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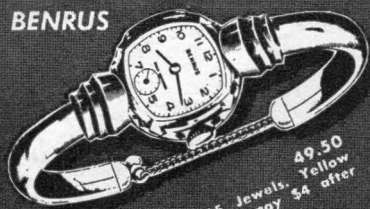
OPEN THE MORGUE,
RICHARD!

by
FREDERICK
C. DAVIS



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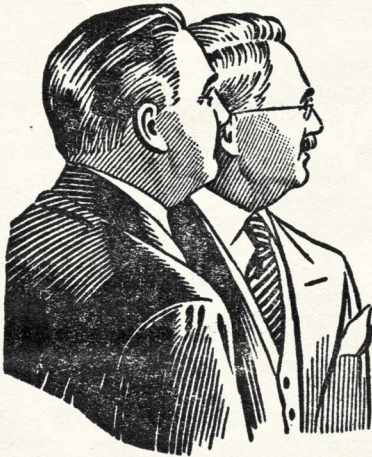
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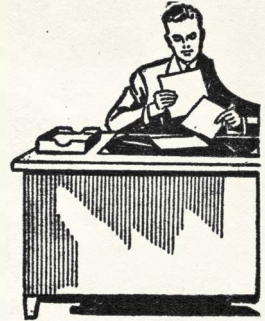
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We want to know if you're

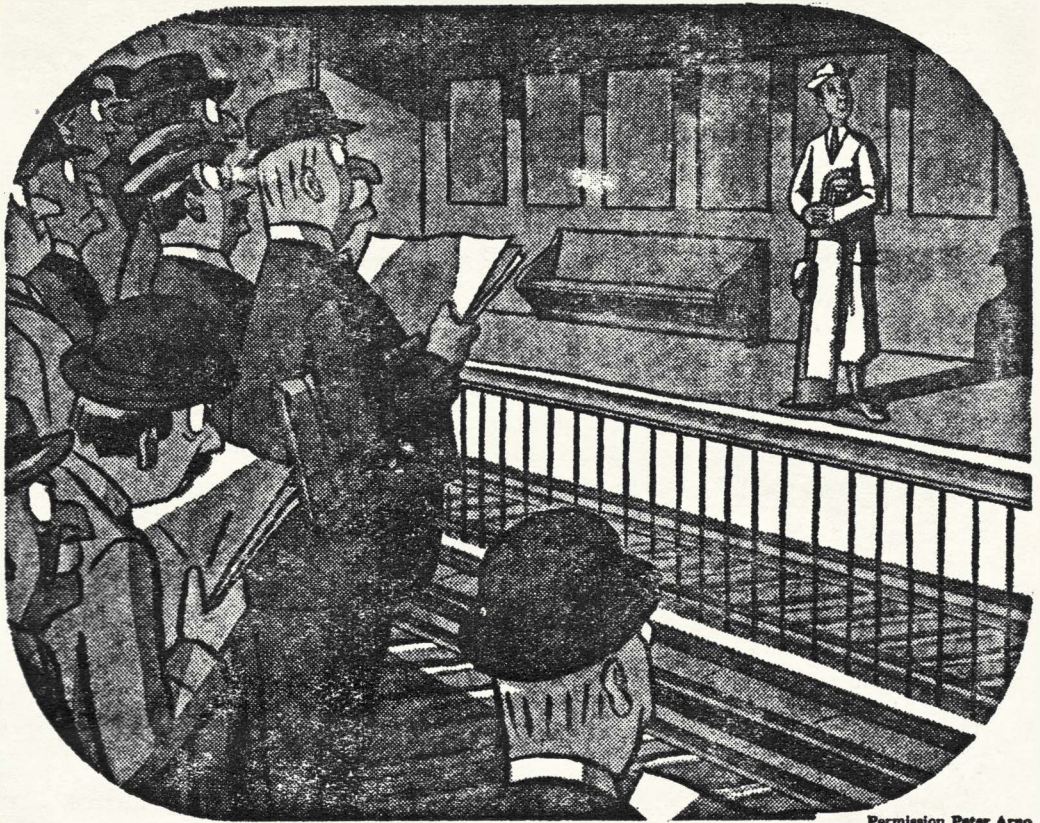
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Keyhole peep at Robert Martin's novel, "Case of the Careless Caress."

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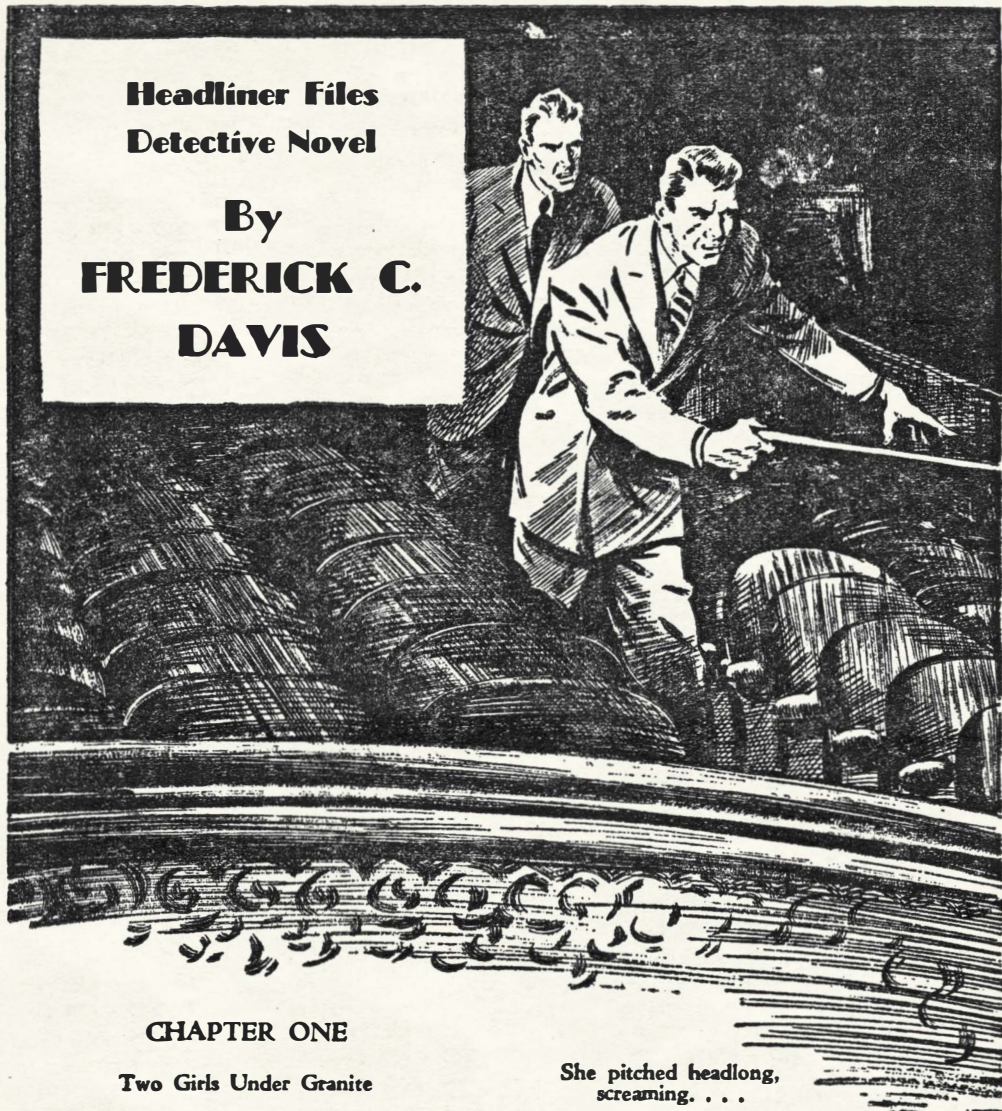
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**Headliner Files
Detective Novel**

**By
FREDERICK C.
DAVIS**



CHAPTER ONE

Two Girls Under Granite

*She pitched headlong,
screaming. . . .*

AT THE end of a tough ten-hour grind in Headliner Files, Incorporated, I often find myself straying into one of the neighboring bistros with a yearning for a long, cool, refreshing drink, such as ginger ale, orangeade or a double Scotch. Occasionally two double Scotches seem required, if I have had a particularly tough day, as I do six days a week. Even three are necessary at times, something extra bracing being called for when I'm due back at Headliner Files afterward to take on the graveyard watch, like tonight.

Coming out of our head office in midtown Manhattan, I turned to Marianne's,



When the shapely scandal scribe dropped in wearing an ice-pick in her back, Thackeray Hackett swore he'd learn the tale she didn't tell—if he had to strip the tinsel from every glittering name on Broadway.

**OPEN
THE MORGUE,
RICHARD!**



a cozy little groggery across the street. It seemed just the place to find a few moments of well earned solace.

My mistake.

At this off moment, however, Marianne's was filled with a quiet that seemed blissful after the hours I'd spent among shrilling telephones. I had the place all to myself except for one other customer, and this one wasn't even visible at the moment, having wandered off somewhere, leaving a half-finished highball sitting all alone on the bar.

Marianne herself took charge of me. The sole owner and undisputed boss of the joint, Marianne is not a petite minx, as her name may suggest, but, instead, a woman of heroic mass and no nonsense who functions as official welcomer, general advisor in her customers' marital troubles, relief bartender and bouncer. She towed me to a toadstool-size table, pushed me into a chair and, without asking what I'd have, brought me a double Scotch.

"Take it slow," she ordered me. "You look beat up. If you don't watch out you fall on your face. Why don't you get yourself a decent job?"

"Why, Marianne, the job I have now is the best in the whole world," I mumbled. "It's exciting, glamorous, unique. I've only one complaint to make about it. It's killing me."

Marianne commented with a grunt signifying it would be my own funeral if I wanted it that way, then waddled off, leaving me to my glassful of nerve medicine. With a sigh I dragged it up. Before I could take a taste of it, the quiet of the little spa was disturbed by a voice. It was husky, urgent and female.

"Lay off that stuff, Sweetheart!"

Frozen, I discovered the speaker half hidden behind a folding screen in a rear corner. It wasn't me she'd spoken to, however. She was clinging to a pay phone, her well dressed chassis swaying slightly. Her low-cut, sun-browned back was turned. She was blindered by a straw hat as big as a manhole cover and as limp as a Dali watch, which she kept flopping up in order to peek out the street window, as if expecting somebody to show. Speaking in what she thought was a confidential whisper, she went on in loud alcoholic ardor:

"You just lay off that buttery double-

talk, Sweetheart, and lis'en to baby. You're makin' a fatal mistake—brushin' me off like this. The way you're askin' for it, Sweetie-Pie, your darling little star's gonna go into eclipse. Permanent. And fast. If you wanta save her from that, you need what this baby's got, see?"

I agreed with this baby that what she had was worth holding onto. While the phone buzzed back at her, she gave a few fretful hitches to her girdle. This frill was, of course, the owner of the highball sitting on the bar. As soon as she got her guy told off, she'd go back to work on it. Apparently she'd been busy most of the afternoon filling herself up to her ear-rings. She kept a strangle hold on the neck of the phone because her knees tended to stray off in diverse directions while she insisted on staying where she was. I couldn't blame her for pulling them back each time. They were nice to have around.

"You lis'ena me, Honey Boy," she said. "You're gonna be the sorriest guy on ole Broadway if you don't get back in there pitchin'. And time's short. This is your precious lamb's las' chance. Get that?" She emphasized it with an ominous 100-proof hiss: "Her las' chance! Any minute now it's gonna be too late."

Marianne barged back to my table, annoyed. "Any minute now I toss her out on her ear. You meet her in your business, maybe? Publicity. Hester Troy."

"There is no publicity agent of any sex in Greater New York or Hollywood whom I have not met, Marianne. I remember meeting Hester Troy and regretting that it had to happen during business hours. It's fascinating, watching her teeter. When she falls, I hope it will be in my direction."

"That could happen," Marianne said. "At least this customer, ever since she perched herself there at that bar, has spent all her time sipping bourbon and staring across the street at the door of your office."

"Why, I didn't realize my charm is as irresistible as all that!"

"It isn't," Marianne explained. "Hester Troy watches that door like a mouse expecting a cat to pop out. She's scared. She drinks too much because looking at your office door scares her panties off her, almost. Why is that?"

"A captivating question," I said. "All we have over there in Headliner Files is

tons of trivial data about famous people, such as the fact that George Bernard Shaw had only five years of formal schooling, Fred Allen's real name is John Florence Sullivan and when you push the bell-button at Hoagy Carmichael's house the chimes play the opening notes of *Stardust*. Such information is completely harmless. Wouldn't frighten a dim-witted child, now would it? So after all it must be my spell-binding charm that holds Miss Troy breathless."

"Sometimes information can hurt a little," Marianne reminds me, "such as when somebody proves you murdered somebody else."

THIS of course was true, but it would hardly apply to Headliner Files. Although the New York Police Department and the Federal Bureau of Investigation are subscribers to our service, we have nothing to do with known criminals. We are concerned exclusively with people who have distinguished themselves in more laudable endeavors, such as show business, sports, politics, the arts, the sciences and, in special instances, in boudoirs. If we have any crooks in our files they are a high grade, very successful type who haven't yet made the mistake of getting tagged as such.

"Okay, Marianne, but please, let's relax. Leave this distressed publicity agent to me."

Marianne plodded off on her flat feet, shrugging as if to say go ahead then, scare a lot of publicity women to death, she should care. The babe at the phone, however, was, as I'd noticed, a more emotional type. Miss Troy had turned bitter.

"So all right, never mind if everybody gets their throat cut! Alla sudden this thing's getting too bigga handle. I'm caught in a terrific squeeze. I'm not gonna be able to stop all hell from bustin' loose—but just skip it. We'll all be dead or worse pretty damn soon now, so what'sa diff'rence. Be seein' you, Sweetheart—inna cemetery, ha-ha! *Blah!*"

She disconnected with an indignant crash. The rest of us—Marianne, Herbert the barman and me—welcomed the quiet back. Glad that we could not forget the unseemly disturbance, we watched Hester Troy as she gave another hitch to her girdle, tottered around on her spike heels and headed resolutely back to the bar.

"Won't you join me, Miss Troy?" I suggested.

She did a wild-eyed double-take and stopped dead, her face suddenly whiter than cold cream.

"Oh, my Lord!" Gasping it out, she pointed a shaking finger at me. "You—you're from—" She waggled a hand in the general direction of the street and swallowed hard, unable to put the rest into words.

Marianne said, with a bouncer's eye focussed on Hester Troy, "Sure, he's Mr. C. Walter Preston, business manager of Headliner Files, Incorporated. So what?"

"And you," I said in return, "are the prettiest press representative in the business. Your boss, S. Richard Harling, the producer, is presenting his bright young star Rhoda Ferris in a new play, *Let's Forget Yesterday*, at the Bandbox Theatre with a gala premier tomorrow night."

"She got fired," Marianne informed me. "What else has she been squawking about over my phone—trying to get her job back? And what did she get canned for in the first place? Drinking too much on the job. If she lives long enough, she might learn better some day."

"Hester, I yearn to have you cry on my shoulder," I said eagerly. "Settle your lovely carcass right here beside me and let me listen to your troubles."

Unhearing, Hester kept her big blue eyes fixed on me as if in mortal fear—which of course I couldn't account for except as a momentary alcoholic aberration. Then she aimed that finger at me again—a finger from which she'd already gnawed most of the red-enameled nail.

"Holy cats," Miss Troy said in a stunned mutter, "she's already tipped you!"

"Tipped me? What about? Who do you mean?"

"You came here looking for me. You wanta corner me with it." Hester, voice and all, was getting shaky—and she began backing away. "You lemme alone. I ain't gonna crack to nobody again, so you better lemme alone!"

"Leaving you alone is a hard thing for a man in good health to do, Hester," I protested. "Besides, I'm too tired to fight against Fate. Come on, Sugar-chile—"

I had reached out for her hand. The sight of me had undoubtedly given her a

bad scare somehow, although I couldn't guess why. She had been frightened badly enough to forget her creeping girdle and even her unfinished drink. But that fear, whatever had stirred it up, was a minor one compared with the alarm that flared up in her when my fingers touched hers. It was almost powerful enough to sober her. She stopped wabbling and stiffened—stood there transfixed with terror, shrinking from me.

"You're workin' together—both of ya closin' in on me!" she blurted. "Ya got me inna middle!"

The mere touch of my hand sent Hester bursting off in what seemed to the rest of us to be a crazy flurry of action. Clutching her handbag and hat, she spun around and dashed for a door at the rear of the bar. In her panicky haste, at any rate, Miss Troy made an erroneous choice. She missed the door labeled *Ladies* and disappeared through the other one marked *Gents*.

"Fine thing!" Marianne said darkly. "Drunks I got to put up with in this racket, but not after the d.t.'s get 'em. I get her out of there."

Marianne marched directly into the gents' room after Hester. Since both retreats were otherwise unoccupied, it made no real difference what word was painted on the door, but Marianne's sense of decorum was outraged. She found trouble, however, in correcting the situation. Hester declined to be ejected. Within a matter of seconds Marianne was roaring. Hester was screeching and there were scuffling sounds that promised a fine hair-pulling cat-fight unless it was stopped pronto.

Herbert ducked under the bar to join me as I hurried in. Marianne and Hester had wrestled themselves over into one white-tiled corner. With Marianne's she-bear arms locked around her thin waste, Hester was striving desperately and hopelessly to tear herself loose. At the same time, having split her handbag open, she had fished out two pieces of paper and these she was attempting to destroy by tearing them to tatters.

Seeing Herbert and me descending on her, she ripped paper and tried to escape with a wilder frenzy. In the struggle there was a sudden ripe cracking sound, and Hester went even limper than the pancake hat she'd lost.

"She hit her head on the floor, that's all," Marianne announced, wheezing as she bent massively over the unconscious girl. "Not hard—she'll be okay when she wakes up. I take care of her."

I started getting busy, but Marianne beat me to it—put her arms around the flaccid Hester and lifted her with scarcely any effort. It was observable that Hester's girdle was peach-colored with lace and a zipper. I turned quickly to Hester's other extremity only to find that Herbert had gathered up her ankles. Marianne leading, they lugged her into the other door where ladies were properly deposited when out cold.

I picked up the torn bits of paper which Hester had scattered desperately about. They had been a glossy photograph—or rather two photographs, as I saw when curiously piecing them together there on the tile floor. Even when only partly reconstructed, the two resembled each other. Both had been taken on a bright summer day in a cemetery. Both showed a granite headstone against a background of trees, paths and other graves.

The one headstone was engraved: *Amy Gates, Born 1920, Died 1945.*

The carvings on the other read: *Hazel Cavano, Born 1922, Died 1945, R.I.P.*

Whoever these defunct dames were, I figured that Hester in her frantic anxiety had meant to keep these pix of their last resting places out of somebody else's hands, not mine. I had never heard of either of them before, dead or alive.

CHAPTER TWO

Some Like 'em Cold

POCKETING the torn photos, I gathered up the contents of Hester's handbag. None of these items were unusual; none enlightened me as to what had scared Hester witless. Going back, I left the bag on the bar. Just then Herbert reappeared from the forbidden regions, ejected by Marianne, with the news: "The boss'll stay with her till she comes to. She'll sober her up."

"This is a fine place for sobriety, all right," I complained; and taking up my practically untouched Scotch, I headed out with it.

I crossed the street carrying the highball

and unlocked the door bearing the sign that identifies Headliner Files, Incorporated, as *Suppliers of Information About Celebrities*, and adds, *Clarabelle Brown, Directress. New York—Hollywood.* I passed through our plushy reception room and through the gate of the counter that barricades callers from our main file room. In contrast to the refined frenzy prevailing here by day, when phones clamor incessantly and file drawers roll in and out with a constant rumble like distant thunder, everything seemed unnaturally serene.

I went on to our banks of file cabinets. Scores of them stand here in regimented array, crammed tight in every cubic inch with our own special brand of personal information, ever ready to serve our thousand-odd clients. For the nominal fee of only fifteen dollars a month, payable in advance, we will delve into our treasury of minutia and tell you anything you may want to know about anybody who's somebody.

Just a short while ago this evening I had left a certain peculiar character named Thackeray Hackett on duty here. I had returned, dinnerless and ahead of schedule, to relieve him; but there didn't seem to be a sound of young Mr. Hackett in the place at the moment.

Turning to the file section designated *Deceased*, I pulled out the *G* drawer, then the one tabbed *C* and, as I'd suspected, found no listing for either the late Amy Gates or the departed Hazel Cavano. Whatever else these two may have done in their regrettably short lives, they'd never earned themselves enough fame to get into our archives.

This didn't help to explain, of course, why Hester Troy had so frantically tried to destroy the pictures, why she'd been watching Headliner Files in inebriated fright, or why she'd abruptly gone berserk. Her dire-sounding talk over the phone, evidently a boozy attempt to get her lost job back, seemed to miss connections with everything else also—except one laconic phrase: "Be seein' you inna cemetery, ha-ha!" Considered in relation to the photographed graves, this sounded like something to make an enterprising undertaker prick up his ears.

Catching me by surprise, a voice said genially, nearby, "Why, most certainly, Miss Archer."

Rising, I followed a short hallway to the

front office which Clarabelle Brown uses briefly during the day, and there I found Thackeray Hackett nuzzling the boss's phone with his worn-down heels hoisted to the boss's desk.

"But of course, Miss Archer, we're completely at your service," Hackett said next, as if anything else were unthinkable. "We'll be only too happy to do our very best for such a highly esteemed, fully paid-up subscriber."

It upset me to hear Thackeray Hackett sounding so damned charming. It isn't like him. Hackett is a human porcupine, tetchy and covered with needle-pointed barbs. His real nature is one of eccentric animosities, exasperations and quiet furies. He is aware of this and forces himself to be friendly whenever he can manage it—but to hear him purring at somebody as he was purring now at Miss Archer was enough to start red lights flashing in my mind.

I headed for our switchboard and tipped a cam to cut in on Hackett's line. A young woman was speaking tersely. Her voice had a certain clenched-teeth quality. It also carried a sense of chilly spite.

"This'll really shake you. I'm going to break it at the perfect dramatic moment, and when it breaks it'll be official. You'll get a nice chunk of publicity out of it. All I want from you in exchange for that is a chance to double-check in your files without tipping my hand."

"Our files are yours, Miss Archer," I heard Hackett responding to my dismay. "Come in and go as far as you like."

"I'll be right over," Miss Archer flashed back, and she vanished in a click.

I went grimly back into Clarabelle's office to have this out with Hackett. He greeted me with a wry smile but didn't get any kind of a smile in return. Shrugging, he rippled his fingers on that thin, arrow-like cane he always carries, and resigned himself to another dressing-down. It wasn't his first.

"That was Eve Archer you were buttering up just now," I said. "Eve Archer, who wields the deadliest poison pen in the gossip-columning business."

Truculent glitters in his baby-blue eyes, Hackett said nothing. Clarabelle in her sweet, motherly way was his pal, and he had learned he had nothing to fear from me so long as he stayed in her good graces. I,

on the other hand, would never learn for sure what might be cooking in Hackett's mind at any given moment. Nobody could do that, maybe not even Hackett. He was unpredictable, except that whatever happened he was certain to be tough to handle.

"And why," I went on, "did you choose to be so sweet to little Eve?"

Hackett said, grinning at me: "Because I love her."

What he really meant was that Eve Archer and he felt in common the same scathing contempt for celebrities.

Every day in her column, "Sleepy-Time Gal," in the *Dispatch*, Eve sniped at the clay feet of the idols who populate our night-life. While other columnists followed celebrities around with a gaga sort of adoration, she bared her claws and tore their glamorous trappings to shreds. She exposed stuffed shirts, punctured inflated egos and in general specialized in taking apart heels who loved nobody so much as themselves in undeserved ways. Sometimes her cracks cruelly hurt good guys who really didn't rate such punishment—Eve was not above jealousy and vindictiveness—but on the whole her readers loved the skillful mayhem she committed every day in print.

I could understand how Hackett, with his cynical temperament, had become one of her gleeful admirers, but I shuddered to think of Eve given free rein to snoop into any of our 60,000 folders at will, with a heart full of malice for all.

"LET me remind you, Thack," I pointed out patiently, "that celebrities are the source and the substance of our service. We coddle 'em. We want 'em to love us because without their cooperation we'd soon fold. Your own job is to help us protect them from wolves, fanatical autograph hunters, salesmen and process servers. I know you scoff at all this, but anyhow it's our business and you're still working here."

Hackett twisted his lips in silent scorn.

"But as to Eve Archer," I went on. "She eats celebs alive. She causes promising careers to wither on the vine. The mere mention of her name is enough to make certain precariously perched personages blanch. As a result this highly esteemed subscriber, as you called her, is one we would be happy to lose. Clarabelle and I have been trying to do it tactfully for months—in a way that won't

prompt Eve to sink her pretty fangs in us. Yet this two-legged dose of venom has just received a cordial invitation from you to wade in here and do her worst. A fine mess. Clarabelle won't like it."

Picking up Clarabelle's phone, I dialed a number from memory. The *Dispatch* answered. I said, "Give me Eve Archer, please," then went on lecturing Hackett.

"In the first place we absolutely never invite people to come in here and browse. We supply specific answers to specific questions. Eve can be no exception to the rule. What is she after?"

"She kept clammed up about it, except to say it's a big exclusive," Hackett answered. "If she has snagged onto something really hot, she can hardly be blamed for not spilling it to us and risking a leak to her rival columnists."

"I'm about to tell little Eve we're closed for the night regardless, except for questions by phone."

Just then the *Dispatch's* operator answered, "I'm very sorry, but Miss Archer has just left."

That meant Miss Archer was heading straight for Headliner Files at this very moment, thanks to Thackeray Hackett.

I will welcome the day when Clarabelle will see that for the good of the firm this guy should be fired the hell out of here. Not that he isn't competent to dig up information for us. Far from it; this job is child's play for him. When it comes to shrewdly using his bean and keenly observing the world around him, Hackett is capable of some high-class detecting.

A year and a half ago, in fact, Hackett was running a top-flight private detective agency on Park Avenue. He would be running it yet in grand style except that his sense of decency tripped him up—he tried to pin a murder where it belonged but wouldn't stick. The killer—a male canary still trilling dulcetly on the kilocycles every week—was protected by interests too powerful for one guy to buck. Bucking them regardless, Hackett had lost his license, and with it his chromium-trimmed agency, his moneyed clientele, his reputation, his career and practically his last dime. This disastrous experience, of course, explains his animosity toward celebrities.

It didn't, however, change the fact that nobody could be less suited temperamental-

ly to his job than Hackett, which meant he had to be watched like a hawk.

"Eve's really on a hot trail and wasting no time," Hackett said softly as I eyed him. "She's arriving now."

I glanced out Clarabelle's venetian blind. A taxi had stopped at the curb. Eve Archer was hustling out of it—a dynamic thirty, six feet of statuesque construction. She had once been a showgirl, as was still evident all over her, except in her face, where a driving ambition had put lines of strain and bitterness. She headed for our door purposefully, as if about to grab onto the crowning scoop of her idol-smashing career.

"Stay right where you are. Thank," I instructed him as her knock echoed. "I'll inform this high-powered puss it's no dice."

I circled through the reception room and opened the entrance. Eve Archer stood there. She didn't come rushing in, as I'd expected, but remained at a standstill, looking, I thought, a little odd.

"What's the matter, Miss Archer?" I asked. "Don't you feel well?"

She started an answer but the sound that came out was a thick gurgle. Her stare was fixed on nothing, in a kind of furious disappointment. Her eyes dimmed and she closed them, toppling forward. I caught her, held her, then hurriedly let her down to the rug. She lay inert there, with a red line slowly lengthening across her skin between her shoulder-blades.

Numbly I became conscious that the taxi had whisked off and another car had stopped. It was a huge black limousine bearing a shining *P.D.* emblem. A man had alighted from it and was now crossing to our open door.

He was enormous and looked like a figure materialized out of the turn of the century. He wore a derby and a luxuriant black mustache just a little smaller than the handle-bar variety popular during the Gay Nineties. I knew him well. It was Lieutenant Blackley, ranking officer of the commissioner's special squad.

Lieutenant Blackley paused in the doorway, frowning at the leggy figure lying between us. Then, as if the amenities must be observed between gentlemen regardless, he bowed and said courteously, "Good evening, Mr. Preston. I've come to keep an appointment with Miss Eve Archer."

"Step right in, Lieutenant." This was Hackett, speaking ironically from a spot behind me. "Miss Archer is right here waiting for you—with an ice-pick in her back."

CHAPTER THREE

Sleep, Baby, Sleep

LIEUTENANT BLACKLEY entered, respectfully removing his bowler; and after wagging his head over the late Eve Archer, he moved toward the nearest phone with the smooth ponderous grace of a frigate under full canvas.

With Blackley notifying headquarters, I could see all too clearly that this murder was not likely to do Headliner Files any good. The corpse lay right here in our reception room, but the sooner we got it out of here and the less we had to do with it from now on the better off we'd be. Playing it smart, we'd know as little about this bloody business as possible.

Although I thought the murderer's identity was an easy guess, I had no interest in helping the law to stage a capture. Far from it—if justice was to triumph here I wanted it to do so without a leg-up from us. Good business demanded that all connections between Headliner Files and the culprit be cut off short and fast.

Getting busy, I signaled Thackeray Hackett to stay put, with no assurance that he'd do it. Next I took a closer look at the ice-pick buried deep in Eve Archer's back. It was not a new one. All the varnish was worn off the handle. This indicated it had had a lot of use, probably behind somebody's bar. Fortunately the handle didn't have Marianne's name imprinted on it, or anyone else's.

While Blackley went on murmuring into the phone, I stepped out. Here at our door, with dusk deepening along the quiet cross-street, a killer had simply passed behind Eve Archer, driving the ten-cent stiletto into her heart from behind, and then hurried on, leaving no sign.

Marianne's business had picked up. Four customers were lined up at the bar, all men. The look on my face warned Marianne trouble was cooking.

"You shouldn't have let Hester leave here in that panicky condition."

"You think I let her out?" Marianne

retorted. "Nobody gets past me without paying the bill. I show you."

She headed again for that door with the taboo mark on it. I followed her through regardless. This was an occasion, the first time since my fifth birthday that I'd been inside a retreat of this restricted nature. Having more frills than the adjacent one, it contained a chaise longue for liquored-up ladies to pass out on. Hester Troy wasn't lolling on it at the moment, however. She wasn't anywhere.

Making a disgusted noise, Marianne opened a door in the rear. "Service," she explained succinctly. A narrow passageway, one properly belonging to the apartment building next door, connected it with the street. "Bad place for it. I lose money this way."

"That's all I wanted to know," I said grimly.

"Never mind, she'll come back soon. Herbie's still got her bag at the bar."

Not with the homicide squad due to swarm in at any minute, she wouldn't. I might give them some helpful tips about her except that my impulses went in the opposite direction.

Turning back, I reached across the bar for Herbert's lapel, pulled his ear close and asked: "You missing an ice pick?"

He blinked over his array of mixing spoons, lime juicers and swizzle sticks, and shrugged. For my money that was the right answer. Anybody could reach over when a barman's back was momentarily turned and lift one of his icepicks without his knowing it or missing it. All Marianne and Herbert had to do to keep clear was to look blank about the one left in Eve Archer's ribs and remind the cops that this little bar was only one among thousands in Greater New York City and suburbs.

"A friendly tip, Marianne," I whispered, drawing her aside. "Hester Troy wasn't here this afternoon. You haven't seen her in weeks."

I was glad to see Marianne was inclined to agree with this interpretation of events. If Hester Troy hadn't been inside this little pump room in weeks, then, of course, she couldn't have been sitting all afternoon at the bar, staring across at Headliner Files' door, scared half crazy.

I hurried back into our reception room to find Lieutenant Blackley ignoring Hackett

while making meticulous notes over the corpse. He paused to eye me with courteous disapproval.

"Please, Mr. Preston, do not absent yourself again without my permission," he said in his precise manner.

"Didn't you tell me to take a quick look up and down the street? Thought I heard you. Sorry. Anyway, I didn't spot any fleeing murderer—and I can't imagine what this terrible crime may have to do with us."

"That question, Mr. Preston, will be thoroughly investigated," the lieutenant promised quietly.

He resumed making notes and ignoring Hackett. I was beginning to feel our chances of getting from under the murder looked good; but then I remembered those photos.

I still had them in my coat pocket. However, I could get rid of them with much less fuss than Hester Troy had experienced. While Blackley kept busy with his little gold pencil and black morocco notebook, I sidled up to a waste-basket and simply dropped them in.

A few minutes later, while Lieutenant Blackley was marshalling us into my office for questioning, I glanced again into that basket and saw with a chill that the fragments had vanished—every tatter gone!

Thackeray Hackett, standing by, wore a cryptic, too innocent smile—and there was nothing I could do about him at the moment except curse the day Clarabelle had misguidedly hired him.

AT 12:40 A.M. a taxi reeled to a stop at the door which Eve Archer hadn't lived to enter. Out of it bounced Clarabelle Brown in a slinky evening gown and mink cape, all aglitter with diamonds.

For hours I had been trying to find a phone wire leading to this gay, intelligent woman of fifty-odd, the daughter of a long line of Texas marshals, who spent an hour or two a day running, as she considered it, Headliner Files, and the rest of the time enjoying life. I'd finally found her, as I'd expected, at a party. She goes to a party practically every night and is invariably the life of it.

Clarabelle, having gaily brushed off the news photogs and reporters camped on the sidewalk, came scintillating in. A homicide dick on duty at the door closed it tightly behind her. She gazed around, seeming puz-

zled, after my message, to find the place no bloodier than usual.

"The homicide squad worked fast, Clarabelle," I explained. "They've already finished."

Their work had consisted chiefly of shooting official pix of the photogenic victim—a duty they had performed thoroughly, with painstaking attention to detail—then lugging her out in a wicker basket. There being no fingerprints or other clues to gather up, they had then hustled off again, leaving a man to guard the entrance and the tenacious Lieutenant Blackley still in charge.

Clarabelle immediately recovered her characteristic air of blithe confidence. "Now, Walter doll," she sang at me, "just you leave all this to Clarabelle. Thank heavens we have Thack too—the dear, sweet boy is so experienced in those affairs. Everything's perfectly sure to turn out fine. Just have faith in human nature. Why, my dear, dear *Lieu-ten-ant!*"

Blackley had begun to beam. There are three reasons behind his frequent visits to Headliner Files: first, being overly suspicious, he can't shake off the ridiculous, mistaken notion that we are fronting for some new kind of shakedown racket; second, he loathes all private detectives, especially a disgraced ex-operative named Thackeray Hackett, and is constantly hoping to catch the vermin operating without a license; and third, he's sweet on our boss.

Well aware of all this, Clarabelle took him in hand at once, gaily tugging him toward her private office. He managed to resist her long enough to fix a sharp eye on me.

"For an information service, I must say you show a peculiar lack of information concerning the victim who died so suddenly at your door. You profess not to know what prompted her visit or why someone should wish so desperately to forestall it. Very well. My advice to you, particularly to your disreputable apprentice here—" He meant that scum, Thackeray Hackett—"is to leave it exactly at that."

He turned to ensconce himself with Clarabelle in her office; and Hackett stepped forward, swinging his dandyish cane lightly between his fingertips, a challenging curl on his lips.

"If I may keep you from your pleasures for a moment, Lieutenant—When you ar-

rived here a while ago, Eve had hardly hit the floor. How is it possible the murderer was able to stroll from under your very nose without being noticed by such a brilliant-minded crime-buster as you?"

Blackley turned a frosty eye on him. "'Under my very nose' is scarcely an accurate statement of the situation. I was still approaching when the blow struck her. I hadn't yet seen her because the cars parked along the curb blocked my view. It was growing dark. The sidewalk traffic seemed normal, even though one pedestrian was a murderer fleeing the scene of his crime. You seem unaware, Hackett—" Blackley could make it sound like a dirty name—"a homicide of this type—a deadly blow struck in passing in the street—is the most difficult of all to solve."

"As you'll soon prove by having a hell of a tough time with it," Hackett commented, his baby-blue eyes full of glints. "When arriving, just a little too late, you mentioned having an appointment with Eve. It was made and kept pretty fast, wasn't it—although not quite fast enough?"

"I refer you to forthcoming editions of the newspapers, Hackett," Blackley said, as if speaking to a germ.

Hackett was heckling him. The appointment angle was easy to dope out. Once Hackett had given Eve the come-on signal, she had immediately phoned Blackley to meet her here. Hadn't she mentioned to Hackett that her break would be "official"? Her choice was Blackley because he headed the special squad that was closer to the commissioner than any other, because he favored the night-life section of the city, for all his old-fashioned looks, and polished many apples there. He had simply taken the call at his favorite hangout, a nearby precinct station, and had toiled right over. The important point was whether or not Eve had tipped him as to the nature of her big scoop.

Hackett asked him that point-blank: "Did Eve tell you what she expected to smell out here, Lieutenant—what she was about to bust loose with?"

Blackley's response was just what he must have expected, an arctic silence. But evidently the answer was no.

"One other question, then, before you turn to happier pursuits," Hackett insisted, ignoring my signal to clam up. "Who was

a gal called Amy Gates, Lieutenant?"
"Who?"

That astonished word came up from Blackley's spherical depths with an ominous rumble. Clarabelle was, of course, merely puzzled by that unknown name. I reacted with impotent fury.

Calmly, while I fumed, Hackett repeated it and even added to it. "Amy Gates, Lieutenant. And another girl named Hazel Gavano. Ever know 'em?"

BLACKLEY looked upon Hackett in the manner of a blue-ribbon St. Bernard disdainfully noticing a yipping mongrel pup. "Obviously you're attempting to press me on an old sore spot, Hackett. I can think of no other reason you might have for gratuitously digging up a minor failure of mine and throwing it into my face like this. Amy Gates and Hazel Cavano were involved in a cheap homicide six years ago—a sordid case now definitely closed." In icy tones the lieutenant added, "Your only reason for mentioning them *was* to embarrass me, was it not?"

"Of course," Hackett admitted. "And may I hope they aren't the half of it?"

With haste and misgivings, Clarabelle tugged Blackley into her office and closed the door. He was about to get charmed dizzy—or so Clarabelle intended. I faced Hackett.

"Listen to me carefully, Thack. A dead body in our waiting room can become a major headache for us. Don't, for Pete's sake, force Blackley to get nasty with us. We were doing nicely until you started needling him."

Hackett frowned. "If I hadn't given Eve the come-on signal, she wouldn't have hustled over here to get herself murdered. I feel responsible."

"That's not true, Thack. Eve was evidently asking for it in some way and was due to get it, and our dark doorway happened to be just right for it. A damned nuisance, sure, but really none of our affair."

"Where should a client of ours get murdered in order to make it our business?" Hackett inquired wryly. "Doesn't it count unless she's actually sitting on your lap?"

"Thack, you're like a trained bird-dog scenting a covey of partridge. You're itching to trail it down—but don't even try. In

the first place, if you do any unlicensed snooping, Blackley will surely nail you up inside the clink. You won't like staying there so long, and it won't enhance our business reputation either. Secondly, no special detecting is necessary here. I already know who sent little Eve to heaven."

Hackett eyed me. "No kidding?"

"Not a bit of it. But don't expect me to take you into my confidence. I'm staying clammed up."

"Poor plodding Blackley may need a little help catching up with you in this murder case, Pres," Hackett said acridly. "Funny thing. Much as we loathe each other, he and I feel the same way when a killer's on the way to getting away with it. It bothers us a little."

"Then stay bothered a little, Thack. Lay off. That's orders. Clarabelle will back them up, I'm sure. Understand? Lay off."

Hackett shrugged and turned away, thoughtfully tapping his teeth with the head of his little cane. Inside Clarabelle's office the musical lilt of her voice mingled with Blackley's polite rumble. It made me feel less anxious. Obviously our play was simply to sit tight and let the murder drift from our door on the tide of Clarabelle's charm.

I felt Hackett watching me as I went to the switchboard. Along with every other press agent in the country, we had Hester Troy's home number listed and also that of her office in S. Richard Harling's Bandbox Theatre. Since she wasn't working for Richard any more, I called her apartment on West Twenty-third Street.

The distant bell rang a long time before I hung up. Not at home. Keeping herself under wraps. Sobering up, no doubt. All this was fine with me. I fervently hoped that in case the cops traced her down somehow she'd play it smart and claim she hadn't been anywhere near Headliner Files this evening.

Then I remembered, in a flash of elation, my drink. That double Scotch I'd brought from Marianne's! Since the sudden death of Eve Archer I'd been too preoccupied to remember it, but there it sat, still on the desk where I'd left it—warm now, but as welcome as an oasis in mid-Sahara.

I was hoisting it when I became aware of Blackley's grumbling, "Yes, yes, this party may leave." Looking around, I saw the

homicide dick opening the outer door for Hackett.

As Hackett stepped out, I recognized in a spasm of consternation that it would be reckless to let him loose without a leash. I sprang up, putting my drink aside, and hustled after him, only to be stopped by the same dick at the door. It took a little time to tempt Blackley from Clarabelle's captivating presence again and get him to pass me.

When I finally made the sidewalk, nobody was in sight. Even the news-hawks had faded, having evidently decided to get the story through the regular channels from Centre Street. But more particularly there was no Hackett.

Figuring where I would go if I were a born investigator like Hackett, I crossed the street directly to Marianne's—and there he was, just inside, talking to the big boss herself.

I yanked at his arm and in spite of Marianne's scowl—he seems to bring out a protective maternal urge in older women—didn't stop yanking until I had him outside again.

"This is the end of the line for you, Brother. You'd seen me dropping in here for a drink, as I often do, and figured this was where I'd picked up those torn prints. You decided it was a good place to snoop. But this is as far as you're going. I ordered you to drop the whole thing, remember?"

"But this is also my night off, while you're supposed to be taking the graveyard trick," Hackett reminded me. "Having no orders to the contrary, I'll just stroll along."

This he did with a sprightly step, swinging his pencil-thin cane. His jauntiness made me uneasy all over again. A hundred to one, I thought, this intractable ex-sleuth was up to tricks. Since Clarabelle was on hand in Headliner Files to take the call in case anyone phoned, all in a lather, to find out what some radio comedian's favorite bedtime snack is, I decided to keep a wary eye on our high-principled researcher, to make sure he wouldn't research too far.

Hustling, I caught up with him. He didn't even glance at me, but continued to saunter along, lightly swinging his cane. We had gone on like this for two blocks when Hackett said to me in a whisper, "Somebody's tailing us. No, don't look around!"

I caught myself in the nick of time. Pausing, Hackett patted his pockets and snapped his fingers as if he'd forgotten something important. He said softly, "Stick with me when I close in." Then he turned back, striding briskly, still in a manner calculated to deceive our shadow. Although I saw no sign of anyone who might be spotting us, I kept abreast of Hackett, alert for his next move.

Halfway down the block he swerved swiftly toward a dark doorway. I pressed in with him, shoulder to shoulder, blocking it. There was a gasp and then a wriggling struggle. It stopped as we crowded closer, pressing our captive against a bronze door.

Delighted, I found we'd pounced on a girl. She looked up at us round-eyed, her red lips parted. Even in this dim light her face had fresher vitality than either Hester Troy's or Eve Archer's—and also a quality of audacity. She didn't yelp. She breathed fast in a palpitant, challenging silence as if to say, "Okay, you got me—what comes next?"

CHAPTER FOUR

Star-Spangled Murder

FOR my money this was the pleasantest moment of a wearing night, but of course it couldn't last. Hackett executed two quick moves simultaneously. He stepped back with the girl's shiny black handbag and at the same time levelled his cane and pressed its point to her body just firmly enough to keep her cornered.

She didn't resist Hackett's little hickory stick, thereby showing herself to be a smart chick. It wasn't the dandyish affectation it seemed. Actually he carried it as a weapon—a substitute for the gun which he could no longer pack legally, and one of respectable power. You wouldn't suspect that Hackett's cane was loaded with potential mayhem, but it could leap out and slice an ear off instantly, or shatter a knee-cap, or fracture a skull, or pop an eye out, as he might choose.

Single-sticking, the technique was called, and as an Eighteenth Century sport it had made the saber duellists of old Heidelberg appear to be sissies by comparison. This girl probably hadn't heard of Hackett's prowess with his stick, but instinct must

have warned her not to fight off its gently pressing point.

Hackett passed her purse to me. I found folds of copy-paper covered with pencilled scribbles and a celluloid envelope containing a card.

"Press card. Mr. Hackett, meet Miss Maxine Kane of the *Dispatch*. Miss Kane, Mr. Hackett. And in case you're curious, my name—"

"I know who you are," she said quickly. "Haven't I been trying my darnedest to get past those cops and connect with you all night?"

As Hackett lowered his cane she grabbed her purse back and eased from the doorway into brighter light, which, on her, looked good. Snappy, tiny, dark-haired, she had eyes full of dark boldness.

"Let's get together on this, Men. What's the real inside dope on how Eve got it?" She added eagerly, "Don't even think of holding out on me. You're the chance of my young lifetime and I can't let you get away from me."

"You'll have to shake a leg," Hackett said. "Your chance of a lifetime is in a hurry."

He hooked an arm through one of Maxine Kane's and started off with her. My next move was hardly a problem. I got over there to her other arm. Hardly reaching to our shoulders, she hustled right along between us, her tiny shoes twinkling. Hackett looked at her with a soft, bemused smile. Sour as he was on the human race, he liked this member of it.

"Since when," I asked happily, getting in some time for myself, "is the *Dispatch* hiring girl reporters who can qualify for the pony team at the Diamond Horseshoe?"

"Oh, I'm not a reporter," Maxine said. "I'm Eve Archer's secretary, or her assistant—or *was*, rather. See, I hopped to it the second the news ticked in, and I'm trying to impress my chief by bringing in a hot exclusive about her. Then maybe she'll let me take over the 'Sleepy-Time Gal' column. I'd love it—but with less spleen than Eve put into it."

"Why didn't you buttonhole us at our office door," Hackett asked, "instead of spooking along after us? Don't you know your high heels are too noisy for a tailing job?"

"I'd decided to pick you up and tease

the story out of you without letting you know I was a newspaper woman." Maxine followed up this candid admission with a rueful smile. "Even though I muffed it, I still want to find out if Eve gave you a hint of whose hide she was after tonight."

"As Eve's assistant, don't you know that?"

"She never breathed a hint when she was sniffing out something hot, and this one must have been really sensational. If only she'd trusted me with it, dammit, I'd have this murder case by the tail." Maxine gazed at us pleadingly. "Really, didn't she ask Headliner Files for information about any certain person?"

We shook our heads and kept striding along. Without having any idea where Hackett was leading us, or why, I found we'd crossed Park and Madison Avenues and were now negotiating Fifth—apparently on our way to the theatre district around Times Square.

"As one of Eve Archer's constant readers," Hackett said, "I've noticed that Rhoda Ferris is one of her favorite targets. Miss Ferris is as classy a young actress as the stage may boast today and everybody else admires her greatly, but Eve seemed to seize every opportunity to snipe at her. Why was that?"

Maxine answered, dynamically keeping up with us: "You've probably got it in your files that Eve worked as a showgirl years ago. That was strictly from hunger. She burned with a desire to become a great actress. Her big chance came in a try-out for an exciting part in an S. Richard Harling production. *Penthouse Paradise*—of course you remember that one. The try-outs finally simmered down to a toss-up between Eve Archer and Rhoda Ferris. Need I remind you that S. Richard finally chose Rhoda, and that that was the start of her glamorous career?"

"So Eve felt afterward, of course," I filled it in, "that that dazzling success should and would have been hers instead if only Rhoda hadn't cheated her out of it."

"Rhoda wasn't to blame a bit, but when Eve got her column she started biting at Rhoda, and Rhoda snubbed her for it, which made it worse, and after that Eve never passed up an opening to hit Rhoda a low blow." Maxine's eyes went round again. "Gosh, for a second there I began suspect-

ing Rhoda might have finally struck back at Eve. But that idea's out. Top-drawer actresses simply don't go around murdering people. Certainly not Rhoda Ferris this time. With a big opening on Broadway set for tomorrow night, she just wouldn't have had a minute to spare for it."

We paused, apparently at Hackett's objective, and Hackett said: "Perhaps Rhoda Ferris herself wouldn't, but someone close to her might get in a little job of killing for her sake. The next question is, then, why? To stop what?"

We gazed in blinking silence at a blazing marquee. Bulbs as bright as noonday sun spelled out *Bandbox* and *S. Richard Harling Presents Rhoda Ferris*. Photos of the new production filled the panels and doorways. Tomorrow night this spot would swarm with first-nighters in ermine and silk hats. That it would be another triumph was already assured; a Philadelphia try-out of *Let's Forget Yesterday* was an unqualified smash. So—murder for Rhoda Ferris's sake, to save all this glory and dough?

"Eve—killed by somebody to whom Rhoda is terribly important," Maxine murmured, looking like a luscious tidbit even in all this glare. "Could be. But somehow I've a feeling we're off the beam here. I think Eve was latching onto a scandal about somebody else, someone entirely different—and I'm going to keep digging like a terrier until I uncover—"

Maxine discovered she was talking to empty air. Our young Mr. Hackett was no longer with us. Startled, I saw one of the swinging doors of the Bandbox Theatre just closing.

"Thack!"

WE WENT after him—pushed into the lobby and found the theatre a vast black cavern with a single bulb glaring far off on the stage where an inviting modernistic bedroom set had been built. Hackett was still out of sight, but we heard quick footfalls climbing the richly carpeted stairway overhead. We chased them up through the mezzanine and to the balcony level, where we glimpsed our man just disappearing through a door.

The door bore no legend, but Hackett seemed to know just where he was heading—an indication of how amazingly well he knew his way through the crannies and

temples of Manhattan's night life. Dogging him through, we found ourselves in the reception room of a beautifully appointed office suite. Hackett was smiling across a desk where a woman sat looking at him leadenly from under dark bristly eyebrows. Tired enough to look thirty-odd, she was probably five years younger.

"From Headliner Files," Hackett said. "To see Mr. Harling, or Miss Ferris, or both, please."

"Publicity? Not tonight, Brother. We had dress rehearsal tonight and I'm absolutely dead. Phone tomorrow. Ask for Miss Pollard. Agnes Pollard, Mr. Harling's private secretary. That's me—I think."

"Mr. Harling and Miss Ferris might see me now," Hackett suggested, "if you'd mention they're sure to be annoyed worse, and very soon now, premiere or not, about the murder of Eve Archer."

"The mur—"

A moment of silence held, following the broken-off echo. It had come from an inner door which had just then opened. Evidently it connected with S. Richard Harling's super-private office. I recognized Harling standing there in the doorway, a tall, cold man, perfectly groomed, obviously of the most elegant taste.

An ethereal blonde creature clung to his arm. Her features were delicate, her eyes large and softly violet; and although she seemed an angel on earth, the fact could not be overlooked that she was a fully equipped woman. This, of course, was the first magnitude star, Rhoda Ferris. After the night's dress rehearsal she looked worn, but not too worn to respond with a shock to Hackett's mention of murder.

"Yes, the murder of Eve Archer. Is it possible you haven't heard of it?" Hackett moved toward them. "I don't envy the cops' job of questioning you about it, Miss Ferris. It's tough, trying to tell whether a talented actress is reacting honestly or skillfully emoting."

Rhoda paled a little. S. Richard started to mouth an indignant protest, got lost and stopped. I quickly attempted to beg their pardon, but Hackett cut in again with the withering contempt he reserved for celebrities like these.

"I know it's silly of me to ask, but does it occur to Mr. Harling that perhaps it's his hand that has opened the morgue door?"

Harling blurted out a noise in horror—or at least in an expert imitation of it. "What—what's that?"

Before I could muzzle him, Hackett went on in stinging tones: "You fired Hester for hitting the bottle too hard. Didn't that turn her sour, drive her to even harder drinking and make her fair prey for Eve Archer? Eve liquored her up under pressure, to worm secrets out of her—confidential stuff that might injure you, Miss Ferris, if published. Didn't Hester actually warn you, Mr. Harling, that Eve had her caught in a squeeze play—meaning she might blab out even more if you didn't help her to resist Eve, and that even so all hell was due to bust loose any minute now?"

Hackett had done a fast coax on Marianne to have picked up all that.

"And doesn't that fact," he persisted relentlessly—"the fact that Eve had learned too much from Hester—account for the further fact that Eve isn't writing any more backbiting columns now?"

"Richard," Rhoda Ferris said faintly, "I asked you not to fire Hester—begged you to take her back—really implored you—"

"Rhoda, Dear, you're so terribly tired," S. Richard said. He wasn't exactly daisy-fresh himself. It took a few seconds for the full force of Hackett's last dig to reach him. Then he stiffened and burst out: "Your—your implication is—monstrous!"

Rhoda's eyes had turned misty. She passed a limp hand across them, leaning more heavily on her producer's arm. She sighed, "I—I can't stand any more—not any more tonight—really I—" And if she wasn't actually about to drop in a faint, it was the most convincing bit of acting I'd ever watched without a ticket.

Instantly Harling was all profuse solicitude for her. Agnes Pollard, dragging herself up with a glare for Hackett, also rushed to the overwrought actress's aid. In the space of a few moments, Hackett had stirred up plenty of ill will for Headliner Files. I grabbed his arm in an unshakable grip, and at the same time Maxine Kane tackled him with spunky spirit and my complete approval.

"You brute of a hawkshaw, you!" Maxine flashed at him. "You ought to get your big ears knocked down for pulling an inexcusable trick like this on the sweetest little actress in the world."

Cynically persistent, Hackett added: "We might do well, Miss Ferris and Mr. Harling, to warn Hester Troy that since she talks too much in her cups, she could very likely be the next to visit the morgue."

Rhoda moaned and drooped against Harling, who uttered elegant curses.

Agnes Pollard spat at us: "Get this louse out of here before I tear him apart—get him out!"

I babbled an unheard apology and welcomed Maxine's help at that task. We maneuvered Hackett out to the balcony, then down through the deserted lobby. Once we had him on the sidewalk, Maxine snapped at him like a furious little wildcat.

"A fine, fancy piece of guessing, Pal—very fine indeed, except that it's as wrong as a three-legged union suit!"

"Wrong or not," Hackett said, smiling at the fire in her, "it fits!"

"No better than it fits any other pet peeve of Eve's, and she had dozens! When it comes to detecting, you couldn't detect a fake redhead six weeks after her last rinse! Now you listen to little Maxie, you misguided gadfly."

It developed into more of a harangue than I could take. When Hackett and Maxine ducked into a taxi together, still squabbling, I willingly let them go, feeling she'd hold his interest in something pleasanter than mistaken theories.

I stumbled into another taxi and let myself into Headliner Files to find that Clarabelle and Blackley had gone. Having dutifully returned to my post for the graveyard trick, I remembered with gratitude that double Scotch I'd had to abandon so long ago. I needed it twenty times worse now, and there it was, still sitting just where I'd left it.

No. It was a mirage. The cleaning woman had been in here. The glass was empty.

THACKERAY HACKETT was due on the job promptly at nine in the morning, but at ten-thirty he still hadn't shown. The rest of us were answering clamoring phones, with our pretty clerks buzzing around our files like honeybees, and even Clarabelle had come in phenomenally early, being worried about the murder on the premises. But not Hackett.

Phoning the *Dispatch*, I connected with

the late Eve Archer's desk and asked, "Maxie, where did you leave our little playmate?"

"I kissed him good night and sent him home at four A.M. Hasn't he recovered from it yet?"

"I don't know, but I'd like to sample those knockout effects for myself. Did you convert him to your way of seeing things?"

"I'm still working on it. You know, that lad is tough to take, but he's certainly got something."

"Unquestionably he has, and plenty of it," I agreed acridly. "But what's it good for?"

When closing time neared, still with no word from our absent researcher, I went into Clarabelle's office. She was keeping a smart weather eye on developments in case Lieutenant Blackley should steam in unexpectedly, as he liked to do.

"Clarabelle, we've been getting along nicely all day without Thackeray Hackett, but we'd better prepare ourselves for a jolt. I can't tell just what it will be, but it's coming, with his compliments."

"But Walter, doll, all the papers have been so good to us, not playing us up too much, and Lieutenant Blackley is taking me out to dinner tonight, and the whole thing's just blowing over. You need to have more faith in human nature, Walter, really."

"Blowing over? Not quite. It's about to blow up—in our faces, if I know Thack."

Rapidly I told her about the black eye he had given us last night in Harling's office. I warned her his absence today could mean only one thing—he was bringing up more ammunition. She plucked diamond rings from one hand and put them on the fingers of the other—a signal of rising anxiety.

"Thack thinks of too many things to do, Clarabelle, and it's no use at all trying to talk him into behaving—but I've cooked up a way to save us from him. That's to beat him to the finish. I'm sure I can do it because I've had a pretty solid idea from the beginning as to who killed Eve."

Clarabelle sat very still, staring at me. "You have, doll?"

"Yes. That gives me the edge on Thack. I hope I can jockey Hester Troy out of that picture before he gets near her."

"Hester Troy, doll?"

"Look, Clarabelle, this is the way I see it shaping up. Hester knows something damaging about Rhoda Ferris, which their elegant boss, S. Richard Harling, apparently doesn't know. Working for Rhoda, Hester stayed loyal and mum. But when S. Richard fired her she turned bitter. Eve Archer worked on her, using liquor, Hester's weakness, as a tongue-loosener. Hester blabbed out more than she wanted to, then realized Eve was all set to spring a spectacular expose. It was timed to break just before Rhoda's big new premiere tonight—the most dramatic moment Eve could choose for ruining a star's career."

"Why, the tramp!" Clarabelle said, swiftly patting all her gray-blond ringlets.

"Hester wanted desperately to stop Eve, but now Eve was dodging her. Somehow Hester learned Eve's last step would be to check her undercover dope against the biographical material on Rhoda in our files. So Hester planted herself in Marianne's across the street from here and watched for Eve to show. See how it figures? Hester had to silence Eve. Otherwise Rhoda's career would be wrecked, thanks to Hester's chin-wagging, and Hester would never be



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trusted with another job by anybody.”

“My heavens, doll!” Clarabella said in a flurry of alarm. “By breaking all that open, Thack, as an employee of ours, will ruin Rhoda just the same, and what’s worse he’ll ruin Headliner Files besides. Walter, doll, we can’t let such terrible harm come to our baby!”

“My sentiments exactly, Clarabelle. Just let me handle the rest of this. I’ll get to Hester while Thack’s still far afield, and help her to dream up a water-tight alibi or maybe ship her off to Europe by plane—anything to stymie Thack. What I plan to do may be slightly illegal, Clarabelle.”

“You just leave the legalities to me, doll,” Clarabelle said grimly, thinking of them in the shape of Lieutenant Blackley, “and get a hustle on!”

I hustled—to a phone. My call to Hester’s apartment went unanswered. She was still keeping herself under wraps, I told myself—still scared and no doubt drinking herself into a forgetful coma. She’d need sobering up before I could brief her, but first I had to find her. Figuring she’d stagger home sooner or later, or that maybe her neighbors could give me a lead, I headed for her apartment.

Her address was a brownstone front and her name on a mailbox led me to a door on the first floor. I buzzed three times, then tried the knob. It turned. The living room had no Hester in it, and neither did the undisturbed bedroom, but the bath did.

Wearing only mules and a slip, she hung over the edge of the tub, her blonde hair spilled on the dry bottom, blood matting it—dried now, a brown-red path of it flowing to the drain. Her upside-down face stared up in vague surprise. It looked like an accident, but I knew better. The same hand that had skewered Eve Archer in the back had staged this death scene.

Hester’s whole body was rigid. There had been no Hester any more since, probably, last night.

CHAPTER FIVE

Final Curtain

I FOUND myself back on the sidewalk in front of Hester Troy’s apartment with the fragments of a beautiful no-good theory raining around my ears.

A cabriolet with its top booted down had braked at the curb. With a twinge I recognized Thackeray Hackett at the wheel. He had his ever-present cane leaning near his left knee and on his other side that cute little trick Maxine cuddling with her dark hair windblown.

“Lift, Pres?” she said softly.

I answered in a jittery mumble, “Why, thanks very much,” and got myself into the rear seat, clambering over Maxine in the process. As they gazed back at me I said: “So, Thack, you’ve spent the day joy-riding on company time? Couldn’t you have stayed longer?”

He smiled cryptically, and Maxine said: “He collected me at the *Dispatch* plant on the way back, with a queer look in his eye, and he’s still got it. Maybe he pinched this car.”

“Borrowed it from an old friend of mine who’s an instructor in geology at Columbia,” Hackett explained.

Thanking my stars he didn’t feel urgently inclined to snoop inside, I found my feet resting on several rusty iron rods. Three feet long, they had couplings on the ends for connecting them together. One had a cross-bar, and another terminated in a spiral like an augur. “What’re those things?”

“A geologist’s drill. Used to bring up specimens of clay and rock from various depths. I found it handy today over in Jersey.”

“You’ve been in Jersey, Thack? Why?”

“First thing this morning I dug into the news files and various official records for 1945. They told me that Amy Gates was buried in a small cemetery in Hackensack and Hazel Cavano in another out-of-the-way graveyard in Perth Amboy. So I went over and drove this drill down through six feet of earth, straight into Amy’s casket. Then I did the same thing to Hazel Cavano’s.”

“Great heavens! You actually mean you wanted samples of their corpses?”

“I didn’t bring up anything,” Hackett said softly. “It’s like the famous case of the non-barking dog—the significant thing is what didn’t happen.” He fished into his pocket and passed over two printed circulars. “Ever see either of those babes before, Pres?”

The circulars read at the top: *WANTED*

—*For Murder.* The pictures printed on them—not rogue's gallery portraits, but two blown-up snapshots—showed two mean-looking young females. Both wore close-fitting cloche hats over severely bobbed hair. Their hard mouths were faked rosebuds. With their squinting eyes, pimply skin and pinched expressions, they looked hateful.

The printed matter under one of them read: "Amy Gates, 21 years, wt. 110, ht. 5'5", hair dark." Under the other was: "Hazel Gavano, 19 years, wt. 95, ht. 5' 1', hair lt. brown, eyes—" and so on. I passed them back to Hackett. He or anybody else could have them.

"Both at that time taxi-dancers in a dive near Harlem," he informed me. "One night a guy to whom they'd given a mickey woke up—it was a little too weak—woke up while they were rolling him. To keep him from squawking to the cops they slugged him—a little too hard. He never got over it. The girls skipped, and it became the job of a dick named Blackley to trace them. But they weren't heard from again until years later, when their funeral notices trickled across the Hudson. As Blackley said, a sordid case and a minor failure for him."

"And one better forgotten." I tried to change the subject. "Did you come here to ask Hester about it? No use waiting around. She doesn't answer her bell, so let's blow."

"I know—because she's dead," Thack said softly. "She was freshly dead when Maxie and I found her with her skull cracked in the tub at an early hour this morning."

They eyed me over their shoulders and I gaped at them.

Maxine added: "We came cruising past just now to see if anyone had found her yet, and saw the handsome Mr. Preston taking a quick powder."

"You—you've kept mum about it—and you a news woman, Maxie?"

"Only because it might give me an in on a bigger story, one that'll clinch the 'Sleepy-Time' column for me. Yet I doubt that it'll build up that way. I think this was just an alcoholic accident, although our stubborn sidekick here argues no."

"Better quit arguing, then; at least here," I said. "Routine coverage on the Archer

job is bringing our favorite pal Blackley."

Hackett let the clutch back even as I spoke, having already spotted the lieutenant. Blackley had emerged from his official car, which had stopped in an opening at the curb a hundred feet ahead, and now he was coursing like a low-flying blimp for Hester's address. If he had spotted us, he chose to pretend we weren't there. Hackett looped us through a U-turn and we went quickly away as Blackley mounted the steps leading to Miss Troy's corpse.

Hackett swung us north at the nearest avenue. It led us directly into the theatre district. I spent the trip resigning myself to the obvious fact that Hackett couldn't be stopped now. This became plainer than ever when he bucked us to a stop squarely in front of the Bandbox Theatre where Rhoda Ferris's brightest premiere would dazzle all Broadway tonight.

The swinging doors opened and out came men packing press cameras. It must mean S. Richard's star had been posing for some last-minute publicity shots, so, of course, she was just where Hackett wanted to find her. Carrying his little hickory stick, he stepped to the box-office grille.

"Phone up to Harling's office and get Miss Ferris personally. Tell her there's a man here who says the cops may soon come around looking for the late Amy Gates."

The flat, grating note in Hackett's voice must have impressed the ticket seller, a most unimpressible breed. We waited while he relayed the message. When he disconnected, he nodded to the flunky guarding the entrance. Hackett strode in with Maxine's trim pumps sparkling right behind him. I brought up the rear, glumly thinking, "Here goes the old ball game. Lord help us now."

THE theatre was softly lighted and the curtain was down, ready for the glamorous audience that would begin assembling in several hours. My breath was coming hard when I trailed Hackett and Maxine into Harling's office at the balcony level. Again Hackett turned to the desk of Harling's sentry, Agnes Pollard. Having caught a few winks, she looked better today, but still quietly desperate.

The connecting door opened and Rhoda Ferris appeared. Hackett's message must

have hit her brutally hard, but she wasn't going to pieces just yet—not with her whole world at stake.

We entered an office that could have served as an ultra-smart movie set. S. Richard Harling sat at his carved desk in the middle of all that opulence looking stricken.

"I've just told Richard the whole thing in a few devastating words, Mr. Hackett," Rhoda said. "You left me no choice."

Shocked to numbness, the elegant Harling said: "I never *dreamt*—"

Rhoda went on with admirable coolness: "And I'm not so foolish as to try to bluff it out with a man as astute as you are, Mr. Hackett. In the strictest privacy, this one time only, I'll admit it. But not ever again. If you should choose to accuse me, you'll never make it stick. I became a fugitive from the law before I could be arrested, so my fingerprints are not on file anywhere—and there's nothing else, nothing else at all, to identify me definitely as one Amy Gates."

In show business the beautification of women's faces is a most artful craft. Skin is smoothed, cheekbones highlighted, noses and chins reshaped, eyes brightened, an over-all smartness added, all as a matter of course. A woman may have hair of a different color, eyelashes of a different length, a mouth of a different shape almost every day if she wishes. It may be said that some women never expose their completely unmasked faces except to their make-up mirrors. Rhoda Ferris had once been Amy Gates, but for my money she didn't even look like a second cousin of herself.

"True, no definite means of identification is left," Hackett said evenly, "now that Hester Troy can't even tell on you again."

Rhoda and Harling tightened. "Hester—dead?"

"A part of the dead past now, yes," Hackett said, fingers rippling on his thin cane. "Did she know you when?"

"She took me in when the police were searching for me—risked her own freedom to hide me until the worst danger was gone. Without Hester's loyalty I'd have been lost then—and I've always been grateful to her. But that was something I couldn't explain to Richard when he insisted on firing her. But don't try—"

Hackett gently shook his head. "You're

overlooking something I can't forget—murder. People made dead and silent. Hester Troy. Eve Archer. And going farther back, the poor bum you slugged to death one night six years ago."

Rhoda Ferris lifted her chin. "I won't blame you for doubting this—but I didn't strike a blow, didn't have anything to do with that man's death. I walked in on it after it was done. Technically I'm guilty because—as we put it in our language of those days—I wouldn't rat on a pal. I did help Hazel to get away. But there's no blood on my hands."

Hackett shrugged. "Let's let the six-year-old corpse rest in its grave. Those other graves in Jersey—the ones with Amy's and Hazel's names on them—were a way of closing that case, of course. Hester Troy had photos of them to show Eve as a convincer, but she didn't live long enough to use them. Eve might have smelled out the trick anyway. A few greased palms had helped to put two empty caskets under the sod, that's all. But Eve Archer's and Hester Troy's caskets won't be empty. It's not so easy to ignore them."

Rhoda said: "I didn't kill them."

"I know that," Hackett answered.

"And I don't know who did."

"But you've a very good idea."

S. Richard Harling rose stiffly.

"Not you either," Hackett said, tapping his chin with the head of his walking stick. "You were very busy rehearsing with Rhoda at the time Eve got it, and I'd just left you both here at the theatre when I found Hester dead. You see, my intrusion last night wasn't all to the bad—it gives you an alibi. The killer we want is the other fugitive from that old murder rap, which will never be outlawed—a killer who has something to lose, too. At least her freedom for the rest of her life. Of course I mean Hazel Cavano, who's no more dead and buried than you are."

Wide-eyed, I turned and peered at the woman standing in the doorway—the one who had given her name as Agnes Pollard.

"NO," HACKETT said to me. "Remember the description of Hazel Cavano on the police circular. Height five feet one. Agnes is taller. Besides, who could have known exactly when Eve would be rushing over to Headliner Files last

night to dig up the dirt and keep a date with a dick—who but her secretary, sitting at her elbow and eavesdropping? When you phoned back to the *Dispatch*, Pres, Eve had already rushed off on short notice, and her secretary wasn't there any more either, having hustled to catch up with Eve—with an ice-pick, snatched from a bar somewhere, all ready in her bag."

I stared at that vivid half-pint "Maxine Kent," and in her eyes, suddenly opened wide, shone the audacity that must have prompted Hazel Cavano to kill.

Her breath caught, she began backing slowly on her shiny pumps toward the door.

"Did you wangle yourself a job with Eve," Hackett said, moving slowly toward her, "so you could watch her at close quarters—because she was out to get Rhoda, and getting Rhoda on an old murder rap would get you too?"

She took tight backward steps and I stared at her, knowing now why she had picked us up last night—to learn whether Eve had dropped any hints to us—whether we had come to suspect, as Eve had, that the biographical background in our folder on Rhoda was phony.

In one swift stream of movement she was across the waiting room and out the door. I loped after her, expecting Hackett to race past me—but Hackett didn't. Then dodging out on the balcony, I found them both standing still. The girl poised on the tips of her high-heeled pumps, finding her way to the stairs blocked. Hackett had popped out from another door.

All taut, she let him come closer.

Hackett said softly: "Trying to get away with it will only mean more murdering and more murdering. It's no use. You can't make it this time. See—"

His next move chilled me. He had been holding his delicate cane lightly. Now he brought it up in one swift action, like an expert swordsman. I was horrified to see him unlimbering this dreadful weapon against an unarmed girl—but he flicked it just once, with a rapierlike stroke, almost gently. Then he stood back, rod-straight, his eyes dulled with regret.

Bright red blood streamed from a cut just below one of the girl's wild eyes.

"You see?" Hackett said. "The police will find it very easy to trace a murderess

with a fresh scar on her soft left cheek."

A wailing cry of thin despair came out of Maxine's throat. Whirling again, she saw me behind her and recoiled, then wheeled to the only direction left to her—down the aisle splitting the balcony in the middle. In crazy desperation we watched her fleeing as if to the brink of a cliff—and suddenly one of her high heels snagged on the carpet. She pitched headlong, screaming again as the railing passed under her, and vanished.

We looked down on her lying there broken on the seats below—splashed hair, trickling blood, shining nylons on legs that would never run again—the last act curtain of a real life play which *Let's Forget Yesterday* would never top.

The next few minutes hardly registered. I remember Hackett hurrying back to Rhoda and Harling. He said, "Notify Blackley—another accident." It might be hard for Blackley to swallow but nobody here would tell him different.

Then I remember leaving before Blackley's arrival, with the thought that Rhoda and S. Richard were in fine nervous condition for an opening night, but unquestionably they'd pull it off brilliantly, like the seasoned troupers they were, even if they collapsed afterward.

We walked along through the Manhattan twilight and I eyed Hackett, thankful there was only one of him on earth.

"I hope there'll never be a next time, Thack. She was too cute a chick to end up in the morgue. But then, Lord knows, bad little girls shouldn't go around murdering people—and it was anyone's turn next."

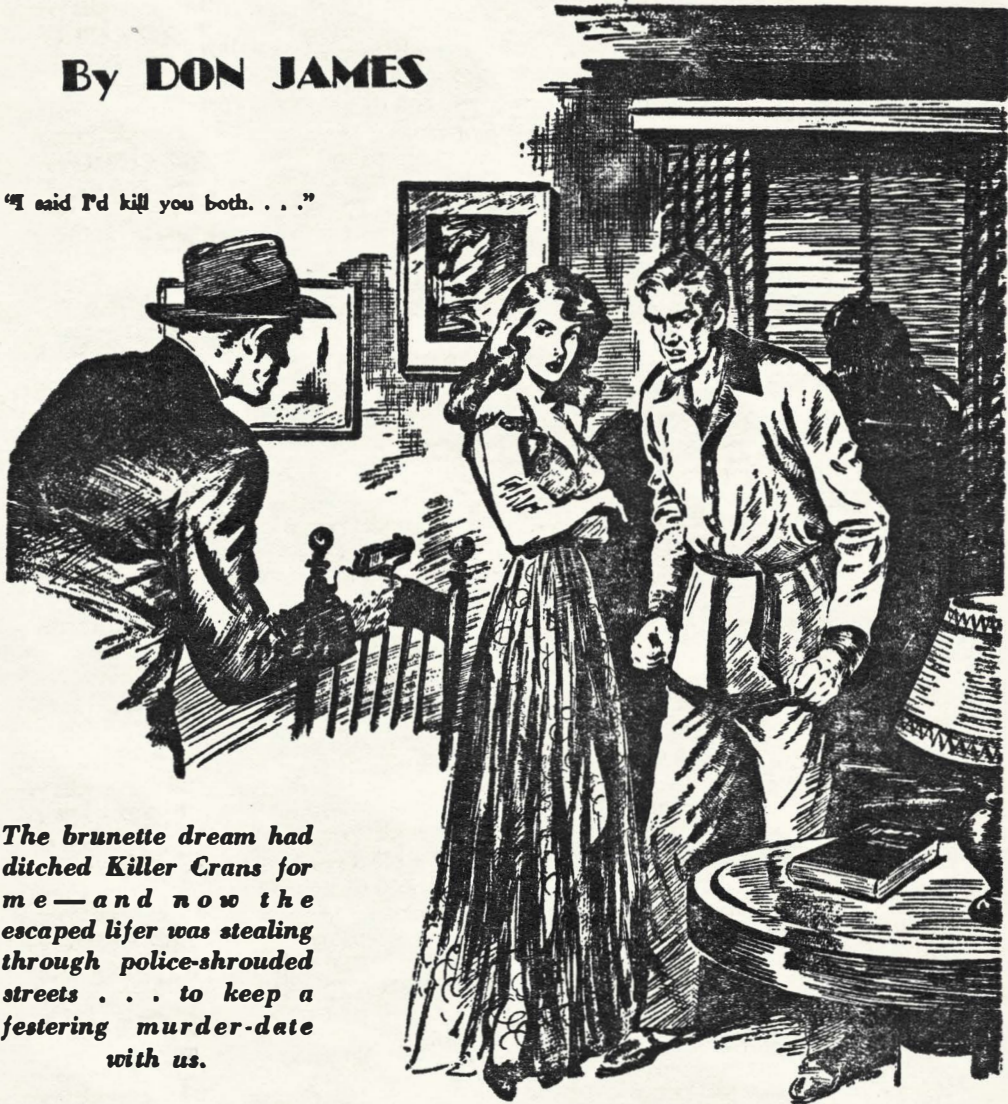
"Better the morgue than the death house, with messed-up lives strewn behind her." Hackett added, "Maybe I wasn't quite fair to Richard when I said he'd opened the morgue door. It really goes back farther, to Hester Troy's drinking. If only she had had the will-power to lay off the stuff, none of this would have happened. Let that be a lesson to us. Liquor will never do us any good."

Somehow we found ourselves in Marianne's next. We settled at a miniature table and Hackett—this down-at-heel ex-shamus who worked for us for peanuts—said sadly: "This is on me, Pres. If you please, Marianne, two double Scotches."

I'LL NEVER SLAY AGAIN

By DON JAMES

"I said I'd kill you both. . ."



The brunette dream had ditched Killer Crans for me—and now the escaped lifer was stealing through police-shrouded streets . . . to keep a festering murder-date with us.

SOMEONE walked down the hallway. Both of us listened to the footsteps. They passed, and I relaxed and lit another cigarette.

Helen got up from a chair, walked across the room and turned on the radio. She found a symphony and kept it soft. Music

seemed to do things for her. She needed it.

"Mac, I'm frightened," she said. She raised a hand and pushed hair back over an ear. The wedding ring looked thin and very clean.

I tried to smile reassuringly. A husband is supposed to be strong and reassuring

and protective. In three years of married life, I'd tried to give her all of those things as well as the rest that goes with marriage.

"I think you're worrying too much," I said. "He won't come here. He's too smart. And the cops will have him any moment."

The telephone rang and I answered. It was Mike Bardie on the city desk at the paper.

"Ad Cran's in town, all right," he said. "Gleason just called from headquarters. Someone tipped the cops. They're on it."

"Thanks, Mike. Anything else?"

"Some follow-up on the prison break. The guard that Cran stabbed with the shiv died. The guard carried a gun. It's gone, so they know Cran's armed."

"Call me if you get more."

"Yeah. And Mac—you can relax. Gleason says they've assigned a man to you and Helen. They're not taking any chances."

"That suits me," I admitted. "I'll write the column here tomorrow and send it in by messenger. Okay?"

"Right. You and Helen stay in the apartment. Cran said he'd kill both of you if he ever got out. He's tough enough to do it if he gets a chance."

"We're staying here until it's safe."

I hung up and the telephone rang again before I could turn away.

"George McKay?" a firm voice asked.

"Yes."

"Lieutenant Birch, Police Headquarters. We're placing a man across the street from your apartment. There's only one entrance Cran could use to get into the building. If he shows up, we want to get him in the street, rather than take a chance on gunplay inside."

"Thanks, Lieutenant."

"Our man's name is Brian. He's wearing a gray suit and hat. If anything makes you suspicious, raise and lower your blind several times. He'll be in to see you."

"Good."

"Keep your door locked and don't open it unless you know who's outside."

"Will you let me know when you get him?"

"I'll call at once."

Helen was in the kitchen when I put the telephone down. I went in and she was making coffee. I put my arms about her and held her.

"They know he's in town and we have protection outside," I said. "They'll get him. We can stop worrying."

She didn't answer for a moment and then she whispered, "I'll never feel safe until he's dead, Mac."

IT WAS only because the penalty for murder in this state is life imprisonment that Ad Cran was not dead.

It had all happened four years before; back in the days when Ad was making headlines with his brilliant defense tactics in the criminal courts. If there were a few raised eyebrows about the associations he had with some of the top racketeers in the city, there never was much said openly. Ad Cran had come up the hard way, putting himself through law school, and most people were willing to give him a pat on the back for making a name for himself.

I had known him since my early days on the police beat for the paper and we had become close friends. I knew more about the background of Ad's connections with the underworld than I would admit, even to him, but I also realized that he needed them in his business.

And, of course, there was Helen. She was singing at Harry Parlow's nightclub, and she was wearing Ad's engagement ring.

Ad and I used to stop at the club and wait for her. Sometimes there would be a little party afterwards with some girl for me. That other girl for me never meant anything. I was in love with Helen; her coal-black hair, the blue eyes, the things that blended into the woman she was.

I tried hard never to let it come to the surface and if Ad suspected it, he never told me. Helen knew it, although I had never told her.

Ad shot and killed Carl Clyde shortly before seven o'clock one summer evening.

It was one of those days when the three of us were going to have dinner together. At four o'clock, Ad called me and said he'd be late. Would I pick up Helen and would both of us meet him at his office? He'd found a new place to eat out on a highway and we'd drive out in his car.

At ten minutes after seven, Helen and I walked down a hallway in the office building to his suite of rooms. The outer door was unlocked and we went in.

Obviously Ad was alone in the suite, as the receptionist was gone and her desk tidied for the night. The doors to the offices occupied by the two young attorneys who worked with him were open and the desks abandoned.

Helen walked straight to Ad's office, making some crack about our being late, and opened the door. She stepped into the room and then she stopped and I saw her become tense.

I looked over her shoulder and swallowed hard.

Ad stood by his desk looking down at Clyde. Ad had a gun in his hand. I didn't know so much ferocity could be in an expression.

He must have known we were there because he looked up and regarded us with solemn eyes. "This is a hell of a mess," he said. "It's going to take some careful planning."

I walked past Helen and looked down at Clyde. He was the big shot racketeer in town. A hard, smooth man who knew and played all the angles.

"Why did you do it?" I asked.

Ad shrugged and put the gun on his desk. "He got something on me and tried to use it. He wanted something I wouldn't do for him. He threatened to get me disbarred if I didn't. He could do it, too."

"You killed him!" Helen gasped.

"That's right," he said quietly. "Look at it this way, Helen. He had it coming. He's been instrumental in the death of half-a-dozen men. I know. I worked for him. Killing him was doing the community a favor. It was doing what the law should have done, but couldn't."

She shook her head and looked away.

Ad's lips tightened and he looked at me.

"We'll have to work fast," he said.

"There's a self-operating service elevator. The building is practically empty. We'll get him down to the basement garage where my car is. I'll get the attendant in his office and out of the way. You pile Clyde's body into the back of my coupe. We'll get rid of him out in the country."

I stared at him.

He snapped, "What's the matter? You're my best friend, aren't you? You know he had it coming—"

Helen spoke again in a tense voice. "Ad! You can't—"

"Why not?" he demanded. "Neither of you can let me down." He looked at us confidently, his broad shoulders poised, his dark eyes alert and calm.

I saw the look of horror that came into Helen's eyes. I saw it reflected in Ad's eyes. The way they narrowed and the hard, angry flare in them.

"You'll do as I say," he said.

His hand reached for the gun.

I hit him with all of my 180 pounds. He didn't get up.

Helen and I looked at one another for a long moment without speaking. Then tears brimmed to her eyes and she turned away and went out into the reception room. I watched her through the open doorway as she sank down into a chair and buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders shook with sobs and then I saw her take the engagement ring from her finger. Her head was bowed and she stared at the diamond for seconds, then dropped it listlessly to the floor. She looked up at me.

"I was wrong, Mac. I made a mistake," she said huskily.

I took a deep breath and looked down at Ad. He was breathing lightly, looking as if he were asleep.

I picked up the telephone and called the police.

HELEN and I were the prosecution's witnesses. The jury convicted Ad within half an hour. As they took him out of the courtroom he managed to stop and look at us with bitterness and hate. "I'll get out," he said. "When I do—I'll kill you. Both of you."

They took him away then, and Helen's hand was clenched tightly as I held it.

"It's all right," I told her. "He'll never get out."

She bit at colorless lips. "Mac—Mac, I'm frightened."

Afterwards, when I took her home, she turned at her door and looked up at me. "Mac, I was so mistaken. I don't know—I'm not sure. I don't believe I ever loved him."

"Don't think about it."

"If it weren't for you now—or maybe if it hadn't been for you all along—"

Suddenly she was in my arms.

After we were married the following year, the cloud of Ad Cran gradually left

us and if either of us thought about the man in prison who carried murder in his heart, we never told the other. It was something to forget; something to be erased in the happiness that we found in one another.

The news flash that Ad Cran had escaped was like the dropping of an atom bomb into our happiness. Now, as I held her and listened to the fear in her voice, I felt the cold edge of premonition knife through me.

Ad Cran was hard, resourceful, and smart. He was as smart as anyone in the police set-up. He had made his living beating them at their own game, out-smarting the district attorney and freeing men in spite of efficiently collected evidence.

If he had hated us on the day he had been convicted, what had that hate become now that we were married?

I shuddered and held Helen closer.

"Let's have our coffee," I said. "We're getting the jitters. We'll have to snap out of it."

The coffee didn't help much.

Before we went to bed, I pulled the blind back and carefully looked into the street. A man stood in a doorway across from the apartment house. There was a feeling of security in seeing the detective, Brian, there and knowing that someone would be on guard all night.

It was probably the only reason we could get to sleep.

* * *

The tapping was light and insistent. Abruptly I was wide awake and reached for the gun on the night stand.

Helen was sitting up when I snapped on a lamp, her eyes wide with alarm.

"Mac! What's happening?"

I shook my head and got out of bed. At the apartment door I stepped to one side and spoke through the panel.

"Who is it?"

"Brian. I need your help and I have to use the phone."

His voice was very low, as if he didn't want to awaken anyone else in nearby apartments.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I think someone's on the roof. I'm coming in with you until we can get a squad car here. Let me in."

From the bedroom, Helen called softly, "What is it, Mac?"

"Brian. He thinks Ad is on the roof. We're going to get help."

I lowered the gun and snapped back the bolt lock on the door.

The man outside pushed in so quickly I was thrown off balance. A gun in his hand arced viciously and cracked against my wrist. I dropped my gun.

Ad Cran closed the door behind him and centered his gun on me. "It's been a long time, Mac," he said.

My stomach muscles squirmed into tight knots to resist the menace of the gun. I felt dryness in my mouth. The pain in my arm was lost in the shock of facing Cran.

"No, Ad!" I said. "Wait!"

"Wait? I've waited. Too long. Where's Helen?"

"Ad, you can't—"

"Where is she?"

Now I could see more than his dark, bitter eyes. I could see the ill-fitting suit on a body that had become thin. I could see the prison pallor of his skin and the hard lines about his mouth.



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Then Helen spoke quietly from the doorway behind me.

"How did you get here, Ad?"

He smiled crookedly and his eyes swept beyond me to her for an instant. "Hello, Helen. You're still beautiful. How did I get in here?" He laughed thinly. "I thought they'd have a stake-out. It was logical. But they shouldn't have used a man I knew. I spotted Brian at once. He got cold and went for a stroll in front of the place. That was a mistake. He's unconscious in one of those dark doorways down there."

I stepped back so that I was beside Helen. She spoke again, "What are you going to do, Ad?"

"I said I'd kill you both. Nothing has changed."

He looked at me and continued. "You took care of things, didn't you! You put me away and you got Helen. It was neat."

I didn't answer him. Desperate thoughts tore at my mind. Could I rush him and have a chance? Could I push Helen back into the room and get to him before he could stop me?

"This is no good, Ad," Helen said. "We can't mean anything to you now. Why can't you leave us alone?"

He shook his head, still watching me. "I know what you're thinking, Mac. Try it. Rush me. I'd as soon do it now as later. I want to see you dead more than anything I've ever wanted."

"Make sure I'm dead, Ad. If I ever lay my hands on you—"

"You'll be dead. A long time dead."

He advanced to the middle of the room and I tensed myself for the leap. I watched his eyes. It would come first in his eyes and then in the tightening finger on the gun trigger.

The dark eyes narrowed and he shook his head. "Later," he said. "Put some clothes on. Both of you."

He herded us into the bedroom. He let Helen dress in the closet while his eyes watched every movement I made.

"Where do you keep your car?" he snapped.

I hesitated, but there was no point in lying. We needed time. Every moment of additional time meant another moment when there might be a break for us, a chance to overpower him.

I told him where the garage was.

"We're going there," he said. "You're going to drive me to the cabin I had at the lake. I've got ten grand there. In the old days I knew there might be a time when I'd need get-away money. It's been there waiting for me."

Helen came from the closet wearing a rain coat over a gray suit.

Cran said, "Let's go. Don't make a break. I can shoot any time, and I will."

The sleepy attendant at the garage paid little attention to us. In the car, Cran put me at the wheel with Helen between us in the front seat. The gun was against her side.

"You can kill her by making a wrong move," he said.

I nodded and we drove through the quiet streets. It was three o'clock in the morning when we left town.

AD'S cabin was musty from years of disuse and bitterly cold in the high mountain air of pre-dawn. Under Ad's direction and wary eyes, I built a fire in the fireplace and then Helen and I watched him take an envelope from a hiding place at the head of a built-in bunk.

The money was there with some papers. Motioning us to chairs across the cabin from him, he examined the envelope's contents.

"Ten grand," he said. "With faked identification and everything else I need to get out of the country." He looked at us thoughtfully. "In those days I never knew when something might break and I'd have to get away quick."

"Listen, Ad," I said. "Take our car and your money. You've got everything you need to get away. We're twenty miles from a telephone—twenty miles is along ways to walk. We couldn't report anything until long after you—"

"I'll take the car and I'll leave you both here. Dead."

"What does it buy you, Ad?"

"It buys back sleepless nights and thinking about you and Helen and a lot of other things."

"You're vindictive."

"I'm a guy on the lam. A man who had a future and money and a girl. First, Clyde got in the way. I took care of him. But you and Helen wrecked the rest of it for me."

"What did you expect us to do? What *could* we do?"

"You could have helped me. That is, I *thought* you could. I didn't know that you wanted Helen that bad, Mac. Why shouldn't I kill you? Both of you?"

"But Helen is—"

"Helen is yours. That's enough."

She interrupted us. "All right, Ad. You've said it. But how do you feel about it? The words don't count. It's what you feel inside."

He smiled crookedly. "What do you mean?"

"You wanted me then, Ad. Don't you want me now?"

He stared at her and his tongue touched his dry lips. Then I could see the hunger in his eyes and I knew. A woman like Helen gets into your blood, and she was in Ad's. I knew what he meant about the sleepless nights and the thinking. I knew the conflict within him; the hate for us and the desire for Helen.

"Go on," he said tonelessly. "Say it."

"I'll make a deal with you. If you leave Mac here alive, I'll go with you. Wherever you go. I'll do whatever you want."

I said sharply, "Helen! Stop it. Don't talk that way. You can't—"

Helen shook her head and still looked at Ad. "You wanted me once. I haven't changed that much, Ad."

"I don't like second-hand women."

He walked across the floor and sat on the corner of a table, the gun loose in his hand.

"But it's an idea," he said. "Just an idea."

"Damn you! You can't—" I blurted.

"You want her alive, don't you?"

There was only one answer to that. I didn't speak.

He said, "Or maybe you wouldn't if you knew what I can do with her. Maybe that's better than killing you. Something to give you those sleepless nights. Wondering where she is, what I've done with her, what's happening to her." He smiled again. "And a lot of things can happen to a good looking girl where I'm going."

"Is it a deal?" Helen asked.

His eyes locked with hers. Anger flared and I felt tenseness string through me; the drawing up of muscles and the hard, hot feeling in my chest.

Ad shook his head. "No deal, Helen.

I'm traveling light and fast. I'd have to watch you every moment. I couldn't get you out of the country with me. I don't want you that much."

"And you think by killing us you'll revenge yourself?" I asked.

"That's right, Mac."

"How soon?"

"Now. I have to move fast. I can't waste time."

"You're crazy. You can't murder us in cold blood. You can't kill Helen. It would live with you the rest of your life."

"Shut up!"

He put the money and papers back in the envelope and put them on the table near him. He did it without taking his eyes from us. The gun came up in his hand.

I was aware of Helen's breathing beside me and the thought that I must get between her and the gun. There was the macabre curiosity of watching the expression of Ad's face. The bleak, determined look in his eyes; the tightening of his lips into a thin, bloodless line.

"It has to be me first," I said. "I'm coming after you, Ad."

"No!" Helen cried. She tried to move past me.

I had to get her down and out of the way. There might have been other ways to do it, but it was the fastest, surest way I knew. Even at the last instant I subconsciously pulled the punch, but there still was enough force. My first thudded against her jaw and she went down.

The first shot came. I was sideways to Ad and I felt the bullet burn across my shoulders. It smacked into the wall behind me.

I turned, crouched and sprang. The second shot went over my head. The third tore into my right thigh a second before I hit Ad in my wild lunge.

We knocked over the table and hit the floor. The gun cracked near my face and I felt the heat of the shot. I grasped at the arm and twisted. The gun barked again and the bullet was like the kick of a mule into my shoulder. I hung on, twisting the wrist, and Ad grunted in pain. There was one more shot and Ad's other arm jerked. I swung hard at his jaw. His head jerked back. He became limp.

I tried to get away from him and to my feet. My right leg wouldn't move for me.

The numbness in my shoulder was becoming a sharp throb.

Dusk settled over my eyes and the room wavered. I remember watching the floor come up into my face as I sprawled forward.

HELEN was bending over me. Her face looked soft in my blurred vision. She smiled and her hands were busy with my shoulder. I looked around. I was on the floor, but there was a blanket under me and another over me. A few feet away, Ad was similarly covered.

I tried to smile for Helen. "Pretty bad?" I asked.

"I don't think so. Flesh wounds. I'm going for a doctor."

"Bleeding?"

"I've stopped most of it." She looked at Ad. "His is the worst. It's an artery in his arm. I have a tourniquet on it."

"He's conscious?"

She nodded. "I've tied his legs, and his good arm to the leg ropes. He's lost a lot of blood. He's weak."

She stood and looked down at me. "You saved our lives, Mac." Tears came to her eyes and her lips quivered. "At first, I—I thought you were dead. . . ."

Helen bent over me again and her lips were cool on my mouth. "I've washed the wounds and bandaged them, but you mustn't move much. It will be an hour and a half or two hours over that road. I'll hurry."

"How about Ad. If it's a tourniquet—"

Our eyes met and the question was there between us.

She said, "It has to be loosened a little about every twenty minutes, or there will be gangrene. I remember that from the first aid I took during the war."

I nodded. I remembered, too. I'd had some first aid work before I went overseas as a correspondent.

The knowledge burned through my mind. *If I loosen it and fail to get it tight enough, he'll bleed to death.*

"Move me close enough to him to reach the tourniquet," I said quietly.

Gently she helped me move closer to him.

"Mac—you couldn't—" She didn't finish the sentence and I know that the thought was in her mind, too.

I remembered all that had happened and

I remembered what she had said in the kitchen, "*I'll never feel safe until he's dead. . . .*"

"Drive carefully," I whispered. "And hurry!"

"Yes, Mac, yes."

I wondered which was the answer: hurry to save me from death—or hurry to save me from murder!

She put more fuel on the fire and, with another brief kiss, she went out into the gray morning. I heard the starter of the car and then the receding sound of the engine as she drove away.

* * *

I stared at the ceiling a long time. Ad moaned and I turned my head toward him.

"Can you hear me, Ad?"

"Yes. What do you want?"

"You're washed up, Ad. You've played it out. Helen has gone after a doctor and the police."

"I heard her go."

"Hold your arm out where I can reach it. I have to release the tourniquet for a few seconds."

"Skip it."

"Hold your arm out. Don't make it tough. I can move and get to it anyhow."

"I said to skip it."

I inched closer to him and looked at the tourniquet. The wound was in his forearm and Helen had placed the tourniquet above it. She had used my necktie.

I reached for the knot. He jerked his arm away.

"Hold still, Ad. You may get gangrene if I don't loosen it."

"You wouldn't want that, would you, Mac?" he mocked.

"No."

"Helen was soft. She could have let me die."

"That's right."

"But she didn't. That doesn't mean you won't."

"I want you to live, Ad."

"Why?"

"Answer it yourself. I'm no killer."

"Any man is at some time or other. I know. Remember? Killers used to be my career. I'm one myself."

"Hold out your arm."

"Go to hell."

"I'm going to keep you alive, Ad. You're going back and finish your sentence."

"You mean that, don't you, Mac," he said flatly.

"Yes."

He was silent for a moment and then he stretched his arm out to me. "Okay, Sucker," he said. "I don't want gangrene."

He was not too weak to move his arm freely. He held it out and I loosened the tourniquet carefully. I saw blood come from the shattered artery and heard Ad's gasp as renewed circulation brought sharp pain to the arm.

Ad spoke softly. "Do me a favor, Mac."

"What?"

"Forget to tie it again."

"What do you mean?"

"I had my chance and missed. This is it. There isn't any more for me."

I watched the spurting artery. I didn't speak.

"Remember what I said about Clyde?" he continued. "I did what the law should have done, but couldn't? He was a murderer. I was being the law—a life for a

life. I was wrong. Let's even it up, Mac. I'm not going back to spend the rest of my life with sleepless nights. I'd rather die than go stir-crazy. Tell them I squirmed away from you. Even it up for me, Mac."

And Helen had said, "I'll never feel safe until he's dead. . . ."

"The sleepless nights are bad?" I said.

"The sleepless nights are hell."

"Then I wouldn't want them, Ad. Not for me, nor for Helen."

Gently I tightened the knot until the blood had stopped running. Ad swore at me and tried to jerk free, but I held his arm until I was sure that the knot was tight.

I'd have to loosen it again two or three times before Helen returned with the doctor, but I wasn't worried now. The knot would be tight and Ad would be breathing when they arrived.

Ad spoke harshly. "I hate your guts, Mac!"

I thought of all the sleepless nights before him.

"That's right," I said quietly. "You probably do."

MURDER WON'T OUT!

It was a wet, drizzly night in late Fall, 1911. In a theatre on Pell Street in New York's Chinatown, Ah Soon, the leading Chinese comedian of his day, regaled his audience with stories antedating Joe Miller by 2000 years.

The greatest tong war in the history of Chinatown was in progress about this time, and Ah Soon was playing to a mixed tong audience. It was made up of the warring On Leongs and the gun-toting Hip Sings.

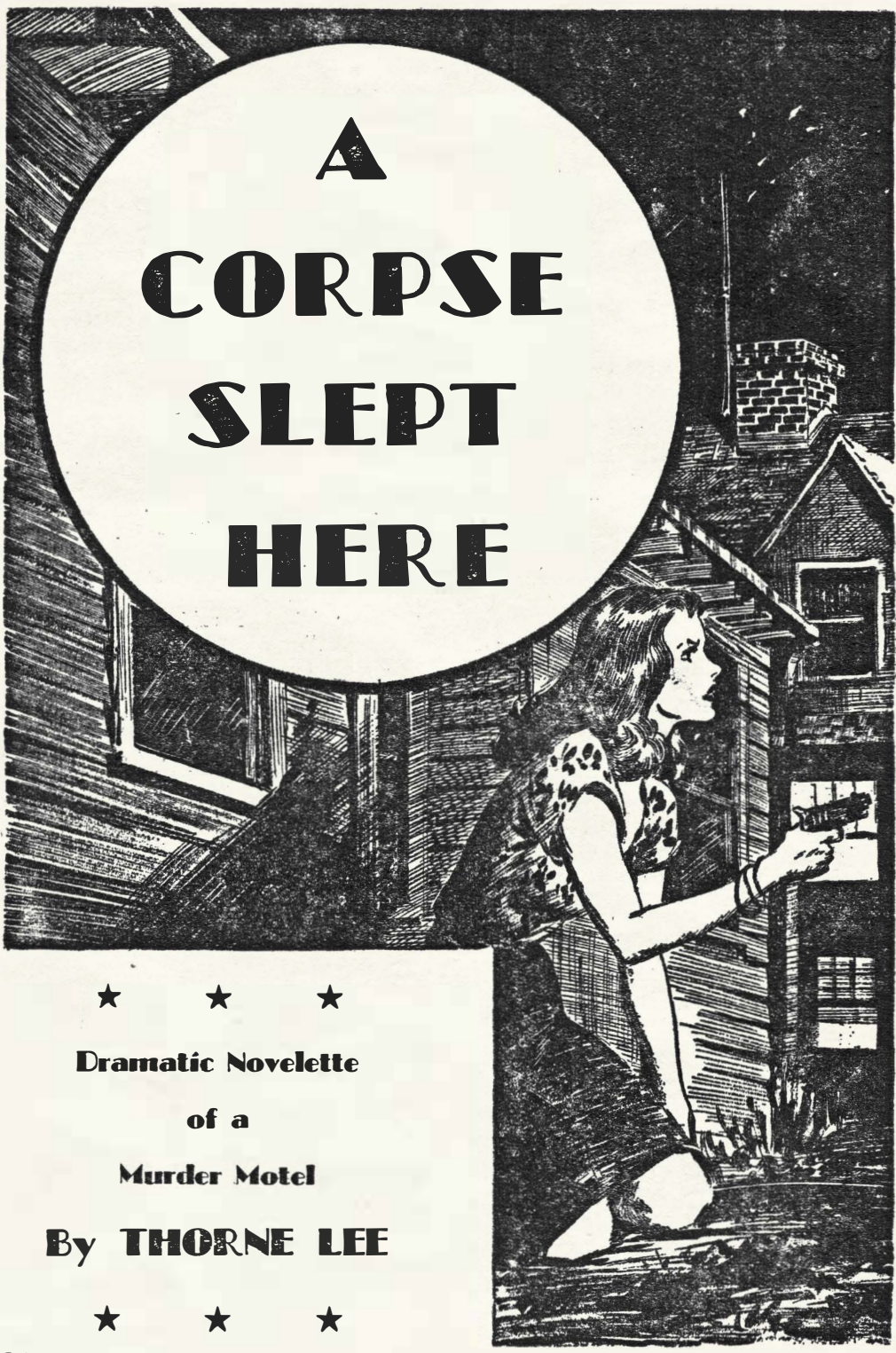
Ah Soon was a brother of the On Leongs—a most important brother, too—and for weeks had been reversing the old Occidental custom of heckling the performer, heckling the audience instead, with emphasis on the Hip Sings.

The Hip Sings stood the jibes of deadpan Ah Soon for a while, then decided to eliminate him. With all due deference to his high position in his tong and on the stage, the Hip Sings sent Ah Soon an engraved card which announced the date, hour and method by which he would join his ancestors.

Ah Soon took a very realistic and Occidental view of his invitation—and went to the cops. The night he was slated to die, Ah Soon, in the tradition of the theatre, went on with the show—accompanied on the stage by two red-faced Irish cops! After the show, he was escorted home by the same cops and deposited in his room. Outside his door sat two of the brothers' best hatchet men, with others downstairs. Ah Soon retired with a copy of China's Joe Miller.

However, the Hips Sings were not to be so easily thwarted. Three of them got to the roof of Ah Soon's place carrying a kitchen chair. Two of them tied the third into the chair and slowly lowered the gunman down the side of the building. Outside Ah Soon's window, the Tongman put one well placed bullet into his victim's head, was carted back to the roof and the three made their escape. The New York police never caught the slayers, and Ah Soon never heckled the Hip Sings.

J.G.MacC.



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Dramatic Novelette

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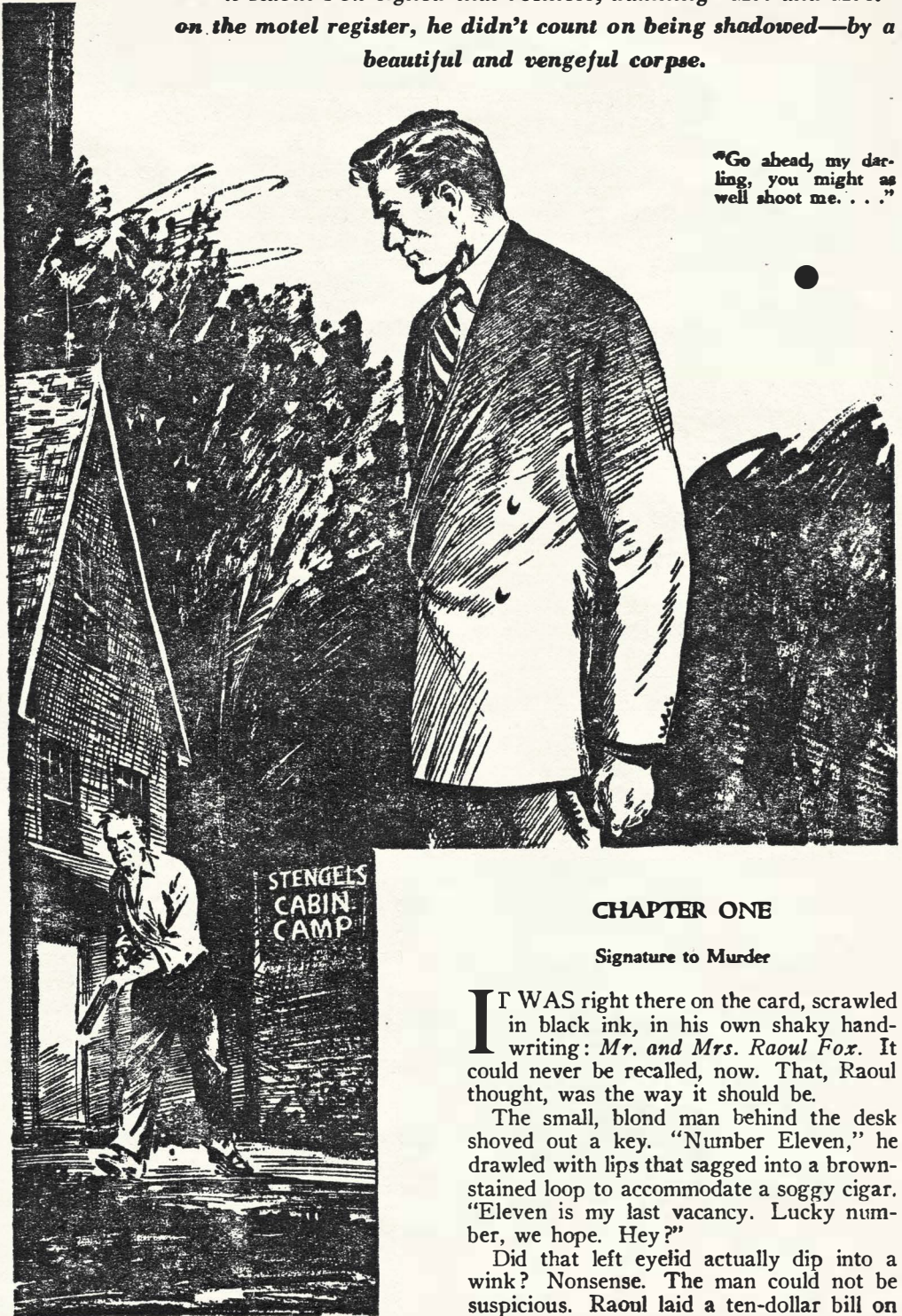
Murder Motel

By THORNE LEE



When Raoul Fox signed that reckless, damning "Mr. and Mrs." on the motel register, he didn't count on being shadowed—by a beautiful and vengeful corpse.

"Go ahead, my darling, you might as well shoot me. . . ."



CHAPTER ONE

Signature to Murder

IT WAS right there on the card, scrawled in black ink, in his own shaky handwriting: *Mr. and Mrs. Raoul Fox*. It could never be recalled, now. That, Raoul thought, was the way it should be.

The small, blond man behind the desk shoved out a key. "Number Eleven," he drawled with lips that sagged into a brown-stained loop to accommodate a soggy cigar. "Eleven is my last vacancy. Lucky number, we hope. Hey?"

Did that left eyelid actually dip into a wink? Nonsense. The man could not be suspicious. Raoul laid a ten-dollar bill on

the desk, snatched up the key, and stepped through the screen door without waiting for his change.

His long black sedan seemed to crouch down in the gravel driveway, as if shunning the rainbow of light from a bright neon sign:

STENGEL'S

Your Favorite Motel

Sternly, Raoul quieted the tremble of his big shoulders and strode across the sand. He heard the crunch of feet behind him and whirled sharply. The little man was following him, hobbling along with the aid of a cane.

"Sorry I can't show you to your cabin, Mister. Got myself lamed up awhile back. Damn hit-and-run driver nudged me off the highway. Gettin' so a man can't even cross the street for cigars any more."

Raoul grunted and slid hastily under the steering wheel. The chattering little man approached the right side of the car, and Raoul's companion sagged down evasively in the seat.

"Good night!" Raoul snarled. Ripping the car in a savage circle, he shot it along the straight row of white cottages. Cabin eleven was next to last in line. He pulled into the open car-shed, flipped off the lights, and slid out of the seat. Groping around the car in the darkness, his body collided shockingly with another.

"Raoul!"

They locked arms, fiercely, the man and the woman, shouldering away the tense pressure of the night. Raoul sensed an unspoken reluctance in the sag of that small, warm body against his own. With an arm looped tightly about the woman's waist, he guided her around to the cottage porch. Her glance slanted off, watching the man with the cane, a twisted, inquisitive shape, far down the gravelled lane under the bright neon light.

"Don't mind about him," Raoul said, with a tight laugh. "That's probably Stengel, the owner. Mike Jorgenson told me about this place. Mike said Stengel has a reputation for not asking questions."

He felt the slight shoulders slumping away from him and wished he had kept his mouth shut. His words, somehow, gave a sneaky quality to the whole affair.

Stabbing the key in the lock, Raoul groped inside the cabin, found a switch. The glow spilled through the door, bathing the woman like a spotlight. She hesitated a moment before following him inside.

The door was finally shut and locked, and the four plain walls seemed to tighten about them, crushing the air in the lungs. The cabin was a single large room with a small adjoining kitchenette. Quite clean, but there was something about it, the elaborately flowered wallpaper and the big iron bedstead contrasting with a modern varnished dresser, that spoke of an attempt to gloss over something that was old, and weak, and shaky at the foundation.

THE woman wandered indefinitely to the dresser, pulled out a drawer, dropped her purse in it with a thud. In a wide mirror she studied the startling paleness of her soft cheeks, the stiff line of red lips. Her blue eyes tried to force a smiling glow, but it came out as a hard, stony glitter. She bit upward on her lip, slammed the drawer shut.

"Oh, Raoul, I wish it were different," she blurted. "I wish it were daylight and you had carried me through the door!"

Raoul stepped across the room and ran his firm, tan fingers down through the black, shoulder-length coils of her hair. He was not tall but the stocky breadth of him loomed big in the mirror. His hair, spilling from under the tilt of his hat, was brown and thick, his eyes a wide, innocent brown.

"I used my own name on the register," he said thickly. "I couldn't do it any other way. That seemed to make it right."

"Wasn't that risky, Raoul?"

He shrugged. "I have nothing to risk. Anyway, they have a man's handwriting and his auto license number, if anybody wants to get legal about it."

She swayed back, her tiny hat just scraping his chin, her small, curved body in his arms. His hands bit deep into her shoulders, but she suddenly swerved away from him, shrank down on the bed.

He lit a cigarette with hands that were definitely beginning to tremble. With a physical wrench, he forced out a laugh. "It's no good, is it, Anita?"

The small gloved hands fluttered in her lap. "Oh, I don't know whether it's good

or bad, Raoul. I really don't. For some people I guess it's all right . . . but it's—it's just not *us*, that's all. We're the kind of people that sit at home and obey the laws and raise families—"

Her face tumbled forward against her palms and she began to cry softly. He ground the cigarette into a tray, switched off the light, and unlocked the door. His arms found her huddled body and lifted her. This time he did carry her through the door and tucked her gently back into the car. Slipping in beside her, he bowed for a moment over the steering wheel, trying to loosen the terrific tension in his chest. Blindly, he flipped a switch, pawed at the starter. The motor whined, gears clashed, and the big sedan backed out of the shed, churning gravel. It lurched wildly into the highway and roared away on a violent release of the driver's emotion. The woman slid along the seat and nestled her cheek against his shoulder.

Raoul's laugh was hollow, but it felt good. "I just happened to think, Anita. We didn't even take off our hats!"

* * *

It was past midnight when he dropped Anita Putnam with a quick, cold-lipped kiss at the apartment she shared with two other girl secretaries. The rest of the night Raoul drove, indifferently, brooding over the unhappy events that had brought him to this silly escapade.

It was not that he was really being disloyal to his wife. Months ago he had ceased to regard Peggy Fox in the capacity of wife. She bore his name, clung to it in fact, but that was all. They lived in the same big house, they acted with all the smirking tenderness of newlyweds, but it was only an act and always would be. Peggy—an

indolent, soft-skinned, self-indulgent blonde—had married him for his money, and secretly boasted of the fact to her little circle of obnoxious friends.

The trouble was that a divorce was almost out of the question; Peggy made sure that he never had a legal excuse for one. A little too late he had discovered that a marriage is easier bought than sold.

It was not such a bad situation up to last year. A man just breaking into his thirties with wide interests and plenty of friends does not have to be lonely. Raoul could have survived that situation for years. But Anita Putnam had finally come along and spoiled it.

ANITA was not exactly beautiful by the usual standards. She was the kind the eye skips over in a crowd—neat, well cut, but not very exciting. You had to talk to her awhile. You had to listen to her quick-flowing speech, to share her sensitive awareness of life. She bloomed slowly in the consciousness with the spreading, devastating beauty of a rose.

Mike Jorgenson, Raoul's junior partner, was the man who had first hired Anita, but she quickly moved up to number-one secretary, and Raoul began to notice her. One day he suddenly had her in his arms, and from then on the association quickly became unbearable. Anita quit her job, but Raoul found that he couldn't stay away from her.

He tried once, desperately, to get a divorce, but the case failed after a flurry of newspaper publicity that kept his wife gloating for weeks. After that, he gave it up as a bad job. Even if he pulled all the legal angles in the forty-eight states, he was dubious of success. Peggy was just

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too cunning for him, lazily secure in her position.

Gradually Raoul's relationship with Anita Putnam became more open, like some unspoken pact between them. They met for secret dinner dates. They danced together, walked and drove together, and then tonight. . . .

Well, tonight had proved only one thing—that his life had reached an impossible stalemate. Sulking gloomily over an early breakfast in a downtown cafe, Raoul concluded that he must get rid of one woman or the other, Anita or his wife. In that case there was little choice. The only sure way he could dispose of his wife was by—

The word came unnaturally to his mind. He had to wrench it out silently with his lips . . . *Murder!*

He could think of the crime, but that was all. Something inside him would always balk at the act itself, the way it had balked a few hours ago in the tight, hot pressure of that tiny cabin. Frankly, he was licked. The marriage ritual was not kidding with that little passage, "Until death do us part."

So that was definitely settled. Raoul strolled to his office in the gray light of morning, feeling a kind of relief. Maybe it would be best if he never saw Anita again.

Work was his only salvation, and Raoul plunged into it so completely that half of his day's routine was done before time for the office to open. The phone rang once but he shrugged it off. Let 'em wait.

Mike Jorgenson was the first one in at a quarter-of-eight, a dark young man taller than Raoul but not quite as solid. Mike's stern gray eyes and thin lips had the kind of grimness that is supposed to go with conservatism, but he was constantly getting wild ideas for architectural design which Raoul had to tone down. Mike was a dreamer with a lot of drive. A good combination, but it can be dangerous.

MIKE tossed his morning paper on Raoul's desk. "Good Lord, R. J.," he greeted, "what cataclysm blasted you so early from the luxury of your bed?"

"The luxury of my bed is a matter of opinion," Raoul muttered, snapping the paper open. His eyes darted with spidery quickness across the headlines and settled

on one in a lower corner. The two bolder lines struck him suddenly like a hard blow on his back and the subhead drove an icy knife of terror deep into his flesh:

WOMAN SHOT DEAD
IN TOURIST CABIN
Body Identified as Mrs. Raoul Fox; Manhunt
Launched for Missing Husband

Raoul slammed his eyes shut like the lid of a box opened shockingly on some foul, unbelievable apparition. He had dreamed those lines, of course. Imagination. Lack of sleep. Disappointment. . . .

The lid flew up again and the thing was there, eerily, in black and white, with all the terrible finality of the printed page:

Body . . . Mrs. Raoul Fox . . . Manhunt . . . Missing Husband. . . .

Missing husband!

"That's me!" he yelled, involuntarily.

Mike Jorgenson glanced up from his desk. "What did you say, R. J.?"

Raoul shook his head stupidly, slid down behind the protective mask of the newspaper. It rattled crazily in his hands. He read on:

Police and sheriff's officers began a statewide search early this morning for Raoul Fox, prominent local architect, when the body of Fox's wife was found shot through the heart in a tourist cabin ten miles north of this city.

Bert Stengel, proprietor of the tourist camp, awakened by a gunshot less than an hour after midnight, found the dead woman, fully clothed, sprawled on an unused bed in one of his cabins. Stengel informed homicide investigators that Fox had registered with his wife in that cabin about two hours earlier. The motel owner could shed no light upon the murder motive, but he thought Fox had seemed extremely nervous.

Identification of the woman was substantiated by the contents of a purse found beside the body, but will not be positive until friends or relatives have been located. . . .

Raoul could read no more. He blindly crumpled the paper in his hands. For a moment he was like a man in a kind of fit, his tongue chewed between his soddenly working lips. *I must be mad*, he groaned inwardly. *This damn love affair has driven me off my nut!*

His eyes slowly came back to focus and found Jorgenson watching him inquisitively. "Hey, R. J., are you sick or something? Hangover, maybe?"

"Yeah, sick. Hangover," Raoul mum-

bled stupidly. He managed to unravel the crazy knot in his throat, to gasp aloud: "Did you read this paper, Mike?"

"Nope. I only read the comics at breakfast," Mike said, laughing. "The news upsets my digestion. Why? Anything doing?"

"No, nothing special, nothing. . . ." Raoul's voice trailed off and he collapsed, exhausted, deep into his chair. He was aware of Mike's anxious glances, but he couldn't quite bring himself to say: *Mike, I've gone crazy. My wife is dead, but she can't be dead because she wasn't even with me last night, and I wouldn't kill her anyway. Mike, I'm not a murderer. I'm just a lunatic. My brain has turned to water. . . .*

CHAPTER TWO

Manhunt

THE telephone rang with all the heart-ripping shock of that last moment in the electric chair. Raoul leaped inches into the air, came down with his hand scrabbling for the receiver. "I'll take it, Mike," he barked hoarsely. "Hello?"

A hard, unfamiliar voice inquired, "Is Mr. Fox there?"

"No," Raoul said feebly, "he hasn't come in yet."

"When do you expect—"

Raoul dropped the phone back on the hook and quelled a violent shudder. "Wrong number," he lied to Mike Jorgenson.

That might have been the police checking his office! . . . Manhunt. . . . Missing. Husband. . . .

Got to get out of here. Got to get away and think. I'm not a murderer, damn it, I'm not!

With a mumbled excuse, "Sick, Mike—take day off," Raoul made a desperate lunge for the door, groped his way into the outer hall. He staggered to a window and gulped in the clean air. That was real. Physically, at least, he was still flat on his feet.

What was it all about? A police manhunt for him, Raoul Fox. . . .

Two stories below him was the main entrance of the building. Across the street in a doorway he saw a man loitering with that odd, studied indifference of the professional shadow. Farther down, by the cor-

ner, another man leaned against a post as if his only concern in the world was the next drag on his cigarette.

Then they were really hunting him! The dragnet had already enclosed his office. If he had not arrived this morning an hour ahead of working schedule, they would have him under arrest already. Crouching like a thief with a bag of jewels at his shoulder, Raoul went out a fire exit and down the steel stairway to an alley. He peered cautiously into the street where his car was parked. Half a block behind it was the familiar black and white of a police car, two men inside.

They had already traced his car! Probably got the license number from that registration card at the cabin camp. *Mr. and Mrs. Raoul Fox. Chrysler sedan, License 800-453. . . .* He groaned: "Boy, I sure put my autograph on this crime—if there really was such a crime, if I'm not dreaming."

He still couldn't believe it, not the way the newspaper put it. His wife could not actually be in that cabin.

The answer would prove to be something simple, of course. Most likely some murderer had seen him drive away last night and had seized the opportunity to plant a dead woman inside the cabin. The law had mistaken the woman for his wife, naturally enough. He'd just have to produce Peggy and straighten them out. But that would mean explaining the whole foolish business, damn it—dragging Anita Putnam's name through the papers, lurid headlines, breakfast-table gossip. . . .

"Boy, when you take a false step, you really go in right over your head, Raoul Fox!"

Trotting back along the alley with all the nervous guile of a real murderer, Raoul found that the street at the other end was unpatrolled. Ducking into his collar, he slipped down to the little cafe where he had eaten breakfast. There was a public phone. It was open to all ears, but he had to risk that. Most of the coffee gulpers along the counter looked like ordinary office workers.

Rheba, the maid, answered the phone at Raoul's home. She knew nothing about Mrs. Fox, except that the house had been empty and locked up tight when she came to work this morning.

There was a commotion on the line and

a rough male voice broke in, "Is that Mr. Fox speaking?"

Raoul sucked in his breath. So the police had taken over at that end, too.

"No," he said thickly, "this is the editor of the *Daily Star*. Has that woman in the cabin camp been positively identified?"

"Not yet, but she sure looks like a picture of Mrs. Fox I got right here in my hand."

RAOUL hung up with a grunt, glanced slyly at the indifferent heads along the coffee counter. He rang up Anita Putnam. This conversation would have to be tricky.

"Anita? . . . This is R. J. . . . Yeah. Me. Are you alone? . . . Good. Have you read the papers? . . . Then you know all about it? . . . Listen, it's crazy. I've got to talk to you. Can you pick me up in front of Macey's Restaurant right away? . . . Yeah. This is tight, very tight. They're here, all around. . . . Can't say. Lots of people, y'know. Just come and get me. . . . And listen, keep your eyes open."

Ten minutes later a small, green, two-door sedan drew up to the curb. Raoul inconspicuously paid for his coffee and drifted out to the waiting machine. He took a quick glance at the street and then slid into the seat, sagging down until only his hat was showing. "Drive," he ordered the woman at the wheel, "and keep an eye on the rear-view mirror."

Not until they were free of the downtown traffic did he manage to breathe deeply. They found a quiet, shady street in the residential section and parked. The woman dropped her hands from the wheel and twisted her eyes to his with an effort that whitened the muscles of her neck. Her eyes were hollowed.

"Raoul, what on earth has happened to us?" she gasped.

He reached out and caught her hand, pressed it between his palms, trying to find the warmth of it, to break the ice, free the blood.

"I don't know," he admitted. "It just doesn't make sense, Anita. I phoned home and some detective there seemed quite sure that it was my wife they found in that cabin, but how could that possibly be?"

"Oh, it was, Raoul. It was!" she cried wretchedly.

He sat up rigidly. "How do you know?"

Her eyes brightened for an instant like blue tips of flame, then tears rushed in to quench them. She ducked her head. "I just know, Raoul—somehow," she stammered. "This is some evil come home to us, something we set in motion ourselves. Why did we have to be such fools?"

"That's the whole trouble," he groaned. "By golly, I could face this thing alone, and stand on my innocence, but now it means dragging your name into it. You're my only alibi, Anita, and it's an alibi I can never use!"

She straightened her shoulders. "If that's the only thing to fear, Raoul, please don't let that—"

"It isn't the only thing!" he snapped. "Who would believe our story if we did step forward? Stengel saw me register at the cabin camp. He saw you, too, but he didn't get a close enough look to judge your features or he'd have known that the woman in the cabin was not the one I brought with me. Y'see, Anita, there's not a solid bit of evidence, not a single witness that it was you I took to that cabin."

"Then what can we do?" she moaned. "What can we possibly do?"

He threw up his hands. "It beats me. Supposing it really is my wife who was murdered in that cabin—though I still can't believe it—how could anyone who wanted to kill Peggy have known we were going there? I certainly didn't tell anybody." He shook her roughly. "You didn't tell, did you?"

"Oh Raoul, of course not!" she sobbed. "What sort of creature do you think I am?"

Sorry, Honey—I'm sorry."

THEY sat there for a full afternoon, whimpers of protest changing slowly to hard reasoning. It finally narrowed down to one possibility, Raoul decided—the slim chance that someone had followed them last night, had witnessed the whole routine of arrival and departure at the cabin camp.

"Raoul!" the girl gasped suddenly. "Could it have been Peggy herself? Could she have been so insanely jealous of you that she went into the cabin and shot herself?"

Raoul released a hard, bitter laugh. "You don't know Peggy. Suicide would be un-

thinkable. She loved herself too much. I remember once when I asked her, 'Peggy, would you divorce me if I gave you legal cause?' She just laughed in my face and said, 'I hope you enjoy yourself, my dear!'

It would be more likely, Raoul thought, that Peggy had been following him in the company of someone else, perhaps in the hope of witnessing something that she could hold over her husband as a club, if she ever needed to.

"That's it!" Raoul gasped. "I believe we've hit it now. Peggy followed us last night with some friend along as a witness and that friend seized the opportunity to murder her in my name."

"Oh, Raoul, do you really think—?"

"Sure. That has to be it. If we could just figure someone with a motive. . . ." His heart took a startled leap. "Hey! I wonder. . . . Y'know, it seemed to me that Mike Jorgenson was acting sort of queer this morning—"

"Mike Jorgenson?" Anita cried. "Oh, surely not!"

"I don't know." Raoul rubbed the brown skin of his jaw, rough with a new beard. "I used to come back to the office sometimes and find Peggy alone with Jorgenson. Mike likes the girls, y'know."

"I worked for Mr. Jorg—for Mike. I can't believe he'd do it," she pleaded earnestly. "What would be his motive?"

"To take over my business. Mike has always disagreed with my ideas. We quarrel pretty violently sometimes. Mike says I'm as stale as an old crust of bread. Anita, if he could plant a murder on me, Jorgenson would be in, all by himself!"

"Oh, Raoul, is that enough? What man would kill for such a petty reason?"

"Petty?" he grumbled. "I don't know about that. Personally, I've found that business competition is one knife in the back after another. From an imaginary knife to a real one is no farther than the length of a man's arm."

"Raoul, it's a crazy reason."

"Sure, it's crazy. All of it. The very fact of that woman being there—my wife or not my wife—is beyond reason!"

Nightfall found them no nearer a solution. Slipping into a small drive-in cafe, they attempted with hamburgers and coffee to settle their inner turbulence. To Raoul the world had suddenly gone primitive. He

felt like some naked, hairy savage crouching over a raw bone.

"One thing," he muttered. "We're strictly on our own, Anita. We settle this thing, or it settles us—and the longer I duck the Law, the tighter draws the noose."

At the thought his throat drew thin as a wire. Food choked up in it. Scalding coffee was scarcely felt on the tortured flesh. "I have a feeling that tonight does it, Anita," he said hoarsely. "Tonight we find the answer, or else. . . ."

Later, driving the streets aimlessly, they passed a newsboy and bought a night edition. There was only one new fact in the murder story, but that was everything.

The dead woman was conclusively identified late this morning by a maid from the Raoul Fox home as Peggy Hansen Fox, 31.

Alongside the article was a photograph of Peggy showing all her full-lipped charm, and beneath it a rather criminal-looking snapshot of Raoul himself—the same two pictures that had appeared last year, he recalled, when he attempted vainly to divorce his wife.

"It was Peggy, all right," he said grimly. "What a setup! They've even got the perfect motive for me—a wife who wouldn't give me a divorce. Anita, if I ever walk into a jail cell, I'll never come out again. There's no lawyer who can beat this."

CHAPTER THREE

No One but You, Darling

THEY carefully haunted the dark side streets, afraid that the police might already be looking for Anita's license number. She was known to be suspiciously friendly with Raoul Fox, and her absence from work would have been duly noted.

Raoul suddenly lunged out and whipped the steering wheel, tugged at the hand brake. The car lurched dangerously and slid up to a curb. "Anita," he gasped, "I've got it! I mean I've got the thread. It's fine as a hair, but it's the only thing to lead us right."

She flipped off the lights and her hands closed moistly with his in the darkness.

"Get this," he said tensely. "The murderer, I'm sure, is somebody who knew

that I signed my real name on that register."

There was an instant of silence broken by a thin voice: "I don't see why, Raoul—"

"You will, if you stop and think. It's pretty deep, but it's the only solution. Don't you see? Most men in a situation like last night—like you and I going to that cabin, I mean—would automatically have signed a fictitious name. An alias just naturally goes with that kind of subterfuge. But if I had really used a false name, the murder trick would not be any good, because no man would have any reason to disguise his name with his own wife. Even if the husband planned to murder the wife, his handwriting would be evidence enough against him. It just wouldn't make sense to sign an alias. The police would know right off that the husband must have registered with some other woman, not his wife.

"This trick was cleverly plotted, Anita, and I'll swear that a clever murderer would never have planted Peggy in that cabin unless he knew for sure that my real name was signed, indelibly, at the front desk."

"But that's impossible, Raoul," she argued weakly. "Who could have known that you signed your own name?"

"The way I feel now, nothing is impossible for this devil," he muttered. "I think the guy must have been a kind of phantom!"

The only chance to prove his point was a desperate invasion of the murder scene. Directing Anita to drive to Stengel's Camp, Raoul mused:

"The way I see it, the trick might have gone something like this: The murderer might have followed us in his own car last night and observed us in the act of renting a cabin. Probably he had Peggy right along with him, still very much alive at that point. Pretending to do a little detective work for Peggy's benefit, the guy went in and made an inquiry of Bert Stengel about getting a cabin for the night. If so, that registration card of mine might still be in plain sight.

"The killer would see how I had registered, and that was all he needed. He would pretend to Stengel that he wasn't satisfied with the prices and would calmly go back to the car where Peggy was waiting. Later, observing that we suddenly left the camp, the guy would be struck with his

murder idea. 'Boy,' he would think, 'what an opportunity! Fox has laid this one right in my lap!'

"And so," Raoul concluded, "the beautiful, the gracious, the unwanted Mrs. Fox exits ingloriously from this world."

It was quite late when the hunted couple dared to drive slowly past Stengel's Cabin Camp again. A half-mile beyond the camp, they turned back, creeping to a stop on a little gravel parkway about fifty yards from the big neon sign. All twelve of the little cottages faced the highway, about fifty yards back, like a cluster of white chicks parading after the mother hen, that big white building that housed the office.

There was no evidence of police activity. Raoul sent Anita in to investigate. "Pretend you're a newspaper woman," he instructed. "Ask Stengel if anyone stopped to inquire about cabins last night *after* Raoul Fox registered. Tell him you've got a hunch."

"What if Stengel recognizes me?" she protested nervously.

"My Lord, Woman, that would be wonderful if he did! That would be the alibi we need, if Stengel sees a resemblance between you and the woman who sat in my car last night. Even if he shows very faint signs of recognition, it may be helpful. Keep your eyes open!"

Raoul watched her small figure down the road, admired her peculiar, bounding grace, so light on the toes. He sighed deeply. *Anita, what have I dragged you into?*

THE loose gravel of the Stengel driveway made a distant, squirting sound under her steps. A screen door was flung open by a man's arm, and she vanished into the office.

Raoul shifted uneasily. It seemed like a long wait. The deep night silence was suddenly broken by the roar of a motorcycle. To his dismay it pulled up in front of a small roadside cafe opposite Stengel's camp, and a uniformed state patrolman leaped gingerly to the ground. Raoul could see him inside the cafe chatting, elbow on counter, with a man in an apron.

Better be ready to move in a hurry, Raoul thought. Fumbling along the dashboard, he found the keys gone from the ignition. He flipped on the dashlight and

saw Anita's big purse in the seat. She must have dropped the keys in there. A woman doesn't go around with keys wadded in her fist or bulging in a pocket.

His fingers quickly discovered the combination of the purse, groped inside, sensitively described a soft lace handkerchief, a long lipstick cylinder, a flat compact, and then a larger metal shape that was strangely, fantastically familiar. Gasping, he jerked the yawning purse down into the light and drew out the heavy object. It was a black, pearl-handled automatic pistol.

His eyes glazed and a dreadful apathy sifted through his limbs. This was not just any gun. It was an old .32 he had given to his own wife several months ago. There was a peculiar chip in the white pearl.

Peggy's gun. But Peggy was dead, shot through the heart. And the gun was in the purse of Anita Putnam.

Raoul's paralysis broke into a frenzy of reaction. He ripped through the purse. Deep at the bottom he found an item more stunning than the first, a doorkey attached to a diamond-shaped leather tab, inscribed with the deep black legend:

STENGEL'S
Your Favorite Motel
Cottage No. 11

"I left that key in the door!" he gasped. "I'll swear I left it in the door!"

The night seemed to churn into a weird, descending spiral, and out of the deep black pool of it emerged a face, white, stiff-lipped. Anita! The body rose up into his slanted, straining vision, a puppet-like thing, not a graceful girl-body, but some creature fiendishly elongated with hands that hung on long ropy arms as low as the knees. From one grotesque hand dangled a gun, from the other a doorkey.

Raoul's ears dully listened to the thin, distant chant of his own lips quoting his own words from an earlier inspiration: *The murderer is somebody who knew that I signed my real name.*

But that's impossible, Raoul. . . . Who could have known?

He roused himself with a terrific wrench of the spirit, studied the hard, cold evidence in his shaking hands. "No one could have known, Anita," he whispered. "No one but you, my darling, no one but you!"

A screen door slammed and Anita was

trotting briskly toward the car. Raoul slid out to the ground, moved forward, irresolutely, to meet her. His arms hung stiffly at his sides.

Just at the fringe of light from the neon sign they came together. She spoke quickly, tensely: "The man—Mr. Stengel—says no one made any inquiries last night. The only registration after ten o'clock was Raoul Fox. Oh, Raoul, what does it all mean?"

HIS voice seemed to come from someone apart, some monstrosity lurking at his shoulder: "It means that there is only one choice left, Anita, only one who could have known how I signed my name."

"Who is that?"

"Here, take my hand."

She reached out and met his grip, palm to palm, but there was something hard and cold between. She fingered the strange outline and suddenly shrank away. The gun thudded on the sand between them. "You found it!" she cried.

"In your purse." Anger was a weak, uncertain thing in his chest. His voice was shrill. "The key was there, too. The key to that cabin—which I left in the door last night. I remember I carried you to the car. You could only have gotten the key by coming back to the cabin later, Anita." He sucked in his breath and expelled the last words with a twisting snarl of the lips: "Coming back with a dead body, perhaps?"

The woman tried to talk, but her face only worked at the words, contorting the flesh. Her voice was gone. The gun lay gleaming in a pool of dull light.

"How long has it been going on?" His attempt to be truculent fell flat. His tongue was flabby. There was no vocal tone to describe this thing he felt. "Mike Jorgenson plotted it, of course. You worked for Mike first and then he set you to work on me. You were the bait. Boy, how I swallowed you, Baby. I'm still on the hook. I can feel it ripping through my chest."

She sank to her knees with a sob as faint as the wind in soft grass.

He went on grimly: "I suppose you were going to plant that gun and key on me, Anita, whenever you had the chance?"

"Raoul, how can you—"

She sagged forward, her hand groping

toward the gun. Something warned him to step on her fingers, but his legs were jointless stilts. He teetered on them with an overpowering dizziness.

"Go ahead, my darling, you might as well shoot me," he heard himself say. "You and Mike have got me beat anyway."

Her fingers closed in an awkward pinch on the gun. The barrel lifted slowly as if it weighed incredibly in her hand, wavered, focussed steeply on the man's chest.

Well, this is it, he thought. This is quicker than the noose. Let the bullet in. It will find me dead already. I just died. . . .

"Raoul, you don't understand."

"Sure, I understand. You fell in love with Mike Jorgenson. So much in love you could do a job like this for him."

"Raoul!" The cry came from such a depth it seemed to echo up the spiral pit of her throat, like a wail for help from the bottom of a well. The gun barrel dipped down again, rooted soundlessly in the sand.

"Hey there!" A new voice sawed harshly through the night.

Raoul whirled. Anita twisted awkwardly on her knees. In the doorway of his office leaned Bert Stengel, cradling a shotgun in his arms. "Hey, you! Come into the light, both of you," he demanded.

Anita rose, stumbled impulsively toward Raoul, then caught herself and shuddered away from him. They advanced cautiously into the light.

"By golly, I believe it's—" Stengel peered along the shotgun barrel as if it were a kind of telescope. "Fox!" he gasped. "It's Fox, the murderer!"

"It's Fox, the husband," Raoul corrected grimly.

"Same thing," Stengel snorted. He stepped outside, motioned them into the office ahead of him. "By golly, there oughta be a reward for you, Fox," he gloated, running a tongue greedily along his wire-thin lips. "I'm gonna get my hand in it right now."

He carefully locked the office door behind them, motioned toward two chairs. "Got yourself another girl already, have ya. Mr. Fox? I suppose this cute little chicken is the reason you cooked the old hen?" There was something rooster-like in the man's crowing laugh. It broke suddenly into a stern monotone:

"Now listen, you two. The phone's right

in the next room. If y'make any moves, I'll bust in here and let go. This gun'll blow a wall right outa the house, so just relax. Time's up for you, Fox. You're under arrest!"

They could hear Stengel in the other room juggling the phone, his sharp: "Gimme the sheriff's office, an' make it quick!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Shooting Gallery

ANITA slouched in her chair, face cupped in her small hands. Her whisper was so low that Raoul could barely distinguish the soft ripple of it above the steady drone of Stengel's words.

"Raoul, you're utterly wrong," she said. "I forgot my purse when we were here last night. After you took me home, I remembered it. I was afraid it would be found with my name inside, afraid that I'd never have the face to claim it again; so I drove back last night in my own car to get it. I parked out on the highway and crept back into the cabin.

"Raoul, *she* was already there. Your wife. Dead. The gun was there, on the floor. Raoul, I went crazy. I didn't think you had killed her. But I knew you'd be accused, so I took the gun. The key was in the door and I took that, too.

"Oh, I must have been out of my mind! There was a siren somewhere down the road—the police coming, I suppose—and my brain went as cold as ice. I thought, if I had to, I could take your place. I thought if I had the gun and the key, they might find me guilty, not you—"

Her whisper fell away to a sob. In the other room Stengel had slammed the receiver back on the hook. His feet were shuffling toward the door.

A pulse throbbed like a hammer in Raoul's brain. She forgot her purse. That was true! He had seen her drop it into a dresser drawer. . . . He fought a wild impulse to throw himself upon the woman in a fever of remorse.

Stengel was back, stumping across the room on his lame foot. He dropped into a swivel chair, the shotgun across his lap. Plucking a smoldering cigar from an ashtray, he chewed at it reflectively, saying:

"Open, shut case against you, hey, Fox?"

He said, "You bring your wife out here, sign your name on the death register, and then pull your pistol and plug the lady.

"One of those family quarrel things, hey? Did she carry the gun herself? Did she get sore and yank it out of her purse, so you had to dive in and protect yourself? Sounds that way to me, or you wouldn't be so bold as to sign your name on the job."

Raoul didn't answer. He just stared and stared at the little man with the stiff blond hair, the flat, unemotional features, the mouth crooked to accommodate his sodden cigar. Stengel squirmed, adjusted his crippled foot, shifted the gun to his armpit.

Raoul's head tilted to one side. "Tell me, Stengel, where did you find the gun in that cabin?"

Stengel grunted. "Didn't find it," he said. "When I heard that shot last night, and found the door open to Number 11, I shot my flashlight through the screen. There was this body on her back on the bed, which was a mighty sick-lookin' red color. That's all I needed to high-tail back here and call the sheriff."

"Did the sheriff find the gun?"

Stengel scowled, scratched his head. "By golly, y'know, they didn't tell me about that. They wouldn't let me into the cabin until they'd worked it over."

Raoul's head jerked forward. "Then how did you know my wife was shot with a pistol?" he demanded.

Stengel's shoulders leaped up. "Hey?"

"You just said I pulled a pistol and plugged the little lady, Stengel. How did you know the gun was a pistol?"

Stengel shrugged, bit deeply into the cigar. "Dunno. Guess maybe the sheriff told me it was."

"GUESS again, Stengel. The sheriff didn't know what kind of gun it was. He won't know until they have time to classify the bullet, because this young lady here came back last night and took the gun away, Stengel."

The little man had his feet flat on the floor, his eyes like twin beads.

Raoul met him eye to eye. "Stengel, the murderer had to be somebody who knew I signed my right name on your register. Only two persons knew that—the woman who was with me . . . and you!"

"What're you getting at, Mister?"

"Stengel, you called it a pistol because you knew it was a pistol. You thought the gun was still in there with the body when the sheriff arrived, but Anita had already taken it away. . . . Tell me, Stengel, what brought my wife here last night with that pistol that she 'yanked out of her purse'? Why did you plant my wife in that cabin? Who was your enemy, Peggy or myself? Or were you hired for the job?"

"You're crazy!" Stengel grunted. "I didn't know your wife from Adam." He chuckled. "Or from Eve, to be exact. You made up this pistol story just to trick me, Fox."

"The pistol is outside right now," Raoul snapped. "It's lying out there in the sand where Anita dropped it. I don't need to describe it, because you've seen it before. You're the one who—"

"Don't get me mad!" Stengel's breath churned thickly in the throat. "You two might get yourselves blasted, y'know, tryin' to escape."

Hobbling over to the door, Stengel unlocked it and tried to peer through the screen. He whirled an instant too late to dodge Raoul's kick, which hooked his



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thigh, sent him stumbling through the door and face down in the sand.

Raoul caught Anita's arm. "Run!"

They leaped from the porch across Stengel, who wrestled desperately with his shotgun. He twisted the barrel and aimed just as Raoul jerked the girl around the corner of the house. For an instant in the protective darkness, Raoul locked Anita in his arms.

"It was Stengel!" she gasped.

"It had to be!"

They could hear the scrambling motions of the man in the sand, dangerously close. They ran down behind the row of cabins. Stengel hopped grotesquely after them.

Raoul counted, the cabins. When they came to Number 11, he panted: "We might break into the open, but it's risky. With a shotgun he doesn't need a perfect aim."

THEY ducked between two cottages, leaped to the porch of Number 11. The door was locked, but Raoul jerked out the key he had found in Anita's purse, slammed it into the lock, twisted. The door burst open just as the sound of those ominous, hobbling steps funneled between the nearest cabins. Raoul scooped Anita inside with the crook of his arm, slammed the door behind them, swiftly locked it.

"That will hold him for a minute," he panted.

"He didn't shoot, Raoul."

"He can't risk any wild shots."

A terrifying silence dropped like black night, veiling the cabin. Raoul struck a match for a brief instant, sized up the interior in a glance. "The Law seems to have it all cleaned up," he whispered.

"Why did he do it?" she murmured.

Raoul slumped on the bed, head in hands. "I think I'm getting it. . . . Blackmail. Remember it was Mike Jorgenson who recommended this place to me? Well, Mike must have made use of it himself. Mike was pretty thick with my wife. He must have been out here sometime with Peggy, and, of course, Stengel registered them.

"Later, when Stengel read in the papers that I had tried to divorce my wife, he recognized Peggy's picture—and had a neat blackmail case against her. He had the one thing that I could successfully use to get a divorce.

"Peggy," he added drily, "could stand such a dangerous situation for a while and then she'd go to pieces. She might try to kill a blackmailer. I think she did. That hit-and-run driver who crippled Stengel was probably my wife. Stengel knew it and he got scared. So—Peggy and Stengel would be like a couple of stalking cats, each waiting to go for the other's throat. . . .

"That's probably how it stood, Anita, when I came along with you and repeated my wife's error. My name on the dotted line was a perfect setup for Stengel. When we conveniently left the cabin and drove away, he phoned to Peggy and got her out here on some pretext, probably some threat that would cause her to bring along a gun. It may be that she had threatened him with a gun before. Anyway, he trapped her and shot her with her own pistol. And he'd have gotten away with it, too, if you hadn't come back, Anita, and sneaked off with the gun. If you hadn't tried to take my crime on yourself—"

Raoul moved toward her, dragged her tightly against him. Her response was to squirm protestingly out of his arms.

"Raoul, that man out there—"

"I know. We've got to move," he said hoarsely. "He may have gone for another key, or to call for help. He might risk his story against ours—but we'd better be prepared for a trick."

Pulling her down below the line of the windows, he lit another match, then extinguished it and worked from memory. He dragged the mattress off the bed and as quietly as possible knocked the steel bed frame apart. He came up with a trough-shaped rod about six feet in length.

GROPING into the kitchen, he located a heavy frying pan. In a husky whisper he instructed the woman. A moment later he called out: "Stengel! Bert Stengel, can you hear me?"

An indefinite shuffle, a step on the front porch, a low snarl: "Are you comin' out, you two?"

The man was still there. That meant his intention was to kill.

"Yes. We've decided to submit to arrest, Stengel."

"Come away!"

Reaching out from the left side of the doorway, Anita twisted the key and jerked

the door open, flattening herself between it and the wall. Her right arm whipped around the edge of the door and fired the frying pan into the waiting night.

From deep in the gloom of the cabin, Raoul could see Stengel at the edge of the porch, ducking. The heavy pan rang against his shoulder. He staggered, swearing viciously.

Raoul hurled himself out of the darkness. His makeshift, six-foot steel spear caught Stengel squarely in the middle, lifted him bodily off the porch, sent him flying backward to sprawl, face up, skidding along the sand. On the force of his charge, Raoul left the porch and swooped like a bird down upon the scrambling body. Behind him the woman began to scream.

Stengel, with miraculous agility, jerked away, still gripping the shotgun. Raoul caught his leg and the little man stumbled backward, like a child on stilts, squirming to recover his balance.

Across the road a motor roared and a big cycle raced on whistling tires across the pavement. The state patrolman had heard Anita's scream. His spotlight caught the scene squarely in its shaft.

Stengel finally went down, twenty feet away, rebounding immediately to his knees. He lifted the gun.

The motorcycle skidded, toppled, and the rider leaped away from it, running. "What goes on there?" he demanded.

Stengel snarled. His body churned the sand, turning to face this new menace. He fired impulsively, blindly.

The uniformed patrolman spun halfway around from the shock of the blast. He staggered backward. A pistol seemed to leap into his right hand and empty itself into the baffled, moaning Stengel, who swayed oddly on his knees like some oriental dancer. Slowly Stengel drifted out upon his face in the grinding sands. He didn't move again.

The officer was bleeding badly at the shoulder from the surprise shotgun blast. Raoul bound up the wound with his coat, while he attempted in hoarse, clipped phrases to explain Stengel's part in the murder of Peggy Fox.

"He sure had murder in that shotgun!" the officer muttered.

Following the wounded cop's tight-

lipped instructions, Raoul helped him into the back seat of Anita's car. "Emergency hospital—three miles south," the officer gasped.

Anita slid in under the wheel and the machine suddenly roared off, leaving Raoul there in the sand, flat-footed, panting. For a moment he didn't realize what was happening. The officer had given no orders for him to stay behind.

Then, abruptly, he understood. A new panic shuddered through his body. He felt strangely cold and empty, with only that dead murderer for company. Anita had left him flat. He had accused her of murder, of the most vicious double-cross a woman could perform. He hadn't had faith in her, and she was running away.

He stood there, alone, his eyes desperately searching the sky, knuckles working. "Damn you, Raoul Fox, you stupid fool! You could have believed in her, regardless. How will you ever run down a woman like that? Are you man enough to catch up?"

Raoul started walking. He walked fast, each step a desperate prayer. Glaring headlights from oncoming cars engulfed him in daylight brilliance, then plunged him again into the black of the night. He ignored them, kept pushing one foot out ahead of the other.

About a half hour later, twin beams of brilliance caught him in their glare. They seemed to imprison him longer than the others. He paid no heed to the lights of the slowing, oncoming car. He kept his eyes straight ahead, his dogged feet pushing out as fast as he could move them. Then suddenly he was out of the blinding glare. He heard the metallic clicking of a hand brake being set. Then one word reached him:

"Raoul!"

He spun about, ran toward the parked car. Somewhere in the road he collided with a soft body. His arms went hungrily about her. "Anita," he whispered into the scented cloud of her dark hair. This time she did not twist away, but clung tightly to him.

"Anita, if you can find it in you to forgive—"

Her warm mouth, finding his, silenced him. . . .

THE END

BRAT'S BREW O' MURDER

By CHARLES LARSON



"I'm sorry, Kid, you're
just too damn smart. . . ."

*After the homicide-filled gyrations of
his Houdini-minded brat, Mr. Johnson
would have welcomed an easy chair—
or the police-proffered sizzle-seat.*

WHEN they took Liz Johnson from her ward to the operating room, they allowed Mr. Johnson to walk along beside the stretcher, which was a mistake since it unnerved him considerably. He was a heavy-set, vigorous man in his middle forties, and he'd had no truck, per-

sonally, with hospitals since he'd had his tonsils out at the age of seven. The memory of his fear then had never entirely left him.

Furthermore, they'd given Liz a dose of something or other to relax her, and she rambled on so about her approaching death that Mr. Johnson half believed her.

"There's a cold shoulder of pork in the ice-box," Liz said bleakly. "That should see you through."

"Oh, now, Liz—" Mr. Johnson said.

"Take care of little Luke. See that he grows up to be a good man." Liz smiled wearily up at him, and pressed his hand.

She looked so ineffably lovely and little and lost that Mr. Johnson wondered how he could stand it. Theoretically speaking, the appendicitis patient's chances were bright, but it was an utterly impossible thing to think of Liz theoretically. Mr. Johnson was quite certain that he would not care to live himself if anything should happen to her.

He bent down and kissed her very gently on the forehead. "You be a good girl now," Mr. Johnson whispered. "You hear?"

"Poor Fred," Liz replied.

And then the stretcher was gliding on into the room, and the doors were closing in Mr. Johnson's face, and he was left alone in the hall which smelled so faintly of cleanliness and ether.

He had just taken out a cigarette and was wondering gloomily if they allowed smoking in hospitals, when a nurse rustled up to him. "Mr. Johnson?"

He turned, surprised. "Yes?"

"You're wanted at the reception desk downstairs."

"Oh? Thank you."

That would, of course, be Luke. For a brief, unselfish moment, Mr. Johnson considered the effect Liz's death would have on someone other than himself. His son, Luke, had just turned sixteen, a terrible age where death was concerned. Too young to take such a loss in stride, it was yet too old to be able to ignore that loss.

Mr. Johnson ached suddenly with pity. He walked glumly to the elevator, and went downstairs.

Luke, Mr. Johnson saw as soon as he reached the main floor, was having the time of his life. Instead of decently worrying about his mother's condition—a matter of common courtesy—he had tackled onto two sinister looking characters in gray

gabardine suits, both of whom he was confounding with a series of deft card tricks.

This card-trick business on his son's part had lately become a major irritation to Mr. Johnson. In order to bribe Luke into practicing the piano, Mr. Johnson had come home one day with a children's magic set, which had included a book on card tricks.

Before a month was out, Luke had not only learned ten certain ways to stack a deck, but had become so proficient in dealing seconds that Mr. Johnson had had to stop playing casino with him. As Mr. Johnson had warned Liz, it could only be a question of weeks before their son was frequenting pool-halls, calling all women 'Babe,' and numbering his best friends from among the sporting element.

The two men in gabardine seemed to be a case in point.

Coldly, Mr. Johnson started toward the reception desk.

Luke glanced up at the sound of his footsteps, and waved; even at that considerable distance Mr. Johnson could see the ace of diamonds nestled in his son's palm.

"Hi, Pop," Luke called. "I'm showing these guys the floating ace trick. Take a card."

"I'll 'hi, Pop,' you," Mr. Johnson said. "Why don't you ask how your mother is?"

"How's Mom?" Luke asked agreeably.

"She's very ill."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Luke said. "Take a card."

The two men in the gabardine suits laughed, and one of them said: "You got a clever boy here, except his mind is more or less one track."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Luke said. "Take a card."

Again the two men laughed. Mr. Johnson's opinion of them fell even lower. Brusquely he turned to Luke. "They told me upstairs that you wanted me. Now what is it?"

"Me?" Luke was surprised.

"Listen," Mr. Johnson said tiredly, "I've gone through a great deal today with your mother. Believe me, I don't feel like playing games—"

"It must have been two other guys," Luke said.

"As a matter of fact," one of the men in gabardine put in, "it was."

There was a moment's silence, and then

Mr. Johnson swung slowly around to face them. He found himself staring rather stupidly into the dull glitter of a badge held in the taller man's hand. After a long while he licked his lips and looked up. "What is this?"

"We didn't want to disturb you while you were with your wife," the taller man said pleasantly.

"Disturb me?"

"You're Frederick Johnson?"

"I am."

"Then I'm afraid you're under arrest, Mr. Johnson."

PARTLY because he'd been under a kind of dull opiate of shock all day on account of Liz, and partly because of the friendly way the words had been put to him, Mr. Johnson felt no reaction of any kind.

He stood with his head bent forward a little and his mouth slightly open, and then he said, puzzled: "I don't think I understand. *I'm* under arrest? What on earth for?"

The man in gray had taken out a package of cigarettes. He paused, surprised, and then offered the package to Mr. Johnson. "Why—for murder, of course," he said.

It seemed to Mr. Johnson that he was standing very far off, watching the whole incredible scene with detachment. He saw himself take one of the proffered cigarettes, and raise it to his mouth. He heard himself repeat, "Murder," like some polite character in a bad drawing-room comedy. But even the sound of his own voice failed to give sense to the word.

Beside him, Luke was pulling roughly at his sleeve. "Pop," he hissed. "Look. Over there."

Obediently Mr. Johnson looked. Through the glass doors of the hospital's main entrance he could see a taxi idling at the curb, while a lean, sunburned man stood near the cab's open window, paying the driver.

Absently he said: "Isn't that Carl Tors?" but Luke was already running away from him, toward the main entrance, calling Tors' name. And this, too, was part of the unreality.

If it was abnormal for Mr. Johnson to be standing in a hospital foyer accused of murder, it was sheer madness for his lawyer to drop out of the clouds at the precise moment Mr. Johnson needed him, like some

benevolent and stoop-shouldered *deus ex machina*.

Dully he watched Luke and Tors hurrying back to him.

"Fred!" Tors was calling. "I came as soon as I could! This is the silliest thing I've ever heard of."

"Isn't it?" Mr. Johnson said.

"Luke mentioned something about murder. Whose murder?"

Mr. Johnson raised his arms slightly and let them fall again against his sides. "I haven't the vaguest idea."

"Whose murder?" Tors snapped at the two men in gray.

Calmly one of them replied: "A woman by the name of Hannah Lindy. Shot to death in her apartment about eleven-thirty last night."

"Lindy," Tors said. "Lindy." He glanced at Mr. Johnson. "Familiar with that name, Fred?"

"Of course," Mr. Johnson said.

"Never mind," Tors said quickly. Red-faced, he whirled back to the detectives. "May I ask why this man should be under suspicion at all?"

"At eleven-thirty, the manager of Miss Lindy's apartment building—the Whitehall, on 33rd and Oak—thought he heard a shot. He got to his own door in time to see Johnson coming down the stairs. Johnson said 'It's only me,' and gave his name. He also gave some excuse about the door having slammed. The manager, who happens to be a semi-cripple, accepted this, and went back to bed. Any more questions?"

Tors closed his mouth and looked helplessly at Mr. Johnson.

"I think," Mr. Johnson said, "that I'd better sit down somewhere."

"Before you do," Luke interrupted, "I better tell you that I think I'm going to be sick."

All four of the men glanced at him quickly. Miserably Luke stared back at them. His face was white. There were two red spots high on his cheeks, and his forehead was spotted with perspiration. He hiccuped softly.

"This," said Mr. Johnson, "is all I need."

"He couldn't have picked a better place for it," Tors growled. Watching Luke apprehensively, he waved to a passing nurse. "Where does it hurt?" he asked.

"I want my Mom," Luke said.

His head pounding, Mr. Johnson sat down on a leather sofa, and gazed wearily at the floor between his knees. At least nothing more could happen. Even misery has its end. He was still sitting there, in a kind of conscious coma, when the solicitous nurse began hurrying Luke off to a near-by washroom.

It came as no surprise at all, considering everything else that had happened to him, to find Luke causing a scene instead of going peacefully. Wailing and fighting with great vigor, Luke began bawling: "Pop!" in such a hair-raising way that the nurse finally stopped.

Exasperated, she looked at Mr. Johnson. "Are you the father?" she asked.

Mutely Mr. Johnson nodded.

"You'd better come with us. We'll have to get him quieted."

Sighing, Mr. Johnson got to his feet, took Luke's hand. "Everything's going to be all right, Son," he said.

Together he and Luke and the nurse plodded on to the wash-room. Behind them, one of the gray-suited men detached himself from the reception desk and followed like a bulky shadow, his face expressionless.

INSIDE the wash-room, Luke's complexion turned from its ghastly white into a more normal shade of pink, but he had taken to moaning piteously by now, and the nurse was hurried into finding a variety of pans in case of emergency. She got him settled on a small stool, and, after opening a window, and commanding Mr. Johnson to see that he remained quiet, trotted off in search of a doctor.

For a while Mr. Johnson merely stood at the closed door, insensate as a Yogi, trying to understand how so many things could happen so suddenly to one man. It was only when Luke knocked one of the pans down in trying to climb up to the lavatory window that he lifted his eyes.

Luke was raising the screen stealthily. Hoisting himself over the sill, he peered downward. "Little drop here," he whispered over his shoulder, "but I think you can make it, Pop."

"What?" Mr. Johnson said.

"Come on, come on," Luke muttered impatiently. "And watch the shrubbery."

Baffled, Mr. Johnson said: "What are you talking about? You're sick."

"Nuts," Luke replied. "We had to do something. I held my breath, and stuck my finger down my throat. Now hurry up before that dopey nurse finds a doctor."

"Do you mean to tell me that you actually—"

"The first theory of magic," Luke said proudly, "is to figure that the other guy is always dumber than you are. They always believe what you tell 'em. And believe me, those cops are dumb. I spotted their badges when I showed 'em the old vest-pocket trick. That's why I telephoned Mr. Tors as soon as I could. Besides, you wanted to get away, didn't you?"

"No! I mean to say—why should I?"

"Snap out of it, Pop!" Luke said. "Come to the party! Those guys weren't kidding outside."

"But that's just the point. I'm innocent."

"Who knows it besides us? Do you have an alibi? Where were you at eleven-thirty last night?"

"Why, I was—" Mr. Johnson rubbed his forehead. "Let's see. I took a little walk. Liz had just gone to the hospital. I couldn't sleep."

"Anybody see you?"

"I don't think so."

"Meet anybody you knew?"

"No."

"See?" Luke said triumphantly. "No alibi. You're cooked."

"But I wasn't anywhere near Hannah's apartment!"

"By the way," Luke said, "who is this Hannah babe?"

"Stop using that word," Mr. Johnson snapped.

"The manager said he recognized you. Ever go up there?"

"And that's another thing. The manager couldn't possibly have recognized me."

"No? Why?"

"Hannah was my secretary. About two months ago she was evicted from her home. Sold from underneath her, I believe. Anyway, she found this other apartment eventually and moved in. Liz and I used to see her once in awhile for a rubber of bridge when she lived in the old place, but neither of us have ever been to the new one."

Musingly Luke said: "You need four for bridge."

"Hannah had a boy friend. She had lots of boy friends. Usually a lad by the name of Skelley filled in."

"Aha!" Luke said.

"Now listen here," Mr. Johnson leaned closer. "I don't know what wild ideas you have in that head of yours, and I don't much care. But I can tell you this right now. I'm not going to squeeze through some window like a trapped rat just because it appeals to your dramatic sense. Once that manager sees me face to face, he'll realize he's made a mistake. He'll clear me himself."

"Suppose," Luke said slowly, "that *he* killed her. After all, he lied about seeing you."

"There you are," Mr. Johnson replied. "I would be a bit surprised that he's the murderer."

"Neither would I," Luke said, "except that if he did, he's not going to run around clearing people—especially people he's already named as the killer, namely—Fredrick M. Johnson."

Mr. Johnson felt far away again.

"Besides which," Luke added, "there's Mom. What if she wakes up and finds you're in jail? She'd have a relapse as sure as you're born."

"What if she wakes up and finds I'm a fugitive? Same thing."

"By that time," Luke said grandly, "we'll have the real murderer."

"No," Mr. Johnson said. "Definitely no. I absolutely will not—"

He broke off as Luke suddenly doubled over and put his ear to the door. "Hist!" Luke said.

Outside, Mr. Johnson could hear the tap-tap of the nurse's heels. He felt an unaccountable wetness in his palms, and an altogether undignified urge to bolt. "Now wait a minute—" he said.

The footsteps grew closer.

Abruptly, Luke shot the lock on the wash-room door. "Go on, Pop, hurry. Beat it!"

Under the nerve-jolting influence of the words, Mr. Johnson found himself at the window almost before he knew what he was doing. There was a surprised rattle of the doorknob, and then he heard the man in gray swearing softly on the other side. Soon the door shook violently under the impact of a shoulder.

LUKE was behind him, pushing vainly at the small of his back. "It's too late to worry about it now. They'll think you were trying to escape anyway."

Sweating, Mr. Johnson jumped, caught the windowsill, and drew himself laboriously upward. The 'little drop' that Luke had mentioned was a good fall of some twelve feet, but there was no question of backing out. Closing his eyes, Mr. Johnson launched himself like a brave but bottom-heavy scow.

He hit the ground with a cracking thud, and managed to draw back only seconds before Luke plopped down beside him, as softly and easily as a cat's shadow.

Then Luke was up and running, and although Mr. Johnson wanted nothing so much as a quiet bed somewhere, he followed, limping and winded.

He didn't look back. He didn't dare.

* * *

Submissively he trailed up and down alleys after his son, across strange streets, and through dark little parks which he hadn't even known existed. These round-about travels, Luke explained, were made in order to "throw 'em off the scent." Mr. Johnson almost found himself listening for the baying of the hounds.

When darkness began to set in, however, after a deadly long time of such wandering, Mr. Johnson ground to an exhausted stop. "Luke," he said.

"Yes, Pop?"

"Just where are you taking me?"

"I think," Luke answered, "that we can now begin to head for the Whitehall Apartments. On 33rd and Oak."

Mr. Johnson tried as hard as he could to understand why it was better to go to the scene of the crime rather than to hide out somewhere, and failed. "Is this wise?" he asked.

"Very. The key to the whole business has got to be that manager. Why did he lie? What's in it for him?"

"Frankly," Mr. Johnson said, "I'm just about through. I don't care why the manager lied. I think I ought to turn myself in."

"You're taking the short view," Luke replied. "And besides—" he patted his father's arm—"you've always got me. Put yourself in my hands, Pop. I'll take care of everything." He smiled, and ran on.

After a moment, Mr. Johnson gave a weary shrug, and followed. . . .

* * *

Dusk had fallen by the time they reached their destination, and the soft glitter of arc-lights spotted the ancient tree-lined street. Before the Whitehall Apartments cars drifted in a dreamy and curious double line.

Luke stopped beneath a whispering linden tree, and gazed scornfully at the curiosity seekers. "Look at those vultures," he murmured. "They hang around like they want to loot the body."

Mr. Johnson shuddered.

"You cold?" Luke asked.

"Honestly," Mr. Johnson replied. "I think we're doing the wrong thing. Why don't we—"

"Nuts," Luke said. "We're here now."

"But how in the world are we going to go about it? I can't just simply walk up to the man and say, 'Let's have no more of this nonsense, Bud. Why'd you kill her,' and walk away again."

"That's right," Luke said. He hitched up his trousers and grinned at Mr. Johnson. "You can't. But I can."

And it was at that moment that Mr. Johnson saw the policeman. He was a very large policeman, with a very large gun at his hip, and he was looking directly at Mr. Johnson with a wise and complacent smile. Mr. Johnson couldn't take his eyes off that gun.

In his mind's eye he saw himself turning, and running, and he saw that gun being aimed very leisurely and deliberately at the crawling center of his back, and he saw himself sprawling grotesquely on the pavement. He suddenly felt very lost and lonesome. He wanted Liz. "Luke," he said.

"Yeah?"

Wordlessly Mr. Johnson nodded toward the policeman.

Very slowly Luke turned.

There was a hesitation as slight as a missed heart-beat, and as noticeable, and then the policeman moved quietly forward, his thumbs stuck in his belt. Looking at Luke, he said: "What was that you can do, Son?"

Smoothly Luke smiled. "Get an apartment. Why?"

Startled, Mr. Johnson stared at him.

The policeman frowned. "An apartment?"

"MY FATHER and I," Luke continued in an appallingly convincing manner, "heard that there was a vacancy in this place. We decided to talk to the manager about it, but my father doesn't have the nerve to ask so soon after the woman—died. I told him that it didn't bother me, and that I could go through with it even if he couldn't. It sounds heartless, but we need the place. Anything wrong in that?"

The policeman looked from one to the other. "You were going to ask the manager?"

"That's right."

"Personally acquainted with him?"

"No, but—"

"Why should you see the manager rather than the owner?"

"In the first place," Luke said, "we didn't know where to find the owner, and we wanted to get our bid in first. In the second place, I'd like to know where you get off questioning us like a couple of common pickpockets. Is it against the law to go looking for a place to live?"

The policeman's face reddened. "You're pretty cocky, aren't you, Son?"

"Not at all. On the other hand, you happen to be a public servant, and I don't like your attitude. Now can we go on about our business?"

Heavily the policeman planted himself in front of them. "You can not."

Luke threw a swift glance at Mr. Johnson. "And may I ask why?"

"Because I doubt that the manager would talk to you right now. You see—" again the policeman smiled slightly—"he's been dead for twenty minutes."

Luke sucked his breath in sharply. In a distant way, Mr. Johnson began to wonder if this were not all a gigantic and monstrous joke designed to drive him mad.

"Dead?" Luke whispered. "Suicide?"

"Yeah," said the policeman. "He shot himself three times in the back, and then hid the weapon somewhere."

Luke licked his lips. "Do they—have they caught—whoever did it?"

"He can't get far. They had him once. He had the guts to visit his wife at one of the hospitals. They think he's a psycho."

Given another eight hours like the last,

Mr. Johnson thought resentfully, and he would be a psycho.

"Well—" Luke grimaced disarmingly. He glanced at Mr. Johnson. "That seems to end our apartment hunting for today, doesn't it?"

Mutely Mr. Johnson nodded.

"There's still that place on West Fremont." Turning to the policeman, Luke added: "Thanks for the information. I don't think we'd want to live in this joint anyway."

With a small wave toward the policeman, he took Mr. Johnson's arm, turned him about, and started leisurely down the street.

Silently the policeman watched them go. Again the center of Mr. Johnson's back began to crawl. Luke risked a glance over his shoulder. The policeman had taken a black notebook out of his pocket, and was thoughtfully checking something in it against their retreating figures.

Almost imperceptibly, Luke commenced to step up the pace. By the time they reached the corner, they were half running. When they lost sight of him, the policeman was still standing in the same thoughtful position, still holding the black notebook.

In a low voice, Luke muttered: "I know an old barn, Pop, where you could hide out from now until Christmas. With a couple of guns you could stand 'em off forever."

Beside him, Mr. Johnson clenched his jaw. "From now on," he grated, "you will kindly keep your big mouth shut." Grabbing Luke's arm, he swept around the next corner.

"Where we going?"

"To see my lawyer. This has all gone far enough. And if *he's* dead by the time we get there, I'll shoot myself. Any objections?"

Luke started to protest, but Mr. Johnson tightened his grip, and glared at him so that he closed his mouth again. Meekly he said: "All right, Pop. We'll go see your lawyer."

CARL TORS was most definitely not dead when they arrived at his home. He opened the back door at their knock, gasped once, and then whisked them inside. "Fred!" he said. "Where in the devil have you been?"

"Wandering," Mr. Johnson answered. He glared again at Luke.

Tors groaned. "What prompted you to leave the hospital the way you did? They didn't have a thing on you. They only wanted you for questioning. But now!"

"There's more," Mr. Johnson said.

Sighing, Tors rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I know. You mean the manager? I saw it in the papers." Avoiding Mr. Johnson's eyes, he added: "Bad break."

Silently the three of them considered their own separate thoughts. "I didn't do it, you know," Mr. Johnson said finally.

Tors nodded, and then seemed to rouse himself. "Well," he said, "I suppose I'd better tell you the rest." He looked up, his face serious. "I spent the day, Fred, checking on everyone who had been connected in any way with Hannah Lindy. It was easier than you might think.

"The girl never made an effort to cover her—" he glanced at Luke, obviously searching for the proper word—"her extra-curricular activities. And she had plenty of them. But something happened when she took her job with you. All of a sudden she dropped all of the boys on her string—with the exception of one. Lad named Skelley. Know him?"

Mr. Johnson nodded. "I've met him."

"At any rate, do you see why the police were so interested in hearing what you had to say? Before Hannah Lindy became your secretary, she had more loves than Madame Pompadour. After you came on the scene. . ." He left his voice off meaningfully.

Mr. Johnson licked his lips, aware that his face was growing red. "Carl, I swear to heaven—Why—I love Liz too much to ever—"

"I know. I know. I'm simply trying to show you how it looks to the police."

"Just a minute," Luke interrupted. He was gazing absently at the floor. "Every time we turn around, we come across the name of Skelley. Doesn't that suggest anything to anybody?"

"Should it?" Tors asked.

"Suppose," Luke said musingly, "that this Lindy babe was in love with some guy. Not Pop, but somebody she hoped to marry. Suppose, then, Mr. Skelley got jealous. Suppose he went to the Whitehall Apartments last night, and suppose there was a fight—"

"It won't work," Tors said. "The police

have talked to Skelley, and there's nothing there at all. He claims that he was in love with the girl, but that she had met someone else whom he couldn't compete with. He bowed out two or three months ago, hoping that she'd see the light and come back to him.

"Their break was so complete that he hadn't even known where she'd moved until he'd seen the Whitehall mentioned in the papers. Furthermore, he has an alibi a yard thick for last night."

"Awfully pat, isn't it?" Luke said thoughtfully. "Awfully, awfully pat."

"Now before you go off-half-cocked," Mr. Johnson began.

Disregarding him, Luke said: "There isn't an alibi on earth that couldn't be broken. And as for this business about not even knowing where she lived—"

He paused, and then raised his eyes suddenly to the lawyer's. "Wait a minute. If we could prove that Skelley not only knew where Hannah Lindy lived, but that he'd even visited her there several times, wouldn't it put a terrible hole in his entire story?"

"Of course," Tors said. "But how—"

"What's the general layout of the place?"

Puzzled, Tors said: "I haven't seen it yet, but I suppose I could find out for you, Why?"

"Part of a crazy idea of mine." Luke bit pensively at his lower lip. "Do you know whether she lived on the first floor or the second?"

"I think the papers said that she had a second-floor room. Apartment D."

Luke smacked his hands together. "Then we're in. I know a trick."

"No!" Mr. Johnson put in loudly. "Whatever it is—whatever it is—I refuse. One more crazy idea on your part and I might as well hang myself. Save the state a great deal of time and expense."

But Tors was pacing back and forth, watching Luke curiously. "Now hold it a minute, Fred," he said. "If the boy's got an angle, we ought to hear it."

"But, Carl!"

"Look, you're in this thing up to your ears already. You ought to be tickled with any possible out, fantastic or not. I can tell you frankly that the manager's murder is the worst thing that's ever happened to you."

"Right!" Luke said. "And this *is* an out." He paused for a moment, and then shook his head. "No. I'd better not tell you. Sounds too screwy. But it'll work. I promise it'll work."

He started toward the door. "What time is it now?"

"Seven ten."

"Give me a couple of hours. At nine everything'll be set."

"But what—"

Luke stopped, his hand on the front door-knob. "Leave everything to me, Pop. I only want you to do one thing." He grinned. "At nine o'clock you be in Hannah Lindy's apartment."

"What!"

"Go in the front door, and go up the main stairway. That's important. I'll see that there's no one there to bother you. When you get to the apartment, keep the lights off, and stay hidden no matter what happens. And keep quiet."

He turned to Tors. "At nine-fifteen, Mr. Tors, I want you to be outside the apartment. Stand where you can hear me if I yell." He opened the door, and started out. "Because if you don't come then," he added, "we are *really* cooked."

AT EIGHT-FORTY-FIVE, the street before Hannah Lindy's apartment house was quiet and empty. In the shadows of a slim tree, half way down the block, Mr. Johnson checked his wristwatch and wiped his moist palms against his coat. Then he walked rapidly up the street, hesitated for a second at the apartment house entrance and, seeing nothing, darted inside. The hallway was unlighted. Uncertainly he made his way across the hall to the stairway, climbed it, and crept along the passage to Apartment D.

Again he hesitated. The very absence of anything frightening frightened him.

Uneasily he reached for the doorknob, turned it. The door was unlocked. He slipped into the darkened room, closed the door behind him. Then, his nerves jangling, he inched across to a closet, shot inside, and, for the first time, allowed himself to breathe regularly.

It took some moments for him to realize that he was not the only one breathing in that closet.

With a muttered oath, he whirled—in

time to hear a soft chuckle, and the quiet whisper: "Relax, Pop. You're rocking the boat."

"Luke!"

"You're early. Now calm down and keep quiet. We got a good ten minutes yet."

Impotently, Mr. Johnson glared at his son. With a grin, Luke raised his hand, made a circle of his thumb and forefinger, and winked. Then he folded his arms and leaned against the wall, paying no more attention to his father than he would to an extra overcoat.

Mr. Johnson sighed, and relaxed.

* * *

It would have been impossible to tell when he first heard the sound of footsteps outside. They seemed to grow from nothingness, to blend with his own heart-beats, and then to emerge, separate, distinct and ominous. With the opening of the apartment door, Luke pushed soundlessly by him, and swung the closet door, too, slightly ajar. Together they looked into the room.

A tall, slender figure was framed in the doorway. Ghost-like it waited, listening. Then, slowly it moved inside.

"Now," Luke whispered over his shoulder, "it starts. Nothing in my hat, nothing up my sleeves. But watch the magic, Pop."

Taking a deep breath he flung the door open, stepped into the room, and flicked on the overhead light.

With a surprised roar, the man spun toward him, blinking in the sudden glare.

"Hold it right there," Luke said.

"Who the devil are *you*? The police called—"

"No." Luke's face was expressionless. "I called."

Baffled, the tall man swept the room with his eyes.

Slowly and easily Luke approached him. "I think I'd better introduce myself, Mr. Skelley." He held out his hand, and then paused significantly. "My name is Johnson."

Frowning, Skelley shook hands with him. "Frankly," he said, "I don't give a damn who you are. Just what kind of a gag is this?"

"Murder," Luke said quietly, "is no gag."

"Melodramatic," Skelley said, "but true

enough. Is that coy statement supposed to mean something to me?"

"It should. Since you're a murderer."

In the sudden stillness a fly buzzed listlessly, stopped, began again.

Skelley's face didn't change. Again his eyes flicked around the room. In his closet, Mr. Johnson tried to stop the trembling in his knees, and failed.

In the same quiet tone, Luke continued: "Last night, in this apartment, you shot Hannah Lindy. Later, you killed the manager, who saw you coming out. Do you deny it?"

Skelley murmured: "You're out of your mind. I've never been in this apartment before tonight."

"That's what you told the police. And that's a rather ridiculous lie." Raising his voice, Luke called: "Mr. Tors. Will you come in here, please?"

Skelley jerked his head around as Tors opened the door, came inside, and stood quietly against the wall.

Without taking his eyes from Skelley's face, Luke said: "Thank you. We'll need a witness. Mr. Skelley won't have to admit having been here before. I've already proven it."

Skelley started to say something, thought better of it, and closed his mouth.

"You want to know how?" Luke murmured. "It was a pretty good trick." He hesitated, and then raised his voice so that Mr. Johnson might hear too. "You know, Mr. Skelley, habit is a deadly thing.

"Every involuntary move we make is made because we have been accustomed to make that same move long enough to establish its pattern. We can't change our actions, because we don't even think about our actions. Not even such simple ones as walking up a flight of stairs."

Skelley was regarding him dully, as though he were half-hypnotised. Tors' expression was admiring.

Luke went on: Now in this apartment house there's a stairway. I don't suppose you noticed it, but there is also a banister.

"A banister is utterly useless to the average person except as a guide. If the stairway is strange, habit will force the climber to touch that banister as certainly as metal will cling to a magnet. On the other hand, a man will go up and down a familiar staircase a thousand times and never even ap-

proach the banister. Habit has conditioned him to ignore it completely.

I TOOK the trouble to coat the banister in this building very thoroughly with lamp black before you arrived. If you walked up those stairs for the first time tonight, you will have picked up a great deal of that lamp black.

"May I see your right hand, please, Mr. Skelley?"

For an eternity, no one moved or breathed. A vein beat in Skelley's forehead. Then, with excruciating slowness, he turned his right palm upward.

It was thick with lamp black.

With a low whistle, Tors stepped forward, looking from the hand to Luke and back again. Mr. Johnson frowned in the darkness.

"Well?" Skelley said at last.

Awkwardly Luke laughed. "It appears that I made a slight mistake."

"It appears," Skelley corrected, "that you have made the mistake of your life."

"I don't suppose it would do any good to apologize," Luke said. He took a large rag from his pocket, and gave it to Skelley humbly.

Rubbing the lamp black off, Skelley said: "It wouldn't do the slightest good to apologize. Not even in court when you answer the little charge of slander I'm instituting against you." Angrily, he gave the rag to

Luke. "Have you anything else to say to me?"

Mutely Luke shook his head. To Tors he murmured: "I'm sorry I had to put you through such a messy experience, too. And I can't even give you a clean rag." Apologetically, he handed the old one across to the lawyer.

It was some moments before the others grew aware of the sharp wrongness in the room.

Skelley was the first to notice. He had half turned toward the door, but now he stopped, and turned back.

Frowning, Luke said: "It's all right, Mr. Skelley. You can go."

Wordlessly Skelley glanced at him. Then, slowly, his eyes moved back to their previous object. Luke followed them.

Behind him, Tors was standing very quietly, the rag hanging at his side. He was regarding it absently, as though he hadn't a completely clear idea of what the thing was.

Both of his hands were quite clean.

After a long while, Luke let his breath out in a gentle sigh. "Well," he murmured. "So one of us has been in this apartment before after all."

Looking up, Tors smiled. "It was a good trick, wasn't it?"

"It wouldn't hold up in court, you know," Tors continued softly.

"No," Luke murmured. "It wouldn't.



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But it might be enough to start the police on an investigation of you."

"Yes."

"They might put two and two together. They might begin to realize that no murderer would give his own name when challenged, and that you were really the only one who would have thought of 'Johnson'—and that you were the first to know that Pop had escaped, so that it might have been possible—and logical—for him to have committed the second murder." He paused and licked his lips. "Could you stand an investigation, Mr. Tors?"

"You know," Tors answered dreamily, "there's a lot in the saying that one killing leads inevitably to another . . . and another . . . and another . . . I wonder if you could use that as a habit pattern?" He took a gun from his pocket, held it on Luke.

"So you were the one," Skelley murmured. "Why did you do it? Did she want to come back to me after all?"

"I should have let her, shouldn't I?" Tors said. "She was no good at all, you know. She took every penny I had—and then she was quite through with me. No good, but so beautiful. When I first saw her in Fred's office, I thought I'd never seen anyone so completely lovely."

They could all hear the tiny sound when Tors cocked his gun. "I'm sorry, Kid—you're just too damn smart—"

At that moment Mr. Johnson chose to come hurtling out of the closet.

Tors whirled, and at the same time Luke leaped upon him. The gun clattered to the floor. Savagely Mr. Johnson drove his right arm into Tors' stomach. Luke worked like a disciplined whirlwind, kicking, gouging, biting.

By the time Skelley got over his initial surprise, and joined the group, there was nothing left to do but to haul Luke off, and to shout to Mr. Johnson that the fight was over, and to stop battering Tors before he killed him.

They called the police from the apartment, and then they aroused Tors because Mr. Johnson said he'd be damned if he was going to lug an unconscious man down those stairs. With the gun in Tors' back, they started down to turn him over to the police.

On the stairs, Mr. Johnson got his second surprise. Inadvertantly his hand touched

the banister. He drew it back, swearing. "You and your lamp black," he said to Luke.

"Oh, stop it, Pop. There's nothing on the banister."

Behind them, Skelley said: "But in the apartment—all that talk about habit—"

"How should I know anything about habit?" Luke laughed. "I just had to say something that would convince Mr. Tors that I knew what I was talking about."

"Then you planned this whole thing!" Mr. Johnson almost shouted. "You knew Tors was the murderer all along!"

"Well, sure." Luke sounded surprised.

"Then why did you go through with that little farce upstairs! Why didn't you simply call the police?"

"Because I wasn't positive. The only way I could make sure was to get Tors to confess. He was expecting something with Skelley, so I figured he'd probably be off guard."

"Would it do any good to ask when you first suspected him?" Mr. Johnson asked cynically.

"Well, you remember how he told us he knew about the manager's death when we got to his place? Said he saw it in the paper." Luke shrugged. "When I left you, they were just getting the first extra out on the streets. I checked with the newspaper office. Tors couldn't have seen it because it hadn't come out yet."

Skelley said, "Then how in the hell did I get the lamp black on me?"

"I had it in my own hand. When I shook your hand I smeared the stuff over your palm."

They were all silent. Then Luke said thoughtfully: "Oh, say, Pop. There's one thing."

"I knew there would be," Mr. Johnson muttered. "What?"

"Well—I had a little trouble getting in here tonight. There was a cop on guard in the vestibule. Luckily I had a small rock with me. I tapped him a little with it and dragged him into the shrubs. I guess he's still there." He smiled apologetically at his father.

Sighing, Mr. Johnson thought wistfully of Liz again. *Take care of little Luke, she'd said.*

Idly he wondered how in the world he would ever explain this night to her.

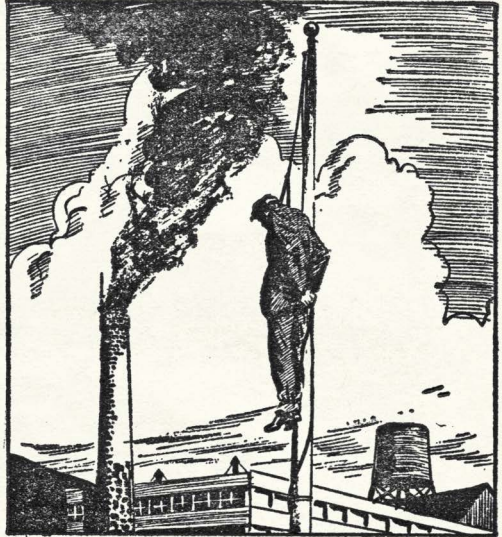
THRILL

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DOCKET



Lee Fiske, private eye, could usually help a guy with woman trouble—but a babe murdered in a cheap hotel love nest was strictly Roger Garrit's personal headache. . . . When Garrit coaxed Lee to visit the murder room, Garrit yelled: "I left her dead on the floor!"



Playboy Roger Garrit didn't have long to worry about the little blonde car-hop who had been murdered. For the dawn found Roger hanging at half mast over the factory he had married when he ran off with wealthy Helen Connors, Lee Fiske's childhood sweetheart.



Lee soon forgot the newly widowed Helen when he met Rebecca Foster, secretary to Helen's millionaire father. Rebecca was big, and she had everything a girl should have, only more of it. The only thing about her Lee didn't like was her wolfish German Shepherd.

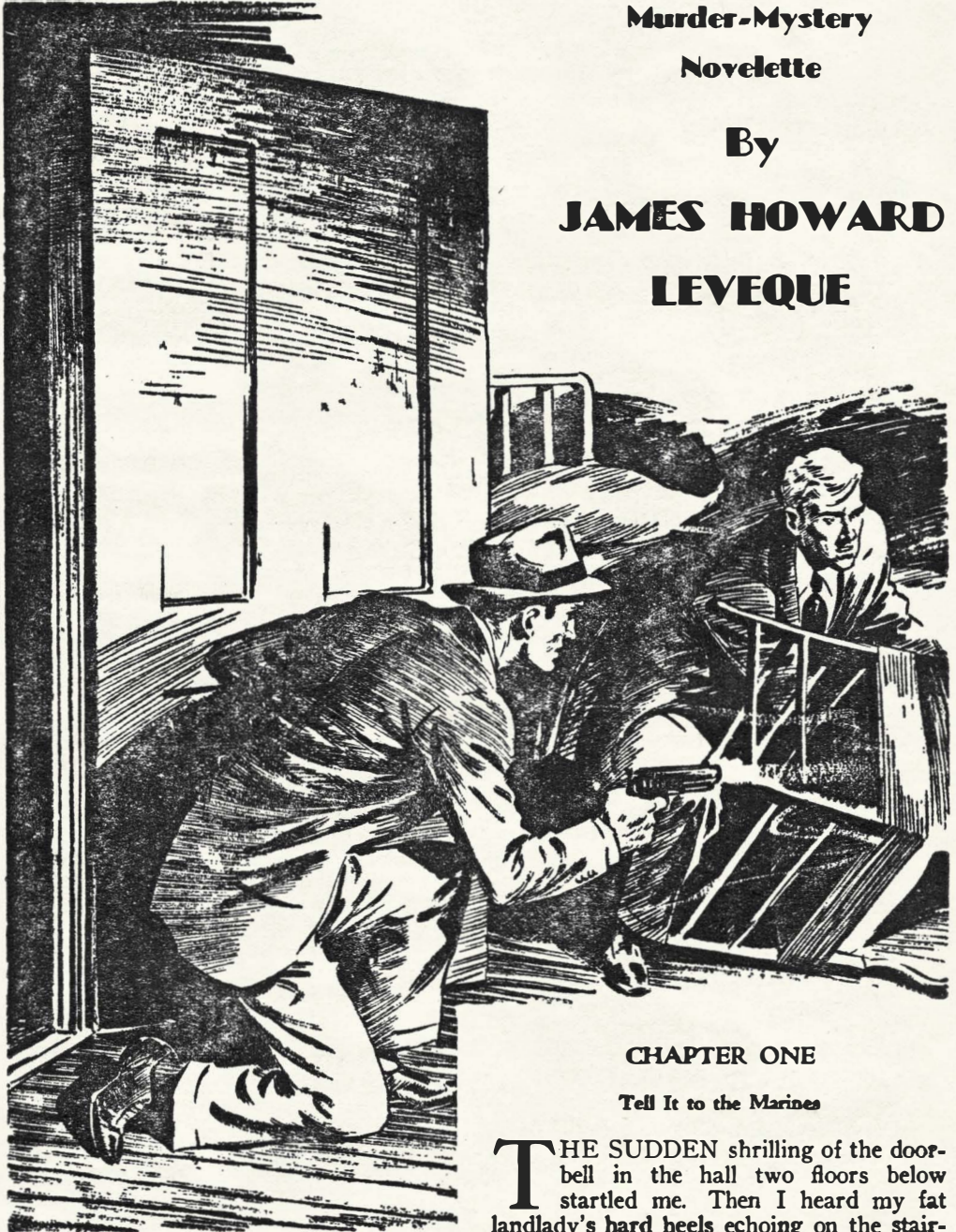


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By
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LEVEQUE**



CHAPTER ONE

Tell It to the Marines

THE SUDDEN shrilling of the doorbell in the hall two floors below startled me. Then I heard my fat landlady's hard heels echoing on the stair-

THE SLAUGHTER

Ex-Marine Nat Oster let the brown-eyed cutie coax him into playing Mr. Fix-It for a swindled buddy—and Mr. Fall-Guy in a brass-bound murder frame.

● ● ●
Even as he was falling, he remembered Deming. . . .



way as she hastened down to answer it. Again I glanced at the morning paper and tried to figure an angle. The face staring up at me out of page one was Frank Morelli's, all right. But there was something wrong. The story didn't fit the Morelli I used to know. He claimed somebody was selling shares in his night club

to unsuspecting GI investors and, through the district attorney, he had come forward to warn the public it was a racket. He got quite a play.

Well, if there was something wrong, it was no worry of mine. Or so I thought. I looked in the smudgy rooming-house mirror and decided I had worries of my own: a brown-and-gray plaid suit—too snug a fit for a guy my size—a loud blue shirt, a maroon-and-yellow tie. It would have given the Marines at Camp LeJeune a laugh to see Gunnery Sergeant Nat Oster in that layout. It might even give Lieutenant Dunnegan of Homicide a laugh, too. But it was all I could get.

As I packed new civilian clothes in a shiny new suitcase, I was only vaguely conscious of approaching steps and voices. In some surprise, I said, "Come in," to a knock on my door. The landlady pushed the door open.

"A lady—" her tone held a question—"to see you. On private business, she said. I told her I don't have no visiting parlor and that I run a respectable—"

"Yes, I know," the girl said quickly. "Thank you."

The landlady backed reluctantly down the hall, and I reached behind the girl and closed the door.

Her hand was at her throat, and there was real fright in her eyes. Her voice was a choked whisper.

"They followed me," she said, almost unbelievably. "They followed me all the way from home!"

I asked politely: "Who followed you, Lady?"

"Two men. In a black car. They stopped outside."

"Who are they?"

She shook her head, then asked: "Are they still there?"

It was her idea for me to go to the window and look out. Before the war, my agency had been pretty active. There were a lot of guys that didn't like me, even some who wouldn't mind taking a pot shot at me, for old times' sake. But I figured they wouldn't do it the hard way. So I went to the window and looked out.

There was a black car there, all right, a short distance down the block. A small, thin guy had climbed out and was walking rapidly toward my rooming-house. I'd

never seen his face around before. I turned to the girl and said, "One's coming in." We waited.

She was pretty in a quiet way. Brunette, brown-eyed, the top of her blue beret level with my chin. Her coat, showing wear but not quite shabby, was two-tone blue.

The doorbell downstairs rang and my landlady went to answer it. Presently I heard her heels echoing in the hall below, and I glanced out the window. The small, thin guy was going back to the car. He opened the curb-side door and got in. The car didn't move.

Somehow, the whole situation irked me. I decided to put this girl straight.

I said: "If this is business, Lady, you're wasting your time. My agency's not open yet, and I don't know when it'll be open." I'm leaving tonight for Florida.

She stood very straight, looked up at me levelly. Her voice was distinctively high and clear, yet oddly soft. "I expected you would say something like that. Mike told me."

"Who?"

"Mike. Corporal Michael Smith. My—my husband."

"Oh."

"He said you were tough."

"Oh."

I REMEMBERED MIKE. A little guy, thin and wiry. A good Joe. Always talking about his sugar and how they had won two cups in jitterbugging contests. In a foxhole at night, he'd bend your ears with his dreams of jitterbugging his way to a national championship.

The girl went on: "If you ever get in trouble," Mike told me, "go see the sarge. He can always get you out."

I said, "Yeah?" and my tone suddenly sounded, even to me, a little rough.

The girl said: "I'm in trouble." She made a small gesture with one upturned hand. "So I—I traced you through the hospital and the separation center and—well, here I am."

I thought: *Why do dames always pick me to tell their troubles to? And why was I such a dope as to give the separation center this address when it was only a room I'd reserved by mail for a few days?*

So I made it as plain as I could: "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Lady. But I've

got my ticket, I'm all packed and I'm leaving tonight. I've got a vacation coming and I'm going to take it!"

She nodded. "Mike said you'd act like this. His very words were, 'the sarge will put up a big beef and walk around beating his gums and waving his hands. He hasn't got the time, he's not a nursemaid, etc. etc. But don't let him bluff you.'"

"I'm not bluffing!"

She stopped, looked at me squarely a long moment.

"No," she said. "No, maybe you're not bluffing. Maybe you do mean it."

"I do."

She looked down at her handbag, ran her fingers slowly along the wooden clasp. When she raised her face again, there were tears in her eyes, tears of anger.

"I knew I was taking a gamble, coming here, but I took it. I took it because I had to have help—Mike has to have help."

"Mike?"

"Yes, Mike! For three years he's been baking on those hot Pacific islands—three years and four beachhead landings. Remember them, Sarge? Oh, you were lucky—you got hit; you came back. But he didn't. A hundred and seven points and they send him to China!"

"That's all right. In the Marine Corps, you sort of expect things tough. But remember what it's like, living on a corporal's pay. Sarge? Every month he sent me fifty dollars. I banked it, every penny of it, and got a job to support myself. We had two thousand dollars saved. That's all Mike talks about in his letters—how we're going to take that money and open a drive-in, have a business of our own. But we won't, not now. The money's gone!"

"Gone?"

"It was my fault. I listened to a man who owned a small night club. Or said he did. The Club Morelli. He showed me how I could almost double our money by the time Mike got back. It seemed too good a chance to miss. I bought an interest in the club. But now I'm scared. The man is beginning to stall me off—I've called his home half a dozen times and he won't even talk to me.

"Yes, I know. It happens all the time and it doesn't concern you!" She tightened the belt around her waist, tucked the overcoat collar closer around her neck. 'Semper

fidelis! How is it you Marines translate that among yourselves? Oh, yes. I got mine, how're you doing?" She turned toward the door.

Maybe the Morelli story in the paper was on the level after all. I asked: "What do you want me to do?"

"Why, I don't want you to do anything! I had thought you might agree to see this man and attempt to persuade him to return the money."

"If the deal is crooked, it's a job for the district attorney."

"Only as a last resort. If I make something official out of this, Mike will be sure to hear of it. He'd never really trust me again."

I thought of Mike and his two thousand bucks. I had twelve hours until train time. I asked: "What's this guy's name and where do I find him?"

"You mean you'll go?"

"Who said I wouldn't go?" My tone wasn't as gruff as I'd meant to make it.

From her handbag she took a piece of paper, gave it to me. It read: *Larry Deming, Room 203, Oklow Building, and below it, My address, 2313 Warder St.*

She said: "I feel better already, Sarge."

I jerked a thumb toward the window. "What about those guys outside?"

"I don't know." Her chin rose. "If they follow me again, now that I've seen you, I can call the police!" She gave me a little smile, shook my hand and left.

I WATCHED through the window. They didn't follow her. She walked rapidly in a direction away from them, not hesitating, not looking back. It took guts. But the guys just sat in their car.

I thought: *Why do I have to mix in other people's troubles?*

I knew why, of course. Mike was a friend of mine and had made that money the hard way. There were blood and sweat on every dollar. If the deal wasn't on the level, maybe I couldn't get the money back. But I could take a poke at this guy, Deming. Mike would appreciate that.

I looked in the mirror and told the gray-eyed, sharp-nosed, ex-Gyrene standing there, "Nat, you're a fool!" But I put on my hat and overcoat, locked my room and went downstairs.

My landlady was waiting for me at the

foot of the stairs. Her face was stern, every chin quivered with indignation. "I run a respectable house, Mr. Oster. I can overlook the matter of the girl in your room—"

I cut in, "Yeah, I think I would, too."

"—but when police detectives come around asking questions about you—"

"Was that little guy a detective?"

She folded her fat arms and hissed: "He certainly was! He showed me his badge!"

"What did he want with me?"

"That, Mr. Oster, I wouldn't know. First he asked if I had a Larry Deming here. I didn't. Then he asked who had the girl called on. I told him you. He made me describe you. I have respectable roomers here, and if they knew I had a police character under the same roof—"

"Madam, to spare you embarrassment, I shall leave within twelve hours." I bowed and walked out.

I stood on Fourteenth street ten minutes before I was able to flag a taxi. I gave the cabbie Deming's address; he started up and I glanced out the rear window. Sure enough, those guys in the black car were following, a block back.

I couldn't figure it. Obviously, they were looking for Deming. They had trailed the girl thinking she would lead them to him. I guessed they were trailing me for the same purpose. What I couldn't figure was why they didn't go straight to his office.

The Oklow Building was in a backwash of business off E Street. Red brick and brownstone, three stories high; unpolished brass eagles guarded the door. I entered, walked past an elevator on which hung a sign, *Out of Order*, and began climbing stairs. It was almost like old times.

The second floor hadn't been swept for days. I brushed past a pile of office refuse, walked to a door that was marked in blue 203 and underneath, *Small Business Enterprises*. I decided my opening line would be, "Mr. Deming, I represent a client who is in financial difficulties." I turned the knob and walked in.

The hair rose on the back of my neck. I couldn't explain why. It was only an anteroom and it was empty. Yet something seemed wrong. I stood still a moment and listened.

Street sounds were muffled here; the whole building seemed deserted. I thought

of those guys tailing me. Maybe they'd actually know the girl was coming to see me, maybe they wanted me and not Deming. Maybe they weren't cops, too. Anybody can flash a badge that looks real enough.

There was a door opposite. I moved quietly across the anteroom and listened again. I thought I heard a noise inside but wasn't sure. I caught the knob, turned it and slammed the door open.

The girl was dead. She lay face down on the worn carpet, midway between the desk and the rear, curtained window. Her hair, pale gold in an oblong of sunlight, cascaded down into a thick smear of blood.

I looked quickly around. There was no one else in the office, nowhere to hide. I knelt, touched the girl's cheek. It was cold. Something about her pert face, the way her nose tip-tilted at the end seemed familiar. I stared at her a moment before rising and glancing around for a telephone. There was none. I backed toward the door and turned to go out.

CHAPTER TWO

For the Love of Mike!

VOICES rose from the stair well. Heavy feet pounded up. I hesitated a moment, then went to the hall door and just stood there waiting. Three men, two in police uniform, mounted to the second floor and swung around the railing toward me.

One cop said: "Why, Lieutenant Dunnegan, look—it's Nat Carter!"

Both uniformed officers pumped my hand energetically. The detective lieutenant was less enthusiastic. He said, "Back already?"

I said, "Hello, Horseface."

Dunnegan grinned without humor. "Got the private agency going again?"

"No."

"What're you doing up here? A dame phoned and said there was a murder in Number 203."

I backed away from the door, told him, "In there," and thumbed them through.

Dunnegan whistled and knelt.

"Quite a job on her back," he commented presently and rose. He told one of the cops, "Phone the captain we got a stiff." He turned to me. "Where's the gun?"

"I didn't see a gun."

"What did you touch?"

"Her cheek and the doorknob."

"Careful, huh?"

"I'm always careful."

"How do I know you didn't do it?"

"You don't."

"What were you doing up here?"

"I came to see a man."

"Still licensed to operate a private agency?"

"No. This wasn't business. It was a personal favor."

"That old dodge, huh?"

"Yeah, that old dodge."

Dunnegan rocked back and forth on his heels, took one end of his watch chain from a vest pocket and began whirling it around, on and off his index finger. He stared fixedly at me.

He asked, "Who is she?"

"I don't know. I never saw her before."

Memory is a funny thing. Even as I said that, a picture flashed in my brain, and I saw a pyramidal tent in a coconut grove on Banika island and Corporal Mike Smith dragging me inside to show me a photograph he'd received at mail call that afternoon.

The girl on the carpet was Mrs. Mike Smith. But I didn't offer the information to Dunnegan, not after just having told him I didn't know. Instead, I asked, "Who was the woman who reported this?"

"She wouldn't give her name. Phoned from a pay station. All I know is, the desk sergeant, who sees a lot of shows, said she had a high, clear voice like some dame in the movies, and maybe she had. Why?"

I shrugged and turned away. I've got pride and I've got a temper, and I know a frame when I see one. That brown-eyed wench had sent me off on a date with murder; then had called the cops so they'd find me here, alone with the corpse. Maybe I get sore too easy. Up to now, I'd just been running an errand for Mike, but the brown-eyed wench had made it personal.

I asked Dunnegan, "When can I shove off from here?"

Dunnegan rose with the dead girl's blood-soaked handbag. He dumped its contents on the desk. A compact, bobby pins, some change, odds and ends—no direct identification.

He asked: "What was that again, Oster?" He was enjoying himself.

"You heard me."

He drawled, "Now, let's not be precipitate about things, Oster. Let's not leave all in a huff and a flurry. Captain McAdam would maybe like to see you."

I HAD an urge to mash that self-satisfied look on his face with my fist. But that wouldn't have helped. I just swore and waited. Presently, McAdam and a medical examiner arrived, followed by the fingerprint technician, the photographer and more cops.

The captain gave me a friendly nod, then listened to Dunnegan's story. The medico and fingerprint man went to work.

When Dunnegan had finished, McAdam asked: "What about it, Nat?"

"A girl calling herself Mrs. Mike Smith came to me at my rooming house this morning and said a man connected with this office had sold her a piece of a night club for two grand. The man—a Larry Deming—had started acting cagey, and this girl was getting worried about her investment. She asked me to see this guy and try to get her money back, if possible. Mike Smith was a buddy of mine overseas, and I told her I'd see what I could do. So I came here and found this."

The captain asked the medico: "Doc, how long would you say she'd been dead?"

The examiner, down on one knee, looked up and said: "No less than eighteen hours. Maybe a full day."

"Nat, where were you eighteen hours ago?"

"In Camp LeJeune, New River, North Carolina. I was discharged yesterday and hitched a ride up on a plane from Cherry Point."

Dunnegan nodded. "We'll check that."

"You were going to report back to this girl, weren't you?" McAdam asked.

"Yes. She gave me her address—2313 Warder Street."

Dunnegan's little eyes batted rapidly. He said, "That's a laugh. There's no such address."

McAdam nodded and I swore. It was as sweet a double-cross as I ever saw, but I played it dumb. I asked McAdam, "How's for me to shove off now?"

The captain played it dumb, too. Or maybe he didn't. He seemed preoccupied all of a sudden and said, "Yes. Yes. Give your address to Dunnegan and don't leave

the district until we check with you.”

Dunnegan wrote my address in a leather notebook and commented under his breath: “You always had a drag with the captain.”

I knew better. I knew McAdam was just giving me rope. Four minutes later I had proved it.

On the street outside, a crowd had collected. There was no sign of the two guys in the black car. I hailed a passing cab and got in. Through the rear window I saw a police sedan draw away from the curb and follow.

I gave the driver the address of a downtown department store in the middle of a G Street block. As I got out, I told the driver to go around the block and pick me up at the department store entrance on F street. I hurried through the store’s crowded main floor, figuring the police car would stop, the detective tailing me would follow me, but the police car wouldn’t follow the empty cab. I was waiting for my taxi when it came by.

The cabbie was no fool. He grinned, said, “Simple and neat.” There wasn’t another cab within hailing distance.

Six blocks away, I told him to pull to the curb and wait. The telephone directory in a corner drug store booth listed five Demings. The first line had been disconnected, the second was busy, the other three informed me, “There’s nobody by that name here,” when I said, “I’ve got an urgent message for Larry Deming.”

I wasn’t shooting in the dark. I was playing the odds. The brown-eyed wench had mentioned telephoning Deming, and it’s practically impossible to tell a factual story that’s a complete lie. And damn unsafe, too. I know because I’ve tried. You’ve got to make as much of it true as you can.

I re-dialed the second number and the answer, in an elderly woman’s nervous voice, was, “He’s not here now.”

I asked: “Is your address in the phone book right?” When she said it was, I hung up.

I gave the cabbie an address two blocks from where Deming lived and walked the rest of the way. Dunnegan would find that cab within half an hour.

THE house was a narrow duplex of ancient brownstone, set in a block that commerce was threatening to overrun. I

walked up a short flight of steps and punched a bell button.

She was a little old lady in faded dress and apron; her house slippers were worn through at heel and toe. She looked up at me with eyes that were brown and troubled and her voice, barely audible, held an anxious note. “Yes?” she said.

“Is Larry home?”

It was plainly a question she had been expecting and dreading.

Her wrinkled hands began to tremble and she hid them behind her.

“No, he’s out.”

There was something about her eyes—maybe I had more than a hunch.

“Mind if I come in?” She hesitated and I added, “It’s important—to him.” That did it. Or maybe she figured it would look better if she agreed.

“Yes. Yes, of course, come in.” I stepped into a hall and she closed the door. She asked: “Are you—are you from the police?”

I turned quickly and faced her. “Why? Expecting the police?”

Her lips quivered, but she said nothing.

“Are you Larry Deming’s mother?”

There was a tinge of defensive pride in her tone. “I am.”

“Well, Larry’s in trouble.” I saw the blue beret then. On a table placed flat against a side wall. Beyond it, thrown across the back of a straight chair, was the two-tone blue, not-quite-shabby, overcoat.

I turned into the living room. It was square, ill-lighted, furnished in 1919 Grand Rapids style. Closed portierres separated it from what should have been the dining room.

I said flatly: “Larry’s mixed up in a murder.”

“Murder!”

“Surprised?”

She swallowed. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Then she asked again: “Are you from the police?”

“No, I’m not from the police. But they’ll be here. They’ll get your son—wherever you’re hiding him!”

The old lady sat down and I bent over her but kept the portierres where I could see them. I made my voice harsh. “Have you ever seen them work on a murder suspect? They don’t handle him gently. A life

has been taken, a human life. It's their business to make the suspect tell what he knows.

"They may arrest you—they'll certainly arrest your son. They'll grill him for hours. Under a bright light, without a friend at his side, they'll pound their questions at him, attack his alibi, prove to him that he not only could commit murder but that he did. They'll throw him into solitary, then yank him out and put him under that merciless white light again—without a cigarette, without a drink of water—for hours and hours and hours—"

A sudden sob shook the old lady and the portierres parted.

"Mom! Oh, you poor darling!" It was the brown-eyed wench. She ran to Mrs. Deming, put an arm around her stooped shoulders.

The old lady was sobbing. "Oh, Julie, Julie!"

I said levelly: "I thought I could flush you without having to search the house."

"You beast! You filthy beast!"

I boiled over. "Look who's calling names! What do you think this is, a May-pole dance?"

"But I give you credit, Baby. That was a great act. And you were doing it all for poor old Mike, sweating it out on a hot Pacific island!" I leveled a finger at her. "You knew the real Mrs. Mike Smith lay shot to death in your brother's office. And you sent me up there, then called the cops to make sure they'd find me there, maybe pin it on me!"

"That's not true!"

"Why, I ought to punch you in the nose."

"Why don't you, you big bully!"

"I—think—I—will!"

I took a step forward. Mrs. Deming held up both her hands and said: "Please—please, Sir—"

I stopped. They were both crying now. Mrs. Deming sat crossways on the edge of an overstuffed chair and wiped her eyes with the wadded hem of her apron. The girl's cheeks were wet, her brown eyes pleading. The fight had gone out of her suddenly.

"I know now I made a mess of things, Sarge. And I'm sorry, truly. But we were desperate. I had to do something. We've never been in trouble before—and Larry isn't bad. Believe me, he's not!"

"Sure, sure. Just a poor misunderstood lad. So you framed me for murder—or tried to. But that's O. K. I entered this rat race with the idea of helping you and Mike Smith out of a spot. After the runaround you've given me, you don't deserve any help. But Mike does and he's going to get it." I moved toward the door.

Julie asked: "Where are you going?"

"To the police. With the whole story. About you and Larry and your mother."

"Sarge, if you'll just listen—I'm trying to tell you what happened."

"I don't care what happened! It's not important to me that I listen, or to Mike. It's just important to you."

She walked over, planted herself in front of me, caught my overcoat sleeves in her hands. She said: "You've got to listen!"

I guess I'm soft. Or maybe I wanted to listen.

CHAPTER THREE

A Stitch in Time

THE brown-eyed wench said: "The first Mom and I knew of anything being wrong was yesterday morning when Rachel—Mrs. Mike Smith—came here and told us that Larry had taken her savings in the night club deal."

"Why did she come here, of all places?"

"We were old friends, and she knew she could talk frankly with us. Besides, she was almost frantic. Mike had written her he'd leave for home in a week."

"Why didn't she go to the police?"

"First, she wasn't sure the deal with Larry was crooked—she'd just got cold feet and wanted her money back. Then, she knew if she went to the police, the whole thing would come out and Mike would know. She begged us to talk to Larry. But he's young and headstrong, and that would have been a waste of time, so I thought if someone could scare him—"

"Well, I asked if there wasn't somebody who was a friend of Mike's but who didn't know her, and she mentioned you. She had letters from Mike in her handbag and I read them. I told her I'd pose as Mrs. Mike Smith and see you—you'd never be able to identify her if you did tell Mike. She agreed but said she was going to make one last attempt to catch Larry at his office—Mom and I hadn't even known he had

an office—and that she'd let us know how she came out. That was yesterday morning.

"We waited all afternoon and last night. Then Larry didn't come home at all. Now I was the one who couldn't go to the police—it would have implicated my brother. I was very badly frightened when I went to you and so relieved when you said you'd help."

"Then you called out the cops!"

"I'm sorry about that, Sarge. But when I reached home after seeing you, Larry was here. He said he'd gone to his office this morning and found Rachel dead. So I called the police, believing they'd get there ahead of you and that when you saw them around, you wouldn't go in. But I was too late."

"You sure were. And even if I'd got the money, how'd you expect me to find you from the phony address?"

"I knew where to find you."

That made sense, or it didn't, depending on how you looked at it. And even if it made sense, there were still a lot of loose ends. Well, what I wanted was Mike Smith's two grand—and a little personal chit-chat with the guy who knew the answers.

I asked her: "Where's Larry?"

"I don't know. He came home and packed a bag and left."

"Just like that, huh?" Julie nodded. "Didn't say where he was going or do anything else?"

"No—oh, yes, he borrowed ten dollars from me. And he made a telephone call. I overheard it."

"Accidents will happen. What did he say?"

Mrs. Deming cut in. "Julie, if this man doesn't intend helping Larry, he doesn't deserve any information."

I assured her: "That's O.K. by me. But who *is* helping Larry? The police? If your son is guilty, nothing I know can hurt him or help him; if he's not guilty, if he was framed, what I know might help. But don't get me wrong. With me, helping Larry is incidental. I just want Mike Smith's dough back."

Julie said: "Mom, we don't know enough to hurt Larry if we do tell it." Mrs. Deming shrugged and looked away. Julie continued: "The telephone conversation was kind of one-sided. He said he had to 'lay

low.' And, 'You're damn right I've got cold feet!' and 'She was murdered, I tell you!'"

"He didn't mention any names?"

"Once he said, 'Okay, Frank,' and then, 'All right, all right!' as though the person on the other end had reprimanded him for using his name."

"Then what?"

"Then he kissed us both good-by and went down to the corner cab stand and got in a cab and left. Mom and I watched from the window."

"Was he followed?"

"You mean by those two men in the black car? No. No, they weren't anywhere around."

"Yesterday, after you'd read those letters Mrs. Mike Smith had, did she put them back in her purse?"

"Yes, she did."

There hadn't been any letters in the dead girl's purse when Dunnegan had emptied it. Obviously, the killer had tried to hide her identity.

"And you don't know where Larry went?" I asked Julie.

She shook her head. Mrs. Deming had been staring out the window. Without looking around, she said: "Julie, are those men out there the ones who followed you this morning?"

Julie looked. They were.

I watched both women as I said: "They seem to want Larry mighty bad." Their faces told me nothing. None of us knew then how desperately those guys did want Larry. I added: "I want him, too. But I know how to find him." They gave me startled looks and I had the feeling they'd have stopped me if they could. All they could do was watch me leave.

THE black car was still parked down the street, opposite the cab stand. What those guys need, I told myself, is a little imagination. I had visions of them tailing me all over town again. That was my mistake.

I saw the small, thin guy walking rapidly from the cab stand to his car across the street. He got in, slammed the door and the car whined into gear. I swore, broke into a run.

At the cab stand, I said: "I'm looking for the driver who picked up a young

fellow carrying a suitcase just before."

A short pink-faced man with thick-lensed glasses said: "For gosh sakes, what's he done—commit murder?" I grabbed his arm.

"There's ten bucks in it for you if you take me to where you took him—fast! Twenty if you beat that black car!"

He said: "That makes it worth a try. Let's go." He made a U-turn in the middle of the block and swung over to the avenue where he could do 35 without getting picked up.

The cabbie said: "That young fellow must be plenty hot."

"He'll be plenty cold," I told him, "if we don't get there in time."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean you just put the finger on him. You don't know who that little thin guy was, do you?"

"Why, sure, it was Spider Ferracci. He's been sitting in his car with that other guy when he happened to think that maybe we knew where he could locate this Deming lad, so he came over to ask. Said he owed Deming a hundred bucks and wanted to pay off."

I could picture Ferracci mentally kicking himself for having followed the girl to my rooming-house, then following me to the Oklow building while his quarry was home, packing, making his getaway.

The cabbie said: "It's on a one-way street. I'll have to go around."

"Take it the wrong way."

"There's a cop on the corner."

"Fine. Blow your horn so he can't miss us. We may need plenty of help."

"If I get in trouble over this—"

"I'll square it."

"I hope you know what you're talking about."

The cabbie did it big. He crashed a red light the wrong way into a one-way street, tires squealing at 25 miles an hour, and sat on his horn. The angry shrilling of a harness bull's whistle followed us down the block.

The cabbie swore. "They beat us. Them bums cost me twenty bucks!"

"You've earned that twenty, Joe. Wait for me. There's one guy still in the car. If he recognizes me and gives me trouble, ram his buggy."

"Say, I own this heap!"

"All I want's a little noise. O.K. Now."

The taxi slid to a stop, its front bumper about four feet from that of the black car. I got out and started toward a flight of steps. I heard the door of the black car open. A voice said, "Hold it."

I stopped at the doorway. The driver of the black car came up the steps behind me and I turned. His right hand was in his overcoat pocket. He was a sharp-faced guy of medium build. He had bushy eyebrows and a thin moustache that didn't go together.

He said: "You ain't goin' nowhere, Bud."

I heard my cabbie gun his motor. When the crash came, I was expecting it. My sharp-faced pal wasn't. His head jerked involuntarily toward the street. The heel of my left hand hit his arm, spun him off balance and I swung with my right. I nailed him flush on the button. He collapsed inside his overcoat.

I reached in his pocket and lifted his gun, a service automatic. It had a familiar feel. I checked the load in the chamber. The cabbie, monkey wrench in hand, was running up the steps, the cop a few feet behind him. I turned into the building.

It was one of those hole-in-the-wall hotels where you ring a bell for the manager. But I didn't have to ring any bells. The manager had heard the commotion and was coming out of his cubicle. He saw the gun in my hand and ducked back.

I said: "I'm looking for a young guy who checked in with a suitcase about noon today."

The manager's face was the color of chewing gum. He swallowed, jerked a thumb back, stammered: "T-t-two oh t-t-two."

I TOOK the steps three at a time, then eased down the long, carpeted, upper hallway, following the numbers under the glass transoms at the rear. It was the last door on the left.

There were two men inside talking. The transom was closed and just a mumble came through. I peeped, saw no key in the lock. But there might be a bolt. I couldn't risk turning the knob.

I took off a shoe, stepped back two paces, aimed carefully and heaved that shoe at the glass transom with all my might.

The glass splintered, the shoe sailed through. As it hit the farther wall, I rammed the door with two hundred and two pounds of beef behind my left shoulder. The door flew open with a crash and I swung to one knee, crouching, all in one motion.

Ferracci let me have it. But the succession of explosive sounds, the shoe sailing over his head, had momentarily scattered his attention. He was too fast and too high with his first one.

He never got off his second. I pumped two slugs into his right chest. Even as he was falling, he remembered Deming. He half turned, tried to raise his gun, level it at the boy who was crouching between an overturned chair and the iron bed. But Ferracci never made it.

I went over and got my shoe. The cop came pounding in, crying, "What's goin' on here, what's goin' on!"

Deming raised himself weakly to the edge of the bed and sat down. He said in a high, half-hysterical voice: "He was going to kill me—with my own gun—make it look like suicide—"

It was a good time to crowd him. I did. "Where'd you hide the letters you took from Rachel Smith's handbag?" I demanded.

"I didn't take any letters! So help me, I didn't!"

"What happened to the gun?"

"It was my gun. Somebody planted it. I went up there and found the body and recognized my gun laying there so—so I took it away!"

I pointed to the revolver Ferracci had dropped. "Is that it?"

Deming nodded. "He took it from me." There was a green, sick look on his face.

The cop said: "What's this all about? What's the story here?"

"I thought everything was on the level," Deming said and began to blubber.

"Where were you yesterday afternoon and last night?"

"I wasted the afternoon in the country, waiting to contact a guy who never showed up."

"Who sent you?"

"My boss, Mr. Morelli. And last night I was across the river on a party. I've got an alibi and I can prove it."

I had no more questions to ask Deming.

I suddenly saw the whole setup crystal clear and wondered why I hadn't tumbled sooner.

I told the cop: "My name's Nat Oster. Used to run a private agency here—"

The cop interrupted: "Yeah, I remember you."

"Well, look, this kid knows the whole story. Captain McAdam is expecting a call from me and I'll report this stiff. Be back."

The cop looked doubtful, but all of a sudden nervous reaction hit Deming and he began crying and babbling like a guy who's shell-shocked. While the cop was trying to straighten Deming out, I shoved off.

I made the call, all right, and reported the stiff. I also told Homicide to get McAdam out to the Club Morelli as fast as possible.

The cabbie, wrench in hand, was still standing over the guy I'd hit in the doorway. Thirty or forty people had collected by now, and the cabbie was taking it big.

He gestured to the sharp-faced guy and told me: "You ought to turn pro."

I gave him his twenty bucks. "Kinda hate to take this," he said. "I ain't had this much fun since Munda."

I climbed in the black car. It started O.K. I backed it up, moved into traffic and headed across town for Brandenburg Road.

CHAPTER FOUR

Leatherneck on the Lam

I KNEW the Club Morelli. It was one of these "intimate" night spots where, before the evening is out, everybody is calling everybody else by his first name. Brick, stucco and neon lights on the outside, satin drapery, redwood paneling and blue-tinted mirrors on the inside, it wasn't at all bad. Morelli had come up in the world.

I figured he'd be waiting. He was. He was standing at a window in his little office that opened out the side of the building when I skidded to a stop in the parking lot. I got out, walked over to a door, opened it and stepped into the low-ceilinged, paneled office.

Morelli hadn't changed much in four years. Maybe a little more paunch, a little

less oily hair. Still beady-eyed, swarthy, black-jowled.

"Nice car you got there, Oster," he said.

"Like it?"

Morelli began: "Somewhere I heard there's a law—"

I laughed out loud. Then Morelli laughed, too. But I don't think it was so funny to him.

"That was a great story about you in the papers today, Morelli."

His smile was a bit thin, his eyes a bit clouded. He was trying to add up the score. "Yeah," he agreed, "it's a dirty shame the way some guys scheme to rob the servicemen, after all they did for us."

"It sure is, Morelli."

"Working a racket on their wives is worse. Women have no business brains. They're too easy to fool."

"Are they?"

He saw he wasn't making a sale and got down to business. "What do you want, Oster? Where'd you get that car?"

"I want two grand, Morelli. In cash. Now."

He laughed shortly. "Same old Oster. Always kidding."

"I never kid."

"Why should I give you two grand?"

"You're not giving me two grand. You're returning two grand to a buddy of mine overseas. Mike Smith."

Morelli went through the routine of looking thoughtful, trying to place the name. Finally, he said: "Never heard of him."

The stall got me sore. I said: "Think hard, Morelli—while you've still got time."

"You can't scare me, Oster." He was already scared. He was playing a hand without knowing what cards he held. "Where'd you get the car?"

"From Ferracci."

"Where's Spider?"

"Dead."

Perspiration popped out on Morelli's forehead, his tongue seemed to get thick. He asked: "Who got him?"

"I did."

Morelli swallowed hard. "Where did—did you—?"

"In a room with Larry Deming."

"Did Spider—" He choked off. What he was going to ask was, "Did Spider get Deming before he died?" But he couldn't afford to show much interest in Deming.

I didn't offer any information; I let him sweat it out. He managed: "Deming was a part-time bookkeeper around here. I didn't know he and Spider were fighting."

He was scared, all right, scared enough to be dangerous. You could see all sorts of plans whipping through his mind. His eyes were a dead giveaway.

He said: "Maybe we got each other wrong, Oster. You and I always used to get along pretty well."

"That's a lie." I was trying to get him sore enough to start something.

But he wouldn't get sore. He said: "Let's talk this over, Oster. If I owe your friend two grand—"

"You took it from his wife. I want it back."

"His wife? Was she one of those women somebody was selling my club to? Why, Oster, you know I reported that to the cops as soon as I found out what was going on!"

"Yeah? How'd you find out?"

"A couple of women came in last night, got a little stewed; and when we tried to calm 'em down, they claimed they owned part of the club. Made a hell of a fuss. I brought 'em in here and got the whole story."

"Who'd they say made the sale to them?"

MORELLI recognized the question for what it was: a trap. Could he safely pin it on Deming or was Deming still alive? If he knew it was Deming, why hadn't he told the police? Why had his hoods followed Deming all day, finally tried to kill him? Was Deming dead or alive? If dead, had he talked before he died; if alive, maybe he hadn't spilled anything yet but would if he found Morelli tried to put the finger on him.

Morelli played it close to the belt. "They were pretty tight, Oster, but when they saw I meant business, they shut up. They said they were going to find the guy who made the sale and prove it. They left in a hurry."

"Why didn't you call the cops in to get their version?"

"The women were tight, Oster. Also, I thought at first it might be a rib. Then I saw I couldn't afford to take a chance, so I reported it."

"That's your story."

"Yeah, that's my story."

"Let's tell it another way, Morelli. A lot of servicemen and their wives managed to save a little money during the war. Many wanted small investments. You picked young wives working away from their homes, their husbands overseas.

"You got Deming to front for you, got him an office and set him up in business. He thought it was on the level, that you really wanted to help these girls out. But you never appeared. Deming posed as the owner and handled the whole thing. Except that you got the dough."

"You're crazy!"

I wasn't crazy. The killing of Mrs. Mike Smith when she began to crowd Deming, Ferracci tailing Deming—the only one who had evidence against Morelli—and trying to kill him, Morelli going to the police before they suspected anything made one pattern possible and only one.

So I said: "Crazy, am I, Morelli? Wait'll you hear the rest of it—before I take it to the D.A.! Everything went O.K. until Deming took Rachel Smith for two grand and then, because she was a friend of the family, tried to get it back. After you refused, you were afraid she'd attempt to place her share of the club on the open market or that she'd tell it to the D.A.

"So you killed her with Deming's gun and ordered Ferracci to get Deming, make it look like suicide. With them out of the way, you could claim complete ignorance of the whole scheme.

"There was just one slip-up, Morelli. I got asked to the party. And I tumbled to the whole thing. You killed Rachel Smith and Ferracci got to Deming—"

"He did?"

"Yeah, and I got Ferracci. And as soon as the D.A. hears—"

Morelli was no fool. I was leaving him an out. He saw it and took it. "Now, Oster, look. I don't admit there's a word of truth in anything you said, though I admit it would give a grand jury a chance to nose into my business. But I got a heart and hate to see a pal of yours suffer because of what a little rat like Deming did. If your only interest in the case is in that two grand—"

"It is."

"And if you could plan to take a little trip—"

I flashed the railroad tickets.

"It might be worth my while to give you the two grand until I can collect it from Deming's estate."

"Get it."

HE KNEW a bargain when he saw one. He went over to a picture on the wall, shoved it aside, revealing a safe. I got a solid grip on the automatic in my pocket. He worked the combination, started to open the door wide, then decided to open it just enough to reach in and get the money. I missed a bet then. I figured he was just trying to conceal the stack of dough he probably had stashed there. I was wrong. He had almost made a bad mistake.

He closed the safe. When he turned around and handed me two one thousand dollar bills his face was pale; there was also a faint, smug smile I didn't like. I took the bills, put them in my wallet.

I couldn't resist the temptation to say: "Maybe I should have told you first, Morelli. Ferracci got to Deming, all right, but didn't get him. Deming's alive and singing."

Morelli's face turned livid with sudden rage. He lost all sense of caution and charged me, hands clawing like a woman's. I stuck my left in his face, but his charge carried through, pinned me against the desk. His fingers fought for my throat. I sideslipped away, measured him with another left and smashed my right into his nose. He spun backward, hit the wall and slid down until he sat on the floor.

A familiar voice behind me said, "Hold it."

I kept my hand well away from my body and turned slowly. It was the sharp-faced guy I'd kayoed at Deming's hotel. His revolver was level with my chest.

Morelli leered: "Maybe I should have told you first, Oster. Whenever I open the safe, there's a bell that rings in the pantry if I don't throw a switch under the panel."

I asked: "How the hell did you get away?"

He laughed without humor. "Your hero pal, the cabbie, had to grandstand. I wasn't out cold when you came by that last time. And when Deming began to scream, the cop called for more help. The cabbie had to rush up there like a big shot. Nobody

downstairs wanted to stop me when I got up. I just walked out the back way."

Morelli was on his hands and knees, trying to rise.

Gus said: "Keep your seat, Morelli." Morelli couldn't believe his ears.

"Sit down, Morelli." Morelli sat.

"I'd been listening outside the door for ten minutes before the pantry bell rang," Gus told Morelli. "Oster has the whole story straight. Deming's going to talk and so will those dames you took. I'm pulling out. You're all washed up, Morelli, and when they come for you, I damn sure won't be here."

With the revolver he motioned me against the wall next to Morelli, made me raise my hands. "And I'm not leaving broke." He edged toward the safe, reached up with his free hand and opened it.

Keeping us covered, Gus began stuffing packets of bills into his pockets. In his haste, he knocked out a bunch of letters, fastened with a string. The rusty red stain of dried blood discolored the envelopes.

"If you'd burned them like I said instead of keeping them to hold over Deming's head, you wouldn't have to explain them to a jury," Gus sneered.

That packet of letters was what Morelli had almost let me see. From where I was standing, I could read the hand-printed address, *Mrs. Michael Smith*.

Morelli said: "You double-crossing rat!"

Gus said: "Looks who's talking." He backed toward the outside door. "I'm taking the black buggy for a while, Morelli." He opened the door, stepped out, turned and started to run for the car.

Morelli made a dive for his desk. I whipped out the .45. Morelli found a small automatic. Maybe he figured on catching me off-guard, maybe he was just desperate and realized getting me was more important to him than getting Gus. Anyhow, he lost his head completely. He swung the black muzzle at me, and I was waiting. I let him have it. He never got off a shot but just crumpled to the floor.

A siren sounded outside. I glanced out the window. It was McAdam and a bus full of cops. They'd driven in the parking lot just as Gus got to the black car. I was waiting for him when he slammed back inside.

He saw the gun in my hand and did not hesitate. Neither did I. My slug caught him in his right side and he dropped, clawing the air like a swimming dog. He lay there twisting and groaning. I picked my hat off the floor and was staring at the hole in it when McAdam and Dunnegan arrived.

McAdam glanced around, hands on hips.

He said: "Oster hasn't changed a bit. Wherever he goes, he leaves a trail of bodies."

It made me sore. One of those bodies might have been mine. I asked: "What delayed you? Didn't you get my message?"

"Yeah. Dunnegan relayed it."

"When?"

"Five minutes ago."

I looked at Dunnegan, who flushed.

I very carefully put the automatic on the desk. It's not safe to have a gun in your hand when you are thinking the thoughts I was.

At headquarters, I made a full statement and signed it. McAdam and the coroner said my statement would clear me for the inquests but to be back from Florida for the trials.

It was dark when I left. I bought a new hat and a box of candy. Then I flagged a cab and went to the Deming home.

Mrs. Fleming looked like a different person. She said: "Mr. Oster, we've seen Larry and he told us how you—what you did for us."

I gave her the candy, said: "He's not out of the woods yet." Then I pulled out the two bills and handed them to Julie. "Mike will be back before I am. When he turns up, give him these and tell him—" I looked her square in the eye—"semper fidelis."

She kissed me impulsively on the chin, which was the best she could do without help from me.

At my rooming house, I grabbed a quick shower, got my belongings and went downstairs. My eagle-eyed landlady was watching me with frozen dignity.

I leaned toward her and whispered, "Hist! Mum's the word! I'm taking it on the lam!" and pinched her on the cheek.

I found a cab and headed for the station. Two hours until train time and I was hungry.

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 ohstellers 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 int correspondence regarding same. Address all letters to The Rackets Editor—DINE DETECTIVE MAGAZINE, 206 E. 42nd St., N. Y. 17, N. Y.

Dream Cream

Dear Sir:

It happened when I was living in a mid-western state not long ago. I had been annoyed a number of times by a middle-aged woman canvasser coming to my house trying to sell me some "Magnolia Cream" she made herself. This cream was made from magnolia petals she got from Florida, and would make one's complexion lovely like the Florida girls have. Well, I have lived in Florida a few years myself, but strange to say I had never seen anyone's skin that in any way resembled magnolia petals. But, being a Georgian and polite, I did not dispute her word, but managed somehow to get rid of her each time without buying any of her creams.

One day, however, she happened to come around when I was ill, and to get rid of her without an argument, I purchased a jar of cream, which I knew of course she did not make. She sold this cream for \$2.50 a jar.

As soon as I got better I went to the dime store and for 25c purchased a jar of cream I thought was like the one I had gotten from her. When I reached home and compared them, I was sure they were the same cream, although she had pointed over the top of the jar she sold me.

Well, my southern temper was up, especially when I knew she would be coming back again. So I looked on the jar I had purchased from the dime store and got the name and address of the company and wrote them what I suspected. I told them she should either be prosecuted or enlisted as a saleslady.

In a few days I heard from the company, and they asked me to send the jar of cream I had gotten from the woman. I did so, and soon I had another letter from them, telling me they had had the cream analyzed and it was theirs. They asked for her name and address, which I gave them. For my part in all this they sent me an immense box containing some of every one of their products.

The woman begged so pitifully, they finally dropped their suit.

I had lots of fun out of it in the letters the company and I exchanged, and decided it was after all, worth more than what I paid for. But I do hate to be swindled.

I've often wondered if the lady ever sells any more of her "Magnolia Cream."

Mrs. C. Eppes
Athens, Ga.

Quick Change

Dear Sir:

I had clerked in a small-town drug store for several months before being taken in on this deal. It looks like I didn't have a lick of sense, but believe me, the trick was slick.

One Saturday night a nondescript stranger came in and bought a tube of toothpaste. He asked rather diffidently if I could change a \$20 bill.

"Sure," I told him, handed him a ten, a five, some ones and small change. He fingered the ten a moment and asked if he could have two fives instead.

The store was jammed with impatient customers, as was always the case on Saturday nights. The other two clerks and I had been working like madmen for fourteen hours.

I fumbled hastily for two fives and took back the ten. From where he stood, the man could look down into the drawer of the cash register. He rustled the two bills hesitantly, and finally asked if he could have five more one-dollar bills in place of one of the fives.

I glanced hastily in the drawer. There wasn't enough of the small bills.

"I'll have to get them out of the safe," I said. "Wait a minute."

The customers began to grumble and shuffle. Some of them edged impatiently back toward the door. I ran to the back room, snatched five bills out of the safe, hurried back to the wrapping-counter and shoved them at the man. He, apparently realizing my haste, was politely edging out of the way of the next buyer. He took up the bills and disappeared.

That night, when we totaled up the day's receipts, we found ourselves five dollars short. The man had kept both fives, as well as the ones. I burned clear down into the ground with humiliation until the following Monday, when we found that he had taken practically every store in town the same way.

Gladys Moore
Tekamah, Nebr.

Heavy Reading

Dear Sir:

During the hot summer, a magazine salesman called at my house one afternoon when I was taking a nap. His loud knock awakened me, and I was still half asleep when I greeted him. He told me all about the magazine he represented and asked if I would appreciate his sending me

the magazine every month just for the postage.

I was still yawning and thought he was trying to send me something free, so I said, "Yes."

He politely asked my name and address and made out a receipt. When he handed me the paper, he said: "That will be three dollars, please."

When I asked what for, he replied: "The postage, Lady."

Johnnie Lee Collier
Kaufman, Texas

Phony Piety

Dear Sir:

Several weeks ago a man came to the social service agency of our church with extreme enthusiasm for our faith. Heretofore, he said, he had been employed by the railroad of our city, and that he would be one of our parishioners beginning the following Sunday.

He had been employed in one of our large eastern cities through the war, he said, during which time he attended one of our biggest churches there, whose minister is one of our most prominent clergymen. He impressed me with his seemingly sincere appreciation for this minister, and also knew that the minister had received a call to another church and was leaving that particular city.

The man was waiting for a check from sick benefits due him which would arrive in a day or two. He was hard pressed for cash and needed just enough for his meals until the check came. He had his room and it was paid for. There was no money left.

It was the best phony story I had ever heard. I bit on it and gave the fellow five dollars.

Some days later when talking with a friend in a similar position in a town not many miles away, I found that he had been honored by this same visitor.

It might be well to keep a watchful eye for such racketeers. A crook such as this can work any territory with slightly different tale and reap a very lucrative harvest.

Leslie Meakin
West Lafayette, Ind.

Backfire

Dear Sir:

Here is a fast deal you may run into when trying to get a new car.

A Rochester man went to one of our dealers and said he would like to purchase a new car.

"Have you got a car for a trade-in?" asked the salesman. When the customer said he hadn't, the salesman said: "Well, you have to have a trade-in, so I would advise you to step over to our used-car department and pick out a car and buy it. Then you can turn around and trade it in on a new car."

The man went to the used-car department and bought a car for \$600, wrote out a check for it and returned to the salesman. He was told that he would be allowed \$250 trade-in value on the used car.

"Only two hundred and fifty dollars!" screamed the man. "Why, I just paid you people six hundred for it!"

"Can't help it. That's the trade-in value on that particular car. Take it or leave it"

The customer thought awhile and finally said he'd write a check for \$1500 to cover the cash on the new car and would drive the car out. The salesman produced the necessary papers, which were duly signed. The customer made out a check for \$1500 and drove out with his new car. He was still fuming over the \$250 trade-in on the \$600 used car he had never even sat in.

Now, this particular customer is a very smart fellow and knows a lot of angles. What he did was to drive straight to his bank and stop payment on the \$600 check for the used car. And as far as we know, there isn't a thing that the auto dealer can do about it except get mad or send him a bill which he probably won't pay. However, the dealer has probably gypped a lot of other customers who were not smart enough for him.

Mrs. August W. Beikirch
Rochester, N. Y.

Mystery Book

Dear Sir:

A few years ago a man came to my door selling books. I bought one, and for some time after I received it, the company sent me circulars advertising various books. If I wanted any, I was to check the name, sign the card and send it in.

I did this once, expecting a book in a few days for a free trial of about ten days. Time passed, the book didn't show up, and I forgot it completely.

A few months later I received a stinging letter, upbraiding me for trying to beat a bill on such a small item as "the book they had sent some time before," etc.

Deciding that a mistake in names or initials had been made, I wrote them a nice letter suggesting that they investigate further, as I had no book; in fact, I didn't even know what book, as they had not named any title. I also told them about the one I had ordered but which I hadn't received.

Back came another letter, more deadly than the first, with such sentences as: "We can use a lawyer in your town; we sent you this book in good faith," and I don't know what all. The name of this book was still shrouded in mystery.

It frightened me at first; then I made myself sit down and think calmly.

As a result, I wrote them a tart letter, suggesting that they furnish the title of the mythical book, the date and my signature on the postman's delivery receipt, and added a few heated phrases about extortion through the mail. I haven't heard from them since.

I can't help wondering how many timid, absent-minded and just plain unlettered folks have been scared into paying for "this book we sent you."

Mrs. W. Dudley
Illmo, Mo.

Step Into My Parlor

Dear Sir:

Being an avid reader of your magazine (especially the racket-letter department), I believe I was more or less responsible for a friend of mine saving himself considerable embarrassment,

as well as his hard-earned cash, by advising him to call the Better Business Bureau before signing a lease for a home. He took my advice and was surprised to learn that what looked like a good proposition was in reality a racket that was swindling thousands of people in almost every locality. Here is the way the racket operates:

The crook will locate a home for rent and sign a one-year lease, paying the owner two months' rent in advance.

The swindler will now advertise in the local papers that he has a fine home for rent. He usually specifies that veterans will be given preference, as this adds to the authenticity of the ad, and lists his phone number. When the calls start coming in, he poses as the advertiser's secretary and informs each applicant that Mr. Blank is out but will call back just as soon as he comes in.

Within a few hours the swindler has a list of forty or fifty phone numbers. He then calls the first one on the list and asks the usual questions a careful landlord will ask. Apparently satisfied, he explains that the house will not be ready for occupancy until the first of the month. He then arranges a certain time for the would-be lessee to inspect the dwelling.

The sharpie then calls the next victim and goes through the same procedure, being careful that none of the applicants will arrive at the same time.

Naturally, the terms are satisfactory and the victims sign the lease, paying anywhere from two to six months' rent in advance. Out of the fifty it's not unusual to secure twenty-five lessees. Considering a down payment averaging \$250, the crook makes over \$6000 for a few days work.

The first of the month finds twenty-five families trying to move into the same home. However, it is only a short while before they discover they have not only been swindled but are actually homeless, as most of them have given up their former quarters.

The crook, meanwhile, has pocketed their money and has left for new pastures.

Yours truly,
William Copeland
Columbus, Ohio

Selected for Suckers

Dear Sir:

In these days of easy money and high-powered betting, people should be warned of a race track racket that is going the rounds. It works like this:

The victim receives, by mail, a list of eight horses, the predicted winners for the eight-race card at X track the following day. "We are scientific handicappers," says the accompanying letter. "Our selections are guaranteed and cost you nothing. Place two dollars on any or all of the enclosed choices. If your horse wins, send ten per cent of the mutual price for a further list of selections. If not, there is no charge for this service."

It is obvious that widely different lists are mailed to hundreds of people throughout the country. Some sucker is sure to win, and winning, will desire another set of these sure-fire selections. The person mailing out the lists bears no financial risk whatever, other than the

comparatively small outlay for postage stamps.

You might think that no one would fall for so transparent a scheme, but I argued with a friend for hours and could not convince him. He had been fortunate, or unfortunate, enough to win on the first selection, and was sinking his entire pay envelope into rainbow dreams.

Sincerely,
E. S.
Philadelphia, Pa.

Limousine to Nowhere

Dear Sir:

I was pretty close to my bottom century-note when I heard of a factory opening up in another state, offering jobs that I could qualify for. Thinking to save a worthwhile share of what otherwise would have gone for train fare, I dropped in at a little share-the-expense, hole-in-the-wall "travel agency."

The agent warmly commended me on my wisdom and took a five-dollar deposit on a place in an impressively expensive make of car in which I was to make the trip. He freely gave me a receipt for my deposit, and I thought that I had indeed found a delightful way to travel and save money.

But when the time of departure came, I was required to surrender my deposit receipt to the driver and to pay my share of the expected expense in advance. This time I was given no receipt.

Furthermore, I was cautioned by the driver to be sure to tell any inquiring officials that I was a personal friend of his, planning on sharing the expense—not a passenger paying a fare.

By the time the battered old limousine drew up and packed in five other passengers besides the driver and myself, I knew I was in for a disappointment. What I did not anticipate was that, after getting us about fifty miles down the road, the driver persuaded the ancient, wheezing auto to "play dead."

He was so slow about getting the repairs completed that the rest of the passengers and I continued our journey by regular interstate bus. The driver with whom we started out naturally refused to refund any part of the fare, assuring us that if we just would wait long enough he would take us as promised. And since we had no receipt for our money, there did not seem to be much that we could do to get him to refund it.

I have learned since that some persons make a regular business of buying an old car of expensive make and filling it to over-flowing with suckers expecting a leisurely trip in an expensive car. Instead, they are bounced over the road at headlong speed, the age of the car and the long hours of driving making the risk of accident great—with no responsibility or insurance on the part of the person in charge of the trip in the event that something does go wrong.

To be safe, go by regular train or bus, or at least do a little investigating of the character and reputation of the share-the-expense travel bureau that offers you cheap (?) transportation.

Carl Hudson
Berkeley, Calif.

CRIME DOESN'T PLAY



Ed kicked the playboy's gun-hand. . . .

By **ROBERT TURNER**

Ed's green-eyed gal was playing secretary to the lady-luring nightclub rajah . . . earning herself a pearl noose.

THAT night Ed Fiore sat at a corner table at the Clover Club with Terry, trying not to look at her, trying instead just to listen to the music from outside in the main dining room.

Across the table, Terry eyed him wistfully. She said: "Why don't you break down, Eddie?" Her green eyes were big and pleading. Soft lights caught in her hair, made it gleam like shiny new copper. "You know we can use the money if we're

going to be married next month. And Gerhart pays a good salary—twice as much as I'd get doing secretarial work in some ordinary office."

He turned to her. His dark lean face set. Ed Fiore was a nice-looking sort of guy, but you knew he could be bad medicine just to look at him. His eyes, under shaggy brows, were brown and sleepy, but they could get bright and hard as agates, too, and then you saw that nobody would ever push Ed Fiore around, not anybody at all.

"Gerhart's bad medicine," Ed said. "He's got a bad rep with women."

She didn't answer that. She couldn't because it was true. It was strictly from madness.

Ed swiveled half around in his chair and let his gaze drift around the bar lounge. Paul Skidine, he saw, was still at the bar, still glaring at the street door, going right on pouring whiskey into himself as though he thought his legs were hollow.

Ed Fiore didn't particularly like that. Skidine was a third-rate playboy, a show crowd hanger-on who had gotten over-big for his britches, typical of the unpleasant punks who hung around this club which Gerhart owned and in which Terry had chosen to work. Paul Skidine had been going all over town these past few days on an all-out bender, telling everybody he was going to fix Max Gerhart's wagon for stealing his girl. It looked like something brewing here this night.

But Ed Fiore had his own troubles. He turned back to Terry. Her lips were moist and red, parted slightly, as though she was holding her breath.

"Look at her," Ed told himself. "She knows I'm right, but she's as stubborn as I am." He'd raised hell when she first told him she was going to work for Gerhart to fill in for his regular secretary, who was ill. But she insisted it was a darned nice, good-paying job, that Gerhart was always a gentleman around her, and that was that.

Well, the hell with it, Ed thought. Let her act that way if she wants. It was her privilege. This was a modern age, after all. He swore to himself; modern age my tonsils.

While he was thinking all that, Ed's gaze focused on Paul Skidine once more. Skidine was clinging to the bar with both hands, now, his skinny, overdressed figure

swaying, his head lowered, as he watched the door.

Suddenly, Ed saw Skidine stiffen. He came right up to his full height as though someone had suddenly poured him full of starch. Instantly, Ed's own gaze swiveled toward the door.

He saw Max Gerhart stop down by the cashier's desk, grinning and talking to her. Then Gerhart turned and came across the bar lounge, looking from right to left, taking in everybody there. He nodded and beamed at those he knew. He saw Skidine and turned his head quickly away again. Then he was wheeling toward their table, his eyes on Terry.

Max Gerhart was very tall, with lots of slim grace. He had lean, satanically handsome features and a smile full of glistening white teeth. He reached across the table and pumped Ed's hand. "So you're Terry's boy friend," he said. "Nice to meet you." He looked away and turned all his charm on Terry. "You look like you have a nice young fellow here, Honey."

"Gerhart!" Ed Fiore said, suddenly. He was watching Paul Skidine weave across the lounge toward them. The skinny little playboy's pinched face was white and twisted. He was fumbling in his right jacket pocket.

Ed got up onto his feet. "You've got trouble coming," he said.

Gerhart's back was turned. He didn't see Skidine. He said: "Eh? What are you talking about? What—"

He didn't finish. Ed Fiore spun him out of the way with a shoulder shove. He punted the gun out of Paul Skidine's fist just as it went off. The sound of the shot filled the room, and the band in the other room stopped playing on a crashing discord.

When Terry caught her breath, she smiled approvingly at Ed.

Paul Skidine stood there, trembling, crouched half over, holding his wrist. His face was blistered with sweat. His lips were moving, forming curses, but his voice wasn't there and you couldn't hear him.

Moving with the swiftness of a striking serpent, Max Gerhart came forward. He came in close to Skidine, then straightened him with a short left jab. He crowded the little killer back against the wall, and shielding the movements of his fists with his body, he went to work.

Ed couldn't see it, but he knew what was happening. He could hear the crunch and the smash of Gerhart's fists into Skidine's face. Ed pulled back his lips, but he didn't interfere. It was Gerhart's show, after all.

A few minutes later, Paul Skidine, limp as a deflated balloon, slid down the wall to the floor. Gerhart kicked him over onto his stomach so that nobody could see what was left of Skidine's face. Then he beckoned to a couple of waiters, walked out and faced the horrified, frightened crowd. He held out both arms.

"It's all over, Folks," he said. "A little trouble. Unfortunate. But it's all cleaned up, now. Back to your tables and have a little something on the house to settle your nerves."

When Max Gerhart turned back, sat down at the table with them, the ugliness and the pallor had gone from his face. He was again the suave man-about-town.

"A nasty little guy," he said, nursing his knuckles in a handkerchief. "A little mucker, that Skidine." He looked at Terry and his voice softened. "Don't let it spoil your party." To Ed he said: "Thanks for the fast footwork." He smiled, and walked away.

Ed was still standing. "I'll see you around, Terry," he said. "I'm not one of these hotshot night-club owners who can sleep all day. I've got to be at the garage at eight tomorrow."

HE DIDN'T see Terry for a week after that. And then he came home from dinner one night and she was in his apartment, waiting for him. She was sitting stiff and prim on the edge of the bed. Even though she was white as cotton and her eyes were glazed with fear and her delicate hands clenched tightly in her lap, Ed had never seen her looking so beautiful.

He shut the door and leaned against it, tossing the key up and down in his big hands. He pushed his hat back on his head.

"All right," he said. "What's the trouble?"

She got up, pushed one hand out toward him, tentatively, opened her mouth to spill out words. But they didn't come. Tears came instead. Her hands dropped back down to her sides. She sat back down on the bed and her head dropped forward. Her shoulders shook.

Ed watched her for a moment, sucking air in hard through his teeth. Then he walked over to a dresser, pulled out a handkerchief and tossed it on the bed next to her. In a moment she stopped the silent sobbing. She picked up the handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes. They were still red around the edges and glassy with tears when she looked up at him, but her chin was firm and her mouth taut, again. She had control, now.

"Ed, you've got to help me," she said. "I wouldn't have come, but I don't know what to do. I don't know who else to go to."

He picked up a package of cigarettes from the bureau, lit one. "What is it?" he prompted.

"I don't know where to start," she said. Her chin began to pucker, but she fought and held on and was able to continue talking. "Mr. Gerhart—Max—he sent me up to Vivian Lee's apartment, and when I got there—when I got there—"

She had to stop. Ed Fiore dragged hard on his cigarette. "Vivian Lee," he said, "is the dame Max Gerhart took away from Paul Skidine, ain't she? The one Skidine tried to kill Max over, the night—well, that night at the Clover Club?"

Terry nodded, blew her nose. "Ed," she managed, finally. "Ed, maybe you won't believe it was this way, but I've got to tell you. When I—well, I got up to Vivian's apartment and I rang and rang the bell and when nobody answered, I tried the door. It—it was open, Ed. I walked in."

She paused, put her hands up over her eyes for a moment, then continued: "Somebody was hiding in there and when I entered I was hit over the head from behind. I don't know how long I was out. When I came to, a gun was in my hand, and—and Vivian was—was—" She couldn't seem to finish.

Ed Fiore took a last drag on his cigarette, mashed the butt into a tray. He still didn't look at Terry. He studied his fine, manicured nails. "Dead?" he said, softly.

"Well—I—I didn't stop to examine her, but there was a hole in the front of her dress, right over the stomach. There was—blood—so much blood, Ed!"

"And the gun was in your hand?"

Terry nodded. She got up, walked over to Ed, stood so close to him that he got the faint, clean scent of her perfume, could see

the smudged tear-streaks in her makeup.

"Ed," she whispered, "I didn't do it. I swear, Eddie. I hardly knew Vivian. I had no reason." Then, swiftly, simply, she told him all she knew.

Max Gerhart had bought a present for Vivian from a jeweler. It had been delivered to him, instead of her, by mistake, so he sent Terry over to Vivian's house with it. He had called Vivian, first, but she wasn't home—at least she hadn't answered.

Terry was supposed to leave the package with the super, but when she got there, she thought that since it contained jewelry, it would be better to make a last try to get it to Vivian, personally. She thought Vivian might just possibly have come home in the meantime.

"So I went up to her apartment," Terry finished, "and—and the rest was like I told you before, Ed. That's all there was to it."

"What did you do when you came to?" he said.

She passed her hand over her eyes. "I—let's see—I got up and saw the gun in my hand. I dropped it right away. It scared me, Ed, just to look at the thing. Then I walked through the rest of the flat and I saw Vivian sprawled out on the floor in the bedroom—dead. I turned and I ran out of there, fast. I—I came right up here, then, Ed."

She turned and gripped his arm tightly with both hands. "But, Ed, that gun is up there, with my fingerprints on it. And I must have dropped my purse when I fell. I came away without it. I mean, I don't have it, now, so it must be still up there, Ed."

Ed didn't say anything. He started to pace the room. He didn't know quite what to do about this. Temper flooded into him for a moment. He started to wheel on Terry and tell her that he had warned her not to get mixed up with Gerhart. He started to remind her of how he'd pleaded with her, and how she refused. He had a mind to tell her to go to hell and take her troubles with her.

And then he looked at her and realized that he couldn't. He kissed her instead and told her not to worry.

"Come on," he said. "I'll hide you out someplace while I try to work something out. Wife of a fellow I know."

As they were going downstairs, Terry said, "Do I have to hide, Ed?"

"Yeah. You see, the cops will probably figure from all the evidence that you pulled the kill, that maybe you were in love with your boss, got jealous of Vivian, had a fight with her and killed her."

"Can't we—could we go back up there and get the purse, Ed, and wipe the prints off the gun?" she said suddenly. "We—I've got to do something." There was a taut, frightened look on her tired little face.

He shook his head. "The chances are, Kid, that the police are already there."

Terry shuddered but didn't say any more as they left Ed's hotel and tumbled into a cab. Ed gave the cabbie an address in the Bronx, and then took out an old envelope and scribbled something rapidly on the back of it.

He gave the envelope to Terry, said: "Go to that address. They're swell eggs and they'll take care of you. You'll be safe, there—for awhile, anyhow. Don't leave until you hear from me."

THE NEXT time the cab stopped for a red light, Ed flung a bill to the driver, got out. He went into a drug store, looked up an address in the telephone directory and then hiked across town to a small apartment house in the East Sixties. He rang Paul Skidine's bell. There was no clicking from the door latch, so he rang again, and this time when there was no answer, he pressed another button, to get in the downstairs door. He climbed up to Skidine's apartment on the third floor, and rapped on the door.

The answer came from the next apartment. A dumpy-looking middle-aged woman in an apron poked her head out. She looked surprised at seeing Ed. She pushed stringy strands of gray hair from her forehead.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said. "I thought maybe it was Mr. Skidine, come back. He ain't home. Been away about a week, now."

"Thanks," Ed said. "You have any idea where I could get in touch with him? It's rather important."

The woman rolled her eyes in thought. "No," she said. "I don't. He must be out of town or something. I've been taking his newspapers in for him. The boy has been leaving them every night. That's why, now

when I thought you was Mr. Skidine, I wanted to catch him, in case he was planning to go right out again."

"How many papers?" Ed asked. His eyes narrowed a little.

"Let me see," the woman said. "There must be six—no—seven. Why?"

"Thank you," Ed said. He tipped his hat, went back down the stairs.

Around at a side alley, he climbed up the fire escape to Paul Skidine's flat. He jimmed open the window as silently as possible with a pocket knife, and went inside. Cupping a lighted match in his palm, Ed looked around.

In the bedroom, Ed saw that the bed was still unmade, just the way it had been when Skidine last climbed out. He looked in the closets. All of Skidine's clothes were still there, and the dresser drawers hadn't been emptied. There was no evidence that Skidine had left for good.

That wasn't so good. At first Ed had figured that Skidine had framed Terry for the murder of Vivian Lee, and vamoosed.

Skidine had made an attempt on Max Gerhart's life, crazed with jealousy. But he probably would not try again, after the shellacking he had taken. The next best way to satisfy his urge for revenge, Ed figured, would be for Skidine to kill the girl who had thrown him over for Max.

But that looked wrong, now. According to Skidine's neighbor, the playboy had been away seven days, since that night he had attempted to kill Gerhart. So it looked as though Skidine was out as a suspect for the murder of Vivian Lee. Just to make certain, though, Ed went around to all of Skidine's habitual haunts, inquiring about him. But Skidine had not been seen during the past week.

When he entered his hotel room, several hours later, Ed found company waiting for him again. "Lieutenant Dickson, police," the man said, introducing himself. Dickson was sprawled on the bed, a bottle of Ed Fiore's guest Scotch on the bedside table and a half-filled glass beside it. He had also found Ed's special-occasion cigars, was filling the room with smoke from one of them. His dead-pan face was scowling.

"I hope I'm not intruding," Ed said. He walked over to a closet and brought out a glass, poured himself a hooker of Scotch. "I hate to bust in on you like this, but I've

got to change my shirt. Do you mind?"

"Where's Terry Lawrence?" Dickson asked, amiably. He took a sip from his glass, smacked his lips appreciatively.

"Why?" Ed asked. "She pass a red light?"

Dickson didn't laugh. Ed Fiore went ahead and changed his shirt.

"Not a red light, Fiore," Dickson said slowly, unsmilingly. "Something a little worse. Seems she blasted another gal—killed her nice and neat."

"You're crazy," Ed said.

"Easy, Fiore. The gal who got it was named Vivian Lee—girl friend of Max Gerhart, the night club owner. Your gal had a yen for Gerhart, too. We found her prints all over the damn place."

"I haven't seen Terry in a week," Fiore said. He paused. "Maybe she had a legitimate reason for being up in Lee's apartment—maybe doing something for her boss, like delivering a package."

"Gerhart says no," the detective said. "And there wasn't any package or anything like that when we got there."

Fiore's eyes narrowed, but he adjusted his tie. "All right, Copper," he said suddenly. "I've told you I don't know where Terry is. Supposing you go back to Headquarters and think that over."

The detective got to his feet and lumbered toward the door. Just before he reached it, Fiore said: "And the next time you bust into my place without a search warrant, I'll bend that Scotch bottle around your ears."

ED Poured himself another drink. He listened to the door shut. His mind flicked back over the conversation. The fact that the package of jewelry Terry said she had brought to Vivian's was not there when the police arrived, gave him something else to work on. That meant the killer had taken it.

He began to wonder about Gerhart's statement to the police that he had not sent Terry over to Vivian's. Possibly, Terry had lied. She might really be guilty. His face clouded and his eyes grew bleak.

Ed was saved the pain of dwelling on the thought by the ringing of the telephone. He went over and picked it up.

A man's voice said: "Ed, listen. This is Max Gerhart." He sounded plenty excited. "I've got something hot on the murder of

Vivian Lee. I'd like to talk to you about it. Can you come right over here—alone?"

"Why me?" Ed said, softly. "What have I got to do with it?"

"Oh!" Gerhart paused. "Well, the cops came to see me and told me about Terry's fingerprints on the gun—and I thought you'd be interested in clearing her—"

"That's right," Ed cut in. "What is it?"

"I think I know the real killer. It isn't Terry, like the police think. But I can't talk over the phone about it. And there isn't much time to work, Ed."

"All right, Max," Ed said. "I want to see you, anyway."

But Ed Fiore didn't go straight to Gerhart's place. He stopped off first at the garage where he worked. The boss kidded him some about showing up on his day off, but Ed only grinned and explained that he had a special, personal job to do.

He went straight to the back of the garage and picked up a thin piece of sheet metal from a scrap pile of broken fenders and bumpers and auto parts. He squinted at it speculatively for a moment, then nodded, grimly. "A little straightening out with the sledge hammer and this ought to do the trick," he told himself.

A half hour later Ed entered the old but conservatively expensive-looking apartment house where Max Gerhart lived. Max was pale and sweating a little when he let Ed in. But there was plenty of his white teeth showing in a grin. He pushed Ed ahead of him into a huge, richly furnished living room.

Ed stopped just inside. He looked at the girl sitting in a big, barrel-backed chair, leaning forward from the waist, her eyes big and green as go-lights. Her fingers looked as though they were going to tear off the chair arms.

"What are you doing here, Terry?" Ed said, through his teeth.

"I—I pulled a foolish trick, Ed," she half sobbed. "It suddenly occurred to me that Max Gerhart always used the Rialto Messenger Service for deliveries of that kind—and I began to wonder why he sent me that time. The more I thought about it—"

From behind Ed, Max Gerhart interrupted her. "That's right, Honey, tell Ed all about it." Something hard rammed against Ed's spine. Gerhart lifted a revolver from Ed's pocket. Then Gerhart

said: "We don't like to keep any secrets from Ed, here. Ed's a right guy. A dead guy is always a right guy. And Ed's going to be dead."

"What Terry was trying to say, is that she became suspicious of me, came here, found that I was out, got in easily enough—every one of the building employees knows she's my secretary—and started going through my things. Unfortunately, though—for her—I came back and caught her."

"I was looking for evidence that Max and Vivian had a fight or something and were through," Terry put in. "Ed, I—I'm sorry I got you into this. In desperation, I told Max that you were suspicious of him, too, so that he'd get you to come here. I figured that while he was on the phone I could make a break and yell, or do something to tip you off that I was here. But I didn't get a chance."

With the barrel of his gun, Gerhart shoved Ed roughly toward a chair. "Sit down," he said. "Make yourself comfortable."

Ed perched on the arm of the chair. His lids were far down over his eyes and the only part of them that showed was like frosted brown glass. His lips were so flat against his teeth, little muscles jumping at the corners were visible.

"Paul Skidine hasn't been around anywhere, Gerhart, since that night at the Clover Club," Ed said, suddenly. "I've got a hunch he's dead. Maybe Vivian knew what happened to him, Gerhart, and was blackmailing you? How about that?"

Max Gerhart winced a little and a blue vein stood out against the pale shiny skin of his forehead. "Go on," he said, tightly. "Get it off your chest, Ed."

"That must have been a pretty rough job you did on Skidine, Max. Maybe you were a little *too* rough. Paul Skidine never recovered from that beat-up job you did on him, did he, Max?"

GERHART tried to grin but it didn't quite come off. It was just a nervous grimace. Ed's eyes watched the heavy automatic as Gerhart tightened his grip, brought it slowly to a level with Ed's stomach.

"Please!" Terry suddenly screamed. "Please don't kill him. You'll never get away with this, Max. Don't be crazy!"

"It's all right, Honey," Max said, lazily.

Sweat was running down his barbered neck, sogging up his immaculate collar. "I'll just tell the cops that Ed heard that you were two-timing him with me—your boss—and that he followed you up here to kill us both. It will seem that he got you but then I got him before he could finish."

"Pretty," Ed said. He didn't move a muscle. He could feel his nerves tightening, waiting for Gerhart's finger to squeeze the trigger. "It's almost as pretty as the way you framed Terry in the first place. You do everything so nice and simple, Max. I tip my hat. You give Terry a phoney package to deliver, drive over there yourself and beat her arrival."

"You do your job on Vivian and then wait for Terry to get there. You take the package back out with you after sticking the gun in Terry's hand and it looks very bad for her. Especially when you deny ever having sent her on the errand."

"You've tagged it," Gerhart admitted. "But so what, Ed? What good did it do you to figure that all out?"

It came then. Watching the gun, Ed Fiore saw the spit of flame and smoke from the muzzle. The thunderclap sound of the shot was deafening within the confines of the room. Ed suddenly felt as though a mule had kicked him in the gut. He grabbed at his middle and folded slowly at the waist.

Through the roaring in his ears, he heard Gerhart say: "All right, Terry. It's your turn, now." He looked up and saw that Gerhart had swung around toward Terry on the other side of the room.

In desperation, Ed fought against the surging pain at his middle and lurched toward Gerhart. Just before he reached him, the night-club owner pivoted, swung the gun back toward Ed. But he was a second too late. Ed chopped down with all his strength against Gerhart's gun wrist. The automatic fell to the floor and Ed kicked it skittering across the room.

Gerhart fell back away from him, his face working in surprise and terror. "You—I didn't miss! I know I didn't miss!"

Ed Fiore didn't answer him. He bored in and brought his right up from his knees. It caught Gerhart flush along the jaw. Gerhart rocked on his heels, made a feeble effort to get up his hands. He didn't make it. Ed clipped him with a short, chopping

left this time, and Gerhart went down. Ed stood there for a moment, sucking in great breaths of air. He turned slowly, then, toward Terry. Her mouth was open and her eyes were very wide.

"Take it easy, Baby," he said. He unbuttoned the front of his shirt and pulled a long, body-wide hunk of sheet metal, hammered to shape against his stomach and chest, from under his belt. "A little something I picked up at the garage on the way up here—an ace-in-the-hole, sorta. Guns are not my racket."

He held the piece of sheet metal in his hands, staring down at the dent where the bullet had been deflected. He walked over to the phone, then and called the police. When he hung up, he went over to Terry and took her by the hand. "Come here, Honey," he said, softly. "While we're waiting for the cops, there's a little chore I have to do."

"Gee, Ed," she said, "I—I don't know what to say. If I—if I'd listened to you in the beginning, none of this would have happened. You—you were right about that night club job, Ed. I—I'll listen to everything you tell me, after this. I guess I've been just a stupid, stubborn little brat."

"I'm glad you realize that, Terry," Ed said, calmly. Before she could stop him, he sat down on a chair, pulled her face-forward across his lap. "Speaking of listening to something," he said. "Now you're going to listen to the sound of hand meeting hide. You'll remember this night every time you sit down for a long, long time."

His hand rose and fell rhythmically. Terry squealed and squirmed, but Ed held her kicking legs with his free hand. He didn't let up until his palm stung from the steady rain of blows.

When he let Terry up finally, tears were streaking down her face and she rubbed tenderly at the injured parts. For a moment Ed felt a little ashamed of himself.

But then Terry flung herself into his arms, and he knew he'd done the right thing when she hugged him and got tears all over his neck, saying: "I—I deserved that, Eddie. You—you're a brute, but I love you just the same."

He rocked her back and forth on his lap, then, grinning a little and thinking that it certainly paid to rule with a firm hand.

● ● KILLER

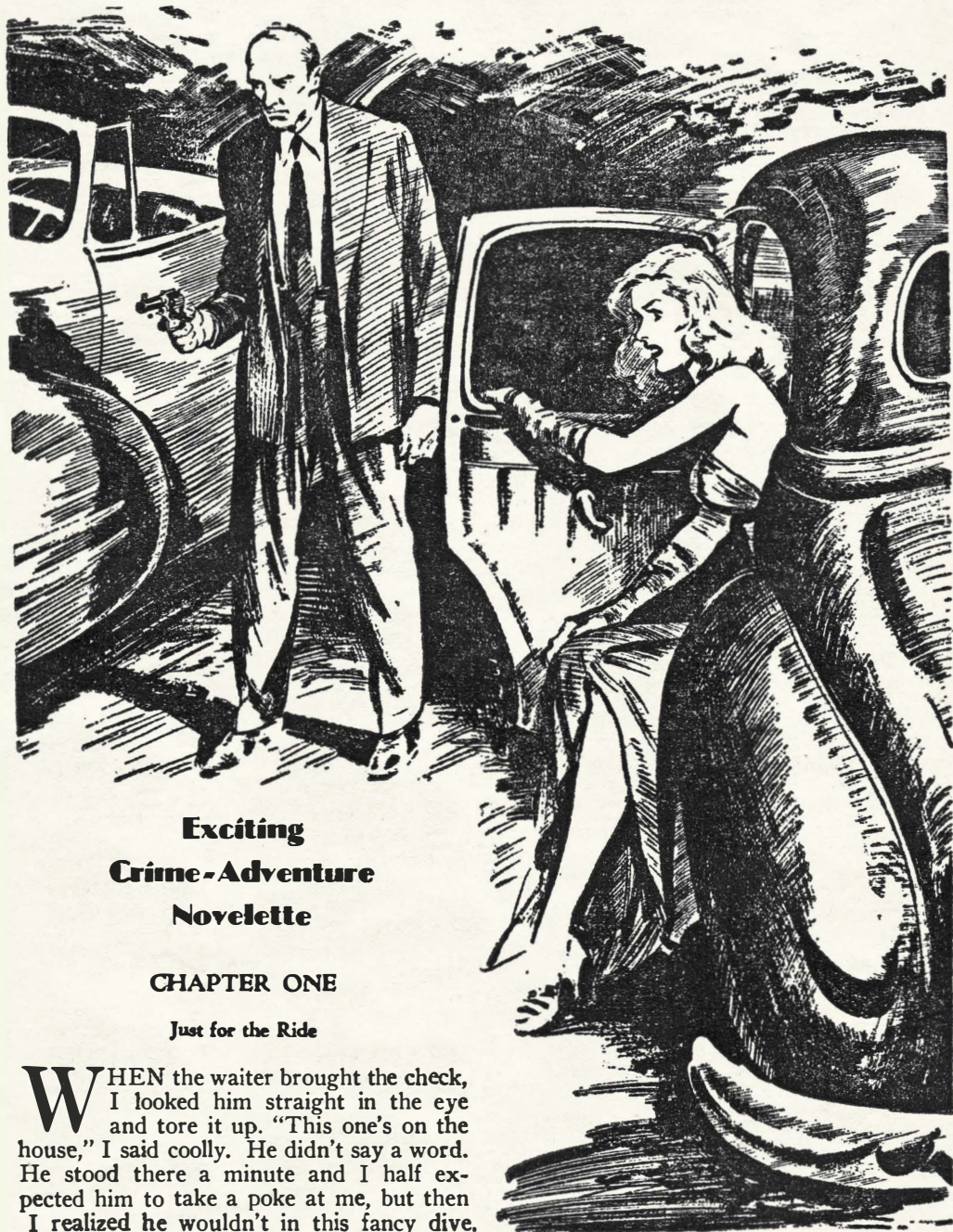
Chauffeur-ing a gorgeous, dice-happy dame seemed like a nifty way to settle a tab—until Marc Bond's goons tried to take the interest out of my hide.



When he hit me, I didn't feel like any damn hero. . . .

By **MARK MALLORY**

TAKE ALL •



**Exciting
Crime-Adventure
Novelette**

CHAPTER ONE

Just for the Ride

WHEN the waiter brought the check, I looked him straight in the eye and tore it up. "This one's on the house," I said coolly. He didn't say a word. He stood there a minute and I half expected him to take a poke at me, but then I realized he wouldn't in this fancy dive.

He looked me over and then walked away. In a minute, he turned with a guy who looked like a well dressed prize fighter. He was one of the biggest men I ever saw in my life.

"What's the trouble here?" he asked. The joint might be high class, but this ape was strictly from the lower East Side. He looked as tough as they come.

"There's no trouble," I said. "I just don't happen to have the money to pay the check."

"So what do you expect us to do?"

"That's your problem."

The waiter signalled him that other people were beginning to take notice.

"Would you be so kind as to follow me so we can talk this over?" he said sarcastically.

I was willing. I had nothing to lose. I was busted flat. They wouldn't find more than three cents in my pockets. The worst they could do would be to send me to the cooler for the night. Then I'd be free to try the same stunt the next morning.

I followed him out through one of the exits. "This way, Brother," he said, not too loudly. We started up a flight of stairs, me still following him. He was just a couple of steps ahead of me. When he reached the top of the stairs he turned suddenly and hit me with one of his massive fists. It came at me so quickly, I didn't even see it coming. But I felt it. And I felt each step going down.

When I finally stopped rolling, I was still conscious, but I didn't even try to get up. I would have been happier if I could have just died there, because I had a feeling that this guy had intentions of repeating the performance at least once or twice again.

"How do you feel now, Wise Guy?" he called from the top of the stairs. I didn't bother to answer. I thought I might get out of this with a few more unbroken bones if I played dead.

A door opened somewhere beyond the stairs, and another voice said: "What's going on here, Mike?"

"Some wise guy comes in and stacks up a nice bill, and then says he's broke."

The other figure joined Mike at the top of the stairs. I knew he was looking down at me.

"Violence, Mike?" the voice said. It was one of the smoothest and calmest voices I had ever heard.

"I'd like to break every bone in his body!"

"You've done well for a start," the voice said. I could hear him start down the stairs. I closed my eyes and pretended harder to be out.

He must have been standing directly above me by now.

"You can stop play-acting," he said to me. "I've called my blood hound off."

I opened my eyes and looked up. From my position on the floor he looked very tall. He was well built and dressed to perfection. If I had been feeling better I would have admired his appearance. He looked the way I would have liked to look.

I tried to get up, and finally managed to after an immense effort. By some miracle no bones were broken—at least I couldn't feel them yet.

"Can you make it upstairs?" he asked in that same even voice.

I was tough and I wanted him to know it. I would make it up those steps if it were the last thing I did. I did, too. I glared at Junior as we passed him, and he glared back. He looked as though he would like to get his paws on me again.

The office was a weird contrast to the back way we had come by. It was luxurious, pure and simple, if luxury is ever pure and simple. There was every convenience you could ask for, all there in one big room. Even in my condition, it would have been impossible not to be impressed.

"Sit down," my friend said, but it was more of a command than a request.

I sat down, grateful to get off my feet. My body ached and I was beginning to feel sick to my stomach.

"Would you like a drink?" he said.

"Yah, I could stand one." I was ready for anything now. This whole setup was so screwy, anything could happen. One minute, some thug is beating me up for not paying my check, and the next minute his boss is offering me a drink. Crazy world.

I WATCHED him carefully. He poured me a shot of something and brought it back to me. He kept his eyes on me all the time, and they were eyes that made you uncomfortable. I began to lose a little of the cockiness I had had earlier. Somewhere in the back of my mind, the idea was be-

ginning to form that this lad wasn't offering me a drink because he was concerned with my health.

"Well," he said when I finished the drink. His voice was beginning to get monotonous. Always it was the same even tone—no expression—no change at all.

"Well?" I answered.

"You're a pretty tough boy, aren't you?"

"I like to think so."

"Pretty bitter, too."

I just looked at him.

"Do you make a habit of going into clubs and refusing to pay your check?"

"Could be."

I had half a hunch that he had known about me all the time, and that he had sent that big bruiser out to beat me up, and that his rescue was just well timed.

"Would you like a job?" he asked.

"It all depends on the job."

"You're not exactly in a position to be choosy, you know."

I suppose he was right, but I didn't quite see it his way. "And supposing I am anyway?"

"Then I'll have to give you back to Mike."

That idea I didn't like. "All right, so I'm not choosy," I said.

He smiled for the first time, but only with his mouth. His eyes stayed serious, cold as steel.

"What's your name?" he said.

"Bruce Mathieson. What's yours?"

He laughed at this. "You're quite the guy, Mathieson," he said. "I'm Marc Bond," he said seriously. He was the type of guy who would always say his name seriously, because it was a name few people laughed at. Marc Bond. He was the toughest operator in town—also the smoothest. No one knew exactly what all he operated, but if there was money attached to it, he was probably in it.

I gave him a slight bow—out of deference to his reputation.

"What do you want me to do—be body guard to Junior?"

He really laughed at this.

"I like you, Mathieson," he said. "I could do a lot for you." This was no boast. He could. He could do a lot for me—or he could break me into little pieces. I imagined that Marc Bond could do just anything with anyone.

"Yes, I like your looks," he repeated. "I think you and I can do a little business."

"What have you in mind?"

"Do you drive a car?"

"So-so."

"You've just got yourself a job as a chauffeur."

I didn't say anything. There was nothing to say. Marc Bond had made up his mind. If I wanted to stay healthy, all I had to do was to follow orders—just follow orders and not talk back.

"You're going to be chauffeur for Mrs. Williams Stevens and her daughter—mostly for the girl."

The names didn't mean anything to me. "Okay," I said. "What's my real job?"

"Smart boy," he said evenly. "See that you just don't get too smart. For the time being you chauffeur this daughter around—particularly in the evenings. She has a habit of liking to go places she shouldn't know anything about. She needs someone to see that she gets to these places safely and gets home safely—and she needs someone who will keep his mouth shut."

"Am I supposed to act as a gigolo, too?"

"You're supposed to act any way that you're told to act," he said. "I'll call Miss Stevens and let her know that you're coming up."

He gave me an address, and one of the boys drove me out to the place. It was an immense house in Forest Hills. I remembered having driven past it several times and wondering who would have enough dough to own a joint like that.

Some servant let me in. I waited in one of the rooms, and she came back in a couple of minutes and said Miss Stevens would see me now. I followed her.

We came to a room. The girl standing there would be Miss Monica Stevens. I almost whistled when I saw her. She was one for the books. She was the kind of girl I used to dream about when I still dreamed. If I had been some other guy, I could have gone over big for a girl like her.

She must have read what was going on in my mind because she blushed slightly. She sent the servant away and then we were alone. I kept staring at her, and was beginning to think that I was going to enjoy driving her around to all these places she liked to go. I could see what Marc

had meant when he said she liked to go to places she shouldn't. She looked all youth and innocence, but there was something about her eyes—something taunting, something rebellious.

I waited for her to speak.

"You're Mr. Bond's friend?" she asked first making sure that no one was listening.

"That's me."

"I'll have to show you to my mother," she said. "I suppose Mr. Bond told you that you're supposed to be from the agency."

He hadn't but that much I could guess. I wondered what this whole thing was about.

There was an immense window behind Monica. I looked beyond her a moment, and made a visual tour of the grounds. If I had had money, this would have been exactly the type of place I would have built. Whatever Marc Bond had in mind for this young lady, it was going to be big. For a second I wondered if I should scam out now before I found myself in some kind of a jam. But there would be time to run out later if things got hot. Right now I decided to stick around and enjoy the scenery. Besides I had a feeling that if I doublecrossed Marc Bond, I had better find myself a new city to live in.

ANOTHER woman came into the room just then. She was another good-looking tomato. She didn't look much over thirty. She really held her age well. But there was plenty about her that I didn't like. She looked hard, and her eyes reminded me of Marc Bond's. They never smiled. No matter what the rest of her face did, her eyes remained the same—cold chunks of steel.

Her questions were purely routine. When she had all the information she wanted, she gave me a little wave of her hand. I knew that was supposed to mean that I could leave. I looked at Monica.

She said: "I'll show you where you'll stay."

It was a couple of rooms above the garage—a swell layout, with telephone and bath included. I couldn't ask for more. A couple of hours ago I hadn't had a cent in the world or known where I was going to sleep tonight, and now I was equipped with a place like this.

"Well, Miss Stevens," I said, a little sarcastically. I wanted to be sarcastic because I knew she was out of my class. "Or shall we be friends, and have me call you Monica?"

"Call me whatever you like," she said. She said it indifferently. If she had been the bitter type, the words would have sounded hard. But the way this girl put them was different. She had something on her mind. I was beginning to wish that someone somewhere along the line would slip and let me know what was going on.

"What's on the menu for tonight?" I asked.

"I want you to drive me to Marc Bond's place on Park Avenue," she said.

"Do I wear a uniform?"

"No," she almost snapped at me. "Of course you don't."

She started to leave—then turned around. She turned slowly, and there was all the grace in the world in that motion.

"Mr. Mathieson—"

"You may call me Bruce," I mocked.

"What job are you doing for Marc Bond?"

I pretended surprise. "What are you talking about?"

"Look." Her eyes looked like she was pleading with me. "I'm rather stupid or I wouldn't be in the mess I'm in now, but I'm not completely blind. What else does Marc Bond want from me?"

"Maybe he's got a crush on you."

She was standing very close to me now. She let me have it with her hand—right across my face. It made a sharp sound. My face stung and I turned red under the collar. I grabbed her arm and forced it behind her.

When I was in high school we used to say that a girl wanted to be kissed when she slapped you. We were standing very close together and I felt like kissing her.

"I wouldn't ever try that again," I said. "It might not be healthy."

She winced. I wanted to hurt her. I was mad because I wanted to kiss her, and she was out of my class.

"You little fool," I said. "You've got everything you could want—money—looks—everything. But you couldn't be satisfied with it. Now you think you can go around slapping every face you take a dislike to."

I let loose of her arm slowly. I could

see my finger marks on her arm long after I let her go.

She stood very still for a minute, massaging her arm, and I saw tears in her eyes. She struggled to keep from crying. She gave me a look that was not exactly filled with love.

"You've got my number wrong, Sister," I said when she didn't say anything. "It just happens that I ran up a dinner bill at Marc's and didn't have the cash with me. He's letting me drive you around instead of washing dishes until I earn enough to pay him. I'm just your chauffeur—eager to be at your service." I gave her a mock bow.

She still didn't answer—just ran from the room and down the stairs. I had the funny feeling that she was crying by the time the door closed behind her.

I didn't see her again until she phoned me that evening and said she was ready to leave.

CHAPTER TWO

The Joker in the Job

TRAFFIC was against us all the way into town, and it took over an hour to reach the club she had mentioned. I had been in clubs like this when I had been in the chips, but that had been a long time ago. It was like one of the sumptuous places they generally have in the movies. Upstairs—high above the street—they had gambling.

I hadn't known what I was supposed to do from this point on in; but she had waited for me, so I assumed I was supposed to follow her. The man at the door upstairs knew who she was. He let us in without any trouble.

Marc Bond saw us from the other side of the room and came over.

"Miss Stevens," he said. Whether he was being friendly or mean, Marc Bond never varied his voice. It was always the same—even, smooth as silk. I wondered if anything in the world ruffled him.

"How do you like your job, Matheison?" he asked me.

"Pretty soft."

"It's better than doing dishes, isn't it?" Monica cracked.

"Are you back to try your luck—or is this just a social call?" he said, turning to Monica.

"I'm back for some luck," she said giving him that same pleading look she had given me earlier in the day.

He led her to one of the tables, and then motioned me back into another room.

"I just wanted to warn you about Monica," he said. "You've got big broad shoulders. She might be tempted to cry on them, and you might find it rather nice. Don't get soft in the head about this girl, Mathieson."

"Look, Bond," I said. "I don't like people with money—especially people who've had money all their lives. So whatever your game is with this kid, I'm with you—as long as I don't have to get in too deep myself."

He looked at me curiously for a minute. I knew he was trying to make up his mind whether to believe me or not.

"Okay," he said patting me on the back. "We'd better get back to Monica."

Monica had won a nice little sum by the time we got back. But she was still going at it.

"Why don't you quit while you're still ahead?" I said. I felt the pressure on Bond's hand on my arm.

"You wouldn't give the lady a bum steer, would you?" he said. I looked at him. There had been no change in his voice, but his eyes were little slits.

"I have to win a lot," she said. "I have a lot of bills."

I watched for the signal, but when it came I never saw it. But somewhere, somehow, the machinery was put in motion, and Monica Stevens began to lose. It took her less than five minutes to lose all that she had won. She looked at me desperately. Then I heard Marc Bond's smooth voice behind us.

"Would you like a little more credit?" he said.

Monica looked at me again, as though she expected some more advice. I just looked back at her. Marc Bond's hand was still on my arm. Me—I had just come along for the ride. I wasn't getting paid for handing out advice.

She suddenly got that defiant look in her eyes. She said: "Yes, I would like a little more credit."

When we left we were \$2,000 less rich. Monica Stevens didn't say a word. I helped her in the car, and then got in myself. It

was a lovely night but I didn't feel like appreciating it. I didn't have a very high opinion of Miss Stevens' intelligence. It was none of my business if she could afford to lose money like that in one night. But I was bitter none the less.

"You're not very bright," I said.

"I—I—" She looked like she was trying to keep from crying.

Then she looked at me angrily. I thought she might try to slap me again.

"Don't get any ideas about hitting me again," I said. "Not while I'm driving."

She didn't answer.

The traffic was slight, but one car stayed behind us. It came to me in a flash that we were being tailed. It made me mad. That damn Bond didn't trust me. He was having us tailed. There was probably somebody at the house to watch me, too. I pulled up beside the road and waited for the car.

"This may be a little rough," I said, as the other car drew up along side of us. I jumped out and went over to the car. Inside were a driver and the big bruiser, Mike, who had gone over me before.

"Going someplace?" I said opening the door.

I WAS the one who was being stupid now. In a second, Mike was on me. I took one sock at his powerful jaw—the only punch I landed. He gave it to me—both fists in the stomach. It knocked the wind out of me, and I was afraid that I couldn't stay on my feet. I saw his massive fist coming straight at my face. When he hit me, I didn't feel like any damn hero.

I could feel the blood on my face, and taste it—salty, warm in my mouth. I made a lunge at him, but before I hit him, his powerful arms were around my neck. I could feel myself going out gradually. I struggled and the gagging in my throat made me sick. Everything faded slowly. All I could feel were those arms around my neck—taking all the air I had. I kicked and struggled, and then the pain stopped and I felt my face hit the pavement.

When I came out of it, my neck ached and my stomach was a mass of pain. Monica was standing over me crying. I felt a feeling of relief, seeing her safe. The boys were gone.

"Can you drive?" I gasped.

She nodded. I pulled myself slowly up to my feet, and dragged myself into the car. Then everything went black again. The next thing I knew Monica was trying to force some whiskey in my mouth. Somehow she had helped me up the stairs to my rooms.

I lay down on the bed. My neck ached less now but my stomach was still giving me plenty of trouble. I felt completely done in. I looked at Monica. Right now she looked like a scared little kid, and I began to feel a little sorry for her. But I felt a lot sorrier for myself.

"Neither of us is very bright," I said.

She didn't say anything. She had begun to cry in a helpless sort of way.

I managed to pull myself off the bed.

"Stop it," I said. "Crying isn't going to get you any place."

"Why did they beat you up?" she asked.

"I don't know. I don't know anything. I'm just here for jokes. I don't even know what kind of a jam you're in."

She looked at me a little amazed, and I think she began to believe me in that minute.

"I owe Marc Bond a lot of money," she said slowly.

I laughed. This was the payoff. Poor little rich girl. She owed Marc Bond a lot of money.

"Why don't you ask your old man for it?" I said in the way of a bright remark.

She began to laugh hysterically. I went over and shook her. I wanted to kiss her, but I shook her as hard as I could. She stopped laughing in a few minutes.

"You really don't know what this is all about?" she said. "You don't know anything about me?"

"That's right," I said sourly. "I don't know a damn thing about you."

"Oh, it doesn't matter," she said looking as though she would cry again. "You wouldn't ever understand what it's been all my life. Always I've had to do exactly what was proper. I couldn't ever drink or smoke the way other people's children did. The type of people I had to associate with were the most proper people in town. They had no vices. My father is so set against gambling, he would even let me go to jail before he would pay off a gambling debt for me."

"What about your mother?" I asked.

"My mother." She spit the words out and I got what she meant. "No, Mr. Mathieson. This sheltered little canary ventured into undesirable paths, and now she's going to have to pay out of her hide."

"Then why do you go down there every night to play?"

She looked at me with her eyes wide open. "I go down there because Marc Bond tells me to," she said. "He can demand payment at any time. I don't know why he doesn't. It's a day-to-day proposition, so I just come when he tells me. Besides," she said almost bitterly, "it's so very much money that any more I owe him can't possibly make any difference."

I walked over to the window and looked out at the yard. I could see everything very distinctly by moonlight. Outside there, everything was calm and quiet. And inside we sat—two people with the world on our shoulders.

"You'd better go in and get some sleep," I said. I wanted to get rid of her because I felt so damned sorry for her, and that wouldn't work. I was in a plenty bad jam as it was. I had to worry about my own hide.

I got ready for bed, my thoughts racing a mile a minute. And just before I fell asleep, I thought about Monica and that lovely face of hers, and how she looked when she cried. Then slowly I fell asleep, only to dream about her.

THE telephone woke me early. I half expected it to be Monica. It wasn't. It was Marc Bond. I knew it the minute he spoke. You could never mistake that slow, monotonous voice.

"Mathieson," he said. "I hear a couple of my boys did you over last night."

"I bet you just heard," I drawled back. I was fully awake now, and my stomach throbbled where I had been hit.

"As a matter of fact, I did just hear about it," he continued. "That wasn't supposed to happen. I just sent them over to have a little talk with you. You shouldn't have jumped them."

"Apologize to the boys for me," I muttered.

"Listen," he said ever-so-patiently. "I want to see you. There are still a few things we haven't got straightened out."

"Okay," I said. "I'll be down."

I was mad though. I was mad because I had got beat up. I was mad at Marc Bond and the boys and Monica. The whole damn world was a mess.

If I left town now, before anything else happened, I could probably stay healthy and come back in about six months. If I went to see Marc Bond and stayed with him much longer, I was in it all the way. After that there would be no turning back. Marc Bond was no small-town crook. If he wanted to hunt me down, he could. It might take years, but someday he'd find me—and that's all, brother. No matter how long I might hide out in some little town, if I ever came back to a city they'd find me. And eventually I would come back to a city. Guys like me can't stand to stay away for very long, and guys like Bond understand only too well about guys like me.

I was thinking all this, but I was thinking it on my way to Bond's. Sure I walked into Bond's office, knowing that the cards were stacked against me from this minute.

Bond looked me over, looking for bruises, I guessed. He would have to be disappointed this time, because I don't bruise very easily.

"Have a drink," he said in a way of greeting.

"Thanks."

He didn't waste any time getting down to business. "Mathieson, you got beat up last night because you didn't act very smart. I sent Mike over to warn you about making another slip like the one you made last night. I don't want you to give Miss Stevens any kind of advice."

I said nothing. I just sat there fondling my drink.

"All I ask is that you play square with me, and I'll play square with you," he continued.

"You haven't given me much chance to show whether or not you can trust me," I said. "You know it's kind of hard working in the dark. And next time the boys give me a going over, I'd—"

He cut me off. "There won't be a next time," he said. His voice stayed exactly the same, but his eyes narrowed. I knew what he meant. He meant there wouldn't be a next time.

"Not that it's any of my business," I said wearily, "but you must know that Monica Stevens isn't going to be able to

pay her debts." I was beginning to hate Marc Bond with a fierce intensity. I hated him because he had me right where he wanted me, and he knew it, and I knew it.

"Her family has money."

"They won't give it to her," I interrupted. "They think guys like you are poison."

"They'll pay it."

"What makes you so sure?"

He didn't say anything for a minute. I noticed now that the room was completely quiet except for me. I was drumming my fingers on the edge of my glass. The noise seemed loud in this stillness. I stopped it.

"They'll pay it—because Mrs. Stevens is the former Mrs. Bond."

I whistled.

There was still no expression in his voice. "You might as well know a few things," he said. "I was married to that woman a long time ago, and she took me for every cent I had. It wasn't much at the time, but it was enough. I just woke up one morning and she was gone. A couple of days later, I was picked up for embezzlement. Mathieson, I spent two years in the pen for a couple of checks my wife signed someone else's name to. That isn't easy to forget."

I couldn't think of anything to say. But I was beginning to understand why Mrs. Stevens would pay the bills.

"Doesn't Stevens know?"

"You don't think she'd be crazy enough to tell him, do you?"

THE whole thing hit me, then, like a ten-ton truck. This wasn't just a matter of business to Marc Bond—it was personal. But I had to make him say it.

"So Monica is just a tool you're using to get even with mama?" I asked.

"You catch on fast," he said slowly. "I'm going to bleed her for every cent the whole family has."

"And what happens to Monica during the process?" I tried to keep my voice calm, to pretend hot anger wasn't boiling up inside me.

"What's the matter, Mathieson? You going soft on the girl?" It was the same expressionless voice but the eyes narrowed again. "I understand Monica is a great equalitarian. Did she let you make love to her—and make pretty promises to you? Did

she tell you you were as good as she was? That would go over big with a bitter young man like you, wouldn't it, Mathieson?"

I never wanted to hit anyone so much in my life. Every muscle in my body ached to slam him. But I didn't. I knew, that moment, that some day I would beat Marc Bond—I'd beat him into a bloody pulp. But I wasn't quite ready to. Not yet.

I struggled to get control of myself. The silence of the room hammered in my ears. I forced myself to grin at him. It must have been a sickly grin, but it was enough. I saw him relax.

"I'm just blowing off steam," I said. "I don't even like Monica. The nearest I ever got to her was the time she slapped me." I rubbed my cheek for emphasis.

Marc Bond smiled at me.

"I think we understand one another," he said.

"What's the next step?" I asked, greatly relieved myself.

"Oh, take the day off—go enjoy yourself for awhile." He thought a minute. "What do you say to going to the races this afternoon? I know a horse that's going to win."

We sat around drinking until it was time for the races, and then we went out to the tracks. I knew he was taking me along to cool off. He wasn't easily fooled. He could tell my dander was up. He was just giving me time to realize it would be smart to stick with him.

We bet on the third race, and we won. We won a lot of money on a long shot. I watched the race carefully, and I couldn't see anything crooked about it. It looked strictly on the up and up to me, but I knew the minute we placed our bets that Bond really knew this horse was going to win. I had known that Bond had his hand in most of the rackets in town, but once again I had underestimated him. This guy had the whole city sewed up. It would be suicide for anyone to buck him—and yet I knew the day would come when I would trade in my beat-up hide just to feel my fists pushing that face in.

It was one of the worst days of my life. Being with this guy all day, making conversation, pretending to be on the up and up with this shrewd character—when all the time I wanted to be as far away from him as possible. Finally he drove me home.

"See you tonight," he said.

I walked as fast as I could to my room. I was tired out and the results of last night's beating were still with me. All I wanted to do was to lie down and go to sleep for a long time. Most of all I didn't want to think about Monica.

When I got to my room, Monica was there waiting for me. It was funny—all day I had been trying to figure some way to get her out of this mess. When I saw her, sitting there in my room, looking very pale, something clicked inside me. It was just as though someone had knocked all the wind out of me. It was hard to breathe. I remembered Bond's words: "Did she let you make love to her? Did she make pretty promises to you?" I just stood in the doorway looking at her, and she just looked back. She looked like it had hit her, too.

"I was worried about you," she said after a minute. "I thought maybe those two men had come after you."

I started to say something sarcastic but the words wouldn't come.

I walked over to her. I wanted to touch her so much I felt like sobbing. Without knowing it, I put my hand to her head and ran my fingers through her hair. She let me, and I found myself thinking how much she looked like a little kid. Then she was in my arms, and I didn't think anymore for a long time.

She was still in my arms when reality broke through again.

"Monica, Monica," I whispered because I couldn't trust my voice. "We'll get out of this. We'll go hide somewhere—there are places where even Marc Bond could never find us."

She looked at me, as though she believed it were possible for a second, and then at the same instant we both knew it was no go. There was no place we could hide. Bond would have his revenge. Some day he would get even with us.

She buried her face against my shoulder, and I could feel her crying.

"Don't worry, Monica," I said to her. "We'll work our way out of this. We'll get out of it somehow."

I wondered whether I should tell her the whole story. Maybe I could get her out of it without her ever knowing about her mother and Bond. Maybe—yeah, maybe I could jump over the moon, too.

"Go inside and get a little rest," I said to

her. "We've got a big job to do. Meet me out here about nine, and I'll explain everything."

I kissed her again, and she left.

I sat down and lit a cigarette. All day something about Bond's story had been bothering me. Something didn't ring true. But I couldn't lay my finger on it. A crazy scheme was beginning to form in the back of my mind. If it worked we might get out of this. If it didn't—at least we wouldn't be much worse off.

I called the house.

"Monica," I half whispered into the phone. "Can you get a gun?"

She didn't ask any questions at all. She said, "Yes, I think so," and that was all.

I hung up with her voice still in my ears. Tonight, I might get bumped off for that girl.

CHAPTER THREE

What Can I Lose?

AT EXACTLY ten minutes after nine, I walked up the steps to Marc Bond's club. I remember looking at my watch very carefully, the way a man will when it may be only a matter of hours before time won't matter to him at all. At the stairs I hesitated, glancing toward Bond's office, then toward the big gambling room upstairs. But neither of those were for me. I was heading for one of the back rooms where the boys played poker for big stakes.

I had a thousand dollars on me, my winnings from the long shot, and I was going to play some heavy poker. And I intended to win one way or the other. Most of the fellows knew who I was by now. There were a couple of other men there who obviously weren't Bond's boys. I didn't let them bother me.

"Count me in the next deal," I said. I pulled up a chair. A tall skinny guy made room for me. No one said much.

I won the first round. The stakes were plenty high. I put everything I had in the second time. I won again, and again. I had fifteen thousand dollars now. I saw a couple of the boys exchange looks, but I was ready for it.

"Okay, Boys, we're going to play this according to Hoyle," I said, and I pulled the revolver out and laid it on the table.

Just where I could reach it easier than anyone else.

No one said a word. The dealer went on shuffling the cards.

I lost one hand, but you can't win every-time. The fifth deal came around. I drew a pair of aces and two sevens. I asked the dealer for one card. It was an ace. I put every last cent I had on that hand.

"Got a cigarette?" the dealer asked.

I tossed him the pack.

The room was absolutely quiet except for the cards. From upstairs I heard a woman squeal. She must have won at one of the tables. I kept winning.

The hands were too good. I knew something was up and I began to get scared. I could feel the sweat on my forehead, and I had a hard time hanging onto my cards. Everytime I got the right cards. If someone had made a fuss when I pulled the gun, it would have been okay, but no one had batted an eye. They just kept dealing me good cards—and I knew they were handing them to me.

I knew, then, that they had me. If I hadn't known before that I'd never get out of that room, I knew it now. Something was going to happen. They knew it and I knew it. We just sat there playing cards—waiting for it to happen.

Out of the stillness behind me, something hit me. I felt the sharp pain and knew I was going out. But I didn't fight it. I thought about Monica for one flash, and then I could feel the table against my face, and that was all.

The first thing I was conscious of was a car honking its horn. Then gradually I could feel my head, like a great iron weight. I tried to open my eyes, and the room bounced around crazily. There was something hard beneath my face. I put my hand up to see what it was. It was the same table we had been playing at. With one great effort, I forced myself into a sitting position, and looked around. I was all alone in the room. The lights were still on. Cards and chips were scattered around the table, and the money I had won was still there.

I didn't get it. I picked the money up automatically and stuffed it in my pocket. I finally managed to stand up. My head ached and my legs were made of rubber, but I stayed on my feet.

Somebody would have to tell me what the score was. I walked over to the door. It was open. The whole place was deserted. I walked slowly downstairs. On the first floor a janitor was cleaning. He saw me and didn't look surprised.

"You want out?" he asked, and he came over and opened the door for me. I stood for a moment in the street. My watch told me it was five o'clock. I hailed a cab. Still no one had tried to stop me. I braced my head against the back seat. Why had Marc Bond let me live? Obviously because he had accomplished what he wanted to—without me. He could get me at some later time, whenever he wanted.

I knew I wasn't wrong. Marc Bond was going to play with me for awhile, and then get me whenever he wanted to. I sat there in the taxi and wondered how I would die—when. I didn't care. But what had happened to Monica? I had made my big play to save her—and I had failed. I wondered what I would find when I got back to the house.

I went straight to my room. I didn't bother to turn on the lights. If there was someone waiting for me, let them shoot. I didn't care. Nothing mattered.

The early morning light outlined the furniture in the room. I went over to the bed, and I nearly tripped before I saw the two figures on the floor. I turned on the lights. All feeling was gone from me.

On the floor were Mrs. Stevens and Monica. Mrs. Stevens had blood all over her face, and there was a gun in Monica's hand. I reached down and touched Monica. Her face was warm. She was still alive. Feeling surged back to me in a torrent. She was still alive.

But it was worse than not feeling, because I suddenly understood the whole thing. Marc Bond had had this planned all the time. It was suddenly so clear. That was why he wanted Monica to owe him money—it would give her a motive for killing her mother—make it look as though they had quarreled over money. I had underestimated Marc Bond again, thinking he just wanted to bleed Monica. But if Marc Bond had just wanted money, he could have gotten it from Mrs. Stevens. She would have paid him anything to keep him from telling about her.

I went over to where Monica lay. She

Killer Take All

was still unconscious. I tried to bring her around but it was no good. She had probably been doped. I took the gun out of her hand. It was the gun she had given me earlier. I put it in my pocket.

I tried to think. Eventually the police would discover this murder. They would arrest Monica and say she killed her mother. I would tell them the whole crazy story and no one would believe me, and they would all think I was crazy. Then some day Bond or one of his men would come and finish me off. It was as simple as all that.

I sat still for a long time. Gradually I felt myself regaining control of my senses. Then out of nowhere the idea came to me. Clearly, I thought, the police will never believe my story—unless Marc Bond kills me. And I was sure I would have no trouble getting him to do that. Ideas raced through my mind. Finally I figured out exactly what I would do. I sat down on the edge of the bed and wrote a carefully worded letter to the police. Then I picked up the telephone and called Headquarters.

I walked swiftly out to the street and got a cab.

Marc was looking fine, just like he'd had a good night's sleep. Mike and one of the other boys were with him.

"I'm disappointed in you, Mathieson," he said. "You could have gone far with me. You knew I liked you."

"Thanks."

"You sort of balled things up, coming here alone."

"What did you expect me to do?"

"I expected you to grab Monica and try to get out of the city," he said coolly. "But now you've spoiled my plans, we'll have to put you in hiding for a couple of days."

I still didn't quite get what he was driving at.

"Why don't you just shoot and get it over with?" I growled.

"Not on your life." Bond shook his head. "You're our surprise package. In case something goes wrong and the police don't believe Monica killed her mother, I think we can convince them that you did."

I could see what he meant. Here I sat with the gun in my pocket—the gun that Mrs. Stevens had been killed with.

Someone stuck a gun in my back about that time. I just stood there waiting. He

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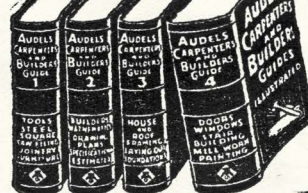
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Mark Mallory

gave me the onceover, and took the revolver out of my pocket. He laid it on a desk. Bond went over behind the desk.

"We want you to hang around here for a couple of days," Bond said evenly. "Until this little thing blows over."

"Anything you say." I had to think hard. I had to do something to stay here. If they had to kill me, I wanted it to be in this room.

"Bond," I said, "the police know that you were once married to Mrs. Stevens." "I don't believe you," he said.

I suddenly felt confident. What had I to lose?

"The hell you don't," I said. "If you don't believe me now, you will when the police get here."

"What are you talking about?" Mike roared, taking a poke at me. I jumped back and felt the gun bruise my back.

"Stop it," Bond said. "Sit down Mathieson. Just what do the police know?"

"They know the whole damn thing," I lied. "Somebody found your ex-wife before I did. The police were there when I got back. They wanted to know what I knew—so I told them the whole pretty story. They didn't believe me, but they finally agreed to let me come here. They'll be here any minute now."

I could tell that Bond was thinking hard, but he was a smooth baby. I didn't expect much from him. But I was sure that one of these guys here had pulled the murder—and the trigger man might crack.

"You're lying," Mike echoed.

"Shut up," Bond ordered.

"I won't shut up!" Mike bellowed.

"Yah, shut up," I said. "Do exactly what he says. You're going to hang, Mike. You thought the police would be too dumb to figure this out. They knew within five minutes the girl couldn't have done it."

He leaped at me again. I ducked but his big fist landed square. I went down.

"Stop that," Bond said again.

"You'd let me hang," Mike raged on. I waited, hardly daring to breathe. "You'd let me hang," Mike yelled again, turning to Bond and walking forward.

I saw Bond's hand go into the desk drawer. Mike was almost on top of him when Bond fired. It was a single shot. Mike crumpled to the floor. I shut my eyes. When I opened them, Mike didn't

Killer Take All

look very pretty. A shot that close is a messy thing.

Bond put the gun down on the desk.

"Don't you two get any ideas," he told me and his other punk.

"What am I going to do with this guy?" the one with the gun asked.

"You go out and drive the car out in front," he said.

"You'll never make it," I said.

"Wanna bet?" he said.

He went over to the window.

"Marc, this guy's bluffing. There's no cops for miles around."

"Of course he's bluffing," Marc Bond said. "Now go on and get the car ready."

The guy left us. I tried to think. If Bond killed me here, Monica'd be clear. Or—and this appealed to me more—if I killed Bond! The police would investigate his death, too—and the whole thing would come out. I had to kill Bond.

He wasn't waiting around to be killed. "Get started down the stairs," he said.

I started slowly down the stairs with him following. Down the stairs. That's how I first met Marc Bond.

I turned suddenly and grabbed him. He was caught off balance. We were on the same step now. I hit him as hard as I could. It felt good. He started rolling down the stairs, but not before he had shot.

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Mark Mallory

I felt the sharp pain in my shoulder, then my legs started to give way. I rolled a couple of steps, but I managed to catch myself. I felt myself growing weak. I gave way to the pain for a moment. Then I forced myself to open my eyes. I looked down the stairs. Marc Bond had crashed all the way down. He hadn't moved.

I went down quickly. He didn't make a sound. He couldn't. He was dead.

The horn of a car honked outside. I grabbed the gun that Marc still held. When the other guy opened the door, I let him have it full in the face.

I sat still for a minute, struggling to keep conscious. From a long distance, I heard a car door slam and several voices coming nearer. Then blackness hit me.

I slept a long time. I woke up once for a few minutes and somebody asked me some questions. I remembered I raved about Bond and how much I hated him, and about then Monica, and how much I loved her.

After awhile I really woke up, and then the cops asked me a million and some questions. Most of the things I had told Bond had been the truth. The police hadn't thought that Monica had killed her mother.

"The girl was doped," a big burly cop told me. "She didn't come out of it for several hours."

I told them everything I knew and they seemed to believe it. They even let me go for a while as long as I didn't go too far for too long.

My shoulder throbbed and ached. The doc told me to keep it bandaged.

I went back to the room to pack my things. I didn't want to see Monica again. She'd been through hell, and she didn't deserve any cheap lug like me around to remind her of it.

Only when I got to my room, she was there, just like she'd been the other time. I felt all the breath go out of me again, and I stood there looking at her. I had almost forgotten she was so lovely.

"You said, once, we could go away," she said softly. "Did you mean that—or was that just a line?"

I didn't try to answer. I didn't need to. She was already in my arms. The bandages got in the way, but we didn't even notice.

THE END

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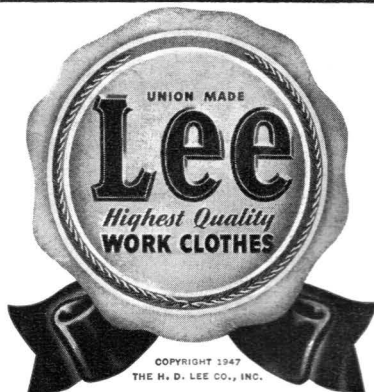
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