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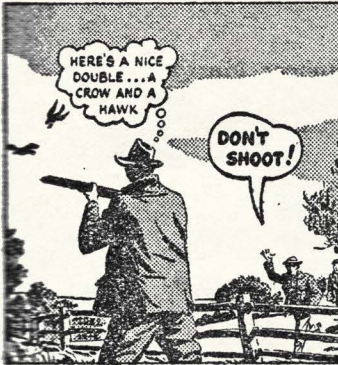
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Vol. 59

CONTENTS FOR APRIL, 1949

No. 4

1—SMASHING DETECTIVE NOVEL—1

- She pays off in kisses when you—*
- Murder the Bum!**-----**Robert Martin** 8
Alive and dead, his wife-stealing boss knotted a rope around Abbot's throat.

2—THRILLING CRIME-MYSTERY NOVELETTES—2

- This cuddly candle-burner doubles as—*
- The Merry Queen of Murder**-----**Frederick C. Davis** 40
Thackeray Hackett helped two burlesk queens fix each other's coffins.
- Ask the Prodigal Son if—*
- The Corpse Belongs to Daddy**-----**John D. MacDonald** 80
Home for keeps, he found his father's body worth its weight—in blood.

4—SUSPENSE-FILLED SHORT STORIES—4

- Loosen up that trigger finger and—*
- Shoot if You Must!**-----**James A. Kirch** 25
Shamus Harkness stopped shooting his mouth off—to start blowing his top.
- Her sudden death meant—*
- Oblivion for Me**-----**Dorothy Dunn** 36
At his wit's end was Dorsey—who didn't figure on slaying his favorite gal.
- Do him no favor but—*
- Bury Your Own Dead**-----**Johanas L. Bouma** 61
A promise was a promise—until Bowers' ex-wife asked him to make mayhem tonight.
- Heaven can wait for the—*
- Angel in the Death House**-----**Stuart Friedman** 68
It was lawyer Preston's dumb luck to find Nikki too enticing to burn.

AND—

- We want to know if you're*
- Ready for the Rackets**-----**A Department** 76
The lowdown on currently popular swindle schemes. Here's a chance to test your ability as a reporter and win \$5.00 at the same time.
- Slayer at Sea**-----**Jack Winters** 6
This mysterious killer knew how to keep justice at bay.
- The May Thrill Docket**-----**75**
Keyhole review of Peter Paige's dynamic novel, "Cash Wale's Carnival Kill."

The May issue will be out April 1st

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Slayer at Sea

By **JACK WINTERS**



THROUGH the héavy gray fog rising from Halifax harbor that July day in 1896, the barkentine Herbert Fuller poked her prow. At the end of a long tow rope at her stern trailed a canvas-covered whaleboat.

The crew of nine men peered into the fog with weary, red-rimmed eyes. Stark fear moved across drawn features. Every motion by one brought eight others to attention. Drooping eyelids became alert with suspicion. The water lapping at the prow grated at nerves worn raw.

One man slept. And he was in irons and bound hand and foot to the mizzenmast.

The covered whaleboat, gurgling through the oily slick in the wake of the barkentine, held the answer to the sombre spectacle. In it, wrapped in canvas, were the bodies of the Fuller's grim-lipped skipper, his pretty young wife and the mousy second mate.

Just about a week ago, eleven days out of Boston with a cargo of lumber, the three had been hacked to bits while they slept.

The triple murder had left a crew of nine: the first mate, a faithful old steward, a Harvard student, and six men of the fo'c'sle. Nobody had seen the slaying. A woman's scream had told of it. And the butcher had left no clue.

On the noon tide, July 2, 1896, the Herbert Fuller had slipped out of Boston harbor with a heavy cargo of lumber bound for Roasario, South America. The crew was new and there was one passenger. The first mate was Thomas Bram, signed on for the trip. The passenger was a young man from Harvard, Lester Hawthorne Monks of Brookline, Massachusetts, who wanted a sea trip for his health.

Captain Charles L. Nash was a salty mariner in every sense of the word. He ruled his ship with his fists. On his last trip he had broken up a mutiny just that

(Please continue on page 96)

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MURDER

Steve Abbot didn't beef when rackets-to-riches Overton took over his platinum-plated wife . . . but he couldn't stand the mogul's coming back from the morgue—to tie a rope around his throat.

Abbot fired the automatic from his topcoat pocket.



THE BUM!

By ROBERT MARTIN

Smashing Detective Novel



CHAPTER ONE

No Hard Feelings

STEVE ABBOT sat at his desk and looked at the back of Patsy Delvane's head. Lately Abbot had been watching Patsy a lot, but he couldn't be blamed for that. She was five foot three, and she had wide gray eyes, a straight little nose, a velvet-red mouth and glossy black hair which curled over her shoulders.

As Abbot watched her, a buzzer let loose—twice. Patsy Delvane turned away from her typewriter and smiled at him. "Buzz, buzz," she said. "That's me."

"Yep," Abbot said. "Scamper in there, darling."

He was a lean man in his early thirties, with thick, neatly combed yellow hair and a firm, wide mouth. A thin scar ran from just below his lower lip to the edge of his jaw. He was wearing a gray, chalk-stripe suit, a soft white shirt, and a dark blue necktie which almost matched his eyes. A pair of thick glasses with amber-tinted frames lay on the glass top of his desk.

Patsy Delvane stood up, smoothed her skirt, picked up a note book and pen, and moved gracefully over a sky-blue rug to a frosted glass door. Gilt letters on the door read: *Harry T. Overton, Director of Personnel. Private.*

Abbot called after her: "Hey—you forgot your pencil."

She turned and held up a capped fountain pen. "I always use a pen—it makes my notes easier to read." She winked at him. "You should be more observing, Mr. Abbot." She entered the adjoining office, and closed the glass door behind her.

Abbot smiled, put on his glasses, and picked up a long report concerning the ac-

cident frequency for the National Motors Company. Presently he frowned, and tore a pale green sheet from an embossed leather pad, removed a pen from a desk holder, and wrote:

*To: H. P. Donner, Division of Safety.
Subject: High accident frequency. Please
make survey of chief causes and report to
me. S. L. Abbot.*

In black print at the top of the green sheet were the words:

*From the desk of Stephen L. Abbot,
Special Assistant, Personnel Section.*

He placed the sheet of paper on top of a pile of similar sheets in a wire basket, lit a cigarette, and stared out over the endless rows of roofs, smoke stacks and water towers, the vast accumulation of brick and glass and steel which comprised the mid-west assembly plant of National Motors, makers of the National Six, the National Eight, and the twelve-cylinder de luxe National Blue Bird.

The telephone on his desk tinkled discreetly, and Abbot picked it up. "Abbot speaking."

An excited voice said: "Mr. Abbot, this is O'Connor, of Plant Security. There's been an explosion in the south paint shop. Four men are injured—"

"How badly?" Abbot snapped.

"Three of them will be all right, doc thinks, but a paint sprayer by the name of Riggio is in pretty bad shape. They just took him to the hospital."

"What else?"

"The south wing is gone, sir. The fire is out now, but about a hundred cars burned up—all Blue Birds."

"To hell with the cars," Abbot said. "Anybody else hurt?"

"Not seriously. All involved have been checked at the dispensary."

"All right, O'Connor. Who is responsible?"

"We don't know for sure, but they say Riggio was smoking. He—"

"Smoking? In the paint shop?"

"Yes, sir. Donner, of Safety, is investigating."

"He'd better," Abbot said grimly. "Tell Donner I want to see him." He hung up and crossed the office with long strides.

As he jerked open the door through which Patsy Delvane had entered, he said, "Harry—" Then he paused.

Patsy Delvane was in the act of twisting out of the embrace of a tall heavy man with smooth black hair. He had a plump well-barbered face and a neat black mustache. There was lipstick on his chin, and his blue-dotted bow tie was lopsided. He turned to face Abbot, a slow smile on his face.

The girl picked up a note book from a huge mahogany desk and hurried out past Abbot, her eyes avoiding his. The heavy man moved to a mirror the size of a movie screen, and began to adjust his tie. He looked at Abbot's reflection in the mirror and said: "You might try knocking, Steve."

"Sorry," Abbot said in a tight voice, "but I thought you might want to know there's been a fire in the south wing. Four men burned, one seriously, and a hundred cars destroyed."

The heavy man turned swiftly. "Fire? A hundred cars? Good Lord, that's a hell of a lot." He moved swiftly to his desk and snatched up a telephone. "We'll get Donner up here."

"I've sent for him," Abbot said.

The other replaced the telephone. "Good. I'll chew his heart out. A hundred cars!" He peered at Abbot. "Six's. I hope?"

"Blue Birds, Harry," Abbot said.

Harry Overton clapped a palm to his brow and gazed at the ceiling. "What next?" he groaned. "Last week he had plant guards leaving the gates at night to sneak beers at Jack's Diner. Now we've got a fire. The old man will raise hell. Dammit, Steve, the Personnel Section is responsible for plant protection and safety. We've got to do something."

"A man may die," Abbot said.

Overton waved a hand impatiently. "Our insurance will handle that. That's what we pay premiums for."

"That's right," Abbot said quietly.

"The state workman's compensation will pay his widow a few thousand bucks—and all she's got to do is go out and snag herself another husband."

Overton frowned. Then he laughed and placed a hand on Abbot's shoulder. "What's the matter, Steve? You seem a

little edgy all the time lately," he said.

Abbot said evenly: "Maybe you'd better get yourself another boy. Maybe I'd better go back to flying freight to South America."

"Dammit, Steve, don't talk like that. You're doing a good job for me, and it pays a hell of a lot more than piloting a flying box car—even if you could get a job."

He laughed softly and struck Abbot lightly on the arm with his fist. "What's the matter, pal? Sore because you caught me trying to kiss our cute little secretary? Kind of go for her yourself?"

Abbot opened his mouth, but before he could speak Patsy Delvane opened the office door. "Mr. Abbot," she said. "Mr. Donner is here."

Turning abruptly, Abbot entered his own office. A red-faced, beefy man in a dark gray uniform stood by the door. There was sweat on his forehead. "Honest, Mr. Abbot," he began, "I don't know how it happened. Every shift we check those boys in the paint shop for cigarettes and matches."

Abbot jerked a thumb. "In there. Mr. Overton is waiting."

The red-faced man gulped, lumbered over the thick rug, and opened the glass door. Abbot heard Overton's voice rasp out: "Donner! A hundred cars. . . ." The door slammed shut.

ABBOT turned and stared out the wide window. Behind him he heard the steady sound of Patsy Delvane's typewriter. A whistle blew, and he glanced at his wrist watch. Four o'clock. The first shift at National Motors was over, and the second was coming on. Then the eleven o'clock graveyard shift. Over and over, night and day, turning out shiny units of steel, glass, rubber and plastic for a car-hungry public. Abbot turned suddenly and moved to the outer door. Patsy Delvane typed steadily, her face averted. Abbot hesitated at the door, his lips tight. Then he went out.

An elevator took him to the plant level, and a guard drove him to the south wing, almost a mile away. He inspected the blackened ruins of the vast car-painting area, and he saw the hundred wrecks of Blue Bird cars. After he had made some

notes and talked to witnesses, he rode back to the administration area. It was after five o'clock when he re-entered his office. Patsy Delvane was covering her typewriter. She didn't look up at him.

Abbot said: "How about a drink before dinner—and maybe dinner?"

She raised her eyes to his. A mocking smile curved her lips. "Gee, mister, do you really mean it?"

"Forget it," Abbot said shortly. He walked to his desk, feeling his face burn.

She stepped up behind him and placed a hand on his arm. "I'm sorry, Steve," she said softly. "But you acted so—so old-maidish—"

He turned to face her. "When I caught you kissing the boss? Why should that worry me? After all, didn't he give you a raise last week?"

She looked up at him with steady eyes. "That's right, Steve," she said quietly. "But I like this job, and I want to keep it. I like the pay, and I—I like working with you. Harry Overton is all right if you know how to handle him. And I've got a three-year-old daughter to think about." She paused, and a troubled look came into her eyes. "He hasn't been too—too persistent, and, after all, I can't scream for help."

Abbot forced a grin. "You just scream whenever you want to. I'll rush to your rescue. How about that drink?"

She smiled. "Thank you, Steve. I'd like a drink with you."

Harry Overton came out of his office. The lipstick was wiped off his chin, and he was wearing a dark blue topcoat and gray felt hat. "Good night, Patsy," he said gravely to the girl, and he nodded at Abbot. "See me in the morning, Steve. The old man will want a complete report of that fire business." He went out, and they heard the whirr of the elevator going down.

Twenty minutes later Abbot and Patsy Delvane sat in the dusky light of the bar in a downtown hotel and sipped at martinis. She reached out and touched his hand. "How long have you and I been working together, Steve?"

He shrugged. "Harry hired me about a year ago. You were there before that."

"I like you, Steve. But why are you always so—so sort of sad?"

He smiled at her. "Watching you kiss the boss makes me that way."

Her eye clouded. "Trying to kiss me. I—I'm afraid I didn't cooperate." She looked down at her glass. "Seriously, Steve, what can I do about it? He is becoming more insistent."

Abbot avoided her eyes and motioned a waiter for two more cocktails. As he did so, he saw a man standing in the doorway of the bar watching them. He was a short thick man dressed in a tight-fitting plaid suit and a dark brown hat. A raincoat hung over one arm, and there was a cigar in his mouth. Abbot turned back to Patsy Delvane. The man moved forward and stood beside their table. Abbot didn't look up, but he saw the girl's eyes widen, and her lips grow tight.

A voice said, "Hello, Pat."

She said quietly, "Duke, what are you doing in town?"

He laughed. It was a hoarse jeering sound. "Why, honey," he said, "you know I can't stay away from you very long."

She flushed, and said to Abbot, "Steve, this is Mr. Delvane." She added bitterly, "My ex-husband."

Abbot stood up, nodded politely, and held out a hand.

Delvane ignored the hand, and his pale eyes took in Abbot appraisingly. He chewed thoughtfully on his cigar. Then he said, "Hi."

Abbot sat down again. He had a cold feeling along the back of his neck, and when he lit a cigarette his hand trembled a little. There was a small silence.

Delvane said to the girl, "Honey, ain't you going to ask me to sit down?"

She lowered her gaze to her glass. "Please, Duke, go away."

Delvane chuckled, pulled a chair from an adjoining table, and sat down. He kept his hat on, and the cigar remained in his mouth. Ignoring Abbot, he said to Patsy Delvane, "This is real cozy. How's the kid?"

She shot a helpless glance at Abbot. Then she said shortly, "Mary Ellen is fine."

Delvane chewed his cigar. "I'd kind of like to see the little rascal."

She shook her head quickly. "I'm afraid that's impossible."

Abbot sat very still.

Delvane laughed unpleasantly. "Okay, honey. Then I'll buy a drink."

She stood up. "We were just leaving. Are you ready, Steve?"

Abbot nodded and got to his feet.

Delvane didn't move. He looked up at Abbot and spoke around his cigar. "Sit down, Jack. I'm buying a drink."

Patsy Delvane moved away from the table. Her face was white. Delvane grasped her by one wrist and pulled her back. She twisted her arm, but she couldn't free herself from his grasp. Delvane laughed softly. "You're having a drink with papa, honey."

She stood still, her eyes lowered. She was trembling a little.

"Let her go," Abbot said quietly.

Delvane's cold eyes swung on him. "Who rattled your chain, Jack?"

Suddenly Abbot felt calm and relaxed. It was like a feeling he used to have, after the Channel was behind him, and he hit the flak over Berlin. A feeling of sadness and resignation, knowing that he had to maintain his course so that the men on the bomb sight could do their work. He knew that he had to hit Delvane, and the knowledge gave him a sensation of happiness.

He swung his right fist, and it smacked sharply against Delvane's jaw. Delvane lurched sideways off his chair and hit the floor on his hands and knees, his cigar still clenched between his teeth. There was a sudden flurry of excited voices, and a woman screamed loudly.

Delvane shook his head and pushed himself to a kneeling position. A broad man in a white jacket appeared suddenly and hooked a hand behind Delvane's collar. He said one terse word, "Out," and hustled Delvane through a door behind the bar. Abbot took the girl's arm and guided her swiftly to the door leading to the lobby.

A smiling waiter confronted them. "You've a wicked right, sir, but you forgot your check."

Abbot slapped a bill into the man's hand. Then he and the girl walked across the big lobby and out to the sidewalk.

NEITHER of them spoke as he drove through the early evening traffic to Patsy Delvane's apartment house. He

stopped beside the curb, and turned off the motor.

"I'm sorry, Steve," she said in a low voice. Her face was a small pale oval in the semi-darkness.

"Will he bother you any more?" Abbot asked. "I mean, do you want me to stick around?"

She shook her head silently.

"How about dinner?"

She shook her head again. "I'll have something in the apartment. Thanks for . . . for what you did for me."

He tried again. "We may as well eat together."

She hesitated, and then she said, "Some other time, Steve. I want to see Mary Ellen, and talk to Joan—that's the girl who stays with us. And I—I have another engagement."

Almost angrily Abbot stepped on the starter, and he waited stonily for her to get out. She didn't speak, and she fumbled with the door handle. He got out quickly, then, opened the door, and walked to the apartment entrance with her. They stood on the sidewalk while the passing crowd eddied around them.

Abbot tried to smile. "Don't mind me," he said. "I guess we're both in the same boat. Our first choice was a bad one. Maybe we'll manage to do better the second time."

She smiled up at him. "Everyone has trouble, don't they, Steve? What made you take a job under Harry Overton after he married your former wife?"

He laughed shortly. "Why not? Harry gave me a good deal, and I'm working for him—not his wife."

"Did you love her, at first, I mean?" she asked.

"Oh, sure," he said bitterly. "We lived on love—at first."

She nodded slowly, her eyes searching his. "I know. It was the same with Duke Delvane and me. I was seventeen then." She glanced away from him, and her lips twisted. "I learned fast from Duke," she added.

"Why does he keep on pestering you?"

"It's probably my fault," she said. "But he scares me. Duke is rather, well—violent. I give him money to stay away from me and Mary Ellen. Every once in a while, when he needs money, he comes

back and threatens to take Mary Ellen away, or to make trouble for me. He's caused me to lose several jobs. I . . ." She made a helpless little gesture.

"A lovely character," Abbot said. "I should have hit him harder. But you don't have to stand for that kind of a racket."

"I know, but I'm afraid to do anything about it. It's easier to pay him and get rid of him for a while."

Abbot placed a finger beneath her chin and tilted her small face upward. "Let's get out of this rat race and go live in a grass hut in the South Seas."

She smiled. "Not in the South Seas, Steve. California. I'm saving up for a little orange grove. Really, so that Mary Ellen can grow up in the sun."

Abbot grinned down at her. "I've got a couple of bucks. How about cutting me in?"

"I mean it," she said. "You'll see. Good night, Steve." She turned and entered the apartment building.

Abbot got back into his car. He sat quietly for several minutes with his hands on the wheel. Then he drove slowly away. It was fifteen minutes after seven in the evening.

* * *

An hour later Abbot drove his car down the long ramp of the big garage beneath his apartment building and wheeled into his parking stall along a wall. Dim lights were burning, but there was no one around. As Abbot locked his car, he heard quick footsteps behind him. He turned. A man was walking swiftly toward him, a heavy man in a plaid suit and brown hat.

Duke Delvane stopped squarely before Abbot. He said softly, "Hello, Jack."

Abbot nodded grimly. The cold feeling at the back of his neck started all over again.

Delvane said, "So you're the romeo my wife's chasing around with?"

"Ex-wife," Abbot said.

Delvane mouthed his cigar. "It's all the same to me, Jack, divorce or no divorce. And I don't like for punks to sock me on the jaw."

Abbot began to feel calm and relaxed.

He shouldered Delvane roughly out of his path and started for the stairway leading up to the street level. Delvane grabbed Abbot's arm, and tried to swing him around. Abbot swung his left, putting his weight behind it. Delvane ducked nimbly, like a boxer, and Abbot went off balance as his fist grazed Delvane's ear. Delvane danced away, and his right hand came out of his coat pocket.

A slender length of weighted black leather swished in a wicked arc. Abbot turned, but not fast enough, and a shower of colored lights exploded behind his eyes. From far away he heard Delvane's choked voice. "Lay off, damn you," and the blackjack struck again. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Blood Will Talk

ABBOT opened his eyes to see a grease-blackened face bending over him. A scared voice said, "Mr. Abbot, what's the matter?" Abbot struggled to a sitting position. He put a hand to the back of his head. His fingers came away bloody. He got slowly to his feet, and he felt hands on his arms helping him. The voice said, "Did you get slugged?"

Abbot shook the hands away and stumbled toward the stairway. The voice followed him. "I was doing a grease job in the back, and when I come out here, I find you on the floor."

"Never mind," Abbot muttered. "It's all right." He climbed up the stairs to the street level.

He was the only passenger in the elevator. The operator said, "Mistah Abbot, you-all hurt?"

Abbot shook his head, and waited patiently for his floor. As he stepped out, the girl said, "You're haid's bloody, Mistah Abbot. Want me to call a doctah?"

"No, no, he mumbled. " 'Night, Clarissa."

He entered his apartment, locked the door behind him, and stumbled to a chair. For a while he sat with his head back and his eyes closed. Presently the pain in his head lessened a little. He stood up, shrugged off his topcoat.

Before a long mirror in his bathroom

Abbot inspected the spot behind his right ear where the blackjack had struck him. He rinsed the blood away with cold water, and then he stood under the shower.

As he dried himself, he felt better, but his head still pounded wickedly. In pajamas, slippers and a flannel robe he entered his tiny kitchen and made himself a drink composed of half bourbon, half water, and two ice cubes. He carried the drink into the living room and sank into a deep chair.

For a long time he sat and sipped at the drink. He thought of the events which had led him from a forty-dollar-a-week job on a mid-western newspaper to twelve thousand a year as a special assistant to Harry Overton, Director of Personnel for National Motors. . . .

Steve Abbot, twenty-seven, newspaper man, married to Janice Cowles, stenographer, in November, 1941. A week's honeymoon at a skiing lodge in Michigan, then a basement apartment with snow banked around the windows. Then Pearl Harbor, and his enlistment in the Army Air Force. Wings at Randolph Field, service as a bomber pilot in the early bitter days of the Pacific. Later, the deadly run over the Channel from England, the parachute jump from a blazing cabin after the rest of the crew had bailed out. Prison camp for two years. An attempted escape a week before D-Day, recapture, with machine gun bullets in both legs. And then rescue by the boys in Patton's tanks. England again, New York, hospital, home—and Janice.

Janice, tall and straight and blonde, with a full soft mouth and smoldering eyes. As he thought of Janice, Abbot smiled grimly, and he remembered a day over two years before. He had been home a month, and Janice had seemed strange and cool. He had shrugged it off—the war, their long separation, he thought. His newspaper had failed during the war, and he didn't have a job. Janice was working, but he wasn't. They were in the kitchen eating lunch when he had told her about the flying job. But she had wanted him to go to work in the bank where she was employed as a stenographer. He could almost hear again his scornful laughter. . . .

"Are you nuts, honey? Counting out nickles and dimes? That's not for me."

"At least, it's a job, Steve." Her voice was cold.

Flying is my job, honey. New York to Rio, and back again. Four hundred bucks a month, and I'll be home every other weekend. We can get an apartment in New York. He had been riding high on the crest of the war's rosy aftermath.

"Every other weekend? That'll be just lovely." Her mouth was hard. "Steve, if you take that job—"

"I'm taking it, I've got to take it—with you, or without you." He had been a little scared, after saying that, but he couldn't take it back.

He had felt sick as she slammed out of the kitchen. He sat alone, trembling.

Three days later he had called her from New York and asked her to join him before he flew his first trip. "No," she had snapped, and the receiver clicked in his ear. When he returned from his second flight to Rio, the divorce papers had been waiting for him. He had signed them furiously, with a tight feeling in his throat.

There had been many girls after that—in Rio, Havana, Miami, New York. And then came the crash in the jungle with a load of washing machines. Pain, temporary blindness, rescue, hospital, no more flying. Back to his native mid-western city, and a chance meeting with Harry Overton, a high school pal who had climbed high on the industrial ladder by being useful to the right people and by not caring whom he hurt on his way up.

Harry Overton, suave and prosperous, with draped tailored suits and hand-made shirts, Director of Personnel for National Motors, and the husband of Janice, his Janice, and nothing he could do about it never no more.

"I think you're a good man," Overton had told him, "and I need a good man, tough and smart. And besides—" he had grinned at Abbot over his highball glass—"I feel I owe you a little something because I married Janice. But you let her go, and I was smart enough to snap her up. No hard feelings, are there, Steve?"

He remembered that he had taken a big swallow of his drink. By that time, of course, he knew all about Harry Over-

ton and Janice. He knew that they had been together constantly all the time he had been in service, and he had thought ironically that it didn't make any difference to him any more. "Hell, no," he had said carelessly. "When do I start?"

And that was how he came to be assistant to Harry Overton, the husband of his cheating ex-wife. But it had worked out well enough, Abbot had to admit. Overton had wanted a job done, and Abbot was doing it, and the pay was good. What in hell more could a man ask? A job was a job. As long as the pay checks kept coming in, what did it matter that your boss had stolen your wife while you were rotting in a prison camp?

The ice rattled in the bottom of his glass, and he got up and moved to the kitchen. On the way, he stopped to turn on a radio-phonograph.

Above the music, the door chimes tinkled melodiously. Abbot glanced at his wrist watch. Nine o'clock. He placed his glass on a table, moved across the room and opened the door. He had a fleeting moment of panic when he saw the girl standing there. It was the first time he had seen Janice since he had left for New York and the ill-fated flying job.

"Hello," he said quietly.

"Steve, may I come in?"

"Why not?" he said. The panic was suddenly gone, and only coldness remained. "I'm always glad to see my ex-wives—especially if they're married to my boss."

Her eyes wavered.

"I'm sorry, Janice," he said quickly and stepped aside. "Please come in."

She moved past him, and he smelled the faint, familiar odor of her. He closed the door and turned to face her. It was then that he saw the whiteness of her face, and the blue shadows beneath her eyes. The soft music drifted through the room.

"You always liked Strauss, didn't you, Steve?" she said.

He looked at her and nodded. He was remembering more and more how it had been with her during the few short weeks they had been married.

"You look older," she said. "Maybe it's the glasses. Why don't you visit us?"

"Us?" His tone was mocking.

She flushed. "Harry and me. After all, you two are working together." She hesitated, and added lightly, "Harry speaks well of you."

"He should," Abbot said.

"What?"

He laughed shortly, "Sit down, Janice. I'll make you a drink." He placed a palm to his forehead in mock concentration. "Let's see if I can remember . . . bourbon and ginger ale. Right?"

She smiled faintly. "That's right, but don't bother. I can only stay a minute. I thought you might help me."

Abbot waited.

"It's about Harry," she said, avoiding his eyes. "He—he's working too hard, and I can't get him to slow down. He's gone so much at night. He eats, sleeps and drinks National Motors."

"That's the way to get ahead in the world," Abbot said grimly.

She raised her eyes. "But it's killing him, Steve. Our doctor says he must relax, but he won't listen. Not even to me. And he's gone again tonight—some meeting or other. He likes you, Steve. Maybe you could persuade him to take a vacation, forget about business for a while. Would you, Steve?"

Abbot said quietly: "Is it just Harry's health you're worried about?"

Her eyes shifted. "What—what do you mean?"

Abbot felt a savage sense of exhilaration. He knew all about Harry Overton and his roving eye. But he couldn't tell her about the women who called Overton during the day, or about the times he had heard Overton telephone Janice that he was being detained by business, when maybe a blonde was already waiting in Overton's car in the company parking area.

He couldn't—or could he? He took a deep breath, and remained silent.

Janice Overton's chin came up a little. "All right, Steve," she said. "Maybe I'm jealous. Where is Harry tonight?"

He shook his head. "I don't know."

"Steve, please don't lie to me."

He had to say it. "You lied to me—about you and Harry. When I was away."

She looked at him steadily. "There isn't much point in my telling you now

that I'm sorry. Maybe—maybe we can blame it on the war. Anyhow, I've burned my bridges."

He tried to smile. "Water over the dam, Janice."

She said quickly, "Steve, I know I haven't any right to come to you like this. It—it cost me a lot. The least you can do is tell me the truth. Several times he's mentioned his secretary—Miss Delvane. Has he been seeing her? Is that where he is tonight?"

"No," Abbot said. He was surprised at the sharpness of his voice.

She took a low step toward him, and he saw the tears in her eyes. He also saw the tiny mole on her right temple, at the edge of her honey-colored hair. He had forgotten about the mole, but now he remembered it very well. He suddenly remembered a lot of things, and his pulse quickened.

"Steve," she said, "I can't go on like this, ignoring his—his actions. If I knew for certain, maybe I could do something about it. You loved me once—can't you help me a little now? Where is Harry tonight? I called his office, but I didn't get an answer."

All the bars were down, Abbot thought, and she was just another jealous woman trying to fight back the only way she knew how. The knowledge gave him a kind of a satisfaction. He stepped close to her and placed his hands on her shoulders. He pulled her slowly to him. Her eyes were suddenly veiled, and he felt her body stiffen a little. But when his arms crept around her, she became limp and yielding. He kissed her almost savagely, and her lips held a remembered softness and warmth.

The door chimes tinkled.

TOO late Abbot remembered that he hadn't turned the key in his lock, but he had time to step away from Janice Overton before the door opened. Patsy Delvane stepped quickly inside. Her lips were pale, and one heavy strand of black hair fell over her face. She stared blankly at Abbot and Janice Overton.

Janice Overton sauntered to the door. "Good night, Steve," she said coldly. "I didn't now you were expecting a—a guest. It appears that I was wrong about Harry.

Do come up for cocktails some evening—with my husband."

"Wait, Janice," Abbot said. "I—"

The door closed softly behind her.

He looked at Patsy Delvane and said harshly, "What's the matter? Didn't your date show up?"

Her eyes stared up at him, and her lips moved. "He's all bloody," she said in a strangled voice, "and his eyes are wide open. His throat, Steve. Harry's throat." There was madness in her eyes, and her mouth opened wide. Her scream started on a treble note. Abbot leaped forward and shut it off by clamping a hand over her mouth. He led her to a chair.

She slumped forward, and there was sweat on her face. Gently he pushed her head back, and she stared dully at the ceiling. "Blood," she whispered. "So much blood."

An icy feeling started in Abbot's ankles and crept upward. "Where is he?"

"In—in his office," she whispered. "On the floor . . . by the fireplace. Is it true, Steve? Did I see him?"

"You're talking," he snapped. "What were you doing in Harry's office tonight?"

Slowly her eyes focused upon him, and she took a deep shuddering breath. "He—he asked me to come back tonight—to do some urgent letters."

"Was that the 'engagement' you mentioned to me?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes, but when I got there, I—I found him. I came straight here. Oh, Steve, his eyes."

Abbot turned abruptly and entered his bedroom. In a few minutes he came out, fully dressed, with a topcoat over his arm. "Stay here," he said to Patsy Delvane, "and don't answer the doorbell, or the telephone. I'll be back."

She looked at him with dull eyes and nodded without speaking. He went out, clicking the lock shut behind him. He drove to the National Motors plant.

The guard at the west gate said, "Good evening, Mr. Abbot."

"Hello, Dave. Did Mr. Overton come in tonight?"

"Yes, sir." He glanced at a time chart on the wall behind him. "At ten minutes of eight. He hasn't come out yet."

"How about Mrs. Delvane? What time did she come in?"

The guard glanced at the chart again.

"Eight-twenty. She left at eight-thirty."

Abbot sighed. "All right. Anyone else in or out?"

The guard cleared his throat. "No, sir."

"Thanks, Dave," Abbot said. He drove through the gate and parked beside Harry Overton's big blue coupe.

He took the automatic elevator to the fourth floor. His own office was dark, but light shone from behind Harry Overton's glazed glass door. Abbot moved silently over the rug and entered the big office.

The lights were all turned on, and the vast mirror over the fireplace reflected the paintings on the opposite wall. Harry Overton lay on his back before the fireplace. His legs were spread apart, and one arm was doubled beneath him. There was a look of ludicrous surprise on his face.

Blood had spurted to the thick rug, soaking it, and had crept in thick rivulets over the white tile of the fireplace. At Overton's feet lay a thin-bladed knife with a heavy bronze handle. Abbot had seen it often on Overton's desk, a razor-sharp instrument with which Overton sometimes opened his personal mail.

Abbot stared a long time, his face haggard. After a while he turned slowly and moved to the massive desk. A chair was drawn up beside Overton's big leather armchair, and on the desk was a stenographer's note book, open at a ruled page. Penciled symbols covered the first few lines of the page. Abbot knew enough shorthand to read the symbols:

Mr. J. F. Glendenning, President, The National Motors Company, Mid-West Division. Dear Sir: Please be advised that effective immediately I am resigning as Director of Personnel of this company. I respectfully suggest that my present assistant, Mr. Stephan L. Abbot, be appointed as my successor. Mr. Abbot, due to his experience and training, is well qualified.

The rest of the page was blank. With a thumb and forefinger, Abbot turned the cover of the note book. In ink at the top was written: *Patricia Delvane*. He moved over the thick rug and closed the door softly behind him. In the darkness of his own office he stood silently for several minutes. Then he went down to his car and drove out of the gate. The guard

waved to him as he went past. Across the street from the gate, a neon sign proclaiming *Jack's Diner, Beer and Eats* blinked at him as he turned the corner and headed for his apartment.

Patsy Delvane was sitting as he had left her. As he entered, she turned her eyes toward him.

Abbot said, "He was dead when you went in?"

She nodded.

"You didn't see anybody?"

She shook her head slowly from side to side.

Abbot began to pace slowly around the room. After a while he stopped, and picked up the telephone. "Police Department," he said.

Patsy Delvane watched him dumbly.

CHAPTER THREE

Let's Fry Together

AN HOUR later Abbot was till answering questions. They had taken Patsy Delvane home at last, and he sat facing Detective Sergeant George Dakin, a thin, freckle-faced man with cold little blue eyes and a neat red mustache. Dakin yawned, stretched, and said casually, "Well, Abbot, it looks like you're in line for Overton's job now."

Abbot shrugged. "Possibly. I hadn't thought about it."

Dakin's eyes glinted. "How much do you make a year?"

"Twelve thousand dollars."

"And—uh—how much did Overton make? What was his salary?"

"I don't know. He never told me."

Dakin leaned forward and said softly: "Would you say it was more than twelve thousand dollars a year?"

"Certainly," Abbot snapped.

"How much more?"

"Dammit," Abbot burst out. "How would I know? Harry must have been getting at least twenty thousand a year, maybe more. And he probably got a bonus on top of that. But what has that got to do—" He saw the smug expression on Dakin's face, and he paused. Then he said bitterly, "I get it. I killed Harry Overton so that I would inherit his job."

Dakin lifted his angular shoulders.

"Overton died around eight o'clock. You haven't yet said where you were at that time."

"I told you I was just driving around," Abbot said patiently.

"Where?"

"No place in particular. Around town, out along the river, just driving. I didn't stop any place until I parked my car in the garage downstairs."

Dakin pointed a long finger. "The garage attendant said he found you unconscious on the floor at about twenty-five minutes after eight tonight. He said you had been hit on the head. The elevator operator said you came up to this floor in a dazed condition. Did you have a struggle with someone, Mr. Abbot?"

"Certainly not. I fell and hit my head against the bumper of my car."

"No struggle?"

For an instant Abbot was tempted to tell the detective sergeant about Duke Delvane. And then he thought of Patsy and said, "No."

Dakin stared at him thoughtfully. "I see," he said slowly. "By the way, wasn't Mrs. Overton formerly married to you?"

"Yes," Abbot said. "That makes it even better."

The detective gave him a wolfish smile. Then he stood up and moved to the door. "Don't try to leave town, Mr. Abbot," he said. "You'll be seeing me again." He went out and closed the door behind him.

Abbot remained in his chair, his face thoughtful. After a while he got up, put on his hat and topcoat, and entered his bedroom. From a dresser drawer he took a flat little .32 automatic. He stared at the gun for several seconds, and then dropped it into his coat pocket. He turned out all the lights, locked the apartment door behind him, and walked down the hall to the elevator. He passed a man in a black belted raincoat. The man was looking at a number on an apartment door. Abbot entered the elevator, a tight smile on his lips.

It was a clear cold night, and he decided to walk the eight blocks to Patsy Delvane's apartment. As he turned a corner, he glanced backward. The man in the raincoat was half a block behind him. Abbot quickened his pace.

Ten minutes later he stood before Patsy

Delvane's door and pressed the bell. The door opened, and she stared at him with wide eyes. "Steve!"

He stepped quickly inside, closed the door behind him, and heard the automatic lock click shut. Patsy Delvane stared at him, her eyes big and dark in her small white face. Her black hair was braided, and it hung in two thick strands over her shoulders. She was wearing a dark blue robe, and beneath it Abbot saw the white lace of a nightgown.

He said: "I can't stay long. What did the police say to you after you left my place tonight?"

"They kept asking me if I had seen Harry before—before he died. I kept saying 'No,' and finally they told me that they had found my shorthand book on his desk with some notes of mine dated today, something about Harry resigning and recommending you for his job. They insisted that I had started to take some dictation from him—but, Steve, I didn't, I didn't."

"Did they show you the book?"

She shook her head. "No."

"All right. Stick to your story." Abbot backed to the door and placed a hand on the knob.

Her eyes searched his face. "Steve, be careful. They asked me about you, about Harry being married to your former wife. They hinted that you were still in love with her, and they asked me if—if you and I had been seeing each other." She lowered her eyes, and faint color came into her cheeks.

He gave her a crooked grin. "I must be quite a guy—in love with my boss' wife, and chasing his secretary. Has our burly friend, Duke Delvane, bothered you any more?"

She turned a little away from him, and her braids moved over her shoulders as she shook her head.

Suddenly Abbot stiffened. He was aware of a faint odor, cigar smoke. He said, "Are you alone?"

"Mary Ellen and—Joan are here. They are asleep."

"I don't mean your daughter, or the girl who stays with her. I mean Delvane."

She turned to face him. "No, no. Steve, please go." Her eyes pleaded with him, and her hand touched his arm.

He looked around the apartment, saw the closed doors leading into bedrooms, and an alcove opening into a dark sitting room. He pushed the girl gently aside and moved toward the alcove.

Behind him, she said, "Please, Steve. There's no one here."

Duke Delvane stepped through the alcove. There was a blue-steel revolver in his hand. It was pointed at Abbot's stomach. A cigar was between Delvane's teeth, and the smoke curled across the broad flat face. "Step aside, Jack," he said. "I was just leaving."

Abbot said evenly, "I think we'd better have a little talk first."

Delvane's teeth clamped over the cigar, and he waved the gun. "The rod does my talking for me. Out of the way, Jack." He took a step forward.

Abbot turned to look at Patsy Delvane. She was backed against the wall, her eyes upon the gun in Delvane's hand. Abbot said to her, "Is it okay with you for Mr. Delvane to leave?"

She nodded quickly. "Yes, yes."

Abbot shrugged carelessly, and shoved his hands into his coat pocket. "The lady says you can go," he said to Delvane.

Delvane laughed, and moved toward the door. "Now you're getting smart, Jack," he sneered.

Abbot fired the automatic from his top-coat pocket. There was a muffled explosion, and the smell of gun powder and burning cloth. Delvane spun around, and stumbled to one knee. Abbot leaped forward, jerked Delvane's gun free, and stepped back.

Delvane still clenched the cigar between his teeth and glared up at Abbot with cold eyes. He said in a complaining voice, "Jack, punks like you ain't supposed to pack rods." A spreading red stain appeared on the fabric of his plaid trousers just above his right knee.

From somewhere in the house, a child began to cry. A door opened, and a young girl, chubby and sleepy-looking, poked her head out. Her eyes got big as she saw Delvane crouching on the floor.

"It's all right, Joan," Patsy Delvane said. "Please quiet Mary Ellen, and go back to bed."

The girl pulled her head back, and

closed the door quickly behind her.

There was a sudden banging on the apartment door, and the knob rattled violently. Abbot turned to the girl. "That'll be a man in a black raincoat," he said quickly. "A policeman. Tell him the truth about Delvane, about how he has been gouging you. Tell him that I shot Delvane while trying to prevent him from bothering you. Say that you want to file charges against him. It's time you stopped this silly pay-off. He can't hurt you any more; I'll see to that. Do you understand?"

She nodded quickly. "Yes, yes. I—I lied to you about his being here because I didn't want to get you into any more trouble on my account."

The banging on the door became louder, and a muffled voice yelled, "Open up!"

"How do I get out of here?" Abbot asked.

She pointed at a door. "Through the kitchen—fire escape. Steve, be careful."

He turned and ran. In the dark kitchen, he found the door opening onto the fire escape, and he clattered down the steel steps. He ran across a cement court to an alley, peered both ways, and then walked swiftly until he came to a cross street. A taxi was parked in front of a dingy bar. Abbot moved up to it and shook the sleeping driver's shoulder. The cabby jerked awake, and said mechanically: "Where to?"

Abbot gave him the address of Harry Overton's home, and got into the rear seat. As he leaned back in the darkness, he remembered suddenly that the woman he was going to see had once been his wife. A wry smile twisted his lips, and he wondered if perhaps he should have said, "Home, James," to the taxi driver.

Sergeant Dakin would have liked that, he thought grimly.

HARRY OVERTON'S home was on a hill overlooking the town below. It was a white rambling house with wide windows and a stone terrace reaching out to a cement drive lined with stubby pines. The wind from the valley blew cold as Abbot stepped out of the taxi and handed the driver some money.

The driver said, "Want me to wait?"

Abbot shook his head. The taxi wound away down the long drive to the highway.

Abbot stood in the wind and looked up at the house. A dim light glowed from behind one of the windows at the side, but the rest of the house was dark. He went up a flagstone walk and pressed a bell button. It seemed to him that he waited a long time, and he turned up his coat collar against the wind. Presently a shadow passed one of the big windows, and the door opened slowly.

"Hello, Janice," Abbot said quietly.

"Steve." Her voice was almost a whisper. In the semi-darkness he saw that she was wearing a long white robe. The wind blew over the terrace and pressed the silk against every curve of her body. "I knew you would come, Steve," she said.

Abbot stepped inside. She closed the door, shutting off the sound of the wind. He turned to face her. "Janice, I'm sorry—about Harry."

He saw that she was holding a tall glass in her hand. "The police were here," she said. "They—they told me." She seemed to shiver, and she took a swallow from the glass.

Abbot took her gently by the arm and led her across the dark living room to a smaller adjoining room lined with book shelves. She allowed him to push her into a chair, but she sat stiffly erect, holding her glass in both hands. A dim light burned in a corner and cast a warm glow over a blood-red rug. On a low glass table beside a huge brocaded divan was a bottle of scotch, a silver bucket of ice, and a soda syphon. Abbot helped himself to a drink.

He took a long swallow of the whiskey. It was good scotch, he thought—Harry probably had cases of it around the place. He looked down at Janice Overton. On her bare feet were gilt sandals with narrow straps. The lacquer on her toenails glowed ruby-red. Abbot removed his topcoat and laid it over a chair, carefully folding it so that the black burned hole in the right pocket was concealed. He finished his drink, and poured another.

Then he sat down on the end of the divan near Janice Overton. He took a cigarette from a gold box on the glass table, and applied flame from a matching gold lighter. The girl reached out and took the cigarette from his fingers.

"May I?" she said.

Abbot smiled. "An old trick of yours. I remember it very well." He lit another cigarette.

She nodded slowly. "So do I. We had quite a lot, didn't we, Steve?"

He was still holding the gold lighter, and he saw that his hand was trembling. He placed the lighter carefully on the table. "Yes," he said. "Once."

Her round shoulders moved restlessly beneath the silken robe, and there was a smouldering look in her eyes. She sipped at her drink. "Did you like Harry, Steve?" she asked suddenly.

He gazed directly at her and moved his head slowly from side to side. "I hated him," he said quietly.

Her eyes swung away from his, and she said in a low voice: "They said Harry's throat was. . . ." She shut her eyes, and clasped the glass tightly.

Abbot drew deeply on his cigarette. He didn't say anything. From somewhere in the house a clock chimed twelve times.

She raised her eyes. "Why did you come here tonight, Steve?"

He took a swallow of his drink.

"Why, Steve?" Her voice was like the high-pitched plaintive query of a child.

"A guy never learns," he said. "I guess it was because you kissed me to-night."

Her lips trembled. "I wanted to kiss you, Steve. Didn't you want to kiss me?"

He nodded slowly.

She stood up and walked out into the darkened living room. The silken robe rustled softly as she moved. She stood in front of the wide window and stared out at the night and at the dark clusters of pine trees moving in the wind. Abbot stepped up behind her. The soft sound of the wind in the pines came to them in the quiet house.

He placed his hands beneath her bent elbows and turned her gently until she

faced him. His hands slid up her arms to her shoulders. He heard her glass thud softly on the carpet, and then her arms were around his neck, and her lips were against his.

Presently she pushed him away. "Steve, we mustn't."

"Why not?" he said harshly. "Harry's dead, isn't he?"

She turned away from him. "Steve. . . don't talk like that."

He said bitterly: "*He* didn't care when I was in the army."

The jangling of the telephone startled them both.

She turned a pale face toward him. The gray light from the night sky silhouetted her tall slim figure against the big window. The shrill ringing continued.

"Answer it," he said in a tight voice.

She moved across the room until she was a vague shadow in the darkness. The ringing stopped abruptly, and her voice came quietly to Abbot.

"Yes? Yes, Sergeant. . . . No, I wasn't in bed. Certainly, I understand. . . . What? . . . I see. . . . No, that won't be necessary. . . . Thank you, Sergeant."

Abbot stood stiffly in the darkness. She left the telephone and moved slowly past him. He followed her into the lighted room, and she turned to face him. "That was Sergeant Dakin," she said in a brittle voice. "He said he knew the identity of the person who killed Harry. He offered to place a guard around this house tonight, but I told him not to bother."

Abbot stood very still. "Yes?" he said.

She stared at him with hot eyes. "You'd better go, Steve—while you have a chance. Sergeant Dakin said that you killed Harry."

"I see," Abbot said. "And did he tell why I killed Harry?"

"He said you were jealous of Harry because he married me, and that you wanted Harry's job. He said that you were

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afraid Mrs. Delvane—Harry's secretary—was suspicious of you, and that you went to her apartment tonight to kill her, too, but that her former husband was there and tried to stop you. He said you wounded Mr. Delvane, and escaped. Mr. Delvane testified that he had been trying to affect a reconciliation with his ex-wife, but that you had influenced her against him. Sergeant Dakin said Mrs. Delvane denied it, but—"She turned away from him and covered her face with her hands. "Oh, Steve, Steve," she sobbed.

ABBOT picked up his topcoat, and put it on. His fingers closed over the automatic in the pocket. He stood staring at her while the events of the evening burned their way slowly across his brain. He remembered. . . . Abruptly he turned and entered the dark living room.

He picked up the telephone, and asked the operator to connect him with Jack's Diner, on National Street. As he waited, the sound of Janice Overton's sobbing came to him in the quiet house.

A cheerful voice said, "Jack's Diner." Abbot said, "Has Dave Osborne, the night guard at National Motors, been in this evening?"

"Dave? Let's see. Yeah, he was in for a beer."

"What time?"

"Oh, between eight and eight-thirty. He said things was kinda quiet on the gate. Who's calling?"

"Never mind," Abbot said wearily. He hung up. For a long minute he stood in the darkness with his hand on the phone. Then he moved slowly across the room. "Good-by, Janice," he said.

She turned a tear-streaked face toward him. He saw the dark shadows beneath her eyes, the tiny mole on her right temple, her yellow hair in glossy disarray. He felt old and tired and drained out, and he took a deep breath.

"Steve, if—if you need money," she stammered.

He shook his head slowly. When he spoke, he tried to keep his voice steady. "So you think I killed Harry because I am still in love with you? And because I wanted his job?"

She stared at him, her lips parted. "Steve."

He said harshly: "Maybe I still love you—but not enough to kill a man. Not near enough. You killed Harry."

She moved backwards. "Steve, you're mad."

He stalked her slowly. "I had to find out," he said, "and I did. You were willing to let me take the blame, weren't you, Janice?"

"No, Steve, no," she said in a choked voice.

He went on relentlessly: "You followed Harry to his office tonight, expecting to find him with another woman. But you found him alone, and you quarreled—and you killed him. Then, in desperation, you made the shorthand notes in Patsy Delvane's note book in an attempt to implicate Patsy, or me, or both of us.

"Then you came to me and put on the wronged-wife act, to win sympathy for yourself, and to make me believe that you hadn't seen Harry tonight in case the police questioned me. You tried to play all the angles possible—and you almost got away with it."

"No, no," she moaned.

"It's no use, Janice," Abbot said in a tired voice. "Maybe you had your reasons for killing him. But you were also ready to let me go to the chair for it."

There was madness in her eyes. Suddenly she smiled brightly up at him, and emitted a throaty laugh. "Really, Steve, you can't be serious. That silly talk about shorthand—what has that to do with me?"

"Of all the persons involved in this mess," Abbot said evenly, "you and Patsy Delvane are the only two who can write shorthand, and Patsy Delvane always took dictation in ink. The notes in the book on Harry's desk were in pencil."

She laughed again. It was a sound like breaking glass. "Steve, that's ridiculous."

He shrugged. "It won't take long to compare the symbols—and if the police start to check fingerprints." He paused, and then he went on: "Two women went in the west gate at the plant tonight. You were the first. After Harry went in, you saw the guard leave the gate—and that gave you your chance. The guard didn't see you enter or leave. He was breaking a rule by leaving the gate, and so he lied to me when he said that only Harry and Patsy Delvane had entered. He didn't

know. He was across the street drinking a beer. He missed you, but he got back to the gate in time to check Patsy in and out. You killed Harry, Janice. You—"

Suddenly she was screaming. "Damn you!" She snatched up the bottle of scotch and hurled it at him.

Abbot ducked, and sprang forward. He grasped her wrists and pulled her close to him. Her wild sobbing filled the room. He stood still, holding her awkwardly, her bright hair just beneath his chin. Presently her sobbing stopped, and he released her wrists. But still she huddled against him.

"I'm glad it's over, Steve," she said in a muffled voice. "I'm glad I can talk to you about it. I—I hated him so, almost from the beginning, and I wanted you back. He was rotten. I couldn't stand it any longer, and I followed him tonight to have it out with him. I parked across the street from the plant, and after Harry went in, I saw the guard leave. He didn't see me go in, or come out—as you said, Steve. I went up to Harry's office, and he laughed at me. He said things.

Horrible things. And he slapped me. The knife was on his desk."

She shivered, and clung to Abbot like a scared child. "When Sergeant Dakin called a little while ago," she went on, "and said they were looking for you, I became frightened—and, oh, Steve, I'm so sorry. I wouldn't have let them convict you, really." She turned her face up to his. "Please forgive me, Steve. Say it. We can go away together, you and I. I've got some money and I'll collect Harry's insurance. You go away and hide, and I'll join you."

He pushed her gently away from him and the light glinted coldly on his glasses. "I'm sorry, Janice. Shall I call the police now?"

She stared at him for a long moment. Then she smiled a little, and an odd light came into her eyes. "I want to tell the sergeant, Steve," she said softly. "In my own way. Do you mind?"

He shook his head silently. His throat felt tight.

Slowly she reached up and put her hands behind his head. She pulled him



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down to her and softly brushed her lips against his. Then she stepped quickly away, and laughed shakily. Swiftly she moved past him into the darkened living room, her white robe billowing out behind her.

Abbot turned to watch her, a blurred white shadow in the darkness, as she moved to the telephone. There was a faint scraping sound, a moment of silence—and then a dull, flat explosion and a bright burst of flame. Abbot stood still for one numb instant, and then he ran forward. He knelt on the floor, and his groping hands found her body. With trembling hands he struck a match.

She lay on her side, one arm out-flung, her yellow hair fanned out beneath her head. Her eyes were open and bright, and her half-parted lips looked warm and soft. Limply in the fingers of her right hand was a tiny silver-plated revolver with a graceful pearl handle. A thin wisp of smoke curled lazily from the delicate little muzzle. The tiny mole on Janice Overton's right temple was gone. In it's place was an ugly black hole clotted with burned powder and blood.

The match burned Abbot's fingers, and he let it drop to the carpet. The top of a table was on a level with his eyes. He saw the dully gleaming outline of the telephone, and the open drawer from which she had taken the gun. Still kneeling, he reached over the quiet body and picked up the telephone. His lips moved, but no sound came out. He tried again.

"Police Department," he said. His voice sounded loud in the quiet house.

* * *

A month later Steve Abbot sat behind a big mahogany desk in an office with a thick sky-blue rug, a fireplace, and a mammoth mirror. Gilt letters on the door read: *Stephen L. Abbot, Director of Personnel. Private.* He place a finger on button and pressed twice.

Almost immediately, the door opened and Patsy Delvane came in. She looked young and fresh in a white silk blouse and a plain black skirt. "Buzz, buzz," she said. "That's me."

"I want to talk to you," Abbot said.

She looked around the office and shivered a little. "This place gives me the creeps," she said. "I can still see Harry lying on the rug."

"I know what you mean," Abbot said. "I keep thinking I'm sitting in a dead man's chair." He got up and crossed the wide window and stared out at the expanse of roofs and smoke stacks. Without turning, he said, "Are you all squared around—with Delvane, I mean?"

She spoke to his broad back. "Yes, Steve thanks to you. The attorney you engaged secured a conviction of extortion yesterday. You've been so busy, I haven't had a chance to tell you. Duke won't be bothering anyone for a long time."

Abbot turned and smiled at her. He took off his glasses and placed them in the breast pocket of his coat. "Still want that orange grove—for you and little Mary Ellen?"

She frowned. "Don't joke about it, Steve. It was just a dream of mine. I—"

"Take a letter," he broke in. He turned to the window again.

She sat down, still frowning slightly, and poised her pen over the note book. Abbot began to speak, and the pen moved swiftly over the page.

Mr. J. C. Glendenning, President, The National Motors Company, Mid-West Division. Dear Sir: I greatly appreciated the confidence placed in me when you assigned me the duties of Director of Personnel following the tragic death of Mr. Overton, and it is with deep regret that I herewith tender my resignation. As soon as it is convenient to the company, I wish to relinquish my duties here and devote my full time to a citrus-growing partnership in the state of California. Sincerely yours, Stephen L. Abbot.

He turned away from the window. "Got that?" he asked.

There were tears in her eyes, but she was smiling. "Steve."

Abbot moved over to Patsy, and she stood up to face him.

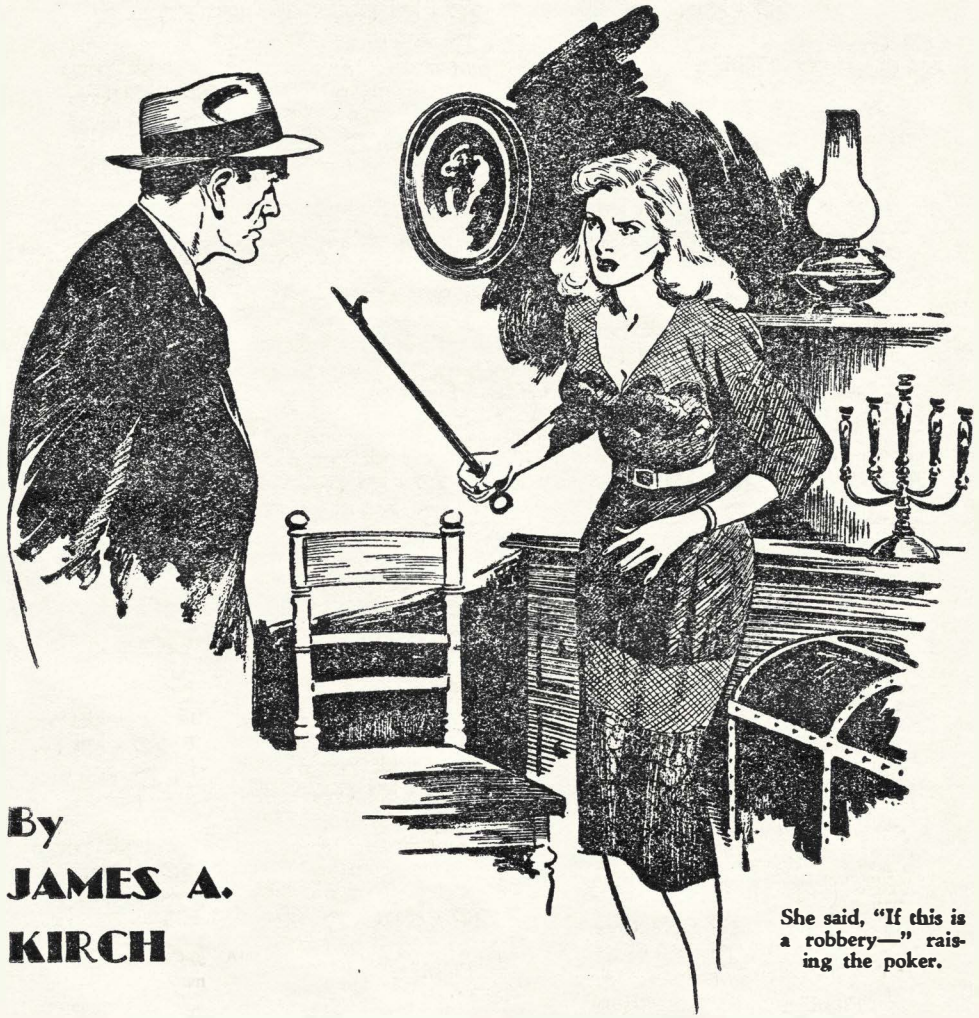
"I want that letter to go out immediately," he said gruffly.

"Yes, sir," she said.

And then his arms were around her, and he couldn't tell whether she was laughing or crying.

THE END

SHOOT IF YOU • MUST! •



By
**JAMES A.
KIRCH**

She said, "If this is a robbery—" raising the poker.

Until Shamus Harkness got orders to quit shooting his mouth off, he wouldn't lift a blazing rod to cure atomic Arlene's murder blues.

THIS little man came into my office without knocking. He had a precise, studied way of walking. Everything about him was neat and precise. He was about sixty, sixty-five. He put his hat on my desk and placed his gloves next to it. He hung his stick over the back of the chair, seated himself, and crossed his

legs carefully adjusting their angle.

I got up behind my desk to check a mental bet I made with myself. I lost. He wasn't wearing spats.

"Mr. Harkness," he said. "My name is J. C. Wilcox."

I said I was happy to meet him. I was. The clothes spelled money. The manner spelled money. The initials instead of a name put the Treasury stamp on it.

He said, "I knew your late partner. We made use of his services at times during the war. I'd like to extend my sympathy."

I didn't say anything. My late partner was not lamented. While I'd been overseas, Eddie Joy had discovered he liked the feel of easy money. Ellen had tried to warn me. Not that she'd known Eddie had gone wrong, but she'd had a queer feeling.

Times have changed, Brad, she'd told me, while you've been gone. Too many people are money-mad. Even though you're honest, you can't play with mud without splashing it.

I'd found out she was right. She was more than right. You can't play with murder, either. But I found that out too late.

I'd let Eddie Joy suck me in blindly as the front man in a phony painting swindle, and when the pay-off came he had two bullets in him. He was dead. I wondered what Mr. Wilcox would think if I'd told him I'd been covering the man who killed Eddie, and that I stood there and let Eddie get it.

"Right after your wife's death, too," Mr. Wilcox went on. "Most unfortunate."

I closed my eyes. I didn't like to think about that. That was why Eddie had died—because he'd caused Ellen's death. He'd warned the midget hi-jackers he'd sold out to that Ellen was dangerous to them and they'd gone up in their little sailor hats and middy blouses and short boys' pants and pointed a gun at her. She'd laughed at kids playing a game, and they'd shot her through the throat. They'd killed her. She was dead. Ellen was dead because she'd been in love with Brad Harkness. That was a nice thing to know. That she was dead because she was married to me. That was a nice thought to carry around inside me.

I opened my eyes and the little man

was still there, his legs still crossed, his keen eyes studying me.

"Mr. Wilcox," I said. "I'm a private investigator. People who come to see me generally don't come to sympathize with my troubles. They have troubles of their own. That's why they're here."

He nodded. "I'll be brief," he said. "Mr. Harkness, I have reason to believe my daughter is being blackmailed."

He looked a little as though he expected it to shock me. It didn't. If I were a blackmailer, I'd pick someone with a father as rich as he looked. The money odor was there. The smell that draws the carrion.

"Her bank has informed me that she has been making substantial withdrawals."

"You keep a close check on her," I said.

"I'm a director of the bank. It's only natural that I would be informed of anything unusual in her financial transactions."

"Transactions?" I said. "Is she in business?"

"She owns an antique shop. The Old Homestead. It might be called more of a hobby than a business, although, naturally, she makes a profit."

The "naturally" was because she was his daughter. Evidently he felt any Wilcox would have the golden touch.

"Well, look," I said. "You could be wrong. She may be stocking up on inventory. It may all be legitimate."

He shook his head. "No," he said. "It isn't that. The bank financed her business. We receive regular reports. No. This is something else. It's been going on about three months. It's not just the money. It's Arlene's actions. She's frightened."

"All right," I said. "I'll buy it to work on. She's being blackmailed. How do you want it handled?"

"Handled?"

"Look," I said. "When a girl pays blackmail, there's a reason. Usually she's done something she's ashamed of. Sometimes it's messy, Mr. Wilcox."

"I see," he said. He was a little bit worried. He wasn't quite sure what his daughter might have gotten herself into. "You will find out who is blackmailing her and what is behind it," he decided.

"You will report to me. After that, we can decide what steps should be taken." He paused, considering. "You will naturally consider anything you discover as confidential information."

"I'm an investigator," I told him. "Not a policeman. Whatever I uncover while working for you is your information. There's only one thing I can't stomach. I . . ." I broke off.

It was a foolish idea. The girl was probably mixed up in some shoddy little deal. There was no chance it was anything much worse than that. I'd been letting myself get morbid, brooding too much. Next, I'd start picturing her as a killer. I pulled myself out of it. "You have any ideas?" I asked.

"There's a Robert Johnson," he said. "He calls himself a jobber in antiques. He's the perennial college type. Boyish looking. He's no good, but they have similar interests. Arlene's been seeing a lot of him."

"Robert Johnson." I wrote down the name. He gave me the address. He gave me his own address and that of Arlene Wilcox's shop. "Anything else?"

He shook his head and got to his feet. "Nothing, Mr. Harkness." He picked his hat off the desk with the same care with which he had put it there. He set it on his head, adjusting the angle exactly. He picked up his gloves and hooked his stick over his arm. "Good day," he said.

I nodded and watched him while he

walked out of my office in the same studied, precise way he'd entered it. I sat there a few minutes, adding it up and wondering why it all left me a little uneasy, and then I realized I might as well start earning my pay. I got my hat off the rack and went down to the parking lot for my car.

THE Old Homestead must have set the bank back a nice penny in decorating. It had been a plain store-and-loft building, but a new front had been added, simulating a farmhouse. It was strictly high toned.

I found a parking place up the street, went down the two steps, and opened the door. Sleighbells tinkled merrily as I entered. I half expected a white-haired old farmer to greet me with a jug of the hard. He didn't. Nobody greeted me. The place was empty.

I looked around a little. Whatever Arlene Wilcox might be, she had taste. Nothing garish, nothing roccoco. Mostly good, solid early American furniture, with a little of the more elegant Jeffersonian period. The woods were all refinished to a soft, satiny sheen. If the Wilcox girl had done this work, she had more to her than the old man's golden touch. I was running my hand along the side of a walnut sink bench, enjoying the soft, velvety feel of it, when I heard a voice at my elbow.

"That's a beautiful piece." The voice

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Tops in entertainment: DR. CHRISTIAN, starring JEAN HERSHOLT, on CBS, Wed. nights; LITTLE HERMAN, new mystery show, Sat. nights, on ABC.

had a velvet touch, too. It was a warm, full voice. It felt nice.

I turned to look at her. She was just right for the voice. She was small and blonde, with rich dark eyes contrasting with the hair. There was a ripple of excitement in her voice, and in her eyes, and even in the soft, slightly parted lips. "It's just two hundred dollars," she said.

"Right now," I said, "that's out of my reach." I said it carefully, trying to put a threat in the words. I wanted to throw her off balance.

I did. She was puzzled by the way I said it. She said, "We have some very nice things at much less."

"No," I said. "I like expensive things. I like money."

She smiled uncertainly. "Everybody does," she said.

"Yes," I said. "Only some people have it. And some don't. You have it." I held off a moment, then said the rest of it. "I want it."

She took a step backward and her right hand closed over a wrought-iron poker. She said, "If this is a robbery—" raising the poker.

I laughed. "You think I'm a crook?" I said. "I'm no crook. I'm your friend. You owe me a lot, Miss Wilcox."

Her hand let go of the poker. Her face loosened a little, and, then, in the back of her eyes, I saw what her father had mentioned. The fear.

"I don't understand," she said.

"I'll explain," I said. "Like I told you, I like money, too. And I'm not getting enough. Oh, you've paid off some. But it will have to be more, Miss Wilcox. The price goes up. Double."

"You're crazy," she said. "I think you must be crazy. I don't know what you're talking about." The fear was in her voice now, too. She knew what I was talking about. Maybe I didn't, but she did. The old man had been right.

"Look," I said. "It's simple. I've been getting peanuts, so far. I want more."

She tried hard. She said, "If this is a robbery, I haven't much here. I'll give you what I have."

"Cut it," I said. "You know what I mean. And you know how much. Double. You can pay it in the usual way."

"You're crazy," she said. "You—"

I decided I'd said enough. I had her worked up, now. If I went any further, she might get smart on me. I said, "Just remember, Miss Wilcox. Double." I picked my hat off the sink bench and went out without saying good-by. I went down the street, got in my car, and waited.

I timed it, just for the fun of it. She came out four and one-half minutes later. She looked up and down the street and then got in a new convertible roadster that was parked opposite The Old Homestead. She headed uptown.

Arlene Wilcox drove nicely. A little too fast, but that was natural. She was on edge. Too much on edge to think about being followed.

I laid back until she reached the fringe of town and swung on to the open highway. After that, I stopped worrying. My thirty-eight sedan was lost in the traffic.

She went about three miles, past the first stretch of fancy hamburger stands and overnight cabins, until she reached a six-foot billboard that advertised *Falcon's Rancho, 1 Mile*. She slowed down, then.

This was running to form. Falcon's would be another overnight cabin set-up. Little Miss Arlene Wilcox had fallen for a gag as old as her antiques.

She went through an archway that said, "See The Zoo," and pulled up in front of a rambling white building with an "Office" sign on it. I drove on down the road and parked, angling my mirror to cover her car. An old man in jeans and suspenders, with a worn-looking panama, came out of the building and sort of hopped over to her car.

Instead of getting out, she talked to him through the window. He kept shaking his head, and once he spread his hands out in front of him. She was doing most of the talking.

Finally, she realized he didn't know what she was talking about. I could have told her that. He'd never even heard of me. She gave it up and started her car with a jerk. I kept watching the old man, to see what he'd do. That was a mistake. He stood there looking after her, and then he hopped back into the office.

And her roadster pulled off the road in front of me.

She was mad. Her talk with the old man in jeans had convinced her I was a phony, and she was out to let me know she couldn't be bluffed. She was out of her car and had one foot on my running board before her engine had stopped.

"I'll have you arrested," she said. Her voice wasn't just warm any more. It sparked.

"Miss Wilcox," I said, "You've got it all wrong. I'm trying to help you. I'm a private investigator."

"You're a crook," she said. "You're the lowest two-legged snake afoot."

I squirmed. I'd been called names before, but I never managed to like it. Not from women like her. "Look," I said. "You're in a jam. And you've lost your head. You're letting them play you for a chump. J. C. hired me to help you."

That put out the sparks. "J. C.," she said. "My father hired you?"

I pushed it. "Miss Wilcox, this is old stuff. A girl makes a mistake. You don't pay off on that any more."

Her eyes widened. "You . . . you . . ."

"We're all human," I said. "Don't take it so hard."

I should have been ready for it. I should have caught the flare of anger inside her. But I sat there and put on what was meant for a friendly, reassuring smile. She probably took it for a leer. Her hand came through the window and slapped me across the mouth hard.

She said, "You're the lowest . . ." and then turned and ran back to her car.

I LICKED my lips. Not chops, lips. That was going to cost somebody something. I considered how it would look on an expense voucher. One slap in the teeth. J. C.'s daughter was not as neat and careful and precise as her father. There was fire inside her. As I backed back to the Ranchero entrance, I realized it was that fire that probably got her jammed up.

The Falcon Ranchero was more of a zoo than a ranch. Wooden cages speckled the grounds. A huge arrow pointed: *To The Wild Animals*, and another: *To The Huts*. The "huts" would be the overnight cabins I'd expected. All according to form—until I opened the door to the office.

I opened the door and started inside. I stopped.

A voice off to my left said, "Don't move."

I didn't move.

The voice said, "Put up your hands. Slowly."

I put up my hands. Slowly.

The voice said, "Don't frighten him. Jocko is nervous."

Jocko didn't look nervous. He looked happy. A heavy collar encircled his neck and a chain ran from it to a ring in the floor. The chain would have kept him from reaching me. But he didn't have to reach me. He had a gun. He held it nice and steady, pointed my way. He held it almost the way a human would hold it. But he wasn't human. He was an ape.

The voice said, "Just stay where you are."

I stayed. I didn't make a move. I held myself there, with my hands raised in front of me, watching the ape with the gun.

He grinned at me. Black lips pulled back over yellow fangs and he made a queer sound in his throat. And he squeezed the trigger.

I dropped sideways. I threw myself to the left, waiting for the roar of the gun and the jarring rip of the bullet.

What I heard was a laugh. It was a full, booming sort of a laugh. It filled the office, blasting my eardrums. Jocko, the ape, added a shrill scream to it, jumping up and down with delight.

The laugh stopped and the voice that had warned me said, "If you could have seen yourself! If you—" He broke off, roaring with laughter.

I got up. I didn't feel sheepish. I didn't feel anything. The cold numbness inside me would be a long time going away. A wavering wet line streaked the floor between me and the ape. A water pistol. A gag.

The voice said, "Honest, if you could have seen yourself."

I turned around slowly to face him.

He was a big man, close to half an inch taller than me. He wore Western boots and breeches and a plaid flannel shirt, open at the neck. His hair was snow-white, but he didn't look that old. Maybe his laughs kept him young.

I said, "You ought to take pictures. Set up a camera."

His brow wrinkled, then he nodded agreement. "That's an idea. I could rig up a movie camera and—"

"Skip it," I said. "You the owner?"

"White Falcon," he said. "Welcome to Falcon's Rancho."

"Yeah," I said. "Break open the cyanide. We'll all have a drink."

His laugh boomed. "Good," he said. "That's good." He sat down at his desk. "What can I do for you?"

"Give me a room," I said. "One of those things you call huts."

He took a card from a file in front of him and slid it across the desk to me. "Hut A," he said. "Two rooms. Fireplace. Bath. Telephone. That'll be \$15."

I filled out the card and gave him a ten and a five.

"Will that be all?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. It wouldn't be all. I wanted more from Mr. Falcon than that. Before I'd be satisfied, that heavy laugh would have cracks in it. But not now. My undershirt was plastered to my back. Looking into the wrong side of a gun does that to me. It gives me the sweats. "Yes," I repeated. "That'll be all."

He called "Pop!" and an old man came in from a back room. He was the same one who'd talked to Arlene Wilcox outside. This time, I got a close-up of him.

There was something wrong with him. Right at first, he seemed a harmless old coot, but when you looked close you knew there was something wrong. It was his eyes. His eyes were too bright.

Falcon said, "Pop, show the gentleman to Hut A," and the old man nodded and picked a key off a rack on the wall. He held the door open for me and I went through and waited until he had closed it after us.

"That Jocko," I said. "That ape. He's quite a character."

"He's lonesome," Pop said.

"He won't win many friends," I said.

That didn't buy a laugh. Pop said, again, "He's lonesome," and led the way down the path to the huts.

Hut A was a regular cabin, with an imitation thatched roof to make it a hut. Pop opened the door and switched on the lights. It was a nice set-up. There was a

small living room, with an open fireplace, a bedroom and a bath. It was cozy. With the right company, it would have been a perfect spot to kill a bottle and an evening—providing you didn't get a phone call from Mr. Falcon a few days later. I was betting Arlene Wilcox got a phone call.

"All right?" Pop asked.

I studied him a minute. He was the one Arlene had spoken to. He was in this, somehow. "Pop," I said, "If somebody gave you an envelope, what would you do with it?"

His eyes struggled. "You didn't give me anything," he said.

"No," I admitted. "But suppose somebody did. Suppose they drove up and handed you an envelope? What would you do with it?"

"Depends," he said. I could see his mind trying to work. "Mail it?" he suggested. He looked pleased with himself.

Either he was a natural actor, or I'd figured him right. He was a little loose upstairs. He was probably the messenger boy, but he was too loose to have planned this thing. He could wait.

"Okay, Pop," I said. "That's all. See you around."

He hopped to the door. He turned with his hand on the knob. "You're wrong," he said. "He's no ape."

"What?" I said.

"Jocko. He's no ape. He's a chimp." He nodded and his face worked a little, as though he were getting ready to bawl. He went out and closed the door after him.

THEN I turned the hot water on full in the shower and let the bathroom steam up. I got in it and stayed under the hot until the numbness Jocko's little joke had caused was warmed out of me; then I switched it to cold. I dressed, leaving my sweat-drenched undershirt on the radiator, and put in a phone call to J. C. Wilcox.

It went through the Rancho switchboard, but that didn't bother me. White Falcon himself could listen in without worrying me. If he was running the kind of set-up everything pointed to, he was wide open. A little pressure and he'd drop Arlene Wilcox like a hot potato. All

I wanted J. C. to decide was how much pressure.

I didn't get him. I got a soft-voiced butler who informed me that Mr. Wilcox was out, but that he would be happy to take a message. I made him happy. I gave him my name and the number of the Rancho and told him it was urgent. It wasn't urgent. If I'd had a good book, I'd have sat down and read it.

If I had, I'd have been reading it when the knock came on the door. Pop, I figured, with more of his double-talk. I said, "Come in," without getting up.

It wasn't Pop. It was a well-built, well-dressed man. He was probably in his late thirties, but his round face would be boyish when they laid him out in his coffin. He had a crew haircut and a boyish smile to go with it.

"I'm Robert Johnson," he said.

I believed him. He fit the brief sketch J. C. had given me of the no-good Arlene was going with. "All right," I said. "I'm Brad Harkness."

He came in and sat down without my asking him. He said, "You're going to hurt Miss Wilcox. She asked me to talk to you."

I should have figured she'd have spotted me. She'd been so angry when she'd jumped in her car that I'd never thought of her doubling back. Now that I thought of it, she was bound to. She'd have to swing around on the highway to get back to town. And when she passed the Rancho, my parked car was something she wouldn't have been likely to miss. It might have been better if I'd parked around back, but the way things shaped up, I didn't think it made much difference

who knew that I was at the Rancho.

The boyish-faced lad said, again, "You're going to hurt Miss Wilcox."

I gave him a smile. Not boyish, but a smile. "Tell me my business," I said. I said it politely.

"You don't understand," he said. "You're stirring up trouble. Miss Wilcox can't afford that. That's why she sent me to see you."

I got mad. "Look," I said. "It's people like you and Miss Wilcox that make these chiseling set-ups possible. This whole thing is corny. Falcon runs a tourist trap, and it's vulnerable as hell. We can blow it wide open."

"That's what I mean," he said. "You've got it all wrong. Miss Wilcox told me what happened. And it's not what you think. She never stayed at the Rancho."

That stopped me. He sounded as though he meant what he said. And I remembered Arlene's anger when I'd accused her of it. I could be wrong. "All right," I said. "I could be wrong. That doesn't change it. Blackmail's no out. There's nothing worth paying blackmail to cover."

"Nothing?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Not in my book."

He let it out softly. "How about murder?"

I sat there while the word washed through me. It hit me like that, in a wave. I sat there and let it go through me before I could say it back to him. "Murder?"

"Manslaughter, maybe," he said. "Or second-degree. I'm not up on that. She killed a man with her car."

"Go ahead," I said. There was a cold, hard knot inside me.

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"It happened right out here on the highway. She was coming home from a party. She'd been drinking. That made it bad."

"Go ahead," I said.

"It wasn't her fault," he said. "She didn't see him. He just lunged out in front of her car. The right fender struck him. It must have thrown him twenty feet."

She hadn't stopped. She'd run a man down, and then driven on. She had a warm, velvet voice, and warm dark eyes, and a heart made of ice. "She didn't stop," I said.

"She slowed down," he told me. "But there were people around. There was nothing she could do. It wasn't her fault."

He might have been alive. He might have been injured, lying there in a ditch, and she'd driven on.

"He was dead," Johnson said. "And there were people around. She wasn't drunk, but she'd been drinking. She was panicky. She drove on."

The dirtiness inside us. The dirtiness in a lovely skin that comes out when the skin is in danger.

Johnson said, "He'd been thrown twenty feet. There was no doubt about that. Two days later, Arlene got a phone call. This guy wanted ten thousand dollars."

Ten thousand dollars for a life. Ten thousand dollars for a body buried back in the woods. That would be the beginning.

"She said she couldn't get it right away. And he agreed to take it in installments. She's been paying him a thousand a month."

"She pays Pop?"

"She gives him an envelope," he said. "Every month. She doesn't know what he does with it."

"He does," I said. "He doesn't know much, but he knows that. That's where it starts. With Pop. That's where we work from."

"Wait a minute," Johnson said. "You can't do that. You're working for Mr. Wilcox. He's paying you. You can't involve his daughter in a murder."

"I'm not," I said. "She's already involved. And I'm not dropping it, Johnson."

"Wait," he said. "Mr. Wilcox will—"

"Get out!" I said. "Get out of here."

I started up from my chair.

He got out. He said, "Wait," and then he looked at my face and sprung out of his chair to the door. He slammed it behind him. I had my hand on the knob when the phone rang.

"Mr. Harkness?" It was Wilcox. From the tone of his voice, I knew what was coming. He'd talked to Arlene.

"Right," I said.

His voice was still neat and precise. "I found I have been somewhat hasty. I was entirely in error. My daughter has explained it. I won't need your services any longer."

I didn't say anything.

"Do you understand?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "I understand."

"I will send you a check," he said. "The error was mine, Mr. Harkness. You've been inconvenienced. Your fee will be paid."

"Forget it," I said. I hung up. The phone was damp under my hand. Buy yourself a death, Mr. Wilcox. But don't cut me in on it. I should have told you that, Mr. J. C. Wilcox. That's one thing I can't stomach. Murder.

Pop was the starting place. He was the one I had to see. I was out the door before I realized I was wrong about that. Pop came second. I'd made a mistake once, and I might make one again. Robert Johnson could have had it wrong. She'd probably been hysterical when she'd told him about it. I'd have to get it first-hand. The starting place was Arlene. I went past the Rancho office without stopping and got in my car.

THE Old Homestead was closed, but there was a sign on the door, "In case of emergency," with an address. The address was two blocks away. I left my car in front of the shop and walked.

The ride had cooled me off some, but not entirely. I realized that as I turned into the entrance of the red-brick house listed on the sign and pushed her button. The palms of my hands were still wet.

The buzzer buzzed and I went up slowly. Two flights. Her door was opposite the stairway. That was a break. If it hadn't been, I might not have gotten in.

She had the door open and was standing in front of it when I reached the top of the stairs.

"You," she said, taking a step backwards.

"Yes," I said. "Me." I pushed past her into the room.

She had courage. She closed the door behind her and stood with her back to it. She didn't flinch away. She said, "My father—"

"Forget your father," I said. "He's out of it. This is between you and a louse. Remember? In your own words, I'm the lowest there is. But there's one thing lower. A murderer."

That did it. She fell apart. Her face crumpled and she swayed a little, leaning forward. She tried to say something, but no words would come out, and then she was falling forward and my arms were around her. I could feel the sobs ripping through her. There was no sound, just the feeling against me of the sobs tearing through her.

"Sit down," I said. I led her to a couch at the end of the room. "I'll get you a drink."

"No," she said. She stiffened and drew up to face me. Her dark eyes were dry. "I can't drink," she said. "I've tried it. And I can't cry any more. It's awful. I keep seeing it, and keep thinking about it. I can't get it out of my mind. It's awful. I'd be better off dead."

"You'd better tell me," I said. "You'd better tell me about it."

"Yes," she said. "I'll tell you." Her voice was lifeless. "I was driving home from this party. I'd had two drinks, but I wasn't drunk. It was foggy and dark, but my headlights lit the road up clearly."

She was going over it again in her mind. She'd almost forgotten me. "He wasn't on the road," she said. "He came from the side. He almost seemed to leap in front of the car. And I hit him."

"You could have stopped," I said. "After you'd hit him, you could have stopped. That would have been human."

"I did stop," she said. "When I hit him, I jammed on the brakes. I stopped as soon as I could."

Johnson had it wrong. He'd said she slowed down. He hadn't said she stopped. It made a difference.

"You should have gotten out," I said. "You should have tried to help."

"I couldn't," she said. "I couldn't get out. There was this man with a gun."

"There was *what*?"

"The man with a gun. By the side of the road."

"Look," I said. "Take it slow. There was a man with a gun by the side of the road. What did he look like?"

"I didn't see him clear," she said. "The fog was too thick. But he had a gun. And he came after me. I was terrified. I drove off."

"All right," I said. "If there was a man with a gun and we can find him, that makes it better. Don't you see, Arlene? Someone was killed. We can't just let it lay. We've got to do something about it. Do you see that, Arlene?"

"Yes," she said. "Oh, yes. I do see it."

"Who was he?" I said. "Who was it you killed?"

She shuddered a little. "I don't know," she said. "It wasn't in the papers. Not our papers. I looked. But it happened out of town."

"All right," I said. "What happened next?"

"That was a Saturday," she said. "A Saturday night. On Monday, a man called me. He said the man I hit was dead. If I gave him ten thousand dollars, he'd be quiet. He said if I didn't, they'd hang me."

"Hang?" I repeated. That would be Falcon. The cowboy boots and the plaid shirt. He'd say "hang."

"Yes," she said. "I told him I couldn't get the money, and he agreed to take part at a time. He said it would go to the man's family. He said I owed them that much."

"Neat," I said. "Nicely put. And you were to give the money to Pop?"

"The old man out at the Rancho," she said. "I drove in as though I were just getting gas and gave him an envelope with the money."

"All right," I said. "Now, think back. Pop; the old man. Did he ever say anything to you?"

"No," she said.

"He's not very bright," I said. "He may not know what it's all about. But he's there all the time. And you gave him the

money. I was hoping he might have said something."

"No," she said. "Only once. And that didn't make sense. He came out one day leading an ape on a chain. It scared me. It jumped on the running board. And the old man said, 'It's all right. Jocko doesn't know. He doesn't know anything about it. He won't hurt you. But he misses Rosie.'"

I said, "That's what he—" and then I stopped. "Lord!" I said. "Oh, Lord!" I got up from the couch. "A chimp," I said. "Jocko's not an ape. He's a chimp. And Harkness is a chump. He believes things. When somebody feeds me a line, I swallow it whole." It was almost funny. It had been there, right in front of me, all the time. The foggy night. The man with the gun. The phone call. It was almost funny.

"Listen," I said. "Where do you keep it? We need a drink."

"In the cupboard," she said. "Under the sink. But I can't—"

"You can drink," I said. "You can even get plastered." I went out to the kitchenette and found a bottle a third full of rye. I poured a jigger in each glass, got ice out of the refrigerator, and built us a drink.

"Lady," I said, "You did it. If you'd only stopped at the police station after you'd driven on."

"I was afraid," she said. "I'd had two drinks. And Bob said—"

I put the highballs down on the floor. I put them down very carefully. I said, "Who said?"

"Oh!" she said. "I wasn't supposed to say that. He said if anything happened, they might make him testify against me. He wanted to protect me. And he wasn't driving. I was."

"He was with you?" I said. "Robert Johnson was with you?"

Of course he was with her. That's how they traced her so fast. That's how they got her number. Not through a bribe or connections. Not that fast.

"It doesn't mean anything," she said. "It's not important. It was all my fault. His being there doesn't matter."

"Oh, no," I said. "It doesn't matter." I started for the door.

Arlene came after me, catching my arm.

"What is it?" she said. "What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure," I told her. "Maybe it's nothing. But I think I just killed a man." I shook her hand off my arm and ran down the stairs to my car.

IT WAS five miles to Falcon's Rancho. A long five miles. It took me twelve minutes. You can kill a man in twelve minutes. I was thinking of that when I jammed on the brakes in the driveway and flung open the office door.

Falcon was seated at his desk. He raised his head as I entered. Last time he'd met me, he'd laughed. He wasn't laughing now. He was looking at the gun in my hand.

"Harkness," he said. "It's all right. 'You don't need that.'"

"Where's Pop?" I said. "Where is he?" He wasn't in the office. Jocko was crouched in the far corner, his red eyes fixed on me. Pop wasn't in sight.

Falcon shook his head wearily. "He's all right. He's packing. I'm sending him away. He's not hurt, Harkness."

"Maybe," I said. "Where is he?"

He called "Pop!" and the old man stuck his head out of the back room. "Okay, Pop," he said. "Finish packing." He turned back to me. "I'm a fool," he said. "I let myself get drawn into it. But not killing. I never even thought of killing."

I lowered the gun. I didn't put it away, but I lowered it. "It was a chimp she killed, wasn't it?" I said. "A chimp named Rosie. What she thought was a man was an ape?"

"Yes," he said. "Rosie was Jocko's mate. They'd both gotten loose. Jocko had his water pistol with him. We were out looking for them. When this car came along, Rosie jumped smack in front of it. The girl stopped, and then Jocko must have scared her with his gun. We didn't even get her number."

"And then he came around with a deal?"

"The next day," Falcon said. "He lined it up for me. It looked good. We were to split. It looked foolproof."

"It doesn't look good now," I said.

"No," he said. "It's washed up. I couldn't kill anyone."

"You should have!" The voice came

from behind me, at the door. It was Johnson. "Drop the gun," he said.

I dropped it. I kicked it away. I kicked it to the far corner of the office.

I turned around, then. He was standing in the doorway, a gun in his hand. Arlene was with him. She broke away and ran to my side.

"I didn't know," she said. "He came in right after you left. I told him you'd been there, and what you'd said. He seemed to go crazy. He made me come with him."

"Where's Pop?" Johnson said. "I told you to take care of Pop!"

"He's gone," Falcon said. "Johnson, we're licked. You might as well quit. You're just sticking your neck out."

"My neck is out," Johnson said. "I'm a three-time loser. The fourth would be the last. I can't take a chance on it."

"You're crazy," Falcon said.

"I'm smart," Johnson told him. "I'm not getting caught again. There'll be nothing left—no one to tie me to this."

Johnson said, "I'm sorry, Arlene. It's your father's fault. It's not mine. I had everything figured out nice." He took a step forward and his gun centered on me. "You first," he whispered.

Falcon said, "Johnson! Put up your hands. Slowly."

It checked him. He turned a little.

"Put up your hands," Falcon said.

He said, "What the?" and then his eyes followed Falcon's. To the far corner of the office. To where I'd kicked my gun—to Jocko. He turned his head, but didn't bring the gun around with it. That was a mistake. When he tried to turn, he

was too late to play the game Jocko's way.

Jocko made a queer sound in his throat, and shot him through the heart.

The chimp screamed in surprise, like a baby, and threw the smoking gun to the floor. Johnson didn't scream at all. He stood there in front of us, a dazed expression on his face, and then he doubled up and sat down on the floor. He stayed that way a minute, sitting on the floor, still holding a gun in his hand, and then he fell forward and lay still.

Arlene leaned against me, trembling. "Take me home," she moaned.

I didn't take her home. I called the State Police and J. C. Wilcox, and we sat in the office until they'd come and the police had finished with us.

J. C. was as neat and precise as ever.

"A commendable piece of work, Mr. Harkness," he said. He ignored the fact that he'd fired me. "I trust my check will be adequate."

Arlene said, "No check could be adequate. You don't know what you've done for me. I can't thank you enough." She tried to smile. She said, "Do come see me. Please."

I said, "I'd—" and then the state trooper's voice rode over mine.

"It's an accident," he said. "An ape. How can you book it as murder?"

Murder. Ellen crumpled into a ball on the floor.

"I'll be busy," I said. "Forget it. In my business, you play it alone." I pushed past her and went out to my car. I sat there gripping my hands on the wheel until the cold numbness had left them, and then I drove home—alone.

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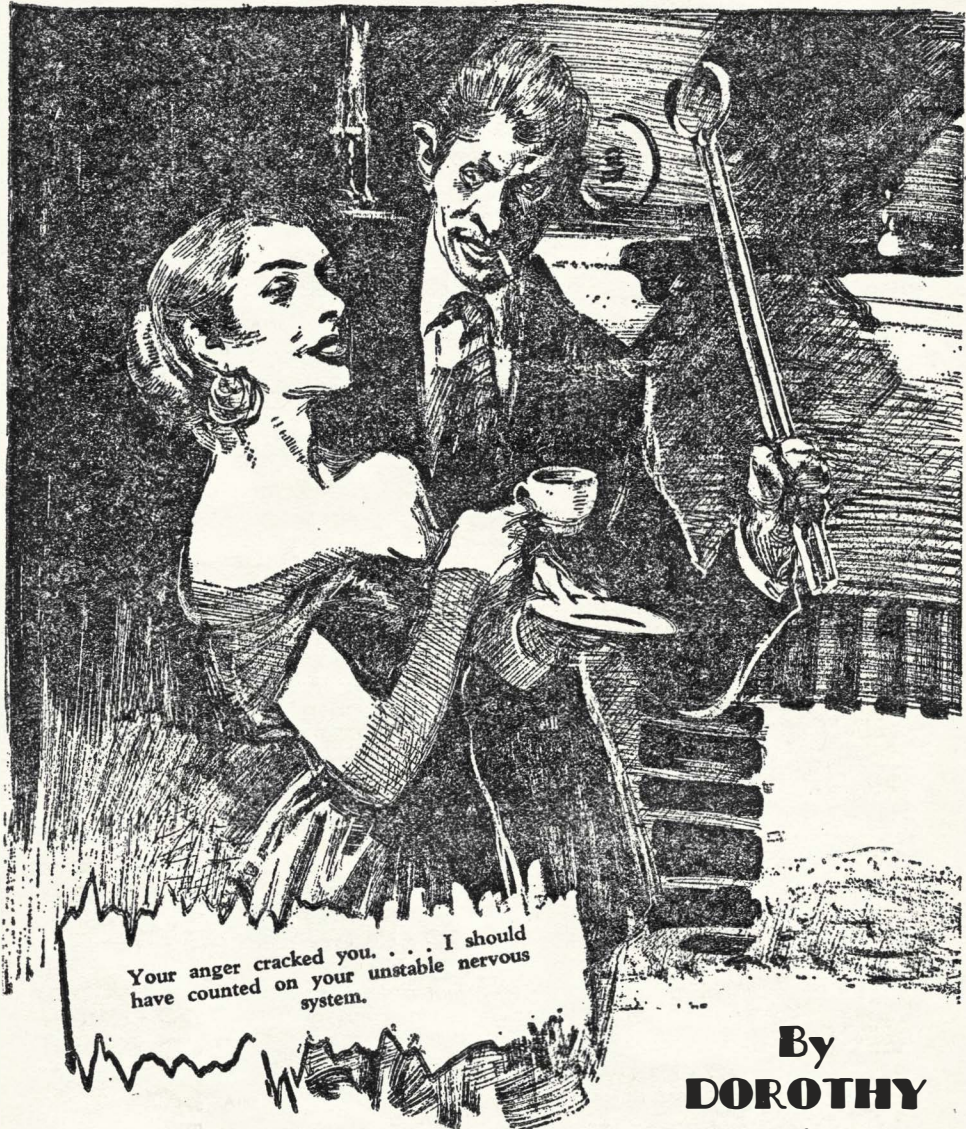


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OBLIVION FOR ME



By
**DOROTHY
DUNN**

Low man in the human scrap heap was Hollis Dorsey—who couldn't remember murdering his favorite gal.

I DON'T suppose, really, that one can ever look back and say: "It was this incident in my life, this moment that drove me to madness. I know exactly when I lost my mind."

But other people can usually tell you just how it was. They can point smugly

to the last overt acts of a rational being. Then they can go on from there, telling how it happened. I don't know just when it was that I went crazy, but they seem to know. I heard them telling it.

"It happened right before our eyes in Myra Slade's pleasant sitting room. Four of us saw it happen, saw the brilliant mind of Hollis Dorsey break into as many pieces as the china tea cup he dropped.

"We saw him turn from an intelligent writer into a maniac. He must have been a maniac to turn against the one person he had no reason for killing. Poor Myra! She was always so devoted to Hollis, so good to him!"

On the stroke of five I dropped the tea cup I'd been balancing and it shattered against the hearth of the gas-log fireplace she never used. I remember the silence of the group as they suspended their talk to watch my face, and I remember the bongos of the clock that filled in that silence.

I remember part of it the way the witnesses described it—but I know there must be more. At five o'clock, the tea cup was in pieces on the hearth. At five-thirty, Myra was crumpled beside it, her blood mixing with the tea leaves.

There has to be more than that, but it's buried in that thirty minutes of my lost memory—as deep as Myra. I've tried so hard to find it, but the block is too big for me to remove and the sepulchre remains closed.

Ever since they brought me here to this gloomy place that is all whiteness and tin, that is sheeted and sanitary, that smells of lost human powers, I have been trying to remember. I've tried it by lying for hours on the stiff iron bed with my eyes open and staring at the ceiling. I've tried it with eyes clamped shut at night. I've tried it by butting my head against the walls.

Now they have moved me to a room that is padded, so I can't hurt my head. They don't know that my head hurts all the time anyway, that it hurts because I can't remember.

I suppose I killed Myra Slade. The four people who said I killed her were all good friends of mine and wouldn't lie about a thing like that. Sudden madness was the only reason they could give, and I can offer no other because I can't remember. If I had to choose the one person I'd never

want to hurt, it would have been Myra.

I know everything that happened to me before that thirty minutes, and I know everything that has happened to me since. But I can't fill the most important gap of all. Why did I do it? I've always needed Myra and I need her more than ever now.

Not only was she devoted to me; she had a brilliant, analytical mind. I'm sure, if she were here, she could explain what happened to me that afternoon at five o'clock.

I wonder if I am as insane as the doctors say? Certainly, the experiment I'm going to make tonight is the action of a madman, but I'm doing it as a last resort. It will be my final appeal to memory, the superstitious appeal of desperation. I'm doing it, not because I believe in such things myself, but because Myra believed in them.

Once, when I was stuck with the plot of *"The Wind Cries,"* Myra had said: "Why don't you try automatic writing, Hollis?" She explained how to do it, how to relax completely and let the hand move, impelled by some hidden force.

I laughed and reminded her that I was a professional writer. "If I can't bring the story off, with all my experience, how can you expect a mere spirit to work it out?"

"Don't underestimate the spirits, Hollis. You could use a little of the perception that comes when a person moves completely out of his own ego."

"Maybe so, but you can keep your ouija boards and automatic writing. I'll stick to the typewriter when it comes to making a living by words."

I wasn't interested then. But I am now. Myra is the only person who knows me well enough to know why I killed her.

They gave me a pad of paper and a pencil, and, because I was once a writer, I feel better with the pencil in my hands. But I mustn't use too much of the paper.

I must sit here relaxing as Myra told me how. I must make my mind a blank. I must remain mentally asleep, yet keep my body awake enough to transcribe the words that will come from Myra. I must let her move my hand and talk through me, for she can't talk any other way, being dead and buried and forever silent.

Why did I kill you, Myra? Why? What

happened to me at your house that Sunday afternoon? Tell me, Myra! Tell me in your own words.

I am relaxed now, Myra. It's strange. My fingers are moving and it's as though my mind were melting into yours, as though I could hear your voice saying things. Don't speak too fast, Myra. I want to get it down just the way you tell it. . . .

YOU never knew that I hated you, did you, Hollis? All those years that our names were linked together, that our lives became more closely intertwined, were not the years you thought them. Hollis Dorsey and his devoted girl, Myra Slade! That's what the whole town thought and you believed the legend yourself, didn't you?

Your first girl in high school. That's how far back you have to remember, you know. You have to remember my love before you can understand my hate. But those are the years that you've tried to block out of your sensitive mind.

It isn't pleasant to think of that day in history class, is it? But you'll have to think of it if you want to know why you killed me. You threw your arms over your head and pitched out of your seat. I saw your eyes as you went down, Hollis, and they were crossed. You didn't twitch for very long and the teacher held the ruler against your tongue for only about five minutes. A very mild attack, but I loved you then and suffered for days afterward, thinking of you as a boy who was brilliant, but also very ill.

You weren't sure what happened, were you? A faint. You didn't remember and you didn't feel too ill when you woke up. For some reason, even the most thoughtless student protected you from embarrassment afterward. There was something special about your appearance when you were eighteen, Hollis. Your classic features had a sort of sweet, spiritual cast that set you apart. The word "fit" didn't match anything about you. "Mild convulsion" was the term used behind your back.

I knew you took pills after that to keep your nerves quiet and that you never felt depressed by your illness. But I appointed myself right then to be the one to look after you. I got a book from the library

and read up on the disease I thought you had, just so I would know what to do for you if you ever toppled over when we were alone.

The book said certain forms are sometimes outgrown. Did you outgrow it? You never had another seizure, nor did you ever refer to any attacks. But I didn't forget the first one. I was young, very much in love, and thought of myself as your faithful, devoted watcher forever. What did I care about other boys? I was all wrapped up in ideals. I wanted to sacrifice myself for you.

I don't believe you returned my love during those early years. They say that girls mature first. You just accepted my worship and took advantage of my tendency to spoil you and always let you have your own way. I enjoyed doing little things for you in the beginning because I loved you so much. But when you started going out with other girls, I realized how foolish I had been.

The wild jealousy of my youth didn't last too long. I was too practical for that. I took things into my own hands.

Janet was your first dream girl, remember? You never knew why she stopped dating you so suddenly, did you? But you came back to me for sympathy and understanding. You were mine again, our names together again because I had told Janet what might happen while you were driving a car or dancing with her. Janet was a weak, silly girl. I'll admit I exaggerated your symptoms a little, but she scared off easily.

It was a little more difficult for me to get rid of Ethel. I did my talking there through her mother. You just didn't have any luck getting girls to stay in love with you, did you? I think you worried about it and asked me to marry you out of pique.

I refused, remember? I had to. My dreams hadn't started that way. Ever since that day in history class, I'd thought of you as a man who couldn't ever marry and my girlish vows had been so intense that they left a mark. I didn't want to marry you, but I didn't want anyone else to have you. We drifted along.

Several years later I stopped loving you, but it didn't matter. I began building up the legend of our great friendship right then. And somewhere along the line I de-

cided that I would enjoy directing your career.

You wanted to write and I encouraged you. I learned to type so that I could help you with the scripts. But, actually, I wasn't interested in your work. I wanted to keep you around.

Hollis, you'd be surprised how many times you changed your own ideas and followed mine. I knew your weaknesses by this time. I knew you better than you knew yourself.

Writing is lonely work, isn't it? I started giving the Sunday afternoon teas so you would meet new people through me. I didn't want you to get restless and go off making contacts of your own.

Finally, the teas got built into the legend. You had been at my house to work. We had done a good stint together. Myra and Hollie, a team. He's lucky to have such a devoted friend who is so interested in his work! *That's* what everyone thought.

Then you met Eleanor. I couldn't watch you every minute. You picked her up, heaven knows where, and began bringing her to the teas. By this time you were old enough to be very seriously in love and Eleanor was too wise to be scared off by anything I could tell her about your boyhood attacks. And she was so beautiful!

You had built up a reputation of sorts as a writer by this time, but you began to neglect your work on the new novel. The only thing you could think about was Eleanor.

OUR time together wasn't important to you any longer. Our years of friendship and my years of devotion didn't

mean a thing. I was thirty-five, Hollis. My life was centered in yours—and I was thirty-five. A woman would understand that, but you wouldn't. And a woman might also understand the intensity of my hate at this point.

Eleanor filled me with a new jealousy that was stronger than any I'd ever known. That's strange, isn't it? I was more jealous through my hate for you than I had been years ago through my love for you. I couldn't stand the thought of the happiness you would have with Eleanor, because you would have a life of your own and I wouldn't.

And you were so naive, so oblivious to my feelings! You even asked me to give a special tea for a few of our intimate friends so that the engagement could be announced. You were making great plans and you were callous enough to talk them over with me, to use me as a perpetual sounding board. You expected me to be delighted over your delight. I must have played my part well all those years!

I have to laugh when I think of that Sunday afternoon. I outdid myself as the charming hostess. Eleanor and I had a heart-warming talk in the bedroom when she arrived. She admired me so much, she said. The brilliant Myra Slade who draws such charming fashion illustrations and still has time to be secretary to the great Hollis Dorsey! And I played the piano like a professional, she said. You're so talented, Myra! Poor little me can't do anything unusual, she said.

No, I thought, you can't do anything except charm the only man I have in my life! Eleanor couldn't do anything except love

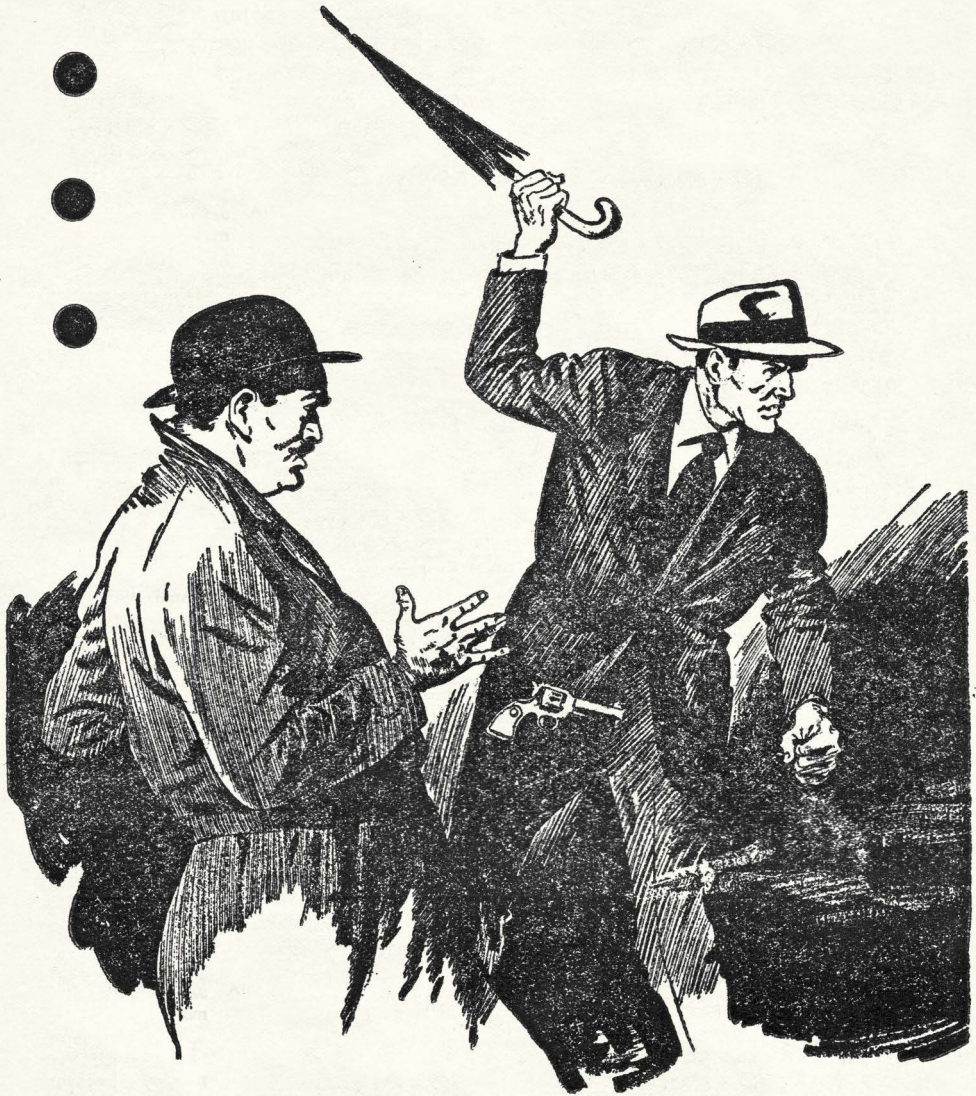
(Please continue on page 93)

NO LUCK? - make a date with

**WILDROOT
CREAM
OIL**



Thrilling Headliner Files Novelette
By FREDERICK C. DAVIS



While Ardelle's blonde rival swore to undo the strutter's stuff, and leave her draping a cold slab . . . ex-sleuth Thackeray Hackett hounded the hot spot—to pick up the remains.

The MERRY QUEEN OF MURDER

He was squeezing the
trigger again. . . .



CHAPTER ONE

Clothed in Fear

THE lights dimmed inside the Casbah Club. An expectant hush settled in the blue gloom, and my ringside table became one of the choicest locations on East Fifty-Second Street.

Ardelle Gaye, "stripper supreme," as her publicity agent tagged her, was about to do her stuff.

I was present strictly in the line of duty, accompanied by a conscientious co-worker named Thackeray Hackett. We were doing a little routine field work, on the cuff, for Headliner Files, Incorporated. Since our organization is a unique news service specializing in information concerning famous figures, it was entirely natural that we should turn our attention to the bistro which was currently featuring Ardelle. No figure was more famous than hers, or more familiar to the public.

Thackeray Hackett and I applied ourselves diligently to our work with our eyes wide open as a dazzling spot of light played on scarlet curtains. With an expert flick of the draperies, Ardelle Gaye appeared. A gray-eyed redhead of the fire-alarm type, she wore a sweet smile and a glittering white evening gown.

She sparkled forward to a mike and, with the muted accompaniment of the orchestra, began to sing softly, lazily. Meanwhile a small bed materialized behind her, complete with snowy pillow and blanket invitingly turned down. At the end of the second chorus, Ardelle yawned prettily, stretched her lovely self.

Entranced, every male in the place watched Ardelle doing something which every woman in the world did every night of her life, but which nobody else did quite so artistically as Ardelle Gaye was doing it now. Her technique was a revelation. Done in a slowly fading glow, it was something to dream about.

At the sudden blackout, the applause was riotous—but fruitless. When the brighter lights came up, the prop bed was gone and Ardelle, alas, with it. The orchestra tinkled for general dancing and waiters resumed their endless treks to and from the bar.

"I feel we have had a well-spent evening here, Thack," I said to my bemused companion. "I can't think of any more work we ought to take care of tonight, except possibly to go over to the Vanity Puff, where Thyra Laine does much the same thing. If we hurry we can catch her."

The voice that answered was not Thackeray Hackett's, but a woman's. Soft. Ap-

pealing. "Mr. Preston, ple-ase." A murmur in my ear. "I need all your help, honey."

Sinking back, of course, I found that the young woman had appeared in the chair between Hackett's and mine. Her make-up was thick enough to have been applied with a trowel. Her hair was an orange-tinted tangle, slightly wild. I'd never seen her before, so far as I could recall. She was a type I could never go for.

"Pres," Hackett said, gazing across at me with cynical glints in his baby-blue eyes, "aren't you going to say hello to Ruby Lesnau?"

I said hello to Ruby Lasnau in a perfunctory way, the name being utterly strange to me. I didn't want Ruby Lesnau, whoever she was, to hold me up from crossing the street and seeing Thyra Laine shed her rosebuds. I was wondering parenthetically how-come Hackett knew this unattractive frill—when he added a few words of explanation.

"Ruby Lesnau is the name she was born with, as I recall it from our files, Pres. Her professional name is Ardelle Gaye."

I felt my neck heating up and my ears giving off a cheery red glow. Ardelle Gaye! The same Ardelle Gaye, of course, whom I had just seen, not ten feet away, doing her heart-stopping act. I'd watched her intently for ten solid minutes. Yet here she was, sitting at my elbow now, and I hadn't even recognized her. Well, after all, I could see just her face right now.

"Don't look so embarrassed, honey," she reassured me quickly, one hand holding the throat of the satin robe she'd thrown across her shoulders. "It happens all the time, honest. It isn't my face that's my fortune. Look, Mr. Preston, honey, I remember you from the cocktail party I threw for the press last month, and I know you're the business manager of Headliner Files, and honest, honey, I've just got to see you."

"You've got to see me?" I said incredulously.

"To talk to you about something mighty important," she added quickly. "Honest, Mr. Preston, I do need your help—because, honey, I'm *scared*."

I COULD see it now, even under her stage make-up—a lurking fear. She kept glancing about with her widened gray eyes, as if afraid someone might be looking at her—this babe who made a career of parading her charms before all comers. Her scarlet-nailed hands kept plucking at her robe. Poised on the edge of her chair, she seemed ready to fly off in sudden fright at any instant. I marveled that she'd been able to conceal her agitation during her number, for unquestionably it was real and deep.

Stripes, by the very nature of their work, I had observed, unavoidably exposed themselves to more misadventures than women whose careers required more clothes. Six months or so, for example, Ardelle Gaye had figured prominently in a scandalous criminal case, and I wondered if her anxieties tonight had any connection with it.

Every paper in New York had gone to town on this glamorous story of high-class mischief. A Wall Street hot-shot named Redford Murton, treasurer of Browwell & Murchison, a major brokerage house, was found to have absconded to the tune of two hundred-odd grand. After dipping into the till for years, Murton had scrambled on the eve of this discovery and had managed to stay missing since. A considerable part of his swag, though by no means all of it, had been squandered on Broadway night life. Here is where Ardelle Gaye came in, photogenically giving the story a front-page zing.

With a wife and two kids in a Gramercy Square house, Murton had secretly kept a snug apartment for himself in a building owned by Ardelle Gaye—a business wom-

an who could hold onto her bucks. Despite the innuendos of the gossip columnists, Miss Gaye had indignantly protested that there was nothing between Murton and herself, except indirectly the lease.

"Mr. Murton always conducted himself as a perfect gentleman," she had asserted for publication, "and although he saw a lot of me, it was always in a crowd. He didn't really know me well enough to buy me so much as one little mink."

However, the unfortunate affair had blown over. The papers didn't mention this one any more, although they had recently dwelt on other troubles embroiling Ardelle Gaye. I recalled no details off-hand, but I felt sure we had them filed. The fright shining in Miss Gaye's gray eyes now proved that the simple act of keeping in the public limelight could sometimes lead to ticklish complications.

"Come into my dressing room for a few minutes, Mr. Preston," she urged, "and let me put you next to it, honey, hmmm?"

I said, trying not to say it too quickly, "I think it can be arranged, Miss Gaye."

She added, "You, too, of course, Mr. Hackett, honey." Rising, she searched again with her fear-brightened eyes through the smoky air. "Ple-ase, right now, before it's—too late."

As she rustled away in her long satin robe, I noticed for the first time the tuxedoed giant who had been standing quietly behind her chair all the while. He could be only one thing, the joint's bouncer. His cherubic countenance belied the power of his shoulders, which looked as if he were wearing football pads under his coat. He gave us a chummy grin—a genial grimace which he would probably



continue to wear while braining an obstreperous customer—and trailed off, guarding Miss Gaye as she headed for an obscure doorway deep in the rear of the big room.

I said, "However, a young woman of her occupation need never lack someone to watch over her. Well, Thack, what are we dawdling here for?"

My gaze was hurrying after Ardelle. But not Hackett's. His, as hers had, was hunting for something dreadful in the misty far corners.

"A guy over there by the door," Hackett said softly. "Mean-looking specimen who didn't check his hat."

Reluctantly I turned my attention from Ardelle, who just then whisked from sight, to the customer Hackett had spotted. Mean-looking, yes. His face was a hard square in which his eyes and mouth were dark ominous lines. He looked like something Dr. Frankenstein had put together on order from Hollywood's horror department. He was also gazing after Ardelle Gaye; and now that she had disappeared rearward he turned his broad, flat back and headed out the front—with, I felt, purposes not to be trusted.

I eyed my friend Thackeray Hackett, the ex-private detective who had been stripped of his license and reduced to working for Headliner Files for mere peanuts.

"Keep yourself under control, Thack. Whatever it is Miss Gaye wants from us, it will probably be outside our field to help her, and I will be obliged to express my regrets. All the same, of course, we oughtn't to lose any time finding out what possibly could have gotten under her lovely skin."

Hackett followed me with backward glance in the direction Square Face had gone. Thackeray Hackett was lightly carrying the slender cane which he is never without. His cynically thoughtful manner made me uneasy. As an investigator possessing a high degree of skill which he was legally prevented from exercising, he was like a starving man scenting a chicken grilling on a spit. Since he was a tough lad to handle under the best of circumstances, as previous experiences had taught me to my grief, I knew I would not only need to keep one pleased

eye on our perturbed Ardelle, but also I must watch Hackett, less happily and as sharply as a hawk.

THE genial gorilla was waiting for us at the curtained doorway beside the band's dais. Without a word he escorted us along a narrow hall and up winding iron stairs. He knocked on a door. It was opened at once, not by Ardelle Gaye, but by a thin, tired-eyed, half-bald, disillusioned-looking little man who blinked at us as he sidled out, sniffed once and passed on.

"Good night, Stoffie, dear," Ardelle's voice called affectionately from inside. Then she opened the door wider, saying anxiously, "Come in, honeys."

We stepped into the cubicle where a full-length mirror was framed in glaring bulbs and the air reeked of scented cosmetics. It was comfortable in a frilly way, and crowded. Many photos of handsome men and other stage stars were tacked on the walls, and on hooks hung the garments which comprised Miss Gaye's costume.

That peculiar character Hackett, however, was more interested in a detail which wasn't even here any more. He poked a thumb over his shoulder and inquired, "Who's Stoffie-dear?"

"Oh, him? Just my dresser," Miss Gaye answered, and while we gazed at her, baffled but thoughtful, she held her robe snugly about her and slid the bolt into its socket.

It was the first time I'd ever had a strip-teaser lock me inside her dressing room. Unfortunately the experience included Hackett. Also, I couldn't forget the ham-shouldered guard just outside the door, who prevented the moment from being all it might have been. Ardelle Gaye, besides, was in a mood for nothing except staying scared.

"Honest, honeys," she said tensely, "the only time I feel really safe is when I'm out there in front of all those people. Times like now— Well, you make it okay, honeys, but believe me, I'm not kidding, it's practically a matter of life and death."

"Does somebody think you know where the booty's buried?" Hackett inquired, straight-faced. As Ardelle blinked her long lashes at him, he explained, "Mean-

ing Murton's booty—the bag of swag the cops are still hunting for.”

“Oh, no, it's got nothing to do with Mr. Murton, honey, and besides I hardly knew him, honest,” Ardelle answered quickly. “No, that jealous cat of a Thyra Laine is out to ruin me, that's what it is.”

“You mean this rivalry between you and Thyra isn't merely a press-agent's stunt?” Hackett asked.

Ardelle looked at him hard and with an angry gesture pulled all the lashes off her left eyelid, then off her right. Tossing her false eyelashes to her dressing table, she next snatched up a towel and passed it across her face. Gobs of artificial complexion came off with it, and with each new swipe she grew naturally prettier.

“Honey, Thyra's fighting me for keeps. She tears her hair on account of the customers line up farther to pay bigger dough to see me. She's tried everything—fans, bubbles, doves and now rosebuds, and still I outdraw her. I tell you, honeys, she's desperate.”

I reassured her, “Just keep in form, and how can you lose?”

Ardelle narrowed her eyes in bitter spite—not at me, but at the mere thought of Thyra Laine's unsportsmanlike rivalry.

“That's just it. She's trying to get me where it will show. I'd look fine, wouldn't I, with big, thick bandages?”

Hackett lifted his eyebrows. “Has she actually tried to mar your flawless surface?”

“Has she!” Ardelle whammed the towel into a corner. “And in what cheap, sneaking way, honey. I get set to take a bath, see—girls in my profession have to take lots of baths, honey—and what do I find in my tub? Broken glass! How did all the broken glass get into my bathtub right there in my own apartment in my own building? If you want to get to the bottom of it, ask Laine.

“It's murderous, what Laine's trying to do to me, and I'm not kidding. Once it was a chemical on my towel so that when I began drying myself I started turning bright blue in splotches. That would've looked novel too. Boy, I almost had to scrub my hide off to get rid of it in time for the next show. And now, tonight, Laine starts hitting her husband for a divorce and naming me in the suit.”

It was a fascinating thought, a guy two-timing one stripper for another.

“I swear to heaven I hardly know this guy Nick Dixon by sight,” Ardelle asserted solemnly. “Nick Dixon, the songwriter, that's Laine's husband. I never even shook hands with him. And not only is she going to accuse me of all that dirt in court—she's really gunning for me. I got it straight from mutual friends, she's sworn to kill me. Even that poor guy Dixon phoned just before the show to warn me to stay out of Laine's reach unless I want to get dead fast. And honey, it doesn't appeal to me much, winding up playing a free benefit to a crowd in a funeral parlor.”

Ardelle nipped at a thumbnail as we gazed at her. There was no doubting for a moment that she was really shaken up.

“Headliner Files is eager to help you if we can, Miss Gaye,” Hackett said politely. “Just what is it we can do for you?”

“Clam up about where I'm holing in, honey, that's what you can do!” Ardelle said earnestly.

“You mean you want us to withhold your address in case any of our subscribers inquires for it?” I put in. “The idea being to keep Thyra Laine from dropping in on you in a dangerous mood?”

“Listen,” Ardelle said. “My apartment where I've been living isn't going to see me again until things get to looking lots less murderous. I'm not even going back there tonight. From now on nobody's going to see me except in the one place I've got to show, on account of my contract—out there on that stage. Otherwise I'm going to stay strictly under wraps in a new place, and I don't want a soul to know about it. On account of if it gets noised around—it could mean I've been in the spotlight for the last time.”

“That would indeed be a pity,” I said. “Miss Gaye, we'll be most happy to co-operate and to do all we can to perpetuate your art.”

“I mean, don't even try to find out where I am between shows,” she emphasized it earnestly; “and if you happen to find out some way, don't let on you know from nothing. Because if you let it leak—you're going to be to blame for a dead

stripper. She looked at me tearfully.

"We'll never permit it," I promised her. "You can count on us."

"Gee, thanks," she said in a long sigh. "Gosh, that's a load off my mind, sweethearts. Honest, I don't know what I'd be doing right now without you honeys."

I was really sorry that this request, simple as it was, must end the interview. Unfortunately, there was nothing left to do but bid Ardelle Gaye a reluctant good night.

We left the dressing room. The angelic bruiser accompanied us down to a side door and we stepped out on a street illuminated dimly by a mixed neon glow. Hackett's hand gripped my arm.

"Easy, Pres," he warned in a murmur. "Don't show too much interest in the doorway on our left, just ahead, but keep an eye on it. Somebody just faded back in there. More trouble probably waiting for our Ardelle."

CHAPTER TWO

Dangerous Brush-Off

STROLLING at Hackett's side toward Fifth Avenue through the rainbow-tinted gloom, I spotted the shadow lurking in the doorway. From the depths of the darkness there someone was watching us. The street was so deserted and the hour so small, that I felt vulnerable to the ominous stare of those hidden eyes. They were intense, hostile.

Hackett, however, appeared to be completely unconcerned. He continued idly swinging his slender cane as if he hadn't a care in the world—even after the shadow slipped out of the doorway to drift after us.

Trouble waiting for Ardelle, Hackett had said. It wasn't hanging around for her any more. It was now coming after us instead.

Tense-nerved, and sticking close at Hackett's side, I reflected that this sort of thing wasn't in the contract as part of my job with Headliner Files, Incorporated.

I already had a tough enough assignment to keep our office efficiently organized for the purpose of serving up our special brand of information concerning

celebrities or, under some circumstances—like Ardelle's—withholding it. In such cases as that of a celebrity who is seriously ill, or of a movie star taking the cure, we are angels of mercy protecting him from disturbances. In the great majority of instances, however, we strive night and day to keep the world up-to-the-minute about renowned characters of all varieties.

But my duties do not include being trailed by mysterious characters in the still hours of the morning. Unlike Hackett, I'd had no experience in grappling with such dangerous problems. I kept glancing at him, anxious for him to cue me, but he just ambled along, casually swinging that little cane of his. All the while that dark ghost continued trailing us, even creeping closer.

It was ridiculous, feeling menaced right there on the fringe of Radio City, with the RCA building rearing overhead—and chilling to think that I wouldn't have been aware of that phantom behind us except for Hackett's alert perception.

Hackett touched my arm. Abruptly he about-faced. I imitated him, and together we started back. Our shadow found himself walking straight toward us, in full sight. Caught by our surprise move, there was nothing he could do but to pretend innocence and keep on coming. He was a short, broad silhouette against the neon signs.

We bore directly down on him until a collision seemed imminent. Then, as Hackett nudged me again, we parted and thereby forced him to pass between us. By this time he was confused and jittery. He spun about as if expecting to get black-jacked from the rear. That move signaled Hackett's cane into action.

Hackett's little hickory stick went flick-flick with a snakelike hiss. The next instant, our man had recoiled against an iron fence with its sharp tip gently pressed against his Adam's apple.

Square Face. The guy Hackett had spotted spotting Ardelle inside the Casbah Club. Still inscrutable, he pressed his flat back against the fence and fixed his black slitted eyes on Hackett in a cold, selfless sort of intensity which made me feel with a chill that he was no stranger to death.

For a moment, with the point of Hack-

ett's little walking stick resting against his throat, Square Face held himself tightly still. It was the smartest thing he could have done. Wisely confining himself to words, he said brusquely, "Take a tip, Bud—lay off me," scarcely moving his lips.

Hackett stood equally still, his baby blue eyes glittering. "It annoys me to be trailed around after midnight by a guy whose name and address I don't know," he said softly. "Give out with it, please."

The plug-ugly said, still mask-faced, "I got something for you, Bud. A little surprise. A special brand of trouble. One you're not figuring on, maybe. A few more seconds of this and I'll start unwrapping it. Want to see, Bud?"

"Let me know when my time's up, Bud," Hackett said evenly.

It was then that Square Face showed he didn't fully appreciate the potentialities of Hackett's little hickory stick, after all.

He reached up with his left hand and batted the cane aside. Simultaneously his right hand darted inside his coat. It reappeared instantly and blue gunmetal glimmered.

Already Square Face had my sincere sympathies. What was about to happen to him shouldn't happen to anybody.

It began with Hackett stepping back with cane lifted to a horizontal position, forehead high. Next the cane turned into a sort of blur. This was because Hackett was spinning it overhead so swiftly as to render it almost invisible in the gloom, a preliminary move called the moulinet. Then, while the gun was still turning on him, he brought it down in a sizzling swipe.

Instantly an uncanny force seized upon Square Face's weapon. It was snatched out of his fist and sent spinning in a sparkling arc to the pavement.

SQUARE FACE was obviously a guy who learned the hard way. As mistakes go, his next move was even worse. With a snarl of rage he dove for his lost gun, and I reflected with a shudder that very soon now he would become unable to recognize himself.

Hackett's cane whirled, flicked again and slapped resoundingly against the side of the gunman's square head. He bounced at an angle, as if he had caromed off a

brick wall, and sprawled out of reach of the revolver. Huddled there, he lifted his face as if wondering how many of Radio City's buildings had toppled on him. Even in that moment of pain, his face remained inhumanly impassive, while he said in a low snarl, "You'll pay plenty for this, Bud. I'm ringing you in."

As Square Face dragged himself up, Hackett stood with cane lifted and ready—but, for some reason that escaped me, Hackett chose not to slash out again. Square Face's head turned and Hackett's eyes lifted.

A movement down the block had hooked their attention. It was not an unusually diverting sight—a slender ankle and spike-heeled shoe disappearing inside a taxi—but the taxi had stopped at the private side entrance of the Casbah Club, and the significance of this was enough to halt hostilities.

The taxi veered off, accelerating to pass us. Square Face, seeming to forget his lost gun and Hackett too, threw himself into a crazy wavering run; and Hackett, to my astonishment, let him go. While the strange gunman was still legging it down the block, the taxi flashed past us. Inside it I glimpsed a ghostly, frightened face that could be Ardelle Gaye's.

She fluttered a hand at her driver, fearfully urging him to drive faster, then peered back. She wheeled into Fifth Avenue at the corner just as Square Face ducked into a private car that had been standing parked near the Casbah in defiance of police regulations.

At the wheel, Square Face propelled his black sedan after Ardelle, jumping a red light in his reckless haste. I looked around quickly for another taxi, but, of course, found none. Then stepping into the street I managed to catch a clear glimpse of Square Face's license plate just before it disappeared. I felt certain I had the number straight in my mind and went back to frown at Hackett.

"You surprised me, Thack," I said. "Why did you let that zombi go? Shouldn't you have knocked a few details out of him first, at least for Ardelle's sake? As it is we don't know who he may be or what's cooking in that gungel's mind of his."

Hackett shrugged. "How tough should

I get with a guy for walking in the same direction as us, Pres?" he inquired. "And if Ardelle has aroused a lingering interest in a spectator, is that surprising?"

My frown turned darker. These unanswerable questions were Hackett's way of saying nothing. This unpredictable character had an exasperating trick of turning close-mouthed just when he seemed to have snaffled something important. Hackett's thoughtful air at the moment, however, did seem for him unnaturally uneasy as if he were anxiously uncertain about the thing he'd discovered.

Since he felt inclined to clam up on me, I decided to waste no breath on him. I might lack his training as an investigator. But even so, I thought I knew a way of applying Ardelle's technique to this affair and getting the wraps off it fast.

"Wait here, Thack," I said briefly, turned and climbed the steps of Twenty-two. Hackett remained on the sidewalk, as if to keep watch. It was well he didn't try to enter this classy bistro, for with his threadbare cuffs and run-down heels, the doorman would have probably barred him.

I was flattered by being called by name, and in a moment I had a phone in my hand from which I was calling the number of police headquarters.

When an operator down there on Centre Street answered, I asked for the Bureau of Criminal Identification. I asked for Johnny Brigg, a friend of mine. Next I said, "Give a quick tip, Johnny, like a good guy, and tell me whose number I have here." Then I repeated to him the numerals I had snatched off Square Face's speeding heap.

"Better go easy on that one, Pres," Johnny answered, without even taking time to look it up. "It's one of ours. That car is registered in the name of the Detective Bureau, Police Department, New York City. Anything else you'd like to know, Pres?"

"Thank you, no," I mumbled. "That's more than plenty."

I hustled back out to the sidewalk then, carrying a warning to my cane-swinging pal; but he wasn't where I'd left him. Thackeray Hackett, stick and all—and including Square Face's abandoned gun—had vanished.

CHAPTER THREE

Here Comes Homicide

I HEADED urgently across town to the neat little building, hard by a hot spot that houses Headliner Files. Even at this unholy hour the place wasn't entirely dark. A sleepy gleam shone through the lowered venetian blinds. Someone must stay on duty here twenty-four hours a day, including Sundays, in case a subscriber should develop a desperate midnight need to know whether it's true that a sultry siren chews gum. This time it was the so-called business manager of Headliner Files who wanted to know something—where Hackett had gone. I hoped to find him here.

Using my key, I eased through our classy reception room and into the main file section where green metal cabinets stand row on row, all packed with personal details concerning the world's great. By day the place is filled with a refined sort of frenzy, with telephones trilling incessantly and pretty file clerks tripping over one another as they delve into our treasury of stardust.

Tonight it was silent and deserted, except for a girl snoozing in a chair with her nylon feet hoisted to the edge of a desk. She was Polly Digby, our capable secretary-general, whose turn it was to hold down the graveyard watch.

Not disturbing her, I looked into both washrooms, into my own cubicle, then into the frilly front office of Clarabelle Brown, originator and sole owner of Headliner Files—all without finding Hackett.

This was serious. Headliner Files' only responsibility in this situation was to keep Ardelle Gaye's new whereabouts confidential, which was an easy thing to do because we didn't know where she meant to hole in anyway. Hackett, however, wasn't satisfied to let it go at that. He had plainly enough yielded to a risky temptation to mix into the Gaye affair more deeply than we had any business to do.

He was inviting trouble. As the guardian of Headliner Files' reputation, I was naturally anxious to avoid a front-page scandal. It would not enhance our dignity to get caught in the middle of the

Gaye-Laine clothes-pulling fracas. I would find it a highly diverting position personally, but for sound business reasons I had to blow a whistle on Hackett fast.

To stop him, I first had to find him. Where could I get my hands on Hackett?

I couldn't blame Ardelle for wanting to get out of the sight of Square Face, particularly since he was so lacking in the finer sensibilities as to steal and operate a police department car. Ardelle had evidently been heading for her new hide-out when this hired gunman had raced off after her. Hackett had been left in their dust. But as he naturally felt a sense of protection for Ardelle, it was logical to reason that he had hit the trail after her.

A good way to find Hackett, then, would be to dope out Ardelle's hiding place.

While Polly still slumbered, I dug into a file cabinet for Ardelle's folder. Skipping all the biographical data, but tarrying a moment over a few choice photos of Ardelle in action, I began by calling her phone number. Expecting no answer at all, or possibly a few yawns from a maid, I was surprised to get an immediate response in an unusually deep, resonant male voice.

"Ardie didn't come home tonight," it boomed. "Not expectin' her back for days." Recalling Square Face, I could believe that. "You wanta see Ardie, brother, buy yourself a scotch at the Casbah. It's cheap at the price."

"You're telling me?" I took a shot at asking, "Are you by any chance Nick Dixon?"

"Who, me? Nick Dixon? You kid-

din'?" Then this character rudely hung up on me.

This left me just where I had expected to arrive—nowhere. The information in Ardelle's folder told me I had called an apartment on Central Park West. Our list of Ardelle's real estate holdings, all apartment buildings, included that address, another at East Fifty-Fifth Street, and others in Greenwich, Stamford and Newark.

It occurred to me that Ardelle might feel safest when closeted in a building she owned herself. If so, those in Connecticut and New Jersey would mean too much dangerous traveling to and from the Casbah Club. This left the building on East Fifty-Fifth as the most logical and the handiest. Hackett, I felt, would also reason in this direction and I might possibly find him somewhere around there now, casing the joint.

Polly was still slumbering, nylon toes in the air, when I eased out. A brisk walk eastward in the early morning glow soon brought me within sight of Ardelle's property. It stood on the edge of one of the choicest addresses in all Manhattan, a solid block of white stone. I reflected that Ardelle, simply by parading what Nature had lovingly provided in her special way for a comparatively few years, had done better for herself that I would do for myself in a lifetime of beating my brains out.

I peered all around. If Hackett was anywhere in the neighborhood, his presence escaped me. Neither was there any sign of the strange gunman. Not a single light shone in any of the classy casement windows at this deathly hour; but I heard the faint swish-swish of a broom.



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THE sound led me to a small, ordinary door at one corner of the building, a service entrance. The broom was swinging on the cement floor just inside, in the hands of a stocky man wearing a cheap cloth cap and an aspirator—a small dust-filter resembling a gas mask, which gave him a Martian look.

"You the janitor?" I said. "Have you noticed a young guy around here who carries a cane?"

The janitor blinked at me, pulled the black rubber nose-piece down around his chin, fished up a pair of horn-rim glasses, put them on and blinked at me again. All this done, he got around to answering.

"Ah, yah," and he nodded genially. "Yah, in dis builting, t'ree-four gentlemen, t'ey carry canes, yah."

Immediately I had the feeling that to try to straighten him out on this would only get the whole thing mixed up worse. Taking a new tack, one he was sure to understand more easily, I said, "I have an urgent, personal message for Miss Ardelle Gaye."

He shook his head and this time fished up a big-bowled black pipe, which he evidently needed to point with. "Nah, Miss Gaye, she not live here. The odder one, yah?" he poked the pipe in the general direction of Central Park West.

"Not tonight, brother," I insisted. "Tonight she's here, tucked away in that little special apartment she keeps vacant for herself. I know all about it, brother."

"Ah, nah," the janitor said obdurately. "Vacancies, nah. We haf here no vacancies in four-fife year. Full up, yah."

He stuffed the pipe away, took off his glasses, stowed them also, then fastened the aspirator back on his face. With his broom going swish-swish again, I decided I'd better try to get along without him. I'd been a little slow in getting here anyway. By this time Square Face, with Hackett dogging him, must have moved on. As to where, I would make a fairly good guess.

In a corner of the classy maroon-and-gold foyer, I found a built-in phone booth. Hating to do it, I dialed Headliner Files' number. Dutifully Polly answered.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart, but I need the home address of Thyra Laine." I figured that Square Face, the hired gunnie, might

be reporting to his employer by now. Besides, I was never adverse to dropping in on a stripper.

In a moment Polly was back on the line, yawning and saying, "Room 204 at the Tiviera Hotel, Mr. Preston." Then she disconnected and, I hoped, went right back to sleep.

I walked, searching for a cab. When I finally found one—it was parked in front of the Tiviera Hotel.

No doorman was on duty and I went into the lobby to find no clerk behind the desk. I climbed the stairs to the second floor.

A tomblike quiet prevailed except at the door numbered 204. There I heard a girl's giggling and a man's quietly alcoholic haw-hawing. A third person was present, another man saying, "Yes, most amusing, really amusing of her indeed."

Surprisingly I recognized that fat-throated, buttery voice and that precise, old-fashioned manner of speaking. They belonged to Detective Lieutenant Blackley a member of the police commissioner's special squad. Yet I couldn't believe it. Staid Blackley in the hotel room of a professional stripper at this unholy hour of the morning? Why?

I found myself gently closing my hand around the doorknob. It turned without a sound. The phone bell rang inside the room and the restrained merriment continued. Then, slowly pushing the door open, I saw first that I wasn't mistaken. It was really Lieutenant Blackley who was here.

He had answered the phone and was listening over the wire, his broad back turned to me. A blimp of a man, with a handlebar mustache and a black derby, he looked like a gentleman officer of the 1890's. There was nothing out-of-date about Blackley's methods as a dick, however. He had single-handedly rounded up several of the toughest gunmen ever to run amok on Broadway, his special beat. He frequently dropped in at our office because he was sweet on my boss, Clarabelle Brown, and also to keep an eye on Thackeray Hackett, that disgraced ex-shamus whom he could never trust this side of the grave.

In all things, even when nailing a killer with a few expertly placed bullets, Black-

ley was courteously proper. I felt his presence in Thyra Laine's room must be unofficial and therefore highly astonishing. What's more, it aroused my envy.

SLOWLY pushing the door open wider while Blackley continued listening over the phone, I saw Thyra Laine herself and the other man. Thyra, a vivid blonde, with boldly bright eyes, and a slightly taunting mouth, was wearing a loosely belted robe of scarlet silk, the kind of silk that keeps flowing. She was tussling playfully with an offensively handsome, curly-haired young man. To judge from her giggling and his soft laughter, both were enjoying it.

Then she glimpsed me in the open doorway. Suddenly white faced, she clutched both arms around her playmate.

"Nick!"

Nick? Nick Dixon, possibly? Her own husband? If so, this little scene didn't quite fit in with the news that Thyra was suing the guy for divorce with a heart full of malice.

I didn't get it.

Thyra and Nick both stared at me as Lieutenant Blackley, disconnecting, turned from the phone to say softly, "Ah? Mr. Preston. The very man I wish to see."

Whatever it was that he had found so amusing a moment ago, he wasn't amused now. His moonlike face was grim. I simply blinked at him as he bowed.

"Good night, Thyra, my dear. Good night, Nick, my boy. No need for alarm, none at all—at least, not on your part." Then he fixed me with an ominous smile and added, "I'll take Mr. Preston in hand."

He did, hooking my arm and steering me from the room. Naturally I did not resist. "A confidential moment, if you please, my friend," he cautioned me as he piloted me firmly down the stairs. Having explained nothing, he halted me on the dark sidewalk and asked a question that startled me.

"Have you by any chance encountered this evening a man having a rather peculiar cast of features, Mr. Preston?" His glance was pointed. "I see you have. I asked because just a moment ago, upstairs in the Dixons' room, I received a message concerning him from Centre Street."

"From headquarters?"

"Perhaps I should explain that this man's appearance may have misled you. His facial muscles are less than normally responsive. You may remember reading about him—how he shot it out with Hollander Bultz, the numbers czar, and killed his man despite his own serious wounds."

I stared at Blackley. "Are you telling me that Square Face is actually a cop?"

"Detective Sergeant Vic Trevor, also of the commissioner's special squad," Blackley informed me quietly. "Tonight on a certain official assignment. The last report received from him at the bureau downtown, by phone—a brief one, since he seemed to be pressed for time—was to the effect that he had had an altercation with a man armed with a cane."

Blackley flicked me with another edged glance. "A painful and of course illegal experience, Mr. Preston. Trevor had to break away, he informed the bureau, but believed the man with the cane was still trailing him."

I swallowed. "His last report, you said? Has something happened to him?"

"Yes," Blackley answered simply. "He has been murdered."

I stood as if congealed in every joint.

"Our harbor patrol boat found Trevor's dead body floating up-river of the Brooklyn Bridge just a short time ago. He had been struck brutally and shot through the head three times. His gun is missing and may have been the weapon turned against him. Of course we shall set ourselves the task of finding it."

Ominously smooth, Blackley continued, "Trevor's death must have come very soon after he made that report."

The lieutenant faced me, gravely resolved, while I stared back at him in stunned wordlessness.

"That report, Mr. Preston, together with certain marks on Trevor's lifeless body, suggests your employee Hackett. Of course I shall examine that possibility most diligently. I feel I shall soon have the pleasure of removing Mr. Hackett from your payroll and bestowing upon him the hospitality of our State. This will, as you know, confirm a long-held conviction of mine that your Mr. Hackett is justly destined to discover himself at last seated upon two thousand volts."

He tipped his bowler, murmured, "Good evening, sir," and cruised ponderously away in the night.

CHAPTER FOUR

Murder Unadorned

A CONFUSING morning followed. If, at ten o'clock, one of our subscribers had asked me where to get in touch with our lone researcher, Thackeray Hackett, I would have had to confess that that was one question I still couldn't answer.

All our phones seemed to be trilling at once, and the air rumbled constantly as if with distant thunder—the sound of heavy file drawers rolling in and out. But as to where our employee Hackett was just now, I knew absolutely from nothing.

Evidently the New York police department was also drawing a blank on it, for so far there was no news that Hackett had been nailed for the murder of Detective Sergeant Vic Trevor.

My peace of mind wasn't helped by recalling Blackley's abrupt leave-taking last night. Why hadn't he grilled me? Because he already knew enough to feel certain of Hackett's guilt? No doubt. Besides, he evidently hoped to smell out Hackett through me and was simply giving us enough rope.

I could understand now those cryptic remarks I had heard Trevor make to Hackett—his promise of a special brand of trouble and his threat to "ring him in." I was left guessing, however, as to why Trevor had been scaring the wits out of Ardelle Gaye, and what he had thought to gain by doing such a glaringly amateurish job of trailing her. Peculiar actions for a trained police dick. Confusing.

Trevor's death was too recent to have appeared in any papers so far, but when the afternoon editions began flooding out they would be full of it, including, probably, special mention of Headliner Files' suspected researcher. That would not be good.

Our being entangled in a homicide was not likely to persuade celebrities to confide in us. And I couldn't forget that none of this would have happened if only Hackett had let Trevor alone.

There was, however, a story played up in all the early morning sheets, that left me staring. It concerned the Laine-Gaye controversy. In it Thyra Laine again vowed vengeance on Ardelle Gaye and reiterated her low opinion of her husband, whose eyes she publicly promised to scratch out if ever he came within her reach again. I could not reconcile these sentiments with the playful little scene I had spied upon in Room 204 at the Riviera Hotel only a few hours ago, at the very same time that these bitter recriminations were fresh off the presses. He had been within her reach then and she hadn't seemed to mind it a bit.

Confusing, yes.

There was only one gratifying note in the whole picture. We hadn't had to refuse to furnish any subscriber with Ardelle Gaye's home address. So far, nobody had asked for it.

A minor complication crept into the situation when Polly Digby appeared drowsily in the doorway of my so-called private office. A rush of inquiries about a swoon crooner scheduled to make a personal appearance at the Strand Theater tonight, was holding her on the job. She had brought a yellow envelope.

"Telegram for Mr. Hackett," she informed me. "Collect."

I tore it open and read a terse message:

NO RECORD HERE.

The signature was equally enigmatic:

STATISTICS BUREAU ROANOKE.

I put it aside, feeling snarled-up enough already and not even attempting to dope it out.

"In case you're trying to find Mr. Hackett, Mr. Preston," Polly said, between yawns, "I saw him this morning."

"You did! Where? What was he doing?"

"He hustled in here just after you called to get Miss Laine's address," Polly explained. "He looked into somebody's folder and then dictated five or six wires over the phone. The one that just came must be an answer to one of those. I think Mr. Hackett's such an interesting man,

don't you agree with me, Mr. Preston?"

"Oh, very," I said wryly. "Five or six wires? Charged to us, of course. Where else did he send 'em, besides Roanoke?"

"Oh, all over, I think, but I'm not sure about 'em, except that they seemed sorta long. I guess I was too sleepy at the time to notice. Then Mr. Hackett hustled out again without saying anything. I think he's just about the most fascinating man I know, Mr. Preston, don't you?"

"Go home, Polly, and get yourself some sleep until your head clears," I suggested. "If you should happen to dream up the fascinating Mr. Hackett's whereabouts, be sure to tip me off."

As Polly yawned on her way, I stepped into Clarabelle Brown's office. Clarabelle hadn't come in yet; 10:15 was still too early for her. She rarely appears at her desk before eleven. Then, about twelve-thirty, she rushes out to lunch, usually with one of the men who are hoping to become her fifth husband, and she returns around three. At four she calls it a day and hurries out to cocktails with another candidate. I love Clarabelle and am completely loyal to her, but sometimes I feel her business would soon go to smash except for her conscientious business manager.

A stretch of the cross-street was visible from Clarabelle's front window. Peering through the venetian blind, I saw rain. A light shower. Then scanning the wet street east and west, I spotted a leisurely-looking guy waiting at the bus stop on the corner of Madison. A bus pulled over, then went on, and he stayed there in the rain. So. A dick. Blackley had ordered Headliner Files cased.

It meant that the good lieutenant, eagerly as he desired to throw a rope on Hackett, had no more of a notion where his murder suspect was to be found than I did.

FEELING my shoulder tapped, I turned to find Polly again, blinking dazedly, with another yellow envelope. Unless we stopped being so busy and let Polly get out of here, she might soon fall on her face. I tore open the telegram, which was addressed to Thackeray Hackett, and found another of those mysterious messages:

NO INFORMATION.

This time the signature was:

VITAL RECORDS PHILADELPHIA.

"What I came to tell you, Mr. Preston," Polly yawned, "Lieutenant Blackley's here asking for Miss Brown."

"Stall him," I said quickly, "until Clarabelle gets down. Phone her to shake a leg. When Clarabelle turns on the charm, Blackley begins to melt, and honey, plenty of thawing is just what we need from him right now."

"But I've already called Miss Brown's apartment four times, Mr. Preston," Polly answered faintly, "and there still isn't any answer."

That made it cuter. On the day when our researcher became a fugitive from justice, wanted for murder, our boss must also turn up missing on account of a too-dizzy scial whirl. She wouldn't be in until even later than usual. This left the lieutenant entirely up to me. I went out to meet him and escort him in as cheerfully as I could manage it.

Blackley stood in our reception room looking huger than a barrage balloon in a voluminous black raincoat. Although I wished to show him all due consideration, I was prevented from approaching him directly by a telegram messenger who, having just hustled in, pushed himself between us. I quickly signed for a third wire addressed to Thackeray Hackett and gave it a brief glance.

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1942.*

this one said, adding as a signature:

BOSTON, MASS.

For some reason, Hackett had been doing a bit of long-distance snooping at our expense. At the moment I didn't give a damn why. I thrust the latest telegram into my pocket, feeling that I ought not to let it delay me on my way to Blackley—and looked up into the face of another customer who had just drifted in.

"Beg pardon," this one said in a voice wavering with age, "but would you be so very good as to inform me, please, the precise location of Shakespeare's tomb in

Westminster Abbey? Right now, please."

He was dripping wet. Water trickled off his hat, his ancient waterproof cape and the end of his nose. It fogged his eyeglasses, clung like dew to his cheeks and soaked the several books and *Literary Memoir* which he had clutched under one arm. Under the other he held a streaming ancient umbrella. An old guy who could get up this much interest in a three-hundred-year-old grave in this weather must indeed be an earnest scholar—but at the moment I was too concerned with a brand new grave being dug right now for the late Vic Trevor.

"I'm sorry, but our service is confined only to living celeb—"

Startled speechless, I gazed into the glitter-filled, baby-blue eyes that were lifted to mine.

Hackett!

By heaven, here he was. With the entire New York City police force alerted for him, he had reappeared inside Headliner Files. Aided simply by the weather, an upturned collar, a droopy hat, at stoop, ordinary glasses, a handkerchief lifted to his nose and a few accouterments which he had evidently picked up at a second-hand store, he had actually dared to insert himself between me and Blackley!

I gazed at him in blank-faced incredulity as he stood there dripping rain, his back turned to Blackley, appearing like a slightly cracked bookworm.

But then, perhaps the safest and least expected place for Hackett to be, after all, was directly under the lieutenant's nose—so long as Blackley didn't scent him.

Holding myself tight, I managed to say to Hackett, "If you'll just take a chair, sir, I'll be with you in a few minutes." To Blackley I added, as Hackett turned away, "Step right in here, Lieutenant, please."

I steered him into Clarabelle's own office. Disappointed at not finding her there, he remained standing and said, "I'll take only a moment of your valuable time, Mr. Preston. First, would you please be so good as to give me the latest address of the young woman known professionally as Ardelle Gaye?"

This was getting sweeter by the minute. It wasn't bad enough that one of our em-

ployees was a suspected murderer who was hiding in plain sight on the premises. No; I must now plead ignorance to Lieutenant Blackley about a detail which ordinarily we would have tossed off as lightly as Ardelle divested herself of a wrap.

"Lieutenant, the police department is one of our most highly valued clients," I assured him earnestly. "We want you to count on us always, Lieutenant. But this time we can't help letting you down."

"Ah?" Blackley said skeptically, from the depths of his globular interior.

"Yes. Miss Gaye told us last night. She's moved to a new place and won't say where. I'm sincerely sorry, Lieutenant, but I assure you—"

"I see," Blackley cut in, in a frosty tone that meant he didn't see a spark of truth in it. "Mr. Preston, you would be most unwise to let your friendship for Hackett get in the law's way. I feel I must remind you, Mr. Preston, that I am relying on you for your closest cooperation in apprehending this blood-thirsty criminal."

I thought dizzily of the fugitive I'd left in our waiting room. Ominously leaving me to mull over the whole situation, Blackley bowed, revolved massively through a half turn and majestically sailed out of Clarabelle's office like a frigate under full canvas.

IN FROZEN horror I found that Hackett was still there—seated in a chair at one side, bent over an open book. I stopped breathing and watched Blackley coursing to the outer door. It seemed impossible, but the lieutenant actually passed Hackett without recognizing him and disappeared into the street.

I sank weak-kneed into the chair at Hackett's side. No other customers were waiting. We could talk here. He was already in far enough.

"Thack, are you nuts? Why did you risk coming back here?"

Quietly, in his natural tones, Hackett answered, "I was expecting a telegram. Stop worrying, Pres. I haven't killed any detectives."

"Blackley disagrees. After all, you'd let yourself in for some serious consequences, batting that dick around with your cane." I noticed, incidentally, that Hackett did

not have his cane now; it was the first time I had ever seen him at large without it. "Trevor reported that incident to Blackley and Blackley probably figures you were anxious to sidestep a prison rap, so the battle went into a second round and that's when you blasted Trevor with his own gun."

Hackett gave me a glittering, acrid look. "Trevor's gun is still where I left it, hidden behind a potted plant at that same spot on Fifty-Second. When he dropped it, I recognized it as a regulation police gun. Don't be silly, Pres. In my spot, I'd have been an utter fool to touch it."

"What actually happened to Trevor, then?"

Hackett shrugged cynically. "I was out-distanced. Positively the last I saw of Trevor, he was doing a mail-order detective's job of trailing Ardelle. A short while ago, having a cup of coffee in a Second Avenue hamburger joint, I heard a radio bulletin saying his car was found abandoned up in Harlem. The location's a red herring. It means he got it somewhere else."

"And where've you been all this time?"

"Tailing Blackley."

This was getting to be a little too rich. The idea of a murder suspect shadowing the detective who was out to nail him—Still, it was exactly like the unfathomable Hackett.

"Blackley needs watching as closely as anyone else this time, Pres," Hackett informed me, keeping an alert glance on the entrance. "There are too many wacky details in this picture. Why was such a human nightmare as Trevor assigned to haunt Ardelle to start with? Why was he

taking such pains to do such a lousy job of tailing her? Why is our lavender-and-old-lace detective hobnobbing with a rival stripper who's divorcing her husband in the papers but still throwing him kisses in their hotel? Something's simmering on the back of the stove, Pres, far back. So we can be sure of only one item. If I don't get this situation shaken down fast, it'll be me that's simmering—in the hot chair."

"It seemed so hopeless before you explained it," I said sourly. "Now it seems hopeless still."

"Not quite, Pres. The break might come tonight. I've a feeling the pressure's really on now. Something's got to give. You can help, Pres, by making it a play-back on last night. I mean, get yourself another ringside table at the Casbah. I'll try to join you there for the blow-off."

"You'll what? You're being hunted down as a cop-killer, remember?"

Hackett smiled tightly, rose, tucked his umbrella and books under his arms and spoke again in a voice that sounded cracked with age. "Thank you so much for the enlightening information about Shakespeare, young man." While I stared after him, he snuffed out into the rain.

Through the venetian slats of Clarabelle's window I peered at Hackett ambling wetly on his secret way. He was given only a cursory glance by the dick on the corner. As he disappeared safely I shook my head, still steeped in confusion. I couldn't guess what Hackett hoped to pull off this evening. But whether or not it would do him any good, he could positively count on me to be up front in the Casbah Club when the shapely Ardelle began her stuff.



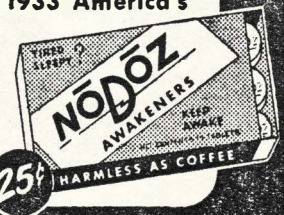
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CHAPTER FIVE

Strippers' Showdown

THE rain had washed the evening air twinkling clear. On West Fifty-Second Street people were heading for the nearby jive joints, the NBC studios or the Taj Mahals of the cinema on Broadway. Guys in top hats and babes in mink were gaily trailing in and out of the night clubs.

I didn't pause to poke behind any tubbed plants. Taking Hackett's word that Trevor's gun was hidden among them, and that the cops would eventually fish it up, I went on eagerly toward the Casbah, timing it for Ardelle's first showing.

Just as I neared that private side entrance, a taxi veered to the curb. The passenger who popped out was Ardelle Gaye.

Still plenty scared, she was courageously returning for the sake of her art. Her face pale, her eyes widened, she gave the street a quick scanning before risking a dash for it. In doing so, she glimpsed something that frightened her even worse—for suddenly she flashed across the sidewalk and vanished inside the door as if in instant danger of mayhem.

A guy standing on the opposite side of the street could have had something to do with the way Ardelle's jitters were hitting a new high. He wasn't the zombi type, like Trevor. Instead, he appeared to be something that had wandered out of a mortuary and was just standing around in his bones. His scrawny wrists dangled out of his too-short sleeves and his skeleton's neck rose like a stalk out of his too-large collar. The dark, feverish eyes in his cadaverous face had been fixed immovably on Ardelle and now they continued to smoulder on the door through which she had sought refuge.

I left the living mummy standing on watch there and entered the Casbah. Max, the major-domo, fawningly led me to the table I'd reserved by phone. Sitting there all alone at that ringside spot, I became the envy of all the poor guys in the far corners.

A typical bistro atmosphere prevailed—shrill voices, tom-tomming orchestra, thickening smoke, clattering dishes, tinkling ice in tall drinks. I suffered through

an interminable wait, and a lonely one except for my double scotch, before that certain expectant hush settled. At long last dimming lights signaled it was time for Ardelle's nightly act. I prepared happily to concentrate on her topic. Then a fanfare sounded, a bright spot of light beamed upon the scarlet drapes and the moment of enchantment began casting its spell.

With a deft waft of the curtains Ardelle appeared as before, a white dream in her glittering long gown, her red hair twinkling, a sweet, eager-to-please smile on her face. It was the damndest thing how she showed no vestige of fear now.

She sparkled forward to the mike with a teasing air of generous promise and went into her husky song. I listened with the pleasantest sense of knowing just what was going to happen; but then a distraction occurred. Someone slid into one of the other chairs at my table.

I peered through the gloom and made out the unfamiliar, flabby-looking face of a guy of about fifty, with thin, brushed-down hair, black-rimmed pince nez with black ribbon dangling, and a thick black cigar. He appeared to be an unctuous undertaker on a holiday, but he really wasn't. He was Thackery Hackett behind another artfully simple disguise.

"You couldn't have come at a worse time," I commented sourly, my gaze straying from him. "How many years in Sing Sing can I get for associating with a fugitive?"

"Tonight's really the night, Pres," Hackett whispered back. "Blackley's acting like a hardware tycoon who's about to spring a demonstration of his latest model bear trap. Everything's coming to a focus right here in the Casbah right now. Watch Ardelle."

"Gladly," I assented, doing so.

ARDELLE had just finished her inviting melody and was stretching her lovely frame, when a slight disturbance had occurred at the ringside. In the dim radiance from the spotlight a figure rapidly worked forward through the close-packed tables. It came out onto the floor, closer to Ardelle, and just outside the white spot it paused, tensing as if to spring.

Ardelle blinked her long, detachable

lashes in the shine, peered into the shadow and gasped in consternation:

"Thyra Laine!"

Her jet-black eyes flashing, Thyra Laine looked like a tigress with claws bared. Her loose glistening robe was tawny-colored. Evidently she had just done her turn at the Vanity Puff across the street when some flare-up caused her to whip over here in a fury. She stood in the clear now, out there on the open floor, fiercely facing the dismayed Ardelle, who had abandoned all thought of finishing her act this evening.

It was a moment of exciting possibilities—as Max, the joint's canny boss, was quick to see. Waiters had tried to pull Thyra back, but she had shaken them off and Max had signaled them to let her go. Two bitterly competing strippers facing each other for an unrehearsed showdown on the Casbah's stage! It would explode all over tomorrow's front pages, a million bucks' worth of publicity for free. The management was more than willing to let them tear into each other, and every guy in sight of them sensed that Thyra and Ardelle were about to uncover a new page in theatrical history.

In the tense hush Thyra glided closer to Ardelle, her scarlet lips curling. "Steal my husband, will you! Sneak him into your dressing room, ha! I'll fix you, you witch!"

Ardelle blurted, "No, really, it's not true!"

To this Thyra answered in sizzling syllables, "Don't give me that, you two-timing chunk of beef! When I get through with you burlesque's cheapest competitor won't give you a job in the back line!"

Then she sprang. Teeth bared, she clawed at Ardelle. In desperation Ardelle clawed back while hundreds watched wide-eyed. Thyra's hair came loose, a whipping long blonde mane. Thyra grabbed into a pocket of her robe and brought up a glittering pair of scissors. She reached for Ardelle's costume. Totally routed now, Ardelle tore loose and spun about to flee. She vanished in a flurry into the darkness behind the orchestra's dais. Thyra started after her, but Max, feeling the fray had gone far enough, wig-wagged emergency signals. His big cupid-faced bouncer and four waiters closed in on Thyra—undoubt-

edly the pleasantest assignment they had had in months. They mobbed her off into the shadows. Next thing he knew, the orchestra was throbbing again, other waiters were hustling up drinks, Max was genially urging everyone to dance, and the Great Moment was gone forever. Now it belonged to the ages. I felt that the entire remainder of my life would be an anticlimax.

Thackeray Hackett, having also witnessed this unprecedented episode with a whimsical smile, was now gazing narrow-eyed at one side of the smoky room—at Lieutenant Detective Blackley.

Blackley was heading for the door through which Ardelle had disappeared. Hackett rose, signaling me to follow him, and he trailed after Blackley with an audacity that chilled me.

While moving, Hackett even dared to abandon his disguise. He dropped his cigar into an ash-stand, tucked the pince nez into a pocket and spat out something—little wads of cotton, I thought—that had made his cheeks fuller. One item he kept, however, a black umbrella, the same one he had carried under his arm this morning as a Shakespearean scholar.

Blackley hoisted himself up the winding stairs. Reaching Ardelle's dressing room, he pushed in. I heard him saying, politely as always, "Good evening, sir. Where, please, may I find Miss Gaye?"

HE RECEIVED no answer because at that point Hackett stepped into the cosmetic-scented dressing room after him. At sight of Hackett, Blackley turned from the only occupant he had found here—the wizened, tired-eyed, half-bald, disillusioned little man whom we had seen leaving on our previous visit. Ardelle had called him Stoffie. He stood there in a blinking silence as Blackley said, in a gratified tone, "Ah!" and reached toward his hip for something for Hackett.

"Never mind the bracelets, Lieutenant," Hackett said, gently swinging his umbrella. "I won't run away from you. In fact, you'll soon be following me, and willingly, I think—away from Headquarters."

In tones of icy skepticism Blackley said, "You're making this a notable evening for me. I shall not only book you for the murder of Sergeant Trevor, but also, at

the same time, I will culminate a second case on which I have been at work for some little while." Feeling confident that he had Hackett neatly nailed, he turned again to Stoffie. "Now, sir. Where, if you please, has Miss Gaye gone?"

"I dunno, brother. She left so fast I never even got a glimpse of her as she went past."

Stoffie had spoken in a deep, resonant timbre. It astonished me to hear such a basso profundo booming out of a frail little guy like Stoffie, until I recalled that the big, well-upholstered boys, like Blackley, usually sing tenor. But what startled me even more, I recognized it.

"You're the guy who answered Ardelle's phone when I called her apartment early this morning!"

Hackett gave me a sharply impatient glance. "And why not, Pres? He's her husband."

"Her what?" I was staring. "*This* runt?"

"Certainly," Hackett said. "Meet William Lowestoft, whom Mrs. Lowestoft calls Stoffie. They were married in 1942 in Boston, when Ruby Lesnau was still prancing through six shows a day as an unknown chorus girl. He didn't kick when she became better known and highly prosperous as Ardelle Gaye, 'stripper supreme.' In fact, he helped her to make the best thing possible of it. Her marriage to him was one of the few things she kept under wraps. And right now she's working on a really big contract, with no beefs coming from him."

William Lowestoft set his jaw. "I ain't talkin', brothers." Then he set it again, harder.

Hackett smiled. "When I mention a big contract, I don't, of course, mean a second-rate songwriter named Nick Dixon. She hasn't really been playing around with Dixon. Thyra Laine's howling to the papers was done under Lieutenant Blackley's instructions."

I frowned at the lieutenant. Both Blackley and Stoffie looked discomfited.

"All staged by our clever lieutenant, that affair, Pres," Hackett continued, shooting cynical glances at me. "The broken glass in Ardelle's tub, the dye on her towel—Well, who can pick locks better than the experts from Headquarters? The threats

of a scandalous divorce suit and Trevor's tailing were parts of the same campaign of terrorism directed against Ardelle by our scheming detective pal here. Tonight it built up to the fight we all saw out there on the stage. Thyra was glad to cooperate for the sake of the nation-wide publicity she'll get out of it. Very convincing work, Lieutenant—" Hackett's eyes glittered at Blackley—"but is it paying off?"

For Blackley it was a moment of grimly sheepish silence.

"But what was it for?" I blurted.

Hackett smiled. "If you felt in mortal danger and needed a safe hiding place, where would you go? If you knew of a hideaway that had already kept someone safe for months—time-tested, as it were—you'd go there, wouldn't you? That's how Blackley slanted it—and I think he's right."

The door opened behind me. The guy who stepped in was, to my astonishment, the human mummy who had scared Ardelle so badly in the street. In the brighter light he looked more human and worried.

"I'm sorry, Lieutenant," he reported respectfully, "but I'm afraid she slipped us again."

"What!" Blackley's face hardened. "Dammitall!" Those were the roughest tones I had ever heard him utter. "Her movements tonight were vital, vital! I warned you of that. If we've lost her, it means this whole thing—weeks of careful preparation—have gone for nothing. Slipped us again indeed! Go back at once, Sergeant, and try your utmost to trace that woman."

The sergeant withdrew in abashed haste on what seemed to be a hopeless assignment. Then, with things getting more messed up for Blackley by the minute, he discovered Hackett grinning at him tauntingly.

"Perhaps you'd like to come with me," this captured murder suspect had the effrontery to suggest. "We may still wind up these cases tonight, Lieutenant—although there are not two of them, as you seem to believe. They are both the same one. Shall we go now?"

Hackett's pungent suavity left Blackley stunned. Hackett had opened the door and was halfway down the stairs before the lieutenant recovered his power of mo-

tion. Then Blackley and I charged after him and followed him out to the sidewalk. A huge black limousine had drawn to the curb in front of the Casbah—Blackley's official car. The plainclothesman at the wheel was Blackley's official chauffeur and assistant.

HAPPILY swinging his umbrella, Hackett ducked into the tonneau. Blackley and I had scarcely any choice but to follow. And when we were closed in with Hackett, another embarrassing moment swamped Blackley. His chauffeur looked at him for directions, but Blackley had no idea where to tell him to proceed. The lieutenant was forced to turn to his prisoner. Grinning, Hackett gave him the fifty-fifth street address.

The car whirred off like a wheeled rocket. Half a moment later, having whipped through a few red lights, we slid to a velvety stop at Ardelle's apartment house. Blackley permitted Hackett to alight first. He didn't head for the foyer but led us instead to the service door at the side. He found it locked and knocked.

After a moment it was opened by the thick-headed janitor, who was again wearing that dust filter. The broom he held in his hand meant we were again interrupting his sweeping.

"Yah?"

Hackett brushed past him. Something about Blackley's authoritative manner, as the lieutenant followed, caused the janitor to swallow any protests he might have had in mind. I followed them across a huge, clean basement half filled by oil furnaces. In a rear corner, Hackett came to a partitioned section. He opened its door.

"You stay oudda dere!" the janitor said suddenly, drifting after us with his aspirator dangling at his chin. Peering at us through his thick eyeglasses, he added, "Dis where I liff, yah."

We went right on in, after Hackett, and gazed around the nine-by-twelve room, which was comfortable enough, in a cheap way, but lighted only by high-set windows of pebbled glass.

"The janitor's quarters, yes." Hackett turned. "This is the objective of all your machinations, I think, Lieutenant. This is the hideaway Ardelle chose last night—the one you hoped she would lead you to

in her terror at Thyra Laine's threats.

He strolled to the end wall, grasped the knob of a closet and pulled the door wide open. Inside it stood a woman. Ardelle Gaye, of course, still scared silly.

"You're going to have some tall talking to do to Lieutenant Blackley, honey." Hackett smiled wryly at the lieutenant. "This is the time-tested hide-out, as Vic Trevor learned when he trailed her to this building last night. He snooped about long enough to figure she had to be down here—and when he tried to check on it, it cost him his life."

Was Hackett saying that Ardelle had murdered Trevor? Hoping not, I stared at him as he calmly went on.

"The East River is right out there," he reminded us, pointing with his ancient umbrella. "Very handy for disposing of corpses."

He turned while we all watched him wordlessly. He stripped the blankets and sheets off the janitor's lowly cot, revealing the cheap mattress. Then he stepped back and swung his umbrella in two swift, swinging swipes. Instantly two gashes opened in the ticking and loose fluffs of cotton flew. Something green, buried inside, was exposed. An obvious hiding-place, but even Hackett seemed a little astonished at himself for uncovering it at the first crack.

"Banknotes, big ones," he said softly. "They'll probably add up to considerably more than a hundred grand."

Ardelle wasn't her usual lovely self at the moment. I have seen seasick people looking happier.

"You're too good a business woman, honey," Hackett said in acrid tones of regret. "You just can't resist the temptation to make a buck, especially when it's to be had along with more than a hundred thousand other bucks. You figured that chunk of coin would be yours if only you would think of a slick way of snaffling it. The dough is Murton's swag, or what's left of his original booty, which Blackley has been hunting for all these months—along with Redford Murton himself."

I turned to stare at the janitor. He no longer looked so much like a dim-wit behind his aspirator and plate-glass spectacles. He had a gun in his fist.

"Just where could Ardelle hide Murton most effectively, Blackley, while planning ways and means of relieving him of the rest of his loot? She couldn't pass him off as a menial at the Casbah, for example.

"Her best bet was a job in one of her own buildings. Since she didn't want him either to be too far away with his dough, ruling out the Connecticut and Jersey places, or too dangerously close, which ruled out her own address on Central Park West, this place proved ideal. That much was slick enough."

SO THIS was Redford Murton, the absconding broker—this guy who had used an aspirator and thick lenses as a disguise—this guy standing there aiming that gun at us.

"That's enough talk," he said with an executive's crispness, dropping his phony accent. "Back up to those closets. I'm going to lock you in. Then I'm leaving with that money. You're not coming with me, Ardelle, darling. You've played me for enough of a sucker already."

"Don't be absurd, my good man," Blackley said. "You're not going anywhere."

The lieutenant was reaching inside his coat, where an armpit holster nestled invisibly among his many bulges.

It happened fast. Murton fired first. Blackley's gun, as it glittered into sight, bounced out of his numbed and bloodied fingers, spinning to the cement floor. Murton was squeezing the trigger again, a dead aim on Blackley's heart, when Hackett inserted himself into the altercation.

Hackett cut loose with his umbrella. In the same amazing manner that I had seen him wield a cane, he spun that umbrella overhead, then swished it down to Murton's wrist. A sharp *thwack!* sounded as the gun blasted.

The bullet smacked against the cement near Blackley's feet, and at the same instant Murton's revolver dropped from his paralyzed fingers. Hackett's swift intervention had undoubtedly prevented the sudden demise of Lieutenant Blackley, but it was still a tight moment. Blackley and Murton stood facing each other tautly, both empty-handed now.

On the floor between them lay two load-

ed guns. The first man to snatch up one or both of these weapons would be in a position to commit a lot of damage on the other. And as for which could get down there and back the fastest—Blackley, with his great girth, couldn't win even though his life depended on it.

In that instant of electrical calm Hackett handed his umbrella to Blackley and suggested softly, "Try this."

Then things happened even faster. Blackley gripped a fat, beautifully manicured hand on the umbrella's handle. At the same instant Murton dove for those guns. Blackley's first blows were awkward, since he lacked Hackett's skill, but seeming to get the hang of it, Blackley slammed the gun out of Murton's hand and whacked the hidden executive to flatness on the floor. When he finished, Murton was ready to be wrapped up and shipped to the death-house for the brutal murder of Detective Sergeant Trevor.

Blackley gazed at the umbrella, lips pursed. "Hmmm. Not bad," he said. "I shall get something of the sort for myself. Thank you."

Looking at Murton's defenseless condition, then at that innocent-looking, old-fashioned umbrella, I felt I could never again trust anybody's dear old grandmother on a rainy day.

I do not clearly recall what occurred after that. Dicks were rushing in and out. I seem to remember considerable hysterics on the part of Ardelle Gaye, née Ruby Lesnau, who was likely to trade her night club spotlight for prison garb—unless, of course, her case was heard by an all-male jury. I saw Blackley returning the umbrella to Hackett, and Hackett refusing it with a smile, saying, "With my compliments, Lieutenant"—and Blackley accepting it, no doubt as a souvenir. Next I found myself outside, freed, with Hackett, who had stopped being a fugitive from the hot chair and had gone back to being Headliner Files' researcher. Instinctively I was heading for the nearest bar.

"Thack, don't ever make that mistake again," I said weakly. "Next time a damsel in distress goes rushing off somewhere, don't you chase her. . . . Let me do it."

THE END

BURY YOUR OWN DEAD

By JOHANAS L. BOUMA



THE only sound in the room was the rasp of his breathing. Pain throbbed inside his head, receded, came again. He pushed the floor with his hands and sat up, wondering how long he had been unconscious. Somewhere in this room was a dead man. The sudden remembering

brought a chill of panic that obliterated all but a picture of the man before the lights went out and the blow came from behind.

The lamp had been behind him, the only light in the room. Now he wasn't sure where it was. He swayed to his feet. A few tentative steps brought him up against

● *Joe Bowers was bound by a blonde to grant her every whim—even when she stamped an old pal COD for hell.* ●

a wall. The floor lamp was somewhere near the wall, he remembered. He groped awkwardly through the dark, finding the lamp, the switch. He pressed the switch and the sudden light was agony against his eyes.

He turned slowly. The man lay prone on the carpet. A knife handle protruded from his left side. His face was gray and sunken, a silent scream against the finality of death.

Joe Bowers looked at his watch. Ten. He was to have called Jane at ten. He had been unconscious for nearly a half hour. A wave of nausea hit him. He shook it off and moved to the dead man's side, turning him over and going through the pockets. It seemed incredible that the letters were still there, six of them, bound together with common string. As he was still bound to Jane with all the fibers of his being.

He sank to the floor, the envelopes in his lap. He wondered about many things as he broke the string and looked at the handwriting. All but one had been written by Jane, written to. . .

For one terrible moment he couldn't believe. It might have been a dream. But his heart's pounding told him it was not a dream. And then the bitterness came; it escaped in laughter, taking him back to a moment that seemed to hover a life time away, a moment that, in reality, was noon of this very same day. . . .

* * *

It was a gray, dismal day. Rain glazed the streets and brought umbrellas out all over the city. Joe Bowers ducked from the cab, raised the collar of his topcoat and strode across the wet sidewalk into Tony's bar and grill, wondering what Jane wanted. Why, after two years, his ex-wife had asked him to meet her here.

Tony was polishing glasses behind the bar. He was tall, supple as a lightweight, dark-skinned and handsome. He looked up. "Joe, boy!"

"Tony. Good to see you again."

They shook hands; they exchanged grins. He had always liked Tony.

"Long time you no come in my place, Joe. I missed you."

Tony meant since the divorce. It had

been a long time, all right. He looked around at the empty bar he so well remembered, and the memories crowded him.

"I guess you know how it's been with me, Tony. Studying night and day."

"You'll make a fine lawyer, boy. I always knew you had the stuff to go out and dig for your future."

Joe looked at his reflection in the bar mirror. Dig was right. There had been four years of law school to sweat through. Jane had shared the first two years, but that's all she had been able to stand. She said she couldn't take the living in converted barracks, existing on a G.I. allowance.

In a way, he had understood. She was different, she was meant to enjoy the good things in life, to have a gay and wonderful time. She told him he had chances at several good jobs, and why didn't he take one of them? He tried to explain that the first years were the hard years, that after he had his degree it would be different. But she hadn't wanted to wait, and he wondered now what she would say if she knew he had the degree and a position with a respectable law firm.

"It didn't used to be like this," Tony said. "Not when you kids were first married."

The trouble, of course, had come from spending too many days at this bar. Days when he should have had his nose in a book. Finally he'd been forced to a decision. Either keep his career in mind or lose Jane. Looking ahead, he had known that taking a job would only postpone the inevitable. On the other side of it, a man had to grab his chances when they were offered. And college educations weren't handed out on silver platters every day of the year.

Tony said, "You had guts to turn your back on her. You'll be a big man, Joe."

Tony understood how it was. Tony'd had troubles of his own. Three years ago the cops had found his wife floating in the harbor, suicide. For a long time it hadn't seemed that Tony would get over it. There had been a lot of talk about her taking the jump because of another man. Knowing Tony, Joe had often thought he'd hate to be in that man's shoes. But he'd never really believed it about another man.

He could remember Angela: tawny-skinned, eyes that had darkened with intense feeling whenever they rested on Tony. They had loved, those two, and it was hard to believe different.

Tony placed a drink on the bar. "On the house, Joe."

"The old gang still hang around?"

"They come and go, come and go. You know how it is."

"Jane?"

Tony grinned. "I wondered when you'd get around to asking. She's in the back booth. Your eyes bad, Joe?"

No, his eyes weren't bad, but he'd expected her at the bar. Or maybe something in him was trying to postpone the meeting. Now he saw her soft blonde hair above the booth's partition, and the top of a man's head across the table from her.

"Bill Dugan," Tony said. "You remember Dugan?"

"Sure. Are they—"

"Nothing like that. Just having a drink together, is all."

Dugan was one of the old crowd. He had been a quiet, stolid man, always wary of becoming entangled in the web of matrimony. He was about forty now, Joe thought, a thick, good-looking man, successful in a small way. Real estate was his business. One of the old crowd.

The thought grated on Joe's nerves. He wondered why you always referred to former friends as "the old crowd." There was never any pleasure in going back. The past was forever past. You could never bring it back because you always expected more than you received, leaving you a little bitter. He wanted suddenly to be gone from this place—and then he remembered

his long-ago repeated promise to Jane.

Tony said, "You heard about her gonna marry this guy by the name of Dickson? A playboy, no less."

HE TOOK a sip of the drink and put the glass down very carefully. He said, "Tell me about it," and was surprised that it had hit him like this. Suddenly he knew that two years hadn't licked it. He wondered if he would ever be able to shove her out of his mind completely. Maybe for him the past wasn't dead.

"You could come around more often," Tony said. "You'd learn what goes on."

"When's the wedding?"

"Next week, the way I heard it. They say the guy's old man is worth plenty. She hooked him on a trip to Las Vegas a couple of months back." Tony grinned. "Ask her; maybe you can be best man."

"Don't be a complete heel, Tony."

In the mirror he could see Dugan standing, then bending over and speaking to Jane in a low voice. He looked at his drink as Dugan stepped to the bar.

"The drinks," Dugan said, "are on Jane." He grinned at Joe. "Long time no see. Some kind of celebration, Joe?"


They shook hands. Joe said, "Taking a day off. Dropped in to say hello. How's real estate?"

"Booming. A big deal on. Well, Joe, see you around. Maybe later, eh?" Dugan gave a wave of his hand, snagged a raincoat from the rack and walked through the door. It was still raining outside.

Joe lifted his drink. Without turning, he said, "Flatten a stool, Jane, and I'll buy you a drink."

He told himself he didn't really want to

Boy, what a
HEADACHE!
starting to throb.




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see her again. But that part was just in his head. His heart, which wasn't his property at all, lifted his face and caused him to smile. She hadn't changed. To him, she probably never would change. He sat there and he looked at her and he held onto the smile.

"You've aged, Joey."

"What did you expect?"

She patted his hand, and she was smiling now. "Congratulations, Joey. I heard about your good luck."

"Thanks," he said. "Only it wasn't all luck. A lot of work went into it."

"Yes." She dropped the smile. "I couldn't take the work, could I, Joey?"

"No," he said. "You couldn't."

He measured the curves and planes of her face, and he listened to her voice. It held a high-pitched quality that didn't belong. And there was the least tremble of fingers when she lighted a cigarette.

". . . and I've been planning to call," she was saying, "but I've been so terribly busy."

"Tony told me. Congratulations."

She looked at him and her lips pulled tight-shut and her eyes narrowed. "What did he tell you?"

"About you getting married."

"Oh," she breathed. Something, he thought, was crawling through her mind, giving off signals. And then, with a warmth and a closeness that had not been there before, she said, "Joey, I need your help in something."

"I told you once that if you ever needed me—"

"Please, Joey." Her face was close and appealing. "I don't deserve your help, but this time—"

"You called me," he said roughly. "Suppose you tell me why."

"All right." Her fingers dug into his arm. "It's Dugan. He has something of mine. Letters, Joey, but really—they don't mean anything."

He took a deep breath. "Look. Jane, if they don't mean anything, I wouldn't worry about them."

"He threatens to show them to Jim unless I pay him ten thousand by tomorrow."

"Jim?"

"Jim Dickson, my fiance."

"Dugan? Blackmail?"

"It's true." Worry made her face unlovely. "It's not the letters so much. It's what Jim's father would do if he found out about them. He doesn't like me. He'd cut Jim off without a penny."

So she hadn't changed. That part he could understand. But Jane and Dugan was difficult to swallow. He shook his head. "Could it be those letters were written while we were married? Is that it, Jane?" She didn't answer, and he said, "I guess I was blind, wasn't I? And I trusted you."

She leaned toward him. "Then why did you come down here to me the minute I called?"

Well, there it was. She'd asked him, and all he had to do was to supply the answer. And what kind of an answer did she expect? "I made you a promise," he said. "No other reason."

Her smile saddened a little. "I'm glad, Joey."

"That makes it nice all around. Now just how do you expect me to be of help with the letters?"

"I'm to call Bill Dugan at his house tonight. I've told him and told him I can't raise the money. He thinks I can get it from Jim, and I can't stall him any longer. I thought—I thought you could go to his place and maybe get those letters."

He turned on the stool and stared at her. "Are you crazy, Jane? Do you think I'd jeopardize my career by becoming involved in a blackmail scandal?"

"The reason I ask your help is because you will be involved if we don't do something and do it quickly. He told me that he'd not only turn the letters over to Jim's father, but that he'd first show them to the newspaper editors. Jim's exploits make good newspaper copy, Joey, and they'd make the most of it. You know where that would leave you?"

He knew where that would leave him, all right. It would leave him free to hunt a new job. Respectable law firms did not take kindly to their fledgling lawyers being involved in newspaper scandal. He said, "That makes me the guy in the corner pocket. I'm out of it and I'm in it. Well, the least I can do is talk to him. Maybe I can change his mind."

"I don't think you can, Joey."

"What else is there? Did you have

some other plan in mind?" he asked.

"Yes. I'm to call him at eight, telling him whether or not I have the money. Then he's to tell me when to meet him. I thought that if I told him I had the ten thousand and found out the meeting place, you could go there ahead of time and wait for him."

"That doesn't solve a thing."

"It does, Joey. He'll have the letters with him, and—"

"Don't say it, Jane. Don't even think it. I'm a lawyer now, remember? Not a thug. If I can't talk him out of it, we'll just have to face the publicity."

Her finger tightened around the glass. Tony came the length of the bar. "Care for another?"

"Please," said Jane. Joe shook his head, thinking there were too many angles in this set-up. And every one of them could lead to trouble. He felt a sudden disgust for Dugan, disgust for Jane because she had been so weak as to become involved with the man. He said, "You must think a lot of Jim Dickson."

"I love him."

Tony placed the drink on the bar and winked at Joe.

Wearily Joe said, "What you love is his bankroll."

JANE strained against the bar, her fingers gripping the edge. "I tell you I love him." She looked directly at Tony and began to weep. Tony shook his head. "Women," he said, and went back to polishing glasses.

"No use making a scene," Joe said. "It's never the best policy to air your troubles out loud."

She took a handkerchief from the breast pocket of his coat and wiped her eyes. He watched her, and a nebulous thought floated across his mind, stirred him to caution. He tried to pin it down, to reason with it, but somehow it escaped him. "Look," he said, "suppose I come back at eight and then you can tell me where you're supposed to meet him. Or I can call him right now."

"Please, Joey, no. He—he said he wouldn't be in this afternoon." She put her hands on his face and kissed him full on the lips. He pulled away from her, wondering if part of him would always

belong to her. She had lied about her love for Dickson; she was not enough of an actress to hide her insincerity.

Something came sliding along the bar. Tony said, "You left your bag in the booth. Take care of it."

Tony had no use for women. Ever since Angela's death it had been that way. Joe frowned at the thought, watching Jane open the bag. She was suddenly a changed woman. A mischievous smile touched her lips. Her hand dipped inside and came up holding a locket. His breath caught. Their first anniversary locket. He'd paid ten dollars for it, but a full heart had gone in the giving.

He took it and fastened the chain around the slender column of her throat. He kissed her quickly and went outside, and a strange ache centered around his heart. She had, after all, kept the locket, and he held the thought close. He scarcely noticed that it had stopped raining. The letters did not seem so important now. Maybe he could make her forget Dickson.

He walked to his hotel. He showered and shaved. Afterwards he ate and then walked the streets again. A raw wind swept from the harbor as he turned toward Tony's place.

The bar was crowded. Two bartenders were on duty, serving the boisterous mob. Tony greeted him and nodded toward the phone booth. Jane was inside. In the dim light he could see her mouth move in hurried talk. Then she pulled back the door and stepped out, smiling when she saw him.

"Joey," she said. "Joey," and she took his hands. "He said any time after nine at his place. He said he'd have the letters. He said—"

"Hold on!" Joe grabbed her shoulders. "You told him you were bringing the money?"

She dropped her eyes. "Yes, Joey."

"And you didn't tell him about me coming to see him?"

"No. I thought this way—well, if he has the letters with him, it might be easier for you to talk him out of them."

"What do you suppose he'll think when I show up?" Joe demanded. "He'll be sore because he's expecting the money, and instead he gets me."

"We have to get those letters." Her

voice was turning shrill and hysterical.

"Take it easy." Joe turned and looked at Tony. "She talks too much," he said.

"And too loud," Tony said. He shrugged and stepped behind the bar.

"Now listen to me," Joe said. "I'm going up there and talk to him. No funny stuff, you understand? If I can't talk him out of it, it's like I said before—we'll just have to take whatever happens."

"Joey," she whispered. Her eyes softened.

"Jane, please, Jane." He had to make his try. "Call it off. Come back to me, honey. We can make it now."

Her face became brittle. "I thought I could depend on you. I thought you said that if I ever needed you—"

"I do need you, Jane."

"I don't mean that way, and you know it. You get nothing, Joey. All right, leave me out of it. Do it for your own sake, for the sake of your career."

"Yeah." He grinned crookedly. "Well, I'll call you around ten and let you know how I came out."

Dugan's place was on the other side of town, but Joe didn't bother with a cab. He walked along the glazed sidewalk, trying to think of what he would say to Dugan. It seemed ridiculous even to make the attempt. He thought that Dugan must need money badly to try blackmail. Whatever the reason, it seemed obvious that you could not presume an old friendship would cause a man to turn his back on ten thousand dollars. But an attempt, at least, was necessary.

The house was a five-room stucco in the residential district. Joe looked at his watch. It was past nine. He went up the walk, looking at the lighted living-room window. He rang the bell and when there was no response, he rang it again. After a minute, he tried the door. It opened and he stepped through and called Dugan's name. On his left, he had a partial view of the living room. A floor lamp shed light, showing him the rose drapes that separated this room from the dining room. He went in and rounded the leather couch, turning then as if his eyes were drawn by some magnetic force. He saw the man on the floor and he heard the rustle of the drapes behind him. And then something struck heavy against the back of his head.

The world revolved in a dazzling wheel that carried him to a moaning darkness....

HE SAT on the floor and he looked at the body and he said, "Hello, Dugan. Hello, sucker." He fingered the letters. He had read five of them, all of them written by Jane to Tony. There was still the other letter. He didn't recognize the handwriting. He read it. Angela had written it to Dugan. The whole rotten affair was in his lap, and he was the only one who knew. Dugan had known, but Dugan was dead, his life's blood staining the carpet.

All right, Tony.

He climbed to his feet and the glint of something in the dead man's hand caught his eye. He opened the fingers and took from them the locket, Jane's locket, the thin, gold-plated chain snapped. He pushed the locket in his pocket and went out the front door. Three blocks away he hailed a cab and took it to Jane's apartment. She wasn't in. At a drugstore, he called Tony's bar. Tony wasn't in either. Tony had left for home a little past eight. It took another fifteen minutes to reach Tony's place.

It was a two-story apartment house, and Tony lived downstairs, left. Joe could hear music coming from inside. He didn't bother to knock. He went in and found them dancing. Tony looked around, grinning. "Joe, boy. Have a drink. Jane just dropped in."

Jane flushed. "Tony asked me. I—"

"Forget it." He tossed the five letters on the table. "There they are, baby."

She looked them over, trembling. "Thanks, Joey. How—"

"And this." He threw the locket at her feet. "You were in too much of a hurry, honey. And you forgot to call the cops so they'd find me there."

She screamed. A tight smile settled on Tony's face. "What's this all about, Joe?"

He said, "You'll read about it," and then Jane screamed again, her eyes wild, looking at Tony, then at Joe.

"Joey—"

"Don't play with me, Jane. You put the knife in him, and you'll pay for that one."

"I didn't!" She swung around, facing Tony, her lips gray. "You did it. You left

the locket there so I'd get the blame." She started to cry, her face wet and unlovely. "Joey, he made me give him the locket. He said I couldn't wear anything from another man."

Joe stared at her, and suddenly it hit him. Tony had used her, knowing the love she felt for him. He shuddered, feeling a great weariness. Hatred was born with it, but it was a slow hatred. He wanted his freedom from this woman.

He said, "You heard her, Tony. You heard what she said."

Tony laughed. "You know what it's good for. I've been here all evening. I can swear—"

"Okay, Tony. Swear all you like. But it won't do any good. You'll be weeping, Tony, because you don't understand the right of this."

"I don't understand any of it, if that's what you mean."

"It goes back to Angela."

Tony took a step. "Leave Angela out of it, Joe. Nothing has to do with Angela."

"Everything has to do with Angela. That's what brought this on. You killed Dugan because you think she killed herself over him. That isn't so, Tony. You've been looking for the guy you thought was to blame, but there wasn't a guy. You thought there was. All these years you thought so. Maybe you even suspected Dugan, and when you heard Jane talking about the letters he was holding over her head, it settled in your mind that he had something to do with Angela. You were never sure, Tony, but you thought you were sure tonight. You saw a way to kill him and place the blame on Jane. She'd been hanging around your neck too long, and you were sick of her. But I got there before you finished, and you had to knock me out.

"That isn't the half of it. Dugan never fooled with Angela. He never played with Jane, either. Angela killed herself was because of you, Tony."

"Don't talk like that. We loved each other."

"Sure, but listen. Jane wrote you letters the first year we were married. Angela found them and it drove her crazy. She wasn't the type to have it out with you—you know that. Just those letters and the

suspicion poisoning her inside. She knew Jane would hang around the bar even when I wasn't along. And a bartender's life is never an open book, Tony, not even to his wife. Maybe you didn't come home a few nights. Maybe you played poker with the boys, but would Angela believe that after she'd read the letters?"

Tony's face went down, but he kept staring at Joe. "Listen, Joe—"

"I'm not finished, Tony. She was going crazy, your wife. She had to confide in a friend, to find out if maybe she was wrong. Dugan was a friend. He was out of town at the time, but she wrote him a letter. And she gave him Jane's letters to you to show him what was going on. She didn't want to live without you, Tony. And she thought she had all the proof she needed insofar as your behavior was concerned. And here's the proof."

He tossed the letter to Tony and watched him read it. Tony raised his face. A strangled sob came from his throat. Then he straightened with an effort. He moved backwards to a bureau and his hand darted inside the drawer.

Jane screamed, "Watch out, Joey!" and then she jumped toward Tony, and Tony, whirling, brought the gun up and shot her.

Joe dove across the room. His fist smashed Tony and knocked him to the floor. The gun dropped from his hand. Joe picked it up and turned to Jane. The shot had caught her high in the shoulder. She whimpered softly, looking at him. "It'll come out now, won't it, Joey? It'll be in the papers and your new job—"

"Don't worry about it."

A vague bitterness went through him. There was a clattering at the door, but he ignored it. He dialed the phone and called the police. Afterwards he stood at the window, waiting for them. Tony had collapsed in a chair. He was sobbing.

"Joey—"

He didn't turn, thinking she would come back to him now if he wanted her to. But he didn't answer.

The window blurred. For a moment he thought it was his eyes. And then he saw that it was raining again. He lighted a cigarette, wishing the cops would hurry. It was lonely waiting here and watching the rain.

ANGEL IN THE DEATH HOUSE

By **STUART
FRIEDMAN**



His fist slammed into Witt's unprotected chin.

THE *Defendant will now rise. . . .* She seemed to float upright from her seat at the defense table, a creature of ethereal lines. She had sat through the trial as composed as a goddess. Her lawyer had seen to *that*. She didn't act or look like her name, Nikki Nixon.

She wore a simple black suit buttoned

• • •
Everybody believed that Nikki had killed her husband — except lawyer Preston . . . who regretted not having done her killing for her.

to the throat. Light from the high overhead globe lay glossy lines of dull gold and frost on her pale blonde hair. She wore it simply, parted and brushed back to a bun at the nape of a neck rising slenderly from the frail graceful slopes of her shoulders.

Nikki placed her fingertips on the oak table, showing hands which spoke a gentle denial that they could have pulled the trigger of a .45. Her wedding band remained loyally on her finger, testimony that she cherished the sanctity of marriage—even to "Pig" Nixon. Could such a woman murder her husband?

Gentlemen of the jury, have you reached a verdict?

The foreman of the jury cast a quick glance at her. Her lawyer, Thad Preston, tautened as if the look were a blow at her which he must take with his own body. His long, bony face had the haggard look of a man who has lived too long on the raw edges of his nerves. He breathed slowly, visibly, through pinched nostrils, his shadowed, bloodshot eyes staring. Fighting for her life, he had fallen in love with her.

We have, your Honor.

Thad had gone without sleep, partly because nightmares scared him awake in a cold sweat. They were always the same. Nikki coming through the door with the chaplain, warden, guards; Nikki being seated in that squat chair and staring at him just before the electrodes were attached.

Partly, Thad had gone without sleep to give the stamp authenticity to his role. Trials were dramas and his part was dynamic, a sound and fury edged with desperation.

He'd hammered Nikki into an inflexible role. Silent, passive. When the prosecution made a damning point, her silky-lashed blue-gray eyes widened and she looked trustingly to the gentlemen of the jury for protection.

What is your verdict?

DAMN IT, GENTLEMEN OF THE JURY, YOU'RE SITTING HERE, PRIVILEGED TO DEFEND THIS HELPLESS CREATURE. YOU AND I ARE FIGHTING TOGETHER AGAINST THE SORDID MACHINATIONS OF THE POLITICAL OP-

PORTUNIST IN THE D. A.'S OFFICE TO SAVE SOMETHING PRECIOUS. DAMN IT, IF SHE DID KILL PIG NIXON—YOU HAVE ONLY TO LOOK AT HER AND KNOW IT WAS BECAUSE GOOD MUST DESTROY EVIL.

We find the defendant—

Thad stopped breathing. From the empty pit of silence in the court there came the flat, steady hiss of a leaky radiator valve.

—not guilty.

Thad sat hearing the rising surge of voices and excitement. It was as though everyone had heard a verdict of guilty and shared a death sentence, dying for a split second in time—then shared reprieve. Nikki Nixon sat, as if a trance. Suddenly her face crumpled and she hid it in her hands and began to sob.

Then Thad Preston stood back of her, gripped her shoulders: "It's over. You're free. It's over." He snapped a glance at his assistant, Paul Witt. "See the matron and property custodian and get her things. I want to get her away from all this."

As Nikki's shoulders stopped shaking, Thad went to her side. "Get hold of yourself. We'll go thank the jury. No, No, don't wipe the tears. They're very effective."

Staring up at him, she took her handkerchief very deliberately and dried her cheeks. He suppressed a quick anger. He led her through a group of onlookers, spoke to acquaintances, grinned acknowledgements to several congratulations.

She irked him again by thanking the jury without coaching from him. He felt as bristly and possessive as a schoolboy. When they finally returned to the defense table, he said peevishly:

"The trial and I are both part of your past, I gather." He checked himself before he'd added: "You don't need me any more."

"Surely not, Mr. Preston. Oh, there's Chuck Kelter." She started for the gate to the spectators' section. The shock of it left him flat-footed for an instant. But he overtook her in a pair of long strides, cut in front of her, blocking the gate. He reached out to a startled, strange woman.

"Mrs. Robinson," he cried heartily. "You *did* get here. Thanks immensely.

You'll have to forgive my rushing away. Give you and Matt a ring."

HE TURNED, gripped Nikki's wrist unobtrusively, whispered: "You damned little fool, don't let me catch you near Kelter. Are you insane?" He stared her down as her lips parted. Then he cast a glance back to Chuck Kelter, a tall, football-shouldered young man in black horn-rims.

The prosecution had found a private detective who testified that he had got divorce evidence for Nikki's husband. The guy was Kelter.

Kelter didn't deny the detective had walked in on him and Nikki alone in his hotel room listening to his records. But, he said, other guests were to have come. They hadn't come.

Chuck Kelter had fumbled and finally gone scarlet and blurted that nobody else had been invited—but that Nikki hadn't known. It was his own idea to be alone with her once. He said that she was the most soulful, sympathetic woman he had ever known.

The prosecution had let him rant on, sounding more and more damningly like her secret sweetheart. Kelter had come closer to convicting her than any other single factor. The prosecution said she had killed to prevent Nixon's divorcing her . . . and before he could change his insurance beneficiary.

The way things stood, if Kelter hadn't had an iron-clad alibi, he'd have been a co-defendant. . . .

Thad kept a possessive grip on Nikki's arm while he talked and bantered and gloated good-naturedly with colleagues. He kept telling himself he was diverting attention from the suspicious fact that Nikki had approached her romeo the moment she was safe.

But he knew he wasn't disguising very well his own anxious glances at her every time her eyes wandered, searching for Kelter. He was making a miserable fool of himself over her. He didn't want her near Kelter because she smiled for him and called him Chuck endearingly.

Then Thad saw Paul Witt coming carrying her hat, coat, suitcase, money.

"Mr. Witt," Nikki Nixon said, extending her hand. "I want to thank you, too."

Thad watched her lovely profile as the rounding of her smile began to flatten. He glanced at the exquisite hand extended in space, not accepted. Thad's feverish eyes snapped to Witt's face.

Color had pulled from Witt's square-chinned face, leaving the beard in clear outline like coal smudge on his jaw. His dark eyes narrowed, Witt slashed savagely downward and slapped her hand. The sound cracked loudly enough to bring a wake of staring, awed silence from people nearby.

"Murderess!" Paul Witt said.

Nikki's underlip started to tremble. Her chin puckered. She lowered her eyes and tried to conceal her hand, which had begun to redden. Fumbling with her coat, she tried to keep from seeing the stares.

Thad stepped into Witt, his fist cocking and slamming up solidly into Witt's unprotected chin. He hooked one into the body as Paul Witt stumbled noisily back against an empty chair. Thad had a third blow set and aimed at Witt's face. But he dropped his hand abruptly, said in a low, savage tone: "You're discharged. Get out at once."

Paul looked pleadingly, drew air in his open, trembling lips. "Mr. Preston, I tried to get in with Campbell, Dooks and Preston because I thought you were a great man—"

"You told that to Campbell about Campbell, then to Dooks about Dooks. What you've done to the firm just now is intolerable. Get back to that scabby little office over there by the police court back in your own shyster league, Witt."

"I'm not that league. I've made good."

"And killed it all."

"You didn't hit me because of the firm. It's her. When I think what she's done to your integrity—"

"Shut up."

"No. You're too fine a man. I can't stand to see it. Making you build a case out of that mythical \$60,000."

"Build a case and win a case. Shut up before I—I—"

Witt closed his mouth, his jaw muscles working. Thad turned his back sharply, took Nikki's suitcase, his own briefcase, took her arm and steered her firmly toward the corridor exist, meeting gazes with stony defiance. He swerved, avoiding

the elevator, took her down the wide staircase to the ground floor, then outside.

"I rented an apartment for you," he said, going toward his car.

"What?" she cried.

"Living quarters. You *are* going to live. Hadn't you anticipated that?"

"No, I hadn't," she said quietly as he keyed open his car. "I hadn't thought past this—this freedom." She hugged her arms to the imitation beaver coat. Then she frowned. "It was terribly nice of you. . . ." She faltered, lowered her eyes, then raised them and grinned. "All right, if that's what you want. Just to be literal about it, I owe you my life."

"Then get in the car," he said. He went around, got in under the wheel. "The apartment," he said evenly, "is furnished. When you get my bill, you will find the rent charged there."

"I will?" she said. She looked at him blankly. "I will?"

He took an envelope from his briefcase, gave it to her. "Door keys, mailbox key, receipts for telephone deposit, lights deposit, rent—and so on. All charged to you. You are free, Mrs. Nixon. Free to lock or unlock the door to anybody, including Chuck Kelver."

Thad started the car, lighted a cigarette for himself, snapped on the radio, drove to the modest apartment building without speaking. He stopped the car, nodded toward the entrance, not cutting the car engine.

"Second floor. You'll find it. Wait." He took out his wallet, removed all but a five-dollar bill, shuffled, counting the rest. "Here's forty-one. You've got another seventeen. I had the woman who brought your clothes and linens put in some food staples, but you may need this cash. I'll send another hundred the end of the week. I'll push the insurance people and get that ten thousand as soon as possible. Then you can pay me.

"When and if you decide to get a job, I might as well warn you your old firm won't take you back. Campbell, Dooks and Preston has an opening. You see Dooks when you're ready—it's all set . . . if you want it. Same salary to begin as you used to earn. I'll say good-bye now."

"Please don't go off like this. I'm all

alone but for you. Please. You're angry with me. I don't want you to be . . . after all you've done."

"The law is my profession."

"I don't mean that. I mean all this, getting everything ready for me, thinking of every little item, and—and I thought you were all fake, all calculation, measuring out just so many grams of emotion, forcing me into that injured-wife role. I thought. . . . But you act like you think what Mr. Witt thought—that I killed him."

"I'll take you up," he said, cutting the engine.

The place had a matching sofa and pillowback chair, occasional chair, coffee table, end table, assorted lamps, fireplace and mantel. He stood with his back to the closed entrance door while she went through, seeing the bright kitchen, bedroom, bath with shower. She came back, eyes shining with pleasure.

"You look different without that monster briefcase. Oh, don't be offended. I adored the pompous, stuffy thing. I'd think about it at night and think a briefcase like that, handed down from great-great-grandfather probably, just couldn't lose."

"It was designed especially for me," he said, "and it's practically new. I'm quite proud of it; my staff gave it to me on my birthday. The same day, in fact, that you came to me for a divorce."

"I'm still glad you left it in the car," she said. "You can stand without it." She moved to him, put her arms up around his neck, kissed him lightly. Her coat was open.

He slid his arms tight around her, crushed her to him and his mouth to the sweet warm softness of her lips. He held her, kissing her a long time, and he still held her as she drew her face away and stared astonished.

"Nikki," he said hoarsely. "The place I really want you to have is the best in this town. But I couldn't do it that way, forcing you. It's your choice. I love you. I can't help it. I love you. I don't care what you did."

She thrust away from him. "You're saying it too . . . just what Witt said. Nobody believes me."

"The jury did. It doesn't matter!"

"I didn't kill him!" Her voice rose in thin hysteria. She clenched her fists and shook them. Her lips became stiff, her eyes frantic. Turning, she ran and flung herself into the chair, lay crying on the arm. He watched her, shifted his weight from one foot to the other, lighted a cigarette.

"I'm impressed," he said finally. "But sit up now and tell me the truth."

She almost screamed up, thrusting her tear-streaked, distorted face at him. "I told you the truth a thousand times—if you'd stop dominating me and telling me how this or that didn't seem convincing I could convince. . ."

"All right, all right," he said, going quickly across, waving an impatient hand. He sat on the sofa edge, facing the side of her chair. "Tell it your own way. When you came to me for a divorce you claimed you'd wanted one a long time. But instead, your husband had hired a detective, gotten evidence on you.

"You claimed you'd had a detective trap him. As I told you, that stalemated it. There were two guilty parties; and the law requires an innocent party. I believed you, Nikki. I believed you were the innocent party, that he'd been cheating on you all through your marriage. But, when you got fed up and took up with that Kelter, your husband got legal proof—"

"Let me talk. I got legal proof too. The detective I hired said—"

"Sorry, Nikki. We checked. He had circumstantial evidence only, as he testified at the trial. And I had a hell of a time putting across the idea that you and Kelter were only friends. However, I'm letting you talk."

"It's the murder I'm talking about. That evening, not what happened before. I kept thinking over what you'd told me. I fumed for a week, determined I wouldn't let him smear me. That evening, he came home in a jovial mood. He'd been to the bank in the afternoon, removed that insurance policy, of course—as the prosecutor kept repeating. But I swear, Thad, that my husband was not going to change the beneficiary. Instead, he said if I'd let him get the divorce, he'd keep me beneficiary. I don't care, I just don't. I wouldn't kill for ten thousand or any other amount."

"I always knew that, Nikki."

"He strutted and bragged and said he wasn't the punk everybody thought. Then he showed me those sixty one-thousand-dollar bills. I had never seen them. They'd been in the lockbox—years, he said. He gloated over that money as if it was a victory over me, a proof that he was smart and important.

"He'd made it in the war but it was 'hot,' black-market cash deals to avoid income taxes. But now he said he'd found a buyer to pay \$930 for each of those \$1000 bills. His buyer was coming that night. As it was secret, I got out of the house and went to a movie."

"So this mysterious buyer came," Thad put in, "robbed and murdered your husband, tossed the gun in your laundry hamper, then headed for parts unknown. The D. A., police, banks, Treasury—everybody has been on the lookout for that money from the moment we first told that story. The search may have been half-hearted, because nobody thought there was much to the story.

"But you can be sure that every one thousand dollar bill that's turned up has had its pedigree searched. That money is still the hottest thing this side of hell and it'll stay that way a good long time. Assuming there was this money, are you sure you have no connection with it?" he asked.

"I swear." She raised her hand, and there was silence while they searched each other's faces.

HE NODDED, chain-lighted a new smoke, rose and went to the phone, his eyes somber. He dialed information: "Nolton Detective Agency. . . thanks."

While he got the agency, he said tersely: "Nikki, if you have any connection with that money, tell me now. The instant those bills get into circulation they'll be traced . . . maybe a month, a year, ten years, but eventually. If they can trace them to anyone with the slightest connection to you, they'll—"

She twisted around in her chair, staring wide-eyed, her lips whispering: "Believe me, believe me, believe me."

"Nolton Detectice Agency? Nolton? This's Preston. Campbell, Dooks, Pres-

ton. Can I see you? Right away? I'll come there."

"Thad!" she cried. "You think he—"

"I want to know why he didn't sew up the job tight that he was supposed to do for you. He could have trapped your husband."

"He did, he did, Thad. I was with him. He and I witnessed them together. I told you, but you said it was useless."

"I believe you implicitly. He could have verified us on the stand instead of giving that tepid circumstantial stuff. But he swore to me that you were dreaming, that he'd never brought it to a showdown. He threatened to make a bad witness if I'd pressed it. Somehow I'm going to pressure the truth out of him."

She came to Thad, raising her face to him, her arms flowing up around his neck, kissed him. "Thad, everybody I ever knew is pale beside you."

"Including Kolver?"

"Thad," she said softly, "you think you created me. You think you equipped me with a character that never existed. Now, the trial is done, so is your creation."

"But you're wrong: I *did* cherish the institution of marriage. I did have a platonic friendship with Chuck Kolver." Nikki raised her left hand before his eyes. She had removed her wedding ring. Looking at him soberly, she said, "You kissed me. Kolver never did. I couldn't lie to you in the same breath I tell you I love you."

"I'll be back," he said huskily.

"And I'll be prettied and silky and feeling like a woman again."

Paul Witt's car was parked back of his when Thad went downstairs. Witt got out of his car, came along the sidewalk. Thad

Preston waited, watching him closely.

"Come for trouble?" Thad said.

"Came to say good-by and show you I'm a gentleman—even if I did have a scabby office near the police station." Witt offered his hand, grinned lopsidedly.

Thad drew off his glove, a little embarrassed. He shook hands, then exclaimed: "Look, guy. Hell! You lost your head, I lost mine."

"Over a dame, Nothing so unusual about that—even in *my* league."

"I apologize for that crack about your league. I apologize for striking you. Come on guy, I'll give you a return engagement later. Now let's get down to the Nolton Detective Agency. He fooled you, fellow . . . me too. The girl and he *did* get the goods on her late husband."

"You know where some bodies are buried—maybe you can think of something to help me put the pressure on that private eye. After that, I'm going to get a sledge hammer and start to work on that alibi Chuck Kolver turned up with."

"What a woman," Witt sneered. "She'll really make a murderer of you. Hell, do your own dirty work in your own way, Preston. Call up the mayor and tell him to call the License Commissioner and he'll pressure that private eye into saying exactly what you want. Kolver's the victim—I take it. You won't be content till you get her sweetheart, will you. Aren't you man enough to keep the advantage you've got with her already?"

Witt shook his head, shut his eyes. Then he opened them and said: "Go to hell. I don't want in with you filthy snobs. I like my larceny a little bit clean anyway. Man, let a shyster venture to counsel you,

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Check local newspaper program listings against possible variations in broadcast schedules

counsellor. Take your winning and sit tight and hold on to some of the honor you did have."

Witt spun furiously, went back to his car. Thad stood breathing slowly, tremulously, watching the frosting of his breath with suddenly stabbing eyes. He glanced up at the window of Nikki's apartment, didn't see her. A woman in love watched her man as long as she could. The very sight of him should be as dear as hers had been to him.

"Paul," he cried in anguish. "Don't go. Forgive me."

Paul Witt turned, hand on the door handle. "I don't! I want no part of your league, whitewashed trash!"

"I've got that coming," Thad said. He opened the door of his car, picked up his briefcase. He peered at the spot just under his name in embossed letters.

"The scratch," he said. "Where's the scratch? Paul, this isn't the briefcase I had in court. I know my briefcase like my own heart." He strode quickly to Paul's car.

"I was going to take it to the leather company who built this case for me and see if they could fix that scratch, because—" He stood very close to Paul. Their eyes met, locked hostilely. "I'm going to look in your car."

"Look and be damned."

THAD twisted past him, yanked open his back door, got in, hauled up the seat cushion. There was no briefcase. Thad backed out, stood tremblingly facing Paul Witt. "Where's *your* briefcase."

"Locked in the trunk."

"Open it. I want to see the briefcase that I carried in court—the identical one. Then you and I are going to the cops, Paul. . . . You had another one made. You were new in the firm when I got that briefcase, but you were there. You recognized the name Nixon when Nikki first came. You coerced that detective to silence—because you planned to kill Pig Nixon for his dough.

"With a respectable cloak in our firm, you had a perfect hiding place—a false bottom in *my* briefcase. It wouldn't have had to be over a sixteenth of an inch deep under the floor of my case. Some skilled man built it for you. I'll find him and he'll

identify you. Paul, you started that trouble in the court in order to make me fire you, because with Nikki's acquittal you knew you weren't safe.

"You knew I'd believe her on that missing sixty-thousand dollar story and I'd not rest till I took the cloud of suspicion off her. You knew I wasn't a good shield any more, only a trap if you hung around."

"If you think that I've stolen anything from your briefcase—" Witt said.

"You didn't. You simply transferred contents. You didn't want me to know. That's the reason you came here—not to be a gentleman. You hung around to make it look good so I never would suspect you. Unlock that trunk."

Witt sneered. "You can go to hell. I've taken all I will from you—" Scuffling around into the street, Witt got in the driver's seat.

"You're not going anyplace," Thad said, starting to get in. Witt's hand went to the door pocket. It came out, holding a .45, one almost identical to the prosecution's Exhibit A.

"Back out. Shut the door," Witt commanded. "In two minutes you won't be able to find that mythical money. What's in my car stays. Preston, I'll kill you—and I'll get by with it, too. Remember, it's in your briefcase, not mine. I'll claim I caught you and had to defend myself."

Thad spun, went at a crouching run to his own car. He heard Witt's car engine whine and then roar as he reversed, sent his car backing noisily in order to clear Thad's. Thad was in his own car, ignition on, starting. He heard the clash of gears and accelerating growl of Witt's motor shooting into first.

Then Thad got his car into gear, engine racing, and cut his wheels to the left. Witt's car had caught up to Thad's rear bumper, picking up speed fast as Thad shot diagonally into his patch.

There was a shattering impact of metal, a scream of brakes and the head-on crash of Witt's car into the left side of Thad's. Thad flattened on the seat, arms flung over his head as he was hurled against the right door of his car.

He felt his car rock, tip high, then fall back on its wheels, rocking on its springs. There was a grating screech and a rivet-

(Please continue on page 92)

THRILL

DIME
DETECTIVE
MAGAZINE
COMBINED WITH ELYNN S. DETECTIVE FICTION

DOCKET



Picking up where his dreams had left off, the long-stemmed brunette Milton Harris had met at the library phoned him. Although the collegian had a splitting hangover, he made a date with her for the circus.



Milton took the brunette Claire to the midway, where she won a huge doll. Then they watched Zingo shoot the balls a midget juggled, under the Big Tent—until Claire got stabbed in the back.



Cash Wale had to find the killer quick—or have the police discover he was masquerading as Zingo, and Sailor Duffy as a giant. He started the wheels spinning by snatching a gun from Claire's hopped-up roommate.



One jump ahead of the police, Cash found that Claire's doll was stuffed with marijuana. . . . The exciting tale will be told in Peter Paige's novel—"Cash Wale's Carnival Kill"—in the May issue . . . published April 1st.

READY FOR THE RACKETS

A Department

Racketeers and swindlers of all sorts are lying in wait for you, eager to rob or cheat you of your hard-earned cash. All you need to thwart them, guard against them, is a fore-knowledge of their schemes and methods of operation. Write in, telling us your own personal experiences with chiselers and con men of various sorts. It is our intention to publicize—withholding your name if you wish—the information you have passed on, paying \$5.00 for every letter used. No letters will be returned unless accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope, nor can we enter into correspondence regarding same. Address all letters to The Rackets Editor—DIME DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 205 E. 42nd St., N. Y. 17, N. Y.

It Made Me Sick

Dear Sir:

I was swindled by the "Health Racket," one of the lowest on the market.

A man came by one day with a "Cone of Cement" supposed to be filled with radioactive radium good for nearly every disease, ache and pain, so he said. Me being stricken with an incurable disease, I was just about willing to try anything.

I bought one with a written guarantee that if I didn't get well after drinking water off this rock for three months I could get my money back. Of course when I wrote I found there was no such address.

I was hard to sell but too dumb to refuse.

Kitty Whitmore
Voth, Texas.

Linen Letdown

Dear Sir:

In late 1947 a lady called on me showing beautiful samples of linen scarves, pillow cases and numerous other pieces stamped, ready to be embroidered.

The material was so lovely, the prices so cheap that I and all my neighbors gave her orders for at least fifty dollars worth among us. We made a small down payment, the rest to be paid C. O. D.

When our packages arrived we eagerly paid the charges, but alas, when we opened them the contents resembled the samples in color only. The cloth was of the sleaziest, flimsiest imitation of linen.

Melissa Sugrue
Pitkin, La.

Check Him Off the List

Dear Sir:

Some time ago my brother-in-law was working as night clerk in one of the larger hotels in Detroit. He related to me one of the most clever tricks in fraudulent check cashing that I have ever heard.

Rather late one afternoon a well-dressed man got out of the elevator on the main floor as though he were a guest of the hotel. He walked over to the cigar counter, purchased a few cigars, lit one and put the rest in his pocket. Then he told the clerk that he wanted a box of

the same kind to take with him when he left the city the next night.

The clerk got the box of cigars and the man, who gave his name as John Palmer, explained to him he would like to get a check cashed. He said he was a stranger in Detroit, that he would probably be busy the next day and not be able to get to the bank. He also explained that he didn't expect them to cash the check since they did not know him.

But John Palmer had a convincing way and told a convincing story. He told the clerk to put his name on the box of cigars and hold them until the next day and he would pay for them when he got the money from the check. He explained they could run the check through in their daily deposit and there would be no inconvenience to them. When they went to the bank they could have them call his bank in Chicago to verify the check. He would pay for the call himself.

Since he had the cigars and the check and was putting out no money the clerk could not see how they could lose and agreed to accommodate him. Palmer wrote a check payable to himself for one hundred and fifty dollars. After endorsing it himself and inquiring what time they went to the bank he proceeded to thank the clerk and left.

The next day just before time for them to send over their deposit John Palmer stepped up to the cigar counter and told the clerk on duty who he was. This man had been told the circumstances by the night clerk. Palmer explained he had wired Chicago for the money and that it would not be necessary to trouble them. He took up his check, paid for the box of cigars and left.

A few days later the cigar company was notified the check was no good. They questioned the two clerks but they were still pretty puzzled.

A trip to the bank cleared the mystery. They had endorsed the check to send in with their deposit. Palmer had taken the check to their bank, explaining that he was practically a stranger in the city but was well acquainted with the men connected with the hotel and they had endorsed the check to accommodate him. Since the company's endorsement was on the check they were now unhappily obliged to make it good.

Zelbert L. Keller
Anderson, Indiana.

Better Late Than Never

Dear Sir:

One summer day I stood in the doorway of our store when I suddenly realized that a man was running along the street, looking bewildered and half hysterical. He ran right into my store. He had passed several other stores on his way to mine, but I did not think it odd at the time.

The man was about thirty years old, and was wearing a leather army jacket on that hot day. It struck me as odd—his outfit, until he started his story. He also had the type of face that, I could have sworn, I knew from somewhere. I kept trying to place him.

He gave me his story very quickly, tearfully explaining that his wife and son were at Long Beach, California for the summer. He had just returned from work when the phone rang. He answered it to find out that his four-year-old son was suddenly stricken with a high fever and the doctor required immediate hospitalization—which required his signature for admittance. His wife, on the phone, told him the child was delirious and kept calling for him. The doctor hinted at a brain tumor and his wife was hysterical with grief and begged him to hurry. There was no way for him to reach her by phone near their bungalow, and the anxiety was driving him crazy, etc.

In his haste to get going he grabbed his army jacket and ran to get his car. Then he remembered the door had slammed and locked him out without his keys or wallet. Would I please lend him \$3.00 for gas to get out to his dying baby, he sobbed. He almost had me crying with him. When I inquired how he would go speeding to Long Beach from the Bronx without a license or ownership identification, should he get stopped by the police, a complete change came over him. I thought he would strike me. (Emotional stress, I thought at the time.) He then shouted that if he were willing to make all the risks involved to get there, why should I hesitate to loan him the money? He swore that he would repay me the next day.

He kept following me and urging me to hasten with the money, and kept glancing to the entrance to the store all the while he talked. He took \$2.78 (all I had) and was ready to be on his way when I asked him to please give me his name, address and signature. He just recently moved around the corner from our store, he said, and without a thanks, he left. I walked out of the store after him; but he was nowhere to be seen. The whole conversation took no more than five minutes and my head was spinning from the encounter.

Out of curiosity, after he left, I visited the address. Of course, no such person was living there, and the apartments went by alphabetical letters, not numbers, as he had told me. Then the sad truth dawned on me. But, I'm lucky it was only \$2.78 that I had to pay to have a familiar-looking, fast-talking man with a sob story teach me not to believe everything I hear and not to count too much on a person's promises.

Mrs. Bertha Rosenweig
Bronx, New York

Sauce for the Gander

Dear Sir:

An ad in a rural magazine caught my attention. It read: "Ten spicy tidbits, \$1.00." Curiosity got the best of me. . . . I mailed a buck.

What did I get back? Ten recipes for spicy chili sauce, pepper relish and chow-chow!

Well, the ad was rather misleading, but the recipes *were* spicy. I had to laugh. Wow, what a sucker I turned out to be!

Clifford M. Eddy, Jr.
Providence, R. I.

Sleight-of-Hand

Dear Sir:

At local carnivals there is usually a booth where you roll balls for prizes. There are holes in boards into which the ball is supposed to go.

If you look carefully, you will see that the holes have been cut out and then painted around the rims and beyond the rims. Certain holes count more than others in the scoring. Careful study will show that the holes which count the most are really too small for the ball to fall into easily—the paint makes all of the holes look the same size.

G. Ann. Delaney
New York, N. Y.

Pick-up's Letdown

Dear Sir:

A girl friend of mine was walking along a rather dark street when another girl hurried to catch up to her. The girl explained that she had quite a bit of money in her purse and would feel much safer walking with another person. The first girl said she didn't blame her, but as for herself—all she ever carried was enough money for carfare.

Just then a car drove up and the girl with "all the money" walked over to get in, telling the driver: "Don't bother with this dame, all she is carrying is carfare."

Harriet M. Davis
Chicago, Ill.

Really A Steal

Dear Sir:

I was having a cup of coffee with a friend in my restaurant one night, when a sharply dressed man approached and asked me if I was the boss. When I told him I was, the man gave a couple of quick glances around and pulled an electric shaver out of his overcoat pocket. The shaver was in a leather case and wrapped in yellow cellophane. It was new. Under the cellophane, on a printed tag, was the price, \$18.00.

He said I could have it for \$12.00 and make myself \$6.00. I shook my head and asked him if the shaver was "hot". He said I had nothing to worry about and lowered the price to \$10.00.

He came down to \$8.00. My friend offered him \$5.00. The man took it, but he wouldn't leave until my friend convinced him that he didn't want any more shavers.

My friend winked at me, plainly indicating

that he'd bought something "hot" and at a bargain price. The next day he tried the shaver out and tossed it into the ash can. The shaver buzzed in his hand, but no man alive could shave with it unless he had saddle leather for skin.

A short time later I saw an advertisement for the same shaver, which could be bought mail order for \$2.98. My friend was taken in because he was led to believe the shaver was a stolen article, when actually it had been purchased and the price tag changed.

LaFayette Stuch
Wayland, Mich.

Expensive Education

Dear Sir:

Sometimes it pays to be kind to strangers; sometimes it does not. I learned this the expensive way.

One night about two weeks ago a nice-looking, well-dressed young man came to the home of my landlady.

"Do you have any rooms?" he asked, explaining that he wanted to register in school (the state university is only two blocks away), and that he wanted a place to stay for two or three days, until he could find out whether his credits from another college would be accepted.

The landlady didn't have any rooms and she was just about to turn him away, when she thought of something.

"Wait a minute," she said. "I have a tenant who has a small, two-room apartment. He might be able to fix you up, if you wouldn't mind sleeping on a studio couch." He said that would be fine, so she phoned me.

"Sure," I said. "Be glad to help the poor guy out."

The next half hour or so we were busy making things comfortable for our new friend. We dug out a mattress from a storeroom, rustled around for clean linens and a pillow, and finally had him a nice bed made. While we worked he stood by, telling us how much he appreciated our hospitality.

He certainly did appreciate it. The next day our "guest" was gone. So was a brand new portable typewriter.

The police detective we called said that our visitor was working a racket that was becoming very common around the university.

Jack M. Swartout
Austin, Texas

The Children's Honor

Dear Sir:

This racket has been in current operation throughout the country with some success, both in the larger cities and in the smaller communities as well. The perpetrators of this swindle usually confine their activities to better-class neighborhoods. This is the usual mood of operation:

A man or woman, quiet mannered and well dressed, selects a home, where they know there are children alone in the house, while the parents are either working or have taken the evening out. They then present themselves to the

children as a friend of the parents, and, making certain that the adults are absent, suggest to the youngsters that they come in and wait the return of the family.

After gaining admittance to the house and becoming friends with the children, they suggest a game of hide-and-seek with a reward of a sum of money for the one finding the hiding place. This amount varies, but usually is \$10, which to a child is very attractive.

Mr. or Mrs. Blank, whichever the case may be, tells the youngsters to go to a far room and blindfold their eyes, so that the money may be hidden, and not to come out until they are called.

After the children are safely away, they shake the house down for the jewelry. Finding the gems they are in search of, the thieves hide the money under the jewel box and call the unsuspecting children. While the youngsters search for the prize, the strangers depart undetected with the jewels.

R. Michael Tubaugh
Columbus, Ohio

Smile at the Swindler

Dear Sir:

A year or so ago, in reply to a knock on my door, I admitted a salesman out of Minneapolis representing a photography studio which was making a house-to-house canvass throughout our neighborhood to procure appointments for photographing sittings. It seemed that they were introducing a new type of tinting to the public for the first time, and therefore, they had a special rate for a limited time only. In view of the lovely portraits which the salesman had with him, for display purposes, I did not see how I could lose, and thereupon decided to make an appointment with him.

Things went smoothly the day I made my visit to the improvised studio which had been set up in the local city hall. The photographer took three different poses of me, and before leaving, I paid him \$1.59. The proofs were to be ready within a week, and I was to come back to the city hall to view them, and make my selection.

A week later, I received a postcard telling me my proofs were ready, and I went down to choose which proof I liked best. I selected the one which I thought was the better of the three, and the photographer did not agree with me; it seemed that he thought another pose was just as good if not better than the one I had chosen. A small argument ensued, and when I told him that I thought I was capable of being the judge as to which one I wanted made into the portrait, he immediately tore to bits the proof which had been my choice. He then told me quite heatedly that my picture would be mailed to me as soon as it had been developed. I was quite indignant at this turn of events, but I thought it was better not to create a scene.

But to this day, I have never received that picture. I was never able to write to the firm to inquire about the situation, as I did not have the firm's address. I shall never know why he preferred the one proof to the one which I

wanted, nor why he was so determined that I was not going to be entitled to my preference, but I do know this. I shall never again be led into a sight-unseen situation such as this was. I only hope that others will profit by my experience and be sure they are recommended by their local Chamber of Commerce before giving any salesman a down payment, or even an agreement such as I did. My loss did not happen to be so great in a monetary value, but it was not the loss of the \$1.59 which bothered me, but rather the principle of the matter.

Lauralee Teets
Washington, Iowa

Dawg-Gone It

Dear Sir:

A few days ago my farmhouse doorbell rang. My caller was a fellow with a briefcase who said that he represented— But almost at the same instant, he pulled up his trouser leg to display for my benefit a nasty, bleeding gash on his calf. My dog had bitten him, and things looked serious for me—unless, well, it would take several stitches to close the "wound," and the doctor would charge five dollars at least.

What made me suspicious was, first, my ten-year-old dog had never before shown such a vicious streak as to nip a stranger. Second, upon looking closely at the gash, it didn't look like a fresh wound at all. Consequently the fellow had to go away minus doctor's expenses.

At my neighbor's, the 'dog bite' racketeer was luckier, for there, too, the dog "bit" him, and my neighbor had never heard about the 'dog bite' mooch. When the racketeer displayed his mercurochrome-painted gash and told him what could happen if he didn't come across with money for doctor's expenses, the neighbor turned pale. On seeing this, the crook really got nery and asked for ten dollars—and got it! What is more, the car he drove was a later model than mine and my neighbor's!

I believe this mooch is not new. I think it has been worked for years with good success by pseudo-peddlers in rural communities, even in villages. Where the crook gets the gash in his leg is a mystery. It could be an old wound that wasn't properly cared for, or maybe the moocher had it made especially. At least it serves the scamp well, because all he need do is to dab it with mercurochrome to give it the appearance of a freshly-made wound, and then find a victim with a yard and a harmless dog.

C. de V.
Russell, Minn.

Job Jitters

Dear Sir:

Here is one of the smoothest rackets I've heard of in a long time, and I've read about them for years in this department.

Until recently, my wife was employed as secretary to the superintendent of a large watch factory. In the course of his various duties, he noticed that the labor turnover in the service department was unusually heavy, and, upon investigation, this is what he discovered, after my

wife and he had checked over the employment records.

It was discovered that most of the help in this department was furnished by a particular employment agency, located in the downtown section of the city. Some checking revealed that the personnel manager and the service department manager were the co-owners of this agency.

The personnel manager would, naturally, know of any and all openings in the service department. His downtown agency would send him applicants for these positions. He would hire them and turn them over to the service department manager.

After a week or two of work, which guaranteed the agency full payment of their placement fee, the service manager would fire the new employee on some fabricated excuse, the personnel manager would extend his deepest regrets, and immediately the merry-go-round would start all over again; thus, how could they lose?

They did, however. They made the sad mistake of using the company phone for their private business, and went at it too hot and heavy. Action is now being taken to recover the mass of fees they collected before they were discovered.

Saul D. Staff
Brooklyn, N. Y.

Water, Water Everywhere

Dear Sir:

A new racket was worked on us when we came to the Southwest because of my husband's health. A friend who was here rented us an apartment so we would not be compelled to go to a hotel, as my husband is badly crippled. When we arrived, there was no water in the apartment, although the landlady had agreed to have the water turned on when we arrived. We had already made arrangements through a friend for the gas and electricity.

I spoke to her about the water, but she insisted that I was to furnish it myself. Being pretty well tied up with the care of my husband and scarcely knowing where to go, I asked her to take me to the water office. She very agreeably did.

But on the way, she hinted that there was another apartment to be had nearer town—even introducing me to the other landlady! Needless to say, after being without water all one day and part of the next, I took the other apartment. It was really nicer and offered no increase in rent. Of course, I had to sacrifice a month's rent for the first apartment.

Later I learned that no one stayed in that apartment more than a week at a time! Probably she has other ways of discouraging tenants when they come so they will move alomst at once. Thereby she gets her rent money for full time—but without having her apartment receive any wear. Since this is a tourist town, it is a smart way of getting rent without much service.

Mrs. M. J. Briggs
Douglas, Ariz.

THE CORPSE BELONGS TO DADDY

CHAPTER ONE

The Prodigal Returns

HE CAME out of the closet with all the lithe grace of a falling step-ladder. It was a closet like you get these days, in a ten-thousand-dollar house. Cigar-box construction and so shallow that a size twelve shoe has to be angled to fit on the floor. He had stiffened up, but the shallow closet had stopped the process with his knees half bent.

It wasn't the way he should have died. It wasn't the right ending for his story. The story had begun in a scabbed frame house with a packed dirt yard on the wrong side of the tracks. There were eight kids. He was the oldest, born on the ship coming over, steerage.

His old man was a puddler in a steel mill. When Ivan was six, he saw the cherry glow of the blast furnaces against the night sky of a dirty little Pennsylvania town. The rest was simple as two plus two.

Ivan Cherkak—high school, shop work, mill work, competitive scholarship, M.I.T., research, back to the mill and through the grind up to production manager, vice president in charge of production, president of one outfit, chairman of the board of three others—all for the sake of making better steel than had ever been made before. Dreams seen against the night sky of that little town.



By **JOHN D. MacDONALD**

Dynamic Crime-Mystery Novelette

*Dad was bullet-riddled and someone had to burn—
but I still counted on the old man's pulling my
chestnuts out of the fire.*



*I pivoted, and my fist ex-
ploded on his chin. . . .*

And he ended up at the age of fifty-four, with his body crammed into a cheap closet in a jerry-built house on a street without trees.

Quite a few stocks would take a plunge when it came out. And, when they heard what had happened, a few hundred men would curse huskily to mask the sting at the corners of their eyes. For Ivan Cherkzak had been straight and fair and clean.

The forty-five-caliber slug had drummed a round, ragged hole in his chest, just to the left of center. The cloth around the hole was charred. A raised welt over his left ear was crusted with dried blood. He had been slugged, had been held upright in the closet, the gun muzzle inches from his chest.

I turned my back on him and walked across the bare floor to the curtainless window. A dead fly, a motionless crust, lay on its back near the trick window catch. The windowpanes still had the little stickers on them to show the name of the glassmaker. Outside, the yard was gummy with autumn rain. Landscaping had consisted of planting four foot-high Scotch pines. Three of them were dead already. The fourth looked as though it wouldn't survive the coming winter.

I tried to get my mind off the silence behind me. I tried to pretend that it was a house I was going to buy. But the sobs broke through and it was the first time that I had cried in many years.

You cry because you have regrets. You cry for the things you didn't do.

He thought he was doing his best for us, I guess. Mother died when Anna was born. I was five at the time. He wanted us to have all the things he didn't have.

Maybe that heart of his had died long before the slug hit it. Maybe some of it died the night he found out I had legally changed my name. What kind of a name is Vladimir Cherkzak? It was the same name that puddler had had, my grandfather. Donald Cheyne was my new name. Maybe a bit more of that heart died when Anna divorced her second husband.

If only he had lived for one more year. He had bought me out of my scrapes. One more year would have done it—for I started to get out of my own scrapes. Just one more year.

He had been surprised to find out that

I had become a rookie cop on the West Coast. I had come East to talk to him. Thirty days accumulated leave. Thirty days to get to know my father again. I had wanted to tell him about the promotion I had received, about my decision to change my name back to the name he had given me.

But he was on the floor behind me and I was staring at a dead fly on a sill covered with cheap varnish, and nobody would ever be able to tell Ivan Cherkzak anything more.

But I turned and told him. I told him with words that were dull, slurred, formless. When I was through I doubled my fist and struck at the wall. I drove a plug of thin plaster and torn garish paper in through the shattered lathes and heard the crumbled bits sift down between the walls.

I inherited his tough strong body, the body that, at fifty-four, had enabled him to work like a young man. He hadn't been afraid. Wary, yes. But not afraid.

His voice over the phone had been guarded. "You just got in? Wait. Let me think. No, don't come here. Just a little trouble. I'll tell you when I see you. No, don't come out to the house. Get a hotel room. I'll meet you at four this afternoon. Number eighty-eight, Holden Road. A new house. Don't take a taxi right to the door. Don't ask me now, son. I'll tell you when I see you."

The three intervening hours I spent trying to figure out what was eating him. Then I had gone to Holden Road. The houses were new. They had been put up fast. But only a few were occupied. The price was too high on them. The street had a dispirited air. The new asphalt was lumpy, and I knew that in another year the potholes would begin to show up.

I had pushed the button beside the front door of the house he had mentioned. There was no answering ring from inside. When I knocked the door, which was off the latch, swung open a few inches. The house, empty of furniture, smelled of varnish and paint and new wallpaper. The small living room was paneled in Mexican pine. The house had a waiting look. I called his name, softly at first, and then more loudly.

Then, proceeding only on the basis that I

had never known him to miss an appointment, I had begun to search the house. He had kept his appointment. I knew he had kept it when I opened the closet door in the second upstairs bedroom.

There are no words for the feeling of loss. Not that particular feeling. I thought of all the years I had given him pain, and of how I had anticipated getting to know him for the first time.

BUT another feeling came along and began to blot it out. Somebody had done this thing to him. Someone had held the gun, had pulled the trigger. Someone had slammed the closet door on his body, leaning hard to latch it. Someone had picked up the ejected cartridge case, pocketed the weapon, walked out of that cheap house. And I knew that I had a date with that someone. They didn't know it yet, but I did.

I had pounded all the rules of police procedure into my skull. I knew that this thing should be reported immediately—which would mean that I'd become a bystander. All the machinery of the local department would mesh.

A decision had to be made. *Do not touch the body. Get hold of headquarters at once.* I squatted beside the body and went through the pockets. He used a big gold replica of a paper clip as a bill clip. Sixty-two dollars. The thin platinum wrist watch was ticking against his wrist. It matched mine within a few minutes.

I made a little heap of the rest of the things from his pockets. Two yellow pencil stubs, a key ring with five keys, oiled silk tobacco pouch, briar pipe with the stem deeply bitten, thirty-eight cents in change, a flat leather folder for identification cards—engineering associations, plant identification cards dating from the war, fraternal organizations, vehicle registration, driver's license.

On the edge of the driver's license was a tiny legend in black ink. "R-18, L-31, R-3, L-49." Obviously a safe combination. I tore a little strip off the edge of the license which included the combination. I put it and the keys in my side pocket, put the rest of the stuff back in the proper pockets.

I stood up and looked down at him. There was a dignity about him, even in

death, the dignity of a man who has never been afraid.

I left the house. The newest key on the ring fitted the front door. I locked it behind me. The inside doorknob had been wiped clean. That used to be the sign of a professional. Now it is the first thing any punk does. . . .

The real estate office had once been an automobile showroom. Through the plate glass as I approached the door, I could see a pretty girl smiling up into the wet-lipped face of a heavy man who, wearing his hat pushed back, was leaning over her, one hand on the back of her chair, another on her typist's desk.

The big face of the electric clock showed a few minutes after five. They both frowned at me when I came in and walked across the wide expanse of floor toward them.

Closer up, the girl was still pretty. But her eyes were too close together, and a frayed, soiled shoulderstrap had crept out from under the padded shoulder of her dress, lay loosely on the firm white arm.

"We close at five," the heavy man said, jerking his head toward the clock.

Though my face felt stiff and cold, I smiled at them. "Sorry to bother you, but I have a few questions."

He straightened up, sighed heavily and strolled over to the plate glass windows, his hands locked behind him, began to stare moodily out at the wet street. The girl gave me a professionally alert look.

"You handle the Holden Road property?"

The man by the windows snorted. She said, "Yes sir, we do. If you're interested you could come back in the morning and our Mr. Trayloe will—"

"Who bought number eighty-eight?"

"We keep our client's business confidential," the man said without turning.

"I can go look at the tax rolls in the morning, friend," I said. "But wouldn't it be a shame if I was in a spot to do you a favor and you hadn't treated me nice?"

He turned then. "You can't do us any favors on eighty-eight, pal. It was a cash deal and the bank liked the look of the money."

"Who bought it?"

They looked at each other. The man shrugged. The girl got up, and with

practised hip-flaunt, walked over to a green tin file, pulled open the top drawer and dug around in it. "Miss Arlene Miller," she said.

"She gave you her check for the total amount?"

"I told you it was cash," the man said. "Ten thousand on the nose."

The girl giggled. "Charlie's eyes stood out on stalks."

"Shut up!" the man snarled.

"You can't talk to me like this!" she shrilled. "We'll just skip that drink. Just because I agreed to go out with you doesn't give you any right to—"

The man walked stolidly to the front door, slammed it behind him and walked away.

"Oh, damn!" she said hopelessly. She glared at me. It had become my fault.

"What was this Arlene Miller like?" I asked.

"Mister, I've got work to do. You've made enough trouble."

I smiled at her, trying to make myself look as if I thought she was attractive. "If I cheated you out of a drink, I'll replace the drink."

She looked at me as if I was a bargain-day special. Her smile was slow in coming, but finally she gave me a dazzling view of slightly discolored teeth. "That's fair enough," she said.

She shoved the papers into a desk drawer, locked the desk, said, "Back in a minute. Hey, what's your name? I'm Glory Mulholland."

"Don Cheyne."

She gave that walk of hers a little extra fillip that swirled her new look around ample calves, and disappeared into the back. I sat on the edge of her desk. When she came out she looked almost presentable.

"Car, Don?" she asked.

"Taxi, if we can find one."

"My crate is parked in back." She clicked out the lights, locked the front door. We walked down the alley to the parking lot. She skirted a puddle, giggled and leaned warmly against me. Her car was a prim little business coupe. Carmined cigarette butts were piled high in both ash trays. She gave me the keys. I helped her in, went around and drove back down the alley.

GLORY MULHOLLAND picked the sort of a place she needed, the cocktail lounge at a second-class hotel called Ambraine. The lights had the same orange glow as candles, ironing out the greedy lines in her face, giving the blonde parched ends of her hair a natural look.

Our martinis were doubles, very dry, with the glasses misted and a twist of lemon in them. "Here's to a better date than the one I was about to have," she said.

She stuck her rather sharp little nose down into the glass. It looked like she took three sips, but when she set the glass down it was two thirds empty. She leaned back with a dreamy look on her face and I knew she was feeling it hit her, knew that she had been thinking of that drink since right after lunch. I also knew that I'd better not dawdle around getting to the point.

"Now you can buy your drink, Glory," I said. "You're an intelligent girl. What was your reaction to Arlene Miller?"

Her mouth twisted. "I know her type. One of those dark ones that looks like she had a little Chinese blood in her. Slanty eyes, sort of. No makeup except lipstick. Lets her eyebrows grow too bushy. A meek, humble little voice and go-to-hell eyes. Pure cat."

"How old?"

She shrugged. "Twenty-five. Loaded with phony culture. In the movies they'd cast her as the female musician who has written a big symphony."

"How did the sale work?"

"She came in one afternoon and priced the house. Not that particular one. Just any of them along there. Wouldn't let anybody show it to her. The next day she came in with the cash. A big wad of it in a brown paper bag. What a hell of a way to carry money. The papers were all made out and she got the keys and the deed and away she went. We haven't seen her since."

"Did she give you an address?"

Glory's eyes widened. "Hey, here's a coincidence. This was her address. Right here! The Ambraine."

Although I dug around a little more, she'd given me the whole works. I didn't like the way it added up. Ivan and a young dish. Maybe a dish with attachments, a dish who left an ex with a hot

temper. Could be. I could not remember any time when I was small that my father was the least bit interested in women. But he was a strong and vital man.

I wondered if my father had put the ten thousand in the brown paper bag. That was the one thing that sounded like him. Money had never been a god to him. It had just been paper that you could buy things with, meriting respect only when you bought the tools of production, when you used it to make the clean lengths of perfect steel.

When I saw the waiter hovering, I came to, saw Glory looking at me peculiarly. I ordered another round. When the waiter went away, she said, "Now I'm curious. Why all the questions? Are you a cop?"

"The police force here never heard of me, Glory."

She was shrewd enough. "That doesn't answer the question, lad."

"We've had enough questions," I said. "Let's talk about something interesting. Miss Glory Mulholland, for example."

But she wasn't listening. She was looking over toward the bar. I looked where she was looking. Charlie had found us. He had his back to the bar, a glass in his hand, and his underlip was out far enough to keep the rain off his shoes.

It solved a problem for me. I said, "Why were you going out with a bum like Charlie?"

Her eyes narrowed. "There's nothing wrong with Charlie!"

"Nothing that a grade-school education couldn't fix."

"You're pretty wise, aren't you?"

I shrugged and grinned at her. She slugged down the second drink and stood up. She was a little drunk. "Nobody can talk about my friends that way!" I raised my arm and her slap missed my face. She stalked toward the door. Charlie gulped his drink, caught her at the door. They went out arm in arm.

I paid the tab, left the rest of my second drink, and walked out of the dimness of the lounge into the hotel lobby. The desk clerk had a bald head, a hard pink face, a warm professional smile as he spun the register toward me, and eyes like gray note paper—pulpy and blank.

"Is Miss Arlene Miller registered here?"

He turned and ran a thumb down the cardex on the wall. "Ten oh eight, sir."

The grip on the house phone was sticky. After three rings, a low voice said, "Yes?"

"I'd like to see you for a few moments, Miss Miller."

"Who are you?"

"I won't take but a few moments of your time."

"If you can't tell me who you are, I'm afraid that—"

"It's about a purchase you made, Miss Miller."

"What sort of a purchase?"

"A house, Miss Miller."

She waited so long that I was afraid she had quietly hung up. "Come up, then," she said.

Her room was almost at the end of the corridor. I knocked and heard the chain slipped off the door, saw it open. I got the impression of a pale face and enormous dark eyes. I got an impression of fear, almost of panic.

The shades were down and the last faint light of dusk didn't do much for the room. I half-heard the swish of the descending blow and tried to duck. The corner of my jaw, under my right ear, blew up with a discordant crash that sent me off into a place where I was clinging to one of those big discs set into the floor at amusement parks. In total darkness the disc spun faster and faster until I slipped off the edge into nothingness.

CHAPTER TWO

Kill and Kill Again

THERE was no daylight left at all. I opened my eyes, and heard the wet sound of traffic in the street far below. My head ached and I felt sick to my stomach. I sensed that I was alone in the room. The blow had cracked a bit off a tooth on the right side of my jaw. I investigated the place with the tip of my tongue, spat out the fragment of tooth. I was bleeding inside the mouth, but there was little pain. I had probably come to a great deal quicker than if the blow had fallen where it had undoubtedly been aimed—at the mastoid bone behind my ear. The unbroken skin indicated that it had been a sap. The man must have been

inside, half behind the door to her room.

I got up too quickly and the first sickening blow of pain sat me gasping on a bed. On the second try I found the light switch. It was a fair-sized room with a double bed and bath. And it had the anonymity of all vacated hotel rooms. A damp bath towel on the bathroom floor.

I couldn't think clearly. They had not waited to identify me or to hear any part of my story. I wondered what their motivation could have been. There had been fear on the girl's face. I was certain of that. I was equally certain that she had matched Glory's description of the girl who had brought the ten thousand dollars to the real estate agency. Against the oval pallor of her face, I had seen the deep lines of the heavy brows.

Things were beginning to get too far out of hand. I moved toward the phone, then changed my mind. I took the elevator down to the lobby, found the booths down near the closed barber shop, dialed the three short numbers for police emergency.

"Police Headquarters. Sergeant Jenari speaking."

"There's a body at 88 Holden Road. Find Arlene Miller at the Ambraine." I hung up before he could say a word. . . .

The odds were against the safe being at the office. I went to the house on the hill, left the taxi down by the main road and walked up the curving gravel drive.

To my surprise, Parker opened the door. His wide sour face was impassive. I hadn't seen him in seven years. I moved a little so the light hit my face, and waited.

His eyes slowly widened. "You!" he gasped. There was no pleasure in it. Just surprise. I tried to walk by him, but he blocked the door. "He isn't here yet."

"I want to talk to you, Parker," I said. He had the loyalty of a weathered old hunting dog. He stared at me doubtfully, then moved aside. Maybe something in my voice or something he saw in my face convinced him.

He shut the heavy door. The dark wood in the big hallway gleamed. A clock ticked with solemn beat. I wondered how long I had before the phone call came in. Parker had every reason to hate me. He knew what a bad time I had given Ivan Cherkak.

Before I could speak Anna came to the doorway. She held a glass in her hand.

She peered at me owlishly. Once upon a time, before her first marriage, Anna had a warmth and glow about her that was more than beauty. Her body was still straight, tall, beautiful. But there was nothing in her face. Nothing in her eyes.

"Hello, Donald," she said, sarcastic emphasis on the name.

"You better know too," I said.

She tilted her head very slightly to one side. "Know what?"

Parker stood, grizzled and heavy-shouldered, his face in shadow.

"You should know that today somebody shot him. They killed him. I found his body."

Parker stared at me. "Not—not him!"

I nodded. The glass slipped through Anna's fingers, splintering on the floor, sending up a gout of liquid to make a widening stain on her pale skirt.

Parker went after my throat. His big thumbs fastened on either side with crushing pressure as Anna screamed, almost soundlessly. The room spun and darkened and I managed to get his thick wrists in my hands, tear loose.

I pushed him back and away. His back thumped against the wall.

"I didn't do it," I said harshly. "Don't be such a damn fool, Parker!"

He looked at me for a long time and then his shoulders sagged. The years that he had fought off for so long piled up on him. There was a glint of tears on his cheeks. He turned and shuffled down the hall with an old man's step.

Anna still stood, her hand at her throat. She said something incoherent, turned and walked into the next room. I followed her, stood over her when she sat down.

"Who is Arlene Miller?" I asked.

She took a long time to hear the question. I repeated it. She looked at me blankly. "I never heard of her."

"Was there . . . was there a woman recently? Did he act as though there was a woman?"

"No. No! What are you talking about?"

She moved quickly when the doorbell sounded. I followed her into the hall. She swung the door wide, went immediately into the startled arms of the man who came in. The sobs tore her throat. He edged in, still holding her, giving me a

quick, puzzled glance. He pushed the door shut with his elbow, made comforting sounds to Anna.

Suddenly she broke away from him and, her face contorted, ran up the wide stairs. In seconds we heard the bedroom door slam.

"What's this all about?" he demanded.

"I'm Vladimir Chertzak," I said.

He looked at me oddly. "I thought you had a new name."

"How would you know so much?" I demanded.

He smiled. "I'm Bill Grayden."

We walked into the drawing room. Under the brighter lights I realized that I should have known him. He had been everything I should have been. His father had been the William A. Grayden who, as my father's lawyer, had helped get me out of a couple of scrapes. While I was getting into trouble, young Bill was doing all the right things. Scholarships. Athletics. He was still blond, but whereas I remembered him as having a rather puffy face, he had thinned down. I imagined that the women would consider those hollows in his cheeks quite interesting.

"Dad died two years after I got out of law school," he said. "I've been handling your father's personal business ever since. What's the matter with Anna?" He looked at me as though to say if it was something I had done, he'd be happy to punch my head.

"My father was murdered this afternoon," I said.

He stared at me and his face went dead white. His mouth opened, moved, but no words came out. He turned and I heard his quick steps on the stairs. In a few moments I heard him knocking at Anna's door.

I lit a cigarette and looked around. Beyond the drawing room was the small study that my father had used. The safe was set in the study wall. Time for that later. My steps were noiseless on the stairs. Anna's door was open. Bill Grayden sat near her, patting her shoulder, murmuring to her. He glanced toward me, saw my raised eyebrows.

Grayden came out into the hall, pulled the door shut behind him. "We were to have been married next week," he said. His voice softened. "Anna's had a bad

time. But none of it has been her fault. I . . . I love her."

The phone rang. I lifted the extension phone off the cradle. "Who is this?" an official voice asked.

"Vladimir Chertzak."

"Son of Ivan Chertzak?"

"That's right."

"This is Captain Griss of the Police Department. Your father has been hurt. I'll have a car up there for you within a few minutes."

"Thank you," I said. I hung up, turned to Grayden. "Police. They're picking me up. You better come along." He hesitated, then nodded.

"Who is Arlene Miller?" I asked as we went down the stairs.

He stopped, looked back at me. "Why do you ask that?"

"I'll change the question. Do you know who she is?"

"Yes," he said. He went on down the stairs, his shoulders straight. There was a low moan from a nearby siren as gravel crunched under tires. I called to Parker. When he came to the end of the hall I said, "Call a doctor. Have him look at Anna. She may need a sedative."

DUE to Ivan Chertzak's prominence, it was turning into a three-ring circus by the time we got there. Captain Griss, a lean, hard, competent-looking man, was bowing and scraping to the inspector, a billowy and asthmatic man with snow-white hair. As Grayden and I got out of the sedan, flash bulbs popped in our faces.

Somebody had managed to get the house current turned on. The house was lit from top to bottom, looking oddly stark with the uncurtained windows. Heels made sticky sounds in the gummy lawn.

Inside the house, the official flash bulbs were popping and the fingerprint boys were busily at work. I noticed that a pane of glass in one of the narrow strips beside the door had been shattered. That was how they had gotten in.

I had to explain Grayden. The medical examiner was snapping shut the catches on his bag. I made the identification, then walked back to the window while they began to clean up. The dead fly was still on its back near the trick window catch.

Captain Griss moved up beside me,

coughing to get my attention. "You interest me, Mr. Chertzak," he said. I didn't answer.

"I thought it odd, Mr. Chertzak, that you made no attempt to find out how badly your father was hurt."

I reached for my pocket. From the other direction, a hard hand reached over and clamped my wrist. My pockets were expertly slapped. Then I was permitted to get my identification and hand it to the captain.

"If these are your papers, why the new name?"

Grayden butted in eagerly. "He had it legally changed several years ago, Captain. My father handled it, under protest."

"That isn't what you called yourself over the phone," the captain said.

"I'm going to change it back," I said.

"I'm still wondering why you didn't ask questions over the phone."

Wearily I said, "Because I had an appointment to meet him here at four. I searched the house and found him. Your people will find my prints on the closet-door handle and on other door handles in the house. I phoned in the tip on him."

"At twenty minutes to seven. Did it take you two hours and forty minutes to find a phone?"

I gave them the facts. I gave them everything, but the combination to the safe. I stood patiently while Captain Griss gave me the tongue-lashing I deserved. When he was quite through, I pointed a thumb at Grayden and said, "He knows Arlene Miller."

Griss, still angry at me, turned on Grayden. "All right. What was the Miller woman to the deceased?"

"That is confidential information," Grayden said with dignity.

"Your client is dead, Mr. Attorney. Spill it!"

Bill Grayden glanced at me. I nodded. He licked his lips. "I don't know very much. I know that Mr. Chertzak bought a house for Miss Miller. You don't ask too much in a situation like that. I was preparing a new will for Mr. Chertzak. I had explicit instructions on writing Miss Miller into the will for a . . . a substantial amount. Then, this morning, Mr. Chertzak phoned me and told me to scrap the new will, that the old one would stand."

Griss frowned. "Would this Miss Miller have known that the new will was never prepared?"

Grayden had a thoughtful look. He said, "Well, the preparation of wills takes more time than laymen realize. She *could* have thought that the new will had been prepared."

Griss smacked a knobby fist into the palm of his hand. "This begins to look clearer. And quicker."

"I'm the executor under the old will, Captain."

"What are the provisions?"

Grayden assumed his cloak of dignity again. "I will divulge the provisions at the official reading of the document with the heirs present."

Griss snorted and turned away.

Out on the sidewalk I said, "What do you want me to do?"

"I'll have you driven home. Don't do anything. Just stay in town. When we pick up the Miller woman, I'll want you for identification. You and those real estate people. . . ."

By the time we got back to the house, the doctor had left. Parker reported that he had given Anna a sedative. Grayden came in and had a brandy with me in the study. We decided that the will could be read on the following day. The reporters phoned three times during ten minutes and I had Parker leave the phone off the hook.

The ache in my jaw had settled to a dull throb. The brandy helped a good deal. I said good night to Grayden and he let himself out. After I heard his car drive away, I sat in the study. On the paneled walls were framed pictures of steel mills. Pictures of groups of workers. I walked over and looked at the inscription on one. "First heat, Marysdale Mills, 1926." Ivan Chertzak was in the picture. A young man wearing a wide grin. His sleeves were rolled up and his hard biceps bulged.

I sat in his chair behind his desk, with his pipe rack near me. The big house was silent. It creaked in the stillness of the night. The lamp cast a warm glow over the desk.

Some faint noise from the back of the house disturbed me. I walked out. The kitchen had been modernized. Fluorescent fixtures cast a white glow. Near the sink, Parker lay on his side, blood that looked

black spreading in a pool under his balding head. His knees were drawn up and he wore a peaceful, sleeping look.

I stood absolutely still and listened. There was no sound in the house. The rain had begun again. It whispered against the kitchen windows.

With the suddenness of a blow, all of the lights went out. I instinctively dropped into a half crouch. One of the cellar stairs creaked. When I turned, I lost my sense of direction. I shut my eyes tightly, then opened them wide, trying to get used to the blackness.

There was the thin scraping sound of the edge of a shoe sole against linoleum. A shadow loomed. I drove in low and hard, felt the surprising whip of a skirt against my face. She went down hard, crashing into one of the built-in counters, moaning as she fell.

Rolling away from her, I poised myself with one knee and my knuckles against the floor. Something crashed down on the back of my neck, driving me down onto the floor. I was swimming in a black sea, fighting my way up. My hands closed on a wrist, and I rolled with it, twisting the wrist with all my strength. There was an answering scream of pain, and the thin crack of bone. I slid my hand up the arm until I found the shoulder. There was a face beyond it.

With the fury I had suppressed ever since I had opened that closet door, I drove my fist into that face.

CHAPTER THREE

Murderer's Jackpot

THE lights were on and somebody was screaming and pulling at me and my arm was turning to lead as I drove it into what had been a face. I stood up and turned on her. It was the girl who had opened the hotel door.

I took two slow steps toward her. She put both hands to her cheeks and backed up. A wide bruise was spreading across her cheek. Her dark hair was rumped, the shoulder of her dress torn.

The crash of the shot in that confined space seemed to shake the walls. Grayden stood in the doorway, an army automatic in his hand. He was looking with pure

horror at the man I had been hitting. I turned. The slug, entering just over the ear, had slid the body two feet further away, leaving a smear of blood on the gay linoleum.

I turned back just in time to catch Arlene Miller as she sagged forward.

Grayden babbled, "I forgot to tell you something. I came back. The front door was half open. I heard the thumping. The lights went on. This gun was on the floor in the doorway. You had your back to that—that man on the floor. He was reaching for your ankles. I fired instinctively. I didn't know . . ."

He followed me, his voice going higher and higher. I put Arlene Miller on the first couch I came to, turned and slapped Grayden across the face. My fingers made a red pattern on his skin. He gulped twice, said, "Thanks. I—I needed that."

While he stayed to watch the girl, I went back out to tend to Parker. The gash in the back of his head was a nasty one, but he was beginning to stir. I soaked a clean dish towel in cold water, folded it and had him hold it against his head. His face was gray.

"I was alone out here. I went near the cellar door and that's all I can remember." Suddenly he saw the body. His face got grayer, and he swallowed hard.

"Don't get up, Parker. What's the doctor's number?"

He gave it to me. I left him staring at the body as I went to phone. Bill Grayden stood looking down at the girl. I gently took the gun out of his hand and slipped it into my jacket pocket. He didn't seem to notice that I had taken it.

I knew that Arlene was the loveliest thing I had ever seen. Small wonder that she had been able to . . . I shuddered.

Grayden turned and said, "The brandy still in the study? I need a—"

"Help yourself. I've got a few phone calls to make."

He walked into the study. I stood looking down at the girl. Her eyelids opened so quickly and she looked at me with such intentness that I knew she had been shamming.

"Are you his son?" she whispered.

I nodded. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Grayden coming back to the couch.

"The will," she said. "Don't let him—"

Grayden leaned over the head of the couch and hit her in the mouth with his fist. She did not flinch or try to cry out. Her dark eyes watched me.

"Better hurry up with those calls," Bill Grayden said. "I'll keep an eye on this lying skirt."

I called the doctor. Then I called the police. I told the police to hurry over. They didn't hear me because I kept my thumb on the phone cradle.

I went back to Bill Grayden, asked, "What was it you forgot?"

He smiled. "I forgot to tell you that there is a copy of the will in the safe in the study. No harm in your seeing it ahead of time. Do you know the combination?"

"No, I don't."

Her dark eyes watched me. A red line of blood ran from the corner of her tender mouth.

"I'll go in with you and open it up. Better bring her along so that we can keep an eye on her."

Arlene Miller got up with surprising ease. Bill Grayden pushed her roughly inside as we came to the study door. He smiled at me, lifted the proper picture off the hook and began to spin the dial, whistling softly between his teeth. Arlene Miller stood by the desk. Bill Grayden handed me the will in an unsealed envelope. I took it out.

It was short, dated 1940. The entire estate to be liquidated, with the proceeds set up in a trust fund, the income from which to be split equally between Anna and myself. There were several small grants to be taken out before the establishment of the fund—such as ten thousand to Parker.

The will, as it stood, meant that I would never have to work another day unless I felt so inclined. It meant complete financial freedom.

Bill Grayden was smiling at me. "Satisfied?" he asked.

I moved closer to him. I pointed at the will. "All except this point right here, Bill."

He stuck his head out to look at the sheet. I pivoted and my fist exploded on the point of his chin. He flipped back and his head thudded against the desk as he

went down. Arlene wore an odd expression. I bent over Grayden, reached into his inside jacket pocket and pulled out the long envelope I found there.

There were two documents in it. A new will, dated three days before, and a letter to me. A sealed letter from my father.

I opened the letter first. It bore yesterday's date.

My son,

I know you will forgive me when you learn that for the past year I have been receiving monthly reports on you from a firm of private investigators on the West Coast. Today I learned from them by wire that you are coming back here to see me. All I can say to you is that I am proud of you, proud of the way you have become an adult.

I hope you will not receive this letter. It is a selfish hope. If you receive it, it will mean that I have been killed. In the past two days there have been two clever attempts made to kill me. I do not know why. I have made enemies of foolish men who blame me for their own failures.

Maybe I am a vengeful man. I do not want to die and have the murderer go unpunished. That is why I am writing this. Should you find I have died, I want you to find out why and who.

There is nothing in my past of which I am ashamed except one thing. Fifteen years ago I pressed charges against a man who had worked for me as a cashier. He embezzled a great deal of money. I used all of my weight to get him sent to prison as I was angry. He died in prison. A year after he died the actual thief confessed. It was a deathbed confession, but carried so many corroborative details that I could not doubt the validity of it. I then remembered that the man I had persecuted, Mr. Ralph Miller, had a small child at the time he was sent to prison. Last week, after a long search which lasted for years, I found the child and the widow. I am rewriting my will to provide for them—rather, I have rewritten it.

There was another reason for rewriting it, my son. You are now capable of assuming your place as the head of the family.

Your loving father,

It bore his heavy signature, sprawling boldly across half the page. I glanced at Arlene Miller and said, "Was your father Ralph Miller?"

She nodded.

I opened the new will. It was as short as the first. It named me executor, and it established no trust funds. It merely said that I could use the estate in any way I

saw fit, provided that I assumed the financial responsibility for my sister, Anna, and for Mrs. Ralph Miller and her daughter Arlene.

"Who is the dead man in the kitchen?" I asked.

"His name is George Fowler. He worked for your father. Your father hired him a few days ago to find out who was trying to kill him."

"And he found out?"

Her eyes flashed. "I found out. I saw Mr. Grayden leaving the house where I was to meet you and your father. He wanted us to meet. He bought the house for mother and me, and had me pay cash so that there would be no talk."

I glanced down at Bill Grayden. His eyes were open—slitted like the eyes of an animal. He made a grab for my legs. His finger tips brushed my trouser cuffs as I stepped back. The automatic fitted warmly and comfortably into my hand. I wanted to laugh.

I leveled it at him and said, "One just for luck, Grayden."

The safety was off. His face was like caked milk. He half sat up, his eyes wide and inched himself along on the floor like a crippled bug. He kept inching until his back was against the wall and still he kept making those little pushing motions with his heels as though he could push right back through the wall.

I aimed it right where I wanted him to have it. Arlene pushed my wrist. The jar of her hand tripped the trigger. The slug thudded a hole through the paneling, brushing his coatsleeve.

Bill Grayden screeched, "I didn't mean to kill the old guy."

"Call Captain Griss," I whispered to Arlene.

Her heels tapped loudly when she crossed the bare floor before she got to the living room rug.

UNDER the adroit questioning of Captain Griss in the tiny oak office at Police Headquarters, it all became clear. Bill Grayden had concealed his distaste for Anna sufficiently to make her love him. He knew the terms of the will. As executor and as husband of Anna, he would be on easy street.

When my father had requested the new will, Grayden had complied, feeling a fortune slip out of his hands. Since he had the run of the house, he decided that the simplest thing to do would be to kill my father.

His first two attempts to make my father's death look like an accident failed. Murder, if it could be pinned on someone else, would be better. My father had not suspected Bill Grayden. Thus Bill had known he was to meet Arlene and me at the new house—and got there first.

Arlene had arrived in time to see Grayden leave. She had called Fowler in a panic when she couldn't find my father there. I had arrived while she was calling Fowler. They had returned and had used her key on the door I locked, had found my father dead in the upstairs bedroom.

Fowler immediately guessed the motive. He and Arlene came to the house. But Grayden had let himself back in again, slugged Parker, and intended to slug me. He had to get the new will at all costs, to keep suspicion on Arlene, and because he had fed the cops that yarn about the new will being cancelled before it was completed.

George arrived, via a cellar window, in time to upset Grayden's plan. Grayden saw his chance and killed Fowler, thus making certain that anything Arlene had told Fowler would go no farther.

Slugging me at Arlene's hotel room had been a mistake. Fowler had the idea that if he could get his hands on Grayden, he could get the truth out of him. In the gloom of the hotel corridor, they had thought I was Grayden.

Captain Griss stared at me. "It all matches up with what Grayden told us an hour ago. He's still quivering from the way you scared him, Cherkak."

I hope that somewhere the old man knew what had happened. I could almost hear the deep boom of his laughter. No one else had to know. I looked again at Arlene's eyes and knew why he had wanted me to meet her—because that's how I had first known Grayden had been out of line . . . when he slapped her mouth.

I sat and wondered how long it would be before that mouth wasn't too sore to kiss.

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RAILROAD MAGAZINE

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Stuart Friedman

(Continued from page 74)

ing-like sound somewhere in his engine. Thad cut the ignition. As he pulled the door catch, he could hear the frenzied race of Witt's car engine, the scrape of a tire against a mashed fender as Witt backed off.

Then he saw the police car cut into the street from the next corner, speed up behind Witt.

"Watch him good, he's holding a gun," Thad shouted. He saw the middle of Witt's windshield shatter. A yellow spit of flame laced out of the jagged hole, a bullet shattered through the side windows of both back doors of Thad's car. There was another explosion, the whine of a bullet into the top of Thad's car. He saw the crumpled snakelike line of ripped, scorched metal. The police were running with drawn guns.

One of the cops shot into the right window of Witt's car a series of smashing detonations like stutters of thunderclaps. Glass crashed onto the pavement. There was the bawling roar of the cop's voice, one more shot. Silence. Then a long long silence.

Thad went around front as a cop opened the door beside Witt.

The crooked lawyer's body lay across the seat. The cops looked at Thad and at each other. One of them blew out his breath slowly, soundlessly, and rubbed the back of his hand across his forehead. The other cop said to Thad:

"You the guy the dame called us about? You the two guys having the fight she called us about?" The cop was staring at the entrance of the apartment as Nikki came out, slowly, then faster, until she was running.

She flung her arms around Thad, clung tightly to him.

"You called the police?" Thad said. "You suspected Witt?"

"No. No. but I watched you from the window when you left and I saw him and—I was afraid for you and I thought there'd be a fight."

"I owe you my life too, now. We'll start even. No, Officer, the fight wasn't over this woman . . . not exactly. It's a long story."

Oblivion for Me

(Continued from page 39)

a man who really belonged to me. Hollis, you belonged to me, even though I hated you and wouldn't marry you if I could!

Eleanor poured it on a little too thick that day. She praised me to the skies. Then she ended up with the usual catty remark of her breed.

"Why don't you get married, Myra darling? I'll bet you've had just loads of chances. You're so talented, but you really need a man to make your life perfect."

Although I didn't say anything, I knew right then that Eleanor wasn't going to have you, Hollis. She was too smug about the fact that her life was going to be better than mine.

I went down to the basement then, ostensibly to get a jar of special preserves. Remember the rose bushes that we used the arsenic on? We didn't use all of the arsenic. I brought some of the deadly powder upstairs with the preserves.

I didn't try to be very careful about it, or very clever. The only thing I thought about was the justice of keeping you away from this last woman when I had kept you away from all the rest. I didn't even think about getting caught, about being tried for murder. I was working from cause to effect.

Cause? Murder by arsenic in your tea. Effect? Eleanor wouldn't have her man after all. Poor little Eleanor wouldn't take you away from me alive. And I had hated you so much during the last months that the thought of killing you was a pleasant one.

You carried your cup over to the fireplace, remember? You stood there looking benignly at our friends, your eyes like a sick calf's when they rested on Eleanor. You took a sip of the tea and made a face. I had loaded it with arsenic. You knew there was something in it, didn't you?

I came over to you at once, just as the clock started striking five. There was accusation in your eyes. The realization of my hate for you was like a blow on the head, wasn't it? One moment you grasped a truth that you should have seen years ago.

Your reaction was something to witness, Hollis.

My back was toward the others and

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they were making their own din of conversation. I whispered the whole thing to you then and you were the only one who heard.

Don't you remember now? I said: "Yes, Hollis, it's poison. You didn't think I'd let Eleanor walk off with you, did you? Not when I got rid of all the others. You never could keep a girl very long because I always took care of them. You'll never be free of me, Hollis. Never!"

You dropped the cup. That was my mistake. You hadn't drunk enough to kill you, just enough to dull your senses, to make you faintly ill.

Your anger cracked you. . . . I should have counted on your unstable nervous system. I realized what was going to happen when you lifted the fire tongs. My last thought was one of joyous triumph. You'd be arrested for my murder! I would be the victim, the martyr.

The cup was broken, the evidence of poison would never be produced. You might even draw a blank and forget about the poison. You were in a state of shock and utter confusion. You never knew that I had hated you until that moment, did you? I'm sure you didn't, because there's nothing weak about you except your health. You were just too gullible to figure any motive for our friendship except mutual admiration.

Your nervous system broke down completely and your first blow had the force of a maniac. My last glimpse of your face was testimony enough for me. I died, knowing what the verdict would be. . . .

I STOPPED writing. I sat there in my cell, shivering and remembering at last. Once the words had written themselves down, I didn't need to look at the sheets. The block in my memory had been removed and I knew the answer to why I had killed Myra.

I realized the writing hadn't been supernatural or automatic. I hadn't really heard Myra's voice. Everything was clear now. I'm a writer, used to submerging myself into the personality of my viewpoint character. The minute I began to write from Myra's viewpoint, I began to understand her for the first time. I began to see all that I'd stupidly overlooked for so long.

Oblivion for Me

How could I have let Myra get such a hold on me! I used to worry about not being able to keep a girl for very long. I used to think there was something lacking in my personality. But I was just the victim of Myra's crazy delusions about keeping me for herself.

Myra must have been unbalanced, I knew that now. But it isn't surprising that my rage got out of control when she tried to poison me. Maybe the evidence can be produced! Now that I remember about that tea cup, maybe I'll be able to prove to the world that Myra was to blame for the whole thing. Maybe I can get out of this asylum.

* * *

The head doctor listened with absent-minded patience. He had read the story through and, when he spoke, his voice was slow and pleasant. He wanted to calm this patient who should not be allowed to get too excited.

"You've worked many hours on this, Hollis, and I'm glad you've started writing again. It will be nice to keep on writing, won't it?"

Hollis Dorsey gripped the edge of the desk, shaking in spasmodic twitches. "That isn't fiction, doctor! That's fact! That's just the way it was. She tried to poison me. That's why I killed her."

"Yes, Hollis. We'll look into that. But you must rest now. I'll talk to you again soon."

The doctor pressed a buzzer, and an orderly came in and took Hollis back to his room. The doctor clipped the pages of writing together and gave them to his nurse.

"Put this with the Hollis Dorsey history," he said. "Rather interesting study of the persecution complex. He thinks Myra Slade tried to poison him. Poor girl. He'll never know what a devoted friend she was to him."

The nurse smiled. "I must read it sometime. Is there any carry over of his writing ability?"

"Not much," said the doctor, "and the penmanship is an awful scrawl at the end. But it's pretty convincing when you read it. A layman might even swallow the whole story."

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Jack Winters

(Continued from page 6)

way. He was a strict disciplinarian who tolerated few of the amenities of social intercourse between crew and master.

As the Fuller plowed her way south, the captain thawed out to his student-pas- senger, but toward the rest of the crew he remained as taciturn as ever, particularly toward his first mate.

Bram, a man of strong feelings himself, returned the dislike, and during gabfests with other crew members had many un- kind things to say about the skipper—and many more things about the skipper's pretty wife.

The Fuller was seven hundred miles out of Boston on the evening of July 13. A slight breeze had sprung up with night- fall, and the ship picked up speed. The steward was in his bunk at nine o'clock. Bram had gone to bed an hour earlier. The skipper and his wife were in their cabin, and Charles Brown, an old Swedish sailor, was at the wheel.

The quiet little second mate Banberg had the watch until midnight, and Bram was to relieve at eight bells. Dawn was not far away when the agonized scream of a woman ripped the quiet night.

The cabin behind the captain's was oc- cupied by the passenger Monks, who got his gun and rushed on deck. With a bound he slammed open Captain Nash's door.

"Captain Nash!" His eyes opened wide and horror swept across his youthful face. The captain's bunk was overturned, and on the floor lay the skipper, blood spout- ing from a horrible gash across his head. Half out of her cot lay his dead wife.

Monks turned and stumbled up the companionway, screaming for the crew. Bram, walking down between the main and the mizzenmast, saw the youth coming at him with the revolver. He picked up a chunk of wood and let fly at Monks' head. Monks crouched, letting the missile fly over his head.

"It's Monks," he called. "Someone has murdered the skipper and his wife."

The young student stayed in his crouched position screaming this over and over, and Bram stood still, shaking his head in alcoholic disbelief. Finally Monks convinced the mate and led him back to

Slayer at Sea

the room of horror. Bram turned, ran back to the deck and became ill.

Monks then went to the steward Spencer's quarters. He awakened the old man, who received the news very calmly. "I'll assume command until we find Mister Banberg, the second mate," he said.

Spencer then began searching the ship for the missing mate. He hadn't far to look. The ax-battered body of Mate Banberg lay quite dead in its bunk.

By the time Spencer returned to deck with the news of Banberg's murder, Bram, the first mate, had aroused himself from the deck where he had been lying crying and ill since he had seen the victims.

Before the crew was gathered, and the news given them, Bram cried, "There's the ax!" And with a bound, he grabbed an ax handle sticking out of a lumber pile on the deck. Its blade was covered with blood.

"Let's throw it overboard," Bram said. "It might be used against us."

Spencer made a grab for the first mate as Bram hurled the evidence overboard. "You shouldn't have done that," Spencer said. "It probably is all the evidence we'll have."

"Well, what the hell," was the mate's reply. "We'll just say we never found it."

Monks and Spencer retired to the steward's cabin to discuss the situation. At first they thought Banberg might have done it, and wounded in the fray had managed to get back to his bunk to die. But there was no telltale trail of blood to lend this theory credence.

Then the two decided it must have been Brown, the steersman. He could have lashed the wheel, and in a matter of minutes gone below and finished off the three. It made sense since the trail of blood went up the companionway, towards the wheel and into the planks where Bram had found it.

It was decided to throw Brown in irons. The two went to the fo'c'sle, and at gun-point took Brown aft. Brown cried his innocence.

Then his arrest loosened his tongue. He began to tell how he had seen from the wheel that Bram had been away from his watch for five or six minutes; that from his position he was given a clear view of

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Jack Winters

the captain's cabin. He said he saw Bram enter the cabin, strike the skipper and a moment later heard Mrs. Nash scream. Then he saw Bram come back on deck and walk to the place the ax was found.

Brown was released and Monks and Spencer turned on the burly first mate. He was bound while lying in a drunken stupor on deck, then tied fast to the mast. Spencer put the bodies in a whaleboat.

So the Fuller finally reached Halifax just seven days after horror sat at the captain's table.

Suspicion hung like a shroud about all nine men, but by a process of elimination they were all cleared—except Mr. Bram, the first mate, and he doggedly decried his guilt.

Bram was put on trial in Boston, charged with the murder of Captain Nash.

Bram's defense brought out some fallacies in the steersman Brown's story. They pointed out that if Bram had been below only five or six minutes, and in view of all the blood in the cabin, Bram could not have had time to change his clothes.

The defense then switched to attempting to place Brown in a more vulnerable position. But Brown stuck to his story of having seen Bram commit the crime; and his story, pieced together with circumstantial evidence of the other crew members against Bram had its affect on the jury. After a long and sensational trial, Bram was found guilty and sentenced to hang.

But he never went to the gallows. His lawyers continued the fight, and a second trial by jury found him guilty, but recommended that he not be hanged. He was given life imprisonment. After fifteen years Bram, still claiming his innocence, was transferred to Atlanta Federal Penitentiary, and on June 20, 1919, six years later, President Wilson reviewed the case and pardoned him.

Bram worked ashore for some years. But the call of the sea was too strong, so he bought a schooner and engaged in coastwise trade. In January 1928, Captain Bram sent a distress call from his ship the Alvena during a terrible storm off Cape Hatteras and was never heard from again.

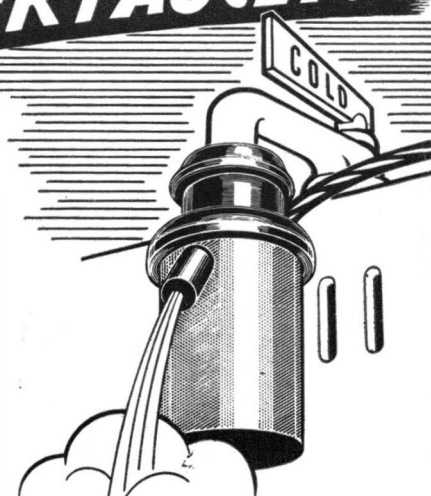
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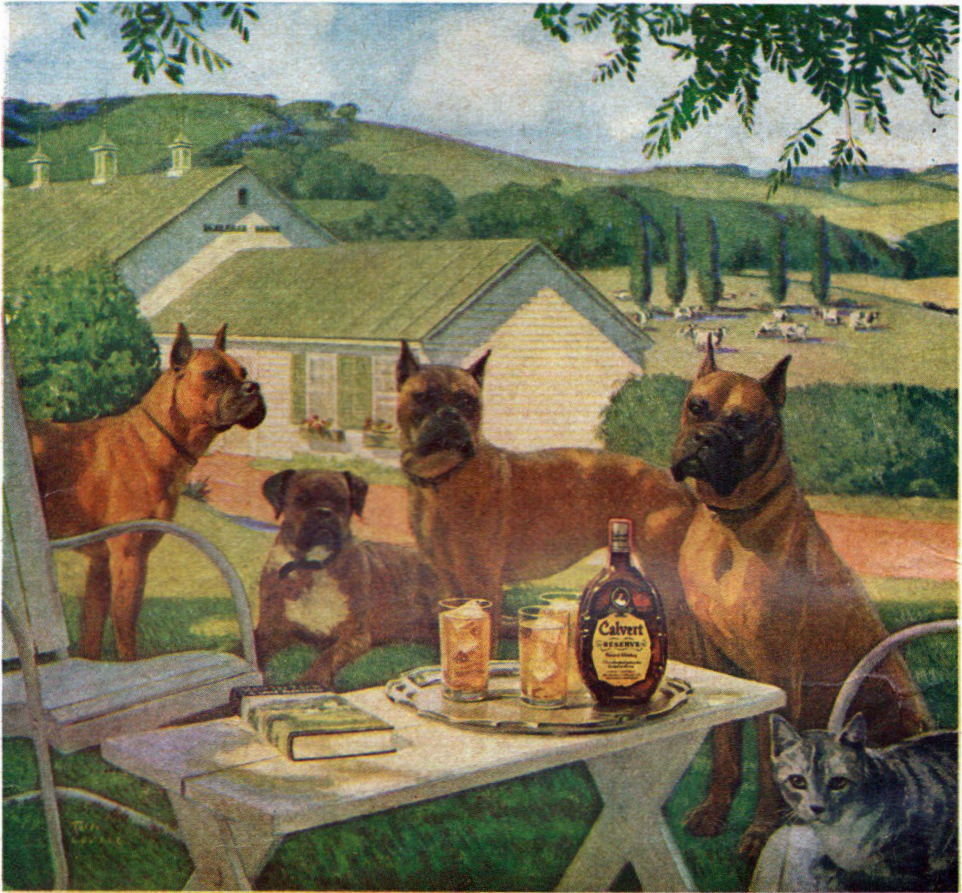
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