dugley by phone.

I went to the phone regardless. A different operator was on duty now; her name was Jean Knowles. Responding to the urgency in my voice, Jean connected

me at once with Chief Dugley’s office.

“Please hop over to Ed Finch’s,” I said. “He’s been shot dead. Before you come get your hands on Frank Gates.”

“Frank Gates?” the chief blurted. “What for?”

“I’ll explain the whole thing when you get here.”

I disconnected before the chief could ask any more questions, and found Mark gazing at me curiously.

“Frank Gates?” he echoed too. “What makes you think Frank did this, Dan?”

“Ed was Frank’s closest pal for years. Ed was a big dumb lug who hero-worshipped Frank because Frank’s so much smarter. Ed helped with the Tillson job, so common sense says he was in it with Frank. Frank was the brains. He’s exactly the type—a man who loves to pull off slick ones, and cash in.”

Kay asked quickly, “But can you prove that, Dan? Remember, Frank is also a close personal friend of Chief Dugley.”

“I know, but I can prove Ed’s complicity beyond a shadow of a doubt, and Frank will have to do plenty of convincing talking to get himself out of this. I don’t believe he’ll succeed. Somewhere there’s got to be concrete evidence to clinch this case against him.”

“You’ve so little time now, Dan.” Kay said.

“I’ve so damned little time; but I’m going to use every minute to make it possible for Barry to catch that camp train.”

A car hummed down the road. It stopped behind Mark’s. Chief Dugley had hustled.

The other man was Frank Gates.

Eyeing me narrowly, the chief asked, “Well, Dan?”

Watching Gates, I said, “Ed was one of the two men who robbed the garage and killed John Tillson. Look at that tire leaning against the well out there. It’s one of the four they took off Barry’s car in order to substitute the stolen set. The other three are still under water. I had to knock Ed down and tie him like that. While I was outside somebody fired through the window and killed him.”

“Somebody?” Chief Dugley’s eyes were still narrowed. “Usin’ the same gun that killed John?”

“Probably. A test will show that. The

rest is even more probable. Ed was murdered by his partner in crime."

"Did you see this so-called partner?"

"No," I was forced to admit. "But obviously Ed was killed in order to shut him up. The partner happened along just after I'd cornered Ed. He couldn't trust Ed to keep quiet. Using a gun, he made sure Ed wouldn't name him."

"And just who do you figure this partner of Ed's was, Dan?"

"You know as well as I do, chief. Everybody in Brandbury knows who's been Ed's buddy for years."

"You mean Frank, here."

Gates stood silent at the chief's side, handsome, forty-odd and smart. No one was quite sure how he made his money. He talked wisely about the stock market, real estate deals, card playing and horse racing. He always looked perfectly pressed and fastidious. His too-smooth face shone and his hands were scrubbed as thoroughly as those of a surgeon about to operate. He made no answer to my indirect accusation. Instead, he smiled faintly.

"You're goin' off half-cocked, Dan," Chief Dugley reproved me. "Frank couldn't've done this. He's been with me all evenin'."

"With you!" I was jolted. "Are you sure of that?"

Chief Dugley nodded. "That's why I was so surprised when you told me over the phone I better pick him up. He was in my office with me when you called."

"But had he been with you every minute." I doubted my ears. "Was he with you a few minutes past midnight?"

"Every single minute since early evenin' Frank's been with me as close as you see him right now," Chief Dugley stated flatly. "He ain't been out of my sight once, not for a second. Dan, you're off on the wrong track. Whoever killed Ed Finch, it positively wasn't Frank Gates."

MY FINE theory had exploded in my face. I'd been too sure of it. It seemed that my last chance to exonerate Barry was gone.

"I'm takin' charge here," Chief Dugley announced. "Better clear out, all of you."

He crowded us to the door, including Frank Gates. Mark was silent with profound disappointment, and Kay was so

heartsick I decided grimly that I couldn't let it go at that. Turning back, I again buttonholed the chief.

"Whoever may be guilty, you've got to admit now that it's not Barry Kirk. Those tires in the well prove he was framed."

Eying me, Chief Dugley said, "Maybe it's *Ed* who was framed." Then he went on shrewdly, "Barry's still missin'. So is Barry's gun. He could've pulled off the robbery *with* Ed. He could've thrown those old tires of his into Ed's well, and then killed Ed, as a slick way of makin' hisself *appear* innocent."

"But good lord, chief—."

"Or, if Barry didn't do that, then *you* might have done it, Dan. You're tryin' your almighty damndest to clear Barry. You ain't stopping at nothin' to save him. If you thought this was the only possible way—" The chief's eyes were shrewd, shining slits. "There's absolutely nothin' so far to prove Barry's innocent. Matter of fact, this makes it look worse for him—and plenty bad for you too, Dan. You better keep quiet!"

Frank Gates, my prize suspect, was already driving off. Going back to the car, I found Kay and Mark both bitterly silent. I knew what they were despondently thinking; I was thinking it myself. "Only thirty hours until the camp train leaves."

The hours slipped past. The rest of that night was a period of empty frustration. The morning brought no new developments, and after almost a full afternoon of accomplishing nothing I sat alone in my office, keenly feeling the relentless pressure of time.

"Only fifteen hours left."

Still there was no word from Barry. The tension in Kay, I knew, was mounting minute by minute while the search for him went on without result. Tonight would be torture for her, and when 7:10 tomorrow morning came, with Barry still gone, something in her would die.

Brandbury seemed unusually quiet. It was a cloudy, oppressively dark day, this last day of my furlough, and of Barry's—this final day when I must close my office and step out of my old life, never to return again until victory was won.

The old town seemed precious now. All the little things about it, which I'd always taken for granted, seemed realer and

warmer than ever before. It was just before four o'clock, and Alma Loomis was hurrying into the telephone office directly across the street, just as she'd done every day for year after year. A rather homely girl in her thirties, she carried her big handbag and moved with a certain earnestness. She disappeared into the street door, then reappeared in the office on the second floor to relieve Martha Gates, who was just finishing her eight-hour spell at the switchboard. It all seemed so good and well-established; and in a moment, I knew, Martha would hurry down and across to Hannock's Market, to get meat and vegetables for the dinner.

Martha, however, broke her routine. Instead of turning to the market she came straight across the street, ran up the stairs and thrust into my office.

"Dan, I can't stand it any longer. I've got to get a divorce."

It had been a long time coming. Martha had loyally held on as long as she could, and it wouldn't be news to the town that at last she'd had enough. Her husband was Frank Gates—the same Frank Gates who had the unbreakable alibi.

"He doesn't care about me any more. I'd rather be entirely alone than feel he's cheating on me behind my back."

"Are you sure there's another woman?"

"No, I'm not really sure, Dan. That is, I've never seen them together, and neither has anyone else, as far as I know. I just feel there must be—some woman he's met secretly, and often, too. I know the signs. He's kept it from me so he could keep on getting money from me whenever he got into a hole. Well, I'm not going to let him walk out on me—run away with her."

"Except to suggest that you'd better not ask for the divorce on grounds of infidelity, because you're not at all certain of the other woman, I'm afraid I can't help you, Martha. There isn't time for me to handle your case, you see. I'm leaving for camp tomorrow morning. Just go down to Jim Leatherman's office, around the corner, and talk to him about it."

"If I *was* sure, you can just bet I'd *name* that woman!" Martha said, her eyes flashing. "She'd never be able to live in this town afterward." Then Martha rose. "Thanks, Dan, just the same—and lots of good luck in the Army."

I WAS still sitting there, trying to think where to turn next to help Barry, when Kay came in, looking ill enough to be under a doctor's care.

"Nothing, Dan?" she murmured.

"Absolutely nothing, Kay. Martha Gates was just in, wanting me to file a divorce action against Frank. She thinks there's another woman, but she hasn't any evidence of it."

"There is another woman," Kay said. "Frank's been so mean to Martha, I'm willing to help her prove it."

"How can you do that?"

"I don't know who the other woman is, but I've seen Frank with her. Two or three times I've passed his car, parked beside a back road, and a woman was with him. Once I was taking a walk when a thunderstorm came up, so I took cover in the barn of the abandoned farm. I saw Frank and a woman running out the back. I haven't told anyone until now."

"Who could that woman be?"

"Any young woman in town."

Taking up the telephone, I asked Alma Loomis to connect me with Jim Leatherman's office. Jim said Martha was there now, so I told him what Kay had seen.

"You'll probably need stronger testimony than that, though," I said. "I'd hire a good private detective to watch Frank. Sooner or later you'll catch him with the other woman and then you'll be all set."

Jim said he'd do it, and also that he wanted to talk with Kay soon. To Kay and me it seemed very much less important than Barry's predicament. About that there was scarcely anything more we could say. Kay was so wretchedly despondent, I swore at myself because I'd found nothing at all I could take hold of. Then, grimly determined to find something somewhere, despite the short time remaining. I took Kay to the door; as I opened it we saw Frank Gates.

He scowled at Kay, his sly mouth twisted, dangerous glints in his eyes.

"You let Martha mind her own business," he said levelly. "You keep your mouth shut. If you drag another woman into this thing you'll regret it. Get that? Keep your hands off or you'll get hurt!"

He turned about, hurried down the stairs and disappeared into the street.

Kay was frightened. I started after Frank Gates, but abruptly I turned back, a feeling of elation surging through me.

"It's all right, Kay," I said. "I think everything will be all right now. At least I see a chance—a long-shot chance—of getting Barry into the clear."

CHAPTER FOUR

Death on the Line

KAY didn't understand. Neither did I, exactly. It was just a spark kindling in my mind and I didn't dare put it into words for fear it would mean another disappointment for her.

"I'm taking you home, Kay," I said. "Please wait there. I'll let you know the minute I've got something."

She went with me, bewildered and anxious. Leaving her at her door, I looked around. Darkness was already settling. The Gates place sat several doors away, and the lights were on inside. Martha was still at Jim Leatherman's office, probably, so Frank must be back home alone. My own place sat just around the corner. Walking back, I saw lights also in the police office above the dime store and in the courthouse across the square. I hurried into Mark Reece's office.

"I've got a plan, Mark," I said. "I need your help. I can't be sure what'll come of it, but maybe it'll give us the proof we need. If so, we've got to get that proof right now, tonight."

He listened, eager to try anything.

"In half a minute I'm going to leave here and go over to Chief Dugley's office. I'll send him over. Then I'll go home. From there I'll give you a ring. Whatever I may say, pay no attention. I won't really mean it. Regardless of what you hear, hurry out of here the minute I hang up and take the chief with you. Take him to Frank Gates's place and watch it."

Mark nodded.

"Frank may come out. He may even look like he's about to skip town. If so, he's to get grabbed then and there. I'll be along next to handle the rest of it. It may not work, but it's our only chance."

"I don't see what you're driving at, Dan," Mark said, "but you can count on me."

"Good. Wait here for my call, and re-

member—no matter what I say, ignore it and get going."

Mark remained at his desk, puzzled. I circled around to the police office. Chief Dugley looked up at me.

"Mark needs you, chief, right away."

"What for?"

"He has to make an arrest, but he wants it kept quiet. It's important, chief."

"All right," Dugley said, slapping his newspaper down, "but why didn't Mark tell me himself? If you're up to some new trick, Dan, you'd better be careful."

Saying nothing, I followed him down the stairs. I felt the suspicion in him. He was sternly jealous of his official power. One false move, I thought, and he'd nail me. When I left him he trudged into the courthouse.

Quickly covering the next three blocks, I passed Kay's home, then paused in front of the Gates place to make sure Frank was still there, and finally I went into my own bungalow. I was ready for my next move, the most crucial one; but just inside the door I stopped still, listening.

My ears caught a sound, a furtive noise coming from the kitchen.

Not turning on any lights, I went quietly to the connecting door. The kitchen was empty. But I sensed a presence. Thinking hard, I didn't move.

Then I said, "I'm alone, Barry."

The pantry door slowly opened. Barry Kirk appeared as a lanky, silently moving shadow. In one hand he had a chunk of cheese which he'd taken from the refrigerator. I snapped on the diningroom light and a dim glow reached him. He was emaciated; his clothes were filthy; thick red-brown stubble bristled on his gaunt cheeks. He looked exactly like what he was—a starving, hunted animal. I snapped the light off and he stood in the darkness gnawing on the cheese.

"I'm glad you've come back, Barry. Are you giving yourself up?"

"No," he said. "I had to see you just once before you leave for camp, and I've got to see Kay. Then I'm—" he made a tired, sweeping gesture toward the outlying fields—"I'm skipping out again."

"I can't let you do that, Barry!"

"I'm going to do it. Nobody's going to stop me—not you or anybody else."

He meant that. If I should try to stop

him there'd be a fight. We'd still be the best of friends, but he'd beat hell out of me if I should attempt to keep him here. He'd decided on his own way and nothing could shake him from it—not his friendship with me, not even his love for Kay.

"You've come back at the wrong time, Barry. It upsets a plan I've made. You know what I've got to do, and how much I hate having to do it—but I'm forced to turn you over to Chief Dugley."

HE let me get as far as the telephone. Then he strode after me, clamped his big hand over mine and kept the instrument pushed down against the table.

"Don't try it, Dan. It's wrong, because I'm innocent. Once they put me in a cell I'd never in this world get out again."

A tough man to handle, Barry Kirk. By failing to notify the police he was here I'd make myself guilty of criminal conspiracy. I could even be disbarred. God help us both, I thought, if Chief Dugley should walk in here now! But Barry didn't realize all that. The rebellious stubbornness in him was part of his inflexible integrity.

"I've just come to say so-long, Dan."

His simple, sincere way of saying it got me by the throat. Looking at him, I suddenly realized that this awkward, big-jointed guy wasn't a flower-grower by nature at all. He was a fighter, a soldier. He'd make one of the best damn' soldiers the Army could ever ask for. Instead, clinging to his own peculiar code of justice, he was determined to make himself a deserter. I just stared at him, unable to speak, still less able to argue.

"All right," I said finally. "Only don't be too quick about saying good-bye to Kay."

"Thanks, Dan." He gripped my hand.

He drifted out the kitchen door. By crossing the back yards he'd be able to reach Kay's home unseen. It would be the most heartrending moment of her life. How long would he stay with her there? A few minutes? An hour? Then, unless my plan worked, he'd be gone forever. . . .

I took up the telephone. Alma Loomis asked, "Who do you want, Dan?"

"Mark Reece," I said. "At his office."

Alma plugged in and Mark answered.

"Dan calling, Mark," I said, speaking

rapidly. "Listen—this is important. I've got the evidence we need—strong material evidence that Frank Gates and Ed Finch pulled off the garage robbery. It's going to send Frank to the chair for killing John Tillson. I'm coming right over."

Without giving Mark a chance to answer, I hung up.

Leaving the house, I rounded the corner. I waited, keeping out of sight. It was very quiet. Kay's house, in the middle of the block, was dark. Barry was in there with her. The windows of the Gates place were lighted. A shadow moved across the curtains of the bedroom—a quick shadow moving back and forth.

Presently a car came up the street and stopped, and its lights blinked out. The two men who got out of it were Mark Reece and Chief Dugley. They stood beside the car, also watching, and I could hear the chief's voice in argument.

Suddenly the front door of the Gates place opened. Frank Gates hurried out, carrying a suitcase. He hustled to his sedan, which was parked at the curb. When he was ducking into it, Mark and Chief Dugley closed in on him from one side while I advanced from the other.

"Just a minute, Frank," I said, "before you leave town."

He straightened. "Stay out of my way, Dan. I've got to go to the city to see about a big real estate deal."

"There's a bigger deal on right here in Brandbury," I answered. "It won't take long. You won't even have to answer any questions. I just want you around for a few minutes, that's all."

"Frank," Chief Dugley said, "you better do it. I ain't so sure about Dan Bond, but Mark Reece is a man I respect. If he's still got suspicions of you, I want 'em cleared up quick. On the other hand, if you're puttin' anything over on me, I ain't going to show you no favors. Now, how about it?"

"Why, sure," Gates said uneasily, anxious to remain in the chief's good graces. "Nobody's got anything on me."

"This way, then," I said.

As we walked into the center of town a repair truck drew to the curb in front of the telephone office. Two men, having done a late job of trouble-shooting somewhere, lugged their tool-boxes and several

coils of wire up the stairs. To Mark's surprise, and Chief Dugley's, I followed them. They dumped their stuff on the landing at the top of the flight and went into a room on the right. We went into the room on the left, where Alma Loomis was on duty at the switchboard.

"What're we doin' here?" the chief asked.

"I'M after information, Alma," I said. The board wasn't busy at the moment, so she eased the spring-held receiver off her ear. "This afternoon I phoned Jim Leatherman's office. Remember that call?"

"I remember it," Alma said.

"A minute or two later somebody else phoned Frank Gates. Remember?"

"No, I don't. That's the busiest part of the day, Dan."

"Again tonight, a few minutes ago, another call was made to Frank Gates' home. You should be able to remember where that one came from, Alma."

"From a pay station," Alma said.

Frank Gates was scowling, and Chief Dugley asked with sharp impatience, "Where's this gettin' us? What's important about those calls to Frank? Everybody gets phone calls, don't they?"

"Not like those two," I said. "They mean plenty. Take the first one. You see, I'd first phoned Jim Leatherman. Martha was there, having just decided to divorce Frank, and the conversation between Jim and me concerned that. It was confidential. Only four persons were supposed to know about it—Martha herself, Jim, Kay and me. Yet someone else did know about it. Within a few minutes Frank received a phone call warning him that his relations with an unknown woman were about to be investigated."

"Well?" Chief Dugley growled.

"Frank was given the same sort of tip-off again tonight. I phoned Mark to say that I'd found evidence strong enough to convict Frank in the Tillson murder. Again the information was confidential between Mark and me. Yet within two minutes Frank knew of it and was getting ready to skip town. Someone had immediately warned him."

"I don't see how anybody could do that!" the chief snorted.

I stepped behind the railing and suggested, "Let me sit at that switchboard, Alma."

Puzzled, she shifted to another chair, taking her big handbag along. She found a compact in it and powdered her nose while I plugged into Kay's number, then tipped the cam, first to ring, then to cut into the line.

"Dan calling. Are you alone, Kay?"

She murmured, "No."

Barry was still with her.

"Keep listening," I said.

Holding the line open and keeping the transmitter near my mouth, I turned to speak to Chief Dugley.

"Check back from the beginning, Chief, and the whole thing will be perfectly clear. Two weeks ago Bill Church, the night mechanic over at Tillson's Garage, took sick. His wife phoned John Tillson to say Bill couldn't come to work. The tire thieves chose that night for their job. It was the first night in months when nobody was to be on duty at the garage, yet the crooks knew their way would be clear. *How* did they know?"

They listened—Chief Dugley with skepticism, Mark intently, Frank Gates with a scowl—and on the other end of the line Kay was also listening to every word.

"Last night, again," I went on, "I phoned Mark from Ed Finch's place. I told him I believed I'd found one of the two men really guilty of the robbery, that I felt confident of clearing Barry. Within a few minutes Ed Finch was dead, silenced by someone desperately anxious to keep him from talking. The killer hadn't come there in the nick of time by sheer accident. The killer had come for the purpose of shutting Ed up—*knowing* what I'd learned and where I'd learned it."

The chief blinked.

"Take a good look at Alma," I said. "Alma herself wouldn't claim to be highly attractive to men. She's going on forty, perilously close to becoming an old maid. You'd hate that, wouldn't you, Alma? More than anything else in the world you've wanted a husband and a home—and the bitter part of it is that you've been in love with a handsome, slyly clever man who is already married."

Alma's face went white; she sat very still.

"The man is Frank Gates. You're the 'other woman' who has wrecked Martha's marriage. You've been so desperate to get Frank and keep him that you've played along with him in his shady schemes—even the Tillson garage robbery. You made yourself a secretly daring sort, Alma, more his type than Martha could be. Your all-important plan was to help Frank cash in on the stolen tires, then run off with him."

Frank Gates was struck silent; and Alma sat ominously still, staring at me.

"You out of your mind, Dan?" Chief Dugley snapped.

"THERE'S no other answer, chief. Everybody knows the operators here listen in on phone calls whenever they feel like it. On the night of the robbery Alma learned in that way that the garage wouldn't be guarded, so she tipped Frank off. Frank and Ed had the job already planned and were waiting for an opening. They killed John Tillson. Frank didn't kill Ed last night, though, Alma herself did that."

"Alma killed—!"

"No one else could have done it. She listened in on my call to Mark's office, because I was calling from Ed's place. It meant that Frank's and Ed's little game was up. Because Frank was at your office, chief, she couldn't warn him—didn't dare speak to him of it in your presence. She was forced to act herself. She was just then going off duty and she knew where Barry's stolen gun was hidden. At all costs she had to save her man. There you have it—the inescapable answer. Alma is the only person on earth who could have pried into all that confidential information, on four different occasions, and Alma is the only person who could possibly have killed Ed."

In the receiver Kay's voice cried, "Dan, Dan, is it true?" I scarcely heard. Alma was rising stiffly to her feet. Her right hand was lifting from her big purse. She was gripping a revolver—Barry's gun.

"Don't say anything, Alma!" Frank Gates blurted. "Don't talk!"

Alma said tightly, "I'm not ashamed of it. I'd do it again. You mean that much to me, Frank. Come on. We can

get away together. My car's sitting right outside, where it always is."

"Shut up, Alma!" he howled.

She was at the door, hesitating, every fiber drawn tight. "Aren't you coming, darling?"

Mark Reece's hand swept down in a sudden arc. It struck the revolver in Alma's hand. The gun spun from her fingers, clattered across the floor. Chief Dugley pressed a big foot on it. For an instant Alma stood poised. Then a thin wail squeezed out of her throat. She spun about, flinging herself out the door.

The next sound was a quick thumping on the stairs—a series of hard thuds going down.

When we reached Alma she was lying inert at the foot of the stairs. A long wire trailed down them, its lower end curled around one of her ankles. She'd stumbled into the coil left by the repairmen at the top of the flight. It had tripped her and she'd plunged headlong. She wasn't dead; but now she and Frank Gates would never fly off, as they'd planned, to some distant hideaway. The same kind of telephone wire that she had used so ruthlessly to protect herself and him had suddenly become a trap sprung on them both.

Chief Dugley had Barry's gun leveled at Frank now. Mark looked dazed with relief and elation. First I called an ambulance, and then I saw Kay's light flashing on the board.

"Dan, is it true?" she cried again. "Is it all right? Barry needn't hide any more?"

"Hide?" I said. "Well, in a way. He'll be hidden among millions of other men in Uncle Sam's Army, until he zooms up to an officership."

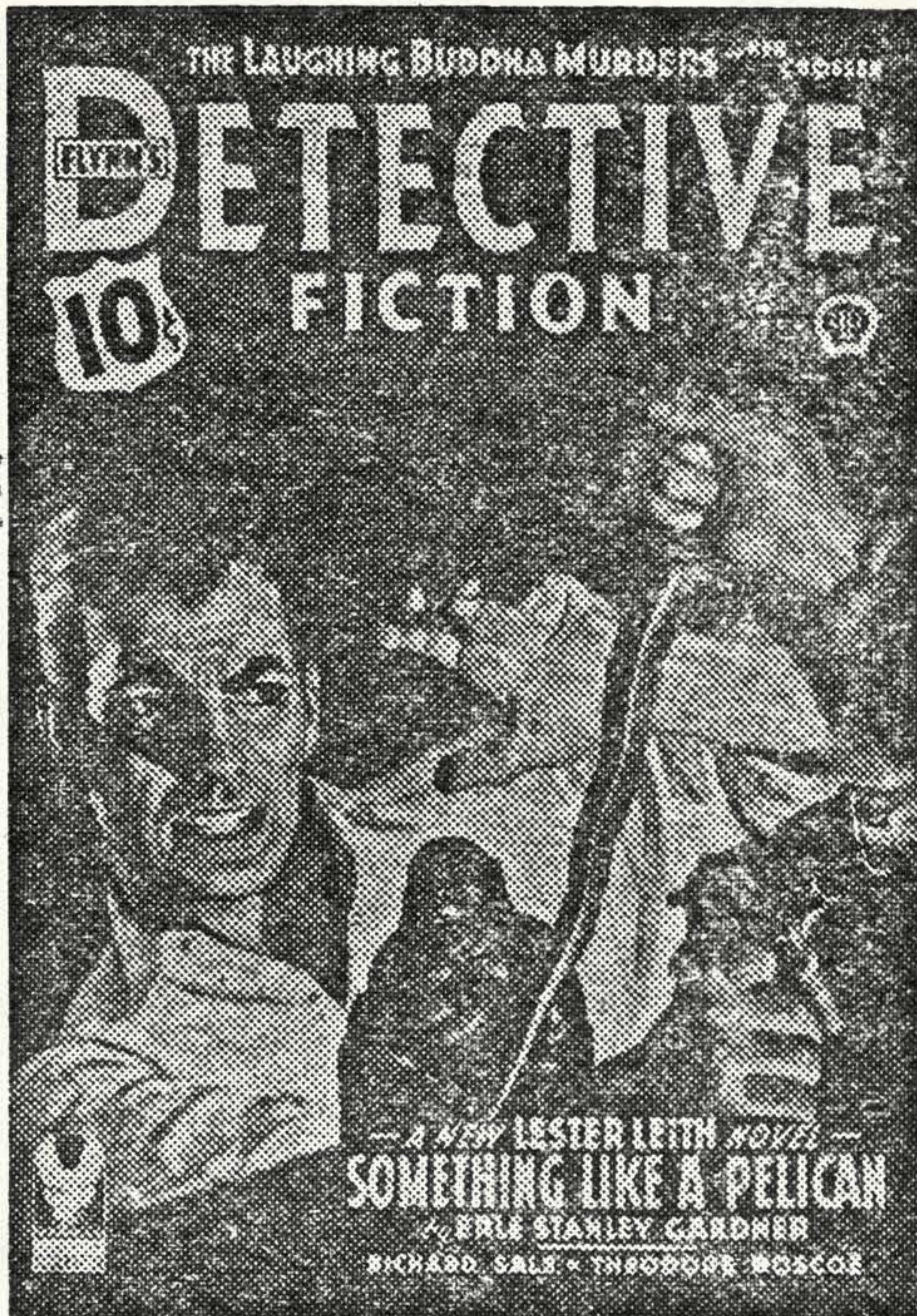
Barry's voice boomed over the wire. "Thanks, Dan! Boy, am I happy! I'll be seeing you, pal—at the railroad station, seven-ten tomorrow morning!"

As I withdrew that plug another light flashed on. Cutting in, I heard Martha Gates' voice.

"Connect me with Kay Reece's home, please."

"Sorry, Martha; she's busy," I said, though of course her line wasn't connected at all now. "She's *very* busy."

THE END



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**By
PHILIP
KETCHUM**

Sometimes a hard-boiled cop can be a human guy — when a girl like Mary Lee is wanted for murder. He can disregard a mile-high stack of evidence and play a hunch!

“He was dead within five minutes. . .”

HE KNOCKED on her hotel door and when the girl opened it he said, “Hello, Mary Lee,” and came into the room.

The girl backed away, a sudden fright showing in her eyes and tightening the lines of her face. She was tall and slender and had light brown hair. She looked just like the pictures of her that Brad

McAllister had studied. Even in this moment of shock she didn't lose the pride in her bearing that Brad had known she would have.

“I think you've made a mistake,” she answered. “I'm Mrs. Bennett. Mrs. Rose Bennett.”

Brad took off his hat and laid it on the top of the dresser near the bed. He turned

back and closed the door, then glanced at the girl and shook his head. "You're Mary Lee and until a week ago you lived at the Buckingham apartments. You're twenty-two and were born in Lincoln Nebraska. You went through school there and the university. You came here a year ago and went to work at the Bergen Trust Company. You aren't married and don't seem particularly interested in men."

"You cook your own breakfast and dinner, go to church on Sunday and to a neighborhood picture show maybe twice a week. You rent books from a lending library around the corner from your apartment, mainly biographies."

The girl's eyes had widened while Brad was talking. When he broke off she managed a faint laugh. "You seem to know a lot about this Mary Lee, at least."

"I do," Brad nodded. "I know what kind of clothes she likes, what food she prefers. I know about a brother she's helping through school. I know so much about her I just can't understand why she killed John Dillon."

"But she didn't."

Brad sat down on the edge of the bed. "Didn't she?"

"No."

"Then why did she run away?"

"Maybe she had to."

"Why, Mary Lee?"

The girl bit her lips. She crossed over to the window and stood there with her back to Brad.

"It was raining the night Mr. Dillon was killed," she said slowly. "I was standing in the lobby of the building after work, waiting for it to slacken up before running for the bus. Mr. Dillon came down from the office and offered me a lift in his car. He said he had to make one stop on the way to my apartment. He did. He went in to—to see someone. When he came out he was stumbling. He could hardly get back in the car. He said he didn't feel well and he asked me to drive. I suggested that I take him to see a doctor but he shook his head. He was dead within five minutes. He had been shot."

"Where was it that he stopped, Mary Lee?"

"I—don't know."

"Was it at his brother's house? His

brother lives between your home and the office."

"Does he?" asked the girl.

"In some ways," Brad went on, "John Dillon was a thoroughly detestable man. He ruined his brother's life. I'll grant you that. And perhaps if you thought his brother had killed him you also thought that his brother deserved a chance to get away. Was that the reason you came here, Mary Lee?"

The girl turned back to face him. "I didn't say it was."

"What would you say if I told you that John Dillon's brother was out of the city on the night Dillon was killed?"

"I'd be glad to know he wasn't going to suffer any more at the hands of his brother, even indirectly."

"And the money?"

"What money?"

"A hundred thousand dollars in unregistered, negotiable bonds that Dillon had with him the night he was killed."

"I don't know anything about it."

Brad stood up. "I'll have to search your room, Mary Lee. Do you mind?"

THE girl shrugged her shoulders and after a moment's hesitation Brad started his search. He didn't find the bonds but in looking through the girl's purse he discovered a slight tear in the lining and under the lining he found a check-stand stub.

"What's this, Mary Lee?"

The girl came forward, looked at the stub and frowned. "I don't know. I never saw it before in my life."

Brad put the stub in his pocket. "It might be for a brief-case which was checked at the Union Station," he said slowly. "And if it is, we'll find a hundred thousand dollars in the brief-case. There's something else in the picture, too. Dillon had an apartment at the Maywood. He didn't use it often but sometimes he went there with a girl who has been described as young and slender and brown-haired."

"Not me."

"The woman who rented him the place saw your picture. She said that you were the girl."

"No."

"Get your hat, Mary Lee."

"Where are we going?"

"To the Union Station—and then to jail."

The girl caught her breath. Her hands were tightly clenched and for a moment she held her body rigid. Then some of the stiffness went out of it and her shoulders sagged wearily. "I'd like to fix up a little," Brad heard her say.

She turned to the bathroom and while she was gone Brad paced back and forth across the room. He caught an occasional glimpse of himself in a wall mirror, an occasional glimpse of a tall, slender young man who was scowling fiercely and who didn't look nearly as pleased as he should have looked.

He was the youngest and newest investigator on the district attorney's staff and he found the girl for whom every policeman and every detective in the city were searching.

Mary Lee came out of the bathroom. She put on a jacket that fit snugly around the waist and then a hat that looked ridiculous until it was on her head.

"I'm ready, Mr. Policeman," she said quietly.

"The name's Brad McAllister," Brad growled.

"Have you phoned for the patrol wagon?"

"We go by taxi."

"And no handcuffs?"

Brad flushed and hated himself for it. He said, "Come on," and turned to the door.

Just as Brad had feared, the check-stand stub brought forth an old brief-case and one glance inside of it disclosed the missing bonds. Brad closed the case and tucked it under his arm. He had brought Mary Lee with him to the station and he looked at her now, his face frozen in tight, hard lines.

"It'll not do any good, I suppose, to say that I don't know how that stub got into my purse," the girl suggested.

Brad shook his head.

"I didn't check it here."

"Dillon had it with him when he left the office," Brad said slowly. "Do you remember that?"

"No. It was raining. Maybe he had it under his coat."

"Did he take it with him when he went in to see his brother?"

"I don't know. I didn't notice."

"Who knew where you were hiding, Mary Lee?"

"No one."

"Then how could anyone have put that check stub in your purse?"

Mary Lee made no answer. She turned toward one of the station exits. Brad followed her. Outside, they took another taxi and Brad said to the driver, "Straight up the avenue until I tell you where to stop."

He hadn't meant to say that at all, he realized as he settled back in the cab. He had meant to tell the driver to head for police headquarters. The other order had just slipped out. He glanced over at Mary Lee.

She had soft features and a mouth that could break into an easy smile. Brad had seen that smile in her photographs. He remembered what he had said to the district attorney.

"That girl a murderess?" he had cried. "Why you're crazy, chief. No girl who looks like that could possibly be a murderess."

The district attorney had laughed at him. "You've got a lot to learn about women, Brad. Never trust the sweet ones."

BRAD scowled at the rounded shoulders of the cab driver. It had started right then, he decided. Maybe it was crazy to think that a man could fall in love with a girl just from a picture, but that was what had happened.

"What'll they do to me?" the girl asked suddenly.

Brad glanced at her and then looked away. "Ask you questions. They'll keep asking you questions until they get at the truth."

"But what I said was the truth."

Brad fingered the brief-case he was holding. He thought of the weight of evidence they had against this girl and of what this would add to it and then he tried to stop thinking of anything. After a minute he leaned forward and tapped the cab driver on the shoulder. He gave the man his own address.

The girl looked at him curiously as he leaned back in his corner of the seat. She said, "Where did you tell him to take us?"

"To my apartment."

"Why?"

"Perhaps," said Brad, "because I'm fool enough to believe what you've told me. Perhaps because I know what will happen to you if I throw you to the wolves."

The ghost of a smile touched the girl's lips. She looked steadily at Brad.

"You'll get in trouble for this, won't you," said the girl.

Brad shook his head.

"You ought to take me in."

"I know what I'm doing," Brad growled. "It wasn't by clever work on my part that I found you. An anonymous phone call tipped me off."

"You mean—"

"I mean maybe someone knew where you were and wanted you arrested. I mean I want more time to work on this. I'll not have a chance with you in jail."

The cab stopped in front of Brad's apartment. He got out and Mary Lee climbed out after him and they went in through the wide open doors. Whether or not anyone noticed them, Brad didn't know. He felt so mixed up that he couldn't think very straight. An automatic elevator took them to the top floor of the building and Brad led the way down the hall to his door. He unlocked it and stepped aside so that Mary Lee could enter. He followed her in and closed the door and was abruptly aware of how shabby his furniture looked. He had never thought of that before.

"You can stay here for a while," Brad heard himself saying. "Don't answer the telephone or the door. I'll have to go back downtown."

"And report you didn't find me?"

"Yes."

"What about the brief-case?"

Brad moved deeper into the room. He laid the brief-case on a chair. "I'll leave it here, too."

"I could take it, you know, and run away again," said the girl.

"But you won't."

The girl shook her head. "For a week, now, I've been expecting you. Expecting a policeman, that is. I think I was scared

to death of what would happen when one found me. It wasn't at all like I dreamed it would be."

"I'm not only a policeman so far as you're concerned."

The girl's eyes were very steady. "I know you're not."

"Tell me one thing, Mary Lee," said Brad slowly. "You ran away, didn't you, because you didn't want to have to tell the police where Dillon had stopped?"

"Yes."

Brad turned toward the door, then stopped. "You'll find some donuts in the kitchen, Mary Lee. The glazed kind that you like so well."

The girl's eyes widened. "You even know that about me?"

"I talked to the woman in the bakery near where you lived."

"You're a—funny policeman, Brad."

"I said I wasn't just a policeman," Brad answered. "And anyhow, I like glazed donuts, myself. Lock the door after me, Mary Lee. And don't worry."

BRAD walked to the next corner and caught a bus to town. He felt a little light-headed, a little nervous. When he reached the district attorney's office he learned that the chief was busy and he paced back and forth across the waiting room.

The door to the district attorney's office opened quite abruptly and the chief and Henry James came out. Henry James was a thin, short man who stood very erect. He had narrow, pinched features. He was vice president of the Bergen Trust company, of which John Dillon had been the active head.

"Anything new, Brad?" asked the district attorney.

Brad McAllister shook his head. "Not a thing, chief. I had a tip a while back that Mary Lee was at the Capitol hotel, but there wasn't anything to it."

"We've got to find her," growled the district attorney.

James moistened his lips. "It's not so much the girl I'm interested in as it is the money Dillon took. If we don't get that money back, thousands of investors are going to lose. We may even be forced to the wall."

There was a high, nervous sound in

the man's voice. His beady black eyes were fastened on Brad McAllister.

"We're doing everything we can, Mr. James," Brad said slowly, "but to me it looks pretty hopeless. I'll bet Mary Lee's a thousand miles from here by now."

Henry James turned back to face the district attorney and started telling him again what it would mean if the money wasn't recovered. Brad listened thoughtfully. The district attorney edged the man to the hall door and finally got rid of him.

"I'll bet he killed Arthur Dillon himself," Brad offered.

"Impossible and you know it, Brad. He was at the office until eleven o'clock the night Dillon was killed. He had a couple of his staff working with him most of the time. Wallace checked all the details of his alibi and it holds up."

A telephone call came in for the district attorney and he took it. Brad went to the office which he shared with the other investigators on the district attorney's staff. He sat at his desk and studied Mary Lee's picture.

Wallace came in and Brad said, "Hey, Wallace. How does this sound? Dillon was going to make a call on the way home the night he was killed. James knew it and went to meet him there and shot him, but Dillon managed to get back to his car. James followed the car and saw where Mary Lee went. He returned to the office and robbed the safe of a hundred grand, checked it at the Union Station and hired a maid in the hotel where Mary Lee was hiding to put the check stub in Mary Lee's purse. After that he telephones us where we can find Mary Lee. We find her and get his money back and send her up for the job."

Wallace blinked. He said, "Swell case, only it didn't work that way. James was at his office all evening."

"Are you positive?"

"I've got his word for it, and the words of two of his employees."

"Who might lose their jobs if they didn't say what he wanted?"

"Nuts."

Brad got to his feet. "That's what happened, just the same. I'll be seeing you, Wallace."

He left the office and went outside. He

took a taxi to the Maywood apartments and talked to the woman who had identified Mary Lee's picture as the picture of the woman who had used an apartment there with John Dillon. She wasn't quite so positive in her identification, this time. From there, Brad went to the Capitol Hotel. At the Capitol he learned that the maid who had taken care of the rooms on the floor where Mary Lee had lived, had quit her job that morning. He got her name and address and went to see her but she wasn't home. After waiting around for an hour, he headed for his own apartment.

Brad was beginning to feel pretty good. He was beginning to feel a little excited and he wanted to tell Mary Lee what he had learned. He knocked on the apartment door in warning, then unlocked it and stepped inside. Mary Lee wasn't in the front room. He called her name but there was no answer. He looked in the bedroom, the kitchen and the bath but he didn't find her. He turned to the chair where he had left the brief-case. The brief-case was gone, too.

Brad had a cigarette.

THE sun had gone down and the shadows of night were beginning to reach into the room. Brad thought of the pretty case he had built up against Henry James and a bitter laugh sounded from his throat. He stiffened at the sound of a knock on the door.

He hurried to the door and opened it and then backed away. It wasn't Mary Lee who had knocked. It was Henry James.

A shock of warning stabbed through Brad's body but he tried not to show it. He managed a grin and clicked on the lights. "Come on in, James," he invited.

James came into the room and his dark eyes turned suspiciously from side to side and then fastened on Brad. "I got a call, too," he said abruptly. "A call saying that Mary Lee was at the Capitol Hotel, registered under the name of Mrs. Rose Bennett. I went there but you had been there ahead of me."

"And discovered that there was nothing at all to the tip."

"But there was."

Brad shrugged his shoulders.

"Those bonds were just like money, McAllister. I suppose it was quite a temptation to you."

Brad managed a grin. "You're crazy."

James moistened his lips. "I want them. I'm willing to say nothing about this."

"About now," said Brad dryly, "you ought to pull a gun on me, James."

"About now I'm going to," James snapped. His hand jerked into his pocket and came out with a gun.

"You found her, but said you didn't," he said quietly. "I thought that looked like an easy way to pick up a hundred thousand dollars. Give me that brief-case. I'll make a slight change in plans and keep the bonds."

Brad looked down at the gun in the man's hand. "Maybe that's the gun that shot Dillon," he suggested. "Maybe—by the way, James, I located that maid who put the check stub in Mary Lee's purse. That's rather interesting, isn't it?"

James caught his breath.

"You see, I've figured it all out," Brad went on. "You killed Dillon. You meant to have his body found in his brother's yard. It must have been a shock to you when he made the car and rode away with Mary Lee. But when Mary Lee hid so she wouldn't have to testify as to where Dillon was shot, you shifted your plans a little.

"Mary Lee looked something like the girl who Dillon was running with and you didn't have to worry about that girl coming forward and identifying herself. You stole the hundred thousand yourself, checked it and hired a maid to put the stub in Mary Lee's purse. You have been taking money all along from the bank and figured this would place all the blame on Dillon. . . . Of course I found Mary Lee on the tip you phoned me, but this was all a trap."

"I—"

Brad chuckled. "You can come out now, fellows," he called. "Here's the man you want."

James' head jerked toward the bedroom door and Brad knew that he would have no better chance than this. He dived straight at the man. The roar of a shot dinned in his ears and flecks of powder burned his face and cheek. He hit the

smaller man in a driving tackle that carried both of them backwards and as they fell to the floor he got one hand on the gun and twisted it free. He stood up, then, conscious of a hammering on the door and of the sound of voices shouting at him. He opened the door and a policeman lurched into the room followed by two men who lived across the hall, several more Brad had never seen, and Mary Lee. Mary Lee was quite pale.

Henry James was sitting up. He seemed half stunned. He looked up at the policeman and a shudder ran over his body.

Brad said, "Take him in, Mike. The charge is murder. And thanks for getting here so darned quick."

"My name ain't Mike," growled the policeman. "An you can thank the girl for gettin' me here. She came rushing up to me just as I reached the corner an' said someone was bein' killed. She collected all these others on the way."

Brad looked over at Mary Lee. "You were supposed to stay in the apartment."

"I know," the girl nodded. "But you were out of coffee, Brad. And donuts without coffee aren't so good. I just went out to buy some coffee and when I came back I saw Mr. James, watching the apartment. Then you came in and he followed you and something in the way he looked around just before he stepped through the door frightened me."

"Where's the brief-case?"

"Out in the kitchen in the flour bin. You didn't think—"

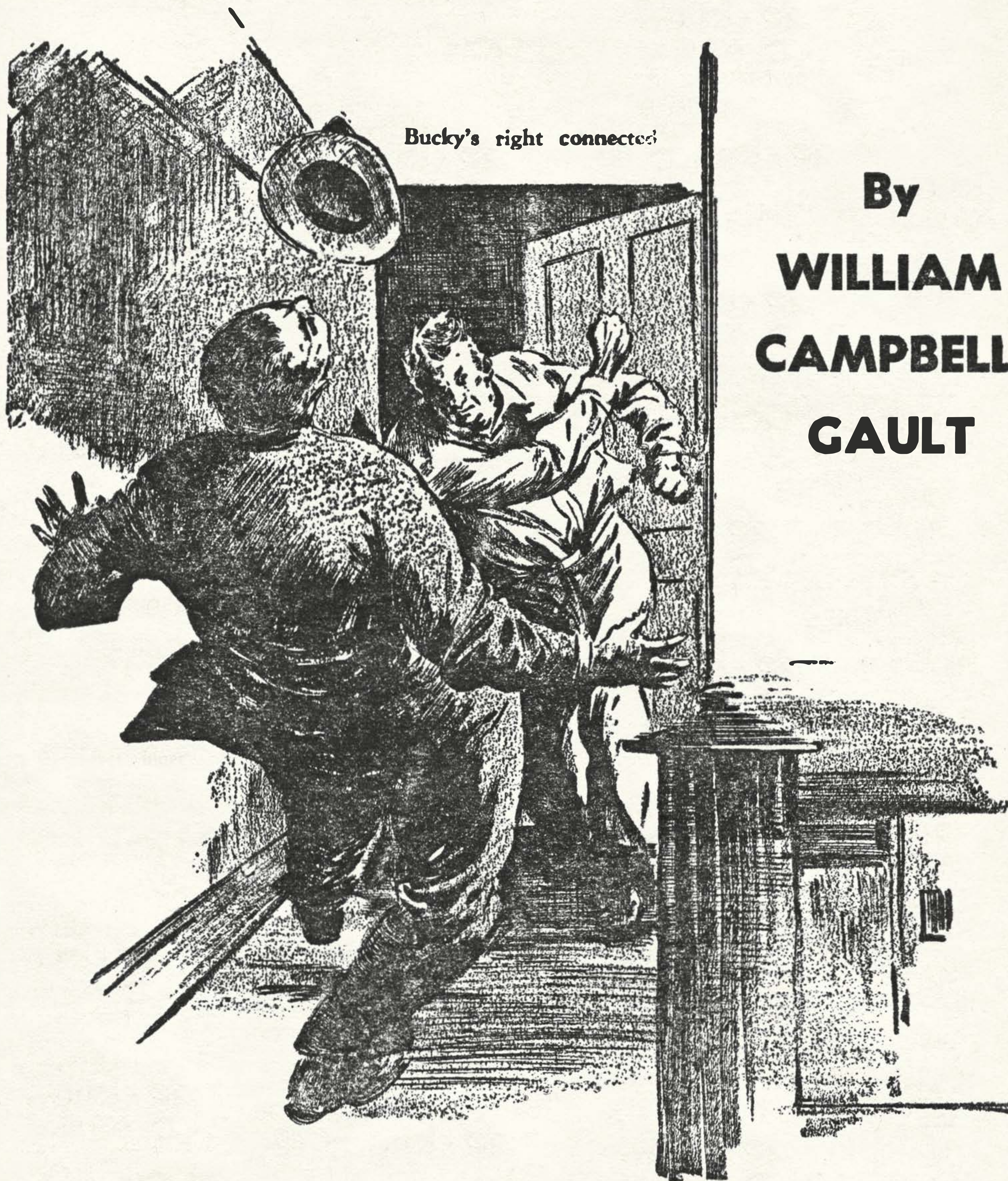
"Come on," Brad suggested. "Let's get it."

He went out in the kitchen and Mary Lee followed him. She got the brief-case and Brad tucked it under his arm. Mary Lee set a can of coffee on the kitchen table.

"We'll have that later," Brad said slowly. "Right now, Mary Lee, we've got to go down to the district attorney's office. There's a lot of talking to do. A lot of explaining. But afterwards—"

Mary Lee nodded and even in the thickening darkness of the kitchen, Brad could see her smile. She said, "Afterwards, Brad," and in those two words, Brad heard all that he needed to know.

DARK IS THE NIGHT



Bucky's right connected

By
**WILLIAM
CAMPBELL
GAULT**

Bucky Gallagher found the first trace of his vanished sweetheart in the grimy offices of a shady detective agency . . . which led him to the morgue—and the uncovering of the blackest market known to humanity.

THEY were having a Sunday night supper at the Glass Kitchen. It was their second date, but Bucky had decided it wouldn't be their last. For he had known, since that first night, that there would never be anyone but Ellen for him.

He was trying to frame this thought into words, without sounding forward or unduly sentimental, when he noticed that

Ellen had stiffened and was staring over his shoulder.

Bucky turned, to follow the direction of her gaze. A very large, and somehow unpleasant, man had taken a seat at the next table.

Ellen's eyes came back to Bucky's. She said: "I've had the strangest feeling about him. This is the third time I've noticed him, and every time he seems to be staring at me. He must live in my neighborhood."

"If you want," Bucky said, and he said it loud enough for the man to hear, "if you want, I'll go over and pop him on the whiskers."

But Ellen said hurriedly: "It's probably just my imagination."

Bucky forgot the incident then, still groping for the words to phrase his little speech. They didn't come to him during supper, nor during the show that followed.

They talked of many things. Of Bucky's job as a welder in a plane factory, and the shop of his own he intended to open, after the war. They talked of Ellen, of her inability to find a job in this city, still new to her. They talked of everything but what was uppermost in Bucky's mind.

Then, on the way home in a cab, there was one of those silences, and Ellen happened to be looking up at Bucky, and it seemed like the *moment*. So he bent and kissed her, and words came easier after that.

This was it—for both of them. And the days that followed were filled with the old magic, the alchemy that makes each day a promise, each night a dream come true.

They planned to marry in the fall, the first of September.

It was dark and stormy that night in August, when he got the note.

They had planned on going to a show, but Bucky was late, due to some overtime at the plant. Ellen's new roommate met him at the door of their double room.

There was a note in her thin hand, and there was a hesitant expression on that thin face. "Ellen left it for you," the girl said and started to close the door.

But Bucky said quickly: "What's it all about?"

The girl shrugged. "It probably says in the note. All I know is she packed up this morning and left."

"Did you two have a fight, or something?" Bucky asked.

She shook her head. "Read the note." Bucky opened it slowly.

Bucky dear:

I had to leave town for a little while. I can't explain, but I'll write, later.

*Always your,
Ellen*

Bucky looked up at the thin girl and his voice was unnecessarily rough. "What's it all about?"

The girl's face tightened. "Don't ask me," she said sharply. "She's your girl friend. Or she was—"

Bucky had never liked this roommate of Ellen's—and he liked her even less now. But it was clear he would get no information from her, whether she had it or not.

He went down the steps slowly, and out into the night. The wind was higher, now, and the first pelting drops of rain were being driven in out of the north.

He put the collar of his raincoat up, and pulled the brim of his hat down to shield his face. It was a night to match his mood, and he trudged bitterly toward home.

HIS mind went back over the days past, trying to find some clue for her action, today. He remembered, then, that she had told him about her only living relative, a paternal grandmother in Boston whom Ellen had never seen. A very snobbish old lady, from Ellen's account, who had cut herself off from her only son when he had married beneath him.

Bucky thought it was logical that something had happened to the old girl, and she had summoned Ellen. He wanted to think it was logical, even though he knew that Ellen's grand mother had no knowledge of her granddaughter's whereabouts.

Bucky decided that was it, that or a job out of town, a temporary job, just to last until they married.

He went home to try and sleep. And he went to work the next day, because he had to go to work, no matter what trouble his personal life held. Going to work was the most important thing in his life, until this war was over.

He went back to the rooming house, the next night, and up to the double room he had visited so often. The door was ajar. And nobody answered his knock. Bucky pushed the door completely open.

The place was deserted.

He stood there, looking at the open, empty drawers of the two dressers, at the empty closet, at the litter of paper and miscellaneous trash that remained.

Dully, he went over to pick up a torn letterhead. "Argus," he read, and the rest was not to be found. There were a few bills, marked "paid" and a broken-toothed comb. Some hair pins, magazines. . . .

He went downstairs to the landlady's room. "When did Miss Johnson move?" he asked her. Miss Johnson was the roommate.

"Last night," the landlady told him. She was looking at him queerly. "Aren't you the boy who was going with Ellen?"

Bucky nodded eagerly. "Have—you heard from her?"

The landlady shook her head. "No. I thought you might have some word. She owed me two days' rent when she left, and it wasn't like her to—"

Bucky reached for his wallet. "No," he said, "it wasn't—it isn't—"

Outside, it was hot, and the porches of all the rooming houses along the street were occupied. Bucky walked on toward that flickering "Eat" sign, and went in.

In the hamburger spot, he looked up all the *Argus's* in the phone book. There was a shoe shine stand and some movers, a theatre, and a restaurant. And a detective agency.

He had no knowledge of the routines of detective agencies, but there was an outside chance that this one would be open at night. It was in a poor district, according to the address, and perhaps it was a poor agency.

It might have been the movers, or the shoe shine stand. Theatres and restaurants didn't usually send bills or letters to their customers.

He took a surface car down to the neighborhood, and walked the three blocks to the agency. It was on the second floor of a two story, red brick building, and from behind the lettered windows a light glowed.

Bucky hesitated a few seconds; and then went up the stairs. He paused again at the door in the hall up there, and then pushed it open.

It was a poorly furnished office, and the man who was sitting behind the battered desk matched the office. He was poorly dressed, and there was a beard stubble on his fat face.

He said, "Good evening," gruffly, and waited for Bucky to speak.

Bucky looked at him closely, and some dim chord of memory in him stirred. But it was elusive. Bucky said: "I—ah—a friend of mine, I think, got a bill or letter from you, and—"

"Easy," the fat man said. "You're getting a little mixed up."

Then Bucky said slowly, "I wondered if you knew a girl named Mary Johnson, or an Ellen Burke." And he gave him the address.

The fat man took his time before answering. "Can't say that I do. What made you think I might?"

"There was a part of a letterhead, or a bill, in their room."

Again, the fat man paused. "I don't quite get all this." He rose, and Bucky saw that he was tall. He went to a file in one corner of the room. "Burke, you said? And Johnson?"

"That's right," Bucky said, and he had the idea that the detective agency man was stalling.

Then the man turned, and he was studying Bucky. "We had some business with this Ellen Burke," he admitted. "But it's not for the public—our business."

"It's very important," Bucky said. "It may help find her. I think—she's disappeared."

The fat man was still studying Bucky. Finally he said: "I'll tell you this, but I can't see that it's got anything to do with her disappearing. She wanted us to check up on a guy, a guy named Gallagher, Bucky, he was called."

"That's me," Bucky said. "Why would she want to check me?"

"I wouldn't know." The fat man was shaking his head. "I told you too much already. Maybe, she was working a racket. How would I know? Maybe she was one of those spies."

Bucky's eyes lighted up angrily, then

dulled. "Well," he said, "thanks. I guess there isn't much I can do."

The fat man walked with him to the door. "I think," he told Bucky, "that somebody's been playing you for a sucker. If I were you, I'd forget all about this girl."

Bucky said nothing. He knew if he lived to be a hundred and forty, he would never forget Ellen. He went out, and down to the street again. He felt faintly sick, and his eyes went back to the lighted windows of the agency. Somewhere, he had seen that man.

He stood, on the dimly lighted street, pondering his next move. And he thought of one place he had to go. He walked the three blocks back to the car line and took another car downtown.

At the morgue, the attendant told him: "There's a girl downstairs. An unidentified girl. If you'd care to look—?"

Bucky gulped, and nodded.

THEY went down a flight of concrete steps, and into a cool and dimly lighted room. Directly under the single, shaded bulb in this grim room was a glass-sided, glass-topped, coffin-like box.

Bucky shivered. He followed the attendant over to the figure under the glass. He looked at the girl laying there, and the sickness in his stomach grew.

He was still staring, when the attendant asked: "You know her?"

Bucky nodded.

"Would you come upstairs, then, and give us what information you have?"

Bucky went up with him, and told him what little he knew about Mary Johnson. Then Bucky was out in the street again. Mary Johnson, according to the attendant, had been found in the river, had been killed by the river.

It could have been a coincidence that Ellen had disappeared the day before her roommate had committed suicide, but he didn't think so.

And, at that moment, he remembered where he had seen the fat man before. In the Glass Kitchen, that Sunday He was the man Ellen had pointed out.

Bucky took a cab, this time.

The light still glowed behind the lettered windows. Bucky paused outside.

He had nothing to go on. He had nothing definite. He had nothing but the determination to keep the fat man in sight until he learned something more. Bucky could see him, now, standing near the window.

Then the light went out.

Bucky moved across the street, and into the shelter of a grocery store doorway.

In less than a minute, he saw the man come through the door of the building across the street. The man started walking north, and Bucky let him get a half block ahead before he followed.

The man walked slowly, and Bucky was forced to stop from time to time. The man turned, two blocks down, heading east.

Bucky followed him down this street for three blocks, and Bucky saw that they were now near the river. He shivered.

There, in front of a two story, frame house, he turned in. Bucky saw him go up the steps, onto the rickety porch. There was a light on in one of the upper windows, here, and a dimmer light in the lower front window.

A shadow crossed this dimmer light, and then the front door opened to admit the private detective. The door closed.

Bucky had two decisions to make. He had, first of all, to decide whether Ellen or the private detective had told him the truth. It didn't take him long to decide that. Then, he had to decide on whether to call the police, or go it alone.

And he knew that the police would walk boldly in, and if there was nothing amiss, the private detective would be warned. He walked down half a block, and crossed the street. He came up again on the right side, walking quietly, and cut over the scrubby lawn to the side of the house.

Quietly, he walked back to the rear. There were no lights on here—but there was a door.

It was locked. And so were the two cellar windows. A light went on in a window overhead, and he ducked around to the side of the house.

He was crouching there when he saw the open window.

He pulled himself up slowly, and jammed one foot against a rain spout, while he hooked the weight of his body on his arm flung over the sill. Then,

cautiously, with his free hand he pushed the window upward wide enough to admit his body.

Then he was standing up in a darkened room, waiting for his eyes to focus.

Finally, he could see the shadowy shapes of furniture. And, from overhead, the subdued voices of two men in conversation. Bucky moved on tip-toe toward the arch that led to the hall.

The street light, shining through the living room window, illumined this part of the house, and he saw the stairway to the second floor. He moved toward them.

The first step creaked, and his heart hammered, as he held his breath. But the voices continued.

At the top, the sound of the voices was louder, coming from a room at the front of the house. Bucky crept toward that door.

He heard the words "—all negotiable stuff, but it'll take a little time—" and then a board creaked loudly under his foot.

The voices seemed to stop for a second, but they resumed almost immediately in a rumble.

Bucky knelt, to look in the keyhole. He was still kneeling—when the door opened.

The fat detective stood there, his eyes ugly. Bucky had a frightened glimpse of a swarthy man sitting on the bed, and then the fat man reached out a big hand.

Bucky threw a right at that chin, and it connected. The detective shook it off, though, and his big hands were reaching for Bucky's neck.

BUCKY put his head down, and buried a left hand wrist-deep in that soft stomach. The fat man grunted, and Bucky was going to try a right for the chin again—when the house seemed to hit him behind the ear . . .

His head throbbed horribly, and he opened his eyes to darkness. There was a smell in the air, the smell of a room never opened to the outside, and his back was on an uncovered floor. He was bound, hand and foot, and there was a gag in his mouth.

He could make out nothing but the shapes of furniture. Both of his legs were asleep, and moving them was torment.

Then he heard a step in the hall outside, and he closed his eyes, as the door opened.

A foot crashed painfully into his side, and he opened his eyes to the glare of a light directly overhead. Bucky closed his eyes again, and bit his lips at the pain in his side. Rough hands untied his gag, and the cloth burned his lips as it was jerked from his mouth.

Bucky looked up into the ugly face of the fat man.

"Start talking," the man said.

Bucky had nothing to say, and he shook his head hopelessly.

Again, that foot crashed into his aching side.

"What do you want to know?" Bucky whispered.

"Who else is in on this?"

"Nobody," Bucky answered. "I'm alone. My girl, I—" Then the throbbing in his head increased, and pain was sharp behind his eyes.

"Why did you figure I knew anything about your girl?"

"She pointed you out to me. In a restaurant, one night."

"Why didn't you tell me that in the office? Where did you go after that?"

"To the morgue," Bucky said.

There was an exclamation from someone standing at the door, and little lights came to the fat man's eyes.

Bucky closed his eyes. At the moment, even death didn't seem so bad.

The voice at the door said: "You never should have. That was a sap move, fixing Mary."

"You, too?" the fat man answered. "You know what's going to happen to this lovesick punk. And your little Mary got what was coming to her."

There was a silence, and the detective continued. "With a quarter of a million at stake, we don't take any chances on weaklings."

Bucky thought, *I stumbled into something. There's no quarter of a million connected with Ellen.*

The fat man turned to his partner. "You stay here. I'm going down to see if there's any word. And stop thinking about that damned Mary."

Again, there was a silence. Then the swarthy face was over Bucky's, and the man asked: "Did—you see Mary?"

Bucky nodded.

"Did she—did she look like she'd suffered much?"

Bucky had a sudden hunch. "She's been scratched on the face," he lied. "And her—her eyes looked—" Bucky broke off.

"Go on," the man said, and his voice was curiously gentle.

"They looked terrible, Bucky said. "They looked—haunted.

Bucky could see the man tremble. Bucky said: "I know how you feel. I—my girl, where is she?"

"About five feet from you, the man said dully. "On the bed, over here."

"Could I see her?" Bucky asked.

The swarthy man shook his head.

Bucky said: "Mary used to talk to us about you. She was sure nuts about you. It was through her that I got a line on your pal."

"You mean—?" the man said. He nodded toward the direction of the door.

Bucky nodded. "He was always trying to make a play for her. But she'd tell him off. She couldn't stand him."

There was a frightening light in the man's eyes, and he was looking toward the door through which the fat man had disappeared.

Bucky said carefully: "You should be able to understand this. I want to see my girl. I want to talk to her—before—before— His voice broke off.

THE swarthy man was staring at him as though he hadn't heard. Then he nodded, and bent to untie Bucky's hands. Bucky rose to a sitting position, and looked down at the cords binding his feet, but the swarthy man shook his head.

He went around behind, put his hands under Bucky's armpits, and dragged him along the floor. Then, Bucky was sitting on the bed's edge, looking down at Ellen.

Her eyes were open, but there was a gag in her mouth, and her hands were bound. Bucky untied the gag and then her hands.

Then she had risen to a sitting position, and Bucky cradled her head in his arms, and her tears were wet on his face.

He had no words for a moment, and then he asked: "What's it all about?"

"I left a note," she told him, "ex-

plaining everything. But I guess you never got it."

Bucky shook his head.

"That—that fat man came to my place. He told me my grandmother had died, in Boston, and left me a quarter of a million dollars. He wanted me to go down to a lawyer's office with him. He told me he'd been checking up on me, that he was working for some Boston lawyer."

Bucky looked over at the swarthy man. He sat, some ten feet from the bed, dangling a revolver in one hand.

"That's true, isn't it?" Bucky asked.

The swarthy man nodded.

"But—I don't understand the rest then," Ellen said.

"I think I do," Bucky told her. "These lawyers in Boston worked through the Argus agency, trying to locate you. And this detective saw a chance to make some money. Nobody had ever seen you. He sent Mary over, to room with you, to get all the information she could. Then they sent a stooge to Boston, to take your place." Bucky pressed Ellen's hand now, as a warning. "But Mary was too straight a kid. And she didn't want to play along. So that fat man—killed her."

The swarthy man was watching them closely now.

Bucky was still pressing Ellen's hand. "Remember how he used to call her all the time? And—that—night—"

Ellen took her cue like a trouper. She nodded.

"What night?" the swarthy man asked hoarsely.

Bucky kept his eyes on the floor, as though embarrassed. "One night we came home earlier than usual. He—he'd been trying to kiss her, I guess. She had a cut lip. Didn't you ever notice it?"

The man's head shook slowly from side to side, and his eyes weren't the eyes of a sane man. "The—" his voice trailed off hoarsely.

Bucky looked directly into those staring eyes, and said: "I want you to promise me one thing. If he—if he— I want you to promise me you'll shoot Ellen, if it will save her from him."

Ellen whispered "I'd give up the money. He could have it all, if he'd let us go, now."

The man was looking from one to the

other, and there was a new light in his eyes. "How could I be sure of that?" he asked. "Once you were free, how could I be sure—"

Then, from downstairs, came the sound of a slamming door.

"He's back," the swarthy man whispered. "There's no time to tie you up again. Remember—if you should double-cross me—" He lifted the automatic threateningly.

Then he was through the door.

Swiftly, Bucky bent over to untie the cords around his feet. The knot was stubborn, and he cursed, as he broke a nail. Ellen, too, was working frantically on her bounds.

From downstairs, he heard the voice of the swarthy man, accusing, threatening

The fat man's voice came through to him, talking easily, steadily. Then there was the muffled report of a shot.

Bucky stood erect, and pain danced up his legs. He flexed them gingerly, and started toward the door.

He was almost there—when the fat man's bulk filled it.

There was a gun in the fat man's hand. Bucky dove.

His shoulder hit that heavy paunch, and the man staggered back into the hall. Bucky ducked his head in time to catch the heavy barrel of the gun on his shoulder, and then Bucky's head rose up savagely, to land on the man's chin.

He could hear the gun clatter to the floor, and the man's big bulk was crashing into the wall.

Bucky came in, fast, and a big fist smashed into his mouth. He could taste the warm and salty blood, and the fat man's hands were reaching for his neck.

Bucky kept pumping those left and rights into that soft stomach, but the big man's hands were tightening now, and darkness was settling on Bucky's mind.

Bucky brought a knee up desperately, and again tried to crash his head into the man's face. But the grip increased.

Then Bucky saw something flash down on the man's head. He saw it flash again and again, and his wavering vision could only make it out as a high-heeled shoe.

The man's hands relaxed, and then

one left Bucky's throat, to lash out at this new threat.

Bucky put all his weight into a right hand for that big jaw. It landed, and pain lanced up Bucky's arm, and he knew he couldn't use that hand any more. He put a left on the man's chin, and another, and another

THE chief of police said: "They picked up the girl in Boston. And that grease-ball died this morning. He was delirious at the end. He kept saying you had promised him the money, but he couldn't use it, now. Fatty will get the chair." The chief smiled. "You're a very lucky young lady." He looked at Bucky. "And I'd say you were lucky, too."

Bucky and Ellen went out, then, into the sunlight, and Ellen was unusually quiet. Bucky had no words, and he felt strained, somehow, as though this was another girl from the one he had planned to marry.

Ellen stooped, right out on the sidewalk, and she looked up thoughtfully at Bucky, and her eyes were wise beyond her years. "I'm going to do something," she said quietly, "and maybe you'll think I'm crazy. But my mind's made up, Bucky, and I hope you'll understand."

He looked down at the earnest young face turned up to his, and his heart gave that little jump it always did when he looked at her.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"I'm going to save out a few thousand dollars for that welding shop of yours, and I'm going to give the rest of the money to the U.S.O." She put a hand on his arm. "I'm going to donate it in the name of that greasy man, Mary's boy friend."

"I'm not sure I understand," he said. "But it's your money, Ellen." He couldn't say why he felt better. Maybe, he was crazy, too. He asked her: "Why are you doing that, honey?"

"Because I love you," she said. "Because I want you the way you are." And she put her hand in his.

Bucky squeezed it until she winced, and for some damn fool reason, tears came to Bucky's eyes, and he was happier than he had ever been in his life.



WHEN GANGDOM RULED

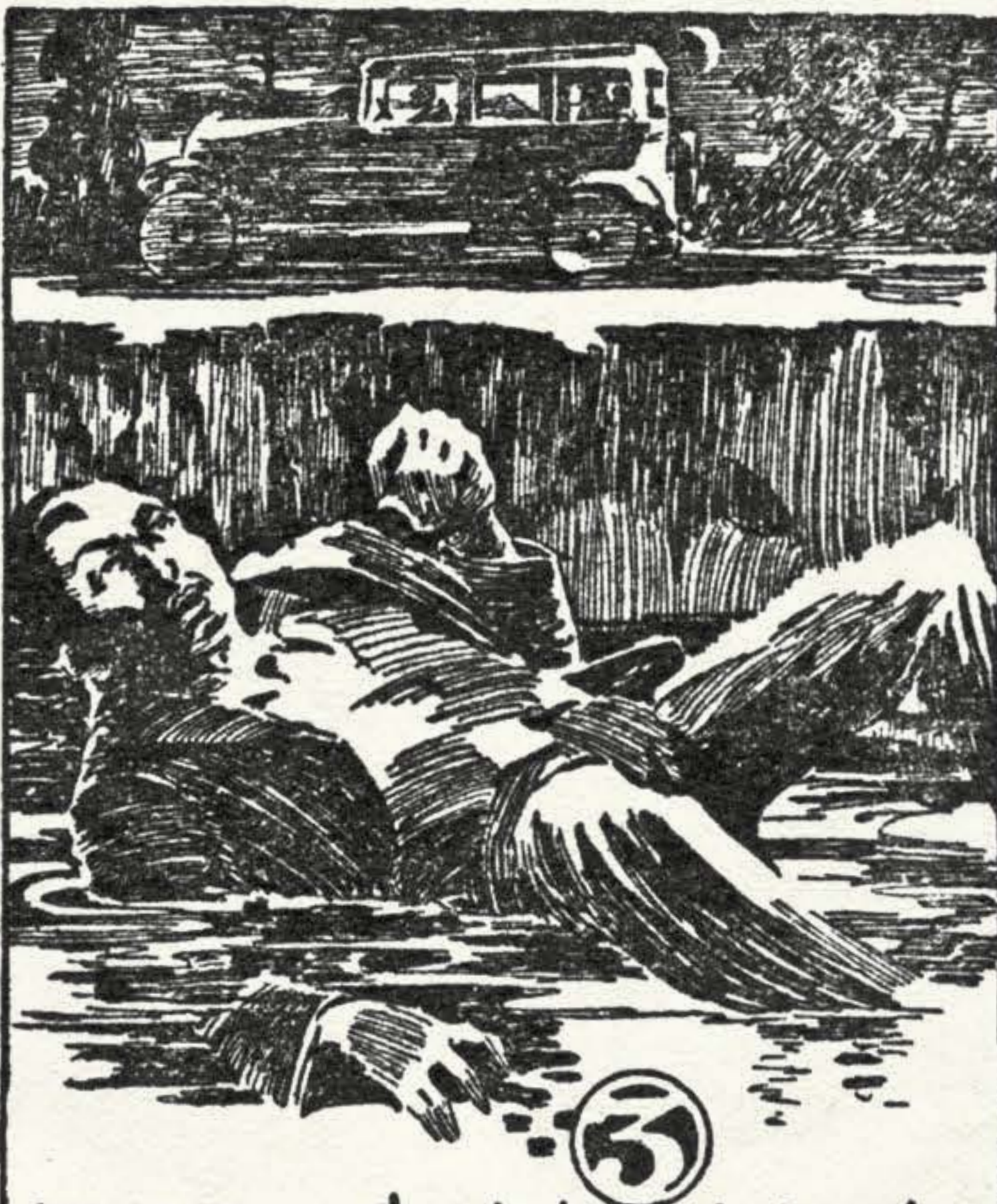
•AN ILLUSTRATED CHRONICLE OF THE TURBULENT TWENTIES• by WINDAS



For sheer unadulterated savagery, Chicago's Viceroy of Viciousness were in a class by themselves. Each in turn waved his sceptre of skulduggery to stop the Law dead in its tracks, then whirled to rend his gangster rivals with bloody atrocities that made the Windy City a byword throughout the nation. When the O'Donnells, beer-barons and gunmen deluxe, decided to remove rival Ed Tanc from his flourishing cabaret and call-house, they made a shambles of Ed's popular tavern, leaving the corpses of the proprietor, two waiters, a girl 'entertainer' and an innocent customer as evidence of their intent.



Choir boy O'Banion was reared in the shelter of sanctity but his later criminal record made men of faith repudiate him. A partial list of his misdeeds includes safe-cracking the Postal Telegraph Office; murdering his pals' John Mahoney and Charles Reser; highjacking a million dollar booze cargo from Sibley's government warehouse. Twenty-five men died by his hand or his orders, until he was 'executed' in his own luxurious flower shop, done to death by covetous Gennas gang rivals.



War between the rivals made treachery and assassination the price of friendship. Men died under the bright lights in bars and brothels, or were found, shot down like dogs, in the mud of lonely ditches. Five hundred died in Chicago's gang feuds, and these were 'big' or 'near-big' shots. The little guys, the punks, were never counted. Attorney McSwiggin, with the gangsters Doherty and Red Duffy, died in a gunburst which smeared them over their delectable dinner table in a swank hostelry.

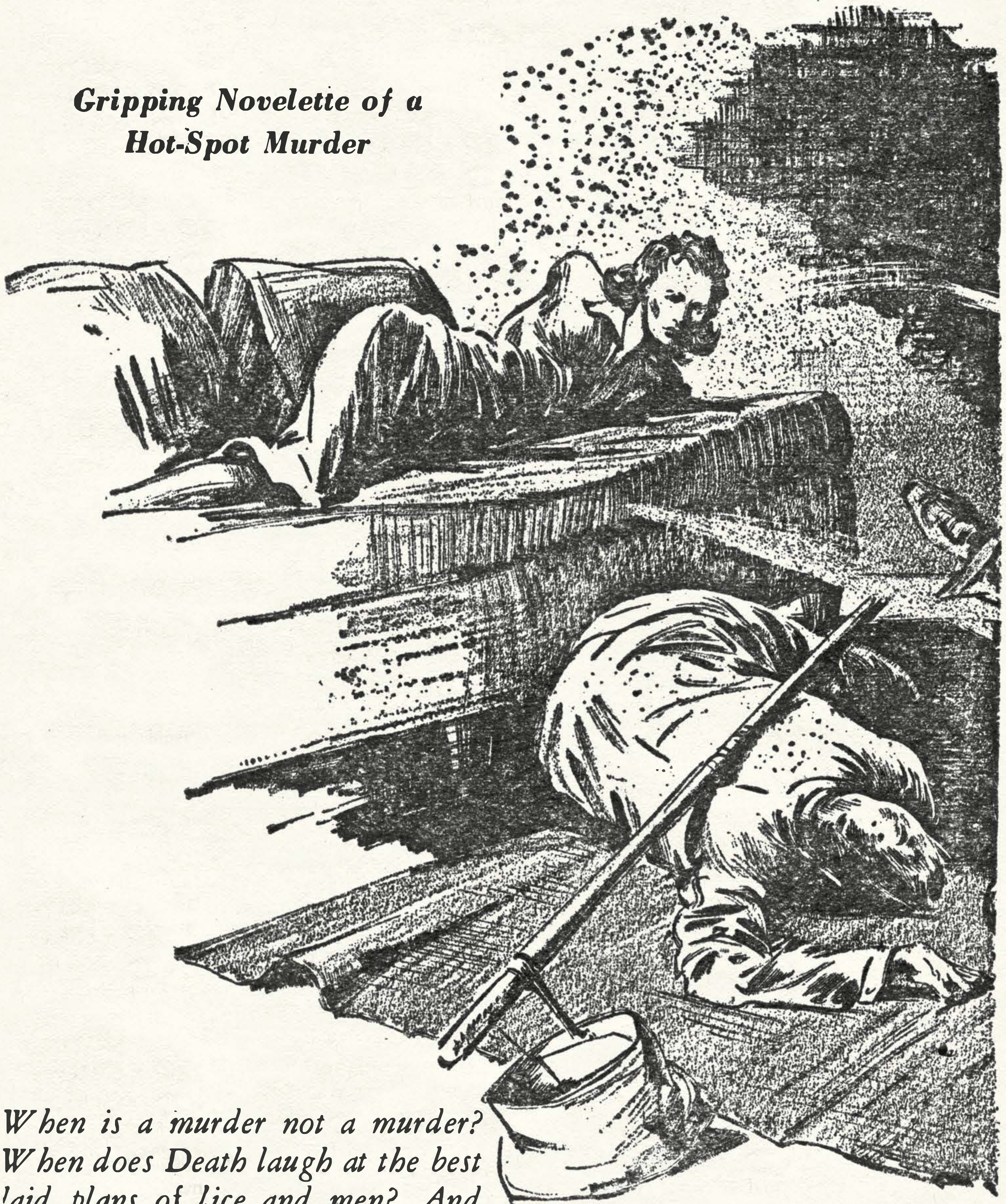


Had this senseless butchery wiped out the wolves of gangland exclusively, it would have been good riddance to whichever pariah perished. But good citizens and stalwart officers were likewise sacrificed on the alters of gangdom's greed. As witness the Battle of Western Avenue, when Patrolmen Walsh, Olson and Conway were cut down with sawed-off shotguns by Scalisi, Genna, and their brother rogue, Anselmi. So the blood of the innocent cried also for vengeance; and how that cry was answered will be revealed in later records.



● ● THE DOUBLE-

*Gripping Novelette of a
Hot-Spot Murder*



*When is a murder not a murder?
When does Death laugh at the best
laid plans of lice and men? And
what happens to a homicide case
when a tough detective lieutenant
goes all-out soft on a blonde and
gorgeous torch singer—whose hus-
band lies cooling in the morgue?
... You'll find the amazing answers
in this compelling story.*

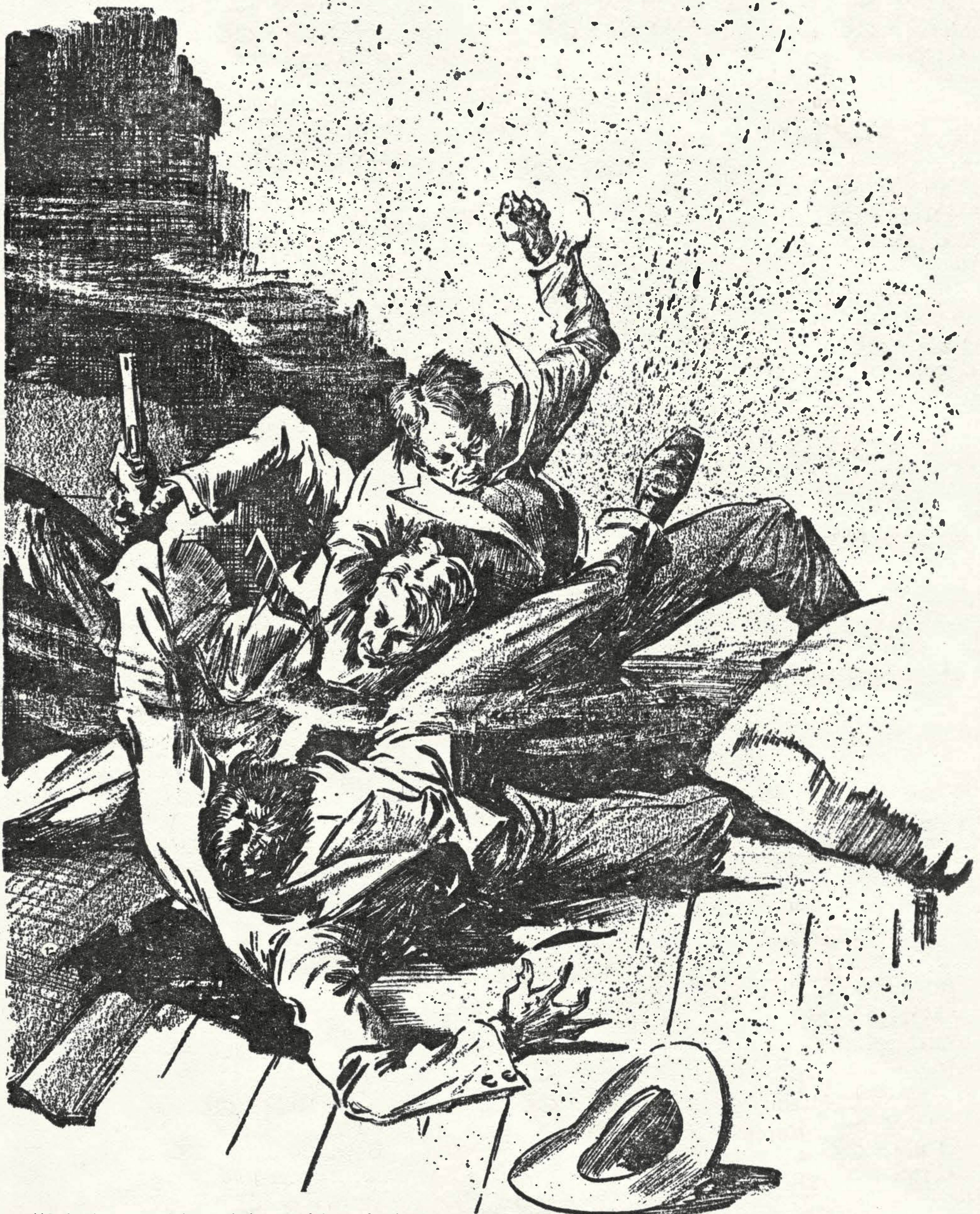
CHAPTER ONE

Sweet and Low

IT WAS three o'clock in the morning when Jim Blade's phone bell rang. He should have been asleep. He wasn't. For hours he had lain staring at the ceiling, trying to find the answer to a problem seemingly impossible of solution.

CROSSING CORPSE

By DAY KEENE



"Blade speaking," he said quietly.

"Listen, mug," a voice said coldly. "Lay off the dame, see? She didn't do it. I did."

"Did what?" Blade demanded.

"You'll find out," the voice informed

The three men became a rolling, thrashing ball of arms and legs. . .

him. "And if you try to pin any false raps on the chickadee—so help me, I'll kill you."

There was a sharp click on the other end of the phone line as the man replaced the receiver. Blade jiggled the cradle of his own phone.

"Find out where that call came from, will you, Gertie?"

"It came from Harve Exter's Sweet and Low Club on Rush Street, lieutenant," the night switchboard operator told him. "I checked while the party was speaking. And don't hang up, please. I have another call waiting." She plugged in a second line. "Go ahead, Inspector Rican. You are connected with Lieutenant Blade."

"Jim?" Rican demanded curtly.

"Speaking. What's up, Harry?"

"Harve Exter has been murdered."

For a moment Blade was silent. Then he asked: "Would you repeat that, Harry?"

"Harve Exter has been murdered. As I have the story so far, he was shot to death in a private dining room of the Sweet and Low. The other boys have just pulled out." Inspector Rican hesitated briefly. "You want in on this or not?"

"I want in."

There was relief in the other man's voice. "I thought you might. McManus went out of here as officer in charge. You take over when you get there. I'll send Pete to pick you up."

Blade thanked Inspector Rican and the other man hung up. "Gertie?" Blade said quietly.

"Evesdropping," she reported.

"Mum is the word," he told her.

"I'll keep it under my arms," she assured him.

Blade dressed carefully if quickly. A tall, big boned, man he moved with a seemingly effortless co-ordination of mind and muscle.

Blade smiled grimly as he knotted his tie and slipped into his coat.

Harve Exter's death had been the only solution to his problem. The way that Blade felt about Mignon he had even considered murdering the man himself. The fact had been no secret, not even to the Department.

On his way out he stopped at the switchboard to thank Gertie for tracing the call.

The red-haired girl said, "Forget it. It is a liberal education to work your line,

lieutenant. I presume you'll be marrying the widow?"

"Suppose," Blade suggested, nettled, "that we bury her husband first, or at least find out who killed him."

HE STRODE out through the dimly lighted lobby. The red-haired girl at the switchboard nodded with approval as he turned up the collar of his overcoat before pushing on through the revolving doors. Then she studied her reflection earnestly and critically in the small hand mirror on the board.

"And what," she demanded, satisfied with her inspection, "outside of a jinkusky voice and another man's son, has Mignon Exter got that Mrs. Covina's little girl Gertie is lacking?"

All of Chicago knew the answer to that one. The torch singing, willowy blonde with the faint French accent had Lieutenant Jim Blade of Homicide wound around her little finger.

In front of the hotel, on wind-blown Dearborn Street, Blade cupped his hands against the cold blasts off the Lake and lighted a cigarette. More snow had fallen and the Sanitary Department plows were busily scooping it up against the morning rush hour traffic and piling it on top of the long and dirty windrows that already lined the street.

A big car, coming fast, braked abruptly across the street. His head down against the wind, Blade crossed to intercept it before Pete should be tempted into trying a U turn and stalling in the drifts.

It wasn't Pete. The collegiate looking youth at the wheel rolled down the window and said, "Hello, lieutenant."

The man on the seat beside the driver and the three men in the rear seat of the big car merely stared. There was a smell of well-oiled metal. It wasn't from the motor.

"Hello, Jerry," Blade said. He put both hands in plain sight on the car door. "You boys looking for me?"

"That's right," Shad Rorick's second-in-command said crisply. "Shad is down in the Sweet and Low and it seems that there's been a sudden demise down there?"

"So—?"

The youth at the wheel was no longer smiling. "So as soon as we found out

that Inspector Rican had assigned you to the case we thought we'd drop out and see you."

"That was nice," Blade said.

SCHLITZ MURRAY on the seat beside the driver growled: "Why kick the ball around? We've been paying plenty, Blade. And while we don't know that it was Shad, see, Shad was plenty high the last time that we seen him. And if he was the lad who cooled off Exter, he's not standing any murder rap. We need him in our business."

"You've been paying me how much?" Blade asked.

"Well, not you," Jerry admitted. "But it's been going through the usual sources to—"

"I'd just as soon not know," Blade cut him short. He slipped the handle of the door, pulled the hoodlum out from under the wheel and slapped him hard across the mouth. "But this is from me to you. You can't buy immunity from a murder rap, not even in this town. And if it was Shad who knocked off Exter and I can prove that he did, he'll fry."

The hoodlum stared at him, defiant: "And you'll marry the widow, huh?"

"Perhaps," Blade agreed. "I hope so." Still holding the struggling hoodlum by the collar he bent down and peered into the darkened interior of the car. "Are there any other of you lads who would like a beauty treatment?"

The smell of oiled metal was stronger here. Blade could see the dull gleam of the barrels of a sawed-off shotgun resting across one of the hoodlum's knees. He was answered by a surly silence. The tall, gangling, police lieutenant had a reputation of being as tough as he was honest. A former back-of-the-yards boy, he preferred to use his fists.

Still twisting, helpless, in his hand, Shad Rorick's second-in-command snarled: "Leave loose of me. Someday you'll go too far."

Blade sat him back behind the wheel so hard that he bounced. "Let me know when I do," he told him pleasantly.

"Yah," Schlitz Murray found his courage as the driver ground on the starter. "Listen to the honest cop. Him and the Lone Ranger."

The big car leaped forward and roared on down the street. Blade stood staring after it thoughtfully until the twin tail lights turned right toward the Outer Drive on East North Avenue. He was still standing in the middle of the street when Pete Cussack braked beside him.

Blade nodded. "Hi, ho, Silver."

"You walking back from a ride, or just starting out on one?" the bald-headed, little squad-car driver demanded.

Blade slid into the seat beside him. "I'll be damned if I know," he said.

CHAPTER TWO

Triple Murder

THERE were three cars parked in front of the night club. One was Homicide. One belonged to the tech squad. The third was the coroner's car.

The large red neon sign that named the club had been turned off but small amber lights still spelled out *Mignon* on the marquee.

Blade, followed by Cussack, pushed through the usual crowd of morbidly curious shivering in the cold and banged on the glass door. A uniformed patrolman let them in.

McManus was in the foyer arguing with a black-haired, flashing-eyed woman in her late forties. She had a wisp of starched lace in her hair and a shabby gray squirrel skin coat thrown cloak fashion over a pert maid's uniform. The detective seemed relieved to see them. He tapped the woman on the shoulder and pointed to Lieutenant Blade. "You argue with him, see, sister? He's the boss."

The woman tossed her head. "Comment?"

"What's the matter?" Blade asked.

"She talks French and I talk English," McManus told him earnestly. "I don't get what she's driving at."

"Her name's Celeste," the colored doorman offered from the corner where he was warming the back of his scarlet-and-gold uniform against a sizzling radiator. "She's one of them refugees. Mr. Exter just hired her the other day."

"As near as I can make out," McManus added, "she says that she's only the ladies' washroom attendant, had nothing to do

with the murder, and wants the hell out of here."

Blade strode on into the club. "Nobody leaves," he called back over his shoulder.

A dozen couples were sitting in sullen silence at the dimly lighted tables around the postage-stamp-sized dance floor. The musicians were huddled in an apathetic group at one end of the small bar.

Blade strode past the closed doors of the row of private dining rooms to the one where flash bulbs were popping. He found Coroner Westman taking off his coat.

"I just beat you by a minute," the coroner told Blade cheerfully. "A hell of a night, eh, Jim?"

"A hell of a night."

He stood looking at the corpse. It was, as always, difficult for him to reconcile a girl of Mignon's beauty living with such a man. Harve Exter had been, in life, a pot-bellied little weasel. Death hadn't added to his looks. The manner of exit from the world was seemingly clean cut. There were two brown stains on the front of his dress shirt in the region of his heart. The powder stains would seem to indicate that the death gun had been fired from a distance of not more than six inches. There was surprisingly little blood.

After a quick glance around the room and at the table set for two, Blade knelt beside the dead man and felt underneath his arm pit for the holstered gun he knew was there. Exter had carried a heavy-calibered automatic. Both the chamber and the clip were filled.

"Funny," the lieutenant puzzled, "that Exter would let anyone with a gun in his hand get so close to him."

Pete Cussack said earnestly, "It must have been someone he trusted."

Blade shook his head. "Harve Exter didn't trust anyone. He couldn't. He had a finger in every dirty pie on the near north side. No one heard the shots, I suppose?"

Hartley, a print man, looked up from the wine glass that he was dusting. "I heard one of the waiters tell McManus that he thought that he heard two shots just before three o'clock. But it being a pretty cold night outside, he figured them for backfires."

"And the body was found when and by whom?"

"At five minutes after three, Jim. By one of the waiters." McManus came into the room mopping at his forehead with his breast-pocket handkerchief. "Boy. Would I hate to be married to that dame. If some of them things that she called me in French mean what I think that they do—"

"Wow!" Pete Cussack grinned.

"Wow," McManus agreed. He reported to Blade: "I've got the boys making the usual frisk and getting the names and addresses of everyone in the joint. You want what I've got so far, Jim, or do you want to prowl it on your own?"

"I'll take what you have," Blade said.

"Well, the joint is lousy with motive," the homicide man admitted. "And whoever did it is still here. The doorman says no one has left since about two forty-five or ten minutes before the waiter thought that he heard two shots."

Blade picked up one of the wine glasses from the table and sniffed at it absently. "Go on."

MCMANUS enumerated his suspects upon his fingers. There were four of them. The first, the dead man's wife, he skipped over hastily in deference to Blade's feelings. The other three were Slim Alcott, a gambler to whom the dead man had owed money, Shad Rorick the racketeer who owned one half of the club, and a little blonde dancer who had come to the club with Rorick and who felt that Exter had wronged her.

"Where's Shad now?" Blade demanded.

"Passed out on the couch of the dining room three doors up the hall," McManus told him. "But he hasn't been passed out long. The bartender said that he made a phone call at exactly three o'clock."

"Let's wake him up," Blade said.

McManus led the way down the hall. The second private dining room was identical with the first. The table was set for two. Shad Rorick lay on his back on a red leather studio couch snoring soddently. A big, powerful, handsome black Irishman, he looked more like a Hollywood leading man than he did like the vicious racketeer and gunman that he was.

A sultry-eyed, slightly disheveled, young blonde eyed the two detectives drunkenly, and slightly frightened, from the table where she was building up a terrific hangover by drinking rye whiskey straight with champagne as a chaser.

"Thish ish a private dining room," she informed them with drunken dignity. "So Harve Exter's dead. So what? I didn't shoot him. I haven't got a gun. Now get the hell out of here!"

Lieutenant Blade ignored her to jerk the sleeping man on the couch into a sitting position with one hand while he tried to slap him sober with the other. Either Rorick was a clever actor or his drunken stupor was genuine. His head lolled from side to side. His eyes opened blearily but there was no recognition in them. He sagged back limply to the couch when Blade released him.

"You checked his gun?"

"I did," McManus said. "And it wasn't his rod that killed Exter. It was as clean as a whistle. I looked."

"How about a hide-a-way?" Blade's big hands fanned Rorick's body deftly as he asked.

He found the second gun, a pear handled .32 caliber automatic, in Rorick's cummerbund. Using his handkerchief to handle it, he slipped the clip and pumped it. The firing chamber reeked of freshly discharged powder. Assuming the clip had been filled, two shots had been fired.

"Okay. That's a horse on me," McManus admitted. "I should have thought of a hide-a-way."

Blade showed the gun to the blonde. "You ever see this before, sister?"

"No," she said quite soberly, "I never have. And it wasn't Shad who killed Harve Exter." She spoke like a small and somewhat frightened child who had memorized a piece. "Shed has been here in this room with me ever since two thirty."

"Without even leaving it once?"

"Without even leaving it once."

Blade and McManus exchanged glances. "We'll be back," Blade told the girl. In the hall he called Pete Cussack and posted him at the door. Then he took the automatic into the room where the print men were still working. "See what you can give me on that, will you, Hartley?" He

turned back to McManus. "Now what's this about Mignon?"

"Well," the detective admitted unwillingly, "when I first got here one of the waiters, a lad by the name of Allier, told me that Harve and Mrs. Exter had a hell of a row."

"Let's talk to Allier," Blade suggested.

They found the waiter in the kitchen eating a liverwurst on rye and washing it down with coffee. A new man to the Sweet And Low he didn't know of the torch Jim Blade was carrying.

"Yair. Sure I heard 'em fighting," he admitted. "Mr. Exter says that he's got his belly full of being two-timed by a cheap little chiseling tramp. He says he is going to toss her out on her ear without any alimony and is going to keep their kid with him on account of she was an unfit mother."

"Go on," Blade said grimly.

"That's all I heard," the waiter shrugged, "except that Mrs. Exter said, 'I'll kill you first.' I didn't think anything about it at the time. But Mr. Exter was shouting and swearing something awful. And when Mrs. Exter comes out of the room she has the makings of a beautiful black eye."

"I—I'll talk to Mignon—alone," Blade told McManus.

"I thought you might want to," he said.

Blade strode out of the kitchen and rapped sharply on the door of the star's dressing room.

MIGNON EXTER was admittedly half French, half Irish. She had come to Chicago from New York five years before. Her first job on the near north side had been behind a green baize counter of a twenty-six game. Then Harve Exter had discovered she could sing. Six months later he had married her. In due time a son had been born. For a year they had been happy. For the last two years, or so Mignon had told Blade, Harve Exter had made her life a living hell.

"It's Jim," Blade called as he rapped.

The door opened immediately. Tall, beautifully formed, in her middle twenties, the platinum-haired torch singer clutched a wholly inadequate negligee together with one hand. She released it entirely to throw

her arms around Blade's neck and kiss him passionately. "Oh, Jim," she whispered huskily. "I am so glad you got here."

Blade closed the door behind him. "You didn't do it, did you, honey?"

The singer looked at him reproachfully with one eye. The other, a swollen, almost shut, was beginning to turn purple. "You know better than that, Jim. But Harve was raising hell about us tonight just before he was killed and—" she broke off and began to sob quietly.

"He had nothing to raise hell about," Blade said truthfully. "We shot square with him all the way." He smiled ruefully. "Hell. When I came in just now—it was the first time that you ever kissed me."

The girl stopped crying to nuzzle his cheek. That wasn't my fault, Jim."

"No," Blade admitted, "it wasn't."

A few stolen minutes together, a few drinks, a few furtive hand clasps had been the sole extent of their affair. Mignon had been willing to go further, but Blade hadn't. He wasn't a prude but neither was it in his code to make love to another man's wife. Carrying a torch was one thing. two-timing was another. He had gone to Harve Exter openly and asked him to agree to a divorce. The pot-bellied, little night club owner had laughed at him.

"Go on home and play with your hand-cuffs, chump," he had said. "You don't realize what a break you're getting by me saying no. But Mignon is my wife. She's the mother of my son. And she's going to stay my wife as long as I want her to."

Blade looked at the picture of Mignon's three-year-old son on her dressing table. The boy was as dark as his mother was fair. Mignon idolized him. "What was the row about tonight?" he asked.

"Us," the singer told him. "Harve said he was going to divorce me and take my boy away." She hesitated briefly. "He—he said that I wasn't a fit mother." She added, hopefully, "It was Shad who killed him?"

"It begins to look that way," Blade said. "You know the little blonde he's with?"

Mignon shrugged. "She used to be one of Harve's girls, I think." Her lips twisted in a bitter smile. "You see it didn't matter if Harve two-timed me. That didn't make him an unfit father."

Blade nodded. "Slip on something that will cover up a little more of that white space and come on. I want to see what Westman and Hartley have got."

The singer kissed him again, hard. "But you love me and you trust me?" she demanded.

"I love you and I trust you," Blade told her. "You'll marry me as soon as I can get this case washed up?"

"Perhaps," she tantalized him.

At the entrance to the hall off which the private dining rooms opened, the maid with whom McManus had been arguing descended on Blade with a torrent of voluble French. He lifted his eyebrows at Mignon.

The singer told him, "She says that she is only the ladies wash room attendant, had nothing to do with the murder and does not see why she should be held like a common criminal."

Blade said: "Tell her we're letting them all go in a minute." He added "She's new here, isn't she?"

Mignon nodded. "Harve hired her yesterday. She claims that she used to be a Folies Bergère star."

Pete Cussack noted the elderly maid's trim ankles with approval. "About 1917 I bet. I seen the show when I was in France with the A.E.F." His eyes brightened at the memory. "Wow!"

The door behind him opened and Shad Rorick staggered out. "What the hell's going on?" he demanded of Lieutenant Blade.

"Murder," Blade told him crisply. "And it looks as if you're tagged. You should have stashed the murder gun before you passed out, Shad."

"What gun?" the racketeer said thickly. "You're nuts."

Blade shrugged and walked on down the hall. Coroner Westman was just wiping the hose of a stomach pump with a wad of cotton saturated with alcohol. "You notice what little blood there was, Jim?" he demanded as Blade appeared in the doorway.

"I did."

"There was a reason," Westman told him cheerfully. "Exter was dead when he was shot. He had been dead at least five minutes. It seems that someone made him a cyanide cocktail."

RORICK had followed Blade down the hall. "It wasn't me," he muttered. "I wouldn't kill a guy that way. Besides, I've been passed out for an hour. I can prove it by the little chickadee who—" He stopped abruptly, sobered, "Hey! If he was poisoned, what's this about a gun?"

Blade looked at the fingerprint man.

Hartley said: "I found the same fingerprints on the gun that I found on the glass that must have held the cyanide."

"Rorick's prints?"

Hartley shook his head. "Hell no," he exploded a bombshell. "Both sets were made by a dame."

Blade felt Mignon's finger bite deeply into his arm. "I didn't do it. I didn't do it," she cried. "I fought with Harve tonight. I even threatened that I'd kill him." She began to cry. "But I didn't."

The elderly French maid took the sobbing girl in her arms. "*Non, non, ma chere*. You must not cry." She glared, defiant, at Lieutenant Blade.

He crossed to the table on which Hartley had been working and picked up the pearl-handled gun. "You ever see this gun before?" he demanded of Rorick.

"It's my gun," the racketeer admitted. "It's my hide-a-way gun." He began to curse, deep blistering oaths. Why the dirty, two-timing little tramp."

"Bring that little blonde in here," Blade ordered Cussack. "You want to talk?" he asked Rorick.

"I'm not saying a word," Rorick said, "until I see my lawyer." He then added bitterly, "But this is what happens to a guy when he tries to give a dame a break."

Blade pulled the racketeer to him by his coat front. "Then you admit it was you who phoned me?"

"I'm not saying," Rorick said.

Pete Cussack flat-footed it back down the hall. His voice was shrill with excitement. "Jim! Doc Westman! Come here. She's dead. The little chickadee is dead!"

Westman and Hartley hurried from the room. Blade turned to follow, stopped as Shad Rorick said:

"I'll be damned! She lost her nerve and did a dutch."

Mignon raised her tear-stained face from the maid's bosom. "That proves it. That proves it, Jim," she sobbed.

"Proves what?" Blade demanded.

The platinum-haired singer said huskily: "Proves that she poisoned Harve.

"I know she did," Rorick said grimly. "She confessed to me that she had." He added bitterly, "But I didn't know that she stole my gun while I was passed out and plugged the dead man twice hoping that the blame would fall on me."

Blade strode down the hall. The little blonde was slumped forward on the table. She still held a glass in one hand. Hartley was busily printing the fingers of the other.

"Everything checks," he told Blade finally. "It was her prints that I found on the gun and on the glass in the other room."

Coroner Westman sniffed the glass then smelled of the dead girl's lips. "More cyanide," he said.

Blade merely stared at the girl. There was nothing he could say. There was no way that he could prove it. But it wasn't a hunch, it was knowledge. He knew that he had been outsmarted. The dead blonde had lost her nerve too conveniently. The solution to murder was too pat.

CHAPTER THREE

Slugged!

MORNING was a dirty gray and two hours old when Pete Cussack pulled up before the pile of melting slush in front of Blade's hotel. A newsboy on the corner was already bellowing an extra.

"Wuxtra—Wuxtra paper! Whadda ya read—the *Tribune* or the *Sun*? Wuxtra paper! Blonde dancer kills night club owner!"

Blade stepped wearily from the car knee deep into slush. "The hell she did," he grunted.

"But we can't prove it," Pete said consolately.

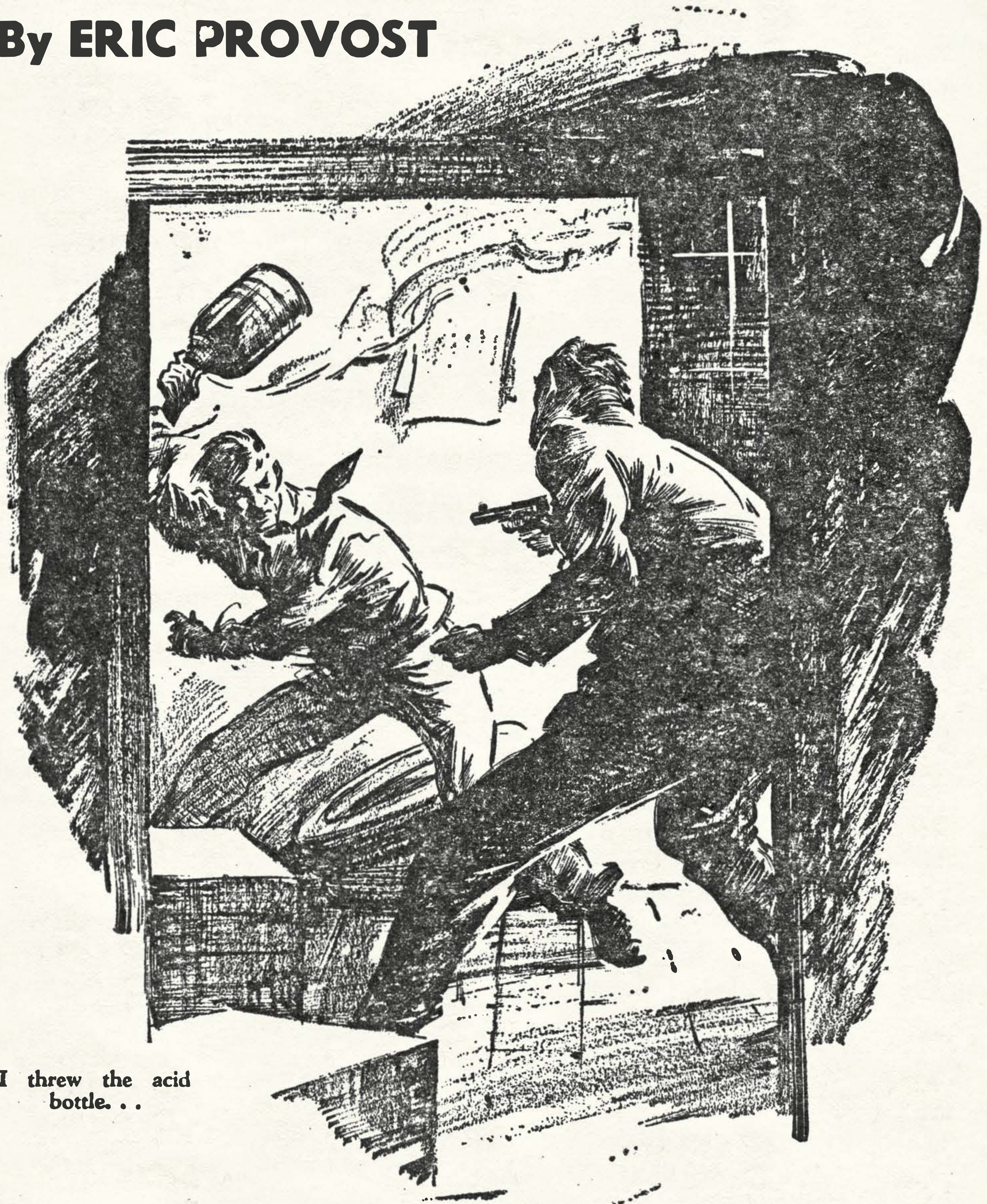
"At least we haven't so far," Blade agreed. "Pick me up in an hour, Pete."

As the squad car pulled away he plowed through and over the windrow of melting slush to the sidewalk, mildly surprised to find no reporters waiting. It was Jim Blade's considered opinion, and he had

(Continued on page 100)

RUBBER COFFIN

By ERIC PROVOST



I threw the acid
bottle. . .

An honest American was Ben Thompson—and he hated the rubber-racket rats who took advantage of the war to frame garage-men into playing their filthy game. . . . An up-to-the-minute murder story you won't easily forget.

YOU'VE often heard of John Doe. Well, that's me. No, don't get me wrong, that's not my name. But the Law says John Doe is just anybody, just John Q. Ordinary and that certainly is me. My legal handle is Thompson and my old lady called me Ben.

I'm thirty-six, have a wife and two kids and run Thompson's Gas Garden which, though small, is the best outfit of

its kind in Midland Beach. We go to the movies a couple of nights a week, read the war news and worry about the tires on my jallopy, even as you and you.

This Midland Beach is one of the coast towns below Los Angeles and, as the C of C will tell you, bigger and better than all the rest. The population used to be seventy thousand, but lately we have some of Uncle Sam's nephews around—how many is none of your business as you can understand.

This rubber situation is a mess. I'm patching tubes that are mostly patches, and some of my customers are beginning to offer real dough for usable tires; but they don't exist any more—like the dodo, they're extinct.

This gas business of mine is holding up pretty well though and I've got no real beef. I'm lucky in one way: I have the fire department business. I used to drive one of the big red wagons, but five years ago when I got married I quit the fire business and opened up this place. Most of the boys are mighty decent and throw what they can my way.

I've seen this thing coming for some time, so it didn't surprise me when this lug came in and hung around, looking plenty, trying to size me up, but saying nothing. We don't have his type around any more, haven't seen them since prohibition went out. Flashy-looking clothes, a beefy face and shifty eyes. He was a bit rusty at the routine. He started off,

"How's business?"

I told him it was lousy and he nodded understandingly. Then:

How you fixed for rubber?"

So that was it. I played dumb. "I got a few used ones, but they don't amount to much. About what size are you looking for?"

His glance dropped to the floor for a second. When he looked up there was a half grin on his face.

"I don't want to *buy* any," he said. "But I know a guy who can get some for you. All you want. Any sizes!"

Before I could tell him off a car stopped by the ethyl pump and the man blew his horn. I filled his tank. When I was through entering the sale on my day-sheet, the guy said,

"Well, what do you say?"

I said, "Scram, bum! Before I call the cops."

His face flushed. His eyes narrowed as he took out a pocket knife and scraped his left thumbnail with the small blade. He looked at me for a minute but didn't say a word. I wondered if he had a rod, but I couldn't see a sign of one at his armpit. Then he walked out, slammed the door and went across the street to a black convertible.

As he pulled away I stepped out by the gas pumps and wrote his tag number down on the day-sheet.

I said that I saw this coming. A month ago a tire warehouse was knocked off and a slew of tires disappeared. The cops worked hard on it, I guess, but they had too much to do on other things, like moving Japs and helping out with blackouts. A few days later the Navy made headlines and the papers forgot about the robbery.

I didn't say anything about this guy to my wife. You know how it is—women worry. The next day when I opened up I thought the padlock on the door of the station worked hard. I looked at it. Around the keyhole there was a tiny scratch. The lock had been picked! If it hadn't worked stiff, I wouldn't have noticed it. I opened that door sort of nervous, wondering what I'd find inside.

Everything seemed in order. The stock on the shelves hadn't been touched and the six-foot pile of used tires in the corner were still there. I looked the rest of the place over quick, but everything seemed kosher.

It was a cinch that something was phoney. I examined the padlock again. Then I went over things more carefully. I found it.

About halfway down the stack of tires there was one I didn't recognize. I pulled it out. It was a new tire, and the number had been buffed off!

I yanked that thing out of there like it was on fire. I locked up again, threw the tire in the back of my car and took it home. I hid it, but good, and went back to the station.

There was a squad car in the driveway. I knew the cops and they looked at me sort of hard.

"Little late, ain't you?" The big one

was a sergeant. He looked at his watch. "You usually open up before this."

I said something about business being so lousy I should better stay in bed, and unlocked the door. This time the lock worked better.

They barged in and looked around. They made big business of looking things over thoroughly before they tackled the stack of tires.

I WATCHED them and kept my mouth shut. I should have told them the story. That would have saved a lot of trouble but you know how it is. Right then, I was marked lousy in their book and a yarn about a frame-up would have sounded pretty thin.

"This all the rubber you have?" The sergeant's face was flushed with the effort of moving the tires.

I grinned. "But yes, sergeant. Are you looking for something for your car?"

"Don't get smart," he said. "We got a tip you had some hot rubber. I'm glad to see it isn't so. Right now a guy caught with stolen tires would draw about a thousand years. They hooked the rubber off a judge's car the other night, outside the Elks Club. He's just waiting to pass out a lifetime at hard labor!"

Who could blame him? The cops left and I sat down to think things over.

I was still thinking when the mug came back. He stood in the doorway and grinned. He said,

"You are plenty lucky. Maybe you are smart. Will you play now and make yourself some dough, or—"

He paused and I knew what he meant. It was prohibition all over again. Rats like him were taking advantage of the war, and the cops being busy and people hanging over radios for news, to line their wallets which had been unlined for many years. They were turning on the pressure: either I agreed to sell their stolen tires, or they'd make it unpleasant—in any one of a lot of ways.

I should have had more sense. But then, the men with brains don't have much fun—at least not the kind of fun I had then. I enjoyed it, lots.

I knocked him down. He grabbed for his hip and I smacked him with a small jack handle. It was not too small. Den-

tists should try jack handles—they extract teeth nicely if you swing them right.

The guy got up and ran—his feet had not been damaged. They carried him across the street to where he'd parked his car. I watched him drive away and I felt full of virtue and inner satisfaction.

It was not till later that I began to worry. What with the news these days, knocking two teeth out of a chiseler seemed such a little thing. But the mug would feel differently on that score I was sure.

They kept me busy all that day. Since the Army took my helper I close up early every night. A man should spend some time at home. And that night the radio carried a flash bulletin. It brought my troubles back to me, if they had ever been away!

More rubber had been stolen. This warehouse had a watchman and he had disappeared, along with many tires. But that was not quite all. It seemed that suddenly people all over the city found that the numbers had been obliterated on the tires of their cars, so that no one could tell who rode on stolen rubber. Half the cars in town had tires without numbers!

The cops said it was done with acid, and talked about arrests. I wondered. . . .

Lots of folks would be unable to prove that they owned their tires legally, except by word of mouth and a possible bill from a garage. The police would have a chore to find out what was what. The crooks were using brains which were not necessary during prohibition. What a setup!

The next morning I did not open up. I didn't have a chance. The cops were there ahead of me this time.

The watchman who had disappeared the night before had been found. He was in the bottom of my grease pit and his skull had been caved in, and the jack handle I had used on the chiseler the day before, was lying right beside him.

The cops were rough. I didn't blame them much. My wife told them I was at home and they said, sure, they knew. They tossed me in the clink and threw the key away.

That bed was hard. The mattress was no thicker than a blanket and the springs were iron slats. I sat and cursed myself for quite a while. Then I got smart and

asked to see the captain of the precinct.

The captain was a nice guy with a tanned face and graying hair. His name, I learned, was Scudder. He listened well. He listened so well that I began to wonder if he had a dictaphone under his desk which was taking down every word I uttered for their use in court. If so, I told plenty. I told him everything.

He waited until I was through, his eyes appraising me. Then he leaned forward and touched a button on his desk.

"You may have a real lead," he said. "We'll pick up this man."

"Wait," I said. "Why don't you let me handle it? Those guys are not small time. They'll have four or five lawyers and foolproof alibis. I'd like to clear myself."

The door opened and a plainclothesman came in. The captain waved him to a chair and told him what I'd said. I'd seen him before. He used to be an arson dick when I was eating smoke. His name was Dugan. Now he was a sergeant of detectives and was working on the case already.

A GAIN I asked them to let me handle it. I thought of all the reasons in the world and added that I couldn't get away, I wouldn't have a chance. I said I would either get the man they wanted or be back inside whatever time they gave me. The captain said,

"We can't let you go, even though I'm inclined to believe every word you've said. I've checked your record. You're clean. You haven't been in trouble. But—"

It would do no good to argue, I saw that. The captain was a man who knew what he would do. But Dugan interceded.

"Let me take him along, captain. I'll keep him close beside me. The sight of him might cause the crooks to make a break."

Dugan stopped, to let the idea sink into the captain's mind. I watched the captain. There was no indication of what he thought, but his fingers drummed on the desk before him.

"Sergeant," he said, "take charge of Thompson. Check his story. Find the tire he says he hid. If you run across the man he's spoken of, pick him up.

Bring them both back here. Remember, I'll hold you responsible for this man. If you want it that way, all right. If not. . . ."

Dugan was a man. He rose and saluted. He looked something like a soldier standing there, even in the unpressed clothes. "Very well, sir, I'll bring the both of them back with me."

In the squad car outside, Dugan gave me quite a lecture on what he'd do to me if I so much as thought about a break. I was, I heard, a dangerous character who deserved no hint of mercy and would receive none from Dugan. It was only from the goodness of his heart that I had a chance to show what I could do. If I tried to make a play he'd fill me so full of lead that the pallbearers wouldn't be able to lift the coffin at my funeral. That is what he said, but underneath the words I heard a lilt of Ireland.

Make no mistake, I knew he meant every word. Only he said it all, so that I'd have the fear of Dugan in my heart as well as the fear of God.

We drove to my house and I gave him the new tire. He took it to Identification to be checked for prints. That was, he said, routine.

In the gas station, Dugan checked on the license number on my day-sheet by phone. The name was Lanford, William, and the place he lived was an apartment house. On the way there, Dugan told me many reasons why Lanford couldn't be on this job alone. But we'd find Lanford first. As luck would have it, the mug was not at home.

Dugan parked the squad car down the block and we sat and waited, talking about things in general. Dugan had a boy at sea on a destroyer. He showed me a picture that he carried in his wallet. The boy was Dugan, only younger. Two keys fell from the wallet when he put the picture back. Dugan recovered them and slipped them back in place, explaining they were spares in case he lost his key ring.

We talked of many things until, two hours later, a black convertible drew up and parked. Soon afterward a light came on in the window we'd been watching.

Dugan grunted. "Come on, my lad. This looks like what we want. You go

in first. I'll be right behind you. Let's go."

My legs felt queer as we approached the door. It was all right for Dugan. He had a gun. But I was empty down inside—until I thought of the murdered watchman and the way the plant had been put on me. Then the burning anger came and I was all right again.

The door of the apartment had a peephole. I got close to it and Dugan stood to one side where he couldn't be seen. I rang the bell.

The peephole door swung back and someone cursed inside. The word was one I seldom use and I am far from perfect. Then the main door opened. The guy who used the name of Lanford was a little drunk. He stood there, looking startled, with a highball in his hand.

"Come in, sucker, come in! How did you get out?"

I smiled. The words were blurred. The S's gave him trouble where I had knocked out his teeth. I pushed him back, a hand flat on his chest. Dugan followed close behind me.

A nasty smile appeared on Lanford's face. "Oh," he said. "I get it." He held out a pudgy hand to Dugan. "Let's see the warrant."

Dugan looked around, paying no attention to the request.

The apartment was well furnished and the stuff was new. A woman was involved somewhere, if I should make a guess. There were touches such as monk-cloth drapes drawn across an arched doorway and soft pillows on a couch. There was, too, more than a hint of perfume in the air. The smell was strong. To me, it meant a weak mind in the head of the woman who used it.

Lanford kept talking in a loud voice. I laid it to the liquor and made a grave mistake.

I noticed a stack of records in a corner, ceiling high, but no sign of a phonograph. There was a mantelpiece and several cloth bags lay empty there. I could see the name of a bank stenciled on the fabric. Coin bags. I've used them often. There was a table in another corner with a shovel full of nickels heaped up high. A small pile of papers used by banks in wrapping coins, lay on the floor.

I wondered what Dugan would do. He

was still cataloguing things and, I could see, listening to Lanford's song about his innocence of any crime and how the cops had hounded him since his release and would not give him a chance to live a life of honor, free of stain.

Dugan was smart. He'd let the guy talk and pretty soon he'd spill something which would be by way of news or evidence.

But I felt queer. The thing was just too easy. It should not be this way. However, I am not a cop and don't know the ropes, so I kept quiet and let Dugan handle things.

Then Lanford offered us a drink. We shook our heads and Dugan made the pinch. He said,

"Let's go downtown. The charge is—suspicion. That's all, right now. But if you want to make it tough, we can chat a while of *murder*. Stick out your hands."

Dugan pulled handcuffs from his pocket but Lanford had a gun. Quick as a flash of light he pulled it out of nowhere.

"The hell with that," he said. Then to me: "Back up!"

My head was against the drapes. Dugan said:

"Don't be a fool! There are other cops outside. Put that thing down."

Lanford's voice was loud—too loud, I thought. He said, "I could use a *bottle*. I sure have been a *sap!*"

There was a noise behind me and I moved. But I was late. Then there must have been an earthquake. . . .

✦ ✦ ✦

IT WAS dark and I was cramped. My head throbbed and there was something in my hand. On top of that, my mouth was full of oil—but it wasn't oil, it had the salty taste of blood. My jaw felt as though a piledriver had been working out on me. Four teeth were gone. I was one large lump of pain—more than I could catalogue. I opened my eyes and promptly wished I hadn't.

I was in the squad car and Dugan sat beside me. But Dugan was a corpse and my hand held a gun. My left wrist was cuffed to Dugan's right. His other hand held a sap—a police blackjack which was wet with blood. As I moved, Dugan's

head fell forward and there wasn't any back.

I wished I'd stayed in jail. I wished my parents had never met each other and that I hadn't been born. I sat and shivered with nausea and fear. But that would do no good and I knew it.

We were still parked near Lanford's apartment. A street light glowed feebly up the block and showed me what I'd seen. At any minute a cop might come around, checking up on cars parked too long. I didn't want to be here when he came.

The ignition keys were gone. The handcuff bit into my wrist as I went through Dugan's pockets looking for them. I dropped the gun to my feet. My prints would be on it and, if that weren't enough, the sap in Dugan's hand looked like we'd had a fight which he had lost.

The cops would never take me in alive if they found things this way. They'd say they'd found me dead, and who could blame them.

I realized now what had happened. That talk of Lanford's had been code—crude and simple, but effective. His woman stood behind the curtain, ready. He'd laid much stress on "bottle" and on "sap." She'd used the bottle as a sap and laid me out. Dugan, like the man he was, had tried to get his gun, or make a fight of it somehow. They shot him, dropped him cold and then they tied a frame to me as tight as they could make it. That was why they hadn't killed me. They hoped the cops would take care of me and leave them in the clear. They hadn't overlooked a thing.

Dugan's key-ring lay in the street, in plain sight of any passer-by. It would look as though Dugan threw it there as he died, to prevent my escape. It was twelve or fifteen feet away and might as well have been on the moon, as far as I was concerned. I couldn't carry Dugan. And as we were cuffed together I could not get out and pick it up.

My throat ached and my own blood gagged me. That sadist had sure given me the works for knocking out *his* teeth. My brain was spinning but it came to me—there were spare keys. The wallet! I found it, found the keys and got the handcuffs off.

Then I had to change places with Dugan. It sickened me. But I got the squad car moving. My mind blank with fear, my stomach tight, all I could think of was getting away—getting to a place of safety—getting rid of Dugan—hiding out. . . .

But Dugan was a man. I thought of that and sanity came back. Dugan would have been a friend. Dugan had believed me. Dugan had given me a break when no one else would listen. What would Dugan do in my place?

Then I got the answer. I might be wrong but it was a hunch worth playing. A heaping pile of records and change-bags for nickels—put them both together and what is the sum they add to? Those things called "jook organs" which have replaced slot machines in many places and proved, because they're legal, much more profitable!

But how could I trace Lanford? Even though I knew he was connected with those musical dispensaries, I couldn't spend much time searching for him. My clothes were soaked with blood and anyone who saw me would quick call the cops.

I'd headed for the edge of town, instinctively avoiding the streets where people gathered. I used more alleys than I ever knew existed but I got the car into my gas station. Thanking the Lord for darkness I got inside to the telephone.

There was a bar not far from here owned by Mike Caruso. I've bought a lot of beer from Mike. But what is more important, in a corner of his place there is a plastic thing which takes in nickels and gives out Crosby in both quantity and volume. I called the bar and Mike answered.

The man who serviced his machine came regularly, he said. He often came in taxis and Mike had heard that the taxi company was part owner of the record business. I knew the outfit and looked up their address in the phone book.

Time was precious but I squandered some inside my washroom cleaning up as best I could. It was difficult. I had no way of sewing rips in clothing or of hiding bruises which were souvenirs of Lanford's feelings.

The squad car was a problem. Driving

it would be dangerous. But leaving it, with Dugan's body inside, would be sticking my head into the State's gas chamber.

Dugan had slumped low and I prayed he was out of sight of people on the sidewalk. Right then I should have called the cops. But I knew they wouldn't believe me. I still had one chance.

Luck, for a change, was with me. I listened to the radio and heard the police announcer's voice calling different cops and assigning chores to each. There was no hint of Dugan's trouble or any sign that they were looking for us—yet. But it wouldn't be long before the captain, wondering what had happened, would begin to check. By that time. . . .

The taxi outfit had a large four-story brick building which used to be a warehouse. I knew the building. There had been a fire in the old days which had really been a honey. Afterward they'd rebuilt it, installing sprinkler systems and putting alarm boxes on every floor. The office was downstairs, in front, with a switchboard for telephones.

I parked the car two blocks away and walked around the building through alleys that enclosed it. The windows on the upper two floors were boarded up, as though they weren't being used. On the back there was a rusty old fire escape.

I could, of course, walk right in the door. But I thought of Aesop's tale about the spider and the fly. There must be another way of getting in and finding out what went on—and more important, getting out again when it was over.

THE GUN which had killed Dugan was heavy in my pocket. I knew there were shells left. I'd looked to see. Again I threaded alleys, carefully this time, eyes glued on boarded windows above. At last, on the back of the building, I saw a thread of light between some boards.

It was a slender thing but worth a try. The iron ladder of the fire escape was three windows away on that floor. I went up slowly, praying that the noise of ancient metal creaking wouldn't be heard. To me it sounded like a band, like Sousa at his best.

I reached the top floor landing. It was still thirty feet along a narrow ledge to

the window with the light. I am no human fly. Reaching that window would be impossible—to me. I have no priorities on wings.

Above me was the roof. If I remembered that roof, there were four skylights. I climbed.

Gravel crunched underfoot as I found a skylight. There were no boards up here. They needed none. There were no lights below. The muzzle of Dugan's gun served as a pry to break the lock. The rest was simple. Getting inside I hung at arms' length in the darkness, then I dropped. It was further than I thought, and my knees came up and kicked me in the face.

Feeling my way as you do in a blackout, I ran up against a row of objects. My hands told me what they were—jook organs. My tip then had been good. Mike was right.

I paused and got my bearings. The wall to the right was painted white, barely visible in the darkness. There must be a door in that wall, or a number of them, opening on rooms. It was from one of those rooms that I'd seen the streak of light through the boards. I walked along the wall and found four doors, all locked. Now there was no sign of light in any of the rooms.

I chose a door in the center of the partition, about in the same position as the window where I'd seen the light. I wrung the front sight off Dugan's gun getting the door open, then ducked inside, closing the door behind me.

It was inky dark. I felt my way, my hands extended in front of me like a kid playing pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey. I took three steps. The fourth brought me up against something familiar, something I've felt and looked at for the five years I've owned Thompson's Gas Garden—a pile of tires!

The paper wrappings had been removed. That, I figured, was to get at the serial numbers. This bunch had put acid on a lot of legitimate tires all over town, removing the numbers, so that the possession of unnumbered tires would not mark anybody as a crook, or a customer of crooks. This, then, was the warehouse where they stored the rubber until they had a chance to dispose of it.

I backed to the door, opened it and got

out of the room. If I could get out of the building . . . then I remembered Dugan.

Finding Lanford was my job and time was a-wasting. There were three other floors in the building. The lower one would probably be out, as it was used for storage space for cabs and the taxi office. The second or third floors were my best bets. I found the stairs.

The third floor was a blank. But on the second, light showed beneath a door. Gun ready, I tiptoed forward. I heard a voice I didn't know, but the guy who answered was Lanford!

Lanford said, "Maybe I'll head for Reno. If you're so damn sure I ought to leave town."

The first man, the one I didn't know, came back, "All right, go to Reno. Go anywhere. But get to hell away from here and stay out of trouble until—"

A phone bell shrilled. The man stopped talking and picked up the instrument. There was a pause. Then he spoke in a clipped voice.

"Okay, have Pete take care of it."

The phone clicked back in place. This guy was evidently the boss. He was giving orders. He resumed,

"Why you pulled that stunt I'll never know. I told you guns were out—so you shoot a cop!"

"The cop was wise." Lanford's voice held a pleading note. "That punk helped him somehow. He was taking me in. What should I do? Go along like a sucker?"

"It would have saved trouble if you had. I'd have had you out in a matter of hours. Now you've killed a cop and rigged some stupid frame-up on this Thompson. You're a fool!"

So there were two of them. The first man, the one who gave the orders, had brains. Lanford was the muscle man who worked outside and pushed the boys around. He had no brains. He had nothing but an empty belly and an eager gun. The gun had filled the belly many times and brought him to his present high estate.

Only two of them! I had a gun. There was a phone in there. That set-up should be fresh meat for me. Cover them with the gun while the phone brought all the cops in town. . . .

I THREW the door open, stepped inside, gun ready at my hip. Light from a single fixture in the ceiling glowed on Lanford as he faced another man across a desk. The phone was there. But there were five men—not two—in the room. Three others stood by a window—hoods, if I ever saw any. My heart stopped pumping.

Five pairs of eyes focused on me. The big man at the desk smiled coldly. He said,

"You're Thompson, aren't you? Come in."

I tried to keep my voice steady but it shook a little. "You catch on quick," I said. "I'm Thompson and I'm in already. Get up your hands!" I held the rod straight at his head. "If these boys of yours make a break, you'll get it right between the eyes. So tell them to behave."

He frowned for just a second, then he smiled again. "That gun won't get us all. We're too many for you."

The hoods against the wall had their hands up. One of them edged sidewise towards a filing cabinet with a bronze bust on top of it. I said:

"Hold it, Mac!"

He stopped but his eyes strayed to the bronze bust. A red box in the corner caught my eye. A firebox, direct to headquarters!

Lanford was edging toward the door. I backed him up with the others. He went a little green around the gills when he looked down the barrel of the gun. He'd killed with that same gun less than two hours ago!

"You line up, too," I told the boss.

He had sense and got up slowly, taking his place with the others. I lifted the phone. Only then I noticed that there was no dial. A voice responded,

"Yes, boss, what is it?"

The phone didn't go outside the building as I'd thought. It went to the switchboard, downstairs in the taxi office!

I slurred my voice as best I could. "Nothing. Forget it," and replaced the instrument. Instead of getting cops, that phone would bring me trouble in large gobs! Instead of trapping them, I had my neck stuck out like a turkey on a platter!

A siren moaned outside. I must have turned my head. The next thing I knew

they were on top of me—all five of them. They snowed me under in a blizzard of slaps, kicks and punches. They rode me down by force of weight like a tank over-rides a pill-box. The gun was torn out of my hand. Then the telephone rang insistently.

"Hold it!" It was the boss.

They climbed off me as he picked up the instrument. A voice was loud in the receiver.

"Boss, there's cops down here. They found a dead cop in a car. They want to know about it!"

That was Dugan. A routine police patrol had found him. They'd tear the town apart now, but they'd do me no good downstairs. If only I could get them up here.

"I'll be right down." The handset clicked.

It looked as though the cops would not come up. It looked like curtains for little Ben! But for a second, I was free. I got slowly to my feet and leaned against the filing cabinet. The boss spoke sharply.

"Stay here. Watch Thompson. This may be our chance to turn him in. But first I want a look at things downstairs. I'll let you know—"

He slammed the door. They started to talk. They liked the way this was working out. I brought my hand up to a bleeding ear where someone's teeth had left an imprint, deep. They didn't notice. So I threw the bronze bust on the filing cabinet at the light. My aim was perfect and the room went blacker than the inside of a skunk.

They lunged at me, cursing. I got away. I heard them grab each other, wrestling, swearing as they found it wasn't me. They made a lot of noise for which I thanked them in my heart. It covered the breaking of glass in the fire-alarm box. I pulled that lever not once, but many times. Then I dove for the door.

But they'd figured on that. I got it open and was going through like a destroyer in a heavy sea when one of them grabbed me by the coat. I let my arms go back, shed the coat and ran.

In the darkness I got twisted. I'd intended to go downstairs faster than any elevator ever made it, but I got turned

around. The next thing I knew I was climbing *up*.

That was bad. They heard me and were right behind me, coming fast. Right then I made a record. Stairs were never climbed so fast in the history of man. I made the top floor well ahead of them and, still in darkness, found the room where they kept the tires. Inside, I closed the door and huddled low behind a pile of rubber.

They didn't figure on this room. They'd left it locked. They took time to search the space outside and they went at it quietly. There were cops downstairs to think of.

Sooner or later they would see the lock was broken and come barging in. I could not hide for long if they lit the lights in here.

I moved back near the wall. There was a clear space and a smell of acid in the air. I took a chance and lit a match. There was a gallon bottle of acid, nearly full, that they used to destroy the serial numbers on bootlegged tires.

Then I heard the sound of sirens. It seemed as if all the trucks in town were coming. I'll put that sound ahead of Benny Goodman any day. Talk about sweet music!

The door opened. Lanford stood there, gun in hand. I tried to stop my breathing. Lanford stepped inside and disappeared from sight. Then a switch clicked and the lights came on.

I threw the acid bottle. It was heavier than I thought and didn't reach him. But the stuff splashed on him when the bottle broke and I guess he lost his head. He saw me duck behind a pile of tires and threw three shots at me.

I crawled. I heard him coming up behind me and I scuttled for the door. Then suddenly the place was full of cops and firemen. Lanford still had the gun, but a fireman grabbed him and held him like a vise.

Then Captain Scudder came. He listened to me a minute, and said,

"We have them all. This was quite an outfit you walked into. You. . . ."

I didn't hear the rest of what he said. I guess I must be getting soft. I passed out cold. . . .

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(Continued from page 89)

gone on record as so saying, that the perfect murder had been committed.

Over his bellowed protests, Shad Rorick had been released on bail an hour before. Shad maintained that he had merely felt sorry for the little blonde and had tried to give her a break by confusing the trail before he had learned that she had stolen his belly gun in an attempt to pin the crime on him. He knew, his lawyer knew, and Jim Blade knew that it was very doubtful if a grand jury would indict him, or a trial jury convict him if they did.

Shad had, so he claimed, merely acted on drunken impulse. He had told his boys of his intention. Jerry Lait and Schlitz Murray had sworn before the Commissioner that Shad had told them that the little blonde had confessed to poisoning Exter and their attempt to pressure Blade had been made in an effort to save Shad from himself. Blade himself had been forced to admit that Shad Rorick had called him from the Club. It seemed incredible that any man really guilty of murder would have done so.

As the final topper for his arguments Shad had challenged Blade to prove a motive for his wanting Harve Exter dead. There was nothing that he stood to gain. The dead man's widow would inherit his half of the Club. They held no joint insurance made out in each other's favor. The books were in perfect order. If Shad Rorick and Harve Exter had not been friends, they had not been enemies.

Still, for all of that Shad Rorick would still have been in jail if the turning wheel of the law had not uncovered an illicit purchase of cyanide by the little blonde whose name had proven to be Mary Phillips. A discarded plaything of Exter's, the girl had ample reason to hate him.

On the other hand it was hard for Blade to believe that even a desperate girl would drop cyanide in Exter's drink, shoot a dead man twice to lay the blame on another man who was be-friending her—and then fail to wipe her fingerprints off either the gun or the glass. Such things just didn't happen.

"And to think," Blade sighed as he stomped across the shoveled sidewalk, "I could have been a C.P.A."

He got his room key from the desk and

walked into the coffee shop. Gertie, the red-haired night switchboard operator, was sitting at the counter reading the *Morning Sun*.

"Ah! The return of Sherlock Holmes," she greeted him. "A cup of coffee black, a stack of wheats, and a double order of pork sausage for Lieutenant Blade," she told the counterman.

Despite his weariness Blade grinned as he dropped down on the stool beside her. "The reporters been here yet?"

"I shooed them away," she admitted. "I told them that Jimmy didn't live here anymore."

Blade thanked her and sipped his hot coffee with relish. Gertie returned to her study of the paper. The *Sun* had gone to town pictorially. It had a picture of Mignon in little more than a string of beads and breastplates on the front page. Grouped around it were pictures of her three-year-old son, Harve Exter, Shad Rorick and Mary Phillips. Blade leaned over and tapped the picture of Mignon's boy with his spoon.

"This is a hell of a thing, isn't it, for a lad that age to be mixed up in?" He added, "Or a sweet innocent kid like Mignon for that matter."

The red-haired operator glanced at him sharply. "What are you stuck for, Jim?" she asked.

"A MOTIVE for Shad Rorick to want Harve Exter dead," he told her candidly. He continued to stare at the picture of Mignon. "Can you imagine a man wanting to play around with anyone else if he was married to Mignon?" His voice held a note of awe. "She's beautiful, isn't she, Gertie?"

"Her curves are in the right places," the red-haired girl admitted. "But who does her kid take after? He doesn't resemble her and he doesn't resemble Exter."

Blade grinned: "Meow. You're just jealous."

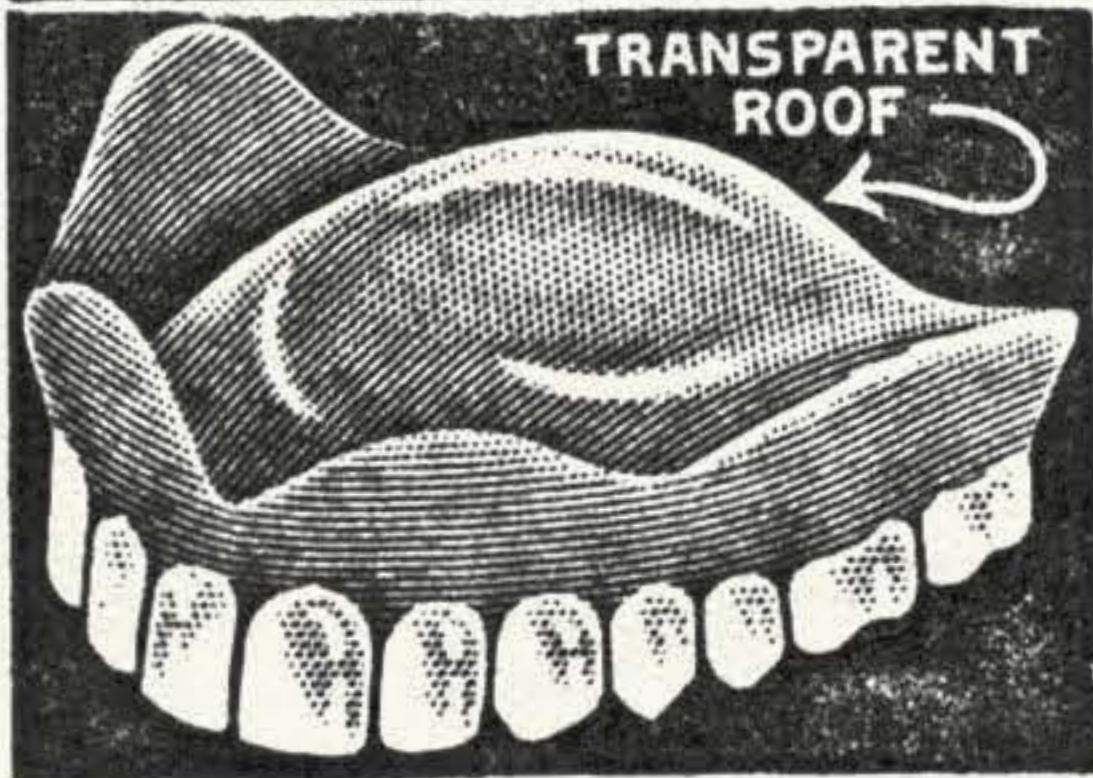
"Perhaps I am," the red-haired girl admitted with surprising heat. "But I'll be damned if I'll let an addle pated blonde make a horse's neck out of you."

Before Blade could reach out a hand to restrain her she slipped off the stool and walked out of the coffee shop.

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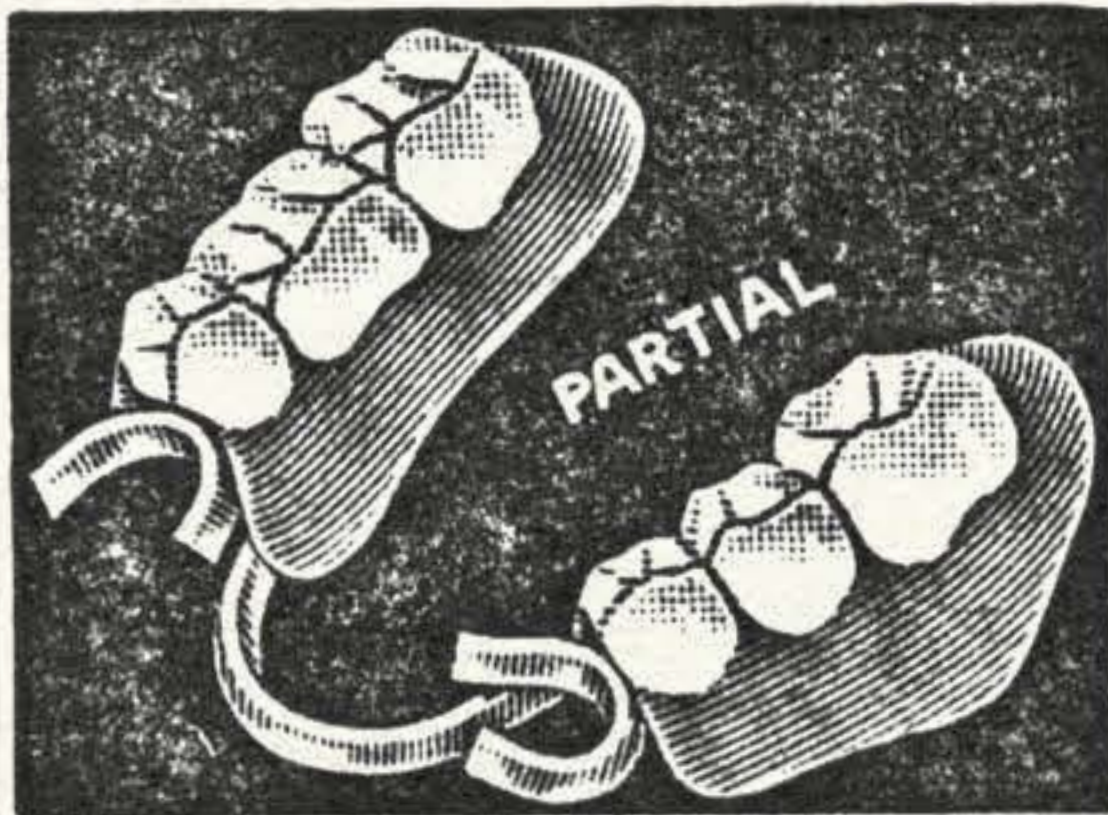
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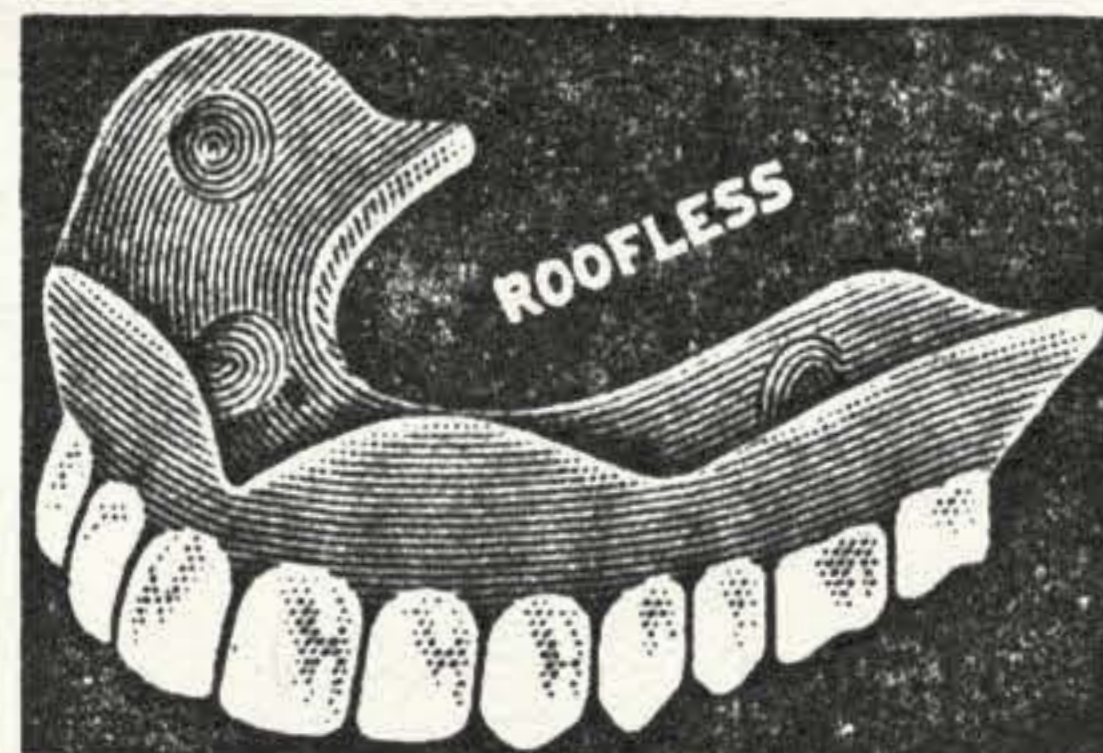
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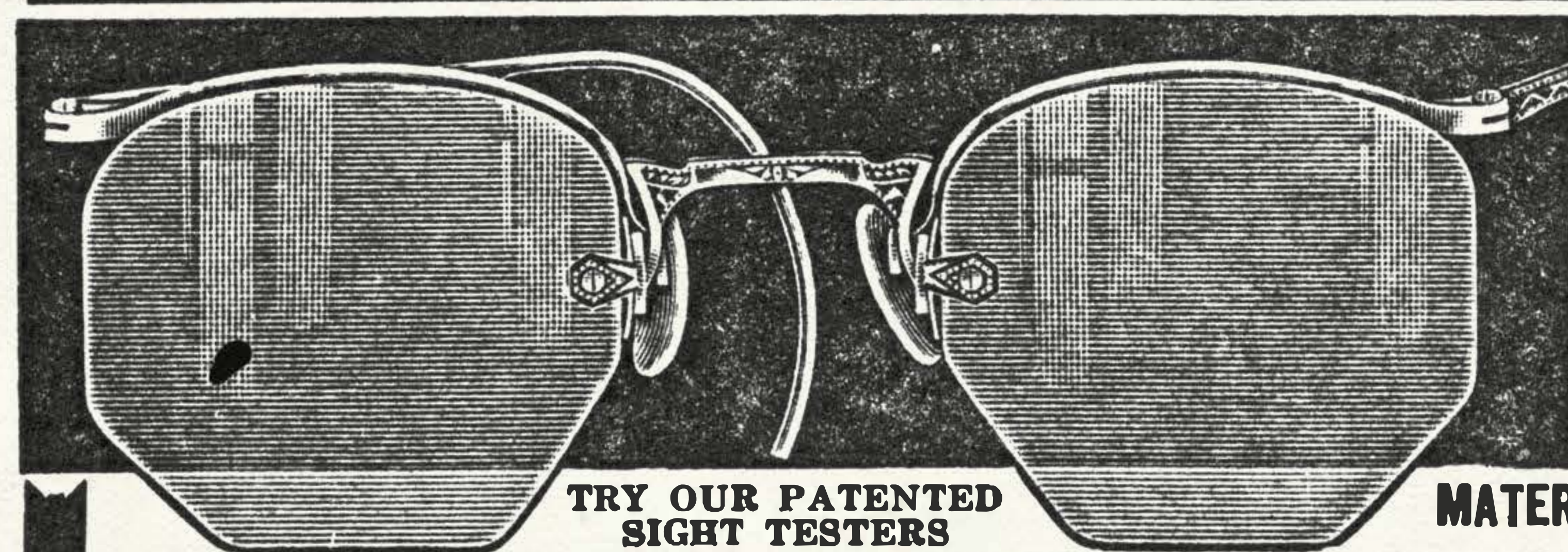
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DETECTIVE TALES

"Those redheads," the counterman grinned as he slapped Blade's wheat cakes and sausage before him.

"Those redheads," Blade agreed. But somehow his appetite had left him. He and Gertie had been good friends before he had begun to carry the torch for Mignon. He shouldn't have kidded her the way he had. She was, after all, a swell kid and there were two or three cases to his credit at the Bureau that he might never have broken except for her common sense reasoning and advice. Both of them had come up from in back of the yards.

He paid his check and walked out into the lobby but Gertie Covina was gone. The day switchboard operator saw him then and called, "You are wanted on the phone, lieutenant. Will you please take the call in booth three."

Blade nodded and sat down in the booth.

"Jim?" Coroner Westman demanded. On being assured that it was, Westman added crisply, "I'm calling from the morgue, Jim. I just finished the post. And I've been wrong as hell about Exter."

"In what way?" Blade demanded.

"He was poisoned and he was shot. But it wasn't the poison and it wasn't the shots that killed him," Westman said. "There was more cyanide in his lungs than there was in his stomach. In other words, it was poured into his mouth after he was dead."

"But you just said," Blade protested, "that it wasn't the shots that killed him."

"They didn't," Westman said crisply. "Harve Exter died of being stabbed through the auditory canal of his ear with some thin, sharp-pointed instrument that was long enough to pierce the brain. Perhaps a woman's hatpin or a ground down ice pick."

Blade fought a sudden wave of fatigue.

"Yes. I'm positive," the physician snapped in answer to his question. "And if you want my opinion of it, Jim, three different people had a crack at Harve Exter last night. But the lad or lady with the hatpin got there first. The other two missed the train. They thought he was drunk. He wasn't. He was dead."

He called the Bureau and asked for Inspector Rican's extension.

THE DOUBLE-CROSSING CORPSE

"Blade reporting in," he said. "You've talked to Westman?"

"Just," the Inspector informed him. "And you had better start rounding up all those possible suspects that you let wander away, lieutenant, or there will be a familiar signature missing from the pay sheet."

Inspector Rican hung up abruptly. Dry shoes and clothes forgotten, Blade strode out of the hotel and hailed a cab.

"When Pete Cussack comes to pick me up," he told the doorman who had just come on duty, "tell him that I've gone down to the Bureau."

In the cab he changed his mind and gave the driver the address of the swank apartment building in which Harve Exter had lived. He wanted to see Mignon. He wanted to search through her dead husband's personal papers in the hope of finding something that might shed some light on this new development.

THE building, on the Drive just below the Drake Hotel, was both new and expensive. A doorman let him in. A second doorman led him to a desk where still a third man demanded his name and business before he would even phone upstairs and inform Mrs. Exter that he was calling.

Blade tinkled his gold shield on the desk and the clerk forgot to call.

"Of course, officer," he bowed. "Please go right up."

It was the first time that Blade had been in the building. "What is the number of the Exter apartment?" he asked the elevator boy as he let him off on the eleventh floor.

"Eleven twenty-one, sir."

Blade strode grimly down the ankle-deep carpet. His salary wouldn't pay the rent of the mop closet in this building.

He paused, his hand halfway to the ornate bronze knocker on the door of 1121, as a muffled but vaguely familiar feminine voice was raised in anger on the other side.

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DETECTIVE TALES

Blade heard the soft scuff on the carpet behind him—too late. He turned just in time to catch the blackjack, that had been intended for the base of his skull, full on the temple.

The carpet was soft underneath him when consciousness returned. Blade eased himself to his knees, then to his feet. There was no one in the hall. The angry feminine voice behind the door was stilled. Blade raised his hand again to knock, then stopped. It was either an optical illusion or he was standing in front of apartment 1021.

He sat down on the hall window sill for a moment and stared out over ice-locked Oak Street beach at the gray waters of the lake until his dizziness had left him. Then he looked at the number again. It was still 1021.

He strode back to the elevator bank and punched the button.

"Sorry, sir," the boy said too quickly and too glibly. "I guess I let you off on the wrong floor."

"So it seems," Blade said. "Who followed me down the hall?"

"No one that I know of, sir."

The boy was lying and Blade knew it but he let it pass. There was no way he could prove it. Disdaining the knocker he pounded with his fist on the door of 1121. There was no answer. Worried now for Mignon's safety, he pounded on the door again.

The door knob turned haltingly. The door opened slowly and seemingly by itself. Blade could see no one in the hall. His hand went instinctively to his gun. "What the hell—?"

"'At's a bad word," a small voice on a level with his knees said earnestly. "My mama says it is."

Blade looked down at his feet. Mignon's boy in a pair of flannel sleepers was studying him with interest with one eye as a chubby fist dug the sleep from the other.

Blade smiled: "Hello, Bub. Where's your mama, son?"

"My mama is sleeping."

Blade looked at the number on the door, then back down the hall. It was possible that he had been mistaken. The tenth and eleven floor were identical. He needed sleep. He needed a drink. The bull

THE DOUBLE-CROSSING CORPSE

fiddles of fatigue were sawing in his brain. "Suppose," he suggested to the youngster, "you tiptoe in and tell your mother that I'm here."

The youngster's lower lip thrust out in a strangely familiar pout. "Who shall I say you are?" the boy demanded. "Are you the man my daddy doesn't like, the man I heard him telling mama has got to stop coming here when—"

"Jim! How wonderful" Mignon floated across the floor, her well rounded curves emphasized by a clinging sheer silk house coat. "Come in, darling. I am so glad to see you. But what are you doing here this time of morning?" She clung to him and kissed him.

"You've been asleep?" Blade asked.

"But of course," she answered.

"I was certain I heard voices," Blade said. He explained the mysterious attack outside the door.

Mignon's eyes grew wide. "I don't understand it," she said. "You must have gotten off on the wrong floor, Jim. There's been no one in this apartment but Sonny, myself and the maid." She touched the bruise on his temple with her fingertips. "Oh, you poor darling boy. Why don't you—?"

"Call the cops, I suppose," Blade said grimly. He took the girl into his arms almost savagely. "Look. You're shooting square with me now, aren't you, Mignon?"

She clung to him, her body soft and warm against his own. "Of course I am, sweetheart."

She lifted her lips to be kissed. Blade kissed her.

The black-haired, three-year-old youngster pounded at Blade's knees. "You stop 'at kissing my mama," he demanded. "'At's what 'at other man does all the time."

CHAPTER FOUR

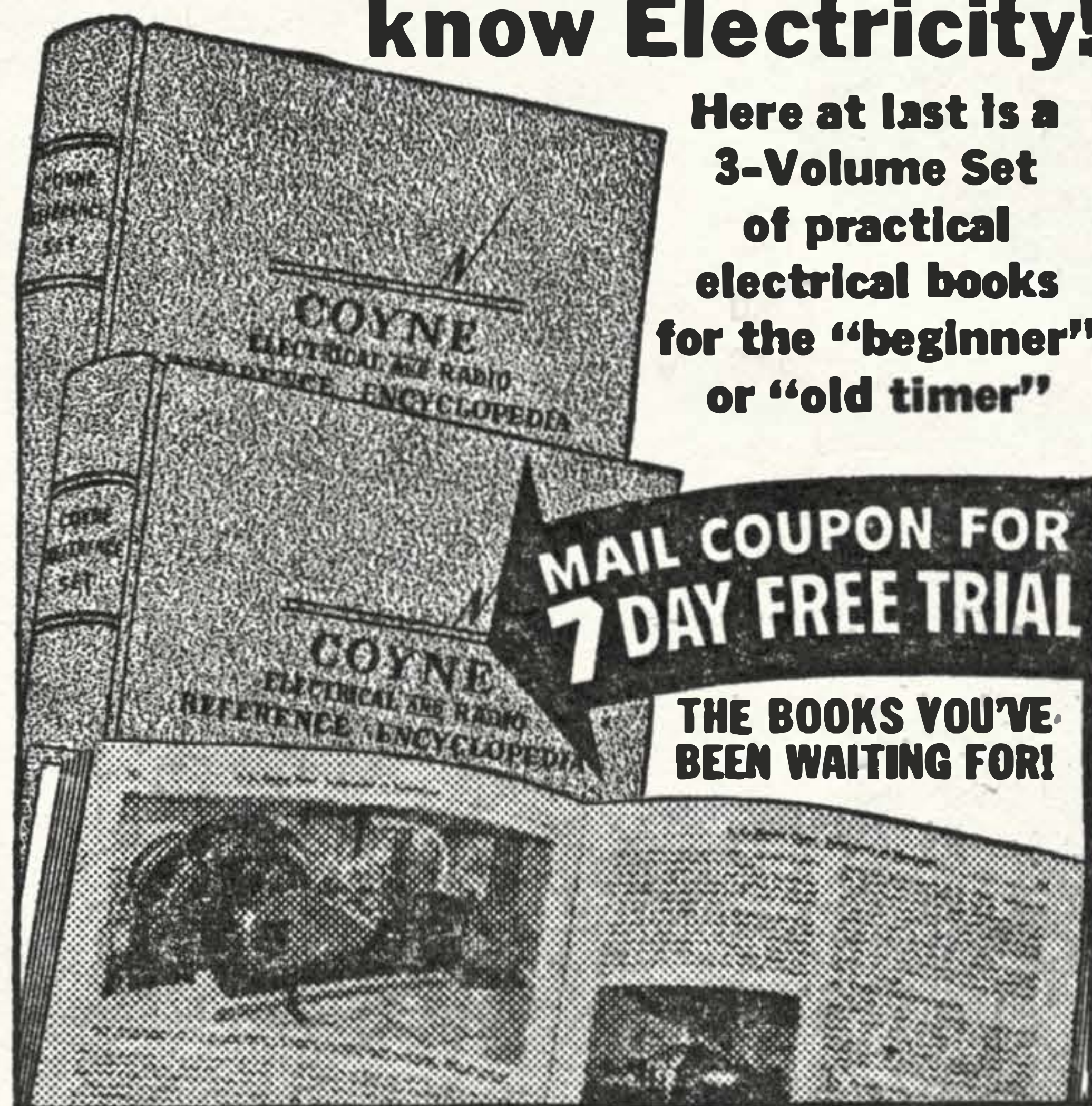
Hair of the Dog

BLADE pushed the girl in his arms away and knelt beside the boy. "What other man do you mean, son? What other man kissed your mother?"

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DETECTIVE TALES

"A bad man," the boy insisted stoutly. Mignon laughed throatily but there was a note of fear in her laughter. "Don't be silly, Jim. Sonny doesn't know what he is saying. He's only three years old. He's just repeating some of the vile things that he has heard Harve say during our quarrels."

"I wonder," Blade said crisply. He took the *Morning Sun* from his pocket and showed the front page to the boy. "Is the other man's picture on this paper, Bub?"

"Go to your room, Sonny. Right now," Mignon insisted sharply.

"'ess," he said obediently, then jabbed Shad Rorick's picture with a stubby thumb. "'At's a bad man," he confided and then toddled off—too late.

Blade got slowly to his feet. "So," he said quietly. "So. While I've been carrying a torch, you've been making a sucker out of me."

He walked slowly towards the girl. She backed away. "You're crazy, Jim. You don't realize what you're saying."

"But Shad did come here?"

"He did. Why shouldn't he? After all, he was Harve's partner. They had a lot in common."

"I wouldn't be at all surprised," Blade said. "This mother love is quite a thing, eh, Mignon? You really didn't give a damn about me, or Shad, or Harve. But you did love your boy." He paused a moment, asked abruptly: "You last saw your own mother—when?"

The blonde singer eyed him warily. "What is this, a gag? I wouldn't know my mother if I saw her. My father took me away from her when I was just a little girl." Her voice was bitter with scorn. "He said that she wasn't fit to raise me."

"Just like Harve said about you. This happened where?"

"I was too young to remember," she admitted. "Why?"

"Just checking my facts," Blade said.

He had the picture now, not all of it, but most of it. He wondered how he could have been so blind even with the smoke that had been getting in his eyes. He knew now who had killed Harve Exter. He believed that he knew why. He even knew who the girl was whose muffled voice

THE DOUBLE-CROSSING CORPSE

had sounded so familiar just before he had been sapped.

"Where's Gertie Covina?" he demanded.

Mignon's eyes widened slightly with fear but her voice remained low and throaty. "I don't know what you're talking about, Jim." She entwined her arms around his neck, pressed her lips to his. "Please believe me, Jim. Believe I love you."

Blade removed her arms.

"The boat sailed a few minutes ago," he told her. He picked up a French phone on a table and dialed his own hotel. "This is Lieutenant Jim Blade talking," he told the day girl on the board. "By any chance did Gertie Covina tell you where she was going when she left there this morning?"

"Why, yes, she did," the switchboard girl admitted. "Gertie said that she was going over to the Beach Apartments and snatch Mignon Exter bald headed."

Blade thanked her and hung up. Then he dialed Inspector Rican at the Bureau. "This is Blade again," he said. "And I think I've cracked the case wide open. Put McManus on, will you, inspector. I want him to pick up a few folks for me."

When he had finished with McManus he dropped the phone back in its cradle and took his watch from his pocket. "We can find her," he said to Mignon, "but it might take time, more time than we have." He glanced at the dial of his watch. "You have exactly one minute," he told Mignon, "to tell me where Shad took Miss Covina after he waltzed her out of here."

"Or what?" the singer defied him.

"That's fifteen seconds," he said. He added quietly: "I can make it easy, or I can make it tough on you, Mignon. Harve Exter was a louse. He deserved to die. I think I can get you a plea." He shrugged. "But of course if you would rather have the State of Illinois raise your boy—"

"I'll change sides," she said simply.

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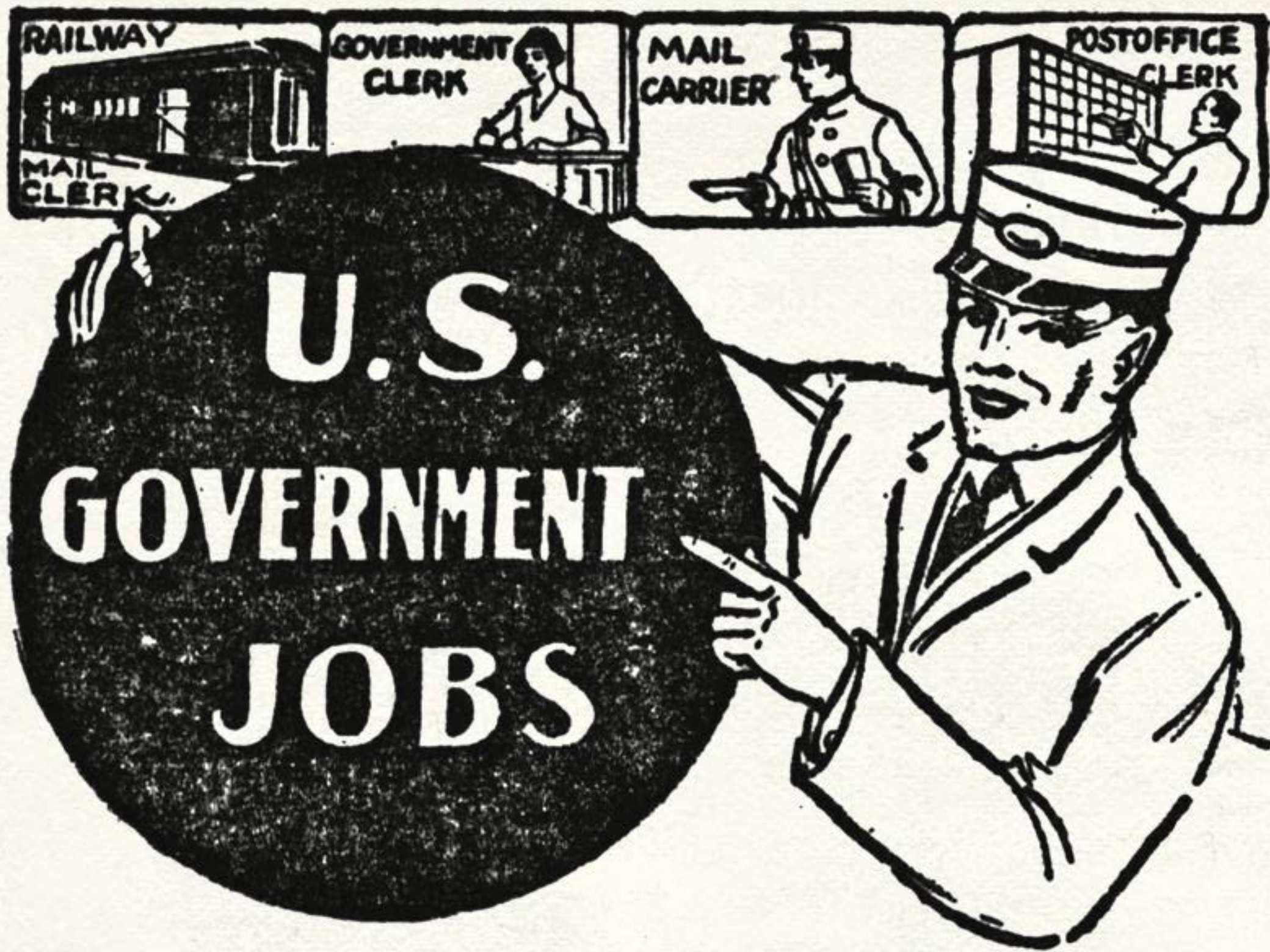
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DETECTIVE TALES

In the exact center of the building, swung on a steel frame work on the roof, a neon sign proclaimed the second floor to be a hotel. But there were never any vacant rooms. Sleep was the one thing that Shad Rorick didn't sell. Six of the rooms at one end of the building he reserved as an office for himself. He was sitting there now, back of a glass-topped desk, glowering at the red-haired girl on the sofa.

"How much do you know? Who else knew that you were going to Mignon's apartment?"

Her wrists and ankles bound with clothes line, Gertie Covina said: "Don't you wish that you knew."

"Slap her," Shad ordered Jerry Lait.

The collegiate looking gunman slapped the red-haired girl hard across the lips. "Wise up, sister," he told her. "You aren't among friends."

"Or is she?" Schlitz Murray leered. He stared at the girl with approval. "You know she ain't a bad looking chickadee."

"Who knew you were going to Mignon's apartment?" Shad persisted.

"Lieutenant Jim Blade," Gertie lied, "and Inspector Rican and—"

"Slap her again," Shad said. "And stop worrying about Jim Blade. I tell you that Mignon has that dumb shamus twisted around her little finger."

The office door opened slowly and Blade leaned against the door jamb surveying the occupants of the room over the long barrel of a .38 slung on a .45 frame for better balance. "No. Not any more," he told Shad. "And this time it's for murder—" he included Jerry Lait and Schlitz Murray with a nod—"with you two boys tied in for perjury and as accessories before the fact."

"How did you get in here?" Shad demanded.

"I mopped up as I came along."

"You're alone?" Jerry Lait demanded.

"I am." Blade lied deliberately.

"Then to hell with you," Jerry swore. His hand streaked to his shoulder holster. Blade nailed it there with a .38 slug.

"I was hoping it would be you," he told Shad Rorick. He added, smiling, to Gertie Covina. "I'm seeing better."

THE DOUBLE-CROSSING CORPSE

"You're looking grand," she said.

"Any other conscientious objectors to coming quietly?" Blade asked.

"No," Schlitz Murray said. "I'll take a chance on a fix. You want me to drop my gun or you want to take it?"

"He'll take it!" Rorick swore. His hand lifted from his desk drawer holding a spitting automatic. The first slug went through Blade's left arm. A second tugged at his top coat. Then the gun went spinning from Rorick's hand just as Murray dived at Blade's knees.

"Kill him! Kill him!" Rorick bellowed. "There's been a slip-up somewhere!"

The three men lost all identity and form. They became a rolling, thrashing ball of arms and legs. Then Blade's slashing gun barrel found Murray's head.

"That's two." Pete Cussack grinned from the doorway.

"Stay out of this," Blade ordered.

The two men were well matched. Both had lost the use of one arm. Rorick was the larger and heavier man but Blade was the more powerful. A lucky kick by Rorick sent the gun spinning from his hand to thud against the base board. The racketeer broke loose and scrambled after it, Blade right on his heels.

Then Rorick had the gun and turned. A wild shot blasted the ceiling. Then Blade's fist found his jaw. The racketeer grunted and lay still.

"Right on the button," Pete Cussack approved. "Boy. Was that a wallop, Wow!"

Jim Blade slipped his pen knife from his pocket with one hand and cut the ropes around Gertie Covina's wrists and ankles. "I've been a fool," he said.

"Hmm. You're telling me?" she sniffed.

IN THE cold gray light of winter afternoon Inspector Rican's office looked bleak and bare despite the crowd of men and women sitting in the straight-backed chairs that lined the wall. Gertie Covina sat near the desk watching Mignon who was crying openly as she hugged her sleeping boy to her breast.

Lieutenant Blade came in the door, his left arm in a sling, and followed by Pete Cussack and a dapper little man with a

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DETECTIVE TALES

wisp of a black mustache. "We're ready?" he asked Rican.

"Whenever you are, Jim."

Blade sat down on one edge of the desk looking at the faces staring at him and choosing his words with care. "This isn't in any sense a reconstruction of the crime," he said finally. "We know who killed Harve Exter. But there are one or two little points that we would like to straighten out before we close the case. That was why officers were sent to bring everyone here who was at the Sweet And Low Club last night when Harve Exter and Mary Phillips died. And it is almost certain proof of your own innocence that the names and addresses that you gave us were your own."

Slim Alcott lighted a cigarette. "Never mind the taffy. Come to the point. It was this Mary Phillips who knocked off Exter?"

Blade looked at the gambler. "Whoever it was cost you money?"

"They did. I was holding Harve's markers for almost thirty grand."

"That's one of the points I wanted to know," Blade admitted. His eyes swept the faces in the room. Most of the employees as well as the patrons of the Sweet And Low were there. He recognized Allier, and the doorman and the chef and Celeste, the ladies' washroom maid. She sat not far from the desk looking very chic, her knitting needles clicking busily as she listened.

"You mean," Alcott demanded suspiciously, "that you are trying to tie me into this?"

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THE DOUBLE-CROSSING CORPSE

"No," Blade said. "You're as clear as cellophane, Slim. You may not have liked the man but you didn't hate Harve Exter thirty grand worth."

The gambler grinned. "Go on. I can enjoy the party now. Who killed him?"

There was an uneasy stir in the room and a murmur of conversation as Blade said. "It wasn't Mary Phillips. He called to the men waiting in the hall. "Bring Shad in, will you, McManus?"

The racketeer swaggered in, handcuffed to McManus. Blade continued:

"Here's the way I see the story. Check me if I'm wrong, Shad. You and Mignon have been two-timing Harve for years. Last night he was sure of his facts and called for a showdown. He needed money to pay off Alcott. And he wanted it from you. He had a club that couldn't miss. Unless you dished up the dough he threatened to take Mignon's boy away from her on the grounds that she was an unfit mother."

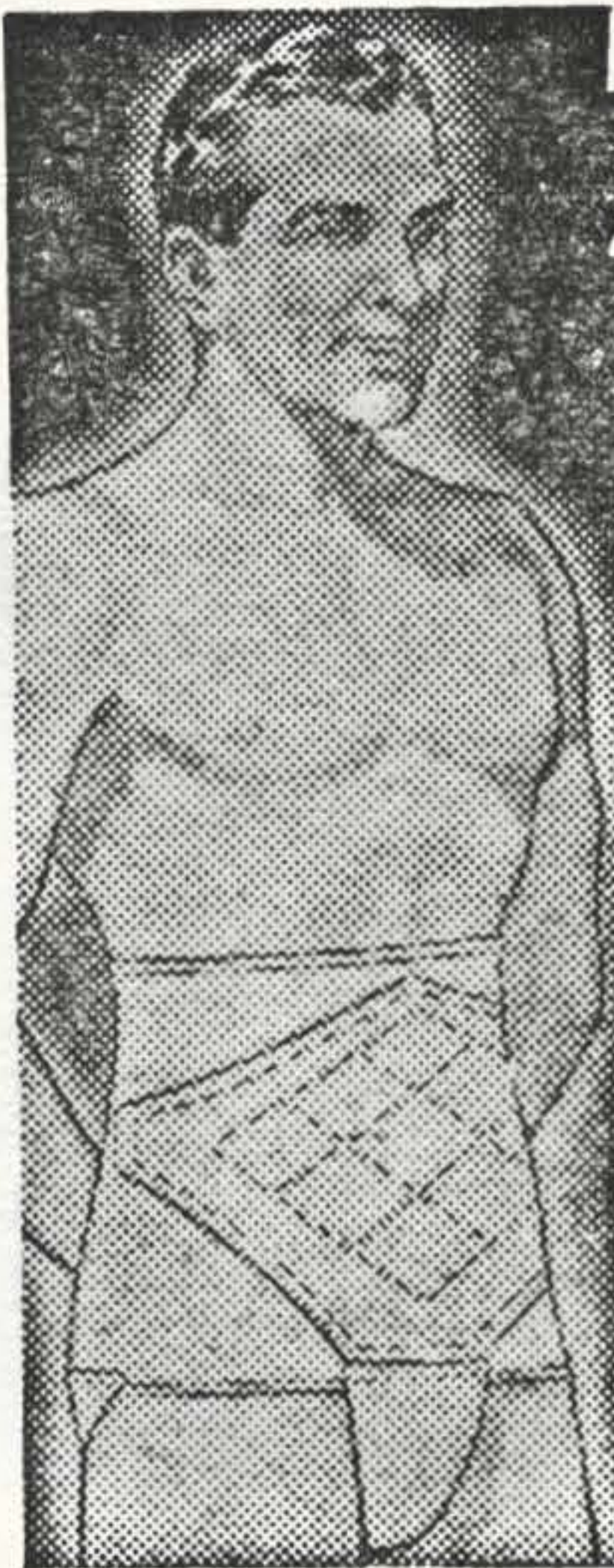
He paused. There was no sound in the room but Mignon's stifled sobbing.

"Harve was roaring drunk and made a hell of a scene about it," Blade continued. "But you knew it was coming and were prepared. You knew Mary Phillips hated Harve. So you had her buy some cyanide, making certain that the purchase could be traced to her, and you promised to slip it to Harve. She wasn't a mental genius and you undoubtedly convinced her that if the two of you swore that the other hadn't left the room you would have an unbreakable alibi. Am I right so far, Shad?"

"You can't prove one damn thing."

"Oh yes I can." Blade smiled. "Here's what happened, Shad. Mignon quarreled with Harve but not until she had fed him enough liquor to put him in a stupor. A little later you slipped into the room. Harve was waiting for you to pay off. But by the time that you got there he was slumped down in his chair, passed out, or so you thought.

"You dropped the cyanide in his glass and poured it down Harve's throat. Then you shot him twice with your belly gun to confuse the trail and lead it back to Mary. Then you called me and had your boys brace me on the street.



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DETECTIVE TALES

"That made you out a swell guy instead of a louse. You were giving the little blonde a break. I found the gun as planned. Mary Phillips made her speech. She said that neither of you had left the room. But she didn't know about the phone call. That made her out a liar and destroyed her alibi."

"Words." Shad Rorick sneered.

"No. Fact," Lieutenant Blade corrected. "A fact that is going to send you to the chair for Mary Phillip's murder. You see she couldn't have killed Harve Exter, Shad. *Harve Exter was already dead when you poured that cyanide into him and shot him with your pop gun!*"

SHAD RORICK'S mouth gaped open. A tinge of green began to spread upwards from his jowls. "Dead? Harve Exter was dead?" he gasped.

"That's right," Blade said quietly. "You see Mignon had double-crossed you. She was so afraid that Harve was going to take her boy away from her that before she left him last night she stabbed him through the auditory canal of his left ear with an ice pick or a hatpin!"

Mignon sobbed: "You promised me!—"

Inspector Rican slapped his desk. "This is murder!" he bellowed. "You killed your husband, Mrs. Exter. And you're not only going to lose your boy—you're going to the chair!"

"Non, non, non!" Her black eyes blazing fire, Celeste rushed to the Inspector's desk and loosed a torrent of voluble French.

"Let's have it, Tommy," Blade said quietly to the dapper little man with the wisp of a black mustache.

The police interpreter translated as Celeste was speaking:

"You can not do this to my baby. It was not she who killed Mr. Exter. It was I, her mother, who did it. I did not mean to do it. I did not even mean to tell her that I was her mother. Years ago my husband took her from me. He said I was an unfit mother. Perhaps I was. I do not know. But all of my life I have loved her. It has made of me a no good. This I would not have happen to Mignon.

"When I came to this country I searched for her for months, not to tell her

THE DOUBLE-CROSSING CORPSE

who I was but just that I might be near her. When I find her I take this job, me, Celeste, who has been a Folies Bergère star. I do not speak so good the English but I understand. And last night I hear them quarreling from where I sit knitting in the wash room. Monsieur Exter struck my baby with his fist. He told her he would take her child away. This thing must not be. When she has left I go in to plead with him. He laugh at me . . . !”

The French woman made a gesture with one hand and the steel knitting needle glittered silver.

“I grow excited. I am not realize what I do. I forget I hold a needle in my hand.”

She stood a moment staring white-faced at Inspector Rican, then Mignon rose to take her in her arms.

“Okay,” Blade said. “That’s all folks.”

Inspector Rican squeezed his arm. “After all, it’s only manslaughter, Jim. Don’t feel so bad about it. We’ll let both of the women take a plea. Rorick will go to the chair alone, for the one murder he did commit—that of Mary Phillips. That killing was obviously his own idea.”

Jim Blade agreed. He walked back into the darkened squad room and lighted a cigarette.

Gertie Covina followed. “How did you know that Celeste was Mignon’s mother?” she asked.

“The same way that you knew that Sonny Exter was really Shad Rorick’s boy,” Blade said, “and that Mignon was merely feeding my torch as a cover to keep Exter from getting wise. They both were French and except for the difference in their ages and the color of their hair they might have been sisters.” He paused a long moment, said quietly: “I—I’m sorry, Gert.”

The red-haired girl squeezed his hand. “It’s okay, Jim,” she told him. “You just let the smoke get in your eyes, that’s all. What you need is a little hair of the dog that bit. Red hair,” she added hopefully.

Inspector Rican nudged Pete Cussack. “Have Jim and Gert made up? Is he kissing her yet?” he asked.

Pete Cussack peeked into the squad room. “Is he kissing her! Oh, boy. Wow!”

THE END

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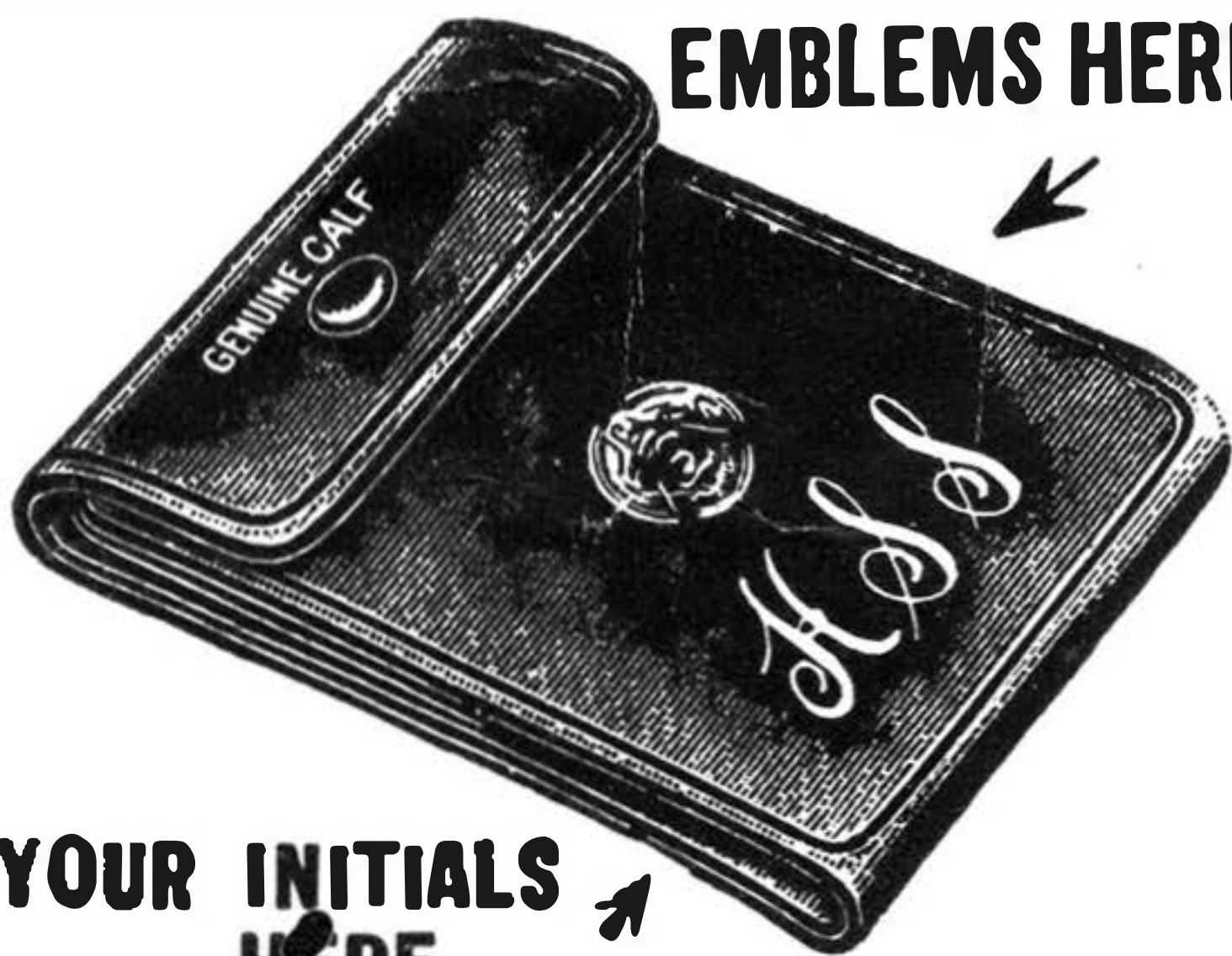
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Gentlemen: I enclose \$1.98. Please send me a Genuine Calfskin Billfold with my name and favorite Emblem engraved in 23k gold. Include absolutely free a life-time Identification Plate carrying my full Name and Social Security Number, or Draft Number. Also include FREE an Identification Key Tag and Gilt Chain to match, all hand-engraved with my Name, Address, City and State.

My Full Name.....
(Please print clearly)

Address

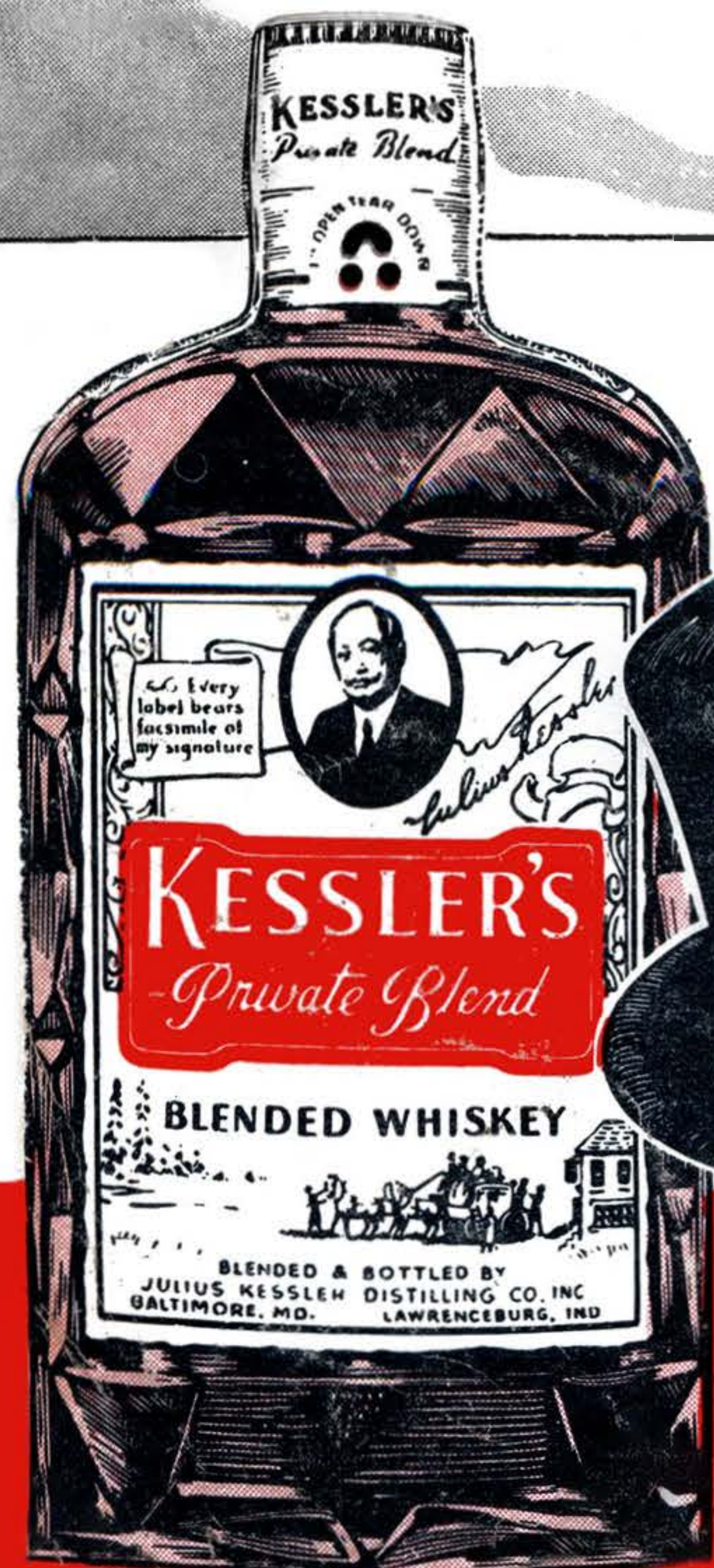
City..... State.....

Social Security Number..... Draft Number.....
 Check here if you want us to ship the a C.O.D. for \$1.98 plus a few pennies postage and C.O.D. charges.

In a national survey of service men just completed—64% of all men interviewed, said that a Billfold with the proper insignia, made a swell gift.

Your Name Engraved Here!

"IT'S IN THE BAG"—Says HI to HATT



"It's a Tasty Package"

"We done our share of travellin'
Around the U. S. A.—
From East to West we've tried the best,
An' now we're here to say
That silky Kessler's rates on top,
No matter where you go—
Just hand a friend this mellow blend
An' watch his friendship grow!"
(Signed) Mr. Hi and Mr. Hatt

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ain Neutral Spirits. 85 Proof. Julius Kessler Distilling Co., Inc., Baltimore, Md.; Lawrenceburg, Ind